

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



*Lush*  
**VELVET** *Nights*  
**TINA DONAHUE**

## **Lush Velvet Nights**

*Tina Donahue*

*When wanton desires and love demand all...*

During the day, Adriana's a lonely corporate heiress, helming a supermarket empire. At night, she hires escorts, scripting provocative fantasies of kidnapping, lust, submission and endless longing. It's all she has to excite her until she meets Nathan Wynn.

Tall, blond and muscular—like a modern-day Viking—Nathan is a labor relations attorney representing Adriana's union employees. His imposing presence intensifies her basest desires. When he protects her from an escort he believes is an attacker, she knows he's wonderfully dominant and unrestrained.

Fascinated by Adriana's underlying sensuality, Nathan brings her to his secluded mountain estate, determined she submit fully to his hunger. At a gentleman's club, he makes certain she denies him nothing. Engaging in a seductive sexual journey, Nathan's caught off-guard by his stunning need for Adriana—and a growing emotional connection she will not let him deny.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Lush Velvet Nights

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# ***LUSH VELVET NIGHTS***

**Tina Donahue**

*Dedication*

*To lovers everywhere.*

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## **Chapter One**

Beneath Adriana Greco's conservative business suit, her upper thighs and buttocks were naked, prepared for what would happen once her meeting ended. Somewhere outside the doors of this office, her kidnapper waited. A man she'd never met, one who'd take control, bending her to his will, stripping her bare, keeping her his sexual slave for the three-day weekend ahead. A fantasy she'd arranged with the escort agency known only by the letter S. Not for the first time she wondered what the S represented—Submission, Seduction, Sex—or all three.

Her pulse quickened and her mouth went dry. She didn't dare leave the conference table to get another bottle of water. Her legs trembled so badly, Adriana wasn't certain they would support her. Even if she did make it to the refreshment table, the others in this meeting might notice her lingering at Nathan Wynn's side. How could she resist? He provided a more pressing temptation than her scripted fantasies with men she hired.

Early thirties and definitely in his prime, Nathan stood near the credenza by the snacks, glancing at the Los Angeles skyline. In the January rain, a more common occurrence than tourists thought, the sparkling city lights seemed to wiggle, providing a kaleidoscope of shifting colors bleeding into the darkness.

Nathan's rugged good looks gave away none of his thoughts. As a successful labor relations attorney negotiating the new contract for Adriana's union employees, he'd controlled today's bargaining so effortlessly. Now he met her company's newest proposal with silence, using the lull to strike uncertainty, to intimidate.

Adriana's attention trickled down his large frame. Her heart beat at an uncomfortable pace. Hours earlier, he'd removed his navy suit jacket and rolled his shirt sleeves to mid-forearm despite the room's slight chill. At the time she'd inhaled deeply, wanting to draw in his scent, a masculine fragrance reminding her of a morning breeze in Greece...the air warmed by the sun, moistened by the sea. His shoulders were impossibly broad, straining his shirt's expensive cotton fabric as he filled his coffee cup, a prelude to giving the meeting's participants his decision.

Fascinated, Adriana watched his muscles flexing with his movements. The flesh on her inner thighs grew moist. Light brown hair dusted his forearms, a contrast to his dark blond locks. Unlike other attorneys of his stature and wealth, he wore his hair as carelessly as a manual laborer, longish in the back and on the top, allowing it to skim his ears and forehead.

Suppressing a shiver, Adriana imagined his hair hanging to his shoulders like a Viking, the strands tangled from the ocean's stiff wind, his powerful body clothed in fur and leather, his dark brown eyes intent, ruthless, lusting as he and his crew left their

ship in search of plunder and women. Reaching her, he would grip her arm, precluding any escape. No screams, no pleas would stop him from taking what belonged to him. Inside her crude hut, where she'd been born and nurtured by parents who had long since passed, his sinewy body would imprison hers on the animal skins serving as a maiden's bed. Not any longer. From this moment forward, she'd never know another night or another day without his dominating touch. Mouth over hers with his tongue plunging inside, he'd shove her homespun dress to her waist, baring her sex. Shamelessly, possessively, his long fingers would probe her cunt, seeking her hot channel. Once inside, he'd pierce her barrier and stretch her virginal flesh, preparing it for his cock. Her wait wouldn't be long. He'd sink deep into her with one forceful thrust, his weighty testicles slapping her buttocks as he pumped unrelentingly, enslaving her to his body and the carnal future he intended for her.

A nagging pressure built in Adriana's groin. In response, moisture seeped from her pussy.

Without warning, Nathan's eyes lifted from his coffee to her. His studied indifference wavered.

Adriana's lips parted at the chink in his armor, the surprising vulnerability she detected in his penetrating gaze. What caused such a thing? Had she spoken without realizing it or sighed too loudly?

His attention remained on her. Heat flared in his dark eyes.

A shiver of pleasure ran down Adriana's spine. The rest of her froze in confusion. In all the days they'd spent holed up in this room, Nathan never looked at her as anything other than his adversary. She owned Greco, Inc., a prominent supermarket chain inherited from her father, an unhappy man who'd rarely noticed her at all. The only men who gave her their time and full attention were the ones she hired.

Self-consciously, she touched the edge of her half-rim reading glasses, adjusting them.

A smile lifted the corners of Nathan's demanding mouth. Adriana tried to pull in a full breath and could not. She stared at his inviting lips. Seconds slipped by. Her heart pounded in time with the slanting rain striking the windows. It sounded like crinkling cellophane.

Steve Boyle, her company's attorney and one of her best friends, tapped her wrist with his pencil. Eyes still on Nathan, she leaned over to Steve.

Nathan's assistant Meghan strolled to the window, pretending to read her notes, giving Adriana and Steve a bit of privacy. Adriana stared at the lovely twenty-something girl, guessing Meghan probably slept with Nathan on a regular basis.

Steve brought his face close to Adriana's ear. His shaggy mustache tickled her cheek. "What gives?" he whispered.

Her attention strayed to Nathan's eyes. They hadn't moved from her. Her cunt ached. She whispered, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yeah, I know. You're not paying attention. Wynn asked you a question several minutes ago. So, what gives? Is your bun too tight? Did it cut off circulation to your brain?"

Uncomfortable warmth spread from Adriana's chest to her neck and cheeks. She averted her gaze from Nathan and flicked it at Steve. Although he was thirty, the same as her, his rapidly balding head made him look much older. To compensate for the hair loss on top, he'd grown one of the biggest mustaches she'd ever seen outside of those on men of Middle Eastern ancestry. Her voice lowered another notch. "Be nice, or I swear I'll tell everyone here you use Rogaine on that thing on your upper lip."

Unfazed by her retort, and certainly not deterred, Steve's hazel eyes twinkled with mischief. "Better answer Wynn or he may think you were staring at him because you think he's hot."

Adriana's blush reached the tips of her ears and prickled her scalp. "What did he ask?"

"If you want to sleep with him."

Her heart lurched. Blood drained from her face so quickly the room spun.

Steve noticed. His hand squeezed hers. "Hey, relax. I was joking." His eyes narrowed with his scrutiny. "You okay?"

Not even close. She lied with a nod and repeated, "What did he ask?"

"If we'd be willing to extend our current healthcare benefits for another year, then modify them to what we want. In exchange, the union's willing to immediately reduce their number of paid holidays."

Even with her dizziness, Adriana knew it wasn't a fair exchange and would cost her company several million dollars in this shitty economy. Of course, a strike could nudge them toward bankruptcy like so many other California businesses. No wonder a smile had interrupted Nathan's controlled demeanor. He deserved his reputation for grinding adversaries under his heel, giving her very little wiggle room, just like in her Viking fantasy, with far less pleasant results.

If she agreed to his demand, she'd prove her father right—she wasn't the child he'd wanted—a fearless, brutal, driven executive who didn't take shit from anyone, not even the unions. If she didn't agree, she'd force Nathan to return. She'd hunger over him for a few more days before she ultimately surrendered to his stipulations and the knowledge he'd never desire her. The heat she'd seen in his eyes represented a male's reaction to a fight he knew he'd win. Would he celebrate his victory tonight with Meghan? Would he imprison her beneath his nudity? Was she his type? Did he have a type?

Heart sinking, Adriana didn't bother to look at the girl or him. She didn't want to know about Nathan Wynn's private life. Nor would he ever know about hers and the paid escorts she used, including the kidnapper who surely stalked the hallways outside this office, waiting for her to emerge.



"Fine," she said in answer to Nathan, groaning inwardly at the catch in her voice. She cleared her throat, left her seat and spoke to Steve. "Wind things up, will you?" Deliberately stepping around the table to avoid any contact with Nathan, Adriana stopped at the door and glanced back. Nathan regarded her ass and legs for a long moment. At last, he lifted his head. Several strands of hair bobbed over his surprisingly dark brows. His smile returned.

Her knees weakened. She locked them, overwhelmed by an insane urge to run her fingers through his hair, mussing it further as she drove her tongue into his mouth. Reality kept her rooted to her current spot. His smile had nothing to do with her as a woman. It recorded another of his conquests. She'd never stood a chance against his legal prowess, neither had Steve, and Nathan knew it. Adriana's fingers gripped the doorknob. Unfortunately, her voice rang with longing. "Have a nice weekend. You earned it."

Nathan's brows lifted ever so slightly. "Should I take that as a compliment?"

His vibrant baritone matched his masculine bulk and enriched the sterilely decorated room, conjuring images of animal skins and leather, shoulder-length hair and a man's uncivilized, insatiable appetite.

Without meaning to, she smiled. "You should."

"Then I will, Adriana."

A muscle in her belly jumped at how her name sounded wrapped in his resonant voice. Her hand loosened around the knob, not yet ready to open the door.

Steve cleared his throat. Impatiently, or perhaps jealously, Meghan tapped her pen against her legal pad.

*She is sleeping with him.* Fighting an envious sigh, Adriana opened the door. "Thanks for coming."

Steve's head jerked up. He seemed uncertain whether to snicker or frown. "We appreciate you getting through this so quickly," he amended.

Adriana nodded to indicate that's what she'd meant to say. Nathan ignored Steve and kept his full attention her. Why? What did he want now? "I have to go," she said. Not waiting for his comment or goodbye, she hurried to her office.

There, she sagged against the door, trying to catch her breath. Should her kidnapper excite her even a sixteenth as much as Nathan did, she'd be in for the fuck of her life. However, if she found him wanting...

No, she wouldn't consider such a thing. She'd enjoy the next three days if it killed her. On that happy thought, she went into her private bath, leaned toward the mirror and checked the scant makeup she wore. Crap. Her mascara had smeared, leaving dark smudges beneath her eyes. And she'd just about eaten off her mauve lipstick. With shaking hands, she fixed her face and considered undoing her bun. Her long, black hair reached halfway down her back, which made it her most striking feature. However, if her kidnapper-date thought so too, she wouldn't have much else to wow him with once they were deep into her fantasy.

She left her hair pinned up and considered her gold-rimmed glasses. Should she put them back on or keep them off? She hadn't worn them in her corporate photo she emailed the agency. Had she told the rep she'd wear them tonight so the escort would be certain to recognize her? Unable to recall details of what she'd said, Adriana sucked her lower lip until she remembered her freshly applied lipstick. Slipping her glasses back on, she peered over them, regarding her reflection. Her olive coloring and black hair resembled her father's, who'd been of pure Greek descent. Her blue eyes matched her mother's, who now lived in London with her fourth husband and their sons. Her look of anxiety belonged to her alone.

Eyes closed, she whispered, "Don't do this to yourself. Have a good time. You deserve it."

Partially convinced, she sprayed her throat, wrists, bra and thong with Gucci's Envy Me, a Christmas present from her matronly secretary who mistakenly thought Adriana's life rocked. The jasmine and peony scent wafted up, its fragrance mingling with the breath freshener she spritzed in her mouth. Her black silk trench coat, an impulse purchase for tonight, fell in soft lines over her charcoal business suit and sapphire silk blouse.

Her heart continued to pound.

Cell phone in hand, she speed-dialed Joe Malachi to let him know she wouldn't need him for the next three days. Technically, Joe served as her live-in chef. She'd inherited him, along with Greco, Inc., after her father passed, since Joe had been her dad's cook. To Adriana, he'd been the father she'd needed. When her parents divorced shortly after her fourth birthday and her mom took off for Europe to start a new life, Joe gave Adriana the love her dad could not. He'd listened to her incessant babbling and comforted her childhood hurts. He—not her dad or her mom—had helped pick out a dress for her middle-school dance and discussed whether she should go to Stanford, Harvard, Yale, Princeton or the school she really wanted to attend. She couldn't have hoped for a better substitute father and owed him an explanation as to why she wouldn't be returning to her Beverly Hills home until Tuesday.

Not that she would tell him the truth.

He picked up on the fourth ring. "Lizzie?"

Adriana smiled at the nickname Joe had given her as a little kid, claiming she'd been as demanding and imperious as England's Queen Elizabeth. Thus, the moniker that evolved into Lizzie and turned into an endearment. It and his raspy voice relaxed her more quickly than a slug of bourbon. With him, she'd always felt loved and safe. If only she could meet a guy her age who'd want her around as he always seemed to. "Hey, Joe."

"What's wrong?" he asked, no doubt hearing the edge in her voice. "You going to be later than usual tonight? Not waiting for her answer, his next question and comments came rapid-fire like a homicide investigator's. "You having car trouble? Tell me you haven't been in an accident. It's raining out there."

"Yeah, I know. And I haven't crashed. I'm still at the office...but I won't be coming home tonight or for the next three days."

"Three days?" Something clanged in the background. Most likely a skillet he'd put on the range. "Is that jerk union lawyer keeping you there?"

She wished. Nathan's thoughts were surely on his upcoming night with Meghan as soon as Steve wrapped things up. "No. We've agreed to the union's terms and they agreed to ours. I just thought..." She panicked, not knowing what excuse to give him for her extended absence, and then the perfect explanation popped into her head. "I'm going to treat myself at a spa. You know, a mini-vacation for the holiday weekend. I thought I deserved it."

"You know you do," he agreed readily. "You work too hard. You never have any fun."

Tonight she would. If the Goddess of Lust smiled down on her, this would be one three-day weekend she'd never forget. Her face warmed. "I'll keep my cell phone on if you need me."

"Just tell me the name of the place. That'll be good enough."

A bead of sweat rolled from her temple to her jaw. She paced the length of her office, decorated efficiently and unimaginatively in chrome and leather. "It's Beautiful something. I can't recall. One of the VPs told me about it. My secretary arranged for them to pick me up. If you need me, call my cell, all right?"

"You gonna be okay?"

Her eyes closed. He knew she'd lied. "Sure."

"You need me for anything, you call, understand?" His voice softened further. "I'll be here. I'm not going anywhere."

Tears stung the corners of her eyes. She murmured, "I know. I'll see you late Monday."

"Or before if you want. Okay?"

Afraid she'd blurt the truth about this weekend and cause him even more concern, or disappoint him because she hired lovers, she mumbled a quick 'sure', ended the call and grabbed her oversized purse. Inside, she'd put custom-made lingerie from a Parisian couturier, another indulgence like her coat. She'd also packed mascara, lipstick and her Gucci perfume. Everything she needed, except boundless confidence, to embark on her newest fantasy. The longest she'd ever committed to. In the past, she'd only indulged in a few hours with escorts, pretending they were either a marauding pirate who'd taken over her ship or an escaped prisoner who hadn't mounted a woman in far too long. Never had she spent the entire night with any of the men.

Again, uncertainty gripped her as she left her office and entered the building's public hallway. Foolishly, she'd told the service to choose tonight's lover so she'd be surprised, just like in a real kidnapping. At the time, Adriana thought it would add an element of danger and excitement to her building sexual tension.

How right she'd been.

Dimly lit halls led to the bank of elevators nearest the street-level garage where she'd parked. The path stretched endlessly and veered around too many blind corners. She passed locked offices with darkened windows, the door plaques stating one belonged to a wholesale distributor, another to an exporter, the next to an office temp agency and beyond it a group of CPAs. Although it wasn't yet seven, the staff for these companies must have decided to get a head start on the holiday weekend. At the first intersection, Adriana entered the new hallway and stopped. About twenty yards ahead, a man headed toward her. A stranger she'd never seen here before.

Tall and young, probably in his late twenties, he wore an expensive business suit that fit his lean frame superbly. With his assured advance, his eyes met hers.

Adriana's heart beat out of time. She didn't notice his features or the color of his hair. She saw only a blur of motion, him coming closer, closer, closer. Her mind asked, *Are you the one?* Her lips refused to part and say the words.

She stared in fear and arousal. Her thoughts ran wild, playing images of him pushing her against the damask wallpaper, barking an order and capturing her mouth, tearing her blouse and bra open to expose her breasts.

A whimper rose in her throat. Her sharp intake of breath interrupted it. She caught a hint of cologne. His? A woody fragrance, it reminded her of Aspen prior to the first snow. Not as masculine or arousing as Nathan's but nice nonetheless.

Alternately softening to her need for human closeness and warmth and tensing with apprehension, she waited for him to make his move.

His steps continued to slow. Taking in her face and length, he gave her an odd look as though she wore new mascara smudges beneath her eyes. He passed without the words she expected to hear or a savage kiss.

Adriana's heart refused to slow. She turned. At a brisk pace, he went around the corner, fleeing from view. Nearly breathless and certainly confused, she rested her shoulder against the wall and wondered if he'd be coming back. Maybe part of his act meant pretending he didn't desire her. His behavior would give her a false sense of security and would make the actual kidnapping even more outrageous and delicious.

Unable to stand the suspense, she returned to the intersection and glanced down the hall. Empty. He must have slipped into the men's room or hid in the stairwell to confuse her further. Unless he'd gone into one of the darkened offices because he belonged there, not with her.

Torn as to whether she should wait him out or continue, Adriana settled on the latter course and went down the next hallway, periodically stealing glances over her shoulder. The young man didn't follow. Her pulse slowed. Vague irritation at having to wait coursed through her, along with her ever-present longing. She reached a new corner and turned into it. Halfway down the hall, a man about her age stood at a closed office door, looking at his watch.

His broad shoulders and large frame made him escort material. Dark hair, beard-shadowed cheeks and a look of impatience fit Adriana's image of a pretend-kidnapper. Like the first guy she'd encountered, this man was a stranger.

He'd either heard her approach or sensed her presence. Head lifting from his watch, he met her eyes.

Her stomach twisted with anticipation. The rest of her couldn't move. She waited for him to say the words she'd given the agency, a command to let her know he'd be spending the weekend with her.

He called out, "Do you have the correct time?"

Unfortunately, those weren't the words. Her heart sank. Lifting her arm to check her watch, she noticed her shaking fingers and made a fist to hide her nervousness. Her blouse's thin fabric wiggled with her quick, shallow breaths. "Five to seven."

"Thanks." He rapped the door three times and frowned as he waited for a response.

As she passed him, Adriana glanced at the plaque. It bore the name of a mortgage company about to go belly up.

The man muttered, "Stupid prick better show his face."

Her thoughts exactly. Where in the hell was her guy? She walked backward down the hall, expecting him to be at the other end, rounding the corner. The only one to notice her happened to be the guy at the door. He gave her a weird look and called out, "Do you work at this place?" He advanced several steps. "Is Rivera your boss?"

She shook her head and pointed behind herself. "My husband's waiting for me."

"Would that be Rivera?"

"No." She pulled out her cell phone to fake a call to her nonexistent spouse or to 9-1-1.

The guy stopped advancing. He returned to the door and pounded on it with the heel of his hand.

Adriana escaped to the next hall. Ahead, she saw the bank of elevators with no one waiting for them or her. Could the agency have gotten the date wrong? Hadn't they been able to find any guy to spend three days with her? If so, they would have emailed their apology, right? So he had to be here, unless he'd gotten in an accident because of the rain. Shoulders slumping, she punched the down button. While waiting for the elevator to arrive, she went to the fire exit, hoping to see her escort hiding inside. Emptiness and a blast of cold air greeted her, along with an unpleasant musty odor reminiscent of rain or a wet, dirty dog. The elevator dinged.

The doors parted. A muscular, thirty-something man leaned against the back rail. He wore khaki slacks and a short-sleeved shirt with the name Ramon embroidered on the pocket. A tool belt hung low on his lean hips. Below it, he sported an impressive bulge. Adriana's eyes jumped from it to his broad chest, full mouth and piercing black eyes. His shaved head and the small gold hoop in his right ear completed the picture, making him dangerous, seductive, hers?

Had to be.

What had she gotten herself into? He looked capable of devouring her. A good thing, given her lonely nights and mounting desire...a daunting proposition given they didn't know each other. On a hard swallow, she edged into the space and leaned against the wall to his left. His attention remained ahead on the still-parted doors. Was he waiting for them to close so he could give her his scripted command, or did he simply enjoy making her wait for the inevitable so she'd want it even more?

Her eyes trailed down him, noting the ornate tattoo on his wrist of a stylized sun. It looked oddly menacing. She dragged her attention away, shifting it to the doors. They remained opened. Her heart skipped several beats at what would happen when they closed finally. Ramon would approach and bark a ruthless order. His hand would be on her throat, keeping her head still so he could claim her mouth. With his body imprisoning hers, the meaty bulge behind his fly would promise pleasure, passion and her submission.

Heat poured through Adriana, wilting her shoulders. Expectation weakened her legs. She gripped the railing with both hands, requiring the support. Something pinged, the sound metal makes as it becomes chilled. She flinched with the sound. On a subdued whoosh, the doors began to close.

Adriana's heart pounded wildly. She turned her head to glance at Ramon, then brought it back at the unexpected movement in her peripheral vision. A hand snuck around the side of the right door, keeping it from closing.

She stared at the fingers, long with blunt tips. The doors hesitated and opened. She forgot to breathe.

Nathan moved inside the small space, abbreviating it even more with his height. His imposing presence made Ramon as inconsequential as a kid brother. The edge of Nathan's briefcase tapped the door. His head lifted from it to her legs.

Unbearable need slithered through Adriana. Her toes tried to curl in her high heels. Her mind whispered a truth she didn't want to face. She wanted Nathan, not Ramon or any of the agency's other studs. *Too bad*, good sense answered. Nathan wanted Meghan on his menu, not her. Foolishly jealous, Adriana glanced around him, expecting to see the young woman trailing behind as she always did.

The hall remained empty. The doors closed. Jerking slightly, the elevator began its downward journey with only her and Nathan.

Before Adriana got too smug and smiled, she reminded herself his bed play had nothing to do with her. Meghan had probably stopped in the ladies' room to freshen up or to remove her underwear, promising to meet him at his car.

Adriana glanced at the buttons on the elevator's control panel, realizing she hadn't punched the one for the parking garage. Neither had he. Only the one for the fifth floor glowed. Why? Suddenly, she remembered Ramon. Had he punched the button for five? Whatever would possess him to do so? What could be waiting for them there? She'd told the agency they'd be taking her car to the hotel and the penthouse suite she'd

rented for the weekend. Surely Ramon knew that, unless he'd wanted to catch her off guard and take her in the stairwell...or he wasn't her guy.

The thought should have daunted. Too easily, Adriana brushed it aside, her attention fixed on Nathan.

His gaze inched up her sheer black stockings to her coat, skirt and blouse, his journey unhurried. He didn't give a damn if she noticed. As a male, he owned the right to regard her at his leisure. At her eyes, he lingered. Surprise and something more flashed across his ruggedly masculine face. An invitation that urged her to cross the small space and join him. A promise of pleasure as intoxicating as his scent and the hint of male musk beneath it.

With the suddenness of a stolen kiss, he smiled...a playful grin, personal, disconcerting, enticing. "Adriana." Her name and his strong voice lingered in the compact car.

Helplessly, she smiled at the sounds and the man. "Nathan."

He crossed over to her side, glancing away only to punch the button for the garage.

His proximity and size overwhelmed. Her knuckles hurt from squeezing the railing too tightly. Turning to her, he tempered his voice as if he didn't want Ramon privy to what he said. "I thought you'd already left."

She watched his broad chest expand with his quiet breathing. His navy wool topcoat matched the twilight shades of his suit and silk tie. Eyes edging up to his mouth, her attention lost in the faint stubble on his upper lip, she answered, "I thought you were still with Steve and Meghan."

He didn't respond immediately.

She met his thickly lashed brown eyes, as sinful as dark chocolate, as seductive as a caress. "Did you change your mind?"

The corners of mouth lifted with his broadening smile. "About what?"

*Sleeping with Meghan.* Not about to voice her thoughts, Adriana searched for a logical answer. Miraculously, she found it. "The terms of the contract." Is that why he'd left her offices? Had something gone awry during the wrap up? Would he be back after the long holiday weekend? Would she be able to see him again? No matter how much money her company would lose with his newest negotiations, Adriana couldn't help her budding excitement. "Surely Steve didn't finish things so quickly."

Ramon cleared his throat. Nathan glanced over, the ends of his hair skimming his much darker brows. Adriana held onto the railing for dear life so she wouldn't reach up and brush his stray locks back.

Nathan returned his attention to her. "No, I haven't changed my mind on the terms. And Steve isn't finished. Meghan's with him and prepared to spend the night until everything's settled."

Surprised, Adriana blurted, "You don't mind?"

"About them doing the work?" He leaned close enough for her to smell a hint of coffee on his breath. "Better Meghan and Steve than you and me."

*You and me.* Her heart made those words sound as hopeful as *I want you.*

*Get real,* her thoughts taunted. If he wasn't spending tonight with Meghan, he'd indulge himself with another woman, one of countless females who'd be delighted to participate in and submit to whatever he craved. Perhaps domination and submission, bondage, a bit of corporal punishment.

The possibilities whirled so quickly in Adriana's mind, she lowered her head to stop her lightheadedness.

Nathan straightened. The elevator dinged. After more throat clearing, Ramon tramped to the parting doors.

Adriana glanced at his tight, muscular ass and watched him exit. He turned to the right and disappeared from view. To take the stairs to the garage? Would he hook up with her there? Was he the one? Even if he were, could she go through with tonight? Sucking her lower lip, she told herself she had to. Once Nathan left, she'd be alone. Again.

Through the years, she'd experienced too few dates and no real relationships. Those men who did seek her out did so because of her inherited wealth. The equally rich ones preferred gorgeous models and stunning actresses.

An intolerable ache settled in her belly and chest. Without thinking, she leaned over for a better view of the hall to catch another glimpse of Ramon, to see where he went or what he might be doing.

"Do you know him?" Nathan asked.

She figured he was asking because he thought she had a thing for the building's maintenance man, and yet his question held no real surprise or curiosity. He might as well have asked her for the time. Gone was his playfulness of a moment ago. The dispassionate attorney in him had returned, reminding Adriana of something she'd forgotten. They weren't friends. They'd never be lovers. They were polite adversaries who'd only see each other again during the next negotiations. By then, he might have hooked up with a woman who turned him inside out and gotten engaged or married to her. He might even have become a father.

Swift and oppressive sadness flooded Adriana at the future she'd painted for him, one she craved but sensed she'd never get. Keeping sorrow from her voice, she lied, "I know he does the repairs around here. I just recalled something I need him to fix in my office. I should have called him back."

Nathan didn't comment. The doors closed. The elevator continued its journey to the garage.

Adriana glanced at the overhead display showing the descending floors. She glimpsed at the control panel. Finally, she snuck a peek at Nathan and found him studying her purse. The side nearest him gaped open, revealing the lacy edge of her red thong.



A surge of blood burned her throat and cheeks. Her ears rang.

After an excruciating wait, the elevator dinged, its doors opening. Chilled air rushed inside, skimming her feverish face. Tire tracks, recorded in murky water, crisscrossed the garage's concrete floor. An overhead light blinked intermittently over a lone Range Rover, surely Nathan's. The rest of the spaces in this section were empty. She'd parked her car around the corner to the left. If she didn't see another vehicle there, representing the one belonging to her escort, she'd have to call the service. Otherwise, when she drove away he wouldn't be able to find her. She'd be spending three days by herself in that damn penthouse suite.

The possibility made her reluctant to leave the elevator, as did Nathan's presence. A faint smile tugged at his luscious lips. His head lifted from her purse. Like a seasoned predator honing in on his powerless prey, he looked at her, his eyes sparkling with mischief.

Adriana felt obliged to explain or to lie as to why she carried underwear in her purse. Sadly, every word she'd ever learned escaped her. Although she appreciated his sudden attention, it also rankled. She didn't want him to toy with her. She wasn't in the mood to be teased or treated like his pet—patted on the head, offered a cute remark and abandoned as he moved on to a real woman, the kind of babe he wanted.

She draped her arm over her purse, hiding its contents. He arched his brows slightly, noting it. Adriana might have commented, but his cell phone rang and the elevator doors began to close.

Reaching out with one hand to stop them and using the other to pull out his ringing phone, Nathan lowered his head to the number on the display.

A strained moment passed, at least for Adriana. Nathan simply opened his phone and said hello to the caller, a woman he called Echo. Given the quick affection in his voice, Echo was surely his date, possibly his future wife. As he listened to her speaking, his eyes shifted to Adriana. He seemed uneasy or annoyed she hadn't left.

Embarrassment broke her inertia. Tempted to give him the finger, she controlled herself and lifted her hand in farewell. Rounding the corner around the elevator, she headed for her Mercedes at the far end of the garage. The only other car in this section was a beat-up Saturn. Ramon's?

Heels clacking against the concrete, she swung her head left, right, searching for him so she could growl her frustration at having to wait, at having to hire him for a good time. At having to fantasize about Nathan while she was with him so she'd reach orgasm and be satisfied.

Lucky for Ramon, he wasn't anywhere in sight.

Fuck. Discouraged and near tears, Adriana reached inside her suit jacket for her cell phone to call the agency and give them hell. The tips of her fingers touched the plastic casing only to drop away at the powerful arm suddenly around her waist. Her mouth opened on a strangled gasp. A large hand clamped over it. She smelled soap or hand lotion on her attacker's fingers.

"Quiet, understand?" a deep voice said, repeating the scripted command she'd given the agency. "You're coming with me." He pushed her toward her car.

Lids squeezed tight, Adriana pictured Nathan's arm around her waist, his hand on her mouth, his cock thickened, rigid, eager to pierce her flesh. Her aching nipples tightened even more. She mewled.

The escort pressed his hand harder on her mouth. Her tongue snaked out, licking his palm.

Obviously not expecting it, his step paused and then he continued with his script. Lips to her ear, he growled, "I'm going to take you with me tonight. I'm going to fuck you hard and long. And you're going to love it—got it? You're going to fucking—"

The rest of his speech dropped off with his startled curse. His arm fell away from her waist, his hand from her mouth. Turning, Adriana gaped at Nathan's hand clamped on her escort's shoulder.

He yanked the guy farther from her. The escort stumbled backward. Giving him no chance to gain his footing or to fight, Nathan swung the guy around to face him. In a flash of movement, he hauled his arm back, tightened his fingers into a brawny fist and threw a right hook.

With a sickening thud, Nathan's blow and the escort's jaw connected. Arms windmilling, the man lurched backward on the rubber heels of his black shoes and tumbled to the concrete, a thin stream of blood trickling from his mouth.

## Chapter Two

The corners of Adriana's vision dimmed. Heart pounding, she dragged her eyes from the escort to Nathan. He flexed the fingers of his right hand, no doubt hurting from his punch. His left held his cell phone.

"You all right?" he asked her. Hastily, his gaze traveled her length. His thumb hovered over the keypad's numbers.

Her voice croaked, "Who are you planning to call?"

"Police. Stay right where you are," he barked at the escort, "or I'll pound your fucking ass into the pavement."

*Oh god, no.* Adriana rushed to Nathan's side. Hand on his, she begged, "Don't call the police. Please."

His face lifted from their joined hands. Confusion washed over his features. "Why not?"

The escort groaned. Startled, Adriana looked over. Dressed in solid black, the same color as his shoulder length hair, he could have been a fallen angel ready for the pleasures of hell, or a model in an exceptionally wanton Calvin Klein advertisement.

The young man tongued the left side of his perfectly sculpted mouth and gasped. "You goddamn bastard!" he cried, his words lisping from his injury. His free hand flapped.

The movement reminded Adriana of a little girl's reaction to a painful boo-boo.

"You broke my fucking tooth!" he moaned. "I'm gonna fucking sue you!"

"You do that," Nathan said, his tone unimpressed.

The escort snarled, "Screw you. And you, you crazy bitch," he growled at Adriana. "You said you wanted this. I got it in writing from the agency. I'm fucking gonna sue you too. I have an audition next week and now I won't be able to keep it!"

Cringing, Adriana's hand slipped from Nathan's. She wrapped her arms around her torso in a futile attempt to protect herself from his questioning expression and the escort's verbal blows.

The young man tongued his broken tooth. On his newest moan, Adriana whimpered. Nathan asked, "Do you know this nitwit?"

"Fuck you!" the man shouted.

Cheeks stinging with heat, Adriana forced herself to look at Nathan. His unruffled expression should have calmed her. Instead, it pissed her off. Did he think she did stuff like this all the time? Didn't he have the decency to appear shocked? "Don't call anyone." Her voice was surprisingly even. "You can go. I'll be all right. Excuse me."

She went to the escort. Instantly, he pulled his knees up to his chest, his feet protecting his groin from the pointed toes of her high heels. Adriana's heavy sigh mingled with his newest moan. "I'm sorry this happened. I didn't know anyone would see you coming up behind me to uh..."

"Kidnap you?" he offered in response to her mortified silence. "Because I was following your idiotic script?"

Briefly, she closed her eyes. "Please go to the ER. Have your agency send the bill to me."

"Are you nuts?" His perfectly trimmed brows drew together. "I had an audition for catalogue work next week. My agent said it was in the bag. Now I won't make it. Without that gig, I won't have enough cash to pay for my newest headshots or rent. I want more than a trip to the ER and dentist."

Of course he did. "I'll have my attorney take care of everything. He's still in the building." She spoke even faster. "You'll get a settlement. No need to call your own attorney who'll want fifty percent or more to negotiate this. Let mine handle it and you'll get the entire amount. All you have to do is forget this ever happened, all right?"

His beautiful features got downright ugly. "Maybe I don't want to forget it. Maybe I want to tweet TMZ and all the other entertainment news outlets and let them know what happened. It'd make for great publicity."

Adriana's stomach churned. However, her brain worked like a ruthless CEO. She made her voice firm, deadly, just like her father's. "And let everyone know what you do for a living when you're not modeling? Doesn't the LAPD frown upon that? Won't your real livelihood prove a risk to those in the modeling and film industries? Won't they be reluctant to hire you because of it?"

He clenched his jaw until the pain proved too much. Blood drained from his face. "Get your goddamn attorney down here. Have him take me to the ER. Now."

"You've made the right choice, Mr..." She paused, not knowing how to address him. "What should I tell him your name is?"

Gingerly, he probed his bruised jaw with the tips of his fingers. "Max Stone."

"I meant your real name for the settlement."

His face scrunched with his new wince. "Ed Marpole."

Turning her back to him, Adriana pulled out her cell phone, speed-dialed Steve and flinched at Nathan watching. He hadn't left? Why?

"Hey," Steve said, answering on the first ring. "What's up?"

She turned her back on Nathan and edged to the left so she wasn't facing Ed. "I need you to come down to the parking garage. There's been an incident."

Ed barked a sarcastic laugh. "Like hell! It was a fucking attack!"

Steve spoke hurriedly. "Who's that? Did you run over someone?"

Adriana strode past the escort and Nathan, halting as she saw her purse on the garage floor. Her X-rated lingerie hung over the side. She didn't recall dropping the

handbag. Pivoting, she walked in the opposite direction, her voice low as she told Steve what happened and what he needed to do. Deliberately, she hadn't mentioned Nathan by name, calling him a Good Samaritan instead.

Steve's initial silence made her panting breaths sound all the louder. "Holy shit," he whispered as if he didn't want Meghan to hear. "I didn't know you were into hiring, uh..."

"I probably won't be anymore. Please get down here now."

"On my way."

"Alone," Adriana added quickly. She didn't want Meghan to witness this fiasco, the only way the girl would ever know what happened. Steve wasn't about to talk, and in her heart, Adriana knew Nathan wouldn't either. He wasn't that kind of man.

"Sure thing," Steve said. "Hold on for a sec. Meghan," he said to the girl, his voice fainter as he spoke to her. "I need to check something out. I'll be right back."

"No you won't," Adriana warned.

He mumbled into the phone. "Yeah, I know."

On the other end of the call, Adriana heard the sound of a door shutting and faint pounding noises as though Steve tore down the hall to the elevators.

His voice huffed, "I'll call Meghan on the way to the ER and tell her we'll pick this up tomorrow. I'll have security lock the office."

"I love you, you know that, right?"

"I will if you don't make anymore cracks about Rogaine."

"Then quit asking me if my bun's too tight."

"Never."

Smiling faintly at his teasing, Adriana ended the call and returned to Ed. "He'll be down in a minute. Here, let me help you." She offered her hand.

The muscles in his jaw tensed. "Stay away from me, you crazy —"

"Fine, okay, I got it." Hands lifted in surrender, Adriana backed away.

"And that goes double for you," he ordered Nathan.

Adriana's eyes darted to him.

Nathan regarded Ed as he would a vile specimen in a lab. His voice cut across the empty space, his tone dark and intimidating. "Keep talking to the lady like you have been and I may forget my manners. Got it?"

Ed fell silent at Nathan's threat.

Adriana's throat tightened with gratitude, while renewed shame made it difficult for her to breathe. He'd protected her so easily, and in doing so he'd learned about her secret life. Why couldn't he have just left? Why did he have to see her like this?

Tears blurred her vision. Defeated, she went to her purse, shoving the lingerie inside.

Minutes later, shoes slapped the pavement, the sharp claps indicating Steve approached at a run.

Adriana looked over. The attorney's protruding belly jiggled as he sprinted toward her. His mouth hung open with his hitching breaths. He called out, "Hi, I'll take care of everything. Ah—hi," he said, coming to an abrupt stop as he noticed Nathan, clearly surprised to see he was her Good Samaritan. His head veered to Ed, still on the concrete. The odd scene didn't reflect in Steve's sudden take-charge voice. "I'm Mr. Boyle. I represent Ms.—" Mouth closing, he glanced at her. His eyes questioned—*does he know your real name?*

She shook her head.

"I represent the lady," Steve said. He paused to haul in more air and swallow. His hand gestured to the left. "My car's on the other side. Let's get your tooth looked at first. Then we'll move on to other matters. We'll take care of everything tonight."

Ed rocked to his knees and groaned as he pushed to his feet. Bent at the waist, he frowned at the damp stains on the knees of his black pants. "You better. She's—"

"What?" Nathan interrupted.

Steve's brows shot up at Nathan's threatening tone. Ed straightened and stepped back. "Nothing."

Hand on Ed's arm, Steve guided him past the elevator to his vehicle. Twice, Steve glanced over his shoulder at Nathan and her.

Adriana watched him and the escort depart, keeping her focus in their direction even after they were out of sight and the motor of Steve's car turned over, settling into a well-oiled purr. Tires swished against the damp concrete, recording his drive to the exit. After the sounds faded, her sigh filled the awkward silence. Determined to get this over with quickly and with as little humiliation as possible, Adriana hugged her purse to her chest, went to Nathan and talked fast.

"I apologize for putting you in such a difficult position." She glanced at his eyes and lost her nerve, looking past. Rain dripped from the concrete overhang and drenched the brightly lit city beyond. "No way could you have known that I had planned to have an—" Her voice stalled. She pulled in a deep breath and continued. "I thought this weekend I'd have some fun. So, I thought I'd order an—" She halted again, unable to say the word escort. In Nathan's presence, it seemed so lame and tawdry.

Her shoulders tensed and her stomach rolled just as it always had when she'd faced her father's criticism, his enduring disappointment in her. Not knowing how to explain the unexplainable, she decided to lie. "This is the first time I've ever called an agency. They told me about their packages. Apparently, the kidnapping fantasy is very popular with the Hollywood crowd. And the only reason I even considered it is because today's my birthday." Another lie. It made her speak even faster. "I had the three-day weekend looming and I just wanted to try something different. I didn't intend for it to turn out this way." Finished, she met Nathan's eyes expecting to see judgment or amusement.

He regarded her carefully while giving away none of what he thought. "Happy birthday."

She rolled her eyes.

Didn't faze him at all, though he did seem to be fighting a smile. "Guess I fucked up tonight's celebration for you."

"Not unless the agency doesn't allow me to use them again."

He didn't comment.

Adriana fought a sigh and spoke without thinking, her voice a challenge, wanting to start a fight and not knowing why. "You don't know what it's like to have to do something like this, do you?"

"You mean kidnapping women I don't know?"

She leveled her gaze on him.

He grinned finally, not to ridicule, but as though he enjoyed sparring with her in this dank, oil-scented garage. It showed in the rush of interest, male and unashamed, flickering in his eyes.

Stunned by it, drawn to it, Adriana shook herself back to reason before she fell even deeper beneath his spell. Given his potent looks and confidence, he probably flirted with all women like this, at least when he wasn't in their offices conducting business. "I meant wanting to engage in a fantasy, but not having anyone to act it out with. A man like you, all you have to do is call Meghan. I bet she'd be down here or anywhere you wanted in an instant." Adriana snapped her fingers in demonstration, the sharp click sounding surprisingly loud. "Right?"

His smile lingered for a moment then faded into faint contentment, holding all kinds of wicked secrets. He studied her mouth and eyes with such concentration, Adriana's face burned. She wanted to turn away and could not, unable to find the will or strength.

His silence persisted. Just beyond the structure, a car's horn wailed mournfully. A blast of damp air carried police sirens with it, those horns screeching in the distance. Nathan's voice followed, its rich smoothness growing intimate, conspiratorial. "You don't know what kind of a man I am."

His words revealed nothing and promised everything, at least in Adriana's mind. Her pussy pulsed. Desire constricted her nipples until they hurt. Again, she spoke without considering the consequences. "Does Meghan?"

"Not in the way you're asking."

Because of Echo? Adriana recalled the phone call he'd taken as she left the elevator. She'd heard his obvious feelings for the woman. That level of emotion should have kept him from noticing the escort and foolishly rescuing her. So why was he still here instead of on his way to his date?

"She's practically a baby," he added.

His comment interrupted her musings. "Who?"

He gave her an odd look. "Meghan. She's only twenty-three."

"She looks fully grown to me."

"Not even close, at least for my purposes or tastes." His eyes prowled down her, stripping her of privacy, then edged back up, leaving her dizzy with desire.

Adriana's thighs and calves stiffened, keeping her from backing away or moving nearer to him.

An unnecessary precaution. Nathan advanced a step, reducing the space between them. His voice tempted and teased. "The activities I engage in would probably shock little Meghan and would make what you had planned this weekend seem downright docile."

With his admission, heat radiated from Adriana's core to her limbs, sapping them of strength. Her breathing quickened at the thought of him ripping off her clothes, holding her prisoner with his brutal kiss and insatiable cock. His big body damp with sweat from his exertions, his weight trapping her, forcing her to submit as he took her repeatedly throughout the day and night, using her mouth, cunt, even her anus as he pleased. Animal hunger tore through her, making her voice breathy. "Really."

"Yeah, really. Care to find out?"

Her brows lifted, sending her reading glasses a bit farther down her nose.

Nathan suppressed a smile. He'd shocked her again. Good. It made her forget her embarrassment. On the other hand, it had revealed his interest in her. A matter he'd been hesitant to convey these past weeks and wasn't entirely certain of now.

Unlike the women he generally approached, he found Adriana almost too interesting. She was fiercely intelligent yet unpretentious, elegant and surprisingly sexy with a smoldering sensuality her business wear and pulled-back hair couldn't offset.

During their negotiations, he'd caught her staring at him numerous times, her delicate nostrils flaring slightly as though his presence stole her breath. Beneath her strikingly exotic features and those incredible blue eyes, he'd seen an expression of naked need and vulnerability.

She owned strength and the ability to yield without pretense, giving a lover her all. A dangerous level of engagement from a woman, especially for a man who wanted nothing of protracted relationships or commitment. Nathan had tried it once and failed miserably. Losing Echo had nearly killed him. Never again would he make the same mistake.

And so he'd played at sex as Adriana apparently tried to do even though she seemed ill-prepared for the consequences, the lack of true intimacy, the sexual hangover when the lover left without a backward glance.

A voice in the recesses of his mind told him to leave. His body, lust and an urge to protect her from guys like Ed wouldn't allow it, no matter how misguided.

*You don't know what it's like to have to do something like this, do you?* she'd asked.



Not this exactly, though his membership at Zanes came to mind. Its nondescript name could have belonged to a restaurant, bar, or even a men's clothing store, not a gentlemen's club in Malibu that catered to every hedonistic delight.

He hadn't been boasting when he'd said his carnal activities would make her planned weekend seem tame. Since his divorce, he'd wanted nothing except unrestrained pleasure.

Adriana's flushed cheeks and parted lips said she believed him. She knuckled her glasses back up her nose. "Are you talking about you and me and..." Unable or unwilling to continue, she looked at him for guidance, her extraordinary eyes widened in wonder and a trace of misgiving.

Nathan cautioned himself to heed her hesitation, knowing he would not. Too readily, he spoke to her wonder, telling himself she'd be better off with him than an escort who pretended passion. "That's exactly what I mean." Unwilling to resist her guileless allure any longer, he brought his hand to the edge of her coat, fingering the buttery fabric.

Although she trembled, Adriana didn't back away. Her head lowered, watching his fingers move to her suit jacket and to the edge of her blouse, the V-neck arrowing to her breasts. Her body heat warmed the lightweight silk. It fluttered with her ragged breathing.

"I'm looking at a long weekend and so are you," he continued in a deceptively mild voice. Having decided to make his move on her, he wasn't about to let her go. He'd show her how to have fun and still protect her heart. He'd done it for years. "We can enjoy it together. I'll take care of everything. All you have to do is exactly as I say." Just like with her pretend kidnapper.

Her lids slipped down in concert with her head lolling to the side. Pleased at her surrender, Nathan continued to run his fingertips up her throat, enjoying her hot, moist skin, noting the rapid thumping of her pulse. Before their weekend ended, he'd have her heart beating faster than she believed possible, her body writhing beneath his mouth, hands and cock, her voice screaming in pleasure.

She forced down a swallow and spoke haltingly. "I rented a penthouse suite at the Mondrian."

He brushed the invitation aside. "Ed and Steve can use it. I have a place in Arrowhead. No maid or room service to disturb us. Just you and me."

She regarded him through slitted lids as a faint, guttural moan escaped her lips, followed by her throaty voice. "Isn't it snowing up there? I'm not dressed for that kind of weather."

Slowly and playfully, he smiled, offering no comment. Words would come soon enough. Right now, he wanted her to think about what she'd just said and to realize clothes were the last things she'd need. Alone with him, secluded from the rest of the world, she'd be deliciously nude until they left for L.A. on Monday.

Understanding finally tinted her cheeks a deep rose. Uncertainty of what else their weekend would bring drained her face of a bit of color, keeping her blush from turning as scarlet as her perfectly polished nails.

Now, he spoke. "Once we arrive at my place, we'll be in our own world, Adriana, where clothes aren't allowed." He ran his forefinger from her neck to the base of her throat to the V of her blouse, touching skin. A muscle in her chest jumped. His cock hardened painfully. His balls compressed, drawing tighter to his body. He ignored both, bringing back his hand, making her wait for his touch, to anticipate its arrival, building its intensity in her mind.

With a measured move, he eased her purse from her hands and held it beneath his arm. "Do you want to get anything from your car for our weekend?"

Her face lowered to the separation in his topcoat, following it to his fly, his obvious erection pushing against his boxers and thin wool pants. He made no effort to hide what she'd soon have inside of her tight, wet cunt and willing mouth. He wanted her to look at and welcome this part of him.

"Everything's in my purse," she said at last, her face lifting to his, her expression wanting.

Nathan laced his fingers through hers, warming her skin chilled from the falling temperature and her mounting tension. Hand in hand, they walked to his vehicle, the hard slap of his shoes drowning out the gentle clicking of her heels. Deliberately, he kept his eyes straight ahead, watching her in his peripheral vision. Adriana's head moved up and down as she took in his face and length, their joined hands.

At his Rover, he put her purse on the backseat and pulled his dark green parka from atop the items he'd packed for the long weekend. He'd intended to use the solitude at his Arrowhead estate to catch up on work and to enjoy a few hours of rest. Not that Adriana needed to know how her fake kidnapping had altered his plans, and in such a captivating way.

Coat in hand, he turned and regarded her lazily, as though he already owned her. "Come here."

Beneath the flickering overhead light, bright spots of pink stained her cheeks and forehead. Her voice dropped considerably, making it nearly as deep as his. "Are you going to use that to tie me up?"

Nathan warned himself against smiling. "It's a parka, not a straightjacket." He stepped closer. Her head crept up. He asked, "You like being tied up?"

Her narrow shoulders lifted. "Maybe."

"Then I'll have to see what I can do." He held the coat out for her to slip on. "Come here," he said again, his voice quiet yet demanding.

She didn't move. A jumble of emotions paraded across her face. Desire. Caution. Disapproval at being ordered about? Head cocked to one side, she looked at him from beneath her lashes. "Technically, I haven't said yes to your first invitation."

So she planned to put up some resistance with him as she had with Ed, warning the little prick if he talked about tonight, he could face charges from the LAPD's vice squad. Excellent. Her inner fire made the coming night and weekend much more intriguing. Nevertheless, Nathan arched one brow, matching it with his resolute tone. "Say yes, Adriana."

She worked her mouth so she wouldn't smile. "Let me take this off first." Shrugging out of her trench coat, she tossed it on his back seat. After a moment's consideration, she removed her glasses, put them in her purse and allowed him to help her with the parka.

The top of her head came to just below his mouth. Her slight frame and delicate fragrance nearly derailed his self-control. He wanted her sleek flesh bared and in his hands, beneath his body, imprisoned by his mouth.

She folded the sleeves to above her wrists. Arms around her, with his chin on her shoulder, he fumbled with the coat's zipper and failed to connect the fastener. His hand jerked up, touching her belly.

Her flesh quivered. Air rushed from her lungs.

Liking her reaction, he ran his fingers down her stomach to her mound.

Surprised, she went to her toes, head turning to the elevator to see if anyone had come down and watched.

Nathan knew they were alone.

Not as certain, her voice shook. "Here." Hands over his, she used her baby-soft palms and slender, moist fingers to move his away. At this point in their encounter, Nathan allowed it. Later, she'd do exactly as he wanted, no longer concerned if others might watch. At the end of their three-day adventure, he'd have her welcoming the idea.

Working the fastener, she pulled it up to waist-level, shifted her weight and unknowingly stepped into him, her ass snuggling his erection. Her hands stilled on the partially closed zipper. Her head lifted. She turned her face, meeting his eyes.

Purposely, Nathan pulled her close so her length would hug his. Arm around her waist, fingers skimming the edge of her breast, he kept her from moving.

Her rough breaths contradicted her immediate surrender, the way her body sagged against his. Promptly, Nathan's cock reacted, becoming so thick and congested with blood its skin seemed in danger of splitting.

Shit. Jaw clenched, he struggled for control, knowing he'd need it if he brought her to Arrowhead. Approximately ninety miles separated them from his mountain estate with rain here and snow there screwing up the drive. No more than two miles away, the Mondrian's penthouse waited, spacious, warm and with room service, but not the level of privacy he ached to have with her. The kind her fantasy kidnapper would have provided, stripping away all protection and her defenses, leaving her no choice except to submit.

Nathan sensed Adriana had no idea how powerful passion could be in a setting that allowed for full spontaneity, like Zanes or his estate.

With great effort, he pulled his arm away and stepped back, wanting to get on the road to his place.

She turned, wearing a look of bewilderment because he hadn't continued to touch her. He would. Once he began, he wouldn't stop. For now though, Nathan grinned at the picture she created. His parka hung to her knees, the sleeves swallowing her arms. She looked like a little girl playing dress up in her daddy's clothes.

Shifting her weight, she rolled her eyes again. "Before you start laughing, having me wear this was your idea."

"And a good one." He reached behind her for the hood, pulling it over her head. The synthetic fur ruff dangled above her nose.

Face turned to it, she inhaled deeply, no doubt catching his scent on the fabric.

"Like it?" he asked.

Busted, she drew her chin up and her head back, trying to see him past the hood. "Hardly."

He smiled at her lie.

She asked, "Is this your idea of a blindfold?"

"Not even close. You can still see. A good blindfold takes away all of your sight and power, leaving you in my hands and completely helpless."

She stopped easing her head back. Excitement tinged her voice. "You know a lot about blindfolds, Nathan?"

"I know about a lot of things, Adriana. In a couple of hours, you'll begin to experience them too." Adding no more, leaving her to anticipate and to wonder what he meant, he opened the passenger side door.

Obediently, she came to the Rover. Fingers on the ruff, she lifted it so she could see him. "What had you planned to do tonight if you hadn't interrupted my plans?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me it does."

Her comment caught him off guard. At a loss, he asked, "Why?"

Uneasiness flooded her features. "You took a call as I left the elevator. Was Echo expecting you?"

He stepped back with the name, a familiar pain settling in the center of his chest. "What?"

"Was she your date? Did something happen and she couldn't make it?"

Head lowered, he pretended to fish his keys from his pocket. "No and no."

"Is she your wife? Do you have a wife?"

His face lifted. Her obvious worry tempered his surprise and irritation at the intrusion into his private life he never shared with anyone. "No, I'm divorced and blissfully single."

Her expression still questioned.

The words came before he could stop them. "Echo's my daughter."

Adriana's brows lifted. "I didn't know you had a child."

"I don't."

Confusion swept over her features, narrowing her eyes. "You just said you did."

True. An automatic response he couldn't seem to overcome even after all the years separating him and Echo. Cursing himself for telling Adriana anything, he decided to explain and get it out of the way so they could concentrate on their weekend. "Until Echo was two I believed she was mine. A few months after Hayley and I got divorced, she married Echo's biological father. Echo has his genes, but I'll always consider her my daughter."

## **Chapter Three**

Rarely had Adriana witnessed the level of pain she saw on Nathan's face and heard in his voice. Heart aching, she longed to gather him in her arms and offer whatever comfort she could. Instinct advised her to back off and keep quiet. He didn't need to confess humiliating details of his ex cheating on him and keeping his daughter's paternity a secret for two years.

Good god. How in the world could any woman do such a horrible thing to a man, or rather, two men? Hadn't she seen the unconditional love on Nathan's face the first time he held Echo and felt her weight, marveled at her warmth and indulged in the wondrous scent of her skin? Hadn't she cared about her lover and what she'd deprived him of? Lost moments he'd never get back...their daughter's first step, tooth, smile, words.

The enormity of her betrayal consumed Adriana's thoughts and stole her ability to make small talk.

Fifteen minutes into their ride, the steady hush of air from the car's heater mingled with the swishing windshield wipers and an Anita Baker CD. The singer's rich voice was grown-up and womanly, the way Adriana sensed Nathan liked his females. Anita's signature style added unmistakable seduction to the songs.

Nathan eased the Rover to a stop behind a long line of cars and glanced over. "Temperature all right?"

In the glare of headlights coming from the opposite direction, his blond hair appeared much lighter, his expression neutral, his previous pain dismissed or suppressed.

Adriana caught a glimpse of it in his dark eyes. He seemed so young suddenly, hurting and lost. Tenderness surged through her. Prudently, she kept it from her voice, not wanting to sound as though she pitied him. "Actually, I've already turned off the heater on my seat. I'm a little warm."

He glanced at how his parka shrouded her. "The coat does come off." His face lifted. "So do your clothes."

Her heart leapt at his change from hurt to hungry and the surprising seriousness in his eyes. "You expect me to strip in here?"

With a smile, he turned back to the traffic. Rain pounded the windshield and roof. The music and Anita's voice enticed. "You said you were warm."

"We could turn down the heat."

His hand stopped hers from adjusting it. "I'm not hot."

Liar. His fingers burned against hers.

"Go on," he said, running his thumb over the back of her hand prior to releasing it. "Take the parka off ...for a start."

Defiantly, she crossed her arms over her chest, refusing him. She liked the bulkiness of his coat, especially on a wintry night filled with dark promise. Its fabric held his masculine scent, arousing and comforting. Its heaviness reminded her of his arm around her waist, his large body intimidating yet protective.

He flicked on his turn signal and eased his Rover into the next, faster lane. "Suit yourself. For now."

And later? What then? Her sprinting pulse and uncivilized thoughts answered. Images unwound in her mind of Nathan using his size to overpower and tame her, imprisoning her arms above her head, his knees spreading her thighs, their naked bellies touching, his sex seeking hers as he taught her surrender and submission to their basest needs. Her throat went dry. After a brief struggle, she managed a swallow and a reasonably steady voice. "What happens when we arrive?"

He accelerated, jockeying the Rover into another lane. "I'm going to strip you bare and enjoy every inch of you with my mouth, hands and cock."

His casual tone made his promise all the more lewd. Blood thudded in her ears. Her eyes darted to him.

Undoubtedly sensing her scrutiny, he looked over. Headlights exposed his expression and eyes. A mixture of feral lust and human need sparkled in them. "Are you afraid?"

"Should I be?"

His expression got devilish. "You sound like an attorney."

"No, I don't. You dodge questions much better than I ever could. Like the one I just asked."

Brows lifting, he glanced back at the cars moving at a crawl. "You have nothing to fear no matter what we do. I'd never harm you."

Puzzled at his comment, Adriana straightened and leaned toward him, her hand settling on his upper arm. Despite his suit jacket and topcoat, she could still feel his impressive biceps. "Of course you wouldn't. I wouldn't be here if I thought otherwise. You're not that type of man."

He flicked his gaze at her then watched the car in front. "Outside of negotiating a contract for your union workers and slugging fake kidnappers, you don't know what kind of man I am."

"I have a fair idea. Are you trying to talk me out of this?"

Although he'd stopped again with the clogged traffic, he kept his attention on the vehicles ahead. "I don't want you to have any illusions about me."

Was her interest so obvious? Did he believe she wanted to make more of this than it would ever be? Her hand slipped from his arm, an almost too quick reaction. To compensate, she made her voice breezy. "Such as?"

"What happened with Hayley wasn't her fault. It was mine, no matter what you've been thinking."

Adriana hadn't expected him to bring the subject up again or to be so blunt. She settled back in her seat. "I wasn't thinking anything."

"A little advice." He turned his face to hers. "Don't ever play poker. You don't hide your emotions all that well."

Disconcerted, she mumbled, "Really."

"Yeah, really. Like your current indignation." His voice teased. "You'd like me to shut up."

She lied. "Not at all."

Giving her a scolding look, Nathan accelerated with the rest of the traffic. "That's exactly what you want. Believe me, you're easy to read. Earlier, in the conference room, your attention kept drifting. Each time I saw you staring at me, I thought you were interested, at least until we got to the garage... I didn't know about Fred showing up."

She muttered, "His name's Ed. Although he probably prefers Max."

"Were you fantasizing about him?"

A quick blush scalded her cheeks. Thankfully, the dark kept him from noticing, and her unease didn't show in her voice. "I didn't know who the agency was sending. I can't fantasize about someone I don't know."

"Your image of him then."

Uncomfortable with the conversation's direction, she wanted to hedge and figured he'd just keep asking until he got the truth, which he could apparently read on her face. "Actually, I was thinking about a Viking." She added no more, not about to confess he'd been the inspiration.

His head swung to her, pausing briefly and returned to his lane. "You like football players?"

Adriana's laugh broke free before she could stop it.

"I take it that means no?"

Still giggling, she answered. "Not a Minnesota Viking, the real ones from history. And no, I loathe sports. I learned them to please my dad, but..." Her words and laughter halted as she recalled the stats she'd memorized, the plays she'd studied and dissected so she could discuss them with her father, a rabid fan. Her efforts went unnoticed. During the games, he surrounded himself with a group of his male VPs, relieving him of having to deal with her on all but the most superficial level, just like an employee.

She remembered the look in Nathan's eyes earlier, the anguish in his voice as he'd said Echo's name. She tried to imagine her father having the same depth of feeling for her and could not. Sorrow at a loss she'd endured all of her life deadened her voice. "Sports bored me to death." Sighing deeply, she turned down the heater's fan and continued, unable to help herself. "My father and I were never close, no matter how



hard I tried to please him. I don't believe he ever really wanted me as you obviously still want Echo. I just don't understand how you could think what happened was your fault. Stop me if I'm out of line here, but did you cheat on Hayley before she cheated on you?"

The last strains of music faded, leaving only the sound of pelting rain and beating wipers. Nathan's eyes flicked to the CD player then back to the road. He put on his right turn signal and edged through traffic to the slowest lane. The Rover's headlights shone on the street sign indicating the next exit, an overpass miles from the turn-off they should be taking.

Adriana's stomach sank with disappointment. Did he plan to get off and head back to L.A. because of her out-of-line question?

"No, I didn't cheat on her," he said.

She turned from the sign to him. His head moved to the stalled car in the third lane, the obstruction he'd avoided by moving over. Once past it, the freeway opened up. Setting the vehicle at a comfortable and safe speed in the rain, he leaned back in his seat and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel. "I didn't drink or take drugs either, if that's what you're thinking."

"I wasn't."

His eyes slid to her.

She smiled.

He hid his own by turning away to check the side view mirror. "I suppose you want to know what happened."

More than anything, though she didn't want to push. "Only if you don't mind telling me."

He fiddled with the headlights, his seat, the wipers speed. Almost as an afterthought, he said, "I didn't have time for her. I was always going to school and working and then crashing because I was so damn tired."

Hazarding a guess, Adriana said, "She wanted you to have a regular job. She didn't like you studying to be an attorney."

"Actually, she helped support us while I attended Pepperdine, both their undergraduate and law schools. She wanted me to have everything, including a life—our life. I couldn't get that part right." He glanced at her and returned his attention to the road. "I've always been a workaholic so I wouldn't end up like my parents." His voice lowered considerably, the tone one uses when telling a shameful secret. "I can't recall either of them having a job for more than a few days at a time. They weren't stupid or uneducated, they just thought working was beneath them. Something only suckers did on a full-time basis. As long as they had their smokes, a bag of fast food and a cheap hotel room for the night, life was good."

Adriana stared, unable to imagine such a thing. "You lived in hotel rooms while you were growing up?"

"Not only me, but my younger brother and sister. Because there were kids involved, my parents got state aid, but Dad sold the food stamps and other benefits for cash that he and mom used to conduct business. That's what they called it. Oddly enough, it wasn't about them buying and selling drugs. Their addiction was gambling. We lived in Vegas then. No matter how badly they did at the casinos, they always believed they'd get that one lucky break and win a million. Sometimes they won a hundred bucks or more and blew it on stuff like toys for us kids. Christmas in April, May, June or whatever, my dad liked to say. By the middle of every month, there was rarely any cash left. The only food my siblings and I had was what we got at school. By the time I was eleven and my brother Ben was eight, we were running errands or doing odd jobs for anyone who'd hire us, just so we had enough money to buy our parents and our little sister Polly something to eat."

Adriana recalled the daily feasts Joe had prepared for her and her dad, enough to feed an entire family. Shaken by Nathan's account, she lifted her hand to touch his, thinking better of it at the last moment. A man like Nathan might misinterpret empathy as a value judgment on his history. What he needed and had was her respect. She'd never known a more honorable man. His voice held no accusation or malice, just a world-weariness he'd known since childhood. She pretended to smooth a bulge in the parka and rested her fingertips on the warm leather seat. "Did Hayley know about your past when you two got involved?" If she hadn't, maybe that's why she couldn't understand his hunger to succeed.

He ran his hand over his mouth and glimpsed at the rearview mirror. To their left, a car whizzed by, sending a wave of water into the windshield, blocking his view of the road. On a muttered curse, he flicked the wipers to their highest speed. Able to see again, he answered, "We met in middle school. I dated Hayley for several months before I told her where my family lived, or rather, how we lived. Didn't bother her at all, until I brought her home, so to speak. After that, she was really on board with my plan to become an attorney. She just didn't expect it to become the most important thing in my life."

"Until Echo."

His fast smile erased years from his features and warmed his voice. "She's really something. Sharp, beautiful, talented. And I know," he added quickly, "everyone says that about their kid, but in this case it's true. She won the lead in her dance class recital last year and her drawings, wow. They blow me away. I'm thinking she's either going to be a performer or an artist. She sure as hell has the temperament." He grinned. "At times she's beyond prickly, but then, she just turned nine. She's entitled."

His love for the little girl brought a wave of happiness and sorrow to Adriana's throat. She cleared it so she could speak. "Does she remember you having been married to her mom?"

He changed lanes to get out of the way of another speeding car. "Not really. She knows because we told her as soon as she could understand. I wanted to remain a part of her life and not as some mysterious uncle."

Adriana appreciated the sentiment but couldn't wrap her mind around him allowing another man to raise the child he loved and believed was his. "Did you fight Hayley for custody and lose?"

Calm registered on his face, serenity she hadn't expected. He looked at her. "The matter never came up. I wouldn't do that to Echo."

"But your name's on the birth certificate, isn't it?"

"It was, until we had it amended. I know you're shocked, but —"

She interrupted, "I'm not shocked."

"Your bulging eyes say otherwise."

Gentle laughter bubbled from her. "They always do that when I get too hot."

"Weird." His manner grew pensive as he glanced at her legs. "What happens to them when you take off your clothes?"

Her smile arrested with his quick change in subject and demeanor as though he wanted to remind her of what they were all about, a good time, not commitment. Disillusionment loomed until she pushed it away. She wouldn't allow herself to wonder what it would be like to have the kind of love he reserved for Echo, to see his expression transform as she walked into a room. During this slice of time he wanted her physically, just as she craved him. She'd make it be enough and hoped her heart would believe it.

As to his question about removing her clothes, Adriana wasn't about to tell him her eyes would most likely seek his, looking for affirmation of his passion, his need. Would he watch her strip? Would he demand she do so? Probably. The thought titillated and daunted. Unlike the escorts she hired, and the few fortune-hunters who coveted her inheritance, Nathan would control events tonight and in the following days. She wasn't paying him to follow a script and he wouldn't do her bidding as a means to her wealth. From what she'd heard, his net worth already approached hers from his successful law practice and investments. Whatever his response to her, either joy or disenchantment, it would be honest.

"Nothing unusual," she answered at last, bunching the parka in her hand, holding it to her throat like a security blanket. His scent on the fabric surrounded and comforted her as she brought their conversation safely back to Echo. "They had the birth certificate amended?"

Seconds passed as he considered his response. "With my help." He lifted his shoulders. "Believe me, it's not because I'm such a nice guy. At the time, I wanted to tear Roy apart and do everything I could to humiliate Hayley like I thought she'd done to me..." His voice trailed off. Gaze turned inward, he frowned as though he recalled a particularly painful memory. Quickly, he shrugged it away. "Once I calmed down, I realized I couldn't blame Hayley for getting lonely and falling in love with another guy. Hell, he was there for her. I wasn't. And she did break it off with him. When she found out she was pregnant, she didn't see him again until Echo turned one. I think from the beginning she knew he was Echo's father. They have the same green eyes and dark hair. Hayley stayed with me for another year, trying to make it work because she didn't want

to hurt me. In the end, she did what she had to for herself, Echo and Roy. He adores that little girl. No way could I take him away from her, even if I still considered her my own. No way was I going to fight Hayley and drag all of us through court proceedings. Echo needed a family who loved her. If I had fought the divorce or the custody, I would have been doing it for my happiness, not hers."

Overwhelmed, Adriana spoke without reservation. "I admire you."

His head jerked to hers. "Don't. I'm not the hero in this."

"Oh yeah, you are."

"Bull. I did what any man would do."

"That's not true. As an attorney you know it."

He looked uneasy. "You don't know me, Adriana. I'm not the man you seem to think I am."

"You don't know what I think. And so what if I don't know you? I did know my father. And believe me, he didn't handle his divorce from my mother like you did with Hayley." She turned in her seat to face him. "They split when I was four. Their divorce wasn't finalized until I was eight. My father fought for sole custody, not because he wanted me. Believe me, he didn't. He wanted to win. Their battle became his reason for being. It was a matter of pride to show my mother no one ever took anything of his even if he didn't want it. She fought back because their prenup limited her settlement. With me, she'd get child support until she found another rich guy, which she did. By the time I was nine and the proceedings were well over, I rarely saw her or my father. He hired a team of nannies to deal with me. They were all right, but it was Joe, my dad's live-in chef, who raised me. He gave me his time. He loved me. So don't you dare dismiss what you did for Echo. I wish my father had done it for me."

Cautiously, Nathan glanced over.

Finished with her outburst, Adriana sagged into her seat.

"You all right?" he asked.

Would she be breathing like a long-distance runner and pressing her fingers into her forehead if she was? "Just a little hot. Can't you tell by my bulging eyes?"

Laughter gurgled in his throat. He cleared it and got serious. "I'm sorry about what happened with your dad." His softened voice matched his touch as he rested his fingers on her thigh. The weight of his hand reassured. Its heat thrilled.

Not caring how needy it made her seem, she slid her fingers over his, daring him to dismiss the gesture and move away.

He did not. He turned his hand over so their palms touched.

She whispered, "Thanks."

His thumb stopped stroking her. His voice held a cautious edge. "For what?"

Allowing her to seek his affection, even though they both knew this weekend meant nothing more than good times and sex. Since it did, she decided to hold nothing back, except the truth. "For being sorry about what happened with my dad."

He squeezed her hand gently and brought his back. "We still have a ways to go. You should take a nap."

"I'm not tired."

His voice changed, the gentleness replaced by a quiet directive, giving it even more power. "Go on. I want you fully alert when we get to my place. Tonight, you won't be sleeping." His tone grew preoccupied, edgy. "You're going to do whatever I say, everything I want."

She didn't comment on his promise. Nathan interpreted her silence as a mixture of arousal and anxiety, a perfect match to his inner turmoil. He didn't want her admiring him. He didn't want her reading his soul and burrowing into his heart with what she'd said about her parents. Jesus, how could any father treat his daughter like a fucking possession, fighting for custody not out of a misguided sense of love but because he refused to give up control. What in the hell was the matter with him? She'd learned sports so they'd have a chance to bond. Hadn't the man even noticed? Was he so self-absorbed?

She deserved better. Certainly more than he'd be providing this weekend. He wasn't what she needed. He'd fucked up his marriage and just wanted to have a reckless good time, not heal anyone's heart, especially his own.

Time to turn back before this went too far.

His hand rose to the turn signal and dropped without activating it. He watched the exit and overpass whiz by. The wiper's steady whap-whap-whap mimicked his walloping pulse and vacillating decisions. He glanced over and wished he hadn't. Adriana's artless expression captivated him. Like a pimply teen, he returned her stare until a horn shrieked. Head jerking up, he glanced at the road and swerved back into his lane.

"Everything all right?" she asked.

Of course it wasn't. The thought of spending tonight and this weekend without her rattled Nathan more than he would have liked. Maybe he'd been working too hard. He hadn't dated in months or been to Zanes since summer. Lust was simply getting the best of him. With a prolonged sigh, he decided not to fight it. Adriana wasn't a child who needed his protection. She ran a major corporation and had hired an escort, proving she could take care of herself. Her happiness belonged in her hands, not his. "Sure. Go on and close your eyes, nothing to worry about. You don't have to keep watching me."

"Maybe I want to."

Sultry didn't begin to describe the sudden velvet in her voice. Beneath it, he heard longing he also suffered and didn't know how to address. Driven to keep the moment light, he quipped, "Hoping to find me so boring I'll put you to sleep?"

"You'll put me to sleep, Nathan, but not by having me watch you."

At her breathy yielding voice, his cock flexed, eager to escape his boxers and sink into the embrace of her loving mouth. Composing himself, he murmured, "You have no idea what I plan to do."

"I know it won't be tame, will it?"

Never. His carnal tastes ran toward provocative, unrestrained, shameless. "That would be telling."

"Are you always so evasive?"

"Are you?" He chanced a glance.

Fingers on her jaw, she tipped her head as she regarded his length, lingering on his groin. "About what?" she asked in a distracted voice.

"Your Viking. What does he do to you in your fantasies?"

Her fingers curled into a loose fist. Eyes lifting to his, she wore a look of scarcely concealed panic.

Amazed, he asked, "That kinky?"

Her answer came as he glanced back at the road. "Not at all. Just the stuff Vikings usually do."

"Didn't they roam the coasts pillaging and —"

She stopped him. "It's just a fantasy. Nothing to do with real life."

Uh-huh. She lusted for a strong man to take control and use her as he willed, hence her kidnapper fantasy. So what would she do if the event wasn't plotted out in advance or hers to control? Submit? Resist? A little of both?

Muzzling his excitement, Nathan didn't comment further. Her body language precluded it. She'd rested the side of her head against the frigid window. Arms crossed over her chest, she slumped in the seat and closed her eyes finally.

He drove without incident, putting on a new CD, this one a restrained instrumental with a sax and strings. Decidedly sensual, Adriana figured the collection probably sold as bedtime music for adults. She pressed her thighs together so her thong wouldn't get too damp and tried to calm down. Already she'd blurted out too much about herself, including her Viking fantasy.

Could she have been any less cool when he'd asked her about it?

For weeks he'd suspected her interest in him, thanks to her inability to hide her feelings. What would he think if he knew she'd given him the starring role in her fantasies and she'd thought about him to the exclusion of any other man? How would he react if he learned her only physical contact with men was with the escorts she'd been hiring the last year?

She didn't want his pity anymore than he would have appreciated hers. Set on retaining a shred of dignity, she worked on pulling herself together, losing track of time

until she noticed the Rover slowing. Its carriage bumped slightly with the change in road surface from sleek asphalt to packed snow found on rural roads.

They'd arrived.

Senses heightened, she smelled the air's glacial bite on her window and heard the tires sending up bits of ice or road salt into the undercarriage. The tiny pieces made tapping sounds like fingernails drumming a hard surface. Her heart banged frantically against her throat while her limbs grew weighty, sluggish at what would soon happen.

She kept her eyes closed, wanting to savor the coming moments as she pictured his place in her mind. A modest cabin, masculine and practical, tucked into the woods, blanketed in snow with a large bed as one of its few furnishings. She imagined a crackling fire, the smoky scent of burning oak, the musky fragrance of his skin. She visualized his resolve as he blindfolded her, his strength as he secured her hands behind her back or above her head and raked his gaze and hands over her unprotected nudity.

He brought his vehicle to a slow stop and put it into park.

On a difficult swallow, Adriana parted her lids. Snowflakes the size of quarters clung to the edges of the windshield and swirled around the large, poorly lit parking lot in front of a country gas station with an abbreviated store and restaurant. Vivid blue Christmas lights decorated the dining area's windows, the glass fogged enough to obscure details of the patrons.

Nathan undid his seatbelt.

With a sinking heart, Adriana noted the other cars parked in the spaces in front of them. Her eyes went to him, regret registering in her voice. "We're getting out here?" They were going to eat now when she was so primed for his touch?

He inclined his head to the left. "Highway patrol's out. I'm going to have a word with the officer, ask if I can forego chains for the few miles we still have to go. Hopefully, I can." He studied her. "You in a hurry?"

Her voice sounded disgracefully breathless. "Maybe."

He touched the side of her neck, trailing his fingers past her collarbone to the V of her blouse, undoing the first two buttons. The next would reveal the clasp on her bra. She should have been startled. Instead, she sighed indecently. He looked at her through lust-slitted lids, his expression pleased. "Don't fix your blouse. I won't be long."

Leaving the wipers on, he popped the door. Icy air poured through the opening. Snowflakes flew past, landing on his headrest.

"Wait." She leaned over to his seat before he could close the door and leave. "Take the parka."

He bent down so he could see her. "I'm fine"

"No, you're not." Hurriedly, she struggled out of his coat. In her haste to yank it off, she pulled her skirt up, exposing her naked thighs, garter belt and the lacy edges of her stockings.

Nathan stared. He leaned back inside, his hand grabbing her wrist to stop her from covering herself. "Leave it like that," he ordered.

His deep voice blocked every other sound and defeated any argument she might have come up with. Given their distance from the other cars, no one would be passing by his Rover and chancing a look inside. Desire snaked through her, sending bursts of warmth through her body.

Head lowered, he lifted her arm and pressed his mouth to the inside of her wrist.

Air hissed through Adriana's teeth, followed closely by a whimpering moan. His lips were ungodly warm and soft in comparison to the bristly bite of his beginning beard.

"Stay just as you are," he murmured, his breath heated, his tongue hot and moist, tickling her skin.

Her fingers curled to touch his cheek. A blast of wind buffeted the Rover, the sharp air penetrating the vehicle. With seeming reluctance, he released her hand and pulled off his topcoat, offering it to her.

Adriana accepted, draping it over her shoulders, while leaving her legs bare just as he demanded. He made fast work of pulling on the parka and adjusting the heater to its highest level to keep her warm. Just as he pulled back his hand, Adriana captured it, running her fingers down his. "Your knuckles are swollen from hitting Fred."

He laughed. "Ed."

"If you say so." She ran her tongue over his knuckles, exploring their contours, tasting the slight saltiness of his skin. "Do they hurt?"

He finished his swallow and hushed his words. "Not anymore."

Smiling, she let go of him, watching as he trudged through the snowy lot to the officer. Impressively tall and broad, Nathan made the other man look inadequate, just as he had with Ramon in the elevator.

A pleasant sense of rightness about tonight flooded Adriana, proving destiny had been on her side in delivering her to him. Here was a man who would satisfy her nagging desires. Wind whipped his pants, pulling the fabric tight over his muscular thighs and strong calves. A new draft of air played with the ends of his hair, pushing it into his face and blowing it back, surely delighted in having physical contact. Foolish wind. He belonged to her...at least for the next few days.

Desperate for his touch, she shifted in her seat, her skin tingling, her heart racing. Unmindful of her torment, he and the officer continued their conversation, their heads turned to a part of the road she couldn't see. *Come on*, her thoughts urged. *Don't make me wait any longer.*

The officer spoke into the communications device attached to the left shoulder of his jacket then said something else to Nathan. He nodded and shook the man's hand, with both of them looking content.

Adriana smiled. Finally he'd return and they'd be on their way.



Shoulders braced against the next icy gust, he headed back to her but didn't get in the vehicle. He moved to the front, pointed at the store and went inside. Nose to her window, she tried to see what he was doing and could not. Snow collected on the establishment's increasingly frosty windows, masking everything inside.

Had the officer insisted he buy chains? Hadn't Nathan thought to bring a set with him? What if the store didn't have any left? Where would they find another set? How long would the search delay their arrival?

Sagging in her seat, she lowered her head to her cell phone ringing inside her jacket pocket. Surprised there'd be reception up here and during a snow storm, she muttered, "Leave me alone." It did not. On the third ring, she recalled the lie she'd told Joe. Was he checking to make certain she was all right? Or was Nathan calling to demand she not button her blouse or pull down her skirt?

Grinning, she dropped Nathan's coat to her lap and reached inside her jacket. On the next ring, she pulled out the device and checked the number on the display. Frowning slightly, she answered. "Hi. Is everything all right?"

Poor reception interrupted Steve's voice. "Better – ever – imagined."

She frowned. "What? Say that again. I didn't hear you."

The call dropped off. Sighing, she closed her phone. It rang again. "Hey," she said on the first ring, "I lost you. Can you hear me?"

"Yeah."

"What did you say before?"

"Everything's better than you can imagine."

"With what?"

"Ed."

Her brows lifted. "His tooth isn't broken?"

"Well, yeah, it is. Unfortunately –" Steve cut out again and came back. "Two molars – cracked."

She pushed up in her seat. "And that's good?"

"There's more."

Her free hand went over her eyes. "Please don't tell me he broke any bones when he fell."

"No but – moaned – ER."

"Huh?"

Again, his voice came through relatively clear. "Calmed down since he saw the doctor. He's not expecting a big cash settlement."

"Why not? What did you threaten him with?"

"Nothing. I'm – Nathan."

She curled her fingers into a tight fist and tapped it against her forehead with the stupid reception. "Exactly what does Ed want from Greco?"

Steve's voice went in and out. "Bit of cash—ER—see the dentist—poor little mouth. Wants from me—another matter."

Stumped as to what he meant, she asked, "He wants something from you?"

"Yeah."

Really baffled, she asked, "He likes you?"

"What?"

At his obvious surprise, she couldn't help but tease. "You've gone over to the other side and decided to divorce Francine to date him?"

He growled, "Be nice or I'll make you guess."

"You're doing that now. Get on with it. I'm busy."

"Doing what?"

She squinted to see better and caught nothing more than vague blobs moving past the store's windows. Concentrating on the tallest one, she answered, "I'm at a spa."

"Without your car?"

Her stomach lurched. She lowered her head and voice. "Where are you?"

Again, his voice cut out and back in. "The office to—laptop—dropped Ed—garage—saw your car still here."

"I took a cab. I was too shaky to drive."

"You—now?"

"What?"

"Are you okay now?"

He wanted to know if she'd hired another escort. Through the years, she'd told Steve about the few guys she'd dated and slept with. Without exception, those men wanted her for what she owned, not for who she was. Embarrassed at her romantic defeats, she'd stopped confiding in Steve. It was easier to discuss her failings with a hairdresser, manicurist or a stranger on a plane than with him.

"You still there?" he asked at her lengthening silence.

She considered closing the phone, pretending the disconnection was due to another dropped call.

He muttered, "Stupid reception—can't—"

"I'm still here," she said.

"Oh. Tell me if you're okay. No details."

Her eyes darted back to the store and restaurant, movement by the door. "I'm fine."

"You sound tense."

Disappointed. A middle-aged couple, not Nathan, exited. The stinging wind killed their smiles. Clumsily, they tramped through a fresh layer of snow to their car. Adriana's gaze returned to the establishment's door. She ached to tell Steve about Nathan but kept herself from it. This weekend was a one-time deal. No sense in anyone

knowing about it. "Don't worry, I didn't hire another escort. I'm through with that." She had no choice. Buying a guy's interest would never measure up to what she'd experience in the coming hours.

"Not passing judgment," he said.

She smiled. "I know. So what did you offer Ed, besides your enduring adoration?"

After several tries, with her shouting "What?" at Steve's fading voice, he explained how he promised Ed an introduction to the best talent agencies, photographers and media people in LA.

"Through Francine?"

"Of—she worked magic for—starring in the next—with—luck—see Ed's—smiling at you from every—in Hollywood."

Whatever Steve meant it was better than seeing Ed sneering at her from across the table at a deposition. "Wonderful. I can't thank you—" She stopped speaking as Nathan exited, holding two cups of something, not chains, in his hands. "I have to go. My masseur's here. Bye." She closed the phone and without thinking tossed it in the back seat.

Nathan came to her side, hitting the glass with his elbow.

She lowered the window and took the cup he offered, hoping it didn't mean they'd be stuck here for awhile. "Coffee?"

His eyes lifted from her bared legs to her partially unbuttoned blouse. "Hot chocolate. You like?"

"Is there whipped cream?"

"A double dollop. I insisted."

Her delighted moan said it all. By the time he'd gotten back inside, she'd taken off the plastic lid and enjoyed her first taste. Decadently rich, it was the kind of drink served decades ago when quality and pleasure, not calories or fat content, mattered. "Oh my god, this is so good. Can I have yours too?"

He finished his sip and chuckled. "If you want, I'll get a gallon of it before we take off."

She swished her next taste around her mouth to cool the temperature and to savor the flavor prior to swallowing. "When will that be?"

"No more than five minutes. The officer said the plows are out and should have gotten past my place by then, so there's no need for chains. You have foam on your upper lip."

She reached up to finger it away. Nathan intercepted her hand. "I'll do it." He put his cup into the holder and brought his face to hers.

The world seemed to pitch, leaving her dizzy. On a sigh, she closed her lids.

He glided his tongue over her upper lip and licked off the whipped cream.

Electrified by his closeness and the act's intimacy, Adriana could barely breathe. Her throat constricted, muffling her whimper. She smelled chocolate on his breath and tasted sweetness on his tongue as he slipped it inside her mouth, filling her completely, demanding she accommodate him.

Obedient, she suckled hard, pulling him more deeply within. Not yet satisfied, he angled his mouth for even greater penetration. Adriana mewled. Her free hand held the back of his head. She drove her fingers into his tangled, snow-dampened locks. Their appetite for each other became noisy and unrestrained, no different than kids indulging in their first sexual encounter. Nathan kissed her as if he meant it, his excitement real, not paid for, stoking her desire.

She couldn't get close enough. The vehicle was too restrictive. He must have thought so too. To her dismay, he pulled in his tongue and broke free of her mouth. A protest rose to Adriana's lips and died as he took her cup, settling it next to his in the holder. Hands on either side of her face, fingers warmed from their drinks, he looked into her eyes.

Her heart beat triple-time. Her thoughts raced. Did he see momentary lust or enduring desire in her gaze, a chance encounter or something deeper? Unwilling to hide her feelings or stop what was happening, she whispered, "Kiss me again and don't stop." *Please.*

Heedless of her request, he took obvious pleasure in exploring her brows, cheeks, mouth, chin.

She closed her eyes, not out of concern he'd find her looks wanting, nor from shyness. Her lids were simply too heavy to keep up. The wait for him too endless.

As though he'd been intentionally testing her limits, he reclaimed her mouth, his tongue driving so deep she had no chance of breaking away.

An indelicate groan pumped from her chest, followed by his uncivilized grunt. His hand slipped from her face to her chest. With no concern for the outside world and anyone who might glance this way, he maneuvered his hand past her blouse, slipping his fingers inside her bra's satin cup.

Instantaneously, her nipple went rigid, welcoming his palm. His fingers splayed over her breast, testing its pliancy, its weight, compromising her control. Her free hand gripped the leather seat, seeking some measure of restraint. Recklessly, her body slumped into his touch and male dominance. Again he proved it by interrupting their kiss. This time he pressed his lips to her neck.

Adriana's head drooped forward, her cheek stroking his. Without breaking pace, his tongue swept her skin while his lips suckled her throat gently. Limp and defenseless, she let her thoughts scatter until he pulled down her bra cup and bared her breast.

Eyes opening, she lifted her face. Nathan eased back. He put up his armrest and hers then lowered his head. His tongue swirled around her nipple, his lips drawing it inside his mouth.

Blinking slowly at the intense heat, Adriana scanned the lot without really seeing it. Her mind told her people were arriving and departing. Eventually, someone would look over and see them through the windshield. In spite of the risk, her heart and body didn't care. Chin lowered, she cradled his head in the crook of her arm, her hand on his tousled hair to keep him from stopping.

Nathan indulged himself, using her, warming her as the storm calmed somewhat, the snow falling lighter now, though still muting the sound of tires and voices. Minutes passed in a haze of rapture and peace, his actions a sanctuary against her loneliness and the cruelty of the outside world.

She could have stayed like this forever.

He appeared to have other plans. Finished for the moment, he lifted his face to hers, his eyes glassy with satisfaction. She didn't have to ask why. His hand had abandoned her breast to settle between her legs. The tips of his fingers stroked the thin scrap of lace separating him from her clit.

Adriana reddened at how damp she was, how ready for him. Pride encouraged her to say something seductive, to convince him she considered their time together nothing more than another carnal adventure, just as he wanted. The raptness of his gaze stopped her. She spoke on a sigh. "How far to your place?"

"Less than ten miles."

Her gaze lowered to his fingers. They'd left her thong to follow the lacy edge of her left stocking. With great care, he explored the fabric. She smiled. He adjusted his body as well as he could, bending over to give her an open-mouthed kiss on the inside of her thigh.

Delightful sensations rolled through her. His wet warmth reached the back of her throat, tingling it. Her mouth sagged open.

His lips moved over her flesh with his murmur, "Ready to go?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. We'll take off as soon as I get you more hot chocolate. It's not too crowded in there. Shouldn't take more than another five minutes or —"

"Forget it." Her voice cracked with emotion. She made no effort to conceal what she felt. "I don't need it."

"If you say so."

"You know I do."

Smug with what he'd accomplished, Nathan straightened. He gave her one last, lingering kiss, the tender kind that soothed the soul, and pulled on his seatbelt. Old snow, packed with ice, crunched beneath the tires as he pulled away.

Adriana glanced out the window then looked down at their drinks, suddenly noticing her exposed breast. Startled back into good sense, she pulled Nathan's coat over her nudity, wearing the garment like a blanket, making certain it also hid her legs.

His head turned to her. "What are you doing?"

"What do you think?" She gave the officer a nervous smile as Nathan drove past the man's cruiser.

"You don't like the possibility of someone watching?"

Her head swung to him. She repeated, "What do you think?"

His smile crinkled the corners of his eyes. "Better get used to it. Won't be long before we get to my place."

Adriana stared at him and then the scenery. Pines, oaks and dogwood trees, burdened with snow, surrounded the homes they passed, many darkened, resembling what she'd imagined he'd own. He didn't slow or stop.

She glanced at the mileage indicator, counting off two miles, three, four.

At length, the Rover slowed. He flicked on the left signal and turned. Adriana glanced up, her heart catching at what she saw.

## Chapter Four

He sensed her surprise in how she leaned forward and in the way her fingers gripped the dashboard above the glove compartment. She tipped her head to see past the top of the windshield, to catch what lay beyond the estate's imposing iron gates.

Monstrous pines, their branches drooping beneath weeks of snow, hid most of his house from view. If Adriana had known where to look, she would have caught a glimpse of the slanted roof and the master suite's stone chimney. Since she didn't, her head moved right, left, her eyes searching. Her dazed expression told him she appreciated the seclusion of his place. How truly alone they'd be. For the next three nights, she belonged to him. Within a half hour, he'd have her nude and powerless, her body to do with as he willed and she desired.

And she would desire—more than she believed possible. Her trust in him not to harm her, the solitude of their surroundings, would allow her freedom she would have never experienced with an escort at a busy L.A. hotel. Here, she could act out her most sensual scenarios, with him as her exacting teacher and guide.

Cock thickening at what he'd already planned for her, Nathan grasped the steering wheel, impatient with any more delays in having her behind closed doors, obedient to his carnal conditions.

The gates swung open onto the drive cleared earlier by his caretaker. Nathan drove inside.

Turning toward him and bending her torso to the right, Adriana looked at the scenery past his window. After a hundred yards, enough to shelter his place from the road and public, the vegetation thinned.

Her head swung to the right, halting at the sight of his sprawling two-story house, constructed of wood and stone. The outside masonry gave it the ancient look of a brooding priory in the Scottish Highlands. The honey-colored wood inside, gleaming and sleek, afforded a more modern, yet seductive design, as did the towering windows which dominated many of the walls.

In this house, he could easily watch the outside world. He suspected Adriana considered how effortlessly others might peer inside, especially those who lived across the lake's narrow finger of water from him and his closest neighbors, a couple with a mansion on the left. Its second floor reached past the trees, affording them a view of his great room.

*You don't like the possibility of someone watching?* he'd asked.

*What do you think?*

He thought as their night went on she'd welcome exactly what he intended for her. Putting the vehicle into park, he undid his seatbelt and covered her hand with his. Though warm, her fingers shook slightly. He asked, "Not what you expected?"

Her slender throat quivered with her hard swallow. Eagerness rasped her voice. "I did picture something far different."

Nathan hid his amusement. "A cabin with dirt floors and guns hanging from the walls?"

"Not that primitive but certainly not this stunning." She lifted her face to the entrance, its massive domed window and the heavy wooden doors protecting a male's lair inside. Lips parting, she wore a look of anticipation and submission.

Fevered at her response, not intending to wait unnecessarily to taste her flesh and to bury his shaft in her snug heat, Nathan brought back his hand. "Put on my topcoat. No—in here," he added as she reached for the door's handle. "Stay in your seat. I'll come around and get you."

His voice sounded harder than he'd intended. He didn't explain or apologize. By the time he'd turned off the Rover and reached the passenger door, she had her arms through his coat and her skirt over her knees, keeping him from seeing her enticing garter belt and the frilly tops of her stockings. Rather than gripe about her foolish modesty, he opened the back door and grabbed her purse. Something fell from the seat, landing on the floor mat with a small tap.

He picked up her cell phone, wondering why it wasn't in her jacket pocket. Had she called someone while he'd been in the store getting their hot chocolate and shopping for another surprise? Had his exit interrupted her conversation? Probably, only who? Steve? The escort agency?

Her phone slipped from his palm into her bag, landing on top of the lingerie she'd planned to wear for her pretend kidnapper. Nathan recalled the man's arm around her waist, his hand on her mouth, his body pressed too close. A flash of jealousy surged through him, stinging his face. Before it clouded his judgment and he became territorial, he reminded himself this weekend was about enjoyment not devotion.

He offered her the purse. In the milky light, he watched her cheeks flush a shade darker than her complexion. She pressed the handbag to her chest as though she feared he'd look more closely at its contents.

Soon, he would. He extended his hand to her, palm up. More than an invitation to begin their evening, it commanded.

The tempting promise in Nathan's eyes, rather than the cold, sent a shiver through Adriana. Shakily, she pushed her bag's shoulder strap over her arm and drew his coat more closely around her body.

His gaze noted her delay. He said nothing. Seconds passed. His silence bore down on her, forcing her to submit.



As though in a dream, she watched her fingers slip over his palm, his strong hand surrounding hers as she exited the Rover. The hem of his topcoat fell to her ankles. The thick fabric swished around her calves, covering her fully. For the moment. Once inside, he'd demand her nudity, her thighs parting to his cock, her sex welcoming it. Her legs got watery as he released her hand. Knees locked, she lowered her head at the faint grinding sound of rock salt beneath her heels. On a startled gasp, she looked at Nathan as he swept her off her feet and into his arms.

A pulse beat crazily in her throat and cunt. Without pretense or reserve, she wreathed her arm around his shoulders, melting into his big, hard body. His breath and hers left brief puffs of white in the freezing air. Snow rained down on them, catching on his hair and lashes. With her palm on his beard-roughened cheek and her thumb on his upper lip, Adriana guided his head to hers, kissing away the flakes on his lids.

His arms tightened around her body, proving his gratitude, encouraging her to do more.

Seeking his mouth, Adriana teased the seam of his lips with her tongue and speared it inside. He made a low rumbling noise one hears from animals during a feeding frenzy or when they're engaged in rutting. Roused by the crude sound, Adriana swept her tongue over the insides of his cheeks and teeth, tempting him to suckle her, tasting a trace of the hot chocolate he'd sipped and an obsession to match her own.

Impulsively, they necked with the newness of a couple on their first date and with the ease of lovers who understood each other's desires. The cold and the burden of him holding her went unnoticed. Their mouths didn't pull free until they each needed to take a full, calming breath.

Still panting, Nathan bumped his body against the passenger door. It closed with a dull thud, the noise sounding remarkably loud, jolting Adriana's heart. Turning, he carried her the short distance to his porch.

It was time. Her fingers dug into his parka. Lips parting on her quickened breaths, she regarded the arched entry, the door's impenetrable wood. It brought to mind images of drawbridges, men in animal skins and furs, women in bedchambers hearing the marauders, heavy footfalls marking their approach, doors crashing inward, muffled female cries, then whimpering moans as the men took their spoils, settling between the maidens' legs, silencing all protests with their insistent tongues and brutal cocks.

She snuggled closer.

"Cold?" Nathan asked.

*Fucking aroused.* "A little," she lied.

He lowered Adriana to her feet and unlocked the door, pushing it open for her. Head lifted, she stopped after a few steps, staring at the cathedral ceiling, at least twenty feet high, and the many-tiered crystal chandelier, ornate in design and dangling gracefully. Wall lights on either side of the door bathed the entryway in a soft amber glow, giving the wood paneling a faint reddish cast. Gleaming hardwood floors

recorded hazy reflections of the mahogany accent tables and wing chairs. The leather upholstery, lemon furniture polish and pine scented the air.

Adriana found the atmosphere as cozy as a Christmas scene and as formidable as the chateau described in *The Story of O*, an inviting place for men where their decadence ruled.

The door closed with a solid smack. She looked over to see Nathan turn the deadbolt, its metal thunk sounding final. Decisively, he came up behind her, hands on her shoulders, body intimately close, allowing no chance of escape. Her head sagged back limply, touching his, indicating her readiness to deliver whatever he wanted and what she craved so badly.

His lips brushed the side of her neck. At the heat of his mouth, she trembled. He murmured, "Still cold?"

Her swallow sounded too loud, her voice too frail. "No."

Straightening, he took her purse, tossed it on a chair and eased his coat from her shoulders and arms, dropping it on top. His parka followed.

Without his coat's protection, she should have been chilled but wasn't, finally noticing the temperature in here. Heat pumped from unseen vents. It wasn't enough to be stifling, just warm enough to persuade them to undress.

Pleasantly anxious, she glanced at the chairs. Would they use one of them for their first coupling, with her straddling his lean hips? Or would he prefer she lie on the thick wool rug beneath the largest table?

His hand circled hers. Wordlessly, he led her from the entryway through a wide and long wood-paneled hall decorated with paintings of homes in various parts of the world. Although the structures differed in design, they owned a consistent theme—lush vegetation flanked each house, providing seclusion for the inhabitants and protection from those outside.

In the artwork, Adriana saw Nathan's hope as a child to escape to somewhere safe and permanent, a place no one would ever order him to leave because he didn't have money. Sympathy for what he'd endured opened her heart even more. Unwise, she knew and didn't care. Tonight and two others were hers—theirs—to be daring and hopeful. She squeezed his fingers. Looking over, he regarded her hungrily.

They reached the end of the hall and entered the great room where he stopped. Curious as to why, she peered at the furnishings. Leather chairs and a sofa in a deep burgundy shade made a semi-circle around the heavy cocktail table and a wide marble fireplace. Brass table lamps adorned mahogany end tables. Decorative light fixtures, similar to those in the entry, graced the paneled walls.

Nathan made no move to turn any of them on. It wasn't necessary. Ashy light from the cloud-streaked moon illuminated the snow and poured through the windows taking up one wall, stretching from floor to ceiling, possibly fifteen feet high. Beyond the spotless panes, that bore no frost or fogging, Adriana saw his side yard. Past it, she noticed another mansion rising above the pines. The second story windows, illuminated

softly with a nightlight, afforded its owners a distant, yet clear view of this room even with the wintry weather.

He pulled his hand from hers.

Her head turned. She noted the winding wood staircase behind him, its banister intricately and beautifully carved, its steps surely leading to the master bedroom upstairs.

He headed for the sofa instead, dropping his suit jacket on one of the cushions. Unknotting his tie, he pulled it from his collar. Silk hissed against cotton. The sound carried across the quiet, expansive space like the whistle of a whip, emphasizing his maleness and her coming subjugation to him.

*All you have to do is exactly as I say*, he'd stated in the building's garage.

Adriana's heart made a funny leap. Her eyes crept down his shirt's smooth fabric hugging his trim, muscular torso. She recalled how he'd looked in her conference room prior to her leaving their meeting. Had it only been a few hours ago? It seemed far longer, another lifetime. "What are you doing?"

He unbuttoned his collar and smiled. "Getting comfortable."

She noticed. It tantalized and concerned. "Down here?" In front of the windows?

He didn't answer. His expression held a secret he wasn't prepared to disclose.

She looked at the stairway.

"Adriana."

Her gaze inched back to him.

"Come here," he said, his tone easy.

And deceptive. She heard an unmistakable command beneath his nonchalance, one she sensed would brook no defiance. Her pulse raced out of control, reducing her voice to just above a whisper, enough for him to hear. "Aren't we going to your bedroom?"

"Eventually."

And until then? *All you have to do is exactly as I say*. Precisely as she'd fantasized with her other temporary lovers. Only with them she orchestrated the action, knowing what to expect.

With Nathan, anything could happen. The tormenting heaviness between her legs built to an intolerable degree, demanding relief. Her heels clicked against the hardwood floor, marking her approach, far slower than her heart's thumping. Reaching him, she surrendered to his closeness, size and heat, pressing the length of her body to his, her face to his neck, capturing more of his scent.

His chest bumped hers with his sharp intake of breath.

Mouth on his throat, she licked his stubble, reveling in the short, stiff hairs, his skin's slight saltiness.

As she suckled his flesh, his lungs emptied on a prolonged moan. She stopped just short of giving him a hickey and murmured, "Let's go to your bedroom." Prepared to lead him, she took his hand.

He followed her around the sofa only to change direction, bringing her past the furnishings and closer to the windowed wall. The night's cold breath seeped through the glass. She glanced from the steadily falling snow to his free hand. He'd pulled something from his pant's pocket and now offered it to her. "Here."

Adriana stared. Whatever he held, he'd wrapped it in a paper napkin printed with the store's logo where he'd bought their hot chocolate. "What is it?"

He released her hand. "Open it and see."

She wondered if he'd given her condoms, although he shouldn't. On the ride, she'd told him about being on the Pill. Didn't he believe her? "Are those Trojans?"

His quick laugh rang through the room. "No. You said we didn't need them, remember? Go on." He shook his palm, urging her to obey.

Confused, she looked at him. "I don't understand."

"Obviously." He murmured, "Happy birthday."

Her hands went to her mouth, quieting her surprised gasp. Quick tears pricked her eyes.

"It's not much," he explained, clearly surprised at her reaction "but it's not that bad."

Adriana shook her head, unable to speak. He'd believed her earlier lie and bought her a gift. They barely knew each other and yet he'd gone out of his way to celebrate an event with little meaning to her parents. Their gifts often arrived days after her birthdays because they'd been too busy to remember their daughter.

Her fingers shook as she took the paper-wrapped square from him. Careful not to tear the napkin, she eased the ends back.

Nathan made an impatient sound. "Do you unwrap all your presents so slowly?"

Only the ones from him. She whispered, "Just wait until I unwrap you, then see how fast I—oh my god," she interrupted herself, hand flying back to her mouth. Beneath her fingers, her lips quivered with emotion at his tender gift. He'd bought her a large refrigerator magnet with the restaurant's logo and *Welcome to Lake Arrowhead* printed over a crude drawing of the area.

"They didn't have much to choose from." Apologetically, he lifted his shoulders. "I'm not much of a shopper, but I didn't think you'd want a pinecone key chain or a shot glass that said 'bottoms up'."

Laughing and crying, she threw her arms around his neck, burrowing her face into his shoulder. Tears rolled down her cheeks, dampening his clean-smelling shirt, dirtying it with her mascara. She told herself to move away and could not. His comfort became too precious. "It's perfect. Exactly what I want. But you shouldn't have done this, Nathan. I don't deserve it."

His breath ruffled the fine hair at her temple. His hands roamed her length, settling on her ass. A faint smile tugged Adriana's mouth at his typical male response—completely sexual, totally unsentimental.

Proving it, he said, "It's only a magnet."

"It's too much." Shame continued to burn her cheeks. Worry twisted her stomach. She didn't want to tell him the truth. His thoughtfulness gave her no other choice. Palm on his firm chest, she pushed away and tilted her face to his. "It's not really my birthday."

His brows lifted slightly.

Adriana blurted, "I only told you it was because I was embarrassed about hiring an—" She stopped, still unable to say the "e" word. "I didn't want you to think I was some kind of weirdo. I'm not. And I am sorry. You should keep this." She offered him the magnet.

His fingers closed over hers, keeping the item in her palm. "It'll be your birthday someday, right?"

Her eyes lowered in embarrassment at his continued kindness and lack of judgment. She mumbled, "In eight months." Long after they'd parted and he'd forgotten her.

"In that case," he said, "there's no reason to return it. In eight months, the store will probably be sold out of this particular model. The damn thing will be gone forever, then what will you do?"

Her eyes jumped to his.

He let go of her hand and smiled. "You did say it's exactly what you wanted."

Holding the magnet to her heart, she murmured, "It's exactly what I need."

Something rushed across his eyes as though he didn't believe her.

"It is," she said, needing to convince. "Really."

Smile fading, he regarded her, his expression evolving from gracious gift-giver to a male who required relief as badly as she. "No, it's not," he said at last. "This is." His hand went to the side of her neck. He pulled her close.

Breathless, Adriana slumped into him.

He studied her for a long moment as though to penetrate her thoughts, her soul. And then he claimed her mouth. His tongue probed, it assaulted, punishing her not for lying, but for denying him too long.

Arms curled around his shoulders, she received his savage kiss gladly, adrift in his barely controlled desire and crushing embrace.

He prolonged his domination of her. Readily, she yielded, giving him her all, whimpering in disapproval as he pulled his mouth free.

Breathing heavily, he lifted his head. His low-pitched voice washed over her. "Get naked, Adriana."

\* \* \* \* \*

Absorbed by the moment or the unexpectedness of what he'd said, she kept her eyes closed. However, her damp, kiss-swollen lips remained parted. For another taste of his tongue or perhaps his rigid cock? Nathan wondered. Did it matter in view of the picture she created – softness and availability no rational man could resist.

Had her escorts felt as he did now when they'd seen her nude or in her gauzy lingerie? Nathan figured they had and pushed the thought from his mind. What she'd done prior to meeting him and what she'd do after they parted wasn't his business, anymore than his private life was hers.

A reasonable conclusion. However, the reality of other men touching and using her remained and nagged. A crazy and powerful urge rose in him to tear off her clothes and take her with a right he knew he didn't have...to brand her with his flesh. To prove to her passion didn't have to be bought or played out like a scene in a book or film. The connection between the right man and the right woman should be enough.

*And how would you know?* his thoughts ridiculed. He'd failed with Hayley. What he'd engaged in at Zanes, where he could buy anything, proved he wasn't an expert on relationships.

Fighting his compulsion to satisfy his basest desires, he waited for her to do as he'd said.

Her lids opened slowly only to close again. Brows drawn together, she whispered, "What?"

Nathan didn't repeat himself. He took the magnet from her, slipping it into her jacket pocket so she'd have both hands free. Lips pressed to her ear, he whispered, "Don't make me wait."

Nervously, she cleared her throat. Her eyes opened as he straightened, her attention darting to his side yard and the house beyond it, the faint glow in the second-floor windows. "Your neighbors..." The remainder of what she'd meant to say drifted off on an edgy sigh.

"They're good friends," he offered. "They won't talk."

Her face and throat flushed. She whispered as if afraid they'd hear her. "If they look out their windows..." Her words paused once more only to continue hurriedly, "With the moon shining in here, they'll be able to see."

He countered, "Eventually, the moon's bound to go back behind the clouds, unless the worst of the storm is past and it stays out. In any event, they won't talk, just like I said."

Her brows lifted, comprehension sweeping across her face at what he'd said earlier about getting used to someone watching. She now understood his reason for staying in here and not moving up to the bedroom.

Nathan had another surprise, one she should have guessed already and hadn't. In minutes, she'd know. He kept his voice mild, knowing it added to her tension. "I've

been to many of their parties. Believe me, those gatherings aren't tame. Lots of Hollywood insiders. All young, rich and decidedly exhibitionist."

Her blush deepened.

He smiled. "You're excited, aren't you?" Beneath her shock, a new wildness glimmered in her eyes.

Not yet ready to admit it, she regarded the distance between this house and his neighbor's, along with the sheer curtain of snow that allowed adequate visibility. Next, she took in the long shadows falling across the room, made by the vertical wooden beams in the panes. Undoubtedly, she believed moving into the gloom would protect her from scrutiny should she lose her nerve. Nathan knew otherwise.

She answered in a throaty voice. "More like daunted."

"Fuck that." She'd been able to lie about her birthday and the escorts, though not about this. He could smell her lust. Not waiting for her response, he touched her throat with his mouth, sucking gently.

Conquered, she sagged into him, though she still hedged. "Give me a minute."

"Uh-uh. Not even a second. I want you naked now." He eased away from her and backed up. Hands on his hips, he lifted his chin, gesturing for her to get started.

Framed in the pearly light, eyes fixed on him, she gave him a look of instinctive defiance cultivated from years of running a major corporation. Unimpressed and impatient, he tapped his forefingers on his hipbones. She glanced at them and his fly. His cock strained against the barrier as it would soon push against her slick inner walls, stretching them, compelling her sheath to contain his full length and thickness.

Her expression grew preoccupied. Eyes unfocused, she lost her *fuck you* expression and shrugged out of her suit jacket. It fell to the floor with a gentle rustle. Casually, she stepped well around the garment, which brought her to the safety of the closest shadow and one of the chairs.

Nathan allowed it. She'd soon learn there'd be nowhere to hide in this room.

Her hand gripped the top of the chair for support as she lifted her left foot to remove her high heel.

"The heels stay," he directed, his firm voice cutting through the space separating them. "So do the garter and stockings."

Slowly, her foot sank to the floor. A moment passed and another as she remained perfectly still. He saw her inner turmoil, hoping she wouldn't cave to propriety and her need for control. He wanted her vulnerable, uncivilized, completely his. He swallowed hard. His palms began to sweat.

With a barely audible sigh, she moved, lowering her head to hide her face. She opened her skirt's side zip and glanced up. Her eyes shifted to his, much as they would to a captor...to see her effect on him, to see what his next command might be.

Nathan's shoulders were too tense, hurting from the uncertainty of the last few seconds and his forced restraint. He kept the pain from his voice. "Take it off."

Once past her hips, the skirt glided over her knees and calves to the floor.

He stared at the tails of her silk blouse. The sapphire color looked deeper, richer against her naked thighs. Her garters evoked images of harlots in the 1920s, their plush bodies imprisoned and shaped by cruel corsets, their shapely legs covered by black stockings, their intimate areas bared, inviting a man's touch, yielding to it.

His fingers curled into fists. Blood collected in his groin, glutting his shaft. Tormented at her slow, indecisive pace, he fought to take a full breath. *Faster*, his mind warned.

Headstrong, she drew this out as she had when opening his gift. The hem of her blouse shimmied as she unfastened the buttons. One, two, three—at last, the garment hung open, revealing the flat crescent of her navel and the front clasp of her satiny black bra. She slipped the blouse off her right shoulder and her left. With her shoulders drawn together, her breasts plumped over the bra cups.

Nathan advanced a step.

Adriana's movements stalled, not allowing the blouse to fall to the floor with her other clothing. Her eyes lifted. In them, he saw stark indecency and bestial greed to match his own.

"Go on," he ordered. His voice sounded stiff, unnatural.

The blouse floated to the floor. She faced him wearing only her underwear, garter belt, stockings and heels.

"I want to see your cunt first," he said.

Her hands remained on the bra's clasp, sudden shyness dancing in her eyes. Bared breasts were one thing. A naked mound represented true nudity and availability to a man's organ.

The tips of her fingers trailed down her torso. Her softly rounded belly—the perfect pillow for his head—shook prettily at her touch. Reaching her panties, she eased her thumbs beneath the elastic and leaned against the chair for support as she pulled them down. In doing so, she'd also turned to the side, exposing her naked ass.

A muscle in Nathan's right pec jumped at the sight of her luscious buttocks, plump with youth. He tore his attention from them to stare at her skimpy thong. The narrow end covering her anus now hung between her thighs. The crotch soon followed, its panel dark and wet, catching the pale light she'd unknowing moved into. Scented with her musk, the silk glistened with her arousal.

Determined to smell it, Nathan stepped closer and inhaled deeply. Her flowery, earthy fragrance set his heart to hammering at a speed he knew no doctor could sanction. Damn near dizzy, he watched Adriana toss her thong on her other clothes and straighten.

The dark, delicate curls between her legs spoke to the male in him, plumping his balls, hardening his cock. Her defenseless pussy captivated. Moments passed before he realized she'd lifted her hands to her bra.



He looked in time to see the cups parting, falling away from her breasts, the pliant mounds large enough to fill his hands easily. Her coffee-colored nipples complemented her olive skin, the areolas wrinkled from stimulation and possibly the cold radiating off the windowpanes. He wanted to ask if she was chilled and thought better of it. In a few minutes, she'd have all the warmth she needed.

Her bra fell from her fingers onto the pile of clothes at her feet.

Nathan's eyes lifted. "Your hair." Helpless to alter the tension in his voice, he continued, "Take it down. It's the only part of you I'm going to allow to be free."

A spark of heat dashed to Adriana's face, sweeping down her throat, chest and shoulders. She found swallowing an impossible effort and gave up after a few tries. Breathing proved equally hard. Primal sensations invaded her body, calling to him—*fuck me now, fuck me raw*. Her hands shook as she lifted her fingers to her tightly wrapped bun, a remnant of her once rigidly ordered world.

Nathan's eyes dipped to her exposed and exhibited breasts. The planes of his face grew sharper with his scrutiny, his silence wait more agonizing. She dropped the first hairpin, hearing it ping against the floor. The second landed on her clothing. The third fell from her palm to an unknown location at his sudden approach.

Unexpectedly and swiftly, his hand went to the side of her neck. Her pulse jumped beneath his thumb. What little breath she'd been able to pull in escaped, increasing her lightheadedness. His eyes raked her naked breasts and pussy with ruthless concentration, his insolent expression recalling prints she'd seen of kings in ancient lands viewing their newly purchased slaves. His fingers moved to the back of her head, finding and discarding the remaining pins.

Unwound, her hair tumbled past her shoulder blades, skimming her back.

Eyes on her, Nathan drove his fingers into her thick mane, crushing it in his palms, using it to anchor her as he swooped down. Their mouths met in a kiss more barbaric than his last, fully male, coarse and unremorseful.

Adriana gripped his shirt, requiring the support. Lewd moans died in her throat, unable to get out, his tongue filled her so well. She suckled him as hard as she could, running her tongue over his width and length.

Hardly satisfied, he slid his hand down her belly, warming her flesh, exploring it, and moved to her mound. His fingers curled over the furry edge, reaching past her plump vaginal lips into her moist entrance.

A growl of delight vibrated her throat. His continued touch and her inability to cry out made her wild. She clawed at his shirt, trying to get closer, to force his fingers deeper and his thumb to her clit.

Indifferent to what she wanted, the pace she tried to set, Nathan removed his hand, broke their kiss and moved back.

*Screw that.* She advanced a step until they were belly to belly again, sex to sex.

A smile registered in his eyes. Warning rang in his voice. "Don't follow me. Stay where you are."

Her hands slowed on his arms, stopping at his biceps. "Why?"

"Just do as I say." Backing away, he pointed his finger at her as she advanced. "I mean it. I'll only be a minute."

"Undressing?"

"No."

She frowned. "Then doing what?"

He answered by going to the fireplace. For the first time, Adriana noticed the logs piled inside. He planned to light a fire? Her eyes rounded. She swung her head from the safety match he held to the windowed wall. Wind drove the snow at a slight angle. Through it, Adriana could easily see the neighbor's second-floor windows, dark now. Her heart missed a beat then raced. When had they turned out the light? Why? In order to stand at the window undetected as a healthy blaze lit this room and everything inside?

Seconds ago, she hadn't cared who might watch. Nathan's body, hands, lips and tongue chased away her lingering modesty while building on her excitement.

Now though...

She swallowed reflexively at the first crackle of wood yielding to the ravenous flames. The pleasant aroma of burning ash and apple wood wafted toward her. So did the fire's too steady light. It grazed her tightly drawn nipples, belly and mound.

Turning, Nathan regarded her from across the room, taking in her length, pausing at her vulva. He came to her readily. She knew the promise of her sex drew him to her as water attracts the roots of a tree and the sun compels all living things toward it. Close enough to touch, he said, "Undress me."

The deep music of his voice, his undeniable virility called to her so strongly it pushed away everything else. Again, she forgot the neighbors. Readily, she dismissed the fire and the outside world. Her hands didn't know where to go first, how to start. She felt as she had as a child, delighted by Joe's special Christmases. Always he'd have a mound of presents for her to open, each wrapped beautifully, the boxes containing gifts she really wanted, the ones her parents hadn't thought to buy. With so many choices and so much to surprise her, she hadn't known where to begin.

She touched Nathan's belt buckle and decided it should wait. Initially, she would bare his chest, followed by his cock. Her fingers fumbled with his top shirt button only to fall away and go to his cuffs, thinking she should tend to them first.

Shit. She'd forgotten he wore cufflinks. Breathing too hard, she pressed the metal ends of the first one together only to have it snag on a loose thread as she pulled it through the opening. "Damn." She twisted and tugged it.

"Just rip the fucking thing off." He paused to swallow. "I don't care."

"Got it." She tossed it toward her pile of clothes and missed. The onyx-and-gold piece tumbled across the floor on a sequence of tiny clinks. The second cufflink bounced on her skirt. Hurriedly, she shoved his buttons through their holes. A shiver of delight tore through her at the thought of his muscular torso. She pushed the shirt inside-out over his shoulders and down his arms, halting at his elbows. Adriana gaped. "Oh my god," she whispered, staring at his tattoo.

It covered his entire torso on the left side, from below the waistband of his pants up to his shoulder and down his arm, stopping at his elbow. A solid black, the design consisted of a series of connected and flowing geometric patterns—leaping flames, what looked to be the sun's rays, swirls, long lines and bold curves. Never in her life had Adriana seen anything as amazing.

"Not what you expected?" he asked.

Surprised at the hesitation in his voice, she met his eyes. "Wow."

He offered a tentative grin. "You like?"

"Oh god, yes. This is freaking awesome." Her nails traveled the striking composition, taking a detour to the sharp peak of his nipple, the contours of his defined abs, the depression of his navel, the silky brown hairs swirling around it and dipping beneath his waistband. Whimpering like a chocoholic coveting a bag of Ghirardelli squares, she decided touch wasn't enough to satisfy her scaling appetite. Palms on his ass, she traced the design with the tip of her tongue, intentionally marking him, leaving her scent.

He sucked in a breath at her tongue on his navel. His buttocks clenched as her mouth reached his abs. Holding him tightly, she worked her way higher, latching onto his ruddy nipple and suckling hard. His pec kept twitching, the muscle dancing beneath her cheek. To reward him for such a lovely response, she brought her teeth down carefully on his flesh.

He straightened at the unexpected love bite, his groin bumping her hip. A growl followed. So did his hands and arms until his bunched-up shirt stopped him from grabbing her. Swearing, he tugged furiously, rotating his shoulders, his arms twisting the fabric as he tried to get free.

Adriana stepped back and spoke through their mingled gasps. "You're just making it worse." He'd yanked the sleeves over his hands, trapping them.

His eyes narrowed on her. His nostrils widened with his harsh breaths. "Get this fucking thing off me."

"As soon as I take off your pants." Sinking to her knees, she pressed her face to his trembling belly and sighed. "Does the tattoo go all the way to your cock?"

Laughter cut off his newest swears. "Unwrap me and find out."

"Sure." She eased the end of his belt through the buckle.

His chest pumped. "For God's sake, not like you did with the magnet. Faster."

And get to the best part too quickly? No way. By the beginning of next week, this would be over, a wondrous memory never to happen again. Adriana intended to make it last.

The ends of his belt swung over his groin with the precision of two pendulums. She watched them sweep past the powerful bulge behind his fly. With wonder, she stroked it.

His shoulders rotated once again as he resumed his struggle.

"Keep still," she murmured, her voice distracted. To make certain he obeyed, she slipped the fingers of her left hand beneath his waistband. On contact, his squirms slowed and stopped. With her other hand, she unbuttoned the band and unzipped him.

Her smile widened at his navy boxers, a trim fit with enough room in the legs to afford his boys some freedom, a chance to breathe. Lids fluttering, she gave him an open-mouth kiss just above the elastic band, sampling the feel of his short, dark hairs on her tongue, relishing his increasingly musky scent.

His throat gurgled with another curse, this one sounding more pleased than the last. Clearing his throat, he barked, "Take them off."

"Eventually." Her answer and tone mimicked his from a few minutes ago.

Air whooshed from him in a pissed sigh, to which he added, "Fuck." His voice creaked as though he hadn't used it in too long.

Disregarding his exasperation, Adriana took great care in lowering his boxers and pants, uncovering him lovingly as she would a much-anticipated gift. To her delight, his tattoo continued to his groin. There, a tangle of cinnamon-colored hair, its shade lighter than his brows, enhanced his masculinity. Nose to his tuft, she sniffed, moaned and caught several curls between her teeth, tugging.

He made a strangled noise like a trapped beast or a man desperate to be free so he could regain command.

*Eventually.* She eased his clothing to his hairy thighs. Her world shifted. His animal scent, aromatic and sensuous, promised breathtakingly vulgar acts. She stared openly at his cock, her body yearning, heart drumming her chest. Long and thick, his organ was so engorged it made his skin shiny and slightly darker than his thatch. Distended veins decorated it. A bead of clear moisture seeped from the slit in the smooth head. Plump and rounded, his balls drew tight to his body, the glands lightly covered with short, brown hairs. Wow.

She turned her hand over, palm up, to cup his testicles so she could test their weight and warmth. Just short of her fingertips touching his skin, Nathan clamped his hand on her wrist. Adriana's head jerked up, then down to him, pulling her fingers away. He'd gotten free of his shirt?

She grumbled, "I just want to touch." *And smell, lick, taste.*

"Later." Releasing her wrist, he shoved his clothing to his ankles. He toed off his shoes, knocked them aside, stepped out of his things and peeled off his socks.

They flew past her head to land in the middle of the floor.

Wayward locks hung over his forehead, giving him a wonderfully bed-mussed look. His dark gaze wasn't as casual. It pinned her. He took her arm, gesturing her to stand.

Eyes locked with his, Adriana pushed to her feet.

With his thighs pressed to hers and his chest crushing her breasts, he kissed her fast, hard, pitilessly. Exactly as she wanted. By the time he finished, she labored to open her lids.

He took her hand, stepped around their clothing and headed for the window, reminding her of what she'd forgotten too easily. On instinct, she held back, causing their arms to stretch out across the space separating them. Nathan stopped finally, looked over and gave her a roguish smile. "Come here, Adriana."

An indecent thrill warred with prudence and her lifetime of being a good girl, trying to please, ending up lonely and ignored unless she paid men to thrill and challenge her as Nathan did now.

*You have nothing to fear no matter what we do, he'd said. I'd never harm you.*

Her steps were lighter than the heaviness in her limbs should have allowed as Nathan brought her to the window, in full view of the neighbors. From behind, he molded his nudity to hers, his solid cock settling in the cleft between her cheeks. She lifted her ass to greet his glorious sex, causing her torso to bend backward slightly, which displayed her breasts even more to anyone who cared to watch.

Hands over hers, he lifted her arms above her head, spreading them widely and placed her palms on the glass. Its chill shocked, biting into her skin and sending a tremor down her spine. His foot tapped the inside of her right ankle and her left, gesturing her to part her legs even more.

Adriana did. The glass, so clear, so clean, reflected her indecent pose and nudity in the fire's shimmery light.

She stared at her naked breasts and cunt, the garter belt draped across her hips, the stockings hugging her thighs. Unable to catch a breath, her dizziness increased, though not unpleasantly. The unsteadiness freed her of responsibility and control. She was Nathan's prisoner now, his to do with as he willed in front of their unseen audience.

Expectation sped through her, sapping her strength, tingling her fingers and toes. Her eyes drifted to his neighbor's darkened windows. She pictured the owners as having movie-star good looks and a restlessness born of boredom because they'd received too much wealth too soon. She imagined them arm in arm, huddled close, their blossoming smiles altering their indifference as they watched what went on in this room. Did they have guests tonight? Were their visitors also examining her nudity? Did anyone comment?

Her breath caught on a faint gasp, her musings halting at Nathan's arm sliding around her waist, his limb so heavy, warm, restrictive. She looked at his reflection in the

window. Sin filled his eyes. He lowered his head to her ear. Mouth on it, he murmured, "Your escorts wouldn't have done this, would they?" His free hand covered her belly.

Back arched, ass pressed into his hard, hot cock, she lost her next breath on a fast sigh. "No."

"You wanted them to make you feel trapped and helpless, but in reality you never were." His harsh, excited breathing skimmed her ear. His fingers inched closer to her pubic hair. "You told them what to do, what to say."

"Yes."

He cupped her mound, his fingers dipping over the edge boldly, possessively.

She clenched her teeth to hold in her cry of delight.

He knew. His voice held satisfaction at her response. "Will I follow your orders, Adriana?"

Never. She was his to do with as he willed. Her eyes closed. Nathan's arm tightened around her waist immediately, a silent order for her to look at him, to answer him. She obeyed. Her voice shook slightly. "No, you won't."

"Are you helpless against what I want to do?"

She cried, "Yes!"

His fingers slipped over her puffy and slick vaginal lips, coming to a halt at her entrance as his thumb covered her sensitive clit. Powerless to stop, Adriana cried out in pleasure and moaned loudly as he pulled his hand away, resting his damp fingers on her hip. She whined, "Don't stop."

"I'll do whatever I want." Despite his accelerated breathing, his voice held the mild, assured tone of a man who's confidently in power. "You're mine now." He pressed his mouth to her shoulder, lingering to suckle.

She whimpered.

He hushed, "I'm going to show you how it feels to be truly captive, Adriana. To belong to someone else—body, heart, soul. To know no one on the outside will change that fact or come to relieve you of what I have planned. You'll plead for me to go faster, to make you come...I won't, not until I'm ready. I'll use you so well, you'll beg for a moment's rest from my mouth, hands and cock but I'll continue until you're crying for even more. I'll command, you'll obey. From moment to moment, you won't know what to expect."

A gasping, prolonged mewl broke free of her throat as he pressed his lips to her neck and returned his hand to her cunt. He worked two fingers inside her sheath, spreading them to stretch her inner walls. The pressure surprised and aroused. Knees bent, she pressed down on his hand to bring his thumb closer to her nub. Instantly, he pulled his fingers out of her and his mouth away from her throat.

"Nooooo," she whined.

Again, his arm tightened around her waist, a new reminder she wasn't to defy him. She'd accept what he would give.

Her head fell forward between her shoulders. Ragged breaths shook her breasts. He offered no comfort, no further touch. She imagined the neighbors watching her misery, the husband deciding he would do the same to his wife, making her beg for release. Adriana envisioned the wife's anticipation and curiosity as to what Nathan would do next.

Everything he desired. Here, Adriana was his slave to do with as he willed. Tamed, she straightened her legs and waited, hoping for him to fill her again, to stroke her until she went over the edge.

As if he knew and wanted to convince her of his authority, his hand went to her breasts, tugging and twisting her nipples, making them so hard they hurt. He suckled the skin just below her ear. Torrents of feeling raced across her shoulders and arms to her fingertips. Wanting more, needing him to stroke her clit, she relaxed her body as best she could.

Unmoved by her submissiveness, he squeezed her breasts – not enough to hurt, not gently either, just the way she liked. Adriana bit her lower lip and maintained her servile silence, afraid a satisfied moan would give her away. Finished, he assessed the weight of her breasts in his palm, the right one first, then the left, his thumb flicking her nipples to display them for the neighbors. Throughout, Nathan's other arm remained on her waist, holding her to him.

His cock hardened and flexed between her buttocks, the movement and his uneven breaths showing his annoyance at having to wait to penetrate and fill her.

Even so, he continued his pitiless game, purposely avoiding her cunt. Her head lolled to the right with the return of his lips to her throat. There, he tarried, his kiss thrilling and seductive. Her fingers curled on the frigid pane, the tips touching her chilled palms. She shivered at the cold, which contrasted so sharply with his body heat.

His hand left her breasts to examine her navel, the mole on her hip, the sweep of her thigh, the curve of her biceps, her elbow, everywhere except the throbbing pulse between her legs.

"Please," she begged.

Nathan acted instantly, turning her face to his, silencing her with his tongue. Expecting an unmerciful kiss, Adriana's heart caught at his surprising tenderness. His tongue stroked rather than probed. His lips caressed. Caught up in the change, she whimpered shamelessly, opening her mouth as much as she could, imploring him to fill her.

He accepted the invitation, his kiss still loving and sweet.

A purr caught at the base of her throat. Dazed and distracted by his affection, Adriana didn't immediately react to his hand slipping back between her legs. That changed as his fingers burrowed into her cunt. She grunted crudely around his tongue. He eased it deeper into her mouth. Thumb on her clit, he mashed the tiny protuberance and pushed it from side to side.

Startling and unbearable sensations raged in her groin, spilling to her thighs. She made such quick, tight fists her knuckles rapped the glass. Her hips squirmed.

The contradiction of his gentle kiss and probing fingers undid Adriana. She rose toward the peak, her head swimming, her arms too heavy to keep up. They fell to her sides. Her mouth broke free of his. She released her weight into him, the back of her head on his shoulder.

Closer, closer, closer her climax came—enchancing misery she strove toward, longing for it to crest and end. Abruptly, he stopped rubbing her clit. The dull throbbing between her legs hung on for several seconds before fading.

*Nooooo.* Frustrated and edgy, she beat her thighs with her fists. “Shit!”

“Quiet.” His cheek pressed against hers.

Panting, Adriana wanted to finish the job herself. Instead, she turned her face to his and licked his bristly chin.

Briefly startled, he smiled.

Good. She had him. Seeking more control, she licked his Adam’s apple. It bobbed beneath her tongue. She chanced a look at his face. His smile widened and now his thumb circled her erect nub. She ground her ass into his sex and arched her back to present her breasts fully to whoever wanted to look. They didn’t matter. Only Nathan did. His thumb made a quick swipe over her clit. Adriana fought a shiver and a moan, determined not to let him know the full extent of her agony and give him too much power. She touched his jaw with her fingers. He flinched at their icy touch and lifted his head to get away. Exactly what she wanted. Before he knew what hit him, she’d turned her head and pressed her mouth to his throat in a wet, wanton kiss.

His groan of approval didn’t match the way his thumb slowed and stopped. Voice cracking, he warned, “No matter what you try, you’re not getting satisfaction until I decide it’s time.”

Crap. Her brows drew together. She pulled in her tongue and tilted her face to see his. A mixture of amusement and resolve sparkled in his cocoa-colored eyes. She closed hers and spoke on a mournful sigh. “When will it be time?”

“When you can’t stand it any longer.”

She laughed shrilly. “That would be now.”

“No...not even close.”

He proved it in the following minutes, using her body with a right no other man had ever wanted or dared demonstrate. While his fingers remained in her cunt and his thumb stayed poised near her clit, his other hand surveyed her intimately from her breasts and nipples to her juicy vaginal lips, down to her anus. Unreservedly, he circled the tight pink ring, testing its tight entrance with the tip of his finger.

Adriana went to her toes, her three-inch heels leaving the floor. Apparently pleased with her shock, his thumb grazed her clit. Her mouth hung opened, delivering a strangled cry. She sank down so quickly, her heels tapped hard against the wood. He



continued. On and on it went with his fingers taunting and retreating, until she thought she'd go nuts. Damp with perspiration, she babbled incoherently and cried out as he rubbed faster and harder, delivering her to climax.

The deep, exquisite pleasure tore cry after cry from Adriana, reducing her to a whimpering, shivering mass.

Nathan removed his fingers from her sheath. Arm behind her knees, he swept her off her feet and into his chest. Still trembling, she wreathed her arms around his neck and drew her knees inward to nestle as close as she could to his powerfully built body. He carried her past the sofa toward the fireplace.

She stopped licking his tattoo and asked, "We're not going upstairs?"

His arms tightened around her, yet another reminder as to who would be in command. "We're not through down here. We've just begun."

## Chapter Five

He brought her to the edge of the thick wool rug facing the hearth. Even after he'd lowered Adriana to her feet, she clung to him. Nathan knew her desire for closeness drove part of her reaction. Not knowing what to expect from him also played into her response.

Focused on her accelerating anticipation, he left her side with one order. "Stay there."

In his peripheral vision, he checked to make certain she hadn't moved. He padded to their pile of clothing, selecting his tie and her blouse for his coming scheme. On a whim, he lifted her thong and brought it to his nose, inhaling deeply. Jesus. His head fell forward at her heavenly fragrance. He struggled to take a full breath and maintain his control. No dice. His fingers crushed the flimsy silk. He wanted to bury his cock in her so badly, he wasn't certain he could go through with his plan to tempt her beyond reason.

Her heels clicked on the hardwood floor.

Looking over, he saw her shifting her weight from foot to foot. She'd moved to the far left to watch him, her curiosity taking her off the rug. He fought a smile at the way she'd reverted to form, covering her breasts with her right arm and hand, her cunt with the left. For protection from his neighbor's prying eyes or as an unconscious reaction to what he intended for her?

*I'm going to show you how it feels to be truly captive, Adriana.*

He suspected she knew what he planned, though not to the degree he had in mind. Nor would he warn her.

Content in the moment, he stared. Firelight changed the color of her skin from olive to a creamy caramel shade, enhancing her dramatic blue eyes. Long, black tresses trailed over her narrow shoulders. She looked as seductive as a dark-haired Venus in Botticelli's famous painting and as debased as an advertisement for an upscale Nevada brothel in a men's magazine.

Eyes on her, he approached, stopping at the cocktail table. He slung the blouse and tie over his right shoulder and curled his forefinger, gesturing her closer. At his side, she seemed to forget her nudity and vulnerability. Her hands rested on his tattoo. Warmer now, her soft palms did wicked things to his pecs and abs, causing the muscles to jerk on contact with her fingertips, which traced the design.

She spoke quietly, nearly a whisper. "When did you get it?"

During a drunken stupor, days after he'd learned Echo wasn't his. Pissed, hurt and tired of working eighteen-hour days, he'd decided to indulge himself in every way

possible, which eventually led him to Zanes and, in a way, to tonight. "Years ago," he answered, "when I decided I liked being reckless."

Her eyes lifted to his then dropped back down to his hands. In his left, he held her wrists. With his right, he pulled the tie from his shoulder and wrapped it around them. Convinced she couldn't get free, he released her and knotted the tie. "On your knees, Adriana."

A flash of surprise registered on her face, though she didn't question. Nor did she resist. She sank to the rug so swiftly, he knew her legs were too weak to hold her and her body craved whatever he intended to give.

Nathan went to one knee. Her eyes darted to his pendulous cock and balls. Gently, he eased her onto her back, her bound arms above her head. Chin lifted, she watched him secure the ends of his tie to the leg of the cocktail table. The second time he pulled on the knot, making sure it wouldn't come loose, her blouse slipped from his shoulder, landing on her arm.

She made a sound halfway between the word "what" and a whimper, finally falling silent, not asking why he'd taken her blouse, simply watching, waiting.

With the garment back in his hands, he spread it on the rug to fold it into a wide rectangle.

Understanding swept across Adriana's face as to his intent. He reached the end of his task and watched her reaction. She blinked rapidly. Her face flamed with a rosy blush, bawdy and oddly virginal. He concentrated on the innocence. It, her mute dependence, bruised lips and the mascara smudges beneath her eyes stirred Nathan as few things had. Surprising affection battled with lust. Given his history with intimacy and love, he made certain to yield to his baser emotions. Draping the silk across her eyes, he lifted her head and pulled the fabric around to the back, tying it behind her right ear.

Her throat jerked with her swallow. Agitated, she tested the binding around her wrists. Unable to free them, her legs wavered. She took a halting breath and pulled her knees up. The narrow points of her high heels gouged the rug. The movement seemed to give her a measure of control.

It provided an image that squeezed the air from Nathan's lungs. With her heels digging in, she'd lifted her hips and unknowingly spread her thighs, presenting a picture of a woman, bound, blindfolded and powerless, ready to be mounted, taken by her master.

He gritted his teeth at the ache in his groin, what it needed right now even as he knew a quick fuck wouldn't satisfy. In the depths of his mind, he realized one, two or even three orgasms in quick succession would only whet his hunger for her. If he'd been able, he would have crawled inside of her body to become one with her mind, heart and blood. Crazy. He'd never been this way with another woman, not even Hayley during their early teenaged romance, and didn't care to examine where his intensity had come from. Nor would he succumb to it. He'd promised to show Adriana

a weekend she'd never forget and by god, if it killed him to wait for an orgasm, he'd follow through.

Resolved, he took several deep breaths to calm down. It didn't work. However, he'd composed himself enough to trust his voice. Face close to hers, he murmured, "Can you see?"

She stopped sucking her bottom lip and moved her head from side to side.

He stared at her damp lip, resisting the urge to draw it into his mouth and hug her until neither of them could breathe. Shaking off his sentimentality, he countered, "I think you can." He pulled the scarf over her cheekbones and to the tip of her nose to block out any vision.

Instantly, she pulled her chin up in an effort to see. Unable to, her heels dug deeper into the carpet.

Nathan sat back on his heels, hands on his thighs as he gazed at her, his heart banging into his ribs. He pressed the base of his palms into his legs and dug his nails into the skin above his knees. The pain should have registered but didn't. Adriana captured his full attention. His forced silence affected her immediately. Her breasts trembled with her quickened breaths. A thin sheen of perspiration shone on her neck and upper chest. The thought of her salty, hot flesh beneath his mouth and hands made him woozy.

She blurted, "What are you doing?"

He pulled in a deep breath and answered lightly. "What do you think?"

She frowned. "I don't know. I can't see." Her voice pleaded. "Tell me."

Driven to thrill her and to provide an exhilarating edge to their carnal games she'd hadn't and wouldn't experience with any other man, he leaned close and whispered, "What do you want me to do, Adriana?"

Her lips trembled with her jarring breaths. "Everything."

He smiled at her eager surrender. "You're giving me license to do whatever I want?"

"Yes."

"I already have it, for the entire weekend, have you forgotten?"

She bit her lip and shook her head. "No." She whispered, "Go on. Please. Do whatever you want."

"Like this?" He laid his hand on her cushiony belly. Fingers splayed, the tips touched the edge of her pubic hair.

Her body quivered beneath his touch. She lifted her hips to move closer to it and swallowed loudly. "Yes. More."

"Of this?" He swirled his tongue around her left nipple.

Her hips fell to the rug. Her back arched, bringing her breast closer to his mouth. "Yes."

"And this?" His fingers slid over the edge of her mound to her plumped vaginal lips.

She gasped at his sudden and firm manipulation of her clit. Her hips rose again. She cried, "Yes!"

He brought back his hand. Before she could complain or try to follow it, he murmured, "Or this?"

He moved swiftly, giving her no chance to answer or to anticipate, making her lack of sight even more acute. The lush velvet night surrounded Adriana, arousing and unnerving her. With her other senses elevated, she became aware of the small rush of air as he moved his leg over her torso and straddled her body. She heard his knee making contact with the rug, its muffled tap on the floor beneath. She felt the tip of his cock brush her torso briefly. His hands, heavy and hot, settled on her inner thighs. Ruthlessly, he pushed them apart.

And then he lowered his body to hers. Adriana's mind pictured him supporting his weight on his knees and elbows, his head just above her cunt, while his sex...

Her breath caught at the image they must have created for those who might be watching. Passion, not embarrassment, heated her face. So did frustration.

With his current position, his cock and balls grazed her chest, maddeningly out of her mouth's reach, yet close enough so she could smell the most animal part of him. Not thinking, she lifted her hands to grab his lean hips and bring his sex to her face. His tie around her wrists yanked her back. Exasperated, she blurted, "Move back a little so I can suck you."

He lowered his head, latching his mouth onto her clit, holding it between his teeth as he laved it with his tongue and ran his fingers down the moist fissure between her cheeks.

Adriana's head tilted back until her chin pointed at the ceiling. Mouth hanging open, she cried out as a cascade of warmth traveled her body, followed by an excruciatingly delightful shudder.

His tongue slowed and stopped.

NO. She tugged on the tie around her wrists, rattling the cocktail table, desperate to get free and force him to do as she wanted.

Deliberately perverse, he ignored her distress and wrapped his arms around the upper part of her legs, just above the crease of her buttocks, and kept her spread wide. His hair and stubble tickled the insides of her thighs. His tongue toured her labia's petals, thickened with desire. He licked away her juices, leaving his moisture instead.

She squirmed to bring her nub closer to his mouth. Arms tightened on her legs, knees against her body, he prevented it. His earlier words returned and taunted. *You'll plead for me to go faster, to make you come...I won't, not until I'm ready.*

Gasping, she stilled her body and lifted her head as far as she could, ready to beg him no matter how hopeless her effort. The words receded with her sharp intake of breath. He'd reached her clit again, though he tasted it intermittently, like a cat batting its paw at whatever it captured, subduing it, keeping it off guard. She moaned her disapproval. He adjusted his weight and resumed toying with her, accelerating his carnal assault. She felt more movement. His hips moving toward her head? Yes.

His silky hot cock brushed her cheek.

Its touch jolted Adriana, diverting her attention from the aching throb between her legs. Not daring to breathe, moving cautiously so as not to give him any advance notice of her goal, she let her head sink back to the rug. The crown of his penis grazed the corner of her lips, obliging her to taste the succulent mouthful, to lick its tiny slit, which left a trail of moisture on her skin. Head turned, tongue poised, she sucked him inside just as he'd returned to her nub.

His tongue stalled. His head shot up so quickly it bumped the inside of her leg. Given his next movements, Adriana figured he glared in her direction for catching him unawares and taking control. Blissfully unconcerned, she pulled him deeper, savoring the subtle saltiness of his pre-cum, the cleanliness of his flesh. Its sheer allure spoke of a male in good health, one at his peak. Purring contentedly, she swirled her tongue over the back of the head, the bumpy skin that drove most men wild.

Nathan's strained grunt said he was no different from the rest. The volume of his groan left nothing to the imagination, nor did the way his body trembled above hers. Joyous, she lifted her head to take even more of him inside, working his rod with her lips and tongue as her body and hands never could.

In between heaving breaths, he sputtered several curses, evidently a moment away from losing control.

Her mind saw his head sagging between his bunched shoulders and her legs, sweat running down his temples, getting trapped in the stubble on his jaw. She pictured his face scrunching, his testicles becoming denser, more compact, ready to spill their –

"Fuck this," he gasped, interrupting her thoughts.

He rubbed her clit so hurriedly and skillfully, she couldn't stop her mouth from dropping open on her loud moan. Freed of her sucking grasp, he lifted his cock away from her lips and pulled his leg over her body. Abandoned by his bulk, she became aware of the fire's heat on her breasts, belly and cunt. Adriana lifted her head in an effort to hear better and to determine his next move.

His tattered breaths calmed. Within seconds, they'd faded. Other sounds became noticeable – flames snapping with the sharpness of a belt or riding crop striking flesh, the wind howling, something popping from the cold, the rapid thumping of her heart.

Why wasn't he saying anything? What did he plan to do? Too many emotions snarled her thoughts, making it impossible for her to do anything except react. Tilting her chin upward, Adriana tried to see past her damn blouse and caught only the faintest glow of the fire. Without asking, she sensed Nathan observing her. His silence

sharpened her condition...the way he'd bound her hands, the blindfold, her partial nudity. Instinctively, she drew her legs together.

Nathan's hands clamped down on her inner thighs. His voice was calm yet firm. "Spread them."

She heard the passion behind his words, a level even greater than when she'd suckled his cock. Dutifully, she opened her legs. He ran his fingers down the backs of them to her ass, a sensitive area needful of his touch. She lifted her hips for more. True to his earlier promise to make her wait, to compel her to want, he cupped her buttocks in his palms and brought his mouth to her cleft, flicking his tongue on her opening rather than her clit.

Undone by his strength and determination, Adriana had little fight left. He might take minutes or an hour to bring her to climax and she owned no defense against his unyielding will.

She released her weight into his hands, her legs dipping to each side, widening the V between them, baring her body for his sole use. His licks and suckles remained negligent, unmindful of her gluttonous desires.

In an attempt to relax so she could endure, Adriana breathed as deeply as possible. She stopped fisting her fingers and tensing her shoulders.

Nathan's mouth reached her nub. The slow sweep of his tongue sparked an immediate response from her body. Heat poured into Adriana's groin. Moisture ran from her pussy. This time he licked her steadily, his lazy pace enticing, goading. Weary and resigned to whatever he ordained, she withstood the delay in her pleasure, at least in her mind. Her heart refused to slow down. The tightness between her legs remained static. Neither growing nor retreating, it became never-ending.

A bead of perspiration ran from her neck to her back. Her thoughts drifted, seeking relief in her fantasies. Perhaps they'd push her over the edge. An image loomed in her mind of Nathan as she always pictured him – with Viking-long hair, his face weathered from years on boats, only this time he'd grown a mustache and short beard which added to his rugged menace. Instead of his tattoo, a network of scars decorated his torso from prior battles that rewarded him plunder, the same as when he'd captured her weeks earlier.

Adriana saw herself at his feet, naked and spread, her wrists bound to the hilt of his sword. Each night, he drove the weapon into her hut's earthen floor and secured her hands to it so she'd be at his mercy for hours, unable to fight or to flee. Outside, women no longer cried out as they had during the initial attack. The other men used them well these last days, taming their flesh with their cocks and mouths until whimpers and lewd moans replaced screams. In here, Nathan surveyed her nudity, his now and for every day to come. Stripped of his furs and skins, he moved between her legs with a male's privilege, his cock swollen and stiff, ready to reclaim her body and to prove his strength, his mastery of her. He would use her thoroughly this night, just as he had from the start.

The first day he'd taken her numerous times, vaginally and orally. He demanded she suck his cock and spilled his seed into her once chaste mouth. Later, he enjoyed her anally. No part of her body was safe from his lust or touch. No demand of his would be too great. If she dared refuse, as she had initially, he punished her. Her buttocks bore faint red marks from his leather strap, a weapon she found frightening and strangely thrilling. It hung over the back of her rough-hewn chair, a reminder of his dominance and her captivity. She stared at it until his mouth covered hers, his kiss demanding her full attention, the same as his organ. Rebellious, her thoughts wandered back to the strap. Within the coming hours, would he bend her over the table and whip her again, forcing her to maintain the humbling position while he regarded her reddened and stinging skin?

Did she want him to?

Held by the image and her outrageous longings, Adriana mewled unintentionally.

Nathan licked her nub one last time and lifted his head, ending his foreplay.

Oh god, no. She opened her mouth to protest or plead and inhaled sharply instead at the surprise of him lifting her legs and pushing them toward her torso, which elevated her ass. Opened so indecently, she had no chance to react as his cock entered her.

*From moment to moment, you won't know what to expect,* he'd warned.

His movements were efficient and unrelenting. He drove his shaft inside, delivering stunning pressure, spreading her inner walls, tunneling into her body until his nest of curls touched hers. Not yet through, he leaned down and pushed the blindfold to her forehead.

Taken off guard, she blinked repeatedly and tried to focus on the naked craving in his eyes. Impossible. He flexed his cock, killing her concentration, driving her attention inward. A large man, Nathan behaved with the assurance of a lover who knew what carnal gifts he possessed. His confident control showed in his gentle kiss on her chin and each cheek despite his quickened breaths and the way she tightened her sex around his. The only response he allowed was one he couldn't stop. His shaft's girth widened, stretching her even more.

Her lips parted on a helpless sigh. She wrapped her legs around his torso, careful not to scrape him with the sharp ends of her heels. Propped on one elbow, with his mouth angled over hers, he plunged his tongue inside, quieting all sounds...for a moment. Her first suckle wrenched a brutal groan from him and brought his hand to her breast. Roughly, he squeezed the supple mound and ground his palm over her hardened nipple. His tongue muffled her moan, though not to his satisfaction as his response proved. He deepened his kiss to quiet and tame her. Willful, Adriana whimpered lustily, her mouth vibrating around his tongue. It triggered something in him. His kiss grew noisy and wild, stealing her breath and his.

Minutes later, he tore his mouth free, shuddered and fought for air. Long before he got his fill, he lowered his head, his hooded gaze taking in their joined bodies. Several



damp locks stuck to his forehead, while others hung free. Adriana longed to push them all back and to drive her hips into his to produce the sensuous friction they both required. Although she sensed he was too far gone to stop, the same as her, she didn't want to chance another delay and so she remained still, leaving the pace to him.

Unaware of her thoughts, he exhaled loudly. The sound must have broken the last of his restraint. He positioned himself so he could thumb her clit—sending tingling currents down Adriana's legs—while pulling out of her until only his crown remained inside. On her labored pants, he penetrated again, piercing her depths, holding nothing back, expecting her body to shelter and delight his.

Disciplined to bring him pleasure, Adriana battled her advancing climax. Jaw clenched, she ignored his fingers massaging her nub and concentrated on a rhythmic tightening of her inner walls around his invading organ. He pulled back and reentered, his testicles tapping her ass. He repeated the action over the following minutes, settling into a fixed speed—neither fast nor slow, extending the unending torment.

She curled her fingers, sinking her nails into her palms, not caring if she drew blood. Her breasts jiggled with each uneven breath and his every thrust. Time not only slowed, it seemed to stand still. Adriana wasn't certain how much longer she could suffer this anguish without whirling past all self-control and breaking. Crazy, her eyes pleaded with him to let them come together, to allow them to come now.

He pretended indifference. Purpose shone in his steady gaze, though she saw the strain on his body and face from forestalling his orgasm. He'd drawn his shoulders up, the lines around his mouth were deeper. Sweat gleamed on his face, neck and chest. His bunched muscles distorted the appearance of his tattoo.

She contracted her inner walls to force the matter to conclusion. In answer, his pumps slowed.

Shit. Adriana closed her eyes, squeezing her lids. Her head thrashed. She tugged on her binding with such force the cocktail table scooted closer, bunching the rug beneath it. Her legs tightened around Nathan's torso. He might stop, but she refused to let him pull out of her. *No fucking way!* her mind shouted.

"Oh—oh—oh," she blubbered. His fingers worked her clit with skill and attention she couldn't ignore. She wiggled to get closer and to get away, unable to make up her mind. No matter which direction she took, his cock pressed against her entrance, reminding her there would be no escape from him unless he allowed it.

He pushed his back against her imprisoning legs as if to demand his release. Too weak to defy him, focused on the mounting sensations in her nub, Adriana loosened her grip. She expected him to pull out and leave her breathless, though not fully wanting. Miraculously, her orgasm had arrived. With a wheezing breath, she accepted it, her body and mind soaring, tumbling.

Seamlessly, as though he'd been waiting for this moment all along, Nathan renewed his pumps, his pace in tune with the contractions between her legs. Ones he continued to feed by rubbing her clit.

"No—I—stop—*wait!*" she gasped, unable to withstand the intensity. She needed a second to rest, for her nub to lose a bit of its sensitivity.

If anything, her outcry made him rub and pump faster, harder. His earlier words whispered in her mind.

*I'll use you so well, you'll beg for a moment's rest from my mouth, hands and cock but I'll continue until you're crying for even more.*

She could barely breathe as her clit hardened anew beneath his thumb and her sheath hugged his untiring, greedy cock. He adjusted his body for better penetration and balance without slowing his pace. His sex pummeled hers as his hand manipulated her small rise of flesh.

Her body shuddered at the combined onslaught. Her mind hollered for still more, just as he'd promised and predicted. This climax arrived with little warning. Adriana cried out her welcome to it. Nathan bellowed. Their voices tried to rise above each other's and filled the room.

As the sounds faded, their noisy puffing replaced it. Spent, he forced his hands to bear the majority of his weight. His muscles bulged with the effort and his forearms began to shake. Even so, as he lowered himself to her, with his cock still inside her cunt, he made certain their torsos did no more than touch so he wouldn't harm her.

His consideration and earlier passion brought tears to Adriana's eyes. Never had a man seen to her needs as fully as Nathan. The few men she'd dated thought of foreplay as a chore they engaged in grudgingly. A second after they got her wet, they concentrated on a quick fuck, never once thinking to masturbate her during the act. Finished, they rolled off her with mumbled catchwords like "wow" or "sweet". And then they fell asleep without uttering true endearments or one word of praise for her beautifully faked orgasms.

To show Nathan her gratitude for the real thing, she wrapped her legs around him in a not-so-gentle embrace and murmured, "That was awesome. Completely amazing. Totally hot. Simply indescribable." She regretted her babbling yet couldn't stop. Even at her own hand, she'd rarely experienced such prolonged arousal and raw joy. "I can't say enough." She swallowed and drew in more air. "Thank you."

He kept his face down as he nodded. A drop of sweat fell from his chin onto her neck. His forceful breaths cooled it.

When his belly tapped hers with his next gulp of air and his breathing still hadn't calmed, she began to worry. "Nathan, are you okay? Do you need to pull out of me and sleep?"

He lifted his face and looked at her with such unfocused eyes, her heart jumped in alarm. "Nathan, go on. Pull out of me and get some sleep."

He squeezed his lids tight and frowned. "Hell no." His head swooped back down, his mouth seeking her throat.

Adriana went limp at his suckling kiss. He lingered long enough in one spot to give her a hickey and to steal a bit more of her heart, which, of course, he didn't want. He'd

been hurt by Hayley, even if he'd contributed to the problem. He wasn't looking to have his life complicated by another woman, unless it was one he adored, not one he'd just happened upon. After three days of this, he'd go his way. Love had nothing to do with his response to her...the way he'd honored her body. He was simply a good man who knew how to rock a woman's world while he had her in his arms.

With his kiss winding down, he buried his face in her neck. She smiled gently and a bit sadly at his stifled yawn. Shortly thereafter, he surrendered to his fatigue, pulled out of her and sprawled at her side. Adriana watched him sleep, not willing to let tonight end. If she closed her eyes, it would.

Firelight bobbed over his muscled body, giving his skin and rumpled blond hair a golden cast, heightening the potency of his dazzling tattoo and beard-shadowed face. Fully entranced, she stared, losing track of time. Her thoughts began to slow. Her lids became gritty, refusing to stay up. Just as they closed, Nathan awakened unexpectedly and mounted her. Twice more he delivered them to climax, his lovemaking not nearly as drawn out as the first time, though just as engaging and rich.

At last, Adriana became too tired to think. She listened to his harsh breathing and drifted off, not realizing it until she awoke sometime later.

A few embers still glowed in the fireplace. The lack of light draped the room in darker shadows than before. She noticed the moon had retreated behind clouds so weighted with snow its brightness couldn't shine through. Countless flakes fell thick and soft, blunting the shapes of bushes and trees, masking this room from the neighbors' prying eyes. Earlier, she would have welcomed the defense. Now she no longer required it. Nathan's arms surrounded and protected her. At one point, he'd untied her hands, though she had no idea when. Her right palm rested on his tattoo, her fingers over his steadily beating heart.

Comforted by his embrace, she slept deeper than the first time and dreamt of Christmas. She was little, no more than nine, and shaking one of Joe's gifts, trying to guess what lay inside the box. The lack of sound and movement stumped but didn't worry her. Joe knew she didn't like the cashmere sweaters her dad's secretary picked out for her year after year because her father refused to bother with the holidays. And she really hated the weird-tasting candy her mother sometimes sent her from European shops. Joe knew Adriana's weakness for Hershey's kisses. And how she loved charm bracelets that jangled as she swung her arm, capturing everyone's attention as she entered a room. Sparkly pink headbands and barrettes were her next favorite choice. Had she told him that? She bit her lower lip and moaned because she hadn't. Reluctantly, she peeled away the edge of the shiny red paper.

A deep voice called out, "Do you unwrap all your presents so slowly?"

With Nathan's remembered question, Adriana's dream evaporated. She opened her eyes. Wan light from the cloud-shrouded sky and last night's snow spilled through the

towering windows, telling her it must be mid-morning. The soft leather molded to her naked ass and back said she was no longer on the rug.

*From moment to moment, you won't know what to expect.*

Propped up on her elbow, she glanced at the sofa serving as her bed with Nathan's parka spread over her nudity like a blanket. When had that happened? To the right, near the end table, she saw her pile of clothes and her purse. He'd brought it into the great room? Why? Oh shit, were they leaving? Had his plans changed because of a problem with his practice?

Her first thought was to close her eyes and pretend to sleep to escape the truth. Her next was to face whatever came. She sure as hell couldn't change it. On a disappointed sigh, she pushed to a sitting position, swung her legs over the sofa, noting she still wore her stockings and heels, then flinched as Nathan came around to her right, seemingly out of nowhere. She stared at the steaming mugs in his hands.

"You okay?" he asked.

Her eyes crept down his nudity, tarrying at his flaccid cock. Even deflated, it was magnificent—long and thick, the brownish skin matching the shade of his weighty balls. The fact he wasn't dressed was a good sign. Obviously, his plans for her were still on and they weren't leaving. She inhaled deeply to relax and smelled something scrumptious. "Is that hot chocolate?"

"Yep." He handed her a mug. "While you were asleep, I plowed the drive, put on chains and drove back to the restaurant."

She finished her sip with a delighted whimper and smiled at his lie and morning grubbiness. Tufts of hair stuck up on the right side of his head and his face needed a shave. "You did not."

With one hand on the sofa's back cushion, he leaned down and licked chocolate froth from her upper lip. The scent of sex on his skin and the damp heat of his tongue made her ears buzz.

He murmured, "How would you know? I pulled you off the floor, slung you over my shoulder, dropped you on the sofa then threw my parka over you and you didn't wake up once. You kept snoring."

Adriana ignored the snoring crack and attempted to calm her sprinting heart. "There's no whipped cream in here." She ran her finger around the lip of her mug. "That's how I know."

He swallowed his sip and cleaned his upper lip with his fingers. "Remind me to have the restaurant fire the delivery guy for not bringing any."

"No need to be a prick."

He arched one brow. "Sure you want to commit to that line of thinking while we're still nude?"

Adriana took another sip of hot chocolate to hide her pleasure at his playful teasing. Few men had liked her enough to bother. As far as she was concerned, verbal banter held as much intimacy as a kiss. "Did the poor man also bring food?"

"Why?" Nathan's eyes dropped from her rigid nipples to her growling belly. "Don't tell me you're hungry."

"Enough to plow your drive and chain up your tires to get back to the restaurant. I'll even buy."

His shoulders shook with suppressed laughter. "My caretaker stocked the kitchen while you were passed out. He came over and said hi—you were still on the floor by the way. You didn't say shit to him. Very rude," he added at her giddy laugh. "But I forgive you. Come on, I'll make you something."

Her laughter wound down. She didn't hide her surprise. "You can cook?"

"Are you kidding?" He sounded offended. "Cocoa Puffs and milk in a cereal bowl is one of my specialties, unless you'd like me to grill you a steak."

"I'll make us something." She pushed to her feet, noticing the toasty heat. He must have turned the heater up full blast to allow for their nudity. "Where's your kitchen?"

His eyes strayed from her thigh to her breasts to her mouth and returned to the tops of her stockings. "You can cook?" He sounded as if he couldn't care less.

Adriana relished his attention and her next sip of chocolate. Her voice gurgled with its thick sweetness. "Joe taught me." As a reminder, she added, "He was my dad's live-in chef. Last night, I told you about—"

Nathan interrupted, "I remember, Adriana." He met her eyes, earnestness replacing arousal. "He raised you. He loves you."

She stared, stunned he'd recall something so seemingly inconsequential to anyone except her, pleased he'd actually been listening. Her hands trembled with emotion. She put her mug on the end table. "Yeah. I love him too. I even applied to Le Cordon Bleu so I could become a chef like him."

"No shit." Nathan frowned. "So why aren't you doing that now?"

She waved her hand, dismissing the memory. "It was a silly whim I should have never considered."

"That's not what your face is saying."

Adriana rolled her eyes.

Waiting for more, Nathan sipped his hot chocolate.

She sighed. "When Dad found out my plans, he contacted Stanford and had me hauled into the dean's office. My advisor and a school representative relayed his message. If I withdrew from school, I was on my own. There'd be no more financial help from him and no reason for me to go back to his house because I wouldn't be welcomed there." Her shoulders lifted. "I was only eighteen and pretty mouthy. I told them I didn't give a damn."

He swallowed his sip. "Good for you."

"Yeah, I thought so too until they added that my father would also fire Joe for talking me into being a cook. They made it sound as if it was something demeaning, not something to be proud of." She rubbed her forehead, remembering the horrible scene, the lack of emotion on their faces. Her dad contributed big-time and they didn't want to lose his funds. Although Adriana couldn't blame them, she'd hated the way they'd handled it. Again, she sighed. "It was get my economics degree or else so I could someday take over the family business, since there wasn't a son to do so. The advisor and rep even said that my father didn't want me to disappoint him as my mother had. That was the worst threat of all. I knew if I withdrew from school, he wouldn't only fire Joe, he'd make damn certain he wouldn't get another job at any of the really nice places. That's the way my father operated. You gave him total control or else. I was so worried about Joe I promised to stay in school and did. After that, I did whatever my father wanted so he'd leave the poor man alone. But don't worry, I still know how to cook most stuff. Is your kitchen this way?" She pointed to the right and moved past him.

Nathan wrapped his fingers around her upper arm before she got too far. Adriana looked over without lifting her face, not wanting him to see her sadness and shame at an event so far in the past.

"It's all right to be angry with him," Nathan said softly. "At times, I still get pissed at my parents for what they did."

Tears threatened. Adriana pushed them away. "Thanks." She lifted her eyes to his. "But I'm okay. I had Joe, remember? Now, let me make us some breakfast."

## Chapter Six

She pretended the last few minutes hadn't happened and Nathan wasn't about to bring up the subject again. For the second time, he reminded himself Adriana's hurt was her own business and their time here wouldn't cure it. Oddly, the reality hadn't stopped him from performing like a porn star last night to make certain he'd pleased her. If she hadn't gushed about how great he'd been, he would have allowed himself to pass out instead of carrying on as The Love Machine and giving her a silver-dollar-size hickey on her neck. To lighten her mood now, he said, "The kitchen's down the hall to the left. You'll like it. There's even more windows in there."

Her laughter rang through the room, bringing Nathan a sigh of relief and a smile. Adriana swung her forefinger from the right to the left. "Who designed this place, a peeping Tom?"

"Come on." With her purse beneath his arm, he took her hand.

"Whoa – wait." She held back and dipped her head to the bag. "Why do you have that?"

"I thought you might want to change into something you brought. You have several runs in your stockings."

She looked.

He added, "And rug burns on your ass."

Her eyes jumped to his. She twisted her torso so she could see her buttocks. Unable to, she ran her fingertips down her cheeks.

Nathan stared at her gently swaying breasts. The image sent a wave of interest to his groin, which he kept out of his voice. "Just before the kitchen there's a bath. I have a tube of antiseptic ointment in the medicine cabinet." He tugged her in its direction and stopped at the door. "Want me to smear it on you?"

Her face reddened. "I'd like a moment alone."

"When you come out, I want to see what's in here." He lifted her bag. She closed the door. He called out, "Leave your hair just as it is and don't wipe off the mascara beneath your eyes. I like it."

She whimpered at that and most likely her reflection, showing the dark smudges and her messy locks. Nathan grinned. He couldn't recall the last time he'd teased a woman so mercilessly or experienced as much fun.

"You still out there?" she hollered.

No. Already he'd backed down the hall at his previous thoughts, reminding himself they'd be here a few days and then they'd both move on. His heart started to race, weakening his voice. "I'll be in the kitchen."

At the table, he read a month-old newspaper so he wouldn't have to think about the end of their stay. He'd finished several handfuls of Cocoa Puffs and half a glass of orange juice when he heard her heels tapping the hardwood floor. Nathan lifted his head just as Adriana entered the spacious brick-and-brass room, her face freshly washed, her hair finger combed.

Ignoring his disappointment that she no longer looked wild and vulnerable, she glanced from the numerous windows to the kitchen's center island. He'd put her purse smack in the middle of the gold-and-brown granite. The skylights bathed the black leather bag and the rest of the room in a gauzy ivory glow.

His noisy chews brought her attention to him. He offered her the box of cereal. She walked from shadow to shadow to reach him, and dug out a huge handful of the chocolate balls, stuffing them in her mouth. "Go on," she said, speaking around them, "look at my lingerie if you want to."

"No. You're going to show it to me. Piece by piece."

Her chews slowed. He gave her the last of his OJ. She swigged it down and wiped her fingers off on her garter belt. Fortified yet hesitant, she went around the island until she'd reached a lone shadow and rifled through the bag's contents, at last pulling out a lacy red thong.

Not good enough. "I already saw that in the elevator at your office."

Her blush deepened. She tossed the item on the counter. Hand back in her bag, she lifted a black bra with the cups cut out on the side to show lots of skin. Nice. Nathan rocked forward on the balls of his feet for a better look. Next, she removed a flimsy piece of bright pink lace. He frowned. "What is that?"

"A teddy. It's like a camisole and panties all together"

Too much fabric. "Go on."

The pile grew higher, the hues gaudier than a Technicolor movie. She reached a wide band of brocaded blue satin, the same shade as her eyes. He told her to stop. "Let me see that." He rubbed his thumb over the bumpy floral design and the crisscross laces in the back.

"It's a waist cincher," she offered.

"Put it on."

Her gaze dropped to it and slid back to him. "It doesn't have garters for stockings."

"Yours are ruined. I'll take them off you. Come here." He pulled out a chair. Its legs scraped over the hardwood, sounding too loud.

Adriana noted his neighbor's house across the finger of water. There were two snowmen in their back yard. The smaller one wore a bright yellow bikini and sunglasses, the other a straw hat and Hawaiian shirt.

"Newlyweds from Beverly Hills," he offered. "No kids. They go to my other neighbor's parties."



Her shoulders relaxed finally and at least one deadly sin flared in her eyes. The rapping of her heels recorded her approach from shadows to light, the faint beats far slower than his scurrying pulse. At the chair, she placed her palm on his tattooed pec. Her thumb stroked his nipple, sending a ribbon of warmth down his arm. She lifted her right foot, removed her heel and tossed it aside carelessly. It landed with a muffled smack on the area rug near the island. Her left shoe followed. It clunked to a stop near one of the windows.

Nathan directed her to put her right foot on the chair's seat. He wanted her open, exposed to his sight and touch.

She wanted the same, as she complied immediately. He sank to one knee, face lifted to her bared cunt. The heady fragrance of woman and sex absorbed him. In no rush, liking her unguarded pose, he toyed with the clasp on the back garter pulled tight over her thigh. Twice, his fingers slid past the device and her buttock, touching her anus instead.

Both times, she inhaled sharply and went to her toes.

Content with her response, he unhooked her stocking. Inch by inch, he folded it over her thigh, knee and calf, taking more time than needed, touching her as much as he wanted so she'd understand one thing – while here, her body belonged to him.

Adriana's head hung down. The ends of her hair skipped over her breasts. He pulled the hose from her foot, smiling at her red-polished toenails, and worked on the next stocking. Legs bare, wearing only her garter belt and a vivid blush of excitement, she met his eyes.

Nathan unhooked her garter belt and tossed it on the island with her stockings. The waist cincher, lightweight yet restrictive, rested on his palm. "Put your arms up."

She folded them over her head like a ballet dancer, exposing her breasts, exhibiting them to him and anyone else who cared to see. Satisfied, he slipped the cincher around her waist and fastened the hooks. The tails of the laces dangled over her fleshy cheeks, providing such a provocative picture his mouth went dry.

He pulled on the laces, tightening them just a bit so she felt imprisoned but could still breathe easily. Fitting her perfectly, the item dipped low in front to the edge of her dark curls. In the back, it exposed her ass. It fucking invited.

With his hand around her wrist, he brought her to the kitchen table, large enough to seat eight. In the past, he'd held meetings here for his staff. The surroundings and catered meals were his way of thanking them for their hard work. Today, he couldn't have cared less about his practice or food. He intended to feast on her. "Put your palms on the edge of the table, bend over and spread your legs."

Without further comment, he waited for her to assume the position. Once Adriana had, Nathan penetrated, driving his cock fully into her channel in one ruthless thrust. Her breath escaped on a vulgar moan. Her subservient position allowed for the greatest friction between their bodies. For Nathan, it wasn't enough. He ran his long fingers over

her cincher and bush to her nub. Forcing down a swallow, Adriana gripped the lip of the table. She lifted her ass. Savagely, Nathan pumped inside while also masturbating her.

Her climax arrived in seconds, her cries uncontrolled, shrill. He didn't stop until she came again, even though he hadn't. Arms above her head, she lay sprawled and panting on the table, the right side of her face on the wood. Pulling out, Nathan left her in the bawdy position with one order, "Don't move."

As if she could? "Where—" It's as far as she got in questioning him. He'd already left the kitchen and she couldn't find the strength to form more words.

She must have fallen asleep because the next thing she knew Nathan's fingers, slick with lubrication, stroked her anus. Quickly alert, she sank her teeth into her bottom lip at the way he pulled apart her buttocks, separating the cheeks to expose and examine her tightest entrance. Seconds ticked by. The lengthening time triggered her increasingly rapid heartbeats. He ran his finger around the pink circle. In response, she wiggled her ass.

"Keep still," he ordered in a distracted, gruff voice...the way he sounded in her fantasies.

Adriana squeezed her lids at her mounting passion. Images snaked across her mind of her hands tied behind her back, the cincher pulled so tight she could hardly breathe, her ass reddened and sore from her Viking's latest punishment. She hadn't spread her legs quickly enough to welcome his swollen cock. She'd failed to lick his testicles to his satisfaction. But she would. He'd make certain of it and not only with his leather strap. He'd take her like this, her nearly nude body beneath his in the most humbling of positions, his choice of entry proving she couldn't forbid him any of her openings. They belonged to him, as she did.

She heard cellophane crinkling and a small ripping sound. Nathan placed the empty condom wrapper on the table next to her face as though he wanted her to anticipate what would soon occur, him taking her anally. Blood pounded in her ears. Her ribs pushed against the cincher with her strained breaths, the garment seemingly snugger than a few minutes before.

Sheathed in the slick, silky latex, his rod brushed her ass. With one hand on her left hip to insure her captivity, he used his other to lift his organ then opened her flesh to his, burrowing into her tightest opening until his balls snuggled close and she mewled at the pressure, the outright crudeness of the act.

It absorbed Nathan as well. He saw to his pleasure, forgetting hers until he'd reached orgasm. Trembling at its aftermath, he leaned down and cupped her mound, working her clit until she came. On her unruly cry, he released himself from her opening and guided her to the kitchen floor. Cradled within his arms, she slept, dreaming of Vikings, pirates, kidnappers...of them holding her captive and cherishing her.

By late afternoon, he demanded food, rather than her. She fed him an entrée of spicy beef hash, gravy-smothered biscuits and dry Cocoa Puffs. Nathan rewarded her culinary talents with a stifled belch and a sloppy kiss. After, he led her upstairs to the master bedroom, an expansive area for a large man with a ravenous sexual appetite. His king-sized sleigh bed provided ample space for a prolonged fuck. Russet leather recliners added variety...while he sagged into one of them, she could straddle his lap. Adriana grinned inwardly at the concept and the area's masculine feel with its chestnut-colored paneling and stone fireplace. The ubiquitous windows provided the usual excitement.

Relieving her of the cincher, he tossed the garment on his bed's bronze satin comforter. Arm around her waist, he brought her into the bath and turned on the overhead lights. Gleaming dark wood cabinets, gold-leaf tile and the sparkling brass-colored floor created a sensual atmosphere where a man could corrupt a woman with little difficulty. He led her past the sunken tub—framed in a brass archway—to the jumbo shower, large enough to accommodate a dozen people. Maybe it had. Perhaps he'd invited his kinky neighbors over here for one of his parties. Previously, he'd said he liked being reckless.

Adriana wasn't about to ask for details. For a few days, she wanted to believe he found her special. That he'd never brought any other women in here, nor would he engage with them to the level he did with her. The truth of their temporary arrangement would come soon enough.

Her face rose to the skylight above the mirrors and sinks, the dimming outside light, night coming. One day over already. Her sigh stalled at him using his body to back her into the shower's far right wall. He lifted her hands to the enamel holders for soap and shampoo on either side of her face.

"Stay just as you are," he ordered and turned on the jets.

Warm water sprayed at ankle, hip and chest levels with an additional flow coming from the showerhead behind him, several inches above his head. Moisture dripped from her lashes, rivulets trailed over her nudity. Nathan lathered his hands with a loaf of oatmeal-colored soap bearing a faint vanilla scent. Dropping the bar back into its holder, he ran his lathery fingers over her.

A dozen kisses couldn't have sapped her strength as readily. Adriana's chin lifted at his intimate, loving touch. The back of her head bumped the tile, followed by her shoulders and ass sagging into it. Her lack of resistance gave him full license to do what he willed. His fingers glided down the insides of her arms to her smooth pits, moving to her breasts, navel and lower. Thoroughly yet gently, he bathed her slit, marvelously sore from the size of his cock and the frequency with which he'd entered her. With more lather on his hands, he dropped to his knees, soaping up her thighs and calves, tickling her toes.

She cried, "Don't!" He did. Her giggles rose above the pounding spray. She kicked at his fingers to stop him. Back on his feet, he turned her to face the wall, directing her hands to return to the enamel holders. Legs and arms spread, she knew how captive she

looked and Nathan treated her as such. His fingers touched each part of her, cleansing her body for his further use.

With her hair shampooed, he turned her around to face him. They stared at each other through spray and wet strands of hair hanging over their eyes. Adriana's heart tripped then beat too hard. Never had she known a more appealing man. Strong yet gentle, rugged and refined. Acting on instinct, she sank to the tile floor, kneeling in front of him as a slave would to her master or as a woman would to her beloved. Palms around his cock, she slipped his organ between her willing lips and cupped his sac.

Nathan grunted loudly, her favorite sound. He went to the balls of his feet. His palms slapped the tile behind her to catch his tilting body. The movement drove him farther inside her mouth, bringing his damp thatch closer to her nose. She inhaled deeply and shuddered at his male scent, appreciative the spray hadn't yet washed it away. With her tongue coursing down his length, Adriana opened her throat to draw him in a bit more.

His knees wiggled, jouncing his balls in her palm. She curled her fingers around the precious glands to feel their shape and weight. As he'd done with her the previous evening, Adriana prolonged his pleasant agony, not allowing him to come too quickly. Once he climaxed, he'd most likely finish his shower and fall asleep. She'd lose precious moments with him.

By the time he'd spilled himself into her mouth and she washed him as thoroughly as he'd done with her, water puckered her fingertips. Leading him from the bath, she saw night was fully upon them. Some of the clouds had cleared, with stars splashing those patches of sky. Eyes on them, Adriana wished for a peaceful heart content with what it had, not with what it craved. Wrapped in Nathan's arms, snuggled beneath the comforter, she luxuriated in each passing moment, refusing to think about the end.

It came anyway and far too quickly. On the morning of their return, she stood at the master bedroom window, looking down at his neighbor's back yard across the slender channel of water. Her mind recorded images of the snowy scene to keep with her memories of this place.

She glanced at the unmade bed, their warm cocoon for the last hours.

Nathan returned to the room, his naked feet slapping the floor. "Do you hear hot chocolate coming?"

At his question, Adriana's eyes stung with tears. Yesterday, he'd asked her the same thing, surprising her by having the restaurant deliver another jug of the divine treat, along with a large container of whipped cream. Tomorrow, she'd be getting her own morning beverage, along with an anti-depressant.

She turned her face from his and cleared sadness from her voice. "I do." To distract him from noting her foolish sorrow, she pointed at his neighbor's yard. "Look. They must have been pregnant. There are kids now."

Nathan handed her one of the hot mugs and leaned forward for a better look. Two smaller snow people stood on either side of the ones sporting the bikini and the Hawaiian shirt. The newcomers wore matching pink tank tops and plaid skirts. "Twins," he said. "I'll have to send them a box of cigars."

"You know better than that," she scolded gently. "Kids shouldn't smoke."

He bumped her hip with his. His voice held a smile. "You know what I mean."

Adriana nodded and stared at the outside scene, envying the people who lived in the house. They had a friend, lover, spouse waiting for them at the end of each day, someone to come home to.

She had Joe, a dear sweet man who should have dated but didn't, not since her father became ill and died. No doubt, Joe was too involved in taking care of her now to enjoy his own life. Maybe on her return she'd fire him, so he'd have a chance at happiness. She'd set up a severance package and a new pension, making him a rich man. She'd deed the guesthouse to him so he wouldn't have to spend his funds on an overpriced condo. He'd be set for the rest of his days, free to find someone special, someone worthy and engage in a romantic adventure he deserved. One she'd never have.

"You thinking what I am?" Nathan asked.

Adriana doubted it. She wanted to stay here forever with him. Most likely he itched to get on the road to beat the crappy post-holiday traffic and drop her off to continue with the rest of her life. With an impassive expression, she glanced at him. "You wish we were on the Starship Enterprise so you could beam us back to L.A. rather than have to drive?"

His brows arched. "You're a Trekkie?"

"I hate Star Trek worse than sports and non-fat milk."

His brows drooped. "You dislike snow too?"

He'd lost her. "Why?"

"I thought we'd give the twins someone to play with." He jabbed his thumb in the direction of his neighbor's back yard. "That is, if you don't mind helping me build a couple of snow girls." His eyes dipped to her naked breasts and cunt.

Apparently, he intended to use her as his model in creating the "girls" and wasn't ready to leave quite yet. Unsteady with joy, she teased, "You ripped most of my underwear off me last night." She slid her eyes to his and spoke on a silky purr. "All I have left to put on are my teddy and the stuff I wore at the office."

"Not a problem. Clothes are the last thing you'll need."

She forgot her temptress act and stared.

He pretended not to notice.

Her hands clutched the mug a bit tighter despite its heat. "I am not, repeat not, going out there nude."

At her defiance, his eyes narrowed just as they had in her Viking fantasy prior to him punishing and ravishing her. Was that his plan? Would he start a disagreement, turn her over his knee, spank her and fuck her? Did she want that?

Her hands shook so badly with arousal and unease, whipped cream spilled over the lip of her mug. Thankfully, her voice didn't tremble as badly as she stated the obvious and tried to sound firm. "It's freezing out there."

Nathan continued to regard her. At last he said, "Yeah, I know. Come on." He put his mug on a side table, took hers in one hand, her wrist in the other and headed toward the bathroom.

Why? To bend her over the counter and paddle her in front of the mirrors so she could see the act? Would he use the back scrubber instead of his hand to whack her buttocks? The edges of her vision faded as she followed him.

He stopped at a set of double doors just outside the bath. Adriana stared stupidly at her mug as he tried to return it to her.

She took it and gaped at the walk-in closet he opened. Women's winter clothes hung from padded hangers. Her mind worked overtime, seeing his gorgeous female neighbors stripping in here to shower with him. Had they forgotten to take their clothes with them when they left? Were they totally nuts?

He gestured to the right. "The parka and ski pants should be warm enough. There's also snow boots, several turtlenecks, socks and—"

"Whose are these?"

His head swung to hers with the gloom in her voice. "Hayley's." He wore an expression that said she was nuts for thinking they might belong to anyone else.

"She keeps them up here so they're available when she, Roy and Echo use the place."

Adriana blurted, "They have a key?"

"Relax, they don't come up here when I do, unless we're celebrating something."

Her head spun with the idea of all of them in the same room without hurt feelings and betrayals resurfacing. Calm as could be, Nathan went through the closet, selecting a light blue turtleneck, blue socks, blue long underwear and the blue parka and ski pants, which he hung over the crook of her left arm.

She noted how he'd ignored the other shades. "You like the color blue?"

He turned his back to her, mumbled something about her eyes she didn't quite catch and left the room, calling over his shoulder. "Get dressed. I'll be back in a minute."

Adriana dropped the pile of clothes and thought about him commenting on her eyes. Did he like them? Or did he want her to wear a color that didn't clash with them? Stumped, she noticed the clothing at the back of the closet. She fingered the puffy pink parka with a red rhinestone heart on the back. Given its bling and abbreviated size, it must belong to Echo. Smiling, Adriana held up the little girl's ski pants and jeans, each

embellished with glitter or bangles, just as she'd adored as a child. Once more, she understood Nathan's generosity in allowing Hayley and Roy to use his house and to raise a child he'd once believed was his. Without Echo remaining in his life, he couldn't exist, he loved the little girl too much.

He returned in jeans, boots, a gray turtleneck and his parka, looking wonderfully unkempt and carefree with hair he hadn't combed in days. Nor had he shaved.

Dressed for an Arctic blizzard, Adriana still groaned as he pulled her into the side yard. She breathed so hard at the cold burning her face, she couldn't see past her vaporous breath.

"Baby," Nathan taunted. "It's only snow." He scooped a mound in his glove and brought it to her cheek.

She blocked him with her forearm, keeping him from making contact. "Careful with that. I'm a black belt."

"Bullshit." He gobbled a bite of the snow, swallowed and studied her. "Haven't you ever built a snow girl before?"

Her laughter made it difficult to keep jumping up and down in the knee-high drifts while beating her arms to generate some heat. "No. But Joe helped me build a fair representation of Frosty the Snowman when I was eight. He came with me and my father to Aspen."

"You like to ski?"

Nathan's sudden enthusiasm told her to lie. Good sense said she'd only disappoint him once he discovered the truth, possibly on a ski slope this afternoon. "I like to cook more."

"Let's see what else you can do." He backed up. "You have fifteen minutes to build your girl." He peeled back his cuff and pretended to glance at his watch, which was still in the house. "Your time starts *now*."

For the first few seconds she studied his ass as he bent over, packed snow into a messy lump and began rolling it. As he looked over, she squatted to her heels, scooped some of the icy stuff in her gloves and patted it into a small mound.

Still pushing his ever-widening globe across the yard, he panted, "That won't do. Size matters."

She giggled. He continued working, really getting into his make-believe competition, not noticing her activities. By the time he'd hefted his second globe on top of the first, she was ready for anything.

"Okay," he said, smacking his hands on his thighs to rid them of snow. "Let's see how you've —"

His words ended in a puff of air as her first snowball hit him square in the back. He turned just in time for her to slam him in the chest with the next.

Clapping and laughing as if she'd won the latest Survivor competition, she shouted, "That's what else I can do!"

Nathan's expression darkened. His shoulders bunched to his ears and his jaw clenched.

Undaunted, Adriana juggled three snowballs in her palms, something else Joe had taught her besides cooking. "Careful now, I'm armed."

Nathan's first step halted with her snowball hitting his parka's zipper. Damn. She'd been aiming for his tattooed pec. The next got him in the navel.

"Aim any lower," he growled, "and you're going to regret it."

Visions of him hauling her inside and spanking her whizzed across Adriana's mind. Their heavy gasping fogged the air. Behind her, something fell and shattered, most likely an icicle. She opened her palm, allowing the last snowball to fall to the ground.

Nathan's eyes flicked to it. He advanced. Just as quickly, Adriana fell to her knees and threw one, two, three, four snowballs in quick succession. With a true aim, she hit him in his nipples and thighs. Didn't stop him at all. He just kept coming like one of those machines in a Transformers flick.

Panicked, she fell backward, rolled over and clawed through the snow to flee, her heart pounding, her movements sluggish, as though she'd been trying to swim through cold caramel sauce.

Nathan grabbed her right foot. Shrieking, Adriana kicked at him. Her boot came off in his hand thanks to Hayley having wider feet than she did. She plowed through the snow with no real direction in mind. It wasn't as if the neighbors were going to help her. Hell, they probably stood at their windows watching, waiting for Nathan to strip her bare and fuck her out here until she turned blue from the cold.

"No!" she cried. He'd grabbed the edge of the ski pants that came above her ankles, thanks to Hayley being several inches shorter than her. Adriana kicked as hard as she could and finally hit something solid.

Nathan bellowed like a gored bull.

Oh shit. Had she hit him in the balls? Rolling onto her back, Adriana gaped at his broad grin. He'd been pretending pain? Jerk. She gave him the finger and seesawed her legs so he couldn't grab them.

Nathan rolled his eyes and sat back on his heels, away from her flailing feet, waiting until she wore herself out. Didn't take long. Adriana lay panting in the snow, sweating from her exertions, too weary to swear.

Like a lion ready for the kill, Nathan crawled to her side and unfolded his body over hers.

She emptied her lungs in a bone-rattling scream.

"Holy fuck," he barked, "stop that!"

Like hell. On another wail, her mouth hung open, which he promptly filled with his tongue. Adriana wiggled, partly in instinct to keep fighting, mostly in pleasure at the scrape of his bristly chin and cheeks against her skin. He muted her moans until she fell quiet again, her lips bumping his with her faltering breaths.



Lifting his head, Nathan inhaled deeply, his chest and belly pressing into hers. He wrapped his fingers around her wrists to keep her arms from moving and shifted his legs to trap hers. "No more screaming," he growled, "I mean it."

"Or what?" she countered, defiance and arousal heating her blood. Rarely had she felt more alive or eager to tempt. "You'll call the cops? What if I tell them about your neighbor's kinky parties?"

"You mean the ones the officers always attend?"

"You're lying."

"You're keeping quiet from here on out. You're going to do exactly as I say."

Bravado and a desire to have him do his absolute worst got the better of her. "Oh yeah? Or you'll do what exactly?"

He moved faster than Adriana would have guessed and certainly swifter than the snow should have allowed. On his feet, he reached down, grabbed her arms and pulled her to a standing position. She turned to flee. Hauling her back, he slung her over his shoulder, wrapped one arm around her legs and placed his free hand firmly on her ass.

Not to be outdone, she pulled up his parka and slid her gloved hands over and between his firm cheeks to stroke his balls through his jeans' denim. His raspy gasps stopped, followed by a full body shiver that stole her breath. Emboldened by the power she wielded over him, Adriana taunted, "Gonna tie me to your bed now and take pictures with your cell phone so you can send them to your neighbors? Or are you going to tape us in the act and broadcast it via webcam to everyone in this neighborhood?"

He hefted her higher on his shoulder and trudged through the thick snow. "You're nuts."

No, he was. Adriana stared at the back of his place as his steps took them farther from it. They weren't going inside? Good God, they couldn't be going to his neighbor's house, could they? Squirming, she tried to look over her shoulder and determine their destination.

His hand came down hard on her ass several times in punishment. "Quit wiggling or I'll drop you right here."

"You do that. I do not want to go to your neighbor's house, Nathan. I refuse."

His head moved from side to side. "You're nuts."

Why? Just because he had a good time at their weirdo gatherings didn't mean she would. Adriana didn't want to share him with anyone else, and she sure as hell wasn't going to let another man touch her. After this weekend, she wasn't certain she'd be able to date again even if a really nice guy asked her. "Put me down. Now. I mean it."

"Whatever you say."

She gasped. They'd reached the edge of the water. With today's cloud cover the lake appeared murky and black, seemingly bottomless. "No!" She gripped his parka so tightly, she'd haul him with her if he tossed her into the lake.

"No what?" he asked, calmly.

"I won't scream anymore, I swear."

Unimpressed, he stepped closer to the inky mass.

She tried to swallow and could not. Her heart walloped at his remembered promise that she wouldn't know what to expect from moment to moment. She recalled his comment about liking to be reckless. Enough to follow her into the water?

Her goose pimples got goose pimples at the thought. "I'll be good," she promised.

"How good?" he asked. His calm baritone held a hint of wickedness.

Her eyes closed. She trembled in renewed arousal. Her passion for him, her beginning love defeated everything else, even the hopelessness of these minutes together, which she knew wouldn't last. "I'll do anything you say. Whatever you want me to do."

He brought her inside, stripping her in a room she hadn't seen before. A large Jacuzzi dominated the space. Puffs of steam rose from the bubbling water, fogging the edges of the double glass doors, though not enough to obscure her view of the side yard or a neighbor's gaze into here.

Nude, Nathan led her to the wall farthest from the water. Thick white towels hung from two gold circular rings spaced several feet apart. He tossed the rectangular cloths on the gold-leafed stone floor and grabbed her wrists. With her back against the smooth wall, he directed her arms through the rings.

Hands on her breasts, thumbs rubbing her nipples, he said, "Spread your legs."

With them parted and her arms held out and supported by the rings, she became his prisoner, bound by her words and heart to do as he willed.

Nathan sat cross-legged between her feet with one hand on her ass to prevent her from pulling away and the other on the turgid petals between her legs. As he explored her clit with indolent strokes, she gritted her teeth but did not move.

His mouth replaced his hand. His tongue lapped her nub unhurriedly as his fingers slipped between her cheeks. He gained entrance into her anus with his forefinger, using the invasion to imprison her further. Adriana's nostrils widened to allow her more air. Her forearms tightened with her clenching fists. What might have been enough for most men wasn't for him. His other fingers traveled the length of her slit with two dipping into her opening.

Restrained and used, Adriana suffered the sweet torture, punishment for her previous disobedience. Hours seemed to pass as he worked her clit hard yet carefully so she wouldn't come. Sweat shone on her face, throat and chest. Her legs quivered and her shoulders ached before he allowed her climax.

On her final cry, he pulled his fingers from her and pushed to his feet. Her breasts shook with her convulsive breaths. Through slitted lids, Adriana watched him pad to

the other side of the Jacuzzi and sit on the edge, his long legs sinking into the steamy water.

His eyes met hers. "Don't move," he ordered.

She maintained her tawdry position. His eyes owned her, they devoured, stripping her of any privacy or will as he regarded the moisture glistening between her legs, proof of what he'd accomplished, and her hard nipples, evidence she wanted still more. He didn't offer her further relief. Without releasing her from his command, he lay back on the polished stone, arms above his head, eyes closed.

Adriana's gaze fell to his cock and sac displayed so arrogantly. Her heart responded with a too-swift beat, her skin with a tingling sensation that reached the top of her head. Knowing she risked disobeying him and not caring if she did, she pulled her arms through the rings and padded to the edge of the Jacuzzi. Although her feet slapped the tile and the metal rings clacked against the walls, Nathan didn't stir at the sounds. Her lips parted at the gently churning water, its welcomed heat on her calves and lower thighs. She walked through it, stopping between his legs.

His fingers curled slightly, indicating his awareness of her.

She buried her face in his groin, smelling, licking, loving him. With her tongue, she perused the short hairs on his balls, his thick shaft, the shocking smoothness of the crown. She filled herself with him, welcoming his climax, drinking him dry. A fitting close to their weekend.

Their time together had finally run out.

## Chapter Seven

On the drive back, traffic sucked. So did Nathan's mood. He gripped the steering wheel so hard, his knuckles hurt.

Adriana leaned against the passenger side door, cell phone to her ear as she and Steve talked non-stop about Ed, her escort turned pretend kidnapper.

After her second, "He really said that?" Nathan tuned her out, cursing himself for prolonging their stay at the estate. If they'd left this morning, he'd be home now, catching up on the crap he had to finish in preparation for his deposition tomorrow. But no, he'd acted like a kid playing hooky, suggesting they build a couple of snow girls to avoid the real, adult world, which led to their romp in the Jacuzzi room and after that no end to his hunger for her.

It gnawed at him now. So did his memory of their weekend. He shouldn't have brought her to his place. When she'd questioned why he'd chosen only blue clothing for her, he shouldn't have said he loved the color of her eyes. Until they'd met, he hadn't really noticed if a woman had blue, brown, hazel or any other shade.

"No way," she said to Steve, her voice breaking into Nathan's thoughts. "He really did that?"

Flicking his turn signal on, Nathan maneuvered his Rover into the left, faster lane, ignoring the blaring horn of the driver behind him. In his shirt pocket, his cell phone vibrated against his pec, the ring tone turned off because he hadn't wanted it to remind him of returning to civilization, the end of this weekend. Only it was. Shit. What now? The ass behind him had miraculously gotten his number and was calling to bitch about his poor driving? He pulled the phone out, opening it without glancing at the caller's number. "Wynn," he barked.

"Nathan?"

Echo. His pounding heart slowed to a reasonable beat. Unconditional love flooded him, begging for the same in return. Welcomed images flashed in his mind—the adoration in Echo's eyes when she'd been two, her breathy voice as she babbled daddy over and over, her chubby baby arms reaching out to him for a hug. For some reason, he ached for closeness now more than he ever had in the past. Lightening his tone, he murmured, "Hey you, what's up?"

"You gotta talk to my dad."

Nathan's chest tightened at her words, blunt and impatient, befitting a nine-year-old who didn't know it killed him to hear her refer to Roy as her father. Seven years had passed since Nathan learned she wasn't his and the reality stung worst today than it had in a long time. What in the fuck was the matter with him?

Making certain to keep irritation and hurt from his voice, he asked, “No kidding? I thought I did that last week. Isn’t it your turn or your mom’s turn or the neighbor’s turn to talk to him now?”

Her loud exhale of air said she didn’t appreciate his teasing. “He wants to grill Wendy’s parents like they’re terrorists or something before he lets me go to her slumber party!”

Nathan sighed at the volume of her voice, the dramatics and the reason for her call. “And you want me to talk him out of it.”

“Yeah – thanks!”

He changed lanes again, more carefully this time, and cautioned himself to be patient. “Wait a sec. What do I get in return?”

“I don’t know. What do you want?”

The last decade back. A chance to be her father. “Wendy’s number. I’ll call her folks into my office and have one of my staff grill –”

“You can’t do that!”

“Sure I can, sweetie. I’m an attorney. Forcing people into my office and grilling them like they’re terrorists is what I do.”

Her frustrated breaths hissed in his ear. “You’re not taking me seriously. No one is. It’s not fair.”

Few things in life were. He’d loved her and lost her to a better man. He’d just spent an incredible weekend with a woman who continually surprised him, who touched him in a way few had, and it left him so depressed he wanted to get drunk to ward off the coming disappointment and pain. Good stuff never lasted. He’d had a lifetime of experience to prove it. Frowning, he made his voice harder than he intended. “You need to listen to your dad and mom. They love you. They don’t want anything bad happening.”

“It won’t! Wendy’s my best friend.”

Nathan warned himself not to argue with her goofy logic or to scare her with stories about psychos abducting little girls from their friend’s houses. It wasn’t his place. He’d never have the right. “If she’s your best friend then she’ll understand why your dad needs to talk to her parents before you go over there.”

“You’re no help at all.” She hung up on him.

He squeezed his cell phone so tight the plastic creaked. Renewed sorrow compressed his throat, thickening his voice. “You may not care now or ever, but I do love you.” On a defeated sigh, he dropped his phone in his coat pocket and glanced over.

Adriana averted her eyes. The sympathetic look on her face said she’d overheard his conversation. Hers was over, the cell phone in her palm.

She maintained the awkward silence until he headed for the exit to her office. "Wait," she said, her voice edgy. "Do you mind taking me home? I'll have my secretary pick me up in the morning."

Nathan turned off his signal and kept his tone mild despite the delay in getting home to his well-stocked wet bar. "Where do you live?"

She gave him the directions.

Her white, two-story Spanish-style home was lovely though modest by Beverly Hills standards. He swung the Rover onto the circular stone drive, stopping at the intricately carved front door. "Don't forget this." He tapped the jug of hot chocolate he'd bought her before they left for the basin.

She pulled the container onto her lap, along with her purse. "Did I thank you for it?"

He recalled her bruising kiss and stopped himself from smiling. "I have a vague recollection that you did."

Her chuckle sounded nervous and uncomfortable. A pulse in his throat drummed too quickly. He should have offered to walk her to the door but could not. If she invited him inside, he might accept and delay their inevitable and final parting. Ignoring her, he glanced at the numerous palm trees on her grounds, the fronds swaying in the gentle breeze. He willed her from his vehicle.

She didn't move. Nathan knew she was waiting for him to look at her, acknowledge her, speak to her.

He could not. He kept his face turned away.

At last she murmured, "I want to do this again."

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. Tears pricked the corners of his eyes at the passion in her quiet voice, the ache in his heart. He pushed back sentiment and lust, and shook his head. "No you don't."

"Yes I do."

He looked at her finally and made his voice sharp. "You don't know what you're saying, Adriana. You don't know what kind of man I am."

Her expression and tone remained serene as though she knew she'd made the correct decision. "I know enough. I want to do this again. No strings," she added quickly, "just a good time. Whatever you want to do. Surprise me."

He pressed his thumb so hard against the steering wheel he wondered if his knuckle would pop. At the same time, he had an insane urge to laugh...and when he was through to seek comfort in her arms. *Idiot*. She needed a better man than he could ever be.

Gently, she cleared her throat, her nervousness returned. "I know you had a good time this weekend."

"And that's all it was, Adriana."

Hurt passed across her face at his uncaring tone. She pushed it away and shrugged in mock indifference. "And that's what this will be. A good time. What do you have to lose?"

He didn't want to consider the repercussions to his heart or admit them to her, so he lied, "I'm not worried about me."

She arched one brow. "Well, don't worry about me, either. I can take care of myself. What's the big deal, Nathan, don't you think you can satisfy me again?"

He laughed at the absurdity of her words. "Oh shit, don't even go there."

"Then you do. Well, prove it. Consider this a challenge. Do your absolute worst or best, however you want to look at it."

She hadn't a clue what she was asking of him and how hard he found it to say no. Funny thing though, he couldn't utter the word. No strings, she'd promised, just a good time. Maybe he should show her the kind he usually had so the sexual world he inhabited would end it between them before things got too deep for him.

Awaiting his answer, she leaned closer.

The scent of vanilla on her skin reminded him of their time in the shower, his body pressed against hers, seeking closeness he wouldn't ask for, warmth he craved and rarely had. His mind returned to their snowball fight, or rather hers, and how she'd shrieked like a little girl as he'd headed for her, pretending to be pissed. Oddly enough, his memory of how she'd scissored her legs to keep him from grabbing her undid his best intentions to save either of them. He inhaled deeply, the muscles in his chest hurting as if he'd run several miles. "Be ready at nine Thursday night. I'll pick you up here."

She beamed like a kid who'd just won a trip to Disneyland. "To do what?"

Nathan rested his hand on the side of her neck, skimming her jaw with his thumb. An insatiable urge to pull her into his arms and bury his face in the hollow of her neck returned. His body tensed as he fought it. "It'll be a surprise, just as you said." It would be the last time they saw each other. He'd make certain of it.

Her eyes sparkled. She eased his hand from her neck and pressed her lips to his palm in a tender kiss that stalled his heart. Her lips brushed his skin with her whisper, "I can't wait."

She had just exited the car and was about to close the passenger door when he spoke in an impassive voice, contradicting his hammering heart. "Wear a blue cocktail dress, Adriana. I want your hair down. And no underwear. Just your garter belt and stockings."

He drove away without further explanation. Just inside her door, she put the jug of hot chocolate and her purse on a Spanish-style accent table and went to the sweeping wrought-iron staircase, sitting on the third-to-last step.

"Lizzie, is that you?" Joe called out.

She held the Lake Arrowhead magnet to her heart and looked up as he came around the arched doorway. Tall and thin, with gray hair hanging loose to his shoulders, Joe seemed more an aging rock star than a chef. His ratty sneakers, jeans and black-T shirt completed the look.

Adriana took the long serving fork he held out to her. He'd speared two Parmesan-coated meatballs on the prongs, most likely his dinner.

His eyes noted her lack of stockings and messy hair as he joined her on the stairs. "You look...tired. You have a good time at the spa?"

Adriana's mouth paused around one of the meatballs. Her eyes brimmed with tears.

"What's wrong?" He rubbed her back. "What happened?"

She was falling in love with a man who feared its consequences above all else, just as her father had avoided intimacy at any level. Unlike him though, Nathan had the capacity to care and still fought his demons. She'd heard his loneliness as he'd spoken to Echo. She'd seen the unhappiness on his face. She also recalled his playfulness when they'd been in the snow, the passion as he'd mounted her, the tenderness when he'd given her what he believed was a birthday present. Her fingers tightened around the magnet, a gift she cherished more than all those she'd gotten in the past. The serving fork drooped in her hand. "I lied."

Joe kept stroking her back. "About what?"

She squeezed her eyes tight. A tear raced down her cheek. "I want strings."

\* \* \* \* \*

The wait to see Nathan again dragged on, seemingly endless. Every time the phone rang, Adriana feared he'd changed his mind or a work-related issue had come up, forcing him to cancel.

By Thursday afternoon, he hadn't called. A pleasant exhaustion replaced her worry. In a few hours, she'd be back in his arms. With her mind at peace, she leaned against her office window, appreciating the flawless Los Angeles sky. A rare treat, thanks to the Santa Ana winds chasing away the clouds and smog, boosting temperatures and making last weekend's rain an unpleasant memory.

From behind, Steve cleared his throat and joined her at the window. "Nice view for a change." He squinted at the unrestricted sun with the tentativeness of a vampire.

She sighed at the sheer vibrancy of the day and the promise of the coming night. *No underwear*, Nathan had ordered, *just your garter belt and stockings*.

"That time of month?" Steve asked.

Adriana's eyes slid to him.

He explained, "You have four spreadsheets up on your computer. I figured you were pouring over this month's profits. Given the bags beneath your eyes, I'm guessing our bottom line isn't too good."



She had bags beneath her eyes? Crap. Adriana grabbed an industry award off her desk. With the metal cup inches from her nose, she studied her reflection in the unforgiving sunlight.

Steve rocked on his heels. "Big date tonight?"

Not if she didn't get to the salon in time to get rid of her dark circles, then to the shop to pick up the blue cocktail dress she'd ordered. She tossed the award on the sofa and grabbed her purse. "I'll be back tomorrow morning—maybe," she added quickly, not certain what Nathan had in mind. Tonight might turn out to be the beginning of another long weekend for them.

Steve stopped rocking. "Maybe?" Worry rang in his voice.

Adriana glanced at her secretary's work station just outside the door. The older woman stared at her computer screen, apparently absorbed, except she wasn't keying in any data. Could be she was thinking. More likely, she was eavesdropping. Back at Steve's side, Adriana spoke quietly. "Relax. I'm never hiring anyone again."

"Wonderful." His belly jiggled as he resumed rocking on his heels. "So who's the lucky man?"

He didn't trust her choice. She could see him calculating the cost to the company as her next liaison went south. To prove him wrong she said, "Nathan."

Again, his rocking stopped. "Our twenty-year-old intern?"

"We have one?"

"Answer me."

"No, not him, whoever he is. Nathan Wynn."

Steve stared. "Oh my god, tell me you're kidding."

Adriana's smile felt foolish, as though she was the last one in on a painful secret. Finally, she frowned, refusing to listen to whatever Steve might say. Despite his shock and Nathan's admonitions that she didn't know him, Adriana knew she did. "I've never been more serious. Now if you'll excuse me."

He caught her arm, stopping her from leaving and whispered, "Adriana, you don't know what you're getting into. One of my attorney friends went out with Wynn. She was a fucking mess after he dumped her. She cried about him giving her two weeks of the best sex she'd ever had before he moved on to his next conquest who lasted even less time. He's with a different woman practically every other day. The man's a fucking player. He woos women then drops them without a backward glance."

Her heart clenched at the thought of Nathan with so many women, a truth she'd already suspected. Even so, she kept her cool and pulled her arm away. "It's not a crime. He isn't married, engaged, going steady, working for an escort service or trying to marry me for my inheritance. He's free to do whatever he wants. So am I."

Steve's mustache sagged with the melancholy in his eyes. "He'll eat you alive, babe."

He seemed so certain of it, her stomach rolled. And yet, Adriana couldn't reconcile Steve's comments with the look in Nathan's eyes as he'd spoken about his marriage to Hayley and losing Echo, his kindness after she'd told him about her father's cruel measures to keep her at Stanford, his sadness on their way home from his estate. If it had been nothing more than an act, he had Brad Pitt, Johnny Depp and Tom Cruise beat for best performer of the century. "He's a good man, Steve." Desperate to defend and explain, she blurted, "He bought me gallons of hot chocolate and whipped cream and even a magnet for my birthday."

Confusion swept over Steve's features, along with a lot of shock. "You've been seeing him since your birthday? Four whole months?"

"I don't have time to explain. Be happy for me, please." She kissed his cheek and fled the office to get ready for Nathan's arrival tonight.

At precisely nine p.m., he sat in his BMW outside her front door, still unconvinced about what to do. See this night to its logical conclusion or drive off and save them both a boatload of grief?

At 9:02, Adriana hadn't bothered to look out the window to see if he'd arrived. Nathan's lust beat out his fear. He decided to get her.

One jab on the bell produced a series of measured footfalls inside. The door swung open. An older man with long gray hair and an unreadable expression stared back at Nathan.

He made an educated guess. "Joe?"

"That's right, Mr. Wynn." He put out his hand. Upon Nathan's acceptance, Joe squeezed his fingers hard like a worried father who wanted to put the fear of god into his little girl's date. Nathan reciprocated, wanting the man to know what happened between him and Adriana was no one's business except theirs.

Joe ushered him inside.

Nathan's eyes swept her foyer, the dark Spanish furniture, white-washed walls, archways stenciled with flowers, golden brown paver floors. Nice. So why was Joe answering the door? Where in the hell was she?

The older man wasn't telling. He offered Nathan a steaming plate of garlic bread with melted mozzarella on top. "To tide you over until your dinner reservation."

Nathan lifted his hand to decline and glanced at the staircase, hoping to see Adriana, frowning when he did not.

"I heard you enjoyed the spa."

At Joe's comment, Nathan's head swung to him. "Excuse me?"

The older man bit into a slice of garlic bread. Its crust made a faint crackling sound. He licked a stray piece of cheese off his lip and chewed slowly. Nathan's eyes shifted to the archways leading into the halls and back at the stairs, still searching for Adriana. He

inclined his head to the left, trying to hear the clack of her high heels against the pavers or on the hardwood stairs.

"The spa," Joe offered after he swallowed his bite. "I heard you enjoyed it."

Adriana must have given the old guy a story about where she'd been last weekend, rather than admitting she'd hired an escort who hadn't worked out. Nathan decided to play along. "What's not to enjoy with that kind of experience?"

"I wouldn't know, I've never been." His voice dropped several notches, just loud enough for Nathan to hear. "Take care of her tonight, understand?"

Nathan leveled his gaze on the man at his threatening tone.

Joe wasn't impressed or fazed. "You might be a big time attorney, Mr. Wynn, but I've watched over Lizzie since she was a little girl. I've seen guys like you come here before. You hurt her in anyway and you'll pay, I will see to it."

"Joe? Nathan?"

His head jerked to the stairway. His heart caught on a beat and raced, trying to right itself.

She stood on the landing, clouds of dark hair framing her face and flowing over her bare shoulders in silken waves. Her royal blue cocktail dress was strapless with a sweetheart top and a snug fit, causing her breasts to plump, leaving none of her other curves to the imagination. The fabric stopped several inches above her knees and shimmered each time she breathed. Silver threads or beads glittered like thousands of twinkling stars.

Unable to stop himself, Nathan moved to the bottom of the stairway. His attention hungered over her amazing dress, the sleek expanse of her legs, her silver high heel sandals.

She descended the stairs with the grace of a woman who knows her appearance will tear a guy apart. Nathan tried to take a full breath and failed. Unnerved at her effect on him, he nevertheless offered his hand to bring her to his side. Adriana slid her fingers over his and leaned close, delivering a flirtatious fragrance with a hint of vanilla.

Nathan's head spun. He warned himself not to go crazy and bury his face in her hair. Setting Joe off would only delay the moment he and Adriana would be alone. "Ready?" he asked in a far too husky voice.

She kissed his shaved cheek and murmured, "Soon as I get my wrap and purse."

Joe handed her a silver evening bag as glittery as her heels. He tossed her silver wrap to Nathan with a look of warning in his eyes. Once Nathan eased the shawl around her shoulders, she turned to Joe and pecked his wrinkled cheek. "Please don't wait up."

His tone of voice betrayed his love. "Wouldn't think of it." He shot Nathan another toxic look but was kind enough to close the door on their exit, giving them some measure of privacy.

At his BMW, Adriana lifted her face to the starry sky. Nathan eyes remained on her. Even in the dark, she fucking glowed with stunning sensuality, stealing the last of his resolve and good sense.

"Did Joe grill you in there?" she asked.

Nathan cleared his throat so his voice would work. "Not all that much."

Effortlessly, as though they'd been lovers for years, she leaned into him, the top of her head against his chin, the rest of her sweet softness and heat molded to his length. "I'm sorry. He means well. Don't hate him."

Nathan eyes closed on her request. He didn't hate the man. He respected him. Joe behaved exactly as he would if Echo had been grown and a man like him came to pick her up for a date. Father figures knew when a guy was no good and acted accordingly. With great effort of will, Nathan eased her from him and opened the passenger door. "Do you mind if we change our plans for tonight?"

A look of panic swept across her face. "Why?"

He couldn't show her how he'd lived since deciding nothing much mattered except having a good time. She deserved better. After a nice dinner at an upscale restaurant, he'd let her down easily and hope to god she didn't notice how deeply he'd already fallen for her and how bad it would be for both of them. "You wouldn't like what I had in mind."

"How do you know?"

He shook his head. "It's too ..." He couldn't finish.

She did. "Kinky?"

"For lack of a better word, yes. We'll have dinner at Melisse. I'll call now and wrangle us a table. Get in."

"No. I don't want dinner." Resting her hand on his chest, she slid her fingers past his suit jacket and tie to touch his tattooed pec. It jumped too readily. She murmured, "I want to know about you. Everything. Including where you planned to take me tonight."

He frowned. "You won't like it there, Adriana."

"Will you be with me? Can I count on you to keep me safe?"

"Hell, yes. But that's not the point."

"Of course it is." She cupped his face in her free hand, providing tenderness and affection he hadn't known in too long. "Show me something wild, Nathan. Make this a night I'll never forget."

He sighed helplessly. "You're fucking nuts, you know that?"

"I'm being honest. Show me."

"It's a gentleman's club, Adriana. Anything goes, and I do mean anything."

Her passion didn't abate. "Am I overdressed?"

Nathan laughed, wanting to give her a bear hug, aching to be as guileless as she, knowing it could only lead to remorse for both of them. "You're beautiful, but disobedient. You didn't wear stockings."

"Couldn't with my sandals. But I did wear something underneath my dress I know you'll like."

She was killing him.

"Let's go, Nathan. It's too late to turn back now."

The tenor of her voice, her words and expression made a persuasive argument. She wanted to know about him and didn't fear whatever he'd show her. He wished to god he deserved her confidence. Because he did not, he'd have to convince her how misplaced it was. His explanation would never do. She'd have to see it for herself. "Fine." He gestured her into the passenger seat. "I'll take you to Zanes."

The name had no meaning to Adriana and she didn't ask for a description of the establishment or what went on there. "Anything goes" pretty much summed it up. With another man, she would have been terrified. With Nathan, she settled into a state of paralyzing expectation mingled with building bliss. The kind she'd experienced as a kid when her mare Penny attempted a particularly high jump and succeeded without killing either of them. Her love for the animal gave her the confidence to hope for the best and to see things through.

Nathan drove slowly and said little, apparently not sharing her mood. They left the Los Angeles basin and drove up the coast, away from too much civilization. In Malibu, he pulled up to a gated estate overlooking the Pacific. As with many mansions in the area, the public couldn't see the home from the street. Nathan was well down the asphalt drive before Adriana caught sight of their destination.

Her heart made a weird twist in her chest. She'd been wrong to think Nathan's Lake Arrowhead estate was as formidable as the chateau where O began her sexual journey. This place held the distinction. Gothic in appearance and constructed of what looked to be black granite, the three-story structure called to everything wanton in a human's soul.

Nathan eased to a stop well short of the valet, a young woman with blonde hair hanging to her waist. Her breathtaking features made her an aspiring model, actress or a future trophy wife. She wore tight black pants, a low cut white blouse and spike heels. Adriana pulled her gaze away from the girl's perfection and caught a glimpse of the rolling sea sparkling beneath the moon. Did Zanes' patrons make love on the beach? She suspected they did not, considering the activity and locale too tame.

Nathan shifted in his seat. "Is your nickname Lizzie?"

Surprised at his question, she looked over. "Yeah—did Joe call me that when he grilled you?"

He nodded. "Did you tell him we met at a spa?"

"No. He knows you negotiated Greco's union contract. Why do you ask?"

"No reason." He pulled up to the valet.

She opened the passenger door first. Adriana shrugged out of her wrap, leaving it on the seat. To help her from the vehicle, the valet offered her hand. It was velvety soft, her manner so seductive heat rose to Adriana's chest and cheeks, warming her despite the chilly night. The stiff breeze delivered the young woman's fragrance—magnolias and ripe youth. "Ma'am," she murmured. Not lingering for a response, she went to Nathan's door.

There, the girl offered him a feline smile and barely contained excitement. "Nice to see you again, Mr. Wynn."

"Deidre."

She kissed Nathan on his mouth, driving her fingers through his wind-tousled hair. His hand went to her ass, his long fingers cupping and squeezing her right cheek as they necked freely.

Adriana's heart dropped.

*You won't like it there,* he'd warned.

At her sudden dizziness, Adriana locked her knees, unable to look away, watching the scene helplessly.

Too many seconds passed before Nathan finished the kiss. The valet suckled his neck one last time then got into his car. Looking over, he held out his hand to Adriana, a wordless command for her to join him. She met his eyes. They were absent of passion, unlike the times he'd kissed her. Instead, his gaze held renewed counsel for her to call this off.

No way. She would prove he belonged to her. No matter how many other women were inside, he would see and want only her.

With an accelerating pulse, she joined him and placed her hand in his. "Let's go inside."

## Chapter Eight

The smell of cigars, aged liquor and female perfume permeated the interior. Smoky jazz played. Sounds of muted trumpets, strings and drums summoned images of moist flesh and sex.

Beyond the dark-paneled foyer, they entered an opulent yet masculine room containing burnished leather sofas and wing chairs decorated with brass studs. Beneath them, Persian rugs boasted intricate designs in deep golds and blood reds. Small table lamps provided an intimate glow to the surroundings and a sense of privacy. An illusion, Adriana knew. Uninterrupted mirrors made up the walls and ceiling so no kiss or caress would go unnoticed by the observers.

Several men in business suits engaged in a discussion near one of the sofas where a man and his date sat, both young and stunningly attractive even by Hollywood standards. The couple exchanged whispered words as their hands roamed each other's sex. An easy matter. The hem of the woman's black dress rested on her belly. Her crotchless panties provided the man quick access to her cunt. Not to be denied what she wanted, she'd released her date's cock from the confines of his garments. Male flesh rose thick and hard from his opened fly, the skin darker than her pale fingers stroking it.

With their drinks in one hand and their cigars in the other, the businessmen continued their discussion while watching the display indifferently as though they'd seen it all and more. A female server approached. Her short red hair swung past her ears with each of her steps. Adriana stared. Other than her black high heels, the young woman was fully nude, pubes shaved, which left her vulva exposed and vulnerable.

The man on the sofa reached out with his free hand, his fingers making contact with the server's upper thigh. She stopped and bent at the waist, presumably to hear his order above the music and conversation of the businessmen. Her naked ass faced them, the angle of her body giving each a clear view of her anus and cunt. The man nearest her interrupted his companion. Closing the distance between himself and the server, he stroked her left buttock. Casually, she looked over, her raised forefinger indicating she'd be with him as soon as she finished with the young man and his date.

"Seen enough?" Nathan asked.

Before Adriana could think to answer, the young woman on the sofa met her eyes. The girl's pouty lips curled up in a smile one might give a new member of an exclusive club. With the server moving on to the businessmen, the young woman's date bent over, his mouth between her legs. Lids fluttering, she reclined her head on the back of the sofa and exhaled slowly.

Faced with the surreal scene, Adriana watched, aware of her pounding heart and other sounds.

Female laughter drifted down one of the darkened halls reflected in the mirrors. Excited male murmurs followed. Pulled from the show in front of her, Adriana turned, unable to determine which direction the voices had come from or what might be beyond the other walls. Her stark curiosity reminded her of when she'd been thirteen and one of her friends brought an erotic romance to school, which they read in the girl's lavatory. She met Nathan's gaze. "Did you plan to share me tonight?"

Immediate fury filled his eyes. Wrapping his arm around her waist, he held her tightly, possessively, answering in a low voice only she could hear. "Fuck no."

Smug at his reaction—one she'd predicted—she spoke firmly and with the power a woman has when she begins to own a man's heart. "Good. Because I don't intend to share you either, with Deidre or any other woman."

Surprise and a bit of disquiet flickered in his eyes.

Content in her newfound power, she asked, "What's down the halls?"

He released her and stepped back. "Private rooms."

"For?"

"More than you can possibly imagine."

Her pulse jumped. Images of O's travails and her own Viking fantasies of him punishing and ravishing her whisked through Adriana's mind. "And upstairs?"

"Rooms with more privacy than the ones down here."

She wasn't certain what he meant. Just as she got ready to ask, two of the businessmen joined them.

"Nathan." The younger of the men clamped Nathan on his shoulder as though they were old friends or met often at this place. His unruly brown hair and crooked grin gave him a boyish appearance that didn't jibe with the hunger in his absorbed gaze. "And you are?" he asked Adriana.

"Lizzie," Nathan offered, adding nothing else.

The other man captured her hand. His fleshy thumb stroked the back of it as he stared at the swells of her breasts. "Didn't you used to work here?"

"Mr. Wynn, welcome back," a lovely dark-haired server said, saving Adriana or Nathan from having to answer the man. Like the red-headed girl, this young woman had shaved genitals while sporting diamond-and-silver rings in her nipples. Sidling up to Nathan, she leaned so close her bejeweled right nub pressed into his jacket's sleeve. "What would you like from the bar?"

Nathan's eyes slid to Adriana. Unlike his performance with the valet, this time he kept his hands off the young woman. Reaching inside his jacket pocket, he pulled out his cell phone and stepped away as he glanced at the display, making the call seem important or private. The unobtrusive movement put distance between him and the



server, just as Adriana wanted. Only he and she could possibly be aware that his phone hadn't vibrated, no one had called.

As though Adriana's power over him didn't sit too well, a look of renewed dominance replaced Nathan's neutral expression. He made a show of turning off his phone and returned it to his pocket. In a firm voice, he asked her, "What's your pleasure?"

Him. Commanding yet vulnerable, just as he was now. Wanting to keep her desires secret from the others, she said, "A glass of white wine."

"Bring the lady your best," he instructed the server. "I'll have a Chivas straight."

She nodded but didn't leave. Her head lolled to the side as another man, one Adriana hadn't seen previously, slipped his hand between her legs, his fingers stroking her naked cunt. Lips parted on a wanton sigh, she turned her pretty face to his. The man's dark good looks made him a model, actor or gigolo. To the side stood his date, whose hand he still held. Her free hand crept down the chest of the businessman with the unruly brown hair, her fingers heading for his groin.

Slipping his arm around Adriana's waist, Nathan turned her away from the scene and spoke over his shoulder to the server. "We'll have our drinks in number five."

Adriana glanced behind herself. The girl inclined her head at Nathan's request just prior to the dark-haired man covering her mouth in a brutal kiss. Brows lifted, Adriana looked at Nathan. "What's number five?"

"Our room." Taking her hand, he led her toward the far left, an area beyond the mirrors' reflections. Expensive rugs muffled their footfalls, allowing her to catch the sound of male voices, different than those she'd heard earlier. Nathan turned a corner. She followed, reaching the edge of an unusually wide hallway with patches of murky lighting, the kind from a screen in a darkened theater rather than from a lamp. Adriana's steps slowed. His stopped, as though he wanted to give her a moment to absorb what lay ahead.

Several feet down and on the left side, men in pricey suits sat in leather wing chairs separated by cherry wood tables. These held drinks and ashtrays for whatever the men smoked, legal or otherwise. In the dim splashes of light, an acrid, bluish haze hung over them. None bothered to glance at her or Nathan. Their gazes remained on the opposite wall, obscured from her by a wide, strategically placed column. She caught snatches of their comments with more than one saying the numbers three and one. The others responded with murmurs of approval.

"Worth my trip tonight," the man closest to her and Nathan offered in a louder voice than the others. Given the lack of adequate illumination, the planes of his face were in muted relief, a mixture of gray and black shadows, enhancing his youth. He looked to be in his early thirties. His confident demeanor belonged to a corporate executive or trust-fund brat.

Nathan moved forward, leading her down the hall toward the column where he stopped. A female moaned.

Startled at the mixture of agony and ecstasy in the voice, Adriana glanced past the barrier, finally seeing the series of glass doors and windows on the right. Private rooms, Nathan had said, for more than she could possibly imagine.

Her eyes widened then darted to the room nearest her, the much-praised number one. In it, she saw the source of the odd lighting, appearing at periodic intervals throughout the hall. The room's back wall glowed with a pearly, unearthly light one might experience in a hallucination or religious experience. Its radiance silhouetted the three figures inside, obscuring specific features and little else. The female knelt at the edge of the circular bed, her mouth seeking the cock of the man who stood with his knees pressed against the mattress. Her shoulder length hair swung forward hiding the curve of her jaw as she took his sex into her mouth. From behind, the second man positioned himself at her ass. Lifting his cock in his hand, stroking it quickly to harden it for penetration, he mounted her, driving inside with one assured thrust.

The woman's head lifted from the second man's shaft, abandoning it. She cried out at her lover's carnal assault, his vigorous pumps. Her lusty voice was the one Adriana just heard. Its clarity indicated the establishment had wired the rooms to amplify sound so the spectators could hear everything within.

Her lover's thrusts slowed. On a pant, he ordered, "Suck him." Defiant, she shook her head. He raised his hand. His palm hit the left side of her buttocks with a sharp crack. She whimpered and rocked into him, her movements saying she wanted more. He punished her well. Her powerful cries filled the hall.

Adriana's legs went doughy at reality melding with her fantasies. She leaned into Nathan, uncertain she could support her own weight.

Tamed, the woman in number one took the other man's cock into her mouth. As she sucked him with a gentle rocking motion, her lover resumed, driving his shaft mercilessly into her body.

The sounds coming from the men in the wing chairs told Adriana what they were doing to themselves as they watched this show and the others down the hall.

Mouth to her ear, Nathan whispered, "Now are you ready to leave?"

Their cheeks brushed as she turned her face to his. Their lips nearly touched. She smelled mint toothpaste on his breath and the scent of aftershave or cologne on his skin, the masculine, sun-baked fragrance reminiscent of a morning in Greece. Her fingers touched the knot on his silk tie, advancing to his throat. His Adam's apple bobbed with his quick swallow. A gush of moisture dampened her cunt. "No."

He straightened.

She met his stare. "Do your worst."

Cupping her face in his hand, he brought his mouth back to her ear and whispered, "Don't you understand, whatever you and I do in our room there will be men in the hall watching."

"Like your neighbors did in Lake Arrowhead?"

He swore and whispered again, "Why are you doing this?"

She trusted him not to harm her. She loved him so much there was nothing she found offensive about their sexual desires, as long as they touched no one except each other. At his estate, the thought of someone watching had increased her arousal. Here, there would be no escape from prying eyes. The idea excited her as nothing else had, while the lighting gave her some measure of privacy and protection. "Why are you fighting it?"

"Someone has to. You're not the kind of woman who comes to a place like this."

Nor was he the type of man who needed this sort of impersonal indulgence, not anymore. He just wouldn't admit it to himself. Nathan longed for an emotional connection as much as she did. She saw the craving in his beautiful eyes. "You don't know what kind of a woman I am."

His frown said he didn't appreciate the way she'd twisted his prior words and thrown them back at him. "Fine." His fingers tightened around hers. "There's no turning back now, Adriana."

Not for a lifetime. She'd fight for him anyway she could.

He opened a door to the left, one previously unnoticed by her, which revealed a paneled, brightly lit hall.

Inside, she peered ahead, seeing they were the only ones in here. "What is this? I thought we were going to our room."

"We're going the back way so we don't pass in front of the men in the hall, obstructing their views of the rooms." He looked over his shoulder at her. "Just as the new arrivals won't block anyone's view of what goes on inside ours."

"Have you used number five before, Nathan?"

His shoulders slumped slightly. Not willing to answer, he led her to an adjacent hall where they turned to the right. A few feet down, they made another right, entering the next hall where she saw several doors. They stopped at the fifth one. He looked at her.

In his eyes, Adriana saw passion, fear, hope for something lasting and disbelief it would endure. Faith in what they meant to each other and where their journey would lead made her bold. She slid her hand down his fly. Instantly, his cock hardened beneath her fingertips.

He clenched his jaw in an attempt to smother his pleased growl. Wickedly, she encouraged him to be uncivilized, her fingers sliding down and stroking his balls.

On a new swear, he clamped his hand around her wrist, opened the door and pulled her inside the oddly lit room. Astonished at the mirrored walls and ceiling, she swung her head to the left and the right, finally tilting it upward. She saw their reflections from every possible angle. In the first hall, what she'd thought were glass windows and doors were actually two-way mirrors. She'd been so absorbed with the threesome in room one, she hadn't noticed their mirrored walls or guessed the voyeurs

could witness what happened in here, while she and Nathan could only guess who looked inside.

Her eyes darted to the red-silk circular bed dominating the space. Beyond the front mirror, a man cleared his throat. Adriana's head snapped up. She saw the look of surprise on her face at how close he sounded. Had he left his wing chair and moved nearer to the glass? Did the men switch seats so they could catch the action in every room? Did the rules allow them to do that? Were there any rules? Behind her, the door closed with a sharp click.

She glanced at Nathan's reflection, seeing him loosening and unknotting his tie. The end of the maroon silk jerked as he yanked it through his collar, reminding her of their first night at his estate minutes after they'd arrived. Arousal pulsed in her pussy. Her nipples ached.

Nathan tossed his tie on their bed. "Get naked. Now."

Unrestrained hunger filled his voice, its bluntness tempered with desire he reserved for her alone. A surge of heat relaxed her body, preparing her for whatever he planned – however he wanted to take her.

Aware of the men in the hall, yet focused on Nathan, Adriana faced him. She swept her hair over her right shoulder, pleased his eyes followed the ends spilling over her breast. To tempt and taunt him, she moved slowly as she lowered her dress's side zip.

His features tightened with impatience. Free of his jacket, he dropped it on the floor. His fingers worked feverishly at his shirt collar, releasing the button.

She opened the zipper to just above her waist. The top of her dress folded over, falling away from her left breast. Her nipple puckered at the loss of clothing and the genuine lust in Nathan's eyes. He pulled his shirt out of his pants, tugging so hard on the buttons to free them that one popped off and landed with a tiny tap near her high-heel sandal.

Her toes splayed at his impassioned response. She pulled the zipper lower, which allowed her dress to sag past her right breast. Consumed with her partial nudity, Nathan ripped his cufflinks from his sleeves and tossed them aside. Their fast, uneven clinks copied the fitful beats of her heart. Naked to the waist, he unbuckled his belt.

Adriana's mouth went dry. Torn between staring at his fly or his tattoo, she managed to ogle both as she finished unzipping her dress. The shimmery satin whispered past her waist, hips, and thighs, sliding to her feet. Nathan's fingers paused on his fly. The bulge behind it grew impressively as he stared at what she wore beneath her dress. A royal blue waist cincher, worn tighter than the one he'd laced her into at his estate. Like the first model, this one dipped to her cunt in front, while leaving her ass fully exposed, ready for his use.

"Can you breathe?" he asked. The huskiness of his voice said he found it difficult to pull in enough air.

Adriana purred, "I like it this way." Although she'd used her softest voice, she wondered if the men in the hall could still hear her words. Guessing they could, she

decided it didn't matter and resumed her normal tone, speaking from her heart. "It makes me feel captive, unable to escape your hands and cock."

His eyes dipped to the delicate curls between her legs.

Two sharp raps on their door caused both of them to look up. Adriana's heart lurched then beat wildly. Who in the hell could that be? One of the men from the hall? She reached for her dress, eager to put it back on should the guy storm in here. Surely, anyone coming inside was against the rules. Certainly, Nathan would slug anyone who tried to touch her.

"Don't move," he said in a voice tight with excitement. Swallowing hard, Adriana released her dress. He swung the door open. The dark-haired server smiled suggestively, her eyes taking in his tattoo. "Your drinks, Mr. Wynn." She slipped past him to put the tray on a side table, her youthful breasts bouncing with each step, the diamonds in her nipple rings winking in the light. With a graceful pivot, she turned to him, arms behind her back, breasts and shaved cunt fully displayed. "Will you need me for anything else, Mr. Wynn?"

Such as? Adriana's eyes narrowed at the thought of the girl joining her and Nathan for a threesome.

Her indignation wasn't lost on Nathan. He regarded her with an unreadable expression and answered the server. "That will be all, Vanessa."

Her smile didn't falter. She glanced at Adriana, her eyes moving up and down her nudity in an appraising manner one might give a rival. "I love your dress, ma'am."

Adriana might have appreciated the compliment if the girl hadn't chosen her dress as the only thing to admire, while attaching "'ma'am'" to her praise. Vanessa was surely no more than twenty-two and probably considered thirty-year-old women one breath away from senior citizenship. "Thank you. No need for you to return."

Unfazed, the girl looked at Nathan. Something resembling amusement danced in his eyes, as though he enjoyed the idea of refereeing a dispute between two women. "We won't need you again tonight, Vanessa."

Her fingers slithered down his tattooed pec and abs. "As you wish, Mr. Wynn." With a light step and bouncing buttocks, she left the room.

Adriana didn't wait for the door to click shut before she spoke. "If that thing has a lock, use it."

He chuckled. "Don't worry, we don't need one for it or the door behind you."

Because the men in the hall wouldn't dare enter here without an invitation, or because Nathan had been in this room so many times in the past he knew what to expect? Although Adriana couldn't escape the reality of his past, it didn't pain her. In his eyes, she saw their future. "Get naked, Nathan."

His brows lifted. To prove he remained in charge, he ignored her command and his building need in favor of getting their drinks. He finished his in one gulp. She sipped hers until his hand went between her legs, his thumb seeking her erect clit. As he

rubbed the small rise, her mouth fell open. Wine dribbled over her bottom lip, slipping to her chin. He caught the drop on his tongue. His breath smelled of scotch. Head lowered, his lips circled her right nipple. Adriana's head fell back. The side of her body slumped into his.

In the hall, someone coughed, reminding her of the audience just beyond the two-way mirror. Low murmurs followed. Were the men commenting on her body and Nathan's attention to her breast? Or were they complaining, impatient to see him mount her?

Nathan's hand slid from her cunt to her buttocks. His fingers left a trail of female moisture across her cheeks. "Finish your wine." With his newest order, he put his glass on the table and sat on the bed, removing his shoes and tossing them to the right. They came to a noisy rest near the door.

Obediently, Adriana drained her glass. Warmed further by the drink, she stepped out of her dress.

"Leave the heels on." He rolled his socks into a ball and threw them at his shoes.

Adriana placed her glass next to his on the table and looked over her shoulder. "What about the cincher?"

He studied her bare ass, seemingly oblivious to anything except her flesh—how it would accommodate and pleasure him. "It stays." He unzipped his fly, pushing his pants and boxers to his knees. His rigid cock jumped out of its prison, its deep color signifying his inability to wait much longer for her sheath's tightness and warmth. Kicking the garments free of his legs, he remained seated on the bed and looked at her. "Come here." He picked up his tie.

Adriana stared at the ends swinging past his hairy calves. Fevered and wanting, she went to him, each step reminding her of how he and those in the hall watched. With her knees touching his, she awaited his will.

"Turn around and put your hands behind your back."

The mirror reflected the tension and scaling interest in her eyes. With her fingers dangling over her buttocks, she'd unknowingly pulled her shoulders back. Her breasts jutted out. In her current pose, Adriana knew the men in the wing chairs saw the curve of her breasts, the points of her nipples, the downy contours of her bush.

The ends of Nathan's tie flicked the backs of her legs. Bound and helpless to resist whatever he decided, she followed his lead as he turned her to face him and the bed. With his knees, he spread her legs, planting his feet inside hers to make certain she kept herself open to his gaze and touch. He didn't make her wait, latching his mouth onto her nipple as his right hand returned to her cunt. He wrapped the ends of the tie around his left palm, making certain she couldn't move her hands. Satisfied, his fingers probed her anus. Her most carnal openings belonged to him now.

Adriana's chin lifted to the ceiling on a salacious moan, a sound similar to the woman in room one. Stripped of privacy and freedom, she regarded herself in the

mirror, her eyes slitted with pleasure, the flush in her cheeks. The men in the hall murmured indistinctly, their exact words unknown.

What they said didn't matter. Nathan's uninhibited grunts captivated, transporting her to a new fantasy where he took her in full view of his Viking clan and her village. In front of a fire, he mounted her, driving his cock deep inside her cunt, licking her nipples, muffling her cries with his tongue. The villagers said nothing. Many of the women looked away, knowing they would be next, their cheeks rosy with the thought, their eyes glistening with excitement they dared not voice. His companions weren't as reserved. Man after man raised their mugs in a toast to the power Nathan had over her. They offered lewd comments about what he should do next to tame her will and make her his, body and soul.

His fingers on her clit were enough to suppress any notion of revolt both in her fantasy and in this room. Jaw clenched against the tension building between her legs, Adriana struggled not to reveal how close she was to climax. Knowing Nathan, he'd make her wait. He'd insist she beg for more.

His mouth deserted her left nipple in favor of her right. Wonderfully sensitive, her bud peaked beneath his laving tongue. Nerve endings in her skin sent tingling waves down her arms. Slick juices rushed from her sheath, bathing his fingertips. He used her moisture to lubricate her clit, his strokes faster now. Keeping pace, his other fingers explored her anus's tight entrance. Wobbly from too many sensations coming at her from her every direction, she sank her teeth into her lower lip. The pain went unnoticed as Nathan's thumb rubbed hard, pushing her past any control.

A succession of coarse cries broke free of Adriana's throat, the orgasm so sumptuous and deep she shuddered in its wake, unable to swallow or pull in sufficient air.

Averse to giving her even a moment's rest, Nathan untied her wrists and brought her down to the bed. On her side, knees drawn to her chest, she sagged against the cool silk, her jerking breaths causing the fabric to flutter. Displeased with her position, he rolled her to her other side so she faced the two-way mirror. And then he directed Adriana to her elbows and knees, legs spread, ass high, her body posed to present her sex, making it available to him.

The three pinpoints of light behind the two-way mirror enhanced the debauchery of the act. The golden circles belonged to the men's cigars, the tips glowing as their lips pulled on the tobacco and their lungs filled with its smoke. The proximity of the lights and their height told Adriana the men had left their chairs and were now standing close to the glass for a better view of what went on in here.

Nathan ran his hands down the insides of her thighs. She grunted in pleasure. He pushed her legs farther apart and stepped close, his hot, turgid cock settling between her vaginal lips. Adriana's fingers fisted. Her eyes closed. She awaited his welcomed invasion.

Eager and obsessed to a degree he'd rarely been, Nathan entered Adriana. His heart beat violently, making the room spin. His head fell forward at his dizziness and at her tight, hot sheath swallowing his shaft slick with her juices. He penetrated her depths so effortlessly, he almost believed some celestial being had created her body just for him and his for her.

Almost. This was merely about sex and having a good time. Something he needed to remember.

Adriana tightened her inner walls around him, encouraging him to forget, to come home. Without thinking, he bent down and kissed her spine gently.

She whispered, "Thank you."

Nathan clenched his jaw to stop himself from answering or making more of this than it warranted. With his hands on the flare of her hips, he straightened and eased out of her until only his cock's crown remained inside, stretching her opening, the pressure a reminder of her duty to harbor his sex, to give him whatever he wanted.

Her ass lifted a bit more, the new angle assuring him she understood and would obey.

He swallowed at her willingness, in here of all places. She didn't care who watched, the voyeurism added to her excitement while her sole focus remained on him. Making him happy, giving him as much as she could of herself. He didn't deserve it.

*Have you used number five before?* she'd asked.

He'd brought dozens of women here. They'd engaged in acts with him Adriana would have found shocking and would never agree to. *I don't intend to share you*, she'd warned.

With a jerk of his hips, he entered her fully again. The snugness of her passage stole the remainder of his breath and scattered his troubled thoughts. Tonight, she belonged to him. He'd deal with tomorrow when it came.

He increased the pace of his thrusts. His balls smacked her ass with light tapping sounds, drowning out everything else. What lay beyond their room ceased to exist for Nathan. Only her sweet, precious body and her desire for him remained, along with his promise to show her something wild. To make this a night she'd never forget.



## Chapter Nine

They drove up to Adriana's front door shortly before dawn. L.A.'s pinkish horizon silhouetted the scores of palm trees in her back yard. The backlighting reminded her of room number five where they began last night's journey but certainly didn't end it. How the hours had sped by. Her heart couldn't decide whether to quicken in disappointment or slow down with exhaustion, which left her restless and weak. Although she would have liked to invite Nathan inside for one of Joe's monstrous breakfasts, she knew he'd decline.

They'd had supper only a few hours earlier at Zanes, eating their lobster and filets in an area set up like a nightclub, with white linens, fine silverware, fragrant rose centerpieces and flickering candlelight on the tables. A romantic atmosphere...and a sensual one. On stage, a group of dancers performed a modern ballet, their lithe bodies nude—the women shaved just like the servers, the men in their natural state, their body hair adding to their masculinity. Beautifully sculpted arms and legs moved in time to the lush music and to the dancers' inner urges. Adriana noted how two of the group touched each other a bit too much, too lingeringly. Each time their eyes met, their gazes smoldered with unashamed passion, telling each other and the world they'd fallen in love. Unable to pull her attention from them, Adriana forgot about her food. When the dance ended, she glanced at Nathan. His gaze was already on her, his expression unreadable, as it had been since they showered, dressed and left room five to sit down to their meal.

After a dessert of molten chocolate lava cake, he acquiesced to her request to see what other treats Zanes offered, her way of delaying their departure. The establishment allowed for every sexual taste. Whether it was the voyeurism she and Nathan engaged in or fetishes, group sex, bondage and submission and finally punishment—which Adriana now realized she preferred in her fantasies. At the end of the tour, he brought her to the upstairs rooms, more private than the others. There, in number six, where no one else could see, they made love with a level of intimacy that excited Adriana more than anything she'd witnessed tonight.

And now they were in her driveway about to say goodbye. She recalled the last time this happened and her request to see him again. It wasn't something she planned to repeat. Her days of asking were over. With her purse in one hand and her shawl in the other, she turned to him.

Nathan's gaze lifted from her legs to her eyes. The set of his jaw had the cold look of finality.

Adriana's heart stumbled on a beat but she refused to let his expression stop her. She saw the yearning in his velvety eyes, a desire he still refused to admit, though he

would. "I had a wonderful time," she said, making her voice light to hide her nervousness. "Thank you."

He nodded.

"No need for you to get out. I can see myself inside." She popped open the passenger side door, exited the vehicle and bent at the waist. "I know you have a long day ahead of you. So do I. I'll call you tonight. 'Til then, Nathan."

Adriana closed the door and didn't look back. She wasn't about to give him a chance to argue her down, to tell her they wouldn't be seeing each other again because she didn't know what kind of a man he was. Now she did and it hadn't scared her away. He'd used Zanes to build a wall around his heart, one she knew was crumbling.

Inside her foyer, she dropped her things on the table and went to the front window. On her knees, fingers pressed to the glass, she watched him.

Nathan's profile was to her, his fingers gripping the steering wheel. He looked as if he didn't know what to do, where to go, how to ease his pain. Minutes passed. Adriana willed him to surrender to tenderness and seek comfort inside her house and arms.

Frowning, he put the car into gear and pulled away.

Sometime later, she felt her arm being shaken. Opening her eyes, she saw Joe. Worry deepened his wrinkles, no doubt at having found her asleep on the pavers beneath the window. "Lizzie, are you all right?" he asked.

She realized how she must look and tried to sound casual as though she spent most nights on the foyer's floor. "Just a little stiff." She offered nothing more, except a reassuring smile and her hand so he could help her to her feet.

His expression noted her groan as she slumped sideways onto the high back Spanish chair, one arm hugging the distressed leather as she would Nathan when she saw him again. And by god, she would. Day after day, night after night, for a lifetime.

Joe cleared his throat. "Would you like me to help you upstairs?"

"I'll be fine." She rubbed her cheek against the leather, liking its masculine feel and scent. "In a few minutes, I'll make it up there myself and get ready for work."

"In your condition?"

"I'm just a little tired."

He blew out a sigh, a sure sign he wanted to argue with her, though he did not. "Do you want something to perk you up?"

Nathan's voice and touch. Nothing could substitute for what her heart craved, the feeling of comfort he provided, the excitement, the sense she belonged to him and her bone-deep loneliness was almost at an end.

"Lizzie?"

"Sorry. I was thinking about work. I'll have some coffee and scrambled eggs if you don't mind."

"You know I don't." He backed up toward the kitchen, pausing at the arched doorway. "Did you have a good time last night?"

She snuggled closer to the chair. "Oh yeah."

The sound Joe made said he wasn't certain she knew what a good time was. "Will he be coming to get you again, tonight? Should I make appetizers so you two have something to eat before leaving?"

"No. Take the night off." She drew her legs up and folded them behind herself on the chair's seat. "Take the week off if you want. You should date. Why don't you?"

He crossed his arms over his chest and frowned. "Are you drunk?"

"Because I'm being nice?"

"More like nosy."

"You don't mean that."

"The hell I don't."

She responded quickly, "I worry about you, Joe. You haven't gone out with anyone since Dad got sick. You really liked Terese. What happened to her? I should have asked but I was so worried about Dad and then with the funeral and taking over the business and everything, I forgot. So, where is she? Why don't you two still date?"

The muscles in his arms tightened. "She moved to Puerto Rico to be with her new husband."

"Oh, Joe, I'm so sorry. You really liked her."

"Not enough to share her with another guy."

Adriana nodded in sympathy. "What about the women you meet at the market where you shop? Aren't any of them single?"

"I haven't a clue. I'll ask next time I'm there and give you a report. Why do you want me out of here? Have you asked Wynn to move in? Did he insist I leave?"

Adriana laughed. "God no. I'm going to deed the guesthouse to you so it's yours for life. I'm giving you a better pension too. You'll be a rich man. You'll have nothing to worry about. This will be your home for as long as you want it."

He stared. "Did you take something last night you shouldn't have?"

"Will you relax? I'm totally clean." She pressed the back of her hand against her mouth to hide her yawn.

"But he is moving in?" Joe asked.

Her hand dropped to her lap. She fingered one of the silver beads on her dress and mumbled, "No. Asking him for another date would have been out of the question. That's why I'm going to have to call him tonight after work."

Joe hurried back to her, his sneakers slapping the pavers. "Why do you have to call him?" His shaggy brows drew even closer together. "Why didn't he ask you for another date?"

"Now you want him to ask me out again?"

"I want him to treat you right." With a look of uneasiness, he shifted from foot to foot. "While he was here, I told him that. Maybe I shouldn't have. Maybe I—"

She interrupted. "Joe, stop, please. Nathan's not staying away because you grilled him about his intentions or what we did at the spa, which by the way, didn't happen. He's not the kind of guy to go to a spa."

"Good for him." His tone of voice said he loathed Nathan even more now than he had last night. "So why hasn't he made other plans with you? And why are you okay with it if you had a good time?"

Adriana closed her eyes and murmured, "He loves me as much as I love him. He just doesn't want to admit it. But he will."

\* \* \* \* \*

After her ill-considered declaration, she suffered through Joe's worried looks until she left for the office. The moment she arrived, Steve took up the slack, his gaze never leaving her as though he expected her to break down and sob. The accumulation of their concern began to wear on Adriana.

Finished with her secretary, she wanted to curl up on her sofa and take a nap. Unfortunately, Steve came into her office and closed the door. "You all right?"

She lifted her chin from her chest. "Tired."

"I can see that." He joined her at the window. "You look like hell."

Her eyes flicked to him. Indignation, rather than defeat, rang in her voice. "That's probably what Vanessa was thinking last night when she made that crack about my dress."

His eyes rounded. "Oh shit. Wynn's made his next conquest already?"

Adriana leaned against the glass, her hand in her suit jacket pocket, fingering her Lake Arrowhead magnet, a talisman to ward off Steve's and Joe's gloom. "What makes you think Nathan's finished conquering me?"

"He's asked you on another date?"

Was it so weird? Was she the one woman he wouldn't think to ask out twice or engage in two weeks of great sex with? Unlike her candidness with Joe, Adriana decided to hedge a bit with Steve. "We'll be making our plans tonight."

"Oh, babe." He lowered his balding head and shook it like a man who'd just learned Jennifer Lopez was really a guy. "Don't get sucked in by his charm, all right?" His eyes lifted to hers. "That's all I ask. Have fun if you want, but don't make more of it than it is. I don't want to see you hurt."

Blood heated her cheeks. "I'm not an idiot, Steve. I can take care of myself."

He rested his plump hand on her shoulder. "I'll be here if you need me. You want to talk, just say so. No judgment, I swear."

"You mean like now with you treating me as if I'm a mental patient and talking about Nathan like he's the prick from hell?"

Steve lifted his hand from her shoulder, holding it and his other up in a gesture of surrender. "I'm just trying to be a good friend."

"Then try being happy for me. Everything is going to work out in a way you never imagined."

His hands dropped to his sides. Caution flooded his face and voice. "Meaning?"

"You'll see." They all would.

\* \* \* \* \*

For the remainder of the day, Adriana forced herself to concentrate on Greco's myriad budgets and profit margins, behaving like the automaton her father had hoped to raise and felt most comfortable with. At eight p.m., she tossed her reading glasses on her desk, locked her office door against any interruption, flicked off the lights and sank in her chair, turning it to face the window. Given the glare of the city, only a few of the brightest stars sparkled in the sooty sky, ready for her to wish upon them as she had the night at Nathan's estate.

Turning her cell phone over in her hand, she let down her guard finally, allowing her concern to filter through the confidence she'd tried to nurture all day. On a sigh, she whispered, "Please let him answer." *Please let him show how happy he is to hear from me.* She didn't doubt Nathan's feelings for her. She worried his fear of another betrayal and the possibility of losing a future child might be greater. Her thumb shook as she punched in his number. With a trembling hand, she brought the phone to her ear. After six rings, his voicemail came on.

Heart sinking, Adriana ended the call and told herself she was behaving like a fool. Maybe he was speaking to a client or to Echo. He wasn't going to stop answering his phone just because he knew she'd be contacting him.

She took several calming breaths to steady her voice prior to her next call. Her feet tapped the floor during his voicemail message. At the beep, Adriana smiled, then spoke softly, and she hoped, seductively, "Hey, it's me, calling like I said. I thought you'd be finished with work by now. When you are, give me a call." She gave him her private work and cell number, repeating both slowly to make certain he knew how to reach her. "I'm looking forward to hearing from you, Nathan. As I said this morning, I had an amazing time. I can't wait for what comes next. Call me to talk about it. I do have some ideas. Bye."

She closed her phone, placed it on her desk and wrapped her arms around herself, appreciating what millions of men went through everyday because society still expected them to make the first move with a woman. Nevertheless, she'd done it with Nathan. All she had to do now was wait for his call.

Sometime later, she jerked awake in her chair. Panicked at the hour – eleven p.m. – she checked voicemail on all her phones. Empty. Her shoulders slumped. She waited another half hour, dropped her phone in her jacket pocket and left her office. Despite her disappointment and fatigue, Adriana wasn't about to give up. She hung on to what she knew to be true and what she couldn't live without – hope.

\* \* \* \* \*

Without asking, Joe cooked her favorite childhood foods during the long weekend. He heaped mounds of macaroni and cheese, lamb burgers and pork gyros on her plate, not commenting when she finished just a bit of his feast. Only once did he ask if everything was all right, not going further or probing for details. Adriana assured him everything was fine. And it would be, once she made her next move.

\* \* \* \* \*

Monday morning, she sat in Steve's office, confessing what had happened between her and Nathan – sort of. She glossed over the intimate parts and eliminated all the kinky ones. Less cautious in her summary of Nathan's life, she explained how he now supported his parents and had educated his siblings, sending them to Ivy League schools, his divorce from Hayley and losing Echo. Exhausted and breathless, Adriana slumped in her chair, awaiting Steve's advice.

He twisted nervously in his chair. Its leather creaked beneath his heft.

Knowing he wanted to run, Adriana pinned him with her stare. "Come on, Steve, you're a guy and I know you have an opinion on what my next move should be. Do I call him again, go to his office, send him flowers, a bottle of booze, a piece of my lingerie, what?"

"Have you thought about giving up?"

She gripped the arms of her chair. "Screw that. I know how the man feels."

"He told you?"

"His eyes did."

He started to roll his then stopped, apparently thinking better of it. "You're certain he has feelings for you?"

Tears threatened, causing her voice to crack. "I've been with a lot of bums. I know when someone's trying to con me. He wasn't, Steve. The man needs me as much as I need him. So how do I get through to him? How do I convince him that what happened with Hayley won't happen with us? That he's a good man and he deserves a second chance?"

Steve loosened his tie and tightened it again. "Ah..."

"What?" Adriana leaned up in her chair. "Tell me. Please. As a friend. Don't hold anything back. I'll do whatever it takes."

His lips fluttered with his hard exhale. "My best advice is for you to chill. Do not stalk him."

Adriana's head slumped forward. She pressed her fingers to her temple and spoke through her teeth. "I know I haven't had great luck with men, but I'm not that desperate."

"I'm only saying —"

"Yeah, I know. You're never going to let me forget hiring Ed and what it cost this company. And now you're worried I'll act like a maniac with Nathan and he'll sue us into bankruptcy and we'll all be out on the street looking for work."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Just a minute." He sounded offended. "As far as I'm concerned, the Ed incident never happened. And I do hope someday, well into the future, you and Nathan will have a good laugh about it."

She tilted her head to see his face. Angry red blotches covered his cheeks and forehead. However, his expression registered hurt that she'd think his feelings for her ran only as deep as the company's bottom line. "I'm sorry."

Almost magically, he calmed down and waved his hand, dismissing all the nasty things she'd said. A typical guy response. Adriana knew most women would be pissed for weeks.

"You're in love. I understand," he offered. "It affected Francine the same way when she fell for me. She blew everything way out of proportion. Worse than goddamn PMS."

So, he did have a feminine side after all. Adriana decided to let his bitchy comment slide. "You don't think I should contact Nathan again?"

"He knows how you feel about him, right?"

"I didn't say the words, but he's fully aware. I saw it in his eyes."

"Then don't call him again. Wait for him to get in touch with you. That's what I'd want if loving a woman frightened me. I wouldn't appreciate being crowded. It would just make me run faster. Give him time to think about the two of you, what you shared, the good time you had. Give him a chance to miss that."

\* \* \* \* \*

Steve's advice comforted Adriana until lunch. By dinner, she was too restless to eat. The following day, a wave of longing hit so hard she could barely function. Her thoughts kept returning to the voicemail she'd left him. What exactly had she said? She'd been so nervous, her words hadn't registered. They'd just fallen out of her mouth. Maybe she said she'd call him again. Was he waiting for her to phone?

Why would he? Nathan wasn't the type of man to wait for anything he wanted. He'd just take it.

At nine p.m., Adriana was the last one in her office and unable to think or worry anymore. Her sore muscles screamed for rest and a bit of peace. Removing her reading glasses, she went into her private bath and splashed icy water on her face to rouse herself for the lonely drive home. Her head was still hanging down, her fingers gripping the edge of the porcelain sink when she heard a noise. A faint creaking as if someone had just opened or closed a door. Steve? Had he returned to his office for something he'd forgotten? Was he back here to see if she was all right? She caught herself before she sighed, listened hard and heard more creaking...or was it tinkling? Like her cell phone ringing? Nathan calling?

Quickly, Adriana ran a towel over her face, tossing it aside as she hurried to her desk. Halfway there, she stopped with a jerk. Her heart jolted. She stared at Nathan standing in front of her closed office door, wearing a look of desperation as though he didn't want to be here but couldn't stop himself. The wind or his fingers had tousled his blond hair. He'd loosened his tie and unbuttoned his collar. His eyes bored into hers, they feasted on her as they did in her Viking fantasies.

He reached her before she could get to him. Hands on either side of her face, he tipped her head back and pressed his mouth to her throat, suckling her, branding her, his groans of delight wonderfully vulgar. Lusty moans poured from the back of her throat. Panting noisily, Nathan lifted his head and stared.

The hunger in his eyes stole her breath. "What?"

Something passed across his face. He pushed it away quickly. "I got your voice mail."

Her lids sank, remaining closed for several seconds before opening. The room still spun. "Just now?"

"No." With his body, he forced her toward the leather sofa. The backs of her calves hit it. "I've been busy." He pulled another pin from her bun, dropping it on the floor. Her hair fell free. He concentrated on her blouse. "Shit. How do these open?" His fingers fumbled with the antique buttons.

Frenzied, she ripped them away from the buttonholes, hearing the delicate faille tear. Nathan's hands slipped past the tattered edges to cover her breasts. Adriana leaned into his touch even as a part of her resisted, his words registering finally. "Busy with what?"

"Has to come off." He unhooked her bra and pushed the cups aside, uncovering her nipples, rubbing them with his palms, encouraging them to peak even more. "I've been working," he answered, swooping down to kiss her throat again.

At the heat coursing down her arms and chest, Adriana's head lolled to the side. Her fingers fisted in his jacket, using it as an anchor to keep standing. "Since last Friday?" Over four days ago? "I thought you'd call me then."

"I'm here now."

With one deft movement, he had her on the sofa. He pushed her dark blue skirt to her waist, baring the tops of her black stockings, garter belt and thong, worn solely for



him, just in case they made plans when he called finally. He hadn't, because of work. He'd come by. Why?

Adriana wouldn't ask, because she already knew the answer. She also knew he'd deny his feelings for her. Don't stalk, don't crowd, don't push, Steve had advised. Fine. She'd give Nathan the time he needed to think about them, to know what he had in her. However, she wasn't going to be entirely complacent about it. "How'd you get into Greco's offices?"

He closed the blinds over her windows, tossed his jacket aside, toed off his shoes and unbuckled his belt. "How do you think?" Lowering his fly, he pushed his clothes to his feet and stepped out of them. "I conned the security guard into letting me in. Remind me to tell building management to fire him."

"No need to be a prick, Nathan."

He grinned wolfishly, pulling off his shirt and socks, dropping them at his feet. "Too late, Adriana. Lose the thong."

She kept it where it was, deciding to torture him a bit by running her nails over it. "How'd you know I was still here?"

He stared at her fingers stroking her slit through the silk. "Your car's in the parking garage."

"I was getting ready to leave." She slipped her thumb beneath the thong's lacy elastic edge, playing with it and him. "You might have missed me."

His face darkened with his strained breathing. "I didn't." He commanded, "Take it off."

Willfully, she took her time, making him wait for her as he'd made her long for him. His shoulders bunched, not liking how she slid the lingerie down her thighs to her knees, pausing every few inches to readjust the position of her legs or her ass on the sofa or —

"Fuck this." He grabbed the sides of her panties, pulling them down her calves and past her heels then tossed them over his shoulder. Down on one knee, he lowered his head to her groin.

Her hips rose to meet him. She drove her fingers through his thick, silky hair, keeping him at his task as he licked her clit. Adriana cried in delight and in torment, not knowing what to expect next.

## **Chapter Ten**

Too aroused for prolonged foreplay, Nathan licked her for a few seconds more and swung her legs off the sofa. Hands beneath her buttocks, he pulled her ass to the edge of the leather cushion, spread her thighs and pushed her knees to her chest. With her body fully exposed and available to him, he mounted her, driving his cock home.

Adriana moaned happily at the angle of their bodies. The root of his sex rubbed her sensitive clit. He pulled back hurriedly and plunged inside. For a few seconds he pumped hard and fast then shifted positions as though he couldn't get deep enough. Repeatedly, he tried for better penetration and so did she, lifting her hips, pushing her body closer to his.

In a tangle of cries, they came, breathless, sweaty, sated. Gasps replaced words. His face pressed to her neck and her arms around his shoulders substituted for sentimental declarations. Wanting more, Adriana kissed the curve of his ear, his beard-roughened cheek.

He finished his swallow and panted, "Tired?"

Content was more like it, though for how long? Reluctant to ask, she whispered, "We could sleep for a few minutes."

They woke together and moved into her private bath, turning on the shower. Beneath the pulsing warm water, they made love again. Next, they tried her desk, with Adriana complaining how hard it was.

Nathan wore a look of confusion. "You're supposed to like it like that."

She ran her toes down his stiffened shaft. He lifted it to her cunt, burying it inside. On a pleased sigh, she murmured, "I stand corrected."

They laughed and played, unmindful of the time. Hours later, they sat naked on her office floor, their conversation light, mostly work-related stuff. Spread out between them was a stash of goodies from the vending machine, a late-night banquet.

Adriana devoured three handfuls of M&Ms and two Milky Ways. Nathan upended a bag of pork rinds into his mouth, patting the bottom of the cellophane wrapper to get the last greasy morsel. In a voice slurred from chocolate and caramel, she said, "I want to do this again."

His heart jumped painfully, slamming into his chest. He stopped patting the bag then decided to give it a few more taps, pretending he hadn't heard her comment.

Coming here tonight had been a colossal mistake. He'd known it on the drive over and on the elevator ride to this floor. For days, he'd fought his compulsion to see her again. To smell her skin, taste her lips, mouth and cunt...to hold her in his arms and to

have her comfort him. Shortly after she had called on Friday, he'd come here and stayed in the parking lot, staring at her car before deciding to leave. On the weekend, he'd driven by her house, wanting to knock on her door just to say hi, compelled to behave like the idiot teenager he'd been with Hayley. Unpleasant memories of his divorce and losing Echo stopped him. Yesterday, he'd stayed clear of this office. Too bad he hadn't been able to do so tonight. Horny or not—lonely or not—he should have gone to Zanes, not here. "Are you going to eat those?" He pointed at the mini-bag of nacho cheese Doritos near her knee.

She tossed them to him. "I have tomorrow night free."

He finished opening the bag and pushed three chips in his mouth.

"I'll be through here at eight," she added.

His chews sounded nearly as loud as his thudding heart.

A difficult lull followed with neither of them eating any more. Adriana laid her half-eaten bag of M&Ms on the floor and pushed to her feet.

Nathan lifted his head. He watched as she padded to her clothes and pulled on her thong. Dropping his unfinished bag of chips on the floor, he stood, heading for his clothes. It seemed the party was over. Just as well. It shouldn't have begun.

In silence, they dressed, their drawn out breaths saying it all—Adriana was pissed. He was relieved, saddened, fucked up, wanting to stay, needing to run. She draped her coat over her arm, the strap of her purse on her shoulder. He lingered near her door, waiting to walk her out. It was the least he could do.

She remained near her desk. "At eight, Nathan." Her voice was soft but firm. "Tomorrow, not the next day, not next week, not next month. I'll be here waiting for you tomorrow at eight."

His fingers tightened on the doorknob. He told himself to leave. His feet and legs wouldn't move.

The edges of her blouse trembled with her deep breath. She released it on a heavy sigh. "Will you be here? Tell me. I need to know if—"

"I'll be back Thursday," he interrupted. "When you least expect it." The words raced from his mouth without him being able to stop them. He crossed the room to her, his hand on the side of her neck. "When you can't protect yourself from me."

She laughed. "Who says I want to? And what about tomorrow? Why won't you be here tomorrow?"

"It is tomorrow, Adriana." He inclined his head to her wall clock. It read 2:15. "We have to work in a few hours. I'm going to feel like hell tonight." He drew his thumb over her downy cheek. "Cut your day off at a reasonable hour and get some sleep. Thursday, I'll return when you least expect it." He brought back his hand and went to the door, opening it. "I'll send the security guard up here to walk you to your car."

With no further comment, Nathan went through the outer offices to the hall. There he stopped, unsteady on his feet, uncertain what just happened. One minute he'd been ready to run. The next he couldn't move.

*I'll return when you least expect it.*

He'd make this a sexual game. That's all it was. He'd get his fill of her, she'd get her fill of him and no one would be hurt. They'd move on to their next lovers and their next. Separately, they'd continue their lives.

\* \* \* \* \*

Seconds before their ten a.m. meeting on Thursday, Steve hurried into Adriana's office, stopping short of her desk. He took in her hair, the ends hanging loose over her shoulders. He retraced his steps to her door, closing it. "New hairstyle?"

New life, she hoped. Excitement bubbled in her, along with a bit of anxiety. She'd forced Nathan's hand and he'd surrendered, unable to stay away just as she'd prayed. And yet, she still craved some kind of acknowledgment from him concerning their relationship—that they actually had one in his mind. That he wasn't fighting it any longer or turning it into a sexual adventure, a temporary diversion to diminish its power. "How long did you and Francine know each other before you told her how you felt?"

Steve remained near her door as Nathan had the other night, his expression no different. He wanted to run. What was it with guys? They could fight wars but not have an intimate conversation with a woman?

"This is about Wynn, isn't it?" Steve asked. "Did you call him again? Are you planning to go to his office to see him? Is that why your hair's like that?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Take it easy. I'm only looking out for your—"

She interrupted, "In answer to your questions—no, no and no. He came here Tuesday night. Actually, he just showed up without any warning."

Steve's brows lifted in obvious shock. "No shit. Why?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Why do you think?"

Face reddened in understanding, he mumbled, "Did things work out between you two?"

"Would I be wearing my hair like this if they hadn't? We're going to be seeing each other again."

More surprise registered on his face. "Tonight after work?"

She hadn't a clue. *I'll return when you least expect it.* So did he mean before tonight? Maybe while she was meeting with Steve? Or had Nathan been referring to later, during the other stuff she had planned for today? Except it didn't make sense. *When you can't protect yourself from me,* he'd said. How did he plan to manage it with scores of

other people around? Why had he even said it? Had he been referring to her kidnapper scenarios? Did he plan to reenact her fantasy because it had brought them together? Did he find it romantic? Did he think it turned her on? What?

Chewing her lower lip, she sagged back in her chair. "I don't like playing games, Steve. At least not like this. I mean, they're okay if I know where I stand. Then they're fun. But how am I supposed to take this?"

His hands went up in total surrender. "Babe, I am not playing games with you. Really. Talk. I'll listen. No judgment."

"I'm referring to Nathan, not you. And what are you talking about—no judgment? You're just filled with it. Because you love me, I know," she added quickly, drumming her nails on the arm of her chair. "I want to tell him how I feel. Get it out in the open. Move on from there."

Steve headed for the chair on the side of her desk nearest to her, dropping himself into it. "How is he playing games with you? What has he suggested?"

She saw his mind going in all the wrong directions and coming up with her and Nathan engaged in a threesome, foursome, group sex and god knew what else. "I used the wrong term. I meant him not revealing his feelings to me."

"What if he doesn't have the kind you want?"

"He does! I've already told you that. Whether he admits it or not to himself and to me is another matter."

"And if he doesn't? If he absolutely refuses to, are you prepared to move on alone?"

Her belly felt weird, as if she might be sick.

Steve leaned forward and laid his hand on hers, stilling her tapping nails. "Breaking this off sooner might be better than waiting 'til later."

And lose all hope they'd be together without even attempting to discuss it with him? God, what was she going to do? She absolutely hated being so needy. It reminded her of when she'd been a kid, doing everything she could for her father's attention and love, which proved impossible. She didn't want to repeat that sorry history with any man but couldn't stop her feelings for Nathan. Although heeding good sense and retaining her pride might be the way to go, it wasn't the solution for her at this point. Maybe later. Oh god, she hoped not later. Dizzy with ambivalence, she sighed, "I'm going to see this through."

Her meeting with Steve began and ended without Nathan showing up, no doubt because too many people were on hand to protect her, just as she'd surmised. On her way out for her business luncheon, she stopped at her secretary's desk. "I may be back later than I planned." Nathan could be waiting for her in the parking garage like Ed had the night she'd hired him. He might have plans for her lunch other than her meeting with a group of local business owners. Only how would he know she wasn't eating at her desk as she usually did? Adriana frowned at her secretary.

The woman's face remained an unreadable mask. "Was there something else?"

"Did anyone call asking if I was going to attend the meeting today or if I was eating in my office?"

The woman's over-plucked brows lifted a fraction. "No one called about your luncheon plans. I did confirm your attendance with the sponsor's secretary this morning."

Adriana nodded, wondering if Nathan knew the woman or had dated her.

"Should I cancel your afternoon meeting?" her secretary asked.

"Not yet. I'll call you from the event if I'm going to be late."

She headed for the elevator, stopping short of it despite the parted doors and went to the fire exit instead. A quick look inside the stairwell told her Nathan wasn't there ready to haul her into arms for some serious lovemaking. She sucked her lower lip and pivoted, heading back to the elevator. The trip down was uneventful except for Ramon, the maintenance guy, getting on at the tenth floor. Remembering him, Adriana smiled without thinking. He ignored her to answer his crackling two-way radio, the call presumably from his boss.

In the parking garage, she glanced around, half-way expecting to see Nathan there, but did not. *Thursday, I'll return when you least expect it*, he'd said. So did he mean tonight? Before tonight? Shit. Unnerved, she made the short and congested drive to Century City and the Waymark Hotel where the event was taking place. Delivering her keys to the valet, Adriana entered the hotel's spacious and luxurious lobby, designed in ivory, gold and crystal, with lots of mirrors like a contemporary version of Versailles. She turned, eyes searching for the concierge to ask for directions to a meeting she did not want to attend, loathing the shallow conversations, the incessant networking.

To hell with this. She was going back to her office to wait it out. If Nathan knew what was good for him, he'd have to show up before eight tonight—the time she'd insisted upon.

Adriana pivoted and headed for the exit, having to stop for a group of Asian and Indian businessmen pouring inside. She stepped to the left. An arm slipped around her waist.

Flinching, she turned her head.

Nathan cupped the side of her face in his hand, covered her mouth and plunged his tongue inside.

Adriana's legs went rubbery, sending her into the hard planes of his body. Around them, people swarmed, oblivious to the kiss, focused on their own lives and schedules. *I'll return...when you can't protect yourself from me*. She should have known he meant whenever he wanted her. And he did. She sensed it in his passion. Arm draped over his shoulder, she returned his fire, suckling his tongue.

He finished the kiss while she wanted still more. Turned into him, stroking the knot on his pale yellow silk tie, she raised her voice enough so he could hear her through the din of the crowd, "Were you in the parking garage? Did you follow me here?"

"Let's get away from the door." He took her hand and led her toward the bank of elevators.

"Where are we going?"

He looked over. "Where do you think?"

She hoped their room was on the second floor so her wait to have him wouldn't be too long. Feeling giddy and playful, she bumped her shoulder into his biceps. "You're going to escort me to my business luncheon?"

"Someone has to." He turned his head away, though not before she saw him roll his eyes.

"Did you follow me here?" she asked again.

"No."

Surprised, she blurted, "Do you know Philips' secretary, Marsha? Did you ask her whether I'd be attending today? Did you two discuss me?" *Did you use to date her? Are you dating her now?*

They'd reached the elevators. Nathan jabbed the UP button. "Who's Marsha? Who's Philips?"

"Never mind." She inhaled slowly in an effort to slow her racing heart. Another thought struck. "Do you usually go to lunch here?" Had he been heading for the ground floor restaurant when he saw her?

He glanced at the darkened globes above the elevators. "Rarely. I eat at my desk unless I have a meeting."

"You didn't have one today?"

His eyes darted to her then returned to the globes. "I canceled it."

"For later?" Dinner?

"I'm free until tomorrow morning."

Her breath caught at the wonder of spending the rest of the day with him. "How'd you know I'd be here?"

Nathan looked down at her. Beneath the overhead lights, his hair appeared blonder, a wonderful contrast to his dark brows and eyes. "You told me the other night while we were at your office's vending machine, getting our stuff. You said you hoped your luncheon on Thursday would have the same menu—candy bars and M&Ms."

He'd listened to what she'd chattered about. He remembered even before he knew they'd be seeing each other again. More importantly, he'd canceled work to be with her. Overwhelmed with gratitude and love, Adriana leaned into him, her lips brushing his neck. Still holding her hand, Nathan folded her arm behind her back and pulled her closer, his heavy breaths ruffling her hair near her temple. The elevator dinged. Its

doors parted. Quickly, as if he couldn't wait another second to have her, he escorted Adriana inside and held up his free hand to the others waiting to get on. "Take the next one."

Two of the older men exchanged glances. A young guy in front frowned.

Nathan's hand fell away from her. As she stepped back, he positioned himself to block the guy's entry. Head turned to the elevator control panel, Nathan reached over and punched the button for the fortieth floor.

The young guy complained. "I've got a meeting to get to. What in the f—"

The doors closed on his oath. Adriana's pulse continued to race. Her eyes met Nathan's as he turned to her and approached. Instinctively, she stepped back. He looked pleased and downright predatory. Driving his fingers into her hair, he used his body to push her into the wall. She dropped her purse. It hit the carpeted floor with a faint whap. Her arms wrapped around his torso, her mouth met his, her tongue slipping between his lips, catching him off-guard. He grunted uncivilly, grinding his sex into hers. Freeing one hand from her hair, he slipped his fingers beneath her suit jacket, cupping her breast, squeezing it.

They kissed wildly, as a couple might do when facing a lengthy separation, a lifetime of never seeing each other again. No. Adriana refused to consider such a thing. He loved her. He'd proved it by coming here today.

A loud ding and the brief jerk of the elevator told her they'd arrived. Nathan grabbed her purse in one hand, her wrist in the other and pulled her down the seemingly endless hallway to their door. Inside, they tore off their clothes, dropping them on the floor, making the pile between them higher and higher.

He grinned at her cherry red garter belt, dark stockings and heels. "Bad girl. You didn't wear panties today."

"I knew you'd only rip them off me when you decided to show up."

Nathan moved into her, his eager cock pressed against her defenseless pussy. "I surprised you?"

He'd pleased her more than he would ever know, until she found the courage to tell him. And she would. Soon. "Oh yeah." She stroked his tattoo. "I looked for you in the stairwell at work and in the garage, thinking you'd be hiding there."

His nostrils flared slightly at her fingertips trailing over his pec. "Like Ted?"

"Ed."

"You like being kidnapped, Adriana?"

*Only by you.* "I don't know. Why don't you show me?"

With one hand, he grabbed her wrists, lifting her arms above her head, keeping them there as he forced her into the wall, imprisoning her with his strength. He kissed her savagely, his free hand roaming her body as he pleased, rediscovering areas that belonged to him, no other man. Impatient with the foreplay, he brought her into the suite's bedroom. Her eyes rounded and brimmed with tears at the Milky Ways and



M&Ms piled on the nightstand to the left, her side of their bed. "You brought me lunch?"

"To keep up your strength." He fell on the mattress, bringing her down with him. Before Adriana could move, he rolled on top, his legs trapping hers, his hand back around her wrists, dragging her arms above her head. Lips to her throat, he murmured, "There's hot chocolate too, in the fridge. All we have to do is nuke it."

Her lips parted on a sultry moan at his mouth suckling her throat and his cock disappearing, inch by hard inch, into her sheath. Joined, they breathed shallowly and held each other in a tight embrace, both tender and electrifying.

He made love to her as though nothing else mattered except them being alone together. This bedroom became their world, a safe haven until her cell phone rang hours into their adventure. With the sound, Adriana recalled telling her secretary she'd phone if something delayed her. Shit. As Nathan suckled the inside of her thigh, Adriana spoke to the woman, telling her she wouldn't be back to the office today. Something came up.

Nathan brought Adriana's hand to his groin, his rising erection. She giggled. Her secretary cleared her throat, obviously disconcerted by Adriana's demeanor.

"Will you be back tomorrow morning?" the woman asked.

Adriana hoped not, but figured Nathan wouldn't be keeping her in here forever. "Sure. See you then." She turned off her phone and threw it across the room, surrendering to Nathan's carnal moves.

Sunlight bled around the edges of the drapes, turning feeble with time, marking the afternoon passing into night. They napped, they gorged on snacks, they finished her hot chocolate, they made love again and again and again until he complained about being sore.

Smiling sympathetically, Adriana pushed to a sitting position and held his flaccid cock in her palm, examining it in the lamplight. Gently, she stroked the reddened skin on the head. He feigned a gasp, followed by a groan of complaint.

"Poor baby," she murmured. "Guess you're through for the night, huh?"

"Get real. I'll work through the pain."

Adriana laughed.

Propped on his elbow, Nathan held his head in his palm and looked up at her. She stopped herself from smoothing back his hair, liking it mussed by the bed and her passion.

"So, you like being kidnapped?" he asked, a mischievous glint in his creamy brown eyes.

"Only if it turns out like this."

He cocked one brow. "How else would it turn out?"

His tone of voice urged her to share more of her fantasies, so they could continue to play their games. On the night he'd protected her from Ed, it would have been enough. Now it wasn't.

"I don't know," she answered, touching the side of his face so he'd look at her, not her breasts. The moment he did, Adriana spoke quickly, unable to stop. "I love you, Nathan."

## Chapter Eleven

His eyes registered immediate surprise, regret, fear, everything except joy. Adriana's heart cramped but her voice remained calm at his remembered passion and the suppressed longing she now saw on his face. Feelings he couldn't hide. She rested the tips of her fingers on his. "Let's talk. Please."

He pulled back his hand and mumbled, "There's nothing to talk about, Adriana."

She ignored his rebuff. "Yes, there is. I love —"

"No, you don't."

"Yes, I do!"

His brows drew together at the defiance and yearning in her voice. He looked at her. "You don't know me, Adriana."

"I know you're a better man than you believe you are. I know you're lonely and you feel deeply about me. You keep proving it."

"By coming here?" He laughed. "You must be kidding. This is a hotel room, Adriana. Where the hell else did you think I'd bring you?"

Despite his words, an odd peace settled over her, quieting her voice. "I'm not talking about that and you know it. You bought me a magnet, and the hot chocolate and the candy today. You listened to me talk about work and remembered my luncheon meeting. My parents couldn't remember my birthday and weren't about to be bothered with my graduation from high school and college, but you celebrated inconsequential stuff that mattered to me. Why, Nathan? Were you trying to seduce me? Did you think you had to when I've been practically throwing myself at you? Do you behave like this with every woman you want to fuck? Do you give them precious gifts and make them feel noticed and special?"

His face continued to darken. He went to a sitting position and pushed past the tangled linens to leave the bed.

Adriana scooted around on her butt, watching him grab his watch from the nightstand and slip it on. Her throat tightened against a cry of frustration and hurt. Deliberately, she made her tone reasonable, non-confrontational. "You're leaving?"

He pushed his fingers through his hair, dragging it back. "I want to have a good time, Adriana. That's it. No strings."

She asked again, in an even softer voice. "You're leaving?"

Nathan turned to her, his emotions hidden beneath an indifferent gaze. "I shouldn't have come here today. I apologize for giving you the wrong impression about where this was headed."

She stared at him, then lost all control, her voice a harsh cry. "Are you leaving me here, Nathan? Yes or no? Answer my fucking question!"

"I did," he growled. His face reddened in anger, fear, sadness. "You're reading too much into whatever I did or didn't do. Why does this have to be so fucking complicated? Why can't we just have a good time?"

Her eyes grew wet, blurring her vision. "For how long?"

"I don't know." He backed away from the bed – away from her. "Until it's over."

She closed her eyes so tightly tears streamed down her face. But her voice was calm and firm. "I can't play at this, Nathan. I love you." For once in her life, she deserved someone who reciprocated and cherished her. "I want a relationship."

He exhaled loudly. "I'm not saying you don't deserve one, Adriana." His voice softened even more. "I'm just trying to tell you the truth. I'm not good at commitment, never will be. You know that. I told you that the first night we were together. There's no middle road here. We either continue as we have been until it runs its course or we say goodbye right now."

Her mouth trembled. She could barely see him through her tears. *Are you prepared to move on alone?* Steve had asked. Her chest ached and her arms hurt. She wanted Nathan to hold her so she could bury her face in his neck, smell her scent on his skin, lose herself in his warmth. She wanted this to go on and on and on no matter what new anguish the future might bring. She wanted what she couldn't have.

Lowering her head, she forced herself to speak. "Goodbye, Nathan."

He dressed quickly in the outer room, not daring to look back, not wanting to think or feel. *I can't play at this*, she'd said. Her weeping proved it. The muted sounds cut through him, wrenching his belly. *I want a relationship*, she'd cried.

Of course she did. That's where this had been heading all along. He'd known it in Lake Arrowhead, but still he continued – like a fool. Like a goddamn bastard.

She cleared her throat. He flinched at the noise and looked over his shoulder to see if she'd followed him to this room...if she'd changed her mind and wanted him to stay under his conditions.

No.

From where Nathan stood, he saw her foot dangling over the side of the mattress, her sweet little toes curled in frustration or unhappiness.

He advanced a step, driven by his urge to kiss her foot, her ankle, calf, mouth. Her remembered words stopped him. *Do you behave like this with every woman you want to fuck? You bought me a magnet, and the hot chocolate and the candy today.*

He'd wanted to see her smile. He'd wanted to make her happy. Fucking idiot. He'd left her in tears. Gathering his things, he stuffed his tie into his jacket pocket and headed for the door, desperate to get out of here. To drive anywhere far away, to run.

*I can't play at this*, she'd said. Why not? Why fucking not? If they took it too seriously, it wouldn't end well, no relationship did. She'd find him wanting, just as Hayley had. She'd meet another guy. They'd fall in love. Like a recurring nightmare, he'd lose everything again...he'd lose her. He already had. Her last words returned, haunting him. *Goodbye, Nathan.*

He went into the hall. From behind, the door to their suite closed with a solid thud. He strode toward the elevator, wondering how long he'd have to wait for it to reach this floor so he could escape this damn place, get in his car, drive to a bar in the next county, get fucking wasted and forget. His head turned to the left as he crossed the adjacent hall. Steps slowing, he backtracked and stared at the exit sign above the stairs.

Nathan headed for them, compelled to keep moving, to flee. He yanked the door open and entered the concrete stairwell. The space was cooler than the rest of the hotel and smelled of ammonia, as if the cleaning staff had scrubbed it recently. He went down two steps and sat, his legs no longer able to hold him.

With his elbows on his knees, he buried his face in his hands, refusing to admit his love even as he could no longer hide from it.

Unable to remain in the room, yet not wanting to go home and worry Joe, Adriana went to Steve's house in Newport Beach. On her third knock, Francine opened the front door. As stocky as her husband, she wore a velour hoodie and pants in a pale lavender shade. There was no surprise on her face at Adriana's disheveled hair and tear-swollen eyes. Steve must have told her everything, including how badly he thought things would end with Nathan.

"Oh, sweetie." Francine pulled Adriana into her hearty embrace.

Steve shouted from the next room. "Is the food here?"

"Don't tell him it's me," Adriana asked, her voice shaking. "I should leave. You're busy."

"Nonsense." With a strong grip around her shoulders, Francine hauled Adriana inside. "We were only planning to eat dinner—as soon as it gets here. You're joining us for it and the rest of the night. I'll make up the guestroom for you."

"I shouldn't. Joe's expecting me. I'd have to call him."

"Steve will do that. Won't you, hon?"

Adriana looked past Francine's shoulder and saw him lurking in the hall, ready to run just like Nathan had earlier. New tears filled her eyes.

"Ah, sure." He backed away. "I'll do that right now. I'll tell him we're working on a complicated matter, and it may take all night, and I thought it would be better if she stayed."

Francine added, "Before he asks why she didn't call, tell him I'm filling Adriana in on my recent surgery. That's why you left the room."

"Something female?" Steve asked.

"He'll ask fewer questions."

"You're right." He headed down the hall to his office to call Joe and lie. Francine had never been sick a day in her adult life.

She directed Adriana into the chrome and granite kitchen, pulling out a chair for her. "What happened with Nathan?"

Adriana waved away the wine Francine offered. Her hands shook. "I told him I love him and wanted a relationship."

"He freaked?"

The misery of that moment returned with such stunning clarity, Adriana couldn't catch her breath. "He gave me an ultimatum—have a good time with him until it was over or end it immediately."

Francine sank into a chair and took Adriana's hands in hers. "You ended it?"

On a new sob, she nodded.

"Good for you."

"I didn't want it to end this way!" Her words and shoulders trembled with her hitching breaths. "I didn't want to corner him but I couldn't stand not knowing any longer how he felt about me. Is that so wrong?"

"Of course it isn't." She squeezed Adriana's hands. "You deserve to know if you're wasting your time with a man."

"I wasn't!" she argued. "I know it. He bought me a magnet. Steve told you about that, right?" Giving her no chance to answer, Adriana cried, "Why would he do that unless he had some feelings for me?"

"I don't know, sweetie."

For some reason, Francine's answer pissed off Adriana. She snapped, "He wasn't trying to seduce me. I practically threw myself at him."

Francine nodded sympathetically.

Adriana's shoulders sagged. "I don't know what to do."

"You're going to stay here tonight so Steve and I can take care of you."

Pulling her hands from Francine, Adriana folded her arms over the table and rested her head on them. Her fingers fisted. "Nathan has to change his mind about us. He just has to. I am not wrong about him."

"What's important is that you did the right thing for you." She ran her hand over Adriana's hair. "In a few days you'll understand that."

In a few days, the reality of tonight would be permanent, unchangeable. A new sob tore from the back of her throat.

Francine murmured, "Everything will look better in a few days."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan stood on the porch of his old tract house in a sprawling development in Orange County. Beneath the gas lamps, he saw kids' bikes and toys in crayon-bright colors littering the front yards of many of the stucco homes. Inside his—or what used to be his—a TV played. Snatches of sound told him the evening news was on, dinner most likely over.

He couldn't decide whether to knock on the door or leave. What should have been a simple matter grew increasingly complicated in his mind. He wasn't even certain why he'd come here tonight.

The pulse points at his temples continued to pound. What he needed was a good night's sleep. He glanced at his car but didn't move toward it.

Behind him, the front door shimmied slightly as it opened. He glanced up as the porch light came on.

"Nathan?" Hayley asked.

He looked over, amazed as always she hadn't changed much in all these years. She wore her blonde hair in a ponytail just as she had in high school. Her freckled nose and cheeks gave her the look of perpetual youth. The contentment in her eyes told Nathan she'd made the right choice when she'd told him their marriage was over. That night, he'd moved out of their house, this house, giving it to her and Echo, because it was the only place his little girl had known. He hadn't wanted her to ever lack for a home as he had. "Hey."

Hayley shifted to the right, gesturing him inside. He stepped into the front room and looked at the dining area. At the table, Echo had her head bent to her school work. In the chair next to her sat Roy. Father and daughter shared the same dark hair, green eyes and stubborn chins. Echo glared at her book, oblivious to anything except her own misery. "This is stupid. I'm never going to get it."

"Not if you keep complaining you won't." Roy tapped the middle of the page with his thick forefinger. A burly guy, he would have looked more at home in a biker bar than helping his daughter with her homework. "Read it again," he said in a firm yet loving voice. "Let it sink in. You can do this."

"Who says I want to?"

Nathan smiled at her sass.

Roy's voice lowered a notch in warning. "Echo."

She sighed. "Yes sir."

"Let's go into the kitchen," Hayley said to Nathan.

On the way, Echo noticed him finally. "Why are you here?"

His heart sank at her indifference, so normal for a nine-year-old who had no idea what he'd given up when he'd left this house.

Hayley's gaze darted from him to her daughter. "Is that nice?" she asked her.

Echo screwed up her face and looked back at her work. Nathan nodded to Roy in greeting.

In the kitchen, Hayley gestured Nathan into a chair. He remained standing near the back door, not really staying, not leaving either. Not knowing what to do.

Hayley went to the fridge. "We had roast for dinner. Can I make you a sandwich? Get you a beer?"

"No."

She leaned against the counter, studying him. "What's wrong? Did something happen with your practice?"

"It's fine." He lowered his voice so Echo wouldn't hear. "So is the college fund and everything else I've set up for her."

Hayley wrinkled her nose as her daughter just had. "I don't care about that, Nathan." She softened her voice. "I asked because you look so awful. When was the last time you slept?"

Days ago, when he'd left Adriana at the Waymark. "Lots to do at work."

Her expression said she didn't buy it. "Then why aren't you there now?"

He didn't have an answer.

"What's wrong?" Hayley went to him, genuine concern on her face. "Are you ill?"

He pressed his fingers into the inside corners of his eyes. "I'm fine. I've just been busy."

"Why are you here?"

Anger flared so suddenly, heat rushed to his face. First Echo made him feel like an intruder and now her mother. Hurt hardened his voice. "Can't I come over occasionally just to say hi?"

"Sure. Except you don't." She sounded confused. "You wait for us to invite you like you're a stranger instead of family. Why are you here?"

He dropped his hand and snapped, "I don't know, all right? I was driving around and I noticed I wasn't too far from your place and I stopped."

Something flickered in her eyes. She glanced over at the sounds coming from the dining room, Echo and Roy discussing the finer points of math. Taking Nathan's hand, Hayley led him out the back door to the yard, sweetly scented with grass and roses. Tonight's cool breeze washed over his feverish face. His heart continued to hammer against his chest. He couldn't recall the last time he'd been so damn hot.

"You've met someone," Hayley said.

His pulse leapt. He lowered his face from the brightest stars in the sky but didn't meet her gaze.

"What happened?" She cupped his face in her hands, her thumbs touching the tears at the edges of his eyes. "Did she reject you?"

He wanted to laugh, or cry, or do both. He fought for control. "I broke it off. It wouldn't have worked out."

"How do you know?"



Nathan frowned. "You and I didn't."

"Oh, baby." Hayley wrapped her arms around his torso and hugged him as hard as she could. "We were so young. We were more in love with love than we were with each other. If it hadn't been for Echo you would have never come home from work."

His eyes closed in an absurd attempt to flee the truth. Shoulders sagged, he asked, "If she had been ours would we have stayed together?"

"You know we wouldn't have. We rarely talked except to fight. Have you forgotten?"

Only until she reminded him. Weary from the memories, Nathan rested his chin on the top of her head, seeking her comfort as a friend. "I can't go through losing everything again, Hayley. I won't."

"Does this woman love you?"

He forced down a swallow and nodded.

"And you feel the same about her. I saw it on your face, so don't deny it."

"Who says I am? I'm fucking fighting it."

In a gentle voice, she scolded, "Don't punish her for what I did to you."

"I'm not. At least, I don't think I am. And it wasn't all your fault." His voice cracked with emotion. "I'm trying to spare her from getting hurt. Hell, I'm trying to do that for myself."

She ran her hands up and down his back in a soothing gesture, the same as she'd done with Echo when she'd been a toddler. "Give it a chance. See where it goes."

He shook his head. He could not. He would not.

Hayley released him and stepped back. In the faint light pouring from the kitchen window, she looked disappointed or saddened for him. "You're sure?"

If he was, he wouldn't be standing in his ex-wife's back yard not knowing whether to stay or to leave. Not knowing what in the fuck to do.

\* \* \* \* \*

Representatives from a small grocery chain sat at the conference table in Greco's offices, discussing the purchase of their stores with Adriana, Steve and two of her VPs. At the credenza, Joe was setting up lunch which he'd catered—a tradition started by Adriana's father and carried on by her. The scent of prosciutto egg cups, Italian meatballs, garlic bread and cinnamon almond cookies had the reps and Steve glancing over at Joe's food rather than the spreadsheets and contracts in front of them.

Adriana stared at the paperwork without seeing any of the figures. It was barely noon. How many more hours to go in this day? Nine? Ten? Exhausted already, she leaned back in her chair, unable to think about it. These days, everything moved too slowly...or too fast. At the beginning of this week, she'd realized it was Valentine's Day. The office staff made a big deal about it. In their cubicles, they displayed the cards

they'd gotten from spouses or children. More than a few women and a sprinkling of men received flowers from loved ones. At the time, the minutes raced toward day's end as Adriana waited for her flowers, her loved one who never came. Now it was the end of the week and time again seemed to stand still.

Steve tapped her forearm with his pen. She looked up, surprised to see the reps and her VPs at the credenza, filling their plates with Joe's feast.

"Tell me what you want," Steve said in a low voice, "and I'll get it for you."

Adriana turned her face away to hide the sudden tears in her eyes. Weeks had passed since she'd last seen Nathan so why was she about to cry now? After their night at the Waymark, she'd wept for days until she simply couldn't do it anymore. She cleared her throat and murmured, "Go ahead and get your plate. I'm not hungry."

He argued, "You have to eat."

"I will tonight. Just get me another of these." She lifted her empty water bottle off the table.

Steve delivered a fresh bottle along with a plate of food Joe prepared for her. She picked at the meatballs while the reps ate like starving men and women.

"Mr. Malachi, this is fantastic," the gray-haired rep said to Joe. He swiped a paper napkin across his lips and patted his ample belly. "I shouldn't have more, but I'm going to."

"Have as much as you want," Joe offered, his gaze going to Adriana's untouched plate.

On Joe's invitation, three of the reps left their seats and returned to the credenza. At the table, a female VP laughed about something with one of the male reps. In the outer office, Adriana's secretary said in a loud office, "Hello – excuse me – may I help you?"

Steve's head jerked up as the conference door swung open. Adriana put down her water bottle and glanced where he did. Her heart stilled and her eyes rounded.

The reps at the credenza continued to discuss the food. Joe said, "What the hell?" Adriana's secretary snapped, "*Excuse me* – you cannot be in here."

Across the room, Nathan met Adriana's eyes, unmindful of her secretary hollering at him, unaware of the others in the room, his attention solely on her, hunger in his eyes like the Viking in her fantasies.

Seconds ticked by. Slowly. Then fast. At last, Nathan reduced the space between them. Adriana couldn't move, her legs were too weak. She noted the dark circles beneath his eyes. He'd lost a bit of weight. His hair was tousled, he hadn't shaved in a few days. He stopped in front of her chair and put out his hand to her, palm up.

Steve and Joe spoke immediately and together. "Adriana," they said.

"What's going on?" one of the reps asked.

Adriana put up her hand to quiet them all and kept her face turned to Nathan, seeing yearning in his eyes, sadness and fear.

"Forgive me," he said to her in an unbearably soft voice.

A tear fell from the corner of her eye, hitting her cheek. "For what?"

"Leaving you."

Her left hand flew to her mouth to stifle her cry. She slipped her right hand into his, allowing him to help her from her chair.

"Ms. Greco?" her secretary asked from behind him. "Is everything okay?"

Adriana gazed into Nathan's beautiful tear-filled eyes. "Is it?" she asked.

"It will be."

In front of her secretary, the reps, Steve and Joe, Nathan swept down and lifted her into his arms. As if they'd done this for a lifetime, her arm slipped around his shoulders. Her other hand rested on his heart. It beat as fiercely as hers.

"Adriana," Joe said worriedly.

She looked over at him, tears running down her face. "It's okay, Joe. I'm okay." She turned back to Nathan. "Right?"

His expression flooded with love. He nodded to her and spoke to Joe. "You have nothing to worry about, sir."

Adriana experienced a sense of elation so fierce it hurt. With her eyes on Nathan, she spoke to the others. "I won't be back today. Please continue the discussions."

No one commented as Nathan carried her out of the conference room. In the outer office, the staff stopped their conversations and work to gape. In the hall outside Greco's offices, Adriana pressed her lips to the curve of his ear, his bristly cheek, his chin, unable to kiss him enough. His solid warmth surrounded her. Never had she felt so protected and safe. On a sigh, she murmured, "Where are we going?"

He stopped at the elevator, fresh tears in his eyes. "Home."

On the ride down, they held each other with Nathan admitting his feelings before she could. "I couldn't stay away any longer. I love you so damn much. I think I knew it when you clobbered me with the snowballs. I should have admitted it then. I'm sorry. I—"

She stopped him with her kiss. They necked through the rest of their ride, the last ten floors, not bothering to stop or step apart as the elevator halted for new passengers.

They'd lost so much time already. There was too much to catch up on.

Their lush velvet nights had only begun.

## About the Author

Tina Donahue is a multi-published novelist in contemporary and historical romance. *Booklist*, *Publisher's Weekly* and *Romantic Times* have praised her work; she has reached finals and/or placed in numerous RWA-sponsored contests. She was the editor of an award-winning Midwestern newspaper, worked in Story Direction for a Hollywood production company and is currently the Managing Editor for a global business document concern.

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