

Just Desserts

**By
Katrina Devlin**

Just Desserts

By
Katrina Devlin

A Newsite Web Services Book
Published by arrangement with the author

All rights reserved.

Copyright 2007 © by Katrina Devlin

This book may not be reproduced in whole or part,
by mimeograph or any other means, without
permission of the author or Newsite Web Services,
LLC

Published by Newsite Web Services, LLC
P.O. Box 1286, Loganville, Georgia 30052 USA
disciplineanddesire@hotmail.com
disciplineanddesire.com

Dedication

For my family and those crazy, nutty years at the restaurant when love was young and life exciting...

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Just Desserts	1
Ciao, Bella	15
The Barbecue	29
Cooling Off	37
Brunch	45
Reserving Judgment	57
Jitters	69
Sisters-in-Claws	79
Adrianna's Dance	94
Thalia Goes Back	105
Stormy Weather	113
Professional Courtesy	129
I Do - I Don't	141

Just Desserts

The bread was late. Nora took another walk to the front door and poked her head out to scan the sidewalk for any sign of Lenny, their normal deliveryman. Nick was going to have a fit if it didn't show up soon. Today was matinee day at the local theatre and they already had over forty reservations for lunch. Nick & Nora's Place had developed a loyal and burgeoning following in the last few years. Screw-ups were just not acceptable on Thursdays. Angrily, she yanked out her cell phone and punched in the number for Pannino's Bakery. Someone was going to hear just how irritated she was.

A moment later, a contrite Nora Mellos flipped shut her phone and ran an exasperated hand through her wild mop of dirty blond curls.

She had completely forgotten to place the bread order. She groaned as she remembered yesterday afternoon. It was a wonder she had even managed to get herself home.

"Shit," she muttered.

"Nora!" Her husband stood just in front of the swinging kitchen doors, his burly shape clothed in an immaculate white chef coat and baggy checked pants. "Hey hon, would you bring me a couple loaves of bread for this bruschetta?"

Oops.

"The truck's running late, Nicky," she lied. "I just called. Want me to run around the corner and buy some from Belle?" Belle's was a coffee shop owned by her very good friend Belle Armstrong. She felt a tiny twinge for telling the untruth, but she didn't want Nick to know about her blunder. Especially since she had urged him to take yesterday lunch off and when he quizzed her about placing the orders, she had told him everything was done.

"No, that's okay, I can wait, it won't take long," he said after making a funny face. "Fish order didn't get here yet either. Give 'em a call, 'kay, hon?"

"Sure, Nick," she called brightly, not too brightly she hoped.

"Ohmigod," she thought in dismay. She had forgotten to call Bright Sea Fish Market, also. How could she have forgotten to call two such important vendors?

Well, actually, she knew how.

Yesterday, Belle had stopped over after the lunch crowd was gone and the two of them had finished a bottle of wine, sampling a tasting of appetizers that Nick's brother, Pete was creating in the kitchen. Although he ran a successful diner in Manhattan, Pete sometimes took over for his little brother when Nick wanted a day off from his own casual-chic eatery. Peter Mellos always enjoyed his visits to the quiet Suburban town where Nick and Nora lived and worked. If the truth were told, he also was trying to impress the seemingly unattainable Belle with his culinary delights.

Nora and Belle had really enjoyed themselves with a crisp, delectable Pinot Grigio and the savory concoctions that Pete paraded before them. When Nick showed up for the dinner shift at 3:30, she and Belle were happily tipsy and completely sated. When Nick asked her about the orders, she quickly yessed him while giggling helplessly at Belle's sotto voce comments. If the truth were told, she was eager to escape before her husband realized just how toasted she was. Nick seemed satisfied and settled into his prep for dinner. Pete reluctantly bid Belle goodnight as the two women sauntered down the street to catch the early movie.

She really did intend to call in the orders once they were out of the restaurant but Belle thought they should stop at The Lucky Penny for another glass of wine.

By the time they left there, they were feeling no pain and neither one of them could give a coherent summary of the movie they watched afterward.

"It was a chick flick," Nora said groggily with her head under the pillow later that night when Nick asked her about it.

So now her goose was well and truly cooked. If Nick found out that she had lied to him. He would not be a happy camper. She hurriedly rummaged through her purse, pulling out the Wednesday sheet that had been clipped to the bulletin board in the kitchen.

Orders to call in:

Bread

Fish

Dessert

Well at least there wasn't a meat order there. That would have been really disastrous – both of the meat purveyors Nick used were forty-five minutes away. She punched in the numbers for the fish market and asked for Estelle.

When she heard the flat, nasally voice of the owner, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Stelle, it's Nora, I need you to save my ass," she said quickly. "I forgot to call this in yesterday and Nick has to have it for today's lunch."

"Shoot, honey," said the older woman.

Nora read the order to Estelle and prayed that they would be able to make a quick delivery.

"No problem, honey," Estelle said. "What's the matter, that Greek lumberjack of yours has a little temper?"

"You have no idea," Nora said, relief coursing through her body. "Thanks a million, Stelle."

Estelle's comment made Nora smile ruefully. Her husband was a very large man and his curly dark hair made him look like a giant Bacchus; his Greek heritage was very clearly apparent in his olive complexion and dark, almost black eyes. He was large but there wasn't an ounce of fat on him and Estelle was just one of many who thought he belonged with an ax in hand and an ox named Blue.

Estelle had hit the target head on when she mentioned Nick's temper. The brawny chef was a stickler when it came to his restaurant. Forgetfulness at home was easily excused but when Nora messed up at work, she felt the sting of Nick's anger – in more ways than one.

Hopefully she wouldn't feel it this time.

They didn't usually buy too many desserts since the woman who worked their pantry was also a skilled pastry chef. But there were a few standard pies and tortes that Nick always ordered from Daria Foods, the same bakery that supplied croissants and Danish to Belle's. Daria herself answered the phone and promised to deliver the relatively small order with only a couple substitutions before lunch.

"Thank goodness," Nora allowed herself a big sigh of relief as she sank down in the easy chair near the front desk.

"Nora?" The deep voice behind her made her jump.

"Jesus Christ, Nick," she snapped. "You scared the shit out of me."

"Would you please watch your language," he said in an annoyed voice. "You know how I feel about that at work."

His admonishing tone just made her angry. She forgot for a moment about her narrow escape from discovery.

"I am a grown-up, Nick," she said snottily. "I can talk exactly how I want."

"Okay, Nora," he said reasonably. "Continue to speak like that. We're right in the front window. You want to put on a show for Main Street? Cause you know what happens when you outright defy me."

His words brought her up short.

Damn him.

Outright defy this, she wanted to shout into his serious, handsome face. But she didn't. She knew better.

"What do you want?" she asked in a surly tone.

"You are in one foul mood, girl," he said. "Maybe we should take us a little trip downstairs." His office, the only private place in the restaurant, was located in the basement behind the laundry room. There was a very innocuous looking ruler in his desk drawer and only she knew how wicked the slim piece of wood really was. Too many times she had been led to that office, to be lectured for one misdeed or another and then bent over her husband's lap to feel the sting from that very same measuring implement. Nick Mellos was a firm believer in wifely discipline.

"No," she said quickly. "I'm sorry, Nick. I don't know what's the matter with me. I must be premenstrual," she lied, hoping he wouldn't do the math and figure out the impossibility of that one.

"Fine," he said shortly. "I just wanted to make sure that the orders were on their way. Did you call Bright Sea?" When she nodded, he continued, "I hope you told them that this kind of thing better not happen again. I can't be getting my fish order in the middle of lunch."

She nodded again, feeling a lump in the pit of her stomach. She felt awful about lying to him and letting him think it was the purveyor's fault especially after Estelle's kindness. But self-preservation was foremost in her mind. It had been a few weeks since she had experienced a punishment spanking but the memory of Nick's big, hard hand on her aching bottom was a strong one and she shuddered involuntarily.

"I'm sorry, babe," he said gently. "I didn't know you were feeling bad."

He lifted her from the chair and held her close, stroking her back and kissing her neck, her cheeks, and her lips. His warm fingers massaged her hips and lingered softly on her ass, patting her lovingly as he rocked her like a baby.

"Take some Advil," he advised, dropping a kiss on her brow.

Tell him. But she ignored the inner voice and pulled his face down so she could give him a proper kiss.

"I love you," she murmured.

"Me too, little one," he said. "But I gotta get back to my goat cheese tarts." He gave her one last kiss and winked down at her.

She felt like a heel. How could she lie to this man. This man that she loved more than life itself even if she didn't always appreciate his methods.

They had been married for about two months when Nick first exposed her to his own process for maintaining domestic bliss. She had been bitching about one thing or another, she couldn't even remember what. She did remember what happened right before...

"You are such a fucking asshole," she had yelled at her husband, turning to storm out of the room.

Not!

He had grabbed her by the straps of her overalls and yanked her back. "If you believe I'm a fucking asshole, then leave now," he said. "And I don't mean the house, I mean the marriage."

"What?"

"You heard me. You're not gonna get away with that shit, not for one more second."

He was implacable and her heart thudded with dread. She didn't want to leave him. He was the only man she had ever truly loved. The only man who had ever kept her from her earlier self-indulgent habits that could be so damaging. Like spending too much, drinking too much and self-doubting too much.

"I'm sorry then," she said. "You're not what I said."

"I'm sorry too," he said sternly. "Cause I am now going to blister your sweet little behind like you never felt before."

Wh...what? Nick, get serious."

"I am serious, sweetheart," he told her, leading her over to the sofa. He sat down and stood her in front of him, trapping her with his massive thighs. Quickly he unclipped the bib of her overalls and yanked them down to her knees. In a flash, he had her over his lap and for a moment she felt his hand on the outside of her bikini briefs. And then that moment was gone and so were her panties, pulled down to join her denim overalls.

"Nick!" she shrieked.

"This is called discipline, darling," he told her. "And for sure you are going to know this position well. Because I am not going to put up with any more of your bullshit."

Nora felt a tingling in her stomach at his words. It was so odd. This very strong man was about to give her the spanking of her life and she really had no fear of him. She felt dread and apprehension for her bottom but she knew with every fiber of her being that Nick Mellos loved her with all of his heart.

She was crying before the first blow landed. His hand was hard and relentless but she felt such heartache from her earlier hateful behavior, she almost welcomed the pain. Almost, but not quite.

"Stop, Nick, stop!" she wailed. "Pleeease!"

"Ever gonna use such language about me again?" He punctuated each word with a hard smack to her bottom and she wept helplessly.

"No, I promise, please, Nick, please."

It continued until she was choking back the sobs, tears and mucous running into her mouth.

When her rear-end was burning and throbbing like a gigantic bee sting, he stopped.

He lifted her tenderly from his knees and looked into her messy face. "I love you with my whole life, Nora," he said quietly. "This is what will happen when you disrespect the rules of marriage. I will never do that and I hope you won't either."

Wordlessly, she flew into his arms.

All well and good. But eight years later and she wasn't a twenty-four year old newlywed anymore. They had built this place together; she had put plenty of sweat and tears into this restaurant and she would not be treated like the hired help when it came to responsibility. So she goofed.

Shit happened.

Enough said.

Now she had to print out the menus. She stopped in the kitchen to pick up the specials and headed downstairs to the office. She typed the menu into the computer and made copies on a pretty floral paper.

By the time she returned upstairs, the wait staff had arrived. She handed the special menus to Lisa to slide into the plastic sleeves and went back up front to the desk. There was a message on the machine. She hit the code and listened.

"Hey Nora, it's Stelle. Just a heads up, hon, Ellis might be a few minutes late with your order. Can you believe he got a flat on the Parkway? But he called in and its changed and all, so he's on the way. But what the hell do you expect, same day delivery and all. Only for my very special customers do I go out of my way like this. Give my best to your hubby and next time, don't forget to call!"

Quickly she hit the delete button.

"Nora, don't worry," Lisa called from her perch at Table 4. "Nick already got the message, he was up reading the reservations just a few minutes ago."

Shit.

It was too late to worry about it now. The first reservation was walking in the front door. Nora plastered on a smile and stepped forward to greet them.

Three and a half-hours later and the dining room was deserted. Nora was finishing up the daily receipts and had already cashed out the wait staff. Lisa stuck her head back in the dining room.

"Hey, Nora, the boss asked me to tell you he needs you in the office for a sec."

"Thanks, Lisa," she said dejectedly.

Just great. They did over eighty for lunch, thanks to her careful seating and maneuvering and she was still in trouble.

Just for a moment, she considered walking out the back door instead of down the stairs. She would still be in trouble but she knew it would be much worse if he had to wait until tonight to speak to her. It would fester in that black curly-haired head of his. And tonight she would be, oh so much more, unhappy.

She went downstairs.

"Yes, Nicky?"

He was sitting at his desk, bent over the order sheets that he carefully wrote out every day. He looked up. His dark eyes, always so expressive of his feelings, hinted of both disappointment and anger.

"I can explain," she began.

"But I don't want to hear."

"That's not fair," she shot out.

"I might have wanted to hear this morning when you first realized your mistake. Before the first lie, I might have wanted to hear. Or even later this morning when you kissed me and told me you loved me. Or maybe, even during lunch when you knew I knew and would have appreciated a word or two about it. But now, I don't want to hear it, Nora."

"I was busy during lunch," she countered. "I turned thirty tables, Nick, with two waiters and a busboy."

"Lock the door," he said simply.

"This sucks," she cried.

"Lock the door, Nora."

Stomping over to the door, she pushed in the button on the doorknob and turned back to her husband. "I am protesting this, it's unfair."

Oops.

He stood up, all six foot, two inches of him. His curly head almost hit the ceiling. He nudged his chair into the center of the room.

"Get rid of the skirt, Nora," he ordered. "And bring your butt over here."

Muttering under her breath, she unzipped her long, khaki skirt and pulled it off, carefully placing it on the chair. She stood in front of him in her striped tee and lacy briefs.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"I forgot," she mumbled.

"Why?"

"Belle and I were drinking wine and having fun and well.....you know." She looked down, embarrassed to have to admit her failure to this man she loved above all others.

"That's fine, Nora, you and Belle got tanked. What about the lying?" He reached out and tipped her chin up with two fingers, making her meet his eyes.

She had no answer.

"Nora? I asked you a question."

Finally she spoke.

"I'm sorry, Nick. It wasn't just about saving my butt but also not having to see this look in your eyes. I hate it when you're mad at me. I have no excuse."

"Okay." He bent down and kissed her softly. "Get the ruler, Nora."

"Can't we discuss this a bit more?" she stalled.

"No, get it."

"But, Nick," she reached out and took his hand, rubbing her thumb over his fingers.

He turned her around and swatted her backside.

"Get it!"

A dozen epithets sprang to her lips, none of them flattering, but she didn't let any of them fly out, knowing from past history that it would only prolong and enhance the ensuing punishment. She bit her lip.

She stepped around him and pulled open the desk drawer, retrieving the long wooden ferule.

He took it and sat down, pulling her over his lap. In a moment, he slid her panties down to her calves. For just the briefest of moments, he laid his hand against her smooth, cool buttocks and she sighed.

He warmed her up with five smacks of his hand and she squirmed silently. She hated when he punished her at work; she was so afraid that someone would hear – either one of the dishwashers, picking up towels from the laundry room or a waiter, taking a cigarette break in the alley.

Thankfully, he flipped on the radio that he kept on his desk for just that purpose. The dulcet tones of Faith Hill broke into the room.

It was hard work, keeping silent once he started using the ruler. The thin wood slammed down on her bottom, leaving fiery red streaks on her skin. She cried quietly and dug her fingers into his black and white checked legs.

The pain was fierce. He wielded the old fashioned rod with an unfailingly rigid arm, striping the curve of her buttocks despite her tearful pleas. When he reached the tender spot above her thighs, she yelped. He laid two-dozen strokes of the ruler onto her tender backside. Her bottom was cherry red and burning like fire when he stopped.

She was weeping when he turned her about and cradled her in his arms.

"You are such a handful, Mrs. Mellos," he told her.

She sniffed and took the Kleenex he handed her.

"But you love me," she said, blowing her nose.

"Yes, but do you love the way I love you?" he mused, referring to the song that just played.

"I guess I do," she told him honestly. "Because I love you and all that it brings."

"You gonna lie to me again?"

"I am going to try never to do such a thing again," she said diplomatically, rubbing her sore bottom.

"You gonna lie to me again?" he growled.

"No sir!"

"So much better," he said approvingly. "You do learn."

"Don't you have work to do?" she asked saucily, comfortable in his sturdy arms.

"Go home and think about today," Nick said. "When I come home, you better be ready to talk to me. And I'm talking ready. Cause I have some things I want to discuss, like how many times you're allowed to be premenstrual every month."

"Oh, yea, that." She blushed, caught in another lie.

"Yea, that, Mrs. Likes-to-stretch-the-truth Mellos."

He stood up and carefully set her on her feet. She leaned her head against his broad chest while he wrapped his arms around her. Burying his head in her blond curls, he inhaled the sweet perfume of her hair while his hands caressed her injured flesh.

"Mmmm," she smiled at him.

"Behave," Nick said.

He left her in the office and went upstairs. She retrieved her panties, which had slipped, down to her ankles and pulled on her skirt, taking care not to aggravate her stinging bottom. She took a minute to run her fingers through her hair and fix her lipstick.

She knew her cheeks were flushed. There was no way to take the sparkle out of her eyes and the knowledge that she had just been reprimanded by the boss himself as she walked into the kitchen on her way out.

"Nora," Nick called. John, the sous chef looked over and Mary glanced up from the salad dressing she was preparing.

She went obediently to where her husband stood behind the line, whisking something in a stainless steel bowl.

"Taste," he said, offering her his finger. He sometimes did that with new recipes. Usually she just tasted the offering and gave him her verdict. Today was different.

She took his finger in her mouth, licking the skin clean of the tangy, citrus and ginger marinade. Throwing back her head, she moaned, much to the amusement of John and Mary. Ever so gently, she tongued the tip of his finger and sunk her teeth into the crease of his knuckle.

"Delicious, Nicolas," she said. "But I'll have more later, my love." She kissed his fingers and waved airily.

The other two were snickering.

Did he honestly think she could resist that parting shot? And after all, he started it.

"I'll remember that, Nora," he said warningly as she scooted through the back door. "I hope you remember."

Duh, like she could forget anything he said or did.

Sometimes he had no sense of humor.

Sliding into her navy blue Cabrio in the lot behind the restaurant, she winced as her bottom made contact with the seat. She backed out of her spot and roared up the driveway.

"Nora!"

She turned to see Belle running up to the passenger side.

"Hi, Belle," she said brightly.

"How was today?" her friend asked. "I have to tell you, I had a hard time getting up this morning."

"Morning wasn't the problem," Nora said, laughing. "It was when Nick found out that I never placed any of the orders."

"Shit, girlfriend, was he pissed?"

"Putting it mildly."

"Well?" Belle eyed her curiously. "What happened?"

Nora wondered what her friend would say if she told her what had just transpired in Nick's office. She would probably be disgusted or appalled or indignant for her.

What the hell.

"Well actually, he spanked the hell out of me," she told Belle.

Belle didn't bat an eye. "Lucky you," she said wishfully.

"Belle!" Nora cried. "You have to be kidding."

"We'll talk later," Belle said meaningfully as she winked and waved goodbye.

Nora watched her jump into her tan Landrover. Shaking her head, Nora pulled out of the driveway and headed toward their house. All of a sudden, she couldn't wait until Nick came home.

Then she remembered his parting glance. Well, maybe she could...

Ciao, Bella

Belle Armstrong glanced in the mirror above her old-fashioned cash register and absently pushed a dark curl behind her ear. Her stomach was turning over with an artillery of butterflies like she had never experienced before. Peter Mellos, the cause of her jittery stomach, was sitting at Belle's spotless oak counter that was decorated with vintage pie trays and creamer sets. Pete was as light as his brother, Nick, was dark and today his normally tousled blond curls were combed back into a short, neat ponytail. He was wearing a stylish pair of wire-framed eyeglasses that only added to his severe good looks, Belle thought. His broad chest was straining beneath the pristine white of a button down cotton shirt and his khaki trousers fit him so perfectly, it ought to be a crime. He had literally just shown up on her doorstep this afternoon, merely two days after his stint at Nick & Nora's Place.

"I came here to speak to you, Belle," he was saying. "Are you ever going to sit down so I can do that?"

Belle laughed self-consciously.

"I'm trying to run a business here, Peter," she countered.

"Sweetheart, hate to break the news, but I'm the only one in here," he took another forkful of key lime pie and groaned. "This is so good, I'm in heaven. Buy or make?"

"I make that, thank you," she said proudly, dropping a curtsy. "As a gal from the horse country of Kentucky, there are a couple things I can do well -- mint juleps and key lime pie."

"So what are you doing tonight, Miss Belle," he asked warmly. "I would dearly love to take you out to dinner, if it would be possible."

"You show up on a Saturday and have the nerve to think I'd be free tonight? You must be kidding," she said flippantly.

Belle sashayed along the counter, wiping away the vagrant crumb with her vigilant cloth.

"Are you busy then?" Nick cleared his throat and took a gulp of his coffee.

She felt a pang of remorse as she took in his subdued demeanor. She mentally kicked herself; she was really interested in this guy, what the hell was she doing.

"Well, actually no," she said truthfully. "Where do you want to go for dinner?"

"Your choice," he said, smiling happily.

"I'd love to check out Poppies," she told him. "They're supposed to have a new chef who's incredible."

"Sounds great," he said. "Let me make some reservations, what time?"

"Well, are you coming over for mint juleps first?"

"Definitely."

"Then 8 or 8:30 would be good."

He pulled out his cell phone and called information. He jotted down the restaurant number and quickly dialed it.

"Lucky," he told her. "They had one table left at 8:30."

"Cool."

"I'm going over to my brother's for awhile. So, where do you live?"

She wrote her home address down on the back of her business card and handed it to him.

"Come over at 6:30 or 7," she told him.

"How 'bout 6:45," he said dryly.

"Perfect," she laughed. "So shoot me, I'm used to being a half hour within target."

"Okay," he said, handing her his empty plate. At the front door, he paused. "What's Belle short for anyway?"

"Isabella," she said shortly. "I prefer Belle."

"Pretty," he said softly, waving as he left. "Ciao, Bella."

Isabella Armstrong sank down on the cushioned red counter stool and hooked her feet around the chrome legs.

Oh Lord, what had she done?

Peter Mellos was a big handful of man. Since her divorce from Dan Blaustein two years ago, she had dated little and somehow managed to keep a cynical and wary outlook on life. Now in the space of three days, she had fallen into a teenaged state of infatuation with a man who at 6'2" tall was at least six inches taller than her former husband and whose blond mane of hair gave him a distinctly leonine look.

Peter was fiercely male. She loved that about him. Like his brother Nick, he was tall and built like a tree. She had heard that their father was a burly fisherman who had returned to Greece and still lived and worked on the island of Crete with Thalia, his wife of forty-two years.

At forty years old, Pete had never been married while his younger brother Nick had been married for eight years to Nora.

It was Nora who greeted him first when he walked into the kitchen of Nick & Nora's Place.

"Petey," she cried, a broad smile spreading across her face. "Twice in one week? What's going on?"

"I have a date," he said happily.

"Belle?"

"Yup."

"Excellent," she said, giving him a quick hug. "Nicky is smoking some fish in the alley."

"Won't that fry his brain?"

"It's already fried, honey," Nora quipped.

"Did you and Belle have fun the other night?"

Nora narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

"What did she tell you?"

"She didn't tell me anything, that's why I'm asking," he said. "Why, what's up?"

"Nothing," Nora mumbled. "I got in a little trouble for forgetting to call in some orders. Your brother," she sputtered. "You know how he gets."

Peter quirked one eyebrow, a specifically Mellos trait, and she shook her head, tossing her blond curls as she made a quick exit.

"Go see him yourself," she called over her shoulder.

Pete laughed, grabbing a can of coke from the refrigerator before heading out to the alley and the pungent aroma of mesquite wood chips and trout.

Nora raced across the driveway to Belle's back door and burst into the café, where her friend was sitting, lost in thought at the counter.

"Belle!" she shrieked.

"I know, I know," her friend laughed. "But he makes my heart go crazy."

"Can I fix us some cappuccino?" Nora asked, and then without waiting for an answer began rummaging behind the counter for the espresso filters.

"Make mine a double," Belle said.

Nora caught up on Peter's surprise afternoon visit while she steamed the milk and sprinkled cinnamon on the frothy drinks.

She set the two large white mugs on the counter and slid a plate of jumbo chocolate chip cookies in between them.

"I need me a little nosh," she argued when Belle made a mocking face.

"I'm not saying anything, sweetie," said Belle.

"Remember what I told you the other day?" Nora began. "About how Nick takes care of business?"

"You mean how he spanks you when you screw up?" Belle laughed.

"Yes, that," Nora said blushing. "Just a heads up, Isabella, by all accounts, it's a family trait."

When her friend's mouth dropped open, it was Nora's turn to laugh.

Belle was speechless for a moment, but not exactly in horror as Nora surmised; she was dumbfounded to think that one of her deepest desires was possibly on the brink of being satisfied. She had always fantasized about a strong, masterful lover taking her firmly in hand. Dan was a lovely person and incredibly good to her while they were in love, but he could never handle her passionate outbursts. Her moody nature was like a sea that needed a captain, not merely a sailor. In the end, their decision to divorce was completely mutual and amicable.

Isabella Armstrong may have been brought up in a genteel Southern neighborhood but her mother was 100% Sicilian and passed on most of her fiery temperament to her only daughter.

"I'm not worried," she finally told Nora.

"He's stricter than he seems," her friend informed her. "Nicky looks and acts like a bear so it's no big surprise but Pete seems so urbane and relaxed, you don't expect it."

"Like I said, I'm not worried," Belle reiterated.

"Good, cause he really likes you."

"Sounding a little like high school, Mrs. Mellos," said Belle.

"Maybe you'll go steady," Nora giggled.

"I wouldn't mind," she said. "I love going steady, did I ever tell you about Marty Jamison, my first steady boyfriend?"

"Tell on," Nora urged.

The two spent some time savoring their coffees while sharing stories of their past romances and near-romances. Belle's late afternoon business was slow; she served desserts and coffees to only a few tables. When Nora glanced at the clock above restroom doors, she was shocked to discover that it was 4:30.

"Shit, Belle, look at the time," she cried. "We've been gabbing here for almost an hour and a half. Nicky's going to kill me."

"And as soon as that last deuce leaves, I've got to close up shop and get home to make ready for Mr. Peter," Belle said, nodding her head toward the young couple in her window booth.

"I'm surprised Nick didn't send out the troops," Nora said. "I guess Pete's keeping him occupied. Remind me to thank that brother-in-law of mine."

When the back door slammed shut a few seconds later later, both women looked at each other in mock horror.

"Nora!" her husband's voice preceded him. Suddenly his face peered around the corner from Belle's kitchen. "Um, excuse me, girls, but my wife is needed at her restaurant, now."

"Chill out, Nick," Nora snapped, embarrassed that he was yelling for her in public as though she were a wayward child. "I was just coming back."

"Come back now," Nick said pleasantly, with just a hint of steel beneath his voice.

"I am," Nora hopped off the stool and joined her husband in the kitchen. "Have fun tonight, Belle, call me," she yelled over her shoulder.

From her perch close to the kitchen door, Belle heard the rumble of lowered voices and then three distinctly sharp cracks that sounded very much like a hard hand connecting with a bare bottom. The soft mewling sound that followed reminded her of a wounded kitten and she felt uncomfortable to be an audio witness to her friend's distress. Guilt washed over her as she realized that she was basically the cause of Nora's punishment. She hurried around the counter and pushed open the In door to the kitchen.

"Nora, I just wanted..." she was stopped short by the sight of Nick and Nora Mellors wrapped in a passionate embrace. Nick's large hands were tenderly cupping Nora's bottom and Nora's fingers were entwined in Nick's dark curls as they exchanged deep kisses. "Oops," Belle muttered, blushing to roots of her own dark curls. "Sorry, guys."

Nick turned around and smiled beatifically.

"We're sorry, Belle, and we're leaving now," he laughed. "Have a good time tonight."

She waved her friends away and went back into the other room to clean up and lock the front door.

It didn't take long to z-out the register. She had barely taken in three hundred dollars today and Saturday was her busy day. She didn't like to admit it, but the Starbucks and Dunkin Donuts around the corner were taking their toll on her steady customers.

She tucked the receipts into her portfolio and grabbed her purse on her way through the kitchen. Quickly she punched in the alarm code before heading into the paved area where her Land Rover was parked.

Belle lived in a cottage that used to be the caretaker's house on a large estate. The estate was now broken up into a dozen elite condos that rimmed a nine-hole golf course and private pond. Belle's enviable location gave her unlimited access to the course, clubhouse and pool but she also enjoyed her own privacy. After her split from Daniel, she had used her share of the house money to buy the cottage and she was eternally happy that she had. She loved her rose arbor and the side porch that overlooked her tangled, wild garden. On a warm spring evening, she enjoyed nothing better than relaxing on one of the worn, wide-slatted rockers and inhaling the verdant richness of her dew soaked lawn.

Tonight was such a night. She showered leisurely and shampooed her shoulder length curls, toweling them dry and merely scrunching them with her fingers in lieu of a hairdryer. She pulled a comfortable, short lilac and gray sheath from her closet and inspected it appraisingly. It would do. It clung to her curvy shape and offered a tantalizing glimpse of her ample cleavage and long legs. She slid on a pair of light charcoal stockings and tucked her feet into a pair of low-heeled black sandals. A pair of amethyst earrings was all the jewelry she

needed. Belle always went for style coupled with comfort and the final effect was delightful; she looked perfectly at home with her own sensuality and never artificial. She threw a cashmere purple sweater over the back of the sofa and went into her snug kitchen to prepare the hors d'oeuvres and mint juleps.

At exactly 6:46 PM, Belle heard the grating sound of tires on stones and looked out the kitchen window to see Peter Mellos just getting out of his gleaming black BMW.

Heart pounding, she hurried to answer the doorbell.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi," he said, handing her an armful of irises.

"Pretty," she said, admiring the frilly petals of the deep purple and lavender flowers. "They match my ensemble," she said, posing with the blooms against her dress.

She pulled him along into the kitchen where she found an enormous chipped urn to hold the long stalks.

"Have a seat," she told him, while she placed the vibrant arrangement on the scarred wood of her preacher's bench, one of her favorite antiques in the eclectic living room.

"You have a nice house," he called.

"Thank you," she said returning to the kitchen. "I thought we could have a drink on the porch, it's nicer to be outside this time of year."

He helped her carry the tray of frosty drinks and mini cheese brioches she had heated.

She pointed for him to set it on the old farm table that leaned up against the house in between the two rockers.

"You like old things, don't you?" he asked, running a hand over the pickled wood surface.

"I love to have things of substance around me," she told him. "History interests me."

"Me too," he said, biting into the flaky pastry. "Mmm, this is great, did you make them?"

"I bought them," she confessed with a smile. "Can't beat Costco's for frozen appetizers. But I did make the juleps."

He took a sip of his drink.

"You have quite a talent, Miss Belle," Pete laughed. "Want to come work for me?"

"Sorry, have a job," she retorted.

It was very pleasant to be sitting next to Peter, sipping the heady libations in the warm May dusk.

The time flew past and they both nibbled until the plate of hors d'oeuvres was reduced to crumbs and the carafe of back up drinks was gone.

"I guess we should get going," Pete said, pulling her to her feet. "Poppies is about fifteen minutes from here, right?"

"Yes, we should go," she agreed, handing him the tray when he held out his hands. "Give me a minute."

In her bedroom, Belle quickly ran her fingers through her hair and freshened her lipstick.

She met Peter in the living room and grabbed her sweater from the back of the couch.

"Let's go," she said.

Belle was keeping a mental inventory of all the thoughtful things that Peter did throughout the evening. The way he opened her car door, firmly kept her on the inside of the sidewalk as they walked to the restaurant, held the door open and pulled out her chair when she returned from the ladies room. The way he was so solicitous of her every desire was refreshing. He was a true gentleman and he was so darn nice, she felt almost let down.

His sheer size and rugged good looks made her feel that he should be behaving in a more cavemanesque manner. Not that she wanted that, but still...

The night flew by and Belle found herself laughing more than she had in months. She felt

herself relax, finally away from the financial pressures of owning and running a small business by herself. Her filet mignon melted in her mouth and the bottle of merlot they shared was smooth and robust without being harsh. She was getting giddy.

"So why did you and Nick both open restaurants?" she asked. "Oh, I get it, you're Greek so you have diner in your blood." She giggled, tipsy with the mint juleps, the wine and the company.

Peter's eyes narrowed briefly.

Then he smiled.

"Believe it or not, we come from a long line of diners," he told her. "Yup, we Mellos have always dined every night."

"Touché," she said. "But I was only kidding." She reached over to stroke the large, tanned hand that was resting by his water glass.

He captured her fingers with a smooth flip of his wrist and carried her palm to his lips.

"Stereotypes bug me," he said. "Nick went to the Culinary and I started waiting tables during graduate school. I realized that I liked restaurants." He shrugged before continuing, still holding her hand.

"I used my education to understand the business of the food industry. So really my MBA stands for Much Better Appetites. Hey, I'm still having fun and my place in Manhattan is almost running itself, now."

"Sounds like you've made a big success of it," she said.

"What about you, Isabella?" he turned her hand over and traced her lifeline with his forefinger. "I don't see a history of coffee shops here."

"I got tired of corporate America," she told him. "I like coffee and I like dessert, it seemed like a plan."

His touch was sending an electric current down to the pit of her stomach. She was completely aroused by Peter Mellos. The tan column of his neck

jutted out of the crisp white collar and she longed to reach out and caress the ridge of his Adam's apple. She leaned into his scent, which was a delicious fusion of musk and spice and maleness.

"I really enjoy your company," he murmured.

"Feel like coming back to my place," Belle offered the invitation with some trepidation. She wasn't usually so bold, but she wanted this man and she wanted him now.

He smiled warmly and didn't release her hand.

"Kind of soon," was all he said.

They stayed connected by hands for the rest of the evening.

On the drive back to her house, she schemed of ways she could seduce him into the bedroom.

At her front door, he tried to back away from their increasingly passionate kiss.

"Aren't you open tomorrow?" he asked with some concern.

"Yea, so, only in the morning."

"It's almost 1:00, Belle," he told her. "I know how hard it is to be open seven days. You need to go to sleep, babe."

She pressed up against him, pushing her breasts into his chest and molding herself to his groin.

He groaned.

"Fuck sleep," she whispered huskily.

He stiffened and she cocked her head back to look into his face.

"What?" she said jokingly. "You have virgin ears?"

He shook his head slowly, smiling ruefully.

"You are a bad girl, aren't you?"

"Peter," she said sultrily. "I am so bad, I'm good."

He held her away and the one hand that had been pressed into the curve of her buttocks smacked her half-playfully.

Her stomach flipped and she felt herself grow even wetter.

"Inside, you," he ordered.

"You're bossy," she complained.

"You have no idea," he said.

In the foyer, she leaned against the wide wooden planks of the inside wall and trapped him in her arms by locking her hands behind his back.

"Just kiss me again," she demanded.

"Now who's bossy," he asked, but complying anyway.

As he bent down, she lifted her lips to meet the soft warmth of his kiss. His tongue tenderly explored the recesses of her mouth while his fingers traveled from her hair down her spine to her ass where both his hands rested gently.

She squirmed closer and he sighed, reaching his hand around to cup the proffered breast. His fingers slid into the neckline of her dress and gently tweaked one plump nipple.

She moaned.

"C'mon, Pete, please," she murmured. "You're making me into the worst tramp."

He tucked his head into her cleavage and nuzzled first one stiff bud and then the other.

Her own fingers were running rampant over his body and she slid her hands beneath his shirt to revel in the smoothest skin she had ever felt on a man. The dark blond arrow of curls on his chest pointed down his navel and she tugged his shirt out of his waistband.

"No, Belle," he said firmly. "Not tonight. I want you too, but I want us to have the time to really enjoy each other."

"Peter," she whined, digging her nails into the curve of his hip.

"You need to learn how to take no for an answer," he said reprovingly.

"Fuck that," she whispered.

She was surprised by the sudden stinging slap he landed on her bottom. She looked at him with her mouth open.

"Hey," she said.

"Yea?" he looked at her sternly.

"What'd I do?"

"You don't have to sound like a truck driver," he scolded. "At least not with me."

"I repeat, fuck that," she taunted.

This time, there was no mistaking his intent. She tried to scoot away but to no avail. The smack was harder and her bottom tingled. And then it was repeated. Twice.

"Peter," she gulped self-consciously.

He just looked at her, his dark brown eyes like velvet in the muted light of her foyer.

"Sorry," she said softly.

"Me too," he said. "I'd love to stay, Bella, call me old-fashioned but I don't want our first date to end in the sack."

"But it's okay for it to end in a smack?"

He grinned.

"You're not only beautiful," he smiled. "You're adorable."

He held her close and rubbed the sting from her bottom.

"I'm staying at Nick and Nora's tonight," he told her. "Mind if I meet you for breakfast?"

"Sure, make me work."

He dropped a kiss on her nose and stepped into the dark night.

"Lock the door," he called over his shoulder. "And straight to bed."

"Yes sir!" Belle saluted.

He chuckled as he slid behind the wheel. He knew without a doubt that she was going to be his. He tooted the horn as he pulled out of the driveway and yelled something out his open window.

She laughed as she heard his robust "Ciao, Bella!" fly over the lawn toward her.

Belle stood in the doorway for a full minute after he was gone. She focused on the brightest star in the sky and made her wish. Then she shut the door and locked the deadbolt.

He didn't know it yet but Peter Mellos had finally met his match. Rubbing her eyes sleepily, she stumbled up to her bedroom.

But her senses were so stimulated; she cursed the absence of him in her bed and conjured up images of his angular, handsome face.

When she finally fell asleep, she dreamt of a sparkling blue sea and a handsome blond pirate who cooked her breakfast in bed.

The Barbecue

"They look so happy together," Nora whispered to Nick as they carried out the platter of marinated chicken and plates of sliced tomatoes and onions.

"I know," Nick laughed. "I've never seen Pete so mellow. He really has it bad for Belle."

Nora nudged her husband with her elbow.

"Has it good, Nicolas," she corrected.

"Belle probably behaves herself," Nick said. "Unlike some little girls who are constantly testing the limits."

"And whom are you referring to?" she asked icily as she plopped her plates down on the glass topped table.

At the clanking sound, both Belle and Peter glanced up from their perch on the garden bench closest to the pool.

"Do you guys need help?" Belle called.

"Not at all," Nora smiled brightly. "Nicky's gonna do all the work anyway, he's the master chef."

Nick glared at his wife's barely masked hostility. What was up her butt?

"Hey, Nora, you want to help me with the focaccia and other appetizers?" he said as he steered her back toward the kitchen door.

"No, I do not want to help you," she said haughtily, trying to dig her heels into the ground. It was like using a feather to stop a locomotive.

"Tough," he said shortly, propelling her up the steps into the house.

Once inside, she wheeled around and shoved him into the dishwasher.

"You big... big ape," she hissed.

"Nora, you're about thirty seconds from going over my knee and getting your sweet little rear-end paddled into a tomato," he threatened as he advanced on her.

"Sure, use brute force when logic and reason won't work," she retorted, scuttling backwards.

"What is your problem, little girl?" he asked, reaching forward to take her by the arms. He dragged her closer until she was only inches away from his face. "You have been acting like a she-goat in heat all day. Nasty, kicking and begging for a good wallop." In anger, his faint accent became stronger.

"A she-goat?" Nora lifted her lip in disgust. "Really, Nick, this is the mainland."

His eyes narrowed and grimness tightened his expression.

"I know where we are," he said softly. "I know who I am but it seems that you don't know who you are. I'm warning you now, Nora, keep this foul attitude and you will regret it."

She winced as he set her down.

Blinking back the tears that were almost clogging her vision, she gathered up the vegetable chips and yogurt dip that Nick had whipped up that morning. She couldn't explain her awful behavior; it was true that she had been hateful to Nicky all day and ever since Belle and Peter arrived, she had been worse. Their blissful happiness somehow made it even more unbearable. The truth of the matter was that after almost two months, she was starting to feel that telltale aggravation and agita that preceded her menses. She had been so sure that this was it, that she was finally pregnant. She was late, later than she had ever been. She had been riding a cloud of secret elation for almost a month now. But this morning, her emotions toppled her into bitch-mode and her stomach had already been cramping for a couple hours. So this time, it was not to be.

And Nick was such a pompous ass sometimes.

He had finished preparing the tray of spiced and grilled bread and was just setting a deep dish of fresh tomato salsa in the center.

"I'm starting the chicken," he said shortly as he left her alone in the kitchen.

"Screw you," she muttered to the slamming back door.

She poured herself a big goblet of Chardonnay and took a long swallow.

"Screw me?" Belle asked wryly. "Okay."

"Oops, sorry, Bellie-button," Nora laughed. "I was not speaking to you."

"What the hell is going on?" Belle blurted. "Pete and I are just waiting for the friggin dishes to fly."

"Not now," Nora held up her hand. "I will tell you, but not now. Just go look like you're having fun. Here, have some wine." She poured a goblet of wine for her friend and thrust it at her.

"Thanks," Belle obligingly took a sip and then made for the powder room. "Have to go freshen up, as they say."

"While you're there, why not pee?"

"Why not indeed?" Belle said in a faux British accent. "Maybe the hubby wants to make up, Nora doll, go check."

"Humph." Nora grimaced at her friend's back.

It was possible that Nick had a small, tiny point and that she was being just a little bit unreasonable. But she didn't think so.

She returned to the yard with her glass of wine in one hand and the ice bucket with the bottle in the other.

"Have enough?" Nick asked snidely.

"Not yet," she rebutted.

"Hey, Nick, need a hand with the bird?" Pete jumped up and quickly inserted himself between his brother and his sister-in-law. "It smells great."

"I can handle it," Nick said gruffly.

"Really, Peter, Nick can handle everything," Nora said rudely. "He can handle every fucking little thing that comes his way."

Peter's eyes widened and he retraced his steps to the bench.

"Nora," Nick said quietly. "Go inside please, and wait for me."

Belle was just walking down the back steps when her good friend took a swig of wine and slammed her drink down on the table. Luckily, nothing shattered.

"I will not go inside, Nicolas, and you will not always be the one in charge," she shouted, stomping closer to her deceptively calm husband.

"Nora," he said in a way that made Belle's heart skip three beats. "Go inside."

"Fuck you," she hissed.

In only a matter of seconds, Nick had her arm in his iron grasp and he had pulled her over to one of the wrought iron chairs at the table.

"Nicky," she shrieked.

It was too late.

He was already sitting and she was flung face down over his massive thighs in such a blur of movement, she thought she was flying.

Her short sundress was pushed up to the middle of her back and his hand came down like a steam shovel against her panty-clad bottom.

She yelped.

He spanked her harder than he had ever spanked her and she was sobbing instantaneously.

"Nick, stop," she wailed. "Please, stop."

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

His hand was relentless and she squirmed frantically, trying to evade the punishing blows. Her face was three shades of red as she struggled to get away. She was mortified that he was spanking her in front of Belle and Peter.

After twenty fierce smacks, he set her back on her feet and brushed her skirt down.

"Apologize to your guests," he ordered.

"You bastard," she squeaked, backing away from him. "How dare you. How dare you treat me like this, you big, Greek gavonne." Her lapse into Italian was probably not the most prudent action on her part.

He lunged and she wasn't able to sidestep his enormous paws. He tossed her over his shoulder as

though she were a sack of rice and carted her toward the back door.

"Watch the chicken," he yelled to his silent, but amused older brother. "Please," he added as he shoved open the door and carried his cursing and red-faced wife inside.

"You big nasty oaf," Nora was pummeling his back with her tiny fists and trying to kick his groin, but he had her legs clamped by his arm and he reached up and slapped her flailing backside with one iron hand.

"Nick!!!!" she yelled.

"You are going to get your mouth washed out before I do another thing," he told her. "But your spanking is not over, not by a long shot."

"You can't do that," she cried.

He ignored her protests and lugged her upstairs to their bedroom and straight through to the bathroom.

He flipped the seat down on the toilet and dropped her on her sore butt onto the hard plastic oval.

"Ouch," she squealed.

He reached for the bar of Ivory soap that was on the vanity sink.

"Open your mouth," he ordered.

"No," she murmured, as close-mouthed as possible.

He just looked at her, one black eyebrow quirked upward.

"S'not fair," she said through her teeth.

He didn't say anything. Just looked at her with those eyes, expectantly – sure of her ultimate obedience.

Asshole, she thought.

A string of recriminations churned from the bile of her outrage and she couldn't stop it. She opened her mouth and...

Big mistake.

Incoming.

The white cake of soap sat on her tongue and she almost gagged. She knew from past experiences that spitting the soap out would not be the best course of action.

He leaned back against the sink with his arms folded in front of him, his dark brown eyes reproachful and stern as he looked at her.

She avoided his eyes and stared at the ceiling.

He was unfair. He didn't know.

She wanted a baby more than anything.

And all day long she had punished him because she wasn't having one.

The tears were streaming down her face before she could stop them and then she tasted salty Ivory.

He reached out and removed the bar of soap. She leaned over the sink and washed her mouth out with water until the soap taste was gone.

Silently he enfolded her in his warm arms. He scooped her up and carried her to the bed where he sat on the edge and rocked her until she stopped crying.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"I thought I was pregnant," she choked. "I was almost a month late. I was so sure and then today, I felt that old familiar feeling again. I was so pissed and sad. I'm sorry I was such a bitch."

"Baby," he crooned, kissing her tenderly. "Why didn't you tell me earlier? I'm sorry I had to punish you but you were out of control. You should have told me."

"I know," she agreed forlornly. "I was an idiot, but I wanted to surprise you. Ha, surprise!"

"Nora, don't do that," he kissed her warmly. "We'll have a baby when it's time for us to have a baby. Right now, we have us and that's the most important thing in the world."

"I love you, Nicky," she whispered, hugging his rock hard chest.

"I love you too," he said. "But I still owe you a spanking."

"What!" she exclaimed. "You already spanked the crap out of me."

"Evidently not," he said dryly.

"Oops, sorry," she made a face and quickly kissed him again before he got mad.

"We'll save it," he told her ominously.

"That's generous of you."

"I thought so." He carefully set her on her feet and prodded her toward the bathroom. "Go wash your face and come back outside. I'll smooth things over with my brother and Belle."

In the bathroom, Nora scrubbed her face with a washcloth and brushed her teeth clean of the vague memory of soap. She inspected herself closely and was satisfied that she looked normal. Belle was going to be all over her for an explanation and she just didn't feel like going into it again.

Oddly enough, both Peter and Belle were chatting casually with Nick when she joined them. Belle handed her a fresh glass of wine and pushed the plate of focaccia toward her.

"Eat some of this, Nor," she urged. "It's incredible. Pete and I have almost finished it."

The chicken was sizzling on the grill and Nora's stomach rumbled. Suddenly she was starving.

The rest of the evening passed pleasantly as they dined by the pool and drank wine; later, they sat on the edge with their feet dangling in the cool water. Nora longed for privacy so that she and Nick could skinny dip in the pool and then finish their night in the hot tub. Her bottom was still smarting a little from his earlier ministrations and her back was starting to ache. She needed his hands on her in the way that only his hands could be on her. She felt so cherished and so loved when Nick Mellos was stroking her back, rubbing her bottom and caressing her breasts.

God, she was horny.

Finally the other couple was gathering their things. Saying goodbye. Promising to meet at Pete's diner for brunch next week.

"Bye," Nora called as she and Nick walked them around to their car.

Once Pete's BMW had turned the corner, Nora jumped into her husband's arms.

"Pool, James," she ordered.

"At your service, madam," he said, bowing.

And for the rest of the night, Nora Mellos got everything her heart desired from the big brawny man who was her husband.

Cooling Off

It was already 95 degrees at 9:00 that Sunday morning. They had to leave in an hour for Peter's place in Manhattan. Nora leaned her face over the cool air that was streaming from the air conditioner and held her hot blond curls off her moist skin. Nick loved fresh air and open windows and wouldn't concede to central air so she had to make do with a few cranky window units. The bedroom only got cool if they kept it blasting on high cool with all the doors shut. The lump of sheet that was her husband began stirring and she stuck a finger in the middle of it, prodding it gently. She wished she could let him sleep longer; it had been a brutal night at the restaurant. They had served a hundred and thirty dinners and turned every table three times. And the fans in the kitchen had gone on the fritz twice during the busiest hours of the night.

Nick groaned and dug his hands under the pillow. The folded pair of pants at the foot of the bed shot to the floor as he stretched his feet.

"It's too hot," Nora sighed as she sank back down on the bed. "Call and cancel. Pleeeease, Nicky."

"Nora, you know I can't," Nick rolled over and sat up, pushing the sheet down to his toes. "Pete always comes out here."

"Duh," she said smartly. "We have a friggin pool, genius."

He rolled toward her and captured her with one arm, yanking her back to his damp chest. He growled like a bear in her ear and nipped her lobe.

"Don't be a smartass," he told her, reaching around to cup her naked buttocks. Gently he squeezed the plump flesh and then cracked her once with an open palm. "Speaking of the pool, let's take a dip."

"Suits?" she queried, reaching back to rub the sting out of her butt cheek.

"Unless you feel like shocking the neighbors," he retorted.

"Oh, like we've never done that," she said sarcastically.

"Wear a suit, Mrs. Mellos," he told her. "Not that the flimsy scraps of material you call a bathing suit are going to protect you from a wolf like me."

"Promises, promises," Nora taunted as she escaped into the bathroom to find her suit.

She hit the water first and dove to the bottom before gliding across the pool to the far side where the diving board was. She was bobbing against the tiled side, when she noticed the mess on the table.

Shit.

Nick was going to have a fit, she thought, once he realized that their dishes from Thursday night were still on the table, along with the platter of leftover steak and the bowl of salad. She had promised him that she would get rid of the mess Friday morning. He was adamant about not leaving garbage in the yard. Their neighbor down the street had surprised a black bear feeding on the koi in their pond only two weeks ago. And there were a multitude of raccoons and skunks in the neighborhood as it was. At that time, Nick had laid down the law about uncovered litter and garbage in their yard.

He nailed a latch to the little shed that housed their garbage cans and instructed Nora that she was not to leave bowls of fruit or chips around the pool.

He was so emphatic about the no garbage rule, she was surprised that he had allowed her to entice him into bed on Thursday night; mostly it was because she was finally finished with her period and was desperate for sex, as was he. She had shooed him into the house after their late night feast without letting him pick up anything, promising to clean everything in the morning before leaving for the restaurant.

And Friday morning, Belle had called. They started chatting about today's brunch date and Nora

lost track of the time. And then her sister had called. And before she knew it, she was late. She forgot all about clearing the table.

Nick would not be pleased.

For just a moment, Nora wondered what it would be like to have a husband who didn't spank. Most women got away with loads more than she ever did. If she were married to a normal man, she wouldn't be fretting in the pool, worried that she was going to get her bottom blistered for an innocent little mistake. Nick was so unrelenting when it came to his damn rules.

Well, maybe he wouldn't notice.

"Nora Elizabeth!"

He noticed. She glanced up and saw him standing by the mess on the table. He was frowning and his eyebrow was doing the one-up-one-down thing.

"Yes, Nicolas Michael?" she replied sweetly.

"I told you about leaving this trash in the yard," he bellowed. "It's not a joke. You told me you would take care of this and three days later and God knows how many critters have sampled it."

"Lighten up, Nicky, nothing's been near it."

"You don't know that," he told her angrily. "I happen to disagree, especially since I'm looking at a trail of greasy foot marks that leads right into the grass."

Ooops.

"You know what's gonna happen when I get in the pool," he said.

"What?" she asked, knowing the answer.

"You're getting a wet bare bottom spanking and then you're getting out to take care of the mess all by yourself."

"You can't spank me out here," she told him.

"Again, I disagree," he said, diving in.

She didn't have a chance to try to swim past him. He caught her in his arms and pulled her to the side.

"Nick, for once, give me a break," she cried.

"Why, so I can come home and find you tangling with a bear someday?"

Nick didn't listen to any more of her protests, he merely pulled her to the side and pushed her over the tiled edge until she was mostly out of the pool and her bottom was an uplifted target. He grabbed a buoyant, fabric pool pillow and shoved it under her hips to elevate her buttocks even more. Yanking the bottom of her tankini down to her knees, he swung back his hand, letting the open palm crack down on her bare flesh. Her breasts ground into the warm, slightly rough tile and she groaned.

SMACK! SMACK!

"Shit, Nick," she muttered. "You're hurting me and the whole fucking neighborhood can hear you."

SMACK! SMACK!

"Do you recall a little meeting you had last week with a bar of soap?"

"Sorry," she mumbled. Oh, he was diabolical.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

His hand felt like a paddle on her wet skin. She started crying in earnest and tried to squirm out of his grip but his hand was inflexible. Her tears dripped onto the concrete below her face and her rear end throbbed as he continued the punishment.

Finally he stopped and when she tried to ease back into the pool to cool her burning skin, he stopped her. He quirked his eyebrow toward the table and nodded his head.

What a beast, she thought as she hurriedly went to pull up the bottom of her bathing suit. Again he stopped her.

"Take it off," he ordered her. "I want to see those red cheeks and know that you've learned your lesson."

"Nick," she wailed.

"Nora, you know as well as I do that our closest neighbor never goes outside, especially in the summer and this yard is completely secluded." He laughed. "A fact you have made mention of many

times when you decided you wanted to make love in the hot tub."

Nora kicked the bottom of her suit in his direction and was gratified when it landed on his head.

Grumbling and bare-bottomed, she set about clearing off the disgustingly congealed dishes from the table. It took three trips to remove everything. She left the dirty dishes soaking in a dishpan of hot, soapy water and returned to the pool.

Nick was leisurely swimming laps. When he saw his wife standing expectantly by the side of the pool, he swam over to her. She looked adorable with her cheeks flushed with embarrassment and her bottom cheeks rosy with his handprints.

"I hope you remember in the future what will happen if you forget again," he told her.

"Yea, yea," she murmured, rolling her eyes as she stared past his shoulder.

"Excuse me," he frowned at her snotty attitude.

"I will remember, now can I come back in?" her voice was petulant and Nick was tempted to turn her over his knee and continue the lesson, but they didn't have much time before they had to leave for Pete's.

"Come in," he told her. "But, Nora, watch the attitude, I'm not trying to be a buster. It's because I love you and don't want you to walk into a potentially dangerous situation. You know there's too many bear around here this year."

"I get it, Nicolas," she said slowly and somewhat rudely as she stepped down into the shallow end, retrieving her bathing suit from the side.

The water felt blissfully cool on her fiery flesh and she swam away from her husband, wanting to put as much distance between her bottom and his hand.

"He was an ogre," she thought.

"She was a brat," he thought, watching her swim past him with her cute little nose in the air.

They stayed in the pool for another twenty minutes and then they both climbed out reluctantly to take showers and get ready for the sticky ride into the city.

As they drove through the Sunday traffic, Nora was silent, still harboring resentment from the earlier spanking. Sometimes she glanced over at her husband and felt an odd mixture of love, anger and complete admiration. He was so strong; she didn't know how he never gave in to the pressures of the moment. Last night when the kitchen was 110 degrees and the fans were out of commission, he had kept his cool, never yelling or losing his even sense of humor. Nora had been working in the air-conditioned dining room and yet she was snappish and perspiring by the end of the night.

But the fact was, he never gave her a break. He always expected her to conform to his incredibly high standards.

"You piss the fucking shit out of me," she said suddenly.

He turned to look at her.

A taxi blared the horn and nearly sideswiped them.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Nothing," she said, coming to her senses.

"I think it was something," he said. Carefully he pulled over and turned down a one-way street, close to the parking lot they always used. "I think it was a big something."

"Nick," she began. "I'm hot and cranky and sometimes I don't appreciate getting my ass whipped for no fucking reason."

"Was it for no reason?" He pulled into the lot and turned off the ignition. As they walked over to the attendant, who was sitting in the empty lot in a lounge chair reading a newspaper, he grabbed her hand and stroked the softness between her thumb and forefinger. "I thought it was a big reason."

"Whatever," she said shortly.

"You know, I honestly didn't think it was enough and now I know it wasn't finished," he said ominously in a conversational tone.

"Nick, forget it," she said, trying to pull her hand from his grip.

"I can't forget it," he told her. "It's not doing you any good to forget it."

"I'm fine with it now," she protested, a familiar feeling of dread in her stomach. "I'm sorry I got mad."

"Hey Sam," he called to the attendant who was still engrossed in his paper. "Can we use the restroom for a minute?"

"Sure," the guy nodded, pointing to the key that was hanging on the inside wall of the tiny building.

Nick propelled her through the dingy office and unlocked the door to the unisex bathroom. Once inside, he placed paper towels on the seat of the commode and ordered his wife to bend over and put her hands in the center of the towels.

She thought about refusing. But then she looked at his resolute stance and decided against it. Sighing, she bent over. Why did she get herself into such dilemmas?

He pushed the hem of her dress up to the middle of her back and yanked her panties down below her knees.

Nora heard him unbuckling his belt and knew that she had gone too far in bitchiness.

He looped the leather and swung back before impacting with the still pink skin of his wife's buttocks.

"Oooh," she groaned, too embarrassed to yell. A fierce fire spread across her tender flesh. "Nicky, please!"

He strapped her a total of ten times and when he was done, she was crying remorsefully. She reached back to rub the pain from her stinging bottom and then leaned into him, burying her face in his neck.

"I'm sorry," she wept. "I've just been too hot and too nasty to think straight."

"I love you, peanut," he whispered.

"Love you back."

He rubbed her back and hugged her until she stopped crying.

They took turns at the tiny sink. Nora wiped the tears off her face with a wet paper towel and ran her fingers through her blond curls. Nick filled one of the Dixie cups with water and casually poured it over his wife's bent head.

"Nick!"

"I'm cooling you off," he explained.

"Thank you," she said.

She held out her hand for the cup and when he handed it to her she also filled it with water and reached up to pour it over his dark, curly head. He sputtered and smiled sweetly at her.

"Thank you, my sweet."

They emerged from the bathroom, shaking their wet heads like puppies and giggling. When they walked across the still empty lot, the attendant looked up curiously before returning to his newspaper.

Brunch

Belle was sitting in the secluded cobblestone courtyard behind The Minoan, sipping an iced coffee under the shade of a forest green awning. Terra cotta urns sprouted greenery and created privacy among the five or six wrought iron tables and chairs.

"My God," Nora sighed, sinking into the chair next to her friend. "It is too hot, even for August in New York."

"What happened to you two?" Belle looked at their wet hair.

"We baptized each other in true devotion," Nora said.

"Poor Peter has been in the kitchen since six this morning. He's upstairs taking a shower," Belle said. "Do you guys mind eating out here? It's kind of jammed inside."

"We noticed," Nick said. "What's he doing, giving it away?"

"It's a popular place," Belle said. "Especially Sunday brunch. He really has a great thing going here."

"Getting ideas about changing locations?" Nora teased.

Before Belle could answer, Peter Mellos pushed open the side door from his restaurant. His blond hair was still wet from the shower and slicked back from his forehead. He wore khaki shorts and a yellow linen shirt. Surprisingly, he didn't look hot.

"Hey kids," he greeted them, dropping a kiss on Nora's cheek and squeezing his brother's shoulder. "Johnny's bringing out menus in a minute. I told him to open a nice bottle of champagne and we'll have a drink."

"Champagne?" Nick raised an eyebrow. "We must be the good company," he joked.

The waiter appeared with four of the huge brunch menus tucked under his arm, an ice bucket

with a bottle of Veuve Clicquot jutting out of it in one hand and four champagne flutes in the other.

"Hi, Johnny," Nora said. "Gotta match?"

He laughed with her and expertly unfoiled and popped the cork from the wine in one deft movement. A tiny beard of bubbles flowed down the bottle into the cloth he had wrapped around it and he filled the glasses.

They raised their glasses and looked to Peter expectantly.

"To love," Pete said with a broad smile. "More specifically to my love, Isabella Armstrong, who soon will become Isabella Mellos."

Nora shrieked.

"I never said I was changing my name," Belle protested, laughing. "Isn't Bella Mellos a little too much?"

"It's perfect," Pete said.

Everyone clinked the crystal and sipped the sparkling wine.

"Congratulations," Nick bellowed, hugging first Belle and then Pete. "May you be as happy as we are, and that's saying a lot."

"Nicky," Nora cooed. "How sweet you are." As she sat back down on the hard iron chair, she shifted slightly when one of the carved leaves in the pattern bit into her sore bottom. "But something doesn't sit right with that statement," she murmured for his ears only.

"Careful, little girl," was the only reply she got. But suddenly she felt a large, warm hand on her leg. Under cover of the long tablecloth, he rummaged beneath her short skirt, massaging the silky skin of her upper thighs and lightly pinching the inner flesh of her crotch.

"You're such a pervert," she whispered, pressing her hand into his groin as she leaned over to kiss him.

"Ditto," he said.

The waiter returned at that moment to take their order.

"So, when's the happy occasion?" Nora asked as she rattled off her choices and handed her menu back to Johnny.

"We'd like to get married soon," Belle told her. "Maybe November if we can swing it."

"Reception at Nick & Nora's Place," Nick offered. "I'll give you such a deal, but I won't cook. At least, not during the party."

"That would be wonderful," Belle said warmly. "I'd like to see if we could get the chapel at St. Catherine's for the ceremony. What do you think, Nor?"

"Perfect," she agreed. "And the leaves will be beautiful in November, we could do a gorgeous harvest table and a warm squash or pumpkin soup to start."

"Filet for entrée," Nick put in. "With mushroom tart and a salad of field greens, apple and walnuts with a little goat cheese."

"Peppercorn sauce for the filet?" Nora asked, tilting her head to the side.

"Maybe a horseradish crème fraîche," Nick countered.

"Mulled wine," Nora said excitedly. "We'll have a fire going and clear out the tables by the hearth. Nice for the cocktail hour, huh?"

"Could we do individual crème brûlée," Belle wondered. "We're only going to have about 60 people."

"Sure we could," Nick assured her. "What kind of cake?"

"Hello?" Peter waved his hand. "Am I invited?"

Everyone turned and looked at him. There was a small silence before the chatter started again.

"Has to be vanilla," Belle said. "And no lard in the icing. Butter cream only with real custard filling."

"Yum," said Nora.

"Very funny, people," Peter said dryly. "I thought we'd just do gyros and baklava."

"You better let Nick handle the fine dining, Peter," Belle laughed. She didn't notice the dark glance her fiancé shot her way.

"Thanks, Bella," he told her. "I was only kidding."

"I know, hon," she said absentmindedly, leaning closer to Nora to show her some photos from a magazine. "Do you like this dress, Nor?"

At that moment, Johnny arrived with their first course.

They enjoyed a leisurely few hours of food and drinks. Beginning with a delectable assortment of appetizers, they progressed to entrée's that varied from eggs benedict to salmon en croute and sizzling swordfish with lime butter and salsa.

"These are fabulous," Nora exclaimed, biting into her second crusty sun dried tomato roll. "I've never had them before. Nicky, you have to get them."

"C'mon, Pete, give," Nick laughed, swiping his own roll in the dish of seasoned olive oil. "They're great. Local?"

"Of course," Pete said, gesturing for Johnny to refill the glasses with more champagne.

"You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Not really." Pete shrugged and sipped his wine.

"Peter, don't be an ass," Belle said, causing everyone's eyebrows to raise. "If your brother wants to know, tell him."

Nick reached out a hand and patted Belle's arm.

"We're just fooling, Belle," he told her. "He's scoring big points with this bread. Eventually he'll tell me and I'll pay a fortune to have it delivered to Jersey. Then we'll be even."

"I don't get this brother rivalry thing," she grumbled. "Why not just help each other now?"

"Nobody knows," Nora said solemnly. "It's a dark Mellos family secret. Each trying to top the other."

"Well, I think it's stupid," Belle said stiffly. "Nick is a highly respected restaurateur and he's family."

Tell him where the fucking bread comes from, for God's sake."

"Bella," Pete said gently. "Calm down."

"Right," she said. "I'm calm."

Something imperceptibly shifted between the newly engaged couple and the rest of the afternoon dragged until Nick and Nora made their goodbyes and took off for home and the pool.

On the way to the car, Nick shook his head.

"I think Belle is going to have an awakening today," he said wryly. "Pete did not look very happy when we were saying goodbye."

"Poor Belle," Nora said. "But she'll get over it. I did."

"That's my girl," he bent down and kissed her tenderly.

Pete and Belle sat at the cleared table in the courtyard and stared at each other.

"I don't know what your problem is," Belle began.

"No, you don't," he said flatly. "But you will. We're going upstairs."

"Says who?" she blustered, stalling for time. There was a new strictness to Pete that she wasn't altogether happy about.

"Says me," he answered. "C'mon, Isabella. It's time."

"Time?" she lifted her hands. "What are you talking about, it's time? Are you some kind of Jedi Knight? Am I going to get my special powers? Is this an initiation or something?"

"Stop talking," he told her. "We're going upstairs now."

Peter's apartment was spacious and surprisingly quiet. His furniture was large and muted with big primitive throw pillows and wide oak floorboards. His artwork was large and silent, with immense portraits and white bleached walls of cottages by water. He directed her into the living room first and jerked his thumb toward the sofa.

"Does that mean sit?" she asked sarcastically. "Am I to infer by your gestures that you want me to sit?"

"While you can," was his cryptic answer.

"What is this about, Peter?"

"I have a restaurant, Bella," he said. "I am not some bum off the street. I am a professional and I wish you understood that."

"So?" she said snottily. "I have a coffee shop and I'm a professional too. What does that mean?"

"Do you know what kind of food cost I run? 26%. That's a consistent 26%. And with the bar, I do a 20% beverage cost. Take a guess at what Nick's costs are," he said, tilting her chin in his direction.

"I don't know," she said. "And so what?"

"So, don't put me down in front of my family, Belle." He was very serious.

For a second, she felt a twinge of remorse. But then she mentally shook herself; he was just being silly. She hadn't put him down.

"For Christ sake, Peter," she began. "You have to learn how to take a joke."

"I think you have to learn how to respect your man, Bella," he said grimly.

"Oh my God," she exclaimed. "You sound like Billy Roy Rufus Lee Jones talking to his gal Sally Sue Bob. I may be from Kentucky but I am not a hillbilly, Peter."

"Don't push me, Belle," he told her, yanking her off the couch and steering her toward his bedroom.

"I think maybe you're pushing me," she said indignantly. "And I don't feel like making love at this moment, so you can just turn me right around."

"I wasn't planning on making love, either," he said flatly. "Not at this moment."

They were in his bedroom. Her eyes searched the spacious room for some escape, but aside from a tiny iron balcony, there was no exit.

He spun her around and gripped her by the upper arms, predicting correctly that she would try to flee. She was forced to look into his solemn face.

"You love me?" he asked gruffly.

"I love you so much I almost can't even breathe when I look at you," she said truthfully.

"So why are we fighting?"

"Because you're a pig headed boor sometimes who doesn't know his ass from a hole in the wall," she retorted. "Do you love me?"

"I love you more than morning in Crete with the sun on my face and the brightest sky reflected in the bluest sea that God ever created."

"So you're saying what? That you love me?"

"Yes!"

"Fine, so what's this about?"

She tried to shake his iron fingers off but they didn't budge.

"It is about respect, Isabella. And your lack thereof," he said sternly. "We have pledged to share our lives, our bodies and our hearts and souls. I respect myself and I respect you. I feel that you should do both also."

"But I do," she protested.

"Not when you poke fun of me," he countered. "Not when you compare my life to my brother's. I don't like it."

"Well maybe you should get used to having a little fun in your life," she quipped.

"Well maybe you should get used to going over my knee and getting your bottom spanked."

"Peter!" she cried.

"It's gonna happen, Bella," he said implacably. "You might as well accept it."

"Why should I accept it," she asked hotly, while her stomach was flipping over at the thought and her panties were getting wet.

"Because you need it," he told her. "Come on."

Without further warning, he sat down on the bed in one agile movement and spun her across his hard thighs. Belle's dark curls fell over her face and

swept the hand knotted fringe of his Persian dhurrie.

"Peter," she yelled. "You can't do this."

"Yes, I can."

"Well, maybe you shouldn't, then." She was trying to reach back and swat his hands away from the waistband of her shorts.

"Definitely I should." He successfully managed to insinuate his fingers beneath her belly to undo the snap and he yanked them down to her knees.

"I don't think I'm going to like it." She was horrified at the humiliating position she was in but at the same time she felt like laughing at the matter of fact manner in which he was going about this.

"You probably won't."

A cool breeze tickled her bottom and she realized he had removed her panties as well.

"You remember what happened to Nora last week?" he asked. "That's pretty much an old Mellos family remedy. You'll have to get used to it." He began stroking her bare bottom, caressing the smooth curve of her upper thigh.

"Pete, it's archaic," she protested, starting to squirm.

"Yea, so?" He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her sensitive skin.

"It's barbaric," she gasped, clutching at straws while his persistent fondling was driving her wild.

"Hardly," he snorted. "It's my woman getting her fanny paddled when she disrespects me or acts like a brat."

"It sounds barbaric," she countered.

"Okay," he suddenly stopped stroking and drew back his hand. SLAP!

"I'm a barbarian."

"Ouch!" she yelped.

SMACK! SMACK!

He began spanking her seriously with a steady rhythm and a hard hand. She groaned and tried to wiggle out of his grip.

He held her firmly with his left hand pressing into the small of her back. When her hands flailed at him, he caught them and held them by the wrists against her back. Her tank top was sliding up her back and she felt her breasts bobbing against his muscular calf.

In the few months that they had been dating, Pete had occasionally swatted her playfully or alluded to tanning her hide if she didn't behave, but once warned, she had rarely caused him any further trouble. This was the first time he was actually disciplining her and she found the concept completely erotic and wonderful. However, the reality was far different from the concept and she was eventually wailing in earnest and trying to escape his punishing hand.

"Peter, please stop," she cried.

Remarkably he did. For a moment, he gently rubbed her burning cheeks and soothed her.

"It's the first time, Bella," he told her. "So I won't be too hard on you. Only ten more and then you have fifteen minutes in the corner to practice your apology."

"Ten!" she twisted around to glare at him. "Fuck that, Mellos, you're not hitting me ten more times."

"Okay," he agreed. "Twenty."

When she started to argue, he gave her a sharp slap in the center of her buttocks. Tears formed in her eyes and she sniffed loudly.

Once she was quiet, he began talking.

"Isabella, I will never hit you," he said gently. "Hitting is abusive and completely disrespectful. I love you, remember – more than Crete, and what we do here is not abuse. It's love."

"I love you, too," she said softly.

"So, you understand when you curse and badmouth me, you hurt us and I can't allow that. So, this is punishment but it's also love."

"Hmm," she wouldn't agree with him. She couldn't.

"Twenty more," he told her. "Then the corner."

Belle stared at the pattern in the rug. She stared at the grooves between the hardwood floorboards. When the silence behind her grew weightier than a boulder pressing against her back, she turned around and looked into his face.

He was waiting. Stern kindness in his rich brown eyes. A wave of longing swept over her and she melted.

"Okay," she told him. "Yes. I accept it."

The last twenty spanks were hard ones. He knew how to find the tender spots on her bottom and she winced when he hit a particularly delicate area.

"Oww," she shrieked.

SMACK! SMACK!

Her bottom was a throbbing, fiery mass of flesh when he finally stopped.

"Okay, Bella," he said, lifting her gently off his lap. "Bottom bare and into the corner. I am going to expect some words from you. Fifteen minutes."

Face burning, she stepped out of her linen shorts and rolled down her panties. Kicking them aside, she headed for the corner he was pointing toward. There wasn't much to look at besides a small, framed photo of his parents on a boat and a Botero print. She studied his mother's laughing face and his father's grin and wondered if Stefano Mellos spanked his golden haired bride. Probably. Peter and Nick must have learned it somewhere. Thalia Mellos looked completely happy and content in the arms of her dark haired fisherman. Their happiness in the photo was a beautiful, tangible thing. Belle felt a sliver of extreme bliss as she imagined herself and Peter in that photo, on that boat, sailing into the future.

She tried not to think of what she looked like now, with a burning, red-splotched ass that felt about as big as her car. She was thirty-six years old and not as firm as she liked to be. She had felt herself jiggling and shaking under Peter's

unrelenting hand and she was embarrassed by her lack of toned muscle.

Oh well, he was marrying her. She knew without a doubt that he loved and thoroughly enjoyed her body so if he wasn't complaining, why should she care.

"Bella, time's up." He had been so quiet in the room; she had almost forgotten he was there.

She turned around to see him crooking a finger at her. She walked to the foot of the bed and stood in front of him, her cheeks pink and her eyes lowered.

"Did you think of anything while you were in the corner?" he asked gravely.

He reached forward and cupped her tingling buttocks, pulling her closer.

"I'm sorry that you thought I was disrespectful," she said quietly. "I know I tease you sometimes, but I love you more than anything. I would never hurt you on purpose, Peter. You mean too much to me."

"Okay," he said. "Apology accepted."

"So, you forgive me?"

"Of course, baby." He pulled her face into his and kissed her gently.

She groaned.

He enveloped her in his huge arms and tugged her onto his lap where he slipped her tank top up over her arms and bent down to nuzzle her breasts. He quickly yanked off her sports bra and then she was naked in his arms. The tangle of dark curls that beckoned his fingers was moist with her own juices and he expertly massaged her clitoris until she was writhing against his belly. In seconds, her thighs were slick with wetness and she eagerly divested him of his shorts and shirt.

"You are a handful," he whispered.

"More than a handful's too much," she informed him, thrusting her perky but not gigantic breasts into his face.

"How 'bout a mouthful," he murmured, descending upon one erect nipple and tonguing it fiercely before taking it into his mouth. His fingers were tantalizing her by alternately rubbing and plunging into her sopping sex.

She came in a huge shuddering movement and stiffened and then collapsed over him, like honey.

He wasn't through with her yet and he made her cum again and again before finally diving into her warm, ready body. They clutched each other in deep, sweaty joy and fell onto the bed, completely sated and happy.

"You are one helluva pain in the ass," Belle murmured. "I am almost dead as I speak."

"So what did you think of the sun dried tomato rolls?" he asked. "Weren't they outrageous? They'd be good for the dinner."

"You're going to let your brother know your bread source?" She pretended outraged surprise.

"I'll have them drop shipped to Nicky's place," he said.

She laughed.

"No more talk, Mr. Mellos," she instructed. "Even if it is about the wedding."

"What do you suggest?"

"Just cook, baby," she teased, rolling over and taking him with her.

Reserving Judgment

Nora shook her head and examined the reservation book one more time. It was impossible. She was studying tonight's seating schedule and her heart was flipping over in dread. Tonight was Saturday night and Table 5 was booked four times, Table 3 was booked first at 6:00 and again at 6:45, and then again at 8:00. Who had screwed up the book like this?

She knew the answer. Amanda.

Nora groaned. She had literally created this debacle herself by skipping out early last night.

Nick had warned her.

"Nora, don't leave Amanda with the book, she doesn't know how to take reservations."

"Nicky, lighten up," had been her flippant reply. She had wanted to go shopping with Belle. The weeks to the wedding were rapidly diminishing and there was still so much to arrange.

"Okay, but listen up," her husband sounded like a coach. "If there are any mistakes, or screw-ups tomorrow night, it's your butt."

She had made a face at him and then kissed him.

"Don't worry," she said, flying out the door.

Well, now she was worrying. Saturday night was their premiere night of dining; they made more than half of their weekly sales on Saturday night. And Amanda had taken far too many reservations for the seating they had available. Well, Nora still had to confirm the tables; there were always cancellations.

Feeling a bit more positive, she poured herself a mug of freshly brewed coffee and carried the phone and a napkin filled with cookies over to the table near the door where she usually sat in between service.

An hour and a half later and she was literally pulling her blond curls into straightness. Not only

did everyone confirm, but she had also added ten new names to the waiting list.

Arghhhh!

She knew she should go into the kitchen and come clean to Nick. He was as good at maneuvering tables as he was at cooking and she needed help.

But he would be mad. And for sure she would get her butt whacked. She just didn't want to get spanked. She was stupid for leaving the restaurant on a Friday night and she was stupider for leaving the reservation book in the hands of a novice college student hostess. But she wasn't stupid enough to want to end up face down over her burly husband's lap with either his hand or that damn ruler creating havoc on her rear end.

She would talk to Belle.

She tucked the portable phone in her purse and picked up the clipboard with the reservation sheets and floor plans.

Belle was sympathetic.

"What am I going to do?" Nora wailed.

"I don't know, but I feel really guilty," her friend said, running a hand over her dark head. "It's not that cold out, how 'bout outdoor café?"

"It's friggin October, Belle!"

"Okay, not outside." Then Belle snapped her fingers excitedly. "I know, you can use my place."

"What?"

"We can tell them that we're doing a neighborhood night and they get the option to dine in the beautifully upscale dining room at Belle's."

Nora cocked her head to the side. It wasn't a terrible idea. The food could definitely stay hot if they used covers and it was only thirty feet across the alley to Belle's back door. She would have to schedule another waiter but that was possible.

"Bellie-button, you are a life saver," she cried, hugging the other woman and spinning her around. "We can not only accommodate at least ten tables, but you can get some much needed exposure."

"You think I'm dumb?" Belle laughed. "So go ask Nick if we can do it."

Nora stopped short and frowned at her buddy.

"You think I'm dumb?" she asked. "My husband will rant and rave and cause holy hell you know where if I tell him about this."

"Nora," Belle began. "I don't know how you can keep it a secret. He's going to know that there are more orders than he has room for. Just tell him. Fess up and maybe he'll let it slide."

"Haven't you learned anything about the Mellos male? Don't you know that they never let anything slide?"

Belle smiled ruefully. Actually, she did know that. Peter Mellos, her very beloved fiancé had driven that point home quite succinctly not a week ago. She had mouthed off over some ridiculous event, not even worth fighting about and he had taken her to task for it, in his inimitable way – over his knee.

"Okay, babe, I hear you," Belle said, grinning. "But if I were you, I would tell Nick right now and take his medicine because later will definitely be worse, right?"

"Let's just get your place ready," Nora said. "Can you close now so that we can set up the tables and create some Nick & Nora atmosphere?"

"I am at your disposal, madame," Belle said, bowing deeply.

"I owe you major big time, Bella," Nora told her.

Nora felt somewhat guilty as she carried armfuls of linen and racks of glasses and ice buckets across the alley to Belle's place. She was used to sharing her doings with her husband. But by 4:00, Belle's cozy dining room looked elegant and very charming. The tables were set with their signature oil lamps and low bowls of flowers. Belle had plenty of CD's that invoked a calm and delightful mood setting. All that remained was to call the patrons and inform them of the location change. Nora chose names of

clients that she knew and everyone was charmed by the novelty of the situation.

"As long as we're eating Nick's food, we're happy," said one woman.

"What about their coats," Belle asked. "Aside from the hooks by the front door, I don't have any place."

"I'll send over some hangers and coat tags," Nora said. "You can hang them in the kitchen."

"What did Nick say when he heard the count for tonight?"

"He was ready to shit a brick," Nora giggled. "But once I told him, there was room for everyone, he backed off and went back to his prep. He has a lot of prep work. For a hundred and fifty people. He will be way too tired to take care of business if he finds out."

They both laughed at that remark.

"Well, gotta run," Nora said. "Terry is coming to work just your room. She should be here shortly. I've already told Antonio that he's bussing here and running food. You just have to greet 'em and seat 'em. Call me on my cell if you need anything."

"Okay, kiddo, keep the faith," Belle gave her friend a high five and waved goodbye.

Nora was surprised by how smoothly everything was going. Belle called her occasionally and let her know the status of the tables. Everyone was charmed by the different locale and loved the intimate setting of the smaller coffee shop. Belle's Fifties collectibles and art only served to enhance the dining experience.

Back at Nick & Nora's Place, the dining room filled up and emptied out according to plan. It couldn't have gone better if it was a normal night. The kitchen was pumping out the food perfectly in sync with the flow of the front of the house. No one waited and no one was rushed through a course. It was a perfect night of dining.

It was 10:00 and Nora was finally relaxing. The last seating was in and most of the orders were taken. She raced through the alley to Belle's.

"We are bad," Nora said, doing a little dance of victory. "We are woman, hear us roar!"

"We bad, we bad," Belle said, emulating Richard Pryor's lines in the movie Silver Streak. "What a fun night, I had such a blast."

"Hi there," Nora waved warmly to a table of four in the window. "Belle, Nicky never knew what hit him. We killed. What a night. He can never complain 'cause I made us a shitload of money tonight. And some of that is yours, girlfriend."

"I'm just happy for the publicity," Belle protested. "I got the benefit of almost forty people knowing that I'm here."

"So, come back over tonight and we'll celebrate with a drink," Nora told her friend.

"Right," said Belle.

Nora didn't realize that one of the men from the table in the window was trying to get her attention. She didn't see him following her and was thus unprepared when she pushed open the door from the alley into the coffee area of her restaurant to find him behind her.

"Nora," he said. "I just wanted to congratulate you on the night. What a great idea, we had a blast at Belle's. I just wanted to tell you and Nick personally."

"Thanks, Glen," she said sweetly. "I'm so glad that you enjoyed it. We're always trying to think of ways to make it fun. I'm glad you enjoyed tonight."

She was hoping he would turn around and leave. She was so desperately hoping that.

"Let me commend Nick on his new endeavor," Glen said. He burst past her in a flurry of energy and dragged her with him into the kitchen.

Oh shit.

Nick looked up from the two salmon plates he was preparing. His dark eyebrows rose quizzically at the appearance of a patron in the kitchen. Nora

knew enough to advise him to come out to the table rather than let the customer walk into the kitchen.

He set the plates aside and nodded to Nora to pick them up.

"Table 2," he told her.

Heart thudding, she complied, taking the two dishes back out to the dining room.

She met Richard, the runner on the way and handed him the plates in a hurry.

"2," she said shortly, turning back to the kitchen.

Too late. Glen was regaling a visibly confused Nick with tales of his night at Belle's.

"Stroke of genius, man," Glen was saying. "I think we should cultivate a spirit of community. I'm going to tell everyone I know about this, I think you did a great thing. Neighborhood Night is okay."

Nick nodded and shook the man's hand, laughing jovially along with the man.

When Glen left, Nick turned and impaled her with his stare.

"Nora," he said harshly. "In the office now, please."

Nora blanched at his tone. She stood frozen by the kitchen doors, considering whether she could run. He didn't usually show his displeasure in public.

Mary and John looked up briefly at his tone but they were swamped with orders and didn't have the time to speculate.

"Johnny, there's only one table of entrée's left, call me in the office when they get fired," he said shortly as he grabbed his wife on the way through the double doors.

"Nick, please," she cried as he swept her through the coffee area to the basement stairs.

"Save it," he said.

He prodded her in front of him and quickly unlocked the office door with his key. He latched the door and spun her around.

"I don't have much time," he said. "So you better talk fast."

"Nicky," Nora began, inching away from him.

He was having none of that. He grabbed her by the wrist and yanked her over to his desk where he kicked the rolling desk chair into the center of the room and plopped down into it. She was contained by the iron grip of his legs.

"I screwed up," she confessed. "Amanda made a complete botch of the book and I didn't know what to do. Belle and I decided to use her place."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Didn't want to," she said honestly. "I knew you would be pissed. And I didn't want to get spanked."

"So now you're getting spanked anyway," he said inflexibly.

She didn't say anything. She was hoping he would realize that he had no time to punish an errant wife.

"Nora, you are getting spanked and getting punished," he told her. "Two different yet completely same things. Hope you enjoy."

"Nick, don't be a bastard," she shot out.

Wrong thing to say.

"Nora," he said. "You have lied to me and used your position to escape judgment by your boss. You may own this restaurant with me but I have seniority and guess what, I'm your boss."

"Fuck that," she cried.

"I don't think so," he said sternly.

Without another word, he flung her over his knees and flipped up her dress to the middle of her back. He yanked down her pantyhose and underwear and rested his palm on her cool bottom.

"You will never try to fool me again," he yelled, swatting her buttocks with a hard hand.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He slapped the naked flesh of her bottom in hard succession. She squealed and tried to squirm out of his aim.

He tightened his grasp on her middle and continued the punishment.

"You will tell me every time you mess up," he ordered. "You will come to me with your problems as they concern the dining room." His hand was unfailingly accurate and she yelped in pain.

"Pleeeeeease, Nick," she whimpered. "Please stop. I promise. I'm sorry about tonight."

He stopped immediately and caressed her fiery bottom with his hot hand. Gently, he turned her around and lifted her off his lap.

"We were overbooked," Nora explained. "I didn't want to tell you so I talked to Belle and we decided to make two dining rooms."

"It was wrong of you, Nora," he said softly. "We're a partnership and you deliberately lied to me. That was wrong, wasn't it?"

Nora nodded. She reached back and rubbed her sore bottom. She glanced at her husband. Nick's dark eyes were so sorrowful, she felt ill. She felt as though she deserved a hundred more strokes on her bottom.

"Nicky, I am really sorry," she said truthfully. "I'm ashamed of myself. I never should have done this, it was so wrong."

"Yes, it was," he agreed.

"But it really went well, honey," she said excitedly. "We made a load of money and Belle got some priceless P.R. Everyone made out well."

"Except I don't like being bamboozled," Nick said. "But maybe we can talk to Belle about something in the future, since it went so well."

"Great," Nora exclaimed.

"Now, what I want you to do," he said strictly, leading her gently over to his desk. "Bend over and take your last 12 with the ruler."

"Nick!" she cried. "Please."

"Nora," he said firmly. "If you had come to me right away, you know you would have gotten spanked. This is for the deception."

"But," she argued, knowing he was right.

He bent her over the clean surface of the old mahogany desk and pushed her until her bottom was a perfect target.

He reached beneath her and slid open the drawer, removing the thin measuring slab of wood.

CRACK!

She squeaked in pain, reaching back automatically to shield her butt. He brushed her hand aside and slammed it down again.

And again.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

Her bottom was burning; she danced over the desk and tried to escape his relentless chastisement.

"Nick, Nick," she yelled. "Honey, stop, please."

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

She didn't want to cry, but the tears spilled over onto the shiny patina of his desk.

"Nora, you will remember that I am not to be fooled with," he said as he swung the nasty implement onto her tender flesh twice more. "Our business is too important to screw up with this kind of pettiness."

"I know, Nick," she said forlornly. "I was really wrong. I'm sorry."

"Okay," he said, lifting her up into his warm embrace.

He held her while she whimpered softly and patted her back.

Just then the intercom sounded.

Nick held down the speaker button.

"Yes?"

"Last table is fired," said John.

"Coming up," Nick said quickly. He sat his wife down in the hard chair. "Nora, you sit here for ten minutes and think about what could have gone wrong tonight and what should have happened to begin with."

He moved the clock in front of her and tapped it meaningfully.

"Ten minutes and not a second less," he told her.

She blushed in embarrassment and nodded softly.

Once he was gone, she leaned back in the chair and propped her feet on the desk, trying to alleviate the stress on her sore bottom.

He was a pain in the ass sometimes, she thought. But then again, so was she. All in all, she was very happy with the man she had married. Although she didn't enjoy punishment spankings, she loved the knowledge that her husband cared completely about her. He never let her transgressions slide past him, he always caught up to her and so she felt very secure in his love.

Not that she didn't think he was a misguided, thickheaded cretin at this moment. But he was her misguided cretin and she was okay with that.

Ten minutes went past. She got slowly to her feet and smoothed down her dress, trying not to wince as the fabric touched her fiery skin.

"Damn," she muttered, locking the office and climbing the steps.

Belle was waiting in the coffee area.

Her expression was sympathetic.

"You okay?" she asked, patting her friend on the elbow.

"I'm fine," Nora said. "And yes, you were right, I should have fessed up this afternoon."

"Poor baby," Belle murmured, steering the other woman toward the front of the restaurant. "Let's get you a nice glass of wine."

"Yes, let's," said Nora.

The bar was on the other side of the restaurant where there were a few tables for casual dining. Nora sat gingerly at Table 4 and summoned the waitress. "Two chardonnays," she requested. "Russian River, Paul knows the kind I like."

Lisa disappeared in a flash of black.

"Oh well," she said. "C'est la vie. I screwed up, I paid for it and now all's right with the world."

Belle shook her head.

"I don't understand it, but if you're okay with it, I guess I am too." She pulled out a pack of Marlboro Lights and dug around for a book of matches in her purse. "I'll be right outside."

Nora watched her friend pace the sidewalk in front of the windows as she smoked. She felt bad that maybe she had caused this current lapse into smoking since Belle had been trying to quit for months. Peter didn't know that his fiancée still enjoyed the occasional cigarette. He would not be happy with that knowledge.

Lisa returned with the two goblets of wine and a basket of bar bits.

Nora took a long sip and munched on a sesame stick.

"Hey, hon," Nick's rich bellow preceded him. "Look who's here," he said, appearing at her side with his brother, Peter.

"Pete," she cried. "How the heck are you?"

"I'm missing my woman," he said. "So where is she?"

Nora's allegiance to her friend was strong but so was the ache in her bottom. She sipped her wine and looked at her husband. Nick merely looked back at her and she thought she read a warning in his glance. She pointed mutely outside.

Peter looked out the large picture window and saw Bella blow out a long plume of smoke.

He mumbled a choice epithet and strode toward the front door.

"Geez," Nora said. "This is just one helluva night, isn't it?"

"Behave," said Nick, pulling out the chair nearest his wife and plopping down. He buried his face in her neck and gently kissed the skin beneath her ear.

"Nicky," she moaned, turning into his arms. "So, how was tonight?"

"Tonight was good," he said laconically. "But later tonight will be better."

And of course she believed him.

Jitters

Peter was furious. He had hardly said two words to her since he discovered her smoking in front of his brother's restaurant. Belle chattered nervously as they drove through the quiet streets to her house.

Finally he reached out and held up his hand.

"You can save it," he said. "In case you didn't notice, I'm pretty angry."

"What an apostle of the obvious," she thought.

"I did notice," she told him, aiming for thoughtful agreement.

"Good," he said, nodding his head. "That's great, Bella. You're halfway there. Didn't you tell me that you quit smoking two months ago?"

"I pretty much did," she argued. "I only have the occasional smoke, what's the big deal?"

It is a big deal when you're basically lying to me. You told me you quit," he repeated.

"And I did, sort of."

He actually grit his teeth and made a growling sound.

"You're not smoking any more, Isabella," he said sternly.

"Peter, don't be such a fucking bully," she snapped, making the sharp turn into her driveway. "You sound like a Victorian grizzly bear, for Christ sake."

He waited until she turned off the ignition then his hand snaked out and captured her wrist. She found herself caught in his unrelenting grip and turned physically around to face him. In the darkness, his velvety brown eyes looked almost black and she couldn't mistake the determination in his grim expression. For all his anger, he looked gorgeous, his muscular physique filling out the cable knit fisherman's sweater that his mother had sent him from the L.L. Bean catalog. His wavy blond hair was combed off his forehead and curled over the rolled neckline of the sweater. She wished he were

pulling her to him in a burst of passion rather than ire.

Belle longed to bury her fingers under that sweater and luxuriate in the warm satin of his shoulders. But he was shaking his head at her.

"I don't think you want to be taking that attitude with me right now," he told her.

"Well, I'm sorry," she sniffed. "But I don't like being lectured to like a child."

Meek contrition would have been a far better mood choice, she realized when Pete reached over and unfastened her seat belt, yanked her over the center console and out his door. He tossed her over his shoulder and retrieved her key ring from the outer pocket of her bag. Slamming shut the car door; he switched on the alarm and strode toward the front door.

From her unenviable position midway down his back, with her nose bouncing against the cream wool of his sweater, Belle watched her front lawn recede as they stepped closer to the porch. He was really mad; she could feel the rigid strength of his arm as he held her in place.

"Pete, please," she began in a placating tone. "It was one cigarette. One little transgression. Surely not worthy of this display of outrage."

Not deigning to answer her, he landed a swat on the perfect target of her crepe de chine clad bottom.

"Ouch!"

At the front door, he fumbled with her keys for a moment before finding the right one.

"Peter," she wailed. "Put me down. I mean it!"

"Oh you mean it?" he sneered. "This time you mean it? Or do you almost mean it. Or sort of mean it?"

"All right, honey," she said gently. "I get it. It's the lie that has you all pissed off. Well, shit, sweetie, lying is just human nature. It doesn't mean I don't love you. Everybody lies."

"Not everybody," he muttered. "Isabella, I better not hear this kind of talk from you. You know better. I expect more from you."

"Sweet," she said. "Could you put me down now?"

"No, not until you understand exactly what I expect from you." He was standing in the middle of the living room and Belle could see her reflection in the oval mirror above the washstand.

How embarrassing. Her short skirt was bunched up almost to her waist, exposing her thighs and most of her bottom.

"You expect perfection," she said snippily. "I get it."

"You're going to get it," he corrected, landing another stinging slap on her rear end.

"Peter, tell me what you want and put me down!" she shrieked.

He did put her down. And then he kicked out the chair from the desk and sat and put her face down over his lap. His hand rose and fell five times in quick succession.

"Owww!" she yelled. "Cut it out, Peter."

"Call this the antidote to lying," he said harshly. "Every time you lie, you're going to get your butt spanked. Maybe then you'll consider more closely what you're saying."

He reached under her skirt and hooked his fingers under the top of her pantyhose and rolled them down to her knees.

She felt cool air assail her silk-thonged bottom.

"Nice," he whistled softly, rubbing one pink cheek.

"Don't you be looking at my butt," she protested. "You're not allowed to ogle what you're abusing."

"This isn't abuse, honey," he said seriously. "I would never abuse you. This is just a little lesson from the man who loves you, every little part of you."

She felt chagrined by his earnest words.

Then his hand cracked down on the little part of her that was bared and thrust up under his nose.

"Eeeks!" she yelped. He had the most god awful hard hand when he wanted to.

"This is just a little reminder, Bella," Peter said calmly as he continued to spank her. "I want you to have a clear idea of what will happen if you lie to me again. Only then you'd probably get the wooden spoon."

"Get outta here," she exclaimed. "Now listen here, dahlin, I am not about to let you lay a kitchen utensil against my body parts. No sir, ain't gonna happen!" Bits of her Southern upbringing were coloring her speech as she wriggled over his lap, trying to evade his punishing smacks.

He merely held her in place as he walloped her poor, burning bottom.

Finally Peter paused and laid his palm against her crimson flesh.

"I think the lesson needs reinforcing," he told her. "I'd like you to go get your hairbrush. You know, the one I bought you."

Oh she knew the hairbrush. It was sitting on a silver tray with a comb and hair receptacle. The large, smooth mother-of-pearl oval was rimmed in sterling and had to be almost six inches in diameter. It was clearly intended for more than taming an unruly head of hair.

"Peter, please," she pleaded as he lifted her off his legs.

"Come here," he pulled her closer and trapped her between his thighs. He held her face between his hands and gently wiped away the tears that streaked her cheeks. She turned into his palm, nuzzling the ball of his thumb and pressing kisses into the very hand that had just tortured her backside.

He reached down and caught the hem of her dress and rolled it up to her navel.

"Hold it up, please," Peter told her as he smoothed down her pantyhose and removed them

altogether. Next he stripped her of her black, silk thong.

She was naked from the waist down and feeling very self-conscious.

"Go get the brush." He gave her a smack on her magenta-hued fanny to hurry her along.

"Geez, cut it out," Belle muttered as she danced out of his reach.

Upstairs, she retrieved the brush from its home on her dresser and held it up to her face. The cream oval was cool on her flushed cheeks. The bristles were too fine for her dense mop of curls; there was only one reason for her to have a brush like this.

"Bella!"

"I'm coming," she called impatiently as she strutted from the room.

He had moved to the sofa. He patted the cushion next to him and crooked his finger.

She went to him with a sinking sensation of dread in her stomach. Her butt was already on fire. She would certainly have a heart attack over his lap.

"Just five more, honey," he told her. "I want you to really understand how much I love you and how lying and smoking or doing anything dangerous will never be tolerated."

"I do understand, Peter," she said.

"Not yet, but you will."

Lying over his lap was easier now. Her torso was stretched out on the lime green damask of her vintage camelback sofa and her fingers dug into the fringe of the needlepoint pillow. She studied the apples and pears in the pillow's design and tried not to anticipate the first blow.

CRACK!

"Shit!" she yelled, trying to reach back to shield her throbbing skin. Gently, but firmly, he removed her hands and pressed them into the small of her back.

"Watch your mouth, Bella," he admonished.

"No fair," she cried. "You cannot whale the tar outta me and expect me to remain civil."

"It's what I do expect."

Again the implement of torture descended.

CRACK!

"Grrr," Belle mumbled.

"Now you sound like a grizzly bear," he told her.

"You're a regular laugh riot, Peter."

CRACK!

"I'm not trying to be."

She was crying again. That devil brush hurt like a sumabitch.

CRACK!

"Just finish," she cried, rocking into his thighs.

And he did.

CRACK!

Very softly he turned her over and scooped her up against his chest.

Belle curled into the plush wool of his sweater and reached up to wrap her arms around his neck.

"I'm sorry I lied," she told him honestly. "I guess I never even think about it when I stretch the truth."

"You'll think about it now," he said soberly.

She nodded.

"Good."

His hands were everywhere, stroking her back and caressing her aching bottom.

She wove her fingers through his blond curls, admiring the handsome perfection of his features.

"You look like Adonis," she murmured.

"Yea, right," he laughed, tilting his head to look down at her. "But you're my goddess, Isabella Armstrong soon to be Armstrong-Mellos."

Belle pushed him back on the couch so that she could straddle him and take advantage of his warm comforting body. She stretched out prone over him and buried her nose in his neck.

"I love you, Pete the Greek," she whispered into the hollow where his collarbone met his chest.

"I love you back."

He reached behind her and cupped her sore buttocks while lifting his head to kiss her.

"And I love you front," he chuckled, transferring his affections to her breasts. In a second, he had her dress off and flying across the room in a flurry of black. Her bra followed.

He then proceeded to comfort her in all the right places.

Belle purred, contented as a kitten as her man loved her like nobody's business.

"Sweet," she sighed, a smile on her face as they drifted off to sleep.

The weeks before the wedding dwindled away. Exactly one week before they were scheduled to exchange their vows, Peter left Belle's house early in the morning to go pick up his parents and youngest sister at JFK.

"Remember, meet us at the restaurant at 11:00 for breakfast," he whispered in her ear. "Nicky and Nora are coming in also and they're going to bring my folks back out to their place. Get a ride from them if you don't feel like driving."

"Right, sweetie," she murmured, still shaking off the cobwebs of sleep.

Then he was gone. Belle propped herself up against her pillow and thought for the hundredth time about her future in-laws. Thalia always sounded so sweet whenever they spoke on the phone and Stefano also was charming. But in real life, things were bound to be different. She didn't worry so much about Peter's youngest sister; Cristina was only twenty-six, she was sure to be harmless. But his married sister Adriana was thirty-four and living in Vermont. She would also be at the restaurant today. Nora told her she was a bit tougher.

What if they didn't like her?

It was too early to call Nora, but Belle decided that she would hitch a ride into the city with her

friends rather than driving by herself. Nora would be reassuring and today of all days, Belle needed her soon to be sister-in-law's comforting sense of humor.

In retrospect, she probably should have driven herself.

As soon as Nick's Jeep pulled up in front of her house, she could sense the current of hostility in the car. Nora was driving.

"Sit up front with me, Bellie," she said, flashing a brittle smile.

"Better yet," Nick said, unfolding himself from the front seat. "You two girls sit in back and I'll play chauffeur."

"I want to drive," Nora said flatly.

"No," Nick said.

"I'm driving," she insisted, a faint streak of petulance in her voice.

"Nora," he warned. "I will drive. Sit in the back with Belle."

"I am so driving," she cried.

"No you're not."

"Fuck you to hell, Nicolas Mellos!" Nora hissed. "Go ahead and drive the goddamn car all the way to an early heart attack. Go ahead, you big oafish bully."

She slammed out of the car and stomped around the side for a moment, too agitated to get in the back seat.

Belle stood there in the gravel, her eyes darting back and forth at this heated exchange. Nervously, she scooted into the back seat and tried not to listen to the dueling couple. But she couldn't help seeing.

Nick shook his head, almost sadly it seemed. Sighing heavily he followed his wife.

"I am going to blister you right here and now," he told her purposefully.

She backed up slowly and when she looked at him, he wasn't surprised to see the tears in her eyes.

"Nicky," she began in a tremulous voice.

"Don't bother," he said shortly, grabbing her wrist and pulling her over to a huge boulder in Belle's front lawn that was decorated with the brass numbers of her street address.

The high privet shielded them from the street but anyone driving out of the complex could see them.

"Please don't," she whispered.

"Too late."

Her short knit skirt was easily pushed aside and he bunched her leather jacket up around her back. She flinched when she felt his fingers in the waistband of her tights and then cold air assailed her bottom.

"Nicky, are you crazy? What if someone sees?"

"Too bad," he said implacably.

She didn't have a moment to consider it further because he was spanking her bare bottom with a ferocity that made her breathless.

"Don't you ever talk to me like that again," he lectured.

"I...I'm sorry," she mumbled.

"I am capable of driving into the city," he shouted. "I did not have a heart attack, Nora."

"The doctor says you should avoid stress," she yelled back.

"And fighting with you is what? Peaceful?" he laughed, his hand continuing to slap her rosy butt cheeks.

"I can't stand it when you go all he-man on me, Nick," she argued. "I can take some of the stress from you but you have to let me."

Draped over her husband's lap receiving punishment in the crisp November air was not exactly what she had in mind.

"I'll ask you if I need stress relief," he said firmly. Nick's big hand paddled his wife's bottom another dozen strokes and then he set her on her feet before him. Gently he brushed down her skirt and tucked her between his powerful legs. "Nora,

I'm not sick. Don't act like I am. I have a little high cholesterol, a little stress. I can control it." He wrapped his arms around her shaking shoulders.

She rocked back and forth, sobbing silently as her husband comforted her.

"I'm sorry, Nicky," she wailed. "I acted like such a bitch but I was really scared. I love you so much, I want you to always be healthy."

"I'm healthy as a horse and you know it," he assured her.

"Okay, I believe you." She kissed him sweetly and reached down to pull up her panties and tights, wincing when the fabric passed over her stinging bottom.

"Spanking your butt wore me out," he said gruffly. "Maybe I'll stretch out in the back and you can drive."

"Cool," she smiled.

Belle had other ideas. She was already in the driver's seat. Jerking her thumb toward the back seat, she switched on the ignition.

"I think some serious cuddle time is needed," she told them, pulling out of the driveway.

As Nick and Nora snuggled together behind her, Belle shook her head wryly.

"I'm marrying into this family," she said bluntly. "On purpose."

"Nicky will drive home," Nora told her. "And you and I will drink champagne and charm the in-laws."

Nick just groaned.

Belle rolled her eyes and giggled. Suddenly feeling light-hearted, she couldn't wait to meet her new family.

Sisters-in-Claws

"That woman!" Nora stormed into the kitchen from the parking lot, slamming the door shut behind her.

Nick looked up from the salmon he was filleting and quirked an eyebrow. His wife was in a major snit.

"What woman, Nor?" he began diplomatically.

"Your sister," she sputtered, stalking over to peer beneath the hot lamps of the steam table at him. "That Adriana is just impossible. I don't know how Michael stands her. She is such a bossy bitch."

"That's our A," Nick laughed.

"I'm serious, Nick," Nora said. "Now she's trying to move Belle's bachelorette party into the city to Chippy's."

"I don't want you going to Chippy's," Nick said, frowning as he imagined his wife at the notorious male revue club.

"That's my point," Nora wailed. "I don't want to go to Chippy's. Belle would hate it also. Why would I want to go look at naked men when I'm married to the best looking guy I know?"

Nick felt a warm glow at her words. He smiled.

"And I already made reservations tonight for ten of us at The Wild Note. Just for a nice dinner and then staying for the band. You know, Bluegrass sort of Country sounds. Belle loves that place."

"So tell A to forget it," he told her.

"I did and she pooh poohed me in that oh really, Nora, what do you know voice and proceeded to talk about renting a limo. I hate this, Nick. I hate being made to feel like a local yokel with no class."

"You are loaded with class, sweetheart," he rumbled, reaching across the stainless steel to grip her wrists and pull her close for a kiss.

"Mmm," she sighed, melting into his soft beard and mustache. Then she wrinkled her nose. "Ugh, you smell."

"Fish happens," he shrugged.

"I swear to you, Nicolas," she said as she washed the salmon juice off her hands at the deep sink. "I am going to come to blows with your sister this week. I don't know why she decided to stay; she could have gone with Michael to Grand Cayman on his business trip, she would have been back in time for the wedding."

"Uh, Nor, I think she wanted to visit with my parents and Cristina."

"She's barely speaking to your mother. Poor Thalia just shakes her head and rolls her eyes. I thought Stefano was going to bust a blood vessel when Adriana told your mother that her dress for the wedding was a bit undignified."

"She said that?"

"Yes, your mother actually blushed. I just wanted to shake that vicious bitch. I know she's your sister, but sometimes, she's downright rude."

"It's kind of strange that she's acting like that to my mom," Nick said. "Those two were always real close."

"I was surprised that your dad didn't drag out the old wooden paddle you always talk about when faced with that kind of brattiness, I thought you said he was so strict with you kids."

Nick laughed.

"Oh, that he was. But when A got married to Michael, my father transferred that responsibility to her husband. If he let's her get away with it, then that's his business."

"Why can't you be more like Michael?" Nora asked cheekily.

"Sweetie, I hate to clue you in but Michael Costas makes me look like a walk in the park. He was always tough with A but she loved it. She's been with him since her senior year in high school and let me tell you, those were some turbulent years. But she stuck with him like glue and they adore each other."

"Well he must've gone soft, cause your sister is really out of control. She just better not ruin this

wedding," Nora declared, shrugging into a bib apron and crossing the ties around her waist twice before looping them in a bow. "So, what do you need?"

Nick was really behind because of the prep for the wedding, Nora had volunteered to help him that Thursday afternoon. Their reservations for Belle's bachelorette dinner were at 8:00 so she had a few hours free.

"Feel like cleaning shrimp?" he smiled impishly, knowing how much she hated that job.

"Oooh, buster, you are just lucky I find you attractive, otherwise I'd clean your shrimp," she said meaningfully, glaring at him.

"Thanks, punkin," he said, smiling broadly. "You're really a big help since I had to give Mary today off because she's working overtime for the wedding."

"Yea, and you're not working over-time?" Nora said dryly. "I feel like I'm single again, you've been here so much. You just better be eating right and keeping the stress down."

"Yes, boss," he saluted.

When she parked herself next to his side with a bucket of shrimp and a stainless bowl, he took the opportunity to reach over and affectionately squeeze her ass.

"Hey, Chef, none of that," she squirmed away from him, giggling.

"I am the master of my domain," he said exaltedly. "You are merely my shrimp wench." He reached for her again and she squealed.

Laughing like a deranged mad scientist, Nick pulled her into a bear hug and cupped her buttocks as he hauled her up against his burly chest.

"I love you like hell, Nor," he murmured into her ear as he enfolded her in his smelly salmon embrace.

"I love you like hell back," she retorted, digging her shrimpy fingers into his dark curls.

Groaning, he plopped her down on the butcher-block counter and attacked her face with his soft lips.

They clung to each other in a silent, bone-shaking embrace.

When he finally leaned back and looked down into her dazed green eyes, she almost cried at the intensity of his love.

"Man, Nick, cut it out, you're killing me," she wailed. "I feel like jello."

"Jello's good," he said.

"We have too much work to do," she insisted. "Time for epiphanies and soul shattering later."

"Such a killjoy," he muttered, lifting her down gently and setting her back to her task with a sharp slap on the bottom.

"Nicolas!" she shrieked, hurriedly rubbing the sting out.

"Nora Elizabeth," he retaliated in mock outrage.

"Just bone your fish," she ordered.

"Boning away," he said suggestively, leering down at his bulging checked trousers.

"Sick," Nora muttered, shaking her head.

They continued their mutual work for another few hours until Nora realized she had to get home to shower for Belle's dinner. John was in by then and Marcos, the sometimes cold station fill-in had arrived.

"Nora, before you go, I need to talk to you," Nick said ominously as she was gathering her things.

He jerked his head toward the door leading into the coffee area. She waited by the espresso machine while she heard him washing his hands at the sink.

"Let's go to the office for just a second," he told her.

In reflex, Nora's stomach dropped. But she hadn't done anything to warrant a spanking so she tried to relax as she preceded her husband down the stairs.

Once inside the small space, Nick quickly snapped the lock.

"What?" she protested, backing away as he turned toward her.

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much," he said, smirking as he advanced upon her.

"Nicky," she yelped. "Cut it out."

Then his arms were around her and he yanked her closer until she could feel his granite hard erection.

"Ohhh," she said knowingly.

"Baby," he murmured into the open collar of her shirt. "I just needed to feel you once more before you left."

Before she knew what was happening, the buttons on her shirt were undone and her husband was dipping his head into the soft, warm flesh of her chest. He pushed her bra below her plump breasts and tongued her stiff nipples until she thought she would burst. She quickly unbuttoned her jeans and slid them down to her knees so his fingers would meet little resistance.

Again and again his fingers plunged into the dripping well of her sex and she moaned like a banshee into his scalp.

"Fuck me," she hissed.

"Later, love," he promised, pissing her off monumentally. "Behave tonight and make sure Belle behaves. If I get a bad report, someone I know is going to get her bottom blistered."

"Nicolas," she cried, frustrated beyond belief. "Don't be a prick! And you're not allowed to play Big Brother, it's Belle's bachelorette party."

"Behave," he warned again, easily pinning her over his thigh and swatting her bare buttocks a few times with the flat of his hand.

"Ouch!" she yelled. "I will, I promise."

"And no picking fights with Adriana," he warned. "She'll get hers when Michael comes back, you can be sure of that. So, no cat fights or you will find

yourself getting punished and you know you don't want that."

His words caused a sick churning in her belly and she shuddered. She wanted nothing more than his approval and to feel his hard desire branded once more on her body.

"Okay," she promised, capturing him in her arms and planting a big fat kiss on his mouth. "If you get out early, come to the Wild Note?"

"Maybe," he said, tilting his head to the side and grinning.

Nora allowed her husband to pull her pants back up and steer her toward the door.

"Brat," she muttered.

"Hmm?" he whispered in her ear as he swatted her one last time and propelled her through the doorway.

"Nothing," she said, smiling.

Adriana was in rare form.

"I need champagne," she insisted to the hapless waiter. "And it has to be a decent vintage, none of this sugary swill that passes for wine down here."

Belle blushed at her future sister-in-law's shrill rudeness.

Nora seethed.

"She is a bona fide bitch," she confided in Belle's ear.

"I love champagne," Cristina exclaimed innocently.

"It is lovely," Belle said warmly.

"She's a baby," Adriana said snidely. "And knowing my brother, you probably drink Asti Spumante and think it's fine."

Belle's mouth dropped open at Adriana's fine-tuned nastiness.

"I'm twenty-six," Cristina protested. "I live in Athens in my own apartment and have had plenty of champagne, thank you. You are acting like an idiot, A, I'm telling Peter what you said."

"Cristi," Belle said softly. "Don't worry about it. Peter could care less and we should all be supportive of your sister now." She was fuming at Adriana's barely concealed animosity.

Adriana stiffened.

"What are you talking about?" she demanded. "Supportive how and why?" At the same time, she pointed one perfectly manicured finger toward her selection on the wine list for the waiter.

"Supportive because you evidently have lost what little sense you once had," Belle said.

Adriana blushed and tossed her head.

"So how's the coffee shop, Belle?" she said. "Doing a booming business?"

"Pretty good," Belle lied. "Want to come work for me?"

"Don't think so," Adriana said silkily. "My husband supports me, I don't have to work like some people."

The six other women at the long table were busy talking, laughing, eating and drinking; they weren't really able to follow Adriana's bitchy commentary but Nora grit her teeth and clenched her fists. She felt like screaming at Adriana but she was carefully heeding Nick's warning. He would be unhappy if she were to engage in a spitting match with his sister.

Belle looked at her quizzically, almost unable to believe her stoic silence.

"It does take intelligence to work," Nora murmured, barely glancing at Adriana.

"What's that?" Adriana demanded, rounding on her sister-in-law.

"I was merely expressing an opinion, Adriana," Nora said slowly as though explaining to a child. "I know it's hard for you to understand, but some women enjoy their work. Some women like it."

Belle snickered.

"I like it," she agreed.

Cristina laughed outright.

"I really enjoy it," she chirped.

"Sure, I can understand Nora saying that," Adriana smirked. "She has to work in the restaurant." She nodded her head knowingly at her sister-in-law. "Like my brother Nick gives you a choice. We all know what Nick would do if you didn't obey him like the little lamb you are."

The women who heard Adriana laughed, not understanding the malice behind her words.

Nora blanched. What was going on with this bitch? Belle was the only one who knew about her husband's unique *modus operandi*. She didn't relish public knowledge of her affairs. She glared at Adriana.

"Sweetie," she said clearly. "I'm sorry you're feeling so neglected by your own husband but today is Belle's day, let's get past your little melodramas, okay, hon?"

Adriana flushed and downed her glass of champagne, turning rudely to speak to the woman sitting on her left.

During dinner, Adriana drank too much champagne and Nora refilled her own glass a few too many times. Belle took the opportunity to chat with Cristina, getting to know the younger woman. By the time the band started playing, both Adriana and Nora were feeling no pain.

The others were off dancing to some boot stomping melody when Adriana confronted Nora, who was leaning against the bar, waiting for a fresh glass of wine.

"Why are you such a bitch to me?" she asked sloppily.

"Me?" Nora almost screeched. "You have been the prima donna of attitude since you got here. I'm just trying to be nice."

"Nice?" Adriana quirked her eyebrow just like her brother.

Seeing Nick's mannerism on a pretty, feminine face made Nora want to laugh.

"Adriana, you have been nasty and rude to me and your whole family since last Sunday," Nora said

earnestly. "You have been Madame Bitch and that's the truth."

"You're a soppy spineless jellyfish," Adriana accused.

"You're mean and opinionated and self-aggrandizing and way too stuck up for what you are, cause honey, you are not all that."

Adriana swallowed hard and bit her lip.

She stared at Nora for a second.

"Nick felt sorry for you," she hissed. "He only went out with you to begin with because he felt sorry for you. He pitied you!"

Nora felt a knot of rocks in her stomach. She wanted to lash out and hurt the woman in front of her. What right did she have to be so awful to her.

"So, Michael probably figured you'd be worth some buckage, your father did inherit lots of money before he went back to Crete, didn't he?"

Adriana twisted her lips in a snarl and made a rude noise.

"Michael has plenty of money, you blond slut," she snapped, tossing her own black as night mane of sleek curls.

"Ouch," Nora deadpanned. "Stop, that hurts, ow. Don't call me blonde, please stop, stop."

Adriana shook her hands in Nora's face, exasperated beyond belief.

"What's the matter with you, Nora, married eight years and no children yet? Is there something wrong with you? Are you not a woman?"

Nora felt a blinding anger at the other woman's callous words. She wanted to slap the smugness off her face. She wouldn't do that though.

"Fuck you to hell," she yelled at her sister-in-law, whirling around to escape to the ladies' room. She slammed into an immovable wall and growled, trying to get around the obstruction.

"Don't think so," said her husband in a low, furious voice.

Nora felt her heart flutter at his angry tone. But he didn't know the whole story.

"Nick, don't start," she said. "There are extenuating circumstances here."

"What did I tell you?" he asked reasonably.

"Not to get into it with her," she answered sullenly.

"What'd you do?"

"That's not fair," she exclaimed. "She started it."

"What did you do?" he asked implacably, putting his arms around her and guiding her toward the table.

"I got into it with her," she admitted.

"So now what happens?"

"You forgive me because she started it."

"What happens?"

They were at the table and Nick sat, pulling his wife onto his lap and keeping her a prisoner of his arms. Outwardly they looked like any loving, affectionate couple. Only Nora felt the steel in her husband's hands as he held her in place.

"What happens?" he repeated in her ear.

"I get punished," she told him in a small voice.

"Very good," he said approvingly.

"Nick, it's not fair. She said awful things to me."

"Nora, my sister is not my wife. I only care about how you behave and how well you listen to me."

"I'm hating her today."

"That's sad," he said. "She's family and there must be something really wrong for her to be lashing out so strongly. She loves you, Nora. Can't you see that she's in pain over something?"

"Pete and Belle are getting married, why do we have to be dealing with Adriana's problems?"

"Later," he said, smoothing her hair. "We have to leave now. Who's picking up the tab?"

"They have my credit card and everyone's chipping in later."

"Say goodbye."

"I have to go to the ladies' room," she argued.

"Hurry," he said, lifting her off his lap.

When Nora emerged from the cubicle, she was surprised to see Adriana leaning over the sink, patting a wet cloth over her skin.

"I saw Nick," she said flatly, glancing up.

"Yup," said Nora.

"He looked pissed."

"Duh," Nora said, washing her hands in the next sink.

"Don't you ever just want to not take it any more?" she asked forlornly. "Don't you get tired of it?"

"I love Nick," she said simply as though that were the panacea for every ill.

"You love him enough to take his shit all the time?"

"It's not shit, Adriana," she said. "It's love."

"I, I think, I'm..." Adriana stammered. "Ugh, I can't talk about it. You're leaving?"

Nora nodded.

"You have a key to our house, right?" she said. "Belle will drop you off, I think Cristi's staying at Belle's tonight."

As Nora was passing by her, Adriana reached out and grabbed her arm.

"Nora," she said. "I'm sorry. I have been a bitch. I've been thinking of leaving Michael. He's been traveling so much and I'm tired of his rules. I have five-year old twins; does he know what that's like on a daily basis? I mean, they're great kids but sometimes I need to be more than a mommy."

"Being a mommy sounds good to me," Nora said.

A wave of guilt washed over Adriana's face and she looked like she was going to cry.

"I'm so sorry I said that to you before," she whispered. "Michael would kill me if he knew how I've been behaving."

Nora felt a wave of compassion for the miserable looking woman leaning against the sink.

She stepped closer and hugged her sister-in-law.

"Rules aren't bad, A," she said gently. "Just remember how much he loves you. We'll talk later, but I have to go now. Your brother is impatient to leave. Say goodbye to everybody for me?"

"I will," the other woman said solemnly. "Nora?"
Nora stopped at the door.

"Obviously, you're in trouble," Adriana said. "Is it because of me?"

"No, it's because of me," she answered honestly.

As Nora rejoined Nick at the table, she felt a twinge of guilt for leaving Adriana in the ladies room by herself.

"If I feel bad for what I did are you still going to punish me?" she asked softly, tugging on his arm.

"Silly question," he laughed.

She groaned, tucking her hand beneath his elbow and following him toward the exit.

"You should give me clemency," she argued. "I deserve that given the provocation and mitigating circumstances."

Nick stopped short, twirling her around in front of him.

"Didn't you have the choice to listen to your husband and ignore the provocation?"

"Just didn't seem wise," Nora said, biting her lip and shaking her head sadly.

"So your spanking will seem really stupid," he answered gravely.

"You're not playing by the rules," Nora said indignantly. "You're supposed to feel bad about all this and absolve me before doing any real damage."

"Sorry," he said glibly.

They had reached his car in the parking lot. He unlocked her door and propelled her into the seat with a firm hand on the small of her back.

"Obviously you didn't drive, right?" he asked, sliding into the driver's seat.

"No," she said reluctantly. He knew she wouldn't have had so much wine if she were driving.

"Good."

"You know you can't do anything at home," Nora said almost gleefully. "Your father and mother sleep so lightly and you know how loud you are."

"Thanks for reminding me, Nora," he said sweetly. "Good thing I was planning on stopping at the restaurant."

"No friggin way," she cried.

"Friggin way," he countered.

Her heart thudded dully as she realized they were only minutes away from the restaurant.

He parked right by the kitchen door and unlocked the door, punching in the alarm code on the keypad.

She was dragging her feet as they entered the dark building.

Once they were in the dimly lit kitchen, he spun her around and held her in his arms briefly.

"You knew this would happen if you disobeyed me," he said sternly. "Don't try to make me feel bad."

"Can't blame a girl for trying," she quipped.

Laughing grimly, he firmly pressed her over the stainless steel counter and yanked down her trousers and panties. She squealed when she felt the cold metal against her warm thighs.

She heard him fumbling above her head for a proper utensil and then she felt the whoosh of cool air and the splat of a wooden spatula against her buttocks.

"Ouch," she cried, reaching back to flick his hands away.

He caught her hands against her back and swung back again.

SMACK! SMACK!

He began laying into her tender bottom in earnest and soon she was squirming and wailing, trying to evade his punishing swing.

The wooden spatula made contact with her flesh at least two dozen times and she was crying, swearing and hip dancing the whole time.

"Nicky, stop," she cried. "Please, honey, please stop, I learned my lesson," she entreated. "I promise. Please stop!"

SMACK! SPLAT! CRACK!

When her skin was fiery to the touch and burning unbearably, he stopped.

Tossing the spatula on the stainless steel counter he leaned over and planted his face next to her's.

"Oww," she said, lips trembling. "You fucking hurt me."

"Yea, well," he said matter-of-factly. "You earned it."

"Pshaw!"

"Pshaw?" He lifted an eyebrow. "Where are you from? Dogpatch?"

"My butt hurts," she wailed. "Comfort me!"

"Yes, m'am," he said, saluting.

He scooped her off the counter and gently rubbed her red bottom as he kissed her sweetly.

"Am I forgiven?" she asked.

"You know it," he told her. "Was Adriana leaving soon?"

"I think so, Belle wasn't planning to stay much later."

"That's good," he said. "Did I mention that Michael's back?"

"Oh boy," she whistled. "I have a feeling your parents aren't going to get much sleep tonight."

"Let's go home," he said.

"Hmmp," she said. "Don't think you're getting lucky," she warned.

"I know I'm lucky," he said innocently. "I have you."

"Depends what you mean by lucky," Nora said, stalking out of his embrace and heading toward the door. Her bottom throbbed uncomfortably and she wondered how she'd sit in the car.

But she counted her blessings as she waited for her big lug of a husband to punch in the alarm code.

She was lucky.

Adrianna's Dance

At Belle's farewell to single life party, Adriana Costas sobered up rapidly after Nick took Nora home. She felt pangs of guilt as she realized poor Nora was probably in trouble with her husband and she had contributed greatly to that state. She sat at the table by herself while the others danced to the Cajun style country music of Laissez-Fare. She drank a mug of coffee and leaned back in her chair, mulling over the events of the past week. She had behaved so poorly; her poor mother was probably completely bewildered by her downright snappiness. The truth was, once Michael had sprung his surprise last minute business trip on her, she had deteriorated inside, collapsing into the brittle shell that protected her when she was feeling most vulnerable. She could have gone also but she chose instead to punish him by declining. She actually punished herself and her family.

He was traveling so much lately and she was feeling bereft. She felt abandoned sometimes. Stefan and Jules were wonderful boys but they were five years old and constantly demanding more and more from her. She desperately missed her old self; and her old husband – the one who would make her bones quiver with his smoldering glances. Lately all they did was tend to the boys and roll into an occasional embrace of sex in the early hours of the morning. Her husband expected certain behaviors from her and as long as she complied, he seemed content.

Although he was strict with her, she loved Michael Costas and she loved him most when he was attending exclusively to her. Perhaps the old adage was true – attention was desirable, it didn't matter if it was good attention or bad – it was attention.

Stupid!

Adriana tossed her long, shiny curls and smiled ruefully. She was destined to act the idiot. Because

if Michael found out how she had behaved this week, she was going to get more attention than she wanted and she would be one sorry wife.

She allowed herself to relax since there was almost no way that Mike would discover what went on once he got on his plane to Grand Cayman.

She focused for a moment on Peter's soon to be wife who was busy dancing a reel with a tall blond man. The momentary stab of outrage dissipated once she realized it was indeed her brother. Somehow Peter had snuck in while she was engrossed in her thoughts. Belle was laughing vivaciously and Adriana felt a twinge of jealousy. Belle was so in love. Peter was so in love. She missed that wonderful sense of newness. That connected bliss that surrounds newlyweds like a halo.

"Is this seat taken?" a deep voice that was more familiar than her own scent interrupted her reverie.

She would have leapt into his arms but he was pulling out the chair and plopping down next to her.

"How are the kids?" he asked, brushing her cheek with his lips.

She felt a pain bisect her body as she felt the joy at seeing Michael again and the agony of his perfunctory greeting. Rage shot through her like a volcano and she blinked at the foolishness of what she was about to do.

"The kids are fucking fine, Michael, and how the hell are you?" She slammed her mug down on the table and jerked to her feet, grabbing her purse and stalking off towards the ladies room.

Amazingly, she got there without impediment. A woman was washing her hands and glanced up in surprise.

Adriana raced into a stall and slammed the lock, sagging back against the door.

He was sure to be pissed at her.

She couldn't understand her anger. She loved her husband. And she was happy that he was so

devoted to the children but the selfish, hidden part of her wanted all of his devotion.

Like it used to be.

The door banged open.

"Man in the ladies room," Michael announced.

"I was just leaving," said a feminine voice.

When the door banged shut again, Adriana felt her stomach drop down to her knees.

"Get out here, Adriana," he ordered.

"No." She bit her lip at her own defiance.

"What the hell is going on?" he asked. "I get this wacko story from your Dad and Nick and Pete and poor Thalia just rolls her eyes. What have you been up to?"

"Michael, go away," she whispered. "You don't care anyway."

"On the contrary," he countered. "I care a lot. And you, honey, are going to care even more."

"Don't threaten me," she cried, looking around wildly for some means of escape. Not too many places to go except on the toilet or over the divider into the next stall.

"It's not a threat, sweetie," he said gently. "It's an honest to goodness promise."

"Go away," she repeated.

"I am not going away," he stated implacably. "And you better get your butt out here on the double."

"Michael," she began. "You wouldn't understand about this. You haven't understood anything."

"Have you tried to tell me anything?"

"Why do I have to tell you?" she cried out accusingly. "How come you can't know me after almost twenty years."

"A, don't make me into a God," he said. "I'm just a man and men don't know everything as you can attest to."

"But you're my man," she said softly.

"Then, get out here," he told her.

She sighed heavily as she realized she was caught. Groaning inwardly, she undid the latch on the door and stepped out of the cubicle.

First, he captured her face in his hands and kissed her. Not just a peck on the lips but a deep, yearning kiss that touched the core of her resolve and broke her down just a little.

His hands traveled down her back and crushed her closer so she could feel his arousal. She melted in his arms.

He stroked her back gently and his hands lingered on her ass.

"I missed you," he murmured. "I've missed you," he corrected himself.

"I'm right here," she said. "All the time."

"You know you're in trouble," he said quietly.

"I figured."

"You know I'm taking off my belt this time," he told her, caressing her cheek with his palm.

"I was hoping you wouldn't," she said flatly.

"Ahh, but you knew I would."

"Not really, Michael," she said honestly. "I feel kind of like I'm just excess baggage sometimes. I don't feel part of us anymore."

"You are part of us and you will definitely feel it," he promised, a glint in his green eyes.

"Can't we just go right to the cuddling and say I learned my lesson," she asked hopefully.

"Don't think so," he said.

"I don't think it's fair."

"I love you too much to let you think this kind of crummy behavior is acceptable. You hurt people you love, Adriana. You ignored your vows by hiding your pain from me, your husband. I won't tolerate that."

Even though she was dreading his particular form of correction, she felt a warm glow within herself at his words. She felt a spark of hope for the first time in weeks.

"Now, much as I think you deserve your punishment right now, I'm not prepared to tie up this bathroom any longer," he told her, turning her

around and guiding her to the door. "You march out there and get your coat, say goodbye to Belle and the others and then we are leaving."

"Can we have one dance?" she asked, twisting around and swaying against him, wrapping her arms around his neck. She dug her fingers into his short dark hair and blew hot air into his ear. "One slow dance?"

"Adriana, move." His palm made contact with her bottom in one fierce smack.

She yelped, tears collecting in her eyes, and jumped toward the door.

"We'll dance later," he said in a kinder voice.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"Maybe I won't want to then," she threatened.

"Maybe you'll dance anyway," he said.

"Hmmp!"

She gathered her jacket from her chair and made her way to the dance floor to say her goodbyes.

Peter leaned over and gave her a big kiss.

"Behave, sis," he told her. "Be nice to Michael."

"Be nice to Michael," she mimicked. "Why does everyone assume that I'm this horrible beast and Michael is some kind of angel."

"I love you," Peter said laughing. "But I know you."

"Big jerk," she muttered, giving Belle a quick hug. "I'll talk to you guys tomorrow."

"Goodnight," Belle called over her shoulder, waving to Michael before snuggling back into Peter's arms.

As they walked through the parking lot to where Michael parked the Volvo, Adriana wondered if she could plead sudden illness. Maybe she could claim bad shrimp.

She stopped short, dragging her husband to a standstill.

"I feel sick," she said wanly. "Maybe the seafood was tainted. I think I have a fever."

"I know you will be burning up shortly," he said ominously. "But it will be a very localized fever."

"Michael!" she wailed. "Be nice, I feel sick."

He looked closely at her, tilting her chin up with two fingers so he could study her eyes.

"Do you really feel sick or are you trying to get out of a spanking?"

She couldn't lie straight-faced to him. He knew that.

"You're not fair," she mumbled.

"Just as I thought." He caught her hand and propelled her toward the car.

She took the opportunity to admire him under the golden lights of the parking lot. His angular face was shadowed with two days worth of stubble that gave him a dangerous looking edge. He had the most fabulous eyes – they were green as moss in a clear mountain stream and were fringed with thick, sooty eyelashes that were the envy of all her friends. He was wearing a black leather blazer over charcoal wool trousers and a gray turtleneck. The leather hugged his broad shoulders and accented his muscular build. She felt a shiver of apprehension as she imagined those strong arms holding her down, pressing her onto his powerful thighs to receive his husbandly corrections.

Michael Costas was a man to be reckoned with and one did not want to cross him. She had been so stupid.

They stopped short and she noticed they were at the car.

"Nick told me we could sleep in his den tonight," Michael told her as he started the car. "You know it's in the basement. Far from the madding crowd as they say. There's sleeper sofa down there."

"How convenient," she snapped.

"Would you prefer it if everyone heard what's going to go on?" He asked dryly. "I think you should be grateful to your brother."

"I think I would be more grateful if he told you to keep your paws off me," she said.

"Like that's going to happen in your family."

"Yea, I know," she agreed forlornly.

"We are going to talk tonight, A," Michael said seriously. "I just want you to know that."

"Goody."

"Oh man, do you need this, girl," he said. "In fact, I think you need a little warm up for the cold ride home."

Before she realized his intentions, he had pulled her face down over his lap and flung her dress up over her back while yanking her panties and stockings to her knees.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

The hot spanks stung her and she gasped, trying to squirm out of his grip but there was no where to go, the dashboard kept her captive on his thighs.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"No more smart mouth from you, young lady," he ordered. "I want to see some respect and some kindness."

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Ouch, cut it out, Michael," she cried, humiliated at the embarrassing position he was keeping her in. Anyone walking past the car could see her naked ass being spanked to a rosy blush.

SMACK!

He set her back on the seat, but shook his head when she would have pulled up her panties and stockings.

"Keep it bare," he ordered. "I want you to anticipate your official homecoming."

She sniffed but obeyed, furtively wiping the tears from her cheek and staring out the window. The cool leather actually felt good on her stinging bottom.

"Don't sulk," he said, patting her leg as he pulled out of the parking spot.

"I am not sulking," she said grumpily.

"Maybe we have to go back to weekly spankings," he said pleasantly. "Like before the

twins. So you can keep your mind focused on being the best you can be."

"Won't that be too much trouble for you," she asked haltingly. "You might have to actually spend time with me."

He ignored her petulant tone and gave her a warm sideways smile.

"I look forward to it, baby."

"Hmmpf," she grumbled.

But her stomach was flipping over in excitement. Michael was acting like he used to when she was the most important part of his life.

She managed to keep quiet for the rest of the ride to Nick and Nora's house. The split-level chalet was in darkness with only the foyer and the front porch lights on.

Once inside, Michael gave her a gentle shove toward the steps leading upstairs.

"Go get your stuff and meet me down in the den," he said, flipping off the porch lights and turning on a dim wall sconce so they could see their way.

Nick's den was paneled in pickled oak and lined with thick Berber carpets. It was behind the laundry room and buried deep in the house, far from the third floor bedrooms. It was perfectly situated for what Michael had in mind. The sofa bed was already pulled out and made up with clean sheets and an array of pillows. He piled three of the pillows in the center of the bed and hung up his jacket. He pushed up the sleeves of his turtleneck and sat down to wait for his wife. He didn't have long to wait.

Adriana slid into the room soundlessly, dropping a heap of clothing and toiletries on the floor. She had changed into a short flannel nightshirt and had removed both stockings and panties and was wearing a pair of fluffy white socks. Her long dark hair hung down to her waist and she looked like a teenager to him.

He patted the mattress next to him and she sat down.

"The kids are fine," she told him before he could ask. "Both snoring like their father."

He smiled.

"I want you to know that I love you very much," he said gravely. "I'm sorry about all the traveling I've been doing but it really has been for our mutual benefit. But I understand now that my giving you your own space was the wrong thing to do – it made you feel neglected."

"You can neglect me now if you want," Adriana said in a small voice.

"Rest assured, sweetie, you will never feel neglected again," he promised her. "Now flip over on your belly here and push up your nightie."

Her heart thudding, she slowly did his bidding. Her bottom was still tingling from the quick spanking in the car; she didn't want to think how much his belt would hurt. It had been quite a while since she felt its sting.

The dread in the pit of her stomach spread to her mouth when she heard the clink of his buckle and the slow hiss as he pulled the leather through the loops of his pants.

Michael always doubled the belt so it was twice as awful on her poor, defenseless butt.

Whack!

She pulled a pillow toward her mouth and bit down so she wouldn't scream.

Whack! Whack! Thwack!

She moaned into the pillow, sobbing as he lit a fire on her rear end. Tears were sliding down her nose and pooling on the sheet beneath her.

"You better learn that you will never disrespect your mother again," he said in a quiet voice as he whipped her bare bottom relentlessly. "You will never disrespect your husband, your family or yourself again or I will punish you exactly this same way."

"I won't," she wept. "I promise, please Michael, please stop."

Again and again the leather strapped her tender buttocks as she cried and pleaded for him to stop. Although he was a compassionate person, full of tenderness and kindness; Michael never seemed moved by her tears when he was punishing her. It was as though he had predetermined how many strokes she would receive and nothing made him stray from that decision.

Whack! Whack!

"Tomorrow you are going to apologize to everyone you were rude and nasty to this week and if I don't like the apology, I am going to turn you over my knee again."

She flushed in embarrassment but she knew better than to protest.

"I promise I will," she gasped.

Her ass was burning. She thought it must be the color of raspberries, verging on purple.

He gave her four more strokes in hard succession. She wailed into the pillow.

Then he stopped.

She felt the thud of the belt as he tossed it on the bed. Then she felt his cool hands on her hot, fiery flesh and she groaned.

"Come here," he whispered.

She turned and went into his arms, grateful now for his strength as he cradled her easily against his chest. He gently rocked her and stroked her back and bottom softly.

"I love you," she said.

"I know."

He set her down for a moment so he could strip off his clothes and then he held her to his warm nakedness.

Her nightshirt went flying across the room and he sighed in satisfaction.

"Now let's dance," he murmured in her ear.

She leaned against him, burying her face in the curly hairs on his chest, inhaling the powerful scent

of his body musk and the faint hint of cologne. Her bottom throbbed but she was on fire for this man.

He was here, a part of her world. She felt as though a nimbus of pure love surrounded them. The connection was back.

They waltzed around the room until they were dizzy. And then they danced some more.

Thalia Goes Back

"What is that noise," Stefano grumbled, turning over in the middle of the bed and reaching out sleepily for his wife.

"Shh, Stef," Thalia whispered. "I think it's Michael and Adriana."

"Kids," he muttered. "They're worse now than when they were teenagers."

"They're wonderful," Thalia said, smiling as she gently pummeled his back. "And you know it."

"Mmm." He burrowed closer to her in the warm bed, wrapping his arm around her waist, keeping her captive in his sleep.

She ran her fingers through the black curls that were sprinkled liberally with gray and sighed happily. She understood what the noise was – it was Adriana and Michael making love. She was glad they had resolved their apparent differences. This week had been a difficult one for her oldest daughter and Thalia had come close several times to scolding her like a child.

Eh, it was nothing new. Adriana thought she was the only woman to experience feelings of neglect, frustration and tiredness in a marriage. Thalia had been there, thank you very much. Only try doing it with four children aged fourteen and under in a strange land while your husband works night and day at a struggling new business.

Thalia and Stefano had come to America when Peter was eight years old, Nick was five and Adriana was only three. In the beginning, Stefano worked for a commercial fishing company based in the Atlantic-Hudson Bay area. They lived cheaply and saved money and Stefano worked weekends at his uncle's diner in Jersey City.

Five years later, when the opportunity to start his own shipping company presented itself, Stefano grabbed it with both hands.

Then came the lonely nights, the long weeks of no husband or father for her four children – little

Cristina had been born by then. Thalia could have cried herself to sleep every night but instead she would lay on her bed, cradling the baby and teaching herself better English by reading aloud from the Reader's Digest. Sometimes she would pore over her photos of their home in Mykonos, looking for some taste of happiness in the familiar old walls and the carpet of blue Aegean that stretched out in the background.

It didn't last forever. Eventually, she got her husband back. But there were some fights and hard feelings that had to be smoothed over before the gladness came back to her heart. Stefano was never one to let a wound fester. In the very beginning of their marriage, he had adopted the practice of physically disciplining her when rules were broken, when she showed him her stubborn side or acted hatefully toward him. On their honeymoon in Athens, she drank too much retsina one night, ended up fighting with him over some insignificant problem, threw a drink at him and stalked out of the taverna back to their hotel.

Rage boiled through her veins at his less than chivalrous behavior.

She was eighteen years old and beautiful; she deserved adulation and planned to find it. She was surprised, to say the least, when her giant fisherman husband scooped her up over his shoulder, whacked her bottom hard and carried her three blocks through the city streets to their quaint hotel near the Acropolis. Back in their honeymoon suite, he had lectured her solemnly on what he expected in a wife and exactly how he planned to maintain domestic bliss; he then proceeded to flip her over his iron knee and spank the living daylights out of her for a good ten minutes. That was how Stefano initiated her into married life with him. Of course, the lovemaking that followed nearly sent her to the moon.

She tried to be a good wife after that first episode. She truly adored her husband and wanted

him to be happy with her so she managed to keep her over the lap lessons to a minimum. After the children, Stefano mellowed a bit and they were often too tired and relieved at the end of the day to do anything other than fall into each other in the sweetness of their bed. There weren't enough hours in the day to spend time on wifely discipline.

Then they moved to America. And he started his own business. Thalia began to cultivate a garden of resentment that she sullenly weeded in the late, empty nights alone.

She remembered very clearly the very first time she played out her feelings of loneliness and outrage before her astonished husband. She should have recollected those early days of her marriage back on Crete. She mistakenly thought that America had tamed her husband and turned him into a model American husband.

Cristina was six months old. Stefano had been gone for three weeks, setting up an office for his business in Athens. She had desperately wanted to go with him but he told her they couldn't afford it yet, assuring her that they would all go back for a nice vacation as soon as possible.

Thalia had been disgruntled at the very least. By the time he walked through the door, three weeks later, a big grin on his handsome face, she had been fuming inwardly for days.

"Thespinas, Thalia," he roared, gathering her up in an embrace. "I missed you, my love."

The children clustered about him, pulling presents and sweets from his pockets like little magicians.

"What'd you bring me, Daddy?" the little voices tripped over him as his children flung themselves at him. "What else, Papa, what else?"

He placated each of his children with a neatly wrapped gift from their erstwhile homeland.

"And I have something here with Mama's name on it," he laughed. "If she will but give me a big kiss and hug as a welcome home."

"Keep it," she said shortly.

The Mellos had a rule about only speaking English in their home. Stefano wanted his children and wife completely fluent in the language of their adopted homeland. The children took Greek lessons after school at a college professor's home in Jersey City so they would know their heritage through the language. The only exception was made late at night, when in the privacy of their own bed, Stefano would allow his wife to speak in Greek.

Thalia broke the rule that night when her husband came home after three weeks away.

"Asshole," she shrieked at him in Greek. "Dirty abandoner of family, I hope your pecker falls off from lack of use!"

Stefano's mouth dropped open at the sheer vitriolic venom in her words. He advanced on her with determination in his step.

"Bastard," she screamed. "Stay away from me, you son of a whore, you won't mistreat me in front of my children."

Peter was huddled over his younger siblings.

"I don't know," he was saying pensively. "I think she called him a bungler with a mother prostitute who was losing his penis to laziness?"

"Do you see this, Thalia," Stefano yelled. "Your son is trying to explain what is clearly unexplainable. Put your children to bed, Mrs. Mellos, I will see to you later."

Thalia felt a nugget of rage, that niggled under her skin, at his condescending tone, she stamped her foot.

"Fuck you, Stefano," she cried.

The children gasped.

And then she gasped. She had spoken in English.

Stefano's eyes narrowed into slits but he didn't go near her. Instead he roared with laughter and gathered his older children in his arms.

"Mommy wants to play a game with me," he laughed hollowly. "Come, I will put you to bed and

tell you what your grandparents told me to tell you. Put the baby to bed, Thalia," he told his wife shortly as he shepherded his children toward their bedrooms.

Thalia's heart was thumping erratically. She hadn't meant to curse him in front of the children. It just happened. English had seeped into her mind and she knew not how to control it.

She picked up her baby daughter and readied her for bed. She put her down in the crib in the alcove off their bedroom. Cristina's little brown eyes twinkled merrily at her from beneath the light cotton blanket.

"Sleep, my love," Thalia whispered.

She was thirty-three years old. She couldn't believe her husband would revert back to his behavior as a young husband in Greece. She slipped into a short, silky black nighty and stretched out on the bed with her Reader's Digest.

Her fair hair fell about her shoulders in unruly curls. Normally she wore it back in a tight plait or in a stiff ponytail.

She had no idea how seductive she looked, her long tanned legs crossed before her, as she leaned on her elbow over her book.

When Stefano barged into the room half an hour later, he stopped abruptly, his body reacting with instinctive pleasure at the sight of his wife in her skimpy black negligee.

"You will not escape punishment, thespinas," he said sternly. "No matter how beautiful you look."

Without realizing, he spoke in Greek.

She steeled herself to move not a muscle but instead glanced at him as though she were bored to tears.

"In English, dear," was all she said.

Stefano shook his head, glaring at the icy woman sprawled on the bed before him.

"You're really pushing it, Mrs. Mellos," he snorted.

"I don't care, Stefano," she said indifferently. "You disappear for weeks and then just think you can snap your fingers and make everything right again."

"Thalia," he said softly. "I am sorry that you feel so put upon but honestly all this work and travel is for us, for all of us, and I thought you understood that."

She slammed shut her magazine and jumped off the bed.

"I do understand it," she cried. "Don't make me out to be some selfish bitch. But I'm tired of dealing with everything, Stef. Peter is almost failing math, Adriana nags me every day about taking ballet lessons and Nicky almost set the kitchen on fire last week." She strode about the bedroom, waving her arms as the frustrations of the last month exploded from her. "And Cristina is teething," she added.

He didn't make the mistake of minimizing her complaints.

"Thal," he began calmly. "I spent two weeks arguing with the landlord over the office in Athens. I had to beg and grovel before the president of the Bank Athenos just to get funding for our first year's mortgage on the ship. Things were not easy for me in Greece." He paused, giving her a long hard look.

She blushed, predicting his next words.

"But I came back happy to see you, Thalia, happy to be with my wife and family again," he told her. "Life is not easy but we do it, love. So it wasn't the nicest thing to be cursed in front of my children by the wife I missed so very much."

Thalia swallowed hard, trying to rid herself of the bad taste in her mouth.

"I am going to spank your fanny," he told her matter-of-factly.

She gasped, backing away from her husband.

"Stefano," she exclaimed.

"Don't even bother," he told her harshly. "You know you earned this one."

For such a big man, he moved quickly. He gripped her wrist and in one movement, he twisted her over his lap as he sat down on the edge of the bed.

It was easy enough to slide aside her silk nighty and remove her skimpy panties.

He cupped her bottom with his large hand and she squealed.

"Please, Stefano," she whimpered. "Don't do this."

He chuckled.

"A little too late, wife," he muttered.

Thalia grit her teeth in humiliation and trepidation. It had been so long since she had been placed in this position. She was afraid and she was embarrassed.

When his hand fell onto her naked flesh, she squirmed helplessly.

"Stef!" she yelped.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He spanked hard with an unforgiving hand. Before long she was weeping into the chenille bedspread.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Ow, please, Stefano, please," she wailed.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Stefano spanked his wife until her bottom was cherry-red. She jerked convulsively over his lap with every smack, moaning incoherently into the soft cloth covering the bed. When he was satisfied that she was contrite, he stopped, holding her burning buttocks in his own hot hand.

Because he adored his wife and loved her more than his own flesh, he bent over her jerking body, pressing soft kisses into her hip, her shoulder and her crimson rear end.

"Thalia, I love you," he told her.

Thalia felt his feathery kisses upon her and wanted to weep anew for the pain she had caused this strong, uncompromising man who was her husband.

"Stefano, I am sorry," she whispered, all of her anger dissolved now. Turning around, she smiled at him through her tears. "And I love you."

He dipped his fingers into her sex and grinned at the wet welcome there.

Later, after such a warm homecoming, his wife was further treated... to a soft, slow night of the most delectable lovemaking he could invent.

And that night was her introduction to her new American husband Stefano Mellos.

Afterwards, if he came home on a Friday night and found her in a sulky bad temper, he would put the baby down in her crib, give Peter a few dollars for ice cream and send him out with the other children to the Dairy Queen down the street.

"Thalia Marie Mellos," he would say sternly. "You come right here."

And Thalia knew that it wasn't wise to defy the big, burly giant who filled a room with his robust voice and thick curls of dark hair. But petite blond Thalia was never intimidated by his size and was rarely wise when it came to dealing with her husband.

"I won't come there, you big bully," she would invariably answer, stamping her foot.

But that was usually the last bit of defiance before he crossed the room in a few big strides and tucked his recalcitrant wife under one arm.

And Stefano continued to treat disobedience and bad temper in his wife the same way year after year. Even now, Thalia thought, smiling gently in the bed next to her slumbering husband, he would resort to the same tricks.

But then again, so would she.

Chuckling softly, she flipped over onto her tummy and wrapped an arm around her husband's barrel chest, snuggling closer to the only man of her dreams.

Stormy Weather

The day before the wedding dawned with overcast skies and a dull, cold metallic taste in the air.

"Feels like snow," Nick announced as he stumbled into the kitchen holding the newspaper.

"Bite your tongue," Nora chided him from her perch at the butcher block island. She was staring into her mug, halfheartedly dunking her tea bag. "Don't even mention snow. Belle will flip out."

"Okay, I won't mention it," he chuckled. "But it's gonna do something, my scar is throbbing."

The scar he referred to was a crescent shape above his left cheekbone he incurred in some mysterious childhood accident in which he nearly blew up the kitchen; it was a great weather predictor – it ached him when the skies were lowering with the threat of some sort of precipitation.

"Damn," she muttered,

"Aren't my parents up yet?" he asked, looking around the doorway into the breakfast nook.

Nora placed her finger on her lips and giggled.

"I ran into Thalia coming out of the bathroom earlier and she was looking rather pink and flustered, but in a good way, you know," Nora whispered. "She just kept shaking her head and muttering, that man, what an animal, that man."

"Your point?"

"Well c'mon, Nick, obviously they were having a little early morning tryst."

"Eesh," he made a face. "Let's not go there, huh, Nor."

"Anyway," she said, rubbing his arm gently. "Belle, Pete and Cristina will be here for breakfast in an hour or so. That'll make eleven of us, feel like making a bagel run?"

"Sure," he said. "You should fry up some bacon, I'll do French toast when I get back."

"You da man," she said sultrily.

He encircled her waist with his brawny arms and nuzzled her neck.

"All recuperated?" he whispered, rubbing her bottom suggestively.

"No, you brute," she cried. "My butt'll be sore for days and you're the cause."

"I think you had a little to do with it," he laughed.

She stuck her tongue at him and made a rude noise.

"That's my little princess," he smiled. "So what's the game plan for the day?"

Instead of answering, she dove her hands into waistband of his checked chef pants and massaged his massive thighs. She kissed the hollow of his collarbone. She was so addicted to this man; she could never get enough of him.

"How did you get all the muscles in the family?" she mused. "I feel like a ninety pound weakling next to you."

"You have a lot of strength, Nor," he said seriously. "Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's not there."

"Cryptic but cute," she said, yanking him closer by squeezing his butt and pulling him to her until he straddled her stool.

"Game plan?" he reminded her, stroking her hair.

"Oh, right. Well, first breakfast," she said. "Then you go to work. I join you there for the lunch shift. Pete's gotta get back to the city and Belle's picking up her folks at the airport. I will leave floor plans and extremely explicit directions with Lisa for setup after close tonight and leave to come back here. We go to the church for the rehearsal where you, I repeat you, will meet us at approximately 7:00 PM. We do the rehearsing thing. Then we all go to Poppies for the rehearsal dinner. You and I leave, fool around until the car gets all steamy in the parking lot, then we go to the restaurant. Inspect and perfect and get the hell outta there and come

home. That, my love, is the game plan. Any questions?"

"So," he said, mouth dropping open and eyes rolling. "We're having breakfast here?"

"Nicolas, don't mess with me," she threatened. "Remember that strength you were accusing me of having." She glanced meaningfully at his crotch and quirked her eyebrow, almost like a native Mellos, she thought.

"Nervous tic?" he asked, bursting her bubble.

"I did the eyebrow," she whined. "You know it was good."

"I'm going to get the bagels and some pastry," he told her. "Try to keep out of trouble, my darling, until I return."

She whistled through her teeth and jerked her thumb toward the door.

What a love, she thought after he was gone. Every day she found another tiny little part of her husband to appreciate and wonder at. She was lucky and she knew it. She was never bored by Nicolas Michael Mellos.

"Is that a snowflake?" asked Peter as they piled into his car on their way to breakfast at his brother and sister-in-law's.

"Bite your tongue," Belle shrieked. "Don't even joke about such a thing."

"Uhh, I think he's right, Belle," Cristina said.

Belle wouldn't acknowledge their words. It would not snow. Not on the day before her wedding. Not when she was planning a beautiful autumnal ceremony. No. Not today.

Peter maneuvered his black Beemer out of Belle's tiny asphalt driveway into the main road leading out of the condo complex.

"Sweetie," he said consolingly, patting her knee. "Snow is lucky, don't worry."

"Snow is lucky?" she said frostily. "To whom, Peter? Eskimos? Tibetan priests? Yeti? Albino prey?"

"Okay, Bella," he said with just a tinge of steel in his voice. "Don't get all whacked on me. So, we get a dusting, a flurry. Big deal."

"Screw that," she hissed. "It is a big fucking deal, Peter. We have seventy-five people driving to this neck of New Jersey to watch us share our vows tomorrow."

She couldn't believe she was snapping at him. She knew she was being unfair to her fiancé by acting out her frustration but there he was, driving the car – perfectly accessible. She couldn't resist the perfect target. Their wedding was not a big, elaborate affair but still she wanted everything to be perfect on her day of days.

"Enough, Bella," he told her. "Let's just go eat breakfast with my family."

"Fine," she said shortly. "But please don't make any more stupid remarks about the weather." She ignored him for the rest of the drive.

Cristina started nervously chattering about everything possible. When they pulled into Nick and Nora's big circular drive, the soft white flakes were splatting against the windshield.

"Cristi, give us a minute, okay?" Peter asked as he switched off the ignition.

"Sure, yea okay, sure," Cristina babbled as she scooted out of the car.

Peter didn't say anything for a moment as he looked at his future bride. Belle studied her fingernails, casually flicking a piece of lint from her pocket to the floor. When the silence became so tangible, she could cut it, she glanced at Peter.

"What?" she demanded.

His maple syrup eyes were dark with emotion and she knew she had pushed him just a little too far. He still wouldn't speak to her.

"Peter," she began in a placating voice.

"No," he told her. "Are you going to let the weather come between us? You're going to let snow cause you to disrespect me and act like a spoiled little brat?"

He was calling her a brat? Today, the day before her wedding, her fiancé was calling her names?

"Fuck that, mister," she cried. "You're the one acting like an idiot. Snow's lucky, Bella," she mimicked in a nasty voice.

"I am going to assume that this is the stress talking, Isabella," he said grimly. "You're still not going to get away with it, but I will also assume that you do still love me, regardless of the snow."

His voice was dear to her, she realized, even when it was laced with anger. Belle felt a leaden weight in her chest at his words. What was she doing? How could she have acted like such a shrew to him? Contritely she bowed her head and reached out to take his hand.

"Peter, I love you so much," she told him in a subdued voice. "I am really sorry I was mean – it's just that I want everything to be perfect."

This time.

That was what she was thinking. Her first wedding had been in late May and what should have been a pleasant, beautiful day in Lexington was 110 degrees in the shade during one of the worst heat waves in Kentucky's history. Her dress almost melted to her. One of her older aunts suffered heat prostration and had to be rushed to the hospital. The flower girl turned the hose on the ring bearer. The lovely tables under the yellow and white striped tent were like sauna beds, the flowers wilted and the butter was soup. It was terrible. She thought an autumn wedding would circumvent the threat of bad weather.

So it was snowing. So what. It wouldn't be the fall miracle she had hoped for – it would still be a miracle – she was marrying the most incredibly wonderful man. A man who made her heart beat faster just by looking in her direction. A man who treated her like a queen and pleased her more than she had ever thought possible.

A man she had just treated like a pariah.

She crawled over the console to snuggle on his lap. He held her firmly, his large palm cupping her bottom.

"Do you forgive me? I love you," she whispered. "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," she sang softly

"You had me at fuck that mister," he said seriously in his best Jerry Maguire voice, repeating in a pseudo emotion choked voice. "You had me at fuck that mister."

She giggled in his arms. "Am I still in trouble?"

"What do you think?"

How had she ever thought he would cut her a break? "I think we're late to breakfast," she said impishly. "Later will have to do, almost husband mine."

"Fair enough," he said, carrying her out his door into the white maelstrom of swirling flakes.

The snow stuck to his thick eyelashes as he carried his prize to the door.

"Shit," Belle mumbled under her breath.

His hand squeezed her bottom with enough strength that she didn't mistake his meaning.

"Nice snow," she corrected.

Lunch was slow at Nick & Nora's Place. Nora didn't care; she was happy that she could escape early without any guilt. The morning's snow flurries had stopped before noon but it was still steely weather, cold and gray with no hint of sunshine.

Nick was conferring with his wife at the piano, his sheets for the wedding spread out before them.

"Eugenio is definitely coming in, right, Nor?" he was saying.

"He told me yes," Nora said, frowning. "Why do you keep treating me like a moron, Nicolas?"

"I just want to be sure that you actually spoke to the man," Nick said calmly. "He is kind of famous for being a no show."

"I spoke to him," Nora told him, suddenly wondering if she had actually spoken to their fill-in maitre-d or just left a message. Everything was merging in her head and she no longer knew what she had done, promised to do or decided not to do. Nick's meticulous attention to detail suddenly pissed her off. How could he be so professional all the time? This was his goddamn brother's wedding, for pity's sake. He should be a little flustered.

"Great, babe," he said, smiling warmly. "So, I'll finish up the prep and get home for a shower and I'll be at the church by seven, right?"

"Yup," she told him, nodding.

"You left the set-up with Lisa?"

"I did," she said.

"So, try to take a nap or something when you get home." He held her face between his big hands, leaning forward to kiss her deeply.

"Honey," she said. "I have a house full of your family, I think I might have to make an appearance."

"They won't mind," he told her. "Take it easy."

She forgot her earlier irritation at him as she basked in his sweet concern for her. He was such a big sweetie. Too bad he never got a break. But he was being very careful with his diet and his cholesterol was under control for the time being so she couldn't nag him too much.

"It'll be so cool when you and Pete open up your place together. Maybe you'll actually be able to relax once in awhile."

"Yea, I think so," he said seriously. "Pete and I have been talking about this since we were in school. I don't know if he's told Belle about it yet, but all this commuting has been killing him. He hates being away from her. He really doesn't want to drag Belle into the city and selling his place makes a lot of sense now."

"And making a bundle on it doesn't hurt," she added.

"True."

Pete and Nick were talking to the owner of the building next door trying to negotiate a price and then expanding Nick & Nora's to include another more upscale dining room called Mykonos. It would double their current space and they would be able to upgrade the kitchen into a large, high tech facility. Peter's investment of time and capital would make it possible; they were all excited about it.

"See you later," she said, smiling at her love. "Remember, parking lot at Poppies – you, me and the front seat."

"Count on it," he laughed.

Nora was pulling out of the driveway behind the restaurant when she saw Belle dart into the front door of her coffee shop. Hurriedly, she pulled into the first parking space she noticed and plugged a dime into the meter. What was Belle doing here?

"Bellie-button?" Nora called as she pushed the unlocked front door open and stuck her head into Belle's.

"Back here, Nor," her friend called.

Belle appeared a moment later from the kitchen, a chagrined look on her face. She was carrying a basket filled with muffins and foil wrapped coffee packets.

"Where are your parents?" Nora asked.

"My place," Belle answered. "I dropped them off and my mother promptly started making gravy while my dad is trying to talk the greens superintendent into letting him play a quick nine holes."

"It's not too cold for golf?"

"If you play golf like my dad, it's never too cold," Belle laughed. "I was just picking up some stuff for breakfast. It's not being used here."

"We had no less than ten customers ask us where the hell you were today," Nora laughed. "I guess I really am my sister's keeper."

"Being an only child, I like the sound of that," Belle smiled.

"You should've called me," Nora said. "I would have brought this stuff to you."

"Yea, well..." Belle seemed uncomfortable. "Actually, Nora, I was meeting my..." "Belle?" a male voice made them both jump.

Nora glanced around to see a nice looking dark haired man standing hesitantly in the doorway.

"Hi, Belle," he said warmly.

"Hey, Daniel," she said. "Come on in."

When the man reached them, Belle embraced him and kissed him. She waved her hand toward her friend.

"Dan, this is my best friend and soon to be sister-in-law, Nora Mellos," she laughed. "And Nora, this is Daniel Blaustein, my ex-husband."

"Um, hi," Nora said awkwardly, extending her hand. She secretly assessed the stranger from beneath her eyelashes. He was cute but not awesome. He seemed kind.

"I just wanted to wish Belle well," he explained. "I'm sure you think it's odd."

"Not at all," Nora said, thinking it was weirder than a fourth leg.

"Dan and I were married for five years, Nora," Belle said. "We are pretty much family."

"Uh huh," Nora said, smiling.

"I'll walk you out, Nor," Belle said, propelling her friend toward the door.

"Bye, Dan," Nora called over her shoulder.

"Nice to meet you, Nora," he said.

Once they were on the sidewalk, Nora rounded on her friend.

"What are you doing, Isabella Armstrong, you wacky broad?"

"Just something I need to do," Belle said softly. "Don't worry about it, Nor, there are some things I have to tell Daniel and then he'll be on his way."

"If you say so." Nora hugged her pal and climbed into her Volkswagen. "See you at the church."

"Right."

Nora drove off, cranking up the heater and shivering slightly.

"It's been a long time, Belle," Daniel said.

"I know," she agreed. "I read about that big case of yours. Congratulations on making partner."

"Thanks," he said briefly. "How are your folks?"

"Great," she told him. "They're at my place. Just got up for the wedding."

"I like what you've done with the place," he said, gazing around. "Your Fiesta ware looks great." He picked up a vintage creamer and turned it over, inspecting the stamp.

"Thanks."

"So, why the summons to suburbia, Belle?" He sat down on one of the chrome counter stools. "What can I possibly do for you?"

Belle felt a sick feeling in her belly as she watched her ex-husband sit at her counter. She knew she should offer him coffee or something but she couldn't form the words. She was remorse torn and guilt-ridden.

"Dan," she said. "I just wanted to make sure everything is okay with you. I know we've been divorced for a while but I still feel guilty that our marriage didn't work. I really love you as a friend and just have to know that you're okay."

"Sweetie, I am great," he told her with a big smile. "I'm seeing a wonderful girl, she's a lawyer too and she lives just about around the corner. I'm happy."

Belle felt relief wash over her as she saw the truth of Daniel's words in his face. He was fine.

"I have just felt so guilty lately," she explained. "Peter is absolutely wonderful but he has a way of dealing with my moods that makes me feel like I really have been a brat for most of my life. I just felt bad thinking that maybe I wasn't the best wife to you when we were married. Maybe I never gave it a fair chance."

"Peanut, you didn't wrong me," he said, chuckling. "Don't get all dramatic about us – you and I both gave it everything we had. We weren't right as husband and wife – we were fine as friends though, even as lovers but not in marriage."

"Oh, Dan," she cried. "Thank you." She threw her arms around him and rested her head on his shoulder. "I'm so happy we were wrong for each other."

"Me too," he laughed.

She smiled happily as her ex-husband hugged her close. When the bell jangled up front, she glanced toward the door and her mouth dropped open when she saw Peter walking into her shop with a big bouquet of hothouse irises.

"Isabella," he said stiffly.

"Peter," she said nervously, backing out of Dan's arms. "This is Daniel Blaustein. My first husband. My ex-husband," she corrected. "Dan, this is Peter Mellos, my next husband, I mean my last husband."

"I get it," Dan laughed, shaking Peter's hand.

"These are for you, honey," Peter said, thrusting the flowers toward her. "I was stopping to talk to Nick and I saw your car. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"You're not interrupting," Dan and Belle chorused.

"Belle was just thanking me for being wrong for her," Dan explained. "It seems she was feeling guilty about being so happy with you. I had to burst her bubble by telling her I'm quite happy without her also."

Peter quirked his eyebrow, looking from Belle to Daniel and back again.

For once Belle was struck dumb.

"You must have the touch," Dan said admiringly. "Belle has never been at a loss for words."

"Yea, well, she still isn't," Pete said. "This little lady has the mouth of a sailor when she doesn't get her way."

"Same old Belle," Dan laughed. "And does she make your life miserable until she gets her way?"

"Hardly," Pete snorted.

Belle was blushing at their conversation.

"Hey," she cried indignantly. "I'm in the room here. Don't talk about me like I'm invisible."

"Sweetie," Peter said innocently. "Tell Dan what happens when you try to make my life miserable."

"Peter," she said warningly.

"It's an age-old remedy, my friend," Peter laughed.

"Dan has to go now," Belle said hurriedly. "Thank you so much for stopping by, Daniel. I wish you lots of luck and happiness with your lawyer friend."

"Thanks," Dan said in confusion, shaking Peter's hand again. "Maybe we can get together sometime and talk." He emphasized the word talk as he nodded toward Belle.

"Sure," Pete said easily.

"Bye, Belle," Dan said, dropping a chaste kiss on her lips.

The bell clanged as he left.

"Lock it," Pete said grimly.

"Peter, don't get all caveman on me," she told him.

"Lock it now, honey," he repeated. "Please."

Grumbling she stamped over to the front door and flipped the deadbolt.

"Why I don't know," she muttered.

"Well, then I'll tell you," he said. "But let's go in the back where it's more private."

Belle's stomach twisted as she preceded Peter into the darkened kitchen.

"I think you could lose the pants," he said conversationally. "It'll make it easier."

"Easier?"

"Yes, much. Remember, we have a little business to take care of," he said meaningfully.

"Peter," she protested. "I apologized about my attitude. You even said it was stress."

"I also said it was disrespect," he reminded her.

"This is stupid," she grumbled. "It's unfair and you're mean to do this the day before our wedding." But even as she griped she was unbuckling her belt and unzipping her jeans. She knew he would never give in. His consistency was one of the things she loved about him.

She was bending over, pulling her jeans over her foot when she felt a hard wallop on her panty clad bottom.

"Mean?" he queried.

"Ouch! Yes, mean, really mean like an ogre," she stormed, kicking her jeans across the floor and reaching back to rub her butt cheek.

"If you want to entertain your ex-husband in the future," he warned in a cold voice. "You be sure to include me in the party too, little one. Cause I don't want to walk into any more surprises like this one."

"Don't you trust me?" her voice squeaked in outrage.

"Certainly I trust you, but be honest, would you have told me that you met him if I hadn't stopped by?"

"Of course," she snapped.

"Isabella?"

"Probably," she amended. "I'm pretty sure I would have. Maybe."

"Okay, panties off."

"Mean," she accused, sliding her silk tangerine colored thong down her thighs, not that it covered much of anything.

"You're just adding to your spanking, you know," he told her reasonably.

"Mean tricker," she blurted. "Why didn't you say that before?"

"Enough with the mouth, love." He pulled the chair away from her small desk and dragged it into the center of the room. Sitting down, he crooked his finger in that way she was coming to know quite well. "C'mon."

"Peter, please don't be mad at me," she cried, shuffling over to stand in front of him. "I hate it when you're mad at me."

"I'm not mad," he said. "But you know you have this coming."

She couldn't really argue with him. He hadn't spanked her since the smoking incident at the restaurant. And she had certainly earned a few since then but he had given her the benefit of the doubt, excusing her behavior as wedding stress induced.

This would be awkward, sprawled over his legs like a rag doll. She wondered if she could seduce him instead. What man could resist a willing mouth in his lap? She knelt before his chair and bent her head onto his thighs, stroking his warm, full crotch with her hands.

"Baby, let me make you happy," she purred.

"Bella, over my lap now!" he ordered, lifting her head from his thighs.

"Damn," she cried. "What, are you made of friggin stone?"

"What I'm made of is about this much patience," he said squeezing his forefinger and thumb together. "And it's all gone."

With that he yanked her forward over his lap and held her down with one hand pressing into her back. His other hand swung back and landed on her bare bottom with a resounding smack.

"Oww!" she yelped. She had forgotten how hard his hand was. How could she forget something like that?

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"This is for your disrespectful mouth this morning," he bellowed.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"And for your snotty attitude!"

"Oww, stop, Peter, please," she wailed.

"And for sneaking around with your ex-husband behind your future husband's back," he continued.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

He rested his hand on her fiery skin for just a moment.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Bella, you better know you're mine," he told her sternly. "And I don't ever let go of what's mine."

"Just friggin kill me now," she screamed. "Put me out of my misery."

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"You have to understand one thing, Isabella Armstrong," he said solemnly.

"What?" she screeched, sobbing softly.

He tumbled her off his lap and pinned her between his knees.

"I love you more than I ever thought I could love anyone," he said warmly. "I love you forever and with all of my being."

He tilted her tear-stained face up and kissed her long and deeply, his hands stroking her stinging bottom.

"Yea, well I love you too, big meanie," she whispered.

"And I'm not made of friggin stone," he told her, scooping her up in his arms so that she straddled him. "Shall we christen the floor?"

"The Board of Health might not like it," she said.

"Let's not tell them."

Carefully he spread a few tablecloths on the tiled floor and lowered his soon-to-be-bridal down on the makeshift bed. He tugged her sweater off and tossed it across the room. He stripped in a matter of seconds and joined her on the red and white checked cloths.

He was so warm, she thought as he enfolded her in his delicious embrace. She dug her fingers into his curling blond hair and pressed her body so close to his chest, she felt like his heart beating was her heart beating.

"You had me from day one," she whispered into his neck.

They spent a very pleasant hour learning that kitchen floors can become islands if enough love surrounds you.

Professional Courtesy

The Chapel at the College of St. Catherine's was not huge but it was an impressive structure with gothic arches and fabulous stained glass windows; the pews were burnished to a fine patina that came from many decades of faithful polishing. The small wedding party gathered in the first pew. Belle's maid of honor was Nora and her two attendants were Cristina and Adriana. She felt bound by some unwritten familial agreement to include her future sister-in-laws in her wedding party but at least she didn't have the guilt of making them buy an outlandish and expensive dress for the occasion. Tomorrow they would be wearing tasteful burgundy sheaths that they definitely could and probably would wear again. Nora's richer autumnal medley brocade was perfect for her golden blond tresses and she looked like a princess in it. Belle's gown was a simple ivory satin with bell sleeves, a scoop neckline and a smooth slightly flaring skirt. Her short veil would be held in place with a wreath of cream roses and baby's breath. She was going to carry tiger lilies.

How different this was from her first wedding where there were no less than ten attendants and a maid of honor with two flowers girls. That wedding had taken place on the terrace of the Lexington Oaks Country Club with a Rabbi and a minister co-officiating. Although not a very religious ceremony, it was nevertheless an elaborate event. There was so much smoke colored chiffon, you could've gift-wrapped a house in it.

"Are we ready?" asked the Reverend Terence McManus, the young chaplain who would perform the ceremony.

Belle looked at Nora and her friend shrugged apologetically.

"Let's get started, Father," Belle said. "We're waiting for Nick but he's a quick study."

It didn't take long to run through the procedure for joining one life to another. It was sinfully easy, Belle thought as she stole a glance at her handsome groom. He was going to be her husband. The realization sent thrills through her entire body. As the priest launched into an explanation of the offering of the gifts – which would be brought up to the altar by Sophia and Thalia, the two mothers, and the Costas twins, Belle continued to study Peter's serious expression. He caught her watching and smiled warmly, squeezing her hand. As he pulled her closer, he gently brushed his hand against her bottom, pausing just a second to caress her.

"Are you going to promise to obey," he whispered just for her ears.

She flushed, rocking against him.

"You want me to lie on my wedding day," she whispered back, joking.

"It's okay," he told her. "I don't really need the words, just the deeds."

"You got it." She smiled sweetly at him, rising on tiptoes to meld her lips with his in a passionate explosion of love. "I'm going to make you so happy."

"God," he groaned. "I love you."

They were lost in their embrace, lost to the soft chatter of the others, the undercurrent of laughter that rippled affectionately around them.

"Ahem, hmm," the sound of the young priest clearing his throat brought the happy couple back to the sacristy of St. Catherine's chapel.

Grinning sheepishly, Peter led Belle over to where the others were waiting. "Getting a little ahead of ourselves," he explained, laughing.

The rehearsal was finished and they were just starting to walk toward the back of the church when Nick burst up the aisle. "Sorry, folks," he boomed. "Last minute snafu and all."

"Nicolas," Nora began waspishly. "Do you have any idea how late..."

She was cut off by a meaningful glance from her husband. "Save it, Nora," he said shortly.

He greeted the Armstrongs and kissed his mother and sisters, hugging his father and slapping Pete's back while shaking Michael's hand.

"We'll fill you in at dinner," Belle said, gently squeezing her future brother-in-law's arm. "You guys want to ride with us?"

"No, we'll take our own car," Nick said, dropping a kiss on Belle's cheek. "Sorry I missed the action."

"It's no problem, Nick," she said, waving away his concerns. "Tell you the truth, Peter and I missed most of it too."

"Where were you?" Nora hissed as they stepped outside into the crisp, cold night.

"Taking care of stuff," he answered cryptically.

"You could've called," she sniffed.

"Yup," he said. "I could've but then I would miss having this lovely conversation in person." He smiled down at her, wolfishly, she thought.

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Nick put his hand on her thigh.

"So you actually spoke to Eugenio about tomorrow, right?" he asked casually.

"Oh for Christ sakes, Nick," Nora exploded. "How many times are we going to have the Eugenio discussion? I spoke to him. He'll be there. Stop worrying."

"Mmm," he nodded his head, flicking on the blinker as they made the left toward Poppies. "Kinda hard," he added.

Nora exhaled, counting to ten in her mind. "What's kind of hard, Nicolas?" she asked in an exaggeratedly simple tone of voice.

"Kinda hard for him to be there seeing as how he's in Milan."

They were at the restaurant and Nick pulled into the parking lot, wedging the Jeep into a corner spot behind a giant oak tree.

Nora's heart flipped over in somersaults of crazy realization. Hadn't she spoken to Genio? She

scrabbled over her memory, trying to remember the older man's voice as he committed to the date. Did she speak to him or leave a message. How could she have just left a message when it was so important to guarantee his availability for the date? Nick had counted on her staffing the restaurant adequately for his brother's big day.

Shit. She bit her lip, afraid to look at her husband's face.

"You lied to me?" he said softly.

She gulped, not wanting to admit it.

"Nora?"

"Nick, I'm sorry," she muttered. "I thought I spoke to him."

"Excuse me?" he spoke harshly. "I believe you were yelling at me a minute ago in a very loud voice but right now, I can't seem to hear you."

"I'm sorry," she cried, jerking her head up. "I'm not perfect, Nick, I make mistakes. I'm not you."

"Nora, don't make a bigger mistake now."

She knew he was giving her a chance to correct her attitude. She decided she would take advantage of his unexpected offer. "I screwed up," she confessed. "I guess I left a message and just assumed he was coming in since Claudia confirmed that she was working."

Claudia was Eugenio's cousin and they always helped out when the restaurant had catering jobs or big parties.

"So, it's my brother's wedding and I don't have a full staff," he said in a dangerously low voice.

"What do you want me to say, Nick?" she said. "I told you I was sorry. You want me to work the reception?"

"That's not what I want, Nora," he said coldly.

"Well I don't know what else I can say," she said shortly.

"You figure it out," he told her. "C'mon, we're going to be late and I know how you hate lateness."

He pushed open his door and stepped outside, moving around the front of the Jeep to open her door.

Damn, she thought, he was really mad. She had screwed up big time. He didn't touch her as they crossed the parking lot toward the entrance to Poppies.

The others were already seated at a long table for eleven in a recessed area off the main dining room. Nora slid into the chair that Nick held out for her next to Belle and swallowed hard to keep her tears at bay. He was being so cold; it was unlike Nick to harbor this kind of anger – usually he spent it immediately, invariably on her bottom.

If he was so angry he couldn't even trust himself to spank her, how would she ever make it up to him?

The blatant love that spilled all around her at the rehearsal dinner was making her miserable. All the couples at the table were caught in their own nimbuses of happy affection, Nora thought as she studied the others. Sophia and Roger Armstrong touched each other often as one spoke and the other listened, punctuating the conversation with endearments and smiles. Thalia and Stefano always looked like newlyweds, constantly exchanging smoldering glances when they thought no one was looking. Adriana was behaving like an angel; she had apologized earlier for her atrocious behavior during the preceding days, with Michael a formidable presence at her side. Now they were as physically close as their chairs would allow, her hand on his thigh, his arm across her shoulders. Belle and Peter smiled unwittingly, tenderly catching each other's eyes and holding hands beneath the white bounty of tablecloth. Nora felt a hardness in the pit of her stomach as she hunched over in her seat, aware of Nick's stiff posture in the chair beside her.

It wasn't fucking fair. She was tired of always having to be perfect. Life wasn't perfect. Why did

Nick expect so much from her? She took a swig of her champagne and tried to find some kind of delight in the crisp bubbles.

She felt eyes on her and she looked up to see Belle watching her.

"Excuse me," Nora said, getting up to go to the powder room, knowing her friend would follow.

"What the hell happened?" Belle demanded when they were alone in the ladies lounge standing in front of a large mirror where there were several upholstered chairs arranged. "You two look like a war took place."

"Sort of," Nora said. "Big boring story, don't want to go into it." She sank into one of the plush chairs.

"Make up," Belle urged, leaning close to the mirror to inspect a tiny mark on her chin that ended up being a speck of sauce from the shrimp appetizer she had eaten.

"I don't think he wants to," Nora said. "He's mad. Really mad."

"Then why are you the one who looks mad?"

"I'm not mad," Nora protested. "I said I was sorry but the big jerk doesn't want to forgive me."

"Hate to bring it up, hon, but you don't sound sorry," Belle told her, catching her eyes in the mirror.

"Bellie, I've been married to this man for eight years, I know when I'm sorry," Nora said, a catch in her voice as the pain in the back of her throat swelled.

Belle turned to her friend and pulled her out of the chair, hugging her hard.

"Please don't have a fight on my wedding day, Nora," Belle said seriously. "I know that's a completely selfish thing for me to say but I want my two best friends to share my joy not hide from it."

Nora nodded, not trusting herself to speak. She didn't know how she could fix this thing with Nick but she would try, she not only owed it to her friend, she owed it to her husband.

After the girls left for the ladies room, Peter leaned over the empty chairs and nudged his little brother.

"What gives, Nicky Bear?" he asked, using the nickname from childhood in hopes of cheering up his sober younger brother.

Nick just shook his head, his hand dismissing the question impatiently. "Nothing," he said.

"What'd she do?" Pete asked. "And don't say nothing."

"Okay I won't." He smiled briefly.

When Pete continued to look at him, Nick shrugged.

"Just a bunch of stuff. Nora has some issues that she can't seem to overcome. You know, lying, irresponsibility, smart mouth – all the lovely things that make life interesting."

"Did you fix it?" Pete asked. "Whatever she did this time?"

"Yea," Nick nodded. "I had to. But she doesn't know that."

"Tell her after," Pete said.

"After?"

"After her guilt assuaging," Peter laughed. "I know you. You're not going to leave her like this all night."

Nick grinned but didn't say anything else. Nora and Belle had returned to their seats.

The owner of Poppies came over to their table as Nora was settling back into her chair.

"I understand I have the owners of Nick & Nora's Place in my restaurant," he said jovially. "And also the respective owners of The Minoan in Manhattan where I have enjoyed the best Eggs Benedict in the western world and Belle's where the key lime pie melts in your mouth." He was a young man with a dark ponytail and neat goatee.

"Guilty," they told him.

"I'm Jean-Pierre," He introduced himself. "I hope you all will enjoy a special dessert my chef de cuisine has prepared for you. And please, accept

this champagne so we may toast the happy couple." A waiter appeared with a tray of fresh crystal flutes and two bottles of Dom Perignon.

Everyone lifted their glasses to the happiness of Belle and Peter. Nora lightly clinked her glass with Nick's, not looking at his eyes. When the young owner had bidden them good night, Nora slipped out of her chair and followed him into the other dining room. She spoke to him quietly for a moment while Nick watched her with narrowed eyes.

He ignored her when she returned to her chair. When she brushed his leg by accident, she felt him stiffen.

The dessert was presented to great cascading sighs from all the women. The chocolate mousse torte was garnished with shavings of almonds and white chocolate and sat in a pool of raspberry sauce, while giant chocolate dipped berries nestled against it.

"Nick, may I speak to you please," Nora asked her husband as everyone started eating. "It's important."

The others watched with interest as the unspeaking couple stood up and left the private dining area.

"I asked Jean-Pierre if we could use his office," Nora told the silent man behind her. He lifted his eyebrow at that.

Nora pulled Nick through the crowded dining room to a small lounge area by the bar. Jean-Pierre was standing at the end of the bar.

"Ah, yes, there you are," he said. "Come this way." He beckoned them over and through a doorway. "Just down a few stairs and then the first door on your right, it's unlocked."

"Thank you," Nora told him. "I appreciate this very much."

"Think nothing of it," he said wryly. "I have a wife. Sometime I will use your office when we are fighting at your restaurant."

Nora blushed. The French were so blunt, she thought in irritation.

His office was cleaner than Nick's. But this restaurant was much newer than Nick & Nora's Place, he had an array of glowing reviews framed on the wall above his new, uncluttered desk.

Nora turned the lock and faced her husband.

"What are you doing, Nora?" he finally spoke.

"I need to make things right between us, Nicky," she said. She closed the space that separated them and stood before him, her head bowed, hating the way she felt. "I was really wrong. I don't have any excuses, I was just lazy and preoccupied and maybe I was mad at you, too."

"Explain," he barked.

"When you nag me about things at work, I tend to get stubborn," she said in a small voice as she studied his shoes. "I get pissed at you for always being right. I'm sure you've noticed that."

"So your excuse is that you act like a brat and you expect me to accept this?" There was no mistaking the incredulous anger in his voice.

"I was wrong," she said. "I have to be honest, I wasn't really sure about Eugenio but instead of just checking up on it when you first asked me, I chose to ignore it because I think I was afraid you were right."

He shook his head as though her words were just too much for him to understand. "That's so irresponsible," he bellowed.

"I told you I was wrong," she snapped. "Give me a break here."

"Give you a break?" he asked icily. "Are you really sorry, Nora? Or is this some little ruse to get past my anger?"

"I am sorry, Nick." She took his hand in her small fingers and raised it to her lips. "I want you to punish me. I know I deserve it."

"I will," he told her. "But I want you to know that you are going to answer every question I ask of you in the future with a complete and honest

answer or I swear I will spank your bottom in front of anyone who happens to be there."

She nodded. He sat in Jean-Pierre's chair and waited.

"Think he ever has to draw straight lines?" Nick asked, glancing over at the desk. "Ah, pay dirt," he said, pulling a long dark wood ruler with a Coca Cola insignia blazoned across it from the leather cup of pens and pencils..

Nora's stomach thudded as she saw the harsh implement in her husband's hand. He swung it against his thigh to test the strength. Then he looked at her.

"I'm glad you figured it out," he said simply.

Wordlessly, she lifted her dress high off her backside and placed herself over his lap. His big hand dove into the waistband of her stockings and yanked them and her panties down to her knees.

CRACK! CRACK!

The wooden slab was as bad as the one in Nick's office at the restaurant.

Nick slammed the hard shellacked wood across her buttocks fiercely and she knew she would have welts from this punishment.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

"Aghhh," she wailed. "Don't hit so hard, Nick, it's probably an antique, what if you break it."

"I'd have to buy him another," Nick said. "But you're right, it's probably dear to his heart if his wife is anything like you."

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

The strokes were less ferocious but still added to the fire on her ass.

CRACK! CRACK! CRACK!

"You better remember this lesson, Nora," he told her sternly.

"I will, I promise," Nora cried as her husband spanked her relentlessly. Finally he laid down the ruler and pressed his hand onto her hot, throbbing cheeks.

"No more lies," he said, punctuating each word with a hard smack of his hand.

She shuddered.

"No more irresponsibility!"

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

Each syllable fell onto her ears accented with the force of his hand on her bottom.

She was sobbing when he lifted her up.

He gathered her in his arms and stroked the heat of her rear end. She clung to him, the pain of her backside alleviated a little by the forgiveness she saw in his eyes.

"What are we going to do about tomorrow," she asked, hating to bring it up but desperately wanting to make amends.

"Claudia is bringing her brother Paulo," Nick said. "He's a good guy, not as great as Eugenio in the dining room but he knows what to do."

Nora stood still for a moment, digesting his words. What a fiend, she thought, beating her butt into a pulp when he had already solved the problem. Making her feel terrible that she had ruined his brother's wedding day. What an unfair jerk! Asshole. She came so close to losing her temper and doing something she would most assuredly regret but then she realized that she hadn't been punished for Eugenio's absence but for her own absence.

"I'm sorry," she told him.

"You're already forgiven," he said.

"No, I'm sorry for all the bad things I just called you in my head," she said pertly.

He nodded at her, grinning. His Nora, she'd never change.

"Let's get back to the table," he said. "I need me some of that dessert."

"Everyone's going to know what happened," Nora said.

"Your point is...?"

"I'm embarrassed." Nora groaned, rolling her eyes. Honestly sometimes he was obtuse.

Nick grabbed her by the shoulders and ran his fingers through her silky blond curls. He lowered his mouth and kissed her until she felt languid and swollen with desire. His big hands stroked her breasts possessively, creating fires of arousal that plundered her equanimity. He leaned back, gazing at her with satisfaction.

"Now they'll just think we were horny."

"Nicolas!" She batted him on the arm.

Nick left the ruler on Jean-Pierre's desk and tore off one of the yellow post-its from a square pad. He scribbled one word.

Thanks!

"One more place we can never show our face again," Nora said dryly as she glanced at the note. Her face was almost as crimson as her bottom as they made their way back to their family.

I Do - I Don't

Belle stretched out languorously, pressing her fingertips against the painted white posts of her antique brass bed. She inhaled the warm scents of toasty heat rising from the old-fashioned brass registers in the floor and the fragrant aroma of potpourri that filled bowls throughout the house. Today she would marry Peter. Before she even glanced toward the window, she knew it was a good day.

Leaning over, she pulled the edge of the cutwork curtain panel aside and peered out the window.

"Yes!" she rolled back, sticking her thumbs up to no one in particular and the universe at large. There was a gorgeous blue sky and the sun was already bright. It could be cold as hell, she didn't care, as long as the sky was clear.

"Thank you," she told the ceiling, meaning God.

She checked her alarm clock. 7:15. It was lovely to sleep in and not scurry about like crazy to open the shop in time for the morning commuters. She really wanted to talk to Peter about combining their efforts; perhaps he would be interested in taking on a joint venture with his bride – she was more than ready to step back a bit. Belle didn't want to give up her business but she figured she and Peter could make a success of a Mellos-Armstrong family restaurant and she could limit her involvement to just mornings or just afternoons as they saw fit. It would be perfect.

She stretched out again, smiling. Life was good. She had a manicure scheduled and hair appointment for the morning with all the other women; and if there was time, a full body massage with Liam. Then lunch at home with her parents would follow with plenty of time to get dressed before the 3:00 PM ceremony.

Peter was planning to be out from the city later this morning. But she probably wouldn't see him before the church. She missed him already,

imagining his luscious golden brown eyes and long, curling blond hair. He was so damned beautiful, she thought. Even though she was just thinking of him, she felt a sweetness in her heart and a wetness in her loins. She found it amazing that he could do that to her. She was truly blessed.

"What did you say?" Belle asked Nora in a dangerously low voice. She was sitting in the chair at Lena's table, getting her nails done. The young woman was in the process of pushing back her cuticles when Nora had made the incredible statement.

When Nick and Pete open the new restaurant.

"What do you mean," Nora asked innocently, craning her neck from her perch next door at Sally's station.

"About Nick and Pete's restaurant," Belle said, swallowing a lump in her throat that felt like a wad of sandpaper.

"You know," Nora said nonchalantly. "Mykonos, the new place we're taking over next door. It's going to be so great, Bellie, you and I will run the place obviously, since they'll be too busy in the kitchen to see to the front of the house. Are you going to sell Belle's or just close down?"

"Hmm," Belle made a noncommittal noise, concentrating hard on not letting any tears spill out of her eyes. She felt so betrayed. Did everyone know of this new plan, except her? Peter had a lot of explaining to do.

Fuck him.

Fuck him to hell. Oh she hated him. How dare he make any plans without her. What an asshole.

"Belle, hold still," Lena warned. "I don't want to nick you."

"Oh, God," Nora drawled. "I have been Nicked, don't go there, my sis."

It was too much.

Belle broke down, sobbing into her hands as she collapsed on Lena's table. At least there was no polish on her nails yet.

"Belle?" Nora was at her side in an instant, her arms around her shoulders. "Belle, sweetie, what's the matter?"

Belle choked into her hands, ignoring the equally alarmed expressions on Lena, Sally and Nora.

"Peter...never...oh shit," she slammed her fist against the table, shuddering from her outrage and pain. "He never told me about this, Nora, I don't know anything about Mykonos."

Dead silence.

"Nora, did you hear me?"

"Shit," said her dearest friend.

"Exactly." Belle looked up and found everything she didn't want to know in Nora's eyes. "He's a prick."

"I sort of agree," Nora said. "But I'm probably in big trouble 'cause if you don't know, then Pete was most likely waiting to spring it on you as a surprise. Don't blame him too much, Belle, he's the typical Mellos male, do now, tell later."

"That sucks, Nora!"

"Duh," Nora lifted her hand in frustrated agreement. "But what can we do? They're ours."

"Not yet, he's not mine," Belle said ominously, gritting her teeth. "And he may not want to be when I get to him."

"Just calm down," Nora said frantically. "Don't go all Lorena Bobbitt on me, it was one little omission, for goodness sake."

"A big omission since it regards not only our lives but our livelihoods."

Nora peeled Belle's fingers out of the ball they were contorted into and spread them out flat on the table.

"Go for it, Lena," she told the manicurist.

The young girl went back to the task of preparing Belle's nails.

As she stretched and pulled the fingers in a soothing massage, she groaned.

"Girl, loosen up and stop yanking back on me. It's not a tug a war."

Belle snorted and tried to relax her hands.

"I hope Liam can fit me in cause at this moment, I am one tense bride-to-be."

"I'm sure he can, Belle," Lena assured her. "Hold on one sec and I'll go book him." She slipped off toward the back of the salon where the spa and massage rooms were.

"Belle, are you okay?" Nora asked softly.

"I'm fine," she said shortly.

"Are you really or are you just saying that?"

"Just saying it."

"That's what I thought." Nora was silent for a moment, then she sighed. "I'm gonna have to fess up."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll have to tell Nick and Pete that I told you. If Nick finds out before I tell him, he will be one pissed off hubby."

"Did he tell you not to tell me?"

"He told me that Pete would tell you," Nora said dejectedly. "I just assumed he would have done so already. But I should have known better, I mean, you would have said something if you knew. My problem is I just don't think before I speak."

"Sounds like you're lecturing yourself, why bother telling Nick," Belle said dryly.

"Yea, right," Nora laughed. "Like he ever just lectures me. Big nasty bully, he eats sweet little girls like me for breakfast."

"You love it," scoffed Belle.

"True dat," Nora giggled.

Lena scooted back into her seat.

"Okay, you're all set, Belle, Liam is going to do you a full body when your nails dry and then Margot will finish your hair."

"Sounds like a plan."

Forty-five minutes later, when Belle disappeared into a back room for her massage, Nora curled into a corner of the plush sofa in the waiting area and pulled out her cell phone.

This was going to suck big time, she thought. She was right.

"Where is she?" demanded Pete fifteen minutes later when he barged through the salon door.

"Hey, Pete, take a chill pill, you're the one in the doghouse," Nora chided.

"I beg to differ," said Nick as he pushed open the door behind his brother.

"One tiny little mistake," Nora began in an embarrassed whisper, "Which I rectified by calling you immediately and confessing."

"Where's Belle?" Pete repeated.

"Yes, where is she?" Nick chimed in.

"What are you, Pete and Repeat?" Nora quipped.

"Nora!" they both shouted.

"In the back," Nora said, jerking her thumb toward the spa.

Pete disappeared into the back of the salon.

Nick circled back and surrounded her with his big beefy arms.

"You look gorgeous," he complimented her, taking in an eyeful of her perfectly cascading blond curls. "Is there any place where we can talk privately?"

"I am not asking to use their office, Nicolas," Nora pouted.

He smiled.

"Fair enough, princess," he laughed. "How 'bout a quiet place where we can talk."

Nora took his hand and led him past the stylists' chairs toward a little sitting area.

"Hi Nicky," his sisters called as they noticed him from the chairs where they were getting their hair blown out.

Thalia was under a dryer in the back; she lifted a graceful hand to her son and smiled. Sophia was sitting next to her and she waved, also.

"Hey, Mom and Sophie," Nick blew kisses to the older ladies. "You look beautiful, Adriana and you are way too glamorous to be my baby sister, Cristi."

"Come over here," Nora pulled him to the sofa on the other side of a marble column and plopped onto the cushions, yanking him down next to her.

"Go ahead," she told him. "I'm all ears."

"Excuse me, did you say you're all rear?" He squeezed her thigh with one hand while the other snaked around behind her pulling her closer to his big, menacing body.

"Nicolas Michael!"

"Nora Elizabeth!"

"At least we know each other's names."

"What's Belle doing in the back anyway?"

"Getting a massage," Nora said. "Lucky her, Liam has the best fingers this side of the Atlantic; all the girls in Dublin are crying since he came here."

"A massage?" Nick's eyebrow shot up almost to the ceiling.

"Yea, so, she's tense." Nora shook her head. "It's no big deal, he's a professional."

"You don't get massages, do you?"

The question sounded so innocent, but Nora wasn't stupid. Besides, she didn't need to get massages; she had her own professional sleeping in her bed each night.

"Only every other Thursday," she said.

His frown made her giggle.

"And twice on Sundays," she finished.

"Pete is not going to like it," Nick said grimly.

Peter was standing in the doorway of the tiny room, unable to believe the sight before his eyes. His woman was lying on a table with a sheet drawn over her thighs and legs while a muscular red

headed man stroked her naked buttocks in deep circular motions.

Liam glanced up in surprise at the sound of the door opening. He was even more surprised to see a blond giant standing in the room with a vein bulging from his neck and crimson spreading across his face from outrage, embarrassment or just plain fury.

Shit.

"I think I'm done here," he told Belle apologetically. "I have a feeling your Adonis just showed up."

Belle craned her neck to see the newcomer.

"It's just the big liar I was going to marry," she said coolly.

"You can leave," Pete told the masseuse, stifling the urge to break his hands as he passed by.

"Go away, Peter," Belle told him, tucking her head back into her arms.

"You let a man touch you!" he said in a deceptively calm voice. "He had his fingers on your ass when I walked through the door."

"And it felt good," she shot back.

Peter laid his hand against her bare bottom, cupping the soft globes of flesh with his big palm.

"Does this feel good?" he asked.

"No it feels awful," she lied.

He took his hand away. Then he brought it back down, only harder and with a definite purpose that had nothing to do with feeling good. The smack reverberated against the walls of the tiny room.

She yelped.

"You can fuck off, Peter," she cried. "Me having a massage with Liam isn't nearly as bad as you deciding monumental life choices without consulting or even considering me."

He brought his hand down again in another hot, stinging spank.

"Did you just tell me to fuck off?" he asked in a silkily.

"Peter, don't you get it," she yelled. "I was wronged, not you!"

"You don't get naked for another man unless he's a doctor, kerima," he said in a tight voice. "Do I make myself clear?"

"I repeat, fuck off," she muttered.

He slapped her buttocks again, leaving a third bright red imprint across her delicate flesh. And another.

"Do I make myself clear?" he said.

Belle tensed for another smack and when it didn't come, she relaxed briefly, turning to look at him again.

"What difference does it make?" she asked in a dull voice. "I'm not marrying you."

"You are marrying me," Peter said in a calm, reasonable voice. "If I have to spank your silly ass into rosy oblivion, then I will, little one and you'll marry me with a red hot tail under your white dress. So, do I make myself clear?"

She felt an unwelcome thrill shoot through her stomach at his masterful words.

"It's cream," she said stubbornly. "My dress isn't white, it's cream."

And then she felt another fiery blow on her bottom.

"Yes," she sputtered. "Yes, yes, enough already."

"Okay," Peter sat on the edge of the table, effectively pinning her beneath the sheet. "We're finished with the massage man. Now about Mykonos. When did we start to date, Bella?"

"Late May," she told him. "Why?"

"Cause Nick and I have been trying to buy the building next door since last January. I have had money tied up in this venture since then. I've certainly told you about it, maybe it wasn't interesting enough to sink in. I don't like to talk a subject to death before it happens, Belle. Call me superstitious but I really wanted this to happen and I didn't want to jinx it with a lot of speculative bullshit."

Belle searched her memory, trying to pull a kernel of truth from his words. It was possible, she finally conceded, that he had mentioned it and she had pushed it aside. She had so much going on with the wedding.

"Okay, that might be true but what about now, Peter," she said. "Nora knew about it, why not me?"

"Isabella," he said sternly. "The owner gave us a tentative agreement on Tuesday of this week. Was I going to talk restaurant business with you five days before our marriage? More importantly, were you going to listen?"

He had a point. She had been rather single-minded in the last few weeks.

"Yea, you're right," she mumbled, reluctantly acknowledging the sense in his words.

"We have fourteen days on a beautiful Aegean cruise to talk about the future. I figured we would get ideas for the restaurant when we actually go to Crete," he told her, caressing her cheek with his finger. "My relatives in Mykonos will be more than happy to entertain us and I know you'll want to order artwork and pottery to make the place authentic."

He stroked her cheek, bending down to nuzzle her neck while gently caressing her naked hip.

"I was so mad at you," she said stiffly, inhaling sharply at the sensations his fingers were creating on her skin.

"I figured that," he laughed.

"And what was that caveman act about Liam?" she demanded. "He's my masseuse, for goodness sake."

"Not anymore," Peter said firmly.

"What a male chauvinist pi..." she squeaked when his big hand reached out and squeezed her bottom. "Yea, okay, he's history but then you gotta do me cause I can't give up my stress relief."

"I know a great stress reliever, darling," Peter promised, patting her rear end.

"Why do I not like the sound of that?" she mused.

"You gonna lie there all day?" he asked.

"Kinda hard to move when Attila the Greek is sitting on me," she said.

Peter stood and gently flipped her over, pulling her up into his arms. He crushed her to his chest, bending down to kiss her deeply.

"Still tense?" he murmured into her neck.

"Nope," she whispered.

"Good." He bent to her breast and licked one plump nipple as his fingers dove further down and gently tickled her while she arched frantically in his arms.

"Pete," she wailed. "Don't do this to me now. It's our wedding day."

"Just so you remember," he said meaningfully. "But I'm thinking you need a spanking to remind you of the first and foremost rule of marriage."

"The one with the penis is always right?" she asked sarcastically, smiling sweetly.

"Trust first," he said seriously.

"That's not fair," Belle whined. "You already smacked me hard, besides I was the one who was left in the dark, evidently you didn't trust me."

"Okay," he said matter-of-factly. Before Belle could squirm out of his arms, he had situated himself on the table and draped her over his lap. "So now you understand that I trust you implicitly. And there was no reason for your nastiness and disrespect. You only had to ask me."

"You and disrespect," she grumbled. "And you only had to tell me, Peter! You know I love you but I am not going to bow down to you every other minute of the day."

"I don't want you to bow down," he told her softly. "But in our marriage, I'm going to be the boss. You already know that. You'll be co-boss for the most part but sometimes, baby, you're going to have to trust me."

In her current position, she didn't really feel in the mood to argue. After all, she was nude and lying over his lap. Duh!

"The other spanking was for Liam," Pete said. "This is just a reminder for the future."

Before she could muster up significant outrage, his hand was descending in a rapid pattern, beating a staccato rhythm onto her naked bottom.

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

SMACK! SMACK! SMACK!

"Ouch, Peter!" she cried.

He stopped.

Lifting her up, he cuddled her against the gray cotton of his pullover sweater. She could feel the hardness of his arousal beneath his worn jeans.

"You are the most miraculous part of my life," he whispered into her ear. "I will always love the hell out of you."

"Me too," she sighed. "I love you so much, it hurts." She grinned impishly.

"Yea, well, we only hurt the ones we love."

"Eeesh," she groaned. "Enough clichés, it's my wedding day."

"How may I serve you, Madame, on this, your wedding day?"

"You could get lost and pretend you never saw me today or we'll have bad luck."

"Seeing you could never bring me bad luck," he said sweetly. "It could however bring Liam some bad luck."

"Peter," Belle warned.

"I'm leaving." He bent down once more and took her face in his hands. "I love you, Isabella, I can't wait to marry you."

"I love you and I'm sorry for calling you an asshole," she smiled.

"You didn't call me an asshole." He frowned.

"Oh that's right, I thought that. Sorry for all the bad, awful, mean, terrible nasty thoughts I had about you."

"It's okay," he grinned. "I think."

"See you at the church." She blew him a kiss and went to retrieve her clothes from the rack against the wall, rubbing the sting from her bottom before she dressed.

On the way back toward the hairdressers' chairs, she stopped and tucked some bills in Liam's hand.

"I'm not allowed to have massages anymore," she told him, laughing sheepishly.

"I know, I was informed by the future Mr. Belle." He snickered. "Could you set him up with a massage, sweetie, he is one gorgeous hunk of man."

"Not likely, Li," she laughed. "Come for coffee in a few weeks so we can catch up."

"Happy wedding day," he called after her.

"Thanks."

A somewhat chastened Nora was sitting demurely on the sofa waiting for her friend.

"You're alive," Belle shouted.

"My ears are blistered," Nora muttered. "Blah blah blah, Nora, don't, blah blah blah, never again, blah blah."

"Poor baby," said Belle. She turned to the owner of the salon who was also her stylist. "Okay, Margot, let's get this show on the road. I have a wedding to get to."

She sat down in the swiveling leather chair and waited for the other woman to do her magic with her clean and shiny raven locks. Since she was wearing a simple wreath of roses attached to a short veil, she was going for a very natural look of loose curls.

Nora was her mirror image in blond.

"Thank goodness Adriana is wearing her hair up or we'd look like a festival of hair goddesses or a Vidal Sassoon commercial," Belle said dryly.

"I know," Nora giggled. "I was so happy that Cristi decided to get her hair cut into that nice, modern bob or it really would have looked like a convention of witches walking down the aisle. Wickens R Us, at your service."

"Do I look like a witch?" Belle asked, rolling her eyes and trying to do the Mellos eyebrow lift.

"You look radiant," Nora told her. "I guess everything got straightened out?"

"Yup," Belle said. "We're fine. As long as I don't get any more massages and he doesn't open any more restaurants."

"Is that all?" Nora smirked.

The first person she saw was Peter. As it should be. He was standing beside Nick at the foot of the altar.

Waiting for her. His eyes twinkled and she saw him wink even though a chapel length divided them.

Her gown brushed the floor as she started up the aisle toward him, her hand safely tucked into her father's elbow.

"I think this one's for keeps," her dad said sotto voce.

"I know," she murmured, smiling brightly at the guests.

Her tiger lilies were the only color against her cream colored dress. Her dark curls held a hint of rich red in the afternoon light streaming through the stained glass windows. A glimmer of red also shone from her ears where a pair of fat ruby and diamond earrings nestled, a gift from her groom delivered by the twins only fifteen minutes earlier.

Belle's attendants carried sheaves of long stemmed cream roses, twined in raffia, wheat and velvet burgundy ribbons. The chapel looked enchanting, bedecked in the most lustrous arrays of autumn colors; sprays of flowers were everywhere. The sweet strains of music etched upon a harp and lute trickled over the pews from the small balcony to the right of the apse as the bride approached her lover.

Nora felt her heart catch in her chest as she watched Belle take Peter's hand. They were so beautiful. She caught Nick's eye and smiled at him.

Her husband returned the smile and she felt a constricting ache in her throat as the prospect of happy tears loomed.

"I do," Belle was saying.

Their vows were spoken in a hush that felt blessed and sacred to Belle and Peter alike. They were pronounced husband and wife to a truly joyful sound of music and clapping by their friends and family.

As their eyes met above their entwined fingers, Belle willed herself into his hands, into his keeping for the rest of their lives. And she knew he was hers.

Not needing any urging, Peter Mellos bent his head and kissed his bride.

"Let's go kick some wedding butt," Pete murmured as they turned and smiled beatifically at their guests.

"You got it," his wife replied, walking in step with him toward the door and their life together.

