



Scarlet
Rose

Rynne Raines

Scarlet Rose

Pure
Sin

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by

Rynne Raines

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Pure Sin

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Dedication

To Weaver and Carolie,
the King and Queen of Kink. Without you as
inspiration this book would only be half done.

To Teresa for jabbing me with the cattle prod
when I got down on myself.

And to all my readers who loved *Welcome To Eden*
enough to demand more from Caitlyn and Evan.

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR

Rynne Raines

AND HER BOOKS

WELCOME TO EDEN

"Rynne Raines has created a winner with this short story that left me wanting more, if only to get more of a taste of the heat generated between Caitlyn and Evan. My only complaint...I wanted MORE!"

~Viscaria, Whipped Cream Reviews

"This will definitely have you wiggling in your seat wanting more. I would definitely look into other stories written by Ms. Raines."

~Diana Coyle, Night Owl Romance

REFLECTIONS

"Great characterizations in an amazing short read all readers will love."

~Robin Lee, Romance Reviews Today

"Rynne Raines puts a lot of heart into a short story. The passion of her characters is wonderful to read. A very enjoyable story."

~Robyn Roberts, Once Upon A Romance

"This was a fun, sexy read. The author had me from the first sentence. Rykel was one hot man! Can't wait for more from this author"

~Renee Hagar

Chapter One

Horns blared, cabbies cursed and pedestrians kept to the sidewalk. The evening sun sat low on the horizon, pouring long shadows over one-hundred-and-two degree asphalt while the remainder of rush hour traffic cluttered Sunset Strip. Los Angeles could get a bit dicey at six p.m. on a Friday night.

For the majority, the weekend instilled a giddy sense of freedom, the promise of rest, perhaps the opportunity to cater a backyard barbeque and tip back a few cold ones. But not everyone fell under the nine-to-five, white-collar routine. Not everyone was suited for working in fancy high-rises, telling jokes around the water cooler, or car-pooling with Alice the receptionist and Richard from accounting. Especially not Bianca Alexander.

However, she thought as she braced her back against the BDSM training room wall and appreciated the sight of the half-naked man kneeling in the center of the floor, she wouldn't have had it any other way.

Ah, yes, nothing like a hard day's work.

Beautiful bronzed skin stretched over John Valher's long body of taut, corded muscle while Vanessa Doyle, his mistress-in-training, flicked her wrist and sent the laces of a light-weight flogger across his bare back. Bianca arched a fine eyebrow and stifled a sigh that rose from her throat. The scent of leather and the slap of strings on flesh had her lashes fluttering.

Memories of the last time she'd kneeled before a master of her own drifted into her mind. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but her recollection was fresh

and, realistically, only four years had passed. Four long years. Much too long ago.

At least she had her job. As a BDSM instructor at Eden—the hottest fetish club in Los Angeles—observing, listening, answering questions, and lending support was all part of the job...as was becoming accustomed to naked bodies sprawled along the studio floor, along with the panting, moaning—

“Ouch! Damn it, Vanessa, you deaf? I said ‘Speed Racer!’”

And with new clients, plenty of cursing.

“Sorry, Johnny.” The small, busty twenty-two-year-old chomped her bubblegum like a grazing cow, ran her fingers through her lengthy mocha curls, then stroked the whip cradled in her left hand. “When you said ‘Speed Racer,’ I thought you meant faster.”

Bianca rolled her eyes, shoved off the wall, and joined the squabbling duo in the center of the studio.

“Okay, listen,” she started, and stepped between them when John lunged for the flog. “This is exactly why it’s imperative to choose a safe word you can both agree on and remember.”

“Remember? All last night I tried to drill it into her head. What more can I do?”

“Hey,” Vanessa whined. “If you must know, I’ve got a lot on my mind.” She surveyed her freshly manicured nails, and tapped one red stiletto against the glossy, black-tiled floor while her bottom lip drooped into a pout.

Disagreements and lack of communication came standard with newcomers. As with everything in Bianca’s life, she would take it in stride, and summon patience. By the time John and Vanessa were through with their six weeks of classes, it would satisfy her to have helped them understand the relationship between Domme and submissive.

“Don’t get discouraged. This is only your second class. It takes time to learn your partner. Just remember—communication, honesty, and trust. Those are the keys to this lifestyle and...” Bianca trailed off as the studio door swung open.

In the archway stood another beautiful male specimen. Her boss, Evan Chambers.

The man was the epitome of sensuality. Since their introduction nearly three years ago, the chemistry between them had been purely platonic. Now, she couldn’t imagine it any other way, especially given three months ago he had tied the knot with a lovely psychiatrist, whom he often referred to as his “kindred spirit.” Even so, she’d have to be dead or blind not to appreciate those brooding midnight eyes and linebacker shoulders. She indulged in a long survey before flashing a smile.

Evan didn’t return the smile. He crooked his finger at her, then gestured to his office down the hall. The door of the training room closed with the click of authority and she creased her brow.

“Excuse me a minute.” Distracted, she started for the door, then glanced over her shoulder. “While I’m gone, try deciding on a new safe word—one, Vanessa, that you’ll remember.”

She slipped out of the studio, long strides carrying her down the dark corridor. Walls of smoked glass flanked her. Behind the transparent walls were the club’s notorious fantasy rooms—esteemed among Eden’s voyeur clientele, tourists and locals seeking excitement.

Halfway down the hall, she briefly wondered if leaving a quarrelling couple in a room full of whips, paddles, and restraints was one of her better judgment calls. Certainly it wasn’t. But in the two years she’d worked for Eden, Evan had never stepped in on one of her classes before and that

made her uneasy.

A few feet from the office, she pulled up short as her heart rate jumped an extra ten beats per minute. She leaned a shoulder against the wall and gnawed a fingernail. Maybe being half an hour late for her shift everyday was finally catching up with her.

“You gonna stand in the hall all day, or are you coming in?”

She poked her head in the doorway and frowned. “How do you always know I’m there?”

Arms cradled behind his head, he leaned back in his chair, then wiggled one finger at her legs. “Blame the boots. They give you away every time.”

She stemmed the urge to cross the room and wipe that cheeky grin off his face but instead smoothed a hand lovingly over the thigh-high, shiny, three-inch latex boots hugging her calves.

She adored these boots.

“I’d much rather blame the marble tile you had installed.”

“Fair enough.” His wide grin vanished too quickly for her liking and her stomach clenched again. “Have a seat. There’s something we need to discuss.”

Oh, Lord, she was getting the heave-ho.

“Is everything all right?” As composed as possible—a large feat for someone constantly teased about wearing her emotions on her sleeve—she settled in the chair across from him.

“I hate to say it, but over the last few months I’ve noticed the enrollment list for your classes getting shorter.” He reached inside one of the drawers, retrieved a tan-colored file folder, and opened it on the desk. “Have any idea why?”

Uncomfortable with the question, she crossed her legs, the tight latex sheathing her thighs squeaked as her muscles tensed. “I’m not sure,” she

admitted. “The couple classes have gone down, but my general class numbers have held. Maybe the couples of Los Angeles have decided they know all there is to know about kink.”

“You’re exactly right.” Evan’s blue eyes lifted from the file and locked on her. “It’s the couple classes we need improvement on.”

Improvement on!

Don’t make a scene, Bianca. Won’t do any good.

She put her heart and soul into these classes, not to mention she formed an emotional attachment to each individual couple in the process. In a world filled with stereotypes and rigid opinions concerning the lifestyle, it was hard enough for beginners to accept themselves entirely. She’d been there once before, terrified and uncertain, and the only thing that had gotten her through it was a Dom who took her under his wing and showed her the ropes.

If anything, the reason she’d taken this job was to give back to their community in the only way she knew how.

“I’m not sure what I can do to improve my classes, Evan.”

“Whoa, maybe improvement was the wrong word. You’re irreplaceable to me, B. But I’ve heard through the grapevine that some of the female clientele don’t exactly feel comfortable with their partners ogling you for the hour-long session they’re paying for.”

So now she was being crucified for the way she looked. Bianca winced. Perhaps it’d be better if she had remained lanky-limbed and still sported a set of lips that she hadn’t fully grown into until the age of twenty-three. Regardless, it wasn’t her fault she had gone from ugly duckling to relatively decent swan...excluding the long legs she realized she would never grow into.

“What would you have me do, wear a muumuu

and stick a paper bag on my head?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Evan flashed his perfect white teeth and let out a chuckle. “A muumuu would never go with those boots.”

She narrowed her eyes and tried not to laugh. “Then what?”

“Bianca,” he braced his forearms against the desk, “you need a man.”

Her mouth draped open. “I don’t see how that’s—”

“Oh, I wholeheartedly agree!”

Cringing at the interruption, Bianca craned her neck. Caitlyn Ward Chambers lingered in the archway, wearing a gray blazer accompanied by a matching knee-length business skirt that hugged her womanly shape to perfection.

“I’ve got a long list of gentlemen who’ve asked for your phone number, several times, actually—wait, I think the list’s in my purse.” A devilish grin touched Caitlyn’s lips.

“Hello, Wife.” Evan’s tone dropped an octave, underlined with a tenderness that only a deaf person wouldn’t detect.

“Hello, Husband.”

Caitlyn crossed the room, circled the desk, planted a long, lingering kiss to her husband’s lips, and envy tugged at Bianca’s heartstrings.

The Chambers were the couple everyone wanted to be—beautiful, successful and in love. At least to any observer, that’s how it would come across. But being part of the tight-knit community they lived in, Bianca saw far more. The bond they shared was one between a Dom and a submissive—unbreakable. A bond she wondered if she’d ever come close to experiencing again in her lifetime.

As the two shared their moment, she’d have liked nothing more than to roll up the magazine sitting on the table beside her and conk them both

on the head for it. Not too hard, just enough so they would stop and she wouldn't feel this emptiness gnawing at her gut.

"Sorry for the interruption." Caitlyn smiled when she finally came up for air. "Evan is supposed to escort me to a conference tonight but I'm beginning to think staying here would be much more interesting. Now, what's this about you needing a man?"

Bianca stifled a groan, sank further against the padded leather chair, and tried to wish herself out of the room. It was bad enough she'd had a total of seven unsuccessful dates in the last four years. Worse, it seemed to be public knowledge. "As much as I appreciate both of you being concerned about my non-existent love life, I can find my own men, thank you very much. Furthermore—"

"I was referring to a second instructor," Evan interrupted. "A male to cater to the female clientele."

Worse than the two of them playing matchmaker, he wanted to hire someone to help run her classes. Perhaps pride shouldn't have been an issue but it was.

"From the horrified look on her face, I'm thinking she doesn't much like the idea," Caitlyn whispered.

"I—I'm just a bit surprised, that's all."

"I understand you like to fly solo. This has nothing to do with your abilities to instruct, but I honestly believe Cade and you would achieve remarkable things together."

Oh, he did not just say Cade!

Not only was Cade Sinclair rumored to be the most deadly attractive Dom on the face of the planet, but he'd also become her primary rival over the last six months. Though she'd never met the man, she knew he was the sole instructor at Halo—another fetish club in Los Angeles that began offering a

similar program when the owner realized the increased clientele it was bringing in for Eden.

Pride aside, she'd heard he was a superb teacher. And didn't she want what was best for people interested in learning more about this community? But still, why did it have to be Cade?

"Is this really necessary? I could try some new programs, do a little more advertising."

"You're misunderstanding. It's not for lack of effort." Evan's head tilted in a sympathetic gesture. "Certainly you can understand how some women might feel intimidated by your...assets."

Bianca glanced over her sleek corset and snug skirt, frowning. To her, the notion actually sounded absurd. She had shortcomings and flaws just like anyone else, things she would change about herself if she could, and she sure as hell wouldn't put herself in the same solar system as the word intimidating.

"I'm sorry, but I have to agree." Caitlyn nibbled her lower lip. "The first time we met, I nearly choked on my tongue, thinking about Evan working so closely with such a beautiful woman."

Bianca forced a smile. She appreciated the compliment coming from a beauty like Caitlyn, but it wasn't helping her cause.

"Isn't Cade busy with his own classes?"

"Ah, you'd be surprised how persuasive I can be. Isn't that right, sweetheart?" Evan arched a dark eyebrow and Caitlyn's cheeks immediately flushed. His influence over her was so obvious—he ruled her body, commanded it with the most simple of gestures. Before Bianca could stop it, the green monster inside her reared its ugly head again.

"So," Evan tapped the file folder on his desk, "if everything goes as planned, he'll be giving Halo his notice this week."

"What do you mean, if everything goes as planned?"

“He wanted me to arrange a meeting with you, make sure you’re both on the same page before anything’s set in stone. The idea didn’t sound unreasonable.”

With two sets of curious eyes pinned on her, Bianca plastered on the most charming smile she could manage even though she felt as if her class was being ripped away from her and handed off to someone else. “Whatever you think will improve the classes.”

“Good.” Evan rose from his chair and snaked an arm around Caitlyn’s slender waist. “He’s expecting you at his studio in half an hour.”

“Half an hour?”

“Problem?”

“No. No, of course not. It just doesn’t leave me time to run home and change.”

“I hardly see Cade Sinclair disapproving of your outfit.” He grinned. “Keep me posted.”

Chapter Two

The neon sign angled with purpose, slanted against the sandalwood and charcoal-colored medieval-style brick. Although the gold lettering contrasted against the dark backdrop, the O in Halo was what always caught her eye. Bianca studied the tilted vowel and arched a brow at the glaring red pitchfork jutting through the center of it.

Apparently all angels had a little devil inside.

A laugh tickled her throat, but she shook it off and climbed the cement steps. The massive double doors remained true to the structure's theme—the arch was at least ten feet high. Though she personally preferred Eden's flare, she appreciated the atmosphere someone obviously took so much time to create.

The door moaned with her entrance. At a quarter to seven, there were no lines or security, only soft music and low lighting. For a place that appeared centuries old, the scent inside was fresh, welcoming, with the hint of lemon and ammonia. She passed through the vaulted foyer and wondered if Cade Sinclair would be as welcoming.

The sting to her pride had dulled but only because on the cab ride over she'd decided to outline a few ground rules for the renowned Dom slated to become her partner. Though she rarely had problems dealing with Dominants in the past, for some reason she imagined Cade would be more trying than any she'd previously met. However, if Evan wanted this direction for Eden, she was more than up to the challenge.

With her new state of mind, she entered the main chamber. The heels of her boots clicked against the polished concrete as she made her way to the petite blonde dressed in a wench's costume who was drying glasses behind the bar.

"Well, hello there." Her pretty head cocked and those smoke-rimmed eyes scanned. "What can I get for you, love?"

"Cade Sinclair, please."

An instant smile swept her blood-red lips as she arched one light eyebrow. "You wouldn't believe how often I get that order."

"Oh, no...ah...let me rephrase." Bianca cleared her throat. "I was supposed to meet Cade Sinclair here. Know where I can find him?"

"Sure," she purred. "Dungeon three, down that hall, third barred room on the left. Can't miss it...or him."

"Thanks."

So they referred to their studios as dungeons, Bianca mused. Who was Cade supposed to be, the dungeon master? She pictured an ogre of a man with a club and hood grunting his commands like any good Neanderthal would, and smirked. Her light snicker bounced from wall to wall when she entered the dark corridor where the bar-wench had pointed.

Actually, it mirrored Eden's fantasy rooms, yet the walls weren't glass but stone and mortar. Every five feet, a sconce fashioned in the shape of a torch protruded from the wall. Although the flames were enclosed with glass, the heat still cascaded over her cheeks. Surprisingly, it did feel as if she were entering the dungeons inside some ancient castle.

A scream split the silence.

She virtually jumped out of her skin. Her heart hammered against her breastplate and ribs. Goose bumps prickled her bare shoulders all the way to her wrists. She wouldn't panic. This was Halo's theme.

She listened closer and arched an eyebrow. Someone was seriously enjoying themselves.

Curiosity never seriously killed the cat but opened a world of discovery, Bianca mused, one she fully planned to explore. She trailed her fingertips along the rough stone, keeping her footfalls slow and quiet, seeking the source of the scream. If she'd thought spectators weren't welcome, she would never have peeked through the steel barred window. However, in a place like Halo, she was certain there were separate chambers for those who preferred privacy.

Her eyes adjusted, focused, then widened.

The brunette was voluptuous and beautiful. On hands and knees, her legs were spread shoulder-width apart by a metal spacer, fastened at her ankles. The man towering behind her was long, lean and muscular. He faced away from Bianca, and she imagined him to be as striking from the front as he was from the back.

With one hand, he jerked a chain attached to the spiked collar fastened around the brunette's neck, thrust his lean hips against her bare ass and drove himself home. A throaty moan erupted from his chained prisoner and Bianca not only swallowed hard, but she did it with a newfound respect for spiked collars.

Her pulse tapped an uneven beat against her throat and she sank her front teeth into her bottom lip. She'd never thought herself much of a voyeur but the sounds of pleasure and the scent of sex had her thighs quivering. Apparently, her lack of a love life was broadening her horizons.

The temptation to stay until the final act was strong, but she wasn't here for pleasure. In fact, she imagined, after laying down her conditions with Cade, their meeting would result in the exact opposite of anything that resembled pleasure.

With a sigh, Bianca forced her eyes from the couple and glanced back down the hall. She counted the barred windows four more times from where she'd entered before her head swiveled back to the lovers. Her eyes lingered on the masculine powerful thighs, moved up to the tight ass, over the wide back.

Holy shit.

It was no damn wonder her client numbers had dropped. The bastard was offering hands-on instruction!

So this was Cade Sinclair's idea of educating, was it? Bianca clenched her fists. Well, if he thought she would allow this type of behavior in her studio, he was in for a surprise. She narrowed her eyes and plotted his slow and painful death. No way in hell would she allow her classes and clients to act as a buffet to the man's obviously insatiable ego.

"On your knees, slave."

The warm whisper burned against the back of her neck and Bianca's knees buckled. But it wasn't the sensation of the breath against her skin that had her reeling. It was the voice. The low seductive drawl had coaxed her to orgasm several times in the past.

Sin.

"I must be losing my touch. Never took you this long to obey an order before."

Her lashes fluttered against her cheeks.

It was Sin all right.

Bianca turned on wobbly legs and wondered when her three-quarter-inch heels had narrowed to the width of toothpicks. She leveled her eyes with a tanned V of flesh bordered by the clean lines of a stylish charcoal dress shirt. It wasn't necessary to see his face. She recalled the exact width, the masculine curve of his chest, the powerful shoulders. Every ounce of her being warned not to look up, yet

she couldn't stop herself. She slowly lifted her gaze and an invisible fist struck her in the solar-plexus.

God help her.

Of course, he would still be as criminally handsome as when they'd parted ways after the Dom/sub masquerade at Blissfully Bound in downtown Los Angeles—the first fetish club she'd ever set foot in.

“Enjoying the entertainment?” he asked. She barely heard him. Thick waves of chestnut hair framing the sharp planes and strong angles of his face distracted her, while the tiny flicker of light in his deep emerald eyes entranced her.

“Sorry? Entertainment?” she said puzzled.

He gestured over her shoulder and cocked a dark eyebrow.

She absently swiveled her head. “Oh, no.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I wasn't watching...well...I mean, I was, but—”

“There's a better view from my office on the second level.”

“Oh no, that won't be necessar—office?”

He took a step toward her, then clasped her fingers, turned her palm up and brushed his mouth against the inside of her wrist. “We never did get to real names, did we? Sinclair. ‘Sin’ for short.”

She might as well have been on the tilt-a-whirl for the nausea gripping her stomach. She swore the stonework shifted. The wide corridor revolved, then narrowed. If she tried to speak, she knew she would stutter, so she bit down hard on the tip of her tongue to prevent a gasp, and struggled for composure.

How could she not have put it together sooner?

“Suppose I should've figured out you were in town when I heard a rumor of a Dom with Indiana's whip-wielding skills was in the city.”

A hint of amusement touched his eyes, but his expression remained stoic. “I'm not entirely sure how

much merit there is to that rumor, but I'll take a compliment in any form. You look good, Bianca."

Her cheeks flamed as she heard him speak her real name for the very first time and she made the mistake of letting her eyes drift over his unsmiling mouth. Their last evening together, that mouth had been between her quivering thighs while he'd endlessly tormented her with his wicked tongue.

"You look good, too," was all she could bring herself to say. He pressed her palm flat against his chest and weighted it there under his large hand. Bianca shivered as his skin burned beneath her fingers and made it hard to breathe.

"Surprised to see me?"

"Well...yes. I wasn't expecting to see you."

"Ever again."

She winced at the hint of bitterness in his short response but before she could respond, he released her hand and quickly cut her off.

"I hadn't anticipated you for another ten minutes. Follow."

How easily he could transform his voice from casual to the rich, low tone that, to this day, commanded her body.

Regardless of whether she should allow him that power or not, she followed him deeper inside the passage and climbed the shallow but wide winding steps to the second level. Her chest didn't start to ache until they reached his office and her situation sank in.

This wasn't a quick and painful reunion after which she would go home, bury her head under her pillow and sob for the next week. They were meant to work together, closely, eight hours a day.

The nausea evolved into violent compressions.

Four years obviously hadn't been enough time to purge him from her system, to eradicate the memories or the hold he possessed over her. But she

wouldn't fault herself for it. He'd been every submissive's dream; dominant yet tender, strong but somehow still vulnerable. Not to mention she'd been a young woman, enchanted by the underground lifestyle, swept up in its forbidden ambiance and raw sensual draw.

She'd fallen for him. Hard.

A mistake she would never make again.

Cade Sinclair circled his desk, dropped his weight into the chair, reached for the phone and tried not to punch the buttons as hard as he really wanted to.

Christ. Why did the woman have to look so damn good?

His plan had seriously backfired on him.

"Make yourself at home," he told her, then cursed the edge in his voice. "I'll be a few."

Bianca didn't seem to notice. In an elegance patented solely by her, she wandered the office, and paused at an oil painting of the San Francisco Bridge, framed in cherry wood. His grip tightened on the phone receiver. After all they'd shared together, passion and memories, hopes and dreams, how dare she treat him as a casual fling four years ago, then have the audacity to admire his favorite painting? She stared at it lovingly, appreciatively, with wide blue eyes and slightly parted, rouge lips that matched her deep, scarlet hair.

"Yeah, I'll hold," he grumbled into the receiver, forgetting who in the hell he'd called in the first place.

This meeting was supposed to bring him closure and make her feel like an ass for writing him off like a bad check after the week they'd shared. At the end of it all, he'd planned to politely decline Chambers' offer and get on with his life.

Instead, his cock strained painfully against the fly of jeans at the mere sight of her. He couldn't take

his eyes off her goddamn boots, and the last thing he was experiencing was fucking closure.

Cade worked the muscle in his jaw to keep from growling. His only solace was that she wasn't as indifferent as she portrayed herself either. He still had a physical affect on her. He'd seen her body react to his whispered command earlier in the hall. If she'd hesitated like that four years ago, he'd have bound and sprawled her over his knees then branded her sweet bare ass with his palm.

But the rules were different now.

Bianca wasn't his submissive any more than he was her Dominant. She'd made the decision not to leave her real name and contact info at the front desk, as was the policy with a masquerade event. To ensure there was no pressure, always, the submissive retained final choice on whether or not there would be a relationship after the week was out.

It apparently didn't matter to her it had been the most explosive week of his life.

Pure irony had brought him to Eden, where his chance meeting with Caitlyn Ward Chambers at a lifestyle seminar had developed into a solid friendship over the last two years. If he hadn't finally agreed to meet her husband, he never would have spotted Bianca at the club. Then the memories he'd fought to keep locked away would still be buried now.

However, his childish need to accept Evan's offer and see the look on Bianca's face had been too strong to decline. This was his payback for acting like the teenage dork spurned by the cheerleader.

"Cade?" Her soft voice had him glancing up into those pale blue eyes before he registered the dial tone blaring from the receiver dangled from his fingers. "I think whoever was on the phone hung up on you."

“Apparently.” He dropped the receiver into the cradle and shoved back from his desk.

Only one woman could make him feel like an ass and make his cock throb at the same time. She was still in his system, revving it up, punching the throttle—he had to have her again.

Correction, he would have her again.

“I’m not sure I understand this. Evan said you wanted to meet me, but if you already knew who I was, why arrange this?”

“Evan misunderstood.” He drained the last ounce of cold, two-hour-old coffee from his cup, then set it down on next month’s schedule, ignoring the ring of moisture it left. “My concern had to do with being on the same page given our...colorful history.”

“How eloquently put,” she murmured and broke eye contact. The gesture made his gut clench and he wanted to curse himself. He wasn’t normally a supreme asshole.

Whatever her reasons for not wanting a relationship all those years ago had been her own. Who was he to question them? Although he’d been told on several occasions his temper often got the better of him, he didn’t consider himself a cruel man, particularly not when it came to the few people for which he harbored fondness.

As stupid as it sounded, in a single week she’d gotten inside of him, stripped him to the marrow and, in the end, left him with a bitter ache that, even four years later, he hadn’t been able to shake.

What he needed from her was closure.

How had she landed herself in this mess, Bianca wondered as she shifted her gaze around what had become a cage of dark mahogany panels disguised as an office with modest furnishings. Now she would have to find a way to tame the lion behind the large oak desk long enough to escape before the claws came out.

“That was uncalled for. I apologize—you cold?”

Taken aback by his apology, she hadn't noticed she was scrubbing her damp palms off on her arms. “No, I'm...I'm fine. I skipped lunch. Always get twitchy when I miss lunch.”

When he rounded the desk, she had the urge to dash for the door, but held her position.

“I could order something in while we discuss our terms. Chinese or Italian?” He ran his large hands up and down her bare arms and her heart back-flipped.

She could deal with his anger. She could deal with his indifference. What she couldn't deal with was his tenderness.

“I don't think that's a good idea.”

“Why's that?”

“It...it just isn't.”

“That's not a reason.” His hand traced from her shoulder, up her back, slid beneath her hair and curved around her nape. The pad of his thumb stroked just behind her ear. The fine hairs on the back of her neck rose and the walls she'd erected to protect her heart crumbled.

He leaned and dropped his voice to a whisper. “I don't remember you ever being this disagreeable. I'm sure a proper flogging would change that.”

Her panties flooded and knees wobbled.

“Please, don't do this...it's bad enough we have to work together.” She encircled his wrist with weak fingers but hardly tried to pry his hold off.

“Do you have a Master?”

Her nipples instantly stiffened and scraped against the inner wall of her corset with each labored breath. “W—what?”

“I'll rephrase.” He pushed her back and leveled his intense gaze at her. “Are you fucking anyone?”

She wasn't startled by his blatant approach. He'd never been one to evade the point and, until

today, neither was she.

“I don’t see how that’s your concern.”

“You’re right, it’s not.” He withdrew and propped a lean hip on the edge of his desk.

A vacant chill poured all the way to her toes the moment his fingers left her skin. She wished to God he’d touch her again. Nothing had ever felt as good as his touch.

“What if I made it my concern?” He casually fingered the rim of his coffee cup. “I have a proposition for you.”

“What type of proposition?”

“Well, it’s pretty damn obvious you’re uncomfortable with the thought of us working together. What if I turn down the job?”

A ray of hope.

“The catch?”

“I find myself in unfamiliar territory. When you cut our ties, I admit being left with unresolved issues.”

“I see.” Her heart turned over in her chest. Was there a possibility she hadn’t been the only one who’d lost sleep over their parting of the ways? She wanted to jump and click the heels of her boots together at the thought. Instead, she bit down hard on the inside of her cheek to feign a neutral expression.

“Chambers wants my answer by Wednesday but what I want is...closure.”

She searched his quiet eyes. Closure did sound wonderful—a single day without wondering what might have been, a night without closing her eyes and seeing his face, imagining his hands on her body, remembering the rich taste of his mouth while lying in bed alone. In four years she hadn’t been able to work him out of her system.

“What are you suggesting?”

“Your complete submission—five days—no

strings attached.”

A jolt of electricity rocketed through her and shot all the way to her toes. She quickly touched three fingers to her lips to suppress a nervous giggle before clearing her throat. “You’re serious?”

“Entirely. After the five days are up, I turn down the job and you never have to see me again.”

A pang of resentment ricocheted inside her chest but it wasn’t enough to drown the excitement. He was offering her five days of pleasure, and an attempt at closure. There was a good chance time had manipulated her memory into believing things between them had been better than they actually were, creating a fantasy in her mind no other man could compare to, in order to protect herself from duplicating the pain of past mistakes. She’d already tried getting over him the old-fashioned way—casual dating, throwing herself into her work, yoga. None had worked.

Maybe a more unconventional approach was just what the doctor ordered. Maybe she could screw him out of her system. But was it a good idea becoming that intimate with him again? “Why this?”

“Do you really have to ask?”

“I suppose I do.”

“It’s simple.” He contemplated her a moment then tilted his head. “I want you.”

This time her low sigh did escape, and she couldn’t ignore the flash of satisfaction in his eyes.

And who was she kidding? She wanted his hands on her, his mouth on her, his thick cock pounding her. More than anything, she wanted to feel the bond his dominance would provide, even if it were only temporary.

Agreeing to his terms would give her time to discover whether or not her feelings for him were merely an illusion fashioned by a seductive setting, or mutual attraction, or fantastic sex. At the same

time, she might discover what she felt for him wasn't an illusion at all. If that happened, Bianca winced, she'd be back at square one, alone and with even more memories to torment her at night.

She forced herself to stop fidgeting with the sapphire pendant dangling from the thin gold chain strung around her neck and swallowed hard. "When exactly would we start?"

"Now."

Chapter Three

The balancing wire was thirty feet above ground. Cade could see the crowd in the stands. The hushed whispers burned in his ears while his heart hammered against his ribcage. Don't look down. Just don't look. Any second the wire could snap and plunge him into a hole so deep it would take the rest of his life to scale.

But he wouldn't back down now. This was what he wanted, needed.

Cade didn't realize he was holding his breath until his lungs screamed for air. Even then, he barely inhaled enough to remain conscious while Bianca silently weighed his proposal. Her eyes stayed locked on the tan and burgundy abstract design on the area rug.

To hell with patience.

"The answer's simple; yes or no."

When her gaze met his, the flash of excitement was unmistakable and Cade relished every last spark.

Though he wanted to close the distance, drag her to the floor and bury his cock inside her slick pussy until sunrise, he stayed himself, feigned disinterest, and kept his body language relaxed. A good Dom always had control over all emotions involved, in joy or in anger—it kept the playing field safe for all parties.

"Do you agree to these terms?"

Her slight overbite had her front teeth sinking into her lower lip. He wanted to run his tongue against them, kiss her, taste her. God, did he want

to taste her.

“Five days...no strings attached?”

Cade flexed the muscle in his jaw, battling the irritation that came with her eagerness to be rid of him. Despite that, he managed a cool incline of his head. “You remember that I don’t do safe words—are you still comfortable with that?”

She nodded instead of answering and he decided that was the first thing they’d start with. He would not accept silent consent.

“Say it.” He lowered his tone an octave and saw the recognition in her eyes. “And prove it. Assume the submissive position.”

She fidgeted with the hem of her corset, fingers winding into the thin fabric. Her nervous energy struck him like a slugger in the chest. Worse, it sparked the primal, possessive animal inside him—he wanted to claim her.

Cade closed the distance to where she stood, placed two fingers under her chin and lifted. Christ, she had to be the only woman in Los Angeles without a tan. Her pale China-doll complexion, deep red hair and pastel blue eyes made her a rarity in this city. However, her unique appearance was merely an attractive shell. The real treasure hid deep beneath it.

“On your knees,” he said in his Dom voice, level and low.

This time there was no hesitation.

She sank in front of him, arms behind her back, chest held high, and knees shoulder width apart. As she shifted, her skirt rode up. His cock ached from the sight of elegant garters clipped to two bands of black lace at the top of her stockings. He fought back a moan.

The woman always did wear the sexiest lingerie.

Head slightly angled, she awaited his next command. He stepped back a foot so he could see

her, adapted a casual stance, then folded his arms over his chest. “Now pull up your skirt.”

“Cade—”

“Don’t test me, Bianca,” he warned.

Those dark lashes dusted against her creamy cheekbones before she locked eyes with him. The struggle for power had his cock hardening and straining against the fly of his jeans. Test me, Bianca. Test me and I’ll brand that sweet ass with my palm until you can’t sit for days without thinking of me.

Finally, she let out a sigh, moistened her lips with her tongue, grasped the hem of her skirt, and slid it upward until the fabric pooled around her waist.

God loves you, Sinclair.

Lavender. Of course, her panties would be lavender.

He almost lost it.

“Spread your knees more.”

Her breasts nodded with heavy breaths and he could see her trembling. However, she skimmed her knees outward on the carpet. At the sight of lace darkened by moisture, his cock jerked. Of any sub he’d ever dominated, she’d always been the most responsive to verbal commands and it absolutely undid him. But the muscles in her legs were taut and her back still rigid.

He walked a slow half circle, swiped his leather jacket from the coat rack then pulled a chair up behind her.

“Bend over.” The coat landed in a heap on the floor in front of her but she only stared at it. With a quiet sigh, he placed a hand on the back of her neck and gently guided her head down on the jacket so her ass presented high and round between his legs.

“I hope you don’t promote this type of disobedience in your classes. You’re to comply with

my commands immediately. No hesitation.” Had she forgotten everything he’d taught her about the D/s relationship? “Tell me, are you nervous?”

She sighed. “What do you think?”

“Why?” He ran his fingers in a long line over her back and she shivered. “Answer.”

“I—I don’t know.” He smoothed his palms over her ass, stroked his thumbs against the string of lace between her cheeks. She panted. He skimmed her moist slit and she jolted, but he squeezed his knees together and locked her in place.

“There must be a reason.” He pulled her panties down until they were at the crease of her thighs. Beautiful. With lazy delight, he dragged his knuckles between her glistening folds, then leaned down and blew a soft stream of breath over her most sensitive flesh.

“Oh, God.” Although she vibrated and tried to wriggle away, he wouldn’t allow it. Not until he got an answer.

“You were never this rebellious before. Whatever Master you’ve had lately has done a piss-poor job of training you.”

“There haven’t been any others.” She moaned and rocked back against his hand, against his fingers that lightly caressed her slick cleft.

“By the looks of things, our entire week will be spent punishing—wait. What did you just say?”

“You. You’re the only one.”

The earth moved under him. His vision blurred as he stared at the small of her back. An elephant had somehow found its way into his office and sat directly on his chest. He was sure of it. That was the only thing that could cause this type of ache.

He toyed with her clit and her fingers curled into the leather jacket. “Please. Please, don’t stop.”

Normally he would have stopped to reaffirm his dominant position, but her allure over him was

savage and unyielding. Her pleasure was his pleasure. And he wanted to please her, not only as a Dom, but as a lover and a man.

“Please,” she whispered and he refused to make her ask again.

With a quick thrust, he shoved his middle and index fingers inside her soaked pussy, then swore when she moaned. If he didn’t find a way to distract himself, this might be the first time he’d come before getting out of the gate. Instead, he focused on the language of her breathing, the signs of her shudders. He spread his fingers slightly, stretching her pussy while lightly scraping his thumb over her swollen clit.

There was no inhibition now.

She impaled herself on his fingers, had his jacket fisted in her hands. The long slope of her back shifted—up, then down—as she rocked. When he noticed she was trying to choose a rhythm that would bring her to climax, he tightened his hold and controlled the pace.

“You’ve never let another master you?” He needed to hear it again, needed confirmation he hadn’t lost his damn mind.

“No,” she muffled into his leather jacket.

“Is that the truth, or what you think I want to hear?” He leaned over her back and brushed his mouth lightly over her spine.

“I—it’s the truth.” Her words were strangled, a harsh rasp of sound. Tiny beads of sweat gathered between her fine shoulder blades and memories flooded him. Nothing had ever brought him more pleasure than seeing Bianca reach orgasm. He remembered the way her jaw would clench as a low moan vibrated in her throat, how her inner thighs quivered just before the eruption. How could he have gone so long without this woman? In that moment, he made a decision. It wasn’t about closure anymore

or cleansing his system of an old flame. He wanted her, pure and simple, and by no means in a temporary way.

“You will always tell me the truth, Bianca. Understand?”

“Yes,” she sighed.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes...Master.”

“Good girl.” It killed him to withdraw his fingers, yank up her panties and give her a swat on the ass. “Get up, angel. We’re leaving.”

“W—wha—where? No,” she sobbed.

The sound nearly broke him, but he needed to think long-term. If he wanted to keep her in his life after these five days were up, he needed her to realize they shared more than just a physical connection.

He rounded to his desk, plucked a tissue from the box, and wiped her cream from his fingers. If one drop of her sweet honey touched his tongue, Cade knew they’d never leave the office. And that would ruin his new strategy. Giving in to his primal urges this early in the game wouldn’t get him anywhere. He needed her full submission.

When he looked back to see her staring up at him, her breasts heaving and her eyes heavy with desire, he stopped breathing for a good twenty seconds.

“I’m starving.” God, she was beautiful. “Let’s get dinner.”

“These boots weren’t made for walkin’,” she grumbled under her breath, as her heel caught in a cement crack outside the rear entrance of Halo. However, when Bianca’s gaze settled on Cade’s tight ass, she decided it wasn’t the boots that turned her legs into gelatin. She narrowed her eyes and burrowed her stare into his thick chestnut waves.

Bastard.

Four streetlamps lit the parking lot. One towered in each corner, casting long shadows over the ground. As her eyes scanned several vehicles, she found herself wondering which belonged to Cade. Not the Mercedes—too flashy. Not the Porsche—the curves were too seductive and feminine. The Chevy half-ton suited him a bit more, but she couldn't imagine him behind the wheel of a vehicle that read, "Born To Be Bad" in purple down the side of it.

Then, there it was...steel perfection.

The lines were fluid and beautiful, yet somehow with the perfect amount of arrogance. Dual chrome exhaust railed the length, distinguished against the shiny black powder coat riding up over the engine and fenders. The motorcycle wasn't the newest model she'd seen but, by far, it was the most impressive—massive, powerful and terrifying...just like its owner.

Bianca slapped her hands on her hips, tapped the toe of her boot against asphalt and blatantly gawked. "You don't seriously expect me to get on the back of that thing."

Cade flashed a try me grin over his shoulder as he reached into the saddlebag.

"Don't tell me you're one of those anti-motorcycle people, 'cause if you are, I might have to rethink this entire arrangement out of principle."

Perhaps she should tell him that. Bianca scowled. With every passing second, she was beginning to think making such a rash bargain with the devil was at the top of her list of stupid decisions. Instead, she stuck out her tongue and rolled her eyes, indifferent to whether or not she came off as a pouty six-year-old.

"I didn't say I was anti-motorcycle." She frowned as he pulled out a second helmet he obviously

intended for her to wear.

“Hey, during our week together I remember mentioning I had one and, if I recall correctly, your exact response was, ‘mmm, how sexy,’” he cocked his head, “or was that just a line you used to ensnare me?”

Bianca glared up at him and decided to bite her tongue. In truth, she had thought it was sexy. Very sexy, actually, but that was before he expected her to get on it. Plus, four years ago she’d been a more adventurous woman. Now, she had bigger responsibilities, a direction in life, and something she wanted to accomplish before she ran face-first into the asphalt at eighty miles per hour.

“Ye have little faith in my ability to drive a motorcycle?”

“Well...” her shoulders sank at his arched eyebrow, “...now that you mention it, I honestly don’t know if you can or can’t drive one. It’s not as if I know a lot about you. We spent all of, what, six nights and a day together.”

Her fear of becoming road-kill was making her bitchy and she hated it. However, Cade disregarded her tantrum, gently smoothed her hair back from her face and over her shoulders, then plopped the beanie helmet on her head.

“Six nights and a day spent naked. And believe it or not,” he said, fastening the chinstrap for her, “during that time, I guarantee you discovered more about me than any other woman ever will.”

She wiggled her head back and forth—the helmet fit her well, the strap snug.

“Put this on.” With the bike straddled between his powerful thighs, he gave it a rev and held up his scarred leather coat. “Might get a bit drafty once we hit a hundred.”

She paused with one arm in the oversized sleeve and shot him a pointed stare. His quick burst of

laughter sang in her ears, but it wasn't enough to loosen the boa constrictor coiled around her stomach.

"You need to lighten up, angel, or this is going to be the longest five days of your life."

Try to find the humor in it, Bianca. There were worse things than riding on the back of a sleek motorcycle with a gorgeous Dom willing to take her to dinner. Yes, things could have been far worse.

"Fine. At least tell me where we're going."

"Nope. Surprise."

Damn, she'd always been a sucker for surprises, and he knew it. With a long defeated breath, she threw one leg over the seat and straddled the massive beast of nuts and bolts.

The engine purred. Slight vibrations through the seat coursed up her inner thighs, against her clit. She inhaled the rich scent of leather, of Cade's spicy cologne from the collar of his jacket, flipped up and curved around her neck. If she closed her eyes, she could easily lose herself. He revved the engine and her stomach muscles clenched, her damp cleft pulsing. She tightened her arms around his waist as a shudder rippled through her. Oh, Lord, it would serve him right if she reached climax before they left the parking lot. His earlier teasing had pushed her near insanity.

But before she could get further acquainted with her new best friend, Cade reached back and yanked her forward on the seat until her crotch was snug against the small of his back.

"Don't want to lose you on the first turn," he said in a serious tone.

She immediately jumped to get off and he stilled her with a firm hand on her thigh.

"Relax—a joke, small joke."

"Yeah, you're a first-rate comedian." She was tempted to take a painful nip of his earlobe, but lost her nerve when he rubbed his palm the length of her

thigh to her knee, then back to her hip under the hem of her skirt. The man had sin written all over him, Bianca decided. If he was trying to make her moan, he was doing a good job. However, two could play at this game.

Rolling her hips forward, she ground her crotch against his ass and lowered her hand from his waist to between his legs. As she traced her fingers up the center hem of his jeans and over the bulge of his cock, he released a low growl.

For a minute, she forgot all about the dangers of rocketing down the interstate on two wheels with no seatbelt.

“Promise me you’ll take it slow.”

“I never make promises I can’t keep—whatever you do, don’t let go.”

Bianca scowled, tightened her arms around his waist, pressed her face into his back, and clung for dear life.

“Oh, my God!” Bianca ripped off her helmet, shook out her mass of knotted hair and savored the rush of adrenaline pumping through her veins. Absolute freedom. Those were the only words to describe it.

“And...she’s hooked.” Cade flashed his straight white teeth, took the helmet from her, and shoved it back into the side compartment.

“When do we get to do it again?” she demanded.

“After we eat.”

Though her bottom lip drooped, she sucked it back between her teeth and smiled as a warm kiss of air caressed her cheeks. She lifted her face into the breeze and welcomed every tickle. Then, as she noticed the burgundy canopy above her head, the smile was replaced with a frown.

“Diego’s?” She gaped at Cade then cast another glance at the sign above the five-star restaurant. “I

can't go into a restaurant like Diego's dressed like this!"

"I like how you're dressed."

"Um, I'm flattered. Even so, being mistaken for a prostitute wasn't really on my agenda for the night." She gnawed on her fingernail and smoothed a shaky hand over her mini-skirt.

"For the love of God." He swore. "You don't look like a prostitute. You're stunning. C'mon, wait until you see the dessert menu. Knowing you, and I think I do, you'll have an orgasm from reading the first page." He grasped her wrist and dragged her toward the entrance.

"Cade, no, they'll kick us out."

"No, they won't. I happen to be a very good customer." Bianca dug her heels into the cement, but it was no use. The bastard was strong as an ox.

"Oh, please, don't make me go in there. Let's get pizza—my treat."

"Enough." His voice was calm but low and she quickly recognized he was asserting his dominance over her. "I like how you're dressed. I like how you look. And I honestly don't give a shit what anyone else thinks. Neither should you. As my submissive your only concern should be to please me."

"I know, but—"

"No buts." He leaned and traced his mouth over hers. "Trust. In. Me." He punctuated each word with a light kiss, one on her chin, the tip of her nose, then in the center of her forehead.

They stepped inside the entrance and an air bubble lodged between her ribs. "Lavish" didn't begin to describe the décor.

"It'll be okay." Cade squeezed her hand. "Trust me."

She pressed her lips in a tight line and nodded.

Time to summon those nerves of steel her mother always teased her about.

They crossed the polished cream marble and stopped near a cushioned, deep claret and golden-colored framed settee.

Breathe, Bianca.

A thin little man behind a half-podium stroked his wiry gray mustache while cradling a phone receiver to his tiny head. Upon catching sight of them, he quickly said his goodbyes and slammed down the phone.

“Mr. Sinclair!” he roared. “How good to see you!”

Bianca jumped at the sound. Who would have expected that booming voice lived inside that skinny little body?

“You, too, Oliver. Busy tonight?”

“Oh, yes! Yes, very busy, but as always, your table is open.”

Your table is open? Bianca arched an eyebrow.

“Good to hear I still have some pull around here,” Cade replied and winked again at her.

“Good evening, Miss. Right this way.”

Bianca fought to keep her mouth from draping when Oliver warmly smiled at her, scooped up two menus, then lead the way into the restaurant.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding,” she whispered. “You eat here every day or something?”

“Pretty much.”

Oliver zigzagged between several round tables draped in floor-length white linen. With a single glass rose bowl and candle centered on each table, the setting was intimate, yet not overly pretentious. The mood lighting had some of the tension easing from her shoulders. She had almost reached a comfortable level of tranquility when they were seated at a relatively private half-circle booth across from the bar.

“Barkley will be right with you. Beverages?”

“Got a bottle of cream soda hiding behind that bar?” Cade inquired. Bianca choked.

“I’m sure I can find some, Sir.”

“Great. I’ll have the usual.”

“Very good, Sir.”

As Oliver shuffled off to the bar, she turned in the booth and gaped. “Cream soda?” she whispered in a harsh tone.

“It was your favorite four years ago.”

“How in the hell do even remember that?”

“It could have something to do with what your tongue was tracing before you—”

Bianca planted a firm finger against his lips and stifled a burst of laughter. A flush of excitement washed over her. “You’re insane.”

“In comparison to whom, exactly?” Unfazed, he unraveled the silverware from a napkin before setting the creamy satin cloth over her lap.

“Everyone.” She slapped at his fingers when they lingered a little too long on her upper thigh. “You can’t just order a bottle of cream soda in a place like this.”

“Why the hell not?”

“I—It just isn’t appropriate,” she muttered, unable to come up with a better reason.

“Tell me something.” He glided across the bench until their thighs touched, then brought his lips dangerously close to her ear. “What good is coming to a restaurant like this if you don’t get exactly what you want?”

His breath was warm against her skin, arousing, impossible to ignore. Her lashes fluttered against her cheek while his large hand slid under the leather jacket across her waist, then up her ribcage. She shuddered as his thumb lightly brushed over her nipple.

“Haven’t you already eaten here once today?” A chipper voice jerked Bianca from the moment and had her eyes snapping up at the rotund waiter, who beamed like a hundred-watt bulb. Somehow she’d

forgotten they were sitting inside a half-capacity five-star restaurant.

“What can I say, I’m addicted.” Cade grinned.

“Ha!” The man clucked. “And who is this lovely?”

“Bianca, meet Barkley.”

The plump Barkley set down a basket of bread, then leaned all the way across the table to snatch up her hand. His thick mustache tickled her skin as he planted what was, in Bianca’s opinion, a rather enchanting kiss on the tips of her fingers.

“It’s good to finally see this one with a woman, I was beginning to wonder if he—”

“Watch it,” Cade warned in a playful tone that had Barkley wrinkling his wide nose.

“All right, enough conversation—you come to eat, yes?”

Before Bianca could say she hadn’t had a chance to browse the menu, Cade ordered a long list of food for both of them.

“Excellent choices!” Barkley slapped a wide palm against the table and bounded toward the kitchen.

Bianca directed a pointed stare at Cade and wondered if he ordered for all his dining partners or just her.

“What?” He draped a napkin over his own lap. “You don’t like shellfish anymore?”

“No, that isn’t it.” She sighed at the irritation in her tone. “I love it, but then I probably mentioned that to you.”

“What’s the problem then?”

“The problem is I could have ordered for myself.”

“Hmm.” He reached for his water and took a small sip. “Would you have ordered shellfish?”

“Well...” Bianca smoothed her hands over her napkin and wanted to lie through her teeth. “...Yes, I probably would have ordered some kind of shellfish.”

Cade cradled his head against his hand and stared at her. "They prepare really good shellfish."

Frustrated, she huffed at a wisp of hair on her forehead. "It's not about the shellfish. I haven't let someone order for me since I was in pigtails."

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes, as if trying to picture what she would look like with her hair in tails. She found it hard not to laugh. "Stop looking at me like that. Much as I'm sure you're accustomed to dominating every situation, dining included, I'm a grown woman. I can read a damned menu."

"Are you finished?"

When she reached for her cream soda, intent on dousing him, his large hand clasped over her wrist and pinned it to the white linen tablecloth. Irritated, she jerked her arm, but his grip made it impossible to move.

"Let's get one thing clear...I was never a fan of pigtails."

She sank her teeth into her lower lip and promised herself she would not scream.

"Retract the claws, angel," he soothed. "I didn't order for you with the purpose of dominating the situation. I ordered for you because I eat here frequently and I thought you'd enjoy what I ordered. However," he stroked the pad of his thumb against the inside of her wrist, "regardless of my intent, as my submissive you should be pleased to accept my will with even the most basic things. As your Dominant, it's my responsibility to fulfill your needs, even if it's only for the next five days. Over the duration I will not put you in a situation where you could get hurt and I will never push you beyond what you're capable of."

She finally understood what she'd gotten herself into. He was asking her for complete submission concerning everything, not just behind closed doors.

Being a Dom wasn't only about sex for him. This was his lifestyle inside and outside the bedroom.

Isn't that what she'd agreed to?

"Do you fully accept me as your Master, Bianca?"

Before she could answer him, Barkley returned to the table and set out two metal pyramids of melting butter kept warm by a small tea light. As her gaze wavered with the distraction, she realized Cade's never did. His intense emerald eyes remained concrete on hers, searching, waiting for a response.

As shadows played over his strong, determined jaw, candle light drew her eyes to where it danced along his sensual lips. A voice inside her screamed, and warned how dangerous agreeing to his request would be. She could separate her emotions from the act between two consenting adults for mutual pleasure, if need be. But let him into all aspects of her life?

That was another story.

"Yes," she agreed, before she sprouted feathers and bolted for the deepest, darkest hole she could find. "I'm sorry if I came off overly defensive. I've been on my own a long time now and I value my independence."

"I would never take that independence from you, ever." He broke off a piece of bread and handed it to her. "It happens to be a quality of yours I admire, among a few others."

His quick wink had her heart doing a somersault. How had she forgotten how he made her laugh? Along with his irresistible Dominant persona, he was a man who possessed an easy, relaxed way about him that had always appealed to her.

Their first night together, she'd been nervous as hell, but he hadn't pressured her or been angry when discovering her inexperience with kink. Instead, he'd asked about her likes and dislikes,

wants and needs. Of course, she hadn't answered with anything that would reveal her true identity—the rules of the masquerade had strictly forbidden it.

But she'd always answered honestly, and his genuine interest in her made things easier. By their second night she was completely at ease with him, as if they'd been lovers for years. Perhaps that's what bothered her most, and what had her insides knotting. It would be so simple to fall back into that relaxed routine, even if it meant a broken heart in the process.

Chapter Four

“It’s official,” Bianca threw her head back and beamed with a satisfied smile. “You can order for me anytime you want.”

Cade chuckled and gave a nod of appreciation to Barkley as he cleared the plates. It had been a joy watching her moan over the succulent lobster tail and rice pilaf, then pass on the side dish of julienne carrots, and finally try to sneak the last piece of fish off his plate when he wasn’t looking. Unlike most women he knew, Bianca wasn’t the type who ordered salad when she really wanted a fat, juicy steak. Nor was she the type to nibble on her food when she really wanted to devour it. She was a woman unashamed of her healthy eating habits, and it delighted him.

“I hope you haven’t completely filled the tank. There’s still dessert.” He wiped his mouth and tossed the napkin on the table.

“Oh, no,” she waved her arms, “I only indulge in sweets when I’m depressed or after I have an orga....” Her words trailed off as he slid his hand under the table, beneath the napkin rested over her lap, and slowly up her skirt.

“Ah, yes,” he murmured. “I recall you mentioning something about that. Well, the dessert here is a must and I couldn’t bring myself to intentionally depress you.”

When he hooked a finger around her panties and tugged them aside, her knee jerked and the rose bowl on the table jumped. The restaurant wasn’t nearly as full as it had been when they’d arrived, yet

a few patrons on the far side of the room, who still lingered with their desserts and coffee, glanced up at the clatter.

“Cade,” she whispered. “What are you doing?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” He stroked two fingers up and down her damp cleft and watched her shiver. “I think it’s pretty damn obvious.”

“That’s not what I meant—people are looking.”

“No, they aren’t.” He pushed his fingers inside her and her knees clamped on his wrist. “Even if they were, it would only be because you’re drawing attention to us. Relax. I know this excites you.”

It was his intent all along to bring them to this moment. Although dining with her was more enjoyment than he’d experienced in a long time, it wasn’t why he brought her here. Tonight he was determined to break down her walls, put her at ease in every situation, and take her to a place where she’d never been before. By putting her in such an uncomfortable position, he was risking everything. But in doing so, she would either run from him or accept him.

It was a gamble he needed to take.

“What if someone sees us?”

“It’s dark in here and the tablecloth covers you.” He circled his thumb over her swollen clit and worked his digits slowly past his knuckles inside her pussy, then out again. “And, if someone does see us, I guarantee they’ll be too conservative to say anything about it.”

“Oh, well now, that makes it all better then, doesn’t it?” Her eyes darted from table to table before settling back on his face.

“Have you forgotten everything I taught you?” he asked, slightly annoyed.

“No.”

“Then why is your attention on every person in this restaurant rather than on how my fingers feel

inside you? Pleasuring you pleases me. Don't you want to please me, Bianca?"

"I do." She sighed and unlocked her thighs a measure, granting him better access. Satisfaction roared through him on an unbelievable scale. It wasn't long before her eyes became desire-heavy and warm.

"Does it feel good?"

"Oh, yes," she whispered in a husky tone and clutched at the tablecloth.

Between the foreplay in his office, the ride over and now this, he knew she was on the pinnacle of release, which meant it was time to push the boundaries a little farther.

With his free hand, he gestured to Barkley, who stood near the bar with Oliver.

"W—what are you doing?"

"Hush, it's all right," he murmured. "No one will know my hand's up your skirt unless you tell them."

The man wasn't the average asylum escapee, Bianca decided. He was a stark raving lunatic!

Barkley quickly noticed the signal and rushed toward them. Her face burned and her muscles tightened around Cade's fingers as the room swayed before her eyes in a series of distorted shapes and colors. With the chance of getting caught, her heart hammered in her chest. Who knew that this would have made her hotter than she'd ever been? As the answer popped into her mind, she wanted to curse.

Cade knew.

He'd always known the right buttons to push, and was still doing a damn fine job of it under the table when Barkley approached.

"Can I offer you both dessert?" he asked with a wide smile.

"You can." Cade smiled back. "Have any of that Belgium chocolate cheesecake left?"

"We do."

“How does that sound, angel?” He curled his fingers back and applied pressure against her G-spot.

“Good,” she replied with a heady breath. “Excellent.”

“What the lady wants, the lady gets. One fork’ll do.”

“Very good, sir.”

As Barkley disappeared through the kitchen doors, Bianca let out a long shivering breath and narrowed her eyes. “You’re scandalous.”

“And you’re beautiful,” he said, not the least bit put off. “I want you to come for me.”

“Here?” She gasped.

“Here,” he echoed. “I know you can do it.”

She nibbled her lower lip and scanned the room for the thirteenth time. Although there were still customers, they were in their own worlds, in their own discussions. She wondered if they had any idea at all what was going on beneath the table only twenty feet away.

This was wrong on so many levels. But why in the hell did wrong have to feel so good?

“Don’t look at them,” he demanded in that low Dom voice. “Look at me. Feel me.”

She shifted her eyes to his. The elaborate décor, the candle light, and the soft muffled voices collapsed into nothing more than a mere background to the sensation of his touch, to the pressure of his fingertips stroking inside her.

There was nothing but him.

The air was a cyclone of electrical currents. A mass of static hummed in her ears. She didn’t care about rules of propriety or social codes. All she cared about was the way he was making her feel...dangerous, excited, sinful.

Deep in the back of her mind, she knew this was his way of establishing dominance over her, showing

her that he would touch her whenever and wherever they were if the mood struck him. That thought alone made the inner walls of her pussy clench.

Images of Cade bending her over the table in front of everyone and taking her from behind flooded her head. Her breasts heaved, a series of quiet, labored sighs burned from her throat...

“Oh, God.” She choked on her climax, gasped, and her eyes flew open at the taste of rich, chocolate heaven melting on her tongue. A violent shudder ripped through her as she stared at Cade who carefully withdrew the fork from her mouth, then his fingers from her slick sheath. He cocked his head, arched a dark eyebrow, and a slow sensual smile drew up the corners of his mouth.

“Is everything all right, Mr. Sinclair?” Barkley’s concern axed into Bianca’s thoughts and she desperately fought to compose herself.

“Couldn’t be better,” Cade replied.

“And you, Miss, is the dessert to your satisfaction?”

“Oh,” she pressed her hand to her throat, swallowed hard then smiled, “yes, it’s...pure sin.”

“Wonderful!” Barkley clapped and his loud chuckle sent his round belly bouncing. “Then I won’t keep you from it—oh, one thing before I forget. Angelo mentioned the stock of Chardonnay is running low.”

“I’ll take care of it tomorrow, thanks.” Cade gave an absent nod and held up another forkful of cheesecake for her.

When Barkley made himself scarce for the third time, Bianca shook her head and let out a low groan. “You work here too?”

“I own it.” He wiggled the fork. “And I think that little outburst just increased Diego’s reputation tenfold. We’ll be packed this weekend.”

Lord, he was an impossible man not to smile

back at, she thought, and didn't bother trying to contain the giddy energy that bubbled out in a blissful laugh. She snatched the fork from him, savored another heavenly bite of dessert, then winked. "Glad I could boost sales."

The moon sat high, tucked between thick clouds that promised rain. While the air had substantially cooled, Bianca was anything but cold by the time Cade pulled his bike along the curb in front of her duplex. Her blood was singing.

Since the moment they'd left the restaurant, anticipation had been building in her stomach. She hadn't entertained a guest of the opposite sex in at least a year—had she taken the three lacey thongs off her lampshade after drying them this morning? Then again, she didn't think tidiness would be on Cade's mind. Did she have anything in the refrigerator to cook for breakfast?

He didn't offer his hand, but caught her around the waist and plucked her five-ten frame off the bike. A thrill tore through her as her feet hit the ground and she teetered into him, missing the curb.

"One too many cream sodas for you." He flicked off her chinstrap, then returned the helmet to his saddlebag.

"Yeah, you really should have cut me off after the first one."

God, why was she so nervous? Her palms were definitely sweaty and was that the sound of her knees knocking together?

His fingers linked with hers as they walked. The pressure of his hand was firm and reassuring, a good distraction from her hammering heart. So good, she hardly noticed the harsh odor of Mrs. Peterson's bushy gladiolas poking over her walkway or the stained cement from accidentally stepping on the overgrown petals each day on her rush out the door.

“Well...this is me.”

It came quicker than she'd expected. His mouth crushed hers. The purse and keys slipped from her fingers as he hauled her against him. A cyclone of energy twisted, distorted as he cupped the back of her head and stole the breath from her lungs. With equal enthusiasm, she clenched her fingers in Cade's thick hair and earned his low growl of approval. The sound clawed, aroused, and ignited the most basic of human needs.

When they surfaced for air and his dark eyes locked on hers, she couldn't breathe. Again. Pressing a shaky hand to her throat, Bianca diverted her eyes. “You made me drop my keys.”

“My bad.” He grinned, then bent over and scooped up her small purple hand bag and keys.

“You hardly look apologetic.”

“Probably because I'm not sorry.” He caught her upper arm and dragged her against him for another derailing kiss. When she again stood speechless and staggering, he brushed the pad of his thumb over her lips. “Not sorry for that one either.”

“I think we'd better go inside before you do something you're really not sorry for.” She backed into the doorway, laughed and felt for the lights. Joy filled her. She'd slipped off her boots, tossed her keys on the half-moon entrance table, and was plucking at the silver hoops dangling from her earlobes when she noticed Cade hadn't followed.

“Keep standing there, Sinclair, and Mrs. Peterson's going to think you're a mad man trying to steal her garden gnomes.”

“I can't stay.”

“She's crazy about her garden gnom—oh.” She set the earrings next to her purse and hesitantly fingered the smooth edges while refusing to meet her reflection in the oval wall mirror. She didn't need a reminder of what devastation looked like. “Oh,

okay.”

“It’s not that I wouldn’t like to.” He moved forward, stopped short of the door and stuffed his hands in his pockets. “I need to be up early.”

“Please, you don’t have to explain.” She forced her legs to steady and joined him at the door. “It’s fine, really. I understand.”

Understand that you have someone else waiting for you. Nothing had changed in four years...why would it?

“I’m actually exhausted. All that eating takes a lot out of a girl.”

“I did warn you about that second slice of cheesecake.” His grin didn’t come in its quick easy way, but then, neither did hers. “Get some sleep. I’ll see you soon.”

“Sure.” The chaste kiss he pressed against her forehead dealt the final blow to her ego but she forced a smile. “Drive safe.”

“Always—and lock that door,” he called from halfway down the walk.

As she caught herself staring after him, Bianca quickly closed the door, threw herself against it and groaned. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

Chapter Five

A curtain of darkness fell over her, a lead blanket of sleep that washed away the uncertainty in her mind and any fear of what the next day might hold. She was in a world where she controlled the secondhand on the clock, manipulated the very essence of time. She'd slain the dragon, rode the white stallion and rescued the helpless prince. Nothing could touch her. Nothing could wake her. Nothing except...the pounding on her goddamn front door.

Five minutes of holding her orthopedic pillow over her head and then another five of her goose down comforter on top of that didn't make the knocking stop. Bianca cursed into the mattress then squinted at the boxy indigo numbers reading ninety-two across the clock radio on her nightstand.

Saturday morning. Damn. Already she could smell the stiff, gelled hair parted down the middle, could visualize the clip-on tie and one-size-too-small white shirts on the boys prepared to spread the word of God—didn't God invent sleeping in?

Grumbling, she dragged her ass out of bed and headed for the door.

"Morning, sunshine."

Worse than God's messengers.

"I hate you." She slammed the door, but Cade stuck his boot in the jamb before it closed all the way and shouldered inside. If he hadn't have been carrying two cups of coffee and a bag of what she assumed was breakfast, she would have cold-cocked him. What in the hell was he doing here anyway?

“Still not a morning person, hmm? Good to see some things never change.”

She glared through one narrowed eye, then stomped back to the bedroom with the full intention of sleeping another hour before she had to shower and get to work.

“Interesting spread you’ve got here. I particularly like the purple bean bag chairs—very nice touch.”

Indifferent of whether her robe was too short or too skimpy and giving him the full view of her bare ass, Bianca flopped face first onto the bed.

“You’re the devil,” she muttered into a pillow and contemplated bloody murder. Fortunate for him, the sound of his light laughter was enough to preserve his life until he told her what he was doing here. “I don’t remember ordering a wake-up call.”

“Told you I’d be up early.”

“Yeah, well, when you told me that, I didn’t think you meant you’d be up early and over here.”

“I’ll clarify next time.” He set one coffee on the nightstand and removed the lid. The aroma drifted toward her. As if he didn’t have enough of an advantage over her. Did he have to know all her vices?

“That wouldn’t happen to have two creams and a sugar in it?”

“What do you think?” He sat on the edge of the bed, sipping from his own cup.

“I think you’ll live to see another day.” She groaned one last time, then flipped over and propped her back against the headboard. She was reaching for the coffee when another marvelous scent tickled her senses. Rich suede and fresh spring air. Damn it, did he have to smell so good first thing in the morning? She surveyed him out of one sleepy eye. Even over-tired and crabby, she could appreciate the simple black V-neck stretched over his muscular

shoulders, the worn blue jeans slung perfectly at his hips.

Bastard.

Why couldn't he be like everyone else first thing in the morning and look like hell?

"Plates?"

"Depends." She combed her fingers through the knots in her hair. "What's in the bag?"

"Blueberry bagel with strawberry cream cheese."

"You're joking." Now, she opened both eyes.

"I know to never joke about food with you."

She contemplated his sincerity, then her stomach growled. Defeated, she swallowed a sip of coffee and pointed. "Kitchen, left—far right cupboard above the microwave."

"Don't get all sociable on me while I'm gone." Cade set his coffee on the nightstand and headed for the door. She stuck out her tongue. She waited until he rounded the corner before cradling her head in her hands, before his act of thoughtfulness made short work of her lethargic mind.

"Blueberry bagel with strawberry cream cheese," she muttered.

The tenderness she experienced irritated her far more than the confusion.

During dinner, she'd chalked up his recollection regarding her love of shellfish as a fluke, and then an uncanny fluke when he remembered when she indulged in sweets.

But now, as she sipped her large coffee with two creams and one sugar, and waited for the breakfast her mother used to treat her to every Saturday morning, she wondered if Cade Sinclair was the first man who had ever really listened to her.

"Couldn't find any knives that weren't covered in peanut butter or jelly, but I figured you'd manage with a spoon." He handed her the plate and two

packets of cream cheese then reached for his coffee.

She forced a smile and with shakier hands than she'd woken up with, peeled open one of the packets. The rich smell of blueberries and cream had her realizing how hungry she was.

"Got any more tricks up your sleeve?" She sank her teeth in with a greedy bite, then rolled her eyes. "Sweet Jesus, that's good."

"Glad you approve—as for tricks, none I'm willing to divulge at the moment."

"Which reminds me." She paused in mid-chew and wagged the bagel at him. "Could you not have told me you owned Diego's before we went inside?"

"That would've eliminated the purpose."

"Oh, I see. You wanted me to feel like an ass."

"Don't be stupid." He snatched her bagel and took a healthy bite of his own before handing it back. "I wanted you to experience what it's like to relinquish control and know that, regardless of the situation, you can trust in me; that when you're with me you can trust my judgment."

"So it was really a test."

"Suppose you could call it that."

"Well, how did I do, Professor?"

"As a submissive?"

She threw her hands up and rolled her eyes.

"Horrible."

Bianca choked on her mouthful of food, then reached for her coffee to force the lump in her throat down.

"You were argumentative," he continued. "You made me repeat my requests more than once and there were a few times when I literally battled with the urge to wrap my fingers around your slender neck and squeeze."

"Well," she sniffed, "I can appreciate brutal honesty."

"Brutal or not, you'll always get complete

honesty from me. I expect the same in return.”

The weight of his tone had her staring at him.

How quickly those playful green eyes could intensify. Yet, it comforted her to know that he didn't take his Dom responsibilities lightly. As an instructor at Eden, she'd come across a lot of people who thought the BDSM lifestyle was nothing more than a game, which frequently put the submissive partners in danger. If a submissive didn't know what their master wanted from them, it often led to constant punishment and borderline abuse. A big part of why she became an instructor with Eden rested on hearing about the widespread mistreatment of subs. Her primary goal when dealing with beginners was educating them on the difference between punishment and cruelty.

She peered at Cade out of the corner of her eye and silently counted her blessings that he'd been the man to break her into the lifestyle.

Even if she didn't agree with all of his practices.

“Well, then, I apologize for ruining the evening,” she heard herself saying.

“You didn't ruin anything,” he corrected. “You asked how you did as a submissive and I told you. As for the camaraderie, call me masochist, but I enjoyed locking horns with you.” He shrugged, then drained the last of his coffee as she studied him over the rim of her own cup.

Beneath the surface of his sarcastic commentary was something most people lacked—raw sincerity. He didn't sugarcoat or tell her what he thought she wanted to hear. His manner was direct, confident. In a world where one never knew what was real or artificial, she found it oddly refreshing.

“You never did tell me how you got your hands on a place like Diego's.”

“I inherited it.” He leaned across the bed and brushed a smudge of cream cheese from the corner of

her mouth. “My father opened the restaurant shortly before he and my mother died.”

“Hasn’t it been around for like twenty years?”

“Twenty-four,” he supplied. “My parent’s car accident was two years after they opened.”

“You would’ve been just a kid,” she whispered.

“Eight.” He stretched his long frame across the bed and propped his head on his hand.

Compassion welled in her throat and had her swallowing hard. She imagined losing a parent at any time would have been heartbreaking, not to mention having both stolen from you as a child.

“My uncle took care of things,” he continued, “until I was old enough to decide whether I wanted the headache of the restaurant business or not. Again, the masochist in me couldn’t refuse and part of me maybe wanted to keep a piece of my parents close.”

His easy smile was award-winning, but his tone betrayed him. Even after all this time, the pain was still there and Bianca found herself wanting to comfort him. She was fortunate to have both her parents. Though they were in Ohio, they were only a phone call away at any time.

“Brothers or sisters?”

He flexed his jaw before answering. “An older sister.”

“Sounds like she made you eat worm pies.”

“Not quite.”

“Beetle pies?”

He finally laughed and shook his head. “No pies of any kind. My sister and I see the world through very different eyes. She’s a successful accountant, rigidly conservative but not unfeeling. Mingling with polite society has always been a big part of her life. It never has with mine, as you probably assumed.” A heavy sigh found its way past his lips, and against her better judgment, Bianca dared to touch him. She

grazed her fingertips gently along his brow, smoothing the concentration lines before sweeping back his hair.

“That feels good,” he whispered. “Let’s just say my sister has a hard time accepting who I am and leave it at that.”

“Okay.” She readjusted her knees and cradled his head in her lap. His eyes closed as she lightly drew her fingers through his hair, and she realized she’d never seen him quite so vulnerable. He was letting her inside, willingly lowering his guard with the belief she wouldn’t hurt him. Strangely, she wondered if, all those years ago, she had, in fact, hurt him.

Nonsense.

She stuffed the outrageous idea back where it belonged and forced herself to remember why things hadn’t worked out between them. He didn’t do monogamous relationships. He was a free spirit and wanted the most out of life. She understood that. Her relocation from Ohio to Los Angeles was motivated by a similar desire. And although she personally couldn’t live without monogamy, it wasn’t right of her to ask him to deny himself all the pleasure life had to offer.

“I’m fortunate,” she said and softly smiled. “My family’s very open-minded. As long as I’m happy, they are. Believe it or not, I only received one lecture when I switched my major from Biological Sciences to Creative Arts.”

His eyes opened. “Are you still throwing clay?”

“Yeah,” she sighed wistfully. Although she was ninety percent hard work, ten percent talent, and certainly would never showcase any of her pieces other than at the local junk market, throwing clay was how she decompressed. The moment she wet her fingers and began the first long stroke, the weight of the world disappeared. “Yeah, I am. It keeps me

sane.”

“You do it here?”

“No.” She laughed. “Hey, my place might not meet health code standards, but that’d make too much of a mess, even for me. I rent a space just off the strip, a very small space. Sometimes I take a few pieces and sell them down at the flea-market. People seem to love junk.”

“I’m sure it’s wonderful.” His sincerity filled her chest with lead. This wasn’t the type of conversation she’d expected having with him when they’d struck their bargain. In fact, everything was the complete opposite of what she’d expected. It was too easy, too comfortable. If she didn’t watch herself, at the end of five days she’d find herself in the same position she was in four years ago...heartbroken and alone.

Cade sensed the walls, the transparent field of energy she so easily erected around herself when someone was getting too close. He wrapped his fingers around Bianca’s ankle and gave it a tug. “You’ll give me the tour of your workshop sometime.”

“Hmm? Oh, no, trust me, there’s not much to see. Besides, if you thought my kitchen was a disgrace, you’d die if you saw the shop.”

“You have this horrible habit of putting words in my mouth, angel. We’ll have to change that.” He moved his hand up her calf, relished the feel of her skin under his calloused palm. She jumped at the initial contact, then tried to readjust the robe sliding up her hips, but he wasn’t having it. That skimpy-ass silk had been torturing him since she’d tried to slam the door in his face. In fact, he’d almost said, “fuck the master plan,” and pounced while her eyes were still half-shut.

“You never did say why you were here,” she said with a shiver.

“Hmm.” He didn’t like the way she snapped her legs together and pulled away from him. The walls

were still there, sturdy and high. "I figured we should discuss lesson plans, in the case you welsch on our deal and we're forever stuck working together."

Her eyes narrowed. "That won't happen."

"No? Strange, I'm beginning to get the impression you're ready to back out."

"I'm not."

He didn't believe her. Everything they'd achieved the previous night had unraveled. Her stance was rigid, defensive and it pissed him off. She'd made it clear she wanted him as a lover, at least for the next five days. But was that all she would ever want?

"You're not convincing me."

"Well," she cocked her head, "I don't know what more I can do to convince you. Guess you'll just have to take my word for it."

"Come with me."

"What? Where?"

"To the shower." He pulled her up from bed then dragged her toward the door.

"Wait a sec." She dug her heels into the carpet and he let out a growl. "You smell clean to me."

"I don't plan on showering."

"Then what?"

"I plan on watching you shower."

Chapter Six

Dark streaks of crimson marked her cheeks while her doe eyes locked on his. In them, Cade noted the shock, but, more significantly, the annoyance. She didn't appreciate how he was inserting himself into her daily life. He assumed having coffee with her, talking with her was far too intimate for casual lovers meant to share a tryst for the span of five days.

That's exactly how he wanted it. Intimate. If he had to tie her down at the end of five days and keep her locked up until she saw reason, he'd do it. But for now, he would use every skill he possessed to break down her walls, get inside and show her just how good they'd be together.

"Lose the robe, angel."

"I—no." Her head shook furiously and he stifled his amusement. "No, this is ridiculous. You are not watching me shower."

"No?" He arched a brow. "Listen, I was lenient with you at dinner yesterday, but don't think for a second I won't bend you over the ledge of this tub for your defiance, Bianca."

She clutched the vee of silk at her breasts and tried to feign disinterest, but he knew her better.

"Now see, that is the exact opposite of what I'm asking of you." He took an assertive step toward her, watched the hue in her cheeks deepen, then wound her long hair around his palm until his fist clenched at the base of her neck. The tension caused her neck to arch, and forced the pale blue flash of her eyes to his. "Apparently," he murmured, "being restrained

and having your ass branded with my mark is what you really want.”

Her eyes closed on the tail end of a quiet moan. “There’s nothing special about my showering ritual, I assure you it’s—”

“Ah,” he pressed two fingers against her lips, “I’m the one who’ll decide that... Submit to me, completely. It’s what we agreed to.” As his mouth brushed over her temple, she shuddered and it rocked him to the core.

Not a second longer and her hands drifted to the belt around her waist, her slender fingers slowly working the knot. The cascade of aqua blue poured off her shoulders and whispered to him as it skimmed her legs, then pooled in a crumpled heap around her ankles. It was pointless trying to stop the low growl of approval in the back of his throat and he silently cursed himself for it. The last thing any defiant submissive needed was praise.

Even if that submissive had the most magnificent body he’d ever set eyes on.

Christ, it was a good thing her eyes were closed so she couldn’t see his expression. Couldn’t have her getting the upper hand on him this early in the day.

However, while they were shut, he allowed himself to soak in the sight. Her legs were long, slender stilts—pale in complexion yet divine in shape. He remembered how strong they were, how much power they possessed fused around his waist when she wanted his cock deeper, harder. Shapely hips flared, enticed, seduced while her breasts rose and fell with short breaths. Although the air was warm, her nipples stood erect, tight and beautiful. He immediately wanted to suck one between his teeth and hear her cry out.

“Open your eyes.”

She softly sighed but obeyed. He noticed her tense when he leaned past her to crank on the

faucets and grinned. Perhaps she'd thought he would make good on his threat and bend her over that ledge. As much as he wanted to, he had other things in mind.

"Water's warm." He shifted his eyes and stole a glance at the long, delicate line of her back.

"You're really just going to watch?" Goosebumps covered her arms. He wanted to run his hands over her, but restrained himself.

"For now." Back to the wall, he propped one foot against it, folded his arms loosely over his chest and waited.

Porcelain squeaked as Bianca carefully set one foot in after the other, then stepped under the spray. Her silhouette was a shadow against the half-closed curtain. As if time slowed, he could see each individual bead of water on her skin as it trickled along her shoulders, down her belly to the fine dusting of hair at her pelvis. His cock throbbed and he almost protested when she turned away from him into the water, but instead he bit it off and savored the view of her perfect round ass.

There was time.

Bianca cupped her hands under the hot needles, let water pool then splashed it over her face. However, the warmth didn't help for a distraction. Although her eyes were closed tight, she felt him. His gaze burned her skin, probing the most intimate regions of her body with quiet domination. And she realized exactly what he was doing.

Without words, without physical contact, he was commanding her body. She blindly fumbled for the shampoo, dumped, lathered, rinsed. Only he possessed the power to make her pussy clench and her nipples ache, all without laying a hand on her. She repeated the ritual with conditioner, turning her backside to him. If he was making her suffer, so would he.

And she knew how her body affected him, remembered how he'd worshipped every inch of her with his mouth, his hands, his cock. He could play the indifferent Dom all he wanted, but his fingers had been shaky when they'd clenched in her hair. Whatever his reason, leaving last night didn't change his attraction for her, or hers for him. The grounds for them parting ways had never been for lack of attraction.

"Turn around."

She'd almost managed to convince herself that this was simply part of her daily routine, that there was not, in fact, a deadly handsome man an arm's length away who was determined to only watch her bathe. "I'm almost done."

Could he possibly torment her any more than he already had? Didn't he know how much she wanted him to hoist her up against the cool tile, drive his cock inside of her and take her to the place only he could?

"Turn. Around." he repeated in that low voice that her body obeyed, regardless of what her brain decided.

The tub squeaked as she pivoted on her toes to see him towering before her with a look in his eyes she was well acquainted with. Hunger. Even under scalding needles of water, she shivered.

"Not satisfied with watching any longer?" As a childish attempt at payback, she ran her tongue over the droplets coating her lips.

"As a matter of fact," he reached for his belt, unfastened it, "I'm not."

"W—what do you think you're going to do with that?" Her heart raced at the jingle, at the long fluid stroke he used to draw it from the loops of his jeans.

"Pleasure you," he answered and jerked off his shirt. He clenched the belt between his teeth before pushing one of the shirt's long sleeves under the

spray, until the navy cotton saturated and appeared black. Partly from anticipation, partly from the sight of rigid, tanned muscle tensed throughout Cade's torso, Bianca's tummy fluttered.

A squeak passed her lips when he wound the soaked cotton around her wrists and tied it, quicker than she could protest. "Wait—"

"Hush." He linked her bound limbs to his belt, tossed one end over the shower bar and fastened it so her arms were fully extended above her head. Then he tugged at the belt. Apparently satisfied it was secure he stepped back. His head-to-toe survey of her made her nipples ache, and she squeezed her thighs together.

"Feet shoulder-width apart," he demanded. "And I'll tell you when you're done showering."

He was in full Dom mode, Bianca realized, his voice was calm and assertive, and this aroused him just as much as it did her. It wasn't merely the savage bulge at the crotch of his jeans that gave him away. It was his eyes—intense, focused, hungry.

"I thought you were just going to watch."

"I changed my mind."

He turned away from her and the cabinets clattered. Poking her head around the shower curtain as far as her restraints would allow, she scrunched up her face as he threw open the mirror on the vanity. Here she was naked and vulnerable and instead of man-handling her, he had his nose in her medicine cabinet? Irritated, she mentally slapped her hands on her hips and asked, "Are you looking for something specific?"

"Not exactly. I hadn't planned on this, but I'm not a man who can't improvise." He rummaged. "Ah, this'll work...for starters."

With her arms extended far above her head, Bianca's breasts heaved as a thrill ripped through her. Cradled in his large palm was her silk beauty

sleep mask. Her irritation instantly melted into a hot pool of arousal. Part of her hoped Cade couldn't see how excited this made her, but she was sure he could. It's why he did it. He knew everything that turned her on. He was the definition of what turned her on. It wasn't the long, toned body, the dark careless hair drifting over his forehead or even those intense emerald eyes that had the inner walls of her pussy clenching in violent spasms. Not saying those things didn't help. But it was more how he dominated her with quiet coercion.

"Relax," he murmured and brushed his mouth over her flexed fingers. "Do you remember the night I blindfolded you?"

"Yes." Could she possibly forget? He had sexually tormented her with what she was certain was every toy ever created, until she had begged him to fuck her. "But we don't have four hours before I need to be at work."

"Then I'd better get started."

Bianca caught the wicked flash in his eyes just before everything went black. His strong hands curved at the flare of her hips, and steadied her while she adjusted to the darkness and could keep her balance.

There was a time when she would have let him lead her blindly down the middle of the strip on a Saturday afternoon without hesitation, confident he would never mislead or steer her in the wrong direction. Although she'd known him only six nights and a day at that point, she had trusted him that much. Until that Sunday afternoon when she had discovered he wasn't a one-woman man....

"Oh, God," she moaned as Cade snatched one straining nipple between his teeth and severed her thought process. As his incisors pricked the rigid peak, her knees gave.

"Easy," he whispered, just loud enough that the

rich texture of his voice vibrated in her eardrums. "Keep your legs apart."

"I'm trying," she panted and blindly shook her head. "You're not making it very easy."

"That's the idea." He slid one hand up her ribcage and palmed her neglected breast while the other found its way between her legs. Two of his fingers parted her slick folds before he gently pinched her clit between his knuckles. Bianca dug her nails into the soft leather of Cade's belt as her cleft flooded. Already, between the water pounding down her back, his lips and teeth plucking ruthlessly at her nipple and his talented fingers prodding her sensitive flesh, she was on the verge of a climax.

"You will not come, Bianca."

Damn him.

Even after four years, he read the signs of her body.

"Then untie me," she grumbled, twisting her hips away from his ministrations.

"Not going to happen." He swung her back and when he pinched her clit a bit harder, she rose on her toes with a heady moan. "And I'm serious. Climax before I give you permission and I'll punish you."

He probed her pussy with his middle finger like an exclamation mark. She groaned, not only from the tip of his finger pressing up on her G-spot, but from the idea of Cade's punishment. He'd always been a firm Master, but never cruel. In the end, his discipline always resulted in her fierce orgasm.

"Understand me?"

She couldn't breathe, speak, think. Bianca bit hard on the inside of her cheek as he worked his finger in and out. The sharp sting of her molars against the soft flesh inside her mouth wasn't enough to distract her.

When she didn't respond, he pressed her clit

down so it strained between the pad of his thumb and the finger inserted in her. "Answer."

"Y—yes," she finally managed in a strangled moan, then regretted agreeing the minute he inserted a second digit, spread his fingers apart and gently stretched her. Hot water spilled down her ass, poured over her sensitive entrance, and a thrill rocketed to the tips of her toes.

She'd entered into a losing battle.

"That's my girl," he murmured, then nipped at the delicate layer of skin above Bianca's rapid pulse and quietly yanked on the button of his jeans. All the while he continued to work his fingers inside of her, snaking the tip of his tongue against her earlobe. He shucked out of his jeans then silently swore as his cock sprang up and grazed the soft skin of her tummy. At the innocent contact, his shaft pulsed and his thighs vibrated.

Christ, get it together, Sinclair.

If he gave in now it would end in short-term satisfaction. Incredible satisfaction, but still short-term. So he withdrew his fingers, fought the sound of her aroused whimper, stepped into the bathtub and prayed to God his willpower would hold long enough for him to finish what he'd started.

He grasped the detachable showerhead, cranked up the intensity setting, and hooked an arm around Bianca's waist so he could spread her slick outer lips with his index and middle finger. When the liquid needles pelted her clit, she rocked her hips, but they had nowhere to go except against his crotch.

"Oh, God, you're not playing fair." She wriggled.

"I'm not playing at all, angel."

He wouldn't deny his tactics were underhanded. Over the span of his thirty-two years, Cade had realized there were times when you had to cheat in order to win. This time around, he didn't plan on walking away empty-handed. That meant turning

up the heat.

With the showerhead firmly in place against her quivering flesh, he smoothed his free hand over her ass, dipped his fingers between her cheeks and relished her sharp intake of breath. He remembered exactly what pushed her over the edge and planned to take her there before his self-discipline ran out. The tip of his finger rimmed her anus in small, wicked circles. "How long has it been since someone took you here?"

"Cade," she chided, then weakly leaned her head against his shoulder while her thighs clamped the showerhead. The intimacy of the question aroused her more than anything he could do to her, he knew, and probed further.

"How long?"

"A long time."

He flexed his jaw.

In his opinion, however long was not nearly long enough. He didn't even want to think about someone else taking her in such an intimate fashion.

"Did he touch you like this before he took you?" He rested his mouth against her damp temple and pressed only the tip of his finger into her tight asshole. "Did he start slowly, inch by inch, stretching you first with one finger before adding a second?" Along with his description he joined a second finger, worked them past his knuckles, full hilt. She trembled against his chest and tried to squirm away from the water pulsing over her clit.

"You're going to make me come...stop," she begged.

"Did he stroke inside you with them gently or did he thrust them like this?" Her back arched as her head slammed into his collarbone and she sobbed out her arousal. His cock jerked at the sound, his knees liquefied. If he didn't bring her to climax soon and get himself out of this shower, all hell

would break loose.

With a labored breath, he swiveled his head, brushed back her wet hair with his chin. Then he began revolving the showerhead against her swollen cleft in rhythm with his fingers.

Christ, she has the sweetest ass.

“Are you thinking of him now, imagining him withdrawing his fingers and replacing them with his cock?”

“Yes...oh, God, I can't stop it.” Her climax exploded in a succession of violent convulsions but he held her steady as her muscles tightened on his fingers, making them impossible to move. Then the memory slashed at him. If he were inside her, she'd be milking his cock right now, draining him for every last drop. He shoved the reminiscence back inside the vault and remembered long-term success. Instead of arching back and driving his cock home, he pressed open-mouthed kisses along her sweat-damp temple, down her delicate jaw, and lightly grated the soft skin with his teeth. Then he reached for the belt with one hand, gave the buckle a yank. She teetered, but he caught an arm around her waist and pulled her back against him before she fell forward.

Mission accomplished.

Chapter Seven

Among the usual chaos of Bianca's desk were stacks of Eden's event paperwork, four dirty coffee mugs, and a small smirking monkey with over-sized cymbals clasped in both palms. The fluorescent lights overhead glared down on the stationery landfill with blatant disapproval. She ignored it, just as she ignored John and Vanessa's rising voices outside in the hall.

You two'll be the death of me.

Slumped over her desk, she did a quick scan of the room and her lips twitched into a scowl. How in the hell did her purse always manage to sprout legs at the most inconvenient of times?

The afternoon had run anything but smoothly. Her first lecture on 'Respecting Your Partner's Boundaries' turned into a shouting match between Paris Ledwin and Marcus Hallwinky as the couple argued over what Marcus could or could not put in Paris's ass. She should have known then to call it a day, go home and lose herself in a pint of cookie dough explosion.

With a curse, Bianca rolled back her chair, dropped to her hands and knees and crawled under the desk to search for the runaway handbag.

It wasn't her style to be on edge like this. She was a down-to-earth, easygoing spirit. The last time she remembered aching for a man this badly was during freshman year. Back then, nothing got her hotter than watching computer nerd Baxter Beedlebum's long, slender fingers fly over his keyboard. Even then, like with Cade, the universe

had plotted against her, interrupting every opportune chance to put those fingers and surprisingly firm body to better use.

A frustrated huff of breath sent the blaring red bangs out of her eyes, only to have them fall back down again. Jesus, when had her office transformed into a damned walk-in closet? She flung a platinum stiletto over her shoulder, then winced when it thumped against the wall. Defeated, she sat back on her haunches and rested her hands on stocking-clad thighs.

Her lips pursed as her mind wandered back to her morning. Following such blissful intimacy in the shower, time should have been suspended, slowed, allowed to be savored. After all, it wasn't every day she woke to the devil on her doorstep who was willing to provide bagels and orgasms.

But there'd been no savoring.

Instead, Cade had yanked on his jeans, tossed his riding jacket over his naked torso, kissed her hard and assured her he'd administer proper punishment for her disobedience soon. He had meant to torture her with wondering when he would follow through on his promise. She was sure of it.

Startled, Bianca jerked. Her head thumped against oak, producing an unflattering hollow knock followed with her low curse. Along with the ringing in her ears from the blow, the chime of her cell phone blared from what seemed like every corner of the ten-by-ten room. She scrubbed a palm over her head and hunted the sound.

"Now how the hell did you end up in here?" She glared at the small purple bag inside her filing cabinet, then stuffed a hand in and snagged the cell on the last ring. "Y'ello."

"Where are you?" The rich tone hummed through the earpiece. She cradled the phone against her shoulder as heat snaked over her skin and her

throat tightened, like always when she heard Cade's voice.

"This is a private number—how'd you get it?"

"Irrelevant. Answer the question."

"In my office, just about to head home." Bianca braced a hip on the edge of her desk and couldn't help but smile at the low command in his tone. "Calling in your punishment so soon?"

"If I were calling in the punishment, believe me, you'd know it. Reach inside the change pouch of your purse."

Never one for small talk, she mused and dipped two fingers inside the pocket, jingling the change. "Are you going to clue me in on what I'm looking for?"

"You'll know when you find it." The tip of her index finger hooked a ring of plastic attached to a small, smooth bullet-shaped object and excitement rippled to her toes. "I'll assume the silence means you've found it."

"Yeah, found it." Bianca chewed her bottom lip as John's and Vanessa's voices held a steady head of steam in the hallway. "I'm thinking we should continue this conversation face to face."

When Cade had managed to tuck the small intimate vibrator in her purse was beyond her, but what he intended her to do with it bothered her more.

"Um...give me five minutes. I'm nearly out the door. I'll meet you—"

"Stop."

Her heels skidded on the area rug three feet short of the door and her shoulders sank. One command, one word was all it took for him to take the reins and have her body comply.

"Listen," she nearly sighed the word, "I'm at work. There are people in the hall. And I'm more than certain whatever it is you want me to do with

this little vibrating gem is beyond scandalous.”

“That much is true, but leave that office and you’ll be wearing the mark of my palm across your ass for the next week.”

Closing her eyes, Bianca readjusted her grip on the phone as her imagination ran wild. “You’re going to get me fired.”

“Get fired and I’ll hire you on as a cheesecake tester at the restaurant.”

“Not funny.”

“It wasn’t a joke. Climb on your desk and lay on your back.”

“Um...” she glanced over her shoulder and cringed, “...remember what my kitchen counters looked like this morning? Times that by ten.”

Thirty seconds of silence had her nervously winding a strand of hair around two fingers.

“Bianca.”

“Yes?”

“If I have to come and clear it off, I promise, you’ll be begging for the mercy of my flog.” His voice was steady, too steady to be bluffing.

She shuddered and pulled her fingers free from her hair. “Okay, okay. One minute.” Flustered, she awkwardly scooped the paperwork and mugs, balanced them on top of the file cabinet, then quickly swiped at the monkey. “Christ,” she swore as its cymbals crashed together and the teeth began to chatter.

On Cade’s low growl, she decided against trying to turn it off, stuffed it under a stack of promotional pamphlets in the bottom drawer of her desk, and kicked it shut.

“All right, I’m on the desk.” On her back, she balanced her heels on the edge and stared up at the ceiling as her heart pounded faster.

“Good girl,” he murmured. “You’ll do exactly as I ask, no hesitation, no questions. Start by

unclamping those knees.”

“You really do think I’m a prude.” She glanced at her secured legs and half smiled into the phone.

“Hardly,” he scoffed. “However, I’m well aware when your tone reaches the octave above soprano, those beautiful legs are frequently clamped shut. Relax for me—let them fall open, wide, as if my hands are pressed on your thighs pushing them apart.”

She swallowed hard, moistened her lips, and visualized.

“And hike up the prissy little skirt I know you’re wearing.”

Her stomach fluttered as she scrunched the skirt half way up her hips. While the air conditioner hummed a slow stream of cold, it didn’t touch the flames licking over her skin.

“Now, ring the vibrator on your middle finger, turn it on—I imagine you want to slide it over those soaked panties.”

“Now that you mention it.” It irritated and aroused her that he knew her body so well.

“Well, you’re not going to. I’ll decide where and when you can touch yourself.”

“Cade,” she glanced at the door, “someone could walk in any minute.”

“True, someone could. However, keep arguing and I will come down there, tie you naked to that desk, and invite the entire club in to watch me fuck you.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” A sharp breath caught in her throat.

“Try me.”

Those two words had her fingernails dug in to the edge of the desk and her cleft throbbing. She’d never thought herself an exhibitionist, yet somehow the idea of being restrained to her desk in front of an audience while Cade worshipped her with his cock

had her biting back a moan.

“All right,” she said out of breath. “Tell me what you want me to do.”

Over the next few minutes, she listened closely to his instructions and couldn't help but squirm with each rich syllable.

Top to bottom, Bianca unfastened the buttons on her blouse then released the front clasp on her bra. A sense of liberation soared through her as cool air kissed each nipple, drawing them taut. If someone walked in, she'd make number one on the list of scandalous dismissals.

She didn't care anymore.

Following the intricate path Cade chose for her, Bianca ran the smooth edge of the vibrator just under her earlobe, slowly over her throat, down the cavern between her breasts making sure to avoid her nipples, at Cade's command. Her tummy quivered as she circled it around her bellybutton, up the inside of one thigh, down the other. One inch to the left and she'd be in heaven...

She didn't dare.

When he finally permitted her to touch her nipples, an explosion of pleasure burst through her. The initial vibrations made her jump. Her back arched with an inhuman curve and a moan exploded free. When the phone slipped from her shoulder, she didn't bother readjusting it, but merely turned her cheek into it so she could still savor the sound of his voice.

“Now,” he whispered, “jerk those panties aside with your free hand. Spread yourself with your ring and index finger and lightly touch your clit.”

Completely engrossed, she closed her eyes and grazed her fingers along her slippery cleft. A ragged groan sputtered past her lips. She knew herself well, had been down this road a thousand times before. Being single as long as she'd been, masturbation was

a must. How many countless nights had she spent in bed with her fingers inside of her, imagining they were Cade's cock? Too many to keep track of, she decided. He'd played the role of her fantasy lover on numerous occasions. Never exactly like this, but he'd been there, in her mind, coaxing her to orgasm with his mouth, his hands, his cock.

"Does it feel good?"

"Oh, God," she choked out. "How can you even ask me that?"

"Would you prefer it were my fingers inside of you?"

"Oh, yes—"

The scream that tore from her throat muffled against a calloused palm as the thrust of a third finger penetrated her. Her entire body jerked with the invasion, but she was pinned by the forearm across her abdomen, by the force of a large hand trapping hers against her slick mound. Her heart jack-hammered and continued to do so even when her eyes locked with the dark gaze above her.

"Hush," Cade murmured and measured the weight of Bianca's anger against arousal.

A halo of fire spilled over the desk and around her head while those ashen blue eyes flashed with the promise of murder. A slow death but well worth it, he mused as the long slender fingers of her free hand constricted hard on his wrist. She tried to pry his palm off her mouth, no doubt so she could curse him. But he wasn't in the mood for her cursing, not tonight. Instead, he pressed up firmly on the two fingers she had inside her slick cunt. Her sharp nails dug into the meat of his wrist while her hot breath burned his palm. The moan was hushed under his hand but he gauged her arousal over nine points on the Richter scale.

His own went far beyond that.

Seeing Bianca splayed out like some type of

offering on a sacrificial alter had his blood boiling and his cock aching. He flexed the muscle in his jaw. Although her blouse and bra crumpled around her and her skirt rode high past her hips, she was the picture of perfection. Watching her pleasure herself had taken him past his breaking point. But while the need to drop to his knees and bury his face between her milky thighs had been extreme, he'd refrained—he'd had to—until being certain she was at the peak of her arousal.

“Do not. Move.” Cade lowered his head, grazed his lips across her feverish forehead. “Do not. Speak.”

She trembled when he removed his hand from her mouth, but said nothing. Within that single act, he knew then that she'd given herself over to him, fully. The Dom inside him roared in triumph, yet the man—the lover—knew he'd won no victory tonight. At least, not the one he wanted. He stared down at her and clenched his teeth against the sudden ache in his chest. If anything, the stakes had gotten higher.

He couldn't wait any longer.

Cade tugged lightly on her wrist, withdrawing her fingers from her tight pussy. He relished her shudder when she locked eyes with his as he placed the slippery digits in his mouth. He moaned at the taste of her and flicked his tongue between her fingers before sucking them clean. Nothing in this world compared to the taste of her.

“Relax.” He pushed her arms above her head, arranging her hands so one clasped the other. Then he lowered his lips to her throat, and pressed hungry, open-mouthed kisses over her burning skin, and down her breasts and tummy, while working another finger inside her. “You make me want to do very, very bad things to you, angel. Afraid my restraint's run out.” On those words, her pussy

gripped his fingers with a violent throb.

When he moved to stand between her legs, the sweet scent of her dampness clawed at his insides. The heavy desire in her eyes broke him. This moment was a long time coming.

Spreading her tender folds, Cade covered her slippery clit with his hot mouth and sucked it against his tongue. Bianca's gasp had his eyes closing. Sweet Heaven. Although he could spend hours devouring her, he couldn't wait much longer to be inside her. He scraped his teeth lightly over the hard nub, thrust his fingers, and savored the sudden buck of her hips, the tightening of her muscles. Still half-conscious of where they were, he quickly reached his hand up and covered her mouth just in time to silence the piercing scream as her body convulsed.

The sensation of her climax pulsing against his lips would've been enough to have him spent in his jeans, if not for how desperately he needed to fuck her. Without an ounce of willpower left, he jerked her up into a sitting position and sealed his mouth to hers in a bruising kiss. In the background of their heavy breathing, one of the cell phones on the desk blared and danced, but Cade ignored it and kissed her like a desperate man. At the moment, he couldn't have cared less about Dom etiquette. He was desperate for her and she knew it.

"I need to be inside you," he whispered. "Now."

More than anything Bianca wanted to smile at the hoarse sound of his voice, reach for the fly of his jeans, pry it open and grip that rock-hard cock. However, the unfamiliar tune coming from the razor-slim phone behind her broke her concentration. "God, maybe...maybe you should just get that." She shivered as his mouth wandered.

"Fuck. No."

Her neck went limp as Cade shoved her legs

wider, pressing his denim-sheathed hard-on against her swollen clit. Another bout of heat flashed over her skin, but the ringing continued. Every voice in her head screamed to ignore it, but she pressed her hands against his shoulders and frowned. "It's the fourth time." She tried to catch her breath. "You know, your house could be on fire."

"Let it burn."

His kiss deepened, drained, consumed.

Bianca's mind was a whirlwind. How many times had she dreamed of this very moment, of being back in his arms again? Was she honestly going to let something as ridiculous as background noise ruin this?

"Stop," she demanded. "I—I can't concentrate. Please, just, just get it."

He violently cursed, then sighed and pressed his lips against the inside of her wrist. "Fine, but don't you dare move a muscle. I'm not finished with you."

Bianca swallowed hard as he studied the screen, his expression shifted from irritation to concern. His smooth brow creased and he held up a finger. When he crossed to the far side of the room, then lowered and softened his voice, Bianca realized she wasn't above eavesdropping.

"Hush, don't cry...no, no, you didn't interrupt anything, just stop crying...yeah, of course...I'll be there as soon as I can."

She heard him swear softly before he shoved a hand roughly through his dark hair, but he didn't immediately turn when the phone snapped shut. The probability that the mystery caller was another woman had thick knots of tension forming in Bianca's shoulders. With Cade Sinclair, there was always another woman, she thought bitterly as the claws of jealousy sank into her stomach.

Fastening the last button on her shirt, Bianca slid off the desk and shoved her skirt in place. Her

heart was pounding even faster than when Cade had caught her off guard, and wasn't nearly as pleasurable. She spied him out of the corner of her eye and fought for composure. If he didn't think what just happened between them was anything, she sure as hell wasn't about to make a scene.

Still facing the wall, he murmured, "I—I have to go."

"No problem." She kept her tone light and painted her lips with the sweetest smile she could manage, then refused to let herself flinch when he came to her, ran his hands tenderly up and down her shoulders.

"You're upset," he whispered against the top of her head as he combed fingers through her hair.

"Don't be silly," she said, refusing to crumble in front of him.

"That was my...my sister...on the phone. She's having a bit of a crisis—if it were anyone else...I—"

"You don't have to explain." Sister...right. "I understand." Just as she understood four years ago when confronted by his other lover—one woman would never be enough to satisfy the vast sexual appetite of Cade Sinclair. With the bitter recollection fresh in her mind, stinging as if it had only happened yesterday, she flattened her palms against his chest. "Go on. Go."

"All right, but we're not finished here, Bianca." He skimmed his lips over her forehead, then made for the door, pausing with his hand on the knob. "Nowhere near finished."

The breath she'd been holding exited her lungs in a slow uneven stream. A shudder rippled over her skin. Unable to shift her gaze from the door, she hugged herself and tossed her hair back.

"That's where you're wrong," she murmured to the empty room and cursed the bitter ache seeping into her chest. "We're beyond finished."

Chapter Eight

Rich green leaves and multi-colored petals sagged over the sidewalk leading up to Bianca's modest-style duplex. With the asphalt already scorching under the heat of mid-morning sun, and no hint of a breeze, Cade shucked out of his riding jacket and flung it over the seat of his bike.

It was early enough on Sunday morning that the residential area was quiet. There were no cars rumbling down the road, no kids on bicycles zipping up and down the avenue. Apparently, all of Highland Street was still in bed. That was exactly where he should have been. In bed, with Bianca.

He drew off his sunglasses, cursed the glare of sunlight, then shoved them back on. Lack of sleep had his eyes burning and his body yearning for a soft place to rest his head. No doubt, he looked like grade-A shit. Though his temples throbbed with the threat of a migraine, and his hands vibrated from too much caffeine, he hadn't been able to make himself to go home, catch twenty winks and come back clean-shaven and in fresh clothes.

He'd never done well with unresolved issues.

During the breaks between Rachel's sobbing last night, he must have called Bianca at least fifteen times, only to get her answering machine. She was pissed at him. That much was obvious. Not without good reason, he'd decided on the drive over. Only a total douche would have left her in the office, vulnerable and on fire. Worse, she'd opened up to him again, given herself wholly to him, and he'd slammed the door in her face like a first-class prick.

Christ, you're an asshole, Sinclair.

He reached the front step, paused before the coffee-colored door, and took a minute to contemplate strategy. It would have been easier if Bianca were just angry. Anger he could work with. Hurt, that was another story.

Irritated, he scrubbed a hand over the stubble on his jaw, narrowed his eyes, and swore if he ever laid eyes on Barry Johnson again he'd beat the shit out of him, not only for using his sister like a bottomless green machine, cheating like a dog and breaking her heart, but for his miserable, fucking timing.

With adrenaline pumping through his veins, Cade raised his fist to the door, pounded three times and stepped back. He hooked his thumbs in his pockets and tapped the toe of his boot against the cement as he waited.

After ten minutes of repeated knocking and no answer, he braced his forehead against the door.

"Damn it—Bianca." He pounded harder. "Bianca, answer the door." He didn't bother keeping his voice down. Why in the hell should the rest of Los Angeles sleep on a Sunday morning when he couldn't?

"Christ, Bianca, just answer the goddamn door."

"She's not home," a scratchy voice snapped.

Cade stepped back and settled his gaze on the nest of washed-out strawberry blonde frayed around the weathered face jutting out the door of the next duplex over. Mrs. Peterson, I presume. He arched a brow as a twist of gray smoke ringed into the air, from the long cigarette clenched between her craggy lips.

"Suppose you're the reason the girl's blasted machine beeped all night—the walls are thin, you know? Very thin." Worn brown slippers scuffed against cement as she shuffled down the walk in a

frumpy robe to fetch the newspaper.

“Yeah. Sorry about that.” He pulled off his shades, jogged down the steps, and beat her to the end of the sidewalk. “We had a bit of a falling out, and I wanted to talk to her as soon as possible.”

“Like I said, she’s not home.” She frowned and narrowed her pale green eyes on him before eventually taking the newspaper he held out.

“You don’t happen to know where she is?”

“That your bike?” With a long pull on her cigarette, she eyed the motorcycle and Cade caught a glimpse of approval at the corners of her mouth.

“Yeah, yeah it is. Want a closer look?”

She shrugged a little. The deep lines in her face smoothed while the slight curve of her lips appeared almost girlish. If he wanted information, this was his in.

“Come on, she won’t bite.” He flashed a smile and waved her over.

Estelle Peterson was a female who liked to talk, Cade mused an hour later. She stood on her front step and waved goodbye. In an hour, they’d discussed the schematics of his bike and her late husband’s passion for riding, but more importantly, he’d managed to pry a few morsels of information about Bianca.

He dug into the saddlebag for his cell, then flipped it open and punched numbers.

According to Estelle, Bianca did come home last night, however, she hadn’t stayed long. That she’d hopped into a cab with a duffle bag and a pint of Rocky Road didn’t help the knot in his gut. But Estelle did give him an idea of where she might be.

A call to Caitlyn for the address of Bianca’s workshop turned out a bust. He snapped the phone shut and swore. The only thing stopping him from hurtling his cell across the street was the slim chance Bianca might cool off and return his calls.

Fat chance.

He shoved a hand through his hair. Further exhaustion set in.

If she wanted to hide from him, there was jack he could do about it. He wouldn't chase her, track her and force himself down her throat. Not his style. But neither was letting something he wanted so badly slip through his fingers. He'd waited four years for this opportunity. Waiting another twenty-four hours wouldn't make a difference...Or would it? Shit.

God, she hated Mondays.

As the cab swung around the final corner and onto Highland Street, Bianca nibbled a fingernail and clutched her duffle bag to her chest. With each bump in the road, her body ached. The makeshift bed she'd set up on the floor of the workshop had been anything but comfortable. However, it suited well enough for the three short catnaps she'd taken. While her fingertips were raw and her muscles burned from hours of forming, sculpting, and glazing, the throbbing was the farthest thing from her mind.

Her legs were watery as she stepped onto the curb and slung the bag over her shoulder. Moving up the walk she sent an anxious scan around the yard. She should have been relieved when she saw her small patch of grass vacant, the front step empty and Cade nowhere in sight. Her shoulders sank. Illogical as it was, disappointment clamped its talons around her heart and squeezed hard, sucking the breath from her lungs. She paused half the distance to the door and pressed her fingers into her stinging eyes.

It was my sister, she remembered bitterly and bit back a curse. Yeah, right. The same sister he had hardly spoken to over the last two years? Perhaps

she would've bought that story four years ago, being naïve and fresh out of the gate. But did Cade really think she was that stupid?

His absence was for the best. She chewed her lower lip. The last thing she needed was a confrontation first thing on a Monday morning. As it was, if she didn't get her tail in motion, she'd be late for work. Again.

"Come outta hiding?"

Bianca jumped just as she'd gotten her key in the lock, then steadied her hand as the scent of cigarette smoke wafted across the yard, right on the heels of the low, scratchy voice.

"I'm sorry. I didn't see you there, Mrs. Peterson."

"Course you didn't, girl. Just stepped out to get me some fresh air."

Right. She tried not to arch an eyebrow as her gaze traveled from the cigarette clamped between peach-painted lips and back to hard eyes.

"That damn machine of yours went off at least twenty times Saturday night."

"Shoot." She winced and readjusted her bag to her other shoulder. "Um, sorry about that. I must've forgotten to turn it off."

Estelle grunted and took another long pull that had the cherry glowing.

"I'd love to chat but I'm going to be late for work. Nice seeing you, and again, I'm really sorry if my machine disturbed you."

"Wait."

Bianca paused on turning the key and tried not to gape as Estelle Peterson waddled down the steps and crossed the yard for the first time since they'd become neighbors three years ago.

"Your boyfriend's got a nice bike." One of her thick arms propped under her heavy breasts while she smoked. "He came poking around yesterday, looking for you. Pounded on your door like a

goddamn maniac before the birds were up. And on a Sunday morning! Can you believe that? It's suppose to be a day of rest."

"Oh, God." Bianca cringed. "I—I'm very sorry about that. It won't happen again."

"Looked upset, too. Said you had a falling out, wanted to talk. Now, you know me, I ain't one of these ol' biddies who's got their nose pressed to the window—I'm a busy woman, got responsibility with my garden and all."

"Oh, yes, of course," she said quickly, and ignored the image of Estelle watching through the window when her cab pulled away Saturday evening after Cade had left her high and dry.

"Don't like gettin' involved in drama." She ground the stub out on the cement before starting back to her own yard. "For what it's worth, think you should hear him out—sweet boy. Anyways, I've said my piece, and the next time you decide to run away, turn that goddamn answering machine off."

"I will."

When the screen door slammed shut behind Estelle, she found herself staring at her own door.

Sweet boy?

Bianca gently shook her head and huffed. Apparently, among all of Cade's God-given talents, he possessed the ability to win over crotchety old women. Then she imagined he had a way with all women...and loved every minute of it. She fought off the pang in her chest and finally turned the key all the way.

She cut to the bedroom and dropped her bag next to the closet. There was no time to sulk. Even if she moved at the speed of light, she wouldn't make it to work on time. Huffing, she reached into the closet, grabbed one of her standard minis and a corset, and flung it onto the bed. Her eyes locked on the navy V-neck, sitting neatly folded atop her pillow, and she

froze. Images of Cade's hard body and damp hair filled her head and, as if she were back in that shower with him, she shivered.

The problem with memories was that you couldn't control them, Bianca thought as she sat on the edge of the bed and picked up the shirt. They came and went when they pleased. She closed her eyes and curled her fingers into the fabric clutched to her chest. A scent, a sight, a texture was all it took to cause the flash, the burst of unwanted emotion. The type of emotion that made people throw logic out the window and follow their hearts.

Cade slammed his office door, put his back against it, and pinched the bridge of his nose. Was it his imagination or were the twenty-one-year old bountiful Cassidy twins actually getting dumber with each subsequent class?

Enough was enough.

At the end of this week, he was done instructing. He ran a ragged hand over his face, crossed to his desk and dropped into his chair. The restaurant brought in far more income than he actually needed to live comfortably, and although he wanted to give back to the community through educating, well, every man had his limitations.

Clenching his jaw, he shoved back the next week's schedule, then flicked a glance to the wall clock. By now, Bianca would be done with her shift at Eden and on her way home. He reached inside his desk, pulled out his cell, and scanned the screen.

No new messages.

He scowled, slammed the phone back in the drawer, then steepled his fingers against his lips. Perhaps she hadn't spent Saturday evening sculpting in her shop. Perhaps she'd found someone else to tend to the fire that he'd started. No. She wasn't the type for one-night stands...or was she?

She'd obviously had no problem with convenient sex the week they met. In fact, he'd made it clear their last night together he was interested in more than a quick fling, and left that ball in her court. She was the one who'd decided he was good for nothing more than a week's worth of fucking.

Don't be an idiot, Sinclair.

Cade shoved a hand through his hair and growled low in his throat. He knew her better than that. Regardless of what had swayed her decision to reject further contact between them, at the time she must have had her reasons. Even from the beginning she'd never struck him as the love 'em and leave 'em type.

But what if she was?

He sure as hell shouldn't be judging her relationship preferences. How many years had he played the market, with only instant gratification in mind? Longer than he should have, that was for damn sure. It wasn't until he met Bianca that things changed for him. Was it her fault if she didn't see him in the same light?

Christ. He was making himself insane.

A soft knock sounded and before he could stop himself, Cade leapt from the chair.

Oh, yeah, real Dom-appropriate. Why not just swing the door open and drop to your knees while you're at it?

Shaking his head, he composed himself and strolled leisurely across the office. "About time you got back to me..." his words trailed off when he stared down. Shit. The Drama Queen Extraordinaire, Karlie Summers, batted her long, fake lashes up at him.

"Expecting someone else?"

"Matter of fact, I was." Shouldn't you be stuck under a house so Munchkins can pry off your ruby red shoes? "What do you want?"

“Thought you might be in need of a cold one.” She wiggled two bottles of ice-cold beer and tossed long chestnut hair over her shoulder.

“I don’t drink when I have my bike with me, but thanks.” Cade fought a scowl and went to shut the door, but Karlie slipped past him. On five-inch heels, she crossed the office and took the liberty of making herself comfortable by propping her barely-covered ass on the corner of his desk. “Come right in,” he muttered and shut the door.

When he turned she’d already popped the cap off one of the beers and had her bright red lips wrapped around the opening. Although her black leather skirt easily rode past upper thigh, her legs weren’t crossed but spread shoulder-width apart, displaying a flash of white lace panties. He fought not to roll his eyes.

Real classy.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding from me all day?”

“Actually I’ve been working. That’s what I do here, I work.” He crossed his arms on his chest and tried to keep his tone neutral, but her coy tone irritated the hell out of him. Over the course of six months, he’d watched her destroy more than three relationships inside the community. It was sport to her. If it were up to him, he’d have tossed her out on her ass the first night they met.

“Oh, c’mon, Cade. That can’t be all you’re interested in doing here. All work and no play?” She set the bottle, dripping with condensation, directly on his desk—another thing that pissed him off. Then she joined him where he stood near the door. She moved close enough that the stinging scent of her perfume burned his nostrils.

“Actually, I was off five minutes ago, so if you don’t mind—”

“Why do you do this to me?”

He narrowed his eyes. “Do what?”

“Torment me this way.” She ran an artificial fingernail along his bicep and his skin crawled. “You’re the only Dom here who knows what he’s doing, how to master a woman. Granted, everyone can go through the motions, play the part, but you... Oh, I can tell, you’re the real deal.”

“Flattered,” he said in a dry tone. “Is that the line you used on Marcel, Patrick, and Stewart? Gotta say, the innocent expression is top notch, but the sincerity of your delivery needs a bit of work.”

Anger flashed in her eyes, but only for a split second. Her lips curved into a slow smile.

“Jealous, Cade?”

“Delusional, Karlie?”

“We’d be great together,” she insisted, and took a step closer. “I’d be the perfect submissive for you, Master.”

“I am not your Master.” Cade gripped her wrists and held her back. “Do you honestly think I don’t see through your game? How you slither from man to man, feeding on the fact you’ve the power to make a few of them stray from their partners, and once you’ve destroyed any chance they might have at happiness, you move on to the next victim? You’re pathetic. I will never be your Master. If it makes it any easier on your fragile ego, I’m involved. So back...the fuck...off.”

Her cheeks scalded as if he’d slapped her across the face, but he didn’t give a damn anymore. He’d tolerated her antics for the last six months and wasn’t in the mood to be diplomatic.

“Get out.” He flung open the door. His chest tightened at the sight of the tall, lean silhouette standing in the archway.

Bianca.

Chapter Nine

Mother always told her the eyes were a window into the soul, and if you looked into a pair long and hard, you might find yourself lucky enough to glimpse the truth of a person. Tonight, the truth came in the form of a vivid storm of green framed by dark lashes. Staring into Cade's eyes, Bianca swallowed hard. If Mother had been right, she thought, shivering as the air crackled with electricity, then Cade Sinclair was far more dangerous to her heart than she'd realized.

Anger. Relief. Understanding. Regret.

Though she knew Cade frequently masked his emotions, this time, when their eyes locked and held, his expression somehow spoke a thousand words. There was no mask now. Only raw, overwhelming emotion. The kind of emotion most people ran from, yet searched for all their lives.

She didn't noticed the other set of eyes watching her, until the owner of them loudly cleared her throat.

"S—Sorry," Bianca stuttered and finally broke eye contact. "I'm interrupting."

"You aren't," Cade said simply. "Karlie was just leaving." He braced one hand on the door, waved her out with the other. The curvy brunette's large eyes narrowed on Bianca for a second before she flashed a last glance at Cade and stormed out.

"Tense." She winced. "Sure I wasn't interrupting? I could come back if you—"

"Unsatisfied customer—it happens." He sauntered to his desk, leaned against it, and shoved

his hands deep inside the pockets of his jeans.

That he didn't ask her to come in shouldn't have bothered her as much as it did. After all, she'd been the one dodging his calls the last two days while hiding at her shop like a coward. She refused to be a coward now.

Realizing he wasn't offering an invite regardless of how long she stood in the door way, she swallowed her pride and showed herself in.

"Thought you'd want this back." She held up the navy sweatshirt.

"How considerate of you."

When his hands remained shoved deep inside his pockets, she awkwardly placed the shirt on the desk and cleared her throat. "It's not the only reason I'm here."

"I didn't assume it was."

She met his eyes and lifted her chin a measure. He wasn't going to make this easy but she could accept that.

"I need to apologize." Uncomfortable with the quickening rhythm of her pulse, Bianca hugged herself and shifted her gaze to a coffee cup on his ultra-tidy desk. "I don't normally do things like this—hide from people, I mean."

"I regret making you feel the need to hide." He uncrossed his ankles and straightened.

Thankfully, he didn't step toward her. Had he, she might have thrown herself against him, buried her face in his chest and begged him to never let go.

Get to the point, Bianca, before he touches you.

"I—I came to end our arrangement prematurely."

"I see." An undercurrent of irritation laced through his silky voice.

It didn't take his touch—the mere sight of his long muscular legs, attached to those lean powerful hips deteriorated her resolve and warmed her skin.

When he stepped toward her, she forced herself not to run from him or to him.

“I want the why,” Cade said.

Of course he did.

“It’s...it’s nothing, really. I just don’t need any distractions right now. I’m trying to get my enrollment numbers at the club back up and—”

“Don’t.” He clenched his fingers in her hair at the base of her neck and arched her head back so their eyes locked. “Don’t lie to me. If you’re angry about how I left you the other night, then say so, but at least have the decency not to feed me some bullshit story about inconvenient timing.”

Her blood heated as he called her out. His emerald gaze burned like fire and she fought to keep her eyes from drifting shut, found it hard to ignore the sensation of his knuckles grazing her neck. He was too close...too warm. The line of his hard, sensual mouth was too tempting.

“I didn’t come here to argue with you.”

“Then don’t.” He held her gaze, made it sound so simple. However, it wasn’t simple. What she was feeling, the intense and violent ache in her chest, went beyond simple. But when his thumb drew small, tantalizing circles at the base of her neck, Bianca closed her eyes and brushed her cheek against the inside of his forearm.

“I need to go,” she heard herself saying, but her body refused to get on board with her brain.

He jerked her into him and crushed her mouth with his. Their thighs slammed together and Bianca’s breath caught as if she were free falling from a seventh-story window. The descent was one of desperation, but she didn’t want to think about hitting the ground.

Cade nudged her lips apart and plunged his tongue deep inside her mouth. A quiver started in her belly, the type of quiver that would linger when

this was all over. She savored the tight clutch of his strong fingers in her hair, the slow roll of his tongue, the flavor of him that would stay with her forever.

Cade's gut knotted with urgency as he expertly worked his fingers against a small area of skin uncovered by her leather and lace corset. This was his last chance. The moment of truth. Bianca was ready to run and if he failed to play his cards right, he had no doubt, she'd disappear from his life again. But this time, permanently.

He wouldn't let that happen.

Cade punctuated the vow by pulling her body harder against his and ravished her mouth with long, fluid strokes of his tongue. He didn't smile when she moaned and stabbed her fingers in his hair. This was not the victory he was looking for. Their bodies had been on the same page since day one. Her heart was what he wanted.

He took her by the shoulders and eased her back from him. Long vibrant lashes swooped against her high cheekbones as her eyes closed in dizzy satisfaction. He put his ego aside and refused to delight in her reaction. It had been his intention to knock her off balance, lower her guard, if only for a moment, and plant a seed of desire to replace her reservations. But for the first time since they'd started this charade, he wasn't sure desire would be enough.

"You'll give me tonight," he said, taking a casual stance and forcing his hands back into his pockets. "You'll give me tonight. And, after, if you so choose, you'll never have to see me again. I want you, Bianca. I know you want me."

She didn't answer immediately and Cade's heart thundered in his head. The office tilted around him in a distorted haze, but it didn't matter. He focused on Bianca's liquid-blue eyes, clouded with emotion he couldn't quite read.

Then it happened. She slowly sank to her knees. Arms behind her back, she shifted forward until the insides of her thighs aligned with his ankles. He couldn't breathe. How long had he waited for this, for the moment she would submit to him again? She had only been back in his life a few days now, but in his mind, he'd anticipated this for four long years.

"You're right," she said softly. "I do want you."

His fingers flexed in his pockets while his cock jerked at the soft sound of her surrender. Christ. He held back a moan as her short, prissy skirt rode high up her thighs, the garters stretching her stockings tight. If he were the same man she'd met four years ago, he would have spun her around, bent her over and taken her like a savage.

However, he wasn't that callous youth any longer. That's where he'd gone wrong with her all those years ago, he was sure of it. There was no way in hell he would make that mistake again.

"Stand." At his verbal release, she slowly rose to within an inch of his mouth, but he warded off the temptation to kiss her again with the anticipation of long-term success. "Follow me."

"Wait." She touched his arm and stared up. "We're leaving?"

The uncertainty in her voice, in her eyes, slashed at him like a thousand blades but he refused to let it show. For Bianca to accept him as a permanent part of her life, he couldn't lose himself in the heat of the moment. She had submissive needs, far too long neglected.

He lowered his head, brought his lips next to her ear and spoke slowly. "If you hadn't been so disobedient this week, I'd be fucking you right now. Unfortunately, there's a matter of punishment we need settled first."

The winding corridors of Halo were a

magnificent maze of stone, mortar and torches. With every subtle bend within those dark hallways, her heart thumped harder. The tendons in Bianca's legs stretched as taut as piano wire and her thighs quivered.

If it were any other man leading her down into what looked like the gallows of a medieval castle with the intention of punishing her, she would have dashed back up the stairs fast as her legs would carry her. But this was Sin. In truth, the thought of his divine discipline had her pussy aching, almost more than the thought of his cock pounding inside of her.

They stopped at a large steel door. Cade cast a glance over his shoulder, and she knew this was him giving her one last chance to change her mind. There'd be no turning back once they entered. She understood the unspoken rules of this world, accepted them. When he flipped up a panel on the wall and punched a few numbers, she did not hesitate when the door opened.

The light in the center of the ceiling buzzed and illuminated a room like no other. No windows. No modern equipment. If forced to compare, she'd say it resembled a torture chamber made for sex and sin.

The heavy steel door slammed. Her stomach hotly clenched as Cade's chest pressed into her back. His large hands grasped her bare shoulders.

"Do you remember?" he whispered against her ear. "Do you remember what I did to you our last night together?"

She shifted her eyes to the massive, wooden St. Andrews cross on the opposite side of the room and sighed. The memory of her first flogging rushed into her head and her knees nearly gave out. Cade was an expert with the flog. A single crack of his wrist could have her reaching orgasm.

That night, he had taken full advantage of his

prowess. She remembered screaming from the intensity, how he'd thrived on the sound and instead of letting the initial waves of her climax subside, he'd forced her higher.

"Answer me."

"Yes," she said quickly and closed her eyes against the memory. "Of course, I remember."

"Well," he said as he moved back a handful of her hair and nuzzled behind her ear, "that was nothing compared to what I'm going to do to you tonight."

A throaty moan poured out of her, but it wasn't from the recollection of his sexual dexterity alone—it was for his compassion.

She recalled the night he made her love him. He'd finally unshackled her wrists and legs at the end of their session, which had crept into the early hours of morning, and she hadn't been able to stand on her own. However, she hadn't needed to. Cade had caught her in his arms, swept her limp and sated body against him and carried her to bed.

Afterwards, he'd held her, soothed her feverish skin with gentle kisses, and asked about her childhood, her family, what she wanted for her future. Then, the intimacy had made her chest so tight she'd found it hard to breathe. And that night, regardless of how premature or implausible, Bianca knew she'd fallen in love with him.

Four years later, she knew she was still in love with him.

"Don't move," he murmured and lowered the zipper on the back of her skirt until it loosened enough to glide over her hips. The scrap of fabric whispered down her legs with the promise of heaven. He took his time slowly working the clasps of her corset. With the final hook free, he slipped it off, and palmed her breasts in his large hands. Her nipples stiffened and exquisite heat shot to her hungry

pussy.

“Interesting.” Short of breath, she arched for his touch. “I remember it taking you a lot longer than that to work a corset four years ago.”

“Glad my proficiency with women’s fashion impresses you.” He squeezed her stiff buds between his fingers, rolled them. Her legs turned to jelly and threatened to give out. He circled to stand in front of her, and with his slow, intense survey, her panties soaked.

“Is this your means of punishment? Not touching me?”

“That’d be punishing both of us.” A few quick flicks of his clever fingers and her garters snapped free.

Her face warmed when he crouched to remove her underwear, followed by her boots. One by one, he slowly rolled down her stockings.

“Stay still.” His fingers wrapped her ankles and firmly slid upward. When he pressed his thumbs into her slick folds, spreading them, tormenting her with a slow stream of his breath, her inner thighs trembled. A single nip of his teeth against her clit sent her spiraling. The thrill rocketed to the tip of every finger and every toe.

“Oh, God, please, can’t we just skip the punishment this one time?” He could punish her all he wanted later. She wanted his cock inside her now.

“Not a chance,” he said, and followed with a long stroke of his tongue. Her stomach muscles involuntarily quivered. “Be a good girl for me and get on the table. I need to grab a few things.”

He not only needed to grab a few things, Cade thought as he rummaged through his personal arsenal of sex toys in the cabinet across the room. What he needed was a moment to collect himself.

He glanced down and rolled his eyes. Christ, if his cock was any harder, it’d split his goddamn

slacks. She was getting to him, had always gotten to him, without even realizing it. His fingers vibrated on the new purple ball gag and he swore softly.

Hell, you've got it bad for her, Sinclair.

He wanted to laugh at himself, but forced it down and gathered a few more tools. Nothing funny about a man in love with a woman who didn't reciprocate the sentiment. His only salvation was that he knew she felt something for him. Desire, at least. Tonight, he would build on that.

Cade slammed the cabinet door, contemplated the collection of toys in his arms, and cocked an eyebrow. Although there was no doubt in his mind Bianca was aroused enough to withstand the laces of his flog, he needed her on fire. By the time he was through, she'd never want for another man inside her ever again.

"A gag?" Bianca visibly shivered on the table while her toes flexed. "We've never used one before."

"That's because I wanted access to your mouth. Tonight is different." He leaned, traced the subtle bow of her lips with his tongue and felt her tension dissolve into his kiss. "It'll muffle the screams."

"Screams?! Cade, I—" He caught her before she could jump off the table.

"Relax." He nipped lightly at her lower lip and she softened in his arms. "I promise they'll be good screams."

It took a minute but she finally nodded. He guided her to lie back on the table and fastened her wrists in the restraints above her head, then continued with her ankles. The spacer he'd chosen had black silk manacles that fit perfectly just above her knees.

Once Bianca was secured in place, Cade ran his gaze from toe to head. The sight of her spread and vulnerable for his taking had a low growl rumbling in his throat.

Nothing would stop him tonight.

“Do you trust me, Bianca?”

She didn't answer immediately. “Yes. I trust you.”

“We've never had the need for a safe word before. This will be no different.”

Her hesitation didn't bother him. In fact, he'd been hoping for the reaction. Gaggling was a new element for her. With all new experiences came reservations.

He stroked her jaw gently with his knuckles and lowered his tone an octave. “Part those pretty lips, angel.”

“And on the slim chance I want you to stop?” Excitement flashed in her eyes.

“You won't.”

With the glossy purple ball hugged beautifully between Bianca's rose-hued lips and the silk straps fastened beneath her unruly mass of red locks, the alpha in him took over.

This was his element. Power rushed into him, consumed him. But along with that power, he felt a grave responsibility, a responsibility he took very seriously.

Having a woman bound and gagged wasn't for the lighthearted or the cavalier, he mused reaching for a tube on the side table. Working with a gag entirely eliminated Bianca's free will. She was allowing him to choose for her, trusting him with her body, mind and soul. To him, that was the greatest gift she could give him. In return, he would give her all the pleasure he was capable of.

He circled a splotch of gel between his fingertips before turning back to study his glorious captive. Although her eyes were heavy with lust, her ankles remained flexed.

“Relax for me.” Cade rested the heel of his palm against the bridge of one foot and pressed down.

“You’ll like this part.”

Her muscles slackening, the flats of her feet lowered onto the table. But her breathing remained quick. At this point, it was just a little too quick for his liking. He lowered his head to hers, forehead to forehead, and closed his eyes to bask in the scent of her hair.

“Trust in me,” he whispered. Then he dusted his mouth over her brow, her eyelids, along the gentle slope of her nose. She turned her face into his as her chest rose and fell with steadier breaths, and in doing so, gave her consent. There it was, trust.

Although the excitement and novelty of being with a new partner for the first time had its perks, in Cade’s experience, nothing compared being with a woman whose body he knew nearly as well as his own. He had branded Bianca’s hotspots to memory, reflected on them over the past four years to the point of obsession, and hoped one day he’d be able to put that knowledge to use again.

The day had finally come.

He skimmed his fingertips, coated with aphrodisiac, over her pebbled nipples. He allowed the sound of her weak moan to break his concentration for only a second before chiding himself. It would be a hell of a long night if his cock jumped against the fly of his slacks every time Bianca moaned.

He reached deep into his well of willpower and plucked her nipples with a ruthlessness he knew she yearned for. Her back arched, the shackles rattled against the table and her breathing picked up because his hands demanded it.

That’s my girl. Go to that special place, he thought, refusing to take his eyes from hers. Things were about to get far more intense.

With more gel applied, he worked his fingers between her slick folds and against her clit, pressing

two inside her tight cunt. Her knees fought the bar between her legs as her inner walls pulsed. God, he would bury his cock there soon, and lose himself in the sounds of her.

When her eyes flashed and her fists clenched, Cade knew the gel was kicking in. The initial burst of heat would be intense but after a few seconds, the aphrodisiac would bring her unbelievable pleasure.

“Easy.” He grazed the backs of his knuckles over her temple. “It’ll get better.”

The muffled whimpers transformed into moans against the rubber ball as she twisted and bucked her hips desperately to meet his hand. Oh yeah, the flames had worn off, but he wasn’t anywhere near finished.

Knowing she was on the verge of orgasm, Cade withdrew his fingers and took his time at the side table. Bianca’s stifled curse cut a notch into his restraint. But only a notch. He knew exactly what she thought he was going to do—bring her to orgasm repeatedly until she was sated and spent before conducting his punishment. However, he didn’t intend to let her climax on the table. Now that he was older, wiser, he had new techniques. He would force her up, then down, each time a little closer. The aphrodisiac would help keep her on the edge between intervals, but he hadn’t used it for that reason alone, and she would soon discover that.

The first vibrator he chose was a favorite to use, small but effective. Shaped in a slender U, it fit between her glistening folds and clamped gently, the stimulator in direct contact with her clit. When he turned it on, she bucked wildly and his heart pounded.

Control yourself, Sinclair. Higher. She needs to go higher.

Tiny pin-pricks of perspiration started on her delicate brow when he coated his fingers once more

and circled them around her anus. He stroked the inside of her thigh with his free hand, soothing her as her head twisted from left to right. She was fighting the onslaught of an orgasm. However, he read her body well enough by now to know he had time still.

The gel, combined with her moisture, had his middle finger pressing inside her asshole easily, but he kept his movements slow, gradual, and steady. He reached for one of the dildos. It'd be a shame to neglect that sweet pussy.

When her slick cunt accepted the tip of the toy without much resistance, she stopped thrashing and moaned. Her eyes were wild, beautiful, and demanding. Beads of sweat started on his brow as he imagined the dildo as his cock and worked the toy all the way in. Knowing her body would reciprocate, he pressed up with the finger in her anus, finding the ridges of the dildo and stroked.

His vision blurred as he heard his name in muffled groans, over and over, but he didn't relent. This was the height he wanted to give her, needed to give her, was desperate to give her. And he wasn't close to being done.

Her mind raced. Her skin burned. Bianca sank her teeth hard into the rubber ball and shuddered. Every nerve in her body was alive with sensation. Even the arches of her feet pressing against the cool table aroused her. After an hour of sexual ascent and descent, she was certain it would only take Cade breathing on her and she'd burst into flames.

Bianca panted against the gag—the gag she had doubted in the beginning and now silently praised in her mind. Between one of their earlier intermissions, Cade had slipped off his shirt and unfastened his slacks so they slung loosely at his hips, revealing a pair of heavenly snug, black boxer briefs. She remembered her mind reeling with the idea of him

fucking her in such a restrained state, but he'd had other plans, ones that included tormenting her further with his toys, his hands, his scalding mouth.

Now, as he stood with his back to her, she cast a lustful gaze over the lean muscle in his shoulders, along the masculine slope of his spine and wondered how much more she could take without feeling his cock inside her dripping pussy. Not much more. Although the effects of the aphrodisiac he'd used had nearly subsided, the heat he caused with his expert ministrations still had white hot flames licking over every inch of her.

"You did so good," he murmured when he turned and carefully removed the gag from her mouth. "I believe you're ready for punishment now."

He couldn't be serious. She glanced to the savage bulge in his slacks while he removed the restraints and knew this must be killing him. No man possessed this much self-control. No man had ever pleased her for hours on end without release. No man except Cade Sinclair.

"How much longer will you make me suffer like this?" she asked weakly when the ability to speak returned.

"You hardly look to be suffering, angel." He slipped his arm under her back. Merely the heat of his bare chest against her skin had her shuddering all over again.

The spanking bench he carried her to was covered in soft black leather. His arms felt so good around her. She didn't want to let go of him when he set her down, knees first, and commanded that she lay across and grip the bar on the other end. But she did as he asked, knowing he wasn't about to let her off without punishment, and that the reward would soon follow.

Bianca closed her eyes against the sensation of plush fabric pressed under her tingling breasts, then

shivered. The bench was fashioned so her knees remained spread shoulder-width apart while her ass sat high and vulnerable. It didn't take a psychic to know what was to come.

Even so, the moment she spotted Cade running his fingers through the laces of his flog, her heart jumped into her throat. She'd never understood why her body reacted so strongly to the sight of a whip in a man's hand, but rather than question it, she merely accepted it, and right now, she would enjoy every glorious second of it. However, when she noticed him setting the flog aside, she frowned.

"Change your mind on that punishment?" she asked, keeping her eyes focused on the wall in front of her.

"In a manner of speaking." He slipped one hand between her legs and she jerked when his knuckles grazed her ultra-sensitive flesh. "You enjoy it too much, it would hardly be punishment on its own."

Before she could reply, he drew his slick fingers up between her ass cheeks and a moan tumbled out of her.

"Take a deep breath for me."

On her long inhale he pressed something smooth and cool inside her ass. This time she was sure it was anal beads, another of her vices. The instant pressure had her pussy clenching. Her teeth set while a new inferno coated her skin.

"Another breath." Patiently, he continued slipping the string of globes inside her, murmuring endearments along the way. But after the first orb penetrated her, his words had become distorted, and blended with the blood rushing past her ears.

"How are we doing, angel?"

"Oh, God," she sighed. "I hardly feel I'm being punished at all."

"Perhaps I'm losing my touch."

"Perhaps you a—"

At the sharp sting of the laces snapping across her ass, Bianca's breath hitched. There was no time to recover before they came cracking down again, the heat spreading into her pussy. The third time, the fleshy walls of her anus clamped around the beads. The quake that rocked through her brought a sob of arousal barreling from her lips.

"Then again, maybe I'm not." He smoothed his palm over the small of her back, up between her shoulder blades, then back down again. "It's about to get far more intense. Don't forget to breathe for me."

She panted through clenched teeth and fought against the orgasm. More intense? What could possibly be more intense?

The moment the string of leather cords branded down on her flesh, a long heavenly pulse of electricity rocketed to the tips of her flexed toes. Good God.

Breathless, Bianca gripped the bar above her head to prevent the oncoming scream. Those were no ordinary beads and that hadn't been simple aphrodisiac earlier. She'd heard of the conducting gel before and had even been curious about how strategically placed pulses of energy would heighten one's pleasure. Now she knew. Pure Ecstasy.

"Oh, God, again...please, again."

With each consecutive lash on her backside, her anus tightened around the orbs, triggering another pulse. Unabashed and in her element, she tossed her head back and let the sound bellow out of her.

This was what she'd been missing—being able to let completely go with a man, one who understood her needs and was more than gratified to deliver. Cade wasn't put off by her shameless abandonment, by the echoed screams of pleasure ringing in his ears. It turned him on. As much as she'd tried to deny it over the years since their parting, she yearned for the bond that only a D/s relationship

provided.

She longed for Cade.

When she finally heard the flog hit the floor, Bianca didn't open her eyes. She needed to savor this feeling, every blissful second of it. Her flesh stung with divine stripes of fire. At this point, she could orgasm by merely willing it. However, she wouldn't. She wanted to climax with him inside her, wanted him to feel the contractions, the pleasure he was responsible for.

"Bianca," He rubbed his palm over her burning ass cheeks. "Tell me why you haven't you taken on a new master since we were together?"

Between the rich sound of his voice, his powerful hands, and the throbbing in her clit, she could hardly comprehend his words.

"W—what—oh, God." She gasped when he slipped two fingers inside of her pussy and probed the orbs, rolling them with gentle strokes. He leaned over her now, his sweat-damp chest pressing into her back, his mouth tracing circles over the nape of her neck.

"I asked why you haven't taken on a new master. It's obvious your submissive needs have been neglected far too long."

"I—I...oh, please don't stop," she begged when his fingers paused.

"Answer me and I won't."

Though her mind was a collection of frayed nerves and wicked thoughts, she managed a sentence. "I've just been too busy."

He gently withdrew the beads. She wanted to curse at the absence of his touch, but she swallowed it down as he hooked his arms around her and lifted her to sit on the edge of the bench. The leather was smooth against her warm and tender backside, but the darkness in Cade's eyes distracted her from the sting.

“If you’re going to lie to me,” And you are lying to me, Cade thought as he flexed his jaw and hesitantly brushed the back of his hand across her cheek, “then I believe we’re done here.”

The sight of her quivering bottom lip twisted like a blade in his gut but he forced himself to hold his ground. After the intimacy they had shared, he wouldn’t stand for more lies even if that meant having to walk away.

“Wait,” she demanded when he turned from her. “Please, just wait.”

Pain etched into her face and he wanted to cradle her against his chest, soothe her, but he stayed his hands. Her eyes shone like glass as they lifted to his. Shit. “All I want is the truth.”

She hesitated again, her slim pink tongue darting to the corner of her mouth before her teeth sank down into her bottom lip, but, finally, she spoke. “When I signed up for the masquerade, I’d honestly thought of it as seven days of great sex with a man who knew exactly what I needed and was more than happy to supply it. But it didn’t turn out that way. It was so much more to me. I—I couldn’t submit to anyone else after you. It didn’t feel right.” Her watery gaze shifted. “I just couldn’t do it, okay?”

A thousand angels crooned in Cade’s head and his chest constricted. The ache was the most excruciating he’d ever felt, yet, amazing at the same time.

“Pretty pathetic, huh?” She shook her head and started to climb off the bench but he forced her legs apart, stood between them and crushed her with his mouth.

Nothing tasted as good as her mouth. Nothing felt as good as Bianca in his arms. He drank of her lips like a desperate man stranded in the desert. His cock stirred as she clung to his shoulders and softened in his arms.

“Look at me, goddamn it.” He framed her face with his hands and shook her gently. “You are the definition of everything I want. You, Bianca Alexander, are...the only woman I want.”

Although her eyes clouded with unspoken words, he didn't give her time to audibly form them. He was kissing her again and shoving his slacks down, then his briefs. One thrust and the warmth of her tight cunt sheathed his cock, his mind lost in the sound of her heady cry against his lips. Deliverance.

“I've had this hard-on since Chambers said you'd meet with me,” he murmured against her mouth, and plunged his tongue again.

“That must have been very painful,” she replied when he finally came up for air.

“Oh, you've no idea.”

With the second thrust of his cock, her fingernails dug into his shoulder blades so hard she surely drew blood, but he didn't care. The pain triggered his primal instincts, urging the rotation of his hips, the slow grinding of his pelvis against her clit.

“God,” she groaned. “How could I have forgotten exactly how good you feel?”

“Apparently I wasn't memorable enough.” He arched an eyebrow, drove his cock harder, and relished the short burst of sound that escaped her. “I guarantee you'll remember this time.”

They moved as one unit. As if no time had lapsed, they fell into a familiar rhythm of shared emotions and sensations. Desperation and need. Battle and surrender. In the background, the light in the ceiling still buzzed but neither heard it—heartbeats pounding and labored breathing took precedence.

Bianca hooked her ankles at the small of Cade's back and pulled his cock deeper. The head of his thick shaft slammed against the depth of her sex

and she sank her teeth into his shoulder to muffle the cry. He was wrong, she thought to herself, in the midst of a building orgasm. He was wrong about the reason why she hadn't remembered how good he felt inside her. She had locked the memory away in order to function and buried what she thought to be childish emotions for an unattainable man as deep as she possibly could.

But now, as he rocked his hips against her, raced his lips over her brow, her temple, down her throat, she set them free.

He wanted her. Only her.

Perhaps the last four years had changed his perspective on the need to have more than one woman satisfy him. Maybe the bond they shared was enough now. Regardless of the how or why, she didn't care.

"Cade," she choked. "I can't stop it, I'm going to come."

"God, yes, come for me, angel. Let it all go."

The explosion was four years of pent-up frustration, of battling emotions, of hiding from what she really wanted. Her pussy pulsed around his cock and when he drew back and thrust again, her heart literally paused, waves sucking her under. She needed this connection with a man. With him.

On the tail end of her climax, she heard him swear softly against her hair and knew he was striving for control. But she didn't want him to control himself any longer. She wanted him as out of control as she was. Desperate to push him over the edge, Bianca drew back and impaled herself on him.

"Fuckin' hell," he cursed against the soft spot of her throat, his grip on her ass tightening. Oh no, you're not getting time to regain control, Bianca thought as he tried stilling her movements. She pivoted her hips, forcing his body to follow. His sweat slick shoulders tensed under her hands when

he released a throaty groan. She knew that groan. The sound triggered her inner-walls to constrict, gripping his throbbing cock. His body quaked against hers for several minutes and Bianca savored every second. She closed her eyes in satisfaction. This is how it was meant to be between us, she thought wistfully. Always.

Sometime later, once the earth stopped spinning and the air became thin enough to breathe, Bianca nudged her nose against Cade's jaw. "Cade?"

"Mmm?"

"You're crushing me," she whispered.

"Live with it."

The laughter that bubbled out of her was uncontrollable. Never had she felt so at ease or so delighted at having her bones crushed by a giant of a man.

He finally sighed and loosened his death grip enough so he could look down on her.

"Better?"

"Yes." But it wasn't. Along with the five inches of breathing room came the bitter ache of reality. She stared at his sweat-damp chest and wanted to take back what she'd said, just to have him wrapped around her again.

"We should probably talk about—"

"Later." He gripped her ass, hoisted her up against him and crossed the room. "We'll talk later."

Her annoyance from being cut off mid-sentence and carried around like a ragdoll dissolved into a tender ache when he kicked open a secret door in the wall. Bianca's lips parted and a quiet sigh slipped out.

"Didn't I mention, as part of your punishment, you're spending the night?" Cade kissed her temple, lower, down over her nose, then seductively on the lips.

Later. They would talk later.

Chapter Ten

The bed was either too small or he was too big, Bianca decided as she rolled her stockings into a ball and spied Cade's feet six inches over the edge. A delightful giggle tickled her throat, but she stifled it and shifted her gaze the length of the sleeping giant. He lay on his stomach, those powerful hips swathed in a sheet of navy satin, his dark, careless hair drifting across the pillow. From a distance, he appeared like some type of Greek God, with his tanned, muscular body and that hard, lean profile.

Definitely the bed was too small.

Careful not to wake him, she tiptoed across the plush cream carpet and kneeled beside the bed, while schoolgirl giddiness pulsed in her tummy. She folded her arms against the mattress and rested her cheek on top of them. The concentration lines from his brow were smooth as he slept, his mouth slightly open, revealing a glint of straight white teeth.

Bianca grinned so hard her cheeks hurt. He looked adorably boyish this way, she thought, as she fought the urge to slip back under the sheets and into his arms.

It was rare to see a sensual predator in such a vulnerable state, so she savored it.

While the evening hadn't gone exactly as she'd planned, she didn't regret it one bit. Part of her knew before coming to the club that ending up in Cade's bed was inevitable. But, they hadn't merely graced the sheets together last night, she reminded herself. They had bridged a gap. They had bonded at a level deeper than she'd ever known before, a level

that was terrifying and surreal.

Though, in the heat of the moment, people said things they didn't mean and made promises they couldn't keep. She wasn't normally a woman to mistake sex for love. She understood that often circumstances appeared different in the light of day, in contrast to the romance of a starry sky and playful shadows. But, as she remembered Cade's tender words, regardless of how hard she tried to hold back, the wheels wanted to spin in that direction.

She got to her feet and pressed a hand to her abdomen. There was no point in speculating now. They would talk. Before she let herself get any deeper, they would talk. But not now. Now, she needed to get home, dash through the shower and get her ass to work.

After zigzagging her way through the corridors of Halo and making her way outside, she shielded her eyes from the burst of sunshine. In a moment of dizzy satisfaction, she tilted her head back and closed her eyes. The warm rays washed over her face. Although it seemed silly to allow one night of sex turn her into a believer in true love, she didn't let herself over-think it.

"Beautiful morning, ain't it?"

Startled by the voice, and by the fact she must have looked like a lunatic staring into the sky, Bianca gave herself a quick shake and pinpointed the sound.

"Oh, yes, it is...um...I'm really not insane," she explained as the unsatisfied customer from last night leaned against the rustic brick building, a slim cigarette clasped elegantly between two fingers. "I was just...savoring the sunshine...that's all."

"Don't have to tell me, honey. I've been there." Karlie took a long pull on her cigarette, then exhaled a long stream into the hair. "Our Cade is quite the

sweet talker.”

Uncomfortable with how she'd said, 'Our Cade,' Bianca wrapped her arms around herself and tried to make light of it. "Right, you know Cade."

"If by know, you mean blow, then yeah, I know him." A loud snort carried from the young beauty as she crushed out her smoke. "The key is not to get attached. Made that mistake myself in the beginning. Oh, wait a second," She clucked her tongue. "Too late, it's written all over your face—can't fault you for it though. I've seen him put stars in the eyes of prettier subs than you and take 'em for a ride. No offense, of course."

An invisible fist slammed into her gut. As much as she tried to shake it off, she couldn't. "I—I really need to go. I'm going to be late for work."

"He'll be done with you by the end of the week." A set of French manicured fingernails dug into Bianca's upper arm. "Might wanna give up now and save yourself the humiliation. A sweetheart like you won't hold his attention for long."

The doors of Halo slammed behind Karlie and emotion slammed into Bianca.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

The street signs blurred, blended with the early morning traffic. As the pavement tilted under her feet and the fingers of nausea seized her stomach, she refused to double over and vomit.

In extra-slow-motion, slideshow images of last night drifted through her mind—Cade's passionate mouth, his strong hands, his tender words that had brought her so much pleasure. They were now the jagged blades twisting in her chest.

She tried to control her breathing—couldn't. She tried to fight back the water in her eyes—failed.

History repeating itself, she thought with a sardonic laugh, then pressed her quivering lips together. It was bound to happen. Part of her knew

that. Men like Cade did not change.

However, she had.

Time strengthened her. She was not the emotionally fragile, lovestruck fool he had manipulated four years ago. At least that was what she told herself as she dried her eyes, took a deep breath and flagged a taxi.

Sweet Christ.

Cade exhaled a long stream of breath and shook out his arms as he stared at the closed door to Bianca's studio. Is this what love did to a man—made his palms sweat and fingers tremble? For fuck sake, it was as if he were back in his uncle's pickup at his first drive-in with head cheerleader Claudia Pearson.

But even then, during that humid summer night, when he'd used his slickest move and managed to get his hands up Claudia's soft cream sweater and discover a bra more impenetrable than Fort Knox, his heart hadn't pounded this hard.

If memory served correctly, he mused, a grin tugging at his mouth, it'd been worth the twenty-five bucks he owed Claudia the next day for tearing it off. But the thrill of copping a feel from the hottest girl in high school paled in comparison to the adrenaline he was feeling now. He wasn't sixteen anymore, and Bianca sure as hell wasn't the rich girl who got her kicks slummin' with the bad boy.

No, Bianca was a woman of substance, driven and passionate about her future, willing to do anything it took to get what she wanted. He could appreciate that. In fact, when it came to something he wanted, he was just as driven. Last night, that drive had paid off.

Delight filled him.

He'd never known a sensation more excruciating and heavenly, but imagined opening the door and

seeing her for the first time after the night they'd just shared, it would become a hundred times worse. Cade scrubbed his knuckles in a circle over his heart, softly laughed, and shook his head.

You're done for, Sinclair.

True enough.

He shoved a hand into his front jeans pocket and pulled out the jeweled choker he had spent the entire day tracking down. As he stared at it, his chest tightened. The white gold was fine and delicate, like the neck it would be worn on. The gentle dusting of diamonds would catch in the light and sparkle like Bianca's eyes when she spied a slice of New York cheesecake. It was perfect for her.

Although he'd never seriously considered collaring a woman, he couldn't think of anything that would make him happier than Bianca wearing the glittering article around her neck. It would signify their connection and their devotion on an entirely different level.

In the world of BDSM, the collar held more significance than a gold band.

He took a deep breath and slipped it safely back inside his pocket.

When Cade finally eased the door open, it was just as he'd suspected: a hundred times worse. His heart clenched, but he shook it off and savored the long line of her neck, her half-naked back, those shapely stilts fashioned on a pair of red stilettos. Beautiful.

After realizing she didn't hear him come in, he took full advantage.

"You've got me at a crossroad, angel." She jumped, but he flashed his palm across her bare midriff, pulled her back into him and nudged her ear. "I was growing partial to the mini and boots. However, semi-sheer red skirts and glossy heels are apparently another weakness of mine."

“Don’t suppose you’ve heard of knocking, Sinclair?”

“Knocking, hmm. Polite custom before entering a room?” He stroked his fingers across her flat tummy and relished her shiver. “I prefer a good stealth attack.”

“I’m sure you do.” She turned in his arms but didn’t meet his gaze. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“That was the idea. Figured the least I could do is buy you dinner, since I didn’t get to buy you breakfast—are you okay?”

“I’m fine. A bit confused is all.” She shook her hair back and met his gaze head on, but he didn’t recognize her eyes. They lacked emotion, somehow appeared darker in shade, and were far too cool for his liking. He cocked his head and retracted his hands from her waist.

“Confused about?”

“Well, if I recall correctly, you said if I gave you last night, the terms of our agreement would be fulfilled. I gave you last night, but here you are.”

Although he didn’t get a good look at the truck that hit him, Cade imagined it was easily a three-quarter ton. He stayed his fingers from clenching into fists, stayed the muscle in his jaw from flexing. Now, it wasn’t only her eyes he didn’t recognize. It was everything about her.

“I hadn’t realized you’d decided you didn’t want to see me again.”

Had the circumstances been different, he might have followed when she broke eye contact and leisurely strolled across the room for her purse. However, his temper was already dangerously skimming the surface. The pain in his chest had gone from excruciating and heavenly to just plain excruciating. He needed to keep his distance.

“Don’t suppose you’re gonna enlighten me on what brought about this decision?”

She swept up her purse and cast a casual glance over her shoulder. "Please don't make parting ways any harder than it already is."

"Funny, doesn't seem very hard for you."

She retrieved a tube of lipstick from her purse, plucked off the lid, rolled cherry red over her bottom lip then pressed them together. "I had a good time last night and won't deny it."

"That's all it was to you, a good time?" Sand filled his mouth and scraped his throat.

"Okay, you're right. I had a very good time."

"Dangerously skimming the surface" had bubbled over into a full-blown eruption and he couldn't keep his distance any longer.

"What the hell's gotten into you?"

"Hmm," she tapped the tube against her palm, "I don't remember our agreement having an explanation clause."

"Fuck the agreement." He grabbed her by the shoulders and gave her a firm shake. Emotion flashed in her eyes—hurt, disappointment, anger. However, it didn't last long before her lashes swept down, then up, and the thick walls of detachment surrounded her once more. "I don't believe this has anything to do with the chess match we've been playing over the past few days, Bianca."

"That's where you're wrong," she shot back. "This has everything to do with the chess match we've been playing. You wanted closure and so did I. If you haven't reached it, that is not my problem—let go of me."

"No." He tightened his grip and shook his head. "You're lying to me. Why?"

"Just because you're not satisfied with my response doesn't make it a lie—I can't talk about this right now."

"Got somewhere to be?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." She squared her

shoulders. "I have a date."

The knife sank, twisted.

"Oh, yeah? Who's the lucky guy?"

"If it makes it easier for you to move on..." she paused, swallowed hard and eventually lifted her eyes to his. "...Donavan Carver."

He swore under his breath and fought the urge to shake her like a ragdoll. The head of Eden's legal team was renowned in the community as the playboy every sub cooed over. Even though he had nothing personal against him, or the way Donavan carried himself as a Dom, the idea of another man's hands on Bianca pushed him over the edge.

"I'm going to be late, so if you don't mind—"

"Fuck that."

His mouth crushed hers. The sonic wave of frustration, anger, and desire exploded through Bianca and she couldn't breathe. Under the hunger of his mouth, she curled her fingers into Cade's shirt and weakly shoved him away, then desperately jerked him back against her. His weight shifted and slammed her into the wall, trapping her under his massive frame. The momentum knocked the wind from her lungs. But the pressure of his mouth increased, his tongue plunged, searched, commanded a moan.

She couldn't stop it and didn't try.

The vibrations rumbled from low in her throat as his thigh rode high between her legs, pressing against her throbbing clit. A frenzy of emotion clutched at her heart as her lips bruised under the force of his mouth. However, through the anger, the hurt, and the betrayal was her undying need to feel him. The need to feel him won out over common sense every time.

Before she knew it, he'd shoved down his jeans, hiked up her skirt and jerked her soaked panties aside. There was no tender caress or the slow, steady

build-up that Cade was famous for in her mind. But there was need. He hooked an arm under one of her knees, pinned it up, and drove his cock inside her slick pussy. There was no warning, no sweet whispers—only two desperate souls teetering on the edge of sanity.

They met each other's demand with equal intensity. Hands and limbs entwined. Hearts pounded. Fear slipped away and the uncertainty of tomorrow, of next week, of forever slipped with it. There was only this moment, a moment neither of them were willing to relinquish.

Balanced on one narrow high heel, she clung to his shoulders. Each time he slammed up and ground his pelvis against her swollen cleft, she sobbed against his lips. He tore his mouth from hers, rested it next to her ear, his voice a rough whisper. "He'll never make you feel like this." He thrust again. "No one will."

He was right, Bianca dizzily thought as he raked his teeth lightly over her jaw, her throat, down across her collarbone. There wasn't a man alive who could make her feel as good as he did. But when she convulsed in his arms, when the climax violently pulsed through her, she remembered there also wasn't a man alive who could hurt her as he could.

In a perfect world, the aftermath of furious sex would follow with a warm bath, elegant flutes of champagne waiting next to a turned-down, king-sized bed, and two people confessing their undying love for each other until the sun rose on the horizon the next morning. But the world was far from perfect. And, in reality, furious sex generally followed with ragged breathing and the whisper of crumpled clothing shifting back into place.

"Tell me," he whispered as he framed her face in his hands and lowered his forehead to hers. "Tell me

you don't love me."

Tears lodged in Bianca's throat. She squeezed her eyes shut against the assault of emotion, knowing if he saw one trickle of moisture drip down her cheek, one quiver of her mouth or heard a hitch in her voice, she was done for.

"Cade." She clasped his wrists in her hands to prevent her fingers from trembling. "I don't love you."

The audible sound of his swallowing cut her so deeply she had to bite the inside of her cheek to stop a burst of violent sobs. But she held her ground, thought of self-preservation, and prayed for lightening to strike her down, if only to stop the pain.

"Thank you."

"F—for what?"

He wrapped her in his arms, lightly brushed his lips against her temple, and murmured, "Closure."

Chapter Eleven

“Eden, please.” Bianca murmured to the cab driver as she quietly settled into the deeply worn cushions of the backseat. The portly old man whose belly nearly reached the steering wheel gave a silent nod and she was relieved when he did not engage her in polite conversation. After a night of crying into her pillow and eating three pints of chocolate fudge explosion, the last thing she felt like doing was enduring casual chit-chat with a stranger.

They pulled away from the curb in front of her house and she winced as early afternoon sun glared through the window, irritating her puffy red eyes. She fished through her purse for sunglasses, barely managed to get them on for the trembling of her hands. God, you’re a mess.

She had spent the night second-guessing her actions, unable to escape the bittersweet memories of Cade’s lips against her neck, his hands on her body, the way he looked at her so intensely it stole her breath. She imagined the process was similar with any couple ending a relationship. However, that didn’t make it any less painful.

Closing her eyes against another wave of tears, she reminded herself that it wouldn’t feel like this forever. The scent of cologne faded. Mutual locations were avoidable. And radio stations that had a habit of playing Love Hurts on the top of every hour could be silenced by jabbing a button.

It wouldn’t be easy to bounce back from this. She had learned that the first time around. But she took comfort in knowing she had done it before,

maybe not completely, but had gotten to a point where every time she took a breath, it didn't hurt as much.

Small steps, she thought and swiped at the tears as the cab came to a gradual stop in front of Eden. Her first step. Making it through the day without publicly breaking down.

"Dill pickle! How hard is it to remember dill pickle?"

"This time I remembered it. You just didn't say it loud enough!"

Bianca pinched the bridge of her nose against the migraine forming behind her eyes. At least with John and Vanessa as her last clients of the evening, she wouldn't have to deal with goo-goo eyes and kissy noises.

"Okay, look." She got in between them. "Forget the safe word."

They gawked in unison.

"Safe words...are..." Bianca searched for words, "...are not for every couple. Vanessa, if you want to be a good Mistress, and I know you do, then pay better attention to John's needs, his expressions, reactions."

"That's the alternative!" John snorted. "Better up my health insurance now."

"Oh, yeah, and your sarcasm is really helping matters." Vanessa toyed with the laces between her fingers. "Maybe what you need is a good thrashing."

"Already had one today. Why not make it another?"

The uproar escalated like thunder between Bianca's temples. Before she could stop herself, she lost it. "Stop! Stop, damn it. Just shut up for one minute."

Four wide eyes. Two gaping mouths. Silence.

With a bitter moan, she scrubbed her hands over

her face. The two hours of broken sleep last night apparently hadn't been enough. "Seriously, what are you guys doing together?"

They looked at each other, then back at her, and stared as if she'd spouted six arms.

"We're in love, of course."

"Hmm." Bianca held back a cackle, folded her arms under her breasts, and clung to diplomacy. "Suppose I've never seen people in love argue with as much...passion...as you guys do."

Again, she had six arms and maybe even horns now.

"The passion comes from loving each other," John started.

"Because we care so deeply," Vanessa finished. "We both want to please each other so badly sometimes it gets a bit intense. Especially when things aren't going as planned." She stroked John's shaggy bangs off his forehead and he grasped her wrist, placing a kiss to the inside of it.

"But you scream at each other." Bianca's chest tightened at their display of affection. "You call each other names."

"Every couple fights and communicates differently." John rose and hooked an arm around Vanessa's waist. "No relationship's ever perfect. Guess we think as long as we're still communicating, through any means, it's better than not doing it at all. Aren't you the one who said communication, honesty and trust are the keys to this lifestyle?"

Now it was Bianca looking at them as if they'd grown horns. "Yes. I believe I did say that."

Honesty. Communication. Trust. Her gut churned again as the words sank in. Had she given Cade those things, ever, or had she stuck her head in the sand and run for the hills when things got uncomfortable and messy?

"You all right, Miss Alexander?"

Bianca glanced at John and nodded quickly. “Yeah. Oh, yeah, I’m fine. Sorry. Let’s continue.” She gave her head a scratch and cleared her throat. “When dealing without a safe word, Vanessa, you’ll need to learn John’s body language, focus on the limitations you’ve previously set, the sounds he makes. Treat this as a time to learn each other without role-play. If you’re not sure if he’s okay with what you’re doing, ask. Ask how he’s doing, if he’s all right. Once you do this a few times, it’ll get easier to read him.”

“I would kind of like it if you asked.” John shrugged and weakly smiled.

“Really? So many times I’ve wanted to ask but I was scared of ruining the mood. I never want to hurt you...well,” she flashed a wicked grin, “not in a bad way. I do love you, Johnny. No man has ever made me orgasm like you.”

“Love it when you say shit like that. God, I want you.”

“Oh, boy.” Bianca leapt back as they pawed each other, knocked over a chair, then landed sprawled across the floor. “Right...well, no one’s booked the studio for tonight so feel free to...yeah, you know what, forget it.” She backed towards the door. “See you next Friday.”

If you both haven’t suffered brain damage from lack of oxygen.

They didn’t acknowledge her, nor did she expect them to. Rather hard to respond when you had a tongue down your throat. She exited the studio as quickly as possible and threw herself back against the door. So much for no goo-goo eyes or kissy noises, she thought and groaned. Oh, yes, she loathed them.

“One of those days?”

Great, another lovebird.

“You could say that.” She opened her eyes and set her gaze on Caitlyn. With any luck, she could

avoid paying witness to the customary greeting Evan and his wife shared on a daily basis. Instead, she wanted to hop a cab and be inside her fourth pint of ice cream within the hour. “Fortunately my clients got the urge and let me out early.”

Gorgeous as usual, she thought bitterly as she skimmed the cream satin blouse and snug gray polyester skirt before moving up to Caitlyn’s golden blonde hair swooped back in a tidy and intricate knot. Kill me now. How did the woman always look so damn perfect? If Evan knew what was good for him he’d have her locked away in one of those curio cabinets where fine porcelain dolls belonged. It was no wonder he only needed one woman. She grimaced and absently touched a hand to her own unruly hair.

“I think Evan’s still in the boutique dealing with an inventory discrepancy. I could page him if you want me to—”

“We need to talk. In private, preferably.” Caitlyn interrupted.

“Oh.” Bianca tugged on one of her earrings. “Everything okay?”

“To be honest, no. I’ve a confession to make and I know you won’t like it, but please just hear me out.”

Yeah, the ice cream would have to wait.

There was something unsettling about being in the boss’s office, alone with his wife, and the word “confession” hanging in the air. Thankfully, this wasn’t some B-rated film, she wasn’t the secretary, nor was she the one needing to confess. Even so, it was awkward. Caitlyn perched on the edge of the sofa. Her strappy pewter heels tapped the floor while she wrung her hands in her lap. Hesitantly, Bianca took a seat beside her and tried to keep her own foot from tapping.

“Forgive me. I’m just, well, just searching for the right words.” The nervous energy was coming off in

waves. “I understand you’ll continue teaching your classes solo.”

Word travels fast when you were the wife of Evan Chambers, Bianca mused. It was only a few hours ago that Evan called her into his office and informed her Cade had turned down the job. As promised, he was no welsher.

“Yeah,” she said and her gut wrenched. “I’m used to being on my own though, and I’m pretty comfortable that way. It keeps things less complicated.”

“Less complicated,” Caitlyn snapped and plucked at the invisible lint on her skirt. “Is that what you think of Cade? That he’s a complication?”

“I was referring more to working in groups.” No, she wasn’t. “I’m sorry, what was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Life without complication is boring. The same shit day in and out, no sense of excitement. No risk, no reward.”

“Maybe I should grab Evan and—”

“Look, I shouldn’t have done it, but the fact is, I did. I didn’t honestly think you’d have to find out.” A few golden wisps escaped the knot as she shook her head. “I swear to you it started out as innocent. No one was supposed to get hurt.”

Wow. Could the conversation hit any higher on the crazy scale? Perhaps the shrink could use a few hours on the couch.

“Caitlyn,” she said slowly. “If you want me to understand, you’ll need to be more specific.”

“You’re right.” She threw up her hands. “You’re absolutely right, and I’m sorry, but you should’ve heard his voice this afternoon. He sounded wretched.”

“Who? Who sounded wretched?”

“Cade, of course.”

Bianca swore under her breath. Was there a

submissive in the metropolitan area Sinclair didn't know? "So, you know him, too?"

"Yes." She sighed. "We met at a lifestyles conference two years ago. We share a thirst for knowledge."

The subtle curve of the kidney-shaped coffee table blurred before Bianca's eyes. It started out as innocent. No one was supposed to get hurt. As the words replayed, she lifted her gaze back to the stress lines marring Caitlyn's natural beauty. Confession. Cade. Oh, God.

It came like lightning, the quick flash of anger splintering into a thousand threads of confusion. Her first instinct was to wrap her fingers around Caitlyn's perfect slender neck and squeeze, but she battled it back and cursed. "Yeah, I really think you should be having this conversation with your husband."

"What? Oh, no." She gripped Bianca's wrist before she could stand. "Evan already knows. He's been lecturing me about it from day one."

Evan already knew about the affair and Cade was still breathing?

"Am I interrupting?" Evan's large frame filled the doorway and Bianca nearly choked.

"Not at all," Caitlyn replied before shifting her gaze back to Bianca's. "Just clearing the air."

"Glad to hear it."

Oh hell, Bianca gaped. She'd entered the goddamn Twilight Zone, shit was about to hit the fan, and her only exit was twenty paces away and blocked by a human refrigerator.

"Secrecy irritates the hell out of me." He shut the door behind him and shrugged out of his designer suit jacket. "So, you haven't strangled my meddlesome wife yet. Always a good sign."

"I wasn't meddling. I was matchmaking."

"Same difference, sweetheart."

“Matchmaking?” Bianca’s head swiveled from one to the other.

“Maybe minor meddling.” Caitlyn’s scowl slipped into a frown as she covered Bianca’s hands with her own. “Okay, okay. I’m sorry, he’s right. I was major meddling, but I only did it because I care about both of you. When I discovered you were the one who got away, I thought if you shared some time together that maybe...well...that maybe you would give it another chance. Please, don’t blame Evan. The extra instructor was my idea. I still think it should’ve worked. You’re clearly perfect for each other.”

The room spun, along with Bianca’s head.

“Wait—y—you’re not having an affair with Cade?”

“What?” Caitlyn squeaked, then swatted Evan for his boom of laughter. “Whatever gave you that idea? An affair?”

“I’ve heard Sinclair’s good, but I assure you,” Evan arched an eyebrow and grinned, “no man alive is that good.”

After the initial shock, and when the reality of the situation sank in, the knots in her shoulders loosened. Bianca unclenched her fingers that had gone white. Relief. Confusion. More relief. It was all a set-up. Perhaps an innocent one and with good intentions, but a set-up.

“He’s in love with you, you know.”

“Caitlyn,” Evan warned. Bianca’s heart jumped as her gaze settled on Caitlyn’s matter of fact expression. In love with her? If Cade was in love with her, he certainly had a funny way of showing it.

“What?” Caitlyn gave her husband innocent eyes. “Doesn’t the woman have a right to know what she’s giving up?”

“Apparently Cade has a lot of love to go around,” Bianca muttered, before she could stop herself.

Because she could see the confusion contorting

both of their faces, and because she was tired of keeping everything bottled up, she let it out. “Had an interesting conversation with a young woman at Halo yesterday. She clarified just how high I ranked on the food chain and, out of the goodness of her blackened heart, suggested I should cut my losses.” Oh, it felt good to say it. “And I know some people in the lifestyle don’t mind the sharing factor, but I’m not one of them.”

“This woman, her name wouldn’t happen to be, Karlie, would it?” Bianca didn’t have time to answer before Caitlyn leapt to her feet. “That lying little shrew—now you listen to me, there’s no way in hell Cade would touch that little slut with a hundred foot pole.”

“Why on earth would she lie?”

“Because Cade’s the only man she can’t wrap around her little finger and it pisses her off, that’s why!”

“She’s quite the troublemaker,” Evan added while Caitlyn fumed. “I actually heard the owners of Halo are going to ban her from the club, to cut down on the drama she’s been causing.”

“Look, I appreciate you guys trying to help, but even if Karlie’s a lying bitch, this has happened before, four years ago, when I went to drop off my information to pursue a relationship with Cade.” Bianca pinched the bridge of her nose as she remembered being confronted by one of Cade’s other women. After so many years, it shouldn’t have bothered her. But it did. It had been the most mortifying experience of her life.

“Trust me, Bianca, if there’s anything I know about Cade, it’s that he’s a one-woman man.” Caitlyn looked to Evan, then back at Bianca. “It must’ve been another misunderstanding. Did you ask him about it?”

“No.”

“That’s it. Get up.” Caitlyn yanked Bianca off the sofa and dragged her toward the door. “After tonight, he’s planning on taking a month off to clear his head, get away from the scene. He’s leaving for Baltimore in the morning. I think we can still catch him at Halo if we hurry.”

“Wait. No.” Bianca dug her heels into the carpet. “I honestly don’t think he’ll want to see me. I—things didn’t end well between us yesterday.”

“You’re in love with him, aren’t you?”

Hopelessly.

“Well...I...” Bianca sighed and wrinkled her nose, “...yes. I love him.”

Caitlyn tapped the tip of Bianca’s nose with her keys and smiled. “I’ll drive.”

Bianca’s palms were damp with sweat. Something surreal took place inside a person after admitting to a long-harbored secret love. Although she hadn’t told Cade yet, saying it to Caitlyn somehow made it more...real.

As she stood in front of Cade’s office door, her heartbeat was rapid and her knees were knocking. Bianca credited half her shaky physical state to what Caitlyn referred to as “aggressive driving” and half to the fear of rejection.

This was ridiculous. He wouldn’t want to see her, not after the charade she’d put on last night. Remembering his eyes, remembering the raw exposed pain that had flashed in them before he’d left her standing alone and quaking in the studio, she winced. Even if he did love her, how could he want to see her after she’d been so cold?

Regardless of every excuse that would make leaving things alone seem the lesser of the two evils, her feet remained planted firmly to the floor. The standard sized door in front of her somehow seemed massive and intimidating. She could hear it

snickering at her with its haunting, chilling laughter.

Don't be a coward, Bianca.

She raised her shaking fingers to the door and rapped her knuckles three times. Breathe. Out of habit, she shoved her hair back behind her ears as her toe drummed the concrete. Maybe Cade had already left—the scuffle of feet across the floor grated in her eardrums. Maybe not.

The door opened.

In slow motion and in disbelief, Bianca's eyes rose from black-currant heels, up snug denim jeans, over a beautiful cashmere sweater and settled on the face of the woman who had haunted her nights the last four years.

Traffic in Los Angeles was a bitch. What in the hell was every idiot and their dog doing taking a joyride down the strip when he had places to be? Cursing, Cade jerked off his chinstrap, leapt from his bike and stormed toward the smoked glass entrance of Eden. Frustrated, he clenched his fists and muttered as adrenaline propelled him up the steps two at a time. On the way over, he'd pushed the speedometer higher than he should have, taken the corners carelessly and ran three red lights. He didn't care. Too much time lost. Too many lies.

“Hey, pal, can't park here.” The officer's voice didn't breach the chaos of his mind. “Ye hear me, fancy pants? This here's a tow-away zone. Move the bike.”

Fancy pants? Christ.

He jogged up the last few steps and without looking back, hollered, “Just write me the fuckin' ticket.”

There could've been a hundred tickets flapping on his windshield when he came outside and it wouldn't have bothered him, not so long as he got to

Bianca and convinced her he wasn't the bastard she thought he was.

A knot coiled in his stomach as he entered Eden and raced a gaze around the room. He squinted and clenched his helmet in his hand. Why were these clubs always so goddamn dark? The sight of Chambers had him across the dance floor in five long strides.

"Where the hell is she?" Evan frowned, then waved off the young woman holding a clipboard and pen. "Where's Bianca?"

"Not here."

"Fuck." Cade shoved a restless hand through his hair. "Then where?"

"I was under the impression she was going to see you. The girls left about half an hour ago and, with my wife's 'aggressive driving,'" he rolled his eyes, "they probably made it to Halo in fifteen."

"What? No. No." He stumbled back. "God, no."

This was hell, Bianca thought as she teetered and fought the need to grab the doorframe for stability. Only this time, the Devil wasn't sneering at her, like she'd done four years ago. The elegant brunette who'd accosted her the Sunday after the masquerade, in Bianca's opinion, had seen better days. Wisps of dark, frazzled hair framed those gaunt, sculptured cheeks. Her nose and eyes were red, her lower lip quivering. If the woman's image hadn't been burned into her subconscious, she might have questioned if it was, in fact, the same person.

"I—I'm looking for Cade." Bianca squared her shoulders, her tone rigid. "Where is he?"

"He's not here but—oh, please, don't leave!" She snatched hold of Bianca's wrist. "Please. Please, I've made a horrible mistake. Oh, God, I'm so sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Tears were one thing. She could handle tears.

But when the woman pulled her into a death grip and sobbed apology after apology against her shoulder, Bianca found herself at a loss. She'd always wondered how she would react to another encounter with the beautiful brunette who'd tainted the most blissful week of her life by telling her the truth about Cade. She never imagined this.

A torrent of mixed emotions flooded through her, and, beyond the anger, resentment and bitter jealousy, sympathy won out.

"Um...it's okay. Don't cry." She circled her palm over the silky cashmere. "Just try to relax, it'll be okay...hush...everything will be okay."

"G—God, how can you be s—so nice..." she sniffled, "...a—after all those horrible things I said to you. No wonder my brother's in love with you."

Bianca froze.

"Oh, please, don't punish him for what I did."

When the room finally stopped spinning, she cupped the woman's shoulders and held her at arm's length. A lump lodged in throat. The rich dark hair was a similar shade. The vivid green eyes, although cat-like and feminine, were the mirror image of Cade's.

"You're his sister," she murmured.

"If he hasn't disowned me yet." After a quick dab with a tattered tissue, she extended her hand. "Rachel Sinclair."

Out of habit, she reached for the hand. Wait one damn second, Bianca's mind screamed. Are you seriously going to shake the hand of a woman wrenched your heart out and stomped on it? "No. No, I don't want to play polite—you lied to me," she snapped. "You told me you were his lover—why? Why would you do that?"

"I know. I'm sorry. Please. Just, please, come inside and let me explain."

Bianca hesitated. Was it an explanation she was

going to get or more lies? Giving the woman the benefit of the doubt might be a mistake but she stepped inside and closed the door anyway.

Rachel crossed the room and grabbed a tissue box off the corner of Cade's desk before settling into a chair. She cradled the box against her chest and swiped at the raccoon smears under her eyes.

"I thought I was protecting him. You have to believe me."

"I don't have to believe anything."

Years of proper manners, taught by her mother, urged her to take the chair opposite Rachel, but she refused. She didn't want to sit. She wanted to pace and yell and cry, but unfortunately, throwing a tantrum wouldn't get her answers. So she folded her arms and dug her fingernails into her skin to stop from losing it. "Protecting him from what? Me? You don't even know me."

"No, no. Not you. The lifestyle." She sniffled and took a moment to blow her nose. "At the time when I met you, Cade was bartending at the fetish club and already had three years into the university. He and I rarely saw each other for much more than quick visits here and there. Maybe it was jealousy." She shrugged. "He's the only immediate family I have. When I felt like I was losing him to something I didn't know anything about, it made me insane. So I got nosy, started asking around about the lifestyle. My social circle was nothing short of mortified when I brought up the word 'fetish.' I was embarrassed for bringing it up and, at the same time, I was concerned for my little brother's well-being. I confronted him."

Oh, that must have gone over well, Bianca mused, and relaxed a measure.

"Of course, he was furious and told me I'd been misinformed." Rachel waved the tissue and dropped her hands back into her lap. "When he tried to

explain how it really worked, I wouldn't listen. I'd made up my mind how I felt about his choice to be involved with such people and I made sure he knew it. After that, we couldn't be in the same room without arguing. It got to the point where we only saw each other at Christmas and birthdays. Then, eventually, never."

"I still don't see how that has anything to do with me." More confused than angry now, she finally settled into a chair.

"Believe it or not, Cade and I were very close before any of this happened. Even when he shut me out of his life, I hadn't given up on convincing him that he was going down the wrong path. After much persuading, he agreed to meet me for a quick visit. I was waiting in the entrance when you came into the club. He was bartending, as usual, and the girl at the desk had gone back to tell him I was there."

"You told me you worked there."

"A lie. When you thought I was the clerk and said you wanted to leave your information for Sin, I put two and two together and knew the message was for my brother. Though I didn't exactly know how the lifestyle worked, I knew how women did. I figured he'd be less appealing if you believed he was involved with a series of women, that they were merely his trophies, that it was just a game to him."

"You were convincing." Remembering the graphic details Rachel had given her about orgies and partner swapping, Bianca cringed.

"I'm not proud of it or of hurting you. I hadn't realized you were new to the lifestyle and thought I needed to pour it on really thick. I'm so sorry. There were so many times I wanted to tell him, but I was afraid he would hate me."

"And now?"

"Now." She let out a strangled laugh. "Now, my husband left me for another woman, my perfect little

world has fallen apart, and I've realized that it really wasn't perfect to begin with. I was a fool to think love came in the form of a white picket fence, corporate gatherings, and a suit and tie. Real love has whatever kind of structure works for the couple, and it doesn't have boundaries. It comes in all different forms." She sighed. "Even though this lifestyle still isn't for me, it is for my brother."

"Does Cade know the truth?"

"When I got here tonight he was already fuming. Something to do with you and an altercation with someone named Karlie. He was on his way out the door until I blurted out what I did to you. He wouldn't even talk to me, just grabbed his keys and his helmet. I begged him not to take his bike, but he wouldn't listen."

Bianca shut her eyes against the image of Cade revving up the throttle and rocketing through the streets. "Did he say where he was going?"

"I assumed to find you, but that was nearly an hour ago."

Had Cade gone to Eden, certainly Evan would have told him where she was. Even with heavy traffic, he should have been here by now. A knot formed in her abdomen at the image of twisted metal and flames. She snatched her cell from her purse and dialed.

Ringling began inside the office and Bianca tracked it to the top drawer of the desk. Not caring a whit about propriety and Cade's privacy, she jerked it open. Her name flashed on the indigo screen and twinkled up at her, but Cade's cell phone wasn't the only thing that twinkled. Just beneath it, a jeweled choker gleamed and glinted with the light above, reflecting in the water forming in her eyes.

She needed to find him.

The entire universe and everything in it was out

to get him, Cade decided as he dragged his ass through the quiet corridors of Halo toward his office. One hell of a long night. After getting a ticket, the greasy tow truck driver had scratched the front fender on his bike when he'd secured it to the flatbed of his piece of shit truck. No amount of sweet-talking had convinced the cops he didn't need a night in lock-up to cool off. His keys were accidentally misplaced in booking and his one phone call had gone straight to Bianca's voicemail.

Life just doesn't get any better than this.

Fortunately, Liz was still cleaning up, so he could at least get his spare keys.

He shoved open the door and froze. Pressing his fingers into his eyes, he shook his head once, then looked again.

Great. Now you're dreaming, Sinclair.

But he wasn't.

Not even his imagination could recreate the rich red of riotous locks framing those defiant yet gentle features, or the subtle bow of her parted lips as she slept folded into his oversized chair.

Hesitant, light footsteps carried him toward his desk as he quietly shucked out of his jacket. As he moved, he refused to take his eyes from Bianca in case she might vanish into a puff of smoke. He reached her side, then flexed his jaw against emotion as he kneeled and noticed the choker clutched tightly in her fingers.

"Where the hell've you been?" she softly mumbled and opened her eyes.

"Lock up. Don't ask," he added when her gaze flashed. "Surprised the cleaners haven't already kicked you out."

"Oh, they tried around one but I wouldn't budge. I told 'em I'd leave at closing."

"It's five-thirty a.m." He stopped himself from brushing the hair from her face.

“Guess I lied.”

Tension crackled between them and the room seemed small, almost suffocating. Was there a right thing to say after so much had happened, after so much hurt?

“You’ll have a kink in your neck from sleeping in that goddamn chair.” Cade swallowed hard and cursed himself for sounding so flippant. He tried again. “I’m sorry about—”

“Please. God, please, don’t apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for.” I’m the one who should be apologizing, Bianca thought as her eyes began filling. Holding back the tears wasn’t an option this time. Could he still love her after what she’d said to him, and how she’d said it to him? Fingers tightening on the necklace in her hand, she readjusted in the chair and dared to stroke the hair back from his forehead. Thick stubble darkened his jaw while circles of exhaustion shadowed under his eyes. “Have you slept at all?”

“Nah. Something about the smell of stale beer and urine in an eight-by-eight cell makes it hard to get cozy.”

“I can imagine,” she murmured. “Maybe we should talk later, after you’ve gotten some—”

“No.” He gripped her wrists. “No more later. Now. We’ll talk about this now. No more arrangements, no more lies, no more running.” He slipped the necklace out of her hand and tightened his fist.

“Bianca, I want to be the one to bring you bagels Saturday mornings, to be the man who orders you shellfish without asking, and the one who causes you to binge on sweets, but for all the right reasons.” The muscle in his jaw worked busily and his fingers trembled as he lifted the necklace, slowly stringing it around her throat. When he fastened the delicate clasp at the base of her neck, the white gold was like

ice against her warm skin, but she savored its sensation.

He eased her back by the shoulders. Concentration lines marring his brow, he looked into her eyes. "I want you with me, Bianca. Always."

She couldn't speak, not now. The words wouldn't pass the tears lodged in her throat. But she kissed him hard, deeply, and hoped he would understand she wanted everything he had just said.

Forehead to forehead, he framed her face in his hands, but this time, this time, she felt him smile. "Tell me again," he whispered. "Tell me again how you don't love me."

"I can't," she whispered as a tear slipped from the corner of her eye. It was as simple as that. She loved him, had always loved him.

"Damn right you can't." His dimples flashed and he claimed her mouth.

As the earth moved under Bianca's feet, she lost herself in the sensation of his tongue, the pressure of his fingers, and the warmth of being wrapped in his arms.

Giddiness bubbled up inside of her. If this was what it felt like to give herself completely to him, to submit herself entirely without reservation or regret, then she would gladly kneel to Cade Sinclair for the rest of her life.

About the Author

Rynne was born and raised in Edmonton Alberta Canada. Now living in Wetaskiwin Alberta, she's grown fond of the slower pace lifestyle and has more time to focus on her one true love, writing romance. A few years ago she started to pursue a writing career seriously and has been plugging away ever since. When she's not walking her headstrong cocker spaniel or in a tub full of bubbles devouring another steamy romance novel, she's handcuffed to her key board. Always looking for new ways to fine tune her craft she is involved with LongRidge Writers Group and is a member with StoryCrafters. Both places are occupied by wonderful writers, many of which have a special place reserved in her heart.

Visit Rynne at www.rynneraines.com.

Rynne Raines

Also available

Welcome To Eden

by

Rynne Raines

Within the walls of Eden, temptation rules and anything goes...

Psychiatrist Caitlyn Ward never imagined setting foot inside the hottest fetish club in Los Angeles until the day a patient's concerns about sexual desires went beyond her expertise. Now, determined to uncover the answers needed to alleviate her patient's mind, Caitlyn ventures into a world of dark and forbidden pleasure beyond her wildest dreams.

Chapter One

Caitlyn Ward swung one long stocking-clad leg over the other and fingered through her notes to where her patient had left off at the end of last week's therapy session. A creature of habit, Caitlyn readjusted the thin wire-framed glasses on the bridge of her narrow nose, then took a sip of cool water from a black marble coffee cup. Across the room, Janet Pennington shifted along the curved brown leather sofa, twisting her diamond-embedded wristwatch back and forth.

"Anxious today?" Caitlyn asked.

The middle-aged woman's mousy hazel eyes shot up from her watch and bulged. "Is it that obvious?"

Caitlyn gave her a gentle smile. "I'm afraid so. Is there something specific causing the anxiety, something you'd like to discuss rather than picking up where we left off last week?"

"I—I'm not sure. It's kind of off topic from what we normally talk about." Her voice cracked on the last word and resulted in Caitlyn's further scrutiny.

When Janet had arrived six months ago, her mother held the focus of most their conversations. Apparently, the sixty-five year-old woman felt necessary to call her forty-five-year-old daughter fifteen times a day and rattle off a long list on the "proper way" to live her life. Yet today, it appeared something far worse than the dragon lady, as Janet referred to her mother, had her upset.

"You understand these are your sessions, we can discuss whatever you want. We aren't limited in any way. If there's something bothering you, it might

help to talk about it.” She tried not to push too hard. When a person felt cornered it only made matters worse.

Janet’s light peach lips curved down at the corners. “Dr. Ward, I’m afraid I might be turning into some kind of freak.”

“Why would you think that?”

“Because of my boyfriend,” she muttered. “You do remember me mentioning him, right?”

Caitlyn skimmed her notes. “Yes, of course, Henry. During our last session, you said you were blissfully happy in the relationship. Has something changed?”

“Yes, something has changed all right, something huge.” She let out a nervous laugh. “It has to do with our...sex life.” Her voice dropped to a whisper on the last words.

Caitlyn’s expression remained neutral. It wasn’t out of the ordinary for people to discuss intimacy issues in therapy, but as Janet fidgeted with the ivory pearl necklace dangling around her throat, she couldn’t begin to imagine what had the woman so wound up today.

“Okay, here it is, Doctor. The other night Henry and I were experimenting in bed. He had brought home this bag, you know, from the sex shop. Now, as you’re aware, I am a woman of the new millennium. I’m open-minded, despite what my mother says...anyways, I thought fine, I’ll give this a go. To tell you the truth, I was even kind of excited about it, so I let Henry tie me down to the bed with these straps. Then he began pulling out more stuff. Let me think...oh yes, some vibrators, a whip, a gag and...”

Caitlyn’s fine brows drew together. “Henry didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“Oh, no.” Janet quickly shook her head, then paused. “Well, sort of, but that’s the thing.” She lowered her eyes. “I think I liked it. No. I know I

liked it. I loved it.”

When the breath locked in Caitlyn’s throat finally worked itself out, she set down her pen and notepad. “Janet, couples often experiment after being together for long periods of time. It’s not unheard of, and it does not make you a freak.”

In an act completely out of character for the conservative beauty, Janet leapt from the sofa. “You don’t understand. I...loved...it. I loved it when he spanked me, gagged me, and when he screwed me as if I had no choice in the matter. Oh lord, then he put the blindfold over my eyes and it was like having sex with a stranger. I nearly went out of my mind. Now lately, we’ve been going to these clubs—you know, fetish clubs? Frankly, it’s all I want to do.”

Well, this session had certainly taken an interesting turn from what they normally discussed. Caitlyn reached for her water again. Although she had attended a brief seminar on the introduction of dealing with sexual identity issues, she didn’t specialize in it.

“You’re a woman, Dr. Ward. Haven’t you ever experienced anything that drove you so completely wild you didn’t want to come back to the office for weeks?”

No, unfortunately she had not. In fact, she hadn’t been laid in a damn year, and sadly, she sure as hell had never experienced anything close to the ecstasy this woman described. Briefly, her mind drifted as her eyes scanned over her notes. Restraints. Vibrators. Whips. Blindfold. Gags. Unexpected warmth gathered between her thighs as she read. Although her vibrator had become her nightly best friend, she hadn’t found a man interested in dabbling with any of the other things.

“Doctor, what do you think could cause this? Am I sick? Do I have some subconscious desire to have sex with a stranger? Could it have to do with issues

about my mother's controlling nature?"

Janet pinned Caitlyn to the wingback chair with a wide stare, and for the first time since she had become a psychiatrist, she found herself the one confused. Honestly, she knew little about what triggered fetishes and even less about "the lifestyle", as her colleagues referred to it. What did cause a person to enjoy being tied up? Lack of power, immobility, or a submissive nature? Deep down she had always wondered what it would be like to have a dominant partner—someone who took control, demanded surrender, and screwed her with the ruthless desperation of an animal. At that thought, she arched a brow and found herself uncrossing and re-crossing her legs to try to rid the heat there.

Janet's foot started to tap against the Persian rug. Caitlyn forced herself from the fantasy and cleared her throat. "Well, if you want my honest opinion, I don't think you're sick at all."

That didn't seem to satisfy Janet. She simply gawked and waited for more of an explanation. Regrettably, Caitlyn didn't have one, and it would hardly be professional of her to comment on something she knew so little about.

After a few seconds of uncomfortable silence, Janet said, "Forgive me, Doctor. I just thought you might be able to explain some of it to me. I'm sorry for mentioning it. You must think I'm horrible."

Uneasiness crept into Caitlyn's chest as tears formed in her patient's eyes. She quickly leaned forward and shook her head. "Of course I don't think you're horrible."

This wasn't right. She was a damn professional and here she couldn't even help her patient with a little information on sex. Suddenly, all those years of university didn't seem so prestigious—not when a woman was experiencing this type of emotional turmoil and she could do nothing to help her. Caitlyn

locked her jaw. It definitely didn't seem appropriate to push past an issue that hadn't been resolved, but then where did she go from here?

Janet started inching towards the exit. "Umm, I'm sorry, Doctor, but I completely forgot about an appointment I have to get to."

"But we have twenty minutes left."

As if not hearing her at all, Janet scurried out the door past reception and disappeared down the hall.

Smooth, Caitlyn, real smooth.

Frustrated, she slumped against the back of her chair and reached for the notepad again. While her fingers traced over the words, she couldn't help but question her own sudden curiosity. Was her fascination caused by lack of answers for her patient, or could it be something more? The latter seemed more likely. Even shrinks got hot...very hot.

Her lips moved side to side as the thought became more intriguing. Perhaps she should do a little research on the subject—strictly for educational purposes, of course. Knowledge never hurt anyone. And who knew, one day Janet might return to her with the same questions. If she did, it would be nice to have some answers for her.

Caitlyn bit her bottom lip. Well, if she was serious about getting real answers, there was only one place she could think of that might have them. If nothing more, it would be an experience to remember.

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