

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TAMING
Delaney

REESE GABRIEL

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Taming Delaney

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TAMING DELANEY

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

Delaney Price squinted through the peephole, her world dropping out from under her.

"Rayf," she whispered, the single syllable rolling off her lips like sheer, hot doom.

Don't open it, said the better part of herself even as the worst part worked the bolts and chain on the door, fingers eventually turning the antique brass knob purchased from a quaint shop in the Village.

"You've got a lot of nerve," she confronted him, her throat tight with tension.

"Wow, Layn," Rayf Connelly rasped teasingly, blue eyes half smoldering, half sparkling, lips angling every bit as dangerously as they did in her memories. "Don't overwhelm me with your enthusiasm."

Delaney clenched her teeth. She'd asked for this. She could have walked away, left the door closed and gone back to her half-baked mystery novel and microwave dinner. What could she expect from this point on but torture?

"Spare me the sarcasm, Rayf. You shouldn't be here and you know it."

He arched a brow, sandy brown, boyishly cute but promising the devil's love. His tanned forehead creased, shortening the distance to the wave of his gorgeous locks. Once upon a time she had been capable of running her fingers through that hair for hours. She couldn't keep her hands off him back then and he was not above making her beg as they played out their kinky games.

Delaney had done lots of begging for Rayf...and moaning and screaming too. In the end though, she'd screamed for him to get the hell out of her life, her head, the joint tax returns, all of it.

"Layn, you can't avoid me," he declared with irrefutable logic. "I'm going to be the best man at your wedding."

Delaney winced internally at the reminder. It was a fact she tried to block constantly. She had wanted so badly to ban her ex from the service but he was Max's boyhood friend, the only logical choice for best man.

"Are you sure you're okay with this?" Max had asked. She knew at a word from her he'd have picked someone else but it wouldn't be right. Besides she needed to show the world how strong she was, how she'd moved on.

So went the theory. Seeing Rayf in the flesh after all this time was another matter. At one time this man had been everything to her, husband, lover, friend...and under the right sexual circumstances her Master, in complete possession of her will and body.

"The wedding isn't for two weeks," she declared, ignoring her racing pulse. There was a time he could murmur her name, issue a single command and bring her to her knees. One touch, enough to make her beg to be conquered. "I'll see you then, Rayf. And don't call me Layn. I don't go by that anymore."

She thought she saw pain flash across his eyes, or was it her imagination?

"Sorry, I'm out of the loop," he said. "New name, new hairstyle too. Can't blame you, wanting to wipe away every trace of us."

Emotion flashed in the pan of her psyche, old buttons being pushed. If he wanted pity he'd come to the wrong place. Slave she might have been in bed but she'd never submitted outside it.

"Don't go there," she lashed out. "Don't you dare. You don't have the right. I moved on, we both did. The wounds have finally healed, I've forgiven you but that doesn't mean I have to be best friends."

This was just the kind of scene she had wanted to avoid, least of all in her own hallway. She shook out her auburn curls, shoulder-length now, a full six inches shorter than when she'd borne the moniker of Mrs. Rayf Connolly.

"Technically our divorce was no fault, no forgiveness needed," Rayf retorted, his eyebrow snaking again. "If you believe the statutes."

She arched her own brow, fiery red, not in the mood to be reminded of their lovely time in New York State divorce court. "So are auto crashes, Raphael, and people still die in them."

"So it's Raphael, is it?" he declared. "Very well, Delaney, we can play it your way."

A shiver went down her spine at the reference to playing. She and Rayf had been master game players, not all of them bad. Some of them were downright delicious, dark and wicked, like electrified licorice. What was it about a man wanting you so badly he'd put you in chains or drag you across his knee to heat up your bottom until your pussy screamed for release?

"We're not playing anything," she said firmly. "You are turning around, walking back to the elevator and leaving my building."

"I need a place to stay," he said.

"You...what?" Delaney couldn't believe her ears. Not even Rayf Connelly could be this inappropriate. "I'm marrying your best friend in two weeks and you show up and expect me...*me* of all people to put you up?"

He shrugged his leather-jacketed shoulders. The same jacket he'd worn when they were together. *So many memories*. Not just of his dominance but his tenderness too. Sometimes he would put it over her shoulders. She could cry because it had made her feel so safe and loved. She just soaked it in, all the things of childhood she'd missed out on. Feeling like a fairy princess in that wonderful, strong material.

"I've been in the city a couple of weeks," he explained. "Working a ten-story job out in Queens. The gig ended early, used up all my cash on room and board."

Delaney fumed. She needed this like a hole in the head. And damn it if she couldn't smell the scent of musk on him too, the same old cologne that used to drive her wild. He had the usual five o'clock shadow too, painting his chiseled features, not quite perfect but solid and masculine and handsome none the less.

"Room and board my ass," she accused. "You frittered it away on some nonsense if I know you."

Rayf ran his fingers through his hair, the gesture he always employed when he was about to come up with some story, not quite a lie but not exactly truth either.

Delaney braced herself.

Rayf Connelly had to be the biggest, most frustrating enigma on the planet. Four years of college to his name, an engineering degree, magna cum laude and what was he doing? Construction. Jockeying steel girders a mile in the air, dancing in the wind with the rest of the sky walkers.

She supposed that was an improvement over the alligator wrestling he was doing before they met. When they were together he worked as a bicycle messenger in the Financial District. He'd come home dog-tired, happier than hell, talking a mile a minute...and horny. Oh god would he be horny.

Trying to cook dinner would be a lost cause. He'd come from behind, grab her by her waist and sink his teeth into her tender, hot earlobe. "You're all I want tonight, baby," he'd growl and they'd be off to the races. If they were lucky they'd make it to the bed. He might just have her right there, up on the counter or over the table. Sometimes she'd play at resisting just so she could get a little spanking. If she wasn't careful he'd rip her clothes from her body to get at her.

Never had a man wanted her like that. They could be together and climaxing a minute from first contact or they could make it last all night. In the end it was all a blur too fast, the relationship gone as mysteriously as it had started. She wished she knew, she wished she understood what had happened.

Delaney felt the twitch between her thighs. Familiar, warm...dangerous. Pussy memory, she called it, imprinted deep inside.

"Actually I had about five hundred bucks left," he explained. "I gave it to a guy with four kids, wife in the hospital."

Delaney blew back strands of hair from her face. Rayf would do something like that. Never had she met a more impulsive, irresponsible, in-the-moment kind of man. "Rayf, you can't just live your life expecting others to pick up all the pieces," she lectured. "You have to plan. You have to think of other peoples' feelings."

Oh god, she sounded like a wife, nagging him...

"I'll stay on the couch," he said. "You won't even know I'm here."

Visions of the lean, statue-like Raphael flashed through her mind, stripped to worn jeans, his corded muscles flexing as he walked, bare feet padding over her dusty-rose pile carpeting and the Mediterranean tile in the kitchen.

The hell she wouldn't know he was there.

"It's out of the question." She held firm. "I'm sorry."

Rayf didn't give up. He never did. "I don't know what other option there is for me. Max is out of town or I'd crash with him."

"I'll give you money for a hotel," she said, desperate enough to bribe the man. "Money for food too. Maybe a nice steak?"

Rayf cleared his throat. "Max won't go for that."

Delaney's green eyes flashed. "What is that supposed to mean, he won't go for it? You going to go over my head now, is that it? You going to talk to my soon to be lord and master?" she said sarcastically.

A smile played at his lips...the cagey bastard. Mentioning submission had been a mistake on her part, one he'd take advantage of.

"We both know better than that, Delaney. You submit to a man on your own terms, in your own time."

Delaney's knees went weak, another reflex reaction. Under Rayf's seductive tutelage, she'd discovered a whole new side to herself, including a craving for bondage, rough sex and a few other things that would permanently redden the cheeks of her colleagues at the New York bureau of *Today News*.

Other times they fucked without words, without roles and that was just as good or better, two animals, copulating, battling. So much energy and passion...but there was a price and neither of them could pay it on a newlywed's budget.

Her gaze narrowed. Was this a foretaste of how he was going to treat her at the wedding—humiliating her with X-rated ghosts? "I'm going to let that slide but I swear, Rayf, if you make any innuendoes in front of other people at the wedding I swear I'll—"

"I'm sorry," he inclined his head, forestalling her speech about how she would be forced to do everything in her power to keep Rayf out of Max's life.

A lump formed in Delaney's throat. Was it just her or did this man have the ability to convey in two words what it took everyone else a thousand to get across? He wasn't a bad person, she'd never felt that he was. It was just...just what?

"What I meant to say," he continued, "is that if Max finds out I showed up and you didn't take me in, he'll be unhappy with both of us."

She sighed. "You shouldn't have put us in this kind of a situation."

Rayf was right, of course, and that was the hell of it. As usual the man had managed to engineer the situation, spinning the world around him and his needs, whatever they were at the moment.

The question now—as it had been when they were together—was guessing those needs, assuming the man even knew himself. It had to be more than simply a place to stay that he was after. Rayf was too complicated, too much a multidimensional thinker to be operating on just one level. It was chess with him always, the 3-D kind like Spock played on the *Enterprise*.

She'd never been good at the game of chess. Delaney was a checkers kind of girl, lots of jumping, not too much brain drain. She kept her deep thoughts for other things.

"You're right." Rayf nodded in agreement. Another of his old tricks. Seeming to give in when he'd already won. "Hindsight..." he muttered. "It'll just be a couple of days though. Max is due back. I'll crash at his place with him."

Another sigh on her part, combined with tightening nipples. He was working her, making her want what he did. She couldn't really be letting this happen, could she? Surely she had more fight in her? Taking in her ex-husband was vastly inappropriate, anyone in their right mind would agree.

Anyone except for Max Roth, who was the kindest, most trusting and most naïve soul on earth. How he ever got to be friends with Rayf was beyond her.

Of course Max would trust Rayf with his bride-to-be. Rayf was above reproach in his mind, the man could do no wrong. And in a sense he was right. In spite of everything, Delaney knew that Raphael Connolly would protect her to his dying breath, even kill for her without a second thought.

And yet she couldn't live with him, couldn't trust him to be the kind of husband she needed. In the end it was more than she could bear. Life with Rayf wasn't worth the fireworks, the explosive passion. It was true, Max would never be half the man in the bedroom but that was okay, because you couldn't live a marriage entirely in the bedroom...or dancing on the girders of skyscrapers, one after another.

At some point, you need to build something and live in it, stake a few fence posts, maybe even have a couple of kids.

If she was going to have a family, now was the time to think of it. Delaney was thirty-one years old. In her biological prime.

"There are going to be house rules," Delaney told Rayf.

Rayf picked up the green duffel bag he'd set at his booted feet. She hadn't even noticed it up to now. Was she that out of it?

"How many rules?" he wanted to know.

"As many as it takes." She tried to keep her eyes off his crotch. No man had ever spellbound her with his cock like Rayf. The way his expression would change as he opened his fly, slowly lowering his zipper, making her heart pound and her mouth water, his eyes drawing her gaze lower and lower. Slow, so slow. Get on with it already, she'd be ready to scream—but he'd drag it out, making it part of the fun.

Unless they were doing things the opposite way...fast and furious. Then she wouldn't get a breath in edgewise. How could any man do that? Enrapture her, give her just one look and make her panties so wet that she couldn't take one more breath until he was in her, rock-hard, deep, decisive. Heaven help her if he reached out and took hold of her hair at that point...grasping, controlling, putting his lips where he wanted them for a kiss.

Delaney squinted a moment. He looked as if he was getting hard now. Was he?

Not fair, not fair at all. How would she stand a chance?

"First rule, no nudity," she intoned as Rayf crossed the threshold, officially resurrecting himself from ghost status in her life.

But what was he now if not a phantom? Some sexy-as-hell creature from the beyond, a vampire with the potential to suck out her living blood? Or just another mortal temptation, like so many others? No, Max wasn't like the others. Never had been, never would be. He was too much...far too much of a good thing.

She was doing the right thing marrying Max. It was wrong to second-guess. Max was a good man, he was kind and he would make an outstanding father. He could provide for children, his parents adored her and made her feel like part of a family for the first time in her life.

Delaney pursed her lips. Where had that voice in her head come from? Who was arguing against Max in the first place?

Rayf tossed his canvas bag on the sofa as if it belonged there. She should have been pissed. Instead she felt a dark thrill. The man had balls, that was for sure.

"That will make for some interesting showers," he quipped.

"I'm not joking," she snapped. "If you can't show me a modicum of respect then you can march your ass right back out of here."

Your tight, delicious, sculpted ass, to be precise...

"Okay, Layn," he drawled, slipping into an even more intimate version of her name. "Don't have a cow. I'll be a good boy and behave."

She bit her lower lip. Rayf had never behaved where she was concerned and she'd loved him all the more for it, all five-foot-ten inches of him, lean and neatly muscled like a Greek god on shore leave from the glistening navy of Olympus.

That old glow still surrounded him. Rayf, an irresistible force who seemed designed by nature for the specific purpose of seducing her. And not just with words but with a probing tongue that knew her pussy inside and out. He could make her come more times than she could count and then just a little past that until she couldn't remember how to count at all.

Even now she was twitching inside her jeans, her body wanting to welcome him. Damn it, she should have worn something more protective, more sex-proof. There was no telling where his libido might be and she didn't want to lead him on. Was it her imagination or did he keep stealing glances at her bare, pink-tipped toes and the sliver of white, flat belly below the hem of her faded, laundry-shrunken T-shirt?

Delaney pulled at the hem defensively. "I'm not 'having a cow' or any other farm animals. I'm being a mature adult. Which brings me to rule number two. No discussion of the past, no personal conversation or allusions to anything that might suggest we have had or ever will have a relationship of a private nature."

Up went the brow, predictable as an atomic clock. "Question..." he murmured.

"Yes?"

Here it comes, she thought as she braced herself for the inevitable smart-ass response.

"What if I need you to pass the salt or I'm looking for the remote or something? Would that be too personal?"

"Don't you worry your pretty little head about that," she replied with a crisp, one-step-ahead-of-you smile. "Because your fingers won't ever be touching my remote and we sure as hell won't be sitting down to share a meal."

"All right then," he said dryly. "Now that we got the pleasantries out of the way —"

“Actually, I’m not done,” she told him, refusing to give him the last word.

He tucked his hands in the front pockets of his jeans, thumbs hooked over the edge. A low blow, drawing attention to his fly like that and that lean waist of his too. Damn, why couldn’t he have spent the last twenty-eight months since their divorce getting soft like every other thirty-five-year-old in the world – her fiancé included.

“Okay, Layn – I mean Delaney – shoot.”

Delaney bit her lower lip. She needed another rule or she was going to look pretty darned foolish. “My bedroom is off limits and no touching anything in my bathroom.”

His eyes lit up with that one. She fought a blush as she pictured what was going through his mind right now. It didn’t take a psychic, just a woman with some first-hand experience.

“Don’t you want to put in a proviso about not going through your underwear drawer while you’re at it?” He held back a smirk.

Delaney squirmed ever so slightly, thinking about Rayf’s large, capable hands... fingers raking through her unmentionables, silk and lace. She was wearing a black cotton thong at the moment and it was pretty well soaked through. A hell of a time to have her bare ass rubbing against the tight denim too.

Worse still was the lack of a bra. If her nipples got any harder this was going to be a problem.

She tracked his eyes, straight to her chest.

Son of a bitch – he’d noticed.

“I think I’m going to need to add a rule or two of my own,” he declared.

Her arms crossed over her chest. “Like what?”

“No provocative attire,” he said, his voice just husky enough to make her want to strip for him, right in her own living room.

“What is provocative about what I am wearing?” she asked.

He snorted. “Come on, Delaney, do I even have to answer that?”

Let it go, her common sense screamed, do not open this big, fat can of worms.

"Yeah," she retorted. "You do. I'd like to know, actually."

"That outfit says come and get me," he said blatantly. "It makes a man want in your pants and it drives him out of his mind wanting to get there."

Her breath caught in her throat. She'd forgotten how graphic he could be, talking about his desire for her. She'd never felt sexier in her life, more wanted than when she was loving Rayf...or fighting with him, for that matter.

"Are you speaking theoretically, Raphael?" She took the bait. "Or do you have some man in mind?"

She regretted the statement instantly. It was going to lead to trouble in a hurry.

Dumb, Delaney, really, really dumb.

"You're the one who wants this impersonal." He shrugged. "I'm just trying to keep it this way."

"Right. And Delaney, the little seductress, is making it oh so hard, right?" Her heart slammed in her chest. He was pushing her buttons. "Well, poor silly me, I was just planning on a night alone in my apartment. Emphasis on *my* apartment, Rayf, and I'll dress any damned way I like when I'm in it."

"Suit yourself," he said. "Say, you got any leftovers in the fridge? I'm starved."

She looked at him in utter exasperation. Nothing had changed, not one thing. This was why they couldn't live together in the first place. He'd start shit and then go into total man-mode, "give me a beer and don't block the boob tube".

"Help yourself, by all means." She threw her arms up in exasperation. "You'll pardon me if I don't join you. I'm going in my bedroom to sew myself a burkah."

"Uh-huh." He walked across the living room like owned it. One by one, he kicked off his boots and pulled off his socks. He bent over, giving her a view of his taut ass, smooth, muscled cheeks good enough for a princess to kiss.

And his bare feet under the socks...*gulp*...yeah, she remembered those too, wriggling toes that played in the sand.

"That was a joke," she said, distracting herself. "About the burkah."

"Was it?" he acknowledged, not a trace of a smile. "Good for you, Delaney."

She watched him cover the short distance from the living room to her kitchen. *This apartment was way too small to be sharing with the likes of Rayf*, she thought. Just sharing the same planet was enough of a challenge.

It was definitely time for bed. Alone.

"This is the wanton hussy, signing off for the night." She gave a sarcastic wave.

She got no response. Storming to her bedroom, she slammed the door. This was not going to work. With a trembling hand she dialed up Max's number using the cell phone on her night stand. Somehow she would find a way to get Rayf out of here, if it killed the man, an option which at this exact moment was not looking too bad.

Just as the phone began to ring, a dread realization came over Delaney.

She'd laid out all those rules but had she ever made Rayf, the noted king of loopholes, agree to a single one?

Who was crazier here...Rayf...or her?

Delaney got Max's voicemail, "Hi, this is Max Roth, Vice President for Currency Management, First Global Trust Bank. I'm currently unavailable at the moment but I'd be glad to call you back, just leave a detailed message..."

"Max, call me," she whispered fiercely, sounding every bit like a woman under siege in her own house. "Call me quick."

Before I do something any more stupid than I already have.

Chapter Two

Rayf opened the refrigerator at the exact moment Delaney was slamming her bedroom door. The combination of the jarring noise and the cool air in his face brought the reality of his situation home in a most disturbing way.

He was a man on a mission and it was not a pleasant one.

The words ran through his mind for the millionth time, no less shocking than the first.

I am in my ex-wife's house trying to break up her engagement to my best friend.

It sounded terrible, monstrous even, and by all accounts it was. It's just that he knew this marriage was wrong and he didn't know any other way to stop it. For months he'd been wrestling with the problem, waking up in cold sweats from the nightmares where the preacher would ask if anyone had any objections and he would try to speak only to have something go wrong.

Sometimes he would have no voice in his throat. Other times he would turn invisible and no one would notice him. In one dream Delaney turned into a witch and pulled his tongue right from his mouth. In another, the church turned into a plane and filled up with snakes. Samuel L. Jackson came in and started attacking him with a machete.

A psychologist would have had a field day.

All Rayf knew was he had to stop the wedding. Max was getting married for the wrong reasons and he was too stubborn to admit it. Besides, Delaney was all wrong for him.

Rayf of all people should know. Delaney was fire and Max, well, Max was tapioca, bless his little number-crunching heart.

As for Rayf himself, he was fire too, which made his own marriage to Delaney a complete unholy conflagration.

Their three-month courtship and subsequent ten-month marriage had been like a glorious, slow-motion plane crash, a total endorphin rush that you lived to tell about but wouldn't ever repeat. Not that nature ever gave that kind of chance twice. As far as Rayf was concerned, a woman like Delaney was a phenomenon, like Halley's Comet, full, lush lips, fiery green eyes, curves to slay the heart of the wildest beast, long, lustrous copper curls to grasp in your fingers, to hold...and ultimately lose.

Delaney was the kind of woman you spent a lifetime second-guessing yourself over, trying to catch a fleeting glimpse of in the bottom of a whisky glass or an echo of it in the romantic whispers of another, lesser female.

She was a goddess, don't let anybody kid you.

Oh yeah, Rayf had been burned, scarred and to hear her side he'd burned back. And now he had to return to the scene of the proverbial crime, whatever the hell the charges were.

Rayf would sooner wrestle an alligator, in fact he had, one of many stops in his interesting metamorphosis of a life.

One thing he'd learned was not to look back once he'd decided something. Seduce Delaney he would but he would stop short of sex. All that was required was to open her eyes, stir her passions a little. Where her head was at, he had no clue. The last time they'd seen each other was awkward as hell, over drinks and dinner with Max and Polly, a woman Rayf had been dating at the time. Delaney had been like fire and ice, giving him a whole spiel about wanting predictability and stability in her life.

With every word he'd felt the sting of those emerald eyes. Max represented everything to her that he was not. Not a good reason to marry though, was it? Spite, or was it just the insane desire to make a point?

Then again, maybe it was just the old biological clock. She'd mentioned having kids once or twice while they were together, but hell, she said a lot of stuff under the stars or

between the sheets or wherever else they'd been coupling at the time and so did he. It never did all add up. The dreams, the wants. You couldn't have a white picket fence and be a globetrotting female photojournalist, could you? With him she'd ended up with neither so they'd never know.

"If that's what you want," he'd told her woodenly that night in their brief moment of alone time while Max and Polly went to check out the display of authentic, antique license plates behind the bar of the motor-themed restaurant.

"No, Rayf," she shaken out her magnificent curls. "It's what I need."

The underlying message was not to be missed. Rayf hadn't met her needs.

Hadn't he, though? She seemed to need the things he *did* give her at the time. And what about the future? Max would never make her moan like he had, he'd never make her beg and Rayf would bet a year's wages that his old, conservative buddy Max wouldn't play the games she liked either.

Max was predictable and stable but Rayf doubted he had an ounce of sexual imagination or wild passion. He lived for crunching numbers, balancing books and spreadsheets. He and Rayf were opposites in more ways than you could count, which was why the friendship had worked all these years.

No one knew the Max Man like Rayf. And one look in his compadre's eyes these days said it all. The slight tightness in his lips, the slight dullness of his smile. Max was getting married because he was turning forty next year and because his aging parents were getting tired of waiting for their only child to have a grandchild. Plus the senior partners at his accounting firm were dropping hints left and right that continued advancement depended upon projecting a certain image, a married image, with a couple of kids to boot.

Picking Delaney was as easy as two plus two. He'd never do better. Hell, no one could do better than her. She was honest, loyal and you could trust her with your life.

But wedded, suburban bliss, PTA, casseroles and regulated subdivision grass? No, it was wrong for both Delaney and Max.

And Rayf would prove it to Delaney. If he had to talk to her for six hours straight. Not that talking was something they were ever very good at.

A firewalk, that's what this was going to be. Opening old wounds, tempting the tiger by pulling its tail...and every other corny metaphor you could think of.

Rayf couldn't help but smile at the contents of Layn's fridge. Take-out Chinese boxes, half a sub wrapped in foil, some bean sprouts, a bottle of hundred-dollar champagne and half a container of strawberry milk with a comical bunny on the label.

This was so *her*...in a nutshell. Quirky, eclectic, aggravating. He checked the milk. Sure enough, it was one week expired. And who else but Delaney would put paper plates and granola bars in the refrigerator?

He settled on the last item, taking one of the foil-wrapped bars from the green box. His stomach growled, wanting a lot more than a silly fiber and sugar-tasting wafer.

Looking down, he noted that his erection had yet to subside. Okay, so he was hungry for more than food. Who could have imagined Delaney would look so good, better than ever? He'd read an article about the danger of sex with the ex and now he understood where the authors were coming from.

Maybe it was the idea of forbidden fruit, a return to a lost Garden of Eden. Certainly Layn could play the part of Eve, natural, graceful, sexy. Filling her jeans but not overfilling them, her tummy nice and flat but not concave, just enough flesh to let you know she was alive, just enough to make you want to touch and feel it vibrate.

He'd like his hand other places too. On those hips of hers and on her breasts too, high and proud, not too small, not too large. He could still see them like it was yesterday, her nipples, coral-pink, delightfully small. They would rise to points in his mouth, little buds. She would moan at the slightest contact, her nipples were that sensitive. And those areolas of hers, inviting, hypnotic.

Rayf touched his cock through his jeans. What was he thinking coming here with platonic intentions? This was never going to work. She wasn't one of the boys he could

debate or share an innocent drink with. She was Comet Delaney...the hottest thing he'd ever touched and she was one room away, right at this very moment.

He'd give anything to see her bedroom. Likely she had it decorated all sweet and feminine, like her old apartment before they were married. She'd gotten rid of that place and moved into his, one of many things she'd ended up regretting. Selling her car was another one and giving up that overseas assignment in Rakuristan, photographing the civil war there for *Today News*.

He hadn't pushed any of those things on her. Had he? Look at all he'd conceded himself, agreeing to stay put all that time so she could stay with the magazine's New York bureau. Manhattan was a compromise and look where it landed them. At each other's throats. It got to where they couldn't talk at all, only in bed and then it was such heady power stuff—like molten fire—there was no controlling anything.

Rayf wasn't sensible around Delaney. He took risks, pushed the envelope. He wasn't like that with any other person in his life—only with nature itself. Was that all she was, some natural force to be challenged and conquered again and again?

He sure couldn't keep from riling her, that was for sure.

What had possessed him to bring up the subject of her clothing? Talk about putting his head in the alligator's mouth. Delaney was dressed just fine and like she'd said, she hardly expected to have her ex-husband show up homeless on a Friday evening.

The problem was all his. Delaney screamed sex as far as he was concerned, no matter what she wore. He had never understood why other men didn't want to jump her bones constantly. Men worked with her in the office, men smiled to have their pictures taken by her, every one of them treating her like a person, a professional. Max on the other hand had never seen her dressed or undressed that he didn't think of seduction, penetration...conquest.

He'd wanted her then and he wanted her now, her eyes moist with need, those magic words on her lips, "Take me, Rayf". Breasts heaving, nipples hard, just for him, her thighs parted, her body craving in anticipation, needing his cock, only his...

Rayf shook the image from his mind. So real. Damn. Could it be Rayf was jealous of his oldest friend? Knowing that Mad Max was going to have Delaney forever, that he was going to wake up every morning to her sweet body and cuddle up to it every night?

Honestly, Rayf would kill to have that again...if not for the fights. If only he had known her better. Sometimes he'd just lie there, looking at her, just watching her sleep, driving himself crazy wondering what she was dreaming.

Delaney always had so much on her mind, way more than he could understand. So many more needs than he could meet.

Rayf caught himself rubbing his cock through his jeans. He had wanted to kiss her at the door, the minute she opened it. Talk about forbidden thoughts. *Just give me one more chance, Layn, I swear to god, I'll hold it together...hold us together.* She wouldn't have had a chance to refuse, he'd have pressed her lips too hard, stolen her breath. They wouldn't have been able to get their clothes off fast enough.

No way they'd reach the bed or even the couch. It would be the floor, her underneath him or on all fours, taking his cock inside her honeyed sex, so fragrant, dripping wet and tight. No one made love like Delaney, no one moaned like her or made a man feel like a man. He was strong as a god with her and the joke is he never deserved it.

Damn, he needed to masturbate. He wasn't thinking right. This wasn't the plan, not at all. He wasn't supposed to be feeling anything himself, just making her feel things.

Rayf headed for the bathroom. The scent of woman hit like a wall, sweet and gentle, lilac and spring rain. It was a cunning, devastating trap. Delaney's shampoo, Delaney's special soaps. Delaney's perfume. Just a hint of jasmine. He'd detected it on her at the door and he was picking it up here too, amidst the frills, the dainty design of blue and white, way too many ruffles for his liking.

Frilly things belonged on a woman's body...or off it.

Delaney had a fine collection of lingerie and their time together had greatly enlarged it. There was an entire language they'd developed, rituals and expectations surrounding each particular item and its combinations. Certain pairs of panties and bras signaled behaviors between them.

Delaney might emerge from the shower and find the black lace demi-bra and thong waiting for her, which indicated she was to be Rayf's slut and pet for the day. He would grow hard as a rock seeing the expression on her face as she saw the dainty, provocative garments laid out for her on the bed.

The way she shuddered as she put them on, the delicious feminine weakness as she slid them against her skin, like chains, like iron, the power of his will absolute. She'd go about her job, she wouldn't see him for hours but all the while, in her mind, she'd be his. And she'd know what was waiting, or rather she'd try to guess it from a series of memories—each more fantastic than the last—what new thing he might do to her when they were together at the end of the day.

Or maybe he wouldn't even wait that long, maybe he'd come and get her for lunch.

It was difficult on those mornings to let her get dressed at all without playing, without fucking. He'd touch and she wouldn't resist, he'd impose and she'd submit. In the black lace...she was...property.

Then there was the red, which meant she would be a stranger. He'd have until midnight to find her during the course of the day and seduce her all over again like it was the first time.

And the gray...well, gray meant he wanted her in charge, to play out her own fantasies.

She could pick out things for him too, it worked both ways. Sometimes their moods conflicted. There'd be fights.

Rayf closed the bathroom door and locked it. He unzipped his pants and pulled his turgid cock through the opening in his underwear. Wrapping his fingers about the base,

he squeezed, luxuriating in the familiar feel. Calloused skin pressing the vein underneath, making the blood pound and throb up and down the engorged shaft.

He thought about the fights.

At the heart of their arguments, always, was who had the real power. She claimed he manipulated her into being some kind of kinky sex maniac. As far as he was concerned, he'd merely awakened her true self.

Rayf stroked himself now, unabashedly, his intended purpose to relieve the pressure, to return the seat of his decision making upstairs to his brain, for at least a little while.

He could almost hear Delaney's heartbeat, her breathing through the thin walls. What was she doing in her bedroom? It killed him to have her this close, knowing she was little more than a stranger. So much easier to be away from her, where he could forget how much he'd lost. He had been so in love with her. To the point of obsession, craving to know her every thought, her every step. If he could have he'd have kept her in his sight all the time, not because he didn't trust her but because she amazed him so and made him happy. Half the time he tied her just to be able to look at her, not for the sex, though that was beyond good too and neither of them ever went begging for orgasms.

Unless it was part of the game.

Rayf was thinking of Delaney in ropes, naked, the way she used to look, in her lingerie, helpless, her hair tousled, her lips swollen from kisses, whimpering. On her back, spread-eagled, her pussy so wet and hot, his fingers would sear at the touch of her. Instant connection and spark, like electricity.

Delaney, with her green eyes like fire, needing a fuck, arching her back, straining against the bonds, knowing he'd do what he wanted with her. Her body writhed, contorted like a question mark. Would he go between her legs, plunging his large, throbbing erection between her pink and pulsing lips, or would he order her, wordless, with a hardening of his expression to prepare to take him inside her mouth?

Sometimes he'd make her say the words, sometimes she'd say them on her own, sometimes she'd pretend to fight and he would twist her nipples in sweet, erotic pain.

"Please, Master, may I suck your cock?"

Rayf stifled himself, keeping his intense passion to himself. He was on the verge of explosion. The remembered words were bringing to life a memory from the first month of their marriage. He could see it clearly.

* * * * *

Delaney was no longer on her back but on her knees, wearing nothing but a corset, breasts proud, nipples neatly clipped and swollen. Her wrists were cuffed behind her back, silver-plated with pink fur, her long red hair was tied back in a black ribbon. She had a velvet collar around her neck and her mouth was wrapped around his turgid shaft, working the vein underneath, applying just the right amount of pressure, her tongue aggressive and flirtatious. She drew him deeper and deeper all the way to the back of her throat. Letting the pressure build until he could hold out no longer.

"Yes, my girl," he whispered stroking her hair with the deepest adoration and affection. "That's my good slave girl."

Delaney went wild—loving, affirming, empowering, moaning—as she sucked with abandon, leaving Rayf no option but to erupt, filling her mouth with his warm, thick emission. He pumped himself dry, feeling the sublime release of complete and total orgasm in the mouth of one's one and only lover.

His hands came to a rest on her bare, creamy shoulders as he arched his neck, releasing a small, satisfied groan. *So good, so good.* Transported like a soaring eagle, a roaring rocket. Thus could he lose his mind with Delaney and not care if he got it back.

Removing him from her mouth, Delaney kissed the tip of his cock and licked it clean. She'd swallowed his come, of course. There had never been a question of Delaney doing this. She wouldn't have it any other way. She was the only woman he ever let do

that in his life because he knew she genuinely wanted to and that was the only way *he* would have it.

"I love you." She smiled looking up into his eyes.

He brought her to her feet for an embrace.

* * * * *

With a gasp, Rayf released himself, his thick, white semen soaking the pink material of one of Delaney's boxed tissues, a match to her pink guest towels.

It had been a while since he'd ejaculated. He knew full well he was only taking the edge off, especially where Delaney was concerned. Keeping his mind off sex with her would never be fully possible...but at least he could keep his lust manageable.

Rayf put his still throbbing cock back into his underwear and zipped up his pants. With the edge taken off, he had a certain amount of time, a window of reason from which to operate. He couldn't afford to waste it. He had to make his move.

And there wouldn't be any games either. He had to tell her what he was thinking and feeling and then move on. He had to make his case for why she shouldn't marry Max and he had to keep himself out of it. He just wanted her happy...alone and happy.

If such a thing made sense.

Tonight...he had to get this over with tonight.

But what if Delaney didn't come back out of the bedroom tonight?

He ran some cold water over his face. How long had he been in here? Flushing the toilet for effect, Rayf left the bathroom. Delaney wasn't in the living room or in the kitchen. Her bedroom door was still closed.

So much for getting this over with fast.

Rayf went to the fridge, hungrier than ever. He decided to warm up the Chinese food. There were three half-finished cartons filled with various delicacies. Maybe if he warmed some up she would come out and share it with him?

Why did she have so much of the stuff anyway? Who was up here eating with her away?

Listen to him. He was getting jealous of someone else's fiancée.

Max's fiancée.

That's who he needed to think of. His old buddy who needed to be set free. Because as well as Max knew banking and how to convert yens to euros he didn't have a clue about the human heart.

Rayf felt his gut tighten a little.

Talk about the pot calling the kettle black. What Rayf knew about love you could fit in a thimble.

There was one thing Rayf did know, though, and that was how to make mistakes and if he could help his buddy avoid one, he would, no matter what the cost to himself.

He only hoped Delaney wouldn't get hurt.

Because Rayf would die before he'd let that happen.

Changing his mind about the Chinese, he went back to the living room. Delaney's black leather couch looked awfully good, even without her on it.

How long had it been since he'd slept?

Three nights straight fretting about coming over here, tossing and turning, had taken its toll.

I'll just shut my eyes a couple of minutes, he told himself.

His back had barely hit the soft, black surface before he started snoring.

While he was sleeping he had a dream.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

He and Delaney were getting married. They were in the little chapel back in Vegas, just like the first time, trying not to laugh as the combination Elvis impersonator and

certified marriage broker recited their obligations to Almighty God and the state of Nevada.

Rayf's head was swimming, her hand was clutched in his, she looked so good in the little white dress, hip-hugging, just low-cut enough to give a hint of cleavage. He had on black jeans and a white silk shirt. He barely heard the man's words. All he could think of was how they would be back in their suite in the Silver Dollar Resort in a little while, tearing the clothes from each other's bodies.

All that was out of memory but in the dream they never got to the vows. Max was there and when it came time for objections, he broke in through the double doors in the back. His parents were with him, along with all the people from the bank where he worked. They were all dressed up. Max had a tuxedo.

"Sorry," he pushed Rayf out of the way. "But one good turn deserves another."

With that he took Rayf's place and proceeded to marry Delaney. Rayf was forced to watch the whole thing from the sidelines, as if he were a statue. When it came time for the kiss, he felt as if someone had kicked him in the stomach.

He tried to tell himself it was okay, that this was how it was supposed to be.

I don't love her, he groaned over and over, I don't, I don't, I don't...

But the voice in his head kept screaming, *you can lie to the world but not to yourself.*

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

Chapter Three

Delaney grabbed the cell phone like a lifeline. It was Max's ringtone. Thank goodness.

"Hey, baby, you're a sound for sore ears," he crooned.

"Max," she sighed. Good old, safe, predictable Max. Dark, curly-haired, almond-eyed Max with a smile like the sun.

Already she could feel her spinning world righting itself. *But was it love?* "I've missed you like you wouldn't believe."

"I've missed you too, kiddo."

Kiddo. A good, safe name, adoring...cute.

But not very passion inspiring.

Delaney pushed the criticism from her mind. This was Rayf's fault, making her question everything. He'd have her doubting her own name if he stayed much longer.

Oh wait, he'd done that already.

"So how's the weather over there?" she asked, not sure how to broach the subject of her unwanted guest.

"It's dismal as all get out. All it does in London is rain," he quipped. "No wonder the people are so pale."

"Are you wearing your raincoat?" she asked.

"Uh-huh. You know me. Always ready for anything."

It was true. Max wouldn't be caught unprepared. He was the only man she knew who still wore goulashes. He kept them packed in his briefcase. Rayf, on the other hand, didn't even own any rain gear. Rain to him meant a chance to ride his motorcycle extra fast or a good excuse to fuck, wet and slippery in the mud.

Delaney sat cross-legged in the middle of her brand new four-poster bed. Rayf would never be allowed to see this bed because he would have one comment on it and one comment only.

I bet you'd look good tied down to it, darlin'...

She tucked her hair behind her ears, fighting to keep Rayf out of her brain. "Max, you love me, don't you?"

"Sure I do, hon, you know that." Max had all the patience in the world and he always said the words the same way, kind and deep.

She still couldn't bring up the topic of Rayf, not quite yet. "I got my shoes yesterday," she said.

He didn't need to be told what for. He was the perfect, attentive male. "Are they cream like your dress?"

"Yep. They're adorable. Sling-back, kind of sexy but subtle. Just right for the ceremony."

"Great."

"Yeah," she echoed, seeing herself two weeks from now at City Hall, with a reception to follow at his folks' place on the Island, a stylish reception for an intimate party, her friends from work, his cousins and his Uncle Herman and of course a select group of his colleagues from the bank.

Delaney adored Max's parents and they had such a lovely home, a comfortable Tudor-style house with an impeccably manicured lawn. They were so unpretentious given their respective positions. Sidney Roth was a psychiatrist at a top hospital and Gilda was a noted sculptor.

They were on a number of community boards and did a lot of charity work. Mostly they loved quiet conversation and good times over a glass of wine, though they were always open to meeting new people.

Even back when she was married to Rayf, she'd felt special on her visits there as the wife of Max's dearest friend. The Roths were as close to real parents as Delaney had ever known and she truly wanted to see their dream filled of having grandchildren.

"Delaney? What's wrong?" Max asked.

"Huh? What makes you think something's wrong?"

"I can just tell."

She exhaled. "Honestly? It's Rayf. He kind of...showed up tonight."

Max's mood turned from concern to ebullience. "Son of a bitch. Rayfer's there? Really?"

Delaney felt doubly bad now for what she intended to say. Clearly Max was bubbling over with the genuine excitement of having the elusive Rayf surface once more in their comparatively pedestrian lives.

"Yeah, he's, um, homeless at the moment."

"Figures," he chuckled. "Still, it's good news for us. I feel so much better knowing you're not alone. Especially since it looks like I might be stuck here a couple more days."

Delaney's heart skipped a beat. "A couple more...*days*?"

As in twenty-four-hour intervals, each fraught with the danger of Rayf's presence?

"Yes. I think I will be home Wednesday at this point instead of Monday. If that is okay with you?"

"Sure, why would that be a problem?" Delaney felt faint. How was she supposed to put up with Rayf all that time?

"You make sure and show Rayf a good time," he said.

Delaney bit her lip. "You think he might prefer a hotel?" she ventured.

"The Rayferino in a hotel?" Max made a snorting noise. "I wouldn't hear of it."

"But..." She had to blurt it out, there was no other way. "Aren't you concerned...given our...our prior history?"

"Delaney, how can you even ask me that?" He sounded hurt. Delaney felt a wave of guilt.

"I just wanted to make sure you were comfortable."

"Don't you give it a thought. Just enjoy each other's company," he said, with an agonizing maturity. "You two have a lifetime of friendship ahead of you."

Friendship with Raphael Connolly? When she ached for his touch, when she couldn't stand to be in the same room with him without throwing herself at him, when his mere presence under her roof had the effect of instantly destroying two years' worth of separating calm?

*Friendship...*when she wanted him inside her, when she was wet with desire, when her breasts were swollen, her nipples throbbing?

Delaney opened her jeans. She needed them off. She needed to have her hand inside her panties. "Max, will you play with me?"

"Play with you? How?"

"You know, over the phone." She shouldn't have to spell it out, should she?

He hesitated. "I'm not sure that would be very satisfying for either of us."

The demon of comparison reared its ugly head as she remembered what Rayf used to do to her over a distance, just his voice...and that wicked imagination of his. He could take her anywhere and make her love it.

"Are you alone?" he would call her out of the blue.

If she wasn't, she knew that she would have to find a way fast, because it wouldn't be long until he was giving her instructions, telling her to open her clothes and touch herself, to bring herself to bliss and torment.

Sometimes he'd make her do things in public, taking little risks here and there. If she resisted him, he'd only get more dominant and that would make her all the hotter and hornier.

"It could be satisfying," she tried to coax Max, her voice thick with desire. "Doesn't it turn you on, thinking what you can make your woman do? Just tell me, Max, I'll be obedient to you."

She lay back on the bed, she was breathing so fast. She skinned down her jeans. "I belong to you, Max, you know that."

"Yes, Delaney, I know that, of course." It came across with tenderness, albeit a little wooden.

He needed help getting into the mood, she decided. They'd never played like this before. Maybe he thought Rayf was too close by?

"I'm on my bed. I'm alone in here," she said. "Rayf can't hear or see anything, honey. I took off my jeans. You should see my panties. They're so wet...I am hot and wet for you."

That was a little white lie. Her heart was warm for Max but her loins, those were inflamed for the man in her living room or kitchen, or wherever Rayf was at the moment.

Delaney clenched her pussy muscles, aching, empty. If only Max would stake his claim—brand her with his will—that would make all the difference. But did he have it in him? And did she have it in her to bring it out?

"Max, I want to be good for you, I want to be your good girl," she said, rubbing her thighs. "Can I?"

"Um, sure..." said Max.

She could sense his hesitancy but Delaney couldn't stop, she had to go through with it. "I need to touch myself," she whispered. "May I?"

"Yes, do that."

Delaney needed to submit desperately. She needed her fiancée to take control, to snap her out of this Rayf-induced fog she was in. "Thank you, Max...thank you...Master."

She said the word tentatively, almost shyly. She heard his breathing. Was he aroused? Repulsed? Indifferent? Role play and dirty talk were uncharted waters between them. In all their sex thus far things had been satisfying, smooth and stable. So predictable you could set your watch by it. They never said a word the whole time and afterward they took a shower and if it was early enough, they had a snack or went out for a meal.

“Master, may I take off my panties? May I spread my pussy lips for you?”

“Yes, Delaney,” he indulged her.

She slid the thong down over her hips and thighs, cradling the phone once more against her ear. She kicked the underwear off the bed, spreading her legs.

Her stomach did a hot flip as she thought of what Rayf would do to her. He’d tie her down or maybe just tell her to act as if she was tied. His word was as good as rope, strong as steel. It could hold her for a minute, an hour...a lifetime.

“My pussy is drenched,” she gasped.

“That’s good,” he encouraged.

Delaney bit her lip in frustration. Max was trying but his heart wasn’t in it. “Hold on a sec,” she said huskily.

She set the phone down and pulled off her T-shirt and undid her bra. Reaching across to the nightstand, she opened the top drawer, where she kept her stash. Two dildos, one vibrator, a pocket rocket and...handcuffs. Silver with pink-fur sleeves to protect the skin.

Rayf had given them to her. She shouldn’t have kept them. Why had she? A dozen times or more she had gone to throw them away but she couldn’t bring herself to part with this souvenir of her past. It was the first toy they’d ever shared together, the first day they’d met. One look at him out on that construction site and Delaney knew she was in trouble. She was supposed to be photographing a supposed mob vault unearthed in the digging for the new Redex Building.

It was a fraud but the shirtless man in the yellow hardhat, wearing his jeans like a second skin, sweat dripping from his bronzed, muscled skin, he was for real. She kept stealing glances at him as he worked the jackhammer nearby, breaking up chunks of concrete. He gripped and mastered the thing, making it look easy as hell. She was mesmerized by those biceps, the tiger tattoo on his left arm.

Wetness pervaded her, moist salt on her lips that she dabbed with her tongue, not to mention the cloying liquidity between her thighs. Her nipples hardened to bullets. She didn't know his name but she wanted his cock, his mouth, his hands. But did he want her? That was the all-important question.

At a certain point he walked by, heading to the watercooler.

He had his gloves off and his hardhat too. Soaked as it was, his brown wavy hair looked good, damned good. She nearly died when he said something to her.

"Why don't you take a picture, hot stuff, it will last longer."

She froze in shock and embarrassment, her emotion combined with a stab of hot need that drilled her to the core. "What did you say?" she went up to him, half expecting him to back off.

Instead he stood there, making her wait as he poured the water from the spigot into a plastic cup. He downed it in one gulp and tossed the cup into a nearby oil barrel. "I said take a picture," he repeated, looking her in the eye. "Or better still, play your cards right and maybe you'll get the real thing."

With that he walked away, not giving her a chance to respond.

She finished the shoot, so frazzled she misread the light meter twice on her trusty Kinoltikon 3000.

"Laney, are you with me?" complained Ted Understreet, the correspondent accompanying her.

She nodded but in her mind there was only *him*. He'd called her hot stuff. Was she all that hot? She didn't think so. Cute, maybe, but not sex siren material.

Rayf would show her otherwise, sooner rather than later.

"Buy you a drink?" he rasped in her ear as she and Ted were packing up at the end of the shoot.

She regarded him, incensed, aroused, completely out of her element. "You've got a lot of nerve."

He smiled and that did her in...permanently. "So sue me."

"You're not even decently dressed like that," she tried a last-ditch effort to avoid the inevitable. "You stink to high heaven too."

"Come with me to my apartment for a shower," he said, nonplussed.

"I don't need one, thank you." She tried not to imagine herself, nude, totally exposed within touching distance of the cocky hunk, water sluicing down his bronzed, muscled body.

"Suit yourself." He shrugged. "You can meet me at O'Riley's Bar instead. Eight o'clock."

She tossed back her red curls. "What's the matter, aren't I worth dinner?"

His blue eyes grew bedroom-dark. "I don't think I can wait that long," he said, his husky voice melting what little was left of her will.

She fought him hard, though her body was already his for the taking. "I don't just jump into bed with a man," she said.

"You will with me," he said it without arrogance, without an ounce of egotism.

"Why?" she spat, intending to humiliate him. "Are you that good?"

"I just know what you need," he said, surprising the hell out of her. "And I know how to deliver."

A wall slammed down, fear, desire, panic. "Go to hell." She spun on the heels of her boots.

"See you tonight," he called out. "I'll be waiting."

She flushed red, thinking how he must be enjoying the view of her shaking bottom in her khaki shorts. And all the while she wondered—*did he mean in hell...or at O'Riley's?*

She chose the latter, eight on the dot. Sex followed quickly on the heels, the passion and temperature putting hell to shame.

"Master," said Delaney, snapping back to the present. "I don't have a stitch of clothing on. Doesn't that give you ideas? What would you like to do to your little slave wench?"

Max rebelled at this point. "Delaney, I really don't think of you that way. We're equals."

"I know that," she said exasperated. "In real life, yes, but can we pretend?"

Max sighed. "Delaney, I'm sorry..."

Delaney felt his pain. He didn't mean anything by it, he really was sorry. "It's all right, Max. It's not a big deal."

"I love you, Delaney, I just...I just can't go there."

"I said it's not a big deal." She tried to keep the edge out of her voice.

"So I'll call you tomorrow then?" he said.

"Sure, Max. And be safe, okay?"

"Always," he said. "And tell Rayf I told him to get a life, okay?"

"I will. I love you, Max."

"Love you too, baby."

She set the phone back on the nightstand. The open drawer of sex toys was staring her in the face.

"Go on, do it," said the voice in her head. *"Take the dildo. You need it, you deserve it."*

"I can't," she found herself saying aloud. "You know what will happen."

"Stop thinking so much. You think you have the power to resist, anyway?" the voice challenged.

She reached with a trembling hand. The answer was no, she didn't have the power.

"Open wide, Delaney. You know how to take it..."

Delaney lifted her hips, her heels on the bed. She inhaled sharply as the soft plastic touched her labia. She teased the swollen lips, making herself work for it, making herself push her pussy up into the air like a wanton wench. Only one man on the planet had ever made the proud Delaney beg and that man was a stone's throw away.

"Say it," the voice demanded, wanting her to go to a place long buried in her soul, dredging up words and thoughts that she had vowed never to let see the light of day.

She shook her head, drenched in sweat. The voice wanted her to pronounce her need aloud, to call out to Rayf. This she could not allow.

"You don't have a choice," said the voice, drawing its ever increasing power from her own passion, her own boundless appetites.

"I owe Max better than this, he's done nothing..."

"You're already thinking it, say it!"

"No," she defied, still mouthing the words from parched lips.

"Then you'll suffer for it, slave," the voice warned.

With her free hand, she pinched her own nipple as if she could compel her own testimony. The pain built to a wicked heat. The confession erupted with all the surety of her sex liquids between her legs.

Delaney whimpered, needing the dildo but refusing to give it to herself.

She couldn't take anymore.

"Rayf," she said in the smallest voice possible. *"I need you."*

"Where, say where you need it..."

"Inside me," she gasped. *"I need you...in here."*

Delaney plunged the dildo, deep and hard into her drenched canal. She clutched at it and almost at once began to orgasm. Pulling the pillow over her face, she suppressed

a scream. Her entire body was convulsing. Try as she might, she could not push the images from her mind, Rayf's hard, naked body on top of hers, having his way.

He'd pin her hands over her head the way she loved so dearly, he'd lower his mouth to her breasts, devouring them one by one. Back and forth until she was out of her mind.

The first orgasm spilled into a second and then a third. She tensed and released so many times she lost count. Every fiber of her being exploded as she pushed and pulled and stuffed and twisted the dildo, toes curling and uncurling with each little motion. She lacked the words. Nothing she'd done with Max compared to this.

It felt as if it would last forever but inevitably it had to end. As Delaney settled down, she resolved to take a quick shower, washing away the scent of sex and sweat.

But what about the guilt? Had she not just cheated on Max by intent if not by action?

The shower cleaned her body but not her soul. It didn't help her loins much either, having to run the soap over her tender skin, feeling its touch like a lover.

She felt herself getting aroused all over again, the water tingling and teasing, reaching the deepest nerve endings. She kept thinking of things Rayf might do to her if he were with her now. Rayf loved to take showers with her. He would make her stand, hands over her head so he could clean her head to toe. She would feel helpless and deliciously desirable as he worked his way over her body, letting her know and feel that she was his one true love, the true center of his heart.

Was he thinking of her now? Did he want her too, like she wanted him? Obviously he had some interest in her. He had a hard-on, after all, and he'd commented about her clothing.

Why the hell was he here, anyway? He wouldn't try to break up her impending marriage, would he? Rayf was a lot of things but he wasn't a cad. He was loyal to his friends and as bad as things had gotten with the two of them she had never once thought him capable of consciously hurting her.

The problem was he did it unconsciously.

If only things had been more cut and dried between them. If he'd cheated on her, ignored her or emotionally abused her. He'd just...checked out, left their marriage high and dry. And she never knew why. But she couldn't stop herself wanting him, couldn't help reaching out for sex, for comfort.

It scared her to think she might do it again. Even now after all this time.

I'm not that strong, she thought. I can't have this kind of temptation right under my nose.

There was only one choice. Delaney had to get Rayf out of her apartment. One day she'd explain it all to Max, when they'd been married five or ten years.

Delaney turned off the water and dried herself. She pulled fresh panties from her drawer and put her jeans and T-shirt back on. She didn't bother with her bra since she wasn't going to be seeing Rayf long enough for it to be a problem.

About a minute and a half, that's how long she intended to give him to clear out.

She found him on the couch. Sound asleep. Great. Now what? He was a heavy sleeper. She knew that all too well.

Chewing her lower lip, she watched his chest, slowly rising and falling. He looked so peaceful and so sexy at the same time. With his eyes closed like that and his lips lightly vibrating he looked like some sleeping prince.

She could awaken him with a kiss to his strong lips, arousing the sleeping prince, the slumbering tiger...

Delaney clenched her fists, forcing the idea from her mind. Likewise the supplemental thoughts of awakening him by undoing his jeans and pulling out his cock so she could lick it to full and glorious hardness.

Enough was enough. She had her future to consider and Max's too. None too gently, Delaney lifted her leg and kicked at the cushion under his head.

Rayf stirred, making little noises.

She kicked the cushion again, harder.

This time his blue eyes popped open. He blinked, focusing.

"Layn," he mumbled, still half awake. "What are you doing all the way up there...so far away?"

Delaney couldn't breathe. He was holding his arms up for her, beckoning her to lie down with him. What the hell was he doing? Dreaming?

She bent down but not to embrace him. "I'm reclaiming my couch," she announced, grabbing the cushion and yanking it from under his head. "That's what I'm doing. And my apartment too. Now get out!"

Rayf sat bolt upright, hands in the air. "Okay, Delaney, I surrender."

Delaney wielded the pillow, hitting him over the head. "No surrendering, just leaving. I'm serious, Rayf. Max just told me he's going to be delayed in London a few days and there's no way I'm putting up with you more than one night."

Rayf shielded himself from a second blow. "One beer," he declared, cryptically.

"What are you talking about, Rayf?"

"Let me buy you one beer, to explain things and then I'll leave you be."

She held the cushion aloft. There was nothing to explain and she sure as hell didn't need to be drinking with the man right now. "I thought you were broke?" she said.

He winced slightly, indicating he'd bent the truth a little before. "Okay, I do have a couple of dollars. Just go with me for one beer, please?"

She tried unsuccessfully to resist the charm in his voice.

"Go where?" she asked, knowing she'd regret it.

Rayf had that look of his, the boy too cute to get in trouble. "I was thinking maybe O'Riley's?"

Delaney glared. He had balls, she'd give him that much.

"Give me one good reason," she said, telling herself she could stop this nonsense at any point.

His answer, as always, caught her entirely off guard. "Because, Delaney, we both love Max and we owe it to him to settle things between us."

"Things are already settled," she dismissed.

"You don't really believe that."

"You don't know what I believe," she shot back.

"Sure I do." He smiled. "Your lip is twitching. You always do that when you're lying."

Panic flooded her. Could he still see that deeply into her soul? "I do not," she said.

He held up his finger. "One beer, Delaney. Surely you aren't that scared of me?"

"I'm not scared." She stiffened. "Why would I be?"

"Then come to O'Riley's."

"I ought to, just to shut you up."

"Do it then." It came out as a taunt.

"Maybe I will."

He continued to smile.

She lifted her nose in the air and flipped her curls. "Be ready in fifteen minutes."

Rayf laughed.

"What the hell's so funny?" she demanded.

"You couldn't be ready in fifteen minutes if the house was on fire."

Actually it was her pants on fire but she was not about to point that out.

"Just be ready," she told him curtly. "Or I'll leave without you."

"As you wish," he rasped, his voice like velvet cloaking steel. "My lady."

A shiver went down her spine. Delaney retreated to her bedroom, wondering what she'd just done.

One beer with Rayf.

Sounded innocent enough, then again, one beer was how things had started the last time. And look where that had ended up...

Chapter Four

Rayf was sitting across from the most beautiful woman at O'Riley's in a corner booth on a Friday night, dim lighting, two full, fresh mugs of beer between them. Once upon a time the woman had been his. Now she was spoken for, by the one man in the world he wouldn't hurt for anything.

Yeah, he could see the looks she was getting. The male eyes on Delaney, wanting, drinking in her curves so well-displayed in that suede skirt and clingy top, cut just low enough to show cleavage. And the black boots, to match the skirt. More than worth the hour she took to get ready to go out.

The first to notice had been the cab driver. Rayf had given him a harsh look, warning him off. He probably should have taken her on his motorcycle but at this time of night parking would have been virtually impossible.

The reality struck him once again. The stakes were high. One beer, that's how much time he had. Like an hourglass, amber liquid topped with foam...at the bottom of which was the end of the night, the end of his chance to help her find happiness.

He watched Delaney take her first sip, slender fingers gripping the handle. "You lucked out," she noted the size of the glass. "They have larger mugs these days. I'd say you'll get an extra five minutes out of the deal."

His pulse quickened at the sight of that tongue of hers, darting, quick and surreptitious as she dabbed at a bit of foam on her lips. He knew all too well what that tongue was capable of, sliding across his skin. He stirred uneasily, feeling the old sensations all over again. That first time he'd seen her, looking so comically out of place at the construction site, he'd vowed to have her. Little did he realize how deep it would go.

"Sure I can't talk you into a whole pitcher?" he quipped.

"Sorry." She shook her head. "We have a deal."

"So we do," he agreed. "You're here and now I owe you my explanation."

Talk he must, though he'd rather be sitting next to her right now, pressing her back against the seat, his arm snaking about her waist, his lips fusing themselves against hers, basking in the warmth, the comfort...the sheer, raw excitement that was Delaney.

"And I'm going to listen," she agreed. "So long as you stay on topic."

The topic...right.

Rayf clenched his fists, trying to keep control. Her eyes were so magnetic, drawing him into her, just like in the old days. Why in blazes had he picked O'Riley's? This is where their natural banter had first turned into something steamier. Such an easy transition they'd made from trading barbs to locking lips. How long had it taken for them to dare each other to make out, right here in the bar?

It had happened just two booths away from this one, like a couple of teenagers. If it weren't for the pointed stares of the bartender and the angry customers, who knows how far they might have gone, his hand crawling up under her skirt, hers unbuttoning his shirt. They'd barely made it back to the car for a furious first-time encounter in the back seat, their bodies rocking to the beat—ironically enough—of Meatloaf's "Paradise by the Dashboard Light".

"Rayf," she said, snapping him from his reverie. "We're supposed to be talking about Max's happiness."

"Yeah, and our unfinished business too," Rayf said.

"We don't have any unfinished business." She shook her head. "My coming here with you proves that once and for all. I have nothing to be afraid of, that part of my life is over. This is just to shut you up, just like I said."

"I don't think anything will ever shut me up permanently," he said wryly. "But I'm willing to do so long enough to listen to your answer to a question I have. Give me one reason why you and Max should get married."

Delaney laughed. "Give me a break, Rayf. Why should I have to justify anything to you?"

"Justify it to yourself then. Just think of me as your devil's advocate."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh goodie, I get a real devil to play the part."

"Hey, at least my services are free." He grinned. "Seriously, though, you told me once you'd never marry again, remember?"

"I thought all men were like you," she said. "I was wrong."

"Max isn't that different from me," he said.

Delaney drank more of her beer. "No, not at all," she said sarcastically. "And neither are night and day."

"He can be pretty demanding though. Aren't you worried about me telling him all your faults?" Rayf prodded, noting the rise and fall of her breasts under her top. Was she wearing one of her sexy bras, something fancy in silk and lace?

"Max doesn't care if I'm perfect." She threw it back in my face. "He loves me for what I am, not what he can turn me into."

"I didn't try to turn you into anything," Rayf declared.

She raised a brow. "Like hell. You wanted a sex doll, a robot you could use for pleasure and not give anything back to."

Her accusation stung. "And how would you know what I wanted? Did you ever ask?"

Delaney frowned, pouting her beautiful lips. "I shouldn't have come here," she declared.

Rayf snapped out of his anger fast. He was losing her and he had to do something. "Layn—Delaney, wait, please, give me a moment. I shouldn't be arguing with you, I know. It's just that...well, I don't know how to say what I really need to say."

"How about in plain English," she suggested.

Rayf sighed. She had him dead to rights.

"It started with the nightmares." He took a deep swallow of the beer and started talking, really talking. He told her about the weird dreams, the ones in which he kept trying unsuccessfully to object to the wedding. Then he told her all his fears about her and Max rushing into something that might not be right for either one of them. He concluded by saying he didn't want anything for himself, he just had this sense of the wedding being wrong.

She listened all the way through, not saying a word, her face expressionless. "Is that all?" she asked when he had finished.

He ran his fingers through his hair. He'd expected more of a reaction. "Yeah, that's all."

"No, there's more, I can tell," she contradicted. "But it's my turn now and you're going to listen. Things got pretty twisted between us. It's like we both took this long roller-coaster ride in our sleep and woke up somewhere in the middle, no clue where we were or how we got there. Everybody said I was rushing into marriage then too and they were right. I loved you and lord knows the sex was incredible but we needed more. Neither of us had a clue how to build a relationship.

"We had the world's longest honeymoon and then it all fell apart. We were both so scared and alone, we'd left everything we knew behind, we were supposed to be this couple now and we hated it and we had only each other to blame. All that passion just naturally turned into spite and anger. The same man I couldn't live and breathe without became the one whose existence I couldn't bear. We had to finish the thing, make a clean break."

Rayf noticed she'd finished her beer. No wonder her tongue had loosened. Was she going to leave now?

"You sound pretty philosophical all of a sudden," he mused.

"I don't have much choice, do I? Either I settle with you or run around like a raving bitch the rest of my life every time my husband comes near his best friend."

Rayf gulped his beer, trying to catch up. It was now or never. "Delaney, don't marry Max."

"Why?" she taunted. "You want me back?"

Yes...no...maybe.

"I want you happy. I want you marrying for the right reason, not to spite me," he said.

"I told you, I'm over you," she declared. "Now how about you get over yourself? You're not nearly as important in my life as you think you are."

"Tell me you don't ever think of me, Delaney, and I'll let this go."

Her eyes flashed. "Fuck you. How's that for a thought? You can't let go of what isn't yours, Rayf, so don't waste your time."

"One kiss. You owe me that."

"I don't owe you a goddamned thing," she hissed. "You're just lucky this glass is empty, or I'd dump it over your head."

She was on her feet. He knew better than to stop her. He followed her outside the front door onto the sidewalk. She was hailing a taxi.

"I don't want you traveling home alone," he told her.

"You're not riding with me, Rayf, so forget it," she said fiercely.

A cab pulled up, bright yellow. The driver was a woman with long blue hair and a black leather jacket, unusual for anywhere else but Manhattan. Before Delaney could move for the vehicle's door, Rayf opened it, ushering her in. His hand was warm on her back. She offered no resistance. The sudden show of docility on her part made his cock ache in his pants.

He was going to have a hell of a time keeping his hands off her on the ride back to her apartment. Poor timing, to say the least but that was their specialty, wasn't it.

Rayf got in after her and told the driver Delaney's address, playing the part of the doting male to the hilt.

"Why are you doing this?" she said as the cab pulled away from the curb.

"Doing what? Making sure you don't get raped on the way home?"

"Please." She rolled her eyes. "Must you be so dramatic?"

His heart slammed in his chest. As a matter of fact, yes, he did need to.

"Don't you know I'd die if anything ever happened to you?" he said.

The admission seemed to stun her for a moment. She looked at him curiously for a long, agonizing minute and then turned away, glaring out the window.

"Delaney, look at me."

"No."

"Look at me," he repeated.

"I said no..."

He took her chin between his fingers and turned her head gently but firmly toward him. Her protest dissolved against his mouth as he sealed their lips for the kiss...the one he felt for some absurd reason he was owed.

Rayf was relentless, holding her fast until she had no choice but to respond, as a woman, as his one-time lover, the best he'd ever known. Her hands reached for his shoulders, pulling him even closer. She gave him her breasts, tented nipples against his chest and her neck, to be nibbled and tasted.

"Layn..." He slid his fingers through her hair, gripping tightly. "Tell me you didn't miss this."

Delaney whimpered. It was the only answer she seemed capable of. He could smell her feminine heat. She needed this as much as he. He'd awakened the beast, the feminine animal inside and there was no turning back. Her eyelids were heavy, her expression was transformed. She was sex now, pure and simple.

And he intended to make it last.

He ran his hand up her thigh under the hem of the sexy little skirt. Into her ear he whispered the words he knew would send her over the top. "You're wet for me, aren't you, Layn?"

She fell back against the seat.

"Oh Rayf, this is bad," she breathed, eyes narrowed to slits as she ground her body into the red leatherette seat. "We shouldn't be doing this."

"You let me worry about that."

He *should* be worrying too, a lot. He had no idea where this was leading. It wasn't enough to say it felt good. The road to hell was paved with things that felt good at the time.

"But I love Max," she said.

"I love Max too," he said, trying to shut out the absurd contradiction as he snaked his finger toward her panty-clad pussy.

"I...I'm not sure..." Delaney clamped her legs tight, underscoring her doubt.

Rayf's hand was trapped between her thighs. He took her earlobe between his teeth, biting just hard enough to bring back memories. Wicked little games with clothes pins and clamps on her nipples and labia, making her scream with a dark mix of pleasure and pain. "Don't think, Delaney...obey."

She shuddered. Something broke inside her like a dam. "Y-yes, Rayf."

"Open," he whispered. "Don't fight it."

Her thighs fell apart, even as she offered a final protest. "W-we're not alone," she whispered.

"The driver can't see," he said. "The glass is too dingy. And as long as you don't scream too loud, you won't be heard over the radio when you're climaxing."

"Rayf, no..." She gasped as he moved his finger underneath the lace to reach her pulsing labia.

"Hands down," he warned as she made a token effort to push him away.

Delaney gritted her teeth, placing her hands on either side of her, palm up.

"Good girl," he praised.

She moaned slightly, clearly turned on by his sudden show of domination.

"You're definitely wet," he said. "Aren't you?"

She nodded grudgingly.

"That's not an answer."

"I-I'm wet," she said, barely audible.

He arched a brow. It was time to kick the game up a notch. "*Who's wet?*" he pushed a finger decisively inside her.

A shudder passed through her. She shook her head, refusing to say the words he wanted.

Rayf smiled thinly. She didn't stand a chance at resisting him. "Your panties," he asked, though he already knew the answer. "What color are they?"

She gave him a look, as if to say "you bastard, you know you're hitting below the belt".

"Black," she revealed. "But it doesn't mean anything."

"Black...the code for her submission," he repeated. "You were thinking about this when you got dressed."

Before she could deny, he began to masturbate her, making her drag a short breath into her lungs, her back arching. "Oh Rayf," she answered. "I-I don't know what I want...I'm so confused."

"It happened unconsciously," he assuaged her guilt. "You would never knowingly betray Max."

"N-never," she agreed.

"Who is wet?" he resurrected the earlier question.

"Your slave," she said softly, cooperating at last. "Your slave is wet."

Rayf found her clitoris, a tiny swollen button. How well he remembered this part of her anatomy. He was its master, its servant and he could bring her to climax with finger and tongue again and again never tiring of the effort.

"It's time for the slave to come."

She moaned. "Rayf, no."

"What did you call me, slave?"

Delaney required no further explanation. "Master," she implored, soft and sweet and jagged with desire, "please don't make me come like this."

"You'll do it before we get to your apartment," he deceived her with a gentle kiss to her lips. "Or I might decide to have you pay for the ride with something other than money."

She was practically panting. This was a fantasy of hers, to be made to service a stranger, a beautiful female. They'd never actually followed through and he doubted he ever could but it was the skirting of the issue, the talking about it...

"You mean..."

"Yes, Delaney, that's what I mean. You come now, for your Master, or I will order you to lick the driver's pussy."

Delaney could hold back no more. The liquids flowed copiously over his hand. Her center was molten. She closed her eyes, trying to maintain some semblance of normalcy. She did well, coming fiercely and quietly, her head against his shoulder.

Rayf felt the energy surging through his body, like a lightning rod from hers. They were connected, still, after all this time. His body tingled, his shaft felt a pleasure all its own, as if he were coming without release, as if he were subsumed in her wave, the glorious fragmenting and dissolving and liquefaction that was Delaney.

"Yes," he said, his voice guttural as he encouraged her through to the other side. "That's it, sweetheart."

Sweetheart. Rayf had no right to use the term, or any other, but he had to say something. She didn't seem offended. She didn't seem anything at all, other than sated.

He licked his fingers, letting her know how much he enjoyed the privilege. She blushed, a dreamy look on her face, half woman, half kitten.

Rayf put his jacket over her shoulders. They laced fingers. She continued to lean against him, her gorgeous copper-covered head nestled. He could smell her, lilac and spring rain, mixed with her continuing female desire.

This night was a long way from over.

Around them, the city was still waking up for night time. Barely eleven o'clock, the lights pulsing, red and green and white, the honking of horns, people walking the sidewalks, laughing, holding hands like they were, the streets filling up with fresh traffic, the omnipresent reminder that New York was the city that never slept.

Millions of people, millions of stories but none of it mattered to Rayf, except as backdrop. His mind could hold nothing more than the thought of Delaney and what he wanted to do with her and for her by dawn.

But it was not meant to be. He'd gotten the answer to his question. Delaney did love Max and she deserved a stable life. What would Rayf ever bring her but confusion and pain, trysts in taxis, ups and downs until they were both too emotionally exhausted to go on.

Rayf would get his things from Layn's apartment and go. He'd head out west for a few months, maybe forever.

Max would in time understand why he wasn't at the wedding. If not, Rayf would at least know that he had done the right thing, namely letting Delaney go.

Maybe if he was a stronger man he could be her friend. But he wasn't that strong, not by a long shot.

She was clenching his hand tighter. Did she know? Could she possibly understand?

Of course she did, she always had.

He drew a breath, like a knife to the gut. His loins tight, his cock rock-hard. The instrument of truth, he smiled ironically.

Was it too much to ask...for another chance to lie with her, inside her? Would it destroy the fabric of the moral universe if he claimed her a little longer?

Just give me until dawn, he prayed. Just give me Delaney...one last time.

Chapter Five

The taxicab drove on into the night, the passion having receded for the moment. Delaney told herself it would all end when they reached her building. She'd keep leaning against him for the rest of the ride back, she'd let that be a Neverland, somewhere between past and future. She'd bring herself back down to reality and then, when she got out of the car, she'd be herself again.

Free of Rayf, over him, totally indifferent to his magnetism and charm...and sexual powers.

Good luck with that...

She shouldn't have let him in the taxi in the first place.

But she had.

Delaney drew a breath. She felt as if she was floating. Was it possible to be drunk on just one beer?

"I'll get my things," he said softly as the cab pulled up in front of her building.

"Good," she nodded, trying to keep her voice steady as he took out money to pay the driver.

The woman gave him a cryptic smile as he told her to keep the change. "Thank you...sir."

Delaney flushed crimson, which she took to be a good sign. She was coming back to her senses. "No PDA's," she warned as they walked to the revolving door. "People know me here."

And no private ones, either, she should have added.

Rayf behaved himself until the elevator doors closed.

He pulled her tight as soon as the elevator doors closed. "We're safe in here." He kissed her. "No one can see."

"Rayf, we can't. Max..."

"I know, I'll be gone soon enough," he promised.

"Rayf..." she protested vaguely with a squirm.

His hand moved to her ass, holding her in place. She gasped. He was rock-hard against her. Everything vanished from her mind but visions of that beautiful shaft of his, covered in veins, throbbing, red and purple with need. For so long it had been the center of her desire, the center of her world.

"I want to take you right here in the elevator," he growled. "It's so hard to fight this thing."

She found strength for both of them. "You'll hate yourself, Rayf, and I will too. What happened so far...it was an accident. But if we go on..."

"I know." He let her push him back, her palms against his powerful chest. "Damn it, I know."

The elevator ride couldn't end fast enough. She could hear his breathing. It was like being in a cage with a hungry tiger. A tiger whose arms you wanted more than anything in the world to leap into.

Delaney didn't even remember getting from the elevator to the front door. Her fingers trembled as she inserted the key in the lock. She could sense him behind her, just out of reach. She knew how busy his mind was, all the things his body was wanting. He wanted things from her too and if he unleashed them they'd both go down in a ball of flames. As always.

Delaney managed to open the door. Closing it was more problematic.

She couldn't get the chain slid in the lock, she was too rattled. He pressed his body against hers from behind, reaching around both sides. "Let me."

His stiff cock was between her ass cheeks. Oh god, she could feel him through his pants, thicker than she remembered. Delaney put her palms to the door. "D-don't..."

He was doing it anyway. Who could blame her as half-hearted as her protest was?

A shiver went down her spine as the chain jingled. The sound made her think of restraint. Bondage was one of Rayf's favorite ways to make love. Sometimes he'd lay handcuffs on her pillow in the morning so she'd know what was coming at the end of the day. She'd hardly be able to concentrate the anticipation would be so high.

"You know the word," he rasped. "Say it...phantom...if you want me to stop."

Phantom. He remembered. That was the safe word they had always used, the secret code to instantly stop any domination scenes between them.

It came from *Phantom of the Opera*. They'd seen it together and talked at length about the implications for erotic power exchange in the main couple's relationship, the dark and possessive phantom and the innocent singer.

"Nod for me," he said as he caressed her bottom, "if you remember it."

She inclined her head, very slightly.

"If I don't hear that word," he rubbed her bottom, "we go on."

Delaney's will was shattering. She made a final appeal to sanity. "I can't hurt Max."

"If we don't try this, if we don't make sure it's really over between us," he said, "then your marriage won't last. Which would hurt him more?"

The logic had its own appeal, though it was her pussy doing all the thinking. "Make it quick," she said, as if that would somehow lessen the sin.

Rayf answered with heavy breathing. He was working on his pants. She unzipped her skirt from the side, sliding it down her legs along with her sopping wet panties. She kicked them off with her booted foot and resumed her position against the wall. Rayf plunged into her without ceremony, sinking immediately into her full, hot depths. She was more than ready, easily as wet as she'd been in the taxicab.

Her sex clenched around his cock like it belonged there, like it had never left. She felt his balls, full and tight.

"See, Delaney?" he rasped. "I told you there was unfinished business."

"You're a real know-it-all prick sometimes, you know?" she complained, her belly spasming, the sexual charge racing up and down her spine.

Rayf fucked her hard, mercilessly, his cock slamming into her again and again. "I'm gonna make you come so hard," he growled.

"Not if I don't want you to," she panted. "This isn't your pussy anymore. I'll prove it."

His hands clasped her waist. "You want to fight, Layn? Good..."

"It's Delaney." She tried to push him back. "I've changed."

She squealed as his hand came down on her ass, his cupped palm sending embarrassingly delicious and humiliating sensations throughout her body. "Some things never change," he said.

"Raphael Connelly," she declared, trying to keep her voice steady. "Don't you dare spank me."

"You seem to be enjoying it," he mused, noting her sexual response.

"My body lies."

"I don't hear the word," he teased, his hand insolently caressing her sore ass.

"I hate you," she said. "And I hate this."

So why wasn't she using the safety word?

"I think you need some discipline, Layn." His voice was dusky and low. He was in that dominant place. Oh god that turned her on.

"I keep telling you, don't call me that anymore."

He smacked her again. "How about slave girl, is that better?"

Her pussy spasmed, fresh liquid dripping from between her swollen lips. "No, it most certainly is not."

"And while you're at it," he ignored her, "I think I'd like you to call me Master for a while."

Her toes curled in her boots. She needed this so bad, she shouldn't but she did. "I'll call you names," she said. "But not that."

He spanked her again, his cock still buried deep. "Stubborn as always," he commented. "You didn't seem to mind calling me Master in the cab though, did you?"

"I was drunk." Delaney gritted her teeth, determined to hold out. She did, for exactly two more swats. That was all she could take, what with the fucking he was doing in between and the whispering in her ear.

"On one beer? Fat chance." He laughed. "You're fighting but you'll surrender, Layn, you always do. You'll let me have my way...completely."

Delaney whimpered as he withdrew his cock to the tip, denying her. "P-please..."

"Please, what?"

"Please...Master," she gave in, letting sweet submission flow through her veins. "Fuck your slave."

She could feel the power surging inside him. As always, they fed off each other. Her admission of slavery was the source of his mastery.

"Do you get to choose what I do to you, wench?" He thrust himself hard to the hilt, owning her.

"N-no, Master." Her pussy clenched. She was at the edge but she didn't dare come without permission.

"That's right," he concurred. "You don't. Tell me what you get instead?"

"I get what Master gives me..."

"Master decides," he grunted, withdrawing himself nearly to the tip and slamming himself against her pelvis again. "Master gets his pleasure."

"Yes," she cried. "Oh yes."

"But Master is kind too," he said indulgently. "He gives his girl what she needs, doesn't he?"

Delaney's knees buckled. How was she supposed to keep standing?

"Y-yes, Master," she succumbed to the overwhelming male energy that was Rayf.

"What does my slave need?" he inquired with deceptive sweetness.

She pushed her breasts against the door, rubbing her nipples. She was on the verge of orgasm already. "D-discipline, Master." She could barely get the words out. "I need discipline."

Rayf took his cock away from her again, iron-willed as always. "Beg for it, girl," he said. "Beg for your punishment."

She pushed her ass out obediently, empty, aching. "Master, please spank me."

Rayf chuckled. "Maybe I should use something else other than my hand. How are you fixed for kitchen utensils?"

"Oh...god..." Delaney felt the heat surge through her and with it that strangely pleasurable feeling of living on the edge, of letting him do something so naughty to her, something society would approve of even less than a spanking.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you, Delaney?" He kissed at her neck. "You'd like for me to get a nice plastic spatula to beat your insolent bottom?"

"In your dreams," she spat, less concerned for pain than she was for the bittersweet memories he was resurrecting.

Of a love, a life long gone...

The first time he'd gotten really kinky they were in the kitchen. She was barefoot in T-shirt and panties. She intended to make cereal and he wanted an omelet. After much teasing and verbal foreplay, he laid her over the table, breasts against the smooth surface, her waist tight against the edge.

"You'll do as you're told, girl," he said as he yanked down her underwear and grabbed the very spatula she should have used for the omelet.

"Don't," she squealed, trying not to laugh.

Rayf delivered a crisp blow. Heat exploded across her ass and pussy. She needed to be fucked fast. He used her twitching bottom as a target, smacking her again. The burning was hot and good.

It was like an itch he was scratching, deep in her soul.

"Rub your nipples on the table," he ordered. "Show me what a hot wench you are."

She swore at him, hating what he was able to do to her. Her body betrayed her. The table was cool on her poor little nubs. She was out of her mind with need as she moved them over the surface.

"That's it, girl." He hit her harder, again and again. She didn't use her safety word. Ten times in total with the spatula and then he took her from behind, his cock slamming deep and hard, a single push that claimed her completely. She came with the second thrust, her pussy dripping profusely. Lording it over her just a little, he kept up his sweet assault until at last he ejaculated, filling her with his hot come.

They sealed the matter with a kiss. Rayf had then sent her back to bed and made *her* an omelet.

Rayf delivered another swat with his hand, bringing her back to the present.

She stamped her foot. "Ow, that really hurt."

It didn't really hurt, at least not in a way that would make her want it to stop. He always knew just how much pressure to apply. They'd always had that bond, which is why she had never once needed to use her safe word.

"I asked you if you would like it if I used a spatula on you." He indulged his bestial nature with a pinch to her soft flesh. "And you still haven't answered."

She gritted her teeth, determined to go toe for toe. A part of her was fascinated too, like a moth to a flame, wanting to see where he'd go next. Was the old magic still there?

"How about your ass, instead of mine?" She tested him.

Rayf took her by the arm, turning her to face him. Her heart stopped dead as he bent back her head, his fingers twined in her hair. Her blood raced. She felt like a rabbit in a predator's grip but she knew it wasn't her body in danger of being consumed, but her heart. *Use the safe word.* It was no use. She was her own worst enemy.

He got her, lip to lip.

The kiss disintegrated her, marking her like a hot brand. "Answer me," he said. "Would you like a spanking with a spatula, yes or no?"

"Yes," she affirmed, attempting to put contempt in her voice. "I'd like it. So what?"

"Yes, what?" He pulled her hair tighter.

Delaney squirmed. The bastard knew what that did to her, stretching taut cords from the top of her head to the very center of her sex. "Yes, I'd like it, Master..."

His free hand went to her cheek and then slid down, fingers possessively moving over her collar bone, breasts, belly and hip in that order. Just a few seconds in each place, but, oh god, did the man know how to touch her.

"Maybe a better man would have gotten over you by now, Delaney," he declared. "But I never did. I can't be with another woman and not imagine it's you. I can't smell her, taste, touch her and not want...this..."

This was another kiss, one that made her disintegrate, forgetting her fears, her doubts and guilt...not to mention her very identity.

"Did you save anything?" he wanted to know. "Any of our old stuff?"

"Some sex toys," she confessed. "And the pink fur handcuffs."

His eyes lit up. His hand gripped her bare buttocks. "I'm going to make love to you while you're wearing those cuffs."

Delaney felt tiny explosions everywhere on her skin, ripples of heat that pooled in her breasts and between her exposed thighs. "Yes, Master."

"What about your lingerie? Do you still have the black bustier?" he asked.

"Yes and the garters too," she confirmed, cursing herself for not lying.

"Music to my ears," he rasped. "I want to see you in them. Touch my cock, feel how hard it makes me just to think of it."

She obeyed his order, just barely grazing the hot shaft, glistening with her own liquids.

"You'll come for me later," he promised. "In bondage."

She bit her lower lip, sucking it in. Delaney had talked about bondage once to Max, they'd agreed, sensibly, to avoid it.

"Do we...have to wait?" Delaney whispered, betraying her needs.

"Yes," he said. "And you'd better stay nice and wet, slave. Are you wet now?"

"Yes, Master." Delaney spread her legs obediently so he could check. Rayf plunged a finger into her opening. "Very good," he approved. "Maybe I'll reward you by letting you suck my cock tonight. Would you like that, girl, along with your discipline?"

Delaney whimpered at the dirty talk, the implications of total domination...he knew what that did to her, even more than the physical things. "Yes, Master, I'd like that."

He grinned, lopsided. "How about a little preview?"

She barely had the strength to nod. He helped her down to her knees on the carpet. Her lips trembled as she kissed him, the lightest contact against his circumcised tip. His shaft vibrated in response, very slightly. She wanted more.

Of its own accord, her mouth opened, even as her eyes slid shut, heavy lidded. She licked him, along the base, running the middle of her tongue along the vein. He sighed in response. She ran her tongue up and down the sides, in anticipation of taking him between her lips. She was just about to do so when he put his hand on her shoulder.

"No more," he stopped her from proceeding. "Discipline first."

"Yes, Master," she looked up at him in awe. His eyes were so intense. Never had he seemed this strong, this present in the moment. Was she deluding herself that much or had something changed in the man?

Get real, Delaney. This is just sex, of course he's in the moment. He's getting what he wants.

"Take off your shirt and bra," he ordered. "And get me my spatula."

Still kneeling at his feet, Delaney removed her blouse and unhooked her bra. His eyes narrowed at the sight of her bare breasts. *Did they still please him?* she wondered. *Did he still love her body the way he used to?*

"Hold your bosom up for me," he commanded.

"Yes, Master." She cradled them almost shyly.

Rayf's face was clouded with desire. He stroked his cock, mesmerized. "You're so damned beautiful," he said, making her blush.

"Thank you, Master," she whispered, her eyes watering.

Rayf's brow furrowed. "Go, now," he grumbled. "Before my cock explodes right here and now."

She suppressed a smile. He did like her breasts. And he'd said she was beautiful. She'd worried about that a lot while they were together. He'd had so much experience, with girls from all over the world. She needed constant reassurance. Her own sexual history was so much more pedestrian, just two long-term relationships and a couple of regrettable one-night stands.

Little by little Rayf had built her confidence, even made her feel like some kind of sex siren.

Without being told, Delaney went down on all fours now. Crawling across the rug as his pretend slave girl was a gift she wanted to give him, allowing him ample view of her wiggling, heart shaped posterior—the one part of her Delaney herself was satisfied with. The crawling was for her pleasure too, as she enjoyed the sensation of moving cat-like, brazen, her thighs rubbing together, slick and hot, her breasts swaying provocatively.

With the leather boots still on, she felt even kinkier and more wicked. These boots were a lot like the pair she used to have when she first met Rayf. The first time he wanted to show her how a woman's body could be worshipped, he had her wear those boots, along with a leather corset they'd bought.

He licked her all over, every inch of her exposed skin, making her sit on the edge of the bed so he could kiss from the top of her boots and work his way up. When he got to her knee caps, he kissed them one by one and had her lie on her back. That's when the fun really began. A wild session of orgasms, one after the other brought on by his probing tongue inside her throbbing, needy sex.

The kitchen tile was cool on Delaney's palms and smooth too. She could smell the lemon from the wax. Such a strange perspective to have on her own kitchen, the refrigerator seemingly miles above her head. When she got to the cabinet below the utensil drawer she stood.

What spatula should she choose? There were so many. She was practically a collector. Was she expressing a subconscious desire for kink? The metal ones she ruled out immediately. That would be sheer masochism. Among the plastic ones were a couple of wider ones, omelet and pancake flippers as well as a rubber cake spatula.

Delaney picked the rubber one. Opting to remain on her feet, she clenched the torture device between her teeth and sauntered back to the living room...to him.

Rayf took the spatula from her mouth without comment.

"Go ahead to the bedroom," he told her. "I'll be along in a few minutes. I expect you to be ready...in position."

Delaney swallowed. Wasn't he going to use the spatula here and now? Never mind, her part was to obey, not to try to guess the man's will.

"Yes, Master," she said.

Compelled by powers she could neither understand nor explain, she moved to do his bidding, in full preparation to finish transforming herself from a reasonable, engaged woman to a wanton sex kitten.

One night, she told herself, just one night.

By tomorrow, I'll throw the man out...of my apartment and my life. If I last that long.

Chapter Six

Rayf was on fire. He needed to cool himself, just a little.

He found an icy cold beer in the vegetable drawer of Delaney's fridge as he waited for her to change into her sexy slave outfit. The beer was underneath a package of licorice whips. He couldn't help but smile to see she was still using her unique method of refrigerator organization.

Unscrewing the cap, he downed half of it in one gulp. Things had never been this hot between the two of them before, which was really saying something given the fireworks they'd been famous for in the past.

Beginning in the bar the night of their first date and ending in the parking lot. They made love in the back seat of the car he'd been driving at the time, no mean feat. Fortunately the windows quickly steamed for privacy, though he was pretty sure a street person or two had gotten a nice view.

Neither of them cared, they were so hungry for each other's bodies. They clutched at each other as if their lives depended on it. They moved fast and slow, they clung, they nibbled and chewed, they clawed. It was incredible, like they'd been doing this their entire lives. The rhythm, the drumbeat, the soaring and diving. Perfect partners.

If only the rest of a relationship could stay so simple.

Looking back, Rayf could see from that moment on he got steadily more scared. No one had ever opened his soul like that. The pressure kept mounting, it felt like death and finally he cracked. Not even a year into the marriage. Some staying power. Would it have made any difference if he were stronger?

There was no looking back though. For the next few hours at least, they had a future. Layn was waiting for him, in her bedroom. He finished the beer, his cock still

hanging out of his jeans, still half-erect, glistening with her sex liquids. Savoring the moment, he gripped his shaft.

Layn was at her submissive best tonight. She'd taken a spanking and now she was dressing on command. He didn't need to tell her exactly how to position herself for him on the bed. It was understood.

They'd played this fantasy out enough times, that was for sure.

He only hoped this one last time wouldn't prove too costly for them both. Did he have any clue what he was unleashing, telling her she needed to cheat on Max to prove her relationship was strong enough to resist temptation? That was the devil's logic if ever there was.

And yet she was going along with things, step by step. That meant Rayf's intuition was right. Her heart wasn't settled on Max. Otherwise she would have thrown him out long ago. Delaney was many things but weak-willed was not one of them. She might play the submissive but she was captain of her own soul.

Rayf's heartbeat increased steadily as he left the kitchen and headed for the bedroom. It was time.

The light was dim. She'd lit a candle. Good girl. A golden flame flickered on the night stand, reflecting off the pale-pink walls. He drew a breath, seeing the elegant four-poster bed. She had to know what that would do to him...

Then again, she'd never planned for him to see it.

The thought filled him with a sadness deeper than he had ever known.

Sadness turned to bliss as he beheld the owner of the bed.

Oh god, she was beautiful.

She took his breath away.

She had her back to him. She was kneeling on the center of the pink spread, her knees apart. Her naked ass cheeks, still bearing the marks of the spanking, were framed in black by the garter and belt. She had black stockings with tiny pink bows at the top.

Delaney wore no panties. Her slender waist was accentuated by the belt and by the black bustier. Her creamy shoulders begged to be touched, as did her hair, which she'd combed, very loose, teasing down her back.

Her head was lowered, respectfully, in anticipation.

Perhaps the most provocative thing of all though was the way her wrists pressed together in front of her, banded in steel, linked by chain. She was wearing the handcuffs.

The pink fur-covered ones. Another little twist of the gut ensued as he remembered picking them out at that adult toy store by the beach in Florida. They were vacationing there, just a few weeks into the relationship. They purchased them to kick things up a notch in their sex lives and did they ever.

He had laughed at the time that her cheeks were pinker than the cuffs when he showed them to her. To think she didn't even grasp at first how they could accentuate a sexual experience...

"You'll find out." He had dangled them in front of her.

She looked nervously around them to see who was paying attention. "Rayf, don't..."

He had grinned, knowing she'd change her tune. He had picked up a couple of other things too while she wasn't looking. Back in the car, he had told her casually to take her panties off and spread her legs. She was wearing a short skirt at the time.

When she had refused, he took a stern tone. "What did you say, girl?"

"In the hotel room." She had tried to put him off. "I'll submit there."

"I want it now," he had said huskily. "Here."

Before she could protest again he punished her with a kiss, hard and open-mouthed that left her wasted and needy.

She moaned softly, wanting more.

"Obey," he had said simply.

Her eyes had been moist, pliant. She was in submissive mode. "Yes, Master."

Off came the panties, wide went her thighs.

He had popped in one of the toys, remote control.

They had proceeded to drive all afternoon. Delaney came and came and came. And when she wasn't coming she was begging to come.

At long last they found a desolate place under a stand of palm trees. He turned the engine off and opened his shorts. "Please me," he had said simply, pulling out his engorged, throbbing erection.

Delaney had devoured him, taking him straight to the back of her throat. He had groaned like a man dying, leaning back against the head rest. She sucked him hard, the way he liked, her tongue working the vein along the underside. Rayf had come almost immediately, flooding the cavity of her warm and willing mouth.

She drank down every drop, draining him totally dry.

Her face was in total rapture afterward. Licking her lips, her cheeks glowing not with embarrassment but sweet, womanly joy, she thanked him.

"I love you," she had added.

Rayf froze. It was the first time either of them had uttered the words. She put her finger to his lips. "It's okay, don't say anything back, it would only ruin it."

Despite her letting him off the hook, he should have risen to the occasion. The fact that he hadn't was something he'd regret the rest of his life. Clearly it was not okay with Delaney and he could tell from the look in her eyes. From that moment on he knew how vulnerable she was...to him and him alone. His fear doubled itself and doubled again.

His mind back in the present, Rayf went up to her, touching her shoulder. She started at the light contact.

"You're gorgeous," he told her. How often had he said those words to her, more often than not as a way to avoid an admission of love?

She sighed, leaning her head against his hand as he caressed the creamy skin. He dropped the spatula and put his second hand on her other shoulder, lightly massaging. She was so warm and so alive. Climbing up on the bed, he positioned himself, kneeling behind her.

"Lift your arms," he said.

Delaney knelt up and arched her back, raising her hands high above her head. Proudly, she displayed the handcuffs. Rayf grasped her wrists, enjoying the feel of skin and fur and steel. She let out a tiny moan as he slid his hands down her arms to her elbows all the way to her upper arms. He paused, letting the tension build before making the inevitable move around the front of her body.

Her breasts heaved at his touch, the firm globes pushed up and out by the bustier. Inserting his fingers between the edge of the material and her skin he found her nipples. They were hard and begging attention. He rolled them back and forth until she begged for mercy.

"Rayf, oh god, I need you...inside me..."

He held her by the waist so she wouldn't fall over. "What about the spatula?" he rasped.

Delaney cursed in a fierce whisper, letting him know what he could do with his spatula...her spatula technically. "Just take me, I can't wait anymore. Do it, before one of us changes our mind."

She had a point. There was a magic here and it might run out.

"Fine," he negotiated. "But the cuffs stay on."

"Yes," she declared. "I want that. Ravish me while I'm chained. Have me, Rayf, use me."

Rayf needed no further imploring. He undid her bustier, allowing the material to fall away from her glorious orbs. She sighed at the newfound freedom, a mixture of happiness and vulnerability. His cock strained, desperate.

He helped her lie on her back. Her lips were swollen and parted. Her eyes were like raging emerald storms. Her breasts angled at him, challenging.

She clenched and unclenched her fists, her hands laid over her head, cuffed wrists resting on the corona of copper curls. Her legs were apart. Rayf got off the bed, just long enough to get undressed.

She was watching his every move as he pulled down his pants and underwear. He'd never seen such hunger on a woman's face. She was the very essence of desire. And she wanted him...

It humbled Rayf beyond measure.

It drove him out of his mind too.

He came to her naked, as he was meant to be in Delaney's presence. She widened her thighs as far as they would go, inviting him.

Ravishment...she wanted ravishment.

Rayf fell on top of her, groaning like a man possessed. She lifted her body to meet him. Immediately, her cuffed wrists circled his neck and her ankles crossed behind his buttocks.

They were prisoners...together in lust.

Fates locked, his cock sealed inside her pussy, his hardness, her softness, his shaft and her glorious tunnel.

Rayf buried his head between her breasts, devouring. He drank in the scent, lilac, spring rain...so many memories. Their bellies pressed tight, steaming. They were sweating already. He pushed harder, wanting to be deeper. If only they could lose themselves, if only they could fuck fast and furious enough to make the world go away.

Rayf gave it his best try. Delaney whimpered as he lifted himself, breaking the contact just long enough to prepare for a fresh thrust. Her soft, feminine complaints turned quickly to cries of lust fulfilled as he plunged again.

She sank her teeth into his shoulder. Rayf had her breast in his mouth. He thrust again and again. Delaney spasmed, her pussy exploding from within. He knew from the way she was writhing, the way her breath had turned quick, shallow, almost non-existent.

She was going to climax...at any moment.

He kept up his pace, concentrating on her pleasure. His handcuffed slave girl, his red-headed comet, the one and true light he'd ever known in his life. He'd die now a happy man knowing he'd given her this, one last shot at ecstasy.

This couldn't be bad, could it? Giving pleasure to the woman he loved...call it a wedding present.

Giving pleasure to the woman he loved.

Had he just said that to himself? Not in past tense but present...

Delaney screamed as he drew a single nipple between his lips, biting down on it, just hard enough. She was there, over the edge, plunging into the abyss. It was the kind of orgasm a woman couldn't have alone—she needed the body of the male, his presence, his strength, to cling to, to explode against, to dissolve with.

Over and over she came but Rayf held back. He wasn't done. Not by a long shot. Gently, he rolled them over. Delaney saw what he was intending to do and took up her new position.

On top. Her hair was wild. Her eyes were wicked. Her face was contorted in a look of pure sexual indulgence. This was the Layn he alone knew.

She placed her cuffed hands on his chest palms down and braced herself as she began her ride. Lifting herself and then falling, sliding herself up and down on his cock, squeezing obscenely with her sex, all the while enjoying more orgasms, little ones, almost invisible ones along the way.

Her eyes closed as she took her ultimate pleasure. His hands went to her waist, content to guide, content to be her servant at the moment, the object of her lust.

Delaney paused momentarily, placing her hands behind her head. The posture thrust her bosom forward most enticingly.

"My breasts," she moaned, clearly getting ready for another big one. "Take them, please."

Rayf clutched them in his hands, holding them the way she liked, the way she deserved. It was an exact formula, a combination of pressure and softness. Delaney liked to feel titillated and teased but she also liked to know she was in a man's grip, someone stronger than her.

"Omigod," she groaned.

Rayf pinched her nipples. "Give it to me. Come for me."

"Yes, oh yes." Her voice revealed the fierce fire in her belly as he pressed the luscious little nubs between his thumbs and forefingers.

Delaney writhed and writhed, using the reserve of her strength, until finally she collapsed, pelvis to pelvis. She came again. She wasn't moving, it was just washing over her, a million expressions danced over her candlelit face, all melding into one.

Womanhood...in its essence.

Greedily he pulled her forward until they were face-to-face. He kissed her, communicating everything he felt with his lips and tongue. Her mouth was his canvas as he swathed its depths, plunging, sucking her inside himself.

She rested her cuffed hands above his head on the pillow. Their sexes were still connected. He gripped her ass cheeks.

Mine...once upon a time.

"From behind," he growled. "I want you from behind."

Delaney didn't hesitate. Climbing down from his cock, she put herself on all fours, supporting herself on her chained hands. Her head was down, her glorious red hair like a flame about her pale shoulders. Her ass stuck out insolently, smooth and perfect.

Rayf picked up the spatula, still on the bed.

He teased her pussy lips, so full and exposed. Delaney shuddered as he ran the rubber very softly along the top of her crack. Her response gave him an idea but was she ready for it.

"I want to come inside your ass," he informed her. "After I turn it pink. Is that okay with the Phantom?"

Delaney smiled at the allusion to their old safe word. If she wanted she could stop what they were doing. But stopping was the last thing on her mind.

Instead, she indicated her willingness. "The Phantom would love to watch," she spoke in code. "There's gel in the night stand."

Rayf opened the drawer, whistling at her little collection of toys. "You're pretty well stocked, aren't you? You could open your own sex store."

Wasn't Max taking care of her?

"Just get the gel," she grumbled good-naturedly. "Master."

He gave her a crisp swat on her naked ass. "Slaves should know their place."

"I do," she teased. "It's on top."

Rayf pulled out one of her vibrators.

"What are you doing with that?" she asked nervously.

"I think you need to have both orifices stuffed to get the right effect."

"Rayf, Master, no," she wheedled.

She was saying no but she wasn't invoking the Phantom...

He grabbed her hair. Damn, he loved doing that. If only it were as long as it had been, he'd have all kinds of fun.

"Ow," said Delaney. "I'm sorry...Master, your slave is sorry."

"Is the slave going to cooperate?"

"Yes," she sputtered. "Your slave will obey."

Rayf turned on the small vibrator and inserted it. Delaney's face showed it was having its immediate effect.

"Don't you want to thank your Master?" he asked pleasantly.

"T-thank you," she stammered under the intrusion of the whirring, artificial cock. "M-master."

"You may come as often as you like," he taunted. "In fact, I doubt you'll be able to stop if you tried."

Delaney clenched her teeth as the first orgasm overcame her.

"Tell me what you need, girl," he demanded, continuing to torment her.

Delaney was transported, her mind slipping into that space of total, almost sacred submission. "P-please, Master...punish my ass...fuck it..."

He slapped her with the spatula, enjoying the way her buttock vibrated. True to prediction, the flesh raised to a delightful pink color.

"Do you like that?" he inquired, waiting for the orgasm to pass through her racked body.

Unlike before, there was no coercion required. "Yes, Master," she said in a soft, submissive voice. "I like when Master punishes me."

"Ask for another."

"M-master...do it...again," she writhed, the sexual tension building already.

Rayf couldn't play this game for long. He was going to ejaculate, in or out of her. One more swat, one more pink spot and then he moved into position.

"It's time," he told her.

"Yes..." she repeated the word several times over, thrusting her ass up to meet him. Rayf coated his cock in the gel, cold and smooth. She cried out as he put some in her tight little hole.

"How long has it been?" he wanted to know, anxious that she'd gotten too tight.

"Not since...you," she confessed.

Rayf's heart moved to his throat. So Max wasn't taking care of her...not in the bedroom at least.

"I'll be gentle," he promised.

"No," she insisted with surprising vehemence. "Don't."

Delaney was brazen, offering up her bottom for penetration. She didn't want Rayf being gentle, she wanted him plundering her tight little canal. She wanted to feel like one wild animal being had by another. So much had happened tonight, so much that the higher, rational part of her would regret. She might as well have something for the beast in her to look back on and smile.

Rayf was too far gone to have a lengthy discussion. He, like her, was in that place of instant gratification. They were peas in a pod. That's what made them so good in the past—and so volatile.

She urged him on as he grasped her waist, tight in the grip of a man who swung steel girders for a living and who had battled alligators for the entertainment of others.

Delaney found herself open surprisingly easily considering how long it had been. Feeling no tension at all, she was able to accept several inches of him right off the bat.

Rayf swore as he called out her name. She knew how much he liked anal and she did too, provided she warmed up first with a boatload of orgasms. He'd been good and patient and held his own climax back. It was time for him to just release...with her as the vessel.

Oh god, she needed to be taken like this. Ordered onto all fours, a vibrator shoved inside her and a cock in her ass. Max was so solicitous, so overbearingly kind and giving, it just didn't dawn on him, the dance, the complex, inexplicable give and take that could make a woman want to submit to her lover, to be overwhelmed by the desires of her mate.

For Max, sex was all neatly tied up in a little box, equitable transactions, just like in finance. That's what made him so good at the bank. She saw the way his eyes lit up when he talked about his job. He was kind to her, he felt a duty to her but did his eyes light up...for her?

They never fought, not about a thing. Was that good? It was such a refreshing change from the constant fireworks with Rayf but now she wondered if she didn't miss the explosions, just a little.

Rayf sunk himself a little deeper than stopped. She could feel the heat of him. How well she remembered this cock, the heat of it, the feel of it, in her every orifice. It had marked her, branded her like no other. Everything in her life was before and after. Nothing compared. How could a man know her so well sexually, always pushing her to the limits and yet never failing to bring her back to her center? Always anticipating, always one step ahead and yet always there to keep her from falling.

It was magic, you couldn't build a sex life like that in a million years. Could you?

Rayf picked up his rhythm again, moving deeper, inch by inch. He was picking up speed. She could feel his cock enlarging. She knew he would not be able to hold back much longer. Sure enough, he exclaimed his situation.

"Need to...come," grunted Rayf, beyond the point of clear articulation.

"Do it, come in my ass," she begged. "Fill me with your hot come...give it to me like I need."

Rayf sucked in a breath and let out a roar, like a lion. Oh yes, she remembered that sound. Exactly what a woman liked to hear. The vibrator, which had been nipping about the edges of her brain, made its fresh claim meanwhile, thrusting her over the edge yet again even as Rayf thrust himself one captivating, triumphant time.

Rayf continued to cry out in masculine passion.

Semen jetted into Delaney's ass. The vibrator buzzed, the stars aligned, the planets shined. She gripped the bedspread with her fingers, pulling the chain taut between her wrists. *Own me, Rayf, own my body...my soul.*

They came together, a single meltdown, hot flames intertwining as though something nuclear, unspeakably amazing filled their souls, their hearts and exploded every nerve ending. It went on forever, soaring to a boundless height, eternity right in front of them.

And then...nothing.

Two bodies in a heap, utterly spent, limbs intertwined, breath softly intermingling, heartbeats nearly conjoined.

Some time later, a minute, a million years, Delaney felt Rayf pull the vibrator from her pussy. She continued to spasm as if it was still there. The rest was hazy. Rayf kissed her and tucked her in. She asked him if he was staying. He said something in reply and she nodded though she didn't really hear him. He might have told her the moon was on fire and it wouldn't have much mattered. It was enough to sleep, to find some dream to lose herself in. But which man would be there? Rayf or Max? Would it really come down to a choice? One thing was sure.

She'd reject them both before she hurt either one.

Chapter Seven

Rayf didn't stay the night. As soon as Delaney was asleep he slipped out quietly, his bag in tow. He pointed his motorcycle due north, out of the city across the bridge and he didn't look back until Albany, three and a half hours later. Taking the Thruway interchange, he picked up the Northway and traveled on through to Lake George.

He had a buddy up that way, twenty-five percent Native American on his grandfather's side. Chipalaqua. They'd met fifteen stories up on a building in Brooklyn. Everyone had warned Rayf about Crazy Pete and how he liked to chant the war cry and pick fights.

"Steer clear of him," said the site boss. "He's possessed but he's the best damn sky walker I've ever seen."

"What the fuck you looking at?" Pete had said to Rayf the first time they saw each other.

Rayf grinned, introduced himself and challenged the man at arm wrestling. Rayf got beat but he put up a decent fight. That won Pete's respect. When the building was done Pete told him to come up to his cabin in the Adirondacks for a while. They drank for three days straight, played darts and solved the world's problems twice over.

Pete was much older and a hell of a lot wiser. Wise enough never to have gotten married. Rayf went to him when he had trouble.

And boy did he have it now.

Pete's cabin was at the end of a long dirt road that wound through the woods. Tall pines, maples and oaks lined the way, along with fallen logs and small islands of snow, stubbornly holding out against the end of winter.

Spring came later back here, as did most everything else.

Rayf could feel his body calming as he navigated the ancient roadway. It was the sense of history that did it. Just knowing that Mohawk Indians had passed this way, treading on their moccasins, and Yankee soldiers in their leather boots during the Revolutionary War.

A man felt small in these woods but not in a bad way.

Pete was out front of the small log cabin when Rayf drove up. He'd been chopping wood, shirtless. It still got cold enough to need a fire at night, even in March. "Look what the cat dragged in," Pete grumbled, happy to see his old friend despite the scowl on his face.

"Trust me." Rayf gave it right back. "If I'd had anywhere else on the planet to go..."

"Well, you don't." The bearded Pete cut him off. "'Cause no one else would ever put up with your sorry ass. Come on in, I'll see if the grizzlies left me any scotch. I know you have some new tale of woe for me."

"Don't I always?" Rayf grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder.

Pete managed a chuckle. He was wearing jeans and boots. His chest was hairy. He had a large scar sideways across his cheek, just one of many souvenirs of his years as an iron worker.

There was a steel plate in his head too compliments of Uncle Sam, fresh out of Vietnam.

Pete found the scotch amidst the stray cans in his hardwood cupboard. Most contained beans, the rest was coffee. He poured it out into two small metal cups—dented tin with handles. They sat down across from each other at the pinewood table.

"To life," said Pete, toasting his friend in the middle of the rustic, two-room cabin. "May we finish on borrowed time and leave the devil footing the bill."

"Amen," echoed Rayf. In all these years he'd never known Pete to use the same toast twice.

"So what kind of mess you get into this time?" Pete quipped, wrinkling his wiry black and gray mustache.

Rayf wasn't sure where to begin. "Let's just say I ended up in the wrong bed, big time."

Pete shook his head. "Ain't no such thing as a wrong bed, just the wrong people in it."

"Oh we were the wrong people all right...it was me and Delaney."

Pete thinned his lips and poured a little more scotch. "Now why'd you go and do a damn fool thing like that?"

Rayf had had a lot of time to think on the way up from New York. Enough to stop kidding himself about any noble motives toward her or Max. "I still love her, Pete. I want her back."

"You had your chance, why should you get another?"

"You're right," Rayf agreed. "I shouldn't. But then again, what if it's destiny? What if we belong together?"

Pete smiled thinly. "Did I ever tell you about Suzie?"

"No, surprisingly enough you haven't. Considering how much time you've spent talking about yourself over the years."

"She was this little bit of a thing, I met her in Saigon," Pete ignored the dig. "She worked in her family's restaurant. Most beautiful little smile you ever seen. She liked me because of my eyes. Almond eyes, she said, like her people. We started talking, nothing heavy, just life, back and forth. Damn it if I didn't start looking for excuses to go back to that place over and over just to see her. One day I went and she was gone. I asked her mother and she just started crying. Her father took me aside. He said she'd been taken away, by the Viet Cong, because she was spending so much time with a GI. They thought she was a spy."

Rayf waited for more.

"That's it," Pete shrugged. "What did you expect, a frigging fairy tale? Look, kid, life comes at you ninety miles an hour, you fuck up, big time. Everybody does. What makes you so special? Maybe I could have made something happen with Suzie, maybe she was my soul mate or some crap like that. But I didn't. So I got this life instead. I get to sit around and drink and think about what could have been. Well guess what, I'd have done the same if I had married Suzie because it's who I am. You get it?"

"Not really," said Rayf.

Pete muttered under his breath. "Dumb fuck."

"Unless," Rayf tried to come up with a moral, "you're saying that as long as there's a chance to go for what you want, you might as well try because no one can say for sure you *shouldn't*."

He shook his head. "No, I'm saying people hear what they want to hear and you already know what you're going to do. You're going to ride your ass back down there and steal the girl away. Maybe not today or tomorrow but real soon."

"But I can't do that to Max. I'll hurt him."

Pete laughed, deep and hard.

"What's so funny?" Rayf demanded.

"You," said Pete. "Thinking you can go through life without hurting people. You think it won't hurt Max by lying to him the rest of your life or avoiding him, which you'll eventually do? How about all the other people you're going to take it out on when you don't get Delaney?"

"I wouldn't do that."

"Maybe," Pete shrugged. "Maybe not."

"I don't want to talk anymore," Rayf decided. "You give me a headache."

"We could play darts but a grizzly ate the board."

"Guess that leaves drinking," Rayf sighed.

"Cheers." Pete lifted his cup.

"Hey," exclaimed Rayf. "That's a repeat toast. You're slipping."

"I'm getting old," Pete grumbled. "So sue me."

* * * * *

Delaney woke up naked and alone. She could still feel Rayf inside her, his hard cock pressing her pulsing sex walls. She'd been dreaming about him and the passion they shared. A night of ecstasy but now it was daylight and he was gone.

That's what she wanted, right?

He could have said goodbye though. He owed her that much. She wasn't just some one-night stand, another notch in his belt. Was she? Delaney decided she'd go back to hating the man. It was easier. The sex wasn't worth it.

Max. Oh god. A knife twisted in her gut. What had she done? She'd let her husband's best man seduce her. She'd given herself over to his every sexual whim and hers too. The events of the night came whirling back into her mind, one by one, screaming in her head like accusations. The taxi ride, the elevator, the spatula, the handcuffs.

She was a bad, bad person and an even worse fiancée.

Poor Max overseas slaving away for their future while she played sex games with Rayf, taking on her old role as his passion slave. She was going to have to tell Max everything. Max deserved to know.

Delaney touched her nipple, sending a shiver down her spine. Why, oh why did it have to be so good with Rayf? Why couldn't he be the one she was supposed to be marrying?

Delaney's breath caught in her throat.

She couldn't mean that, could she? She couldn't honestly be thinking about marriage to Rayf...again. Not even as a fleeting thought, a wild and crazy notion.

Some ideas were too insane and dangerous even to think.

And this was one of them.

No, Delaney needed to confess to Max. Plead with him to take her back. It was the only way. For all three of them.

Rayf could never handle another marriage. He was totally wrong for it. She couldn't hold him down like that.

As if she cared one whit what happened to him...

She'd call Max. After she took a shower. A long, hot one.

She wasn't stalling, she decided, just making sure she was completely ready.

It took her the length of her time under the water to reach a new conclusion. She couldn't do this over the phone. She'd have to wait until Max came home. In the meantime...in the meantime she'd suffer.

She deserved as much. To live with the uncertainty, the plaguing guilt, knowing what she'd done to him but not knowing how he'd respond.

What if Rayf told Max first?

That wouldn't happen. Would it?

Maybe she should call Max after all and beat Rayf to the punch.

Or maybe she should stop acting so paranoid and just go on with her life. It's not like she'd killed someone or robbed a bank. They were three adults, they'd work things out.

Three adults. With Rayf in the equation? Was he really an adult? He certainly made love like one. She couldn't help thinking how it was different with him this time. He seemed steadier, more focused. Had he changed? She couldn't assume that. She'd raised her hopes before.

Delaney sighed. It was going to be a very, very long weekend.

* * * * *

Rayf was still debating what to do when he got the cell phone call. Max was the last person he was expecting to hear from, though it shouldn't have been a surprise at all.

Why wouldn't a man call his bosom chum and best man with his wedding less than two weeks away? Especially since, as far as Max knew, Rayf was supposed to be staying with his fiancée at the moment.

"Trouble in paradise?" Pete read Rayf's expression as he studied the incoming number.

"It's the third part of the triangle," Rayf quipped.

Pete grabbed his cup and the bottle. "That's my cue to amscray."

"Hey, leave the bottle at least."

"Nah, you've had enough," said his drinking partner of the last three hours. "Besides, I need some for the grizzlies."

"I hope they chew your damn fool head off." Rayf clicked the phone on as Pete disappeared out the front door. "Hey, Max Man," he said, trying to sound normal.

"Hey, Rayferino." Max's usually cheerful voice was flat. Odd.

Had he been talking to Delaney? Had she ratted Rayf out?

"You sound like hell. What's the matter?" Rayf said. "Did the dollar fall against the yen again?"

"No, it's holding pretty steady," said Max.

"That's a joke," said Rayf. "Ever heard of a joke, you ignorant son of a bitch?"

Max wasn't his usual self at all. "Yeah, I get it. Listen, Rayf, I need to talk to you."

Fuck. So he had talked to Delaney after all.

"What about, Max?"

"It's complex. Can we do it in person?"

"Sure, I'll sprout wings and fly over the London Bridge."

"I'm back in New York, actually."

Double fuck.

"Aren't you supposed to be in England still?"

"Yes. I came back early. I told you, this is important."

Rayf cleared his throat. "Can I ask you one thing?"

"What?"

"Did you talk to Delaney yet today?"

"No, why?"

"No reason." He'd dodged the bullet. So far.

"How quick can you see me?" Max asked.

"I'm upstate. I'll leave now." If Max needed him, it wasn't even a question of making the man wait. "I'll be there in a few hours."

"Upstate?" Max asked. "What are you doing there?"

He cleared his throat. "I'll explain, old buddy. You know me. Impulsive, right?"

Max didn't know the half of it this time.

"All right, how about if we meet in Kingston, midway?" Max suggested.

"Done." Whatever was going on, Max wasn't screwing around.

Max was already waiting at the Sugar Hills Diner when Rayf walked in two hours later. He'd expected to see his old friend looking tired or upset but to his surprise he was positively glowing. His dark hair was crisply curled and he had on a brand new shirt, an Oxford, blue and white pinstripe.

"You don't look like a man in crisis," Rayf commented. "You better not have gotten me down here to settle some old sports bet between us."

Max laughed lightly. "Now that you mention it, you still owe me twenty bucks for the '86 World Series."

"In your dreams, cowboy." Rayf slid into the booth across from Max.

"What can I get you?" asked the waitress.

"More coffee for me," Max said. "And some for my friend."

The waitress was young and pretty, with big blue eyes, a willowy blonde. Between his almost constant thoughts of Delaney and his worry about Max, Rayf didn't give her a second look.

Max waited until the waitress delivered the coffee before heaving a sigh. "Rayf, you know I love Delaney." He stirred some milk in his coffee.

"Of course." Rayf tried to sound neutral.

No one could love her like me, though, Rayf thought. No one knows her strengths and her faults like I do and adores her for them all the more.

"And I'd never do anything to hurt her," Max added.

"I wouldn't either," said Rayf, a little too quickly.

Max looked at him strangely for a moment before continuing. "I thought everything was so cut and dried. I mean she's the perfect woman, right? You and I talked about it when I first wanted to start dating her."

Rayf smiled, remembering the conversation they'd had. Max had come to him, asking his blessing. As if it were Rayf's to give.

"If you think you can make something work with my ex-wife," he'd said, or words to that effect, "more power to you. Lord knows I tried."

He'd made it sound so cavalier but there was far too much emotion behind the words. He hadn't meant them, not really. He realized that now.

Max's head hung low over the steaming mug. "This is so hard."

The tension was unbearable. "You're killing me, Max, just say it."

Max looked him dead in the eye. "I met somebody else, Rayf."

Rayf's mouth dropped open. Should he laugh or cry? "You...what?"

"I didn't cheat on Delaney," he said quickly. "I would never break our trust like that."

"I sure as hell hope not," said Rayf, promptly putting himself up for Hypocrite of the Year Award.

"I am a total shit, aren't I?" Max slipped into a pity party, which really didn't fit with how obviously happy he was about the "somebody else".

"No, you're just human. So tell me what happened."

Max drew a breath, his spirits lifting visibly. He was in love all right, thought Rayf.

"Her name is Emily. She works at our London branch. I can't believe all the things we have in common. She handles Third World loans, she does yoga, she's even a fan of Milton Friedman, the supply side economist, can you believe it?"

"Be still my beating heart," Rayf said dryly. "Don't tell me this is all from one trip?"

"I know, it's crazy," said Max. "It's only been a week but I can't get enough of her. We work together great and we have a ball outside the office. One night we went to St. Martin's in the Field and heard a live classical music concert."

"Sounds like a blast." Rayf opted to go for the bottom line. "But what about sex?"

"Oh we haven't even talked about it yet," Max dismissed.

Rayf raised an eyebrow. "Dude, sex isn't something you talk about, it's something you do."

"Actually, we both believe sex is better left for after marriage."

"So what do you do before it?"

"I told you, concerts, exercise. And kissing. Rayf, you have no idea what a kisser Emily is."

Rayf frowned.

"What is it?" Max asked.

"Delaney's not so shabby in that department herself." He found himself defending her.

Max cocked his head, giving him that look again. "Who said I was comparing them?"

Rayf ran his hand through his hair. "I just meant that Layn deserves respect, you know, as a friend."

"Come to think of it," Max said, "what were you doing upstate? I thought you were staying with Delaney?"

"Why am *I* getting the third degree?" Rayf put him off. "You're the one who wanted to see *me*."

"Sorry," said Max, though he had nothing to apologize for. "I've just got a lot on my mind. What am I supposed to tell Delaney? I don't know for sure what might happen with Emily but I need to give it a chance, don't I? I'm so torn up about the thing I begged off the rest of my trip. Luckily the bank president is understanding. Delaney doesn't suspect anything. She's even making me dinner. God, I feel like a heel."

Rayf winced internally. How was he supposed to be an objective voice here? More than anything he wanted a chance of his own with Delaney. But was that the right thing for her?

"Max Man, I need to level with you..."

"About what?"

"About me and Delaney." He cleared his throat. "Last night, I was at her place and...something happened."

"Something like what?"

"We made love, Max. But it wasn't her fault, it was all me. I seduced her, she didn't want to, I swear."

This wasn't coming out well at all.

Max pinched his brow. "Well, I assume she did want it, Rayf. It takes two people to make love."

"Yes but I don't want you upset with her."

"How can I be upset with her for following her heart?"

Following her heart. Is that what Delaney was doing?

"I think she's confused right now," said Rayf.

"Are you confused?" Max asked.

"Me?"

"Yes, you, the second of the two people in question who made love last night."

"Yeah," he said, fingers flying through his hair. "I'm confused."

"You're lying." Max shook his head.

"Bullshit, Max."

"Don't deny it, Rayf, I know it's true, because you're doing that stupid thing with your hair."

Rayf frowned. "Where'd you get an idea like that from?"

"From Delaney, where else?"

Rayf's heart soared. "She talks about me."

Max eyed him. "Yes, Rayf, she does."

"A lot?"

"Yes, a lot."

"Is it...all bad?"

"It comes across that way on the surface, complaints and so on," said Max, "but honestly it gets on my nerves. Like I don't already know how impossible you are without her input."

Rayf grinned. "I think you guys both love me, what do you say?"

"We both put up with you, that's as far as I'll go."

Rayf chuckled and then went for broke. "Max...honestly...do you think she'd ever take me back?"

Max smiled. "You know her better than I do, you always have."

"I'll say one thing," Rayf considered. "She deserves better than me."

"Which would be a problem," said Max, "if you weren't just the kind of selfish bastard to go after her anyway."

"True," said Rayf. "I do have that going for me."

"You're also moody as hell, just like her."

He couldn't help grinning over that. "She is a wildcat, isn't she?"

"Pretty untamable, if you ask me."

Rayf couldn't help thinking of last night. His hand, brazen on her proud ass, his fingers entwined in her hair. His cock, buried deep in her pussy, making her moan and scream. "Oh I have my ways where she's concerned."

Max drank some of his coffee. "I'm sure you do but whatever you have in mind, it needs to be something different from last time. Unless you want another flash in the pan arrangement."

That was the last thing Rayf wanted. "No, Max, this time it's got to be for keeps."

Max studied him. "I believe you mean that."

"Why?" Rayf quipped. "Because I'm not touching my hair?"

"No," said his oldest friend. "It's because I can see you've run out of options. And stubborn as you might be, you won't let happiness slip away twice in one lifetime."

"Plenty of people do though."

"You're not plenty of people," Max retorted.

Rayf raised his cup. "To Emily, may she process you a lifelong loan and never leave you dry."

"To Delaney," he countered with a clink of white ceramic. "May she be ready to meet you halfway."

Amen to that, Rayf thought, amen to that.

Chapter Eight

Delaney had prepared supper for her and Max. She didn't know if he'd want to eat it after she made her confession but she'd needed to keep herself occupied during the day. Cooking had always been therapeutic. And as long as she steered clear of spatulas today, she'd be fine.

It was a weird coincidence, Max coming home early from his trip. He said it was due to bank business in New York. If he wasn't so scrupulously honest and trusting she'd have suspected that he was coming back to check up on her. He'd sounded a little distant on the phone but Delaney sensed no hostility. She was firmly convinced he didn't know yet what had happened between her and Rayf.

Turning the pan of chicken parmesan down to low, Delaney poured the pasta into the silver colander. She'd made linguini, Max's favorite. She even had a nice bottle of Chianti in a quaint, straw-covered bottle.

Max arrived promptly at six, not a minute too early or too late. He was wearing his brown wool suit, very sharp with a white dress shirt and yellow silk tie. She hugged him tight, greeting him at the door in a loose black skirt and light, scoop-neck top, also black. She had on heels and pearls.

Ever the perfect gentleman, Max commented on her appearance. He even noticed her new perfume.

"Very pleasant," he smiled.

"It's Desperate Passion," she said wistfully, thinking of how Rayf would have reacted instead. She'd have been lucky to make it back from the living room to the kitchen without being thrust against some wall or laid down on the sofa.

"It's your fault," Rayf would have grumbled, imperiously removing any clothing in the way of their immediate joining. "You can't smell like that and not expect me to do something about it."

Delaney's pussy twitched. She'd been fantasizing about Rayf almost nonstop since he'd left yesterday. Today was Sunday, how was she supposed to go back to work tomorrow? He was in her head, his ghostly hands on her body, roaming at will, tweaking and taunting.

The harder she tried to repel him the more he was there. Coming up from behind her in ghost form, grasping her breasts as she stirred the sauce. Moving his hands between her legs in the shower, lathering her sex lips, making her moan with desperate need. Even taking a jog she was not safe as she pictured him coming up from behind, laughing as he tackled her in the grass, smothering her with kisses as he pulled the clothes from her body, readying her for his tongue, his fingers...his cock, bringing her to orgasm after orgasm, manipulating her clitoris, turning it against her into a weapon of pleasure, a trigger of lust to be pulled again and again.

"Dinner smells delicious," said Max. He looked vaguely guilty. "Did you go to a lot of trouble? I'm not really sure I'm going to be able to stay."

Delaney marveled at Max's complete departure from the norm. "You can't stay? Why not?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "It's just that I have something to say and...well, after I say it...I'm not sure...that is to say..."

Max was stammering. Calm, rational Max. Wonder of wonders. "I think you need a glass of wine," she said.

He sat down on the couch. "Thank you," he accepted the crystal glass filled with rich Chianti.

He drained half of it in one gulp.

"Max, now I know something's going on," she declared. "Out with it, you're making me nervous."

He handed her the glass. "More, please?"

She complied and after another swig, he opened up. Boy did he open up.

"I know all about what happened with you and Rayf and I'm cool with it."

He could have knocked her over with a feather. "You are?"

"Yeah. You see, Delaney, while I was in London something unexpected happened. I never intended for it and god knows I would never hurt you."

Her heart did a flip. She knew what was coming. The question was how was she going to react?

"We never went to bed or anything but there's real chemistry," he said. "I'll be honest, if Emily had wanted to, I wouldn't have said no."

"Emily," Delaney repeated the name. Surprisingly, she was calm. "It has a nice ring to it," she said softly.

"She's from Brighton. She works for the bank in London. I think...I think you'd like her."

Delaney had to laugh at his expression. "Relax, I'm not your mother, you don't have to sell me."

"No, you're my fiancée," he took her hand. "And I wish there were some other way this had worked out."

"Why? What did you do wrong?" she exclaimed. "When someone crosses your path and you're attracted, why fight it?"

"But we had so many plans," Max pointed out. "We were together a long time."

"I know and I won't say I'm not going to cry the minute you walk out that door, Max, you are such a special guy. But I have to be honest too. What happened last night with me and Rayf, I have to work through it. If I don't shake him, how will I get on with my life?"

Max squeezed her hand in both of his. "Are you really sure you want to shake him?" he rasped.

Delaney frowned. Did she?

Max kissed her knuckles. "I love you, Delaney, I always will. But I'm not the man for you. There's parts of you I can't satisfy. I thought maybe it was me, like I had something missing but I met Emily – and no offense to you – but suddenly I saw it was possible for a woman to be totally, well, enraptured by me and me by her."

"I'm not offended," she gave him a hug. "I cheated on you, Max, big time and here you are graciously forgiving me. I'm just not ready for another marriage, I don't think, not to anyone."

"I understand," he soothed.

She caught him checking his watch. "What's up?"

He looked sheepish. "Emily's flying in. I have to meet her at the airport. I feel so bad..."

"Go," she shooed him. "I can eat loads of chicken parm all by my lonesome, you'd be surprised."

After I've polished off the wine.

"You're the best, Delaney," he kissed her forehead.

A minute later he was gone, another closed door, another ex.

She went for the wine bottle, not bothering with the glass.

It's got to be me, she thought. I'm poison for relationships.

Before Delaney could get too far into her grape-filled valley of misery, the door bell rang. Again? What now? Had Max forgotten his attaché case filled with a bright shiny new life?

Listen to her, sounding so cynical.

She trudged to the door, contemplating what to do with all that chicken parm. She looked through the peephole.

Rayf was on the other side of the door.

And why not? A night like this just begged for bad to worse.

Delaney opened the door, determined to nip this little stunt in the bud. "If you're here for Max's leftovers," she snapped bitterly, "there's none to be had."

He had his canvas bag. "I need a place to crash, just for a night or so."

She told him where he could go with his bag, not mincing words.

"I've already been there," he said, blue eyes piercing. "For me hell is called life without you."

Delaney's lips found his. She was so lonely and so tired of fighting and she just missed this man and all the trouble he brought and there just had to be a way to work it out.

He lifted her up, holding her tight so she could wrap her slender legs around his waist. She was still holding the bottle of wine, totally oblivious. Their mouths said everything that needed to be said. The energy was there, the momentum, good intention enough to propel them forward for a long time to come.

Sure, there'd be rocky roads and fireballs, there always would but just a little head start was what they needed. And maybe this time, just maybe, they could meet in the middle.

Rayf managed to carry her to the living room, laying her down on the couch, all without breaking the kiss. They were a flurry of concentrated activity. Sex—they needed sex and all it offered. Breathing was secondary to opening his pants and pulling down her panties. She was so hot and wet she took him in a single vacuum rush, his cock disappearing to the hilt.

Delaney gasped. For the first time since Rayf had left last night she felt right. "Rayf...oh god..."

Rayf sank his teeth into her neck, suckling. He was pressing her hard, chest to chest, stealing her breath but giving her life.

"Fuck me," she begged. "Hard."

His buttocks pumped up and down, filling and emptying her, rocking her body and creating the internal friction she needed to reach climax. This wouldn't be any ordinary orgasm either. It would break records. But it was only the beginning. Everything up to now was for this and everything in the future would lead to its own conclusions.

Rayf couldn't hold out and she didn't want him to. He came with a grunt, shuddering against her. She held the back of his head, cradling, drawing him tight, savoring the feel, the rush of having him fully inside her, as he released his showering bursts of warm, thick emission.

He kissed her a million times, all over her lips and cheeks and then he moved down to the floor between her legs. "My love," he whispered, placing her feet up on his shoulders so she could spread her thighs even wider. "I can't get enough of you."

She pulled her dress up all the way to her waist, giving him access to her bare pussy as he went to work, moving his tongue up and down her slit, dabbing at the super sensitive flesh, drinking in her nectar. At the same time he reached up with his hands, molding her breasts through the material of her top.

She threw her head back against the sofa as he found her swollen clitoris. Oh yes...it was nice to be pleased by a gorgeous man who enjoyed the taste of her so much. Delaney let her entire body spill into his hands as he lifted her high into the heavens. Orgasms...splendid, shooting beams of light, showers of color, waves of bliss. He gave her one after another, his tongue functioning as a miniature cock with all the knowledge in the world of where to go and how to touch. Stroking, pressing the swollen button until it could take no more.

At last he let her go, coming up for air. Delaney wanted to kiss him. She wanted to taste her sated self on his lips, she wanted to lick them clean and then to taste the slight salt of his sweat along his forehead and neck.

Sensing her will, he raised himself up, face to face. Their mouths fit perfectly as they exchanged their souls, their essences...and the source of their power.

Before long they had switched positions, with him sitting on the couch and her on her knees, allowing her to perform the exquisite fellatio she had not gotten to do last night. How much she'd been savoring this moment.

Slowly, she took off his shoes, one by one and his socks and then his pants and underwear too, baring his wonderful body.

She kissed his muscles, up and down his legs. His calves, his strong thighs. Rayf took off his jacket, meanwhile, and his T-shirt, baring his chest. Oh god, that torso. Her stomach did a hot flip. Those pectorals, that washboard stomach. Moving in closer, she dove in hungrily, tasting his left nipple as she rubbed her hands across his biceps. He shifted, releasing a sharp breath.

Rayf had excellent nipples. Easily stimulated, large and brown. She blew cool air over the wet surface, causing him to grab the back of her hair.

"You're a devil," he growled lovingly. "You know that?"

"I know," she whispered, going for the right nipple next.

Rayf reached for her. She pushed his hands away. "No, this is my fun, don't spoil it."

She had him naked, how she wanted him, and she was going to take full advantage.

"Give me trouble," she teased her nude partner, "and I'll have to get out the cuffs to use on you."

"In your dreams." He chuckled.

Delaney continued her loving torture, working down to his lean waist. He tasted good, a mix of musk and perspiration and testosterone.

His cock was already rock-hard when she reached it.

Lovingly, she licked him up and down, cleaning him of their fluids. She wanted him erect again and she knew it wouldn't be long.

She weighed each of his tight balls in her hands and sure enough he began to stir, that beautiful shaft she loved so well and craved so badly. Before her eyes, without any further contact it began swelling.

Her belly tightened.

Rayf was thickening, right before her eyes. "Yes," she whispered, trailing her finger tips over the glorious flesh, velvet covering over steel.

Now she could do it right.

She began again with the lightest nibbles to the tip of his turgid cock, reddish-purple and swollen with need. He reacted by arching his back and putting his hands on her shoulders.

"Delaney, that feels so damn good," he croaked.

"It's Layn," she corrected.

He released a satisfied moan as she moved promptly up his shaft, continuing to bite down, just hard enough to drive him wild. He seemed especially to like the pressure she was applying to the thick vein on the underside. Without applying her lips or tongue, she exhaled, blowing air over the hot flesh.

Rayf mumbled something incoherent. She dragged her teeth backward, raking his skin. Then she sucked, working him hard, rolling her tongue back and forth, increasing the suction with each motion.

She wanted him to come in her mouth. She wanted him to release himself to her pleasure. She wanted to swallow him whole to let him know that she too felt emptiness without him.

But Rayf had other ideas.

"No," he said, his hand on her shoulder. "I want you up here on my lap."

Delaney released him but stayed where she was. "You're not the boss of me," she taunted, savoring the erotic tug of war to come.

She planned on losing and loving every minute of it.

"No but my cock is," he rasped.

"Seems like your cock is on my side." She kissed it, just to prove his point.

He shivered, nearly losing his resolve.

But Rayf was much too stubborn for that. "Up here now, girl, or you'll be sorry."

"What will you do?" she inquired for informational purposes.

"I'll tie you down, Layn, and I'll tease you until you beg to come and then I won't let you, because you've been such a naughty girl."

Actually, it didn't sound like such a bad punishment, the trouble was, she wanted to mount him just as bad as he wanted to be mounted. "I'll be good," she said in her sexiest voice.

Delaney climbed up and knelt on either side of Rayf's hips. She was facing him, holding her dress up. "May your slave have her Master inside her?" she asked.

"My slave damn well better," he grumbled, clamping her waist and guiding her.

She moaned as he slid himself between her lips. "Oh god, Rayf, I need you so bad...I need us..."

"Good," he leered, sitting her solidly down. "Because I don't plan on letting you throw me out this time."

Delaney pulled her dress over her head. Her nipples were throbbing under her bra. Rayf was in her...dominating her body and soul. "I just wanted to please you," she said, moist eyed. "I stopped being able to so I...I gave up."

"Oh Layn," he said tenderly. "You never stopped pleasing me, you were the best thing that had ever happened to me. I stopped knowing how to please myself. I took it out on you. I woke up one day and felt...old, trapped but that was me, not you."

She undid her bra. "I'm going to get old," she warned. "My body won't always be appealing."

He cupped her breasts. "I love these," he said. "But I'm *in* love with you."

Delaney shifted forward, increasing the pressure on her clit. "We can start again. But I'm not rushing."

He massaged her, the way she loved best, finding all the little hot spots, ending with tiny, sweet tweaks of her nipples. "Time is my middle name."

"No," she managed to reply. "Trouble is your middle name."

"I'd be honored if you let me share it with you." He grinned sideways, blue eyes dancing.

"Don't worry about that." She gave his cock a squeeze. "The label seems to suit me just fine."

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese welcomes comments from readers. You can find Reese's website and email address on the author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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