

The book cover features a woman with dark hair pulled back, looking over her shoulder with a slight smile. She is wearing a dark, possibly red, top. In the background, the muscular torso of a man is visible, partially obscured by the woman. The overall color palette is warm, with shades of red, orange, and brown. The text is overlaid on the image.

Loose Id

JIANNE CARLO

LUCIFER'S  
*Choice*

*Hades Squad 2:  
Lucifer's Choice*

*Jianne Carlo*



## **Hades Squad 2: Lucifer's Choice**

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## Dedication

*To Antonia Pearce with many thanks for making my goal of ten books by 2010 happen!*

*I couldn't have done this without you.*

*Heartfelt thanks,*

*Jianne*

## Chapter One

Sax Anders couldn't remember the last time he'd fucked a woman without knowing at least her first name.

*A first time for everything, I guess.*

Slipping another button of her blouse free, he bent to brush his mouth over hers. She smelled of Shalimar, and her lips tasted of the tequila shot she'd had earlier—tangy, spicy, with a hint of lime, and grains of salt dusted his tongue. Pushing the silk shirt open, he trailed his forefinger along her satin-soft skin up her rib cage over the lace froth of her red bra and cupped the thin material covering her breast while licking the seam of her mouth.

She stiffened, but parted her lips and let him in. His boner jerked, the jeans tightened pressuring his aching testicles, and the taste of her had him fast-forwarding to fucking, pronto. He broke off the kiss hoping to regain control of his raging lust.

"Sax?" Cheeks flushed the hue of a ripe peach, lips glistening wet, sienna locks cascading and waving around her face, she lifted her hands and laid them flat on his shirt. "Something wrong?"

"Will you be upset if we moved this to the bed?" Sax asked.

"Not at all," she replied, tipping her head back to meet his gaze directly. Brows arched, mouth curving in a little Madonna-mysterious smile, she stared at him through half-lidded eyes. "Isn't that where we're going to end up?"

When she smiled, the enticing heart-shaped mole at the right corner of her mouth danced an invitation he couldn't refuse. He sipped the spot, his tongue laving the darker pigmentation tracing the outline of the tiny heart. That mole had drained all the blood in his veins to his cock when he'd first glimpsed her earlier, head thrown back, lips parted in a wicked grin, one shoulder lifted in the sauciest sex-kitten pose he'd ever witnessed.

"Without a doubt," he said, kneading her breast and shifting sideways to scoop an arm around her back. "Put your arms around my neck."

"Why?" A series of tiny creases knitted her forehead.

He hefted her onto his lap. "Because it'll make you, me, and bed happen faster."

"Oh," she whispered and ran her tongue over the edge of her teeth. "Okay." Linking her hands at the back of his neck, she said, "I never thought you'd be cavemannish in bed."

“And how long have you been wondering what I’d be like in bed?” he asked, stood, and stalked over to the canopy bed that dominated the Santa Fe Hilton’s suite.

“Need your ego stroked?” she purred. “I wouldn’t think a man who looks like you has any problem in the bed department.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” he said, knowing his Norwegian coloring, platinum hair, blue eyes, six-six height, and wrestler build stood out anywhere, but more so in the predominantly Hispanic and Native American population of Santa Fe. “I was wondering if we wasted the last two hours at El Meson.”

“Anticipation heightens the senses.”

“Tell me about it,” he quipped. “From the moment I laid eyes on you, I anticipated us doing this.”

Settling her in the middle of the bed, he stared at his bounty. A beauty with a trace of an exotic heritage, from the rich chocolate of her eyes, the classic but long line of her nose, the high cheekbones, and the dusky color of her complexion, all spoke of the glamour and style of a Bollywood actress. And that mole. His prick twitched when she shot him an under-the-eyelids side-glance and pouted. The mole danced and played hide-and-seek under the muted lighting in the room as her lips quirked up.

Sax had spent enough time in India to recognize her ancestral roots. He traced the line of her neck as she arched her head back, his attention captured by the fullness of her breasts. Every man in the bar had been fixated on the cleavage revealed by her ruby shirt, the hint of her wickedly red bra when she leaned over to pick up her shot glass.

He footed one shoe off, then the other, and when she fiddled with a button, he ordered, “Don’t.”

“What?” The question was snapped, and irritation showed in the frown that riddled her forehead.

“I want to unwrap you,” he said, climbed onto the bed, lifted one leg to straddle her with his knees, and batted her hands away from her middle. “Your skin’s so soft.” Splaying his fingers, he savored the heat of her flesh, the smoothness of her the skin as he teased the buttons of her blouse free to reveal the most delicious navel ring. He choked as a lance of lightning lust shot straight to his straining prick and testicles.

“This might go down quicker than I anticipated,” he muttered, fumbling with the rest of her top’s fastenings. She wore the sexiest harlot half-cup bra he’d ever had the privilege of viewing, and the sight of her mounded breasts had his mouth salivating. He flexed his jaw, his fingers tingled, and he almost tore off the brass button on her pants in his haste to get her naked.

*I only have one fucking condom.*

She rose onto her elbows and shrugged, working one sleeve of the blouse down her arm. Sax shifted to her right, unzipped her black corduroy jeans, tugged the

waistband down over her supple hips, and just about swallowed his tongue when a matching scarlet lace thong materialized.

"Mouthwatering," he muttered, catching a whiff of the musk of her desire as he peeled the fabric from her skin. *Thank you, God. She's as ready as I am.*

She wriggled and lifted to help him, and as her belly rose, the tiny imp on the pink, silver, and diamanté navel ring winked in the muted light from one bedside lamp. Unable to resist, he bent and outlined the heart-shaped devil with his tongue, and his carefully planned seduction shattered into a zillion shards.

"I take it you like my little Lucifer," she said, her voice husky, her eyes darkened to a velvety fudge brown.

"How appropriate," he said, jerked back to reality by her using the word *Lucifer*, the nickname given to him by his Hades teammates. "I take it you have a little bit of a devil in you?"

"I plan to," she stated, "if you play your cards right."

"Beautiful and witty," Sax retorted. "Now let's put that smart mouth of yours to good work." He teased the corner of her lips, tickling the pillow-supple flesh until she sighed, tiny puffs of her breath feathering a tantalizing caress over his jaw as she wound her arms around his neck.

Sax slipped his hands around her back, cupped a palm over her taut ass, molding her pelvis to his erection as he deepened the kiss, exploring the evenness of her perfect white teeth, the moist heat and sweetness of her lips.

He stroked her tongue, testing the tip with a soft nip.

Her hips arched, and she gasped into his mouth, purring like a hungry kitten, a deep rumble from the back of her throat.

Her fingers trailed his nape, and the lithe, electric caresses flooded the blood to his already straining cock. Want and need savaged logic and rationality, and an avaricious desire he hadn't felt in years exploded through his bloodstream.

She squirmed against his groin, rubbing up and down his arousal, the promise of her pussy evident as the scent of her musk mingled with the Shalimar perfume, and a heady intoxication hazed his brain.

Tucking his fingers under the bra's clasps, he flicked at the hooks, fumbling to free the closure, and finally separated flesh from fabric. She hooked her leg up over his hips, and he lost the ragged remnants of his military discipline. Sax pushed onto his elbows, listed to one side, and helped her free first one, then the other arm from her blouse.

"Perfect," he growled and impatiently slipped the bra cups below the mounds of a pair of flawless breasts tipped by nipples the colors of a Santa Fe sunset, peach-pink with a hint of chocolate. He tasted one, sucking the taut peak, dragging the flat of his tongue on the underside before sawing the wet point between his teeth. She wrapped her other leg around his thigh and purred again, tangling her fingers in his hair and holding him fast to her breast.

“Oh, Sax.” She moaned the two words, her voice serrated, irregular, raspy with desire.

Glancing up at her, he froze. His throat clogged at the vision before him. Her eyes were unfocused, her lips swollen and reddened to a rich ruby shade, her dark curls tousled, and her nostrils quivered as her chest rose and fell. Sunset colors washed her complexion as she tossed her head on the pillow when he rolled her wet nipple and pinched lightly. He set his mouth over her unattended breast and drew her peaked nipple between his teeth.

He wanted to draw the moment out, to taste her all over, to bury his tongue deep inside her pussy; he cupped his hand over her mons and ground the heel of his palm over her clit. She whimpered, a breathy little mewl, and he felt her shudder and gathered her close, peppering her throat with hot, moist kisses and smiled against the hollow of her collarbone when she tugged his shirt.

Sax whipped the shirt off, uncaring of the buttons he popped, and started to unbutton his jeans.

“My turn,” she ordered, pressing her palm to his hand. “My turn to unwrap you.”

“Whatever the lady wants,” he mumbled and rolled onto his back, his eyes fixated on the fierce expression she wore.

“Oh I want.” She shot him a don’t-you-dare-move glare. Her soft pants punctuated the quiet of the room. She struggled with his belt, and he suppressed a howl of frustration. When she worked on the zipper, her face a mere inch from his cock, he grabbed the sheets and twisted the supple material while gritting his teeth.

Sitting back on her haunches, breasts jiggling, nipples still wet from his ministrations, she stared intently at his crotch, and he heard the breath catch in her throat when she separated the material of his jeans. She reached under the denim and found his sex, fingers gripping his cock as she freed the throbbing organ from the fabric and then bent to lick the crown.

Sax shuddered as his balls rammed hard and tight against his groin. “That’s all the unwrapping I can take, babe.” He hauled her up, shifted her onto her back, and reached for the wallet in his back pocket. Hopping off the bed, he shoved his jeans down, holding the wallet between his teeth before ripping his emergency condom from the compartment and biting the foil loose.

She hadn’t moved an inch, her eyes bolted to his cock, lungs working overtime as evidenced by the rapid rise and fall of her breasts, and she bit down on her lower lip. “You’re a big man.” She swallowed a couple of times.

Nudging her with one hand, he urged her hips off the bed, and she complied, letting him drag the scarlet thong down her long, long legs. Sax grunted when his gaze locked on to the inky curls, his mouth salivating at the peach lips dewed with her moisture, the spicy scent more intoxicating than any liquor he’d ever drunk.

He had to have a taste; he leaned over and inhaled deeply, filling his nose with her essence. His fingers threaded through her folds, and he groaned at how wet she



was, how slick and creamy she was for him. His thumb found her clit, and he flicked the swollen nub then pressed a tight circle with the heel of his palm. His mouth watered, and he bent to her, slurping from bottom to top, his nose separating the prettiest pussy lips he'd ever seen.

A hint of Shalimar mingled with her sex's zing, and he indulged himself, eating at her as if she were ice cream melting on top of a cone, and he couldn't allow a drop to go to waste. She squirmed, pressing into his mouth. Distantly he heard her purring like a contented tabby, and she angled this way and that, urging him to the clit he'd left unattended.

She locked her thighs around his head, and he knew she was riding the crest of the tsunami. Using his shoulders, he spread her wide, and his eyes feasted on his bounty. Her swollen folds, drenched and shiny, framed the treasure he hunted. Positioning his thumb and finger, he drew back the reddened hood, bent to her center, and took a last deep breath of her tang. Simultaneously he pinched her clit and thrust his tongue into her. She let out a long moan, her walls clenched, and he set a steady rhythm, slow, deliberate, pinching and tongue-fucking until her internal convulsions came faster and faster and she climaxed, her legs trembling on his shoulders.

His balls and prick were on fire, and he couldn't wait a second longer. Pushing up, he sat on his haunches, his gaze never leaving her pussy. He sought the condom on the spread with one hand and plucked her clit with the other.

"Oh, Sax," she moaned, and her legs fell open. "Fill me."

In his haste to get the condom on, the rubber rolled in on itself. Fingers uncharacteristically clumsy, he fumbled to straighten it and slide the rubber down his cock. Her eyes glistened, and their gazes met and fastened as he lifted her and guided himself to her opening. She shuddered when he rubbed up and down her folds, and her eyelids fluttered when he entered her. Tight heat encased his burning erection, and he grunted as he worked into her slowly. Her muscles grabbed at his cock, and he clenched his jaw as his testicles contracted.

Nuzzling her throat, he licked a path to her ear and whispered, "So good. God, you feel so good." He needed to know her name all at once, but knew he had to keep his mouth shut.

Her walls continued to resist his invasion; her muscles clamped the head of his cock so hard he had to bite his tongue to stop his climax. He thrust shallowly, withdrawing and plunging and gaining little ground. Changing the angle of her hips, he cupped her ass cheeks and drove deep and hard. She stiffened; he heard her muted whimper, caught the slight twist of her lips, and froze.

Through gritted teeth he asked, "Okay?"

He raised his head and glimpsed a hint of something flash across her features. "Very okay," she replied and touched a finger to his throat. "Kiss me, Sax."

"My absolute pleasure," he said, meaning every word, and slanted his mouth over hers, his tongue and cock stroking in and out, plunging to the hilt, pulling out

to the tip, flesh slapping flesh, the friction accelerating as she creamed for him. He lost himself in her heat, in the pull of her pussy, the way her tongue danced with his, the way she strained to meet his fierce thrusting.

Sax knew he was close to exploding, so he reached between them, fingering her clit, working the pulsing nub until her walls contracted and clutched and sucked at his cock. She whimpered and purred and hooked her legs around his waist. He ignited and rode her hard, his thumb polishing her clit and drawing out her release as he ejaculated, spewing sperm like a horny teenager on his first fuck.

Their bodies perfumed the room, the smoky zest of sex enshrouding them, a thin layer of sweat slicking his chest hairs on her soft breasts, her nipples poking at his pecs. Sax leaned on his elbows; she was too slight for his full weight. He tucked her hair behind one ear, but she had her head turned to the side, and he couldn't see her expression.

Cupping her jaw he nudged her chin so she had to face him. "It's been a long time for you, hasn't it?"

"You could say that," she replied, not quite meeting his eyes but staring at his mouth.

"It has for me too." Sax didn't know why he'd admitted that. "How long are you in town for?"

"Not long," she answered. "I leave today."

"Have breakfast with me?" Sax realized he had no intention of letting her out of his sight.

"Is that an invitation to spend the night?" She gave him that little half-lidded sultry look of earlier, her brows arching, and an impish smile curving her lips.

"Definitely. I should warn you, though, that we'll have to get creative. I only had the one condom." He traced the outline of her mouth with his forefinger, the irrational craving to stroke and caress her not a morsel diluted by their spectacular coupling. Instead he reacted like a junkie desperate for the next high.

"There's a vending machine in the ladies' room," she quipped. "But unfortunately I have to decline your invitation. I have a breakfast meeting, and I still need to get some work done tonight."

"I want to see you again," he stated, watching her carefully. "Where do you live?"

"That's not going to be possible," she said. "I'm engaged."

Sax rolled off her, too shocked and surprised to do anything but snap, "To be married?"

"That's usually the way it works," she replied.

"What was this? A last fling?" White-hot anger settled in his chest. *She fucking used me.*

"Something like that." She scooted across the bed, reached over, and gathered her clothes from where Sax had tossed them on the floor. "I need to use your facilities."

"What's your name?"

"Pardon?" She halted in midstride and turned around to face him. Shaking her head, one eyebrow lifting, she said, "How very appropriate. You don't even remember my name."

"I didn't catch it in El Meson. The flamenco music was too loud." He hated being on the defensive.

"Do you know, now that I think about it, that's probably a good thing. Ships that pass in the night." She shrugged. "Fate and all that."

Sax's mood had soured from pissed to pounding fury before she closed the bathroom door. Water ran; the hotel's old plumbing groaned. He removed the condom and went to the sink in the suite's kitchen to clean up. He flicked on the light, dumped the rubber in the wastebasket, and searched for soap.

He heard the bathroom door opening and decided to let her speak first, not trusting his control of his temper.

"Thank you, Sax, for a nice evening." She was fully dressed, not a hair out of place.

"That's it?" he snarled. "Wham, bam, thank you, sir?"

"I can't see a reason to prolong this," she said. "Can you?"

"Thanks for the fuck," he growled, pulling his lips wide but knowing his bared teeth couldn't remotely be described as a smile.

"Temper, temper," she muttered, opened the door to the suite, and waltzed out the door.

"Bitch," Sax spat as the door clicked shut. He kicked the wastebasket, the steel container tilted, and its contents—a half-eaten apple, a banana skin, a few crumpled pieces of paper, and the condom—spilled onto the floor.

He shoved the discarded fruit back into the garbage container and picked up the rubber, noticing a pinkish tinge to the fluid on the outside. Frowning, he straightened the condom and noticed the tear in the top. "Fuck. That's all I need."

Straightening the rubber, he identified what looked to be a smear of blood. "Fucking shit. The first time I don't get a sexual history—this is my reward?" Trashing the hotel room appealed like manna to his seething brain, but instead Sax searched his carry-on for an evidence bag, stuck the rubber in it, and stuffed the baggie into a zippered compartment.

The following morning Sax found himself at El Meson again.

"Who stuck a burr under your saddle?" Devil, aka Dominix Zubiri, stretched his legs under the table and laced his fingers together behind his head, mussing the thick shock of black hair brushing his shirt collar. "Have anything to do with the beauty you left with last night? Didn't get lucky?"

"Depends upon your definition of luck," Sax replied and took a slug of his beer. "I'll be glad to see the last of this town."

"Santa Fe? It's a great town, Lucifer. Fantastic galleries, great restaurants, amazing sunsets." Devil raised a bushy black brow. "What happened last night? Nalini sure looked hot for you."

"Nalini? Her name's Nalini?"

"You didn't get her name?" Devil's eyebrow winged up.

"I didn't catch it when Andrea introduced us," Sax retorted, cricking his neck left to right at the sudden knotting of his shoulders. "Is Andrea on today?"

"Didn't see her," Devil replied. "Why?"

"Maybe I want Nalini's number," Sax growled.

"She's as sweet as *dulce de leche*." Devil slouched farther into the wide chair. "Wait a minute. You didn't get her phone number," Devil said sitting up straight in his chair. "By God, somebody refused you." He slapped a hand to his thigh.

"What're you doing?" Sax snapped as Devil's fingers got real busy on his phone's keypad.

"Texting the squad. They're gonna love this one."

Their breakfast, a sizzling metal platter of eggs, ham, and peppers, arrived in a cloud of saffron, garlic, and tomatoes. Sax's appetite had vanished with Devil's mention of his one-night stand's name. "For your information *sweet* Nalini's engaged."

"In what?" Devil queried around a mouthful of scrambled eggs.

"Not in, but to whom, as in engaged to be married." Sax arranged the tomatoes around the eggs.

"No shit," Devil sputtered. "I'd have laid odds she wasn't a cheating woman."

*Me too. Go figure.*

"Did she inform you of this before or after?" Devil tore a slice of the crusty bread in half and topped it with a cluster of tomatoes, red pimentos, and a translucent slice of *pata negra*, the famous air-dried ham produced only in Spain and Portugal.

"After I told her I wanted to see her again," Sax replied, signaling a passing waiter.

"Ouch. Tough. She's a very tempting morsel."

*Who probably gave me an STD.*

"I have to find her."

"Another coffee?" the waiter asked.

"A couple of shots of tequila," Sax countered. He waited until the waiter left the table. "The condom broke."

"Double fucking ouch. She isn't local—Nalini, that is. Guess you may need this, then." Devil thumbed through the photos on his phone. "I took a shot of the two of you last night."

"Why?"

"Not exactly sure, Luce. Something just wasn't right." Devil dragged a hand through his mop of black curls—a gift of his Portuguese heritage. "She made a beeline for you."

"It's not a rare occurrence," Sax grumbled.

"Yeah, we all know that women throw themselves at you. Yada, yada."

Sax stared at the head shot of the woman he'd fucked last night. No doubt about her beauty or the quiet intelligence glistening from her dark gaze, but there was some intangible quality he couldn't pin down, some *déjà vu* frisson that had tarantulas crawling across his vertebrae.

"What're you going to do?"

"Find Andrea and figure out if she can tell me how to contact Nalini." Sax checked the photo again.

"I'm taking it that Nalini doesn't know the rubber broke?"

"She left before I noticed." Sax waved a hand. "And I don't need to hear a single fucking word about that."

"Her future husband won't be thrilled."

"*I'm* not thrilled," Sax barked.

"Accidents happen." Devil shrugged.

"I've had that condom in my wallet for at least a year. I should've known better."

"You haven't fucked a woman? In a *year*?"

"For fuck's sake, Devil. I usually confine my activities to Trina in New York in the comfort of my own bed where I have a stash of fresh rubbers." The waiter arrived not a moment too soon with the tequila shots.

Nalini had tasted of tequila and lime.

Sax shoved the two glasses to the side.

*Now I'm soured on tequila.*

"What time's your flight?"

"An hour. You?"

"Same. Do you know about the meeting with the new client this afternoon?"

"Yeah, I'll be there. I'm heading back to the hotel. Do me a favor and see if you can get Andrea's phone number from the bartender."

"Done."

"And e-mail me the pic of Nalini."

"Already sent."

Nalini. So she *was* Indian. A faint memory stirred but failed to coagulate; he'd heard the name before but couldn't place where or when. Sax wandered back to the Hilton on autopilot, his thoughts too divergent to focus but returning repeatedly to the night before. Nalini hadn't shown an ounce of guilt about the man she was engaged to, had mentioned the engagement nonchalantly, almost as an afterthought.

Norwegian by birth and upbringing Sax didn't have any Quaker hang-ups about sex. He fucked responsibly. All his partners understood he had no interest in a deep relationship. Casual frolicking sex with women who could converse intelligently and happened to be stunning formed the basis of his sexual liaisons. Because of the demands of their new firm, he and the rest of the Hades Squad had been working long, arduous hours, and for the last few months, sex had been regulated to hasty shower masturbation and Trina, his longtime fuck buddy, when he could fit her in.

Just as he slipped the key card into the slot and opened the door of the suite, his cell rang. He checked the screen—Satan, aka Lorcan McGuillycuddy, the de facto head of their new company. "You're burning the midnight oil."

"Tying up some loose ends from the *Indonesian Express* job," Satan commented.

"We find our missing crew member yet?" Sax asked. The Hades Team had recently rescued a container ship from pirates in the Indian Ocean, and one of the hostages, the only female crewmember, had gone AWOL before she could be debriefed. Since the terms of the agreement with the shipping line had been full payment when all crewmembers had been accounted for, they needed to find the missing woman.

"Nah. Tomorrow the eleven o'clock news will lead with the story, but with only that lousy profile shot of her. I doubt we'll get a response. That's not why I called. Your father's in town. He's sitting in on our meeting with the new client. It seems he recommended us to them."

"Strange. He hasn't called me," Sax mused. He and his father, a diplomat and a member of the prestigious International Olympic Committee, had an excellent relationship, and though his folks lived in Oslo most of the year, the family stayed in close contact.

"It's a missing-person case."

"What?" Sax shook his head. His thoughts had strayed to Nalini again, and he'd lost the gist of the conversation.

"The case your father recommended to us. It's a missing-person case."

"I thought we'd agreed not to take any of those."

"Did you expect me to refuse your father?"

"Point taken. Anything else?"

"I hear you got dumped."

Sax knew Satan wore a smug grin, and he knew his next request would make the man howl. "I need the name of the lab we use."

"The forensic lab?"

"One that can do a battery of STD tests."

He hung up after listening to a full minute of Satan hooting.

The trip back to New York proved uneventful. Sax managed to contact their friendly El Meson waitress, Andrea, after arriving at La Guardia at around noon. Turned out Andrea and Nalini had met three days earlier at the Manitou gallery in Santa Fe. Andrea said Nalini had been living in Europe for the last couple of years, but didn't have a contact number for her.

Sax had to rush to make the afternoon meeting at the Hades Squad's new offices located in Amityville on Long Island. He literally bumped into Satan as he strolled through the main doorway.

"What's up?" Satan's features lived up to his nickname—black hair, black eyes, olive complexion, one Roman nose broken three times, and a permanent five o'clock stubble darkening his chin and jaw.

"Shit just hit the fan. You're not going to like this, Sax. I was broadsided too."

They never called each other by their real names. "What? Something wrong with Destiny?"

Sinner, aka Linc Chapman, a member of the team, had recently married, and the Hades Squad had adopted his new wife, Destiny, in a heartbeat.

"No, it's not Destiny. Much closer to home."

"My family?" A rake could have scraped the back of his neck—his skin and hair tingled that much.

"A picture's worth a thousand words, and all that kind of crap. Follow me. It'll become evident only too soon." Satan stomped through the reception area, which boasted a modular cherrywood desk sporting an oversize flat-panel LCD, an olive tartan-patterned upholstered couch, two matching chairs, and a low coffee table with a stack of magazines arranged by size.

The first person he saw upon entering the conference room was his father. He had his arm around a woman dressed in a tailored navy skirt and a crisp snowy blouse. She looked to be in her fifties and wore an exquisite pearl necklace with matching earrings and bracelet. Another man around the same age wearing a pinstriped suit Sax recognized as Savile Row tailor-made stood on the other side of the woman, holding out a mug, which the woman accepted.

Satan slapped a legal file on the table, Sax's father raised his head, and a jolt of affection and admiration shot through Sax as his eyes met his father's.

"Son, I'm glad to see you."

"Dad." Sax marched over to shake his father's hand and give him a hug and a shoulder pat. "I hear you've brought us a new client." Sax turned to face the older

couple, and a déjà vu foreboding spiraled up his spine, numbing the pads of his fingers.

“You remember Dr. Haresh Marajh and his wife, Chandani.”

Sax might as well have been standing on a Norwegian fjord at the icy chill that sailed from his toes to his scalp. “Of course. You were stationed in Norway for a few years. I remember your son, Tarak. We attended the same school and were good friends. I believe you also have a daughter, Nalini.”

*The woman I fucked not fifteen hours ago.*



## Chapter Two

Nalini Marajh let herself into her parents' Manhattan condo. Her father hadn't changed the locks on the six-room penthouse suite, and he hadn't disowned her, two facts that raised her hopes for a positive reunion. She hadn't set foot on American soil for two years, hadn't seen her parents or her brother since the day of her arranged marriage to Anand Dawir twenty-three months ago.

No longer a dutiful and obedient eighteen-year-old, no longer innocent and naive, she knew exactly what she wanted and where she was going. For twenty months she'd served on a number of container ships servicing Indonesia, Singapore, and Australia. During those months she'd earned her Engineer of the Watch license, accumulated a tidy nest egg, and become financially independent.

Dragging her carry-on through the hallway, she strolled down to the last door, which stood open. She scanned the bedroom that had once been hers. Her mother hadn't changed a picture or painting, and the Swarovski crystal she had collected stood in the mahogany display cabinet. The miniature train sparkled in the mid-afternoon sun, and the teddy bear with the balloons reflected all the hues of the rainbow. The beautiful ornaments she'd once coveted seemed so trivial and frivolous now. A deep wash of shame burned a path across her neck and face. Although she had always been well aware of the poverty in India and the Far East, it had still been a shock to realize that what she spent on one of those stupid crystals could feed a family for a year.

Nalini's nerve endings throbbed, and a blood vessel at the side of her head pounded. She deposited the carry-on next to the bed and stumbled to the bathroom to hunt for a couple of painkillers. Mesmerized by her reflection in the mirror, Nalini shook her head.

After swallowing two pills, she went back to her bedroom, noticed a framed photograph of her taken four years ago, and traced the outline of the gaunt-faced sixteen-year-old Nalini.

*God, how did I think a blonde pageboy suited me?*

She cringed at the green-tinted contact lenses, the bleached and dyed brows.

*I so didn't want to be Indian. I so wanted to fit in with all those Swiss girls at the finishing school. No wonder Sax didn't recognize me.*

She tapped a finger on her then nonexistent breasts.

"I may not be able to fit into a size two anymore, but"—she cupped her breasts—"at least these puppies grew in once I started eating again." Nalini well

remembered the agony of starvation required to get to the weight the modeling agency demanded she maintain.

She settled into the chaise lounge and linked her hands in her lap, staring at the ceiling.

Immediately, images of her lovemaking with Sax waltzed through her mind.

*I did it. I lived my fantasy.*

How many Christmases had she celebrated with Sax and his family when they'd lived in Norway? Following him around all moon-eyed and full of puppy love. He'd never had time for Tarak's little sister, yet she'd lived for the moments he'd carelessly ruffle her hair or throw her the odd compliment on a pretty dress.

*You noticed me last night, Sax Anders. Big time.*

Their paths would never cross again.

She snorted. Not only had he not recognized her; Sax hadn't even bothered to get her name.

It had been sheer, impossible fate that brought his company—his team—to rescue the *Indonesian Express*, the container ship she crewed on, from the pirates who had taken the ship and her crew hostage. Since she'd lived and worked using forged papers and passports, no one was looking for Nalini Marajh. No, the authorities and the Hades Squad were looking for one Gita Lee, aged twenty-five, the product of a Korean and Indian marriage.

Nalini'd managed to stay out of the televised reports of the rescue and remain, as the television announcers put it, "the unidentified crew member who vanished." She worked carefully to ensure that all crew photos showed her with a baseball cap or the ever-present helmet required when on duty. Makeup carefully applied to add seven years to her face, plus letting her eyebrows go bushy had changed her appearance dramatically.

The landline rang in the condo, and she tensed, waiting for the voice mail to click in, almost falling off the chair when she heard her own voice say, "You've reached the Marajhes. We're not in, so please leave a message."

"Mom, Dad, it's Tarak. I've arrived at Kennedy, and I'm heading to the Hades Squad headquarters, which is probably where you are."

"What?" She bounded out of the chair and sprinted down the hallway, her heart in her throat. "Why?" She stared at the decorative white and gold telephone. "Noooo. No. This can't be happening."

Pacing a tight circle, she debated picking up the phone. Why was her family at the Hades Squad headquarters? She'd left them clear messages saying she'd meet them here at the condo.

This was not going according to plan.

She stomped to the kitchen. Her plan had seemed so simple. Lose her virginity and present her parents and Anand with a de facto reason their arranged marriage couldn't happen. She found a glass and hit the Ice button on the fridge.

"They're hiring the Hades Squad to find me." She flipped the switch and pressed Water and filled the tumbler. "Why now?"

Gulping down the cold liquid, she sifted through her options. Long, lonely months at sea had left her with the eccentric habit of speaking to herself. "One, sit and wait for them to come to me. Two, go there and take them by surprise. Three, do nothing."

If Tarak had just landed at Kennedy, then she'd get to the Hades offices in Amityville before he did. Nalini grabbed her purse and headed out the door.

By the time the cab dropped her off at the three-story building housing the Hades Squad offices, worry and apprehension had knotted every muscle in her body. In the elevator on the way to the third floor, she massaged her shoulder and neck to no avail. When the doors slid open, Nalini held her breath as she scanned the reception area, anticipating the worst-case scenario and finding it in the form of one furious Norwegian.

Sax Anders stood in front of a half-hidden desk, his arms crossed, pupils contracted to twin points as sharp as tacks, and his navy irises held the chill of Scandinavian fjords. "Your parents, brother, and fiancé are in the conference room. When you've finished offering them your explanations for disappearing for the last twenty-three months, you and I will have a short conversation."

A shudder rolled through Nalini, and she folded her arms to still her quaking limbs.

"You *will* answer one question immediately," he commanded, his Adam's apple jumping. "Did I take your virginity last night?"

"You didn't take it. I gave it to you." She widened her stance and planted her hands on her hipbones. "My decision. Mine." She stabbed a finger to her ribs.

"Oh I agree with you," he growled.

"Wait a minute—my parents are waiting for me?" Nalini frowned. "I didn't know I was coming here until half an hour ago. They couldn't be expecting me."

"Security cameras on the building captured you exiting the cab." His clipped enunciation, the grim pull of his lips, and slight flaring of his nostrils indicated an anger barely held in check. "Your mother fainted. And for ten seconds I thought your father was having a heart attack."

"Are they okay? Oh God, what have I done?" Her pulse skittered. Nalini rubbed her collarbone and tried to take a deep breath past the panicked fear filling her throat.

"A question you'll be asking yourself a number of times over the next few days, I imagine. The conference room's that way." He angled his head to the left.

Nalini surveyed the shadowed hallway he indicated. She adjusted her purse's shoulder strap and tucked the leather bag under her arm. Not checking to see if Sax followed, she strode forward, head down, passing a couple of mahogany doors before the corridor dead-ended into an open room dominated by a twenty-seat circular conference table.

Swallowing hard, she lifted her chin and promptly met her fiancé's dark, impenetrable gaze. The tight set of Anand's lips and the slight sneer to his mouth had Nalini's blood curdling in her veins. Anand's arrogance exceeded the conventional boundaries of those born to wealth and position. Inclining his head, his smug composure unfazed by her reappearance, he greeted her. "Nalini."

"It is you." Nalini swung left, and she watched as her mother collapsed into a chair. The pink patent Chanel handbag Chandani Marajh grasped fell out of her hands and clattered onto the table. She looked tired, and the tiny lines at the corners of her eyes had deepened.

"Hi, Mom," Nalini croaked.

"Where have you been?" Her father barked each word separately before he slumped into the seat next to her mother's. "We thought you were dead. I've had an army searching for you, and you, you waltz into this room and say 'Hi, Mom'?" He banged a fist on the table.

Nalini flinched.

"Two years later," he yelled punctuating each statement with his fist. Stacks of pencils and notepads piled on the far corner of the table jumped and shifted. "Two years, Nalini. Two years of not knowing if you were alive or dead. Two years. Your mother almost had a nervous breakdown. Two years."

Nalini searched her mother's misting eyes, noted the way she gathered the purse and crunched the leather in her hands, her normally coiffed and perfect bob tousled as if she'd dragged her hands through her hair repeatedly. All of a sudden the impact of what she'd done to her family made her insides clench and jerk.

"What *were* you thinking, Nalini?" her mother asked, her expression so forlorn, so wounded, Nalini wanted to fly into her embrace.

*That's just it, Mom. I wasn't thinking, not straight, anyway. My composed mother almost had a nervous breakdown? Oh God, how am I to make up for all the hurt I've caused?*

"Four thousand people were invited to our wedding," Anand interjected, his apparent sangfroid belied by the harsh edge to his voice. "Four thousand, three hundred and seventeen, to be exact, waited for you to appear that Sunday."

Nalini took in his one-of-a-kind three-piece charcoal suit, the scarlet designer tie, the matching handkerchief tucked into the front pocket, and knew she'd made the right decision all those months ago.

She clamped her lips together.

"Don't you have anything to say?" her father barked.

"At this point I figure I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't," Nalini declared. "I did send you a letter."

"Letter? Letter?" her father bellowed. "Five lines is a letter?"

"You knew I didn't want to get married, Mom." Nalini scraped a thumb over the dimple in her chin, fighting the urge to pinch the bridge of her nose and ease the pulse pounding behind her eye sockets.

"You were the one who accepted Anand's ring and proposal." Her father's position hadn't changed one iota.

"I did." If she'd learned one lesson over the last months, it was to take responsibility for her actions. "And that was my mistake. Oh hell. It's all my mistake. I ran away. I jilted Anand the day of the wedding. I took the coward's way out. But I'm here now to face the music."

A throat cleared, and her eyes swept in the direction of the sound. Tarak, her brother, leaned against the opposite wall, one foot propped on a chair he'd turned sideways. He gave her a quick nod, and his lips curved a tad at the corners. His presence warmed the chill that had settled across her flesh, and she smiled at him. "Hi, Tarak."

"Nalini. It's good to see you alive and well."

Though he was nine years her senior, she and Tarak had always been close, and he took the role of protective older brother seriously. The obstinate forelock that Tarak had never been able to tame fell across his brow, and he brushed it to the side.

"It's good to see you too."

"Let's not do the touching family-reunion scene." Anand flicked his wrist in Nalini's direction.

The sun picked that moment to stream through the windows, and a series of glary rays played with the room's shadow bands. Nalini's peripheral vision caught a movement to her right, and she spied Sax watching the scene from the doorway. Her stomach hollowed, a flurry of images from the night before peppered her brain, and moisture, slick and thick, coated her thong. The man was a walking testosterone machine. His wide-legged stance, those bulging biceps and broad shoulders together with his flaxen hair and bronzed complexion reminded her of Viking berserkers and medieval warriors. The narrow-eyed glare he shot Anand sent a shiver rolling across her neck.

How could anyone be so rumpled and look so deliciously dangerous? Dressed in black jeans, a black crew-neck sweater, and scuffed boots, Sax had his hair tied back in a ponytail at his nape, and his jaw glistened when the mid-afternoon sun highlighted a day's worth of stubble.

"Where have you been, Nalini?" The question came from her tight-lipped father, who had moved to stand beside Anand. "Have you any idea of the repercussions of your actions? You foolish, foolish girl."

Nalini gripped the table edge so hard her nails scraped the wood. She'd rehearsed her speech a million and one times, but the words she'd carefully composed skittered into an awful blankness. She cleared her throat and then answered, "I'm never in one place for long. My job involves considerable traveling."

"You're working?" Anand's dark brow quirked. "You're not qualified for anything. Other than being my wife."

Nalini met her fiancé's gaze, and a smile coasted across her mouth as she savored her answer to his self-righteous, mocking remark. "I'm an engineer of the watch."

"An engineer of the what?" Her mother sat up and fingered the straps of her pocketbook. "You were at school?"

"Online school. I was an apprentice on a ship." Nalini didn't want to throw too much at them all at once. "I have a full-time job that I enjoy."

"You're doing manual labor?" The horror in her mother's voice couldn't be mistaken.

"No, Mom. I chart the ship's course. Manage the logistics."

"A cruise ship?" Tarak asked. "You're always seasick."

For a second Nalini thought about clarifying her brother's assumptions, but decided to let the ground lay fallow. "Not anymore. I've a cast-iron stomach these days."

"I don't understand," Chandani mumbled. "Hareesh, do something."

Twin beads of sweat trailed down the hollow between Nalini's breasts in the strained silence that followed as her father exchanged a silent glance with first Tarak and then Anand. "We came here today to hire Sax and his team to find you. I find it remarkable that you chose to return on the same day at the same time."

"I was at the condo when Tarak called and left a message indicating precisely that." Nalini pressed her fist to the spot between her breasts, trapping the dampness with the bodice of her sundress. "I guessed why you were here and came right away. Why are you here, Anand?"

"To help in the search for my missing fiancée, of course." He studied her bare fingers and snarled, "Where's your ring? I spent a small fortune on that rock."

"In the bank," Nalini answered. "I'll return it right away, of course."

"Return it?" Anand's black brows gathered. "Why?"

"What do you mean why?" Nalini took a step back, and her grip on the purse tightened.

"We're engaged, Nalini." Anand adjusted the knot of his tie. "Our fathers signed the agreement two decades ago."

"Are you insane?" Nalini tried to keep her voice even, but the question came out as a shout. "Why would you want to marry me after what I did?"

"As your father said, you're a foolish girl. But you'll learn the proper conduct required of you as my wife." Anand's eyelids drew down, his irises barely visible through narrow slits. "What you need is a firm hand and consistent discipline."

"I'm not a dog." Nalini knew her options had run out. She had so not wanted to do this in front of her parents. "And I'm no longer a virgin. I've lived on a ship for

the last twenty months.” Nalini pasted a smile on her face and went for the gusto, relishing the moment. “With mostly *male* crews. Dozens of men of all ages.”

To her right, Sax choked and spat out what she presumed was a series of foul Norwegian curses. He stared at her and shook his head.

Her father's coffee complexion paled, and her mother's eyelashes fluttered rapidly. Tarak took his foot off the chair and straightened. “Nalini. What are you saying?”

“Your virginity or lack thereof is not the issue.” Anand placed both hands on the table and leaned forward. “At issue is the political and social melding of two families. This alliance has been carefully planned. Everyone expects it.”

Rage flooded her veins, and she ground her teeth so hard the enamel squeaked.

Across the room her mother moaned. “God help us. Nalini, child, what have you done?”

“What I needed to. But apparently not enough.” Her voice hoarsened. “I never thought *you'd* want soiled goods, Anand.”

Her father let out a strangled growl. “Be quiet, Nalini. Stop talking at once.”

Tarak marched over to her and placed his hand on her shoulder. “Dad, Mom, Nalini's been missing for almost two years. I suggest we discuss what's happened as a *family*.”

Her father pulled a monogrammed white handkerchief from his suit pocket and touched the crisp triangle to one moist temple. “Tarak's right. Anand, I'll be in touch with you and your father once we've sorted out this situation.”

“Haresh, we *will* hold you to the terms of the dowry,” Anand warned. “Nalini's actions two years ago embarrassed my family. My personal reputation suffered. I expect nothing less than the announcement of our wedding within the month.”

“I will *not* marry you.” Nalini fisted her hands. “This isn't feudal India. I'm over twenty-one. I have my own money. I don't need anyone, any *man*, taking care of me. And I release *myself* from our betrothal. As for the ring—I'll have it sent to your New York brownstone.”

“We have a legal, binding contract,” Anand retorted. “You *will* be my wife.”

Nalini lost it; her voice rose with each furious word she spat. “Why would you want a woman who doesn't want you? You only want me so you can parade me around as your possession in front of those four thousand, seven hundred, and what was the number?” Nalini threw her hands up. “It's not happening. I'm an American citizen, and we're in America. Land of the free and the brave. I'm not anyone's possession.”

Tarak squeezed her shoulder. “Stop yelling, Nalini. Anand, desist. This is not the time or the place.”

“I have a headache coming on.” Her mother touched a finger to her forehead. “Haresh, take me home. Take all of us home.”

"Anand, I'll speak with you in a couple of days." Her father hadn't so much as glanced at her since his initial tirade.

"I'll be expecting your call." Anand flicked a finger across his lapel, dislodging a minute white speck before he turned and stared at Nalini. "You and your family owe me compensation."

Money, it was always money with Anand.

Nalini bit her tongue.

Sax straightened and moved away from the door frame.

Anand stomped across the room, and the aroma of sandalwood and aftershave cloyed Nalini's nostrils. His gaze trapped hers, and she refused to let him having the satisfaction of her being the first to look away. Anand paused in the doorway, glared at everyone before grabbing the brass knob and slamming the door shut. The bang reverberated in the sudden quiet.

Sax nailed Nalini with a hard stare.

*He'll make a scene if I go back to the condo with them.*

She glanced at her parents and brother. "I'll meet you at the condo."

"Why not come with us?" Tarak asked.

"I have a meeting," she lied.

"Chandani, watch your step," her father interjected as he cupped his wife's elbow and guided her around a high pedestal table. "Sax, please accompany Nalini to her meeting, and then bring her to our home."

"Certainly, Mr. Marajh. I won't let her out of my sight."

"Despite my prodigal daughter's safe return, I still desire the report we discussed." Nalini's father halted two feet away from Sax. "There are some other matters I'd like to put in your hands. Perhaps you could pay us a visit sometime tomorrow?"

*What report? What other matters? Surely me being home settles everything?*

"Understood, sir. I'll have the report to you before the end of the week. And I'll call you in the morning to arrange a time to meet." Sax turned to her mother. "Mrs. Marajh, it was a pleasure to see you again."

"It's time you called us by our first names, Sax," her mother, the quintessential diplomat's wife, said. "Chandani and Haresh from now on, please."

She watched her mother, father, and brother open the door and file out of the room, her neck muscles bunching as Sax continued to stare at her

Neither of them uttered a word until the elevator dinged. Then Sax ate up the distance between them. She tipped her head back and waited for the barrage to begin.

"Why'd you do it? And don't tell me last night wasn't a deliberate setup. It was." Sax's navy gaze bored into hers as if he wanted to dig into her soul.



"Do we have to make a big deal out of this? I needed to get rid of my virginity, and you were available. It was convenient."

"Convenient?" He grabbed her chin with his thumb and forefinger, leering at her, his tanned cheeks sporting twin red circles, his eyebrows pulled together. "You just happened to be in Santa Fe when I happened to be there for a conference. Convenient? I was just the cock to pop your cherry. Convenient?"

"We were never supposed to see each other again. You didn't even know my name."

The lips that had kissed her to paradise thinned. "Andrea texted me your name."

"I didn't give her my real last name." Nalini's forehead puckered. "Why would you want to contact me?"

"The condom broke."

For a second his words hovered without meaning; then all the blood in her body drained away, and her fingers and toes became icicles. Her stomach upended, and the saliva in her mouth turned bitter. Nalini gasped. "No. I saw you put it on."

"But you didn't see me take it off." Sax's scowl deepened as his brows gathered. "There was a crack in the rubber."

"Oh God," she yelped, cupping a hand over her mouth and collapsing into the nearest chair. "I couldn't be..."

"Tell me you're on the pill."

"What?"

"I take it the answer's no," Sax declared.

"Yes. I mean I'm not on the pill." She knuckled the side of her throbbing head. "Surely the chances of me being pregnant are next to zero. It was only the one time."

"All it takes is one swimmer."

"Oh God." *Pregnant*. The word stretched and stretched and stretched filling her brain.

"When are you due to menstruate?"

*Let's get right to the nitty-gritty, why don't we?* "This week or early next week, I think, but I'm never very regular." *Wonderful timing, Nalini Marajh.*

He slapped a fist against his open palm, and Nalini flinched. "You don't know exactly when?"

"I never had any reason to track the damn thing," she muttered and swiveled, giving him her profile. "You're the big stud with all the girlfriends. It was my first time. Forgive me for being a little on the nervous side and not calculating my ovulation to the day."

"Nervous?" He snorted. "You planned this in great detail, went to extensive lengths to discover my schedule. Why not go on the pill? Use an implant?"

"I figured a man like you, a player, would take care of things. Besides, I've been at sea for months. I've only been in the States for a few days. When would I have found the time to get on the pill?" Nalini squeezed her eyes closed, not wanting to see the contempt in his blue gaze. "I'll find a doctor today. Figure out what my options are."

"It's two o'clock." Sax checked the stainless-steel watch on his wrist. "We have a medical office on retainer. Sinner's wife, Destiny, goes to one of the doctors there. I'll have our office assistant make an appointment."

"You don't need to be involved. I can handle this myself." Nalini's nerves prickled, and the hairs on the back of her neck bristled.

"Don't dream of crossing me on this, Nalini." He towered over her, and she had to crane her neck to meet his gaze. "What's your cell?"

Whipping his phone from his pocket, he waited and punched in the digits when she grunted out the number. "Don't move a muscle. I'll have the assistant call right now." Sax disappeared through the doorway.

Nalini cupped her hands over her face, and the exhaustion of the last week seeped into her limbs. She'd been fast-forwarding on empty since the rescue, had refused to let the memories of those frightening days in the cargo hold blossom in her mind.

"We've an appointment in ten minutes," Sax's deep voice announced.

The headache gathering behind her eyes mushroomed; Nalini looked up to find Sax standing in front of her. For long seconds neither spoke. Nalini breathed in the tang of his aftershave, the faint aroma of cigar smoke from the night before at El Meson, and the blood coursing through her veins faster than a spring run-off slowed. He'd been both gentle and domineering with her last night, taking such pains to ensure her pleasure before finding his.

"I sent the condom to a lab to test for STDs. Can I assume you're disease free?"

*What a fool I am to think he cares.* Heat suffused her cheeks and throat. "Where would I have gotten a disease?"

"The dozens of men you crewed with?" One blond brow winged up, and his mouth curled into a sneer. "The dozens of men you had?"

"You know that was just for Anand."

Sax pulled the chair from the table and tugged her upright.

"You don't have to have sex to contract an STD. The doctor's fitting us in between appointments. I'll drive."

Sax drove an Audi R8 the exact shade of his navy eyes.

Nalini smoothed her skirt after settling into the passenger seat, fastened her seat belt, and refused to speak until he did.

"When did you decide you were going to fuck me?" He didn't look her way, and the *F* word made her cringe into the buttery leather.

She shrugged.

"You're not denying you planned it?"

"Fine. I planned it."

"Why me?"

*Because I heard Satan and Sinner talking to you from the ship. Because fate brought you back to me. Because you're my every fantasy.*

Nalini went for a milder version of her thoughts. "You must know I've always had a crush on you."

"Five years ago, Nalini. A normal person doesn't hunt down a crush for her first fuck. You're not coming clean with me."

"I wish you'd stop using that word," she snapped, focusing on the unending white-line zipper in the middle of the highway.

"Don't make what happened into a Cinderella fairy tale." He geared up, and houses whipped by in a blur. "It was sex."

At least he hadn't used the *F* word again. Nalini's rigid spine relaxed a tad. "I know what it was, Sax. A one-night stand. That's all I wanted." She twisted the clasp on her purse open and closed. "It all made sense a few days ago. It made sense this morning before I found out my parents and Tarak were headed your way."

"Who'd you bribe to get my schedule?" His tone remained hostile, each word clipped and terse.

No way did she intend to be interrogated. Not right now.

"I need to phone my parents to let them know I'll be late." Nalini dug in her purse for the disposable cell she'd bought days earlier. Luckily Tarak answered the phone and she was able to keep the conversation short and make vague explanations as to why she'd be a couple of hours late. Tarak asked to speak to Sax. Nalini handed him the phone and listened as he, too, gave ambiguous reasons for their delay. She tucked the telephone back into the bag's inside pocket after he dropped it in her lap.

"How'd you get my schedule?" The muscles in his jaw and neck contracted.

The man was relentless.

"Right place, right time." She refused to elaborate on her answer and opened and closed the purse's latch.

"Nalini, I'm an investigator by trade. I *will* find out." Sax took his eyes off the road for a second to scowl at her. "I will document every single breath you've taken over the last twenty-three months. Every sneeze, every crumb you ate, every step you made."

Nalini's fingers tingled, she twisted the handbag's clasp so hard. She had no doubt Sax would do as he indicated. What was the point of keeping everything a secret anyway?

"I overheard a conversation between Satan and Sinner."

The roar of the finely tuned German engines would normally enthrall Nalini, but the strained air in the car closed in on her, and she had to clutch her purse

tightly to keep from jerking the car door open, and tumbling out. She stared as the broken white paint in the middle of the road merged into a solid line.

The steering wheel jerked left as he cut to her. "Impossible. Satan, Sinner, and the others have been on a mission for the last week. Out of the country."

"I know."

"What kind of ship did you crew on?" He clipped out each word.

"A cargo ship," she answered. "Owned by a company based in Holland."

Three lines crept between Sax's pale eyebrows. "A cargo ship?"

"Five days ago, my ship was boarded by pirates and held for ransom. I was the only woman on board. The crew hid me in the hold." Nalini paused and took a deep breath. "I spent forty-eight hours cowering, hiding, and wondering every second if those pirates were going to find me, knowing if they did, I'd be raped over and over. I had sex with you because I wanted to, because I chose to, because *I* chose *you*, and not the other way round. I wanted it to be wonderful." Nalini fused her lips together and gritted her teeth. *What have I done? Shut up, shut up.*

The car's brakes squealed as the vehicle screeched onto the graveled shoulder and Sax yanked the handbrake. He slowly turned to face her, then gripped her chin with his thumb and index finger, forcing her to meet his direct gaze. "You. You're the missing female crew member from the *Indonesian Express*."

## Chapter Three

"Damn it, Nalini. You should've told me." Sax studied her pinched lips, the way she blinked and looked away, and wished they weren't in a car parked on the shoulder of the road on the Long Island freeway. Her revelation shouldn't have knocked him into next week. He should've pounced on the coincidence of her working on a cargo ship and turning up five days after the Hades Squad raid and rescue of said cargo ship.

She had done serious damage to his normal thought patterns.

Mentally, he compared the photo from the backgrounder on the ship's crew to the woman facing him. The female crewmember had cropped, tightly curled black hair, bushy brows, a significant overbite, and a dark walnut complexion.

His jaw clenched involuntarily. "Why did you leave the scene?"

Her olive skin took on a pink sheen. "Isn't it obvious? I was on the run."

"How did you vanish so completely?" Satan and the others had been convinced they were dealing with a professional soldier because she'd vanished so fast and left not a trace of her path.

"I'm not going to answer that." She dropped the purse she'd been clutching like a lifeline in a typhoon onto the floor mat, and her mouth tightened into a flat line.

"You will." Sax fished his cell from the storage box behind the gear stick, stuck his headset on his ear, and speed-dialed Satan. "Make no mistake about that."

"What're you doing?"

"Informing the others. We've been looking for you since the rescue. Satan found a pic with you in profile on the ship. The local stations are running it during the five o'clock news, and the national channels are picking it up for the eleven segment."

"Oh God. That's going to really upset the parents." The color washed out of her cheeks, and she bit her lower lip. "I let them think earlier that I was working on a cruise ship."

"I noticed," Sax declared. "You have a penchant for half-truths."

Her nostrils flared as her brows gathered. She opened her mouth, and he shook his head and pointed to the phone. She clamped her teeth together. He heard the enamel snap in protest.

Satan picked up. "Yo. Where'd you disappear to?"

"Nalini's the missing crew member from the *Indonesian Express*." Sax wasn't about to divulge any more than necessary, even to Satan.

"Ah shit. Hang on." Sax heard keyboard clicks. "Damn, she's good. I'd never have recognized her. The overbite was pure genius. Luce, you need to bring her back so we can debrief her."

"I know." Sax kept his gaze trained on Nalini, who appeared to be captivated by the unkempt shrubs lining the road's shoulder. She had her back to him, one elbow on the armrest, her chin cupped in her palm.

A truck whizzed past, and the Audi shuddered. Nalini shot him an over-the-shoulder glance at once sultry and apprehensive. The wicked heart-shaped mole at the corner of her mouth kicked up as her mouth pursed. For a fifth of a second, his concentration slipped, and he missed Satan's response.

"Say again," he demanded.

"Now we can bill the shipping line. Our deal was for all crew members accounted for," Satan repeated.

"I know. That's why I'm calling, that and the news segments."

"I can probably get the piece pulled from the eleven news. But the five news is going to be near impossible."

"Do what you can."

"What about the parents?"

"I'm running an errand with Nalini, which will take approximately thirty minutes. I promised her father I'd escort her back to her parents' condo once we're finished."

"I can make the call to her parents to warn them if you run late."

"You're no diplomat."

"Give me a fucking break. Luce, we're going to have to use her real name. The backgrounder and her papers won't stand up to scrutiny, and she could be charged with fraud. The shipping company is going to go ape."

"I figured. This complicates matters."

"Hang on a sec." Sax adjusted the earpiece and cut a quick sideswipe at the back of Nalini's head. In the momentary silence he listened to her soft inhales. Her breathing was smooth and even and her posture alert but not rigid. "Nalini, Satan can't guarantee the five o'clock news won't carry the segment with your photo, not that we think anyone would recognize you from the crew pic. Your real name will come out eventually, and I'm guessing you don't want your parents to hear this on national television. Satan's offered to warn them."

Halfway through his explanation she twisted to face him, her jaw working, and she heaved an audible sigh before saying, "Tell him to go ahead. I may as well get this over and done with. The cargo ship will be nothing if they ever hear about..."

Too fucking right. If Haresh Marajh found out Sax had taken his daughter's cherry—

"I heard. I'll leave right now," Satan said.

"That'll work."

"I'll let you know how it goes," Satan suggested. "If they go ballistic, take her back to your place. From what Devil indicated, that's what you want anyway."

"Stay out of it," Sax ordered, the warning inherent in his lowered voice. Satan fancied himself as a matchmaker, and Sax didn't need any interference in this unholy mess of circumstances.

"You hear me, Lorcan?" Since they never referred to each other by their given names, his use of Satan's real moniker emphasized the seriousness of his order-request.

"Methinks the protest-too-much stage is kicking in. Later."

Sax glared at the silenced phone, and his glance swept to the other side of the vehicle. Nalini's Shalimar perfume permeated the car's interior. He remembered the way the scent mingled with her musk, and his prick instantly saluted. Furious at his body's unwanted reaction, he stabbed the ignition button, and the car roared to life.

"What reports does my father want?"

Grudgingly Sax noted that she had an uncanny knack of homing in on the important factors.

"He wants a detailed account of your movements while you were missing." Sax eased the car onto the road.

"You can't tell him about Santa Fe." She shrank into the corner near the door. "You can't."

"I have to. You were there. You're on a passenger manifest. Lies have a nasty habit of coming back to bite you in the nuts." A slither of apprehension lifted the hairs on his forearms as he pictured the fallout from their fucking. The elder Anders and Marajhs had been friends for decades. Haresh and Ragnan served on several boards together, including the prestigious International Olympic Committee. "I have absolutely no intention of telling anyone what happened between us."

"You're not going to tell my dad?"

"No. Not unless he asks me directly," Sax answered. "How do you plan to explain this afternoon?"

"I'm not. I'm not going back to that place where I have to account to them for every single waking moment." She straightened from her hunched position. "Where is this doctor? It's ten to—we'll be late for our appointment."

"We'll make it there in time." The Squad paid the medical office a huge retainer. The damned doctor could wait. "I'm not sure what options the doctor will offer."

"No matter what happens, I'm not marrying you because of an accidental pregnancy."

"I don't recall asking you," he growled. "The appointment's with a Dr. Ella Roth."

"Does she know why we want to see her?"

"Yes. I knew we were short on time. I thought it provident to inform her."

"Oh." She picked at a loose thread in her skirt.

They drove for a while without speaking, the quiet broken only by the low hum of three male voices discussing which NFL teams could end up playing in the Super Bowl game. The sting of Nalini's blithe repudiation when he'd asked to see her again the night before made his fingers tighten on the gear stick, and he asked, "Why'd you say you were engaged?"

"According to Anand I'm still engaged." She closed her eyes, leaned back against the leather headrest, and snorted. "If Anand can enforce that blasted dowry agreement..."

An adrenaline surge sparked by a momentary rage at the image of that pompous ass stroking Nalini's breasts torpedoed Sax's brain. His foot slammed on the brake, and the Audi stopped on a dime at a light.

Nalini suddenly straightened, her spine as rigid as a steel beam. She stared out of the passenger window without speaking for the three minutes it took to get to the office building housing the doctor's practice.

Sax's eyes narrowed as he stared at her profile, noting her guarded expression, the rapid flaring and narrowing of her nostrils, and the arrhythmic tapping of her forefinger on the armrest, all signs of a brain in overdrive.

*Whatever you're cooking up, it's not going to be good.*

Dr. Ella Roth proved informative and completely neutral in her presentation of the options available. Roth wrote two scripts—one for the morning-after pill, and the other for a migraine remedy for Nalini's burgeoning headache.

Sax asked a few questions mainly related to any future complications, of which there appeared to be none.

"Should we pick up the prescriptions on the way back to your parents' condo?" Sax shot her a surreptitious dart, and he hardened immediately when he took in the serenity of her profile, the classic elegance of her straight nose, the full lips, and the heart-shaped mole that drew his fascinated gaze repeatedly. He remembered the first time he'd noticed her as a teenager.

She'd interrupted his and Tarak's chess game in her father's study, stammered an apology, and seemed unable to move, she was so tongue-tied. It'd been a hot summer's day. She must have been all of fifteen, and she'd been eating an ice-cream cone encased in red and green sprinkles. The frozen milky substance dripped down her wrist. She'd hastily lapped at the chocolate puddle, and the sight of her pink, pink tongue and that wicked mole winking had twisted his groin into knots. His arousal had happened in a heartbeat, and he'd had to draw out the chess game until his erection subsided. Sax had avoided visiting the Marajh household like the



plague after that day, convinced he harbored the most deviant desires for a female more a girl-child than a young woman on the verge of blossoming into womanhood.

"Yes, to the headache medicine, no to the morning-after pill—I'm not taking that under any circumstances." Rubbing her temple and closing her eyes, she slumped lower in the car seat. "Can you drop me to a hotel afterward?"

"I gave your father my word—"

"I'm not going back to the condo. Period." Nalini folded her arms, and he felt her gaze drilling the side of his skull. "Take me to a hotel."

The woman had a stubborn streak a mule could learn from; Sax ground his teeth together to contain the heated response doing a whitewater advance up his throat. "No. I'll take you to my place. I'm not leaving you alone tonight."

"Not a good idea," she retorted.

"Your being alone tonight is not negotiable. You have two choices—the condo or my place."

"Don't try to bully me." She lifted her chin.

"Nalini, you've been through a pirate's raid, lost your virginity, and reunited with your parents after almost two years. Add to that the possibility you're pregnant and Anand's threatened lawsuit. I'm not leaving you alone tonight," he stated making an effort to keep his tone neutral, his voice conciliatory.

"Your place."

Sax glanced at her, prepared to see twin streams of smoke pouring out of her ears, and mentally winced when he caught her ducked head and the downcast slant to her mouth.

An awkward interminable silence followed, during which Sax listened to Nalini's soft breathing. He shifted sideways to inhale her perfume and immediately pictured himself suckling her pouty, peach-pink nipples. He stifled a curse when he missed his footing on the clutch as he shoved the stick shift to overdrive and metal grated against metal, the sound reverberating in the confines of the sports car.

She winced and mumbled something about him having a heavy foot. He left Nalini in the car while he went into the pharmacy, and though she'd made no bones about even considering the morning-after pill, he left Dr. Roth's script with the pharmacist and had them fill the headache prescription.

"We'll order in." He slid into the driver's seat and handed her the bag with the medicine. "After we eat, you can be alone or do whatever you need to."

It was going to be one long, uncomfortable night, given his aching erection. Willing his prick to subside, Sax added, his tone rougher than normal, "I have a guest suite, and it's always prepared with the necessities, new toothbrush, stuff like that."

"Is this guest suite separate from your house?"

"No, it's not." Twelve impossibly short feet separated his master bedroom from the guest room. His fingers tightened around the steering wheel, and he forced

himself to focus on practical matters, ignoring his weeping boner. "What sort of food do you want to eat?"

"Whatever," she muttered. "It'll all taste like sawdust."

"Stop behaving like a spoiled brat," he chided. "Neither of us is happy about the situation. Try to make the best of it."

Sax strangled a long sigh when he glimpsed the mutinous set of her jaw working left and right. Remembering her unfettered enjoyment of the tapas he ordered for her at El Meson, he said, "There's a place near my house that does a mean garlic mussels dish with Pernod and white wine."

The low murmur of the radio was his only response for a couple of miles.

Then she leaned forward, rested her elbows on her knees, stretching the seat belt taut, and propped her forehead on her palms. "I'm sorry I involved you in this. No. I'm sorry I *chose* to involve you in this. I know you feel responsible because of our parents' friendship, but I can handle this on my own. Please drop me at a hotel."

*You chose to involve me?* Her apology both surprised him and rankled his simmering temper. *You chose?*

"I don't recall you holding a gun to my head last night, Nalini. And for the record, I'm not doing this because of our parents."

"Why are you?" She turned to face him, and the bleak expression in her dark eyes made his stomach suddenly hollow. "I take full responsibility for deceiving and seducing you."

*You seduced me?* He snorted. "It takes two to tango, babe. And for the record, I seduced you."

Gearing down, he coasted off the freeway onto the exit for his house and drew to a stop at a red light.

"You think?" She arched a brow, her lips curving. Popping a couple of buttons on her dress free, she unsnapped her seat belt, leaned on the center console, and shifted, giving him an eyeful of transparent black bra and taut pink nipples straining against the sheer fabric.

The tight jeans he wore became two sizes too small as his prick steeled and his balls blued. He involuntarily licked his suddenly dry lips, lips he wanted to wrap around her nipple.

She whispered, "The light's green, Sax," and flashed him a siren's half smile.

The driver in the car behind them sat on his horn.

Stifling a curse, Sax manhandled the gearstick and gunned the car before it stalled out.

She mumbled something he didn't catch as he was too busy trying to contain the spike of rage that almost tripped his temper fuse. He never lost his cool. Never. Never did anything without a carefully drawn plan. And he didn't want Nalini Marajh in his life for a second longer than necessary.

"Food. We were talking about food."

She let out an audible sigh. Speaking to the windshield, her voice on the tinny side, she said, "Mussels sound good. Is that this restaurant's specialty?"

"Says so on the menu."

"Where exactly do you live?"

Peering out the window, she scrubbed at the frosted film covering the door's window with the sleeve of her sweater, Sax noticed her buttons were once again fastened, and a twinge of disappointment made his cheek muscle twitch.

"I don't really know Long Island."

Sax gave her points for her attempt to start a conversation. "I live near East Marion, which is on the northeast tip of the island."

She twirled a curl around her forefinger. "I don't know the area."

"This is it." Sax pulled into the front driveway of his house.

"You live here?" She stared at the ranch home centered on an acre plot surrounded on three sides by the tranquil waters of a quiet inlet. "I imagined you in a modern condo. This is charming. I love the red brick."

"I wanted a place with a backyard, a view of the water, and a fireplace." As he talked Sax walked around the car to open the passenger door. He helped her out and kept his hand on the small of her back, guiding her up the path to the three steps leading to the doorway. The weather had shifted, and a wintry chill swept across the small stoop. Nalini shivered and hugged herself.

Sax punched in his security code, unlocked the door with his key, and soon as he stepped inside ahead of Nalini, punched in the second alarm code.

"Just how many locks and alarms do you have on this door?" Nalini asked, dusting her shoes on the welcome mat as she scanned the great room and eat-in kitchen to the left.

"I'm in the security business, remember?"

"And that makes you paranoid?"

"No, it makes me very careful."

"Lovely fireplace. Is the stone native to the area?"

"Yes." Sax's gaze zipped across the large, irregular clay tiles outlined by white grout that ran floor to ceiling. "Make yourself at home. My sister Anna often stays with me when she's in the States. I know she wouldn't mind you borrowing whatever you need. I'll show you to your room."

He left Nalini with an array of black sweats, graphic shirts, socks, and an armful of towels. She shut the door before he could ask what kind of salad she'd prefer. He had a hasty shower, changed into his jogging pants and a T, and ordered crab cakes, mussels, Caesar salads, and two penne a la vodka main courses.

When the food arrived and she still hadn't exited the bedroom, Sax charged down the hallway and knocked on her door, which was slightly ajar. "Nalini, you okay?"

"Come in," she replied and looked up when he toed the door open. She sat cross-legged on the bed, dressed in the clothes he'd lent her, black sweats and a graphic T-shirt. "I've been sitting not thinking or trying not to."

"And?" he asked and jammed a shoulder into the door frame.

"It seems I've jumped from the pan into the proverbial inferno." She cocked her head and nibbled on her lower lip before adding, "I feel like I'm on fast-forward. I'm guessing you're wishing Santa Fe had never happened."

*No, all I'm wishing is that I could bury my face between your thighs. Tongue you slick and glossy and then screw you till you scream my name over and over.*

"Sax?"

He shook his head, the image and smell of her so vivid that flames licked at his testicles.

"The food arrived a few minutes ago."

She muttered, rolled off the bed, and crossed her eyes. "My brain's simultaneously racing and numb. Lay on, Macduff. Feed me."

"You know your Shakespeare," he commented and couldn't resist setting his palm in the small of her back. His fingers ached to stroke her, trace the curve of her waist, uncover that belly ring again. "Most people get that line wrong."

"Yeah, I know. Lead on instead of lay on. We had strict teachers." Nalini spoke with her hands, and a vision of her elegant fingers while performing the traditional Bharatanatyam Hindu dance flashed through his mind. "I can quote Shakespeare ad infinitum."

"I remember you practicing your Lady Macbeth role for the school play."

She threw him a glance over one shoulder, both eyebrows lifted. "I didn't think you ever noticed me back then."

"Believe me, I noticed you plenty." Sax grimaced as he remembered that chess game against Tarak and his total lack of concentration. Visions of Nalini wearing the sexy midriff-baring costume while dancing for one of her parents' embassy parties had him losing his queen in a hasty move and ultimately being checkmated on the next. The only game he'd ever lost to Tarak.

She swung about to face him. "Because my crush on you was so obvious?"

"It was hard to miss," he admitted. "But that wasn't the only reason." He knuckled the side of her face, marveling anew at the softness of her skin. "This." He traced the heart-shaped mole. "Sparked impure thoughts."

When she grinned, his finger slid to the dimple in the middle of her chin. "I wish I'd known. I had a repertoire of fantasies about you."

"Which you decided to live out," he muttered. "Last night." His mood soured right away.

"It was a stupid idea." She averted her gaze.

"Agreed." He drew a circle with his forefinger, indicating she should turn around and continue walking. "What's done is done."

"I called the folks." She obeyed his signaled command and walked down the hallway. "Tarak answered. I think he's fielding calls so I don't have to speak to my father. Anyway, I told him I needed some time alone and was going to spend the night at a hotel. Technically it's not a lie."

"Because you used the words going to?" He didn't like the way she manipulated words.

"Something like that," she agreed. "You don't have to sound so accusing. I couldn't exactly tell them where I'm spending the night without giving everything away, could I?"

She had him there. This was a no-win situation.

He'd built a roaring blaze in the fireplace, and as they stepped into the great room, he choked back a groan at the intimate setting created by the low table in front of the flickering flames, the muted lighting, and the oversize cushions scattered on the floor.

The aroma of garlic and briny seafood filled the room. He'd dished out the crab cakes and the salads. Nalini strolled through the room and surveyed the table, the leaping orange and yellow-hued flames. She opened her mouth, gave a little shake of her head, and pressed her lips together.

"What?" he asked, catching her forehead creasing.

"You have a lovely home, and the setting is, uh, cozy."

In the back of his mind, he pictured the two of them naked and entangled in front of the fire. She could be pregnant, he reminded himself.

"I figured we'd eat Japanese style around the coffee table." He pointed to the two oversize blue floor cushions on adjacent sides of the table.

"You know I haven't eaten for the day. It smells wonderful." She rubbed her hands together and plopped onto the creative seating. "All of a sudden I'm ravenous."

"I figured you wouldn't want any alcohol. I poured OJ for you."

"Thanks." Nalini picked up the glass he'd pointed to and sipped the liquid. She dipped a finger into the remoulade sauce on top of the crumb-dusted mound, brought the dollop to her mouth, and slurped. "Heaven. I hope there's more sauce somewhere."

*I'm never going to last the night without jacking off.*

When she repeated the action, this time sucking on her finger, he dropped to the floor and stretched his long legs under the table to hide his burgeoning erection.

He lifted a shoulder. "Forgive my curiosity, but did you ever figure on returning to the fold prior to the hostage taking?"

"Of course. I just kept putting it off. I didn't want to return without having enough money of my own in the bank." Nalini polished off the last crumbs of her crab cake, sweeping the plate with her finger pads, and then licked each finger one by one. By the time her dainty pink tongue reached her pinkie, his cock had maxed

the stretch in the cotton pants and was pointing vertically at the underside of the table. "The pirates' raid upped the timing and the ante, I guess. And then I heard your voice on the radio. I knew I couldn't return a virgin. It seemed like fate." She ducked her chin. "That was incredibly selfish of me, I know. But I'm also incredibly glad it was you. Thank you."

She peeped up at him and used her tongue to capture a miniscule crab morsel at the corner of her mouth, the corner with the mole. Sax's prick did a vigorous hip-hop jiggle in the loose sweats, and a stream of sticky precum coated the flesh below his navel. Why the hell had he given into the crazy notion of skipping underwear tonight? So he could sneak a quick release in the can.

*Maybe if I double bag, I can persuade her. For fuck's sake, don't even go there.*

"This is an excellent Caesar's," Nalini crooned. "There's loads of anchovies. I love anchovies."

"I should, I guess, since I'm Norwegian, but I'm not a fan. Can't stand the pickled herring or sardines either."

*Here I am talking about sardines, and all I can think about is getting you naked and sweaty, which is what got us here in the first place.*

"But you like fresh fish?" She nibbled on a green piece of lettuce, her even white teeth grazing tiny pieces, and every couple of bites, she licked the dressing off the middle of a lettuce leaf. His head swam as he remembered the way she'd gaped at his cock and snaked her tongue over her lips, and he wondered what she'd do if he drenched his prick in Caesar dressing.

"Sax?"

"Yes."

"I asked if you like fresh fish."

*No, I like fresh pussy. I crave your fresh pussy.*

"Of course. Ready for the mussels?" He had to get to the bathroom, but walking was going to prove excruciatingly painful, not to mention awkward.

"Sure. Let me help. I haven't done anything yet." Nalini stacked the wooden salad bowls and the empty paper plates into a neat pile. "Where's the garbage? I'll dump the paper plates. Shall I put the salad bowls in the sink?"

"Go ahead. I'll turn on the microwave to heat up the entrée." Sax had never moved so fast. He twisted right, giving Nalini his back, lurched to his feet, knocking his knee on a table leg, and stifled a string of expletives. Stalking to the microwave, he hit three minutes, stabbed Start, did an about turn, and jog-walked to the bathroom off the laundry.

He jammed the door shut with his back and twisted the lock closed.

"I can't believe I'm going to resort to this," he muttered and turned on the cold tap, let it run for sixty seconds, yanked his sweats down, and shoved his erection under the frigid running water. Grinding his teeth he bore the burn of the near-freezing water until his prick went flaccid. "Full circle, all right. I jerked off for two

weeks every time I thought of Nalini after that fucking chess game in the study. And now I'm talking to myself."

He dried off, shot his limp cock a disgusted look, and pulled up his pants. When he returned to the great room, Nalini had the penne a la vodka and the rest of the food on the table. She shot him a dimpling smile, and her mole kicked up just so, and he was hard and aching again.

"I didn't know if you had any Parmesan." She waved a hand at a small plastic container. "But they did include a side of extra vodka sauce. It's delish."

"I've had it before."

*I've had you before.*

"It's superb."

*You're superb.*

Every bite tasted like sour grapes. Freshly made pasta, creamy vodka sauce seasoned with fresh oregano, Parmesan curls, a sprinkling of red pepper flakes, and he wanted none of it.

"Um, something happened." She spoke to her dish, her fork tines scraping the stoneware. "I had to go to the bathroom. We don't have to worry about me taking the pill."

For a second her words didn't penetrate his lust-thickened brain. "You got your period? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes." She stared at her plate. "You're off the hook. Heck, I'm off the hook. We never have to see each other again. All's well that ends well. No consequences to face. I can't think of any other clichés to recite."

"That's terrific news." Why then did he feel more deflated than a punctured helium balloon? "What a relief."

"The pasta's delicious. It tastes like it's homemade. Although I'm sure I'll regret the extra sauce tomorrow."

*No sex tonight, that's for sure. Or until she finishes her period.*

Sax choked down a long mournful howl. He knew enough about Nalini's parents and their religion to know she'd never consider sex until after she stopped menstruating. Being liberal and Norwegian, he had no hang-ups, and he intended their next fuck to be one of absolute, mindless, endless orgasms on her part, so he wanted her comfortable and relaxed. *I'm going to be jacking off like a thirteen-year-old over the next few days.*

Then he remembered his sister and the cramps she suffered every month. "Nalini, do you need me to take you back to the drugstore?"

"No, thank you. I, uh, keep an emergency supply." She had cut most of the individual penne into three pieces and pushed the pasta around the plate. Streaks of pale tomato sauce smeared the white plate. "There's no need for me to stay here now, Sax. I called a cab. It should be here in ten minutes. I'll launder your sister's clothes and have them returned tomorrow."

“Nalini, stop.” He covered her hand with his, and her fork clinked on the dish. “You’re not going anywhere tonight. Give me your phone, and I’ll cancel the taxi. And stop staring at the damned dish and look at me.”

Her head rose slowly, a peach shade tinted her cheeks, and her lips wavered when she tried to smile. “I thought of another one. Cliché that is. Much ado about nothing. Amazing how relevant Shakespeare’s words still are today, isn’t it?”

“Your phone,” he declared, flexing his fingers. She leaned to the side, picked up her phone, and handed him her cell. “Do you want any more of that pasta?”

She shook her head. “If I ate another bite, it wouldn’t stay down.”

Sax pulled Nalini to her feet as he stood up. “I’ll cancel the cab. Go to bed. I’ll bring you a cup of chamomile tea.”

Drawing back to meet his gaze, she asked, “Chamomile tea?”

“Anna has gallons of it during that time of the month. Sister training—what can I say?”

“Thanks.”

Waves coasted through him, waves so poignant and tender he immediately suppressed them. This woman had so many facets, so many fascinating angles and cuts he yearned to explore. He watched her stroll down the hallway until she disappeared around the corner.

When he entered the bedroom carrying the mug of tea less than seven minutes later, she was fast asleep, her cheek resting on both hands, knees bent, hair tousled to midback, the glossy waves glistening in the slight glow from the bedside lamp. Her chest rose and fell evenly, her peach-hued complexion made more luminous by the onyx fabric against her slender neck. He sipped at the tea, scowled when the just-boiled water scalded the roof of his mouth, and knew he couldn’t let her go. Not yet.



## Chapter Four

Nalini awoke to bright sunlight and a strange bedroom. She glanced around the room, taking in the olive curtains, the cream wallpaper with tiny charcoal squiggles, and the old-fashioned rattan furniture the color of a well-fertilized coconut tree trunk. Sax's guest suite had been decorated with Southern plantations or Caribbean villas in mind. The plantation paddle fan above the bed swirled, and a draft of cool air drifted over her cheeks.

Images of the night before played through her mind—their shared dinner, the easy camaraderie, the way he'd assuaged her embarrassment about having to talk about her period and insisted she stay the night. How he'd offered to make her chamomile tea. The tea? A quick glance at the bedside table showed nothing but a lamp and alarm clock.

*OMG, I fell asleep before he brought the tea.*

Warmth rushed across her cheeks and throat, her shoulders, and she thought about how yummy he'd looked last night. How she loved his hair loose, even if his straight blond locks were prettier than hers. And his irises had been the color of the stormy seas off Long Island Sound, their amazing shade such a contrast to the tanned skin of his face.

All night she'd sat there babbling because her nerves had her jittery and off-kilter when all she'd wanted to do was have him hold her, kiss her, and plunder her with his bold tongue. She'd caught him staring at the corner of her mouth more than once, his gaze fierce, and each time the words he'd uttered when he'd touched her mole earlier, "This sparked impure thoughts," clanged through her brain.

Tracing the grooves in the paddle fan doing hypnotic circles, her eyes glazed over, and she blew out a long breath. "You've had your fantasy, Nalini Marajh. Move on."

*Why can't I want someone else? Why has it always been him?*

She lay quiet for a few minutes, listening to morning birds calling to each other, hearing the whistle of the wind through the trees, and the tang of the sea floated across the pillow on a cool draft. Drawing the sheets above her shoulders, she glimpsed a crack between the window and the sill that allowed the intermingled aromas of brine and grass to perfume the room. A cozy lassitude took hold of her limbs, and her eyelids drifted shut.

Did Sax sleep in the nude? She pictured his hard body, the images from Santa Fe of them flirting and dancing, of him unwrapping her, making her nipples ache.

The feel of his rough tongue lavaging her clitoris electrified her senses. She could almost taste the saltiness of his skin, and her fingertips tingled with the remembered feel of his rippling pectorals, the slight dusting of hair in the center of his chest. That first furious thrust of his cock had rocked the breath from her lungs, the slight pinch of her broken hymen no match for the exquisite pressure when he filled her. Nalini squirmed, wriggling her butt on the soft cotton sheets.

From the time her shipping company's electronic newsletter had announced the security contract with the Hades Squad along with a photograph of the five members and their nicknames, her obsession with Sax became a living, breathing virus, dominating every spare minute.

Over the last few months on the ship, she'd purchased a slew of erotic online romances, poring over the vivid love scenes. Oral sex had become an obsession, both the giving and receiving ends. She'd fantasized about the act constantly. At night, she'd lain awake craving Sax's touch, trying to imagine the feel of his mouth on her most intimate parts, and when she fell asleep, he dominated her dreams.

Nothing, not a single thing on this fine earth, could've prepared her for the feel of Sax's lips and teeth on her clit. For the way he'd gone all caveman, eating at her folds, sucking and sipping and burying his nose between her pussy lips. The way he'd explored her with his fingers, his mouth, the long inhale he'd taken before nuzzling her heat, abrading her clit with his teeth.

She'd wanted to taste him, to swallow his cock, suck on his balls. And the flavor of him, the one sip he'd allowed her, had been too fleeting to learn, too little a taste to imprint on her tongue.

*I want to lick him from head to toe, to smell every inch of his flesh, to discover what drives him wild. I need to see him grit his teeth because I hit a sweet spot. To make him come with only my mouth. Is the slit sensitive? The crown? The rough ridge just under the head?*

Nalini salivated. Her breathing hitched, and her nipples burned every time she moved and the taut peaks grazed the T-shirt. She bit her lips as the Rabbit vibrator she'd purchased in Santa Fe blazed and pulsed in her mind, calling to her like the apple in Eden's garden. She'd been too scared to chance buying such a toy while on the ship, but damned if it hadn't been the first item on her list once she hit the States. Not that she'd broken the blasted thing in yet. God, the way she felt right now, all it would take was one touch and she'd fly apart.

Not hearing any noises to indicate Sax was awake and moving around, she stole out of bed, crept to the bathroom, and sneaked the Rabbit out of her purse. Guilt assailed her when she turned on the shower and let the hot water batter her bunched shoulder muscles.

*There is nothing wrong with this. Normal women have vibrators. Normal women can bring themselves off.* Nalini unclenched her hands and stared at the pink plastic dildo. A telephone pealed repeatedly, the loud ringing persistent and definitely not Rabbit-conductive.

The Rabbit fell from her unclenching fingers, and she jammed her back to the wall.

*Are you insane, Nalini Marajh? You pick now to learn how to masturbate?*

She shuddered, picked up the dildo, and threw it on the bath rug. She had a quick shower and shampoo and stuffed the Rabbit back into the bowels of her purse. After toweling off, she donned the sundress from yesterday and tied the matching sweater around her shoulders, knotting the sleeves in front. She called a cab and requested a ride to the nearest train station.

Slinging her purse over one shoulder, she looped her sandal straps through two fingers, tiptoed to the door, and shuffled the cream-painted wooden panel open. The house seemed eerily quiet—not even the hum of an appliance met her ears. The faint whine of a whirring car refusing to burst into full ignition reached her ears.

Either a neighbor or Sax had car issues.

Nalini stole down the hallway. The smell of freshly brewed coffee permeated the entire area, and she took a deep breath, savoring the pungent aroma. Dropping her shoes and purse on the tiled counter, she peered through the narrow gap between the curtains bordering the window over the sink and glimpsed Sax half-hidden by the upright hood of the Audi, his head bent over the engine.

His butt stuck out; he had an elbow braced on the car. Glancing over his shoulder at the kitchen window, he dragged a hand over his loose, damp hair, and Nalini ducked behind the red-and-white-checkered drapes.

She quickly dropped in place all the necessities for a cup of coffee. Just before she hit the Start button, the slap of feet on the hardwood flooring sounded in the laundry room.

“Nalini?” She loved the low rumble of his voice, the way his words echoed through her belly and up her throat.

“In the kitchen,” she called out, her heart thump-thumping against her rib cage. “Hi.”

He looked even more handsome than he had last night. The rays of the sun hit the white polo shirt he wore and reflected a dazzling brilliance. Nalini blinked his features into focus and had to stop herself from licking her lips as the golden stubble shading his chin glinted like moon dust. Faded blue denim clung lovingly to his thighs and butt, and his feet were bare. She swallowed, the yearning to explore his muscles a physical ache in her chest.

“Morning.” He greeted her, slashing a white-toothed grin her way, his carefree expression morphing to a frown when he asked, “No ill effects? Anna has, I believe, a year’s supply of ibuprofen in her medicine cabinet as well as any other accessories you might need.”

Nalini wished she could stop the heat crawling over her cheeks. “I’m fine. Really.”

"I went into town and brought back breakfast." Sax backed her into the corner, his hands bracketing her waist on the countertop. "Maple-cured bacon, blueberry pancakes, and a fruit medley. Hungry?"

Guilt mixed with a heady rush of lust welled up her throat. "I called a cab."

"No." His lips curved, and the slight smile he wore warmed her insides. "No cab. And Nalini?"

"Yes?" she whispered, falling into the depths of his dilated pupils, the black circles making his navy irises take on a violet hue.

"As far as you're concerned, you're no longer engaged, correct?"

"Aha," she mumbled. "Not engaged. No Anand."

He bent his head, and soap and a hint of a grassy aftershave made her head swim. "I want to see you again. To make love to you again." A dusky shade colored the ridge of cheekbones designed for a Viking warrior.

*Sax wants to make love to me. Again, and again, and again, I hope. Maybe I'll ask him to show me how to use the rabbit.*

"I'm supposed to start my new job in Harlingen in two weeks."

*Nooo, that's not what I wanted to say.*

"That's not an answer."

His breath smelled of minty toothpaste, and her brain stopped functioning as she sniffed in the giddy aromatic elixir. "Okay."

"Okay?"

"Yes?" A thousand fireflies skipped over her skin.

"Yes, you want to see me again?"

Not trusting her voice, she nodded.

"Yes, you want us to make love again?"

Again she nodded.

"Say it," he ordered, and his voice held the promise of orgasmic sensuality. "Say it."

"Sax?" For the life of her, she couldn't get another word from her vocal cords.

He licked the seam of her mouth. "Say it."

"I want you to love me again."

"How long do we have to wait?"

Her eyes dropped. She fiddled with the coffee cup, adjusting the handle left and right, waiting for the burn in her cheeks to subside and her throat to unclog. "It varies." Nalini squeezed her eyelids shut. "A couple of days."

"The longest estimate," he demanded. "I need something to go on."

"Oh," she muttered, staring at his tanned toes. "A week."

"Workweek, five days, or calendar week, seven days?" he retorted immediately.

"A workweek," she said, her voice a miserable groan.

"Are you going to have coffee or not?"

"Oh. Yes." She stabbed Start, the coffeemaker hissed, and sixty seconds later spewed a dark, fragrant brew.

"What new job in Harlingen?"

"ConoCargo's headquartered in Holland, and there was an opening in the cargo department. I applied for the position about nine weeks ago. I start at the end of this month."

"In two weeks." He brushed his satiny lips over hers, and she savored the tingling caress. "Stay with me."

"I can't." The appliance went silent as the smell of espresso perfumed the air. "I want to make peace with my parents. It's going to be bad enough when they find out about me being held hostage. That plus me moving to Holland isn't going to go over well." She spun around, grabbed the mug, and brought it to her lips. "Sax, I'll only agree to see you again if we keep everything a secret."

"No," he growled. "I'm not sneaking around like an adolescent."

Nalini gulped down two mouthfuls of the hot liquid and scalded the roof of her mouth. She swallowed and then shrugged. "What's the sense of anyone finding out about us? It's not as if either of us expects anything to come of the next couple of weeks."

"Turn around," he ordered.

Sighing, she obeyed.

He looked like the wrath of the devil. The steel in his blue eyes glinted like gunmetal under a Mars sun, and the mouth that had just whispered over her lips tightened to a thin, grim line.

"Be reasonable, Sax. Let's enjoy each other over the next few days. No strings attached." *Isn't that what all men want?*

His thunderous expression intensified as his brows gathered. "How do you intend to explain your nightly absences?"

"Since I have no intention of staying with my parents, I won't have to." Nalini peered at him over her cup. "I made a reservation at an extended-stay place north of the city. The cab I called should arrive any minute."

"Cancel the cab." A muscle in his neck twitched. "I'll drop you at your hotel. We'll keep our relationship under wraps for now. Don't think you're running this deal, Nalini, because you're not."

She flinched at his harsh words. "I didn't want you to think you owed me anything." The adrenaline rush drained away, leaving her emptied, raw, and ragged. She slumped against the counter. "I did an impulsive, stupid thing that could've had the direst of consequences. I involved you, and I shouldn't have. It would've been better if I'd chosen a stranger."

"Maybe." He had her mesmerized, and she couldn't break their fastened gaze. "But what's done can't be undone. Breakfast is on the table."

"It's not supposed to be good for the digestion to eat when you're angry," she protested.

"Sit," he commanded. "And for the record, I'm ticked off, not angry. I don't take kindly to ultimatums."

She cringed. "Who does? I'm sorry."

He cupped her elbow, took the cup from her grasp, and set it on the table.

Her eyes locked on to his thick fingers as they left the blue porcelain to connect with her chin, and his hand curved around the side of her face.

"No one's this defensive out of the blue. What's worrying you?"

"The confrontation with my father. You. Our parents being friends." She attempted a half smile. "Consequences. The smart thing to do would be not to see you again."

"Yet you agreed," he mused. "Why?" He swept his thumb over her bottom lip, and a delicious shiver coasted up her spine.

"The famous brass ring? I made a decision when I was held hostage that I wasn't going to hide away anymore. That I was going to take charge of my life." Nalini met his gaze. "The thing is—I'm American born, went to kindergarten here in New York, middle school in Norway, English boarding school and Swiss finishing school after that. Yet I've had basically a traditional Hindu upbringing. Half of me thinks that having sex with you should be my choice, my right. The other half is very, very guilty." *And scared.*

"You're a beguiling conundrum, Nalini Marajh. It took a lot of courage to share that. Let's take this one day at a time, one issue at a time. Agreed?"

"Yes." *Like I have a choice.*

Taking her bottom lip between his teeth, he sawed lightly. A puff of breath escaped her open mouth, and her pulse galloped so fast her vision blurred. The backs of her thighs hit the edge of the table as he wrapped an arm around her waist and urged her body to his. His tongue invaded her mouth, his lips slanted, and he stroked the sensitive soft spot behind her upper teeth. His hand slipped to her bottom, his fingers kneading her ass, and he ate at her, his lips taking, not giving, the kiss one of plunder and pillage.

Currents of desire swept away any resistance, any semblance of retreat as her sex throbbed and her breasts grew heavy and hot, her nipples flamed and ached for pressure. Her knees went weak. She gripped his T-shirt, he lifted his head, breaking the contact, and instantly Nalini rose on tiptoes, seeking the magic of his touch and taste. He touched her lip, the pad of his thumb abrading her flesh. Her eyelids flew open, and she peeked at him.

"Perhaps I should have rung the doorbell." The feminine British-accented voice came from directly behind Nalini.

A blast of frigid air gushed through the kitchen. The scent of a cloying perfume drifted to Nalini's nose, and she glanced over her shoulder to discover a woman standing in the laundry's doorway. A woman who looked vaguely familiar. She wore

navy capris, a spandex red-and-white-striped blouse, flat deck moccasins, and dangled a set of car keys from a bent finger. Nalini disliked the blonde's haughty quirked eyebrow and the amused purse to her lips at once.

"I apologize for the poor timing, darling. I did try to call earlier."

*Darling?* Nalini's lips tightened and she gritted her teeth.

"No need to apologize, Trina. What brings you by?"

Nalini twisted out of Sax's embrace. Trina? The woman fit the Swedish swimsuit-model persona made famous by Playboy magazine to a microthong bikini. Double-D breasts, waist narrower than a man's hands span, bronzed legs to the neck, and a smile so set in place Nalini's fingers itched to scratch it off her face.

"I'm taking my new Baltic out for a spin. Want to join me?"

*Baltic?* Trina obviously knew Sax well, intimately even. Nalini's eyes narrowed, and her mouth pinched as her gaze swept from one to the other.

"Can't," Sax answered, scrubbing his jaw. "Rain check?"

Nalini fumed, her nostrils flaring, and her nails dug into her palms as her hands fisted.

"Of course. I'm spending the weekend at the point. Drop by if you get a chance."

"I will."

"Ta then." Trina waved a hand, and the five-carat solitaire she wore on her forefinger sparkled in the streaming sunlight.

"Be careful out there," Sax called as Trina twirled around and ambled out of sight, her hips swaying seductively.

A car horn tooted.

Trina stuck her head back through the doorway. "There's a taxi in the driveway."

"I'll be there in a minute. Thanks, Trina." Sax grabbed the wallet lying on the island, tugged out a couple of twenty-dollar bills, and in two strides he caught up with Trina. She leaned to him, and her lips moved, but though she craned her neck, Nalini couldn't make out what Trina said.

*I'm jealous and I have no right to be.*

Nalini tried to squelch the green-eyed monster tempting her to sneak into the laundry room so she could hear what Trina and Sax were discussing. Her bare toes curled and flexed, and she stared at the washing machine as if the blasted appliance had answers to the questions bombing the corners of her brain. Had he slept with Trina? Did he like her? Why did she call him darling? Why hadn't he introduced them?

"Wasn't that a tad on the rude side?" Nalini struggled to keep her tone even when he sauntered back into the kitchen sans Trina. She hoped the sound of a car starting meant that the woman had left. "You could've introduced us."

"I didn't see the point. It's not as if you're going to be bumping into her anytime soon." Sax drew back a chair and gestured. "Sit."

He took a seat opposite her once she'd complied with his directive. Nalini knew she was pouting but couldn't stop the mounting petulance canting her mouth.

She tried to be civilized. "What's a Baltic?"

"A luxury yacht designed for racing." He gathered his knife and fork.

"Is she a friend?" She regretted the blurted query before the last word formed.

"Yes."

"Why does she look familiar?"

Sax looked up abruptly from spreading syrup evenly over his blueberry pancake. He cocked his head, his brow furrowing as he raked her features. "Probably because she's graced the cover of every fashion magazine on the planet."

The puzzle pieces assembled, and Nalini scrunched her nose as a rush of mortification dusted warmth up her throat and cheeks. "That was Trina Blount, the supermodel. Didn't I read that you dated her a while back?"

*Shut up. Shut up.*

"You may have." Sax cut a pie wedge out of the plump pancake. "FYI the evening news did run that shot of you last night. The gossip columnist at the New York Times recognized your name. They're set to do a piece on you in a couple of days."

The unexpected topic change halted her attempt to capture a wedge of watermelon. The fork dropped from her grasp and clinked on the white plate. In the back of her mind, she knew that the day of reckoning with the media was inevitable, but she'd pushed the notion aside, not wanting to deal with the details of where, why, and when.

"Oh God. That's all I need." Nalini studied the pulp in the orange juice, hating the familiar wash of helplessness in the face of the media fascination with her well-known family. Her uncle, a Bollywood magnate, her father one of India's most revered diplomats, her aunt dubbed the Queen of Bollywood, India's version of Hollywood, and the most beautiful woman in the world.

"Until I became Anand's fiancée, I lived a life out of the public eye. Yes, my family's well-known in India, but only there. When I jilted Anand, all that changed." She touched her hair. "Luckily I don't look like I used to. I'm not a size two anymore, my face has rounded, and for the first time since I was a teenager, this is my natural hair color. All I want is an ordinary life. Is that too much to ask?"

"You can't change whose daughter or niece you are, Nalini. Learn to deal with the media and the leeches sucking up to you." Sax assembled a slice of bacon on top of the pancake and speared the morsels. "Running away like you did two years ago only fueled the public's appetite for news of you. Once the press knows you're back in the picture, so to speak, they'll hound you until the next tidbit of sensational news takes you out of the headlines."



"That makes secrecy more essential." Nalini forked a pineapple chunk. "Can't you see that?"

"I've already agreed that what happens between us stays between us for the time being. The issue's settled. You should call your parents before we leave. The press may stake reporters outside the building." Sax methodically cut another section of pancake.

"I'll do that." She nibbled on the pineapple. "Maybe I should go straight to the hotel?"

"Did you make the reservation in your name?"

"I did." She met his gaze. "I guess that wasn't a smart move." Her lips pulled down, and she squeezed her eyes shut.

"I'd suggest two things right away. Make another hotel reservation using the Hades Squad company name, and don't return to your parents' condo. Arrange to meet them at the hotel, or you can use this house or the company's conference room."

Nalini ran a finger around the rim of the cup, her appetite vanishing as visions of paparazzi and zoom lenses soured the saliva in her mouth. "I'll take you up on the hotel reservation, thank you. I'll figure out something with the folks after I talk to Tarak."

Sax's plate had not a morsel left on the white porcelain. He jerked a chin at the mound of fruit and the lone half-eaten pancake left on Nalini's dish. "You should try to eat more."

"I'm not a big breakfast eater," Nalini explained. "I tend to like fruit, yogurt, and nuts."

"Are you a vegan?" Sax asked. "I should've remembered you wouldn't eat meat."

"My mother is pretty strict about sticking to the recommended Hindu diet, and I guess I just never developed a taste for meat. I eat chicken and fish. Lots of legumes."

"And mussels," Sax quipped.

"And mussels," she agreed, her mind flashing back to El Meson and their naked entwined bodies. A wave of flutters started low in her belly, and her toes curled around the chair's feet.

A chime sounded, and Sax pulled his cell from his T-shirt pocket.

Nalini looked at him, one eyebrow climbing.

"A reminder. My mother and Anna are due in today. Do you remember them at all?"

"Of course I remember your mother, but I don't remember Anna. She's much younger, isn't she?"

"Fifteen and very precocious." Sax threw his paper napkin on the table, collected his plate, and walked over to the sink. "The bane of my existence, and the

brat relishes torturing me. She's almost six feet and very striking and knows it. We all try to rein her in. Anna's bent on a career in modeling." He angled his chin at the coffee mug. "Another cup?"

"No, thanks, not done with this as yet." Nalini circled the mug with both hands, enjoying the heat from the liquid. She traced Sax's movements as he stacked his plate in the dishwasher, enjoying the way his glutes flexed in the tight jeans. Then she noticed the shiny brown oil coating a rag by the sink and remembered the malfunctioning engine she'd heard earlier. "Something wrong with the Audi?"

"Linc told me the oil needed changing." Sax emptied a dollop of liquid soap into the dishwasher container. "It looked like an easy procedure on the Internet. Now the damned car won't start."

"You've never changed the oil in a vehicle?" Nalini blurted almost spewing the coffee she had sipped. "But that's the easiest procedure in the world. And, and, well, you're so macho and studly."

"I hire people to look after my car," Sax retorted. "And how the hell do you know how to change the oil on a car? Not the Swedish finishing school, I presume?"

"As if." Nalini snorted. "One of the engineers on the *Indonesian Express* was restoring a 1960 Ferrari 250 GT SWB. Turns out I have a knack for engines of any kind." Nalini flashed him a grin and waggled her eyebrows. "We finished the Ferrari, sold it, and were working on a Devin SS until the pirates boarded. Turns out also that I'm a great driver. I can't wait to drive on the Autobahn."

Sax shot her a rueful grin. "Why do I get the feeling you're a speed demon?"

"Because I am," she replied. "I love the rush when you max out a V8 engine. Anything that makes my stomach do that hollowing-out thing. I've always wanted to do a parachute jump. What's it like free falling?"

"Interesting." Shaking the excess water off his hands, he swiveled, crossed one ankle over the other, and reached for a checkered dishtowel that matched the curtains. "I have about an hour's work to do before I can drop you to the hotel."

"That's not necessary. I can take a cab."

"I promised your father I'd deliver you to him, and I intend to do precisely that. Why don't you freshen up while I make the new hotel reservation and then call your parents to arrange a meeting?"

"I understand your concern, Sax, and that you feel a responsibility to my father, but I'm a big girl. I can take care of myself." Nalini's teeth snapped together on the last word.

"Two choices, Nalini—the hotel, or wait for your parents in our conference room. Do remember the Hades Squad is contractually responsible to your father." Sax crossed his arms as his blond eyebrows pulled together.

She glared at him. "You actually signed a contract with my father? Exactly what are the terms of this contract?"

"You'll have to ask him about that. Legally, the terms are confidential."

"I'll meet my parents in your conference room." *And I'm going to choose my own blasted hotel.* "Aren't you forgetting something? We don't have transportation. While you make the reservation, I'll check out the Audi."

He raked her features. "I don't remember you having a temper. You always seemed so composed as a teenager."

"I also couldn't rebuild a car engine." Nalini pushed the chair away from the table, picked up her plate, and marched over to the sink. "By chance do you have any tools? Wrench, stuff like that?"

"Sinner outfitted me with every tool in the book. There are ten drawers of tools in a red kit in the garage. And there's one of those handyman aprons next to it." Sax eyed her sundress. "Maybe you should change first?"

"You worry about the hotel. I'll worry about the car."

Nalini drooled when she saw the top-of-the-line selection of tools in the garage. Every single wrench, drill bit, even mini electric screwdrivers, the kind used for jewelry repair, had their original steel shine, and some hadn't even been unwrapped.

"What a sin," she muttered before getting busy under the hood. As with most state-of-the-art cars on the market, almost every part in the Audi was digitally controlled. It didn't take her long to find the problem. The starter button wasn't connecting with the electricals.

It would be much easier to hot-wire the car and then drive it to the dealer to repair.

"Found the problem?"

Nalini jumped, hit her head on the hood, and yelped. "Ouch."

Strong arms embraced her from behind, and she inhaled the intoxicating scent of male tanginess and woodsy aftershave, relishing the heat of his arms. Sax rubbed the spot on the back of her head and murmured, "Didn't mean to make you jump. I did clear my throat, but you didn't notice."

She twisted back to look at him. "I was admiring the engine. It's a fantastic car."

"I hope you have that kind of one-track mind when you're examining my engine." One hand slid over her shoulder to tickle the back of her ear. "Sting receding?"

"Sting being replaced with other sensations," she quipped.

"Good," he murmured and brushed his mouth to her temple. "One thing at a time, remember? Injury soothed, accommodation next. You've a few choices. There are two hotels not ten minutes away from here, and I found one within walking distance of your parents' Manhattan condo."

"I don't want to be within walking distance of my family." Nalini pushed in the hood hinge and stepped back, her bottom scraping Sax's groin in the process.

“Let me get that,” Sax directed, clasping the metal in both hands, and then he slowly lowered the hood into place, clicking it shut. “Do I have to tell you that the closer you are, the happier I’ll be?”

His breath, hot against the cool breeze, sailed sparks across her nape.

Nalini’s lungs stuttered, and all at once she remembered the Swedish bombshell.

“What about Trina?”

He lifted his head and growled, “What about her?”

“I’m out of commission for a week. How does this work?”

## Chapter Five

For ten years Sax had worked hard to tame his volatile temper, and for ten years he'd been successful until the last few milliseconds. Nalini had him seeing red.

"Turn around, look me in the eye, and then repeat what you just said."

She laid her palms flat on the Audi's hood. "I was out of line. I'm sorry."

"Not good enough." He cupped her shoulders and spun her around. "You insulted both of us with that comment. I am a disciplined man, not some rabid adolescent controlled by his cock."

Ducking her head, she whispered, "I *am* sorry."

Sax rolled his finger up her neck, forcing their gazes to lock. "Ask me what you really want to know."

Snagging her lower lip with a perfect white canine, she shook her head. "I've no right to ask."

"I slept with you, Nalini. That gives you the right." She had the most beautiful eyes he'd ever seen, though they seemed too bright and brimmed with moisture at the moment.

"Are you dating Trina?"

He placed her hands on his chest. "Not anymore."

She stared at his Adam's apple.

"Go on."

"Does Trina know that?" Nalini averted her gaze.

"We never had that kind of relationship. She's someone I've known for a long time. We had sex occasionally, but that trailed off several months ago." The last edge of irritation with her vanished when she shot him an under-the-eyelid peep and stopped worrying her bottom lip. "What has you frowning?" He smoothed the three faint lines forming between her brows.

"I thought all men had to have sex regularly." She played with the button on his polo shirt and darted side glances at him.

Leaves rustled as a weak breeze drifted through the saplings and bent the brown grass. Sax caught the hint of Shalimar at Nalini's temples, tightened his arms, and tucked her closer. The hard-on he'd sported since the day before thickened as her belly rubbed against his prick.

“Regular is preferable.” Sax knuckled the sweep of her cheek. “Gratuitous sex hasn’t interested me since I was a teenager. Don’t get me wrong—I’m not a paragon of virtue, but I’m not promiscuous either. You”—he tapped the tip of her nose—“on the other hand, were a paragon of virtue. You’re giving me mixed signals, Nalini.”

“That is what I’m doing, isn’t it?” She bent her head. “I-I’m only now beginning to feel confident in myself, in my ability to survive on my own. I don’t want to lose that.”

“Why do you think that might happen?” Sax brushed his lips across her forehead.

“I’m not sure.” She fiddled with his collar. “I’ve learned how to be friends with men over the last two years. I know nothing about how things work when a man and woman are sexually involved. You’re a little on the overwhelming side, you know? You’re so good-looking and so big and hard and male.”

Her complexion pinkened, she stole a peek at him, and Sax’s testicles contracted instantly at the saucy grin she wore. “I think I made you blush.”

“Nonsense.” Sax felt the heat climbing his neck. “Paratroopers don’t blush.”

“Yes, sir.” She saluted, her eyes dancing with mischief.

“Nalini?” He couldn’t resist her tempting mouth and surrendered, sipping at her lips, nibbling, and sucking.

She looped her arms around his neck, tiptoed, and opened for his greedy tongue. She tasted of Eve and the Garden of Eden, of temptation and paradise. She smelled all Amazon strong, a hint of her familiar Shalimar mixed with the incongruous aroma of machine oil. Her nipples pearled on the thin shirt he wore, the twin peaks skating up and down his chest. Sax slid his hand up and cupped one, savoring the round mound, weighing her soft flesh in her hands. He broke the kiss, leaned his forehead on hers. “The next five days are going to seem like an eternity.”

“I agree.” She tipped her head back, and he marveled again at her flawless complexion, her skin tinted a dark, ripe peach hue along the ridges of her cheekbones.

“You ready to deal with your parents?” Unable to resist touching her, he traced a line from her ear to the dimple in her chin.

“No. But I do want it over and done with.” She leaned into his caress, her eyes taking on a dreamy glaze. “I don’t know if they’ll support me against Anand. If they won’t, I’m not sure what I’ll do. I need to find a good lawyer no matter what. Can you recommend one?”

His neck muscles knotted as he remembered Anand’s stance on the dowry and the contract’s provisions. “The contract was drawn up in India?”

“I think so. I’ve never actually seen it. Can you believe that?” Nalini shuddered in his embrace, and he stroked her spine, caressing the vertebrae in the small of her back. “I think I’ll be able to persuade Tarak to get me a copy.”

The sun climbed higher in the sky, erasing the shadows cast by the foliage to the right of the driveway. Nalini lifted her face to the warm rays and said, her gaze

on the heavens above, "It's going to be a lovely day. Look at the color of that sky. I used to love days like this at sea, especially when a new day dawned so perfect and full of promise."

Sax saw only the difficulties she'd be facing with Anand and wondered what their relationship had entailed. "I'll start hunting for a lawyer immediately. What's the verdict on the Audi?"

"The starter needs to be replaced, but I can hot-wire it so we can take it to your dealer. It won't take long."

"Like I said, a beguiling conundrum," Sax mused. "Hot-wiring engines. Who'd have guessed?" He kissed the bridge of her nose. "Which hotel do you want me to book?"

"The one close to here," she answered without a second's hesitation.

"I'll have someone at the office make a reservation later." Sax draped an arm over her shoulder and turned them around.

"I thought you had work to do," she protested as they walked into the house.

"My day got rearranged," Sax explained. "Your father left me a message. I have a meeting with him at noon. At the condo."

Her spine went rigid, and she halted abruptly. "Answer me one question. Is your contract with my father all about me?"

"Yes." Sax cupped her shoulders. "What's bugging you, Nalini?"

"I guess I'm wondering if it comes down to my father or me, who would you choose?"

She studied his chin, her mouth flattening.

His jaw clenched, and he let his hands drop away from her; the temptation to shake some sense into her proved so strong he almost surrendered. He closed his eyes and counted to thirteen before he regained control of his spiking annoyance.

"You wound me, *elskling*," Sax declared. "Even to ask that question. First, your father came to us because he was desperate to find you. While I understand he's angry with you, I can't imagine him not wanting to protect you. Trust me. It won't come down to a choice. And if it did, the answer should be obvious."

By the time they were seated in the car, the tension between them had diminished, and Sax carefully steered the conversation to mundane topics. The dealership had the starter in stock and replaced the faulty part within an efficient half an hour. Nalini explored the Audi models on the floor, entered into a fervent discussion with one of the salesmen prowling the pristine showcase area, her chocolate eyes twinkling as she enthused about the mechanics and features of each vehicle.

Sax enjoyed watching the way her whole body came alive, hands gesticulating with a fluid dancer's elegance, long fingers reverently stroking the shiny steel engine, as she and the salesman, a stocky balding man, became more and more

animated. Such a mixture of confidence and doubt—willing to plunge into new experiences, but afraid to trust in her own abilities.

He wanted to see her blossom, take that first flight from the nest, and soar to new heights. But first she had to learn to trust again. And he had a feeling earning her trust wouldn't come easy.

"Sax, you have to come see this," she pleaded, tugging his arm and leading him over to a convertible model on the floor. "It's the RB Spyder 5.2. This is the V10 engine. It accelerates from zero to sixty in four seconds. Four seconds. Isn't that amazing? I can't wait to take it for a test drive."

He shuddered at the thought but couldn't dampen the passion that had her almost dancing in place, her feet shifting back and forth as she rocked on her heels. "The hotel's not five minutes from here, so you can always arrange that for later in the week." Sax made a mental note to phone the dealer and ensure that no test drives occurred without him being present.

Her earlier dismal mood shifted a hundred and eighty degrees when he offered to let her drive to the office. She launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck, and kissed him full on the mouth, her passion heady and contagious, and his hopeful organ tented his jeans.

"My international driver's license expired two weeks ago. Otherwise I'd take you up on that offer in a heartbeat," she declared.

Sax held the door open. Nalini hopped into the front passenger seat.

"Do you know my mom doesn't know how to drive?"

"A lot of people who live in New York don't drive." Sax shrugged and clicked his seat belt locked while firing the starter. "It's not that unusual."

"No, you don't understand. She's never wanted to learn. She can host a cocktail party for sixty in a heartbeat, do a formal sit-down dinner for a dozen in three hours, but she can't drive."

"She's a different generation," he commented, easing the Audi out of the dealer's garage. "And she's a diplomat's wife. Chauffeurs are the norm."

He changed gears and stepped on the accelerator after checking the digital clock's readout: 9:35. His first meeting was in fifteen minutes.

"Your mother's a diplomat's wife too. Can she drive?" Nalini twisted in the passenger seat to face him.

Sax winced and admitted, "Yes. But she grew up in a different culture. Norwegian women are very independent."

"And chauffeurs are provided for her, but I bet she drives herself."

"Most of the time." Sax geared down. "Where are you going with this?"

"I don't want to become my mother. I don't want to have the kind of relationship she has with my dad if I marry. But I don't want to hurt her feelings either."



"What's wrong with your parents' relationship?" He darted a glance at her profile, now marred by a slight frown.

"She caters to my dad's every whim and defers to him on all decisions. When I wanted to go to college and asked her to help me persuade Dad to let me go, she offered me a year at finishing school instead." Nalini touched his forearm. "I'm not blaming her for my bad decision to accept Anand's ring and go ahead with the wedding, but I am angry with her for not supporting me when I wanted to call things off."

"Tell her," Sax suggested. "Sit down and talk to her and tell her how you feel and what you want. It sounds to me as if you need to be honest with your folks. You can't expect them to guess what you're thinking."

They pulled into the parking lot ten minutes later, and when they reached the Hades Squad offices, Sax organized a laptop for Nalini and had the machine set up in the conference room. He grabbed a cup of coffee as she settled into a chair and logged in.

"I have to meet with your father in an hour."

"I'll phone Tarak to organize getting Mom alone. I'm worried about having to tell Dad about the hotel and the fact that it's close to your offices. I don't want him to suspect anything about us."

Sax considered his words carefully before saying, "Why not come clean with him? Tell him you want to be independent. Show him you have the money and the means to be on your own. You'll have to tell him about the job in Holland. I'm going to meet with Satan in a few minutes to find out what happened when he met with your father. I'll arrange the hotel."

"Thank you." She gifted him with a quick smile.

"My pleasure, *elskling*." He ambled over to her, half-sat on the table, and bent to brush his lips over hers.

When he stood she touched his wrist, the gesture somehow poignant and tender. "What does that word mean?"

"It's a Norse endearment. The equivalent of darling or sweetheart," he explained.

"Oh," she whispered and turned three shades of peach and pink, her gaze fixed on his thighs. "*Elskling*. How's it spelled?"

He spelled the word for her, and his prick thickened under her focus.

"I didn't know you spoke Norse."

"An interest of mine inherited from my mother. She's somewhat of an expert on the Vikings." Sax ached to adjust his burning balls.

She gave him a speculative look, tilting her head to one side, her mouth quirking at the corners.

"What?" He smoothed the creases between her brows.

"Are you going to be like that for the next five days?" She angled her chin at his rampant arousal.

"That's pretty much guaranteed," he answered. "I haven't wanted a woman the way I want you in a very long time."

Pink suffused Nalini's face and neck, her nostrils flared, and her pupils dilated to encompass her irises. His dick reared as her mouth opened in a silent O, and a watershed of desire drained the blood from his brain. If Satan hadn't poked his head through the doorway at that instant, Sax would've had her back to the wall in a heartbeat.

"Yo," Satan greeted them. "Good to see you, Nalini. Got a moment, Luce?"

"Yeah." Sax dragged a hand through his hair, picked up his mug of coffee, and drained it. The lukewarm caffeine jolt didn't halt the blood flooding his groin, and he walked awkwardly around the conference table, willing his erection to subside.

"Haresh Marajh is an interesting character." Satan had his feet up on his desk, his head resting in his linked hands when Sax entered his office three minutes later.

"Did he see the news report?" Dropping into the chair on the other side of the desk, Sax studied his friend's countenance. Poker-faced as always, Satan didn't appear concerned, and that had Sax's pulse accelerating. The further a situation deteriorated, the calmer Satan grew.

"I actually watched it with Haresh, Chandani, and Tarak. Overprotective doesn't begin to describe Haresh's reaction. If the man had his way, Nalini would be locked away in a fortress. Within seconds of the news clip, the press started calling their house phone. Nalini's uncle, the Bollywood magnate, phoned from India. Apparently Anand leaked news of her return to the Indian press. She's news in the gossip sheets."

"Fuck. I expected no less." Sax quickly brought Satan current on his plans for protecting Nalini. "I'll have to get the report on Nalini's missing months completed immediately. Haresh also requested a thorough background on Anand Dawir. It's my guess he wants ammunition in case Anand makes good on his threat to sue them for breaking the dowry contract."

"He *is* going to sue. Haresh was contacted by Dawir's lawyers. He's demanding proof Nalini's no longer a virgin and a pregnancy test. He's also threatening to sue the shipping line Nalini works for."

"On what fucking grounds?"

"Sexual assault." Satan lowered his feet to the ground and sat up in his chair. "She shouldn't have used that line about dozens of men. It's going to come back to haunt her."

"Shit," Sax muttered. "Nalini was a virgin until two nights ago. And she's only been with one man. Once."

"You're a lucky man. She's full of fire, that one." Sax picked up a yellow pencil and tapped the keyboard lying on the desk. "How much of a trail did you leave?"

"I'm assuming she flew into Santa Fe, so there will be a passenger manifest. And she had to have stayed at a hotel, which means a credit card will be listed." Sax leaned forward resting his forearms on his thighs. "Plenty witnesses to us dancing at El Meson, and the waitress who introduced us, Andrea, knows we went back to my hotel together."

"Will this Andrea keep her mouth shut?"

"She didn't seem the vindictive type, but if the newspapers offer her money..." Sax lifted a shoulder. "Who knows?"

"How's Nalini going to react to the pregnancy test and all the rest?" Satan took one look at Sax's grimace and groaned. "Why do I have the feeling the caca's going to hit the fan?"

"The condom I used broke. We visited a doctor yesterday to determine her options, but she's not pregnant. We found that out late last night, but not before I left a prescription for the morning-after pill made out to her name at my pharmacy." Sax closed his eyes and spat out a curse. "I sent the condom to the lab for testing. I'll have to retrieve both items pronto."

"I'll organize that." Satan twisted his lips. "You know that eventually all of this will come out. It might be wise to set Nalini up in a safe house. Devil's place has that guest cottage in the back, and his security is airtight—"

"Not on your life. Devil gets nowhere near her unless I'm there. And she won't go for any sort of safe house. Not right now." Sax straightened. "The hotel will only be safe for a couple of days at max. She can't go back to her parents' condo today."

"Agreed. Haresh was furious yesterday when he discovered Nalini had been held hostage. He wants to forbid her to go back to work."

"The worst possible tactic he could use. All that's going to do is make her dig in her heels. She's determined to remain independent. Hell, she's supposed to take up a new position in Holland in thirteen days." Sax massaged the back of his neck. "She's going to hit the roof."

"And understandably." Satan met his gaze. "You do realize that if Dawir sues the shipping line, she'll probably lose her job. They won't want the publicity. And there's her forged papers."

"That job is her lifeline. She identifies herself so much through it." Sax's stomach soured as he tried to figure out how Nalini would react if she lost the means for her financial independence.

"How do you want to proceed?" Satan flipped a pencil between two fingers.

"I'm going to meet with her parents and brother and outline the situation." Sax linked his hands behind his head and contemplated a cream stain on a white ceiling tile. "Since I'm a friend of the family, the press probably won't make the connection with the Hades Squad for a couple of days. After that the connection will be evident. What we need is our own PR agency to put the spin *we* want on the situation."

"What about Destiny's friend? What's her name again?"

“Jess Blaine.” Sax dragged the memory of Destiny’s maid of honor at the wedding to the forefront of his brain. “Great idea. She thinks out of the box.”

“I’m assuming the squad’s taking the financial hit for the PR?” Satan queried.

“No. I am. Thanks for the offer. I’ll bring Nalini up to speed. Can you take her out for lunch and then to the hotel?”

“Sure. It’ll be a pleasure. I take it you don’t want her left alone,” Satan more stated than asked.

“I’m paranoid. I know it. But I don’t want her left alone.”

As he walked down the corridor after leaving Satan’s office, Sax pondered his options and decided to omit certain aspects of the situation from Nalini for the next twelve hours. Checking his watch he groaned. Eleven thirty. He wouldn’t make the noon meeting on time.

Nalini surprised him yet again.

She listened impassively to the news of Anand’s lawsuit, his leaking her return to the Indian media, and his demands for the pregnancy and virginity tests. Sax kept mum about the threatened suit against her employer and what he intended to tell her father.

“How did my father react to my being kept hostage?” She folded her arms across her chest, that stubborn chin jutting, the mole disappearing as her lips pulled down.

Sax hopped onto the conference table, sitting so he faced her and his thighs aligned with her right hand. “He wants us to provide you with bodyguards.” Sax stifled his mental wince. Not quite the truth, but not a lie either.

Her eyes narrowed, and she studied his features. “That may have been his second option. I’m sure his first was locking me away in some fortress.”

Hard-pressed to curtail his facial expression, he tried to keep his lips from twitching but couldn’t contain a quick grin.

“He did, didn’t he?”

Sax nodded.

“How did Satan talk him out of that?”

“I believe he spoke of your ability to vanish and referred to your disappearance the day of the wedding and after the rescue.”

“And he’s agreed to the bodyguards?”

“Yes. Satan and I came up with a suggestion.”

“What?” Nalini’s eyebrows rose and she shrank back into the chair.

“Hire a PR firm to put the spin we want on the situation,” Sax replied, and he did a double take when she smiled.

“I’ve been thinking about that since you mentioned me learning how to handle the publicity yesterday. I think you’re right.” She leaned forward, and her fingers scraped his jeans.

Temptation reared, and he succumbed, not even trying to control his automatic reaction. Sax captured her hand and placed her palm on his thigh. His half-hard prick went hard before the warmth of her flesh penetrated his jeans.

"You constantly surprise me." He turned over her hand, brought her palm to his mouth, and dropped an openmouthed kiss in the center. "I happen to know a firm that may be suitable. Since the press knows you're here, neither Satan nor I think it's a good idea for you, or any of us, to go near their condo. Your father and brother are meeting me at a restaurant. They'll bring your suitcase. While I meet with them and collect your luggage, Satan's going to give you the contact card for Jess Blaine. Why don't you call her and set up an appointment?"

"That's a good idea." Her lips parted, but she clamped them together without speaking.

"Trust me to handle the situation with your father," he requested. "I promise you that I won't divulge anything you've asked me not to."

"Cross your heart and hope to die?" She flashed him an audacious grin.

"Horrible oath," he muttered. "I must look up the origin. Will my word be enough?"

"Yes." Her smile wobbled a bit. "I have to start somewhere."

He fought the urge to lift her onto his lap. Time and priorities had to be managed.

"I'm late for the meeting with your father, so I'm going to take off." He tongued the underside of her wrist, savoring the way her pulse accelerated under his caress. "I'll bring your suitcase to the hotel as soon as I can."

Deciding to let Satan handle the lunch and transportation to the hotel on his own, Sax cupped her face and kissed her and him senseless. When lurid visions filled his brain, he lifted his head and jumped off the table. Rubbing a thumb over her swollen mouth, he said, his voice husky with lust, "I'll call you," before abruptly marching around the table.

When he reached the doorway, Nalini called out, "Drive carefully."

He shot her a rueful smile over his shoulder. "I have a feeling I'll be saying that phrase a ton of times once you get ahold of that Spyder."

His last image was of her startled chortle and the impish twinkle of her dark eyes.

To avoid going through building security, Sax had arranged the meeting with Nalini's father at 21 Club, a private club frequented by diplomats. He'd requested a separate room, and the maitre d' ushered him to it via a narrow, private entrance.

Haresh and Tarak Marajh were already seated when he walked into the room. Tarak rose immediately and extended his hand.

"I apologize for my tardiness." Sax shook first Tarak's hand and then his father's.

"How is my daughter?" Haresh asked, his stare intent.

“Very resilient, sir, and surprisingly adaptive.”

“Where is my daughter?”

Sax outlined the situation careful to detail the security precautions the squad intended to implement. When he introduced the topic of hiring a PR firm, Tarak’s eyes narrowed, and he addressed his father. “This is precisely what I suggested two years ago. Dad, the publicity is going to happen no matter what we do. We need to be aggressive and control how information is doled out. Anand fully intends to take us to the cleaners for the dowry. He wants control of Nalini’s shares in the bank. You must know that by now.”

Haresh sighed. “I realized that after he refused to agree to a settlement two years ago. He recently had his father declared incompetent. The last straw was this vulgar request to test Nalini’s innocence.” He took a sip of water. “What news of her claim? About these men on the ship?”

“Do you really want to learn the answer to that in a report, sir?” Sax kept his tone even. “May I respectfully suggest that now is the time to ask your daughter what happened face-to-face?”

“Our generation doesn’t discuss these topics.” Haresh rubbed a finger over his temple. “I did Nalini a disservice by allowing her too many liberties.”

“Perhaps, Dad, you didn’t allow her enough liberty,” Tarak interjected. “Nalini’s proved she can forge her own path in the world. You can’t cage a bird who’s tasted freedom. Her spirit will shrivel up and die if you try. We’re living in a world that’s changing at the speed of light. Do you really expect Nalini to still marry Anand?”

“Of course not. We’ve seen his true colors. Am I supposed to let her work on this ship again after what happened?” Haresh shook his head. “It will drive me insane. Worse, your mother will collapse.”

“Sir, I have news that may alleviate that concern. Nalini’s been offered a position at ConoCargo’s headquarters in Harlingen, Holland. She’s due to move there in thirteen days.”

“No,” Haresh snapped, slapping his hand on the table so hard the cutlery jumped and clinked. “I will not have it. She’s just returned to us. Chandani will be devastated.”

“I’ve investigated the company thoroughly.” Sax sought to soothe Haresh’s worries. “Their security is excellent. The population of the town is less than sixteen thousand, and the crime rate’s virtually zero.”

“She doesn’t have to work. I’ll gladly provide a generous allowance. I’ll buy her a condo on Fifth Avenue. She can see her mother every day.” Haresh flipped his napkin onto the table. “I forbid her taking this job.”

“And have her run away again?” Tarak argued. “Dad, all you’ll do if you take that attitude is force her into exile. Even Mom agrees with me on this. Do you know how much she regrets not fighting for Nalini to go to college? Or not listening to her when she wanted to postpone the wedding?”

"I accompanied Nalini for most of yesterday afternoon, and we had dinner together," Sax remarked. "She thoroughly enjoys her job and relishes her financial independence. She wants to work. I did prepare a report of what I've learned with regard to her skills. She *is* a certified Engineer of the Watch." Sax took an envelope from his jacket. "I've detailed the tests she had to take and the qualifications for the job. Her last job review rating was superior. Her supervisors rave about her professionalism. And she's developed a remarkable new hobby. Restoring vintage racing car engines."

Haresh blinked. "Nalini doesn't know how to drive."

"She does now. My car wouldn't start, and she hot-wired it for me." Sax clamped his lips together. He'd slipped with that data burst, and he covered quickly by changing the topic. "Did you bring her suitcase?"

"It's in my trunk," Tarak answered, staring at Sax as if he sported purple spots. "Hot-wired? *I* don't even know how to hot-wire a car."

Meeting the other man's gaze, Sax tipped his head slightly, hoping Tarak would understand his silent communication. To his relief Nalini's brother fell back in his chair and didn't pursue the issue.

"Lorcan is taking Nalini to lunch and then to the hotel. I'm to meet them there with the suitcase. She's registered as a Hades Squad employee under an alias. The contact information's all in the report." He pushed the envelope in Haresh's direction.

"Sax, how do you recommend we visit with her?" Tarak's grim, concerned expression resonated positively with Sax.

"For the next couple of days, I'd suggest using our conference room. The team and I are discussing different options for relocating her, as we fully expect the press to focus on her whereabouts within the next twenty-four hours."

"I can't tell how much we appreciate your efforts." Tarak took a sip of water. "I'm assuming you need to leave?"

"I do. Unless there's something else I can do at the moment..." Sax glanced from Haresh to Tarak and back again. Father and son locked gazes for a few seconds; then Haresh rose and shook Sax's hand.

"Dad, I'll go with Sax to transfer the suitcase. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Once he and Tarak reached the private entrance to the VIP parking lot, Sax asked, "How's your father going to handle the situation?"

"He'll fume and rant for the rest of today, and Mom will calm him down." Tarak grimaced. "Since her nervous breakdown Mom rules the roost. Dad'll fight giving in, but he will. Mom's going to be really upset about Nalini moving to Holland. I have to know, Sax, is she a virgin? The shares Anand's after will reduce my ownership of the family bank to below fifty percent. And if there's a lawsuit, a jury will decide the financial issues. You know how conservative the Indian public is."

“Can I get a copy of the dowry agreement?” Sax countered. “Talk to Nalini. That information’s not mine to divulge. I will tell you that your sister’s the least promiscuous woman I know.”

“What are you not telling me?” Tarak inspected Sax’s neutral features. His eyes widened, and his jaw dropped. “She hot-wired *your* car this morning. I don’t believe it. It’s you. No deck hand, no dozens of men. When? How? What are your intentions toward my sister?”



## Chapter Six

Nalini spent thirty minutes speaking with Jess Blaine, the woman who'd designed a marketing campaign that had skyrocketed *Destiny Driven*, romance author extraordinaire and Sinner's wife, to best-seller lists worldwide. Nalini didn't go into the details of her situation, but Jess grasped the basic issues immediately. The two women agreed to meet in the Hades Squad conference room the following morning.

Satan stuck his head through the doorway. "All done with Jess?"

"Yes."

"Let's go for lunch then." He glanced at his watch. "Just got a text from Sax. He's on his way back, and he'll meet us at the restaurant."

"I need to make one other call first," Nalini murmured. "I'll be five minutes."

"No probs. My office is at the other end of the hallway. Come get me when you're ready." The second he stopped speaking, Satan vanished. He made her nervous with those ferocious black eyes and that voice so sonorous his words echoed in her ears even after silence reigned.

Inhaling deeply, she dialed the condo's phone number, which went straight to voice mail. "Mom, if you're there, please pick up." She knew her father wouldn't have made it back to the condo from the meeting with Sax.

A clacking sound hurt her ears before her mother said, "Nalini? Is that you, darling?"

"Yes, it's me. Mom, can we meet tomorrow? Just the two of us?" Nalini crossed her fingers.

"Of course, child. What time and where?"

"A little tea shop I found here on Long Island. I'll organize the cab for you. When's Dad going in tomorrow?"

"You don't want him to know." She heard Chandani's familiar long-suffering sigh. "I don't like keeping secrets from your father."

"Just this once, Mom. I need to talk to you. Dad's too angry to listen right now."

"He'll be gone before nine, and he's working late. An IOC steering committee meeting. I can meet whenever you want. And Nalini, I've learned to organize my own transportation. Just give me the name and address of the place."

Nalini pulled the phone away from her ear and stared at it. Her mother organized her own transportation? Since when?

"Nalini, are you still there?"

"Yes, Mom." Still stunned from that tidbit of information, Nalini rattled off the address and phone number of Chat Noir, frowning when she heard the familiar clicking of a cell phone coming from the receiver.

"It looks charming, darling. What time should I be there?"

*Huh?* Nalini pulled the phone away from her ear again. *What did Mom say?*

"Nalini? What time?"

"Three thirty?"

"That's fine, darling, and the menu looks absolutely scrumptious. See you tomorrow."

The line went dead, and for a few seconds Nalini couldn't move a limb. It couldn't be. *Mom? With a cell phone? Accessing the Internet?*

Gathering her scattered thoughts and belongings, Nalini met Satan in the hallway and followed him to his car. During the drive, Satan fielded a half dozen calls. She stared at the passing landscape. They pulled up at a log shack located on a tiny inlet facing a spectacular view of a shallow bay with waters more green tinged than blue. She glimpsed Sax leaning on the Audi; he wore a navy jacket, khaki pants, and the crisp white polo shirt from this morning. His lips curved as Satan opened the door for her, and he straightened when they approached.

Her throat went all fluttery, and she couldn't seem to breathe in enough oxygen, because her chest felt like a giant elastic band compressed her lungs. It worried her, this uncontrollable reaction to him, and her greeting was sharper than she intended. "What did my father have to say?"

Instead of answering her query, he grinned, captured her hand, and kissed each fingertip in turn. "I missed you."

Nalini's brain froze, and she couldn't focus on anything but his mouth and the sparks shooting straight to her curling toes. A bird squawked above, she blinked, and a snort at her side broke their connected gaze.

"Bird just shit on your car," Satan quipped in an amusement-laced tone. "But a bomb could've dropped, and the two of you wouldn't have flinched."

"Pay no attention to him. Cynical couldn't begin to describe his outlook on life," Sax declared. He sighed when she glanced at Satan and then swept her eyes to their linked hands. "And yes, he knows about us. Clear case of need to know."

"All of the squad needs to know, Nalini. But I'm the only one who'll know everything."

She whipped around to face Satan, pulling her hands from Sax's. "What do you mean everything?"

"Satan, give us a few," Sax ordered.

"Right," he replied and marched around the Audi.

A fishing boat's engine droned in the distance, the low hum drowning the quiet sounds of nature, the trees swishing in a light breeze, two pelicans cawing to each other, a sudden splash as fish flopped on the bay's surface to avoid a predator.

"I trust Lorcan with my life, Nalini." Sax reached out and ensnared her wrists, tugging her closer. "I can't protect you properly without a backup. If something happens to me, someone needs to step in right away."

"Protect me properly? I don't understand. What is everything?"

"The condom, the forensic tests, the morning-after pill prescription."

She squeezed her eyes shut as mortification coated her tongue in bitterness. "Oh God." Covering her face with her hands, she asked, "How can I ever face Lorcan again?"

His arms hauled her to his hard chest, and he rubbed the small of her back. "He won't judge either of us. Scrap that. He blames me entirely for the condom fiasco. And he's right. I should've shown more control."

"No. It was my fault. I chose you." Nalini's lips quivered as she leaned back to stare at him. "I thought I had changed. That I wasn't the selfish spoiled brat I had been at sixteen. It was so selfish of me to pick you."

"I never want to hear that again," he growled as three deep grooves formed on his forehead. "You may have orchestrated events, but make no mistake, Nalini Marajh—I was absolutely determined to be inside you that night."

"You don't like the idea that I chose you, do you? Why? I thought it would be flattering."

Little lines formed on either side of his mouth when his lips thinned. "Men are hunters by nature," he muttered.

"And what are women by nature?" Her eyebrows winged up. "Docile? Obedient?"

"Stand down, elskling." He softened the order with a wry smile and a brush of his thumb over her lips. "The last words I'd use to describe the adult Nalini Marajh are docile and obedient. Passionate, stubborn as a mule, smart as a whip maybe, but never docile and obedient."

The man had a way of dousing her temper in an instant. She shook her head. "I don't understand how you do that."

"What?"

"Make my brain go mushy," she grumbled, running a finger across the top of the pocket on his shirt.

"I like this. I'm hard, studly, and now I make your brain mushy."

Nalini stared at him, drowning in eyes as deep and blue as the Geirangerfjord she'd first seen as an eleven-year-old while living in Norway.

"What're you thinking? You have the strangest expression on your face," he explained when she frowned in response to his question.

"I was remembering the first time I met you." A smile twitched at the corners of her mouth. "I had never seen eyes so blue they almost looked black, yet still have golden glints in them. Then we went kayaking on the Geirangerfjord, and I stared into the water, and I understood where your eyes came from."

"Not my father?" he asked, his lips curving.

"I made you blush again," she teased, tracing the apple of his cheek. "Your father's eyes are a lighter shade of navy."

He gave her a little shake. "Woman, once and for all, paratroopers don't blush. Understand?"

"If you say so." She snuggled closer and laid her head on his chest.

"Lucifer." Satan's shout came from behind them. "The hours are a-chugging by, and my to-do list is replicating exponentially with each unproductive minute."

Nalini tiptoed and peered around Sax's shoulder. "Is he always so fierce?"

"Actually he's a pussycat. He just doesn't like having his personal space invaded, so he scowls all the time. It works. Not for the women, though. They seem to like the brooding, intense types." He kissed her forehead, placed a palm in the small of her back, and urged her forward.

The interior of the restaurant surprised her. Instead of a tavernlike atmosphere with wooden tables and benches as she expected from an enterprise called Shifty's Eats, the place looked like a cozy reggae bar. Funky lamps shaped like conch shells cradled round pillar candles, and the walls featured oversize photographs of bobsleds.

*Bobsleds?*

Nalini drifted closer to a table near to a window with a view of the narrow sound and studied the framed pictures. Sure enough, bobsleds. She stuck one hand on her hip, squinting at the tiny lettering on the left edge of the photo. She jumped, and her thigh hit the table when Sax's lips tickled her ear. "Sinner's cousin, Shifty, who was on the 2010 Jamaican bobsled team, owns this place."

"You're kidding." Nalini chortled. "There is an actual Jamaican bobsled team? I thought *Cool Runnings* was pure fiction."

"No. Based on fact. And don't make the mistake of starting Shifty on that tack. He can go on for hours." He pulled out a chair for her. "Satan's checking the daily specials."

Nalini read through the menu while they waited for Satan to join them. "It's all Caribbean food. The jerk shrimp looks interesting. How spicy is it?"

"Three levels of heat. Inferno, double inferno, and triple inferno."

"I'm Indian. I love hot and spicy." She sniffed. "And I smell garlic and cinnamon. Two of my favorite spices."

"The fresh fish and chips today is made with haddock," Satan announced as he slumped into the chair opposite Sax.

"I don't know why you bother to check. You always have the same thing," Sax commented. When Nalini raised an eyebrow, he added, "Double order of the jerk pork with cassava fries."

A stocky waitress dressed in a long neon orange and green skirt and a white frilly blouse took their order.

"Nalini, we have a proposition for you," Satan stated as soon as the woman was out of hearing distance. "First, we expect that the press will home in on your connection to us very soon. We'd like to attend your meeting with Jess tomorrow. Your brother, Tarak, will join us as well. We expect to have a proactive publicity campaign in place by end of day tomorrow."

"Planned, not in place," Sax interjected. "It'll take Jess and her team at least three days to assemble all the bits and pieces. While that's happening, we want you unavailable to the media. I've arranged with Trina to borrow her yacht. You and I are going to take a trip down the coast starting the day after tomorrow."

Nalini cringed at the thought of being beholden to the beautiful Trina. She forced herself to concentrate on Sax's plan instead of the beautiful Swede. "My parents aren't going to like this."

"I broached the idea with Tarak, and he's on board." Sax tunneled a hand through his hair.

Nalini went on alert. He only did that when trying to buy time to choose his words.

"Tarak's positive he can convince both your parents of the wisdom of going on the offensive." He met her gaze. "Hear me out before you throw my next suggestion in the flames. Everyone loves a romance. There's nothing more appealing to the public than a secret love. We create a love story between you and me based upon our long-term family connection. We make Dawir the villain."

"Two years ago, you wanted to see if your feelings for me were real and asked to delay the wedding. He refused. You ran away. We stick to the truth, your career on the ship, and use the Hades Squad rescue to reconcile two separated lovers. To preempt Dawir's suit, we announce our engagement at a cocktail party hosted by your parents, to which Dawir's invited."

The air in the restaurant closed in on her, and she scrambled out of the chair. "I need some fresh air." Nalini didn't wait to see their reactions; she sprinted to the door, banged it open, and ran to the end of the deck. Panic had her lungs straining for air; the trees spun until their leaves blurred into a sea of mottled green. Her throat went dry, and no matter how fast she blinked, her eyes wouldn't focus.

Strong arms encircled her. She pounded her fists on Sax's chest. "Let me go. Let me go."

"No." he growled. "You're having an anxiety attack. You're going to hyperventilate." He covered her nose and mouth with a paper bag. She twisted and tried to get free of it. "Listen to me. Breathe on my count. One in, two out. One in,

two out. That's it. One, two. I'll let you go if you promise to keep the bag over your nose and mouth. Do you promise?"

His words gradually penetrated her brain, and she nodded.

Sax let her go slowly, his arms dropped to his side, but he continued to crowd her, and her heart accelerated. He seemed to understand she needed room and stepped back. "Keep the bag in place. I'm going to get you a chair. Lean against the wall."

Slumping into the wood, Nalini kept her eyes closed until she heard his footsteps. He carried a wicker chair with a high peacock-fan back. After he set it down and checked that the feet didn't wobble, he cupped her arm and helped her into it. A shadow fell across her legs, and she glanced up to see Satan holding two tumblers, one large, one small.

"Brandy first, then the carbonated water." He stooped. "Trees vertical yet?"

So stunned that her giddiness subsided at once, Nalini slipped the bag from her nose and mouth, and she stared into Satan's obsidian eyes. "How did you know?"

"A while back I was in an Afghan prison cell that measured four feet all around. They let me out twice a day. After I was rescued, elevators brought on anxiety attacks. To this day I can't abide dark, enclosed spaces. How many attacks have you had?"

"This is number three. I had the first one on the day of the wedding when I smelled the lilies in my bouquet and I remembered my grandmother's funeral. She loved lilies. I had never seen a dead person before. I knew that if I married Anand, I would be the living dead."

"And number two?" She hadn't realized that Satan was holding her hand until he squeezed her fingers. "Drink this now. One shot."

Taking the glass from him, she blurted, "When I was in the cargo hold hiding from the pirates."

"Drink up." He guided her hand to her mouth. She downed the shot and coughed a couple of times as the liquor licked a path of fire down her throat. "The darkness?"

"No. The rats," she replied. "I could hear them scurrying around. I was so afraid to fall asleep. I didn't know if they'd have rabies." She tried to smile. "By the end I had convinced myself I had the plague."

"It goes away in time. You have to figure out the triggers. Here, sip the water now. I added a dash of Angostura bitters to it. It's a West Indian remedy for any stomach ailment." He handed her the tumbler. "The whole thing now. Take your time."

"Thank you." She glugged down half the glass. The fizzy liquid eased the dry burning in her throat. "What did you mean by triggers?"

"What is it that triggers an attack?" Satan shot her a wry smile. "I'd never keep a chest or a freezer that can be locked from the outside in my house. Or our offices. Or any place I want to be comfortable."

"But there's nothing similar about any of the times it's happened." Nalini searched her mind. "There were no lilies in the cargo hold, and there were no rats in the funeral home."

"You went dead white when I mentioned announcing our engagement." Sax spoke for the first time since Satan had appeared. "And you look now like you're about to empty your stomach. I believe your trigger is a feeling of being trapped. By the way, it's a fake, temporary engagement. No marriage. No commitment. A media stunt—nothing more."

Nalini couldn't meet his gaze. Instead she studied the cracks in the wooden flooring.

"Never had a woman have a panic attack at the thought of marrying me before," Sax murmured. "An experience I'd prefer not to repeat."

"Stifle it, Sax. She doesn't need that now. Deal with it," Satan barked.

She felt bereft when Satan gave her fingers a last squeeze, stood, muttered something in a language she didn't recognize to Sax, and walked to the restaurant's entrance.

Nalini couldn't think of a single thing to say, and the strained silence grated on her nerves. She drank the rest of the water, scraped at a pen stain on her dress with a fingernail, and then straightened the hem of her sweater.

"Don't move an inch. I'll be right back," Sax commanded.

She didn't answer and didn't look up. The door banged in the distance, and the stillness of the air made her lift her head. Thunderclouds had rolled in. Big waves of black covered the sky in great swaths, and the sun's rays strained to penetrate the thickness of low-level nimbostratus. A fat raindrop hit her nose, and she flinched.

*Why does the thought of being engaged make me want to climb out of myself? Is the feeling of being trapped really triggering my panic attacks?*

The door squeaked, and Sax stalked her way. "It's going to storm. We need to get you to the hotel right away."

"I understand."

"Here's your purse and your sunglasses."

"Thank you." She slung the tote over one shoulder and tucked the glasses in the V of her sundress. "Where's Satan?"

"He'll make his own way back." Sax cupped her elbow and guided her down the four stairs.

Once they were settled in the Audi, Sax tuned the radio to CNN and set the volume to a level that didn't encourage conversation. Nalini fiddled with the tote's buckle while sweeping him surreptitious side-glances. His stern profile proved

foreboding, and she couldn't discern from the set of his mouth if he was pissed at her or not.

"I can't control it, you know," she blurted after ten minutes had elapsed.

"Is the thought of appearing with me in public so terrible?" His tone was gruff, and he didn't look her way.

"It's not you—"

"Right," he growled.

"It isn't. I agreed to us being together, didn't I?" Nalini protested.

"And insisted on secrecy," he retorted. "Mixed signals again, Nalini."

Nalini wanted to hit him hard. "How many relationships have you had, Sax?"

"Why?"

"Just answer the blasted question," she demanded and cuffed the leather purse in her lap.

"Maybe a dozen." His tone had changed from fury clipped, and he looked at her for the first time since they began the journey. Gearing down, he pulled over onto the shoulder, turned off the ignition, and turned to her. "And this is your first. First everything."

Reaching over he unsnapped her seat belt and hauled her into his lap. "My bad. I keep forgetting the cultural divide between us." Framing her face with his big warm palms, he said, "Think about the plan. It covers all the angles, and one advantage I didn't point out in front of Satan is that it gives *us* a reason to see each other. We're talking less than thirteen days in total before you leave for Harlingen. The physical distance once you've relocated gives us an excuse to taper things off without much of a fuss."

*He doesn't want to see me once I leave.* Nalini fixed her eyes on his square jaw. *What a ninny. I'm the one making a fuss about no commitment.*

She forced her thoughts to the practical. "What about my parents and yours?" she asked, a tad distracted by the way he smelled of rain, aftershave, and soap.

"Everyone will know the plan, and everyone has to agree to it. Otherwise it won't work."

Rain pounded on the roof of the car, and both of them glanced outside at the same time. Lightening cracked and thunder boomed, the two startling noises mere seconds apart. In the distance white light dazzled the creeping darkness ahead. Another jagged fork split the sound barrier, the slash of lightning maybe about hundred yards away. Nalini flinched.

"It's a nor'easter," Sax stated. He quickly returned Nalini to her seat. "Buckle up, elskling. The roads are going to be wiped out soon."

Nalini was tight-lipped by the time they neared the village. Visibility dropped exponentially with each half mile they traversed, flooded corners had cars starting and stopping erratically, and three times Sax avoided being rear-ended by climbing



the edges of empty sidewalks. His razor-sharp reflexes and driving skills had her sucking in her cheeks as he wound through the narrow streets of the town.

"My house is two minutes away from here, Nalini, and I have your suitcase in the trunk—"

"Go for it." Nalini rushed out. "The closer the better."

They pulled into the garage to a barrage of lightning flashes followed by the roar of rolling thunder mingled with splinters of sound, as if tree branches had fractured. Sax left the garage door open to retrieve her suitcase from the trunk. She winced when a fierce gust shot right to left, and a torrent of rain soaked him from head to toe.

The garage light dimmed, fizzled, and went out.

"Shit," Sax growled as he heaved the luggage above his head, consumed the distance to the laundry room door, dumped the suitcase, and made his way unerringly to where she stood trying to adjust to the darkness. "Are you okay?"

She heard the urgency in his voice and realized he feared another panic attack. "I'm fine. Just can't see a thing."

"The electricity's gone. I don't have a backup generator installed yet." He curled an arm around her waist, and his wet pants dripped a minishower over her left sandal. "You're freezing." He rubbed her arms.

Nalini burst out laughing. "You're the one who's soaked to the bone. I'm warm and dry compared to you. Don't you dare worry about me. Point me in the direction of the toolbox. I saw two flashlights in there."

He fumbled to find her chin, and his lips bussed halfway between her nose and her ear. "That's the spirit."

Once Sax led her to the chest, a quick scramble in a drawer produced a neon orange flashlight and another smaller one.

While Nalini aimed the light on the door, Sax used a penknife of some sort to unscrew the digital lock cover, did something to two wires, and the back door popped open. She focused the wide beam of light on the laundry area.

"I'll show you where the candles and emergency supplies are, and then I have to go close the garage door."

"I can manage fine, Sax. I promise you I'm not going to have another panic attack." She shoved his shoulder. "Go do the door, and I'll hunt for candles."

For a second, he said nothing, but simply stared at her.

"Something wrong?"

"As I said before"—his damp finger brushed her cheek—"a beguiling conundrum."

Nalini thanked the gods for the dimness, which hid the color scaling her cheeks. She resorted to making light of the situation. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

While Sax struggled with the garage door, Nalini searched the fireplace and discovered an old-fashioned cylinder of long matches. She found and lit eleven candles and divided them so the kitchen and great room were evenly illuminated. The temperature had dropped significantly, and the laundry door slammed shut as a whoosh of ice-laden air raced through the rooms. Flames dipped, bent precariously, and righted a tad less brilliant than before.

Bumping sounds came from the laundry room, and Nalini called out, "Did you get it shut?"

"Yeah." Sax's voice came from behind her, and she jumped and spun around, clamping her hand to her chest. "You have to stop doing that, Sax Anders. My heart can't take it."

Her eyes widened, and her jaw dropped to her knees, or so it felt.

Sax stood there, glorious chest bared, one too-small towel slung loosely around his hips, damp hair kissing his shoulders, the picture of a Norse warrior of yore. Nalini licked her lips as twin beads of rain trickled past his nipple. Of its own volition, her hand rose to swipe at the moisture. His skin burned with cold; she yelped and dropped her hand.

"You're absolutely frozen, Sax. Go have a hot shower right away, or else you'll catch a cold. I'll make sandwiches."

His lips curved. "I'm Norwegian, Nalini. We don't catch colds." With that pronouncement he swiveled and ambled down the hallway. She watched him until he disappeared around the corner, admiring his powerful legs.

Nalini hummed as she waited for Sax's return, smiling at his remark about Norwegians not catching colds. Really, was the man that macho? The pipes went silent, and she tensed, knowing he'd be in the room soon.

"It's your turn, Nalini." Sax's raised voice came from a few feet away. She twisted from her position at the sink, crossed one ankle over the other, and drank in the sight of him. He wore a white sweatshirt, jogging pants, and his feet were bare. "There should be enough hot water for a quick shower."

He brushed his lips over her forehead. "I found a couple of lanterns in my bedroom and set them up in yours. Your suitcase is there too. Go take advantage of the hot water."

"Funny the way fate works." Tiptoeing, one hand pressed to his rigid pectorals, the other curled around his neck, she nibbled his bottom lip.

"Fate?"

His hands cupped her rear end, and in the mellow candlelight, his irises reflected more gold flecks than normal. "I *am* staying with you." His nostrils flared, and the rigid arousal teasing her skin made her belly ripple. "I'll be back in five."

Exuberance flowed to her feet, and she did a couple of hip-hop moves on the way to her room.

"I remember those moves from El Meson." Sax's playful shout reached her at the doorway.

She grabbed the door frame, balanced on one foot, and poked her head out. "FYI, I was dancing flamenco, not hip-hop, at El Meson. We'll have to work on improving your dance vocabulary. I love to dance."

She giggled at his pained expression and remembered his stiffness on the dance floor.

Nalini dressed in the sweats and another borrowed graphic T, but even with the fire, the temperature was too cold for her to go barefoot, so she rummaged through his sister's clothing until she found a pair of socks. The great room, when she reentered, smelled of pine.

"Perfect timing," Sax murmured, his glance sweeping from her sock-covered feet to her damp hair.

They ate PB&J sandwiches before a roaring fire and sipped on a Dancing Bull merlot Sax had opened.

After dinner Sax went to the laundry room and returned with a sleeping bag.

"I don't know how far the temperature will drop tonight. Our best bet for staying warm is sleeping here in front of the fire."

"That makes sense." She eyed the rolled-up sleeping bag.

His blue eyes danced. "Body heat."

"Sax...you." She ducked her chin. "I mean...the timing still isn't..."

He joined her on the floor, his long legs encircling her body. "Shush, babe. Don't get all embarrassed and tense. I know how things stand. I have to admit this storm's been very fortuitous. As you said earlier, fate—you're staying with me. Now woman, help me roll this out. You take the other end."

"I've never been camping," Nalini admitted. "I guess you've done it a lot."

"Rite of passage in Norway. Clean toothbrush and paste in the bathroom off the laundry. I'll get the pillows in the meantime."

The great room was empty when Nalini returned. Her nerves had her hopping from one foot to another, and on impulse, she decided to be proactive and scurried into the sleeping bag. Sax's whistling preceded his entrance, and her shoulders hunched as she tried to burrow into the far side of the fabric.

He slipped into the sleeping bag effortlessly, with none of the awkwardness she'd exhibited. A cloud of warmth, aftershave, and soap cocooned her when his arms tugged her close to spoon. Her bottom encountered his erection, and she attempted to inch away to ease his discomfort.

"No, elskling. I need you close." His breath tickled her ear.

"It can't be comfortable," she whispered.

"Comfortable, no. Any place I'd rather be? No."

He kissed her nape, and a delicious shiver coasted up to her scalp.

"Why did you choose lilies for the wedding if they reminded you of your grandmother's funeral?"

She stiffened, uncurling, but Sax hauled her back, his arm tagging her waist.

“Forget I even asked that. This is our first night together. No pressures.”

*He always knows the right words.*

Nalini’s muscles relaxed, and she blew out a long sigh. “I didn’t choose them. My future mother-in-law did. I wanted daisies. She said they were too pedestrian and that the family would be embarrassed.”

“Who paid for the wedding?”

“Anand insisted on having a huge western-style reception before the traditional three days of the Hindu ceremony. He paid for the former; we paid for the latter.”

His fingers combed through her hair rhythmically, the caress so soothing her eyelids drooped.

“Then I say it’s dammed fortuitous that the reception came first.”

A smile lifted the corners of her lips and her lids became too heavy to keep open. “Fate,” she murmured and scooted closer to his warmth.

“Fate,” he repeated and sniffed. “What is it your hair smells of?”

“Rosemary,” she mumbled.

When his fingers gently massaged her scalp, she purred and succumbed to the dream team.

## Chapter Seven

The storm raged until four in the morning. Sax built up the fire and checked doors and locks twice. After Nalini's breathing evened out around midnight, he communicated with Satan via radio. According to Satan, who had a working generator, the meteorologists predicted the nor'easter would flood most of Long Island's rural roads.

When he slipped back into the sleeping bag for the last time, he relaxed, and, not wanting to disturb Nalini's sleep, he loosely curled his arm around her waist. If only he'd known. Her bottom followed his groin like a heat-seeking torpedo, and he got a kick out of putting distance between their spooned bodies and watching her scoot closer and closer until she was back right where she belonged.

Close to dawn, she mumbled something he couldn't make out, flipped over onto her back, and flung her hands over her head. The move showcased the perfect shape of her breasts, and he knew from the way they mounded she hadn't worn a bra. He couldn't choke back a groan.

Her eyelids fluttered, the thick fringe of sooty lashes heightening the olive hue of her cheeks.

He crooked one elbow under his head to better observe her.

*You are so beautiful. And so naive.*

*And I'm dancing to my cock.*

Pursuing her meant disaster of the worst interpersonal kind, involving interconnected families. Still, the plan they'd concocted provided perfect cover for their brief relationship.

*So why am I ticked she had a panic attack at the thought of marrying me?*

She made him feel alive again. Adrenaline sizzled through his veins every time he thought of her, pictured her, remembered the feel of her, the taste of her, the smell of her. He glared at his rampant arousal.

When was the last time he hadn't been able to control his cock? That final raid in Afghanistan. He'd spent the three days of R&R after the raid gorging on sex. Battle lust. Easily sated. Easily explained.

Passion had been sorely lacking in his life for some time. One-night stands had long ceased to have any appeal. For the past eighteen months, he'd been more apt to relieve himself unless Trina was immediately available. And when Trina had popped by yesterday, all he'd wanted to do was hustle her out before Nalini cottoned on to their relationship.

*Yeah right. No save there.*

Nalini, eyes closed, stretched her fingers and made that purring sound that sent his prick into ecstatic jerks and twitches. Her lips curved into a smile he wanted to drink in, and she purred again.

*When was the last time I woke up smiling?*

Her lids inched open. She wrinkled her nose, blinked when she saw him, and turned on her side to face him, one hand under her cheek. "I had the most delicious sleep. Did you?"

*Delicious. Pussy. Nipples. Ass.*

"Sure. Delicious."

Hair tousled, cheeks all peachy from the fire's warmth, she radiated happiness, her eyes dancing with sheer joie de vivre. "I dreamed of you."

His cock roared to life.

"I started reading these erotic romances on the ship," she muttered, her eyes focused on his neck.

His balls drew up tighter than fists, and his vocal cords closed house.

"I...I know we can't—yet." Her nostrils flared, her throat worked, and when she met his gaze head-on, a muscle jumped below eyes wider than a startled fawn's. "Can I taste you?"

The room reeled. He snagged her wrists as she inserted a finger into his pants waistband.

"I'm on a hair trigger, Nalini." The hoarse, growled words crackled like static electricity, hissing and spitting in the muted silence. "This isn't how I'd planned our next time."

"Do you know how many nights I've lain awake fantasizing about you? Wondering what you'd feel like, how you'd taste?" Color raced across her face. The lust he felt must have been obvious, for Nalini grinned, partially unzipped her side of the sleeping bag, and pushed the material away. Dragging the waistband of his sweats down, she reached for his cock and unerringly found the slick underside that always set him off. Her forefinger trailed the crown's circumference, and when she leaned on one elbow, bent her head, and licked the slit, Sax shuddered. "What drives you insane?"

*I'm going to blow the second she sucks me.*

Every muscle in his body knitted, and he surrendered, the nickname given him by the squad wickedly reversed by the tempting, irresistible Nalini Marajh. "You don't have to do this."

"I want to, Sax, so very much." Her black pupils merged with the lighter irises, and she wagged her eyebrows. Mischief curved her mouth into that saucy Santa Fe smile that haunted his first thoughts in the mornings. "Help me get these off." She tugged the sweatpants, he lifted his hips, and she wriggled until she disappeared

under the half-open sleeping bag. His eyes crossed when she nuzzled his groin, then stuck her tongue into his navel.

*I'm fucked.*

She alternated kisses from one thigh to another as she worked the pants off his legs, and kissed one instep before sliding the material free of his feet.

"You have beautiful feet." Her muffled voice was pure manna to his lust-hazed brain.

His last effort at gallantry detonated like a C4 explosive charged with nitro. Sax balled his hands into fists, jammed them under his head, focused on the ceiling tiles, and began counting the tiny aerator holes in the cream square above. Sweat collected on his forehead. The urge to direct her, to get that hot mouth on his cock, had him seeing black spots.

Her fingers encircled the base of his prick, and she stroked him with the other, her hold too light, too agonizing, the worst torture he'd ever borne. Her tongue flicked across his cockhead, his vision went out of focus, and he choked back a groan.

When she parted her lips and sucked the whole crown into that moist, tight mouth, flames licked his testicles, and a spurt of precum sent fire and ice the whole length of his cock. It was the worst blowjob in the world. She couldn't find a rhythm, starting and stopping, trying a few short strokes, then long ones, then fast, then slow, and she brought him to the edge repeatedly.

His body jerked and twitched to her command, his cock preening, balls blued into hard rocks and ramming into a groin so over sensitized he had to bite his tongue to contain the primal howl building at the base of his vocal cords.

She lapped him, finding that spot on the ridge of the head that made the blood sing in his veins. His hips wrenched off the sleeping bag when she took one testicle into her mouth and slowly traced the circumference.

"Nalini," he croaked as perspiration drenched every inch of flesh.

For a second, her hands and mouth fell away. Sax prayed for deliverance, for the return of her tongue and fingers. She poked her head from under the sleeping bag, kicked and shoved at the blankets, and straddled him, hair gloriously tousled, cheeks flushed, a wild glint in her eyes, and she stared at his cock, licking her lips.

He grasped her hands, wound them around his on-fire cock, and guided her into motion, afraid to let go—afraid not to, the visual of their joined hands, her teeth worrying a swollen lip, too much, too soon, too little, too intense.

He roared her name as the torturous release ripped through him, bunching every muscle tauter than a predator coiled to strike. His orgasm racked shudders from scalp to toes, and his eyes crossed again, dark spots numbing thought as his sperm spurted hot on his groin.

In the sweetest gesture he'd ever encountered in his short life span, she set about cleaning the semen off his half-hard cock and belly. The lithe licks wrenched a jolted aftershock through his body.

"No, elskling," he murmured, his voice hoarser than a frog with the flu. He slotted one eye open to find her watching him intently. Chin propped in both hands, feet facing the ceiling, the tentative question in her eyes, the hint of insecurity in her rapid blinking, had him hauling her on top of him.

"What's the verdict?" He outlined her mouth, pausing to trace the heart mole.

He felt her weight sinking into his chest, and the long sighs she blew out as she relaxed comforted him. She pursed her mouth, tilted her head, and said, "Undecided. Practice is needed, I believe."

"Best blowjob in the universe," he quipped, acknowledging that such a thing existed, the best and the worst all wrapped into one tongue, one mouth, one woman. His woman.

"You'll tell me if I do something wrong?"

Sax hated the sad little apologetic grimace that punctuated Nalini's query. He didn't hesitate, simply tilted her head back for a quick kiss. "Impossible for you to do anything wrong."

She retreated from the physical contact and sat back on her haunches. "I didn't do it right at the end."

Sax captured one hand and tugged her across his chest. "Stay."

Her lips pursed. "Stay? Am I a dog?"

"Not a dog. My personal pet." Her eyebrows slashed together, and when she tried to roll off him, he snagged his arm around her waist. "I'm teasing you. Where did that saucy attitude from Santa Fe go?"

A whiff of her Shalimar perfume drifted to his nose when she rested her palms on his sweatshirt, the action so tentative and slow, he held his breath until her hands stilled after testing a couple of positions. She peeked at him. "What?"

He repeated the question.

"Tequila courage," she answered.

"You can't be comfortable in that position. Here." He arranged her so she could prop her chin on her linked hands. "Better?"

"Weird."

Sax was certain he'd heard incorrectly. "Weird?"

"Until that night in Santa Fe, no one had touched me in twenty-three months. I mean, other than shaking hands." Nalini spoke to his ribs. "I'd forgotten how it felt."

Her words made his chest ache. "You didn't have any friends?"

"I couldn't really talk a lot about myself." She picked at a stray thread sticking up from his sweater. "The men were mostly in their fifties and all were very kind. They sort of adopted me, but they kept their distance."

"How on earth did you end up on a cargo ship?"



Unable to resist the lure of her tresses splayed over his sweatshirt, he picked up a handful of the thick locks and brought them to his nose. Rosemary smelled tangy and fresh.

"It's a long tale."

"We have the time." Sax massaged her deltoid, and she tilted her head to the side, giving him better access.

Watery sunlight made a halfhearted attempt to lift the shadows in the room. The logs had burned to coals, the disintegrating wood dark and gray and interspersed with yellow and orange glowing bark. Only a hint of the sweet pine from last night lingered in the warmed great room. The birds hadn't begun their morning conversational quarrels, and the only sounds were the occasional pop and crack from the dying fire.

Applying slight pressure in his kneading of her shoulder muscles, he soon had her lying with her cheek resting on his chest, facing him, although she held herself stiffly.

"You don't have to answer any of my questions." Satan had to debrief her before ConoCargo would let her back on the job, so Sax knew he would eventually learn the whole story.

"I took a cruise to New Zealand when I ran away. Everyone knew I always got seasick, so I figured it would be the last place they'd search." She stared at the cusp of his shoulder. "I met a few of the crew during our first stop. One, the only executive crewmember, was a woman from Norway. I told her I'd gone to school there. We started talking, and I asked about jobs. She offered to help me, but I didn't want a cruise-ship job—too chancy. I found out later on that she'd started in cargo."

"And you don't consider her a friend?" Sax continued to massage her deltoids. Every time he hit a sweet spot, she let out an almost imperceptible sigh and sank more onto his chest.

"Sort of. We're great e-mail buddies, and I'm very grateful to her for recommending me for the apprenticeship, but we work completely different schedules and regions. I think I've seen her three times since the cruise."

"Weren't you lonely?" Like most Norwegians he relished interacting with people of all classes, colors, and races. Inveterate roaming and socializing were built into the Nordic psyche.

"More scared than lonely at first. Most meals are eaten in shifts, so you're always sitting across the table from a different crewmember. And we all work in teams. I had forged papers, and I was always in disguise."

"Where'd you get the papers?" He twined a curl around his finger.

"Believe me, it wasn't difficult in Bangkok. You can get anything you want there. Since I was an apprentice, I worked with three team leaders for the first six months. Until you pass a series of tests, you're not allowed to work alone."

A sudden hum crashed into the silence.

Nalini's eyes widened, and she jerked away from him.

Sax cupped her cheek. "The electricity's back." Though he hated to curtail this sweet slice of intimacy, they both had a packed schedule today.

"The sun's shining." Nalini pushed off his chest and peered at the grime-crusted window. "Is that mud on the glass?"

"Yep. I want to make a quick assessment of the damage to the property. Why don't you get ready?" Sax lurched to his feet and offered a hand to Nalini. He pulled her to her feet. "We'll grab breakfast in town unless you're ravenous."

"I can wait."

They made better time than Sax expected and were on the road by ten after nine. He kept the car in low gear for the first two miles driving on the slick, debris-coated roads.

"How bad was the damage?" They'd had no time to talk between waking and leaving.

"Broken branches and a lot of mud everywhere. All in all not too bad."

"I'm glad. You have a lovely home. If I could've, I would've have stayed until I have to leave for Harlingen." She said the words so softly and shyly, he wanted to growl.

Sax gritted his teeth, he so wanted to yield to the temptation not to spoil their blossoming trust and camaraderie. But he had to stick to the plan. "What time is the meeting with Jess Blaine?"

"Ten. I must admit I'm interested in hearing her spin on the situation."

"Jess, Satan, and I brainstormed and came up with the plan we discussed at lunch yesterday." Sax didn't have to look at her to know she was pissed. She'd crossed her legs, and her elevated foot jerked and jabbed, the cutout sandals she wore slashing vibrant purple circles.

"And why wasn't I part of this?" she growled.

*Because then I'd have to tell you that Tarak was the one who suggested the idea.*

Of course her brother had ulterior motives.

*As do I.*

"It was a spontaneous thing. Jess called me to get more of a background on your family." Thank God he never relied on ad-libbing. "Satan called, and I put him on hold, or I thought I had. One thing led to another, and before we knew it, we had the outline of a plan."

*Fuck, how am I going to fix this later on?*

He repressed a sigh. When she'd come out of the guest bedroom, his prick had wept with joy.

She was dressed in a royal purple suit that must have been tailor made for her. Nipped at the waist, the rich silk dress had a square neckline, and the bodice

clung to her full breasts. The skirt skimmed her luscious hips and twirled around her long legs to end in a wide diameter midcalf. A short fitted jacket and four-inch strappy stilettos completed the outfit. The rich color brought out the sun-kissed auburn strands in her mahogany hair, and the ends curled the undersides of her breasts.

"Why didn't you tell me this last night?" Her foot hadn't stopped its angry dance. She straightened. "You deliberately didn't tell me. You wanted to soften me up with all your concern and your questions. Why? So I'd agree to this plan? Well, maybe I have a plan of my own."

"You're right. I chose not to tell you." He deliberately used her words for the night in Santa Fe. "After your reaction to the plan at Shifty's yesterday and knowing about the panic attack in the darkness of the cargo hold. I decided to wait until this morning. We were out of electricity and in the middle of a nor'easter. Put yourself in my place. What would you have done?"

She ignored his question for the five miles they crawled around the wreckage littering the roadway.

Out of the blue Nalini stated, "You could have told me first thing this morning."

"Believe me, this morning I had other things on my mind. As you well know."

Sax geared down as they approached the turn for the building that housed their offices.

The second he yanked the hand brake, she exited the car.

Sax followed her into the building at a leisurely pace, and his mood soured when he glimpsed a swirl of purple as the door to the emergency stairs did a slo-mo close. For a second he stared at the door.

"Oh no, elskling. You don't get away with that." Breaking into a sprint, he traced her path, taking the stairs three at a time. His booted pounding echoed in the narrow stairwell. He caught up with her on the second-floor landing. She was fumbling with the door and sending fast over-the-shoulder darts in his direction.

Nalini's hands dropped to her sides, she lifted her chin, but the telltale pulse in the hollow of her throat and her quivering mouth gave away her fear.

Disgusted with himself, his temper dissipating, Sax flipped the lock on the bar handle and opened the door for her. "Elevator's to the right."

He waited until she was in the building corridor, closed the door, and trudged up the rest of the stairs. Where had his iron discipline gone? He had scared her. And as she so aptly pointed out, this was her first relationship.

First.

Refusing to consider the possibility of a second, far less a third, he took a few deep breaths before entering the third floor and bumping into Jess Blaine.

"Lucifer. How are you?"

“Good to see you again, Jess.” He kissed her on the cheek, as always surprised at how the woman smelled and looked like the girl next door. The perfume she always wore had a spring aroma, green grass and flower buds. Though she favored designer duds, her peaches-and-cream complexion seemed soap fresh, and her lips, her best feature, looked like cotton candy puffs, soft and mouthwatering, according to Devil, anyway.

“I’m looking forward to meeting your Nalini.” Jess shifted the iPad she carried to her other hand.

“Do me a favor and don’t say that in front of her—the ‘my’ part that is,” Sax suggested. “I should warn you that Nalini hasn’t agreed to the plan. She was expecting—”

“To propose a plan of my own,” Nalini stated, her voice coming from behind.

Sax rolled his eyes. Would nothing go right today? “Nalini Marajh, meet Jessica Blaine, Jess, Nalini.”

After their murmured exchange of pleasantries, Jess addressed Nalini. “Did you have this plan in mind when we talked yesterday?”

“I’ve been tossing an idea around for a couple of hours.” Nalini didn’t so much as glance his way. “I believe everyone’s waiting for us in the conference room.”

He waved the two women ahead and followed them down the hallway.

Tarak greeted his sister with a bear hug and swept her off her feet.

Nalini laughed and pushed her hands against his chest. “I’m too old and too tall for this now.”

Tarak set her down and tweaked her nose. “You’ll never be too old or too tall, *dilruba*.”

Nalini threw her arms around Tarak’s neck. “I missed you so.”

Satan, who had taken a seat at the far end of the circular conference table, cleared his throat.

Sax waited for the siblings to sit and took the chair adjacent to Nalini’s.

Devil sauntered in but halted at the door.

Jess chose a seat one down from Satan.

Shooting Sax a wink and a grin, Devil occupied the spare chair between Satan and Jess. Poor Devil had the hots for Jess, and she didn’t seem the slightest bit interested.

“Did everyone go through my e-mail?” Satan asked.

“What e-mail?” Nalini glanced at Sax.

“We didn’t have electricity last night. *I* haven’t received an e-mail.” Sax glared at Satan.

“Here,” Jess said, sliding her iPad across the table. “It’s on the screen.”

Nalini read the screen in silence, then shifted in her seat and slid the iPad to Sax.

Sax devoured the contents quickly. "Thank you," he said, returning the iPad to Jess.

"Let's begin," Satan said. "Devil, dim the lights."

Once darkness prevailed and the built-in PC projector hummed to life, four points appeared on the wall opposite Satan.

- 1. Break the dowry agreement*
- 2. Present our version of the events to the media before Dawir presents his*
- 3. Ensure Dawir's lawsuit does not tie up Nalini's shares in the family bank re voting rights.*
- 4. Get public opinion on our side*

"Any issues with these?" Satan tapped the ever-present pencil he usually twiddled on the table. "Speak up, either yes or no. Start clockwise."

"No," Devil replied.

When nays had been cast by everyone, Satan continued, "The next screen shows how we plan to achieve each goal."

- 1. Leak rumors of a secret love immediately*
- 2. Nalini and Lucifer disappear to buy us time to get all our ducks in a row*
- 3. Haresh and Chandani send out invites to a party celebrating Nalini's return*
- 4. Lucifer and Nalini announce their engagement at the party*
- 5. Immediate leaks about the parents' approval of the future son-in-law, Sax*

"We'll also suggest Dawir wouldn't allow Nalini to have a career. The whole macho-living-in-the-past image." Jess grinned. "There are so many nuances we can bring up that'll make him appear a horrifying villain. Without linking to him directly, I'll have numerous reports highlighted in the media. This is going to be fun, and by the end, Dawir will be totally vilified."

"Jess will e-mail a schedule detailing the different leaks and releases. Nalini's uncle, the famous Bollywood producer, has a movie in the final stages that will make *Slum Dog Millionaire* look like a box-office error. He's advanced the marketing campaign for the movie to the week after the cocktail party. What this will do is take the focus off Nalini in India entirely."

"We're assuming that when Nalini leaves for Harlingen to take up her new position, the media will lose interest. In Europe Nalini's not a big deal. In India she is because of her family and her now ex-fiancé." Sax gritted his teeth when the pencil Nalini twirled cracked in two.

“ConoCargo hates this sort of publicity. Is there any way we can unlink the missing-heiress headlines from two years ago to my being employed by ConoCargo?” As usual, Nalini couldn’t speak without using her hands, and she bumped Sax’s shoulder as she twisted in the other direction. The contact went to his groin, and he had to clench his jaw when his prick danced in anticipation.

“I’ll have to think about how to handle that.” Jess pursed her mouth. “There’s no way we can prevent the media from resurrecting the past or ConoCargo from being mentioned, but we can lead them in other directions.”

“Are we all agreed, then?” Satan’s gaze swept the table. “Votes all around.”

“Before we vote,” Nalini said. “First, I’d like to thank all of you for coming together to help me. I’d like to make one change.”

One by one every muscle in Sax’s body knitted.

“What change?” Satan assumed his bland poker expression and stilled all movement.

“Substitute Devil in Lucifer’s role, and I’m on board. Otherwise I’m not.”

Devil, who had been drinking a glass of water, spewed liquid across the table.

Sax barely managed to suppress a roar. The fires of hell roasted his forehead. *Devil? Devil spending three days on a yacht with Nalini? Over my dead body.*

“No.” He managed to keep his voice to a shout, and the only physical evidence he intended to strangle Devil in the next ten seconds was his fist banging on the table. “No.”

“Let’s not overreact,” Jess said, her tone soothing and tranquil. “Nalini, what’s your thinking behind substituting Devil for Lucifer?”

“My parents and Lucifer’s parents have been friends for decades. Lucifer’s father is up for the position of Chairman of the IOC. The publicity could negatively affect his chances of obtaining the position,” Nalini explained. “The secret-love aspect could be changed from knowing each other from childhood to hostage falls in love with rescuer. That happens all the time, and when the engagement is broken off by mutual agreement, it won’t be unexpected.”

Across the table, Devil opened his mouth. Sax shot him a look worthy of a strike from Lucifer’s famous fork, and he closed his trap instantly.

She’d called him Lucifer. Twice. “Out. Everyone.”

At once, Satan, Devil, and Tarak vaulted out of their chairs, with Jess two seconds behind them. The door banged shut fifteen seconds later.

“Why?” He couldn’t look at her.

“I gave my reasons,” she replied, her voice wavering on the last word.

“No, Nalini. The real reason.” He shoved the chair back, turned hers, and hauled her into his lap. “Look me in the eye and tell me the real reason.”

Her breathing hitched, but she kept her head bowed.

"Elskling?" He cupped her face, but she focused on a spot to the left of his shoulder. Her skin was clammy. His hand slid to her collarbone, and he rested his thumb on the pulse point at the base of her neck, testing the beat—accelerated but not to the point of danger. He massaged her nape. "Why?"

She squeezed her eyes shut. "My parents will think you're the perfect son-in-law. I don't want to be married, period. I don't want to be engaged. I want to be free."

He'd figure that much after her panic attack at Shifty's, and in the wee sleepless hours of the morning had formulated a response. Shit, but she'd surprised him with the Devil substitution.

"We'll draw up a contract specifying a beginning and ending date for the engagement, a *legal* binding contract. In addition, if it's worth anything, I'll also give you my word that within a month of your being in Harlingen, I'll end the engagement."

She studied his chest for a long minute, and his belly did a series of somersaults.

"Okay, with one stipulation."

*Fuck, you're fast becoming a formidable opponent, elskling.*

"Our only communication during that month will be remotely—texts, e-mails, phone calls."

"Look at me," he commanded.

Her lips quivered, tightening and twisting, and she took a deep breath, her breasts sweetly expanding in the fitted bodice. She met his gaze, nostrils flaring, eyebrows raised in an unspoken plea for understanding.

*God, I love you.*

The thought came from left field, and he had to swallow a few times to ensure he didn't vocalize the words.

"We'll include that stipulation in the contract." He stroked the upsweep of her neck resisting the temptation to kiss her senseless. "By the way, my father's already been confirmed as Chairman of the IOC. The vote was held two weeks ago."

Her dark lashes fluttered rapidly, and she shot him a fierce look. "You could've told me."

"I didn't know it figured in your thoughts," he said.

She nibbled on her lower lip.

"What?" he asked, finding the dimple in her chin with his thumb.

"Are you angry?"

At least she no longer stared everywhere but at him.

*I'm fucking furious, but not with you. With myself for not anticipating this.*

"I'm full of admiration for your intellect. Do you play chess?" From now on, he intended to be three moves ahead of her.

She drew back. "How'd you know?"

"You're a good tactician. I'll bring my set when we're on the yacht. It'll give us something to while away the hours."

He had to suppress a grin when she did a double take and frowned, but he knew she wouldn't ask him if he no longer intended to make love to her. Carefully, he settled her back into her chair. "I'll get the others."

With that, he left the room. Satan and Devil knew better than to be hovering anywhere nearby. When he reached his office, he went straight to the crystal decanter on the sideboard and poured an ounce of cognac into a glass. After downing two glasses he regained enough control to suppress the rage coursing through his veins.

The meeting concluded within the hour. Sax contributed little, his mind too hyperactive and the details they discussed too minor to hold his attention. When Nalini folded the updated printout of the amendments to the operation plan and placed her hands on the table in anticipation of standing, he laid his hand on her thigh and said, "Stay."

Tilting her head to one side, she looked him directly in the eyes as her brows gathered. "I really am beginning to dislike that word. When you say it, anyway."

"Please," he added.

She gifted him with what could only be described as a baring of her teeth. "Since you asked so nicely. Of course."

When everyone had departed and the door was shut, Nalini shoved her chair back, dislodging his hand. "What now?"

"This," he answered, framing her face with his hands before slanting his mouth over hers. She pulled back at first, planting her palms on his chest and resisting his hold. He licked the seam of her mouth, slipped one hand between her legs, and caressed the soft, sweet point behind her knee. When she moaned, he invaded the hot, moist cavern of her mouth with his tongue, and he stroked in and out, shallow teasing thrusts, barely entering past her teeth, staying there and exploring until her hands gripped his shirt and dragged him closer.

He lifted her onto his lap, positioning her sideways so her rump abraded his erection. He delved further with his tongue, tracing the area behind her teeth, flicking across the roof of her mouth, and tickling the tip of her tongue until she purred, the sound coming from the back of her throat. She tangled her fingers in his hair, and she twisted, standing on one leg to swing the other across so she straddled him.

The scent of her, the feel of her supple curves in his arms, the sound of her muffled whimpers, the lingering taste of a guava sweetness on her tongue, intoxicated his senses, and he struggled to keep a smidgen of control. She went wild, fisted her hands in his hair, kneaded his shoulders, scraped frantically across his back with her nails, and heaved those full breasts into his chest.



Finding the zipper in the back of her dress, he drew the tab down while keeping his kissing at midlevel, and she purred again. He unclipped her front-close bra and palmed her breasts, drawing small circles on the undersides. She let go of his head, shrugged off the jacket, and pulled the front of her dress down to midwaist.

When she resumed kneading his scalp, he pinched her nipples. She lifted off his lap and plunged her tongue into his mouth. He nipped the tip, then laved the spot. Strangled whimpers filled the silent room. Sax pushed her back down, fitted his arousal between her thighs, grabbed her ass, and slid her back and forth. Keeping one hand on her bottom, he rolled her nipple, tugging on the point, and she began to move without his urging, rubbing herself on him.

Breaking their fused lips, he transferred his attention to her breast, drawing as much of her roundness into his mouth as he could, suckling and tonguing hard until she cried out his name. He slid her onto the table, shoved her skirt above her waist, and let his erection work her clit while he moved to her other breast. Sliding one hand under her ass, he drew her hips off the table, ground her thong-clad pussy against his cock, and with his free hand caressed the breast he'd ignored.

Between pants, she moaned his name, yes, no, please, and he knew her climax neared. He took one nipple between his teeth and pinched the other hard. She flew apart, her legs locked around his waist, and she moaned over and over and over, "Sax, Sax, Sax."

## Chapter Eight

Since she was running late after her doctor's appointment, Nalini took a cab to Chat Noir. She stared through the vehicle's mud-streaked windows. The weather had morphed once more. Gray skies and a steady drizzle cast dusk shadows on the scenery zipping past her unfocused eyes.

Images of Sax and her in the conference room flashed through her brain, and she slumped onto the worn leather of the taxi's backseat. Not once had she ever imagined herself capable of such passionate oblivion. She'd come apart in the Hades Squad's offices on a table. She'd given him a blowjob this morning, and all she could think about was his thick cock stretching her pussy.

Nalini covered her face with her hands, remembering how long it had taken for rational thought to return. Sax had held her, his palm massaging each vertebra, his fingers combing the tangles from the ends of her hair all the while crooning words her frazzled brain couldn't comprehend.

"Miss? We're here."

She flinched and shook her head to clear her muddled thoughts. "I see that." A quick glance at the meter showed she owed the man an even twenty. Nalini searched for her wallet, extracted twenty-five dollars, paid the driver, and exited the cab. Not a single person walked the slick sidewalks. Leaves and a layer of grime plastered the grated heating vents to the right of the establishment.

Chat Noir, housed in a whitewashed brick building, proved to have a European café exterior with dark charcoal canopies framing two picturesque windows hovering on either side of a three-paned wooden door. Two baskets housing bunches of cascading emerald ivy the exact shade of the sign above the door waved tendrils in a slight breeze. The storm's fierce winds had erased any lingering city scents, the chill air now redolent of nature's fury—soil mixed with a hint of manure, torn grasses, and briny ocean.

Adjusting her jacket, Nalini stared at the old-fashioned lantern centered above the brass numbers spelling out the address, two hundred and thirty. She closed her eyes briefly and, before courage fled her soul, took a brisk step forward. A trio of hanging brass bells jangled as she entered the tearoom.

"Darling." Her mother's voice came from the left, so Nalini turned, the smile automatically claiming her mouth when she caught sight of her mom sitting in a love seat situated in a nook under the window. Chandani Marajh wore a veiled

black hat that Nalini remembered fondly, as she'd worn it to their first mother/daughter tea on the occasion of Nalini's seventh birthday.

"Mom," Nalini greeted her. "What do you think?" She gestured at the pale slate walls framed by three-feet-high white panels, the intricately detailed white ceiling, and the mini brass chandelier.

"Charming, darling." Chandani rose, edged around the long, narrow table fronting the love seat, and threw her arms around Nalini, hugging her fiercely. "Oh dear me, I've missed you, child."

A warm, wet drop splashed onto Nalini's chest. She drew back without releasing her hold on her mom's arms, and her eyes misted when she saw the tears streaming her mother's cheeks.

"Don't cry, Mom. I'm back, and I promise you I'll never run away again." Nalini's voice cracked on the last word, and the waterworks she'd tried so hard to choke back rolled from her eyes.

"Miss? Ma'am? Is something wrong?"

Sniffing, Nalini twisted to the right to find an older woman scrutinizing mother and daughter intently. Brown eyes flecked with moss met hers. "I haven't seen my mom in a while," Nalini explained. "Happy tears."

"Oh," the woman uttered, lips parting to reveal four even white teeth framed by pointed canines. "In that case, carry on. But may I suggest taking a seat?" She pointed to the paisley-patterned taupe love seat Chandani had vacated. "I wouldn't want anyone to run you two over."

Only then did Nalini realize they blocked the door completely. "Of course. Sorry."

"I'll be your server today." The waitress motioned Nalini and Chandani to their table.

"Sit next to me, Nalini."

"Sure, Mom."

When they were seated side by side on the love seat, their server asked, "Have you decided on your beverage?"

"My daughter will have a pot of Earl Grey, and I'll have the Darjeeling," Chandani replied, then hesitated, captured Nalini's hand between both of hers, and stated. "I didn't mean to order for you."

"I still haven't acquired a taste for Darjeeling." Nalini squeezed her mom's hand. "Are we going to have tea?"

"If that's what you want," Chandani answered.

"Mom, don't go all wary on me." Nalini looked up at their server. "High tea for two please."

"Certainly. High tea takes approximately twenty minutes. We always bake our scones freshly for each serving."

After the server left, Nalini held her breath and averted her eyes from her mother's. "Mom—"

"No, darling, wait. I want to go first," her mother interrupted, her voice resonantly decisive. "There's not been a single waking second in the past two years that I haven't regretted not agreeing to postpone the wedding when you asked me to."

"Mom—" Nalini began.

"No. I need to say this." Chandani gripped Nalini's fingers tighter. "After your father refused to let you go to university, all the fight went out of you. My lovely, spirited daughter vanished. I hadn't realized how unhappy you were at the finishing school."

"How did you know? I never said anything." A bell, a la Notre Dame, rang, and Nalini jumped.

"Oh. That's me," Chandani muttered, grabbing the black Louis Vuitton tote standing on the table. "Ten to one it's your brother. He was very worried about us meeting."

Nalini's jaw dropped open when her mother pulled an iPhone from her purse, checked the screen, and tsked. "As I thought. Here." She showed Nalini the screen briefly. "He wants to know if we're both okay."

"Mom?" Nalini shook her head. "You're the most technophobic person I know, other than Dad, that is."

"I hear your new hobby is rebuilding car engines," her mother quipped.

"Pardon?" Nalini blinked. "Have I entered a parallel universe?"

"Maybe we both have, darling." Her mother patted her hand. "When you vanished, your father told me he would hire private investigators and we would find you before the weekend was out. Two months later we hadn't heard a single word. Every time I asked your father what was happening, he'd say he was doing everything he could. I was so frustrated and so angry. Then I met the CEO of India's largest software developer at an embassy party. He told me that the Internet was the best tool for locating missing persons. I hired one of his employees to tutor me."

"You use the Net?" The notion numbed Nalini's brain.

"I have a blog," Chandani declared. "A missing-relatives' blog."

"Oh, Mom," Nalini blurted, "I'm so, so, sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I just wanted to make my own choices."

"And you will, darling. You will." Chandani sniffed as she fished in her tote. "Oh where's a handkerchief when you need one?"

"Ladies." Their server appeared at the head of the burnished table. "Earl Grey for you." She used a mitt to place a white teapot decorated with yellow roses framed by tiny green leaves in front of Nalini. "Darjeeling for Mama." She grinned at Chandani.

The distinctive aroma of bergamot wafted on the curls of steam drifting from the teapot's spout.

Chandani dabbed her nose with the snowy square of cotton that had eluded her scant seconds before, and she reached over and covered Nalini's hand with hers. "I remember our first tea. How you were so fascinated because mine smelled so different from yours. You couldn't understand why Darjeeling and Earl Grey could both be called tea."

"It was logical, you have to admit," Nalini retorted, sharing her mother's amusement. "They didn't even taste alike."

"And the first thing you did when we returned home was to look up the two teas." Chandani shook her head. "That night at dinner you regaled the family with your newfound knowledge."

"I was such a puffed-up brat. So proud of knowing that bergamot orange has a flavor less sour than a lemon but more bitter than a grapefruit, and that that's why Earl Grey smells and tastes the way it does."

"I should have known then that you had a driving curiosity. That you needed to learn."

The sadness in her mother's hazel eyes caused a frisson of dread to ride Nalini's shoulders. "What is it, Mom?"

"Regret that my weakness made me lose two years of your life."

"Your weakness?" Nalini searched her mother's delicate features so unlike her own. "I don't understand."

"I let myself believe that what had been right for me would be right for you. I refused to face reality. You're more American than you will ever be Indian. You've lived most of your life surrounded by girls who expected to make their own choices—"

"Mom, don't. Don't blame yourself. I didn't have a backbone back then. I was over eighteen. I had no right accepting Anand's ring."

"Darling—"

"Let's not do this, Mom. Can we just say we both made mistakes and move forward?"

Chandani squeezed Nalini's hand before testing the teapot with two fingers. "Now tell me about this engine hobby."

Nalini poured Darjeeling for her mother and then filled her cup with the steaming Earl Grey brew. She glanced around the tearoom, surprised by the increase in noise level. Obviously popular with both locals and visitors, there wasn't a single unoccupied seat in the house. The conversational buzz ebbed and flowed around a table that seated perhaps two dozen women celebrating a special occasion, as evidenced by numerous colorful party gift bags piled into one corner.

"Only if you tell me about your blog. I can't believe you have a blog. Wait a minute." She rested the china pot on the table. "How did you know I was unhappy at finishing school?"

"I e-mailed every single member of your class." Her mother topped off her tea with a dollop of cream and met Nalini's gaze. "There's quite a community out there who have missing children or other relatives."

Nalini recognized the stubborn cast to her mom's mouth.

She always thought she'd inherited her determination from her Dad. But she was so wrong.

The waitress returned carrying a wrought-iron three-tiered tray.

"Oh that smells heavenly," Nalini exclaimed, her mouth watering as a mixture of chocolate, maple, and melted brie odors sailed to her nose.

After depositing the tray on the table, the server listed the contents of each plate from top to bottom. Nalini and her mother made appropriate appreciative murmurs. "Refills on the tea?"

"No, thank you," Nalini answered. "Mom?"

"I'm fine, darling." When the waitress departed she repeated, "Now tell me all about this engine thing."

Time didn't simply fly by; the hours vanished in a blink, or so it seemed. The shadows deepened, and the hanging lamps and track lighting overhead flickered brightly before fading to a muted glow as dusk descended. Most of the tea patrons had departed, and strains of Maurice Chevalier's "Thank Heaven For Little Girls" brought Nalini's thoughts full circle.

"What about Dad? Is he very, very angry?" She hadn't planned to ask the question, but her father remained the only source of tension between them.

Chandani wrinkled her nose. "I'd say more discombobulated than angry. He had a wife who'd never done anything more useful than throw a few charity fundraising events a year. Who devoted herself to her husband's career. He's only now beginning to understand my blog. And he very reluctantly agreed to get a cell phone." Her mother traced the rim of her chintz porcelain plate. "I love your father with all my heart, Nalini. I know you thought that since our marriage was arranged the way yours to Anand had been, that there was no affection between us. But that's simply not true."

Nalini dropped her gaze. "I don't remember ever seeing you two kiss."

"Your father is old-school, darling. Public expressions of intimacy are not done. And I must admit, I'm very uncomfortable that way as well. However, that's as far as I'm prepared to go on that subject." Chandani dabbed the gray napkin to the corners of her mouth. "On that note, I need to be wending my way back home. Now, may I have your permission to tell him of our visit?"

"I—of course."

"Good, I do hate keeping secrets from him. He's my best friend, you see."

Best friend? The one subject she hadn't intended to broach popped out of her mouth. "You haven't asked me about the dozens of men. Why?"

"As if I believed that for a second." Uncharacteristically Chandani snorted. "I know you, daughter. And I know that never happened. You're very much my child, Nalini. We are one-man women. There will only ever be one man for you. Consider yourself fortunate if you find him. Grab the brass ring, darling." Her mother caught her hand in hers and touched a finger to her cheek. "Now I really must rush. I haven't a clue as to what I'm wearing to the IOC dinner tonight."

"How're you getting home, Mom?"

"I arranged for the cab that dropped me off to pick me up. I'll give him a buzz now."

"Okay, you go ahead. I'll take care of the bill. No." She held up a hand. "I insist."

Her mother departed in the usual flurry that always accompanied a Chandani exit. As soon as she'd settled the bill, Nalini took a deep breath, dug out her temporary cell, and dialed Sax's number.

"Anders speaking."

Why did his deep rumble make her stomach go all aflutter?

"It's me. Nalini," she babbled aware she was babbling but unable to stop. "I, uh, I just had tea with my mom."

"That's great. How'd it go?"

He didn't sound upset with her.

"Great. Strange. I found a lovely place right here on the island. Um, I was going to take a taxi to the hotel, but I don't know the address."

"I'm actually about to quit for the day. Why I don't I pick you up and drop you off. Where are you?"

She gave him the name of the teahouse and then hung up. For a good five minutes, Nalini simply sat there staring into space. When her phone dinged and she saw the text message—*I'm outside*—she lurched off the bench and exited the quaint establishment.

After she'd slid into the passenger seat and buckled up, Sax reached over, framed her face with both palms, and kissed her. He tasted of smoke and beer and glorious man. Her mind went blank, and she surrendered to the moment, to the slide of his tongue, to the tenderness of his touch. When they came up for air, the blood sang in her veins.

"I'll take you to the hotel if you want, but I'd much prefer that you spend the night with me. I have your suitcase in the trunk." His slid his fingers up and down her neck.

She had an urgent yearning to tell him all about her mom's blog, her father being her mom's best friend, about how shell-shocked she felt. Hastily, she gritted her teeth and ducked her head.

"Why is it that I decide to do the sensible thing and you change my mind with one sentence?" She rested her forehead on his shoulder.

"I had no idea I was so persuasive." He finger-combed her hair, and the slight pull on her scalp felt strangely soothing.

"You've no idea." Her voice was slightly muffled by his sweater, which smelled of the outdoors—grassy and woody.

He drew back, tipped her chin, brushed his lips against hers. "We're going to my place, then?"

"Yes."

"Thank you." His thumb stroked her chin before he faced front and punched the vehicle's ignition button.

Darkness cloaked the narrow streets, and they encountered numerous crossroads with nonfunctioning traffic lights. The early morning debris that had clogged the rural road leading to Sax's house hadn't been cleared, and she deliberately didn't speak, knowing he needed to concentrate on driving. The silent journey didn't serve to clear her muddled mind.

She vacillated from one breath to the next. Hope and exuberance made her heartbeat skip one second; fear and anxiety made her lungs stutter the next.

"Nalini, we're here," Sax said, his voice low and dark and rich like moist brownies fresh from the oven, but still she flinched. Buried and tangled in the chaotic mixture of pessimism and optimism clashing in her brain so that her sense of hearing went fuzzy. He rubbed a circle on her shoulder with his thumb. "Elskling?"

Snapping off her seat belt, she stared at the closed laundry room door before twisting to face him. "My mother says she loves my father with all her heart. She says he's her best friend."

"And this surprises you?"

"It doesn't you?" Her brows winged up when he touched the tip of her nose and gave an imperceptible shake of his head.

"Your parents and mine are a different generation. And they suffer from the added stress of being diplomats. My father and yours were groomed for their current positions from birth. My dad like yours has two personas, one private, one for the public." Sax caught a lock of her hair between his thumb and fingers. "Do you want to go for a drive and talk about this?"

"A drive?" She rolled her eyes. "I must seem like an idiot sitting in the car rambling on and on."

"Never an idiot. Wayward and stubborn, yes." He hopped out of the Audi, closed the door, and strode around the hood. When he opened the passenger side for her, she declared, "You don't have to do that. I do have two working arms."

"In some matters I, too, am old-school." He helped her out of the car. "I picked up dinner."



"You must've been pretty certain I would stay," she muttered.

While she pouted, he collected two insulated bags from the backseat. "I'm hoping you'll consider staying until we leave for our sailing trip." He transferred the bags to his left hand, threaded his fingers through hers, and tugged her into motion.

"I'll get the door," she volunteered.

"The security's working again. I had a generator installed today, and it's hooked up and functioning. The code's zero three, fifteen, eighty-nine." His eyes twinkled at her, and the golden flecks that only appeared when he was amused glinted under the garage's fluorescent lighting.

She punched in the numbers and twirled to face him on the last digit. Did he know? Or was it a coincidence?

"I wanted to make it easy for you to remember." He answered her unasked question.

"So you made the security code my birthday?" Her insides turned to mush.

"For now," he answered. "It's not the best pass code, but it's only for tonight. I'll generate something new in the morning."

The lock clicked, and he held the door open for her. "After you."

"I'm going to stick the food in the oven and then have a desperately needed shower." As they strode into the kitchen, he added, "The guys and I helped repair a couple of the more damaged businesses in the village this afternoon. Why don't you go ahead and have your shower? I'll bring in your suitcase. And Nalini?"

"Yes?" Lost in admiration of the way his biceps bunched and rippled when he unpacked three covered circular foil containers and stashed them into the oven, she didn't meet his gaze directly.

"Unpack this time?" He glanced at her over his shoulder, and there wasn't a hint of amusement in his eyes.

Smiling, she nodded. "I will."

When Nalini returned to the great room, Sax was nowhere in sight, and a delicious cheesy aroma had her stomach growling in anticipation. She sniffed, closing her eyes in an attempt to identify the type of cheese perfuming the air.

In the distance she heard the sound of water running and assumed Sax was in the shower. Singing "Thank heaven...thank heaven...thank heaven for little girls," Nalini searched through the drawers and cabinets until she found the accoutrements for two place settings—wineglasses, cutlery, and plates. The words to the song had been stuck in her head since she heard it at Chat Noir.

Her stomach went all aflutter when she looked up from setting the table and found him staring at her. Some unseen force sucked all the oxygen from the atmosphere. The corners of her mouth lifted until she noticed his hands balled into fists and the flush riding his cheekbones.

She tried to swallow, but the saliva in her mouth had evaporated. "Did something happen?" Her voice came out as a croak.

The fierce glint in his narrow-eyed gaze vanished, and she recognized his father in him as he assumed a careful diplomatic neutrality, his face devoid of any expression. "No"

Something wasn't quite right. Sax was pissed about something. Nalini looked down at the knives and forks in her hand, and she forced a smile. "I thought I'd make myself useful and lay the table. I didn't mean to...I mean I guess I should've waited for permission?" she half queried, half stated.

He was at her side before she stopped speaking. His hand curved around her neck, his thick fingers radiating heat. "Mi casa es su casa, Nalini. Feel free to do whatever you want. Rearrange the furniture, the drawers, replace anything you want. I don't give a shit once you're here with me. There's only one thing that I ask."

"What?" she whispered, mesmerized by the intensity of his stare.

"Don't leave without telling me where you're going. I don't care how pissed you are at me. I need to know you're safe. I have to know you're safe." He snagged her waist and drew her flat against the warmth of his hard body. "Promise me."

Again not a question, but not an order either.

"Nalini?"

"What if I don't want to talk to you?" she blurted.

"Leave me a note, a voice mail, send me an e-mail, text me. Slam out the doors if you feel like it, but text me where you're going. It killed me today not knowing where you were, if you were safe. I know you're perfectly capable of taking care of yourself. I know you would've called me if you needed me. I won't hover. I'll give you all the space you need. All I ask is a little peace of mind." His lips curved, but in more of a wolf's snarl than an attempt at a smile.

He was deathly serious, she realized, and a whole specter of emotions ran riot in her veins. Elation chased a dying flame of resentment. Her breathing accelerated, and she tried to read his impassive features—no frown lines marred his forehead, and the corners of his lips didn't sport the fine lines of annoyance of a few minutes before. *How would I feel if he up and vanished? Especially after what happened in the conference room?*

"I promise," she agreed.

He smacked her butt, his arms dropped away, and he stalked to the double-door stainless-steel fridge. "What kind of wine? We're having a crab quiche, a green salad with blue cheese crumbles, and garlic bread."

"Quiche?" She wrinkled her nose.

"You don't like quiche?"

"I love quiche, but it's so fattening."

He spun around and a wide smirk chased his mouth. "Believe me, Nalini, you don't have to worry about your weight. If anything you could gain a good ten pounds."

Immediately, she pictured Trina's lean, toned body. "I thought you favored the supermodel type."

"I favor you." He stalked over to her, took her in his arms, bent her back so only one foot connected with the floor, and kissed her senseless.

When he pulled his mouth away from hers, he whispered against her lips, "Any doubts?"

The friction, his hot breath feathering her swollen lips, her fuzzed brain cells, prevented words from forming, so she nodded, then shook her head.

"I'm assuming that means you understand I want no other woman but you?" He straightened, his hands settled around her waist.

"I like the way you prove your point." Nalini blew out a long breath.

"So quiche is okay?"

"Quiche is great. Where'd you get it?"

There's an organic restaurant along the route to Chat Noir. Their tomato soup is some of the best I've ever had. And their apple tartin has been voted the best on Long Island for the last three years in a row."

"That's my favorite dessert." Saliva coated her tongue at the thought of the tasty dish.

"Save that expression," he ordered. "I expect to see that on your face several times on our sailing trip. Red, white? What do you prefer?"

*Should I tell him?* Nalini mused as she retreated to the mundane activity of placing the cutlery and napkins on the table. Avoiding the issue, she answered, "Do you have a Pinot Grigio?"

"Yep." He opened the refrigerator, and the door made a familiar vacuum sucking sound. "I take it you resolved things with your mother."

"Mostly. I'm sure we'll have other issues to work out. And I'm still reeling," she admitted. "When I left home two years ago, my mother didn't have a clue as to what a PC was, much less the Internet." She rolled both shoulders and looked into his eyes. "Now she has a missing-relatives blog. She texts, she has a cell phone, and goodness knows what else. This from a woman who collected messages from her secretary every morning and hand-wrote responses."

Nalini gave him a quick summary of the conversation she'd had with her mother that afternoon. When she finished speaking, he quirked one eyebrow and smiled at her. "A perfectly understandable reaction. She loves you. She wanted to find you. Things weren't moving as fast as she wanted, so she decided to take control. It sounds as if the orange doesn't fall far from the tree."

"I guess." Nibbling on a cuticle she eyed him, taking in his relaxed stance as he braced against the sink rim, one bare foot propped on the cabinet door, elbows resting on the tiled counter. "I can't get over how much she's changed."

"It's been two years, and she's had to deal with her worst nightmare. Her child gone missing. What would you have done?"

A great big lump grew in Nalini's throat as she tried to imagine her baby vanishing. "I'd have killed anyone who got in the way of me finding her."

The timer on the stove dinged. Sax grabbed two square potholders and bent to the oven. Glancing back at her he directed, "I nuked the soup. Want to get it on the table?"

"Sure." Nalini retrieved the soup and set the bowls on the table. "Your parents aren't affectionate to each other either?"

He deposited the containers of food next to a lazy Susan sporting five vitamin bottles and a steel rectangle filled with paper napkins.

"Compared to yours, mine are probably pornographic." At her involuntary gasp, he shot her a wry smile. "I simply mean that the cultural divide is deep and wide. Norwegians are notoriously liberal on all counts. Including all matters related to sex. But my parents are descendants of diplomats, and as such, disciplined to be restrained on all fronts. Hindu culture frowns on any form of physical affection. So I'd say compared to your parents, mine were positively demonstrative. Compared to the parents of most my friends, they were frigid. It's all relative."

He drew her chair back, and she gratefully settled into the padded high-backed seat. Nalini studied the surety of Sax's movements as he opened the wine, the confidence that emanated from the quick twists of the corkscrew, and the way his biceps bulged with each turn of the tool. Never had she felt so relaxed in another human being's presence, save Tarak's.

"I love them, you know." Her voice wobbled a tad. "I just don't want to be them."

"And it sounds as if your mother's accepted the fact that you never will be. Move on. Grab the things you want from life."

An icy chill slithered across her nape. He had echoed her mother's words to a T.

Sax sliced the quiche into four quarters.

"I feel like I'm taking one step forward and two back. Like I'm at war with myself."

"Aren't you?" He poured the white wine into her glass. "You were brought up as a conventional Hindu female, but lived most of your life in non-Hindu cultures. Sounds to me as if you've been battling conflicting cultures and traditions all your life."

Nalini slumped against the soft chair back, unable to meet his direct glance. "I have, haven't I?"

His hand covered hers on the table. "You choose who you are. Yes, you have to live with your decision in terms of your family, but *you* need to be happy with who you choose to be."

"I thought I knew who I was when I left the ship." She lifted her chin. "I so wanted definition in my life, permanent definition. To know exactly who I am, what I want, and where I'm going. But I'm beginning to realize that may not be possible."

"I'm eleven years your senior and I'm still evolving." Sax lifted his glass. "I believe change is good once you have a stable core. My basic beliefs don't waver. Loyalty, honesty, courage, the do-unto-others creed, but other things change. I no longer have to work twenty-four seven to prove anything. I've started living my life with the end in mind. On my deathbed what do I want? To have built an empire? Or to be surrounded by a family I love?"

Although the quiche smelled heavenly, Nalini's hunger ebbed in the face of their discussion. "You make it so stark. So black-and-white."

"Is that a bad thing?" He angled his wineglass. "Every aspect of society today contrives to muddy our vision. To make us want things we don't need. Need things we don't want. Strip all of that away and cut to your deathbed." He clinked their glasses together. "That's the essence of a life."

Nalini sipped the wine, savoring the tart yet fruity finish. "You've obviously thought about this. What do you want?"

"That's a discussion for another time and another place. Dig in while the food's hot." Sax flashed her a grin Lucifer himself couldn't improve upon. The wicked amber gleam in his navy irises spiked her internal body temperature, and her fork tinkled on the plate. She blinked, returned his smile, and clasped the handle tighter.

Though the food proved delicious and spiced with unusual flavors, her taste buds couldn't quite appreciate the meal, her thoughts too tangential for focus of any sort.

She rinsed the dishes and Sax stacked them in the dishwasher, the chore somehow familiar and comforting. Nalini discovered they shared the same taste in authors, were totally divergent in terms of movies and music, yet both loved Shakespeare and classic plays. When he walked her down the corridor to her room thirty minutes later she felt strangely bereft.

At her door, he halted, ran his knuckles across her cheeks and his gaze mesmerized hers like a sorcerer casting an enchantment spell. "Sleep with me?"

Her lips twitched at the corners. Not an order being issued, rather a definite question.

Staring at his chest, she laid both palms on either side of his ribs. "Things haven't changed as far as...you know." Why oh why did she have to blush like a twelve year old at the mention of normal body functions?

"I know, elskling," he murmured brushing his lips to her temple. "I like having you in my arms. I like waking up to find you in my bed. Sleep is all I'm after."

"Yes."

They lay together not more than ten minutes later in his oversize bed, the mattress so high he had had to lift her onto to it, and Nalini took the opportunity to survey the room. "How long have you lived here?"

He shifted, his arms curling around her waist and drawing her bottom to his groin. "A year or so. Why?"

“All the other rooms are completely furnished, yet this one only has the bed and a TV.”

“I don’t need anything else. Anna and my mother furnished the rest of the house. I told them this room was strictly off-limits,” he explained, nuzzling her neck.

She squished her shoulder to her ear. “That tickles.”

“Meant to,” he retorted, nipping at her earlobe.

“Sax?”

“Mmmm?”

“We don’t need a legal contract.”

## Chapter Nine

Sax blinked. His tongue rested on Nalini's nape for a pulse beat before he gathered his wits and continued kissing his way up the sweet curve of her neck. Inhaling the aroma of the rosemary shampoo she used when strands of her hair snaked over his cheeks, he twisted the wavy locks around a finger and contemplated the strong line of her jaw.

Senses heightened by the lack of light in the bedroom, he heard the slight hitch in her breathing and the soft scraping of nails on the cotton sheets. She wore the requisite T-shirt and sweats of the previous night and stiffened as the seconds ticked by without a response from him.

The temptation to let the matter lie fallow and accept her tentative capitulation soared. No contractual limits on communication after she left for Harlingen would render him an enormous tactical advantage in the coming weeks.

Stick to the plan, he reminded himself.

His fingers traced a circle around the ring dangling from her navel, and his lips curved when he remembered her quip about planning to have a devil in Santa Fe.

"I had Tarak draw up the contract after we left the conference room." His lips skated over her supple flesh. "I signed it, and Tarak has the original in his keeping. We expanded the terms to preclude me initiating any form of communication."

Nalini's spine went rigid, and her belly hollowed under his palm.

"What do you mean?" She broke a seven-second silence made more deafening by the fact she'd held her breath.

"I can't communicate with you unless you communicate with me first," he explained.

"Oh," she whispered.

She scooted away from him, her bottom no longer nesting his erection. Sax followed her retreat, curving her tightly to him and fitting her ass back where she belonged. "That's what you wanted, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she muttered, her tone crisp. A traveling beam from the lighthouse across the bay highlighted her hand twisting the corner of the pillowcase into a tight spiral.

*You don't like this move at all. Ball's in your court, elskling.*

He nuzzled her neck, tasting the tang of perfume in the nook. "Have you done any sailing?"

"I worked on a ship if you recall." Irritation deepened her voice, the sarcasm coating her statement too thick for dripping.

"Sailing a small yacht is a completely different experience from being on a three-hundred-ton container ship. You said yesterday that the reason you chose a cruise was because everyone knew you were prone to seasickness."

She craned her neck and twisted to peer at him.

The shadows concealed all but the whites of her eyes, and the irises appeared a richer color than oak bark coated with chocolate. "It may be worthwhile to take an early morning spin around the bay tomorrow. I checked the forecast, and the weather should be clear and sunny."

"I guess that makes sense," she muttered, turning and resting her cheek on the pillow.

Tension emanated from her muscles, and Sax knew sleep would be evasive if she didn't relax. He threaded his fingers through her hair, combing the silky locks down her back. "What will you be doing in Harlingen?"

Her deltoids slackened, the cusps of her shoulders slumping a tad, and one lone finger smoothed the quilted comforter covering her hip. "I'll be an apprentice again. ConoCargo wants to look at different options for maximizing cargo storage, so I'll be working with the design engineers for the new ships they want to build."

"That sounds challenging," he murmured, using his thumb to knead a pressure point at the base of her scalp.

"Mmmm. That feels wonderful." She arched her neck. "I hope so. To tell you the truth, the last couple of voyages have been boring. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out how to arrange the cargo. I mean, there's only so much space. It can become complex depending upon the design of the ship. The company wants all future ships to be ConRO."

"ConRO?"

"Most ships are designed to store cargo in one way. RORO means the cargo is wheel based and is rolled on and rolled off. ConRo means that the ship is a hybrid and can carry both containers, which have to be stored and removed by crane, as well as wheeled cargo. Maximizing space is tricky on hybrid ships."

Sax discovered Nalini's knowledge extended far beyond cargo management. She had a thirst for learning, and during the last two years, she had soaked up all aspects of life and duties aboard ship. They talked, mainly about her job, for a good forty minutes before her replies to questions came slower and slower, and she drifted into sleep in the middle of a mumbled explanation about liquid cargo.

As he watched her breasts rising and falling, Sax considered his outburst during the meeting, and his lips curled into a sneer of self-derision. How many times had he lost control in the last few days? Too many.

She didn't know it, but he'd claimed her on the conference table.



He couldn't identify the exact moment, couldn't pinpoint what had prompted the realization that there would be no other woman for him, no other woman he wanted at his side for the journey of life. Yet so many issues had to be resolved—religion, culture, the vast divide in life experience between them, not to mention her lack of sexual experience.

Logically, he should let her go, give her the freedom to experiment sexually and otherwise.

Not going to happen.

Not even over his stone-cold-dead body. He'd come back from the grave and destroy any man who tried to touch her.

Sax stared at the window, tracing the circular beam from the lighthouse as it swept the far shore. *How the hell am I supposed to let her go to Harlingen when I can't stand her being out of my sight?*

Until his midteens Sax's Norse berserker heritage had ruled supreme. Years of arduous physical and mental training doled out daily by his father and grandfather had taught Sax how to control his passionate nature. In less than twenty-four hours, Nalini had demolished the civilized veneer he'd so carefully and deliberately constructed to contain the primitive warrior at his very core.

*How do I bind you to me, yet set you free?*

Sleep claimed his psyche as he worried the question.

Sax had arranged to borrow the Sabre 386 Satan used for short hauls the following morning. An hour after dawn, the wind at their backs, he tacked the boat into the middle of the bay. He lifted his face to the heavens enjoying the chill of frost in the stiff breeze barreling across the boat. Unlike parachuting, sailing soothed his soul. During his teen years when angst and emotions spiraled and erupted into a violent outburst, two hours weaving in and out of fjords through narrow treacherous channels that required absolute focus to navigate safely helped him regain control.

The early morning sun struggled to erase the ice from the air, succeeding only in fits and starts when the wind died away for the few seconds it took to change direction. He inhaled, relishing the tacky saltiness of ocean spray gusting on a fierce updraft. Nalini had gone belowdecks to fix two cups of hot chocolate. The aroma of the brew zipped to his nose, and his mouth moistened in anticipation of the hot, sweet treat.

When he glanced to the hold, Nalini stood in the doorway, her stance wide as she balanced two mugs while climbing the three steps leading to the deck. She'd tied her hair up in a high ponytail that the wind disrespected the second her foot hit the deck. Thick strands whipped free from the elastic band, and she scrunched her nose and shook her head in an attempt to clear her vision.

Relatively tranquil seas helped to stabilize her gait as she stumbled to him, her focus on the frothy confections she carried. Using exaggerated motions, she slowly lowered into the seat beside him. Sax relieved her of one mug, gulped two

mouthfuls of the scalding liquid, and licked the sticky melted-marshmallow foam off the top of his lip.

Her eyes followed his tongue, and his cock preened.

The last couple of days had been sheer torture, his prick and balls reacting to Nalini as if he'd taken an entire bottle of Viagra. He'd been so hard and aching for so long that he couldn't remember being otherwise. The blowjob yesterday had cut the edge of his desire for mere minutes; the need to be inside her grew stronger by the second. Her thigh sidled along his, and he choked back a groan as his cock swelled to new proportions. Why the hell couldn't he concentrate on anything but being inside her heat?

"How's the stomach?" he queried.

"Perfect," she replied, showing twin dimples and a perfect smile. "You were right. This is totally different from being on a cargo ship. It's so exhilarating." She tilted her head. "The wind, the smell of the sea, so clean and, I don't know, sea-y."

Desire zipped to his prick, tightened his testicles, and he jerked the steering wheel a fraction too much to the left. He stuffed his half-empty mug into the alcove designed for such a function and adjusted their direction by eight degrees. "Briny is the word you want, I believe. I'm glad you're enjoying the sail."

"You look like you're in your element." She sipped her hot chocolate. "Like a Viking sailor roaming the seas. How long've you been sailing?"

Draping his arm across her shoulders, he shifted her closer so their hips and thighs touched and aligned. "Since I can remember. No matter where Dad was stationed when I was young, we spent summers in Norway. Dad and I sailed every day come foul or fair weather." He brushed his lips to her temple.

"You and your father are close, aren't you?" The corners of her mouth twitched down and then lifted as if uncertain of what emotion to express. "I have memories of my dad playing Go Fish with me, of us reading together, of him hugging me." She bent her head as if studying the swirling dark liquid in the mug. "By my third term in boarding school when I came home for the holidays, instead of a hug I had a meeting with him in his study to go through my grades, which were never quite good enough."

"I can't imagine you failing," he commented, studying her profile, enjoying the slight upturn of her nose.

She twisted to face him. "I'm the only one in my family who's not a member of MENSA. Tarak got straight A's. I had a C average."

"There's nothing wrong with a C." He took the mug from her and stacked it next to his in the alcove. Cupping her jaw with his free hand, he studied the wan smile she wore, wanting to erase the poignant sadness limning her onyx eyes. "I'd give any odds that Tarak couldn't rebuild a car engine if he tried."

Her hands snaked around his waist, and she laid her cheek on his sweater.

The unhesitant, spontaneous gesture had the words *stay with me* boomeranging around his brain.

"Sax?" Her whisper floated to his ears.

"Elskling?" Sax angled the rudder for the return journey, the urge to hold her, kiss her, breathe her into his soul too overwhelming to resist.

"I unpacked," she mumbled into his chest.

He grinned, and a whoosh of sheer joy surged through his veins. "Want to race to the shore? And I mean race. The water's choppy enough we can plane her all the way back."

"Plane?" She even frowned beautifully. Sax used his thumb to smooth the three even lines between her brows.

"When the winds and the waves are just right, the hull lifts to the point where the boat skims across the water. It's as close to flying as a ship can get."

She pushed away and met his gaze, her eyes wide and glowing, dimples in full force as her mouth curved. "How fast?"

He shifted to hold the wheel between his knees and checked the fastenings on her life jacket. "As fast as the wind will take us. If you want, I can hook you up on the bow. If you stand, you'll get that Titanic king-of-the-world feeling when we plane."

She stood all the way back to shore, screaming when they planed, arms wide, and the wind threw back her exuberant exclamation, "I'm queen of the world!"

\* \* \*

The vision of Nalini on the prow sustained him through four interminable meetings and a day that lasted well past dusk. Sax was waiting at a red light when the ringtone he'd downloaded for her sounded.

*Where are you?*

He thumbed. *On the way home.*

*I found an Indian restaurant near Chat Noir.*

Sax pulled into an empty parking spot across the road from Chat Noir. *Where?*

The reply was immediate. *Sunrise 220.*

*Be there in 2.*

He wore a silly smile for the three-minute drive to the restaurant.

Restraint had its rewards.

They hadn't had any time together after the sail. Satan had to fly to Toronto unexpectedly, and he'd called while they were docking the boat to request Sax stand in for him on all scheduled meetings. They'd rushed back to the house, dressed, and he'd taken every short cut imaginable to the office. Nalini's HR department called at the beginning of the car ride, and they hadn't exchanged more than three words during the journey.

When he'd pulled into his parking spot, Nalini had reached over, clamped her fingers around his neck, and hauled him close for a tongue-drugging kiss that fired his groin, had his prick saluting at full mast, and left his balls bluer than a

horseshoe crab's blood. Not a conducive state for client meetings. During a break between appointments, he discovered Nalini had gone to the city to visit with her mother. She'd left him a voice mail saying she would organize dinner. Sax canceled his last meeting, too impatient to see Nalini to concentrate on mundane security arrangements for the squad's newest client.

The temperature had dropped to the point where his warm breath fogged when he broke into a jaunty, whistled rendition of Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." Raindrops clung to the streetlights like fat diamonds, and the crystals in the asphalt-paved road glistened in the sweep of headlights from the cars crawling by.

Wide-arched windows dominated the front of the Tandoor Grill. Sax pushed open the door and stepped into the restaurant, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dimly lit interior. A narrow corridor led to the foyer, and he spied Nalini standing and chatting with a gray-haired man half-hidden by a tall podium-like desk.

*Fuck.*

She wore the Santa Fe outfit—the tight black pants, the scarlet blouse—and he spied the front strip of her matching bra. His jaw dropped and he reacted like a stunned teenager, his gaze devouring her from head to foot, gobbling up every inch of her.

Red toenails. Red fingernails. Red lipstick.

*Double fuck.*

*I'm on the fucking edge.*

His balls jammed up tight against his groin, and he wanted nothing more than to cage her against the wall and fuck her hard and fast, to take her to the point again and again, to torture her until she shattered, and then fuck her agonizingly slowly.

"Hi," she said, and he recognized when her eyes widened and she bit her full lower lip that his expression wasn't civilized. "I...what's wrong?"

*How could you wear that outfit?*

Balling his fists, Sax held his breath, the fragrance of her perfume too potent for his overloaded senses; he shuttered his eyes and growled, "Nothing."

By the time the host led them to a table and seated them, he'd regained mere smithereens of control over the pillage-and-plunder lust firing his loins.

A black-clad waiter appeared immediately, doled the normal sound bite including his name, and then asked, "May I take your drink order?"

Nalini flashed him that saucy, sexy peep from Santa Fe. His fingers itched to sweep all the paraphernalia off the table and get her flat on her back.

"A shot of tequila, please, a saltshaker, and a wedge of lime."

*What?*

"Nalini," he warned, his voice hoarsening as visions of her sucking on the lime made his eyes glaze over.

She touched a finger to the dimple in her chin. "Hmm, let's see. If I remember correctly, you drank beer at El Meson—Spanish, I believe. So you should have a beer from India if we're going to re-create that night, save that we're substituting one ethnic food for another, Indian for Spanish."

*Re-create?*

"Sir?" The waiter tapped a pencil against a small notepad.

Sax ordered one of the brews the knowledgeable waiter suggested, drumming his fingers on the table, clenching his jaw as he waited for the chatty attendant to shut the hell up and leave. His prick, ever the optimist, went as hard and stiff as a plank of wood, a thick, on-fire woody.

"How was your day?"

"Long," he replied. "Nalini, do you have something to tell me?"

The waiter appeared, carrying a circular tray bearing a tall glass, a dark bottle of beer, a shot glass, a ceramic saltshaker, and a saucer with three lime wedges. After he deposited their drinks, the young man pulled a notepad from his apron pocket and removed a pen tucked behind his ear. "Are you ready to order?"

"No," Sax stated.

"Yes," Nalini answered. She raised an eyebrow. "Do you mind if I order some samosas? I'm starved."

*Starved, dying of hunger, parched, thirsty, deprived, depraved.*

"Sax?" She snapped her fingers. "Hello?"

"Whatever you want," he growled, his stare glued to her scarlet lips when her mouth curved.

While the waiter dutifully wrote down the appetizer order, another server appeared with a dish bearing a selection of Indian breads. The smell of garlic, cumin, and mustard enveloped the table. A young girl dressed in a purple sari delivered a hot towel to Nalini and then slid a similar rolled towel to Sax.

*Fucking Grand Central Station.*

Sax scrubbed his hands, barely biting back the mental command "Out!"

A sitar strummed in the background. Nalini glanced past his shoulder. "I think there's going to be live entertainment."

"Wonderful," he snapped. "I don't suppose you feel like takeout?"

"Sure," she answered, flashing him a grin so sultry, so saucy, so fucking sexy he had to grab the table to restrain from vaulting to her side.

"What?" Her words didn't register.

"Shall I order?" She opened the menu.

"Nalini," he rasped, needing to hear her acknowledge his interpretation. "That outfit. The tequila..." He waved at the shot glass.

"I was way off base with my estimate of five days," she quipped.

His cock jerked, and his balls felt like they were in a vise grip. "Condoms. Drug store." He stood, the tight jeans resisting his every move, and a jolt of pain ripped through his groin. Swallowing, he dredged up enough saliva to speak, surprised that his voice didn't sound animalistic, primitive. "There's a drugstore around the corner. You order. I'll be back."

"No." She bounded to her feet, curled her fingers around his wrist, and tiptoed to whisper, her hot breath feeding the building lust frenzy coursing his veins. "I went to the doctor yesterday. You don't need condoms. I took care of things—she gave me a birth-control shot."

He snatched her to him. "I'm going to fucking come right here and now. Don't speak. Don't say another word. I need to hold you."

Sax buried his nose in the crook between her neck and shoulder, inhaling her essence. He ran every mental exercise in his repertoire through his brain. Finally he lifted his head and stroked her hair. Her lips brushed his chin. "We can skip the food."

His mouth twitched. "You're starved, remember?" He drew back to meet her gaze. "I'll pretend to be civilized while we wait."

Sax offered the waiter a hundred-dollar tip to halve the time between order and food delivery. Nalini popped her tequila shot; he drank his beer and listened to her recounting of her day. She and her mother had spent the morning at a spa and then met Tarak for lunch. No mention of her father, and that worried him.

"What did you order?" he queried when they were finally in the car and on the way home.

"A mixed Tandoori grill, vegetable biryani, prawn masala, garlic naan, papadums, and chutney."

"I haven't had Indian cuisine in years." He attempted to stay focused on the food. "What's biryani and masala again?"

"Biryani is any dish made with rice. Masala is a mild red curry flavored with yogurt. Papadum is a crisp bread. Naan is more doughy and soft." She swept him a side-glance. "You're not listening to a word I'm saying."

Sax grinned. "Naan is doughy and soft." Immediately he pictured her soft, swollen pussy, and his foot jerked on the clutch. "We're here." He yanked the hand brake. "You go ahead. I'll bring in the food."

"Sure?" She cocked her head and stared at him.

"Sure," he reiterated. "Go on."

Before grabbing the bag with the takeout, Sax adjusted his prick and squeezed the head hard. To no avail. His raging erection didn't even respond to pain. He found Nalini standing at the sink, staring out the window. "Something out there?"

She shook her head. "Just staring at nothing."

Setting the bag on the counter, he moved to stand behind her, bent his head, and kissed her temple. His breathing grew labored as he inhaled the fragrant blend of Shalimar and aroused woman. "Are you wet?"

She sucked in her cheeks and nodded, and he studied her reflection in the windowpane. Her eyes dominated her face, she snagged her lower lip with a tooth, and their gazes met.

"Show me," he ordered, his voice gruff and hoarse.

Her eyebrows climbed. "How?" she whispered.

"Take my hand and show me. Let me feel how wet and creamy you are for me."

"Oh." The tip of her tongue flicked across the seam of her mouth.

Sax groaned. He dared not touch her, too close to climax to risk contact.

"Unbutton your blouse," he directed.

She made as if to twist around to face him. "No. I want you to watch yourself."

One by one she slipped the buttons loose, her gaze locked on to his in the window's reflection.

"Unclip your bra."

The jeans pinched his balls when her breasts sprang free of the confining undergarment. The red lace curled around the undersides of the firm, jutting mounds.

"Touch yourself."

"Sax?" Her nostrils flared.

"Do it."

She rested the pads of her fingers on her puckered nipples.

"Pull on them."

Using her thumb and forefinger, she tugged on the taut points and emitted a low, breathy purr. Sax fastened their eyes together in their reflected image of the glass. "Offer me one."

Cupping her right breast, she lifted the mound and tiptoed.

"Mine," he growled before leaning over to latch on to her sweet flesh, and he drew hard, scraping his teeth and laving the whole areola in his mouth. She gasped when he sawed the tip, and her ass rubbed his aching cock. He fit himself against her, pressing her against the cabinet.

"Sax," she whimpered. "I want. Omigod. Omigod."

When he moved to her other breast, she squirmed to the side, but he penned her, keeping her caged between his groin and the wood. He released her mound, suckling the nipple to the tip, and then nipped. She cried out his name.

"Show me now. Show me how creamy you are." His testicles were contracted so tight he thought they would implode.

She fumbled with the belt, then the top button of her pants, and yanked down the zipper. Wriggling her hips, she tried to snake the garment past her hips.

“Stop. Show me now.”

“Omigod,” she mewled, grabbing his hand and then shoving his fingers down the front of her thong. Her thighs shook when he slid his thumb over her clit.

“Breast,” he demanded.

When she presented him with her tit, he opened his mouth and took possession, licking and nibbling and drawing the turgid nipple while he slipped one finger into her, then another, and yet another, fucking her faster and faster as her labored breathing quickened. He reached around to her left breast, and when he squeezed the tip, her pussy clenched. He ground his thumb on her swollen nubbin, and she dissolved, arching into his hands. “Omigod, omigod. Ohhhh.”

Sax caught her around the waist when she went limp in his arms. “Hold on to the counter,” he commanded. Dropping to one knee he dragged her trousers and the thong off, helping her to step out of the pants legs. He hauled the step stool his housekeeper used to reach high shelves over and set her foot on it. His face inches from her wet and slick folds, totally intoxicated by her spice, Sax shrugged out of his clothes and stood.

“Keep your hands on the counter.” He caged her in again, his hands on the outsides of hers. His prick wept precum on her ass, wetting the crease and making the plump cheeks slippery. He bit the cusp of her shoulder and fondled her breasts, tugging on the distended tips.

“Put me inside,” he growled, sliding his cock between her thighs.

Sticking her butt out, she reached down and curled both hands around the crown of his prick.

“Now.”

He groaned when her pussy rimmed him, the spasming walls sucking at the head. She tiptoed, and his prick sank into her sex. The walls of her pussy convulsed and strained and tightened around his cock, the burning heat gripping him too potently for him to hold back a second longer.

Using his thighs, he widened her stance and tilted her forward, opening her vagina to his seeking hand. Sax kept one arm around her waist; with the other he spread her folds and pulled the hood back, feeling her clit heating and hardening.

“Mine.” The last shreds of control evaporated, and he fucked her then, plunging in to the hilt, changing the angle until he found her G-spot, working her clit, pinching and rubbing as he fucked her, pumping in and out until the climax burst through him and he spewed sperm, ejaculating what felt like gallons into her pussy.

His lungs burned, and he didn’t catch his breath for long minutes. Burying his nose in her hair, he closed his eyes and sniffed—drowning in the tangy aromas of her shampoo, Shalimar, and the delicious zest of sex, of pussy cream, and semen.

“Sax?” He met her half-hooded gaze reflected in the windowpane.

“Mmmm,” he murmured, nibbling a path to her ear.



"Wow." She gifted him with a dreamy sex-kitten-contented smile. "I think this could be addictive."

"It is," he agreed, flexing his half-hard cock inside her.

"Oh," she muttered and looked down at their joined bodies. "I didn't know it could do that."

"It"—he nipped her shoulder—"can work miracles. Leap tall buildings."

"Can it do it again?" She shot him a backward glance, and her internal muscles contracted, clenching his prick.

"You're doing that on purpose," he accused.

"You object?" Distended pupils made her eyes look like black lagoons.

"I condone. Heartily."

Reluctant to leave her heat, Sax nuzzled her neck, propped his foot next to hers on the stool, and lifted her leg over his thigh, studying the reflection of her glistening pussy in the window.

"What are you...oh..." Their gazes locked. "This feels very wicked."

"Wicked is very, very good for the soul." He stroked her pink, slick folds apart and tickled her clit. She arched. "Let's take round two into the bathroom."

"Bathroom?" She twisted to see him.

"Spa in the bathroom," he explained, not intending to voice his ulterior motive, to soothe her pussy so he could fuck her again. Reluctantly, he withdrew from her heat and lifted her high against his chest. His cock slapped his belly. How long had he been flaccid? Thirty seconds?

Nalini noticed. "How long does it take?"

"What?" He quirked an eyebrow.

"You know." She pursed her mouth. "For it to go down."

"It is a cock, a prick, a penis if you must, but not 'it.' And it did already. But it"—he emphasized the last word and waggled his eyebrows—"is interested again."

"Oh," she mumbled, her jaw dropping. "I thought that only happened with teenagers. I mean a man of your advanced age... Shouldn't it take longer?"

"My advanced what?" he demanded, setting her down on the edge of the sunken oversize circular tub in front of a picture window that faced the harbor. Her legs dangled down the smooth speckled marble, and she kicked her feet, watching him open the faucets and test the water temperature. "You're going to regret those words, Nalini Marajh."

When the tub was full, he lifted her in and fit her back to his front, his cock to her bottom crease. Stabbing the button to activate the spa, he wedged into a position equidistant from the pulsing jets. Cupping her jaw, he tilted her head and locked their lips together. She went pliant in his arms, sighing and purring as he tasted her, thoroughly learning her hot spots. When he nipped her tongue, she tangled her hands in his hair and wriggled to sit sideways.

She moaned when he tickled the roof of her mouth and strained to follow when he danced his tongue in and out of her mouth, plunging and retreating, and sucking along her lips. The tips of her breasts scraped his chest as she twisted to straddle him, her sweet pussy lips spreading over his arousal.

He broke the kiss. "Turn around."

"What?"

"Turn around. The jets can be very interesting."

"The jets?"

"Mmmm, I'll show you." He arranged her so she straddled him, her legs spread wide over his thighs, and edged them closer to the water pulsing from two jets. Separating her folds to expose her clit, his palm on her ass, he elevated her and angled her pussy to one jet.

She grabbed his biceps when the water hit her clit, and squealed. She dug her heels into the tiles and retreated. "Easy," he crooned. "Too close, too soon." He repeated his actions, keeping a good nine inches between the jets and her pussy.

"Oh," she muttered but didn't move away, instead shifted a tad right. She caught her lower lip with a tooth and worried the plump flesh.

Sax slipped a finger into her sheath, and her vaginal walls shuddered around the digit. Her eyelids slipped to half-mast, and her weight sank onto his hands and chest. She levered her hips up and bowed her head as the water pounded her clit. He lifted her higher, she moaned, her hands slipped to his sides, and her nails dug into his skin. "Omigod."

Nalini's breathing accelerated, her breasts heaved, and her head went slack as the orgasm ripped her apart. She collapsed on top of him, her limbs supple, beads of moisture dotting the corners of her mouth. He held her close and petted her back to reality before climbing out of the tub with her in his arms. After drying her wet skin, he carried her to the bed, lay on the mattress, and tucked them both under the covers.

The second time round, he took his time tasting every inch of her, eating her pussy until her taste was burned into his senses, lapping her through orgasm after orgasm, branding her with his hands and lips. He positioned his cock at her pussy and thrust once, hard and fast, lifting her hips to reach the core of her heat. "Mine."

He kept her off-kilter, pumping fast, then slow, teasing her G-spot, pinching her clit. Her knees fell open, and he hooked them with his shoulders and drove higher and deeper. She scored his back with her nails, the sting fueling the need to make her submit to him. He inched out of her, leaving the head of his cock at her entrance, and flicked her nubbin with his thumb.

"Sax," she moaned and beat him with a fist. "Please. Let me."

"Who do you belong to?" He pulled the hood back from her sex and circled her clit with his fingers. "Who...do you belong to?"

Their gazes locked. He gritted his teeth, grazed her nub with the pad of his thumb, and held himself perfectly still.

"No," she muttered. "Don't make me."

Fitting his mouth over hers, he demanded her surrender, taking her to the edge again, waiting until she raked his back, and begged for release before asking, "Who do you belong to?"

"You," she whispered. "You."

## Chapter Ten

“What *are* you doing?” Nalini opened one eye to see a naked Sax sitting on his haunches between her spread legs. She eyed the bowl he held, and her gaze drifted to the razor in his hand. Blinking to clear her vision, she tried to sit up, only to discover her hands were tied. A shiver of alarm crept over her shoulder blades. Craning her neck she tugged at the black silk scarf wound around her wrists and looped through a slot in the headboard.

“Why am I tied up?” Her heart beat so loudly in her ears she almost didn’t hear his reply. “And how did you do this without waking me up?”

“You are a very sound sleeper. I tried every trick in the book save a pitcher of ice or water, and all you kept doing was shrugging me away.”

“And so the logical move was to tie me up?” She pulled at the fabric restraint, though her initial apprehension had rapidly dissipated, replaced instead by the familiar, delicious, belly-fluttering anticipation that always preceded the roller-coaster climb to the highest summit before the wild ride began.

“No. That’s for safety.” He waved the metallic razor. “I didn’t want to take a chance on injuring your sweet pussy.”

His intentions suddenly became clear.

“You’re going to shave me? There?” She squealed the last word. “Why?”

A wave of sexual heat giddied her thoughts, and her sex grew slick, her pussy folds tingling in hopeful expectancy. She choked back the moan welling up her throat.

“I like a naked pussy,” he replied and laid a hot, moist towel on her mound.

She flinched at first and then relaxed as the heat warmed her vagina and thighs. He liked a naked pussy. The words conjured images too wicked to acknowledge, and she grabbed at the first rational thought.

“You didn’t consider consulting me on this?” Nalini grumbled. “It is *my* body you’re taking liberties with.”

“Trust me, you’ll like this. I know I will.” Gloriously nude, his long flaxen locks brushing massive shoulders, he looked like an angelic version of the devil, especially when the morning sun’s rays backlit his body and cast dark shadows that hid his features. Nalini’s gaze traced his powerful legs as the muscles contracted when he walked to the bedside table.

"Why do I have to be tied up?" *And why is my pulse racing and my sex creaming?* Nalini squeezed her eyes shut, too embarrassed to meet Sax's intense scrutiny. *He knows. He knows it's turning me on.*

"The way you wriggle?" He lifted an eyebrow. "That pussy is precious property. No nicks."

He grabbed two black scarves from the bedside table.

"You've done this before," she accused, unable to keep the bitterness from her tone.

"Groomed my woman? Nope. This is a first." His thumb brushed her pubic hair. "Are these virgin curls?"

"Of course." She worried her lower lip. "You don't like hair there?"

"I like hair." He secured one foot to the bedpost and gently edged her legs apart. "I also like variety. Uncomfortable?" He studied her face.

"No, but not exactly comfortable either," she retorted.

"You're wet," he murmured, leaning forward to slide a finger across her cleft. "You like this. Being at my mercy."

Nalini gritted her teeth as moisture drenched her labia, the slow trickling motion making her internal walls shudder uncontrollably. Her eyelids flickered, and though she wanted to deny his statement, her physical reaction gave her away. She risked a quick, surreptitious peek and caught him staring at her pussy, his expression rapt, fascinated. His nostrils quivered and he growled, "Thank God today is Saturday. I can play all day."

*Play?* Her belly ring danced as her stomach contracted, the silver devil sliding over her skin, the slight grazing firing sparks up her rib cage, and her breasts ached, the budding nipples craving his mouth, his teeth. When he swizzled the razor in the soapy water in the bowl and glanced her way, her lungs forgot to function, and her heart skipped whole beats. For long seconds he trapped her gaze, the pin-drop quiet of the room broken only by the swishing of the ceiling fan. His dilated pupils consumed the navy hue of his irises, and flames seemed to lick at her flesh. The desire inherent in his primitive stare kindled a firestorm from her toes to her scalp.

Nalini licked her lips and shuttered her eyes, the visual impact of his concentrated scrutiny too forceful to endure a second longer. Her mind went into overdrive, and she searched for a logical rational thought, any semblance of sanity.

"Do I get to shave you?" She purred the question and shot him a half-hooded glance.

He did a double take and then chuckled. "I'd be happy to oblige. You can do the honors after I'm done."

She eyed the glints in the gold V of hair dusting his erection. "And do I get to tie you up?"

"You can put me in cuffs anytime, elskling. Blindfold me—eat strawberry jam off my cock." He sent her a bad-boy grin and waggled his eyebrows. "I'm open to any and all suggestions."

"Jam," she mused. "Marmalade maybe. I'm more of a savory person."

He quirked an eyebrow. "We'll have to do a grocery run. I'm partial to berries of any sort." Sax curled his hand over her heel and massaged the arch of her foot. "Your toenails remind me of the color of ripe strawberries, while your pussy lips are darker, more like overripe raspberries." He cocked his head to one side. "Raspberries and whipped cream—now that's the dessert of my fantasies."

Her nipples pearly, the sensation as they peaked so like fire and ice that she couldn't prevent a low whimper from escaping her lips.

Following her gaze, he murmured, "These need some attention, do they?" He reached over and flicked first one, then the other taut point.

Nalini arched off the mattress, digging her heels into the sheets. "Sax."

"Not yet, elskling." He cupped the underside of her breast. "Soon. Anticipation heightens the senses."

"Is this normal for you?" she asked jerking her head at the scarf tied around her wrists. "Do you like your women bound and gagged?"

"Don't tempt me," he warned. "I have other plans for your luscious mouth. A gag would be a shameful waste of a hot, moist cavity."

Trina's Angelina Jolie lips blasted through Nalini's brain. She couldn't get the image of Sax and Trina naked in bed out of her head. "Did you do this with Trina?"

He finished knotting the silk scarf, set his hands on his hips, and gave her a speculative glance before replying. "No. I will not discuss Trina with you. Let it alone, Nalini."

"You can tie me up and shave me without asking my permission, and I can't ask you about Trina?"

"Do you really want to know the details of my sex life with Trina?"

*Yes. No. Definitely, no.*

"Oh all right." She scowled at him. "I don't want to know."

He picked up a short shaving brush, added a powder to the liquid in his bowl, and worked up a rich foam. Balancing the ceramic container in one hand, he climbed onto the mattress, rolled onto his side, and kissed her hip. "I can smell myself on you. Very arousing."

"Are you ever *not* aroused?" She angled her chin at his erect cock.

"Not since Santa Fe," he admitted. "And I don't see that changing anytime soon."

She tried not to preen or grin, but her lips curved, and she let out a long sigh.

"What?" he asked, lathering up the brush. "You're wearing that saucy smile that makes my balls ache and my cock dance. So what prompted that sexy smile?"

She didn't want to give him more ammunition. He had too much of an advantage over her sexually as it was. "That's my secret."

He let the brush fall into the bowl and traced a finger around the silver devil dangling from her navel. "When did you get this?"

"After the squad rescued us, I hid out in a halfway house owned by a crewmember's mother. She rescues girls from the brothels and teaches them a new trade. Body piercing is a popular career choice."

Nalini's hips lifted involuntarily when he swathed a dollop of foam over her pubic hair. "Ooh. It's warm." She squirmed when he applied more sudsy cream, and her black curls disappeared under the white coating.

The heated foam had her tingling all over. Her toes curled when Sax swept the brush over her folds, and she sucked in her stomach reflexively. "Did you decide to sleep with me before or after the navel ring?"

"Before." She hesitated for a full inhale. "Are you still angry with me about that?"

"I'm way past anger." He picked up the razor and slid the instrument up the outside of one fold. Nalini shuddered. He worked in silence, concentrating on her pussy. The gentle scraping had her vaginal walls trembling, and she bit her tongue but couldn't suppress the murmurs of pleasure escaping her lips.

By the time he cleansed her naked skin gently with another hot towel, Nalini hovered on the brink of orgasm. Her lungs labored for oxygen, and her heart threatened to jump through her rib cage.

"Beautiful," he crooned, his fingers parting her folds. He leaned in and licked the middle of her cleft, his mouth firming over her clit. He bit down and suckled hard, and she shattered, exploding as her hips levered off the mattress. He clamped a hand on her belly, eating her pleasure point. Liquid seeped from her core, and he toyed with her labia, sliding his hand back and down, pausing to rim her center and thrust two fingers into her sex.

When his tongue replaced his long fingers, Nalini went up in smoke, explosive contractions making her inner walls fist and clench around his probing tongue. Her arms slackened, legs trembled, her head fell back onto the bed, and she closed her eyes, savoring the pleasure cascading through every pore, every nerve ending.

The next thing she knew, he'd untied the scarves and gathered her close. He feathered kisses along the side of her neck, his lips skated across her cheek, and he sipped the seam of her mouth. When his tongue tangled with hers, she tasted herself, smelled her essence on his skin, and her pulsing clit quickened. She rubbed her sex on his cock. He lifted her to a sitting position, guided her hand to his erection, and ordered, "Ride me."

Her gaze flew to his, and the hunger in his navy gaze skipped sparks to her nipples, and the invisible line connecting all things sexual pulled at her clit. She pressed a palm on his pelvis, raised her leg, and pushed herself onto his cock, biting

her lip when the crown parted her channel. Her eyes crossed, and she purred, relishing the sweet invasion.

He settled his hands at her waist and urged her down the length of him. She felt full to bursting, his prick too thick and hot and hard for her to move, even though her walls were slick with cream. When he lifted off the mattress, she held on to his sides and yelped his name as his penis sank deeper and hit a sweet spot that had her gasping, “Omigod, omigod.”

His fingers grasped her nipples, and he tweaked the burning points, forcing her over a precipice. She shrieked, “Sax,” and would’ve collapsed but for his arms holding her up, his fingers rolling and pinching her into another climax.

Sax flipped their positions, rolling her onto her back, and he thrust forcefully, his cock plundering her pussy, fucking her hard and fast, pounding her channel, his gaze focused on her face. Beads of perspiration dotted his forehead. She heard his voice but couldn’t decipher his grunts until he commanded, “Come for me, elskling.”

Her body acknowledged his claim on her, and she fractured, splintering into a zillion pulsing contractions. A thin patina of sweat coated their bodies. Her breasts slipped and slid over his flesh when she squirmed, trying to find a comfortable position. He smelled wonderful, salty and soapy with a hint of aftershave, and she buried her nose in the sparse hairs scattered across his pecs.

Nalini closed her eyes and rubbed her cheek over his nipple, her tongue darting out to lick the tight point. She opened one eye and twisted her head back to see his face. He turned to her and gifted her with a slightly crooked smile. “We need another bath. He ran the back of his hand across the top of her breast. “No. A shower this time. Did I tell you about my shower?”

“A shower’s a shower,” she muttered and kissed her way along the line of a rib.

“We Norse are very particular about our bathing practices. I designed the shower myself.” He winked at her. “Come on, lazy bones. Let’s get naked and wet.”

“Aren’t we already in that state?” she asked.

“Naked, yes, properly wet—no.” He rolled over, taking her with him, and caught her in his arms as the mattress fell away. “Your pussy’s all swollen and rosy.”

“Sax.” She swatted his shoulder.

“You’re blushing all over,” he murmured, walking to the bathroom. “And that includes your pussy too. I like the bare look.”

“I’m thrilled,” she retorted. “What *would* I do if you didn’t like it?”

“The chance against me *not* liking your pussy’s too great to be calculated,” he quipped and halted. “This is my shower.” He slid her down his body until her feet touched the bare marble.

She turned around and couldn’t stifle a gasp. “Oh my goodness.”

Staring at enormous glass-tiled enclosed shower, Nalini’s gaze flitted from the holes scattered sporadically on one wall, to the even pattern on the opposite wall, to



the overhead showerheads, and what seemed to be track lighting circles spotted with vents.

"It's digitally controlled," Sax explained. "I can mimic an Amazonian rainstorm or a Long Island nor'easter."

"What are the holes and the vents for?" she asked

He opened the door, picked her up, and stepped into the enclosure. "Steam, water jets, whatever I program. I set it for a gentle spring rain this time."

"What's the bench for?" She touched a fingertip to the wooden slats nestled into one corner.

"Take a guess," he suggested, standing in front of it.

"It's too high for..." She gaped at his jutting prick. "You didn't." Her voice rose on the last two words.

"It's a fucking bench," he quipped, setting his hands on her waist. He hauled her onto the seat.

She dangled her legs and studied his erection. "Are you on Viagra or something?" She trailed a finger down the slit in the crown of his penis. "This can't be normal. I mean for a man of your advanced age."

He clamped a hand over her mouth. "You are *so* going to be punished for that, Nalini Marajh."

She creamed for him, and a whole swarm of butterflies heated her insides. "I gather I'm going to enjoy this punishment?"

His only answer was a satanic grin.

"Turn onto your hands and knees." Helping her into position, he placed her hands on the last slat. "Perfect," he crooned, running a hand up her crease. "We can fuck for hours in here."

"I'll prune," she protested, glancing over her shoulder. "Ohhhh." She strung the word out as he filled her core, slowly working his rigid organ into her sheath. Shuddering, she dropped to her elbows, and the angle of his penetration changed. His cock hit the spot that made her pussy spiral and convulse. "Omigod."

Automatically, her bottom poked higher and back, seating him so deep she'd swear later that she felt him in her throat. She rotated left and right, wriggled a tight circle around his prick, demanding, "Hard and fast, please, hard and fast."

Her fingers tightened on the slat, and she gripped the wood so hard the skin covering her knuckles stretched and paled.

His hands kneaded her ass, squeezing the cheeks, rolling her flesh between his fingers, pinching the dimples, and reached around to tweak her clit and pull on her distended nipples. She arched her spine when he plunged to her center.

Mumbling the words, "Hard and fast," over and over like a litany, like a prayer for benediction, like an invocation for orgasm, she met him thrust for thrust, begging and pleading, "Harder. Faster."

Sax obliged, his prick ramming her hard and fast, his hands splayed over her mound, his fingers abrading her sex with each plunge and piston. They rode each other to climax, Nalini slamming back into his pelvis, his testicles slapping her folds, steam, mist, and spray coating their slick bodies.

"Now, elskling, now," he demanded, plucking her clit like a taut guitar string, wringing a long, husky purr from her throat as she took flight, soaring into ignition, her pussy milking every drop of semen from his cock.

Her arms and legs shook, and she rested her forehead on a slat, gulping in air, her vagina clenching and jerking sporadically as aftershock after aftershock racked her body. He gathered her hair in his hands, combing the damp locks away from her face. The gentle rain from above died away, and foggy steam rolled from the side vents, enveloping Nalini's flesh like a soothing moist blanket.

When his cock slipped out of her greedy vagina with a slurping pop, she rose onto her palms. He quickly slid his hands under her knees and caught her to his chest. Their gazes met—hers dreamy and glazed, his fierce and intent.

Her stomach rumbled in the momentary silence, and she grimaced. "I can't believe my tummy did that at a time like this."

"A time like this?" He raised an eyebrow.

"This is so perfect," she whispered, following a droplet of water as it beaded and rolled over the six-pack ridge of his belly. "I—that was amazing." She drew a circle around his taupe areola. "I've dreamed about this for years. I've read every book on the topic." Shaking her head, she continued, "The theory is so tame compared to the actual act. But I guess you know all that."

"Yes and no. What we have between us is special, Nalini. You fire my blood." He kissed the tip of her nose. "But I believe I need to feed you. The night is young, elskling, and you're going to need every ounce of fuel."

"Really?" She slid him a head-bent peek, fluttering her eyelashes. "I can't wait. I feel like I could run a marathon. Or eat an entire medieval feast."

She borrowed one of his denim shirts, when Sax pulled on sweatpants, and they ambled to the kitchen, fingers laced together, hands swinging. Nalini surrendered to the moment, refusing to worry about Anand, her father, or what the fates had planned for her.

Nalini reheated the tandoori and the rest of the food in the microwave while Sax handled the broiler and warmed the bread and samosas. She tossed the cucumbers in the minted yogurt, explaining the origins of the dish, raita, as she did so.

Sax refused to let her off his lap when they finally sat to eat. They fed each other amid kisses, caresses, and murmured conversation. The bright rays of the sun heralded their path back to the bedroom. Sax pulled the drapes closed, and they made love one last time, a tender, slow loving that induced a sexual lethargy after their climaxes.

Nalini loved the way he kept his arm tight around her waist while he slept. If she rolled away, even for a second, he hauled her back to him and nuzzled her neck while half-asleep. She sifted his long, thick hair through her fingers, careful not to wake him up. Her chest ached as she watched the rise and fall of his pectorals. She touched a fingertip to the vein throbbing at his temple, and sniffed along his jawline, relishing the tang of his aftershave, the aroma of the sea on the stubble coating his chin.

Her pulse quickened when she remembered him forcing her to admit she belonged to him.

*I am my own person. I belong to no one save myself.*

Thoughts fast-forwarded to Harlingen, to them parting forever soon. She swallowed around the sudden clog in her throat and studied his relaxed features. He had the longest eyelashes she'd ever seen on a man. Thick and as dark as rich milk chocolate, they fanned his cheeks and cast shadows on his bronzed flesh.

The image of her bound hands danced around her brain.

*I liked being tied up. I liked that he had me at his mercy.*

Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to erase the memory of her sex creaming, the excitement thundering through her veins when he'd forced her higher and higher, wrenching orgasm after orgasm from her body, and her vagina sparked and convulsed. She wanted to rub against him, to take him inside her, and ride him like he'd wanted, to make him climb to the heavens with her. Gradually her eyelids grew heavier and heavier, and her worries slipped and slid from the front of her brain, retreating as her mind fogged into slumber.

The strident ringing of a doorbell woke Nalini. She pulled the covers over her bare shoulder, and her gaze skimmed the wrinkled sheets, searching for Sax, but found only a slight indentation in the mattress outlining where he'd slept. She elbowed to a sitting position, hugging a pillow to her belly.

Low male voices reached her ears, and she inclined her head, listening to the deep rumbles. While she couldn't decipher their words, Nalini recognized Satan's lazy drawl and Sax's clipped pronunciation. She hurried out of the bed, showered briefly, and dressed, choosing faded jeans and a loose pink cashmere sweater and forgoing socks.

When she strolled into the kitchen not seven minutes later, Sax greeted her. "Good morning."

Feeling unaccountably shy, a blush warming her throat and face, she said, "Good morning. Hi, Lorcan—back from Alaska so soon?"

"A get-out-of-jail quickie," Satan replied. "My cousin, Shifty, got himself thrown into jail. A case of fists and jaws meeting."

"Not to mention the husband who discovered Shifty in bed with his wife," Sax stated, his voice ripe with sarcasm. "Coffee?"

"I can get it," she protested when he stood. "I have two hands and working feet."

He kissed her forehead and pressed her into the chair he'd been using. "Sit."

When he set the coffee mug in front of her, she stared at the caramel liquid for a few seconds before saying, "Thank you."

He pulled the chair opposite out, sat, hauled her into his lap, and brought the mug to her lips. "Drink."

Her eyes narrowed, she sent him a nasty glance redolent of the you-not-Tarzan variety, but she gulped down two mouthfuls of the hot brew, grateful when her spaced-out brain started to connect the dots as the caffeine hit her bloodstream.

"The plans have changed," Sax stated.

"What?" Her forehead knitted, and the hint of a headache pulsed behind her eyes. "How? Why?"

"Dawir gave an interview on the Good Morning America equivalent in India." Satan traced a finger around the mug in front of him. "Suffice to say he painted your reunion as a romantic Cinderella tale. The ginormous solitaire you returned was at the center of the report. The party your parents are throwing was the highlight of the piece, and speculation's running wild about a wedding date."

"How does that change our plans?" she asked her voice wobbling a bit.

"Our legal expert says that the dowry agreement, in terms of the shares in the family company, will not hold up in Indian court." Satan gave her a half smile. "Unfortunately, public opinion will side with Dawir, given your lack of virginity."

Nalini flinched, and she elbowed Sax.

Sax centered the heart-shaped pendant she wore on her collarbone. "What Satan's trying to say is that your running away, the two of us in Santa Fe, it's all going to paint Dawir as the wronged party in the public's eye. Dawir's civil suit will be decided by a jury, and we don't want public opinion on his side. Jess and Satan met this morning and she suggested you and I tie the knot in a civil ceremony."

"What?" she squeaked and slapped the mug so hard on the table the crack of pottery on wood sounded like lightning. Caramel liquid splashed the paper napkins stacked in a stainless-steel holder. "Marry? No way. I'm not marrying anyone. Not in your wildest dreams."

She bounded off his lap and gripped the table when one knee buckled.

Satan and Sax exchanged mutual shrugs. The inherent male arrogance in the gesture fueled her rising temper. "I'm only going to say this once. I'm not getting married. Period." She stamped a foot. "And to suggest that's the only way out of this situation is ridiculous."

Spinning on one heel, she did an about turn, marched to the bedroom, retrieved her phone, and called the cab company from the first night while cramming her clothing into her lone suitcase. After a mad scramble under the bed, she retrieved her shoes and shoved them onto her feet. She clicked the luggage shut, popped out the handle, and wheeled the case down the corridor.

Satan had disappeared; only Sax was left in the kitchen. He eyed her hand clutching the suitcase, his eyes narrowed, and he said, "You *will* end up married to him if you don't stop reacting emotionally to his every move."

"Thanks," she snapped. "Wonderful words of wisdom there. And I should do what? The wise move of marrying you?"

"For the third time, I haven't asked." He bared his lips, and the wolflike snarl sent a shiver from her scalp to her jerking toes. "If, *if* I ever ask any female to marry me, there will be no doubt as to whether the question has been popped. Satan was merely relaying Jess's suggestion. A suggestion, which I negated immediately as it was proposed."

"Oh." A watershed of humiliation drenched her head to foot in a fine layer of sweat. She pulled the suitcase upright and nibbled on a finger.

*He didn't ask me to marry him. The thought had her shoulders slumping. He doesn't want to marry me. You don't want a permanent relationship, Nalini Marajh. And you've made that painfully clear.*

Ignoring the heat coasting across her flesh, she muttered, "I apologize. I didn't mean to jump to conclusions. What are we going to do?"

"Stick to the plan but accelerate the timing of everything." He levered to a standing position and carried his mug over to the sink.

"What about our sailing trip?"

"Canceled," he answered, washing the mug with a sponge. "The party's set for tonight."

Her stomach dropped to the center of the earth, and her fingers tightened around the suitcase's handle. "The engagement party?"

"Yes. Your mother has everything organized. You're to dress at your parents' condo. Guests will start arriving at eight. I'm due to be there just before nine."

Warring emotions did three-sixty flips from second to second inside her brain, fear, the yearning to finally be done with everything, a sense of hopelessness that her time with Sax would soon be ending, and all at once, one single feeling dominated her tangential thoughts. *I need to tear up the contract he signed.*

"I'll get dressed, and we'll go to Tiffany's." He set the mug into the metal dish drainer to the right of the sink.

"Tiffany's?" she croaked, so startled out of her dank thoughts her knees buckled, and she collapsed into the nearest chair. "Why are we going to Tiffany's?"

"We need a ring, Nalini."

Nalini stared at her ringless fingers, and the air in the room grew weighty and bore down on her chest, compressing her lungs. "I hate rings." She flexed her left hand. "I can't expect you to go to the expense of buying a ring, far less one from Tiffany's. We can get a cubic zirconia, a good fake."

“No. The media will pounce on that. Tiffany’s it is. I can return the ring.” He swung around, crossed one foot over the other, and folded his arms. “You have a decision to make right now.”

The look he gave her caused all the hairs on her forearms to salute, and an icy shiver rolled up her vertebrae. “A decision?”

“Walk out of my life or resolve to work out any issues that arise between us,” he declared. “You ever threaten me with a suitcase or disappear at the first hint of a problem again, keep on walking and don’t look back. I told you once before—I don’t take well to threats or blackmail, emotional or otherwise. Commit to us being together until you leave for Harlingen, or walk out that door.” When she opened her mouth, he held up a hand. “I’ll play my part in the coming events no matter what happens, but if you walk, it’s over between us.”

An entire glacier chilled her from head to foot, and her palms grew damp.

She noticed a breadcrumb stuck in the fissure between the wooden floor slats and ran her fingers over the steel handlebar of the suitcase. Her glance skipped across the divide between them and focused on his bare toes. The big one traced a circle in the air. For some strange reason the gesture made her heartbeat stutter.

Felled by a big toe.

In the distance a crow called. The distinctive harsh cawing noises rent the quiet of the setting, and Nalini clenched her hands into fists. She averted her eyes long enough to check the scenery outside the window and then squared her shoulders and met his gaze.

*I should do it. I should leave right now and save myself the heartbreak.*

## Chapter Eleven

The cocktail party was in full swing when Sax arrived. The Marajhs' condominium boasted ten thousand square feet of living space and a wraparound terrace, which overlooked Central Park on one side and the Guggenheim Museum on the other. He scanned the crowd, automatically assessing the people count at approximately one hundred and fifty.

Spying Jess, Satan, and Devil herded into a tight circle near the baby grand piano that dominated the living room's far corner, he worked his way through the guests and over to them. After the initial meet and greet, Sax queried, "Any changes to the agenda?"

"You tell me." Jess grimaced. "Your father and Haresh Marajh have been holed up in the study for the last thirty minutes. Nalini isn't answering her cell, and she's late. A half an hour late."

Sax adjusted his burgundy tie. "Destiny and Sinner dropped by this afternoon. Nalini and Destiny hit it off from the word go. Destiny took Nalini shopping for an outfit for tonight. I had a late meeting, and when I got home, I found this." He retrieved a sheet of paper from his jacket pocket.

Jess opened the folded note and read the message aloud. "*I have to do a favor for a friend. I'll meet you at the party.*"

"Nalini doesn't have any friends in the US," Sax stated.

"Yes, she does. Andrea, remember?" Devil rubbed his chin. "I think I still have her number in my reents."

"Andrea's in Santa Fe." Sax's mind raced. "And why isn't Nalini answering her cell?"

"Maybe because *she* traded her disposable cell for a permanent iPhone," Nalini answered, her voice tart and clipped and coming from behind him. "And maybe Andrea's visiting New York?"

Sax did an about turn and sucked in air when his jaw went slack. He gobbled up the vision facing him. To date, Nalini hadn't worn makeup save for lipstick. He had to ball his hands and grind his teeth to resist the instinct to throw his jacket over her shoulders, hustle her out of the room, and scour the streets for the nearest hotel. The sophisticated, elegant, poised woman in front of him bore only a slight resemblance to the tousled and flushed Nalini of this morning.

Nalini wore an off-the-shoulder, toga-style metallic blue dress banded at the waist. The supple material caressed her hips, and a midhigh slit on one side gave

tantalizing glimpses of her long shapely leg. Curling tendrils escaped from her loosely upswept hair to frame her face.

Kohl-rimmed eyes amplified her exotic beauty, sparkling powder dusted her cheekbones and her shoulders, and wet ruby lipstick made her mouth sultry and pouty even in repose. She reminded him of the exotic Sirens of Greek myth, who enticed sailors to their deaths on the rocks, and damned if he could resist her alluring enchantment. Even now when she scowled at him, arms folded, one sandal-clad foot tapping the carpet, her irritation with him more than evident, his prick danced to her tune.

A quick sweep of the room revealed what he expected. Every male in the room, young, old, married, single, eyed her appreciatively. Two young dandies, gazes locked on Nalini's back, threaded through the guests, their lustful intentions stamped on their faces.

*Mine.*

He shifted, forcing Nalini and Andrea to the right and effectively blocking the approaching young bucks.

"Jess, this is Andrea." Nalini edged back and gestured to Satan. "And this is Lorcan. He works with Sax and Dominix."

Sax's gaze flickered to the waitress, Andrea, and he inclined his head.

"Hi." Andrea grinned and tossed her head, sending her wild mane of ringlets into a blurry tussle. "Nice to meet you, Lorcan, Jess. Good to see you again, Dominix, Sax."

"Andrea's in town for three days. And guess what? She's taking a leave of absence from her job, and she's going to travel Europe for three months." Nalini smiled. "Isn't that great? She's going to stay with me in Harlingen for a couple of days before she starts to wander the continent."

*Fuck. Another ball in play.*

"What caused this sudden decision?" Sax asked, doing his level best not to snarl the question.

"It's not a sudden decision, but all part of the grand plan," Andrea explained. "I graduated two weeks ago, and before I start a real job, I want to travel. I've nothing tying me down." She rolled both shoulders. "And nothing to lose. Besides, with Nalini being in Holland, I can have a base."

"And for me it'll be great having someone I know around while I settle into my new job." A half-distracted smile curved her mouth for brief seconds. "I must admit that the prospect of living in a new country was a tad daunting. Having Andrea there will make things easier."

*Not if I have anything to say about the matter.*

He wanted her lonely and pining for him, not gadding about with Andrea and having fun. Schooling his features into a careful neutrality, Sax said, "I didn't realize that you'd found a place to live in Harlingen."



"I've sort of found an apartment." She scrunched her nose. "ConoCargo leases four or five apartments in Harlingen for new employees to use until they find a place. I got a text message from the HR department while we were shopping."

"How fortuitous." Sax couldn't keep the irritation out of his voice.

Nalini blinked rapidly, the fringe of her sable lashes dusting the curve of her eyebrows, and she ducked her head before peeping up at him. "They booked a flight for me. I leave in three days."

*Three days? No way.* Sax worked his jaw.

"We're booked on the same flight," Andrea chimed in.

*Wonderful.*

"Um, Nalini. I'm supposed to be meeting my cousins in twenty minutes." Andrea tapped Nalini's forearm. "How long will it take for me to get to the Village?"

"About twenty minutes," Sax answered, eager to see Andrea depart. "I'll call the cab company we use."

"Thank you, Sax."

He manipulated Devil into accompanying Andrea to the lobby.

Jess glanced at her watch. "Anand Dawir hasn't arrived as yet."

"He likes to make an entrance." Nalini rolled her eyes. "When we were engaged, we never arrived anywhere on time. Even for formal dinners and embassy parties."

Sax spied his father and Haresh Marajh strolling through an arched doorway, which led to the interior of the condominium. Ragnan Anders' expression mirrored the thin-lipped, set features of Nalini's father.

At that moment, the double front doors opened, and Anand Dawir, dressed in a pinstriped blue suit, white shirt, and a navy cravat tied into an intricate series of knots, sauntered into the foyer. Sax went through every foul word he knew mentally when he recognized the two women Dawir escorted.

"Are you on good terms with your aunt?" he asked Nalini.

"Of course." She craned her neck to follow the direction of his gaze. "Oh no. Why is Aunt Diyva here with Anand?" She cupped a hand over her mouth. "I have to find my mother right away."

He captured her hand. "Dawir is making a beeline for you." Sax glanced at Jess. "He has something up his sleeve. We need to do a preemptive strike. Nalini and I are going to disappear for five minutes. Get everything set up."

Nalini didn't offer any resistance when Sax whisked her out of the packed room, down the hallway, and through the first open doorway he found.

"How'd you know this was my old room?" Her gaze followed his actions as he secured a chair under the doorknob.

"I didn't," he retorted, straightening and turning to face her. His eyes flickered around the chamber, noting the numerous miniature crystal ornaments in a

cabinet, the frilly pink and white pillows, and the pile of stuffed bears and rabbits scattered haphazardly across the rose-patterned comforter. The frivolous décor seemed at odds with the headstrong, bold Nalini he knew.

“Can you think of any reason your aunt’s with Dawir?” Every instinct Sax possessed had gone on full alert the minute he’d spied her famous aunt.

She shook her head. “No. They know each other, of course. The families have been friends for ages.”

“She’s a beautiful woman,” Sax remarked, raking her features,

She shot him a fierce scowl, anger swallowing the brown of her irises. “So everyone says.” Planting her hands on her hips, chin jutting, she continued. “Aunt Diyva is petite and delicate. She’s the one who decorated this room.” Nalini waved one hand. “I always wanted to be like her. That’s why I took up classical Indian dancing. Big mistake.”

“Why?” He heard the hurt in her voice.

“Because all my instructors compared me to her, and I was never good enough.” Nalini sat on the mattress. “And then the media started doing the same thing. My nose isn’t as straight, my mouth’s too wide, my chin’s too pointy. I’m a giantess.”

Sax sat next to her, hauled her onto his lap, and pressed her cheek to his chest. “She hasn’t got an ounce of your passion and fire.” Tipping her head back he swept her bottom lip with his thumb. “And I can’t begin to imagine her rebuilding an engine.”

Nalini broke into a wide grin, and her dimples played peek-a-boo when she tried to tame her wide smile. “I think you like the fact that I can do that. This is the third time you’ve mentioned it.”

“Hmm,” he murmured. “I have this recurring fantasy of you wearing a neon orange jumpsuit and nothing else, your face all flushed, a bead of perspiration trickling from here.” He trailed a finger down the line of her throat to the valley between her breasts. “To here.”

Color stained her cheeks, and she gifted him with the saucy Santa Fe side peep that featured in his waking dreams. He touched his mouth to the top of one mounded breast. The alarm on his watch sounded. Ignoring the beep, he licked her skin and nuzzled the sweet curve, inhaling the telltale scent of her arousal mingled with the aroma of her perfume.

Her fingers tangled in his hair, and she kissed his forehead. “What was that beep?”

“Time for us to go in.” Reluctant to let her go, Sax raised his head, and their glances locked. Her eyes narrowed, and she searched his face. “Remember we’re all on your side, *elskling*. Ready?”

She caught his jacket lapels in her hands and stared at him. “In a minute.” Licking her lips, she ducked her head for a few seconds, took a deep breath, and met

his gaze. "You were right earlier about my reactions when things get a little hairy. I do tend to cut and run. I'll try not to do that anymore."

He wanted to beat his chest and roar at the small victory, but knew better than to let a hint of triumph show. Shopping for the ring at Tiffany's had not been a pleasant experience, Nalini rejecting all but the smallest, most mundane solitaire diamonds, and they couldn't agree on a single choice. Finally, he'd dropped her off to her parents' condo after purchasing a ring more representative of a gift for a baby girl than a grown woman.

"Sax?" She gave him a wobbly half smile. "Is that not good enough? I don't want to make any promises I can't keep."

"Maybe you should toss the suitcase," he suggested, winking. "It'll make cutting and running a lot harder."

"Are you trying to tell me that I'm too impulsive?" Her mouth twisted to one side.

"You tell me." He thumbed her cheek.

"I know I am." She blew out a long breath and directed her gaze to his throat. "I sent an e-mail to the HR department about the airplane ticket, telling them I couldn't be ready to leave in three days. I haven't heard back as yet."

Stifling the urge to swoop her off her feet and swing her around and around and around, he instead squeezed her closer and kissed the top of her head. Silken strands of hair tickled his cheeks, and he drank in her essence, his Nalini. A fragrance that would haunt him for the rest of his life.

"I know how important this job is to you." He tilted her chin so she had to meet his gaze. "We'll make the best of whatever time you've left. I promise you I won't press for anything more than you're willing to give. No pressures. None."

Her lids shuttered her eyes, and she fiddled with the knot of his tie. "Thanks." She pursed her lips. "I think."

*You don't like having the ball in your court, do you, elskling?*

Sax hustled her out of the room and led her back to the party. Two guests sat on the piano bench, and the faint tinkling of the ivory keys reached Sax's ears. Tarak, Nalini's parents, his mother, father, and Anna formed a tight circle to the right of the baby grand.

Placing his hand in the small of her back, Sax urged Nalini in their direction. He caught his father's eye and dipped his chin.

Haresh Marajh intercepted the glance between father and son and signaled a waiter, who immediately stalked forward carrying a tray bearing three bottles of Perrier-Jouet Fleur de Champagne and a half dozen crystal flutes.

Nalini halted in midstep, and she twisted back to look at Sax, her eyes wide, nostrils quivering. She swept her tongue over her upper lip, and he wanted nothing more than to kiss away her fears and soothe her anxiety. Adjusting his stance Sax curled his arm around her waist and whispered, "Courage, elskling. It'll all be over and done with in less than ten minutes."

Nalini gave him a slight nod and took a deep breath, her breasts straining the silken blue fabric, nipples pouting when she exhaled. His half-hard cock went turgid, and Sax choked back a stream of expletives. He couldn't afford to be distracted, not until they left the party.

"All set?" Sax met his father's gaze.

"Yes. Reacquaint Nalini, your mother, and Anna," Ragnan ordered. "Here comes the rest of your squad." He lifted his glass in the direction of the main entrance to the condo.

"And Shifty," Sax declared, unable to contain his grin as Devil, Demon, and Sinner approached, trailed by Shifty, who was almost unrecognizable sans dreadlocks and the requisite toque woven in the colors of the Jamaican flag. "I didn't know you owned a three-piece suit."

"Tip of the iceberg." Shifty flicked a finger at an imaginary speck of lint on his lapel, and his gaze turned to Nalini, who looked slightly taken aback. "Nalini, I presume." He lifted her hand to his mouth and brushed his lips across her knuckles. Sax's jaw clenched. "No wonder Lucifer's biting the dust. You are enchanting. Those eyes, that mouth."

"Stifle it, Shifty," Sax commanded. "And get your paws off Nalini."

"Are you the bobsled Shifty?" Nalini demanded. "Sax took me to your restaurant."

"Yes, ma'am." Shifty winked at her. "Did you like the food?"

Nalini face and throat turned a thousand shades of pink and peach. She sidled a surreptitious peek at Sax. He grinned and rolled a shoulder.

"Everything was delicious," Nalini declared, sending Sax a narrow-eyed dis-me-if-you-dare glare. "And I love the ambiance of the place."

"Thank you. I did the decorating myself." He curled his fingers and blew a breath over his nails.

Devil rolled his eyes to the heavens. "Don't. His ego's overinflated as it is."

"We're just here for a five-minute appearance," Sinner announced. "Destiny's waiting for me to come home to eat dinner."

"And you know her cooking." Demon sported a crooked smile. "I wouldn't miss one of Destiny's meals for all the money in the world."

"You're not invited." Sinner shot him a scowl. "I'm leaving."

"Do you want us to stay?" Devil asked.

"Not necessary. Take off," Sax instructed. "I can handle the rest."

"Later then." Sinner adjusted his tie. "Let's get outta here before the you-know-what hits the ceiling."

Shifty's lip curled. "Can you believe it? That wife of his is making him clean up his once colorful expletive repertoire."

With that, the four men bid everyone adieu and headed for the condominium's entrance.

Sax procured a glass of bubbly from the waiter and pressed it into Nalini's hand. "Come meet my mother and sister quickly." He linked her elbow as they walked around the piano.

"Darling," Chandani called out. "Can you believe how much Anna's grown?" Her mother gestured to the long-limbed coltish teenager on her left.

"You probably don't remember me," Anna exclaimed, her pageboy locks brushing her nape when she leaned forward. "But I remember you well. Sax had a picture of you dancing in costume on the notice board in his room."

Nalini's head whipped about, and she stared at him. "He did, did he?" She cocked her head to one side, and that all-woman, all-knowing Madonna smile lifted her lips.

"It's good to see you again, Nalini." Brigit Anders gave Nalini a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Anna, your brother looks like he's about to put you over his knees, and I won't lift a finger to stop him. Stop being a wicked brat."

"I was just teasing," Anna protested. "Nalini, do you think you could ask your aunt for an autograph for me? I've seen all of her movies."

"Really?" Nalini's brows rose. "You like Indian movies?"

"I like the dancing and the singing."

"She also has a major crush on the Indian actor, John Abraham," Sax drawled.

A rosy hue tinted Anna's creamy cheeks. "You don't have to tell the whole world." Her mouth took on a mulish slant.

"Stop teasing her, Sax," Nalini chided. "Why don't I introduce you to my aunt? I'm sure she'll be able to get you John Abraham's autograph, and I know she'll gladly autograph a photo for you. Did you bring one?"

"Yes." Anna patted the purse slung over one shoulder. "Thank you, thank you. OMG, all my friends will be soooo jealous. Can you believe this month, Mom? First Trina asks me to be in an MTV video, and then I get to meet the Queen of Bollywood."

When his sister mentioned Trina, Nalini frowned, her lips tightened, and she shot Sax a glare.

"Have you met Trina, Nalini? She's helping Anna break into the modeling world," Brigit explained. "Sax, did I remember to tell you the Blounts are joining us for a week in the fall? Of course all the top modeling execs will be there. It's very generous of Trina to do this for Anna."

"I met Trina a couple of days ago," Nalini replied.

Sax caught the flaring of her nostrils when she spoke and the tight set to her mouth as her jaw worked, and his lips twitched at the slight evidence of jealousy.

The tinkling of a bell silenced the chatter in the room, and all eyes turned to Chandani Marajh, who held a silver-plated bell in one hand.

Haresh stepped forward. "I thank you all for coming tonight to celebrate Nalini's safe return to her family. I know that there have been a host of rumors and innuendo regarding my daughter's absence for the past two years. Tonight I wish to dispel the gossip fueled by the media. Before I begin, however, I would ask you to raise your glass and toast the announcement of Nalini's formal engagement to the son of one of my closest friends."

Out of the corner of one eye, Sax glimpsed Anand Dawir sauntering around the piano.

"To Sax Anders and Nalini Marajh, long life and happiness."

"Hear, hear," Tarak boomed. "Sax and Nalini."

Like cattle being herded, the guests raised their flutes and repeated, "Sax and Nalini."

The lid of the grand piano collapsed when Anand karate-chopped the lid-prop holding it upright. The resounding crash and discordant ringing of piano keys reverberated around the room like the boomeranging of a jet breaking the sound barrier.

One by one, couples, threesomes, quartets, shifted their feet subtly and turned to stare at Anand. Discussions and salutations went into suspension, and the murmur of animated conversation subsided. An expectant pause throbbed in the momentary quiet. Sax watched as glances darted their way and eyes averted when they met his challenging stare. The brief on-and-off display of furtive looks reminded him of Christmas lights blinking on and off.

Sax kept a bland grin in place when Anand suppressed his scowl and bared his teeth in a macabre imitation of a smile.

"As most of you know, Anand Dawir's father and I had long hoped for a union between our families." Haresh cleared his throat. "However, that was not to be. No one can predict where Cupid's arrow will strike. Chandani and I have known Ragnan and Brigit Anders for decades. Nothing could have pleased us more than Sax and Nalini falling in love."

Sax kept an eye on Dawir's white-knuckled grip of his champagne flute, waiting for the stem to crack under the increasing pressure. He loosened his hold on Nalini and took a step forward.

"For my part, I'd like to thank Anand Dawir for his generosity and selflessness in releasing Nalini from their betrothal." Sax raised his glass. "To Anand Dawir."

*Checkmate.*

"Hear, hear," Tarak intoned. "To Anand."

They had put Anand into an impossible position—damned if he did, damned if he didn't. Having Anand's mother present as a witness had been a stroke of genius on Chandani's part. There was still the matter of Nalini's shares in the family company to resolve, but the legal maneuvers to transfer the voting rights to Tarak had begun the day before.

One step at a time.

After the toast was completed, Sax snaked an arm around Nalini's waist and shifted her so that their hips touched. Nalini compressed her mouth, swallowed imperceptibly, and leaned into him. The trust implicit in her small gesture fired a primeval protective urge hitherto buried by the civilized facade he'd developed over the years.

When Anand began to walk in their direction, she shivered and shrank closer to Sax. He patted her side and whispered, keeping his focus on Anand's face, "Hang in there. Ten to one, he's out of here in two minutes."

"I'm okay," Nalini said sotto voce. "He's not going to take this lying down."

"He hasn't much choice."

Ragnan Anders moved to stand alongside Haresh Marajh. Brigit and Chandani flanked their spouses. "Brigit and I welcome Nalini to our family. As Haresh said earlier, nothing could have pleased us more than Nalini and Sax falling in love. It's a Norse custom to signify the union of a couple with an exchange of rings."

Brigit picked up a box from the sideboard positioned against the wall behind the piano, lifted the lid, and removed a gold choker studded with diamonds and sapphires, and a matching armlet. "Since the tenth century, the oldest Anders male has claimed his bride to be with this necklace, and she, in turn, has claimed him by placing this band around his arm."

"Did you know about this?" Nalini whispered, her nails digging into his forearm.

"Yes," he answered.

Ragnan relieved his wife of the jewelry and lifted the items for all the guests to view. "As is our custom I pass the Anders neck ring and armlet to my son and heir, Sax, on the occasion of his betrothal."

Sax accepted the gold jewelry from his father.

He released his hold on Nalini and gave her the armlet.

Frowning, she studied the two-inch-wide cuff and ran a finger over the wolf's head carved into one end, pausing to rim the navy sapphires that formed the eyes of the animal.

"Thirty-seven years ago Brigit and I pledged our troth in front of our families and friends. Today, Nalini and Sax claim each other in front of their families and friends."

Shrugging out of his jacket, Sax surveyed the assembled guests.

"Why didn't you warn me?" Nalini mumbled when they faced each other.

"I wasn't sure if my father had the armlet and neck ring here in New York." He brushed a wisp of hair away from her nape. "I thought you'd be pleased. No Tiffany diamond."

She flashed him a rueful grin. "I am. Thank you."

Sax fitted the gold collar around her neck and then turned and rolled up his sleeve so Nalini could fit the armlet around his biceps. Then he drew her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly, delighting in the sweetness of her yielding, enjoying the passion of her response when she tiptoed to follow his retreating lips.

Haresh Marajh cleared his throat.

Ragnan Anders cuffed his son's shoulder.

Lifting his head, Sax checked the spot where he'd last seen Anand, only to find the man had vanished. Catching Satan's gaze he rolled his eyes to the condo's entrance. Satan got the message and hustled to the door.

A slew of well-wishers encircled Nalini and Sax, the males pounding his back in caveman approval, the females examining the Norse neck ring. Sax kept his arm clamped around Nalini's waist for the duration of the party. When the crowd thinned to under a dozen, Satan reappeared.

Sax raised an eyebrow.

"Five minutes on the balcony," Satan suggested.

The wind had picked up, and the temperature had dropped a good fifteen degrees. After the heated stuffiness of the condominium, Sax welcomed the bite of the chilly breeze.

"Nalini's aunt is staying in Dawir's brownstone." Satan rested a hip against the wall and crossed one ankle over the other. "I counted more than a dozen paparazzi following her. She gave a statement about how happy she was about her niece's engagement."

"I don't get it," Sax muttered. "Dawir must have known the media would follow her."

"This aunt, is she the mother's sister?"

"No." Sax braced on the steel railing. "Nalini's fraternal grandmother had a child late in life. Nalini's aunt is seventeen years younger than her father, Haresh."

"Is Nalini close to the aunt?" Satan tilted his chin and blew out a long breath.

"I don't know, but I'll find out." Sax dragged a hand through his hair. "Do we have Dawir covered?"

"Yeah. I ordered a twenty-four-seven tail. What can he do now though? You effectively severed his balls tonight with that toast." Satan grinned. "That was a sweet move."

"Tarak can take the credit for that one."

"What's bugging you?"

"It went too easy tonight. Dawir's not stupid. He's hiding an ace somewhere." Sax fingered his chin. "I can't shed that ambush feeling."

"I know what you mean." Satan straightened.

"I'm taking the next three days off."



"I figured. Want me to see if I can get Nalini's flight to Harlingen rearranged? ConoCargo owes us big time for the hostage rescue."

"I'm tempted, but no." Sax shrugged. "I may regret that decision sooner rather than later."

"You've got it bad."

"No denying that."

When they returned to the living room, Sax and Satan found Brigit, Anna, Nalini, and her mother hovering over a tray littered with two teapots and four dainty porcelain teacups and saucers. "Would either of you like a cup of tea?"

Satan snorted, opened his mouth, and then clamped his lips together. "No, thank you."

"My husband, your father, and Tarak are in the study." Chandani poured cream into her teacup. "I believe the brandy they're having might be more appealing than Earl Grey tea." She flashed a grin, and Sax understood where Nalini's saucy smile came from.

*Three days. I have to bind her to me in three days.*

After he and Satan had settled into two oversize, supple black leather chairs, and the two of them were nursing generous portions of oak-aged amber liquor, his father asked a question that startled Sax out of his dogged brooding.

"Repeat that, Dad," Sax directed, resting his hands on his thighs.

"Do the rumors about the Dawir's banking empire collapsing have any basis?"

"I didn't know there was such a rumor," Sax mused.

"It's not just the Dawir banks. There are several other Indian-based banks in trouble." Haresh swirled the brandy in his glass. "The worldwide mortgage collapse has cut liquidity to a trickle."

"Why did Nalini's aunt accompany Dawir tonight?" Sax met Haresh's gaze. "You didn't seem surprised she came with him."

"Chalk that move up to my wife," Haresh explained. "You know how the media hounds Diyva's every move. She and Chandani decided that her arriving with Anand and his mother would confirm that Anand had voluntarily released Nalini from their betrothal and infer that there were no hard feelings between the families."

Sax exchanged a glance with Satan. "Doesn't that directly contradict what Dawir said in the interview on the Indian morning show? He can still deny everything. And what about the lawsuit he's initiated?"

"Dad and I met with our lawyers and the company board earlier today." Tarak stretched his long legs and took a sip of brandy before continuing, "Pending Nalini's approval, her shares in the company have been transferred to me for an indefinite period. Even if Anand proceeds with the lawsuit, once Nalini signs the transfer papers, he has no claim on them."

"He can still claim the monetary equivalent of the value of the shares." Haresh shook his head.

"Which amounts to...?" Sax set his snifter on the coffee table.

"Just over eleven million in US currency." Tarak sipped his brandy. "We can, of course, keep the lawsuit tied up in the courts for some time, maybe even three years."

"But Anand can slap us with an injunction, and that would mean all major decisions would have to be decided by the courts." Haresh grimaced. "That would be ruinous for the company."

"What Anand wants is a cash flow injection large enough to keep his banking empire afloat and give him time to stabilize the situation." Tarak steeped his fingers and propped his chin on two linked forefingers. "Tomorrow our lawyers will approach him with a proposal for a hefty interest-free loan."

"The terms?" Sax raised an eyebrow.

"No more interviews, he drops the lawsuit, and if he's able to turn the bank around, we receive the equivalent monetary value in nonvoting shares." Tarak sat back in his chair and crossed one foot over his knee. "The best win-win scenario Dad and I could come up with considering the circumstances."

"You think he'll go for it?" Satan leaned forward in the chair, elbows braced on his knees.

"Time's not on Anand's side," Tarak answered. "He doesn't have much choice. If he goes through with the lawsuit, he'll never be able to get the capital he needs in time to save the bank."

"And the way you worded everything tonight, we've effectively backed him into a corner. His options are limited severely. I can't see any other way out for him." Sax glanced at the clock on the far right wall. "It's almost midnight. We should get going."

Fifty-five minutes later, Sax settled a sleeping Nalini in the center of the bed. The woman slept like the dead. Not even an eyelid flickered when he divested her of her clothes. Sax stripped quickly, slipped onto the mattress, spooned her warm body, and tucked the covers around her shoulders.

She sighed, and a flutter of air tickled the hair on his forearms.

He nuzzled her nape, and she purred and scooted closer.

His arms tightened around her reflexively.

*I can't let her go.*

Tomorrow he'd find a way to dissuade Andrea from joining Nalini in Holland. His jaw clenched.

*I shouldn't follow her.*

*I should let her go.*

## Chapter Twelve

*Today's my last day with Sax.*

Nalini stared at the ceiling, her eyes following the fan's paddle. The thought hurt physically. A sharp lance of pain radiated from her chest in waves of needles and pins to her fingers, toes, and head. Her lips quivered, and tears pooled in the corners of her eyes.

Sax grunted, and she turned slightly, her cheek grazing the pillow's downy cotton casing, and studied his face. He looked boyish, the stern lines on either side of his mouth and eyes softened in repose, his chiseled features gentled by the slight curving of his mouth. She'd grown accustomed to waking up next to him, to his face being the first thing she saw every morning.

*I don't want to leave him.*

Last night they'd walked along the beach behind his house, and for once the weather had cooperated. The full moon hung like a dazzling snowy Christmas globe in the night sky, stars twinkled, the sea shimmered under the silvery glow, and a playful breeze skipped and dipped over the water, prodding peaks in the far distance and smoothing the puckering surface in the sheltered inlet.

His even breathing feathered puffs of air across her cheeks and nose. He usually woke before her, and she stayed still, relishing this opportunity to memorize each feature, his full sensuous lips—lips capable of bringing her to ecstasy in a heartbeat. Her belly went hollow as images of those lips peppered her brain.

Eyebrows a shade darker than the hair sweeping his shoulders, a nose as strong and as pronounced as the square jaw sporting a layer of gold dust stubble. He shifted on the pillow, and his pectorals bunched and rippled as he settled more heavily into the mattress.

*You can't have your cake and eat it, Nalini Marajh. Either you want freedom or you want him.* What was it he'd said the other night? Live your life with the end in mind.

*If I died tomorrow, what's the sum of my life?*

*Here lies Nalini Marajh, Engineer of the Watch, daughter of Haresh and Chandani, sister of Tarak.*

No, *beloved daughter of Chandani, beloved sister of Tarak*, she corrected. A hovering tear escaped one eye and rolled down her cheek.

*Is that it? Is that all I am? All I want to be?*

*I have to talk to Dad.*

The thought galvanized her into action. She slipped out of Sax's arms and edged across the mattress and off the bed. She sneaked out of the room, closing the door softly, and made her way to the guest room she'd occupied previously.

After stripping, Nalini stepped into the shower and turned on the water. The spray hit her face, and she burst into tears. Great huge sobs racked her body, she had to lean on the cool tiles for support when her legs began shaking and her knees threatened to buckle. The water ran colder and colder, the chill in the stream had her teeth chattering, and still her blubbering wouldn't stop.

Finally, she gathered what little was left of her wits and turned the shower off. A glance in the mirror showed reddened eyes, a pink-tipped nose, and a bluish tint to her lips.

"I look worse than something the cat dragged in," she whispered.

Forcing her limbs into action, she towed off and dressed—picking a casual pants suit, a turtleneck sweater, and a pair of comfortable walking shoes. To her surprise, the clock showed only half an hour had elapsed since she awoke.

The note she composed and left for Sax was short but detailed.

The trip to her father's Manhattan office took less than forty minutes. During the train ride, images of the past few days played in her head. From the fateful night in Santa Fe to the long walk along the beach she and Sax had taken the evening before, the tea with her mom, the cocktail party, her initial confrontation with her parents and brother.

*Why did I burst into tears in the shower?*

*I love him. I love Sax Anders.*

*But I want freedom. I don't want to be chained.*

*Is love a chain?*

Nalini waited in the reception area while her father's executive assistant buzzed his office.

The older woman smiled at her, set the phone receiver on the hook, and waved at the door. "Go right in, Ms. Marajh."

For the first time since she'd returned, Nalini examined her father's features in detail. When had all those wrinkles formed on his face and neck? His skin had that papery fragility she'd always associated with her grandmother, and his complexion had the pallor of exhaustion she saw often in the older dockhands.

He rose when she walked in and closed the door behind her. "Nalini, is something wrong?"

"Yes," she replied, her voice shaky. "I hurt you and Mom, and I'm sorry. I'm sorry I ran away, and I'm sorry I stayed away for so long. I'm sorry I disappointed you." She clamped her lips together and blinked as waterworks threatened again. "Oh Daddy, I don't want you to be mad at me and ashamed of me."

"Nalini, my darling daughter." Arms outstretched, he hustled around the desk and enveloped her in a breath-squashing embrace. Nalini laid her cheek on his shoulder and let the tears fall. "Shush, darling girl. Don't cry, child. It breaks my heart to see you unhappy."

He stoked her spine and rubbed her shoulders, then led her over to the sofa against one wall and helped her sit on the soft upholstery. After a while, she managed to stop crying, and he handed her his handkerchief. She wiped her cheeks and dabbed her eyes and sniffed.

"How about a cup of tea?" Her father touched a finger to her cheek.

She nodded and choked out, "Tea's perfect."

While he pressed the intercom and ordered a pot of tea, Nalini straightened her clothes and tried to compose herself mentally.

"Now what's brought on these tears, daughter?"

She met his gaze and grimaced. "I'm not sure. And I wish it would stop. I hate crying."

"You rarely cried as a child," he said. "I think the first time I really saw you cry was at your grandmother's funeral."

"I remember that. Nanna was my idol." She folded the kerchief. "We did everything together."

"Those were the days when I was busy with my career and your mother and I were gone half the time. I never worried about us being absent so often, because I knew my mother would take good care of you." Haresh covered her hands with his. "I was wrong, child. Time is the one commodity we can never replace. I can never make up for all the birthdays and the plays I missed when you were young."

His words reverberated in her head. "That's it. That's exactly it. I don't want to waste any more time being estranged from you and Mom and Tarak. I don't want to be on my deathbed and regret my life."

"Nalini." Her father's complexion paled. "Are you ill? Is something wrong with you, child?" He reached for the intercom and buzzed. "Get Dr. Hadley on the phone right away."

"Dad, stop," she protested on a half cry, half laugh. "I'm fine. Nothing's wrong with me physically."

"Why all this talk of your deathbed?" Her father's deep baritone quavered on the word *death*.

Nalini chuckled and reiterated the conversation she'd had with Sax.

"Ah," her father declared. "You leave this evening for Harlingen. And correct me if I'm jumping to the wrong conclusion, but you're wondering if you're doing the right thing?"

"I'm so confused," she blurted. "I've worked so hard for this position. But I'm not sure I'm ready to leave you, and Mom, and Tarak. We've only had a few days together, and I feel like I'm leaving a whole bunch of things unsaid and undone."

"I can't give you an unbiased opinion, child." Her father shook his head. "I'd do anything to keep you here close to us. You know that you don't have to take this job, that I'll gladly buy you an apartment and give you an allowance. You only have to say the word." He snapped his fingers. "And I'd never ask you to account for a single penny."

Nalini shook her head. "I can't, Dad. I need to earn my own money. It's important for me. I'm not exactly sure why, but I know I need to work."

"Why not find a job here?"

"I've thought about that," she mused. "ConoCargo has a small New York presence. I'll investigate the possibility of a transfer."

"Your mother would be over the top with joy to have you living close enough to visit regularly." He gave her a rueful smile. "Forget your mother. *I* would be thrilled to have you living in New York."

"I'll look into it as soon as I'm settled," she vowed.

"And if I can pull any strings, will you let me?"

*My father's asking my permission.* Nalini couldn't repress a small snort. It must be snowing in hell.

"Maybe." She wrinkled her nose. "But only if I ask you to, promise?"

"You have my word, daughter." He cleared his throat. "What about Sax? How do you feel about leaving him?"

She studied her fingernails and noted the red polish had chipped on her right pinkie. "Why do you ask that? Has Tarak said something?"

"I'm old, not senile." Her father's voice had that well-remembered amused, sarcastic tone he favored for those he considered lackwits. "It's obvious that the two of you care about each other. Is he accompanying you to Harlingen?"

"No." Compelled to make the situation clear, she added, "He's not. And I don't want to talk about him anymore if you don't mind." She peeped up at her father. "I want to make things right between you and me. I can't leave with things hanging."

A knock sounded on the door. "That'll be the tea. Come in," her father called out.

While his assistant set a tea tray on the coffee table in front of the sofa, her dad suggested they have lunch at his club and invite her mother and brother along. Haresh instructed his assistant to make the arrangements after Nalini accepted his invitation.

"Dad, you haven't asked about what I told Anand," she blurted just as her father turned his office door handle. "About not being a virgin."

His olive complexion went gray. "Your mother has assured me that you made that remark simply to try to end your betrothal to Anand." He kept his gaze fixed on the wooden panel. "Do I need to know anything else?"

Nalini bit her lip to prevent a smile from forming. It cost her father a lot to give such a bland response. "No, Dad. That's exactly why I said what I did."

The morning raced by, and lunch was everything Nalini could have wished for, a cozy family meal with no undercurrents of tension or dissension. She babbled like a two-year-old, telling her family of all she'd done and seen while away from them, and they responded in a like manner.

After their meal at the 21, her father insisted on having his chauffeur drop her to the train station. She promised to call them from the airport that evening and managed not to cry until she waved good-bye to them from her seat on the train.

Nalini took a cab to the Hades Squad office building. The elevator took forever to reach the third floor, the doors opened, and déjà vu had her lips widening when she spied Sax leaning against the desk, arms folded, ankles crossed.

"Hi." She stepped out of the elevator and glanced to monitors to the right of the reception desk. "You saw me on the cameras?"

"That plus Tarak texted me when you left them." He straightened.

She took two steps, wrapped her arms around his waist, and rested her cheek on his chest. "Are you angry with me?" Her voice was muffled by his sweater.

"Angry, no. Concerned, yes." He wrapped his arms around her. "Thank you for leaving the note."

"I didn't want you to think I was running out again," she explained. "But I had to see my father."

"I take it things went well." He combed her hair with his fingers.

"Yes." She tilted her head so she could see his face. "We've a long way to go, but I think I'm on the right track with my family. Especially my dad." Sax looked tired, his tanned complexion paler than normal, and the lines around his eyes seemed more pronounced. "I didn't want to cut our time short, but I needed to see them."

"I know, elskling." His lips brushed the tip of her nose. "You do realize we have to head to the house right away? You still have to pack, and you need to be at La Guardia two hours before departure."

The pain from earlier returned with a vengeance, wrapping around her chest and rib cage and squeezing her lungs so she had to hold her breath to stop the sharp ache. She nodded and pushed away from him.

During the following three hours, Nalini felt as if she'd stepped out of her body, as if another being controlled the mechanics of her torso, her mind, her mouth. She packed, replied to his questions, made polite conversation, organized her tickets and passport in the car, and walked beside him as they strolled to the security checkpoint.

"I guess I should take that now." Nalini clasped the handle of her suitcase, tugging the carry-on from his grasp. She couldn't look him in the eyes, instead focused on the middle of his chest.

"Take care of yourself, Nalini." He released his hold on the luggage.

"You too," she croaked, meeting his gaze for a mere instant. "This is for you." She slapped two brown legal envelopes to his chest, rotated, and marched down the roped-off area without looking back. On autopilot she lifted her suitcase onto the belt, took off her shoes, stuck them into a container, and walked through the arched screening device.

Nothing registered, nothing at all—not the rest of the security check, not the brief wait in the gate, not the milling crowds, not the announcements over the intercom, not the baby bawling in the seat behind her when she finally sat on the plane.

*If this is freedom, I don't want it. I feel like I'm leaving half of me behind.*

*I don't want to be alone for the rest of my life.*

"Can I get you something?"

Nalini jumped and looked at the flight attendant who had stooped next to her aisle seat. She sniffed. "Pardon?"

"You haven't stopped crying since you boarded. Can I get you something? Some water? A glass of wine?"

Nalini ran her hand over her cheeks, and her fingertips grew damp. "I didn't even know I was crying. No. I'll be okay."

"Good-byes are tough," the flight attendant murmured. "I'm sure things will work out."

"I wish I could be sure," she whispered.

*Will you come for me, Sax?*

\* \* \*

Sax watched Nalini until she vanished around a corner. Stood there like a lump on a log hoping against hope that she'd change her mind and come running back into his arms. When the intercom announced the departure of her flight to Amsterdam, he inhaled, and on his exhale surrendered the last vestiges of optimism left in his soul.

When he arrived back home, he grabbed a bottle of Jenever, the Dutch gin his father favored, from the freezer, set it on the table along with a shot glass, and proceeded to get inebriated as quickly as possible. He hadn't believed she'd actually get on the plane. Not after the last three days they'd spent together. They'd talked about every subject possible, including family and children. He'd been half afraid Nalini wouldn't want kids, that she'd consider them a limit to her freedom. Staring at the orange and blue flames hissing across a green log, he couldn't prevent a smile as memories of their conversation from last night ebbed across his brain.

"You want four children?" Nalini squealed. "Why four?"

"I always envied my friends who had packs of cousins and siblings. I grew up alone. Anna's almost half my age." He shrugged. "I want my kids to be friends with each other, to grow up together."



"We're alike in that way, I guess." She looped her arms around his neck, and he marveled at how easily she'd lost her self-consciousness about being naked over the last couple of days. "I love Tarak, and he's a great big brother, but I don't know him as an equal. Why four and not just two close together?"

"I always figured on adopting a couple of kids." Sax tickled the whorls of her ear, and she giggled. "I've done a lot of work with the Big Brother organization, and there are so many older children who're in the foster-care system. A good home and a family life could make a huge difference and prevent a couple of kids from slipping through the cracks."

"You've put a lot of thought into this." She tilted her head to one side. "I've never thought about that before, but it's definitely worth considering. Okay, hypothetically speaking, I agree with the four-kids thing once they're close together in age."

A commercial blared from the television, interrupting his reminiscing. His hand jerked, and the liquor in the shot glass leaked onto his pants.

"Fuck it," he muttered and slapped the glass on the table. The envelopes she'd given him caught his eye. Scooping one off the table, he reached for the penknife lying next to a candle and sliced open the top. The jewel studded neck ring clattered onto the table. He barely resisted the urge to pelt the damned heirloom into the fireplace. While she hadn't worn the Viking necklace after the night of their engagement party, his optimism had risen because she hadn't returned the piece.

"Why return it now, elskling?" He fingered one of the sapphires set in the gold band and set the jewelry on the table.

The second envelope proved lighter and flatter than the first. He cut it open and slipped his hand inside. When his fingers encountered not the expected sheet of paper but scraps, he frowned and emptied the contents on the table. It took him a while before he recognized the document. And then he couldn't stop grinning from ear to ear.

But even after piecing the torn sheets together, he needed confirmation before he allowed hope to soar. Thumbing through his contacts until he found Tarak's number, he stabbed Call, and when Nalini's brother answered, "Hello," he barked, "When did you give Nalini the contract?"

"It's fucking two in the morning, Sax," Tarak barked. "What the hell's wrong with you?"

"Answer the question," Sax demanded. "When?"

"This afternoon after we had lunch."

"Thanks, buddy." Sax hit End.

She'd torn up the contract. He threw the scraps of paper into the air and followed their fluttering descent to the floor. A few scraps wound their way onto the smoldering logs in the fireplace, and Sax grinned as they combusted.

What exactly did Nalini mean to convey by destroying the contract that forbade him from communicating with her?

There was no way he could sleep now, not until he'd figured out what to do to win the ultimate prize. Nalini, married to him.

That night Sax chopped enough wood to take him through three winters. At dawn, he showered and changed and headed to the office.

Sitting in front of the panel LCD screen attached to his PC, Sax stretched his legs, propped an elbow on the desk, and rested his chin in one cupped palm. She'd given him permission to contact her, and not just remotely, as she'd originally requested. He could catch the morning flight, take her out to dinner, and pop the question.

Too much too fast.

He picked up a brass letter opener and twirled it with one hand.

*She has to come to me, to make the first move.*

Sax knew he had to keep himself fully occupied until Nalini made contact, but he also knew he'd climb the walls and drive everyone, including himself, crazy waiting for that first communication.

"What's up?" Satan stood in the doorway. "She actually caught the flight?"

"Yeah," he muttered. "Life's a bitch."

Satan sauntered into the room, hooked a chair with his foot, and slumped into the seat. "Not going after her?"

"No."

"You going to sit there and moon for the next month?"

"I am not capable of mooning," Sax snapped.

Satan slapped a legal envelope on the desk.

"What's that?" He jerked his chin at the missive.

"Bill for expunging the prescription from the pharmacy's PC." Satan stuck one boot on the corner of the desk, crossed the other leg over at the ankles, and linked his hands behind his head. "Threw the rubber in the incinerator. Didn't think you'd want it back. Lab hadn't even opened the package. No record there either."

"I owe you. Your boots are muddy."

"Some of us work for a living. We took on a new client yesterday. I met her in the park," Satan declared. "NASA."

Sax straightened. "NASA? I don't get it. They have top-class security."

"One of their research scientists has received a series of death threats over the last few months. Yesterday an attempt was made on her life. We're to discover who's behind the attempt."

"And why wouldn't they work with Homeland Security on that?"

"Let me rephrase my earlier statement." Satan waggled his eyebrows. "I may have misled you a tad."

Sax snorted. "Right. You're trying to distract me."

"And succeeding, I believe. The scientist is Gabrielle Aboud."

Sax whistled. "Daughter of a distant cousin of Bin Laden, American-born, credited with discovering three new galaxies and moving Pluto from planet to star status." He twirled the letter opener. "Won a Nobel Prize at the grand old age of thirty-seven. The lead of the team charged with finding a new fuel for future space exploration."

"What you keep in that head as trivia," Satan commented, and sarcastic couldn't begin to describe his tone. "Interested in hopping down to Cape Canaveral and doing the preliminary investigation? Terms of the contract are no communication with the outside world, save for us, until your report's finished."

A self-imposed moratorium. He couldn't have asked for a better opportunity.

"Done. I'll leave immediately." Sax stood. "How long do you anticipate I'll be off the grid?"

"Two weeks?" Satan shrugged. "You can stretch it longer if you want, but I'm guessing you won't last a second beyond that."

\* \* \*

Not one minute of the fourteen interminable days passed without his thoughts turning to Nalini. Sax worked nonstop, falling into bed only when he could no longer keep his eyes open. On the second day, Satan forwarded an e-mail from Nalini.

*In case you need it, here's my contact information. Phone: 011-31-40-561-6239. I haven't found an apartment yet and am staying at the Village Inn. Andrea arrived yesterday, and she left for Monte Carlo this morning. Hope all is well,*

*Nalini*

Three days later Satan forwarded the same message to him and added that she'd put a return receipt on the resent e-mail. Two days passed, and he received another forwarded communication.

*This is my third e-mail, and I haven't heard from you. Are you okay? You're not down with a flu or something? Did you ever open up the envelope I gave you at La Guardia?*

*Nalini*

He had her worried and anxious. Good. *See how it feels on the other foot, elskling.*

Sax composed and discarded a dozen e-mails before sending a curt response.

*Norwegians don't get the flu. I'm on assignment with little access to e-mail or voice mail. Thanks for the contact info.*

*Sax*

The reply came within two hours.

*I was so worried. Glad to hear you're okay. I hope you're not in a jungle somewhere.*

*Nalini*

He waited a whole night to respond.

*No jungle. A resort on the east coast. Sun, wind, waves, and great beaches. How's the job?*

*Sax*

Less than half an hour and he had her reply.

*Not as exciting as I'd hoped. My supervisor's very detail oriented and wants every i dotted and every t crossed.*

He interpreted that to mean she was chafing under her supervisor's control.

*Beaches & sun, huh? It hasn't stopped raining since I arrived and the temperature is in the forties. What kind of resort? Like a Sandals with all couples, or a hedonism singles' place? Lots of thongs and bikinis I imagine.*

*Nalini*

She was worried and jealous.

*Sorry to hear the weather's so dismal. No, no thongs or bikinis but there is a nude beach. Working on an all-over tan. Where's Andrea?*

*Sax*

He didn't hear from her for two days.

*Andrea's hooked up with a group from the UK, she's in Eastern Europe. I'll let her know you're concerned about her.*

*Nalini*

Sax finished his report that day, booked a flight to Amsterdam, and organized a rental car before composing his reply.

*Glad to hear Andrea's okay. I wrapped the job today, heading back to Long Island this afternoon.*

*Sax*

In twelve days he'd averaged maybe four hours sleep a night. His overtired body demanded a respite, and the second his plane left the runway, he fell into a deep, dreamless slumber. The impact of the plane's wheels hitting the landing strip jerked him awake.

Sax switched on his cell and noted the time. He had two hours to catch the flight to Amsterdam. The flight to Schiphol, Holland's largest airport, left from another terminal, and he had to jog to make the connection. He slept the entire transatlantic journey.

The rough touchdown in the Netherlands jerked Sax awake, and he knuckled bleary and aching eyes as the glass enclosed Schiphol airport terminal whizzed by the 747's window. His cell beeped when he hit the Power button, and Sax noted he'd missed three calls, all from Satan.

Since he only had a carry-on, Sax headed straight for the Hertz office. Once he had programmed the GPS and merged onto the highway that would take him to Harlingen, he adjusted his earpiece and called Satan.

"Yo," Satan muttered, his tone grumpy and husky. "How'd I know you'd call as soon as I got to sleep?"

"What's up? You called me three times." Sax checked the rearview before switching lanes.

"Collected your mail. There's a letter from Harlingen."

Sax's blood congealed. "Hang on. I'm going to pull over."

He took the nearest exit and pulled into the first gas station he found. "Open it and read it to me."

"I don't want to do that. I'll scan it and send it to your phone. Give me ten. Reply to the e-mail to let me know you got it."

Hitting the control for the windows, he watched the glass roll down, inhaled gas fumes as the wind ripped through the car, and tried to brace himself for what he could only expect was a Dear John communication.

The phone tinkled, an envelope icon flashed on the screen, his thumb hovered over Read, and then he dropped the cell into the passenger seat. She wasn't getting off that easily. If Nalini was going to dump him, then by God she'd do it to his face.

At noon he arrived at the Village Inn. He left his carry-on in the car. Gray skies and a light drizzle gave the town of Harlingen a somber cast.

The lobby of the inn was surprisingly crowded. Luggage and people jostled for space. Doormen and waiters bustled about a side entrance that led to a tiny restaurant, the front desk was crammed into the far right corner, and the smell of apples and cinnamon reminded him he had slept through last night's meal and this morning's breakfast.

An elevator dinged, and he automatically glanced in the direction of the sound as dark doors parted.

Nalini stepped into the lobby.

She looked wan and leaner than he remembered, her cheekbones more prominent, and his heart turned over in his chest and forgot to pump blood through his blood vessels. He stood paralyzed, unable to move a limb, his eyes manacled to her face, his brain willing her to see him, to run into his embrace.

She heaved a great big sigh, her breasts lifting and falling, and raised her head. Their eyes met and she froze. The occupants of the elevator streamed around her immobile form. Someone bumped her from behind, and he swore and ate up the distance to her.

"Sax," she whispered, her lips curling and flattening, and she reached out a hand and touched her finger to his grizzled cheek. "You're not tanned."

He blinked. "Tanned?"

"The nude beach," she muttered.

"What did you tell me in the letter?" he demanded, oblivious to the onlookers, unaware of the irritated glances from those attempting to board the elevator, not

hearing the music playing in the elevators or the doorman calling out the names of guests who'd ordered taxis.

"You didn't read it?" she demanded, her forehead creasing, and she bit her lip.

"I came straight from my assignment," he declared. "Satan told me about it."

"Oh." She ducked her head to study the floor and, from the direction of her gaze, his boots. Her tongue snaked out to wet her lips, and his permanent hard-on threatened to explode.

"Tell me," he repeated his hands balling into fists. "Right now."

"Not here." Her lips took on a stubborn cant, and she scanned the lobby, avoiding his gaze.

He caught her chin with his thumb and finger and forced her to look right at him. "Right here. Right now."

"Okay," she snapped. "Okay." And jerked her chin from his hold. "I told you that on my deathbed I want to have no regrets. I don't want to think if only. I want to be surrounded by my husband, children, and grandchildren. I want to have been there for each birthday, each school play, each soccer game.

"I want the last thing I see to be the face of the man I love. I want your face, your voice, your scent, your touch, to fill my last moments on this earth, Sax Anders." Tears rolled down her cheeks, and words spewed from her lips. "And you can go ahead and laugh or joke or whatever you want. I hope you had fun on the nude beach."

"Elskling, elskling." He hugged her to him. "Oh God, I missed you." He drew back to look at her and scrubbed the tears from her face with his fingers. "Don't cry. Please don't cry. I was working in Cape Canaveral for NASA. The nude beach was for seniors only. What's your room number?"

"Seniors? Seniors?" Her voice rose to a shriek. She cuffed his shoulder. "Seniors! You beast! I couldn't sleep, picturing you surrounded by hordes of Trinas. How dare you!" She hit him again.

"I so love you, Nalini Marajh." He whooped, scooped her off her feet, and headed directly for the stairway.

"What're you doing? Where are you going?" She thumped his chest. "Don't think that you can just take me to bed and make me forget how mad I am at you!"

"Works for me, sweetie," a woman to the left of them offered.

"Nothing like makeup sex," a grandmotherly type intoned.

"Ah give him a break," a young long-haired male dressed in the tie-dyed T-shirt of the hippie era lounging on the landing two steps above advised. "The man's got eyes only for you."

Color suffused Nalini's throat and face. She glanced over Sax's shoulder, her eyes widened, and she buried her nose against his neck. "You couldn't have waited until we were alone. Everyone's looking at us."

"No. As a matter of fact, I can't." He let her slide to her feet on the landing, dropped to one knee, dragged the neck ring from his coat pocket, and asked, his raised voice silencing all the chatter in the lobby, "Nalini Marajh, will you marry me? Will you make the happiest man on the planet, no, in the universe?"

Unshed tears glistened like diamonds in her eyes. She bit her lip and swallowed. "Oh, Sax, yes, yes, a million times, yes."

The entire lobby broke into thunderous applause.

THE END

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*A Paratrooper in a Pear Tree*  
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## Jianne Carlo

Jianne Carlo knows multi-cultural romance. Born to an Indian father and a Hispanic mother intent on becoming a nun, she met and married her Dutch-bred immigrant husband in her last year at college. Their children check off the majority of the boxes under the category, Ethnic Origin.

Add to this the fact Jianne grew up on a sixty by forty Caribbean island where the population mixture represents the world's religious, cultural, and ethnic diversity (and some mixtures no one's dreamed up) and you have a multi-cultural woman who believes the word "Mutt" represents the best of human nature.

She's lived and worked in Canada (Ontario, Vancouver), the United States (San Francisco, various small cities in southern California, Miami, and Parkland) and the Caribbean (Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Barbados, Puerto Rico, Dominican Republic, Tortola) and South America (Guyana).

Her passions in life center around her proudest achievements: a happy marriage (measure of happiness varies with level of irritation), and three grown sons of the finest caliber she's proud to call friends, although they're never allowed to forget the mom factor.