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# Letting Go

Michele Zurlo

# LETTING GO

*Awakenings 1*

**Michele Zurlo**

EROTIC ROMANCE



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**LETTING GO**

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# Letter from Michele Zurlo

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With deep gratitude,

Michele Zurlo

# **DEDICATION**

Many thanks to Laura, a true friend who reads with a merciless eye.  
Mercy is overrated.

This is dedicated to Suzy, Laura, Natalie and everyone who  
encouraged me. Without all of you, this wouldn't have happened.

# LETTING GO

**MICHELE ZURLO**

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## Chapter 1

Sabrina stretched out on the comfortably lumpy maroon sofa in the common room of Rife and Company, the ad agency for which she worked. It was a large room, dominated by a long table in the center for equally long meetings. Sadly, she was responsible for the content of her fair share of those meetings.

At the end where she sat, someone had thoughtfully arranged a living room for more intimate gatherings. She ran meetings from there whenever she could. It usually didn't sit well with Joy White, her boss, but unless she said something, Sabrina didn't move.

Her skirt, which fell to just above her knees when she stood, rode up, but she didn't bother to adjust it. On this beautiful, sunny Saturday morning in June, nobody was around. Besides, she had nice legs. They were short, but shapely. She was an avid swimmer, but her mother wasn't and she had the exact same legs. Sabrina took comfort in the fact that they'd still be there for her when she was approaching sixty.

Before everything went digital, it hadn't been unusual to see a bunch of people in the office, especially on a Saturday. Now when her exciting coworkers wanted to work on the weekend, they did it from home.

Sabrina's grandfather had died the previous week. Everyone knew how close they were, but the mostly false sympathy did little more than annoy her. Sabrina's grandfather had been quite wealthy. Long-lost relatives who wanted a piece of his estate were turning up in droves. Raised to always be polite, Sabrina was tired of the constant company. She needed some time

alone. She needed time to catch up on her work. That wasn't going to happen at home.

When she was five and her sister's father left, revealing that Sabrina wasn't his kid, her grandfather had filled that void in her life the best that he could. Seeing him the way he was at the end was almost more painful than watching his coffin being lowered into the ground. She missed him. They had butted heads as frequently as they had agreed on things. He had respected the way she stood up to him when nobody else would. She wished he was around so she could stand up to him now.

As much as she missed him, she didn't miss his antiquated notions. Like the fact that every woman needed a husband, or—like her sister—a wife. He wasn't prejudiced, but he had his ideas about the way things should be. He nearly went postal when she dumped her college boyfriend because he wanted things she didn't want—namely, marriage. At least, that's the story as she liked to tell it.

Truthfully, she dumped him because the sex was lackluster. Sure, he was handsome and sexy and he tried really hard to please her, but the orgasms just didn't happen. Sex with him left Sabrina unfulfilled. So when he arranged for a horse-drawn carriage and popped the question, she imagined what life would be like with ten, twenty, fifty years of sexual resentment built up. It wasn't pretty, so she turned him down. Since the end of her Stephen Era, she still hadn't found someone who did for her what her sister-in-law did for her sister. She'd been in the next room while they were going at it. Judging from the sounds she heard them both make, Sabrina knew she was missing out on something spectacular.

Grandpa, bless his damn soul, had decided that her inheritance would be a cool twelve million dollars. It was a token inheritance since he'd settled large trust funds on both Ginny and Sabrina years ago. But—and this was a big *but*—she had to get married before her thirtieth birthday and she had to stay married for an entire year. And her mother, who hadn't had a date since Alex Breszewski left twenty-four years ago, had to sign an affidavit attesting to the truthfulness of the marriage. In other words, they had to appear to be in love.

If Melinda Breszewski thought they were faking it, the money would be split between Ginny and the remaining five cousins. Grandpa loved Ginny, settling twelve million on her as well, but he hated the rest of his



grandchildren, and with good reason. They were cold, calculating, and fixated on getting his assets. The two times Sabrina had met them, they pumped him for money. He wrote checks to get rid of them, telling them he'd subtract the amount from their inheritance.

On the plus side, she did have a year once she was married to prove to her mother that she and her husband were actually in love with one another.

Sabrina had found all of this out yesterday and her thirtieth birthday was in four days. Did Grandpa have a sense of timing, or what? She wasn't even seeing anyone! What was the point of having another relationship with sex that didn't do it for her?

She wasn't picky about men. She found all sorts of them attractive and she'd slept with more than she cared to remember. Some were better than others, but none of them were memorable. And that's what she wanted—someone who could take her to those heights she'd glimpsed—and heard—but never reached.

While she sat on the couch feeling sorry for herself, in walked Jonah. Something. She sucked with names. In her business, that was a liability. She'd developed coping mechanisms though, so very few people had noticed her shortcomings. Jonah was new to the corporate world. He used to be a teacher, but had left the profession due to the inadequate pay. That told her Jonah used to be an idealist, but his illusions had been shattered. She didn't know him well enough to know if he was bitter or happy about it all, and she had too much going on in her life to care.

Not that it mattered. Who the hell could she get to marry her by Wednesday?

Jonah nodded at Sabrina. His eyes roved up and down her legs for a second before he sat down all the way on the other side of the room, opening his laptop at the other end of the long conference table. Sabrina understood that to mean that he wanted to be left alone as much as she did. He sat facing her, so she couldn't help but watch him. After all, she really didn't have anything pressing to do and he was easy on the eyes.

Her mother, or Ginny, or Ginny's wife, Lara, or those greedy cousins would be calling the house or stopping by to gloat. The sympathy from her mom, her sister, and Lara was real, but she could tell the rest of them were greedily licking their lips in anticipation of having an inheritance when she

failed to find the place where Mr. Right and Mr. Right Now were the same person.

She wasn't usually so cynical, but this situation stunk. It was like a bad movie from the fifties, except that she knew ending up with a "nice, handsome guy" wasn't something that would make her happy or fulfilled.

She had tried the lesbian thing once, especially after listening to Ginny and Lara, but she couldn't get into it. Maybe she was asexual. That thought didn't make her happy. Of course, she wasn't going to have a discussion about sexual inadequacies with her grandpa. Talking about sex with anyone, even her free-spirited, best friend of a sister, wasn't something she was comfortable doing. She just thought about it. A lot.

Jonah moved, squeaking his chair in the process and distracting Sabrina from her sad, sad life. A week ago, she didn't have these worries. It was interesting how a week could change things.

She studied Jonah. She might not have a memory for names, but she never forgot a face or a conversation. She'd seen Jonah in staff meetings, but she'd never talked to him. She wasn't in the mood to talk now. Looking was enough.

He was about five-foot-ten, which was a good height for a man. Sabrina was five-foot-two, but she did like them tall. He had a slim, athletic build, but because he wore only suits to the office, she couldn't tell if he was muscular or just one of those people who was naturally on the lean side. He had sandy brown hair that would show golden highlights in the sun. It was cut short, but she could see the beginning of corkscrew curls. She wondered whether the texture was soft or coarse.

She wasn't close enough to see his eye color, but he did have nice lips. They were full, but not too big. She didn't think about kissing him or anything like that. She had a policy of not getting involved with anyone at work. It didn't advance a woman's career to be seen as a slut. If it did, she would have tried out about half the guys there. There was no shortage of good-looking men in her office. There was something about advertising that pulled them to the field.

"Is there a reason you keep staring at me?" Judging by the tone of his voice, Jonah was irritated.

What came next oddly surprised Sabrina more than it did Jonah.

"Will you marry me?"

He looked over his left shoulder, and then turned the other way to check behind his right side. “Are you addressing me?”

“There’s no one else in the room,” she pointed out. She could have denied the whole thing and he probably would have let her get away with it, but she didn’t.

“Why would I want to marry you?” His question wasn’t mean; he sounded honestly baffled.

“Are you already married?” Mortification waited in the wings of her emotions. Why was she digging this hole deeper?

“I am not married.” He looked at her in a way she would get to know quite well. To the average observer, it appeared to be a thoughtful look. In a way, it was thoughtful. But the things some people thought were surprising. She would come to find that the hidden depths of this man were downright shocking. “Why would you want to marry me? You don’t even know my name.” It was a valid question.

Sabrina liked his voice. It wasn’t too deep, but it was strong and distinctly masculine. “I do too. It’s Jonah.” Score one for her.

“No, it isn’t.”

Her triumphant smile vanished.

“It’s Jonas.” He emphasized the *s*. “Jonas Spencer.”

Sabrina sat up and smoothed her skirt down. “It’s nice to meet you, Jonas Spencer. I’m—”

“Sabrina Breszewski, Head Creative Director or something else long and boring that basically says not to mess with you.” Of course he beat her to the punch. Who, but a teacher, would know everyone’s name? He even pronounced it correctly, recognizing the “szew” was closer to “chef.” “You’re in charge of deciding who gets which accounts. And you sit on the interview committee, though you weren’t present at mine. Something about Jared Larsen sinking or swimming on his own.”

She smiled again. That wasn’t her title, which was equally stupid and inconsequential, but he had her duties and her attitude toward Jared nailed down. “I recommend, that’s all.”

Sabrina’s strength was in knowing which associates would work well with whom and on which accounts. She was good at judging character. She had a hunch he’d work well with pretty much anyone, so she hadn’t been

too concerned about meeting him in person. She'd looked over his resume and rubber-stamped his application, nothing more.

He was definitely not flattered by her invitation. "I've worked here for four months and this is the first time you've deigned to speak to me."

What grade had he taught? His tone would have hardened seniors on their knees, begging for forgiveness. Not Sabrina, though. "I didn't notice you seeking me out."

He smiled at her for the first time. His smile was something to see. His entire face changed and made her want to do things to make it come back. She saw that he had white, mostly even teeth. The ones on the top next to the middle were slightly twisted, bringing back thoughts of the hot fantasies she'd entertained about David Bowie ever since she first saw *Labyrinth*.

He interrupted her thoughts again. "You didn't answer my question."

"Which was?"

"Why would you want to marry me?"

Sabrina sighed and spilled an abridged version of her sob story. Then, in a masochistic effort to make herself seem more pathetic, she offered him half a million for his services.

He got up and paced slowly in such a way that she had no doubt he owned the room. Jonas had a presence. Maybe it was him. Maybe it was the twelve years he'd spent as a teacher. She liked it. He stopped in front of her and stuck his hands in his pockets. "My apartment building caught fire last month, so I'm technically homeless right now."

She remembered hearing something about that, but she'd dismissed it as a rumor when nobody took up a collection. "I have a house," she informed him. "You can have your own room."

He looked her up and down slowly. She knew she wasn't a bad-looking woman. She was short, but nicely put together. She had long brown, gently curling hair that framed her round face. Her eyes were a nice deep chocolate brown, also round. She'd been told by more than one man that her lips were incredibly kissable, though she didn't necessarily return the sentiment. "So this is to be a platonic marriage?"

She was tired of craning her neck to look up at him, so she stood up. It didn't help. "You can date, have girlfriends, whatever you want. All I need you to do is to pretend you're in love with me well enough to fool my

mother, sister, and a bunch of other self-absorbed relatives, though to a lesser extent.”

He must have figured that her neck was getting sore because he flopped down on the sofa and patted the seat next to him. “I don’t like to rush into things,” he said.

“Well, then I guess the answer is no,” she said. “I need to be married before Wednesday.”

The look he gave her shut her up. Truthfully, it made her quiver a little bit too. She saw that his eyes were green.

“You want me to marry you this weekend so that I can pretend to be a loving husband in front of your relatives. You and I will maintain a professional relationship and I am free to date.” His summation was surprisingly non-judgmental.

“And I’ll pay you half a million dollars at the end of your year of service. Since you’ll be living with me, you can save your money. Maybe buy a house next year.” She smiled. The incentives surely outweighed the cost.

He scratched at the pale stubble on his chin. “It would be nice to not live with my best friend. I mean, she’s great and so is her husband and their new baby, but living there is awkward.” He looked over at her. “I’m sorry, Sabrina. Your deal is tempting, but I can’t do it.”

She thought she had him. She shrugged to cover her bewilderment. “It was a stupid proposition.”

He slapped a hand on her knee, patting it a couple of times before withdrawing. She had mixed feelings about that. He didn’t want to marry her, but he had no problem copping a feel? Still, he had strong hands and a firm grip. A little thrill traveled up her thigh. “No, it’s not stupid. Desperate, maybe, but not stupid.”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “Thanks.” Her sarcasm was unmistakable. She’d rather be called stupid than desperate.

“Don’t you have a boyfriend or someone to whom you’re close who might be better suited for this job?” His tone was both apologetic and concerned.

She shook her head. Sabrina burned her ex-boyfriend bridges pretty fast, another reason to avoid dating at work. “I guess I’ll end up exactly where I’ve always been, minus a grandfather.” She looked over at him. “Can I ask

you why you said no after appearing to actually think it over? Did you think it over or are you amusing yourself?" For some reason, she knew he'd tell the truth.

His shrug was the essence of nonchalance. "I don't want a wife I can't fuck."

Her eyes were as wide as saucers and she blushed furiously. No one had ever used language like that around her. Her mom had always used euphemisms for all bodily functions, and she honestly didn't expect it from someone who spoke like he had been an English teacher.

Emboldened by her reaction, he grinned and continued. "I'm not going to lie to you, Sabrina. I do find you attractive. I've thought about laying you across that table over there and finding out what kind of underwear you have hidden under those sometimes very short skirts more than once."

He paused when she gasped. Her skirts weren't inappropriately short. Well, not the ones she wore to work.

His eyes were glued to the naked flesh above her knees. She wasn't wearing nylons. "For the record, I always hope for a lacy thong, black or peach. I think every man in this office has entertained similar fantasies. But even if I hadn't, I would be hard pressed to marry a woman who only wanted a roommate."

He was cute in a studious sort of way and she wasn't against casual sex. It was less about the money and more about the possibility she might murder every one of her family members who threw a superior look her way while living it up with Grandpa's money. Maybe they could work out a deal?

"What if you meet someone you really like? Wouldn't a physical relationship between us complicate your relationship with her?"

"No."

Sabrina tilted her head to the side, trying to figure out how to take that. "If I were to meet someone and find out he was sleeping with another woman, it would be a deal-breaker."

"I would insist on fidelity on both our parts."

She was taken aback. Okay, he did rub off on her a little. "But it's not a real marriage, Jonas. It's only for a year."

He shrugged, a casual gesture he wore well. "Still, it's a marriage. Not a 'til-death' sort of thing, but a marriage nonetheless."

Her eyebrows drew together. "There's no love involved either."

“No, but there should be honesty and friendship. And sex.”

Did she really want to whore herself out for twelve million dollars? What the hell, she would have done it for free, if only to find an orgasm worth having. She knew the chances of having good sex with someone as proper as Jonas—f-word notwithstanding—were slim to none. Most of the men she tended to date were very proper and very well-mannered. Why would he be any different? What was a couple of minutes once a month?

“How often are we talking about?” She asked the question as if she hadn’t already talked herself into it.

He stretched out his long legs, crossing them at the ankles. “As much as we want. I’d never kick you out of bed.”

“Jonas.” She strove to match the tone he’d used earlier. She was only partially successful.

He laughed at her attempt. “Twice a day?”

“Once a month.”

His smile was teasing. “It’s not your period, Sabrina. It’s wild, wet, and fun.”

That description brought to mind an amusement park. Some of the sex she had amused her, but not too much and not for long, but that wasn’t something she was going to share with him. She made another offer. “Twice a month.”

He laughed, finding her compromise amusing. “Twice a week. Minimum.”

“Are you serious?” She wasn’t going to commit to something that wasn’t going to happen. At this point, it wasn’t even about the money. It was about wiping those greedy, smug grins off the mouths of her cousins, whose malevolence had begun to grow in her imagination in direct proportion to the absurdity of their conversation.

Casually, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, he gripped her by the shoulders. Through the thin fabric of her blouse, Sabrina could feel that his fingers were warm and strong. She knew he was going to kiss her before his hands slid up and he threaded his fingers in her hair. It was part of the deal. She didn’t have high expectations and so she was pleasantly surprised. His lips were firm, not nearly as soft as they appeared. He didn’t pull her into him or otherwise touch her. She was a little disappointed.

When he finished, he leaned back. One arm rested on the back of the couch while the other elbow rested on the arm of the sofa. He propped his chin on his hand and studied her. She had the feeling of being dissected. “Are you a virgin?”

She looked at him as if he had lost his mind. “I’m almost thirty.” It occurred to Sabrina that she knew almost nothing about Jonas. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-four. Answer the question.”

She stalled. Did he think the kiss was that bad? She’d never been accused of being a bad kisser before. “One kiss makes you think I’m a virgin?”

He shrugged again. “You’re a little passive.”

“It was a first kiss.” She was growing indignant. It wasn’t like passionate feelings had led to the kiss.

“So?”

This time, she grabbed him, drawing him down to her altitude. He submitted to her, letting her control the kiss. Lightly, her lips brushed against his until she increased the pressure. Her tongue licked at his lower lip before slipping inside. He tasted warm and minty. She was determined to show him that she was an accomplished kisser.

He met her halfway, toying with her tongue until either he felt he had played with her enough or passion took over. She wasn’t sure what it was like for him, but passion was definitely a factor for her. Heat spread, warming her blood. Her heart followed suit, its rhythmic beat thumping in her ears.

She wanted to explore this unexpected chemistry, but Jonas broke the kiss and settled back against the couch. He cleared his throat. “Are you opposed to role playing?”

“I’m not into Dungeons and Dragons.” Her breathing was just beginning to normalize. Shyness took over and it was hard to look directly at him.

He smiled. “Neither am I, unless it involves some bondage and domination. Perhaps some light spanking.”

Sabrina’s eyes came close to bugging out of her head. Heat blossomed in her cheeks and spread down her neck, the tell-tale sign of a blush. She had grown up in a house where one used the ‘powder room,’ because any



other term was forbidden. The taboos to which he referred were definitely not a suitable topic for conversation, even for joking.

He laughed again. She liked his laugh, but she didn't care to be the source of his amusement. Her frustration must have shown because his tone changed to seriousness. "I meant dressing up for sex."

"Are you talking about lingerie, or a French maid's outfit?"

A rakish grin stretched the corners of his mouth. "Yes."

It wasn't a clear answer, but she knew what he meant. She shrugged, trying to fake a nonchalance she didn't feel. "I've worn lingerie before, but not the other stuff. Look, I'm willing to try, but what are you going to do if I absolutely hate it?"

"Make you not hate it." His eyes, edged with topaz, held a promise that made Sabrina catch her breath.

She really didn't know where to go with this, but Jonas had figured out how easy it was to disconcert her, a fact she'd successfully hidden for the duration of her career. He sauntered across the room and grabbed his laptop before settling back on the sofa.

"What are you doing?"

"Booking our flight to Vegas," he said, as if everything was settled.

Still in shock from the most explicit discussion she'd ever had with a stranger about sex, Sabrina didn't say anything.

He found the flight, but before he booked it, he asked one last thing. "Let's recap the terms, shall we? I am to be the best, most loving husband to you in front of your relatives. At least twice a week, I get to fuck you until you scream my name. The rest of the time, we're friends."

"Screaming isn't necessary, and I wish you wouldn't use that word," she said.

He reached out a hand to move a lock of hair that had fallen in front of her face. "Screaming is absolutely necessary, and I think I'm going to like using that word around you if you're going to blush like that."

\* \* \* \*

As Jonas clicked the submit button, he prayed his credit card had enough space on it to pay for the first class tickets. The debt his ex-wife had

left him was considerable. Living frugally alleviated most of the balance, but he canceled the cards as he paid them off.

Sabrina Breszewski wasn't a woman who watched her pennies. He didn't know much about her background, but her graceful bearing, expensive clothes, and the shyness most people mistook for haughtiness was telling. Sabrina's parents weren't people who got their hands dirty. They were the kind who paid others to do it for them.

He hadn't been kidding when he said he had fantasies about finding out what sort of panties she wore, but that was such a small part of what he desired from her. He wanted to masturbate against those luscious legs. He wanted to know what she sounded like when she came. He wanted to know what she tasted like. He wanted to crack that polite, proper exterior and expose the wild woman hiding beneath.

She was a passionate person. Her dynamism and drive when it came to advertising was amazing and inspiring to see. She seemed totally unaware of the awe with which most people regarded her brilliance.

Jonas wanted what she had. He wanted to feel the excitement and energy he felt when he taught high school, but he wanted to feel it in connection to advertising. Leaving teaching was the hardest decision he'd ever made. So often, his life no longer felt real. But this was what he wanted. This was what he needed. He had to prove to himself that he could make it at something that paid a good salary.

And there was no reason he couldn't have an intelligent, sexy woman in his bed while he did it.

## Chapter 2

Jonas picked Sabrina up at her house. She offered to meet him at the airport or to pick him up, but he refused. He was the kind of man who opened doors, insisted on driving, and pulled out a lady's chair, even in the kitchen. Yet his pride prevented him from letting Sabrina do anything for him.

Sabrina loved her house. It was rather large for one person, but that didn't bother her. Her grandfather had bought it for her when she graduated from college, surprising her by holding her graduation party there. None of her cousins knew he had paid for the house, but speculation was rampant.

He had spent months peppering her with questions about her dream house. He had searched for the perfect location, something close to the city, but not too close. It was convenient to everything, but far enough away to afford privacy.

Seeing the house now through Jonas's eyes, Sabrina hoped it measured up. It was a contemporary Victorian, painted white with violet shutters. The first floor had a verandah that wrapped around the side. She used it mostly during the spring and the fall, when the evenings were just cool enough for a light sweater. The front door opened into the foyer, with a grand curving staircase dominating the space. An opening to the left revealed a large formal dining room that she hardly ever used. To the right was a living room that swallowed half of the house. The large kitchen, laundry room, office, and a breakfast nook took up the rest of the space on the ground level.

The second floor had three bedrooms. Two were currently guest bedrooms. Sabrina intended to let Jonas pick which one he preferred and make it over to suit him. The two rooms shared a bathroom at the end of the hall. The master bedroom, like the living room below, was massive. It had a rounded sitting area with floor-to-ceiling windows in the front.

A sofa, loveseat and two end tables provided a comfortable place where she often sat to complete office work she brought home.

The walk-in closet was in the back, part of the bathroom and vanity areas.

The master bathroom itself was large. It had a shower and all the usual features. A little room off the back hid a whirlpool bathtub that would easily fit two or more people, though she'd never tried. It was truly her dream house.

She gave Jonas a tour, unconsciously holding her breath. The house said more about her than anything she owned. She wanted him to like it. He didn't say much as she showed him the rooms and his face didn't reveal much about what he was thinking.

"What do you think?" she asked as he stood in the sitting area, hands thrust into his front pockets, looking out the windows. "Which room do you want?"

Turning to look over his shoulder, he smiled a long, slow grin. "My dear fiancée, I'll be sleeping with you."

"But you can have your own room," she pointed out. "I don't want to encroach on your privacy." She really meant *her* privacy. She'd never shared space with anyone before. Well, not since Stephen. He hadn't bothered her. Since then, she hadn't invited anyone to stay the night in the same room. She usually arranged for dates to end at someone else's house. That way, she could leave when she wanted to be alone.

He crossed the room and landed in the closet. "There's plenty of room in here for my stuff, which is amazing because I think I've seen you wear at least twenty different skirts this month alone." His head poked out of the door. "You have the most incredibly sexy legs I've ever seen. You have no idea what I'm going to do with them."

Sabrina's expression matched the internal pain she felt at that moment. His smile was triumph and pure jubilation. She didn't want to know what he wanted to do with her legs. She couldn't imagine what he could do with them. They were *legs*.

He talked to her from the closet. She could barely hear him, so she reluctantly crossed the room to stand in the doorway. He was wearing the same suit he had been wearing earlier. "Do you have any clothes that aren't suits?" she asked. She was slowly accepting that he would be a literal

roommate. At least it would alleviate questions her mother was sure to raise if she knew they had separate rooms.

“Plenty,” he said. “They survived with minimal smoke damage.”

She’d forgotten about the fire. “Do you have a lot of stuff to move in?”

He wrinkled his nose in response and opened one of her drawers. “Are you packed yet?”

She knew he had seen the open suitcase on the bed. “I’m almost done. Is it time to get going?” Sabrina was nervous about the trip. She was fine with flying, but the fact that she was about to marry a stranger was slowly sinking in.

“We have about a half hour,” he said, scrutinizing the contents of another drawer. “I saw you in a dance club a month or two ago. You were wearing this tiny denim skirt. Do you still have it?”

“The one I wore with leggings?” she asked. She continued at his suggestive smile. “I think I have it somewhere.” Oh, she remembered the skirt well. Ginny had convinced her to buy it, but she’d only worn it once. It was too short and though many people noticed her that night, she felt uncomfortable. If she happened to drop something on the floor, it didn’t matter how ladylike she crouched, someone was going to get a glimpse of something she didn’t want to show them. “Why?”

“I want you to wear it tonight.”

“To our wedding?” The idea was shocking and nothing at all like the tasteful summer dress she had planned to wear.

He shook his head. “Wear something nice to the wedding. The skirt is for after.”

That answered her question about what he was expecting tonight. She would wear it in the privacy of their hotel room. She went over to a drawer on the other side of the large closet—where she put things until Goodwill could pick them up—and pulled it out. It was tinier than she remembered. It wouldn’t take more than a cursory push to move it out of the way for sex. Blushing, she wondered if he planned for her to wear it for the duration. If his sexual prowess was anything like that kiss, then she wouldn’t hate sleeping with him. She tried to imagine what he looked like naked.

His eyes, currently green, turned a smoky shade of topaz and his smile was predatory. For the first time, she got wet just looking at someone, or rather, from the way he looked at her.

"I'll finish packing," she said, exiting the closet with a blush on her cheeks and that skirt in her hands. Perhaps tonight would be an improvement in her track record.

Later, on the plane, he revised their vows so that they'd be accurate. "We need to always be honest with one another. That should start with our vows." In the end, they promised to honor each other for the duration of their marriage, in sickness and in health and in all other aspects of their lives. It was a bit sappy, considering they nixed all the love and cherish stuff, but it was honest and it did aspire to loftiness.

After they arrived, Jonas took Sabrina to the hotel, which was above a casino. She'd never been to Las Vegas before. The lights seemed garish, but the desert backdrop was breathtaking. They dropped their things in the room, not bothering to unpack. It was nearly eight in the evening and their return flight left at two the next afternoon.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," she said.

Jonas put his arm around her. During the three hour flight, she realized he had no reluctance about touching her. On the other hand, she was very reticent to touch him. Sabrina didn't come from a demonstrative family. She figured her reluctance would change in time, as she acclimated to his presence in her life. "This is your last opportunity to have second thoughts. Want to fuck before we do the deed? It'll relax you. Perhaps it'll soothe your nerves?"

Sabrina narrowed her eyes at him. She disliked that word. "I'm not sleeping with you until we're married."

"You drive a hard bargain." He grinned. "Let's go."

"Wait!" she said, panicking. "We don't have rings."

He patted the pocket of his suit, which was miraculously fresh and unwrinkled after the long flight. "I brought my grandparents' rings. I will want them back once you divorce me."

"You'll divorce me. Will it fit?" She wasn't concerned about it being too large, only too small.

"Perfectly."

"How do you know? I haven't tried it on." She became peevisish when nervous.

Jonas smiled enigmatically. "I have an eye for these things." He refused to show them to her.

They had to wait in line once they got to the chapel. Apparently, Saturday in Vegas was a big day for out-of-state marriages. Jonas kept up a steady stream of conversation. Sabrina found out that he taught for twelve years before giving it up. He hated the politics and the apathy of both the students and parents. The pay didn't allow him to live the kind of life he should with that amount of education, so he went to college at night and during the summer, getting his master's in advertising in four years.

Everything seemed so planned in his life, even his career change. "Is this the most impulsive thing you've ever done?"

"This isn't impulsive, Sabrina. It's only for a year. I'm used to measuring my life in years." He moved a strand of her hair, looking over her face appreciatively. "Besides, I make a habit of doing things most people would call inadvisable and I have yet to regret it."

"Such as changing careers?"

"Such as marrying an incredibly sexy woman in order to live out the myriad sexual fantasies I've had about her." He held a hand up when she began to respond. "I know, I know. I can't fuck you at work. We could get caught. I can't afford to lose this job. I'm still paying for my original bachelor's degree."

He'd booked this flight quickly enough. "Well, you won't have to worry about those things for a year," she assured him. "I'll foot the household bills. You are responsible for your entertainment expenses and clothes. Of course we'll keep our finances separate. It'll streamline the divorce." Something else occurred to her. "Did you want a prenuptial agreement?"

Instead of answering, he kissed her, slanting his lips over hers in one of the most provocative kisses she'd ever experienced. It didn't scare her, but it did arouse her. A sliver of apprehension stabbed her chest. She didn't want to go to sleep disappointed tonight. She enjoyed the time she was spending with Jonas and she didn't want that shadowed by a series of unfulfilling sexual encounters. Perhaps she should have held out for her original terms. One thing was certain: Jonas knew how to kiss.

Their turn came up before Sabrina was ready and they were married before she knew what was going on. She wasn't usually so absentminded, but this was a unique circumstance. She'd only known him for twelve hours.

When he slid the rings on her finger, she gasped. Not only did they fit perfectly, but they were the most beautiful pieces of jewelry she'd ever seen.

The diamond on the engagement ring was small enough to be classy, but large enough to attract notice. Surrounded with a nest of emeralds, it reminded her of Jonas's eyes. The wedding band featured matching jewels. His matching band was plain, with tiny diamond and emerald chips to show they were part of a matched set.

Sabrina watched them sparkle in the lights of the Las Vegas night. "No wonder you want them back. I'll take good care of them." She couldn't take her eyes from them. She wondered how his eventual real wife would feel about being Jonas's second wife to wear the rings.

"I know you will."

They went out to dinner and she had a few drinks. By the time they got back to the hotel room, Sabrina was feeling uninhibited. She thought he would want to have sex then, but he didn't. He unzipped her suitcase and pulled out the denim skirt and a lacy camisole she hadn't packed. She usually wore it under a suit jacket. Its pretty femininity was wasted because it was never seen.

"Put this on." His voice had gone a little hoarse.

Her body responded to him. Fresh moisture surged between her legs. This night wasn't progressing how she envisioned it and she was much more attracted to Jonas than she thought she would be.

Sabrina grabbed the clothes from his hands without looking at him and headed to the powder room to change. It wasn't until the door was closed and locked that she realized she hadn't packed the leggings that went with the skirt. She put it on anyway, reasoning that Jonas would probably want to take it off soon enough. The camisole dipped low, revealing the swell of her breasts. She was glad her bra converted into strapless. There was no way she could get around without support.

She ran her fingers through her hair, brushed her teeth, and freshened her make-up. Jonas had been doing a little freshening of his own. He faced away from Sabrina and her first sight of him when she opened the door to leave the bathroom was jaw-dropping. He had changed into jeans that hugged his butt. She'd wondered about his physique and that sight settled her question. He had the most incredible behind she'd ever seen.

The shirt was a rust-colored t-shirt with a logo from one of the chain stores in the mall, but it clung to his shoulders and chest. That suit hid much. While he did look good in a suit, he looked even better in street clothes. He



had an unbelievable body. The degree of his sexiness was no longer in question. She couldn't wait to show him to Ginny. Not that she'd be able to properly appreciate him, but she would be happy for Sabrina.

He whistled appreciatively when he saw her. "You are even more beautiful than I imagined," he said. "And my imagination is pretty spectacular."

She stood there, uncertain as to how to begin. After all, she was the one who had proposed a platonic marriage. He was the one who bargained this into the deal. She liked that he saw her as sexy. She didn't want to cross the line into slutty.

He approached her. She wasn't sure what he would do. The way he talked about sex didn't seem to match what she knew about his generally relaxed approach to life. The quiet ones were always the most surprising. He looked at her with those smoky green eyes as he ran his fingertips over her lips, her cheeks, her eyelids. Sabrina was trembling by the time he kissed her, equal parts nerves and sexual tension. The first time she was with a man, she always hoped it would be different. She always hoped the sex wouldn't be tedious. It was the optimist in her and the reason she was so often disappointed.

This kiss was different from the others. It was insistent, demanding. She opened her mouth to let his tongue in, but he coaxed hers into his mouth, licking at it and sucking on it as if it was water and he had spent a month in the desert. She lifted her hands, running them up his chest to his shoulders, feeling his muscles ripple beneath her fingers. She was glad she seemed to affect him as much as he affected her.

She had thought him shy, reserved, but he was nothing of the sort. Those descriptors better fit her. Jonas touched Sabrina as if he owned her, and she didn't flinch away from him at all. Instead, she leaned into him, pressing her breasts and hips against his firm body.

His hands moved down over her back to grasp her behind, squeezing her firmly and pressing his arousal into her abdomen. She didn't let his lips get away, but she had reversed the possessiveness of his kiss. Now she had his tongue. The harder she sucked on it, the more he made little moaning sounds in the back of his throat. She felt his hands on her thighs, sliding gently beneath her skirt, and then she felt silk panties fluttering around her ankles.

He stopped kissing her and pushed her back, holding her at arm's length to study her with that knowing look. She could see her face in the mirror behind him. Her lips were puffy from his kiss, and she was slightly flushed. Dropping his hand to hers, Jonas said, "Let's go."

"Where?" Sabrina was surprised. And panty-less.

His eyes softened. "Dancing. I'd like to see you shake those hips before I shake them for you." He beckoned her again. "I know a great club."

Sabrina took his hand. She knew he wanted her. She could see he was still hard. Anyone who looked at him could see he was hard. She said the only thing she could think to say. "I don't know what kind of music you like."

"It's not about the music. It's about the company." He didn't ask about her preferences.

She crouched down to retrieve her panties, but Jonas stopped her.

"No. Leave them here."

Sabrina raised a brow. "Jonas, I hope you don't think you get to boss me around in this marriage."

He grinned. "I know better. I've watched you for some time. You like to be in charge. I'm okay with that."

She continued crouching down, which was a process in and of itself. It would have been nice of him to help out on this, but he didn't. His hands closed around her ribs and he pulled her to standing. "Jonas!" She was not happy with him, but this seemed to arouse him even more.

His lips closed over hers again, cutting off her protest. When he finished, she was not steady on her feet. "No underwear tonight." She heard the amusement in his voice as he steadied her and she didn't know how to respond. He smiled and closed his hands around hers. "Please?"

He had a way of asking that made it seem as if granting his request was just a matter of time. The faster she did it, the faster things would move along. Tentatively, she nodded. Nobody would know, and it was kind of liberating to be so naughty.

He rewarded Sabrina with a smile and led her from the room.

The club was one of those ones that didn't exist in the Midwest outside of very large cities. Ginny had dragged Sabrina to similar clubs when they visited New York, Los Angeles, or Paris. It wasn't exactly upscale, but nearly so. A line out front snaked around the corner.

"I don't think we'll get in," she said. She had seen things like this in the movies. Ordinary people like them didn't rate admission, even to a three-star place like this. If he had given her some warning, she could have called ahead. Her name wasn't well-known, but her money was.

Jonas must have known someone, because when he bypassed the line and gave his name to the security guard, they let the pair right in. When he said, "Mr. and Mrs. Jonas Spencer," it took her a minute to figure out who he meant.

She hadn't changed her last name. Though Breszewski was Ginny's father's name and Spencer was far easier to pronounce, she didn't want to change it now just to change it back in a year. She supposed she could have kept it permanently, but she didn't think that was fair. After all, it was his name. However, he couldn't have known her intentions either way.

The club, whose name was simply City Club, was dark. Music pulsed through her body, amplifying the throbbing she still felt from her almost-encounter with Jonas. She headed to the bar with the intention of getting a drink, but Jonas stopped her. "I need you sober tonight, honey. You had four glasses of wine with dinner and you're still a little tipsy."

Sabrina frowned, but not because he seemed to be keeping track of her alcohol intake. *She* hadn't been keeping track. Was that the reason she responded so heatedly to his touch earlier? It explained much. Not wanting their first time together filled with drunken groping, he was killing time.

Jonas mistook her frown. He leaned in to shout over the music. "You can have as much as you want when we get back to the hotel. I won't stop you. Dance with me, Sabrina. Let's have some fun."

He threaded his fingers through hers and led Sabrina to the dance floor. The shoes he had chosen for her had very high heels. She didn't mind wearing them. She had originally purchased them because they made her legs look even better. However, they made her stand with her hips thrust forward, which was sexy, but not an easy way to dance. When she mentioned this to Jonas, he looked down at her feet and smiled bashfully. "Sorry. I'll make it up to you. But goddamn, you look hot."

And he did. He held her as they danced, helping her balance. His ulterior motive was probably to keep her close because he never let her move more than an inch or two away from him. Sabrina was uneasy at first, but soon the crowd fell away and all she saw was Jonas. His eyes were still a

smoky green and his lips found hers again and again as they gyrated and ground against one another.

When he'd had enough, and frankly, so had she, he leaned down and said, "Let's go."

Finally, they were on the same page. Sabrina wanted Jonas with a desire that nearly crippled her. Completely sober, she stumbled after him as he pulled her through the crowd. It wasn't so much the heels as it was that her legs were weak with desire. Wetness dripped from her, smearing across her inner thighs so that she could feel the slipperiness when she walked. It was a foreign sensation, curiously erotic.

They went out through a different door. It was painted the same color black as the walls, and it was hard to find because it blended so well with the décor. She had thought it a service entrance, but it wasn't. Never letting go of her hand, Jonas led Sabrina through several doors and short hallways until they came to one guarded by a very large, burly man and an equally formidable woman.

Jonas handed him a plastic ID card. The woman ran it through a magnetic card reader. The duo watched the display screen with expressionless faces. They could have been automatons for all the emotion they seemed to have.

The man looked them both up and down, and then asked, "Watch?"

Jonas smiled and shook his head.

The woman crooked her head at Sabrina. "Hold out your arms. No cameras, phones, or other electronic or recording devices allowed inside."

Jonas released Sabrina's hand. The man patted him down, but she didn't watch because her attention was on the woman patting her down, running her hands along Sabrina's sides and underneath her breasts. She protested when the woman confiscated her purse, but Jonas said, "You'll get it back."

"I thought we were leaving."

That smile didn't falter once. "You'll enjoy this. I promise."

Sabrina wanted to go back to the hotel and have sex with Jonas. She didn't have much patience for whatever this was, but he wasn't exactly giving her a choice. Too focused on him earlier, she had no idea where they were and she didn't know how to get back to the hotel. Still, she was curious as to what could put such a satisfied grin on his face. "We can stay for a little while."

The big man opened the door and closed it behind them. The lock clicked with a resounding thud. The hallway was long, but it eventually opened into a room that stopped Sabrina in her tracks. People in various stages of undress were draped all over the room, but that wasn't what made all the color drain from her face. Many of them were having sex and all the rest were watching. He had said they weren't there to watch.

The room was set up with offshoots from the main area that appeared to be private, but they were not. As Jonas walked Sabrina into the room, pushing her with his whole body, she saw additional alcoves hiding more couples, or triples, or more. He must have known she was going to run because his arm snaked around her waist and he held her tight against him. His hard-on pressed into her lower back. Her heart beat so hard and so fast she thought it would break through her chest. She was as excited as she was afraid. The tableau in front of her was far outside her realm of experience and imagination.

When she spoke, her voice was a whisper. "Jonas, I don't want to stay here." It was a lie, but she didn't want to think about why it was a lie.

"Relax," he said, bending his head to whisper in her ear. It was as if he knew. "Take a minute to get used to it."

In less than a day, her opinion of this quiet, unobtrusive, unassuming man had completely changed. She asked him to marry her because she thought he was harmless. She agreed to have sex with him because she thought he would be sweet. Unfulfilling, but sweet.

She felt him smile against her neck. "Look around you, Sabrina."

She hadn't realized her eyes were shut tight.

"Look at their faces."

She didn't open her eyes. Curiosity was the bane of her life. She wanted to open them, but admonitions from her mother popped into her head. Things she would say about the people who did these kinds of things and what that meant about her if she wanted to watch them. Or if she wanted them to watch her. Slowly, she forced her muscles to relax.

His free hand came up and fondled her breasts through the fabric of her camisole. He kissed her neck, grazing it with his teeth and causing her to quiver. "I'm going to do that to you, Sabrina. I'm going to fuck you until you come with all these people here to see it."

It shouldn't have titillated her, but it did. Good God, the idea that someone might watch her come made her even wetter than she already was. She'd never guessed a place like this existed. How did he know something like this would turn her on?

Her eyes finally opened. To the left sat a man, his head thrown back with a dreamy expression on his face. A woman was bent over him, her mouth bouncing up and down the length of his penis while another man took her from behind. She wondered what it would be like to be in her position. Did having a man take her from behind make giving a blowjob more enjoyable? They both wanted the woman so much.

A little farther down the hall, another woman sat on a man's lap, riding him while he suckled her breasts. She could see various combinations of people pleasuring one another just from where they were standing.

She moaned as Jonas bit into her shoulder and pressed her against him even harder. "Do you still want to leave?"

Slowly, hesitantly, she shook her head once. Then she shook it again decisively. "I'm not very good at this," she confessed, hoping he would mistake her words for nervousness and not take them at face value. She really wasn't very good at sex, but he was about to find that out for himself.

"You'll do fine," he assured her. "I'll make sure you enjoy it."

He slipped his hand under her skirt. It was short enough so that it barely moved as he parted her with his fingers, rubbing and pressing her slick clitoris. She couldn't breathe. Paradoxically anxious and filled with an incredible yearning, she leaned against him. One emotion fed the other, sharpening the pleasure. She whimpered.

Then she looked up and happened to meet the eyes of a woman looking at her with such undisguised fascination that she wondered what the woman saw. As Sabrina watched the woman watching her, Jonas worked his magic, slipping his finger inside her and moving it in gentle swirls. She moaned and moved against him, giving in to the fascination, the permission, in that woman's face.

"That's it, Sabrina. Let me touch you. Let me make you come." He added another finger, and she moaned, her knees weakening. The sound was small and strangled as she struggled to swallow it.

“Don’t fight it,” he whispered. The words, spoken against the sensitive skin on her neck below her ear, made Sabrina quiver even more. “Let it out, honey. Tell me how you like it.”

All around her, the sounds of sex created an erotic cacophony. Sighs, moans, whispers, demands, and climactic screams filled the air. The arm that kept her from running away now held her up as her legs turned to liquid. She couldn’t say she was close to orgasm, because she wasn’t, when he abruptly withdrew his fingers. She moaned in protest, but he only chuckled as he turned her to face him.

She hadn’t realized that Jonas had moved her from the center of the room until that moment. They were in an alcove. Not only could people in the main corridor see them, but the alcove itself was paneled with a darkened glass that she was sure hid people behind it who wanted to watch without being seen. He set her on the edge of a large, solid rectangle a little over three feet in height. Bent at the knee, her legs dangled down the sides.

They weren’t alone. The anonymous onlookers were treated to the sight of three couples in various stages of erotic play, and they were about to become the fourth. Being this close to the couples rendered her too shy to look at them. She concentrated on Jonas.

He parted her knees to get closer and kissed her hard, plunging his tongue deep into her mouth and leaving her breathless. The rough fabric of his denim-clad body rubbed against her throbbing clitoris, making her gasp. Heat swirled through her. She didn’t know what to do with the intensity of the feeling. She held on to him. Firmly in unexplored territory, Sabrina needed an anchor.

Drawing back, he stared deeply into her eyes. His chest moved fast, his breaths coming harder now, and his eyes were liquid gold. “Tell me what you want me to do to you, Sabrina.”

She licked her lips, trying to force words when her only coherent thoughts were feelings.

He licked her ear and nibbled at her lobe, sending shivers throughout her body. His gentle whisper was husky with desire. “Tell me, honey. You’re in charge here. I am your willing slave.”

“I want you.” Her lips barely moved.

His eyes locked with Sabrina’s. She felt like she was the only person in the world who mattered. “How do you want me, Sabrina?” His hands were

on her waist, slipping beneath the soft, thin fabric of her camisole. She quivered as his warm hands explored the skin there.

Her inhaled breath was sharp and tremulous. "I want you to touch me, Jonas. I want to feel you inside me."

He eased her top over her head, pausing to kiss her again when her arms were temporarily bound by the flimsy fabric. Electric heat shot through her body, and she arched closer. She never knew a kiss could ask for so much, and this was only the beginning. After some time, he released her arms, throwing the camisole on the ledge behind her.

Tentatively, she slipped her hands under the hem of his shirt, touching him for the first time without a barrier. A low moan escaped him, finding its way into her mouth.

His skin was smooth and firm. Emboldened, she increased the area of her forays, pushing his shirt out of the way until he pulled it off and threw it behind her. She explored his strong shoulders and the clearly defined muscles on his chest and back. He was muscular without being bulky, inherently sexy.

He pushed the cups of her bra down, folding them beneath her breasts. Then his hot mouth was on her nipple, first one, and then the other. Sabrina arched against him, holding his head close, and wrapped him in her legs. He licked and sucked and bit, sending jerky waves of pleasure shooting to her core. Never had a lover been so rough. Her body responded feverishly to this treatment, seeking more and faster. Tension and heat coiled lower and lower. She completely forgot her audience.

His hands were all over her legs. Pushing her back so she lay down on the hard plastic-coated surface, he pried one leg loose and lifted it high. He bent and his mouth was on her calf, licking and nipping at the skin there. Moving higher, he sucked at the back of her knee. She cried out, slamming her hands down onto the surface beneath her, searching for something to hold on to, but there was nothing. Reflexively, her body lifted from the table at the shock of unexpected pleasure.

She felt his lips curve in a smile. "Like that?"

"Yes," she croaked, her voice hoarse with hunger. "Very much."

He chuckled, and she felt his teeth scrape the curve of her inner thigh. He caressed her with his hands, stroking higher and higher until his fingers



were again inside her. Thrusting them in and out, he asked, "Is this what you want?"

"No," she panted. "I want you." She was disappointed when he withdrew his fingers.

"You're going to have to do better than that." He switched legs, his mouth on the back of her other knee, driving her into the air again.

Sabrina never knew that part of her body was so sensitive. She wanted him. She wanted this. She knew he felt the same way. Why was he playing hard-to-get? "What do you want me to say?"

"Tell me what you want." He barely moved his lips to answer, leaving his words muffled against her leg.

"I want you to make love to me."

"No, you don't," he said against the skin on the side of her upraised knee. "Tell me what you really want. Tell me to fuck you."

He stopped his exploration of her legs to look in her eyes, his expression encouraging.

With equal parts desire and alarm, she lost control of her breathing. "You're going to make me say that word, aren't you?"

His eyes burned with promise. "You have no idea how much you're going to enjoy saying it."

Her breathing came in gasps and half-sobs. She wanted him inside her. She needed him inside her. "Jonas," she begged. "Please."

"Say it, Sabrina," he urged, grazing his teeth along the back of her knee. She moaned and writhed at this torture. "Tell me what you want and I will give it to you."

The woman to their left cried out her climax and the woman between her legs leaned back, breathing hard. The woman to their right gasped and moaned as she murmured commands to her lover, who thrust into her with excruciating slowness. Sabrina wanted what they had.

She could barely speak. "Jonas." The plea strangled her. She was afraid of asking because she didn't want to be disappointed. Not by Jonas. Not after all he made her feel. Finally, she was awake and coming alive.

His voice was silky and heavy with need. "Say the words, Sabrina. Tell me you want me to fuck you."

She wanted him more than she had ever wanted anyone in her life. He promised the same things other men promised, but he seemed capable of following through. "I need you, Jonas."

Using her shaky arms to push into a sitting position, she unbuttoned his pants and drew down the zipper.

He didn't move.

She slid her hands into the waistband and pushed them down until they pooled at his ankles.

He didn't move.

She touched the silky softness of his full erection, stroking him gently with her fingertips, and then grasping the shaft harder in her hands.

He didn't move. He breathed harder with the effort it cost to resist her, but he didn't move.

She was desperate, an unfamiliar feeling. The reading of the will only left her depressed, not desperate. "Fuck me, Jonas." The words were quiet. Her face was scarlet. She couldn't look at him. She could barely speak.

He smiled triumphantly. "Yes, dear. I will happily fuck you until you come." He opened his hand, revealing a condom. "Put it on me."

Her fingers trembled in anticipation as she unrolled it down the length of him. Then she looked up at him standing before her. He was magnificent.

He pushed her back on the table and entered her slowly, savoring every inch. He stretched her by degrees, penetrating a little more with each passing second. When he was all the way in, he reversed directions, withdrawing just as slowly. At this rate, she would be insane by morning.

She itched for him to feed the heat inside. "Faster," she begged. "Harder."

He did as she asked, increasing the tempo and force only slightly each time she asked it. Her pleasure built, and she felt the orgasm looming ahead of her. She had been here before, only to be disappointed time and again.

Fear seized her. It tasted bitter and metallic in her throat. She prepared herself to come close, closing her eyes to hide the frustration she knew was moments away.

Jonas must have known what she was doing. He lifted her legs, hooking her knees over his shoulders to open her to him even more and pounding himself into her. It hurt. She knew she would be sore for days, but she didn't care because with the pain came a sharp pleasure she'd never felt before. It

was enough to push her closer than she had ever been and it scared the hell out of her. She had never lost control like this. She had never once been in a position to give in. Now it was a choice she had to make.

“Don’t fight it,” he ordered through his ragged gasps. “I won’t let you do this. Let go.” He rammed into her harder and faster, pushing her closer despite all of her fears. He took over her body, making it his.

She screamed as she came, the waves rolling over her, holding her down, stretching her into something she didn’t recognize. She’d chased this moment her entire adult life. Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes and she couldn’t stop the tremors that shook her to the core.

His orgasm followed. He pulsed and throbbed inside her with such a force that she nearly came a second time, his semen shooting out so hard she wasn’t sure the condom could contain it. She didn’t worry, though. Birth control had been a staple of her diet since she was a teen.

Jonas pulled her to a sitting position and held her until they were both breathing somewhat normally. He adjusted the cups of her bra to cover her breasts and slipped her camisole over her head. “You okay?”

Sabrina couldn’t stop shaking. He tilted her face up to his and gently wiped the moisture from her temples, concern clouding his tawny eyes.

He searched her eyes for something. “Sabrina? I know I was rough, but you seemed to want that. Did I hurt you too much?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine. This was very different for me. Intense.”

Inhaling sharply, he nodded his understanding. “But you liked it? You might want to do this again sometime?”

Nodding before she thought about it, she said, “Yes, I...I want this again.” She meant the orgasm. Truthfully, the audience didn’t matter. They dropped away, and she didn’t notice them, her attention focused on Jonas.

He held her hand as they walked back to the hotel, which was several blocks away.

They didn’t talk much, even as they changed into their pajamas. Well, Sabrina changed into hers and he stripped down to his underwear. She climbed into bed beside him. They lay in the dark, each lost in their private thoughts. Then she broke the dark silence with a question.

“How long have you been a voyeur?”

“Exhibitionist.”

“Sorry?”

He chuckled, a low, tired sound. “Voyeurs like to watch. Exhibitionists like to perform, to be watched. It’s a symbiotic relationship among strangers.”

Sabrina repeated her question, changing the noun. “How long have you been an exhibitionist?”

“Sixteen years.”

Doing the math, she realized he had been eighteen when he began doing what they had just done. She had still been a virgin when he began fucking women in front of an audience. The slow, even breathing next to her told Sabrina he’d fallen asleep.

The curtains parted a little, letting in just enough neon light to let her see his relaxed face, so she watched him for a little while. He was handsome, she decided as she studied his face, and much, much different from the man she thought he was. She knew this year would be different than she originally thought, but she was cautiously optimistic and looking forward to it.

## Chapter 3

The next morning, Jonas let Sabrina have the first shower and then inquired as to what she wanted to do with the few hours they had before they needed to be at the airport. She was well-rested, especially considering the fact she hated sleeping on a mattress that wasn't hers, but when someone expends as much energy as they had the night before, exhaustion trumps discomfort.

She didn't want to gamble, which didn't seem to surprise Jonas, so he suggested showing her some of the other tourist attractions. He opened doors, deferred to her in nearly everything, and held her hand as they walked. Sabrina was surprised he held her hand. Even though they'd shared something remarkable, they were still strangers. Hand-holding was a sign of affection. She liked him and she could tell he liked her, but she didn't see where affectionate feelings would have had the time to develop.

Still, she caught herself staring at him more than once. When he caught her, he would lean down and give her a light kiss.

They wandered around the town for most of the time, talking and getting to know each other. She rationalized it all by reminding herself that they would need to know these things about one other if they were going to pull this off.

His parents were still living, as were his maternal grandparents, and he had two younger sisters. One was her age and the other was two years younger. Sabrina told him about her mother, who had raised Sabrina and her sister alone after Ginny's father left when Sabrina was five and Ginny was two, and about Ginny and Lara.

"You're close to your sister?" he asked as they headed back to the hotel.

"She's my best friend."

"Is that who I saw you with at that dance club?"

She looked up at him, confused.

He countered her look with a devilish smile. “When you wore that skirt.”

Sabrina didn’t need details.

“What were you doing at a gay bar?”

He shrugged. “I was there to see a former student who had come out of the closet and needed some moral support.”

Wow. Teachers were sure different now than they were when she went to school. She couldn’t imagine a single one of her high school teachers at a bar to see her. Sabrina’s disbelief was reflected in her question. “So you went to the bar with him?”

They paused on the sidewalk in front of the hotel. The street was relatively quiet. “He’s twenty-five now. An adult. I ran into him about a week before that and he invited me to his show. He was the drummer in the band that played.”

It hadn’t been a memorable band. She shrugged and shook her head to let him know she had no recollection.

“Anyway, I saw you there, dancing, and I ended up watching you instead.” He opened the door to the hotel. “I watched your sister a little, too. She looks a lot like you, only not as gorgeous.”

She ignored his compliment, not liking that it came at Ginny’s expense. “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

He smiled shyly. “I was afraid of you.”

Her jaw dropped. After last night, she found that very hard to believe.

“No, really, I was. I had been at Rife and Company for about six weeks. I’d seen you around, listened to you speak at staff meetings, but you didn’t notice me at all. I didn’t take it personally. You don’t seem to notice anyone unless you need them for something. Anyway, you have quite the reputation. People warned me to stay out of your way.” As he explained his reasoning, he guided her into the hotel and to the bank of elevators in the lobby.

Sabrina frowned. She wasn’t aware she had such a grim reputation. “People at work don’t like me?”

He pushed the button for the elevator. “I didn’t say that. You’re known for being driven, focused on work. You expect the best from everybody around you and you don’t accept excuses for less than spectacular work. I wasn’t sure I was up to your standards.”

The elevator chimed and they got in with too many other people. She waited until they exited on their floor before continuing. "So you avoided me. Why did you talk to me yesterday?"

He put the card in the slot to open the door. "I thought you would ignore me, but when you kept staring, I couldn't concentrate. I have a presentation due tomorrow, which is why I'll be working my ass off tonight while you sleep the sleep of the righteous." He pushed the door open. "At any rate, talking to you worked out fine. Unexpected, but nothing I regret. I had a nice time this weekend, Sabrina. Thank you."

She lingered in the doorway. "For what?"

"For everything." Reaching behind her to close the door, he trapped her between it and his body, claiming her with his lips, and then abruptly releasing her.

It only lasted a minute, but fire raced through Sabrina. The way he caged her with his arms excited her instead of making her feel trapped. It was a new sensation, one she liked.

Later, on the plane, she asked him about the club they had visited. He had given his name at the door and he knew exactly what was behind door number three.

He smiled enigmatically. "Don't ask. Believe me, you don't want to know. However, I happen to know there are clubs like that all over the country. Any time you want to take a road trip, just say the word."

Sabrina flushed red and turned to look out the window, letting the subject drop. It was too much, too soon.

That evening, she helped him move his things from Ellen and Ryan's house. Ryan, who still taught at the high school Jonas left, didn't help them move, but he did loan them his truck. His wife, Ellen, was at work, so he was alone with their four-month-old son, Jake, and could only help them load the truck.

When they finished, Ryan clapped Jonas on the shoulder. "Ellen's going to be pissed she missed you." He tilted his head toward Sabrina.

Jonas shrugged. "She'll get over it."

The tall, lanky, red-head snagged his son from the playpen where he'd spent his time watching adults lug boxes outside. He balanced Jake on his hip. "Though it does explain why you'd call into work last night after asking Ellen for more hours."

Sabrina opened her mouth to inquire as to what Ryan meant. The agency didn't have official working hours on the weekends.

Jonas answered before she could say anything. "Ellen owns a club. I work there a few days a week."

Sabrina wanted to assure him there was no need to work a second job, but she didn't feel it was her place to interfere with the way he lived his life. After all, they had only known one another for a day.

They bade Ryan goodbye. It took one trip to move all of Jonas's things to her house. It must have been a bad fire.

"Did you have renters' insurance?"

His grin was ironic. "For the first time in four years, I let it lapse. How's that for fate?"

She put away his clothes in her closet—their closet—while he got to work on his presentation at the dining room table. She made him dinner, which he didn't properly appreciate, because it came from the freezer. That's when she informed him that if he expected better fare, it would be his job to do all the cooking.

He laughed at her, something to which she was growing accustomed, and said he didn't mind cooking if she would do all the dishes. Maybe it was a perfect match after all. When he finished his presentation, it was nearly eleven. His supervisor, Jared Larsen, didn't do a good job of checking over the presentations made by the people on his team before presenting them to the client. Sabrina had been assigned to his team when she first started at Rife and Company, so she knew what Jonas was up against.

She offered to check it over, but he refused, reasoning that it was unfair to have the big boss check over his work. It was her turn to laugh at him. "I'm not technically Jared's boss. We have equal standing."

"Yet you do the hiring and you assign the accounts, or determine who gets to compete for the accounts," he pointed out. "I'd say you have more power than Larsen."

Sabrina shook her head. "I may have more of a say, but I don't have *carte blanche*. Jared's input is considered, as is that of every team leader. And I don't make the final decision on anything. That comes from above me."

"Ahhh," he said. "It's like being a department head. You're expected to do additional things, but you can be undermined or ignored at any time."



“Exactly.” She laughed. “Look, if you have a connection, Jonas, use it. Nobody else who has my ear would hesitate to use it.”

In the end, he gave in, hovering nervously over her as she clicked through the screens. She realized he was anxious about what she might say. He did tell her that he didn’t think his work was up to her standards.

She was glad his presentation was good. She tweaked a few things without his permission. They were a beginner’s mistakes, things Jared should catch if he was thorough about his job. Sabrina explained this to Jonas, but he only stared at her with that same thoughtful, appraising expression he used when he was considering her proposal of marriage. It was disconcerting because she couldn’t fathom what he might be thinking.

It was late and she’d had a bigger-than-expected weekend. His silence wore on her nerves. Finally, she snapped. “What?”

He settled next to her at the dining room table and leaned forward, searching her eyes. “I don’t want people to doubt my work. I don’t want people to even think to themselves that any success I have is because I’m married to an executive. You’ve already proven yourself. You started where I am now and earned your position.”

“I had some good mentors,” she said.

“You worked on Larsen’s team,” he countered. “I know he didn’t help you out.”

She shook her head. “He certainly didn’t. Don’t be afraid to use your resources.”

He frowned. “I don’t see you as a resource.”

“You should,” she said. “It’s a perk of being married to me.” She closed his laptop and shifted to face him. “Look, I have no intention of hovering over you or getting involved in your career. But there is no reason you can’t ask me my opinion or to check over something. I do have more experience in these matters.”

He stood, his green eyes clouded with doubt. “Well, if you ever want to know how to split your infinitives with dynamite results, you can ask me.”

She had no idea what that meant and she didn’t ask. Some things were better left to the imagination.

The next morning, they drove to work together. Sabrina let him drive her car because she had a better parking spot and because she could work while he navigated the roads for twenty-five minutes, plus his car wasn’t

very reliable. They didn't talk about how things might change at work. He wished her a productive day, she wished him luck on his presentation, and they parted ways.

Sabrina didn't realize until she was going through her messages with her assistant that she didn't know where in the building he worked. She knew it was on her floor, but that was all. She made a mental note to wander by Jared's hideout around lunch time, but she never got a chance to get over there. Missing a week for her grandfather's funeral had put her behind on too many things. She probably should have been working Saturday morning instead of lounging around and propositioning strangers.

She was still working when her assistant, Minnie, buzzed to announce, in a very annoyed tone, that a Mr. Spencer wanted to see her. It was unusual for someone in an entry level position to see someone in Sabrina's position without an invitation. She told Minnie to send him in.

"Sorry about that," she said, glancing up at him quickly. "She doesn't know who you are."

He sat across from her and took off his glasses. "You're keeping it a secret?"

Sabrina frowned. "No, I just haven't had a chance to say anything. I don't make a habit of revealing personal information at work."

The look he gave her was one of profound disbelief. "You opened up to me pretty quickly."

Her mind went to a different place than what he meant and she blushed. "A fluke."

She didn't realize until she said it that she meant two things. First, confiding in someone at work had been a fluke. Second, she was sure the single night of amazing sex was a fluke. She threw down her pen, stretched, and gave Jonas her full attention. "What brings you to these parts?"

He smiled. "The dinner bell."

She blinked at him. "The what?"

"It's nearly six. Time to go home. Your secretary is one of the only people out there." The corner of his mouth twitched in amusement.

She looked at the clock on her computer. The last time she'd looked up, it was near three. She still had so much to do. If Jonas hadn't come for her, she would have stayed until after dark. She rang Minnie and told her to go home.

Jonas waited patiently while Sabrina gathered the things she wanted to take with her. He surveyed the pile of papers dubiously. "You think you're going to get any of that done?"

She sighed, resigned. "Some of it I have to get done."

They didn't make it home until after eight. Jonas insisted on stopping off to eat. "I saw the inside of your refrigerator, Sabrina," he said as he pulled into a sit-down restaurant. "You seriously lack food in your house."

"I'm not home much."

"At least it explains all the frozen lasagna."

She shot him a dirty look, but all he did was grin in return. He was easy to be with. She liked that he didn't take her too seriously, especially given his revelation about how intimidating people found her. She relaxed and enjoyed both dinner and her companion.

The phone was ringing when they got home. Jonas looked at Sabrina and then answered it when she showed no signs of doing it herself. As she headed up the stairs to change out of her work clothes, she could hear him talking to someone. She didn't know who would be calling her house that he would have anything to say to, and she knew his friend, Ryan, didn't have her number because Jonas didn't even have it.

She turned around when he came into the bedroom. "We should probably give each other our phone numbers." She would have said more, but he handed her the phone.

"Your sister and your mother are in the driveway, wondering if they can come in to see you." He disappeared into the closet as he said it, no doubt to change out of his suit.

Sabrina was tempted to swear, but didn't. She held the phone to her ear. Ginny was on the other end. She didn't bother with a greeting. "Yes, you can come in."

"Are you sure?" Sabrina heard the laughter in Ginny's voice. "It looks like you're entertaining someone special."

"I'm not entertaining anyone right now, except you."

"Honey, I'm in the driveway. He answered the phone. I saw him through the living room window. And when I drove by yesterday, I saw his car in the driveway. I assume it was his car. Anyway, we can come back later if you want."

“He lives here,” she said. “If you come back later, he’ll still be here.” She hung up the phone and abandoned her plan to change into something in which she could fall asleep while working. Ginny and her mother were at the door by the time Sabrina unlocked it.

Ginny was as tiny as Sabrina, and they looked remarkably alike. For as long as Sabrina could remember, random people assumed they were twins, except where Sabrina let her hair grow until it spilled halfway down her back, Ginny cut hers in a short style that made her resemble a pixie. Ginny was slightly taller and her face was a little rounder, but the differences were largely insignificant.

Fortunately, they both took after their mother. At fifty-eight, she looked every bit as beautiful as she had when they were little girls. When the three of them were together, Melinda Breszewski was often mistaken for their older sister.

Ginny threw her arms around Sabrina. “You look really, really good, considering everything that’s happened.” Melinda joined in on the hug.

Sabrina tried to unsuccessfully disentangle herself when suddenly Ginny and her mother let go. They stared, mouths agape, toward the bottom of the curving staircase. Then Ginny noticed the boxes still stacked on the hardwood floor in the foyer. They had not yet unpacked the bulk of Jonas’s things. “You weren’t lying, were you?”

Sabrina motioned Jonas closer. He smiled welcomingly and draped his arm casually around her shoulder. She reached up to hold his hand. So much depended on this moment. She wanted them to like Jonas. “Jonas, this is my mother, Melinda, and my sister, Ginny. And this is my husband, Jonas.” It was the first time she’d ever used the word “husband” in describing him, and yet, the word rolled from her tongue as if it belonged there.

Jonas extended a hand to Melinda first. “It’s very nice to meet you, Melinda. I hope you don’t mind if I call you Melinda? Sabrina has told me so much about you.”

Melinda reluctantly shook his hand. Manners dictated her behavior. She harbored a skeptical, cynical soul, and Sabrina had inherited it from her. “Husband? Sabrina, tell me you didn’t do something stupid.”

Sabrina met Jonas’s eyes. He smiled. It was her show. He would go along with whatever story she concocted. “I think it’s working out good so far.” She smiled back at him. “What do you think?”

“I would say it’s working out *well*.” Without much effort, he kept his face open and friendly. He turned his charm on her mother. “Ideally, we would have waited and invited our families to the wedding, but Sabrina was in a hurry, so we went to Vegas on Saturday.”

“Saturday? Is that where you’ve been all weekend?” Melinda’s outward skepticism turned to disgust.

Sabrina nodded, stiffening. A headache began to form at the base of her skull. “We got back yesterday and moved some of his stuff in. We haven’t had a chance to unpack it yet.” She hated feeling like she had to explain the boxes in her foyer, yet she did it anyway.

Jonas turned up the charm to divert attention. “Ginny, Melinda, would you both like to sit? Can I get you something to drink? I think I saw some Scotch in the freezer.”

Melinda wasn’t buying it, and not just the fact that Sabrina would store Scotch in the freezer. Sabrina liked it cold, but Melinda would consider that a poor way to treat alcohol. Sabrina could tell by the way she narrowed her eyes at Jonas that she had already decided against liking him. She crossed her arms over her chest. “Nothing for me.”

Ginny said, “I’ll take some water. Really, we can’t stay long. I have to be at work early tomorrow. Drew and I are getting ready for a competition.” Ginny co-owned a successful pastry shop and catering company in Royal Oak called Sensual Secrets and the competition would be televised on the Food Network. It wasn’t her first, but she always practiced for them as if it were. Sabrina was surprised to see her out this late at all. She must have been worried. Sabrina felt a twinge of guilt for putting her through an anxious weekend.

Jonas didn’t seem to take it personally. If it were possible, his smile widened before he went into the kitchen to get drinks. It had been a long weekend and a busy day. Maybe he was glad the company wasn’t going to stay late because he wanted to go to sleep.

Ginny and Sabrina followed Melinda into the living room. It might have been Sabrina’s house, but Melinda let it be known she was in charge.

Melinda settled on a recently reupholstered antique chair, her spine ramrod straight and her hands folded neatly in her lap. “Sabrina, did you think about this carefully before you married someone you obviously don’t know?”

She thought she and Jonas got along pretty well. However, something happened to her syntax around her mother. She loved her mother dearly, but no one ever had the ability to turn her into an incompetent child faster. “I didn’t think it was obvious,” she said. “Because I do know him.”

“He’s cute,” Ginny whispered. “Where did you find him?”

“At work,” she answered in a normal voice. Melinda wasn’t bothering to whisper. Sabrina didn’t know why Ginny felt she should do so. Jonas obviously had left the room so they could talk about him. “Jonas came to work at Rife and Company about four months ago.”

She could have made up some lie about how they’d flirted for months and how they’d been out several times, so he seemed like a natural choice. Jonas would have backed her up, whatever she said. But Sabrina hated to lie, especially since she was so bad at lying to her mother, so she told Ginny about him seeing them when Ginny dragged Sabrina out to the bar with her and Lara.

Ginny’s eyes sparkled triumphantly. “I told you that was a great skirt. You never listen to me.”

Jonas returned in time to hear her comment. “It is a great skirt. She wears it well. Then again, she wears them all well.” He handed Ginny a glass of water and he put a shorter glass in Sabrina’s hand. He had sized up her mom correctly and brought alcohol. She thanked him.

Melinda’s voice was tinged with bitterness. “You married some guy because he likes the way you look in a skirt? I gave you credit for more brains than that.”

Jonas settled on the couch between Sabrina and the arm of the sofa. He rested one arm behind her, but she was sitting on the edge of the cushion, so they weren’t touching. However, his nearness had a curiously calming influence.

“No, Mom. I didn’t know about the skirt until later. I married him because he agreed.” She took a sip of expensive Scotch, a gift from an appreciative client. Cold fire. It went down smoothly.

Much like Sabrina, Melinda wore a blouse and a modest skirt that fell past her knees, though she always wore a modest skirt. Sabrina liked hers a little shorter. Though they were still appropriate for work, they made her feel daring.

Melinda’s legs were neatly crossed at the ankle. So were Sabrina’s.

Melinda turned her venom on Jonas. “Do you know why she asked you to marry her? Didn’t it surprise you that someone you barely knew proposed marriage?”

“Certainly,” he admitted. “I wasn’t sure she was talking to me at first. I didn’t agree until we negotiated terms.”

“Terms? You do realize that according to the terms of my father’s will, her inheritance cannot be split due to divorce? You won’t get a penny from her.” Melinda folded her hands in her lap and smiled triumphantly.

Jonas was singularly unexcitable. Sabrina was impressed with his calm. She wanted to pick her mother up and throw her out. She entertained fantasies, but she would never have the courage to stand up to Melinda. Jonas didn’t have history with her mother. Sabrina marveled at how he didn’t lose his temper. “She didn’t say that, but I figured. I turned her down when she offered me money.”

Sabrina’s back was to him because she was turned to face her mother and Ginny. Ginny’s eyebrows rose at his confession. Sabrina knew Ginny was impressed by him as well. She twisted to face him, her knees brushing against his thigh. “That’s not why you turned me down.”

His eyes softened and he moved a lock of her hair, tucking it behind her shoulder. It hadn’t been in her face. “There’s only one reason I accepted.” His grin grew secretive. “Maybe two.”

“And what was that?” Melinda wasn’t going to be happy until Jonas admitted it had been the half a million dollars Sabrina offered him. Sabrina wasn’t sure if that was still part of their bargain, but she had every intention of honoring it.

Jonas leaned forward to look Melinda right in the eyes. “Why, Melinda, for the oldest reason there is. She agreed to have lots of sex with me. When a beautiful, strong, vibrant woman offers unlimited sex for a year, only a fool would refuse.”

Sabrina’s face and neck burned pink. She closed her eyes and studied the floor, letting her hair fall forward to curtain her face and hide her blush. Thinking back to their conversation in the conference room, sex had been his primary concern.

Melinda looked like she was going to have a stroke. Sabrina gulped her drink and Jonas took the empty glass.

“You want some more?”

Wordlessly, she shook her head. She didn't want more Scotch and she didn't want him to continue provoking her mother at her expense.

Ginny watched this all with amused fascination. She sat in one of the wingback chairs, her head lolling against the back and her denim-clad legs crossed at the knee. Her question was, like her, blunt. "Besides the occasional roll in the sheets, what do you get out of this?"

Sabrina should have known when he turned his attention directly to her that she wasn't going to like his response. He began slowly, thinking as he went along. "Well, my apartment burned down, so I have a roof over my head. And..." He leaned in closer to Sabrina, speaking in a low voice, but loud enough so that everyone heard. She noticed that his eyes had changed to smoky green. They mesmerized her. "That 'sheets' thing sounds nice. Maybe we should try it in a bed next time?"

Sabrina's face flamed anew. She needed more scotch. Before she could choke on his words, he kissed her, right there in front of her mother, who never so much as allowed that sex *might* happen in a marriage. To this day, Ginny and Sabrina were convinced they were born via immaculate conception.

Melinda shot to her feet. "You know, I don't believe I approve of you. Sabrina, I think you have made a mistake in marrying this man. I hope for your sake that you have the sense to rectify your lapse in judgment before it is too late."

She meant children. Her big regret in life was having children and then failing in her marriage. Sabrina had no doubt that if she and Ginny had not been born, Melinda would have blithely gone through life as if she had never been married. When she was younger, Sabrina used to think that her mother should have remarried and that would have made her happy, but she knew now that wasn't true. Nothing and nobody could make Melinda happy. The best for which anyone could hope would be a little less bitter.

Jonas stood when Melinda did. "Melinda, you know and I know that you made up your mind to dislike me the moment Sabrina introduced me. I understand why and I don't blame you at all. If some stranger married my daughter in order to help her get an inheritance, I would be wary of him as well."

He had Melinda's attention. Twin spots of anger stained each cheek. "How dare you!"



Sabrina honestly didn't think someone so quiet and seemingly reserved would go up against her mother, his penchant for exhibitionism notwithstanding. She fell for him a little.

His face remained neutral, a mask. "Under the circumstances, I don't expect you to like me after one meeting. However, I am your son-in-law and that isn't going to change. I think the least you could do is to give me a chance."

Ginny met Sabrina's eyes and mouthed "wow." It had taken her nearly seven years to get Melinda to the point where she was civilized to Lara, whose only crime had been to fall in love with Ginny. Their mother didn't care about gender. She hated every person either of her children had ever dated, even Stephen. Melinda was the only one who wasn't upset when Sabrina ended things with him.

Melinda didn't respond, but Jonas turned to Ginny. "Sabrina's birthday is Wednesday. She told me how horribly your cousins have treated her. I'd like to invite them all over for a small celebration. Can you take care of the invitations? I'll do all the rest."

"I don't want a party," Sabrina said. Her stomach muscles tightened, threatening to return dinner. She hated the idea of a birthday party.

"You only turn thirty once," Ginny said. "I wanted to throw you a surprise party, but I canceled it when all this happened." She turned her thousand-kilowatt smile to Jonas. "I'd be happy to handle the invites and the cake. What's your cell number so we can plan this without Sabrina around? She can be such a wet blanket."

Sabrina didn't have a good feeling about this. Ginny inherited a love for all of the social things in life, while Sabrina inherited a driving need to do well in school and succeed at work. Whenever Ginny got an idea in her head, it grew and grew. By Wednesday, Sabrina didn't doubt it would either be a formal dinner party or something with a beer keg and a DJ. She would need to have a little chat with Jonas before this got out of hand.

Ginny and Jonas talked about general plans for the party, ignoring her attempts to cancel it before anyone knew about it. Melinda studied them both carefully. Apparently, she had decided to postpone judgment.

On the way out, Melinda hugged Sabrina and said, "I hope you know what you're doing." She bade Jonas a good evening and they left.

He closed the door behind them and locked it for the night before leading Sabrina up the stairs for bed, all of her intentions to do some more work forgotten. “That wasn’t so bad, was it? I see why you’re so close to Ginny. She’s great. And your mom...well, I see now why you are the way you are.”

They had just reached the door to the bedroom when he said that, slowing his pace so that she could enter the room first. She stopped, blocking his path. “What is that supposed to mean?”

He smiled maddeningly before picking her up and moving her out of his way. He went into the dressing area and began untying his tie. “You didn’t ask me how the presentation went.”

“It went fine.” She followed him without thinking. “Joy was impressed. I heard her congratulating Jared on it.” She stopped suddenly. Jared would have presented the material without giving credit to Jonas or anyone else on his team. It was part of the reason people left his team as soon as they had a choice. “Oh. This was your first presentation, wasn’t it?”

He hung his tie on a wooden spinning rack Sabrina had left empty because she had no idea what it was for. She had a jewelry box for necklaces and her stockings were in a drawer. “No, it wasn’t. But it was better than the others, thanks to your input.”

She waved away the compliment. “I didn’t make any significant changes, Jonas. You do good work.”

He unbuttoned his shirt. He had a magnificent, strong chest hidden under those suits. There was so much she had been too preoccupied to notice on Saturday, and the closet light was much brighter than the one at the club had been. Patches of light, gently curling hair began at his navel and thickened as it traveled downward. The rest of him was recently tanned from the sun. She caught a glimpse of his tan line when he dropped his pants.

“How does Jared get away with taking all the credit, as if he alone worked on the proposal?” He grinned at her as he pushed at the waistband of his boxers.

She tore her eyes away from his body as he finished undressing. It was too late. A warm blush heated her face and neck. “I’d like to say he doesn’t, but he does. He’s Joy’s nephew. At least they don’t advance him, but he doesn’t seem to care.”

Before she made a fool of herself, she went into the powder room to remove her makeup, closing the door for privacy. She didn't want to start something she knew wouldn't end satisfactorily for her, and she didn't want to chance it not being fulfilling for him. Though men were different, weren't they? Things like duration and quality didn't matter so much to them.

When she climbed into bed, he was already there, absorbed in a paperback novel, the cream-colored Egyptian cotton sheet pulled to his waist. He wasn't wearing a shirt, but that didn't surprise her. She had turned off the air conditioning. It wasn't warm for a June night, but it was too warm for a lot of clothing. Out of curiosity, she checked the cover of his book and found it to be a popular mystery novel. He tossed it on the nightstand and turned out the light. She wondered if he was wearing anything under the sheet.

Thoughts of work and of her personal life whirled through her head. She waited for them to settle down so she could sleep, but one thing kept nagging at her. "Jonas?"

"Hmmm?" He was half asleep.

"I really don't want you to make a big deal out of this."

"Out of what?" he murmured.

"Out of my birthday. I don't care for parties."

He didn't reply. She thought he was asleep until he pulled her to him and kissed her, cradling her face in his hands before he let them roam her body. She wore a thin cotton nightgown, and though he didn't move it out of the way, his hands burned through the material. She touched his bare chest, giving her hands permission to touch him the way he touched her, and she kissed him back. When she let her hands roam over his hips, she found out he was wearing boxer shorts. She didn't know if he knew she was holding back. She couldn't help but hold back. Things were different now. There was no audience, no urgency.

Finally, he ended the kiss and his exploration of her body, falling asleep with his arm still draped across her. For some reason, she didn't remove it.

\* \* \* \*

Meeting Sabrina's mother was interesting to say the least. Jonas had dealt with his fair share of the uptight crowd. He saw Sabrina heading for a future just like her mother's if she kept that passion under such tight control.

He thought their visit to the club went well. He'd expected her to be shocked by the sight of so many people having sex. Witnessing her innocent and naïve reaction to sex and innuendo turned him on more than it should have.

However, when she began withdrawing, anger surged through him. She'd been close. He'd known she was close. He could feel her vaginal walls sucking at him, yet she tensed, bracing herself for... what? Disappointment? Did she have so little faith in him?

Could he blame her? They'd known one another for less than a day.

But she responded to his urging, surrendering to the sensations in her body. When that slick little pussy pulsed around him, it sent him over the edge. She was soft and silky and his. He had a right to feel possessive, even if it was only for a year.

Yet he hadn't cracked her shell. He wasn't under the illusion she would submit to him easily or willingly. Nowhere did he doubt how much she would love it once she did. Jonas was looking forward to the challenge.

She liked the way he kissed. She liked his touch. Each time he reached out, he expected her to flinch away, but she didn't. She actually leaned into him. It was a wholly unconscious response, which made it that much more important. It was a true reaction, not calculated or controlled.

Beautiful, talented, with an icy exterior that burned. He was playing with fire. He knew the danger, but he couldn't resist the challenge.

It bothered her that most people didn't see past the defensive shell that hid a vulnerable center. Yet she didn't want people to see her vulnerability either. She was repressed, asleep, a bundle of possibilities. She was part wildcat, only she didn't know it.

Sabrina needed awakening in the worst way. And he was just the man to do it.

Ellen called the next day at work, but he ignored her voicemail and all three of the text messages she sent. He and Ryan had met Ellen their freshman year of college when they were on academic probation for excessive partying. She whipped both their asses into shape and helped them find the things that mattered.

Jonas wouldn't have accomplished much in his life without Ellen's no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners approach to friendship. She was his best friend, but she could be a pain in the ass sometimes.

He was tempted to call into work that night just to avoid her. It was a pitfall of working at the fetish club she owned that was attached to the upscale nightclub she owned.

Being a master of bondage and discipline paid more than his day job, but it didn't give him the prestige and success he craved. Chances were, Ellen would show up when he was between clients and make him talk. At least she would wait until there was a lull. Jonas hated leaving his clients hanging—sometimes literally—while he left the training arena to have an argument with Ellen. It was never good for the person he was beating into submission to see that he wasn't the most powerful person around.

He prayed for a busy night, but events never worked in his favor for long.

"When you asked for Saturday night off, I had no idea it was so you could get married."

Jonas had been crouched behind a counter. The front of it was plastic-coated a smooth black. Like any other counter, the back was an open series of shelves. Jonas didn't keep much back there, but what he did keep there was zipped tight in a duffel bag. He shared his work station with any number of people who were in and out when he wasn't there. The tattered red bag spent most of its time in the trunk of his equally-tattered car.

He straightened slowly, affecting a demeanor indicating he was doing so because it was what he wanted. In no way was he going to admit that it was bad form to get married and not tell his best friend.

Ellen was several inches shorter than him, reaching five-six in her stocking feet. The three-inch spiked heels on her boots almost closed that gap. It wasn't Ellen's height that in any way made her a formidable woman. Her larger-than-life personality took care of any false incongruities implied by height.

As he expected, her expression was fierce. The words had been too soft to be doing anything but hiding an incredible amount of anger.

Jonas shrugged. "I brought her by your house when I picked up my stuff. You weren't home."

“No, you jackass, I wasn’t. It’s the end of the month. Sophia and I were knee-deep in accounting crap. You knew I wasn’t going to be home.”

He knew better than to shrug again. Her feelings were hurt. “It was an all-of-a-sudden thing. I wasn’t sure she’d actually go through with it. Besides, it’s only for a year.”

Ellen came closer. The music wasn’t too loud, but the bass drowned out her voice just then. “Marriage is serious business, Jonas.”

He didn’t need a reminder. “No shit.”

“I don’t want to see you get hurt again.”

She stopped when he held up his hand. “Elle, it’s fine. It’s an arrangement. She needed someone to play husband for a year so she could get some inheritance and I’m sick of my parents and my sisters setting me up on blind dates.”

Eyes so dark brown they were nearly black studied him knowledgeably. “I can’t see you marrying anyone to help them get an inheritance, or just to get out of a few dates. You’re getting something out of this.”

A satisfied smile curled his lips. “I took her to your sister club in Vegas.”

Ellen’s brow rose. “This is the hot chick from Rife you’re always talking about?”

He nodded and flashed Ellen a satisfied smile. “At first, I didn’t think she’d stay, but once she got used to it, she was amazing. When we were going at it, she didn’t take her eyes from me. She was easily the hottest woman in the place and she never once looked around to see other people’s reactions.”

Ellen’s reaction was less-than-thrilled. She sighed, a resigned sound. “Ryan says she looks just like Helene.”

Jonas shook his head. The little spitfire sharing his bed had nothing in common with the icy bitch that passed for a human and called herself his ex-wife. Damn woman kept his name after the divorce. Insisting on a change would have dragged out the proceedings when he just wanted to get it all over with.

“She’s nothing like Helene.” With a look, he dared Ellen to argue.

\* \* \* \*

He half-listened to her plea for not having a party. When Sabrina arrived home on Wednesday, he and Ginny had arranged for a buffet-style dinner spread. Ginny brought an intricately-decorated cake that was themed a combination of birthday and wedding, which was way too much food for the nine of them. Sabrina's three cousins and their parents all made it to the party.

Ginny accosted Sabrina with a big hug and smacked a kiss on her cheek. Sabrina smelled scotch on her sister's breath already. Melinda must have been in rare form. Sabrina wasn't looking forward to seeing her mother and she felt guilty about it.

"The cake looks wonderful, Gin." She recognized Drew's handiwork in the white chocolate bride and groom figures situated on the second tier, and Ginny's in the piping and pulled-sugar flowers. Separately, they were amazing artists. As a team, they were unstoppable. "You guys are going to win that contest for sure."

"At least you and Lara have confidence in us," she said with a shrug. "But, then again, you sort of have to." She liked to pretend it didn't matter to her, but Sabrina knew it did. Winning competitions like this not only brought them more business, which they didn't actually need, but also international acclaim, which they both craved. Drew was in negotiations to expand the catering side of the business into a syndicated cooking show.

Ginny had been with Drew longer than she had been with Lara, having paired up with Drew in freshman P.E. She met Lara later when Lara's mother hired the pastry school to cater her fiftieth birthday bash. It was love at first sight. Only later did Ginny find out Lara didn't have a sweet tooth. Being with a pastry chef was a waste, but at least Ginny knew Lara wasn't with her for the sweetness of her confections.

"Shut up," Sabrina said playfully. "You'll do fine."

The doorbell rang and both sisters looked toward the foyer, then to one another. Ginny squared her shoulders and squeezed Sabrina's hand.

"It's only one night," Ginny said, letting out a long breath. "With a stranger here, they should be on their best behavior."

"We can hope," Sabrina said. She didn't have much hope, but she wanted to. Jonas had gone out of his way to make sure everything was perfect. He hadn't let her do a thing, shooing her from the kitchen the previous night when he prepared most of the meal.

Sabrina pasted a welcoming smile on her face and opened the door. There stood her mother's half-brother and half-sister with the three children they had between them. All five of them had arrived together, forgoing the bringing of spouses or other family members. She took heart in the fact that usually meant they didn't mean to stay very long.

Jonas joined the women as they greeted the guests. Sabrina introduced Aunt Ingrid and Uncle Randolph first, then her cousins Timmy, Tommy, and Regina.

Shock widened their eyes when she confirmed their suspicions by introducing Jonas as her husband. Still dressed in his suit and tie, minus only his jacket, he had a very distinguished air about him. She watched as each of them searched for signs of defect and turned up their noses, unable to find a flaw.

She happened to catch her mother's eye as she turned. Melinda had been in the kitchen with Jonas, but Sabrina hadn't made it back there to see her yet. The expression of smug satisfaction on her face did Sabrina's heart some good. She didn't extrapolate that to mean her mother was warming up to Jonas, only that she loved witnessing the moment her estranged relatives' arrogance was brought down one notch.

Sabrina wondered if Jonas was shocked by the ages of her cousins. Having been so busy the last couple of days, she neglected to mention that her grandfather was forty-two when he married the love of his life. It had been his first wedding, but her second. Ingrid and Randolph had both been in their early twenties when Grandma remarried. Grandma had been a widow, but since her kids were older and didn't live with them, Grandpa never developed a close relationship with either of them.

They didn't plan to have children, but within a year, Sabrina's mother was born. While Grandpa was always generous to Randolph and Ingrid, he showered his one biological child with everything she could want. Melinda repaid his kindness by running away with her lover—a man Grandpa hadn't liked when she was twenty-six. She returned two years later, alone and heavy with child. Sabrina.

Grandpa found someone suitable for his daughter to marry, someone who would raise her bastard daughter as his own. When Sabrina was five, the man she thought of as her father divorced her mother, arranging for



visitation only with his biological daughter. Sabrina didn't understand it then any more than she did now. She just didn't care about it now.

All of this put the average age of her cousins north of fifty, and her mother's siblings firmly entrenched in their seventies. She wasn't close to any of them and neither was her mother. The only time Grandpa had seen them was when they wanted money. They stopped coming around ten years ago, when Grandma died.

When Grandpa died, they came to the funeral only because they knew Grandpa promised Grandma he would name her grandchildren in his will. Grandpa wasn't someone who went back on his word. They were named, but nothing was guaranteed.

If Jonas was surprised, he hid it graciously, greeting each person by name. Timmy and Tommy weren't twins, but they may as well have been. Less than a year apart in age, they were difficult to distinguish. Both short, rotund, and bald, they were even more difficult to tell apart now than when they were younger. It didn't help that they still dressed the same. Tommy's face was slightly more rounded, but that was the only significant difference.

Regina fared better. Where Aunt Ingrid overindulged her boys from the beginning, Uncle Randolph was a much stricter parent. Regina reaped the benefits from personal discipline, but she was rather rigid in demeanor and she had been raised to look upon Sabrina's mother, two years her elder, with a disdain that carried over to Ginny and Sabrina.

"Dinner is served," Lara said, appearing from the kitchen to save the awkward moment from lasting any longer. Like Ginny, she dressed casually for the occasion, in jeans and a flower-print t-shirt with the name of Ginny's bakery emblazoned on the back. They did this to get on Melinda's nerves. She hated the sexual connotation behind Sensual Secrets' name. She thought it sounded more like a lingerie store.

Dinner conversation was strained. Jonas did a wonderful job keeping up a steady stream of topics.

Lara complimented him on the dinner, which was homemade lasagna. "Did you make the sauce as well?" she asked.

"Yes. It's a Spencer family recipe. I'd tell you what's in it, but then I'd have to kill you. Then Ginny would kill me and my parents would come after her. When all is said and done, the carnage wouldn't be unlike that at the end of *Macbeth*. It's better for everyone if I don't say too much."

Lara and Ginny shared a mercy laugh with him.

Aunt Ingrid said, “Well, that’s wonderful. She’s gone and married the hired help. Dress it up all you want, dear, but trash is still trash.”

Inhaling sharply, Sabrina trembled with buried anger. She struggled to contain it. Nothing good ever came of a display of temper around these people.

Melinda came to the rescue. “That kind of statement is not only untrue, but extremely rude.”

Fury subsided to annoyance, and then receded to numbness. She felt as if she was made of ice and nothing could crack her. It was both comforting and disturbing.

Regina came to her aunt’s defense. “Melinda, anyone who cooks for themselves is trashy. You cannot deny the truth of this. Even *you* employ a cook and housekeeper. Even if you didn’t, one does not cater their own event.”

At work, when someone crossed a boundary or challenged Sabrina, she had no problem calling them out or putting them in their place. She couldn’t do it around her family. Her insides were ice and her tongue was paralyzed. A thousand thoughts zoomed through her brain, but she couldn’t utter a word. She stared at the remnants of sauce on her plate and wished the evening was over.

“I cook,” Ginny said frostily. “And when you can cook as well as this, it’s a sign of love and generosity to prepare a loved one’s favorite meal.”

Jonas had no way of knowing this was Sabrina’s favorite meal. She thought he made it because he wanted to show her how much better it was when it didn’t come from frozen and premade. Either way, it was a nice gesture. The entire evening was a nice gesture on both Jonas’s and Ginny’s parts. That didn’t ease her discomfort.

“Not to mention that it’s extremely ill-mannered to be so judgmental,” Jonas added dryly. “Especially with someone you’ve known a total of twenty minutes.”

He shot a concerned glance at Sabrina. She caught it from the corner of her eye, but she couldn’t move. His hand crept over to take hers under the table. She stared down at it, unable to so much as acknowledge his kindness or his reassurance. She wanted them to all leave, and she knew Jonas wasn’t going to make them go. It was her show.

Suddenly, she glanced up, catching everyone in a sweeping look, a cold smile frozen on her lips. “Well, now that dinner is finished, you’d best be getting on your way. Ginny will cut you a piece of cake to take home.”

She stood, pushing back her chair, and began to clear the table. Jonas helped. Sabrina snatched plates from Uncle Randolph and Regina that were only half-eaten. Timmy and Tommy gulped down their remaining bites before she made it around the table to them. Aunt Ingrid, despite her remarks about the dinner, slurped it down like a pig at the trough in a hurricane. She finished seconds before anyone finished their first helping.

Ginny, knowing Sabrina had reached the end of her endurance, retreated to the kitchen with Lara to prepare pieces of cake for everyone to take home. Melinda handled the pleasantries until the five of them disappeared into their respective cars.

Closing the door heavily, Sabrina eyed the stairs longingly. A long bath sounded good right now. She could light candles and use her scented oils. She could play soft jazz until she dozed in the cooling water.

“I know you’re tired, honey,” Melinda said sympathetically. She took Sabrina’s hand and led her into the living room. “We have a few gifts for you and then we’ll leave you alone.”

She didn’t want gifts. She hated the obligation that went with forced gift-giving. Birthdays and Christmas were the two worst times of the year. She was forced to purchase gifts for people and they were forced to do the same for her. When all was said and done, it was a wash. Sabrina had things she didn’t want and so did they, but no one could ask for a gift receipt without offending the other person. Even Ginny had fallen into that trap. However, Ginny actually liked these rituals.

Sabrina lowered herself to the edge of the sofa and softened her smile because it was expected. Ginny, Lara, and Jonas gathered around to watch as Melinda put a slender box into Sabrina’s hands.

She examined the box before untying the ribbon that held it closed. It was plain and black, with no logo to mark it as a necklace, a watch, or a pair of gloves. It was June. She hoped it wasn’t a pair of gloves. Similarly, she and her mother had completely different tastes in jewelry and Sabrina didn’t wear a watch.

Slipping off the cover revealed folded papers. She took them from the box, opening them to read the words. It was a legal document. Melinda had

signed the affidavit attesting to the fact that Jonas and Sabrina were in love. She had the twelve million dollars as long as they stuck it out for a year.

Stunned, she looked up at her mother. "But why?"

Melinda smiled at her daughter sadly. "Maybe I'm hoping. Either way, you deserve it, Sabrina. Dad had good intentions, but it was a stupid provision."

Ginny hugged Sabrina and threw a larger box on her sister's lap. "That's a little something for the both of you. It's a combination wedding and birthday present."

From the self-satisfied smirk on her face, Sabrina knew she was in trouble. Ginny knew she hated gift-giving. Long ago, she stopped buying things she thought Sabrina would like and started buying things she thought her sister *should* like.

Just to annoy her, Sabrina opened the wrapping paper at the seams, ripping nothing in the slow, painful process.

"Bitch," Ginny said good-naturedly. "Wait 'til you see what's inside."

It was filled with assorted colors and styles of silk, thigh-high stockings, matching garter belts, thong underwear, and bras. Sabrina raised a questioning brow at Jonas.

He shrugged. "That's all her. I can't say I have a problem with her taste though."

Later, when everyone had gone, Jonas apologized for not giving a gift. "I haven't had a chance to get to the store."

He had worked at his second job the night before, tending bar at his best friend's club. Sabrina wanted to tell him there was no need to do the extra work, but she didn't know exactly where the boundaries were in their relationship.

Sabrina was in the midst of shedding her work clothes. Presently, she wore only a skirt and bra. Looking up, she saw him leaning against the doorframe of the closet, watching her. "You've already given me the only thing I wanted." He thought she was referring to the fact he married her, but she meant the orgasm. She had no intention of clarifying her statement.

The smoke in his eyes should have made her wet with remembered passion and the promise of more to come, but it failed to move her. Still numb from the encounter with her relatives, she turned away from him to unzip her skirt. Still, he had done so much for her. When she felt his arms

come around her from behind, she let her head fall back against his shoulder.

He kissed her neck, working his way across her shoulders. His large, warm hands cupped her breasts. When she turned to face him, she tilted her face to meet his kiss and finished unbuttoning his shirt. They made their way to the bed, slowly undressing one another to explore and caress more skin.

Though he didn't actually arouse her, she didn't mind his touch. It comforted her to be held and to hold him in return. Slowly, Sabrina began to unthaw.

After a while, when his green eyes turned tawny with his arousal, she ripped open a condom. He moaned when she touched him to put it on and he kissed her as he entered her. When he was completely in, he stopped, looking down at her uncertainly. She knew the cause of his hesitation. She was barely wet. She didn't know how he knew that through the lubricated condom, but he did.

"Don't stop," she said as she ran her fingertips down his chest and thrust her hips against him, wanting to get it over with as quickly as possible.

He thrust into her, then again and again. She matched his rhythm as the heat built inside. She clung to him as his pace approached frenzy and he whispered her name. She imagined it was an exclamation of passion, not the plea she so clearly heard. Eventually he came, collapsing next to her.

After a few minutes, she rose to complete her evening toilette. When she rejoined him, Jonas was lying on his side of the bed. Sabrina arranged the covers over them and turned off the light. Jonas lay next to her. She thought he was sleeping until he pulled her close and spooned her from behind.

"You didn't have an orgasm," he said, his voice muffled by her hair.

She really didn't want to discuss her sexual shortcomings with him. "But you did," she said. "That's all that matters."

He was quiet after that. Too quiet.

## Chapter 4

Cherry Montez was in the stocks, and for that, Jonas was exceedingly grateful. Cherry was a regular and she liked a heavy hand. Normally, he specialized in light whippings, pinkening the skin of his clients so that the lightest touch brought them intense sensations. It wasn't a sexual thing. It could be and it frequently had been for him, but this was business. Dominating people in the back rooms of Ellen's club brought him more money each year than any other job he ever had.

And Cherry Montez paid handsomely for his services. She liked his style and she frequently brought a current boyfriend with her. Sometimes they watched. Other times, the pair both spent time being disciplined.

The music wasn't so loud tonight. Cries, sobs, and pleas filtered through the screeching guitar riffs. His whip sang as it cut through the air, and she yelped as he brought it across her upper thighs harder than he had the last few hits.

Sabrina was under the impression he was tending bar. Jonas was more than willing to let her labor under that misconception. This was a part of his life where ignorance would keep her in bliss.

Bliss.

At least something would bring her bliss. It certainly wasn't him. He'd never failed a woman like he failed Sabrina the other night. It ate at him, and he took his frustrations out, as he always did, on his clients. After all, it was what they paid for.

He replayed the occasion of his failure over and over in his mind, unable to find where he'd gone wrong. She responded to his kiss, to his touch. Why, then, had she been nearly dry when he entered her? If the condom hadn't been lubricated, he wouldn't have been able to slide in at all.

Had her relatives upset her so much? Jonas frowned, and Cherry quaked before him. She was an attractive woman, but one he'd never been tempted

to sample. Clients were strictly off-limits. When the relationship failed, a Dom lost his client, as well as his bed partner.

Jonas barely noticed her.

The woman his mind saw was the same woman his mind had focused on for four months. Suddenly, the conversation they had when she proposed marriage made more sense. She hadn't been limiting the sexual encounters because she liked order and schedules. She wanted to limit sex because she knew last night would happen. She expected to not have an orgasm. She accepted it without fighting.

That wasn't the Sabrina he knew. That wasn't the woman who could stare down every single person in the advertising department and on the executive board. Her crusty exterior hid a core that was much softer and much more vulnerable than anyone guessed.

When he first started at Rife and Company, Jared Larsen regularly referred to Sabrina as a whore. He disrespected all women, but he seemed to have a special hate reserved just for her. As different stuffed shirts breezed through the floor, Jared would point out specific ones and tell Jonas "that Breszewski slut fucked him, too."

Jared Larsen was a large man. He often bragged about playing the position of outside linebacker in college. Now in his early forties, he hadn't hit the gym since graduation. His waistline seemed to have increased in direct proportion to his recollection of his feats on the field. He kept his sparse hair shaved close to his head and he never wore a jacket over his shirt and the single red tie he seemed to own.

It didn't take long for Jonas to disabuse Jared of the notion that he wanted to hear crass things said about anyone, Sabrina in particular. Now that they had a personal relationship, Jonas was glad he took that stand.

Still, those men did seem like men Sabrina would date. They were professional and respectable. Most of them came from families that had money. They were probably disappointing in the sack, just like he'd been.

He'd been gentle, understanding about her emotionality. Almost reverent. He wanted to comfort her, to let her know he respected her and found her irresistibly sexy. Maybe that was the problem. She'd responded to him better in the club when he'd barely been able to restrain himself long enough to make her come.

Maybe she didn't want gentle. Maybe she hadn't been being polite—she could be painfully polite—when she assured him she hadn't minded his roughness.

He wondered yet again why she had chosen him. Sabrina Breszewski could easily have had her pick of any single man in the entire state.

He was going to make this up to her. He had to make this up to her.

\* \* \* \*

Sabrina was feigning sleep when Jonas slid into bed much later that night. She wanted to tell him he didn't need to work a second job. Bartending away all of his free time wasn't necessary. She would have happily given him the extra money he seemed to need, but she didn't feel it was her place to interfere with the life he had before he met her. Besides, she knew he wouldn't take money from her.

She woke Saturday morning to an empty bed. This surprised her because Jonas hadn't come home until after midnight. She lay staring at his vacant pillow, marveling at how much her life had changed in one short week. Last weekend, she woke thinking she really should get to the office to begin to wade through the mountain of paperwork she knew awaited her. She had wanted something to take her mind away from the slap in the face that passed for her grandfather's will.

It wasn't that he left her out completely. From the day she was born, he paid into a trust. Melinda and Ginny each had one as well. Twelve million was a symbolic inheritance. To Sabrina, the will said that reading to him when his eyesight went and holding his hand through the pain and feeling as if part of her was dying right along with him didn't mean much because she lacked a life partner. She didn't want a life partner, not then and not now. Jonas wasn't bad company, but she would have rather been given a choice. Under different circumstances, who knows what would have happened?

When they were at work, nothing was different. She was the same person as always. Nobody knew she was married. Jonas hadn't said a word to anyone either. They carpooled most days, separating and meeting at the elevator before and after work. Except for that first day, he hadn't appeared at her office again. Now he texted Sabrina if she wasn't at the elevators when he was ready to go, and she did the same with him.



She didn't know why neither of them said anything to anyone. Perhaps they wanted to avoid questions. He'd said he didn't want people to think the quality of his work was a reflection of her instead of him. Maybe he was ashamed of her.

Even the staff meeting was the same as always. He came in with his team, sat in the back, listened politely, didn't ask questions, and left when the meeting was over. It embarrassed her to admit it, but she didn't really notice him until she saw him stand to leave. He didn't seem to care that she didn't so much as greet him.

On their first weekend home together, Sabrina convinced herself to get out of bed and go for a swim. Her pool was twenty-five meters, the standard length, but only three lanes wide. Today promised to be sticky and warm. She turned on the air conditioning, closing the windows in various rooms on her way downstairs.

Jonas was nowhere to be found. No evidence in the form of used dishes was in the kitchen. It was as if he'd vanished. She grabbed a swim towel from the laundry room and headed outside. It was only nine in the morning and the temperature was already in the nineties.

"Sleeping Beauty awakens."

She looked over to find the voice, shielding her eyes from the sun. She found him in the garage. Since it was an older home, the garage, a converted carriage house, was a backyard feature instead of attached. She only minded in the dead of winter when the wind chill was far too cold, forcing two-thirds of the entire population to reconsider living in Michigan.

"What time did you get up?"

"Six." He walked toward her, dressed in an old purple t-shirt with a Woodhaven High School Warriors logo across the front and cutoff shorts. He wore contacts today. His glasses were missing, but from the way he looked up at her standing on the deck in her one-piece, she knew he could see clearly. He stopped, resting an arm on the deck railing. His hair glinted with honey and blond highlights in the bright sun, and his gaze wandered down the length of her body and back up.

"Is there a reason you pay someone to cut your lawn?"

It was an odd question. The answer was obvious. "They won't do it if I don't pay them. It's a business arrangement."

"You don't have a lawn mower."

“The service has their own. They also deal with the weeds and fertilizer and all the stuff I want nothing to do with.” Sabrina didn’t like activities involving dirt or other places where bodies decomposed.

Jonas nodded once, the look on his face that of someone who should have known better than to ask. “So then it’s an exercise in futility to continue to look for gardening items?”

She shot him a sympathetic look. “I’m afraid so. I might have a little shovel somewhere, but that might be for snow.”

He sighed, looking over her head, then back to her face. “You hire out your snow removal too?”

She descended the three steps to the flagstone path that split into two directions, one leading toward the garage, the other leading to the pool. It was probably not a good time to tell him she was seriously considering hiring that company to replace the path with pavement. “It’s the same service.”

He pulled her closer to him, resting his hands on her hips. “Going for a swim?”

“I thought that was obvious,” she said.

“You could be sunbathing,” he said. “You do have a nice tan. And, given your lack of interest in the outdoors, it wouldn’t be much of a stretch to think you wouldn’t want to get that suit wet.” He tore his eyes from her chest and lifted her hair with one hand. “Or chlorine in your hair.”

“Maybe you need to go back to sleep,” she suggested. “You’re cranky.”

Abruptly, he let go. “I got up early so I could plant your birthday present, but I’ve spent the last three hours digging through the mass of junk in your shed and searching every inch of your ironically clean garage.”

She reached out to take his hand lightly in hers. “You didn’t have to get me a present, Jonas. You’ve done enough.”

“I like to garden,” he said. “I find it relaxing to plant something, nurture it, and watch it bloom into something beautiful. I wanted to give you something beautiful.”

Words failed her. He filled the silence with a kiss. It was the first time he’d touched her since that disastrous birthday party. She didn’t realize until then that she missed having physical contact with him. The kiss was soft and undemanding.

“You found nothing in the shed?” It was all she could think to say. The shed seemed like a logical place to find gardening equipment.

He shook his head. “A ton of old junk, magazines, trash, broken hoses, and cracked earthenware pots.”

She made a thoughtful sound.

“You have no idea what’s out there, do you?”

She bristled at the laughter behind his words. “I don’t think I’ve ever been in the shed.”

“Then you won’t be upset by the fact that I threw out most of it?”

The shed was toward the rear of her property. It was so far from the house she never thought about it. It could have fallen down and she wouldn’t have noticed for weeks. “You can do whatever you want with the shed and the stuff in it. Do you want me to have the guys finish cleaning it out Thursday?”

“The guys?” He lifted an amused brow, something that didn’t look right on him.

Sabrina was beginning to feel defensive. She found the fact he was amused belittling. Who was he to judge the way she lived her life? “The guys who do the lawn. I sometimes hire them to do extra things. They do a good job.”

This time he laughed. “Do you happen to know their names?”

“Yes, I know their names. There are only three of them. If you stop being so condescending, maybe I’ll introduce you one day.” She jerked her hand away from him and flounced down the path to the pool. If she had used their names, how the hell would he have known who she was talking about? He didn’t know them.

She swam for a good two hours. It was one activity where she could lose herself and, given the way Jonas made her temper flare, it was a good way to work out her aggressions. Really, who cared if she cut her own lawn or paid someone else to do it? That didn’t mean she was too good to know the men who kept her yard looking nice. She even knew their families well enough to attend the occasional birthday party or barbeque.

The midday sun blazed overhead, setting the pavement on fire and she had forgotten to wear sandals. She hopped across the pavement around the pool to the grass and padded back to the house, avoiding the flagstone path. Maybe pavement wasn’t a good idea.

Jonas was just returning to the house when she mounted the cooler wooden steps to the deck. Completely ignoring her, he opened his trunk and began unloading a shovel, gardening tools, and bags of dirt. She couldn't imagine why he needed bags of dirt. The entire yard was filled with dirt.

She went inside and ate brunch. After a shower, she called Ginny to wish her luck on her competition. Though it was on Monday, she was leaving that night so she wouldn't feel rushed once she got to Atlanta. Sabrina wished she could take the day off from work, but she was still so behind from her grandfather's funeral and they had a large presentation due Tuesday. Melinda would return with a camera full of pictures.

When Jonas came in later, he was sweaty and dirty. He stood in front of Sabrina, hands on his hips, and waited for her to finish talking to Ginny. It's amazing how quickly someone waiting in impatient silence can end a conversation.

"Did you want something?" She was still mad at him for treating her as if she was somehow less of a person because she hired out her lawn work and snow removal.

Without a word, he grabbed her hand and dragged her out the back door, across the deck, and down the steps. Releasing her hand, he gestured in front of them.

It was hard to miss, which was why she was even more discomfited when she realized what he had done. A trellis, stained to match the deck, sprouted from the freshly turned ground. In front of it was a rose bush in full bloom. The flowers were breathtaking, tangerine toward the bottom with a burst of pink at the tips. Jonas had threaded the thorny branches through the rungs of the trellis so they climbed up. In a few years, it would be covered with blooms. It touched Sabrina so much more than twelve million dollars.

When he said he wanted to give her something beautiful, she thought he wanted to cut the lawn and trim the bushes. After all, he did ask for the lawn mower. Now she understood why he got up so early. It was much cooler at six in the morning than it was in the afternoon, especially for this kind of work.

She stuttered, trying to form words to thank him, to express how lovely it was, not only the flowers, but the gesture. Every time she returned to the house from a swim from now until the day she died, she would think of this moment. She choked on emotion.

Jonas took her hand in his sweaty one. She hung on tightly.

"I'm glad you like it," he said.

Finally, she found words. "It's beautiful."

He kissed her, crushing her body to his. She was shocked by his hunger, and a little afraid. When he released her, she took a step back to steady herself. He bent to gather the last of his equipment to put away.

"Jonas?"

He paused to look up at her, his eyes green in the bright light.

"Thank you."

He stood. "I'm sorry I was such a dick earlier," he said, leaning down to plant another kiss on her. "I don't suppose you're up to going to the lake tomorrow and meeting my family?"

Understanding dawned. She hadn't met his parents yet, or his two sisters. He was nervous about introducing her to them. That's why he was behaving so oddly. The question came back to haunt her. Was he embarrassed about having her for a wife?

The idea haunted her for the rest of the day and kept her up half the night. Jonas left after dinner to go to work. She was still awake when he returned at two, though she pretended to be asleep. He crept in quietly and disappeared into the bathroom. In minutes, she heard the shower. By the time he joined her in bed, she was asleep for real.

The next morning, they arrived at the lake before his parents to find that his sister, Amanda, and her husband, Richard, had already claimed a spot under a stand of trees. They had spread blankets on the grassy ground next to the picnic table and were busy unpacking a cooler. Amanda greatly resembled Jonas. She had the same curly light brown hair that shone with blond highlights, only hers fell past her shoulders. She had the same changeable green eyes. But where he was frequently introspective and quiet, she was sparkly and vivacious.

Amanda ran toward them and scooped Sabrina up in a heartfelt hug before they had been introduced. Luckily, Jonas had insisted on carrying the cooler. All Sabrina had was the bag with their towels and a change of clothing.

"I'm so happy to finally meet you," she gushed. "Jonas has been talking about you for months and months. It's about time he brought you around to meet us."

She was still hugging Sabrina as she said this, lifting her slightly off the ground. At five foot seven, she was the short one in the family. Sabrina quirked her brows at Jonas, questioning Amanda's greeting. He shrugged in response.

"That's interesting," she said. "We've only known each other for a week."

That threw Amanda for a loop. She let go, holding Sabrina at arm's length to study her. When she did that, she looked so much like Jonas that Sabrina was surprised she didn't follow it up with a kiss. Then she frowned and looked at him. "Joan?"

"Don't call me that," he said, ignoring the question completely.

"Hey!" Another voice called from behind them. "I thought that was you."

Sabrina turned to find a leggy, blond-haired, blue-eyed beauty bearing down on them. She had a bag slung over one tanned, athletic shoulder. She approached without varying her pace. She seemed like the kind of woman who never hurried anywhere because she knew that nothing truly began until she arrived. Despite that, Sabrina liked her immediately.

"Sam," Jonas said, handing his cooler to Richard and throwing an arm around her. She was nearly his height. "This is Sabrina. Sabrina, this is my baby sister, Sam."

"It's very nice to meet you." Sabrina expanded her gesture to include Amanda. "Both of you."

Jonas hadn't prepared Sabrina for his family, except to tell her general information like names and ages. The three siblings and Richard quickly fell into the kind of conversation only people who've known each other for a very long time can have. Sabrina found out that Richard and Amanda had been dating since eighth grade. She was the same age as Sabrina and had been married for ten years. They had two kids, five and two, who had stayed the night with their grandparents, so they would show up whenever the older Spencers arrived. That might have been her life if she had accepted Stephen's proposal.

Sam was a few years younger. She was currently "flying solo," as she put it. Her boyfriend was in Toronto for business. She planned to join him at the end of the week. She threw her bag down at the picnic table, then

dragged Amanda and Sabrina to the blanket, insisting she wanted to get to know her new sister-in-law better.

It didn't take long for Sabrina to decide she liked his sisters. They had a million questions about the impulsive wedding. Sabrina wasn't sure what Jonas had told them, and she didn't want to reveal anything he wanted to keep hidden, so she turned the main question back to Amanda, who originally asked it.

"What did Jonas tell you?"

"Are you pregnant?" Sam asked, leveling a serious look at Sabrina.

Sabrina's eyebrows shot skyward. "We've only known each other for a week."

Amanda tilted her head to one side and leaned back against the blanket. "You have to admit this is weird. I mean, he's been talking about how much he wanted to ask you out for months and now here you are, married. How did it happen?"

She answered honestly. "I don't know. He was there and I asked him to marry me. There was no forethought or planning of any kind involved. It was literally the first thing I said to him."

Sam's blue eyes sparkled. "That's so romantic."

Amanda rolled her olive green ones. "That's so unlike Jonas. He just agreed to it? He didn't ask for time to think it over?"

"He thought it over," she said. "He asked questions, negotiated terms, then agreed."

Nodding, Amanda said, "That's more like him. He's terribly analytical."

"Annoyingly so. What were the terms?" Sam asked.

Sabrina refused to tell them the terms, but she thought they guessed something from the blush she couldn't stop. A shadow fell over them.

"Are you guys being mean to my woman?" Jonas asked.

"No, go away," Sam said, waving her hand to shoo at him.

He crouched down in front of Sabrina. "Sabrina?"

She still had to look up at him. Luckily, the sun was off to the side somewhere. "They want to know why I married you."

"And you said?"

She smirked, releasing her inner imp. "You were the hottest guy in the room."

"Ha, ha," he said.

“He must have been the only guy in the room,” Sam said. She turned to Jonas. “So what would you have done if she had just sat there and ignored you?”

“Ignored me?” he asked as if it were the most outrageous idea in the world. “She couldn’t keep her eyes off me. She just sat there in that short skirt, showing off her legs and staring at me. I couldn’t ignore an invitation like that.”

“The skirt was knee-length,” Sabrina said.

He snorted. “If your knee was in the middle of your incredibly sexy thigh, then it was knee-length.”

She would have responded, but Amanda beat her to it. “Okay, you two, we get it. We’re just glad Jonas is finally with someone. He hasn’t had a girlfriend in more than five years.”

Sabrina looked from Amanda to Jonas and back again. “I don’t believe that.”

He held out his hand and helped Sabrina to her feet. “She didn’t say I didn’t date, Sabrina, only that I didn’t have anyone steady.”

“Then it’s a good thing you met me,” she joked.

His response was to study her silently. “Come on,” he said softly after what seemed like forever. “Let’s go swim.”

It was amazing how something so quietly stated could be so disquieting.

His parents didn’t arrive until after lunch. They had called to let Amanda and Richard know that their children were not easy to motivate in the morning. Richard had laughed, an infectious sound, saying they got it from their mother. Amanda shot him a look, but it was more playful than indignant.

Brandon and Alyssa Spencer were both tall and good-looking. Jonas and Amanda resembled their father, while Sam seemed to favor Alyssa’s classic beauty.

Alyssa Spencer was the opposite of Sabrina’s mother in every way. Like Amanda, she was instantly friendly, welcoming her new daughter-in-law with a genuine hug. When she smiled, she meant it, and when she asked Sabrina about herself, it was because she was interested. Sabrina didn’t get the sense that Alyssa was judging her in any way.



Sabrina was a little less sure of herself around Brandon. She had been close to her grandfather, but she always seemed to be ill at ease around other people's fathers.

Brandon was a very handsome man. Sabrina found herself wondering how Jonas would age, but she shook away the thought. He was hers only for a year.

"I know it's only been a week"—Alyssa said as she unloaded the lunch items from the cooler they had just packed away—"but how do you like being married to a former teacher?"

Sabrina shrugged. "I didn't know Jonas when he was a teacher. He's a little bossy, but he's nothing compared to me."

Jonas had just finished racing Ricky, Amanda's five-year-old, back from the water. Ricky won, but Jonas made a good show of it. If Sabrina hadn't known Jonas was a runner, she would have completely believed the validity of Ricky's victory. He overheard her remark.

"I'm not bossy," he said. "You're just not used to having another person in your house."

While that was true, it wasn't enough to cloud her judgment. "Picky, then," she amended. "Particular."

Alyssa laughed. "That's my son. You can add stubborn, bull-headed—"

"Those are synonyms, Mom," Jonas said, popping the lid of an energy drink and taking a long pull.

"Whiny and irritable, especially when he doesn't get enough sleep," Sam added.

"Enough," Jonas said. "Sabrina has plenty of time to experience all of my faults on her own."

"Yes," Sabrina agreed. "I met irritable yesterday."

"You're supposed to be on my side," Jonas added with a pointed look. "You know, being married to me and all."

She refrained from pointing out that he was back to being bossy. Smiling in remembrance, she said, "I also met kind, generous, and thoughtful. He planted a rose bush for my birthday."

Jonas paused in the midst of finishing his drink to return her smile.

"That's my son," Brandon said, throwing an arm around Jonas's shoulders and clapping him on the back. "I'll take credit for that."

Sabrina felt dishonest and hypocritical as the day wore on. His family welcomed her like she was a real daughter-in-law. At least her family knew this was a temporary arrangement. She didn't have to pretend so much around them. That didn't mean she pretended to like them or Jonas; Sabrina wholeheartedly liked every one of his relatives. But she did have to watch what she said. She knew they didn't have a future. Perhaps they would continue to be friends afterward, but that was doubtful. Whatever the outcome, they would remain friendly. After all, they were colleagues.

Sabrina must have been frowning into the distance as she sat on a blanket and looked out over the lake because Jonas joined her before too long.

"You okay?" He had just come from swimming and droplets of water fell on her, cooling her skin where the sun had warmed it.

"Fine. Why?"

"You have a brooding look about you. Serious thoughts?" His eyes were the prettiest shade of green in the brightness of the sun.

She smiled a quick, reassuring smile. "The pessimist in me is wondering why your family is being so nice to me."

"They must like you," he said, lying down next to her and closing his eyes against the bright sun. "Don't be so hard on yourself. Lots of people like you."

"You said people at work are afraid of me," she reminded him.

"Afraid of disappointing you," he corrected. "That's an important distinction." He reached up and, grabbing her ponytail, pulled her down to him. It was an awkward position to hold and she fell onto his chest. He laughed as he kissed her.

"Nobody wants to disappoint you."

She closed her eyes. He was referring to the other night. He had kissed her a couple of times since then, but he didn't try to go any further. She wasn't sure if it was because he was adhering to the agreement and he wanted to space out the twice-weekly promise of sex, or if he thought he had been inadequate in bed.

"You don't disappoint me."

He frowned up at her. "I know that's not true. I shouldn't have pushed you. I knew you were stressed out by the dinner and everything. I thought I could help you relax."

Nothing would have helped her relax. Even the prospect of the bath she imagined to soothe herself was iffy. It had a seventy-percent failure rate. Sabrina shook her head. "It's me, not you. I probably should have told you sooner, but I didn't think it would bother you so much."

"You've had this problem before?"

Sabrina rolled to lie next to him. Most men would have been happy that she put out. Most men wouldn't have noticed she wasn't overly enthusiastic. Most men wouldn't bring up the topic or want to discuss it. Jonas wasn't most men.

"Jonas, I really don't want to talk about this."

"We'll get to it sooner or later," he said, reaching over to turn her face to him. "Wouldn't you rather sooner?"

"No," she said. "I'd rather not at all." His silence was deafening, so she added a plea. "Look, I'm having a nice time here with your family. Let's not ruin it, okay?"

He propped himself up on one elbow to kiss her slowly and deeply. "Okay, Sabrina, but I'm not going to let it go. We will resolve this before the day is over."

She hoped that meant he would leave it alone until they got home.

Toward evening, they packed everything up in a whirlwind of activity. Sabrina helped Amanda carry her tired children to the car. Richard had already been loaded up like a pack mule. Faith snuggled into Sabrina's shoulder. She was an energetic two-year-old and she had taken an instant liking to her new aunt.

"Are you gonna come to my house?" she asked sleepily. "You can sit in the back with me."

"Sorry, honey," she said gently. "Not today. I have to go home with Uncle Jonas. We came together."

"So he doesn't have to drive alone?"

"Right." Sabrina settled Faith into her seat and secured the complicated belt over her. Turning to Amanda, she said, "You might want to check to make sure I did this right."

She laughed, but followed Sabrina's suggestion. As she looked on to see whether or not she made an error, Sabrina caught sight of Jonas talking to two very young bikini-clad women. He was laughing at something one of them said. The girl leaned in closer. It was obvious they knew each other.

Amanda, who had been talking to Sabrina, backed out of the car. She might have asked something, but Sabrina had ceased listening. Perhaps she had no right to the possessiveness and jealousy she felt, but there was no denying she was in their grip.

Following Sabrina's line of vision, Amanda grabbed her arm. "Students."

"What?"

She squeezed Sabrina's arm tighter, demanding her attention. "They're students."

"What does that mean?" Sabrina was truly lost.

Sympathy shone in Amanda's green eyes. "Until January, Jonas taught high school. We can't go anywhere without him bumping into a student or one of their parents. Those are most likely high school students."

"They're not wearing enough to be high school students," she said. And they were awfully close to him. Sabrina had never stood that close to a teacher, even while fully clothed.

Amanda laughed the same way Jonas did when he found Sabrina amusing. "We're at the beach. It's summer. Don't tell me you wore a muumuu to the beach when you were sixteen."

"I didn't talk to my teachers in public, even if I liked them," she said. "I pretended I didn't see them."

Amanda laughed again. "He was well-liked by his students and much respected by his colleagues and the parents of his students. They were sorry to see him go."

"I thought Jonas left teaching because he didn't like it anymore," Sabrina said.

"Who told you that?" She closed Faith's door and opened her own. "Jonas loved teaching and he was very good at it."

Sabrina wondered why he told her he left because he was tired of it. She hadn't been aware he left in the middle of the school year. As she approached her car, she could see that his smile was genuine. Everything about his body language conveyed a liking for either the company, the conversation, or both.

"Mr. Kubina said you might come back next year," the slimmer blond said as she sucked on the end of a strand of hair. She sounded hopeful.

"No," he said. "I won't be coming back."

“But why? You’re such a good teacher.” This was from the other blond, who was only slightly less slim than her friend. She probably thought she was fat.

Jonas hadn’t seen Sabrina coming toward them. She didn’t want to interrupt, so she reached into his pocket for the car key. If their car was anything like Amanda’s, it would be baking hot on the inside. She intended to get the air conditioning going.

Without missing a beat, he snagged her wrist and pulled her closer, throwing an arm around her waist. “Sabrina, this is Rebecca and this is Brooke, both former students of mine. Girls, this is Sabrina.”

“You really did get married?” the one Sabrina thought was Brooke exclaimed. “Mr. Spencer, you swore you’d never get married! You said they’d have to drag your rotting corpse to the church and hope hell froze over!”

Both girls gaped at Sabrina as if she were an exhibit in an oddities museum that suddenly sprang to life, proving for once and all that she wasn’t wax. Suddenly the one who was probably Rebecca remembered her manners. “It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Spencer.”

They exchanged basic pleasantries for about thirty seconds before the girls beat a retreat. As they walked away, Sabrina overheard one of them say, “Well, she’s hot, that’s why he married her.”

“They’ve got you pegged,” she said, grinning up at Jonas.

He kissed her and opened the passenger door for her. “I’m not complicated,” he said.

As they drove home, she couldn’t help but wonder at his claim. He didn’t seem complicated, but the more she got to know him, the more complicated he became. If what Amanda said was true, why had he given up teaching? The students obviously liked him and he seemed to have a good relationship with them. Starting pay at Rife and Company wasn’t very much, so that couldn’t have been a lure, and the benefits weren’t all that great until one reached executive status.

It wasn’t really Sabrina’s business, but she couldn’t help her curiosity.

## Chapter 5

When they got home, Sabrina went upstairs to shower. She shampooed her hair, washing out the sand and the smell of lake. Letting the water beat its rhythm into her face, she tried to relax. The day had been nice. She hadn't been kidding when she told Jonas that she liked his family. They were the kind she always wished she had.

It wasn't that she didn't love her mother and Ginny, because she did love them very much. The Spencers, however, knew how to have fun, how to enjoy being together. She liked his sisters and she knew Ginny would as well. She had an adorable niece and a cute little nephew who were openly affectionate with their new aunt, who was essentially a stranger. They'd all welcomed her as if she and Jonas had been together for years and they'd been patiently waiting for them to arrive at the same conclusion they realized long ago.

Ginny gave Jonas the benefit of the doubt, but she still doubted him. Melinda hadn't been more than polite to Jonas, which was how she would treat anyone she didn't like. Sabrina was the same way. If she liked someone, she was a little more relaxed around them, but not much. She often wondered if people could tell the difference. They weren't supposed to be able to discern anything. Manners had always been of foremost importance in her upbringing. Ginny escaped those strictures. Her father helped. It explained the difference between the girls.

Sabrina wondered if her mother's marriage would have lasted longer if she'd ever been playful and affectionate with Ginny's father, as Jonas's parents were with one another. She wondered if her mother had felt affection for her ex-husband at all, or resentment because Grandpa had essentially forced her to marry. Or was she just cold like Sabrina?

Sabrina didn't want to be cold and unfeeling. She just didn't feel anything very deeply.

She tried to feel pride in her accomplishments, but she did not. She wanted to feel something for Jonas. She liked him. He was attractive, intelligent, and fun. She wanted to look at him and feel desire, but she didn't anymore. Only that first night had been magic. It was as if she had been allotted one night of good sex. She'd used it well, but she resented not being able to have more. She wanted to feel an orgasm again.

The door to the bathroom opened and closed. A cool breeze brushed against her as Jonas opened the curtain to the shower. It wasn't unusual for him to poke his head in the bathroom to talk to her or ask something, but he didn't usually open the curtain. She did the math and prepared herself to meet his sexual demands.

He stepped in and closed the curtain before putting his arms around her from behind. Pressing his naked body against hers, he spoke into her hair. "You okay?"

Warm water sluiced over them. With six water jets, the shower was easily large enough for two. "Yeah," she said, laying her head back against his shoulder and forcing her body to relax.

He dropped a kiss on her shoulder. "Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. It's warming in the oven." With that, he patted her hip dismissively and reached for the soap.

She was relieved. Failure wasn't something she enjoyed. She wondered if he'd be okay with a blowjob instead, but she didn't ask. She was sure he hadn't given up on her yet.

After dinner, he suggested a movie. They agreed on something and she popped it into the DVD player. He turned off most of the lights, leaving only the one upstairs in the hall lit. The gentle, soft light spilling into the living room relieved the darkness enough so they could see each other. She sat at one end of the sofa. Jonas stretched out, rested his head on her leg, and fell asleep.

The movie was one she liked, so she kept watching, letting him sleep undisturbed on her lap. She did remove his glasses, but otherwise she left him alone. He had worked last night after getting up so early to plant her rosebush. He hadn't been scheduled, but Ellen had called, a desperate plea in her voice that he couldn't ignore.

"I've worked at Elle's club since I was in college the first time," he had said. "It pays well, and it's work I enjoy, so I never quit."

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” she assured him. “I don’t want you to change your life for me.” She blushed. “Well, more than necessary.”

When the movie was nearly finished, she became aware that he was awake and watching her. She concentrated on the movie, trying to ignore him, but he was too distracting. She moved her hand, which had been resting on his shoulder, to his eyes, covering their penetrating stare.

“Do I make you nervous?” He laughed.

“No,” she said. “You’re distracting me.”

“You didn’t mind being watched last week.” His voice was low and husky with remembered desire.

Her skin burned. She flushed deep pink and lied. “I didn’t pay attention to any of that.”

“You did when we first got there,” he pointed out.

“Jonas,” she protested.

“Is it safe to say being watched wasn’t what turned you on?”

She was thankful he hadn’t moved her hand from his eyes. The pink wasn’t going away anytime soon if he was going to keep this line of conversation. “You liked it. It didn’t affect me one way or another.”

That wasn’t entirely true. While they didn’t distract her, something about the fact that everyone was enjoying themselves made it seem like it was okay for her to do so. She didn’t think anyone there would judge her. This brought up an exasperating paradox. There was no one here to judge her, either, so why couldn’t she have an orgasm? She wanted to have one. Jonas wanted her to have one. There didn’t seem to be a real conflict.

He didn’t respond except to move her hand from his eyes. He stared at her as he put her finger in his mouth, suckling and nipping at it. She knew he meant it to be erotic, but the only thought running through her head was thankfulness that she’d already seen the end of the movie. She closed her eyes and focused on enjoying what he was doing.

Lifting his body, he pulled her under him, and his lips found hers. She kissed him back. His kisses did affect her. They always did. She let her hands loose to roam his chest. He felt good. He was soft and hard in all the right places.

When he lifted again to let her remove his shirt, she saw the raw desire written in his eyes. It gave her pause. How could he want her so much when



she knew she'd disappointed him last time and he had to know this time would be no different?

He slid her lightweight sweats down her legs, stroking his hands over flesh she desperately wished was more sensitive to his touch. It was pleasant, but that was all.

His mouth roamed her bare legs next, and all the places that made her wet when he touched her at that club failed to react in the privacy of her own home. Ever so lightly, his teeth grazed the back of her knee. The last time he'd done that, her body had shot into the air at the electric pleasure. Now nothing. He dropped her leg and wedged himself between Sabrina and the back of the sofa, propping himself up on one hand.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

She did her best to look innocent and puzzled. "Nothing." She didn't push her luck by asking why he'd stopped. She knew very well why he stopped.

He gave her that look. It was deeply penetrating. She felt naked, as if he could see her soul, which wasn't something she was sure *she'd* even seen. She lifted her hand to her heart, covering the place where it seemed likely a soul would reside.

Guessing he was giving up for the night, she tried to sit up, but he rolled on top of her to prevent an escape, pinning her to the sofa with his hands and his tawny eyes. Instantly, she was wet. What was wrong with her?

"Do you want to have sex or don't you?" The harshness in her voice was a cover for the embarrassment she felt over being aroused by something he clearly hadn't meant as a sexual move.

He studied her a moment longer. "I think the question isn't whether or not *I* want to have sex, Sabrina. I think the question is whether or not *you* want to have sex."

She shrugged. "I wasn't stopping you."

He growled. "Are you attracted to me at all?"

The question took her by surprise. "Of course I find you attractive."

He shook his head. "That's not what I asked."

"Then I don't know what you're asking." Frustrated, she pushed against him, but he didn't budge. She pushed harder, still with no result. Curiously, her heart sped up, shooting excitement through her body. It only excited her more to know her attempt to free herself was futile.

"I'm asking if you feel attraction for me. That would be the physical response. Desire. I know I can turn you on, but I have no idea how I accomplished it before. If it wasn't the audience and it wasn't the way I touched you, Sabrina, what was it?"

His voice was soft and his eyes were patient. He actually wanted to know. Unfortunately, she had no idea what to tell him. She squirmed under him, pushing with all the strength she had and refusing to meet his eyes. Briefly, she closed her eyes against the tide of desire sweeping through her. He was getting the response he wanted, only this wasn't how he wanted it. It couldn't be.

Finally growing impatient, he captured her hands and pressed them to the sofa. Heat spiraled to her crotch and all he'd done was try to talk to her. She felt her control slipping, and it scared the hell out of her.

"Sabrina, I only want to make you feel good," he said, somewhere between a growl and a plea. "But you have to tell me what you like. You have to tell me how you like to be touched. When I say I'll do anything you want, I mean it. There are no boundaries I won't cross to make you come."

Her breathing was ragged with effort. It could have been desire, but she didn't want to admit to it. "Let go of me."

Instantly, she was free. She fled the room. Like a coward, she wanted to hide in her room, close the door, and have a good cry. She made it as far as the foyer before he caught her.

He pressed her body to the wall, caging her with his arms, but otherwise not touching her. She closed her eyes against the suddenly insistent throbbing between her legs. What was wrong with her? A man is tender and gentle and her body fails to respond. He pins her in place to demand answers and all she can picture is him lifting her and fucking her against the wall. She trembled at the thought.

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said, trying to soothe her with his tone and his words. A thumb caressed a lock of hair next to her temple. "I just want to know how to make you come. It's something we'll both enjoy. I promise, Sabrina. That's all I want."

She refused to look at him, keeping her eyes averted down or to the side. "I don't have answers for you. Why can't you just have sex with me and not worry about anything else? I'm willing to let you have my body, Jonas. Don't overthink this."

He smiled sadly. "I'm not that kind of lover. The more you enjoy it, the more I enjoy it. I want you to lose control in my arms, Sabrina. I want to feel you come on me again and again and again, until I can't hold back anymore."

She hazarded a brief look in his eyes. He was sincere. "You didn't seem to have a problem last time," she pointed out.

"Ejaculating isn't the same as coming. It feels good, but it isn't enough. Was it enough for you?" His thumb lightly traced the edge of her lower lip. He wanted to kiss her, but he wasn't going to do it until he was sure she wanted it.

She nodded, and her cheeks flamed again. "I didn't hate it, Jonas. It was pleasant."

He exhaled his frustration. "The smell of roses is pleasant. Sex should be orgasmic, which is a far cry from pleasant."

Closing her eyes and looking away again, she said, "It isn't you. It's me. You're doing everything right."

"Obviously not."

She didn't know what to say in response. So many reasons winged their way through her thoughts, most of them true, but none of them things she wanted to say out loud. She could fake it for him, couldn't she? She'd faked it plenty of times with Stephen and various other men over the years. It was only for a year.

"Tell me about a time you've had an orgasm, Sabrina. What happened? Where were you? How and where did he touch you? What did he say to you?"

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him in amazement. Never had one of her lovers asked her to tell them about her experiences with other men.

He knew he shocked her. His mouth curved into an amused smile. "I'm not jealous or naïve. I know you've had other lovers. So have I. I'm willing to tell you anything you want to know. I like a lot of different things, but mostly, I like when my lover gets off. Nothing compares to the feel of a woman coming around my cock."

Leaning closer, he spoke near her ear. His fingers brushed away her hair, and his warm breath fanned her neck. "I like it when you squeeze me with your cunt. The feel of you pulsing around me is unparalleled. I want

you to come on my fingers and in my mouth. I want to know how to touch you to make you do that, Sabrina. Tell me. Let me give that to you.”

She choked back a sob. She wanted that, too. Her words emerged as a desperate whisper, filled with years of repressed longing. “I don’t know.”

He stepped back, dropping his arms, and studied her with that look. “You mean to tell me that the only orgasm you’ve ever had was last week?”

Mortified, she nodded once, her sights firmly on the heated cherry flooring she’d installed before last winter. The dim light from the upstairs hall reflected from it unevenly. He was quiet for so long, she had to say something.

“I told you it was me, not you.”

He gathered her close, holding her in his arms. She tried to squirm away. She didn’t want his pity. He didn’t let go, and she gave up trying to escape.

“What about when you masturbate? Do you prefer your fingers or do you use a vibrator? A clitoral simulator? Do you prefer to be stimulated from the outside or the inside?” He spoke the words into her hair, murmuring them as if they were intended to bring comfort.

Masturbation was a joke. She’d tried it several times over the years, but nothing happened. She tried fantasizing, but to no avail. She shook her head against his chest.

He was quiet for a long time, no doubt hunting his mind for an answer.

“Okay, something turned you on last week. Let’s take this apart.” He let her go and stepped back to study her. She wished he was still holding her, not for the emotional comfort, but because it made her burn inside. “We made out at the hotel. Did that turn you on?”

She shrugged, blushing furiously. She wished more than anything for him to let this go. Why couldn’t he just take what was offered and not question it?

“Sabrina, now is not the time to be shy.”

“I don’t think you understand that this isn’t something that’s supposed to be talked about.” She snapped at him, the words leaving her mouth without consulting her brain.

He looked at her as if she had just told him Congress outlawed daylight. “Why not? Just because you were raised by a sexually-repressed, uptight woman doesn’t mean you have to be one too.”

White-hot anger coursed cold through her veins. Perhaps her mother was sexually-repressed and uptight, but Sabrina wasn't stupid. She knew she was very much like her mother already. She didn't want to go through life the way her mother did, always frowning and disapproving of other people's pleasure. She wanted to have another orgasm, damn it, and she wanted to have it with Jonas.

Maybe she didn't want to be that woman, but she didn't want to talk about it either. "I'm finished with this conversation, Jonas. I'm going to bed."

He caught her again, caging her against the wall. This time, he held her there with his body, not trusting her to refrain from ducking under his arm and running for the stairs. She closed her eyes as desire flooded her, soaking her panties.

"I'm not going to let you have your way in this," he said. "You're stuck with me for a year. I was very open about the fact that I like sex. Active sex—where we both enjoy each other's bodies to the fullest—not crappy, passive sex. I'm perfectly capable of masturbating by myself. Of course, you're always welcome to watch. You know how I like an audience."

He kept his voice low, erotic with an edge of anger. The eroticism of his voice didn't affect her nearly as much as the fact that he was holding her in place. She looked up at him and saw his tawny eyes light as he recognized her desire.

"What am I doing that is turning you on?" he breathed, not moving a muscle.

For the life of her, she didn't want to tell him. It was too humiliating. She was an intelligent, capable, successful woman. Why did a man holding her immobile make her legs weak? She closed her eyes and turned her face away.

He didn't move for the longest time, and then she felt his strong hands encircle her wrists. He forced them above her head and pinned them to the wall.

She couldn't stop the whimper that escaped, or the tear that labeled her shame. She fought him, but he only tightened his grip. Her limbs weakened with desire. She stopped struggling.

"Look at me," he commanded in a way that left no doubt he was in charge.

Reluctantly, she did as he said, letting him see her misery. “This isn’t right.”

He searched her face, wonder and hope lighting his features. “There’s nothing wrong with this, Sabrina. Don’t judge what turns you on and don’t try to rationalize it. Desire isn’t a rational thing. Have you ever been held down? Tied up?”

She shook her head. None of her lovers had been men who thought outside the realm of what was considered normal.

“I didn’t hold you down last week,” he said, frowning.

“You did,” she said, the words barely above a whisper. “When we danced, you held me close. You didn’t let me get more than a few inches from you.”

“You were wearing high heels after having a little too much wine. I was helping you balance. That wasn’t aggressive or possessive. Well, maybe a little bit possessive. Do you like knowing you belong to me?”

She ignored his question, dismissing it as absurd. “When you first took me into that room, I wanted to leave, but you wouldn’t let me.” He had wrapped his arms around her and held her immobile. She was wet then and she was wet now.

“I wouldn’t have held you there if I thought you really wanted to leave. Did you want to leave?” The frown hadn’t left his face.

“At first,” she said. “But no, I wanted to stay. I knew you would have taken me away from there if I asked.”

He lowered his head slowly, brushing his lips against hers. Electricity raced through her and a fire ignited. She nearly sobbed with relief. In holding her down, he set her free. She didn’t understand it and she didn’t want to.

She opened to him, deepening the kiss. She tried to move her arms, to embrace him, but he didn’t let her move. She moaned, a small sound, but it got his attention. He broke the kiss, and breathing hard, grinned at her. She wanted his lips back. She tried for them, but he evaded her.

“Onion.”

Onions had not been on the menu at dinner, so she had no idea what he was talking about. He laughed at her puzzled expression and kissed her, hard and brief.

Regarding her with complete sobriety, he said, "If we're going to do this right, we need a safety word. If I do something to you that you don't like, you want me to stop, or if I hurt you, say 'onion' and I'll stop immediately."

"Why would you hurt me?" she asked.

He shrugged. "You're a sexual mystery, but I like mysteries. If I'm going to push your boundaries, it stands to reason I may go too far. I already know you like it rough. A safety word will stop the action, temporarily or permanently."

The idea of something like this wasn't new to Sabrina, but she'd always dismissed it as deviant and absurd. Now it opened the door to something denied her for so long. She opened her mouth and closed it, then tried again. "How do I know if it's temporary or permanent?"

"We decide that during the time-out. Now if you understand the rules, I'd really like to fuck you." He was hard against her. Too preoccupied with her own budding desire, she hadn't noticed that this turned him on just as much as it aroused her.

Her blushes were becoming a permanent thing around him. Would she ever grow used to that word? She nodded. He dropped his hands from her wrists, which she found disappointing. He used his body to hold her and let his hands roam where they pleased, leaving behind trails of quivering flesh.

He stroked her over her panties. Chuckling at how wet they were, he pushed them down her hips until they pooled at her ankles. She kicked them aside, and he slipped his hand between her legs, parting her and stroking until she panted and held on to him for balance.

When he slid one arm around her, she really thought he meant to lower his pants with his free hand, but he surprised her by thrusting several fingers so deep inside she could feel his farthest knuckles widening her entrance, lifting her onto her toes. She exhaled a gasp at the sudden and violent intrusion.

Pausing, he locked eyes with her, waiting to hear the word that would tell him he'd gone too far. After she had gone silent, he separated his fingers and slowly slid them down until they were almost out. The sensation was incredible. Her head fell back against the foyer wall and her fingers dug into his shoulder.

By the time he thrust upward, the tension inside Sabrina was coiled so tightly she had to concentrate on not panicking. He repeated his movements,

drawing deep sighs and moans that made her breathy and lightheaded. Her hips moved, thrusting against him to the rhythm he established. It pushed her so close, but it wasn't enough.

"Jonas?" She struggled to utter the single word, not because she was speechless with desire, but because she was about to ask him to do something she didn't know if he wanted to do. Maybe it was a little bit of both.

Without missing a beat or pausing in his actions, he pressed his temple to hers. "Yes?"

"You said that you fantasized about me." Was it wrong to bring that up now?

He smiled, his breaths coming soft against her cheek. "Frequently."

"Will you..." She licked her lower lip nervously. "Will you tell me about them? Or is that too personal?"

The fingers inside her stilled, then withdrew, and she whimpered in protest before she thought about what she was doing. The kiss was slow and deep, but not unexpected. She didn't expect him to let her slide to the floor.

"You're allowed to get personal," he said at last.

His hands roamed her thighs, trailing across her hips to caress her waist and stomach. He sealed his forehead to hers and kept his eyes on her body. "The first time I saw you, you were standing in that little access hall behind your office talking to Jared."

The lightness of his touch and the fact that she knew he wasn't going to let her go anywhere combined in a curiously erotic fashion. He knew it. She didn't know how, but he did, and he fanned the flames inside her higher.

"Your skirt was cream-colored. It had about an inch of lace at the hem that ended just above your knee. You were wearing stockings that matched it. Thigh-highs, the kind you hold up with a garter belt."

She loosened the tie on his sweats and watched them slither to the floor. She knew he had shifted from reality to his fantasy. The skirt was real, but the thigh-highs were a recent thing. She had yet to wear Ginny's gifts.

"You saw me coming and got rid of him. It was just the two of us. You asked me into your office to reach something." He said the last two words slowly, as if they were an inside joke.

She gave his underwear the same treatment he'd given hers. He looked very sexy in boxer briefs, but she wanted to touch him. Taking him in her



hands, she caressed the extra-soft skin of his erection lightly. “What did I want you to help me reach?”

His wolfish grin gave away the answer. “Orgasm, honey. You closed the door, and I knew you only wanted me for my body. The way you looked at me brought me to my knees.”

He lifted her, impaling Sabrina quickly and forcefully. She cried out, ignoring the coolness of the wall along her back as he trapped her and slowly thrust in and out. How had she looked at him? She wanted him to continue, but she didn’t have enough control of the fire running rampant in her veins to form words. Her eyelids were heavy, and she knew she wouldn’t be able to deny him what he wanted from her.

“You licked your lips, but it was a wasted gesture. I was already hard from just that one look, Sabrina, the one you have now that says, ‘Jonas, I’m hot and ready for you. I want you to fuck me until I can’t remember my name.’”

He thrust into her harder and faster. The heat spiraled until even her fingertips trembled. If he hadn’t been holding her up, she would have turned to a pool of liquid jelly on the floor. The feeling both scared and titillated her. He increased his tempo again, and she came on him, crying out her climax right there in the foyer.

“Yes, that’s it, honey. Let it come to you. Don’t fight it.”

He slowed his thrusts. She thought he might climax, too, but he didn’t come and he didn’t stop. She looked at him questioningly. Surely he knew she had an orgasm.

His lips covered hers, seeking, demanding, taking more and more. The pulsing inside her grew, lengthening. He wanted more. “Say it, honey. Tell me to fuck you until you can’t remember your name.”

Sabrina wasn’t sure she wanted that. She liked what he had done for her so far, but she was terrified of the place he was pushing her. Reaching deep inside, she convinced herself to trust him, just this once. She opened her eyes and stared into his liquid gold ones.

“Fuck me until I can’t remember my name or yours.” The words were breathy and labored, but they drove him higher. She reveled in her power. The thought that he really did want her, that he really did fantasize about her was a powerful aphrodisiac. She wanted to feel him come inside her more than she wanted to come again.

She wanted to urge him faster, but she knew he wouldn't listen to her. They were caught between his fantasy and the feel of him fucking her for real.

"I am on my knees in front of you, Sabrina. I lift your skirt out of the way, tracing patterns on your naked inner thighs. I part the lips of your pussy with my fingers, and you tremble in anticipation. You want my mouth on your clitoris as much as I want to know the smoky, musky flavor of you coating my tongue and filling my senses."

His eyes never left hers. She didn't need to tell him she'd never come with a man's tongue stimulating her. And now he was making her come at the idea of his tongue circling her tender, throbbing nub and plunging deep inside her to find what he termed a "rough patch" that would take her over the edge.

Though she never once broke his gaze and the power he had over her, she pictured his fantasy vividly and she wanted it too. She wanted to call him out of the hallway and into her office, where he would lick her until her legs were weak and she had to lean against her desk for support.

The throbbing of the orgasm inside her was a starting point as he thrust into her, forcing her higher. Words became impossible, and he stopped talking, but the movie he had begun in her head refused to stop playing. She pictured him kneeling before her with a dozen expressions on his face, anything from cocky and confident to shy and pleading.

Sounds penetrated the haze of her pleasure: sobs, cries, demands, and she realized they came from her. She wanted him to go faster, to fuck her harder, but he wouldn't, even when she used crude language. He kept his pace slow and steady, driving her up the sheer face of the cliff on his terms.

Then, suddenly, his pace was frenzied. Sabrina hooked her legs around him and hung on for dear life. Her vision went black and the scream that escaped came from deep inside. His cry joined hers and she felt his cum shooting into her. His body jerked, spasming in time to the pulsing of his cock.

He was right. Last time hadn't been anything like this for him. He sank to the floor, taking her with him. They were quiet, unable to speak or move for the longest time. Sabrina's body cooled before she regained control of her muscles.

“Damn it, woman. You are far hotter than you know.” He said the words into her neck.

She wasn’t sure she heard him correctly. “Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

He laughed the laugh of a man who knew he was lost, but hadn’t accepted it. “I’m not sure.”

Later, when the house was closed up for the night and they lay in bed, she gathered enough courage to ask Jonas the question that had begun burning in her since he told her his fantasy.

“Jonas?” She whispered his name in case he was already asleep. It would be a valid coward’s way out.

He wasn’t quite out yet. “Hmm?”

“Would you really do that? If I asked you into my office and locked the door, would you really do...that?” She bit her lip, hoping he wouldn’t make her ask again, this time with a more complete description. He was quiet for so long, she’d begun to think she imagined his acknowledgement of her question.

When she’d given up, he spoke, his voice muffled by a face half-turned into his pillow. “Hell, yes. You wouldn’t even have to lock the door. If you recall, I said nothing about you locking the main door to your office. Anyone could have come in and watched.”

She blushed in the safety of the darkness, but somehow, she knew he was aware of her pink complexion.

\* \* \* \*

Jonas walked in the clouds. His sleep had been deep and peaceful. Waking before the alarm, he watched as shafts of light crept over the dark room and onto Sabrina’s sleeping face. He liked the way the light glinted from her lush, dark brown hair. It was mussed and the slight curl that was usually only evident at the tips showed in gentle waves. He loved her hair. He could have spent hours running his fingers through it and fisting it in his hands.

She was beautiful and passionate and his.

He shouldn’t have felt so cocky about being the only man to have ever given her an orgasm. It wasn’t fair to her. She deserved to let go like she had

the night before. She deserved to feel the total release and surrender of a large, powerful orgasm. She deserved to have had that happen years before now.

And the tale of his fantasy only spurred her higher. It was another avenue to explore. First he would investigate the way light bondage seemed to turn her on. How much could she take? She seemed to like the aggression, too. The Dom in him was exceptionally pleased to have found someone so sexually compatible. He hadn't expected it and he was going to enjoy every second of it.

Jonas wasn't under the delusion that their entire relationship would have that dynamic. He understood she only wanted him to behave like that where sex was concerned. If he tried to dominate her in other aspects of their life together, he could very well find himself thrown out on the street.

He couldn't let that happen.

Waking her early, he captured her wrists with one hand and held them above her head. He kissed her, loving the way her entire body responded, pressing upward, seeking his heat.

He touched her roughly, squeezing her ass and rolling her nipples between his fingers through the silk of the sheath she wore to bed. She was drenched in seconds. Shoving away her tiny nightgown and his boxers, he plunged into her and fucked her until she bucked beneath him, begging and screaming. Only when her eyes clouded with orgasm did he give into his own powerful need.

Crashing back to Earth, he smacked a kiss on her lips and smiled at her satisfied expression. "Good morning."

Sabrina's eyes, already soft from the aftereffects of her orgasm, lightened even more. "I agree."

## Chapter 6

The next several weeks were a sexual honeymoon. Jonas experimented with Sabrina and she enjoyed every second of it. Her “twice a week” rule was blown out of the water. She liked it when he approached her unexpectedly, shoving her to the couch or the bed or against the wall and toying with her until she begged him to fuck her.

She was amazed at the power of that word. Something about it drove him over the edge and made him hers. He may have held her down physically, but she had no doubt he was at her mercy once she uttered that word. Sometimes she said it early on, but more often she waited, holding out as long as she could, playing with him as much as he played with her.

The power she had over him took her breath away. She wondered if he would mind if she initiated their encounters. His open attitude toward sex encouraged her.

One morning before work, she woke early and watched him sleep. He had worked the evening before, so she hesitated, but not for too long. Though he regularly shared his fantasies with her, she’d begun having her own. It began with the fact that she now slept naked, something she’d always wanted to do, but lacked the courage against the number of admonitions running through her head. What if the house caught fire? What if there was some emergency and she had to leap from bed to attend to it? What if someone came to the door? In all likelihood, she would grab a robe first, whether or not she was clad in pajamas.

She liked the way the soft silk of the sheets caressed her breasts, her stomach, and the back of her thighs. It made her feel sexy and alive. Even when Jonas wasn’t home, she fell asleep with a smile on her lips.

The sheet had fallen down his chest as he slept, one arm resting carelessly on the pillow above his head. The tanned, chiseled expanse of his torso captured her attention. Screwing in her courage, she traced her

fingertips down his bare skin, pushing the sheet out of the way until she had his penis in her hands. Instantly, it hardened. She looked up to find his eyes open and delightfully tawny.

“I want you to fuck me. Hard and fast. No foreplay.”

Before she could process the movement, he pinned her to the bed, entering her as hard and fast as she asked. She wasn’t very dry, having entertained the fantasy just before she woke him, and she was sopping wet before his second violent thrust.

She struggled against him because she liked the futility of it. She trusted him to not let go, to not let her win the physical battle. She needed him to force her to orgasm. She’d tried masturbating to fantasies of what he did to her, but she wasn’t able to get anywhere with them.

The sounds she made came faster and harder, ripped from her with each thrust. Unexpectedly, he let go, reaching down to hook her knees over his shoulders. This new position let him into her far deeper than before and stripped her of any sense of control. She came immediately, the convulsions inside milking a climax from him.

Jonas cried out and collapsed next to her. His breathing returned to normal, and he fell back asleep. Sabrina took a shower, stroking the tender, abused flesh between her legs. It was sore to the touch, but the pain brought with it a pleasure and excitement she didn’t expect. Giving in to the urge, she closed her eyes and continued stroking her clitoris. Heat coiled in her loins, and her breath came faster.

Bracing one hand against the wall, she ventured deeper, where she was more swollen and raw. The pain was worse there, but she fought against her inclination to stop. The pressure inside increased until it released suddenly, her body stiffening as she climaxed on her own for the first time in her life. She rested her head against her arm on the tiled shower wall, weeping with the relief of release.

Sabrina’s success gave her courage in other respects. Jonas had an amazing imagination, but some of the fantasies that stuck with her the most were the ones he described with their office as the setting.

Where she once thought he was ignoring her at staff meetings or listening politely, she now knew he was picturing her naked, beckoning to him across the room to pleasure her on the long conference table in front of the entire office staff. That would never happen, but some of his other

fantasies were more plausible. The first one he shared with Sabrina constantly reasserted itself in her head.

They had been sleeping together for nearly a month and he hadn't once tried to act out that particular fantasy, either at work or anywhere else. Stephen had gone down on her several times, but he didn't enjoy it and neither did she. Sabrina knew Jonas would be different. She wanted to know what it would be like to have his face between her legs.

The first problem with which she had to contend was the fact that he was rarely found in the area around her office. Nobody knew they were married and now she wondered if she could entice him to her and if that would fuel rumors of a relationship between them. He would probably like that.

Not wanting to send anything untoward on the company's e-mail, she texted him with a simple message. She told him she had no appointments between two and three in the afternoon. He was intelligent enough to extrapolate the rest.

When he texted her back, asking if she needed help reaching something, Sabrina knew he figured it out.

Of course, as luck would have it, her schedule changed unexpectedly. The meeting that was supposed to end well before two did not. When she finally opened her door, fifteen minutes had elapsed. She found Jonas in the hall, leaning casually against the opposite wall, conversing with Randall, a member of her team.

Randall had been with her the longest. He wasn't her first acquisition, but he was her best. Like Sabrina, he had come to Rife fresh from college, accepting an internship to get his foot in the door. Her grandfather had funded her unpaid year of "experience." Randall's then-girlfriend, who was now his wife, funded his. He was short enough to look Sabrina directly in the eye when he spoke and as square as a brick house. His looks and his tenacity were reminiscent of a bulldog.

They both looked over as soon as Sabrina's door opened. One of the perks of being the boss was that she didn't have to explain her actions. She cocked one brow at Randall, which implied a question she had no interest in asking.

"I'm working," he said with mock defensiveness.

She held up both hands. "I didn't say a word."

“You don’t have to,” he grumbled, turning to catch Jonas’s eye. “Catch you later, man.”

Jonas nodded. “Let me know how it goes.” He watched Randall walk away, and then turned the same look on Sabrina that she’d just given to Randall. “Need help with anything?”

She smiled. “Now that you mention it...”

Leaving the sentence dangling, she gestured into her office. He sauntered in and she closed the door behind him, locking it. She’d already secured the door on the other side of her office.

“Chicken.”

“We’ll call it ‘job security.’ Now, I think we’ve wasted enough time on pleasantries. How about we get to work?” She was able to get the entire statement out without laughing. The laughter that threatened was of both the amused and nervous varieties. Amusement didn’t lead to orgasm with her. She needed him to take charge and set the tone. He was good at it.

But this time, he just looked at her with an expectant expression on his face and his hands in his pockets. He had worn a suit jacket to work that morning, but he wasn’t wearing it now. The white pinstriped shirt and the emerald tie brought out the green in his eyes behind the wire-rimmed frames.

Sabrina realized the tables had been turned. She was supposed to be in charge. She had no idea how to give him a look that would say she wanted him on his knees in front of her. She only knew how to want it.

Finally, she thought about how, when they had sex at home, she always felt like she was someone else. Taking a breath, she became someone else. Office slut seemed to be the appropriate label for what she wanted. Who else asked a co-worker to lick her pussy?

Cocking her head to one side, she turned on her flirtiest smile. “You’re relatively new here, aren’t you?”

“I’ve been here for more than six months, Ms. Breszewski.” He caught on to what she was doing immediately.

“I’ve heard good things about you. Can I call you Jonas?” She didn’t wait for a response. Approaching him, she fingered his tie, letting the smooth fabric caress her skin. Inches separated them. “Jonas, I’d like to see what you’re made of.”



A knowing light came into his eyes. He grasped her hips and pressed them to his pelvis, lifting her in the process. She had to grab his arms to keep from losing her balance.

“Would you?” he asked.

She imagined him throwing her on the black leather sofa in the corner of her office and holding her hands hostage as he groped under her skirt. It worked. When she looked up at him, she had the right look on her face, the one that begged him the way he liked. Despite the green tie, his eyes darkened to topaz. Instantly, he dropped to his knees.

His large, warm hands followed her stockings up, disappearing under her skirt. She hadn’t worn the cream one with the lace hem. This one was black. It flared under her hips, making her seem curvier than she was. She always thought it made her look a little plump, but Jonas assured her that men the world over didn’t share her opinion.

He stopped, his hands stuttering when they reached bare flesh. For the first time, she wore a pair of thigh-highs. He glanced up, burning her with his tawny eyes.

His hands retreated, but only for a moment. This time, when he ran his hands up her legs, he raised her skirt as well. She watched his face as he discovered she wore no panties, only a garter to hold up the stockings. He stared at the V of hair pointing to his destination, mesmerized.

Sabrina was becoming heady with power. “Lick me,” she commanded.

“Spread your legs,” he said, his voice strangled and his breathing uneven.

She thought he would want her to lie down on the couch or at least lean against her desk, but they were in the middle of the room and nothing was nearby. With a move that was much more decisive and confident than she felt, Sabrina widened her stance.

He rotated her hips forward, spreading her wider with the movement and parting her with his thumbs. Without hesitating, he opened his mouth. His face disappeared, leaving only the top of his sunstreaked hair nestled against her deep brown curls.

The first sensation was heat, pure molten lava that made her inhale sharply. Strong and talented, his tongue caressed her as erotically as he promised. Her legs trembled, and she swayed. He broke off sharply,

catching her before she fell, and guided her back several steps to lean against the front of her desk.

His tongue returned to its exploits and she gripped the desk, luxuriating in the tiny pain the edge caused as it dug into the palm of her hands. If Jonas had taught her nothing else, he taught her that she liked when control was taken from her, leaving her with no choice but to reach climax. It was to be her release in more ways than one. In taking control from her, he often handled her roughly, but never rough enough to leave marks or bruises. Jonas definitely knew her body's limits.

Now he was gentle, almost reverent. It wasn't enough. Jonas was not handling her roughly and she needed more if she was going to come. Letting the desk dig into her hands went a small way toward that end.

The pressure between her legs changed. His mouth opened more, biting her clitoris sharply. Sabrina yelped at the unexpectedness of the pain and wetness flooded her pussy. She felt self-conscious at the thought of her juices pouring into his mouth, but he moaned into her flesh, sucking harder and harder.

Capturing her swollen and throbbing clit between his teeth, he drew it into his mouth, stretching it. Cold fire raced through Sabrina, passion mixed with a titillating sharpness. She moaned and leaned back, not to escape him, but because her knees would no longer support her weight.

Without seeming to move, he thrust a finger inside, pinching the thin skin there with the thumb that remained on the outside. She nearly came with the sharpness of the pinch.

Two more fingers joined the first, stretching her from the inside as his strong lips kept her clit elongated. She came on him, just like he wanted, her juices soaking his fingers and filling his mouth. She knew she was loud and there was a better than even chance that someone standing near one of her doors would hear her, but she didn't care. She knew it pleased him to have it so.

He stood, kissing her as hard as he sucked her a moment ago. Her musky taste lingered on his lips and tongue, giving her a taste of her essential femaleness.

Reaching between them, she loosed his belt and opened his pants. He was inside her before she was able to fully move his boxer briefs out of the way, riding the waves of her waning orgasm. He pushed her knees up so that

her feet rested on the edge of the desk and he held them there with his shoulders as he leaned over her.

She couldn't hang on to him in this position. She was forced to balance by resting her weight on her hands behind her. She let her head fall back and she concentrated on the growing tension, forgetting everything except Jonas and the way he made her feel.

The first distraction was momentary. He pulled the pins out of her hair, freeing long strands to cascade down her back. She pushed it out of her mind, knowing he wanted to leave a tangible mark on her, a "Jonas was here" sign. He knew she wouldn't have time to put it back up before her next meeting.

The second distraction nearly undid her. The phone rang, her direct line. The only people who used that number were her myriad bosses. It was most likely Joy, Vice-President of Marketing, and her immediate supervisor. Sabrina liked Joy; she was largely responsible for promoting Sabrina as far as she had come this fast. Her only downfall was the fact that she was Jared's aunt and she definitely watched out for him, making sure he looked good no matter what. Sabrina often took flack for his mistakes and not by her own choosing.

She turned her head toward the sound.

"Don't," he said, his lips lingering near hers, ready to capture them. "You're almost there."

"It's Joy," she said, the face of the cliff already receding into unreachable territory. "I have to take it."

He imprisoned her hands behind her, forcing her to use her stomach muscles to balance. Immediately, the tension inside increased. She moaned out loud, a long, low sound that was far too loud to not be heard outside the four walls of her office.

Jonas chuckled and closed his mouth over hers, swallowing her sounds and demanding her soul. She knew it sounded dramatic, but that's exactly what he did, and it was the first time he did it. She fought him, not the fact that he was holding her so that she couldn't move even to meet his thrusts, but the fact that she didn't want to share such an intimate part of herself.

"Give it to me," he murmured, losing himself. His tawny eyes took on a dreamlike quality. He was lost in the fantasy. "Give it all to me."

The phone stopped ringing, and Sabrina gave him most of what he wanted. She drew the line at her soul. He had no right to it.

She whimpered, trying to control the volume of her orgasm.

He thrust harder, knowing it would push her higher. “Let it go, Sabrina. Let me have it.”

She bit him. Hard. She wasn’t aware of what she had done until it was too late. With her teeth firmly entrenched in his shoulder muffling the sounds of her orgasm and his face buried in her neck for the same reason, they came together. It was the first time it happened. She was used to him following her, sometimes a great deal of time later. It was an amazing feeling.

She thought he got a little bit of her soul in that moment. He definitely gave her a piece of his. Either way, it terrified her. It terrified her long after they fixed their clothing and parted ways, a pink stain of lipstick on his shirt where she bit him.

\* \* \* \*

Staring into the men’s room mirror, Jonas dabbed the pink smear with a stain stick halfheartedly. He wanted to leave it there, to have something of Sabrina when she wasn’t around, but he didn’t have that many shirts he could wear to work.

To the outside world, there was nothing going on between them. Nobody knew she had a claim on him—which he liked—but they also were unaware that he had a claim on her. That bothered him. Several times, he’d been forced to watch men from clients’ companies fawn all over Sabrina. She always handled it with patience and grace, but the part of him that wanted to stand up and demand they back off was getting harder and harder to ignore.

## Chapter 7

Joy breezed into Sabrina's office moments after Jonas slipped out the back door. At sixty-three, she was a powerhouse of energy and drive. Tall, with a willowy figure and a chronic smoker's cough, she was Sabrina's opposite in so many ways.

She was loud, forceful, and unreserved. She had a presence that demanded immediate attention. Sabrina envied her many things, but being related to Jared Larsen was not one of them. If Sabrina's weakness was that she was too reserved, too controlling, then Joy's was that she doted on her dead sister's overgrown child. Otherwise, she was a talented ad woman.

"Where have you been?" Her lips pressed together, highlighting her displeasure. "I called, but you didn't answer."

Sabrina shrugged away the question. "What did you need?"

"I have someone for your team," she said. "I want her to start immediately."

Sabrina bristled at this. Her team was hand-chosen by her and they were easily the best group of people in the company. Their skills complemented one another, making the sum of them much greater than what they were individually. Adding a new member would tinker with that chemistry. As talented as she knew Jonas to be, she never considered adding him to her team because she didn't know how he would change the group's dynamic.

"Joy," she protested. "There is an interview process."

She pushed aside Sabrina's concern. "Veronica will be a great addition to your team. There will be some problems, naturally, but I expect you'll straighten them out in no time."

Sabrina stole Jonas's penetrating stare, turning it on Joy until she grew uncomfortable.

"Sabrina, she's very, very talented. Just sometimes she lets her mouth get away from her."

Great. She needed someone with a talent for alienating others, as if she didn't already have enough to worry about. Usually, she was the one who made clients wary. Her shy, reserved nature often came across as aloof and cold. Many people didn't realize that a person could be both confident and shy, or that a shy person could hide behind a façade of confidence. Sabrina's posture and body language exuded the conviction that she was in charge. Her icy demeanor often hid an underlying fear that people wouldn't like her.

That was one of the reasons she and Ty worked so well together. When she first met Ty four years ago, he extracted a smile from her immediately. He was tall without being bulky and he was a mesmerizing shade of dark chocolate, but that wasn't what made her smile. Something about Ty put her at ease and then he used his incredible sense of humor to keep her there. He was golden with clients. She used his charm and presence extensively in presentations. He balanced her shyness perfectly.

Then there was Clare. Clare had worked for several advertising firms before Sabrina lured her away three years ago with the promise of equal treatment and respect for her ideas. She was incredibly creative and she brought the perspective of a working mother with teenaged and college-aged children.

Though they were both level-headed and talented, Clare was a counterweight to Randall. He was in his late thirties with two young children. Clare balanced Randall's inherent unattractiveness with her smooth motherly charm.

The rotating member of the team was the intern. Right now, she had Ophelia. It wasn't a paid position and Sabrina wanted her to have a full experience, so she rotated Ophelia around the team as an assistant. At twenty-one, she was still optimistic and full of the possibilities in life. Sabrina had been, too. That was about the time Stephen asked her to marry him, forcing her to take stock of the deficiencies in their otherwise perfect relationship. She still regretted breaking his heart, and her own too. Ophelia often made her wonder what had become of his life. Had he fallen in love? Married? Had children? Was he happy?

"Joy," she cajoled. "I have all I can handle right now."

"Why? Did you suddenly get a personal life?"

She meant it as a joke, but it stung nonetheless. It had been a while since Sabrina had a date, and Joy knew Jared had a thing for her. She looked the

other way when Sabrina was on his team, ignoring it because Jared had still been married. Now she thought they would make the perfect couple and Sabrina had no idea why.

“Yes,” she answered Joy without changing her expression. “I have acquired a personal life.”

The dismissive way she looked at Sabrina said she didn’t believe her. “Well, too bad. I have Veronica here with me.” She walked to the door and flung it open to motion Veronica inside.

Sabrina recognized her immediately. In her mid-forties, Veronica Russell was a familiar figure in the advertising community. She was talented. She had a strong personality. And she had a knack for not filtering anything she said.

“Well, you’re smaller than I remembered,” she said, shaking Sabrina’s hand. “We met last year when you stole that automotive parts account out from under me.”

Sabrina threw a look at Joy. The woman owed her, big time. Screwing on a smile, Sabrina withdrew her hand from Veronica’s iron grip. “What brings you to Rife and Company, Veronica?”

She jabbed a thumb in Joy’s direction. “She said I would be a perfect addition to this team, but I don’t know.”

“You have doubts?” She raised a polite brow. Was there a way out of this?

“You have a reputation for being a bitch,” she said, tossing her bright red, frizzy hair over her shoulder. “I like that in a woman, but men find it off-putting. It seems you and I have the same problem in this field.”

Except Sabrina had manners. She refrained from amending Veronica’s statement out loud. It brought to mind what Jonas said about people being afraid of disappointing her. Was he putting a good face on the way people viewed her because he married her, or was his assessment closer to the truth?

The polite expression frozen on her face was all the encouragement Veronica needed to continue.

“Except for the fact that you’re pretty. Men will overlook many flaws in a pretty face. That must be how you’ve gotten this far this fast. In me, they only see the flaws.”

“Well, then,” Sabrina began, “you’ll just have to keep your mouth closed when we’re with a client. Let everyone else do the talking.”

Unlike Jared, Sabrina required her team to be part of the presentation. Nobody failed to receive credit or accolades for their work. Jared liked to complain that she micromanaged, but they were, by far, the company’s most productive team. Only since the addition of Jonas had Jared’s team even begun to approach the average in productivity.

Joy clapped a hand on Veronica’s shoulder before Veronica could respond to Sabrina’s uncharacteristic rudeness. “Let’s get you settled in. I had maintenance move a desk for you.”

Sabrina had never been so happy to see five o’clock. She and Jonas continued to carpool, as it was working out well. They were both quiet on the drive home. Sabrina didn’t know the drift of his thoughts, but hers were in turmoil over the things Veronica said. Was her reputation really so bad? She knew she could come off as cold, but she worked really hard to mitigate that perception.

Successful women in this business still had the problem of being perceived as a bitch or as a slut. She wasn’t sure which was worse, but so far she had gone the bitch route. She had certainly proved herself a slut this afternoon. Her stomach rolled with regret. How did Jonas really see her? Perhaps it was unfair to cast him in the same pool as the rest of the men in advertising and with the majority of their clients, but he had mentioned—albeit diplomatically—that her coworkers considered her unapproachable. It was a euphemism for the word Veronica used.

Out of nowhere, Jonas interrupted the self-deprecating flow of her thoughts. “I can’t believe you’re not wearing underwear.”

Sabrina stiffened, stung by the judgment inherent in his words. She had apparently moved from “bitch” to “slut” in his estimation. Either way, it hurt. She was quiet for the rest of the ride, pushing her hurt into a ball of anger that she could stow safely away. It would come in handy the next time he demanded a piece of her soul.

When they got home, she headed straight for her underwear drawer. This had been a grave mistake.

He followed her, but she didn’t think anything of it. He was in the habit of changing into jeans to make dinner. Sometimes he wandered outside to



do yard work or walk the property. Other days, he went to work right after dinner.

She opened the drawer. Before she could reach inside, he slammed it shut with one hand, leaning his weight against the facing. He didn't cage her with his arms or try to intimidate her with his presence as he did when he approached her for sex, so she knew he wasn't trying to turn her on.

"What are you doing?" His voice came at her from just above her right ear.

Still angry and stiff, she kept her back straight and her shoulders square. "What does it look like I'm doing?" The ice queen was in charge.

"Don't answer a question with a question," he growled.

She whirled on him. "Don't ask stupid questions."

The muscles in his jaw clenched and his eyes glittered green with anger. Slowly, the look turned cold, matching her frostiness. "It won't help, you know. It's far too late."

She refused to break the glare between them by looking down in shame. "Leave me alone."

He dropped his arm, making sure she knew her escape path wasn't blocked from either direction. "You can't undo what you did today." His voice was deceptively soft.

Anger made her shake. She struggled to control it, to turn it inward. "How dare you?"

"How dare I what?" he asked, openly sneering at her. "How dare I take advantage of what's offered? You, of all people, should know a woman without panties is demanding to be fucked."

Her face was scarlet with anger, so the embarrassment was camouflaged.

"You'll never make a good whore if you don't realize that right now," he continued.

She curled her hands into fists, digging her nails into her palm to prevent the tears that pricked her eyes from falling. He wasn't saying anything she hadn't already thought, berating herself all the way home for the way she acted today. What the hell had she been thinking?

"You...you...you..." she stammered, unable to think of something to call him that would sting him the way he had hurt her.

“Bastard? Son of a bitch? Asshole?” He supplied those suggestions and more, never taking his eyes from hers.

None of those words were ones she particularly liked. She abandoned the name-calling route. No epithet she could throw at him would do anything more than amuse him. “You didn’t seem to mind this afternoon.”

She wanted to close her eyes and shrink into nothing the moment she said it. Breaking down, she looked away, turning her head to sever his hold over her.

“My God, you suck at this,” he said. “Come on, Sabrina. I’ve seen you take on Jared with no problem, yet you can’t think of a single comeback now?”

Her eyes widened in shock. Slowly, she looked up at him. She had no idea what he was talking about.

“How are we ever going to have a good fight if you refuse to shout at me? I gave you every opportunity to call me names, but you didn’t. I thought you might take the high road. You headed for it, but you stalled before you made any progress.” His hands were on his hips, and he had the look of a youth soccer coach whose players just lost a game that should have been an easy win.

“What are you talking about?” Her anger hadn’t vanished, but bafflement temporarily won out.

“What are *you* talking about?” he returned. “I thought we were having our first fight. For the record, this doesn’t count. I thought I had you when you clenched your fists. You were ripe to take a swing at me or at least call me something nasty, but you didn’t.” He looked her up and down. “I gave you every opening, Sabrina. I even tried to help you out with things to call me. Why didn’t you?”

Her eyes were still wide with shock. “What good does name-calling or violence do? You’re stronger than me and you know worse things to say.”

He laughed, a real deep-down belly laugh. He fell against the row of drawers behind her. She turned to leave, but he caught her, wrapping her in his arms. “You are a rare woman.”

She didn’t like the game he was playing. She didn’t understand the rules, but she knew when she was out of her depth. She pushed against his arms, trying to dislodge them. “Let go of me.”

“First, tell me why you’re mad at me.”

She thought it was obvious. "You won't let go of me."

He ignored her. "I told you I couldn't believe you weren't wearing panties. You gave me the silent treatment the rest of the way home and marched up here to cover yourself. Why?"

She stiffened anew, not that she was relaxed before. He wanted to know, so she went for it. "You judged me. How could you do that?"

"I did nothing of the kind," he said. "Who put it into your head that a woman who goes commando is asking for it?"

As wonderful as things had been between them, he had to know she was still innately uncomfortable discussing these things. Hoping he would give up, let her go, and drop the subject, she didn't answer him.

"Stupid question. Of course it was your mother."

Pride reared its head. "Leave my mother out of this. She's a good person."

"I know she is," he said. "But she's passed some pretty Victorian notions to you."

He let her go so abruptly she had to reach for the chest of drawers behind him to steady herself. She looked up at him, swallowing unasked questions that she wasn't sure she wanted answered.

"For the record, I did not pass judgment on you. I thought what you did today was incredibly hot. I know how much courage it took for you to break through your antiquated barriers to proposition me in the first place. The more I know you, the more I'm amazed you agreed to marry me after you heard my terms."

He walked around her. She didn't watch him go, but she felt him pause before he left.

"Not wearing underwear, sleeping naked... Those things don't make you a slut any more than wearing underwear or sleeping in a high-necked flannel nightgown makes you virtuous. If you like it, Sabrina, there is no reason in the world you shouldn't do it. It's also perfectly okay to enjoy having sex with me and to be the one to initiate it. There is a lot of passion in you. Don't fear it. And the next time you decide to be mad at me, you need to tell me about it instead of pouting."

The words were spoken softly. He would have stayed with her if she asked, but she needed space and time. He left and she didn't move for the

longest time, thinking about what he said. She had been unaware of exactly how many hang-ups she had until she met Jonas.

In the short time she had known him, he had done so much for her. She was grateful, though it only illuminated how much more work needed to be done. It was a painful thought and a painful prospect. She had no desire to face her demons. She wouldn't have faked her way through therapy when she was a teenager if she did.

He didn't bring up the subject again that evening, turning the topic of dinner conversation to their families. He had invited his parents and her mother to dine with them the following evening.

"Do you think your mother will bring up your grandfather's will at all?" he asked.

Sabrina shrugged. Melinda wasn't vindictive, but there was no telling the roads a conversation might travel. "She might."

"Can you ask her not to?"

Something in the tenor of his question gave her pause. "Why don't you want your family to know about any of that? It's more believable than love at first sight. As affectionate as you were to me at the beach, I don't think they bought it."

"We all have our own crosses to bear," he said. "I didn't marry you for altruistic reasons, Sabrina. I could give a damn about your inheritance."

"Yes, I know," she said, the tell-tale blush creeping up her neck. She hated that damn thing. "You married me for the sex. Little did you know it was going to be so much work."

He laughed. "I don't mind the work. You could say I get off on it. But seriously, I bought myself a year of peace, probably more. Now they can't nag me to settle down with someone and get married. I've already done it."

Sabrina couldn't imagine his parents or his sisters nagging him to get married. Then she remembered Sam and Amanda talking about how he hadn't had a serious relationship in years. He must have had his heart broken pretty badly. This marriage was just as much a refuge for him as it was for her. She reached over and squeezed his hand sympathetically.

He looked up at her in surprise. "It amazes me how perceptive you can be with other people when you're so blind to things that directly affect you."

"Yes," she agreed. "I don't know how you put up with me. You're such a saint." She was proud of herself for the note of sarcasm that crept into her

voice. It usually took her years to warm up to someone enough to banter with them.

“A fallen saint,” he said, rising to clear the dishes. “I can’t have you putting me up on a pedestal.”

Later that night, as they lay in the dark, Sabrina wrestled with her demons. “Jonas?” she whispered. She didn’t know why she whispered. He always seemed to hear her, even when she thought he was sleeping.

“Mmm?”

“Did you...was today...at work...I mean, did you mind?” She bit her lip to keep from fumbling further.

“No,” he said, turning his face out of his pillow so she could understand him. “Text me anytime. I should warn you I have a meeting tomorrow afternoon, so I won’t be free. I can spare you a half hour at lunch though.”

“You didn’t have to hold me down.” It wasn’t an accusation, but he took it as one.

“I wasn’t about to let you answer the phone,” he said. “There’s no way you would have had an orgasm if you had.”

“I know,” she said. “I meant that it wasn’t what...did it for me.”

She felt more than heard his head rise from his pillow. “Really?”

She didn’t know how to explain it, but she tried anyway. “It’s like I wasn’t me. I was someone else and so were you.”

“You were playing a role?” he prompted.

It sounded so awful. “I...yes. I was. Does that upset you?”

Amusement colored his voice. “No. I’m all for role playing. We can do more if you want. Much, much more.”

She chewed her lip, uncertain. When would his patience with her end? “I wouldn’t know how.”

He chuckled. “You did a fine job today. Did you give yourself a different name?”

Frowning, she said, “Why would I do that?”

“To complete the illusion. Role playing is all about fantasy. You made one of my fantasies come true today, Sabrina. I meant to thank you for that. You can’t know what that meant to me.” He moved closer, his lips only a breath from hers. “I’ve always wanted to kneel before the great Sabrina Breszewski.”

“Who was pretending to be the office slut.” She laughed, but it was self-deprecating.

He winced in the faint light from the full moon seeping between the open curtains. “Maybe you should choose a persona that doesn’t make you feel dirty afterward.”

Her smile was painfully thin. “That’s probably a good idea.”

He kissed her. It was full of tenderness and it scared the hell out of her. Desire, she could handle. She didn’t want affection or the complications it would arouse. She was relieved when he draped an arm across her and fell asleep. She didn’t think she could have responded to him if he tried to make love to her.

\* \* \* \*

The next couple of weeks passed quickly. She didn’t see him much at work. Their paths had never crossed before and fate didn’t change anything. And they were both far too busy to meet more than a couple of times each week.

Since she was raised to be such a socially-conscious person, she invited his family over regularly. Sam was still in Toronto with her boyfriend, but Amanda and Richard brought the kids over whenever Sabrina invited them, as did Ryan and Ellen.

Ellen was an odd person. While Ryan seemed at ease around Sabrina, Ellen seemed to always be studying her. Sometimes she got the same quietly thoughtful look Jonas used that disconcerted Sabrina. It was no less effective coming from her.

Sabrina was hopping out of the pool after having spent a good portion of her afternoon turning into a prune so that Faith and Ricky could cavort in the water, when Ryan’s shadow fell over her.

He was every bit as tall as Jonas, only he was thinner and his skin was covered with freckles that matched his shock of strawberry hair. In one arm, he cradled his son, Jake. In the other, he had a towel, which he held out to Sabrina.

“Thanks,” she said, wrapping it around her waist. Ricky and Faith disappeared into the distance, each with one hand threaded through Amanda’s.

"I'd like to say you're welcome, but I came down here with an ulterior motive. I have a favor to ask." He grimaced apologetically.

She waited for him to continue, hoping he didn't want her to take Jake into the pool. As an infant, he was not housebroken.

"Can you loan Ellen a swimsuit? She didn't bring one because she hasn't lost all of her weight from the baby and she still feels self-conscious about her appearance, though I have no idea why. I keep telling her she's every bit as attractive as the day we met."

Mentally, she searched her closet. Ellen was easily five inches taller and, as Ryan just pointed out, she was much curvier. Having decided on a diplomatic answer, she opened her mouth, but Ellen interrupted. Sabrina hadn't seen her approach from behind.

"Ryan Kubina, your ass is mine."

He looked over Sabrina's head and smiled. "There was never a question about that, Elle."

Dark, shoulder-length hair swung out of the way as she tossed her head, reminding Sabrina of a temperamental horse. Her glare could have melted ice cubes in winter. She turned the blast of hellfire on Sabrina, toning it down only a tiny bit. "You. Come with me."

Without waiting for a response, Ellen linked her arm through Sabrina's and dragged her off, not stopping until they were upstairs in the bedroom. She locked the door behind them. "Those bastards have a bet going."

Sabrina lifted a brow as someone knocked on the door.

"Ellen? Sabrina? It's Amanda. Open up."

Skirting Ellen, who quite frankly scared her, Sabrina unlocked the door to admit Amanda. She breezed in, and Ellen closed the door again, making sure it was locked.

"What did they do this time?" Amanda asked.

"They bet I couldn't fit into one of Sabrina's swimsuits." Her deep brown eyes narrowed with displeasure.

If she were Ryan, Sabrina would never upset Ellen out of mortal fear.

"You can't," Amanda calmly pointed out. "She's short and tiny."

"Thanks," Ellen retorted dryly. "That wasn't what pissed me off. Ryan bet he could get Sabrina to drag me up here and try one on. Jonas didn't think she'd do it."

Amanda's mouth rounded as if to say, "Oh, that explains everything," but no sound came out.

Sabrina watched from the sidelines, dripping chlorinated water onto her carpet. Then she disappeared into the bathroom to change. Closing the door was a wasted effort. It burst open before she was able to pull on underwear. A blush stained, she was sure, the majority of her body.

Ellen waved her embarrassment away. "Oh, don't worry. I've seen it all before."

"Did you need to use the bathroom?" Sabrina asked, her manners kicking in automatically. "I can change elsewhere."

"You see"—she continued—"you're so formal and well-mannered. You were going to offer me a suit, weren't you?"

"I don't think I have anything that will fit you," Sabrina said. "But you're welcome to look."

Her mouth twitched. "Get dressed," she commanded as she closed the door.

Sabrina felt as if she were the subject of a joke and she didn't know the punch line, only that people were laughing at her. She emerged a few minutes later, a towel around her shoulders to catch the drips from her damp ponytail. Ellen and Amanda were lounging on the wide window seats in the sitting area.

Ellen didn't look too upset anymore.

"Are you still angry with Ryan and Jonas?"

"No," she said, turning to lie on her stomach. "But this does give us some quiet time. No kids, no husbands. Just the girls. We should do a girls' night out next weekend."

"You can invite your sister," Amanda added. "And Lara. They were so nice when we met them last week. They seem like fun."

They could bet the planet she would bring Ginny with her. Then she would understand at least one person.

"Okay," Ellen said, pinning Sabrina with a knowing look. "Let's hear it."

Uncertain, she said, "Next weekend sounds okay. Jonas is working Friday, so that's probably a better night. I think Ginny is free, but I'll have to call."



“No, silly,” Ellen said. “I mean, tell us how you snagged Jonas. He swore he’d never get married.”

Sabrina thought about the scar he had over his broken heart and the fact that he asked her to not tell his family anything about the real reasons they married. “I guess I caught him on a good day.”

“What Ellen is so tactlessly trying to ask”—Amanda interjected—“is if you know about Helene.”

She’d never heard the name before. Wordlessly, Sabrina shook her head.

“Bastard,” Ellen said.

“Quite the asshole,” Amanda agreed. She sat up to face Sabrina, patting the place on the cushion next to her. “Come sit, Sabrina.”

Sabrina didn’t move.

“You know,” Ellen said, shifting to sit up, her legs crossed in front of her. “When I first met you, I thought you would be just like her. You look that much alike.”

Amanda cocked her head to one side. “Not that much alike.”

“Same coloring, same build.” Ellen shook her head. “Ryan and I were shocked that Jonas would suddenly get married, but when we saw you, we understood.”

“And you were so stiff when we first met,” Amanda said apologetically. “You barely returned my hug at all.”

Both women stared at Sabrina, as if their words should mean something to her. She addressed Amanda first. “I hadn’t met you,” she said. “I’ve never been one of those people who hug strangers. Your family is very different from mine. We were never demonstrative. I wasn’t raised that way.”

“The point is,” Ellen said, “we thought you were just like her until we got to know you a little better.”

“Well, I didn’t,” Amanda said. “Not with the way Faith clung to you. Not once during that whole day did you lose your patience with her.”

“She’s a sweet girl,” Sabrina said quietly.

Ellen waved in her direction. “And you didn’t get upset when Jake spit up on you.”

“He didn’t do it on purpose.” If their intent was to let her know she looked like Helene but didn’t act like her, they succeeded. Except for the

fact that Sabrina had no idea who they were talking about, everything was fine.

“Sit.” Amanda patted the cushion next to her.

Sitting, Sabrina put up a hand. “Wait. Are you talking about the woman who broke his heart?”

“He did tell you,” Ellen said, pressing her hand to her chest in relief. “Thank goodness.”

“I guessed,” Sabrina said. “And anything he hasn’t told me is none of my business.”

“Don’t be so quick to dismiss this,” Amanda warned. “I love my brother, but he can be the biggest jerk where women are concerned.”

Sabrina eyed her warily. “He’s been nothing but kind to me.”

Ellen frowned at this. “Kind? That doesn’t sound like Jonas. He’s a lot of things. ‘Kind’ isn’t one of them.”

“I don’t like the direction of this conversation,” she said quietly. “I think you have good intentions, but you know nothing about my relationship with Jonas.”

“Are you in love with him?” Amanda asked gently, her green eyes filled with sympathy.

Sabrina answered honestly. “No. We’re friends.”

“With benefits,” Ellen added.

“There is that,” she said. Turning to Amanda, Sabrina tried to allay her fears. “He isn’t in love with me either.”

“I know,” she said softly, apologetically. “That’s what concerns us. We didn’t know if you could see it or not.”

Sabrina stood. “Neither one of us went into this with illusions about the other person. While I certainly don’t know everything about Jonas—nor does he know much about me—it doesn’t change anything. We may not have discussed previous relationships with each other, but that doesn’t mean I’m ignorant of the baggage he carries. Perhaps he agreed to marry me because he’s tired of defending his decisions to you. I don’t know and I’m certainly not going to make him answer to me.”

She would have said more, but a knock at the door interrupted. Ellen flew past her to answer it.

“You rang?” she said, opening it a crack. She placed her foot behind it to hold it in place.

The door opened much wider, and Jonas came in. "That trick works better if you're wearing shoes." He strode across the room, stopping at Sabrina's side.

Without a word, he bent her backwards and kissed her. It was an odd kiss to begin with. His lips were icy cold and so was the tongue he teased past her lips. Then something else followed. She realized it was the last of the Italian ice he had just eaten.

He set her back on her feet with a grin. "How was that?"

Swallowing the lemon-flavored ice, she smiled back. "The ice was good, but the kiss needs a little work."

"You walked right into that one," Ellen said as she plopped back on the window seat. "Why are you interrupting our girl time? By the way, you can tell Ryan he lost the bet. Sabrina hasn't tried to talk me into wearing any of her suits."

Ignoring the last part of her statement, Jonas looked down. "Can't you see the shining armor? I've come to rescue my lady fair from the clutches of my evil step-sister and the Wicked Witch of the West."

Amanda kicked his shin. Sabrina moved out of the way. Her family might not be physical with one another, but his family didn't share those values. He kicked her back, missing because she rolled to the back of the window seat, dodging his retaliatory strike. He went after her again, but Sabrina pulled on his arm, distracting him.

"Why do I need a shiny knight?"

He took her hand and fell to one knee, dramatically pressing the back of her hand to his lips before he spoke. "Because I'm sure these two are filling your head with nonsense. They'll cloak it cleverly, but it's nonsense no matter how they style it. Pay no attention to the women behind the curtain. Beware of dog. It all applies to Ellen and Amanda, especially when they have you under their control."

"I'm not under anyone's control," she countered.

Jonas rose to his feet. "Oh yeah? Then what were they telling you?"

"We were making plans for next weekend," Ellen answered in a voice Sabrina didn't dare interrupt. "A girls' night out. No kids, no husbands. Just five hot women and a pulsating dance floor."

He looked from Ellen to Sabrina. She wasn't about to lie to Jonas. There was no reason. "Apparently, I also resemble your ex-girlfriend upon first sight. Further examination vindicates me."

She had never seen Jonas angry before. Annoyed, frustrated, focused, but never truly angry. His eyes darkened to olive green and the cords in his neck stood out. And then he shouted.

"You had no right!" Amazingly, he projected his anger toward both women, neither of whom seemed impressed by his display.

Ellen sprang to her feet. She stood inches from him and planted one hand firmly on her hip, while the other jabbed at his chest. Her volume matched his. "You can't treat her this way, Jonas. It isn't fair."

"You don't know what you're talking about," he said through his teeth. "I haven't done anything."

Seriously alarmed, Sabrina put a hand on each combatant's arm. "There's no need to get upset," she said without raising her voice. In addition to years of reminders to never yell, she simply didn't have the voice for it. Her volume was pitiful and her tone was not only high-pitched, it cracked when she became distressed.

They went on as if they hadn't heard her. There was a good chance neither one had.

Ellen narrowed her eyes. "You haven't?"

"No," he said in the quietest venom-filled voice Sabrina had ever heard. "I haven't."

Ellen studied him, critically assessing him for something Sabrina had no clue about. At last, she was satisfied. "I misjudged the situation," she said. "I apologize."

She stepped back to widen her stance and looked at Sabrina. "You must think I'm completely loony," she said. "I'm sorry. I just didn't want you to get hurt."

That comment did nothing to quell Jonas's anger.

"I'm an adult," Sabrina assured her. "I can take care of myself." Looking from Amanda to Ellen, she added, "Maybe it's best if you give us a moment alone."

A little embarrassed, both women exited the room. Sabrina closed the door behind them, and then came back to Jonas. He hadn't moved, and the furious expression on his face was unaltered.

“Care to talk about it?” she ventured.

“No,” he said with no less venom than he used with Ellen.

Stung, she stepped back. “Are you angry with me?”

“No,” he said. Finally, he moved. His eyes pinned her with their intensity. “But I am interested in knowing what they said to you.”

She shook her head slowly, careful not to break his gaze. “Nothing more than what I already told you. Why does it upset you so much?”

. “You’re nothing like her.” His voice was thick with a pain she didn’t understand.

“I didn’t think I was.” Even though she broke Stephen’s heart, she had done it honestly and as gently as she could. No description of—or reference to—Helene had been at all flattering.

He crushed her in his arms, kissing her savagely. It didn’t scare her like he had when his kiss was tender and understanding. Instinctively, she knew he sought those things from her. Unfortunately, she responded to his brutality, forgetting herself for a long moment.

When she did force herself away from passion, she softened her body to his and he responded in kind, gentling his kiss. He let her go and ran a hand through his swim-damp curls, breathing raggedly.

When he finally looked at her, regret and sadness crept across his features. He ran a thumb over her swollen lips. “I was too rough with you.”

“It’s all right,” she assured him. “I know the safety word.”

The tension broke as they both laughed.

Later that day, as they lounged on the patio after eating far too much barbeque, Amanda turned to Sabrina. “What are you packing for Kentucky?”

Sabrina had no idea what Amanda was talking about.

“It can get really cold at night,” she warned, tying back her long blond curls in an attempt to make Faith stop using them to pull herself up.

Sabrina stared at her blankly. Often, Jonas and his family fell into the kind of talk that excluded her. She didn’t mind, as they usually stopped long enough to fill her in on the back story. She felt as if she had tuned out during the back story and now she was failing the pop quiz.

“We’re not going,” Jonas said from the other end of the patio. The steady scrape of metal on metal worked its way over to Sabrina as he

cleaned the grill, something she had never done before. "I haven't been at work long enough to be eligible for vacation time."

"What?" Richard exclaimed. He was normally a quiet person, but in a comfortable way. Sabrina greatly hoped to pick up on his style.

"You have to go," Ricky said. "Uncle Jonas, we always go."

Amanda, seeing Sabrina's usual confusion, filled her in. For as long as she could remember, their parents rented a huge log cabin in Kentucky near two sizable lakes. They spent the last two weeks of the summer there, including Labor Day weekend. This would be the first year Jonas missed.

Sabrina turned to Jonas. "You could probably get the time, but you wouldn't get paid."

He waved her words away. "Don't worry about it."

"It won't be the same," Amanda said, cajoling. "Sabrina, you have to make him change his mind."

"You would think, Amanda, that you've put Sabrina on the spot enough today." Jonas's words were nearly as steely as the look he threw Amanda. "Leave her alone."

\* \* \* \*

Jonas waited until Sabrina was in the shower before sneaking off to call Ellen. He understood her intentions, but she was *his* friend. Even if she didn't trust him to treat Sabrina right, she had no business telling Sabrina things he didn't want her to know. Helene was a chapter in his life that was closed and it needed to stay that way.

Unbelievably, she answered.

"Before you get all high and mighty on me, I'm going to apologize," Ellen said by way of a greeting. "Again."

"I don't understand why you would say those things to her in the first place," he said. Ellen's apology had effectively diffused his anger. He unwound the hose to water Sabrina's roses. "I don't want her to feel like she's a replacement, Elle. She's nothing like Helene."

Ellen was quiet for too long. At times like this, it bothered Jonas how perceptive she could be. "No, she isn't, Jonas. But she is a replacement, and that's not always a bad thing. You've needed someone in your life for a long

time, and Sabrina seems to understand you. And you're happy, Jonas. It's been far too long since I've seen you happy like this."

"I'm not in love with her, Elle. This is a temporary thing." The reminder was as much for him as it was for her.

Her laugh crackled through the static. "Temporary, permanent, whatever. It doesn't matter, Jonas. She's good for you, and that's good enough for me. But I like her and I don't want to watch you hurt her and throw her away."

Jonas turned the water off and turned the crank to replace the hose. "She's an adult, Elle. She knows the score. She isn't looking for something permanent either. We have fun together."

He could see her shrug through the phone. Ellen was such a romantic. It was irritating. "Well then, by all means, have fun."

They chatted about other things for a while. Ellen tried in vain to convince him to go to Kentucky and he invited her to go in his place. His parents often treated Ellen like their third daughter and Ryan like a second son. Hanging up fifteen minutes later, Jonas felt restless. Missing the Kentucky trip wasn't something he wanted to do. Even if he could afford the time off or the travel, the idea of staying with Sabrina in the same house as his family made him nervous.

Like his friends, his family liked her a little too much. He didn't want them to be traumatized when it came time for the divorce.

## Chapter 8

As it turned out, any discussion of Kentucky was pointless. Jared chose that time to take his vacation, and Joy informed Sabrina that she was covering for him. She sat in Joy's upscale office, so much larger than her own, and fumed at the breathtaking view of the city. Sabrina had no windows at all. One day, an office like this would be hers. She would earn it and it would take time, but it would still be hers.

"He has a major presentation next week," Sabrina said. It was a whiny protest, but she had her own presentations to mastermind. Jared timed his vacation just right. All of the groundwork should have been done already. Right now, he should be practicing and refining the pitch. Jonas had said nothing about this project, so Sabrina had the sinking feeling he knew nothing about it, which meant Jared was sitting on it.

A tension headache started in the back of her head.

Joy sat back in her chair and adjusted the jacket of her business outfit. "It's two weeks, Sabrina, and he always covers for you."

Sabrina refrained from telling Joy that when she prepared to leave for vacation, she made sure her team knew everything that needed to be done and she trusted them to do it. Nobody had to babysit her accounts.

She didn't know Timothy, Jonas's partner, or the intern for the team, but she knew Jared. This meant a lot of work for her. She grimaced and caved, lacking grace completely. "Fine, but you owe me."

Joy leaned forward. Sabrina knew she would probably remind her how she had advocated for her to be put in charge of a team. It was her way of telling Sabrina that she owed her success and her position to Joy. It was at times like these that Sabrina seriously considered starting her own firm. Or taking over this one. She could afford to buy the stock.

Sabrina held up her hand to stall Joy. "You just dumped Veronica on me and you know as well as I do that Jared is going to leave a mess for me to



straighten out. I'll be calling in my favor soon." Rising to leave, she threw a last glance at Joy. "Next time, it's someone else's turn."

Taking her frustration out on the elevator buttons didn't alleviate any of her tension. Perversely, she headed toward Jared's office when she reached her floor. Realistically, she did need to meet with him so that he could bring her up to speed on his projects and his schedule. She would instruct Minnie to meet with Jared's assistant to coordinate those meetings with the ones she already had scheduled.

The growing list of tasks in her head was rudely interrupted by the fact that Jared's office was empty. As he shared his assistant with another team leader, Sabrina couldn't find him either. She stared at Jared's open door through narrowed eyes, trying to decide whether or not it would be ethical to go in and start poking through his things.

That was the moment she heard a familiar laugh. The answering laugh was familiar, too, but not in a good way. It was a feminine laugh, young and flirty. On a whim, or driven by an inexplicable surge of jealousy, she traversed the short corridor to the open area where Jared's team shared space with another small team.

Leaning back in his chair, Jonas was watching as the pretty, buxom blond intern bent over something on his desk, ostensibly for a closer look. Sabrina couldn't see his expression, but she did know that he had a clear view of her ass through that tight skirt and of her long, shapely legs. He had expressed enough appreciation for Sabrina's to make it clear he was a leg man.

She reined in her jealousy when she rounded his desk and saw his slightly bored expression.

He clicked his pen impatiently. "Tina, I need to finish this."

"It's really, really good," she cooed. Then she looked up at Sabrina, straightening suddenly. "Ms. Breszewski, I'm sorry. I didn't see you standing there."

Jonas smiled, something slow and admiring. "What brings you to this part of town?"

"I'm firing your boss and taking over his accounts and his team." She delivered it deadpan. The intern bought it.

"Oh, no! You already have an intern. What happens to me?" Her big blue eyes grew two sizes and her mouth shaped to match.

Jonas rolled his eyes. “Don’t tease like that, Sabrina. It’s cruel on so many levels.”

“Breszewski!” Jared’s booming voice called her name. He was twenty feet away, but he used enough volume to cover a much larger distance. “What the hell are you doing? I heard rumors you were trying to steal my people, but this is ridiculous.”

She ignored his insinuation. No doubt Jonas had been seen outside her office on several occasions, and those toadying for better favor with Joy via Jared probably ran to him to report. “I’ve come for your files. I don’t suppose you’re ready to debrief?”

“I’m not leaving until tomorrow.”

Glaring at him, she said, “You have nothing prepared at all, do you?”

With a curt jerk of his head he asked her into his office. She knew he was going to get rude, and she was glad he wasn’t going to do it in front of Jonas. She could hold her own against him, but she didn’t think Jonas would put up with it very well. The door slammed shut behind her. Jared’s office was in a nicer location than Sabrina’s. He had a bank of windows, but the room was much smaller. She frequently worked with her whole team inside her office. Six people would never comfortably fit inside Jared’s tiny space.

Jared’s area was more centrally located, whereas hers was off the beaten path. Anyone near Sabrina’s office was lost or meant to be there. It had its advantages in the lack of interruption, but she found herself often left out of the loop on office affairs not directly related to business. While she had only found out about Jared’s vacation today, it probably wasn’t news to anyone else.

He threw a folded newspaper on his desk. It was open to a half-finished crossword puzzle. Since it was *The Detroit News*, she wasn’t impressed. “I don’t need your attitude, Breszewski.”

“Jared, if I’m going to manage your accounts for two weeks, I need lead time. I need to look them over while you’re still here so that I can access you when I have questions.” This was old, worn ground.

He gestured to a chair across from his desk, but she didn’t take it. Jared was old-school and she knew the chairs were situated lower, so that anyone in them would have to look up to him. She’d long ago learned how to look up at people without appearing subservient and when to remain standing to move things along.

She waved away the invitation. “How many accounts do you have?” Last year, there had been four. Three of those had been badly neglected.

“Five. We just acquired an up-and-coming cat food project.” Without sitting, he rounded his desk to put something official between them to indicate they were in his territory. She wondered if he had peed on the thing as well. He tossed the file across his desk.

She opened it. Everything was as she thought. “Your pitch is next Wednesday and you haven’t even given this to Jonas and Tim.”

He shrugged. “I let Tina take a crack at it.”

“Tina?” She desperately hoped he hadn’t let a potentially large account like this, or even a small one, rest in the hands of an untried intern.

“My intern. You saw her out there.” Something in the way he said it made her think Tina was more willing to give Jared what he wanted than Sabrina had been when she was stuck on his team as an intern. She discounted the implication on the basis that Jared was a misogynist jerk.

Her sigh had him scrambling.

“She’s coming along nicely. I gave her to the teacher. He’s good with the whole ‘mentor’ thing.” He rearranged some papers on his desk. Sabrina thought one looked like an off-track betting receipt. Her grandfather used to budget a certain amount of money each month to lose on the ponies.

She closed her eyes against the pain that wrapped around her head and squeezed. “You handed her over to someone who has been in the advertising business for a little over six months?”

Resentment colored Jared’s neck. “He’s good at it.”

Sabrina knew he was good at it. She frequently looked over his work. After the first time, he had hesitantly begun coming to her with questions. She knew he hated relying on her the way he did. He wanted a clear delineation between work and home, but Jared was no good to him. If Jared’s accounts were in good shape, she had no doubt it was due to Jonas’s diligence and not Jared’s sudden leadership abilities.

Tapping the file in her hand impatiently, she jettisoned the topic. “What else do you have going on?”

He dug into his file cabinet and tossed the remaining files to her. “These two are dormant and these two have something coming up, but not for another month or so.”

Sabrina couldn't believe he still had a job. She took the files and left without thanking him for his time or insight. She headed back to her office, which was in the opposite direction of Jonas's desk.

Jonas waited for her in the hall that linked the two halves of the floor together. It skirted the large main conference room where they had first met. Without a word, he pushed her into a supply closet and leaned against the door to stop anyone from entering.

Before she could tell him this was not the time for a quickie, he said, "You look stressed."

Bitter was a better descriptor. It was nice of him to not use it. "It seems Jared is planning to go on vacation."

"I know." He grinned. "I'm looking forward to it."

"I'll be covering for him."

His grin grew. "Now I'm really looking forward to it."

"Were you aware that you have a major presentation next Wednesday?"

The grin dropped from his face. Her headache throbbed. He struggled to keep his voice from becoming a growl. "If you tell me it has anything to do with cat food, I'm going to kill him."

It was her turn to grin. "Then I guess I won't tell you it has anything to do with cat food. If they arrest you for murder, who will I get to take your place?" She meant to tease him, and he took it that way, but the words crashed into her with startling clarity. After Jonas was finished with her, what *would* happen to her? Where would she find a man who understood what she needed like he did? For this reason and because of her headache, her grin wasn't successful.

"You can't replace me," he said, taking the files from her hand. He shoved them on a shelf full of toilet paper rolls and turned her around. "That bastard has Tina working on this. I thought he made it up so she could practice developing a campaign."

"He was looking for cheap labor," she said. "He used to do things like that to me when I was his intern. Luckily, I made some choices that turned out to be fortuitous for me and for the company." She shouldn't have been surprised that he was still up to his old habits. He hadn't had an intern in years. She wondered who let him have one. It wasn't Joy's responsibility to place interns.

Jonas dug his thumbs into the middle of her back, finding knots of tension she hadn't known were there. She yelped.

"Breathe into it," he said, pressing harder.

The pain grew worse before it lessened and disappeared. He moved his thumbs up, chasing the knots away. By the time he finished with the back of her head, she was leaning against him. He wrapped his arms around her and dropped kisses onto her neck.

"I've ruined your hair," he said, pulling the pins from it and stowing them in his pocket. His fingers caressed her lips. "Let me finish relaxing you."

She opened her mouth to capture the tip of his middle finger. Turning to face him, she said, "I think you need it more than me."

Before he could correct her English, she pulled his face down and kissed him. Her other hand wandered down to loosen his belt and open his pants. She slipped her hand inside to find him already hard. She smiled in the middle of the kiss, pleased with the effect she had on him.

Heady with power, she sank to her knees and licked the length of him. He smelled of her scented soap and fresh laundry mixed with something musky and masculine.

He quivered. "Sabrina, you don't have to..."

Whatever he wanted to say was forgotten. She took him inside her mouth, sucking gently, exploring his slanted, soft head with her tongue. She let him set the pace to some extent. He rested one hand on the back of her head, encouraging her and letting her know she was in command.

She reveled in the taste of him and in the sounds he made. Sounds she ripped from him. The change in the pressure of his hand on her head and the crescendo of moans he issued let her know he was about to come. She gripped his ass hard, sealing him to her, and he came.

Instantly, he hauled her to her feet and kissed her, his tongue dueling with hers for possession of the semen she had yet to swallow. Unlike him, she wasn't in a generous mood. She felt unaccountably possessive and she didn't want to share.

The kiss ended, and he held her close, resting his chin on top of her head. "You didn't have to do that."

"I know," she said. "I wanted to."

His embrace tightened. He ran his fingers through her hair in long strokes. He liked it when she wore it down.

Before he could get maudlin, she added, "Plus, I'm good at it. I wanted to show you I was good at something."

"Don't underestimate yourself," he said into her hair. "You're good at a lot of things, and you're much more passionate than you seem to think."

\* \* \* \*

Jonas returned to his desk with the feel of her lips still tingling on him. For Sabrina to get that stressed over something meant Jared screwed up royally, which meant a lot of work for him.

Since he'd started at Rife and as he proved himself capable, Jared had "bestowed" more and more responsibility on him. Jonas had been a teacher too long to feel honored by the extra work. On top of that, living with Sabrina had opened his eyes to the things Jared was supposed to be doing and wasn't.

Yet he wasn't as upset as he should have been. Ever since he caught his first glimpse of Sabrina and the kind of campaigns she developed, he'd wanted to work for her. She would be a demanding boss, but he would learn so much.

Then there was the bonus of proximity. There would be an actual excuse for them to meet. While those would be great opportunities for them to have sex, he also harbored fantasies of picking her brain professionally.

Yes, he decided. This was a very good development.

\* \* \* \*

After informing her team of the impending, albeit temporary, changes, Sabrina spent the rest of the day in her office poring over Jared's files. Some were in better shape than she thought they'd be. The cat food account was going to be the majority of the problem. She was going to need to enlist someone from her team to help.

She didn't know Veronica that well, so she couldn't move her. Ty was the logical choice. He was smart and worked well with others. The more she considered it, the more she could see him meshing with Jonas. The two of

them would feed ideas to each other and come up with something wonderful. The only unknown in this scenario was Tim.

She would need to pump Jonas for information about his partner. The fact he rarely mentioned Tim didn't surprise her. Their conversations at home largely excluded work.

Her cell phone rang as she finished informing Ty of his temporary reassignment and the rest of the team that they'd have to pick up the slack related to Ty's absence. She listened to the customary grumbling, most of which was directed toward Jared, with grace and silent aplomb.

The number on the caller ID was unfamiliar. "Hello?"

"Sabrina? This is Alyssa Spencer. I'm so sorry to bother you at work, but I didn't want to chance Jonas overhearing. Is this a bad time?" She sounded truly apologetic and Sabrina had the sense that Alyssa would sound that way no matter where she called her. "No, this is fine." She assured her mother-in-law. "Can you hold for a minute?"

Without waiting for her reply, Sabrina covered the receiver and handed the cat food file to Ty. "Look this over. I'll send you to meet with Jared's team tomorrow."

As she walked away, Sabrina resumed the conversation. "Thanks for waiting, Alyssa. What's wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong, dear. Amanda told me about what happened yesterday at your house. She's really sorry for putting you on the spot."

She frowned. Amanda had already apologized, though it was Jonas she had upset, not Sabrina. "Jonas was the one who was annoyed, Alyssa. I wasn't mad at her."

She made a motherly sound of concern. "Brandon and I are extremely sorry you can't make it to Kentucky this year. We were so looking forward to having a chance to get to know you better."

Jonas hadn't consulted her about it one way or the other. "I'm sorry," she said. "One of my colleagues is on vacation that week and we can't both be gone at the same time." She refrained from mentioning Jonas's looming presentation that could win or lose the account. "I could pull a few strings, though, and get Jonas down there after next Wednesday."

Alyssa sighed on the other end. Sabrina felt bad. If she had known about this even a week earlier, she could have arranged for them both to go.

"What about his birthday?"

This one, she fumbled. "His birthday?"

"He didn't tell you." It was a statement. Alyssa knew her son.

This time, *she* sighed. "I'm beginning to think he leaves out more than he reveals."

Alyssa laughed sympathetically. "I'll have to keep you in the loop, Sabrina. Wednesday is Jonas's birthday. We usually wait and celebrate it in Kentucky. We do Sam's at the same time. Her birthday is the second week in September."

"Wednesday as in the day after tomorrow? Or next week?" Sabrina ground her teeth. Why hadn't he mentioned it?

"The day after tomorrow. I can't believe he didn't tell you."

Sabrina could. "Well, I'll have to retaliate appropriately. Let's surprise him."

"I usually call him in the morning," she said. "Just to wish him a good day."

Sabrina smiled wickedly. "Well, do that, but don't ask him out to dinner or anything. If he asks, you have plans. You meant to keep up the tradition of celebrating his birthday in Kentucky, so you didn't keep your schedule clear."

A plan formed in her head. She sucked at lying, but he hadn't told her anything about this, so she wouldn't be forced to pretend to have forgotten. Alyssa and Sabrina mapped out a plan for a surprise party. Then Sabrina enlisted Ginny's help, and not only for her cake skills. She had an extra key to Sabrina's house and she knew the alarm code.

Then there was the bonus that Drew Snow, Ginny's business partner of four years and friend since high school, was one of the country's top chefs. He had clinched the deal to film six episodes of a cooking show for Food Network. Sabrina wanted him to cater. Alyssa would handle the decorations and help Drew and Ginny with the food preparations.

Her job would be to get him home on time.

\* \* \* \*

Wednesday began like any other day. Alyssa called while they were in the car driving to work. Jonas had worked the evening before and was dozing as Sabrina drove. He let it go to voice mail. Sneaky devil probably



didn't want her to hear his end of the conversation. It annoyed her that he wouldn't tell her about his birthday. After all, she told him about hers.

Sabrina moved Tim and Jonas to the smaller conference room near her office so she wouldn't have to travel to the other side of the floor to see them. Tina came with them. Sabrina asked Ophelia to change places with Tina for the duration, knowing she was the more competent intern.

It wasn't her fault, or Tina's. Sabrina had simply trained Ophelia better than Jared had trained Tina. If Tina kept her eyes open, she would learn a lot in the two weeks she would be with Sabrina.

Ty moved into the conference room. She was pleased to see him take a leadership role immediately. It didn't take her long to figure out that Tim was a follower. He did whatever he was told and he did it to the specifications given. She didn't see him ever progressing to a better position.

Sabrina didn't realize how much Jonas was bristling under the changes until he snapped at her. He and Ty had brainstormed a variety of approaches. They were hunched over a spread of sketched ideas when she came by to check on them. She commented on several she liked and pointed out the major problems with the rest of them.

"Are you going to be looking over my shoulder for the whole two weeks?" He forced the question through gritted teeth, his green eyes shooting daggers at her.

She struggled to react as his superior and not his wife, but she couldn't stop her eyes from widening in surprise. At least her voice was strong and even when she answered. "Yes."

He threw down his pencil and rested both hands on the table between them. "I can't work like this. Stay out of my way. If I need something from you, I'll ask."

Her mouth tightened, and her eyes narrowed.

Ty put a hand on Jonas's shoulder, but he addressed Sabrina. "Sabrina, Jonas didn't mean it the way it sounded. We're working under a deadline, as you know, and it's stressful."

Jonas's eyes hadn't left hers, and his expression hadn't changed. "No, that's not the problem. I'm used to this. I don't appreciate having someone constantly micromanaging my work."

She wasn't about to let this go further. "My office. Now." She turned and left without looking back to make sure he followed. If he hesitated, she was sure Ty would remind him that she wasn't known for her patience with insubordination and that she was well within her rights to fire him.

She opened the door, and it slammed behind her. She whirled, intending to let him have it, but he opened fire first.

"You didn't even let us have a chance to discuss any of the ideas. The discussion is the most important part of the creative process. We could have combined ideas, or altered others to come up with something we really liked, but you can't let that happen, can you? You may give your team credit for their ideas, but you make sure your hand is in every single piece, don't you? I prefer to have my work stolen than to have it hijacked!"

Fury narrowed her vision so that her surroundings faded. She saw only Jonas. If he wanted to push her over the edge, he found the right buttons. "I don't have time to massage your ego, Jonas. I not only have Jared's five accounts to maintain, including this large project which wasn't even started until I told you about it Monday, I have the eight my team normally handles. If you can't handle the way I do things, then maybe you need to go back to teaching."

Though he was standing less than two feet away, she shouted at him every bit as vehemently as he had shouted at her. He was right; yelling did relieve stress. She had more ammunition in store. She was also working with four new people and she didn't know their skill sets. She might know what Jonas was capable of in the bedroom, but she didn't have a clear picture of what he was like at work.

"Wow," he said. "I wondered if you had claws, kitten."

It was a low blow. "Asshole." The word was whispered in anger, not pain. She would have called him something worse, like "bastard," or "son of a bitch," or "motherfucker," but she liked his mother and she saw no reason to cast a shadow on her character.

His eyes glittered hard. He closed the distance between them with half a step. Grabbing her wrists, he pinned them behind her and kissed her almost viciously.

She fought him, struggling against the direction he was trying to take her "passion." For someone who was so against bringing work home, he didn't have a problem bringing home to work. It probably wasn't very nice,

but she couldn't remember ever being so angry and out of control. She bit his lip.

Without releasing her, he pulled back and looked at her, his eyes tawny with arousal and the ghost of a smile curving his mouth. "Are you opting to not use the safety word?"

She stifled the urge to kick his shin. Her heels featured pointed toes. She could do some real damage. "We're at work, Jonas. This is neither the time, nor the place."

"I'm pissed at you, Sabrina. The way I see it, I could yell at you some more and you could yell back. We could both say things we'll regret or we could use this passion for something more fun."

He was still angry. She could see it in the firmness of his mouth and feel it in the stiffness of his body against hers. She was just as angry. While she couldn't deny his kiss and his rough treatment aroused her, she wasn't going to let him use sex to control her.

He kissed her again, softer, letting his passion supersede his anger. She drew back her foot to kick him, but the door opened. She was glad for the interruption because she didn't want to kick him, but she was mortified to be caught in a position like this.

"Sabrina?" It was Ty. "Is everything...okay?"

Jonas let her go and stepped back. She smoothed the hem of her shirt, taking in Ty's flexing fist and the way his narrowed eyes were regarding Jonas.

"Yes, Ty. Can you give us a minute?"

He stared at Jonas a long, long time. Reluctantly, he nodded. "I'll be right outside," he warned Jonas as he backed out the door.

She turned on Jonas as soon as the door clicked closed. "Don't you ever do that again. I am your boss for the next two weeks. I expect you to treat me with dignity and respect. You can't kiss me just because you're unhappy about the way I do things."

He wandered over to her sofa and sat down. "I kissed you because you look so damn hot when you get mad that I couldn't resist. For the record, that was the first time I've ever seen you lose your temper. You should do it more often. I bet you'd scare the hell out of your mother."

She was dangerously close to losing her temper with him again and his nonchalant attitude wasn't helping. She stalked over to stand in front of him.

“You may not like the way I do things, but we don’t have time to ease into this. If we snag this account, Jared gets all the credit. However, if we lose this account, I’ll get all the blame. Check your ego at the door or it will get bruised.”

“It’s already bruised,” he mumbled. Looking up at her, he continued in a clear voice. “It amazes me that you engender such loyalty and devotion when you obviously don’t trust anyone but yourself.”

“That’s not true,” she said. “I trust my team implicitly. You’re forgetting that you are not a member of my team.”

“Veronica—”

She cut him off. “Has been with me less than a week. She’s also enduring a trial by fire. The sooner you realize the way I treat you has nothing to do with you, the better we’ll get along.”

He scooted forward to perch on the edge of the sofa, all business. “Therein lies the problem. Sabrina, you *do* know me and I know you. Pretending otherwise will only create more problems than either of us wants. I need you to trust me to come to you when I have a problem and let me work through this on my own. Ty and I are making progress. We should have a proposal by Friday if you leave us alone.”

Letting her breath loose in a long, thoughtful exhale, she settled onto the couch next to Jonas. He was asking for a lot. He wasn’t far from the mark when he accused her of micromanaging. The only difference was that her team knew how to deal with her. Ty suffered her in silence. Randall ignored her. Clare tolerated her. Veronica had shot her more than a few dirty looks and Sabrina was sure Veronica’s tongue had holes in it from the number of times she’d bitten it. Veronica was going to be a challenge.

“Fine, but if you fail, I will kill you.” She used the appropriate gravity when she said this. “And, believe me when I say that no one will find the body.”

His hand closed over hers. “That lacked your characteristic grace,” he said. “Thank you. I know it’s hard for you to give what I’m asking.”

She looked at his hand, appreciating the long, strong fingers and the way they felt on her. “Yes, well, it’ll be easier than explaining to Ty what you were doing to me.”

His thumb traced circles on the place on her wrist where her pulse beat. “I think it was obvious what we were doing.”

“It looked like you were attacking me, which you were, and I was trying to break free, which I was. He doesn’t know anything about my personal life and you don’t seem comfortable with anyone knowing about us.” Sabrina shot him a pointed look as she said the last part.

“If you explain the marriage, you’re going to have to explain the divorce,” he warned.

“People don’t ask about divorce and people don’t make a habit of asking me personal questions.” She said this with complete sincerity, and he burst out laughing. It was exasperating. “I don’t see what’s funny about any of this.”

Raising her hand to his lips, he pried open her fingers to kiss the palm. “You’re priceless. Never change, Sabrina. I like you just the way you are.”

He left and she stared after him, unable to fathom what in the world he found amusing. Ty came in, and she motioned him over to sit next to her.

“What did you need?” she asked.

He gave her a look that she interpreted to mean he wanted to ask something and he was struggling with whether or not he should broach the subject. Finally, he decided. “Sabrina, did he try to assault you?”

Her eyes widened. She knew what he saw, but when he put it in legal terms, it sounded so ominous and wrong. “No, Ty. No. Jonas would never do something like that.”

Those chocolate eyes that usually smiled with inner joy were serious. Even at their most important presentations, she’d never seen him so worried. “You’ve known him for a day, Sabrina. You don’t know what he will or won’t do.”

“I’ve known him for longer than a day, Ty.” She hoped the look that went with her statement was meaningful and uninvited further questions. “I’d really appreciate it if you kept this to yourself. We don’t really want this getting out.”

He stroked his smooth chin, his elbows resting on his knees. “How long has ‘this’ been going on?”

In the three years she’d worked with Ty, this was their first personal conversation. She was surprised when he came to her grandfather’s funeral, now here they were, discussing her love life in more detail than she ever anticipated. “Two months. I never expected to work with him. It seems the different dynamic isn’t an easy change for either of us.”

“Okay, there’s not a delicate way to say this,” he said, leaning toward her and taking her hand in his. She was unused to being touched like this, and now it had happened twice in one day. “When a man holds a woman the way he was holding you...”

Sabrina cut him off. “Then he really knows how to please that woman.” She hadn’t thought about how that would sound before she said it and now her trademark blush made its appearance.

“Sabrina,” he began in protest.

“Ty, trust me when I say you really don’t want to know the details of my sex life. Jonas is a gentleman. He’s kind, thoughtful, and generous. You weren’t meant to see what you saw. Nobody was.” She bit her lip to keep from saying more.

It seemed now that she had acknowledged there was something between them, the floodgates opened. She hadn’t felt the need to confide anything about her relationship with Jonas to anyone. It was time she phoned Ginny for a heart-to-heart. She was good at this kind of thing.

The look Ty gave her was doubtful at best. “I’ll be watching him, Sabrina. He has a way to go before he wins my vote.”

Sabrina flopped back onto the sofa and put her legs on the coffee table, crossing them at the ankle. It was the least composed she had ever been in front of an employee, but she wasn’t feeling overly composed.

“Ty? Can I ask you a question and you give me an honest answer?” She didn’t look at him, not wanting to pressure him either way.

“As long as you promise not to hold it against me,” he said.

She glanced up at him. The humor was back in his eyes, but she wasn’t fooled. She knew he would be watching Jonas closely. “I promise.”

He leaned back beside her and rested his long legs on the table next to hers. “Then go for it.”

“Am I too involved with your work?”

“You’re going to let his crack about micromanaging get under your skin?”

“Ty,” she pleaded. Jonas wasn’t frequently wrong about anything. “Jonas asked me to step back and let you guys do this without my feedback until you have a proposal.”

“That’s gotta hurt,” he teased.

“So it’s true.” She sighed. “It is hard for me to give up control. I don’t want to get in the way of the work you guys do, but I don’t want to step back and have it all blow up in my face.”

“There is a happy medium,” Ty said. “But you’re going to have to find it through trial and error.”

She scrubbed a hand down her face, careful to not smear her makeup. “I like how you told me I was a bitch without ever saying the word. That’s some talent you have for diplomacy.”

He laughed. “Did you honestly just crack a joke?” He whipped out his cell phone. “Let me get this on tape.”

He punched some buttons, but she took it away and closed it. “I won’t say that twice in a row.”

“Just to be clear,” he said, leaning forward. “I would never call you a bitch. You’re smart, talented, and beautiful, inside and out. You have a wicked business sense and you pursue your goals with a startling single-mindedness. If you cross the line from time to time, nobody who’s ever worked for you for any length of time is going to second-guess you. You’ve pissed me off more than once, but I trust your judgment, so I swallow my pride and move on. I know in the long run that I’m going to learn so much from you that I’ll come out ahead in the end.”

She squeezed his hand, which hadn’t left hers, in thanks. “When I die, I want you to speak at my funeral.”

He lifted a thick brow at her. “Two jokes. He really rattled you, didn’t he?”

“He always rattles me,” she said. “That’s one of the things I like about him. He doesn’t take my shit and he’s not afraid to argue with me.”

“Is that an invitation to argue with you?” he asked. “Because I have no problem arguing with anybody.”

She pushed away all mirth to regard him with complete sincerity. “If you think your idea is better than mine or if you want to question something I say, I think you should do it.” If nothing else, it would improve her team’s morale and confidence. At best, she would see an overall improvement in their pitches.

“Nicely,” she added. “Be gentle with me, Ty. I’m fragile.”

He laughed uncomfortably, and she knew he was thinking of the rough way Jonas was holding her when he walked in on them earlier.

## Chapter 9

She put Veronica with Tim and refrained from checking on anyone until it was nearly time to call it a day. She was pleasantly surprised to find nothing amiss and she was able to accomplish many other things she would normally end up taking home to finish. Perhaps Jonas was right.

When she made it to the conference room where he and Ty were working, he looked up at her, an unspoken warning in his eyes. She ignored it.

“Let me see what you guys have so far,” she directed.

Ty waved her over to show her the storyboard he had nearly completed. Jonas came over to tape the last three sketches in place. She studied them carefully, impressed with the idea and the sketches, but she said nothing about them.

She looked up at them both. “It’s five o’clock. Time to call it a day.” She turned to leave the room, when Ty’s voice stopped her.

“A happy medium, Sabrina.” His pointed look was less sharp because of the amusement in his eyes.

“It looks good.” Ignoring Jonas, she winked at Ty and left the room. Within five minutes, Jonas was in her office.

“Are you ready to go home?” he asked tightly. “I thought waiting by the elevator would be a little stupid, given the fact I’m working so close to your office.”

She grabbed her purse and smiled at him. “Let’s go.”

He was quiet and aloof for most of the ride home. She was fiddling with the radio when he finally broke his silence.

“You didn’t say anything about the presentation so far,” he said accusingly.

“You asked me not to say anything until Friday,” she reminded him.

“I didn’t mean...Christ. You’re pouting about this, aren’t you?”



There was an edge in him, an anger she didn't understand. "No, but you are."

He turned the radio off in the middle of a song she liked. "You winked at him."

Frowning, she asked, "I winked at who?"

"At whom. 'Who' is a subject. 'Whom' is an object." He didn't take his eyes from the road. His response seemed automatic, and she knew it was a defense. That didn't make it less aggravating.

"Don't correct my grammar, Jonas. It's annoying. Answer the damn question."

A muscle in his lower jaw twitched. "Ty. You were in your office with him for quite a while and I know you didn't tell him we're married."

"You didn't want me to," she reminded him. "You're the one who's embarrassed to be married to me, not the other way around."

"I'm not embarrassed to be married to you," he snapped. "And I don't think it's right for you to flirt like that right in front of me."

She narrowed her eyes. That wasn't flirting. She could flirt with the best of them, or the worst, depending on the point of view. She just didn't do it often. "You sound jealous."

"He's younger and better looking and he'll probably get a promotion long before I do. For Christ's sake, I'm five years older than you."

Stifling a grin, she said, "Four years. I just turned thirty."

"I'm thirty-five," he said. "Today is my birthday."

She let a moment pass before making a knowing sound. "So this is why you've been so cranky all day. Why didn't you tell me it was your birthday? Do you know how inconsiderate this is? I didn't have a chance to make reservations or buy something sexy to wear. I had my eye on this black lacy thong I thought you'd like, but I haven't had the nerve to purchase it. This would have been the perfect motivation."

Folding her arms over her chest, she pouted for a bit. When they pulled into the garage, she turned to him. "I don't even know what to get for you."

Flouncing out of the car, she made it to the garage door before he caught her. "Let me make it up to you," he suggested.

From his tone, she knew what he had in mind, but she still asked. "How?"

"Buy the thong. Wear it tonight and let me tie you up."

She was wet from the way his voice turned husky when he breathed the request against the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck. "Why would you want to tie me up?"

"When I hold you down," he said, "it inhibits my movements as well as yours. This way, I could hold you down and still have my hands free. I promise you'll like it."

She already liked it, and he hadn't done anything. "Let's go inside," she said. "I need different shoes. My feet are killing me."

They came in the back way, through the laundry room, but she had already warned Ginny and Alyssa of the path they usually took to enter the house. During the time Sabrina pretended to pout, she had been unable to detect anyone's cars near the house. Either they changed their minds or they hid their vehicles well.

As soon as they stepped into the kitchen, she turned to watch Jonas. Though she was sure the rich, mouth-watering smells of Drew's cooking tipped him off the moment he walked in the door, the candid surprise in his eyes as everyone yelled to him made her smile.

Family and friends thronged around him. She scooted away to greet Ginny and her mother and to thank Drew for throwing together dinner on short notice. At five-ten, with spiky blond hair and startling blue eyes, Drew's show was sure to be a success with anyone who enjoyed a pretty face and a dynamic personality. Once they tried his recipes, they'd be hooked.

Jonas tore himself away from everybody and wrapped his body around Sabrina, laying a long, slow, open-mouthed kiss on her that was pornographic in its heat and intensity.

"You made me feel guilty," he accused.

"Serves you right," she said. "This wasn't easy to throw together in two days."

"Does this mean I don't get my gift?" His hands were strong on her waist and his warmth penetrated the fabric there.

"It means you have to wait until tomorrow." She laughed. "Come and meet Drew. You'll never meet a better chef."

Jonas, who was an accomplished cook in his own right, wasn't offended, especially after he tasted Drew's Wisconsin chicken and Ginny's signature Creamy Berry Tart. Later, after everyone ate too much, drank all

the wine, and left, Jonas tried to thank her for the party as they cleared away the remnants of the mess.

“It was the best present anyone’s ever given me,” he said.

She waved away the compliment. “Your mother and Ginny did most of the work. I only wrote the checks.” Heading to the dining room, where she had a hutch that hid more than it revealed, she rifled through a drawer of junk to find his gifts. “I did get you something.”

He sat down at the dining room table as she directed and opened the envelope. The first piece of paper was a notice that he’d paid his student loans in full. The second was a round-trip ticket to Lexington, Kentucky.

“I could only get you next Thursday and Friday off,” she said, “but I figured it was better than missing your family vacation for the first time in thirty-three years. A rental car is waiting for you in Lexington. You can drive the rest of the way.”

He looked at her, a flurry of emotions mixing across his features. “You paid off my student loans?”

He hadn’t owed much, only about ten thousand. Sabrina nodded.

He shook his head. “I’ll pay you back.”

“It’s a gift.”

“I can’t accept this,” he argued. “It’s far too expensive. You don’t have your inheritance yet, and even if you did, I wouldn’t accept this from you.”

She hadn’t expected this reaction. She was oddly hurt by it. “Why can’t you?”

Lightly, he caressed her cheek. “I don’t want your money.”

Frustrated, she tried to point out rational reasons for him to accept the gift and move on. “This way, you won’t have to work a second job. You’re so tired on the days after you work, Jonas. Now you’ll have more time to do the things you want to do.”

He stared at her, a strange emotion glittering from his green eyes. “I like working at Ellen’s club.”

“I know,” she said, amending her logic. “But you can cut back your hours.”

He stood, taking her in his arms. “If you want me to work less, honey, all you need to do is ask.”

“I didn’t do this to interfere with your life. I don’t want you to change things for me. I did this to give you more options.”

“You keep spending large amounts of money on me,” he said testily.

Shocked, Sabrina drew back. “I do not. This is the first time I’ve spent over a thousand on you.”

He raised a brow. “I have several pairs of three-hundred dollar jeans that say differently.”

“Did anyone ever tell you it’s rude to fish in the trash for price tags?” She didn’t see his point about the jeans. “You had one pair of jeans when you moved in here. You may have saved your suits from that fire, but you let your casual clothes burn.”

“My suits cost about three hundred each, Sabrina. I saved them because they were the most expensive things I owned. Now I have designer jeans, countless designer shirts, and silk ties. You need to stop or you’ll have spent your inheritance before you get it.” Firm lines settled in around his mouth. If he didn’t watch it, he would have a disapproving scowl set into his face permanently.

Sabrina waved away his concern. “The twelve million is nothing to me. I have plenty of money and I get to spend it however I choose. If you don’t like the clothes I buy you, all you need to do is say something.” She really didn’t see why he was making a big deal out of a few gifts. It bothered her that he wasn’t more appreciative. She didn’t add that she felt compelled to shop when he was gone at work. He frequently returned home to find something new she thought would look good on him.

She didn’t draw the line at clothes either. He was constantly absorbed in some kind of thriller or mystery novel. His favorite authors were easy to identify. She picked up new releases for him, as well as gadgets and electronic items. His new laptop was in the mail. She hadn’t meant it as a birthday gift. She had been shopping online when she noticed how beat-up his looked.

She flounced away and went upstairs. It had been a long, long day and she didn’t feel like fighting with him. She hadn’t walked away from their first fight today unscathed.

She stood at the vanity and pulled the pins from her hair, tossing them carelessly on the marble surface. She had paid his student loans before she knew his birthday was coming. The real gift was time in Kentucky with his family. She threw the statement closing the loan into the envelope at the last minute. Somewhere in the back of her mind, she knew he wouldn’t be

pleased by that gift and she didn't want him to think she was being manipulative.

Jonas appeared behind her in the mirror, his expression heavy with meaning. He pushed her hands away and finished freeing her hair. When he was done, he pulled her back against him and massaged her scalp.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly into her hair. "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Sabrina didn't reply. She didn't know what to say. His hands moved to her neck and shoulders, kneading the knots she carried there.

"I don't want you to think you have to buy me things to keep me with you, Sabrina." His lips grazed her throat as his hands worked their magic on her arms.

She stiffened at the insinuation. "I know you won't leave before the year is over."

"Relax, honey. I wasn't talking about sex either. I don't want you to think I married you for your money. You have to know it doesn't matter to me." His voice caught a little. He had meant to keep from her how important this was to him.

She turned in his arms. "I never thought it mattered to you. You need to stop worrying about it, Jonas. I give more to charity each year than I've spent on you."

He looked at her oddly, his hands never stopping as he smoothed the stress from her lower back. "You can't possibly make that much money."

Shrugging, she said, "The money I make at Rife is inconsequential. My grandfather set me up with a very large trust fund on the day I was born."

His hands stopped. "That's some kind of favoritism."

"No," she said. "Grandpa took care of Ginny and Mom, as well. The twelve million he gave Ginny outright came with strings when it came to me. That's why Ginny and Mom thought it was so unfair. But mostly, the way he did this was to make my cousins think there was nothing left so we wouldn't get caught in a costly legal battle."

Thoughts raced through his head, reflecting on his face. "If you're so damn wealthy, then why did you only give me one ticket to Kentucky?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, you can obviously afford to take time away from work. Why aren't you coming with me?"

She bit her lip, knowing that however she answered, it was going to come out wrong. "You didn't invite me."

"Amanda invited you. My mother invited you. I thought it was a given that you were expected to be there, too."

She tried to pull away, but he didn't let her. "You didn't tell me about the trip for a reason."

"So you assume it was because I don't want you there?"

"You don't." She said it with certainty. He had serious problems leaving her alone with his family members. He stayed by her side the entire evening, tensing whenever she slipped away and he saw her in conversation with one of his relatives. He didn't have a problem with her speaking to Ginny, her mother, Lara, or Drew, who stayed for the party.

After much thought, he spoke, forcing the words out painfully. "I haven't told you about Helene. I don't want you to hear about her from them."

Empathy surged through her. She wanted to take away his anguish. It may have been years old, but the pain was still fresh. "Maybe you should tell me."

He let go of her and tugged at his tie.

She pushed his hands away to loosen it for him. "You don't have to if you don't want to, Jonas. I haven't exactly told you anything about me either."

"Aren't we a dysfunctional pair?" The ghostly smile on his lips didn't reach his eyes. "She isn't my ex-girlfriend. She's my ex-wife."

Sabrina felt an insane urge to strangle him with the now-loosened tie in her hands. It was none of her business, and she hated the surge of jealousy she felt. He'd married her because he loved her. Somehow, it made it worse to know they'd been married, that they'd planned to spend the rest of their lives together. He'd never once referred to Sabrina as his wife. She wasn't the first to wear his grandmother's wedding rings.

She watched the maroon silk slither through her fingers and pool on the floor. She might have said something like, "Oh," or it might have remained inside her head. She rubbed at her eyes, and then stared at the black smudges on her hands. Abruptly, she turned and went into the bathroom to wash the makeup from her face.

Sabrina looked like her.

It didn't matter what he said. His sisters, his friends, even his parents saw the resemblance when they looked at her. It explained the hesitancy that lasted a second every time they saw her again. She thought it was due to the fact that maybe she wasn't his usual type, but now she knew she was thoroughly his type. It was unsettling and hard to process.

He followed her into the bathroom. His reflection in the mirror eyed her regretfully. "I meant to tell you, but as time passed, it didn't seem relevant. Then I didn't want you to know. It was selfish of me and I can't explain why I didn't want you to know."

Her patience for games vanished. "You don't want me to know because I look like her. That's why I caught your eye in the first place, isn't it?" She rinsed her face, the icy water a punishment for having been so gullible.

He snatched her towel and dried her face. "You don't look like her. You look nothing like her." His hand trembled, and his denial had been too vehement.

She took the towel from him and finished with her face and hands. "Don't lie to me, Jonas. You're the one who insisted honesty be part of this thing between us."

She disappeared into the closet to shed her clothes.

The things he insisted on made so much more sense now than they did before. He wanted a monogamous relationship. He wanted to sleep with Sabrina from the beginning, and it had nothing to do with her. Most likely, he closed his eyes and pretended she was Helene. That stung more than anything. Sabrina didn't expect him to feel anything tender for her, but she'd believed him when he said they were friends and that he desired her.

Jonas gripped her shoulders, forcing Sabrina to look at his face. "I am being honest, Sabrina. Maybe at first, I wanted you to replace her. But you haven't. You can't, and I don't want you to. I didn't know you then, but I know you now."

Abruptly, he released her, his shoulders slumped in defeat. "She left me almost five years ago. We were married for eighteen months."

"But you dated for a long time," she guessed. "Three years? Four?"

"Five."

Five. She'd spent five years with Stephen. It was a significant chunk of time, not something easily dismissed. She hadn't even seen Stephen in eight

years and the memory of him haunted her, full of regret and a sense of failure.

“Why did she leave?” It was an unfair question. If anyone asked Stephen why Sabrina had dumped him, he wouldn’t be able to do more than guess.

Jonas drew a hand through his hair and took a ragged breath. “Because she said she couldn’t survive on a teacher’s salary. I didn’t make enough to buy her the expensive things she wanted. We weren’t poor, but I couldn’t make enough to satisfy her desire for material items.”

That gave her pause. It explained his reluctance to accept the gifts. “You left teaching so you could shower your next wife with expensive things?”

He nodded, a short burst of movement from an otherwise frozen man.

Sabrina pulled on her nightgown and went to him, resting her hands on his chest. “Jonas, accepting gifts from me doesn’t make you materialistic. Besides, you’ve given me something money can’t buy.”

He looked down at her, searching her eyes. “What’s that?”

“I thought there was something really wrong with me until I met you. You opened an entire world to me, one I thought I’d never know. For the first time in my life, I feel truly alive and it’s all because of you.”

Shaking his head, he said, “Anyone could—”

She cut him off. “No, Jonas. I’ve had far more lovers than you can possibly guess. Nobody has. That’s my point. You didn’t pretend to love me and you didn’t judge me. You don’t question what I want, what I need. You give it to me without reservation. Maybe this is something that’s always come easy to you and you can’t appreciate what you’ve given me, but don’t brush it aside or belittle it.”

She trembled, thinking about how empty, how inadequate, how dead inside she had felt for so long. Even now, she wasn’t fully ready to face her feelings, or the fact that she had any. He pushed her to anger, to jealousy, and to pain, all in one day. They weren’t comfortable emotions. She couldn’t control them and that terrified her.

But it also freed her. When she didn’t know anger, she couldn’t know joy. Without jealousy, she didn’t recognize that the security she always thought she felt was a sham. Without pain, she felt no pleasure. She wasn’t done. She wasn’t at a place where she felt whole or fully alive, but she was on her way and it was due to him.



He held her, kissing her tenderly as he led her to bed. When he held her hands immobile above her head and whispered in her ear, urging her higher, she came, crying out her orgasm as she arched beneath him.

Afterward, she lay in his arms with her head resting on his shoulder and she let her hand passively explore his chest. He captured it, bringing it to his lips.

“Come to Kentucky with me.” His mouth curved into a large smile beneath her fingertips. “There’s a club in Lexington I think you’d love.”

## Chapter 10

The next day was smoother than the previous one. Sabrina practiced stepping back with everyone, not just Jonas and Ty. Randall and Clare shot her strange looks, but didn't comment. Veronica began to smile at Sabrina instead of scowling.

Overall, she found nothing was lost from the experience. Work progressed. She offered her opinion when she couldn't hold her tongue and found it better received. Perhaps Jonas was onto something with this. After all, he had undeniable leadership experience. She pondered the difference between being bossy and being the boss.

Toward the end of the day, she heard raised voices coming from the conference room where Jonas and Ty were working. The sound triggered alarm bells in her head. She didn't need a shrink to tell her that one of the reasons she kept such tight control over her team was to prevent arguments like this.

She entered the room, closing the door behind her. Ophelia sat at one end of the table, watching the disagreement. She twisted a strand of her long, frosted hair around her finger.

"What are they fighting about?" Sabrina asked.

She looked up at her, startled, and sat up straight. She was easily six inches taller than Sabrina, but the sight of her boss made her tremble. Sabrina wasn't sure she liked that. "Oh, they can't decide which concept they want to use for the commercial. Jonas thinks Ty's idea isn't versatile enough and Ty thinks Jonas's idea is too versatile."

Without waiting for an invitation, Sabrina rounded the long table and lifted the sketches, coolly assessing each with an eye toward the client profile. Jonas automatically stepped back to let her access the ones in front of him, never missing a beat in his passionate debate with Ty.

“Gay people are more likely than straight people to spend the money to purchase expensive food for their pets,” Jonas said. “It’s insane to ignore the sales potential in this area.”

“The client didn’t name gays as a marketing target,” Ty argued. “Don’t compromise the integrity of the campaign just to put a commercial or two on Logo and Bravo.”

In studying the sketches, she saw their point of contention. Jonas wanted to run a spot where the players were interchangeable. A heterosexual couple could become a gay or lesbian couple with only the change of actor or actress. Ty wanted something with a single actor and a cat. It didn’t exclude gays, but it didn’t include them either.

“Ty is right, Jonas. The client didn’t specify this audience.” She turned to look at him, to face the fury she knew she would find. “They’re just starting up this line. They don’t have the budget for something like this. Although simple to accomplish, it would cost more money to shoot and it might be the difference between us landing this account and another firm who can bring it in for less.”

He regarded her dispassionately, and she was relieved. At least he wasn’t taking any of this personally. She recognized the brilliance of his plan. If only the cat food company had a little more to spend, this would explode them into an untapped market.

Pleased with his reaction, she continued. “However, I think you should keep this idea as an addendum. We can add it as a modifier to the original proposal. You’ll need to research the added sales potential in order to really sell this.”

Without a word, Jonas handed her a short stack of papers. He’d already done the necessary research. She had no idea when he might have fit it into his packed schedule, but it was thorough.

“We’d need a name if you want to go the gay route,” Ty said. “The anonymous commercials don’t pack as much of a punch, especially when you use women.”

“Yes,” Jonas agreed. “People tend to overlook generic grown women who live together. We could use Ginny in the mock-up.”

That caught Sabrina’s attention. Though Ginny was well-known in culinary circles and by loyal Food Network viewers who caught her appearances on various shows, she wasn’t a national celebrity. “Ginny?”

“Ginny.” He uncrossed his arms and spread his palms wide. “She’s all fired up because Drew is getting his own show. She said he’s too much of a prima donna already. If she turns it down, we threaten to ask Drew. He seemed open to it when we discussed it last night.”

Immediately, she held up a finger and pointed out the flaws. “Drew isn’t gay and he’s using sex to sell his show. Coming out of a closet he may not even be in wouldn’t help his ratings.”

Jonas lifted his brows in doubt. “He hit on me.”

He propositioned Sabrina as well, but she knew better. Squelching her urge to laugh, she reoriented his perception of the conversation. “If you reexamine the conversation you two had, you will no doubt realize he hit on us.”

“Us?”

She wasn’t about to tell him that Drew had a thing for heterosexual couples, not in front of Ty. She wasn’t sure if he had sex with the male half, but she knew he loved threesomes. It was a part of his life she didn’t want to know more about.

Ignoring his question, Sabrina ticked off her next point on another finger. “Second, did you tell Ginny you were planning to out her to the entire world? She may seem like a free spirit, but she values her privacy. She’s not truly jealous of Drew’s impending success. After all, he’s not doing it as a pastry chef, and she’s producing the show.”

He nodded. “Good point. We can use you. I’ll bet very few people would know the difference.”

She stared at him with uncharacteristic stoicism. She wondered if he would be surprised to know she’d explored that avenue already. It would most likely turn him on and he’d want her to repeat it for his benefit. Then there was the fact that Ginny needed to give permission for her name or her likeness to be used, whether or not Sabrina was the temporary stand-in.

Ty watched in silence, sizing up their relationship through this interaction. Finally, he broke in. “This is taking shape awfully fast for something that’s supposed to be a theoretical add-on. If you’ll kindly tell us which direction to take, we’ll work on finishing this proposal tonight for your personal edification.”

Trading her creative shoes for her pragmatic ones, she pronounced judgment. “Go with Ty’s idea.” She handed the papers to Jonas. “Add this

in with a separate cost analysis. Don't attach Ginny's name to it and don't mention her in the presentation."

She pinned Ty with a steel look. "Forget anything you heard about Drew Snow."

Ty shrugged his broad shoulders. "Who?"

"I'm leaving in a half hour," she murmured to Jonas as she brushed past him.

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

Before she left, she caught sight of Ophelia. She had completely forgotten the intern was there. Her lapse in discretion was uncharacteristic and unforgivable. She'd relaxed her guard because not only did Ty put her at ease, but he knew part of her secret. She didn't care to keep it a secret, but it was important to Jonas. Maybe he didn't want people to look at him and see two failed marriages. Maybe he would pretend this one never happened.

Once they were safely ensconced in the car, an apology was her first order of business. He smirked a little bit, but she caught the short gesture.

"What is so amusing?"

"The whole office thinks we're having an affair."

She glared at him, seething inside. "You're fine with people thinking we're having an illicit affair, but you don't want them to know we're married?"

"It isn't illicit."

White-hot anger surged through her. "I don't find this amusing. I could lose my job for this, Jonas."

"You don't need to work," he reasoned.

Her fingers flexed, and she pictured punching him in the arm so vividly her fist hurt. "That isn't the point. I have a reputation at this company and in this business, a reputation I've worked hard to build. The last thing I need is for it to be destroyed with charges of sexual harassment."

That hit home. He was quiet for several miles as he considered it from her point of view. She was in management and it appeared she was having an affair with a subordinate. By definition, it was sexual harassment, even if it *was* consensual.

"I'll have those rumors quashed in a week," he said.

"Just in time for us both to take off early so we can catch a flight together." Her sarcasm was not lost on him.

He turned into the driveway, stopping the car outside of the garage. He turned to put his arm on the back of her seat and looked deeply into her eyes. "Does this mean you won't let me tie you up tonight?"

She slammed the car door and was in the house before he could cut the engine. Fuming, she realized that she was more than a little anxious about what he proposed to do to her that evening. The realization did nothing to calm her down. Neither did the fact that Jonas didn't follow her inside. She looked out the front window to see her car disappear from the driveway.

Her spirits were in a freefall. He hadn't told her he was working tonight. Besides, she reasoned, he didn't have a change of clothes in her car. The suit would stand out at a bar, particularly on a bartender.

She changed her clothes and went for a swim. She didn't know how long she was there, but a shadow looming over the shallow end caught her attention. Poking her head up, she saw Jonas crouched down, waiting for her.

He had changed into jeans—a pair she bought him—and a t-shirt. He looked too good. She regretted buying the jeans, knowing he primarily wore them to the bar where she wouldn't see him in them.

"Are you going to come in for dinner?" he asked. "I made your favorite."

"My favorite?" She wasn't aware she had a favorite dish.

He shrugged. "It's something new, destined to become a classic."

She rolled her eyes. "You heated up Drew's leftovers."

"You betcha. Come on, Sabrina. After dinner, I'll show you the present I bought for you. It's something every woman should have, but you don't."

She chalked the self-satisfied grin on his face to his anticipation of Drew's cooking.

As they ate, Jonas tried to apologize. "I didn't realize the harm, Sabrina. At least give me a chance to fix this before you expend all this energy being mad at me, okay?"

"What if you can't fix it?" she asked, pushing her plate away before she burst.

"I can fix it," he said confidently. "Why don't you head upstairs? I've laid an outfit on the bed for you to wear."

"What if I don't want to wear it?" She knew she was being a pain, but the trepidation that disappeared as she swam was back in full force.

"It's a role. You have to dress for the role." He rose and carried their plates to the sink. They had developed a habit of eating in the kitchen, ignoring both the breakfast room and the dining room unless they had company.

"What is the role?" she asked, keeping the excitement she felt from her voice. The whole concept of playing a role made her heady with some kind of floating feeling. She liked leaving Sabrina Breszewski and all that she represented in the dust.

"Your husband has been out of town. You've taken the opportunity to entertain strange men in your bedroom. Tonight's lover knows you'll never truly be his and so he's hell-bent on making sure you can think of nothing but him—no matter who you're with."

He gave her the scenario in the same tone as an afterthought, but she wasn't fooled. She wondered how he would play the role of the husband who caught her with one of her lovers. The idea of a spanking made her tingle.

"What's my name?"

He closed the dishwasher. "You don't share that information with your lovers. You don't know their names and they don't know yours."

She was wearing a towel over her damp swimsuit, but the way he stared made her feel like it was transparent. She liked this fantasy.

Hurrying up the stairs, she scooped up the clothes he had left on the bed and jumped in the shower. She wanted to look perfect for her anonymous lover who burned for her and only her.

The white lacy bra and matching thong were easy to put on, but she had no idea what he wanted her to do with the black leather cuffs. They were thick and strong. The clasps were metal buckles. She assumed they went on her wrists, but it would take two hands to secure them.

She found Jonas waiting for her on the bed, absorbed in one of his thriller novels. "You're late," he said without looking up. He was already in character.

"Sorry," she said breezily. He was her lover, here at her behest. "I wasn't sure when you would arrive. You didn't confirm the time."

Wordlessly, he held out his hand. She placed the cuffs in them, which he tossed carelessly on the bed next to his novel.

Standing, he checked her over as if she were a piece of prime rib or real estate. She passed inspection, but just barely.

“You’ll do.”

“I’ll do?” Her tone was outraged. “Who do you think you are? You are here for my pleasure.”

His emotionless eyes met her haughty ones. A thrill ran through her at the hardness there. His hand came up to caress her cheek. She batted it away.

“I don’t think I like you,” she said, sizing him up the same way he had appraised her.

He wound his hand in the hair at the base of her neck and forced her to her knees, pulling her head back to look up at him. It wasn’t until that moment did she realize they were playing a domination game and he was the much more experienced party. It was a battle of wills, and she was determined to win. Or lose. Whichever felt better.

“You don’t have to like me,” he said. “But make no mistake: You are here for my pleasure.”

With his free hand, he traced the outline of her lips, which parted slightly because she was already panting in anticipation.

“Unzip my pants.”

He released her hair the tiniest bit so she could see what she was doing. Her hands were clumsy as she fumbled with his snap and zipper. She expected him to be hard, to spring out at her as he had done so often. He wasn’t the least bit aroused.

She glanced up at him in surprise.

“You’re going to have to do better than that,” he said. “Touch me. Take me in your mouth.”

She thought back to his surprise in the supply closet when she first did this to him only four days ago. The power she had over him lent her strength now. The fear and trepidation he temporarily engendered vanished and she affected her sultriest look.

Deftly, she pushed down his pants and boxers to claim her prize. She fondled him with expert hands, caressing the sensitive skin of his sac with a light touch. She was the queen of hand jobs. She had given more than her fair share in lieu of actual sex.



By the time she added her lips to the mix, his eyes had turned tawny. She knew nothing would make him stop her now and she hadn't yet begun to use her tongue.

He came moments after she took him in her mouth. Hauling her to her feet, he kissed her furiously. She knew he had planned to hold out for far longer. She smiled a great Cheshire smile and resisted telling him he was at her mercy. He had met his match.

Her grin must have incensed him further. She sailed through the air, weightless for a moment before she hit the bed, bouncing twice before the momentum played out. He joined her, lifting her to snatch his novel—which he tossed to the floor—and straddling her stomach so she couldn't move.

She closed her eyes against the tug of desire that negated the sense of power quickly vanishing from her veins. He captured one wrist, securing the cuff to it. There wasn't much she could do to distract him. He had fastened his pants before joining her on the bed. The other cuff encircled her wrist tightly before she realized he had changed hands.

He had definitely done this before.

Flipping around, he slapped cuffs onto her ankles before hopping to the floor. He held a hand out to her. "Come on."

"Where?" she asked.

Tossing her over his shoulder, he said, "When I tell you to do something, you do it without question. You've earned a punishment."

His tone, his promise, and his arrogance combined in a way that left Sabrina drenched. She'd been with arrogant men before, but they hadn't promised nearly what Jonas assured.

The domineering way he handled her helped, too. She half-wished he would gag and spank her, but she checked that thought at the door. Even though he cautioned her that she should never be ashamed of what turned her on, he would think she was too odd if she voiced that naughty desire. Hell, she thought it was iniquitous and it was *her* thought.

He whistled as he carried her down the long hall to the room he converted into his office. It was the same tune she often heard him whistling when he worked in the yard. She had no idea what it was, but it spent enough time stuck in her head for her to recognize it anywhere.

She wasn't sure why he needed a home office. Strangely reticent to bring work home, he almost never used it. For that matter, her own office downstairs had been grossly neglected since Jonas became part of her life.

Jonas had a narrow, drop-leaf table in his office. It was scratched and warped and had sustained smoke damage in the fire. Sabrina had offered to have it refinished, but he refused. Instinctively, she knew he would be furious if she refinished it without his permission.

Four handles were bolted to the top, one in each corner of the main surface. Four more could be found if the leaves were unfolded. They resembled the kind she'd seen on boats and now she saw a new use for them. Not only could they hold a rope and a sailor's knot nicely, the eye in the middle was the perfect place to secure the kind of hook often found at the end of a dog's leash.

With a swift click, two short hooks were fastened to the cuffs on her wrists. She stood at one end of the table where he set her and looked up at him. She kept her expression cool and impertinent. His chest brushed against hers lightly and her nipples responded instantly, hardening to dark, ripe peaks visible through the thin material of the lacy bra.

The hands on her waist traveled upward possessively. This lover might not have had her before, but he knew her body and he wanted her to know he owned it. She shivered in anticipation as he cupped her breasts through the delicate lace, his thumbs grazing the hard pebbles at the tips.

As if he were caught in her thrall, his head dipped and she felt the heat of his mouth close over each nipple, dampening the fabric and spilling fire in her core. He pushed her backward, arching her body over the table. She tried to lift herself onto the top, but he stopped her with a slight pressure at her waist.

His hands retraced their path, extending the foray until her arms were raised above her head. Deftly, he moved around the table, securing her wrists to the hooks. Satisfied, he stepped back to survey his work. Her toes were on the ground, her butt was against the edge of the table, and her back was arched over the top. The entire arrangement was held in place by her wrists. She could neither twist, nor lift herself into a comfortable posture.

She protested the awkward position, but he only smiled absently and left the room. Minutes passed like hours. The muscles in her shoulders screamed for release and she had no idea what this had to do with sex. Yes, pain

turned her on, but not this kind. Besides, he was unaware she liked when he got too rough, when his fingers bit into her shoulders, arms, or wrists as he held her down, or when he left her tender and bruised, the only time she could successfully masturbate. He always apologized anxiously for losing control while she assured him she was fine.

Then he would avoid her for days, giving her time to heal completely. The one time she tried to seduce him while she was still sore, he stopped when tears came to her eyes, even though she begged him to continue.

This was annoying, undignified, and not at all sensual. What did he hope to accomplish by leaving her like this? Then she remembered. Power. Domination.

Just when her thighs and calves began to ache, he strode into the room. The rectangular box in his hand was tied with a single red ribbon.

He leaned his elbows on the table next to her and held up the box for her to see.

Ignoring his offering, she spoke without thinking. "If you think leaving me like this will make me at all contrite, you are sorely mistaken."

Pride leapt into his green eyes, only to disappear into the hardness. "You haven't begun to learn how to be contrite, my dear."

He placed the box carefully on the table and straightened to his full height. His hands traced along her muscles, igniting her everywhere he touched. She knew when he came to her pussy that her subterfuge was over. The thin strap of the thong was drenched, useless, not that it ever had a purpose.

He fingered her wetness, pinching, pressing and pulling at her clitoris until she moaned and whimpered. She was not going to beg. Not yet.

His exploration continued down her legs to the bottom of her feet. Her toes were sore from holding her weight and she was sure she had a crease across her ass from where she rested her weight there to give her toes some relief. She congratulated herself on her dedication to swimming. Her muscles were strong and she had punished them far worse than this.

Then he was next to her again, holding the box. "Inside this box is the next item I will use to torture you. Call me when you're ready." Then he was gone.

Sabrina had no idea how long she held out. She thought about what might be in the box, but her imagination was too limited. Her wrists were

already tied down, so it wouldn't be rope. Handcuffs were too wide. In the end, curiosity got the better of her. Then it was only a matter of figuring out what to call her mystery man whose name she didn't know.

Finally, she decided on a simple statement. "I'm ready."

He took his own sweet time in coming, striding into the room after far too long and looking far too relaxed. That was the worst part of the wait, knowing he heard her and that now she had to wait until he decided it pleased him to give her his attention.

Placing one hand under her back and another under her rear, he lifted her onto the table as if her weight were negligible. The muscles in her shoulders and lower back screamed in protest as they unbent and her weight was redistributed along the length of the table. A moan escaped.

He clicked his tongue at her and rearranged her long hair to suit him. "If you weren't so stubborn, you wouldn't be so sore. Never question me again."

Lifting her legs by the ankles, he secured them to the hooks at that end of the table. Now she was bound at each wrist and each ankle. Her knees were bent and in the air. She let them fall together, but he wrenched them apart, pushing them until she was completely open to him. It was an inelegant position, and she didn't like feeling inelegant.

Holding the box aloft again, he urged her. "Open it."

She stared at him. Her arms were bound above her head. "How?"

"Use that luscious mouth of yours," he suggested.

Lifting her head, she took the end of the ribbon between her teeth and pulled. He was enjoying her discomfort and all the reasons for it. "Now what?"

"Now you ask for help," he said, resting his chin on one palm. "I like to hear women like you beg."

She viewed him through narrowed eyes. Women like her. Bored housewives or well-mannered, successful wives? She struggled to remind herself it was a role. They were both playing roles, and he had obviously done this many times before.

"Would you be so good as to open the box?" She went for haughty with that statement and succeeded.

He shot back with a perfect mockery of her. "Would you be so good as to beg?"

A beat passed. "Please."

Amused, he said, "That's not begging."

She licked her lips nervously, her eyes flickering from his to the box and back again. She wasn't sure she wanted to know what was in the plain white box. Screwing in her courage, she tried again. "Please?"

He smiled and lifted the lid. "Was that so hard?"

Reaching inside, he withdrew a flesh-colored, phallic-shaped item that was slightly longer and thicker than any penis she'd ever encountered. She had her suspicions as to what it was and what he intended to do with it, but she said nothing as she threw him a questioning look. She was careful to not actually question him.

Frowning at the item, she gave a tentative response. "Thank you?"

"Is your husband really so neglectful? Should I have more sympathy for you? Do you honestly not know what this is?" Jonas wasn't surprised, but his character mocked her as if he found it impossible that she wouldn't be intimately familiar with whatever that was.

"I assume you're going to fuck me with it," she said.

His mouth twisted sourly. "Such language from such beauty. You really should refrain from speaking that way. It ruins your attempts to appear better than me."

Twisting a dial near the base produced a humming sound. He set it on her stomach so she could feel the vibrations. He twisted the dial again and the rate of vibration increased. Her insides clenched, and a fresh wave of moisture gathered between her spread legs. It was hard and plastic against her skin and she wanted to know what it felt like inside her.

He watched, gauging her reaction. She knew he wouldn't move until she asked. Begged.

Her breathing came harder, and her eyelids wouldn't open beyond halfway. "Please," she panted. "Put it inside me. Make me come."

"I can grant part of your wish, my dear."

She felt the hard tip moving the fabric of her thong and nudging her vaginal lips farther apart. It moved, the vibrations stimulating her outside, finding her clitoris and the sensitive flesh leading from there to her opening. Her hips lifted from the table and the word spilled out. "Please."

It slid inside, needing no extra lubrication. She thrust against it, wanting the vibrations deeper inside. He moved it slowly, maddeningly negating her

attempts to draw it deeper, faster. Tension coiled in every muscle of her body. She trembled with need and strained against her bonds.

Ignoring the riot he fueled, he continued thrusting the damn thing into her with excruciating lassitude. When he took her hard and fast, the orgasm came the same way. Now he urged her up the side of that mountain in a way that didn't assure she'd make it. She hated the uncertainty. She hated the lack of control. She hated that she had surrendered to his domination so quickly. She vowed to hold out much longer next time. She knew there would be a next time, that there would be many next times. There had to be.

She sobbed. She begged. Mindlessly, she pleaded and fought her bonds. Patiently, he ignored her. Or maybe she did affect him. She was too wrapped up in her own internal struggle to process anything other than the sensations that had taken control of her.

Finally, he turned the dial, making the vibrations come faster as he rotated it inside. Sabrina lifted from the table, the climax stretching longer and more intensely than anything she'd ever experienced. Before she could come down, her feet were free.

She didn't recall when he switched the way he secured her wrists. They had exchanged places. She was once again on her feet, bound only by her wrists. This time she was bent over with her breasts pressing into the table. He lifted her hips and entered her from behind, thrusting, riding the waves of her climax.

"Harder," she gasped. "Please."

This was a new position for them. She'd never come this way, but she trusted him to not let her down. He didn't thrust harder or faster, but he did reach around her, and she felt his fingers on her clitoris, pressing and rotating the way she liked.

The only sounds were their mingled moans and the wet slap of his hips against her ass. She was damp everywhere with the effort and so was he. Even the bottoms of her feet were slick against the cherry flooring.

She rested her head on the table, relaxed her arms, and let him take her where he wanted. Sensing she had given over to him completely, he varied his rhythm, using her for his own pleasure. She came again and again, each more intense than the last. Sabrina lost track of how many times he made her scream her climax against the surprisingly smooth grain of the table.

She was liquid, malleable and molten. No place inside her escaped the inferno. For the first time in her life, even for the first time with Jonas, she held back nothing. Everything exploded in white, and that was the last thing she remembered.

When she awoke, she was lying on the black futon in his office, wrapped in his naked body. She was too weak to move or speak or let the slight chill in the few places he didn't touch bother her. She reveled in the safety of his arms, listening to his even breathing until she couldn't keep her eyes open anymore.

The next time she woke, the grandfather clock in the foyer was chiming five. The thin light of dawn streamed in through the windows, competing with the lights they left on in the hall and in his office where they lay in exhausted slumber.

Turning her head slightly, she studied his face relaxed in sleep. It was something she hadn't done since their first night together. He was truly a beautiful man. She didn't know how he ever escaped her notice before that fateful morning in June. She regretted it, not only because it was time she'd lost with him, but because she knew her grandfather would have liked Jonas. They were from vastly different worlds, but they were both good men.

"Serious thoughts?" His voice was hoarse with sleep.

Not wanting to share the drift of her thoughts with him, she smiled. "I was thinking this thong isn't nearly as comfortable the next morning when it's damp and stiff."

Chuckling, he planted a kiss on her forehead and tightened his embrace. "You have far more stamina than I gave you credit for."

"I don't know why," she teased. "I've put up with you for two months now. My fortitude is astounding."

"So are your blowjobs. I thought Monday was a fluke, but I see that you do have some unexpected hidden talents."

She peered at him through narrowed eyes. "I'm not sure that's a compliment."

"Oh, it is," he assured her. "The highest kind." Caressing her hip, he added, "Come shower with me. We haven't had sex in there yet."

## Chapter 11

They were late to work.

Sabrina tried to work in the car on the way there, as she frequently did, but Jonas confiscated her Blackberry, severing her lifeline.

“Hey,” she protested. “I need that.”

“You want it,” he corrected. “We need to talk about last night.”

It was a stereotype, but she thought this was an odd statement coming from a man. “Seriously? We both had a good time. What is there to talk about?”

He wasn’t fooled by her attempt to brush him off. He reached over the console and threaded his fingers through hers. It had been a long time since he held her hand just to hold it. “It amazes me that you’re still so shy about sex.”

“It’s not shyness,” she argued. “I just don’t see what there is to discuss.”

“I need to know what worked for you and what didn’t.”

Sabrina bristled. “It was fine. But you should know that. This wasn’t your first time using that table of yours. I always wondered about the hooks.”

“I’m an old hand at bondage,” he agreed. “So trust me when I say I need to know what you liked and what you didn’t.”

She thought about what they had done in detail. She knew if she was quiet for too long, he’d probably pull the car over and they’d be even later to work. “I like when you get that look in your eyes, the one that says, ‘I’m in charge.’ It makes me know that when I challenge you, you won’t let me have my way. Even though I know that when I give in the sex will be incredible, I just can’t. I’ve never been able to just give in, but you already know this. I like that you can make me let go and enjoy what you’re doing to me. I’ve never passed out from climaxing before.”



A self-satisfied smile settled on his lips and lit his light green eyes. "I did wonder what your threshold was. You nearly bested me."

"Really?" This caught her interest. She wondered if she could wear him out first. Then she remembered where they slept. He hadn't removed her wrist cuffs or taken her to bed. He must have been exhausted as well. "Was it the blowjob?"

Pink stained his cheeks. It was the first time she'd seen him blush. "It was extremely difficult to maintain my role afterward. I wanted so badly to make you feel the way you made me feel. Where did you learn to do that?"

Her lips twisted wryly. "You'd be amazed at what a woman will do to avoid sex with a man she likes when she knows it will be disappointing."

He glanced over at her, and then changed the direction of the conversation. "What about the role playing?"

"I like it," she said. "I like that I can be anyone I want with you. I expect the bored housewife will need to take other lovers. I was thinking that she might like to try the gardener next." The sight of his shirtless form working in the warm August sun never failed to arouse her. So far, she had left him alone when he was playing in the dirt.

"The gardener?"

"Yes," she said, caught up in the possibilities. "Then someone else's bored husband in the changing room of the department store. An eager college student, maybe an intern looking to sleep his way into the company. Oh, and the tech support guy. She wouldn't know how to address issues that arise with her computer. And a lumberjack. I should get you a flannel shirt. The pool boy is always a hottie."

His laughter cut her musings short. "And I was worried you didn't like the role playing."

"No." She shook her head. "I need the role playing. I need to not be myself."

"Threesomes?" he ventured.

"Absolutely not." Her answer came with conviction. She wouldn't be able to let herself go with anyone but Jonas. No matter what persona he assumed, it was essentially Jonas who gave her permission to be free.

"Good," he said, relieved. "I don't think I could handle sharing you."

The quiet way he spoke the words made her look over and study him. Something permanent in the way he stated his possession was as comforting

as it was terrifying. "It's only a year, you know." Her words were equally quiet.

"No, it's not," he said, never taking his eyes from the road. "It's a fever, something that burns from the inside. Do you honestly think either of us can walk away from this before it has run its course?"

She had no response to his passionate sentiment.

\* \* \* \*

An agitated Jonas met Ellen for lunch at a café around the corner from the Rife and Company offices.

"I'm glad you came to your senses." She shoved the lettuce back into her BLT and took a huge bite.

They tried to meet at least once a week. This would be one of their last meetings alone. When the school year started up again after Labor Day and Ryan went back to school, Jake would be joining them. Jonas liked kids. He liked them a lot. The dream of having a couple of his own had died years before, having walked out the door with Helene.

It wasn't that he thought Sabrina would be against having kids, just that she wouldn't want to have kids with him. Their relationship, as she reminded him that morning, was temporary. He had ten months left on his contract.

Then what? He harbored no illusions that he would be able to find someone like her again. The thought was both comforting and terrifying. Falling for Sabrina was not an option, for so many reasons.

"Sabrina's loaded." He made the statement casually. Ellen was the only person to whom he would dare say something like that. Too many people would take it as a statement only a gold-digger would make. "Apparently, we can afford the time and the travel."

Ellen thought about that for a minute, mostly because she wanted to finish chewing before she spoke. Sabrina lived very near Ellen. While it was an area that tended to attract people who were upper-middle class, it wasn't where one typically found people who were filthy rich.

"I get the sense you're not talking about that huge inheritance she has coming her way next summer. Oh, that reminds me..." Voice trailing off, Ellen plopped her purse on her lap and dug through it.

Jonas refrained from commenting on the size of her bag. Most of the stuff through which she sifted was baby-related. A drop of jealousy squeezed through his defensive denial. The image of Sabrina in a similar position flickered for a moment, and then was gone.

Shaking his head to clear away the cobwebs, he reflected on the need for sleep. There was no way Sabrina would ever be caught looking as unorganized as Ellen did at that moment.

Ellen hit pay dirt. Extracting a pile of unopened envelopes, she handed them across the table. "I don't see why you can't change your address from mine to yours on these."

Taking the stack of what he knew were bills, he muttered an insincere thanks. "For starters, Sabrina saw my student loan statement lying around and paid it off for my birthday. She claims ten thousand isn't much money."

The shadow of confusion crossed Ellen's face, gone almost before Jonas could register it. "Maybe she wants you to stay home more? You do work a lot and she seems to actually like you."

Anyone else would have earned a cold glare. "I have bills to pay. Besides, I've already cut back on my hours at the club."

Ellen snorted. "You still work there three and four nights a week."

"And make more than I do in advertising," he reminded her. "Working for you is paying off the majority of my debt. With Sabrina covering my living expenses, I'll have this paid off in about eighteen months."

Stuffing another bite into her mouth, Ellen refrained from saying what they were both thinking. That debt was Helene's. The fact he was paying it down instead of declaring bankruptcy said much about his character, but it definitely exacted a toll.

She changed the subject. "So, are you taking her to that club in Lexington? I can call down there and get your name on the list."

\* \* \* \*

Sabrina forgot that Amanda and Ellen wanted to have a girls' night out. Ellen called to remind her around noon and Sabrina spent the next several hours arranging things with Ginny and Amanda.

Jonas would take the car home so he could change and go to work. Sabrina would stay in the city and have dinner with the girls. They planned

to go clubbing that evening and shopping the next morning. Amanda bowed out of the shopping since they were leaving for Kentucky the next morning. She was thrilled to find out Sabrina and Jonas would be joining them the following Thursday.

Ty, Ophelia, and Jonas presented to Sabrina in the early afternoon. She liked the majority of their proposal. After some tweaks, under which Jonas bristled, she sent them off to finish the project. Without some serious help, they would fail to meet their deadline. She pulled Randall, Clare, and Veronica from their projects, which were in much better shape, and put them with the cat food account. She couldn't find Timothy anywhere.

She also reassigned the ditzzy intern whose name she couldn't remember. She glued herself to Jonas as soon as she entered the conference room. No doubt she thought the nasty look with which Sabrina nailed her had to do with restrictions on inter-office dating and not the cold strands of jealousy wending their way through her.

At five o'clock, Jonas came into Sabrina's office to bid her farewell. Minnie didn't stop him. She was exceptionally good at her job. When Sabrina's predecessor moved on, he left Minnie in limbo. Snatching her up was one of the best decisions Sabrina had ever made. She had figured out that Jonas was welcome in Sabrina's office and she had begun treating him rather warmly.

"I put Tina to work with Clare," he said. "Clare seems to have more patience with her than anyone else."

Sabrina had been in the middle of sorting an enormous amount of paperwork. It littered her desk in piles. Peering up at him with her brows drawn in confusion, she asked, "Who?"

"Tina. Blonde hair, long legs. The attractive intern on my team you seem to like glaring at."

Her eyes narrowed at that. She didn't like that he not only noticed Tina's attractiveness, but commented on it.

"Sheathe your claws, kitten. She doesn't hold a candle to you."

He came around her desk and took the papers from her hands to throw into the chair. Sabrina stepped into his arms, missing him already.

"When will Ginny be here?" he asked, his voice muffled because his face was buried in her neck.

"Ellen's picking me up."

He stiffened. "Promise me you won't take everything Ellen says too seriously, okay? She can be overly intense."

"What are you so worried about? You already told me about Helene." Placing her hands on either side of his face, she maneuvered him in position for a kiss. "Do you really have so many dark secrets?"

"A few," he said.

Sabrina wanted to ask about them and assure him she wouldn't pry, but the conflicting urges never had a chance to fight it out. He kissed her like a lover, giving her more than she ever thought she deserved. His lips massaged her and his tongue teased sighs and moans. It wasn't a passionate kiss. It wasn't meant to start anything they didn't have the time to finish, but it left her weak. Her heart pounded with the same sense of comfort and fear she had earlier when he told her that she was a fever inside him.

Ellen texted Sabrina from the street outside moments after Jonas left. Sabrina climbed into the passenger seat of Ellen's green minivan to find the inside transformed. Gone were the car seat and the baby paraphernalia. It was as if the odor of diaper wipes and Cheerios never existed. It was oddly deflating.

Ellen grinned at her. "Ryan detailed the van. I love it when he gets a bug up his butt."

"What brought it on?" Sabrina asked.

"The promise of mind-blowing sex. He likes it when I tie him up and punish him. We haven't been adventurous lately." She related this as if she were telling Sabrina what color she had selected for her living room walls. Either she was pleased with the new color or she was just happy to look at something different.

The memory of her night with Jonas brought a fond blush to Sabrina's cheeks. Ellen glanced over at her, but Sabrina had already successfully hidden her shock.

"I'm not scandalizing you, am I?" she asked. Laughter hid behind her question.

"No," Sabrina said. "I am familiar with the concept of bondage."

"So, where are we going for dinner?" Ellen asked, abruptly changing the subject.

She reminded Sabrina of that girl in high school who convinced the entire senior class to donate an impossibly large stone bench with some

pithy saying on it one day and convinced the mascot to wear something politically shocking to the state finals the next day. She was glib and adept at controlling the conversation. Subtleties and pleasantries were lost on her. Sabrina wasn't sure if she liked Ellen or not, but she would make the effort for Jonas.

"Riverside."

The name of the upscale and exclusive bistro silenced her for all of five seconds. "Well, it's a good thing I listened to you and wore my little black dress. I almost didn't. I can't seem to lose this last little bit in front."

"Yes, well, that'll teach you to get pregnant," Sabrina said dryly.

She burst in a tide of laughter. "I didn't think you had it in you. You're so painfully polite all the time."

"I barely know you." Somehow, Sabrina didn't think Ellen would recognize that reasoning as a valid excuse.

"You know me better than you think," she said. "I'm Jonas's best friend. We're a lot alike."

Sabrina looked over at her in surprise. "I thought Ryan was his best friend."

She flashed a knowing smile. "Second best. Jonas and I formed a bond in college that can never be broken. Plus, he introduced me to Ryan. They both failed the same American Lit class."

Sabrina didn't know if she was more surprised that Ellen was his best friend or that he had failed a literature class and still ended up with a degree in English. Ellen noted her surprise and chattered away. By the time they met Amanda, Ginny, and Lara at the restaurant, Sabrina found out more about Jonas than she had ever thought to ask.

Uncovering a knack for finding every party on campus, he blew off his first semester of college, landing himself on academic probation. Ellen was part of a student organization that mentored struggling freshmen. Jonas was a handful from the beginning, thinking he was the authority on everything.

One day, Ellen had enough of his attitude. She took him down with a pinch hold on a nerve in his shoulder and informed him that she would hurt him very badly if he didn't straighten up and fly right. Then she put him to work at her club. At the time, it belonged to her parents, who had since passed the business to Ellen.

The discipline he learned there carried over into his academic life. His grades straightened out, and he discovered his love of teaching.

"It was the saddest day of his life when he quit teaching," Ellen said. "I'll never understand why he went through with it."

Sabrina had listened to her entire story without interrupting, a courtesy she knew Ellen would never return. Curiously, she didn't mind. Now she had something to add. She could defend his decision to change his career. "He's very good at advertising. He has good ideas and people like him. It would take a miracle for anyone to land that cat food account next Wednesday. He knows this and he won't give it anything but his best effort. If we do land the account, it will be largely due to him."

"I have no doubt," she said. "It's just he was such a good teacher."

Sabrina had never heard Jonas express anything approaching regret for leaving teaching, so she let the subject drop. She directed Ellen to valet park. Shedding the suit jacket she wore to the office revealed a black dress of her own.

Ellen lifted a dark brow when she joined Sabrina on the sidewalk. "You look hot in pretty much anything, don't you?"

"It's the Breszewski curse," Ginny said, coming up suddenly behind them. She enveloped Sabrina in a tight hug, and then held her at arm's length to study her dress.

"I came from work," Sabrina said, knowing Ginny's objection before she said a word. The hem of the skirt came down to her knees and the short-sleeved dress was very plain. Ginny's dress was scarlet and silver, the pattern and cut perfect for a hot August night on the town.

"You can't wear clothes with personality to work?"

"I wasn't really going for the reputation as the office slut," Sabrina said, turning her attention to Ellen to introduce them.

Ellen looked from Ginny to Sabrina. Except for the fact that Ginny was a little taller than Sabrina, her face was slightly rounder, and her hair fell only to her ears, they looked very much alike. "I'd like a piece of that curse."

Ginny linked her arm through Ellen's and dragged her to the door. "If you share yours. I'd give almost anything for curves like yours."

"Is Lara inside?" Sabrina asked before Ginny could say more. She had a knack for hitting on women and not even realizing it. More than once, she

found herself surprised by a bouquet of roses or some other romantic gift. Lara took it in stride. Sabrina didn't know where she found the patience.

Amanda was waiting in the lobby with Lara. Both tall, athletic blondes, they made a striking pair. Men waiting with their wives turned their heads to look at them more than they should have. Ginny abandoned Ellen immediately, gluing herself to Lara's side.

They were seated quickly. Ginny was well known in culinary circles. Sabrina was frequently able to get reservations at exclusive restaurants on the strength of her last name alone. The chef himself came out to greet them and suggest his best dishes.

After dinner, Amanda excused herself to make sure Richard packed everything correctly and get her beauty rest. Sabrina made a mental note to buy her a portable DVD player for the kids and an herbal eye mask for the drive home. She and Ginny planned to shop in the morning.

As they waited for the valet to bring the cars, Ginny suggested some of her favorite dance clubs, listing the attributes and drawbacks of each one.

Lara raised a brow and said, "I thought Ellen owned a club."

"I don't think you want to go there," she said, looking at Sabrina.

Sabrina hadn't been to the club at all. Shrugging, she said, "I can't see why Jonas would mind. He's working. It's not like he'll even know we're there."

The club was housed in the lower floors of a high-rise, five-star hotel and day spa. Sabrina hadn't realized how posh it was and she knew that was the snob in her. Though Ellen lived in a very large home not far from Sabrina, she discounted the classiness of the club based on Ellen's brash personality and the lack of creativity in its name. City Club didn't scream anything other than stinky, semen-soaked couches and techno music. It was a mistake she wouldn't make again.

The entrance to the club was down the street from the hotel's main doors, clearly marking them as separate entities. A line of hopeful patrons waited in a cordoned line outside. Ellen handed her keys to the valet. They waited for Ginny and Lara to do the same. At her signal, the security guard moved the thick red rope to admit them.

The inside mirrored the stylish exclusivity of the area. The furniture was new, glistening and modern. The inside was arranged in several distinctive



sections, each playing a different type of music. Though it was open, the music remained where it was meant to be.

Ellen waded through the crowd of dancers, leading them up several short flights of stairs to a restricted lounge. A line of security kept the general public outside. They parted as soon as they saw Ellen approach.

Servers swarmed them the moment they entered. Ellen indicated which table she wanted. A girl took their drink order and left them alone.

“Wow,” Ginny said. “This is better than the red carpet treatment I get at Riverside.”

Ellen shrugged. “They know who signs their paychecks.”

Ginny and Lara enjoyed the VIP treatment for all of five minutes before they drifted off to the small dance floor nearby, lost in each other. Sabrina watched them wistfully. Other than their first night together, Jonas hadn’t taken her dancing. He hadn’t taken her anywhere. He hadn’t even intended to take her to Kentucky. Sabrina frowned.

Ellen leaned closer to speak to Sabrina, her words in opposition to the elegant jazz that rocked the room. “Jonas works too much.”

“I know,” Sabrina said. “I told him there was no reason for him to keep working, but he said he likes his job.”

She downed her second shot of tequila. “That’s no reason to neglect his wife.”

Sabrina could tell she was about to mount a soapbox campaign as to the things Jonas did wrong in their marriage. Ellen was nothing if not opinionated. Desperately, she searched for a way to change the direction of the conversation. “He doesn’t neglect me.”

She laughed. “He spends a lot of time avoiding you because he’s afraid he might fall for you. I tried cutting his hours more, but, well, he’s in demand.”

Alarm bells sounded and they weren’t from the dance floor. “Ellen, I don’t think—”

She cut Sabrina off. “He’s not here to interrupt me, so I’m going to take this opportunity to put my nose where you both seem to think it doesn’t belong.”

Sabrina tried again. “Ellen...” How much could she tell her without revealing things he didn’t want his friends and family to know?

"I've never seen him so happy," she said. "It scares the hell out of him. Helene did a number on that boy."

"He told me," she said, trying to placate Ellen. "She didn't want to be married to a teacher."

"And what do you think about that?" she asked with uncharacteristic detachment.

"I think she couldn't have loved him if she couldn't accept him as he was."

She sat back, a satisfied smile on her face. "I knew I liked you."

Sabrina sipped her fruity drink and watched Lara gaze adoringly at Ginny. "I think you're getting ahead of yourself, Ellen. I told you our marriage was an arrangement. We're not in love with each other."

"Call it what you want," she said. "I've seen you together. You were just as unhappy before you met him."

"No, I wasn't," Sabrina argued. Ellen didn't know her before she married Jonas. She hadn't been happy. She hadn't been sad. She focused on a goal—furthering her career—and pursued it relentlessly, disregarding inconsequential things like emotions.

Ellen sat back, watching Sabrina use her drink as a shield from the conversation. Why couldn't she talk about normal things like fashion, hot movie stars or politics? Sabrina had a definite opinion about Johnny Depp, and she was prepared to share it.

Something Ellen said replayed in Sabrina's head. Jonas wasn't here to interrupt her. Of course, she meant Jonas wasn't in the immediate vicinity. Didn't she? Sabrina excused herself to wander the floors. He had to be at one of the bars. She just wanted a peek.

Sabrina returned to Ellen a good twenty minutes later to find her deep in conversation with a sultry brunette in an extremely short leather skirt and cotton tank top. Leather bands encircled her wrists. They looked remarkably like the ones Jonas used on Sabrina.

Ellen smiled at Sabrina. "Sabrina, this is Sophia, one of my best."

Sabrina greeted Sophia with a polite smile and a handshake. She wasn't a bartender. Ellen's bartenders were dressed in uniform. Every single one of them wore a black lawn shirt with the club's name emblazoned on the front. There were various styles, but they were easy to spot. Jonas didn't own a

shirt with the club's name on it. Sabrina felt slightly nauseous. Why would he lie? "One of your best what?"

Sophia's lush lips curved in a pouty smile. "Dominatrixes, of course."

Sabrina's face froze. Her body turned to stone. "Of course," she managed to choke out.

Sophia's dark brows drew together in a confused frown. She looked even lovelier when she frowned. "Ellen tells me you're Jonas's wife. It's very nice to meet you. That naughty boy didn't tell me he got married. I didn't even know he was seeing anyone."

Sabrina couldn't respond. It should have been easy. She turned to Ellen, who regarded her with wary concern. "Ellen, why did you say Jonas wasn't here? Isn't he working tonight?"

"Of course he is!" Sophia laughed. "I just left him twenty minutes ago. He had two lined up and one in the stocks. He won't be finished for quite awhile."

Sabrina stared at Sophia, who apparently spoke a version of English she didn't know. The music and the crowd became nothing more than a background. Sabrina couldn't take her eyes from the cuffs on Sophia's wrists.

"Sabrina?"

Ellen's voice called to her, but Sabrina's mind had stalled. Images flashed before her. The remote look in his olive green eyes when he gripped her by the back of her head and forced her to her knees. The surety of his voice when he promised she would like her punishment. He bought her a vibrator. They were little things, but they added up.

How would he know about that club in Las Vegas? It was so similar to the setup here—an upscale dance club with a room for exhibitionists and voyeurs in back. Sabrina didn't remember seeing anyone dressed as Sophia was, but Jonas wore jeans to work, so what the hell did she know? Was he doing those things here, with other women? Why would he insist on monogamy when she had been willing to let him live his life unaltered?

Ellen gripped Sabrina's shoulders hard. She concentrated on the pain and focused on Ellen's concerned brown eyes. "Sabrina, you said you knew."

"He doesn't tend bar for you, does he?" She whispered the words and Ellen had to strain, but she heard them.

“He told you he was a bartender?” She looked confused.

Sabrina shook her head. “He didn’t tell me anything. He just said he worked for you.”

“But you said you were familiar with bondage and domination.”

Feeling began to flow back into her limbs as the shock receded. There had to be a simple explanation. “The concepts, yes.”

“Oh my God,” she gasped. “He was telling the truth.”

“Was he?” Right now, the idea of Jonas telling the truth was foreign.

“He’s never whipped you, has he?”

Sabrina glanced at Sophia, the Dominatrix. “Is that what you do? You whip people for money?”

Her worried and concerned face mirrored Ellen’s. “Sometimes I tie them up, tell them they’re naughty, and let them sit awhile. It depends on the client.”

“Do you have sex with them?” It was a crude question, but Sabrina had to know. She had to know if her husband had sex with strangers for money. Somehow, she couldn’t reconcile the idea of Jonas doing something like that with the man who caged her against a wall and made her believe she could have an orgasm.

Sophia’s delicate nose wrinkled in disdain. It was one of the nastiest looks anyone had ever given Sabrina, and it lifted a huge weight from her shoulders.

“Is that what you thought?” Ellen asked. “Jonas would never cheat on you.”

Sabrina pierced her with an intense look. Confusion, anger, and helplessness competed for dominance. Anger won. “I wouldn’t know. It appears I don’t know him at all.”

Sophia squirmed uncomfortably.

Ellen patted her hand sympathetically. “Sophia, why don’t you leave us alone for awhile? And do me a favor? Don’t mention any of this to Jonas.”

“Any of what?” she asked with the smile people used when they realized they just dodged a bullet but they can’t save their friend from playing the hero. “It was nice to not have met you, Sabrina.”

“Wait,” she called before Sophia turned away. “I’m sorry for offending you. I didn’t know.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she said, flashing a genuinely friendly smile. “I’m sure things will go much smoother when we meet for real.”

“Come on,” Ellen said. “I want to show you something.”

Sabrina followed her through the club, numbness and apprehension taking turns mixing the remnants of dinner in her stomach. Ellen led Sabrina through a door that gave her a sense of *déjà vu*. It looked like a service entrance with security guards. She braced herself for the worst.

The first room was a nicely-appointed waiting room. Men and women perused magazines, browsed the internet, and watched television as they waited. Some of them were dressed up and some of them barely wore anything. Ellen ignored everyone and continued past the receptionist, through a locked door that read her fingerprints.

Sabrina followed her down a long hallway to a network of catwalks. She really didn’t want to see people having sex, not with Ellen. She walked behind her on the carpeted walkway, watching her crane her neck over the side as she looked for something. Sabrina kept her eyes firmly on the back of Ellen’s dark-haired head.

She stopped suddenly and pointed. “There.”

Sabrina looked only at Ellen. “Ellen, I don’t want to see—”

Her eyes turned hard. “It was wrong of him to keep this from you. It’s one thing if you two go for straight vanilla sex. It’s another to hide your true self from your life partner.”

“I told you we were only giving it a year. We’re both entitled to our secrets.” The image of Jonas in her office earlier in the evening replayed before her eyes. He had secrets. Ellen knew them. He didn’t want Sabrina to know them.

“Are you sure he’s never whipped you? I saw the way you looked at Sophia’s wrist cuffs. She likes the way they look, but she also uses them to restrain clients.” The harshness of her voice matched her eyes. Sabrina couldn’t believe this was the same woman who blew raspberries on her infant son’s round belly.

“I think I would remember that,” she said. “He did tie me up once.”

“And you didn’t like it?” she ventured.

Sabrina answered candidly. “I loved it.” This explained why he was so damn good at it.

“Lots of people like it, Sabrina. Jonas ties people up. He whips them. He doesn’t have sex with them. I’ve never seen him look at a client the way he looks at you.” She took Sabrina’s hand in hers. “Look over the railing.”

“Can he see me?”

“Only if he looks up, which he won’t.” She could tell Sabrina was about to argue with that thin assurance. “He is one of the best, not only in the state, but in the country. He’s had invitations to work at the most elite clubs, offers to freelance all over the world. His ability to concentrate on the client is amazing.”

Sabrina believed it. Hesitantly, she peered over the railing, gripping it tightly. She wasn’t afraid of heights or of falling. She was afraid of seeing Jonas do something with someone else he should only do with her.

The sight that greeted her stopped time. He was shirtless, wearing only the jeans she bought him. Sweat glistened from his torso, reflecting in the dim light that suffused the entire area. He wielded a whip, swinging it back and forth with a practiced precision against the backside of a person whose face she couldn’t see. The body appeared to belong to a male.

As she watched, he switched hands with a flawlessness that left her no doubt that the man he punished was unaware of any change. If the man cried out, she couldn’t hear it over the pulsing of the bass-heavy music.

She wasn’t sure how long she watched, but the man was eventually taken away by others clad in leather bondage gear. His back, which she could see when he turned, was a mass of welts, but the skin was unbroken.

Alone for the time being, Jonas rolled his shoulders, stretching muscles that had to be exhausted. He coiled his whip and hung his head for a moment, looking utterly lost and lonely. Sabrina’s heart went out to him.

A couple, barely dressed, entered his arena and the vulnerable man disappeared. He chatted with the man, while the woman waited silently by his side. Suddenly, he grabbed her by the hair, forcing her to her knees. Sabrina held her breath, her entire body tense as she battled insane jealousy.

He buckled wrist cuffs on her and secured her to a chain hanging from the ceiling above where she and Ellen stood. In one swift movement, Jonas grabbed the man, subdued him, and secured him to a chain next to the woman. He struggled and shouted. His voice carried, but not his words. They didn’t matter anyway.

“Do they use a safety word?” Sabrina asked.

“Onion.”

Her head snapped up and her eyes met Ellen’s. Of course he would use the same one. He was trained to use it. A giggle bubbled from Sabrina, coming louder and more forcefully the more she thought about it.

This was where he came to exorcise his demons. She didn’t know if he was over Helene, but she did know he was still reeling from what his ex-wife had done to him. If he needed this, she wasn’t going to take it from him.

The giggle grew louder. Ellen clapped her hand over Sabrina’s mouth to stifle the sound of her laughter. She dragged her from the edge of the railing, where she collapsed on the ground, forcing Ellen to follow her down to keep her quiet.

She hugged Sabrina, smoothing the hair from the smaller woman’s face. Tears bubbled from Sabrina’s eyes. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d laughed so hard.

“Oh, Ellen,” she said when the compulsion to laugh had passed. “Jonas tied me up last night. He put those cuffs on me and threw me over his shoulder. He was taking me to his office where he has this table, which I’m sure you’ve seen. I remember thinking how nice it would be if he would spank me, too.”

Her brows rose, encouraging her to continue. “Did he?”

Sabrina shook her head. “No. He was very gentle.”

“If you want him to”—she grinned—“all you have to do is ask.”

Again, Sabrina shook her head. “No. He hasn’t shared this part of himself with me for a reason. Whatever it is, I’m going to respect his privacy. He’ll either tell me in his own time or he won’t tell me at all.”

Ellen helped Sabrina to her feet. “Does that mean you don’t want him to know I told you about any of this?”

“I would appreciate it,” she said. He was so worried about her finding out. Why? Did he think she wouldn’t understand? That she would disapprove? Make him stop? How little he knew her and how little she knew him.

Ellen put a gentle hand on Sabrina’s shoulder. “How about a drink?”

Many drinks later, they went home with Ginny and Lara, leaving the freshly detailed minivan in the city overnight.

\* \* \* \*

When Jonas's shift ended, he met up with Sophia to walk her to her car. The parking garage was just behind the club, but Jonas and the rest of the workers made a point to walk out in pairs or more. Sophia had been attacked in the parking lot a few years earlier. Though she never said anything, Jonas knew she was afraid. He always made it a point to look out for her.

He was bone-tired, but reluctant to go home. For the first time since he met Sabrina, his bed would be empty. The idea of not having her warm little body next to him was oddly depressing.

Just now, Sophia was too quiet. While she was never the most talkative person in the room, when it was just the two of them, she usually opened up. "What's wrong?"

She shrugged. "Just tired. I work both jobs on Fridays." Fully aware that Jonas also did double-duty on Friday, she wasn't complaining.

He slung his arm around her shoulders and squeezed. She flinched a little at the unexpected gesture. He didn't take it personally. Sophia didn't care to be touched. "And yet, my crystal ball tells me that's not what's wrong."

She smiled up at him, her deep brown tresses pulling from under his arm as she turned her head. "I didn't know you were into the occult."

"I deal in magic and illusion, Sophie DiMarco. So do you. That's why we get along so well. We're both equally fucked-up and we both hide it quite well." They came to a stop at the door to her car. "Spill."

Her eyes narrowed at him, and then she reached for his hand. When he tried to close his fingers over hers in a supportive gesture, she raised his hand between them and pointed to the simple platinum band on his fourth finger. "You got married and didn't tell me."

Sophia was one of the only people Jonas had let into his life after Helene left. She was aware of his baggage, but she missed the worst of it. He smiled apologetically. "Sorry. It happened kinda suddenly."

"So sudden you wouldn't even invite me to your wedding?"

Jonas's expression morphed from contrite to concerned. He hadn't meant to hurt her feelings. He hadn't meant to hurt anyone's feelings. His parents were more baffled than hurt. "We eloped, Sophia. Nobody was invited."



That mollified her a little. “I didn’t even know you were dating anyone seriously.”

He hung his head, not so much in shame, but in thought. He had bonded with Sophia over their mutual desire to never become seriously involved with another person again. For different reasons, they’d taken vows of casual sex and no strings. Jonas had definitely broken that promise. “We didn’t date,” he said. “I went to work one morning, this beautiful woman asked me to marry her and I took a chance.”

Sophia’s brows rose. “Because she was hot?”

Jonas shook his head. “Because I wanted her.”

He wanted to find her, drag her home, and turn her ass pink, not stopping until she admitted she belonged to him.

## Chapter 12

Ginny had to work in the afternoon so they got up early, medicated their hangovers, and went shopping. Ellen came along. Their adventure seemed to have bonded them, creating a new understanding. Suddenly, the little things that annoyed Sabrina about Ellen disappeared, magnifying her generous heart and blithe spirit.

Sabrina remembered to pick up a DVD player and herbal sleep mask for Amanda. Perhaps she overdid it, but she also bought Jonas some summer clothes and a suitcase. She could only recall him in one pair of swim trunks and two different pairs of shorts. He seemed to have a plethora of t-shirts from mall chain stores. She bought him a few more.

They parted ways in the City Club parking garage and Ellen drove her home. It was a wonder they made it in one piece, given the fact they kept giggling over things that weren't funny. Ellen helped Sabrina carry her bags into the house. The two of them were a cacophony of dropping bags and uproarious laughter. They ended up in a heap on the floor of the foyer.

Sabrina looked up to find Jonas peering down at them, hands in pockets and a perplexed expression on his face. He was wearing contacts today and she had no trouble seeing his eyes were a brilliant light green. She stopped laughing

“You have the sexiest eyes I’ve ever seen,” she said softly.

He reached down and plucked her from the floor and set her on her feet. Leaning in, he sniffed her. For a woman expecting a kiss, it was a definite disappointment.

“What are you doing?”

“Sobriety check. Would you mind standing with your arms out to the side and seeing if you can touch your nose with your index finger while counting backwards from one hundred in increments of seven?”

Ellen grabbed Sabrina's hand and she helped her new friend up. Ellen shot Jonas a look of disdain that bounced right off. "Somebody didn't get his beauty rest last night. What's wrong? Are you exhausted from a long night of tending bar?"

Sabrina stiffened at the jab. "Ellen," she warned.

Jonas cut her off for reasons all his own. "Ryan called here three times today looking for you. Don't you have a baby or something like that to take care of?"

She wrinkled her nose at him. "You definitely didn't get enough sleep. Does Sabrina know what a prick you are when you don't get your eight hours? And why the hell is Ryan calling you? I told him I was going shopping with Sabrina, Ginny, and Lara."

"He didn't want to bother you, but he wondered if Sabrina had given me an ETA." He pointed a look at Sabrina. "She didn't."

Ellen rolled her eyes dramatically, gave Sabrina a hug, and left.

Sabrina faced Jonas, aware he wasn't pleased with her. She chalked it up to his nervousness about not knowing what Ellen might have told her.

"It looks like you two bonded," he said warily.

"Don't worry," she said. "She's still your best friend."

His face darkened, outlook ominous.

Sabrina stepped over several bags, stopping inches from him. Dropping her head back so she could see him, she rested her hands against his chest. "If we get in a fight right now, can we have make-up sex right after?"

The corners of his mouth turned up and his arms encircled her. "If I had time. My boss gave me an impossible amount of work to do in a very short amount of time."

"Surely you can make some time for a roll in the sheets?" she asked. "She can't be that heartless."

His mouth closed over hers, and he kissed her, a starving man given a feast. She kissed him back, seeking to soothe his fears and tap into the passion simmering just below the surface. She was successful.

One hand threaded through the hair at the back of her head, cradling her. The other hand gripped half of her rear end and lifted her against him. She cupped the sides of his face in her hands and gave in to the demands of the kiss.

"Jonas? Oops. I so gotta start knocking."

The sound of Ty's voice brought their activities to a screeching halt. Jonas put Sabrina down, and she stepped back, tripping over the mountain of shopping bags on the floor. He caught her before she crashed and landed in an awkward position.

"Hello, Ty," she said. "What brings you over on such a fine summer day?"

"Cat food," he said without cracking a smile. He was dressed casually in light blue cargo shorts and a white t-shirt extolling the virtues of Aruba. It was the first time she'd seen him in something other than a suit. "You didn't, by any chance, come over to help, did you?"

Sabrina shot Jonas a look clearly indicating he was dead. Ty had never been to her home before. Jonas had obviously not informed Ty that he did not live alone. Because Jonas wanted to maintain the illusion they were not married, she was now a guest in her own home. "I can help. Just let me grab some lunch."

"You didn't eat?" Jonas asked. "It's nearly four o'clock!"

It did explain why she and Ellen were so slap-happy. She shrugged. "Okay, how about dinner? What are you making?"

"I was going to order pizza," he said, leaning down to help gather up the bags. "If that's okay with you. I'm working tonight."

She'd forgotten. Ty disappeared into the kitchen and Jonas helped carry her purchases to their bedroom. Or was it his bedroom now?

"Look, Sabrina, I didn't know when you'd be home."

She waved away his explanation. "Just let me know when I get to move back in." She pushed aside the hurt she felt and disappeared into the bathroom to splash cold water on her face.

He followed her, leaning against the door jamb. "Are you mad that I have Ty over to work on this? It needs to get done."

"You can have anyone you want over," she said into a towel. "It's your house. Normally, I would say, 'It's your house, too,' only that doesn't seem to apply in this case."

"Sabrina," he began.

"Don't," she countered. "Anything you might say is only going to exacerbate the situation. Let's go downstairs and work on the presentation and eat pizza. Then Ty will leave, you'll go to work, and I'll get to know my new vibrator."

The evening progressed as she anticipated, but she wasn't able to get anywhere with the vibrator. In direct opposition to the actual clients she had seen, visions of Jonas whipping faceless sexy women ruined her concentration. The more she thought about it, the more she wanted it to be her. She didn't want to end up with welts, like that man. She knew there was something lighter, something that wouldn't leave a mark but that she would find incredibly erotic.

Her fantasies were woefully inadequate. She wondered if Ellen would let her go back and watch on Tuesday when he worked again.

In the meantime, she swam until she was tired enough to sleep, then she hugged Jonas's lonely pillow to her naked body and drifted off.

She woke to the feeling of something slipping beyond her reach. Opening her eyes, she found Jonas's lanky silhouette leaning over her. He slid a hand between her knees to lift the one on top, which would free his pillow.

"Want something?" she asked sleepily.

He froze, then chuckled, low and quiet. "What are you offering?"

She released his pillow, pushing it toward him. In the dark, his groping hand met hers. She turned over and pretended to fall back asleep. In reality, she was fuming. She hated lying to people, especially people like Ty, who she needed to trust her.

He lifted the sheet and slid underneath, scooting across the bed until his body spooned hers. "Ryan stopped by the club."

An image of the lanky redhead hanging from one of those hooks, dancing under the sting of a whip, filled the dark space when she closed her eyes. She opened them to banish the picture. Either way, she was acutely aware that Jonas was naked and that she missed the feel of his skin against hers.

"He let me know what a jerk I was to you this afternoon."

Sabrina thought she had been pretty clear about that, but she said nothing.

He smoothed her hair away from her face and shoulder. "Apparently, it is acceptable to miss the hell out of one's wife when she's gone for a whole night. It is not acceptable to treat her like crap when she returns."

When the hell did he get a wife? Her anger at his denial of their relationship receded as she realized he was admitting to missing her.

“He wasn’t upset about the way you talked to Ellen?”

His arm tightened around Sabrina and his fingers splayed across her stomach. “Ellen gives as good as she gets. You should have heard some of the things she screamed at me when I lived with them.”

“If you were half as nasty then as you were this afternoon, I don’t blame her.”

He sighed. “Sabrina, I don’t want to fight with you. I’m trying to apologize.”

The mushy feelings fueled her panic, which made her extra snarky. “Is that what this is? I thought it sounded a lot like you were trying to justify your behavior this afternoon.”

Leaning up on one elbow, he rolled her onto her back, cupped her cheek, and brushed his lips against hers in a gentle kiss. His body was one long line of tension and she knew what it cost him to hold back.

“I’m sorry,” he said, rising back up to hover above her, a shadow in the darkness.

He might have wanted to say more, but she pulled him back down and let loose her frustrated passion. She was rough with him, digging her fingers into his lean, corded muscles and raking her nails down his back. He responded in kind, brutalizing her with his lips and nipping at the sensitive skin along her neck and shoulders.

Pushing her onto her stomach, he shoved a pillow beneath her breasts and entered her from behind.

He held his weight away. “Close your legs.”

They’d never done this before. She was worried that he couldn’t be rough with her like she wanted and that she would be disappointed yet again tonight.

He started slow, feeling his way around in this new position. It didn’t take Sabrina long to realize he didn’t have to hold her down. Except to lift her hips the slightest bit, she couldn’t move. Immediately, heat coiled inside. She gripped the pillow he positioned under her as the fire grew. A cry escaped.

“Faster,” she breathed.

“No,” he said, his hot breath fanning her neck. “Stop fighting it. Stop fighting me.”

The urgency pressed inside, begging for release. She couldn't let it go. Every cell in her body, from the soles of her feet to the hair follicles on her scalp, demanded release. Tears pressed against her closed eyelids and a sob escaped.

She pressed her palms to the mattress, pushing against him, wiggling and fighting them both. He gripped her hips, immobilizing them so he could resume his rhythm.

"I can't," she said desperately. "I can't."

"Yes, you can. Tell me what you need." His honeyed voice sent shivers down her spine where they mingled with the trembling in the rest of her body.

Frustrated tears spilled, wetting the sheet next to her face. "I don't know."

He let go of her hip on one side to thread his fingers through hers. Squeezing her hand reassuringly, he said, "You do know. You always know. Trust yourself, honey. You're so close."

Gently, so he wouldn't think she was rejecting him, she disentangled her hand from his and slid it downward. He lifted her slightly so she could fit it between her body and the sheet. With one finger, she parted her vaginal lips and found her slick and swollen clitoris. She pressed and rotated, rubbing it hard, punishing it until she crested. It throbbed beneath her fingertip as she screamed her release and Jonas came, pulsing inside her, jerking against her hard contractions.

He held her afterward, stroking his hands over her cooling body while she traced patterns over his smooth chest.

"You did that on purpose," she said. She didn't have to explain that she referred to the fact he made her take control, he made her masturbate while he fucked her.

He kissed the top of her head. "I did."

She luxuriated in the soapy and lightly musky smell of him. "Why?"

"The vibrator didn't work for you, did it?"

He had such an innocuous way of asking something she found threatening. Sabrina stiffened anyway, but his knowing hands soothed her back to relaxation.

"How did you know?"

"It'll take practice," he said. "Don't be discouraged."

She could tell he was tired. Given his job and the hours he had kept this week, she didn't know how he was still awake. "Most men would feel replaced if their lover masturbated without them."

"I'm not most men," he murmured.

No, she thought as he surrendered to sleep, he wasn't most men.

The next morning, she woke to an empty bed. Since it was Sunday, she wasn't alarmed. Jonas was in the habit of gardening on Sunday mornings. He had let his disapproval of the lawn service go, since he found he really didn't have time to tend to it himself, but he refused to let anyone touch the three flower beds he had put in.

Sabrina's roses flourished and the yard looked nice, so she didn't comment and she didn't worry about what would happen to them when he was no longer around. If she did, she would have to think about what would happen to her when he was no longer around.

He worked on the cat food account the rest of the day. She helped him and found herself developing a new admiration for his talent and skill, not only as an ad man, but as a teacher. She approached him as an assistant, not his boss, and he treated her the way she thought he might treat any of this students. He had the authoritative air of a natural leader and an honest appreciation for anything she had to add.

Maybe this was why Tina liked working with him. Maybe this was why those girls at the lake had looked so disappointed. Sabrina chalked it up to the fact that he was handsome and built. Maybe they weren't as shallow as she originally thought.

"Are you happy in advertising?" she asked him suddenly.

She knew he heard her, but he took his time answering. When he did, it was without looking at her. "Happy enough."

"Do you miss teaching?" she pressed.

Now he looked at her with wary green eyes. "Ellen got to you, didn't she?"

She didn't bother to deny it.

"Let it go," he said. "What's done is done."

"You could teach college," she suggested. "If you didn't want to deal with high school politics anymore." She didn't add that he was going to deal with those kinds of politics anywhere he went.



Even now, she knew the cat food proposal wouldn't net them the account because the team hadn't been given enough time to prepare. They had no finished commercials, only storyboards. For an account like this, that wasn't enough.

She knew Joy would have her head on a platter as soon as word came through that they were going with a different company. Jared would completely escape blame because Joy was his aunt. Joy may have helped Sabrina's career along, but that didn't mean anything when it came to her nephew. That was office politics.

"College politics are the same. Let it go."

Reluctantly, she did.

Jonas, Ophelia, and Ty worked their asses off to get the presentation ready by Wednesday afternoon. Randall, Veronica, Clare, and Tina pitched in to take it to the point where they wouldn't be laughed out of town. Filming and artwork took some time if it was done right. It was a serious proposal, but she knew any firm who had used the entire month to prepare would be in a better position.

She packed their suitcases Tuesday night. She had every intention of whisking Jonas away to the airport as soon as the presentation was over.

After the tepid reception of their proposal, Sabrina thanked the cat food people for their time and gave her team the rest of the day off. She and Jonas made their three-forty flight out of Metro and she introduced him to the luxury hotel lifestyle by seven-thirty.

He lay, stretched across the incredibly soft, king-sized bed and said, "I think I could grow to like having a wealthy wife. How about we continue to vacation together after the divorce?"

She laughed as she hung up the outfit she wanted to wear to dinner. "I have a healthy trust fund. We can vacation anywhere you want and we don't have to wait until next summer."

He twisted around to watch her undress, the light in his tawny eyes jumping the distance between them. "These clubs are found in major cities all over the world."

"Give me a list," she said as she shook out a black lace bra. It was transparent in all the places the lace didn't cover. She hadn't shown him this purchase yet. "It'll be the perfect Christmas present."

From the expression on his face, she wasn't sure he heard anything she said. She could just ask Ellen for the contact information. With the grace and eroticism of a classically-trained enticement artist, she donned a matching thong and unrolled thigh-high stockings to cover her legs. She remembered what he said about what he hoped was under her skirt when she asked him to marry her.

"My God," he said. "You expect me to wait until after dinner?"

She flashed the most seductive, sultry smile she could muster and slid into the little black dress Ginny bought for her after she spent Friday evening disapproving of Sabrina's outfit.

"I love it when Ginny takes you shopping." The huskiness in his voice cancelled out his implication that she would never pick this out for herself. She resisted the urge to take credit for the lingerie.

"Are you going to get dressed?" she asked, gesturing to her garment bag. "I packed something nice for you to wear." Shooting him a pointed look, she disappeared into the bathroom to fix her face and hair. Just because she liked it when he pulled out the pins to free long strands of hair, she arranged it in a classic upsweep.

When she emerged, Jonas was wrestling with his cuff links. She helped him with them, then retied his bow tie and smoothed the lines of his jacket. Ginny wasn't the only one with a good eye.

"I feel like a kept man," he said, referring to the designer tuxedo Sabrina bought without his knowledge.

She smiled up at him. Nothing was going to ruin tonight. He didn't realize it yet, but this was their first date. "If I feel like a kept woman, does it make us even?"

Lifting a hand to her cheek, he said, "No man could ever keep you."

*Oh, yes, he could.* She pressed his fingertips to her lips and held his gaze. "Maybe something precious shouldn't be treated as a possession."

"Where are you taking me for dinner?" he asked, changing the subject without taking his hand from her.

She refrained from calling him a coward. Amazingly, she spent years running from something like what she had with Jonas and here she was, trying to figure out how to convince him that running wasn't the best course of action.

Grabbing her handbag, she led him to the elevators. Ginny had arranged for them to dine at a restaurant owned by a friend of hers. They were normally booked months in advance, but they could always make room for the sister of a pastry chef they wanted to lure to their establishment.

They dined slowly, savoring the food and the company. She couldn't remember ever having a nicer time on a date. She couldn't remember ever being on a date where her date wasn't aware it was one.

Afterward, he took her to the Lexington City Club. Like the club in Vegas and Ellen's club in Southfield, a line snaked around the corner. They skipped it, heading right to the front. Jonas smiled and gave their names. The well-muscled man in black checked his list and opened the barrier for them to pass.

They didn't waste time dancing. Both of them had waited too long for this. Sabrina found the hidden door before he did. One thing was certain: She would never look at a service entrance the same way again.

Jonas greeted the twin guards with a stoic face. He looked from one to the other, handed over a blank card, and said, "We've come to play."

The guard nearest Sabrina waved the card over a scanner, handed it back, and opened the door.

Ellen's secret club opened to a waiting area. This one did not. They were searched and pointed to a unisex locker room where they stowed the majority of their clothes. Sabrina kept her underclothes, though she lost the thigh-highs. Jonas watched wistfully as she shoved them into their locker, but he didn't comment.

He stripped down to the black silk boxers Sabrina couldn't resist getting for him. He looked every bit as delicious as she thought he would. "It's a nicer place," he said. "But the people are friendlier." He added the last part as a warning.

She thought it was an odd warning. What was wrong with friendly people?

Jonas held her hand as they entered the main room. He was right; it was a nicer place. The lighting was dim, obscuring many people's faces, but it was larger, cleaner, and more colorful.

Sabrina tugged on his arm. "I want to watch for awhile."

"Whatever you want, honey. Tonight is all about what you want."

They walked around, Jonas following wherever her interest led. Sabrina was looking for that spark, that permission, the eroticism she found at the Vegas club. She saw a variety of sexual positions, some of which she filed in her memory to try later with Jonas.

A pretty woman approached them, or rather, Sabrina. She didn't see the woman coming until it was too late to avoid her. She was about five-nine with short auburn hair and a dusting of freckles over her pert nose. The smile on her face reminded Sabrina of a cheerleader at the point in the game when it became clear nothing could defeat her team. Without warning, she grasped the sides of Sabrina's face in her hands and kissed her full on the mouth.

It wasn't the first time she'd kissed a girl, so that wasn't a shock. It really wasn't different from kissing a man until you got to the breasts. That's when she lost interest.

The redhead ended the kiss and moved to Jonas. Sabrina had never seen him kiss another woman and she decided right then that she never wanted to see it again. He had the sense to gently disengage her before Sabrina became violent. The tall beauty flashed that winsome smile at each of them and disappeared into the crowd.

Jonas looked at Sabrina, shrugged, and said, "I told you they were friendly." Before she could respond, he pointed to a couple on the far side of the room. "I want you to do that to me."

Sabrina craned her neck, but she couldn't see anything. It was one drawback to being five-two. He led her closer. The crowd parted to reveal a man lying on his back while a woman undulated on top of him. Nowhere was she being restrained. She was in complete control of the situation.

The sinking of Sabrina's heart was painfully palpable.

She studied them for several minutes before she turned to Jonas with regret etched in her face. "I can't. I wish I could, but I can't."

"Sure you can," he said. "You can do anything you set your mind to."

"Jonas, I can't even masturbate successfully."

He grinned down at her, his eyes already liquid gold. "Yes, you can." He gestured to the woman. "Look at her."

"I see her," Sabrina said. The fun was quickly disappearing.

“No,” he said. “*Look* at her. She isn’t half of what you are, Sabrina. She isn’t beautiful. She isn’t powerful. When you walk into a room, people take notice. I want you to own me like you own a room.”

Sabrina looked at her, but she thought about what he said. The parts about beauty and power didn’t impress her. He wanted her to own him. He wanted to look up at her and know she controlled his destiny. He was asking her to give him what he regularly, and without reservation, gave to her.

She thought about the first time he fucked her in the office and she remembered the dizzying rush of power she felt when she saw his head between her legs. She hadn’t thought she would climax then either.

Taking a tremendous leap of faith, she indicated an empty table near the couple he wanted to emulate. He sat down and helped her climb up to straddle him. The table was surprisingly soft, a plastic-coated foam mattress instead of a hard surface.

“Relax,” he said, pulling a pin from her hair. “We can take our time.”

Focusing on the desire written across his face, Sabrina let him slowly remove the pins and hand them to one of the fans that had gathered to watch. When he finished, he ran his fingers through her long tresses, scattering them like a halo.

When she couldn’t stand it anymore, she gripped his face and kissed him. Passion exploded, fueled by Sabrina’s trepidation and the ecstasy he derived from their admiring audience. His hands were everywhere, teasing, touching, and stoking the flames higher, yet his lips never left hers.

Wrapped in the things he made her feel, she forgot the spectators. She explored him, touching him everywhere she wanted and luxuriating in the deceptive softness that surrounded his iron muscles.

Tucking the cup of her demi-bra under her breasts, he lifted her and captured one sensitive peak in his mouth. Tendrils of heat raced to her core. She dripped for him. The moan that escaped wasn’t merely a reaction to her arousal. It was proof that she was right to trust him. He certainly knew how to choose a moment to push her to become more.

Wiggling urgently, she made him lower her back to the table. She drove him insane with her tongue around his ear before she whispered her request. He was already hard and he had been for some time.

“I want you to make me come with your mouth first.”

She kissed him before he could reply, giving him time to consider the request. Barely breaking the rhythm of the kiss and of their bodies rocking together, she added to her request. "Lie down, Jonas. I want to be on top."

The world moved as he lifted her again, this time to move back, and he did as she asked. Sabrina worked her way up his body with her mouth. When she moved to straddle his face, his hands came up to hold her hips in position. He looked up, awaiting orders.

It was her show. Reaching down, she parted her lips and traced figure-eights through the wetness. Her hips rocked over him until he groaned and she stuck her finger in his mouth, letting him have a sample of what was to come.

With his elbows, he widened her knees to force her lower. She gasped when his tongue began its forays. He began gently, but quickly turned rough, sucking and biting until she shouted her release.

Panting with the exertion, she slid down his sweat-slickened body and helped him out of his boxers. Kneeling above Jonas, Sabrina touched him, drawing her fingertips lightly over his erection and spreading the moisture at the tip around the slanted head. He thrust against her, moaning.

"Honey, you're killing me."

Smiling, she positioned her opening over his penis and masturbated with it. Ever so slowly, she slipped the tip inside and teased him until he was completely surrounded. His hips rose and his fingers dug into her thighs as he tried to establish a rhythm.

She thwarted his efforts. "This is my show," she reminded him. "You haven't begun to die." She lifted herself and slammed down onto him, again and again, until tears wet the corners of her eyes. The nearly-gone orgasm was reborn. She came on him within seconds, but she didn't stop. She wanted more. She wanted him to beg, to plead, to scream her name.

Changing the rhythm, she rotated her hips, grinding into him. She snapped them back and forth as another climax stole her rhythm. Riding the waves of this smaller orgasm, she leaned forward, swinging her legs backward to bring them together on top of him. Except that she was facing him, it wasn't very different from the position he introduced to her the weekend before.

Using her arms, which were thankfully strong from her relentless swimming, Sabrina moved up and down. The position intensified the

sensations, ripping incoherent sounds from them both. He writhed and arched beneath her, his hands clutching at her body. In that moment, she knew he was hers. He was completely hers.

The headiness of the power rush fueled her climax, sending her higher than she'd ever been. He cried out, his body lifting fully from the table, taking her with him. Sabrina collapsed against his chest, thankful she was too small to crush him.

Later, as they lay in bed at the hotel, she let her hands roam his body, arousing him until at last she climbed on top and rode him hard. Sabrina was liberated. Where she thought she had been free before had been illuminated as yet another prison. It was a prison she liked and planned to visit often, but now she was truly free. He hadn't handed her the keys; he'd shown her that she had them all along.

He never once gloated about being right. He gave everything to her without strings attached. Maybe that's why she finally admitted to herself that she was in love with him.

\* \* \* \*

Jonas eased Sabrina's petite body from its position across his. While he liked sleeping close to her and he loved when she used him as her pillow, he needed water. His little vixen definitely worked him hard.

She had come so far in only two months. The dynamic woman who couldn't find sexual satisfaction was gone. Now Sabrina could enjoy herself in a variety of positions. He no longer needed to hold her down or tie her up, though he fully intended to keep doing just that. Bondage and domination turned him on nearly as much as exhibitionism. The only thing he hadn't done was whip her.

Jonas was conflicted about that idea. On one hand, he did want to turn her skin pink so that the slightest pressure set her nerve endings on fire. He wanted his responsive lover to become even more so. Yet he didn't want to know her like that. There was danger in forcing a lover to give herself over like that, to have complete faith and trust in him. It was the trap into which he fell with Helene. That bitch hadn't wanted him for a husband. She wanted his skill with the whip for her own. She hadn't loved him; she had loved the way he made her feel.

The light spilling from the bathroom bathed Sabrina's breasts. Jonas paused a moment before hitting the switch. Moments like this, he couldn't help but just watch her and wonder at the fact she was his. His. But only temporarily. Somehow, the time limit that functioned as a safety mechanism was shifting, becoming something that threatened his perfect little world.

Maybe she would want to continue their relationship without time restrictions. As long as things stayed like this, Jonas could handle it. They liked and respected one another. They got along well in and out of the bedroom. As long as she didn't fall under the delusion that she was in love with him, this thing between them could work out indefinitely.



## Chapter 13

The short vacation flew. Jonas led Ricky and Faith against Sabrina in a pillow fight the first night. She retaliated by introducing them to the water balloon. Sam, Amanda, and Richard joined her side. Six against one might not have been fair, but she thought it only evened the odds. It didn't help that Ricky and Faith's loyalties were up for grabs or that a water balloon hurled by a young child didn't often burst, which had the net result of supplying live ammunition for Jonas.

They all ended up in the lake.

She impressed them with her boating expertise when the engine on the rented pontoon quit in the middle of the vast lake and she learned to bait her own hook. The night before they left, Alyssa presented Sabrina with a wedding-ring quilt she made for her. She clarified that it was for Sabrina. If she had been given any kind of warning—here she threw a reproving glare at Jonas—she would have given it to Sabrina as a wedding present.

Sabrina was so touched by the gesture and the beauty of the quilt, she couldn't prevent tears from welling in her eyes. She could definitely see where Jonas inherited his talent for gift-giving. It was rare, and she wished she had it.

Amanda was pleased with the DVD player and the sleeping mask, but those weren't gifts from the heart. They were easily obtained at any store. Though Amanda thanked her a million times, Sabrina still felt inadequate.

She called her mother from the airport. Melinda was also in an airport, but in Milan. She had always liked to travel. Ever since she and Ginny moved out, Melinda had resumed her passion. It was not unusual for her to be away for a month or longer.

Sabrina shared Alyssa's thoughtfulness with her mother and they chatted about other things. The waiting area was crowded and the rows of chairs were full. Next to her, Jonas battled to keep his eyes open. She didn't

have much sympathy. He and Richard had spent most of the night on the dock with Brandon, finishing all the alcohol in the cabin.

From the periphery of her vision, Sabrina saw a woman standing in front of Jonas. His slouched posture suddenly straightened, and he was amazingly alert.

She was a few years older than Sabrina, pretty, and dressed to kill in a slinky red number and spiked heels. The most striking thing about her was how much she looked like Sabrina. Though Sabrina wore jeans and a nice tank top, people would think they were related if they stood near one another.

Sure, there were basic differences in their faces, but they answered to the same physical description. Sabrina was sure the woman was five-two and a little over a hundred pounds. Her caramel brown hair floated halfway down her back and she peered at Jonas with large brown eyes. She was probably a C-cup, as well.

"Hey, stranger," she said, tilting her head in the way women do when they know men can't resist them. Still, there was something icy about her. Sabrina's heart stopped. People often said there was something icy about Sabrina. *It's Helene.*

Sabrina glanced at Jonas. He was pale beneath his tan. "Hi," he said uncertainly.

Her smile became more predatory. "What brings you to these parts?" She answered her own question without giving him a chance to respond. "Ahhh, the annual Spencer family vacation. I'm still a Spencer, you know. You could invite me."

Melinda chattered on the other end of the phone, describing how Milan had changed since her last trip there. She was heading to Edinburgh next. Scotland had always looked attractive from the brochures.

"How have you been, Helene?" Color was returning to his cheeks. Sabrina had never seen him not in control of a situation.

"Just fabulous," she beamed. "It's not like you to fly down. I thought you liked the road trip aspect of the whole thing." She looked around, sweeping the room with eyes that moved right over Sabrina, dismissing her outright. "Who are you here with?"

"No one," he said.

Sabrina started at that. She was *no one*. That said so much about the state of their relationship. She was in love with a man who discounted her as nobody.

They spoke for a few more minutes, but all Sabrina noticed was that Helene was working her way closer to him and he reacted like he was the high school nerd and the prom queen suddenly took an interest in him.

Sabrina ended the conversation with her mother when they called their flight to board. It was a quiet flight because she was hurt and fuming. Jonas picked up on the fact that Sabrina had overheard his entire exchange with Helene and left her alone.

Things exploded at home as she unpacked her clothes by dumping them on the laundry room floor.

"Come on, Sabrina," he cajoled. "How long are you going to act like this?"

She looked left and right. It was a long, narrow room with a door at one end that led to a covered walkway to the garage. She leaned toward him conspiratorially. "You know, they put people away for talking to *no one*."

He winced. "Look, I'm sorry about that, but—"

"But *nothing*." She glared at him through narrowed eyes and stalked upstairs to unpack the rest of their things, which were mixed together in the luggage.

He followed her after a little while. She hoped he started the washing machine in that time. It was the only way his clothes were going to be washed because there was *no one* else to do it.

Sabrina was in the closet, trying to toss the suitcase on a high shelf when he found her. Without a word, he took it from her and stowed it. She turned to leave, but he stopped her with the iron grip of his hand on her arm.

"Sabrina, you can't not talk to me."

She whirled on him, breaking his grip in a way that ensured she would have the bruises to show for it. "You don't want to hear what I have to say."

His eyes were olive green and very, very hard. "Try me."

"Fine," she gritted out. "You referred to me as *no one*."

"She was asking if my parents or sisters were around," he interjected.

"*Don't* interrupt me," she shouted. "It doesn't matter who you thought she meant. You were with me—*your wife*—whether you want to admit it or not."

He stepped closer, but she was savvy to his tricks. He thought he could use his proximity to distract her from anger. She took a step toward the door and continued.

“Did you think that denying I existed would make me not notice that you married a replica of your first wife? Ellen and Amanda told me I looked like her, but I stupidly believed you when you said I didn’t.” Sabrina raked a hand through her hair, tugging viciously at the long strands that were so like Helene’s. “Oh, sure, there are basic differences. My face is more oval, her eyes are a little smaller.” Her nose was stubby as well, but it would have been petty to point that out. “But we’re easily the same height. We have the same build, hair, coloring.” She scrubbed a hand over her eyes. “I bet we even have the same bra size.”

“Hers are fake,” he supplied.

Her look shut him up. She did not need to be reminded he’d seen Helene naked and had probably done many of the same things with her that he did with Sabrina. “You won’t tell your family our marriage is an arrangement. They treat me as if I belong. You don’t, but they do.” She swallowed the pain. “Yet you don’t want anyone at work to know about us. I don’t understand you at all.”

He stood with his arms crossed as she fell silent. “Are you finished?”

Technically, she had to stay with him until next June, but she wished to God she was finished with him. She gave him an icy nod.

“If I had introduced you as my wife, you would be here accusing me of using you to throw it in her face. She would have laughed and said something inherently cruel to you. I wasn’t about to let her do that.”

Sabrina’s blood pressure shot skyward. She didn’t think it could get worse, but it did. “Friend, lover, wife, boss. You had more to choose from than just one thing. I thought that no matter what else was between us, at least we were friends. Isn’t that what you said when we began this? That at the very least we should be friends?”

She was trembling. He reached out for her, but checked his response, knowing she would probably punch him if he touched her. The gravity of her hurt finally got through to him.

“Sabrina, I never meant—”

“I don’t care what you *meant*, Jonas. I only care about what you *did*.” She hugged her arms across her torso, knowing it was a defensive gesture,

but not caring. She needed some kind of defense against him. He held more cards than he knew. “I saw the way you reacted to her. You’re still in love. I get that.”

She focused on a knot in the wood of a chest of drawers, swallowed her tears, and drew on all her strength to keep her voice steady. “What I don’t like is knowing that I’m her replacement. I don’t like knowing that when you look at me, you see her. When you’re with me, you’re pretending it’s her. I don’t like being *no one*.”

She exited the room, and he didn’t follow. It was a wise move on his part. There was nothing he could say to negate the hurt she felt. Any denial would sound false, even if it were true. Empty platitudes would only hurt more.

She spent Monday at Ginny’s, who had a few people over for Labor Day and didn’t press when she explained away Jonas’s absence with a vague, “He’s busy.”

\* \* \* \*

Jonas stayed home, did laundry, and cooked several meals for the coming week. If Sabrina was going to continue to avoid him, there was no way he could make sure she was eating properly. Her default meals tended toward the unhealthy, if she ate at all. He cringed at the thought of frozen lasagna.

He grew up in a house where everyone took turns cooking, but he learned fairly quickly to keep Sabrina away from the kitchen. If Drew Snow hadn’t been able to teach her anything in all the time he’d known her, then Jonas’s efforts would be equally futile.

Besides, he liked cooking for her. He liked knowing she was dependent on him in at least one way.

On the plane, he had been amused by her pouting. It wasn’t until she threw the word “friends” at him that he understood how deeply his actions wounded her. He thought about that as he slung wet clothes into the dryer. Ellen was a friend. Ryan was a friend. But Sabrina? Were they really friends? There was so much he didn’t know about her and so much he hadn’t told her about himself. How was it possible to know someone on such a profound level, but still be strangers?

But it was more than that, wasn't it? She was his lover, and that meant something to them both. Sabrina deserved more respect and appreciation than he had shown her.

He leaned over the whisper-quiet dryer and damned Helene all over again. Despite Sabrina's accusations, he wasn't in love with Helene. He hadn't been in love with Helene for some time, probably since before they made it to the "I do" portion of the relationship. But he had wanted to believe. He'd wanted so badly to have the fairy tale Helene promised. A family. Children.

Even though he didn't harbor tender feelings for her, even of the repressed variety, Helene still had the power to knock him speechless. Sabrina could do that to him if she tried, if she treated him half as callously as Helene had during their time together. Beautiful women were a fantasy. No matter how tightly he held on, no matter how much she seemed to need him, a beautiful woman would eventually leave.

He wasn't shallow enough to think physical appearance mattered too much and he did have the ability to see the beauty on the inside. In that respect alone, Sabrina was the most beautiful woman he'd ever been with. Add that to her physical loveliness, and he knew holding onto her was just a fantasy.

Besides, he didn't have it in him to love again. That ship sank years ago and there was no going back. There were no raw materials to salvage.

Still, he would make this up to her. Sabrina didn't deserve to hurt like this, not when she'd never been anything but good to him.

He needed to talk to Ellen in the worst way.

\* \* \* \*

Jared returned from his vacation on Tuesday, so Timothy, Jonas, and Tina returned to their own side of the floor. Tina visited Sabrina at lunch, gave her a dozen mini-carnations, and crushed her in a hug.

"I learned more from you in a week than I've learned from Mr. Larsen in two months. Thank you."

Jonas worked Tuesday night, as he usually did. He left dinner for her to heat up, but she wasn't hungry.

She stayed home, restlessly wandering the empty house and wondering if he pictured Helene's face on his clients. Did he punish her with every lash of his whip? Did he punish himself for losing her? She couldn't stop torturing herself.

In a moment of desperation, she called Ellen and told her everything. Ellen knocked on the door before Sabrina finished pouring out her heart, cell phone pressed to her ear and face twisted in sympathy.

Instantly, Sabrina realized her mistake. She was his best friend. Her face flamed. She tossed her cell phone on the hall table and buried her face in her hands. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called you. I shouldn't have put you in this position."

"I won't breathe a word to Jonas," Ellen assured Sabrina as she steered her into the living room and settled her on the sofa. "If it's any consolation, he already told me everything."

"Everything?" she asked. Sabrina found that hard to believe.

"Yes. I know why you asked him to marry you. I know about your arrangement, though he will refuse to take the half million you seem to think you're going to pay him."

. "How long have you known?"

"Since the beginning," she said, waving away Sabrina's concern. "Jonas usually tells me everything, Sabrina. I know he isn't exactly forthcoming with you, but believe me, I've been working on that with him."

Ellen had known from the beginning that Sabrina was only a temporary event in Jonas's life, yet she befriended her anyway. Sabrina wanted to know why.

Ellen spoke with characteristic surety. "Because you care about him and he cares about you. I haven't seen him this happy in a long, long time."

Sabrina frowned. "Still, it's only for a year."

Ellen shook her head. "You're in love with him. You may not know it yet, but you are. I had to know what kind of a person you were. I had to know if you have what it takes to make this work with him. I wasn't going to do anything to push him towards you if you didn't. But you do." Then she flashed a brilliant smile. It was one of those smiles that transformed a face from ordinary to beautiful. Sabrina could see why Ryan spent so much time trying to amuse Ellen.

She gaped at Ellen, but not because of the smile. “He’s still in love with Helene.”

“No,” she said, her smile fading like a shaft of sunlight on an overcast day. “He isn’t. But he is still damaged by what she did to him. Gun shy. You have a lot of scar tissue to penetrate, but you have Ryan and me to help. Then there’s the fact that his parents and his sisters think you’re the miracle they’ve been hoping for. They never liked Helene.”

Lying to them weighed heavily on Sabrina’s conscience. She liked them, too. “Alyssa made me a quilt.” She wondered if Alyssa had made one for Helene as well, but she didn’t ask. “They don’t know about our arrangement. He won’t tell them.”

Ellen took Sabrina’s hands in hers. “He knows he’ll never hear the end of it, especially not now that they know you. Jonas isn’t stupid, Sabrina. He knows they won’t care that this was supposed to be a business deal. Anyone can see it’s not.”

Sabrina disengaged her hands from Ellen’s. She hadn’t realized she was so transparent. For someone who spent her entire life being branded cold and distant because she was shy, Sabrina had apparently met her match with Jonas’s friends and family.

“Ellen, he isn’t in love with me. I’m not stupid, either. I know what a man in love looks like and how he behaves. I’m not even sure he likes me.” She might have said he probably liked her in the bedroom, but she still wasn’t sure he was with *her* when he was with her.

“No, he isn’t,” she agreed. “He’s singularly resistant to anything that might leave him a shattered, shell of a man. Again.”

Sabrina knew what Ellen was dancing around. She sighed. “Ellen, I won’t play manipulative games with him. That’s not how I want him.” Sure, she could stop taking birth control. With the way they went at it, she could be pregnant inside of a month. Jonas was a good man. He would do the “right thing” and stick it out for the sake of the kid. But then she would always know he was here for the child and not for her. It wasn’t fair to the theoretical child, to her, or to him.

Ellen stayed with Sabrina until they were both rubbing their eyes and yawning, talking about anything but Jonas. Sabrina felt better when Ellen left. Most of her anger was gone, but not all of it, and her doubts lingered.



\* \* \* \*

The Thursday morning staff meeting was going to be an ordeal. There was no way around it. Joy called Sabrina to her office beforehand. Sabrina braced herself to take the heat for the lost cat food account.

Joy's assistant showed Sabrina inside. Joy waved her to the empty seat opposite the desk. The assistant, whose name Sabrina could never recall, hovered nearby. That was never a good sign.

Joy pressed her thin lips together, covering her nicotine-stained teeth. The tense evenings at home this week had worn on Sabrina's nerves, and she didn't have the patience to bear Joy's unfair disapproval.

"Sabrina, I took a chance with you." She steeped her hands in front of her face. "I plucked you from the talent pool and put you in charge of an entire team. You manage a good number of important accounts and you generally keep the clients happy. I thought you could handle putting the finishing touches on one little cat food account, but I was mistaken."

Sabrina choked on her tongue, so she stopped biting it. "Finishing touches? What the hell are you talking about? Nothing had been done on the account at all. I had to pull my entire team from their work to even come up with the presentation they saw. I had less than a week!"

"That's not what Jared told me." The hard expression in her eyes dared Sabrina to challenge her.

Without the slightest reservation, Sabrina accepted the challenge. "Jared lied. He gave the work to his intern who had been there all of two months. Neither Timothy nor Jonas had any idea about the account until I told them."

"I refuse to believe that," she said. "His work has been spectacular, especially in the last six months."

"That's Jonas's work," Sabrina said with a careful calmness underlined in steel. "Jared, as he always does, is taking credit for his team's work. He's logged more time on the golf course than in the office this summer."

Joy actually *sneered* at Sabrina. "I've heard the rumors about you and this Jonas. The office is ripe with news of the two of you sneaking into closets and meeting clandestinely. Jared said it's been a real problem lately."

Sabrina stood slowly, parking her hands on her hips. "It must not be very sneaky or clandestine if there are rumors about it. I can't believe you

would sink to the level of throwing rumors at me instead of addressing the real issue, which is that Jared dropped the ball on this one, not me.”

Joy stood and the two women glared across the desk at one another. Then Joy spoke. Her words were slow and measured. “I’ll give you this one warning, Sabrina. Having an affair with a subordinate, even if he isn’t directly under you, is grounds for dismissal.”

“I am not,” Sabrina said through clenched teeth, “having an affair with *anyone*.” And if she asked Jonas, he could tell her he was having an affair with *no one*. After all, that was the description of her that he used to ‘save’ her from Helene. It would work for this situation just as well.

The staff meeting immediately followed. Everyone was assembled by the time Sabrina breezed in, late. Joy wasn’t there, but that wasn’t a shocker. She rarely attended these meetings. Jared was missing as well, so Sabrina began the meeting. She didn’t have the most seniority, but people paid attention when she spoke, so the other team leaders often bestowed the honor on her.

She went through the items on the agenda rapidly, not bothering to hide the fact that she was seething. She felt Jonas’s eyes on her. He didn’t look at her very much at staff meetings, opting instead to stare at his notebook. He always appeared to be taking copious notes, but Sabrina was certain he was probably doodling.

Then she declared the last three items stupid because they were and dismissed everyone. It was the shortest meeting in Rife and Company history. If she took into account the fact they started fifteen minutes late, then it was a four-minute meeting. Jared chose that moment to show up.

He lumbered through the door, more red-faced than usual, scattering would-be executives in his wake. “Breszewski!” he bellowed.

Everyone who hadn’t run from the room the moment Sabrina blew the whistle suddenly slowed in their movements. Haste was easily forgotten when one could witness what promised to be a juicy altercation.

She stood, squared her shoulders, and glared across the room at him. A few months ago, she would have tried to placate him until she could get him behind a closed door. Now she didn’t care if they had an audience. Her change in attitude threw Jared off his game for a second.

"You goddamn bitch! What the hell do you think you're doing? You're not going to win this." The veins in his neck stood out, making him look like some obscene scientific experiment gone awry.

Jonas stood. Jared might not have recognized the icy calm in those green eyes, but Sabrina did. He put a hand on Jared's arm. "Back up and try again." He said it quietly, but there was no mistaking his authority.

"Stay out of this, Spencer," Jared growled, shaking off Jonas's hand. He rounded the table, stopping inches from her face, forcing Sabrina to tilt her head back to look up at him. He was in her personal space, but she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of taking a step backward.

"I'm finished cleaning up after you," she said venomously. "You're going to take the heat for this one, not me."

Jared's volume didn't decrease with his proximity to her. "*You* lost the account, Breszewski. This one is all on you. I handed you a perfectly good pitch and you dropped the ball."

Sabrina wiped spittle from her forehead and shouted back. "Don't be an ass. You handed me nothing but an empty file, two men, and an intern who didn't know the difference between copy and film. It was because of me that we avoided looking completely incompetent, which is an image that would damage the reputation of this firm."

"Your incompetence lost the account," he bellowed.

She lowered her volume in direct proportion to the amount he raised his. "Oh, shut up. You don't have a leg to stand on."

He clenched his fists. "You goddamn frigid, icy bitch."

A deceptively calm voice interrupted. "You have exactly five seconds to move away from my wife or I will make you."

Sabrina hadn't seen Jonas follow Jared, but he was now standing right next to her. Jared's eyes rose, meeting Jonas's, finding nothing but olive-green ice. Even Sabrina was chilled. The room, which had quieted to witness the exchange, became tomblike.

Sneering in a perfect replica of Joy, Jared didn't budge. Five seconds passed. Exactly five seconds. Jonas's arm shot out, and Jared was on his knees before the sixth second finished.

"When you speak to my wife, you will refrain from using obscene language. And when you argue with my wife, you will remain at least three

feet away. If you even think about hitting her, I will make your life miserable.”

Jared stared at Jonas. The incredulous expression on his face remained unaltered.

Sabrina didn’t need him to fight her battles. She didn’t bother to hide the mixture of wrath and disgust she felt at both his display and his timing.

He released Jared, but didn’t help him to his feet. The two clashed with silent glares.

Snapping her fingers between them, she called their attention back to her. “This ends now, Jared. I’m through covering for you. The next time you’re in over your head, don’t expect me to lift a finger to bail you out.”

“I’ll have your job, Breszewski,” he threatened before turning his venom on Jonas. “Don’t expect to get anywhere in this firm, Spencer. You’ve messed with the wrong man.”

Sabrina let the threat against her go. If she wanted, she could buy a majority share in Rife and Company just to have him fired. As it stood, she was a voting shareholder. The threat against Jonas concerned her. She might be angry with him, but she wasn’t vindictive. “Stow it, Larson. Everyone knows your winning streak the last six months is directly due to Jonas.”

Jared turned and left. She watched him go. The room emptied pretty quickly. Her team lingered the longest, each person except Ty throwing wounded looks in Sabrina’s direction. Ty just looked confused.

When they were alone, Sabrina faced Jonas, turning the full force of her anger on him. “Never do anything like that again.”

His brows shot into his hairline. “He was going to hit you.”

“He was thinking about hitting me,” she clarified. “He wouldn’t have done it with a room full of witnesses, but that is beside the point. You had no right to undermine me like that.” She jabbed a finger toward him to punctuate her point.

“Undermine you? What the hell are you talking about? Did you expect me to just sit there and let him talk to you like that?” His fists clenched and released. He raised a hand to touch her arm. It hovered indecisively in the air before dropping back down.

Sabrina understood why he felt the need to come to her aid. It was more than the fact that Jared threatened her. He was trying to make up for what happened at the airport. He was trying to show her that he wasn’t

embarrassed to be married to her. Claiming her in front of the entire office took their relationship public in a way that also quelled the gossip about them. If she wasn't so completely irate, it might have mattered.

Sabrina kept her voice low and even. "I am good at my job. I have spent years cultivating the respect and admiration of my peers and coworkers. In one minute, you undid years of hard work. Do you honestly think anyone is going to take me seriously anymore? Do you honestly think that every person in this firm isn't going to laugh at me behind my back every time they see me?"

She could hear the snickers now. *Don't piss off Sabrina. Her husband will come after you.* Every time she asked for a favor, ran a meeting, or threw out an idea, a thought akin to that would wend its way through the head of every person in the room.

She plopped heavily onto the chair she had so recently vacated and put her head in her hands, grateful that the conference room was wood paneled and not enclosed in glass.

"Sabrina," he said, putting a hand on her shoulder.

She shook him off. "Just go away, Jonas. Every time we have a conversation, things only get worse."

He hesitated, his hand hovering inches from her before it dropped, and he left.

Sabrina was alone for all of two seconds before her team filed in. Minnie sat next to her and patted her shoulder in a display of motherly concern. She was well past sixty and Sabrina would miss the hell out of her when she retired.

Randall sat on the other side. Clare, Veronica, and Ophelia sat across from her. Ty locked the door and joined them.

"You've had one extraordinary day," Minnie said. "You stood up to Joy White and Jared Larsen." At Sabrina's questioning look, she explained. "Oh, secretaries miss nothing. Joy's secretary is a real gossip. Not like me. I discovered months ago that you were married. All of your paperwork goes through me."

"Plus there's all that chemistry between you," Ophelia added. "A blind person couldn't miss it."

"I must be blind," Randall muttered.

"I wish I was," Ty said. "How come you didn't tell me? You let me think you were having an affair, and all the time, you were married."

"I can't believe you didn't tell us," Clare said quietly. "How long ago did this happen?"

"June." Sabrina sighed. "Right after my grandfather's funeral."

They demanded the story, and she gave them the abridged version, leaving out any mention of wills or money. "It was a whim. He didn't want anyone to know."

"He was ashamed of you?" Randall exclaimed. His neck, which was never significant to begin with, disappeared in his outrage. His loyalty gave Sabrina warm fuzzy feelings, which was a nice change. "What's wrong with him?"

She found herself defending a decision she didn't completely understand. "He didn't want people to think I was doing his work. I can see where he would want credit for his own ideas. We almost never discuss work at home."

Veronica pounded her fist on the table in a gesture of what Sabrina thought was indignation and solidarity. "At least we won't have to defend you anymore to everyone who thinks it's okay to deride you for having an affair with the hot new guy."

Sabrina found it ironic that Veronica would refer to Jonas as new when she'd been with Rife for less than a month. Her smile was tight. "There is that."

\* \* \* \*

The ride home was silent and tense. She headed right for the pool, hoping that some serious laps could put things in perspective.

"Dinner will be ready in one hour," Jonas called after her as she cruised through the kitchen on her way out the back door.

Knowing he wasn't one to pussyfoot around her, Sabrina made sure to be on time for dinner. She didn't put it past him to drag her from the pool and carry her back to the house in order to eat.

They dined in the breakfast nook, which overlooked the back patio. Having been too upset to eat lunch, Sabrina was famished. She had no trouble ignoring him for the duration of the meal, at least until he spoke.

"I'm sorry, Sabrina. I didn't think. I just reacted."

She raised her head for the first time since dinner began and watched him struggle for the right words. He played with his fork, pushing the remnants of his food around his plate.

"I've never once referred to you as my wife. Maybe I didn't want to put you into that category because I have such a dim view of wives. Maybe I was afraid that if I said it, it would be true. I was completely serious when I swore to never marry again. I honestly don't know."

He looked up, meeting her eyes.

"I only know that when I said the words, I realized for the first time that I actually married you. This whole summer has been a kind of dream for me. It has an unreal quality to it. Maybe because this is temporary, because we've put a time limit on it, maybe my mind has had trouble processing it all."

He threw his fork on his plate and leaned back in his chair. "You've never been married, Sabrina. You don't know what a failure of those proportions is like. Then there is the fact that we're in uncharted territory. I'm not sure how to define our relationship. When you threw out to me the other night that you thought we were friends, it really brought that home for the first time. Are we friends? I wonder how we could possibly be friends and then I wonder how it's possible that we couldn't be friends."

She bit her lip. His last sentiment was a bit vague, but she knew exactly what he meant. They discussed so many things—politics, ideals, what to have for dinner—but they never talked about themselves. Nobody knew her like Jonas knew her. He had given her so much, but in many ways they were strangers.

She set her napkin on her plate. "I may not have been married, but I know what it's like to fail at a long-term relationship."

"How long?"

"Almost six years."

He rose and collected the plates. "What was his name?"

"Stephen."

She followed him into the kitchen and helped clean the mess. He tended to clean up his dishes as he went along, so it didn't take long. He grabbed two beers from the refrigerator and directed her to the patio. "How about you tell me all about Stephen?"

“Only if you tell me about Helene.”

He went first. It was only fair. They watched the sky streak purple and the sun set and Sabrina learned all about Helene. He had met her when he was doing his student teaching and was instantly blown away by the fact that she noticed him at all. She was a couple of years older and that held an exotic charm for him. He’d never dated an older woman before. She was a regular at Ellen’s bar. They flirted for several weeks before he asked her out.

They dated for several years. Helene was glamorous. Sabrina took that to mean high-maintenance. Jonas worked five nights a week for Ellen, longer shifts than he worked now. He told Sabrina that he had cut back his hours when he married her. She hadn’t known. He made more money working for Ellen than he did teaching those first few years. Helene worked as a receptionist at a dentist’s office. Together, they made enough to buy a modest house in a nice neighborhood.

After they married, he quit working for Ellen. He’d made it clear he wanted a family, but Helene did an about-face after the wedding. She wanted to wait. Then she didn’t want to spoil her figure. Finally, she didn’t want to deal with kids. Not now, not ever.

It was a crushing blow to Jonas, but he loved her, so he adjusted.

Helene liked material things. She shopped incessantly, burning through everything he’d made working for Ellen. The credit card debt became unmanageable. Then he found out she’d been having affairs. Plural. That was the final nail in the marital coffin.

When they divorced, everything had to be sold to pay creditors. They split the rest of the debt, but she had defaulted on her portion and the creditors came after him. He’d been paying down her debt for five years.

The heavy confession lingered in the air. “So,” Sabrina began, trying to alleviate the tension. “I take it you’re not still in love with her?”

His laugh was tinged with bitterness. “No. I’m not still in love with her. I haven’t been for a long, long time. Even now, when I think about it, I was going through the motions, not wanting to admit failure. I think I knew before the wedding that I didn’t love her, but I didn’t want to admit it. She was beautiful—a geek’s dream. Not real.”

Sabrina frowned, thinking of Stephen, and she was thankful she hadn’t tried to make it work when she knew it wouldn’t be fair to either of them.



Jonas reached across the table, squeezing her hand lightly before releasing it. He bit his lip and exhaled loudly. "The first time I saw you, it was from the back. You were at the other end of a corridor, and I couldn't see all of you. With your hair down and your general shape and size, I did a double take, thinking she had somehow followed me to Rife and Company." He shook his head at the ridiculousness of it all.

"Then you turned around, and I saw that you were very different from Helene. Classy in an authentic way. You had something she could only hope to have, some quality I still can't name." His eyes roamed her face as if the word might be written there.

"Maybe it has to do with your grace and poise or the way you really listen to whomever is speaking to you. It was daunting. I remember thinking I was glad I wasn't working for you. I'd be constantly doubting myself and clamoring for your approval."

She laughed. She couldn't help it. For the two weeks he'd worked under her, he hadn't doubted himself once and he hadn't clamored for anyone's approval. Having been intensely serious, he pressed his lips together and gave her a look of severe disapproval.

"Did you use that look on your high school students?" she asked, trying her best to stop laughing. "It must have been very effective."

"It was," he said dryly. "You must not be worried about failing my English class."

"I can hold my own in an English class. Math, too." She grinned. "How much do you still owe on your credit cards and why haven't I seen a statement lying around?"

He had the nerve to look embarrassed. "I have most of my mail delivered to Ellen and Ryan's."

Sabrina's mouth opened to ask why.

He held up a hand to stop any question she might have asked. "At first, I was too lazy to change my address, and then I figured there was no point in changing it just to have to redo the paperwork in a year. Then after you paid off my student loans, I didn't want you to see them and get the wrong idea."

She stared at him without changing her expression. "How much do you owe?"

"A little over two hundred grand."

She swallowed a crack about him wishing Helene shared her excellence in math. Still, it wasn't out of reach for her.

"Jonas, I can—"

He cut her off. "Do not offer to pay off my ex-wife's debt. It was my mistake and now it's my penance."

"Well, I can see now why you get so upset when I go shopping." Shyly, she reached across the small space to rest her hand on his. "I promise I won't leave you with credit card debt. I don't even own a credit card." She used a check card. Grandpa taught her to always pay with cash. Paying later never did any good for anyone who wasn't charging interest on the loan.

"Your turn," he said, turning his palm up to hold her hand. "Tell me about this Stephen who broke your heart."

"I broke his heart," she confessed.

She and Stephen had been fourteen when they first met. They flirted and passed notes for two years because neither of them were allowed to date. Junior year, he asked her to the Homecoming Dance and they spent the next six years together. They even attended the same university so they wouldn't have to be separated.

The fall after they graduated from college, he proposed. Sabrina broke up with him.

Jonas stared at her after she finished her short story, waiting for a shoe to drop. After a long silence, he asked, "What was wrong with him?"

"Nothing."

"Did you live together?"

"No. My grandfather would have had a heart attack. My mom probably would have been okay with it, but I didn't want to chance it."

"He was controlling? Lazy? Drank excessively?"

Sabrina shook her head. "I thought I wasn't in love with him. The sex sucked."

That gave him pause. "I thought you were exaggerating when you said I gave you your first orgasm."

"I wish." The words were out before she realized how they sounded. Her eyes widened, and she turned to Jonas. "I don't regret not marrying Stephen. He was kind and considerate. He treated me very well. He would have been a good husband. He was willing to take me as I was, lackluster sex and all, but I wanted more."

Sabrina sighed. Breaking up with Stephen marked her entry into the world of serial dating and sex on the second date, sometimes the first if he kissed well. She often thought of him and various “what if” scenarios, but she never once considered looking him up or trying to rekindle anything.

“He just let you go? After six years of bliss?”

She looked for the sarcasm in his question, but there was none. “No. He stepped back, gave me time to come to my senses. He enlisted my grandfather’s help in trying to change my mind. Our families had us married for some time before Stephen actually proposed. It was difficult to stick to my decision, but I knew it was the right one for both of us.”

“What happened to him?”

Sabrina shrugged. “One day, he stopped coming around. I missed him at first, but I was mostly happy to not have someone constantly checking up on me. I heard he met someone special, fell in love, and they have everything they want. I ran into his brother a few weeks ago. He told me Stephen moved to Chicago to open a new branch of their family business.”

“Family business,” Jonas repeated. “Why do I get the feeling this isn’t a chain store?”

Sabrina laughed at that one. “Galen Enterprises have their hands in many pots. If I were less scrupulous, I might use my connections to pursue an account with them.”

“You know,” he said conspiratorially, “a wise woman once advised me to use my resources and connections.”

She thought about that for a long time. What would it take to contact Mr. Galen and land a chance to pitch to them? They were larger than the cat food company. It would mean significant promotions for her entire team.

Later, when they were in bed and the room was dark, Jonas asked her something else. “Why me? You were with him for six years. I assume you were both virgins, but six years is plenty of time to work out the kinks. We made good progress the first week and things have improved since then.”

It was a question she’d never asked herself. “I don’t know. I suppose neither of us figured out what else to try. He didn’t force the issue, and I was too busy being mortified about my inadequacies to bring it up. He certainly never did the things to me that you do.” She waited a beat before adding, “I didn’t know some of those things were possible.”

He laughed, probably at the irony of a sexually-active thirty-year-old woman who was as ignorant and inexperienced as Sabrina had been. She didn't ask because she didn't want to know. Pulling her to him, he spooned her and repeated his question. "But why me?"

She understood the analytical Jonas. He wasn't asking for compliments. He was asking for data. "You make me forget myself. I'm someone else when I'm with you. I'm a voyeur, an exhibitionist. I'm a sexually-adventurous middle-level executive. I'm a bored housewife amusing herself with the gardener, the pool boy, the delivery man, or a random stranger I found in the grocery store. I don't know why, but it makes a difference."

"Well, then we need to get to work on the gardener, the pool boy, the delivery man, and anything else you've dreamed up."

\* \* \* \*

They did get to work on all of those things. She texted him some days to let him know the role she expected him to assume when they got home. Other times, he texted her first. He was very good at role playing and Sabrina steadily improved.

For the first time since her wedding night, she wore her wedding rings. Now that everyone knew, there was no reason to keep the beautiful pieces of jewelry hidden.

## Chapter 14

Not long after they began exploring the many options of the bored housewife, Jonas visited Sabrina's office. They had driven in separately because he took the morning off for a dentist appointment. The November afternoon was cloudy. The oppressive and unrelenting steel grey infected everyone's attitude. Sabrina wished they had an excuse to fly to Florida or someplace else in the Sun Belt, but they didn't.

Minnie buzzed and Sabrina gladly put aside her tedious tasks to see Jonas. He strode into her office, bringing his own internal sunshine. The green silk tie he wore that turned his eyes a brilliant shade of emerald had been an impromptu gift. He'd let his hair grow several inches on the top, but he kept the sides cut close. Her fingers twitched, remembering the way his curls felt in her hands when she straddled his face that morning. She brightened immediately.

Coming around her desk, she greeted him with a chaste kiss and led him to the sofa so they could sit closer together. "What brings you to this side of the world today?"

He placed a large, plain rectangular box on the coffee table, the kind that usually contained clothes. Sabrina doubted there was lingerie inside. He wouldn't bring something like that to work.

"I brought you something."

"A present?" She eyed the box with a smile.

He caught her hands before she could open it. His grin was wily. "Not exactly." He handed her a sealed envelope. "When you come home today, I want you dressed in this outfit. Park in the driveway and ring the doorbell." Leaning over, he kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be expecting you at five-thirty. Don't be late."

She didn't quite know how to respond. When they role-played, he usually sent her a text. This was unusual.

He turned the handle to exit her office, a smug smile on his face. “Have a great afternoon.”

As soon as the door was closed, she tore the envelope open. Inside was a typed document. Characters:

1. A male virgin named Matt, mid-twenties, never leaves the house unless it's to attend a comic book event. Enjoys online role-playing games. He has tons of friends, but he hasn't met most of them in person.

2. A beautiful, high-priced escort named Sabrina. She was recently arrested for solicitation. The District Attorney, young Matt's father, will give Sabrina a break if she agrees to initiate his son into the world of live, warm-blooded women.

Setting:

The house is an expensive Victorian in an exclusive suburb. Matt is home alone. He is expecting Sabrina at five-thirty, sharp. His parents are out for the night and plan to stay overnight in the city. He's okay with the fact his father hired a woman to have sex with him. Due to his awkward social skills, he gave up on women at a time most boys were still discovering them. He's never been on a date. He skips all social events that might involve women because they leave him tongue-tied and insecure with even an innocent look. Even his online characters avoid interacting with women.

Objective:

Sabrina must teach Matt how to please a woman.

The description made Sabrina laugh, but the contents of the box sobered her. Inside was a little black dress. Sleek and sexy, with just a hint of slutty, it looked like something Ginny would buy. She wondered if Jonas had been out shopping with her. She didn't keep close tabs on where he went and with whom, so it was entirely possible. She could see the two of them pawing through racks of dresses until one of them came across this. Since they had the same build and coloring, Ginny would try it on to make sure it fit. The imp in her probably wouldn't let him see it.

Also in the box were black silk thigh-highs and a pair of sleek, high-heeled leather boots. A matching dress coat, long and belted, completed the ensemble. The purple fall jacket she wore to work would not have matched the outfit. Jonas was very thorough. A jacket, stockings, and thong were buried in the bottom of the box.

Her office, thankfully, had a mirror in the closet. At the end of the day, she sent Minnie home on time and changed. When she stepped back to study her outfit in the full-length mirror, she heard a low whistle. Looking up, she spied Ty standing in the middle of the office.

“You look hot, Sabrina. Is Jonas taking you out tonight?”

She squirmed uncomfortably and hoped Ty didn’t notice. “We have plans.”

“Damn. If my girlfriend wore that, we wouldn’t be going out, I can tell you that much. I don’t envy your guy tonight.”

She blushed and smoothed the short skirt part of it. “It’s too slutty?”

Ty shook his head. “It’s just slutty enough. Every guy is going to be looking at you and wondering how Jonas landed a catch like this. Hell, we all wonder that anyway. You have to take Vanessa shopping with you the next time you go, Sabrina. At the very least, she needs those shoes.”

She looked down at the black, high-heeled boots that molded to her calf. They were very sexy. “Jonas bought them.”

Ty helped Sabrina into her jacket, his bottom lip clasped between his teeth. Something was on his mind. She hoped he was more at ease with Jonas by now. They seemed to get along fine, even going out for lunch a few times a week.

“What brings you in here when you should be halfway home?”

“I wanted a woman’s perspective on something.”

Sabrina had packed her clothes into the box Jonas brought. She picked that up and grabbed her purse. “Is it something we can discuss on the way to the parking garage?”

Ty nodded and took the box. “I’m going to ask Vanessa to marry me tonight.”

“Congratulations,” Sabrina said. She hadn’t known he was that serious about anyone.

“I knew you would understand. You and Jonas didn’t date that long, but you knew it was right.”

She wasn’t remotely tempted to tell him the true circumstances. “How long have you and Vanessa been together?”

“A month. I knew the first moment I saw her that she was the one. However, she’s more like you, all level-headed and analytical. How did Jonas convince you?”

Sabrina blushed at the memory of how bold she had been. “I asked him.”

Ty was speechless as they stepped into the elevator, but he recovered before they had descended two floors. “What made you ask him?”

Shrugging, she said, “It was an impulsive, irrational situation. I didn’t even know his name. We hadn’t met or had one conversation. It was actually the first thing I said to him. Does that blow your theory about me out of the water?”

Ty laughed. “No. That happened when you finished my sentence by telling me that Jonas holding your hands behind your back means he knows how to please a woman.”

The elevator dinged to let them know they had reached the ground level parking. Ty put the box in the trunk of her car. She laid a hand on his arm. “Ty, just be yourself. If Vanessa is a decent person, she’s dating you because she likes you. If you think the woman and the moment are right, go for it.”

As she stepped into her car, he said, “Have fun tonight.”

She grinned at him. “Oh, don’t worry about me. I will definitely be having fun tonight.” *I think*. It had been a long, long time since she had a virgin.

The drive home gave her a great chance to think. She had always wondered at men’s fascination with female virgins, but she chalked it up to possessiveness. Jonas could be possessive of her, but she wasn’t the virgin in this scenario. She was the experienced one. She would be the one to initiate him into the art of pleasuring a woman. She would be the one with all the power and all the responsibility.

A thrill ran through her. Did he know he was giving her a do-over? She was so glad he hadn’t asked her to call him Stephen.

She rang the doorbell, and her nipples hardened as the frigid November wind bit through her jacket and the thin fabric of her dress. She had to ring three times before the door jerked open.

Jonas stood before her transformed. His hair, which he had been growing out, was straight, falling over his eyes like straw. She didn’t want to think about what he did to those sexy curls to get them to lie down like that. He wore his glasses, but he had added tape to the bridge.



His shirt, a plaid, button-down dress shirt, was too tight. It was tucked sloppily, with half of it not making it in at all. She thought he intended to look nerdy, but he was too well-built to pull it off. Even the pocket protector was sexy. His pants were awkward as well. His belt missed at least one loop, and his tube socks were mismatched. She bit her lip to keep from laughing.

He stared at her while she checked him out. The wind whipped hair across her face and chafed against her cheeks.

“Matt?” It was his middle name, so the transition wasn’t too difficult.

He nodded, a slow blush spreading up his neck to stain his cheeks.

She was impressed that he could blush on cue. Sabrina wished she could control her blushing that well. “I’m Sabrina. You are expecting me, right?”

He nodded again, staring at her feet.

“Are you going to invite me in?”

“Oh.” He slapped his hand to his forehead. “Come in.” He moved aside to let her pass him.

There was plenty of room, but she managed to let her shoulder brush against his chest. Then she shrugged out of her jacket and handed it toward him. He stared blankly at the coat in her outstretched hand.

“When one entertains a guest, he hangs her coat.”

He clapped his hands together and rubbed them nervously. “Right. My mom told me that.” Gingerly, he took her jacket and slid it onto a hanger. Then he turned back to face her, his eyes traveling from her feet to her face and back down. He blushed again when he realized she was watching him. “My dad said I should feed you because you’ll be here for dinner.”

She went to him and took his hand in hers. He shook and his palms were sweaty. “I think you’re too anxious to eat right now. How about we work up an appetite first?”

His eyes were firmly locked on the floor. “Where do you want to do it?”

“Why don’t you take me to your bedroom?”

Without looking directly at her, he led the way up the grand curving staircase, turning right at the top instead of left. Sabrina was glad he was avoiding their bedroom for this. She stopped cold at the door of the guest room.

It was transformed. Instead of the tastefully-decorated, gender-neutral décor, it was the den of a man who dreamed of women slightly less than the newest Battle Fever game, but never got to taste them. Vintage posters

covered the walls. Some were for video games, others for movies. Several were highly-airbrushed shots of centerfold models.

The bedspread was vintage *Star Wars*. Action figures lined the shelves. Science fiction books and cheat manuals for video games were stacked around the room. Clothes were thrown all over the floor. The television was on, paused in the middle of a violent and bloody video game battle. Her jaw dropped at the completely unexpected décor, but she decided to ask about all the unfamiliar paraphernalia later.

"We should probably close the door," he said, shoving his hands deeper into his pockets. "In case my mom and dad come home early. They said they would stay out late because you were coming, but they don't always do that."

He reached behind her to close the door. Turning, she saw a current swimsuit calendar.

"My dad gets *Sports Illustrated*," he said. "I don't read it though."

Scanning his room, she found her portable satellite radio system and tuned it to a soft jazz station. A lone, mellow horn filled the air.

"I like metal," he said. "With lots of heavy guitar. I have Guitar Hero. I'm pretty good at it."

"It's background noise," she said. "Mood music. We're not listening to it." She went to him, stopping less than two feet away.

He peeked at the low neckline of her dress, and then dropped his eyes to the floor when he saw her watching him. "Sorry."

Gently, she lifted his chin until his eyes met hers. "Don't apologize for finding me attractive. A woman who is about to sleep with you likes to know you find her attractive."

"You're pretty," he said. "But a lot shorter than I thought a hooker would be."

Sabrina winced at his crudity. "I'm an escort. There isn't a height requirement. Does my lack of stature bother you?"

He shook his head. "What's the difference between an escort and a hooker?"

Caught off guard, she laughed. "The price."

"How much do you cost?"

Taking a step closer put her inches from him. "I think you're stalling."

He ran a hand through his hair. Some of it settled down, but most of it stayed in the air. It was an improvement in his style. "I don't know what to do first."

Resting her hands against his chest, she tilted her head up. "I like to start with a kiss."

Nervous green eyes flickered to her lips and away. "What if I'm not any good?"

"I'll teach you." She waited for a long time, but he made no move. "I know you've never been with a woman, Matt. Have you never kissed one?"

He blushed again. It was answer enough.

Sliding her hands up his chest, she captured his face in her hands. "You're very tall, Matt. I can't kiss you if you don't meet me half way."

He leaned down slowly and rested his lips against hers. She felt his tension and his playacting sucked her further into her role. With slow, feathery strokes, she brushed her lips against his until he relaxed, then she slipped her tongue into his mouth and explored him that way. Little by little, she coaxed him into the kiss, drawing back when he was breathing hard.

She would be lying if she said he didn't affect her just as much. Even when he wasn't trying, he kissed too well. She was heady with power and moist for him already.

"Did that suck?" he asked hoarsely.

Smiling up at him, she said, "No, that didn't suck."

"Now what?"

"Now we get serious."

"More kissing?"

She nodded. "More kissing."

This time, his lips were firm when they landed on hers. He used the same tricks on her that she had used on him. She tugged his hands from his pockets and put them on her waist. He gripped her tightly, and she pressed her body into his. Instantly, he grew hard and pushed himself away.

"Sorry."

She cupped his cheek in her hand. "Don't be sorry. It's okay for you to be turned on by me. It's a little necessary if we're going to get anywhere today." His quick rise gave her pause. Jonas was playing this as if he were a sex-starved man in his early twenties. She steered him to a ratty old armchair set up in front of the television, no doubt so he could play his

games. The chair was a new addition to the house. She had never seen it before. She would have thrown it out or had it reupholstered if she had.

“You want to play?” he asked. “I have another controller.”

“Honey, I’m here to play with you.” She draped herself across his lap, letting the neckline of her dress dip to preview more of the show. “Now, tell me truthfully. When is the last time you masturbated?”

He blushed. “I don’t know.”

“Was it more than an hour ago?”

His blush deepened. “I don’t see why it matters.”

“Because, darling, I like a man with stamina. If it’s been a while for you, then you won’t be able to please me. I’m here to teach you how to please a woman, Matt. Trust that I know what I’m doing.”

“You want me to go masturbate?” He stammered the words, forcing them out as if he’d never before voiced the thought.

She shook her head and slid to kneel in front of him. With sure hands, she whipped off his belt and lowered his pants. It was hard to not laugh at the tight white underwear he wore beneath, but she managed. Jonas was a boxer man. She’d never seen him in anything like this before.

His long, wide cock sprang forth, fully erect. He tried to cover it from her view, but she patiently removed his hands. “What are you doing?” he asked frantically as she licked the length of him.

She didn’t answer with words. Taking him into her mouth, she sucked him hard, the way she knew he liked, and fondled his sac with a light touch. Anything he might have said was lost as he moaned, rocking his hips to the rhythm she set. He didn’t hold back. Before long, he came, shouting incoherently as he tangled his hands in her hair. He pulled her up to him, kissing her long and hard. It was slightly out of character, but she didn’t care. She loved the way he kissed.

Still breathing hard, he rested his forehead against hers. “Are we finished?”

She laughed. “No, honey. We’re just getting started.”

He blushed when she caught him staring at her chest again. “Sorry.”

“Stop apologizing. It’s okay.”

“My mom said it’s rude to stare at a woman...” His blush deepened as he indicated the general area of her breasts, refusing to say the word. “...there.”

She let out her breath in a controlled stream. “Matt, never bring up your mother when you want a woman to fuck you. That’s one person who needs to stay firmly out of your bedroom and your sex life. Now, say the word you don’t want to say.” She fondled her breasts while he watched, squeezing and pinching roughly. “What are these?”

His jaw dropped. It took him a few tries, but he finally managed the word. “Breasts.”

“Louder. Come on, Matt. You can do this.”

“Can I touch your breasts?” The tone of his question was innocent, but his eyes were riveted to her chest.

“Yes.”

His fingers trembled as he reached for her, cradling one round globe in his hand through the thin fabric of her dress.

“Would you like me to take it off?” she asked. “Or would you like to undress me?”

He swallowed, his eyes still firmly on her low neckline. Against her thigh, she felt the return of his arousal. “Should we go on the bed?”

“We’ll make it there eventually. There’s no hurry.” With one finger, she moved his hair out of his expressive eyes. As an afterthought, she removed his glasses and set them on the windowsill.

He reached for them. “I can’t see without those.”

Shifting, she straddled him. “Then you’ll have to get closer and feel your way around.” Leaning up on her knees, she placed his hands on her thighs and directed them upward until he understood that she wanted him to remove her dress.

Jonas would have run with that permission, but Matt didn’t, so Sabrina took care of the dress herself. He stared at her, taking in the strapless, black lacy bra, matching thong and thigh-highs. His hands gripped the arms of the chair so hard his knuckles whitened.

She took advantage of his speechlessness to remove his shirt. He had a magnificent chest, lean and well-muscled. She couldn’t resist running her hands over his taut skin. Her lips soon joined her hands. He felt good, he smelled good, and he tasted heavenly.

When her mouth again met his, gone were the innocent kisses. Passion took over, and he met her challenge, responding with only his mouth. She

didn't know what it cost him to maintain his role, but his restraint brought Sabrina back to her role.

Breaking the kiss, she pulled back. "Where would you like to touch me now?"

His hand came up, hovering uncertainly in the air. "Where should I touch you?"

"Wherever you want. Start here." She put his warm hands on her hips and caressed his arms and chest. "Do you like the way I'm touching you?" Her hands slid into his open pants.

Suddenly breathless, he nodded.

"Touch me the same way."

Hesitantly, his hands slid up. He stopped just below her bra.

"If it's in your way, take it off."

Light, tentative hands trailed to the back, unhooking it with practiced expertise. She shrugged out of it and tossed it onto the floor with her dress and his shirt. He stared at her breasts, mesmerized. Then slowly, his hands rose, cupping them both. He explored unhurriedly, caressing lightly.

Growing impatient, she guided his fingertip over her nipple, teaching him to tease it to a peak. "Now," she said, breathing hard, "take it in your mouth. Use your tongue on it the same way."

He didn't need additional urging. Lightning quick, his mouth locked around her nipple, sucking and nibbling at the sensitive tip.

"Yes, Matt, like that." She moaned, low and long. "Oh, yes. Like that."

He caught on to the game, kneading one breast with his hand and the other with his mouth, and then switching to take her higher. Heat swirled from his tongue, unfurling in her core. Telling him what to do was a powerful aphrodisiac.

He buried his face between her breasts before his lips traced a trail up her neck and claimed her for a long, deep kiss. Pushing him away, she stood before him on trembling legs and removed her boots. Then she held out a hand to him and finished undressing him when he stood. Kneeling before him, she planted a kiss on his full erection before standing to lead him to the bed, where she ripped back the covers and guided him to lay on the mattress. She shed her thong and joined him, straddling him in a display of her utter control of the situation.

He grasped his erection, intending to enter her, but she stopped him.

“No?” He whined his question.

“Soon, darling. You must prepare me better than this.”

“How?” he whispered, straining toward her. “Tell me how.”

“Touch me.”

Immediately, his hands were on her, roaming from her breasts to her waist, grasping her hips and caressing her legs. She caught his right hand and guided him to her wetness.

“Touch me here.”

Panic lit his topaz eyes. “I don’t know how. I don’t know what you like.”

“Then find out,” she said. “If you make me gasp, then you’ve found something I like. If you make me moan, you’ve found something I really like. If you make me scream, you’re onto something wonderful.”

He slid two fingers between her lips. “You’re so hot, Sabrina. It’s like you’re on fire.”

“I’m on fire for you, Matt. You did this to me.”

His touch was light, tentative. He fumbled, touching her clumsily. She gasped anyway and Jonas took over. He knew full well how she liked to be touched. “Can I taste you?”

“Not this time, honey.” She moaned, unable to resist him any longer. Positioning herself over him, she guided him inside, sliding down his length slowly until she was sealed to him.

He looked up at her expectantly, his eyes a smoky topaz. Defiantly, he moved his hips, bucking them beneath her.

Placing her hands on his stomach to hold him down, she smiled and squeezed him inside her until he gasped. “Do you like the way this feels, Matt?” She lifted herself, slamming down on him.

He gasped.

“Answer me. Do you like the way this feels?”

“Yes,” he breathed. “God, yes. You feel like heaven.”

“It gets better. Would you like it to get better?”

Wordlessly, he nodded, his smoky topaz eyes impaling Sabrina as he struggled to maintain his role. There was no doubt in her mind that Jonas wanted nothing more than to flip her over, hook her knees over his shoulders and make her scream incoherently.

“Listen to me, Matt. This is important. When I come, the feel of my orgasm milking your cock is like nothing you’ve ever experienced. If you come before I do, you’ll miss out on that feeling and I will be very, very upset with you.”

He stared at her, brows knit together.

“You hold back, Matt. You hold back until I tell you it’s okay to let go. That’s all you have to do, darling. Just hold on until I tell you it’s okay to let go. Do you understand?”

At his nod, she rocked her hips back and forth, rotating on top of him. His hands roamed her body, tentative at first, then firm with purpose when she moaned in pleasure. She rode him hard and fast until she came, milking him the way she promised she would. His orgasm followed.

She collapsed on top of him.

“That was incredible,” he said. “You must make a lot of money.”

She wanted to smack him for that comment, but she couldn’t break character. They were just beginning. Completely ignoring him, she asked, “What did you have planned for dinner?”

“Um, the cook left something. I could heat it up for us.”

Gathering the bare minimum of clothing, she snagged his shirt. He watched her button most of it and roll up the sleeves. Glancing up, the fiercely possessive look she caught in his eyes was not in character. She called him back to his role. “You don’t mind, right?”

Blushing, he shook his head and wiggled into a pair of tattered dark blue sweat pants she had never seen before.

Dinner was leftover Thai food from last night. Straddling him as he tried to slump over his cardboard container, she took his food away.

“Hey, I’m still hungry,” he said, but his hands were already on her thighs, pushing the hem of his shirt upward to expose her nakedness instead of grabbing for the container in her hands.

Licking her lips, she stabbed at the spicy shrimp inside and held it between them. “Hungry for what?”

His voice rose an octave. “The shrimp?”

The prawn disappeared into her mouth. She chewed slowly and as sensually as she could. “Good boys get to eat, Matt. For everything you do well, you will be rewarded.”



Regarding her with wary eyes, he asked, "What if I do something wrong?"

"Then you'll have to do it over and over until you get it right." She leaned back, letting the edge of the table press into her back. "And if you please me enough, you can have dessert. You do want to please me, don't you, Matt?"

Wordlessly, he nodded.

"Touch me."

Confusion crossed his features. He pushed his hair out of eyes. His gaze was firmly attached to her chest. Slowly, he unbuttoned the shirt and slid his hands to cover her breasts. She fed them each one forkful.

Unable to remain still, his hands caressed her soft flesh, teasing the nipple into arousal. She fed him again.

"Pinch them," she ordered.

His touch was tentative.

"Harder." She gasped as he followed her command, not only pinching them, but rolling them between his fingers. Sweet sensations rippled through her. Uncertain how long she would be able to maintain the façade of actually eating, she fed him more. "What comes next?"

"You didn't say there would be a quiz." His mouth pursed, and his voice was petulant.

"This is all a test, Matt. If you know you can please a woman, then nothing will stand between you and the woman you want."

He snorted derisively. "I've looked in the mirror."

She stared at him. Years of hurt permeated his voice. "It's nothing some new clothes won't fix," she said. "You have an incredible body. Never let anyone tell you otherwise. When I finish with you, you'll know how to bring a woman to orgasm with your hands and your mouth."

"Why would I want to do that?" His eyes were hard. "I just wanted to know how to fuck and we already did that."

"I fucked you, Matt. You didn't actually do anything but lie there and take it. By the time I leave, you'll know how to take matters into your own hands." She took his face in her hands and kissed him until they were both breathing hard. "Giving a woman an orgasm, that's power, that's control." She rained kisses over his face. "You want that, Matt, don't you? You want to know that you can make your woman wet with a look or a word. You

want to know she lies awake at night, alone in her bed while you're at work, wishing you were inside her."

His words were so quiet, so strained that she barely heard him. "No woman will ever want me like that."

"You don't know how wrong you are," she said, thinking reverently of the way Jonas affected her. "Touch me. Make me want you."

Placing his hot hands on her thighs, he caressed and massaged the tender skin there, circling closer and closer to the inferno he was creating inside. Her breathing came harder, encouraging him to circle closer.

When she felt he had mastered how he should be touching her, she lifted her lips to his, capturing them in a long, slow, deep kiss, and pressing her breasts against his bare chest. "Yes," she urged him. "Touch me, Matt. Don't be afraid."

His thumbs parted her as he massaged deeper and deeper, teasing gasps from her.

"Do you want me now?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, struggling to catch her breath. "But make me wait, Matt. Show me what you promise. Tease me with those strong hands."

"What if I'm too rough with you?" he asked. "What if I get carried away and I hurt you?"

Her vision clouded over at the memory of the wonderful ways he hurt her. "You can be rough, Matt. I'll tell you if you go too far. Don't hold back your passion. I get off on how much you want me."

He was an apt pupil. Shoving two long fingers deep inside, he thrust them slowly in and out, teasing her to the point of frenzy. Sabrina rocked on him, the heat spiraling from him into her, fanning the fire within. He bent his head to suckle her breasts, biting and rolling her nipples with his teeth and tongue.

Remembering her role, she eased away from him, laying herself open on the table. "Finish with your tongue," she commanded. "Make me come with your mouth."

Pushing her legs farther apart, he continued to touch, tracing his fingertips through her wetness as though he was memorizing every surface, every fold. Then his tongue was on her, burning her with its heat. Her hips rose from the table and she moaned.

Sliding his hands beneath the rounded globes of her ass, he lifted her hips, tilting her for better access. He licked her, his hot tongue tracing flames until he locked onto her clitoris, his teeth scraping as passion took him. He sucked hard, slurping and making little sounds in the back of his throat as if he had been starved and she was the only sustenance that could save him.

She gasped his name, his real name. She wanted to thread her fingers through his hair, to feel his soft, silken locks wrapping around them, but she had to grasp the table for leverage and balance. He slid two fingers inside, rocking her fast and furious until she came, screaming at the riot of waves washing over her.

Then his heat was gone for a moment as he stood, shifting his position. He grabbed Sabrina by the back of her neck and drew her to him, kissing her hard and she tasted herself on his lips and tongue.

He lifted her, impaling her on him, and carried Sabrina upstairs to lay her down on his *Star Wars* comforter. Wild hands roamed her body, desperate and adoring at the same time.

She wrapped her legs around him tightly and returned the favor, luxuriating in the texture of his smooth skin as he moved against her, thrusting deep and slow.

With all the gentleness of a virgin, he made love to her. If she hadn't known him the way she did, Sabrina would have thought he was actually in love with her, so reverent were his caresses. It was bittersweet. He gazed down at her, his eyes heavy-lidded with passion, his movements deliberate and unhurried.

The fire he stoked in her grew, and he carefully fed it with each measured thrust. He locked her to him with his topaz eyes and welded her to him with each slow lunge, refusing to give into an easy frenzy.

Her hips undulated beneath him, rising slowly to meet him each time. The fire smoldering in her core was unlike anything she had ever experienced before and it frightened her with what it forced her to give him. She had felt close to Jonas before, but never like this, as if they were two halves of a whole, their souls meeting and joining for the first and last time.

He felt it too. She saw it in his eyes, innocent and undisguised, just as she saw his determination. He could have climaxed at any time, but he was tenaciously waiting for her. Then the slow burn culminated, pushing her

over that pinnacle. She lost all sense of herself as she climaxed, calling his name over and over until he joined her in the abyss.

Much, much later, after she lured him firmly away from virgin territory, she lay in Jonas's arms, her head on his shoulder, hoping nothing had changed between them.

"Jonas?"

"Hmmm?" He was hovering on the edge of sleep.

"Where did you get all this stuff?"

"What stuff?" He was waking up. There was humor in his voice.

"Don't be obtuse. The posters, the books, the chair, the clothes." She lost it on the last word. Laughter made her gasp for air.

"Are you laughing at me?" His voice held mock reproof. "Sabrina, that's not nice. Even nerds like hot women."

"I'm not disputing that," she said, once she brought her amusement under control. "But how long have you been planning this? It must have taken you a long, long time to find all that stuff."

"Not as long as you think," he mumbled. "Most of this *stuff* is mine. It's been in my parents' basement forever. The Wii is Ryan's. Ellen paid me to take it out of the house. We've got it for the weekend. I was going to challenge you to a game of bowling tomorrow, but now I'm not sure I want to play with you. Maybe I'll kick your ass at boxing, golf, or Dance Dance Revolution. As you may recall, I'm not a bad dancer. I have good rhythm—a fact I dare you to dispute—and stamina."

Understanding dawned. It wasn't the first time he had brought up the topic of a geek liking hot women. "You were a geek in high school, weren't you?"

"You wouldn't have looked at me twice unless you needed help with your calculus or AP English."

"Maybe you underestimate yourself." She hated to think she would have missed out on this because he didn't fit into her social circle.

He shifted her to his chest. "Honey, I've seen pictures of you in high school. You were hot then and you're hot now. There are, no doubt, legions of girls from your graduating class that are extremely bitter about the fact that you're still so damn sexy twelve years later. Don't pretend you weren't popular. You wouldn't have noticed me at all. I was quiet and geeky. I

didn't date until college. I'm different now, but you still didn't look at me at all until you needed a husband."

"That's not true," she said. "I noticed you before then. I thought you were cute."

"But not cute enough to talk to."

"You shouldn't take it personally, Jonas. I don't date people from work. It creates too many complications." She traced circles on his chest with her fingertips.

He stopped her. "I think it's a mistake to allow you around virgins."

Lazily, she slapped at his chest. "You enjoyed it. Don't pretend like you didn't."

"Hell, yes, I enjoyed it. But, honey, you'll ruin a guy for life."

Sabrina was tired. Deflowering a virgin and stepping around an ego was hard work. "Watch it, Spencer. You're treading on thin ice."

He laughed, the deep, rich sound rumbling under her ear. "Simmer down, hot stuff. If this was a guy's first sexual experience, no other woman could hope to ever measure up."

She let him fall asleep under her while she pondered his last statement. In so many ways, he was her first sexual experience. She didn't want to look elsewhere. Even if all things were equal, no one could hope to measure up to Jonas. She had it bad. Sabrina closed her eyes and tried not to think about Ellen's firm conviction that she would need to trick him into staying once the year was over.

## Chapter 15

In December, Sabrina surprised Jonas with a trip to London, Paris, Berlin, and Tokyo. Ellen supplied the names of the clubs and paved the way for their admission. Sabrina had been to all four cities before, but now she saw them through new eyes. They went sightseeing and stayed in the finest hotels.

The New Year dawned bright and fresh and full of promise. She couldn't help but feel a little deflated. It marked the beginning of the end of her time with Jonas.

She sat in her office, staring into the middle distance instead of preparing for the preliminary interview she was about to conduct with a large firm that had contacted them about putting together a proposal. She tried to quiet the ticking of her biological clock, which had never bothered her before and refused to cooperate now. Images of children with Jonas's eyes and her hair kept appearing, mocking Sabrina and distracting her from the task at hand.

When Minnie called to announce her appointment, Sabrina took a deep breath and squared her shoulders, preparing to meet with the people who had requested her specifically. She wished she had been more prepared. She hadn't even looked at the name of the company.

Sabrina opened the door and froze in shock, recognizing Stephen immediately. In eight years, he had changed so little. His dark brown hair was shorter, but he hadn't been able to tame the unruly waves. It didn't take much for her to see it moving with a breeze or to remember the silky feel of it against her skin. His face was distinguished, marked by a jaw that was square and strong. He had a wide smile and friendly brown eyes.

He was only five-eight, but he commanded attention as if he were much taller.

“Stephen!” His name had not been on the account. She would have noticed a detail like that, though the name “Galen Enterprises” should have tipped her off.

His smile widened when he saw her. “Sabrina,” he said, delight dancing in his warm eyes. “I wanted to surprise you. I see I was successful.”

He leaned close and kissed her cheek, lingering a little too long. Her entire team and her assistant watched her greet the man she’d nearly spent her life with. Sabrina ushered him into her office and tried not to see the questioning and disapproving looks five people sent her way. At least Ophelia’s internship was over. Otherwise she would have been sending one too.

She’d expected a team, a contingent of several people. Stephen came alone. Minnie took his coat and hung it up. Sabrina directed Stephen to the sofa. He reached for her hand and pulled Sabrina down next to him. The visit had a dreamlike quality. She kept expecting to wake up to the sight of Jonas sound asleep next to her.

Minnie offered coffee. He accepted and turned to Sabrina, never once relinquishing her hand. “You look absolutely incredible, Sabrina. It’s been far too long since I’ve seen you. Tell me how you’ve been.”

She needed time to compose her thoughts because the first thing that came to mind was the number of men she’d slept with since she’d last seen him. Genuinely happy to see him, she smiled widely. “Why don’t you go first? Brett told me you moved to Chicago and got married.”

“I did,” he said. Minnie handed him a mug of fresh coffee. “Thanks.” He waited until she closed the door behind her to continue. “The divorce will be final in April.”

Sabrina nodded in understanding. “So you came back to see me.” She wasn’t sure this was actually a business meeting. She’d sent out tentative queries to Galen, but she hadn’t heard back. “Why?”

“I missed you,” he said candidly. “We were good together.”

Sabrina had a slightly different recollection, but she wasn’t about to bring that up now. “Stephen, I’m married.”

He nodded and ran his thumb and his eyes over her wedding rings. “I heard. Jonas Spencer, age thirty-five. Left teaching a year ago to pursue a career in advertising. He shows promise.”

“Who is your spy?” she asked.

He laughed. "If I tell you that, I'll have to tell you how I know all about your grandfather's will and the real reason you married Mr. Spencer." He looked up, meeting her eyes. "When will your divorce be final?"

"Stephen," she said in warning. Not only was it a rude question, she didn't want to think about what life would be like without Jonas.

"Sorry, Sabrina. I wanted to lay all the cards on the table right away. We never played games before and I don't want to start now. I sent flowers to the funeral, Sabrina. I would have divorced Kelly in a heartbeat for you."

She remembered seeing the flowers. She'd sent a thank-you note. "If you're being completely honest, then why did you want to meet me here? Does this have anything to do with business, or is this entirely personal?"

He sighed. "Mostly business. Dad wants to explore options for expanding his market base for several of our products. Imagine my surprise when my research turned up your name as one of the best. You were always intelligent and creative. I never doubted you'd be good at this."

"Thank you," she said. She concentrated on turning the discussion to business matters, so she didn't see him leaning in to kiss her until it was too late.

It was a short foray. His lips brushed against hers. They were cool and soft, just like she remembered. He was testing the waters. Sabrina drew back and rose to her feet.

"Stephen, I told you I was married." She kept her tone gentle, even a little regretful, but it had an underlying firmness that couldn't be missed.

His eyes lit wistfully. "Normally, I would love that you're so loyal. But I haven't heard you say you were in love with him."

She thought Jonas should hear something like that from her first. "It's really none of your business."

His smile grew. "I'll wait."

"Can we discuss what it is you want Rife and Company to do for you?"

Two hours later, Sabrina had a sizable list in her hand. Stephen's father wanted one firm to handle all of the marketing. Since Rife was a midsize company ripe for growth, they thought it was a good fit. However, they were giving eight pitch spots to different companies. Rife would receive two. Sabrina's team had to take one. The other should go to her biggest rival.



Sabrina wondered if his research had revealed that Jared Larsen was her biggest rival and that her husband was on Jared's team. Now she and Jonas would be in direct competition for an account that could make either one of their careers. It wasn't the first time she'd competed with Jared, but it was the first time since she'd married Jonas.

The competition didn't worry her; the fact that Stephen seemed determined to win her back did. Sabrina didn't put it past Stephen to try to sow discord, or enlist Jared to help. Her stomach twisted, refusing to consider lunch.

She asked Minnie to set up a meeting with Joy and Jared immediately. The sooner she got this out in the open, the sooner her stomach would stop heaving.

Joy was ecstatic. She knew Galen Enterprises was a large firm with diverse holdings. The firm usually had to nibble away at a company, account by account, until they trusted Rife with their prize possessions. This could double the shareholder values in a very short time.

Jared smelled a rat. "Why us?"

"I've known the Galens for years," Sabrina said. "I've been querying them. But it won't be an easy sell. My acquaintance with them won us two spots of eight. If either of us lands this account, it will be because we earned it. My connections won't get us special treatment with the people hearing our pitches."

He wouldn't let up. "Why now?"

*Because Stephen wanted to reestablish a connection with me and this was his excuse.* She used Stephen's reasoning for her verbal answer. "We're a midsize company ripe for expansion. You'll find our competitors will all be similarly sized and positioned."

Sabrina was quiet at dinner, trying to figure out how to broach the subject with Jonas. She was sure Jared had already told him and Timothy about the project. After the mistake he made with the cat food account, Jared had cut back on his tee time and was actually seen in the office during business hours.

Also, he had been given permission to temporarily hire another team member. She asked him to interview Ophelia, because she was good, but she wasn't sure that was a nice thing to do to her. Sabrina called to warn her either way.

“Worried?” Jonas asked, reaching across the table to lay his hand over hers. It was the middle of winter and she was wearing a sweater, thick socks, and slippers, even though the floor was heated. He wore his customary t-shirt and jeans and his feet were bare. It was Tuesday, so he would leave for work right after dinner. “I promise not to peek at your notes if you promise not to peek at mine.”

Her smile was as tiny as her laugh. Confession time. “It’s Stephen’s father’s company,” she said. “Stephen met with me today, representing Galen Enterprises.”

“Ahhh,” he said, as if it explained everything. “I wondered who would have the nerve to kiss you.”

Nobody had been in the room. Her jaw dropped. “How did you hear about that?”

“I guess when somebody rich and handsome lays one on somebody else’s wife in front of a roomful of witnesses, news inevitably travels directly to the husband. They meant well, of course.” He was amused. “Don’t worry. I won’t kill him for such a small token of affection.”

It dawned on Sabrina that he was talking about the kiss on the cheek. She waved away his words. “That was nothing. He kissed me again when we were alone.” She’d meant it to sound nonchalant, but the way Jonas’s features hardened had her rethinking her delivery.

“On the mouth?”

She’d fumbled this badly and now she paused, searching for the best way to recover. She took too long.

Jonas was far from pleased. “I thought he was married and living in Chicago. From the way you described him, he didn’t seem the type to cheat on his wife.”

“His divorce will be final in April.”

Jonas stood, grabbing his plate. His dinner was only half-eaten. Sabrina jumped to her feet and went to him, putting her body in the way of his exit.

“I told him I was married.”

Some of the tension left him. “Before or after he kissed you?”

She had to think about that one. “Both.”

He evaded her, and she was forced to follow him into the kitchen. “He’s still in love with you.”

Maybe he was, maybe he wasn't. She wasn't about to debate Stephen's feelings with Jonas. "No. I think he's upset that his marriage is ending and he's trying to recreate simpler times."

He cleared his plate into the disposal and started in on the dishes.

"Damn it, Jonas, don't do this. I didn't kiss him, he kissed me. I moved away from him and reminded him that I was married. I steered the conversation toward business matters. I did everything right. You can't be mad at me." She hated feeling like she had to be defensive. She hadn't done anything wrong.

He stopped, staring out the window above the sink. "I'm not mad at you."

"Then why are you acting like this?" She stomped her foot, a useless gesture. "This is why I didn't want to tell you. But it didn't feel right to keep it from you either."

"Because we're friends." He said it quietly, as if he was reminding himself.

"Because we're lovers." *Because I love you.* "Because we promised to be honest with each other. And, yes, because we're friends."

He whirled, grabbed her around the waist, and pinned her against the counter, kissing her roughly, as if he could erase the memory of Stephen's brief brush. Sabrina gripped his shoulders to hold him close until his hands moved up her back. Then she threaded her fingers through his short curls and deepened the kiss.

It was different from the way he usually kissed her. Though it was erotic and she was wet for him, he didn't do it to arouse her. He did it to mark her, to brand her, to bind her to him. Didn't he know it was unnecessary? He broke the kiss, resting his forehead against hers as their chests heaved, starved for air.

"I have to go to work," he said at last, his voice heavy with the weight of his demons. He left without looking back.

Trembling, she watched him go, wishing she could call out to him and make him see he wasn't alone, not if he didn't want to be.

But she didn't. She couldn't.

\* \* \* \*

The next month passed in a rush. Work was insane. In addition to their regular accounts, her team was putting in extra time on the Galen pitch. They knew it meant significant promotions for all.

Sabrina had pulled back drastically from the way she used to control her team's every move. It turned out to be a good thing because now she could spend more time managing the Galen proposal and filling in the holes when they ran short on staff.

Jonas worked no less than Sabrina did. Where they had reached an unspoken agreement to leave work at work, mostly due to the fact that he monopolized her time when he was home, they now set aside time each night for work. It left less time for the role-playing she loved to do with him, but they found time elsewhere.

They woke up earlier in the morning. They ordered out for dinner. They showered together. Most significantly, he began waking her when he got home from work. Those encounters were invariably frantic and rough. She didn't complain. She loved it hard and fast and she understood why he needed it to be like that. He left her sore, but soreness had built-in benefits for Sabrina. She could finally masturbate on her own regularly. The vibrator was no longer something only he could use with her when she was restrained, but something she could use by herself.

He ceased prompting her to use dirty language with him. He didn't ask her to speak at all. Instead, he murmured her name desperately, as if each night was their last time together. After a month of this, she began to worry. Which of his demons had him now? Was it a new one? Or an old one tired of being dormant?

On a frosty Tuesday in February, restlessness invaded Sabrina, and she couldn't make it go away. She wanted Jonas. She wanted him home and she wanted him inside her, pounding her until he made her come. She had the vibrator he had so thoughtfully bought her, but it wasn't the same.

It was never brutal, never cruel and demanding. It did the job, but it didn't push her to the heights Jonas could make her reach. To be fair, Jonas was never brutal or cruel. He was rough when she wanted it and gentle at any other time. She secretly craved the ruthlessness she sensed in him, that he saved for his clients.

She heard him come in downstairs sometime around midnight. He crept through the darkened room, disappearing into the bathroom. She knew he

would shower, then climb into bed. She didn't know if she would feel his hand on her hip in invitation or if he was too exhausted to do more than fall asleep.

Boldly, or perhaps a little cowardly, she donned her silk dressing gown and turned the handle to open the bathroom door. Though it was cold outside, the house was sealed tight, and she still slept naked most nights. It was easier to do with Jonas in bed beside her. He generated more body heat than should be humanly possible.

In the eight months they'd been married, she had never disturbed him in the bathroom after he worked. She wanted him to have time to lay his demons to rest. However, that hadn't been happening since Stephen had reappeared in her life.

He wasn't in the shower as she expected. Instead, he was bent over the sink, his strong hands gripping the edge so hard his knuckles were white. Lost in thought, he stared at the floor and didn't hear her come in.

He was fully dressed, but the hard, lean muscles of his shoulders and arms were visible through the fabric of his shirt.

Tentatively, she caressed his shoulder. "Jonas? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said tightly. "Go back to bed."

Sabrina didn't believe him. She leaned against the counter next to him and watched the strain show in his lines even more. His head turned slightly, and she knew he was looking at her legs. The dressing gown belted in the front, covering anything she wouldn't want to show to the general public, but it was short, falling only to mid-thigh.

"At least tell me what you're thinking about."

Without looking at her, he answered, the strain in his body reflected in his voice. "I'm trying to convince myself I should masturbate and leave you alone."

"I'm awake," she pointed out. "You don't have to leave me alone."

"Go to bed, Sabrina." Finally, he looked up at her. She saw the misery there, the internal battle he was fighting. She had no idea why he was fighting it. She was more than willing. "You have no idea what you're asking."

"No?" she challenged. "Then tell me."

Slowly, his eyes darkened. When he was aroused, they were liquid gold. Now, they were closer to bronze. He caged her with his arms and that look.

She was instantly wet. Her nipples hardened and her breasts swelled, yearning for the feel of his palm and the pinch of his fingers. Her breath caught. She struggled to refrain from leaning close and kissing him. Something in her knew he wouldn't be able to handle it right now. It wasn't what he wanted.

He hadn't meant to turn her on. "You won't like it," he warned.

Her upper lip curled in a smile. She wasn't about to run away from this challenge. Something dangerous and reckless in his demeanor beckoned to something primal in her. "Why don't you let me decide?"

The bronze light intensified. She'd never seen him like this. He was in the grip of a fever. It couldn't be the first time, and she knew it wouldn't be the last. He leaned close, his lips so close she could feel them tracing the curve of her neck, though their pressure never materialized, leaving her longing for the physical contact.

"I want to make you cry, Sabrina. I want to turn your skin pink with my whip, heating it until you cry out for mercy. I want to see tears streaming down your face because you ache and you don't want me to stop, but you know you should want it to stop. I want to hear you beg me until I can't stand it anymore."

He lifted his head to look her in the face. "I want to hear you say you belong to me and no one else. I want to hear you say that no one can make you feel the way I make you feel. I want you to scream my name because it's the only word you know, because it's everything to you."

He was hoping to scare her and he did a little. She held his gaze, searching his eyes for hate, for anger, for malice, but she found nothing remotely like that. She saw only his desire, his need. She thought about how the only time she could masturbate to orgasm was when she was sore from the rough sex she needed, that he gave her without question, without judgment and without reservation.

Slowly, she loosened the satin belt of her short robe, letting it fall open. Rolling her shoulders ever so delicately, she released the fabric. It slid down her body with the whisper of a caress, taking Jonas's eyes with it.

His eyes feasted on the sight of her naked body for a long time. As potent as if he were actually touching her, he caressed the curve of her hip, the lines of her inner thighs, and her calves before changing direction. He

lingered on the sight of her breasts with their pebbled nipples tipped toward him, begging for his mouth.

When he met her eyes again, his eyes had returned to olive green. He shook his head, a tiny, desperate movement. "You have no idea what you're asking."

"I trust you." The words came out on a breath colored with need, but they were completely true.

"It will hurt, Sabrina." Desperation was back.

Now she understood the look he gave her when she misbehaved during their bondage activities. He wanted to discipline her, but he was afraid of hurting her in a way that would irrevocably damage their relationship.

"I know the safety word," she said, throwing him a cheeky grin. The grin was brief. She quickly morphed it into something infinitely more seductive, assuming the role of the bored housewife.

Lifting her hand, she traced his lips with a seductive finger. She wanted the abandon he promised. "I've been a naughty wife, Jonas. I've amused myself with the delivery man, the pool boy, the gardener, and random men from the street. My husband is away so much, you see, but now he's back and he knows everything."

He stopped breathing. She let her finger wander, and she knew she was trailing fire in her wake. "He's very intelligent, you see. He knows what kind of woman he married. Maybe he sent me those morsels as gifts, but now he's home and he needs to remind me that no one measures up to him. Nobody can come close to making me feel the way he makes me feel."

She had him, but he hadn't realized it yet. "Make me come, Jonas. Make me scream your name because it's the only word I know."

"If you go to bed now, I will forget all of this," he said, trembling with the effort to refrain from touching her.

Sabrina shook her head. "No, you won't, and neither will I. You told me not to be ashamed of what turns me on. You told me it was okay to want this, to want you like this." As she spoke, she let her fingers stroke his face and trail south. "I've been waiting for you, Jonas. I've been aching for your touch."

He stilled her fingers with his iron grip before she could release the snap on his jeans.

Without a word, the desperation vanished, as did the pain and anguish. His dark olive eyes regarded her without compassion or mercy as his hands encircled her wrists. He pinned them behind her back and kissed her savagely, ravaging her lips in a punishing kiss.

Sabrina was so wet her legs trembled. She tried to press her body to his, but he threaded his fingers through her long, dark hair and pulled her back, holding her away from him.

He broke the kiss, but not his grip on her hair, which he used to force Sabrina to her knees. Her heart sped up in anticipation. If he were merely going to bind her, she knew what came next. Because this was all new, she had no idea what he was going to do, and that was the best part.

Faced with evidence of his erection at eye-level, an impish impulse kicked in. From the beginning, she had been aware of her power over him. In some ways, he was never in charge of sex. He might make her beg and say words that would never normally cross her lips, but he only did it to please her.

Licking her lips hungrily, Sabrina ran her hands up his inner thighs, encircling the area of his arousal wantonly. Usually, that would be enough for him to open his pants and press her toward him. This time was different. He lifted her, tossing her over his shoulder and knocking the air from her in a long whoosh.

She protested, pushing herself up after they cleared the doorway. "You know you want it," she said. "You know you want me to suck your cock." Words like that from her never failed to excite him, but they fell on deaf ears this time. For the first time in a long time, she felt a little helpless. Her clitoris swelled in anticipation.

He threw her on the bed so hard she bounced, but he didn't follow her down. "Don't move," he said, turning to leave.

"Or what? You'll punish me?" All of her bravado was false. She may have agreed to let him whip her, but the thought petrified her.

The look he threw over his shoulder promised much. "I'm going to punish you anyway. If you move, I'll punish you even worse."

When he returned, she had moved, and not just in an effort to adjust her position. She was standing in the bathroom door, having just come from hanging up her robe. She may have dropped it in an effort to be sultry, but she hated leaving clothing on the floor. Having been the victim of her



exasperation on the topic often enough, he knew exactly what she was doing.

Ripping the robe from its hanger, he tossed it to the floor next to the bed. If she were lying down, she wouldn't be able to see it. Since she knew it was there, the robe would haunt her for the rest of the evening if he didn't make her forget about it.

He grabbed Sabrina and set her gently on the edge of the bed with her feet on the floor. All business, he ignored everything except his task, which was to secure leather bindings to her wrists. He handcuffed her to the foot of the bed.

Sabrina might not know what came next, but her character would. "Honey, you don't want to do this," she said. Before she could utter another word, he gagged her. She gazed up at him furiously, the promise of retribution in her eyes.

He smiled, mirroring her earlier impudence. "One day you'll learn, but I hope that day doesn't come anytime soon." He left the room.

When he tied her up, he invariably left her alone, though usually in a far less comfortable position. Waiting was part of the game, and she had developed patience. Tonight, anxiousness made the wait unbearable. Sabrina heard the back door slam shut and she nearly wept. He couldn't leave her here like this. The robe on the floor she couldn't reach became unimportant. She was wet, curious, and waiting.

She heard the door again and relief flooded through her. Moments trickled past until, at last, he was back.

Tossing an unfamiliar duffle bag on the bed next to Sabrina, he unzipped it and rummaged around. The odor of canvas and leather wafted from it. Because of the angle, she couldn't see what was in the bag, but she didn't have to. She knew.

He lifted out one whip. The handle was eight inches long, bound tightly in black leather. The end that would soon be licking her flesh was also black leather, but it wasn't tightly bound. Like one of the whips she had seen him use that one night at the club, it was a bundle of leather falls, spilling from the handle in a riot of promise.

Turning it in his hand, he adjusted his grip until it was perfect. He held it in front of her, rotating it so that the individual strips of leather tumbled

over each other. "I've been around the world with this thing, my dear wife. I've tested it on hundreds, making sure it was properly broken in for you."

Sabrina stared at the thing, caught between the fear common sense told her she should feel and the anticipation she couldn't help but feel.

He opened his hand, balancing the handle on his palm. "It's perfectly weighted for my hand and the grip is comfortable and familiar. If it were a tennis racquet, I would be a formidable opponent. As it stands, my darling, you do need to be taught a lesson."

Abruptly, he closed his hand around the handle and released her handcuffs with his other hand. She hadn't even noticed he was holding the key, something that always caught her attention in the past. He removed the gag.

"Stand up, darling. You're going to take this without the benefit of restraints."

*Now* she was afraid. She assumed he would tie her down. In her fantasies, she was always tied down for this part, if not the whole thing. She panicked. "You would do this to me? Your wife? I married you when no one else would have you and this is how you repay me?"

Okay, maybe that was going a little too far, but she was completely unnerved by the fact that he released the handcuffs. It was one thing to be tied down, to passively accept what he dished out because she had no choice but to trust him. It was something else entirely to stand there and take it, to become an active participant. No matter how much she wanted it, no matter how much she fantasized about it, she didn't have the courage to follow through like this.

Sabrina looked up at him to see a glimmer of satisfaction in his eyes. The bastard was doing this on purpose. He was counting on her to cry wolf, or "onion," as the case may be. Well, she could play this game at least as well as he could.

Ignoring her nakedness, Sabrina stood proudly and glared at him with a disdain she did not feel. "You can't do this to me. I made you. I can break you." Her words forced him to use his skills to dominate her in other ways. If he refused to tie her up, then she was going to make him use force.

A slow smile curved his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'm going to make you beg," he promised.

Her stomach muscles clenched, and she was aware that she had become uncomfortably moist. Her breathing became shallow, but she didn't look away from the promise he made and kept from her.

He threw the whip on the bed and took one step, closing the distance between them and forcing her head back in order to keep challenging him. His fingertips traced a path down her arms that made her tremble. She thought he would imprison her wrists, but his hands jumped to her waist and he spun her around to face the post at the foot of the bed.

It was shorter than the posts on the headboard, reaching only to the height of her shoulders. His hands closed over hers, a gentle caress when she wanted rough treatment. With infinite tenderness, he lifted her hands and placed them so she gripped the post. He lifted her hair and secured it out of the way. She felt his breath on her neck below her ear where he knew it would drive her insane with the need for his touch.

"Hold on, darling. This is all you're going to get." He brushed a feathery kiss across the sensitized skin and stepped back, snagging his whip. "Now this is a precision operation, as I'm sure you know." He had dropped all pretense of intimacy. His tone was brusque. "If you move too much, the blows will hurt more or less. If you tense too much, you'll feel it for a week. In any event, don't count on sitting or leaning against anything tomorrow."

Waiting was the worst part. Until that point, Sabrina thought she was so good at waiting. It was a mind game, one she had learned to play, or so she thought. The time it took for him to find his grip and tell her to hold still stretched her coiled nerves. If he kept this up, she would come at his first touch.

The first blow landed on the back and side of her right leg. The second landed in the same place, but on the left side. They came so quickly she didn't have time to process the first, much less recover from it, before he struck a second, third, fourth time.

It stung.

It was nothing like she thought it would be.

Air escaped her lungs in a low, brief moan which she didn't think could be heard over the swish of the whip through the air or the sound it made smacking against her virgin skin. Her hands tightened on the smooth, polished antique wood.

The stinging moved up her body, claiming her ass, her hips, continuing to torture the sensitive skin of her back. The blows came too fast for her to anticipate them. She tensed all over and the singing of the whip stopped.

She still felt every sting of the lash. Every nerve was awake and protesting, every muscle supporting the picket line. Tears welled in her eyes, and she couldn't make a sound.

He moved closer, and she could feel the brush of his clothes against her skin, even though he wasn't touching her. The fingertip he ran from her shoulder to her thigh and back up the other side nearly sent her over the edge. She couldn't squelch one miserable moan. If he touched her clitoris now, she had no doubt she would come.

"Relax," he directed. "You're no good to me if you don't relax."

She tried. She willed her muscles to respond, but they were granite. Ironically, she knew he had barely begun. According to Ellen, clients typically lasted for fifteen to forty-five minutes. This was pathetic. She strengthened her resolve, but it didn't help to relax her.

He kicked at her feet, forcing them shoulder-width apart. Reaching under her, he found her wetness. She trembled, her entire body shaking at his touch. He pressed her clitoris hard, and she came. It was a small release, but it allowed her to relax.

The throbbing hadn't subsided when he started again. The stinging, which had begun as hundreds of separate lines, merged into one mass. She was on fire. Dropping her head against the bedpost, her entire body relaxed into the rhythm he set. Her hips moved back and forth, wanting more but afraid of asking because then he would stop.

He moved around Sabrina, and the tips of the whip stung the front of her thighs and her stomach. Her moans and gasps came louder, and she knew he could hear them over the sound of the whip whistling through the air.

Then he stopped, and she cried out in protest. Sabrina turned her head to see him reach into the bag for another whip and a length of rope. He crossed to the rounded area of the room where a window seat ringed the bank of windows. Gossamer curtains covered them, but anyone standing outside the house could see their silhouettes. All the lights in the room were on.

Sabrina had removed the chandelier an earlier occupant had placed in that spot because the idea of that much glass hanging from the ceiling in the

bedroom didn't sit well with her. She'd left the anchor in the ceiling. Jonas pushed an end table over and looped the rope through the anchor.

He beckoned to her. "Come here."

She obeyed immediately, willing to do almost anything to make him continue. Sore muscles and burning skin protested pleasantly.

He handed her both ends of the rope. "Hold this." They fell to a point that was still above her head. Reaching up, she grasped one end in each hand.

He lifted the low table that sat next to the sofa and put it back, then picked up the whip he had tossed on the cushion of the window seat. The tongues of this whip were longer and thinner. There were fewer of them, but she knew it would sting more. Lifting his eyes to the rope in her hands, he smirked. "Don't let go."

The rope was to anchor her and keep her arms out of the way. He had no intention of restraining her, of giving her that release. Like he had in that club in Lexington, he was going to make her work for it. "Bastard." She muttered the word under her breath, but he heard it anyway.

He laughed. "Oh, honey, you have only begun to atone for your sins. When I finish with you, you won't remember anything but me and what I've given you. When you shower, when you dress, every time your clothing shifts against your skin, you will remember exactly how much of a true bastard I am."

He began working her with a feverish intensity. She thought the first whip hurt, but it was nothing compared to this. He spared no part of her. Sabrina's skin burned. A glance down showed she was as pink as he predicted. An inferno smoldered inside her, a chemical bomb set to explode if only he would light the fuse.

She begged. She sobbed. She pleaded with him, apologizing profusely, but forgetting why. The reasons no longer mattered. Just when she thought she could stand no more, peace came and she submitted completely.

She had submitted to him before. Each time, the release had been soul-deep, incomparable to anything else. This time was even more so.

Sensing her acquiescence, the whip halted. Sabrina heard the dull thump as it fell to the carpeted floor. Cold hands shocked the hot skin of her waist.

"Let go," he said.

"I have." She sighed.

He chuckled gently and the rumble sent waves through her skin, though his chest barely brushed her. Tears blurred her vision. She felt his hands pry her fingers loose and lower her arms. He leaned her against him, putting his arms around her only so he could squirt something from a little bottle into the palm of his hand.

The oil was hot as he rubbed it into her skin everywhere he had turned her pink. She knew it was because the oil held in the heat emanating from every inch of her. She whimpered with need by the time he made it to her inner thighs. Without hesitating, he slid his hand between her legs.

Sabrina stiffened because she knew what was coming next. She lifted her head from his shoulder to look up at him, her mouth open in surprise.

He smiled indulgently and pushed her head back down on his shoulder. "Vitamin E," he said into her hair. "It'll help your skin heal."

She wasn't interested in her skin. She was interested in the tight coils inside that begged for the release he promised with those hands that never stopped moving. The oil mixed with her own fluids, greatly reducing the amount of friction she craved.

He slid several fingers inside and she rode his hand hard, scraping her clitoris on his palm until she came. She cried out his name and tears coursed down her cheeks, mingling with the ones that had already dried.

He released her hair and kissed her, the gentle affection in direct contrast to what he had just done and how he usually kissed her after he spent the evening punishing his clients.

It was her undoing.

He picked her up, hooking his arm under her legs and cradling her against his chest, and he carried her to the bed. Laying her down, he caressed her with his eyes and his words, praising her as he undressed. He lay down on top of her, settling his weight so that he slowly pressed her into the mattress. His touch was soft, reverent, but her skin was so sensitized that every caress was amplified thousands of times. Because he hadn't restrained her, she didn't feel trained to keep her hands away from him. She let them explore, reveling in the power to exact gasps and moans he didn't want to give.

She made love to him. She wasn't sure he was aware that he was making love to her, too, and she wasn't about to bring it to his attention.

## Chapter 16

In the morning, Jonas examined every inch of Sabrina. No trace of pinkened skin remained, but he was right about several things. She felt it when she showered. Her muscles, which she tensed after he warned her not to, were sore. When her clothes shifted over her body, which happened far more often in the course of a day than she ever thought it could, it felt as if he were caressing her. She was still so sensitive.

And she was tired. They were both going on three hours of sleep, which made him irritable. Sabrina also suspected he realized that not only did he make love to her, she made love right back to him. Both were enough to render him a bear.

She ordered take-out to be delivered right after they arrived home and sent him to bed when he finished eating. He tried to argue with her, but he didn't have the energy. Of course, that meant he woke up at four in the morning, ready to start the day, which meant he woke her up for a couple of hours of slow love. She didn't mind at all.

Ellen invited Sabrina out that Friday night. They made a point to have a girls' night out at least once a month. Ginny and Lara were out of town. Ginny had accumulated a good number of international recognitions for her work and she was in demand for shows and private jobs around the world.

Amanda was taking her turn with the flu her family was passing around, leaving them on their own.

"Let's go to my club," Ellen suggested as she picked Sabrina up. They were both dressed to kill and freezing in the icy February wind. "We won't have to pay for drinks."

"Okay, but you can't work while we're there." Every time they went to her club, Ellen invariably ended up having to deal with some kind of problem. "What do they do when you're not there to put out fires?"

She laughed. "I have a new manager. She's pretty good, so we shouldn't have our night interrupted."

The irony of two attractive women alighting from a minivan was lost on Ellen, so firmly was she entrenched in motherhood. Sabrina was the only one who noticed the double-takes as people realized they didn't fit the minivan stereotype. It probably helped that the security guards treated them both like persons of extreme importance.

Ellen took Sabrina to the VIP lounge and they both ordered their usual drinks. She was partial to tequila shots and Sabrina tended toward anything with coconut rum. Sabrina liked hanging out with Ellen. She wasn't demanding or high-maintenance. Sabrina didn't have to watch what she said around her or worry how she would take something. Ginny was the same way, but both Lara and Amanda could be easily offended.

After they gossiped for an hour about the usual stuff, Ellen turned to Sabrina with that expression she got when she wanted to broach a subject and she wasn't sure how Sabrina would react.

"So," she began. "What's going on with our boy?"

Jonas seemed fine to her, especially since Tuesday. "What do you mean?"

"He has some serious angst issues."

It bothered Sabrina that he wouldn't come to her with his problems. "What did he say?"

"He hasn't said anything." She shrugged. "I've barely seen either of you in a month."

"Things have been hectic at work. We've both been keeping insane hours." Sabrina explained about the competition for the Galen Enterprise account, amazed he hadn't told her already.

"He told me about that," she said. "I get the feeling it's something else."

Sabrina shrugged and shook her head. "I have no idea, Ellen. I didn't even know he was upset about anything. He seems fine at home."

Just then, Ellen's floor manager came running to her, whispering urgently in her ear. Sabrina sighed. She knew they should have gone somewhere else. Now Ellen would look at her apologetically and promise to be right back. Very few "emergencies" took under twenty minutes.

The floor manager, who might have been somewhere around fifty, left as quickly as she came.



Ellen turned to Sabrina. "Can you come with me?"

It wasn't what she expected. "Why?"

She pursed her lips. "There's been an accident. Things like this happen once in awhile. It's why we make clients sign consent forms and pay huge membership fees. But we still send everyone involved home for the night."

Sabrina thought Ellen wanted her to spy on Jonas. She was against it for two reasons. First, it wasn't nice to spy. If he wanted her there, he would invite her. Second, she would probably be jealous of anyone she saw him whip.

She opted for obfuscation. "What kind of accident?"

Ellen looked her in the eyes and her face was grave. "Jonas drew blood from a client. No one has been hurt, and our house doctor has cleared the client for release, but I'm still sending him home."

Her eyes widened in understanding. "He's going to be pissed."

"Yes," she said. "If you're with me, he might go quietly. Maybe you can take him home."

"Ellen, he doesn't know I know what he does."

"Sabrina, don't you think this has gone on long enough? Besides, he's in a holding area. I can take you there through the bar." She rolled her eyes and tugged at Sabrina's arm. "Come on. It'll be fine."

He was sitting in a chair across the small room, where he could see the door. No doubt he planned to ambush Ellen as soon as she arrived. He was wearing his shirt, but no shoes. The shock on his face at seeing Sabrina was momentary.

He snarled at Ellen. "There is no reason for me to leave."

"Policy," she said placidly.

He shot a glance at Sabrina. "Nothing happened."

"Great," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm. "Then we cut our girls' night out short for no reason. Thanks."

"Ellen," Sabrina said. The warning and sympathy of her tone were real. He was having a tough time. The angst issues she mentioned were in full force. "I'm sure Jonas didn't mean..." She let the sentence trail off, waving her hand in the air vaguely. "...whatever it is that happened."

"Still," Ellen continued, narrowing her eyes at him. "Policy dictates you go home. No exceptions. I should warn you that getting snarky with me has never worked in your favor."

He glared at her. She regarded him impassively. Sabrina reached out to him. "Jonas, let's go home. Where are your shoes?"

His glare melted, and he looked at his feet in surprise. When his eyes lifted, they found Ellen. His anger was not gone at all. "Elle, be a dear and get my things."

Ellen, not reacting to his sneering tone, seemed immune to his attitude. With a roll of her eyes, she left, and they were alone in the room together.

Jonas studied Sabrina in a way that set her heart pounding and not in a good way. She didn't entertain the idea that he might whip her later because she knew, given his mood, she'd be fortunate if he spoke to her at all.

The ride home was long and cold and silent.

\* \* \* \*

Jonas fumed as the road disappeared beneath the tires. For weeks, he had been rough on his clients. He was known for having a light hand with the whip. He was good at reading clients, at knowing who wanted to leave with heated skin and who wanted to be reduced to a sobbing mass.

Sabrina had wanted to be reduced to a sobbing mass, and he never saw it coming.

The signs were there. She liked rough sex. Whenever she was in control, she was seldom gentle. Passion wasn't something she controlled. It controlled her or it didn't exist. He understood this about her. He loved this about her. He loved driving her to such great heights and watching her freefall.

She was incredibly beautiful all the time, but he especially liked looking at her when she came. Her body writhed and arched. She forgot herself, leaving all her hang-ups far behind. Whispers, sobs, and sighs, all with the letters of his name, fell from those luscious lips.

From the second he heated her skin, he fell into her trap. She surrendered to his whip on a basic, primal level, one to which he'd never reduced her before. Just like Helene, she wanted this from him. She wanted the way he made her feel. She craved his special skill with the cat.

And she'd known for some time she could have this from him. She waited until the right moment and she played her hand well.

Well, he wasn't stupid. He hadn't realized Ellen took her to the club. For some reason, he naively believed he could trust Ellen to keep Sabrina away from that part of his life. Away from the dark parts he hadn't wanted to share with her.

It wouldn't have taken Sabrina long to notice that those who worked in the bar part of Ellen's club wore uniforms, shirts emblazoned with the Southfield City Club logo. From there, it was a simple jump to the realization that Jonas didn't own a single shirt with the club's logo on it.

Sabrina hadn't been in the least bit surprised to see him shoeless and wearing his own shirt tonight. Though she refrained from saying anything incriminating, her subterfuge was no longer necessary.

The time for lying had passed. This thing between them had to stop before he lost his heart to another shameless vixen who only wanted him for the way he made her feel.

To be fair, he'd set up their relationship that way. From the beginning, he controlled her perception of him, training her to seek him for sex and pleasure. She had responded well. Too well.

There was a storm inside him that was going to consume them both. He couldn't let this go on. It was time.

\* \* \* \*

In the kitchen, he threw the keys on the counter and perched his hands near the waist of his jeans. "How long have you known?"

Sabrina wasn't about to play games with him, but it did take her a minute to do the math in her head. "Six months. Since before we went to Kentucky."

"Ellen told you." He was looking for someone to blame.

"If it helps, I found out you were lying to me by accident. I thought you were cheating on me with Sophia. Ellen set me straight."

"You met Sophia?" Steel was softer than his question.

She closed her eyes, realizing her error. She'd identified a second friend who had betrayed him. "Briefly. She was nice." Sabrina moved closer, laying a hand on his arm. "Look, does it really matter? It's out in the open now. You don't have to hide what you do and I won't have to wonder how in the world a bartender pulls in so much money."

"You...you don't care?" That question was much softer, but he was looking at his shoes as he asked it.

"I do care. I care about anything you do, especially something that takes you away from me three nights each week." Her voice was surprisingly steady given the way her emotions strangled her.

He looked her in the eye. "Why have you never said anything?"

She drowned in the olive green and took a chance. "You once told me you have some pretty dark secrets. I figured out there were mainly three. But they're your secrets. I wasn't going to pry or force you to tell me things you didn't feel comfortable sharing with me. I hoped one day you would trust me, know me well enough to understand that I can handle your secrets."

He tensed. "Did Ellen show you or tell you what I do? Is this why you let me whip you? Because you thought it was what I wanted?"

"You did want it." She choked down a laugh. He had been very descriptive about exactly what he wanted. "But I wanted it, too. I've fantasized about it for some time, but I didn't want to tell you because then you would know I knew one of your secrets. Oh, Jonas, I wanted you to confide in me when you were ready. That's why I haven't said anything."

He swallowed and bitterness twisted his lips. "You said three secrets. What were the other two?"

"Helene, obviously. But we've already dealt with that issue." *Mostly.*

Jonas jolted Sabrina out of her thoughts with a prompt. "And the third?"

"Really," she said. "Wouldn't you rather deal with that when you're ready? I really don't want to force you on the last one."

"Sabrina."

She responded to his note of desperation, knowing it was a mistake and unable to stop herself. It was another one Ellen had revealed. "You're terrified of falling in love with me."

His eyes glittered hard, but his voice was soft. "I'm not in love with you."

She dropped her hand from his arm and turned away. She couldn't let him see how his words cut. "I'm aware." *Painfully so.* She didn't mind thinking it in the confines of her head, where optimism could creep in to assure her there was time. Patience, as he had taught her, always paid off.

"You're not in love with me." It was an order, a directive, not an observation.

She couldn't lie to him. "Yes, I am." Tiny cracks formed in her heart. They hurt.

"No, you're not." Someone who didn't know him would have been deceived by the softness of his voice. Sabrina wasn't.

"Just because you're afraid I'll crush you like Helene did doesn't mean you get to dictate my feelings." He caught her arm, but she refused to face him. She would lose it if she saw the coldness, the remoteness that he wore for armor. "I liked you from the beginning. I've loved you for longer than I care to admit." *It most likely started with the rosebush.*

"You love the way I make you feel," he said as if she were a child to whom he was explaining a common misconception. "You love that I set you free, that I taught you how to let go and enjoy sex, to have fun with it. You can have that with anyone, Sabrina. Stephen seems interested."

She looked at Jonas then, incredulity rendering her momentarily speechless. She recovered quickly. "I'm not a confused teenager with a crush on her English teacher," she shot back hotly. "I don't have stars in my eyes. I'm painfully aware of your faults."

"Sabrina," he began.

"I know the difference between love and sex." It came out much louder than she intended. He would try the patience of a saint and she was at least six incarnations away from anything approaching sainthood.

The hard remoteness took over. She didn't have a chance of reaching him, not that she thought this was the right time to have this discussion in the first place. "I never meant for this to happen. I never wanted to hurt you." He was quiet, but she could see he had already arrived at a decision. The cracks in her heart multiplied. The pain was crippling. "Time away from me will give you perspective. I will wait until June to file for divorce."

The hand around her arm loosened and dropped away. With the posture of a defeated man, he walked from the kitchen, heading toward the stairs.

His intention didn't register. It sounded like he said he was leaving, but it looked like he was going up to bed. Wordlessly, she followed and found him in the closet.

He tore through the racks and drawers, tossing his clothes into suitcases and stuffing them into bags. "I'll come back for the rest when you're not home."

Tears coursed down her cheeks, and she choked back a sob. “You don’t have to do this, Jonas. I’m not asking you to leave.” She desperately didn’t want him to leave. She couldn’t breathe. She could barely think.

He froze at the pain in her voice, but he didn’t look at her. “I can’t do this, Sabrina. Maybe you are in love with me. Maybe what you feel is real and not the product of our role-playing, but it doesn’t matter either way. I can’t stay here and lie to you. I can’t hurt you more than I already have.”

“Don’t go,” she begged, sagging against a row of drawers, powerless to stop him. Each article of clothing he punched into a bag pummeled her heart, chipping away at something slowly shattering. She thought breaking a heart was a faster thing, a momentary process. She hadn’t realized it kept breaking. “Don’t run away from me, from us.”

“There is no us!” He yelled his denial, as if the volume would give it validity. His skin reddened in fury.

She wasn’t afraid of him. She’d never been afraid of him. She’d been afraid of falling for him, of what he might make her feel, but never of him. Her legs gave way, and she slid to the floor. In a trance, Sabrina watched him gather his things and try to step over her.

He stopped in mid-stride to stare down at her. She couldn’t imagine how desperate and pathetic she must have looked. “I can’t love you the way you want, the way you deserve. There are things inside me that have nothing to do with you and you can’t fix them. Nothing can fix me. Go back to Stephen. He never stopped loving you.”

Then he was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Time took on vague and ethereal qualities. She didn’t remember moving, but she woke in her bed to find her mother lying next to her. Instantly, she was transported back to when she was five and Ginny’s dad—she’d never been able to call him Alex—left. She was bereft at having lost the only father she ever knew. It would have been easier if he’d died.

When Ginny was with her dad for her monthly visitation, her mother always let Sabrina sleep with her. She was a poor sleeper in those times. Ginny and Sabrina shared a room by choice. They had always been close.

She knew when Ginny wasn't there. She knew why Ginny wasn't there. She cried a lot.

She didn't know how many times she slept, sobbed, or just laid there unaware of anything, but every time awareness returned, Melinda was there to smooth her hair back and hold her.

Sabrina had indistinct impressions of being forced to eat soup and use the bathroom. She sat on the edge of the bed, wondering when she'd changed out of her dress, and wrinkled her brow at her mother. "Don't you have a flight to catch this morning?"

Tears sprang to her mother's eyes, but didn't fall. She shook her head. "My trip was cancelled. Don't you worry about that. There's nowhere else in the world I'd rather be."

Later, she lay on the sofa with her head in Melinda's lap and no tears left in her body. Forgotten memories came back. Sabrina had several moments of clarity in that time. The first came then. Memories of her mother holding her when she cried, and more significantly, when she couldn't cry. Taking mother-daughter art classes with Sabrina, even though she hated art. She still had a collection of badly-painted pottery which she displayed with pride. Sabrina's name was printed on the bottom of every piece in blocky, childish handwriting.

She used to hug Sabrina all the time. When had she stopped? When had Sabrina begun to see Melinda as cold and bitter? She was neither. The bitterness was the same shyness Sabrina had that people so often mistook for something haughty and aloof. She pushed her mother away when she was a teen. It began with asking Melinda to drop her off a block away from school and it never ended. She only respected Sabrina's wishes, just as Sabrina had respected Jonas's.

She saw it clearly. Her mistakes stretched before her like a bad section of the Yellow Brick Road.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, baby?"

She used to get so mad when Melinda used terms of endearment. Even a month ago, it made a place deep inside her shrivel up to escape the implied bond. "I'm sorry."

"For what? You haven't done anything."

Her voice soothed Sabrina far more than she deserved. “For being such a horrible daughter.”

“No, sweetie, don’t you think that for a minute.” The sob she swallowed made it worse. “You’re a fabulous daughter. You’re intelligent and sensitive and kind. Not a day goes by that I don’t think of you and almost cry from the pride I have in you.”

“I’ve thought unkind things about you,” Sabrina confessed.

She laughed, a sad kind of laugh, and tucked Sabrina’s hair behind her ear. “Every daughter thinks unkind things about their mothers. It’s part of growing up, of forging your own identity away from her. As wonderful as Grandma was, honey, I thought some really nasty things about her. Some of them I said to her face. I was always thankful you refrained.”

The second moment of clarity came when she was alone. Jonas thought she was Helene. He packaged her up neatly in his “Helene Box.” He passed unfair judgment on her after he swore he’d never judge her. Maybe he put her in that box beforehand. In any event, Sabrina was determined to not be Helene. Logic deserted her. The clouds cleared briefly. She went into the bathroom and found shears in a vanity drawer. She gathered her hair into a ponytail, secured it with a band, and cut it off.

The third moment of clarity was Ginny’s doing.

Sabrina woke from a nap to find Ginny sitting on the edge of the bed. Sabrina sat up, astonished to see her. She had a competition in Madrid that weekend. What was she doing here?

She laughed. “I missed the stench of Paris,” she said. “So I came to see you. It was very thoughtful of you to recreate it for me in your bedroom.” She turned on the light next to the bed.

Sabrina shielded her eyes from the brightness. She hadn’t remembered the reading lamp being that brilliant. “What the hell are you talking about? Why aren’t you in Spain?”

“I won second place.” She stared at Sabrina without smiling. “The competition ended Sunday. Today is Wednesday. You don’t remember having this conversation before, do you?”

Dumbfounded, Sabrina stared at Ginny. “It’s Saturday.”

“Four days ago it was Saturday. Today is Wednesday. You haven’t showered in five days, big sister. Time for a soak. When I say soak, I mean shower. The filth on you isn’t something in which you should bask.”



She helped Sabrina out of bed. Her legs were weak, and she leaned on Ginny for support. In the name of sisterly love, she grabbed one of Sabrina's bathing suits and joined her in the shower, washing her hair at least four times and directing Sabrina in how to wash until she snarled at her to get out.

Sabrina did feel better once she was clean and dressed. Ginny was drying Sabrina's hair when Melinda came in and said, "Oh, thank God. I tried getting you in here, but you're far too heavy for me to carry."

Melinda looked tired. She had dark circles under her eyes and she was uncharacteristically pale.

"Mom, are you sick?"

Tears made her eyes glisten. "Yes, Sabrina. When my baby girl is in so much pain she can't get out of bed, it makes me sick."

"Maybe you should go home and get some rest," she suggested. "I'll be fine."

She wasn't fine, but she was alert, and that was an improvement. Melinda left for a couple of hours because Ginny promised to babysit. She didn't bristle in the slightest over the way they talked about her. Sabrina's full capacity for logic and rational thought took a little longer to return. She was depressed.

It was during one of Ginny's turns that Ellen came to visit. Sabrina was on the sofa in her room—which she hadn't left in a week—trying to work a crossword puzzle. It was an easy one, with clues like "Tigger's pal" and "Two-letter conjunction." She found it challenging.

Ellen looked Sabrina over critically before sitting in the chair next to the sofa. "You look like shit."

"Thanks," she said, unsure how to respond. Why was Ellen there? What had Jonas told her? She defaulted to her manners. "You're looking well."

Rolling her eyes, she slapped the arm of the chair forcefully. "Are you going to let him win this? I never thought you were the kind to roll over and play dead."

Sabrina closed her pen in the puzzle book and set it on the end table. "I'm sorry, Ellen. I don't quite know what you mean."

"I'm on your side," she said. "Don't use your manners on me."

Sabrina was going to tell Ellen she didn't know what she was talking about, whether or not she phrased it politely, but Jonas's agitated friend

jumped to her feet and continued. Sabrina hadn't seen that much movement nearby in a long time. "Jonas, Sabrina. I'm talking about Jonas. Your idiot husband."

Sabrina flinched. Ginny and Melinda had assiduously avoided mentioning his name. "He isn't here."

"I'm well aware of that," she said. "He's at my house, but not for long. Ryan is on the verge of kicking his irritating ass out."

Sabrina didn't see what it had to do with her. "I didn't make him leave."

"I know. He told me. I had to drag it out of him and it took a few days, but I think I got all the details. I won't make you relive them."

"Thank you."

"Ginny tells me you haven't been to work in a week. You've got a ton of flowers downstairs. One of the best is a huge bouquet of flowers from Stephen, who I understand is an old boyfriend of yours."

Sabrina had trouble following simple conversations. Ellen was impossible. She waited, hoping Ellen would eventually arrive at a point.

She plopped down next to Sabrina. "Can I have the flowers?"

Sabrina shrugged. She really didn't care.

"Great. I know the perfect place for them." Suddenly, she threw her arms around Sabrina and hugged her so tightly Sabrina wondered how her bones didn't break. "You can't let him do this, Sabrina. You can't let him go."

Stiffening, she pushed Ellen away. "I can't force him to stay," she said when she felt her dignity had been restored. "I don't want him on those terms."

"He's going to take forever to come around if you don't do something," she warned.

"He's filing for divorce in June, on my birthday." Sabrina recited the fact without thinking about what it meant.

She clapped happily. "Then we have time. Let's start with your hair. What in the world possessed you to cut it?"

Sabrina regarded her solemnly. "I'm not Helene." It made perfect sense to her.

Ellen cried

Shocked, Sabrina unbent enough to put her arm around Ellen and rub her shoulders soothingly.

“That bastard.”

Funny, Sabrina had called him the same thing, but she hadn’t meant it at the time.

In the end, Ginny brought over a friend who she swore could work miracles with hair. Sabrina had chopped it so unevenly that she ended up with a pixie cut. Her head felt naked, but they assured her it was an attractive look.

The mirror showed that it wasn’t bad. If her face hadn’t been gaunt or her eyes so sunken, it would have been an attractive look. Ginny brought food and Ellen kept up a steady stream of chatter. Between the two of them, they managed to distract her for a long time.

Ellen had a plan, which she didn’t reveal until Sunday night. She was right that Sabrina couldn’t afford to take all this time away from work with her big proposal only a week away. Since she almost never ran into Jonas at work, Sabrina wasn’t overly worried about going back for that reason.

Due to her unexpected leave, her team had been on their own for a week. She didn’t know what unpleasant surprises awaited.

Ellen and Ginny agreed that she needed to focus on work. Ellen would work on Jonas. Sabrina objected, and Ellen promised to leave him alone. She said it more to placate Sabrina than because she meant it, but Sabrina was too tired to argue.

Work was a pleasant surprise. Randall enveloped her in his very large arms as soon as he saw her. “You *were* sick, weren’t you?”

“We weren’t sure,” Veronica chimed in. “Jonas didn’t seem to know anything about it and he became very rude whenever anyone asked.”

“I like your hair,” Clare said quietly. “It looks really good on you. Different, but good. It makes your eyes look bigger, not that you needed help in that department.”

Minnie and Ty stared. She smiled weakly. “Thank you for the flowers,” she said. “And the card. I’m sorry this happened now, with so much at stake.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Minnie said in the tone that meant she knew more to the story than everyone else and she wasn’t about to dish. “We took care of everything. I have some papers for you to sign and some personal e-mails to answer, but we’ve handled everything else.”

Sabrina searched her face, wondering whether or not to be happy about that. The control freak in her was chomping at the bit. This was the only aspect of her life where Sabrina still felt some measure of control.

Looking at the rest of them gathered around like she was a long-lost friend, Sabrina felt guilty for more than abandoning them.

Ty spoke up at last. "I stopped by to see how you were doing a couple of times."

She hadn't known. Her mother either didn't tell her or she was too out of it when she did.

"Your mother is a lovely woman," he continued.

Sabrina closed her eyes and looked away. It would have to come out sooner or later. "Jonas and I separated. He moved out."

Ty put a heavy hand on her shoulder. "I thought so."

Before they could start drowning her with their condolences, Sabrina turned to Minnie. "Give me about ten minutes, and then meet me in my office." She turned back to her team. "Then I'll be around to catch up on things."

They had made tremendous progress during her absence. Minnie shared with Sabrina how hard each of them had worked to make sure the team wasn't behind when Sabrina returned. The week passed with incredible speed. She was very pleased with the presentation. Knowing the Galens like she did proved to be quite useful in making decisions about what to include and which direction to take.

They traveled to the Galen building, which was just twelve blocks away, to make their case bright and early Friday morning. It was the second day of proposals. Sabrina's team was the second group to present that day. Jared's had been the first.

Jared had hired Ophelia as his temporary team member. She bounded over to Sabrina as they passed in the lobby, thanking her again for the recommendation and gushing over Sabrina's hair. Sabrina was able to smile and accept the compliment without self-consciously feeling for what she had donated to Locks of Love.

When Ophelia released Sabrina, she glanced around, her eyes automatically searching out Jonas. She hadn't seen him since he walked out on her.

He was pale. The color finished draining from his face as she watched.

Their eyes met briefly, then she turned away to give her team last minute instructions. They surrounded her on purpose, creating a barrier to protect her from Jonas. Veronica squeezed Sabrina's hand hard. She caught herself before she shot Veronica a dirty look. It made her stop thinking about Jonas and it made her stop shaking.

The group around Sabrina didn't stop someone from politely shoving through. Stephen took both of her hands in his and kissed her cheek. "I'm not part of the board, so I have no say in this decision," he warned. "I just wanted to wish you luck."

She had no trouble giving him a genuine smile. "You were just looking for an excuse to kiss me again."

"Guilty," he said, reaching out to touch her hair. "I like this. It reminds me of when you cut it short to make the varsity swim team sophomore year."

Sabrina shrugged. "It did improve my time." By a whole four seconds, which didn't impress her, but it did get her on the team. She knew from the outset that she had neither the talent nor the drive to swim for college or try for the Olympics. It was fun and it kept her in shape. She immediately began growing her hair back out. A lumpy swim cap wasn't a bother.

Stephen excused himself and escorted them to the conference room they would be using. When he left, Ty gave Sabrina such a curious look that she snapped at him. "What are you looking at?"

"You flirted with the son of the CEO." He sounded impressed.

"I told you I've known the Galens since high school."

He grinned. "You didn't say he had a thing for you. We could have dressed you up in sexier clothes for this. He may pretend he doesn't have a say, but I'll bet he does."

Sabrina blushed. "Knowing Mr. Galen, Stephen will have a significant say in the decision, but not a vote. And Stephen doesn't have a thing for me. We dated in high school."

Clare raised a brow.

"And college," Sabrina added.

Veronica laughed so hard she snorted. Randall muttered something under his breath. It sounded like he was thanking God.

The presentation went extremely well. If Sabrina's team landed the account, it would be because they had earned it, not because Stephen was

entertaining some belated fantasies about getting into her panties, which she was definitely wearing these days.

\* \* \* \*

The next week crept by. They still had plenty of work to do, but not nearly the amount they had become used to handling for six weeks. Then Stephen called to let Sabrina know his father was notifying Joy White that Sabrina's team had been awarded the account. They wanted to take her to lunch to discuss timelines.

It wasn't an intimate lunch by any stretch of the imagination. In addition to Stephen and Mr. Galen, Joy and Mr. Rife himself rounded out the crew. Stephen and Mr. Galen met Sabrina at the elevator, each man greeting her with a hug.

Mr. Galen took each of her hands in his and kissed her on the cheek, just as Stephen had done. He treated her with warmth and respect. He asked after Melinda and Ginny. He again expressed his condolences about her grandfather, with whom he had golfed regularly until Grandpa declined too much to enjoy golf.

He directed Sabrina to call him by his first name, which was Steve. It was weird calling someone she'd known by one name for seventeen years by another name.

The only unexpected thing to happen was that Mr. Galen—Steve—insisted on naming one of the team leaders. Apparently, Jonas had singularly impressed him in the presentation. When Stephen told Mr. Galen that Jonas was Sabrina's husband, Mr. Galen's dilemma was solved. Surely she wouldn't mind putting her own husband on the team?

With Mr. Rife smiling indulgently at Sabrina as if he were personally responsible for the way things turned out, she swallowed her pride and nodded. Jonas was brilliant and talented. She would cope.

Ellen jumped up and down and actually turned a cartwheel in the middle of Sabrina's living room. A well-executed cartwheel. "What?" she said when she caught Sabrina's expression. "I took twelve years of gymnastics."

Sabrina did not share Ellen's excitement. "I don't know why you're so excited. It's going to be torture."

“For him.” She smiled. In that moment, Sabrina hoped with all her heart that she never did anything to piss Ellen off. Every insidious thought showed in that smile. “He has to watch you every day, knowing he could have had you and he blew his chance. Even better, he has to do what you say because you’ll be his boss.”

She probably shouldn’t have told Ellen the news before Jonas knew or had a chance to decide, but Sabrina foolishly thought Ellen would help her through the panic. She knew Jared wouldn’t have said anything to Jonas today, even though he was supposed to inform him of the promotion. She knew that job would fall to her and she did not relish it.

“You don’t think that’s going to torture me more than him?” Sabrina asked.

Ellen waved away her friend’s concern. “The jerk is in love with you, but he’s too busy trying to keep his head from slipping out of his ass to admit it. Now he’s gotta watch you take meetings with Stephen, go out to lunch with him, laughing, flirting. You have to flirt with him.”

“That’s not fair to Stephen.” Sabrina didn’t like games.

Ellen’s shoulders dropped and so did the starry look in her eyes. “You have to play dirty in this game if you want to win.”

Sabrina shook her head. “I don’t want to win that way. That isn’t how you ended up with Ryan.”

“No,” she admitted. “Ryan didn’t have this problem. He knew his number was up the moment he met me. Jonas lacks self-awareness.”

Sabrina slumped back on the sofa, defeated. “I wish you could whip him into shape like you did when he nearly flunked out of college.”

She narrowed her eyes at Sabrina. The look that inspired fear in the hearts of millions—or at least in Sabrina’s heart—appeared on Ellen’s face. “Come on. I’m taking you to the Club part of the club. Sophia should be able to help with some of that stress.”

Sabrina winced. “Sophia?” Sophia said she wouldn’t hold it against her that she asked if Sophia was a prostitute, but Sabrina didn’t know her well enough to know if she was sincere.

“She’s really very good. I go to her when I need a good whipping.” Ellen had her coat on before Sabrina moved. “Ryan is too much of a submissive to deliver for me. Get moving. Sophie leaves early tonight.”

“I don’t know,” Sabrina said. The idea appealed to her more than she let on. Total submission for non-sexual purposes was something she desperately needed. It was still too cold to swim. She really needed to enclose the pool. “What if Jonas is there? I don’t think I could—”

Ellen stopped Sabrina’s words with a wave of her hand. “He won’t be there. I fired him.”



## Chapter 17

Other than to say it was time Jonas moved on, Ellen wouldn't reveal why she fired Jonas. Using her dominatrix voice, she advised Sabrina to drop the subject. It was a wonder how Ryan got anywhere arguing with her. Sabrina knew he prevailed in as many disagreements as he lost. Ellen seemed to have a knack for barreling right over Sabrina.

Sophia squeezed Sabrina in as her last client of the evening. Dressed in a simple black lacy baby tee and jeans, she was incredibly lovely. Her long black hair was pulled back in a ponytail and her large eyes were accented with dark eyeliner, giving her a harder, more severe appearance that did not hide her softness.

However, she wasn't there to admire Sophia's exotic beauty. Ellen handed Sabrina over and disappeared. Sabrina hadn't changed after work, so she still looked like an executive. Sophia wasn't impressed.

"Take off your clothes," she said. "Strip down to your underwear."

Sabrina didn't have a problem stripping to her panties in front of strangers. Having sex in front of people all over the world changed one's perspective on things like that. Her problem was that she wasn't wearing underwear. Of all the days to take up the habit again, she picked this one.

Sophia regarded her stonily. Sabrina recognized the expression as one Jonas and Ellen both used. She stripped to her bra and thigh-highs. Before she could fully stand back up from removing her shoes, Sophia cuffed her to a padded bar. It was thick enough so that Sabrina's torso curved around it and her feet could still reach the floor.

Curiously, she was not aroused. If Jonas had done this, she would be drenched. If he were watching, she would be drenched. Because it was just the two of them, it changed the whole dynamic.

Sophia didn't hesitate before she began whipping. She wasn't gentle. Sabrina realized that Jonas had been extremely gentle. At first, she held in

the urge to cry out. The sting of the lash came predictably after she heard it whistle through the air. She tried to concentrate on relaxing, but she found it impossible to relax on cue.

Sophia concentrated on Sabrina's upper thighs, butt, and lower back. Her purpose was not to turn her pink. It was to make her submit. When the burning pain became unbearable, Sabrina cried out. The sting concentrated, forcing tears. Gradually, she relaxed, submitting to the whip. Anyone could have wielded it. The person didn't matter, only the kernel of peace that steadily grew as hot tears bathed her cheeks, dripping onto the padded bar where she rested her head.

Then it was done. Her wrists were free. She dressed.

Sophia squirted water from a bottle into her mouth and leaned against another piece of equipment. "You'll want to rub some Vitamin E into those welts," she suggested. "Otherwise, they could become bothersome. You have sensitive skin."

Sabrina found it ironic that Sophia could say that after having spent twenty minutes whipping her. Ellen returned with a timing that made Sabrina think she had watched. She led her to a locker room and handed her a small bottle of oil.

"Come out when you're done," she said. "We'll get a drink."

Sophia joined them for the drink. Neither woman mentioned Jonas and Sabrina was very grateful for that. He was on her mind enough.

It was difficult to sit. She constantly shifted in her seat, finally settling on the very edge of the chair so that her body made minimal contact.

Sophia laughed at Sabrina's discomfort. "You're a natural sub, you know that, right? You come back and see me anytime."

"We'll have to get you an ID card," Ellen said, sipping her herbal tea. "There's an application. I assume you'll want to run a tab."

"You think I'll be back?" Sabrina asked, laughing. "I can barely sit. I can't imagine working like this all the time."

Sophia leaned closer. "Most of it will be gone by tomorrow. I gave you a really nice line on your upper thigh that should stay for a few days. Let me know if it works for you."

Sabrina opened her mouth to ask, but realized what she meant in time. If most of the evidence was gone, she would have freedom of movement. By leaving one welt where she had, Sabrina could lean it against the edge of a

desk. The pain would relax her. She wondered if she could capitalize on this to masturbate, something she still couldn't seem to do successfully unless she was sore. Jonas left her crippled in so many ways.

The next morning, Sabrina had Minnie summon Jonas for a meeting. Jared was supposed to have notified Jonas of the opportunity for promotion, but nobody had seen Jared around since it had been announced that Sabrina's team won the account. His streak of responsibility had come to an end.

Minnie escorted Jonas into Sabrina's office, where she was seated on the sofa, studying the timelines and to-do lists scattered over the coffee table.

Winning the account was proving to be a phenomenal amount of work. It was so large that it would involve the restructuring of the entire advertising department. Sabrina would have five teams to manage. Each team would have a leader who reported to her. She had to figure out which teams would handle which branches in order to follow the timeline.

Additionally, they would move to a new floor, which was being remodeled according to Sabrina's specifications. She wanted a lot of open space, a few comfortably appointed conference centers, a digital media lab, and several offices. The technology would be state-of-the-art and easily upgradable. Sabrina rose and crossed the room to greet him, offering her hand to shake. This was a business meeting. Nothing personal was involved.

"Thanks for coming." She smiled. "Can I offer you something to drink? Coffee?"

He shook his head, staring at her as if she had lost her mind. He didn't shake her hand. "No, thanks."

Minnie shot a look that let Sabrina know she would be available if anything was needed and left the room, closing the door firmly.

Jonas eyed Sabrina suspiciously. "What's going on?"

"Why don't you have a seat?" She indicated the sofa and chair grouping at the other end of her office, trying not to recall the number of times they had sex there. One good thing that would come from having to move her office would be that she could leave those memories behind.

"Sabrina," he began.

"This is business, Jonas. You're aware we won the Galen account."

His jaw ticked, and his lips pressed together. "I meant to congratulate you on that, but then, you knew all along you would get the account."

"Don't be nasty," she chastised. "You know that's not true."

"I saw him kiss you before your presentation. Nobody else received the same treatment." He sounded jealous. Sabrina wished he would sit down and have a conversation like a normal person.

Leaning against her desk caused her to wince. She had forgotten about the gift Sophia had left. She used it now to help focus on the reason he was here instead of his apparent bitterness.

"Both Stephen and Steve are like that. Over time, you'll see them greet dozens of women the same way, especially ones they've known since childhood."

"Are you sleeping with him?" The fury in his olive green eyes was palpable.

Sabrina massaged the space between her eyes where a headache was forming. She leaned harder against the desk. "For the love of God, Jonas, that's none of your business, but since you're so intent on being a jerk, I'll clear the air."

Dropping her hand and fisting it on her hip, she glared at him. "I am not sleeping with Stephen. Just because you told me to have a relationship with someone isn't enough of a reason for me to actually do it. He is an old friend and now our client. And you have no right to question me either way. You walked out on me, not the other way around. This is how *you* wanted things to be. Let it go."

He turned on his heel to leave, but she wasn't finished.

"Don't even think about it," she growled at him. "I didn't ask you here because I want to discuss the mess that passes for our relationship. I asked you here to offer you a job. Steve Galen, the CEO, was impressed with you. He wants you to head one of the teams, specifically the one in charge of the feel-good campaigns."

He froze. Without turning, he said, "You called me here to offer me a job?"

"A promotion. You'd have your own team. You would have to report to me, of course, but you'd be free to develop projects as you see fit." She couldn't resist a jab at him. It was a low blow, but he pushed her to it. "And

seeing as how you're down to just the one job now, you might appreciate the raise that comes with it."

When he turned back to her, he had a wry smile on his face. "You've been hanging out with Ellen way too much."

Sabrina shrugged. "There's a staff meeting at two. I'll need an outline of how many people you think you'll need to hire and their expected duties."

Bitterness crept into that tight expression. "You're assuming I'll take the job. Don't I get some time to think about it? This is a big decision."

He had a point, but not the time. "Jared was supposed to have this conversation with you yesterday. You were supposed to have an answer for me by this morning."

He stuck his hands in his pockets. It was a casual gesture that reminded her of better times. He wore one of the many green silk ties she had bought him. This one had a subtle diamond pattern that caught the light when he moved. She liked how it brought out the green of his eyes. The tawny color was something she liked to save for just the two of them. She wondered if he thought of her when he picked it out that morning.

He nodded knowingly. "Jared went out for lunch yesterday and was picked up for a DUI. He won't be back for a while. I don't know if Joy can save him this time. Apparently, it wasn't his first offense."

Sabrina hadn't known any of that, but it explained much. She took a deep breath and continued with the informal job interview. "If you're going to work for me, I expect that we maintain a professional working relationship. There will not be a repeat of the way this started out today."

While she was laying down the law, she leaned back against her desk, inadvertently bumping her welt. Jonas noticed the way she stiffened briefly from the contact. He narrowed his eyes and studied her thoughtfully.

"Sleep wrong?"

"I'm fine," she said, brushing away his concern, which brought a fresh pain all its own. "Do you think you can check the baggage at the door?"

"What did you do?" He wasn't going to let it go.

She crossed her arms over her chest. "After all, we'll be divorced in a few months, both moving on with our lives. This job is a great opportunity. You shouldn't let your fear of me keep you from it."

"You went to the club."

"I go all the time with Ellen," she said dismissively. Sometimes she hated how single-minded he could be. "Can you focus on this conversation? This is your job interview. You and I don't have a personal life in common anymore."

"We'll always have Paris," he said. He meant it as a joke, to lighten the mood. It had the opposite effect. The bliss of Paris hit her hard, not just the club they had visited, but of all the touristy things they had done, as well as the champagne and the nights spent in his arms. She had been in love with him then. It meant more to her than it did to him.

"I'd like to forget Paris," she said quietly. "We work together, nothing more. Feel free to pretend we just met this morning." She turned away to avoid seeing his reaction, but she wasn't fast enough. She caught the flash of regret that made her think he still cared.

It kept her up at night.

\* \* \* \*

She was hurting. Real hurt, not the temporary kind that was a byproduct of stubborn pride. Jonas sat in Ellen's living room, nursing a beer that was now room temperature. On the floor, Ryan leaned over Jake and jangled a set of plastic keys in an effort to keep his son still while he changed the diaper.

For a second, an image of Sabrina doing the same thing flashed. She wouldn't wear ratty sweats and a t-shirt like Ryan. Even the clothes Sabrina wore when she was relaxing sported designer labels. Her hair would be pulled back in a sleek ponytail that fell over her shoulder. The baby with Sabrina's big brown eyes would smile and grab for that length of silk.

Jonas closed his eyes, banishing the image and the fantasy. He'd thrown any chance for that away. Even if he did love her, there was no way she would forgive him now. He'd been cold and cruel and callous. He was a stubborn jerk, an ass. The nouns kept coming, but none of them punished him like the image of the look she tried to hide when she said she'd like to forget Paris.

Their year together was supposed to be fun, an adventure, a lark. He wasn't supposed to hurt her like this. She wasn't supposed to come out of

this looking more fragile and grief-stricken than she had after losing her grandfather.

She'd lost weight, not that she had extra pounds to spare. Her gaunt figure tore at him something awful, but that feeling had nothing on the way seeing her without that gorgeous length of hair ripped him to shreds. Ellen told him the reason she'd cut it and he hated himself for making her think she was anything like Helene.

Now he would see her every day. Now pain and regret would stab through him a million times as he caught glimpses of her wandering the floor, or met with her, or listened to someone else talk about their interactions with her. It would be his penance. Somehow, the price he was paying for hurting Sabrina was far more costly than what he was almost done paying for his mistake with Helene.

It hadn't quite been a month, but the changes in her were painful to see, not that Ellen let him forget any of that for a second. It was why he was living in his parents' basement instead of Ellen's spare room. It was why he was visiting Ryan and Jake while Ellen was at work.

Yes, he was a coward. A jealous jerk and a coward in so many ways.

"There we go, buddy. A fresh canvas for your scented art." Ryan lifted Jake to his feet, holding the toddler's hands for a moment to steady him.

Jake smiled and babbled something that ended in a distinct "Daddy."

Ryan returned his son's smile. "Absolutely. Why don't you go over and visit with Uncle Jonas while I take care of this stinky package you gave me?"

By the time Ryan returned, Jonas had a pile of toys on his lap, offerings from Jake's toy box.

"I got a promotion today. I'll be working directly under Sabrina." The words came out tighter than he intended.

"Congratulations," Ryan said as he sank onto the vacant loveseat. The lack of surprise in his voice was telling.

"You knew," Jonas said, laughing sadly. "Just how much time is Ellen spending with her?"

Ryan shrugged, defending his wife to the bitter end. "They're friends. It's what you wanted, Jonas. Just because you dumped her doesn't mean the rest of us are ready to let her go. She's part of our lives. What did you expect?"

Jonas shook his head. He expected things to go back to the way they were before he met Sabrina. She would be that strong, vibrant, driven woman he was used to seeing around the office and he wouldn't have to endure endless reproofing looks and comments from his friends and family and those unfailingly loyal members of her team. He generated enough self-recrimination to keep himself miserable as it was.

Jake handed him a stuffed doll in a pink dress. "Thanks, buddy." He put it next to the dump truck, but Jake didn't like that arrangement and he confiscated the truck.

Looking up to catch Ryan's eye, Jonas said, "I didn't expect any of this."

"You know you're an idiot, right?" Ryan asked.

Yes, Jonas was aware he was an idiot. The ache in his chest that was absolutely not a broken heart reminded him of that fact with unrelenting regularity.

\* \* \* \*

Working with Jonas was much easier than Sabrina anticipated. There were moments when she saw him and grief hit her anew, but as time passed, the intervals between those reactions lengthened. Mostly, their relationship was courteous and professional. He argued with her often, but it wasn't personal.

Months passed. The office space was completed, and they moved up four floors. Sabrina's office was much larger, and she had a bank of windows out of which she stared, daydreaming when she should have been working. Ellen's plan, in which Sabrina had decreasing faith, included a lot of waiting.

When her spirits would fall, Ellen would inevitably arrange a girls' night out, and Sabrina saw Sophia professionally a few times each month. Sam had moved back from Toronto, having decided her boyfriend was not worth being stranded in a foreign country. She and Sophia joined the group.

Sabrina didn't know if Jonas was aware that she still saw his family regularly. She babysat Ricky and Faith. She went to the movies with his sisters. Ellen visited her home or Sabrina visited Ellen's nearly every day. She shopped with his mother. Sabrina drew the line at attending events, like



his father's birthday celebration, where Jonas would be. It was too weird. If he knew, Jonas never said a word.

Stephen's divorce finalized, and she went out to dinner with him to celebrate. He kissed her, and she let him. The spark was definitely gone. They ended up laughing it off.

Ellen recruited him to help in her campaign to convince Jonas he was making the biggest mistake of his life. Sabrina had more faith in Jonas's stubbornness than in the possibility of his eventual enlightenment, especially as time passed. He began to treat her more like a friend and a colleague than as someone with whom he had shared his life.

He became too comfortable around her at work, striking up conversations about topics that didn't relate to the job. He interrupted an important phone call to ask the name of the restaurant in Lexington where they had dined before visiting the club.

Stephen began sending flowers to the office and dropping by to take Sabrina to lunch. He would kiss her on each cheek and whisk her away to lunch.

Sabrina regretted her inability to keep anything from Ellen. Jonas's best friend was wickedly good at making Sabrina reveal things she hadn't mean to divulge. The subtle tightening of Jonas's jaw whenever he saw Stephen made Sabrina feel guilty for her part in the game. She put an end to it, even though it brought a fleeting joy to know Jonas still cared for her on some level.

One warm June day exactly two weeks before her birthday, Sabrina arrived home from work to find Jonas waiting on the patio in back. Well, near the patio. He had opened the garage to access the gardening tools. He was digging around near the rosebush.

A shot of pain went through her, arcing like an electrical burn through her torso, and dozens of Sunday mornings of watching him play in the dirt replayed in her mind. She had an irrational fear that he was taking the bush back as part of the divorce settlement. By the time she parked the car next to his in the garage and made it to the patio, fear and pain morphed into anger. When she spoke, the words came out harsher than they should have.

"What are you doing?"

Without looking up, he said, "Weeding." He was wearing the same suit he had worn to the office. The striped red tie made his eyes turn gold. His

mother had picked it up the last time they shopped together. He poked at the ground a few more times, expertly dislodging several clumps of weeds with his trowel. "And feeding. Your gardener isn't keeping this up."

Sabrina looked at the rosebush clinging to the trellis for support and envied it. "I haven't had a chance to talk to them about it. I don't think they do flowers."

He wiped his trowel on the grass and disappeared into the garage. She followed him. "What are you doing here?"

"I tried to see you this afternoon, but you were at meetings. You weren't back by the time I had to leave, so here I am." His delivery made it seem like it was normal for an employee to wait at her house.

Logical, maybe. It just didn't make sense. Sabrina heeded Ellen's voice in her head cautioning her to patience. He hung the trowel on a peg board and washed his hands.

"I have something to give you. I didn't want to leave it on your desk because I didn't know if you would return to the office before coming home, and I know you'll want some kind of explanation with it."

He dried his hands and pulled an envelope from his pocket, which he held out to her. She stared at it blankly.

"You'll have to open it to read it," he prompted.

Sabrina wasn't under the impression that it was personal and she was right, sort of. It was his letter of resignation. Her heart stopped. Strands of ice formed in her veins and their sharp points jabbed painfully. She stared up at him, shock and amazement communicating a question her lips couldn't form.

He shifted, regret flashing on his face before it strengthened with resolve. "I've done a lot of soul-searching in the past few months. Something about being thirty-five and living in your parents' basement will do that to a guy. Advertising is a job. I'm good at it. I've proven that I can be successful doing pretty much anything I want. I needed to do that."

He did it, all right. He was easily one of the best employees that ever worked for her and one of the best advertising minds with which she'd worked.

"I'm going back to teaching. I had my final interview this morning, and they offered me the position. It's at the same school where I worked before.

I'll be making less. A lot less, but it's what I want to do. Teaching fulfills me in a way nothing else can."

That explained why he was late to work today. Numbly, she nodded. She understood what he was doing and why. The pain that prevented her from speaking was because she knew she had no chance with him anymore. He was breaking all of his ties to her.

"I failed at something, too." He reached out to finger a strand of her short hair, his expression regretful. It had grown over the last few months and now it was chin-length. "You are nothing like her, Sabrina. I never meant to hurt you. I hate what I did to you. I wish I could take it all back."

She shook her head, denying his line of reasoning. She did not regret their time together. As painful as it was now, he had changed her life in profound ways. She wanted to tell him that, but she couldn't speak without choking on the heart she thought had already been safely broken. There were even smaller pieces to be made.

He seemed oblivious to the struggle going on inside her. "You knew me better than I liked. You saw inside me and the mess didn't make you run in the other direction. You were right about everything. I am desperately and irrevocably in love with you, only I was too terrified to admit it. And now it's too late."

He kissed her on the cheek and turned toward his car.

Hope surged through her, suspending all pain. "Where are you going?"

His profile was turned to her. She saw the muscle along his jaw tighten. "Home." The single word hung in the air, an unasked question.

Her jaw dropped at his stupidity. "I've waited how many months for you to finally realize you love me and this is all I get? A kiss on the cheek?"

The look of confusion that crossed his face morphed into one of incredulity. "What about Stephen? It's no secret that the two of you have been spending time together."

"Did Ellen tell you that? I told her to leave you alone." Sabrina shrugged, a gesture demonstrating the helplessness of trying to get Ellen to alter her strategy when she didn't want to. "She thought you would come to your senses before you divorced me, but I hoped for after. I want a real wedding this time. Our families weren't too happy about missing the first one."

The expression on his face didn't change, so she kept talking. "And I always wanted to wear an expensive white dress with a long train and matching veil. Your mother and I found a really nice one last weekend, but I'm not sure about it. I was going to wait until my mom got back from Mexico City tomorrow to get her opinion on it. Your dad said he would walk me down the aisle, if that was okay with you."

He grabbed her roughly, his hands encircling her arms. He shut her up with a gentle shake. "You want to be married to me?"

"Somebody called my mom to take care of me when you left. Since you were the only one who knew you left..." Her eyes softened with love. "I never doubted that you cared, Jonas, only that you would realize it."

His expression matched hers. "I'll never give you reason to doubt me again."

A smile played on her lips. "How about you do the getting-down-on-one-knee thing? That would be far more romantic than shaking me. Then you can carry me into the house and we can get started on the make-up sex. It's going to take a long, long time for you to make this up to me."

He tried to kiss her, and she slapped a palm over his lips and looked at him expectantly. "Do this right, Jonas. This time is for real."

Kneeling on the concrete garage floor, he did it right.

# THE END

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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