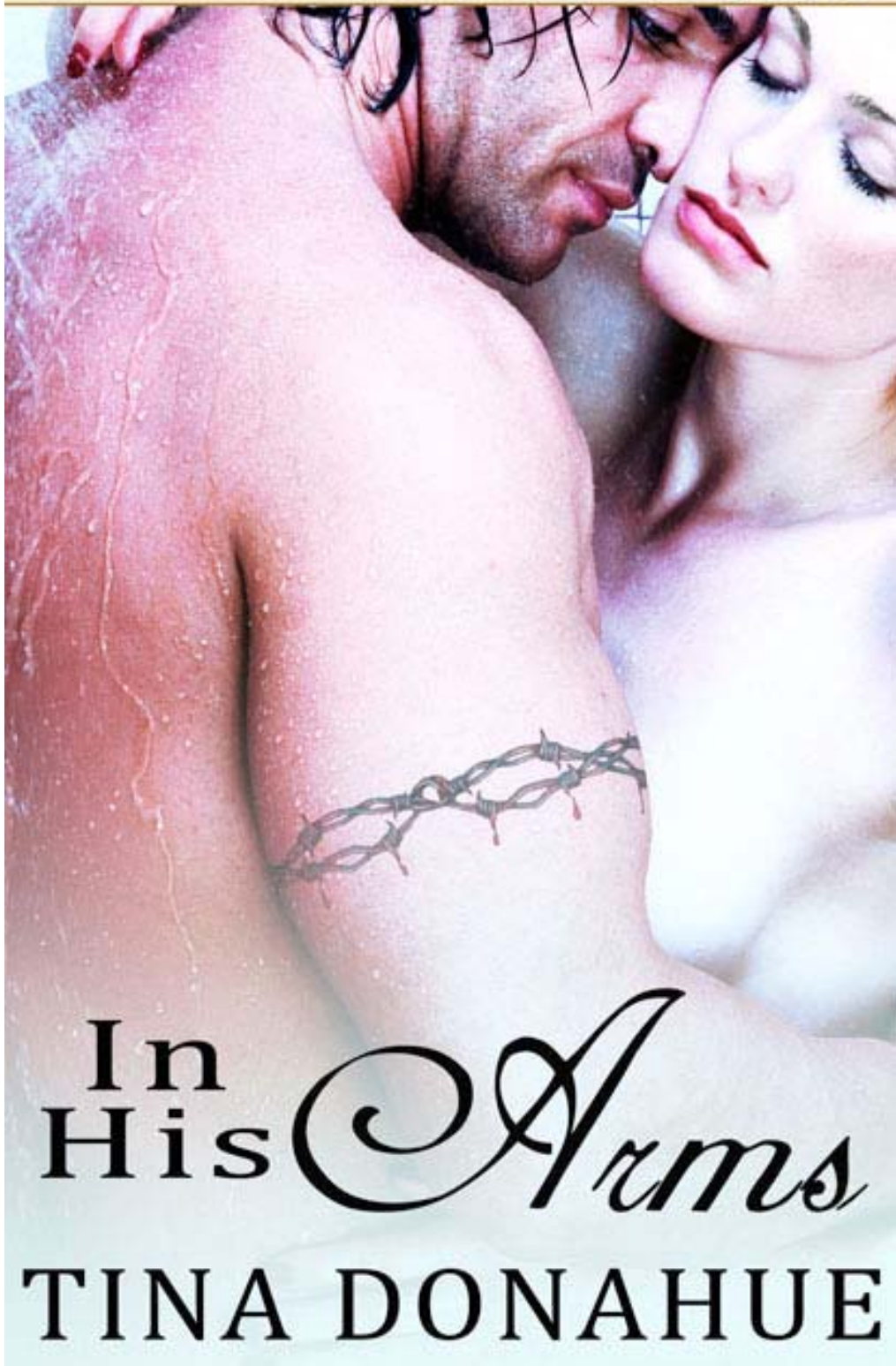


ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



In His Arms

Tina Donahue

Owned by one man, loved by another.

Abducted and delivered into sexual slavery, Lori has surrendered her will in order to survive. For more than a decade, she's been known as Summer, her owner's possession until he gives her to his newest lieutenant, a mysterious man called RJ.

Commanding and virile, RJ controls without cruelty and possesses without threat, engendering a mixture of safety and passion. In his strong arms, Summer enjoys carnal pleasure she's never known and tenderness she's craved. In his heated gaze, she experiences a sense of recognition she doesn't immediately understand until it proves dangerous in a way she could never have imagined.

Bound by desire, need and growing love, RJ traverses the shadowy world of human trafficking, risking all for Summer's freedom. But when he learns she harbors a fateful secret that threatens to tear her from him, they stand to lose everything.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

In His Arms

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IN HIS ARMS

Tina Donahue

Dedication

To my editor Briana St. James, whose insightful suggestions made this a better book and me a better writer.

And to all the wonderful writers I've met on the romance loops who have supported my dream and have also provided invaluable advice.

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Prologue

Phoenix, Arizona, 1999

Knowing this might be her last chance, Lori Clayton decided to make something momentous happen, uncertain whether to be thrilled or afraid.

Cordless phone to her ear, she paced the living room of her parents' tract house as Britney Spears sang ...*Baby One More Time*. The music pumped hard and loud. Britney's sad words spoke of how loneliness was killing her. Lori knew what she meant, wanting a guy so badly your whole body ached. With a sigh, she announced, "He's out there." *I gotta talk to him.*

Lori's best friend Piper whispered from her end of the call as though she worried someone would overhear. "What's he doing?"

Returning to the front window, Lori eased the filmy curtain back carefully and sneaked a look across the street. Her heart jumped. She gaped. "Oh my god, oh my god." Caught between excitement and embarrassment, she bounced on her platform sandals.

"What?" Piper yelled into her phone.

Lori sagged against the window frame. Her voice trembled. "He just took off his tee."

"No. He's like undressing?"

"Just his tee." She paused to swallow. "He's hot."

"So you keep saying."

Lori groaned. Sometimes Piper could be so naïve and say the dumbest things even for a fifteen-year-old. "Not that kind of hot. Sweaty. From shooting baskets and dribbling and stuff."

"Ewww. He's sweating?"

Yeah. But it wasn't gross like with the boys in Lori's sophomore class at high school. On Tav Rafferty sweat looked good. At nineteen, he was a man, already over six feet tall with nice arms that weren't too muscular, soft brown hair streaked gold by the sun and the most amazing eyes she'd ever seen. His lashes and brows were so dark they gave her chills, the same as the kind she got when she unwrapped a really great present. "I love his eyes."

Piper snorted. "You love Justin Timberlake's eyes. And Leonardo DiCaprio's. Face it, you're an eye woman."

Tav's were different. Amazingly better than even those of Justin Timberlake, the mega-cute singer of 'N Sync. "I'm going over there to talk to him." She didn't move. "Do you think I should go over there?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Are you dressed to play basketball with him?"

Rolling her eyes, Lori fingered the edge of her white baby tee cut high enough to bare her midriff. Her pale green capris were as tight as she could fit into and still be able to move and breathe. "Of course I'm not dressed to shoot baskets. I want him to notice me as a woman. I want us to talk."

"Get real." Piper's voice held an edge of disdain that said she was rolling her eyes. "It's not like guys want to talk, unless it's about sports, you know?"

She did. The boys at school bored her into a coma with their stupid conversations. "Tav's not a boy anymore. He's a man. I've got to make my move before he heads back to school."

"So why isn't he with his college friends in California or Mexico for spring break?"

"Grades, what else?" The other night while Tav shot baskets, his father yelled at him to apply himself, to become an attorney like every other guy in their family. Tav didn't say anything, but by the way he gripped his ball, Lori knew he was pissed.

"He's been grounded?" Piper asked. "Maybe you shouldn't bother him."

Lori sucked her lower lip. With her torso bent to the right for a better view, she watched. Head down, Tav dribbled his ball, his chest pumping hard. "Maybe I can make him feel better."

"You haven't before."

True. Tav didn't know she existed. His family had moved into the neighborhood over a year ago and the only conversation they'd had thus far was her saying "Hi, I'm Lori. I live across the street," and him grunting "uh-huh". "I have to try. This is my last chance until he comes home for summer."

"Okay, but make it fast. We're supposed to go to the mall, remember?"

"Your brother agreed to drive us?"

"He better or I'll tell mom and dad I caught him smoking again with his girlfriend. She's such a skank. Are you going to let Tav kiss you?"

Lori's eyes jumped from his fly to his naked chest damp with perspiration, the moisture glinting in the heavy sun. Her cheeks stung at the thought of his lips against hers, his tongue snaking into her mouth. Briefly dizzy, she wasn't certain whether to shiver or giggle. "Huh?"

"You are," Piper accused. "You're even going to let him feel you up."

"In the front yard? Are you totally stupid?"

"Your parents are at work, so are his, right? Who's gonna know? And how else are you gonna get him to notice you unless you flirt and give him some serious action?"

The base of Lori's throat tightened so quickly, she couldn't refute her friend's words or even respond. And not because she had never let a boy feel her up. She had, during several parties that veered out of control before her friends' parents made an appearance to keep things from going too far. Curiosity, not passion, had driven those

encounters. Though cute, the boys were forgettable. She considered her moments with them needed experience for when the real thing came along.

Would she find it with Tav?

His body arced as he shot another basket. The ball circled the rim before it fell inside the hoop past the strings to his waiting hands. Large hands Lori imagined on her breasts, her hips, her...

She swallowed and found her voice. "Give me a half hour." What could happen in that little bit of time? "I'll walk to your house. We can leave from there, okay?"

"Whatever. Should I wish you luck?"

Britney's voice cut off mid-lyric as Lori turned off the CD. "I'm only going to say hi." And maybe kiss him if he wanted it. And possibly touch his bare chest.

Piper giggled. "If you don't show up, I'll know what you're doing."

"Like you could guess," she mumbled. "Don't worry, I'll show." Giving her friend no chance to respond, she ended the call and put the phone on the end table.

Head lowered, Lori closed her eyes, trying to calm down. Her mind refused, telling her not to bother Tav when he was in a crappy mood. It wasn't smart. Her body didn't care. Sluggish didn't begin to describe the lack of strength in her arms and legs. A sense of destiny swept through her, taking over.

"Just say hi to him," she whispered. "Talk. No biggie." Her stomach rolled. What if she couldn't think of anything to say? With a groan, she ran her fingers through her long, strawberry blonde hair worn like Britney's on her album cover. Maybe Tav would like it.

On the front walkway of her parents' house, Lori stopped. A gentle breeze brushed past, delivering the scent of dry desert air and a hint of water nourishing the scant landscaping of ocotillos, hot pink oleanders and Jacaranda trees. Her eyes trailed over Tav's baggy jeans and broad shoulders.

Images of them talking, and him actually looking at her, scrolled through her mind. Coupled with the mounting temperature, already near eighty degrees, a bead of sweat slipped down her cheek. Heat prickled her chest and face.

She willed herself not to blush and couldn't stop, disturbed by the weakness, dreading any imperfection. Instinctively, she held up her right forearm, inspecting her port-wine birthmark on the inside of it. Covered with makeup, the reddish splotch appeared lighter, though still visible in the harsh sun.

A muffled moan escaped her throat. She wanted to die. What had she been thinking wearing a short-sleeve tee today? Why couldn't her parents spring for laser treatments to get rid of the dumb thing?

"It makes you special," her father always reasoned.

It made her ugly.

To the right, a group of children laughed shrilly in a backyard. Lifting her head, Lori froze, her eyes snagging on Tav, her heart pounding wildly. He'd stopped shooting

baskets to stare at her—or rather her right forearm. Quickly, Lori hid it behind herself. Aware of how dumb she looked, she waved with her other hand and called out, “Hi!”

Several strands of hair stuck to Tav’s sweaty forehead. Lips parted on his rough breaths, he glanced at her top, capris and platform sandals then rolled his eyes. As he would to a baby or worse, a girl he considered repulsive.

Lori’s hand dropped. Quick tears clouded her vision.

Unfazed, Tav adjusted the volume on his CD player. The bass of Puff Daddy’s *Can’t Nobody Hold Me Down* throbbed across the yard. Tav dribbled to the right, the left, avoiding imaginary players then sprang up, tossing the ball at the hoop.

Stuck to the spot, Lori blinked quickly, desperate to drive back her tears. If she acted like a scared kid and went back into her house, she’d just have to come out again in a few minutes to walk to Piper’s and would have to pass him on the way. If she continued down the street now, there’d be no avoiding him either.

The steady thump-thump-thump of his dribbling ball rang against the concrete, keeping time with the music’s pulsing rhythm, saying Tav didn’t care about her and never would.

Surprising fury at his indifference rushed through Lori, quickening her breath. She’d only said hi and was trying to be nice. Since when was that a major crime? Who did he think he was? God? His grades sucked, his dad said so. He was shooting baskets in his parents’ driveway when the rest of his friends were on spring break in Mexico. Did that make him hot? No. It made him as imperfect as her.

Crossing her brief front yard, Lori headed for his house, stopping at the edge of his neighbor’s walk, waiting for him to acknowledge her.

Tav didn’t. As his shot slipped through the hoop, he danced briefly to Puff Daddy’s rap, retrieved his ball and lifted it above his head. Knees bent, he prepared for his next move.

Lori yelled, “Bet you don’t make it!”

Tav flinched at her voice. With an abbreviated jump, he released the ball too quickly. It bounced off the rim and dropped to the ground. “Shit.” Growling, he grabbed the ball and turned to face her, his broad shoulders jerking with his heaving breaths.

Something inside Lori fluttered, sending tingles down her arms and legs. She recognized part of her reaction as fear, the other as deepening interest. For the first time ever, Tav noticed her without looking bored or repelled. He was pissed, sure—but she had his full attention. Making certain her arm was still behind her, she stepped closer and struggled to keep her voice from sounding too excited. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

His brows drew together.

Oh crap, why had she said that? Guys didn’t want anyone to think they were afraid. Hurriedly, she backtracked, “I mean, I shouldn’t have broken your

concentration. Do you play basketball at school? What college do you go to? Did you win a basketball scholarship?"

His jaw continued to tighten. He spoke through gritted teeth. "Go. Away." Not waiting for her departure, he turned.

Her heart sank. On its heels, outrage spiked. She curled her fingers into fists. "Are you always such a jerk? What's the matter, Tav, don't you know how to talk to girls?"

His hand stalled near his CD player. Bringing it back without pumping up the volume even more, he looked past his shoulder at her. "Find me a girl to talk to and I'll go on all night."

A wave of mortification sent heat to Lori's face and throat. Her words spilled out before she could stop them or calm her wobbly voice. "Why do you hate me?"

Tav stared at her as though she was something smelly stuck to the bottom of his sneakers. "Holy shit, are you going to cry?"

"No!" She pretended a tear wasn't trailing down her cheek, refusing to wipe it away. "Why can't you be nice to me? I just want to talk."

Turning, he snapped, "I'm busy. Go away. Leave me the fuck alone."

"Fine." She tightened her fists, digging her nails into her palms. "You're a creep, you know that?"

With his back to her, he made another basket. "Better return to your playpen, Lori, before your mommy knows you got out."

For one awful moment, she couldn't move. Turning too quickly, she stumbled briefly on her platforms then hurried to her house, knuckling away tears. She'd just reached the front walk when she remembered Piper. Torn between going back inside and continuing with her plans for the mall, Lori decided she couldn't stay home. Tav would know he'd hurt her. She wasn't about to give him the satisfaction.

With as much dignity as possible, she hurried back down the street, reaching his driveway. He stopped dribbling as though he expected her to say something else. Chewing her lower lip, she slowed and looked over.

Tav's turned his ball in his hands, his attention on it, not her, his whole mood saying he dreaded having her anywhere near him.

Crushed, Lori continued down the walk, praying she wouldn't trip on her platforms and give him something to laugh about. She went past two houses and pivoted to go across the street when she noticed a slow-moving car approach, a silver Honda, the same kind Piper's brother drove. Had he come to pick her up? Had he and Piper heard what Tav had said to her?

Her stomach pitched. Pulling herself together, pretending nothing could possibly be wrong, she stared at the car, trying to see past the sun glaring off the front windshield. The vehicle edged closer, the driver's side window whooshing down. A man in his twenties smiled at her, showing his perfect white teeth. "Hi, I think I'm lost. Can you help me?"

Lori started to look at Tav then stopped, regarding this guy instead. He was good-looking in an adult way with thick, dark hair and hazel eyes, the same color as hers. His friendly manner encouraged her closer. Two steps away from his door, Lori hesitated and glanced over. Dancing to Tupac's *California Love*, Tav spun the basketball on his forefinger, the same as the Harlem Globetrotters, still ignoring her.

"Sure," she said to the guy in the car, her voice loud so Tav would hear.

He moved the ball from his right forefinger to his left clearly immune to her presence.

The guy behind the wheel cleared his throat. "Great." His deep voice sounded super nice, the way a man should talk to a girl. "My cousin and I are looking for Creosote Trails Drive."

Lori pulled her gaze from Tav. She returned the young man's smile, deliberately flirting with him, hoping Tav would look over and notice. Glancing past the guy to the girl in the passenger seat—his cousin—Lori figured her to be nineteen or twenty with chestnut hair similar to Piper's and pretty blue eyes.

If they were on this street and looking for Creosote Trails Drive, they were lost. "You're like way away from there. You have to go down this street to Paintbrush Lane, make a right, then go past Lantana Court and make a left, then you go to..."

"Wait," the girl interrupted as Lori got to the seventh street. Briefly, she laughed. "I have a map. Can you show me? Please?"

"Sure." Lori offered the guy an interested smile to prove to Tav she no longer thought about him. The dull smack of his ball against concrete said he couldn't care less. Frowning, Lori rounded the back of the Honda and went to the passenger side, away from his indifference and gaze should he decide to take a look.

The girl's door yawned widely. She strained to turn in her seat, trying to reach something in the back. "My map," she said, her leg out of the vehicle, the heel of her strappy sandal touching the street. "It fell on the floor near the edge of my seat. Can you reach it?"

"Sure." Lori bent down.

"Hurry," the young man said.

Head turned to ask why, Lori gasped instead. Her hand flew to her hair as the girl wound it around her fist. In her other hand, she held a knife, pressing it to Lori's throat. Lori's knee hit the edge of the car. Pain tore up her right leg. She tried to jerk away from the knife and bumped the side of her head on the edge of the car. Breathing heavily, the girl continued to shove her into the backseat. The young man kept repeating, "Hurry—hurry—hurry."

Mewling, Lori scrambled into the back of the car to get away from the girl and her weapon. Too late, she realized how the movement trapped her. The girl's door slammed shut, sounding final, the way the metal bar on a rollercoaster does, warning that you have to take the ride, you can't escape. Knees on the backseat, Lori pounded the heels of her hands on the rear window. "Tav!" she screamed. "Help me! Tav!"

"Shut up!" the girl shouted, reaching around the seat, grabbing the back of Lori's capris to yank her to the floor.

Terrified sobs stole Lori's breath. Why were they doing this to her? Who were they? Confused, she twisted her hips to pull away from the girl. Her fists beat against the window. Everything went too fast. And then it became slow. As though in a nightmare, she saw her body jerking, her legs kicking, her mouth opening on a new cry.

The car moved down the street, away from her house and Tav.

Please, her mind begged him, look at me, help me!

He got smaller and smaller. His head lifted finally. He stared. The basketball fell from his hands. He took a step forward.

The car turned, entering another street.

Tav blinked sweat out of his eyes and squinted at the sun reflecting off the Honda's side windows. His heart thumped in his chest, the rush of blood in his ears masking all other sound.

The day turned eerily quiet. His mind raced, trying to make sense of what he'd just seen. Or thought he'd seen. Lori's eyes rounded in fear, her mouth opened in horror, her fists banging the back of the Honda's windows.

Was she playing a game? Was she acting like a stupid kid again to bother him? What else? Swearing beneath his breath, he went to retrieve his ball from a clump of cacti on his neighbor's front yard.

He stopped short of it, noticing something in the street. Heart beating out of time, he stared at Lori's platform sandal while the scene he just witnessed replayed in his mind.

Chapter One

San Francisco – Eleven years later

Familiar sounds came from the wet bar of The Montborne's penthouse suite, the noise reaching the gold-and-ebony powder room to the side.

In front of the gilt-edged mirror, Summer Parrish prepared for tonight while listening as Hogan closed a cabinet. Following the wood's muffled thud, she heard the brief tap of a heavy crystal glass coming to rest on the counter, then the clink of ice cubes dropping into it for his drink. Chivas, no doubt. As one of the most trusted members of Anthony's operation, Hogan expected good scotch and even finer surroundings.

The suite boasted fifteen hundred square feet of 1920s-style luxury, beginning with a sumptuous front room. There, ornamental plants rested in large brass pots separated by graceful ferns. Japanese silk papered the walls, its delicate honey color reminiscent of a late summer sun streaming across a field of wheat.

Pricey works of art completed the decadence, along with garnet leather sofas, painted screens hosting intricate designs in rich browns and dark yellows, an ivory marble fireplace and two chandeliers raining beads of soft gauzy light throughout the space. Though exquisite, none of it competed with the sweeping view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the city's skyline, a one hundred and eighty-degree vista on display tonight.

Earlier, Hogan had opened the thick velvet drapes, stripping the room of privacy even on the 39th floor of the building. The windows of the taller surrounding structures allowed anyone to peer inside this space.

The previous month, when Summer had entertained the senator in this suite, he'd asked her to close the drapes and told Hogan to leave.

Hogan refused. "If I go, so do you," he'd announced, unconcerned with the lawmaker's response.

Used to deference, the senator hurled insults, but ultimately remained. A young man with an Ivy League degree, beautiful wife, small children and a constituency devoted to seeing him reach the White House, he'd expected Summer to see to his pleasure as she had for so many other men.

On an edgy sigh, she smoothed down her glossy black hair, cut in a modified Dutch Boy style. The ends of it swung forward, touching her cheeks. Full bangs grazed the edge of her perfectly shaped brows.

Steadying her hand, she applied another coating of mascara to her lashes and allowed herself to wonder who would arrive tonight. Another politician? An

industrialist? A Silicon Valley computer geek barely out of puberty with more money than he knew what to do with? Someone's husband or father?

Doesn't matter. She twisted the tube, closing the mascara. If a man had the thousands of dollars required to be with her for the night, her job was to feign pleasure. Five years ago, she'd learned the consequences of not doing exactly what Anthony wanted, the only time she'd defied him.

Assaulted by the memory, her fingers trembled around the bottle of Dolce & Gabbana perfume. She applied the fragrance liberally to her throat and between her breasts. A cloud of exotic jasmine, orange blossom and sweet vanilla surrounded her, perfuming her skin, encouraging a man's desire, the same as the lubricant she'd stroked on her inner folds and clit.

In the next room, Hogan's cell phone rang.

Almost time, Summer thought. No escape. She'd known as much five years earlier, when Anthony had allowed her to live rather than killing her, threatening her in a way she never believed possible. Even though they both knew she would never try to leave again, Anthony still wanted to make certain, ordering Hogan to remain in the room as she entertained clients. Added protection Anthony insisted upon so she wouldn't reveal anything to them about herself or the operation.

"Are you ready?" Hogan called from the suite's living room. "What's taking so long?"

An equal measure of dread and resentment gripped Summer. Tamping down both emotions, she kept her voice subdued. "I'll be right there."

She inspected herself carefully, knowing he'd notice any imperfection. With her palms, Summer smoothed a wrinkle in her strapless black dress, the bandage design so popular with Hollywood stars, women who were free to come and go as they wished. Where were they tonight? What were other women her age doing? Going to a rock concert with their boyfriends? Sharing drinks at a restaurant with their fiancés or new husbands? Planning their seemingly endless futures? Being cherished and protected?

Her body ached with envy, but she didn't cry. Tears only brought a rush of emotions she couldn't allow. She'd get through tonight as she had all the others, pretending she was on a date with a guy she loved, imagining they'd marry and have a child and buy a house where her parents and his would visit.

Her gaze turned inward, seeing it. A sad smile touched her lips.

Holding onto the precious picture her mind created, a future she'd never have, she braced for the inevitable and glanced at herself one last time, confident she'd hidden all her flaws.

As she entered the suite's living room, Hogan drained his glass, his eyes darting to her. A husky man in his mid-thirties with shaggy blond hair, brown eyes and the all-American good looks of a high school football star, he topped out at five-eleven. In her black heels, Summer was nearly as tall.

Scotch shone on his lower lip as he extended his glass to her.

Without further instruction, she took it to the wet bar, refreshing his drink, wondering who or how many would arrive tonight, knowing better than to inquire.

"Not so much ice," he instructed.

She removed two cubes and delivered his glass.

Purposely, his fingers covered hers, stroking her tapered nails polished a deep scarlet. "You look nice." His boyish features grew playful. "You smell even better."

When he decided to be nice, Hogan could be the most charming of men. When he did not, he terrified her. Uncertain as to which mood he would settle on this evening, Summer kept her gaze on his, yielding, obedient, attuned to his every need.

Taking his drink, Hogan sipped the scotch, his eyes never leaving hers.

Two sharp raps hit the front door. At the sound, Summer turned her head, her heart twisting slightly as it always did as these evenings began.

Hogan placed his glass next to an antique lamp with a frilly gold shade, looked through the peephole and turned the deadbolt.

Flinching at the noise, Summer admonished herself, allowing no other reaction. Her face a mask of compliance, her mind resigned to whatever happened, she glanced up from the knob as Hogan swung the door open.

In the hall stood the man who'd spend the evening with her.

Involuntarily, her pulse jumped. Adrenaline accelerated her heart, driving pulsating warmth through her body at what she saw.

No more than early thirties and tall, probably six-three, he had a young man's build—broad, muscular shoulders and a trim waist. Shoulder-length hair, shiny and clean, in a deep cocoa shade, matched his brows and shadow of beard. His sculpted mouth and straight nose added to his male beauty, though his eyes captured most of Summer's attention.

An incredible bluish gray, they seemed translucent behind his sooty lashes, knowing, focused as he kept his attention on Hogan, speaking in low tones to him and to Farrell, another of Anthony's men who'd escorted him to the suite.

Forgotten for the moment, Summer allowed her gaze to roam the stranger, dressed casually but expensively in a black leather coat reaching his knees, a dove gray crew-neck sweater, charcoal pants and dress boots. Sparks of interest stirred her heart, feeding her foolish fantasy that he was here to pick her up for their date. That she'd be safe in his arms, cherished, protected.

As if to contradict her thoughts, Hogan put his hand out to Farrell, palm up. His associate delivered a pistol, surely the stranger's and unexpected. None of the other men who'd come here had given Farrell their weapons. Who was he? One of the lower-level cops Anthony had on his payroll? Summer glanced at his long hair. Did he work undercover in vice?

The weapon's lengthy barrel glinted dully in the hallway light. "You won't need this while you're here," Hogan said to the stranger. With the gun at his side, he stepped back and went into the suite's spare bedroom.

The stranger spoke in a low voice to Farrell, his full attention on him, not her. His manner suggesting assurance he'd do as he pleased during the coming hours. There was no reason to rush or to inspect the goods.

Clients knew Anthony provided the best. His girls were young, disease-free and healthy, not allowed to smoke or to drink. Nor did he permit any use of drugs. The girls he owned had clear minds. Only in their thoughts could they escape these evenings, pretending their 'dates' looked like this man—remarkably handsome and virile.

The dull sound of metal hitting metal came from the bedroom, telling Summer Hogan had closed the wall safe with the pistol safely inside.

Back in the living room, he spoke to Farrell. "Find anything interesting on him?"

The overhead light glanced off Farrell's lightly freckled forehead and auburn hair. The collar of his tailor-made dress shirt seemed too small for his thick neck, his fair skin chafing red beneath it. "Nope," Farrell said. "He's clean. No wires."

A sound of disgust escaped the newcomer. "This is how I'm treated when I saved Mr. Karam's life?"

Summer's brows lifted slightly at the sensuous rumble of his deep voice and his words. He'd saved Anthony? When? From what?

Hogan smiled. It didn't reach his eyes. They turned hard, wary. "We're not about to take any chances on you being a fed. You're not, are you?"

The stranger held Hogan's gaze, his expression sizing up the shorter man, his expression saying he wasn't impressed. "Not in this life. Am I coming inside or not? Don't waste my time."

"Never," Hogan replied solicitously, gesturing him into the room.

Just past the door, the newcomer stopped and glanced over, catching Summer watching him.

A jolt of embarrassment overcame her. She blushed helplessly. The warmth grew, flowing from her chest to her cheeks. She wanted to turn away from him, to hide her obvious discomfort. She wanted to keep pretending she was a normal woman, one he'd met at a nightclub or through friends.

His presence and this hotel suite precluded that.

As though he'd read her thoughts—or noticed her reddened cheeks—something flickered across his handsome face. Surprise that she'd blushed? Disappointment that she wasn't the kind of woman he would ever want?

More embarrassment flooded her, replaced quickly by unease. Her belly clenched at what his refusal of her would mean when Anthony found out. He'd accuse her of making him look the fool. Afraid of the consequences, Summer knew she should flirt

outrageously with the stranger to change his mind about her, an easy role to play with such a beautiful man.

Inexplicably, his good looks and the expectation of Anthony's punishment changed nothing. She remained rooted to the spot, staring at his eyes, held by them.

Again, something registered in his gaze. He broke it in what seemed a deliberate manner. Glancing down, he took in her full length, his eyes touching her breasts plumped by the dress' sweetheart neckline, her narrow waist, the way the garment hugged her hips, its stretchy material revealing the soft swell of her mound.

His expression remained unreadable, refusing to tell her what he thought. And then he looked up, his eyes unexpectedly direct, appraising.

Summer's mouth went dry at his scrutiny, or rather the sudden familiarity of it. As though she'd faced him before tonight and had worried at the time that he would reject her.

She thought back to the parties at Anthony's compound. Had she seen him there, even fleetingly? No. She would have recalled. He wasn't the kind of man a woman would forget. Her tattered nerves must be playing tricks on her mind.

Eyes on him, she watched as he shrugged out of his coat and tossed it on the leather chair closest to him. The soft fabric of his sweater rippled over his broad chest with each breath. Glancing lower, she studied the prominent bulge behind his fly.

Hogan went to the door. "Get out of here," he told Farrell. "You're not needed any longer."

Farrell's eyes shifted to her. "I want to stay."

Summer's eyes slid to the stranger, worried he'd allow it.

He regarded her for a long moment, then spoke to Farrell. "Leave."

The man protested.

"Now," the stranger said, his voice so deadly calm it held more menace than a shout.

On a muttered swear, Farrell departed. Hogan closed the door and threw the deadbolt. Arms crossed over his chest, he turned and spoke to the stranger while inclining his head to her. "This is Summer. She's yours to do with however you please from now on."

His odd words broke the stranger's grip on Summer. She jerked her head to Hogan and spoke without thinking. "What are you talking about?"

He lifted his hand to run his thumb over his jaw. "You belong to RJ now. You're his gift from Mr. Karam."

Summer's eyes flew to RJ, then back to Hogan. This wasn't about RJ enjoying her for the evening as compensation for saving Anthony's life? She belonged to him now? What did that mean? Where would he take her? For how long would she be away? Would she ever return to Anthony? If she didn't, she'd never again —

No. She stopped her thoughts, refusing to consider losing the only thing keeping her alive. Her shoulders tightened and her fingers drew into tense fists. Why this? What had she done this time? Her lungs burned for air, the room lurched. Hadn't Anthony hurt her enough for running away five years ago? His never-ending punishment was worse than if he'd killed her. She lived with it each day of her life.

Unable to bear it any longer, she shook her head so hard the ends of her hair whipped her cheeks. "No," she cried, the word wrapped in a plea. "I won't go with—"

Hogan interrupted in a barely controlled voice. "What do you mean, you won't?" He moved toward her swiftly, causing her to retreat several steps. Summer's head snapped to the side as her hip and thigh bumped one of the chairs.

Hogan continued to crowd her, cutting off every chance of escape, his tone threatening. "You think you're going to tell us what to do? Is that it? Like fucking hell. You've been trouble from the start. It's time someone taught you some manners."

In a flash of movement, RJ grabbed Hogan's arm before he could strike her, yanking him away from Summer. Hogan's thick fingers folded downward, making a fist. Grunting and fighting, he tried to free himself. RJ held onto him easily, the tips of his fingers digging into the man's suit jacket.

Strained breaths pumped past Hogan's lips. His florid face matched the shade of Farrell's hair. He growled, "Get your fucking hand off of me."

Summer saw RJ's fingers squeezing even harder, blanching the tips. Sweat dotted Hogan's forehead.

Breathing easily, speaking in that same calm yet deadly voice, RJ warned, "Don't touch her. Understand?"

Hogan heaved a breath and yanked his arm one last time. It remained imprisoned, his Italian silk jacket ripping instead. He swore loudly.

RJ's jaw tightened with his next squeeze. "Understand?" he repeated through his teeth, his manner proving he didn't care if Hogan was one of Anthony's most valued lieutenants or that he had a gun and wouldn't hesitate to use it to right a perceived wrong. RJ seemed to believe Anthony would support him in this dispute.

Huffing at the pain, Hogan blurted, "Yeah, I fucking understand." RJ released him. Hogan backed away quickly, rubbing his arm, his head twisted to the right to inspect his ruined sleeve.

RJ continued to face the man, his large frame deliberately between Hogan and her, strong, protective.

Summer's heart began to slow.

RJ turned to her. "Are you all right?"

Her gaze shot to Hogan.

"Are you?" RJ asked again, his voice insistent.

Summer met his eyes and nodded.

He didn't look as if he believed her. "Come here," he said, holding out his hand. "It's all right. No one's going to hurt you."

At the sound of his voice and words, gentle, not threatening, something inside Summer shifted, confusing her as to whether she should trust him or if she should remain cautious. She forced down a swallow and approached slowly, glancing at his hand.

He lowered it, his long fingers relaxed.

Stopping in front of him, Summer glanced at his beautifully chiseled mouth while she awaited his next move.

He didn't touch her or speak. Silence pressed in on them, the quiet interrupted only by the rush of wind against the windows, the faint ticking of an antique clock on the mantle, her pounding pulse.

She stared at the dark stubble on his upper lip and caught a hint of soap on his skin, light, fresh as spring air with a trace of lime. The scent of his leather jacket lingered on his sweater, a powerful, masculine fragrance. Far taller than her, he appeared broader than she'd first thought, his body potently male.

Her heart beat so fitfully, her body weakened.

At last, she tilted her face upward and met his eyes. Her breath caught. Dark gray flecks, stormier than the blue, intensified the color of his irises, increasing their allure. She searched for any signs of brutality and saw none. Instead, he looked at her with patience and curiosity.

"Why don't you want to go with me?" he asked in a soft voice.

For any other woman, the question might have seemed ludicrous. For Summer, it was not. For over a decade, her role had been to obey.

This time, she could not. There was too much to lose, a matter she couldn't reveal to RJ. Nor the fact that if he took her away, she'd escape him as surely as she had once done with Anthony. Only this time she'd return willingly to Anthony's compound and beg him to let her stay. He'd given her no choice. For as long as she lived, his world would trap her.

"I don't know you," she said, unable to think of any other excuse.

"Then we'll have to change that, don't you think?"

Having no idea what to say, hopeless to answer, she simply looked at him.

He held her gaze for moments, then murmured, "I won't hurt you." He ran his knuckles over her cheek to her jaw, pausing before going further, as though wordlessly asking for her permission.

Summer's heart continued to beat painfully while her skin tingled from his gentle touch.

RJ let another moment pass, then trailed his fingertips to her shoulder, leaving currents of warmth in his wake. Instead of touching her intimately as so many other

men had, his fingers glided over her biceps and moved lower, to her right forearm. There he paused and looked down.

Instantly, Summer's heart caught—a conditioned response from a lifetime of trying to hide her imperfection. Warily, she followed RJ's gaze to the birthmark on her forearm, covered now with special makeup, her only option.

Years ago, Anthony had sent her to a cosmetic surgeon to have the stain removed with a laser.

"What your father wouldn't do," he'd said, offering proof he cared about her.

At the time, she'd convinced herself he loved her as no one else ever had.

The laser's treatments lasted several months, but then the discoloration returned, marking her. Ruining her, Anthony claimed so casually, the love she thought he had for her an illusion.

With little choice, she'd learned to mask her flaw as skillfully as possible. In the room's muted light, one had to be looking for the blotch to see it.

RJ's thumb stroked the spot, his action saying he'd noticed.

Instinctively, Summer drew her arm back, expecting him to return her to Anthony, to ask for another of his girls, one who was perfect.

Again, he surprised her, curling his fingers around her wrist, not allowing her to quit his touch. Face lifted, his eyes studying her, he spoke in a soothing voice. "There's no reason to be afraid."

There was every reason. What would happen once they left this suite? If he took her out of California or the country, she might never see the United States or the Bay area again. Overwhelmed with dismay, she asked, "Are we leaving now?"

Hogan spoke from behind, his comments directed at RJ, his tone contemptuous. "Mr. Karam said to make certain she's what you really want, just as if you're one of our clients. He said you're not leaving this suite until you do."

Caught off guard by Hogan's directive, RJ looked over at the man, but didn't comment. In a night he hadn't anticipated, he kept encountering nothing but surprises.

Like having his gun confiscated before being allowed to board the elevator for this suite. And hearing on the ride over that Anthony had given him Summer, not for the evening, but as a gift for saving his life, a matter RJ hadn't predicted and no one had obviously informed her about.

Mr. Karam said to make certain she's what you really want, just as if you're one of our clients. He said you're not leaving this suite until you do.

He had two choices—neither of which were ideal. Stay and meet Hogan's challenge. Or leave, knowing Hogan would take Summer to tonight's next client and the next, men who might not notice or care about the turmoil RJ heard in her voice and saw in her eyes.

He felt them on him now.

He recalled her reaction upon first seeing him. Again, not what he'd expected. A part of him had wondered if she'd feign passion or engage in blatant seduction. Instead, she'd stared at him with barely concealed embarrassment. At what he might expect from her? At how Anthony told her to perform? RJ had no idea, but her expression had rocked him to his core, intensifying his urge to protect her.

He might not be her idea of Prince Charming, but he wouldn't use her as another man might. Or harm her as Hogan tried to do.

Not even trying to hide his dislike for the man, RJ pulled his gaze away and looked at her.

Summer's eyes were still on him, watchful, waiting.

Making his decision, the only one possible given the circumstances, RJ asked, "What do you like to drink?"

Hogan answered before she could, his voice dropping several degrees. "Mr. Karam doesn't allow his girls to have liquor."

"Summer isn't Mr. Karam's concern anymore." Before RJ could catch her reaction to his words, he swung his head to Hogan. "Get her a glass of white wine."

The man hesitated. Then, as if recalling their last altercation which he'd lost badly, he strode to the wet bar, banging cabinets, rattling glasses.

Indifferent to Hogan's irritation, RJ turned back to her, gentling his voice. "How old are you?"

Clearly startled at his question, she hesitated, then asked, "How old am I?"

He had to make certain of her age, so he nodded.

She spoke in a barely audible voice. "Twenty-six."

His gaze traveled her features. To him, she seemed younger than her physical age should have allowed. It was something in her eyes, a lack of guile, a surprising vulnerability her role in Anthony's operation hadn't crushed.

Her embarrassment from a few minutes ago returned. She shifted her gaze from him.

RJ let a moment pass, then teased, "Hey, I'm over here."

Her eyes darted back to his.

"Am I that awful to look at?" he asked sincerely.

Summer's eyes widened in surprise. "No."

"You're sure?"

She started to smile, then stopped. "Yeah...very." After a moment's hesitation, her gaze drifted down him.

Leaning a bit closer to her, RJ pitched his voice to the same subdued tone she had. "Why are we whispering?"

A small smile threatened to break loose.

He tipped his head so it would be level with hers. "Is that a grin I see?"

She flicked her eyes to him.

"Here," Hogan said, his presence intruding. He extended a glass of sauvignon blanc to her.

"It's all right," RJ said when Summer hesitated to take the glass, no doubt reluctant to break one of Anthony's rules. "If you want to try it, go on. If you don't, he can take it back. You don't have to do anything tonight you don't want to. Whatever happens from this moment on is your choice."

Her eyes jumped to his.

Hogan muttered something beneath his breath.

Ignoring him, RJ kept his attention on her. He wasn't about to have her afraid of him. He needed Summer to know she was in charge tonight. If she accepted him—and that was a big if, considering what she'd said earlier—he craved her willing participation.

She glanced at the glass in Hogan's hand, seemingly torn as to what she should do. On a halting sigh, she took it and risked a sip.

"Good?" RJ asked, keeping his voice deliberately mild.

Licking her bottom lip, she met his eyes. "It tastes like pears." She sipped again. "And kind of like melons."

He sensed she wasn't wild about it. "What do you usually like to drink?"

She didn't hesitate at all. "Anything with chocolate."

RJ grinned, thinking the answer fit her perfectly.

Bringing the glass back to her lips, Summer watched him over the rim. Her gaze dipped to his mouth, then returned to his eyes. Staring at them, she took another taste, but lifted the glass too quickly. A bit of the wine spilled over her bottom lip.

Before she could clean it with her fingers, RJ intercepted her hand, unable to help himself. "I'll get it. Okay?" he asked.

New color rose to her cheeks. After a moment's hesitation, her fingers curled around his and she nodded, granting permission.

RJ stopped himself from letting out a relieved sigh. For the moment, at least, he'd saved her from Anthony's other customers.

Once she'd released his hand, RJ used his thumb to brush away the drops.

Her lids fluttered. Lips parting, she inhaled deeply.

Not in fear, nor in mindless obedience to what he wanted. RJ could see she liked what he'd done. "Better?" he asked.

Slowly, she nodded, her gaze never leaving his face.

In her eyes, he saw what looked to be confusion, as though she was uncertain how to feel. He also detected a bit of wonder, perhaps because he wasn't behaving like the men she usually met.

Drawn to her in a way he couldn't resist, liking her sweet charm, RJ eased a bit closer and she reacted immediately but not cautiously. Her face lifted to his, her gaze travelling his face, touching his eyes then dipping to his mouth.

The urge to kiss her—the unbearable need—rose swift and pitiless, seeming to come out of nowhere. Crazy, he knew, considering his purpose here tonight and what he'd imagined on the way over.

Reminding himself of his promise, that she wouldn't have to do anything she didn't want, he waited for her to say something, to make some kind of move.

Her attention remained focused on his mouth. At last, she eased closer, her knee bumping his.

RJ didn't bother to look down. Neither did Summer. She kept her face raised to his, an unmistakable invitation. An honest one.

Taking it, he bent his head to hers.

Her lids fluttered, then sank.

Gently, RJ brushed his lips over hers, his pulse racing at their plush heat, his mind ordering him to take this slow, to measure her reaction before he went further. After only a moment's contact, he lifted his head and opened his eyes.

Her lids lifted slowly, as though she found them too heavy to keep up. Her gaze had blurred...softened beyond his expectation. She lifted her hand and rubbed her thumb against the side of his mouth. No doubt removing the lipstick she'd left there.

He smiled.

Regarding it, smiling gently in return, Summer stroked his bristly cheek with her fingertips.

Her featherlight touch sent a bolt of desire through RJ's body, affecting him more than a slow, sexy striptease. Turning his face, he kissed her wrist then leaned down and pressed his cheek to hers, needing to have her close, needing to protect her. Her silky skin nearly undid him. The same as her faint vanilla scent. So fragile, so delicate.

Mouth to her ear, he whispered, "Tonight's about whatever you want. You set the pace."

To his surprise...to his delight, she moved into him.

Their bellies and thighs touched—hers soft and yielding, his unresisting, solid. Summer's pulse jumped, shaken by their closeness. Her mind kept repeating his words.

Whatever happens from this moment on is your choice. Tonight's about whatever you want.

Given the option, the first she'd known in too long, her decision had been easier than she might have imagined. She liked his gentle manner, his playful teasing. He'd made her smile.

He made her want again. She craved his large body and protection.

But she couldn't go with him. Tonight would be all they had. Intending to enjoy it, she leaned into him.

The edge of his hair skimmed her cheek, delivering his shampoo's faint citrusy fragrance. Summer inhaled deeply, capturing more of it. Beneath the manufactured scent was his own, unmistakably a man's musk. Her belly fluttered.

Whatever you want.

She placed her free hand on his chest and splayed her fingers to touch as much of his right pec as she could. Beneath his cashmere sweater and her caress, his firm muscles danced. In her fantasies, when she'd needed comfort, she had imagined a man like RJ.

You set the pace.

Her cheek glided over his as she sought his mouth, just as she would if they'd been on a date. Willingly, she eased her head back to encourage his kiss.

In no hurry, he allowed her to experience the contradiction of his beard-roughened face and the pillowy softness of his lips, the hint of cherry tobacco on his breath. Hers caught as the tip of his tongue—hot and wet—probed the seam of her mouth. Back arched, breasts nuzzled against him, Summer took as much as he could give her.

He filled her well.

She curled her fingers in his sweater. Encouraged by her response, his hand went to her hair. Working his fingers through it, he cupped the back of her head in his large palm.

Her lips parted even more, her tongue sliding over his. She tasted a trace of peppermint toothpaste meant to mask what he'd smoked, and something beyond it, an indescribable flavor belonging to him alone.

A soft grunt escaped RJ. His flat belly bumped hers, his cock brushing her mound.

She imagined his hardened shaft inside of her, stretching, possessing, arousing, fulfilling her female need to have a strong man take her and deliver pleasure they both wanted. Her scalp tingled. She tightened her hold on his sweater to draw him closer. Eager, not compliant, Summer suckled his tongue, then forced it from her mouth so she could enter him.

Clearly liking the way she took charge, he drew her tongue deeply inside, his lips pursed around its base, not letting go. It fueled something buried in her and affected him as well. Their kiss turned surprisingly greedy, savage, their harsh breathing punctuated by her mewling and his satisfied grunts.

Minutes passed. Their lewd sounds grew quiet, the kiss evolving from wild to tender like a gentle dream that shielded her from the harsh realities of waking. From tomorrow.

Summer didn't want the moment to ever end, but RJ pulled his mouth free and heaved in a full breath. Unsettled by the loss of his touch—her body weakened with desire—she looked up at him.

Stark wonder registered in his gaze, telling her their kiss had affected him as much as it had her, going beyond satisfaction.

It seemed to have moved him in a way he hadn't anticipated.

Pulling his gaze from her with a speed that said he didn't want anyone peering into his soul, he glanced at her wine. "Do you want to finish that?" His voice rasped with lingering emotion.

Under his watchful gaze, she drained the glass. Tonight, the wine represented her choice, her freedom, the same as her hunger for him. For the first time, she'd choose a man instead of having one take her.

Briefly, the ivory-colored beverage stung her tongue and throat. Unused to alcohol, she soon felt its warm effects ribboning from her torso to her arms and legs, giving her an even deeper sense of independence.

RJ took her glass, extending it to Hogan.

Brows drawn together, Hogan placed the wineglass on a Queen Anne end table, then held his hands behind himself.

"Close the drapes," RJ said.

"Why?" Hogan snapped.

Summer saw impatience in RJ's eyes.

Hogan must have too. He strode to the windows and yanked the drapes. They swayed back and forth, cutting off anyone's ability to look inside.

RJ looked at her.

His calm manner, protective strength and male beauty kindled something within Summer. She moved back into him, further aroused by his scent and size.

Smiling, RJ turned her until Summer's back faced his chest, his arm around her waist—weighty, restrictive—her ass to his groin and stiff cock. A heavy sigh rushed past her lips. Her head lolled to the side, a wordless invitation for him to make her feel wanted...prized, at least for tonight. He accepted, his mouth settling on her neck. With his tongue, he made small circles, licking, tasting.

Desire for him poured through Summer despite Hogan's presence. Pretending he didn't exist, as she had so many times in the past, she rested her hand on RJ's thigh. His impressive muscles jumped, greeting her palm. In return, she squeezed gently. He latched onto her throat and suckled.

Passion she'd rarely known shimmered through her, tingling her skin and stealing all of her strength. Wonderfully limp, she released her weight into him.

The edges of his hair swept past her breasts as he enjoyed her neck a bit longer, his tattered breaths scudding over her skin. Moving his arm from her waist, he draped it across her chest, his fingers curled around her biceps, a more imprisoning hold than his last. And yet his caress remained gentle, not bullying.

Thankful, she opened her eyes and eased her face to his to catch his expression. RJ didn't allow it. He swooped down and kissed her again, the contact impassioned,

irresistible and far too quick. Lifting his head, he ran his free hand down the side of her dress, his fingers searching for the zipper and finding it.

Heat rushed to her cheeks, though not in embarrassment. In anticipation.

The warmth deepened as RJ lifted his hand from the fastener to cup her chin, turning her face away so he could reclaim her throat.

Pleasure sluiced through Summer. RJ's kisses enticed, working more magic. She closed her eyes, accepting the darkness and him.

His chest quivered against her back as he murmured, "You like that?"

Desire for him coarsened her breaths. Her heart pumped violently, punching her ribs. "Yes."

"You want more?"

She spoke on a sigh. "Yes."

RJ grasped the fastener and eased it down, unzipping the dress to her waist. The smooth fabric fell away from her breasts. Exposed to the room's slight chill and his coming touch, her areolas tightened, the tips stiffening.

Hogan released his breath in a noisy sigh, his frustration evident, saying he wanted RJ to share her.

Protectively, possessively, RJ's hand slid from her waist to her breasts, cupping the left one in his calloused palm, his fingers circling the soft globe and squeezing, though not painfully.

He dominated without cruelty and possessed without threat, engendering a mixture of safety and passion, his thumb rubbing her nipple, rousing the nub, obliging it to respond. It became exquisitely sensitive, suffering for more. Tormenting pressure built between her legs. In response, moisture seeped from her pussy.

His arm tightened over her chest as he lowered the zipper to her hip and pushed the dress past her mound. Fleeting, the fabric clung to her thighs, then slid past her knees and calves to the gleaming parquet floor.

Head bent, he settled his mouth on her biceps, his tongue slick and hot. His free hand slid past her belly and garter belt to the edge of her thong. There, he hesitated.

Tonight's about whatever you want.

Willingly, Summer yielded, parting her thighs.

Slipping his fingers beneath her thong's flimsy black silk, he cupped her mound, his hand nestled between her legs, exploring her damp slit.

An indelicate moan tore from deep within Summer, shaking her core.

Slowly, searchingly, his hand traveled her hidden folds. Plump with desire, they clearly revealed her reaction was genuine, not an act, her body aching for his, her mind and heart demanding he mount her, piercing her depths until his shaft burrowed fully inside.

In no rush, he explored her cleft lazily, his fingers growing familiar with the most intimate part of her. Lust poured through Summer, intolerable, demanding.

With seeming reluctance, he removed his hand from her mound and released his hold. Summer forced her eyes to open. She looked over as he stepped to her side, his gaze sweeping her partial nudity – the skimpy thong, black satin garter belt, dark hose and heels.

Helpless against his scrutiny, longing for it in a way that made her feel both weakened and powerful, she allowed him to look his fill.

Once more, his eyes shifted to her forearm and birthmark.

Her little finger twitched with her sudden discomfort, the intolerable compulsion to hide her arm behind herself. Fighting it, she remained motionless, vulnerable.

Palm up, he offered her his hand.

She accepted it without pause.

Hogan said something inaudible beneath his breath. RJ took no notice. Nor did Summer. Fingers closed over hers, RJ kept her steady as she stepped out of her dress.

He kicked it aside, and slipped one arm around her waist, the other behind her knees, lifting her into his arms.

Her breath rushed out in a pleased sigh. Her fingertips touched the base of his throat, noting his fevered skin and the rapid beating of his heart.

"The bedroom," he said to Hogan, his eyes on her, desire scraping his voice. "Where is it?"

"To the left." Hogan inclined his head. "The first door."

RJ didn't move. Instead, he held her gaze, his arms tightening around her in a reassuring caress. "Tell me what you want," he asked.

She touched his bottom lip with her fingertips, astounded at its softness and heat, and answered with the truth. "You."

Pleasure glittered in his eyes.

The sight pleased her beyond reason, exciting her even more. Tonight, she'd hold nothing back from him. She'd allow herself to dream, to enjoy his warmth, tenderness, passion, believing it would always belong to her, believing it was because of her, remembering these few moments of indulgence and joy when they parted.

Chapter Two

With great care, RJ carried Summer to the paneled hall, careful not to alarm her in any way, wanting to maintain the fragile trust he'd already built, grateful for her current response.

She ran her fingers across his pecs and pressed her lips to his cheek, her mouth and breath warming his skin.

His lids sank to half-mast, complementing his pleased grunt. It drew Summer closer. She snuggled against his chest, her arm draped across his shoulders, her fingers leaving his pecs and going to his ear, circling the lobe, tickling it.

RJ stopped mid-step and loosened his hold briefly, pretending to drop her.

She yelped, then giggled at his horseplay. The joyous sound touched his soul. Arms wrapped around his neck, she held tight.

He adjusted her weight, an easy matter. Although she was physically taller than he would have guessed, she was smaller too, her shoulders narrow, her bone structure delicate. Head turned to hers, he noticed again that her hazel eyes were more gold than tawny, their color arresting behind her long lashes.

Holding her gaze, he winked.

A new flush crept up her throat, staining her cheeks. She curled her fingers on his pec, glancing down shyly.

The moment humbled RJ. She wasn't anything like Anthony had described. He needed to know why she wanted to stay with that kind of man.

Why don't you want to go with me? he'd asked.

I don't know you.

No matter what he was—and he'd done many things that made him ashamed, beginning when he was a teenager—he wasn't the man she thought. Hunger for her to understand that, a sudden desire for her to see him and no other man nudged RJ, encouraging him to continue down the hall.

Behind them, Hogan still followed, his shoes slapping the hardwood floor, keeping time with the sharp clap of RJ's.

Frowning at the man's unending intrusion, RJ turned the corner and entered the master bedroom.

Bathed in the glow of the city, its gold-papered walls and polished furnishings glimmered with understated excess. Here, no larger buildings loomed nearby to allow strangers a view from their windows or to obstruct the sweeping view. Outside, twinkling lights in a riot of colors ate away the darkness. The Golden Gate Bridge,

illuminated with street lamps, rose imperiously, slashing the dusky sky with its scarlet color.

RJ carried Summer to the California King bed, its tall mahogany headboard flush against the wall, its linens fragrant with the fragile scent she wore.

Without anyone asking, Hogan turned on the lights.

Brass wall sconces with fluted glass shades provided delicate illumination, the faint glow almost mocking the primal acts that would soon occur.

RJ lowered Summer to the mattress. She lay back, rubbing her palms over the silk comforter, her body vulnerable, her eyes on him.

Bending down, he ran his knuckles across her cheek, hoping the simple gesture assured her she wouldn't come to harm, not at his hands.

Her lids fluttered. She smiled.

"Comfortable?" he asked.

Summer nodded.

Giving her another wink that widened her smile, he grabbed the black-and-gold tasseled pillows, tossing them on the floor. With his knees touching the edge of the gold comforter, RJ lowered his eyes to her thong, her navel, nipples, throat and then her eyes.

A surge of lust battered him. He forced it down, determined not to take anything without her approval and without first seeing to her pleasure.

Hand resting on her thigh, he trailed his fingers toward her cunt, glancing up to see her response.

She parted her lips, her gaze softening, accepting. As if to prove her desire for him, her willingness to engage in sex, she dragged her hands above her head, crossing her right wrist over her left, exposing her breasts fully to him. Her areolas puckered around the long tips, firm and ready for his use.

The muscles in RJ's chest tightened, not allowing him to take a full breath. To the left of the bed, Hogan shifted his weight, causing the floor to creak, reminding everyone of his presence.

It rankled RJ, but he said nothing—yet. He'd deal with the man when the time was right.

Concentrating on Summer, RJ's hands went to her thong. He lowered the shred of silk away from her cunt and over her hips. There, he stopped. With his fingers resting on her mound, he ran his thumb up her warm, wet cleft, enjoying its slickness and her satisfied gasp.

RJ lifted his eyes from her slit to her face, wanting to know the truth, needing it before he went further. "Did you use a lubricant before I arrived?"

A deeper flush colored her face. After a brief hesitation, she nodded.

"You won't have to use it when you're with me," he promised, evidence of that already in her lust-swollen vaginal lips.

Her breasts jiggled with her heightening breathing.

"Do you like the thought of that?" RJ asked.

She answered in a voice strangled with desire. "Yes."

Satisfied, he looked at her smooth mound, his fingers stroking the bare skin.

Summer reacted immediately, her hips lifting, driving her body closer to his fingers.

He held back, not yet touching her clit, concentrating instead on her smooth pubes. At one of their meetings, Anthony had told RJ he insisted his girls not have any body hair. They were to be fully naked, no part of their cunts hidden from a man's appraising gaze.

"It seems to make them more submissive," Anthony had offered with a smile in his voice.

"No more of this either if you don't want it," RJ said to Summer, his eyes again meeting hers. "I prefer you natural."

Hogan spoke up, an edge to his voice. "Mr. Karam insists upon the Brazilian wax."

RJ's eyes didn't leave hers. "Summer no longer belongs to Mr. Karam."

Something flickered in her eyes. Panic? Sadness? Why? From what RJ had already experienced with Anthony, the man wasn't the sort who would generate anyone's loyalty.

Wanting hers, RJ pushed everything aside except the desire humming in his blood. He eased her thong past her thighs and off her legs, but didn't drop it on the floor. Instead, he pressed the damp silk to his nose, inhaling deeply of her female musk. The room seemed to spin and his eyes closed to stop his dizziness.

"I want a piece," Hogan said, his voice thickened with insistence and excitement.

RJ's jaw clenched. Opening his eyes, he caught Summer watching him, her caution returned as she awaited his response.

Taking another breath, he released it quickly, then tossed her thong on the bed and swung his face to Hogan, knowing the time for their showdown had come. "No."

The man stepped closer to the bed. "Why the fuck not?"

RJ didn't try to hide his disgust. "I don't have to explain myself to you. Now get the fuck out of here and close the door on your way out."

"Not a chance." Hogan planted his feet widely apart, his hands on his hips. "Mr. Karam's orders. He said I stay while you break her in."

RJ's eyes narrowed at the man's crude comment, his very presence. "I'll be certain to ask him how true that is the next time I see him."

"You do that. I'm not leaving." Before RJ could comment, Hogan snatched Summer's thong from the bed, easily ripping it. "I can tie her hands with this. Then we both can—"

RJ interrupted in a low growl. "Don't touch her, not if you want to leave here in one piece."

Bright spots of red dotted Hogan's face.

Ignoring the man, RJ looked at Summer. Her eyes sparkled in the golden light. Her mouth trembled. Her expression seemed to be one of gratitude.

"Still comfortable?" he asked, his voice softened.

She swallowed, the movement causing her slender throat to bob. She stole a look at Hogan before she said, "Yes."

RJ smiled. "Tell me what you want."

Her lids fluttered. She whispered, "You."

And only you, he heard in her voice. RJ nodded in agreement, wanting her too, more than he'd imagined when he'd been on his way here tonight. Hands on her thighs, RJ lifted them so her heels rested on the comforter. Feet spread, she exposed her beautiful cunt to him, freely offering it. He'd given her a choice, take him or leave him.

Thankfully, she'd wanted him to stay.

He met her eyes.

Summer's breaths grew shallow. A pulse beat steadily between her legs. More moisture answered, the wet warmth seeping from her opening.

Don't touch her, RJ had ordered Hogan. With those three words, he'd offered her the greatest and dearest protection she known, along with a measure of respect.

Gratitude mingled with her growing attraction to RJ, the power of both emotions overwhelming her. She wanted to feel his weight and heat. Her body ached to touch his.

RJ made her wait. He stepped away from the bed, his hands on the edge of his sweater, lifting it over his firm torso.

Eyes fixed on his smooth, golden skin, Summer forgot to breathe, her gaze following his sweater as he pulled it upward, the ends fluttering over his pecs.

Her lips parted on a wanton sigh at his unusual tattoo. The geometric design, a series of thick black swirls that ended in sharp points, covered his right pectoral muscle and flowed over his shoulder to his back. Several of the points curved from behind to reach just below his right nipple. Another set curled around his muscular biceps. The effect proved startling, savage, the kind of marking men would have used in ancient times to declare their strength to an enemy or a woman they held captive.

For the first time in eleven years, Summer didn't feel trapped. She hungered for this, wanting nothing more than to have RJ mount her, his heavy weight and heat making her feel protected, safe, treasured...if only for a time.

Her heart beat crazily at the thought. At having something—someone—she wanted.

She stared at the tufts of hair beneath his arms, a deep coffee color, bearing his male aroma. Her eyes shifted to the side, another tattoo circling his left biceps. As black and geometric as the other, this one was a tribal band, with loops and whorls that jumped as his muscles flexed.

He pulled the garment away from his head, tousling his hair, giving it a bed-mussed look complemented by his hooded eyes.

A new rush of moisture bathed Summer's opening. Her breaths came fast and hard. Hogan cleared his throat, demanding notice.

Summer ignored him, unable to drag her focus from RJ.

His beautiful eyes strayed to her parted and waiting vaginal lips.

She longed for him to touch her.

He did not, instead retreating several steps to one of the gold satin sitting chairs, a dainty design made more ineffective by his masculine bulk. Slowly, as though he enjoyed having her anticipate their coming pleasure, he removed his leather boots. His black socks followed, revealing his large feet and long toes.

Before the night ended, she'd lick and suckle them before moving to his cock.

Standing, he unbuckled his belt, lowered his fly and pushed his pants to his knees, letting them drop with a faint whoosh to his ankles.

The sound matched her quick exhale of air.

Navy boxer briefs hugged his narrow hips and powerful thighs. Behind the stretchy placket, she saw the promise of his meaty cock and balls. She spread her legs even more, summoning him to fill her, wordlessly begging him to do so.

With a smile curling his beautiful mouth, RJ pushed down his briefs and stepped out of them.

The room seesawed, along with Summer's thoughts. Naked, RJ faced her, confident in his masculinity and ability to bring her pleasure.

A thin sheen of perspiration coated her throat, intensifying her perfume, enhancing her female scent. Never had she been as ready for another man, not in all the years since Anthony had owned her, changing her life forever. Her pulse points throbbed, marking each beat of her sprinting heart. She feasted on RJ's tall, perfectly formed body, the thatch of thick, dark hair covering his groin, his rigid penis, ruddy with arousal, his balls plump and tight against his groin.

Padding to the edge of the bed, RJ sank to his knees and slid his large hands beneath her ass, bringing her close to him. At his commanding touch, her lips parted and her lids fluttered. Once he had her in position, he met her eyes, confirming her approval, then licked the length of her cleft.

Molten heat flooded her. Chin pointed at the ceiling, Summer lifted her ass, bringing her cunt closer to RJ's tongue, wanting everything he had to give.

He ignored her wordless request for more. Working two fingers inside of her sheath, he stretched her opening as though he wanted to make certain it would be adequate for his thick cock.

She relaxed her muscles, accepting this invasion as readily as she would his stiffened rod.

With his fingers still inside, RJ finally returned to her clit, his mouth latching onto it, his stubbled cheeks scraping the tops of her thighs, his tongue swirling around her tender nub.

Summer's fingers curled into tight fists. Her lusty moan filled the room.

Clearly not wanting her to come too quickly, RJ withdrew his tongue from her nub to lick the edge of her vulva and her smooth mound. Summer swallowed and panted. She elevated her hips to force him back to the only spot that mattered.

He paid no heed to her willfulness. Hand on her belly, he directed her body to return to the mattress. Once she complied, he held her there, his fingers still inside, pressing into her much softer flesh, his tongue continuing to ignore her nub.

A protest gurgled in the back of her throat.

Immune, RJ lapped her juices, as though testing her reaction to him as a man and as a lover, one she'd chosen. Never had she known anyone like him and she responded without artifice, mewling for more, for every –

Her thoughts halted at his teeth bearing down carefully around her nub, his tongue negotiating its contours. Something indescribable and thrilling coiled between her legs, tensing her muscles, snatching her breath. Crudely and loudly, she cried out at the orgasm sluicing through her, the contractions of her inner muscles sucking RJ's fingers deeper.

There they remained as Summer fought for air. She'd barely managed a full breath when his thumb replaced his tongue on her clit.

No. Even the slightest stroke became more than she could endure, the pleasure too deep, unbearable. The points of her high heels gouged the comforter. She heard the fabric rip. Her hips thrashed trying to escape him.

He wouldn't allow it, keeping his fingers deeply inside, his thumb poised on her nub. She whimpered.

At last he halted, speaking in a strained voice, "Too much?"

Yes. No. She sighed loudly.

So did he. "Do you want me to stop?"

Fevered, she was prepared to say "yes", the plea already rising in her throat.

He waited for her guidance, what she wanted. She didn't know. Couldn't speak. As her silence lengthened, RJ brought his thumb back from her clit and began to pull his fingers from her.

"No," she blurted. "Don't—please." She lowered her ass to the comforter, relaxing her legs. Her knees sagged outward, creating a wider V, allowing RJ whatever he willed, which was exactly what she wanted.

Eyes closed, Summer sensed him watching her reaction as his thumb grazed her clit, taunting the small rise of flesh. She gritted her teeth to keep from crying out. Her inner walls hugged his fingers, slick with her juices.

He continued stroking, teasing, his movements measured and deliberate.

Hopelessly aroused, Summer floated on a wave of delight, so new to her she could scarcely contain her delight. So welcomed, happy tears filled her eyes.

She seized this small measure of joy with all that she had, self-indulgent for the first time in recent memory. As his strokes quickened and her muscles tensed, Summer's mind, heart and soul embraced her coming release. *Now, now!* her thoughts shouted and the tension broke. A flush of feeling and heat journeyed to the edges of her body, snatching her breath, making her tremble helplessly, telling her she was more than the submissive Anthony had created.

She was a woman who could still feel...a perfect complement to the right man.

RJ.

He suckled the inside of her thigh, the area nearest her cunt, delivering bursts of warmth to that part of her body.

Too drained to respond or to move, Summer accepted his continued manipulation of her clit and the burden of his fingers burrowed within her. Time seemed to stand still, her world reduced to his stroking, licking, her body willingly exposed to whatever he desired.

At last, he pulled his fingers from her, eliminating the pressure she now craved. Continuing to gulp air, Summer labored to open her eyes. She looked at RJ through slitted lids.

He went to his feet. Hand on his shaft, he stroked his pendulous length, which would soon be inside of her. Her moisture glistened on his blunt fingertips. His thumb swept across his cock's reddened slit, capturing a pearl of pre-cum. He used it to lubricate the darkish cap, smooth, fleshy, masculine.

Predictably, her body hungered and yielded, wanting him now, unable to bear a delay.

He didn't mount her. Instead, his attention moved to the side. Hogan. During the last minutes, Summer had forgotten him.

RJ had not. There was sudden danger in his eyes, saying he didn't want the man so close to her. He didn't want him in this room or suite at all. A moment passed in strained silence. RJ's gaze grew even darker, murderous. The muscles in his shoulders and arms bunched as a man's would when preparing for a fight. He wore the look of a rutting animal.

Nothing would keep him from her. He wouldn't allow another male to share.

Summer's pulse raced with desire. As her breath caught in anticipation of his touch and raw lust, it was his size and youth that finally cowed Hogan.

The floor creaked slightly as the man backed away from the bed, but didn't leave the room, his splotched face cataloging his humiliation at retreating in the least. Beneath his embarrassment, Summer saw a thread of fear as if he wasn't quite certain what RJ would be capable of doing if pushed too far.

Satisfied with the man's response, RJ returned his attention to her. The ends of his hair glided over his shoulders as he tilted his face to her naked cunt, slick from her orgasms. Pride in what he'd done lifted the corners of his sensuous mouth.

Summer also smiled, her manner unguarded and shameless.

RJ looked more pleased by that than anything. Playfully, he skimmed the insides of her thighs with his fingertips, pausing at the lacy edge of her stockings.

"Do you want me to take them off?" Summer asked in a husky voice, eager to please him for all he'd done, the moments of happiness he'd given her.

"Later," he said.

His voice held a promise of delight.

Summer's smile widened to a grin, then paused as Hogan pulled a chair across the floor, its legs skating over the polished hardwood. He sat a few feet from the bed, arms crossed over his chest, his face a darker red from frustration, anticipation.

Ignoring the intrusion, clearly wanting her focus on him, RJ directed her backward on the bed so he could climb onto the mattress. Once there, he ran his finger beneath her stocking, testing the garment's elasticity, regarding its transparency.

Summer's lids fluttered at his welcomed touch. Hogan cleared his throat. RJ pulled back his hand, cradling his cock in his palm, directing it to her opening, bathing the head in her slippery heat.

She lost her breath on a ragged, wanton sigh.

Not yet entering, his crown nudged her cunt. A muscle in her thigh quivered uncontrollably. Her pussy pulsed.

Absorbed, RJ kept his face lowered, his attention on his rigid shaft, drawing the crown up and down her dewy cleft.

Her fingers curled into loose fists. A shiver tore through her, followed by a panting moan. In her thoughts, she saw his cock, congested with blood, inching into her body, hugged by her vaginal lips, the penetration revealed fully by her naked pubes.

His eyes lifted, meeting hers. His gaze questioned.

Summer's lips parted at the stark need she felt. "I want you," she said, meaning it, stunned by the intensity in her voice.

RJ grinned. With one certain thrust, he entered her, burying his cock to its root within her tight channel. His dark male curls brushed her nude mound. His testicles slapped her ass.

Inhaling sharply, she splayed her fingers at the burden of containing his width and length, the welcomed pressure unraveling her next thoughts. To open her even more, he flexed his penis. Her sheath expanded, accommodating him, yielding to his superior strength.

His eyes didn't leave hers. Their unsteady breaths were the only sounds breaking the quiet. With them joined fully, RJ leaned forward, supporting his weight on his elbows, his mouth heading for her breast, his tongue tasting her nipple.

His greedy licks echoed through her length. A vulgar growl broke free of Summer's lips. With her loss of control, RJ drew her nipple inside his mouth, dragging his tongue over its tip and suckling firmly, relentlessly.

Summer's body shifted, pushing her belly into his. She tightened her inner muscles, squeezing his cock. He inhaled quickly, then twisted his hips, burrowing himself more deeply inside.

Breathless, she embraced his control, welcoming from him whatever he decided to do, knowing it wouldn't harm her, it would only bring pleasure.

Releasing her right breast, he moved to her left, his coming beard scouring her far more delicate skin, each suck insistent and unyielding. With her willing agreement to this act, he expected her all and Summer gave it, arching her back, delivering herself to him.

His coarse grunt affirmed his approval.

He suckled her throat next. Deep, pulsing waves of warmth surged through her, moving Summer beyond the lust another man might have generated. RJ's kiss entered her soul. Desperate to touch him, to cradle him to her, she lowered her arms, placing her palms on the back of his head. Her fingers tunneled into his silky hair to keep him at his task.

He acquiesced, his lips moving lightly over her skin, the caress of his mouth softer than an infant's sigh with an impact that caused the room to spin. Conquered, she became limp, easing her hold.

Again, RJ took charge. With one hand clasping her wrists, he pushed her arms back over her head, restraining them as he lifted his face. Feral craving shone in his eyes, matching her appetite for him. With a look that said he needed more, RJ released her hands and lifted his trunk, his legs folded back to support his weight. He directed her legs toward her torso, the angle opening her fully, lewdly, allowing him better penetration, compelling her body to shelter his.

Eagerly, she obeyed. His slitted eyes and tightened jaw told her how close he was to coming and that he'd endured a wait far longer than many males would have tolerated.

For that, she liked him even more and would have given him whatever pleasure he required.

To her surprise, he didn't demand or take. He seemed intent on her enjoyment.

Placing one hand on the back of her thigh, he gripped her flesh, holding her in place, trapping her in an intimate embrace. His other hand went to her mound, his thumb returning to her clit and skimming it.

Lush chords of temptation stirred Summer as few things had. Her buttocks clenched. She bit her bottom lip, not caring if she drew blood. Filled with his cock, tormented by his fingers, she had no choice but to rise on a wave of passion, unable to think or to breathe.

For RJ, it didn't seem to be enough. With stunning skill, he prolonged her arousal, determined to draw out her climax. He swept his fingertips over her nub, then abandoned it, stroking her mound instead, frequently and deliberately edging close to her clit but not touching it. Only when the treasured sensation receded did he come back and resume taunting and teasing that part of her.

She tensed her arms and legs, ignoring how her muscles hurt. The back of her neck was wet, dampening the comforter. Her heart couldn't beat any harder. It slammed into her chest, making it difficult for her to breathe.

Suffering as much as him, her expression as strained, her breaths as ragged, she begged, "Please. Let me come." *Let us come.*

"Is that what you really want?" he asked, a hint of mischief beneath his own frustration.

She wanted it to end and yet she didn't. Her voice dropped to a whimper. "I don't know."

"Do you want me to decide?"

Teeth gritted, Summer nodded, braving whatever he gave her and whatever he denied.

RJ worked her clit, taking possession of her pleasure, leaving her no alternative except to submit. Damp with perspiration, she complied, drawing her legs back even farther, offering him her flesh.

Within her, his cock thickened, stretching her to the edge of endurance, stealing the last of his patience. She answered his fingers' quick, hard strokes with a moan of deliverance, her voice trembling with the force of her orgasm.

On her cries of relief, he pulled back his lean hips and thrust inside, opening her again, taking what he'd earned. He continued to rub her nub with his fingertips, her sheath with his cock, the movements synchronized, uncivilized.

The mattress shifted, the bed frame creaked with RJ's male assault. One Summer received readily. Her breasts shivered with his body plundering hers. Her inner walls narrowed, hugging, squeezing, pulling his penis as deeply as the organ could go.

His low-pitched, unrestrained bellow announced his climax, one of pure joy, untamed and primitive. Summer could tell RJ didn't care who heard or watched. His gratification was all that counted.

And he'd seen to hers too. He'd made certain it came first.

On a rough breath, he pulled out. Exhausted, Summer lay panting, her cunt wet with him. Through heavy lids, she saw Hogan run his palms down his thighs to his knees, gripping them so hard his knuckles blanched, the action affirming his frustration and arousal.

If RJ noticed, he offered no sympathy for the man's condition. He crawled over Summer's leg and sagged to the mattress.

Arm around her waist, his touch possessive, RJ turned Summer to her side, facing him. His tangled hair, damp with sweat, stuck to his temples and throat. He parted his lids, observing her through the narrow openings.

Helpless to stop herself, grateful he'd delivered bliss, not harm, she offered a soft smile that touched the deepest parts of her.

RJ lifted his hand. Lightly, his fingertips touched the side of her mouth. Her smile trembled beneath his tender touch, one she treasured already.

One she wouldn't experience again once she left him.

A sense of unreality settled on Summer.

Desperate to escape her uncertain future if only for a little while longer, she turned her face to RJ's hand, giving him an open-mouthed kiss on his calloused palm.

His chest expanded with his languid, satisfied breath.

As she drew back, he stroked her cheek, then settled his hand to the side of her throat, his long fingers draped around the back of her neck. In turn, she rested her fingers on his tribal band tattoo. One of his muscles moved beneath her hand. She stroked it with her thumb.

RJ's nostrils flared slightly. He caught another breath and spoke on a drowsy sigh. "Come here." Curling his fingers on the back of her neck, he eased her as close as their bodies allowed. Her breasts snuggled against his firm chest, his cock nestled between her cleft, their thighs touched.

Surrounded by his male scent, heat and strength, Summer closed her eyes.

He touched his forehead to hers. She smelled sex on his breath, the aroma of her body mingling with his.

His thumb stroked the edge of her jaw. Silky warmth stole down her throat and spine. As if RJ knew what he did to her, he murmured a promise. "We're just getting started."

To prove it, he kept her close, imprisoned within his protective embrace, his deep breaths glancing off her cheek until his strength returned.

It took less time than Summer had imagined. As his cock stiffened against her belly, she opened her eyes, meeting his gaze, lost in it. With no hesitation, she said, "Take me again."

He searched her face. "How?"

She answered easily, "Any way you want." She needed to experience everything with him. Tonight would be her last chance. Tomorrow, she would have to run.

To the side, Hogan made a slight noise, reminding them they weren't alone.

As he had earlier, RJ dismissed the man, keeping his attention on her. Seconds passed as though he was trying to determine the sincerity of her request.

She snuggled closer, her eyes never leaving his.

Apparently convinced, or possibly seeing the overwhelming need on her face, he asked, "Where are the condoms?"

Summer's cheeks heated with excitement at what she knew he would do. "In the top drawer of the left nightstand."

Easing back from her, he rolled over and reached up, pulling the drawer open, snaking his hand over the edge.

In her peripheral vision, Summer saw Hogan watching. And then her attention returned to RJ. In his large hand, he held a shiny red packet and a tube of lubricant.

His eyes shifted to hers. "On your hands and knees," he said.

Lust, mingled with anticipation, smoldered within her. Rolling to her belly, she pushed to her elbows and knees. Head down, she spread her legs as wide as she could and arched her back to lift her ass, presenting herself to him and only him.

A pleased sound escaped RJ. His breathing had already picked up, the same as hers.

Beneath his weight, the mattress bounced slightly then dipped as he moved between her legs. Summer held her breath, expecting to feel his hand on her anus, his fingers stroking then exploring the tight pink ring.

As he had before, he made her wait now.

Her heart beat out of time. She sensed him opening the cap and squeezing the clear jelly on his fingertips.

At last, she heard the faint tap of the tube as it fell to the bed linens.

Eyes snapping closed, her lips parted at the first stroke of RJ's fingers on her, followed by the lubricant's damp chill. With great care, as if he were preparing her for a delicate act, rather than a wonderfully indecent one, RJ spread the silky concoction over her anus. She swallowed hard and managed no more than a small breath. Slowly, he worked his fingers inside her opening where his cock would soon be.

Titillated at the thought, undone by his intimate touch, Summer couldn't stop the heat stinging her cheeks or her audible purr. With prolonged strokes, revealing how much he was enjoying himself, RJ probed her opening. Intentionally, Summer kept still, allowing him this, allowing him whatever he wanted because she craved it too.

Given his tattered breaths and the low growl he produced, her response satisfied him, though it was hardly enough.

Proving he couldn't delay any longer, RJ finished with his preparation of her body and leaned back.

The sound of him tearing the condom's cellophane wrapper made Summer's heart miss a beat, after which it raced too hard trying to regulate itself.

She trembled at RJ's sheathed cock grazing the inside of her thigh, the condom silky and slick, his organ erect, hot.

He slipped one hand to her waist, his fingers touching the edge of her garter belt. His free hand went to his cock, lifting it to her anus. And then, without hesitation, he began working it inside.

She inhaled sharply at his hardness and size, the resulting pressure. It didn't stop him. Inch by inch, he penetrated, sinking his cock into her tightest opening, his flesh demanding entry, expecting her body to comply.

With all of her will, Summer relaxed her muscles to ease his journey, to prove she would do anything he asked and enjoy everything he gave.

His sac tapped her cunt with his final push. Fully inside, he gave her no opportunity to adjust to the strain of containing him. Sliding his hand down her belly to her mound, he curled his fingers over the edge to her clit.

Summer's legs jerked. He answered by flexing his cock, his flesh pushing against her tight ring, taking refuge in her depths, possessing her. A crude moan flowed from the base of her throat, drowning out RJ's harsh breaths and Hogan's prolonged, clearly envious sigh.

Her clit, swollen and tender, registered each brush of RJ's fingertips. Torrents of astonishing pleasure rushed through her. Her breasts swung, the tips of her nipples rubbing against the comforter as RJ eased out, nearly leaving her body, then pushed back inside.

Although the pace of his thrusts increased, he stroked her clit lazily. The inconsistency of his actions destroyed Summer's concentration and control. Her thoughts scattered, her body took over, reducing her to RJ's vessel, to do with as he wished...as she had asked.

His hand and cock used her well. Her clit and anus achieved a sensitivity she didn't know existed.

She became aware of his balls tapping her pussy, his hairy thighs pushing against the backs of her legs, his forceful breaths keeping time with each penetration, her hair swinging forward, sensations swirling in her groin, her climax climbing and peaking.

Her shameless cry rang loud and clear, interrupted by her gasp for air. RJ grunted. He pumped. Her body shook with the force of his thrusts. And then he came. His shout was as savage and as welcomed as the act. Nothing else seemed to exist.

For seconds afterward, she could barely pull in enough breath while he seemed incapable of anything but gasping for air. She pictured his broad shoulders slumping, his head hanging between his shoulders, too heavy to keep up.

With one last effort, she managed a full breath and her heart began to quiet.

RJ moved back finally, releasing his cock from her. Exhausted, Summer dropped to her side. Through barely parted lids, she watched him leave the bed and remove the condom, dropping it in a wastebasket to the side of the nightstand. Returning, he lowered himself to the mattress and her.

Without him having to ask, she moved into his embrace.

He kissed her tenderly in what seem to be gratitude for the pleasure she'd just provided him.

Resting his cheek against hers, he whispered what he had a short while ago, "We're just getting started."

They were nearing the end. Unsettled and fatigued, she said nothing. She was unwilling to think, dream, hope. Gratefully, she escaped into sleep.

Chapter Three

In the depths of her mind, Summer knew she must be dreaming.

She stood in the center of a suburban street, hand over her eyes, shading them from the intense sun. Where was she? The cloudless sky was too clear for the Bay area and the vegetation was all wrong. Her gaze swept the sparsely landscaped housing development. Pink oleanders, purple blooms on Jacaranda trees and the ocotillos' scarlet blossoms added the only color to the neighborhood's beige blandness.

Cautiously, she turned, an image flashing in her mind, reminding her of something she'd forgotten. A cordless phone on the end table in her parents' living room. She'd left it there after speaking with her friend. They'd planned to go to the mall.

Glancing down, she frowned. Why had she worn black stockings and high heels with her pale green capris? She smoothed the satiny cotton, then ran her hand past her bare midriff to her white baby tee and up to her hair.

Her eyes rounded. She stared at the ends of her hair, not understanding when she'd let it grow past her shoulders. It was supposed to be short, just past her ears, the way Anthony –

Her thoughts snagged on his name. A scene assaulted her mind, taking her back to something that had happened in the past within a large chamber of a private home. She recalled a sparkling chandelier drizzling most of its light onto a low, circular platform placed in the center of the room. Surrounding it were leather chairs, each occupied by men she'd never seen before, some old with gray-streaked hair or balding, others in their twenties and thirties.

Bluish smoke from their cigarettes and cigars hung above their heads like a dingy fog. They drank imported beer from dark brown bottles and amber liquor from short crystal glasses. An occasional laugh punctuated their murmured conversations. Their gazes kept drifting to her and the other young women.

One of the men, his face hidden in the shadows, ordered them to undress.

With shaking hands, she unbuttoned her silk blouse, fearful of what would happen if she refused or forgot her name was now Summer. Her eyes darted to the other girls.

The one on her right opened the front clasp of her black satin bra, pulling the cups back, baring her pale breasts and nipples. The areolas' tint was a delicate pink, matching the girl's faint blush. The young woman on her left lowered her navy skirt, revealing the lacy white thong she wore. Clothing rustled, falling to the engraved rug as the girls stripped obediently, their attention on the young, handsome men.

All except one.

Surely no more than twenty, she did not disrobe. A stew of emotions raced across her lovely face—outrage, loathing, defiance.

A man in his late twenties noticed and left his chair. His dark blond locks and sensuous features gave him the look of a fallen angel. He lifted his lightweight sweater and unbuckled his belt. Its leather hissed through the loops of his pants as he pulled it free. The other men fell silent. The girls' hands froze on zippers, buttons and clasps. As one, their heads turned to the young woman who remained clothed.

Insolence fell away from her features as the blond man reached her. In awe, she stared at his male beauty even as she stepped back, avoiding the belt dangling from his hand.

Reaching out, he grabbed her wrist, holding her so firmly she stopped struggling. A smile tilted the left corner of his mouth. He spoke in a seductively soft voice, the kind a parent uses when they want to reason with a wayward child. "You, I'll have first."

He pulled her to a table, ignoring her pleas that she'd obey, forcing her to bend over the edge of the wood, face down, ass up. Her long, manicured nails clawed the polished surface. Bunching the hem of her dress in his hand, he pushed it to her waist, exposing her buttocks already bared by her thong, her soft, rounded cheeks unmarked.

His belt whistled through the air.

In her dream, Summer flinched at her memory of the girl's punishment, the man assaulting her and her final obedience as she disrobed and padded to the circular platform.

Sickened and panicked, Summer ran toward her parents' house, stopping when she heard a steady thump-thump-thump coming from behind, something hitting the concrete.

She looked over and squinted. The sun shone directly in her face, stabbing her eyes. The back lighting silhouetted someone standing in the driveway of another house, shadows obscuring facial features. Given the body's broadness and height, she knew it had to be a guy. A name crept close, then receded, burying itself with her other memories of this neighborhood.

And yet, a powerful attraction remained, drawing her closer.

Halfway to him, she stopped, hearing a car's motor, its tires screeching down the street.

Blood drained from her face. She swayed unsteadily on her heels. Her thoughts warned, *It's coming for me.*

The thumping grew faster, louder, as did the engine's roar. Her legs wouldn't move. She couldn't escape. Her fists beat the air. She screamed at the silhouetted figure to help.

He turned away.

The car reached her.

Chapter Four

Summer jerked awake, her eyes snapping open, her vision unfocused. The nightmare she'd had dissolved, leaving her with a sense of anguish, hopelessness, anger. Heart hammering, she blinked repeatedly and met RJ's gaze.

His eyes searched hers. Again, she found their color remarkable. Again, she experienced a sense of familiarity, the kind that makes fast friends of strangers and eliminates the awkward moments between new lovers. It was as though she'd not only manufactured him in her mind for her fantasies, but tonight he'd shown up.

Unexpectedly, his expression grew troubled. "Bad dream?" he asked.

From his chair, Hogan stirred. "Maybe she's tired of you already." He yawned loudly and cleared his throat, pushing the sleepiness from his voice. "Maybe she's ready for some of me now."

RJ's focus remained on her as if the man hadn't spoken.

Captivated by his eyes, she stroked his tattooed pec, asserting her commitment to him, no one else, for the rest of this evening. After, she'd have to escape his hold in whatever way she could. Sorrow coursed through her at the thought of never being in his arms again. Snuggling closer, she whispered, "I want you, you do know that, right?"

His smile said he did.

Pleased, but still wanting to show him what was in her heart, Summer pushed him until he lay back against the mattress. Arms above his head, he spread his long legs, his position and the look in his eyes so typically male, filled with expectation of how she would satisfy him.

Gladly taking the reins of their pleasure, Summer straddled his lean hips, her shaved cunt brushing his thick pubic hair. He lifted his dark brows as if to ask, "*Nice, but what's next?*"

Bending forward, Summer showed him. The tips of her nipples skimmed his chest. Her hands went to his wrists, too thick for her fingers to circle completely. Even so, she held them in place. Snaking out her tongue, she licked the tuft of hair in his left pit.

His hips rose, bumping hers, saying her action surprised or possibly tickled him.

Heedless of his response, she buried her face in his underarm hair, inhaling a blend of fragrances—soap, deodorant and his unique male aroma. Catching a few strands between her teeth, Summer tugged gently.

A throaty grunt rumbled deep within his chest, pushing his ribs into hers.

She acknowledged his delight by giving him more, licking the hair and then the sensitive skin on his underarm. He wiggled and laughed. Its uninhibited, vibrant sound

caressed her soul, urging her to provide him with a night he'd never forget. One she'd remember when she returned to Anthony.

Sorrow pressed closer. She pushed it away.

RJ swallowed. His prominent Adam's apple bobbed with the movement. She gave the bump a quick lick, then suckled his throat just beneath his chin, her tongue sweeping over the short, stiff hairs of his coming beard.

He squirmed beneath her, obviously wanting more.

Summer gave it. She released his wrists to cup his face instead, trailing kisses from his jaw to his cheek to his chin, then fitted her mouth to his and thrust her tongue inside. On a loud groan, he lowered his arms, his hands cupping her buttocks, his fingers spreading the cheeks to explore her cunt and anus.

She moved her ass into his touch, encouraging whatever he desired, verifying it with her searching kiss.

His fingers slowed in their exploration of her most intimate areas. He moved his hand to the back of her head, keeping her mouth from leaving his, and wrapped his free arm around her waist, pulling her so tightly to him she could scarcely breathe.

Her chest and belly pushed into his with each halting breath, which he stole readily, his body crowding hers as he inhaled full and deep.

Hogan muttered something, the tone of his voice saying he wanted them to acknowledge his presence and invite him to participate.

Summer ignored him, as did RJ. His mouth bruised hers, driving her bottom lip into her teeth. His embrace trapped and liberated, compelling her to enjoy his absolute masculinity and to offer much-needed relief. With the heels of her hands on his shoulders, she pushed as hard as she could to break his hold and free her mouth so she could concentrate on his cock.

Insolent, he held tight and sucked her tongue, not yet willing to let go. His actions ordered her to deepen the kiss and she complied, her palms slipping from his shoulders to the mattress. Clearly pleased, RJ nearly devoured her with his kiss, finally pulling his mouth free to gulp air.

Too limp to move, Summer rested the side of her face on his chest, enjoying the powerful sound of his racing heart.

This time, Hogan mumbled, the words still indistinct.

RJ's chest trembled with his low growl, a crude sound that told Summer he didn't give a fuck about the other man, only her. He was ready for more.

She kissed his dazzling tattoo and licked the point of the design that curved just beneath his nipple, laving the ruddy disk with her tongue before pushing up. Lust burned in RJ's eyes, matching the hunger raging through her. Beneath her cunt and buttocks, his cock thickened, ready to penetrate her depths.

As he had done so skillfully with her, Summer now made him wait. Eyes locked with his, she twisted her torso and reached down to remove her right heel, tossing it to

the side. It landed on the gold-and-black Persian area rug near the window. Her left shoe came to rest near Hogan's chair, hitting the hardwood floor with a sharp thwack.

With her right stockinged foot against the comforter, she leaned on her left knee, expanding the space between her and RJ's body. Hand on his cock, she lifted it and looked down.

Thick veins ran the length of his meaty shaft. The head was smooth, plump and dark with his arousal. Lust raged within her and within him too. His rigid column of flesh flexed in her hand, demanding she bring it home to her damp pussy. Deliberately willful, she stroked her vulva with the crown, her movements taunting and unhurried.

RJ's fingers curled into fists. "Take me inside now. Fuck me now," he complained as all men did, though his whining was far more enchanting.

Pretending to be tamed, Summer did as he asked—though slowly—lowering her body onto his, driving his cock inside her cunt bit by bit, his dusky rod swallowed by her paler flesh.

Impatient, he placed his hands on her hips and flexed his own, driving himself inside—quickly, completely. Her head fell forward at the exquisite pressure, the ends of her hair skimming her cheeks.

On a loud exhale of air, he dug his fingers into her hips, his movements commanding her to ride him.

Up she went, her body releasing his until only his thick crown remained inside, distending her opening, keeping it ready for further use. Beneath her, his legs shifted. She imagined his long toes splaying, then curling. She slithered back down on his shaft until their bodies touched. He swallowed quickly. Summer caught a bit of air and slid her fingers over the edge of her mound.

Immediately, RJ pushed her hand away, claiming her clit for himself. With his thumb, he circled the erect bud, not yet touching it, his wait telling her he wouldn't coax her to climax until she saw to his pleasure. Giving him a sultry smile, she made her strokes measured and long. He matched them, his thumb drawing unhurriedly across her nub.

Mewling, she gritted her teeth and increased her pace, as did he. Each time she slowed, he followed.

Unable to equal his determination...unwilling to...the mattress soon jounced with her haste to climax, her impatience for the tormenting yearning to end.

Summer came first, her face tilted to the ceiling, mouth sagging open to release her choking moan, her arms hanging listlessly at her sides. RJ's grunt transformed into a growl that ended in a roar, his thighs drawing up quickly, hitting her back.

She slumped forward, draping her torso over his, her heavy breaths glancing off his neck, slick with perspiration.

He slid his hands to her waist. With one strong rocking motion, he rolled them both over until he was on top and still inside. Drowsily, he captured her mouth, his kiss

tender and comforting, not intended to arouse. She responded in kind, accepting the imprisonment of his body as he finished their kiss and buried his face in her neck.

There he remained, his cock within her sheath, possessing her as he waited for his strength to return. Minutes passed. Five, perhaps ten, Summer wasn't certain. She knew he could feel each breath she took and every swallow she managed. His confining weight reminded her of how she'd willingly given her body to him, more than once coaxing him to do whatever he wanted because tonight they belonged to each other.

Even Hogan seemed to understand that. He made no more comments. He didn't budge from his chair.

The sounds of their breathing filled the room, along with an occasional slap of wind against the windows and the faint blaring of a car's horn on the street below. RJ stirred finally, his playful kiss on her neck and stiffening rod announcing his recovery was nearly complete and it wouldn't be long before he took her again.

On a deep breath, he pushed to his elbows and lifted his head. His hair hung limply on either side of his handsome face, the ends grazing her shoulders. His hooded eyes regarded her with an intensity that seemed to reach her soul, as though he meant to uncover her deepest thoughts, including her plan to escape him.

Alarmed, she wanted to glance away, but didn't dare. He'd know something was wrong. She ran her hands up his arms, her thumb stroking his tribal band, her pussy contracting, working his thickening cock.

His lids slid down until they were narrow slits. He swallowed quickly, then drew in a deep breath causing his belly to bump against hers. She tightened her sheath, her buttocks trembling with the effort.

Her actions must have shattered his concentration. He pulled his gaze from hers and closed his eyes. Pushing to his knees, he eased out, then plunged back inside, taking her with abandon, completion his only goal. It wasn't until his jaw clenched and his body convulsed with his orgasm that he remembered to fully arouse her. His strokes on her clit were hesitant and sloppy.

If he'd been any other man, Summer would have feigned climax and gotten away with it. With RJ, she didn't want to lie about something so intimate.

Her body melted into his, her will yielding to his command. His fingers stayed on her mound, his thumb on her clit. Thankfully, her flesh was so sensitive and her body so needy of his, sensations raged through her, reaching her toes and the top of her head. She peaked within seconds.

The forceful contractions of her inner walls shuddered around his penis, the rhythm natural, not phony, proof she wasn't faking.

Even so, he leaned down to her ear and whispered, "Did you enjoy that?"

She kissed his cheek in answer, then nodded so he'd know for certain she had.

RJ swallowed and hauled in another deep breath, speaking as he exhaled. "Don't ever lie to me about this."

Summer shook her head, assuring him she would not.

"Or anything else," he added.

She shook her head again, knowing she would.

RJ rolled them back, putting her on top. There, he caressed her as the last of Summer's strength drained away from too many emotions, uncertainty and the slice of pleasure she'd known tonight. As her lids slid down, her only hope was that this time her rest would be deep and dreamless.

Within minutes of her falling asleep, the weight of Summer's body sagged into RJ's. Not that he minded. Smoothing the back of her hair, he glanced down. She'd curled her slender fingers into a limp fist against his right pec and her lips puffed with each breath, tickling his throat.

Suppressing a smile, RJ looked over, then strained to lift his head to see the clock on the nightstand. When he did, he realized it wouldn't be long until morning, the end of his and Summer's stay in this suite. The beginning of her future.

Unease knotted his gut. His gaze shifted to Hogan. The man blinked quickly and repeatedly, his lids no doubt as gritty as RJ's. They were both fighting sleep, with neither of them willing to give into it, though RJ sensed Hogan might be ready to succumb.

The man's right arm crossed his chest, his fingers resting on his holstered weapon. No doubt prepared to draw it if he lost consciousness and awakened suddenly, ready to kill RJ if he made the wrong move.

On a heavy sigh, he dropped his head back to the mattress. Summer wriggled slightly with the motion, then settled back to sleep.

Again, he looked down at her, wondering about the woman she really was, where she'd been, what truly went on in her mind.

Don't ever lie to me, he'd warned.

He sensed she would because of Anthony. She didn't want to leave him. She might even be in love with him. If so, RJ knew it would make tomorrow and all the coming days that much more difficult for him and her.

* * * * *

Murky light bled through the smothering fog, greeting Summer as she awakened. Disoriented, it took her a moment to realize it was morning. Instantly, her mind panicked. What now?

Pain stole the last of her breath at the horrible picture her mind created – RJ driving her out of state or taking her to the airport and a private jet for them to leave the country. Once at the new location, once he'd grown tired of her as Anthony had, he'd sell her to the next man, who'd take her farther and farther away with no means or power to return.

Dread flared, erasing all the pleasure she'd experienced last night. What followed was desperation so acute it brought tears to her eyes. What was she going to do? How would she fix this and return to—

She flinched at RJ's hand cradling the side of her face, turning it away from the window to him.

His eyes were alert, saying he'd awakened minutes before she had. Studying her, he asked, "Another bad dream?"

She blinked quickly to clear the tears from her eyes. "No."

He ran his hand down her back. She collapsed onto him, unable to fight his allure even as her terror built at what the coming hours would bring.

He murmured, "Still sleepy?"

She thought about lying and decided against it, figuring he'd know. "Do you want me to be?"

His hand stilled near her waist. He rolled her to the side, his fingers circling her biceps, his voice quiet and for the first time pissed at something she'd said. "I want an answer. *Your* answer, not what you think I want to hear. So, I'll ask you again—are you still sleepy?"

Blood rose to her face, stinging her cheeks. She shook her head.

"Hungry?"

Although her stomach growled again, with the sound no doubt prompting his question, she was too wound up to eat. Not knowing how to answer, she blurted, "I'm not sure."

Confusion swept his features. He frowned as though he didn't believe her and intended to question.

Put into an impossible position, she met his eyes with sudden courage, waiting for whatever happened, determined it wouldn't defeat her.

His eyes swept over her features and then his gaze turned inward, tension seeping from his face. Releasing her arm, he rolled to his other side, reaching for the phone on the nightstand near Hogan.

The man's torso and head slumped to the left, his body overflowing the small chair. His hand was wrapped around the butt of his gun, ready to pull it from his shoulder holster if need be. A whisper of air fluttered past his upper lip. Sleep gentled his expression.

RJ put the phone on the bed, along with the hotel's room service menu. Glancing over, he asked in a quiet voice, "What do you usually like for breakfast?"

His question stopped Summer, jarring loose a memory of Anthony once asking her the same thing. In the early days, it was how he had wooed her, wanting to know her likes and dislikes, what made her happy. When he was certain she'd fallen for him, he took away even the simplest of decisions, making them all, telling her what to eat, how to dress, when to sleep and to what men she'd give herself.

Whatever you want, RJ had said last night.

Was he simply repeating the pattern? Heartsick, Summer didn't know...she didn't want to know.

With a heavy sigh, she concentrated on the matter at hand, what she'd really like for breakfast—two McDonald's Egg McMuffins washed down with a chocolate shake. The absurdity of requesting fast food in a five-star hotel didn't escape her, nor did the chance to order something she wanted for a change, even if it wasn't her favorite food. Hand extended to him, she murmured, "Can I see the menu?"

RJ handed it over.

She studied the selections, taking her time, wanting to get it right. Previous experience told her she may not have another chance to do this for a very long time. At last, she slid the menu across the comforter to him. "Steak, medium well—no, well done, with scrambled eggs, home fries, an English muffin with butter and strawberry jam or maybe blackberry jam and a large orange or apple juice."

He scratched his whiskered jaw. "No coffee?"

"I'd prefer a chocolate milkshake."

He grinned. "That's right. You'll drink anything with chocolate."

Surprised he remembered, she hid her delight with a shrug. "Well, not anything. I'd draw the line at something toxic."

He laughed softly at her sarcasm. "How do you stay tiny eating so much?"

She stared at his lingering smile, her caution unraveling at its tenderness and warmth. Distracted, she murmured, "It's not that I'm so tiny." Her hand sought his cock, her fingers curling around the shaft. She watched it blossom beneath her touch, becoming hard quickly. Feeling mischievous, she added, "It's that you're so big."

His organ responded by thickening even more. His balls began to plump. With her free hand, she stroked the contour of the left one, loving the wrinkly skin, the fine covering of hair on the gland, its utter masculinity.

RJ made an indelicate sound, then cleared his throat. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

Her eyes met his. She spoke sincerely, her hopeless attraction to him obvious in the breathlessness of her voice. "No. You're a beautiful man." *You seem to be a nice guy.* "I enjoy touching you."

Surprise registered on his face. Beneath it, Summer saw gratitude. Why? Didn't he realize how attractive he was or how awesome he performed as a lover?

"Beautiful?" he asked.

She smiled at his teasing tone. "In a very manly way." Cupping his cock in her palm, snuggling her fingers around it, she stroked his flesh as her cunt would.

His soft laughter ended on an abrupt sigh. He circled her wrist with his fingers, stopping her from going too far and bringing him to orgasm. She was about to defy him

and continue stroking when his gaze lowered. He removed her hand from himself and turned it over, exposing the inside of her forearm, the birthmark.

Shrinking inwardly, she chanced a look. The makeup hadn't rubbed off. Relief surged through her, followed by frustration because she could still detect her imperfection...and so could RJ. He lifted her hand and kissed the edge of the stain.

Shaken by his kindness, Summer curled her fingers until they touched his stubbled cheek.

He straightened, his eyes meeting hers. "I need to breathe to order our food."

Confused, she shook her head. "What?"

"Keep your hands off my cock until I place our order. If I can't breathe, I won't be able to speak."

A grin broke across her face. She leaned close and whispered, "What about Hogan?"

RJ's lips brushed her ear. She shivered with pleasure. He murmured, "I don't care if he breathes or not. And I sure as hell like it when he shuts up, don't you?"

Giggling, she whispered in his ear, "I meant, what about his food?"

Silent for a moment, he pulled back and regarded her. "Do you care if he eats?"

She shook her head.

He eased a wayward strand of hair from her cheek and settled it behind her ear. Tendrils of heat warmed her. Her lids fluttered.

He whispered, "Good answer." With a smile, he lifted the phone's receiver and in a low voice placed their order, confirming the kitchen would make her a double-thick chocolate milkshake and their food would arrive in forty minutes.

Throughout, Hogan didn't stir. Glancing over at the man, RJ said to her, "Give me your leg." Not understanding, she didn't move. He swung his head in her direction.

"My leg?" she asked in a lowered voice.

He nodded.

Feeling somewhat foolish, she draped it over his lap and released her breath in a prolonged sigh at his fingers slipping beneath her stocking to undo the front strap of her garter belt. With it freed, he worked at the strap on the side of her thigh. Carefully, he folded her stocking down, peeling the gauzy fabric from her leg and foot. Her toes wiggled. She giggled quietly as he stroked her scarlet-polished toenails.

Draping her stocking across his upper thigh, he gestured for her other leg. Willingly, she slid it onto his lap and watched as he removed her remaining stocking. He rolled the hosiery into a tight ball, twisted his torso to face Hogan and threw the items at him.

Summer's hands flew to her mouth, muffling her gasp and laughter as the hosiery hit Hogan's shoulder and fell to his lap. It wasn't enough to alarm the man, though it did rouse him from his sound sleep. He snuffled a curse and groaned, then tested his

stiff muscles. Finally, he noticed Summer's balled-up hosiery resting on his groin. His eyes narrowed and his gaze shot up.

RJ left the bed, his large body as relaxed as his voice. "In about a half-hour there'll be a knock on the door. Breakfast for me and the lady. Tell room service to set it up in the front room."

Hogan brushed her stockings off himself. The moment they landed on the floor, he kicked them away. "Tell them yourself."

"Can't." He offered Summer his hand, palm up. She slipped her fingers over his, allowing him to help her off the bed. He positioned her in front of him, speaking to Hogan as he unzipped her garter belt. "The lady and I will be showering."

The man barked a laugh. "What lady?"

Summer's face burned at his retort, so vicious and unnecessary. She knew what she was – what Anthony had made her.

RJ kept his head lowered as he removed her garter belt. Tossing it on the bed, he looked at Hogan. "Don't disturb us."

"I'll do whatever the fuck I want."

"And you'll regret it if you do."

"So will you. I promise you that."

Indifferent to the man's threat, RJ wore a placid expression, the kind reserved for someone inconsequential. Summer knew better. Moving to RJ's side, she tugged his hand to lead him to the bath so she could separate him from Hogan.

At last, RJ looked over at her. "There's no rush." His free hand lifted to her face, his thumb stroking her chin, his fingers on her cheek. "We're just getting started." He folded her arm behind her back, using it to pull her close, then kissed her deeply. His tongue probed, his lips caressed, turning her to mush in his arms. He enjoyed her for so long, they might as well have been alone. As they separated and she caught a deep breath, Hogan pushed from his chair.

RJ didn't acknowledge the man's movement. He led her into the bath. Three times the size of the one near the front entrance, it had the same sumptuous décor – gleaming gold fixtures, gilt-edged mirrors, black marble counters veined with copper.

Summer flinched at a sharp smacking sound coming from the bedroom. Her head jerked in its direction with the wild dinging of the phone. She sensed the instrument was bouncing across the floor. A solid knock cut off its next ding – what she figured was Hogan's shoe connecting with the plastic. The resulting thud told her the phone had most likely sailed into the wall.

RJ spoke on a yawn. "Management's not going to like that."

Despite her alarm at Hogan's rage, Summer couldn't stop her giggle. Without thinking, she asked, "Why are you pissing him off?" She kept her voice to a murmur only RJ could hear. "Aren't you afraid that he still has his gun and you don't have yours?"

"Nope." He padded to the spacious glass-enclosed shower, its black tile wall and floor matching the ebony counters. Twisting two of the knobs, he turned on the jets to the right. Water sprayed from gold showerheads.

Summer's gaze trickled down RJ's broad back and lean hips to his tight ass. A pulse in her cunt ticked, the slight contraction sending more moisture to her opening where it mingled with his semen. Her voice shivered with renewed desire. "Why not?"

RJ turned to her. "Lock the door."

Her head swung to it then back to him. "I can't."

He frowned.

She spoke quickly. "Anthony doesn't allow locks. There aren't any here. He rents this suite exclusively."

Whatever RJ thought about that, he kept it well hidden from her. Padding to the door, he swung it closed, seeing what she already knew. A metal plate replaced the area where the lock should be. Summer suspected there might also be hidden cameras and bugs in the outer rooms, perhaps even in here.

RJ went to her and spoke in a subdued voice further muted by the pounding spray. "Hogan's not going to do anything but bluster. It makes him feel like a man. God knows, something has to. I saved Anthony's life. He wouldn't like it if the cops found my body here with a bullet in my back."

He didn't know Anthony. She tried to reason. "He wouldn't have to worry about it. He'd have the mess cleaned up and your body disposed of."

"You've seen him do that before?"

Bile rose to Summer's throat at her memory of the awful things he'd done. Murder hadn't been among them, at least not in her presence. She'd witnessed him breaking in young women, their bodies next used by his men and countless clients, their wills stripped. Those who yielded fully remained a part of his stable of girls. The ones who defied him in the least weren't as lucky.

After Anthony meted out his punishment, his men took them away, presumably for auction to their new owners. Summer never saw them again and didn't want to consider what may have actually happened. She stepped back. "No."

RJ's eyes noted her retreat, though he made no comment on it. "Come on." He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, his touch gentle. "Our food's going to be here before we know it and I don't want Hogan eating it."

She followed him into the shower, pulling her arm from his grasp to protect it from the water. A foolish reaction, she knew, but so instinctive it happened without conscious thought. To cover her actions, she grabbed a sea sponge with her other hand, holding it beneath the water to wet it. Then she worked a large green bar of soap over the sponge's soft surface. A faint lime scent wafted up from the thick lather. Her eyes shifted to RJ's.

Water dripped from the ends of his hair, rolling down his muscular pecs. He backed up to the tile wall just beyond the water's most intense spray and lifted his arms to the showerhead he hadn't turned on. Fingers gripping the gleaming gold, he faced her unashamed, his feet planted widely apart, waiting for her to wash him.

She pressed her face to the hair in his pits, wanting to capture his scent before she scrubbed it away. The muscles in his arms tightened. A noise rumbled in his chest, more animal than human. Smiling, she drew the soapy sponge down his arms, cleansing him.

His chest expanded with his deep breath, producing a sound of momentary relaxation or building arousal. To determine which, Summer tilted her face to his, delighted it was the latter. In his hooded eyes, she saw a bit of the wonder they'd shared last night. The kind normal couples experienced without a second thought.

She yearned for normalcy, eager to make this time with RJ and her fantasy last a bit longer. Carefully, lovingly, she drew the sponge across his pecs to give him as much pleasure as he'd repeatedly given her. Slick paths of lather streamed down his abs and around his navel, stopping at his pubic hair, trapped by it before the faint spray rinsed him clean.

Hand on his hip to steady herself, Summer sank to her knees and sat on her heels, her face level with his groin. He eased his hips toward her, the movement telling Summer she could damn well do with him whatever she wanted.

The sponge dropped from her hand. Traces of soap clung to her fingers. She curled them around his erect cock, but didn't slip it into her mouth as he surely craved. Moving it to the side, she exposed his testicles, bringing her face to them. She brushed her lips over the sensitive, lightly furred glands. Tongue snaking out of her mouth, she explored their contours.

His hips jutted forward. He exhaled loudly and went to his toes, the muscles in his calves tensing, his legs wavering.

She released his cock. Lightly, it tapped her cheek. With her hands on his ass, she held him still and took his right testicle into her mouth.

He made a jumble of noises she'd never heard from any other man, the sounds intoxicating, urging her to do more. As she suckled the gland, familiarizing herself with its size and weight, she pulled his cheeks apart and ran her fingers down the furrow, locating his anus and probing it delicately, mindful of her nails.

RJ choked out a gasp, his body stiffening. Proud of what she'd done, Summer released his right testicle and licked his left while continuing to explore his anus. Arms dropping to his sides, he hit the shower wall with an abrupt tap as he sagged into it. The position gave him the support he needed to plant his feet more widely apart and push his groin forward, directing his penis toward her mouth and pulling his ass from her touch.

Rebellious, she persisted. Her fingers returned to his tight ring even as her tongue abandoned his sac.

He sputtered a curse.

Carefully, she worked her forefinger inside his anus, trapping her digit within his hot, smooth channel. On a sigh, she purred, "Don't you like this?"

His heaving breaths told her he did, though it wasn't enough to satisfy him. Sucking in more air, he released it on a shuddering sigh. "Suck me."

Without pause, she flicked her tongue over the tip of his cock, tasting the saltiness of his pre-cum. He groaned. She tarried on his shaft, running her tongue up and down its hard surface, following the distended veins, enjoying them.

As if frustrated with her play, RJ placed his hands on either side of her head, his fingers curled around her skull. "Holy fuck, suck me now." He spat out his words in obvious desperation. "Take me as deep as I can go. Drain my cock fucking dry."

Her skin flushed at his passion. Blinking water from her eyes, she regarded his muscular thighs and calves, dusted with dark hair. Their strength called to the female within her, as did his rigid shaft and balls.

Abandoning his anus, she brought her hand to his sac, cradling it within her palm and squeezing gently. Indistinct words, garbled and halting, poured from his lips. She responded by taking his cock's cap into her mouth. She flicked her tongue over the bumpy skin on the back. Instantly, RJ's fingers tightened on her head and his hips moved, wanting to drive him deeper.

"More," he demanded.

Summer complied, opening her throat as she eased her head toward his groin, taking his shaft more deeply into her mouth, letting it fill and possess her. She didn't stop until her nose reached his dark curls, damp with the shower's spray, fragrant from the soap.

He breathed heavily and unevenly for a few seconds, no doubt trying to maintain control.

Willfully, Summer stole it. She fondled his balls and ran her tongue down his rod as she released it bit by bit from her mouth, only to suck it back inside to its root. He tugged at her hair, unknowingly or deliberately, it didn't matter. She wouldn't stop.

Take me as deep as I can go, he'd said. Drain my cock fucking dry.

She paced her strokes to stir and to satisfy, following his desires completely. He came with an agonized groan, his body shuddering, his cum filling her mouth. Gladly, she swallowed the salty fluid until none remained and his flaccid penis slipped from between her lips.

Cheek against his groin, she caught her breath as his chest pumped with his rough breathing.

Clouds of steam drifted around them, fogging the shower's glass door and walls, forming silvery beads on the black tile. RJ shifted his weight. Pulling her head back, Summer glanced up. His head hung between his stooped shoulders, damp hair stuck to his neck, his eyes were narrow slits. Wordlessly, he offered her his hand.

With his help, she pushed to her feet, expecting him to take her place on the tile floor and lean against the wall to rest.

His free arm slipped around her waist. On a weary grunt, he straightened and turned, backing her into the wall close to the pelting water. Trapping her with his body, he lifted her right forearm, deliberately holding it beneath the showerhead's flow.

Summer's heart stalled. She fisted her fingers, wanting to free her arm, knowing it would be useless. Although weakened from his orgasm, RJ was still stronger than her, determined, staring at her forearm. In the areas the soap had touched, her waterproof makeup had washed away, leaving crimson splotches darkened by the water's heat.

RJ turned his face to hers. Droplets clung to his long lashes, brows and beard-roughened cheeks. Fatigue and something else, something unreadable, reflected in his eyes. "How'd you get this?"

She averted her gaze. "I didn't."

His fingers tightened on her arm. Not to injure, but to let her know he wanted an answer. "Who did this to you?"

"No one." Her eyes met his. Defiance bristled in her voice. "It's not a bruise. It's a birthmark. A cosmetic surgeon took it off with a laser, but it came back. It's never going to go away. It's going to mark me forever. If it disgusts you, you better tell Hogan. He can return me to Anthony. You can pick another of his girls. One who's perfect."

RJ released her arm. She pushed against him, wanting to get away. With his hips and torso, he continued to confine her. His hand went to her throat. Her heart paused, then beat too quickly. She lifted her chin, the back of her head bumping the tile.

Eyes on her, he murmured, "Leave the concealer off. You don't have to hide anything from me."

She forced down a swallow as her thoughts raced. Why would he want the birthmark exposed? So he could use it to criticize her as Anthony had? Anger rose so quickly, she spoke without considering the consequences. "Anthony's other girls are perfect. Choose one of them."

His jaw tightened. She braced herself for his fingers to do the same around her throat, cutting off her air, proving only he gave orders no matter what he'd claimed last night.

His touch remained gentle. His hand caressed. "I chose you."

Confused, her frown fell away. "Anthony didn't just give me to you?"

"He gave me a choice. I chose you."

Why? Reluctant to know something that might hurt or disillusion her, reminding herself she and RJ had no future, she asked, "How did you save Anthony's life? When did it happen?"

Ignoring her question, he backed up. Not enough to give her a chance to leave the shower—so he could grab the soap and another sponge. Lathering it, he told her to lift her arms.

They trembled slightly as she did, draping them over her head. He stifled a yawn as he washed her pits and breasts, dragging the sponge down to her pussy.

Summer's anxiety dissolved at the pleasant sensations. "What's RJ stand for?"

His hand paused at her vulva, deliciously sore from his size and passion. "Richard James."

She considered the names against the man, deciding they didn't fit him as well as his initials. She asked, "Is James your last or middle name?"

"Last." He dropped the sponge and captured her mouth, kissing her deeply, not lewdly, with emotion, not lust. Once finished, his lips brushed her ear. She expected him to lick it.

Instead, he whispered, "No more questions. If I want you to know something, I'll tell you, understand?"

Surprised at his abrupt tone, chastened by his words, her cheeks burned. She said nothing else. He didn't want her asking personal questions any more than Anthony had. They were both secretive, intense men. Kind when they had to be, ruthless when they did not. She had to remember that.

Ever vigilant, Summer remained attuned to RJ's mood as they finished their shower. Wrapped in fluffy robes, they padded into the suite's living room where breakfast awaited them. Hogan stood at one of the large, rectangular windows, regarding the foggy day as he enjoyed a cup of coffee.

RJ gestured for her to eat, finishing his own meal in haste, offering no conversation, his pensive mood discouraging her from speaking. Summer left her milkshake for last, relishing the final chocolaty sip.

The moment she placed the tall glass back on the table, RJ looked at her with an unreadable expression. His earlier tenderness and warmth became a distant memory, one she craved, but couldn't count on again.

Abruptly, he pushed away from the table and stood.

"Time to go," he said.

Chapter Five

As Hogan directed his Mercedes away from the hotel's front entrance, RJ lowered his sun visor, using the vanity mirror to observe Summer in the backseat.

Her lovely face was pale, expressionless.

As she turned her head and leaned up, almost imperceptibly, her sable hair swung forward, the silky ends brushing her cheeks. Her gaze swept the streets, lingering on the signs, attempting to determine their direction.

In the suite, RJ had caught her building unease. His withdrawn mood prevented her from asking any more questions he was reluctant to answer, personal or otherwise. She'd eaten when he wanted her to do so, dressed when he said she should, while trying to hide her thoughts from him.

The halting way she'd breathed and her mechanical movements told RJ exactly what was going through her mind. No matter what had happened between them last night, she still wanted Anthony, not him.

Hogan slowed his vehicle behind a line of cars at a red light.

Looking in their direction, but not really seeing them, RJ brooded over his reaction to Summer's choice in men, a matter that shouldn't have bothered him. Ordinarily, he wasn't a jealous man. His ex-wife had certainly tried to get a rise out of him so he'd be more involved in their marriage. Unable to, she split.

He'd wanted it to bother him. It hadn't for long. Practicality ruled his nature.

His gaze returned to the vanity mirror. He glanced at Summer's fingers curled into a tight fist against the car's window, her birthmark hidden beneath the sleeve of her black trench coat.

Lust and tenderness coursed through RJ in equal measure. His eyes swept over her, eager to see all he could, knowing it wasn't enough.

Frowning, he looked away, watching Hogan edge forward with the other cars before jockeying the Mercedes to the left. What the hell? They should be going toward the right. RJ was ready to ask about the change in direction when he spotted the accident up ahead. They'd have to take a detour. His attention returned to Summer.

Blocked by Hogan's seat and the car's angle, she didn't see the accident. Her head swung to her window, then to the one on the other side, her eyes vigilant, searching.

Hogan flicked on the turn signal. Summer flinched at the faint clicking sound.

A powerful urge to comfort her welled up in RJ as it had last night. This time, he drove it back. The less she knew about his plans for her, the better for both of them.

She turned her head farther right, watching as they edged past the two-vehicle wreck. Although her expression remained passive, RJ saw the scaling anxiety in her eyes. She settled back in the seat, her face to the front, her gaze darting to his sun visor. Unexpectedly, she met his eyes in the vanity mirror. Behind her tension, he saw naked despair.

The muscles in his chest tightened at her unhappiness, her utter helplessness, the same look he'd witnessed as she'd wakened from her nightmare, her skin slick with perspiration, her mouth tight with panic. At the time, her fear had nearly undone him. She'd seemed so damn young, more a teenager than a woman of twenty-six. He'd been tempted to tell her again she had nothing to fear...she'd never again be hurt.

The words didn't come. He couldn't allow it because any promise he made might very well turn out to be a lie. His job was to make certain she trusted him. It was the only way he could ensure her safety.

His stomach knotted. Ignoring it and pulling his gaze from her, he drew deeply on his cigarillo, filling his lungs, exhaling slowly. Cherry-scented smoke swirled around him and drifted to Hogan, who RJ had heard was trying to quit smoking.

The man's jaw clenched even harder. He gripped the steering wheel and cursed the shitty traffic that forced them into another prolonged stop. During it, he pulled a square of nicotine gum from his pocket and popped it in his mouth.

RJ enjoyed his smoke, ignoring how it deepened Hogan's misery. He made no move to hide his undeniable contempt for the man. Being gracious and backing down wouldn't be prudent, not if he wanted to survive in Anthony's operation.

The dynamics of the man's enterprise were no different than those found in Pelican Bay, California's supermax prison housing the worst of the worst. Behind that facility's walls, a wise man took the offensive quickly to establish his dominance. He tolerated no shit, fought when he had to and killed without hesitation, accepting the reality there'd never be any parole or freedom.

To the best of RJ's knowledge, no one had ever left Anthony's employ alive. More smoke poured over his lips. He blew the last of it toward the windshield.

Chewing his nicotine gum, Hogan made a right and then another, following the route until he returned to their original street. In the distance, RJ saw the signs directing traffic to the Golden Gate Bridge. In the mirror, he watched Summer's reaction. Puzzlement flickered in her eyes as though she'd expected them to go south instead of north, perhaps to another city or the airport.

On the bridge, scores of tourists braved the somber day and chilly wind. College-age kids walked briskly, their cheeks reddened, their smiles widened at either their stamina or this new adventure. Parents with small children stopped to point out the sights—the boats on San Francisco Bay, Treasure Island shrouded in fog, the tops of Sausalito's and Tiburon's hills piercing the gray mist.

The bundled-up kids bounced in place. Most likely from being cold, RJ wagered, than from excitement. A few of the men carried their smallest children on their

shoulders, the little ones clutching their fathers' heads for dear life as traffic whooshed by.

Suppressing a smile, he glanced at the vanity mirror, Summer's face turned to the college-aged kids and the families. Sadness and envy shone in her eyes. They were free. She was not.

Just as quickly, as though she sensed him watching, her expression changed. It became guarded, indifferent, until they left the bridge and continued up the 101, known as Redwood Highway at this point, then turned right onto the 131, Tiburon Boulevard.

She stared at the surroundings RJ knew were familiar to her, her bewilderment evolving into a bit of relief, then renewed caution as the vehicle approached the heavily vegetated promontory and Anthony Karam's estate.

Her eyes met RJ's in the mirror, imploring him to tell her what this meant, to explain why they were here.

To keep her from saying something Hogan would report to Anthony, RJ spoke to the man. "How long will the lady and I have to stay at Mr. Karam's compound?"

The right side of Hogan's mouth lifted with his smirk. "Until he figures you know the operation as well as you should."

Or the man decided to trust him more than he currently did. Saving Anthony's life hadn't guaranteed his loyalty. "Remind me to thank him again for giving me a job." RJ tapped the tip of his cigarillo against the lip of the ashtray. A column of gray ashes fell from his smoke. "Being an ex-con is a bitch when it's all you have to put on an employment ap."

Hogan didn't comment. He turned into a private road, well-protected from intruders or the curious. Monterey cypress, towering eucalyptus, firs and shrubs gave the area a pristine look, not yet corrupted by men. Flanked by dense vegetation, they drove for more than a mile with the car easing to a stop at a black wrought iron gate intricately designed with swirls and loops, creating the illusion of flowering vines creeping up latticework.

Hogan's window made a faint humming sound as he lowered it. The sea's tang wafted into the car, along with the sharp fragrance of plants and damp earth. He tipped his head to the left so his face would be in full view of the security camera and spoke in his normal tone. "Tell Mr. Karam we've arrived."

The intercom crackled, followed by a male voice. "Proceed."

A motor whirled. The gate swung open. For the length of a football field, the heavy foliage continued, thinning gradually to a generous expanse of dark green lawn. The lush grass glistened with dew. Manicured shrubs and flowerbeds bordered it. A few of the plants had bloomed, offering sprays of scarlet, pink, yellow, the delicate petals buffeted by the breeze.

The Mercedes purred down the path.

RJ's eyes shifted to the left, the series of guesthouses on the seven-acre estate. The structures were of Spanish design with white stucco walls and red-tiled roofs, each owning as much square footage as the typical single-family home. He wondered which was Summer's and now his.

His gaze went to the vanity mirror. He wasn't surprised she was already watching, or rather, appraising him. She now knew he'd be working for Anthony, staying on the estate with her and that he'd spent considerable time in prison. It should keep her from asking anything else for awhile.

The Mercedes turned to the right. RJ looked in the same direction, seeing the main house, its architecture also Spanish. The two-story structure, possibly 8000 square feet, sprawled on a cliff overhanging the Bay. Rust-colored pavers and peacock blue tiles in a diamond pattern made up the driveway. Thick, glossy vines hugged the gentle archways leading into the house. Scores of plants in enormous clay pots surrounded the heavy wooden doors and shuttered windows.

To the left was the garage with enough space for fifteen cars. A silver Rolls, a cherry red Ferrari and several Jaguars in varying shades took up half the spaces.

Hogan parked his Mercedes in the last slot to the right and exited, waiting silently as RJ took his time finishing his second smoke of the morning. Summer stayed in the vehicle as he did, leaving only when he popped his door.

Her eyes touched his for a moment and then she looked at the house.

RJ saw a contradiction of relief and dread on her face that she tried to hide as she returned her gaze to him. With a slight incline of his head, he gestured for her to go first.

Crisp wind, smelling faintly of pine, ushered her toward the door. Her hair blew wildly. A gust of air whipped her silk coat against her bare legs. With her stockings and thong ruined, she wore only her trench coat and snug dress. Arms crossed over herself in an obvious attempt to keep warm, she walked carefully, her heels tapping the tiles slick from the mist.

The solid slap of Hogan's and RJ's shoes followed, ringing through the courtyard, announcing their approach.

RJ expected a servant or one of Anthony's men to greet them at the door and take his Glock from Hogan. At the penthouse suite, the man had refused to return the weapon to RJ, slipping it beneath his pants' waistband instead, explaining that Anthony would return the gun in good time.

RJ ached for it now as Hogan opened the front door onto a deserted foyer, beautifully appointed with gleaming hardwood floors, elaborately patterned Persian rugs, white-washed walls and graceful wrought iron railings that followed a sweeping staircase on the left.

The scant furniture—mainly accent tables—had an Old World quality, telling RJ they were most likely priceless antiques. Soft lighting from numerous brass table lamps

gave the space a cozy feel. Crystal vases overflowing with red, white and lilac roses sweetened the air.

Hogan crossed the foyer to a hall. Summer looked at RJ for direction. He inclined his head for her to follow the man. He took up the rear, keeping his face straight ahead, his expression neutral, knowing someone—perhaps Anthony—watched their every step. In his peripheral vision, RJ noted the closed-circuit cameras mounted on the walls near the low ceilings, the equipment more obvious here than it had been in the hotel suite where those in Anthony's operation also listened and watched.

He tried to gauge Summer's mood. She walked with more assurance here than outside where she'd been in danger of slipping on the damp tiles. Even so, she didn't seem eager to reach their destination. With each new hall they entered, her pace continued to slow, causing her and RJ to fall back from Hogan.

The man noticed finally. He stopped and looked over, giving them a chance to catch up.

This new hall opened onto a courtyard within the house. Glancing up, RJ saw plumes of fog drifting apart prior to the wind driving them back together. Moisture shimmered on the leaves of tropical trees and ferns.

Hogan went to a set of double doors, their dark wood carved extravagantly, the same as the one at the front of the house. He opened them onto a lengthy, rectangular-shaped room topped by an arched glass ceiling and ringed by columns. Vines snaked up the supports, the verdant leaves thriving in the moist, warm interior that smelled of chlorine. Frail threads of steam rose from the Olympic-size pool. No one swam inside. The placid water reflected the muted light seeping through the glass roof.

RJ glanced at Summer. Head turned to the right, she stared. Color tinted her cheeks. Her lips parted.

He followed her gaze to a sizeable spa at the far end of the room. Vapor rose from the churning water. Within it lounged Anthony Karam.

Eyes closed, head tilted back, he'd draped his arms across the lip of the tile floor, long fingers drooping over the sides. In his mid-thirties, he had the exotic good looks Hollywood leaned toward in casting movies about terrorists, a romantic fiction that the men were more misunderstood than dangerous, their smoldering sensuality irresistible to women.

Anthony wore his wavy black hair short. Heavy dark brows complemented his olive complexion, beard-shadowed face, strong nose and cruel mouth, the bottom lip plump, nearly pouting. His Adam's apple quivered with his swallow. The light coating of hair on his chest sparkled with the spa's spray. Fingers curled into loose fists, he managed an abbreviated stretch. A large silver ring, its design unknown to RJ, glinted around the middle finger of his left hand. His right pinky was missing.

Hogan went to the man first, his approach noticed by Anthony who parted his heavy-lidded eyes, their color as dark as his hair. Positioning himself to the left of his boss, Hogan held his hands behind his back and waited.

Anthony ignored his trusted lieutenant and RJ. His attention went directly to Summer, his gaze touching her eyes, throat, chest, coat and bare legs, lingering there, his eyes seeming to undress her further.

A wave of possessiveness rolled through RJ...surprising, primal, unstoppable. He wanted his reaction to have everything to do with a bruised ego, another man staring so openly at a woman who seemed to want only him last night and her craving the man in return.

In the depths of his mind, he knew better. His intense attraction to Summer, unlike anything he'd experienced with his ex or other women, fueled his response and fed his desire. Last night, he hadn't been able to get enough of her. Each hour he'd touched her and tasted her caused her to burrow more deeply into his world.

Hands at his sides, fingers loosened to hide what he felt, he watched the nonverbal exchange between Summer and Anthony. She seemed to wilt beneath the man's steady scrutiny. Out of fear or desire? RJ wasn't entirely certain, resolved to change both.

Plainly satisfied with his effect on her, Anthony's eyes moved to RJ. He gave him a sleepy smile. "My friend." His melodious voice could have belonged to an actor or singer rather than a trafficker of human flesh. Eyes drifting back to Summer, he continued to speak to RJ. "I trust you enjoyed yourself last night?"

Summer's blush deepened. Her focus remained on Anthony.

RJ pushed back his mounting jealousy. "Very much."

"Tonight will be better." Anthony's tone and broadened smile held a wealth of carnal promises.

RJ didn't question the man, nor did she.

Their silence lengthened, filled by the water's sloshing as it swirled around Anthony's body. Arching his back, he stretched, then spoke, his voice quickly authoritative, ringing across the lengthy space. "Summer."

Instantly, she left RJ's side, not bothering to question whether he wanted her to do so or not. The points of her heels clacked on the tile as she went to a refrigerator set flush against one of the muraled walls. The scene, painted in sherbet-colored hues, depicted a deserted beach ringed by gentle hills and dotted with flowering shrubs. Pulling out a dark bottle of Guinness, Summer pried off the cap and delivered the brew to Anthony.

He transferred it from his left hand to his right, so he could wrap his fingers around her ankle. RJ caught her slight shiver. Because of the chill on Anthony's fingers from the refrigerated bottle? Or from her fear of him?

Her expression revealed nothing. Anthony's thumb ran over her bare skin. His ring flashed dully in the subdued light as his hand crept up her calf.

RJ's shoulders tensed.

Summer's lids slid down. She seemed to stop breathing with Anthony sitting straighter, his fingers sliding to the inside of her leg, his hand disappearing beneath the hem of her coat and dress.

Face lifted to her, lips curled up in a knowing smile, he murmured, "Are you wet?"

"Yes." Her voice was barely audible.

"For me?"

She nodded. "Always."

A hint of a smile touched Hogan's lips. Deliberately, RJ relaxed his jaw, keeping it from clenching as Anthony's eyes darted to him.

The man's smile disappeared as quickly as it had arrived, progressing into an expression of concern the moment he glanced back at Summer, his manner that of a father with a precious child. "Are you sore from last night?"

A moment passed in which her lips parted for a deep breath. Quietly, RJ regarded her, refusing to lose his composure. He'd seen her willing passion with him last night. What he witnessed now wasn't anything close. He suspected she was buying time to determine how she should answer Anthony's question.

RJ didn't get it. She'd made it clear she wanted to stay with Anthony. Why? Because of a lingering love that made her fear of him tolerable?

Her nostrils flared slightly as his hand shifted again. She answered at last, "Not as sore as I've been with you."

Anthony's brows arched as though he was pleasantly surprised at her answer and fully pleased. Curiosity rang in his voice. "RJ used your cunt only once?"

She swallowed. "No. Numerous times."

"What of your mouth and anus?"

"He used those too," she said, her voice holding a bit of the embarrassment RJ had witnessed in the suite.

"Which did you like best?" Anthony asked.

"I have no favorites."

"Your only concern is seeing to his pleasure."

"Yes."

"Because it pleases me. It's what I want."

"Yes."

And that's all her reaction to you will ever be, Anthony's words seemed to say. At the pointed insult, barely contained rage tore through RJ. As certain as he'd been a few seconds ago that she was putting on an act for Anthony, he now began to question the longing and delight he'd seen in her eyes last night as he'd kissed her, held her, made love to her.

Had that been nothing but a performance?

His chest muscles tightened to the point of pain, not allowing him to take a full breath. *No*, he thought. Fuck no. He'd given her real pleasure, honest pleasure and she'd repeatedly asked him for more.

Abruptly, Anthony pulled his hand from between her legs. A moment passed before Summer opened her lids and looked down at him. To RJ, she seemed torn between staying at his side and running.

Anthony pressed his fingers to his nose, inhaling her musk. He bent his leg, his knee breaking the surface of the water. For a long moment, he regarded the bubbles rippling around his thigh and calf, then spoke in a voice absent of curiosity or concern. "What do you think of the man you now belong to?"

Summer's face drained of color, leaving her skin deadly pale. She curled her fingers—those Anthony couldn't see—into a tight fist.

From fear or suppressed anger?

RJ sensed a bit of both. He recalled her look of envy as she'd watched the young adults on the Golden Gate Bridge, their lives in their own hands, not someone else's. Despite her studied submissiveness, he saw her inner fire Anthony still hadn't conquered.

Revealing none of her emotions, she spoke in an indifferent voice. "He's fine."

Heat rose to RJ's face.

Anthony's hearty laugh echoed through the cavernous room. "Just fine?" With his amusement, tears rolled down his cheeks. He brushed them away. "You're not as in love with him as you are with me?"

Her knuckles blanched with the tightness of her fist. Her voice remained soft. "Never."

RJ's chest tightened again.

Anthony grinned at him, showing two rows of perfect white teeth. "It seems you have much work to do with her." His chest quivered with more laughter. "Perhaps a whipping or two before you fuck her raw will do the trick. What do you think?" Face tipped upward, smile gone, he looked at her.

Resignation drifted across her face, damping her outrage. "I think he'll do whatever he thinks is right."

"Because you belong to him now."

"Yes."

"But you won't really be his, will you?" Anthony asked in a seductive voice, draping his hand over her foot. "You'll always be mine, at least in your heart."

Summer didn't get a chance to answer. Anthony's head lowered at a sharp clack, the sound a door makes as it's closed. He glanced past Summer to the room's entrance.

RJ looked over. A young woman in her early to mid twenties padded barefoot toward them. No more than five feet with a delicate build, she had exquisite features—large light brown eyes, a slender nose, plush mouth, tawny skin. Her shiny black hair

hung straight to her waist. The edges of her claret silk robe fluttered away from her sheer negligee, exposing the curve of her youthful breasts and flat belly.

Eyes on the woman, Anthony removed his hand from Summer's foot. At once, Summer stepped back, away from him.

RJ searched the young woman's face for her reaction to Summer's presence. Her features remained impassive, her attention fully on Anthony as if they were alone in this room. She moved to his side, offering him her hand.

Taking it, he put the Guinness on the tile and left the spa. Water streamed from his abs past his belly to his curly black pubic hair, dripping from it to his tight balls and fully erect penis. Neglectful of how wet he was, he wrapped his arm around the young woman's waist, pulling her into him. "This," he said to RJ, "is Mina. The woman I love." He returned his gaze to her, working his hand beneath the right cup of her gown, pulling the flimsy fabric from her breast, revealing her coffee-colored nipple.

As his fingers caressed her flesh, he covered her mouth, kissing her deeply. Hand on his face, she cradled it, her thumb stroking his morning stubble. Her left ring finger sported a large diamond—possibly four carats—the gem capturing the faint light and winking it back.

RJ's gaze darted to Summer. He saw patience in her expression, not jealousy. Anthony might as well have been showing affection to a house pet rather than another female who was either his fiancée or his wife. Whatever was going through Summer's mind during the couple's show of affection, she didn't seem to consider the woman a true rival.

Once Anthony had licked and suckled Mina's nipple, he pressed his cheek to hers and spoke to Hogan. "Escort my new friend and Summer to her quarters." His eyes shifted to RJ. "We've moved your things there. Take the rest of the morning and afternoon off. You'll be dining with me tonight. Until then, you should at least try to win Summer's affection."

His taunting laughter followed her, RJ and Hogan from the room.

Chapter Six

Relief at them staying here, at least for a time, drained Summer completely. She wanted to sink to the ground, curl up in a fetal position and sleep for days.

Betraying none of this, she accompanied RJ and Hogan outside, her hope still fragile but renewed. No matter what happened in the next hours, days, or weeks, she'd still be here, close to the only thing keeping her alive.

To spare them from having to walk across the grounds, Hogan used one of Anthony's golf carts to drive her and RJ to their guesthouse.

On arrival, RJ spoke quickly to the man, "Don't bother getting out or coming back for any reason, understand?"

Offering no comment, Hogan kept his face straight ahead.

Summer went inside the structure. RJ stopped at the front door, inspecting it, his thumb running over the metal plate where the lock should have been.

Taking off her coat, she dropped it on the high-backed Spanish bench in the foyer, neglecting to turn on the overhead light. In the gloom, her birthmark wasn't as noticeable.

RJ entered the house at last, glancing from the foyer to the living room visible through the arched doorway. His eyes moved over the heavy Spanish furniture to the antique light fixtures on the walls to the low ceilings.

Summer sensed he was looking for cameras, determining whether there would be an audience as to what he might do now that they were physically alone.

Concern replaced Summer's previous lethargy. Her heels tapped against the pavers as she backed away from RJ, uncertain as to his mood, how he intended to respond to her comments about him in the pool house.

He's fine. I have no favorites.

You're not as in love with him as you are with me?

Never.

Desperate to control the coming moments, she unzipped her dress, pushing it from her torso to her knees, letting it drop to the floor.

RJ turned to the faint whooshing sound and faced her.

Even with her misgiving, she couldn't deny his masculine appeal. She liked his hair windblown. Its wildness enhanced the dark whiskers on his upper lip, chin and cheeks.

His gaze took in her nudity, lingering on her peaked nipples and smooth mound. Animal heat surfaced in his eyes, along with something else. Anger at Anthony's words, spoken solely to humiliate? Rage at her attention to the man?

Uncertainty held her to the spot. Passion warred with caution. RJ's big body could injure or comfort her. His large hands might deliver pleasure or punishment.

I won't hurt you, he'd said.

He hadn't as yet.

He'd been in prison, his life as hard as hers, and yet he'd shown her some measure of decency and respect. Repeatedly, he'd protected her from Hogan. He'd called her a lady. He'd told her she had no reason to be afraid. Even when she'd pissed him off by asking too many questions, his touch hadn't injured, it had aroused.

Because he was wooing her as Anthony once had, or because he did have a core of goodness?

Summer had no idea, only time would reveal the truth. Willing herself to relax, she forced herself to step out of her dress and went to him. Naked...deliberately submissive, she murmured, "Tell me what you want."

He stopped her hand from resting on his chest, brushing it away. His fingers went to her throat, the same as this morning in the penthouse shower, his palm now chilled from the clammy day.

As he stepped forward, she backed up. Her ass and shoulders bumped the wall's white-washed surface. To her right, a yellowed photograph of a Spanish family from another century bounced slightly. The frame made gentle tapping sounds.

RJ held her gaze. His blue eyes bore into hers. Summer's breath caught as he brought his mouth to her ear. Lids sinking, she smelled cherry tobacco and the lime-scented shampoo he'd used. She inhaled haltingly.

He pressed closer and spoke at a volume no microphone could pick up. "Don't play me."

Summer heard the warning in his voice, the possessiveness beneath it and something more. A hint of naked pain, so like her own. Gently, she curled her fingers around his wrist and turned her face to his ear. Given their stance, whoever watched them from the closed-circuit cameras most likely believed they were engaging in pillow talk. She kept her tone as low as he had. "I'm not, RJ. I haven't."

His free hand went between her legs, slick with her juices, her clit still erect. She inhaled sharply as he stroked it.

Mouth to her ear, RJ said, "This is for him."

She shook her head, the movement brushing her cheek against his. "No."

He kept his body against hers, giving her no chance to escape. "I told you not to lie to me."

"I'm not." Her body melted into his, offering no resistance. "I knew what he'd do when we arrived. It's happened before. I had to be prepared."

RJ's hand stalled on her clit. "Before we left the suite, you used your lubricant?"

"No." She paused to swallow, then murmured, "I knew you didn't want me to." He said nothing, his body tensing against hers. Expecting him to accuse her of lying, she

offered the truth. "On the way to the pool house, I thought about last night. You mounting me, your cock stretching me, your balls tapping my ass. While he touched me, I imagined it was you."

Breathing heavily, he remained as he was for a moment then stepped back. Summer opened her eyes. RJ searched her face as though trying to determine if she was playing him, if this was nothing more than a con. She held his gaze, allowing herself to be emotionally vulnerable, to recall his playfulness when he'd pretended to drop her in the hall, his mischievous wink, the way he'd kissed her birthmark.

Gratitude welled in her at his kindness, along with a growing fascination for him, no matter how foolish. Summer knew even if his tenderness and integrity proved genuine, business would always come first. Someday he'd turn his back on her as Anthony had, leaving her to another man, warning her of what she already knew. She wasn't a woman he would ever love.

Pain flooded her soul, while her heart ached to enjoy what comfort and pleasure he could give her now.

"I want proof," he insisted, his voice still brittle with hurt.

Summer shook her head, not knowing what else to offer except the truth, her mind racing for a way to provide it.

RJ didn't give her a chance.

Her lips parted on a surprised gasp as he bent from the waist and slung her over his shoulder, her ass pointing to the ceiling, her legs and arms dangling over him as he straightened.

Down the narrow hall he went, his booted foot kicking open doors, revealing the bath, a spare bedroom, an exercise area and finally the master bedroom.

Dominating the space was a king-size canopy bed of black wrought iron, the headboard, footboard and overhanging canopy painstakingly crafted with arabesques, the filigree providing a graceful, feminine look. In the right corner of the room, near the door, a closed-circuit camera hung from the ceiling.

RJ bent forward, depositing her in the middle of the mattress. As she made contact with it, the bedframe creaked from her weight and the bronze comforter puffed around her body, delivering her Dolce & Gabbana scent. It mingled with the lemony furniture polish the maid had used earlier.

Eyes fixed on her, his mood intent, RJ went to the light switch, flicking it on. Just past the bed, four bulbs blazed from the bottom of the ceiling fan, the glass fashioned to resemble flames. RJ went to the next wall and flipped that switch. On the heavy mesquite dresser, light poured from two brass lamps, the illumination glinting off the ornate mirror behind them.

Summer's gaze darted to her reflection—her upper body propped up on her elbows, her legs sprawled—then back to RJ. He tossed his coat on a tooled leather chair near the stone-and-brick fireplace. His hands went to his belt buckle as he spoke. "On your hands and knees facing the mirror."

Her heart thudded.

It seems you have much work to do with her, Anthony had said. *Perhaps a whipping or two before you fuck her raw will do the trick.*

I want proof.

Or a confession. Words pulled from her during and after punishment.

RJ looked at her.

She spoke without thinking, her voice shaking, "Are you going to whip me?"

RJ stared, not certain he'd heard her correctly. "What?"

Her lower lip trembled. "Are you going to whip—"

"No." He growled. "Hell no."

She seemed unconvinced. "You said you wanted proof."

By hitting her? His fury built at her thinking he'd do such a thing. And then shame replaced it at what he'd just done. He'd backed her into the wall, flung her over his shoulder, dropped her on the bed. He'd terrorized her when he'd promised her he'd never do such a thing. Straining to control his voice, he said, "Not like that."

Confusion swept her features. "Then how?"

He went to the bed, looking down at her, his memory of what Anthony had said in the pool house and her wanting to stay with him fueling RJ's uncertainty. He kept his voice at a pitch the microphones couldn't pick up. "You said you were thinking of me when you were with him. I'm the one who made you wet."

Her eyes widened. She spoke in an equally low voice. "You did."

"I want proof of it."

Uncertainty flooded her features. "How? Tell me. Please."

"Do you want me?"

"Yes!"

"Then get on your hands and knees," he said again, his ragged breathing gravelling his voice.

For a moment, she didn't seem to know what to do. At last, she assumed the position he wanted.

With his fly unzipped, he went to a chair and sat, removing his boots and socks, tossing them on the snowy sheepskin rug, making her wait for him, making her want him even more than she had seemed to last night in the suite.

Glancing up, he met her eyes. In them, he saw desire. Real? Manufactured? A bit of both?

As if understanding his turmoil, she mouthed, "I want you."

Back on his feet, RJ pushed his pants and boxer briefs past his knees. They dropped to the floor. Stepping out of his clothes, he pulled off his sweater, mussing his hair more than the wind had, flinging the garment to the floor.

Summer looked over, her eyes following him as he rounded the bed and faced her ass. Head snapping forward to the dresser's mirror, she observed him in it climbing onto the mattress. It bounced beneath his weight.

Show me you want me, only me, he thought, his hands settling on her hips, directing her ass closer to him.

Readily, she complied. RJ watched her face in the mirror, seeing gratitude in her eyes that he wasn't going to harm her.

Shit. He didn't want her gratitude, he craved her fucking trust, which he'd almost lost. He ached for her unrestrained desire, which he wasn't certain he had. Running his hands over her lush buttocks, he snatched another breath and separated her cheeks.

Summer inhaled sharply, the kind of sound a woman makes when she's aroused, not afraid. Running his fingers down her warm, damp furrow, as she had done with him in the shower this morning, he circled the tight ring of her anus.

A throaty grunt escaped her.

Pleased and eager for more, he lifted his cock in his free hand, directing it to her juicy slit.

This is for him, RJ had accused her when he'd touched it.

No. I knew what he'd do when we arrived. It's happened before. I had to be prepared. On the way to the pool house, I thought about last night. You mounting me, your cock stretching me, your balls tapping my ass. While he touched me, I imagined it was you.

RJ bathed the crown of his cock in her slippery juices. She wiggled closer to him. He swallowed hard. Slowly, making her want, praying she'd want, he eased the head inside her channel trapping it in her silky heat.

His lids fluttered. The room lurched at the sensations rolling through him. Gritting his teeth, not giving into his lust, he penetrated lazily, inch by inch, until their bodies touched. And then he bent over her, touching her clit.

Summer's head fell forward. Her shoulders bunched with her tattered breaths.

One unhurried pump followed the other as RJ masturbated her, concentrating on her pleasure, trying to ignore the tension in his thighs, the heat in his groin, the demands of his cock. His balls were so tight they ached.

She mewed as she had in the suite, the sound telling him she wanted him to go faster, harder, to bring her to completion.

Show me you want me.

Sweat dotted his forehead and bristly cheeks. A quick glance in the mirror revealed the distended veins in his neck, the prominent muscles. He was suffering as much as she seemed to be, but he wouldn't give in. He wanted proof.

His fingers stopped stroking. His hips no longer pumped.

Summer dug her nails into the comforter, revealing her frustration. To fix it, she tightened her inner muscles around his cock, working it, coaxing him.

"Don't," he said.

She stopped immediately and lifted her head. Face reddened, chest pumping, she sought his eyes in the mirror, her gaze questioning.

Bending down, RJ wrapped one arm around her waist. He watched Summer's brows lift as he pulled her to her knees. Still inside of her, he wrapped his left hand around her wrists, holding her imprisoned hands between her ripe breasts. His right hand slid down her belly, returning to her naked mound, fingers curling over the margin and dipping into her slick moisture to reach her erect clit.

On a pleased gasp, her back arched, driving her ass into his groin and his cock at a harder angle inside her cunt. RJ's arm pressed against her waist. He pushed his right knee and then his left against hers, directing Summer to part her legs even more, preventing her from closing them.

"Watch," he said.

Her eyes jerked to the mirror. She regarded their reflections, how he'd trapped her. How he intended to drive her wild to convince himself of her response.

Summer's head drooped to the right as his fingers flicked her nub and his cock stretched her sheath.

She alternately melted in his arms and fought him, attempting to drive her clit closer to his fingers, to force him to rub her harder, faster.

RJ refused. He made certain completion plagued Summer without allowing her to come. Bringing her close only to pause, he rested his damp fingers on her hip as he waited for her breathing to quiet. When it did, he began again, his strokes slower than the previous time.

She writhed and moaned.

He ignored her, stopping again just short of her release. During this interlude, he suckled her neck and her shoulder, making her wait even longer for him to return to her clit.

Damp with perspiration, she finally cried out, "Please!"

His hand didn't move from her belly. His fingers remained poised on the edge of her mound. He wanted his resistance to torment her as her words had tormented him in the suite.

No, I won't go...

With him. He intended to change that. He had to.

"Please what?" he asked.

She swallowed then begged. "Let me come."

"Why?"

She blurted, "Because I need to!" Irritation hardened her words.

RJ paid no heed. "Prove it," he said, his voice intractable, his fingers returning to her clit, daring her to fake a response.

The back of her head hit his shoulder. Tension drained from her body. She became limp against him. Vulnerable. Opened. Willing.

Again, he directed her to watch, bringing her to within a breath of orgasm only to withdraw his touch, causing her to start over. Through it all, her sheath narrowed around his cock, driven by the feelings he sensed raging within her.

Grateful for her partial response, RJ again suckled her shoulder. Summer turned her head to watch. His mouth met hers. He speared his tongue past her lips, filling her as his fingers rubbed her nub, this time remaining on it.

Mouth falling open against his, allowing him greater penetration, she forgot to suckle his tongue as he steered her to orgasm. Grunts and groans interrupted her choking gasps, the sounds suppressed by his mouth. Her body twisted within his embrace as she peaked, both of them slick with sweat. A steady pulse beat deep within her cunt, caressing his cock.

RJ moved quickly before it faded, tearing his mouth from hers, releasing her hands, directing her forearms back to the bed. Positioned thusly, he rode her for a long time, his thrusts even and slow, prolonging, intensifying her next climax and his.

It came sooner than he wanted, the sensations deeper, richer than any he'd known. His legs wavered, wanting to give out. His moans and gasps mingled with hers.

It wasn't enough. RJ feared it would never be enough, not with this woman.

He wanted to stay within her for the rest of the day and through the night. His body demanded otherwise. His knees ached and his legs shook, not wanting to support his weight.

Giving in, he pulled out of her. Immediately, she slumped to the bed, eyes closed. Not yet ready to give her rest or to be separated from her flesh, RJ rolled Summer onto her back and unfolded his length over hers, his jagged breaths pushing his chest into her damp breasts. His world reduced to her scent, her softness and warmth.

He strained to control himself, finding it increasingly difficult around her. With the tips of their noses touching, he spoke in a quiet voice only she could hear. "I don't want you to hide anything from me. Don't play me. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Understand?"

Summer struggled to open her lids. They seemed too heavy for her to lift, her fatigue too overwhelming to allow for speech. At last, she nodded, her nose rubbing his.

"Say it," he demanded, hating his loss of control.

She inhaled as deeply as his body allowed. "I understand." She used the same low tone he did so the microphones couldn't pick up her voice.

His muscles didn't relax. He spoke without thinking, unable to help himself. "If you don't, you'll regret it. Do you understand that?"

Her body went still beneath his.

RJ lifted his head looking at her.

Summer met his gaze, her eyes already cleared of the velvet heat produced by her orgasms. Alarm swept her features. "What are you talking about?"

He didn't answer her. He couldn't.

Her hands went to his upper arms. She gripped them, panic in her touch and her words. "What has Anthony told you to do to me?"

RJ stared at her now as he had when she'd asked if was going to whip her. He frowned, helpless to understand what could possibly be going through her mind or what Anthony might have done to her in the past, and why she would want to stay with him. "Nothing. This isn't about him. It's between you and me."

She searched his face. Whatever she saw, must have satisfied her. Closing her eyes, she breathed slowly, ready to escape into sleep.

Or away from him.

Troubled at the thought, RJ regarded her lips parting on another weary sigh.

Unable to stop himself, he brushed his mouth gently against hers and lifted his head, wanting to see her reaction.

Her lids parted slightly and she met his eyes, her gaze softened, a tender smile curling her lips.

He kissed her again, more deeply this time, measuring her response. She accepted his tongue eagerly, not allowing him to pull away when he needed a breath.

When their mouths finally broke free, she snuggled close, her body telling him what her words had not.

Satisfied for the moment and wanting his own rest, some measure of fucking peace, RJ rolled off her, pulled down the comforter and reached for the pillow nearest him. As he pulled it away from the headboard, there was the unmistakable sound of metal hitting metal.

Surprised at the sound, he looked at Summer to see if she'd noticed it.

Through slitted lids, she watched him. Her expression, no longer relaxed or content, said she'd heard what he had.

RJ pushed to a sitting position and leaned over, lifting the handcuffs. One end circled a metal bar in the headboard. The other, opened and lined with a cushion of velvet, waited to trap its prisoner. His head swung back to Summer, his gaze questioning.

This time she spoke in her normal voice, thick with coming sleep. "There's another set on the other side of the headboard beneath the pillow."

His eyes jumped to that end of the bed.

Summer continued, fatigue or perhaps resignation erasing all emotion from her voice. "At night, when it's time for me to go to sleep, Hogan or one of Anthony's other men come in here and cuff me to the bed until morning."

Chapter Seven

That night Anthony held court in the dining room, spacious enough to contain a hundred or more guests. Arched windows, twenty feet high, afforded diners an unrestricted view of the Bay. In the distance and darkness, San Francisco's lights twinkled like glitter dust on a Vegas showgirl.

Anthony ignored the breathtaking view. His dark eyes evaluated Summer and RJ as they moved toward him.

He stood yards away near the ivory marble fireplace, its mantle towering over his six-foot height. Immaculately groomed, with shaved cheeks and flawlessly styled hair, he wore a beige knit shirt, camel pants and brown leather loafers. In his left hand, he held a delicate wineglass. Bringing it to his lips, he sipped the red bordeaux.

Three bottles of Chateau Latour 1982 stood on the sideboard, one opened, two still wearing their paper wrappings, the packaging ridiculously inconsequential for so fine a vintage. At least, that's what Anthony had once told Summer, boasting how each bottle cost nearly two thousand dollars.

Paid for by her and his other girls' nightly labors. She didn't wonder where those young women would sleep this evening or with whom.

As she and RJ crossed the last of the yawning space, her bronze high heels seemed to clack too loudly against the russet tiles.

Anthony took another sip of his wine, his gaze offering a cool appraisal of her silk sheath dress, a Versace design. Its dark honey tint complemented her cropped beige sweater with three-quarter length sleeves worn to ward off the chill and to hide a bit of her birthmark.

In the guesthouse, RJ had watched her prepare for this evening, his eyes simmering with desire—perhaps jealousy of her history with Anthony—his voice edgy as he reminded her not to mask the discoloration. Unthinkingly, she'd reached for the concealer. When she'd lowered it to the counter, he'd taken her arm, bringing it to his lips, giving her a lingering kiss on the reddish stain.

Summer accepted RJ's compassion gladly, her heart continuing to open to him. His gentle kisses on her birthmark made it seem a worthy part of her, acceptable, normal, just as her father had claimed so long ago.

Trapped by Anthony's gaze now, her comfort faded away. Light poured down on her from one of the room's four chandeliers, each fixture constructed of crystals patterned to resemble budding flowers. The unforgiving glow emphasized every flaw.

Anthony's eyes moved over her birthmark. Impulsively, she put her arm behind herself. His attention remained on her, his mood unknown, his eyes dipping to her belly and then to her breasts. Without comment, he drained his glass and held it to the side.

Mina came from around the table, her lilac caftan rippling over her body's dips and swells. Lavish silver embroidery graced the edges of the garment's sleeves and its hem. A slit on the left side revealed her silky leg to mid-thigh, the flowing dress a contradiction of the modest and immodest.

Reaching the sideboard, she grabbed the bottle of wine, bringing it to Anthony. As she filled his glass, his attention moved from Summer to RJ.

Summer's eyes slid to him, marveling at his height and build. He was taller and more muscular than Anthony. Beneath the chandeliers' lights, his shoulder-length hair shone with cleanliness, its dark brown shade full, rich. Freshly shaved, dressed casually in a black crewneck sweater and charcoal jeans, he seemed more the master here than Anthony did.

Her task complete, Mina padded barefoot to the sideboard, where she remained.

Anthony moved his hand slightly, swirling the Bordeaux in the glass. He dipped his head as though finally acknowledging her and RJ's presence. And then his gaze shot past them.

Summer's head turned to the sudden clap of shoes. RJ also looked over. Their eyes met for a moment. In that slice of time, she caught his alarm—the same as hers—with the approach of two of Anthony's men.

Her mind scrambled to recall all she'd said to RJ while they'd been in the guesthouse. Had she unwittingly told him something she should not? Would the men punish her for it now? She tensed, waiting for them to grab her.

As if RJ thought the same, he stepped in front of Summer, his body protecting her from the men's approach.

They grabbed his arms.

Summer's belly clenched. RJ spat a curse and yanked his right arm free. Anthony's lieutenant grabbed it again. Summer stared, too stunned to move or to speak as the three men tussled briefly. Shoes scraped against the tiles, the sounds punctuated with shouted oaths.

The men's combined weight and strength overpowered RJ. They pulled him away from Summer, dragging him across the room. He stumbled backward, his hair jumping on his shoulders, teeth clenched. The men pushed him into the wall.

Eyes rounded, Summer flinched at the thud of RJ's head and shoulders striking the plaster. There, the men held him despite his grunts and struggles. Why? She'd expected them to take her, not him.

Her head swung to Anthony for an explanation. He ignored her.

Another set of footfalls rang across the room. Looking over, Summer's heart seemed to stop as she saw Hogan. Gone was his outrage from last night, his frustration at not getting what he'd demanded. He'd have the final say now.

No. Summer stepped forward, her mouth opened for a scream to stop this insanity. She gasped at Anthony's hand on her wrist, his fingers squeezing it painfully, jerking her back.

"Say one word, make one sound," Anthony warned in a lowered voice, "and he'll get worse."

Oh god. He was testing her feelings for RJ, wanting her to look as if she didn't care what happened, this was no big deal, only Anthony mattered. Summer couldn't do it. He might take it as her agreement that Hogan should beat RJ to death.

Her head swung back to him, her eyes filling with tears. She bit back an anguished moan at Hogan's first blow, his fist connecting with a muffled thud in RJ's abs. Gagging and gasping, RJ tried to catch his breath. Before he could, Hogan struck his jaw. RJ's teeth clacked against each other. Blood trickled from his mouth and split lip.

Gorge rose to Summer's throat. Hogan smiled.

RJ looked at him through pain-slitted eyes, then spat, leaving red-tinged spittle on the man's face. Growling like a rabid dog, Hogan drove his fist into RJ's jaw and back into his midsection.

Wheezing with pain, RJ slumped against the wall, his arms slack in the other men's grip. Hogan stepped away, massaging his fist.

Summer couldn't catch her breath. Was it over? Or would there be more? Would Hogan kill him? Would Anthony allow it or encourage it?

In answer to her anguish, Anthony's grip loosened, his thumb stroking the edge of her birthmark. Disconcerted, she glanced at him. He regarded RJ thoughtfully, even tilting his head as though he wanted to hear the man's miserly pants, how pain compromised his ability to breathe. Several seconds passed. Summer looked back at RJ and Hogan. He stopped massaging his hand, allowing it to drop at his side.

Anthony's grip tightened, encouraging Summer to meet his gaze. Fighting a shiver, she did.

"Who do you want more?" he asked, his voice uncommonly soft.

She spoke without hesitation and lied better than she ever had. "You." Any other answer would get RJ killed, not because Anthony was jealous or wanted her so badly. He did not. To him she was an object and he didn't part easily with the things he owned, even those he'd decided to give away. "Always you."

Anthony said nothing. His ominous silence made the pounding of her heart all the more noticeable. Panicked, Summer moved into him, desperate he believe her so he'd no longer care about RJ.

Again, Anthony's grip tightened. Again, it stopped her.

Pinning her with his gaze, he lifted her forearm to his mouth, kissing her birthmark as RJ had done in the guesthouse, his actions telling her he'd been watching them... he'd seen everything.

Fear whispered through her. She pushed it away, resolved to do whatever it took to save RJ and to also survive. "I should have covered it as you've always told me to," she murmured, "I'm sorry."

Anthony suckled her port wine stain, making the color deeper, redder, and then he licked it playfully. Head lifting, he released her arm. "You know what I have to do now."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Go to the table."

A bead of sweat rolled down her back despite the cool breath of air in here. Her eyes touched Mina's, who watched without expression. To her, whatever Anthony wanted, Anthony received. Summer reached the table and waited.

"Not there," Anthony said, "to the end on the right."

She went to that part of the table, where RJ couldn't help but see what Anthony had planned.

Hogan approached quickly, pulling away the heavy chair so it wouldn't restrict the movements of his boss. He next pushed the silver serving trays aside, heaped with pita bread and hummus, olives, stuffed grape leaves, eggplant spreads, a spinach pie.

An olive dropped from its tray and rolled across the table. Catching it, Hogan popped the salty fruit into his mouth.

Summer's gaze slid from the space he'd created for her to the windows. Reflected in the glass, she saw the men holding RJ, his features twisted in pain, his fingers fisted. In rage at Hogan's beating or what Anthony was about to do? She prayed RJ wouldn't say anything to stop it. She didn't want his protection now. For his safety, she would endure this gladly.

In a few minutes, it would be over. Only those in this room would witness her chastisement and its aftermath. Despite the towering windows, the house sat too high on the cliff, the table too far from the glass for those in boats or ships to see anything. Even with a telescope, they'd get only a glimpse of the chandeliers and wall hangings.

Anthony crossed the room to her, his shoes slapping the tiles.

Needing no direction, Summer lifted her dress above her thighs and hips to her waist. She draped her torso over the table, supporting her weight on her forearms, head bent penitently, legs spread wide, ass lifted, her lacy beige thong baring her buttocks.

The coolish air licked her skin, intensifying her partial nudity and her wait for the inescapable. She pressed the pads of her fingers against the table, not daring to make fists.

Anthony rested his left hand on her ass, his warm palm chasing away the chill. "Not one sound," he ordered in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear.

In agreement, Summer nodded. The ends of her hair swayed rhythmically, hypnotically. She concentrated on them, not Anthony pulling her thong down to her thighs, baring her fully to the men in here and to RJ.

Anthony unbuckled his belt, releasing it from the loops of his pants. "Tell me you want this," he said.

With no other choice and wanting to save RJ, Summer told him she did.

Not one sound.

Through a haze of pain, RJ tried to catch his breath and could not. Air wheezed out of his lungs, matching the whistling of Anthony's belt.

It cracked against Summer's buttocks.

A surge of rage trembled through RJ's body. He considered using it to break free of Anthony's goons, knowing if he did they'd draw their weapons and he'd have a bullet in his head halfway to reaching their boss. Then he'd be an eternity away from stopping Anthony from hurting Summer.

She'd be alone again as she'd been before he arrived.

RJ looked away, not wanting to see Anthony punishing her for whatever rule he thought she'd broken. He gritted his teeth after the third crack, his mind screaming for it to end.

Silence answered, though not for long. RJ heard the whoosh of fabric, Anthony's pants dropping to the floor.

"Who do you want more?" he asked Summer.

Her voice held no pain, no hope, no joy, simply resignation to what she believed she couldn't escape. "You."

Minutes later, Anthony grunted, then cried in release.

It was over.

With Anthony's ego restored, Summer pulled her thong over her sore buttocks, smoothed down her dress and sneaked a look at RJ, wishing as she had last night that they had different lives and had met at a bar or through friends.

Her eyes filled with futile tears that she blinked away quickly.

Thankfully, RJ didn't see her current embarrassment or shame. His gaze was on Anthony, not her. Whatever he thought of the man, his conclusions remained hidden behind a veil of pain. Already a bruise bloomed on his jaw, the skin a purplish red. His breaths came in short spurts. He no longer fisted his fingers. He seemed dependent on the other men's hold to keep him from sliding to the floor.

Anthony grabbed his belt, slipping its end through the loops on his pants. "I gave her to you," he said, speaking to RJ, his voice drowsy from his orgasm and the wine he'd been drinking, "but never forget, she will always be mine."

RJ made no comment. Anthony's hand went to Summer's hair, stroking it lightly, his attention on it as he continued. "Perhaps you should have chosen another of my girls. I've added several to my operation recently." Eyes narrowed, his gaze returned to RJ. "Summer was one of my first. We have a history. We share a special bond." He looked at her.

She ordered herself not to show any outward emotion, uncertain how to respond to his comment about their special bond, confused as to how she should feel. If he kept her, she'd be able to remain here, her only goal.

If he kept her, she'd never again know RJ's touch, the weight and warmth of his big body on hers, his strong arms surrounding her with tenderness...the protection she'd craved and hadn't known. Unsettled, she kept her eyes on Anthony, afraid to look at RJ, worried her troubled feelings might become obvious.

RJ cleared his throat and spoke in a voice blurred with pain. "I'm not into your new jail bait. I want a woman, not a girl."

"How foolish of you," Anthony mused. "The youngest have many years to give. The most beautiful—the most perfect—can work night after night, making you a rich man. With a percentage of the proceeds returned to me, of course."

His hand gripped Summer's wrist. His thumb touched the edge of her birthmark, an unforgiveable imperfection. "In our business, thirty is old. Summer just turned twenty-six." His voice grew distressed, concerned for his ward. "What happens to her when she's no longer attractive a few short years from now? Do you think I'd be foolish enough to take her back?"

"I know you wouldn't be." RJ paused to swallow, then panted out his words. "When the time comes, I'll deal with it. The problem will be mine, not yours."

Blood drained from Summer's face at how casually the two men discussed her future as though she were an inanimate object, not a person. After eleven years, she should have been used to it, but was not, especially when it came to RJ. He'd protected her. He hadn't whipped her. He'd delivered pleasure instead of pain, but that didn't mean she had his love.

Her stomach turned over, making her queasy. She hid it all, ignoring the ache in her heart.

Anthony's head swung to her. He spoke more to himself than to her or RJ. "Now why would a man want a woman who isn't perfect and who's no longer truly young?"

He looked at his newest employee. "Do you believe that makes her so grateful that she'll be more yielding?" Releasing her arm, he touched his belt and smiled. "You would do well to get that notion out of your head. If you insist on keeping Summer, be certain to discipline her regularly. She can be defiant. She's proven herself untrustworthy."

RJ inhaled slowly, testing his capacity to take a deep breath. "Don't worry. I'll handle it."

"While the two of you are here," Anthony retorted, the tone of his voice saying the matter of her ownership remained unsettled. He wouldn't entertain further discussion on it tonight. He lifted his chin slightly, his eyes sliding from the man on RJ's right to the one on his left. Together, they released their hold on RJ.

"Forgive the indelicate greeting of my staff," Anthony intoned, "but in my business I have to make certain my friends are truly my friends."

Summer glanced at Hogan, who struggled not to smile at Anthony allowing him to reestablish his rank, the reason he'd been the one to mete out RJ's beating. A game Anthony encouraged among his men, enjoying their violence toward each other, which reinforced their loyalty to him.

RJ pushed away from the wall, his steps hesitant as he swayed unsteadily and spoke through his teeth. "Maybe I should have let that van hit you."

Anthony's laughter pealed through the room. "I'm certain many of my enemies would have enjoyed that. But you did not. You saved me."

"That I did." He smoothed down the sleeves of his sweater. He touched his swollen lower lip, then looked at the drying blood on his fingers. Working his tongue around his mouth, he lifted his head and moved so swiftly that Summer gasped.

Hand on Hogan's throat, RJ shoved the man backward. Startled, Hogan's arms flailed. He opened his mouth, but didn't get a chance to make a sound or utter one word. RJ's fist smashed into his jaw too quickly. On a crunching sound, blood sprayed from between Hogan's lips. The blow sent him staggering. RJ followed, grabbing the man's jacket, yanking him forward, keeping him from falling.

His next two blows landed squarely in Hogan's belly, sending him to the floor where he slumped from his knees to his back. Stepping around him, RJ placed his foot on the man's throat and glanced at the other men, his expression defiant at their fingers resting on their shoulder holsters. The men's eyes darted to Anthony, waiting for him to tell them what to do.

Summer's nails dug into her palms. She watched Anthony from her peripheral vision, unable to guess his reaction if she met his gaze. He flicked his hand, the gesture ordering his men to do nothing. They lowered their hands, allowing their suit jackets to fall forward, concealing their guns.

Hogan gurgled and coughed weakly.

RJ looked at him as though he were an insect he intended to squash. His voice rumbled with rage. "Don't ever touch me again. If you even think about it, I'll fucking tear you apart with my bare hands, not enough to make you die, just enough that you'll beg for it." He pushed more of his weight on his foot.

Hogan's eyes bulged. His hands flew to RJ's boot, hovered briefly and fell away. His lips moved in a soundless plea for mercy.

Immune, RJ continued, "You're also going to stay away from the lady. She belongs to me until Mr. Karam decides otherwise. You touch her, I'll kill you."

Summer's gaze shifted to Anthony, worried at his reaction to RJ protecting her from Hogan. Impassively, Anthony watched the scene.

Reddish drool dripped from the side of Hogan's mouth. Tears ran from his eyes. He nodded his acquiescence to RJ's demands.

"Help your colleague to his room," Anthony ordered his men, his voice disinterested, bored. Summer had heard more passion from him during his tirades at the housekeeping staff for missing a fingerprint on a mirror.

"Come," he said to RJ, gesturing him closer, his voice filled with good cheer. "Let us enjoy our meal." He shouted for Xavier, one of the oldest and most trusted members of his house staff. A man who had worked with Anthony's late father and mother in their convenience store shortly after they immigrated to this country. Long before their son engaged in his illegal activities.

No matter what Xavier witnessed here tonight, Summer knew he wouldn't talk.

The second the elderly man appeared, RJ told him he wanted a bottle of Chivas, not giving a fuck whether Anthony approved or not. Sparks of white hot pain had settled in his jaw and ribs. None broken, just bruised.

He downed his drink in one gulp. As he poured another, the scotch burned its way to his belly, its quality and strength blunting his agony. Not the worst he'd known. In his adult life, he'd engaged in countless brawls, resulting in more than a few broken bones. However, no one had ever expected him to enjoy a fancy dinner while he recuperated.

The absurdity of it didn't escape him. Neither did Anthony's narcissism. The man's face was untroubled as he sipped a spoonful of the chicken lemon soup, then dug into an unappetizing looking mess he called a shepherd's salad with onions, green peppers, cubed tomatoes and cucumbers.

The vegetables crunched with each of his chews. Tapping his hand in front of RJ's place setting, he said, "Taste it, it's good." His silver ring glinted in the light pouring down from the chandelier. "Summer loves it. Don't you?" he asked her.

RJ glanced in her direction. She sat on the same side of the table as him, across from Anthony. Her head bobbed gently with her nod, her face mirroring her misery as she forced another spoonful of the soup into her mouth. RJ recalled this morning as she'd sucked on her straw, making indelicate, unsophisticated noises while trying to get the last drops of her chocolate milkshake.

Summer just turned twenty-six, Anthony had said.

Again, RJ marveled at how very young she appeared, picturing her as a teen gulping milkshakes, joking with her friends, smiling. Something she did far too infrequently.

Rage continued to churn in his belly at his memory of Anthony whipping her, the sick pleasure on the man's face. No matter his own failings, and he had many according

to his ex, RJ didn't strike women to get a high. He didn't sleep with teenagers. Even the worst of men had to hold something sacred.

If Anthony tried to discipline her again, RJ wasn't certain he'd be able to stop himself a second time from interfering—no matter the fatal consequences—or if Summer would welcome his protection. He sensed she'd drawn attention to herself to take the focus off him, sparing him a beating that might have gone too far, resulting in his death.

Her kindness brought a rush of feelings, tightening RJ's throat, touching him as few things had. Her bravery was greater than most of the men he'd known, criminals he came across in his daily life. All had bluster. None owned courage or integrity.

Summer barely knew him and yet she had protected him, not shedding one tear during her whipping as Hogan had after only a few blows. No words or sounds had escaped her parted lips.

A wave of admiration and gratitude drove RJ to press the side of his leg against hers.

Summer's fork halted a few inches above the salad. Her hand shook, causing a wedge of cucumber to drop from the metal tines onto several tomatoes. She speared it again, but didn't bring the food to her mouth. Tentatively, she pressed her leg against his, then seemed to wait for his response, apparently uncertain as to whether he'd touched her by mistake.

He pressed again.

Head lowered, she dabbed her lips with a napkin, her expression inscrutable as though she didn't quite trust his gesture. Nevertheless, the color blooming in her cheeks told him she enjoyed and welcomed it.

If he hadn't been in such fucking pain, he would have smiled.

"You need more," Mina murmured, refilling Anthony's wineglass. RJ glanced at her diamond ring. The solitaire appeared gaudier than he recalled.

"Excuse me, Mr. Karam," Xavier said. He folded his age-spotted hands in front of his white chef's coat and continued in a low, reverent voice, "Cook says the lamb will be ready to serve in five minutes."

Anthony nodded.

The elderly man turned, then stopped at a crash in the hall, the sound of shattering glass, perhaps a vase.

"No, stay away from me!" a child's voice screeched, accompanied by light slapping noises, the sounds bare little feet make when they're running.

Into the room he bolted, a boy somewhere between four and six years of age. He wore pajamas embellished with characters from the newest Disney animated movie. Strands of wavy black hair stuck to his sweaty forehead. His features resembled Anthony's. His skin coloring matched Mina's, the same as his light brown eyes.

Their child, RJ thought, glancing at them.

For the first time tonight, Mina's normally placid expression wavered. Her full attention was on Anthony as she studied his reaction to the boy's entrance. Anthony's eyes followed his son, who ran around the table shouting, "Stay away from me! Stay away from me!"

An older woman in a conservative gray dress and low heels hurried into the room, only to stop short of the table. Ignoring the shouting boy, she stared at Anthony, her expression anxious, an apology forming on her narrow lips.

"I don't wanna go to bed!" the boy spat at her and backed away, even though she hadn't moved.

"Nicky, please," the older woman begged in a voice normally reserved for an executioner rather than a child. "It's time for you to—"

His bellow interrupted her. "No, no, no, NO!" He ran in the opposite direction, around the table.

Following him with his gaze, RJ turned his head and caught Summer also watching the boy. All the blood had drained from her face, leaving a grayish cast as if she might be ill.

RJ glanced at her salad and the soup, barely touched because she so obviously hated it. Had the scant amount she'd forced herself to eat upset her stomach?

Nicky ran past her and RJ, the boy's shrieks piercing and loud. He darted around the older woman, no doubt his nanny, and headed down the other side of the table. Without warning, Anthony's hand shot out, grabbing his son's arm.

"Stop that at once," he said, his voice low and icy.

The child came to an abrupt halt, not even bouncing in place. His narrow chest pumped with his quick breaths, his eyes went so wide the whites were visible. His lower lip trembled. He didn't make another sound.

With the boy's naked terror, RJ's eyes jerked to Mina and then to Summer. Both women looked nervous, as if they'd witnessed this scene on other occasions and hadn't liked or approved of its outcome. If Anthony struck the boy, RJ knew he'd beat the crap out of him and would get a bullet in his skull for his trouble. To avoid it, he asked, "Your son?"

The nonchalance of his question and his casual tone broke Anthony's concentration and barely suppressed rage. As it drained from him, his gaze remained on the terrified boy. "Yes," he answered. He ran his knuckles across Nicky's downy cheek and spoke in a much-softened voice. "You behave for Ms. Wilson, understand?"

The boy nodded meekly.

Anthony flicked his gaze at Mina. "Go with them. Make certain he gets in bed and stays there this time."

She left the table. Pulling the boy from Anthony, she lifted him into her arms, sighing from his weight or her relief at having him away from his father. Nicky wrapped his short legs around her waist, his arms around her neck. Tears brightened

his eyes and slipped down his cheeks. He sobbed, "Mama, I'll be good. Don't punish me!"

Mina ran her hand down his hair, shushing him, comforting. Together, she, Nicky and Ms. Wilson left the dining room.

Anthony turned back in his chair. Fork in hand, he speared two tomatoes and looked up at Summer, his hooded eyes challenging her to say anything.

She remained silent, her complexion pasty. Anthony tilted his head to his fork, slipping the shepherd's salad into his mouth. Summer's head turned toward the doorway where Mina, Nicky and Ms. Wilson had exited.

RJ wondered if she was waiting, as he was, for sounds of Nicky crying because the child still feared what might happen because he'd made his father angry.

"He looks more like me everyday, doesn't he?" Anthony asked.

RJ looked at the man. His focus was on his salad as he speared tomatoes, ignoring the other vegetables.

"Yes," Summer said in a quiet voice tinged with misgiving.

"A good thing." Anthony smiled, his good mood suddenly restored. "I certainly wouldn't want him to look like his mother. Xavier!" he hollered, leaning back in his chair. "Where is our lamb? We are starving!"

Mina returned to the room halfway through the main dish. She, like Anthony, pretended Nicky's earlier outburst hadn't happened.

Summer ate as much as her cramping stomach would allow. Politely, she declined the cinnamon custard Xavier offered.

On his last bite of it, Anthony pushed his chair back and stood. Mina followed. So did Summer. She noticed how RJ looked at each of them in turn, keeping his seat as he downed his Chivas. Only then did he stand.

Anthony came around the table to him. "Go back to the guesthouse and get some sleep, no matter what this one wants." He grinned at Summer, then sobered as his hand clamped on RJ's shoulder. "Tomorrow I'll show you your place in my operation. Another of your rewards for saving my life."

Giving him no chance to respond, Anthony's hand slipped from RJ's shoulder and went to Summer's throat. He pulled her close and kissed her deeply, his tongue tasting of vanilla, cinnamon and Turkish coffee.

She recalled RJ's taste. Fueled by it, she was able to respond to Anthony, her hand resting on his chest. His heart beat smoothly beneath her fingertips.

Appeased with her response, Anthony finished his kiss and pressed his cheek to hers, whispering in her ear so the others couldn't catch what he said. "Sleep well. Dream of all the things you want. Know that I can give them to you if I choose."

At his callous words and empty promises, eleven years of frustration seethed through Summer. Rage followed. With great effort, she ignored both emotions.

Releasing her, he turned away and left the room.

Side by side, she and RJ went through the house to the front door, saying nothing, not even looking at each other, aware of the cameras recording their actions and words.

Outside, a gust of clammy wind tangled her hair and whipped her dress against her stinging buttocks. She endured the pain, knowing it wasn't nearly as bad as RJ's. He breathed sharply a couple of times as though his bruised body had gotten the better of him. When one of Anthony's men drove up in the golf cart to take them to the guesthouse, he seemed visibly relieved.

Inside their home, Summer took his hand, leading him to the bath. There, she turned on the water in the tub, deliberately speaking in her normal voice so Anthony's men could hear. "A warm bath will take away some of your pain."

She went to the shower next, putting the water at its hottest temperature, turning on all the heads. "Damp heat will also help." She flipped the switch to the exhaust fan, knowing it wouldn't be enough to combat the rising plumes of steam. They fogged the mirrors and the lens of the camera.

Protected finally from Anthony and his men's scrutiny, she placed her hands on RJ's shoulders. With a light touch, she directed him to the toilet seat and spoke in a lowered voice further masked by the shower's pounding spray. "Sit."

He didn't resist. Back slumped against the tank, he stretched out his long legs, resting the heels of his boots against the tile floor. She went to the medicine cabinet and selected a bottle of peroxide, cotton swabs and antiseptic ointment.

Returning to him, she soaked the cotton with the peroxide and warned, "This might sting a little."

RJ grabbed her wrist, stopping her from touching his split lip, and spoke in an equally quiet voice. "Then don't do it."

She allowed the cotton swab to drop from her hand and sank to her knees at his side. "The cut should be cleaned. I'll blow on it so the sting's not so bad."

RJ lowered his head and laughed softly, the sounds halting, but sounding so boyish and sweet. She smiled. "What's so funny?"

"Aw God." He groaned and laughed, then groaned some more. "You'll blow on it so the sting's not so bad?"

"Do you want me to use my hairdryer instead?" She continued to tease, speaking just a shade above his renewed laughter. "Are you afraid I'll spray saliva on you?"

"Stop." He cupped her face in hands. "I can't laugh anymore. It hurts too fucking much. Are you trying to kill me?"

Her smile collapsed. She kept her voice scarcely above a whisper. "How bad is it? Did Hogan break one of your ribs? You're breathing funny."

His hands dropped from her face, falling to his sides. He tilted his head back until his chin pointed at the ceiling. "I always breathe funny when I'm aroused."

Summer caught herself before she laughed. He behaved like a typical man, pretending nothing was wrong, his body could take anything. Gaze lowered, she lifted the edge of his sweater past his fly, above his belt and up to his pecs. A mournful gasp escaped her lips at his battered flesh, the large mean bruises on his belly and ribs.

"I'm all right," he said in a voice graveled from the hurt. "Nothing's broken."

"How can you be so sure? Let me call Anthony so he can get his physician out here."

"No. Just drop it." His quiet voice hardened. "And don't you ever again get yourself hurt to protect me, do you understand?"

Her face grew even more heated at him realizing the cause of her actions. "I don't mind."

"I do. What Hogan did tonight was nothing. Believe me, I've been through worse."

"In prison?"

His eyes opened. He brought down his head and looked at her through the thickening steam, his expression a warning not to ask anything else.

Summer didn't heed it. She had to know about him. She wanted to know about him. It would be all she had to hold onto once she returned to Anthony, either because he demanded it or she'd run away from RJ. "How much time did you serve? What were you convicted of?"

Something passed across his face. Averting his gaze, he made his tone sharp, an admonishment for her to back off. "You don't want to know."

She did and she sensed it wasn't murder. Burglary maybe. Or robbery. But not cold-blooded murder and not human trafficking. There was something about him—an inherent decency that precluded such horrendous crimes. She'd seen the look on his face when Anthony caught Nicky's arm and demanded the little boy's silence. At that moment, Summer knew RJ would have killed Anthony if he'd dared hit the child.

Truly vicious men didn't act like that. To them, anyone was fair game. The younger and weaker the victim, the better they liked it.

I'm not into your new jail bait, he'd told Anthony. I want a woman, not a girl.

He seemed to want her, really want her for reasons Summer couldn't fathom and didn't want to question.

She bent her head to his torso and kissed his belly and ribs as gently as she could. Moving her face up to his, she smelled scotch on his breath and whispered in his ear, "You should leave. You can leave. Don't stay."

He made no comment. Summer moved back and met his eyes, so stunningly blue, so beautiful. So closed to her now, the bond they'd begun to form with his laughter and her teasing already absent.

"Why do you want to stay with him?" he asked, his voice as low as hers had been so he wouldn't be overheard.

She had no immediate answer she could confess to him or a lie he'd believe. It wasn't because she wanted it. She had no choice in the matter.

"He brutalizes you," RJ said. "He hits his kid."

"No." She shook her head so quickly the ends of her hair slapped her cheeks. "He's never hit Nicky. Mina wouldn't allow it."

He countered, "She seemed incredibly docile to me. The proverbial good wife."

Glancing over, Summer grabbed another cotton swab, soaking it with peroxide. With her palm on the side of his face, she murmured, "Keep still. Let me clean your lip."

His nostrils flared with the sting of the peroxide. She cleansed the wound as best she could and murmured, "Mina's not Anthony's wife."

RJ swallowed hard, then breathed as deeply as his bruised ribs would allow. "Fiancée then."

"She's not that either." Summer dabbed a bit of the antiseptic ointment on his lip. "Don't lick that off, it tastes like crap."

He grinned until the pain in his jaw stopped him.

Lightly, Summer touched the bruise and told him what she should not. "Anthony and Mina can't get married."

Obviously puzzled, he asked, "Why? She's not free? She has a husband somewhere else?"

Summer capped the ointment and put it on the counter. Eyes lifted to his, she whispered, "Her husband was Anthony's biggest competitor. She helped Anthony bring her husband down so Anthony could take over his operation."

RJ's brows lifted slightly. "You're saying her husband's no longer alive?"

"I'm saying she's not about to start divorce proceedings and bring herself to the attention of any court."

Chapter Eight

Once his bruised face had healed, RJ began his role in the operation, accompanying Anthony's men and numerous young women to San Francisco's finest hotels for the girls' appointments with their clients.

He never saw who they serviced. No one mentioned names. Anthony's lieutenants told him nothing about the enterprise, insisting he go to the hotels' restaurants and enjoy a prolonged meal. The moment he headed there, they escorted the females to their suites. Hours later, the men would collect him. Inside the Mercedes, BMWs and Jaguars, the females waited for Anthony's lieutenants to drive them back to their buildings.

Some of the older girls—ones in their mid-twenties—tried to engage RJ in conversation as though he was another of their endless streams of clients. Several flirted openly, their eyes hungry as they regarded his hair, mouth, shoulders and the bulge behind his fly. The younger ones didn't seem to notice him at all.

They stared out their windows at the passing scenery, their gazes haunted, the same as Summer's had been that day on the Golden Gate bridge.

As he had with her, RJ caught himself thinking far too much about the other girls' unattainable dreams and hopes, finally forcing himself to dismiss it. He had a job to do.

For the moment, he had Summer.

On the first morning after the beating, she'd insisted on shaving and bathing him, telling him to relax, to heal.

He smiled at the memory of her straddling him in the tub, her feet against his hips, knees against the sides of his pecs, her slender fingers slathering shave cream on his face and throat so carefully that she barely touched him.

He wasn't as delicate. A lot of the foam ended up on her breasts as he bent his head and suckled her nipples as hard as he dared while she tried to shave him.

Alternately purring in delight and giggling at his misbehavior, she waved the razor in her hand. "If you don't keep still, I might cut you with this."

Mouth to her ear, he whispered, "You fucking expect me to keep still when we're like this?"

She whispered in return, "If you're a bleeder, you damn well better."

"I'm not." With a growl, he'd pulled her as close as he could and captured her mouth, his tongue muffling her lusty moans.

Minutes later and dripping wet, he had her bent over the bath's counter with his cock snuggled inside her cunt. They watched each other's faces and reactions in the mirror. On each of his pumps, she tightened her inner muscles, providing the greatest friction possible.

He grinned. She responded with a wicked smile.

For RJ, shaving and bathing would never be quite the same, nor would anything else without Summer, not even coming home.

Each morning, upon his return to their guesthouse, she greeted him out of camera range with a welcoming smile and a guileless kiss that said she'd genuinely missed him. Just pressing his face against her sweetly scented hair drove all the other crap away—the stench of cigarette smoke in the cars, liquor on the men's breaths, the girls' choking perfume.

Although RJ knew the smells clung to his clothes, Summer never asked where he'd been or what he'd done. He sensed she didn't want to know if he'd enjoyed another woman.

Why would he when he had her?

He continued to seek her trust. When he finally did something to shake her confidence in him, he wanted her to remember the good moments and hang onto them as he would.

Already there were too many to count. Like those times when her eyes would light up because he'd surprised her with wedges of chocolate cake and petit fours from the restaurants. Greedily, she devoured the treats in secret, concerned over how Anthony might react, always finishing on a satisfied sigh, her manner as peaceful as when RJ watched her sleep.

Only upon awakening did he see renewed caution in her eyes as she regarded him in their bed, her expression saying she wanted him there even as she feared it wouldn't last.

He knew it would not. He was manufacturing a dream for them that couldn't endure. Unwisely, he continued to enjoy the fantasy, pushing their inevitable parting from his mind.

* * * * *

At the start of his third week at the compound, RJ grew increasingly anxious about his growing feelings for Summer and the job. He itched for a bigger role in Anthony's operation, more independence and the return of his gun.

Away on a business trip for his legitimate holdings, Anthony had put David Jacobski in charge, an older man with far more finesse than Hogan. Determined to make his move, RJ sat across from Jacobski in Anthony's office, a room off the dining area.

It boasted more square footage than his and Summer's guesthouse. Hundreds of leather-bound volumes filled the built-in mahogany bookcases that stretched from floor to ceiling. Pearly light poured in through the arched windows, shining dully off the burgundy sofa and chairs, polished hardwood floors and massive desk, its construction particularly masculine.

"No," Jacobski said to RJ's request. His leather chair creaked as he relaxed his hefty body into it. "You don't need your gun to enjoy a meal in a five-star hotel."

RJ drew deeply on his cigarillo, directing the smoke to the ceiling as he exhaled, a measure of deference to the man's age and rank in Anthony's business. He kept his voice mild. "What I don't need is this job if it's going to be so pissing boring."

Jacobski smiled as a father would to an impatient son. With his thick silver hair and sparkling green eyes, he exuded enough likeability to have been a neighborhood priest or a spokesperson for a new pharmaceutical product. "If you're bored, then enjoy one of the girls after they're finished with their clients. We have extra suites at the hotels for unexpected events."

RJ regarded the man as he savored another lungful of smoke. It poured over his lips with his words. "I'm not looking for tail. I want to be useful." He tapped his cigarillo against the crystal ashtray, knocking off the ashes. "I know the locations where we do business. I know where the women live. At the very least, let me pick them up and deliver them to their clients. I'll be their fucking chauffeur like Hogan is now."

Jacobski's expression changed from likeable to firm. "There's more to the job than that."

"And how in the fuck do you expect me to learn all the other parts if I'm stuck in a restaurant?"

"Hasn't Summer told you what goes on?"

The change in Jacobski's tone was subtle, but didn't go unnoticed by RJ. The man was fishing for information, no doubt prompted to do so by Anthony. "You tell me. We're on closed-circuit TV. There's bugs all over the damn place. Haven't you been watching and listening like the others or do you prefer cable TV?"

A smile broke across the man's weathered face, creating more wrinkles in his cheeks and around his eyes. "I prefer to watch you and Summer. You two remind me of when I was younger. I used to make women moan like that."

RJ didn't comment, nor did he return the man's smile.

It vanished as Jacobski asked, "What do you two whisper about?"

Buying time, RJ tapped his smoke against the ashtray, removing the newest ashes. "She tells me what all men want to hear—how long I am, how hard, how she likes me to fuck her."

"Not very imaginative."

"She knows I'm an ex-con, not a poet."

Jacobski's laughter rolled across the spacious room. "And what do you whisper in return?"

"For her to shut the fuck up. I'm not interested in hearing her talk. I want her mouth for other purposes."

"And you do seem to enjoy it," he said, pushing from his chair.

RJ's gaze followed the man as Jacobski went to one of the arched windows. Hands clasped behind his back, he regarded the view. A thin fog hovered over the Bay and San Francisco. Heat continued to creep up RJ's torso despite the day's chill, making his wool sweater too hot. Sweat ran from his chest to his belly.

He waited for Jacobski to call one of the other men in here, perhaps Hogan, telling him to bring Summer to the room. RJ imagined Jacobski questioning her about what she'd really whispered to him. She'd lie, of course, even though it wasn't necessary.

She hadn't revealed anything about the operation. She'd thanked him for the treats, whispering how much she adored chocolate, how infrequently she got it. She'd admitted to having been self-conscious about her birthmark ever since she was a little girl, grateful he didn't find it unpleasant. She told him she'd been frightened when he and Hogan had fought and hoped it would never happen again.

"You don't have to refer to me as a lady," she'd whispered, "it just pisses him off."

"Good," RJ had whispered back.

"Please listen to me," she argued, trying to convince him to behave. "I know what I am. I accept it. Don't get yourself hurt just to spare my feelings."

"I'm not. I'm telling things the way I see them. Who you sleep with doesn't change who you are to me."

With his comment, she'd rolled away from him, though not before he saw her eyes filling with tears. At the sight, his heart turned over.

Night after night, they continued to converse like school kids watched by a manic, sexually repressed nun. As far as RJ was concerned, what Summer told him in confidence was no one's business but his.

Jacobski sighed deeply and rocked back on his heels. "I suppose you could start shuttling the girls to their appointments."

"And escorting them to their rooms."

"No." He turned. "The others will do that for the time being. Small steps, RJ. Even though you saved Anthony's life, I can't be having the men thinking that he prefers you over any of them. It's not good for morale."

"Why in the fuck would they think he finds me special or trusts me at all if I don't even have my gun?"

The older man dismissed the comment with a wave of his hand and returned to his chair. "You'll get it back in time when you prove yourself. Now get out of here, I have work to do."

The next week stretched into the fourth.

RJ didn't ask for any more audiences with Jacobski or Anthony, who'd returned from his overseas trip. Keeping his mouth shut, RJ listened to the other men's conversations, storing details for later use. When they told him to do something, he did it without question, keeping his distance as a wise man would in prison.

He picked up the girls from the buildings where Anthony's men guarded them, drove his passengers to their hotels, waited downstairs until they'd finished, then ferried them back, discouraging all conversation.

He didn't allow himself to wonder what happened after the girls walked through the front doors of their buildings at dawn, who waited upstairs in their rooms or whether the men would cuff them to their beds as they'd done with Summer. That wasn't why he was here.

Thanks for protecting me from Hogan, Summer had whispered unexpectedly one evening.

He couldn't do it for everyone and so he ignored his sudden sentimentality, imagining the look on his ex's face if she'd seen it. Over the years she'd warned him repeatedly about getting in too deep, losing perspective, risking his freedom or his life. Heeding her advice now, he bided his time and waited for Anthony to send for him.

At the end of the sixth week, Jacobski told him to go to their boss's office. RJ sensed his meeting with Anthony wouldn't result in the man returning his gun or giving him more authority and independence in his nightly work. Careful to mask his emotions, he strode inside the room, stopping just short of Anthony's desk.

Eyes on his computer screen, Anthony keyed in something quickly, despite his missing pinky, frowned, then continued reading, deliberately ignoring RJ.

He made no sound to force the man's attention, preferring to observe. Although it was nearly four in the afternoon, Anthony wore a black velour robe as though he'd just gotten out of bed with Mina.

Not for the first time, RJ wondered what Nicky would think of his mother once he was old enough to know about her former husband and understood how she'd betrayed him, certainly to his death. And what of Anthony? Given Mina's black-widow history, how long would she remain loyal to him or their son? Another male who might get in her way and she'd need to remove.

Thinking of Nicky's uncertain future, RJ frowned.

It went unnoticed by Anthony who continued to work. As his silence lengthened and too much time began to pass, RJ's heart made a funny twist. He listened closely for the slap of shoes coming from behind, another ambush like the one in the dining room.

Seconds ticked by. Only the faint tapping of Anthony's computer keys interrupted the oppressive quiet. A steady drizzle, cold and nasty, fell soundlessly on the thick foliage surrounding the windows. A metallic scent permeated the air, the day's chill seeping into the room.

At last, Anthony stopped keying. RJ glanced from the window to him. The man offered no greeting or smile, nor did he tell RJ to take a seat.

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither of them revealing anything. Anthony settled back in his chair finally. The remaining fingers on his right hand stroked his leather armrest. "Are you enjoying the job?"

"I'd like to learn more."

"Of course you would," Anthony retorted, glancing past him.

A moment ago, RJ might have looked over. Now he did not. He hadn't heard anyone approach. Anthony was simply playing with him as he did with everyone. His volatile moods kept things in a constant state of flux. No one knew what to expect from minute to minute, which allowed him the greatest control.

Seemingly frustrated because he hadn't cowed RJ, Anthony returned his gaze to him, asking, "And Summer, are you enjoying her also?"

That question he'd expected. "She's a willing submissive, just as you'd promised."

"Yes." A smile touched his lips, but not his eyes. "I trained her well so very long ago." His fingers continued to stroke the armrest. "She's brought in a lot of business for me from the very beginning, despite her obvious flaw."

RJ offered no comment.

Anthony's fingers curled over the armrest, gripping it, the movement indicating his restraint had ended. "You've been here for six weeks. In all that time, you haven't sent her out on any jobs. Why is that?"

Not allowing RJ to answer, he leaned up in his chair, his eyes narrowed. "Thus far I've allowed you to keep her, but let me remind you, seventy percent of her earnings for you go to me. I haven't seen any profit from you as yet. That is not acceptable, do you understand?"

"I hear you."

"I wonder." Anthony's expression darkened. "If you don't send her to work, I will."

RJ forced himself to remain calm, having played this confrontation in his mind for weeks. His only surprise was that Anthony had waited so long to make his demands.

"So when can I expect my cut?" the man asked.

"Next weekend," RJ said, committing Summer to something she had no knowledge of. There was no other choice. Not any longer.

Anthony's dark brows lifted slightly as though he hadn't anticipated the response. He sagged back in his chair, the leather squeaking slightly beneath his weight. "And what happens next weekend?"

RJ told Anthony, revealing the plans he'd made weeks ago.

"Does she know?"

"I'll tell her tonight when I return from my run."

After a nod of approval, Anthony's eyes filled with new suspicion. "Why did you wait so long to do this?"

"I had to give her time to trust me. I can give her orders or threaten her, but in the long run, all that gets me is mindless obedience. It doesn't mean she'll do her job well."

"Like she would if she's in love with you," Anthony said.

RJ's chest ached with the images rolling through his mind. Summer kissing his palm and the tips of his fingers, giving him a smile he hadn't expected and saw too infrequently, her gazing at him as he drifted to sleep. Was that love? Or was it gratitude that he hadn't harmed her? That he treated her with more respect than most men? What did it matter? Events were unfolding and he couldn't stop them. Not now. "Yes."

The corners of Anthony's mouth curled up in an approving smile. "You're right. Women are far easier to handle when they love us and believe we love them in return. They'll do things they never would have considered."

Like servicing men they didn't know? Ones who disgusted them? Sudden rage replaced RJ's sorrow. Disturbed by his emotions, not trusting his voice, he merely nodded.

"Good then," Anthony said and looked back to his computer screen, their meeting over.

Summer waited for RJ that night as she had on all the others, her fingertips on the chilled front window, her eyes searching the darkness for the car's headlights as it approached. Unlike those past evenings, her heart beat too swiftly tonight, her stomach rolled. Something was wrong.

Earlier, she'd seen it in RJ's eyes. They didn't remain on her as long as they had only yesterday. His answers to her sexiest comments were distracted and monosyllabic, saying he wasn't in the mood for her prattle.

Prudently, she kept her tongue, lighting his cigarillo, massaging his shoulders, bathing and dressing him for his nightly work. He'd left without his usual goodbye or a kiss.

Her head turned to the antique clock on the mantle. Moonlight poured through the windows, touching its face. On all the previous evenings, he'd already returned by this hour.

He's found someone else, Summer thought, the idea tormenting her. These past weeks he'd seen the other girls, their youth and perfection. They made him realize what he'd been missing.

Her belly cramped. Tears pricked her eyes. Blinking them back, she ordered herself not to think, not to feel. RJ owned her. She couldn't expect him to want her exclusively, no matter how much she craved it. She should be grateful for the nights they'd had, him bringing her treats, holding her in his arms, behaving as though she deserved respect.

As he was surely doing with another young woman right now.

Summer's hand flew to her mouth to stop her anguished cry before Anthony's men heard and reported it to him. Turning from the window, she was halfway to the bedroom when she stopped and retraced her steps down the hall, not knowing what to do. Stay by the window and wait as she always had or try to get some sleep and forget her heartache.

Lights pierced the glass and shone on the living room wall. She ran to the door, opening it just as RJ reached the porch and the driver made a quick left, heading for the main house and Anthony's garage.

"Hi." She slipped her arms around RJ's neck. Fingers in his silky hair, she directed his head to hers. Their lips touched. A shudder of delight surged through her. On her toes, she kissed him wantonly, longingly, trying to ignore his tepid response.

Easing back, she inhaled deeply, catching the scent of scotch and tobacco on his breath, Givenchy soap on his skin, the Xeryus fragrance he used in their bath. His body smelled of cedar, fruit and clean forest scents, not another woman's perfume.

Relieved, she smiled, pulling him inside and closing the door. "Are you tired? Did you eat? Do you want me to warm something for you? Xavier made too much for my dinner, so you can finish—"

"I'm not hungry." He went past her, removing his leather coat and tossing it on one of the living room chairs.

Summer remained by the door, afraid to move.

He glanced over. "Come here."

His tone of voice left her no choice. Stomach sinking, she went to him, still fearing he wanted another of Anthony's girls and she'd be going back to her rightful owner. A matter that should have brought relief, not turmoil. With the issue settled finally, she wouldn't have to worry about RJ taking her away from here. She wouldn't have to find a means to escape him and return. She'd stay with Anthony just as she needed.

Everything would be the same as it had been, except now she'd long for RJ, missing him, wanting him. A sob caught in her throat at how impossible everything had become, pulling her in two directions at once. Her lower lip quivered.

He frowned. "What's wrong with you? Why are you crying?"

She shook her head and swallowed hard. "I'm not." She made her voice as light as she could.

His hard expression didn't change. "I told you not to lie to me."

"I haven't."

"The fuck you aren't." Rage flared in his eyes. "What happened? Did Hogan try—"

"No." She kept her voice as soft as he had so they couldn't be overheard. "While you were gone only Xavier came by to deliver my dinner."

His eyes searched hers in the muted light. Something in him shifted, no longer concentrating on her misery. "I have something to tell you." Anger gone, his voice now sounded oddly indifferent. He might as well have been speaking to a stranger.

She made her voice as cool as his, its volume no longer low. "Yes, I know."

Again, he frowned. "Then why are you still about to cry? You knew this moment would come. So don't look at me as if you didn't."

"I'm not," she repeated and reminded him of something he'd apparently forgotten. "I asked you that night in the Montborne to choose another girl, one who was perfect. I understand."

RJ shook his head. "You think this is about another girl."

"You want someone else," she said, her voice as dead as her heart, her pride building to preserve what little dignity remained. "Someone young and perfect. I under—"

He interrupted. "I told you that night and I'll tell you now, you belong to me. That hasn't changed."

Surprised, she stared at him.

"Nor has your responsibility to earn your keep," he added, his voice hard. "You haven't brought any money in for over a month. That's about to end."

The pitch of his voice, the reality of his words sounded brutal and final—far worse than if he'd told her he preferred another woman. Rattled, she didn't react immediately. Her mind went in too many directions, recalling his previous wooing of her, lingering on each precious moment, his every word.

Until she recalled Anthony. He'd behaved the same in the early days. Not as consistently as RJ, not as believably, but he had managed to seduce.

From the beginning, she'd dreaded and predicted RJ's betrayal, him using her as Anthony had, and still allowed her heart to open to him, to believe he actually did respect her enough to keep her for his own.

All illusion gone, her heart hardening by the moment, she asked, "Where? When? With whom?"

He paused at her questions, the uncaring efficiency of her voice. Glancing at the clock chiming the hour, he said, "Vegas. This weekend. There's a group of Saudis coming in. The other men have been talking about it for weeks. From what I understand, it's a very big event."

"Lots of money to be made."

His head turned to her. His eyes narrowed, expecting her argument or plea.

She offered neither.

He muttered, "Yes." An emotion she couldn't identify raced across his face.

Again, she became unsettled, uncertain what to believe. Her thoughts returned to this afternoon. The scent of frying bacon had awakened him a few hours before he'd gone to see Anthony. Naked, RJ had padded into the kitchen, his hair bed-mussed, face bristly with his beard.

Scratching his ass, he'd leaned over and kissed her neck as she tended to the bacon, then turned it off and brought her to the table. There, he put his hands on her waist, lifted her up and set her on the edge. On his knees, with his hands opening her thighs, he'd buried his face between her legs, licking her cunt, making her cry out in delight, telling her exactly what he was hungry for.

Afterward, as she lay sprawled over the table, too weak to capture a full breath, he'd simply looked at her, his gaze tender, making her believe—or hope—they shared a special bond. They were almost like the family she often dreamed about when she was with the other men.

Her heart tore a little more. To repair it, hope bubbled up. She softened her voice, again speaking low so no one except RJ could hear. "Was this Anthony's idea?"

"No, it was mine." His tone grew detached. "I've been working on it since my first week here."

Silent, Summer thought back to that time. Him calling her a lady, bringing her the sweets, telling her who she slept with didn't change who she was to him. And it did not. She realized that now. She was no lady. She was a whore. His whore.

If he'd slapped or whipped her, those actions would have hurt less. Summer told herself to remember this moment—the second time she'd been conned by a man. And the last.

From this moment forward, she'd protect her heart. She'd endure and survive.

Chapter Nine

Immediately, RJ noted the change in Summer. Although she did whatever he wanted, her eyes didn't touch his. She spoke to him as she would to one of her clients—seductively without any true emotion. She became a shell without a heart or soul, while her body responded to his mouth and cock mechanically, not in the way he'd become accustomed.

It ate at RJ far more than he would have liked or could admit. In the days leading up to the weekend, he warned himself repeatedly to keep his cool. What he'd done was necessary. He couldn't let her stay at home waiting for him like a suburban housewife. Anthony had finally forced his hand. And RJ had a job to do.

On Thursday, he awoke at one in the afternoon after eight hours of unsatisfying sleep. Sun bled through the edges of the shutters, glinting off the iron bedframe, its designs creating twisting shadows on the mattress. Summer wasn't in their bed. Propped on his elbow and lifting his face, RJ sniffed deeply, expecting to smell bacon or sausages frying, her preparing him breakfast as she always did.

The scent of sex and her lingering perfume greeted him.

He padded into the kitchen, finding it empty, no preparations for his breakfast on the counter. She wasn't in the exercise room or in any of the baths. He searched for a note and didn't find any. Hurriedly, he pulled on his jeans, sweater and boots, then went outside.

Though clear for a change, the day was crisp, the sun's unrestricted rays warming his face and little else. He ran his hands up and down his arms while his gaze scanned the compound. Separated by lengthy expanses of thick grass, countless flowers and trees shivered in the wind. Guesthouses dotted the landscape. Beyond them, the main house stood as a silent sentinel, sprawling, imposing.

He wasn't foolish enough to go there and ask any of the men if they'd seen Summer. They'd been watching, as they always did, and knew where she was. She hadn't run away. She couldn't. Not here.

RJ went back inside and made himself a pot of coffee. An hour later, he'd drained the pot and had finished four smokes. Summer still hadn't returned.

After brushing his teeth, shaving and showering, he reheated and finished the dorado Xavier had prepared for Summer's dinner last night. Hating fish as much as she did lamb, she'd left most of it.

At five p.m., RJ was on his second Guinness when he heard the front door open. Rounding the kitchen table, he went into the hall.

Summer placed her black leather purse on one of the accent tables. She shrugged out of her cashmere coat, draping it over her arm. Dressed simply in black jeans, a black turtleneck sweater and high heeled boots, she looked more provocative to RJ than those times she'd worn her skimpy dresses.

Sensing his presence, her eyes lifted to his groin and chest, but not his eyes.

Angered beyond reason, he went down the hall to her, his voice tight. "Where have you been?"

She showed no reaction to his harsh tone, nor did she meet his gaze. He might as well have been one of the estate's gardeners asking if she wanted their front lawn mowed. "I had an appointment at the salon to prepare for my customers in Vegas."

RJ's gaze jumped from her mouth to her eyes. At last, they were on him. Veiled. Indifferent.

The muscles in his chest tightened with his building fury. A crazy reaction, he knew. One he couldn't stop. He wanted more than her mindless compliance, determined to have it. "How'd you get there?"

"Hogan drove me."

RJ's jaw clenched. "Why?"

She answered simply. "He has a license, I don't. I've never been permitted to drive."

Ignoring the accusation in her voice, he returned to the matter at hand and asked, "You got a haircut? It doesn't look any different to me."

"The girl only trimmed the ends."

"And that took all this time?"

"I also had a manicure and a pedicure."

He glanced at her nails, polished a deep red, looking no different to him than they had last night.

She stepped around him and went down the hall, speaking as she did. "If you haven't eaten breakfast, I'll make you —"

RJ interrupted. "I've already eaten."

Not pausing to ask what he had or whether he'd enjoyed it, she went into their bedroom. RJ followed. She'd draped her coat over the back of a chair and was now in front of the dresser, removing her Dior watch and diamond stud earrings.

"Why didn't you tell me where you would be?" he asked.

She walked past him to one of the chairs, sat and removed her right boot. "I didn't want to wake you."

"You could have written a note. Why didn't you?"

"I thought I'd return before you woke up."

He heard her lie. She was provoking him, deliberately throwing Hogan in his face, punishing him for what she had to do this weekend.

She tossed her left boot on her right. Standing, she pulled off her sweater and unhooked her bra, dropping both on the chair's seat. Her jeans and thong followed, mechanically, efficiently, as though she was undressing for a client she loathed, but had to service.

RJ frowned.

Summer didn't catch it. Except for a few minutes earlier, she still refused to look at him. He watched her pad into the bath, her steps muffled by the frilly white socks she wore. His eyes trailed down her narrow shoulders and plush buttocks. Long ago, the marks from Anthony's belt had faded.

"I told you I wanted you natural," RJ said.

She rubbed hand lotion on her palms as she turned to him. Her cunt was freshly waxed, the shadow of pubic hair from these last weeks gone. "My customers in Vegas prefer me like this."

His fingers curled into fists.

If she noticed, she ignored his anger, adding, "Foreign clients are often that way. I'm assuming it's a cultural thing. They also like group sex, one girl to five men. Three of them using her, the others filming it. It turns them on. Outnumbering the girl makes them feel powerful."

RJ didn't comment.

She turned from him, facing the mirror, regarding her toiletries.

The pulse points in his temples drummed with the same intensity as his heart. He sank to the edge of the bed, removing his boots and socks. Back on his feet, he pulled off his sweater, throwing it across the room. His jeans and Jockeys followed. "Come here," he said to her.

She didn't look up from the perfume bottle in her hand. "I'll be there in a min—" "Now."

The bottle made a small tapping sound as she placed it on the counter. Turning, she padded to the bed, prepared to give him whatever he demanded, except unguarded eagerness, willingness.

He craved it now more than anything, possessiveness heating his blood, muddying his thoughts. Fingers wrapped around her upper arm, he pulled her on the bed. The mattress bounced beneath her falling weight. He scrambled next to her, lifting her hand, locking her right wrist in the cuff still hanging from the bedframe. Her left wrist followed.

Trapped, she closed her eyes and breathed shallowly as if expecting the worst.

She had no idea what he wanted to do to her.

Not attempting to lower her voice, seemingly unconcerned with who might be listening, she said, "If you punish me, the marks won't fade in time for my flight tomorrow."

RJ worked his jaw, hearing the taunt in her voice. She wanted him to whip her. It would keep her here. Straddling her, their sexes touching, faces just inches away, he said, "Look at me."

Her fingers curled, the tips of her nails digging into her palms. On a shaky breath, she opened her eyes, meeting his gaze, her thoughts and feelings masked.

Fury, then sorrow tightened RJ's throat. His hands went to hers, his thumbs stroking the base of her palms lightly, his voice naked with pain, soft and coaxing. "Look at me." *Please.*

Color dotted her cheeks. Her lids fluttered as she obeyed him finally.

In her eyes, he saw a world of sadness and years of hopeless longing. It stole his breath. Not wanting her to speak, fearful he might say something he should not, he lowered his mouth to hers.

Summer's lips trembled beneath his from what he guessed was her uncertainty and tangled emotions. Careful to keep his kiss tender, knowing she needed his reassurance all would be well, RJ ran his tongue over the seam of her mouth. Peppermint scented her breath rather than the chocolate he knew she preferred and he wanted to give her.

On a shuddering sigh, she parted her lips to him. He slipped his tongue inside, filling her fully, not brutally, savoring her wet heat. He kissed her with the respect she craved and with a depth of passion he couldn't deny.

He wanted her. He couldn't have her. Not completely like now.

His kiss became greedy and she responded, her hunger building, matching his. As she suckled his tongue, faint moans poured from her throat, proving her contentment. Minutes passed as they necked with the joy of lovers, rather than the tyranny of an owner enjoying his possession, with RJ being the first to tear his mouth free. He pressed his cheek to hers and felt her tears.

Shame replaced his previous anger. Discounting it, he said, "Don't cry." He'd meant it to be a command. It sounded more like a plea.

Summer shook her head, her moist cheek rubbing his. She whispered, "I'll be all right. I always am."

He imagined her surrounded by a group of men, strangers, acceding to their coarse demands, feigning arousal, pushing back her disgust.

"Will you miss me?" she asked.

RJ's hands tightened on her wrists, his bonds more loving than the cuffs. Mouth seeking hers, he kissed her again, deeper than the first time...lingeringly... showing her what their parting meant to him, what he couldn't express.

When she grew breathless beneath him, he kissed her chin, her throat and suckled each sweet nipple, his tongue making lazy circles over the long tips. A satisfied grunt pushed her belly into him. She arched her back, giving him greater access.

He needed more.

Moving between her legs, he placed the bottom of her feet on the comforter, knees bent. The edges of her mouth turned up in a faint smile tinged with sadness as he touched the edges of her lacy socks, the kind a kid might wear.

She seemed so young, so fucking vulnerable.

"Make it last," she murmured in a voice that held no lies, one that wanted some measure of human warmth and peace. "Give me something to remember until I return."

From a trip that would have haunted most women.

I'll be all right, she'd said, I always am.

RJ kissed the inside of her satiny thigh, suckling hard, stopping just prior to marking her as belonging to him alone. She didn't.

Reminding himself of what lay ahead, beginning with tomorrow's trip to the airport, he settled between her legs, his mouth on her cunt, the petal-soft flesh bearing her unmistakable scent.

Make it last.

He tried, licking her nub, burying his fingers in her hot, tight sheath, pleasuring her with an urgency both of them suffered. She came twice from his fingers and mouth before he mounted her, desperate to get as close as he possibly could.

This time, he didn't have to ask her to look at him. Her eyes never left his. She searched his face. Her expression told him she was trying to determine his reaction, the truth of his desire.

RJ hid nothing from her. He couldn't any longer. This had gone too far, no one had to tell him that. For him, there was no turning back, even though they'd be parting tomorrow.

His body invaded hers and she accepted him as she'd done in the past, as he wanted, with sweet willingness. Her cunt tightened around his shaft, sucking it deeper, providing shelter. He held off and so did she until their bodies were moist with perspiration, their chests heaving with their fitful breaths. Still, he wouldn't give in.

Adjusting his weight, he moderated his thrusts, sliding in and out of her at a maddeningly slow pace as though it would stop time.

She sucked her lower lip, holding back as he did.

The look on her face, her genuine desire for him, broke the last of RJ's resolve. Unable to bear the wait any longer, he pumped fast and hard.

Summer's breasts trembled with his body pounding into hers. Cheeks flushed, lids lowered, she let out a mewling moan.

On its heels, he came with a nearly crazed growl, his cum spilling into her channel.

Her gasps mingled with his as their mouths touched and he kissed her again, frantic in his desire to taste her, devour her, crawl inside her heart, mind and soul.

She wrapped her legs around his hips, keeping him inside. There they remained until Summer fell asleep. Watching her, RJ unlocked the cuffs. He called Jacobski, telling the man he wouldn't be working tonight, he needed to prepare Summer for tomorrow's trip.

Returning to the bedroom, he gathered her to him, holding her as she slumbered. Her slight breaths warmed the side of his throat. The tips of her fingers rested on his heart.

Make it last.

More than anything, he wanted to.

When she awakened a short time later, he held her for minutes, not yet willing to let her go. The moment he did, he positioned her on the mattress, arms above her head, legs spread wide. With his back to her, RJ straddled her torso and bent his head to her cunt while lowering his cock to her mouth.

Summer pressed her lips to his inner thigh in a playful kiss, teasing him before she turned her attention to his shaft.

Far more impatient, he focused on her clit, aching to taste it again, to relish the mingled flavors of her moisture and his cum. He licked the salty fluids, then paused on a swallow as she took him in her mouth, her tongue laving the uneven skin on the back of the head, her hand cupping his balls.

Threads of pleasure coursed down his arms and legs, weakening each. Barely able to manage a breath, he concentrated on her clit while her female fragrance surrounded him, filling his lungs. No matter what happened tomorrow or the next day or the next, RJ knew he'd never forget the scent of her musk, her body's softness and warmth, her indescribable essence.

Pushed to the edge once more, animal lust took over. Gripping her legs, RJ tongued her clit quickly and she responded, sucking his cock, fondling his balls.

On a cry of pleasure mixed with the anguish of pending loss, he poured himself into her and she lapped his cum greedily, just as he had enjoyed each drop of her precious moisture.

Their orgasms wrung the last of their energy, but for RJ it wasn't enough. He sensed it would never be when it came to Summer. He snatched a bit of sleep and so did she, and then they continued, with him taking her repeatedly, passionately, tenderly throughout the night.

Brisk and overcast, morning arrived. With the bed linens twisted around them, Summer clung to RJ as she had last night, savoring these last minutes, unwilling to dwell on what the rest of the day would bring.

It would come soon enough.

Snuggled against his warmth, she made time stop, if only for a moment. Crazy, she knew. It would have been far more prudent to accept her fate, to keep pushing him from her head and heart.

His gentle caresses wouldn't allow it. His seemingly uncontrollable need of her undid Summer's best intentions.

He couldn't have manufactured his responses last night. On some level, she sensed he did care as Anthony never had. To him, she was property. To RJ, she'd become a person, a woman he craved. Maybe not forever, but at least for now.

She loved him. More craziness, she knew, and couldn't help herself. He'd touched a part of her that had withered away and died too many years ago. For the first time in a decade, she felt young again.

Face close to his, she asked if he wanted breakfast. He studied her for what seemed like minutes, though it couldn't have been more than one. His gaze drank in her features, her eyes and then he shook his head. "Not hungry. You?"

"What's in the kitchen can't compare with what's in here."

His grin crinkled the corners of his beautiful eyes, his dark lashes making the blue so much more impressive.

Running her fingers over his tattooed pec, she asked what she'd been wondering about for days. "Will you be taking me to the airport?"

His gaze moved from her mouth to her eyes. He nodded.

Overcome with happiness, she smiled. "And you'll pick me up when I get back?"

His expression clouded. The alarm buzzed, then shrieked. He turned his head from hers and glanced at the clock. Voice lowered, he spoke on a sigh. "We better get going."

For the most part, he remained quiet as they showered and so did she. He watched her drying her hair, putting on her makeup, covering her birthmark with concealer, a necessary measure. Clients wanted perfection, not flaws.

She told him that, not in a goading way as she would have yesterday before they'd made love, but as a means to explain.

Without comment, he left the bath and went into their bedroom to get dressed.

Their silence grew on the drive to San Francisco International Airport. RJ had selected it rather than the one in Oakland, which was closer, as though he wanted to lengthen their time together. Or so Summer chose to believe. Whatever his reasons, he'd booked her on a commercial flight, a chance an outsider might think would give her an opportunity to flee.

She understood how impossible it was, as did Anthony. Despite the cuffs he wanted used on her each evening, it was more a symbolic gesture than anything. He knew she'd never run again, so there wasn't any reason for her to take the private jet he used for his legitimate businesses. He didn't want that part of his life tainted with what she and his other girls did.

Summer stared at the scenery passing by, the low-hanging clouds, the dreary day. Her peace of only a few hours earlier had evaporated. Stomach twisting, she blinked quickly, trying to drive back her tears.

For one crazy moment, she wanted to beg RJ to turn around, drive them back to the compound, to lie to Anthony that they'd had to cancel the Vegas trip – they'd try again tomorrow or next week or next month. For a little while longer she'd be able to pretend she and RJ were a family, a husband and wife with a child, similar to the couples in the other cars.

Where were they heading? Were they happy? Did they appreciate their freedom?

She turned her face away from an older woman who looked at her suddenly from a silver Cadillac. Pulling down her visor and opening the mirror, Summer pretended to smooth her hair. In her long camel coat, cream cashmere sweater and pricey wool pants, she was dressed like a young executive or a pampered model. No one in the airport would guess the real purpose of her trip or the invisible chains that kept her from running.

The urge to escape or to say something to RJ welled up in her again as he jockeyed Anthony's black Mercedes into one of the lanes leading to short-term parking. In a few hours, she'd be on the plane, avoiding small talk with the passenger next to her. Once in Vegas, one of Anthony's associates would meet her at the gate, taking her to the designated hotel where she'd stay until Sunday evening.

Although her return to the Bay area would conflict with RJ's work schedule, she asked again, "When I get back, will you be here to pick me up?"

He drove down another aisle of the parking area, looking for a free space. "If I'm not, someone else will be here to get you."

Tears welled in her eyes, smearing her vision. She turned her head from him so he couldn't see her sorrow.

He found a spot, parked and took her carryon out of the trunk. Side by side, they walked to the terminal's entrance. Instead of going inside and heading for the security checkpoint, RJ took her bag to one of the skycaps, checking it in.

Speaking to her, he said, "Anthony's man will get the carryon for you in Vegas. No need for you to hassle with it."

She grabbed his hand, stopping him from going into the building.

RJ glanced past her at the other travelers rushing by. The stench of diesel fuel hung in the air. Horns honked. Tires hissed over the asphalt. Voices rose and fell, then rose again in a variety of languages, creating more of a din than the traffic. Meeting her eyes, he asked, "What?"

Her gaze moved over his long hair, fluttering in the cold breeze. He looked so handsome in his white cable knit sweater and black leather coat. She wanted to tell him so and that she couldn't do this, not any longer, not since meeting him. The words wouldn't come because she had no choice in the matter. She had to earn her keep just as he'd said, the words not his, but Anthony's. In her heart, Summer knew it. "Thanks."

He glanced past her again at the people streaming by. "For what?"

Giving her a few minutes of happiness. "Taking care of my bag."

His fingers curled around hers. Without comment, he led her into the building, heading for the monitors that showed arrivals and departures. Her gaze turned inward, she no longer heard the other people, only the heavy beating of her heart.

RJ said something she didn't catch. His cell phone rang. Continuing to walk, he answered it, listening, then saying only one word, "Where?" She guessed he was getting his instructions for tonight, which girl he'd be picking up, where he'd be taking her.

Obediently, Summer kept pace with him as they moved down a corridor past a series of airport shops to the security checkpoints for numerous flights. Summer's free hand went to her shoulder purse. Her fingers shook as she reached inside to again pull out her boarding pass and state ID, a fake Anthony had purchased from his contact in the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Rather than stopping, RJ led her toward the left, another series of gates and checkpoints. People rushed past them, children squalled, someone barked a laugh with the boisterous sound followed by a man's loud voice saying how much he'd enjoyed his trip to the city.

Inattentive to their direction, Summer followed RJ, her gaze downcast, her thoughts absorbed with steeling herself for this weekend, one she could not escape.

It wasn't until a cold breath of air glanced off her face that Summer realized they'd left the building and were heading back to short-term parking. She looked at RJ. His eyes scanned the area as if he were searching for something. Their car? Had he changed his mind? Were they going back to the compound?

A weight lifted from Summer's heart. In the same instant, her insides grew cold. What would he tell Anthony? Would the man believe RJ? If not, what would happen to him? Another beating from Hogan? Or worse?

Her heels clicked against the concrete as he pulled her across the path of oncoming cars to the parking area. His steps were hurried, intent. Her unease building, Summer held back. As much as she wanted to, she couldn't miss her flight. There would be no way to explain.

RJ released her hand and grabbed her upper arm, forcing her to move as quickly as he did.

Her breath came in pants, her head swinging from side to side looking for the Mercedes. In an ocean of cars, she couldn't see it, nothing looked familiar. "RJ, what are you doing?" She kept her voice down even though they were alone in this lane. "We can't go back. I have to get on my flight."

He scanned the area and looked behind them.

Summer tried to, but he pulled her forward so quickly she nearly lost her balance. "RJ, listen to me, we have to go back into the terminal."

"No." He directed her to the right, between a series of vehicles. Behind them, a car honked. Summer flinched at the noise echoing off the concrete. RJ didn't react to the sound. It was as though he hadn't heard it.

Panicked, she cried, "Please let me go back and get on my flight. I don't mind. I can take whatever happens in Vegas. I don't want Anthony blaming you because I didn't go. I don't want him hurting you because —"

Her words stopped as they reached a dark blue SUV with heavily tinted windows. With his free hand, RJ grabbed the handle for the backseat, opening the door. Summer's heart slammed against her chest. Behind the wheel sat a burly man with a shaved head, older than RJ by a decade.

"Followed?" the driver asked.

"No," RJ said. "I made certain of it. We're good."

Summer's eyes darted from him to the other man. Her thoughts flew back to RJ's cell call a few minutes ago. *Where?* he'd asked. Had he been speaking to the driver, asking where he'd parked? Why?

In answer, images flashed in her mind of her childhood home in Arizona. A spring day. Hot already, the sun shining mercilessly. Her dressed in capris and a baby tee, walking down the street to a friend's house, a car stopping, a young man asking for directions, the girl with him putting a knife to her throat, pushing her inside their vehicle, trapping her, abducting her.

Was it happening again?

A scream rose in Summer's throat, the muscles so tight with terror no sound slipped out. Her body trembled convulsively. She swung her head to RJ as he pushed her inside. Scrambling away from him, Summer fell into the door on the left. She tried to open it. The lock wouldn't budge. She flinched at the solid smack of his door closing.

Recoiling from him and the driver, she sobbed, "Why are you doing this? Did Anthony tell you to do this?" Had he told them to take her away and kill her?

RJ nodded to the driver who pulled out of the spot. Turning to her, he said, "Everything's going to be all right."

Summer pressed her back against her door, edging away from RJ's touch, hysteria building in her voice. "Where are you taking me? What are you going to do to —" Her question ended on a gasp as RJ scooted across the seat to her, his hand on her throat, his lips on her ear.

"You need to be quiet," he said, his voice calm.

Quiet sobs racked her body. She tried to push him away and could not. His strength defeated her. As the driver paid for parking, RJ held her close, muffling her weeping, his mouth still to her ear, his words whispered, "Everything is going to be all right. You are not going to be hurt. Never again will you be hurt, Lori."

Her fingers dug into his sweater. The SUV accelerated, its movements telling her they were pulling away from the airport, switching lanes. To go where?

RJ held her firmly, but gently. "It's okay," he said. "You're going to be okay, Lori."

Her heart caught on the name. It penetrated her panic, echoing through Summer's mind like a returning nightmare. This couldn't be happening. He couldn't have called her by her real name. She must have imagined it.

He eased his embrace and leaned back so he could see her face. Eyes lifting to his, she stared.

He regarded her with worry, not anger. Compassion, not cold brutality. "Nothing's going to happen to you," he said in a mild voice, his tone soft, reassuring. "You're safe now. Do you understand me, Lori?"

She swung her head to the driver who watched her and RJ in the rearview mirror. Her eyes darted to the scenery. Were they going north, south, east? She couldn't tell.

RJ rested his hand on hers. She trembled at his touch, pulling her hand from beneath his. "Why are you calling me that?" Tears graveled her voice. "Did Anthony tell you to call me that?" Had he told RJ her real name? Was this Anthony's way of playing with her or punishing her?

"No," RJ said.

She pushed against the door, trying to get away from him, unable to. Tears ran down her cheeks.

With a heavy sigh, he eased away, scooting back to his side of the leather seat. "I know who you are," he explained in a neutral voice. "We know who you are." He inclined his head to the driver. "This is Blake Gannon, my cousin. We're bail enforcement agents—what the public calls bounty hunters. We've been looking for you."

"For a very long time," Blake added.

Her breath continued to hitch. She didn't understand. If they were bounty hunters, why would they be looking for her when she'd never been arrested? Why would RJ say she was safe and nothing bad was going to happen when they'd obviously abducted her?

She shook her head. A strand of hair stuck to her tear-dampened cheek. She clawed it away. "I don't believe you. You're following Anthony's orders." Her voice rose to a shrill helpless cry. "What have I done? What has he told you to do to me?"

"Nothing," RJ assured. "He doesn't even know you're gone as yet. Hours will pass before he realizes your luggage arrived in Vegas without you."

"Listen to me!" he said, interrupting her next comments, the volume of his voice rising above hers. "I was there when you were abducted, Lori. I was in my driveway shooting hoops the day you went missing. I heard the car screeching away. At the last minute, I looked. I saw you in the backseat pounding your palms against the window. One of your shoes fell off. A sandal. I saw it in the street."

Her head kept swinging back and forth, refuting his words. They weren't true. They couldn't be. Not after all these years. "No," she said at last, denying what he claimed.

And yet, her shaky voice contradicted her refusal, the same as her thoughts. She recalled their first meeting at the Montborne, the way he'd looked at her. It had seemed so familiar as though she'd experienced his scrutiny before and his rejection...because he hadn't been a stranger.

I don't want you to hide anything from me, he'd said the first day in their guesthouse. *Don't play me. Don't tell me what you think I want to hear. Understand? If you don't, you'll regret it."*

He'd spoken with cruel authority then. She recalled the way he'd beaten Hogan, threatening the man's life. She tried to reconcile it with what he was telling her now, details he might have gotten from Anthony. "I don't believe you. You're RJ. You work for Anthony."

"We set up Anthony's accident," Blake offered. "It was all a ruse so we could break into his inner circle."

RJ let out his breath in a pissed sigh. "We had no choice," he muttered more to himself than to them. "Law enforcement wouldn't do shit."

Blake glanced over his shoulder briefly. "Cheryl did all she could. You know these things move slowly when you get the Feds and local authorizes involved."

"What are you talking about?" Summer cried.

"We found out about you by chance from a bail jumper," RJ answered. "When we caught up with him, he wanted to deal, hoping we'd let him go. He told us about Anthony's operation, saying we could make more in a week working for him than we did in months in our business. And it was so easy, he claimed. All we had to do was drive his girls to hotels for their appointments with clients. As a bonus, we could sleep with the young women afterward."

RJ paused, then continued, "He bragged that he did it all the time. He described the females, explaining how submissive they were. One of his favorites, he said, was a girl called Summer who had an unusual birthmark on her forearm."

Her lower lip trembled.

RJ lifted his hand to touch her. She pushed against her door, trying to get away, not wanting to hear any more.

He dropped his hand to the seat and continued, "I had to play the part to make Anthony think I was an ex-con. It was easy. I deal with them everyday in my work. Some of the things I said to you...how I treated you at times, it was all part of my strategy, not who I am. At the hotel when I realized it was really you, I wanted to get you out of there then. But without my weapon and with everyone watching us all the time, I had to plan our escape so you wouldn't get hurt and I wouldn't get killed."

"We didn't even trust communicating by cell phone," Blake interjected. "We worked out a system where I'd follow the car from the compound and we'd meet in the dining rooms of the hotels where the girls were meeting their clients. With Anthony's men upstairs, guarding the young women, we had time to pass information."

RJ glanced from his cousin back to her. "The Vegas trip was the first opportunity I had to get you out of the compound safely and for good."

Her stomach continued to roll at the reality of what he'd said. The mistake he'd made by taking her. Dread constricted her throat. Was the compound in front of them or behind? She didn't know. Couldn't tell. "No," she said.

He frowned slightly, his expression telling her he misunderstood. He believed she was responding to what he'd just stated rather than to the enormity of what he'd done, what he didn't understand.

"Listen to me," he repeated, clearly containing his frustration. "I know you think Anthony told me about your abduction. I'll prove he didn't. I'll tell you things that only you and I can possibly know." His gaze moved from her fists to her eyes. "Eleven years ago, I lived across the street from you in Phoenix. You came over to talk to me minutes before you were kidnapped."

His expression grew haunted. When he spoke again, shame quieted his voice. "I blew you off. I told you not to bother me. I was pissed at my dad for insisting I become an attorney like him. I didn't want that or to go to college. I just wanted everyone to leave me alone, so I took it out on you. You started to cry. You asked me why I hated you, why I couldn't be nice because all you wanted to do was talk."

Tears dripped from her chin, falling on her hands.

He murmured, "I know this is a shock, but you have to believe me. I don't really work for Anthony. He didn't tell me to do anything to you today. Even if he had, I wouldn't have done it. RJ is my dad's nickname, not mine. Please understand, I want you to be safe. Please try to remember me from Phoenix. It's me...Tav."

Chapter Ten

He could see she believed him finally. It was in the way she averted her gaze and wrung her hands. Not the relief and joy he'd hoped for. Of course, Cheryl, his ex, had warned him that physically rescuing Lori would be only the beginning of a very long road.

"She has more than a decade of bad to get over," she'd said. "Trust won't come easily. She may be more comfortable at first with the way things were."

RJ sensed her issues on trust weren't the only thing driving her reaction. Shame had a part in it too, because he wasn't the ex-con she'd thought. He was someone from her past who'd seen a small part of what she'd endured these past eleven years—Anthony whipping and mounting her in front of so many men, the velvet-lined cuffs on the bed, the cameras in the guesthouse, her every move witnessed, her every emotion scrutinized and suppressed.

Shoulders drawn forward, she breathed shallowly, her face so pale she seemed close to fainting. Worried, he asked, "Are you all right? Do you need to lie down, Lori?"

Her eyes darted to him, wide, fearful.

Trust won't come easily. She may be more comfortable at first with the way things were.

"Would you prefer I call you Summer and you keep calling me RJ?" he asked.

She glanced away, her face turned to the scenery racing by.

He met Blake's eyes in the rearview mirror. His cousin looked as lost as he felt.

"Do you mind?" she asked in a shaky voice.

"Not at all," RJ assured. "Whatever you're most comfortable with."

Her eyes remained on the road, the other drivers. "Where are we going?"

He spoke reassuringly. "Yosemite. Cheryl, my ex-wife, has a cabin near there. She works for ICE."

"Immigration and Customs Enforcement," Blake explained.

"Cheryl will be taking care of you for the next few days," RJ added. "Until we can get law enforcement involved."

Summer's head jerked to him. "Involved in what?"

At the terror in her voice, RJ told himself to take this one baby step at a time, to heed Cheryl's warning that Anthony's hold on Summer would be tough to break. She saw him as invincible, not a cowardly sociopath with human limitations just like any other man. "Your kidnapping. The proof of what's happened to you. But we won't contact them until you feel safe," he added hastily at her horrified expression. "We won't jeopardize your security."

Her chest jerked with her ragged breaths. Her face drained of even more color.

Alarmed, RJ reached over, his fingertips touching her shoulder. "Are you going to be sick?"

She wrapped her arms around her middle as though her stomach hurt. "Can we go to a gas station so I can use the ladies' room?"

"There's a truck stop a few miles ahead," Blake offered, adding quickly to RJ, "None of Anthony's people come out this way, do they?"

"Most are still asleep at this hour," he said. "Go on and stop there." On the outside chance there might be trouble, he'd have Blake give him the spare Glock before they exited the SUV.

He leaned in Summer's direction, not enough to crowd, just enough to offer some measure of comfort. The kind she'd sought from him last night and this morning when she believed she'd be spending the weekend in Vegas, used and abused by other men.

His chest ached at the thought. His fingers curled into fists. He wanted to pound Anthony into the ground, forcing him to beg for mercy, making him sob as Summer had. But even beating him to death wouldn't be good enough. RJ's rage was too great, unstoppable. So was his shame.

If he hadn't blown her off when they'd been kids, she would have lingered in his front yard. She wouldn't have been a target for Anthony. He would have driven away, looking for another victim. She would have been safe.

Hatred for his past actions and how he'd ruined her life continued to eat at RJ, along with the way he'd acted at the compound, sleeping with her so freely, so endlessly. A few minutes ago, he'd claimed his treatment of her had been strategy, not who he really was. He hadn't been entirely truthful.

His possessiveness from last night had been genuine and kept intensifying. He wanted her as he'd never craved another woman. Every part of his being ached to be close, to claim her for his own as he'd done so unreservedly these past weeks. He'd tried to trick himself into believing it was okay because she'd seem to want him as much as he had her. But the truth of it was, she hadn't really had a choice in the matter.

Now she did.

Understanding and accepting it, RJ forced himself to keep his distance and to drive all turmoil from his voice, replacing it with comfort. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

She closed her eyes and nodded.

"You're going to be all right," he said, wishing he could pull her into his arms, afraid now to try.

Large enough so travelers could see it for miles, the truck stop was practically a city unto itself, with a restaurant, hotel, truck/car wash, playground for children and a postal annex. Blake drove past thirty or more big rigs, heading toward the lot reserved for passenger vehicles.

RJ shoved the Glock in the back of his jeans' waistband and offered Summer his hand to help her from the SUV. Her fingers were icy against his. The wind didn't help. It whipped past them, clammy with moisture. "Let's find the ladies' room," he said.

Inside, a gift shop separated visitors from the restaurant with its chrome-and-plastic décor. Country-western music played—a soulful song by Tim McGraw. The scent of bacon and ham mingled with the aroma of baking pastry.

"Do you want us to get you some ginger ale?" Blake asked.

Summer shook her head in answer, scanning the crowd...families with children, young adults, truckers laughing with the waitresses at the yellow-and-white counters.

RJ touched her hand. Her heart leapt. She didn't dare look at him, afraid she might cry.

"The ladies' room is to the left," he murmured, loud enough for her to hear him above the other noise.

She glanced over, seeing numerous women heading that way. "It looks crowded, I might be awhile."

"Take all the time you want."

Tears stung her eyes. She swallowed and asked, "Can I have a hot chocolate? I'm really cold."

"Of course, whatever you'd like," RJ said. "Do you want us to order you something to take with us? You can eat it later when you're feeling better."

"Just the hot chocolate, please."

"Sure, whatever you —"

His words stopped as she hugged him, her arms wreathing his neck, drawing him as close as she could.

With his cheek pressed to hers, he wound his arms around her torso, his hands running up and down her back. "Everything's going to be all right."

Summer stopped herself before she told him how wrong he was. As brave as he'd been, as kind and compassionate, even he couldn't save her. Years ago, circumstances had gone too far, veering out of control. She'd never be Lori Clayton again. Until the day she died, she'd be Summer Parrish, Anthony's creature. His property. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

She eased away, bracing herself so she could look into his eyes. Her heart jolted as they met hers.

Never would she forget their color or the depth of feeling she saw in his gaze. He had cared about her. He might even love her. It wasn't enough. It was too late. "I'll be all right," she said. "My stomach's settled some. You don't have to keep watching me like Anthony always has."

RJ's face colored in obvious embarrassment at the comparison. "I'm not. I won't." He pointed behind himself. "Blake and I will order your hot chocolate. We'll meet you by the counter, all right?"

She cupped his face in her hands and regarded him, memorizing his features. "Thank you."

He smiled self-consciously. "For what?"

"Being the man you've become. Looking for me all these years. Risking your life to rescue me."

He swallowed and glanced away as though he feared revealing too much emotion. It still showed in his rasping voice. "None of this would have happened if I hadn't treated you so badly that day."

"You couldn't help it, you were a teenager. Everyone knows teenaged boys are monumental jerks."

Laughing, he turned his face back to hers and grew serious again. "I'm so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Gently, she shook her head. "There's no need. Please don't feel guilty about anything. Sometimes things are out of our control. It's not your fault."

He hugged her so hard Summer wasn't able to breathe, not that she minded. This moment would be their last together.

As he released her, his knuckles stroked her cheek. "I'll get you the best hot chocolate they have, with mounds of whipped cream."

Pushing to her toes, she brushed her lips against his, needing his warmth and closeness to fortify her for what she had to do. He tried to pull her closer for a real kiss. This time she eased away. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

As the space between them grew, she glanced over her shoulder. RJ wore a sheepish expression at being caught watching her. He lifted his hand in farewell and turned away just as she'd wanted.

Never again would she see him. Her heart fell. Tears clouded her vision.

In the ladies' room, she washed her hands so no one would think her presence odd while she stalled, giving RJ and Blake enough time to get to the restaurant's counter. To have their attention diverted as they placed their order.

Dropping the paper towel in the metal bin, Summer wove around the women still pouring inside. She exited and stopped by the wall separating the restroom's entrance from the rest of the building. Peering around it, she saw RJ and Blake behind a score of other customers at the counter, their backs to her, heads turned to each other discussing something...most likely the trip to Yosemite and when to get law enforcement involved in her kidnapping.

A matter she couldn't allow.

"I love you," she whispered to RJ, sick at the thought of never seeing him again, but she had no other choice. She had to return. She'd die if she did not.

Eyes blurry with new tears, she hurried from the restaurant and stopped in the parking lot, uncertain of what to do next. If she asked any of the travelers for change to make a phone call, wouldn't they wonder why she didn't have her own cell phone, credit card or money, dressed as she was?

If she bothered too many people for cash, they might alert management. Even if she got the money, she'd have to go back inside to use the pay phones. RJ might see her. He'd stop her. If he did not and she got through to Anthony, his men would come to get her, finding RJ here. They'd kill him for his betrayal.

Panicked at the thought and guessing few of the travelers would agree to give her a lift, she ran around the building toward the big rigs, singling out those with running motors. She'd offer her Dior watch or pearl earrings as payment for the trip back into San Francisco where she'd call Anthony. If none of the truckers accepted her jewelry for a ride, she'd offer them sex. In any event, she'd first have to tell them a story as to why she needed their help.

She stopped at an eighteen-wheeler with plates from Kentucky. A middle-aged man glanced up from his rig's back tires, noting her presence. Surprise registered in his eyes.

"Are you heading for the Bay area?" she asked. "My car's stalled. I don't have time to call the auto club or wait for a cab. My sister's in the hospital. She needs me. Please, you have to help. I can pay you."

He shook his head. "I'm going north."

Summer wanted to ask him where they were, near what city. Backing away, she turned and ran to another rig, trying to hold back more tears. Surely, one of these men would be driving into San Francisco.

"We'll have your hot chocolate ready in a few minutes," the matronly waitress told RJ. "Pay me then."

He nodded.

Blake leaned close and murmured, "She's been out of our sight for nearly five minutes now."

RJ sighed loudly. The moment Summer had left them, Blake had been antsy, worried, wanting to stay close to the restroom's entrance, to be there when she emerged. RJ had argued against it for two reasons.

It was highly unlikely any of Anthony's men would just happen upon this place or be actively searching for them this soon. More importantly, RJ had wanted to prove himself different than Anthony—he wouldn't always watch her—he would give her some space, even if it was only the few hundred yards currently separating them. "It's crowded in there. I told her to take her time. She's had a shock. She's not feeling well. Relax."

"Something's not right."

RJ glanced at his cousin. His gaze swept the area as he spoke. "I've been watching for Anthony's men, all right? I seriously doubt any of them would be this far away from the city and at a truck stop when they're used to five-star hotels. Or that they'd storm the ladies' room looking for her. Like I told you at the airport, no one followed me this morning. Hell, Anthony doesn't even know she's missing as yet, so why would he have his men out searching and here of all places?"

Blake rubbed his shaved head, a gesture he always indulged in when agitated. "I'm not worried about Anthony's goons or even Mr. Prick himself. It's her. Lori. Summer. Whatever name you want to use."

RJ frowned. His head swung toward the restroom. "You think she's fainted?"

"I think she's conned you. She's been gone too fucking long for this to be legit."

A warning shot through RJ with the force of a blow. Still, he refused to believe she'd actually run from him and back to Anthony. He argued. "Where can she go? She doesn't have the SUV's keys. She doesn't even know how to drive."

"She can hitch a ride, right?"

RJ told himself she wouldn't. She'd thanked him for searching for her and risking his life. Her embrace and expression revealed the depth of her feelings for him. It wasn't a lie. It couldn't be.

She may be more comfortable at first with the way things were.

Cheryl had warned him repeatedly, hadn't she, telling him to expect Stockholm syndrome. Long ago, Summer would have identified and bonded with her captor as a means to survive. Anthony had played head games with her for years. What she did now might not make sense to RJ, but it would to her.

Pulse racing, he decided to try the ladies' room first. Reaching it, he stopped an older woman as she exited. "Hi. My wife's in there. We just found out she's pregnant. She gets these bouts of morning sickness. They usually last only a few minutes, but she hasn't come out in so long I'm getting worried."

"Of course you are," the woman said. She patted his shoulder with her plump hand. "I'll go back inside and check on her. What's her name?"

"Summer."

"Oh, how sweet."

"She's wearing a light brown coat and a light-colored sweater and dark pants."

She patted his shoulder again. "I'll be right back. Don't you worry."

Less than a minute later, the woman exited the restroom, shaking her head. "She's not in there."

RJ's heart beat so hard, he could scarcely breathe. "She has to be. Did you call her name?"

"Several times."

"She's wearing a light brown coat and —"

The woman interrupted, "No one in there is dressed like that." She called out to him as he hurried away, "Maybe she's in the restaurant getting some 7-Up to settle her stomach!"

He and Blake punched open the doors to the building and ran outside. RJ scanned the parking lot. Not seeing her, he said, "Take the rigs to the right. I'll get those on the left."

His shoes clapped the concrete with his sprint. Head turned, he glanced between the trucks. He listened for Summer's voice or Blake's shout that he'd found her.

Idiot, he chided himself. How could he have been so stupid as to have allowed his emotions to cloud his judgment and let down his guard? He'd been so close to rescuing her, getting her life back. *Please, baby, be here. You can't return to Anthony. I won't let that –*

RJ's thoughts stalled. His pace slowed at the sound of voices...one deep, one higher in tone. He strode past the next rig and stopped. Summer's back was to him. The trucker she spoke to was grinning widely. In his thirties, with a full beard and pot belly, he stroked her arm until he saw RJ.

Hand falling away from her, the man stepped back. Summer's words had already paused. She glanced over. Her eyes got wide at RJ's approach.

His attention on the man, RJ spoke in a low, threatening tone, "Whatever you've agreed to with her, forget it."

The guy's hands flew up in a gesture of surrender. "Hey, I don't want any trouble. She just asked for a ride. Didn't know you two were together."

RJ reached her.

"Don't do this," she begged him in a trembling voice.

He ran his fingertips over her cheek and used his softest tone. "Come on." He reached for her hand. She held it away. He fought his irritation and possessiveness, speaking in a mild voice. "We'll work this out."

She shook her head.

Forgotten for the moment, the trucker rushed to his cab, fired up his engine and pulled away.

She tried to follow. Grabbing her wrist, RJ stopped her, not about to let her go. He spoke hurriedly, "Don't do this to yourself. Anthony doesn't own you. He never did. He doesn't care about you. You're free now. For the first time in eleven years, you're free."

"No, I'm not." She twisted her wrist so he'd release her.

RJ tightened his hold.

"I'll never be free," she cried, her voice barely audible beneath the rumbling of motors from too many trucks.

"I know that's what you think," RJ said, trying to reason, "but Anthony isn't God. He won't be able to find you."

"Don't you understand, he won't have to! I'm going back! I have no other choice!"

"Summer, please. You need to give yourself time to heal. To forget. Blake and I will help. Cheryl will help too. We'll protect you. We'll take care of you."

"I don't want that. I have to go back," she insisted, then interrupted him. "If I don't, Anthony will harm Nicky."

His mouth closed on the rest of what he'd intended to say. Frowning, he shook his head. "Nicky? His boy?"

"And mine. Nicky isn't Mina's son. He's Anthony's and mine."

Chapter Eleven

Surprise, then disbelief played across RJ's handsome face.

Summer sensed his mind picturing Nicky's features and coloring, refusing to reconcile them to hers. His gaze trickled down her length, lingering on her taut belly. No doubt further proof to him that she'd never given birth.

He didn't understand Nicky had been a small baby, full term, yet barely five pounds. She hadn't gained much weight during her pregnancy because she'd been on the run from Anthony, living on the streets until he'd caught up with her, forcing her to return.

In the weeks following their son's delivery, Anthony put her on a ruthless exercise schedule so he could again sell her to his clients. According to the doctor who oversaw her son's birth, the few pounds she'd put on and her good genes saved her from stretch marks. Anthony told her how lucky she was...if she'd ruined her body, he would have killed her.

RJ met her gaze.

She spoke before he could. "I never expected to be pregnant. Anthony's careful, making certain his girls are always on birth control. Every once in a while it fails, this time it just happened to be for me. I knew when I started to show he'd force me to get rid of the baby, even though it was his. It couldn't have been any other man's."

Remembering, her voice broke. "In the days before I conceived, one of Anthony's clients complained that I hadn't been submissive enough. As a punishment, Anthony kept me in his bed for a week, doing everything he could. That's when we made Nicky."

Her breath came in short bursts. Lightheaded, she continued, "I knew his routines and just waited for the right moment to escape. In those days, he didn't have the security he does now. He lived in a mansion, but it wasn't gated. He never guessed I'd have the nerve to leave. I hitched a ride into San Francisco, bummed some change and called my house. A stranger answered, saying he'd had the number for years.

"I didn't know if my parents had moved and had forgotten about me or where to find them, so I did the best I could. A couple of days later, I met up with a group of homeless kids. They watched out for me. We were all afraid of the cops. I knew many of them were on Anthony's payroll. When I was seven months pregnant, I finally trusted the other kids enough to tell them about Anthony. One of them contacted him, asking for money in exchange for my location."

At the memory of her friend's betrayal, Summer's eyes filled with tears, her voice thickening with unbearable sorrow. "Anthony said he was going to kill me and the

baby for running away, but Mina talked him out of it, saying she'd take Nicky. Their personal physician delivered him at the mansion and gave him to Mina. She wouldn't even let me hold him or kiss him."

Tears streamed down Summer's cheeks. She brushed them away with the back of her hand. "Anthony said I had to do exactly what he wanted or Nicky would pay for any mistakes I made. And then he said if I was good, he'd allow me to see him at times. It's how he torments me."

Sleep well, he'd said the night she and RJ had joined him for dinner. Dream of all the things you want. Know that I can give them to you if I choose.

Countless times, he'd promised her more contact with Nicky, always withdrawing it at the last moment. He knew she couldn't complain. Refusal of his demands never crossed her mind. Running away was no longer an option.

"You try it again," Anthony had warned in a chillingly casual voice, "and I'll kill your son."

"I have to go back," she pleaded with RJ. "Now. Please, take me to the airport. If my flight's already left, I'll give you my watch to reimburse you for getting me another ticket. Once I've landed in Vegas, I'll tell Anthony's man I screwed up and missed my first flight. I won't tell him about you. I'll say you left me at the airport and I never saw you again. You don't have to return. I don't want you to. Please."

Hand on her wrist, he looked past her. Voices grew louder, announcing the approach of what sounded like several men. "We can't talk here," he said, leading her back to the SUV.

Moments later, shoes slapped hard on the concrete behind them.

Summer's gaze dipped to RJ's free hand as he reached beneath his jacket for his gun. He looked over. She did too.

Blake ran up to them, his cheeks puffed out with his heaving breaths.

"Something's come up," RJ told his cousin.

The man looked at her.

At the SUV, RJ opened the back door for her. "Get in."

She didn't move. "Are you taking me back to the airport?"

"Not if you don't get into the fucking SUV, we're not." He wore the look he had at the compound, of a ruthless ex-con pummeling Hogan with his blows.

Summer got inside. RJ closed the door, grabbed Blake's arm and pulled him toward the front of the vehicle. There, they kept their backs to her, speaking in low voices she couldn't overhear.

Blake nodded at whatever RJ said, then glanced over suddenly, his gaze touching hers. At the shock in his eyes, she knew RJ must have told him Nicky was her son. She glanced at her watch, the time they were wasting by discussing this. She had to get back to the airport and on a flight to Vegas. No matter what it took, she'd protect Nicky. For as long as she was alive, she'd do whatever Anthony wanted to keep her son safe.

RJ and Blake separated finally and returned to the SUV, taking their seats from before.

"We didn't know," Blake said to her, his eyes on the rearview mirror. "I'm sorry."

"Everything will be all right if you just get me back to the airport." She took off her watch and placed it on the seat next to RJ. "That should more than cover the cost of a new ticket, but you can have these too." She unscrewed her pearl earrings and held them in her palm, extending it to him.

RJ pushed her hand away.

Blake drove out of the lot and toward the freeway entrance.

Summer stared. She shouted, "What are you doing? You're going the wrong way!"

"We're going to the cabin as we'd planned," RJ said.

"The hell we are!" She threw her earrings at him and grabbed the handle for her door, trying to open it even though she knew how useless it would be. Pounding her fists on the window, she shouted at the cars passing by, "Help me, please!"

No one looked her way. The tint on the windows was too dark for them to see inside.

"Nothing's going to happen to Nicky," RJ reasoned.

More than a decade of frustration and rage surged through her. Years of being lied to blinded Summer to everything except her son's safety. A child she adored. One Anthony had never allowed her to suckle, kiss, hold, nurture. Turning on RJ, her fingers clawed, she spoke through her teeth. "Take me back. *Now*. I want to be near my son."

He regarded her, his expression stony. "I can't let you return to the way you've been living. I won't. *Listen to me*," he growled, interrupting her, "You can show up in Vegas, you can continue to do this for as long as Anthony can make money off of you, but there will come a time when you won't be a valuable commodity to him anymore and he will get rid of you."

"I don't care! Until then, I'll know my son is safe! I won't leave him!"

"Anthony won't let you ever have the boy. He'll continue to use him to control you."

"I don't care. I have to go back."

"I can't let you do that."

A primal cry of hopelessness and anguish poured from deep within her. She flung herself at RJ, pounding his chest with her fists, screaming at him to listen to her.

Too easily, he grabbed her wrists, moving his arm over her head and turning her body until her back faced his front. Holding her to him, his embrace firm, he lowered his mouth to her ear.

"Don't," she cried, turning her face away. "I don't want you to ever touch me again. You're no different than Anthony. First, I was his prisoner. Now I'm yours." She paused to swallow. Her words bounced with her tattered breaths. "If anything happens to my

son, I will never forgive you! I will make you pay!" She rammed her elbow into his torso. She kicked his shin with her heel. "Let me go!"

He would not. Although he breathed as heavily as she and spoke in a voice tight with pain, there was also tenderness. "Nothing's going to happen to Nicky, I promise you that. Nothing's going to happen to you. We'll work this out."

Unable to free herself, her head fell forward. She whimpered, "You don't know what you're dealing with. You don't know Anthony like I do. Please, just let me go. Please forget you've ever seen me."

He spoke on a sigh. "I can't."

She went limp in his arms, her shoulders shaking as she wept.

You're in too deep, Cheryl had warned him. You're losing perspective.

No one had to tell RJ he'd fucked up big-time, even greater than his ex had predicted. Summer's hitching sobs told him he hadn't considered the consequences of his quest. Over the years, he'd searched for her untiringly, wanting to free himself of his guilt, never worrying about her reaction. He'd convinced himself she'd want him to save her. She'd hunger for freedom. And so he'd dismissed Cheryl's concerns, telling her everything would be all right.

It couldn't be more wrong.

His fingers gripped Summer's wrists so tightly that he had no doubt he'd leave marks, but he couldn't bring himself to release her. He had no way to stop her tears. How could he let her go to Vegas and then return to Anthony? No matter her youthful appearance now, there would come a time when she wouldn't be young enough for the clients. With her value gone, Anthony would have her killed.

RJ forced down a swallow. He lowered his head to hers, wanting to kiss her hair, knowing it was the last thing she needed.

She wanted her son. God, how could he have been so blind? He'd seen her worry at dinner when Nicky ran inside the dining room and thought it was because she'd witnessed Anthony striking the child in the past. Not once had RJ considered she might be the boy's mother.

We have a history, Anthony had said about her. We share a special bond.

The clues had swirled around him and he hadn't caught any of them. And now, he couldn't send her back. There had to be a way out of this for her and Nicky, a means to give them a future. He just didn't know what it might be.

An hour into their drive, she fell asleep, exhausted from frustration or crying. Perhaps both. The side of her head rested against his shoulder. Her wrists were lax within his grasp. RJ glanced at the rearview mirror. Blake met his gaze and lifted his brows as if to ask, "Is she okay?"

RJ shrugged helplessly, continuing to hold her, determined to protect her, especially from herself.

The miles grew between them and the Bay area. Plump gray clouds crowded the sky, promising a blizzard. In the distance, the Sierra Nevada loomed ominously. The last storm had dumped several feet of snow, blurring the outline of the peaks, lingering on the sagging branches of countless trees below the timberline.

Despite the toasty heat pumping through the SUV's vents, RJ smelled the air's icy bite. The closer they came to their destination, the more traffic had thinned out, with the majority of vehicles equipped with racks to hold skis.

For one wild moment, he imagined himself driving the SUV with Summer in the passenger seat and Nicky in the back. They'd be laughing at something the boy said, all of them excited about reaching their cabin where he and Nicky would gang up on Summer, throwing snowballs at her. To make amends for their blitz attack, they'd prepare her dinner, tossing a frozen pizza into the oven and giving her all the hot chocolate, Hershey bars and M&Ms she wanted.

He blinked rapidly to clear his eyes, his thoughts returning to the time they'd been gone. By now, her flight would be arriving in Vegas with one of Anthony's lieutenants waiting for her. Minutes past her scheduled appearance, the man would be confused, not worried—not yet. He'd question the attendants and check with the airlines to see if he'd gotten the wrong flight. Once he realized what happened, he'd be on the phone to Anthony.

Summer stirred in his arms. With a groan, she lifted her head, turning it from side to side as though she didn't know where she was or couldn't recall what had happened. Seconds passed. Her stiffening body told RJ she remembered everything. She twisted her wrists in his hands. Although he'd loosened his hold, it wasn't enough to free her.

He murmured, "I'm sorry."

She made no comment. Nor did she turn her head to look at him.

In silence, they drove. Flurries flew past the windows with some bumping off the glass. A short time later, the first of the storm arrived, still too early for drivers to put on chains. Snow drizzled, then rained down, compromising nothing more than visibility.

Only the steady whapping of the SUV's wipers broke the pained silence. Blake directed the SUV off the 140 and onto a series of local roads leading to their destination. The cabin RJ had given Cheryl in their divorce.

You've always wanted her, not me, she'd said after telling him she was through with their marriage. *I wish you could have loved me even a tenth as much as you do her.*

He'd tried to convince Cheryl that she was wrong...what hounded him was guilt, not passion.

Holding Summer in his arms now, feeling her weight and heat, he realized he'd grown to love her over the years, imagining how she looked, idealizing everything about her.

The real woman she'd become was better than anything he'd fantasized. He genuinely liked her personality, so sweet and giving, but with enough of an edge to be playful. He admired her intelligence, courage and integrity. He'd seen unending kindness in her eyes. He adored the sound of her laugh, something she rarely did. Something he wouldn't hear again.

She despised him for keeping her from Nicky, the same as Anthony had always done.

Blake made a turn to the right, taking an unmarked private road. Gravel flew against the SUV's undercarriage, sounding like sleet hitting glass. Falling snow veiled the trees surrounding the cabin, a modest one story structure with two bedrooms and a bath, purchased long after he had moved his and Blake's operation from Arizona to California.

For years, RJ suspected Summer had been sold into prostitution and so he concentrated on the West Coast and its thriving human trafficking as the most likely place to find her.

If he'd learned she'd ended up in Europe or the Far East, he would have followed her there.

On the porch, Cheryl waited, no doubt having seen the SUV's headlights or having heard its approach. Arms wrapped around her middle, she bounced on her heels in an attempt to keep warm despite her heavy parka and jeans. A slender woman of average height, with dark red hair, brown eyes and freckles, she wore a dispassionate expression, the kind a cop or an ICE agent might employ.

RJ knew better. He sensed her tension as she stopped bouncing on her heels. Eyes narrowed, she stared at Blake and the empty passenger seat, her breath vaporizing in the frigid air. She squinted as though trying to catch a glimpse into the backseat, her first view of the woman her ex-husband had always preferred.

He released Summer's wrists, wrapping his hand around her upper arm, helping her out of the SUV. Snow clung to her long lashes and hair, dyed black to hide her natural strawberry blonde color. The icy air brought a flush of pink to her cheeks, erasing the past eleven years, making her seem a teenager again.

She looked to each side and behind herself.

"You can't run in this storm," he said in a low voice only she could hear. "You'll freeze to death."

She offered no retort, not even acknowledging his presence. Suppressing a sigh, he led her to the front porch.

Cheryl's gaze moved from his hand on Summer's arm—escorting her as he would a prisoner—to her puffy lids. "Everything all right?" she asked him.

He rolled his eyes in answer, conceding she'd been right all along about Summer's reaction to him rescuing her and his lack of insight into what he'd been doing. "Let's go inside."

Heat poured from the vents and the healthy blaze in the fireplace. Bobbing flames cast the living room's chunky plaid sofa in a soft amber glow, producing an effect that whispered, "You're home." It wasn't any longer, not for him and Cheryl. She'd taken down their pictures, replacing them with photos of Yosemite's dramatic landscape. All traces of their six years together were gone.

RJ wanted to feel bad, sorry, guilty, something. Exhaustion and worry over Summer pushed everything else away. Cheryl led them to the kitchen table, the one place in the cabin where there were enough chairs for everyone to sit. Ashy light poured in through the windows above the sink.

Cheryl's eyes slid from Summer to him. "What happened?" she asked.

What didn't? Before he could answer, Summer pulled her arm from his grip and stepped back. She spoke to Cheryl. "Tell him I have to go back. Now. Anthony has my son. He'll harm Nicky if I don't do exactly what he says."

Cheryl's expression didn't change. Summer might as well have been reporting on the status of the weather rather than revealing she had a child. Coming around the table, Cheryl said, "Tell me what Anthony's threatened."

"I don't have time!" she snapped. "I have to go back! Take me to a gas station, I'll hitch a ride from there! I have to leave before the storm gets too bad!"

Unruffled, Cheryl asked, "Have you considered what will happen if you do go back to Anthony?"

Summer's shoulders drew inward, the stance one takes when prepared to fight. "I don't care about me. I'm worried about Nicky."

"So am I," Cheryl said.

"Bull! You don't know him! You don't know me! You —"

Cheryl interrupted, her tone composed but firm, "If you go back now, what makes you think Anthony will believe any story you come up with, especially if the man he's come to know as RJ doesn't also return? Anthony may conclude that you two were running away and at the last moment you lost your nerve. He may wonder just how much you told RJ about his operation or if RJ's really a cop."

She stepped closer. "If Anthony's pissed enough, he may just murder you in front of your son as a lesson to Nicky that he had better never cross the line or betray his father."

Summer's eyes widened in horror.

RJ frowned at his ex. "That's enough."

Cheryl countered, "She needs to know what could happen." Her head swung back to Summer. "Tell us what you know about Anthony's operations. What he's done to

you all these years. Help us bring him down. That's the only way you and your son will ever be safe."

Summer kept shaking her head. "No." She interrupted Cheryl, "With me gone, he'll be even more careful. You'll never be able to prosecute him. He has cops and politicians on his payroll. He runs legitimate businesses. He's buried all traces of his trafficking. You can't stop him." She turned her head to RJ, looking at him finally, anger, frustration and hurt in her eyes. "Neither can you."

Cheryl cut off RJ's comment. "With your help we can."

Summer glared at the woman. Cheryl kept her cool, waiting for Summer's next argument, the determination in her eyes saying she'd counter it. Blake went so still he seemed to have stopped breathing. A log popped in the fireplace. Wind hushed past the cabin. The muscles in RJ's shoulders and chest hurt from the oppressive tension, how fucked up everything had turned out to be.

"Fine," Summer said, breaking the silence first, her voice dead. "I'll help you. I'll tell you everything."

Caught off guard, RJ stared at her.

"On one condition," she added, her attention on Cheryl. "You let me go. You take me somewhere where I can hitch a ride and return. I can take care of myself. I'll convince Anthony I wasn't trying to run away."

"Fuck that," RJ said. "You can't go back. I won't let—"

"It's not your decision to make!" she shouted, drowning him out. "I'll tell him you kidnapped me. That you beat me to find out about his operation so you could muscle in on it with your men, but I wouldn't talk because of what he'd do to Nicky. Blacken my eye." She thrust out her arms. "Tie my wrists so I have rope burns. When I go back, he'll see what you've done to me and he'll believe whatever story I tell him."

RJ spoke through his teeth. "No."

Her jaw tightened. "We do it my way or I won't tell you anything." She turned to Cheryl. "We do it my way or I'll tell the cops you kidnapped me and held me against my will."

"They won't believe it," RJ said. "And even if they did, I don't give a fuck. I'll go to prison before I allow you to go back to that motherfucking prick."

Summer mewled, then spoke to Cheryl, her voice caught between a fight and a plea. "You can't keep me here forever. I'll find a way to escape. The only thing that will change is if I give you any information before I return to Anthony."

Chapter Twelve

Cheryl and Blake exchanged a glance, then looked at RJ. Arms crossed over his chest, he wore an expression that said he refused to back down.

A new sob caught in Summer's throat, driven by fear of what Anthony would do to Nicky if she didn't return and also by sorrow because she and RJ never had a future. He was such a good man, the kind she'd always fantasized about when she'd been with clients, but her son had to come first.

Whatever punishment awaited her, she'd accept it. Willingly, she'd give her life and freedom for Nicky's, buying time, appeasing Anthony until her son reached adulthood and could fend for himself.

Cheryl shifted her weight and spoke first. "Okay, we'll do this your way."

RJ uncrossed his arms. The wooden floor groaned beneath his weight as he went to his ex-wife, looming over her, his big body and voice deliberately intimidating. "Fuck that. I'm not letting her go back there. And I'm sure as hell not going to let anyone here lay a finger on her so Anthony thinks we beat her up."

"You don't have a choice," Summer said.

He looked over, anger pinching his features, frustration in his eyes.

"It's my decision," she said.

His jaw tightened. "We can figure this out. You don't have to return."

"Yes, I do. I'll never forgive you if you keep me from my son."

Pain raced across his face. Crossing the room, he lifted his hands to her biceps, holding her as possessively as he had in the guesthouse. "I want you to be safe. I want you to have a life. Your own life."

"I want that for my son." She leaned into him, resting the palm of her hand on his cheek, loving his skin's warmth, the beginning bite of his beard, his clean scent. In the coming weeks, months and years, she knew she'd cherish every memory she had of him. "Promise me you'll do all that you can to have Anthony arrested someday. Promise me you won't risk Nicky's safety to do it or try to stop me from going back."

He stared at her. "I'd never do anything to hurt your boy, but I can't promise —"

"You have to. I want your word." She lowered her voice to a whisper, "Please."

Averting his gaze, he swallowed quickly. With her fingertips, Summer touched the edge of his eyes, the tears he fought against. "It's all right," she murmured, "everything will be all right."

Mouth trembling, RJ looked at her. "You're taking care of me now?"

"Until I go back."

He pulled her closer into his embrace, his arms wrapped around her torso, his cheek pressed to hers. "You're not going to let me rescue you, are you?"

She shook her head, her throat too tight to speak.

RJ breathed haltingly, his chest pushing into hers, his sigh loud and sad. "I give you my word I won't stop you. But you have to let me, Cheryl and Blake figure out how to orchestrate your return and when it will be."

Her belly clenched at his words. She fought his caress, pulling back. "What do you mean when it will be? I can tell you what I know while you're driving me to a gas station so I can hitch—"

He interrupted, "How do you plan to tell Anthony you got away from me and so easily?"

"I'll think of something."

RJ's hands returned to her biceps, holding her more forcefully than before. "And what if he doesn't believe you? It's like Cheryl said, he may think I'm with the police. He may think you're helping us to get your son."

She jerked out of his grasp, turning away from him. RJ brought her right back, interrupting her again. "We have to give this a few days. Then, when you show up, you can convince him you escaped when I wasn't guarding you."

"No! You're doing this hoping I'll change my mind, but I won't. I can't wait that long. I've already been gone past my flight's arrival in Vegas. More than enough time for you to have tried to get information from me. If I don't go back right away, he'll hurt Nicky."

"What about Mina? That night in the guesthouse, you said she'd never allow him to harm the boy."

"For minor infractions of his rules. This is different, RJ. You haven't seen Anthony when he's enraged. I have. He won't care what Mina says. He's crazy enough to kill his own child to punish me for escaping again."

"Why would he?" he argued. "He won't know for certain what happened to you or to me unless we call him or you return. He knows how much you love Nicky. Why would he believe you'd go with me willingly?"

"I don't know!" she cried, continuing to oppose, trying to make him understand. "Even if he doesn't think I escaped, you're right, he might worry that you're with the police and he'll flee the country. He'll take Nicky somewhere that I'll never find him!"

"How about we convince him otherwise?" Blake asked.

Summer looked at him. So did RJ and Cheryl.

With the sudden attention, Blake pushed his hands deeper into his jeans' pockets as though he intended to stand firm on the points he would make. The diamond stud in his left earlobe winked in the room's murky light as he turned his head from one to the other. "I'll call him and say RJ and I are working together and that we have Summer. He won't get her back unless he gives us a cut of his operation."

"You can't be serious," Summer said. Why didn't any of them appreciate that none of their plans would work to free her or Nicky? "He'll tell you to kill me."

Blake nodded. "I know. But I'll tell him we'll work it so that your murder is pinned on him, your body found in a place he's associated with. That he'll be the one to answer a lot of inconvenient questions from the feds, not the local authorities on his payroll, and he'll be the one to face charges."

Inhaling deeply, he continued, "He plays our game or we'll go one step further, exposing his trafficking by simply making a few anonymous calls to any number of agencies, giving them info RJ learned while in Anthony's employ. Do you think he'll want to take that risk or deal with us?"

Unconvinced, Summer shook her head. "He'll disappear. He'll leave for another country with my child!"

"No he won't," Blake countered. "He's too fucking greedy to abandon his operation unless he's absolutely certain there's no other choice." Blake's eyes, a darker blue than RJ's, darted from his cousin to Cheryl, then back. "He'll hedge his bets just as he's done with any other competitor. He'll try to find out even more than he already knows about RJ. What he'll get is a second helping of the manufactured crap we've already put out to con him. He won't learn anything we don't want him to know."

"He'll conclude that RJ's really not that much of a threat, simply an ex-felon who's tried to muscle in on others before, failed, then took off for his next scheme. While Anthony's learning all that, you'll finally return. You'll give him your story about refusing to tell us anything because of what you knew he'd do to Nicky. We'll come up with a logical scenario on how you escaped so you could get back to your son."

"No," RJ said, his voice firm.

Blake blew out a sigh. "You have a better plan?"

"Yeah, I do. I'm not going to let her take a chance on going back to him alone."

"What are you talking about?" Summer shouted. "You just gave me your word!"

He looked at her. "And I'm keeping it. I'm letting you return—with me. I'll take you back now. I'll tell him I screwed up and you missed your flight. I'll find another way to get you and Nicky out of the compound while I'm there to protect you."

Summer felt the blood draining from her face.

"Are you nuts?" Cheryl asked RJ. "You can't take the boy." Her voice rose. "They won't let you take the boy."

He ignored her. Summer pulled away from him and backed up several steps. He followed. "Cheryl's right," she said, "you won't get anywhere near Nicky and you can't go back. Anthony will wonder why you let me miss my flight. He'll get suspicious. He'll have his men beat you up to get the truth, and once they do, he'll have them kill you."

"I'll risk it. I'm not letting you go back there alone. I'll talk my way out of it just as you'd planned to."

"You don't know him!" she cried. "I won't let you go back!"

"Listen to her," Cheryl said to RJ, her voice shaking. "Risking your life isn't going to do her or the boy any good. What we need to do is to calm the fuck down before we make any move."

Blake spoke. "I still say I call Anthony and tell him we have Summer so he doesn't blame any of this on her when she returns alone."

Cheryl nodded. "I agree."

"Fuck that," RJ said. "Either I go with her now or we get law enforcement involved."

Lightheaded at the thought, Summer grabbed the back of a chair to steady herself.

Cheryl whirled to face RJ. "They won't move as fast you want them to. You know that. Even with what she may tell us, there's no guarantee it would hold up in a court of law without corroborating evidence."

"Isn't the last eleven years of the hell she's lived through enough?" RJ hollered.

"No, it's not, and you know it!" she yelled back.

Summer's eyes flew from one to the other. Voice shaking, she spoke to Cheryl. "What would the police do if they found proof of what I tell you?"

The woman breathed hard, her face reddened with anger, frustration or both. "They'd get warrants and raid Anthony's compound and his businesses."

"No." Summer bumped against the chair, knocking it into the table as she went to Cheryl. "That can't happen. I know him. He'd take Nicky hostage and would threaten to kill his own son to save himself. You can't do that to my baby—promise me you won't do that!"

"We won't," RJ said, joining them, "but I'm not sacrificing you, either."

They all started talking at once.

Cheryl interrupted in a shout, "No one is going anywhere until we decide what in the hell Blake is going to say when he calls Anthony!"

No matter what Summer said or how she pleaded, she couldn't convince any of them to let her leave—at least not yet. And certainly not in this storm.

Heavy, wet snow clung to the edges of the kitchen windows, softening the shapes of everything outside, making driving difficult, if not impossible.

Sick to her stomach, Summer sank into a chair at the kitchen table. The others also sat, discussing their plan, avoiding her gaze, the tension in their bodies obvious. They expected her to interrupt, to challenge each point.

She did not, knowing it would do no good.

For more than an hour, she listened while Cheryl, RJ and Blake wrote his script. They made certain to use information only RJ would know so Anthony wouldn't think she had told them anything.

Eventually there was nothing else for them to decide or debate. Blake pushed out of his chair. "Everything's going to be all right," he assured Summer, squeezing her shoulder gently. Moving past her, he went into Cheryl's master bedroom to make the call on her clean phone—one Anthony couldn't trace.

Summer pushed from her chair, trying to follow. RJ blocked her.

"Get out of my way," she said, her fight returned, a growing edge in her tone. "I want to hear what Blake says to Anthony. I want to listen to Anthony's response."

"No."

Her voice rose, growing shrill. "What if Anthony wants proof that I'm with you? What if he wants proof that I'm still alive?"

"We'll give it to him if he asks for it, but until then you stay out here."

The door to the master bedroom closed with a brief click.

His hand on her arm, RJ directed Summer back to her chair.

She dropped into it, her head turned in the direction of the bedroom. Heart hammering, she waited to hear Blake's voice. An eternity seemed to pass before she caught anything past the blood pounding in her ears...a deep murmuring sound, the kind a man's voice makes when he's speaking.

Summer looked at RJ. In the pale light, she saw faint lines around his eyes and mouth. He seemed to have aged years in the last few hours.

Rounding the table, he went to one knee at her side, taking her hands in his, thumbs stroking her fingers. "We'll beat him at his own game," he said in a low voice. "We'll get Nicky and you out of there for good."

Her lower lip trembled. More than anything, she wanted to believe him, to hope. Feeling bad for her earlier rage when he was simply trying to protect her, she turned her hands so they held his and brought his fingers to her lips, kissing each blunt tip. She was about to press her mouth to his palm when she remembered Cheryl and looked over.

The woman had moved to the sink, her gaze on the snowy scene outside, not her ex-husband.

Blake's footfalls, heavy and hurried, sounded from the bedroom. Alarmed, Summer's head jerked to RJ.

"He's just pacing," RJ said. "He does that when he's on the phone."

Summer's stomach knotted with an unexpected worry. She kept her voice down. "What if Anthony agrees to Blake's proposal, telling him that he wants you to bring me back immediately so you two can talk about your cut in his operation?" Her fingers tightened around RJ's. "What are we going to do then? You can't go back."

Unexpectedly, RJ smiled. "Even a brain-dead ex-con isn't dumb enough to return to that compound with the woman he's kidnapped based upon a psychopath's promise. Don't worry. Blake will tell him to fuck off and will hang up on him."

She released his hands. "What?"

"Shh. Quiet." Frowning, he pushed Summer back into her chair. "Anthony's not going to react rashly. He'll have his cop buddies dig deeper into my background, going beyond my rap sheet that they surely gave him before he brought me on as one of his lieutenants. With Cheryl's help, we've built quite a past for the felon known as Richard James. All they have to do is find it and they will."

He cupped her face in his large hands. "What Anthony learns will give him a false sense of security. He'll be waiting for Blake's next call, knowing he's dealing with two losers."

"And then I'll return."

His expression clouded.

"There's no other choice," she said.

RJ huffed out a sigh, but didn't comment. The door to the bedroom made a shivering sound as it opened. Blake's footfalls recorded his long strides down the hall.

Cheryl returned to the table. RJ stood. Summer pushed to her feet.

Blake shrugged, then smiled. "I was really good."

RJ glared. "And?"

"He agreed to everything we want," Blake said. "He told me to have you bring Summer back right away so the two of you could talk."

"You hung up on him?" Summer asked.

"I called him a motherfucking liar and said I wanted some damn proof, some security first before we step one foot into that compound, and then I hung up. It's okay," he added quickly. "We expected —"

Cheryl interrupted, "She knows. Tav already told her."

"RJ," he corrected, his voice firm. "It's how Summer knows me. It's what she's comfortable with."

Cheryl regarded him for a moment and then her eyes slid to Summer. Whatever she thought about RJ's comments, she hid it well behind a mask of indifference. "We need all the information you can give us, everything that's been done to you, so we can work on nailing Anthony when you return. We'll do everything in our power to make certain your stay's not that long and to get you and your son out of there for good." She went to a cabinet near the refrigerator and pulled out a tape recorder, pen and pad.

Putting them on the kitchen table, she spoke to Summer. "Let's get started."

Chapter Thirteen

Staring at the recorder, Summer found it impossible to think or to speak. It was one thing to live the life Anthony had forced her into. To sit here and reveal the details to these people was another matter entirely.

She looked at RJ.

Compassion, and what she sensed was guilt, saddened his features. He pointed behind himself. "Blake and I can wait in the living room while you and Cheryl—"

Summer interrupted, "No." He needed to hear everything. As brutal as it was, it would make it easier on him when she returned to the compound, leaving his life forever. No matter his and Cheryl's assurances, Summer feared they wouldn't outwit Anthony. No one would. RJ needed to move on and find a woman worthy of him.

Pulling back the chair next to Cheryl's, Summer sat. The legs of RJ's and Blake's chairs scraped over the wooden floor as they also took their seats. Pearly outside light spilled across the table, glinting dully off the recorder's metal casing.

Cheryl tapped her forefinger against the on button, not yet depressing it. "It's best if you start from the very beginning." Unexpected sympathy rang in her voice. She seemed as uncomfortable as RJ and Blake. After clearing her throat, she continued, "The day Anthony abducted you from your Phoenix neighborhood."

Summer's gaze turned inward. Memories of her childhood home assaulted quickly, stealing her breath. The warmth of the sun that day, the clean smell of dry desert air, a hint of moisture beneath it returned with such startling clarity she might as well have been fifteen again—hopeful, carefree, then trapped and helpless. She whispered, "It wasn't Anthony."

Cheryl's gaze moved to RJ and Blake. She spoke in a soothing tone to Summer. "We didn't hear that. When we start recording, you'll have to speak up so we can capture what you say."

Summer nodded and pitched her voice at a level they could hear. "Anthony didn't abduct me."

RJ leaned against the table, knocking it slightly with his weight. "Summer, I was there. I saw you pounding the back window of the Honda Civic with your fists. I gave a description of the car to the police and told them you'd been kidnapped. At first, I thought you were fooling around, then I spotted your shoe in the street. I finally realized you'd been abducted. This isn't the time to protect Anthony. You need to tell us the truth. It's the only way to—"

"Tav," Cheryl interrupted, then corrected herself quickly, "RJ." She shook her head at him, her brows drawn together in a faint frown at his interruption.

"It's okay," Summer said to Cheryl. "He doesn't understand." She turned to him. "The guy in the Honda wasn't Anthony. The girl with him wasn't Mina."

Bewilderment widened his eyes. "Then who were they?"

"I don't know. I never heard their names. They never addressed each other in my presence." She looked at Cheryl, wanting to get this over with, to tell them everything she could. Someday it might save Nicky. "I'm ready to start. Please turn on the recorder. I'll speak loudly."

"Don't say anything until I give you the okay," Cheryl said. She depressed the button and stated the date, time, her name, rank in ICE and purpose of the recording. Nodding to Summer, she said, "Please state your name and age."

"I'm Lori Clayton," she said, unmoved by her given name, the girl she'd once been. Eleven years ago, she stopped thinking of herself as anything but Summer Parrish, a woman she would be until the day she died. "I turned twenty-six last month."

Cheryl spoke into the recorder, giving the date of the abduction. "Please tell us what happened the day you went missing."

Summer leaned back in her chair, hands clasped, gaze down, images rolling through her mind, but not reaching her heart. She might as well have been watching another girl's life, not her own. That would be too scary.

In an unemotional voice, she told them about the guy stopping his car to get directions, the girl with him asking her to get the map from the backseat, the knife against her throat, the girl shoving her into the vehicle, it speeding away.

Suddenly, Summer recalled the car's pine scent, the kind you get at a car wash, and the girl's perfume, smelling of vanilla and roses.

Shaken by details she'd forgotten, Summer forced down a swallow and continued. "The girl pushed me to the floor of the backseat. I kept crying and asking why they were doing this. She told me to shut up or she'd slit my throat with the knife."

Summer's nails dug into the backs of her hands, the pain steadying her, pushing away the building emotional torment she'd suppressed for years, allowing her to go on. "We drove for what seemed a really long time. Finally, the guy pulled into a garage. I heard the door opening, then closing. They took me out of the car into a house and then a bedroom and pushed me into a walk-in closet. It was dark in there, so I felt my way around.

"There weren't any clothes inside. From the other side of the door, the man told me if I made any noise, he'd kill me and then he'd kill my parents because he knew where I lived. He'd been watching me for weeks. He'd been waiting for a chance to take me and now he had and I'd never go home again."

Suppressing a shiver at her memories, Summer's eyes moved from Cheryl to RJ. "I pressed my hands over my mouth so he couldn't hear me cry. I didn't understand what was happening. One minute I'd been on my street and now I was in a closet—it didn't make any sense. I wanted my mom. I didn't know then that I'd never see her or my dad again."

All color left RJ's face. His hand went to her arm.

Tears welled in Summer's eyes. She sensed he already knew what had happened to her parents—her mom's cancer and her dad's heart attack—learning about them, keeping in contact with them as he'd searched for her. Unclenching her hands, she placed one on his. "It's okay. I know my mom and dad are gone. Anthony told me when Nicky turned two. He showed me their obituaries on the Internet. He said they'd never been looking for me. They hadn't cared. If they had, they would have found me."

Blake muttered an obscenity beneath his breath. RJ's fingers tightened on her arm.

Averting her gaze, she returned to her abduction. "I don't know how long I cried that first day in the closet, but eventually I fell asleep. I woke up to the guy pulling off my clothes."

Her lower lip trembled as she saw it all again and relived it—her panic, her pleas. "I begged him not to hurt me, not to touch me. He told me to shut up, that he owned me now and I'd do whatever he said. After he was finished, he left the closet with my clothes, locking the door." Flinching at the memory of that sound, the knowledge she wouldn't be going home, she fell silent, feeling ill.

"Do you need a break?" Cheryl asked.

Summer shook her head, forcing herself to speak, to tell them everything so it would hopefully help her son. "For days, the routine was the same. He'd come inside and assault me, then leave."

She recalled his spicy cologne, the weight of his body, his hands on her wrists. "They didn't give me any food or water. I got so thirsty I could barely swallow. I thought they were going to starve me to death because they didn't know how else to murder me. I expected to die. After awhile it didn't matter anymore. I just wanted it to end."

RJ scooted his chair a bit closer, wordlessly protecting her.

Summer acknowledged him with a brief smile. Blake cleared his throat. Cheryl waited.

Meeting her gaze, Summer continued. "On what I'm guessing was the third day—it might have been less or more, I really don't know—they asked what kind of fast food I liked. I had no idea if it was day or night, I'd lost all track of time. I told them my favorite was Egg McMuffins or a Big Mac with a chocolate shake. They left and didn't come back for a really long time.

"At first, I got worried, thinking they'd been in an accident or something and no one would ever find me, and then I started to cry because they'd made me believe they were going to get me some food and I figured they'd lied. I was still sobbing when they opened the door and gave me two Big Macs, a shake and one of those McDonald's apple pies."

Without meaning to, she smiled, ignoring the tears streaming down her cheeks.

"I can't tell you how good the burgers smelled. I ate half of the first Big Mac really fast, but then I slowed down, forcing myself to take small bites and savor the taste because I didn't know when I'd have food again. Both of them watched me like they wanted to make sure I finished it all. While I was working on my second burger, the guy said, 'See how good I can be to you when I want to be? When you don't cause me any trouble and do whatever I say?'"

Summer's gaze moved from Cheryl to Blake to RJ, her vision blurry with tears. "I know it doesn't make sense, but I started to feel bad for having cried, for having pleaded with him not to touch me. Here he was, giving me the kind of food I wanted, even getting me one of the apple pies, and I'd only caused him problems."

RJ squeezed her arm. "It makes perfect sense, honey. He was brainwashing you."

"RJ," Cheryl warned.

He didn't acknowledge her. His attention remained on Summer. "You were a fifteen-year-old kid torn from your family, sexually assaulted and threatened with death."

"RJ," Cheryl repeated.

He put up his free hand, a gesture for her to be quiet as he continued, "Of course, you would have been grateful for any kindness he'd shown you. This wasn't your fault. Not in any way."

Summer nodded, more to assure him than herself, and returned to the beginning of her captivity. "For the first few weeks after my abduction, the guy kept me in the closet. I guess my mind shut down at that point."

She inhaled deeply and spoke on a hitching sigh. "All I could think about was the next time they'd bring me a chocolate shake and a Big Mac or an Egg McMuffin and a surprise...maybe an apple pie, maybe fries, they always brought me something extra. I started to live for the aroma of the food, the first bite. And then one day, the guy opened the closet door and told me to go into the bathroom, to brush my teeth, take a shower and shampoo my hair."

She smiled again, recalling her pleasure at the warm water sluicing over her skin, how wonderful it was to wash her hair and to have clean teeth.

"What?" Cheryl asked.

Summer jerked back to the moment, her smile fading. "When I got out of the shower, the guy was in the bathroom waiting. He stared at the birthmark on my arm, the first time he'd seen it. The day he'd abducted me, I'd covered it with makeup. He'd never had the closet light on, so he hadn't noticed it the times he was inside. He hollered for the girl to come into the bath.

"The second she did, he grabbed my arm, twisting it so she could see what he did. She told the guy she'd get a special makeup to cover it. No one would know. It wouldn't affect the price.

"I had no idea what they were talking about, but I sensed if the girl hadn't spoken up, the guy would have killed me." She paused to swallow. When she continued, her voice sounded faraway, distracted by what her mind saw. "Gradually, the guy allowed me more time out of the closet. I was so grateful, I began to like him and the girl. We even laughed a few times."

She shook her head, finding it hard to believe how easily she'd forgotten her parents, substituting her abductors for them, accepting the unnatural as normal. "One night, possibly five months after they kidnapped me, the girl gave me a gold silk blouse, short black skirt, heels, stockings and lacy black underwear. She told me to shower, put on makeup and get dressed. I didn't ask why. A part of me wanted to believe we were all going out to dinner or a movie like friends do."

Her eyes moved to RJ. She smiled sadly and shrugged her shoulders at how naïve she'd been, how hopeful and foolish.

He brought her hand to his lips, brushing them against her knuckles.

Squeezing tears from her eyes, she said, "Once I was made up and dressed, the guy put his hand on my throat and squeezed, cutting off my air, warning me not to make a sound. If I did, he'd kill me. I knew then we weren't friends. I knew then something awful was about to happen."

She blinked rapidly, her words accelerating, keeping pace. "The girl led me out to the car and told me to get in the backseat and then she blindfolded me. We drove for maybe an hour. When we stopped, the guy told the girl to stay in the car. He brought me inside a building that smelled of liquor and smoke from cigars and cigarettes. I heard a lot of murmuring, the voices so deep I knew it had to be men.

"The guy took my blindfold off and I saw we were in a large room in what looked to be a private home. There was this monstrous chandelier in the center of the ceiling, creating a kind of spotlight on a low, circular platform beneath it. To one side a group of men sat in leather chairs, drinking and smoking these fat, smelly cigars and cigarettes. Some of the men were older than my dad, others were young. They were of varying races and cultures, given the differences in how they were dressed.

"Directly across from them and facing the platform I saw a line of girls, thirty in all. Most were teenagers. A few couldn't have been more than twenty. They were dressed like me, in sexy outfits and heels, their faces made up. I still didn't have any idea what was going on. I wondered if this was some kind of party and the men would be asking the girls to dance with them or maybe even to perform on the platform like you see in movies when people go to nightclubs.

"While I tried to figure it out, my kidnapper leaned close to me and whispered, 'Your name is Summer Parrish. Answer to that or I'll kill you.'"

Recalling the scent of coffee on his breath, its heat against her skin, a shiver tore through her. RJ hushed warm air on her fingers. Caught up in the past, Summer was unable to respond to his kindness. Words spilled out of her mouth. "I took my place

with the other girls. One of the men told us to undress." Her heart caught, then slammed against her rib cage. "I was too frightened to resist. But one of the girls did."

Her face heated at the image she saw in her mind of the blond man whipping the girl and assaulting her.

Cheryl spoke in a gentle, prodding voice. "What happened to her?"

Eyes closed, she told them, her voice laced with shame. Pulling her hand from RJ, she turned her body away from his.

Just as quickly, he rested his hand on her shoulder, refusing to be repulsed.

"Go on," Cheryl said, breaking the grinding silence. "Tell us what happened next."

Summer cleared her throat. Her voice remained gravelly, thick with tears. "One after the other we marched to the platform, draping our arms over our heads, turning slowly so the men could see every part of our nudity before they bought us."

Bile rose to her mouth. Swallowing hard, she forced it down. "When it came my turn, one of the older men bid on me, laughing that he liked strawberry blondes." She continued on a moan. "I didn't want to go anywhere with him. I didn't want him touching me. I kept trying not to cry. My eyes started darting to the younger men, hoping they'd notice me, that they hadn't seen my birthmark."

Her voice lowered a bit as she recalled what happened next. "Finally, one of them offered to buy me. He was in his mid to late twenties and very good-looking. Dark hair and eyes, olive complexion, tall." She lifted her head and looked at each of them in turn. "It was Anthony."

RJ's face flushed with what looked to be rage. Blake and Cheryl exchanged a quick glance, then nodded.

"He brought me to his house that night," Summer said, then clarified. "It wasn't where he lives now. It was a tract house in an ordinary subdivision. Months later, I realized he was just getting started in trafficking. He hadn't yet made his millions. That night, he took me up to his bedroom and put me to bed, telling me to get some sleep."

She fingered away tears and tried to steady her trembling voice. "It had been so long since I'd slept on a mattress. The sheets were as soft as fur. They smelled of fabric softener. I didn't wake up until the following afternoon. He came to me then, asking what I'd like to eat. Whatever I wanted, I could have."

Her hand dropped from her cheek to her lap, her fingers curling into a fist. "He was so damn nice. He made certain I had fresh bed linens and access to a shower and all the food I wanted. He asked me about myself, where I'd gone to school, what subjects I liked the best, those I hated. At times, he made me laugh. In the early days, he never once criticized my birthmark or seemed to consider it a flaw.

"He seduced me into thinking he loved me, that I was the only woman for him and that's why he bought me. I didn't question it. Within weeks, I'd fallen in love with him. I would have done anything he asked."

Deliberately, she looked at RJ, wanting him to know everything about her eleven years of captivity, the woman she'd become. To understand there never could have been anything lasting between them.

"The first night Anthony joined me in bed, he didn't have to assault me. I wanted him there. I felt protected, cherished, lucky that he and not any of the other men had purchased me. Early on, he'd had his doctor come to the house to give me birth control. Anthony said he didn't want me getting pregnant unless I wanted that. I believed him. Our first time together, he aroused me in ways I'd never dreamed possible. What he did felt so amazing. I couldn't get enough of it."

Blake adjusted his bulk in the chair. Cheryl didn't comment. RJ's gaze never left Summer's. His expression remained open and understanding, his unspoken thoughts hanging in the air...she'd been conned, seduced.

Averting her gaze, she spoke to Cheryl. "Anthony's honeymoon treatment of me lasted a few weeks and then he said he had money problems and needed me to help out." She glanced at Blake, then back to Cheryl, purposely avoiding RJ's eyes. From the beginning at the Montborne, he'd been able to read her soul, to know when she wasn't being entirely honest with him.

She wouldn't lie about facts today, but she had to hide her love for him, how it tortured her to return to a man she'd grown to fear and loathe. "Despite what I'd gone through up to that point, I was still very naïve. I thought he wanted me to look for a job at a fast food place or at the mall. I told him I'd do whatever he wanted. I'd help out in any way I could."

Her shoulders slumped. Embarrassment colored her voice. "He said he owed some people a lot of money. He'd borrowed too much to buy me, he'd wanted me that badly. And now he couldn't make the first payment and they were threatening him. He held up his hand, showing me the stump of his pinky. He said the last time he'd been unable to pay these kind of people, they'd cut off his finger. This time, they threatened to take his whole hand.

"I was so horrified I begged him to let me help him. He took me in his arms, thanking me and crying because I was so sweet. He said there was a man, a friend, who wanted a date with me and if I went out with him, he'd give Anthony enough cash to make the first payment on the loan." She pressed her fingers to her forehead. "I didn't want to go out with anyone else, but I didn't want Anthony to be hurt, so I agreed.

"A young woman came to the house to dye and cut my hair the way you see it now. Anthony said I looked more beautiful that way. I didn't argue. I only wanted to please him. He drove me to his friend's house, telling me to do whatever the man wanted or Anthony wouldn't be paid.

"The moment I saw the guy, I recognized him from TV commercials. He was a local politician, a family man. Pictures of his wife and kids were all over his house. He told me they would be gone until the following night. He and I would have a lot of time to be alone and get to know each other."

She drew her shoulders in, a useless attempt to distance herself from what had happened. "The following afternoon, Anthony picked me up. I was so relieved to see him I couldn't stop crying. He told me everything was going to be all right. He thanked me for helping out. He said he loved me. Three days later, he set up my next date, then the next and the next.

"Within weeks, he had me working for him every night. Gradually, his stories about thugs threatening him stopped. He didn't ask anymore if I'd help out. He expected it. He bought another girl and put her in his bed, telling me to use the spare bedroom. When I complained and said I didn't want him to sleep with anyone else and I didn't want to go on these dates any longer, he slapped me, saying I'd do exactly what he demanded or he'd kill me and after he dumped my body, he'd murder my parents."

Her mouth curled up in a forlorn smile. "He said exactly what my kidnapper had. They sounded so much alike. But by then, I thought I still loved Anthony. I honestly believed all I had to do was try a little harder, to please his clients as much as I could, and Anthony would love me as he had in the beginning. He wouldn't notice the other girls he bought. He wouldn't sleep with them any longer.

"A few times, he reverted to the way he'd been, treating me with kindness and respect. It took being pregnant with Nicky to understand that everything Anthony did was to keep me in line." She brushed away the last of her tears. Her gaze touched each of theirs, lingering on RJ's.

His beautiful eyes glistened in the silvery light. She saw unspeakable sorrow in his expression at what she'd gone through.

"I'm all right," she murmured.

His Adam's apple bobbed with his swallow.

Cheryl's chair made a slight scraping sound against the wood as she adjusted her weight, then turned off the recorder. "Do you know the names of the men who paid Anthony for your services?"

She nodded. "Some of them became regulars. They talked about their wives and children, their businesses, their political careers, the criminal cases they were working on."

Cheryl pushed the pad and pen across the table. "Please write down their names and, to the best of your recollection, when you saw them last, where you met them and details about what they told you concerning their cases or their careers."

"Also the names of the girls Anthony bought," Blake said.

Summer looked at him. He smiled sweetly. She couldn't help but return it. For a burly guy, he was so gentle. "I don't know if the names I heard are their real ones."

"Doesn't matter," he said, "we'll take what we can get."

"We'll try to locate them like we did you," RJ said. "All we need are some identifying features. Ages, eye and skin color, height, whatever sets them apart."

She turned to him. "Not all of them stayed with Anthony. If he couldn't break their wills completely, he had his men take them away."

Blake and Cheryl glanced at each other.

"You're saying Anthony had them killed?" RJ asked.

"I don't know," she said, not adding that she didn't want to know. Pen in hand, she poised it above the pad. "There's a lot of clients and girls, this may take awhile."

RJ spoke first. "Take all the time you need."

Hesitant at where this would lead, she couldn't quite bring herself to write the first name.

RJ murmured, "It's the only way for you and Nicky to finally be free."

Her hand shook. She pictured her son years from now, tall like his father, handsome, ruthless, having learned that lesson well as he grew up. A sweet innocent boy who would become a cruel man, no different than Anthony.

Without further pause, she began writing.

Chapter Fourteen

Several hours passed. Summer had filled numerous pages with her neat penmanship and still she continued to write all that she knew, waving away RJ's offer of hot chocolate and something to eat.

"I'm not hungry," she kept saying.

RJ let it pass until he heard Summer's stomach growling loud and long. Earlier, Cheryl and Blake had polished off a pepperoni pizza. Its cheesy, spicy aroma lingered in the kitchen. Covering Summer's hand with his, RJ said, "Enough. You need to rest and eat."

She pulled her hand away, avoiding his gaze. "I don't want anything."

He knew where this was going. She intended to starve herself for the next few days so when she returned to Anthony, he'd see how badly her captors had treated her. Every part of RJ resisted the thought of her going back to the compound at all, much less alone. Surely he'd be able to think of something to keep her safe while also being able to get Nicky. First, though, he wanted her to eat.

Finishing his cigarillo, he left the table and went to the cabinet nearest the sink. Cheryl's gaze moved from Summer to him. She spoke softly so only he could hear. "Want me to heat up another pizza?"

RJ pulled packages of M&Ms, Hershey bars and other sweets from the cabinet. During one of his furtive meetings with Blake, in yet another hotel restaurant, he'd told his cousin to have Cheryl stock up on chocolate in preparation for Summer's arrival. "Only if Blake wants it," he said in a low voice.

"He's still asleep in the living room, semi-comatose from eating most of the last one."

"I know. I can hear him snoring." He gave her a smile.

Clearly startled, she returned it and then her gaze flicked toward Summer. Cheryl mouthed, "Is she all right?"

RJ nodded. Summer was the strongest woman he'd ever known. After having lived with Cheryl, that was saying a lot. Impulsively, he leaned over, kissing her cheek. "Thanks for doing this," he whispered.

Nodding, she turned away from him, not quite hiding the tears in her eyes. Whether they were for what had happened to their relationship or because of Summer's eleven years of sexual slavery, RJ didn't know. Nor did he question.

He returned to the table, dropping the candy near Summer's elbow. "Time for a break."

The tip of her pen paused on the pad. She stared at the mountain of chocolate.

In a teasing voice, RJ said, "I know you want some."

Summer lifted her face. She seemed torn between teasing him in return and crying.

To keep things light, RJ unwrapped a Hershey bar, took a bite and spoke around the chocolate. "Damn. You gotta try this. It's hmm, hmm good."

She rolled her eyes and fought a smile. "That's the Campbell's soup jingle."

"Who cares?" He lowered his head, his mouth capturing hers, his tongue snaking inside, giving her a taste of what he knew she wanted.

A subdued moan escaped her as she suckled his tongue, enjoying the chocolate.

RJ allowed it for only a moment, then broke free. He waved the remaining candy bar under her nose. "Come on, take a bite."

Eyes on the treat, she chewed her bottom lip. He sensed her mind working as to how much one taste would affect her chances of fooling Anthony when she returned.

RJ swallowed, praying she'd cave to temptation, hoping she'd eat all the candy so he could keep her here and ensure her safety. He knew it was nuts to hope for such a thing, but it was all he had right now.

Without comment, she took the bar from him and gobbled it up. He unwrapped another, handing it to her. Thankfully, it was too much for her to resist. She ate it and another.

"Do you want pizza or a burger?" he asked. "We have both."

Head shaking, Summer licked chocolate off the corners of her mouth. "Neither. I have to finish this."

He took the pen from her hand, tossed it on the table, then massaged her fingers. "Your hand's cramping so badly your writing's becoming illegible. It's time for you to eat, then you should rest. We have a few days for you to write everything down."

Her breathing grew ragged. The color left her face.

RJ rested his free hand on her cheek, his thumb stroking her plump bottom lip, still sticky with chocolate. "Nicky will be all right. We'll get him out of there."

Tears brimmed in her eyes. Fear, and what sounded like defeat, quieted her voice. "There's too many people and cameras."

"At the compound," RJ said, having a sudden thought. "What about when he leaves it? Surely, he doesn't spend every minute of his life there."

She regarded him for a long moment, a bit of hope racing across her face. "Once a week, Mina brings him to San Francisco for an outing. They go to the zoo, toy stores, movies, any number of places."

Cheryl came to the table. "Does Mina take him into the city alone?"

Summer shook her head. "Two of Anthony's men always accompany them."

RJ hunkered down by Summer's chair. "What day do they usually go?"

"It varies. There's no set schedule." She fell silent. Her brows drew together.

"What?" RJ asked.

"With me gone and with what Blake said when he called, there's no way Anthony will let Mina leave the compound now with Nicky. He'll want them there where he knows they're safe from you and Blake."

"At least until you return and RJ supposedly disappears," Cheryl said.

RJ's head snapped up. He glared at her.

She ignored him, clearly accepting what he could not. Summer wouldn't let them keep her here forever. Whatever it took, she'd go back to the compound to be near her son.

Summer pushed out of her chair and went around the table. RJ turned his head to her.

"I'm tired," she said, sounding every bit of it. "Is there some place I can lie down?"

On his feet, RJ answered before Cheryl could, "You can have the master bedroom. If that's all right with you," he added quickly, his eyes darting to his ex.

She nodded. He took Summer's hand and led her down the hall.

Inside the warm, snug room, RJ watched her glancing at the cheap dresser, overstuffed chair and the bed's red-and-black plaid comforter. Since arriving, she hadn't even taken off her coat. Her fingers paused on the edges of it. Her eyes moved to him.

He backed toward the door. If she opened the window in this room and tried to escape, he'd be able to hear it from the hall where he intended to stay. "I'll be in the kitchen," he lied, "if you need me."

"No." She stepped toward him and spoke in a low voice. "Can you stay with me? Please?"

Surprise and relief washed over his features. He nodded readily, closing the door, but not coming any nearer.

Summer reduced the space between them, her hands on his chest, her head tilted back so she could see his face. She needed to remember every detail of him—the crinkles around his eyes, the mole near his left ear, his wonderfully long hair, his arousing scent. "Hold me?"

His voice rasped with emotion. "Oh baby, you don't have to ask." Arms wrapped around her middle, he pulled her close, his embrace solid and warm.

She wreathed her arms around his neck and tried not to cry. Unable to stop her tears, Summer buried her face in the hollow of his neck.

RJ murmured something beneath his breath that she didn't catch. In one fluid movement, he lifted her into his arms, bringing her to the bed. There, he sat with her on his lap, holding her to him, rubbing her back.

Too many years of questions bubbled up, pouring from her. "Did my mom and dad cry a lot when I was gone? Did they move because they couldn't stand to live on the street where I was abducted? Did they ever think they'd see me again?"

RJ rocked her back and forth as he spoke. "They missed you terribly, but they never gave up hope. They stayed in the house until it got to be too much for your mom. Your dad thought a new place would help her to cope."

Summer pressed closer to him. Her lips moved against his neck as she spoke. "Do you think they knew how much I missed them?"

"Oh baby, absolutely. They would have been proud of you for surviving. They would have loved to know about Nicky."

Her shoulders trembled with grief at all she'd lost and would never get back—family, her youth, freedom. RJ kept rocking her, allowing Summer to cry herself out. When at last she stopped, he murmured, "Do you want to sleep?"

She suckled his throat in answer, her arms drawing him closer. "I love you," she whispered, unable to hold back the truth any longer.

Hand on her cheek RJ turned her head so she had to look at him. "What?"

"I love you. I can't help it, I—"

His kiss smothered the rest of her words, his tongue plunging into her mouth. He tasted of chocolate as she did and of cherry tobacco. She suckled his tongue, feeding his arousal, her fingers pressing into his back, demanding he get as close as possible.

They necked for minutes, producing sloppy, satisfied sounds. Abruptly, he finished their kiss, lifted his head and regarded her in what looked to be wonder.

"What?" she asked.

His lids slid down. He inhaled deeply, then opened his eyes and met her gaze. "I adore you."

Smiling, she allowed his love to wash over her, desperate to have these last moments with him. To believe Nicky was still safe. To suppress her worry of what she'd face in the compound.

I'll miss you, her mind whispered to RJ, knowing a large part of her would die without him. Trembling at the thought, Summer guided his head to hers, brushing her lips against his. With tenderness and affection, they kissed until it proved too little to sate either of them. RJ's desire grew savage and she responded in kind. They pulled at each other's clothes, tossing their garments on the floor, then fell back on the bed, their naked flesh hot and welcoming, their limbs entwined.

For once, Summer allowed herself to be free of any restraints, holding nothing back, giving RJ her all...not as a submissive, but as a woman he loved. She pushed him to his back and straddled him, wrapping her fingers around his wrists, dragging his hands above his head. With her body poised over his, she stroked his cock with her moist cunt, deliberately tormenting him, then rubbed her tightened nipples over his pecs.

He grinned sinfully.

She kissed it away, filling his mouth with her tongue. On a lewd grunt, he jerked his hips upward, driving his groin into hers, his rigid shaft demanding the shelter of her sheath.

Not yet ready to give him what he craved, she ended their kiss and teased, "So now you want me? I guess since I've grown up I'm not a pest anymore, huh?"

His dark brows lifted in surprise at her question. His voice lowered in obvious embarrassment. "I was stupid to have treated you that way."

Summer ground her cunt against his thick pubic hair.

"Fucking stupid," he amended, attempting to catch his breath.

She stole it with another kiss, then tore her mouth from his so she could whisper in his ear. "I'm going to do things to you that you can't imagine. I'm in charge now."

A low rumbling laugh rippled from his belly to his throat. "Oh fuck that." With very little effort, he broke her hold on his wrists and rolled them over until he was on top, panting as heavily as she. Dismissing any foreplay, he drove his thickened cock into her damp channel, joining them and trapping her, owning her.

With a feline smile, she worked her inner muscles to tighten her passage. RJ inhaled sharply, balancing his weight on his elbows. His hands went to hers. Fingers laced, he held her so she couldn't move her arms. His weight and size precluded her escape from his carnal desires. Already the room smelled of their musk. Eyes locked, they gazed at each other, intoxicated with their newfound intimacy.

RJ smiled and so did she, the gesture substituting for words.

They fell into each other's rhythm easily, their bodies rocking with RJ's prolonged, assured thrusts. For the first time in eleven years, Summer fully understood the beauty of sex and how a man's domination of her flesh could be protective and exciting rather than cruel or painful.

"Don't hold back," she murmured.

He smiled. "As if I could?"

"Give me your all," she pleaded. "Fuck me like you've never done before."

He paused in his pumping and leaned down to her, their lips just inches away, their breaths mingling. "I'll make love to you as I've wanted to from the beginning. From the first moment I saw you in the hotel."

At the memory, at what tomorrow would bring, her eyes clouded with tears.

If RJ noticed, it didn't stop him. He seemed intent on this moment, the future and their pleasure. Straightening, he resumed his even thrusts, picking up speed gradually, while meeting her gaze.

Her eyes cleared and desire took over, making her greedy for his strength, size and the wonder of his body within hers.

RJ made certain she came before he did and then brought her to orgasm again as he climaxed. Gasping and sweaty, he rolled them over so she'd be on top while he remained inside.

Summer licked his tattooed pec and suckled his throat. His legs wavered, indicating the sensation tickled or pleased, perhaps both. A short time later, they settled down, their chests rising smoothly with their quiet breaths.

Taking her hand, he brought it to his lips, but didn't kiss it.

She lifted her head and forced her eyes to open, seeing what he did. The bruises he'd left on her wrist from holding her in the SUV.

"Shit," he said, his thumb stroking the darkened skin. "I'm sorry."

Head lowered to his chest, she closed her eyes and murmured, "It's all right."

"No, it's not. I hurt you."

Summer shook her head, rubbing her cheek over his heated skin, not yet saying what she must. Before she returned to the compound, he'd have to do far worse than simply leaving marks on her wrists.

Chapter Fifteen

The following day, Blake made his next call to Anthony, skillfully playing the man, keeping him off balance as to whether Blake and RJ were a serious threat or easily dismissed as two losers. A necessary action to buy time for Summer's return.

With each passing hour, RJ sensed her retreat from him. She glanced at the windows repeatedly, watching the storm evolve into an inconsequential flurry, seemingly unmindful of the fact that the two feet of snow it had dumped would make driving unlikely...at least for another day.

More than a few times, she bumped into the sharp edges of the kitchen table and the counters, deliberately bruising herself to prove the legitimacy of her abduction when she returned.

Cheryl and Blake pretended not to notice what she was doing. RJ said nothing until she asked if they had a rope.

Blake answered first. "There's one in the SUV."

"Where it's going to stay," RJ said.

Summer spoke to Cheryl. "I need you to tie my wrists so I have rope burns."

"No," RJ growled.

Cheryl glanced at Blake. "Get the rope."

"Fuck." RJ pushed past his cousin and headed for the master bedroom before he said or did something he'd regret.

Light footfalls hurried down the hall, following him. He turned, expecting Summer, and saw Cheryl instead. She crossed the room to him, keeping her voice low. "Do you want Anthony to believe she's been kidnapped or not?"

RJ drove his fingers through his hair, pulling it away from his neck. "I don't want her to go back at all. I want to go to the authorities with what she's given us. Let them handle Anthony."

"In six months or a year?" she asked, frowning. "You know it would take that long to verify everything Summer's given us. She's not going to stay here with you and wait a week much less that amount of time. If you love her, you won't keep her from her son. She'll hate you for the rest of her life if you do."

"There has to be another way."

"There's not and you know it." Cheryl's voice hardened. "Once she's back and everyone's routine returns to normal, we'll have a chance to get Nicky when Mina takes him into San Francisco."

"And leave Summer unprotected at the compound to face Anthony? Fuck no."

"She's already said that's what she wants. Maybe she can convince Anthony to let her go with Mina and the boy. Then we'll be able to get both of them. Listen to me," she argued, interrupting him. "We won't be able to do shit if she doesn't convince Anthony she was abducted when she returns."

With no other choice, RJ tied Summer's wrists that night, securing her to the bedpost. He ran his hands over her lush breasts and the flare of her hips, tracing the bruises she'd already given herself. Mean purple and red marks she wanted Anthony to see.

RJ closed his eyes, squeezing the lids, unable to bear the thought of her being hurt, refusing to accept her departure.

"Don't leave," she pleaded, even though he hadn't moved. "Make love with me."

He entered her carefully, tenderly. Her body writhed beneath his, a wordless complaint it wasn't enough. She desired his naked lust and unguarded passion.

Helpless to resist, RJ pounded into her, his cock stretching her sheath, forcing it to contain him, to give him pleasure. The act transcended lovemaking, turning fierce, savage, uncontrolled, a form of possession. He couldn't let her go.

He had to. There weren't any other feasible options.

Gasping from his orgasm, he licked the sweat between her breasts, tasting the slight saltiness of her skin, watching her chest rise and fall with her fitful breaths. He suckled her nipples, lingering on each, enjoying her throaty growls of delight. His teeth nipped at her throat, his tongue lapped the underside of her arm.

She giggled and tried to pull free. The rope rubbed her wrists. Friction from its rough manila fabric had already formed angry red lines on her flesh.

"Don't stop," she said.

RJ tore his gaze from her restraints and met her eyes glazed with desire and love. He kissed her deeply, his hand fondling her breast. She arched her back, delivering her body to him.

For the remainder of the night, he didn't stop, taking what he had to have, giving her all that she asked for, untying her finally and holding her in the safety of his arms.

Hours later, he awakened to the sun seeping through the bedroom's thin curtains. Propped on his elbows, he squinted at the light, cursing it. The rising temperature would melt some of the snow. With the plows surely out, the streets would most likely be clear.

Summer would want to go back today.

He turned his head to her side of the mattress. Empty. Glancing up, he saw the door to the bathroom ajar, light spilling from the inside. RJ left the bed and stopped short of barging in on her. With his knuckles, he rapped the door lightly and asked, "Can I come in?"

She didn't answer.

His brows drew together. He listened closely, hearing her rough breathing. "Hey," he said, going inside, "are you all—"

RJ's words stalled. He stared at her reflection in the mirror. A bruise bloomed on her jaw and her cheek. Her swollen left eye was slitted. Within a very short time, it would turn black.

"What in the fuck have you done?" Hands on her biceps, he turned her to face him.

Summer met his gaze with an odd combination of sorrow and defiance. "I have to go back today."

He pulled her into him. She squirmed, attempting to get free. Arms firmly around her, he refused to let go. Through his tears, he saw his sock on the bathroom counter, the rectangular shape inside no doubt a bar of soap. She must have used the makeshift weapon to strike herself repeatedly, cruelly, as a kidnapper would have done when demanding information.

His hand went to the back of her head, his fingers burrowing in her hair. He kissed her temple and her ear.

Sagging against him, she whimpered. "Please, I have to go back today."

The pain in his chest made it impossible for him to take a full breath. If anything happened to her, he'd hunt Anthony down as he would a rabid animal, making him suffer, making him pay, no matter the consequences.

She whispered, "It's time."

It was wrong. She shouldn't have to protect Nicky. It was his job to do that.

"RJ," she repeated, her voice anguished.

Having no other choice, he nodded finally and released her. "Blake will make his final call and then we'll bring you back."

They decided it would be best for Blake to lose his cool during the conversation, causing Anthony to believe that he and RJ had lost steam quickly, realizing their foolish scheme hadn't worked.

With the plan settled, Blake spoke to Summer. "You'll tell Anthony that shortly after you heard me on the phone, RJ and I took off. At first, you didn't know what to think. After a half-hour, you sensed we weren't coming back, you pulled your wrists free of the rope and ran to the corner gas station. There, you begged a guy in a pickup to take you back. You gave him your designer watch to pay for the ride."

Summer shook her head. "What if Anthony asks why I didn't call him to have one of his men pick me up?"

"You didn't want to hang around the area," Blake said. "You were afraid RJ or I would see you. You had no idea where we went. The only thing on your mind was getting as far away from this place as you could and returning to the compound as quickly as possible."

Cheryl joined in. "When Anthony asks where RJ and Blake held you, direct them to the abandoned cabin up the street. It's off Pine Cone Road and has been empty for years. I'm certain Anthony will send his men there to check out your story. RJ will plant your purse there for the men to find, along with food wrappers, the remains of a fire and other stuff so Anthony believes you were held there."

Blake backed toward the master bedroom. "I'll make the call now."

Summer wanted to follow. RJ took her hand, stopping her. She looked at him.

Plainly agonized, he stared at her blackened eye, the bruise on her chin.

"We need to clear the cars and the drive," Cheryl said in a low voice to RJ. "We only have an hour after the call before Summer goes back."

He frowned, then sighed. "Blake and I will do it, and then I'll take her."

"No," Summer and Cheryl said at the same time. After exchanging a glance with the woman, Summer spoke to RJ, keeping her voice at a pitch that wouldn't carry to the master bedroom. "You can't go anywhere near the compound. One of Anthony's men may be on the road and might recognize you."

"She's right," Cheryl said. "I'll take her. They've never seen me or my Jeep."

Summer spoke. "You'll drop me off at the edge of town before Anthony's private road." From the bedroom she heard Blake's voice rising, his feigned anger. "I'll walk the rest of the way."

"That's over a mile," RJ argued, his fingers gripping hers.

She turned her face to him. "You're hurting me."

His anger wavered, then collapsed. Looking down, he released her fingers.

Blake's voice carried down the hall, louder than before, infuriated, the sound of a man losing control.

Summer's belly ached at the thought of Anthony not buying it, and the truth that it didn't matter. She still had to return. "You have to stay away from the compound," she told RJ, then spoke to Cheryl. "You have to leave me off where I say."

The woman nodded, her auburn hair bobbing over her shoulders. Sunlight spilled into the room, making her skin seem paler, her freckles more pronounced.

"Stay here," Summer begged RJ, "where you're safe."

"Fuck that. Blake and I are going to keep an eye on the compound."

Cheryl countered. "We need to do this in shifts. Have Blake take you back to your place. I'll keep the first watch."

"No," RJ said, his face reddened with frustration.

Summer touched the back of his hand. He swung his head to her. "I'll be all right," she said, wanting to believe what she could not.

The door to the bedroom made a slight popping sound as the wood pulled away from the jamb. Blake's footfalls followed. Reaching the kitchen, he inhaled deeply and spoke on a relieved sigh. "The conversation went perfectly."

"We leave in an hour," Cheryl said.

The time passed more quickly than Summer expected. Blake and RJ tramped back to the porch, breathing heavily from clearing the vehicles and the gravel drive. She clung to RJ, her hands caressing his cold cheeks, regret and uncertainty building as they kissed goodbye.

Brushing back her bangs, he rested his chin on her forehead. A long moment passed before he seemed able to speak. "Once you're inside, give us some kind of a sign that you're safe. Please."

She struggled not to cry. "I may not get a chance right away. Promise me you won't do anything foolish."

"I'd never risk your safety." His voice sounded rusty. He cleared his throat. "Or Nicky's."

"I love you." She squeezed him hard one last time, then forced herself from his embrace. "I have to go." Deliberately, she hurried from the porch to the drive. The soles of her shoes skidded on the ice. She came down hard on one knee, tearing her pants, scraping her skin.

RJ rushed to her side. Panting at the pain, she said, "I'm all right." She'd had to do it. If she wanted to stay alive, she had to convince Anthony that she'd run from here, slipped and fallen. It was the only way.

On a muttered oath that said he understood why she'd stumbled, RJ helped Summer to her feet, escorting her to Cheryl's vehicle. "Take care of her," he said to his ex, his voice a demand wrapped in a plea.

Cheryl nodded.

Heart aching, Summer watched him grow smaller and smaller in the side view mirror as the Jeep went down the gravel drive. At the last minute, he lost control, breaking into a run, trying to follow...unable to.

Summer kept her head down so passing motorists wouldn't see her blackened eye or the bruises on her face. Although her scraped knee stung and throbbed worse than her other injuries, she welcomed the pain. It kept her from missing RJ, worrying about her son, dreading the minute she'd walk back into the compound.

An hour into the drive, Cheryl broke the silence. "You doing all right?"

"I'm fine. Take care of RJ, okay?"

Cheryl looked over. "Uh-uh. That's your job, not mine."

"I may never see him again. Even though he won't face it, you and I can."

Cheryl gripped the steering wheel so tightly her knuckles blanched. "You need to work it so you're with Nicky and Mina the next time she takes him into the city." Looking over, she glanced at Summer's scraped knee. "It'd be a hell of a lot easier for us to rescue you and your son if you're away from the compound."

"Don't worry about me. Help Nicky."

"Oh, screw that," Cheryl snapped. "You're his mother. He needs you."

Summer wrung her fingers. "He doesn't even know me. He loves Mina. Oh god." Her hands went over her eyes at the truth she'd refused to face until now. "What will it do to him if he's taken from her? She's the only mother he knows."

"What will happen if you leave him with her even if Anthony's behind bars? She's been complicit in this all along. She's no innocent. What will her warped thinking do to your son?"

The thought was too awful for Summer to consider. Dropping her hands, she told herself Cheryl was right. No matter Nicky's feelings for Mina, he had to be better off away from her, free to live a normal life. "I'll try to work it so I can be with him and Mina the next time they leave the compound." She turned to Cheryl and spoke quickly, "But I want you to promise me, if I'm not, you'll still try to get Nicky and bring him somewhere safe. I don't matter. He does."

Cheryl inhaled deeply and nodded.

Traffic increased as they neared their destination, slowing their arrival. Heart racing, wanting to get this over with, Summer directed Cheryl to the area where the woman needed to drop her off.

Cheryl eased her Jeep to the side of the road, well past the last of the buildings, in an area thick with cypress that protected them from view. Her hand went to Summer's. Both of their fingers were icy despite the heat pumping through the vents. "I'll be watching the compound until tonight," Cheryl explained, "then RJ will take over. After him, Blake will come on. We'll be out here the entire time, on one of the hills so we have a good view of the area."

Summer brought back her hand. "There's no telling how long it will be before Anthony allows Mina and Nicky to leave the compound again. It could be weeks." Her heart sank. "Won't you have to go back to work?"

"I'm on leave. We're not going anywhere until you and your boy are safe." She paused to swallow. "Signal for us if you sense something is coming down, but do it innocuously so Anthony doesn't know."

Summer shook her head, not understanding. "Signal how?"

"Do the windows in the main house have shutters or curtains?"

"Shutters."

"Try to get near one facing east. Pretend you're adjusting the shutters to let in the light or keep it out. Fiddle with it for awhile. I know it's not perfect," she added hastily, "but it's all we have right now. Use it to signal us if you need help."

And put them in danger? She'd never do that. Rather than argue the point, she lied with a nod. "When you do see Mina driving away with Nicky and you rescue him, you won't let her talk her way out of it?"

"I'll tell Mina what we know. Believe me, she won't threaten us with kidnapping, not with the shit she'll be facing. But you need to do everything you can to be with her and Nicky."

"Anthony may refuse me."

"Then you'll have to get off the grounds as fast as you can once they do leave. You'll have a very short window of time to escape before Anthony knows what's happened."

She might not have any time at all. Her only comfort would be that Nicky was safe before Anthony discovered what she'd done and killed her. Sick with fear, she nodded and squeezed the woman's hand. "Thanks for everything you've done." Suppressing a shiver, she reached for the door's handle.

"Wait," Cheryl said. Summer looked over. Cheryl lowered her gaze and softened her voice. "For years, RJ's thought of nothing but you. At first, I assumed it was simply guilt. Eventually, I realized he'd fallen in love with the thought of you, the woman he imagined you to be." Her voice wavered slightly. "When he brought you to the cabin, I saw how much he adores you...that you were even more than he'd been fantasizing about."

She looked at Summer. "He'll die if anything happens to you. Let him know you're safe when he's out here tonight watching. Go to the window or to a balcony if the house has any. Please."

She fingered tears from her eyes. "I'll do everything I can to try."

Cheryl smiled sadly. "Be careful."

Summer embraced the woman, then left the Jeep and the last of her safety. The sharp wind pulled at her hair, whipping her coat around her legs. Intentionally, she walked through the brush to scuff up her boots and tear her pants. From behind, she heard Cheryl starting her vehicle. Minutes passed before Summer heard the motor accelerating, the Jeep probably making a U-turn, heading for the area where Cheryl would keep watch.

A hint of rain dampened the air, giving it a metallic, earthy scent. Summer held her coat to her throat and negotiated the heavily vegetated area, moving past eucalyptus, shrubs and firs. Within minutes, she was panting heavily from her walk and escalating apprehension.

Several birds took flight from the left, startling her. Eyes clouding with new tears, she continued, praying for Nicky's safety and her own, hoping RJ wouldn't do anything rash, putting himself in danger.

A ship's horn resonated from the Bay, sounding forlorn. Birds squawked overhead. Air whistled past her. Increasingly dizzy, she wanted to stop and rest, to gather courage, knowing she could not.

Nicky needed her. She had to give her child a future.

What seemed a long time later, she reached the gate, her feet sore, legs shaky. Struggling to breathe, she went to the intercom and rang the buzzer, making certain to lift her face to the camera.

Seconds passed and nothing happened. Panic gripped her. Was the compound empty? Had Anthony sensed RJ's plan? Had he taken Nicky and fled the country?

Hand shaking, she was about to press the buzzer again when a voice said, "What the hell?"

Summer recognized Hogan's voice. She heard his shock. Her terror and sorrow broke free. She cried, "Please, let me in!"

Chapter Sixteen

RJ's cell phone rang, causing him and Blake to flinch. Pulling the phone out of his coat, RJ checked the number. "Cheryl."

Blake nodded and maneuvered the SUV into the fast lane.

Answering the call, RJ spoke quickly. "What happened? Has Summer changed her mind? Is she all right? We're only an hour out of the area. What in the fuck is going on?"

Static answered. RJ swore. "Cheryl, are you —"

She interrupted, her voice edgy, but far calmer than his. "Two men met her at the gate."

RJ's throat constricted, holding in his cry of frustration. The last time he'd felt this helpless he'd been nineteen, staring at the Civic screeching away, seeing Summer—or rather Lori—pounding on the glass, begging for his help. Shoulders bunched, he spoke through his teeth. "What did they do to her?"

Blake's head whipped to RJ at the barely suppressed rage in his voice.

"Nothing," Cheryl said. "They helped her up the drive. I don't think she would have made it on her own."

"Why the fuck not?" RJ shouted. "What happened?"

"Nothing!" Cheryl yelled. "She's terrified, RJ. She'd just walked over a mile. Give me some credit, will you? If they'd tried anything, I'd be dialing 9-1-1, not you."

"Is Summer all right?" Blake asked RJ.

"For the moment." Squeezing his phone, he brought his free fist down hard on his thigh. "We shouldn't have let her go back," he snapped at Cheryl.

"We didn't have a choice and you know it," she countered. "If we hadn't done it her way, she would have escaped us and gone back on her own."

"We have to protect her, Cheryl."

"We will. Now get some sleep. You're going to be up here all night."

RJ closed his cell phone and rammed his fist into the passenger side door.

"Easy," Blake said, "nothing's happened to her."

"Not yet," RJ growled.

"She's a smart lady. She'll protect herself."

"He's a fucking psychopath, Blake." RJ hit the door repeatedly. Anguish over losing Summer a second time registered in his voice. "What if he doesn't believe her?"

Blake inhaled deeply and blew out a sigh. "He will."

* * * * *

Hours before he was set to relieve Cheryl, RJ couldn't keep still, couldn't think, couldn't eat. He paced his modest apartment, checking the time repeatedly, calling Cheryl every few minutes, asking for updates, listening to her saying the same thing over and over—"No one's left the compound, no one's arrived, no one's even gone outside the main house."

It was driving him nuts.

Finishing his cigarillo, he lit another. Already he'd gone through three packs today. "I'm coming out there now," he told his ex, pausing to take another drag on his smoke. "I can't wait any longer."

"You're so wound up you're going to crash hard," she warned. "You'll fall asleep while you're out here. You may miss them leaving the compound. Stay there. Get some rest."

"I can't." He grabbed his coat and three packs of cigarillos, making a promise to himself. The moment Summer was safe, he'd quit smoking. He wanted to be around a long time to be with her and Nicky. "I'm heading out there now."

At ten p.m., there was still no movement at the compound. RJ kept his high-powered binoculars trained on what he knew to be Anthony's bedroom. Several times during the last weeks, the man had summoned RJ inside the spacious area, decorated with priceless antiques from Spain.

From his king-sized bed, with Mina at his side, Anthony had asked RJ for reports of his previous night's activities...what young women he ferried to what hotels, how long their assignations lasted, whether they said anything to him when he'd brought them back to where they slept at night.

Shutters kept RJ from seeing inside the windows, but light bled around the edges. Currently, it was the only room in the sprawling house showing any signs of life.

Fear tightened his throat. He sensed Summer was in there with Anthony. She certainly wasn't in the guesthouse they'd shared. Cheryl would have seen one of Anthony's men transporting her to the building. He would have.

The grounds remained empty, illuminated by landscaping lights. A fat moon rained ashy beams from an unusually clear sky. Trees, bushes and flowers shuddered in the stiff breeze.

"Please, baby," RJ begged, "show yourself. Let me know you're all right."

An hour passed without movement. Then another. RJ's legs and arms ached from maintaining the same position for so long. His throat was raw from too many smokes. He had to pee.

Holding the binoculars with one hand, he reached for a plastic container with the other so he could relieve himself. His fingers had just touched the bottle when the double doors to Anthony's bedroom opened.

Light spilled onto the balcony. A moment later, Summer came outside.

RJ forgot to breathe. Leaning up, he held his binoculars with both hands, zooming in on her, seeing the injuries she'd given herself this morning, but no new bruises. He relaxed enough to swallow as he studied her. Whether she felt pain or fear, he didn't know. She wore an expression he couldn't read, masking whatever lay in her thoughts and heart.

The ends of her dark hair wiggled wildly in the wind. It pushed against the blanket she'd wrapped around herself. Barefooted, she walked across the stone balcony, her face lifted to the moon or a star as though she were wishing upon it.

RJ's eyes began to fill. Shaking off his emotions, he tightened his grip on the binoculars and whispered, "I'm here, baby. I'm watching over you. We'll get you out of there."

Her lids slipped down as though she'd heard him. For a moment, her mask fell away, showing him her anguish. She moved her lips, soundlessly forming words—what looked to be "I love you".

Movement to the side caught RJ's attention. He inched his binoculars to the right. Naked, Anthony stood in the doorway, his hand on the knob. He said something.

Summer's head lowered. She opened her eyes. A veil had already settled over them, hiding all emotion, leaving only submission. Without comment, she returned to the bedroom. Anthony closed the door behind her. The light inside the room went out.

Eyes open, Summer stared into the darkness, listening to Anthony's quiet breathing, telling her he'd fallen asleep. His back was to her in the bed. Earlier, he'd told Mina to sleep in Nicky's room.

Summer's fingers gripped her pillow. She bit her bottom lip, unable to relax or to trust completely that Anthony would continue to believe her story. Initially, he'd been surprised upon hearing of her return, then enraged she'd allowed her kidnapping to happen.

She'd heard his tirade as he came down the hall into the foyer where his men held her. The sight of her bruised face and bleeding knee had stopped him cold. Quickly calmed, he'd regarded her sorry state.

Not knowing how long his composure would last, she'd pretended to faint, buying time, grooming him to believe her lies as he'd once groomed her to trust his.

He'd ordered Hogan to carry her to this room. Here, Anthony had waited until she stirred and opened her eyes, feigning confusion as to how she got on the bed. He'd questioned her about RJ and Blake—what they'd asked her, what she'd told them.

Her answers were always the same...she'd revealed nothing about her customers, nothing about him. RJ and Blake had starved and beaten her. Still she hadn't talked. She hadn't wanted anything to happen to Nicky. She'd escaped and returned because she loved her son and adored Anthony.

He'd ordered two of his lieutenants to drive to Yosemite to check out her story. Hours later, they'd called, finding her purse in the abandoned cabin, confirming what she'd claimed.

Finally pleased, Anthony had allowed her to bathe, ordering her to show him just how grateful she was to be with him. In the performance of her life, she made him believe her lies...that she wanted him as she had no other man, artfully concealing how much she loathed him. How delighted she was to have a part in delivering him to justice.

When at last he'd fallen asleep, she'd risked going out on the balcony, her one chance to let RJ know she was safe. For the moment.

Squeezing her eyes tight, Summer recalled feeling RJ's presence, his gaze on her. "I love you," she mouthed now as she had then, wishing they were together, wanting them to be, determined to do everything she could to make Nicky safe, and perhaps to reclaim her own future in the process.

Chapter Seventeen

More than a week passed, the days crawling by. Not once did Anthony allow Summer out of his sight. Although her bruises had faded, Summer's scabbed knee precluded her from servicing any of his clients. She remained in Anthony's bed, catering to his every desire, convincing him – fooling him – of her loyalty and enduring love.

On a Friday morning, Mina came into the bedroom unexpectedly. Summer looked up from the breakfast she and Anthony shared at a table near the balcony. Padding across the room, Mina's eyes took in the velour robes Anthony and Summer wore, the mussed bed. *Her* bed.

Jealousy smoldered in her eyes.

"What is it?" Anthony asked, not bothering to glance at her.

"Nicky," she said.

Summer's fork stalled near her mouth. Mina's eyes slid to her.

Hiding her concern over what the woman might say about her son, Summer slipped the wedge of cantaloupe between her lips, chewed, then forced the fruit down her throat.

Anthony finished his Turkish coffee and ran a napkin over his mouth. "What about him?"

"He's getting restless."

As if on cue, the child's high-pitched voice rang down the hall. "Mama, Mama, Mama!"

Mina sighed loudly. "Yes, Nicky," she called out, her exasperation apparent. "I'm in Papa's and my bedroom."

The child ran inside, clutching a bright red truck. His shirt had skidded up his belly, showing his navel. His dark hair stuck out on all sides as though he'd been rolling on one of the Persian rugs. Summer fought a smile. Love washed over her so quickly, the room seemed to shift.

"Look at what I can do, look at what I can do!" Nicky shouted. Falling to his knees, he put the truck on the floor and pushed it hard. The toy raced across the room, managing a wheelie before hitting Summer's foot.

Eyes wide, Nicky's gaze jumped to his father, his shoulders lifting to his ears.

"It's all right," Summer said first, her voice husky with unshed tears. She picked up her son's truck, offering it to him. "Here you go."

Nicky looked at Mina. The woman nodded, granting permission for him to approach Summer. Shyly, he went to her, his hands behind his back.

"I think this is yours. I know it's not mine," she teased gently, handing him the truck, offering him her smile.

He snatched the toy and retreated several steps. Summer's heart sank even as her anger raged at Mina and Anthony for taking her child. "It's okay," she murmured to Nicky. "Your truck didn't hurt me."

The boy stared at her for a moment, confusion sweeping across his small face as to whether he should trust her or not, and then he whirled around and ran from the room.

"I want to take him into the city tomorrow," Mina said to Anthony. Her eyes went to Summer. Her voice accused. "We missed going for two weeks because of the problems you caused." She turned to Anthony. "Nicky needs the outing and so do I. I have shopping to do."

Anthony speared a wedge of pineapple. "Take Valenz and Dobbins with you."

"I'll tell them now." She left the room.

Summer's belly rolled with expectation and apprehension as to what would happen when Mina and Nicky left the compound tomorrow. Mind racing, she knew she had to make her move, to somehow be with them.

Keeping unease from her voice, she murmured, "You need more coffee." With a surprisingly steady hand, she poured Anthony another cup, then said, "Mina's angry with me."

Offering no comment, he sipped the strong, fragrant brew.

Resolved to do what she must, Summer continued, "I want to make it up to her for the missed outings...if you'll allow it."

Anthony returned his cup to the saucer. "What did you have in mind?" A grin flashed across his handsome face. "You want Mina to join us in bed tonight?"

Summer forced herself to smile even as revulsion swept through her. "I was thinking of something more innocent." She cut another piece of cantaloupe, spearing it with her fork. "Nicky's becoming quite a handful. I thought I could babysit him tomorrow, keep him occupied in the mall while Mina shops, so she can relax and enjoy herself."

Anthony said nothing. Anxiety pricked the back of Summer's neck. Ignoring it, she chewed and swallowed the fruit, waiting for his response, his countering that Valenz and Dobbins could watch her child.

He leaned back in his chair, his attention never leaving her. "Mina's been very jealous of you for being in my bed these last days."

Summer's eyes remained on his.

"She'd like to punish you for that," he said.

Her heart jumped, then beat painfully at what she hoped he was thinking. "And I'd deserve it," she answered, playing him as he'd so often played her.

Anthony dropped his napkin on the table. "I think she'd enjoy seeing you act the babysitter with your own son. How ironic that would be. Don't you agree?"

Not daring to show her mounting anticipation, Summer nodded.

"She knows Nicky's lost to you," he added, his voice cold, cruel. "That he'll never be your son."

Raw, pounding pain surged through Summer as she recalled the child's reaction to her a few minutes ago, verifying Anthony's words. She spoke on a ragged sigh. "I know."

Anthony pushed away from the table and stood. "I have my own amends to make to Mina for showing you too much attention. I'll tell her you'll be going with her and Nicky tomorrow, acting as the boy's babysitter while she enjoys herself. I'm certain she'll be very pleased." He left the room without a backward glance.

"Holy shit," RJ muttered, his previous exhaustion evaporating with stark surprise. Four hours ago, Cheryl was supposed to have relieved him of his post. He'd called, telling her not to bother. He wasn't about to move from the spot.

Thank god he hadn't.

He adjusted his binoculars, watching Mina, Nicky, Valenz, Dobbins and Summer walking across the courtyard to the garage. She'd done it. She'd conned Anthony into letting her go into the city with Mina and the boy.

RJ whooped in delight. Seconds later, he was on his cell phone, answering Cheryl's "what happened" with the best news of his life. "There's movement. Summer's with Mina and Nicky. It's my guess they're headed into the city."

"I'm leaving now. I'll get in touch with Blake."

"Hold on," RJ said before she could hang up. "Valenz and Dobbins are accompanying them."

"Give me a sec to check the men out."

As he waited for Cheryl to get back to him, RJ focused on Summer. Either her bruises had faded completely or she'd hidden the last of them with skillfully applied makeup. She wore faded jeans, a white turtleneck sweater and a tan suede jacket. Her eyes never left Nicky. The boy bounced on legs that seemed to be made of springs. RJ grinned.

"We're in luck," Cheryl said. "Dobbins and Valenz have outstanding warrants."

Briefly, RJ closed his eyes at how easy this was becoming. After all that had happened, the horror was almost over. Summer and Nicky were almost home. "They're getting into the black Mercedes now." He gave her the license number. "Get in touch with Blake, then call me and him right back. We'll do a three-way while I follow the car so you'll both know where they're heading."

"Don't worry. We'll catch up at the final destination. Just don't do anything crazy before we get there. Remember, the men know you. They'll recognize you."

"I'll be careful," RJ said, watching Summer getting into the backseat next to her son. He wouldn't do anything reckless unless he saw Summer's or Nicky's lives were in danger.

* * * * *

As Valenz guided the Mercedes across the courtyard, Summer's heart skipped several beats. A part of her kept worrying that Anthony would run out of the mansion, ordering them to stop so he could drag her from the car.

Nothing happened. The Mercedes purred down the drive. In minutes, they'd be past the gate. Almost free.

She wanted to look out the window and search for RJ's, Cheryl's or Blake's vehicle on the hill, but didn't dare. Summer knew they were out there hiding, watching. RJ wouldn't let her down. Neither would the others.

Beside her, Nicky rocked back and forth in his booster seat, the heels of his Reebok's hitting the upholstery, his small body barely able to contain his childish enthusiasm. Smiling at him, blinking tears from her eyes, she asked, "And what do you want to see most today, Nicky?"

He shrugged. Holding back a sigh, Summer waited, her eyes remaining on him, drinking in her child's beautiful features.

Nicky's gaze darted to her. She winked. He looked away, then back. Summer smiled.

"Pirates," he said to her, shyness lowering his voice. "I wanna see pirates."

They stopped first at a kid-friendly shop with a wide array of pirate regalia. Plastic sword in hand, Nicky skipped down the aisles, pausing to stare at costumes, wigs, jewelry and fake weaponry, wanting all of it. As Mina paid for the purchases, Summer turned her head away, pretending to cough. Her eyes scanned the street outside the store, looking for Cheryl's Jeep or the SUV Blake drove that day at the airport, seeing neither.

Her stomach churned at the thought of RJ and the others not being able to find her.

"Let's go," Mina said.

Within minutes, they headed to the Westfield Mall.

Inside the rambling structure, a cacophony of voices rose from the throng of shoppers. Rap music pumped from one of the stores catering to teenaged girls. Loud laughter joined it. The scent of pizza and Mexican fare mingled with the fragrance of cinnamon buns.

Sweat trickled down Summer's chest, settling in the valley between her breasts. With so many people and too much space, she hadn't a clue how RJ, Cheryl and Blake could find her and Nicky.

The child tried to pull his hand from hers. Gently, she tightened her fingers around his. Her eyes darted to the stores on the lower level and to the balconies above.

"You're not going fast enough!" Nicky complained, pulling her.

"Sorry." She saw Mina was several steps ahead, heading for Bloomingdale's. Valenz and Dobbins were on the other side of Nicky.

Summer eased her child to the right, away from a group of on-coming shoppers. Suddenly, someone bumped into her from behind. Glancing over, she saw a woman with dark red hair stride by, then turn her head.

"Sorry," Cheryl said to Summer, giving her the vague smile one reserves for strangers, "didn't mean to bump into you." She hurried through the throng of weekend browsers.

Summer's throat went dry. Her eyes filled. They'd found her. Instinctively, she knew she had to separate Nicky from Mina and the men to give RJ and the others a chance to make their move. Summer's gaze shot to the left, the right, then up ahead. Her eyes widened at what she saw.

Carefully, so the others wouldn't notice, she tapped Nicky's hand with her forefinger. When her son looked up at her, she winked, then pointed at the display.

The moment he saw it, he jumped rather than walked. "I wanna see it!" he hollered.

Mina's steps slowed. She looked back at Nicky, then at the display he was pointing to, an advertisement for the new Disney flick playing at the mall's theater. His finger kept jabbing air while he bounced. "Please, Mama, I wanna see it!"

"I'll take him," Summer said.

Shoppers pushed past them. Voices rose and fell. Mina's eyes narrowed. She spoke to her son. "We'll get the DVD later. We'll see it at home."

"No, *now*," he begged.

"Valenz and Dobbins can go with us," Summer offered, "they can wait for Nicky and me outside the theater."

"Please!" the child piped up.

Dobbins muttered something beneath his breath.

"Please," Summer said to Mina, forcing her voice not to shake. "I'll take good care of him."

The woman went to her. Leaning close, speaking in a voice only Summer could hear, Mina said, "He's not your child."

With those heartless words, bitterness seethed through Summer at what this woman and Anthony had done to her. Keeping it from her voice, she spoke in an equally low tone, making her words submissive. "He loves you. I'm no threat. Just let

me have a few minutes with him. Please. I won't say anything. You know what Anthony would do to me if I did."

Mina stepped back.

Nicky looked from her to Summer, his brows drawn together. "What are you whispering about? I wanna go see the movie!"

"Hush," Mina told him, then spoke to the men. "Go with them. Wait outside the theater. I'll be in Bloomies." She shot a last warning look at Summer, then headed toward the store.

Summer, Nicky and the men went toward the escalators.

RJ and Blake watched from the entrance to a shop selling leather coats and accessories. When RJ was certain Valenz and Dobbins wouldn't see him or his cousin, they followed. In the other direction, Cheryl was tailing Mina.

RJ smiled. Summer had done it. She'd gotten out of the compound and had separated Nicky from Mina. Now all he and Blake had to do was take care of Valenz and Dobbins.

Through the mall and up the escalators he and his cousin tailed the group. Summer's head swung right and left, no doubt searching for them.

Don't, RJ's thoughts warned. Just keep moving.

Thankfully, Nicky captured her attention. Head bent to him, she smiled and said something. He jumped off the escalator, pulling her toward the theater's entrance.

RJ grabbed Blake's arm, directing him to the side as they left the escalator, watching Valenz hand Summer the money needed for admission and refreshments. The man said something to her. She nodded and led Nicky into the theater.

Blake made the call he and RJ had agreed on earlier.

Minutes passed. The crowd thinned out. Valenz glanced at his watch. Clearly bored, Dobbins looked around, apparently searching for the most comfortable place to wait for the movie to end. His eyes moved past Blake to RJ. Recognition, followed by shock, flickered in his eyes.

Quickly, RJ and Blake approached. From behind Dobbins and Valenz, mall security came forward, along with two of San Francisco's finest. They'd been waiting downstairs until Blake called to tell them where to find Anthony's men, so they could arrest the two on their outstanding warrants.

Mina held a lacy red thong up to the light, examining the garment's craftsmanship. To her side, she saw someone drawing near. Another salesgirl? She bit back an irritated sigh. Why couldn't the store's staff leave her in peace? She didn't want them bombarding her with information about today's sales.

"Ms. Karam?" the woman said.

Mina's thoughts paused at hearing her name—or rather Anthony's—since she'd taken and used it whenever she could. Was this a salesgirl who'd waited on her before and recalled how much she'd spent? Had to be. She flicked her hand in a gesture of dismissal. "Thank you, but I'm just looking."

The woman didn't leave.

Sighing, Mina glanced over, noting the woman's ugly red hair, freckled face and clothing that said she was a customer, not a salesgirl. A warning rang in the back of Mina's mind. How did this person know her name?

"You brought Nicky Karam here today?" the woman asked.

Mina's heart jumped to her throat. The thong fell from her hand. "What happened?" She frowned. "How do you know about my little boy?"

"He's not your boy," the woman said in a lowered voice. "He's Lori Clayton and Anthony Karam's. DNA will prove it."

Panic prickled Mina's skin. She stepped back, bumping into a rack.

The woman followed, crowding her, not allowing any escape.

"Who are you?" Mina whispered.

"Cheryl Rafferty. I'm a special agent with ICE, Immigration and Customs Enforcement." She pulled out her badge and a set of handcuffs, showing both. "If you don't want to be hauled out of here in these, be a good girl, keep your fucking mouth shut and come with me."

Mina's gaze shot to the woman's hand on her arm. "Don't touch me."

Cheryl's grip tightened.

Mina snapped, "I want an attorney."

"Of course you do," Cheryl said.

After numerous advertisements for fast food and toys, the film finally started. Eyes riveted on the screen, Nicky stuffed himself with buttered popcorn and chocolate candy, washing it down with a sip of his Coke.

Summer watched her son, keeping herself from smoothing back his hair, straightening his sweater, not wanting to distract him from the film. She wondered where RJ was now. Had he seen Dobbins and Valenz waiting outside? Had he confronted them? Did the men pull their guns?

Nicky laughed suddenly, along with scores of other children in the audience.

She glanced at the screen, not really seeing it, then looked to the left at someone moving down their aisle. Fear snatched her breath, followed by a rolling wave of relief.

RJ met her gaze and winked. Mouth trembling, she managed a smile. Once he was in the seat next to hers, RJ leaned over and whispered in her ear, "It's over. We have Mina and Anthony's men in custody."

Summer gripped his arm, unable to fully believe it. At any second, she dreaded more of Anthony's men arriving and racing down the aisles, taking her and Nicky back to the compound. "What now?"

He kissed her ear and answered, "Mina's asked for an attorney and has already made her one call." RJ paused, then continued, "Anthony will surely hear about it in a very short time."

* * * * *

Relaxed in his office chair, Anthony reviewed the spreadsheets that recorded his expenditures on the newest girls he'd purchased. Last year had been good for his operations. This year would be great. Smiling, he keyed in data and brought up his reports, studying them.

"Mr. Karam."

Jacobski. Anthony didn't bother to hide his irritation at the man's interruption. "What is it?"

"Your attorney's on the line."

Frowning, Anthony looked up, then stared at the dread on Jacobski's face, his pasty skin. "What happened?"

"Mina's in custody."

With mounting shock and rage, Anthony listened to Jacobski relating what had happened at the mall. How RJ and Summer had conned him. How she had *lied* to him, giving him up to the authorities.

How she'd finally freed herself and their son.

Epilogue

Concord, California – Three years later

Shrill childish laughter pealed across the fenced backyard of the modest tract house. One of hundreds located in a residential area approximately thirty miles outside of San Francisco and a world away.

Palm on the sliding glass door, Summer watched Nicky and his new friend, Jacob, tear from one end of the lawn to the other, competing in a race with rules only they knew.

With a gentle smile, she studied her son. *Her son*. No doubt about it now. Child protective services had put her through countless interviews for nearly two years and a battery of psychological tests to determine her competency.

At times, she hadn't believed she'd make it. How difficult it had been to be free, something she'd craved and prayed for through her eleven-year ordeal. Something she'd had to relearn.

Ordering a meal at a restaurant, knowing when to go to bed, deciding what to wear, learning how to feel again and to express her own wants and needs had been nearly impossible in the early days and at times daunted her even now.

She'd found direction and solace with Diane Evers, her therapist, a gentle older woman who reminded Summer of what her mom would have been like if she'd lived. More times than she could count, Summer had sobbed in Diane's arms during their sessions, and then she'd grown angry for all she'd lost.

Not once did Diane pass judgment. She became a friend and continued to help Summer find her way. She'd been instrumental in convincing the State to finally relinquish custody of Nicky.

Being a mother to her son was the greatest hurdle Summer had ever faced, but willingly endured, along with Nicky's initial reaction to her. Confused and angry at being taken from Mina, he had regarded Summer warily each time she visited him at his foster family. For too long, he'd been either uncommunicative or defiant, testing her to see if she'd disappear as Mina had or if she'd hurt him.

With great patience, she fought for her son's heart. As soon as his therapist agreed, Summer told Nicky she was his biological mother, and that she hadn't wanted to give him up, but circumstances hadn't allowed her to keep him. Warned by his therapist to tell him no more than that, she hadn't. There would be a day when he'd learn about her abduction and her confinement. Though not now. She wanted to give him all the time he needed to adjust, to just be a kid and enjoy life.

"No, I won!" Nicky shouted suddenly, then laughed as he and Jacob wrestled and rolled across the grass.

A grin broke across Summer's face as she watched the two boys. Nicky was growing so tall he amazed her. With each passing year, she saw more of her features in his. No longer did he only resemble his father.

Her smile froze and her fingers curled on the glass, making a fist, an instinctive reaction every time she thought of Anthony and what he'd done. His cons. His lies. His cowardice.

The moment he found out what had happened at the mall, he'd abandoned Mina to whatever the authorities had planned for her, betraying her before she betrayed him. By the time police showed up at the compound, he'd disappeared along with most of his liquid assets, having planned for an eventual escape. For over a year, the authorities had searched for Anthony.

Interpol and the feds located him in Brazil, where he'd started a new operation. Extradition to this country followed. He now awaited trial in a federal prison where he was told when to get up, when to sleep, what to eat, how to behave.

A small measure of the captivity he'd forced on her.

The prosecutors told Summer she might receive millions from Anthony's operations to make up for the eleven years she'd lost. With more ease than most would have considered possible, she declined the money she and too many other innocent girls had made. Summer wanted no profit from her days of sexual slavery. She needed to move forward with her life and to help the other girls do so with theirs.

RJ agreed. He'd worked hard to reunite the girls with their families and to hunt down Anthony's lieutenants who'd abused them.

Her head turned at the sound of the front door opening, RJ's return from work or his cousin's house. Blake and his girlfriend lived two neighborhoods away. Cheryl and her new boyfriend also shared a home in the area. They surrounded Summer and RJ, delivering safety, peace and the family she and Nicky needed.

RJ strode into the family room dressed in his bounty hunter best—faded jeans, a black tee and biker boots—so handsome he stole Summer's breath.

Grinning widely, he glanced at the boys outside. "They break any bones yet?"

"They're working on it." She held out her arms, melting into his embrace, inhaling deeply of his scent.

RJ buried his face in her hair, shoulder-length now and back to her natural strawberry blonde color. No longer did she hide it or her birthmark, though it was the only part of her distant past that she'd returned to. She and RJ called each other by the names they'd grown to know each other as. Somehow it seemed more fitting than Tav or Lori. They weren't those people any more...hadn't been for years.

She squeezed him as tightly as she could. In return, he held her against his big body carefully...too carefully.

On her tiptoes, she whispered in his ear, "I'm not going to break."

His sheepish chuckle rumbled through his chest. "Indulge me. I don't want to hurt our baby."

Our baby. How sweet that sounded and scary too. But she had him to help her, to comfort and protect. On those nights when she still awakened in a panic, he held her as she cried, comforting her back to sleep. RJ would never let anything happen to her again or their children.

"I'm not even showing yet," she said, then licked his earlobe and spoke over his pleased moan. "What are you going to do when I'm as big as a whale?"

"Hug you from across the room?"

Laughing softly, she slapped his shoulder.

"Hey!" Nicky shouted, pulling on the door's handle.

"Uh-oh," RJ said, "they've seen us. Now we're in for it."

Summer eased away from him and turned to her son and his friend. The boys' faces were flushed from their games, their clothes rumpled, their hands filthy. Just like hundreds of other nearly nine-year-olds in the area. Normal kids with normal lives. Satisfaction bubbled up in her.

"Can we go to Chuck E. Cheese's?" Nicky asked, his gaze darting from RJ to Summer and back.

RJ scratched his neck. "That place that has the meatloaf you don't like?"

Nicky's eyes widened as though RJ had lost his mind. "No. Chuck E. Cheese's. They got pizza."

"And games," Jacob piped up.

RJ gave Summer a look of confusion, then shook his head at Nicky. "I think you have it wrong, bud. That's the place with the meatloaf."

"And broccoli," Summer added.

Jacob's eyes bugged out. "You guys don't know nothing."

"Yeah, they do," Nicky said, frowning at his friend, then turning back to Summer and RJ. "You guys are kidding me again, right?" He crossed his thin arms over his narrow chest. "You do it all the time."

Suppressing a smile, Summer spoke to RJ. "Looks like we're busted."

"So can we go?" Nicky whined. "Please, Mom? Dad?"

Summer exchanged a glance with RJ, seeing his love for her son...their son. The adoption was almost final. Not once had Anthony asked about Nicky or challenged RJ for the child.

If he had, Summer knew RJ would have fought hard and long until he'd won.

From the beginning, Nicky had captured RJ's heart, and once Nicky knew RJ wouldn't harm him in anyway, the boy had opened up to him faster than he had to her.

To Nicky, RJ was better than any superhero in a movie or in the comics. RJ was the father he'd never had, a good man who listened to his childish prattle, who didn't fly into rages, who treated him with respect and a sense of fun, taking him camping, fishing and to every sports game imaginable. For over a year, they'd been inseparable. Calling him Dad had come so easily to Nicky.

"If it's okay with your mom," RJ said.

He looked at her expectantly.

"If it's okay with your dad," she teased.

"Mom," he whined, his shoulders slumping.

"Okay, okay, we'll go to Chuck E. Cheese's," she said, "as soon as you guys wash your hands and your faces."

Whooping and laughing, the boys ran down the hall to the bathroom.

"You're a good mom," RJ said, fingering the wedding band he'd put on her finger the year before, when she felt confident enough to be his wife and the woman they both deserved. "You know how much I love to go to that place."

Laughing, she brought his hand to her lips, kissing his wedding band.

Down the hall, the children chattered, excited about their night.

In RJ's arms, Summer continued to heal, growing stronger with each passing day. Finally expecting and enjoying the little things—driving a car, grocery shopping, spending an evening with her husband and their son.

Experiencing the wonder of freedom. Respect. Safety.

Love.

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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