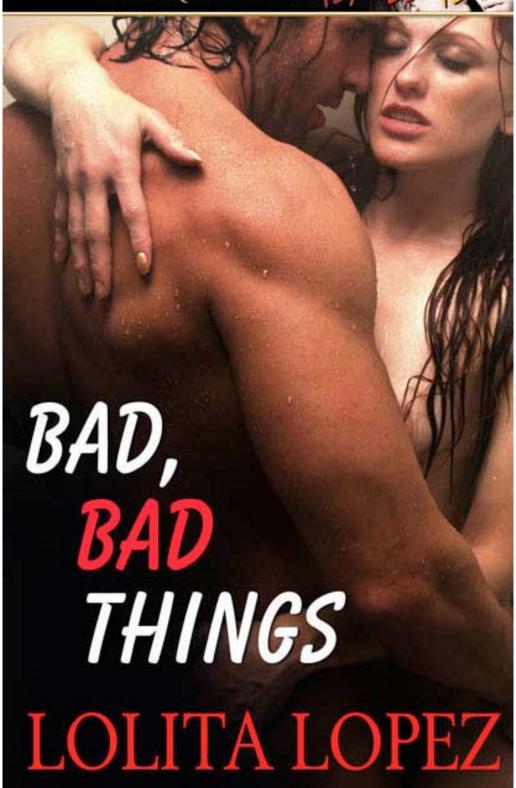
ELLORA'S CAVE GEN-EDGE



Bad, Bad Things

Lolita Lopez

Pretty Things, Book One

Ofelia Brandt, D-list actress and tabloid princess, needs money—and she needs it fast. Her hot mess of a sister has gotten herself in deep with some really scary people. It's up to Ofelia to deliver the money they're demanding on deadline, or else. With her back against the wall, Ofelia knows she has only one choice. Blackmail.

Her mark? Sexy-as-sin Russian billionaire, Sergei Alexandrov, star of a kinky sex video that Ofelia went to great lengths to steal. After a steamy encounter in his car, Sergei agrees to pay for the video...but he wants one more thing. Ofelia. For one night. Preferably naked.

There's always a price when you do bad, bad things...

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



Bad, Bad Things

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BAD, BAD THINGS

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Chapter One

"I need money. Fast," I add, slipping into the seat across from Marco. I hide the wince my movements elicit and try not to think about how much pain I'm in at the moment. "By the way, you need to look up the definition of 'private', cuz this ain't it." I gesture at the busy patio of the trendy restaurant. Just over the ivy hedge, paparazzi skulk, cameras armed for that perfect shot. "And what in God's name are you wearing?"

"Do you like it?" Marco runs a hand along the front of his hideous flower-print blazer layered over an equally offensive yellow shirt. He flicks the garish pink carnation tucked into the lapel. "Is this gorgeous or is this gorgeous?"

I try not to grimace. "Channeling your inner Lady Gaga again?"

He puts up a beautifully manicured hand. "I don't want to hear it. She's fabulous!"

"She's something," I mutter, adjusting my sunglasses. "But really, I'm not here to debate your questionable fashion sense."

"I know." He waves his hand and rolls his eyes. "You need money. Tell me something I haven't heard a thousand times. Maybe you should put away the Oscar dreams, use those connections of yours and oh, I don't know—get a job. I hear Cater Street Productions is casting."

My nose wrinkles. "They do crappy straight-to-DVD films."

"Um, sweetie, beggars can't be choosers. I mean, hon, remember that one and only film of yours?" He blows a raspberry and gives me two thumbs way down. "Bombs away, baby." He shakes his head sadly. "You had a hit show once."

"And I'll have one again," I snap back in irritation. It's as if Marco has been eavesdropping on my agent's calls or something.

"Look," he says gently, "it's not like you're the only actress who's had a hard time transitioning from a successful tween show to the big leagues. Why don't you take an industry job or something? Better yet, let them film that reality show they've been after you about for the last year."

"I'm not about to have cameras following me around 24/7. I won't humiliate my mother like that. You know she likes her privacy!" My jaw clenches at just the mere thought of people trashing my mother in the rags. I take a second to cool down.

"This time, Marco, the money thing...it's different. This isn't about covering my AMEX or the rent." I glance around to make sure there are no camera lenses peeking through the hedge before lowering my sunglasses.

Marco gasps. "Sweet baby Jesus! Who gave you a Chris Brown beat down?"

"Shh!" I fix him with a frown and shove my sunglasses back into place. I push a little too hard and smash the frame against my swollen eye.

"It's Mona again, isn't it?" He shakes his head. "Look, Ofelia, I know she's your sister, but she's a fucking liability."

"Yeah, it's Mona and her boyfriend or dealer or whatever the hell he is." I sigh and sit forward. "I can't get into specifics here. Suffice to say these people aren't fucking around. They want their money."

"Mexican? Columbian? Russian?"

"Mexican. Big, hulking bastards armed to the teeth."

Marco groans and rubs his forehead. "How much? Is it something I can loan you? The website is doing well and I just got that big advance check on the book. Maybe I could dip into the capital for the music label."

"No, Marco." I twist a curl around my finger. "I'm touched that you'd go that far for me but this is way out of your league. You don't have the kind of money they want."

"So what's the plan?"

My lips curve in a mischievous little smile. "Junior year at Cranbrook-Canterbury Prep ring any bells?"

Marco pales. "Oh no. No. No. No!" He spreads his hands like an umpire calling safe. "You promised to leave those schemes behind when we graduated. We were all lucky we never got caught. No way," he says firmly. "Count me out."

"I never counted you in," I say, annoyed. "Not this time, anyway. I just need info." "What kind of info?" he asks warily.

"The juiciest kind, Marco. Not those bread-and-butter tidbits but the really dirty stuff that has your legion of gossip addicts crashing your server."

He sits back and crosses his arms. "Are you sure you want to go this route? I mean, honey, this isn't high school anymore. Blackmailing the principal for his," Marco touches his nose, "habit was one thing. It was an easy end to our cash-flow problems, but this?"

"I don't have a choice." I can hear the desperation in my voice and it makes me sick. Memories of last night rush through my mind. My heart races and I swear I can smell the cheap cologne on the dirty bastard who flung me to the ground and nearly ripped out my hair as he dragged me into the dining room. It's all I can do not to flinch at the memory of his fist slamming into my face.

And there was just something so familiar about his face, as if I'd seen it somewhere before...

"These people mean business. It's the money or my family."

Marco holds my gaze for a long moment before finally nodding. "All right." He leans forward and licks his lower lip before pulling it between his teeth. He holds it there and fiddles with the straw wrapper resting between us on the table. He issues a heavy sigh. "There's this rumor about a sex tape."

I roll my eyes. "That's so not a big deal anymore. Everyone has a sex tape, even your grandma."

"Hey!" He's really offended by the idea of his sainted *abuelita* playing Jenna Jameson for some sweaty old man.

"Sorry."

Marco narrows his eyes at me. "Doubt it."

I shrug. "So there's a sex tape starring who?"

"Cruz Rafaelo."

"The Spanish soccer player?" He nods. "I'm not seeing the juicy part. The guy is a huge man-ho. His fine ass in those tight little Speedos has been plastered all over every tabloid in creation. He's always got some overly tanned, bleach-locked tart hanging off him."

Marco shoots me a shut-the-fuck-up-and-listen look, so I zip it. "Sorry," I apologize again.

"Can you keep quiet long enough for me to finish?"

I bob my chin dutifully and rest my hands on the table. "I'm listening."

"Good." He takes a sip of his ice water. "This tape...it's not your typical sex tape. From what I hear, it's filthy. I mean super-kinky shit. And here's the kicker." Marco grins almost evilly. "His partner? It's not a woman."

"I'm still not seeing the juicy angle. So this soccer player made a gay sex tape. BFD!"

"It's not the fact that he's being jackhammered by another man. It's the *identity* of the other man."

As he speaks, I can tell Marco's been guarding this juicy little tidbit for quite some time. He practically radiates giddiness as he leans even closer to whisper the name of the man.

"Sergei Alexandrov."

For the first time in my life, I am speechless. My tongue won't move. It sits like lead in my mouth. I try to wrap my head around that piece of information.

Sergei Alexandrov, sexy-as-sin Russian billionaire and paranoid recluse, making a sex tape with a slutty soccer star.

And now I know why Marco sat on the rumor. The Russian has a reputation for ruthlessness. How else does a thirty-something amass that kind of power and fortune? He employs a private army of ex-Special Forces types. Muscular, testosterone-overdosed, gun-toting, trigger-happy nuts. The kind of people who would think nothing of putting a whole hell of a lot of hurt on anyone stupid enough to publish that kind of rumor on a gossip site.

"I didn't know he was gay." It's the only thing I can think of to say. "I never got that vibe from his pics in *Forbes*."

"I don't think he is." Marco toys with his straw. "It's all about power and control with him. Or at least that's what I hear." He shrugs. "Apparently there was some big brouhaha between Cruz and his coach. Sergei owns the team and he spent a shitload of money bringing Cruz to the program. I hear this was his way of disciplining him."

I'm not sure why—maybe I'm just a total pervert—but the idea of Sergei subjugating Cruz turns me on something fierce. I can just see Sergei shoving Cruz down on his knees while he unzips his fly. I'm taken back to that night in Cabo when Marco and his boyfriend let me stay in their room and watch. My clit throbs and my toes curl as those memories leave me all warm and tingly.

I squeeze my thighs together in an attempt to lessen the pulse of my sex. I need to focus. "Who told you about this?"

"A journalist never reveals his sources."

I start to point out that spreading gossip via Twitter and a blog isn't really journalism, but bite my tongue. "Look, I need the source so I can shield you from the shit storm that will most definitely ensue."

He relents with a dramatic sigh. "The ex-girlfriend, some Eurotrash celebutante. Monica something-or-other," he says with a wave of his hand. "And yes, I checked it out. I got close enough to Cruz at a club opening in Vegas a few weeks ago to ask. He got very shifty."

"Who has the tape?"

"Cruz."

"The only copy?"

"He keeps it on him when he travels. Wears the key around his neck. There's a false bottom in his suitcase."

"What! Who does that?"

"I know," Marco says with a laugh. "Like some spy, right? Instead of state secrets it's man porn!"

I lean back in my seat and chew on my thumb. It's a nasty habit but one I've never been able to break. "Cruz's team is coming here to play that big expo later this week. I saw one of the billboards on the way over here. Sergei will come to watch his team. It's the only time I can make my move. It's cutting it close to the deadline though."

Marco seems suddenly tense. "You're really going to do this?"

"Do I have any other choice?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"They'll kill my mother and me and Mona and that worthless junkie she loves without so much as a second thought." I shudder with remembrance of the cold, almost dead look in my attacker's eyes. "Of that I'm sure."

Marco slumps in resignation. "Well you can't pull this one off alone."

"Yeah," I agree, inhaling a calming breath. "It's time to round up the girls."

* * * * *

Two hours later, the old crew is back together. Fox and Jolie sit across from me, their backs against the sofa as they try to digest all that I've just divulged. They both expressed outrage at my beating the night prior. Here, in the privacy of my bedroom, I

bare all the bruises from my horrifying experience. The finger marks around my throat and scratches on my upper arms. My skinned knees and broken toe and black eye.

"Maybe we could pool together whatever liquid assets we have," Jolie suggests.

"None of us can get this kind of money together, not even you, Jolie." I shoot down her suggestion as nicely as possible. Obviously shaking down my friends for money was my first instinct but when it wasn't feasible, I moved on to Plan B. "And if these people think my friends will keep bailing me out, they'll never stop asking for more."

"This is just fucked," Fox grouses. "And if you don't want the whole world to know what happened here last night, I suggest you get someone over here to fix the front door. It looks like someone took a goddamned battering ram to it."

Not surprisingly, Fox is still nursing a hangover. She relies heavily on the Texas Sunrise clamped in her hand. A rainbow of ink discolors her fingertips. Black smudges mar the edge of her right palm. She's wearing that thick rubber band around her wrist again. That never bodes well. Her yoga pants ride low on her curves and display a wide swath of tanned tummy. A white *Star Wars* tee two sizes too small barely holds in her C cups. Green flip-flops dangle precariously from her toes.

Jolie is the yin to Fox's yang. Where Fox knows how to rock that just-rolled-out-of-bed look like no one's business, Jolie looks as if she just stepped out of a Bergdorf window display, in her simple yet elegant green silk dress and patent peep-toe pumps. Her bared shoulder lends an air of sophisticated sexiness and highlights the beauty of her brown skin.

Fashion sense seems to be ingrained in her DNA. Not surprising for the daughter of the first African-American supermodel. With her stunning looks, Jolie could have easily followed in Mommy's footsteps but chose a different path, eschewing fashion for a stint as an events coordinator in one of her father's hotels.

"This is really serious, O." Fox plays with her rubber band. "I mean, like, call the FBI or DEA serious."

"And tell them what?" I throw up my hands. "My drug addict sister's loser boyfriend ripped off a shipment of coke, got scammed by his connection and now has the entire Mexican mafia after him? Oh, and sis and douche bag just happened to fuck off to God only knows where, leaving me to clean all this up? Yeah, I bet that will go over real well. I'm sure the feds will be lining up to help me out."

"But blackmailing someone like Sergei Alexandrov?" Jolie visibly shudders. "He stayed in one of our hotels in Paris once. We had to clear out the floors above and below and let his team come in to do bug sweeps and all sorts of crazy stuff." She shakes her head. "This isn't going to be easy."

"Neither is watching some cartel enforcer kill my family!"

Jolie jumps at my too gruff reply. She sighs loudly and picks out a black hair tie from her purse. She runs her fingers through her silky black hair, gathering it together and twisting it into a loose bun at her nape. "So what's your plan?"

"Whatever it is, it better be damn good." Fox swirls the remnants of vodka, lime and cranberry juice in her glass. "We haven't pulled one of these since senior year at Cran-Can. We're rusty as hell and this is no time to make mistakes."

"We've done this half a dozen times at least." I try to sound as reassuring as possible. "We'll just do what we do best. I'll take care of the B&E. Fox, you'll take care of Cruz. Jolie, you'll set the scene."

"The team is staying at our hotel," Jolie says, pulling out her iPhone.

Fox smirks. "That's convenient. Guess that means we don't have to pull the fire alarms or cause an infestation scare of some kind to get the players moved."

"A lot less fun though." I catch her gaze and wink. If there's one think Fox loves, it's devious little stunts like that.

Jolie's fingers tap away at her screen. "According to the booking info, our mark is in a shared room but I'll make sure he's moved to a private suite." She does some more tapping. "You'll need a uniform of some kind. Housekeeping or room service," she

decides. "You'll have to pull the whole shift though. Security is tight. If you try to slip in after shift change, it won't work."

"I'm not afraid of a little hard work. I'll pay off a maid and get her uniform. I want your hands clean." I turn to Fox. "Yours too."

"Hooking up with him won't be a problem." Fox makes a face and downs the last of her cocktail. "But I'm not sleeping with him."

"I would never ask you do that," I say with all seriousness. "You just need to get the suitcase key, pass it off to me and keep him occupied long enough for me to get what I need."

Jolie looks up, her lips drawn tight with worry. "You're not going to ransack the place are you? That could complicate matters."

I shake my head. "I know where it is. I'm going to grab it and go."

"What if he calls the police?" Fox gets up and makes her way to the tiny built-in fridge near my entertainment center. She grabs a bottle of chilled vodka, the glass bottle fogging up as the vodka splashes into her glass. "The last thing we need is the cops poking around in all this, especially with a fucking Mexican drug cartel involved."

"He won't call the cops." In this, I'm absolutely confident. "What's he going to say? That someone broke in and stole his sex tape? A sex tape that he obviously made on the sly? I mean, do you really think Sergei Alexandrov okayed a video camera in the room that night?"

"Do you really think Sergei Alexandrov is going to let you get away with this?" Fox eyes me over her glass. "This isn't high school, where the worst that might happen is expulsion. Back then our parents could clean up our messes by spreading around a little money and handing out favors. But now?" She takes a long, hard drink and then shakes her head. "This is the real world, O, and in the real world, people get hurt."

"You think I don't know about hurt?" My voice is shrill so I reel it in. If there's one thing I'm not big on, it's emotional displays. Saying anything more on the subject of life's generally shitty treatment of me won't get me anywhere. "Look," I say calmly, "I

know I'm asking a lot of you. This is risky and I'll do my best to bear the full brunt of the consequences if it all goes tits up but if you're uncomfortable taking part, I understand."

"Hell yes I'm uncomfortable!" Fox stalks back over toward us and plops down with a hmmph. "I'm finally getting my shit together—"

"Uh-um." Jolie clears her throat and points to the vodka. "You do realize it's barely two in the afternoon, right?"

Fox shoots her the finger. "All right. I'm getting *some* of my shit together," she rephrases while giving Jolie a look of utter annoyance. "I don't need a felony extortion charge on my rap sheet. The press would kill my chances of putting together my publishing company. I haven't been working my ass off for the last year to lose this, the only thing I've ever really wanted, when I've come so close."

"So you're out?" I fully appreciate her position. Fox has been drawing and producing and selling her own line of graphic novels and manga since high school. Whatever her problems—and she's had a ton—that drawn fantasy world of hers was always the rock that kept her somewhat grounded.

"Yes. Aw hell. NO!" Fox gulps two-thirds of her glass. She hisses and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. "I'm in. I've always got your back, O."

Jolie holds out her hand, palm up, and waggles her eyebrows. I slap my hand down on top of hers without hesitation. Fox rolls her eyes and joins. "Christ, we're a sappy bunch."

That gets Jolie and me giggling. It suddenly hits me just how amazing my two best friends are to risk so much to help me. I've always heard it jokingly said that you know your best friend is *really* your best friend if she'll show up with garbage bags and shovels, no questions asked. Jolie and Fox are those friends.

Teary-eyed, I sling my arms around their necks and pull them close. "I don't know what I'd do without you guys."

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"Probably get snuffed out by some cartel crony," Fox comments as she ruffles my hair.

Jolie snorts and sits back. "Your sense of humor is terrifying."

Fox just shrugs and finishes off her vodka. "We can't all be awesome."

She starts to get up for another glass but I stop her with a gentle hand. "Maybe we could cut back just a little until this job is done?"

Fox huffs but relents. "Yes, mother."

Satisfied, I reach for a nearby notepad and pen. "So this is how it's going down..."

Chapter Two

"Come on, Mama. One more bite?" I gently prod her mouth with the siliconetipped child's spoon. She jerks away and bangs a fist against her chair. "Okay. We're done."

I set aside the bowl of pureed squash flower soup—her favorite—and carefully wipe her face with a damp washcloth. The left corner of her mouth droops and orangetinted saliva oozes from her lip. I swipe it clean. Her green eyes bounce from side to side as she shakes uncontrollably, arms and legs undulating in a jerky rhythm. I offer her a sip of water through a straw. Washcloth at the ready, I catch the stream from the left side. "More?"

She shakes her head. "Na-na-na-no."

Deciphering her stuttered and jumbled speech has become second nature. "All right." I put down the glass and cloth. She tries to brush her bangs from her eyes but misses. Instinctively I reach out to help but stop myself just before touching her. Although it frustrates her to try and miss, it pisses her off even more when I help her. She eventually gets them moved out of the way.

"Ha-ha-ha..." Mom stops and gives a lopsided frown. She makes a clunky motion with her hand. "Sna-sna-snip."

"Haircut?" I guess correctly because she smiles. "Sure. I'll get Bonnie to come over and do your hair sometime this week. Maybe I can give you a mani-pedi tomorrow?"

She nods, her head bobbing wildly. I'd have one of the girls at Bonnie's salon do it but I know how difficult it can be to attempt to paint the toenails and fingernails of a woman who can no longer control her body's movements.

"De-de-mo-mo-na?"

"Mona?" I cringe inwardly, my stomach churning at the thought of my drugaddled older sister hiding out in some crack house with her douche bag boyfriend. "She's not here today. She's still at the beach house with Carter."

I hate lying to my mother but there's no other way. Her memory isn't as good as it used to be and she gets confused so easily. I'd rather just lie to her than try to explain Mona's drug addiction and the mess she's gotten herself into this time. But after seven years of caring for my mother and shielding her from Mona's dumbass moves, I'm something of a pro.

"I'll try to get a hold of her later, see if maybe she'd consider coming home sooner." Another lie. If I knew where Mona was, I damn sure wouldn't be chatting her up. I'd be asking her where the hell she is and when she was going to tell me she had the Mexican Mafia on her ass.

The buzz of my cell phone in my pocket sends my pulse racing. It's time.

"I'm heading out tonight, Mom. It's Sandy's night to sit with you. She'll probably be here not long after I leave. Delia will stay with you until then." It's Thursday, so I switch on the TV and turn it to her favorite channel. I maneuver her electric wheelchair into place, replace the emergency call button necklace I'd taken off before feeding her and make sure she's comfortable.

"Ca-ca-care-foo-foo-ful." She reaches for me, arm waving wildly and fingers in spasm.

"I will," I promise, kissing her cheek. "I'll send Delia up."

I leave the room with one last smile in her direction. Sadness wells up inside me. That beautiful, once-vibrant woman has been sentenced to a lifetime spent within the walls of our home and the paved pathways around the estate. I push away those vile memories of the night that changed our lives and reduced my mother to an invalid. I can't think of that right now, not when I'm just hours away from breaking into a hotel room to steal the sex tape that I pray will be my family's salvation.

I grab what I need from my bedroom and skip downstairs to the kitchen for a bottle of pomegranate juice. I spot the pile of bills on the kitchen counter. Just the thought off all the final notices contained in those seemingly innocent envelopes sours my tummy. The weight of juggling my mother's mounting medical bills along with the cost of upkeep around the house makes my shoulders sag.

Like everything else that burdens me, I shove it out of my mind and concentrate only on the moment at hand. Tonight I have to focus. One slip-up and I'm fucked six ways to Sunday.

I snatch a bottle of chilled juice from the fridge and toss the bills in the bottom drawer of the kitchen island along with all the other random odds and ends. Out of sight, out of mind.

"Ten cuidado, mi'ja." Delia, our longtime cook and housekeeper, stands in the foyer, arms crossed against her chest. Worry etches deep lines in her face. I can tell she's still angry with me for locking her in the panic room/closet of my mother's room the night those cartel assholes paid us a house call. The second I heard the front door splinter, I'd known the shit was about to hit the fan. Mom and Delia's safety had been my only concern. Knowing they were safe while I was having the crap knocked out of me made the experience somewhat less terrifying.

Somewhat.

"I'm just going out for some drinks with Fox."

"No me mientas." She doesn't buy the lie for one millisecond. Delia knows me as well as my mother, sometimes better. It's not surprising really. She's been in my life from the first moment I drew breath.

And, of course, there's that tiny little insignificant detail about the blood we share.

But we never talk about that.

Ever.

"All right." I close the distance between us and take her hand. It's chapped and red from cleaning. I frown and shake my head, wondering why the hell she won't use the gloves I leave in her cleaning caddy. "I wouldn't be doing this if there was any other way."

Her lips purse before she sighs and draws me into a squishy hug. Her scent, a mixture of lavender soap and Pledge and Dawn dish soap, wraps around me, calming my nerves. It's like coming home from a long vacation and sucking in that first breath that makes you feel all warm and relaxed and secure.

Delia pushes me out to arm's length. She holds my gaze. "This thing with your sister," she says, her English heavily accented, "it has to stop. We cannot live like this."

"I know. I'm working on it."

Delia kisses my forehead and pats my cheek. "I leave supper en la refrigerator."

"Great." I peck her cheek. "I'll try not to be out too late."

"Mmm-hmm," she hums skeptically.

"Sandy will be here soon. If she asks about this," I gesture to the battered foyer, "just tell her I had a fight with my drunk boyfriend." When she makes a face, I mirror it. "Look, I'd rather have people think I'm some kind of hot mess than have them know the truth."

I don't stick around to argue with her. She won't tell Sandy anything about the door. Delia will do what she always does in sticky situations—pretend she doesn't speak enough English to understand. I'm fairly certain Sandy, Mom's sometime night nurse since I can only afford her a few nights a week, thinks Delia is fresh off the bus. Clearly Delia sees the advantages to the assumption so I leave it alone.

The drive to the parking lot where I've stashed a rental car doesn't take long. I down the last of my juice, switch vehicles and slip into the backseat of the compact to change into the maid's uniform. An ash-brown wig and square-framed glasses change my appearance quite a bit. No longer am I the familiar face from that cheesy tween show that made me a household name, or from the paparazzi shots snapped as I

stumbled out of clubs with Fox. I'm a nobody, a Plain Jane able to blend in and disappear.

After I park the rental in the employee lot, I fall in with a bunch of other employees arriving for the night shift. No one gives me a second glance. The ID badge and uniform I bought off Linda Martinez, a new maid with only a couple days of employ with the hotel, grants me all the access I need. Since Linda is so new and hasn't made any meaningful work relationships, I don't have any trouble playing the part. No one even asks me about my day as I pick up my cart.

Gee, no wonder Linda was so eager to sell me her stuff. I wouldn't want to work with the rest of these Debbie Downers either.

The housekeeping manager doesn't give me more than a cursory glance as she barks orders. Me, on the other hand? I can't tear my gaze away from the big, square-toed man shoes she's wearing or the very obvious stubble poking through her pantyhose. Who wears a skirt without shaving her legs—even if just to the knee? And what's with the run? Seriously, pantyhose are cheap. Get a new pair already!

"Room 1221 wants the rings wiped off the countertops in the dining room. The bathroom isn't up to their standards either."

Although I loathe cleaning, I'm secretly pleased as I push my cart down the hall toward the service elevators. A little planning goes a long way to a smooth execution. We just might pull this heist off.

Jolie sends me a text. Cruz still hasn't left the hotel. While I wait for the green light, I play housekeeper. It's not particularly glorious work but it's hard and keeps my mind occupied. This isn't a time for second-guessing or what-ifs.

* * * * *

Three-and-a-half hours later, I'm elbow-deep in a vomit-splashed toilet, my nose buried in the crook of my other arm as I try not to gag on the tequila and Jell-O fumes, when my pocket vibrates. I consider whether or not to stop scrubbing. Not wanting to subject myself to the stench of tequila puke any longer than necessary, I put some elbow grease into my work and finish up the job quickly. When I stand back and give it a look, I see a sparkling toilet of which even Delia would approve.

I chuck my gloves in the waste container on my cart and fish out my phone. There's a text from Jolie. Cruz has left. Fox is on the prowl.

"Finally," I grumble, and get back to work, my body hyper aware as it anticipates the next text-message buzz.

I have hopes the night will improve after the Jell-O shot aftermath but it doesn't. The things people get up to at night in hotels! Fox and Jolie and I got up to some rather hair-raising antics while on vacation in Amsterdam once but after answering a few more housekeeping calls, I'm suddenly convinced I'm a prude.

It's nearly three in the morning when Jolie texts me again. I put down my plunger and resign the dildo-clogged toilet to a visit from the maintenance crew. I try not to work up any scenarios to explain how, exactly, the hot pink dildo was flushed down said toilet.

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Per Jolie's instructions, I call her. "What?"

"Little problem."

"Oh?"

"Fox and Cruz are about to walk into the lobby and he's still wearing the key."

"What?"
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"Yeah. She's trying. She really is. We met up in the bathroom at the club and she told me he's a slippery fucker who won't stand still long enough for her to get her hands around his neck. And oh my God, O! He's such a gross dancer. I swear he was dry humping her leg out there—"

"Jolie," I cut in, "you can recount the dry humping later." I'm starting to experience some mild panic now. "Did Fox say anything?"

"She says to give her twenty minutes and then head up to the room. Do you have the other room key?"

I pat my pocket to make sure. "Yes."

"Use it, wipe it clean and then drop it in the lost and found box in the housekeeping office."

"Got it." I hang up, load my cart and give the embarrassed couple sharing the hotel room an update. I keep it professional and avoid their uncomfortable looks. Once outside the room and far down the hall, I give in to the fit of giggles threatening to overtake me. Considering I'm about to commit an act of burglary, I could use the laugh.

I park my cart outside the door to Cruz's private suite. Tempted to press my ear against the door, I remember the security cameras. I swipe the guest card instead of my housekeeper's card and slowly, quietly, enter the room. Immediately I hear giggling and laughing from the bedroom area. It stops me dead in my tracks. Is she fucking him?

And then I hear a loud crash and thump.

Eyes wide, I rush toward the closed bedroom door. It swings open to reveal Fox in a curve-hugging dress, the hem so short it barely covers the cheeks of her ass. She's wearing way too much makeup and has teased her hair to within an inch of its life. Couple all of that with the shocking spray tan and she looks as if she just stepped out of a *Jersey Shore* episode. Clearly she studied her mark and dressed the part.

"Oh, thank God!" Fox exclaims and gestures me inside the room.

My gaze lands on Cruz, facedown and snoring on the floor. A coffee table is turned on its side. Champagne spills from a bottle and seeps under his prone form. He's wearing some kind of shiny man thong and not much else. It's obvious he's a fan of manscaping. "What happened?"

"Four Ambien and some champagne," Fox says, moving aside the bottle with her toes.

My eyes practically bug out of my head. "You drugged him?"

"I told you I wasn't going to sleep with him." She bends down to retrieve the key dangling from the necklace. "Having his stubby dick poking my belly while we danced was enough for me, thanks."

I'm stunned. "It's stubby?"

Fox looks up at me. "That's what you took from that?"

I shrug and crouch down next to her. "I'm just surprised. With his reputation, you'd think he had a golden wiener or something."

She cackles at that and shakes her head. "Golden wiener. I'm going to have to create a character in my next installment named that."

"Please do." I lift up his head as she works the thin platinum chain free. Slobber dribbles onto my fingers. "Ew!"

She holds up the key. "Got it."

I pull on a pair of medical gloves and snatch the key from her hand...

Then my stomach drops as I realize there are suitcases everywhere.

Trunks stacked in corners. Hard-shelled cases on wheels, open and spewing their clothes. Soft-sided bags, unzipped to show uniforms. Big, small and everything in between. "FFS!"

Fox snorts at my text speak and tugs on her own pair of gloves. "I know, right? That's why I gave him four Ambien instead of two. It'll give us more time to search."

"I'm surprised he didn't taste the pills. They don't dissolve all that well," I murmur, snapping some quick pics with my cell phone. We have to put everything back exactly as it was. I start my suitcase search. If it doesn't have a lock, I move on to the next one.

"Oh, he did taste them. I didn't trick him into taking them." She studies one of the cases as she aids in my quest. "Maybe the lock isn't on the outside but on the inside of the suitcase."

"Good thinking," I say and start opening them one by one. "How did you get him to take them?"

"I told him Tiger Woods had freaky sex with all those whores while on Ambien."

I pause my rummaging. "Is that true?"

"Marco reported it so it must be." Fox makes a funny face as she picks up some weird-looking silicone tube thing. "What a perv!"

"What is that?"

She shoots me a look that clearly says I'm dumb. "It's for jerking off."

Suddenly I do feel dumb. "They make toys for that? I mean, they have hands."

"So do we," she points out, "but that hasn't stopped you from stocking that bedside drawer of yours with all kinds of vibrating dirtiness."

I glare at her. "Well I didn't hear you complaining the last time you stayed over. Or Jolie," I add for good measure.

Fox dumps out a small trunk filled with hair and skin products. "Yeah, well—Hey!" She runs her hands over the bottom. "I think this is it!"

I rush to her side. Sure enough, she's found it. My fingers tremble as I stick the key into the small lock hidden beneath a flap. The false bottom lifts on a hinge to uncover a stash of DVDs.

"Whoa." Fox sits back on her heels. "I thought it was just one tape."

"Apparently someone has a naughty habit." I glance over my shoulder at his still-snoring form. "Are they labeled?"

Fox heaves a sigh of relief. "Yes." She flicks through them. "Oh my God! Are you seeing some of these names? This is a gold mine!"

For just a few seconds, I'm on the same wavelength as Fox. The money to be made off these is limitless.

"No," I say finally. "We just came for one."

Fox nods in agreement. "Right."

She finds the DVD we need and we replace the rest of them. It takes twenty minutes to fix all the dumped suitcases then we drag Cruz across the floor and haul him up onto

the bed. Replacing the key around his neck is our first task and then we split up to tackle the others.

I jerk on the sides of his man thong and snap the flimsy elastic so I can tug them free. I toss them over my shoulder and pull a tube of lipstick from my pocket. It's a cheapie from the drugstore, one I won't mind throwing away because there is no way in hell I'll ever use it after what I'm about to do. First I apply a thick coat and leave lipstick kisses all over his neck and waxed chest and belly. I run my palms over them, blotching the stains artfully, mimicking the smear likely to happen during frantic sex. As carefully as possible, I smudge cherry red circles around his semi-hard penis to make it look as if he received a blowjob.

Fox opens three condoms, adds a dollop of lotion inside the tips for good measure and wraps each in some tissue. She leaves them on the floor around the bed. I avert my eyes as she shimmies out of her panties and drops them next to a Lucite hooker heel. The other shoe she stuffs in her purse.

"What do you think?" Fox asks, stepping into the extra pair of panties she stashed in her bag.

"I think he's going to wake up hungover as hell, take one look at this room and think he had the time of his life. Give me your gloves." She peels them off and hands them over. I motion toward the door. "You should go. I'll clean up and hit the road."

She nods. "I'll find Jolie and we'll catch up with you tomorrow. Can't chance being seen together tonight."

Fox tucks the DVD into her purse and leaves. I set the room to rights, bunch up my gloves and shove them into my pocket next to Fox's. As I exit the room, my heart is beating a million miles a minute. I'm shaking but do my best to play it cool.

Luckily another housekeeping call sends me back to work. The rest of the night passes quickly.

"Where were you around three?" Frau Hauskeeping stands over me as I restock my cart before the end of shift. The run in her pantyhose has reached mid-calf now. "I sent

someone from maintenance up to 1774 and you weren't there. We tried to reach you repeatedly."

"I was up on the twentieth floor."

"What were you doing there? You're not supposed to be up there."

I keep my eyes down as I stuff more paper towels into one of the compartments. "I dropped my cell phone under my cart in the elevator and hit the wrong floor button when I was trying to grab it. It took me up to that floor."

"What were you doing in the elevator?"

"I wanted to take a smoke break."

She huffs loudly. "You can't just take a break when you want to, okay? I tell you when you can have a break, got it?"

"Yeah."

She lingers as if she wants to say something else but apparently decides against it and walks away from me. I breathe a little sigh of relief and finish my end-of-shift duties. The last thing I do before clocking out is drop the wiped-down card in the lost-and-found box.

And then I get the hell outta there.

Chapter Three

"Let's watch it," Fox urges, sitting cross-legged on the end of my bed the next evening. As a kind of celebration, we're decked out in our jammies and spending the night watching movies and noshing on yummy pizza and the most expensive champagne Fox could steal—er, borrow—from her stepfather's wine cellar.

"No way!" Jolie scrunches up her nose as she examines her pedicure touch-up.

Fox turns toward her. "What's the big deal? It's not like we haven't watched porn together before, Jo."

"Don't call me Jo," she says sharply. "And it's just different. Porn is people you don't know. We know who these people are. I have to see one of them for the rest of the week. I don't want visions of his wang in my head when I run into Cruz in the lobby."

My tummy clenches. "How is that going? Anything come up today?"

Jolie shakes her head. "If he noticed the DVD was gone, he hasn't said anything. Neither the team's handlers nor security have made any inquiries. They'd be the first ones to start nosing around. I think, for the moment," she qualifies, "we're in the clear."

"The maid I borrowed the uniform from having any trouble?"

"She's on shift tonight so I won't know until tomorrow at the earliest. If anything comes up, I'll just pull some strings and have her moved out of housekeeping and over to guest services, catering or events. It'll be fine." She waves her hand. "I'll deal with it."

"Blah, blah," Fox interrupts and springs from the bed. "We're watching this DVD. O needs to know what's on it to make sure it's actually worth the money. End of discussion."

Jolie starts to argue but seems to realize it won't do any good. She opts for sulking instead. "Whatever."

I don't even try to dissuade Fox. When she wants something, Fox gets it. "At least lock the door, Fox. I don't want Delia bursting in at an inopportune moment."

Fox does as I ask and pops in the DVD while Jolie clears away the pedicure paraphernalia from atop my comforter. We settle onto my bed, Jolie between Fox and me, and wait for the tape to start. In unison, our heads tilt to the left as the camera focuses in and out and seems turned on its side. Eventually it's righted, paused and then shifts to life again.

"No way!" Jolie perks up and points at the TV. "That's one of our hotels!"

"How can you tell?" I wonder, squinting at the room.

"I chose that wallpaper for the European market." Her forehead scrunches. "It has to be Germany, Munich or Berlin."

"They play a lot of soccer over there." I let loose my ponytail and shake out my hair. "Maybe this was filmed after a game."

"Shh!" Fox turns up the volume. "I hear voices."

Sure enough, the sound of a conversation between two men can be heard. It's a little muffled and not at all clear and takes place entirely off screen.

"What a crap recording job! With all the DVDs we found, you'd think he'd be some kind of a pro at this," Fox remarks.

"Maybe this was his first tape," I suggest, not knowing much about the age of this tape or the others.

"Doubt it," Jolie says. "Cruz didn't move to Sergei's team until early last year. This tape was made between then and now."

"This is boring!" Fox picks up the remote and fast-forwards through at least fifteen minutes of the recording during which all the action is off stage. When Cruz moves onto the screen, she hits play again.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. Cruz is completely naked except for a red ball gag strapped into his mouth and some kind of black thong-like device around his genitals. "Is he...? Is that a...?"

"Chastity belt," Fox says and scoots closer to the end of the bed for a better look. "Looks like latex or rubber."

"Whoa." Jolie's eyes are wider than I've ever seen them. "It's like a thong but scarier."

Cruz climbs onto the bed, his movements hindered by the chastity belt straps circling his thighs. Head down, he presents his ass. I'm suddenly very glad for the side view the camera provides. I don't think I'd much care for a straight-on view.

Another man steps into view. He's fully dressed in black trousers and a pinstriped shirt, the sleeves rolled up to his elbows to reveal muscular and tattooed forearms. A looped belt rests in one hand. Only the very bottom of his angular jaw is visible.

"Is that him?" Fox pauses the tape.

"I can't tell," I reply, biting my lip. "The camera is tilted down too far."

She hits play and we watch in silent fixation as the man we assume to be Sergei administers one hell of a whipping with his belt. Cruz cries out in pain but pushes his ass back again and again to accept the blows. At one point, Sergei barks an order and Cruz grabs his cheeks, spreads wide and takes even more punishment. The belt licks between his buttocks and smacks against his plump, latex-encased sac. Like a consummate sadist, Sergei takes his time administering the whipping. He alternates quick whacks of the belt with slow, almost teasing swipes.

It's a fascinating and disturbing display. To see Cruz practically begging for another biting lash, his hips rocking, distorted words filtering past the gag, does something very strange to me. At first I'm stunned, appalled...but then I'm inexplicably turned-on by the whole thing. There's something so incredibly exciting and forbidden about watching someone else's private moments.

By the time the whipping stops, the three of us are breathing hard. I sneak a sideways glance at Fox and Jolie. They're both flushed and tense, eyes locked on the television. There's something in the air, an electric zing that tells me this night is about to get a lot more interesting.

On screen, Sergei puts down the belt and orders Cruz onto the floor. There's no mistaking Sergei now. His voice is clearer on the DVD and the Russian accent is unmistakable. Cruz kneels at Sergei's feet like some kind of well-trained pet. When Sergei bends down to remove the gag, his face is plainly visible. It's all the proof I need.

I expect Jolie to point this out and demand Fox stop the DVD, but she seems distracted by a silky patch of skin just above the waistband of Fox's pajama bottoms. I'm more interested in the action on screen. The idea of switching places with Cruz makes me tingle with excitement. I've always secretly gotten off on this kind of thing. There's a reason I have all those A. N. Roquelaure books stashed under my bed.

The sexual tension in the room sizzles and I'm not sure who makes the first move, but before I know it, we're all lying on the bed in various states of undress. It's all hands and mouths and tongues as clothes are removed and discarded.

Jolie's lips are so soft beneath mine. A hint of champagne clings to her tongue. My hands tangle in her black hair, the texture so fine and smooth, what she jokingly refers to as "good hair". Our breasts touch, nipples pebbled, hers a deep cocoa and mine a little rosier. She's warm and supple beneath my roving hands.

Fingers grasp my derriere, the nails far too short to belong to Jolie. Pressed up against Jolie's back, Fox nips at her shoulder blade and reaches across her hip to grab me. Her eyes are smoky with desire as she captures my gaze. There's no mistaking that look. Tonight, *she'll* be calling the shots. Fox wastes no time taking charge and arranging us as she likes.

With Fox's not-so-subtle urging, Jolie ends up on her back and I end up on my tummy between her splayed thighs. Her immaculately waxed cunt is so pretty, the inner lips a stunning bright pink. The smell of her arousal tantalizes and I lick my lower

lip, desperate to taste her. I circle her clit with my fingertip. It's firm and already swelling and peeking out from beneath the hood.

As I'm kissing and nibbling my way up Jolie's inner thigh, Fox pulls my hips up off the bed and slides underneath me. She palms my ass and presses soft kisses to my lower belly. My pussy clenches at her close proximity. No one I've ever met eats pussy as good as Fox does. I get so wet just thinking about her tongue sliding between my folds and flicking my clit.

But of course she's a complete bitch about it and teases me mercilessly by blowing softly on my burning skin and kissing everywhere but right where I want her. When she finally sucks my clit between her lips, I yelp and thrust down against her tongue. "Oh fuck yes!"

Reveling in the mind-blowing sensations Fox evokes, I swipe Jolie's cunt with the pointed tip of my tongue. Her cream is slick and just the slightest bit salty. She always tastes so good. Jolie fists the comforter and bucks her hips as I lap at her pussy. I draw lazy circles around her clit with my tongue and then lick slowly up and down, throwing her off every time she seems to get close. She makes the sweetest little sounds, her moans and whimpers restrained and almost embarrassed.

Sometimes it's hard to concentrate on giving Jolie pleasure because Fox is driving me crazy with her torturous techniques. She brings me right to the edge and then backs off, moving her lips to my thighs or belly. It's frustrating and yet so good. I'm gripped by the urge to send her old girlfriend, Pip, a thank you gift of some kind.

I suck on two of my fingers and lube them up nicely before slowly sliding them inside Jolie's hot, slippery pussy. Fingers pumping in her channel, I attack her swollen clit with my tongue. She goes wild. Her hips swivel. She grabs my hair and pulls hard as she rides out a breathtaking climax. I can feel her cunt pulsing around my fingers and it turns me on something fierce. The act of giving her joy provides an amazing a high.

Jolie pulls away, sliding up the comforter and away from my tongue. Eyes closed, she reclines against a pillow and enjoys the afterglow. Smiling devilishly, I wipe my mouth on the back of my hand and sit up, my knees on either side of Fox's head. She loops her hands around my thighs to hold me in place while she feasts on my pussy.

The sound of her tongue sliding through my juices competes with my moans and pants. There is nothing hotter than riding Fox's face to an explosive orgasm. Our eyes meet, her pupils dilated with lust, and I'm gone. I come so hard I can't breathe or cry out. I just keep my gaze fixed on hers as she licks and sucks me into another, even more stunning climax.

When I just can't take any more, I fall off her and onto my back. As I pant and shudder, Jolie moves between Fox's legs. I move closer to Fox, snuggling up to her side. I kiss her neck and cheek and then capture her mouth. I can taste my cum on her lips and tongue. The musk of sex infiltrates my system like some kind of aphrodisiac. I suckle the tip of her tongue then teasingly bite Fox's lower lip as Jolie tongues her to a shattering orgasm.

We collapse in a sweaty, tangled heap. Much kissing and caressing and nibbling and giggling ensues. It's always like this between us. We fool around when the mood hits though it's never anything more. We all love one another but it's not that all-consuming, passionate love. It's something simpler, gentler.

I still remember the first night we indulged our curiosity sophomore year at Cranbrook-Canterbury. Sharing that kind of intimacy fortified our bond as friends and soon we were invincible as a unit. If only the dean of resident life had known what a colossal mistake he was making by putting the three of us in a shared suite.

With a sexy little smirk, Fox crawls across my bed so she can reach the bedside table. She delves into the drawer and produces a sparkling blue harness and flesh-toned dildo. Her delicate eyebrows arch. "Who's first?"

* * * * *

Hours later I wake up with my cheek against Jolie's tummy. With every breath she takes, my head rises and falls. My body still hums with satisfaction.

I roll onto my side and rub my eyes. The static buzz of a muted television catches my attention. In the stillness of the night, it's as if I can hear the electrons charging across the air. I lift my head and spot Fox wrapped in the top sheet and sitting on the floor in front of the television. She's paused a frame of the DVD with Sergei, naked from the waist up, facing the camera.

Curious but not wanting to wake Jolie, I stealthily slide from bed and join her. Fox opens up the sheet and I slide in beside her, tugging the free side around my shoulders and down toward her waist. "What's up?"

"These." She points to the screen. "Tattoos."

I take a better look. There are stars and religious icons tattooed on his skin. "You thinking of getting a new piece?"

Fox shakes her head. "These tattoos aren't just tattoos, Ofelia."

Whenever she uses my full name, it's serious. "What are they?"

"They're symbols for really bad things, O. Mafia stuff," she clarifies. "Bad, bad shit."

Fox knows her ink so I don't doubt her assertion for a moment. I focus on Sergei's fuzzy image on the television. Even though he's just had dirty, kinky sex and, from the sounds of the tape earlier, one hell of an orgasm, his face is still taut. There is no joy in his face, no warmth in those eyes. He's so cold and distant and brutal.

Oh Christ. What the fuck was I thinking?

And then I realize I *wasn't* thinking. I just acted on my first impulse because what other choice do I have? I get this money for the Mexicans or I lose my sister, my mother, Delia and myself to a violent bloodbath.

My stomach lurches as a chill runs down my spine. I'm going to face off with that man tomorrow. I'm going to sit across from him and attempt to extort from him with promises of public humiliation if he doesn't give me what I want.

And I'm going to pray he doesn't have me hunted down and taken care of the second I leave his presence.

"No." Fox slashes the air with her hand. "You can't do this. You have to drop this scheme."

"I can't."

"You can."

"No, Fox. The wheels are in motion. There's no going back now." I'm determined, resigned. "I've already made an appointment with him. If I don't show up, he's going to get curious and start nosing around. He'll put two and two together and I'll lose the element of surprise. That's a must in these kinds of negotiations."

"Negotiations?" she hisses angrily. "Are you listening to yourself? Ofelia, this is some serious shit."

"Like I don't fucking know that?" I can feel my anger bubbling to the surface. I'm not mad at Fox. I'm mad at the situation. I take a deep breath. "Look, it's happening whether you like it or not."

Fox clenches her jaw and flicks off the TV. "I wish you would at least think of your mother. What the fuck is she going to do if you get yourself in deep shit?"

"I *am* thinking of her," I say, my devious mind already creating a backup plan, one even more convoluted than my current one.

"Oh, come on, O!" Fox's exasperation is evident. "I know that look. You can't be serious. You're not actually going to try to double-cross that man!"

"Have a better idea?"

Jolie sits up in bed. Her sleepy, confused gaze falls on us. "Is something wrong?"

Lolita Lopez

"No," I say before Fox can open her mouth. She rolls her eyes and stomps into the bathroom. A few moments later, I hear the shower. Jolie gets comfortable again and falls back asleep.

And me?

I sit quietly—and plot.

Chapter Four

A few hours later, I'm trying not to barf as my taxi pulls beneath the porte-cochere of the five-star hotel where Sergei has a room. The same hotel where I played maid. The same hotel where Fox and I drugged and robbed an international soccer star. And I'm about to just waltz in there, bold as brass, and pretend none of it ever happened.

Driving didn't seem like a very smart move since I'm in a perpetually anxious state. Talk about an accident waiting to happen. Juggling my backup plan—already set in motion, just in case—with my current scheme isn't easy. I have a nasty case of the shakes as my adrenal gland dumps massive amounts of adrenaline into my bloodstream. My mouth is bone dry. My stomach heaves.

Get a grip, self!

I finish up a text and hit send before settling my fare, then check my makeup one more time. I spent a lot of time covering up my still-black eye and dressed carefully to cover the fading bruises on my neck and other bits. I can't let him know I'm under any kind of duress. It will totally weaken my position.

The second I step out of the taxi, I suck in a steadying breath and hold it, closing my eyes for a few moments. I will my heart to slow and wiggle my fingers at my sides, shaking out the tension. As the saying goes, this ain't my first rodeo. It is, however, the first time I've attempted to blackmail someone face-to-face. Normally I prefer a few cryptic letters or phone calls and a drop-off spot in a public place, but those tactics require precious time I just don't have.

I check my watch and adjust my sunglasses before heading toward the entrance. I have an appointment with Sergei in the hotel's restaurant in eight minutes. Hopefully he reserved a table in a quiet corner or even a private dining room. Then again, being in close range to other patrons might up his level of discomfort and give me an edge.

Either way, a public setting is a must. It's the only way I can be relatively assured of my safety.

"Miss Brandt?" A severe-looking man in a black suit and mirrored sunglasses moves toward me, blocking my access to the hotel's entrance. I can't quite place his accent. South African maybe.

"Yes?" I clutch the strap of my purse and fight the urge to flee. He has the most intimidating presence. Something tells me I'm about to be in a bad, bad way.

"Mr. Alexandrov had an urgent meeting arise. He's asked that you join him in his car. He'll arrange for you to be taken home after your business is resolved."

His tone brooks no refusal. Suddenly I'm the one off-kilter. As I follow the nononsense bodyguard to an idling car, I can see all of my well-laid plans circling the drain. There's no two ways about it. I'm right and truly fucked.

The bodyguard opens the door and steps aside. I hesitate before sliding into the backseat and carefully arranging my skirt over my crossed knees. It's cold in the car. Siberia cold. I suppress a shiver but the goose bumps are impossible to stop. My nipples stand at attention, poking against the cups of my bra. Thank God they're thick enough to hide the embarrassing side effect of the chilly blast. It would be nearly impossible to play the part of blackmailer with my nips calling attention to themselves.

I don't even have a chance to buckle my seat belt before the car pulls away from the hotel.

Slowly I become aware of Sergei's presence.

He sits on the other end of the seat and glares at me. He's the most imposing figure I've ever had the misfortune of meeting. I can actually feel his gaze sweeping over me, taking in my peacock blue slim-fitting dress and high-heeled strappy slingbacks. His gaze lingers on my chest as if he's trying to imagine what my tits look like. As rude as his stare is, my skin tingles under his bold appraisal.

His cologne, a bright mix of leather and woodsy scents, permeates the sectioned-off backseat. He smells of money and power and sex. My gaze settles on his strikingly

handsome face, the hard lines of his jaw and the pale green of his irises. He wears his ashy brown hair slicked back in a style that immediately annoys me. My fingers just itch to get in there and mess it all up, give him a more laid-back, mussed look.

"Take off sunglasses."

His barked order makes me jump. I try to block the erotic images it evokes but it's impossible. I see Sergei shoving his huge cock in Cruz's mouth, gripping the other man's hair as he snaps his hips. Just like last night, my mind betrays me by replacing Cruz with a vision of myself on my knees, mouth open wide, chin shiny with my own saliva.

"All right." Removing my sunglasses, I press my thighs together and try to concentrate. I clench the glasses in my left hand.

"You have something that belongs to me?" His tongue rolls over the syllables in an odd way. I can tell he's not all that comfortable with his English skills. A good thing for me?

Summoning my courage, I swivel my ass on the seat so we're looking eye to eye. His gaze is unwavering and hard and my first instinct is to glance away but I can't. Even as my stomach does somersaults, I keep my gaze fixed on his. "Yes."

"You want money."

It's not a question and I don't try to deny it. "Yes."

"Show me."

Another barked order. My iPhone is still clamped in my right hand. I tap the screen and queue up the fifteen-second clip I copied. I press play and hold it up for his inspection.

Recognition flashes across his face as he appears onscreen and bends down to playfully slap Cruz across the face. A split-second later, the recognition is replaced by the briefest display of shock. Just as quickly as it appears, it vanishes. He steels his expression as the clip plays and ends.

"There's another ninety minutes of that."

"Where did you get this?"

"That's not important." I place my phone in my lap. "I'd rather talk about what I'm going to do with it."

His cheek twitches and his fists curl. He's barely containing his rage. Whether he's enraged with me or himself for being so careless, I can't say. A quiver of fear pierces my belly. "How much?"

Clearly he's played this game before. In a way, I'm relieved. No beating around the bush. I start to reach into my purse for the card with the price and account number but Sergei snatches my wrist. His fingers brand my skin. I try to jerk free but he's too strong. "Let me go!"

"So you can shoot me?"

My jaw drops. "Are you fucking insane? Do I look like a card-carrying member of the NRA?"

"You look like conniving little bitch."

His sharply spoken words sting with the harshness of unwanted truth. Unfortunately I'm not smart enough to let it go. "I may be a conniving little bitch but at least I'm not stupid enough to let someone tape me fucking an employee."

Sergei's nostrils flare. His fingers tighten around my wrist. With a quick tug, he effortlessly pulls me close, my ass sliding swiftly on the leather seat until our bodies are touching. Our gazes clash. I'm unsettled by what I see reflected in those green eyes. It's no longer anger but something else, something even more frightening.

Lust.

"You play with fire." The fingers of his other hand move to my necklace. He winds the coral beads around a digit and yanks me closer. The beads bite into the sensitive flesh of my neck. They make it a little more difficult to breathe. With one good twist he could cut off my air supply. I should be scared but I'm not. I'm so fucking turned-on by his brutish, asshole alpha behavior that I'm getting wet. I don't know what the hell that says about my mental state but it sure as hell can't be good.

His exhaled breath buffets my cheek. I'm keenly aware of the heat radiating from his body and penetrating mine. I should break free and end this now, but I can't. I find myself leaning forward to whisper in his ear, "Maybe I like the burn."

He shudders as my words tickle his skin. He moves so quickly it's stunning. I barely register his lips pressed against mine before I feel his tongue probing and seeking entrance.

My will crumbles and I surrender to kisses that knock the breath from my lungs. He's forceful and tender at the same time, his lips caressing with the softest of movements even as his tongue stabs insistently against mine. The suggestive motion provokes a needful pulse just behind my clit. I can imagine the feel of his tongue there, lapping and licking until I come hard against his lips.

There's something about the illicit nature of our impromptu make-out session that drives me wild. An adrenaline surge fuels my arousal. Just moments ago we verbally sparred as enemies. Now Sergei coaxes my knees apart, the hand previously clasping my wrist now sliding between my thighs to seek the wet heat hidden behind my black lace hipsters. When his fingers encounter the soaking lace, he whispers something in Russian. By his tone, I know it's something utterly filthy—and fucking hot.

His thumb brushes over my swollen clit, the cream coating my skin easing the rub of the lace against the highly sensitized nub. It won't take much for me to climax. A few quick flicks of that thumb and I'm going to come.

So I stop him.

I grab his forearm and squeeze. Even though I'm so aroused I'm in pain, I have to stop this. If I let him bring me to orgasm, the power paradigm shifts. He'll be in control—and I can't let that happen.

Sergei's grip loosens on my necklace. I have enough slack to pull away and I do. Even though my clit pulses and my raging hormones tell me to keep playing this game, to let him hike up my skirt and fuck me right there in the backseat, I do the smart thing and knock on the dividing panel. "Pull over."

Sergei seems shaken back into reality by my instruction to the driver. He lets go of my wrist and scoots back. His stiff cock tents his trousers. The car glides to a stop just as his frosty aloofness returns.

"Here." I toss a white business card with numbers on it toward him. "You have until close of business tomorrow."

My piece said, I waste no time bailing from the car. I can barely walk, my legs are so shaky. With every step, my panties teasingly scrape against my clamoring clit. I shove on my glasses and take a bewildered look at my surroundings. It's a street lined with upscale shops. Spotting the nearest door, I hurry toward it.

My sense of danger is high. I've just blackmailed one of the richest men in the world, after all. He could have me grabbed off the street and thrown in the trunk of his car. Lord knows, with money like his, he could make me disappear with a snap of his fingers.

Inside the boutique, I inhale a trembling breath. I glance over my shoulder for the first time. Sergei's car is gone. My heart pounds against my chest as I touch my kiss-swollen lips. I can still taste him, just the barest note of lemon. His scent clings to my skin and clothes. I'm gripped by this bizarre urge to find that cologne and douse my bed sheets in it so I can roll around naked in his scent.

"Oh fuck," I groan, rubbing my forehead. Am I seriously in lust with Sergei? Great. Just fucking great. That's exactly what I need right now. An attraction to the man I'm attempting to extort. Boy, I just thrive on complications.

My caterwauling cell phone interrupts my thorny thoughts. I recognize the ringtone immediately and answer as I busy myself with the rack of dresses in front of me. "Hey, Marco."

"How could you!"

His screeching voice startles me. My fingers freeze on the hanger. "What?"

"I never thought you'd betray me like this!" He's hysterical and screaming in such a high tone I can barely understand him. "She's my rival. *My rival*! Are you trying to destroy me?"

Shit. He's already heard about my backup plan. Shit!

"Calm down!" My sharply whispered words do nothing. He continues to rant so loudly, nearby shoppers are giving me curious looks. I move into the closest corner and try to reason with him. "It's not what you think, Marco."

"Don't give me that shit! She wouldn't call me to gloat if this wasn't something big." He sobs raggedly. "I hate you, Ofelia Brandt. I fucking hate you!"

The line goes dead. Stunned into silence by the vitriol in his voice, I stare at my phone. Marco has always been something of a drama queen but this was different. I'm hurt that he doesn't understand why I did what I did. How he could believe I'd betray him to his rival without a damn good reason is beyond me.

Or is it?

If I was honest—really honest—I'd admit my schemes don't exactly engender a lot of trust.

If I was honest—brutally honest—I'd admit I'm not always the best friend and sometimes I exploit people.

But those are things I'd never admit aloud. Just admitting them to myself makes me want to crawl in a hole and die. Deep down inside, I think maybe, just maybe, I'm a truly shit person.

And that sucks.

Chapter Five

"What do you think, Mom?" I hold up neatly painted toenails for her inspection. She studies the cherry red polish and holds up a jerky thumb. "Great!"

I start to clear away the nail polishing supplies. Mom tries to stay as still as possible so as not to smudge her nails. I'm quite proud of myself for only swiping her fingers twice with the tip of the wet brush. I didn't hit her toes once.

"Up-pup-pup." Mom inclines her head toward the speakers.

"Sure." I adjust the volume. Stevie Nicks' smoky voice filters over the airwaves. Mom closes her eyes and leans her head back against the overstuffed chair. Her stretched out legs move in a sort of rhythm, her ankles bouncing side to side on the ottoman in time with the music.

I'm always surprised by the seemingly haphazard extent of her injuries. She can still control her legs enough to sway in time with the music but couldn't take a step to save her life. I can only imagine how incredibly frustrating it is for her and it makes me profoundly sad.

"Mo-mo-na?"

I avert my gaze as I toss acetone-soaked cotton balls in the trash. "She didn't answer her phone. I'll try again later."

"La-la-lie!"

My attention snaps to her face. She's pissed. She *knows*.

"Na-na-not duh-duh-dumb," she says angrily. "See." She brings her closed fist next to her eye. "Bl-bl-black."

I sigh heavily and move onto the smidge of free space on the ottoman. "I'm sorry I lied to you."

She shakes her head. "Na-not ma-ma-mad you."

"I'm glad to hear that." And I really am. I really need to hear it from her. "Look, here's the deal, Mom. Mona and her boyfriend are in big trouble. They owe a lot of money to some really bad people and I'm trying to make it all go away. I don't know where Mona is. She's disappeared. I'm looking, but no bites yet."

"Druh-drugs?"

I nod. "Cocaine. Meth. Pot."

Mom looks away, her eyes shiny with tears. She gulps back a sob and slaps her chest. "Fa-fa-fa-fault!"

"No," I say sternly. "This is no one's fault but Mona's. She's a selfish junkie. We can't help her until she'll help herself. That's all there is to it."

"Jay-jay-james."

Her first husband. Mona's father. Coke-snorting, whore-humping Caligula of eighties Hollywood.

"Maybe," I say, following her reasoning. It's not the first time I've wondered whether Mona's addiction has a genetic component behind it. Bad blood will out and all that.

I take hold of Mom's hand and give it a reassuring squeeze. "I'm going to fix this. I promise."

She touches my face with trembling fingers. Tears drip down her cheeks. I swipe them away and kiss her forehead. "It's going to be all right. You'll see."

Mom swallows hard and sniffs. I blot her face with some tissues and then get her settled in for the night. Knowing she's feeling a little low, I climb in bed beside her and snuggle while we watch *Golden Girls* reruns. When she's good and asleep, I switch off the TV, move her call button into place and leave the room.

Sandy isn't coming tonight. It's just me and Delia. There's a beam of light beneath Delia's door. I can just barely hear the television as I pass.

My shoulders sag under the weight of my burdens. I slump into the squishy chair in my reading corner and stare out the window. The back lawn is a mess. The gardens are overgrown with weeds. Scum coats the ponds. I still haven't been able to afford to replace the koi.

The stack of scripts on the coffee table catches my eye. Right next to them are the piles of bills I fished out of the kitchen drawer earlier. Guilt sours my stomach. What the fuck am I doing? Why do I keep wasting time on casting calls and running wherever my agent sends me when I need money *now*? Why the hell do I keep embarrassing myself at those auditions?

"It's never going to happen."

Saying it aloud makes me want to cry. And yet...and yet it frees me from the ridiculous dream I've entertained for so long. The dream of following in my mother's footsteps, of earning three Oscars and a dozen more acting awards, of being *someone*.

"Mediocre." I say the word bandied about in the press—and it's true. I'm not very talented. Sure, I was a super-cute kid on a successful TV show once. Now I couldn't get a commercial spot hawking feminine deodorants.

I cradle my face in my hands and sob. No money, no job, no education and no prospects. A junkie sister on the lam. The Mexican mafia on my ass. A Russian billionaire probably plotting my demise this very instant. Ain't my life just fucking grand?

A ringing cell phone interrupts my pity party. I wipe my wet face, no doubt smearing mascara and makeup everywhere, and shove off the couch in search of my phone. I follow the muffled ring to my bed and find my iPhone buried under the dress and undergarments I'd worn out earlier. The number isn't one I recognize but I answer anyway. "Hello?"

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"Ofelia."
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My heart fucking stops. There's no mistaking that Russian accent. "Y-yes."

"No deal."

My stomach drops. I can feel bile rising in my throat but shove it down. I have to be strong now. My life depends on it. "Then I'm releasing the tape."

"Not so fast," he says quickly. "We negotiate on price. Too high for one tape."

"The price is non-negotiable."

"Then give me something else."

I'm totally flummoxed. What the hell else can I possibly give him? "I'm not Blockbuster. I don't have shelves of sex tapes over here."

"Not tape," he corrects. "You. Tonight."

I don't know what to say. A resounding and shrieked "NO" springs to mind but something Marco said to me a few days ago comes back to me.

Beggars can't be choosers.

And maybe he's right. My back is against the wall. I need that money in that account by tomorrow night.

God, have I really been reduced to prostitution?

"Half now," I croak and then clear my throat. "As a good-faith payment," I clarify.
"I want the rest in the morning."

"Fine." I can hear the smug smirk in his voice. "I send car."

I catch my reflection in the mirror above my vanity. Tear-streaked face, rumpled tracksuit, and messy hair. "Give me an hour."

"Da."

I stand there, phone in hand, for a good five minutes and just stare at myself. I can't believe I've just agreed to trade sex for cash. It's a hell of a lot of money and in a way I suppose I should be flattered. And sure, Sergei is sinfully sexy and makes my panties wet but, I mean, come on! This is wrong.

Right?

I'm so confused as I hurry through a shower. I make sure all my naughty bits are silky smooth and slather on a light-scented lotion. Within half an hour, I've blow dried

my hair, applied enough makeup and jewelry to cover the bruises on my body and selected a simple but sexy black cocktail dress. The dipping V-neck shows off some of my best assets. I settle on a pair of pumps that are easily kicked off—just in case I need to run.

My thumb hovers over the screen of my iPhone. I need to text someone to let them know where I'm going. If I message Fox, she's going to lose her shit. I send a quick text to Jolie instead. She'll disapprove and be worried but she won't call to scream at me. She'll wait until we're in the same room together to really lay into me.

I grab my purse and stuff it with necessities before leaving my room. I pop in to check on Mom and then knock on Delia's door. She shuffles out in her robe and house slippers looking decidedly annoyed. "I'm heading out. If I'm not home by noon tomorrow, call Jolie. She'll know what to do."

I peck her cheek and take off, not wanting to fight with her. She calls after me but I pretend I don't hear and hurry down the staircase. A flash of headlights illuminates the foyer. I reach the door just as the austere bodyguard from earlier today rings the doorbell.

He starts to speak but his gaze flits to the still-destroyed interior of the entryway. "What the hell happened here?"

"Oh that?" I brush past him, effectively forcing him outside, and shut the door.

"Just a little home renovation gone awry."

He doesn't believe me for a minute. His eyes drift lower and settle on my neck. I swear he can see the fingertip bruises there. Suddenly nervous, I flip forward a little of my hair. "Can we go?"

He snaps back to reality and ushers me to the car. As we drive across the city, I'm struck by the memories of my backseat encounter. Sergei's scent hangs heavy in the air. If I close my eyes and pretend, I can feel his breath against my skin, his hand sliding between my thighs.

Soon we arrive at the hotel, the place where all this began, and I'm shaking with fear and excitement. It's the fear of living out a scene like the one on the tape because, quite frankly, I've had enough beating to last me a lifetime, thank you very much. It's the excitement of doing something so wrong and so sordid it'll make me blush when I'm wrinkled and scrawny and living in some miserable old folks' home.

We enter through a private entrance at the rear of the hotel and take a similarly private elevator up to the penthouse suite. It's a place I'm intimately familiar with, having thrown a few parties there with Jolie. Well, not really *with* Jolie. Against her wishes, actually. But I still contend some part of her wanted to have a little fun or else she never would have supplied us with keys.

Sergei holds court in the living room of the suite. He's comfortably seated in the corner of a sleek white sectional sofa. His laptop is open and running on the cushion next to him. He talks quickly into the Bluetooth headset attached to his ear. He seems irritated and immediately I'm nervous. I study him with a wary eye as I follow his bodyguard into the room.

Sergei's demeanor changes as he becomes aware of my presence. There's a flash of a smile before his stony façade slips back into place. He ends his phone call with a few clipped orders and then tosses the headset aside. The laptop is closed and moved. He gestures for me to come closer.

"Check her."

The bodyguard moves behind me and I'm forced to endure the humiliation of a pat down. He keeps his palms out, using his knuckles to follow the outline of my body. Sergei's gaze never leaves mine. I can tell he gets some kind of thrill from this. Maybe Marco was right. It's all about power with Sergei.

"She's clean." The bodyguard takes my purse and unceremoniously dumps it on the coffee table. I'm beyond mortified as the contents fall out for Sergei's inspection. The DVD, birth control pills, condoms, makeup, a few emergency tampons, travel-sized toiletries, an envelope of emergency cash, an extra pair of panties, a burner phone and a pair of disposable ballet flats for those nights when my feet are killing me after a long night of partying.

The guard unzips a pocket and removes the roll of antacids and travel-sized packets of pain relievers. He has the gall to taste each of them. "Not drugs."

"I don't do drugs!" Sure, I've had nights where I've had a little too much to drink but I've never, not once, abused drugs, prescription or otherwise. "And I don't appreciate being treated like a criminal."

"How should I treat you?" Sergei motions for his guard to leave as I frantically gather my things. "Extortion is crime."

Well, he's got me there.

The door shuts behind his guard and for the first time we're completely alone. I don't know what to do so I just stand there, gripping my purse in one hand and feeling incredibly uncomfortable. I have the feeling he doesn't quite know what to say either.

"Do you do this often?" He seems confused so I clarify. "Pay women for sex."

Sergei snorts. "Nyet." His brow arches. "Do you make habit of blackmail?"

"I wouldn't call it a habit."

He chuckles and pats the cushion beside him. "Come. Sit."

I cautiously move closer and sit on the very edge of the cushion. Sergei smiles in amusement and gently pries the purse from my hands. He sets it aside but keeps my fingers in his grasp. His thumb moves lazily over my skin. "Are you hungry?"

"What?" That was the last thing I expected to hear him ask. "Um, no."

"Champagne?" He's already pouring so the question is moot.

"No." Getting tipsy is the last thing I need so I decline the glass he offers. To his credit, he doesn't push.

"Relax," he whispers silkily. "I will not hurt you."

I laugh nervously and tug at the hem of my dress, making sure my skinned knees stay covered. "I find that hard to believe.

Sergei's thumb stills. He wears an expression of surprise and injury. "Why?"

"I've seen the whole tape," I remind him.

"Ah. Yes..."

"Look," I brush away the loose curl clinging to my cheek, "I'll do whatever you want. Just don't hit me, please."

Sergei is clearly taken aback by that request. "I never hit woman in my life!"

"You didn't seem to have any problems whipping a man."

"That was different!" He's riled up now. I wonder belatedly if I've just poked the bear. "That was game. You never play games?"

"Not like that."

He's interested now. "Then what kind?"

I shrug and nervously gnaw on my thumb. "Girl stuff. Toys. Role playing."

Sergei gently pulls my thumb from my mouth. "Not very attractive."

"No," I agree with embarrassment. "It's a nervous habit."

"Are you lesbian?"

My brow lifts. "Does it matter? I mean, I'm here for money, not love. And I could ask the same of you. Are you gay?"

"No," he says. "Not gay, not straight, just...open." Sergei frowns. "But it does matter to me. If you don't like men, I won't force issue." He motions toward the door. "You're free to leave."

"Just like that?" Even though this is my out, I'm not the least bit tempted to lie. The longer we talk, the more I want to stay.

He nods. "Without second half of money, of course."

"Of course," I parrot sarcastically. "No," I say eventually, "I'm not a lesbian. I'm just like you. Open. Curious."

I'm struck by the bizarre nature of our conversation. Are we really discussing sexual orientation? Why hasn't he made a move yet? Is he going to draw this out all night? I'm not sure how much more of this small talk I can take. Although that thumb rubbing circles on my hand is kind of nice. Okay. Really nice.

"I am curious why you need money."

I squash the urge to chew on my finger again. Best to divert. "Why all these questions?"

"I want to learn more about you."

"You don't have someone on your payroll to do things like that? You know, just snap those fingers and – blam! – a dossier appears on your lap?"

Sergei's lips curve just a bit. "I'd rather do this myself."

I shrug. "It's your time you're wasting. A quick Google search would have told you all you wanted to know about me."

He shakes his head. "Not girl in paparazzi pictures and sleazy tabloid stories. I want to know the *real* Ofelia."

The way he says my name sends little quivers of pleasure through my tummy. It's lazy and slow, like honey over the tongue. I almost can't stand it.

"Trust me. You wouldn't like her." I grab a champagne flute and sip. Sergei's studious gaze blazes over my face. "What?"

"Why I would not like real Ofelia?"

I gape at him. "Um, I'm blackmailing you, for one."

He makes a dismissive face. "Just dirty side of business."

Now I'm really gawping. "You can't be serious."

"I am big target. You are just one of many."

That tidbit makes me sad. No wonder he's so closed off and cold. My feelings toward him grow more complicated as sympathy is thrown into the mix. I want to tell

him I'm sorry I've dragged him into this, that I'm sorry I'm such a manipulative bitch, but I keep my mouth shut.

"You are first I pay full price," Sergei admits, his hand drifting to my face. He brushes his knuckles along my jaw. "I never negotiate before."

My eyelids lower as his thumb caresses my chin. I have to know. Is this a game? A strategic move? Or something else. "Why me?"

"You infuriate me." His lips touch mine briefly. "You enchant me." He nibbles my lower lip. "You are like witch weaving spell."

I've heard some lines in my life but this one? Oh, this one *nails* it. With just a few words, Sergei has managed to turn something distasteful and morally compromising into a night I'll remember for the rest of my life. I actually believe he wants me for me, that this isn't about the money or the blackmail. It's not true, but it's nice to pretend.

"Tell me you want me, lubimaya."

I have no idea what he's just called me and I don't care. The way he said it is enough for me. "I want you, Sergei."

And that's the truth. I haven't wanted a man like this ever. Normally I'm the one calling the shots. I'm the instigator in a relationship, in and out of the bedroom. I'm the one who begins and ends it. The control never leaves my hand.

But now?

With Sergei, I'm not quite sure who's in charge or what's really happening—and I like it.

Sergei's insistent kiss leaves me all warm and tingly. He cups the back of my neck and slides his tongue against mine in the wickedest dance. I can't keep my hands to myself a moment longer. I take hold of his shirt with one hand and tug him closer. My other hand ends up in his hair, finally mussing the brushed-back strands as I'd wanted to earlier.

He breaks our passionate kiss and stares into my eyes. It's unnerving, almost as if he can see behind my public persona. Maybe he *does* really want to know the real Ofelia.

"You are so beautiful, *milaya moya*." Sergei nuzzles my nose. "You do not need all this makeup. Less is more."

There's no stopping the wince Sergei's touch elicits. His fingers sweep over the bruised area around my eye, the area I caked and camouflaged. I hope he won't notice—but he does.

His jaw tenses. "Ofelia? What is wrong with eye?"

"Nothing." It's pointless to lie but it's instinct. "Really."

Sergei stands and pulls me up with him. Despite my protests, he drags me across the living room, through the master suite and into the well-appointed bathroom. He shows his strength by clasping my hips and lifting me onto the marble counter. With one look, he effectively silences and paralyzes me. I'm not moving an inch.

My stomach churns as he wets a washcloth and then carefully wipes my face clean, starting at my eye. I can't meet his gaze. Guilt and fear and shame send my eyes south to the floor. Even though I can't see him, I can feel his anger. It radiates in waves, pulsing through me and setting my nerves on edge.

Sergei removes my necklace and swipes away the makeup there too. His fingertips touch the bruises marring my throat. "Who did this?"

"It's none of your business."

Sergei tips my chin, leaving me no choice but to meet his steely gaze. "This is why you need money?" He seems to read the answer on my face. "Then it is my business."

"I can't." My voice is barely a whisper. "I just can't."

Sergei softens and kisses me so tenderly it brings tears to my eyes. "Ofelia."

His imploring tone breaks through my defenses. I know I shouldn't trust him with the truth but I can't stop myself.

I tell him everything.

He listens without judgment. I get the feeling he's heard—or done—worse.

"And so I picked you to blackmail," I finish, sniffling loudly. "You have deep pockets and dark secrets."

He seems impressed with my honesty. "You are practical girl. I like this."

"No, I think you had me pegged right the first time." I dab at my nose with the tissue he handed me. "I really am just a conniving bitch."

"No. Opportunistic," he decides, gathering me close and kissing my temple. With a heavy sigh, he says, "You should go."

"What?" Stunned, I pull back. "Why?"

"This," Sergei touches my black eye, "change everything." He shakes his head.
"You can have money without sex."

His gracious offer dazes me. He's not fucking around either. I could slide off this counter, walk out that door and still have every penny.

The dynamic shifts. Just moments ago, I was battling my desire for Sergei and embracing the reluctance spawned by the knowledge I was, in essence, selling my body. But he's right. Now everything has changed. For a moment, I can almost forget what brought me here. I can almost convince myself Sergei doesn't care about the blackmail or the money, that he's genuinely concerned for me.

"What if I want to stay anyway?" Suddenly nervous he'll reject me and send me home now there's no game to play, I bring my thumb to my mouth.

Sergei captures my gaze and slowly draws down my hand. Hesitation marks his face. "Why?"

"Whatever this is," I gesture between us, "whatever is happening between us tonight, I don't want it to end yet."

There's no masking the vulnerability in my voice. Sergei heard it, I'm sure. He gives me a reassuring smile. My heart beats a resounding pulse against my eardrums. I inhale shuddery breaths as Sergei parts my knees, pulls me toward the very edge of the counter and steps between my open thighs. His hand tangles in my hair, tilting my head back and presenting my lips for the taking. I melt into his all-consuming kiss.

Desperate to feel his skin, I attack the buttons lining the front of his shirt. His hands grope my breasts and slide beneath my skirt. Frustrated by the slow pace of the unbuttoning, I grasp a handful of expensive cotton and silk blend fabric and tug it free of his trousers. "Take it off!"

Sergei smiles against my mouth. "Da."

He peels the shirt up and over his head, revealing a deliciously muscled torso covered in tattoos. I reach for him, bringing him even closer, pressing our pelvises together, and flick my tongue against a nipple. He makes an odd little noise and threads his fingers through my loose hair. I lick and suck and outline his tattoos. The taste and smell of his clean skin energizes me.

When he's had enough of my tongue sliding over his chest, he pulls my face up to meet his, darting his tongue inside my mouth. He expertly unzips my dress while making love to my mouth. The straps of my dress fall down around my shoulders. He takes hold of the front and pulls it down even farther, baring my breasts to his hungry gaze.

I brace myself against the counter as he teases my breasts. His tongue grazes my puckered nipples. He playfully teethes the peaks. With every swipe of his tongue, pleasure twists in my lower belly. Sergei licks a long, meandering trail up the side of my neck and bites my earlobe.

I'm soaking wet now. I'm panting for him, clutching at his ribs and begging him to give me relief. "Sergei..."

"I smell you." His growled words send ripples of excitement through my body. "Is your pussy wet for me?"

"Yes." I buck against him in encouragement.

"You want my fingers?" Sergei's fingers slide behind the tiny scrap of silk guarding my sex and probe my cunt. "Or my tongue?"

I watch as Sergei licks my pussy cream from his fingers, his lusty gaze fixed on mine. My pussy pulses as desire blossoms in my chest. I'm on fire as Sergei falls to his knees and pushes aside my skirt. He coaxes me to lift my bottom and frees me of my panties.

"Maybe I use both." His words vibrate through my clit, his lips just centimeters from finally touching me. That pliable tongue takes one swipe and I'm gone.

"Oh God!" My cry echoes in the bathroom. I grip the counter and hold on for dear life as Sergei traces my folds and swirls his tongue over my clit. He grasps my thighs, forcing my legs wide, and delves into my cunt. His tongue explores me. His nose stimulates the stiff nub of my clitoris.

A pair of fingers slides easily into me. He laps at me with broad swipes, working me into a frenzy, and then switches his concentration to the underside of my clit. The sensation is sharp, almost too much at first, but he varies the pressure and keeps me hovering at the edge of exploding. His fingers continue to fuck me, the tips curving and seeking out my G-spot.

And oh fuck, it feels so good. He pumps against that spot and ramps up his tonguing efforts until I'm practically bouncing up and down on the counter. An animalistic fervor overwhelms me. I want to come but I don't want to come. I want to make the panicky, starburst feeling last forever.

"Sergei!" I climax with a gush, my juices slicking his fingers and chin. "Oh God! Oh fuck! Oh yes! Don't stop!"

Sergei hums against my highly sensitive clit and I lose it again. His persistent tongue forces me to endure the peak of that climax for the longest forty-one seconds of my life. His flicks grow gentle, allowing me to ride the waves of aftershocks until I'm boneless with pleasure.

Cheek pressed to my abdomen, Sergei wraps his arms around me and pulls me down onto the floor with him. He tucks me against his chest and strokes my bare arm as I bathe in the afterglow. My overworked body takes some time to recharge. Eventually the tingling leaves my arms and legs and I feel as if I can control my extremities again.

Hands planted on either side of his head, I straddle his waist and kiss him thoroughly. I smile mischievously and bite his full lower lip. "Your turn."

Chapter Six

I take off my dress and toss it aside. It lands next to Sergei's shirt and my discarded undies. He grasps my hips and sits up, takes my nipple into his mouth. The sharp sucking sensation heightens my arousal. I grind against his waist. He groans with approval and bucks against me, rubbing his stiff cock between the apex of my thighs.

With a slight push, I direct him back to the floor and wiggle my way down his body. His belt buckle jangles as I work it loose. The vibrations of his anticipation tremble through me as I lower his zipper and pull down the front of his trousers. He lifts his hips so I can pull his pants down low enough. I smile at the sight of his tented boxers. His cock actually twitches beneath the fabric. I stroke him through the cotton, teasing him with the promise of what's to come.

Taking a bite of his waistband, I tug it down until his erection pops free. *Oh my*. Now *that* is one beautiful cock. Thick, long and ruddy—and uncut. It's the first one like that I've ever seen. Not that I've seen all that many, of course. I mean, I'm not a total slut or anything.

Sergei moans when I wrap my fingers around his hard length. His skin is blazing hot. I cup his taut balls and loosely swirl my hand up and down his erection. His fists knot at his sides. Like a child with a new toy, I experiment with the crown of his cock and the foreskin protecting it. I quickly learn the ways to make him tick.

Having him gasping at my playful touch makes me swell with power. I bend down and circle his cock with wet kisses. My tongue clicks against the head and then slides along the underside of his erection. I nibble his sac and stroke his dick until he's spewing what sounds like utter filth in Russian.

"In your mouth," Sergei pants, rising up on his elbows to watch. "Suck me."

How can I deny him? I slick my lips with saliva and take the top part of his cock between my lips. My tongue twirls around the head. Releasing him, I lick my palm and use the wet skin to stimulate him with long, tight strokes. Sergei's stomach muscles contract and he inhales sharply. Clearly whatever I'm doing is working.

I flick my tongue against the bumpy ridge just below the head of his penis and then suck the same spot. Sergei falls back, his elbows collapsing, and starts cursing in Russian again. At least I assume it's cursing. From the tone of his voice, he sure as hell isn't reciting nursery rhymes.

"Let me stand."

I scramble off him. Sergei stands and rids himself of his trousers, boxers, socks and shoes. He stands over me and pets my hair. Somehow I've assumed the role of submissive while he plays the master. I like the idea of giving sexual power to him. There's something alluring about the idea of not being in control just this once.

Sergei takes hold of his fat cock and rubs the head of it against my lips. It oozes precum and I lick away the salty cream. He nudges my lips and I let him in, my mouth opening like that of a baby bird. With the finesse of a pro, I swallow him deep. My nose bumps his neatly trimmed pubic hair. Taking controlled breaths and relaxing my jaw, I let him sit in the warm, wet depths of my throat. His fingers caress my cheeks. When he takes hold of my head and gently, slowly pumps his hips, I experience a thrill of excitement. I relinquish control, knowing that if things do go too far I'm ultimately the one with all the power. One good bite, after all...

Sergei ramps up the pace of his thrusts. There's something so incredibly dirty about the squishy sounds his cock makes as it slides in and out of my mouth. It makes my pussy drip and clench. Jeez, maybe I really *am* a freak.

I reach down and strum my clit as he fucks my mouth. With my other hand, I steady myself against his muscular thigh. Sergei grips my hair in his hands, his fingers tightening. My scalp burns—but it's a good burn. The kind that makes me feel alive. The kind that heightens all sensations and takes this experience to a whole new level.

Some part of me wants him to treat me as roughly as he did Cruz. A bigger part is thankful he doesn't because I'm just not ready to live out the fantasies that turn me on so bad.

My fingers slide through the slippery juices coating my pussy lips and find their way inside me. And it feels so good. I'm getting it from both ends. I can almost imagine what it would feel like to have another lover with us, maybe Fox or some male stranger we pick up at a club. It's a dirty thought that spurs me on, makes me moan around Sergei's thrusting cock.

"Ofelia." He says my name with such intensity, with such need. "Ofelia!"

He's going to come. I'm struck by the urge to beg him to come on my face or to give me the fabled pearl necklace but I don't. I'm too shy for such a kinky request. "Come on my face!" is probably a bit too much for a first encounter.

Sergei stiffens and shoves his dick deep inside my mouth. It pulses and shoots its load, missing my taste buds as it splashes the back of my throat. I do my fellow cocksuckers proud and swallow without gagging.

He pulls out slowly and falls to his knees in front of me. Wrapping an arm around my waist, Sergei draws me tight against his heaving chest and devours my mouth. His tongue searches for something as it touches the insides of my cheeks and my palate. It dawns on me that he's tasting himself.

I'm reminded of a conversation with Jolie once about snowballing. This is the closest I've ever come to that particularly kinky act. It makes me shiver with the sheer dirtiness of it.

Sergei's nimble fingers find my clit. Still kissing me, he strokes me until I come on his fingers. It's a shockingly powerful and quick climax that leaves me shaking and clutching at him.

Still kneeling, we stare into one another's eyes. It's the most intensely intimate experience of my life. I want to say something but don't want to ruin the moment. I

sense he feels the same way. He kisses me tenderly and strokes my cheek. "Come, *lubimaya*. I make love to you."

Sergei helps me stand and takes me hand. He leads me into the bedroom and guides me down onto the bed. He removes my shoes and tosses them over his shoulder. After an incredibly thorough kiss, he leaves the bedroom and I wait in nervous anticipation. Walking without a hint of shame over his nudity, Sergei returns, the strip of condoms from my purse in hand. He tosses them onto the bed.

Like a prowling cat, he climbs over me. Our fingers intertwine above my head as he plants his knees on either side of me. Naked and hot, our bodies touch and slide. The pointed tips of my breasts drag along his muscled and decorated pecs. His cock smashes against my lower belly, leaving wet smudges along my skin.

Sergei kisses all of my injuries with such gentleness it brings tears to my eyes. He whispers sweet things to me in a mix of English and Russian. I want to believe the things he says. I want to believe he'll protect me. I want to believe this isn't going to end with the cold light of morning.

He sits back on his heels and grabs a condom. Sitting up, I take it from him and rip into the package. I grasp his steely cock and slide the contraceptive sheath into place. There's some primal part of me that wants to flirt with danger and allow him to spill his cum inside me. The responsible, say-no-to-STDs side of me puts the kibosh on that dangerous impulse.

I lie back on the bed and spread my legs. Sergei leans over me and claims my lips in the kind of passionate kiss that leaves my toes tingling. Ever so slowly, he enters me, his way eased by my extreme wetness. I love every delicious inch of his cock sliding into me, stretching me, filling me. When he's fully seated, Sergei holds still. Our eyes meet and something passes between us. It's just a brief flash of something so powerful it scares me—and then it's gone.

He rocks against me for a few minutes then draws back and starts to thrust at an angle. I gasp as my exposed clit rubs against his pubic bone. The man has mad skills

and knows just how to move to make me claw at him and beg for more. I've never had an orgasm during sex. During foreplay, with sex toys or oral or some combination with Fox and Jolie? Sure. But straight-up boy/girl, penis-meets-vagina sex? No way.

"Come on my cock, *milaya moya*." Sergei's thumb works in tight circles against my clit. I clutch at his sides and dig my toes into the mattress. Oh God. Oh God! It's so good.

"I'm going to come for you." My voice is tinged with the desire to please him. Tension builds in my lower belly and I'm vibrating as I approach the precipice. The competing sensations of his thrusting cock and strumming thumb make me lose control. Fireworks burst behind my eyelids. His name falls from my lips like a mantra. "Sergei!"

His thumb skillfully draws out the orgasm for all it's worth. Eventually he has mercy on my poor, over-stimulated body and takes away that talented digit. He doesn't stop thrusting though, just slows his pace. He bends down and captures my mouth again. His fingers sift through my hair and he nuzzles my nose. "Hold on to me."

With surprising finesse, Sergei rolls onto his back and somehow manages to keep me from slipping away. He grabs my hips and settles me into position atop him. I've always loved playing cowgirl and waste no time taking control. One hand on his belly, I sway back and forth on his cock. He plays with my breasts as I switch to a bouncing move. The sound of our bodies slapping together melds with our groans and sighs.

Sergei sits up and nibbles my breasts. His hand tangles in my hair. Chest to chest, we undulate atop the bed. I wrap my arms around his shoulders and hold tight to his chiseled body. His hard breaths tickle my neck as he licks and suckles his way back up to my mouth.

We're sharing a particularly deep kiss when Sergei's fingers tighten in my hair. I pick up on his cue and really grind my pussy against him. He grunts against my mouth and bucks against me, shoving his cock as far as it will go. While he shudders and groans, I keep snapping my hips back and forth, milking his orgasm as long as possible.

Forehead to forehead, we cling together. He nips my lower lip and rubs my back with long, soothing strokes. I touch his face, his stubbled cheeks rasping my palms and fingertips. For the first time since I've known him, Sergei looks completely and utterly relaxed. There's none of the usual wariness or distrust etched on his face. Knowing I've given him this sense of peace makes me feel so strong and powerful. I doubt I've ever had that effect on anyone.

Reluctantly we separate so Sergei can deal with the now precariously dangling, loaded condom. I take a moment in the bathroom before rejoining him in bed. I'm not quite sure what to expect and I'm surprised when he offers me the space beside him and a glass of water. I take it gratefully and slake my thirst. Sex is hard work, after all.

When we're sufficiently hydrated, Sergei reclines against the pillows and gathers me close. Snuggling is a welcome development. He stares ahead at nothing in particular, his mind somewhere else. I decide to live in the moment and not think about the nightmare that is my current life. My fingers randomly trace the tattoos adorning his torso. "These are mafia tattoos."

Immediately I wish I hadn't said that. The hot sex seems to have broken my mouth filter. I start to apologize but Sergei just nods. "Yes."

I know I shouldn't but I can't stop myself. "Are you still...you know...involved?"

Sergei shakes his head. "That was old life. This," he gestures around, "is new life. No crime. No mafia."

He grows quiet and I wonder if I've crossed a line I never should have approached. Eyes still focused ahead, Sergei says, "I make mistakes in past."

"Oh I know all about mistakes. Believe me," I mutter unhappily.

"Not like these," he says softly, sadly. "I do bad, bad things."

"Murder?" I can't believe I've just asked that. I mean, seriously, shut the fuck up, self!

"No. Never." Sergei glances down at me. "I never hurt woman either." He inhales a long breath. "Drugs. Money laundering. Black market. Those kinds of things."

"But that's all in the past. You've obviously moved on from that life."

"Da." One side of his mouth curves up with annoyance. "But the people from that time? No."

I think of how Fox and Jolie and Marco had all moved past our little high-school schemes. What did I do? I dragged them right back into the thick of it, mired them right in the shit. I'm no better than the people still bothering Sergei.

"I did some really bad things in high school. Gossip, lies, blackmail."

"Why?" He genuinely wants to know what spurred me to seek such nefarious ends.

"It's complicated, Sergei. A lot of it had to do with my mom getting hurt."

Sadness flashes on his face. "Too bad injury ruined career. I like her movies."

"A lot of people liked her movies." My eyes prickle with heat and I glance toward the window. Blinking quickly, I try to clear the welling tears. "You know, he never went to jail for it. He just took off to Asia. Bangkok at first, I think. I don't know. He was killed last year in a mugging in Hong Kong. So that's that."

"Ofelia." He takes my hand and gives it a squeeze. "What happened that night in Rome?"

I play with the embroidered edge of the comforter. Do I really want to get into this with Sergei? My throat gets tight at the very thought of spilling the beans on what was hands down the worst night of my life. I glance at Sergei and realize if there was ever a man who could understand the kind of nightmares I've seen, it's him.

With a long sigh, I launch into the story. "We were at a film festival. It was supposed to be a nice vacation. Even Delia, our housekeeper, came with us that time. But James called that afternoon ranting and raving because his alimony check bounced."

"Who is James?"

"Mom's first husband. Mona's dad. He OD'd a few years ago in Las Vegas."

He issues a short hum of understanding.

"So anyway, Mom confronted Mike, her second husband and manager, about the money situation and all hell broke loose." My stomach churns at the horrific memories of that night. Of Delia shielding me as Mike transformed into a madman. Of the sounds of my mother screaming in pain. "They were fighting up on the second floor. It started in their bedroom—we were staying in a townhouse of sorts—and eventually they were up on the second landing."

"Did he hit your mother before that night?"

"He was never physically abusive. Well—that I saw," I qualify. "I spent a lot of time on set or at school back then. Mom could have hidden the bruises from me and probably did. She wouldn't have wanted us to worry."

"That night, your mother fell, yes?"

"He pushed her down the stairs." My fingers tighten around his. Panic constricts my chest. "She was already on the floor. He'd been kicking her in the head and then—wham!—he just kicked her over the edge. She tumbled head over heels all the way down."

I can still hear the cracking bones, and shudder. "Once he saw what he'd done, he ran out. Delia and I called for police and an ambulance but the damage was done. Mom suffered a massive stroke and bleeding around the brain. All because of *money*." Disgust fills my voice. "He'd embezzled and pissed away just about every cent she'd ever made."

I twist so I can see him better. "That's how I got into blackmail." Confusion spreads across his face. "We needed money," I explain. "There were medical bills and taxes and school fees. I was just getting bit parts here and there by that time, nothing substantial. And then Mona told me she'd seen the principal at Cran-Can buying coke from some guy she partied with at the time."

"So you blackmailed him."

I flush from guilt. "Yes. It was wrong. I knew it then and I know it now. It's just that times were rough and I didn't think I had any other options...and it was easy." My face burns with shame. "I'm so embarrassed by the stupid things I did then. And you know what? I really want to be a better person and I thought I was—but look at me." I shake my head and blink back tears. "I broke into a hotel room, drugged a soccer player, stole a sex tape and blackmailed you with it. Maybe," my voice breaks, "maybe I really am just a rotten human being."

"Your circumstances." Sergei brushes a tear from my face. "Extenuating."

"Maybe my friends were right. Maybe there was a better choice, something not so ugly or illegal. Why do I always choose the easiest and often nastiest route?"

Sergei's fingers brush featherlight across my cheek. "I am last person in world to judge you. As I say before, I make many mistakes." He kisses the tip of my nose. "But we make better choices now. Yes?"

Staring into his earnest eyes, I truly believe I can be a better person. I believe I can make the right choices and walk the straight and narrow. I sniff and bob my chin. "Yes."

He grins. "First choice of new era. We take bath or order room service?"

"Hmmm." I consider my options. "How about room service first and then a bath?" Smiling, he lands a quick kiss on my lips. "Good choice."

* * * * *

Hours later, I'm dozing and spooning with Sergei when I hear the faint ring of my cell. It wakes me from much-needed rest. Behind me, Sergei snores softly in his sleep. Since it's our first night together, I find it kind of cute. If this were an every night thing, I might have to get him some of those nose strips.

Exhausted from our night of seemingly endless sex, I almost fall back asleep until the ringtone manages to penetrate my groggy state. Recognizing it as Mona's, I bolt out of bed and rush into the living room. I dig through my purse until I find my phone. "Hello?" My panicked voice echoes in the stillness of the darkened room. I can just make out the outline of silver-domed room service trays on the glass coffee table. "Mona?"

"Ofelia? Oh, thank Christ! I need help. I need you." She's sobbing so hard. "I'm in a lot of trouble."

And suddenly all of my anger with her dissipates. There will be time for ass chewing later. Right now I need to find her and get her home. She's not safe out there with her boyfriend.

"I know you're in trouble. Just tell me where you are so I can help you." Her phone starts to break up and I can barely hear her. "Mona?"

Her signal strengthens. "I'm at one of Carter's friend's houses. I...I don't know the address."

I squeeze my eyes shut and pray for patience. It's clear she's suffering from withdrawal. The shakiness of her voice and her confusion tell me that. "Do you know what city you're in? Maybe a subdivision?"

For the next ten minutes, we narrow down her possible location to a subdivision called Falls Creek in a nearby suburb. She recounts her movements over the last week and takes me down a long and meandering path of drugs, sex and crime. I cringe at the thought of the abuse her poor body has suffered. I can only hope she hasn't contracted some kind of horrible disease.

"Look, Mona, just hold tight until I get there. It's going to take me close to an hour. Just get your things together and be ready to leave the second I pull up outside in my taxi. We don't have time to fuck around. And no, you can't bring Carter."

"I don't want Carter!" she screams maniacally, causing me to jump. "He can go to hell."

I have a feeling I'm not going to like the story behind her sudden hatred of him. He's probably done something despicable that's going to make me want to strangle his scrawny pill-popping ass.

"Okay. No Carter." I scribble down the possible address on the hotel stationery. "You said it's the house on the cul-de-sac with a green car and a black SUV out front, right?"

"Yeah."

I make another notation and end the call. "I'll see you soon. Just stay there, Mona. And please, for the love of God, be safe!"

Grabbing my purse, I rush into the bedroom and promptly trip over my shoes. All the crap in my bag dumps onto the floor. A quick glimpse at the bed assures me Sergei is still asleep. Trying to be quiet, I pick up the toiletries I need and run into the bathroom. My mind races as I brush my teeth and wash my face. I slip back into the dress I wore last night but skip the panties. I have another pair in my bag—well, on the floor.

I'm brushing my hair and pulling it into a high ponytail when I hear the text message alert on my phone. I finish up and head back into the bedroom to find Sergei, naked as the day he was born, standing next to the bed, clutching my phone. His sleepy eyes blink as he stares at the screen. "What is this?"

"A text message." I snatch my clean undies from the pile on the floor and step into them. Man, I am going to look so silly prancing around town in a cocktail dress at six in the morning. "What's it say?"

"That you are double-crossing liar."

The anger vibrating his voice stuns me and I look up at him in shock. "What?"

"O, meeting place and time okay with me. Bring tape and pics. I have money." He reads the text to me. Fury blazes in his eyes and I realize it doesn't matter what I say. He's not going to believe me. Despite what we shared last night, Sergei has returned to his default setting—distrust.

"I don't have to explain myself to you." I snatch back my phone and stuff it in my purse. My throat constricts painfully as the foolish hopes encouraged by our night together shrivel and die. "I think our business is done."

"That is all you have to say?" Sergei's chest heaves. "You think I let you walk out now? Let you sell copy of my tape?"

I straighten my back and face him head on. "I think I'd like to see you try and stop me."

Sergei's jaw clenches. "Do you know who I am?" He gestures to the tattoos on his chest. "You play with fire."

"Do you know who *I* am?" I counter testily. "I'm not some stupid girl you can push around with empty threats. My best friend owns this hotel. She knows I'm here. If I don't check in with her soon, you'll have the cops all over your ass. And then, of course, there's my friend who just happens to run the most popular gossip site in the world. Maybe you'd like to make a splash as his hot topic?"

Sergei studies me for a long and uncomfortable moment. "Who are you?"

His words wound me, make my eyes burn. Like always, I shove down my emotions and lock them away where they belong. "Didn't I tell you that you wouldn't like the real Ofelia?"

There's an air of sadness about him as he nods. Not able to stand another moment in his judging presence, I turn around and walk over to my shoes. Something catches my eye as I bend down to grab them. I'm drawn to the vase of tiger lilies on the dresser.

My stomach drops.

How do you like that? I've been played.

"You sorry son of a bitch!" I snatch the pale yellow ceramic vase and whirl around to face him. Water sloshes around my fingers. Sergei flinches as the vase explodes against the gleaming wood floors, sending ceramic shards and water and flowers everywhere.

And there, right in the center of all that debris, is a tiny wireless video camera. I'd noticed the telescopic lens peeking out through the flower stalks.

His Adam's apple moves but he says nothing. Shaking my head, I laugh with derision. "You've got some huge balls. Standing there, screaming at me about double-crossing when you were recording the whole night."

He makes no apologies. "It was insurance."

"So all of that last night—it was just a game." The silly romantic side of me wants him to tell me I'm wrong, that he meant everything he said to me, but he doesn't correct my assumption. He doesn't say a damn word. He just stands there, stock-still and silent, and I hate him for it.

Trembling with rage at my own stupidity and his duplicity, I hurl one shoe and then the other at his head. He bats them away, knocking them to the ground. Tears spill down my face. Self-loathing twists my stomach. Of all the men to care about, it had to be *this* one...

The only one as sneaky and underhanded as me.

"Ofelia." Sergei finally speaks. He says my name softly, pleadingly, but it doesn't work. There's nothing he can say to make this better. We're beyond salvaging the glimmer of possibility between us.

"Go fuck yourself, Sergei." My snarl clearly stuns him. I haul my purse higher onto my shoulder and tiptoe around the ceramic bits littering the ground. Once on safe ground, I stomp barefoot out of the suite. He calls after me and follows me as far as the living room, but I just lift my hand overhead and shoot him the finger.

My barefoot state and rumpled cocktail dress garner quite a few looks from the staff and other guests bustling about so early in the morning. I ignore them all, turning up my nose and slipping on my sunglasses to cover my black eye. They can all go to hell for all I care.

I snag a taxi from the pool waiting outside. It's not until I slide into the backseat that I realize I left the note back in Sergei's room. There's no way I'm going back to get it. I give the driver the best directions I can and offer a heavy tip. He's more than happy to oblige.

Alone in the backseat of the cab, I cry silently. I've just colossally fucked up everything. There's no way Sergei will make the second half of the payment now. There's no time to scrounge for the rest of the money. I'll just have to grab Mona, Mom and Delia and stash them somewhere safe. After I meet with Rennie, Marco's rival in the trash-and-tell business, I'll do the same thing—find a hideout and lay low until the shit storm blows over and we're safe again.

Well. Safer.

I send a quick text to Jolie letting her know I'm okay. I'm tempted to let her send security in to harass Sergei but decide against it. He's not worth the headache. Or at least that's what I tell myself.

The taxi pulls into the subdivision where Mona and her junkie boyfriend are hiding out. We drive the streets for a good ten minutes before finally finding the cul-de-sac house with a green car and black SUV out front. The driver agrees to wait and I rush up to the door.

As I stand on the porch, my survival instincts kick in and tell me to bolt. Something isn't right about this place. It just feels weird.

But I can't leave. Mona needs me.

I don't bother knocking or ringing the doorbell. The door proves to be unlocked so I cautiously walk inside. The entryway branches off to a living room on one side and a dining room on the other. It quickly becomes clear to me what purpose the house serves. The dining room table holds mounds of baggies containing cocaine and pot. There are scales and boxes of various supplies. Raw inventory is stored in the living room. This is obviously the place they break up the big, taped blocks of drugs into smaller parcels for the street market.

Oh fuck this. I have to get Mona and get the hell out of here.

There's movement upstairs. Footsteps, I think. Even though flashes of every slasher film I've ever seen rush through my brain, I climb the stairs.

Clearly I'm an idiot.

All the doors are open upstairs. I spot a bathroom and what look to be two bedrooms with bare mattresses tossed on their floors. Piss and vomit stains are easily visible. The stench is overwhelming. Boy, this is one classy place.

I take a left at the top of the stairs toward what I assume is the master bedroom. There, on the dirty sheets of the only bed in the house sitting on a frame, sits Mona. She wears a filthy pink sundress with dark blotches along the hem. Her greasy, matted hair curls around her pale, gaunt face. I spot cigarette burns and nasty scabs along her arms and legs. Even now she scratches at her arms, tearing the skin as she chases away phantom crack bugs.

"Mona?" I take a guarded step inside the room. When she's like this, I never know what to expect.

Startled, she jumps to her feet. Her eyes are crazed and glassy. Eventually she recognizes me and sits back down. The craziness reflected in her blue eyes fades only a bit. "You always come."

"Yeah." And I do. I'm always the one running around behind her, cleaning up her messes. "I've got a car out front. Let's go."

"I wish you hadn't come." She gazes off into the distance. Her voice is dreamlike. There's a strange slackness to her facial expression.

"You're as high as a fucking kite!" There's no concealing the accusation and frustration in my voice.

"Of course she is."

I practically jump out of my skin. With a bone-chilling shriek, I spin around toward the male voice in the doorway. I recognize him immediately. He's the same brute who knocked me around in my house. The one whose face seemed oddly familiar.

He takes a menacing step forward. "How else could I get her to cooperate?"

My gaze falls to the machete holstered on his hip. Dried blood cakes his fingers. Panicked, I look to Mona to see if she's injured. I notice the stains on her dress again. Blood—but whose?

I find my answer seeping beneath a door I assume leads to the closet. I couldn't see it before, the viscous, dark blood pool. I can only guess that it belongs to Carter.

Think, Ofelia, think!

My phone is in my purse in the cab. If I scream, I doubt any of the neighbors will hear. If they do, they probably won't help. They'd have to be stupid not to know what kind of a house this is. They've probably tuned out all the weird noises and comings and goings. If I'm seriously lucky, someone will call the cops and report a disturbance, but who knows how long it will take them to show up. Mona has already passed out in a drug-induced stupor upon the bed.

So I'm on my own.

"I told *el jeffe* you were trouble." He sneers as he closes the distance between us. "I said you would make problems if we went after you."

"I know who you are." My voice trembles but I keep my chin high. "The family resemblance is strong. That nose, those cheekbones—your brother, the mayor, has the same ones."

His nostrils flare. "You don't wanna bring my brother into this."

"It's too late. I already have. The pictures I took of myself and the video from our security system are probably up on the Web as we speak." That's a blatant lie but he doesn't know it. "You fuck with my family, I fuck with yours."

His backhand cracks against my cheek, sending me stumbling sideways. I clutch my face and choke back tears. Fuck, that *hurt*.

He's furious as he strides toward me. There's no doubt in my mind. I'm going to die.

But I'm not going down without a fight.

He grabs my arm and pulls me close so his blows will have maximum impact. I kick and bite at him. I've seen enough crime shows. I want his DNA all over me. I throw in a scratch across his face for good measure.

But he's just so much bigger than me, not even my adrenaline surge levels the playing field. With a quick sweep of my ankles, he drops me. I land with a thud on the dirty carpet. The fall knocks the breath from my lungs. He pins me to the ground and leers in my face. I almost gag at the sour stink coming from his mouth. His nasty hands squeeze my breasts. "You know, *putita*, you might be worth all this trouble."

With his forearm across my neck, he keeps me in place. His other hand works on his belt buckle and jeans. I want to fight but I can hardly breathe. There's so much pressure against my windpipe. Blood fills my mouth and drips from my nose. I'm going to black out any time now. Maybe that's a good thing.

Suddenly, blissfully, the choking pressure disappears.

I choke and sputter. Spots dance in front of my watering eyes. I'm vaguely aware of the sounds of a scuffle. A fist repeatedly slams into a face, the dull thud of skin against skin ringing in my ears.

Dazed and confused, I sit up...

And watch Sergei beat the living shit out my assailant, one Chuy Cardenas, brother of Mayor Conrad Cardenas.

"Ser-sergei," I croak. "Sergei!"

He pauses mid-swing to look at me. I'm taken aback by the utter rage etched on his handsome face. He releases Chuy, who slumps to the floor, unconscious and oozing blood. Sergei wipes his hands on the front of his expensive white shirt, leaving red smears. Breathing heavily, he walks toward me and crouches down. He dabs at my battered face with the crisp handkerchief he keeps in his suit jacket.

"How?" I wonder, still shocked by his presence. Sergei reaches into his pocket and produces my scribbled note.

The realization that a forgotten note was all that stood between me and certain rape and death shatters what little control I have left. The floodgates open and I sob uncontrollably.

Sergei sits down and cradles me across his lap. I bury my face in his neck and hold tight. His gentle hands caress my arms. Lips to my forehead, he whispers reassurances. "Everything okay now. I take care of this. All of this."

And he does.

Chapter Seven

"You know, Marco, I'm fairly certain we had this discussion about private places three weeks ago." I send a quick glance in the direction of the paparazzi milling on the sidewalk across the street from the restaurant where we've gathered. I gesture toward his toned-down outfit consisting of electric-blue jeans and a banana-yellow t-shirt emblazoned with a pic of David Bowie during his glam phase. "At least you're not dressed like a little monster today."

Marco snorts with amusement. "Even my love for Lady Gaga knows its bounds. And honey, I'm not about to pass up the chance to be photographed with the three of you." He waves his delicate hand in the direction of Jolie, Fox and me. "We don't get together all that often."

"If you ask me," Fox pauses to sip her Sprite, "this is the perfect place for his *mea culpa*."

Marco smiles sheepishly. "About that, Ofelia..."

I reach across the table and clasp his hand. "It's okay, Marco. You don't have to apologize."

"But I do," he insists. "I told you I hated you. I should have let you explain."

"Look, I only contacted Rennie to break the Cardenas story because I wanted to keep you out of it." I swirl the straw in my iced tea. "Publishing photos and video of a cartel enforcer—who just happens to be the mayor's brother—beating the crap out of some girl is pretty risky. I didn't want you in the middle of it."

"And you're such a doll for thinking like that." He lifts my hand and kisses it.

"You're a dummy is what you are," Jolie grumbles. "You're just lucky the pics and vid never made it to the 'Net."

"I had to do something, Jolie." I sigh and shrug. "It was the only card I had left to play. If I didn't get the money in time, I needed to know there would be some kind of pressure on those crazy assholes trying to kill us. Family is important, even to scum like that. There's no way Chuy would have gone after my mom or Delia once that story went live. He'd want to protect his brother."

"And now he's in jail," Marco says.

"For now," Jolie points out. "He could get out and then what?"

"Oh, I don't think she needs to worry about those folks anymore," Fox comments with a sly grin. "I have a feeling *The Russian's* taken care of that."

I blush and glance away from their curious stares. "I wouldn't know."

"Oh?" Marco leans forward with interest.

"She hasn't seen The Russian since *that* day," Fox explains. "He took her home, gave her a bath, fed her breakfast and tucked her into bed. When she woke up, he was gone."

"He gave you a bath and tucked you in?" Marco is about to swoon. "What a marshmallow!" He sulks. "Why can't I find a big, yummy Russian billionaire to pamper me? I am so jealous of your new lover boy."

"He's not my lover," I hurriedly reply.

"You had sex with him," Jolie says. "Ergo, he is your lover."

"Was," I counter. "Maybe. Ugh! I don't know." I rest my forehead in my hands. "I really just don't know what's going on with us."

The group grows quiet. Fox steers the conversation to a different place. "What about your sister?"

I pick up my head. "She's starting her third week of treatment tomorrow. It's too soon to know one way or another."

"Is she really at one of those Mormon places in Utah?" Marco's eyes are wide.

"I don't know about the Latter Day Saints thing but, yes, it's in Utah." I play with my silverware. "Whatever their methodology, it seems to be working this time. I actually believe her when she says she's going to stay clean. I think she believes it too."

"Dude," Fox says with all seriousness, "she saw some machete-wielding bastard hack up her boyfriend and then try to kill her sister. If I were a junkie, that would be all the motivation I'd need."

"Is that why you're chugging Sprite instead of nursing vodka on the rocks?" Jolie gestures toward Fox's glass. Come to think of it, I haven't seen Fox drink alcohol in weeks.

She waves her hand. "Let's just say Mona's ordeal persuaded me to practice a little temperance."

"I'm impressed. I really am, Fox." I pat her hand encouragingly. "I've had a similar change of heart. It's time for me to leave behind all the schemes and even my acting dreams. It's time to move forward."

"So you're really selling the house then?" Jolie rubs her finger around the rim of her glass. "Quitting acting I fully support. It was going nowhere fast. You're better than straight-to-DVD crap. But the house?" She shakes her head. "You've lived there your entire life."

"And that's a really long time," I say, feeling eons older than my twenty-three years. "It's time to let it go. Mom agrees. We need to be realistic. We have to downsize."

Fox grins. "I know a good realtor."

We laugh at that little joke. Yeah. I *bet* she knows a good realtor. Her mother runs the most successful real estate agency in the state.

"Did I tell you guys Cruz has been trying to hook up with me again?"

I gape at Fox. "You're joking."

She's just as amused. "Nope. He seems to think he had some smokin'-hot sex. He's sure that's what helped them win their expo games."

"There's a sideline for you, Fox." Marco sips his mojito. "You can rent out your magic pussy to all those athletes who can't juice anymore."

Our raucous laughter garners quite a few annoyed looks from the other patrons on the patio. We take that as our cue to leave. Jolie has to get back to the hotel and Fox needs to pack for a Tokyo trip. Marco and I start to make plans but the sight of a familiar face under the awning at the front of the restaurant interrupts us.

"I'll have to rain check."

Marco follows my gaze and smiles knowingly. "Sure thing, kiddo." He gives me a pair of air kisses and flits out the front door to greet the waiting paparazzi.

As the South African bodyguard whose name I still don't know saunters toward me, I'm struck by the memories of that morning three weeks ago. He stops just in front of me and smiles. "Mr. Alexandrov will see you in his car."

It's all I can do not to smile one of those goofy smiles of relief and excitement and utter giddiness. I hold my emotions in check and follow him out a private door in the back. Sergei's sleek black car idles in the alley. Immediately my tummy flips and flops. The smell of his spicy cologne fills my nose, the scent imprinted in my mind so clearly it fires any time I think of Sergei.

The bodyguard opens the car door and gestures for me to get inside. I hesitate and touch the sleeve of his very well tailored black jacket. "What's your name?"

He seems a bit discomfited and reluctant to answer. "Gerhardus."

"Gerhardus?"

Well. How do you like that?

"My mates call me Kitch."

I can't help myself. I just have to know. "Am I your mate?"

"You'd have to ask Mr. Alexandrov."

"Very diplomatic," I say with a teasing smile and climb into the backseat. Just like the last time, it's frigidly cold. I rub my arms and wish I'd worn something a bit more substantial than my whimsical sundress. "Jesus, Sergei! I know you're probably homesick but do you have to keep it as cold as Siberia in here?"

"Hello would be nice," Sergei playfully admonishes as he shrugs out of his jacket. "Not from Siberia. Moscow is home." He drapes it over my shoulders and brushes his fingers through my loose hair. He plays with the ruched fabric at my bust. "What is this color?"

"Sunset pink," I whisper, wishing his fingers were touching me, not the cotton.

"Sunset pink," he repeats softly, his lips mere centimeters from mine. My eyes drift closed as he brushes his mouth against mine. "I missed you so much, Ofelia."

"You didn't say goodbye." I don't even try to hide the hurt and disappointment in my voice. "I woke up and you were gone."

Sergei plants a tender kiss on my forehead. "I wanted to stay but...the Mexicans and the money and the mess."

I hold his gaze so he can't evade me. "And that took three weeks and a trip to Russia to sort out?"

"No. I *did* have business in Russia but not for so long. I was...confused," he says eventually.

"Are you still confused?"

Sergei caresses my cheek. "No. We both make mistake before but we can start over, ves?"

My heart swells and threatens to burst. "Yes."

His eyebrows arch. "No more schemes?"

"No more insurance?"

"Nyet." Sergei reaches over and buckles my seat belt. He pecks my cheek and gives his driver a signal. Kitch presses a button on the dash and the separating glass rises into place. We're alone. Finally.

"Where are we going?" I snuggle as close as my seat belt will allow. "Hotel room? Or maybe one of those sleek yachts of yours I always see splashed in the tabloids?"

Sergei laughs and curves an arm around my shoulders. "We go on yacht soon. You pick destination." He kisses me and rubs his thumb over my chin. "Now we go home. I promised your mother I bring you."

My jaw drops. Mom *never* meets strangers. The day Sergei brought me home, she stayed in her room. "You spoke with my mother?" He nods. "How?"

"Delia let me in to see her. I bring her macaroon from Paris."

Oh, he's good. Those pastel-colored confections have always been Mom's guilty pleasure. "Now how the hell did you know she loves Laduree macaroons?"

"The same way I know your favorite flower is peony; you always wanted to play cello but would not practice; and your favorite food is something called..." He pulls his phone from his pocket and scrolls down the screen until he finds the note he's left himself. "Carne guisada."

He absolutely butchers the pronunciation of my favorite meal but I let it slide. "And how is that?"

"I ask friends. Jolie and Eugenia."

I'm thrown by the Eugenia for a bit. "Oh God! Don't ever let Fox hear you call her Eugenia!"

He frowns with confusion. "But that is name."

"Yes, but it's horrid. It belongs to some old knitting nanny with fifty cats. No." I shake my head. "She goes by Fox and has since we were kids."

"Why Fox?"

"Crazy like a fox. It's a saying."

"Ah."

But I can tell he doesn't really get it. It must be one of those things that doesn't translate well.

"Your mother is nice woman." Sergei pockets his phone. "We manage to talk after few awkward moments. I think she liked me."

"If she let you in to see her, she liked you."

"So did housekeeper. She made me lunch."

With a chuckle of amusement, I snuggle close to him. "Delia is such a mother hen. You know, the only real external conscience I've ever had, the only person who's ever been ballsy enough to tell me no or call me on my crap, has been Delia."

"I would expect nothing less from grandmother."

I stiffen at his unexpected words and pull free. I can't tear my eyes away. "Who told you?"

"This," he touches my nose, "and these," he gestures to my eyes, "tell me everything. Delia have same. She is grandmother."

"Yes." It's something I've never admitted—and it feels so good to say it finally. "Yes. She's my grandmother."

"But she works as housekeeper." I can hear the displeasure in his voice.

"It's not like that, Sergei." I sigh and push a hand through my hair. "It's really complicated."

"I want to know."

I close my eyes and exhale. "My mother had an affair with Delia's son. Mom was still married to James. The marriage was bad and she was lonely and needed someone and he was there."

"And you were conceived."

My head bobs. "James went ballistic when he found out about it. The affair ended their marriage. He got a lot of money to keep it all quiet and claim me as his. Back then, adultery wasn't such a blasé thing in Hollywood."

"It should not be now," Sergei comments rather grumpily. I'm a little surprised by the moral line he's drawn. Apparently marriage is one of the things he holds absolute. "Delia's son—my father—left as soon as Mom told him she was pregnant. It was just a fling with a famous movie star to him. He was dabbling in club promoting at the time so access to stars was easy."

"That must have been difficult for Delia."

"She didn't work for Mom yet. Delia showed up on our doorstep a few weeks later. She was sent by an agency for a job listing. Mom didn't know who she was when she hired her. It didn't all come out until right before I was born but by then, Mom and Delia had become very close."

"So she stay," Sergei finishes.

"So she stayed. She was in the hospital the night I was born. She's been there every day since."

"And your father?"

"He started up a pretty successful promotions company, married a really nice woman—a teacher—and had five kids. They're really happy." My throat tightens. Embarrassment blazes across my face. "I've never told anyone this...and I'm not sure why I'm telling *you*, but I went to see him once, after Mom was hurt. I was so lost and confused and I really needed a second parent, you know?"

Sergei nods as if he understands. "Da."

"I made an appointment to see him but when I got there, his receptionist told me he'd had an urgent meeting. I could hear him in his office, laughing and talking on the phone. I asked if I could reschedule and she said no. He was booked for the foreseeable future. She handed me an envelope with a check for five thousand dollars in it and a sticky note."

Just like then, I feel sucker-punched and sick. "You know what it said?" I look at Sergei, a sad smile curving my lips. He hesitantly shakes his head. "A parting gift." I swallow hard. "A fucking parting gift. That's all I was worth to him. A lousy five K."

"Ofelia." He breathes my name so sadly. "I should not have asked. I am sorry."

"Don't be." I give a little shrug. "It kind of feels nice to tell you these things."

My admission makes him smile. "I am happy to have trust."

I lean over and kiss his cheek. "You've earned it."

Sergei cups my face and captures my lips in a lazy, thorough kiss. When it finally ends, he gazes into my eyes. "You are worth more than five thousand to me."

"Oh yeah?" I can't help but smile at that.

"Yes. Much, much more."

I want to ask how much but I already know. The amount he paid to get that drug cartel off my ass was obscene. God only knows what he did to smooth over the nightmare at the drug house.

Thinking about all he's done for me, all he's put on the line, makes me a little nervous. I'm afraid to admit it aloud but I am so in love with him. He's that elusive other half I've been searching for all these years. He's the only man who will ever understand me, the real me, the real Ofelia.

"Sergei?"

He clearly hears the seriousness in my voice. With a little frown of concern, he touches my chin. "What is wrong?"

"What if you wake up one day and decide you don't want me anymore?"

"Will never happen, *lubimaya*." He's completely confident in this. "You are sneaky, brilliant, beautiful—my perfect match." He brushes back my hair. "You are only woman for me."

"So where do we go from here?" I've never been in this situation and have no idea what to expect. "Are we exclusive? Are we, like, open?" I think of his penchant for naughty domination scenes with other men and my lust-filled nights with Jolie and Fox. "Are you still going to play your games?"

He gives a little shrug and pierces me with the sexiest of smiles. "Maybe we play game together."

A thrill of excitement ripples through me. The prospect of a little adventurous sex with Sergei and maybe another man or woman makes me so hot. I have the feeling our relationship may stay firmly outside the box—and that's okay. We're far from typical, after all. I mean, how many girls can say they snagged their man with a blackmail plot gone awry?

Sergei gathers me close. "From now on, I take care of you and mother and sister and grandmother. I spoil you with jewelry and clothes and trips around world. I make love to you every night until you beg me to stop." He smiles against my temple. "Maybe in morning too."

"Sergei!" I laugh and relax into the warmth of his embrace. For the first time in a long time, I feel safe and secure. Even though there's a chance this could end in tears, I'm committed to seeing it through. Maybe we'll still be together in ten years, or maybe we'll make a huge splash in a few months when we have the most spectacularly sordid breakup this town—and Marco's website—has ever seen.

"What happens if I get tired of all this spoiling and red-hot sex?"

Sergei's hand slips beneath his jacket still draped over my shoulders. His hand forms around my breast and gives it a playful squeeze. He nibbles my lower lip as his hand moves to the hidden inner pocket of his jacket.

I gape at the sight of the DVD in his hand. I can't help but laugh. "You didn't!"

Sergei grins and waves the DVD. "You see, I have something that belong to you."

Bliss bubbles in my belly. Damn, but he really is good. It's thrilling to be on the other end of a blackmail attempt, even if it is just a joke.

I tease my lips over his. "And if I say no to your demands?"

Sergei's hand tangles in my hair and he takes my mouth passionately. "If you get tired of me and leave, I know nice man in pink shirt with gossip site and two girls who think you could use taste of your medicine."

I offer my best scowl at the idea of Sergei using my crew. "You would find them impossible to work with. They're not as easily swayed by those gorgeous green eyes." I pause and giggle. "At least not Jolie and Fox."

Sergei chuckles and twists a few strands of my hair around his finger. He extends the DVD. "Take it. Destroy it. Keep it. Your choice."

I click my teeth in mock disappointment. "But it's your bargaining chip!"

Sergei just shrugs and nuzzles his nose against my neck. He nips at the sensitive skin and sends shockwaves of need straight to my clit. "We make new one..."

And as his greedy fingers sneak between my thighs, I don't doubt it.

The End

About the Author

While browsing bookstore shelves as a teenager, Lo discovered the erotic writings of Anaïs Nin and Anne Roquelaure. Certain her mother would not approve, Lo smuggled the books home and squirreled them away in the most likely of places—under her bed. Late at night, she delved into the sensual worlds both writers created.

As a co-ed studying biochemistry and genetics at Texas A&M University, Lo dabbled in creating naughty tales to entertain her friends. Study for a midterm or pen a deliciously dirty story to delight her small band of fans? Not surprisingly, Lo is now on an extended sabbatical from college.

Luckily, Lo stumbled onto the world of erotic romance publishers. She realized there were other readers and writers who loved and craved breathtaking romance with the spiciest of love scenes. She took a chance and submitted her first novella. The rest is history.

Lo lives in Texas with her family and beloved Great Dane, Bosley.

Lo welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her <u>author bio page</u> at <u>www.ellorascave.com</u>.

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