

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



*Taming
Tara*
KELLY JAMIESON

Taming Tara

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Tara has needed to be tough and in control to prove to her grandfather, and the rest of the world, that she can run the family business. But when Grandpa hires Joe to help manage the business, her control is threatened.

Joe is desperate to make a success of this job after his career tanked in a disastrous scandal. When he runs into Tara at a club, her Dominatrix act doesn't fool him—he can see the submissive inside her. He knows if he can show her that side of herself, it will make his new job a helluva lot easier. But teaching Tara to see inside herself becomes more than just a business strategy—it becomes personal.

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Taming Tara

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Chapter One

Tara slid the wrist loop of the flogger over her hand and rolled the top ball of the handle in her palm, fingers loose. Biting her lip, she swung the tails in a smooth figure eight, alternating dragging them over the skin of Adam's bare buttocks, changing to a circle, then snapping her wrist and giving him a stinging slap. This was a little different than practicing on a pillow. Restrained, helpless—he was at her mercy. Her teeth sank deeper into her bottom lip. Was she doing it right?

She'd been practicing. She flicked her wrist carefully, giving just the right amount of force to the stroke.

He cried out.

She did it again. And again.

The glass block wall behind the two men glimmered with reflected light from the candles arranged in a row on the floor. Dim lighting and black carpet kept the mood in the small play room dark, mysterious, edgy...

She turned to the man beside Adam on the spanking bench and laid another fall across bare flesh. She watched the warm flush creeping from rounded buttocks down to his thighs. Yes. His thighs. She flicked the flogger tails there too. She had to remember to vary the places she struck. Too many in one place could be bad.

"Oh please," he begged. "I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what?" she demanded. Her hand started to heat from holding the flogger. She'd have a blister there tomorrow to remind her of her first night at Le Château. Her shoulders ached too. She rolled them, trying to not miss a beat with the flogger, then widened her stance in the above-the-knee leather boots she wore. She felt powerful. In control.

Scared.

The power she held in her hands at that moment—to inflict pain, to control, to dominate—had fear sizzling through her blood, knotting her stomach.

That wasn't right. She wasn't supposed to be afraid. She was supposed to love it. She wanted to be in control.

But as she swung the flogger again, she knew she held back.

* * * * *

The next morning, Tara sat in her grandfather's office, staring at him across his desk. She rubbed her forehead, trying to push away the tightness between her brows

with her fingertips. Her shoulders ached and she hadn't slept well last night and now...
"You did what?"

"I hired another manager."

She stared at him, still unsure if she'd heard correctly. "Why? Who? Why would you do something like that?"

He gave a long-suffering sigh. "You can't run this company by yourself."

Outrage rose up inside her, fierce and hot. "Grandpa! I am perfectly capable of running this business."

He frowned at her. Tension hummed around them. They'd had this conversation so many times. He didn't think a woman could run the family business, which was probably why he was still so involved, reluctant to step aside and let her take over. She was doing a good job; if only he could see that, dammit. Instead he just kept interfering in her decisions and refusing to acknowledge she really did know what she was doing. And now — *now* he'd hired an outsider, a total stranger, to do her job, to make decisions she should be making. Perspiration dampened her silk blouse and that unpleasant burning feeling in her stomach returned. "Who is this guy?"

"The grandson of an old friend of mine. He happens to be looking for a job right now."

"What does he know about the olive business?"

"He has an MBA in operations and supply-chain management."

She pressed her lips together. "Which means he knows nothing." An MBA. Huh. A fancy degree meant zilch to her. "Where did he work before?"

"His last job was with a pharmaceutical manufacturer in San Francisco. I'm sure he'll be able to learn everything he needs to know quickly. Apparently he was quite a star. He's a smart boy."

"Boy? A *boy*? How old is he?"

"Thirty." Grandpa eyed her. "Two years older than you."

So she couldn't play the age card. Fine. Her heart sledgehammered under her ribs and blood pulsed hotly in her veins. Her hands gripped the arms of the chair in which she sat, the blister on her right hand stinging. She ignored it.

She studied her grandfather, sitting behind the big mahogany desk in his office. The afternoon sun shining through the window behind him lit up his white hair, a contrast to skin browned from the sun. Sharp, sparkling topaz eyes, just like hers, regarded her from beneath thick white brows. She leaned forward.

"You don't need to hire someone else! I can do it, Grandpa, you know I can."

So she didn't have a hot-shot business degree. An MBA in operations and supply-chain management. Pffft. What she did have was a love for the business in her blood and a vision not just for their company but for the entire industry.

But everything she tried to do, Grandpa disagreed with. The job she loved with all her heart had become complicated and exasperating. She'd grown tired of trying to do

end runs around him, only to have him discover what she was up to and then give her hell. The constant battles and efforts to stay strong and in control were exhausting her.

She'd always known she would work for Santa Ynez Olives, but after her parents' deaths she'd also known she would be the one to manage it. Grandpa wasn't going to live forever. But although he'd let her work there, and although she'd pushed, shoved and elbowed her way into management, he'd never supported her taking over entirely.

"We need his business expertise," Grandpa said.

The insult was like a slap in the face and she almost flinched. Once again, he was telling her how little he thought of her professional abilities. Tears stung her eyes and she blinked rapidly, determined not to show how hurt and afraid she was. She had to be tough and strong to show him she could do it. Any sign of feminine weakness would just prove him right, in his mind.

But she also knew there was no point in arguing. When Grandpa made up his mind about something, it was a done deal. She'd spent half her life arguing with him over everything from how she should dress and what boyfriends she should date to this important decision.

She stood and smoothed down the skirt of her suit with trembling hands. "When does he start?"

"He's coming in this afternoon, but he'll start officially Monday."

She stiffened. Monday!

"I expect you to show him around, bring him up to speed on what he needs to know about the business."

"I will not!"

"Tara."

She fought to stop herself from yelling. "I don't have time for that," she said, lifting her chin. "I'm busy. Busy running this company. If you want him here, you bring him up to speed."

He narrowed his eyes as he looked at her and shook his head slowly from side to side. She tightened her trembling lips, heart thudding in her chest. She always succeeded in pissing him off. Shit. She had no choice in this if she wanted to stay involved. And anyway, it was probably better if she had control over what information this guy got about Santa Ynez Olives.

"Fine," she said through a tight jaw. "I'll do it."

"I expect the two of you to work together. I'll bring him down to your office when he gets here."

Teeth clenched, eyes burning, she nodded tightly, then turned on one sensible heel and walked out of his office, resisting the urge to slam the door behind her.

She stalked back to her own office down the hall and this time let the door fly with more force than was necessary. She sank into her leather chair behind her own desk,

light maple and much more modern than her grandfather's, her mind whirling like a dust devil.

What the hell was she going to do? She blinked at the prickle in her eyes, angry at herself for the weakness of tears.

"Smarten up," she muttered to herself. "You need to think."

She slumped in her chair, her head falling back, eyes closed. Her heart was still thumping crazily, her stomach tight. This was so bad. Everything she'd worked so hard for over the last seven years—longer than that, really, even before she'd come to work there full-time—was all for nothing. When her parents had died, her world had been ripped apart, the one constant Santa Ynez Olives and the knowledge that her parents were going to run the company one day. And with them gone, she had to do it.

She sat up straight, eyes flying open, and slammed her palms flat on her desk. Damn him. Damn him. Whoever this Mr. Hot Shot MBA was, he wouldn't have a clue. Nobody—well, nobody other than Grandpa—knew this business like she did. This was more than a business. This was her life.

She stood and strode over to the credenza, poured a cup of coffee from the thermos sitting there and inhaled the scent of Karma Coffee. The steam and rich, dark aroma soothed her, although she probably didn't need any more caffeine. Her nerves were pretty much shredded already.

The way the knock on her door jolted her was proof of that, and her mouth went dry. She set down the cup and smoothed damp palms down her skirt, looking down at the bland black suit she wore. She wasn't a professional shopper like her sister Sasha. Santa Barbara was a casual city, and since the business was a family-run, earthy kind of business, there was no need to dress up. Grandpa, although he'd become a businessman, was an olive farmer at heart and was more likely to be wearing worn corduroy pants and a plaid shirt than a suit and tie.

She turned as her grandfather entered her office followed by another man whose commanding presence drew her eyes immediately. Grandpa had probably been over six feet tall in his youth, maybe now an inch or two less, but the man behind him was a good four inches taller than him. Maybe Grandpa's slightly stooped shoulders and thinning white hair made the other man appear all virile, dominant male. Or maybe he just...was. An expensive-looking suit fit his wide shoulders to perfection, with a snowy white shirt and silky striped tie beneath the jacket.

Tara cast one last glum look down at her frumpy suit and strode across the carpeted floor, hand outstretched, hoping she appeared confident and in control on the outside because inside she was shivering like a kid at the beach in December.

"Tara, this is Joe Scaletta. Joe, my granddaughter, Tara Lockhart."

Joe Scaletta took her hand in a firm grip, a very firm grip, and shook it.

She looked up at him. She too was tall, five seven, with her heels maybe five nine, putting her on an even level with Grandpa and most other men, but Joe was taller. His almost-black hair fell over a deeply tanned forehead. Long thick lashes and nicely

straight eyebrows framed coffee-dark eyes. When his full, chiseled lips smiled, two grooves appeared in each cheek. Masculine, annoyingly *appealing* dimples.

"Pleased to meet you," he said in a deep, rich voice. Confidence and strength radiated off him like heat and she felt pinned in place by the intensity of his gaze, the aura of power he gave off and the hint of arrogance. She held his gaze, but then couldn't do it, dropping her eyes to where their hands were clasped, only for the space of one, maybe two heartbeats, before looking back up at him. His eyes narrowed minutely and her insides trembled.

"Um..." Heat washed over her. Then she remembered who this guy was and she firmed her mouth. "Likewise. Come in. Please, have a seat."

Grandpa had drilled good manners into them at an early age, with all the parties he'd hosted over the years at his home and at the country club and all the charity events and social functions they'd been forced to attend. So she could be as polite as a Santa Barbara society hostess. A chilly society hostess.

Grandpa and Joe each took a chair. "Can I offer you a cup of coffee?" she inquired.

"I'd love some," Joe said. "It smells incredible."

"It's Guatemalan." She moved to the credenza. God. Why had she said such an inane thing? Like he'd care. "What do you take in your coffee?"

"Just black."

She nodded in reluctant approval.

"None for me, thanks," her grandfather said. "That coffee you drink could strip paint."

She smiled stiffly at Joe. "Grandpa doesn't share my taste in coffee. I hope it's okay for you."

"I love good coffee," he replied easily, flashing those dimples. He lifted his cup. "And this is really good."

He was sucking up. Mr. Hot-shot-MBA-suck-up. Go for it, buddy. See if it helped.

* * * * *

"Tara will tell you a bit about the company today," Tyrone said. "Monday she'll show you the store and the ranch."

"I'm too busy to go to the ranch on Monday," Tara snapped.

Joe sat back in his chair. Her icy eyes were shooting arrows at him and her voice could have frozen the cup of coffee he held. He'd become so attuned to people's responses, so used to looking for it, he knew what he'd seen earlier when she greeted him, but now... Interesting.

"Move things around." Tyrone's voice hardened. "I expect you to bring Joe up to speed with everything he needs to know."

She snorted. "In one day?"

Tyrone sighed. "Of course not." He shot Tara a warning glare.

She pressed her lips together, then lifted her coffee mug to her mouth.

Joe's gaze moved back and forth between Tyrone and his granddaughter as he worked to keep his face neutral in the face of their obvious discord. A rock materialized in his gut. What had he walked into here?

He sipped his coffee and studied the granddaughter.

Thick honey-colored hair hung in shiny waves to her shoulders and long bangs skimmed eyes amazingly like Tyrone's—amber-gold, like a cat's, now snapping with intelligence, annoyance and defiance. Her nose was small and straight above a mouth that he could picture softening...Whoa. He mentally gave his head a shake. *Don't go there, buddy.* This was business, just business, and although he'd glimpsed something in her that struck a chord, she was not even close to his type.

Jesus, get a grip, man. Since he was lucky to have this job, he'd better keep his mind firmly on business. He focused on what she was saying.

"I have three meetings Monday morning," she said in a crisp, business-like tone. "First with the manager of our retail store, then with two web page designers, one at ten o'clock, one at eleven. I sent out an RFP for updating our website and I've been meeting with some of the top contenders."

He nodded.

"I'll see if I can move my afternoon meetings so we can drive out to the ranch." She flashed a searing look at Tyrone.

"Sounds good." Joe smiled at her grudging offer. She didn't smile back. Great. Just great. The tension in the office was as thick as San Francisco fog and there was nothing good about that.

Tyrone rose to his feet. "I'll leave you two to get on with it." His amber eyes were sharp as they slid to look at Joe. "Come see me Monday, when you get back from the ranch."

"Sure."

Tyrone walked out, leaving them alone in the office. Joe shifted his gaze back to the woman across the desk from him.

God. That mouth. It conjured up images of—Jesus, he couldn't seem to stop himself from thinking about her in ways that were completely inappropriate, like her on her knees, his cock sliding between those lush lips. Right now, though, her arms were folded across her buttoned-up chest and her glossy, full lips were pressed together in a way that suggested a hot temper. A temper that belied the intriguing flicker he'd seen in her eyes when they'd shaken hands.

"So," she said in a tone that could freeze alcohol. "What is your background? What do you know about food manufacturing, wholesale and retail sales, marketing, ranching...?" Slender golden brows arched above cool eyes.

He gave her his most charming smile, the one that always worked.

Tara stared coldly back at him, waiting for his response. Christ, for someone who looked so sultry, she was as cold as the Pacific Ocean in winter. She needed to be warmed up. She need to be turned over his lap and spanked. That would warm her up. His palm tingled at the thought.

"I have a degree in operations and supply-chain management from Golden Gate University," he said, focusing. He worked to keep his face carefully neutral as he prepared to talk about his former employer. "For the last five years I was with a pharmaceutical manufacturing company in San Francisco. The last year I was there, I worked in finance. Before that I was senior manager of quality and standards."

They'd been doing cross-training to groom him for a more senior management position, but he wasn't going to say that. That would just lead to questions about why he no longer worked there, which he wanted to avoid as much as he wanted to avoid an STD. "I also have some experience with sales and marketing and with business process reengineering. I have to admit, however, I know nothing about olive ranching."

She nodded, her mouth in a tight twist. "I figured that."

Anger began a slow simmer. His attempts to be warm and charming kept slamming into her wall of ice. Once again the urge to pick her up and turn her over his lap reared up inside him. His next words came out in a sharper-edged tone. "I'm sure the olive business is extremely complicated and highly technical. And what is *your* business background, Tara?"

Her eyes narrowed, mouth firmed. "My background is this business," she stated. "And that's all I need. Do you know anything about olives?"

"Well, I've never been involved in the olive business, but my family owns several Italian restaurants in San Francisco. Olive oil is a big part of our culture. And olives."

She rolled her eyes and his annoyance rose. Christ, what a witch. A hot, sexy witch, but still...an intense urge to tame her spiked inside him.

"Domestic olives have traditionally been inferior to imported olives," he said tersely, as if reciting something he'd memorized. Which he had. "Only recently has domestic olive oil been able to compete with imported—Italian, French, Spanish, Greek—although the olive business in California has been changing over the last few years."

Her eyes widened. "You've done some research."

"I'd be a fool to take a job like this without knowing anything about the company."

"So you know some of our history?"

"What's on your website."

She rolled her eyes again. "Our website is crap," she muttered.

A grin broke through his annoyance. Their eyes met and her lips actually quirked.

"You should do something about that," he said, hoping she would know he was teasing.

"Ya think?" She appeared to soften microscopically. She sighed again. "That's what my meetings Monday are about. Not just designing the website—my goal is to expand our retail business to the web. Not only the store," she jerked her head, indicating the retail enterprise below them, "but e-commerce that could service the entire country."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Makes sense."

"Of course it makes sense!" Passion warmed her voice, sparking interest inside him. "We have so many tourists here in Santa Barbara. You wouldn't believe the people who call us or contact us through the website, wanting to order olives, oil, specialty products..."

"So what's the problem with that? You sound like you expect me to argue with you."

Her mouth pinched together again. In that brief moment of passion, she'd been gorgeous—eyes glowing, mouth soft. "My grandfather doesn't agree with that plan. He's quite suspicious of the internet."

Joe laughed. "Really? It's been around awhile now. Even my grandmother has e-mail."

Her lips twisted a bit. "I know. I don't know why he's like that." She shook her head. "But I'm going forward with it anyway."

"Whose final decision is it? Tyrone gave me to understand he's pretty involved in all decision-making around here."

Tara sighed again and he felt a tug of sympathy at the frustration in her face. "Yes. He still has final authority on most things. But sometimes I just go around him. Like, he thinks I'm just updating the website right now. He doesn't know I'm actually going to start selling product online."

As soon as she'd said the words, he saw she regretted letting that little piece of info slip to him.

Christ. He ran a hand through his hair. What was he supposed to do with stuff like that? Run to Tyrone? Or go along with her and risk his job if Tyrone found out? His gut sank like a stone in water.

Tara eyed him warily. The silence grew, thick and sticky.

"Don't worry, I won't say anything to him," Joe finally said, not sure if he was totally fucking up or making a smart move here. He could have added the words, "for now", but that sounded too much like holding something over her head, and right now he just wanted to establish some kind of working relationship with her.

She shrugged, although concern still tightened the corners of her eyes. "He keeps catching me up and then he gets so pissed off at me."

He was getting a sense of what was going on at the Santa Ynez Olive Company. Two very strong personalities going head to head. Fuck. Joe had always liked a challenge, but how much was he going to be caught in the middle of these two? That old "rock and a hard place" thing was becoming an uncomfortable reality for him.

"Tell me about the company," he said, reclining in his chair and hoping a change of topic would soften her up.

"Well." Tara rested her elbows on her desk and leaned forward. "My great-great-grandfather founded the company in 1855. He started off growing olives on a small ranch near Santa Ynez. We've grown quite a bit since then."

"You certainly have."

"Most of the olives were grown for canning." She made a face. "Canned black olives."

"You don't look too impressed."

"After I graduated from high school, I spent a year in Europe. I wanted to learn the olive business from a European perspective. They've been doing it a lot longer than we have. The culture of olives is completely different there."

A year in Europe. Wow. "Where did you go?"

"France and Italy. I made quick trips to Spain and Greece, but most of the time—Provence. Tuscany." She sighed and her eyes grew a little dreamy. He sat there, fascinated by her wistful expression. "It's amazing. I learned so much there. I learned what I want this business to be."

"What do you want the business to be?" He had to ask, couldn't resist knowing what was behind the passion.

Her topaz eyes sparkled. "In Europe, olive oil is like wine. Olives are more than just a crop, they're revered. People live off them. Here, they're just a crop. Well, until recently, anyway. That's what I'm fighting against. My grandfather grew the business on canned black olives and to him it's a crop, nothing more."

She paused, pursed her lips. Her luscious, lickable lips. "Don't get me wrong, he's very knowledgeable about olive cultivation. Without him, we'd be nothing. But I think Americans need to be educated about olive oil, about the different tastes, different types of oils. And now that people are starting to recognize the health benefits of olive oil and the Mediterranean diet, it's really starting to take off."

Her eyes met his, a flame glowing in their amber depths. "I want to grow the best olives," she said. "I want to grow the best varieties we can grow here in California. I don't want to just imitate Italy or France, I want to produce a world-class California olive oil."

"You've already won awards for your oil."

"Yes." Her eyes sparkled. "Last year at the Los Angeles County Fair Olive Oils of the World Competition we won a gold medal with our Santa Ynez Estate oil and a silver for our Mission Lemon oil. After a lot of work on my part. Grandpa thought I was crazy, trying new varieties, new ways of pressing the oil. But it paid off."

"I understand that's a pretty prestigious competition."

She nodded. "And our sights are set higher this year." Pride heated her voice, and damn it if it didn't turn him on. They were talking about *olives*, for chrissake, and he was getting a freakin' hard-on here. Jesus.

Her cheeks flushed and she leaned forward. "I want to do more. I want to produce olives for eating that are more than just tasteless canned black olives. In Europe, they match olives with herbs like rosemary and thyme, and lemons. We've started doing that too, and some of our things are selling fantastically. We've partnered with a family down south who produces lemons to make our lemon olive oil.

"Twenty, thirty years ago, around the time I was born, my parents both worked here," she continued, her voice steady. "My grandfather, as you probably know, is my dad's dad. My father was supposed to take over the business."

He knew her parents were both dead. Thought about making some kind of sympathetic remark. But Tara kept going.

"He had a vision too, but back then nobody was interested in olive oil. A few Italian restaurants, sure, but that was about it. Now it's taken off so much. But it's a tough business." She grimaced. "A bad year can ruin a whole crop and sink you. Also the food service industry is tough. Supermarket distribution is brutal. Price matters more than taste. On the other hand, we supply to some really good quality restaurants. People come to our retail store—foodies who love good food—but we need to expand our sales. And our products. The world has changed."

Talking about her work transformed her. The icy witch with sparks of temper in her eyes metamorphosed into a glowing, passionate woman. Her fire and zest were contagious. He felt it and, Christ, it felt good.

He'd come there for one reason only—he needed a job. He didn't care what it was, as long as they paid him. Olive manufacturing had sounded lame to him, so he had no intention of getting all invested in the business. This was just a short-term strategy for him.

But for a guy whose emotions had been kicked around and stomped on for the last year, it actually felt great to be excited about something.

"Only a few producers bottle the olive oil they grow themselves," she told him. "We're one of them. We mill and bottle only our own olives."

"How do you plan to expand?" His interest sparked higher. "Just through the internet?" That didn't seem likely to give the kind of growth she wanted.

She shook her head vigorously. "No. I want to expand production. We have ten thousand olive trees right now, but I think we can increase production using some new methods. High density planting and mechanical harvesting. I think that's going to be the key to our expansion. And if we can sell on the internet and do some work with the supermarket distributors...God! We can do incredible things."

Her love for the business was obvious. Her knowledge impressed him, not just of her own company but of the entire industry. But a little voice of caution in the back of his head raised all kinds of questions.

This wasn't the time. Later he'd get answers to his questions. Right now, everything she was telling him fascinated him, and the potential for the business seemed huge. What little he knew about the olive and food business was enough to tell him her instincts were good, her vision inspiring.

She looked at her watch. "Well. You probably want to get going. Grandpa said you're from San Francisco. Do you have a place to stay here?"

"Yeah, with an old college buddy."

"That's good."

Joe nodded. "It's been great catching up with him. He's letting me stay with him until I find a place of my own."

"You'll want to wait until you decide if you're going to stay here in Santa Barbara before you find a place of your own."

He met her gaze steadily. "Why wouldn't I want to stay here?"

She held his gaze equally resolutely—for about two seconds. And then her eyes dropped. A rush of pleasure heated his blood. "This is a new business for you. You may decide you don't like it. You may find it's not a good fit."

He narrowed his eyes. "You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

She lifted a brow.

Her challenge hit him like a punch to his gut. He liked a challenge. Business challenges. Strength challenges. Domination and submission challenges.

"Let's just put our cards on the table," he said, leaning forward. "You don't want me here, do you?"

Their eyes met levelly, head on.

"No," she said. "I don't want you here."

Chapter Two

Her eyes were frosty despite that warm whiskey color. Once again her hostility was palpable. This was one pissed off lady.

"I don't agree with Grandpa's decision to hire you," she said through clenched teeth. "We do not need another manager here."

Joe nodded. Yeah, he got the message. This was getting more and more complicated. He bit back a sigh. What the hell had he gotten himself into?

She actually could be right about one thing. If he had to go to Tyrone Lockhart about every little decision, he was outta there. No way was he interested in a job where he had no real authority.

Aw, who was he kidding? He was desperate for this job. Any job. If he had no authority, he'd just have to find a way to make things work. He had no fucking choice. At least for a while. He had no intention of staying in Santa Barbara forever, but right now he needed to make some money, needed to restore his credibility. As soon as things died down back in San Francisco, he'd go back and find another job there, where he belonged.

"Well, I'm here," he said as he stood. He gave her a grim smile, held her gaze without yielding. "Get used to it." And when once again he saw that glimmer of hesitation, that barest hint of surrender, satisfaction expanded inside him. She wasn't going to surrender easily or without a fight and he was suddenly looking forward to the battle.

* * * * *

Tara checked her watch. The play party at Le Château started at ten o'clock. Earlier, she hadn't decided whether she was going to go, but now...she needed to be distracted from the frustration of dealing with both Joe and her grandfather. She needed this outlet, this release.

Mostly she needed to forget the feelings that had built inside her when Joe had left her that afternoon, the hint of warning in his voice and the look of power in his hot eyes that made her shiver and go soft inside.

Because the feelings he evoked in her were just like when she had those shadowy dreams—strong hands, demanding kisses, a hard body pressing into her, wicked, forbidden images of power, pleasure and pain. She closed her eyes against the dark hunger rising inside her, the craving to be pushed, taken to the edge. The dreams had prompted her to seek out the club, to see if she could find the things she dreamed

about. A way she could be strong and dominant with men without being labeled a cold-hearted, ball-breaking bitch.

She changed into a shiny black latex halter dress that stopped at mid thigh and over-the knee black stiletto boots. The outfit felt a little...ridiculous. *So not her.* Hey, she was trying to explore a different side of herself. Maybe dressing the part would help. But she covered her clothes with a bland beige trench coat in case she ran into Grandpa or Sasha on her way out.

Le Château wasn't the kind of party place her sister frequented. In fact, if either Sasha or Grandpa knew Tara went there, they would die. Grandpa would literally have a heart attack. He was driving her crazy, but she didn't want that to actually happen. Although, even though she wasn't sure if Le Château was the kind of place for her, she had to admit that the idea of her grandfather finding out she was doing just one more thing to defy him added a slight edge of excitement to the whole deal.

She brought her new toy along with her and her tummy jumped at the thought of using it. Hopefully there would be some nice submissive men at the club tonight who'd want to feel a little pain.

Le Château sat on the outskirts of town, a former residence that had now been converted into a club. The mansion did resemble a castle with a round turret on one corner and still looked just like a private residence with no signs or anything to indicate it was otherwise. She parked in the lot behind the house and entered through the rear door, showing her membership card.

Inside, the heart-quickenning beat of Orbital vibrated through her body. She wasn't yet a regular there – this was only her third time, in fact.

She knew her desires were different. She knew she needed more than she was getting from the few relationships she'd had. Like Hugh. Dating hadn't worked out so well, but she wasn't prepared to be celibate either. Sex was important. Necessary. But sometimes not all that satisfying. So she'd hoped by joining Le Château and trying some different things, she might find what she was looking for, might find what she needed – even though she wasn't entirely sure what that was.

She wandered across the red- and gold-lit room to the bar and requested a drink – green tea and apple juice. No alcohol here at Le Château. She surveyed the play stations, almost all of them in use already, other club members sitting on couches grouped in corners. The dim red and gold lights created shadows and deep corners of intimacy. She caught the eye of an attractive man across the room – a familiar face. Adam. She pushed herself away from the bar and strolled over to where he reclined in a chair.

"Hi, Adam."

"Hi, Cara."

She didn't want to use her real name. Santa Barbara wasn't that big, and in the business world the last thing she needed was word of her new kinky pastimes getting out and damaging the company. She knew she was taking a risk by doing this, which

added somewhat to the thrill of it, but everyone else at the club was in the same position—using a fake name, keeping their real identity a secret. A lot of the men there had wives at home who had no idea what they were doing, and probably some of the women too. In fact, there were some extremely high-profile members of the business community who liked to frequent the club. Discretion was important and the club made privacy a priority. That's what she liked about it.

"You look like you're waiting for someone," she said.

"I am. Jason. And..." Adam studied her. "We both need to be punished."

She lifted a brow. "Really? And now what do you both need to be punished for?"

He paused, then said, "Last week I let him fuck me. Up the ass."

She shook her head. "Shame on you. Did you like it?"

"I did." He bowed his head

She held up her flogger, dragged the tails across her palm. "You're right. You do need to be punished." The two men seemed to be in denial over their mutual attraction to each other.

"In the red room. Eleven o'clock," she said. She fondled the handle of her flogger, the ball on the end smooth in her palm.

"We'll be there."

She returned to the bar and picked up her drink.

Two submissive men who needed to be punished. What more could she ask for?

Her stomach clenched a little at the thought. The idea of laying a flogging on the bare asses of two pretty boys was...well, she wasn't sure if she could exactly describe the emotion it aroused in her. Excitement certainly, but along with that came a little trepidation, a little uncertainty. Even a little envy that they were getting all the attention.

She lifted her drink to her mouth, her gaze drifting across the room, various groups and couples in an assortment of clothing—leather, PVC and some that were barely there, studded harnesses, chains and collars.

Her eyes stopped on a tall, broad figure, dark-haired, his back to her. He wore black leather pants that showed off an exceptional ass and a black vest, no shirt. There were times when the fetish wear of some men in the club just made her want to roll her eyes or laugh. It was hard for some guys to pull off wearing shiny PVC pants, shorts or harnesses. And the ones who showed up in police uniform costumes just made her want to giggle. But this guy looked at ease in his black leather and the shoulders and arms revealed by the vest were ripped—bulging biceps, satiny olive skin.

Then he turned and Tara choked on her green tea. Oh. Dear. God.

It was Joe Scaletta.

* * * * *

Jesus fucking Christ.

Joe stared across the main room at Le Château. That could not be Tara Lockhart leaning against the bar over there, so fucking hot in a shiny black dress that looked like it had been laminated to her curves and heels that could seriously injure a man. Her honey-blond hair had been scraped up into a tight, high ponytail. Her eyes were wide, her lips parted as she met his gaze.

Oh yeah, that was her.

Busted, sweetheart. Joe's pulse leaped and he couldn't restrain the smile curving his lips. Tara Lockhart, secret Dominatrix.

Huh? That wasn't the impression he'd gotten of her earlier. Sure, she was strong. Intelligent. Confident. Bossy. But that flicker he'd seen in her eyes, the way she'd hesitated when he'd greeted her, made him question her domination. Somehow it didn't ring true.

He crossed the room toward her as if drawn by a magnet. No way was he going to do her any favors by pretending not to recognize her or disappearing. He was going to have his fun with this and the anticipation of it sizzled through his veins.

Like arousal.

He stopped in front of her and stared down at her, not saying a word.

"Hi," she finally said weakly, her eyes dropping briefly.

"Well. Tara. Imagine my surprise seeing you here."

She swallowed but lifted her chin. "Likewise."

He looked her over, up, down, then raised his gaze back to her face. "Very nice."

She pressed her lips together. No thanks for the compliment. He wanted to laugh.

"I had no idea you were into the lifestyle."

"I'm not."

"Ah." He lifted a brow. "Just...exploring?"

"No. Well." She sucked her top lip in briefly. "I'm uh...checking this place out."

"Ah. Finding yourself."

"I'm not finding myself! I know exactly who I am." Irritation tightened her voice.

He nodded. "Of course."

"Don't patronize me! What the hell are you doing here? If my grandpa knew..."

He lifted a brow. "Does he know you're here?"

She blinked. "No."

"Then we're on even ground," he murmured.

She closed her eyes briefly. He could almost hear the curse words he was sure she wanted to spit out. "I guess we are," she finally said.

"So." He trailed a finger over her bare shoulder and down the satiny skin of her arm. "Top or bottom?"

She gritted her teeth. "Top."

"Of course."

"You?"

"Top. Always."

"Of course." She echoed his words in a chilly tone.

He smiled. "You, Tara, are no top."

Her eyes widened. "Yes, I am."

He shook his head slowly. "I can see it in your eyes. You may think you are – you may fool others into thinking you are – but you're not."

"That's ridiculous. In fact, I'm meeting two men at eleven o'clock in the red room who need to be punished. And I'm going to do it."

"But are you going to enjoy it?"

She stared at him. "Of course I am."

He looked at her. Said nothing. "What are you drinking?"

"Uh. Green tea and apple juice."

"Sounds good." He reached for her drink, took it from her and tasted it. "Yeah, it is good." He handed it back to her.

She glared at him. He gestured to the bartender and requested another one for her and one for himself.

"So how are you going to punish these two men?"

"With this." She held up her flogger, lifted a brow.

"Nice." He took it from her, let the ball of the handle snuggle into his palm. Gave it a flick across his own palm. "Very nice."

He watched her breasts rise beneath the shiny PVC and the way her eyes darkened as she watched him snap the flogger. Oh yeah.

"Nice, if a bit...amateurish," he added.

"What!" Her lips parted.

He smiled. "This is good for a beginner. You can't do too much damage with this."

"I know what I'm doing!"

The bartender passed their drinks over and Joe handed one to Tara. She clenched her hands into fists and refused to take it. Oh man. She was just asking for it.

"No thanks," she said shortly. "Give me back my flogger."

He lifted a brow. Waited.

"Please."

Ah. Satisfaction. It was a small thing, but still...the anticipation of bending her to his will, of bending her body over and giving her what she really wanted sizzled through him. Jesus.

He handed her the small black rubber flogger and itched to hold his favorite one, a wicked beast with a dozen braided deerskin tails and double slapper tips. He imagined dragging the tails over Tara's soft skin, watching the look of fear in her eyes as she waited for what he could do to her with it. He was confident in his technique, knew he could change the sensations from massage-like to sharp stings to deep thuds.

He had to suck in a hard breath at the images in his mind, because what were the chances he was ever going to get to flog his boss's granddaughter? And never mind the fact that she didn't even seem to know she wanted it.

Leading her to that discovery could be so much fun...but mixing business and pleasure—or pain, as the case may be—was never a good idea.

He glanced at his watch. Five minutes until her "play date". His mouth twisted. Just as well she had plans and he had to look elsewhere for his fun. But he watched her when she left, followed her to the hall and observed her enter the red room. For some reason he felt almost...protective of her. She was in there with two guys, and although the club carefully screened members, as he well knew, shit could happen, especially if she was inexperienced for one thing, and for another, she wasn't really dominant. Things could get out of control and she might not be able to get them back on track.

He wandered around, passing by a group of submissives sitting together on a couch, dressed in frilly lingerie and white collars. For once, they didn't interest him at all. Too easy. He couldn't stop thinking of Tara and her strength and will and resistance. The urge to overpower that resistance and have her was eating away at him, destroying any appeal others might have held.

He kept an eye on the door to the Red Room, tension tightening inside him as time went on. It was a rule of the club that he could not enter a private room. Otherwise he would have stormed in there and taken over. Not that he wanted to spank two boys. He just wanted to attend to Tara.

When the door finally opened and first one young man, then the other emerged, both of them flushed and glazed-eyed, Joe strode down the hall, passing them. They barely glanced at him, with eyes only for each other. Huh. What was Tara getting out of a threesome with two men who were so into each other?

He paused at the door, then lifted his chin and entered the Red Room.

Chapter Three

Tara sat on the pallet on the floor, staring at the pattern of stripes the hardwood created. Things hadn't gone so well. Jason and Adam had pretty much had to come right out and tell her they wanted to do forbidden things and then be punished. It had taken her a few minutes to realize they wanted her to make them do those things, the threat of the flogger forcing Adam to take his friend's penis in his mouth and suck it.

She sighed. Her arms and shoulders ached and her right hand burned from the friction of the flogger handle.

Once again, the flogging had been...weird. She'd concentrated on technique, but had a hard time getting past that fear that she might actually hurt them. Even though she knew that was what they wanted. A deep, aching longing had risen up inside her as she'd punished them, a disappointment, a yearning for something more than she was getting from this. When she'd watched them, it had been erotic, but this time she'd told them to leave before she tried to find the satisfaction that would ease that emptiness inside her. Although she wasn't even really aroused.

And she knew Jason and Adam hadn't been quite satisfied either. They shouldn't have to direct the scene; *she* should be the one to do it. Normally she had no problem telling people what to do. It was what she did every day at work.

Why wasn't this satisfying her? What did she really want? She'd been so excited to come to the club and try these things, certain this would fill the emptiness in her life, the dark yearning she felt inside her. But it didn't seem to be working.

When the door opened, she looked up, thinking it was Adam or Jason coming back for something.

Joe.

He stepped inside, closed the door behind him and leaned against it, hot, dark eyes burning into her.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, sitting up straight.

He said nothing.

"This is a private room," she snapped, rising to her feet. "You can't come in here unless it's agreed on. That's the consensual part of 'safe, sane, consensual' in case you don't remember."

"I remember," he said, his voice low and rough.

"Then get out!"

"No."

She stood and glared at him, lungs tight, eyes wide. He moved toward her. Every nerve ending tingled. She took a step back, almost without realizing it. Dammit. "Joe."

"How did it go?"

"Fine." Her eyebrows snapped together.

"Really." He lifted a brow. "You don't look like you just had the best scene of your life. Or are you already crashing?"

She had no idea what he was talking about.

"It wasn't that great, was it?" He stopped in front of her, long legs planted wide, arms folded across his impressive chest.

She pursed her lips. "It's only my third time here. It will get better."

"Uh-huh." He studied her, making her feel very warm.

"I spent some time with a Master who taught me to use the flogger."

Joe shook his head. "Maybe you need a little more...mentoring."

She blinked at him. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, I'm an experienced Dom. If you want to learn, maybe I can help."

Her breath stuck in her throat. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"Very likely not," he muttered, his mouth firm. "But it's hard for me to watch someone struggle when I could help."

"I'm not struggling! I'm fine, I'm just...new to this."

"Here's your first lesson," he said, voice like velvet. He stroked a hand over the curve of her shoulder and down her arm, his hand big and warm, leaving a trail of heat in its wake. "There's a difference between the technical skills—using a flogger—" he gave a short nod at the tool lying on the pallet. "A whip, a cane, ropes...whatever. The technical skills are important, for sure, but the psychological skills...those take much more time to develop."

"Uh..."

"Understanding people...what they want. Knowing what they need. What they really mean. Negotiating. Communicating. Self-control."

She nodded.

"But most important is that to be a Dominant, you have to understand *yourself*. You have to be in control of yourself before you can control someone else." His fingers lingered on her wrist, over the sensitive skin where her pulse leaped. "And think about this...the best way to learn how to be a great Dominant is to experience what it's like to be a sub. Many Doms learn that way."

His air of authority and confidence, the sultry rasp of his voice, surrounded her like a warm blanket. She stared up at him. She took in his words, even as she felt a little irked that he was lecturing her. How did he know she didn't know all that stuff? She could be a pro Domme for all he knew.

Well, apparently her inexperience was pretty evident. She drew in a long breath. "Thank you for all that wonderful information," she said coldly. "But I think I'll do just fine without your help."

He bent and picked up her flogger, brushed it across his palm. Her eyes followed his actions. Her lips parted.

"I think I could...convince you," he murmured.

He wouldn't. He would not use her own flogger on her to make her give in to him. A thrill of uncertainty chased through her. She lifted her gaze to his. He smiled.

She reached for the flogger and grabbed it away from him.

"No, thank you," she snapped.

"Suit yourself. But if you change your mind..." He gave her a wicked smile. "You know where to find me. See you Monday morning."

Oh dear God. Now she had to face him Monday morning in a swelter of embarrassment about this. As if it wasn't bad enough she had to deal with a stranger coming in to take over the business, he was a goddamn Dom and he'd showed up at her club.

She could have stomped her stiletto-clad foot as she watched him leave.

* * * * *

Joe knocked on the open door of Tara's office Monday morning. He'd spent the entire weekend thinking about her. Not the new job. Not how he was going to learn everything he needed to know about olives, for Chrissake—just her.

Her fierce opposition to him being there. Her strong, spirited nature, her passion for the business, the surprise of seeing her at Le Château ...and the hint of submission and uncertainty in her eyes.

He still couldn't believe she'd been there. He'd been in town a few days, decided to check out the local scene and who did he run into but his new...uh...colleague. She wasn't his boss. She was his boss's granddaughter, which was just about as bad. It was some kind of sign, he just hadn't figured out if it was a good one or a bad one.

She shoved back her chair and stood, and he admired again her curvy body in the little dark suit, the jacket all buttoned up and so at odds with the black painted-on latex dress she'd worn Friday night.

"Good morning. Come in."

It was like she was a different person. This morning, she was cool, in control of herself, all efficient and polite business. He could almost think seeing her at the club all worked up and soft had been a dream.

"First we'll go down to the store," she told him, voice crisp. Okay. They were going to pretend Friday never happened. That could work for him. Maybe.

She strode across the room on those endless long legs and, trying to gather his wits together at the contrast between cool professionalism and hot sensuality, he followed along behind her.

The offices of Santa Ynez Olive Company were located on the second and third story of an older building on State Street in downtown Santa Barbara.

"We own this entire building." Tara led the way down the stairs at the rear of the building. "The retail store is on the main floor and we lease space to a clothing boutique on one side and an art gallery on the other."

He had to drag his eyes off the way her snug skirt cupped her sweetly rounded, very spankable ass as he followed her down the stairs.

The store hadn't opened yet for the day, so the only people there were two men, one looking over some papers, the other unloading stock from a box onto a shelf.

The retail space was small, which was okay considering they sold relatively few items, all specialty items—oils, olives and some imported foods like capers, roasted peppers and vinegars. A baker's rack held loaves of breads and the tantalizing, yeasty aroma filled his nostrils and reminded him of home.

"The bread is delivered every morning from a local bakery."

Joe picked up a bottle of olive oil in a dark, etched glass bottle that looked handcrafted, the bottle itself a work of art. It was a one-liter bottle of oil and the price on it said fifty dollars. Holy shit!

Apparently seeing the look of astonishment on his face, Tara grinned.

Her smile sucked the air out of his lungs.

It was the first time he'd seen her smile, really smile, and holy crap, she was fucking gorgeous. Her smile lit up her face, lit up the whole room, and he realized to his dismay that he was standing there staring open-mouthed at her, the expensive oil in his hands forgotten, his gaze riveted to her.

He snapped his mouth shut.

"It's totally worth it," she said, still smiling. "You can try some later. Out at the ranch. We'll do a tasting and you can have a lesson in olive oil."

He nodded and carefully set the bottle back on the shelf.

The tastefully decorated shop catered to an upscale, "foodie" clientele. Was that Tara's doing? All the packaging was artistic and classy and seemed to fit with her vision for the business.

"How has the recession affected sales of this kind of luxury item?" Joe asked.

"It hasn't. These kinds of items seem to be recession proof. The people who can afford to buy them can still afford to buy them. But good question." The words almost seemed to be pulled out of her reluctantly.

Tara introduced him to Jack Berns, who was stocking the shelf. The young man greeted him with a friendly smile, stood up and shook hands before resuming his work. Then she introduced him to Jose de la Cruz, the manager of the store.

"I wanted to talk to Jose before I met with the web designers," she told Joe. "He has some ideas too about marketing."

They followed Jose into his small office at the rear of the store. Jose was older than Tara. Did he subscribe to her innovative ideas or was he old-school like Tyrone?

It didn't take much time listening to Jose and Tara to realize Tara had the man completely under her control. If Jose had ever had a different thought, he now deferred to her on everything. Interesting. She was obviously very strong willed, but once again, some of the things she said raised questions for him. Or maybe it was the things she wasn't talking about that got his spidey-senses tingling.

How did she know what kind of sales figures she could expect from putting all their products on the internet? What was her plan for the inventory they would need to carry to fill online orders? This space was clearly too small for what she had in mind. He was curious about her research, her business plan. He made mental notes, grateful for his near-photographic memory.

After an hour talking to Jose, they went back upstairs, where her first website developer was waiting outside her office. Joe had to grit his teeth when Tara didn't bother to introduce him.

Two hours later, his head was spinning only a little. Thankfully, he knew enough about target markets, niche markets, product, pricing, promotion and distribution that it didn't really matter that he knew next to nothing about olives.

"It's a lot to think about," Tara said afterward. "Back-end databases and shopping cart systems. Technical support. Programming languages. God, I don't know anything about Basic HTML or JAVA."

"How many providers will you be talking to?" Joe asked her.

She looked at him. "Those are the first two. Paige is setting up meetings with two more. Why?"

He shrugged. "Two isn't enough. Their prices are wildly different and so are their ideas."

Her hands stilled on her keyboard. "I think Imagemakers, the first group, are the ones I'd like to go with."

"Why is that?"

She was silent for a moment, watching him. Her intense, sparkling eyes raised his body temp a few degrees, but he kept his mind firmly on business.

"They get me," she finally said.

He almost snorted. "What the hell does that mean?"

She frowned. "They get me. They get my ideas. They know where I'm going."

Now he did laugh. "You've met with two groups. Imagemakers was double the price of the other one and you want to go with them because 'they get you'?" He shook his head in amusement. "Have you got a project plan for this?"

She frowned. "No."

Oh man. He sighed. "Just because you have one retail outlet doesn't mean setting up to do business on the net is going to be easy," he told her bluntly. "You need your entire information technology team involved in this project."

"We contract out our IT services."

"Fine." He shrugged. "You still need to involve them. And where's your market research and analysis?"

She stared back at him, eyes wide, lips rolled in.

"You have done market research?"

"Um..."

He sighed. "Sweetheart, designing the website is such a tiny part of this whole thing. You need a business model. You need to do more research. You need to think about distribution channels, warehousing, inventory control..."

She scowled. "Do. Not. Call. Me. Sweetheart." The words squeezed out between her clenched teeth. "And do not tell me what to do."

Whoa. Heat surged through his veins. She had no idea how those words inflamed him. Challenged him. Urged him to not just tell her what to do, but to make her do it... More inappropriate images flashed through his mind, sizzling hot ones of Tara restrained and helpless with no choice but to do exactly what he wanted.

He shook his head. He had to focus on the business challenge here, not the challenge of dominating a hot little spitfire.

He could only imagine the kind of trouble she could get herself—and the company—into if she just plunged into this blindly. For him, though...wow. He was figuratively rubbing his hands together, raring to go, ready to dig into the challenge and get to work.

"We'll grab some lunch before we head up to the ranch," she told him, back to being Mistress of Ice. "I'll get Paige to go pick up some sandwiches for us. What would you like?"

"Doesn't matter to me."

She left the office and returned a few moments later, dropping into her chair behind her desk. "I need to check my voice mail." She picked up the phone. He watched her as she pressed buttons, listened and scribbled notes on a pad of paper on her desk, quick and efficient. Finally, she hung up.

"I have two calls I need to return, but I'll do that on the drive to Santa Ynez." She started typing on her computer keyboard. "I want to make some notes of my meetings." And she proceeded to ignore him.

He sat there for a few moments, then started tapping his fingers on the arm of his chair. She shot him a glance at one point, then frowned and refocused on her computer screen.

She was doing it on purpose. Making him feel insignificant, useless, in the way. He recognized it because he knew just how to play that game. But as the saying went, two

could play. And patience and self-control were only a couple of the things he'd learned from playing that game.

She was obviously pissed off he'd dared to question her business planning. Or lack of business planning, he should say. And if he thought she'd been icy Friday afternoon, that was nothing compared to now. Probably their little encounter at Le Château had increased her annoyance. The thought amused him.

Paige knocked on the door of the office, then walked in with a paper bag in her hands.

Joe regarded the new secretary he shared with Tara with interest. Her black and purple hair stood in spikes, a ring pierced one eyebrow and thick black makeup ringed her eyes. She was tiny, maybe five foot one, wore heavy black combat boots and a short black skirt with a striped T-shirt.

"Here's your lunch," she said. She set the bag on Tara's desk. "There are three kinds of sandwiches, some coleslaw, napkins and forks in the bag. Do you want me to make some coffee?"

"Yes please," Tara said immediately. Joe smiled at Paige and got his more familiar interested smile in return, a stark contrast to the icy response he was getting from Tara. Paige was young, looked like she was just out of high school, and despite the raccoon eyes, she was kind of cute. He looked down at his suit. He'd definitely gotten the impression from what he'd seen so far that he was overdressed. Whatever. Better to overdress the first day on the job.

Tara opened the bag and pulled out the food, spreading it across her desk. He slid his chair closer and selected a thick sandwich that turned out to be roast beef. Excellent. It was delicious and he was starving.

Tara ate half a tuna sandwich and he devoured the roast beef, piled thickly on squishy fresh bread. The tang of horseradish nipped his tongue. Then he ate the pastrami and the other half of her tuna when she had pushed it away. The coleslaw was really good too, some kind of Asian creation with crunchy noodles, sunflower seeds and a tangy dressing made with soy and sesame oil.

Tara watched him finish off the coleslaw, one eyebrow raised. "You have a big appetite."

He grinned. "Oh yeah. For many things."

Chapter Four

Was that some kind of reference to sex?

Tara stared at him and he held her gaze as he lifted his fork to his mouth. He had to be making some kind of perverted reference to their meeting at Le Château. Heat sizzled over her skin at the memory. She'd managed to pretend it had never happened all morning, but now one little comment had her burning. She looked down at her desk.

All those muscles must let him eat that much food. All that muscle must burn a whole hell of a lot of calories. And, as she knew only too well from seeing him Friday night, those were some really nice muscles.

Really nice.

Her cheeks heated even more as she peered down into her coffee cup.

The caffeine probably wasn't necessary. She was alert, edgy, almost vibrating with nerves and energy. All due to her new colleague, who followed her around, listening to her with such focused intensity it was making her self-conscious.

He was making her more than self-conscious. He was making her feel like an idiot. Intelligence shone in those black-coffee eyes and he asked smart, succinct questions about stuff she – and it killed her to admit this – knew nothing about. Dammit.

She wanted to growl, wanted to pick something up and throw it. Throw it at him. She clenched her fists. "Okay," she said, covering her feelings with briskness. "We should go. It'll take about forty minutes to get to the ranch."

The thought of being in a car alone with him for the next hour or so was almost enough to make her lose what little control she still had, but she grabbed her purse, briefcase and cell phone. Joe again followed as she ran down the stairs, this time turning left and exiting the building through a back door. She strode up to her car, all sparkling chrome and glass in the hot mid-day sun, and dug around in her big purse for her keys.

"Nice car."

She glanced at him as she pushed the button to unlock the doors. "Thanks." Her BMW Cabriolet was okay and it got her around.

He slid into the passenger seat beside her and fastened his seatbelt. She pulled out onto State Street, then turned right onto Chapala, the route to the ranch so familiar she could drive it in a trance. In fact, she sometimes did. Soon she was accelerating rapidly onto the freeway, merging closely into the speeding traffic. Joe gripped the door handle. She smiled.

"Don't worry, I'm a good driver." After a short stretch on the freeway they exited onto Highway 154 and started climbing into the mountains that snuggled Santa Barbara between them and the Pacific Ocean.

The sky was a cloudless blue and Tara spared a thought for the beauty surrounding her despite her mind being crowded with thoughts and sensations, most of them to do with the man sitting beside her, taking up a lot of space in her small Beamer. He smelled good, kind of spicy-citrusy, he was big and, God, he was sinfully gorgeous. She had to admit it. He'd pushed the seat back as far as it would go and his long legs still looked crowded under the dash. His thighs were big and muscular under the fine dark wool of his suit trousers.

She cranked up the air conditioning.

"I just have to make a couple of calls," she told him. "Then I'll tell you more about the ranch and the mill."

"You're going to talk on a cell phone on this road?" he asked, incredulity straining his voice.

"I'll be quick." She fitted an earpiece to her ear, punched in some numbers on the phone and called back the distributor who'd left her a message that morning. "Yes," she told him. "We want into Safeway. No, we're not paying that much rent." She outlined her negotiating position. "Call me back once you've talked to them," she told the man and ended the call. Then she called the ranch.

"You're kidding," she said when Juan answered. "Customs found some dirt on the roots? They quarantined them? Damn it. What do we have to do?" Juan didn't know. She sighed. "I'm on my way. I'll call them myself once I'm there."

She snapped her small phone shut and tossed it on the dash, then told Joe about the calls. It was strange to be telling a total stranger such private details about the business. She gnawed on her bottom lip, and her annoyance at her grandfather for putting her in this position revved up again like the motor of her Beamer as they climbed the steep mountain road at seventy miles an hour.

"How far is the ranch?" Joe asked.

"About twenty-five miles from Santa Barbara. Near Santa Ynez. It's about a thirty, thirty-five-minute drive in all. We'll be there soon."

"Tell me more about olives."

She needed no urging to do so. "Well, the first olive trees were brought here by the Franciscans. Those were Missions, a variant of Spanish trees the conquistadores brought to North America. Then Manzanillo olives were brought to America in about 1875, and about ten years after that, Sevallanos were planted and an Italian variety, Ascolano. Now there are so many varieties, probably over a hundred. But a lot of other ranches around here have been turned into wineries."

Joe nodded. "This area is known for its wineries. Not so much for olives."

"That's because you don't know anything about the olive business." She paused. "Anyway, the temptation has been there to go into grapes instead of olives for us too. I can totally understand why some people turned to vineyards and wine, rather than olives. Now some have gone back to olive growing, but it's difficult. It takes so many

years of care for trees to produce enough olives, careful pruning and irrigation. Luckily most of our trees are mature, although we're always adding new stock."

"That's what the call was about."

"Yes. We've brought in some nursery stock from Italy. Importing trees from Europe can be frustrating. There can't be any soil on the roots of the trees, which means they have to be cleaned and packaged to retain moisture on the roots while they're shipped. And then if Customs finds a bit of soil—which apparently they did—well, I'll have to deal with that, dammit."

She shook her head, turning the wheel as her BMW hugged a mountain-wrapping curve in the road. She'd seen the spectacular view so many times she hardly noticed anymore. Today, she spared a glance for the sweeping vista dropping away from the highway, wondering what this looked like through Joe's eyes.

"It's beautiful," he observed, gazing out the window, although his knuckles were still pale where his hand gripped the door handle.

Soon they were descending into the valley, acres of rural landscape, gold fields shimmering under the hot summer sun, stretching away to rolling green hills dotted with round trees. In the distance, neatly planted rows of trees climbed up a hillside toward the dark outline of the mountains.

The road curved back the other way and Tara leaned into the curve, enjoying the way her car handled the winding roads without reducing speed. Soon, though, she slowed and turned onto a narrow road where a large green, red and gold sign at the highway said "Santa Ynez Olive Company". She followed the narrow, tree-lined road for about five minutes.

"Is that a house?" Joe asked, looking around with clear interest.

"Yes."

"Who lives there?"

"Nobody now." She tried not to sound sad about that. "Grandpa used to, but after my parents died he moved to Santa Barbara to live with us. He thought it was better for us to stay in our own home. Sometimes I stay out here if I don't feel like driving back to town."

"When did your parents die?"

She pressed her lips together. "A long time ago. I was fourteen, my sister Sasha was twelve."

"I'm sorry."

She felt his eyes on her, shrugged. "It's okay. Grandpa brought us up." She stared straight ahead out the windshield, tightening her fingers on the steering wheel. Since the day her parents had died, Grandpa had drilled it into them that you showed no emotion about that, in fact, didn't even talk about it. "The house actually belongs to my sister and me now. I've thought of buying out Sasha's half, but I can't do that until she turns twenty-five."

"Why not?"

"It was the terms of my parents' will. Everything is held in trust for us until we're twenty-five. When I turned twenty-five, I got access to my trust fund, and Sasha will turn twenty-five in about five months. Until then, jointly held property – really only the house – can't be disposed of. We each have part ownership of the company, although Sasha's not interested in it at all."

"I see." He paused. "You love it out here, don't you?"

She shrugged. "I suppose. I've thought of moving out here, but it just seemed easier to stay in the city." She did love it out here. So much. But she wasn't going to tell him that. That was way too personal.

She drove past the house, a sprawling ranch-style with white stucco and red clay tile roof, surrounded by huge cacti, flowers and mature olive and oak trees. Around another curve in the road they came to some other buildings.

"This is the mill," she told him, rolling into a parking spot and coming to a quick, jolting stop. She flicked off her seatbelt and turned off the ignition. When they stepped out of the car, the heat slammed into them.

"Wow," Joe said. "It's a lot warmer here."

"Yes." She slid her arms out of her suit jacket and tossed it into the car. "Away from the coast the temperatures get a lot warmer. That's what makes it ideal for growing olives here."

Joe again followed her example, removing his suit jacket. His white shirt still looked crisp despite the heat. He slung the jacket over his shoulder, then loosened the knot of his tie as he gazed around, taking everything in with alert, interested eyes.

Tara was proud of the family business and everything they'd accomplished, and after feeling humiliated by him that morning, she wanted to impress this man. After his earlier sarcastic comment, she wanted to dazzle him with how complex the olive business was, prove to this hotshot MBA he didn't know everything.

The large building that housed the mill, with metal walls and roof, was designed for function, not beauty. She started across the ochre-colored, packed-earth parking lot toward it, her spiky heels sinking into the ground.

Damn. She usually didn't dress like this when she came to the mill. The black skirt was warm in the hot sun and her heels were extremely impractical for tramping around outside.

"Hold on," she muttered to Joe and turned back to her car. She unlocked the trunk and reached in to pull out a pair of flip-flops. Standing on one leg, then the other, she slid her black pumps off and tossed them into the trunk, then slipped her feet into the flip-flops. She slammed the lid of the trunk back down. "There." She dusted her hands off and picked up her purse and briefcase again, then turned to see him watching her with amusement and...oh hell...unmistakable sexual interest.

She'd given him a bit of a show of her legs as she changed shoes, dammit. She licked her lips, met his gaze. "I...um...don't usually wear heels when I come out here."

He nodded, his eyes on her mouth as her tongue moved over her lips, and heat flooded over her that was definitely not from the summer sun. This man was not intimidated by her like so many others. And that was such a knee-weakening turn-on, she had to suck in a deep breath. She swallowed and then, getting a grip on herself, she turned and strode across the parking lot, trying to look confident and professional in flip-flops with big pink daisies on them.

Tara and Joe entered the mill through a side door and walked into a cool office area. Air conditioning, thank God. She was still having that hot flash.

"Hi, Tara!" Donna, the receptionist-slash-secretary-slash-office manager greeted her with a smile, which Tara returned. They exchanged some small talk, and then Tara introduced Joe with a lack of enthusiasm she knew was noted by both Donna and Joe. "Is Juan in his office?"

"I'm in here," a voice called through an open door and Tara walked over, feeling Joe close behind her. Again she performed introductions. Juan's eyebrows drew down, then lifted. He shot Joe a narrow-eyed glance then turned back to Tara.

"I've already called Customs again and found out what we need to do," Juan told her. "We have to go there and clean off the roots of every tree."

"How many trees had dirt on them?"

"Only one. But to make sure, we have to open every one."

"Oh my God," she groaned. "That's a hundred trees."

"I know. I'll go tomorrow and I'll take a couple of the guys with me."

"Where are the trees?" Joe asked.

"Los Angeles." Juan grimaced. "They're being held by Customs at LAX."

"Great," Tara said with a sigh. "That'll take you guys all day. I'll come with you."

"Uh..." Juan hesitated and glanced at Joe, which made her frown.

"I don't think you need to go along to do that," Joe said to her casually. "I'm sure Juan is capable of handling it."

She tried to keep the frown from taking over her face even as annoyance rose up inside her. Who the hell was he to tell her what Juan was capable of? But another glance at Juan told her that, yes, Juan had taken her remark to mean she thought he couldn't deal with the issue himself. And that he wanted to.

And dammit, she didn't have time for that anyway. Swallowing a sigh, she nodded. "Of course he is." She gave a tight smile.

"The trees are Grappolo from Italy," Juan explained to Joe. "Some kinds of trees we buy here, some we propagate ourselves, but these ones had to be ordered from Italy."

Joe nodded his understanding. "Pain in the ass, having to go all the way to LA." He and Juan shared a look and this time Tara couldn't stop her scowl.

"Okay," she said briskly. "I've got to talk to Blair about some things. I'm hoping to have time to show Joe around the mill and the ranch. Maybe later you can take us out?"

"Sure," Juan said. "Just come on back when you're ready and we'll go for a drive."

"Juan's young, but he has a degree in crop science and management," Tara told Joe after they left his office. "He's so smart about the horticulture part of the business. He and Blair keep the ranch and the mill running."

They spent the next hour with Blair, manager of the mill, discussing problems with pressing equipment, replacement parts and the information Blair had on mechanical harvesting. He and Juan had just toured a ranch up in Sonoma that was using the new high density planting methods and mechanical harvesting Tara was anxious to explore.

"But they only produce oil," Blair reminded Tara. She frowned.

"Probably a stupid question," Joe said. "But what does that matter?"

"Not stupid at all. Mechanical harvesting can damage the olives," Blair explained. "Olives that are going to be eaten need to be hand picked."

Tara was nodding, thinking. "I still think it's worthwhile exploring," she said. "I'd like to go see that ranch too."

Blair nodded. "Of course. Why don't you take all this information I brought back and have a look at it. Let me know if you have any questions."

"Okay." She stuffed the thick folder into her briefcase.

"I'll e-mail you some links too," Blair said. "There's a lot more information on the internet."

Joe grinned. "No internet fear here?"

Blair smiled back. "Nah, not me," he said. "I spend hours online doing research on equipment, pressing techniques...you name it." Again, Tara bristled at the easy way Joe seemed to connect with the two men here at the ranch. Not that she didn't have a good working relationship with them—they did whatever she told them to do. But it was a distant, reserved relationship—almost like they were afraid of her.

"Okay, time for more olive education," she told Joe. "There's not too much happening at this time of year, as we harvest in the fall, but we can show you around." Blair came with them and she was glad because he was the expert. She knew the basics of milling, but that wasn't her area of expertise. Joe seemed fascinated by all the equipment and the huge steel tanks that stored oil.

Blair and Tara showed him the route olives took, starting from their arrival at the mill. "This is where we weigh them, then they get dumped into a hopper to separate them from any leaves and twigs."

"From there they go on a conveyor belt to a washer," Blair explained. "They travel through a water bath that removes any other foreign materials. Then they go to the hammer mill where they're crushed to a paste."

They walked through the mill and Tara watched Joe, taking in his careful attention. "In the malaxor, the paste is slowly turned to separate the oil from the paste, then

pumped to that big horizontal centrifuge where the oil is removed and the remaining paste is sent outside as waste. The oil and some remaining vegetable water are sent to this smaller vertical centrifuge. Any water left is removed and the olive oil is collected in these stainless steel drums. The oil is decanted for about a month before being bottled. Eventually it's pumped into the big storage tanks."

He nodded to the huge tanks. "These twelve stainless steel storage tanks hold over a hundred thousand gallons of just-pressed oil. We maintain and monitor the storage tanks in a strictly regulated, climate-controlled environment to preserve the fresh taste and integrity of the natural oil. To be called an 'estate-grown' olive oil, the final product has to be grown, harvested and processed on the same farm or estate."

"Remember, I said that we're one of the few olive oil producers that grow all our own olives?" Tara reminded Joe. He nodded.

"We're always in total control of our olive oil from the first bud on a tree branch to the last bottle on the processing line," Blair continued. "We have strict quality control. We constantly do product testing and periodic tastings to ensure the highest quality of our oils." He pointed to some highly technical equipment where a staff person in a lab coat and gloves was removing a sample of oil.

"There are standards established by the International Olive Oil Council," Tara explained. "In order for an oil to be labeled extra virgin, it has to have an oleic acid content of below one percent. Then we have our own standards...the organoleptic properties."

"Huh?" Joe grinned.

"The taste, the aroma, the feel of the oil on the tongue...those are organoleptic properties. We'll taste some oils and I'll tell you more about that."

"We also do canning and curing here," Blair explained. They went on a quick tour of that part of the building too, a large manufacturing enterprise where mostly black olives were canned.

"Would you like to go for a drive through the groves or would you like to taste some oils?" Tara asked.

Joe smiled and shrugged. "Let's go for a drive."

Back outside, they climbed into a dusty old jeep, with Juan driving. The wind blowing over them was only slightly cooling in the hot afternoon sun.

Tara let out a sigh as they drove through the quiet groves shifting with shadow and light. The trees were so old, growing in neat rows, the small leaves shimmering as the slight breeze teased them in the sunshine, changing them from green to gray to silver and silvery-green. There was an intimate atmosphere in a grove of mature olives, the twisted trunks and branches hanging with heavy, still-green fruit giving a feeling of peace, strength and anticipation. It always brought to Tara's mind all the stories of olives in mythology and literature she'd read.

Today, though, the only feeling the groves brought to her was irritation at having to do this with Joe Scaletta.

"There are over seven hundred olive cultivars in the world. We grow seven here at Santa Ynez," Juan said. "These ones here are Mission olives."

"Your mainstay," Joe murmured.

Blair glanced sideways at him and nodded. "Right. Up ahead are Manzanillas and Luccas. There are olives grown for eating and olives grown for pressing. Kind of like grapes...some are grown for eating, some for wine. But unlike grapes, you can't just pick a drupe and eat it. They're bitter as hell."

"They have to be cured."

"Yes. They have to be picked at the right stage of ripeness. And flavor depends on many other things—rains, pests, the pressing process, how the oil is stored."

They continued driving through the groves. "These are Sevallano olives. We grow these for eating."

"The stuffed Sevallanos are very popular," Tara put in. "We make some stuffed with California almonds—another local partnership—and some with garlic."

When they returned to the mill and the offices awhile later, Tara felt dusty and windblown and only slightly less irritable than she had when they'd arrived. Usually she enjoyed a chance to get outside and into the olive groves, but Joe's huge presence was distracting and unsettling.

They went inside and she led the way to a back room where they would do the tasting.

"One day," she told Joe as she assembled oil and cups, "I'd like to do tours of the farm, like they do with so many wineries now. And have tastings here. We do tastings at the store sometimes, but not here. It could be really awesome."

He nodded and she could see he was thinking more about that. Dammit. Why did she keep spilling her guts to this guy?

She poured a small amount of olive oil into a plastic cup. "Place it in the palm of your hand and cover it with your fingers to warm it," she instructed Joe, showing him with a small cup of her own. "After a minute or two, hold the cup under your nose to appreciate the bouquet of the oil."

They lifted the cups to their noses.

"Remember earlier I said the organoleptic properties were taste, aroma, feel?"

He nodded. "It smells like olive oil," he said, wrinkling his nose and flashing those appealing dimples.

She laughed. "Okay. Now place a small amount of oil on your lower lip, and with the tip of your tongue, taste the oil for its degree of sweetness."

Oh God. This might have been a big mistake. Watching his tongue come out and lick his full bottom lip was so sexy. She cleared her throat. "Now, sip the oil and taste for spiciness, using the sides of your tongue."

She waited.

"First, what do you feel?" she asked him, watching his face.

"Mmm..." His dark brows drew down. "It feels smooth...oily."

"How about thick? Sticky? Cooling?"

He shook his head. "Yes. It's thick and smooth but...not cooling, it's...warmer."

Huh. How about that. "Good. And what do you taste?"

"I would say this is...kind of peppery."

"Wow. I'm impressed. Here, try it with some bread." She ripped a hunk off a crusty loaf and handed it to him. He dipped it in the oil and chewed on it thoughtfully.

"It's peppery and warm, but not really biting."

"It's not making you feel like you have to cough? Not burning in the back of the throat?"

"I do feel it in the back of my throat, but not like I'm going to cough."

"Good. It mellows over time. This is our Arbosana. It's a perfect complement to traditional, rustic dishes such as bruschetta with garlic, pasta and beans, panzanella."

Joe grinned. "Sounds like home. And it's not pasta and beans—it's *pasta e fagioli*."

He said it with an Italian roll to the words that was so freakin' sexy she felt herself melt deep inside. Drawing in a deep breath, she poured more oil into a clean cup and they continued their tasting. Watching Joe savor the tastes, closing his eyes to get a deeper appreciation of the aromas and tastes and feel of the oils was a disconcertingly arousing experience. He was a sensual man, obviously enjoying the sensory pleasures of the olive oils. Her lower abdomen grew warm and achy and she squeezed her thighs together.

"This one tastes buttery," he told her.

"That's right. It's nice with broiled fish, steamed vegetables and some cheeses. Now try this one." She poured yellowish oil into a cup and handed it to him. He performed the ritual and tasted it, then made a face. "It tastes like alcohol. Bitter."

She grinned. "That's cheap olive oil from a supermarket. It demonstrates the four enemies of oil—time, oxygen, temperature and light. Freshly milled olive oil is green, but if it's bottled in clear glass, it will turn yellow. To avoid that, we bottle ours in colored bottles.

"The polyphenols are the first to go," she explained. "Polyphenols are light-sensitive antioxidants that give the peppery taste to the olive oil. Temperature is important too. Olive oil always should be stored between sixty and seventy degrees."

They tasted a couple more, and by the time they were done, she had a warm flutter low in her tummy. Dammit.

She glanced at her watch. "It's after five. We should start back to the city. Grandpa said he wanted to meet with you at the end of the day." One corner of her mouth turned down.

Joe nodded and shook hands with Blair, thanking him for the tour and his time. Blair gave him a firm handshake in return and a wide, welcoming smile. "Any time."

"I may take you up on that in the next few days," Joe told him. "I feel like I've just skimmed the surface of what goes on out here. I'd really like to come back and learn more."

"Absolutely," Blair agreed and Tara scowled at him. He noticed her black look and his smile faded.

"Let's go," she said to Joe and stalked out of the building, aggravated by the sound of her flip-flops slapping against her feet.

"Would you like me to drive?" he offered as they neared her car.

"No." She slid into the driver's seat and slammed her door. Joe climbed into the passenger seat.

"Okay. Just thought you might like some time to review that information Blair gave you on high density planting. Mind if I look at it while we drive?"

She paused, hands tight on the wheel. Shit. She did not want him becoming an expert on high density planting before her. But she'd already said she didn't want him to drive.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth and hauled her briefcase up from the backseat. She pulled out the thick folder and practically threw it at him.

His lips twitched, which only annoyed her more, and she slammed the car into reverse, backed up with a spinning of wheels and took off out of the parking lot. She drove home through the mountains on the winding highway at hair-raising, stomach-dropping speeds, taking perverse pleasure every time Joe grabbed for the door handle.

Chapter Five

"How was your day?" Tyrone Lockhart greeted Joe with a smile that split his brown, weathered face.

How had his day been? Fucking unbelievable. He was eager to jump in, get his hands into the olives, so to speak. But Tara hated his guts and trying to tell her what she needed to do differently was going to be like WWE Smackdown. And that, strangely, was a huge turn-on for him. An image of him wrestling her down and covering her body with his...*stop!* Jesus.

The olive groves had been amazing. He couldn't even describe how he'd felt there, in fact he was a little embarrassed to have been so strongly affected by the atmosphere in the groves.

Then there was the olive oil tasting. Oh man. Tara watching his mouth the whole time, heat clearly visible in her eyes. His brain had been instantly flooded with...sex. Sex with Tara. Hot, slippery, rolling-around-in-olive-oil sex.

"Interesting," he finally replied to Tyrone in egregious understatement, slamming a door shut in his head on the nasty thoughts he was having about Tyrone's granddaughter as he took a seat in front of Tyrone's desk. "I'm actually surprised how fascinating this business is."

And not just the business. He was fascinated by Tara Lockhart. Moody and complicated, intelligent and knowledgeable, strong and forceful, that passion and hint of submission simmering beneath the surface made her sexy as hell and kept causing his mind to wander away from business to thoughts of tying her up naked and paddling her sweet little ass.

That door in his head kept popping open. He had to slam it shut again.

"Great." Tyrone walked around behind his desk, thankfully unaware of his dirty thoughts. The image of Tara in shiny black latex holding a flogger flashed into Joe's mind. Christ, what would the old man think of that? He'd probably have a heart attack. "So, tell me your first impressions of the business."

Joe thought back over the day. "It's amazingly complicated." He remembered with a twinge of embarrassment his sarcastic comment to Tara about the olive business. Jesus. What an idiot he was.

"Seeing the olive groves and the amount of knowledge needed to just grow the olives is overwhelming. You have a guy with a degree overseeing just that part of the business. Irrigation, propagation, ripeness, fertilizing, pruning...I haven't got a hot clue about any of that stuff."

Tyrone just nodded and smiled. "That's okay," he said. "What else?"

"Well, then the mill...it too is complex. Again, highly technical. The place looks like a laboratory. The equipment, the capital expenditures for that alone—wow. But that's the kind of manufacturing environment I'm more familiar with."

Again, Tyrone nodded.

"I learned a little about olives and oil and curing," Joe said. "I guess what I mostly learned is how much I don't know. The business things I understand—the costs of processing, packing, marketing, input output relationships—but oil extraction rates and net extraction recovery rates...uh-uh." He smiled ruefully.

"What do you think about high density planting?" Tyrone asked.

Was this a test? High density planting was Tara's pet project.

"I think we need to do a detailed cost-benefit analysis," he answered. "I see a lot of advantages to it. To be competitive, it seems to me economies of scale in a few different areas is the answer. But there are some disadvantages to it that we would need to be clear on before we start spending money."

Then Joe realized what he'd said. "Uh...when I say 'we'..."

Tyrone laughed. "I'm happy to hear you talk like that. First day on the job and you're already taking ownership of the company. I have to say, I wondered how committed you'd be to this job."

"Well, to be honest, I did have some doubts. In fact, I still do."

Tyrone raised his white brows. "Such as...?"

"I gotta ask...why am I here? Tara is obviously capable of running the show. She knows this business. I've never met someone with more passion for what they do and she has incredible vision."

Tyrone sat back in his chair, frowning. "Yes, Tara is a visionary. She has ideas. But she's a woman. She relies too much on her gut and not enough on careful business planning."

Joe almost winced. Talk about politically incorrect. He couldn't disagree with Tyrone's opinion of Tara, but no way in hell would he ever be stupid enough to say it was a gender thing.

"I've worked hard over the years to get this company where it is and I don't want to risk it all," Tyrone continued. "And I'm getting too old to fight over things all the time. I want to make sure we have someone here who can keep things going when I'm gone."

"But—"

Tyrone held up a hand. "I know. Tara thinks I'm stuck in the past, too traditional and conservative. But I know times are changing. This whole olive oil thing...who would have thought twenty years ago we could actually sell oil for fifty dollars a liter? Ha! That's crazy!"

Joe smiled and nodded.

"But it's selling. People are going crazy for good olive oil. People are tasting it like wine, for God's sake."

"My parents own a couple of Italian restaurants in San Francisco and, man, good olive oil is important to them."

Tyrone shook his head. "So you know it too. Well, like I said, that's the way the world is going. I'm not resistant to change, despite what Tara may think. But someone needs to make her stop for a moment, back up a bit, do her research, make the best business decision. When I try to tell her that, we just end up at each other's throats."

Joe nodded. "So that's how you see my role here? Someone to balance Tara's creativity with some careful business planning?"

"Exactly." Tyrone beamed. "Although I'd really be happier if she were out of the business altogether."

Joe tightened his jaw to keep his mouth from dropping open. "Why? She obviously loves the business."

"It's not a woman's world," Tyrone said, again startling Joe with his out-of-date attitude. "My son was supposed to run this business. Not his daughter." A flash of pain darkened the old man's eyes.

Joe struggled for words. It must've been hard to lose his son so young. "Well, it is a lot for one person," he managed. "Even though you're here, I see she's taken on a hell of a lot. Probably more than she needs to." He was pretty sure "delegation" wasn't a word that existed in Tara's vocabulary.

"You're absolutely right. I'm glad you see that. Take some of the load off her. Let her have a life."

"Uh...okay. But I'm not so sure she actually wants that."

Tyrone scowled. "She doesn't know what she wants. She should be doing what her sister is—charity work, hosting dinners for clients, looking pretty—not out getting dirty in the groves, trying to drum up business partnerships with people who don't believe a woman can really know anything about olives."

Well then. Joe rolled his lips in. Sitting at home looking pretty—nope, he couldn't picture Tara going with that. He almost laughed. "She's pissed off I'm here," he said.

Tyrone nodded. "She's mad at me, not you."

Joe wasn't so sure about that. Sure seemed like she was pissed as hell at him too. He still had that feeling of being squeezed from both sides and didn't think it was going to get better. But again, he didn't have much choice right now. He needed this job and he'd just have to try to make the best of it.

Guilt nudged him, though, at Tyrone's statement that he wanted someone here to keep things going when he was gone. Joe would be long gone by the time that happened—his intention only to lay low for a while until he could go back to San Francisco and resume his career there.

He walked out of the building to the rear parking lot where he'd parked his car that morning. Christ, it seemed a lifetime ago after all that had happened today. He pulled

out onto the side street, turned onto State Street and drove to his buddy's place near the Mission.

Nick lived in a nice place a block off State Street, an older home he'd been renovating. He was already there, in the kitchen, slapping some ground beef into patties.

"Hey." He looked up as Joe walked in the back door and grinned. "How was your first day on the job?"

Joe shook his head. "Strange. But interesting."

"Wanna beer?"

"Hell yeah." Joe strode over to the refrigerator and helped himself. He popped the top and took a long pull. "Ah. That's good." He leaned against the counter and watched Nick work. "What're you making? Burgers?"

"Yeah. I thought we'd grill them. And I bought a salad at the deli."

"Sounds good. What can I do?"

"Not a thing. Just relax and tell me about your day."

Joe pondered that. "Well. The boss's granddaughter is pissed off beyond belief I'm even there. And she's hot as hell."

Nick raised an eyebrow. He was almost as tall as Joe, leaner and rangier, with buzz-cut short, dark hair. "That makes it...awkward."

"Yeah." Joe shook his head. "She's one angry woman."

"What's her problem?"

"Well." Joe tipped the bottle to his mouth. "Apparently the old man doesn't even want her there." He shook his head, the tug of sympathy for Tara surprising him. "She's brilliant. She's telling me all this stuff she wants to do to expand the business, and it sounds like she knows what she's talking about, but she tells me the old man doesn't want to do it. Turns out he doesn't think a woman can run the business. Must be tough—sounds like she's trying to maybe fill in for her father, who died when she was fourteen and should have been the one taking over, but she's being shut out."

"I guess that would be reason enough to be pissed off at the world."

"The thing is, the grandfather has some good points—says she needs to slow down, not rely so much on her instincts, and I can see that. She's leaping ahead into big decisions without all the facts. And I'm caught in the middle."

"Ouch. Sounds like a lose-lose situation."

"Yeah," Joe said slowly. "Yeah, it does."

"You'll figure it out," Nick said. "Come on outside. I'm going to cook these babies up."

They went out onto Nick's deck where he had the gas grill already heated.

"I know the sister. Sasha Lockhart," Nick said.

Joe studied his friend as Nick flipped the burgers, his face smoothed into an expressionless mask. What was up with that?

"Really," he said.

Nick's mouth tightened and Joe smiled. "What?"

"What, what?"

"What's with her?" Joe grinned. "You hot for her? Is she a ball-buster like her sister?"

Nick choked. "Uh. No. She's a spoiled society princess who spends her life getting manicures and going to parties."

"No kidding." Interesting. He eyed Nick. "Not your type, huh?"

Nick's mouth twisted. "Not even close. She reminds me too much of Erin."

His ex-wife, the social climbing bitch who'd dumped him when he'd changed careers from big money to no money. Well, Joe couldn't blame Nick for not wanting to get involved with someone like that again.

But he couldn't help but think Tara didn't seem like a social climber. She seemed hardworking, intelligent, driven—but he didn't get the impression it was about status.

"How the hell did you end up working in a youth center, anyway?" Joe asked as they sat down to burgers and potato salad.

Nick shrugged. "My law career was pretty short-lived. It just wasn't for me. This job came open and I went for it. Gives me a chance to do something that feels good. The kids are amazing." He shook his head, pausing with his thick burger in his hands. "I've learned more from them than from all my years of law school."

Joe nodded. He couldn't imagine voluntarily giving up the career he'd worked so hard for and felt that familiar twisting of his gut at the thought of what he'd lost. But hey, if Nick got more satisfaction from what he was doing, good on him.

"How long are you planning to stay here?" Nick asked.

"For a while. Don't worry, I'll look for my own place."

"I'm not worried," Nick said. "Just asking."

"My plan is to get some new experience I can put on a résumé and get the hell back to San Francisco. The olive business is interesting, but it's olives, for God's sake."

"Yeah. Olives." Nick turned the corners of his mouth down.

"And no offense, but this place is not a big city like San Fran."

"No, thank God, it isn't." Nick paused. "What about the hot granddaughter?"

"She needs a spanking."

Nick laughed. "Well, if anyone can charm her into submission, it's you, Stallion."

Joe grinned at his old high school nickname. The Italian Stallion. God, nobody had mentioned that in years. It was good to be with Nick, someone he shared so much history with, someone he was totally comfortable with and someone he didn't need to explain things to.

"She thinks she's a Dominatrix."

Nick lifted an eyebrow.

Joe wanted to tell Nick he'd met her at Le Château, but strict rules about discretion had been drummed into him about that kind of thing. "She thinks she's the boss," he said instead. "She even thinks she can boss me."

Nick grinned back. "A challenge."

"Oh yeah."

* * * * *

The next day Tara sat Joe down in his new office, quickly set up by Paige while they were out at the ranch, with a bunch of stuff to look at. He was eager to dive in and learn more about the business, but it took less than an hour for him to realize he was wasting his time. With a groan of frustration, he went to her office, but she wasn't there.

"Out at a meeting," Paige told him with a smile. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

Joe paused. Huh? What meeting had she gone to without telling him? "Yeah, maybe there is," he said. "I'd like to see the audited financial statements for the last few years. Can you get me those?"

"Absolutely," she said. "I'll bring them to your office in a few minutes. Anything else?"

"Tax assessments," he continued and listed off a few other things he'd like to review. Then he went back to his office. Thankfully, Paige hadn't questioned his authority to look at that documentation.

The afternoon passed quickly with something to sink his teeth into. At about four o'clock, Tara appeared in his office.

"How's it going?" she asked with a falsely sweet smile.

He returned the smile. "Very educational." She tried to hide her look of surprise, but he saw it flicker in her eyes.

"Really. That's good." She moved across the office, closer to his desk, to peer at what he was doing. Her eyes widened.

"Hey," she said. "That's not the stuff I gave you."

He met her eyes. "The stuff you gave me was useless," he said softly. "I was wasting my time."

Her cheeks pinkened and her eyes shifted. "But...how did you get that?"

He shrugged. "I have my ways."

They stared each other down and a tense heat grew between them.

"Don't dick me around, Tara," he finally said. "I know you don't want me here, but I'm here. If you have a problem with that, you deal with Tyrone."

Her mouth firmed and her eyes flashed. Turning on one sensible heel, she left his office.

* * * * *

And that's what she did.

She stormed into her grandfather's office, hurling the door shut behind her.

"This isn't going to work."

He looked up from the work on his desk.

"What isn't going to work?" he inquired, but she knew he knew what she was talking about.

"I cannot work with that man. He's extremely annoying and pushy. He helped himself to our financial statements and started going through a whole bunch of other sensitive financial information."

Tyrone leaned back in his chair. "I'd expect him to be up to speed on the financial picture," he said. "I don't have a problem with that."

She clenched her fists, still standing in front of his desk. She willed herself to calm down, knowing if she wanted to convince Grandpa this was a mistake, she would have to present her arguments calmly and rationally.

She took a seat and crossed her legs, marshalling her thoughts.

"Look," she said, more calmly. "Having two managers is never going to work. Neither of us is sure what the extent of his authority is. In fact, I'm never sure what the extent of *my* authority is around here, with you second guessing everything."

Tyrone frowned. Oops. Wrong thing to say.

"I mean, we need to have authority levels and lines of decision making clearly laid out," she said.

"We can do that."

"But with him *gone*. He's just in the way here! I don't have time to teach him every little thing about this business. I'm busy running it myself. If I don't have time to do the work, the business may suffer."

He smiled. "I'm not buying that one," he said. "I realize it will take some of your time initially to get him up to speed, but the up-front investment will pay off when he can take some of the burden off you. Give you time to do the things you should be doing."

"Oh for God's sake." She rolled her eyes. "I'm not going to be a charity princess like Sasha. I'm not interested in that."

"You should be finding a husband. Having babies. You know the talk about you—you scare men away with your attitude."

"What attitude?" Like she needed to ask. She swallowed a sigh. She knew, thanks to that disastrous relationship with Hugh. He hadn't hesitated to tell her how her

independence and need for control were humiliating and emasculating as he'd dumped her. Grandpa had drilled it into her over and over again – act like a lady, soft and sweet and not too smart. It had worked with Sasha, but Tara wasn't going to get like Sasha. And what Grandpa didn't know was that there actually were some men who liked a strong woman. Men who needed to be dominated, tied up, bound and gagged and flogged – but no, she wasn't about to share that part of her life with him.

"Never mind," she said shortly.

She couldn't let Joe take some of the burden off her. Her fear was he would take *all* the burden off her. Her fear was she was losing control of her own destiny, her family business. If she didn't have to work twelve-hour days, what would she do? Her whole sense of self was tied up in the job. She *was* her job. She could not be like Sasha, much as Grandpa wanted that. Her stomach cramped at the thought.

The fear struck deep and she trembled as she realized she was not going to convince him. With a heavy heart, she returned to her own office. Joe's confident competence, his business knowledge and his intensely compelling personality made her want to scream with impotent frustration.

Chapter Six

Sasha dressed carefully for her tour of Santa Barbara Youth Action. As the newest member of the fundraising committee, she was getting a tour so she'd know what they were all about. But it was the director of the center, who'd be giving her the tour, she was really interested in.

God, Nick Findlay was hot. Like a slightly older, bigger Justin Timberlake. Short dark hair that she wanted to run her hands over. Lean, athletic body.

So she dressed in her best pink suit, silk blouse and diamond earrings. She studied her French manicure. Alita had done an impeccable job this week.

At the center, Nick greeted her with a reserved smile she found incredibly sexy and a firm handshake as she walked in. "Nice to see you again, Sasha."

Her heart fluttered in her chest and she returned the smile. "Nice to see you too."

"Come right this way." He led her through a large area that looked like a big family room—couches and chairs arranged in groupings, books and magazines scattered over tables. A big pool table took up space on one side of the room and a table tennis game on the other. The noise and energy in the room bombarded her.

About fifty kids ranging in age from about seven to teens all appeared to be yelling or laughing or running around and she stopped dead, taken aback. "Whoa."

He laughed. "Yeah, it's crazy. When the kids are in school, it's much quieter. This is where the kids hang out. There are lots of activities for them to do as you can see. We have more things outside—a basketball court, and a play structure for the younger kids."

He gave her a tour of the entire building, even outside to see the playground and, lord, more kids outside played basketball on the court and climbed on the structure. There were more leaders out there too.

"This is a busy place," Sasha commented.

"It's summer," Nick said easily. "Kids need somewhere to go during the day. During the school year, we're only open from two o'clock to six o'clock. Kids just come after school."

"Of course."

It must take a lot of money to keep the place going. A lot of money and a lot of work. Memberships were very inexpensive and they let kids join without paying if their family couldn't afford it. She assumed most of their money came from donations. Which was why she was there. To raise money.

The whole place was very impressive, actually.

Nick was impressive too. The last time she'd seen him at a meeting, he'd been wearing a businesslike suit and tie. Today he was dressed casually in cargo pants and T-shirt. He was relaxed around the kids, teasing and joking with them, even grabbing the basketball and joining in the game for a moment, showing off some fast, athletic moves. Wow.

"Our next meeting will be here, in the boardroom," he told her as they finished the tour. "I guess I'll see you then."

"Yes." She smiled at him. She wanted him. And what Sasha wanted, Sasha got. That was the way her world worked. "Would you like to have dinner with me tonight?"

He drew back. Not quite the reaction she was used to.

"Uh...thanks, but...I have plans."

"Oh." She blinked at him. "Maybe some other time."

"Yeah. Sure." He took a couple of steps backward. "See you next week." And he disappeared.

Huh. What was up with that? He couldn't get away from her fast enough. She pouted. Weird. And disappointing.

* * * * *

Joe spent the entire next day with Tara as she reluctantly shared more information about the company with him.

"Pricing depends on a number of factors," she told him. "We have to account for about thirty dollars per gallon for pressing, processing, bottling, labeling and corking the oil, and a marketing charge of about fourteen dollars per gallon. That makes about forty-four dollars per gallon for processing and marketing. Costs for the olives to produce the oil are in addition to that. At about five hundred dollars per ton, the cost of the olives will add another eight dollars per gallon, for total costs of about fifty, fifty-two dollars per gallon. Say, about fifteen dollars per liter."

Joe lifted his brows. "So that fifty-dollar bottle I saw yesterday has a profit margin of thirty-five dollars per liter?"

"No." She shook her head. "There are other costs too, but that oil was a premium, hand-pressed oil. I'm talking basic extra virgin olive oil. We sell that for not much more than fifteen dollars per liter."

"Oh. Well. With costs at that level, you obviously have to charge a premium price to make a profit."

"That's right. A number of factors could work to reduce the high costs of processing and marketing, including economies associated with increased processing volumes and improved plant utilization, larger volume purchases of inputs, increased mechanization with larger scale operations and economies of scale in marketing operations."

Now he was learning more about the business. This was stuff he could get into. He almost rubbed his hands together.

"In Spain," Tara continued, "average yields per acre are less than half California's, but Spain's annual total olive production is more than fifty times larger than California's."

"Because they have more acreage."

"That's right. Plus, the European Union subsidizes olive oil production, about seventy cents a liter. If they reduce that, then we can become more competitive."

"But you're not waiting for that."

"No." Tara shook her head and he couldn't help but notice how her silky honey hair slid over her shoulders. Today she was dressed in a white skirt and powder blue twin-set. She'd removed the cardigan, revealing nice shoulders and slim curvy arms. Diamond studs glittered in her earlobes, other than her gold watch, the only jewelry she wore.

"U.S. per capita consumption and imports of olive oil have more than doubled over the last decade, with a portion of the increase attributed to consumers' diet and health concerns," Tara told him. "We've developed a niche market for California produced, handcrafted olive oil, but the volumes are still small, and imported olive oil still accounts for over ninety-nine percent of U.S. consumption. Even with the overall growth in demand for olive oil and California's small market share, the high costs of small-scale processing and marketing limit the amount of olive oil we can profitably process in California. If our entire olive crop were crushed for oil, it would be able to substitute for less than ten percent of recent imports."

Christ, she was smart. That itself was a huge turn-on, never mind the sexy sparkle in her eyes. Heat curled inside him. "So which is it?"

"What do you mean?" She frowned as she looked back at him. His eyes moved over her smooth, golden skin, her cheeks lightly tinged peach, her eyes framed with thick lashes. Her full mouth gleamed, like yesterday, with a pale shiny peach gloss.

"I mean, which do you want to focus on? The niche market, producing small quantities of high-quality olive oil, or expanding your production using new planting methods like high density planting and producing larger quantities of oil."

Her frown deepened. "I...I want to do both."

He met her gaze. "You think you can do both? Really?"

She blinked at him. He could practically see the wheels turning in her head. "Increasing production doesn't necessarily mean giving up those high-quality oils, those niche markets."

He kept looking at her.

"Does it?" Her mouth turned down and her eyes narrowed.

"Well, you just said you have high production costs here, compared to Spain and Italy. That limits how much you can produce. Why not focus on the specialty markets then? Do what you can do well."

She shook her head. "No. I don't believe we have to limit ourselves to that. I think with new planting methods and mechanical harvesting, we can do both."

"Show me."

Her eyes widened. "What?"

"Show me. Show me how you can do both."

"Well, I...I...just know it."

He almost laughed. "Not good enough, Tara," he said softly. "If you want me with you when you try to convince Tyrone that high density planting is worth the investment, and let's face it, it's going to cost up front, you've got to convince me first. I need facts and figures and cost-benefits analysis. You've got to prove to me you can do both."

She stared at him and the hint of deference in her amber eyes and soft mouth sent lust slicing through him, making him hard. Oh man. This was bad.

Then her gaze hardened. "No." Her brows drew together and she shook her head. "No! This is insane. I don't have to prove anything to you. Who the hell do you think you are?"

He still just looked at her, using the power of his gaze. It always worked.

She jumped to her feet and stood there. He leaned back in his chair, linking his hands behind his head.

"I'm going to talk to Grandpa right now," she muttered and stalked out of the office. He watched her go, her cheeks flushed a deeper hue of peach, her back stiff, long slender legs striding across the room.

Adrenaline sizzled through his veins. Holy fucking shit. She wasn't going to give in without a major battle. He smiled. Anticipation tingled over every nerve ending. She had to be the most difficult woman to master he'd ever met. She was smart and strong and, Jesus Christ, she had him dangerously on the edge of losing control.

He could physically dominate her. He was bigger, stronger—he could restrain her and he could show her that. Too bad that wasn't appropriate behavior for the office. No, here he had to rely on his wits—intellect, experience, instinct. He had to know her triggers...and he was definitely getting to.

But what if Tyrone didn't back him on this? What if he'd just made a total fool of himself? Shit. If Tyrone didn't support him on this, he was fucked. He'd have lost every inch of ground he'd gained with Tara. She'd never listen to him and he might as well just leave, because there was no way he'd have any influence on anything after this.

He waited, anxiety gnawing at his gut. He really didn't want to lose this job so quickly. Strangely enough, the business interested him, and he was enjoying staying with Nick and getting reacquainted. He was also fascinated by Tara. He wanted to get under those business-like exterior layers and find out how submissive she really was. He'd never been attracted to a woman like her—other than the fact she was blonde. He

did like blondes, although his tastes ran to small, feminine, submissive blondes, not tall, strong, independent blondes.

He lowered his hands to the arms of the chair, tapping one foot while he looked around her office and waited. And waited.

God, she was gorgeous when she was furious.

Her face even more flushed, her eyes sparkled with fury and she slammed the door behind her as she stalked back into her office and stood there, chest heaving. And what a nice chest it was. Another layer he wouldn't mind peeling away. Her breasts were high and round and full and quivered beneath the thin blue knit sweater as she took deep breaths in and out. Her fists clenched at her sides, her arms stiff.

He waited.

He could see she was ready to practically stomp her feet in frustration and he tried not to smile.

"Shut up," she hissed. "Just. Shut. Up."

"I didn't say a word." His lips quivered.

She almost growled as she strode over to the buttery-soft leather chair behind her desk and threw herself down into it. She met his eyes and he lifted a brow.

"Fine," she snarled. "I'll prove it to you. Give me a week."

He lifted one shoulder. "It's a big project. Take two or three weeks. Don't rush through it. I know how busy you are."

Her lips tightened. "Two weeks. I was going to start looking into soap producers to partner with, but that can wait."

"Soap producers?" Jesus, now what?

"Yes. Never mind that."

"No, no, tell me. What else do you have up your sleeve?" She was a crazy woman. What the hell else was she planning? She was spreading herself way too thin.

"The pomace we throw away. Well, actually it goes to compost. I want to find a soap producer who would use it to make olive oil soap. It would be very moisturizing."

"You're shitting me."

She gave him a look, chin down, brows lifted.

"Please," he said. "I've heard you use worse language."

She tossed her hair back, looking a bit abashed. "Fine. No, I'm not shitting you. It's being done elsewhere. I didn't just make it up. I think it's another avenue we should explore."

"I'll explore it," he offered. "You've got enough on your plate."

She stared at him, chewing on her bottom lip. "No."

He inhaled slowly through his nose, digging deep for patience.

"Fine. Do it all yourself. But just remember—you need to show me a business case for anything you want to do."

She scowled at him, folding her arms across her chest.

They stared at each other for a long wordless minute and the room grew warm as heat built between them. Her lips parted and then, once again, her lashes lowered. Adrenaline sizzled through his veins and he shifted in his chair. Christ.

A knock at the door had them both blinking, licking dry lips.

"Come in," Tara croaked.

Her grandfather poked his head around the door.

"Hello," he said. He looked back and forth between them. "Sorry to interrupt. I forgot to mention to you earlier, Tara, that we have some visitors coming from Italy in three weeks. They'll be traveling down from San Francisco with Bob Moir and Ben Kibsey."

Joe had no idea who they were and his expression must have communicated that. "They are two olive growers from the Napa Valley," Tyrone added. "Tara, could you arrange a dinner party for that Friday night? I've offered to take them out for dinner."

"Why don't you get Sasha to do it?"

"She's busy with her charity work." He smiled fondly and Joe noted how the corners of Tara's mouth turned down at that. Huh. Little sibling jealousy there? "Besides, this is something you should do. I'll expect you to act as hostess for the dinner party."

"Fine," Tara snapped, rolling her eyes.

"And while we're talking about dinner," Tyrone continued, "Joe, why don't you join us for dinner at home tonight? I should have offered earlier, but it slipped my mind."

"Thanks." Joe glanced at Tara and saw her mouth compress. "That's very nice of you. I'd be happy to join you."

"Good. We'll see you at seven. It's just casual, Tara and her sister and I."

Joe nodded. So he'd get to meet the sister who apparently was everything Tyrone wanted Tara to be. A spoiled princess, according to Nick. Interest sparked in him as he left her office.

"Lots of door slamming going on lately," Paige commented to him as he emerged from Tara's office. He paused, then grinned and held up both hands in innocence.

"Wasn't me."

She smiled back.

He walked back to his own office, shaking his head over the idea of manufacturing soap from olive oil.

Chapter Seven

Tara fumed. Bad enough she had to see him at work all day, now Grandpa was inviting him to their home for dinner. She had half a mind to stay at work all evening, which actually wouldn't be that unusual.

At home, she changed into a pair of jeans and a tank top, since Grandpa had said casual, and wandered into the kitchen where Nina was preparing their meal.

"What are we having, Nina?"

"Chicken with artichokes and lemons and olives," Nina replied. "Served over couscous."

"Mmm. My favorite." She reached for one of the marinated artichoke hearts Nina was slicing up and earned a little slap on the back of her hand. "Hey!"

Nina grinned affectionately at her. "I need those for the meal. Oh all right, have one."

Tara grinned and popped a piece of artichoke into her mouth. Yum. "Where's Sasha?"

"In the den." Nina frowned. "I think she's making martinis."

"Oh." She frowned. Tara and Nina both worried about how much Sasha was drinking lately. "I'll go see."

She left the huge kitchen and went across the hall into the cozier den. This was where she and Sasha spent most time when they were home, where they watched television together or read if they weren't in their own rooms. Sasha indeed stood at the bar pouring a drink from the martini shaker into a stemmed glass. She dropped two olives from a crystal bowl into the glass.

"Hi," she said, noting Tara. "Want one?"

Tara sighed. "Sure. How many have you had?"

Sasha shrugged, poured another glass and dropped in two olives. "Who's counting? I hear we have a guest for dinner tonight."

"Yeah. Grandpa invited Joe."

"I can't wait to meet him. He's sure got you wound up."

"He does not!"

Sasha just laughed. "Oh yeah, he does. Last night when you got home you were practically spitting you were so mad."

"And today too," Tara muttered.

"What happened today?" Sasha looked ready to be entertained.

Their grandfather entered the room. "Oh good, you've made drinks. Joe should be here any minute."

"Actually, I'll have to make more." Sasha turned back to the bar. "I just poured the last one for Tara."

She shook up another batch and while she was doing that, the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Tara said reluctantly. She went to the front door and opened it to Joe. He held a bottle of wine, and was dressed in a pair of black pants and a form-fitting, sexy-as-hell charcoal T-shirt made out of some expensive-looking fabric.

"Hey," he said, and she felt his eyes move over her as he checked her out. Her stomach muscles clenched and she tried to stay calm. "This is for you." He handed her the wine.

"Thank you. That wasn't necessary, but thank you."

He shrugged and walked into the foyer, glancing around. Tara knew their home was impressive. The ceiling in the foyer reached all the way to the second story, and a wide curving staircase with carved wooden banister climbed to the second floor. A spectacular chandelier hung above them, golden and amber globes of glass that cast a mellow glow. Rugs in jewel tones of ruby, sapphire, emerald and topaz decorated the gleaming oak floors.

"We're just in the den having drinks," she said. "Follow me." She led the way down the hall and into the den, furnished comfortably with soft tan-colored leather sofas and chairs and battered antique pine furniture.

She introduced Joe to Sasha, who looked him up and down with unabashed appraisal. Tara couldn't help but compare her faded jeans and cotton tank top to Sasha's silk dress and sexy sandals. Sasha was just totally different, her hair highlighted to a much paler blonde, flat-ironed to perfect straightness, her lips shiny bright pink.

Tara had always felt dull and boring beside Sasha, but it didn't usually bother her. Tonight, however, she wished she compared more favorably to her younger sister seen through Joe's eyes. Damn him. Why did she even care what he thought?

She glumly sipped her martini as Sasha poured one for Joe and Grandpa. She could have made more of an effort to look nice if she'd really wanted to impress him, but she'd stubbornly refused to give in to that silly feminine urge. And anyway, she couldn't compete with Sasha, so she never usually even tried.

"Do you like that painting?" Sasha asked Joe, apparently seeing his interest in the large painting on the wall behind the bar.

"Uh," he said. "It's kind of...disturbing."

Sasha grinned, handing him his martini. "It's by a local artist, a young man from Solvang. I like to support young up-and-coming artists."

Joe looked around the room at some of the other art.

"Sasha has redecorated the entire house," Grandpa said. "And as she's the only one in the family who knows anything about art, she chose the paintings and the sculptures too."

"And the chandeliers," Sasha added. "They're Dale Chihuly."

"I don't know much about art, either," Joe said. "But you've done a nice job of the house."

"Thank you." Sasha smiled at him.

"Sasha's very talented," Grandpa added.

Tara stopped herself from rolling her eyes. Sure, it was easy to decorate a house when that's all you had to do.

Sasha expertly kept dinner conversation going as they ate, and Tara sat there saying little. She felt Joe's eyes on her from time to time, and knew he was probably comparing her to Sasha with her perfect manners, gentle laugh and conversational grace, moving easily from one topic to another—current events, art, a little gossip.

That thought just made Tara slump even more in her seat, dried up any possible topics of conversation she might have wanted to discuss. The truth was, the business was her life, and if she wasn't talking business, she didn't have much to say.

For the first time in her life, she wondered if maybe her existence was too narrow. Was she missing out on things by not having a social life, other than Le Château, by not participating in all the parties and balls and fundraisers that Sasha did? Joe must think she was a boring lump, sitting there mutely.

But no. With Grandpa constantly trying to discourage her in the work she did at Santa Ynez Olives, she had to make it her sole focus. She had to prove to him—and to everyone—she could do it. She had no time for anything else.

* * * * *

They had no safety measures to prevent potential employee theft.

Joe sighed as he looked through the accounts payable. No policies or procedures, nothing, zip—something he was acutely aware of after his last job. So when he met Friday morning with Fiona Desara, the controller for Santa Ynez Olives, he definitely wanted to talk to her about that.

"We need to develop some rules—authorization levels, maybe approval for entering new suppliers into the computer system," Joe told her. Fiona was open to other suggestions and they discussed options.

"I could have done something like that a long time ago," Fiona said with a sigh. "But Tara likes to keep pretty tight control of things."

Joe pursed his lips. Oh yeah. Another example of how she could be delegating more. Fiona seemed very capable of dealing with the company's finances.

"Let's talk about this tax audit," he said. "Anything I need to be aware of? Concerned about?"

When he finished with his meeting with the controller, he went to talk to Tara. Her office door was closed and he lifted a brow at Paige.

She smiled. "In a meeting. With the last of the website designers."

What the fuck? She was meeting with them without him? A surge of anger heated his veins. After the last meetings when he'd challenged her on her decision-making process, when he'd confronted her with all the things she hadn't thought about, she'd gone ahead and met with them without him?

On purpose too, no doubt, the little witch.

He narrowed his eyes as the office door opened and Tara showed out a woman dressed in a business suit. Tara's eyes met his, then slid away as she walked past him.

He strode into her office, threw himself down into a chair and waited, fingers tapping on the arm.

She returned a few moments later and stopped just inside her office.

"Can I do something for you?" she asked, starting forward again toward the chair behind her desk.

"Did you forget to tell me about a couple of meetings this morning?" he asked tersely.

Color bloomed in her cheeks and she didn't look at him. "Um...no."

"That's what I thought." He rose to his feet, placed his hands on her desk and leaned forward. "You deliberately left me out, didn't you?"

She scowled at his chest. "You were busy with Fiona. And you didn't need to be at those meetings."

His jaw tightened. "Yes, I did. I want to make sure we make the best decisions. There's a lot more to this than just the design of the website. We have some fundamental decisions to make about our online sales and marketing."

She pressed her lips together.

"Tell me about the meetings." The muscles of his arms tightened, supporting him as he leaned on her desk.

She licked her lips. "Well, I still like the first one we met with."

"Because they 'get you'?"

Her mouth twisted. "It's not just that."

"Okay then, what is it?"

"I just think they're the best ones."

He leaned forward. "You could be right. Once again, you have to prove it to me."

She regarded him with open hostility. "We are not going to Grandpa with this," she told him coldly. "This is my decision." Her grandfather would have a fit if he knew

what she was planning. She knew it. Joe knew it. Oh yeah, this one was going to be battled out between them.

"Our decision," he stated. "And if you want me to agree, it's the same deal...you have to show me."

Her hands curled into fists at her sides. "I don't have time for this shit! You're driving me crazy!"

"I know." A smile tugged his lips. Pushing her buttons was kinda fun.

"You can't make me do it." She stared defiantly back at him.

He reached out and touched his fingertips to her cheek. "Oh I think I can," he said softly, holding her gaze.

She froze. Their gazes locked. They were both thinking the same thing—his assertion last week at Le Château that he could dominate her. "Get out."

They faced each other, almost nose to nose. Her body quivered. Adrenaline surged through him.

"You can't make me," he softly threw her own words back at her.

Her jaw tightened. She took another step toward him as if she was going to physically try to eject him from her office. The thought almost made him laugh. She wanted to get physical? Bring it, baby.

He took a step toward her too.

Joe's blood zinged through his veins as the adrenaline rushed through him and his heart thudded fast and heavy in his chest. Christ, dominating her was a challenge like no other. They stood there staring at each other for long, wordless moments. Unable to help himself, his eyes went to her mouth, now softly parted, her white teeth just visible. When he looked up at her eyes again, she lowered hers, her cheeks flushed, and white-hot need jolted through him straight to his groin. All he wanted at that moment was to grab her and bend her over the desk, spank that pretty ass and then fuck her brains out.

Her breasts rose and fell beneath her blouse. Tension rose between them, stretching tighter.

He shook his head and took a big mental step back. This woman was testing his control like nobody ever had. He'd never, ever been at the edge of losing control in the office like this. Yeah, he was confident, authoritative, knew what he wanted in the business world and usually got it—heavy emphasis on *usually*—and kept that very separate from the dominant tendencies he let loose in his personal life.

"I told you, Tara." He flicked his gaze over her. "Don't dick me around."

Her eyes widened and he loved the flash of fear and uncertainty he saw there as he turned and left her office and returned to his own.

By the end of the day he was ready for a weekend. His mind buzzed with all the information he was taking in, not to mention the perverse pleasure he got from annoying Tara with all his questions.

He grabbed his laptop and briefcase and left the office. He'd always been one to work hard when he was at work, do whatever it took to get the job done, work long hours at times if he had to, but balance had always been important to him too. Back in San Francisco, he'd had friends he liked to hang out with, a large family he was close with too and a full and busy life outside of work. Which had been the only thing that had kept him going when his career had gone down the toilet in one quick flush.

He didn't know many people in Santa Barbara, but that was okay. He wouldn't be there long anyway. He was here to work and that's what he should concentrate on. For now, though, it was the weekend – time for him to play, relax and recharge so he could show up Monday morning and kick ass.

And he knew just how he was going to play.

Chapter Eight

Tara watched Joe leave the office. Friday evening, and he was no doubt off to have fun somewhere while she sat in the office alone. Oh well. It was good to have quiet, uninterrupted time without worrying about him sticking his nose into what she was doing. She wanted to review the proposals from the website designers again.

He'd been so pissed off she'd almost seen smoke coming out his ears that morning when he realized she'd met with the designers without him. A thrill of triumph had mingled with a measure of fear at his anger. At the thought of what he could do to her. And yet—wasn't that her goal? To make things difficult for him, so maybe he just wouldn't want to stick around. She felt like a little kid playing with matches, tempted to do something scary, fascinated at what the dangerous result might be.

She pushed aside thoughts of Joe and pulled out the folder with the proposals to work on. After spending some time going over them, she wandered down to the store to help out there for a while to see how things were going. Friday evening brought lots of tourists shopping up and down State Street and the store was full. She wished they had the soap deal and could sell some really cool olive oil bath products. She was convinced they would go over well with the same demographic who liked to shop for specialty food products.

How did she know that, though?

Dammit. That was Joe's voice in her head, asking another damn question, making her second-guess herself, making her have to prove her gut was right. She sighed as she gave a credit card back to a customer, forcing herself to smile as she handed over their package. Finally business slowed a little and she could leave.

She didn't want to go home and sit there all alone on a Friday night. But if she went to Le Château...would Joe be there again?

So what if he was? She didn't have to have anything to do with him. She could find another partner, or partners, like she had before. Let him find his own little submissive to dominate.

But thinking about Joe doing things to someone else sent a dark thrill trickling down her spine. He embodied dominance—big, strong, intense, his air of authority unquestionable and commanding. Her insides quivered at the thought.

Maybe even watching him would be fun...

* * * * *

She chose a different outfit tonight, and dammit if she wasn't thinking of the approving look in Joe's eyes as he'd studied her last week in the black latex dress.

Tonight she stepped into a slim black pencil skirt and a black bustier with a heart-shaped neckline. She left her hair down and loose.

She rubbed her thumb over the healing blister on the palm of her right hand before picking up her flogger. How much was she going to be able to do tonight? Oh well, there were other things she could try.

When she walked into Le Château, she couldn't stop her gaze from searching the crowded room, looking for broad shoulders, dark hair...but she didn't see Joe. That didn't mean he wasn't in one of the private rooms, already paired up with a sweet little thing who wanted him to...*don't go there!*

She wandered through, exchanging interested smiles with a few people, then got herself a drink. Nerves fluttered in her tummy. She didn't see Jason or Adam, the only two men she'd ever scened with there, and she hesitated to approach someone else. Not very dominant of her. Huh.

Two men and a woman seated on a couch began to attract some attention as they made out and Tara watched them for a while, a warm ache of arousal growing inside her. It was still hard for her to believe she was standing in this place watching people have sex. Then her gaze was drawn to another scene, where a man turned a woman so her back was to him and bound her hands behind her back. The position thrust her naked breasts forward. She turned to face him and he pushed her to her knees in front of him.

Tara edged closer and paused, knowing if they were doing it in one of the public areas, they wanted to be watched. Her mouth grew dry and her heart picked up speed as the man pulled his erection out of his pants, long and hard. He met her eyes briefly and the domination and sensuality in them made her tummy flip over.

"Open," he commanded the woman. She obediently opened her mouth and he cupped her jaw with one hand, directing his cock into her mouth with the other. The woman looked up at the man, their gazes locked as he fucked her mouth, one hand still holding her jaw, the other holding her hair back so those watching had a clear view of his cock sliding in and out of her mouth.

Tara's nipples tingled and her pussy ached, a low flutter in her tummy. She watched with helpless fascination. The woman's pose was submissive, hands behind her back, on her knees in front of him, the man aggressively thrusting into her. That yearning started deep down inside her, a hot ache of need.

"This turns you on, doesn't it?" a black velvet voice whispered in her ear.

She started, turning her head to see Joe standing beside her. She blinked at him but said nothing. He slid an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. She tried to jerk out of his grasp, but he held her tightly and her eyes slid back to the scene in front of her. His warmth and his scent surrounded her, that erotic spice and citrus fragrance.

The man lightly tapped the woman's cheek. "Deeper," he said. "Take it all."

And he pushed himself further, it must have been right to her throat. One hand on the back of her head, he held her as he pushed in and Tara could see the woman was

almost choking. Then the man released her, pulled all the way out and the woman gasped and swallowed, blinking rapidly. The tears running down her face did not take away from the look of ecstasy she wore. Heat flashed under Tara's skin as she watched, wide-eyed.

"That's a good little slut," the man said and he bent and kissed the woman's swollen mouth.

Tara melted inside, knowing her panties were wet and sticky. Joe shifted her so she stood right in front of him, her back pressed to him, his arms linked around her, and they watched together.

"Gonna come in your mouth," the man said. "Swallow it."

He pumped into the woman again, harder, faster, and with a tight cry he came. Tara wished she could see it, see him coming. She'd never seen a man come. She'd had sexual relationships with men, but that had never been one of her experiences.

"Admit it, Tara, that turns you on." Joe's voice rasped in her ear.

She gave a jerky nod and Joe pressed into her from behind. Oh lord—he was hard too, his erection firm against her lower back, his thighs solid against her butt.

"You want that," he whispered, bending his head to her. She shivered in his arms. His hand slid lower on her tummy, over the corset, lower...Her pussy clenched hard.

"No," she said. "That's not what I want."

"What do you want?"

"I...I want to be the one in control."

"Why aren't you with those submissive boys tonight then?"

She blinked. "I didn't...they're not here."

"There are others." He nuzzled her hair.

She sucked briefly on her bottom lip. She didn't want to admit to him last week's scene had left her feeling let down, as though none of them had been truly satisfied.

"Remember what I told you—the best way to learn is to experience it. Come with me," his voice cajoled, seduced, his hands caressing her stomach. "Let me show you."

Heat raced through her, lust sliced through her. Everything inside her yearned to say yes.

The scene in front of them, the beauty of the woman's submission, the thrill of the man's dominance, combined with the hard strength of Joe's arms around her made it so hard to say no to him.

"No." The word came out like a whimper and he gave a soft laugh.

"Oh yeah, that was convincing."

"Joe."

He released her waist and slid his big hand around hers, giving a small tug. And she went with him.

He took her hand and led her out of the main room and down the hall, past the Red Room where she'd been last week and into the Black Room. She pulled at his grip, trying to resist, but not very hard. She tripped along after him in her stilettos.

Inside the Black Room, she eyed the equipment in the room nervously.

"Don't worry," he said, closing the door. "We don't have to use any of that stuff."

She turned wide eyes back to him.

"I wouldn't even tie you up the first time," he continued, moving toward her across the black carpet. "I would never expect a submissive to allow that much vulnerability with someone she barely knows."

"I'm not a submissive."

He stood in front of her, rested his hands on her bare shoulders and smiled. "Right."

She opened her mouth to speak and he laid a finger over her lips, then bent his head and kissed her, a soft brushing of mouths. She jerked her head away, took in a sharp breath and he lifted a hand to cup her head and hold her there for him. He deepened the kiss, opened her mouth to him and licked inside her mouth.

Oh God. It was like his mouth took possession of hers. She trembled against him, then melted into him and kissed him back. His hands twisted in her hair, then tugged, sending a cascade of shivers over her skin. A low moan vibrated from her throat and he drank it in. He tugged harder, the sensations sharper now, tingling all the way to her pussy, and he pulled her head back to expose her throat to him. He licked his way down to the tender hollow where her pulse fluttered.

He pressed more kisses down over her collarbone and onto her breasts spilling from the top of the black bustier. A small tug on the bustier revealed her fully to him.

"So pretty," he whispered, gazing at her nipples. His heated admiration sent a spiral of delight down through her and her nipples tingled almost unbearably. He bent his head to take one nipple in, licking over the tight bud first, then sucking it into his mouth—just the hardened tip of it. He closed his eyes, pressed her nipple between tongue and roof of his mouth and sucked.

She made a long, low noise as her body turned to liquid, and her hands fisted in his hair.

"You like that," he whispered against her flesh. He sucked the other nipple, gave a small suckle to the soft flesh beside the nipple and kissed his way back to the other breast. He played like that for a long time and she couldn't get up a single smidgen of resistance to drag his head away from her, the pleasure pouring over her at his suckling touch rendering her helpless.

Her legs weakened and when they threatened to give way, he picked her up and carried her to the bed in the room, a bed with a wrought iron headboard and footboard.

He laid her gently on the mattress and reached for her hands. He lifted them over her head and wrapped her fingers around one of the iron posts of the headboard.

"Hold tight," he ordered her. She lay there, gazing up helplessly at him, feeling like her body was out of her control, soft and quivering and desperate.

He knelt beside her and with two hands hitched the hem of her skirt up. Higher. Higher.

"Christ, Tara." He surveyed the black lace tops of the stockings attached to garters as they came into view. "That is so hot." He stared at her for a long, heated moment, then continued to lift the skirt higher. Her breath caught as he exposed her panties, a black scrap beneath the garter belt.

"These have to come off," he murmured and unsnapped the garters. Then he tucked two fingers into the panties and pulled them off.

God, how could she be letting him do this? But her aching, needy pussy seemed to be in control of her head and there was no way she could have moved. She should have been protesting, but her lips couldn't form any words.

"Very pretty," he said, studying her. The admiration in his eyes weakened her defenses even more. Her eyes drifted closed at the sensations pouring through her, the heat, the liquid heat burning inside.

Then his hands slid up over her torso to cup her breasts again. A moan leaked out of her and her breasts swelled. His fingers plucked at her nipples, tugging, twisting, adding to the spiral of sensations inside her. Her nipples were sensitive and were always the way for her to achieve arousal, but she was already aroused, so this was overload, a fierce, wicked, pleasure overload.

And then he picked up the flogger.

Her eyes widened, every muscle tightening. What was he going to do? Reason urged her to roll to the side to escape him, to get the hell away, but desire and curiosity made her stay put, to wait and see what he'd do, what she was about to experience. Because although she'd been taught how to use the flogger and she'd been using it on others, she'd never experienced what it felt like anywhere other than her own palms.

She bit her bottom lip, eyeing him fearfully but expectantly.

He swept the tails over her pussy, a soft brushing that sent tingles shooting through her. Down. Up, the tails catching on her clit, sending sparkles of ecstasy through her body. Down. Again. And again.

"Spread your legs."

And she did.

Then he added a little wrist motion to achieve a light slap. She made a noise low in her throat, heat shimmering from her pussy over her entire body.

"You like that," he murmured, eyes intent and focused on her.

She wanted to deny it, but words wouldn't come. He continued on, delivering light little stinging blows to her pussy, while heat and electricity spiraled up inside her, tighter, hotter with every stroke. The buzz of a burgeoning orgasm tingled. God, from

being spanked on her pussy! What was wrong with her! Her teeth sank deeper into her bottom lip as her body tensed. And yet, he took her higher. Higher.

And then he stopped.

Throbbing, aching, empty, she cried out with need.

He smiled at her.

He lifted the flogger and her pussy tightened in anticipation. But instead of hitting her there again, he delivered smarting little blows to her breasts. Another low cry escaped her as her nipples tightened painfully. A flush of pleasure radiated over her skin.

One breast. The other. Then back. He built an erotic rhythm that she sank into, lost in edgy pleasure.

"You need to come, don't you, Tara?"

God, oh God, she did, she did. The thought entered her head, way back in the far recesses of her brain, that this was Joe, this was *crazy*, but she could not stop it. "Yes!"

He pushed her thighs wide apart, exposing her aching, wet pussy, and to her utter shock, he turned the handle of the flogger around in his hand and probed at her opening with the rounded end of it. Ah! God!

With a push it was inside her, filling her, and her hips lifted off the mattress, heels digging in, fingers curling.

"Oh Jesus!" she gasped. With one hand, he thrust the handle of the flogger into her, deep, over and over, picking up that rhythm again, and with the other hand he found her clit and rubbed. Tight little circles just where she needed them. Tension coiled in her, unbearable, straining, and then she shattered, sparks flying, intense, violent pleasure tearing through her.

* * * * *

She'd looked fucking amazing in that corset, pushing her tits up. He'd liked the little ivory ribbon threaded through the top edge of it and tied in a bow between her breasts. Tough black with a hint of softness. Sweet. She was the perfect size—for him anyway, since he didn't find huge tits all that appealing, liking just enough to fill his hands—and shape, high and round and firm. When he'd seen the look of almost dazed fascination and arousal on her face, watching that scene, he'd known he could have her. She just needed to learn what was inside her.

Joe barely caught the basketball that slammed into him, thrown by Nick.

"Pay attention, buddy," Nick called across the court. Nick had talked Joe into coming along to the center Saturday afternoon for a game with some of the kids. They'd played basketball together in college, but it had been awhile for Joe.

Joe dribbled the ball up the court, avoiding the kids, aimed for the basket and sunk it. He pumped a fist into the air as the kids on his team cheered. He grinned. But his mind wandered away again.

The debate about whether it had been a good idea to do that with Tara, considering who she was, kept ping-ponging in his head. Yeah, it could make things damn uncomfortable at work. On the other hand, this could make things better. Once he learned her triggers, gained her trust and her submission, it could only help.

Was there an ethical problem there?

Nah. It wasn't like he would try to use his control over her for something unethical. He wasn't going to steal from the company or make bad decisions. He was only trying to stop her from making him waste his time looking at useless information, excluding him from meetings he should be at and arguing with him over every damn thing. And if it helped her look inside herself and find out who she really was—hey, it was win-win.

He caught the ball, passed it to a lanky thirteen-year-old and jogged down the court, swiping a hand across his sweaty forehead. Christ, he was out of shape. He needed to get back into working out.

There was also still the fact that he could be putting at risk the only job he'd been able to find after months of pounding the pavement. Big risk—worth it?

He'd never been a reckless gambler. In the business world he liked to take calculated risks. Consider the pros and cons. Look at the issue rationally and logically. So he'd done that, there at Le Château, considered everything at lightning speed and made his decision. Now he had to live with it.

But he hadn't quite taken into consideration the effect she was going to have on him. He was experienced and had shown many women their submissive nature, had pushed them past their boundaries—like a teacher. As he'd offered to be for Tara. And while he'd enjoyed it and had taken satisfaction from it, it had always felt...distant.

Not with Tara. It didn't feel distant. It felt...personal. His body burned at the idea of teaching her about her sexuality, about the desires he knew haunted her. He ached to show her the kind of satisfaction she could find in submission in a way that made him almost...nervous.

And, lost in his thoughts, the elbow that hit him in the eye sent him stumbling to his knees on the court. Shit!

Chapter Nine

Tara spent the weekend shifting back and forth from heated arousal to scorching mortification. How could she have let Joe do that to her?

She'd known he might be there, but had gone anyway, thinking stupidly that she could avoid him. Resist him. Dammit.

She didn't even go in to the office, which she usually did on weekends, in case he was there. She was so edgy, she actually sought out Sasha to talk to her.

Her sister was sitting in the den, flipping through a magazine, drinking a martini.

Tara eyed the nearly empty glass. "Drinking again?"

Sasha looked up and frowned. "Would you get off my back about the drinking?"

"Why are you drinking so much, Sasha?"

"I'm not!"

Whatever. Tara sighed and sat on the couch beside her. She picked up a thick *Vogue* magazine and flipped through glossy pages.

"Anything nice in here?" she murmured, knowing her sister would have picked out several outfits.

Sasha shrugged. "Not really."

Tara lifted her head. "What's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

Sasha wasn't her usual cheerful self. She wasn't interested in the clothes in the fashion magazines. She'd gone out with Baxter—Baxter the Bastard, as Tara called him in her head—when they'd supposedly broken up weeks ago. And she was drinking herself into a haze pretty much every night. But they didn't exactly have a close relationship where they talked about stuff.

Grandpa walked in just then.

"Hello, girls."

"Hi, Grandpa." Sasha smiled up at him.

"Next weekend is the Santa Barbara Wildlife Federation party at the country club," he said as he walked over to the bar. He smiled at Sasha as he poured himself a glass of Scotch. "Have you got something pretty to wear?"

"Of course!" Sasha fluttered her lashes at him. "I got a beautiful dress a couple of weeks ago when I was in New York."

"Perfect. You always know how to impress everyone."

Tara looked down at her hands. She wasn't even going to the party and she certainly wasn't going to impress anybody. Not her kind of thing at all—she'd been to too many where she'd just felt excluded, like she didn't fit in. Nobody wanted to talk about olives. Some men liked talking business, but then their wives got annoyed and...it never was much fun.

She left Sasha and Grandpa talking about who was going to be at the party and went back to her room to wrestle with dark, heated memories of Joe flogging her to a peak of orgasmic ecstasy.

* * * * *

"So what are we up to today?" Joe asked with a grin as he walked into Tara's office Monday morning. She sat there behind her desk, hands clenched into fists already, eyes sparking, mouth tight. Satisfaction at her reaction to him surged inside him. He'd gotten to her. And she hated it.

Of course, he also had to deal with *his* reaction to *her*. Had spent the whole weekend trying to deal with it.

She wasn't going to give in without a fight and he didn't want to break her—just wanted her to see inside herself. And his ulterior motive suddenly seemed less important than helping her learn that about herself and the enjoyment they could both have in doing so.

"You're scheduled for more time with Fiona." She turned and met his eyes and he could see the quivering uncertainty she was trying to hide. Then her eyes widened. "Oh my God! What happened to you?"

He touched his eye. He'd forgotten about the shiner. "Oh yeah. I was playing basketball." He wasn't going to tell her he'd been so distracted thinking about her that he'd run into an elbow.

"Jesus. Are you okay?"

He shrugged. "Just a black eye. No big deal."

She blinked. "Um. Okay. Well...we should talk."

"Okay." He propped one hip on the corner of her desk. Waited.

She pressed her lips together. "What happened at the club...it doesn't change anything here."

"What would it change?"

Her cheeks heated and she floundered for words. "I don't know. But I just wanted to...I still don't want you here."

"What are you so afraid of, Tara?"

She stared at him and her cheeks flushed. "I'm not afraid of anything. Why would I be afraid?"

"I don't know, that's why I asked." He leaned closer so he could smell her flowery fragrance. He inhaled it slowly, bringing back memories of when he'd held her in his arms at Le Château and breathed in that heady jasmine and magnolia scent. "You're afraid of me, aren't you?"

"Of course not! That's ridiculous."

"I don't think so. I just can't figure out why. Do you think I'm going to take your job away from you?"

She shook her head violently. "Don't be ridiculous." But her reaction told him what he needed to know.

"I'm not trying to take anything away from you, Tara."

She stared up at him. "You're crazy," she said. "You can't take this away from me."

"I don't want to take anything away from you," he repeated.

"Fine, then there's no problem."

"What else are you afraid of?"

She pressed her lips together. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know, when you enter the BDSM lifestyle, it's not unusual to not know what you want."

"I know what I want! And I'm not in that lifestyle!"

"Tara. Whether you're dominant or submissive, the first, most important thing you have to learn is honesty. First of all honesty with yourself."

She jumped to her feet, shoving her chair back, hands clenched in fists. "I do not want to talk about this! I told you, that didn't change anything."

"You may learn you want to dominate," he continued, standing too so he blocked her escape from behind her desk. A pulse leaped in her throat and her breathing quickened. "You may learn you want to submit." Her eyes flickered. He smiled. "Maybe you'll learn you like both and you'll want to switch. But that's what it's all about. Learning about ourselves. I'm still learning too."

She stared at him, saying nothing. "I won't learn I want to submit," she finally said, looking down.

"Just so long as you're honest," he repeated. "You have to have an open mind, and be honest with yourself. Just think about that."

He turned and left her office to find Fiona.

Joe loved the money part of business. It had been a tough decision whether to major in finance or operations, so he'd taken a lot of finance courses. In his last job he'd had responsibility for budgeting and planning, so he enjoyed working with Fiona. But accelerated depreciation and capitalized costs weren't enough to keep his mind off Tara and her delicious uncertainty.

Joe wasn't one of those people who hated to admit to mistakes. If he screwed up, he screwed up; he learned from it and moved on. But he couldn't quite get himself to think that giving Tara that super-nova orgasm had been a mistake.

Although the fact they had to work together added a certain layer of complication to the whole thing.

On the other hand, he wanted to tame her, both in the office and out of it. Now that he knew what she was really about, his techniques would be the same, but the tools would be different. In the office he couldn't pick up a flogger or tie her to her chair. But there were other ways. She was such a sharp-tongued, shrewish witch, she definitely needed to be gentled. Not broken. He would never want to break that strength, that intelligence. But he could soften it...and he could make her like it. He knew it.

* * * * *

Tara sank down into her chair again, all warm and shaky.

She was afraid. He was smart and experienced and charming and he was taking over the business that was her entire life. It was all she had. She had to be strong and in control to hold on to it. If she gave in to him, she'd lose everything.

He was also goddamn annoying – arrogant, confident, domineering.

Even if he said he didn't want to take anything away from her, even if he truly had no intention of trying to take over this company, it could still happen because that's what Grandpa wanted. So she had to stay in control – always.

But she was afraid of Joe and the things he was challenging her to do – and not just business.

Just after lunch, Juan called to tell her that there'd been an accident at the ranch. One of the laborers had fallen off a ladder and appeared to have broken his leg. They were taking him to the hospital in Santa Barbara.

Shit. She rubbed the tightness between her eyebrows, hoping the guy was okay. She had a meeting scheduled with a supplier that afternoon that she couldn't change, but as soon as she was done she headed to the hospital.

Javier was in a room, leg casted, looking pale, but okay. His young wife was beside him, holding a baby on her hip.

Tara introduced herself. "I'm so sorry this happened," she told Javier. "Of course we'll cover your medical bills, so don't worry about that."

"Joe already told me that," Javier said.

Tara froze. A frown tightened her forehead. "Joe was already here?"

"Yeah. He just left. He wanted to make sure I was okay. And he told me as soon as I can move around they'll find something for me to do at the ranch. Whatever I can do. He's a great guy."

She gave him a tight smile. "Yes. He is."

"And you all are great to work for, I gotta say."

His wife smiled back at her as she bounced the baby. "Yes. Thank you."

Tara forced a smile. "You're very welcome. I'm just glad you're going to be okay."

* * * * *

After the fundraising committee meeting Friday morning, Sasha lingered at the Youth Action Center. It wasn't because of Nick. Not at all. He'd been all business, professional and courteous during the meeting. They were planning the annual fundraising gala to be held at the Four Seasons Hotel. Just the kind of thing Sasha loved to plan and she'd put forth some great ideas if she did say so herself, but she'd found herself distracted by Nick's gorgeous eyes and appealing smile.

Why had he turned her down? It didn't make sense. Guys fell over themselves to be with her.

But she didn't hang around because of him.

She wandered into the kitchen just as lunch was being served. Her eyes roved around the room, but no Nick.

"Hi," said one little girl, her silky dark hair in a ponytail, her brown eyes big and watchful. "Who're you?"

"I'm Sasha. Who are you?"

"Julia."

"What are you having for lunch?" Sasha asked.

"Sandwiches. Are you having lunch?"

"Um, no. Not here."

"You can have this." Julia pushed a sandwich toward her. "It's tuna. I hate tuna."

Sasha smiled. "Do you?"

"It stinks."

Sasha laughed. "So Julia, how old are you?"

"I'm ten. How old are you?"

Sasha was amused at the little girl's directness. "Twenty-six."

"My mom is twenty-five," she said.

Sasha's eyes widened. *Whoa*. "Your mom is twenty-five?" she repeated.

Julia nodded. "Yup." She took a bite of her sandwich.

Sasha picked up the tuna sandwich, frowned at it, then took a bite too. "What about your dad?"

"I don't have a dad," Julia said matter-of-factly. "Just a mom. She goes to school and works a lot, so I come here."

"Oh. That's good she's going to school."

"Yup. She says when she finishes school she'll be able to just work one job and she and I can spend more time together."

"How many jobs does she have?"

"Um...right now, just two. She works as a waitress at two different places, one at night and one in the day. Before, she was also working at an office building, cleaning at night."

"Who stays with you at night?" Sasha asked, lowering her sandwich from her mouth.

"Nobody." Julia shrugged her small, thin shoulders. "I go to bed by myself and my mom is there when I wake up. Then she brings me here and goes to her other job or to school."

Sasha swallowed. A girl her own age was raising a daughter, going to school and working three—three!—jobs to support them. A little ache of sympathy tightened her stomach.

"Well, it's good you're so grown up and you can help your mom," she said, her throat tight. She smiled at Julia.

Julia was looking at Sasha's hands. "Your nails are pretty."

"Thanks."

"Some day I want to have nails like that."

"You will, if you want. So what are you going to do this afternoon?"

"I'm going to do art." Julia's face lit up. "This afternoon we're going to do some stuff with beads."

"Ooh," Sasha said. Beads. She loved jewelry design. She'd done some jewelry design courses in art college. "That sounds fun. Maybe I'll come see what you're doing."

"Okay," Julia agreed. "Maybe you can make something too."

"I'd love that."

So she did. After lunch, the leaders organized the kids into different groups and took them off to various parts of the building. Some went outside, some went to the library, some to the gym in the basement. Sasha followed the jewelry making group upstairs.

She introduced herself to the leaders and sat down at one of the tables. They gave her a kind of funny look, glanced at each other, then shrugged.

They had some pretty nice beads to work with, but not much choice of findings.

"I don't know what to make," one girl said. She sat there, overwhelmed by all the choices.

Sasha poked through the findings and found two ear wires. "How about a pair of earrings?"

"That's too hard."

"What's your name, sweetie? I'll show you how."

"Emily."

"Hi, Emily. I'll do one and you copy me with the other. What colors do you like?"

They picked out some pretty blue and green beads. "These crystals would look nice too," Sasha suggested. In no time they had a pair of sparkly drop earrings. "Are your ears pierced?" She checked Emily's ears and they were, but she had no earrings. "Do you want to wear them?"

Emily nodded and Sasha carefully helped her put them in. Emily shook her head, her eyes shining. "I want to see them!" She jumped up and ran to a mirror on the counter and inspected her new earrings, turning her head one way, then the other.

"I want earrings like those!" Julia said. "Sasha, help me, help me!"

A circle of little girls formed around Sasha as she began helping the others, picking out beads and colors. Julia was surprisingly creative, choosing an unusual combination of glass beads that was actually quite stunning.

The girls were all modeling their creations, pushing each other away from the mirror and giggling, when Nick walked into the room.

He frowned at Sasha, sitting on a small chair at a low table. "What are you doing here?"

She smiled at him. "I love jewelry design. When I heard they were going to be doing some this afternoon, I decided to hang around."

"That's not necessary," he said, folding his arms across his wide chest. "As a member of the fundraising committee, you're not obligated to do this."

"I know that." She kept her smile firmly in place. "I just wanted to."

"Nothing else to do?"

She blinked. Was that a jab? "Uh. Well, I had a free afternoon."

Hell, most of her afternoons were free. Her charity work and decorating the house only took so much time.

"I'm sure you did. Well, thanks." And he turned and stalked out of the room, shoulders rigid as if he was pissed off she was there. Not exactly what she'd been hoping for. She sighed.

Chapter Ten

Tara had some questions about the high density planting only Blair could answer, so Friday afternoon she drove out to the ranch. It was also a good way to avoid seeing Joe.

She got the info she needed, met with Juan on some other issues and was sitting in an empty office tapping away at her laptop computer late in the day when Joe walked in.

He looked dismayingly sexy in a pair of jeans riding low on his lean hips. A navy blue polo shirt, soft and well-washed, hung from his broad shoulders and outlined the muscles of his chest, the short sleeves showing off his rounded biceps.

"What are you doing here?" she asked with a frown. "I thought you were busy with Fiona."

"We finished going over things last night."

She lifted a brow.

He laughed. "I mean late yesterday. In case you haven't noticed, she has a diamond the size of an olive pit on her hand. I think there's a fiancé in the picture."

"Yes. There is."

"You know, I seriously think you're underutilizing her skills," he said.

She frowned at him. "What do you mean?"

"She's an incredible asset to the company. Working with her on this tax audit has given me a good sense of her abilities. She's incredibly detail oriented and extremely knowledgeable. The external auditors think so too. It's made the whole thing go much smoother."

"Oh. Well. That's good."

Huh. She wasn't sure what to think about that. Of course she knew Fiona was bright and capable, otherwise Tara wouldn't have hired her. But underutilizing her...?

"So. It's Friday. Wanna go get a drink somewhere?"

She blinked at him. "A drink? You came all the way out here to ask me out for a drink?"

He grinned. "No. I had to talk to Blair about some things."

"Oh. Well. No. I don't want to go for a drink. I still have work to do."

He shook his head. "Okay. Maybe I'll see you later at Le Château?"

"No. I'm not going there tonight."

"No?" He moved closer. "Why not?"

"I just...I'm just not."

"Tara."

He stopped beside her chair.

"What?" Her heart thudded in her chest at the look in his eye. God, why did he do this to her?

"You're afraid, aren't you?"

She rolled her eyes. "Not this again."

"I think you're mostly afraid of yourself."

She snorted and turned her gaze back to her computer screen. "That's ridiculous."

"I don't think so."

"Look, I have work to do..."

He pushed the laptop computer aside, and lifted her chin so she had to meet his eyes. "Remember what I said about honesty?"

"I'm honest."

He shook his head slowly side to side. His jaw tightened. "You're not being honest. With me. Or with yourself."

Anger flared inside her. She frowned at him and tried to draw back, but his fingers cupped her jaw. "You know what you really want is a man strong enough to show you who you really are."

"Oh for God's sake!" Her breath hitched. "Your ego is unbelievable."

The barely restrained power, primal and male, leashed by his air of authority, made her tremble inside.

"I saw inside you," he continued. "Last week at Le Château. When I made you come like crazy. You were so hot for it—I could see what you wanted. You just don't want to admit it."

"Okay! Yes! It was good. But not the way you think..."

"Show me." His eyes challenged her.

"Show you what?"

He grabbed her hand and pulled her up out of the chair, hard against his body.

"Show me what you want."

She quivered. "Stop."

He chuckled. "At least say it like you mean it."

She just stared back at him as if hypnotized.

"Oh God," he groaned, sliding his hand around the back of her neck.

Their mouths connected, sending a jolt of white-hot electricity through her straight down between her legs. He speared his fingers into her hair to hold her head as he kissed her, opening her mouth with the pressure of his jaw, pushing into her mouth with his tongue. Her tongue met his, pushed back and their mouths played back and

forth as they tasted and sucked on each other. The kiss deepened, grew hotter, their mouths open, tongues sliding, and Joe yanked her harder up against him, his arm circling her and holding her there.

God. His tongue in her mouth, one hand holding her head, the other on her ass...she couldn't help her hips from moving against his in a helpless, needy rhythm. He tasted hot and delicious as he sucked on her tongue and she got lost in the heat of it, the mindless sensation. She arched against him, a small moan escaping her as he changed the angle of his head, kissed her again, and she clutched his shoulders.

"The house," he muttered. "Do you have keys to the house?"

She looked at him, dazed, blinking.

He gave her shoulders a small shake. "Tara. I'm going to fuck you. Do you want to do it here in the office?"

* * * * *

She blinked again. "I have the key."

Perfect. They didn't even have to drive. Ignoring her computer and papers and briefcase, he grabbed her hand and practically dragged her out of the office. His dick was about to explode, lust spearing through him, heating him up. They had to get out of there.

It had been building up for weeks, ever since he'd arrived. They'd had some fun at Le Château, but this time he was going to be inside her. He was going to own her. He was going to show her once and for all what she really wanted.

He pulled her across the parking lot and down the path through the purple-spiked salvia and sunny daisy-like flowers to the ranch house. He felt her resistance in the way she held back, but he wasn't letting her pull away. She unlocked the front door with trembling hands, glancing at him over her shoulder, and they stepped into the cool, dim foyer.

Joe shut the door, reached for her and spun her around, shoving her up against the carved wooden door and devouring her mouth. She tasted so damn good, like he knew she would. He couldn't get enough of her, all soft and warm and tantalizing. Their tongues slid together, mouths open wide for each other in long, deep kisses.

He slid his hands up under the cotton shirt she wore, but it was form-fitting and not stretchy, so he had to go for the buttons, his big fingers fumbling with those damn tiny fuckers. Finally he had the blouse open and wrenched it apart so he could see her breasts. God. His chest heaved as he gazed down at her, plump breasts almost spilling from lacy bra cups, sky blue like the shirt she wore. He was staring at her in a near-stupor and had to marshal his control yet again.

"Bedroom," he said. "Where is it?"

She closed her eyes and her breasts rose on a long intake of air. Never mind. He'd find it. He bent, slid an arm beneath her legs and lifted her against him.

"Joe!" Her eyes flew open and she clutched at his shoulders. "Stop! I don't want this."

"Yes, you do. You say you don't, but I can feel it. The way you kiss me back. The way you melt against me." He strode into the house, past a spacious, airy living room with wrought iron chandeliers hanging from vaulted ceilings and walls of mellow pine paneling. Arched windows looked out onto an expansive terrace. He turned down a hall, past a huge master bedroom, pausing with an arched brow. Tara shook her head, arms around his neck, so he continued on to the next room, opened the carved pine door and walked inside, then lowered her feet to the creamy area rug layered over polished wood.

"This is the room I use when I'm here," she croaked. He had a dim impression of a minimally furnished room—a big bed with a plain white duvet, simple painted furniture. Sunlight beamed between the slats of wood blinds, creating a tiger-striped pattern on the floor.

She stood beside the bed, shirt hanging open, gazing at him. His head whirled as more blood rushed from his head to his cock and again he had to fight for control.

"Take your shirt off."

"No."

He closed the distance between them but didn't touch her. He watched her struggle with the need inside her, saw the curiosity warring with resistance, knew every sinful thing she was wishing for. He could grant those wishes.

"I'm going to give you what you want."

"You don't know what I want."

"Oh yeah, Tara, I do. Remember." He still didn't touch her, only with his gaze. "Honesty. I'm being honest with you, and you need to do the same for me. I can show you all the things you secretly want. And how good it can be."

"Not like this."

Her stubbornness yanked at his self-control, but when uncertainty flickered in her eyes, he dug deep for patience. This was new to her, all new, all scary. "I'll look after you," he said softly. "That's my responsibility as Dominant. Not just to control you, but to pleasure you. It'll be so good, sweetheart."

Their eyes met and held and he saw the surrender there. Urgent need swelled inside him. He was dying to see how submissive she was, to overcome her resistance and have her obey his every demand, hear her beg him to sink his cock into her. But first he had to earn her trust. He was figuring out her triggers and knew he could get her to surrender to him. Completely.

"Now take off your shirt or I'll spank that pretty ass."

Heat flared in her eyes and her hands slowly lifted to the edges of the shirt, pushing it down over one arm, then the other, then dropping it on to a chair beside her. *Yes.*

He settled his hands on her waist, her flesh warm and silky. He studied her. Her breasts were high on her slender rib cage, full and round, sweetly cupped by blue lace. His mouth filled with saliva at the sight and he swallowed again. He reached behind her and flicked open her bra, tugged it off and dropped it to the floor. He drew out the tips of her breasts with his fingers, tugging over and over again, and her whole body twitched against him.

Her eyes drifted closed and her head fell back and when he looked at her face, he saw ecstasy.

"Oh God," she whispered.

He groaned. "I can't wait any longer to taste you." He bent his head, taking one small nipple into his mouth, sucking hard. He pressed it between the top of his mouth and his tongue, loving the soft and hard feel of it, the sweetness of her taste. Then he tasted the other, his hands cupping her, lifting her to his mouth. Mmm. So good. Eyes closed, he lost himself in the taste of her, the feel of her all soft skin and warm flesh, heat coursing through his veins. He spent a long time at her breasts, loving the reaction he was getting from her as her trembling hands clutched his shoulders and her body twitched and shuddered against his.

"I can't stand up any more," she whispered to him. "My legs...."

He understood, amazed his own legs were still holding him up. "Now take your skirt off," he instructed her, his voice not entirely steady. She reached for a side zipper and drew it down, then shimmied a bit to get the snug skirt over her hips. It fell to the floor and she stepped out of it.

His breath stopped. She was wearing nothing but a pair of sky blue thong panties. Her legs were miles long, her body slender, but rounded in the right places. Desire surged through him, his body aching, his thick hot erection pulsing. He pressed a hand to his groin in near-agony.

"Sit down on the bed," he ordered her. She moved and lowered herself to the bed, hands pressed to the mattress on either side of her, shoulders raised. She watched him.

"Lie down."

"Joe."

"I said, lie down." He stood before her. "This is how it goes, Tara. When I tell you to do something, you do it. No hesitation. No questions."

Her low groan told him enough as she lowered herself to the bed and he stripped the golf shirt over his head, then stepped out of jeans, socks and underwear. Naked, he stood before her, his cock bobbing in front of him, long, hard, throbbing. He slid his hand over it, needing the touch, watching her lips part and her eyes darken. Her eyes roved over his body and he saw the exact moment she became aware of his cock. Her eyes widened and her look changed to one of awe and apprehension.

"Oh God, Joe," she whispered. "Um..."

"I know." He was big, even when not aroused, hence the high school nickname. When aroused, he was even bigger, and he didn't actually think he'd ever in his life been this hard. "Don't worry. I won't hurt you."

She gave a jerky little wide-eyed nod. He stood between her legs, pushed her with a hand between her breasts so she lay down on the bed, let his hand slide up to her throat, then drew in a deep breath, inhaling her scent, holding her like that. He loved the smell of her, that fragrance of exotic jasmine and magnolia. As they'd worked side by side at the table in her office, he'd often caught a whiff of the scent. It turned him on—but now, the sexy floral mingled with feminine arousal, she smelled like warm spice and sin, sex and submission.

"I'll make sure you're really ready for me," he assured her.

She bit her lip.

He slid his hand down her body under the little lace triangle covering the patch of golden fluff between her legs. He spent a few seconds enjoying the feel of his fingers tangled there, then slid lower, his long finger dipping into her slick folds. "You're wet already, Tara. Your panties are soaked."

She moaned.

He closed his eyes, trying to breathe. He fought the urge to come swelling up in him, his balls tight. Breathe, man, breathe.

"You're tight too," he muttered. She shivered. He probed her deeper with his finger, then slid it out. Her body made a soft, wet noise as he withdrew that finger slowly. "And I'm big, so we need to take our time."

He measured her slender hips with his hands, then went to his knees on the floor between her legs, looking at her soft pussy covered by blue silk. Fucking gorgeous.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted. She rose up on her elbows, her long bangs hanging over one eye sexily. He hauled her butt closer to the edge of the bed by her legs and pushed her thighs open. She gasped again, falling flat on her back. He tucked his fingers into the little blue velvet ribbons crossing each hip and tugged on them, then pulled them down. He felt the damp heat of her and smelled her sweetness as he removed her underwear. Then he pushed her thighs even farther apart.

"Oh God, Joe, don't," she begged him. Her hands fisted in the duvet.

He laid his hand on her soft pussy in a sharp little caress and her body jolted.

"I told you, Tara. I give the orders. You don't question me, you do what I say, you come when I tell you."

"But..."

He gave her pussy another tap. She cried out.

"I want to look at you," he said. "I've already seen you...remember?" He knew she did. She was wet, so wet. "Look at you," he murmured. "Your little clit peeping out from between these soft pink folds." She made a low guttural noise at his explicit words.

He pushed her thighs up to her chest, drawing another ragged moan from her. Then he used his fingers to part those folds, opening her wider, admiring her glistening pink prettiness. "So pretty. So sweet." He swallowed another groan. "I want to make you come," he told her and she whimpered. "Should I make you come with my fingers or with my mouth?"

"Oh God!" she cried. "God, Joe."

This time he wanted to taste her, so he bent his head and took a long, luxurious lick, taking his time although he was hot and hard and throbbing everywhere. He licked slowly over plump smoothness, up, down, one side then the other. He let his tongue dip deeper between folds, licking up her cream, swallowing the taste of her, so delicate and female. He pushed the tip of his tongue deeper inside her, rewarded with a hot little whimper. Her fingers opened and closed on the bed beside her.

He slid his hands beneath her ass and lifted her to his mouth, causing her to make more noises deep in her throat. So sweet, so hot and so aroused—for him. A growl rumbled in his chest as he licked around her clit, so slowly, so carefully.

"Oh God," she groaned. "Joe..."

He murmured a wordless response and sucked her soft flesh into his mouth gently, in slow, suckling kisses, working his way up to her quivery clit. And then he closed his lips over the bud and sucked. Her hips lifted even higher, his hands beneath her ass, her pussy against his face. Jesus, this was heaven, pure absolute heaven, the feel of her, the taste of her, knowing the pleasure he was giving her. Her body tightened and trembled and then he used his teeth oh-so-carefully on her swollen clit, held it there while he rubbed his tongue over it.

She came hard and fast. She bucked against his face, her hips jerking, her body shuddering as she cried out and he felt the surge of moisture her orgasm brought. Wow. Oh wow. She was hot.

He lifted his head from between her legs and smiled at her. "Good girl."

* * * * *

A masculine thrill ran through Joe. He'd never been with someone that responsive. She'd come so fast and hard against his mouth, so wetly, he was almost shocked.

"Gonna fuck you now," he murmured, moving up over her. Her breasts, soft on her ribs, quivered as she struggled to draw breath in and out. She licked her lips and forced her eyes open. "Gonna fuck you hard, baby. You're ready for it. Aren't you?"

He reached for her body and lifted her effortlessly, turning her so she was lengthwise on the bed.

"Don't move."

Her lust-fogged eyes questioned him, but she obediently said not a word.

"Condom." He rolled off her and off the bed. "I'll be right back." Christ, that condom in his wallet better still be there.

It was. But only one. Damn, damn, damn.

Tara sat up on one elbow to watch, eyes wide as he rolled it on. "God," she murmured. "Do they even make them big enough for you?"

He grinned, looked down at himself and gave himself a stroke. He heard her breath catch, lifted his gaze and met her apprehensive eyes. "Smart mouth," he said, his amusement letting her get away with that comment. "Be careful, or I may have to gag you."

She bit down on her bottom lip as he climbed back on the bed and he read the genuine fear in her eyes.

"It's okay," he soothed, his elbows beside her head. He pushed hair off her face with one hand, then both hands held her face as he kissed her mouth, his body tight with restraint. He wanted to pound into her, but held himself back. He pushed into her and felt her inner muscles tighten around him. "Just relax, sweetheart." He pushed further, pausing as she opened her legs more. "You can do it. Take me in," he groaned against her mouth. "Take all of me."

A few more strokes and he was in, filling her, touching her womb. She quivered around him, fiery wet. He stopped, holding himself deep inside her. She was tight, like a fist holding him from tip to root. "You okay?" he whispered. She nodded, a jerky little nod, and opened her eyes.

When their eyes met, he went very still. Raw desire mirrored his own, layered with sweet, sweet surrender. His breath stalled and every muscle tightened, and then he couldn't hold back any longer and he surged into her, long hard thrusts as he fell. His ears roared and his teeth caught the soft flesh of her neck as he pumped hard and heavy into her and his orgasm crashed over him in waves of pleasure.

He cried out against her skin as he drove into her, so close to utterly losing it and pounding her into next week, but he'd promised not to hurt her, he'd promised...

"Oh sweet Jesus," he groaned raggedly, gasping desperately for air. Then she convulsed again as he pressed one last time into her soft body, her hips arching against him, her hands fisting in his hair and tugging hard. "Jesus," he gasped again, pressing deeper, still hard inside her, pressing her through her climax until she was limp beneath him.

He buried his face in the pillow beside hers. Her hands fluttered on his back in little soft strokes. He still held his weight off her, but his arms quivered and he rolled to his side, taking her with him. He wrapped his arms around her, too tightly, he knew, but he couldn't let go of her. His eyes closed and he drifted on a wave of bliss. Quivers of sensation rippled through her body and around his cock.

Well. He wasn't sure if he'd accomplished his goal with Tara, but he sure as hell had succeeded in confusing himself. That had felt...different. Unlike anything he'd ever experienced. Maybe because she was so strong, so resistant, and he'd had to work so hard to get her under him. But the connection he felt with her at that moment was almost...scary.

Chapter Eleven

When the scorching ecstasy of her orgasm began to fade, Tara wanted to crawl out from under Joe and run. Far. Fast. Dear God, what had they done? His body radiated heat against hers, his arms and legs rough with hair, the skin over his shoulders smooth, muscles strong and powerful. She closed her eyes against thoughts of work, about how she and Joe were going to face each other at the office after this. She must have lost her lust-crazed mind.

This was a gigantic mistake, but it was too late now to change things. And as his cock stirred inside her, still huge, her body twitched in response, her pussy quivering again. God, even that hard fucking hadn't been enough for her, apparently.

And apparently it wasn't for Joe either.

"I want to do that again," he groaned in her ear. Her body thrilled at his words. And at how hot he'd been for her. She felt sexy, wanted, desirable—something she'd never felt with a man before. But how could she have done those things? Let him order her around, tell her what to do and then let him do such wicked things to her. But it hadn't felt wrong. Just...irresistible. Incredible. Satisfying.

"No..." She tried to protest. But his hands started doing things to her, stroking her, touching her in places he somehow knew were connected straight to her pussy. Her breasts had never been so sensitive, so full and tender, and his mouth on her nipples had lust unfurling inside her all over again.

He rolled to one side to get rid of the condom, then pushed her onto her back. He slid a hand between them and cupped her mound. His fingers just rested there, holding her. "You liked it when I spanked your pretty pussy."

A blade of lust stabbed her womb and her pussy clenched hard.

"And you'd like even more than that." He nuzzled her neck below her ear. "Wouldn't you?"

Her pussy vibrated with need again already and he'd barely touched her. It was his words inflaming her, making her fever-hot.

His smile deepened and his fingers twitched on her sex. She couldn't help it. She lifted her pelvis into his hand. "Mmm." He made a little noise of approval and kissed the top curve of one breast.

"I need to go to the bathroom," she whispered.

He lifted his head. "Maybe I won't let you."

Her eyes widened. She tried to push at him, but he kept nuzzling her, sucking gently on the flesh on the side of her neck, licking over her collarbone.

"Joe. Seriously. I have to go. Do you want me to have an accident?"

She felt his smile.

"Do what I tell you and I'll let you up to go to the bathroom."

Dear God! Her body tightened. "What...what do you want me to do?"

"I want you to suck my cock."

Oh. Oh. Oh. Like that was a hardship. Her mouth watered to taste him. But him telling her what to do didn't sit well. She wanted to argue, to tell him to go to hell. Her bladder twinged. She swallowed.

She bent and kissed his bare chest, which swelled at her touch. She licked him. Then she sucked a small flat nipple into her mouth, making him gasp.

He grabbed her hair, twisted his fingers into it and lifted her head. He growled at her and she smiled.

This was Joe. She still could hardly believe it. For a moment, she looked at him, remembering him in her office, asking smart questions, driving her crazy, making her do that goddamn business case. He was businesslike, smart, super-sexy and right now he was big and naked and in her bed and he had her obeying his every command like a slave.

He tugged her hair, urging her lower. "Do it, Tara," he muttered, eyes closed, cheekbones darkened with desire. "Suck me."

She wasn't sure how she was going to do that, given his size, but she wanted to try. She kissed her way down his flat stomach, stopping to dip her tongue into his navel, and he jerked. Then she spent some time on the flesh between navel and pubic hair, kissing and licking and sucking. That seemed to please him and he shuddered and twitched at her touch. She squirmed lower, almost fearful, but her mouth wanted him. She laid her hands on his thighs, hairy and, right now, soft and relaxed although she knew he was all muscle, and pushed them open.

Earlier he'd studied her intimately, making her squirm with embarrassment that had turned to pleased delight, knowing he liked what he saw there. And she liked what she saw too. My God. He was powerfully masculine, his cock large and hard, heavily veined, with a pronounced ridge around the head, rising up out of a thick black nest of wiry curls. She drew in a deep breath, put her hands around him and tugged experimentally.

"Oh yeah," he groaned and his fingers tightened in her hair, pulling the hair back off her face, pushing her head toward him. In the past, when guys had done that to her, she hated it, hated them thrusting her head toward their groin in a greedy demand. But at this moment, his hands in her hair, tugging, urging, the soft moans as he implored her for more, murmuring her name, turned her on so much she had to stop and press a hand between her legs.

When she paused, his eyes fluttered open. Seeing her crouched there between his legs, her hand pressed to her pussy while she gasped for control, he started to push up.

"Are you coming, Tara?" he asked hoarsely.

She bit her lip. "No. Almost. I just....sorry." Then she couldn't believe she'd apologized for that. He'd told her she couldn't come unless he said so, but that was ridiculous!

His eyes darkened. "Do it. Let yourself come."

She shifted the pressure of her hand and shuddered. Oh God. A fast, hard orgasm shook her, her full bladder intensifying the sensation. Her breathing was quick and shallow as she recovered.

"Holy shit," Joe said. After a few breaths she lifted her head and pushed her hair back.

"Sorry," she said again breathlessly. "I couldn't help it." She shook her head a little, in awe of herself for the rapid orgasm, but also in annoyance at once again apologizing to him for it. "That's never happened before."

He nodded, eyes dark and liquid, watching her intently, patiently. Apparently there would be no punishment forthcoming. And that thought sent a flash of fire through her.

She licked her lips and bent her head again, even more eager to taste him. She kissed the tip of him, sucking ever so gently with just her lips, then swirled her tongue around the flared rim. Then she took him deeper, sucking him, licking him, moving her head up and down.

"Oh yeah," he groaned. "Fuck, Tara, your mouth is incredible."

Something warmed inside her at his praise. His eyes closed and he gave a low groan. She took more of him into her mouth, his weight smooth and heavy on her tongue. He filled her mouth, stretched her lips, but he smelled and tasted so damn good, tasted like clean, warm, aroused male.

"Easy, baby," he moaned. "Slow and easy."

She took more of him, deeper, rubbing him with her tongue. His hips lifted, his hands gathered back her slipping hair and held it at her nape.

"Oh yeah," he groaned, hands back in her hair. "Suck it hard, baby. Damn."

She loved the way he filled her pussy, but the advantage of a smaller guy was she could take him all the way in her mouth. No way could she take all of Joe. Using her hands and her mouth, though, she sucked and licked him until he was taut and shaking on the bed.

"Touch my balls," he ordered, his voice rough and sexy.

She slid one hand lower, beneath the heavy sac, and cupped him. His balls were full and tight. She gave a gentle experimental squeeze. "Yes," he groaned. "Harder. It's okay." She gave a firmer squeeze, then a tug, her hand on his shaft going one way and the hand on his balls the other. He let out a long, low groan and she was afraid she'd hurt him, but then he said, "Oh God, Tara, that's so good." She did it again, rolling his testicles in their sac, her mouth sucking hard. His balls tightened even more, drawing up against his body.

He moved into her mouth in small thrusts, and she focused on relaxing her throat, breathing through her nose, her heart beating wildly.

"Hell, Tara, you're driving me out of my mind. That's it...so good...suck it..."

His words thrilled her, urged her on. She'd never been so excited to do this, her mouth full of him, tasting his arousal, wanting so much for it to be good for him. Her mouth moved on him, one hand circling the base of his cock, the other cupping his balls.

She played for a while, alternately licking the head, kissing it gently, opening her mouth on the side of his shaft and sucking, then taking him deep again. She kissed the soft skin where thigh met hip, nuzzled his rough hair, inhaled the scent of him, then held his shaft and licked it all over.

"Hoy shit, Tara," he groaned. "Damn..."

She sucked him in again, so big and heavy in her mouth, moving her lips up and down the shaft now wet from her attention.

"Gonna come, sweetheart." His hands tangled in her hair again. She nodded without lifting her mouth from him, sucked and squeezed harder and faster and then he came in her mouth, pulsing hot, tantalizing jets into her. She sucked and swallowed until he was done, then let him slide out of her mouth.

"Christ, Tara," he muttered, tugging her hair harder to lift her head off him.

She lifted her eyes and gazed up his chest at him. His head was back, eyes closed, breathing heavily. His hands gentled in her hair, fingertips stroking her head, and like he had earlier, she laid her cheek down on his flat stomach and put her hand over his hip bone.

Lord, what had she done? Her fingers moved over his smooth skin, the sharp, pleasing taste of him lingering in her mouth.

His fingers continued to stroke her hair lazily. "C'mere," he finally said and she wriggled herself up over his body, stretching out on top of him. He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her mouth, a long, open-mouthed kiss. "That was incredible. Thank you."

His gratitude warmed her inside, something softening in her chest, and their eyes searched each other's, not quite sure what was going on here.

"Okay," he said, giving her a smack on her bottom. "Now you can go to the bathroom."

She inhaled deeply and slid out of bed, then padded barefoot across the room to the attached bathroom. She sat in there for a long time, the taste of him still on her tongue. Delicious, dark and male.

What was she supposed to do now?

Run. Get the hell out of here. This could not keep going. She pressed a hand to her tummy, prepared to walk out and find her clothes, dress and leave.

But when she walked back into the dim bedroom, her clothes were gone.

She stood in the middle of the carpet, searching the room with her eyes, unbearably aware of her nudity and Joe lounging in the bed, sitting against the headboard, hands behind his head, displaying his rounded biceps and the flat muscles of his chest and abs. He watched her with amusement.

"What did you do with my clothes?" she demanded.

He smiled. "You don't need them."

"Yes! I do! I'm leaving now!"

He shook his head and patted the bed beside him. "No, you're not. Come back to bed, Tara. We aren't nearly done."

Her legs went weak and her heart pinged in her chest. She closed her eyes against the sinful temptation of his naked body, powerful muscles, gleaming dark skin dusted with black hair and his huge beautiful cock. Heat simmered low inside her.

"I need to use the bathroom too," he said, throwing back the duvet. Oh God. His thighs were heavily muscled, his penis semi-hard and heart-stoppingly large, framed by that aggressive thatch of black curls. He was intensely, fiercely masculine and she stayed standing in the middle of the room as he climbed out of bed and came toward her.

She had clothes in the closet she left there for times she stayed overnight. She'd grab something as soon as he was in the bathroom and be out of there. That didn't solve the problem of how they were going to face each other Monday morning, but at least it would get her out of this dangerous situation.

"Come with me."

He slid his hand around hers and tugged her with him. She dug her bare feet into the carpet, but he pulled her off balance and she stumbled along. He was taking her into the bathroom with him? Oh God.

"You're not leaving," he murmured, pulling her into the bathroom. "Close your eyes if you want to." He held onto her with one hand and moved in front of the toilet, taking his penis in the other hand. Jesus!

She squeezed her eyes shut, averting her head as he relieved himself, picturing it but unwilling to open her eyes and see something so profoundly intimate. He was an animal! How could he be doing this to her?

He sandwiched her between him and the vanity, reaching around her to wash his hands, and she looked down and watched him rub his soapy hands together under the running water to avoid seeing their naked images in the mirror. Then he opened the door and her heart lurched again when he swung her up in his arms and carried her back to bed.

She wasn't a petite little thing, so his strength was impressive. He laid her back on the mattress and was instantly beside her, radiating heat off his satiny skin. She pulled the duvet up over her chilling body and her mind's resistance totally succumbed to the pleasure of absorbing his warmth. He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her.

The roughness of his face turned her on. She put a hand up to touch it again, stroking the sandpapery skin. It was so masculine, so tough, so bad. She almost laughed at herself for being so turned-on by whiskers. He turned his face and kissed her palm and then she melted.

This was insane. Totally, completely off the charts crazy. How had she let herself get into this mess? Much as she wanted to blame him, try to claim he'd taken her against her will, she couldn't deny she'd been a very willing participant. Reluctant, but willing. Somehow he'd hypnotized her or something.

Or something. He'd definitely taken charge. Which usually irked her to no end. But it was almost a relief to give in to it, to have the choice taken away from her. And how barbaric and prehistoric was that? Did she want to be dragged by her hair back to a cave?

Apparently so. That's basically what he'd done.

She closed her eyes. Strange sensations bubbled and churned inside her. God, he could not be right about her. That was so not who she was. She had to be strong, had to be tough to show Grandpa and Joe and every other man she could run that business. Joe kept telling her she had to be honest with herself, but she really didn't want to think about what this all meant, what this all said about her. It scared the fuckin' crap out of her.

The shades on the window were dark now, the sun having set.

"I have to get back to the city," she said.

"No."

She sucked in her bottom lip. "Joe."

"Tara. You can't leave. You have no clothes."

She gave a huff of laughter. "Yes, I do. I keep extra clothes here. They're in the closet."

"Not anymore."

"What!" Her eyes flew open. "You took all the clothes in the closet too? What did you do with them?"

He smiled down at her. "Never mind." He stroked a hand over her shoulder, sending ribbons of sensations curling through her. "I plan to keep you here, naked and at my mercy." His forehead crinkled. "Just one problem. I only had one condom."

"Well. There you go. There's no point in staying then."

He smiled. "There are other things we can do."

She rolled her head from side to side on the pillow. "No. We can't."

He flipped her over to her back and loomed above her, radiating heat and intense sexuality.

"Yes," he said. He bent his head and kissed her again. "We can."

"But...but I'm hungry." She had no idea what time it was, but it must be long past dinner time. And she wasn't just making that up. Her stomach did feel a little hollow.

"Hungry, hmm? Okay. This is how it's going to work. You do what I tell you to do and I'll reward you. I'll let you eat. Go to the bathroom. Have an orgasm."

She almost choked on her gasp. Her muscles tensed and adrenaline heated her veins. He was the most depraved, infuriating, sadistic animal she'd ever met! He could not do this to her! This was an outrage.

"You have got to be joking!" she growled through gritted teeth. "You're insane!"

He shook his head, hands tightening on her shoulders even as she tried to lift up off the bed, pressing her down into the mattress. "You, my sweet little spitfire, need to learn some lessons."

"I'm not learning a damn thing from you! Get off me!"

But he played dirty. Her nipples were tender from all he'd done to them and he had only to put his mouth over one and she was arching up into him, shuddering with delight. He sucked gently, then licked the nipple in a slow stroke that made her wet. Gently he licked and sucked at the tip of each breast, sensation streaking from nipple to womb until she writhed on the bed under him.

Then he stopped.

Jesus! Her pussy throbbed and ached.

"What is there to eat in this house?" he asked.

She blinked up at him, her mind fuzzy and blank. "Eat?"

"You said you were hungry."

She could have wept, hovering on the edge of an orgasm. How did he do this to her? "I don't know!"

"Let's go look." He rolled out of bed, reached a hand for her and tugged her out too, then led her out of the bedroom.

"Joe! Could we put something on?"

"Nuh-uh. Don't need clothes."

He led her into the kitchen where he opened the refrigerator. "Hey. A bottle of wine."

"What more do we need?" She pursed her lips and folded her arms across her bare breasts.

He kept peering into the fridge. "Olives. Of course. Cheese. D'you think there's any bread?"

"No."

He blistered her with a look—a hot, warning look—and she gave a huff and opened a cupboard. "But there are crackers," she said, pulling out a box.

"Perfect. Find us a plate."

She tightened her lips but opened another cupboard and retrieved a bright yellow plate, one of the colorful Fiesta dishes filling the cupboards. She set it on the counter and dumped some crackers from the box while Joe sliced cheese.

"And a bowl for these olives," he said. "And how about some wineglasses?"

Her teeth clenched, but she found a bowl and two wineglasses. He handed her the jar of olives. "Got a corkscrew?"

She took the olives but stood there, staring him down. He smiled.

"I could look through all the drawers," he said mildly. "But it's faster if you know where it is."

"Top left drawer," she snapped, wrenching the lid off the jar of olives. She scooped a generous mound of olives into a bowl while Joe pulled the cork out of the wine, then poured two glasses. He handed her one.

"Here. This will help relax you."

"I don't need to relax." A ridiculous statement. Her nerves were stretched taut, her muscles so tight her neck was starting to ache. Joe laughed.

He stroked a hand down her arm and she became instantly, skin-tinglingly aware again that they were both naked. His fingers lingered on her wrist, over the pulse that leaped there. "Relax," he murmured. "Let's go eat in bed."

Her eyes widened at that, but she said nothing, picking up her glass and the bowl of olives and following him to the bedroom. She couldn't even make a break for escape. He was holding her captive there with no restraints.

Chapter Twelve

They sat on the bed, Tara with the covers pulled up demurely under her armpits, eating olives and cheese and crackers and drinking Chardonnay.

"Why'd you join Le Château?" Joe asked.

She looked down at the wine in her glass. "I don't want to talk about that."

He nodded. It was personal, a decision to explore something like that. He got that. And he knew she was still struggling with the reasons. Fine. They'd talk about it later.

"Tell me about your parents then," he said. She considered that as she swirled her wine in her glass, then lifted her eyes. To his surprise, she started talking.

"They died when I was fourteen," she told him. "In a car accident on the freeway. They'd been in Los Angeles on business."

"Fourteen is young to lose your parents."

She nodded. "Sasha was only twelve. Grandpa, of course, stepped right in. He'd been alone for a long time. My grandmother died before I was even born. It must have been hard for him too to lose his wife so early and then his son. But he moved to Santa Barbara so we could stay in the home we knew, stay in the school we knew, and looked after us. He gave us everything."

She didn't say it but he could hear "except"...

"Everything but...what?" he asked.

She looked at him in surprise. "Everything but what I really want." She bent her head, peered down at her wine and swallowed hard. "He gave us generous allowances, cars when we were sixteen, he sent us to college. We had a beautiful home, all the clothes and shoes we could want, trips to wherever we wanted to go and Nina was there to look after everything."

"But..."

She looked up at him. "You know what I want."

He nodded. He knew what she thought she wanted. "You want to run the company."

She nodded, nibbling a cracker. "He has very old-fashioned attitudes about things."

"Oh yeah."

Her eyebrows slid nearly up into her hairline.

"I'm not gonna argue with you on that one," he said. "Being a woman has nothing to do with ability to run a business. And I don't believe a woman should be at home barefoot, pregnant and in the kitchen. Unless she wants to be."

She stared at him, the cracker suspended halfway to her lips. "Really?"

"Why are you surprised by that?"

She shook her head. "I just...I don't know. Because you too seem to think I can't run the business."

"I don't think that at all."

Her head tilted and she regarded him open-mouthed.

"I think you're strong, intelligent and knowledgeable. You also have great vision and passion."

She blinked at him, the hand holding the cracker lowering. "Really?"

Had no one ever complimented her? His chest tightened. Christ.

"Really." He took a bite of cheese, chewed and swallowed. "You miss your parents a lot, don't you?"

"Well. You know." Her eyes lowered. "Not every day. It's been a long time. But since I became involved with the business, I think a lot about my dad, about what he would have thought of what I was doing, what he would have done. Sometimes I still have dreams about both of them, like they're still here," she confessed and met his eyes with a hint of embarrassment.

He was so damn lucky to have the family he did. They'd supported him through all his shit and they always would, no matter what. He hated that Tara hurt and he had to admit it kinda bugged him that Tyrone didn't think she was good enough to run the company.

"I think your dad would be very proud of you, proud of what you've done."

She nodded again, her bottom lip quivering, and tough-as-nails, bossy, controlling Tara looking so soft and vulnerable damn near ripped a hole in his gut. He stroked a hand down her bare arm. She thought what she wanted was to run the business. And yeah, she did want that. But he knew what else she wanted.

He set the empty dishes aside, took her wineglass from her and set it on the bedside table and pulled her into his arms. She tipped her head back and gazed at him, her hands on his chest, her eyes soft and yielding.

Need slammed into his balls, and the urge to throw her down and fuck her crazy rose up inside him. He had to fight for every bit of control to take it slow, take it gentle. Trust. He was building trust. 'Cause he was gonna need it.

He lowered his mouth to hers and kissed her, long, clinging, warm kisses, their mouths tasting each other, tongues nudging, mouths lifting, shifting, clinging again. She softened in his arms and heat spiraled through him. He pulled her onto his lap, fighting with the bed covers to free her, kissing her again and again. Sweet. Hot. Consuming.

He nipped at her bottom lip, sucked on her tongue and she moaned. Her hands roamed over his shoulders and chest and rubbed his nipples, sending a barrage of sparks through him. God, that was good.

"I don't have another condom," he said, their foreheads resting together as they panted.

She made a small noise.

He slid a hand between them to her pussy and found her drenched and slick and swollen. "Ah, sweetheart." His fingers played there. "I'll make you come."

"What about you?"

"Don't worry about me."

"I can..."

She'd already given him one blowjob. Jesus.

"Make yourself come then," he said. "I'll watch. And then you can watch me."

He laid her down on the bed and parted her legs, then waited for her to touch herself. She stared back at him, eyes big and glossy, lips pouty from his kisses.

With a small groan, teeth sinking into her bottom lip, she moved her hand between her legs.

"Oh yeah." He sat back and watched with avid eyes. Her slender fingers stroked through her pretty pink folds, dipped deeper, slicked moisture up over the straining bud of her clit. She rubbed in small tight circles, eyes closed.

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

"That is so fucking hot, Tara." He stroked his cock, thick and hard. Easy. He wanted her to watch him too. Pleasure poured over his body, a buzzing, a growing pressure at the base of his spine.

"This is awful," she whispered without opening her eyes.

"Why, sweetheart? Doesn't it feel good?"

"It feels...wicked." She licked her lips and her fingers continued their rhythm. "I've never...done this...in front of someone."

He smiled with satisfaction. There were many things he would make her do that she'd never done in front of someone.

He wished for some toys—something to insert inside her to make her orgasm more intense. His fingers would have to do. So he let go of his cock and probed her entrance. She started, blinked, then her eyes drifted closed again as he pushed inside, one finger, then two. Her hips lifted at his touch, and her breasts swelled and flushed. She gave a soft cry and her body tightened and clamped around his fingers. When she came, he felt the pulses, the ripple of her pussy around him over and over. She cried out again and he leaned up and kissed her mouth.

"Wow," he said against her lips. "Hot."

"Mmm."

She'd need a few minutes. But he needed to come. Right. Fucking. Now. He lay down beside her and fisted his cock again, dragging it up and down in slow strokes, twisting over the head just how he liked, waiting.

She shifted, rolled to her side and met his eyes. He held her gaze and deepened his stroke, the combination of her eyes focused on him and the touch of his hand intensely intimate and erotic and lethal to his control. Her gaze went to his cock. Her eyes widened, her lips parted and she sat up. The fascination in her expression almost undid him as his hand moved up and down, around the head, faster and harder. Leaking pre-cum slicked his hand. He rubbed his other hand over his chest, then cupped his balls. God, he'd love her to touch him right now, play with his ass, but that...might be...Christ! Just the thought of that sent him over.

"Ah fuck!" He came in hot spurts, semen on his belly, sliding over his fingers. Tara stared, absorbed in the sight, and he gasped for breath, his heart pounding, chest heaving as he finished himself off.

Jesus, that was the hottest masturbation he'd ever experienced.

Without a word, she reached over for some tissues from the nightstand and, to his surprise, wiped him clean, gently, attentively.

They curled up together, her body touchingly small and dainty in his arms, and when she fell asleep, harsh reality intruded into his brain.

He'd fucked his boss's granddaughter and potentially jeopardized the only job he'd been able to land after months of looking. And the only reason he had this one was because his grandmother, bless her heart, had used her influence with an old friend. He needed this job, needed to prove to the world he wasn't scum; in fact, he needed to prove it to himself. He almost groaned aloud at the complicated mess.

He wanted to tame Tara so they could work together, so he could keep this job—but taming her might be the very thing that lost him the damn job.

* * * * *

Tara awoke later that night, the lamp still on, almost startled to find herself in bed with a big warm male body, his hair-roughed arms around her and one hairy muscled leg twined with hers. His soft breathing told her he was asleep.

Remembering her astonishment at the size of him when he'd removed his pants, she slid a hand down his side, over his square hip bone and lifted the covers enough that she could peek down at their bodies. His penis, soft but still impressive, lay against her thigh, thick and heavy, his balls beneath it fat and round. Her gaze was glued there, studying the perfect shape of the round head of his penis, when he twitched against her. She dropped the duvet and her eyes flew up to his, which were now open and watching her with amusement.

"Do you like what you see?" he asked, his voice raspy. She pressed her lips together in embarrassment, then she shrugged.

"I've seen bigger."

"Bullshit." He rolled her onto her back and pinned her down. A small gasp escaped her lips. His eyes gleamed wickedly, his mouth curved and those dimples flitted across

his cheeks. His face was really dark now with scruffy beard and she put a hand up to touch his cheek, to stroke the roughness there. He closed his eyes briefly at her touch, rubbed his cheek against her hand. "I guess I need to shave."

"You're a little rough."

"Yeah." He held her gaze. "But you like it rough. Don't you, Tara?" His voice was a velvet seduction.

"Um..."

He kissed her mouth and she felt him hardening, lengthening against her thigh. "I know what you like."

"You do not."

He arched a brow. "You're going to argue with me? Now?"

She blinked.

"Go ahead," he invited her. "It turns me on when you argue with me." And he kissed her again, igniting every nerve ending. Jesus. She'd been fighting with him ever since he arrived and here she'd been turning him on. Talk about the wrong strategy!

And yet the knowledge she affected him that way made her all warm and syrupy.

* * * * *

In the morning, Joe woke first. He studied Tara sleeping, her eyelashes curved fans on her cheeks, her pretty mouth soft. In sleep she was vulnerable, sweet.

The truth was—she was always vulnerable and sweet. She just hid it well. And something squeezed his heart at that realization.

He rolled carefully out of bed and pulled on his jeans sans underwear. He wandered through the spacious house, with airy vaulted ceilings and gleaming golden wood floors, into the kitchen. There, square terra cotta tiles were cool beneath his feet.

He gazed out the window onto the tiled terrace with a small, Spanish-style fountain, currently dry, shaded by a vine-covered arbor. Clay pots of palms and other tropical plants were scattered here and there. He could easily picture some comfortable lounge chairs, shaded by olive and oak trees or pulled into the sun, looking toward the craggy mountains in the distance.

The kitchen was large, although a bit outdated, and he opened a few cupboards, then the freezer to look for food. Ha! A loaf of bread. Frozen, but that was no problem. A jar of peanut butter in a cupboard would complete the meal. While the bread toasted, he located coffee and quickly spooned the grounds into the coffeemaker and got that started.

While the coffee brewed, he explored the house. He found a large dining room furnished with a kind of retro-chic 1950s Scandinavian-style dining set. He assumed Tyrone slept in the huge master bedroom when he stayed. There were four other bedrooms, two with ensuites, another large bathroom, a small powder room and a half

empty room that could be anything...a den, a library, an office, another bedroom. The views from the windows were spectacular, lots of light and sunshine flooding in through them in a way that couldn't help but make you feel cheerful.

A short time later he carried a tray with a plate stacked with toast and peanut butter and two cups of coffee—both black, no cream or milk to be found, so he hoped Tara could handle that—down the hall into the bedroom. Tara rolled over in bed as he walked in, half awake.

Her honey-blond hair hung in tousled strands around her face, eyes sleepy, mouth swollen. She was fucking sexy as hell. His dick twitched.

"I thought I smelled something," she murmured, shoving her hair back.

He set the tray on a dresser and carried her cup of coffee to her.

She sat up and took it in both hands. "You made breakfast?" She peered up at him.

"Yup. Not much to choose from. Sorry your coffee's black." He paused.

She shrugged and sipped it. "I can drink it black. Mmm. This is good."

"And I found a loaf of bread in the freezer."

She shook her head, eyes questioning him. "Um...thank you."

"You're welcome." He sat on the bed, the plate of toast between them, his own cup in his hands, and leaned forward to kiss her.

"I'm starving," she said. "Cheese and crackers wasn't enough dinner for me."

"Me either."

"Do I get to get dressed today?" she asked him, with just a hint of snark.

He considered that. "I don't know. I'd love to keep you naked, but the truth is, that just makes me horny, and without condoms..."

She lowered her chin. "I have to go home."

"Why?"

"I...uh..."

"If you tell me you have to go in to the office, there's no way in hell you're getting any clothes back."

She blinked at him. "Uh..."

He grinned. "It's the weekend. Neither of us has any reason to go back."

"Yes, but..."

He shrugged and took another bite of toast. "So, we'll get condoms. There must be somewhere around here."

"Santa Ynez." She snapped her mouth shut. Joe grinned.

She sighed. "It's only a few miles away. It's kind of a cute little town."

"Perfect," he said. "I've never been there. Let's go check out Santa Ynez."

"I'm going to need clothes."

He laughed at the waspish tone in her voice. "Oh all right, if you insist."

“And I need a shower.”

He grinned and stroked up her spine. “A shower sounds good. Let’s go.”

She met his eyes and bit her lip. “Um...alone,” she muttered.

“Nope. We shower together.”

Her eyes darkened. No way was he giving her a chance to run while he was in the shower. Even though he knew the shower was going to lead to more sex. Well, at least that was a good place to have sex without a condom.

He followed her into the small bathroom and she cranked on the water. Soon steam filled the room and they stepped into the enclosure.

She eyed him uncertainly, eyes flickering. She’d never showered with a man before. He’d bet his Porsche on that. Sweet.

“Ladies first,” he told her, reaching for a bottle of body wash. He squirted some into his palm and slicked it over her abdomen. With a few rubs, he worked up a good lather, nice and soapy and slippery, gliding his hands up and down over her pretty body. Her breasts. The feeling of a pair of tits all soapy and slick was like nothing else. Especially hers. Firm resilient flesh all slippery in his palms. Her nipples hardened into tight little points. Christ.

Then he slid a hand between her legs, gently soaping her pussy, expecting she was tender there. She moaned. Hell yeah, he had to make her come. So he turned her so her back pressed against him, her ass round and fitting perfectly into his groin, and found her clit, water pounding down on them, running into his eyes, and he fingered her to an orgasm, her head falling back on his shoulders.

“Good girl,” he murmured, kissing her mouth.

“Now you,” she said. “I want to do it.”

Jesus. Jesus Christ. It killed him, but he had to stop her.

He grabbed her hands as she reached for him, gritting his teeth. “You have to ask my permission.”

She paused, looked up at him and blinked. For a moment he thought he might have blown it and she was going to refuse. Her pretty mouth was set in a mutinous line, but then she said, “Can I please wash you?”

He gave a short nod and released her hands. She squeezed a puddle of body wash into her hand, soaped him up and her wicked fingers circled the base of his cock, ran over his tight balls, behind them, up through the crack of his ass—fuck! The caress was brief, but enough to have pleasure slamming through his bloodstream, heat cascading over him, balls tightening and pulling up hard. She pulled at his dick, her hand slick and soapy, up, down, up, down.

“Yeah.” He set his hands over hers gently and showed her how he liked it with that twist over the head, and she took over, her focus on him and her hands, stroking him perfectly. “Oh yeah. So good, baby, just like that.” Pressure built inside him and he thrust into her slick hands. His jaw tightened...and then he came, the top of his head

nearly blowing off. "Ah, Christ," he almost shouted. "Christ, Tara." Hot semen spilled over her hands, quickly washed away by the water.

When he could focus his vision, he looked at her and saw...gratification. She was happy she'd done that for him. With a long groan he pulled her up against him, wrapped his arms around her and gave her a soapy wet hug. Satisfaction swelled inside his chest.

The doubts from last night were still there. The temptation, no, the *need*, to tame her had been so consuming he'd lost sight of reality. He was in a really precarious position here and spending the day with her wasn't going to help that. And yet...he couldn't help feeling it was all good and right. Seeing the look on her face, the joy she got from giving, even if she didn't yet recognize it for what it was... Worth the risk. Christ, he hoped he was right.

Chapter Thirteen

They drove back to Highway 154, this time turning left toward Santa Ynez. It was another perfect day, the sky cerulean with a few wispy clouds streaking the sky. Orange and purple wildflowers brightened the roadside and rolling golden fields stretched away from the highway to the distance where the Santa Ynez Mountains jutted into the sky. Santa Ynez had a quaint, Western style. Joe found a place to park and then they stood on the sidewalk. "First things first," he said. "We need a drugstore."

He smiled down at her, the sun gilding her softly curling hair. She'd slid sunglasses onto her face so he couldn't see her eyes, but he could see her cheeks pinken. Sun glinted off the fine golden hairs on her arms.

She nodded across the street. "There's one right there."

They took care of that errand, then emerged back into the bright sunshine. He put on his own sunglasses. "Where to now?" he asked.

She gave a heavy sigh as if she were being forced to be a tourist. "We can wander around, look in some of the shops," she said, starting down the street. "There's some cute places and wine tasting rooms."

"Sounds cool."

They spent a while in one room where artists were painting and tasted a few different wines, browsed in interesting little shops and galleries, sat on a patio and drank margaritas.

"What next?" he asked.

"We could go to one of the wineries near here," Tara suggested after a short pause.

"I'd like that." They walked back to the car, hand in hand again. "But first let's pick up a few things and then later I'll cook us dinner."

"You cook?" She looked up at him.

He nodded. "Sure. Don't you?"

"Well...I can make a few basic things. But I have to admit when it comes to cooking, I'm as spoiled as Sasha. Nina basically does all our cooking and on weekends we eat out a lot."

He grinned at her. "Spoiled little rich girl. That's okay. I can cook. My parents are both chefs, remember?"

She nodded and took him to a little shop where they could get a few groceries.

"Speaking of home, you should call and tell them you won't be back 'til tomorrow."

She gave him a long look.

He gave her butt a gentle tap, a promise of what else could come if she didn't do as he told her. "Call them."

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse and made the call. "I'm going to tell them you kidnapped me and held me a naked hostage," she said as the phone rang. He grinned and waited as she left a message saying she was out at the ranch.

"I saw some cookware in the kitchen, so we should have the basics, right?" he asked as he picked out baby greens for a salad, fresh tomatoes, garlic and herbs, bread and cheese. When he ordered muffins at the bakery and picked up a quart of milk, she looked at him inquiringly.

"Breakfast."

"Oh my God."

He grinned.

They climbed back in the car and turned off the highway to drive to The Bridle Path Winery. He admired the vineyards lining the road to the winery then pulled into a busy parking lot.

"I like this place," Tara said. "And it's close."

Joe studied the white stucco building with traditional red tile roof as they walked toward it. Potted palms and colorful flowers adorned the stone courtyard and a long, shaded veranda lined one side. Water splashed in a fountain in the center of the courtyard, sparkling in the sun. They walked through a wide, vine-covered arch in the stucco wall.

"Nice," he murmured, lowering his glasses to take it in. "This is what you'd like to have at the mill, isn't it?"

"Yes," she admitted. "Can't you picture it?"

"Absolutely," he said with a smile. "Have you done your business case?"

She gave him a look that made his grin widen.

"Better get on that," he said and gave her butt another little pat. Then he took her hand again to lead her out of the heat and into the cool tasting room and just laughed when she yanked it away from him.

"This is a Viognier," they were told as they accepted a glass of a deep golden wine. They each swirled the glass, inhaled the aroma. "You'll notice aromas of apricot and honey, perhaps a hint of anise. It's rich and complex." They sampled several other white wines, and then moved on to the reds. "The finish of this Pinot Noir lingers long with flavors evolving from cherries and currants to cocoa with an infusion of exotic spices," the young woman said. A 1999 Cabernet Franc followed, a lighter, tawnier colored wine with aromas of pine needles and vanilla. It was tarter than the previous one, a little puckery.

At the end of their tasting, Joe said, "I liked the Pinot Noir. I'm going to get a bottle of that for dinner." It was more than he usually paid for a bottle of wine, but what the hell, he had a spoiled rich girl to impress tonight.

The sun was lower as they drove back to the ranch. Inside the house, Joe wandered to the French doors off the living room and threw them open, then stepped out onto the terrace. The air was soft and warm and still outside, a quiet peacefulness he'd never experienced. He drew a deep breath, some of his tension easing.

Now that Tara had clothes, she could make a run for it, back to her car in the lot at the mill. But she followed him out onto the patio. Warmth spread through his chest.

"We're staying here again tonight?" she asked.

He turned to look at her and saw the hesitation on her beautiful face.

"Yes." He moved toward her put his hands on her shoulders. "After I make dinner and we drink that wine, I'm going to take you back to bed and fuck you all night."

She blinked up at him and her eyes went hazy.

He had her.

"Come on. Let's go try that wine."

* * * * *

He led her into the kitchen and she helped him cook dinner, a pasta made with the fresh ingredients he'd purchased earlier, garlic bread with peppery olive oil from the ranch and salad dressed with a vinaigrette of balsamic vinegar and mellow oil. While they cooked and ate, they talked. Joe told her about his large Italian family, the restaurants his parents owned and where he'd worked since he was twelve years old until he finished college.

"This is good," she said. "You really can cook."

He reached for the bottle and poured more wine into their glasses. "Thanks."

They cleaned up together, then wandered outside with their wineglasses as the sun set. Crickets chirruped in the fields around the house, the sky deepening to a rich cobalt blue, the stars appearing one by one. The cool night air brushed over them.

A tall queen palm beside the house swayed gently in the evening breeze. The bright moon lit up the sculptural shapes of the plants, the black and spiky agave, the cacti round and deceptively soft in the darkness. The sweet scent of jasmine drifted to them from the flowers growing up the wall near the front door, filling his senses, reminding him of Tara's scent.

"Wow." Joe gazed up at the sky. "Living in the city, you don't see stars like that very often."

"You're a city guy, aren't you?" she murmured.

"Yeah, I guess I am. But up here, it feels...good." He shrugged.

"You're feeling it," she said. "The romance of it."

He looked askance at her.

"It's the *terroir*."

"The what?"

"It's the land. *Terroir* is the influence of the land on the quality of the oil, the romantic part nobody can quite put their finger on. When the oil is good, people often say it is because of the land—the ideal soil, wonderful climate or whatever."

"And when it tastes bad, it's because of something else," Joe murmured with amusement.

Her lips curved up. "Of course." She lifted a shoulder and his hand trailed down her cheek to touch her collarbone, revealed in the open V of her T-shirt. "There's a lot of science involved in olive productions—you've seen that. But there's something else too...things difficult to pin down. I know all that stuff like irrigation and soil quality are really what matter, but there has to be heart and soul and...love." She lowered her eyes in embarrassment.

"I think I know what you mean," he said, his voice low and husky, fingers trailing down lower now, between the curves of her breasts. "Tara, you're so beautiful."

He took the wineglass from her hand and set it down on the low stone wall that edged the terrace. He turned her to face him, a soft breeze fluttering tendrils of her hair around her face. He ran a thumb across her full lower lip.

Tara laid her hands on his chest, looked up at him, then nipped at the pad of his thumb as it stroked across her mouth. Heat exploded in him and he hauled her up against his body and took her mouth in a wild, voracious kiss, eating at her mouth with avid hunger.

She met him equally, pressing herself against him, winding her arms around his neck and burrowing her fingers into his hair. Her mouth devoured his too, their tongues sliding and rubbing. They kissed over and over, hotter and wetter, the heat between them building to inferno temperature. Joe rubbed his hard cock against her mindlessly, hands sliding down to her ass to cup her and hold her there for him to press and rub against.

"I'm about to combust," he groaned.

"Me too." She rubbed herself back against him, her soft breasts dragging across his chest. "How do you do this to me, Joe?"

He didn't know how to answer that question, so he just kissed her again, his hands sliding up underneath the cotton T-shirt she wore. Her back was silky smooth and curvy and she moaned into his mouth. Finding the clasp of her bra, he flicked it open, then yanked the top and the bra off over her head together.

Her breasts were bare to him in the moonlight, gleaming pearly skin and puckered nipples. He sucked in a breath as she leaned back in his arms so he could look at her. Saliva pooled in his mouth and he was afraid he was about to drool on her.

"Fucking awesome," he muttered, unable to look away.

"Touch me," she whispered. "Please." It was the closest to begging she had gotten yet. His dick hardened painfully. Her head fell back, her arms straight as she clasped her hands together behind his neck. Her arms pushed her breasts together.

"Oh baby, all I can think about is sliding my dick up and down between those sweet tits." His body burned with lust for her, his cock so hard he hurt, his skin hot and prickling. With trembling hands, he undid the button at the top of the skirt he'd allowed her to wear. It sat low on her hips and when he tugged down the short zipper, the skirt fell to the patio. She was wearing different underwear today, no less sexy but a little more covered up, white panties that looked like tiny lace-edged shorts. He stared down at them for a moment, then reached up to release her hands from behind his neck.

She made a little murmured questioning sound and he turned her around. "Let's see the back," he murmured. His gaze traveled down the curve of her back and he sucked in air through his teeth. "Oh baby, those little shorts only cover half your cheeks." The rounded curve of her bottom beneath the lace edge set his heart thudding painfully in his chest.

"They're not shorts," she said, her voice choked. "They're panties."

"Whatever they are, they're fucking hot." He just had to touch. His hands stroked the rounded flesh, traced the crease where cheek met thigh and trailed down the back of her thighs.

Her body twitched hard at his touch and he knew he'd found a new erogenous zone. Overwhelmed with erotic need, he stroked her softly again and again there while she trembled and shook, her hands on the low wall in front of her, leaning slightly forward.

"I love your ass," he whispered, leaning over her back to kiss her shoulder. "So smooth and round and soft." Then he remembered his original plan and he whisked the panties down over her legs. While one hand fondled a breast, he opened his jeans with the other and released his throbbing cock. The night air drifted coolness over his burning flesh. He dug a condom out of his pocket and quickly rolled it on. Then he turned her back to face him and hoisted her up against him with his hands under that beautiful ass.

"Oh God, Joe, out here?" she whispered, clutching his shoulders.

"Yeah," he said. "Right here. Right now."

He managed to hold her with one arm while he nudged his way into her folds. She was wet, literally dripping wet and he almost dropped her as his knees went weak. "Normally I'd take a little more time," he panted. "To make you ready. To get you nice and wet. But...Jesus...you're already wet. And I...can't...wait..." He pushed into her, struggling for control and patience. She was so tight and he felt heat and wet, warm tugging as she pulled him in. Slowly he eased into her, two hands back on her butt, bending his knees for a better angle.

She held on tightly, lifting and lowering herself slightly to help the fit, making little whimpers of need and urgency. Then he was in her all the way, his dark thatch of curls pressed to her tiny blonde patch. He looked down at where they were joined, amazed himself at how he fit into her slender body. He thrust up into her. "Look," he gasped. "Look at us, Tara."

She too looked down as their bodies drew apart and then slid together, a low ragged moan coming from deep inside her. The visual mesmerized, his thick flesh gleaming with her cream moving in and out of her. The sensation was indescribable, the tight friction of her body on his, the way he filled her, the way her body tightened and quivered as he held her up against him. He couldn't keep his orgasm at bay much longer, but he wanted her to come.

"Touch yourself," he ordered her. "Make yourself come." He bit his lip hard as she let go of his shoulder and slid a hand down between them to find her clit. She'd barely touched herself when she went off, crying out, her pussy rippling around him, and he thrust harder to intensify her orgasm. He let himself go. He poured himself into her, shuddering violently, as she pulsed around him, milking him.

Weakness slid down his legs and he staggered in a semicircle to sit down hard on the low wall, narrowly missing the two wineglasses perched there. Tara straddled him, still impaled on his cock, and collapsed onto him, her head buried in the crook of his neck.

Their breathing heaved together as they clutched each other, eyes closed, Tara's face pressed to his neck, his hot face pressed to her cool silky hair. After long moments, he realized goose bumps dotted her silky flesh.

"Cold?" he murmured into her hair. Her naked body was draped over him and for a moment he felt bad that he'd stripped her bare and all he'd done was open his fly. She nodded against him and he stood up, still holding her against him, and walked into the house. He headed straight to the bedroom, tossed back the duvet and laid her tenderly on the bed. He covered her, then stripped off his shirt and jeans and stepped out of the deck shoes he wore without socks. Then he slid in beside her, tucked her under his arm and fitted her body to his. She kissed his chest and nestled in closer, still limp from her climax.

Chapter Fourteen

They couldn't get enough of each other, making love again before they dropped off to sleep and again in the morning. Tara slid out of bed to go make coffee while Joe went back to sleep. Naked, she peeked out through the French doors from the kitchen onto the terrace. Her clothes littered the tiles. Scanning the area, she darted nervously out onto the terrace to retrieve them, then quickly slipped the tank top over her head and stepped into the little boy shorts. She couldn't help but smile at Joe's comments about her "shorts". And the shameless, wanton way she'd behaved last night. God, he'd taken her on the terrace, out in the open, totally naked. She shivered with remembered delight.

She considered leaving. Just getting out while he was asleep, running back to Santa Barbara so she didn't have to face him again. Except she did have to face him again. And besides...she couldn't just leave him. Yesterday he'd brought her breakfast in bed. He'd made dinner for her. He'd given her so much pleasure and told her she was beautiful and smart. Her heart swelled, remembering that.

So she made coffee and poured it into a large thermos jug when it was ready. Along with the muffins they'd bought yesterday and two mugs, she carried the thermos into the bedroom.

Joe sprawled on his stomach in her bed, taking up almost the whole damn thing, he was so huge. His bare feet, long and sexy, hung over the bottom of the bed, the duvet twisted crazily over his body. His arms were up around the pillow beneath his head, the morning light shadowing the curves of his muscled arms and shoulders. His dark hair was tousled, his cheeks darkened with whiskers, his beautiful chiseled mouth relaxed. She just stood there and looked at him, coffee and breakfast forgotten, rubbing mindlessly at the ache in her chest. She let out her breath on a soft sigh at the beauty of him.

Fear bubbled up inside her again, fear she'd fought all day yesterday as they'd explored Santa Ynez, holding hands like lovers, cooking dinner like a couple. She was not an emotional person, she was detached and independent. Sure, she cared about people. Obviously she loved her sister and her grandfather. She cared about the people who worked for her. But she could not care about Joe. Because, dammit, he scared her.

Swallowing hard past the tightness in her throat, she sat down on the edge of the bed and gave Joe's big shoulder a little shake. He stirred, his long dark lashes feathered on his cheekbones, then fluttering open. His eyes, hazy with sleep, immediately fastened on hers. Dark and liquid, like hot coffee. She couldn't resist reaching out to push his hair back off his forehead, combing her fingers through it gently.

"I brought you breakfast," she told him. "Coffee and muffins."

"Mmm." He reached for her and before she knew it she was tumbled beneath his big, hard body. "I just want *you* for breakfast." He rubbed his scratchy face against hers and she hunched her shoulders up as she tried to evade him. And she giggled. Good God, she giggled.

He pushed her tank top up over her breasts. She hadn't bothered with a bra, just the tank top and panties. He rubbed his face over her breasts, took a nipple between his lips. Oh God, he was doing it to her again. She was helpless to resist him.

She grabbed hold of his hair, intending to pull him away from her sensitive nipple but instead she moaned and held him closer as he sucked harder.

"Joe," she murmured. "Stop. Enough."

"You don't sound very sure of that," he murmured, switching to her other breast, sending all kinds of shimmery tingles through her, everything inside her going soft and warm.

And he proceeded to have her for breakfast— and then coffee and muffins.

After they'd had a shower and dressed again, she suggested they should get back to Santa Barbara.

"What's the rush?" Joe asked. "It's Sunday." She stared at him with frustration. She needed to get away from him, from his overwhelming sexual presence, from the temptation of his body and most importantly from the way he looked at her and saw inside her and asked her questions about stuff she didn't even want to think about.

"Let's go for a walk," he said. "You can show me more of the ranch."

She sighed and gave in to the inevitable. What would she do at home, anyway?

So they spent the afternoon wandering the dusky olive groves, then sitting in a grassy field in the sun talking.

"Did you know olives are a powerful aphrodisiac?" she asked.

"Huh?" He grinned. "Uh no. I've heard of other foods that are aphrodisiacs....oysters..."

"I think that's just because they look like female genitalia," she said.

He choked. "Yeah, that could be it."

"Anyway, apparently the ancient Greeks ate olives and steamed barley before a night of love. It supposedly made men inexhaustible in bed."

"Ah." He nodded thoughtfully. "Worth trying."

She laughed and pushed at his shoulder. "Like you need it." They shared an intimate smile.

"You're beautiful when you laugh," he told her, brushing her cheek with a long piece of grass.

Oh God, he was doing it again. Telling her she was beautiful. Nobody had ever told her that. Well, she had a vague memory of her parents saying it, but that didn't count. She knew she was okay looking, but not beautiful, certainly not glamorous like Sasha.

But Joe really seemed to think she was beautiful and her heart warmed and softened at that.

He pushed her down and rolled over her. "That will be my new mission in life. Make Tara laugh."

She couldn't help but laugh again, but sobered instantly when he kissed her. Oh Lord, she was in so much trouble here.

She had no idea how she was going to handle things Monday morning.

* * * * *

Nick was sitting in his living room watching a movie on DVD when Joe arrived home Sunday evening.

"Wow," he said as Joe came in. "You finally showed up. Must have been a good weekend." Joe had left him a message that he was out at the ranch.

"Oh yeah." Joe dropped into a chair across from Nick. He ran his hands through his hair and sighed.

"So, you're doing your boss."

Joe scowled. "She is not my boss," he said. "Let me just make that perfectly clear. I do not work for her."

Nick held up his hands. "Ooookay. Sorry."

"She is, however, my boss's granddaughter," he continued with a groan, dropping his face into his hands. "What the hell was I thinking?"

"Apparently you were thinking with your other head," Nick said helpfully.

"Yeah, thanks, buddy. Christ. I've probably just screwed up the only job I could get, besides maybe waiting tables." He leaned his head back against the couch, closing his eyes.

"Must have been good," Nick said. "You look exhausted."

"Yeah." He expelled a long breath. "It was better than good."

"Was it worth it?"

Joe considered that. If it changed the dynamic between them and led her to trust him with business decisions, then yeah, it had been worth it. Christ, a whole weekend of hot sex with a gorgeous woman? Of course it was worth it!

But there was one other small problem. His intention had been to teach her a few submission lessons, for the sole purpose of gaining her cooperation at the office. But somehow the inner vulnerability, the generosity and passion she usually kept hidden, had done some kind of number on him, because he hadn't had that much fun in a long time. Not just in the bedroom. Tasting wine with her, sitting in the olive groves talking, hearing about her parents...it had been fun. And although he'd dominated her, he'd done it without any tricks or toys—no cuffs, no flogger, no ropes. Which was weird for

him, the guy who'd gotten so bored and blasé about sex he'd sought out fetish clubs for excitement.

"I hope so," he finally said.

"She's not likely going to run home and tell Grandpa she slept with you, is she?"

"Jesus Christ."

Nick laughed. "So what's the problem?"

"No problem. It's just a job." Yeah right.

"You can get a job anywhere," Nick said, waving a hand.

Joe shook his head. "Nice try, buddy," he said. "Where were you when I was pounding the pavement in San Francisco a few weeks ago? Nobody wants to hire me. I'm damaged goods, man." He shook his head in disgust. "If I can just get back on my feet, eventually people will forget what happened, but right now...I'm borderline desperate."

No borderline about it. Yet somehow his career problems seem to have ducked into the far recesses of his mind, forgotten and unimportant. Somehow Tara had become not just a problem to be solved, but a treasure to be won.

"Her sister is uh...acting kinda weird," Nick said. "Have you met her?"

Joe focused on his friend. "Yeah. She didn't seem weird. Kind of slutty princessy, but not weird."

Nick frowned. "She's not slutty."

Joe bit back a grin. "Why'd you say she's acting weird?"

"She...ah...asked me out."

Joe laughed. "That's not weird."

"Well, in a way it is—she's on the fundraising committee. Of course I turned her down, and then Friday she stayed after the meeting and hung out with the kids."

Joe quirked a brow. "The kids in the center? Why would she do that?"

"I have no idea. Like I said—weird. None of the other committee members do that."

"You know why she did it." The grin broke free. "She's hot for you."

"Fuck." Nick rubbed his face. "Maybe. But I don't want anything to do with her."

"Maybe she's not like Erin."

"Oh yeah. She's *exactly* like Erin."

"Well, hell. Don't piss her off. Remember, I work for her family."

"I'm not going out with her just to save your sorry ass!"

"I never said that. Just...be nice to her. She can't be that bad."

Nick's grimace made him laugh again. "The thing is, she can't just do that. She can't just hang out and work with the kids. We have to make sure anyone who works with the kids is screened properly. Liability issues. She's actually really good with them and they love her..." He shrugged. "But I can't let her do that."

One corner of Joe's mouth deepened. "Shit."

* * * * *

Joe was already at the office, standing at Paige's desk looking at some papers when Tara got there at seven-thirty Monday morning. He glanced up when she walked in and his smile was so warm it melted her. She smiled back uncertainly.

He looked so damn good in his casual pants and shirt, the sleeves rolled up over his strong brown forearms.

"Good morning," he murmured and moved purposefully toward her. God, he was going to kiss her. She sidestepped him and returned his greeting, ducking into her office. He followed her to the door with a little frown.

"You okay?" he inquired, lifting a brow, leaning against the door frame.

"Yes, of course!" she said, a little breathlessly. "I'm fine. But we need to talk."

A faint smile curved his lips.

"Sure." He stepped into the office and closed the door.

"We need to be sure we're on the same page. You know...."

He met her gaze neutrally.

"I'd rather people don't know about...us," she said, struggling with the words. "It's just better, since we work together...."

"Of course," he said. "Don't you trust me to be discreet, Tara?"

"Yes, yes, of course I do," she hurried to assure him. "And I just wanted to make sure you know this doesn't change anything."

"What do you mean?" The silkiness in his voice alerted her and she eyed him warily.

"I mean, what happened at the ranch doesn't make any difference to what happens here. In the office."

She felt the stillness of his body even though the expression on his face barely changed. She started to shake a little inside.

"That was just sex," she continued. "It has nothing to do with us...here...this..." She waved a hand between them. "Business."

He stared down at her for several thudding heartbeats. "Of course not. You're right."

"Oh. Okay."

Just then her grandfather walked into her office and Joe stepped back.

"Tara," Tyrone said. "I didn't see you last night. When did you get home?"

"Around six." She swallowed. "I went to bed early." Joe had carefully taken a few steps back, shoving his hands in his pockets.

"You must have. How was your weekend?" He was looking at her curiously and her cheeks grew warm again. *Handle this, Tara, handle this.*

"It was fine," she shrugged, avoiding Joe's eyes. "How was yours?"

"Good," he said. "I had a visit from an old friend." His eyes slid over to Joe. "Your grandmother."

Joe's brows snapped together above his nose. "Grandma was in town?" Tara could see his mind working at a furious pace.

"Yes. She was here on some business, but she stopped in to see you and was told you were out of town for the weekend."

Shit, shit, shit. Now Tara met Joe's eyes, communicating silently.

"Yeah, uh....I went to LA for the weekend," Joe said. "Nick must have forgotten to tell me she came by."

"Ah. Anyway, she stopped in to see me and stayed for dinner Saturday night. It was quite pleasant. We caught up on some news. She was wondering how you're doing. I told her you seem to be catching on quickly here. Right in the thick of things after only three weeks."

Joe smiled at Tyrone. "Thanks. I'm sorry I missed her. I'll give her a call today."

Tyrone left and Joe and Tara faced each other again.

"Thank you for covering," she said.

"I don't like lying," he said, his jaw tight. "But I agree it's better to just keep this between us."

"Okay. Then...we're good?"

"There are still things we need to talk about," he said. "A shitload of things. But this isn't the place."

"Oh."

"So. Let's talk about the website redesign. After you talk to CoastTech, you'll need to put that all together into a business case."

She scowled, but they'd already had this fight once. "Yes," she muttered. "But I'm still working on the high density planting case. And I haven't even gotten to the case for using the pomace. I don't know when I'll get time to get to that."

He frowned. "I offered to do that for you."

"I know, but..."

He leaned forward, eyes intense. "I'll do it, Tara."

She studied him for a long moment, nibbling on her bottom lip. She wanted to get the high density planting business case done more than anything—that was her biggest project and the one she needed Grandpa's approval on to move forward, the one that was going to take the business to the next level. She couldn't do it all herself.

But it vexed her to hand something over to Joe when all along she'd been trying to keep things away from him. She tried to reconcile that with the man who'd given her so much on the weekend – and couldn't.

"Okay." She turned around and picked up a folder from the credenza behind her desk. "Here." She slid it over to him. "Go for it." She paused. "But...you won't rule it out just because it's...soap, will you? Or just because it's my idea?"

"Tara." He gave her a look of censure. "If it's a viable business opportunity, I'll say so. I don't care whose idea it was or what it is."

She nodded slowly. "Okay."

"And since you're so busy, I'll handle the tax audit."

She pursed her lips. "I hate audits," she admitted. She sighed. "Okay."

His lips twitched. "Okay."

Paige poked her head into the office. "Joe, Cole Sotello is on the phone for you."

Tara frowned. "For Joe? Doesn't he want to talk to me?" Cole Sotello was the competition – another olive oil producer a little farther north in the valley.

"He asked for Joe."

"I'll take it in my office."

"Why is he calling you?" She shifted her gaze to Joe. Her stomach tightened and her heart started beating a little faster. This was her worst fear...other people were going to start going to him instead of her.

"I have no idea," Joe said patiently. "I'll let you know."

She stared at him in dismay as he left to take the call. Why wouldn't Joe speak to her?

Dammit, and she'd just handed over the pomace business case and the tax audit. Shit! She needed to get a grip. She could not be getting all soft just because they'd had sex. Really, supernova hot sex. She had to stay in control. Had to.

Joe returned a short time later with his arms full of files.

"So what did he want?" she demanded.

"Who?"

"Cole Sotello!"

He lifted a brow. "He wants to have lunch tomorrow."

"Oh." She pursed her lips. "Why?"

He gave her a long, patient look. She met his gaze defiantly.

"I don't know, Tara. I'll tell you tomorrow."

"Why can't I come?"

"Because he invited me."

She wanted to growl with frustration. She was being totally excluded from the meeting and it wasn't fair, dammit. "But I..."

"Don't worry," he told her. "I can handle whatever it is."

She nodded.

"Have lunch with me today."

"No." That was a bad idea.

"Yes. I'll swing by at noon." And he disappeared. Damn him.

Chapter Fifteen

Having lunch together wouldn't look odd to anyone.

They walked to a restaurant nearby and sat on the patio under the shade of a colorful umbrella. After ordering coffee and sandwiches, they faced each other across the table. "My plan..." Tara began.

Joe shook his head. "Uh-uh. No work talk. It's lunch time."

She frowned. "But..."

He smiled, looking around the busy patio. There was nobody there they knew. None of the office staff, nobody from the store. He reached across the small table and took her hand. "If you want to talk about work, tell me more about your ideas for the ranch. The tours, the tastings."

He half expected her to withdraw her hand from his, given the public location, but her fingers curled around his almost instinctively. He liked that. She smiled at him.

"Okay," she said, apparently only too happy to do so. She talked about all the ideas she had and how they could use the property, the way she'd like the tasting area to look, the feel of it, how they could do tours. To his surprise, some of the ideas she had about what to do with the house were things that had floated through his own head when he'd been out there.

He could actually envision himself living in that ranch house. He'd love to have a swimming pool there; just beyond the patio was the perfect location. He could see himself in an updated version of the kitchen, whipping up pasta dishes or moving between the kitchen and the patio to an outdoor cooking area, grilling steaks, sitting beside the pool with a bunch of people talking and laughing.

Jesus Christ. He had to give his head a shake, a hard shake. What the fuck was he thinking of? This was not his life, here in Santa Barbara. This was a temporary thing, short term, a stepping stone back to his real life.

He listened to Tara talk, resisting the impulse to jump in with questions about costs and feasibility. This was her vision, her dream, and he didn't want to shut her down. There'd be time for that later, some day when they were making her dream a reality.

Fuck. Once again, what was he thinking? Like he'd be around then. By the time Santa Ynez Olives got to that point, he'd be long gone, back in San Francisco working for some other big manufacturing company, achieving his own dreams.

The thought cast a shadow over their lunch and he forced it to the back of his mind, focusing again on Tara and the lively energy and enthusiasm on her beautiful face as she talked.

* * * * *

Sasha found herself looking forward to the next planning meeting at the center. Again she stayed after, lingering with the kids. She had no idea why they appealed to her so much. Maybe because they were so accepting of her, so honest. She made more jewelry with some of the girls.

"Yo, Sasha."

She turned and smiled at Caleb and Isaiah. "Hey, guys. What's up? Or should I say, whassup?" She grinned.

"We was just wondering if you would give us some advice."

The two teenage brothers, age thirteen and fifteen, shuffled their feet in front of her. She wasn't sure how their pants stayed up, they were so huge and baggy, but they were nice kids. Polite.

"Sure."

"It's our mom's birthday next week," Isaiah said. "We want to get her something nice."

"Yeah," Caleb said. "We've saved up twenty bucks. We saw a real nice necklace at Dollar World we think she'd like, but we're not sure. You know what a fine lady would like."

She smiled, groaning inwardly. Dollar World? "What's it like?"

"It's..." They looked at each other and shrugged. "It's got beads and stuff, silver and black."

"Oh." She thought for a moment. "Well, I don't know your mom, but I'm sure she'd like anything you get for her."

"We want it to be special," said Caleb.

"Well, what kinds of things does she like? Does she go out much?"

"Nah. She works a lot. But she bought a new dress last week because she's goin' to a wedding for my cousin. It's a black dress. We thought some bling would look nice with her new dress."

"Okay." Sasha tapped her bottom lip. "You know, you could make her something. Last week I was helping some of the others make jewelry and there's some nice stuff upstairs. If you make it yourself, it means so much more."

They looked at each other doubtfully. "Make it? Us? Fo' reals?"

"Um. Yeah. Fo' reals." She held back her smile. "I'll help you. I'm pretty good at that. You can pick the beads and I'll help you."

"Well...okay."

The two boys were indecisive when it came to choosing what they wanted and she spent some time helping them design the necklace, bracelet and earrings they wanted to make. Then she showed them how to get started.

"The guys gon' think we got suga in tha tank," Caleb muttered as he threaded beads onto the cord.

Sasha didn't know what that meant and wasn't sure she wanted to. "You're doing great," she said. "A few more beads and you'll be done. I'll show you how to use these little crimpers."

They finished up and she helped crimp the end beads. She fastened the finished necklace around her neck, the bracelet on her wrist and held the dangling earrings to her ears to model for the boys.

"Sweet," Caleb said.

"That is off da heazy," Isaiah added. They both flashed wide grins at her.

"Now, use your twenty dollars to buy her a nice card and some pretty paper to wrap these in and she's going to love it," Sasha said. She had to admire their work; it really looked professional and glamorous.

"Sasha?"

She turned and saw Nick scowling at her. Shit.

"Can I talk to you? In my office."

She followed him downstairs. "Go on in," Nick said with a gesture.

She preceded him into his office and her body brushed his as she edged by him. A little electric frisson shimmered over her and she felt him jerk back. A little befuddled by that, she sat down on a chair.

Nick took a seat behind his desk and the look on his face made her insides tighten up.

"Nick," she said, standing and sauntering behind his desk. He rolled his chair back from the desk and away from her. His hands gripped the arm rests. "Why wouldn't you go out to dinner with me the other day?"

"I think that's pretty obvious," he said in a choked voice. "It's never a good idea to get involved in a relationship that's business."

"It's not like I work here. Or work for you. I'm just a committee member."

She perched on the edge of his desk. He couldn't get much farther away from her unless he wheeled himself right out the window.

"Look, you're a nice girl, Sasha," he said. "But you're just not my type."

She blinked at that. She had never in her life heard those words from a man. "What type am I?" she asked slowly.

Nick heaved a slightly desperate-sounding sigh. "You're rich," he said. "That's enough for me."

"You have some kind of prejudice against rich girls?"

"Look, I was married to a woman who was, um...very ambitious. All she wanted was to be rich, associate with other rich people, shop and travel."

Sasha's eyes widened. He was describing her life.

"Yeah," he nodded. "When I took this job here, she thought it was a step down for us. She didn't want me to do this. The money wasn't good and it wasn't a prestigious job like my old job."

She knew he used to be a lawyer at one of the biggest firms in Santa Barbara.

"I see," she said slowly. "Is that why she left you?"

"Yes. Although she didn't exactly leave. We mutually agreed to end the marriage. We wanted different things from life."

She studied him. "What do you want from life, Nick?"

"Really...this isn't..."

"I'm interested."

He sighed. "I want to do work that means something. I get to use my skills here to do big things, but I also get to see the impact of what we do right at the street level, when a kid who's at risk comes here and ends up making something of his or her life."

"Don't you want to get married again? Have a family of your own?"

He met her eyes. "Sure. Maybe some day."

She nodded. But she could see why he wasn't interested in her. Hell, it was pretty clear she wasn't good enough for him, with his lofty goals and desire to serve, to do good things.

Disappointment flooded her again, along with a familiar sense of self-loathing. Disappointment because she was so used to getting whatever she wanted. If she wanted a guy, she got him. She wanted a new car, she got it. But she couldn't deny this particular man was out of her reach. She was nowhere near good enough for someone like him, someone so...worthy.

She flashed a high-wattage smile at him and slid off his desk. "I understand completely. I'm glad we had this talk."

He gaped at her momentarily, then recovered. "Sure," he said.

More than anything she wanted to fling herself into his arms, wanted to feel those strong arms around her, wanted to kiss his handsome face. She wanted him to want her just as much as she wanted him. But that wasn't going to happen. He was way too good for her.

She walked around back to the chair in front of his desk. "So what did you want to talk to me about? Plans for the fundraiser are going well."

He lowered his gaze to his desk. "It's not about the fundraiser. The thing is, you can't just show up here and do things with the kids."

"Why not?"

"Our leaders all have to go through security checks. We need a criminal records check, we need to make sure anyone who works with the kids hasn't got any record of child abuse...things like that. It's for the safety of the kids."

"I don't have a criminal record!"

"I know you don't, but there are rules and policies we have to follow. If anything happened, I'm responsible."

"So." She blinked at him. "You're telling me I can't come help here anymore."

He pressed his lips together. "Yes. That's what I'm saying."

* * * * *

Tara was actually waiting in Joe's office after his lunch with Cole Sotello, impatient for him to return to find out what Joe wanted to meet with him about. She sat there and chewed on her index fingernail. Why hadn't Joe called her? She hated that Joe was out schmoozing with one of their competitors and she had no idea what they were talking about. She could not believe that in the short time Joe had been there, word was out he was in charge.

He wasn't in charge. They worked together. Dammit.

In the time he'd been there, he'd developed an interest in the business that seemed genuine. He'd connected with the staff, apparently had a photographic memory because he remembered every little thing she'd told him, no matter how fast she threw it at him, not to mention all the things he'd learned at the ranch and the mill. And he did have impressive knowledge of supply chain management and lean manufacturing methods. He'd taken on work that had lightened her own load, and truthfully, there were some things he'd taken on she didn't miss. That included pretty much anything to do with finance, although she was still inclined to try to keep everything for herself. But since he was a numbers man, he seemed happy to handle those things and she had to admit, he hadn't screwed up anything yet.

She sighed as she waited and forced herself to keep her fingers out of her mouth.

"Waiting for me?" Joe walked into his office with his cell phone in his hand.

"Yes," she said. "Tell me what happened."

He sat behind his desk. "Hang on," he said mildly. "I've got to check my voice mail."

He did so, jotted down a couple of messages, then hung up while nerves twisted in her tummy. She suspected he was deliberately making her wait just to drive her crazy. He did know how to get to her. She forced down her impatience.

"So." He sat back in his chair. "What do you know about Molina Distributors?"

She frowned. "Molina? They're a big olive oil importer in Los Angeles. Huge, in fact." She waved a hand dismissively. "The oil they import is mediocre."

He nodded. "Apparently, Cole Sotello and Johnson Brothers are joining together to sue Molina."

"Whaaat!" Her mouth dropped open. "Sue them for what?"

"They claim Molina is importing olive oil, then cutting it with cheap canola oil, passing it off as pure extra virgin olive oil and, of course, selling it at a very attractive price."

Tara nodded. That wasn't really a surprise. She'd heard rumors, stories, whatever, about unscrupulous producers who did that. But Molina was big. "Wow," she said. "How'd they come to that conclusion?"

"Apparently they've had some independent testing done at a lab to confirm it. Joe wants us to join the lawsuit."

Her eyes widened. "Whoa."

Joe leaned back in his chair and nodded. She looked at him. He was serious for once, looking thoughtful. There was a confidence-inspiring and reassuring aura of solid reliability about him, and despite her annoyance and pique at being excluded from the meeting, she knew he'd probably handled it well. Dammit. There went her resolve to take back everything from him.

"What did you tell him?" she asked.

He smiled. "I said we'd consider it."

Her eyes widened. "But we wouldn't."

"Why not?"

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip. Of course, she'd gone with her gut instinct first response, which was "no freakin' way", and naturally Joe was taking a different approach. "Why would we do that?" she asked. "Think of the publicity."

He nodded. "Why wouldn't we do it? Give me your rational reasons why we shouldn't."

"I just did!"

He smiled again, put his hands behind his head and regarded her thoughtfully. "Look, I'm not saying we should. I just think before we make a decision, we'd better give it some careful thought and have a plan."

She slowly sucked in a long breath between her teeth. He was right, damn it. "Fine," she said shortly. "I'll get right on it." Shit. A feeling of being overwhelmed started to swell up inside her, choking her. She stood up, smoothing her skirt down over her thighs.

"Sit down." Joe waved a hand. "You don't have to do this by yourself. In fact, I'll handle it."

She sat down slowly on the edge of the chair. She did not want him to handle it. Then again...it would be almost a relief to have something like that taken off her plate. That heavy weight, that swamped, drowning feeling wasn't so much fun.

"But that's a big decision."

"I'm not suggesting I'm going to make the decision myself," he said mildly. "What I plan to do is have a look at the situation, do some checking into it, talk to Johnson Brothers, maybe even Molina. Then we'll have a meeting here. I definitely plan to

include Tyrone and I think our legal counsel should be involved. And Marina." Marina was their public relations manager.

"And me."

He smiled slowly. "Yes, Tara, and you. Most definitely you."

Tara nodded. What he said made sense. Letting him take on the leg work for something so unpleasant was actually...okay with her. Feeling a little lighter, a little brighter, she stood up again.

"Okay," she said. "Go for it."

He smiled at her and she couldn't help it, she smiled back. His smile was so sexy and infectious, almost irresistible. Those long dimples that appeared in his cheeks just made her want to lick them. She shivered at the thought. She tried to be tough and businesslike, but it was getting very hard to fight him all the time. With a gulp, she fled his office for the safety of her own.

* * * * *

When Baxter called to see if Sasha wanted to go to a big party that night, she didn't hesitate.

"Absolutely," she said. She could drown her humiliation at Nick's rejection with massive amounts of tequila, obliterate her disappointment with whatever other controlled substances were available that evening, soothe her ego with sex with Baxter.

"Haven't seen you around much," he said.

"I've been busy." She'd been busy showing up at the center, where she apparently wasn't wanted.

"You're turning into a big bore like your sister."

"Hey." She took offense on behalf of Tara. She could call Tara a bore, but nobody else could.

"Sorry," he apologized insincerely. "I'll pick you up at ten."

"Okay."

But the party was a big let-down. It wasn't really that different than any other party she went to, but she just wasn't into it. She knocked back shot after shot until her head was spinning and her body was buzzing. But tonight she could still feel the emptiness. Her friends were all laughing hysterically about stuff that wasn't even funny and Baxter was just irritating. When he started making out with some blonde bimbo, she couldn't bring herself to even care. He was just an idiot.

She called a taxi from her cell phone and was home in her bed before midnight.

* * * * *

Over the next few days, Tara and Joe were busy with their own work, popping into each other's office to consult on various things. At one point, Tara had questions about

a piece of equipment at the mill Blair wanted to purchase. The new piece of equipment would change some of their processes and Joe had such a good knowledge of manufacturing processes. So she went to see him.

When she presented the problem to him, he thought about it, then asked if it could wait a couple of weeks. He had some other ideas on changes they could make to business processes at the mill that might make things more efficient and, of course, reduce costs. She agreed to wait, curious about what he was going to propose.

They met with Tyrone, Marina Coutts, their PR manager, and Derek Atwood, their legal counsel, about the Molina lawsuit on Friday afternoon.

Tara entered the meeting room at the end of the hall a few minutes early. Paige had prepared coffee for the meeting and Tara poured herself a cup of the richly fragrant brew and gazed out the windows overlooking State Street. Oh, good coffee from Karma Coffee. Paige did know she liked good coffee. Taking a sip from the steaming cup, she turned just as Joe walked in. He was dressed more formally today, in black dress pants, a pale blue shirt and a striped blue tie, but his sleeves were rolled back.

"Hi," he said and they shared a smile.

"Coffee?" she asked. At his nod, she poured another cup and handed it to him, black, just how he liked it.

"Thank you."

Their eyes met and held and she knew he would have kissed her if he could have. The fact that she'd pleased him with the simple act of pouring him a cup of coffee spread warmth in her heart and made her absurdly glad she'd done something for him, even such a little thing.

Tyrone came into the room at the same time as Marina and they chatted as they waited for Derek to arrive, taking seats at the long oak table in the middle of the room. Paige showed Derek in a few moments later.

Joe brought everyone up to speed on the issue, providing much more detail than he had when he and Tara had last spoken, and she was reassured and impressed by the amount of information he'd acquired since his lunch with Cole Sotello.

"Do we know for sure Molina is doing this?" Derek asked.

Joe shook his head. "Cole tells me they've had testing done at an independent lab but hasn't shared that with me. We either take his word for it or we do testing ourselves. That's one of my points."

"Testing in a lab is expensive," Tara said. "We've done it in the past, on our own oils, to ensure quality and compliance with COOC standards."

Joe nodded. "Yes. It would cost a substantial amount. We need to make a decision about that, because we could spend a whole lot of money to learn there isn't really any basis for a lawsuit. On the other hand, we have to think about what we would do if the testing did show some unethical practices."

They all nodded. "That's the big question," Tyrone agreed.

Joe had carefully laid out all the pros and cons. He'd already consulted with both Marina and Derek separately and had taken their input into consideration.

"There is that old axiom that bad publicity is better than no publicity," Marina said. "However, I don't always subscribe to that."

"But it wouldn't necessarily be bad publicity about us," Tara put in, earning a startled glance from Joe. Amusement ticked inside her. She'd been the one who'd instantly declared this was something they shouldn't do and now she was considering the other side. Did he think she was so rigid she couldn't see both sides of an argument? Well, actually...there might have been a time when, yeah, she *had* been that stubborn. God, what was happening to her?

"True," Marina said. "It is, after all, Molina who is being accused of wrongdoing. However, we'd need to be prepared for the damage control their PR people would launch. Some of that could be an attack against us."

"Oh." Tara sat back in her chair.

"Even so," Marina continued, "we can spin lots of things lots of ways. If our reasons for participating in the lawsuit are really about ethics, honesty and credibility, we can play up those things. This is a family business, with a long tradition of quality, blah blah blah."

They continued to debate the issue for some time, Derek putting in his opinions and estimates about potential legal costs and issues, Marina focusing on the publicity, and Tara started to feel like they were spinning their wheels.

"We need to make a decision and come up with a plan," Joe finally said.

"You're the one who's done the research," Tara said. "What's your recommendation?"

He met her gaze and she could see the warmth there for her. Again, softness expanded in her chest.

"I recommend we not participate in the lawsuit," he finally said. "Here's why." He explained his reasons, why he felt the risks outweighed potential benefits. "And," he finished, "Sotello is going ahead with or without us. If Molina is doing something wrong and they get caught, we reap the benefits anyway."

"That almost sounds a bit unethical itself, to me," Tara commented with a frown.

"I don't think so," he said. "Sotello too is a competitor. We're not their best friends. This is business."

"Again, it comes down to spin," Marina said. "If we handle it right with Sotello, we don't necessarily piss them off."

"I agree with Joe's recommendation," Tyrone said. "What's our plan going forward?"

"I'll talk to Sotello," Joe said. "It was me he contacted and I said I'd get back to him. I'll take him for lunch again or something. Marina, you and I can meet before then to talk about some strategy." Marina nodded.

Joe followed Tara back to her office after the meeting, closing the door behind him.
“You okay with that?” he asked.

Chapter Sixteen

She turned and faced him. He'd taken control, directed the meeting, in fact had decided the outcome. Everyone had listened to him and deferred to him. And he was making sure she was okay with it.

Tears prickled the corners of her eyes. Oh dear God, what was that about? She should be *pissed* at him!

He was doing exactly what she didn't want him to do. He was taking over. She'd wanted to show him she was the one in control, but she couldn't deny he'd made her see both sides of the issue and – dammit – he was right. For the sake of the business, she couldn't argue with him. She should have been pissed – but she wasn't. She felt relieved – relieved that she had someone to share this problem with, that it hadn't all fallen on her shoulders, and touched that he'd asked if she was okay with it.

"I could have handled that," she said.

Joe's dark eyebrows drew together. "Yeah," he said slowly. "Of course you could have."

She smiled at him and his face cleared.

"Thank you," she said, and somehow she was in his arms and he was kissing the breath right out of her. His hands roamed her body, spreading fire over her. When he started lifting her skirt, she pulled away from him with a gasp.

"Joe. Not here."

He gave her a wicked grin. "Why not?"

"Someone could come in..." He kissed the side of her neck. "Grandpa...Paige...stop."

And at that moment a knock on the door had them leaping apart.

Her grandfather walked in with their visitors from Italy and his colleagues from the California Olive Oil Producers. Tara put a shaky hand to her hair. She'd met Ben Kibsey and Bob Moir before. They both grew olives up in Napa. They introduced her to Mario Deluca and Salvatore Alzieti from Italy.

Tara introduced them to Joe, a little flustered at being interrupted in the middle of a hot make-out session in her office. She smiled at their visitors. "Can I get anyone coffee?"

They declined the offer, as they were on their way back to their hotel.

"Your ranch is charming," Salvatore said with a heavy accent. "Small, but charming."

She smiled. "Yes, I'm sure it's small compared to yours. How many acres do you have?"

They chatted until Paige announced that the limo was there to take them to the Biltmore, and Joe offered to show them out.

"So," Tyrone said when he and Tara were alone, "how are things going with you and Joe?"

She turned to look at him. Did he know something was going on between them? Heat swept over her as she studied his bland expression.

"Things are going okay," she admitted reluctantly. No way in hell was she going to admit she actually liked having Joe around. "But I still don't get it, Grandpa. Why on earth would you rather have a stranger coming in and running the family business than me? I've been doing a good job."

"You're a woman."

At one time that comment would have made her scream. Now she just sighed. He really needed to get with the times.

"You should be finding a husband. Having babies," he said. "Now that Joe is here you should have more time for fun. Like the dinner tonight. Please don't talk business the entire evening. Ben and Bob are bringing their wives."

Great. She was expected to entertain the little ladies. Exactly the kind of evening she detested. Thank God Joe would be there.

She froze as she realized where her mind had just gone. She pressed a hand to her stomach. She did *not* need him.

Later, at home, she poured herself a glass of wine and filled a small crystal bowl with some spiced olives, then carried them up to her room to nibble on while she got ready for dinner.

It felt like an important event, but it was only a dinner for a few visitors she would never see again. So why was she taking so much trouble with her appearance? She didn't even need to go down that path. She knew exactly why. Once again, she wanted to impress Joe.

He was intruding in her business, taking over things she should be doing, making her work on stupid damn business cases for things she knew instinctively were the right things to do. And yet, she couldn't quite work up the anger she had when he'd first arrived.

She took a final look at herself in the full-length mirror in her room. The dress wasn't new, but it flattered her shape, a black designer dress that wrapped around her body in intricate layers, low cut in front and in back. It hugged her curves right down to her knees, the skirt so narrow she had to walk in uncharacteristically small steps. Daringly, she wore the spiky black patent pumps she usually reserved for parties at Le Château, along with her usual diamond studs in her ears and a diamond hanging on a

gold wire around her neck. She'd put her hair up in a loose chignon, something she didn't often bother with, her long bangs hanging in a sweep over her eyes.

"Why are you even coming tonight?" she asked Sasha as she descended the wide stairs to the foyer of the house and found her sister waiting. Sasha's sequined red dress glittered under the lights of the Chihuly chandelier in the foyer. Her long blonde hair, that paler shade of blonde than Tara's own, hung in a perfect straight curtain and her glossy red lips matched her dress.

"It's dinner at Insatiable." Sasha gave her a cheeky grin. "Who could say no to that?"

"It's a business dinner," Tara reminded her. "Remember? Olives are boring?"

"I know, but you can't talk business all night."

Tara sighed, recognizing her own contrariness. She didn't want to play hostess for their guests, but she didn't want Sasha there either. What was wrong with her?

They drove from their home in Hope Ranch to the restaurant near Stearns Wharf and then pulled up in front. Tiny white lights glimmered in the topiaries flanking the doors. They entered the restaurant and an attractive redhead in a strapless, form-fitting black dress greeted them with a beaming smile. She led them through the restaurant to the back.

A half-wall decorated with stunning sculptures and plants separated the back area from the rest of the dining room, the subtle lighting delineating the separate area. The long table set for twelve gleamed with silver and crystal, and small fresh flower arrangements of white orchids and olive branches lined the middle of the table. Jazzy piano music played softly in the background.

"Can I get you a drink while you wait for the rest of your party?" offered a waiter, young and gorgeous like everyone else who worked there.

"I'll have a martini," Sasha said immediately.

Tyrone gave her a look, then ordered a glass of Scotch, and Tara requested a glass of Sauvignon Blanc.

"We have several available by the glass," the young man said. "Would you like to see the wine list?"

She shook her head. "The Honey Estates Sauvignon Blanc, please," she requested, naming a local winery. He nodded approvingly.

"I'll be right back." He flashed a brilliant white smile and left.

"This is beautiful," Tara said. "I haven't been here for a while."

Their Italian guests and the two olive growers from Napa, along with their wives, arrived. They exchanged greetings and ordered drinks, and then the last to join them arrived, Joe and another man.

Joe wore another expensive-looking suit Tara was pretty sure was Armani. God, the man could fill out a suit. His dark hair was combed back off his face, but she knew that wayward lock would soon be hanging over his forehead.

And who was that with him? He was about the same height as Joe, not quite as broad through the shoulders. His dark hair was cut very close to his nicely shaped head and he also wore an expensive looking suit.

Tara heard Sasha's gasp behind her. Sasha's long nails dug into her arm.

"What is he doing here?" she hissed into Tara's ear. Startled, Tara looked down at her sister.

"Grandpa invited him," she said calmly. "Wouldn't you expect him to come tonight?"

Then she realized Sasha wasn't looking at Joe – she was looking at his friend.

* * * * *

Joe entered the restaurant and looked around. He was no stranger to restaurants, having practically grown up in one, and the elegance of this one impressed him. The buzz in the room indicated it was the place to be and he could see every table was full, except one quickly and discreetly being cleared and set. The hostess showed them through to the back area where the Santa Ynez group had been set up.

As he walked around the half-wall, his eyes immediately went to Tara and his breath caught. It was a side to her he hadn't seen – different from the professional businesswoman in a suit or the Dominatrix wannabe at Le Château. Tonight her hair was in a sophisticated up-do and her elegant dress outlined her sexy shape. The V in the back showed off the curve of her spine, and when she turned, the similar V in front revealed a hint of rounded, gleaming cleavage. She was wearing those do-me shoes, though, and he had to swallow hard to get control of his hardening body.

Her sister stood by her side in a sparkly red dress, her hair pale blonde, her skin tanned, the nails on the hand clutching her martini glass long and manicured. Her full lips, so much like Tara's, were red and shiny and she wore a lot more makeup than Tara did. They did look alike, but Sasha's vivid sexiness did nothing for him. It was Tara's understated beauty that drew his eyes back.

He shot Nick a glance as he moved forward to greet Tara and her sister. Nick's black frown was not a good thing. Then he remembered – Nick and Sasha. Hey, Joe had had no idea Sasha would be joining them.

"Tara," Joe murmured as they drew closer. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you," she said. "You remember my sister, Sasha." Sasha was staring at Nick with an expression as happy as his. A thick tension enveloped the four of them.

"Um...and this is my friend, Nick Findlay," Joe said. "Nick, this is Tara Lockhart. Your grandfather told me to invite him along," he explained to Tara. Then for Nick's benefit, he added, "I didn't know you were coming tonight, Sasha."

Sasha didn't even glance at Joe, her eyes fastened on Nick. "Isn't that funny?" she gave a quavery little laugh. "I didn't expect to see you here, Nick."

Nick's mouth formed a grim line.

Joe looked back and forth between Nick and Sasha, then his eyes met Tara's, questioningly. She gave a minute lift of one shoulder.

"Sasha, tell us about the ball you're organizing for the Youth Action Center," Tara said smoothly. Apparently she did have some social skills when she chose to use them. Huh. She sipped her glass of wine and smiled at her sister and Nick with slightly raised brows. "When is the gala this year?"

When Sasha didn't immediately respond, Nick said, "September fifteenth. Plans are well under way."

A waiter arrived to take drink orders, interrupting for a moment.

"The gala is our biggest fundraising event," Nick continued. "Our corporate sponsors, like Santa Ynez Olives, have been very generous in past years."

Tara smiled. "It's important to be good corporate citizens. And we enjoy giving back to the community where we do business."

Joe wanted to shake his head. Where had this smooth-talking hostess come from?

Nick smiled and nodded, although the smile didn't reach his eyes, and Sasha scowled.

Tyrone joined them at that moment. Joe introduced him to Nick. "We haven't met." Tyrone shook his hand firmly. "I was on the board at the Action Center for many years, but that was before your time."

Nick nodded, smiling faintly. "I've certainly heard about all your contributions. We were just talking about how generous your company has been to our organization."

"Of course, of course. And Sasha's doing some fundraising work for you, I understand."

"Uh...yeah." Again Nick's eyes connected with Sasha's, then slid away.

What was going on between them? Nick had denied any interest in her because she reminded him of his ex-wife, but clearly there was something there.

"Was it you who gave Joe the black eye?" Tara asked with a smile, deftly changing the subject.

Nick laughed. "Yeah, that would be me."

"Nice job," Tara said, her eyes flashing to Joe.

Nick burst out laughing. "Thanks." He too looked at Joe, smiling wryly.

"Well," Tara said. "Why don't we take our seats?"

She spoke to their other guests and soon everyone was seated at the long table. Joe found himself sitting directly across from Tara. Ben Kibsey, whom he'd met that morning out at the ranch, sat on his left and he resumed the interesting conversation they'd begun that morning about irrigation and a recycled water project going on in Sonoma. But the entire time he was acutely aware of Tara sitting across the table from him. He could feel her eyes on his even as she held a conversation with Bob Moir on her right. If he stretched his leg out, he could find her foot under the table.

"Water's scarce as you move from the valley floors to the hillsides," Ben said. "A non-irrigated operation can only produce about a half to a third of the yield of an irrigated operation."

Joe nodded. "Water's a big issue, isn't it?"

He sensed Tara watching him and looked across at her. She held his gaze and lifted her wineglass to her shiny mouth. Joe's own mouth watered just looking at her and his cock grew painfully hard. His gaze moved down to the enticing cleavage revealed by the dress, the sides of her round breasts visible. Damn. His body tightened even more. Luckily he was seated and a long table cloth and serviette in his lap provided some disguise.

He glanced at Sasha sitting beside Tara and noticed she had just finished her second martini. That one had lasted only minutes and she lifted a hand. With only a small gesture she caught the waiter's eye and he nodded his understanding. The impeccable service also impressed Joe.

When he opened the menu he saw their dinner was already planned. The chef's tasting menu was written in a fancy script along with a different wine pairing for each course.

"Chef Gregg has prepared a special menu for us tonight," Tara told the group. "He's going to come out and talk to us about it a bit later."

Everyone nodded and studied the menu. Joe shrugged and closed his menu, then picked up his beer. He turned to Nick on his right.

"What's with you and the princess?" he asked quietly, barely moving his lips. Nick nodded, smiling.

"Christ," he muttered through the fake smile. "I can't believe this."

"What's the problem?"

Nick glanced at him, rolling his eyes ever so slightly. "I told her not to come to the center anymore."

Joe cursed under his breath.

"Nick, what's the theme for this year's gala?" Tara asked.

"Uh..."

"The theme this year is 'Starry Nights'," Sasha said. Then she stood. "I need to use the ladies' room. Tara?"

Tara shook her head, then, catching Sasha's pointed glance, she too stood, picking up her little evening bag.

"I'll come with you," she said dryly. Joe and Nick shared a glance.

"Man, this is awkward." Nick rubbed his face after the two women had left the table.

"I told you to be nice to her!"

"What could I do? I had to stop her from coming!"

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit."

* * * * *

"This is so awkward!" Sasha cried once inside the ladies' room.

Tara turned and faced her, leaning against the polished granite counter. "What's so awkward about it? You're usually good at this kind of social stuff."

"Nick! Why is he here?"

"Apparently Grandpa told Joe to invite him."

"How the hell does he know him?" Sasha cried.

"They're friends. That's who Joe is staying with until he gets his own place."

"Oh Jesus." Sasha shook her head.

"What's going on?"

"I...I asked him out the other day."

Tara lifted a brow.

"And he said no." She hitched a shoulder. "But I really like him. So I...I started hanging around at the center. Doing stuff with the kids. And he..." She looked down. "He told me to stay away."

"What! Really?"

"Yes." She sucked in her bottom lip. "So it's kind of humiliating to see him again."

"But you have to work with him on the committee."

"Yeah. Oh God."

Tara rubbed her nose. "Well, you're just going to have to make the best of it. We can't exactly get rid of him."

Sasha sighed. "Yeah, I guess you're right." She dragged her fingers through her long straight hair to smooth it, took her shiny red lip gloss out of her purse and touched up her lips. "I need another drink."

"You're downing those martinis pretty fast. Maybe you should take it easy."

One corner of Sasha's mouth deepened. "Who cares?"

And she turned and left.

Oh God.

Tara's heart ached for Sasha. She was a spoiled princess, but she had a good heart and she was obviously hurting. Her feelings for Nick couldn't be all that serious—could they?—but rejection always hurt.

Tara followed her sister out of the stylish restroom, down the dimly lit hall and back into the restaurant. She took her seat at the table, flashing a smile at their guests. Joe was watching her. He'd been watching her all night and her nipples tingled and

tightened beneath the silky fabric of her dress. She shivered a little and looked across the table to find his eyes on her. Again.

He was looking at her with such focused intensity she wanted to squirm in her seat. Then she noticed his eyes moving down to her chest. Her breath caught in her throat and she went lightheaded. To her horror, she had an urge to reach her hands up to the wide straps of her dress at her shoulders and slowly tug them down her arms, baring her breasts to his gaze.

Oh. My. God. She picked up her glass and took a big gulp of wine, almost choking on it. Joe's lips quirked.

Her frown deepened. *Damn him.* He'd sent her some kind of telepathic dominating command and now he was laughing at her.

A tall, stunningly handsome man dressed in black pants and chef's whites that fit his broad shoulders to perfection entered their area of the restaurant.

Tara smiled. You couldn't help but smile at Tyler Gregg, he was so incredibly handsome and sexy. His spiky dark hair was tousled as usual, his sexy eyes gleamed devilishly. When he'd gotten married a couple of years ago, every girl in Santa Barbara—no, make that every girl in California and probably half the girls in America—had been bitterly disappointed. He'd had quite a reputation as a ladies' man, dating one gorgeous supermodel or actress after another before falling in love with his business manager. Now they had a new baby.

Tara stood to greet Tyler and he hugged her and kissed her cheek.

"So you have something special planned for us tonight?" Tara asked him, leaning back in his arms to smile at him.

He grinned. "Of course."

"Let me introduce you," Tara said. She went around the table, her arm linked with Tyler's, and Tyler shook hands with everyone. Joe's greeting was curt when it was his turn to be introduced.

"To start this evening, I have an olive spread made with Sevallano olives and fresh California walnuts," Tyler began. "It's served on lightly toasted baguette slices that have been brushed with olive oil."

Tara caught Joe's eye and he smiled at her. She couldn't help but smile back.

"The salad will be a simple salad of mixed field greens dressed with a sherry wine vinegar and olive oil vinaigrette," Tyler continued. "The main course this evening is leg of lamb roasted with green olives, lemons and garlic. It's served with potatoes and pan gravy. Dessert is a cake made with olive oil and champagne grapes."

"What kind of olives are with the lamb?" Joe inquired. Tara shot him an amused glance, which he caught. He just grinned.

Tyler flashed his white teeth too. "They're Arbequina olives," he replied easily. "Good question."

"Sounds incredible, Tyler," Tara said. "Thank you so much."

"And naturally, each course is paired with a wine that will enhance the experience," he added. "I'd better get back to the kitchen. It was a pleasure meeting you all."

"He is so gorgeous," Sasha sighed when he'd left. Joe and Nick glanced at each other and Tara could see them resisting the eye roll. She smiled.

"Yes, he is," she said. "He's also happily married and a new father."

Tara chatted with the two wives about their day and suggested some shops for them to visit the next day before heading north again, feeling Joe's warm eyes and smile on her. Even though they were having separate conversations, she felt as if they were together.

Soon their starter was served, crispy, chewy baguette spread with the olive and walnut combination, a tangy hint of Dijon mustard and fresh herbs...thyme, oregano and...was that sage? Delicious. It was accompanied by a nice local Zinfandel.

Tyler Gregg tried to use local ingredients and wines in his restaurant as much as possible, although he did import specialty items as well. At Santa Ynez Olives, they appreciated his business, as the restaurant used extensive quantities of a number of different olive oils and olives.

The salad was simple, as Tyler had said, but exquisite, with a fabulous Arbequina extra virgin oil.

"So, all these things are made with your oil and olives?" Joe asked Tara and she nodded. She shot him a look. Had he asked that just so she could show off for their guests? Gratitude warmed her inside.

"Yes," she said. "Tyler is an amazing chef, so we're very proud he chooses to use our oil and olives."

She was proud of their company and she appreciated Joe helping show their visitors how successful they were. She eyed him across the table. He was talking again with Ben and Bob, knowledgeable yet unafraid to admit when he didn't know something.

"I've been in this business all of four weeks now," he said to them with a laugh. "All I know is how much I don't know."

They laughed too, but Tara knew Joe had already learned a lot about the olive business. So much, it was scary. And their guests were impressed too.

"We could use someone like you at our ranch," Ben said. Joe laughed.

The main course, a fabulous creation of perfectly pink and succulent lamb enhanced by garlic and lemons and, of course, the olives was served at a leisurely pace.

"A pretty traditional combination," Tara commented. "But Tyler does it so well."

"Fresh herbs too," Ben agreed. "Really nice."

"Nice presentation," Joe added. Lemon halves and olive branches garnished the dish. "A few weeks ago I wouldn't have even known what that is." He smiled self-deprecatingly.

The local wine, a lovely Syrah, was another perfect complement.

Dessert arrived, a delicious, moist cake dotted with small champagne grapes, dusted with confectioner's sugar and served with, of course, champagne, a dry sparkling white from another local vineyard.

"Made with olive oil too." Joe asked of the cake.

She nodded. "Of course. Olive oil and butter, I believe."

After dessert, Tara looked down the table to where her grandfather was rising from his seat. It sounded like he was leaving already. He walked around behind her chair and bent down to speak with her.

"Thank for you arranging all this, Tara. It's been a good evening."

Her chest tightened at his words of praise, faint as they were.

"You can take care of the bill?" he inquired quietly. "I need to go home now. It's late."

"It's not that late," she protested. "And how will I get home?"

He frowned, then looked across the table. "Joe, can you drive Tara home?"

Chapter Seventeen

"Of course." Tara and Joe's eyes met across the table.

Grandpa turned to Sasha with a frown. "You're coming home with me," he said, voice clipped.

Tara's stomach clenched. Her gaze flickered between Grandpa's scowl and Sasha's slightly inebriated pout. Apparently Grandpa had noticed Sasha's sulky face and rapid alcohol consumption throughout the dinner.

Sasha stood too. "Fine." She tossed her hair. "I have another party to go to anyway."

And with a pointed look at Nick, she followed Grandpa out of the restaurant.

At one time Tara would have been delighted to see Grandpa's disapproval directed at Sasha instead of her for a change. But tonight she didn't feel delight. She felt...worried. About Sasha. She wasn't handling her disappointment or hurt or whatever it was she was feeling about Nick very well, downing martini after martini.

There had to be more to it than that. As far as Tara knew, Sasha barely knew Nick. And she'd been drinking a lot for a while now. Clearly, she was deeply unhappy and Tara cursed herself for not realizing this sooner. She watched Sasha and Grandpa leave together with a tight feeling in her chest, then turned back to Joe. He looked at her, eyes alight with...concern?

"You okay?" he asked softly.

She nodded. The other guests decided to leave too and she and Joe finished off the evening together, thanking them for coming, wishing them good night like a host and hostess of a dinner party. Something she'd always found so uncomfortable and excruciating became easy and enjoyable with him there at her side.

Nick excused himself to use the men's room, leaving them alone.

Joe's smile deepened as he looked down at her and reached out a hand to touch a loose tendril of hair.

"Did I tell you how hot you look tonight?"

"Um..." She had no idea. She was transfixed, watching his full lips move as he smiled and spoke. He had such a nice mouth...

"Tara?"

"Mmm?"

He bent his head and brushed his mouth over hers, exactly what she wanted him to do. He smelled so good and he was so warm, his mouth firm and gentle on hers. She swayed where she stood.

"You taste good too," he murmured, and kissed her again. She parted her lips under his, deepening the kiss, and he rested his fingers on her cheek, holding her there gently while he kissed her again and again.

The sound of a throat clearing startled both of them and they turned to see their server standing there with the bill for the evening. He smiled at them.

"Sorry to interrupt," he said. "I'll leave this with you and be back in a few minutes."

Tara mindlessly took the bill from his hand, in a daze and bemused. She glanced down at it, then back at Joe. Smiling, he plucked the bill from her fingers and quickly scanned it. He showed her the total.

"Is that what you expected?"

She nodded. Tyler had given her a price including wine and they'd had a few other drinks on top of that. She pulled her gold card from her purse. It was only a few minutes before the waiter returned and whisked her card away, returning with the credit card slip. She scribbled in a generous tip for the waiter, then scrawled her signature across the bottom.

"Okay, we can go," she said breathlessly, stuffing the receipt and the card into her tiny purse.

"Where the hell did Nick get to?" Joe took Tara's arm, then paused. "Let's go to Le Château," he said gruffly.

She reached a hand up and pushed that lock of dark hair off his face. His eyes were hot and heavy-lidded, and heat built between them as they eyed each other. She felt edgy, achy, dizzy. She knew he wanted to be alone with her, but... "I don't want to go there."

"Why not?"

How could she explain that? Then she realized he thought she meant she didn't want to be with him. "Let's go to the ranch," she said.

His eyes widened fractionally. "The ranch? Now?"

"Sure. We can make it there in half an hour."

He pursed his lips. "Okay."

"Here comes Nick."

They dropped him off at home and Tara waited in the car while Joe disappeared inside and returned with a small bag. Then he drove her home and she too ran in to grab a few things. To her surprise, she met Sasha on the stairs, coming down with an empty wineglass. Her nose was pink and shiny, eyes red-rimmed.

"Sasha. I thought you were going to a party."

"I changed my mind." Sasha brushed past her and continued down the stairs.

"Sasha, wait." Maybe she should stay. Maybe she should try to talk to Sasha about whatever was bothering her so much. She bit her lip.

"What?" Sasha asked, pausing.

"Are you okay?"

"Of course." Sasha gazed at her defiantly, then continued down the stairs.

"Wait. I'm...I'm going to the ranch tonight."

Sasha paused again at the foot of the stairs, turned and peered up at her. "Now?"

"Yeah. I'll be back tomorrow. Or maybe Sunday. Can you let Grandpa know?"

"Sure." With a hitch of her shoulder, she turned and walked away. Tara gazed after her, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. Oh lord.

"Do you want me to drive?" she offered when she climbed back in Joe's Porsche. "I know the road better than you."

"That's okay."

"I can get us there faster," she said persuasively.

He laughed. "I can get us there alive."

"You were nervous when I drove out to the ranch, weren't you?"

Still smiling, he shifted gears smoothly as he headed into the mountains. "Nah."

"Yes, you were." She smiled, warm inside. "I'm a good driver."

"Sure you are."

She grinned, liking the easy teasing between them, but then she started thinking about Sasha again and her smile faded.

"Hey." Joe reached his hand out and took hers. His fingers were warm against her cold flesh. She curled her fingers into his, wishing it didn't feel so comforting, wishing she didn't actually like him so much. "What's wrong?"

She sighed. "I'm kind of worried about my sister. She's been drinking too much and she's gone back to hanging around with Baxter the Bastard."

Joe laughed.

"I call him that because he treated her like crap," she said. "They broke up, but lately she's been seeing him again. And I think..." She bit her lip.

"What?"

"Well. She really likes Nick and he turned her down. She was definitely not herself tonight."

"She did seem different."

"I don't suppose..." Her voice trailed off.

"What?"

"Could you talk to Nick? She's really hurt by him telling her to stay away from the center."

Heavy silence filled the car. "He had to do that," Joe said quietly. "It's the law."

Tara sighed. "I know. But he didn't have to turn her down for a dinner date."

Joe's mouth tightened. "You think he should go out with her just because she wants to?"

She bit her bottom lip. "No. Of course not."

"He has his reasons for not wanting to get involved with her. It's not our business, Tara. It's between them."

Tara stared out the dark side window. "I know, but...she's my sister. Grandpa was angry at her tonight. I could tell."

Joe's silence encouraged her to keep talking.

"Usually she's the one who can do no wrong," she said softly. "And I'm the one who does everything wrong. Tonight it wasn't like that."

She felt his glance, but still he said nothing.

"I thought that would make me happy, but it doesn't. I'm worried about her."

"She'll be okay."

She turned to Joe. "Yeah. Probably. It's just...weird."

The drive through the dark mountains on the winding road went quickly, the tension in the car humming and building as they neared the ranch. Tara's tummy fluttered with nerves and anticipation. Soon they turned off the highway onto the road to the ranch and the mill. The branches of the old olive trees formed a twisted, lacy black canopy against the star-dusted sky. When Joe pulled up in front of the house and killed the engine, it was so quiet and peaceful they sat there for a minute looking at each other.

What was she doing here with him? This was insane. But the aching emptiness was still there inside her and every time she thought about Joe's kiss at the restaurant, she was flooded with wet longing, her insides low down cramping with desire.

"Come on," Joe said and opened his door. She opened her own door before he could come around and stepped out of the car.

They were barely inside the door of the house when they were in each other's arms. His hands were all over her as they groped and kissed and staggered down the hall to the bedroom.

Joe found the side zipper of her dress while her fingers fumbled with the rest of the buttons on his shirt and shoved it off his shoulders. His beautiful shoulders, dark skin smooth over hard muscle and bone. Her hands lingered there admiringly and she leaned down and sank her teeth into one firm muscle. He jumped at that, giving a little growl low in his throat, then his hands slid down her sides, pushing the dress down her thighs until it dropped to the floor.

His hands found her ass, bared by her thong underwear, and cupped it. Then fire flashed over her butt as he laid his hand on her in a gentle smack.

She cried out. "Joe!"

"That's what you get for biting me," he growled and laid another warm caress on her other cheek. Heat radiated from his hand over her flesh. Liquid flowed between her legs. She moaned. Oh God.

She kicked off her stilettos just as Joe picked her up and tossed her on the bed on her back. She let out a little cry of surprise, watched him with wide eyes as he shucked his pants and underwear, and then he was over her. He had a condom in his hands.

He rolled it onto his erection, tugged her tiny thong underwear to one side and fingered her.

"Are you wet, Tara? Ah, yes you are. Good girl."

Liquid pleasure slid through her veins, making her helpless and weak.

He pushed into her slowly, stretching her, filling her. Sensation exploded in her, raced through her bloodstream and heat rolled over her skin. Her hips lifted against his in a mindless, seeking rhythm.

He was on his knees and he lifted her legs, pushing her thighs back against her chest, giving him deeper access. Then he turned his head and, hands on her ankle, he lifted one calf and pressed a long, slow kiss there.

Her world slowed and thickened at that moment, watching him press a kiss to her calf with closed eyes as he filled her. Her heart tilted and her mind spun. He rubbed his rough cheek against her leg, opened his eyes and met hers and something shifted in her, made her breath stop. Their eyes connected and held as he lowered her calf, held both legs with his big hands and thrust harder into her.

God. She wanted to close her eyes against the intensity in his eyes, the frightening intimacy of having him inside her while looking at her like that, but she couldn't look away, held captive by his gaze.

"Come for me," he growled. "Come now."

She slid her hand down her body, found her swollen clit and rubbed. He pushed in again, faster, harder, once, twice, three times...and she came hard, ecstasy crashing over her, stars sparkling behind her closed eyelids.

He tensed and then vibrated inside her as he came too, in long, wrenching shudders inside her. When she could once again see, she watched his face, contracted in near-pain, a low guttural sound coming from deep within him. He was incredibly beautiful and triumphant, feminine joy overcame her that she could do that to him, make him feel so much.

"Holy Christ," he said long moments later. He withdrew from her slowly, carefully, then slid off the bed to go to the bathroom and get rid of the condom. Tara lay there panting, heart still racing, wet panties twisted. Her breasts heaved and quivered in the lacy cups of the bra she still wore.

What had just happened? That wasn't sex, it was an earthquake rocking the nearby San Andreas fault.

She blew out a breath, trying to get control back, limp and blissful. When Joe came back, she watched him cross the room on long legs with thickly muscled thighs, admiring his narrow hips and waist with those rippling abs and impossibly wide shoulders. Not to mention his impossibly thick penis, still partially hard.

"You okay?" he asked, sliding down beside her, resting his head on his hand, elbow bent, and pressing one hand to her abdomen. "That was intense."

"Yeah. I'm okay. I think."

The warm weight of his hand on her tummy was reassuring, tender. It made things soften inside her even more. She closed her eyes against the sensations and emotions assaulting her, gulping for air.

"Did you bring lots of condoms this time?" she whispered.

He choked on a laugh. "Like you wouldn't believe, baby."

She sighed and snuggled closer. "I did too."

He laughed again. "Tell me now," he said softly, his hand still moving in slow circles on her stomach. "Why did you join Le Château?"

She sighed, closing her eyes against the warm intensity in his. "I wanted...something. More than just sex. I'd been having dreams about...domination. Holding someone down, making them totally surrender to me, making them do whatever I wanted." She peeked at him.

He lifted a brow.

"I wanted to explore that. I felt like something was missing from my life. I-I've had relationships, but...the last guy I went out with broke up with me because..." She swallowed. "He said I made him feel I was cutting off his balls. Emasculating him."

Joe snorted and she lifted her eyes back to his.

"He obviously wasn't man enough for you."

She fought the smile tugging her lips. "And you are."

"Hell yeah." He frowned, his hand still petting her tummy in gentle, reassuring circles that made her tingle as they edged lower. "So you thought you needed to dominate someone."

"Yes. I found a place where I could go and be in control and men would love it."

"And did *you* love it?"

She lowered her gaze again, her chest tightening. "I..."

"Honesty, Tara."

"I...I didn't love it. But that's just because...I was new to it."

He looked at her still, saying nothing, and she wanted to squirm away from him and those see-inside-her eyes, inside her to things she didn't want him to see.

He lowered his head to the pillow and reached for her, circling her with his arms in a protective embrace. Thankfully it didn't seem he was going to try to convince her yet again that what she really wanted was to submit. Perhaps he had finally accepted her for who she said she was.

Chapter Eighteen

She awoke to sensation—dark, erotic, electric—her body stretched out on the bed, hands above her head. She sank into the touch of hands, hard but gentle, and Joe’s mouth, warm but greedy, as he kissed and nibbled and sucked.

When she tried to reach for him, hardness bit into her wrists. What the...she jerked her wrists. But to no avail. Her eyes flew open. Her hands were bound by leather cuffs to the headboard behind her. The lamp beside the bed cast a golden glow over the bed, where Joe lay beside her stroking her, kissing her, setting every nerve ending aflame. His dark hair gleamed in the lamplight, his olive skin satiny smooth over big muscles.

“What are you doing?” she demanded through a tight, dry throat. “Untie me!”

He lifted his head from where he pressed a kiss to her belly and slanted her a wicked smile. “No.”

“Joe!”

Fear sizzled over her body and she yanked at the restraints again, craning her neck on the pillow to look at them. She could not let him do this to her. The idea that he could do anything he wanted to her sent adrenaline surging through her and, oh dear lord, a rush of liquid heat in her pussy.

This could not turn her on. It could not. She was not going to submit like this.

“Tara. Just let go. You can’t fight it, so just...feel it. It’ll feel so good, baby.”

“Oh for...” Her eyes burned and she blinked back tears of frustration. This was exactly why she hadn’t wanted to go to Le Château—the fear that he was going to do something like this, something to force her to do things she didn’t want to do, to see things she didn’t want to see.

Joe cupped her pussy with one big hand. “You’re pulsing here,” he murmured. “And...you’re wet. So wet. You tell me you don’t want this, but your body is telling me different, Tara.”

“I’m not!” She choked on a sob, fighting for control.

“You can be punished for lying,” he said. “You know I’ll do it.”

“Oh God.” Her stomach swooped.

“You know I can show you things. You know you want this.”

She closed her eyes against that mesmerizing heat in his gaze.

“What’s your safe word, Tara?”

“I...I don’t know.”

“We need a safe word. You have to feel safe.”

“I’m tied up! How can I feel safe?”

"Olives," he decided, lips quirking. "You know how it works, right?"

She pressed her lips together and glared at him.

"Trust me," he murmured. "Trust me to know what you need. I'm responsible for you – not just your pleasure, but your safety."

She went still. "Responsible?" she whispered.

"Yeah."

"I haven't heard that word used. I've heard control, domination, power. But not...responsibility."

"That's how I feel." He ran his hands up the sensitive insides of her arms and covered her bound wrists. "I take that responsibility seriously – I'm the one who's responsible for giving you pleasure. For knowing how far to take you, for knowing when to stop. Responsible for knowing the technical skills, so I can use those toys without harming you when we do. And it's a sub's responsibility to be honest."

Her gaze fastened on his as he talked. "I'm not a sub."

His mouth went firm and he slowly shook his head. "Let go, Tara. Let it take over you. Find out what it feels like to give yourself over to it. And be honest when you're telling me what you're feeling." He kissed her mouth while he tickled his way back down her arms, lingering in the thin-skinned bends of her elbows. "Use the safe word if you're in unbearable physical pain. Not just because you're being stubborn. So be honest – with yourself and with me."

She blew out a frustrated breath.

"Honesty is important, but I know it's not easy, especially at first. Especially if you don't know what you really want. But that will come, as you learn more about yourself."

How did he *know* she wasn't sure what she really wanted? She'd had the dreams, the dark fantasies of bondage and pain, and yet she wasn't sure how to make those fantasies come true. So far the things she'd done hadn't been all that fulfilling.

"This is insane," she said, almost crying, her wrists burning as she fought against the leather cuffs.

"Sssh." He pressed a hand to her shoulders. "Stop fighting it, you'll just hurt yourself."

He leaned over her and his mouth on her nipple sent heat sweeping over her body, need clawing inside her, sharp and hot. She closed her eyes against the dark eroticism of being helpless beneath him as he took her body – giving her pleasure beyond her darkest, wildest imaginings.

"I can't!"

"Yes," he crooned against her breast, one hand cupping it. He licked again. "You can."

She rolled her head back and forth on the pillow, tried to squirm away from his touch, but his big heavy body pinned her to the mattress.

"Don't you see, Tara?" He lifted his head. "The hardest things to do are the things you're most afraid of. That's what takes the most courage. The most strength." He paused. "It takes strength to give up control."

She stared back at him, her mind racing, breath coming in shallow pants. What was he talking about?

"And you *are* strong," he continued, kissing her chest between her breasts, inhaling deeply. He moved lower to her tummy and licked her bellybutton, sending shivers cascading over her. "So strong and determined and smart."

Oh Jesus, he was making her melt with the compliments again. How could he combine such aggressive physical domination with such sweet words? How could he ask so much of her, yet give her so much too? It was crazy.

He nuzzled the curls between her legs, making her legs twitch, but she kept her thighs firmly together. He stroked her hips, the outsides of her thighs.

"Open for me, Tara."

"No."

He smiled against her hip. "Okay then."

And he flipped her onto her tummy. Her arms twisted above her head, heat flaring at her wrists and down into her shoulders.

"Ow!" She bit her lip. She could end it now. She just had to say the word. It hovered on her lips, but then Joe's mouth on her ass vaporized the safe word and it was gone on an exhalation. He kissed her butt cheek in a slow reverent kiss that made her go molten. Kissed the other cheek, slow and open-mouthed. Nibbled with his lips. Kissed her again. Sighed against her sensitive skin. She clenched her glutes.

"Mmm," he murmured and laid his hands on the tight muscles. "Nice."

"Oh God."

Sensations shimmered over her body as his lips and tongue spread sweet heat over her butt, down to the sensitive crease where cheek met thigh, up between her cheeks.

"Oh dear lord!" Her head lifted and her back arched at the sinful touch of his tongue there.

He pressed a hand between her shoulder blades, pushing her flat, and continued his exploration, his other hand parting her thighs, which she could no longer keep tight together. Fingers trailed lower, through her drenched folds, back up between butt cheeks. She clenched. She gritted her teeth. She moaned.

A flame burned inside her in a licking, twisting spiral of heat.

"I love your ass," he murmured just before he gave her a sharp tap there. She cried out again. "And you love that, don't you?"

He warmed her ass with his hand, one cheek, then the other. Heat radiated from her buttocks and shimmered up her spine and into her brain, rendering her hot and hazy.

"Joe." She dragged his name out of her.

He paused and gave a gentle stroke. "You want more, don't you?"

He moved away and she lay there glowing with hot pleasure, unable to even lift her head. She heard him leave the room then return with a rustling noise.

Finally she dredged up strength to turn her head and peer at him through her long hair trailing in front of her eyes. And what she saw had her heart stuttering.

He held a flogger—a bigger, more dangerous version of her little one, and he looked like he knew exactly how to use it.

Her breath caught and she stared wide-eyed at him. Her heart lurched into an uneven rhythm, blood pulsing hotly in her veins.

"Joe."

He walked toward her, dragging the tails across his own palm, his face dark and focused.

"I know you want this."

She couldn't take her eyes off the flogger, the sensual way he moved it, the confident way he held it. Her pussy tightened, every little muscle inside her clamped down hard on a surge of need.

He was a primal male animal, naked and assured, his eyes making her dark and wicked promises.

"I know there are things you want that you don't want to admit to."

"Yes, but...but not like this."

He smiled. "You think you want to be the one doing this. I see it in your eyes—a craving. But not to do this to someone else. You want it for yourself."

She bit her lip, once again unable to utter the words she wanted to. His admonishment to be honest kept ringing in her head. What would it be like? What would it feel like? What would it do to her—to surrender? Just this once?

"Do you think I might hurt you with this?"

She didn't know for sure what he would do. He could do anything he wanted. Fear sizzled through her, a sharp edge of uncertainty. And excited anticipation.

"Remember the safe word," he said softly, flicking the tails of the flogger.

He approached the bed, watching her. "You want this. You want to be cuffed and flogged and fucked in every orifice. And you want me to do it."

Her eyes widened and fluttered. His dirty words made her even wetter, her pussy aching. Her chin tilted up, but she said nothing. She watched him. Her shoulders ached from being in the position, restrained, arms stretched and twined above her head.

"You liked what I did last time," he said, dragging the tails over the curve of her ass. Up. Down. Up the groove of her spine, then back down, in a wicked caress. Then with a flick of his wrist, he delivered a thumping little blow and she moaned with pleasure.

Her eyes fell closed. More heat suffused her body at each stroke, at first like a sensual massage, achingly pleasurable. The sensation changed from stinging to dull as he varied his strokes over her body, and pleasure vibrated through her with every touch. She sank into the rhythm, flames licking over her body, pleasure and pain combining into a heady shimmer.

And then he stopped.

She lay there, vibrating, unable to move. Was that it? Her pussy quivered, helpless and needy, and she pressed her hips forward into the bed.

"This will add to the pleasure," he said from behind her, his voice a dark promise. She heard a noise—a squirt of liquid—and then hands lifted her butt in the air. Slippery fingers probed at her heated butt cheeks. And between them. She clenched tightly around the intrusion, where no one had ever touched before.

"No!"

"Relax." He stroked a hand over her buttocks, probing again.

"What is it? What are you doing?"

Something slid inside her, past the tight ring of muscle, smooth and round. Small. She sucked in a breath at the unfamiliar sensation.

"Beads," he replied, and pushed in farther. Another small round penetration. And another—only bigger. Filling her. Stretching her.

She groaned and hid her face at the forbidden thrill of it.

He paused between inserting each bead, stroked her tender flesh, then pushed again, maddeningly slow until her ass burned with it. "Keep those there," he instructed her and then the tails of the flogger swiped over her again in another hot caress.

She cried out. Pleasure ricocheted through her body from the inside out. As he brushed her flesh with the flogger, the beads inside her picked up the rhythm and transferred it to her very center until her entire body vibrated inside and out with edgy pleasure.

Her mind emptied. Her blood raced hot, her skin burned and she drifted on a euphoric high of submission and pleasure-pain. She floated.

He took her up. Hovering. Higher. She knew the safe word. A vague thought entered her head that she should say it, that she should stop this. But his words—unbearable pain. She could bear this. She absorbed it into her. And when she was almost at the point where the pleasure peaked into a sharp exquisite point—he stopped.

He smoothed his hands over her body, up her back, over her shoulders and arms and released her wrists. He rolled her over onto her back. She stared at him through dazed eyes, unable to process coherent thoughts.

"Come now," he murmured. He lifted her legs, pressing them up to her chest, and his fingers slipped between her legs. "Come for me. You're so close."

He stroked through her wetness, wetter than she'd ever been, up over the bump of her clit, her ass still filled with the beads. He pumped them a little as he rubbed her clit, sensation rocketing through her in hot waves.

She cried out, closed her eyes, and turned her head to the side. It was too much, too much sensation, too much pleasure, heat rushing through her body, building to an intense peak, making her mindless with fiery ecstasy. The forbidden pleasure of the beads in her ass, the wicked touch of his fingers on her clit, the helplessness of being at his mercy all combined into a dark, edgy euphoria. Her orgasm crashed over her and when he pulled the beads out of her anus, one by one as she came, fire flared over and over and over, her body convulsing in hard pulses.

* * * * *

Restraining his own dominant urges to shove his prick inside her and fuck her senseless was a supreme challenge to his self-control. His cock throbbed, his balls ached with the need to come. Adrenaline sizzled through his veins and he could even taste it in his mouth. Yeah. Oh yeah. He'd done it for her. A massive wave of satisfaction rocked him.

He held her arms as he drew them slowly down to her side, knowing the burn she would be feeling. Starting with one small hand, he slowly massaged her, his fingers kneading and stroking their way up her arm to her shoulder. He knelt beside her and tenderly massaged her shoulder muscles, using his thumbs to press deeply. She moaned and her eyelashes fluttered.

"That...feels good," she moaned.

"You were amazing, Tara."

She'd really gone far away and he'd been impressed, awed even, though he sensed she could go even further. He continued his massage down the other arm and hand, then gently rolled her over to her tummy again. Her long hair curtained her face from him. He pressed fingers and thumbs into the tight muscles from shoulders down the sides of her spine in a slow sensual massage, until he reached her ass. Her sweet, blushing pink ass. He shifted and leaned down to press a kiss to each soft, hot cheek, gently massaging her tender flesh. Her small whimpers of pleasure told him what he needed to know.

"Stay put," he said, rolling off the bed. "I'll be right back."

In the bathroom, he ran warm water over a cloth and returned to wipe the slick lube from her ass and pussy, carefully washing her.

"There you go," he crooned and he lay down beside her and pulled her into his arms. She was as limp as the cloth he'd just tossed to the floor. "You did so good, baby. So good. Christ, you make me hot."

His erection pressed against her softness, but he knew he had to wait. He needed all his control to be able to give her what she needed.

"I can't believe I let you do that to me," she moaned. He cupped the back of her head and pressed her face to his chest.

"You loved it." He stated it with utter certainty and satisfaction.

"No, I didn't."

He inhaled slowly, delving deep for patience. Surely she still wasn't going to be in denial about what she'd gotten from that? He swallowed a sigh, giving her a chance to recover and catch her breath before he got inside her pretty body. He wanted to fuck her everywhere—her pussy, her mouth, her ass. And he had no doubt she wanted that too, deep inside her.

When he felt her heart rate slow and her breathing even out, he moved her away from him, gently laying her on her back on the bed. "So beautiful," he said, carefully pushing strands of hair back off her face. Her mouth was swollen and red; probably she'd bitten her lip while he'd flogged her. Her eyes still held a dazed haziness, her cheeks flushed a pretty peach. He rubbed a thumb over her plump bottom lip, pushed into her mouth to feel the sharp edge of her bottom teeth, the warm velvet of her tongue.

"Suck me," he said softly. Her mouth closed around his thumb and she pulled at it with a soft wet suction. "Good girl."

Her pupils dilated and he let her suck for a moment, then tugged his thumb away and dragged his fingertips down the side of her neck to her breasts. He loved her tits and playing with them for a while to get her all hot again would be sweet torture.

He bent his head and took one tight little nipple into his mouth, fit it to his tongue and sucked. Her fingers slid into his hair. Aw, that felt damn good. Although he loved seeing her bound and helpless, there were advantages to having her hands free.

He nibbled and licked and sucked with increasing pressure and intensity until her body twitched hard beneath him and her fingers dug into his scalp, sending electricity sizzling down his spine. He lifted and looked down at her breasts, firm and round, tipped with hard, dark red little nipples almost glowing with heat and sensation. "They're perfect, Tara." He stroked a hand over them, cupped her fullness, then pinched and rolled the nipples in his fingers. He bent his head and used his teeth with exquisite care. She gasped.

"Tell me, Tara." He nipped at the other nipple, swollen and crimson. "Does it hurt?"

"Yes." Her head tossed on the pillow, her hips lifted and satisfaction drizzled through him like warm honey at how responsive she was to him. His cock leaped. "God, yes."

"If you want me to stop, say the word." He dragged his tongue over the tight bud, alternating soft with hard, soothing with sharp.

She didn't say it, just moaned again.

"Your nipples will be sore," he murmured. "But when I touch you tomorrow, just a brush of my finger against your tender nipples will remind you of this and make you wet."

Her breathing grew even choppy. "Oh dear God."

Christ, he needed to be inside her, and he moved over her, parted her thighs and slipped his fingers through her wetness. Unbelievable. Her clit twitched delicately at his touch. She needed to come again as much as he did.

He reached for a condom, gloved up and prepared to push inside her. "What do you want, Tara?" He paused, his hands on her thighs. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to fuck me!"

"Ah." And he thrust into her. She was wet and soft enough to take almost all of him on the first push, and with the second he was balls deep inside her. Christ! On his knees, legs spread wide, he dropped his head back, eyes closed, lungs straining. Her velvet warmth wrapped around his cock, tight and hot. Moisture beaded on his forehead. Pleasure tore through him, violent and ferocious.

"Oh be careful," she begged, head tossing. "So deep...so deep..."

Ah Christ, he didn't want to hurt her. He eased up just a little. He reached for her face, grasped it and turned it toward him, holding it. "Look at me," he commanded. "Open your eyes."

She dragged her eyes open and met his. And everything he saw there slammed into him, knifing straight to his heart. His hand slid from her jaw to her throat, holding her there like a collar. He fucked her with hard, heavy strokes and she lifted into him and fucked him back, their eyes fastened on one another.

"Come," he said. And reached between them to find her clit with his thumb. He pressed over it and she cried out and arched up off the bed. He watched the ecstasy tighten her beautiful face, a pink flush of pleasure flow up from her breasts to her throat to her face.

Need for her whipped through him, wrenching at his muscles. His head spun, his skin tingled everywhere, pressure built at the base of his spine, his balls tightened. And then he came violently, sensation exploding through his nerves, racing over his body. He slammed into her, holding himself against her soft pussy as he poured into her, coming in long, hard spurts of ecstasy.

Chapter Nineteen

They slept the rest of the night in each other's arms until Joe felt Tara roll away from him as dawn brightened the edges of the window around the shades. She slid out of bed and disappeared into the bathroom.

He waited for her, thinking about what he wanted to do to her next. Or what he wanted her to do to him. Now that they'd broken down that barrier, he could take her further—his mind wandered away with thoughts that made him hard.

She emerged from the bathroom and began to dress.

"What are you doing, Tara?" He lifted his head and propped it on a hand.

"Getting dressed." Her back was to him and he didn't like the stiff line of her spine.

"Come back to bed."

"No." She dragged a shirt over her head. "I'm leaving."

"The hell you are." He threw back the covers and surged out of bed. He strode across the room to her, and laid his hands on her shoulders, turning her to face him. "What's going on?"

Her eyes sparked fire at him, her mouth pressed in a pissed-off line. "I can't believe you did that to me."

"Did what?" What was she talking about? The anal sex? The flogging? The cuffs? What?

"All of that!" She shrugged his hands off and moved away. "You knew I didn't want that and you did it anyway. I'm not like that. I don't want to be tied up and used, I don't want to...to..."

Ah fuck. He'd thought they were past that.

"Tara. You're doing it again."

"Doing what!" Her voice rose.

"Lying to yourself."

"I'm not lying to myself! Maybe you're the one who's deluded! Did you ever think you might be wrong about me?"

She faced him, indignation pouring off her, hands clenched at her sides.

"I know what I saw in your eyes," he said quietly. "I saw it, Tara. And you never once said the safe word. If you wanted me to stop, you could have said it any time. You *are* lying to yourself if you're saying you didn't like everything I did to you." He crowded closer. "Everything. The beads in your ass." He bent his face to hers, nearly nose to nose. "Your wrists in cuffs. Being flogged until you came." Now he did rub his nose along the side of hers. "You can't deny it."

She stood there, saying nothing, her eyes flickering as she thought.

"I told you last night," he murmured. "You need to face your fears. You need to be brave enough to do that. I thought you were brave enough. But if you can't—then you're a coward."

"I am not a coward!" She stepped back from him, hands clenched, body rigid. But she didn't meet his eyes.

He swallowed a sigh. "You submitted last night, so beautifully. It was truly beautiful, Tara." He lifted a hand to cup her jaw. She blinked at him. "I just wish you'd trust me enough to give yourself to me completely."

"I can't give myself to you! I can't do it, Joe. I just can't. Don't you know what I'd be giving up?"

He regarded her thoughtfully. "I do know. I know exactly. But I also know what you'd be getting in return. And if you can't see that, then there's not much hope. I'm not the enemy here, Tara."

"Yes you are!"

He shook his head, still standing there buck-naked, uncaring. "No I'm not. You're your own enemy. You need to face yourself."

"I have. And I don't want this. I want control."

"Tara, haven't I made it clear? This isn't about me controlling you. It's about controlling myself. Controlling myself so I can give you what you want...what you need. You're the one with the power."

"You're talking complete bullshit," she bit out, turning away again.

He came to a rapid decision. "Tara. Listen to me."

"Don't give me orders!"

A low growl vibrated in his throat. "I want to tell you something. Something important. Will you please sit down for a minute?"

She sighed. "Fine." She sat in the arm chair, rather than on the bed.

"You think I'm the enemy why?"

"Because..."

"Honesty," he reminded her tersely.

She paused. "Because you're making me lose control."

He studied her, her narrowed eyes looking at the floor, not at him. Her fingers twisted in her lap. "I can't give up control," she whispered. "It's all I have. I've worked my whole life to take over the business and you're taking that away from me."

He blew out a breath. "I told you before, Tara. I'm not trying to take anything away from you." He inhaled deeply, let it out slowly. "Let me tell you something." Now he paused, his gut clenching. He searched for words. "Let me tell you why I came to Santa Barbara."

She lifted her big amber eyes, darkened to a smoky topaz, and looked at him.

"I used to work for a company called NCC Technologies. You may have heard the name."

Her forehead creased and she nodded. NCC had been all over the news a year ago, so he wasn't surprised she'd heard of them.

"They manufacture some very popular OTC and prescription medications. They have a large research and development department. They've developed some drugs with huge promise for treating several types of cancer. I worked there for five years."

He grabbed for his boxers, stepped into them, then sat on the bed. He put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward.

"I loved working there and I was doing well, getting promoted. I was ambitious and intended to work my way up to VP. Maybe higher eventually. And I was on a fast track. They liked me there. When I did some good things in operations, they decided I should have cross training, so they moved me to finance. I really liked that."

She smiled faintly.

"Yeah, you know I like numbers. Anyway, I started seeing some things that made me worry. Things like apparent loans the VP and CFO were taking out. But they were manipulating the loan program so they didn't pay any interest. At first, I just figured there was something I was missing and everything was okay. Then one day I couldn't ignore it anymore. So I went to my boss, the director of finance, and told him what I was seeing."

He paused. "He heard me out, told me he'd look into it and sent me away. So I kept working hard. But nothing happened. I was still seeing stuff that didn't look right, so I went back to him, asked what he'd done about it. He talked a whole lot, kind of indirectly warned me about being too inquisitive and again showed me the door.

"Then I was really suspicious and I actually started looking for stuff. And holy shit, did I find it." He shook his head. "It was sickening. They were taking all that money and I knew what they were doing with it. Les Swenarchuk had had a big party at his home one night. He lived in an unbelievable mansion and was always taking off on trips to Bermuda or Italy. None of those loans were being repaid, plus they were giving themselves bonuses nobody else knew about. It was millions of dollars. I felt sick."

"Whistleblowers usually end up screwed, despite everything that's happened in the business world," she said in a near whisper. "Did you do it? Did you blow the whistle on them? Is that why you got fired?"

He shook his head again. "No. I never had a chance to blow the whistle. I got fired before that."

"But...why? Did they know you were going to?"

"Maybe. They accused me of stealing. They showed me documents with my name on them that made it look like I was the one who was manipulating the loan program. I don't know how they did it, but they set me up. They knew I was onto them and they set me up to take the fall."

"Oh." Her eyes went wide.

He smiled without humor. "I know what you're thinking. You're thinking it could easily have been me and I'm just claiming to be framed. And you know what? I can't prove it. If I could, things would have turned out much, much differently." He grimaced.

"I was charged with corruption and grand larceny. You have no idea how crushing that was. How completely mortifying and humiliating. How frustrating to not be able to prove my innocence. How furious I was at the people I'd trusted, the people I'd committed my career to."

He closed his eyes for a couple of slow breaths, trying to relax the hands that wanted to clench into fists.

"I got a good lawyer," he continued. "I had to sell my condo to pay the legal bills. My family helped as much as they could, but it cost a hell of a lot. Then somehow, the shit hit the fan. I wasn't there, so I don't really know what happened, but I gather Swenarchuk and Burton got greedy. You'd think," he said, shaking his head in wonder, "when I caught it, they would have cleaned up their act. But no. They kept going. Stupid assholes. My only consolation is they ended up in jail and I didn't."

Her eyebrows lifted in the unspoken question.

"I had to make a deal. My lawyer advised me it would be the best thing to do. I couldn't prove my innocence and it looked bad, so we cut a deal that I'd testify against them in exchange for immunity. I was a small player in the company. And they had one problem with their case against me—they could never figure out what I did with the money." He gave a harsh laugh. "Because there wasn't any. So I got off. But...I didn't really get off." He bowed his head. "Just try to find a job with that hanging over your head. Not a chance. I spent months pounding the pavement. I'd had to sell my condo so I moved in with my folks. Not a happy situation for any of us."

"I needed to start over, so I decided to come to Santa Barbara. Nick was here, he offered to let me stay with him while I got on my feet."

Tara watched him intently, taking it all in.

"It was...humiliating," he admitted, looking down at his hands. "And to be honest, when my grandma told me it was an olive company, I kind of went, holy shit, *olives*? But the truth was, I was desperate. I figured if I could just work for a while, I could do up a new résumé and in a while, when everyone's forgotten about NCC, I'd be able to move back to San Francisco and find something new."

He raised his head and met her gaze head-on. "I never intended to stay here, Tara. So you can rest assured, your job—and your company—are safe from me. I'm not trying to take them away from you."

She nodded. Emotions flickered over her face, so quickly he couldn't get a sense of what she was thinking. For a moment he thought he saw the gloss of tears in her eyes and her mouth tremble. But she quickly tightened her expression and nodded.

"Thank you for telling me that," she said. "I suppose you know I have to tell my grandfather about this."

He lifted his chin, tightening his jaw. "You don't have to. Once again, Tara, I'm asking you to look inside yourself and ask—do you really think I would steal from my employer?"

She didn't answer.

Fuck. She didn't trust him. He knew that already—because of her refusal to submit totally to him. That required complete trust and if she believed he could actually be a lying thief—there wasn't much hope she would ever trust him with everything she had.

"Please. Take me home now," she said in a low voice.

He sighed. If she couldn't come to him freely, knowing herself, accepting herself and accepting him—then there was no point in pushing it.

* * * * *

The drive back to Santa Barbara was excruciatingly quiet. Joe didn't try to talk to her, to convince her of anything—his innocence, that she shouldn't tell Grandpa, that they had more than just sex and bondage.

She'd listened to Joe's words and had felt them like small stabs of a knife. He'd been fired from his last job for stealing from the company. He hadn't told Grandpa about that. And he was planning on leaving.

What should have had her jumping into the air and pumping a fist—all of it—instead had her slumping into a disappointed, hurting lump.

She could go to Grandpa, tell him the truth about Joe and he'd have no choice but to fire him. He'd be gone and she'd be back on her own again, on track to taking over Santa Ynez Olives all by herself.

And he'd never intended to stay. That too should have had her jumping for joy.

Instead she felt a small crack in her heart, a painful, splintering crack.

And why was that?

She didn't even want to analyze that. The pain in her chest terrified her. Surely to God she hadn't had some crazy idea they could actually have something together?

That would just be insane. They'd had sex. Nothing more.

And she didn't want anything more.

* * * * *

This was so not what he'd planned on happening when he moved to Santa Barbara.

Getting all tangled up with a woman—and not just any woman, but the woman he had to work with—hadn't been in his plans. Even when he'd gotten the idea that if he could tame her, help her find herself, it would make things easier at work, he hadn't

foreseen that his emotions would get all snagged up in the sex and the domination. That her lack of trust would be so agonizingly hurtful. Shit.

Why the hell was that, anyway?

What had just happened between them was something he'd never experienced before. He'd had women who learned to submit. And some who did it naturally. He'd shown them pleasure, taken his own pleasure, taken their gift, but this...was something different. He cared about Tara. He wanted her to find herself and know herself for her own sake—so she could know the joy of submission and how freeing that was.

She was all bound by her own expectations, her grandfather's expectations, society's expectations—she needed to be set free like no one he'd ever met and he knew he could do it. If she'd only let herself go. A deep sadness filled him that she wouldn't, that she wasn't going to let herself know the freedom of submission.

And they still had to work together. As long as he still had a job, which likely wasn't going to be much longer.

* * * * *

Sasha flipped through the newspaper Saturday morning, eyes hurting, head pounding, when a classified ad caught her eye. It was a job advertisement for a community outreach representative at the Southern California Museum of Art. As she quickly scanned it, she realized she actually met the qualifications, other than the fact she had no real experience.

A job. She bit her bottom lip. Maybe that's what she needed. Despite the charity work she did, her life felt so empty lately. She needed to do something real. Something that had meaning for her. Like at the center—working with the kids and seeing the good things the center was doing for them made the fundraising work more meaningful. She'd actually be earning a paycheck and doing something she enjoyed.

Grandpa would have a heart attack. It drove him crazy that Tara worked and that was a family business. If *she* went out and got a job—he'd probably cut off her allowance or something. Except—if she had a job she'd have her own money and wouldn't need to depend on him for every dollar. The job probably didn't pay much, but it would be her own money—it would be her independence.

It was a crazy idea. She didn't need to work. She'd just keep doing what she was doing. It didn't matter.

Chapter Twenty

The phone call Monday morning shocked Joe right out of his low spirits, but created a whole new dilemma. Bob Moir, calling on behalf of the California Olive Oil Producers, offered him a job. In Napa. Close to home. Close to his friends and family.

Joe hung up the phone with a promise to consider the offer, then slumped in his chair and stared into space. Why wasn't he overjoyed? He'd never intended to stay in Santa Barbara, only came there because he'd been so desperate. This was an actual job offer, one that hadn't required a favor to get.

So the olive business was never exactly what he'd intended to get into. But he had to admit a deep fascination with it.

Also a deep fascination for a certain woman involved in the business. But that had nothing to do with this.

He glanced at his watch. He and Tara were supposed to meet at ten to look over her proposal for high density planting. She'd finished it and had asked him to look at it before she presented it to Tyrone.

He went to her office. They hadn't yet seen each other since he'd dropped her off at her home in Hope Ranch Saturday morning. She sat behind her desk, her mouth drawn into a downcast line, eyes fatigued as she gazed at her computer monitor. Yet she didn't seem to be doing anything, just sitting there...staring.

Much like him.

He sighed, knocking on the open door before moving into the office.

She looked up at him, her face neutral. "Good morning."

"Hi. Ready to review your proposal?"

"Yes."

It was all stiff and formal business as he reviewed what she'd done. "I'd suggest changing this projection," he said. "It seems a little optimistic."

She nodded, saying nothing. Not even a glimmer of argument. Disappointment tugged at him.

He suggested a few other changes and additions she hadn't thought of. "I'm going out to the mill for the rest of the day," he told her. "Anything you need me to do?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Okay." He started out. "Oh, before I go...here's the deal on the soap producing." He turned around and tossed a folder on her desk.

She grabbed for the folder. "So? How does it look?"

He shook his head. "Sorry, Tara. It sounds like a good idea, but economically it's not feasible. The oil refinery would have to be practically right next door for it to be economically viable. The cost of shipping all that pomace hundreds of miles to have the oil extracted, then to the soap factory, pretty much eats up any potential profit."

"Oh." Her face fell. Then she tipped her head to one side. A hint of color brushed her cheeks and a flare of temper darkened her eyes. He could guess she was thinking he'd just said that because he was pissed off about what had happened at the ranch. "Are you sure? Did you..."

"I'm sure," he said. "Check it out if you want, but when you see the numbers, you'll agree."

He hated having to disappoint her, but what he said was the truth—there was no way they could make it economically viable. He had to be honest, whether she liked it or not.

She pressed her lips together and gave a short nod, then turned back to her computer, blinking. Dammit, she was on the verge of tears. That was so not like her. Christ.

Joe's chest ached and his gut churned for the entire drive out to the mill where he met with both Blair and Juan about some of the new equipment issues.

* * * * *

Tara tossed the file Joe had just given her onto her credenza and folded her arms across her chest. She regarded it blackly.

He was just being an asshole. She should have known what happened out at the ranch was going to affect how they worked together. She wouldn't have thought he'd be that petty, that he'd nix an idea just to get back at her, but that's what it seemed like.

Damn him.

The corners of her eyes stung and she blinked. God, she couldn't cry over this. That was just wimpy-assed. She was a strong, independent businesswoman. She could find a way to make that pomace idea happen. She'd go through his research and find a way. But first she had to get back to the high density planting. Grandpa'd said they could talk about it Friday and she had more work to do based on Joe's feedback.

She narrowed her eyes. He wouldn't have suggested making changes that would trash the proposal, would he? He couldn't be that vindictive?

No. She took a deep breath. Even as he'd pointed out things to her, she'd known he was right. She'd missed some things, overstated some projections. She knew exactly what she had to do to make it perfect.

"Tara?"

She looked up to see Fiona standing in the door.

"Yes?" She forced a smile at the controller.

"I need your signature on these." Fiona walked over and laid some documents on the desk.

"What are they?" Tara frowned and picked one up.

"New signing authorities."

Tara's eyes skimmed over the print. "Oh. Why are we doing this?"

"Joe suggested it. He noticed a while ago we didn't have much in the way of safeguards to prevent employee theft. We're going to change some other things too. Didn't he tell you?"

"No." She rubbed her forehead. "No, he didn't."

"I'm sorry." Fiona's brow creased and she blinked rapidly. "I should have told you...I'm really sorry, Tara, but I..."

"It's okay." She smiled reassuringly at Fiona. God, the woman acted like she expected Tara to slap her or something. Was she really that intimidating?

She sighed.

"It's okay," she said again. She signed the papers and handed them back. "It's a great idea. Something we should have done a long time ago. And by the way..." She hesitated, then plunged on. "I heard you were very helpful with the tax audit. From both the external auditors and from Joe. They were very impressed with your knowledge and attention to detail. So thanks for that."

"Thank you." Fiona blinked at her. Tara groaned inwardly at her surprise. Clearly, she didn't hand out enough praise to the people who worked for her. "I..."

"Yes?" Tara waited.

"I think I could contribute a lot toward helping to grow the business," she rushed on. "I know you've wanted to do a lot on your own, but since Joe's been here, I've felt that maybe I could have more of a role in the management of the company."

Tara drew in a long, slow breath. She nodded. "I think you're right," she said quietly. "I'll set up some time in the next few days for us to sit down and talk more about that."

Fiona smiled, nodded and left. Tara thunked her head down on her desk. He'd put things in place to prevent employee theft. She was so screwed.

* * * * *

The idea had circled around and around in Sasha's pounding head all weekend. On Sunday, she'd used Tara's computer to work on a résumé. Monday morning she held it in her hands. And then she drove to the Southern California Museum of Art. She paused outside on the sidewalk, took a breath, then went inside.

She didn't need a job. But for some reason she wanted to show Nick she wasn't just a spoiled princess who sat around the pool all day. She could make a real contribution.

They'd never hire her. It was a crazy idea.

But an hour later, when she emerged from the museum, she'd been offered a job. A real job. A job she'd gotten all on her own. A bubble of excitement swelled inside her, but she tried to keep it down. Getting too excited about something just led to disappointment.

She walked down the street to the Youth Action Center, found Nick in his office.

"Um...hi. Can I talk to you for a moment?"

Did she imagine the flash of pleasure she saw in his eyes when he first lifted his head and looked at her in the door to his office? Because if it really had been there, it had quickly been replaced by a guarded, wary look.

"Sure," he said. "Come in." He leaned back in his chair.

She took a seat. Twisted her fingers.

"I just came to tell you that...um...I'm resigning from the fundraising committee."

He looked first stunned, then disappointed, then completely poker-faced.

"Oh. Well. That's a surprise."

"I've enjoyed working with you. All of you."

He still said nothing, so she turned to leave his office, her chest tight and achy. As she paused at the entrance, Caleb sauntered in.

"Yo, Sasha," he said.

She forced a smile. "Whassup, Caleb?"

He grinned. "Just wanted to let you know our mom loved the stuff we made her. She thought it was off da hinges."

Sasha's smiled widened. "That's great! I'm so glad she liked it."

Caleb held his knuckles out and she met his fist with her own in a gentle tap.

"Thanks, Sasha," he said and ambled out, the crotch of his pants down around his knees under a baggy T-shirt.

She turned and Nick stood there in the door to his office. Their eyes met and held and the room around them faded to the background, her consciousness narrowed to Nick's lean, tanned face, the blaze of his blue eyes. The moment stretched out and she had to fight with everything she had not to move closer to him, something invisible and powerful and almost irresistible drawing her toward him.

He felt it too, she knew he did, and her heart went hard and cold in her chest at the thought that he was letting something go that could have been so incredible. She'd never felt this kind of attraction to anyone, ever. Had he? But just because she was rich he wasn't even going to give them a chance. Her eyes stung and she swallowed through the constriction in her throat.

"Good luck with...everything," she said to him, her voice a bit thick. "This is a great place. You do good things here."

"Thank you."

She picked up her purse and started to the door. When she brushed past him, every sense and nerve in her body was on high alert, ready for him to reach out a hand and stop her. But he didn't. With a tight smile, she walked out the front door.

"Bye, Nick. Thank you again."

"Bye, Sasha."

* * * * *

"Okay, Tara," Tyrone said Friday afternoon. "What have you got?"

Tara had all the paperwork prepared, all her careful research and spreadsheets with projected costs and earnings. She handed it all over to her grandfather.

As they went through it, Tyrone was quiet, occasionally asking a brief question, but not saying very much.

"You'll want some time to look at in more detail," she finished. It was tough to get a read off her grandfather. "I know it's a lot to take in."

"Yes, it is." Tyrone gathered up the paperwork. "I'll look at it in more detail tomorrow. But I have to talk to Joe about it."

Her heart gave a little bump.

"You have to talk to him about it?"

He frowned. "Of course. He's seen this, hasn't he?"

"Yes. I showed it to him on Monday."

"Why isn't he here?" Tyrone frowned. "I want to know what he thinks of it."

The truth was, he wasn't there because she was terrified.

Although he'd given her some suggestions of things to change and other things to add, he'd never really said what he thought about her proposal.

Her stomach cramped. This project was so important to her. This was her chance to grow the business, to put her mark on the company and really make it her own. If Joe trashed it like he had the soap idea, she'd be devastated.

"Um...I didn't know you wanted him here."

"Well, I'll talk to him about it."

She sat there, looking at her grandfather. She rejected the idea of begging him not to do that. She looked down at the papers in her hands.

"Sure," she said. "That's fine." Then she lifted her head, met his eyes. "Grandpa, did you know why Joe left his last job?"

* * * * *

Joe looked up from his computer as Tyrone entered his office. Tyrone held up a folder. Joe lifted a brow.

"This is Tara's proposal for high density planting," Tyrone said.

Joe nodded. She'd given it to him already? He'd thought they were going to do it together. His mouth twisted. She'd obviously wanted to meet with Tyrone alone. Had she told Tyrone about his previous job and what had happened?

"I want your opinion on this," Tyrone said.

Joe studied the man. Surely if he was going to fire him, he'd come right out with it.

"I think Tara's done an excellent job," Joe finally said. "Her research is thorough, she's projected a few different scenarios based on solid assumptions. Some of them are more realistic than others."

"But do you support going ahead with the plan?" Tyrone asked.

Joe paused. He had to be honest. "Yes. Yes, I do. Even Tara's worst-case scenario predicts we'd be turning a profit in two years. I think that's a reasonable risk to take, and in the best-case scenario, the pay-off could be huge. I think we can't afford not to do it."

"Okay," Tyrone said with a nod. "If you're on board, then I likely am too. But I would like to take a day to go through all this stuff." He turned to leave.

"Tyrone."

The older man turned back. "Yes?"

"Do you have a minute? There's something else I need to talk to you about."

* * * * *

"Remember when Mom and Dad died?" Sasha said pensively.

She and Tara sat on the couch in the den, and for once Tara was drinking a martini and Sasha wasn't.

"For the longest time, I pretended it wasn't true. I made up this whole story in my head about how Grandpa was just telling us that to punish me."

"Punish you for what?" Tara turned on the couch to face her sister, propping one elbow on the back of the couch and leaning her head on her hand. It was so unusual for her and Sasha to be talking, talking about something real, something meaningful.

"The week before they died, I had a big fight with Mom and Daddy about getting a horse. Remember I wanted a horse so bad?"

Tara nodded.

"Well, Mom and Daddy talked about it, but they still said no. I was so mad I was yelling at them and I told Daddy I hated him and I wished I had different parents."

"Oh no." Tara's heart contracted at the thought of what Sasha must have felt after their death.

Sasha nodded. "Two days later they were gone. God, I felt so guilty. Anyway, I made up the story and I kept believing one day they'd come back, once I had suffered enough."

"Grandpa never liked to talk about stuff," Tara said with a sigh. "So we never talked about how we felt or how much we missed them. It was like it wasn't allowed."

Sasha nodded.

Tara's throat ached again. "So, while you were pretending they were coming back, I was just in deep denial about feeling anything at all."

"Yes." Their eyes met. "I guess that's why I've been drinking so much," Sasha said slowly. "And why you work so much. But lately it hasn't been helping."

"What does help?" Tara asked with a wry smile. "I want to know."

"You know what helped? When I was working with the kids, teaching them how to make jewelry. When I helped Isaiah and Caleb make something pretty for their mom because she works so hard. When I found out Julia's mom is only a year older than me and she has a daughter, goes to school and works two jobs—three, at one time. And I could do something—only little things, I know, but still—I could do something to help Julia and her mom. That helped."

Tara studied Sasha as she shook her long, straight blonde hair back and her face firmed with determination.

"So," Sasha said, swiping a finger beneath her eye and sitting up straight. "That's why I decided to get a job."

Tara's mouth fell open. "A job? You?"

"Yes." Sasha smiled and her smile held confidence and pride. "I got a job as a community outreach representative at SCMA. I start Monday."

"You're kidding me! Does Grandpa know about this? He's gonna have a stroke."

"He doesn't know." Sasha bit her lip. "I know he won't like it, but he's going to have to get used to it. I need to do something more with my life." Her eyes turned sad and she looked away. "And then maybe someone like Nick will think I'm worth caring about. One day."

Her small shrug made Tara's heart squeeze. "You are worth caring about," she said, reaching for her sister's hand.

"Thanks, Tara. So are you." Sasha blinked and smiled. "So, what's going to make you feel better? Convincing Grandpa to let you run the company?"

Tara didn't answer. She'd thought that's what she wanted...

"You might get that sooner than you think," Sasha said, squeezing Tara's hand. "If Joe takes that new job offer."

Tara froze. What the...? "Job offer? From who? And how do you know about it?"

"Grandpa told me. Joe just told him this afternoon. Ben Moir from Napa called and offered him some great job with the COOP. Apparently he had to make a decision by today."

"And he's taking the job?" Her insides were cold and hollow.

Sasha shrugged. "Grandpa didn't know what he'd decided to do."

"Oh."

Tara leaned back against the couch, her heart thudding painfully, her mind churning. He had another job offer. Just what he wanted. Napa was close to San Francisco.

Had he told Grandpa about his last job? It didn't sound like it or Grandpa surely would have mentioned that to Sasha.

"Where is Grandpa?" she asked.

"He went out for dinner."

"Oh." Tara stood on rubbery legs. "I'm going up to my room for a while."

"Are you okay, Tara?" Sasha's perfectly groomed brows pushed together.

"Yes." She forced a smile. "This is great, actually. You know I didn't want Joe here. When he's gone, Grandpa will have to realize I can run the business just fine."

Except she wasn't so sure of that anymore.

As she trudged heavily up the wide curving staircase, doubts and uncertainties weighed on her shoulders. In her room, she threw herself down to lie sideways across her bed and stared at the ceiling.

Joe had made himself so invaluable, the idea of taking back all those projects he'd assumed responsibility for made her body clench with panic. The tax audit, all the finance stuff, that lawsuit...God. Her stomach churned and she pressed a hand to it.

He was going to leave. And if she was going to be brutally, painfully honest with herself, she had to admit...she didn't want him to.

Her throat tightened and ached and she closed her burning eyes. God. Not only did she need him at work, but she just...needed him. She'd fallen in love with him.

He was the only person who'd ever stood up to her, who was as strong and determined as she was, who hadn't let her walk all over him. Other than Grandpa, of course. But Joe also had a way of making her feel special. Desired. He'd told her she was smart and beautiful, while all Grandpa'd ever done was make her feel useless and incompetent.

Her heart ached with thoughts of what he'd gone through. A man so strong and proud and career-focused had had everything snatched out from under him. He'd been left with nearly nothing, forced to rely on his parents, his grandmother to help him find a job for God's sake, humiliated and beaten up. He was a good man. He didn't deserve that. Impotent fury rose in her that he'd been dealt such a fucking lousy deal, along with a desperate need to do something—anything—to make it better for him.

She rolled off the bed and walked over to her briefcase sitting on the carpet near the door. She pulled out the folder on the soap production idea. She still hadn't looked at what Joe had given her.

She sat on the side of the bed, opened the folder and started looking at the research and the numbers. Her eyes moved over one page, then another. She nodded. She calculated. She nodded again.

She closed the folder and stared unseeingly across the room. Her mind wandered back to the first day she'd met Joe. Her mouth twisted wryly in remembrance of what a bitch she'd been to him, not just that first day, but lots of days. Not telling him about meetings she'd set up. Sending him to look at paperwork that didn't mean anything, wasting his time. But he hadn't let her push him around. He'd dealt with her grouchiness with patient humor, challenged her, stood up to her, pushed her even to the point where she'd stormed into Grandpa's office, hoping for his support, and had to return humiliated to face Joe. And had he been snotty about that? No.

Everyone liked him. Everyone in the office, everyone in the store, even their goddamn competitors liked him. His air of solid competence inspired confidence in him.

And now, looking at her soap proposal, she saw he hadn't just trashed it. He'd done more than just research it and cost it out—he'd even explored things she hadn't thought of, in an attempt to find solutions. He'd tried to make it work. For her. It just wasn't economically viable.

He was right.

He was always right.

Except about her. About her supposed desire to submit.

She bent her head and gazed at her bare feet.

If this was the time for brutal honesty...she sighed and closed her eyes.

She did want to submit to him.

He was everything she'd ever dreamed of alone in her bed, those wicked dark dreams of sin and submission. She was the one who wanted to be tied up, held down, spanked until pain turned into pleasure. She wanted everything he'd tried to give her.

She knew why she'd held back. That was no mystery. Except now...the reason didn't seem so important. Faced with Joe leaving and the burden of running the company on her own, battling with Grandpa endlessly about every little thing, surrendering to Joe didn't seem like weakness...it seemed...necessary.

She looked up at the clock beside the bed. The play party at Le Château started in half an hour. Would Joe be there?

Chapter Twenty-One

Joe leaned against the bar at Le Château, a glass of San Pellegrino in his hand, and surveyed the scenes. His head thumped in time with Enigma and he lifted a hand to rub the back of his neck. He wasn't sure what he was doing there. He'd had some crazy idea of coming here, finding some willing submissive he could flog and fuck into next week to take out some of his frustration, but his responsibilities as a Dom wouldn't let him do that. Plus there was nobody who really interested him that way. It all seemed too...easy. He attracted enough interest from some of the pretty little subs there tonight, but instead he stood alone at the bar, letting the music increase his headache.

He wanted to sit down. Weariness and disappointment and anger had sapped his energy. He found a comfortable arm chair and sank into it, letting his head relax against the back of it.

The tall slender blonde who walked into the room caught his attention. Probably because she looked like Tara, her honey-toned hair gleaming in the red and gold lights. But she was dressed in white and—holy crap, it was Tara.

She stood just inside the entrance, looking around, the white off-the-shoulder mini dress she wore hugging her curves.

Joe straightened, his heart sledgehammering so hard in his chest he could barely hear the music anymore. He waited for her to spot him. Had she come here looking for him?

Finally her eyes came to rest on him. Their eyes met in a collision he felt viscerally. Her lips parted. She hesitated. Then she started toward him on long bare legs, her feet clad in strappy white sandals that revealed pink polished toenails. He wasn't a foot fetish kind of guy, but he had an urge to pay some attention to those pretty toes.

She stopped in front of him. Nerves shimmered in her eyes and her bottom lip trembled ever so slightly.

"Hi," she said.

"Hi, Tara."

A pause thickened around them.

She curled her fingers around the small purse she carried—no flogger tonight—and her breasts lifted on a long inhalation. "I was hoping you would be here."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"I wanted to talk to you."

"About?"

She lowered her chin and looked at him through her eyelashes. "Could we maybe go somewhere else?"

"Where do you want to go?"

Her eyes darted around. "It doesn't matter. Just somewhere...oh, never mind."

And she went to her knees in front of him.

* * * * *

He stared at her, unmoving. What the fuck? His heart almost burst out of his chest.

Her head bent, her long golden hair curtaining her face, she set her little purse on the floor beside the chair and clasped her hands together in front of her.

"Tara." He reached out a hand and lifted her chin. She met his gaze and the submission shining there sucked the breath right out of him.

"You were right," she whispered, her shiny pink lips barely moving. "About me. I do want to submit, but...but only to you."

Her trembling admission stopped his heart. For a second he was lightheaded, out of breath. Then his heart lurched back into a crazy rhythm.

A long, low groan tore out of him. "Oh Tara."

"I'll do anything you want," she said. "Anything. Just tell me."

Satisfaction and hot desire swelled in him.

"You'll let me tie you up?"

"Yes."

"Flog you?"

"Yes." Her voice was a whisper. "Please."

His cock surged painfully.

"Fuck you anywhere I want? Your mouth? Your ass?"

"Yes."

"While other people watch us?"

Her eyes went huge, her hesitation barely there. "Yes."

"So they know you're mine."

She nodded. "Yes."

"Suck my cock," he ordered. "Right here. Right now."

Her hands immediately went to the fly of his pants, her slender fingers trembling as she tugged the zipper down over his straining cock. She bit her lip, but she didn't even glance around to see if anyone else was watching as she drew his hard, throbbing length out.

Truthfully, he didn't care if someone watched. He wasn't an exhibitionist, but on the other hand, he did want her to submit to him in public. And she had no hesitation in doing so.

She bent her head to him, kissed the sensitive tip of his cock, wet with pre-come, then opened her mouth and took him in. Fuck! His hands clenched into fists, then he reached for her head, pulled her hair back from her face and held it clasped loosely at the nape of her neck. Hot wet velvet surrounded him, the hungry suction of her mouth pulling at him, sending fire racing through his veins. He slowly expelled his pent-up breath. Pleasure assaulted him, every nerve ending sharply aware of the drag of her hot, nimble tongue over him.

When she lifted off him, he started to bark an order, but when he saw her dribble a thin line of saliva from her mouth over his cock, he set his jaw and shut up. She spread the wet heat over him with her tongue, slick and slippery, easing the way for her clinging mouth again when she took him in. His thighs tensed, heat cascaded over his skin and he let out a long, low groan. He tightened his hands in her hair and helped her find her rhythm, her mouth pulling at him, her teeth scraping over the ridge of his cock in a blindingly sublime pain. His head spun as she sucked and licked him and he lifted his hips to fuck her mouth.

She made greedy little noises of pleasure as she sucked him, worshiped him with her mouth and her hands, her moans vibrating right through his balls. His body craved more of her, need whipping through him, blistering pleasure and ferocious hunger.

"Gonna come in your mouth, Tara," he muttered, darkness shrouding his vision. "Oh Jesus, oh yeah...there it is." And his climax roared over him like a California earthquake, a seven-point-oh on the Richter scale, pleasure racing up his spine, down his legs, tightening his balls and out through his cock into her mouth. She sucked and swallowed and murmured her appreciation, one hand around his shaft at the bottom, the other curled into his pubic hair and tugging with an exquisite sharp pain that intensified his orgasm.

"Jesus!" He held her head until he'd finished, his cock pulsing in her wet mouth, and then she drew back and lifted her eyes to his.

"Was that good?" she whispered, mouth swollen and wet.

He groaned again. "Oh Christ." His hands slid to her shoulders, pulling her up and toward him, and then she was on his lap and they were kissing, mouth to mouth, his own taste sharp on her tongue.

He wrapped his arms around her so tightly she probably couldn't breathe, but she didn't complain, just kept kissing him back with that sweet sinful mouth. He slid a hand down her back and pulled one thigh up and over him, her short dress riding up so high her ass might be exposed to the rest of the room.

He cracked an eyelid open to see if anyone was watching.

Oh, yeah. They'd attracted quite an audience. Heat slid over him, but mingled with pride and ownership and ...something more.

"People are watching," he murmured to Tara. She tensed, but only a little.
"I don't care," she muttered, burying her face in the side of his neck. "I don't care."
"Me either. That was amazing. God, Tara."
Her body, curled up on his lap, still quivered, her breathing irregular.
"Now you need to come."
"Yes, please," she whispered.
He smiled.

* * * * *

He led her to a room at the end of the hall—the Dungeon. She trembled as he opened the door and let her enter before him.

"It's the only room available," he said, closing the door. "Are you nervous?"

Blue lights gleamed off extreme equipment and toys—an imposing black St. Andrews cross, a black leather bench, paddles, canes and cuffs. A row of candles in glass flickered along one wall.

"Yes." She faced him.

"Good. You should be."

Her stomach gave a jump of excitement and fear.

"You know the safe word."

"Yes."

"Are you ready?" He walked toward her, full of purpose and strength and masterful authority. "Are you ready to submit to me? Completely?"

"Yes." Her gaze hung on his. What was he planning to do her? Curiosity burned along with the ache of desire between her legs, the thrill of fear that shivered over her skin.

He stood in front of her, close enough to feel his heat but not touching. "Are you afraid, Tara?"

"Terrified." The honest admission fell from her lips. Her hands trembled. "I'm so terrified, Joe."

Not of what he could do to her. She had a safe word and she recognized she trusted him totally. He would never hurt her. He'd never humiliated her other than by forcing her to look inside herself and realize ...she was lying. To him. And to herself.

But she was filled with terror at the thought of letting go of control.

"I want to do it," she whispered, eyes still fastened on his, begging for his understanding. "But I'm afraid I can't."

And the understanding she needed from him was there, in his eyes, curving his mouth into a faint smile.

He reached out and tucked a piece of hair behind her ear in a tender gesture that started her melting inside.

"You can do it," he said softly. "You can do anything, Tara. You're strong and smart and sexy. I told you before...the things that are the hardest to do take the most courage. I know you have it in you."

His tender confidence in her confused her. He was so aggressive, so intimidating with his air of authority and command, and yet she felt protected and safe with him. Safe enough to let go.

Nerves clutched at her stomach again and she swallowed hard.

"I want to give you everything I know you want," he continued. "All those dark secrets I know you have. Last time you held back, but I saw it—deep inside you, the part of you that wants to be dominated and fucked. You want to submit because you're strong."

She drank in his words, wanting to believe them.

"I'm going to challenge you," he said. Like he hadn't already? God! "I'm going to make you give more of yourself than you ever have. I'm going to take you places you've never been. You know how this goes?"

She lifted her chin and nodded again.

"My way." He stroked her bare shoulder. "Whatever I tell you to do, you do. No questions. No hesitation."

A dark thrill shivered over her. But despite the fear still lurking inside her, it felt natural and right to let him lead her that way. She wanted it so much.

"First take off your dress," he ordered her.

She reached for the hem of the stretchy dress and eased it up her thighs. He stepped back to watch, his eyes hot and hungry. As always with him, she felt sexy and desired, and she wriggled her hips as she tugged the dress up over them, over her breasts and off. She stood before him in white lace panties and bra. Her nipples tingled and tightened and she ran her hands over the top curves of her breasts, down over her stomach.

His eyes darkened.

"Love the white lace," he said, his voice smoky. "Are your panties wet, Tara?"

"I...I don't know." Of course she knew. She'd been aching between her legs since she'd seen Joe and sucked on his cock.

"You're lying," he said. "You know you're wet."

She bit her lip.

"Lying is a punishable offense," he continued. "You know that. Don't you?"

She nodded.

"Come here." He moved toward the St. Andrews cross, silhouetted black against the shiny blue wall. She followed him, eying the chains gleaming silver and blue in the lights.

Her pussy clenched and she trembled inside. What was he going to do? Joe followed her, helped position her on the cross, facing away from him, legs apart, then fastened her ankles to the cross. Her chest tightened. Then he lifted her arms one by one and fastened them too with cuffs around her wrists attached to the chains.

"Let me see," he murmured, sliding his hand over her ass, then between her legs, cupping her pussy over the sheer lace. "Oh yeah, you're wet. Your panties are soaked, Tara."

She gave a nod.

"Did sucking my cock make you wet?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Does being restrained make you wet?"

She swallowed. "Yes." She was totally at his mercy—and a rush of dark pleasure rose inside her.

His hands played with her butt, teasing, stroking, making her shiver and shake and ache with need.

"Hmm. Need these panties off." And with a sharp wrench, he ripped them right off her. Oh. Dear. God. Liquid heat gushed between her legs.

A hand landed on her ass. She jolted.

"Your body is mine to pleasure or punish as I see fit," he growled. Another heavy caress heated her flesh. Being totally under his control, while terrifying, only escalated the sensation, intensified the pleasure.

"Feel it?" he murmured. "Wait for it."

He gave her another tap and heat bloomed over her flesh. The next smack was harder—he'd picked up the wooden paddle she'd seen lying beside the cross.

A series of taps had every nerve ending flaring to life, pain coursing through her body as her ass burned up. Everything inside her tightened into a coil of pleasure so intense it almost wasn't bearable. Thoughts flew out of her head and her body went limp, suspended on the cross. She gave herself over to sensation, soaked up the heat, let the pain become thick, heavy pleasure, absorbed the helplessness and transformed it into strength.

The knowledge that he could do anything to her at that moment, that she was completely vulnerable, was also transforming. Because as she gave herself up to it, she knew with utter certainty that she trusted him. Completely, totally, with utmost faith that he would not hurt her.

She existed in a hazy glow of pleasure and pain, floating. The rhythm of the taps on her buttocks spread into a shimmer of heat, a blur of thoughts.

He stopped. Her body pulsed with heat and energy as she waited, anticipated...

A soft trickle of a touch slid up her spine. It took a few seconds for her to realize he was licking her. His tongue drew wet strokes across each shoulder and his teeth bit the muscle there, so gently, so softly. She twitched hard. He kissed the nape of her neck, tenderly drawing her hair aside. Ripples of exquisite pleasure slid over her.

He kissed his way back down her spine, pressing a lingering kiss right at the base where she was so sensitive. She shivered.

Gentle hands stroked over her, down her back, over her ass, down her thighs. Back up, he dipped between with probing fingers, right where she ached. Her pussy tightened, her clit straining. And when his fingers brushed over her, tremors started deep inside her. Was it okay to come? Is that what he wanted?

"Yes," he whispered as if reading her mind. "Come, Tara. Let go."

The humming intensified, everything inside pulling up tight and hard, higher, harder into a sharp point of exquisite ecstasy that shattered into a starburst of colors behind her closed lids. Her body limp, she sank into the restraints.

"You're mine," he said from behind her, voice gruff. "Mine to take—to punish, torment, to pleasure."

"Yes."

His words whispered over her like a soothing caress, The pleasure he gave tore down her barriers, the ones she'd clung to so fiercely, but his words reassured. She felt safe, felt protected, felt understood. His words stripped away very last remnant of the walls she'd erected and made her his.

"Christ," he muttered. He stopped and her body throbbed, drifting on a high of submission. "Christ. I...I'll be back."

Chapter Twenty-Two

She heard rapid footsteps, then the door closing.

Silence enfolded her. She couldn't feel her own body anymore, just heat, just shifting, floating warmth. Where had he gone? Why? He'd just left her here, restrained and helpless.

Borne along by sensation, she let go, thoughts drifting through her mind like wisps of smoke. If she trusted him with this—her body, her soul—she had to trust him with everything. He would never do anything to harm the company. She knew it on an instinctive, primal level, that his innate honesty and intelligence, the sense of responsibility and the compassion he'd demonstrated to her over and over, would never be compromised.

He would never try to take it away from her. And she knew too the reason that knowledge made her so sad was because she didn't want him to leave. She was in love with him, and the fact that this was a short-term stopover for him was like a knife stabbing into her heart, more painful than the slap of the paddle on her ass.

Whatever he told Grandpa about her plan would be honest and would be the best thing for the company. If he didn't support it, it would be for good reason and she'd have to work harder. If he did support it, it would be justified.

Bound and helpless, euphoric with pain, she felt free. Free to just feel. Free to feel the amazing heights she flew to, free and secure enough with herself to admit she didn't want to do it all on her own. That submitting to Joe meant strength, not selling out. That by admitting she wanted him, needed him, she wasn't betraying her true self—it *was* her true self. Tara felt connected with herself in a way she never had before, connected with an inner part of herself she had been denying for so long.

Her thoughts all came together with crystal clarity and for the first time she recognized the truth in what Joe had tried to tell her—by submitting to him, she had power over him.

Submission was truly freedom and love and—she realized with awe—power.

She had no idea how long she floated on a euphoric shimmer, lost in her wandering thoughts and feelings, until Joe returned. Hands unfastened her wrists and ankles, turned her. Her head fell back against the cross and Joe rubbed her wrists, lifted them to his mouth and kissed them tenderly. He laid his hands on her aching shoulders, warm and heavy, massaging tense muscles with bone-melting strokes.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

"Yes." And she was. She felt safe, loved, certain he would take care of her. She opened her eyes and sought his. Was he okay though? "Where did you go? Why did you leave me?"

"Christ, Tara." He lifted her in his arms and carried her to the pallet on the floor, then laid her gently on the mattress. "I had to leave, I was losing control." He shook his head, his mouth a grim line. "Nobody's ever got me that close to the edge before."

He lay down beside her and wrapped her in his arms. She started to shiver and he rolled to his feet, unfolded the soft blanket lying on the pallet and covered her gently with it. He stripped off his clothes, climbed under the blanket with her and enveloped her in his body heat, hands stroking and warming and comforting her.

"Easy," he whispered, pressing his mouth to her hair. "I've got you. It's okay, Tara. It's okay." She sank into his embrace, absorbing his heat and his touch and his words until her trembling eased and her body became warm and pliant.

He rolled her under him and eased himself up onto his elbows to gaze down at her. The respect and reverence and appreciation in his eyes had her lungs seizing up, heat suffusing her body. She could not look away from him.

He smoothed her hair off her face, palmed her cheeks, then kissed her mouth in a slow kiss full of worship and longing. She poured it all back into him, her mouth moving against his, unable to get enough of him, unable to give enough to him. Her hands gripped his shoulders, so solid, so strong.

"I love you, Tara," he said, voice deep and throaty. "Know that."

"I know it." She gazed back at him, a connection so powerful she felt it stretching between them, drawing them together. "I know it. And I love you too."

Then he was inside her, filling her, stretching her, completing her. She tingled and ached, arching under him to meet his strokes, their eyes locked.

She clung to his shoulders as he surged inside her, the tingling intensifying into electricity, shimmering hot and swelling larger and larger, sliding over her body, weakening her limbs, tightening her womb until she came around him, her body clenching hard on his thick cock inside her. She cried out as she dug her fingers into the heavy muscles of his shoulders.

"Yeah," he groaned. "Oh yeah, baby, squeeze me like that. Christ. Oh Christ, Tara." And his body tensed against her, his face tightened into a near-grimace as he poured himself into her. She felt each pulse inside her, the white-hot heat of him without a condom. She should be upset about that, but she wasn't—because she trusted him.

Their bodies slid together, slick with sweat, limp and panting for long moments, clutching each other as if they never wanted to let go. And Tara knew her world had changed. Irrevocably. Forever. For better.

"Do you want to talk here?" he murmured in her ear a long time later. "Or go somewhere else?"

"We have to talk?"

He tapped her butt and she smiled against his chest. Realization of the power she too held over him through her submission sent a thrill chasing up her spine. It was fun to push his buttons too, exciting to learn how far he'd let her go and what he'd do to her if she pushed too far.

She was absurdly glad she'd pleased him, insanely proud of herself for submitting so totally.

* * * * *

"I would like to go to the ranch," she said softly. "But there's so much we need to talk about..."

"Yeah. We'll go there. But first let's get a few things out in the open."

She nodded and he helped her to sit. She wrapped the blanket around her and he sat naked on the mattress. Emotion surged inside him as he looked at her, hair all tousled, lips swollen, her eyes sweetly submissive, her gaze fastened intently on him.

"I've heard of Domspace, but I've never experienced it like that," he said, shaking his head, still shocked and confused by the intensity of emotion that had overcome him while he'd been dominating Tara. Every sense had become hyperalert—he'd smelled her arousal mingled with the scent of melting beeswax, heard every cry and moan and breath she uttered, Christ, he'd thought he could hear her heartbeat. He'd felt every impact of the paddle as if it was on himself, knew exactly how hard and far to push her, read every signal her body gave off as if their minds and senses had merged, an intense and erotic bond. Nothing and no one else had existed for him, and at the point he realized that, he'd set the paddle down and walked out of the room. In the hall outside, he'd leaned against the wall, dragging air into his lungs, trying desperately to figure out what it all meant, trying desperately to regain control.

And that was when he realized why he'd so desperately wanted to tame her.

She'd given him back his self-respect. By submitting to him, by trusting him completely, she'd made him feel like a man again instead of the loser he'd felt when he'd arrived in Santa Barbara, someone viewed as a criminal, treated as a criminal, not worthy of hiring for even entry-level positions. She'd given him the most precious gift of her submission and the power of it had overwhelmed him.

"I'm sorry I left you like that."

"I knew you'd come back."

A connection again arced between them.

"Are you taking that job offer?" she asked.

"You heard?"

She nodded, watching him.

"I haven't given them my answer yet."

"Why not? I thought you had to decide today."

"That's what they wanted. But I had to talk to you first."

"Me? Why?"

His eyes roved over her beautiful face, the smooth line of her bare shoulders, the curves of her breasts visible above the edge of the blanket.

"Because if you really want me to go...I will."

Her eyes widened.

"I know you think I'm the enemy," he continued. She opened her mouth to say something and he pressed two fingers to her soft lips. "Wait. I'm ready to leave if you still believe I'm a threat to you running the company. If that's what you really want...I'll leave."

A sharp ache materialized in his chest as he spoke the words to her. But he'd come to realize in those moments of lucidity she meant everything to him. In taming her, in succeeding in the biggest challenge he'd ever had, he'd fallen in love with her. She'd made him feel like a man again, not a loser with a criminal reputation who couldn't even find a job. The mutual respect and trust they'd built between them had changed him too, and the love he felt for her meant he'd do anything for her.

"Isn't it what you wanted?" she asked softly. "Going back to San Francisco? You said you never intended to stay here." A shadow passed across her eyes.

"That was my intention when I got here," he agreed. "It's not now. But I'll leave. If you want me to."

"I don't want you to."

Relief swelled inside him like a balloon. He grinned. "I wanted you to say it. Tell me, Tara."

"I already told you. I love you. I trust you. I trust with you with everything, Joe. The business is the *least* important thing I trust you with."

He nodded.

"Tonight, you set me free," she continued, fingering the blanket. "I realized so many things."

"Like...?"

"I need you. I want you to help me run the company. You know so much about things I don't...everyone likes you and respects you."

"They respect you too, Tara."

"I suppose." Her eyes cast down. "But...I think I haven't made it easy for them to like me. I've been so focused on being in charge, on being in control...you've helped me let go of that. Loosen up a bit. Last week I felt like I...belonged. That dinner the other night was the first time I felt like I had a place, that I fit in. You made me feel like that."

She lifted her eyes to him and her words caused an ache in his gut.

"You challenged me in so many ways. Business cases. Rationale and research." The corners of her mouth lifted. "But it's not just about the business. I need you in so many

ways. You called me a coward because I was running from myself. And you were right."

"Don't make me have to tell you that again," he growled. "Or I'll paddle that pretty pink ass again."

Her cheeks flushed.

"Tara, the truth is, you've not only surrendered to me, you've conquered me," he said on a sigh. He ran a hand through his hair. "I've never met a woman who challenged me in so many ways. You drove me out of my fucking mind—I had to have you."

"You have me."

"You have me too. Christ, Tara. You've given me so much."

Her eyes widened. "I have?"

"You've given me your submission. The most precious thing you could give me. And in doing that, you gave me back my confidence. My self-respect."

She eyed him a little skeptically. "I don't think there's been anything wrong with your confidence."

His laugh turned into a groan. "Oh baby, you have no idea. My self-esteem took a kicking with what happened at NCC." He sighed. "And now I'm nothing without you. No Dom ever is without a sub. You have power too."

"I realized that. Tonight. I never knew that by giving in I would feel so powerful. So strong."

"The truth is, we need each other," he said, reaching for her hands. "We enable each other to become who we really are. We both have to be willing to surrender."

"Oh Joe." Her lower lip quivered.

"I tried so hard to tell you. Thank God you finally experienced it, because the power you have has to be given freely. I can tie you up and hold you down and make you do things you won't even admit you want—but for you to submit to me completely—body, heart, soul—you have to do it willingly. When we left the ranch last week, I didn't feel much hope you would ever get it."

"I've been fighting it. I've been fighting you." She paused. "I'm sorry, Joe."

Her pretty apology tore at something inside him, humbled him. Defiant, difficult Tara apologizing and admitting she'd been wrong made something soft and warm break free inside him, made him feel so powerful and elated.

"I'm going to push your limits, Tara."

She nodded, a shimmer of fear mingled with her trust in those amber eyes.

"In so many ways. By expanding your limits I'll be expanding your capabilities and your self-confidence. But I can only do that when you trust me."

"I trust you."

"Did you tell your grandfather about my last job?"

"No."

Another feeling like being grabbed by the throat took hold of him. He nodded, fought to swallow the emotion welling up inside him.

"It didn't make a difference," she said. "I know you didn't do it. And I know you wouldn't do anything to hurt Santa Ynez Olives."

"Thank you." The words scraped out over a throat that felt like sandpaper.

"And did Grandpa talk to you about my business case for high density planting?"

"Yes."

"What did you tell him?"

He studied her, the curiosity in her eyes untinged with fear or animosity or worry.

"I told him I support it. I think we'd be crazy not to do it. You've worked out all the details and it's a solid plan."

She blinked at him, her eyes suddenly shiny in the dim blue light. "Thank you. But again—I trusted you would do the best thing for the company. If you said my plan wouldn't work, it would be justified. And I'd just go back to the drawing board."

"I would have told you that before you presented it to Tyrone," he pointed out gruffly and gave a small cough. "I wouldn't set you up to fail."

"I knew that too." Her mouth went soft and her bottom lip quivered. "Oh Joe. I love you so much. Please don't leave. We can run the company together. I'll learn from you and..."

"And I'll learn from you. C'mere." He opened his arms and she scrambled over into his lap, half-losing the blanket. He held her tightly, pressed his cheek to the top of her head. "I told you before, you're smart and knowledgeable and intuitive about the business. And you made me feel good about myself again—not like a scummy loser who couldn't get a job—you made me feel strong again. Just know that we need each other."

"I won't let you tell me what to do all the time."

He grinned. "That's good."

Her hand slid from his neck, cupped the back of his head and drew his mouth down to hers, opening for him. He kissed her, one hand on her back, one hand sliding to her ass to bring her closer yet, his mouth moving on hers in a long, lingering kiss. Her lips were velvety and sweet, her tongue gently nudging his as he kissed her over and over again. With a final slow kiss, he lifted his head and smiled down at her.

"We'll have fun, Tara," he promised her. "We'll work hard, but we'll have fun."

"We'll probably fight."

"No doubt about it," he agreed happily. "It is fun pushing your buttons. Although I have to say, lately you've been a lot less grouchy."

Her mouth puckered into a reluctant smile. "You softened me up."

He let a touch of arrogance show. "I knew what you really wanted."

Then her smile went sly. "But I'm learning about your buttons too."

Oh yeah, still some spice and spark left there. He'd tamed her, but not broken her, just like he'd wanted, because he still loved the thrill of the challenge, loved her because of that strength and spark.

Chapter Twenty-Three

"That's perfect," Sasha said approvingly, watching the little girl tie a shiny ribbon around the bracelet she'd just finished. "Is that going to be for you to wear or is it for someone else?"

"It's for my sister," Sarah said. "She just broke up with her boyfriend and she's been kind of sad, so I made this to help her feel better."

"That is so sweet," Sasha said with a smile. "You are such a good sister. I know she'll love it."

Her first week on the job and she was back at the center, only this time she belonged. She hadn't seen Nick yet, but that didn't matter. She wasn't there to see him, she was there to work with the kids, and a deep contentment filled her as she helped Sarah trim the edges of the ribbon attractively.

"What is going on here?" The deep voice coming from behind her vibrated with disbelief.

She turned on her child-size chair and looked up – way, way up – into Nick's eyes.

"Hi, Nick," she said, very neutrally. "How are you?"

"I'm...uh...fine." A frown edged at his brow and his mouth thinned. "What are you doing here, Sasha?"

She smiled faintly. "Don't worry. I'm not stalking you."

"I wasn't..."

She waved a hand. "That's okay. I'm working."

His brows lifted and she nodded, smiled at Sarah.

"A couple of hours a week I'll be here working with the kids on art projects," she told him.

He gazed at her in astonishment. "Huh?" Then he noticed the kids listening with interest. "Why don't you come see me in my office when you're done here?"

"Sure." Sasha turned back to the table where they were working and smiled inwardly. She helped the kids clean up and put things away and then she picked up her purse and briefcase and went downstairs. She knocked softly on Nick's door.

He looked up, but she could tell he'd just been staring into space, not really doing anything. "Come in."

She walked in, took a chair and crossed her legs. She adjusted the casual flowered cotton skirt she wore over her knees.

"You can't just walk in here off the street and start doing stuff with the kids," he began, his voice stern.

She grinned and rolled her eyes at him and he stopped talking.

"What?"

"Don't worry, Nick, I'm here in a totally official, sanctioned position. I actually have a new job." She told him about the position she'd obtained. "They set everything up with Brody, they did the screening process, it's all good."

"Oh." He looked a little dumbfounded.

"Brody was happy to have someone come and do art projects with the kids. I have lots of great ideas." She couldn't help but smile, unable to completely rein in the enthusiasm for the plans she had, much as she wanted to appear professional and competent to Nick. "That's why I quit the committee. Because of my new job."

"Why on earth would you get a job?"

Heat swept up over her face. She knew exactly what he meant. She looked down at her hands, then back up at him. "I haven't been happy for a long time," she said honestly. "When I was here, working with the kids, I felt like I was contributing."

"And I took that away from you." His voice went very low.

"You were just doing your job," she replied. "I understand that. But I wanted to do something...meaningful. Something that made a difference. This job seemed perfect."

She met his gaze head-on, hoping he understood.

"Oh," he said again. He was staring at her.

"I...uh..." Crap. Uncertainly flooded through her. What if he *still* didn't want her working with the kids? "I hope that's okay with you. If it's a problem, I'll just take the center off the list of groups that we work with."

"No!" He swiped a hand over his eyes. "No, don't do that. Of course it's okay."

Their eyes connected again.

It was still there. Good or bad, she didn't know, but that spark, the heat between them that was growing, warming her, was still there and she was going to find out where this could go. She parted her lips slightly and with satisfaction watched Nick's gaze move to her mouth. Unfortunately that alone caused a flood of desire to pool low in her belly and momentarily she lost control of the situation.

Her breath caught in her throat and her heart started to thud painfully. She was amazed Nick couldn't hear it. She wrapped the fingers of one hand around the other to hide the fact that suddenly she was trembling.

"We missed you here," he said, amazingly.

"Oh. Wow. That's nice." She looked at him with wide eyes.

He nodded. "Especially the kids. I heard about the gift Isaiah and Caleb made for their mother. She actually came in to thank whoever was responsible, she was so touched. Especially since those two boys were on the verge of becoming car thieves about a year ago."

Speech momentarily deserted her. "I-I don't know what to say. I know you weren't happy I did that, but..."

Nick waved a hand. "Don't think I don't appreciate the things you did for the kids." He shook his head. "I can't believe you're back. And you got a job."

She grimaced. His amazement at the fact she had obtained employment stung a little. "I know you think I'm a useless society princess. But I promise I'll do my best for the kids while I'm here. As with the other organizations I'll be working with."

The moment stretched out, tension humming between them. Then Sasha stood. "Well, I should go," she said. "I'm sure I'll be seeing you."

"Sasha. Wait."

She turned to him, smiled inquiringly.

"Do you...would you..."

She watched him as he struggled, amusement tickling inside her. He was just as nervous as she was. This was good. This was very, very good. But she waited. Once before she'd extended an invitation to him he'd refused, and this time it was going to have to be up to him.

"Would you like to go get a drink somewhere? Maybe dinner?" He rubbed a hand over his short-cropped hair. "I'd like to hear more about your new job."

She smiled slowly, warmth blossoming inside her and spreading from her middle outward. She drew a deep breath, let it out slowly. "Sure," she agreed. "That sounds nice."

* * * * *

"Grandpa, we need to talk to you."

He looked up from the papers on his desk. Tara and Joe stood side by side just inside the door of his office. He lifted a brow. "Okay."

Joe closed the door and they sat in the chairs. Tara faced her grandfather across the desk, remembering the day she'd sat in that same chair while he told her he'd hired Joe. She smiled and glanced at Joe.

"What's this about? I haven't finished going over your proposal yet..."

"It's not about that," Joe said, voice deep and sexy. "I need to tell you about why I left my last job."

Grandpa sat back in his chair and folded his arms across his chest. "Okay."

Joe told him the story and Tara had to resist the strong need to reach out and clasp his hand in hers. It still hurt her so much that he'd been treated like that. That he'd been so helpless to prove his innocence. Her stomach tightened as she watched her grandfather's face.

Tyrone said sat silently for long moments, apparently processing what he'd just heard. Then he asked, narrowed eyes looking at Joe, "Why didn't you tell me this?"

"The obvious reasons," Joe said. "I needed a job. This was pretty much my last hope. I didn't want to lose it."

Tyrone's gaze shifted to Tara. "You knew this?"

"Yes."

"Since when?"

"About a week ago."

"Why the hell didn't you tell me sooner?" he barked.

She straightened her spine. "Because it didn't matter. I know Joe is innocent. He would never steal from anyone, including us."

And at that moment warmth enclosed her fingers in a strong clasp. She glanced down at Joe's hand on hers on the arm of the chair, then back up to her grandfather—who'd also noticed.

He frowned.

"What's going on between you two?" he demanded, sitting forward.

"I'm in love with Tara," Joe said in a strong, confident voice.

"And I love him too," she added. They shared a glance and their fingers tightened on each other's.

"Jesus Christ." Tyrone stared back at them. "Tara, you were ready to kill him a few weeks ago."

Tara smiled. "Yeah. I still might if he pisses me off." She slanted a mischievous glance at Joe.

He smiled. "I don't think so, sweetheart," he drawled.

The authority in his voice made her melt. Damn, she was not going to be a doormat for any man, was not going to let him walk all over her, but it was so damn hard to resist him. And yet she knew he wasn't her keeper, her commander, her master...but rather, her protector. Partner. Lover.

Grandpa rubbed his forehead. "Jesus. What the hell is happening here? Sasha goes out and gets a job. And you tell me you're in love with Joe. There must be a damn full moon or something." He shook his head. "Or I'm just getting old." Then his amber gaze sharpened. "On the other hand..."

Tara sent Joe a sideways, dubious glance. "What, Grandpa?"

He barked out a laugh.

They stared at him.

"This is perfect!" he said. "Joe can run the company and you can stay home and have babies."

Tara gritted her teeth. Joe's thumb moved over her hand in a soothing gesture. She relaxed a little. "No, Grandpa. We never said anything about getting married." They'd talked about it, at the ranch, over the weekend, but it was too soon to let him know that. "Or babies. That will be up to us. In the meantime, I'm not going anywhere."

Joe leaned forward. "Tyrone. You know damn well if Tara left, this company would be devastated. We need her drive, her passion, her vision—and her knowledge."

Tyrone stared back at Joe. He leaned back in his chair, picked up a pen and shifted it between his fingers.

"Yes," he said. "You're right."

Tara swallowed a gasp and turned wide eyes to Joe. He smiled.

"Thank you," she whispered, not sure who she was directing it to more—Grandpa or Joe.

"Tara and I are a team," Joe said.

Her heart expanded in her chest and she took a big breath. She felt accepted, cared for, as if she could totally be herself and it was fine. In giving herself, she'd gotten so much. Respect. Love. She'd found herself, her true strength.

Now she had what she really wanted.

About the Author

Kelly Jamieson is the author of several sexy romance novels. Her writing has been described as “blisteringly sexy” and “a spicy delicious read”. If she can stop herself from reading or writing, she loves to cook. She has shelves of cookbooks that she reads at length. She also enjoys gardening in the summer, and in the winter she likes to read gardening magazines and seed catalogues. She also loves shopping, especially for clothes and shoes.

But her family takes precedence over everything else (yes, even writing). She has two teenage children who are the best kids in the world, not that she’s biased, and a wonderful husband who does loads of laundry while she plays on the computer writing stories. She loves hearing from readers.

Kelly welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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