



Reaction Time

Alannah Lynne

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to the three most important men in my life. My real life hero and husband, whose courage and strength never cease to amaze me. And to my sons. Thank you for all your support, encouragement and enthusiasm. I love you!

Chapter One

Nikki Kincaid shook her head, *almost* feeling sorry for the kid in the piece-of-shit Honda next to her, revving his engine and signaling he wanted to race. She knew she shouldn't accept his challenge. Street racing was dangerous, plus the pesky little detail that it was illegal. But dammit, it was fun.

And she wanted to have a little fun for a change.

Did the kid honestly think his one-hundred-and-fifteen-horsepower Civic could compete with her Shelby GT500? The power of her Mustang alone would leave him sitting at the light wondering what happened. Considering she had one of the fastest reaction times in the NHRA Pro Stock Drag Racing Series, when the light turned green she'd be a quarter mile down the highway before he could blink.

She sighed. Three years. That's how long it had been since she'd had any fun. That's how long it had been since racing stopped being a choice and instead had become a job that carried an overwhelming responsibility. That's how long it had been since racing ceased to be her true love and passion.

But this little race would be like before—fun.

She glanced around, checking to make sure there were no other vehicles in the way and no cops. Well, none other than her irritating passenger. Looking out the passenger window, she nodded once to the kid before returning her attention to the stop light. "That car sounds like a pissed off bumblebee," she muttered beneath her breath, unable to believe the kid truly wanted to race.

As the word "race" hit her brain circuitry, her body instinctively took over. Her left hand clenched the steering wheel while the fingers on her right twitched on the Hurst shifter. Her left foot mashed the clutch to the floor and the toes on her right flexed with the anticipation of stomping on the gas pedal.

She flicked a casual sideways glance to her passenger, Adam “Tight Ass” Guthrie, off-duty detective and friend to her brother, Nate. Head bent over, eyes focused on the threatening letter she’d received that morning, he was oblivious to the kid next to him or the launched gauntlet.

Nikki smiled as she considered the added bonus to this race. Tight Ass was gonna shit a brick.

He would probably lecture her on yet another of her obligations—acting as a responsible role model. He would probably make the three-hour trip to Richmond miserable. He would probably do that anyway, so she might as well go for it now and have her fun.

God, she could throttle Nate for insisting she have a weekend babysitter. The threats she’d received, the ones suggesting her health might fare better if she didn’t race anymore, seemed relatively harmless. But her ever-watchful big brother insisted she have protection. Tight Ass agreed with Nate’s cautious attitude, damn her bad luck, and had volunteered to take a couple days off to accompany her to the drag strip.

Unfortunately, he was the last person she wanted to spend five days with.

Maybe if she made his life hell he’d pack up and leave. Then she wouldn’t have to deal with him or the mix of unwelcome emotions his presence stirred in her.

The left-turn lane got the green arrow and she zeroed in on it. Watching. Waiting. As soon as that light turned red, she’d get the green light.

Yellow.

Adrenaline pumped through her veins like it always did at the starting line of a race.

Red.

She popped the clutch and mashed the gas at the exact instant her light flicked green. Tires squealed and her body slammed backwards into the seat from the forward thrust.

Second gear.

Third gear.

The kid was still sitting at the light and she burst out laughing, imagining his face. Eyes wide, mouth dropped open. Friends in the car laughing their asses off at the spanking he'd just gotten.

Fourth gear.

Fifth gear.

She cut her gaze to Tight Ass's fingers embedded into the dashboard. He was wearing an expression she imagined was similar to the kid in the car. Pure shock.

She threw her head back and enjoyed a rare, roaring laugh as she slid the shifter into sixth and eased her foot off the gas. One hundred ten was probably pushing it.

"Stop!" her passenger demanded.

She bit into her bottom lip to squelch the laughter and continued to let the car coast to a slower speed.

"Stop the fucking car. Now."

"All right. All right. Give me a sec to get to the exit." With feigned concern and a lot of humor, she asked, "Do you need a men's room, or is the side of the road okay?"

His lip curled back in a snarl.

Holy shit. Eyes wide, she sucked in a startled breath. Much to her surprise, and dismay, Tight Ass was even hotter all riled up.

She stopped on the side of the road and as she shut the car down, he shot out of his door, circled the car and yanked her door open. He grabbed her arm and jerked her from the car while she fought to shake him loose. "Let go of me," she yelled.

Snatching off his sunglasses, he got nose to nose with her and snarled, "You ever pull a stunt like that again and I'll kill you myself."

Several things struck her at once—his impressively broad chest, his strong shoulders and his incredibly thick neck. *I wonder if he has hair on his chest or if it's smooth and lickable.* She swallowed hard and swiped her tongue across her bottom lip. It was impossible to tell through the loose-fitting knit shirt, but she did know one thing. His lips, now pulled into a thin, tight line, were definitely kissable.

Dear God, what am I thinking?

This was why she avoided him. He confused her. His overbearing personality and often alarming intensity scared her. Despite that, with nothing more than a heated look, he made her body hum and purr like a well-tuned engine. And right now she wanted to strip and lick him like a Tootsie Roll Pop.

She pulled her gaze away from his mouth and looked into his eyes. She'd always considered her chocolate eyes dark, but his were black as lumps of coal and equally cold. Completely devoid of any emotion.

Her stomach dropped and her chest ached. Seeing him remain completely unaffected while she suffered through a heat wave, hurt and pissed her off. However, she'd never allow him to know it, so she hid her hurt the only way she knew how, with her smart mouth and in-your-face attitude.

She pushed her breasts forward until they were pressing into the fabric of his shirt. "You're supposed to protect my body." She pressed against him harder. "Whatcha gonna do? Handcuff me so I'll behave?"

An intoxicatingly predatory smile shattered his hard expression and he leaned in close to her ear. "Be careful what you ask for, sweetheart," he threatened, the raspy rumble sending warm breath down the side of her neck and a cold shiver racing down her spine. "You might get it."

Nikki fisted her hands at her sides and fought the urge to grab onto him as his spicy scent, hot body and gravelly voice filled her with a disturbing sensation.

Desire.

Reckless, nearly uncontrollable desire.

While Nikki searched for words—something she never, ever had to do—he hooked his fingers under her elbow and led her around to the passenger side. Opening the door, he said, "I'm driving from here on out." Then he unleashed a smile that reeked of wicked intent and self-assured arrogance. "And I'm betting you learn to behave even without the handcuffs."

Chapter Two

Thirty minutes had passed since Adam's ridiculous comment and Nikki was slumped down in her seat, booted feet propped up on the dashboard, brooding. What the hell did he mean she'd *learn to behave*? She didn't care much for his attitude and she sure as hell didn't appreciate him insinuating she'd *asked* to be handcuffed.

Even if it might have sounded that way.

And at the time seemed somewhat appealing.

But that was when he looked all ferocious and sexy. Not all arrogant and...sexy.

Time to set him straight on a few things. "For the record," she said, leveling him with a pissed-off scowl. "I never said I *wanted* you to handcuff me. That was your overinflated ego being delusional."

His lips twitched as if he were fighting a smile. "Oh, you want it all right. Even if you haven't yet recognized it for what it is."

She felt her eyebrows shoot to her hairline while her mouth dropped open. "What?" When he continued to look amused but didn't respond, she crossed her arms over her chest. "What do you mean 'haven't yet recognized it'? How the hell do you know what I want?"

"Because I'm an investigator, it's my job to read people." He flicked his gaze from the road and studied her. Returning his attention to the road, he softly added, "I'm also a sexual Dominant and I recognize the signs of a submissive."

This time her jaw damn near hit her knees. *Oh shit!* If she'd known he got off on abusing women she'd never have provoked him. "You mean you get off on beating women?" *Well, hell.*

He snorted. "Hardly."

She dropped her feet to the floor and turned in her seat to face him. “You don’t have to beat up women in order to get it up?” She cringed. How could she ask such a personal question? She didn’t want to know about his sex life and she certainly didn’t want to know what excited him. And yet, she’d asked and now found herself holding her breath, waiting for an answer.

“The whole BDSM scene has been skewed by Hollywood and wild imaginations. It’s not at all what most people think.”

“How is it?” She bit her tongue and gave herself a mental head slap. Why, why, why did she continue to ask these questions?

He shifted his gaze back to her and a warm smile slid across his face. “A Dom and sub relationship is very...powerful.”

This time she snorted. “Yeah, well, that’s pretty much the way most people see it. One powerful person in charge getting off using whips and chains to beat someone who’s tied up and helpless.”

The smile dropped off his face. “It’s a total exchange of power,” he said, his voice low and tight. “And I’ve never used whips or chains on my subs.”

As a memory swam to the front of her mind, her stomach tightened and a knot lodged in her throat. It was late one night and she’d been out walking. As she came home, she saw Adam leaving her brother’s half of the duplex, a petite brunette tucked in close to his side. She’d been captivated by his attentiveness toward the woman and had stayed hidden in the shadows, watching the two of them interact. The woman had looked happy and probably infatuated, but she definitely hadn’t looked abused.

“What do you use?” Her mouth opened and the words flew without any consent from her brain.

His sunglasses kept his expression masked, but she could tell he was carefully considering his answer by the way he chewed the inside of his jaw. Finally he said, “If they like to be restrained I’ll use a rope, or silk ties, depending on how rough of a sensation they prefer. Mostly I’ll use a flogger. Or if they liked to be spanked I’ll use a

paddle or leather strap. A few enjoy the cane.” He shrugged. “It depends. I use whatever my subs enjoy.”

She narrowed her eyes and studied his profile. Focusing on his straight, almost aristocratic nose and hard, square jawline kept her from thinking about the roller coaster in her stomach. And the annoying throbbing a little further south. Alarmed by her body’s reaction to his words, she squirmed in her seat. The level of her curiosity also concerned her but she couldn’t stop the questions from flowing. “They enjoy it?”

“Of course,” he said, throwing her a confused glance. “Why would they do it if they didn’t enjoy it?”

Before she could think that through, “Back in Black” burst from the phone attached to her belt. She jumped, feeling twelve again, getting caught making out in the back row of the movie theater. She snatched the phone free of its clip and flipped it open. “Hey, Nate.”

“Hey, Sis. How’s it going?”

She relaxed at the sound of her brother’s voice, grateful for the interruption to this crazy conversation that had gotten way out of hand. Anxious to regain her balance, feel back in control and resume her mission of making life hell for the babysitter, she flicked a pointed gaze to the speedometer and allowed her irritation to come through in her response. “Slow.”

Nate’s boisterous laughter pulled a laugh from of her too. “Tight Ass wouldn’t let you drive, huh?”

A quick peek to her left and the raised eyebrows on Adam’s face confirmed he’d heard Nate’s comments.

She frowned. When did she start thinking of him as Adam?

Probably when we started talking about him getting it up and spankings.

She quickly pressed the volume button on the side of the phone, ensuring there’d be no more eavesdropping, intentional or not. She also squeezed her thighs tightly together, trying to suppress the thrumming that resumed with thoughts of Adam, erections and spankings.

“How are things at the track?” She chewed her lip and prayed Nate didn’t comment on the tremble in her voice. Clearing her throat, she tried again. “Everything set up and ready to go?”

“Yep, all we need is you.”

She’d already known the answer and didn’t even know why she’d asked. She had total faith in Nate and his abilities, and probably couldn’t get in the car week after week if she had to trust anyone else with her life. “What else is going on?”

Nate sighed. “Have you talked to Mama?”

Something about the tone of his voice set off warning bells and she tensed. “No. Why?”

A long, lingering sigh came through the phone. “She’ll be at the race this weekend.”

“What?” Nikki screeched, jerking ramrod straight. “Why?”

“I don’t know. Did you tell her about the threats?”

“No, of course not.” Every cell in her body switched from aroused to red alert. “Did she say something about them?”

“No. I’m wondering though, like you probably are, why she’d come here and put herself through the pain and agony.”

It took great effort not to clench her jaw and gnash her teeth. “Where’s she staying?”

“I don’t know, but she’s not staying with me. Amber’s coming this weekend.” He chuckled, leaving his comment open for interpretation.

“I don’t need to hear that,” she said dryly. Maybe if she had sex herself she wouldn’t be put off hearing about her brother’s very active sex life.

What would sex with Adam be like?

She shivered and suppressed the urge to look at him. “But you’ll still have an extra room because Amber will be sleeping with you.”

“Mama is *not* staying with me. Not with Amber here.”

“Well she’s not staying with me. I’ll be in my room—alone—and Adam will be in the guest bedroom.”

“You think?” Adam asked. Nikki whipped her head around and glared at Adam. Did he actually just insinuate he’d be sleeping with her?

“What’s with the emphasis on *alone*? That for my benefit or yours?” her obviously amused brother asked before she could respond to Adam’s infuriating assumption.

She rubbed her eyes, weary and frustrated. “I meant *alone* as in, Mama isn’t sleeping with me.”

“Yeah right.” She heard from both men simultaneously.

“Bite me,” she growled, only to regret the words as Adam’s gaze shifted back to her, eyes hooded, his mouth set in a lusty grin.

Her brother laughed. “If Mama doesn’t know about the threats, how are you going to explain Guthrie’s presence? And when did you start calling him Adam? It’s always been Tight Ass.”

Nikki closed her eyes and let her head flop back against the headrest. “I don’t know.” Which pretty much summed up her life at the moment, didn’t it? She didn’t know what to tell her mom. She didn’t know how to make Adam miserable enough to leave. And she didn’t know why the thought of him leaving made her feel empty inside.

For someone who stayed in control at all times, at all costs, she felt very out of sorts and overwhelmed. She lifted her head off the seat and announced, “You’re the one who insisted I needed a babysitter, you figure out the explanation.”

“Babysitter?” Adam asked, sounding as offended as he looked.

“Uh-oh.” Her brother laughed. “Good luck explaining that one and I’ll see you when you get here.” She snapped her phone shut with a growl and sank back down in the seat. She was just beginning to process the conversation with Nate when “Highway to Hell” burst from her phone. With a heavy sigh, she flipped open the phone. “Hello, Mama.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Adam’s head whip around to face her. Obviously, he didn’t expect “Highway to Hell” to be the warning—er, ring—for her mother. She smiled and shrugged.

“Where are you?” her mother asked.

She'd been so caught up in conversation about handcuffs and spankings—damn it, why did those words make her sex throb—she didn't know where they were. She glanced at the passing countryside “Somewhere on Interstate Ninety-Five headed north.”

“You're driving to the track?”

“Yeah. It *was* a good chance to drive my new car.” She glared at the current driver while he flashed a snarky grin. Smiling made him look almost friendly and she wondered why he didn't do it more often.

Rather than contemplate the possibility Adam might have a few good qualities, she shifted her focus back to the conversation with her mother. The gaping silence meant her mother was gearing up to drop her bomb and Nikki felt herself growing tenser by the second.

“I'm coming to the track this weekend.”

“I've heard.” Nikki flinched at her harsh tone and deliberately softened it. “Why would you do that to yourself, Mama?”

“What? Show my support for my children?”

Nikki rolled her eyes. “This is a little different than a mom going to a high school play. You hate me racing. And why would you choose this track, out of all of them?”

“It's close.” Her mother cleared her throat. “It makes sense to go to the track that's only two hours away instead of ten.”

Nikki sighed and rubbed the back of her neck. Her mother's answer seemed logical, but her instincts told her this decision wasn't based on logic. “Are you coming up on Sunday morning?” She tried to be hopeful and optimistic but instead sounded desperate and pleading.

“Of course not,” her mother said, sounding offended. “I'm coming on Friday. I want to have a couple of days with you and Nate.”

Nikki fought the urge to howl in frustration. “There's a little bit of a problem. There's not going to be anyplace for you to stay.”

“What do you mean? Don't you and Nate have your motor homes?”

“Yeah, we do but...” Shit. How did she explain Mama couldn’t stay with Nate because he and his girlfriend were gonna be having wild monkey sex all over the RV? “Nate’s got company for the weekend and you’d probably be uncomfortable staying with them.” Tact wasn’t her specialty but that’d sounded pretty good.

“What about you?”

“Me? Ummm...I’ve actually got a—” she glanced to Adam, “—friend with me too. Both my rooms are taken.”

Adam smiled and shook his head no.

She frowned and mouthed, “No what?”

“No,” he said in a low rumble. “You’re not sleeping alone. But she should probably stay somewhere else.” Shrugging, he added, “That way she won’t hear you moaning and begging.”

Chapter Three

Nikki was so shocked by his bold statement she barely heard her mother say, “Okay, I can sleep on the couch.”

His arrogant, overbearing attitude and totally inappropriate statement had Nikki’s palms sweating and her heart pounding to the point she thought it might burst.

However, she would never, ever allow him to know he affected her like that. She pulled her jaw back up into its socket and glared at him. “Are you threatening me?”

Her mother gasped. “Wha...what do you mean?”

Nikki froze. *Shit*. What had been the last thing her mother said? What was the last thing she’d said to her mother? In a small back corner of her brain, she took note of her mother’s tone. She sounded rankled and a bit defensive and that seemed out of character for her normally mild-mannered and somewhat timid mother. But it was difficult to spend too much time and effort analyzing her mother’s response when ninety-nine percent of her was erupting in flames.

Nikki scrunched her eyes closed and forced herself to focus. “I wasn’t talking to you, Mama. When I get to the track I’ll see who’s there and find some place for you to stay. Okay?”

“All right,” her mother quietly said. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow?” It wasn’t a statement, but instead a question. One asked by an insecure person in constant need of reassurances those she loved would still be around tomorrow.

“Of course, you will. I love you.”

Nikki snapped the phone closed and laid her head back onto the headrest. She closed her eyes and forced deep, even breaths into her body. Sometimes she got so tired of carrying the world on her shoulders she thought she’d buckle from the weight. How did it all get this out of hand?

And when had their relationship flip-flopped so that Nikki acted as the mother and her mother the child?

“What’s the deal with your mom?” Adam’s tone was quiet and gentle.

She turned her head and watched the passing countryside. “I don’t know,” she sighed. “She never comes to the races, and why she’d pick this one is beyond me.”

“What’s wrong with this one?”

Nikki twisted in her seat and tucked one leg under her. “You really don’t know?”

His eyebrows knitted into a frown and he shook his head. “No, but apparently I should.”

“You’re not much of a detective, are you?”

Grinning, he slanted his head in a confident gesture. “We’ve already established I know more about you than you’d like to admit.”

Remembering she was supposed to be angry with him, Nikki took a deep breath and glared at him. What made him think she had some suppressed desire to be bound, gagged and beaten into submission?

The whole notion was ludicrous and if he truly knew anything about her, he’d know she was the one always in charge. Although she and Nate were equal business partners, because she drove the car, the majority of the responsibility for keeping Kincaid Racing afloat fell to her. And then there was the care of their mother. Their father had had a large life insurance policy so, financially, their mother was well taken care of. But emotionally, she was bankrupt. Probably because Nikki was the daughter, she felt the majority of the emotional care fell to her. And taking care of their mother had become a full-time job these days.

No, Nikki Kincaid did not bow down to anyone.

And yet, every time he broached the subject, something deep within her stretched and yawned and seemed to be awakening. As a naturally curious person, she did have questions. But asking them would make it appear she was interested.

Which she wasn’t.

No way would she let him...what? What did he do to his subs to bring them this supposed pleasure?

“Why do you keep insisting I have some suppressed desire to be...dominated?”

He flicked his gaze to her and reached for her wrist. Startled, she snatched her arm away from him.

“I’m not going to hurt you. Trust me.”

“Said the lion to the lamb.” But even as she said it, she reluctantly offered her arm.

He wrapped his large hand around her much smaller wrist and began slowly and sensually stroking his thumb along the sensitive skin of her inner wrist.

She frowned, disconcerted by the warm and gentle current running along her arm and the warm, fuzzy feeling settling low in her belly. “What are you doing?”

His utter stillness made him appear deep in thought. Finally, without answering her question, he asked one of his own. “You know what I’d do to you if you were my sub?”

Oh, God.

She wanted to yell, “What?” but instead kept her composure and cool resolve in place. “I have no idea.”

The muscle in his jaw flexed as he continued to stroke her wrist. “I’d have you take off your clothes, leaving only your bra and panties. Then, I’d get you warmed up and ready with a light flogging.”

She commanded her breathing to be slow and calm. “Ready for what?” she asked, with a forced nonchalance she was far from feeling.

The corner of his mouth tipped into a grin. “Once I had you writhing with pleasure, I’d move on to the leather strap...no, my hand. I’d need to touch you.” His voice sounded like it had been roughened with sandpaper. “There’s no way I could have you in that position and not in some way be skin to skin.”

She swallowed hard and shifted in her seat, trying to squash the persistent throbbing and flood of moisture accompanying the desire.

His nostrils flared and his chest expanded as he took a deep breath. He let go of her wrist and cleared his throat. “But right now, tell me about your mom.”

She should have been grateful for the frosty attitude and sudden change of subject, but instead she found herself missing the heat and strength of his hand. Although she was loath to admit it, she'd liked having his hand on her. While his touch had been stimulating, it had also been soothing and reassuring. How did that happen?

She shook her head to get rid of those unwanted thoughts and to get on board with the change of subject. "My father was killed in a crash at Richmond. Sunday will mark the three-year anniversary of his death."

She watched, intrigued as he morphed back into the Tight Ass she knew and all traces of lust dissipated.

"I'm sorry. I'd forgotten that happened here."

"Yeah, well, it gets even better. Remember last year when I had that bad, freak accident?" She waited for him to nod. "That also happened at Richmond. We definitely have bad luck at that place and I almost hate going there each year."

A weight settled in her chest at the full realization of what her mother was about to put herself through. She dropped her head to her hands and ground the heels of her palms into her eyes. "Why would she want to do this?"

After a long period of silence Adam sighed. "Nikki, I'm sorry I didn't put it all together. And you're right. I'm not very well prepared." He gave her a smile that appeared almost sheepish—almost. "Certainly not as prepared as I should be. It's no excuse but Nate and I played phone tag for a few days and I didn't get copies of the letters until late last evening. I've only briefly looked at them and didn't have a chance to ask questions or dig deeper."

"Hot date kept you from doing your job?" Damn it. She was gonna have to cut out her tongue.

The sheepishness slid away and an egotistical male smile took its place. "Something like that."

She stiffened as the hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Shifting in her seat, she stared out the window. "I wasn't prying," she said, acting bored and disinterested.

“I’m wondering, though, how are you going to protect me and figure out who sent the letters when you’re not prepared?”

“Tell me what to expect when we get to the track.”

“We’ll go straight to the garage and have a team meeting. I have a couple of interviews to do and after those we’ll go eat. In order to make sure my guys take good care of me, I feed them well.”

This time she got to smile as his fingers tightened their grasp on the steering wheel. He apparently didn’t like the idea of another man taking care of her anymore than she wanted to think about what he did to his subs.

“After dinner we’ll go back to the motor home. Nate and I can catch up on general business stuff, go over last minute details for the car and—” she let out a big sigh, “—figure out where we’re gonna put Mama.”

“I understand the difficulty for all of you in being at this track. But I don’t understand why you’re opposed to her being there if it’s what she wants to do.”

Nikki struggled for an answer that wouldn’t betray her mother, yet would explain their concerns. “She didn’t handle my dad’s death well. And she’s never wanted me to race. After my wreck last year she got even worse. Nate and I are worried about her but we don’t know what to do. I’m afraid coming here will be her breaking point.”

Adam nodded but didn’t comment and eventually they were wrapped in a comfortable silence. Nikki wondered if he was considering her and the case or reflecting on his hot date from last night.

And why the hell did she care?

Chapter Four

Adam watched Nikki step into La Paloma's private dining room and jerk to an abrupt halt. She frowned and then, as she looked around the table at her limited seating options, her expression turned mutinous.

There were four seats on one side of the table, five on the other plus the two seats at each end of the table. Adam was sitting in the last seat on the left side. The seat to his left, at the head of the table, was open as was the seat directly across from him.

When Rob and Joe, two of Nikki's crewmen who he knew from the local BDSM group, had invited him to ride to dinner with them, he didn't realize they had ulterior motives. He thought he was giving Nikki an opportunity to have some time with Nate and a break from being around him.

It wasn't until after they'd arrived at the restaurant that he'd realized Rob had other plans in mind. Over the past year, Adam had made no secret of his interest in Nikki. And Nikki had made no secret of her desire to avoid him. Rob had immediately picked up on the cat-and-mouse game the two of them were playing and had taken matters into his own hands.

The other members of the crew didn't know anything about the Dom and sub dynamics. They only knew Nikki had been a true bitch throughout the day and had decided she needed to get laid. Lucky for him, they'd unanimously voted him the man for the job.

Consequently, the crew had taken it upon themselves to arrange it so Nikki only had two choices. She could sit beside him, or she could sit directly across from him.

Adam took a drink of water to hide his smile and watched as she tried to get her mouth in working order. She opened and closed it a few times then clenched her teeth tightly together, causing her jaw muscles to pop and twitch. He found her absolutely

adorable when she was mad, and right now—arms crossed, hip cocked, toe tapping—she was royally pissed.

Zeke, the youngest and greenest of the group, made a mistake of flicking a quick apologetic glance in Nikki's direction.

Nikki made eye contact and smiled. "Zeke, would you please move down there so I can sit here in your seat?"

Color rose in Zeke's cheeks and he cast a nervous glance to Rob.

Everyone else quickly began drinking from their water glasses, playing with their silverware or burying their noses in their menus. Anything to avoid acknowledging the powder keg with the ticking fuse standing in the doorway.

Rob smiled at Nikki and then, looking more innocent than Adam ever would've believed possible, said, "He can't move. The NHRA has imposed a few new rules that Carl needs to fill him in on before tomorrow." Nate stepped through the doorway behind her and upon seeing the seating arrangement—and Nikki's kickass expression—burst out laughing. Nikki faced him with a head-on glare. "I'm glad you think this is funny." She cast a disgusted look around the table and growled, "Traitorous bastards. Every last one of you should be fired."

Even though Adam found the situation and her reaction humorous, a part of him felt bad for Nikki. As he considered how ganged up on she must feel, a twinge of tenderness swept through him and his chest constricted with emotion.

Nate glanced around the table, eyebrows raised expectantly. When it became obvious nobody was going to give up their seats, he scrubbed a hand down his face and sighed. "Well?" he said, gesturing to Nikki. "Where are you sitting? I'm hungry and the quicker you park it the quicker we can get some food."

Someone sucked in a sharp breath and the tension level around the table spiked as everyone braced themselves for the impending explosion.

The frustration and anger flowing from Nikki was palpable. Suddenly, her toe tapping stopped and the room fell into an eerie silence.

Adam found himself holding his breath and cringing, waiting for the blast.

But it never happened.

Without saying a word to anyone, she dropped her arms, squared her shoulders and stomped to the seat across from him. Within the span of a heartbeat, her demeanor shifted from warrior to preservationist. He'd believed their conversation in the car had left her feeling open and vulnerable and the way she moved now corroborated that belief. She carefully pulled out her chair and gently sat, as if afraid to touch Rob or the table. It was like someone protecting exposed nerve endings that were raw and painful.

The questions she'd asked only confirmed his belief in her submissive nature, and he suspected she began to question it herself. For someone as strong-willed and independent as Nikki, that alone was a lot to come to terms with. Now, this close-knit group of men, with whom she worked day in and day out, had sided with him. It had to hurt and leave her feeling alone.

He swallowed the lump in his throat and fought the urge to go to her and pull her into the safety of his arms. She'd kill him for embarrassing her and she probably wouldn't find him as comforting as he'd like to think he could be.

Instead, he watched and waited and when she finally looked over at him, he offered a reassuring smile. He really did mean it as a show of support but based on her murderous expression she wasn't taking it as he'd intended.

Angling into the seat at his left, Nate muttered, "You know there's going to be hell to pay for this."

Adam chuckled and said beneath his breath, "I swear I didn't have anything to do with it. I can't say this often, but in this case, I'm totally innocent."

The waitstaff began distributing the previously ordered drinks and normal conversation resumed. Right up until the waitress took Nikki's drink order. Instantly, all conversation ceased.

As all eyes turned in her direction, Nikki looked around the table. "What?" When no one answered, and only continued to stare, she added, "You guys order drinks all the time. Why can't I?"

Nate, apparently the only one willing to step into the minefield, said, “Yeah, well...usually when we say, ‘bottle, no mug’ we’re getting a beer. Not wine. You planning on drinking the whole bottle? Straight out of the bottle?”

Nikki pulled in a lungful of air and glared at Nate. Yeah, actually, that was her plan. But since they were in a fairly nice restaurant, and not on the tailgate of a pickup truck, she supposed that wouldn’t fly. Once again unable to formulate a smart-ass comeback—dammit, she needed to re-sharpen the edges of her tongue—she shifted her attention back to the waitress and smiled sweetly. “I guess I’ll take the glass too.” *And maybe I’ll use it.*

The waitress left and attention shifted away from her—thank God—and back to Adam. Her soon-to-be-unemployed ignition man spoke, “Adam, what brings you here this weekend?”

“I thought it would be a good chance to watch Nikki race.” Adam paused, took a sip of his beer and looked directly at Nikki. “I’ve been waiting a long time for this opportunity.”

She was surprised to hear he wanted to watch her race. However, as his eyes grew dark and heavy-lidded, she had the distinct impression watching her race wasn’t the opportunity he was speaking of.

With perfect timing, the waitress arrived with Nikki’s bottle of wine and poured a paltry half-full glass. Without taking her gaze off Adam—for fear of losing the staring match—Nikki picked it up and downed the contents in one gulp.

The sweet, cool liquid soothed her frazzled nerves and she resigned herself to gulp-sized drinks. As she reached for the bottle to refill her glass she heard Rob say, “Good luck.”

“Thank you,” she said on a sigh, relieved and grateful someone understood her dilemma. She turned to offer him a smile and found his beer bottle tipped in a silent salute toward Adam.

She blinked.

Then blinked again.

After a few unsuccessful attempts at speaking, which came out as spits and sputters, she finally choked out, “Why are you wishing him good luck? I’m the one who needs the luck, being stuck with...with...*him* for the whole damned weekend.”

Adam, the cool, calm voice of reason, spoke from across the table. “I’m the one being nice.”

Nikki whipped her head around so fast it made her dizzy and her breathing became choppy and shallow. “As opposed to...”

He chuckled. “I’m not crazy enough to answer that question. I’m sleeping with you, remember?”

She wasn’t normally prone to hysterics but they were crushing in on her with every passing breath. Blocking the roaring in her ears and the spots dancing before her eyes she screeched, “You are not sleeping with me!”

She was aware of low chuckles surrounding her, but she kept her attention focused on Adam. She had never met a man more infuriating in her life. And through it all, he stayed calm and collected while she flirted and danced with insanity.

His expression remained neutral, but his eyes glimmered with humor. “I’m sleeping in your motor home, Nikki. There’s no way I’d piss you off, then close both eyes.”

The image of Adam being afraid of her made her smile. Making him miserable wasn’t working, maybe she could make him think she was psychotic and he’d leave for fear of his life. Given her current state of mind, convincing him she might resort to violence didn’t seem too difficult a task.

After picking up the bottle and chugging a few gulps, she felt calm enough to switch back to the scrawny glass. While she poured and drank, poured and drank, poured and drank, she learned a couple of the guys already knew Adam, and those who didn’t acted as if they were long-lost friends.

While they enfolded Adam into her personal circle, she got cozy with her bottle of wine and studied him. She began to see things she’d never noticed before and would probably be well served not to notice now.

Like the sprinkling of chest hair visible where the top buttons of his dress shirt were undone. It looked soft and inviting and she wondered what it would feel like under her hand, the curls wrapping around her fingers as she leisurely swept them across his chest, down to his stomach and back to his neck.

Then there were the strong forearms sticking out below the rolled up sleeves. She giggled as a ridiculous image of Popeye popped into her head. Adam most definitely ate his spinach because his hands were huge. She should've noticed when he had his hand wrapped around her wrist but she'd been too busy trying to control her breathing and act unaffected to notice particulars.

Is it true what they say about men with big hands and big feet?

She shifted in her seat and crossed her legs, squeezing her thighs tightly together. Thank God for the table. Without it, she would be embarrassing herself trying to determine whether or not there was any truth to the saying by getting a good look at his crotch.

Most disconcerting of all was his laugh. Had she ever heard it before? True, he didn't smile a whole lot, but she must have heard him laugh at some point. She just hadn't noticed her chest vibrating to its deep resonance.

Since Nate had called ahead and reserved the back room, he and Adam felt safe enough to let their guard down. In this relaxed state, joking and laughing with her crew, she could see where some women might find Adam attractive.

Good thing she wasn't one of those women.

She shifted her gaze from Adam to the Renaissance painting on the wall behind him. Her chest tightened and a lump rose in her throat. How did a simple two-tone image of a couple clearly in love, elicit such overwhelming emotion? The man peered into his lover's eyes as he reached to caress her face, while she gazed back with absolute adoration. His possessiveness was depicted as clearly as her devotion. Although there was nothing to indicate it was a picture of a Dominant and his submissive, she was left wondering.

Where had that thought come from?

She must be smashed. What would make her think those would be the dynamics between a Dominant and his submissive? Wasn't it only about power and control without any emotion or devotion involved?

What would it be like to have someone think she was the most precious thing in the world? How would it feel to be cherished?

Her gaze slipped to Adam and she found him looking at her like a lion prepared to pounce on dinner. She shivered and dropped her gaze to the table. He may want her, but he only wanted her physically. And even in that capacity he only wanted to control her. She reached for her bottle of wine and considered the notion he probably wouldn't know how to show true affection.

But even as she had the thought, a voice in her head cried *liar* and a memory swam through the haze. She closed her eyes and let the movie run, remembering the long-ago night with startling clarity.

She'd run out of laundry detergent and had gone to Nate's to borrow some. Adam had been sitting in a chair directly across from the front door with a full-figured blonde on her knees at his feet. She hadn't thought anything of it at the time, other than to observe what a pig Adam was for sitting in the chair while the woman sat on the floor, but now it made sense. She must have been one of his subs.

As she'd come out of the laundry room her gaze had swept back to Adam. And this time she'd stopped in her tracks. He'd been leaning over, feeding the woman from his plate with tenderness she'd never have thought him capable of showing. For some stupid reason her chest had tightened and she'd had to fight the urge to cry.

As a similar cloud of sadness floated around her now, she heard chuckling and Nate's deep voice. "Nik, let go of the bottle." She opened her eyes and found her hand clenched tightly around the neck of the bottle, to the point it should've cracked. "Nobody's gonna drink your wine. Relax."

"Yeah, well, one can never be too careful." She laughed. "Especially with a group of supposed friends like this."

Only after she'd refilled and chugged did she chance a glance across the table. Somehow, somehow he knew she'd been thinking about him. It was written all over his face. However, instead of the smug, arrogant look he'd been giving her all day, this expression came dangerously close to mirroring the tender one he'd given the blonde. The honesty of it took her breath away.

God, what's with these mushy, emotional thoughts and feelings?

She had to get away from him. Since dinner hadn't arrived, she excused herself and practically ran to the ladies' room.

A large sitting area situated directly inside the door provided much needed privacy. She dropped into one of the chairs and stared at the ceiling, hoping to either find answers in the vast white space or allow the blankness to suck her up and take her away.

She closed her eyes and fought the dizzy spins. She'd had entirely too much to drink and instead of making her numb and immune to Adam, it was making him more appealing. And sexy. God, was he ever sexy.

For the past year and a half, she'd been telling herself he was an overbearing asshole who needed to be avoided. She did not need to see this nice, personable side of him.

If she thought she could have quick, meaningless sex with him and then move on, she'd do it in a heartbeat. But it wouldn't be quick—somehow she knew he would take his sweet time and it would be a long, memorable experience. And, despite her attempts to block him from her life, she already cared for him so it wouldn't be meaningless. Her only hope of surviving the weekend was to resume her campaign of avoidance.

With her resolve back in place, she took care of business then washed her hands. She flung open the bathroom door and yelped when she saw a dark figure looming in the hall.

Nate was leaning against the wall opposite the bathroom door, his arms crossed and a concerned expression on his face. "Shit, Nate. You scared me." She glanced around the hallway and saw they were alone. "What are you doing?"

"We were worried about you. The back room is safe but we didn't want you walking through this dark hallway without someone watching you."

"Where's the babysitter?"

“He thought maybe it would be best if I came back and checked on you, since you seemed upset.”

“I’m fine. But I’ve got one question for you. Why did you insist Adam come with me? Why him of all people?”

Nate didn’t hesitate in answering. “He’s the only other person I trust with your life. Besides me, there’s nobody else I’d rather have protecting you.”

Nikki’s breath caught in her throat. She knew Nate thought a lot of Adam but she didn’t know he thought *that* much of him. “You don’t know what you’re saying, Nate. I don’t think you know him as well as you think you do.” No way could he know about Adam’s secret perversions and still be so gung-ho on having him be her bodyguard.

Nate’s expression became unreadable and an uncomfortable silence squeezed in on them as he studied her. Finally, he sighed and said, “Yeah, Sis. I do know what I’m saying. I know him very, very well and I’m telling you, I trust him completely.”

Nikki’s feet were rooted in place. Nate was trying to tell her something without coming right out and saying it, which wasn’t like him. It was the Kincaid Curse. They always said what was on their mind—without much prior thought—and never left anyone wondering where they stood.

But right now she definitely wondered, and what he’d implied left a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach. Did Nate know about Adam’s lifestyle and, if so, was it something he condoned?

Before she had time to consider all the implications, Nate motioned for her to go ahead of him. “Our food’s getting cold, let’s go eat.”

She sat at the table and looked at the mostly empty bottle of wine. It must be the wine making her paranoid and silly. Nate couldn’t have possibly told her he knew Adam was a Dominant, and, knowing how he treated women, still trusted her to his care.

While everyone else ate like they hadn’t seen food in weeks, Nikki pushed her pasta around on her plate. About halfway through the meal she pulled her head up and found Adam looking at her, a lopsided grin on his face.

“Better eat,” he said, pointing to her food with his fork. “You’ll need to keep up your strength.”

Nikki blinked then looked around the table. A few of the guys were looking at her, amused, while the others had their heads down, faces damn near in their plates, trying to ignore the conversation.

She turned and called the waitress over to the table. “May I please have a glass of sweet tea. A big glass of sweet tea.” This was getting ridiculous. The wine, along with his previous brash remarks, had her reading all kinds of things into the most innocent of remarks. She had to get her mind off sex and back on business.

Damn Adam for the whole conversation in the car. If he hadn’t told her about his sexual preferences and all the things he enjoyed doing to his subs, making her want those same things for herself—

Whoa... What the fuck?

She didn’t want those things. She was only mildly curious.

Yeah right. Keep telling yourself that and you’ll be fine.

She dropped her head into her hands and rubbed her forehead. Sleep. After a good night’s sleep her entire life would be back to normal. It still might be crazy, but at least it would be a comfortable crazy, and that she could handle.

Nikki got a to-go container for the pasta and had the waitress take away the remaining wine. Considering the bizarre thoughts she’d had about Adam while on her little wine-induced trip, she’d probably never drink again.

As they left the restaurant, she found herself closely flanked by Nate on her left and Adam on the right. Focused on ground and not paying attention, she was surprised to look up and see her crew in a circle surrounding the three of them, all moving as a single unit through the parking lot. They hadn’t told the crew about the threats but Adam’s presence, and Nate following her to the ladies’ room, had obviously tipped the guys off that something was wrong.

She came to an abrupt halt and looked around at the men who had instinctively fallen into this protective circle. Laughing to keep back the tears, she scanned her gaze over

each of them. “Look at you guys redeeming yourselves. Shit, I can’t fire you now.” Becoming more serious and mushy, undoubtedly due to the wine, she said, “I love you guys. Thanks for being my crew.”

She was met with lopsided grins and nods as Adam snaked his arm around her waist. “Keep moving, sweetheart. It’s pretty dark in this parking lot. Let’s get you to the car.”

She looked up to respond to Adam and sucked in a shocked breath. Suddenly, she’d become the brunette she’d watched Adam leading to the car outside of Nate’s. And dammit...it was nice to have his arm around her and have him concerned about her.

Damn wine. She’d never drink again.

Chapter Five

After dinner Nikki, Nate and Adam went back to Nikki's motor home to analyze the letters she'd received and compile a list of potential suspects. The general consensus was—surprisingly—Nikki didn't make enemies. She was a smart ass with those close to her but otherwise, she let her driving do the talking and had earned the respect of her fellow competitors. Nikki said she didn't know of any disgruntled employees and, despite the rumbling noises she'd made all afternoon and the tinderbox atmosphere at dinner, Adam agreed with her. There was a mutual respect and admiration between Nikki and her crewmen and he didn't believe any of them would want to harm her. Especially not after seeing their remarkable display of protectiveness.

Since she hadn't dated anyone for quite some time, they nixed the idea of a pissed-off ex-boyfriend, which left them right where they'd started. With nada.

"I'm going out with Nate," Adam said, as Nate rose to leave. "I need to make a phone call and do some checking around. I won't be gone long."

He waited while Nate hugged Nikki goodbye, then stood and moved to where she sat on the couch. He leaned over, rested his hands on the back of the couch on either side of her head and whispered, "When I come back, be wearing something a little...less."

Her mouth dropped open and a flash fire ignited in her warm brown eyes while pink spread across her cheeks.

He winked, stepped back and exited the coach before she had time to respond, either verbally or physically.

If this hadn't been so important to him he would have found her outrage humorous. Instead, he found himself uncharacteristically unnerved. Since the first time they'd met, her jokes and body language had been like jagged stepping stones. They'd led him down

a path to her private thoughts and fantasies and he'd come to the conclusion she was a sexual submissive.

Even though he knew she felt the same attraction he did, she'd been determined to keep him at a distance, making him wait a year and a half for the opportunity to confirm his suspicions. Based on the questions she'd asked in the car, and the way her heart had raced when he'd held her wrist, she was at least curious about dominance and submission. Now, he had to get her to understand the dynamics of the relationship and give him a chance to prove how incredible it could be.

As he walked back to the coach fifteen minutes later, he found himself holding his breath and considering two possible scenarios awaiting him. The first being, in some form or fashion, she'd have done as he asked. Or, she'd be waiting at the door with a baseball bat.

Cautiously, he pushed open the door of the coach and cast a quick look around. Not immediately seeing her, he eased inside, edgy as a beat cop walking into a possible trap.

As he moved through the kitchenette toward the back of the coach, he caught sight of her through the partially opened bathroom door and stopped dead in his tracks. She was brushing her teeth and wearing the sexiest bra and panties set he'd ever seen. It wasn't the contrast of the teal fabric against her dark skin or her well-toned body that knocked the air out of his lungs—although her long legs, narrow waist and round breasts definitely demanded attention. What made her so incredibly beautiful to him was she'd followed his request.

He'd intentionally been vague when asking her to change, allowing her to feel, at least to some degree, in control. Since she was wearing nothing more than her bra and panties, his suspicions about her submissive tendencies were confirmed. And the Dominant in him came roaring forth.

He moved to the bathroom door and watched as she finished brushing her teeth and then began pulling a brush through her thick, black hair. Although she pretended not to know he was standing there, her shallow breathing and beaded nipples gave her away.

Because of her independent nature and fierce personality, he recognized the enormous amount of time and patience it would require to get her to relinquish control in this area of her life. But he was encouraged because on a gut-deep level she already recognized her body's need to submit or she wouldn't have been dressed this way.

He watched the flutter in her neck and smiled. Despite the protests her mind might throw out, it was obvious her body wanted it this way and had already crossed over to the dark side.

His side.

He slid the bathroom door the rest of the way open and moved into the small space with her.

"Did you ever hear of knocking?" she snapped, as she twisted part way around and glared.

He dropped his gaze to her pink toes and his cock twitched and strained against the fly of his slacks. Underneath the incredibly rough and brazen exterior she showed to the world there lay a feminine soul. His inner beast growled with the impatience of wanting to bring her to the surface and stake his claim.

He had a reputation of being a good Dom, always in control and able to bring out the best in a submissive. But he'd never wanted anyone the way he did Nikki. Keeping himself under control tonight, while getting her to willfully submit, would be the true indicator as to whether or not he deserved his fine reputation.

He took a step toward her, but instead of sliding his hands across the flat plane of her stomach and up her sides like he wanted, he made a less threatening move and gathered a handful of silky hair. After letting it sift through his fingers and swish into place along her shoulders and back, he brushed his knuckles down the side of her neck. "You've pleased me very much, Nikki."

The pulse in her neck fluttered and her breathing became harsh and labored. Her nipples pebbled, silently begging to be stroked and plucked. But she narrowed her eyes and hardened her stare. "Are you always this arrogant and presumptuous?" she spat out. "The way I'm dressed has nothing to do with you. I'm simply getting ready for bed."

She turned her back to him and attacked her hair with the brush. “Well, did you make any great discoveries? Did you find who’s threatening me so you can leave?”

He positioned himself behind her and stroked a finger down the side of her neck. Smiling at her reflection in the mirror he lowered his voice and said, “I discovered a whole lot more in here.”

She shifted away from him as far as the counter would allow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Some in the BDSM scene might consider Nikki’s behavior that of a brat, a submissive who intentionally acted out against her Dom either for attention or for the enjoyment of the punishment she’d receive for her bad behavior. But Nikki wasn’t a brat. She was confused and probably scared.

She was a take-charge-always-in-control-woman who participated in a dangerous sport dominated by men. Her dreams and fantasies would most likely reveal her sexually submissive nature but consciously, she’d probably never considered anything of the kind. And the idea of submitting to anyone under any conditions, especially sexually, had to be scary as hell.

Every cell in his body shouted, *mine*, while his cock throbbed and his balls tightened at the thought of all the things he wanted to do to her. Taming this wildcat would be the greatest challenge of his life.

And if he succeeded, his greatest reward.

He clamped a steel lid down on his lust and pulled forth every ounce of control he possessed. She was off-balance and he needed to keep her that way. He took the brush from her hand and tossed it on the bathroom counter top, causing her to freeze and appear momentarily stunned by the quick motion.

Pushing his advantage, he grabbed her by the shoulders and turned her to face him. “You may be getting ready for bed, Nikki. But if you were truly dead set on going against me, you would have waited until you were locked safely behind your bedroom door before you undressed tonight.”

She planted her hands hard against his chest and he felt her palms digging in as she tried to push him away. However, her fingers simultaneously curled into the fabric of his shirt, as she attempted to pull him closer.

She squeezed her eyes shut and took a deep, shuddering breath as her muscles twitched and trembled. He knew she was fighting an internal struggle. Her mind wanted to push him away. Her body wanted him closer.

He rolled his fingers off her shoulders and down her arms, enjoying the sweet contrast of silky smooth feminine skin against his rough and calloused fingers. Gentling his touch, he wrapped his palms around her small waist and initiated a more intimate touch, stroking the pads of his thumbs across the sensitive skin below her breasts.

She gasped at the contact and her eyes flew open, revealing an emotional mix of deep desire as well as fear and confusion. Seeing her struggle with herself, but not against him, he blew out the breath he'd been holding and continued the slow, sensual caress.

The key is to keep her feeling, not thinking.

He wanted her excited by his touch, to acknowledge the chemistry between them and trust him to take her to places she'd never dreamed of. But in order for that to happen she needed to go with what her body craved and ignore the fear and confusion pounding in her head.

"You have no idea what you do to me," he murmured as he dropped whisper-soft kisses along her temple and continued to stroke her skin, occasionally brushing the underside of her breasts.

Her fingers were still frantically clutching his shirt, but she'd closed her eyes and appeared to be relaxing, which gave him the encouragement he needed to inch backwards into her bedroom, pulling her with him. When he hit the edge of the bed, he eased down and pulled her to him. "Pull your knees up and sit on my lap." Surprisingly, she did as he asked without a fight. He scooped his hands under her knees and lifted, then wrapped her long legs around his waist.

His entire body throbbed with an almost overwhelming need to rip the thin strip of fabric disguised as underwear from her body and ram himself into her to the hilt. But tonight wasn't about what he wanted. Tonight, everything was about Nikki.

He worked his hands under the curve of her ass and pulled her as close as humanly possible without actually being buried inside her. He flexed his hips and drove his steel-hard erection and the rough fabric of his slacks into the intimate folds of her body. "Feel how hard my cock is? That's what you do to me." He rotated his hips, grinding himself even further into her. "And once you've given yourself over to me, I'm going to fuck you seven ways from Sunday."

Chapter Six

Nikki gasped and forced her eyes open at the intimate intrusion and Adam's words. Holy hell, what was she thinking? The ravenous look in Adam's eyes and the intense set of his jaw shocked her into realizing she obviously wasn't thinking or she wouldn't be sitting on his lap, thoroughly enjoying what appeared to be a rather impressive cock.

She'd stripped down to barely nothing in an effort to get him all hot and bothered—sort of like he'd done to her in the car—with the idea of leaving him cold—sort of like he'd done to her in the car. She obviously hadn't thought the whole stupid idea through very well or she would've easily seen how it might backfire.

As soon as she'd heard the door to the coach open, realized they were alone and she was barely dressed, she'd started to overheat. When she'd seen him step up to the bathroom door, the heat had turned to simmering lust. When he'd touched her and told her she'd pleased him, she'd suffered a total meltdown.

No one had ever looked at her with such desire. There was nothing subtle or covert about it. He wanted her. Her body and brain had instantly parted ways and it had taken all of her self-control to keep from launching herself at him and begging to be fucked.

His touch left trails of fire on her skin and his whispering kisses were hypnotic. His erection crushing into her caused her head to spin and his brutal honesty about what he intended to do to her made her want to scream *yes*.

But being reminded she'd have to give herself over to him had been the hard bite she'd needed to snap out of her lust-induced trance. Faced with the reality of the situation, allowing him to screw her senseless didn't seem like such a great idea. In fact, it was probably very bad.

She wasn't good at one-night stands. When it came to romantic trysts she acted too much like a girl. She'd get emotional, then spend the next couple of months pining over him when she should be concentrating on racing and her mother.

And he's a damn Dom, remember? Him in control. You not in control with no say over what happens.

She swallowed hard. No, she would never allow that to happen. Determined to ignore how great his hands felt cupping her ass, and how tempting his hard body was pressed against hers, she let go of the death grip on his shirt. "We need to stop."

He cocked his head to the side and studied her for a few beats, obviously trying to gauge her seriousness. Her mind was very serious, but her body still vibrated to his touch. Even to her own ears, she'd sounded breathless, maybe a little desperate, but she hadn't sounded like a woman who truly wanted things to come to a screeching halt.

A lopsided grin saying, *you're in trouble now, in a good sort of way*, slid across his face and she beat down a whimper. She, Nikki Kincaid, did not whimper. And she didn't fall for charming smiles, either. Not even ones on sensual mouths with full bottom lips that begged to be licked and sucked.

He leaned in and nuzzled her neck, then clamped his teeth onto her earlobe and tugged, sending chill after chill cascading down her spine. "We don't *need* to stop," he whispered. "But we do need to talk, sort of cover some basics."

She closed her eyes and shook her head, trying to clear the cobwebs. *He wanted to talk?* He'd basically hypnotized her with his magical touch, talked dirty to her, gotten her smoldering hot with his cock wedged against her and now he wanted to talk?

The man was hair-pulling infuriating. She should be glad all he wanted was to talk. But her ego didn't like that, once again, she'd been worked into a frenzy while he remained completely unaffected.

Okay, the raging hard-on pressing into her counted for something, but still. She squinted her eyes and shot invisible daggers into his lopsided grin. "I do not understand you."

His grin only widened as he slid his fingers into the fine hair at her temples then pushed through the long tresses until he was at the nape of her neck. He gathered her hair into a ponytail and wrapped it around his fist, holding her securely in place while he stroked a rough finger along her exposed neck. “There’s a lot you don’t understand. That’s why we need to talk. You have a distorted view of Dominance and submission and I want to make sure you understand it better before you reject the idea, and me, completely.”

A tingle crawled across her scalp from the slight tug on her hair. It didn’t hurt but she got the message. She wasn’t going anywhere until he decided she was. She should be terrified and fighting to get free, instead she found herself sinking into him even further.

Deep inside, she felt the pulsing hum of absolute certainty. Adam would never hurt her.

He brushed his callused fingertip across her shoulder. “It’s not about abuse of any kind, physical or emotional.”

Although her brain wasn’t quite yet ready to buy what he was selling, her body screamed *all systems go* as her nipples tightened into hard buds and strained against the fabric of her bra.

He apparently noticed the silent invitation because his gaze dropped to her breasts and he licked his lips. With his eyes downcast, his long, dark lashes created shadows across the tops of his cheeks. His often intense, penetrating stare was blocked and his intimidating appearance was softened. He looked gentle, almost boyish, and she wanted to throw her arms around his neck and pull him to her in an embrace.

But this impression was false and misleading. As if to confirm the fallacy, he ominously traced the top edge of her bra. “You can be sure I’ll do wicked things to this body of yours, but it’s not about abuse. It’s about pleasure. Exquisite pleasure for both of us.”

It was wrong for his words to excite her, but they did and she couldn’t suppress the shudder rocketing down her body. God, she wanted his mouth on her but she wouldn’t

allow herself to ask him for it. Or for anything. She reminded herself, she didn't want this.

But her body yelled, *hell yes we do*, and her back arched, pushing her breasts toward him, causing her ass to grind down on his lap.

Ravenous desire spread across his features and his gaze consumed her. "Christ, Nikki, you are so beautiful. Look at how your body craves my touch. Let me take you where it wants to go."

In a barely there touch he circled her nipple through the fabric of her bra. Try as hard as she might, she couldn't hold back the moan inching up her throat.

"I bet if I locked you into my handcuffs and laid you across my lap you'd get hotter and wetter than you've ever been. And if I spanked your ass until it was a nice bright pink you'd come, wouldn't you?"

Shit. She was hot as hell already but at his words, the internal dam burst wide open and a flood rushed between her spread thighs. She knew he could smell her arousal and feel the moisture as it soaked through his pants. She tried to squeeze her thighs together to stop the throbbing and to hide her embarrassing reaction but it only increased the thrumming ache, scratching and clawing at her.

Suddenly, he flipped the front closure of her bra open and cupped her full and heavy breast in the palm of his hand.

She dropped her head back and closed her eyes, unable to deny herself this pleasure.

"Watch," he commanded, his tone compelling her to obey without question.

She watched as he pinched and rolled the nipple between his thumb and index finger. "Look at how your body responds to my touch. If you'll trust me I can make you feel things you've never believed were possible."

Before she could respond, he bent his head, flicked her nipple with his tongue, then caught the hard nub between his teeth. Further thought became impossible as she gasped at the pleasurable pinching sensation and her sex clenched in response, signaling its approval. Heat seeped from her nipple, through her breast and straight to her core. His

hand slid from her breast, along her stomach and down the front of her lace panties until he was under her, cupping her.

Without conscious awareness of her actions, she ground herself down onto him, seeking relief from the pulsing desire and internal ache. His chuckle startled her and she brought the embarrassing gyrating action to an immediate halt.

Using the hand he'd cupped her with, he tipped her chin up and forced her to make eye contact. She smelled her arousal on his fingers and saw his nostrils flare as he also caught the scent.

"Give me control, and I'll take care of the itch you need scratched." His voice sounded as if rocks rattled around in his vocal box.

Once again, reminded of his arrogance and domineering nature, fire of a different kind erupted. Through clenched teeth, she said, "I can scratch my own itch, thank you very much. I don't need you."

The hand knotted in her hair gave a slight tug, a reminder of her position, while the thumb and forefinger of his other hand clamped down on her nipple. Hard. "Not right now you can't," he said, as the evil grin slid back into place. "But tell me you'll be mine for this weekend, that you'll turn yourself over to me completely, and I'll let you come."

What the hell was wrong with her? She shouldn't be further turned on by his words and actions, but she was. She should be climbing off his lap and telling him to go to hell. Instead, she was panting and working her hips in a circle, trying to grind down onto him harder.

She'd always been drawn to strong, alpha types and assumed it came from growing up in the testosterone-driven world of the NHRA. But, having learned the hard way the overbearing alpha type wasn't to be trusted, she only dated men who were "too nice" and who she could control. Not physically, but emotionally and within the context of their relationship.

But those men didn't do anything for her. They didn't cause her blood to boil and her heart to feel like it was going to explode. They didn't cause the internal flood she now

experienced and they'd never, not one time, made her contemplate dropping to her knees and agreeing to do anything they said.

Adam made her feel all those things. And more.

The need to come battled with the need to remain in control. Her small internal voice encouraged, *trust Adam*. If she told him to stop he would. And she knew unequivocally, he'd never hurt her, at least not physically.

And if she went along with him she would get a male-induced, instead of self-induced, orgasm. Shit, looking at it that way what did she have to lose? "Fine. Fine. I'll do whatever you want. Just let me come."

His eyebrow popped up and an amused expression crossed his face as molten lava shot through her nipple and down to her sex. *Jesus Christ*, did he have a vise clamped on her nipple? "I think you're forgetting who's in control." He released his grip and cool air brushed over the inflamed skin. Gentling his touch, he massaged the tender flesh and said, "Ask me for what you need."

She bit her tongue and forced heavy breaths through her nose. Doing what he wanted was one thing. Begging him for it was completely different. She had a shower massager. She could take care of herself. She'd been doing it for a long time and there wasn't a need to stop now.

But her hard-headed resolve quickly melted as he bent his head and took the throbbing nipple into his mouth. As he sucked and laved, gently soothing the sting, she thought, *well hell, my shower massager can't do this*. She pushed herself into him more fully and wrapped her hands around his head, pulling him into her.

He stopped and pulled back. "Before we go any farther, I'm going to give you a safeword. Actually, a few of them. When I'm doing something you like, like now, or you want more, you can say 'green'. Although, I'll already know by your body's reaction, and I'll decide if you get more of it or not. If I'm doing something that's uncomfortable, or too much, say 'yellow' and I'll ease off." He flashed a snarky grin which showed perfect, white teeth. "By the way, a little aside, I hate the color yellow so don't wear it while I'm around."

As she struggled to switch gears and keep up with his bizarre train of thought, he grew serious and his grin disappeared. "If I'm doing anything you don't like, or can't handle, say 'red' and I'll stop immediately. Do you understand?" When she gave a brief nod he said, "I don't ever want to really hurt you. I want to bring you more pleasure than you've ever experienced, and I think I can, but I need you to always be honest with me and tell me what you're thinking and feeling."

She studied his expression, absorbing his sincerity and...what? It wasn't concern. It was more along the lines of...affection. He was looking at her like she was the most important thing in the world and her chest constricted to the point where breathing became impossible.

"I want you to give me everything, Nikki." The charged seriousness of his tone caused her to become even more alert to his touch and words. "I want you to share every fantasy and desire. Every fear. I want to fulfill those desires and make your fantasies reality. And I want to help you overcome your fears."

"I've watched you on dates, and you walk all over those men. None of them have been tough enough to stand up to you. To give you what you crave. What you need. I can." He cupped her jaw in his palm. "You fight to control every aspect of your life. But dammit, in this give me control."

She dropped her head and squeezed her eyes shut. He made it seem so easy. Like some fairy tale, let go and let him handle it. But when she let go of the reins bad things happened.

If she'd still been in control of ordering and checking car parts, maybe her dad's accident wouldn't have happened. If she hadn't let the guys on the crew talk her in to partying the night before, she might have been aware of what was happening with her own car last year. She might have been able to stop before the breather blew into a million shreds and took her out, as well as her competitor. And, of course, had she remained in control the night of her high school graduation, she wouldn't have lost her virginity under such undesirable circumstances.

Adam tipped up her chin and held her in place as he whispered, “Open your eyes. No hiding from me. Nothing. Ever.”

Compelled by the commanding tenderness in his voice, she did as he asked.

He kissed her cheek, the corners of her mouth, then lightly brushed his lips across hers. “I don’t want to control any other part of your life.” He chuckled. “I don’t know shit about racing.” He grew serious again. “But I do know you. Let me take care of you. Let me love you.”

His last words were barely audible but she felt them like a punch to the gut. She drew in deep breaths, trying to get air into her lungs but the passageways seemed to be blocked. She felt the sizzling in her chest, a warning sign of the impending panic attack closing in on her. He seemed to be talking about more than this one weekend and something about his tone and the look in his eyes made her think this encompassed more than sex.

But what exactly was he saying?

Why her? Why now?

Before she asked the torrent of questions running through her mind, or succumbed to the panic welling up inside her, he pressed his mouth to hers and kissed her long and hard. His lips were commanding. His tongue demanded entrance into her mouth and once granted, it set about claiming her completely.

She was vaguely aware of him standing, her cradled in his arms, legs still wrapped around his waist, but she was too lost in the kiss to process him turning and laying her on the bed until she felt the cool satin comforter against her back. He rested the curve of her ass at the edge of the bed and knelt in front of her, hooking her knees over his shoulders.

She shifted and squirmed, embarrassed to be spread open before him like a buffet and to have him looking at her like she was the dessert he didn’t get at dinner.

He took a deep breath and his nostrils flared. “You are so fucking beautiful,” he said, his voice rough and ragged. “You have no idea how badly I want to rip these panties off you and sink my cock into you until I’m buried balls deep.”

She groaned and involuntarily thrust her hips. There wasn't any point in playing this game anymore, not even with herself. It was obvious she wanted him as much as he claimed to want her. Why not go for it and enjoy the experience? "If that's the case, why aren't you doing it?"

"Because tonight isn't about a quick, mindless fuck. It's about making you understand what a relationship with me would be like."

She tried to process the word "relationship", meaning more long-term than this weekend, but as she tried to get her mind around the idea, he slid his hands to the inside of her thighs and forced her legs even wider. Cool air rushing against her heated core, as well as knowing his mouth was mere inches away, caused further thought to become impossible. And unimportant.

He nipped at the sensitive skin inside her knee then slid his tongue along her inner thigh, stopping short of the edge of her soaked panties. He slipped his fingers under the lace and pulled the fabric to one side, exposing her to his view and touch.

She wiggled and squirmed, uncomfortable with the intimacy and wanting to edge away from him, but also craving his touch and wanting to scoot closer. He bent his elbow and readjusted his position, still holding her panties out of the way while his arm lay across her stomach, anchoring her in place. The fingers of his other hand flicked her swollen, sensitive clit, causing her to rock her hips and moan.

In one quick motion, he thrust his tongue into her. Once. Twice. The sensation was so intense she practically flew off the bed. He curled his tongue and pulled it through her swollen lips to her clit, where he nipped harshly then stroked the sting away with a soft caress. As he gave one long draw on her clit, she bucked and arched and cried out. Nothing had ever felt this good.

And then he stopped.

"There's one more thing we need to cover before I'll let you come."

Thank God. Anything.

"In the bedroom, you will do as I say without question. And you'll call me Sir. Starting now."

Okay, anything, except that.

“One word is all it’s going to take. Call me Sir and I’ll give you what you want.”

“Never,” she growled, as she fought to dislodge him. With a quick yank, he disposed of her panties and began a full oral assault. He flicked his tongue across her swollen clit. He nipped and sucked and buried his tongue deep, leaving her breathless and quivering.

She grabbed his head to hold him in place, determined to make him finish what he’d started. But before she knew what was happening, he was sitting over her, tying her wrists together with the remnants of her panties. He scooped her up, dropped her in the middle of the bed so her outstretched arms reached the headboard, and tied her to the frame.

“What the fuck are you doing?” she gasped, shocked.

Completely unfazed by her rant, he sat back and watched her struggle. Sweeping his boiling hot gaze down her body, he whispered, “My God. Bound to the bed like this, you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.” He stroked a finger between her breasts and down her stomach. “You’re struggling with yourself more than you are those bindings. Stop fighting, yourself and me, and let go.”

The annoying small voice whispered in her ear, *you know he’s right*. But she didn’t want him to be right, and she sure didn’t want to be a weakling and submit.

When she remained quiet but continued to struggle, although admittedly not terribly hard, he slid two fingers inside and went straight for her G-spot. She gasped and thrashed while her hips took up a natural pounding rhythm against his hand.

“Say it, Nikki. Sir. That’s all it’s going to take and I’ll let you come.”

She didn’t need him to let her come. She rocked her hips, making his hand hit where she wanted it most. She was close. So close. Almost there.

His fingers stopped moving.

Fury whipped through her and she tried to fight her way free again, only to have her legs restrained by his strong hands. Suddenly, he was kneeling between her legs again, combining the magic of his tongue, teeth, lips and hands, taking her to the edge of what

would surely be a cataclysmic orgasm. She stood, perched at the edge, ready to tumble over.

And he stopped.

She shrieked with frustration and thrashed her head from side to side. Desperate for release she finally stooped to pleading. "Please," she begged. "Please, please make me come."

"You have all the control, Nikki."

She snarled and raised her head, wanting to look him in the eye when she told him to go to hell, but she stopped short when she saw the tender and sincere look on his face.

"This is the mystical, magical part you need to understand. It takes a lot of courage to be a sub, more than it takes to be a Dom. And the great paradox is *you* have all the control."

She gritted her teeth and squeezed her eyes shut. What a bunch of horseshit. She was going to kill him. He was a walking dead man. He was just too stupid to realize it.

As she jerked on the bindings again, feeling a slight tinge of panic, he made a slow, calming caress across her stomach, and said, "Look at me."

It was more of a glare than a look, but once she made eye contact he continued, "A sub *always* has the ultimate control. You can call game over at any time." He stroked his fingers back inside at a pace that was slow and torturous while his thumb circled her clit. "Either call me Sir or use your safeword and we end everything. The choice is all yours."

Either way she lost. Be a wimp and safeword out of it, or submit. He was still kneeling between her legs, gaze locked on her face, wearing the tender and affectionate expression he'd worn earlier.

Something deep within snapped. In that instant, it didn't seem quite as important to win this game. She sensed how much he wanted this and for some inexplicable reason she wanted to make him happy.

She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, "Please let me come..." She swallowed hard and forced herself to say what he wanted to hear. "Sir."

He froze, apparently stunned by her acquiescence, but soon recovered. He thrust his fingers into her while massaging her clit. His breathing was harsh and ragged. “Come for me, sweetheart,” he rasped.

At his command, she lost all control over her body. Screaming and bucking, she feared she might shatter into a thousand pieces. He replaced his fingers with his tongue and drew her orgasm out for what seemed an eternity. She had never experienced anything as intense or quite so satisfying.

As she floated back to clear consciousness, he untied her from the headboard and wrapped her into the protective cocoon of his arms. Brushing the hair away from her face he whispered, “I’ve worked with a lot of subs, Nikki, but never in my life has that word sounded so sweet. Thank you for giving me that gift.”

Ridiculously happy she’d been able to please him, warm fuzzies filled her entire being. She didn’t want to contemplate how she felt because if she did, she’d have to take into account everything that had happened. And she wasn’t ready to go there. Instead, she tucked her head further into the crook of his shoulder, inhaled his masculine scent and let sleep carry her away.

Chapter Seven

Nikki cracked one eye open and peeked at the other side of the bed, confirming she was as alone as she felt. At some point during the night Adam had untied her wrists and early this morning he'd slipped out of bed. Since he seemed to know everything else, he must have known she needed time and space to come to grips with all that had transpired last night.

And in this case he'd be right.

Physically, she'd never been more satisfied. Emotionally, she was a wreck. In the stark reality of daylight her begging and calling him Sir seemed incomprehensible. However, under the cover of darkness, the stroke of his touch, the lure of his words and the affection shining in his eyes, it all changed. The boundaries between submission and control—and why those boundaries even mattered—had been much less defined.

She'd always been attracted to Adam but had tried to ignore the attraction and keep her distance, telling herself he was too uptight and too much of a rule follower. *He wasn't a rule follower*, she thought, as hysterical laughter bubbled inside. *He makes the damn rules. And expects them to be followed.*

A Dom. A real honest to God, you-will-do-as-I-say freakin' Dom!

But in fairness, after last night, she had to re-evaluate what that meant. He'd been honest about what he wanted and expected from her. He'd been firm and unyielding, but he'd countered it with compassion and tenderness. And she'd never seen anyone as affected as he seemed to be when she'd caved in and called him Sir. And fear hadn't been an issue. Truth be known, her biggest fear had been he'd leave her, more aroused than she'd ever been in her life, and make her take care of the grand finale on her own.

Oh, God! Had she actually begged?

She threw a pillow over her head and pulled it tight. Maybe she'd save whoever was threatening her the effort and do herself in. The worst part was, she had no doubt she'd beg him again for another one of those mind-blowing orgasms, especially knowing she had a safe—

She bolted straight up in bed.

Did he say—?

She sucked in an angry breath. He did say that.

She flung the pillow aside and tossed the covers off as she shot out of bed. "I don't like yellow, don't wear that color, my ass," she grumbled. She rifled through the dresser drawers, pulled out a bright yellow T-shirt and snapped it once, sending the wrinkles to Neverland. She always tried to wear black and white shirts with her sponsors' logos, but today she'd make an exception.

Because he was good with his mouth and hands, and the whole situation had been the most erotic experience of her life, it didn't make him the master of her universe. Yeah, his words alone caused her nipples to tighten and everything feminine to ache. His touch was like velvet on exposed nerve endings, soothing yet arousing at the same time. But dammit, no one told her what to do and what not to do and she'd make sure that message was screamed—figuratively—loud and clear.

After a quick shower she put on her pushup bra—never hurt to accentuate the positives—donned the yellow T-shirt and jeans—tight, of course—and pulled on her boots. After scarfing down a granola bar and chugging a glass of orange juice, she brushed her teeth, put her hair up into a ponytail, pulled on a ball cap featuring her main sponsor's logo and headed to the garage.

As she approached the garage, she took in the scene. Nate and the crew were hard at work on the car while Adam stood off to the side, eyes sharp and focused. The content of the threatening letters didn't seem like someone truly wanted to harm her. It sounded more like they just wanted to scare her into not racing. Because of that, Nate and Adam had reluctantly agreed she was safe when the garage area was open only to drivers and crews. But later today sponsors and the press would be milling about, and one of the

things Adam and Nate discussed last night was how to maintain a sense of normalcy yet keep her protected in crowds. Adam planned to stand off to the side, out of the way, and be the hawk watching everyone.

She tried to act nonchalant as she approached the garage, but her self-assured strut hit a speed bump the second Adam's gaze landed on her. She actually felt the heat of his stare boring into her and a flush crept up her neck while her stomach knotted into a ball. Determined to give the impression he had no effect on her whatsoever, she shifted her focus to the car and crew and beelined for Nate.

After a short while of being in her normal surroundings and discussing familiar things like torque, calibration and gear ratio, she felt more in control and up to the challenge of facing Adam.

He was leaning against one of the workbenches, legs crossed at the ankles, arms crossed over his impressive chest. He had the appearance of a man who didn't have a care in the world but appearances were deceiving, because she was sure he actually had two.

First, he was taking the threat against her seriously and had sworn to keep her safe. But she wondered who would protect her from him. Because concern number two was the fact that she'd blatantly ignored his sensitivity to yellow and had dressed like Little Miss Sunshine.

Funny thing was she didn't particularly care for yellow either, but being told not to wear it had made it infinitely more appealing.

As she stopped in front of him—a little more than an arm's length away—his heated gaze took a leisurely stroll over her body. He obviously appreciated the package, if not the wrapping, and as he finished his visual perusal he erased all expression from his face and said, "You had to try it, didn't ya, sweetheart?"

She batted her eyelashes and looked as innocent as she was capable. It wouldn't have worked with Nate, and she knew it wouldn't work with him either, but she gave it a go. "What do you mean?"

A big-bad-wolf smile spread across his face. “Step a little closer and we’ll discuss it.”

The sounds of wrenches and air guns reverberated off the walls of the garage but she was sure he heard her heart pounding, even over all the mechanical noises. “Umm...no thanks. I’m fine right where I am.”

“Bwack, bwack, bwack.”

Bastard. She narrowed her eyes and glared. He knew she’d never back down from such a direct challenge so she took a small step closer. “Happy now?”

“Not exactly.” His gaze roamed freely over her body, as if he owned her and had the right. “You know, I threw the part about not liking yellow in to make sure you were paying attention. We weren’t doing anything heavy enough last night that you would have needed them, but it’s important you know your safewords. I needed to be sure you understood what I was saying. I knew if you were, you’d do exactly this.” His eyes darkened and his smile turned ominous. “You know there’s going to be hell to pay for wearing that shirt and those jeans and being a cocktease.”

Nikki chewed the inside of her cheek and processed Adam’s words. A silly, girly warmth rushed through her, knowing he cared and was concerned for her safety. She was slightly concerned about the future possibility of needing to know her safewords. And it would be foolish to say she wasn’t being a tease. The shirt and jeans were tight, showcased her curves well and she knew how men reacted when she wore them.

But she was only interested in teasing one cock. And based on the tight fit of Adam’s khakis, she was doing a damn fine job. She switched to chewing on her bottom lip and frowned. Why didn’t she get any of that last night?

His soft chuckle startled and shocked her into realizing her gaze was locked onto the fly of his pants. “Problem?” Leaning in close he added, “And remember, you tell me nothing but the truth. The whole truth.”

Shit. She was so not going to tell him the truth. She would never admit to feeling cheated by not getting that bulge last night. But she was addled and couldn’t come up with a believable response quick enough.

A smug smile dripped from his mouth as he uncrossed his arms and legs, slid his fingers into the side belt loops of her jeans and pulled her to him. “You’re taking way too long to answer, which means you’re planning on lying.” His voice was low and menacing. His dark chocolate gaze bore into hers. “Do you know what happens when you lie to me?”

She cursed the tremble starting in her extremities and puddling in her core. She shouldn’t be reacting to his words or his dark expression, but damned if the threatening look and dangerous eyes didn’t make her hot as hell. What deliciously torturous things did he do to those who lied?

How could just thinking about it get her excited?

She couldn’t respond. All she could do was look at him and think about how badly he messed with her head. She didn’t want to call him Sir and give him total control of her body. But a fundamental part of her responded to his words and touch and looking at him now, like last night, something within her shifted and all she wanted was to make him happy.

Suddenly, she was very sorry she’d worn the yellow T-shirt.

She shifted her gaze away from his and stared at the concrete floor. Jesus, she was as certifiably loony as her mother. Her mother’s obsessive-compulsive behavior was getting worse and worse. And staring at this man in front of her, who made her think and feel one thing one minute, and then another thing the next minute, Nikki understood how that could happen. The smart ass in her wanted to laugh at the thought. The daughter in her wanted to cry. And as expected, thoughts of her mother quickly darkened her mood.

“Penny for your thoughts.”

She turned her attention back to Adam, who had his head cocked to the side studying her, his expression as gentle as his tone. Before she lost her nerve, she leaned into him, pressed a quick kiss to his cheek and quietly said, “I’m sorry for wearing the yellow T-shirt.” Thankfully, when she took a step back he let her go without any resistance.

Unable to deal with the emotional chaos, she kept herself distracted by throwing all of her energy into the day’s events. They were nearing the end of the racing season, the

points race for the championship was close and, since Nikki was one of the championship contenders, tension was running high.

Adam was never more than a few feet away. Nikki knew his presence allowed Nate to relax about her safety and concentrate on his job of making sure her car was perfect.

She did the usual rounds of media interviews, met with sponsors and their guests and signed the occasional autograph. By six o'clock everything was set for the next day's qualifying races, the rest of the crew had taken off and Nate was headed toward his coach and a waiting Amber.

Nikki kicked at the garage's concrete floor with the toe of her boot and shoved her hands into her back pockets. The silence in the garage was overwhelming and unfamiliar and she kept thinking, *what now?* She didn't want to go back to the motor home where she'd be alone with Adam. Being alone with him was becoming increasingly dangerous to her emotional well-being. It was too early to eat dinner. If she ate now she'd be starving again before bed. Most of the other competitors were hanging out in their motor homes. Maybe she and Adam could walk around and visit with the other drivers and their wives.

She jumped as a hot hand wrapped around the back of her neck and warm breath kissed the side of her cheek. "What's the matter? Afraid to go home with me?"

"No," she barked defensively. Too defensively she realized as the words came crashing out of her mouth. She turned her head to look at him and consciously relaxed her stance and tone. "Why would I be afraid of you?"

His wicked, promising grin slid into place and she took a deep breath, steeling herself against its magnetism.

He nipped on her ear. "Because you have a punishment coming. Two of them, actually. One for wearing the yellow shirt. The second for not answering me honestly when I asked you a question." His voice was low and husky and anticipation raced down her spine, causing her to shudder, despite her determination to remain unaffected.

"I know you're at least curious, and maybe even eager, to know what I'm going to do to you. Let's go so you can find out."

Unrestrained curiosity had gotten her into trouble more than once in her life but she was dying to know how he punished his subs who misbehaved. Since the conversation in the car yesterday, she couldn't get the image of him with a paddle or strap in his hand out of her mind.

Did he really spank them? Her stomach fluttered and knotted while her sex pulsed with the thought. Did he stand them in a corner? Would he send her to her room without dinner? Ground her from the TV?

He moved in front of her and narrowed his eyes. "You're smiling."

She laughed, confident he was merely messing with her head and wouldn't seriously punish her like a child. "Yeah, I was wondering if you were going to ground me from the TV."

His eyes liquefied and became heavy lidded. He brushed his knuckles along her neck and down her arm. "No, what I have in mind for you is definitely more hands on." Linking his fingers with hers, he tugged and began walking.

She instinctively fought his grip and dug the heels of her boots into the concrete.

When he turned to face her, his stern expression gave her pause and made her think maybe she should be afraid. Very afraid. He quirked an eyebrow and without an ounce of humor said, "Unless you'd like to receive your punishment right here I suggest you stop pretending to fight me and come on. I'm not much into exhibitionism, but I bet there's more than one person in this garage area who would love to see you with your pants around your ankles, your bare ass turning pink."

She gasped and tried to pull in air but it didn't seem to be making its way to her lungs. His expression left no room for argument and there was no mistaking his words or intent. He'd do it. Without hesitating for one second, he'd do exactly as he'd threatened. A thousand butterflies lifted off in her stomach and an uncontrollable trembling rippled through her body.

This time when he turned and began walking, she followed—legs wobbly, head spinning to the point of dizziness, hyperventilating with no brown paper bag in sight.

As her mind raced and adrenaline pumped, questions flooded her brain. When, exactly, had she become okay with this? How many subs did he have? Was she one of many? And if so, why did it bother her?

Her steps became heavier and she dragged her feet. “How many...women...girlfriends...subs, whatever you call them, do you have?” The words gushed out of their own accord. Damn her mouth anyway.

He stopped and turned to face her. “One. And she’s the most beautiful, contrary, hard-headed one I’ve ever known.”

He turned and started to walk again but this time her feet were rooted to the spot. Did he mean her? She certainly fit the contrary, hard-headed part. But what about the hot date he’d had on Tuesday night?

Her breath caught in her throat and she took a step back. He didn’t mean her. He must be talking about the hot date. And what was she, besides a weekend diversion?

He’d seemed to want more last night, but the prospect of hot sex could make a man say and do anything. Except they didn’t have sex. Was he simply fucking with her head, getting her to fall for him even though he wasn’t interested in anything more than playing with her this weekend?

She jerked hard on her hand and it slipped through his fingers. She should be glad he wasn’t talking about her. She didn’t like playing his games anyway. He confused and distracted her when she needed to focus on racing. She should be thankful she’d figured it out now and hadn’t allowed herself to get further involved in his ego trip.

Why then, did she feel as if she’d been trampled on all the way to her soul?

Concern and confusion creased his brow as he turned and closed the distance between them. “Nikki? What’s wrong?”

“I can’t be one of many, Adam. I’m not made that way.”

He rested his hands on her hips and bent his knees, making them the same height and bringing them eye to eye. “What the hell are you talking about?”

Nikki waved her hand around as if she were shooing flies, or shooing off his handsome face and bottomless eyes. “I was never good at sharing, you can ask Nate. I’m possessive of my toys, my cars and my—”

“Yoo-hoo, Nikki. Over here.”

Nikki and Adam simultaneously turned their heads toward the very Southern, very prim sounding voice. Nikki closed her eyes and dropped her head into her hands, which helped muffle her voice when she screamed, “It’s not Friday yet, dammit! I can only handle one lunatic at a time!”

Her hands fell from her face as Adam’s fingers tipped up her chin. “Nikki, sweetheart, talk to me. I’m assuming she’s your mother?”

It was all too much. One problem she could deal with. Two, of this emotional magnitude, she snapped. Straight armed, fists clenched at her side she spat out, “I’m not your sweetheart. And I’m sure as hell not gonna be another one of your playthings. Leave me alone, Adam.”

She turned and stalked off to the golf cart carrying her mother, leaving a stunned Adam standing there alone. After speaking with the driver, she climbed onto the empty backseat and took the short trip back to her motor home.

As soon as the cart slowed, and without a word to her mother, she jumped off and stormed to her motor home. Only to stop short when she saw an envelope attached to the door, having the same typeface and appearance as the previous threatening letters. She ripped the letter off the door, stomped into her motor home and went straight to her bedroom. Slamming the door behind her, she grabbed her cell and dialed Nate’s number.

“This better be damned important.”

“I got another letter.”

“Shit. What’s it say?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t opened it. But that’s not really my biggest problem. I can’t handle Adam and Mama by myself.”

She heard a muffled curse. “Mama’s here now? I thought she wasn’t coming in until tomorrow night.”

“Yeah, me too, but guess what? She’s here. Get your ass dressed, you’re coming with us to dinner.”

Amber squealed in the background, there were a few more muffled curses then, *click*.

She snapped her phone shut, flopped face down on the bed and did something she hadn’t done in nearly three years. She cried. Gut-wrenching sobs until her face was swollen, her nose was stopped up to the point she couldn’t breathe and there wasn’t a tear left in her body.

Chapter Eight

Nikki kicked at the sheets wrapped around her legs like she was shaking loose a Chihuahua that had latched on to an ankle. Finally freeing herself from the tangled mess, she flipped onto her back and forced herself to stare at the ceiling fan. Keeping her attention locked on the blades as they went around and around and around kept her from looking at the clock...again.

Her body knew she needed sleep. Her body wanted sleep. Well, actually her body wanted more of what Adam had to give. But with Mama tucked away in the guest bedroom and Adam on the couch, that wasn't going to happen.

The cool air from the ceiling fan wafted across her body, causing her nipples to pucker and press into the front of her cotton tank top. They were sensitive—especially the left one, which had received the majority of Adam's attention the night before—and she ran her hands across them in an effort to massage away the pulsing ache.

What a ridiculous idea. Touching herself did nothing to assuage the thrumming in her breasts and thoughts of Adam only intensified the ache settling around her heart. And while she lay in bed aching, Adam was camped out on the couch mere feet away. But he might as well be a million miles away for all the good it did. Despite her best efforts to ignore his presence, her mind insisted on rehashing every painful detail of the roller coaster day.

From the second she'd cracked her eyes open the day had been for shit.

She woke up every morning alone, but this morning she'd felt lonely. She'd never spent the entire night with a man but she'd liked having Adam in her bed. Several times during the night she'd awakened to find his arms wrapped around her. Protective. Possessive. And it had been comforting and gratifying.

She kept telling herself it should have felt wrong. She shouldn't have liked the way his hands felt on her—and in her. She shouldn't have gotten excited by his words and the way his eyes had devoured her. And she sure as hell shouldn't want more.

But she did. And now, having finally admitted it to herself, she wanted him with a desire bordering on obsession. God, she hated being such a freakin' girl.

How could she want someone so complex? He was demanding—no shit, he was a Dom—but he was also tender and compassionate. She'd felt safe with him and, although it had been hell to give up control, it had also been freeing.

None of it mattered, though, because he didn't want her in the same way. Although he'd indicated he wanted more than sex, she wasn't even sure he wanted anything past this weekend.

As the vise squeezed her chest tighter, “Back in Black” erupted from her cell phone. *Oh shit!* Three-thirty phone calls always meant bad news. She snatched up the phone from her nightstand. “What’s wrong?”

Before Nate responded, Adam burst through her bedroom door. His dark hair was tousled around his head but his eyes were wide and alert. Was it wrong to take a small amount of pleasure in knowing he hadn't been sleeping either?

Nate, who never lost his cool, sounded frantic. “Amber’s sick and I don’t know what to do for her.” She heard moans and mumbling through the phone. “I mean horribly sick, Sis. You’ve gotta come over here.”

“I’ll be right there,” she said, feet already on the floor. She relayed the information to Adam as she pulled on a pair of jeans, tore off her tank top and pulled on a T-shirt. Then realized she’d flashed him a shot worthy of a dozen strands of beads at Mardi Gras.

Adam, who’d apparently been sleeping in his clothes, slid his feet into a pair of topsiders while Nikki crawled on hands and knees, pulling her flip-flops from under the chair in the salon.

Her mother opened the bedroom door, confusion and concern flickering across her face. “Where are you going?”

Nikki stood and stuck her feet into the hot pink flip-flops and grabbed her jacket from the hook by the door. “Amber’s sick. We’re going to Nate’s.” Nikki gave her a quick hug. “Go back to sleep. We’ll be quiet when we come back in.”

Her mother stood statue still through the hug, looking slightly shocked. “I should go with you,” she said, dropping her gaze to the floor. She wrung her hands together and whispered, “This is terrible.”

“We’re going on over,” Nikki said, as she pushed the door open. “You know where Nate’s coach is. We’ll see you there.”

She had one foot on the top step of the motor home, the other about to follow when Adam gripped her arm. His expression was unreadable and he appeared to be carefully considering his words. Surely he wasn’t going to address their issues now. As Nikki’s patience reached its final inch he said, “You go on over to Nate’s. I’ll walk over with your mother.”

Nikki frowned. He was being nice. Dammit, she didn’t want him to be nice. It made it too difficult to stay pissed, and she needed to stay mad in order to keep her distance. “Thanks,” she grumbled, then jumped down the steps and headed for Nate’s.

By six a.m. they’d moved Amber to the track’s medical center and the track physician had started an IV and began giving her medications to stop her nausea and help her sleep. It appeared to be a severe case of food poisoning and the only thing to do now was keep her comfortable and hydrated.

Nikki sat off to the side and watched Nate brush wisps of hair from Amber’s face and whisper words of affection to her. Thanks to the medication, she was finally sleeping peacefully, but Nikki knew on some level Amber heard him because she rolled her head to the side, putting them face-to-face.

Even though his brow was creased and his mouth drawn tight, the love pouring from her brother was obvious. Nikki had never seen him in love and it was almost painful to watch. She knew Amber was “the one” and, while she was happy for him, she also knew it meant big changes would be taking place in their own relationship.

Soon she’d be totally alone.

Racing had always been their first priority. It had been infused into their systems as children and for the past three years there hadn't been a choice about it. But it appeared Nate had found someone who meant more to him than racing, and Nikki needed to let him know she understood.

She stepped behind her brother's chair, wrapped her arms around his neck and kissed him on top of the head. "I'm gonna go back to the coach and check on Mama and Adam, and try to get some sleep. I'll meet with the guys, let them know what's going on and let Carl know he's gonna be running the show today. You stay here with Amber."

He swiveled around in his chair and she knew he was getting ready to argue, simply out of habit and from the belief that nothing interfered with racing. She put her hand over his mouth and cut off his argument. "It's only qualifying. You know we'll get through it with no problem. You need to stay here with Amber."

Relief, guilt and finally uncertainty scrolled across Nate's face. He shook his head. "I can't stay here when you're out there. She'll be okay now and she'll sleep most of the day anyway. I know Adam's watching your back, but I'll feel better being there myself."

"She'll be fine."

Nikki turned at the sound of Adam's curt and clipped words while Nate rose from his chair.

Adam moved a few steps closer and shrugged. "At least out of the car she'll be fine."

Nikki felt the tension rolling off Nate as he wrapped an arm around her shoulder and studied Adam carefully. "What do you mean?"

Adam shoved his hands into the front pockets of his faded jeans and studied the ground. Finally, he rocked back on his heels and looked at Nate. "I can assure you Nikki is completely safe from any further threats."

The hair on the back of Nikki's neck stood on end. "How do you know?"

Adam studied Nikki's face and a strange mix of emotions she couldn't decipher emanated from his eyes. He closed the distance between them and stroked his thumb across her cheek, almost as if he were trying to console her. "Remember last night at dinner, Nate and I went to the bar while you and Amber went to the ladies' room?"

Nikki frowned in confusion but nodded.

Adam slid his hand back into his pocket as the muscle in his jaw tensed. “Tell me what happened when you got back to the table. You had dessert, right? Was it already at the table when you got there or did you order it when you got back?”

Nikki flicked a questioning glance to Nate, who was staring at the floor deep in thought. Tension began to thrum through her body and a chill crept over her skin. She didn’t understand where Adam’s question was leading but she instinctively knew her answer was important. And the weight of that knowledge made her nervous.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, replaying the scene in her mind as she began to recap the events. “We ordered and then went to the restroom. On the way, Amber and I passed a waiter carrying a tray full of desserts. I looked at the chocolate silk and told Amber I’d made a huge mistake. I should’ve gotten it instead of the key lime pie. She laughed and said she was thinking the same thing, only in reverse. By the time we’d gotten back to the table we’d agreed to trade off. I ate her chocolate silk and she ate my key lime.”

Adam took a deep breath before flicking his gaze back to Nate. After a long pause, where each man seemed to be studying the other, or trying to reach each other’s minds, Adam shifted his attention back to Nikki. “Where was your mother?”

Nikki frowned and scrunched up her face in confusion. “She waited at the table while we went to the restroom. When we got back she went.”

“What was her reaction when you and Amber switched off desserts? Did she seem upset? Did she try to stop you?”

Nikki folded her arms across her stomach and hitched her hip with a disgusted huff. “She didn’t know. She got up right after we were seated and by the time she came back we’d finished them off.”

Nate dropped his grasp on her shoulders, pushed his hands through his hair and muttered, “Fuck,” as he walked back to Amber’s bed.

She looked back to Adam, who appeared to be in physical pain, then threw her hands up in the air in frustration. “Would you please tell me what the hell is going on? What

does dessert have to do with anything?” She switched her focus back to Nate. “And why are you angry? I’m completely lost here.”

Adam took another step toward her and softened his expression. Holding her gaze steadfastly, he said, “Amber ate the dessert you were supposed to eat.”

“Yeah, I just told you that.”

He locked his jaw and ground out, “Your dessert was poisoned with something, Nikki. But you didn’t eat it, Amber did.”

Shock reverberated through her system as she processed this information. Oh. My. God. Someone had tried to poison her. She jerked her head around to look at Amber as tears filled her eyes and a pain lanced through her gut. Shit. She should be the one lying there instead of Amber. And she’d give anything to trade places with her.

“I can’t believe she’d do something like this,” Nate said, shaking his head, incredulous. He stood with hands on hips, feet shoulder-width apart in a battle-ready stance.

Adam slowly nodded. “Your mother’s sick, Nate. She needs help. And she needs it now.”

Nikki was still reeling from the revelation that someone had intentionally tried to poison her when Adam and Nate’s conversation seeped into her tired brain. Her head snapped from Adam to Nate and back to Adam. Heart pounding, breathing shallow, she thought she might pass out from the lack of oxygen. “Are you saying Mama poisoned Amber? While trying to poison me?” Adam nodded while Nate turned his back to her and began a gentle caress of Amber’s face.

She collapsed into Nate’s chair. How could this have happened? How did their mother get this far out of control and her not notice?

She should have seen the warning signs and somehow prevented this from happening. Nate must be furious with her. She stood and touched her fingers to his tense shoulder. “I’m sorry, Nate. I should have been paying closer attention to her. I knew she wasn’t well but...shit.”

She turned her attention to Amber, brushed away a stray lock of hair Nate had missed and whispered through tears, "I'm sorry you got caught up in this."

"Sis, it's not your fault. She's sick. We've both known she wasn't well but I don't think either of us could've ever guessed she'd do something this extreme." He squeezed her hand, as if to drive his point further home. "Don't you dare blame yourself for this."

Emotion clogged her throat and she wrapped her arms around Nate's neck, thankful for his understanding. She took a few moments to shore up her battered emotions before turning to face Adam. "How, exactly, did you come to this conclusion?"

Adam shrugged. "Once I had a chance to sit down and study the letters, I got the feeling it wasn't someone who seriously wanted to hurt you, only scare you into not racing. Like anything or anyone would keep you from racing. Even racing illegally," he added wryly. "When you mentioned your mom's difficulties in coping I started looking in that direction. I still had every crew member of every team checked out, as well as the competitors, but kept coming up empty." He smiled. "For such a smart ass you've certainly gained the respect of everyone I talked to."

She wrapped her arms around her waist and rubbed her arms. She knew it was a compliment but she couldn't take much pride in his praise now. Not when her own mother had tried to poison her and had made an innocent person sick.

"Her body language and expression last night when she heard about Amber told me something was off. That's why I had you go on to Nate's and I stayed behind."

"And she confessed?" Nate asked.

Adam moved his head from side to side in a so-so gesture. "She didn't come right out and say it, but she said enough to make me sure Nikki's safe. I'd never take a chance with Nikki's safety. And I certainly wouldn't be accusing your mother if I wasn't a hundred percent positive."

"Where is she now?" Nikki asked, not at all comfortable with their mother being on her own.

“She’s back in your motor home asleep. I don’t think she slept at all last night. She was probably listening and waiting for you to get sick. Ready to come and take care of you.”

Nikki snorted. “Yeah, and assuage her guilt for poisoning me.”

He flicked his gaze to Amber. “And convince you you were too sick to race. Don’t think it would’ve taken much convincing. Not as sick as she was.”

“Wouldn’t have mattered,” Nate muttered.

At the same time Nikki said, “Don’t underestimate me.”

Nikki turned to her brother and wrapped him in a huge hug. He was the older sibling but she was the one who always felt the need to hold it all together. “I feel horrible this happened. I should have been watching her more closely. And spending more time with her.”

She let go and moved away from him, pushing her fingers through her hair. The overwhelming guilt she’d immediately felt gave way to anger. Anger at her mother and anger with herself for allowing things to get out of control. “How could she do this? Shit, she tried to poison her own daughter.” As bile rose in her throat, she looked at Amber again. “I wish it had been me, instead of Amber, suffering because of our fucked-up family situation.”

“I’m as guilty of missing the signs as you are, Sis. We can’t beat ourselves up for it now. We just need to get her help.”

Nikki nodded, not really in agreement, but not willing to argue the point any longer. “I need to go get my head on straight and get ready to race. You stay here with Amber.”

She turned to Adam and found herself at a loss for words. Between the complicated mix of feelings she had for him, the guilt, anger and betrayal she felt from the unbelievable revelation her mother had tried to poison her and the sadness she felt for Amber, her head was an emotional disaster area.

Adam had made her think it might actually be okay to let someone be there for her, to lean on them and allow them to take care of her. Watching how sweet Nate had been

with Amber had only reinforced those feelings. But between his need to dominate and the fact he'd admitted to having a girlfriend, Adam obviously wasn't the one to fill the role.

Her throat closed up and her chest ached. Needing to leave before she revealed too much, she gave him a sad smile. "Thanks. For everything," she added, hoping he'd understand all that encompassed. Then, she dropped her head, fought back the sting in her eyes and walked away.

Chapter Nine

Nikki held her hand straight up, flicked her wrist and sent the spoon spinning across the kitchenette where it landed in the sink with a clang. Next, she shifted her gaze to the trashcan and judged the distance. Probably not a good idea to try making that shot. If she missed and the ice cream container landed on its side, she'd have to get up and get it before the remnants ran all over the floor.

And she didn't intend to budge from her horizontal position on the couch.

She carefully placed the container on the floor, making sure it stayed upright, then stretched out. She propped her head on the armrest and rested a bent leg against the back of the sofa. Nestling down into the soft cushions, she clutched a pillow to her chest and closed her eyes.

As she lay there dozing off and on, she decided there had never been a more fucked-up weekend. The weekend her dad died held the distinction as being the most horrible weekend of her life, but this one took the cake for total and complete fucked-upness.

Considering she'd escaped the weekend without a crash, and had placed second in the finals, it would have been tempting to say the black cloud had lifted and a new kind of relationship was beginning for Kincaid Racing and The Virginia Motorsports Park. But her mother poisoning Amber, and Nikki getting her heart broken were evidence that the black cloud still loomed over them.

And now she was feeling guilty because she'd stayed at the track while Nate had flown back to deal with their mother alone. Her original plan had been to stay overnight and have a leisurely drive back the next day. Nate had insisted she stick with her original plan. At the time, right after the race and the adrenaline crash, she hadn't had the emotional or physical strength to argue with him. Now that she'd had a little time to rest,

and had revived a few of her abused brain cells with a carton of ice cream, she wished she hadn't agreed.

A quick rap on the side of the coach, followed by the door flinging open, had Nikki on her feet in a fraction of a second, frantically searching for something more lethal than a pillow or the empty ice cream container.

Nate reached to steady her, laughing. "It's just me, Nik. Damn, settle down."

"Jesus Christ!" She gasped for air and fell back on the couch. "You scared the shit out of me." She dropped her head to the back of the sofa and waited for her heart rate to slow and the dizzying adrenaline rush to subside. As everything returned to normal, she lifted her head and glared. "What are you still doing here? I thought you left hours ago."

Nate settled into the leather recliner, which he considered his, stretched out his long legs and laced his hands behind his head. "I needed to go over some things with Carl since he'll be handling things at the shop tomorrow and Tuesday. While I waited for the plane, I wanted to come and talk to you about a few things."

"Well I'm glad you're still here." She stood and headed toward the back of the coach. "I was feeling guilty for letting you go back and deal with Mama by yourself." As she walked through the kitchenette and into her bathroom, she yelled over her shoulder, "I'll get Jeremy to hook up the car to the back of the coach and I'll fly back with you. Let me secure a few things and I'll be ready to go."

"No, you won't," Nate said, following her. "Stay here tonight, enjoy the quiet of the track, take a little bit of time for yourself and drive back tomorrow...with Adam."

Nikki dropped her toothbrush into the sink and whirled around to face him. "What?"

Nate rubbed the back of his neck and worked his head around in a circle. "Sit down a minute so we can talk."

She narrowed her eyes and studied him. "What's going on? Why is Adam coming back here? I'm perfectly capable of driving home by myself."

He took her by the elbow and led her into the bedroom, pushing slightly and forcing her to sit on the bed. He propped himself in the doorway and crossed his arms. "This

doesn't have anything to do with you driving home. It has everything to do with Adam, and you giving him a chance. He's a good guy. Shit, he's a great guy."

"Wonderful. You date him."

Nate flashed a quick glimpse of teeth. "Not my type. And besides, he's only got eyes for you."

Nikki snorted. What a crock of shit. But it didn't matter if he did have eyes only for her. There was still the issue of his lifestyle and she didn't know how she felt about that. She crossed her arms in a defensive gesture. "I don't think you know your good buddy, Adam, like you think you do. If you really knew what kind of guy he is you wouldn't be pushing like this." She shook her head, sorry for Nate because he so overestimated his friend. "You have no idea what you're suggesting."

It took Nate several minutes to respond and the longer he looked at her the more his gaze felt like lasers slicing through her. She squirmed from the intensity of his stare and the silence began to roar. *Not good.*

He scrubbed his hand across his face and sighed. "Yeah, I do know what kind of guy he is." He paused for a moment, maybe for effect, or maybe to give her time to absorb the full scope of what he was implying before he dropped the big bomb. "And he's exactly the kind of guy you need."

Nikki's mouth dropped open and she stopped breathing. She'd heard her brother's words but they weren't speaking the same language. She'd been trying to tell him his friend got off on dominating women. What was he telling her? And what the hell did he mean, he's exactly the kind of guy she needed?

She dropped her arms and gripped the edge of the mattress. She didn't make decisions about who she dated based on her brother's opinion, but this conversation seemed to be about more than dinner and a movie. She leaned forward, thinking maybe if she got closer she would understand better. Articulating each word she said, "Tell me what kind of guy you think he is. And tell me what kind of guy you think I need. And why."

She'd always found his lopsided grin cute and endearing. Now she found it annoying and disconcerting. Like... Well damn, like Adam's. "I know Adam is a Dom, and a damn good one."

She jerked her gaze up to his. *He knew?*

"I also know you're like a bulldozer with the guys you date. Adam isn't going to let you push him around and you need someone like him. Someone stronger than you, to help you with the load you insist on carrying by yourself." He threw out a hand to cut off her impending argument. "This is as far as I'm going into your personal life, but I know Adam would be good for you."

Nikki sat up straighter and stared at her brother. After eyeing him for several minutes, she came to the only logical conclusion. "Have you been drinking? With the mandatory drug tests I know you'd never risk smoking anything, and you seem sober, but you sure as hell aren't thinking straight." Recognizing how tense she'd gotten, she forced her shoulders to relax and softened her tone. "You've always been vague about this, but how do you know him? You guys don't seem to have anything in common."

"I've known him a while. We're part of the same BDSM group." His smile broadened and turned conspiratorial. "He's the one who introduced me to Amber."

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. She took a deep breath and swallowed hard. "Are you telling me you're a... Is Amber a..." Her voice came out as a hiss and she was unable to finish the question, but she knew he'd understand. She held her breath and waited.

He laughed. "Yeah, I'm a Dom and Amber is my submissive."

She blew out the breath she'd been holding and her shoulders slumped. "Well, shit."

He laughed and uncrossed his arms, letting one hand fall to his side while resting the other on his hip. "Not sure I understand that response."

She pushed her fingers through her hair and scowled. "It's kind of complicated."

"Try me."

"Adam's not a jerk."

Nate looked amused but held back his laughter. "No, he's not."

“Since I’ve figured out he’s an okay guy my only line of defense against him has been that he’s a Dom. Even though he told me I had a distorted view of the lifestyle.” She shifted her gaze away from Nate as she remembered the things Adam had done in an effort to back up his claim. “I still believed someone who got off on dominating women must be a major egomaniac with issues.”

When she looked back at him, the corners of his mouth were twitching. His cheek drew in as he began chewing on the inside of it, probably in an effort to keep from laughing at her. “And now?”

“You’re not an egomaniac. In fact, you tend to shy away from interviews and the spotlight and attention in general. I’ve seen you with Amber, you treat her great and it’s obvious how much you care about her. And she seems to love you just as much. That kills my theory of Doms being people with starving egos, who feed their cravings by forcing women to give them attention.”

He burst out laughing. “Adam’s right, you do have a distorted view.” He swiped a hand down his face, seemingly wiping away the laugh. “Sorry, go ahead, finish what you were saying.”

“You like Adam and, as you said, you trusted him with my life. I guess if I’m ever going to give a relationship a real shot...” She chewed on her lower lip and stared at the carpet. If this whole Dominance and submission thing wasn’t a package deal with Adam she wouldn’t hesitate. But it was and it required she wade into a deep level of trust that terrified her. She shrugged and looked back to Nate. “Maybe I should try to trust him. I know you’d never suggest I be with someone you thought would intentionally hurt me, in any way.”

All traces of humor instantly left Nate as he shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and his shoulders and arms tensed. “Damn straight. The last guy I suspected of hurting you ended up in the emergency room.”

Nikki froze. No one had ever mistreated her—no one had ever been given an opportunity to mistreat her—except Jared, and she hadn’t told a soul about what he’d done. She’d been young and naïve and had honestly believed he cared. Living with her

own idiocy had been bad enough. Having anyone else know about it would have been mortifying.

He'd been a few years older than her and an expert at charm and romance. He enjoyed racing and spending time with her family. He'd been a fan of her dad and, she realized later, had used her to get close to him.

She'd been a virgin when she met Jared, wanting to wait and give herself to the right person. She'd been such a fool to think he was the one. Graduation night seemed like the perfect time, a great way to begin the next chapter of her life. But after her graduation ceremony and dinner he'd started drinking. And kept drinking. He'd even continued to drink after they'd checked into the hotel room he'd reserved for her special night. By then, she'd changed her mind. She didn't want her first time to be with someone too shitfaced to even remember the act.

However, Jared decided she wasn't allowed to change her mind. Despite being drunk, he was still stronger than her and had been able to hold her down and take her virginity anyway.

She'd never wanted anyone, especially Nate, to know about that night and how she'd allowed things to get so out of control. Hoping for a small miracle, that that night remained her secret, she cautiously asked, "What are you talking about?"

He turned and looked out the bedroom window. "I don't know what Jared did to you and I don't want to know. I'm still afraid I'd kill the son of a bitch if I knew the whole truth. The day after your graduation, I knew something was wrong. For days you kept to yourself, staying mostly in your room. And I heard you crying a couple of times."

When he turned around to face her again, his brown eyes were dark and narrowed and any intelligent person with an ounce of social skills would recognize the warning flares being fired. "I finally found him downtown about a week later and confronted him. Let's say the answers he gave didn't make me very happy. By the time I got finished with him his friends had to scoop him off the ground and throw him in the back of his truck. I found out later they'd actually driven him straight to the emergency room and claimed he was in some sort of bizarre accident."

She launched off the bed and threw her arms around his neck. “I love you.” It didn’t take away the pain and shame she’d lived with all these years, but it made it a little easier knowing Jared hadn’t gotten away with it completely.

Nate laughed and enveloped her in a bear hug. “I love you too, Sis. Very much.” After a few minutes, he took her by the shoulders and held her at arm’s length. “And I want to make sure you understand something else.” His tone and expression were serious. “I love Amber. Hell, I adore her. If we had a regular vanilla relationship, it would be great. Having the type of relationship we do makes our bond even stronger. She doesn’t submit to me because I demand it. She does it because it fulfills a need she has and it’s a gift she gives to me. She turns herself over to me and allows me to hold her body, heart and soul in my hands. I cherish her submission for the gift it is and I always treat her with love, respect and dignity.”

Frustrated, Nikki blew out a breath and pushed her fingers through her hair. Okay, her view of Dominance and submission was warped. She still had one more problem—the other woman. She’d admit to being a spoiled brat, the center of the universe to the men in her life—at least until Amber came along—and she wasn’t about to make it a habit sharing now. She also didn’t want to contribute to another’s hurt by seeing Adam when she knew he was involved.

She folded her arms and sighed. “I am attracted to Adam, but there’s one other problem. What about his girlfriend...or girlfriends?”

Nate drew back as if she’d slapped him and looked at her like she had three heads. “He doesn’t have a girlfriend. He wouldn’t be pursuing you if he did.” He shook his head in disbelief. “Don’t you ever give anybody credit for being a decent person?”

Her shoulders stiffened and she raised her chin. “He told me he had a date the night before we came here.”

Nate blinked several times before breaking into a mischievous smile. “You’ll need to ask him more about it. But I can assure you he doesn’t have a girlfriend.”

A knock sounded on the door, causing her to jump.

“That’s Adam,” Nate said, heading out of the bedroom. “I’ll let him in and you can decide if you want him to stay, or if you want to send him back on the plane with me.”

As he got to the bathroom door and started into the kitchenette, Nikki grabbed his arm. “I’m scared, Nate.” She hadn’t meant to blurt it out quite like that, but she had and she couldn’t take it back now. Her previous submission to Adam had been coerced, and because of extreme horniness she’d caved. She didn’t think she could go into the situation, knowing she’d be expected to turn herself over and give him total control of her body. She started to shake and tears burned her eyes again. “I mean I’m really, really scared. I don’t think I can do this.”

Nate pulled her into a reassuring hug. “You put yourself into a race car that goes two hundred mph. You can do anything you put your mind to. You have to decide what you want. Do you want to give Adam a chance, or do you want to send him away?”

She sniffed into his shoulder. “Racing’s different. I’m in control of the race car.” She pulled back from him, laughing through her tears. “In case you haven’t noticed, I don’t give up control easily.”

“No shit.” He slung his arm around her shoulder and put her into an affectionate headlock. “Don’t send him away simply because you’re scared. Be honest with him about everything you’re thinking and feeling and he’ll work through it with you.” He dropped a kiss on top of her head and let her go. “I’m going to let him in and see how Mama’s doing while you decide what you want.”

Nikki wrapped her arms around herself and returned to her bedroom where she flopped down on the edge of the bed. A million thoughts whirled around her head. She didn’t know how to slow any of them down, sort them out or work through them in any kind of logical order.

Instead of trying to work through them in her mind, maybe she should listen to her heart. There, she had no questions or doubts. She wanted Adam and in the very depths of her soul she believed she could trust him the same way Amber trusted Nate.

Nate reappeared in the doorway and with a cock of his head and the raise of an eyebrow asked for an answer.

She swallowed the elephant in her throat and barely managed an affirmative nod.

He broke into a pleased smile. “Go easy on him, Nik. He cares a lot about you.”

She nodded numbly but his words didn’t register. She was too busy trying not to throw up. She watched him walk through the kitchenette and into the salon, out of view. After a brief conversation with Adam, the coach door opened, the steps creaked as Nate went down them, and then the door closed.

The soft snick of the lock clicking into place screamed its warning.

They were alone.

Her stomach flip-flopped before bottoming out. She squeezed her eyes shut as the churning reached a fever pitch and an all-too-familiar fire flared in her chest. She gasped, struggling to pull air into her lungs as her hands grew clammy and sweat broke out on her neck, forehead and upper lip.

Get a grip.

She forced herself to pull in slow, even breaths. She wasn’t afraid of Adam. It was knowing she wouldn’t be in control that left her panicking and terrified.

Adam’s words, “the sub is always in control,” echoed through her mind and helped to loosen the fist squeezing her lungs. The painful pounding of her heart began to slow and her breathing became more normal.

You can stop at any time. You have a safeword.

She could do this. She could trust Adam. If she panicked and needed him to stop, he would. They were only having sex, it wasn’t a life or death situation, everything would be fine.

Under control again, she opened her eyes and found Adam standing in the kitchen, watching and waiting. He’d obviously been watching her work through her panic attack and, while his expression remained neutral, his eyes were warm melted chocolate filled with concern.

He wore black dress slacks, a grey button-down shirt, black loafers and carried a small overnight bag. He looked sexy as hell, tempting as sin and as loving as a true partner.

He set the overnight bag on the floor then walked into the bedroom. Stopping in front of her, he extended his hand and greeted her with a warm and caring smile. “C’mon, let’s go sit out there.”

She gave a sigh of relief, thankful for the opportunity to go to the living room where she’d feel far less intimidated. She felt the heat radiating from him before she even made contact. The second she slipped her hand into his everything inside warmed and the jumbled puzzle pieces slipped into place. She knew, with every fiber of her being, he’d never harm her, nor would he ever let anyone else. She shifted her gaze to his face. All the tenderness he’d shown before was shining through, as well as something that looked a lot like love.

He sat on the sofa, then pulled her onto his lap. She stiffened and felt herself begin to blush with memories of the last time she’d been sitting on his lap. Slightly uncomfortable, and unsure of what to do with her hands, she linked her fingers together and laid them in her lap.

She almost snorted at her prim and proper posture, but Adam began rubbing her back and all she could do was close her eyes and relax into his touch. All this drama was ridiculous. Of course she’d rather be the one in control, but instinctively she’d known from the beginning it wouldn’t work that way with him. Which was the reason she’d spent an enormous amount of time and effort avoiding him. He rested his other hand on her leg and absently swiped his thumb across her knee. The heat from his hand seeped through her jeans and, between the casual stroking and caressing, she relaxed to the point of nearly melting.

“I hear you did well this weekend. Congratulations.”

She slowly opened her eyes and turned her head to face him. “Yeah, I’ll take second. Especially here. Thanks.”

He tipped his head to the side and smiled. “I really do want to watch you race. Maybe I can go with you another time.”

“I’d like that,” she said, shocking herself first by saying it and second by realizing she meant it.

His eyes twinkled and his smile grew mischievous. “You’ve missed me.”

Her breath hitched and her stomach tightened. When his smile spread from his mouth to his eyes he was one of the most handsome men she’d ever seen and he became irresistible. Still unwilling to fully succumb to his charm, she rolled her eyes. “Yeah. It was a real struggle. No one here to harass me. Nobody telling me what to and what not to wear.”

His eyes darkened and grew hooded as the playful smile turned rakish and menacing. “You want it, don’t you?”

She crossed both arms protectively and stiffened. “Want what?”

He held her gaze as the air crackled with sexual electricity. “Your punishments.”

She froze. Did she? Is that why she brought up the yellow shirt?

His hand had slipped under her shirt and, as his fingers stroked her skin, it was like fire being trailed up and down her spine. Everything inside her erupted into a ball of flames but, despite the heat emanating from the inside out, she began to shiver.

“Why are you shaking?” he asked, his tone soft and low. She tried to look away but he caught her chin in his fingers. “Don’t turn away from me. No hiding, remember?”

Yeah, she remembered he’d said that but she’d never agreed. “Because...” She bit down on her bottom lip. Too ashamed to admit she got turned on simply thinking about what he might do to her, and the trembling came from nervous anticipation, she went with a partial truth. “I don’t know what to expect.”

The corner of his mouth tipped up. “That’s part of the fun. But, I promise, you don’t need to be afraid.” The sparkle in his eyes twinkled as he added, “And there’s no need to wait any longer.”

Her breath hitched while her heart tripped over itself. “What?”

He slipped his hand out from under her shirt and dropped his other hand to pat her knee. “It’s time. Stand, right here in front of me.”

It surprised her to realize she did want this with him. She wanted to know what he did to his subs, she wanted his hands on her and she wanted more of what he’d given her before.

But instinct caused her to bristle at his commanding tone and she glared at him with her pissed-off-bitch look. “Excuse me?”

He met her glare with a slightly amused expression. “You knew what to expect if I stayed. Every time I have to repeat myself, or you balk when I tell you to do something, additional punishments get tacked on. Now stand.”

She blew out a puff of air. He was right. By letting him stay she’d effectively given her consent he’d be in control, at least for tonight, and she’d stand by her agreement no matter how difficult. But before she went any further she still needed to know one thing, and he could kiss her ass if he had a problem with her asking the question. “Are you involved with someone?”

He pulled his head back and studied her closely. After a few heartbeats, he grinned. “That’s what set you off the other night, right before your mother arrived, isn’t it?”

She refused to allow him to skirt around the issue by asking another question. But when she only glared and didn’t answer he cocked an eyebrow and gave her a look that said, *I’m waiting and I expect an answer. Now.*

She huffed. She would never win with him. “Fine. Yes, that’s what set me off. I told you I’m no good at sharing. Nate said you don’t have a girlfriend, but you told me you had a hot date. What’s the truth?”

He appeared pleased with her answer and began absently playing with her hair. “There is nobody else in my life, and there hasn’t been for a while. Since the moment I saw you, all I’ve wanted is you. Yes, I’ve had play partners and I’ve trained a few submissives, but I haven’t been involved with anyone in over a year. And there’s a big difference for me in playing with someone, and being involved with them.” He took her chin in his fingers again and held her in place. Locking gazes he clarified, “I don’t want to only play with you. I want you in my life completely.”

Her stomach and throat tightened with emotion. She never would’ve believed Tight Ass capable of making such a declaration, but before she caved completely she still had one more question. “What about the hot date you had the night before we left? Were

you—” her stomach heaved with the thought but she forced the question, “—training a submissive?”

A huge grin lit up his face and he laughed. “No. I was having dinner with my daughter.”

She never saw that one coming and if he hadn’t been holding on to her she might have fallen off his lap. “You have a daughter?” How did she not know this? “What’s her name? How old is she? You were married?”

Love and pride emanated from him. “Her name’s Megan and she’s ten. Her mother and I divorced when she was six. She stays with me every Friday night and since I wouldn’t be home this past Friday, I took her to dinner on Tuesday night. I don’t miss my time with her unless it’s for something pretty damned important.” He ran his fingers through her hair and stopped when he had a handful. Tugging slightly, he added, “I decided you were worth it.”

A giant fist squeezed around her heart. *Nikki, you can be such a bitch sometimes.* She’d been thinking terrible things about him, cussing him for being a jerk, and he’d been having dinner with his daughter.

“Are you satisfied, now?” he asked, a slight smirk playing on his mouth.

No, she wasn’t satisfied, not even close. She’d fallen for him even when she believed him a domineering jerk with a kind streak. Now she knew the truth. He was a kind, compassionate and loving person with a dominant streak.

And she was in deep shit.

She smiled and gave a slight nod. “Thanks for your honesty.”

“You will get nothing less than complete honesty from me. And I expect the same from you. Understood?”

“Understood.”

She couldn’t ask for more. She also couldn’t delay the inevitable any longer, and she didn’t want to. She wanted to know what Adam would do to her. She wanted the experience of turning herself over to him, someone she *knew* she could trust. Mostly, she wanted Adam.

She took a deep, fortifying breath, rose to her feet, turned and stood directly in front of him.

Ready.

Willing.

Chapter Ten

Adam appeared too overwhelmed to speak. She watched his throat work as he swallowed hard and his jaw muscle tightened then released. Emotion glistened in his eyes and was equally evident in his voice when he said, “I want you on your knees, right here in front of me.”

She dropped to her knees as he leaned over and unzipped the overnight bag. *Oh fuck!* It wasn't filled with clothes and a toothbrush as she had assumed. It was filled with...stuff. She watched, wide-eyed and silent, as he pulled out a silk scarf followed by a pair of leather cuffs. When he pulled out a hairbrush and leather strap, she began to tremble. When the small paddle appeared, she gave thanks for being on her knees because, otherwise, they would have buckled.

Once he had everything lined up next to him, he leaned back, stretched his arms along the back of the sofa and looked at her with a scorching gaze.

Her blood turned molten under his stare and when he commanded, “Take off your shirt and bra,” she became volcanic.

Nervousness, excitement and anticipation all bubbled up within her. Her fingers shook as she undid the buttons on her blouse, sometimes taking two or three tries before getting them undone. She pushed the fabric off her shoulders and let it slide down her arms to the floor. Her bra had a front-clasp fastener and with a flick of her fingers, she flipped it open.

His eyes grew impossibly darker and became hooded as he focused on her breasts. Her nipples peaked under his scrutiny as she slid the bra off and let it drop to the floor with her blouse.

“I love the way you respond for me,” he murmured. His hungry gaze wandered down to her stomach then back to her eyes. “Now, undo your jeans and push them down as far as you can without standing.”

She swallowed hard while her stomach pitched and rolled. Curiosity, excitement, dread. What a strange combination of emotions. If he would tell her what he planned to do it wouldn't be as disconcerting. She could be prepared. But he'd already made it clear that wasn't going to happen so, as she struggled to undo the button of her jeans, she became a victim to her wild imagination.

Finally, the button slipped free and she hooked her thumbs into the waistband of her pants, wiggling her hips as she worked the tight material down her ass.

Was the fabric this rough and scratchy a few hours ago? With every sensation magnified, even rough and scratchy was stimulating. She was so aroused she might be able to come from nothing more than a strong breeze.

Or a soft touch.

As if reading her mind, Adam stretched toward her, but didn't touch her where she most wanted. Instead, he brushed a finger down the middle of her breasts, stoking her fire and causing it to flare even hotter. In a barely there touch he circled her left nipple then gave a gentle squeeze. “Keep your eyes closed.”

She did as he asked, listening as he moved things around on the sofa. With her eyes closed, she became more aware of her surroundings and for the first time, she noticed his scent. It wasn't a strong aftershave or cologne but more like the fresh smell of soap and shampoo. It grew stronger, as did the heat from his body, when he leaned in close and wrapped the cool silk scarf around her head. He tied it at the back and adjusted it to make sure her eyes were covered.

“The blindfold will help you concentrate on my voice, the feel of my hands and make you more sensitive to touch. Does it feel okay?”

She nodded slightly. “Yes.”

“Sir,” he prompted. She didn't immediately respond but instead chewed on the inside of her cheek. Adam's fingers gripped her chin and tilted her head up. She didn't know

why, because of the silk scarf she couldn't see him, but she supposed it allowed him to see her face more clearly.

"It's not an ego trip like you think it is. Yes, calling me Sir shows you respect my position as your Dominant, but it also sets the mood and the tone." He didn't sound angry, only firm. "It helps put you into sub-space quicker."

She didn't know what sub-space was but it seemed important. And wanting to please him, she took a deep breath and acquiesced. "Yes, Sir, it's fine. Thank you."

"Good girl." She heard the approval in his voice and a warm rush of happiness washed through her. "Now, clasp your hands together and hold them out in front for me."

He wrapped the first cuff around her left wrist, slid the strap through the buckle and fastened it. She'd expected the leather to be stiff and to dig into her skin. But, as she moved her wrist in a circular motion, getting used to the feel of the leather against her skin, she found it to be soft and, actually, quite comfortable.

He fastened the other cuff around her right wrist. "These cuffs are important to you. Do you know why?"

She shook her head. "No, Sir."

"You're learning fast," he said, and she heard the smile in his tone. Adjusting the fit of the cuff he continued, "It absolves you of all responsibility. I now make the decisions for you, and the only choice you have is whether you decide to use your safeword. The cuffs actually free you. Do you understand?"

The click of a lock and the slight tug as the cuffs were fastened together caused her a moment of terror. Adam must have sensed her panic because, as the pressure built in her chest and she found herself gasping for air, he gently stroked her hair and whispered soft words of encouragement.

When the spike of fear began to taper, she reminded herself she had a safeword. This was Adam and she was safe. She considered what he'd said. She didn't have to do anything except follow his commands. Already knowing it made her happy to do as he asked, she breathed in long and deep and let the full impact of the situation settle over her in the form of an amazing serenity.

Knowing he waited for an answer, she nodded slightly. “I understand.” After several heartbeats, she remembered the rest. “Sir,” she added snidely and gave him a crooked smile.

He chuckled before the sound of rustling fabric filled the air. She had the sensation he now stood in front of her. She heard his belt buckle being unfastened and the rasp of his zipper sliding down. Anticipation curled low in her belly and she licked her lips.

“You are so incredibly beautiful on your knees like this. I have to see you with my cock in your mouth.” She heard more fabric being moved then felt the soft, moist head trail across her cheek and down the side of her neck, marking her. He ran the tip across her bottom lip and tapped. “Open up, sweetheart.”

She felt like a starving woman who hadn’t eaten in days and her mouth watered with the anticipation of tasting him. Ready to take him inside, she eagerly opened her mouth but soon learned his size presented a problem. As she struggled to take all of him her frustration must have been evident.

He snaked his fingers through her hair, controlling the movement of her head. “Relax. I’ll teach you how to take all of it.”

A stab of jealousy shot through her, as she wondered how many women he’d taught to do this. She forced herself to dismiss those thoughts and shifted her entire focus on satisfying him. Savoring every inch, she ran her tongue along the sensitive underside, down to the base and back up again. She sucked, then gently nipped at the engorged head before wrapping her lips around him and sliding down as far as she could go.

She was treated to a hiss of pleasure before he said, “Okay, relax your throat muscles.” He began pushing in to her, further and further. She feared she’d gag but she forced herself to relax and concentrate, determined to do this for him.

“Keep your muscles relaxed. That’s it. You’re doing great.”

With the tickle of pubic hair and the heat of his body on her face, she realized she’d taken every glorious inch. She swelled with pride and had never been more satisfied than she was in that moment.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and pushed her head back, before pulling her down on him again. “Your mouth feels so fuckin’ good.”

He began to tremble and his grasp on her head tightened. His pace increased and became rougher. He jerked and lunged, then growled from deep in his chest as hot liquid pumped down her throat.

She heard him take a shuddering breath as he withdrew from her mouth then readjusted his clothing. He stroked the side of her face and cupped her jaw in his palm.

“You’re incredible.” He wrapped his hands around shoulders and lifted her. “I want you to stand, I’ll help you.”

His voice was rough with passion and it was like gasoline to her already overheated system. She was thankful she still had on panties, no matter how skimpy they might be, because otherwise the proof of her arousal would soon be running down her thighs.

His calloused hands were gentle as he wrapped them around her waist and moved her into position next to him. “Lean forward and lay down. Time for your over-the-knee spanking.”

She’d had trouble keeping her balance with her hands buckled together and her jeans tight around her thighs, but as his words registered, the trembling became Richter-scale measurable and she stumbled, nearly falling.

Adam tightened his grip on her waist. “I’ve got you.”

“Why can’t I take my jeans off?” she asked, flustered and frustrated.

“Why do you want to?” He sounded amused.

“Because they’re uncomfortable. I can’t move very well.” And having her pants around her thighs like this made her feel wicked and wanton and shameful for liking it.

He chuckled. “Not being able to move very well is the point of cuffs and restraints.” He settled her across his lap and stretched her arms above her head. “How does it make you feel, knowing if anyone saw you right now they’d know exactly what’s going on? Your hands are bound, you’re laying across my lap with your pants partway down, your ass is exposed by the thong you’re wearing. You’re obviously about to get your ass spanked.”

She shuddered and clenched her thighs tightly together. How could his words affect her as much as a physical touch? No one would see them. The doors were locked and the track was basically deserted, but the idea of it sent butterflies rushing through her stomach and it became a struggle to breathe.

His rough hands stroked the heated flesh of her back and ass. “Tell me. How does it make you feel?”

“Hot.” It was the only word that came to mind and she only trusted her voice to speak short, single syllable words.

“I have waited what seems like a lifetime to get my hands on you. I can’t even begin to tell you how incredible you are. Your hands stretched above your head like this shows off the muscle definition in your shoulders and back.” Seemingly talking to himself more than to her, his voice grew huskier and deeper.

Her body continued to respond to his words, pleased he found her beautiful and desirable.

As his hands kneaded and stroked her flesh, she began to writhe. In the dark recesses of her mind a voice whispered *yes, punishment*, but unable to contemplate the ridiculous nature of that thought, she focused on the obvious. She needed his touch. Her clit was swollen and throbbed, the flood of arousal had to be soaking through her panties, her sensitive nipples were being scratched by the rough fabric of the sofa and she was burning up from the inside out.

“Incredible,” he mumbled as he rubbed his hand over first one cheek followed by the other. One hand stroked up her spine to her shoulders as the other continued to caress her ass.

Suddenly, *Whack!*

Shocked, she tried to jump as heat shot through her, but the hand on her back held her firmly in place. “Ow. Shit, that hurt.”

“It was supposed to. That’s why it’s called punishment.” He didn’t exactly chuckle but she heard his amusement.

Whack!

This time the blow landed on her other cheek. Before she could react, the hand on her back began smoothing its way down her spine, while the hand inflicting the pain dropped and began massaging her clit through the fabric of her panties. Unable to decide if she wanted to yell or purr, she settled for something in between. How could this feel good and bad, right and wrong?

He began to work her in earnest. Blow after blow landed on first one cheek, then the other, followed by the incredible stroking that brought her closer and closer to climax. It was a steady rhythm—pain, pleasure, pain, pleasure, pain, pleasure.

The sensations swirled into a whirlpool and she began to drown in it. In this state everything morphed and changed. Her ass burned, but it felt good. She teetered on the elusive edge of an orgasm, but it wouldn't come. Her nipples ached and screamed for Adam's touch, but instead of being massaged, they were scratched by the rough fabric of the sofa.

In her mind, she was no longer being spanked for the yellow T-shirt but instead for all the guilt she carried around. For allowing Jared to take her against her will and causing her to bury a basic part of her nature. For not saving her father. For not paying close enough attention to her mother recently and for allowing Amber to get hurt.

Some deeply imbedded dam broke wide open and a sob broke free from her throat as tears streamed from her eyes and collected in the silk blindfold.

"That's it, sweetheart," Adam said, as he gently stroked her legs, back and ass. He murmured soft words of encouragement as he turned her over, pulled off the blindfold and cradled her in his lap. "Let it all go."

What a bizarre mix of emotions and sensations. Her ass was on fire from a spanking that had also aroused and left her desperate for an orgasm. She'd experienced a tremendous release, not of a sexual nature, and at this moment felt more cared for than she ever had.

When the tears stopped and she'd settled down, Adam said, "I'm going to help you stand and pull off your jeans." The tenderness in his tone, and the depth of love in his

eyes caused her fragile state to deteriorate and she had to fight the urge to start crying all over again.

He helped her stand. “Rest your hands on my shoulder, I’ve got you.” She stood in place while he tugged her jeans and panties down her legs. “Lift your leg,” he said, tapping her left foot. She did as he asked, and they repeated the process with her right leg. “Turn around and put your hands on the back of the sofa.”

Unbelievable. She actually wanted him to spank her more. She wanted the cleansing it brought, and she wanted the sensation. She craved the burn and knew, with a little more, she’d come.

He stood behind her, grasped her waist and touched the inside of her ankle with his foot. “Spread your legs for me. Wide.”

She gasped and began trembling again. Lying across his lap had been one thing. But now, naked and spread wide open with everything in full view, she couldn’t hide anything. Not her desire, nor her body’s reaction.

Adam took a step back and drew in a deep, fortifying breath. Christ, he felt like a teenager again, barely able to control himself. Seeing Nikki spread like this, he had to consciously remind himself he was a civilized man, not an animal marking and staking a claim on his mate.

But that’s how he felt. He knew with every fiber of his being Nikki was his, and he’d waited a long time for the opportunity to make it a reality. He’d love her, care for her and kill to protect her.

But right now, he was going to fuck her.

Since he hadn’t refastened his slacks after the incredible blowjob that left him weak-kneed and even deeper in love, it didn’t take much effort to rid himself of them, as well as his boxers.

Focused on Nikki’s punishment—the one he’d instinctively known she needed in order to let go of the guilt she carried around like a suit of armor—he’d forgotten to get out the condoms. He grabbed the box from his bag, pulled one out, ripped it open with his teeth and, in record time, had it rolled over his throbbing cock.

He'd never been this hard, or needed someone like he needed Nikki. And he didn't see a need to wait another second for what they both wanted. But when he turned and saw her, spread open with honey dripping from her pussy, he decided he could wait long enough to have a taste.

Kneeling behind her, he planted his hands on the pink and heated flesh of her ass and spread her open. Her lips were swollen and inviting, as was the tight bud above. He slipped a finger into her, coating it in her juices before brushing it across the puckered opening of her ass.

She tried to clench her muscles to block him but he held her open. "Have you ever had anal sex?" Christ, he was wound so tight his voice sounded like it'd been through a sawmill. He held his breath, waiting for her answer, and prayed he'd have the additional gift of taking her in a way no man ever had.

She shook her head and whispered, "No, Sir."

He released a whoosh of air and smiled. "Well, you will. Not tonight, but soon. Very soon. I intend to have you in every way possible and to imprint myself on every part of you. Inside and out."

She shivered and her thighs quivered.

"Does that excite you?" He continued to run his finger over the sensitive nerve endings surrounding her anus, occasionally dipping into the tight opening, letting her get used to the idea of him being there and accepting his touch. She nodded but didn't answer, causing him to crack his hand across her ass. "I didn't hear your answer, Nikki."

She hissed and through clenched teeth said, "Yes, Sir," all the while pushing her ass back into him, silently asking for more.

He couldn't hold back his smile. She wanted to fight against herself and him, but she was a submissive at heart and couldn't stop her body's natural reaction or her true desires. Rewarding her for her honesty, he stroked his tongue through her slick lips and continued until he was at her anus, intentionally leaving additional moisture around the tiny bud.

He moved his mouth back to her pussy and at the same time pushed his index finger into her tight ass. She moaned deep and low and pushed back into him.

His restraint snapped and he couldn't wait another second to bury himself inside her sweet body. Despite his near-desperate state, he crawled inch by agonizing inch inside, allowing her to gradually adjust to his size. She began to writhe and push back onto him, letting him know she was ready for more and a primal surge of satisfaction rushed through him.

He ran a hand down her spine and was once again led to the tiny bud that had him so inflamed. He'd never been partial to anal sex before, but with Nikki, knowing no one else had ever taken her there, it was quickly becoming an obsession. He'd told her not tonight, but if he waited until after midnight, technically, it would be tomorrow and he wouldn't have to consider himself a liar.

Temporarily satisfying his impulse, he slipped his index finger back inside and was treated to a near-frantic whimper, as well as a tremble that indicated she was on the verge of a climax. He stopped his movements and leaned over her. "You don't come until I tell you to."

He knew the message had gotten through the lusty fog because she immediately stiffened and actually tried to pull away from him. He chuckled. "You're not going anywhere. And you don't really want to, do you? I promise it'll be the best orgasm of your life, but it will be when I tell you."

He heard her teeth being ground to ashes but she didn't try to move away from him. When she realized he wasn't going to continue until she answered, she gritted her teeth together and said, "No, Sir. I don't want to go any fucking where. The only thing I want is for you to make me come."

He burst out laughing, the joy of being with her filling his soul. He knew it would always be like this. She would never be the timid submissive who did exactly as he said, when he said. And he didn't want her to. He suspected he'd fallen in love with Nikki the first time he'd seen her and the fire within her had kept him captivated. She was the submissive but in actuality, he was bound to her and knew he always would be.

He slowly began moving again, his finger and cock gliding in and out of her in perfect sync. It didn't take long before she was writhing again and he felt her fighting to keep her orgasm at bay. She was struggling to please him and his heart swelled with pride and satisfaction at her efforts.

He pushed her until he knew she was at the brink. He leaned over and kissed her neck. "Come for me," he whispered.

She erupted in his arms.

He pulled his finger free, knowing as he did it would send her orgasm soaring even higher. He held her tight as he continued pumping in and out of her, quickly following her over the edge into orgasmic bliss.

Once he regained his composure, he yanked off the condom and dropped it into the ice cream container turned trashcan. Turning, he sat on the couch and pulled her with him, cradling her in his lap. He quickly undid the cuffs and massaged her wrists and hands.

She was a mess with her tear-stained cheeks, puffy eyes and swollen lips. She was also the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. And she was his.

He brushed the hair away from her face and dropped his mouth to hers for a kiss. After a long moment, he pulled back and smiled. "You know you're mine, right? Not just for tonight, but for forever. Are you okay with that?"

Her gaze met his and her unreadable expression caused his heart to clench in fear. Maybe he'd pushed her too hard, too fast. Maybe she needed more time to come to terms with all she was and all he expected from her. Maybe he shouldn't have professed his undying love this soon.

Her face lit up with a smile. "Don't look so worried. I was trying to figure out what to do next to piss you off. I kind of like those punishments."

The weight crushing his chest lifted and he laughed with joy. "Well, you were due two, and you've only gotten one." He wrapped his arms tightly around her and cradled her close to him. When he had her tight little ass adequately exposed he smacked her one good crack. "That's for embarrassing the kid in the pissed off bumblebee."

She laughed and then her expression turned more serious than he'd ever seen her. She swallowed hard and he could tell she was trying to formulate the right words.

He shook his head. "Spit it out. Don't keep anything from me or censor yourself."

Her smile was shy—at least shy for Nikki—and she said, "Thank you. Thank you for seeing what I'd been hiding all along. And thank you for being willing to take a chance on me."

He stroked a finger along her bottom lip. "No thanks necessary. I should be thanking you. You've given me a tremendous gift by trusting me and allowing me to do what I have tonight."

And it was time to move on to the next round. He stood, cradling her in his arms. "I think it's time to move to the bedroom for your second punishment. And isn't it close to midnight?"

About the Author

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Sometimes love won't come. Other times it just won't go.

Color My Heart

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A Red Hot Summer story.

Hannah Myers has had disastrous relationships in the past, but catching her now-ex-boyfriend cheating on her was the worst. As she picks up the pieces of her shattered heart, the last thing she expects to find in the hall outside her apartment is a young *god* asking if he can help. Yeah, he can help! He can take her clothes off, for starters...

Billy Hendricks has dated in the past, but he's never met anyone like Hannah. Their sudden affair is supposed to be just a casual summer fling. But to Billy it is anything but casual. He's seen the passion in her artwork, and he wants more from her than sex.

Hannah tells herself she will not fall in love with Billy. A smart girl needs to safeguard her heart. But how can a smart girl get hunky, wonderful Billy out of her system? Why, with another man!

With Hannah flinging her summer love right and left, things are bound to get colorful.

Warning: This book contains creative sex and a sinfully hot ménage à trois. It may cause heart palpitations, S.O.S. calls to your better half, and all kinds of 911 emergencies. Keeping the A/C on at all times is highly recommended while reading!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Color My Heart:

Ignoring the conversation around him, Billy watched Hannah as she laughed over something Lance said. He could hear her rich, throaty laugh all the way across the patio and he suspected she'd intended it that way. He sat on one of the foldout chairs across the lawn, his drink untouched over his knee, a hand curled around it.

Every time Lance brushed her arm or bent to touch her waist, Hannah kept stealing glances his way—as if to check if he was watching.

Hell yeah, Billy was watching.

And for a moment he felt like sending his chair flying high into the air—in Lance's direction.

Hannah had asked him to act normal at the party, friendly, so Billy had stayed away. He'd figured he wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her, so distance had seemed the wiser choice. And here he was, sitting like a trained little dog waiting for a sign to go fetch.

The thought made him grunt.

Her obsession about people not knowing about them bordered on the insane. And now, hell, now she was coming on to Lance. Right in front of Billy. Evoking a million spirals of emotions inside him, none of them welcome. Much less pleasant.

Billy wasn't stupid.

He knew she'd been hurt.

He knew she was trying to get over some heartless bastard and move on with her life.

He could see the anger that lingered inside her in each of her paintings, but he could also see, *feel*, her passion.

What they had between them wasn't normal. It was sizzling hot chemistry and more. Her reluctance to embrace it, to admit that what they had was the kind of thing a million people waited a lifetime for, was driving Billy crazy.

He couldn't quite make out the way she made him feel, but he'd never felt this way before. He ached to hold her, protect her, make love to her—not just fuck her. He'd had her so many times he'd lost count. And yet each time he did, he wanted more. All of her, all the time.

At work, Billy usually found himself daydreaming about her, anxious for the clock to move the little hand to the six, the large hand to the twelve, so he could get off and finally get to see her.

But Hannah was so guarded, spoke so little about herself. Maybe at one point in his life, more than one woman had annoyed the hell out of Billy by going on and on about what she needed, how everyone including her parents had failed to give it to her, etcetera,

etcetera, etcetera. But where Hannah was concerned, Billy wanted—no, *craved* with every fiber in his being—to know more.

He wanted to know whose pictures had occupied the empty photo frames in her living room. He wanted to know who'd inspired her to paint that blinding, violent masterpiece he'd seen yesterday. He wanted to know why she'd let Billy inside her body, but not her mind, her heart.

He wanted to know *her*, damn it!

This arrangement sucked.

"This is just sex, occasional, no-strings, and certainly no involvement beyond," she'd said that second time they'd "bumped into each other".

"That's fine by me," Billy had said. And it *had* been fine—for like five days. Now it wasn't fine. Nope. It was not fine at all.

And the message Hannah was getting across wasn't very heartening. She was flirting with Lance, leaning close to him, whispering into his ear, right in Billy's line of vision. And as much as Billy hated watching her, his cock felt like a baseball bat. His balls were heavy, an aching pain inside his underwear.

He narrowed his eyes, bile rising up his throat. She was trying to drive him away. Trying to show him they didn't mean anything. *He* didn't mean anything. Of course.

Clenching his jaw together, he rose to his feet and set his drink down on the chair seat. Damned if he was going to sit here all evening watching her. Damned if she thought she could drive him away. And damned if she wasn't asking for it.

He wound his way across the lawn, ignoring a string of salutes and inquisitive gazes as he headed for her.

Now Lance chuckled over something she said and Billy seized the moment to draw up behind her. "I know what you're trying to do," he murmured into her ear, cupping her hips and letting her feel his erection—the erection *she* had given him. "You're trying to make me jealous, drive me away, aren't you?"

She'd gone stiff. Mute.

Well, good. Because he wasn't through talking.

He grazed her earlobe, his voice but a whisper. “Guess what, Hannah? I am so hot for you I’m near bursting. Even if you go on and fuck him, I’m *still* not going anywhere.” He pressed a wet kiss to her ear, his lips lingering against the delicate shell of her earlobe. “I’m in for the long haul.”

“Billy, please, not here.”

He barely heard the words; she spoke so low.

“Not here? Are you afraid of a show, Hannah? You’re doing fine all by yourself—you’re so hot you’d come now if I touched you, wouldn’t you? It excites you...my watching you.”

“Yes.”

A shudder coursed through Billy at that breathy word, lust tightening his muscles. “Ask him up to your room.”

“No, I—”

“Look at the front of his pants, sweetheart. He’s hard for you. You’ve been working him all night. I’ll bet if I stick my hand under your dress right now, you’d be wet as a seal. You *want* to fuck him. You want to see if he can make you feel what I do, don’t you? You want to try someone else, see if he does anything for you?”

“Yes, yes, all right, I do!”

He can run, but he can't hide

Reckless

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A Red Hot Summer story.

Sheriff J.T. Summers promised to keep an eye on his best friend's little sister. What could possibly go wrong? A lot. "Little" Nikki Durant isn't so little anymore. She's sex on a stick, and she's pointed right at him.

Nikki has always loved J.T., and she's through waiting for him to come around. The soaring summer temperature is nothing compared to the heat generated when she sets fire to his senses. With a take-no-prisoners attitude, she's out to get her man. But no matter how many ways she offers it, J.T.'s not buying.

What's it going to take to get him to realize her love for him isn't a passing fling? Get herself arrested? Hmm...

Warning: This title contains one very frustrated hunky sheriff, one very determined heroine, sex by the pool, sex in the office, and yes, they do make it to the bed. Eventually.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Reckless:

J.T. pulled to a stop in front of the ranch and wiped the sweat from his brow. He couldn't wait to jump in the pool. There weren't too many safe places left in Barley for him to hide, but he was safe here.

He climbed out and strode to the house in his swim trunks, flip-flops and T-shirt. He knocked then rang the bell, but when no one answered, he opened the door and let himself in. Jasmine had said they might not be here. Which was fine with him. He could use the alone time to work off some serious sexual frustration.

He made his way through the living room and to the glass patio doors. Beyond, the pool shimmered a sparkling blue, and he nearly groaned as he imagined how nice it was going to feel to immerse himself in its coolness.

He shut the door behind him, kicked off his flip-flops and made a beeline for the deep end. But when he got there, his gaze drifted to the lawn chair situated just a foot from the diving board. And to the beautiful, *naked* woman stretched out, sunbathing.

Fuck me. Fuck him. Fuck a duck.

Nikki was laid out, butt-ass naked, her gorgeous tanned skin glistening in the sun. There wasn't an inch of pale skin anywhere on her, which told him she was no stranger to tanning in the nude.

Her slender legs were slightly bent at the knees and parted, just enough to give him a prime glance at her pussy. He groaned. Dear God, this was so unfair.

His gaze drifted higher to her trim waist and the diamond teardrop ring at her belly button. It glittered in the sun and lay in the hollow of her taut belly. Then he settled on her pert breasts. Perfect. Just fucking perfect. Not too large but not small by any means. Just big enough that they stood erect. Not a bit of sag. If he didn't know better, he'd say they were fake, but he'd been up close and personal, and they were way too soft, too fleshy to be silicone.

Her nipples were dark, maybe from tanning, but they were mouthwateringly erect. Brown, darker than her skin. Puckered and pointed. He closed his eyes and tried to stop the inevitable meltdown.

"I expected you a half hour ago," she said lazily.

His eyes flew open to see her watching him with hazy contentment.

Jasmine. Hell. He'd been royally set up and screwed. So much for friendship. Damn women stuck together like thieves.

"I'll just be going," he muttered. How the hell was he supposed to go for a swim with a woody the size of a tree trunk and her lying in the sun gloriously naked?

"Coward," she said bluntly.

He blinked. "Excuse me?"

She sat up, and he couldn't help but watch the way her breasts swayed with her motion. Or the way he'd caught the most spectacular glimpse of her pussy when she'd spread her legs to put her feet down on either side of the lounge.

She pushed herself up and walked to where he stood. His tongue flipped and tied itself into about thirty knots. He was so going to hell for this.

“You. Are. A. Coward,” she said as she jabbed a finger into his chest.

Before he could react, push her away or whimper like a girl, she slipped her hands down to his crotch and cupped him through the fabric of his swim trunks. Busted. He was so completely busted. There was no hiding that kind of erection from her.

She glanced up at him, her eyes glinting in satisfaction. Then she worked her hands underneath the legs of his shorts, and he sucked in his breath as she found his balls.

“Close your eyes, J.T.,” she said in her sweet, husky voice. “Work with me for a second.”

Despite his vow to resist her at every turn, he found himself closing his eyes as her fingers kneaded his sac. Jesus that felt good.

“Now imagine this. It’s hot. You head to the pool for a swim. Only when you get there, you see a woman sunbathing in the buff. She’s attractive. You wouldn’t mind getting some of her ass.”

J.T. frowned. He didn’t like where she was going with this, even if she was dead-on.

“The woman opens her eyes, and she sees this really gorgeous man staring at her. The man can see she wants him too. She gets up, and he watches her breasts. Imagines what they’d taste like. She’s imagining his mouth around her nipples, and she wants him. God, she wants him.”

J.T. clenched his fists at his sides as her fingers brushed lightly over his dick.

Her voice lowered to a whisper. “She walks over, wanting to touch him, needing him to touch *her*. She runs her hands up his trunks and feels his balls, so big and tight. And then his cock. Like an iron bar. So hard. So rigid. And she begins to fantasize about taking him inside her.”

His chest swelled until he feared exploding. He’d never been so thoroughly seduced by a woman’s voice before.

“Do you know what she does next?”

“No,” he croaked. But he wished. Man, he wished.

She pulled at his trunks, sliding them down his legs until his dick sprang free of the waistband. She knelt on the hard concrete and cupped him in her hands. Her mouth was close, so damn close he could feel her breath over the crown of his dick.

“She takes him in her mouth,” she said just before her lips closed around him.

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