

ELLORA'S CAVE *Moderne*



TRISTAN'S
temptation
SABRINA YORK

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The red-hot sequel to Adam's Obsession.

Tristan Trillo has one steadfast rule—*thou shalt not fish in the company pond*. That puts his executive assistant Shannon Weiss firmly out of reach. He tells himself the secret steamy computer simulations he creates—ones featuring a seductress with more than a passing resemblance to Shannon—are enough. But

watching the virtual Shannon get spanked or tied up, taken from behind or while down on her knees, just makes him want the real Shannon more.

When Shannon discovers the depth of Tristan's desire, she vows to seduce him in real life, his rule be damned. After a blazing, illicit tryst in Tristan's office, he insists they can never do it again. So Shannon, ever the obedient assistant, makes certain the next time she seduces him, they do something completely different.

Poor Tristan is a man trapped between his steadfast rule and a

burning passion. A rock, if you will,
and a *very* hard place.

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to my darling Seaquills—Celeste Deveney, Kathy Klein, Natalie French and Monica Britt. They always knew it would happen.

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Chapter One

Tristan Trillo burned. He leaned forward in his lush leather chair, hiding his hard-on behind the big mahogany desk as his assistant Shannon Weiss entered his office.

She looked particularly enticing today. Her adorable corkscrew curls were swept back in a ponytail, revealing the delicate features of her heart-shaped face – wide, brown, fawn-

like eyes, turned-up nose and sweet bow lips. She wore a tight leather skirt and form-hugging belly shirt. Slick leather boots encased her calves.

“You wanted me?” A throaty purr.

Did he want her? Dear God, yes.

“Care to take some...dictation?”

Her response was a cheeky smile.

“Of course.” She closed the door with a sharp click and strolled to his desk, steno pad in hand. “Where do you want me?”

“Here.” His heart pounded. “Come here.”

She grinned and tossed the steno

pad heedlessly to the floor then rounded the large desk in a seductive saunter until she stood before him, luscious legs spread shoulder-width apart. The light from the window cascaded over her body, forming shadows, highlighting the peaks and valleys of her small upturned breasts. He caressed the soft skin of her thigh between the top of the boots and the hem of her skirt. His fingers curled around the warmth and drew her closer. She murmured soft encouragement.

“Take off your shirt.”

She complied without reservation,

revealing a wispy push-up bra that cupped her breasts with exquisite precision. It was sheer and scant. He could almost see the coral rings of her nipples.

His grasp tightened on her flesh.
“On your knees.”

She smiled at the command and knelt before him, placing a hand on his thigh. It drifted slowly up to the buttons of his jeans. In a heartbeat, she had them open and his cock in her hand. Tristan shifted restlessly as she bent her head, took him into her sweet mouth and began to suck. Her head moved up and down as her tongue and

lips milked his erection.

The sight was alluring, seductive and damn arousing. It always was.

But today, for some reason, it just didn't cut it. Normally the image of Shannon on her knees before him with his cock in her mouth was enough to drive him wild but today it was just frustrating. It simply wasn't enough. Not nearly enough.

With a snort, Tristan slapped his laptop closed and spun around to glare out the windows overlooking the parking lot. When Jack Maris created Virtual Life, a high-resolution role-playing game,

Tristan, as CEO of Trillo-Maris Software, had been excited about the prospects. It hadn't taken long for him to realize the potential of a game where players could create their own reality and interact with avatars that looked and sounded just like people they knew, or people they wanted to know. The game could be played as a single player, as a private group or as an MMORPG interfacing with internet players across the world—all of which boded an extraordinarily promising market share.

But for Tristan, the game had an infinitely more personal draw.

Using Jack's little-known code to access the Green Door application, he'd created a seductive scenario featuring Shannon Weiss in hope of exorcizing the ill-conceived passion he felt for his prim little assistant. However, as time passed, Tristan had developed racier and raunchier scenarios. Delving into his darkest desires, making them come to life in the virtual world, only whet his appetite for the real thing.

Now he thought of very little else.

What he *really* wanted—pretty much more than he wanted to draw his next breath—was the real

thing. He wanted Shannon there on her knees before him, her warm hands on him, her slick mouth tormenting him and bringing him to climax. And he wanted it so badly he could practically taste it.

But there were three major problems with this obsession.

The first problem was Tristan's dedication to his business. When he, his brother Adam and his college roommate Jack Maris started the company, they'd agreed on several critical rules. The mandate at the top of the list — *don't fish in the company pond*. That meant no romantic entanglements with

employees. There were many reasons why this was a sound policy. Most specifically, when these kinds of relationships went sour, it could ruin a business.

Adam had no compunction about breaking the rules, Tristan noted with disgust. He'd recently become engaged to their very best financial analyst, much to Tristan's chagrin. It didn't seem fair that Adam could circumvent the rules and get laid every night—which he wasn't in the least shy to report—while Tristan vented his frustration with his cock in his fist, obsessing over a digitalized version of the

woman he desperately wanted.

It was damn frustrating. But it was *his* rule and Tristan always followed the rules. So despite his ever-growing fascination with Shannon, Tristan kept it in his pants and controlled his desire, turning instead to Jack's version of virtual reality porn and feeling a little sleazy in the process. He kept telling himself he should just quit doing it—he realized it was a crutch for a very unwise addiction—but he always came back.

The second reason his fixation on Shannon was unwise was because she had a boyfriend—a

handsome, muscular hunk whom she adored. Of course Tristan had never discussed Bosco with her but he'd overheard snatches of conversation between the women in the office mooning about how cute he was, with "those dreamy brown eyes", "such big, muscular shoulders" and an "adorable ass that wiggles when he walks". In his mind's eye, Tristan had created a vision of Bosco as a big, dumb, muscular jock. It was pretty annoying to think of Shannon in bed with a douche bag like that, especially since Tristan wanted her in *his* bed.

The final reason his obsession with Shannon was idiotic in the extreme was the simple fact that Shannon Weiss would never, ever do any of the things Tristan fantasized about her doing. She was excruciatingly meticulous and reserved and ever so proper. She would be revolted by his carnal desires. Deep and dark and unrelenting as they were. When he was in his right mind, he couldn't even imagine her having a sexual urge, much less acting on it. The prospect of the real Shannon, aloof and modest, on her knees sucking the sanity right out of a man was

wholly absurd.

This obsession was wholly absurd.

Tristan swung around to glare at Shannon's desk, which he could see through the floor-to-ceiling windows flanking the hall. She sat primly in her task chair, back straight, intent as she transcribed their most recent meeting minutes from the recorder to the computer. She was dressed, as always, with exquisite taste — no thigh-high vinyl boots and belly shirts here. No. She wore a perfectly tailored business suit and had her wild hair tamed into an elegant little bun atop her

head—though wayward tendrils had escaped to caress her swanlike neck.

He'd had dreams about those tendrils curling around his finger, dancing along his thigh as she dipped her head again and again...

Damn.

Tristan yanked his imagination away from the abyss and opened his laptop again, forcing himself to concentrate on work. He would not think about Shannon or her unruly hair or her sweet face or those tantalizing ruby lips and how they would feel stretched around his...

Damn.

Damn. Damn. Damn.

Work, he reminded himself. He had to focus on work.

A timely phone call saved him, demanding his attention to solve a thorny problem, forcing his attention away from the passion slowly driving him mad. He was congratulating himself twenty minutes later—for mastering twenty whole minutes of not thinking about Shannon—when her sultry voice sent him tumbling back into the cauldron of his simmering desire.

“Mr. Trillo?”

“Yes?” he snapped. He was

always snapping at her, it seemed. He didn't mean to but whenever she was near, whenever he smelled her scent or heard her voice, frustration gnawed at him and made him irritable.

And did every British woman sound so sexy? The dulcet tones of her crisp accent made his cock twitch.

"I'm off for the day. Is there anything you need from me before I go?"

His lungs seized. Did he need anything from her before she left? Christ. Multiple visions of what, exactly, he needed flooded his

mind. "No!"

Damn. That was a little harsh.

She stood there silent, still, her eyes luminous and serious as she studied him. He felt her gaze like a caress, and his cock, the voracious beast, stirred once more.

It should be illegal for a woman to look at a man like that and not offer him some relief.

It really should.

"Are you sure?" Her voice was soft, timorous.

He sighed and scrubbed his palm over his forehead. "Yes, Shannon." God, he was weary. So

tired of all this wanting. "I'll see you tomorrow."

She nodded crisply and returned to her desk, gathering her things. He watched her surreptitiously, knowing he shouldn't. Knowing he should look anywhere but there, but she was like a magnet for his attention. He couldn't break away from her allure.

As she walked away from him, toward the elevators at the end of the hall, his attention fixated on her ass in that pinstripe skirt, measuring the span of those tight globes. How would they feel in his

hands? The very notion made his mouth water.

She rounded the corner and he caught himself leaning to the left to keep her in his sights. He groaned, calling himself all kinds of a fool. He opened his laptop and against his better judgment logged on to Virtual Life to finish his virtual blowjob with his virtual assistant.

God, he thought to himself. I really need to get laid.

She really needed to find a new job.

Shannon Weiss frowned at the

unpleasant truth. She loved her job more than anything but her boss made it utterly untenable. Of course, it wouldn't be so bad working for the surly old bear if she hadn't been stupid enough to fall for him.

But fall for him she had, and almost immediately. She'd set eyes upon him in the interview—taken in his handsome, sharply edged face and utterly delicious body—and that, as they say, had been that. She'd received several other offers for her services—her résumé and references were impeccable, after all—and though the other firms

offered more money, Shannon had accepted Trillo-Maris' offer. All because of Tristan.

He was just the type of man she hungered for. He was just the type of man she always won. Until Tristan. For some reason, he always ignored—or missed—her subtle lures. She knew he found her attractive—a woman always knew—so she could only assume his reticence was due to his stubborn devotion to his rule of thumb—absolutely, positively, no office romances.

Normally when she saw a man she wanted, Shannon went for it,

no holds barred. Tristan, however, sent her nothing but stop signs. It was painfully clear the man had no salacious interest in her whatsoever. Which was rather demoralizing because she was utterly mad for him.

She'd been heartened to see a romance bloom between Adam and her friend and coworker Kat, hoping Adam had succeeded in breaking the ice, in breaking the rules, but Tristan held firm. He'd become even more taciturn since the announcement of his brother's engagement.

With this discouraging

reflection, Shannon pulled open the door to Charlie's Bar and Grill. She stepped into the dim, musty interior and squinted, scanning the tables and booths for her friends. She usually didn't join the Trillo-Maris crowd for happy hour but tonight she really needed a beer.

"Shan-non," Sara bellowed from across the room, standing to wave at her. "We're over here."

Picking her way through the peanut shells littering the floor, she made her way to their table. "Hey, guys."

"Glad you could join us." Jenny grinned and the multiple piercings

tracing the way along her lip line danced.

“Yeah. Pull up a chair.” Kat tugged out the seat by her side.

Shannon smiled at the warm welcome. That was the thing about this company. Everyone there was so nice, so friendly. She’d loved it from the very start and hated to think of leaving. They were as close to family as one could get.

“Thanks.” She dropped into the chair with an audible *oof*. “What a day, huh?”

“No kidding.” Sara flicked back her blonde mane and signaled to a passing waiter for another pitcher.

“You want a beer?”

“And how.” Shannon’s great gust made the others laugh.

“Shan, I don’t know how you do it.” Jenny wrinkled her nose. The plethora of piercings ringing her nostrils bunched.

Shannon tried not to stare. She always did. But she couldn’t help thinking how painful it all must have been. She didn’t even want to think about the tattoos. “Do what?”

Jenny wagged her eyebrows. Again. Dancing studs. Yikes. The eyebrows must have really hurt. “How you work for Tristan and keep your sanity.”

Good question. She wasn't quite sure. "He can be trying."

"Trying?" Jenny gaped. "Try mouthwatering. I'd be all over him like a cheap suit if I were his EA."

Kat chortled. "Which is exactly why you're not his EA."

"Right." Sara took a fresh pitcher from the waiter and leaned over to fill everyone's glasses. "An executive assistant has to be professional and precise. Practically perfect in every way."

"Like Mary Poppins."

Shannon grimaced at the comparison. "I'm hardly perfect in every way."

“Balderdash.” Sara mimicked Shannon’s British accent with flawless inflection and they all laughed. “Seriously. Can you imagine if Jenny were Tristan’s EA?”

Jenny fiddled with a streak of pink hair. It wasn’t all pink, just the streak. The rest of it was green. “He wouldn’t be so damn grumpy, that’s for sure.”

“Ah, but can you imagine the coffee?” Kat grimaced but softened it with a smile in Jenny’s direction. One of Shannon’s duties was providing coffee for company meetings. As coffee was a particular

passion of hers, Shannon made sure only the best beans were ground under her watch.

“Ugh.” Sara groaned. “We wouldn’t get any work done at all.”

Jenny put out a lip. “I only burned it once.”

“Once was enough.” Kat nudged Shannon with her elbow. “You can never go on vacation again.”

Sara nodded so vehemently her shaggy bangs flopped into her eyes. “No kidding.”

Shannon offered a small smile. “Fortunately, I don’t seem to have a life so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

It was true. Her universe revolved around Tristan Trillo and he barely acknowledged her existence. When he didn't want coffee, at least. The thought made her smile dim but fortunately no one noticed. Their attention had gone to the front door of the bar, which had opened to admit Adam Trillo and, in his wake, the object of her obsession.

Tristan.

Why did her belly have to lurch at the sight of him?

But it did. She dipped her head and studied her beer as he and Adam made their way across the

bar. She didn't look up once but she knew, every second, exactly where he was. It was always like that. Like she had a radar for him.

"There you are." Kat stood to give Adam a slow, sultry kiss.

"Ick," said Sara after a moment or two of watching. Avidly.

"I know." Jenny wrinkled her nose. "It's like seeing your parents smooching."

"At least they keep it out of the office." This, Tristan muttered under his breath but Shannon heard him. She always heard him.

"Of course we do." Adam stole another quick kiss. "We know

what's good for us." He seated himself in the chair to Kat's right, leaving the only other spot—for Tristan—right next to Shannon.

Oh dear.

She picked up her beer and took a sip in an attempt to avoid drooling like an idiot and ogling him as he angled into the chair. His thigh rubbed against hers as he settled himself and she jerked in response, sloshing beer on the table. Self-consciously, she cleared her throat and carefully mopped up the spill.

In five years, she'd never been so close to him.

He was so warm.

She couldn't resist a quick peek at his profile and was stunned to realize he was looking at her. Every muscle in her body froze and caught on fire. His gaze burned through her. God, his eyes were beautiful up close.

But as soon as their gazes met, as soon as he noticed they were tangled in a visual tryst, he frowned and turned away.

Why that sent a shaft of pain through her heart, she had no idea. And she refused to think about it.

Why did he have to be such a dick?

Why, in a social situation, could he not be civil? Make small talk? Smile, perhaps? People did it every day. But not Tristan. There was a firm line between work and private lives that he never crossed. Even here, now, she could tell he was very uncomfortable sitting with his coworkers, drinking beer. She could feel the tension in him, it fairly hummed in an aura around him.

It was damn aggravating.

And it spurred Shannon to mischief.

Deliberately, she let her thigh relax against his. His response was immediate. He tensed up like a

tightly coiled spring. His knuckles went white around his glass until she was certain the fragile vessel would shatter under his grip. Thusly encouraged, she tapped her foot, rubbing her leg against his in time to the song as though she were merely enjoying the music. As though she had no cognizance of the heat searing into her at the spot their bodies intersected.

His muscles bunched. He stood and tossing her a dark look, muttered, "I'll be right back."

Disappointment skirled in her belly as he hightailed it to the bathroom. Sunk in her misery and

completely absorbed in her pathetic Tristan-fest, she jumped when two heavy hands fell on her shoulders.

“Hey, this ain’t fair,” a deep voice boomed. “Why do you get so many pretty ladies at your table?”

Shannon turned to the behemoth behind her, an unfamiliar man wearing a Stetson and shit-kicker boots. His words were directed at Adam but his eyes were on her. “Hey there, sweet cheeks,” he drawled. “Wanna dance?”

She shot another forlorn glance at the men’s room and shrugged. “All right.” Why not? At least she

could try to enjoy the evening.

“Whoo hoo. You shore got a pretty accent,” the cowboy said, drawing her to her feet and onto the dance floor, where he yanked her against him. He was big and hard and cute in a gosh-I-shore-like-country-music kind of way but hardly her type.

Within a minute she was pretty sure enjoying the evening was out of the picture and she had the crushed toes to prove it.

“Who the hell is that?” Tristan growled to his brother when he came out of the men’s room—hard-

on finally tamed—to see Shannon on the dance floor with a man big enough to eat her for breakfast.

Adam shrugged and tipped back his beer. “Some guy. Asked her to dance.”

“And you let her?”

“Let her?” Adam snorted. “Have you *met* Shannon Weiss? She does whatever she wants.”

“He could be some kind of pervert.”

“I dunno.” Sara stared dreamily at the twirling couple. “I think he’s kinda studly.” This, she said as the man’s large paws slipped down to cup Shannon’s ass.

Tristan bristled and glared impatiently at the others sitting around the table doing nothing as that bear of a man mauled his — *their* — friend.

“Maybe she’ll get lucky.” Jenny grinned and licked the rim of her glass. She caught Tristan’s expression and blanched. “Or... not.”

“Whatever.” He shoved his fist into his pocket and pulled out some crumpled bills, which he tossed unceremoniously onto the table. He drained his beer. “I’m outta here.”

“Okay.” Adam sketched him a wave. “See you tomorrow.”

“Yeah.” Tristan forced himself not to look at the dance floor as he made tracks for the front of the bar.

Damn but it bugged him to see her smiling and flirting and dancing, for Christ’s sake, with another man. The sight of Billy Bob’s hands on her ass almost sent him into orbit.

He had to get out of here. Now.

He desperately needed to be alone.

Hell, what he really needed was to get laid.

But none of the usual suspects interested him. Not anymore.

The only woman he wanted was Shannon. And she was beyond his reach.

Chapter Two

Tristan checked his watch—for the tenth time—and frowned. It was after nine and she wasn't here. He tried not to let Shannon's absence dominate his attention but it was hopeless.

Besides, she was late.

She was never late.

He felt unaccountably like a child promised a treat and then, at

the last minute, deprived of it. It was damn annoying. He glared at his computer, at the quarterly report he was pretending to write, and snorted in disgust. Clearly he wasn't going to get anything substantial done until he discovered where she was.

As always when there was a mystery to solve regarding one of his employees, he went directly to the source of the rumor mill. He found Sara in the lunchroom cussing at the coffeepot.

"Damn." She flipped the switch several times in rapid succession and glared at the appliance as

though it had mortally offended her.

The pot was empty. “No coffee?” he asked ingenuously. Shannon was in charge of the coffee. That was as good an opener as any.

“No. Shannon’s not coming in today. Didn’t I tell you?”

“No.” She hadn’t. Damn it. Damn it all anyway.

She smacked the pot. “Do you know how to work this thing?”

Tristan ignored Sara’s question about the idiotic coffeepot. He shoved his fists into his pockets and frowned. Shannon never missed

work. Not ever. He didn't relish the idea of not seeing her for a whole day. Weekends were bad enough. By Monday he was like an addict with the DTs, finally moving closer to his next score.

"Is she okay?"

Sara fiddled with a knob. Flicked a switch. Punched random buttons in rapid succession.

"Sara? Is she okay?"

"She's fine. It's Bos. He's sick. Barfing all over the place." She tugged out the basket and scowled at the grounds before slapping it back into place with a grunt.

Ah. Bosco. Tristan frowned at

the reminder of Shannon's lover. The douche bag. He was probably a mooching deadbeat partier. "Late night, huh?"

Sara blew out a breath and frowned at the machine. "Yeah. Anyway, she said she can finish editing the quarterlies if someone can bring her laptop."

Hmm. That sparked his interest. Perhaps he might finagle a way to see her today after all. "Where does she live?" God. She'd been working for him for five years and he had no idea.

"Villa Toscana. Off Ventura Boulevard. In Encino."

Tristan stilled. His heart thudded in his throat. "Really?" Villa Toscana was the development just down the hill from his place. They lived so close to each other and he'd never even known. "Huh. Well, that's on the way to my house. I can take it to her."

"Great." Sara seemed relieved. She probably had a hot date tonight and didn't want to waste time wandering all over creation delivering computers to wayward coworkers. Normal people had dates. Or so he'd heard.

He cleared his throat. "If you can get me her address, I can take

care of it.”

“Sure thing.” Sara stood back and placed her hands on her hips, woebegone and perhaps a little desperate. Sara needed coffee like koalas needed eucalyptus.

Tristan glanced at the thing and immediately saw the problem. He picked up the cord and stuck it into the outlet. “You might try plugging it in.” He grinned as he sauntered out of the room, his mood suddenly lifting.

He was going to see Shannon.

He finished the quarterly report in record time, urged on by a demon living in his pants. As soon

as he had a workable draft, he slipped his laptop into its carrier and then slipped Shannon's nearly identical laptop into her nearly identical carrier. He looped them both over his shoulder and headed for the door, beset with curiosity.

What was Shannon's place like? What was she like outside the confines of the office? And why the ever lovin' hell had he never known they were neighbors?

Following Sara's directions—scrawled on a scrap of paper—Tristan made his way to Villa Toscano. Though he'd driven past the development every day on his

way to work and back, he'd never paid it much attention. It was a housing development just like every other housing development in the valley.

As he drove through the streets, he realized the neighborhood was really very nice. The houses were small but modern, with an attractive architecture that was pleasing to the eye. All the homes had nicely landscaped lawns and well-tended greenbelts. Shannon lived on a cul-de-sac on the far end of the development near the canyon. Tristan could see, as he pulled into her driveway, she had a

nice view of the sprawling valley below. Practically the same view he, himself, enjoyed.

Interesting.

He got out of his car and looked up the hill, trying to gauge the location of his house in relation to hers. Could he see her place from his vantage point on top of the hill? He'd never much thought about the houses below, other than to enjoy the panoply of lights in the evening. The prospect that one of those houses was *hers* absorbed him. He wouldn't be able to tell for sure unless he got a gander at the hill from her backyard. Enthralled

by the possibilities, he grabbed her laptop and headed for the front door.

It took a minute or two for her to answer his summons but she finally opened the door, looking adorably flustered and mussed. Her corkscrew curls were all askew and a streak of...something was smeared across her cheek. She stood there with her delectable bow lips agape.

“T-Tristan,” she burred, clearly stunned to see him.

She must have been stunned. She’d totally forgotten to call him Mr. Trillo. That almost made him

smile. Almost.

“Shannon.” He thrust the carrier at her. “I brought your laptop.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

She took the computer from him and they stood there. Staring at each other. For an awkward moment. Or two. She opened her mouth to say something then closed it. He shuffled his feet.

He should go. He really should go.

But he didn't want to.

And then a hideous snuffling and hacking and finally the unmistakable aria of vomitus

echoed from inside the house.

Shannon flushed. "Oh God." She tossed a panicked glance over her shoulder. "Um, come in." She left the door open and rushed back into the living room.

Come in? he thought. *Don't mind if I do.*

Slowly, he stepped over the threshold, noting the attractive art on the walls and the beautiful tile in the entry. He followed Shannon into the living room to hear her scream at a large bulldog perched on an upholstered couch. Heaving.

"No! No! No, Bos!" she bellowed, yanking the dog to the

floor. “Not on the sofa.” She grabbed a newspaper and attempted to shove it under the creature’s mouth as he hacked and gacked in wild spasms.

The dog turned his head to avoid barfing on the newspaper and vomited, rather voluminously, on Tristan’s shoes.

Shannon—calm, controlled, pedantic Shannon—said something mighty profane and Tristan didn’t bother holding back his grin. There was something compelling about seeing her in her home environment. And utterly out of control.

She buried her face in her hands. "I am so sorry, Tristan."

He kicked the worst of the mess onto the newspaper. He should be mad. Hell, he should be furious—those shoes cost him three hundred bucks. But he just couldn't dredge up any anger.

It wasn't her fault her dog liked to barf on men. And she was just so damn cute. Besides, it was extremely gratifying to hear his name on her lips. To know she thought of him as something other than "Mr. Trillo". At least once in a while.

"It's okay."

“Bosco.” She frowned at the snorting, snuffling beast. “You’ve been a very, very bad boy. I should spank you.”

Bosco, for his part, just grinned, tongue lolling maniacally.

Tristan, for his part, was speechless. Two things occurred to him at just that moment. First of all, Bosco, it appeared, was not a muscular, dreamy stud with a cute butt and broad, muscular shoulders. He was a dog. And a dog that snorted.

And secondly, Shannon’s voice, that sultry Southampton purr, burned into his consciousness.

You've been a very, very naughty boy. I should spank you.

Dear God. How he'd love to hear her say those words to him. Not that he was into that kind of stuff—he'd much rather be the one doing the spanking. Especially to her perky, rounded ass. But still. The prospect was mind-blowing. He was going to have to add an instance to his game where his virtual Shannon said just such a thing.

While he ruminated on the prospects, Shannon rushed into the kitchen and grabbed a handful of paper towels. Before he could stop

her, she knelt before him and began cleaning off his shoes.

Tristan went from zero to rock-hard in less than a breath. *Jesus.*

Reflexively, he stepped back, away from such temptation. How easy would it be to lace his fingers through her hair and pull her to his crotch? Easy.

She glanced up at his retreat, bewilderment puckering her features.

He shook his head and crouched beside her, taking the towels from her and mopping ineffectually at his shoes.

“You don’t have to do that,” he

rasped, unable to meet her eyes.

“I am sooo sorry,” she moaned. “After you came all the way over to bring me my laptop. Oh Bosco.” She glared at the dog once more. He’d reclaimed his spot on the sofa and was observing them impassively. At her recrimination, he wagged his nubby tail. Like once.

“It’s okay.” Tristan finished up and cast about for a place to put the soggy towels.

She took them from him and deposited them in the trash in the kitchen. She washed her hands at the sink, gesturing that he do the

same. He did and took the opportunity to survey her home. It was a nice little Rambler with—as he'd suspected—a beautiful view of the valley. He looked across the granite countertop to the sliding glass door on the far side of the living room.

“Nice place,” he said, accepting a fluffy towel to dry his hands.

“Mmm. Yes. I love it here.”

He strolled over to the glass doors and peered into her backyard. Ironwork fencing edged the lawn before a drop-off into the canyon. He angled his gaze up the hill and with a thrill to his solar

plexus saw his own ironwork fencing.

His heart skipped a beat at the realization. He could see her house from his. And he'd never even known. "Nice view."

She slid the door open so they could wander onto the patio. "I love to come out here at night and just stare at the stars."

Tristan set his teeth together. Son of a bitch. That's what he did. What he used to do. From now on he'd be watching her. His insistent erection twitched as he imagined what she might do on this patio at night while watching the stars...

The knot in his belly tightened even more.

He had to get out of here.

“Well...” He shifted from one foot to the other. “I’d better be going.”

Was that disappointment limning her eyes? “Sure. Thanks for bringing my computer and, again, sorry about Bos.”

“No problem. These are old shoes.”

A lie, and they both knew it, but he could tell she appreciated his tact.

She walked him to the door and

held it open for him. "I'll have the quarterlies done by tomorrow," she promised.

"Don't stay up all night. Remember, we have the staff meeting at nine." He could have kicked himself for slipping into his usual official persona but it was for the best. Desire rode him hard. It was all he could do to resist the urge to drag her into his arms, knowing they were alone—except for Bosco, who wouldn't be telling anyone—and her bed was just a hallway away.

"I'll have them done."

"Do you think he'll be better by

tomorrow?"

She shot her dog a disgusted look. "No worries. He just got into the pantry and ate an entire summer sausage this morning. He should be all barfed out by tonight."

Tristan couldn't hold back a grin.

"The blighter eats everything he can wrap his mouth around."

His grin faded as visions of Shannon's mouth wrapped around a summer sausage—*his* summer sausage—wafted through his mind. His knees went weak.

"Right then," he said. And

without another word, he sketched a wave and headed for his car.

He knew it was rude and he could tell his cold departure hurt her feelings but he just couldn't help it. Another second in her presence—preternaturally aware of her disheveled hair and casual attire, her soft come-hither expression—and he would be tossing her over his shoulder and heading for that bed.

Damn, he thought as he angled his car toward his house—which overlooked hers. His life had just gotten a hell of a lot more complicated.

Shannon knew, the instant she slipped the computer out of the carrying case, it wasn't hers. Her laptop had a neon-pink smiley face sticker on the top.

This computer was Tristan's.

A sudden thrill washed through her.

Now, she'd had access to Tristan's computer before. As his assistant she was often called upon to upload files and organize documents. But she'd never had an opportunity to study his, um, hard drive at length. In private.

In the office, she would never

dream of doing what she was about to do.

Driven by an overwhelming urge, she shoved her conscience aside and clicked on his Virtual Life icon, nestled in the corner of the screen. This was a chance to peek at Tristan's secret self and she couldn't let it pass her by. It was wrong to do it and she knew it was wrong but her fingers just kept moving. This was a chance to find out more about him, to learn things she would never discover otherwise. She just couldn't resist.

The program booted up and she quickly reviewed his history, noting

he had developed a couple sci-fi instances—where he got to play the captain of an interstellar freighter or survive after being marooned on a dead moon—as well as several fantasy football scenarios. But the one that piqued her interest was the scenario simply named *the Office*.

It sounded innocuous enough, especially for a man obsessed with his work, but what captured her attention was the frequency with which he'd run this instance. He'd played it daily—every day, in fact, for the last two months—practically since the program had been

installed. Every day, including weekends and holidays. No one was that obsessed with their work. Were they?

She clicked on the icon and a password request flashed onto the screen.

Her heart leapt and then settled into a low throb. As far as she knew, the only instances requiring passwords in the game were Jack's illicit Green Door scenarios. She swallowed heavily and stared at the screen.

Tristan Trillo had designed Green Door scenarios. Dear heavens. He had, virtually,

uploaded his sexual fantasies into the game. She shifted restlessly as a sudden dampness washed through her. It occurred to her she could, here and now, discover his deepest, darkest desires.

Dare she?

Why, yes—she grinned to herself—she did.

She typed his all-access password into the box and flinched when it was rejected. Damn. Clearly this was something he wanted no one to have access to.

Of course this only fueled her determination and she spent the next half hour typing in potential

passwords. His birthdate. Adam's birthdate. His mother's maiden name. The name of his childhood dog. His last girlfriend. His favorite brand of ice cream. The first and last names of every employee. And then, finally, she typed *her* name.

Her heart stuttered when that last attempt opened the doors to his fantasy world.

She held her breath as the curtain rose on the scene.

Tristan sat at his desk, working as he always did. The door opened and a tawdry version of her—dressed rather like a whore—entered the room. There was some

cheesy byplay but it all ended with her on her knees, taking him into her mouth and...dear God.

Shannon sat back and gaped at the screen, shaking.

It was unbelievable. It was gripping. It was fan-fucking-tastic.

Tristan Trillo fantasized about her. *Her!*

And—she quickly checked his history again—he had done so today! Twice!

As alluring as this prospect was, a much more fascinating realization possessed her. This was but one of twenty or so scenarios stored in his private archives. With mounting

excitement, she scanned the other offerings, making a note of each scenario and its frequency. And she noticed several rather captivating trends.

First of all, all the sexy scenarios—all of them—featured a mildly altered rendition of Shannon. Not one other woman. Not Kat or Jenny or Sara. Not even Angelina Jolie. Not anyone else.

Second of all, Tristan Trillo had a kinky side. She would never have expected it.

Her heart stuttered at a scene entitled *Bad Girl*, which involved a delectable spanking. It made her

entire body warm as the girl on the screen—the girl with decidedly familiar features—bent over Tristan's lap to receive a well-deserved paddling. In another scene, she was tied up to receive his greedy attention and in yet another she featured as a stripper, giving him a lascivious lap dance.

Stunned and more than a little aroused, Shannon wandered out to her patio and glanced up the hill at the darkened house perched on its crest, wondering where he was. What he was doing. Was he thinking about her right now?

She sat on the lounge in the

shadows and slipped her hand under the band of her yoga pants and let her fingers drift slowly over her engorged clit as she reflected on Tristan Trillo and his naughty little fantasies. How annoying to know that all this time she'd been sitting at her desk, lusting after him, thinking he was utterly uninterested. And all the while he'd been his office pretending to work, ogling lurid images of her on a computer screen and fantasizing about her mouth on his cock.

How much time had they wasted?

Tomorrow, she resolved, a new

reign would begin.

She hoped he would survive.

Up the hill, in the house perched on its crest, Tristan Trillo sat on his sofa in the dark, staring at the computer screen, a frown on his face. His fingers hovered over the touch pad as his inner demons battled. On the one hand, it would be harmless to take a peek at Shannon's Virtual Life. Really, what manner of mischief could a woman like Shannon wreak?

Virtual Shannon goes to the library and borrows a book, returning it on time, of course?

Virtual Shannon goes to the spa? Shopping at the mall? She certainly didn't have any scenarios like his. She didn't even know about the Green Door program. How could she? He'd told Jack to keep it secret, after all.

It would, doubtless, be ungodly dull.

What harm could it do?

But on the other hand, snooping around on her hard drive was an invasion of privacy.

Guilt racked him but curiosity and that driving mania to know more about her drove him harder. He would only look a little. A brief

gander. For a minute. He grimaced and clicked the icon and the Virtual Life program flooded the screen.

He scanned her history and noticed one of her scenarios was much more popular than the others. It was named only by the letters TT. He frowned and clicked on the icon and then blanched when the password prompt appeared.

Stunned, he stared at the message as though he'd never seen such a thing before.

Holy crap. Shannon had accessed the Green Door.

His cock and balls tightened.

It could mean only one thing. Shannon's sexual fantasies were stored here, on this computer. At his fingertips. He shuddered uncontrollably at the thought.

While he was certain her fantasies would be tame and naive—holding hands over a chocolate shake, perhaps—he was desperate to know. And the knowledge was only a password away. He immediately started typing in the usual passwords—birthday, SSN, mother's maiden name—all of which were rejected. What else did people use as passwords? Pet's name! With certainty, he typed in

“bosco” but that was also denied. He glared at the screen, at the instance name, and an overwhelming certainty gripped him. Slowly, he typed in *his* name.

The instance opened.

He choked on his own breath.

Holy. Crap.

Even as the ramifications of the password she’d used flooded him, the instance began to play out on the screen and Tristan was forced to reevaluate everything he’d ever known about Shannon Weiss.

Prim and demure. The fucking hell.

The scene opened on a room, empty save a single chair. There was a man in the chair and he looked remarkably like Tristan.

And he was naked.

And he was tied to the chair.

Tied to the chair!

Lust, like a wildfire, licked through his gut as he anticipated what was about to happen.

The door opened and a woman entered—Shannon, but unlike any Shannon he'd ever imagined. This Shannon was a siren, a seductress. She was dressed in a tight vinyl catsuit with stiletto boots and a studded collar cinched tightly

around her neck. And she carried a riding crop. She walked to the chair and stood before it, legs spread wide, hands fisted on her hips.

She gifted him with a wide, knowing smile and purred, “Are you ready for this?”

Virtual Tristan—apparently a little more obedient than the real Tristan—responded, “Yes Mistress.”

“Umm. Good boy.” She traced the curve of his cheek with the crop, letting it rest on his lips. “Open.” Virtual Tristan parted his lips and Virtual Shannon slipped the tip of the leather crop into his mouth. “Now suck it,” she said.

Tristan — real Tristan — nearly
whimpered. Not because the scene
was his cup of tea but because it
was hers. He'd always seen
Shannon as reserved and aloof. To
know she had a wild side that was
this...wild...made him want to
march down the hill and pound on
her door. And then bend her over
the sofa and pound into her.

His cock was close to bursting
but he didn't succumb to the desire
to stroke it, because he knew what
would happen and he wanted to
finish the scene. He wanted to
know what made her hum. What
made her moan. What made her

come.

Virtual Shannon rubbed the crop across poor Virtual Tristan's lips. "Do you want to suck on something else?"

"Yes Mistress."

Gads. The guy was a pussy. If he had Shannon dressed in a getup like that, in a room, alone, he'd be all over her by now. Hell, he'd be inside her by now. Tied to a chair or not.

His jaw dropped as Virtual Shannon unzipped her virtual catsuit to reveal two virtual breasts. She stepped closer to her slave and grabbed a handful of hair, directing

his head to one hard, throbbing nipple. And yes, the nipple *throbbed*. For a second Tristan wondered how Shannon had achieved the effect but all reflections of her computer prowess vanished when she threw back her head and moaned.

Virtual Tristan was doing himself proud as he sucked the nipple roughly into his mouth. His jaws undulated with the effort.

“Yes,” she hissed. “Harder.”

As this byplay continued, Tristan wished he could fast-forward through the action. What he really wanted was the main

event, where Virtual Tristan put his virtual dick into Shannon's hot, wet pussy. But the program didn't have a fast-forward option.

He'd have to talk to Jack about that in the morning.

So he sat there and watched as poor, immobile Virtual Tristan sat tied to the chair and pleasured Virtual Shannon with his mouth, which to Tristan seemed like a damn waste of potential.

Maybe Shannon had control issues in bed. *Hmm*. He stored that nugget away for future reference before he recalled, with a cold dash of reality, there was no future for

them.

This was as good as it could get.

The realization made him cranky so he glared at the screen, but just then things started to get interesting. Virtual Shannon had decided to strip. She poured out of the slinky catsuit and boots and stood before Virtual Tristan utterly naked but for the collar around her neck.

What a vision.

Tristan swallowed his drool and allowed his fingers to drift over his crotch. He stroked his hard cock, but gently, because he was already tightening with the need to come

and he really wanted to get to the good part first.

And yikes. Here was the good part.

Virtual Shannon took Virtual Tristan's cock in her hand and stroked. And there's where fantasy veered far from reality. Virtual Tristan merely moaned. Real Tristan would have bucked and cursed and come right then and there. But Virtual Tristan didn't come. He merely moaned quiescently.

"Umm." The seductress stepped closer. "Do you like that?"

"Yes Mistress."

“Would you like some more?”

“Yes Mistress.”

Really? Was that all this guy could say? How about, “Give it to me, honey. Fuck me with your hand. Make me come”? Better yet, “Untie me, princess, and let me show you how a real man fucks a woman in a dog collar.”

But apparently Virtual Shannon was satisfied with the reply, for she smiled and rewarded him with another stroke. And then she went down on her knees.

Tristan perked right up, suddenly very interested. She bent her head and took him in her

mouth, moaning as he slid into her, inch by inch, by inch. By inch.

Shannon apparently had a very healthy imagination, at least regarding the size of a man's member. Tristan bit back a grin. She must think he was some kind of freak of nature.

His grin faded and his balls tightened as Virtual Shannon stood and placed her hand on Virtual Tristan's shoulder, straddling the chair. "Do you want it?" she whispered in his ear.

"Yes Mistress." What else would he say? Hell, even *real* Tristan would utter those words if they

would get Shannon to lower her hot cunt onto his aching cock.

And she did—well, virtually.

Saliva pooled in his mouth as Virtual Shannon impaled herself on the waiting cock and rode herself to orgasm.

They came together—the three of them. As her moans and groans, her fevered movements, became inevitably more wild and frantic, Tristan couldn't stop himself from stroking his cock, faster, harder, as desperate and feral as the woman on the screen. At the last moment, he had the presence of mind not to shoot his wad all over her laptop,

but just barely. He released his passion into a quickly grabbed tissue and collapsed on the sofa, too drained to even contemplate the secrets he'd just learned about a woman he thought he knew.

Chapter Three

Shannon was already at her desk when Tristan arrived in the office the next morning, dressed demurely and sitting straight-backed in her task chair, shuffling through some papers.

“Good morning, Mr. Trillo.” She didn’t so much as glance up as he approached. He tried not to let it annoy him.

How could she look so reserved,

so modest and detached, when last night a scene of her making had whipped him into a mindless frenzy? What depths bubbled beneath that cool British exterior? What would it be like to explore...

Harshly, he yanked his wandering mind from the question and strengthened his resolve to resist her allure. He'd castigated himself most of the night for his lapse, in between sessions of madly jerking off. He should never have opened her laptop. Once he'd realized the mistake, he should have driven back to her house and switched machines.

But he hadn't and now he would burn for it. Every time he saw her, he would burn. Because now he knew the truth.

"Here," he said without preamble, shoving her laptop into her hands. "I gave you mine by mistake."

"Yes, Mr. Trillo." She offered a small, impersonal smile. "I noticed. I put yours on your desk."

"Oh. Um. Thanks." He stood there, not sure what to say, not sure it would be wise to say anything, and then he blurted, "Were you able to finish the quarterlies?"

Their gazes met. Her eyes were

wide and thickly fringed with dark lashes. He wanted to sink into them. She appeared slightly amused but her response was as prim and professional as usual. "Yes. I finished the edits and printed out copies for the staff meeting."

"Okay. Good." Still he lingered, loath to leave. For some reason. "Did you make the coffee?"

She dipped her head to hide it but her amusement was now utterly undeniable. "Yes, Mr. Trillo," she said like a schoolgirl reciting a classroom welcome, and he cringed.

In five years, Shannon had never once failed to make coffee before a staff meeting. It had been a stupid question, a question designed to prolong this interaction. Which was, in itself, stupid. Stupid with a hint of desperate.

But he didn't want to go into his office and stare at her through the blinds.

He wanted to stare at her from right here. The view was better.

"Can I get you some?"

Tristan blinked. "Huh? What?"

Shannon glanced at him from beneath those extraordinarily long,

thick lashes. "Coffee." The hint of a pink tongue dabbed at her lush lips. "Can I get you some coffee?"

Hell. If he didn't know better, he would think she was flirting. But that was nuts. No. This impression was nothing but a delusional backlash from last night's revelations. Now that he knew the truth about her steamy side, his horny subconscious would likely invest every casual word, each indifferent action, with lurid sexual underpinnings.

"No. Thanks." He shifted from foot to foot. "I have to go into my office now," he said. "And work."

Her lips twitched, a tiny, knowing smile. "Of course."

He knew he was acting like a doofus but he couldn't help it. At the moment, he *was* a doofus. He stormed into his office and with a brutal twist of his wrist closed the blinds. The last thing he needed was to watch her sitting there all day long. Looking so damn sexy.

He watched her, sitting there next to him at the conference table, looking so damn sexy, and tried like hell to control his raging hard-on. Thank God Jack Maris was the one giving the bulk of today's

presentations. Tristan had only been responsible for the quarterly update and he hadn't had to stand for that. Thank God. Not even a blind man could miss his hard-on if he stood right now. Hell, he'd probably knock the blind man over with it if he got too close.

So instead he sat there, ignoring Jack's presentation, and fantasized about Shannon bending over the conference table wearing nothing but a dog collar and vinyl boots.

It was torture. Sheer torture.

But he couldn't stop.

He couldn't stop thinking about the scenario that had sent him to

the moon last night, or the others he'd found once he'd recuperated from the most draining orgasm of his life. Visions of Shannon seducing him at a grocery store and fucking him silly on a tropical beach and giving him head as he piloted a spacecraft through the Crab Nebula danced through his head. And more.

What was worse, her fantasies had fired more of his. He would need a month online to create all the scenarios crowding his mind.

She crowded his mind. He wondered if he would ever be able to concentrate on work again.

It dawned on him that Jack had finished talking and everyone was staring at Tristan, waiting. He cleared his throat and glanced around the room. Having no clue what had just transpired, he said what he always said at the end of one of Jack's presentations. "Thank you, Jack. Adam, do you have anything to add?"

Adam frowned at him and cleared his throat. "Yes, Jack's presentation was very thorough. We certainly appreciate all your support in beta testing the Virtual Life program. Sara, would you like to talk a little about the marketing

plan?"

"Sure...Adam." With a quick, curious look in Tristan's direction, Sara stood and began to outline the sales points and release dates for the new program. Before long, people turned their attention to her and Tristan was left to the luxury of his private musings. Which returned, of course, to Shannon.

He could smell her, sitting next to him. Her perfume, her shampoo, her body oils, whatever. It was intoxicating. It was alluring. It was distracting. Every time she moved, he got a waft. Like a worm invading his nasal cavity, it

burrowed in deep, became part of him.

She dropped a pencil between them and bent to retrieve it. When she bent over like that, he could see right down her blouse. He could see her dainty breasts cupped in her dainty bra. As she slowly righted herself, he could swear he caught a glimpse of nipple. He almost swallowed his tongue.

He'd made intricate mental notes about every aspect of her being today. He noticed her outfit—a modestly long tweed skirt and decorously buttoned blouse—the style of her hair, the prim set of her

chin, her expressions, the words she uttered. All in an effort to come closer to reconciling the two Shannons. He'd failed miserably. He still couldn't imagine her doing—or even wanting to do—some of the acts he'd seen on the screen last night, but he couldn't quell his rampant imagination.

And as for reminding himself of the reasons why the two of them could never become tangled in an array of limbs on his office carpet with him thrusting into her hot wet canal—well, what a waste of time that had become.

He was now more fascinated

than before.

The meeting, apparently adjourned by Adam, ended while Tristan was mooning over the woman he could never have. When he emerged from his dark ruminations, he was surprised to see everyone except Adam and Shannon had left the room.

“Tristan?” Adam said. “Can I see you for a sec?”

He wiped a hand over his face. He knew that tone. “Sure, Adam.”

“Shannon, can you give us a minute?”

“Absolutely.” She collected her papers. As she stood to leave, her

arms filled with presentation packets, her pencil dropped to the floor once again. "Blast," she muttered and bent to pick it up.

Two things occurred to Tristan at that moment. First of all, Shannon was certainly having a difficult pencil day. She'd dropped several of them in the space of an hour. And second, when she dipped to retrieve her pencil, the slit in the back of her very modest skirt parted until he could see practically all the way up.

He was still gawking, trying to get another delicious glimpse of bare thigh, when she stood and

made her way from the room, closing the door in her wake. Still, after she disappeared from sight he stared...at nothing. He was frozen in place.

“Tristan?” Adam’s sharp tone wrested him out of his stupor. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Huh? What?”

Adam propped his hands on his hips and glared at him. “What. The. Hell. Is Wrong. With. You.”

“Nothing. Why?”

“What was with the quarterlies report? You were like a zombie through the whole thing. Thank God Shannon had handouts so we

could understand what the hell you were babbling about. And during Jack's report? Where were you then? You just stared off into space and didn't even notice when he turned the meeting over to you."

"He did?"

"Yes. He did." Adam rubbed his temple with two fingers. "What the hell is up, dude? Are you sick or something? This isn't like you."

Tristan's impatience flared. "Yeah," he said. "I'm sick." *Sick of being horny.*

But Adam wasn't buying. He looked his brother up and down and frowned. "You're not sick.

You're as healthy as a horse."

"There's just something on my mind." Tristan crossed his arms over his chest.

"You'd better get it off your mind. We have an enormous launch coming up and you need to be on point for it. This is a huge leap for us."

"I know." Tristan didn't mean to snap. But he didn't need anyone telling him how important this program launch was.

"And that's another thing... when did you become such a mean fuck?"

"What?"

“Yeah. Lately, everyone’s complaining that you’re just being a bastard, snarling and snapping and growling. And poor Shannon gets the brunt of it.”

“Has Shannon complained about the way I treat her?” The possibility horrified him.

Adam blinked. “Of course not. Shannon never would. But the others have noticed and mentioned it to Kat. And do you know what else they’ve mentioned to Kat?”

“What?” It was a petulant ejaculation.

“Shannon’s been working on her résumé.”

The bottom fell out of Tristan's world with that one brief statement, that blinding revelation. "What?" Not so petulant now. Appalled was more like it.

Trillo-Maris without Shannon?

There would be no reason to come to work.

Tristan paled. When had that happened? When had his desire to see her superseded his desire to steer his business, craft his fortune? And then he realized the truth. His business was a success. His fortune had been made. But that was all he had in his life, and it was sadly lacking.

“Dude, you’ve got to be nicer to her.”

“She’s not leaving.”

“She’s working on her résumé.”

“She’s *not* leaving.”

“Okay. Okay. I’m just saying. People are talking. You need to fix whatever is wrong or we’re gonna have a full-scale rebellion on our hands. And if Shannon leaves, brother, I am not cleaning up that mess.”

“She’s not leaving.” But Tristan was talking to himself. Adam had already stormed from the room. For good measure, he poked his head back in and hissed, “Just fix it,” and

then disappeared again.

Tristan slumped in his chair. Shannon was thinking about leaving. What a devastating possibility. Despondently, he gathered his papers and his coffee mug and trudged back to his office. Her desk was dismally empty and that only depressed him more. He never liked it when her desk was empty, especially when she could be off somewhere, even now, interviewing.

Interviewing, for Christ's sake! With a snarl, he slammed his door shut and then he winced, remembering he was supposed to

be nicer.

Shit.

He didn't feel very nice.

Not at the moment.

He yanked on the blinds, closing them with a violent snick, wishing it were that easy to shut out the world. He was going to have to talk to Shannon about this and he dreaded it.

He sat at his desk and fingered the lid of his laptop. Now, as always, he felt the overwhelming urge to open it and slip into his Virtual Life, into a place where everything was easy and controlled and ultimately satisfying.

But it was his obsession with Shannon that had caused this problem, had nudged its insistent nose into his work life. The reason he was so surly to her—to everyone—was because he was so damn sexually frustrated all the time. Every day. Pretty much all day.

He needed to figure out a way to let it go, to release the hunger for her—without breaking his rule, of course. There were other reasons he and Shannon couldn't be together but he had to think a bit to remember what they were.

Oh yeah. Her boyfriend. Well, that one no longer applied, now

that he'd met barfing Bosco. But there was one other critical hurdle...

His blood thickened in his veins as he recalled the third and final reason he'd decided he and Shannon could never be. He had, in his ignorance, decided she was way too prim and proper for his tastes. Too genteel and delicate to be fucked by a wild beast like him.

Hah! What a joke.

He knew better now. Now he knew she liked it rough. She liked a man to dominate and she liked to dominate in return. She liked giving blowjobs to enormous

virtual cocks and she liked a little ass play. She even liked toys.

He shuddered and buried his head in his hands.

The only thing standing between Tristan and absolute bliss was his own stupid rule.

Trouble was, he was damned if he broke it and damned if he didn't.

With a swift, angry flick, he opened his laptop and logged on to Virtual Life. The usual scene opened and he fought a flare of mild annoyance at his pathetic hunger. He hated that he needed this, but he did.

He settled back in his seat as the instance opened. He immediately knew something was different. The shock froze him in place. He'd played this instance every day, sometimes more than once, and it was always identical. He'd programmed it like this. But now...

Now when Virtual Shannon walked into the room, she wasn't wearing a tight leather skirt, form-hugging belly shirt and slick leather boots. She was wearing a decorous tweed skirt and...shit! A blouse suspiciously identical to the one Shannon was wearing today.

What the hell?

“You wanted me?” she purred in a throaty voice, as she always did.

“Care to take some...dictation?”

“Of course.”

The instance continued on in its usual cheesy manner but Tristan barely noticed. He was poleaxed. There was only one explanation for the change in the scene.

Last night, Shannon had accessed his Green Door files and made some wardrobe adjustments. He should be furious but how could he be, when he'd hacked her private files as well?

That she knew he'd created an

instance about her gave him pause. He'd had no idea this morning that she'd discovered his dirty little secret. She'd given nothing away.

Technically, she could sue him for all he was worth. Technically, creating a virtual sexual scenario featuring one of one's employees was way, way, way over the line. The fact that she'd done the same—created an instance where he was tied to a chair, for example—was irrelevant. He was the boss. It was incumbent upon him to protect his employees from anyone who would take undue advantage of their position. Even himself.

Especially himself.

What he'd done, dressing her like a trollop and programming her to suck him off like a common whore, had been despicable. A wash of shame flooded him. She wasn't like that. She wasn't. No wonder she'd gone in and changed poor Virtual Shannon's clothes.

Aw hell.

He scrubbed at his jaw with his palm. Could this get any worse?

Apparently it could. A soft knock on the door ripped him from his morose reverie.

"Come." He combed his fingers through his hair in an attempt to

make himself presentable.

“Mr. Trillo?”

It was her. She opened the door a crack and poked her head around. He stared at her, her corkscrew curls and fawn-like eyes, her heart-shaped face and dimpled chin. God help him. Desire and fury stabbed at him, twin blades in his gut.

He willed his passion to calm. He didn't want to screw this up. He really didn't. “Shannon.”

“May I speak with you?”

He sighed heavily. This was it. It was time. “Please. Come in.”

She edged into the room, closed

the door behind her and turned to him, clasping her steno pad before her. He opened his mouth and then closed it, unsure how to begin.

Her tongue, tiny and pink, swept out to dampen her lips and he blurted out the thing hovering at the tip of his brain. "Adam says you're looking for another job."

She flinched. Obviously that wasn't what she'd expected him to say. She cleared her throat and whispered, "Would that please you?"

Please him? Hell, it would kill him. "No!" This, he snarled with such vehemence she stepped back.

He clenched his teeth and forced himself to calm down. "Sorry. I'm just... I don't... I'm not good at this," he finally finished in a huff.

"Good at what?"

He frowned. "Apologies."

She shook her head, bemused. "Apologies? For what?"

He favored her with a meaningful glance. "I think we both know. I went on Virtual Life just now."

A charming blush blossomed on her cheeks. She dropped her gaze. "You don't need to apologize for that." She spoke so softly he almost didn't hear.

“Don’t I?”

“Not unless you expect me to apologize for dropping my pencil in the boardroom or rubbing up against you in the bar.”

He gaped. “That was deliberate?”

Her features suffered a subtle shift and suddenly her expression was anything but demure. “And,” she murmured, “not unless you expect me to apologize for this...”

She sauntered toward him, mimicking the moves of the Shannon in Virtual Life. As she rounded the desk, she tossed her steno pad heedlessly on the floor.

She stood before him, her knees nudging his. When she slipped one slender calf between his legs and edged closer, he almost swallowed his tongue.

His heart beat, pounded, in his cock. He was hard as a rock. But then his pulse stalled, skittered, because she raised her hands to the top button of her blouse and looking him straight in the eye, slowly unfastened one button. And then another.

Tristan shuddered as pure lust sliced through his body. He should stop her. But he couldn't. He couldn't. He wanted this, needed

this.

She spread the lapels of her blouse, revealing her perfect, perky breasts cupped in a sheer coral lace bra. God. She was even more beautiful than he'd imagined.

"Shannon," he rasped, and then he lost all capacity for speech.

Because she knelt before him and placed her palm, so incredibly small and delicate, on his thigh. Her gaze captured his and held it as slowly, insistently, her caress made its way to his crotch.

She touched him.

That slight pressure on his throbbing, bourgeoning cock made

him cross-eyed. With agonizing precision—that took forever—she unfastened his pants and slipped her hand inside the placket. Into the slit of his briefs. She licked her lips as she found his cock—not a difficult task considering its swollen state—and she squeezed gently. Tristan threw back his head at the sensation, the feel of her palm against his throbbing flesh. He arched into her caress.

Part of his mind spun with disbelief that she was here, now, real and warm before him. The other part was excited beyond belief.

Not one of those parts even considered telling her to stop.

With his help, she slipped his cock from its confinement. It sprang free with a vengeance. She stared at it in wonderment. She stroked him from base to head and back again, murmuring with pleasure. She flicked a look at him, a womanly, sultry look that sent pings of delight shooting through his being.

“I want to taste you,” she said in a sweet, soft voice. *God*. Those words, in that accent, made him wild. “Would you like that?”

“Oh yeah,” he murmured. As an

afterthought he added, "But you're not tying me to the chair."

Her brow, that beautiful, elegant, patrician brow, arched as she considered his words, realizing he too had peeked into her fantasies. She murmured, deadpan and dry as the desert, "I was hoping I wouldn't have to."

Her head came down and her mouth engulfed the sensitive tip of his cock. The vision of her lips stretched to accommodate his girth nearly made him come. The sight, the sensation, warred within his mind for dominance. He wasn't sure which he enjoyed the most but

it hardly mattered. It was incredible, any way you sliced it.

He tightened his muscles in an attempt to hold back his impending orgasm, knowing beyond a shadow of a doubt it was a hopeless cause. *God*. When had he ever been so aroused? He was like a schoolboy with his first woman.

Her mouth was a slick, velvet heaven. She rose up on her knees and buried her head in his lap to get a better angle—he was so hard his cock was like an obelisk, long, thick and utterly intractable. She shifted again and eased him deeper. He filled her completely. The head

of his cock nudged the back of her throat. He shivered as her muscles caressed him. The pleasure blinding.

She withdrew—he groaned in dissent—and then took the head of his cock back into the cavern of her mouth, licking, nibbling and sucking in turns at his engorged, heinously sensitive glans. When he was certain he was going to lose his mind at the sheer torture of the sensation, she upped the ante, tightening her lips and sucking even harder. And so she teased him. On and on until he thought, perhaps, he might expire.

He writhed there on the chair, panting and moaning like a dying man as she tormented him incessantly. He wanted so badly to come in her mouth, to grab her head and fuck her like the snarling beast she made him—but he wanted something else more.

He wanted to touch her. Taste her. He wanted to make her come. To watch her and hear her and *smell* her as she climaxed around him. To make her as mad and helpless and weak for him as he was for her.

He pulled her to her feet. As he stood with her, his pants dropped

to the ground and he impatiently kicked them out of the way. They caught on his shoes so he kicked those off as well. He settled her against the desk and cupped her perfect breasts. As his thumbs skated over her hard, distended nipples, she moaned and undulated her hips.

“Do you like that?” he hissed, moving closer, pressing his bobbing cock against her belly, nudging her into the desk and rubbing hard against her.

“Yes, Tristan.” She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and rolled her hips, a hot, horny hunger

limning her expression. It was then Tristan saw it. He saw the point where the two Shannons intersected. She was both—sultry and demure. Seductress and saint.

She was a woman he could love.

The sudden revelation was too difficult to take, too intense, too utterly humbling. It haunted him. But he didn't stop. He couldn't. He was lost now. A dark beast compelled him. He turned her around and bent her over the desk. His hand roved over the swell of her ass and he squeezed a warm, firm globe. She moaned in response and shot a hungry look over her

shoulder. Her eyes flared when his fingers drifted down the line of her skirt and slipped through the slit in the back, skating up her naked thigh to the crux of her being.

What he found there set him on fire.

She was damp—he noticed that right away with a visceral thrust to his gut. Cream coated the skin of her inner thighs, making his approach slick and quick. But there was more. As he tangled with the soft curly hairs—brave sentries protecting the tender flesh of her pussy—he realized, under her prim and proper skirt she was utterly

bare.

His response was feral.

Shannon whimpered as Tristan's caress drifted up her thigh and skated across her clit. She knew the second he realized she wasn't wearing any panties because his body, already hard and throbbing, went rigid. He hissed a sharp invective and lowered his mouth to her ear, nibbling sharply.

"Jesus, Shannon," he growled, madly yanking up the length of her skirt so he could bare her completely to his gaze. "Jesus."

His hand was hot and hard on

her ass. He squeezed it again, this time flesh to flesh. The harsh tug sent sensation rocketing through her, making her clit swell even more.

She'd wanted this for so long. Dreamed of this. Ached for this. How many times had she come to her own touch, imagining it was Tristan's hand upon her?

She was suddenly impatient for him. Wild for him.

As his caress drifted down to dance across her pussy again, she arched back at him, pleading for more.

"Touch me," she begged, and he

complied, edging closer, stroking her slick lips, nudging her engorged clit. Her body tensed with pleasure. "Ah! Yes."

"You're so wet." His voice was hard, hungry.

"You make me wet."

He froze at her words but only for a heartbeat. With a small growl, he drew back, away from her clit, and slipped his fingers deep into her pussy instead.

Shannon whimpered with bliss. The sensation of fullness, of warmth, made her knees buckle.

He was not unmoved either. "Jesus. You're so tight." A slightly

strangled whisper.

She squeezed her muscles around him and he groaned.

God, she wanted him. She had for so long. She could barely believe she was here like this with him. That he was touching her like this. That he was standing behind her, hard and hot. Panting in her ear. She loved it.

But she wanted more.

“Fuck me, Tristan. I want your cock inside me.”

A fierce shudder racked his body. Without a word, he set the tip of his cock to her opening. He pressed in and she winced. He was

enormous. Fat, thick and long—she knew, she'd measured him with her mouth. Thank God he was a moderately patient man. He took her in tiny increments, rubbing her clit and massaging her hard nipples until her muscles opened to allow him more of her.

By the time he was fully seated within her, she was whimpering and sobbing with pleasure. He touched her everywhere, massaged every twitching nerve in her pussy. His heat, his throbbing length, seared her to the core.

“Please,” she moaned. “Please. Please.”

He withdrew and she tried not to clench against him but failed. He growled in response to the sucking sensation and eased back in. It was quicker this time because her body was learning his breadth but the internal friction against her sensitive tissues made her tremble. She could feel the coming orgasm but was helpless to slow or control its onset. By the time he thrust into her for the third time, she was lost, quivering and quaking and moaning as bliss washed through her.

But he wasn't done. Not by a long shot.

After her orgasm, her muscles relaxed and the walls of her pussy became slack. Tristan took full advantage. He started moving a little faster, and faster still until finally he was rocketing in and out of her with wild abandon. She could hear his grunts and groans, his agonized hiss as she came, once again, around him, sucking at his straining cock.

And then she felt something she never expected. His cock, as thick and hard as it was, swelled a little more and stiffened like a pike. His movements became more frantic, more determined. Each thrust was

like a pile driver inside her, nudging at her womb as he neared his climax.

When he came—one hot jetting stream of semen after another—he flooded her canal, filling her with the most amazing sense of contentment she'd ever experienced. Drained, he collapsed on top of her, his cock still wedged within her. She squeezed a little, reflexively perhaps—she couldn't help it, he felt so good inside her—and an aftershock rocked her.

He groaned and angled up and away. His cock slipped out, leaving a wet trail along her inner thigh.

Shannon stood and righted her skirt.

“God, Shannon,” he rasped. “That was phenomenal.”

“It was.” They shared a tangled glance, reflecting on the perfection of their mating.

And then he frowned. He frowned and yanked on his pants with hard, impatient jerks. “But we shouldn’t have. We shouldn’t have.” His expression was bleak, all the way down to his cheekbones. “This can’t happen again.”

Ah. Agony sliced through her as his words hit home but Shannon threw her shoulders back and

stiffened her spine. She disciplined herself to exude calm composure. It wouldn't do for him to know how she felt. Not when his entire being radiated annoyance and regret.

She really hated the regret.

But all she said was, "Of course not." And then she smiled and reached over to help him fasten his pants—his fingers were shaking, after all. It took everything she had in her but when she was done, she gave him a little pat on his forearm and added ever so nonchalantly, "But at least we got it out of our systems."

He froze for a second. Cleared

his throat. Looked around for his shoes. "Yeah," he said. "Out of our systems."

Shannon swallowed the tears burning in her throat. "Right then." It was difficult adopting the staid, stalwart persona he expected of her but she did it. "I'm off to lunch." She glided to the door with what she hoped was enviable aplomb.

But as she exited Tristan's office, she fumed.

We shouldn't have, he'd said. *This can't happen again,* he'd said.

Well, she thought. *We'll just see about that.*

Tristan sat at his desk, staring at the closed door, his mind in a whirl. He couldn't believe he'd just bent Shannon over his desk and fucked her. It was something he'd imagined a thousand times and never expected to experience.

Jesus. It had been infinitely better in real life.

But it had been exceedingly unwise.

Worse than that, it could never happen again.

And even worse, she'd *agreed* with him on that point.

What the hell was up with that?

At least we got it out of our systems, she'd said with a calm, demure — utterly sincere — smile.

Acid burned in his gut. Had she really been that unaffected? Had their amazing encounter not scored her soul? It had his.

At least we got it out of our systems.

What a laugh.

Judging from the sensations still rocking his body as he relived their encounter again and again and again in his mind, he suspected she wasn't out of his system at all. He

just didn't know what he was going to do about it.

Chapter Four

He was still thinking about her when he left for home that evening, though he was determined to put her out of his mind. He failed miserably, of course, as the memories of her sweet mouth and creamy clutches around his cock danced through his brain.

Even though she'd drained him completely, he was still hard most of the day. He tried logging on to

Virtual Life but the instance that had always brought him satisfaction now left him utterly unmoved. It was simply not enough anymore. He'd tasted heaven with her, the real thing, and this pallid, cheesy scene was a pale reflection.

He wanted her hands on him, her mouth around him. He wanted her body pressed up against his, preferably nude. He railed at himself that he hadn't taken more time, hadn't stripped her naked and studied her form at length. He should have savored their encounter, kept her in his office

and taken her again instead of blurting that ridiculous edict right away.

He knew this couldn't happen again and apparently so did she. But he shouldn't have been so blunt about it. So crude.

And she'd agreed so quickly, which gnawed at him. Had she insisted, surely she could have convinced him to perform again. But she hadn't.

That was damn annoying.

Could it be? Was it possible it hadn't been as fantastic for her as it had been for him? He'd been a bull elephant in musth, fucking her like

a mindless beast and shoving her aside as soon as he was done. Not his usual style, to be sure. He usually made it a point to leave women purring and keening for more.

With Shannon there had been no finesse, no seduction, no tender afterplay. With Shannon it had been hard and brutal, direct and to the point. He was, he realized with a flush of mortification, an idiot.

And a jackass.

And a damn prick to boot.

The more he thought about it, the darker his mood became. By the time he reached his house, he was

furious. At himself. At her. At life in general.

He popped open a beer and went to sit on his patio but found himself staring at her house, there in the distance down the hill, and brooding.

Shaking his head in disgust, he returned to his kitchen and opened the fridge, glaring at the contents. Nothing looked good.

In desperation, he went to his laptop, determined to do some work tonight if he could coerce his brain to think about something other than her slender, elegant form, the soft curve of her ass, the

tantalizing tenor of her moans as he thrust his cock deep into her.

He was sitting before his computer, decidedly not working, his mind beset with visions and recriminations, when his email chimed, announcing he had an instant message. He frowned. He didn't want to talk to anyone right now. Maybe not ever. But he clicked over—it could be something important—and he stilled.

The message was from Shannon.

Her private email.

With numb fingers, he opened the message.

Tristan, he read. Are you all right? He snorted in response. I didn't see you this afternoon.

He hesitated before responding, worried what might flow forth if he allowed himself free rein.

Yes, Shannon. I'm fine. How are you?

God. How lame.

Her response floored him.
Horny.

A smile blossomed on his face. So she had enjoyed it. At least a little.

Didn't you get enough in my office? The question was out and

sent before he had a chance to think about it. He shouldn't be flirting with her. He'd ended it, hadn't he?

Her reply wiped the smug smile away.

Not nearly enough.

What? Not nearly enough? Hell.

Didn't you enjoy it? Again, no thought involved, just a raging need to know.

Her immediate response was gratifying. *Umm. I loved it. But I want more.*

His cock twitched but Tristan forced himself to subdue his growing passion. *We can't do that*

again, he typed and hated himself.

I know, she wrote, but I've been thinking...

What?

Perhaps we could try something different.

Something different? What did you have in mind?

Log on to Virtual Life.

Besieged by an odd mixture of curiosity, arousal and trepidation, he did just that. He was surprised to see the group icon, heretofore untested, glowing. He clicked on it and a dropdown menu appeared. There was one choice — *Shannon*.

Interesting. The game had been designed for single players, online community and for private groups. But...

His IM dinged again and he flipped back to read, *Turn on your Voice Over Internet Program*. He did and Shannon's voice rolled over his speakers.

"I thought," she purred, "we could play. Would you like to play the game, Tristan?"

"Shannon?" An insipid question. Of course it was her. "How did you do this?"

She chuckled, deep and low. "I told Jack you wanted to test the

interactive applications and had him enable the functions on our computers.”

Little minx. “When did you do that?”

“This afternoon, while you were hiding.”

“I wasn’t hiding.” But of course it was a lie. He had been hiding.

“Hmm,” she murmured. Her voice rumbled through his being. “At any rate, I thought perhaps we could...explore the possibilities on a virtual platform. Surely that wouldn’t break any rules. It’s practically work.”

He contemplated the idea for a

second, but just barely a second. She must be right. "Okay. What did you have in mind?"

She made a little noise in her throat, the sound of a woman satisfied with a man's response to her overture. "Why don't you select a scenario?"

He clicked over to Virtual Life and reviewed the instance list. In a heartbeat, he realized the available scenarios were his and hers, mingled together. He read the titles, titillated, but couldn't decide.

And then, without a doubt, he knew what he wanted. "You choose." He wanted to know,

needed to know, what sparked her fire.

“All right.” He heard her mouse click. A scenario coalesced on the screen. It was innocuous, at first glance. Virtual Shannon, dressed in a plaid skirt and white blouse, sat on a bench in a hallway. The word *Schoolmaster* was stenciled on the door to her right. Quickly, he checked the name of the instance and his cock leapt to attention. He’d never seen this scenario before. It was new. She’d created it just this afternoon. It was titled *Shannon Has Been a Very Naughty Girl*.

He swallowed the saliva pooling in his mouth.

Before he could move or comment or formulate a coherent thought, Virtual Shannon, in her schoolgirl uniform, stood and walked to the door. She opened it and entered a traditional principal's office. A man sat at the desk—a man who suspiciously resembled Tristan. He looked up as she approached.

“You wanted to see me, Mr. Trillo?” she said in a sweet, innocent voice.

The man at the desk, the virtual Mr. Trillo, just sat and stared, struck

dumb.

Shannon cleared her throat and repeated herself. "You wanted to see me?" And Tristan realized this instance, unlike the others they'd created, was not pre-programmed. They were creating it as they went along.

He said in as stern a voice as he could muster, "Yes, Miss Weiss. You've been very naughty."

The lovely, innocent Miss Weiss clasped her hands behind her back and dropped her head, digging the toe of her shoe into the virtual carpet. "I didn't mean to be naughty. I hope you won't punish

me.”

Dear Jesus in heaven. Tristan shifted as, suddenly, things got very hard for him. “Miss Weiss,” he said, “if I don’t punish you, how will you learn your lesson?”

“I’ll be good.” Yeah. He’d put money on it. “I’ll do anything you say. Just please don’t spank me.” As she said this, Virtual Shannon placed her hands on her ass, rubbing alluringly. “My bottom still stings from the last time.”

“You know—” He swallowed, finding it difficult to form words. “You know you need a spanking.”

“Please, schoolmaster.” She

strolled across the room and knelt in front of him. "I'll do anything to avoid a spanking."

Tristan swallowed the drool pooling in his mouth. "Anything?"

"Yes, *schoolmaster*."

A shaft of lust licked him. He quickly unfastened his jeans and reached for his cock. He wasn't going to be able to take much more of this, he knew it. Yeah, he was weak. But it would be worth it.

"I think a spanking is definitely in order."

"But—"

"No buts!" He bit back a grin at

his unintentional play on words.
“Come here, Miss Weiss.”

She stood slowly and stepped closer.

“Drape yourself over my lap.”

“Please, schoolmaster—” she protested but Tristan could hear her soft gasps over the speakers, along with a slick resonance that assured him her fingers were working as madly as his own.

“Do it.” There was a slight pause and then her character moved as he had commanded. “Skirt up.” And when she complied, “Panties down.”

He heard her whimper over the

line and then, in the blink of an eye, her character was bare-ass naked from the waist down. It was nothing compared to the real thing, the real thing he had fondled so lasciviously in his office that morning, but it was close enough. Because Tristan was imagining the real thing in its place.

“Are you going to spank me now, schoolmaster?” she asked breathily, prompting him, goading him.

“Oh yes.” He frowned at the controls, trying to figure out how to make Mr. Trillo bring his hand down on her ass.

Apparently Shannon had programmed in a macro for that, bless her heart, and the first sharp slap fell. The sound of it echoed through the room and Shannon obligingly cried out with an anguished sob. It shot through him like a fist.

“Please,” she whispered as another smack found its mark. Her sob was wreathed in a moan this time. He could hear the wet noises as her fingers sluiced in and out of her pussy and that made his cock throb. God, how he wished he were in that schoolmaster’s office right now with Shannon draped over his

lap, his hand falling again and again on her soft, pliant flesh.

The ass on the screen slowly turned red. Tristan marveled that she'd taken the time and the effort to program in such a detail. This evidence of her diligence made him even harder.

"Do you like that?" he hissed, his tight fist snaking frantically up and down his cock.

"Yes, Master." Another smack. And another.

"Do you want more?"

"Yes!"

"I want to do this to you in real

life," he panted, his control nearly at an end. "God, Shannon. Do you want my hand on your ass? Is that what you fantasize about when you're sitting at your desk acting all prim and proper?"

"Yes." Her moan was deeper, more resonant. He recognized the timbre. She was close. Very close.

"This is what happens to naughty girls," he said, goaded by that demon, the one crawling about in his loins. He wanted very badly to explode but he wanted to take her with him. "They get their bottoms paddled, don't they? And if they are really naughty, they like

it, don't they, Shannon?"

"Yes, Tristan. Yes." She was shivering, he could hear it in her voice. Her pussy would be quivering and grasping at his cock right now. If he were there. If he were in her. She'd be squeezing and massaging his length and sucking at him with her muscles.

"You'd like it, wouldn't you? You'd like me to smack your ass hard, wouldn't you?"

"Yes."

"And then do you know what I'd do?"

"Ah! W-what, Tristan?"

“Then I’d slip my finger into your pussy and see how wet you are.”

“I’m wet. God. I’m so wet.”

“Are your fingers in your pussy?”

“Yes. God. I want you.”

“I want you too. I want to feel how wet you are for me. I want to rub your clit and suck your tits and make you come. And maybe, just when you’re right there on the edge, begging for it...”

“Yes?”

“Maybe I’ll spank your pussy too.”

She cried out as ecstasy claimed her, sobbing and moaning and crying his name. And that sent him over the edge as well, hurtling after her into pleasure's tight grip.

Still gasping, he returned to sanity. "That was amazing."

"Indeed." He heard the smile in her voice.

"But, Shannon..." He hated himself for being such an ass but it had to be said. "We really can't do this again."

There was only a small pause before she said, in the gentlest voice, "Of course not."

And they wouldn't. He was

certain.

At least, not until the next time.

Chapter Five

“Did you know you and Tristan are practically neighbors?”

Shannon, sitting with her friends in the lunchroom, glanced at Sara, forcing a blank look. “Really?” She tried to infuse an interested lilt in her voice. “I hadn’t a clue.”

Liar.

She knew where Tristan Trillo

lived. She'd always known.

She'd bought a house in that neighborhood on the off chance she might see him in passing on occasion.

She never had.

Not until the other day when he'd shown up at her door.

She dug her spoon into her yogurt and stirred, intently studying the strawberry swirls as though they held the secrets of the universe.

"Yeah. Me either." Sara chatted away obliviously, as Sara often did. "But when he offered to bring you your laptop that day Bosco was

sick, he mentioned it.”

“Really.” Kat’s gaze snapped to Shannon. Kat was the company analyst. She noticed things other people—like Sara—tended to miss. “How interesting.”

Shannon frowned. She recognized the glint in Kat’s eye, a sudden speculative gleam. Now that Kat had found bliss with Adam, she wanted everyone paired up. Couples did that to their single friends. It was like a disease.

She shrugged, slow and deliberate. “It’s not like we’ll be sharing jars of fancy mustard through our kitchen windows.”

“Still.” Sara fluttered her lashes like a teenage girl mooning over a pop idol. “He’s so dreamy. I’d love to have him as a neighbor. I could go over to borrow a cup of sugar, like in my bikini. I could seduce him over gardening tips.”

“He is cute.” Jenny flicked the page of her magazine and twirled her hair with a bored finger. Today her hair was purple. “But you could never seduce Tristan Trillo.”

Sara put out a lip. “I could too.”

“Nope.” Kat drew circles in her yogurt. She was dieting. To fit in the wedding dress. “None of us could. That guy is a fanatic about

his rule. You should have seen his reaction when Adam told him about us." She tut-tutted. "He didn't take it well."

"But surely he's adjusted to the news by now." He had. Hadn't he?

"Hah! He still complains at Sunday dinner when we all get together. He's never mean to me but he always gives Adam a ration of it."

"What does their mom say?"

Kat chuckled. "She just sermonizes about grandkids. She's convinced her sons are deliberately withholding their sperm in an attempt to deny her that one joy."

Sara stilled and fixed her attention on Kat. “Are they? I mean is Adam... Does he...”

“Are you asking me intimate details about my sex life?” Kat asked incredulously.

Sara had the grace to blush. “Maybe a little. I was just wondering if he—”

Kat cut her off with a sharp slash of her hand. “I’m not talking about this.”

“It’s just...I can’t imagine Adam using a condom—”

“Drop it!” Kat growled. “I don’t want you thinking about Adam at all. Certainly not like that.”

“Yeah.” Jenny traced her lips with a black fingernail. “If you have to fantasize about a guy not using a condom, fantasize about someone who’s not engaged to your best friend. Fantasize about Tristan not wearing a condom.”

Shannon’s heart lurched, first of all due to her unaccountable fury at the prospect of Sara—or anyone—thinking about Tristan, with or without a condom. And secondly because, as she recalled their mad, passionate tryst in his office...there had been no condom in evidence.

Now, on the face of it, that didn’t present much of a concern

for Shannon, who was routinely privy to all of Tristan's mail—including his medical results. She knew he had a clean bill of health, just as she knew her records were impeccable. But when her last relationship had ended, some three years ago, her doctor had recommended she switch birth control pills in an attempt to lower her blood pressure. Since she hadn't been getting any anyway, she'd simply stopped taking pills altogether.

Heavens.

"So will there be any grandchildren for Mama Trillo?"

Jenny asked teasingly and Shannon jumped, flushing until she realized the question had been directed at Kat. In a sudden panic, she quickly reviewed her monthly schedule and frowned, trying to remember when her last period had occurred. She relaxed when she worked out that the day in Tristan's office had been on the downside—the least fertile time—of her cycle.

How awful would it be to turn up pregnant with Tristan's child?

And how wonderful.

Still, she vowed to make certain, should they ever have the opportunity to mate again—and

she was determined they would—she would have adequate protection available.

“So?” Jack Maris skewered Tristan with a probing look.

They were in Adam’s office, around the small conference table in the corner, ostensibly going over production estimates from the manufacturer. Tristan was having trouble staying on task.

He frowned at Jack, who had just yanked him from a steamy fantasy featuring Shannon in the shower. “So...what?”

Jack sighed dramatically. “So

how did your little interactive demo turn out last night? How did Virtual Life hold up?"

For a second, panic raced through Tristan's mind, along with the certainty that Jack knew about his virtual tryst with Shannon—that Jack somehow had witnessed everything.

Fury skirled in his gut until he realized if Jack had been referring to Tristan's interaction with Shannon, his tone would have been infinitely more suggestive. His eyebrows would be bobbling and he'd be licking his lips with glee. No. Jack had no way of knowing

how Tristan had used the game last night. Jack was concerned about one thing—his reputation as resident genius.

When Shannon had asked for applications to be loaded on his computer, Jack probably assumed Tristan was checking up on him. Along with being brilliant, Jack was paranoid in the extreme.

Tristan cleared his throat. “It went well. I think we should start a public beta test.”

“Really?” Jack’s eyes lit up and Tristan relaxed. He had effectively thrown the hound off the scent. Dodged, in fact, a virtual bullet. He

would have been hard-pressed to explain what he'd been doing with the program last night, and with whom. And why.

“A public beta test sounds great,” Adam said. “Why don’t you start on that now, Jack?” The command was a patent dismissal and they all knew it. Adam, Jack *and* Tristan. He shot his brother a dark glower, which Adam returned.

Shit.

So much for dodging a bullet.

As soon as Jack left the room and closed the door, Adam lit in. “What the hell was that all about?”

Tristan studiously flicked through the pile of papers before him. "Hmm? What?"

"Come on, Tristan. I know that expression. What exactly have you been up to?"

"Nothing." Tristan glared.

"Okay." Adam folded his arms over his chest. "Tell me about your interactive demo. How did Virtual Life hold up? And what the hell is the deal with running the demo a month ahead of schedule?"

"It was a private demo."

Adam sat back and stared at his brother in stunned silence. "Oh. My. God," he said. "You're getting

cyber-screwed.”

Tristan’s frown darkened. “I don’t want to talk about it. And I don’t need to hear any sermons from you about internet sex.” Adam had spent more than his share of time on the internet trolling for a little bow-chicka-bow-wow. Hell, if it weren’t for the internet, Adam and Kat would probably never have found each other and Adam wouldn’t be getting laid at all.

“Hey. No sermons here. I’m just glad you’re getting your groove on again, even if it is in a virtual world. But I have to mention,

you're still just as cranky." He unleashed an evil-brother grin. "Maybe you should try getting laid for real. Trust me. It's lots better."

"Thanks for the advice." Tristan was glad Adam thought this was all a big joke, that he wasn't going to dig deeper. If he did, there'd be hell to pay. Tristan was the one, after all, who'd made life so difficult for Adam when he and Kat had started seeing each other. It was his rule that had almost destroyed their romance. If Adam even suspected what had happened between Tristan and Shannon, he would make his brother's life miserable.

Just one more reason to make sure nothing else ever happened with Shannon again.

Nothing.

Nada.

Zip.

It was nearly ten that night when Tristan finally broke down and called her. He used the phone because they'd already done the computer thing and he'd insisted *that* couldn't happen again. The phone, for some reason, he could justify.

It took her awhile to pick up,

though he knew she was home. He could see the light streaming softly through her windows as he stood on the bluff overlooking her house.

“Hello?” Her voice was soft, watery. Like she’d been crying.

“Shannon?”

“Tristan.” She whispered his name.

“Are you all right?”

She sniffled. “Yeah. I was just, um, watching a movie. How are you?”

“I’m...good.” It was a lie. He was hungry and antsy and annoyed. “I’ve been thinking about

you.” Like incessantly.

“Have you?” Her sniffles seemed to have cleared up. She stepped out onto the patio, wearing a terrycloth robe, cell phone in hand, and looked up at his house. He sketched a wave.

“Yes. Have you been thinking about me?”

“A little.” He heard the smile in her voice.

“Just a little?”

“Okay. A lot.” She sat on a lounge chair and pulled a blanket over her lower body. It was a cool night and her legs were bare.

“Did you just get out of the shower?” Something started to simmer in his groin.

“The bath.”

He groaned at the vision her words stuck in his head. “Did you have bubbles?”

“Not tonight. But I could do that, if it would interest you. I’d let you watch.”

“Would you?” He liked that idea. He liked it very much. “Did you touch yourself while you were in the bath?”

She chortled. “Of course, Tristan. But do you know what?”

“What?” He was mindless with curiosity.

“I’m touching myself right now.”

“What?” He almost dropped his cell over the cliff. Jesus. There. On the balcony. *Outside.*

“Yeah,” she moaned, deep and low. He swore he could see the undulations inside her robe, under the blanket, a quarter mile away. In the shadows.

“Shannon, Jesus. You’re killing me.”

She didn’t reply but her knees rose to points in the distance as she shifted her body. A random

observer would have no idea the woman relaxing on the lounge was slipping her fingers into her dripping pussy, but Tristan knew. He knew with a visceral jolt to his solar plexus as he heard her groan, the sharp gasps and the tiny little whimpers of pleasure. "Fuck." He squinted in a vain attempt to see her better. There in the dark. A quarter mile away.

"Oh yes. Fuck me." Her voice was like velvet. "I'm so wet for you, Tristan. I've been thinking about your big cock all day and I want you in me sooo bad."

"Do you?" Hell. He wanted that

too. More than fucking anything.

“Mmm. Do you know how hard my little clit is? It’s like a stone. So hard. So fat. It feels so good when I touch it. I wish you could touch it. I wish you could lick it. I wish...”

But Shannon was talking to herself. Tristan had severed the connection and was heading for the door, his car keys and his hard-on making twin bulges in his jeans.

Shannon pulled back the cell phone and stared at it.

Call ended?

She glanced up the hill but

could no longer see Tristan's rangy form leaning against the fence in the moonlight. Whatever had happened? She hoped, quite desperately, that he hadn't fallen into the ravine. She stood and walked to the fence, peering up into the shadows. Nothing. How odd.

Suddenly Bosco began to bark and Shannon turned to scold him. Just then, the doorbell rang and a thrill shot through her. He couldn't be at her door. Could he?

Certainty and arousal drove her and she ran to the door, peeking through the peephole before

throwing the portal wide.

“Tristan,” she said on a gasp, and then she cried out as he swept her into a wild embrace and backed her up against the wall.

His lips came down on hers in a passionate rush and he consumed her like a starving man. He held her still with his body, anchoring her as he nibbled at her, licked her and fucked her mouth with his tongue. At the same time, his hands insinuated themselves inside her robe and roved with illicit intent, molding her breasts, tweaking her nipples and, finally, testing the viscosity between her legs.

When he touched her there, on her throbbing clit, and slipped his fat fingers into her sweltering cavern, she came. She didn't mean to come so quickly but the ravenous longing in his ardent kiss overwhelmed her. A part of her brain, the part still clinging to a capacity for thought, acknowledged that, while they had made passionate love, this was their first kiss. And she came, the first time he kissed her.

The revelation made her come again. Or perhaps it was his mouth, which had traveled down her body and was now worshipping the

bundle of screaming nerves between her legs. He sucked at her clit, nibbling and licking, laving and flicking with his tongue until she was a panting, clutching, snarling creature, lost to sanity, lost to reason.

With that overwhelming orgasm, she slumped to the ground, gaping at him in speechless awe. His gaze, avid and hungry, skated over her. With a resounding groan, he lifted her in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. He tossed her onto the bed and stripped her of her useless robe and flung it to the floor. Impatiently, he yanked at

his belt.

Shannon's body still thrummed with arousal despite her recent bliss. Her body remembered his, recalled how it felt as he slipped in and in, deeper and deeper until his thick length was seated fully within her canal. Her body remembered and lusted for his return.

Enjoying the sight of Tristan Trillo stripping in her bedroom, she trailed her palm over her belly and into her pubic hair, arching as she touched, ever so gently, her throbbing clit.

"Umm." She licked her lips as Tristan kicked off his pants and

briefs and his cock popped free. "In me!" she urged.

He did not tarry. He set one knee on the bed and angled her legs apart, levered over her and slipped in. And...

God, he felt so good.

Shannon arched into him with an irrepressible moan. He was so big, so hard, so filling. She tried to clench her muscles around him but couldn't. He was far too large. But he appreciated the effort. She could tell by the way he grunted, the way the light in his eye caught fire. The way he thrust harder and harder still.

“You feel so good.”

“So do you,” he gasped. “God. I’ve wanted this all day.”

“Me too.” She dug into his flesh with her fingernails and angled her pelvis toward him. Ever accommodating, he slipped deeper. “Yeah. Like that.”

He grunted as an uncontrollable shiver shot through her, resounding through her pussy, through him. “You’re so tight.”

“Harder. Please.”

He complied, shifting his position and beginning a relentless series of thrusts, each harder, deeper and more delicious than the

last. Each nudged her closer to the edge of her sanity. He bent his head and licked her nipple and she groaned. It felt so good, sent shock waves straight to her clit. He did it again and then he took the throbbing crest into his mouth and sucked.

“Do you like that?” he asked between nibbles and nips, though he should know the answer. She whimpered and twitched with delight around him, clutching him, working him. “Do you?” He sucked harder.

“Yes, Tristan. Ah!” Without warning, her orgasm came to her,

whisking her away to a world of sensation. Her entire body spasmed and her mind went blank. She was aware of nothing but the cloud of pleasure transporting her, aware of nothing but the hard, pistoning cock driving her further and further from herself. And then the wave broke. Pleasure, like nothing she'd ever known, crashed down upon her, leaving her shuddering and weeping and utterly serene.

He had come too, during that last clenching surge. He lay beside her panting and replete. While he'd slipped out of her and over to the side, his arms enfolded her, his

fingers clung, desperately, tellingly, to the side of her breast. As though he didn't want to let her go. He didn't want to sever this connection. He didn't want this to end.

She turned her head. His handsome features were slack with contentment. She caressed his cheek. "That was wonderful."

He leaned over to kiss her lips. With his thumbs, he brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not crying."

"Then what's this?" He held up a finger, a glistening drop clinging

to the tip.

She smiled and took his fingertip into her mouth, sucking ever so gently. "That, my good man," she said, "is bliss."

"Stop it. You're making me hard again."

Her lips twitched. "Would that be so horrible?"

"No. But Shannon..." His chuckle was slightly exasperated. "You know we have to stop doing this."

"I know." She nuzzled her nose against the taut skin of his chest. Her breath skated across a nipple and he grunted.

“If anyone at work found out about us, especially Adam, there would be hell to pay.”

“I know.” Her tongue snaked out to nudge an enticing copper disk.

“Stop it,” he whispered through a grin, slapping a hand over his nipple. “Go to sleep.”

“Will you stay?” she asked. She had to.

In response, his caress drifted across the small of her back. Over the dimples on her butt. Down to the sensitive backs of her knees. Then up. Up and up, until he stroked, stoked the heart of her.

Made her gasp and cry out and beg for more.

And she didn't get much sleep at all.

It wasn't until the next morning—as the sun dawned bright and warm and she awoke wrapped in his arms, held tightly, close to his heart—that she realized the box of condoms she'd purchased remained unopened in her dresser drawer.

Chapter Six

“I love that color,” Shannon said, sighing at the flowers on Kat’s desk.

“Which one?” Kat grinned. Her desk was awash in blooms, roses in a panoply of colors.

“The cream.” Shannon gently stroked one exquisite bud with a tentative fingertip.

“I love cream.” Jenny took a bite

from her peach as she flipped through a thick, glossy tome. "Oh," she cooed. "Look at this dress." She wedged her peach between her teeth and flipped the heavy book around so the others could see.

Sara glanced up from the magazine she was perusing. "Lordy. That is divine."

Kat shook her head. "I'd get lost in the ruffles." She waved the magazine away with an insistent hand. "Look for something simpler."

"It's your wedding day, for heaven's sake. You should be a princess."

“She already is a princess,” a deep, seductive voice purred. Every female gaze turned to Adam Trillo with deep appreciation. He was yummy. He prowled into Kat’s office, an undeniably male counterpoint to the veritable florist shop filling the room.

“Aw.” Jenny batted her be-glittered eyelashes. “Isn’t that sweet?”

“Darling.” Adam took Kat in his arms for a long, probing kiss.

A very long, probing kiss.

Shannon, Jenny and Sara watched for a minute but looked away when the kiss continued.

And continued.

Sara tipped back her head and studied the ceiling, pursing her lips to whistle a tuneless refrain.

Still the kiss continued.

When Adam finally surfaced, Kat was flushed and breathless. Beautiful. Happy.

Shannon tried not to let her jealousy rise. Kat and Adam were getting married, after all. And they deserved their happiness. It wasn't their fault Shannon's love life was somewhat less than perfect.

Oh, no doubt, her interludes with Tristan were perfect, or as close as a human being could come

without expiring on the spot. But great sex did not a perfect love life make. His insistence—after each encounter—that it couldn't happen again was starting to wear on her patience.

Sure, she'd been able to lure him back, using one seductive tactic or another. But a woman got tired of being the aggressor every time. A woman got tired of launching the chase. A woman wanted a man to pursue her. Once in a while.

But that wasn't going to happen.

Tristan wasn't going to bend on his rule—at least, he wouldn't bend it any more than he already had.

He certainly wasn't about to slip into a permanent relationship with her. He wasn't even willing to make their relationship public.

He wasn't even willing to tell his own *brother* about their affair. That in itself was tremendously significant because Tristan told Adam everything.

Shannon fondled the lovely cream rose, absorbed with its velvety texture and sweet smell. She tried to ignore Adam and Kat's byplay and tried not to envy her friend the love she'd found. But most of all, she tried not to cry.

Crying was foolish. She knew

what she was getting into when she seduced Tristan in the first place. Just because she'd decided she wanted more than mind-boggling sex didn't mean he was obliged to comply. She was being decidedly foolish to even expect him to want the same.

But she did.

"Did you get your dress for tonight?" Adam asked Kat, drawing Shannon's attention from her morose reverie. Kat had regaled them all on their plans for tonight. They were going to a party at a beachside restaurant in Malibu.

"Yes." Kat leaned into Adam

and wrapped her arms around his neck. They were so in love. It was too much to bear. Shannon desperately wanted to leave but didn't want to be rude. "It's skimpy and it's black."

"Mmm." Adam nibbled Kat's neck. "I love it!"

Kat laughed. "I knew you would." She adjusted Adam's collar, though it was perfect. "Who's Tristan's date again?"

Shannon's attention sharpened, as did the dagger through her heart.

"Tristan has a date?" Sara gaped. "Who?"

Adam had discovered Kat's earlobe. "What? Oh. Tandy Larsen."

Tandy Larsen. Shannon's stomach plummeted. She'd thought for certain Tristan had ended it with Tandy. Months ago.

Yes. She was definitely going to cry.

"Dear me," she said, pretending to glance at her watch and hoping to heaven no one noticed she wasn't actually wearing one. "Is that the time? I've got to get back to work. You two have fun tonight." This, she threw over her shoulder. She had already left the room.

Adam stepped out of the way to let Shannon depart in an all-fired rush to get back to work—how like her. He turned back to Sara and said with an evil smile, “Tristan’s going with Tandy. He just doesn’t know it yet.”

“He doesn’t know who his date is?” Jenny’s face scrunched up in a bemused moue.

Kat grinned. “He thinks he’s just going to a friend’s birthday party.”

“But Kat and I figured he needed something a little more stimulating.”

“So we set him up on a date.”

Adam leaned forward and whispered, "With a woman."

"So...you set up a date with his ex?" Sara lifted a dubious brow.

"One of his exes."

"His favorite."

Sara snorted. "There's a reason exes are exes."

"Dang." Jenny put out a lip. "I wish you'd picked me. I'd love to go on a date with Tristan. Even with you two along."

"Jenny," Adam chortled, "even I wouldn't do that to my brother."

A date.

Tristan had a date.

Shannon sat at her desk and determinedly fixed her attention on her computer, though she saw nothing through the blur of her tears.

She should have known. She should have suspected. She should have...

What?

She'd wanted him and she'd taken him. He'd told her all along their relationship was little more than a one-fuck stand. It was not something he was interested in pursuing.

She should have listened.

With a heavy sigh, Shannon closed her laptop and gathered her things. It wasn't time to go home but it was Friday and she was tired and she really didn't care much if anyone needed her for anything.

Besides, she desperately needed to be alone to think this through. She had to get to a place where she could survive this thing with Tristan, where she was comfortable mentally, physically and, most importantly, emotionally. That she'd been devastated to learn he had a date tonight should be a huge red flag.

The robot would be flailing its

arms and bellowing, “Danger, Will Robinson. Danger. Danger.”

They’d never made any promises to each other—he certainly never had. There was no agreement or understanding, certainly no talk of monogamy. She had no right to be jealous. She had no call to be hurt.

They had screwed.

Several times.

That was it.

And it wasn’t much.

But it felt like so much more—to her, at least.

She just needed to remember

that most of what had happened with Tristan had happened in the privacy of her own mind. He certainly didn't share her fascination. She was nothing more to him than a fuck buddy—a fuck buddy who happened to work for him. He had no claim on her and she had no claim on him.

If only she could remember that.

“Have you seen Shannon?” Tristan asked, poking his head into Adam's office later that afternoon.

“Nope.” Adam turned the page on the document he was studying, a clear and unsuccessful attempt to

dismiss this interruption. "Not for a while."

"Her desk is cleared off and her laptop is gone. It looks like she left for the day."

Adam shrugged but Tristan could tell it was a halfhearted effort. "No clue. If you need her," he suggested, "why don't you call her?"

Tristan shifted from one foot to the other. "She's not answering her cell."

Adam grunted and returned his attention to his work. As though he didn't care. Or something.

Kat entered the room, carrying

two garment bags over her shoulder. *That* caught Adam's attention.

Before they could get all gooey —and Tristan could tell they were about to start kissing again—he threw out his burning question. “Hey, Kat, have you seen Shannon?”

“No.” She handed one of the bags to each of the brothers.

Tristan took the bag with a frown. “What's this?”

Adam grinned. “I told you he'd forget.”

“Technically, I didn't argue the point. This party has nothing to do

with work, after all.” Kat playfully patted Tristan’s cheek.

“What party?” Tristan unzipped the garment bag. “Hell. It’s formal?”

“Levin’s birthday?”

“Shit.” He’d forgotten. Completely.

“Don’t worry,” Kat said. “I picked up a gift from you.”

“You did? What’d I get him?”

“A GPS device-thingy from that fancy-schmancy device-thingy store.”

“Wow. That was nice of me. She’s a keeper,” he whispered to

Adam in an aside.

“No kidding.” Adam draped his garment bag over the chair and pulled Kat into his arms. “It’s nice having someone around to do things for you. And to do things *to* you!”

Kat cuddled closer with an impish, knowing grin. “It’s nice to have someone to warm your feet at night.”

Adam shuddered. “You need to quit doing that. You almost gave me a heart attack last night.”

“My feet are not that cold.”

“I beg to differ.”

“Adam Alan Trillo...”

Tristan sighed. Clearly they could be having this conversation for a while and he really wasn't in the mood to listen, so he interrupted. “So have either of you seen Shannon?”

Adam and Kat turned and stared at him.

“Well, have you?”

“You already asked us.”

“Did I?”

“Yes,” Adam said. “And if her desk is cleared off and her computer is gone...call me crazy but I'm thinking she went home

early.”

“Shannon doesn’t go home early.” Dear God, was his voice really that petulant? Hell. He *felt* petulant.

“Maybe something came up.” Kat pulled out her cell phone. “Let me call.”

Before Tristan could murmur plaintively, “She’s not answering her cell,” she was answering her cell. For Kat.

“Hey, Shannon. Kat Hart.” Kat flashed a thumbs-up at Tristan. “I’ve got her,” she said. “Yeah. Shan, Tristan was wondering where you are. Oh. Uh huh. I see.

Okay. Have a good weekend. Sure. Okay."

Tristan started to fidget, impatient for the conversation to end. How could women talk so much and fail to get to the point already?

"I know. Totally. Huh? What? Yeah. We will. Okay. Bye."

As Kat flipped her cell phone shut, Tristan realized he'd been holding his breath. He let it gust out in a heavy rush.

"Well?" he snapped, even before the phone was completely closed. "Where is she?"

"She had to leave early." Kat

flashed a smile at Adam. "She told us to have fun at the party."

"Is she okay? Is she sick or is something wrong with Bosco?"

Kat tipped her head to the side and studied him, then shook her head. "No. She just had to go."

"But she didn't say anything..." Muttering to himself, Tristan shuffled out of Adam's office.

"Hey," Adam called after him. "Be ready to go at five. We have to drive to Malibu and there'll be traffic."

Tristan frowned. "I don't want to go to the party." He wanted to go to Shannon. He should probably

talk to her about last night. And tonight, maybe.

“You have to go to the party!” Kat, for some reason, looked horrified.

“Why?”

Adam shrugged. “It’s Levin’s party.”

“You met him first. *You* go.”

“You have to go,” Adam insisted.

“Why?”

They exchanged a glance then, his brother and his best-analyst-turned-fiancée. It was one of those lover-ly looks that meant they were

communicating without words.

And they were probably talking about him.

Tristan was learning to hate those looks.

Kat twined her fingers together and shot him an innocent smile. She even batted her eyelashes, the witch. "Because you have a date."

Aw shit. "I have a what?"

"A date." Adam stepped between Tristan and Kat. Really? His tone hadn't been that sharp. "We decided it would do you good to go out with an actual woman."

A woman? One woman popped

into his mind. Only one. His heart lifted and his lips curled. Had Shannon gone home early because she had to prepare for a date with him? Now there was an interesting prospect.

Suddenly an evening at the beach dressed up in a monkey suit didn't sound so annoying. It sounded intriguing. "What woman?"

His brother's mischievous grin boded well for his hopes but then Adam opened his mouth and said the most hideous thing Tristan could ever have imagined. "Tandy Larsen."

His heart, his belly and his mood dropped sharply. “Tandy? You’ve got to be shitting me. We broke up years ago.” And it hadn’t gone well.

“It was nine months ago. She thought the date was a great idea.”

“Yeah,” Tristan muttered. “She would.”

It’d taken him forever to let her down easy. And now he had to start all over again. Convincing Tandy Larsen he wasn’t in the market for a girlfriend—at least one named Tandy Larsen—was the last thing he wanted to be doing tonight.

He wanted, very badly, to talk to Shannon and see how she was doing. Then maybe hold her again and kiss her again. And maybe try that thing with the peanut butter again. He'd really liked that. Really.

Apparently Shannon had a thing for peanut butter.

Damn. He probably wouldn't get back from the party until ten or eleven. Or later, if Kat and Adam wanted to stay. Would that be too late to show up on Shannon's doorstep?

He headed back to his office in a foul mood and punched her number into his cell but she didn't

answer. For some reason she still wasn't picking up. For him. His dismal mood darkened even more.

After he left, Adam shot Kat a curious look. "Did any of that seem a little odd to you?"

She tapped her lips thoughtfully. "Apparently we picked the wrong woman as his date."

Chapter Seven

Tristan didn't see Shannon all weekend, even though he went by her place several times and banged on the door and called her on the phone and even reconnoitered her patio through binoculars like a pervert stalker.

Nothing. Not a glimpse. It was as though she'd disappeared from the face of the earth.

And all the while, he burned.

He could think of little other than her expression as he buried himself in her body, the way she'd felt wrapped around him. He wanted her with a passion he'd never experienced before. But it wasn't only her body he desired. He missed her company as well. He'd have a thought and turn to share it with her but he'd be alone. Or he'd fix a meal and realize, for some reason, he'd made up two plates.

He was infatuated with Shannon. Everything about her haunted him—her mop of curls, her expressive eyes and her rosebud

mouth. She talked a little in her sleep, he remembered, just little mumbles and moans, with the occasional “Tristan” thrown in. And she snorted when she laughed sometimes—a dainty little snort but endearing for all that.

This preoccupation with her should have annoyed him, would have annoyed him, say a week ago, but oddly it didn't.

It felt...right.

His phone rang several times over the weekend and he rushed to answer it, only to find the person on the other end of the line was not someone he wanted to talk to. Not

the gentleman with a wonderful offer from a Nigerian banker. Not Adam, who called to remind him to bring wine for their Sunday dinner with Mom. And certainly not Tandy Larsen, who called to announce she was ready to accept his apology for breaking up with her in the first place.

At one point in his life, Tristan had had the patience to deal with Tandy's histrionics—he'd even thought her tantrums and scenes were cute—but not anymore. Not even the prospect of hot make-up sex could intrigue him. At least, not hot make-up sex with Tandy.

Their “date” had been miserable —although it had served to validate his decision to end it with her. She’d been clingy and flirty and had patently ignored his every gentle rebuff. And then, when he’d come right out and told her he just wasn’t interested, she’d dropped to the ground in a fit of the vapors.

In retrospect, he realized she’d probably expected him to catch her.

He remembered what a drama queen Tandy had been. How exhausting Tandy had been. And then he thought of Shannon—calm and prosaic, even when he’d announced there would be no more

screwing around like horny little bunnies. She hadn't accepted his decrees but there had been no tantrums, no tears, no fits of the vapors. She'd just calmly, quietly seduced him—again and again. And again. Using only her wits and an inscrutable feminine understanding of his deepest desires, she'd made him want her beyond reason.

And he wanted her still.

But she wasn't around. Not at all.

By Monday he was in a certifiable snit.

He went in early because he wanted to be sitting there, in his office, when she arrived. He wanted to grab her right off the bat and interrogate her about where she'd been all weekend. Hell, she hadn't come home at all. He'd spent two whole days vacillating between worry and anger. Oh yeah. And lust.

When she finally arrived, she brought protection. Smart girl. She probably knew how furious he'd be, so she walked into the office with her female posse—Kat and Jenny and Sara. They marched, in formation, through the front doors,

down the hall and straight into the lunchroom.

Tristan frowned and stood, barely biting back a growl. He didn't want to wait for her to make coffee and small talk with the "girls". He didn't want to wait until they had shared all the details of their weekend, each minute facet of every TV show or movie they'd seen since Friday. He wanted to fuck Shannon right now. No. *Talk* to Shannon. He wanted to talk to Shannon right now.

He strode down the hall and poked his head into the lunchroom and said, very succinctly and with

absolutely no preamble, "Shannon. My office. Now." Without waiting for her response, he stormed back down the hall to his office, slamming the door in his wake.

She took her sweet time responding to his summons but at least she had the good sense to bring him coffee. She announced herself with a sharp rap and then opened the door without waiting. "You wanted to see me, Mr. Trillo?" She juggled two mugs in one hand and her steno pad in the other.

"Close the door." He glared at her over his steepled fingers.

Her demeanor was bland and

unreadable. She closed the door with her toe and placed his mug gingerly on the desk in front of him before sitting in the chair on the far side of his desk.

No steno pad tossed heedlessly to the floor, he noticed. No wild, passionate blowjob.

She took a sip of her coffee and cleared her throat. "Did you want something?"

Did he? Hell. He wanted her—bent over the conference table. The chair. The sofa. Pressed against the wall. The desk. The windows. Yeah. He wanted something, all right.

"Where were you this

weekend?"

She recoiled at the question or perhaps at the vehemence with which the question was posed. "I beg your pardon?"

"This weekend. I tried to call you."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Trillo. I went away this weekend. I wasn't aware we had any projects pending."

"I wasn't calling about work, damn it." He wished she wouldn't be quite so prosaic. Wished she would show some shred of emotion. Quivering passion, perhaps. "I wanted to see you."

She didn't respond, other than

to sip her coffee contemplatively. Finally, she murmured, "I thought we agreed we wouldn't do that anymore."

"I know," he snapped. "But I just wanted to *see* you."

She raised a brow, a delicate, elegant brow. It mocked him more than words ever could. It spoke to his inconsistency, his stubbornness and his weak, weak will. "I went away for the weekend."

"Were you alone?" he hissed, beset with visions of Shannon and another man. He swallowed the acid surging into his mouth. It burned all the way to his gut.

“I was with my sister and some friends.”

Relief flooded him. Until her next words registered in his brain.

“Though you know, Tristan, if I was with another man, it would be none of your business. When I promise fidelity, I keep my word, but you and I have made no such promises. You’ve made the nature of our relationship very clear.”

He swallowed heavily. It was true. He had. Again and again. “Are you saying we’re finished?” How the words made it past his lips, he never knew. They were like sharp, jagged stones in his mouth.

“Of course not. You’re the one who insists our relationship can never work. I love being with you. I love every moment.”

Well, now. That was promising. He felt infinitely better.

“So can I see you tonight?” His mood plunged when she shook her head.

“Not tonight, Tristan.” She picked up her coffee mug and her steno pad and headed for the door. “Tonight I have a date. And you,” she said glancing at the clock, “have a meeting.”

She had a date.

Tristan stood back in the shadows and glared down at Shannon's patio. He could hear the music floating on the night wind through the open doors and he clenched his fist.

She had a date.

He wished they'd come out onto the patio so he could get a good look at the bastard. He hoped he was dumpy. Bucktoothed. And bald.

And then they appeared. The two of them. They walked out onto the patio—*he* sauntered, the cocky prick—to take in the view. The beautiful, romantic view. Tristan

fumed and glared at the view. Damn that view. Why couldn't it be hideously repulsive?

And what was with her date?

He wasn't dumpy. Not in the least. The guy probably lifted weights all day long to get a physique like that. And he certainly wasn't bald. And—damn it all anyway—his teeth were perfect. They glinted in the moonlight when he smiled. Even from here. Hell.

His heart hitched as Shannon moved closer to the Adonis and slipped into his arms. Together, they twirled across the patio.

Muted music wafted through the still night on an errant zephyr and he snarled. He slammed into his house and emerged a minute later with his binoculars. The guy had his hand on the small of her back, fingers splayed as they danced, and she looked happy. Happy, for Christ's sake!

Then the guy dipped her. *Dipped her.*

Tristan's eyes narrowed when she laughed up at her date as though she was enjoying this dance more than anything.

Hell. She'd enjoyed fucking him a damn sight more, he'd wager.

She'd better have.

When they disappeared into the house, Tristan lost it. He trained the binoculars on the sliding glass doors but they didn't reappear and the music became softer, more intimate. A new CD came on. Tristan had to strain to make out the slow, jazzy strains filtering out into the night, but to him it sounded like the perfect music for...

Hell.

He dragged his fingers through his hair, imagining all sorts of sleazy scenarios until, finally, he couldn't take it any longer.

Knowing he was acting like an immature ass but unable to help himself, he hopped into his car, sped down the hill to her house and laid on the doorbell.

The chime echoed through the house but no one answered the door. Where were they? And what were they doing?

Hell!

Tristan rang the bell again in a staccato fashion and was gratified to hear Bosco let out a series of barks and growls, his nails scratching against the door. That would bring them. Wouldn't it?

And then he heard her voice—

music to his ears. "Bos!" she called. "Stop that." Tristan smiled as he noted a change in the tenor of her voice. She was coming closer.

The door opened and she was there, bending slightly to hold on to Bosco's collar as he attempted to leap on the intruder. She was there and, thank God, fully dressed. He'd arrived in time to stop any illicit behavior. His feral grin widened.

"Hey, Shannon."

"Tristan?" Her lovely brow quirked upward, the British form of surprise. "What are you doing here?"

He leaned against the jamb.

“Just came by to see how you’re doing.”

“I have company,” she hissed, throwing a glance over her shoulder into the living room. Good. They were still in the living room.

“Great!” He pushed past her into the foyer, reaching down to scratch Bosco behind the ears. “Can’t wait to meet him.” Ignoring her frown, he strode down the hall. She sighed as she closed the front door and followed.

The scene before him was pleasing in the extreme. The man of the evening—Shannon’s date—was

seated on the sofa studying a Scrabble board.

Scrabble.

They were playing Scrabble.

“Who was it, Shan?” her date said in a distracted voice. When he turned his head and saw Tristan, his nostrils flared.

Shannon caught up and stepped between them to make introductions. At least that’s what Tristan assumed. If she knew the extent of what was going on in his gut, she’d be stepping between them to keep Tristan from ripping someone’s way-too-handsome face off.

“Tristan, this is my friend Steve Olsen. Steve-o, this is Tristan Trillo.”

Steve—Steve-o—stood and Tristan was irritated that he was very tall, much taller than Tristan. He was also much, much prettier than Tristan, with long sweeping lashes and a thick shock of hair with a little Elvis curl right in front. From his great height, he gave Tristan an assessing look. But it wasn't the assessing look of a man sizing up the competition. It was the look of a man sizing up a potential conquest.

Then Steve-o smiled.

“My heavenly God.” He fanned himself with one hand, apparently in raptures. “You aren’t *the* Tristan Trillo, are you? I’ve heard so much about you. Shannon practically gushes.”

“Is that so?” Tristan smiled at Shannon, a sly, knowing smile.

All right. It was a smirk.

She crossed her arms over her chest and muttered something under her breath.

“Totally.” Steve-o ignored this byplay. I’ve heard about it all. The late nights, the long projects.” He grinned and leaned in. “You’re quite the slave driver.” He laughed

at his own private joke and picked up his wineglass to take a sip. "It's poetic that you two are now an item."

"We are not an item!" Shannon blurted, glaring at them both in turn.

"You're a *something*," Steve purred. "And it's so romantic."

"Brother."

"I mean, she's been crazy for you for —"

"Steve!" Shannon's ejaculation halted the sentence much sooner than Tristan would have liked. Still, the prospect set his pulse racing. Shannon was crazy about him?

And had been for...how long? As long as he'd been mooning over her?

Could it be that they'd been wrapped in a web of mutual lust for years, never knowing the other was sitting on the other side of a flimsy glass partition trying desperately to corral lustful urges?

Steve rolled his eyes. "You heteros," he sniffed. "Everything has to be so furtive. So many games."

"What do you mean?" There were no games between them. Were there?

"You want her. She wants you."

Just fuck each other and enjoy the hell out of it. Quit worrying about who knows what. Or who's going to approve or not approve. God. If I worried about that I'd never get laid."

Tristan glanced at Shannon. It was good advice. There was nothing he wanted to do more right now than to flip her over the sofa and sink into her sweet pussy. Going without her for three whole days had tested his restraint and seeing her with another man had pushed him close to the edge. He didn't want her to want any other man. Only himself.

His feelings for her definitely went way beyond mere lust. They were ravenous and feral and harsh. And he wanted her bad. He didn't particularly care who knew about it. All he cared about was feeling her desperate, panting breaths in his ear as she came.

"Now," Steve said primly. "My work here is done. I've got to go." He drained his wineglass and picked up his jacket. He paused at the door to add, "Just remember this. None of the people you're trying so hard to please are worried about pleasing you. Your life is your responsibility. You have to

make yourself happy, and damn the consequences.” And then, with a sketched wave and a cursory pat for Bosco, he let himself out

Finally. Alone at last.

Tristan fixed Shannon with a hungry look.

She avoided his gaze. Instead she busied herself collecting the plates and glasses on the coffee table and meticulously arranging them on the kitchen bar. “Would you care for something to drink?” This, she asked in her most hostess-y voice. “Some cake, perhaps?”

“No.” Tristan’s voice was rough, laced with tightly reined passion. “I

want you.”

She stopped in her tracks.

“I’ve wanted you every minute since I was inside you last.”

“But we —”

“I know what we agreed. I know what I said. But you heard Steve. *Damn the consequences.*” Steve’s little speech had really resonated in his soul. What was keeping them apart, after all?

It was *his* stupid rule and *his* stubborn streak. Adam wouldn’t really care if Tristan broke the rule. Hell, Adam had already shattered it.

“Why shouldn’t we enjoy each other?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

She dipped her head. He thought, perhaps, he saw the glitter of tears on her lashes.

“Why?” He took the Scrabble board from her and set it back on the coffee table. When she wouldn’t look at him, he gently nudged her chin up with two fingers.

Hell. They were tears.

“Why, Shannon?”

“Because you are also enjoying

Tandy Larsen.”

His mouth fell open. “What?”

“I know you went on a date with her.”

“Now wait just a minute. I did not go on a date with her.” His belly lurched at her expression. Panic flared. “It wasn’t a date. Honestly. Kat and Adam set it up. They thought they were doing me a favor. You know I can’t stand her. She drives me crazy.”

“But you went out with her.”

“No. I went to Levin’s party and she was there. I didn’t ask her out. I didn’t want to be with her. I only want...”

“What?”

“You. I only want to be with you. And damn the consequences.”

Shannon cleared her throat and stared at the floor. “Sometimes consequences have a way of catching us unawares.”

He moved closer and pulled her soft body against his. She was warm and she smelled sweet. He buried his nose in the crook of her neck and tasted her. “Shannon,” he rasped. “I need you.”

“Tristan.” She arched against him as his lips and teeth and tongue tormented the side of her neck. He knew how to rouse her.

He knew the spots that made her twitch and groan. And with every tryst, he learned more. He ached to discover it all, even if it took forever. He skated his hand up her flank and cupped her breast. When he swiped a thumb over a nipple, her entire body jerked in response.

“I want you.” He allowed his mouth to make the pilgrimage to her ear and over her cheek, to trail along her jawline and nibble at the dimple on her chin. Then he took her lips.

He tasted her gently at first, rubbing his lips against hers until they were tender and tingling. He

laved her lips with his tongue, tasting the sweet nectar of her breath. Then, finally, he settled his lips upon hers and set about seducing her with his mouth. He drew her tongue into his mouth and sucked and was shot through with passion when she reciprocated. His kiss became wilder then. He held her head and feasted madly, loving everything from the taste of her to the tiny impassioned grunts issuing forth as he explored, demanding more and ever more.

His cock was hard and throbbing. He was ready to take her

now. But then, he'd been ready to take her since Friday. He needed to bring her along in this raging desire. Draw her closer to the insanity he felt, secure her in his world so she couldn't slip away again—could never, would never, show up on a date with another man, for Christ's sake.

What he wanted, rather desperately, was to stake his claim.

His mind flew through his options and suddenly it dawned on him.

He knew how to capture her.

He knew exactly what to do.

He pulled back and frowned at

her. Sternly.

“I was furious when you told me you had a date tonight. You should have told me it was with a friend.”

“You didn’t ask,” she responded playfully. Then again, she hadn’t yet realized where this was going.

He narrowed his eyes. “You knew what I would assume.”

“I have no idea what you mean.” She tried to turn away. He stopped her.

“Really? Do you know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think you were trying to make me jealous. Were you?”

She fixated on the little crocodile on the left breast of his shirt. “Maybe.”

“You don’t think that was a naughty thing to do?” Her gaze rocketed back to his and her dainty little nostrils flared as comprehension dawned. “You don’t think I have a right to be angry?”

“I—”

“No.” He cut her off. “No excuses. Was it a naughty thing to do? Yes or no.”

“Yes?”

“Are you asking me a question or are you telling me a fact?”

“Yes. It was a terribly naughty thing to do, but —”

“Ah!” He halted her words with a finger to her lips. “Then you agree, you should have a spanking.” It wasn’t really a question but he waited for her answer. It was difficult to wait because she was getting nervous and restless, which meant she was fidgeting and tugging at her lip with her teeth, and, frankly, both of those moves inflamed the predator in him.

“I suppose.”

“No. You don’t suppose. The answer is yes or no.”

“Yes.” A whisper.

She didn’t meet his eyes when she said it so he tipped her chin up. “What? I didn’t hear you.”

“Yes.” She stared at him. Her lips trembled. “I should have a spanking.”

Sharp satisfaction sliced through him and he dropped her chin. His cock twitched in anticipation. In a moment he was going to have Shannon Weiss draped across his lap with her skirt up, with her panties down around her knees.

Frankly, he couldn’t wait.

Chapter Eight

Shannon stared at Tristan as an unholy hunger welled within her. The thought of his hand coming down, hard and masterful on her ass, sent a wet gush of slick cream sluicing through her pussy. She shivered as she pressed her thighs together. Her clit throbbed. Her mouth went dry. She could barely look at him.

“Come here,” he commanded in

a hard voice and she complied. He led her to the sofa. He sat and patted his lap. Obediently, she draped herself over his thighs, quivering with anticipation. He flipped her skirt up, baring her ass to his view. "Mmm." He drew his palm over the tight curves, tracing the edge of her panties across her lower back. "Take them off," he rasped.

She glanced up at him. His features were tight, laced with desire. Quivering, she slipped her panties down to her knees. His reaction quick and hard—a sudden, turgid swell against her left hip. He

jerked her closer until she was fully on his lap, pressing against his cock. It was hot and thick, rigid and throbbing. He surged against her.

He returned his attention to her bare ass, squeezing and caressing those quaking globes. "God, you're gorgeous." He stroked her reverently.

And then his hand fell.

She cried out at the first smack. It was harder than she'd anticipated and it shot through her like a bullet of lust. She moaned and buried her face in her arms. It felt incredible. Better than she'd ever imagined. His hand fell again

and again and her ass began to heat under the endless barrage. The warmth coursed through her. Waves and tingles resonated from her throbbing clit to her swelling nipples. Each smack sent a rush of heat racing through her.

He paused every so often to caress her sweltering, sensitized buttocks. Her moans rose to cries and she pressed her clit against his hard thigh. Before long, she was undulating in mindless passion.

“Is this what you wanted?” She loved his little grunt of exertion, his groans of pleasure as each smack fell. “Is this what you need?”

“Yes,” she cried. “Yes.”

“You like it when I smack your ass, don’t you?” He paused, once again, to fondle her burning flesh. “You know you do.”

“Please.” She ached. She wanted.

The delightful spanking continued but he shifted his angle lower, to the underside of her trembling ass. The sudden new pressure on her clit, pressing her harder against his thigh, was exquisite. Cream oozed from her pussy. She could feel it easing past her lips and dampening his jeans. She spread her legs wider and

rubbed herself against the rough fabric.

He groaned. "You are so wet." He drew his fingers up and down over her slit, delving deeper with each pass. "God. You're so wet." He held her open with two fingers and edged deeper with a third. "Wider." He nudged her hips higher. "I want to feel you."

She complied, spreading her legs as wide as they would go, but rather than easing into her pussy again, he smacked her again, right over her wet clit. She cried out as the first orgasm took her, turning to him with pleading eyes. She

wanted him in her. Needed him.

He was utterly unsympathetic. He reached around and yanked the neckline of her dress down. "Play with your nipples. Pinch them." She did, whimpering as twin shots of agony and ecstasy rocketed through her.

"Tristan," she panted. "Please. Please."

"I'll please you, all right." He paddled her, five sharp smacks in a row. "Are you playing with your nipples?"

"Yes," she sobbed.

"Does it feel good?"

“Yes!”

“Do you want more?”

“Yes. Please.”

He paused, resting his large, warm palm on her burning ass. His fingers twitched, as though the sensation was just as intense for him, as though he itched to caress her more. But something stopped him.

Impatiently, she wiggled her ass, attempting to rub her clit against him.

“Not just yet.” He tightened his hold against her gyrations, forcing her to still. “There’s something I would like to know.”

“What?” she asked softly, and then more impatiently when he didn’t respond. “What?”

He traced a line over her ass and made a gentle, teasing pass at her sopping pussy lips. He dandled lower, just barely brushing against her clit.

Shannon cried out at the touch and sobbed for more. She was close. So close.

“He said you were crazy about me. Is that true?”

She stilled. Shuddered. Her breath caught in her throat. “What?”

Heartlessly, he dabbed at her

again and then hovered, just out of reach. "Is it true?"

"Yes!" she cried.

His fingers returned to their tormenting rhythm. "You're crazy about me?"

"Yes, Tristan. Yes."

"How long?"

"What?"

"How long have you been crazy about me?"

Mortification washed through her. She couldn't tell him. Couldn't possibly admit the truth. Not now. Not like this.

She didn't answer. Instead she

rubbed against his erection, attempting to tease him, to distract him. He hissed in response and pressed up against her as well. But the delightful sensation between her legs stopped. She groaned.

“Touch me, Tristan. Please.”

“You like it when I stroke your clit?” he asked, teasing her gently.

“Yes. Yes.” She arched into him and knew bliss for a heartbeat before he cruelly pulled it away.

“Then answer my question.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“It’s too embarrassing.”

The harsh smack on her ass caught her at unawares and she cried out with a jerk.

“It’s not embarrassing to writhe on my lap begging for my touch? You know you want it. I can tell you’re close. So answer my question.” His voice was desperate. The words grated out.

“Forever!”

He stilled. “Forever?”

“Yes!” she yelled. “For-fucking-ever. Since the first time I saw you, you ass. Now touch me!”

He didn’t touch her, at least not the way she craved. Instead he grasped her shoulders and lifted

her off his lap, turning her to face him. His eyes were damp, his expression tight. A muscle throbbed in his cheek. "Since the first time you saw me?" he rasped.

"Yes. Yes, damn you." But there was no anger in her tone. How could there be?

"Jesus." He sucked in a deep, hitched breath. "Jesus."

And then he was on her.

It happened quickly. He tipped her gently but forcefully onto the floor and was on top of her, his pants unzipped, his rampant cock bounding free and slipping past her tender lips. Nudging in. The

tightness was exquisite. He pressed deeper. Her flesh tightened and resisted his onward press, tugging at her clit.

The fullness stretched her unbearably but it was what she wanted, what she needed, and she hissed in pleasure as he entered her relentlessly, until he stroked her womb.

She clenched around him and he lost all pretense of gentility. He yanked himself from her and slammed in again, as though driven by a wild urge to claim her, to possess her utterly. He repeated the exquisite movement, fucking her

hard and hot as his breath huffed in her ear and small groans emanated from the base of his throat.

“God yes,” he growled, shifting a little to change his angle, pounding deeper and harder than before. She could feel his cock swell as it always did just before he came, and she whimpered at the added pressure. Her pleasure rose sharply.

Her ass burned but it was a delicious sensation. And with each triumphant thrust, her tender flesh scraped against the carpet. His cock filled her completely and, as he pounded into her sweltering cave, his pubis and the wiry hairs

covering it in a thick pelt ground relentlessly against her tender clit. She was wet and slick everywhere. His thrusts were well-oiled and perfectly placed. Her orgasm swelled and swelled again, hovering there, teasingly, just out of reach.

Sensing her frantic need, barely restraining his own, he levered up and looked down at her, panting in great gasps of exertion. "Do you know...when I first...wanted you?" he ground out, snarling in his fervor.

She cried out as he made a circular movement with his hips

that made his cock dance within her. "When?" He lifted her hips and she wrapped her legs around his waist, riding him as wildly as he rode her. He was ready to explode. She could feel it in his tightly tensed sinews. In his trembling form. He was waiting, though, for her. Her pussy wept at the knowledge and the beginnings of her orgasm, deep within, stole closer. "When?" Was that her voice, so demanding and distraught?

"In the interview." He pounded harder, a frenetic series of thrusts. "The day we met." He drove her over the edge. Her entire body

clenched and she cried out as wave after wave of delight washed over her and exquisite rhapsody danced along every nerve. She seemed to come forever, and even after the crisis passed, tiny little aftershocks pressed themselves upon her for long minutes as she lay there in his arms, desperately trying to catch her breath, desperately trying to find herself again in a sea of bliss.

“That,” Tristan said, “was incredible.” It was. She was. He stared at her in awe. She was beautiful, lying there, her hair disheveled and her cheeks pink

with pleasure. But her eyes were closed, her lips tight. "Are you all right?" He brushed away an errant tendril.

Her eyes opened and found his. She smiled. "Yes, Tristan. I'm fine."

"Did you...like that?" Somehow, he just needed some reassurance. Somehow, now, with passion exhausted, he needed to hear her say it.

"I liked it very much," she said softly. "Too much, perhaps."

Too much? Was there such a thing as too much pleasure? "What do you mean?"

She gave a little shrug. "You

make me lose my sanity sometimes. It's a little...overwhelming."

Overwhelming? Hell yeah. "And that's not good?" How could that not be good?

She sat up and readjusted her dress and then found her panties on the floor where they'd fallen and slipped them back on. "You just make me...feel things. You make me say things and do things I normally wouldn't."

Yeah. He knew that. And it made him a little smug. He liked that she lost all control when he touched her. He liked that, though she might resist, she wouldn't resist

for long.

Because he felt the same way.

He lost all sanity when she was near as well.

“What wouldn’t you normally do?”

She huffed and crossed her arms over her chest. “For one thing, I would never admit I’m crazy about you.”

“But you are.” He couldn’t help grinning.

“And I would never have told you...” She paused and her gaze fell.

“What?”

“I wanted you the moment I saw you. I would never have admitted that.”

“I wanted you the moment I saw you. I don’t mind admitting it.”

She snorted—a delicate grunt. “Men are different. Nothing embarrasses you.”

Not precisely true but he let that point go. “I’m glad you said it. I’m glad it’s true. And I am glad I can make you crazy with passion because you make me crazy too.”

“But Tristan, it’s a little too much. Don’t you see? We get all wild and crazy and have hot

steaming sex and forget about things that matter.”

He frowned. Wild and crazy mattered. Hot, steaming sex mattered. “For example?”

“For example...” She dipped her head. “We’ve never once used a condom. We just get close to one another and passions rise and the next thing I know, we’re at it. All thoughts of protection gone in the wind.”

Never once used a condom.

Tristan’s gut curled into a tight ball. He’d been a religious user of prophylactics his entire adult life but, frankly, when he was near her,

protection was the last thing on his mind. That fact flabbergasted him. Perhaps he should be a little frightened as well.

“Is there...anything I should know?” It was a little late to be asking but hell, he probably should know.

She gave a little sniff. “I’m clean.”

“So am I.”

“I know. I checked your med files.”

He should be offended. Really, he should. But he wasn’t. At least *she’d* been cautious. “So if you’re

clean and I'm clean, what's the problem?"

She sighed heavily. "I am a woman of childbearing age, Tristan."

"But you're on birth control."

She nibbled on her bottom lip.

"You're...not on birth control."

Hell. "Why the hell aren't you on birth control?" She was a woman—a damn attractive woman—of childbearing age. She made him hard with a glance. A word. A breath. She should be on birth control. Perhaps a double dose.

Why the vision of a little girl with her adorable nose and unruly

mop of hair skated through his mind, he couldn't say. Why that vision gave him a warm sensation in his gut and made him want to grin was an even deeper mystery.

"Why would I be on birth control when I'm not seeing anyone?"

"You're seeing me!"

"I wasn't a week ago."

"But you've had boyfriends." It was a statement, not a question. A woman like her always had boyfriends. Though now he thought about it, the only "boyfriend" he'd ever heard her speak of was Bosco and he didn't

count. Aw hell. "You have had boyfriends. Haven't you?"

"Of course I've had boyfriends." Again, she looked away. He was beginning to really dislike when she looked away. "Just not for a while."

"How long?" He swallowed the sudden lump in his throat, dreading her answer.

"A while."

"How long?"

Her response was a mulish frown.

"Do you want another spanking?" He was teasing, but not

really. Even though his hand ached, he was up to the task should the need arise.

She grimaced and rubbed her ass. "No, I don't want another spanking." She shot him a saucy little grin. "At least not for a while."

"Then tell me."

"Six years."

Six years. Hell. *Six years*. She hadn't been with another man since she'd met him. That was... Wow. That was incredible.

"That makes me so horny," he finally said and she laughed.

“Everything makes you horny.” She stood, reaching down to help him up as well. “Do you want some cake? I’m going to have some after I freshen up.”

“Did I make you hungry?”

“That was quite a workout. But then, you always make me hungry. But I’ve been fantasizing about this cake since I bought it at Donna’s this afternoon.”

“Ooh. You didn’t mention it was from Donna’s.”

“Chocolate Death.”

His stomach growled. “My favorite.”

She shot him a coquettish smile. "I know." She sauntered into the kitchen, a saucy twitch to her behind.

Of course he followed.

By the time they finished eating, frosting was all over the sheets.

Chapter Nine

Their conversation roiled in his mind all night, keeping him from sleep. That Shannon hadn't been with anyone but him for years was mind-blowing. And it made him a little crazy. Even after a full night of soul-satisfying sex, he still wanted her.

But he wanted more than that. He wanted her wanting him with an equal fervor. His imagination

was afire with the possibilities. By the time he arrived in the office the next morning, he'd hatched a devious plan. He got in a little late because he'd had to make a stop at a boutique on Sherman Way. Once in his office, he shut the blinds and waited for her to appear.

As soon as he saw her emerging from the lunchroom where she'd been brewing coffee for their upcoming staff meeting, he called her into his office.

"Good morning, Tristan," she said softly as she appeared at his door. Today she wore a crisp jacket with a flirty skirt.

“Good morning, Shannon. Please come in and close the door.”

She complied, sauntering to his desk, her ubiquitous steno pad in hand. “Did you...want something?” Her smile was mischievous and alluring.

“You know what I want.” He motioned her closer.

She stepped around the desk and stood before him, smiling down at him with an angelic mien. She was absolutely gorgeous this morning, practically glowing with feminine contentment. Though she wore a perfectly respectable business suit, on her it was

unbelievably sexy. He wanted to bend her over the desk and take her right then and there but he had bigger plans.

He caressed her hip and let his palm slide down over her soft bottom. "Have you recovered?"

She laughed lightly. "Barely. Last night was amazing."

"Tonight will be better."

Her lips twitched. "Oh? Do we have plans tonight?"

He grinned. "I do."

"Do tell..." She cupped the back of his neck, threading her fingers through the hair curling at his

nape.

"I made reservations at a club I know. We'll be having dinner there."

"Which club?"

"It's a private club. You've probably never heard of it."

"Try me."

He leaned in and whispered, "The Pleasure Palace."

"Dear heavens." He could tell from her expression she'd heard of it. The club was a carefully guarded secret of the rich and famous, a place where private dinners were served in secluded alcoves and

themed suites. It was a place where any fantasy could be lived out to its fullest with utmost discretion. "Are you a member?"

"One of our clients is co-owner. He owed me a favor."

"Oh my."

He knew what she was thinking. She'd guessed what he had planned. But only part of it. He was much more devious than she could ever imagine.

"Does the notion of being at my complete command arouse you?"

She swallowed heavily. "Yes."

"Are you going to think about it

all day now?"

A small squeak emanated from her sweet, bow-shaped lips. "Yes."

He let his hand slip down her thigh and around, up the front of her dress. He found her lacy panties and slipped a finger beneath the band.

"Tristan."

His blood thickened as he stroked her damp lips. God. She was already ready. The urge to fuck her here and now rode him hard but he resisted. He wanted her mad with it. Crazy.

"I got you a present," he rasped, gesturing to the small box on the

desk.

She shuddered, gulped. "What? What is it?"

"Open it." His voice held a thread of command.

She trembled as she reached for the box and he noticed this with tremendous satisfaction. Poor thing. She had no idea what was in store for her. She opened the box and stared down at the two brass balls in silence. "What are these for?"

"For your pussy." To illustrate the point, he slipped his fingers up into her weeping canal. She moaned. "Put them in."

“What?”

“Put them in. You know what they are, don’t you?”

“I’ve seen Ben Wa balls before.”

“But you’ve never used them?”

She shook her head. Her pink tongue danced out to dampen her lips. He warmed at the sight.

“I want them in you all day, making you throb from the inside out.”

“I can’t wear these all day.”

“I think you can.”

“Tristan, we have a staff meeting in...” She checked her watch. “Ten minutes.”

His grin was slow and perhaps a little wicked. "I know. And all during the meeting, with each twitch of your muscles, those balls are going to remind you what's coming. They are going to remind you about tonight."

She shuddered and her cunt clenched around his fingers. He yanked them out. "No coming," he warned her. "No sneaking off to the bathroom to play with your clit. Promise me."

"You're driving me crazy!"

"That would be the plan."

She tipped her head to the side. "Tristan, we can't do this in the

office.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“What about your rule?”

“To hell with the rule. Adam broke the rule. Why shouldn’t I get my fun as well?”

“But...”

“No buts, Shannon. Put them inside. Now. Or you’ll pay for your disobedience tonight. They have all sorts of rooms at the Palace, you know.”

Her throat worked as her gaze skipped from him to the balls and back. Her hesitation made him suspect she was going to chicken

out, a thought that sent a shaft of disappointment through him. But in the end, she didn't. In the end, she lifted her leg, placed it on his thigh and, holding onto his shoulder for balance, slipped first one and then the other orb into her pussy. She hissed as they eased, inexorably, in.

"They're cold," she whispered.

"Not for long." His fingers joined hers inside her canal, pressing the balls deeper still. "Don't let them fall out." He pulled her panties up tight in her crack until the crotch rubbed against her clit. She moaned and he bit back an

evil chuckle.

It was going to be a long day.
For both of them.

And it was.

By close of business, Shannon was cross-eyed with lust. She'd thought of nothing but Tristan, his cock inside her, all day. The sensation of fullness, the slight movements of the balls inside her, the heat scorching her body from the inside out, had her going mad.

Conversations were difficult, to say the least. And more than once, her coworkers paused during an exchange to stare at her.

“Are you all right?” Kat asked when they met at the copier. “You look like you’re in pain.”

“Yes. I’m fine.”

Kat’s expression was dubious.

“Really. I’m just tired.”

“You should go home if you don’t feel well.”

It was all Shannon could do not to snort. Would that she could go home. Or better yet, march into Tristan’s office and demand he fuck her right then and there. But she wouldn’t. She couldn’t. This was his game and she was determined to prove to him she could play along.

But dear heavens, it was killing her.

She almost fainted with relief when she checked the clock on her laptop and discovered it was almost five. Almost time.

He made her wait until everyone had left the office, another agonizing hour. And then he came to her.

He stood at her desk, looming over her like a dark, delicious shadow. "Are you ready?"

"Am I."

He chuckled. She was not amused. She was too horny to be amused.

She stroked his hard thigh, perilously close to something harder. "We could just stay here."

He captured her hand with his own. "No, Shannon. We have reservations."

"But Tristan..."

"Come on." He grabbed her coat and purse. "No pouting. Let's go."

The short drive took forever. Shannon never fretted much over LA traffic but today she desperately wanted a bazooka to blow away every car in their path.

He glanced over at her and grinned. "Not long now."

She glared at him. Her mild arousal had, through the day, morphed into a raging inferno. She was so wet the balls kept slipping out and each time she surreptitiously reached down to press them back in, she nearly exploded.

“You’re going to pay for this, Tristan Trillo.”

Though her threat was a roiling growl, he laughed. “I certainly hope so.”

He pulled through a pair of bronze gates and into a small parking lot next to a rather fanciful, though understated, mansion. The

sign at the gate said simply, *Privat*.

A flutter arose in the region of her heart. "Is this it?"

How he heard her whisper, she didn't know. "Yes, Shannon. This is it." He turned to her, his expression tight. "Are you ready? Because God knows I am."

She swallowed. Nodded. Her body was molten, her limbs like rubber. She prayed she could walk the short distance to the door.

He came around the car, opened her door and helped her out. He kept hold of her hand as they walked toward the Palace. His palm was slightly damp. She could

only hope he was suffering as much as she.

They were greeted by a butler in formal attire. "Name?"

Tristan cleared his throat. "Trillo."

"Ah yes." The butler's gaze flicked from Tristan to Shannon. It took some effort but she forced herself not to wonder what the ever-so-proper gentleman was thinking of her. "Mr. Trillo. This way please." The butler opened the door and led them up a wide, sweeping staircase and down several corridors to an intricately carved door. They saw no one else

in that short time. Not a soul. “You are in the Pasha Room.”

A jolt of excitement sizzled through her body. She glanced at Tristan but his demeanor gave nothing away. How on earth had he known about her fantasy? She flushed as she realized how, exactly, he’d known. She’d left a trail of breadcrumbs in her Virtual Life account.

“Please ring when you are ready for dinner.” The butler nodded and left them there in the hallway.

And they were alone.

Anticipation, desperation, mind-numbing hunger swamped

her soul.

“Tristan.” Shannon gripped the arm of his coat. “I don’t think I can move.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed. “It’s okay, Shannon,” he said. “Let me take care of everything.” He swung her up in his arms and pushed open the door with his shoulder.

How it thrilled her. Tristan’s arms around her, the feel of his masterful embrace, being held close against his hard, hot chest. And he was hot. Heat rolled off him in waves. She couldn’t resist the opportunity of her position to suckle the sweet flesh of his neck.

He stumbled but caught himself. His chuckle reverberated through her body. "You will pay for that, my minx."

She laughed and repeated his earlier words. "I hope so."

On the threshold of the room, he paused. "Close your eyes."

She pouted. "Do I have to?"

"Yes, silly. That's how it works. Close your eyes and imagine your deepest, darkest fantasy."

Shannon stilled. Dear heavens. She'd never told anyone her deepest, darkest fantasy. It had always seemed far too intimate. Far too raw. That he knew of it

frightened her to death. She shivered.

“Trust me,” he whispered. “Close your eyes.” She did and he kissed each lid in turn. “You’re safe with me.”

And somehow, she knew she was.

He stepped into the room and stopped cold. His muscles clenched around her. Instinctively, she opened her eyes.

Her breath snagged in her lungs.

The room was everything she had imagined. An illicit thrill shot through her as she took in the scene. It was lush and luxurious

and decadent, swathed in silks and satins. Velvet pillows adorned a wide divan and were scattered around a low-lying table. An elaborate high-backed chair held court in the center of the room. Its purpose was obvious in the well-positioned straps. Nearby, a small table was decorated with all manner of toys—feathers and whips and...

She shuddered. “I don’t think...”

He chuckled. “Then don’t. Don’t think.” Slowly, he lowered her to the ground. “Simply enjoy.”

She buried her face in his shirt,

quivering. Cowardly. Suddenly afraid. Not of him. Of herself. "Tristan..."

He silenced her with a kiss then turned her and pulled her back against his chest. "Shannon. This is your fantasy. Embrace it. I'm here to bring you pleasure."

She frowned. "There's a real difference between fantasizing something and actually doing it."

"I know." His grin was wicked. He gestured to the chair. "Shall we, my captive?"

She trembled at his words, at the vision, the illicit imagery they evoked. But he was there behind

her. His palms skated down her arms and warmth flooded her. She allowed a tiny nod. Yes. This was her fantasy. It always had been. To be tied and forced to passion.

To see it laid out before her was overwhelming.

He leaned closer and whispered in her ear, "You are mine, Shannon. Mine to torment. Mine to please. But first...remove your clothes."

The balls nearly popped out.

She whirled on him, instinctively covering her breasts with her hands. His face was stony, obdurate. But she could tell he was just playing the part. He wasn't

really the cruel master. Rather her partner in the game. Her game. Lust bubbled in her belly and she dropped her gaze, slipping into her role. "Yes Master."

He tipped her chin back up. "Louder. I want to hear those words. See them on your lips."

"Yes...Master."

"Nice." He kissed her but it was like no other kiss he'd ever given her. This kiss was hard, commanding. He sucked at her mouth. Thrust in his tongue. Possessed her.

Her mind spun, her body wept.

He stepped back and crossed his

arms over his chest, observing her coldly. "Well?"

"Well?" Well, what?"

He gestured to her person. "Remove your clothes, slave."

She shivered. For heaven's sake. Why did she feel so vulnerable? He'd seen her naked before. Still, she trembled as she complied. It was difficult to slip the dress from her shoulders. Difficult to let it fall in a pool at her feet. Very difficult to remove her bra, one strap at a time.

Even more difficult to meet his gaze when she stood there, bare but for the wisp of her panties.

He stared at her with a hunger that made her heart hitch. The planes of his face were taut with it. His eyes burned. His nostrils flared. She felt the heat in his scrutiny as it skated over her exposed breasts, across her belly and down to her lace-clad cunt. She longed to cover herself but she didn't.

"Turn around."

She did. Slowly.

He exhaled in a hiss, stepped closer. His hot hand drew a line of fire on her ass. He massaged one cheek and then another through her panties. She jerked as he landed a little slap. It stung, but only a

little. She reveled in the warmth.

“You are so beautiful, Shannon.” Boldly, he caressed her breast. He ended the stroke with a tweak of her nipple and she whimpered. His mastery felt so good. Fed something deep within her.

“Tristan?” She jerked as his warm lips caressed her nape.

“Yes?”

“These balls...they have to come out.”

He chuckled. “Well hell. I completely forgot about those.”

She smacked him. The wretch. She’d been in agony all day.

“Do you want me to do it?”

“No.” She didn’t snap. She never snapped. But she was so tightly wound, if he so much as touched her, she would lose all control.

“You’ll have to take off your panties too, I suppose.”

She shot him a scorching look and slowly eased them off. Dampness trailed all the way down her thighs.

She stood before him, completely naked, and spread her legs. Just spread them.

His face was etched with harsh lust that tightened when, with no

prompting at all, the balls slipped out and fell to the carpet with a dull, heavy thud. The sensation, the relief, the ravaging hunger for more made her lightheaded.

His lips thinned, paled. His throat worked. "I want to see you in the chair."

A skein of sizzling arousal snaked through her. She knew what the chair was for. She desired it and dreaded it. But she couldn't hesitate. Would not disobey.

He led her there and seated her.

It was a very special chair. Hewn of wood, it had a high back and removable arms. The seat was

split so her bottom perched on a small ledge. Everything—the globes of her ass, her breasts, her cunt—was totally exposed.

Tristan took his time arranging her, slowly lifting one arm and securing her wrist to the straps high above her head. He took his time, tasting and tormenting her. And then he did the same with the other arm.

When he finished, he stood back and inspected his work, relishing the vision of her, helpless and constrained as she was. He licked his lips.

Shannon sat there, arms bound

overhead, and burned. The leather bindings at her wrists were not painful but they reminded her she was helpless. His captive. She tugged just a little to test them and a shot of excitement ran down her spine.

She couldn't believe this was happening. Her fantasy coming to life...and with him! She couldn't stop her hips from rolling as sheer lust washed through her.

"Ah ah ah." Tristan waggled a wicked finger. "I didn't say you could move. Hold still."

"But..."

"No talking, Shannon. I'm the

Master here. You will do as I say.”

He seemed so domineering, so indifferent, it startled her. For a moment, she was paralyzed with fear. But there in his eyes she saw him. She remembered. And she relaxed.

“Good girl.” He walked to the rough-hewn table and surveyed the implements. Her pulse thudded in anticipation. What would he choose? The whip? The strap? Or something more heinous?

He chose the feather.

Ah. Definitely heinous.

As he approached, a swirling ball roiled in her gut. Anticipation

and dread and dizzying desire skirled through her. He stopped in front of her, running the feather through his thick fingers. Just stood there and observed her reaction.

Imagining what he would do with it, would do to her, had her crying out, tugging at her bonds.

Really. She really should change her mind. Perhaps...

But it was too late. Tristan brought the feather down and dragged the soft fronds against her neck.

“Ah!” She arched up, helpless against the sensation. She mewled in agony, not because it was too

intense but because it was not nearly enough. It was barely there. He allowed the feather to drift down her chest and around the circumference of one breast. He tormented her thusly for a long time, never once touching her straining nipples. He tormented her until she squirmed in the chair, dampening it with hopeful passion. "Please, Tristan! Please."

He paused in his ministrations—Shannon had no idea what he was doing because she'd long since closed her eyes—but then the sensation returned...only harsher.

Her lids flew open and she was

stunned to see he'd turned the feather around and was using its quill to score the torment on her flesh. Liquid horror trilled through her as the quill traced closer to her nipple and closer still.

She almost came out of her skin when it touched her, scratched across her aching nub.

The breath hissed out of him at her reaction. "Do you like that, Shannon?" And when she didn't respond, "Do you?"

"Yes. Yes, damn you. Yes!"

His smile was wicked. He flipped the feather around again and repeated the torture on her

other nipple. And then—oh heavens—the feather made its way lower.

Shannon wriggled and moaned, tugging at her bonds in earnest. She knew where he was heading. She couldn't bear it. She couldn't!

Determined to avoid the torment, she pulled her legs together. The feather froze.

“Shannon. Open your legs.”

She glared at him mulishly.

“Open your legs or I will have to bind them too.”

The hint of an orgasm wracked her at his words. She was helpless

before him but not completely helpless. If he tied her legs apart, she would be utterly at his mercy. She wasn't sure why she didn't obey. Or maybe she just didn't want to admit to herself what she really wanted, really needed.

Complete submission.

He shook his head and tsked, setting the feather down on the table. He returned to the chair and slowly unfastened and lifted one of the wooden arms. Though she fought him, he took her leg and slipped it far to the side and set the heavy arm back in place, securing her thigh exactly where he wanted

it.

To her fascinated mortification, he did the same to her other leg.

Now she was completely restrained. Her hands were tied over her head and her thighs were trapped on either side of the chair. Splayed wide.

The realization made her quiver. He could do anything to her —*anything*. She couldn't stop him. And she delighted in it.

He returned to the table. This time he brought the feather but he brought something else as well. A thick leather strap.

She swallowed. "What's that

for?"

He ignored her and began his torment with the feather once more, starting at the very beginning and making his way down her body in agonizing increments. First with the soft side and then with the torturous point. He ended at her cunt, rubbing the dampening feather back and forth against her tender flesh until she wept and begged and pleaded for more.

Her orgasm was almost upon her, hovering, imminent, when he stopped.

She cried out, "No! Please. No."

Tristan was close, kneeling

before her as he worked. He wiped the sweat from his brow and met her gaze with a smile.

“Please, Tristan. I am almost there.”

Again, the smile. It was wicked. He was wicked. He picked up the strap and showed it to her.

A delicious shudder licked through her body. “W-what are you going to do with that?”

“Tenderize the meat.”

She put out a lip. “The ‘meat’ has been tenderized all day.”

Without warning, the strap came down, right on her throbbing

clit. Agony. Ecstasy. Lashes of pleasure. Lashes of pain. Every muscle in her body clenched deliciously.

She didn't come, but just barely.

When he followed the slap with a swipe of his tongue, shivers of impending orgasm slashed through her. But his touch was tantalizingly brief. And before she could grab hold of the bliss, he was gone.

"Ohh. Tristan!" she growled, throwing back her head in agony. "I'm going to make you pay for his!"

He chuckled. "I do hope so."

She stilled as something

wonderful and fat nudged at her opening. Two fingers eased in and Shannon convulsed around them. "Yes. Oh yes. Please." But then they withdrew and she changed her tune. "No. No. Please."

"Don't worry, my sweet. It's coming. It's coming."

And then his mouth was on her, his fingers in her. He sucked and stroked, plying insanity upon her. She arched madly, trying to force him deeper, harder, more, more. She was supremely aware of the straps binding her hands, aware of the restriction over her thighs, aware she was helpless to do

anything but come. To be anything but his.

And she did. She was. For one brief, beautiful eternity, she was completely and utterly *there*.

When she came back to herself, he had already released her from the chair. Already carried her over to the divan. Was already stroking the lust back into her. He urged her, with heat and hunger, to unbearable heights until she wanted nothing more than to open for him, allow him in.

Fortunately, Tristan was not a tentative lover. He knew when she was ready and he knew what she

wanted, needed, more than breath itself. He levered himself over her dampened body and spread her legs and eased himself in. And...

Ah! Bliss.

The moment he entered her, the very second he filled her and stroked her and took her, she came. Again. And again. Each thrust took her further and further into the bliss he'd drawn upon her with a feather quill.

He sped up, his breath panting and hot in her ear, his grunts and groans and moans reverberating through their bodies, vibrating at the very point their bodies joined.

He sped up and drove deeper, harder, sending a thousand shards of agony and ecstasy through her with each lunge.

Her body tightened. She felt it, that something, stalking her and she wanted to be captured. Wanted to be consumed. Just as his cock swelled inside her, just as his essence jerked and gushed into her, it took her. Took her utterly. Took her completely.

She exploded. Imploded. Flew.

And after their hearts, floundering in tandem, had once again calmed, she looked into his eyes. And she knew what that

something was.

It was love. And it possessed her.

Completely.

Chapter Ten

Afterward, once they recovered their sanity and reclaimed their clothing, they enjoyed an exotic meal of lamb and jasmine rice. There were no implements so they ate with their fingers and reveled in licking sweet oils from each other's hands.

"So." Tristan leaned back on the fat velvet pillows and stared at her. "What did you think of that?"

Shannon took another sip of the delicious wine and sighed. "It was wonderful, Tristan. But..."

A frown flickered across his face. "But?"

She glared at him. "But if you say we shouldn't do *that* again, I'll smack you."

He threw back his head and laughed. "Oh, we're definitely doing that again."

"Though..." She tapped her lip with her finger. He tracked the movement with glittering eyes. "Perhaps next time?"

"Yes?"

“Perhaps next time,” she purred, “you can be the one in the chair.”

His expression was priceless. Horror and curiosity and arousal at the prospect of being bound helpless before her ravening desires.

Before long, she had just that. Tristan Trillo. Writhing in the chair and begging, begging for sweet release.

It was sublime.

Something unusual happened the next day.

Tristan and Shannon were late

for work. They were never late for work.

He drove her home after their amazing night at the Pleasure Palace and he kissed her on her doorstep. And he kissed her in her foyer. And the hallway. And her bedroom. They spent the remainder of the night in each other's arms, cuddling and kissing and making love.

Not surprising she forgot to set her alarm.

Not surprising they slept in. Way past ten.

When they awoke, they were both in a state, madly scrambling to

dress and wolf down hastily scrambled eggs. He sent her to the office first—he had to stop by his house and change clothes because it would never do to show up in yesterday's outfit. Besides, if they came in together, *late*, good God, everyone would notice.

By the time he got there, she was situated at her desk and working diligently. He refused to be annoyed by the way she glanced up, offered him a tight, tiny smile and went directly back to work. But then, Adam was there, riffling through a sheaf of papers.

“Where the hell have you been?

We had a conference call with Proctor."

Hell. Tristan slapped his forehead. "Damn it, Adam. I'm sorry. I forgot."

Adam boggled. "You...forgot? Proctor? Our biggest client?"

"I'm sure you handled it."

"Of course I handled it." Adam put his hands on his hips. "Are you okay? You look a little pale."

Tristan shrugged and pushed past his brother into the sanctum of his office. "I'm fine. I just didn't get any sleep last night." He heard a snort from Shannon's desk. He ignored it.

Adam followed him in and shut the door behind him. "Are you sure you're all right? Damn it, Tristan. You've been weird lately."

Tristan stilled. "Weird? How?"

"Everyone's noticed."

"Everyone?"

Adam leaned against the door and fixed his gaze on his brother. "Is there something you need to tell me?"

"Something?" Tristan pretended to be busy. He shuffled some papers around on his desk, thumbed through his messages.

"Tristan. Are you...sick?"

He froze. They both remembered, were haunted by the day, long ago, when their father had sat them both down and announced, quite calmly, that he was dying. "No. I'm perfectly fine."

"You aren't acting fine. Maybe you should go see Doctor Rafferty."

"It's nothing."

Adam sprawled in one of the visitor's chairs. He rested his chin on steepled fingers and pursed his lips, as though he was trying to unravel a mystery. "Something's going on."

Damn it all. Why did Adam have to be so fucking observant?

Tristan blew out a breath. “All right. Yes. Something is going on. But it’s something personal.”

“I’m your brother.”

“Something *very* personal. I’m... just not ready to talk about it.” He tried to ignore Adam’s hurt expression. As brothers and business partners, they’d never kept things from each other. Well—Tristan steeled his spine—until Adam started courting Kat.

“Okay. Fine.”

“Fine.”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready?”

Tristan fiddled with his paper clips. "Yeah. Sure."

"And if you need anything – *anything* – you'll come to me?"

"Of course."

"Okay then." Adam slapped his knees with both hands. "In that case, if it's not too much trouble, we have a staff meeting."

"When?" Tristan instinctively checked his watch.

Hell. He'd forgotten to put it on.

Adam grinned. "Ten minutes ago. Come on. Everyone's waiting. And they're in a really bad mood."

"Why?"

Adam's grin broadened. "Jenny made the coffee."

The rest of the day was torture. Pure torture.

You would think, after a night like he'd had last night, a man's body would be sated. Quiescent. But every time he looked at Shannon, Tristan's ardor stirred anew. It was as though he'd taken a drug that made him want nothing but more and more of the same.

Another torment in his own personal ring of hell was that Shannon was gorgeous today, glowing with an inner light that

attracted every male in the office the way a porch light attracts moths. Okay. Not a particularly romantic analogy but Tristan wasn't in a romantic mood. He was in a predatory mood and he didn't like the other lions eyeing his gazelle.

And damn it all anyway, whenever he approached her, she was surrounded by people, laughing and chatting and having a good old time. While he was left in the corner stewing. What he really wanted, more than anything else, was Shannon all to himself. He didn't want to share her with

anyone.

And then something occurred to him. He could have her to himself. If he took her away for the weekend. He checked his calendar —nothing important—and logged on to the internet and began researching bed-and-breakfasts in the local area. His fingers froze over the keys. No. Not a bed-and-breakfast. They could run into someone they knew.

A cruise? Yes!

One of the national lines had regular weekend runs down to Ensenada out of San Pedro. Ah. That would be perfect. They could

sequester themselves in their cabin, order food and champagne and delight in each other's company for the whole weekend.

And no one would be the wiser.

The idea so lifted his heart, so intrigued and excited him, he practically thrummed with anticipation. She'd just better say yes.

As soon as she returned to her desk, he called her into his office.

"Yes, Tristan?"

"Shannon. Shut the door."

The look she shot him was as dry as the desert.

He grinned and shook his head. "A conversation. Nothing more."

She chuckled and stepped into the room, shutting the door behind her, and sat before his desk. "What is it?"

He cleared his throat. Hell. Now he was too nervous to broach the subject. What if she said no? "Um. I really enjoyed last night."

She tipped her head to the side and studied him. "Did you? Which part?"

The light in her eyes sent a jolt of excitement through him. "All of it, Shannon."

"Even being tied to the chair

yourself?"

He shifted restlessly at the memory of the torment she'd inflicted upon him. Hell yeah. "You're a naughty girl."

"You deserved some payback."

"Oh, I suffered."

She leaned forward with a wicked grin. "Not nearly enough."

"What are your plans for this weekend?"

Perhaps that was a bit too blunt. She sat back, frowned. "This weekend?"

"Yes." Why did he feel like a pimply faced high school boy

asking a girl on a first date?

“Nothing.”

He realized he was holding his breath and blew it out in a gust.

“Let’s go away.”

“Away?”

“Together. For the weekend.”

She laughed and crossed her arms over her chest. “We can’t go away together. People will notice.”

“It’s a weekend. No one will notice.”

Her tongue darted out, wet her lips. He fixated on the sight. “What did you have in mind?”

Why did his heart leap like that?

God, he was nervous. "How does a cruise to Ensenada sound?"

"A cruise?" Her tongue peeped out and wet her lips, distracting him. "I've never been on a cruise."

"Do you have a passport?"

"Yes. But..." Her face fell. "Tristan, I can't go away for the whole weekend."

"Why not?"

"Bosco!"

Bosco? Tristan gaped at her. "Can't you get a sitter?"

"Who? Kat? Sara? How do I explain where I'm going?"

"Don't you have a sister?"

“She’s allergic.”

He was starting to panic. He could feel the heat rising in his cheeks. He hadn’t realized how much he wanted this until now. And man, did he want it. “Can’t you tell Kat you have to visit your sister for the weekend?”

“Lie to my friend?” Shannon stilled. Every muscle in her body went tight. Her eyes, large and limpid, were laden with sadness. “Tristan. I hate this.”

“This?” His heart shot up into his throat, pounding hard. “You hate...this?”

“Not this, *this*. I hate all the

lying and sneaking around. I hate pretending like we're nothing but coworkers. It's just not in my nature to prevaricate."

Hell. He hated it when she got all British and used big words. "Shannon..."

"Tristan, I just... I don't know if I can do this anymore."

The throbbing moved up into his head. A big fat Viking pounded on his temple with a hammer.

"Shannon. Please."

"I'm sorry, Tristan. I just can't. Not right now." Were those tears on her lashes? God. He hoped they weren't tears.

When she stood and left, rushing to the ladies' room, he didn't follow. He sat at his desk, fiddling with his letter opener and feeling like a worm.

Several hours later, she poked her head into his office. Her eyes were red, her skin pale. "Tristan?"

"Yes, Shannon?"

"Do you have a minute?"

He began to rise, to sprint to the door to help her in, help her sit. And then he remembered. That was something a concerned *boyfriend* would do. Not a boss. "Sure."

She came into the room but didn't close the door. Didn't sit. She stood before him, mangling a piece of pink paper. "It's about this weekend."

"Yes?"

"Um." She cleared her throat. "My vet says he'll take Bosco."

A wash of relief flooded him. But then concern arose. She didn't seem happy about this. Certainly not as happy as he was. He would have her to himself for three whole days. On a boat. In the middle of the ocean. And she would have him. So why did she look so peaked? He reached across the desk

and took her hand in his. She stilled, glanced over her shoulder into the hall and slowly drew her fingers away.

“Shannon, are you all right?”

She dipped her head. “Yes. I’m just a little...” She put a palm to her belly. “My tummy’s upset.”

“Are you sure?” He meant about his weekend, not about her tummy, but she understood.

“Yes, Tristan.” She met his eyes then and he saw it there, the spark he was hoping for.

“Maybe you should take the rest of the day off. You know. Catch up on your sleep?”

It was a weak attempt at humor but her lips twitched. "I have things to do."

"You need your rest." He lifted a brow so she would know, would realize he had plans—big plans—to keep her from sleeping this weekend.

She nibbled at her lower lip. He was transfixed by the sight. "I can sleep tonight."

"Tonight?" He sat back, beset with annoyance that he wouldn't be keeping her awake all night once more.

She shook her head, reading his mind. Or perhaps his expression.

“No, Tristan. Not tonight. For one thing, I’ll have to pack. What kind of clothes do you take on a cruise?”

Clothes? “You won’t need any clothes.”

“Tristan,” she growled at him. Growled. He kind of liked it. “I’ve never been on a cruise. I want to experience everything.”

“You’ll experience everything, all right.”

But she was having none of his teasing. She threw back her shoulders and became all British and stiff. “If I’m going—”

“You are.”

"If I'm going, I plan to have a wonderful time."

"You will."

"And not just in the cabin! Why, there are so many fun things to do. Scuba diving, buffets, fancy dinners. Baked Alaska!"

"Have you never had baked Alaska?"

"No. But it's fascinating. Just the idea of it."

"We're not going on the cruise just to eat, you know. Food, I mean."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "You will not starve me."

“I wouldn’t dare.”

“And we will explore everything.”

She was so adorable in her tenacity that he had to laugh. “We will.”

“You’re impossible.” She growled again but this time the sound hid a chuckle. She tossed the pink paper at him in mock fury. “Here’s a message from Proctor. He wants you to call.”

“Ugh,” Tristan groaned. “Probably annoyed I forgot our conference call this morning.”

“Adam was beside himself. He had to handle it on his own.”

Tristan shrugged. "It's good for him." It was time Adam took over more of the business. Tristan was getting tired of handling every little thing himself. Which was odd. He used to revel in it.

She turned to go back to her desk but he caught her hand. "Shannon?"

"Yes, Tristan?" Damn but she was lovely.

"Thank you for coming this weekend."

Their gazes tangled just a moment more, or perhaps an eternity. And then she whispered, "Tristan, I wouldn't miss it for the

world.”

Chapter Eleven

“It’s so big!”

Tristan grinned at Shannon. It was all there on her face, the wonder, the awe, the excitement.

Too bad she was gazing at the ship with all that adoration.

And it was big. Enormous, in fact. It took a long time for them to file through the customs lines and check their luggage—she brought

far too much, in his opinion—and up the gangplank and into the dazzling foyer to register with the purser. He was annoyed to discover once they were on the boat, they weren't allowed to go directly to their rooms. Rather they were led to an upper deck and plied with exotic tropical drinks while the crew valiantly attempted to show them emergency procedures.

Shannon was adorable in her broad-brimmed floppy hat and enormous orange life jacket. It clashed horribly with her sundress, she said, but she said it with a laugh.

By the time they were allowed to go to their rooms, Shannon was hungry so they took a detour over to the shrimp bar on the Lido Deck and hand-fed each other crustaceans and cocktail sauce and buttered bread until they could hold no more.

They walked to their room—finally—Shannon swinging her hat and humming. Tristan snaked an arm around her waist. God it was good to be here with her. Alone. Never mind the other two thousand people on the boat. He didn't have to worry that anyone would see them or recognize them.

He had her all to himself. All weekend.

He kissed her neck and she leaned in to him. "Are you happy?"

"Mmm. This is wonderful. After we unpack, how about we go up on deck and play Titanic?"

"Play Titanic?" He bit back a smile at her enthusiasm. Damn, he liked her enthusiasm.

"You know." She threw her arms up in the air. Her hat hit the wall. "'I'm the king of the world!'"

He chuckled and pulled her back into his arms. "I'd rather play 'I'm the king of the bedroom'."

She snuggled closer and kissed his neck, his chest. Her clever fingers found a sensitive nipple. "You are the king of the bedroom," she whispered and lust slashed through him.

But just then the cabin door to their right opened and a herd of screaming children dressed in swimsuits and floaties erupted into the hallway. To his horror, Shannon didn't step away from him. Rather, she found his nipple again and, once the children and their frazzled mother had passed, tweaked it.

Tristan flinched. "Whoa!" He grabbed for her hand and held it

still when she would have tweaked him once more.

Her attention drifted lower. He flinched again as she found something more substantial to tweak.

“Where’s our room?” Her voice was hungry and hard.

“Right here.” He pulled out his keycard and slipped it into the lock.

They didn’t even notice the room. There could have been a herd of elephants milling about and they wouldn’t have noticed. They only noticed each other. They only noticed the hunger in each other’s eyes and the burning in their

bodies.

It was all Tristan could do to get Shannon's sundress over her head, get his pants off—kicking madly to dislodge his shoes. He eventually gave up and walked her backward to the bed, taking tiny steps to accommodate the constriction around his ankles. And then...

He was in her.

She was wet and hot and oh so tight. Her cunt massaged his cock with each thrust, sucked at it with each withdrawal. Their coupling was hard and hot and fast. It had been far too long since they'd been together, since he'd been in her.

Since Wednesday, if he counted right. Far too long. Far too long for sanity. Certainly too long for seduction.

Fortunately Shannon, his adorable, delicious, sensual Shannon, didn't require seduction. She wanted to be fucked and that was just what he gave her. He pounded into her from one angle and then another, barely pausing to think, barely pausing to breathe. It was pure instinct. When her cries became pleas and her pleas became too loud, he took her mouth with his and swallowed them.

She tightened around him. The

tension and the heat imploded and expanded. And he knew. He knew she was there. Her bliss sent him over the edge as well and they came together in a hot wash of delight. It crawled up from his toes to the top of his head, making all the hairs on his body stand on end, making his skin prickle with pleasure, tighter and tighter until... ah! Release.

She clutched at him—inside and out—as she came, scoring his back with her nails in a frenzy of gratification.

“Yes. Yes. Yes.”

He wasn't sure whose cries they

were. Maybe they came from both of them.

He didn't care.

He was complete. Exhausted. Drained.

He dropped his head onto her shoulder, panting like a man just finishing a marathon. And then, when he could move, he pulled his penis from her still-twitching cavern, rolled over to her side and pulled her into his arms.

It was then he noticed the elephant in the room, there on the pillow, staring at him. A whimsical creation of artfully folded towels holding a fresh flower in his trunk.

Tristan could barely hold back his laugh.

This was going to be an amazing weekend, he was sure of it. One he'd remember for the rest of his life.

The next morning he awoke, all warm and wrapped around her. He could tell by the movement of the boat that they'd docked. The chatter of the passengers disembarking and heading off for their day tours and trips wafted up through the window. He was glad he and Shannon had planned nothing. He snuggled deeper into

their cocoon and pulled her closer, taking great pleasure in the feel of her soft skin against his.

She stirred and something, that wild, lustful beast inside him, stirred as well.

“Good morning.” He loved looking into her eyes first thing in the morning.

It was a wonderful way to start a day.

She smiled. It was a shy offering and he loved that too. “Good morning.”

“How did you sleep?”

A strand of her hair, an adorable

tousled corkscrew curl, flopped onto her face and he brushed it away, taking the opportunity to stroke her cheek.

“Mmm.” She tucked her nose into the crook of his neck and kissed him. He shivered.

Yep. Definitely stirring.

But there was another hunger as well. His stomach growled plaintively and they both laughed. “Are you hungry? We can order breakfast in.”

She smiled up at him and opened her mouth to respond. Then her eyes flew wide. “Oh.” She pulled off the covers—exposing a

tantalizing display of creamy skin — and put a hand to her belly. “Oh!”

“What is it?”

She didn’t answer. She quickly untangled herself from him, leapt from the bed and sprinted for the bathroom.

The ensuing sounds made it pretty clear to him there would be no breakfast in bed in the near future. If at all.

“Do you think you’re seasick?”

Shannon glanced up from her plate, where she was diligently drawing circles in the scrambled

eggs with her fork. Tristan's expression was dark, concerned.

How mortifying!

Of all the times to be ill.

She had retched so...wretchedly. He'd been wonderful, holding back her hair and telling her it was going to be all right. But how in heaven's name would he ever want to be intimate with her again after seeing that? She scanned the informal dining room, mentally logging all the potential places she could throw up again should the feeling return.

"I'm so sorry."

"Stop saying that. You've

nothing to be sorry for.”

She pushed her plate away. Really, she could bear the sulfurous smell of the eggs no longer. Which was odd. She loved eggs.

“So, do you think you’re seasick?” he repeated. She wished she could smooth the worry from his brow.

“I don’t know. I’ve never been on a cruise before.”

“But you’ve been on a boat.”

She tipped her head to think about it. “Yes. But I don’t remember feeling like this.”

“Maybe it was the shrimp. We

ate a lot of shrimp last night. I've read about cruise-ship food." He fell silent, brooding. "What a stupid idea. We should never have come."

Her heart dropped. Her stomach began to churn again. "What?"

"No. No. I didn't mean *that*. I just...we should have gone to a bed-and-breakfast. They don't move."

She patted his hand. "It was probably the shrimp."

"I'll take you to the doctor."

"I'm feeling much better." She took a sip of coffee to prove the point. When she was able to force it down, she took another.

“If it’s food poisoning—”

“I don’t think it’s food poisoning.”

“Still. We should get you to the doctor. Just in case.”

“Tristan! There are so many other things we could do.”

He frowned. “No arguments. I won’t relax until I know it’s not something serious.”

She sighed. “All right.”

She let him take her to the doctor’s office but she didn’t let him come in with her. There were some things a woman just had to do on her own. But instead of going off

and exploring the ship or visiting the colorful stalls on the pier, he sat outside the medical offices with his elbows on his knees and his fingers laced tightly together like a man expecting the worst.

The doctor was an older Dutch gentleman with a charming accent. He was very kind and talked Shannon through all her symptoms. He did a few tests, a urine sample, a vial of blood, which he handed off to a tech, and then he ordered coffee as they waited for the results. In the meantime they chatted about their home countries.

When the tech returned, he

flashed Shannon a smile but he said nothing. He simply gave the paper to the doctor, who studied it with a serious mien. "Huh," he grunted, grooming his bushy eyebrows.

"What is it?"

"Young lady, I think we've found the reason for your illness."

"What is it?" Shannon leaned forward.

"Your hCG is high."

"What is that?" Shannon asked in a panicked voice. Things with letters were bad.

He patted her on the knee. "No need to worry, my dear. You're

pregnant. Congratulations.”

Shannon’s jaw dropped. Her heart thudded once and then stopped, right there in her chest. It seemed to take an eternity to start back up again. Pregnant! A thousand thoughts crowded into her mind, a jumble of emotions battered her. Elation, fear, astonishment, disbelief, excitement. Fear again.

“Would you like me to tell your husband?”

Her heart now set up a rapid tattoo. Oh God. Tristan. How would he react? “No. Please. He’s... not my husband. Please don’t tell

him.”

The doctor nodded and patted her hand. “I suppose you would like a moment then.”

Shannon nodded. “Yes. Please.”

He left her alone with her conundrum. Which was really the kindest thing he could have done. Shannon remained in the little plastic chair for a long time after the doctor left. Thinking. This was so much to process, too much to think about. She would have some very big decisions to make in the coming days but she made one decision right away.

She wouldn't tell Tristan about

the baby. Not now. Not yet.

Her father had been forced to marry her mother when a little slap and tickle resulted in a child. They'd been miserable. She didn't want that for her and Tristan. She certainly didn't want him to feel obligated to her. For anything.

He'd made it clear enough their fling was just that. A fling. Not something he even wanted his brother to know about. The idea of a baby, of eternal, endless responsibility tied to a woman he really wouldn't have chosen for a long-lasting relationship, would horrify him.

She didn't want that. She didn't want this relationship to end so dismally.

She didn't want it to end at all.

But it probably would.

When she told him.

One could not keep a baby a secret for long.

She crumpled the paper with her test results. *Damn it.* Just when things were going so well.

How she would handle telling him when the time came, she didn't have a clue.

But for now, for the rest of this weekend—her last as a footloose

and fancy-free woman—she was going to enjoy herself. She was going to enjoy Tristan.

These memories would have to last the rest of her life.

By God, she was going to have fun.

She would tell him when the cruise was over. When they got home, she would start worrying about this.

When they got home, everything was going to have to change.

Tristan was relieved to see

Shannon emerge from the doctor's office with a smile on her face. It was a tight, subdued smile but it beat the hell out of tears. "Everything okay?"

"Sure. Everything's fine." She didn't meet his eyes. "He suggested I stay away from shrimp for a while."

"So it was the shrimp?"

She wrinkled her nose. He moved in to kiss her but she leaned away and grabbed his hand. "Come on, Tristan. Let's go out on the pier."

He pulled her into his arms. "Wouldn't you rather go back to

the room?" He tried to make his voice sexy and hot but her lips tightened and she shook her head.

"I've never been to Mexico."

"It's *Ensenada*."

She laughed. "That's still Mexico."

"Hardly. It's like, LA-South."

"Come on. I want to go shopping." She tugged at his hand and, of course, he followed. But something niggled at the back of his mind. A little voice whispered something was wrong. He just couldn't put his finger on it.

Not to save his life.

Chapter Twelve

The pier was a tourist trap. Passengers—from the boats docked neatly in a row—vied with the each other to purchase cheesy trinkets but Shannon loved it. It was a crazy carnival atmosphere with the delicious scent of churros and lime heavy in the air. Strolling mariachi bands entertained the crowd and a troupe of jugglers performed tricks for tips. Booze flowed freely.

Tristan and Shannon walked from stall to stall, holding hands. Every once in a while one would point something out to the other and they would laugh. The sun was warm on her shoulders and a soft breeze teased at her hair. She tipped up her face, just enjoying the day, the feel of his palm against hers. His presence by her side.

Over to her left, a little girl with enormous brown eyes was making her dog, a poor Chihuahua dressed up like a clown, do flips for the crowd. Shannon's heart melted. She fished in her purse and pulled out a five and tucked it into the tip

jar.

“You shouldn’t encourage her,” Tristan whispered into her ear.

“Why not? They’re so cute.”

“She should be in school.”

Shannon laughed. “You, sir, are a curmudgeon.”

His eye went wide. “I am not a curmudgeon.”

“You are. Oh look.” Another stall, one with tiny clothes decorated with intricate embroidery, caught her eye. She stepped closer. “How adorable.”

“Baby clothes?”

Shannon stilled. One piece, an

exquisite christening gown, snared her attention and something inside her quivered. It hit her again, and it hit her hard. *She* was going to have a baby. A baby who might wear a gown like this.

An emotion she'd never known welled up in her chest. She pulled the hanger from the rack and held the piece out. Once she touched it, she knew she had to have it.

“Cuánto?”

“You’re not going to buy that, are you?”

She froze. She’d forgotten. Forgotten he didn’t know. Forgotten she couldn’t tell him. She

flashed him an enormous smile.
“For my sister.”

“Is she expecting?”

“They’re trying.” She turned back to the vendor, a wrinkled old woman with the bright light of hope in her eyes. “Cuánto?”

The woman told her the price and though it was high, Shannon pulled out the money and paid for the little dress right then and there. As the woman wrapped the gown in tissue, Shannon struggled with feelings she couldn’t quite place. There was a happiness, a bone-deep elation, but it was wreathed in sadness. Regret.

She took the bag, trembling with the knowledge she'd just made the first purchase she would ever make for her child. *Her child.*

She would never forget this moment.

"Hey! Margaritas." Tristan snapped his fingers like a flamenco dancer. "Do you want one?"

Shannon put her hand to her belly and wrinkled her nose. "I-I'd better not."

"Oh yeah." His face fell. "Are you still feeling queasy?"

"No." She wasn't. In fact, she felt wonderful. "But you go ahead. I want—" Heavens. What was that

smell? She cast around the plaza until she found it. A fajita stand. Her mouth watered. Like a zombie, she made her way in that direction. "Umm. Fajitas."

Tristan skipped along behind her. "Shannon. I don't think you should have spicy foods."

"Mmm. Onions. And peppers." Her belly growled. She wanted nothing more than to eat and eat and eat.

He gave in eventually and they both had fajitas. He washed his down with a margarita and she had a bottle of water.

She had another fajita. And, to

Tristan's astonishment, another. On top of that she gobbled down two churros and a cup of ice cream.

"You're amazing." Tristan laughed as she licked the last little bit of ice cream from her cup and looked around for more.

She grinned. "Just making up for lost time, I guess."

"I guess!"

They were walking back to the boat, hand in hand, when Tristan suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Shit!"

Shannon, perforce, stopped as well. "What is it?"

“Come here. Hurry.”

He pulled her around a corner and together they huddled behind a stall featuring enormous sombreros with the word “MEXICO” painted in gaudy colors on the brim.

“Did you want to buy a hat?”

“No. Shh!” He peered out at the crowd. His entire body was tense.

“What’s wrong?”

“Damn it. It *is* him.”

“Who?”

“Levin. Damn it. Scoot back a little. I don’t want him to see us.”

Shannon stepped back. She

stepped back and stared at Tristan. Saw him. Saw their relationship, perhaps for the first time.

The pain racking her heart was sharp and bittersweet. There was probably anger swirling around in there somewhere as well.

Because Tristan tracked Levin's every move and angled her deeper into the stall as his friend hove into view. *Hiding her.*

And she knew.

In her heart of hearts, she knew.

She couldn't be with Tristan.

She couldn't be with a man who was ashamed to be seen with her.

Who willfully kept their relationship a secret.

It hadn't bothered her—well, not too much—before. At first.

But it bothered her now.

She couldn't even school her expression when Levin finally climbed the gangplank of one of the other ships. When he turned around and his gaze fell on her face, he paled.

Fortunately he didn't patronize her by asking what was wrong. He had the *cajones* to refrain from playing games. "Shannon, that was not what it looked like."

"It looked like you were

avoiding your friend."

"I was."

"Because you're here with me."

He sighed and dragged his fingers through his hair. "We've been through this."

"I know."

"It's just, if Adam knew..."

"I know."

"He would make my life a living hell."

"I know. I get it. I understand."

"Then why are you angry?"

Shannon glanced around the plaza, at the beautiful day, at all the people having a wonderful time,

totally oblivious to the devastating heartbreak going on right inside her chest. "I'm not angry, Tristan. I'm hurt." She swallowed, a pathetic attempt to force back the tears hovering on her lashes. It didn't work. One fell, and then another. And then many.

"Shannon. Honey. Please don't cry."

"I'm not crying!" Why she yelled, she had no clue. Her emotions were all in a welter.

He reached out to dab at the stream but she dashed his hand away. "Shannon..."

"I'm just tired of it, Tristan.

Tired of being a part of your life you cannot bear to share with your friends. Your brother. Your mother!"

He blinked. "You want to meet my mother?"

"No! Yes! Tristan, that's not the point."

"What is the point? Is there a point?"

He was glaring at her now, which was just ducky, because she was glaring right back. "Oh, there's a point all right. It's just on the top of your head."

"What? What does that mean? Is it some kind of British insult?"

“Ooh. You make me so angry sometimes!”

He took a step back. “I’ve never seen you angry.” He leaned in and whispered, “It’s kinda hot.”

She smacked him. Not hard, just a fist to his rock-hard shoulder, but she smacked him. She couldn’t help it. Besides, he deserved it. “If you are too bloody ashamed of me to introduce me to your friends—”

“Levin’s not my friend. He’s Adam’s. Don’t you see? That’s why —”

“I don’t even know Levin. I’ve never met the man. He wouldn’t know me from Adam.”

Tristan smiled. "He'd know you from *Adam*."

It was a joke. A bad one. "Stop it! Just stop it!"

"Come on, Shannon. Don't you think you're overreacting?"

Wrong thing to say. Heat crawled up her cheeks. "Oh shut up."

"Shannon..."

"No. I mean it. Shut up and listen. It's over."

He paled. "No. Don't say that."

"It is. O-ver."

"Shannon, baby..."

She froze. Everything inside her froze, her muscles, her blood, her

breath. "Don't you ever call me baby."

"What? Why?"

"Never. Do you hear me?"

"Shannon, honey, calm down. Let's talk about this."

"No. I'm done talking. I'm done hiding. I'm done," she waved her hand at the Mexican hat stand, "skulking in the shadows."

"We weren't skulking."

"Oh. We were. We were skulking. We've been skulking all along. And I am done with it. Finished." She began to flounce away but stopped and spun around

to face him once more. "And when we get back home, I'm leaving Trillo-Maris."

"You can't leave Trillo-Maris!" Was that panic warbling in his voice? Good. She didn't care.

"I'm leaving Trillo-Maris," she hissed. "And I am leaving you."

To say their drive home was uncomfortable was an understatement. Tristan had never realized the trip from San Pedro to Tarzana could take so long. Shannon hadn't spoken to him after their fight on the pier. He'd tried several times to engage her in

conversation, to talk it over, but she froze him out every time. She was much more determined than he was, especially when it came to being stubborn.

She'd slept on the little sofa in their cabin all night long and when he'd offered to give her the bed, she'd just glared at him. She'd been sick again in the morning. She seemed fine now. But he knew better than to ask.

He shot a glance at her profile. Something deep in his gut clenched. She was so damn lovely. He didn't like having her angry with him. But still...

He bit back a smile as he drove. This was their first fight and as fights went, it'd been pretty spectacular. He was looking forward to the make-up sex. He only regretted he hadn't been able to charm her out of her pique on the ship. They'd missed out on almost all the adventures he'd had planned with strawberries and whipped cream, the champagne foot bath and an illicit massage on the deck.

Hopefully it wouldn't take her long to simmer down so they could work things out. She wasn't leaving Trillo-Maris and she sure as hell

wasn't leaving him. No way.

The thought sent his blood pressure rising. He'd realized on the cruise—when she was sick, when he held her in his arms and, more to the point, when he couldn't—he wanted more from her than some tawdry affair. He wanted much more.

He didn't want to think about life without her and, whatever it took, he'd do it to keep her.

And damn it all, she was right. It was time to quit hiding their relationship. It was time to take the next step. The big step. The very serious step that made his knees

weak and his belly quake.

He was going to have to tell Adam.

Chapter Thirteen

It was late. Probably too late for visiting but Shannon couldn't wait. She needed to talk with someone—a friend—and she needed to talk now. She felt like her brain was going to explode with all the thoughts and emotions swirling around. She raised her hand and knocked on the door.

It took a few minutes but Kat finally answered. Thank God she

was still dressed.

“Shannon.” Kat gaped at the sight of her then recovered herself and opened the door. “Come in.”

“I hope it’s not too late?”

“No. Never. Shannon...what’s wrong?”

Shannon gushed an inappropriate laugh. “Do I look that bad?”

“No. Of course not. Come in.”

What a relief. What a blessed relief to find a warm welcome on a night like this. She didn’t mean to fall into Kat’s arms in her foyer and she certainly didn’t mean to start

crying immediately. But sometimes these things couldn't be helped.

Kat, being as wonderful as she was, just held her and patted her back and murmured nice things like, "It'll be ok," until the worst of it was over.

"I am so sorry." Shannon mopped at her cheeks with the tissue Kat handed her. And then she mopped rather ineffectually at the stain she'd made on Kat's shoulder.

"It's all right."

"No it's not. It's s-s-silk." She was burbling and she knew it.

"Shan. Don't worry about it.

Come in and sit down.” Kat led her to the sofa. “Tell me what’s wrong.”

“Hey, Kat?” a deep male voice called from the bedroom. “Who’s at the door?”

Shannon froze. “Adam’s here?”
The horror.

“Don’t worry. I’ll tell him to butt out.”

But Adam was already there, padding into the room in a pair of flannel pajama pants with red chili peppers all over them. And nothing else. His features were so much like Tristan’s it hurt to look at him.

“Hey, Shannon.” He stopped.

Stared. "Are you all right?"

Kat made a face. "Of course she's not all right. Go back in the other room and finish watching the movie."

"Were you watching a movie?" Shannon stood. "I'm sorry. I'll go."

Kat caught her hand and pulled her back down onto the sofa. "Adam's watching the movie. I was reading a book." She leaned closer and whispered, "It's a horrible movie."

"I heard that!"

"Well, it is. Shooting. Fighting. Car chases. Testosterone flying everywhere." She wiggled her

fingers at Adam. "Go. Overdose on Stallone."

Adam looked from Shannon to Kat. Something in her expression must have convinced him he was not necessary to this conversation because he shrugged and headed back into the bedroom. A moment later a clashing cacophony drifted from the room.

"It really is a horrible movie," Kat said, standing up and heading for the kitchen. "How about some wine? I have a Moscato." She found a green bottle and waggled it. "It's your favorite."

Shannon swiped at the tears and

shook her head. "Just water, please."

When Kat returned, she had two large glasses filled with ice water and a box of ultra-soft tissues. What a friend.

"So tell me, Shannon. What is going on?"

"Oh Kat..." She glanced at the bedroom.

"Don't worry. He won't come out." Kat grinned. "I have him trained."

Why this made Shannon burst into another flood of tears, she had no idea. But Kat pulled her back into her arms and nursed her

through it until she was just sobbing a little with the occasional hiccough.

“Now. Tell me.”

Shannon sat back and threaded her fingers together, loath to say the words. Worried about what Kat would think of her. “I’m...”

“What?”

It was probably best to just blurt it out. “I’m p-pregnant.”

To her credit, Kat controlled her reaction. Her eyes widened only just so. “How wonderful. Congratulations. I mean, you’re happy about this, aren’t you?”

“About the baby? Yes.” She was. She’d had plenty of time to think about it. And she was happy. Just a little worried.

A silence settled between them as Kat fiddled with the hem of her shirt. At long last she said, “I didn’t even know you were seeing anyone.”

Shannon choked on a watery laugh. “Yes. I’ve been seeing someone.”

“Well, clearly. But I thought you...”

“You thought I what?”

“Never mind. So tell me about him?”

“Him who?”

“You know. The guy.”

Shannon puddled up again. “I don’t want to talk about him.”

“No. Of course not.” Kat patted her knee. “So... What are your plans?”

“Well...” Shannon sat up a little straighter. This was why she wanted to talk to Kat. All business, no pity. “I’m having it.”

“Of course.”

“But I think I need to find another job.”

“Shannon. This is not the time to be starting a new job.”

“Yes. I know. But it could become uncomfortable around the office. You know. When I begin to show.”

“No one at Trillo-Maris is going to judge you. We’re a family.”

An annoying tear tracked its way down Shannon’s cheek. It was true. She felt so at home there. If only... “But Tristan...”

Kat’s lips tightened. “Tristan will just have to learn to deal with it.”

“What?”

“He’s treated you like his personal servant for far too long. No more fourteen-hour days. No

more last-minute projects. No more pressure and for heaven's sake, no more stress." Ferocity tightened her features. "And, as God is my witness, he will be nice to you."

Shannon barked a laugh.

"No. I mean it. He can be a tyrant where his company is concerned. Don't worry, Shan. Adam and I will keep him in line."

"You're the best friend ever. But..."

"But what?"

Shannon leaned closer. "You can't tell Adam. You can't tell anyone."

“Shannon, honey. They are gonna figure it out. You know.” Kat held her hand out in front of her own flat belly. Way out in front.

“I know. Just, please, give me some time? And keep it a secret?”

“If you promise to stay.”

“I promise to try to stay.”

“Deal.”

“But listen, Kat. I need to take some time off. You know, to work some things out.”

“I understand.”

“I’m not coming in to work tomorrow. Can you cover for me?”

“Of course. Anything. Take all

the time you need.”

Shannon laughed. It wasn’t a humorous laugh. “What I need,” she said, “is nine months.”

After Shannon left, after Kat was certain she was emotionally stable and fit to drive, Adam emerged from the bedroom. He glanced at the door. “That was interesting.”

Kat sniffed. “She just needed to talk.”

“Mmm. Girl talk?”

“Yes, Adam. Girl talk. And it’s confidential. So don’t ask.”

He pouted. "I wasn't going to ask."

"You were too."

"Was not."

"Really?"

He shrugged. "If it was so confidential, I guess you should have kept your voices down. I heard every word."

"Adam. You were supposed to be watching a movie!"

"It ended."

"You heard everything?"

"Yeah." His expression was grim. "Tristan will not be pleased."

Tristan came to work on Monday with a bouquet of flowers only to discover not only had Shannon called in sick, she would likely be out the rest of the week. To make matters worse, when he went by her house, several times a day, she wasn't there. Even Bosco wasn't there, snuffling and snorting at the door.

If Bosco wasn't there, she probably wouldn't be back any time soon.

Each night when he went home, he stood on the patio and stared down at her place through the darkness, just waiting for the lights

to flare on. But they didn't.

It was awful not being with her. Not being able to talk to her. The torment was made worse by the knowledge that she was still angry at him. He didn't even want to think about her threats to find another job.

She was probably staying with her sister. Or maybe her mother. But Tristan didn't have their numbers and, try as he might, he couldn't get the information from Kat. When the hell had she become so close-lipped anyway? Adam was worse. And the two of them together—impossible!

Whenever he so much as mentioned Shannon's name, they launched into tag-team harangues, nagging that he should stop being such a slave driver, that he should give Shannon more space, let her live her own life.

He wasn't quite sure what they were babbling about. Shannon had never complained that he was a slave driver—not even that night in the Pleasure Palace.

Hell. Now why did he have to go and think about that?

He forced the memory from his mind. He really didn't need lust clawing at him on top of everything

else.

By the end of the week, he was worried. Really worried. They'd never had a fight before so he didn't know what the statute of aggravation might be for her. But he had to accept this wasn't a simple little tiff. This was something much more.

If only he could talk to her, reassure her. Tell her he'd decided to toss his idiotic rule out the window, tell her what he was feeling. But he couldn't. And to make matters worse, there was no one else he could talk to about it either.

Because no one knew.

Yeah. He was miserable.

By Sunday, he was a mess, reliving every second he'd spent with her in the past month and second-guessing every word he'd said.

He came to the conclusion he'd been a pompous ass.

When Adam called to remind him about the football game they'd agreed to watch together, he almost cried off. He knew he wouldn't be good company. He knew he really didn't give a shit who won the game. And he knew he didn't want to pretend to be civil for an entire

afternoon.

But Mom was expecting them. And frankly, Tristan knew it was time to come clean to his brother.

When he got there, the game was already in full swing. Adam, as always, was yelling at the screen. Tristan poked his head into the kitchen and waved to Mom and Kat, who were snapping beans for supper. He grabbed a beer for himself and one for Adam.

“Don’t ruin your appetite,” Mom called as he wandered back to the family room, twisting off the tops.

Mom had an awesome hi-def

wide-screen TV. It had been Adam's idea to get it for her two Christmases ago because she had a larger family room than either of them and she didn't mind if they had friends over. Not that *she* ever turned it on.

Tristan handed Adam his beer and flopped down on the other end of the overstuffed couch. He waited for a commercial. "Do you have a minute?"

Adam glanced at the screen, checking out hot babes selling beer and web domains, and shrugged. "Probably." He shoved a handful of popcorn into his mouth.

“Don’t ruin your appetite.”

Adam chuckled. “Yeah. Right. Wassup?”

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

Adam stilled, his beer halfway to his mouth.

Tristan sucked in a deep breath and pulled a small box from his pocket. He tossed it in his brother’s direction. Adam scrambled to catch it—amazingly not spilling a drop of beer. Shooting his brother a curious look, he opened it. He stared at the ring.

“Dude. Are you proposing to me?”

“Never mind.” Tristan leaned over to take the ring back but Adam held it out of reach.

“Never mind, my ass! What the hell is this? You bought a ring? Tristan, you’re not even seeing anyone.”

“That’s what I wanted to tell you.” He scrubbed at the pulse throbbing in his temple. It didn’t help. “I’ve been...seeing someone. And I’m in love with her.”

“What the hell? Why didn’t you tell me?” Outrage and bemusement warred in Adam’s eyes.

Tristan had to look away. “I couldn’t tell you.”

“Why the fuck not?” Adam’s nostrils flared and he sucked in an enormous breath. “Oh. Oh. Oh hell. You’ve been dating someone from the office!”

Tristan wanted to crawl into a little ball.

“Oh hell. After everything you put me through with Kat? After all that talk about your stupid little rule?”

“I know. I know. It is a stupid rule.”

“And now you just...” Adam stilled. He went a little pale around the lips. “It’s not Shannon, is it?”

Tristan blew out a breath and

flopped back on the sofa. He pulled a pillow in front of him and mashed it against his chest. "Of course it's Shannon."

Silence hummed between them. "Tristan..." Adam's tone was funny, strangled maybe, as though he wanted to say something but couldn't. Or wouldn't.

"What?"

"Shannon's..." Still strangled. Still clipped.

"Shannon's what?"

Adam wiped a palm over his face. "Nothing. Shannon's great. Just great." He tossed the ring back. "Have you told her?"

“Told her what?”

“That you love her, idiot.”

“No.”

“You should tell her.”

Tristan dropped his chin to his chest. “She’s gone AWOL.”

“You have to find her. You have to tell her before...”

“Before what?”

Adam’s lips moved but no sound came out. Then he said, “I don’t know. Before it’s too late?”

“I will. I mean, I plan to. When I see her. If I see her.”

“You better fucking figure out a way to see her.”

“Yeah.” The game came back on and Tristan sat there, hugging his pillow and staring at the television, but he had no idea what was happening on the screen. He had the sense Adam wasn’t really paying attention either. “You aren’t mad that I broke the rule?”

Adam chuckled and then he barked a laugh. “Oh, you’ll pay for that. But no. I’m not mad. I couldn’t be happier. She’s great. She’s really great.”

Tristan relaxed. Collapsed. What a relief.

He felt so much better.

One hurdle over.

Now all he had to do was get Shannon to say yes.

The game heated up and Adam's attention swung back to the screen. In a minute he was screaming at the players once more. Tristan finished his beer and stood.

"Hey, bro. Get me another beer, will you?" There was a strange expression on Adam's face but Tristan couldn't be bothered to work it out.

"Sure."

Tristan wandered into the kitchen—thinking about Shannon, plotting how to find her, corner her, force her to listen to him—but

something made him stop at the threshold. His mother and Kat had their heads together and they were whispering.

Now, that was pretty typical of the two. Mom had taken to Kat like a mother duck takes to ducklings. She'd always wanted a daughter and had been cursed with rowdy boys. But they weren't whispering softly and they were both so absorbed in their furtive conversation they didn't even notice him.

"How far is she along?" Mom's eyes were alight with glee.

"Not far."

“How exciting. I can’t wait.”

“It’ll be tough for her.”

“I’m sure. But I was a single mother. I survived. Besides, she’s practically family.”

Kat sniffed a little and covered Mom’s hand with hers. “I am so glad to hear you say that.”

Tristan grabbed a brownie off the cooling rack.

“Careful, dear, those are hot.”

“Okay, Mom. What are you guys talking about?”

Was it his imagination or did Kat pale a little when she saw him? “Nothing!” she warbled.

Tristan opened the fridge and pulled out the milk.

“Don’t drink out of the carton, dear. Get a glass.”

Obediently, he complied. “Didn’t sound like nothing.”

“It’s just wonderful. Someone’s going to have a baby.”

He bit into the brownie. It was hot. He took a quick snort of cold milk. “Really? Who?”

Mom sighed. “Don’t talk with your mouth full. For heaven’s sake.”

Tristan swallowed. “Who?”

“No one,” Kat snapped.

At the same time, his mother chirped, "One of the girls at your office."

Tristan blanched. "What?"

"Elaine! That was supposed to be a secret."

Mom patted Kat's hand. "I know, dear. But it is just so exciting. One of our girls." She frowned at her son. "Kat's afraid you won't approve. Now what did you do to make her think that?"

Tristan glanced at Kat. Her lips were tight. She refused to meet his eyes. Really? Did she really think so poorly of him? That he was a...*curmudgeon*? He wasn't. He

really wasn't. If Jenny or Sara—probably Jenny—was in a family way, it was her decision. Her life. As her boss, he would make damn sure she had everything she needed.

“I don't care. We'll take care of her.” He smiled at Kat in a manner he hoped was reassuring. She just paled a little more. “We're all family at Trillo-Maris, right, Kat?”

“See.” Mom nudged Kat's arm. “I told you so.”

Kat bit her lip.

Adam entered the kitchen—probably hunting down his beer. He hovered there behind Tristan, a

looming shadow. "So it's out? He knows?"

Mom nodded, beaming. "See. I don't know what you two were all worried about. He took the news just fine." She sighed. "What a darling little baby *she* will have."

Tristan had a sudden vision of Jenny's child, a little boy with green hair and an armament of piercings in his nose. He chuckled, glancing at his brother.

Adam was focused on Kat with a funny look on his face, so Tristan's gaze, naturally, swung in her direction. She glared meaningfully at Adam and shook

her head. Their expressions, the glances passing between them, made him still. Made him ask, through nerveless lips, “Who is it we’re talking about, exactly?”

Before Kat could shush her, Mom blurted it out. “Why Shannon Weiss, of course.”

And a glass of milk shattered on the kitchen floor.

Chapter Fourteen

How he drove home, Tristan would never know. But somehow he did. He was on the hill heading up to his house when he made a sudden turn to the right. Into Shannon's development. He knew he shouldn't bother. She hadn't been home all week, after all. But something inside him, some compulsion, wouldn't allow him to just drive on by.

His heart caught in his throat when he saw her car in the driveway.

She was home.

He was parked and storming to her door before thought fully formed. Oh. And he was pounding. On the door.

Bosco barked and howled like a banshee so he knew she couldn't ignore him for long and, indeed, she did not.

The door opened and there she was. Ah. There she was. For a moment he was stunned speechless by her beauty.

And then she opened her

mouth. "Go away, Tristan."

"No." He put his foot in the door to stop her from shutting it in his face, which was a mistake because, damn, it hurt. But at least she couldn't shut him out. Though she tried. When she slammed it on his foot again, he grabbed the door with his hand. "Shannon. We need to talk."

"There's nothing left to say."

"Yes. There is."

"Like what?"

"Like, I'm an idiot?"

That got her. She almost smiled.

"You *are* an idiot."

“Shannon. Please. Please let me in.”

He could see she was waffling, wavering, so he pressed forward, gently shouldering his way through the door. Bosco greeted him with a flurry of sniffs and snorts and then, bored, trotted away.

“Well, all right.” She strode into the living room, her arms wrapped around her waist. He stared at her, at her belly, trying to see if he could notice any difference. There was none. She was as slender as ever.

At the initial realization that he was going to be a father, the blood had drained from his head. He'd

nearly passed out. Thank God Adam had been right behind him to steady him or he would probably have ended up facedown on the linoleum. But now that he'd had time to think about it, time to reflect, he couldn't be happier. A child would bind them together. Pull them even closer. A child was a connection they would always share.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

He forced his gaze up to her face. God, he loved her. He couldn't wait any longer. He pulled the ring out of his pocket and dropped to

one knee. "Shannon Weiss. Will you marry me?"

She paled and then turned a bright pink. Tears pooled in her eyes.

His heart lifted. This was it. This was the moment. The moment she said yes.

But she didn't say yes. She took a step back and hissed, "Oh my God. She told you!"

"What? No!" He leapt to his feet.

She put her palms on her cheeks. "I can't believe she told you."

“She didn’t tell me anything. I overheard. But it was...I didn’t know who...and then Mom... Shannon!”

She whirled on him, a fury. She thrust a finger at the door. “Get out!”

“No! Shannon. I love you, bab... sweetheart. I want to marry you.”

“I will not. I refuse.” She marched to the door and held it open. “Go.”

But he didn’t want to go. He wanted her to say yes and fall into his arms and kiss him silly. “You have to marry me.”

Every muscle in her body

clenched. "No. I do not."

"But the baby... It's mine."

"No," she snarled. "It's mine."

"Shannon. Be reasonable."

"I am being reasonable. I'm being very reasonable."

"But I love you. You love me."

She stared at him, those big doe eyes wide and wet. "I do. I do love you, Tristan. But you don't love me. I'm your hot office fling, the dirty little secret you keep from everyone. I'm the woman you fuck in secret. Not the woman you marry. The only reason you're proposing is because of the baby."

“No. I’m not.” He was trying to stay calm but he felt reason slipping away. Felt her slipping away.

Her chin firmed. She threw her shoulders back. “I’m sorry, Tristan. The answer is no. And that’s final. Please go.”

“It’s not final. It will never be final until this ring is on your finger.”

At the sight of the ring, the four-karat emerald-cut diamond in a velvet box, the tears began to flow. But all she said was, “Go. Please go.”

And he did.

But it wasn’t final.

It would not be final. Not until she was back in his arms.

He didn't bother with flowers in the morning. He knew better. But he did have a plan. A ring in his pocket and a plan.

If Shannon was convinced that he was ashamed of her or he didn't want their relationship to be public, she was in for a rude awakening.

He came in late on purpose. Adam was already running the meeting. The crew was sitting around the table and drinking coffee and eating scones. They all looked up—like a herd of meerkats

—when he entered the boardroom but there was only one set of eyes that mattered.

Her gaze was like a frigid wind.

He ignored the shiver skewering him and offered the company a tight, impersonal smile. “Morning.”

Adam lifted a brow. “Good of you to join us.”

Tristan ignored him. “Everyone, I have an important announcement to make. Shannon?” She stiffened, glared at her steno pad. “Could you get me a cup of coffee?”

A flutter of confusion crossed her face, but that was okay. It was critical to his plan to throw her off

balance. She straightened her spine and cleared her throat and said in that British tone, as cold as the moors, "Yes, of course, Mr. Trillo."

He soaked in the sight of her as she made his coffee. When she returned to the front of the room, he knelt before her. Not a wise move, he realized, since she had a steaming cup of coffee in her hand.

What was it the Brits said? In for a penny, in for a pound.

He took a deep breath and just said it.

"Shannon Weiss. I love you more than this company. I love you more than my reputation. I love

you more than my friends. I love you more than anything. I humbly ask you to be my wife. Live with me and share my life." He thrust the ring forward. "Will you?"

The gasps from around the table shook the room.

Kat, bless her heart, took the mug from Shannon's hands.

But that just freed Shannon up to cross her arms over her chest when she was about to say no, so Tristan leapt to his feet and yanked her against him and kissed her.

She allowed it. But only for a moment.

It was awful when she pulled

away.

She put her hand over his, the one holding the ring, and pressed it back toward him. "No."

"No!" Sara squawked. "Are you crazy?"

"No. I won't marry a man who is only proposing because of the baby."

Jack spewed a mouthful of coffee across the conference table. "Baby?" He gaped at Sara. "There's a baby?"

"Shh," she hissed.

"Shannon, I told you. I'm not proposing because of the baby. I

love you. I've loved you for a long time."

Sara leaned her cheek on her folded hands. "This is so romantic."

Adam glared at his staff. "Could you give us some privacy, please?"

Tristan frowned at his brother. "Us?"

Adam ignored him and shooed everyone out into the hall. They grumbled about it but they left the conference room, leaving only Adam, Kat, Shannon and Tristan.

Shannon humphed. "It's not going to make a bit of difference, you know, whether they're here or not. My answer is still no."

Adam nodded. "Since Tristan's only proposing because of the baby."

"I am not!"

Shannon glared at him.
"Precisely."

Adam cleared his throat. "It may interest you to know that Tristan showed me the ring on Sunday."

"And?"

Damn, Tristan reflected. She could be glacial to Adam too.

To his credit, his brother took it well. He leaned closer to Shannon and said in a half-whisper, "He

showed me the ring *before* he found out about the baby.”

Shannon wobbled a little bit and reached behind her for a chair. Sat with a plop. “Are you being straight with me?”

“Is that true?” Kat glanced from Adam to Tristan and back again.

“He showed it to me when we were watching football. Told me he had something to confess. Admitted he was seeing Shannon. That he was in love with her.”

Kat frowned. “You knew this and you didn’t tell me?”

Adam held up his hands. “There wasn’t time. Right after we talked,

he went into the kitchen where you and Mom let the cat out of the bag."

Kat crossed her arms over her chest. "It wasn't me." She turned to Shannon. "It wasn't me! Adam overheard our conversation the other night. Let something slip to his mom. It was Elaine who told Tristan. But none of us knew. I mean, we didn't know Tristan was the father."

Adam grinned, looking full of himself. "I knew."

Kat smacked him lightly on the shoulder. "You should have told me."

“Come on, sweetheart.” Adam snaked an arm around Kat’s waist and steered her to the door. “Let’s give these two some space. I think they have some things to discuss.”

“Yeah,” Kat said as Adam led her from the boardroom. “But you should have told me.”

The door closed and they were alone. Tristan dropped his gaze, suddenly nervous. Suddenly scared spitless.

“Is it true?” Her voice was soft, came to him through a fog.

He glanced at her and was, once again, nearly unmanned by the tears in her eyes. “Is what true?”

“Did you already have the ring?”

He knelt before her and took her hands in his, kissed her fingers. “I bought it on Monday.”

“Monday? A week ago?”

“The day after we got back from Ensenada. Shannon, I know I’ve been an ass.”

“You said idiot.”

He smiled. “That too. It was wrong of me to hide from Levin. I should have been a man. Introduced you and to hell with... with everything.”

“It wasn’t about Levin.”

“I know. It’s about us. Being proud of each other and wanting to share our love with the world. And I am. Proud and happy and humbled you would even consider being with me.”

“If I marry you...” His heart lifted and his expression must have as well, because she repeated, “If I marry you...everyone will know. It won’t be a secret anymore.”

“I don’t want it to be a secret. I want everyone to know you’re mine. Especially every man.”

“But your rule...”

“It was a stupid rule. We both know it was a stupid rule.”

She cupped his cheek. "It wasn't a stupid rule. It was a good rule. It was just stupid for us."

"It was hell on me. Shannon, can you forgive me? Can you forget what a dolt I am long enough to say yes? I do love you. I really do."

"But enough to spend your life with me?"

"Yes!"

"I mean, my parents married because they had to and they were miserable."

"We won't be miserable. I promise."

She laughed, a little. "You can't

promise something like that."

"I can. I will. I will make you happy and keep you happy and..." He shot her a mischievous grin. "Maybe, every once in a while, you can misbehave."

"And you'll give me a spanking?" She did laugh now. It was the most beautiful sound he'd ever heard.

"Only if you really, really want one."

"So no more hiding our relationship?"

"Not a chance."

"No more ducking into Mexican

hat-vendor stalls?"

"Only if you really, really want a hat."

"No more secret trysts?"

"Maybe a few," he said with a sheepish grin

Her face was a cameo. She was exquisite. He couldn't believe she was gazing at him with *that* expression. Couldn't believe he deserved her, had won her.

But she hadn't said yes. Not yet.

He held out the ring again. "So will you marry me, Shannon? Will you make me the happiest man in the world?"

She held out her hand and his heart leapt.

Not daring to delay for an instant, he slipped the ring on her finger. It fit perfectly and she sighed. "Tristan. It's beautiful."

"You're beautiful." Still on his knees, he knelt up and kissed her. Kissed the sweetest, most adorable lips in the land. Heaven. It was heaven.

Because she kissed him back.

His bliss—their bliss—was interrupted when the door opened and Jack Maris poked his head into the boardroom. "Say, are you guys going to eat the last scone? Because

if you aren't..."

In tandem, they bellowed, "Get lost, Jack."

And for once, he did.

Epilogue

The middle of the night was a magical time. Tristan pulled Shannon closer and kissed her forehead. The stars above were dazzling and mirrored in the twinkling lights of the city below. It was beautiful, clear and cool. The heat of the day still hovered but only just enough.

Shannon was a warm weight in his arms. He could feel her breath

on his neck and her heart beating against his. Her breasts were heavy and round, a burning imprint on his chest. He stroked their fullness and she murmured in her sleep and cuddled closer. Thank God the patio lounge was big enough for both of them.

He wanted to wake her, rouse her, but she needed her sleep. Now, for the moment, he was content to hold her, knowing she was and always would be his.

Life was perfect. Absolutely perfect. He had the most beautiful woman in the world in his arms, a tremendously successful company,

a pretty damn nice house and...

A plaintive wail split the night and an instinctual sizzle shot through his solar plexus. It always affected him that way when he heard her cry. Like a red-hot poker in his heart.

“Not again,” Shannon whimpered.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart,” he said, disentangling himself and settling her back down on the lounge chair. “I’ll get her.”

He covered Shannon with the blanket and she nuzzled deeper. “Mmm. Thanks, hon.”

He padded through the sliding-

glass door and into the house, past Bosco snoring on the couch and down the hall to the room that had once been his den. It was painted pink and yellow now and had Pooh Bears and butterflies gamboling on the walls. And there. There in the crib, standing up and clutching the rails with tiny fists, was Emma. His Emma. Her pudgy cheeks streaked with tears.

“Oh sweetheart,” he murmured, scooping her into his arms. “Don’t cry. Daddy’s here.”

She smelled like talcum powder and sweetness. He cuddled her closer and she cooed and patted his

cheek. He gobbled at her fingers until she laughed.

“Did you wake up? Did you? Are you going to be a night owl forever?” He grabbed a blankey and headed to the kitchen to make her a bottle.

God, how he loved the feel of her in his arms.

If someone had told him a year ago he would love another female with the depth he felt for Shannon, he'd have called them crazy. But now here she was, his baby girl. His Emma, with her corkscrew curls, fawn-like eyes and adorable bow-shaped lips. He loved her more

than he ever thought a man could love. And he loved Shannon even more, as astounding as that was.

Emma murmured and burbled and spit at him as he waited for the bottle to warm and he talked right back at her. All nonsense but the most important words he ever said. He tested the milk on his inner wrist and then sat in the big rocker they'd installed in the living room. He held his baby girl and stared out at his wife sleeping in the shadows on the patio on a balmy night.

At some point, she stirred. She always did. A mother's instincts defied comprehension. Shannon

somehow knew her baby was eating. Her body wanted to be there. To provide.

Tristan sat in the rocking chair, holding his daughter. Out in the shadows, his wife stood and stretched. The moonlight captured her silhouette even through her fuzzy robe and the breath snagged in his throat. God. She was lovely.

She put her hand on her belly and lumbered toward the house, yawning all the while. "Oh," she whispered. "You're feeding her."

"You were sleeping."

She yawned. "I was tired. Sorry."

Tristan chuckled. "No worries. I love doing this."

"You do, don't you?" Her eyes glowed in the moonlight. "You're such a good father."

Emma lost the nipple and grunted. Tristan rushed to reposition it in her mouth.

"Sweet darling." Moving slowly, Shannon leaned down to kiss Emma's forehead. The baby, cheeks working, merely grunted.

Tristan put out a lip. "What about me?"

Shannon smiled and bent to kiss his forehead as well. "You are my darling too." She sat on the arm of

the sofa and watched. Just watched as Tristan tipped up the bottle and continued feeding their ravenous child. When the bottle was empty, when Emma was sucking on air, he tossed the blanket over his shoulder and gently lifted her up, rocking and patting her back.

Shannon stood, her features luminous, warm and filled with love. "How's our girl doing?" she cooed, rubbing a tuft of rampant curls.

Emma belched and they shared a smile. "Our girl is doing fine," he said. He put his hand on Shannon's big belly. "And how's our boy

doing?"

Her hand joined his and they shared a long, lingering moment. And then they felt it. A tiny kick. Her eyes widened and she laughed. "Oh, he's doing fine," she said. "I think your mum was right."

"She was?"

"I think he's going to be a handful. Just like his father."

She kissed him and it rushed through him, just as it always did, like a wildfire.

Love.

Complete, absolute and all-consuming.

About the Author

Her Royal Hotness, Sabrina York, writes naked erotic fiction for fans who like it hot, hard and balls-to-the-wall, and erotic romance and fantasy for readers who prefer a slow burn to passion. An award-winning author in multiple genres, Sabrina loves writing hot, humorous stories in all kinds of settings.

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