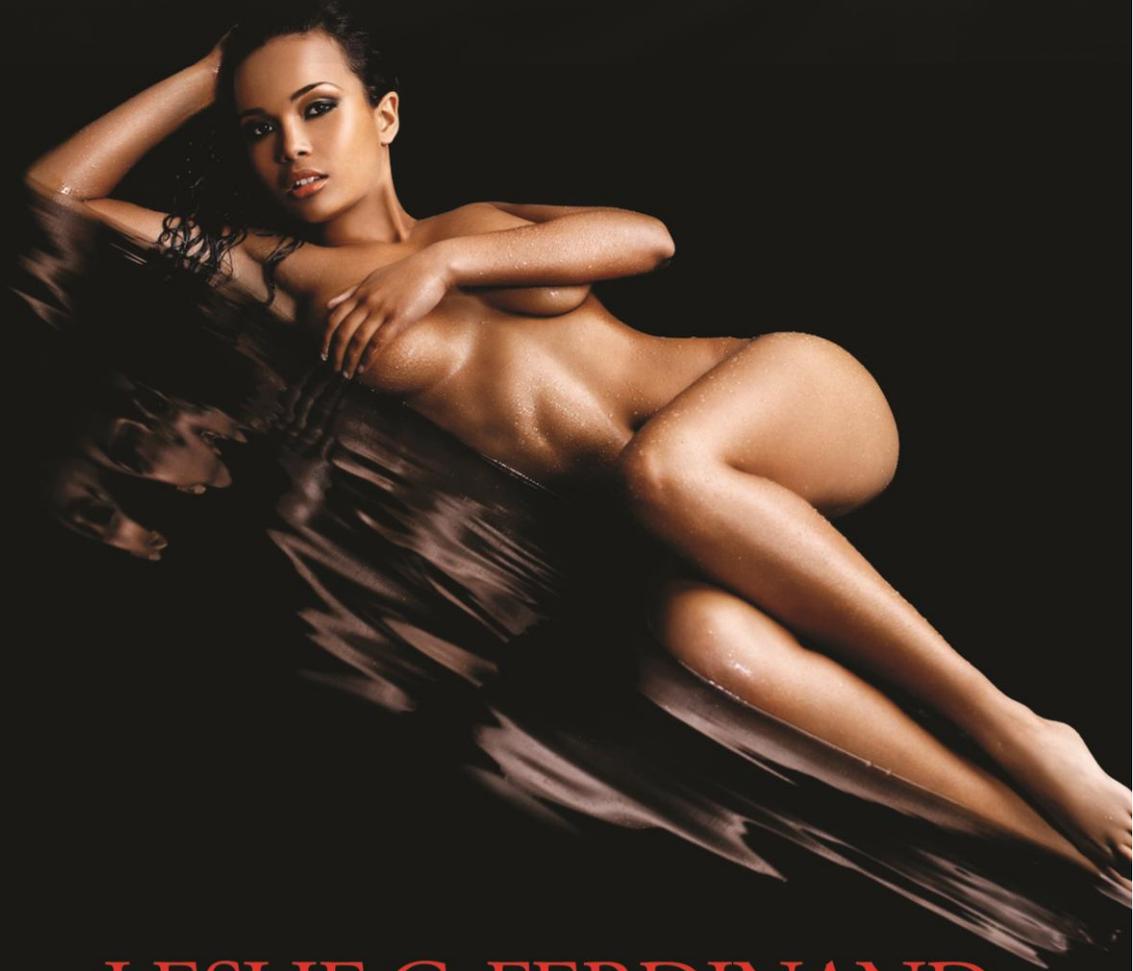


WICKED

Mure



LESLIE C. FERDINAND

Wicked Allure

By Leslie C. Megahey & Shirley H. Ferdinand

PUBLISHED BY: Leslie C. Megahey & Shirley H. Ferdinand Wicked Allure

Copyright © 2012 Leslie C. Megahey & Shirley H. Ferdinand Cover Image Copyright © 2012 iStockPhoto/Larysa Dodz Photography Cover Design Copyright © 2012 Clevell Harris, Harris Designs. This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places and events is purely coincidental. The characters are solely from the authors' imaginations and used fictitiously.

ISBN:978-1475010800

AISN: B007S6QX5U

Smashwords Edition: 978-1476421339

Multicultural Erotic Romance: Adults Only Content, Explicit Language and some drug use.

I wish to thank Joyce who insisted we could do this. I would like to thank Bob for introducing us to her. I would like to thank my family and friends. And, always, I thank God for allowing me to use my imagination, wild though it can sometimes be.

“*O* omph!”

The sound exploded from Zachary Steele’s mouth as he climbed into bed and collided with a warm body. He swore the room had been empty when he’d walked in.

Frowning, he searched his memory, realizing he wasn’t certain if he’d been alone or not. He’d come in, amazed at how big his penthouse suddenly seemed to him. After gazing around, impressed by the sheer size of this one room, he’d laid out four lines of coke on the highly polished nightstand, snorted two, then went into the bathroom.

Once he’d returned to the bedroom, he’d turned off the lights and sat on the couch near the fireplace for a long while. He’d forgotten how long he’d sat in the gloom, as black as the void in his life. Seeing no good about ruminating on his past mistakes, he’d gotten into the bed, and found it already occupied.

Had he really gotten that wasted that he didn’t know where he was or who he was with?

He was supposed to be at his apartment, but, while he had a familiarity with this room, it was *un* familiar as well.

He squinted, unable to see much in the darkness. Unsteadily, he turned and flicked on the bedside lamp. Two small lines of white powder remained. The room was spinning, the combination of coke and scotch buzzing through his veins. The thought persisted that something was off about his bedroom. The hunter green and gold décor didn’t seem right. Neither could he remember purchasing the paintings of correlating scenes from an African hunt that marched along the room’s long walls.

At the fuzzy edges of his brain, he knew those paintings and knew they shouldn’t be in his house. Hell, he wasn’t even sure how he’d gotten here. One moment he was dancing with Karolyn, his business partner, at her birthday party, and the next he was imagining he was floating above the crowd. Flying high.

He laughed, loud in the still silence of his surroundings. He sure as shit was flying high, but not because he’d suddenly sprouted wings.

“Zachary?”

Zach jerked around at the sound of his name. A voice went with the warm body he’d collided with. Not *a* voice. *Her* voice. Soft, sexy, curling through him like wisps of smoke. His laughter must have awakened her. His mind immediately rejected the notion that she was really in bed next to him. Madigan couldn’t be here. She didn’t even know where he lived anymore.

She was stirring beside him and sitting up, the sheets rustling with her movements.

The lamplight bathed her honey colored skin with a golden glow. Exotically high cheekbones set in a delicate face attested to the melting pot of her heritage: African-American, Native American, with a smattering of French and Spanish. The black silk sheet she held around her breasts contrasted perfectly with her beautiful complexion.

Dark hair hung past the graceful curve of her shoulders, cradling her lovely face in a cloud of thick waves. She appeared so fragile and vulnerable. *Young*. He drew his brows together, reminding himself that she was all of those things. He was the sonofabitch who’d thrown her aside.

Madigan’s topaz eyes were hazy, glazed. Zachary stared at her, baffled, a wild, primitive explosion of pain and sweetness, disbelief and hope bursting through him.

Madi wasn’t a drug user, so she must have been plastered from the expensive champagne that had been served at her mother’s party.

No, that wasn't right either. She hadn't been at her mother's party.

"Zachary, what are you doing here?" Even as she sat next to him, she swayed.

"You're in my bed at my house," he retorted. "I should be asking you the very same question."

"I am?" She shoved a hand through her hair, biting down on her lush lower lip and glancing around at the splendidly furnished room with the high cathedral ceilings and wall of windows that had somehow escaped his attention until then. A vast panorama of the night-darkened sky studded with brilliant stars stretched before them. "You should?"

Deep concentration furrowed her brow and she seemed lost, ethereally beautiful, a goddess of the moon who'd bewitched him an eternity ago.

"Are you really here, Zach?" she asked, her sexy-soft voice tinged with disbelief.

"I think so, Madi," he said, the confession rumbling from deep within his gut. He wasn't sure of anything at the moment. Not the place he thought was his home. Or the girl in the bed. "Are *you* really here?" She giggled at the absurd question. Zach was sure she didn't understand how removed from his mind he felt.

Her slim fingers released the sheet and nipples the color of wild cherries on firm, rounded breasts greeted his hungry gaze. "Now tell me if you think I'm really here," she said coyly.

Zach fought through the confusion dazing his mind. While his penthouse was finely furnished, the rooms were smaller, reflecting a bachelor's functionality that the opulence of his present surroundings lacked. Try as he might, he couldn't force one iota of sanity into his brain, reeling over Madigan's presence and his strange, but familiar surroundings.

He raised his gaze to her lovely face and reached out to touch her, almost afraid that she would evaporate but unable to restrain himself any longer. He'd fantasized about touching her for three years, ever since he'd forced her to walk away from him. Her skin was soft, warm, and fragrant. His fingers began to roam across her breasts, but then his hand suddenly seemed separated from his body, floating away, into the air, like it had been amputated. What the hell?

Right. He was flying. High. He could float away all at once or piece by piece. It didn't matter. The pieces would be put back together after the coke and the alcohol wore off, just like a maddening puzzle that Madigan had always accused him of being.

Swaying, he held up his arms and saw that he once again possessed both hands. All the better to touch Madigan. But she was gone, her being there as much a figment of his imagination as his floating appendages. Zach's shoulders slumped, disappointment and defeat crushing the euphoria of having Madi with him again.

"Madi," he said in a bleak, raw voice, hanging his head into his hands.

"I've missed you." The whisper rose from behind him, where she'd fallen back against the pillows, and he jumped. She wasn't gone; she was there, right where he'd last seen her. But he found no comfort in her presence now. She was just another one of the fantasies that he so often had about her. More intense and extreme because of the state he was in. The Madigan he knew would never have admitted that she'd missed him.

She had too much pride for that and he'd hurt her terribly.

He'd wanted her there at Carolyn's party. Carolyn's other two daughters and Madigan's sisters, Kelly and Brianna, had been there and Zach had wondered where Madigan was. If the other two were at their mother's birthday party, he was pretty sure Madi would've been too.

When she hadn't shown up, he'd gone on a mission to remove her memory. She tortured and tormented him. He'd thought the combination of drugs and alcohol would do that. It had been years since he'd did any lines, so, maybe, he'd overestimated the numbing effects. Instead

of serving as a catharsis, the drug had turned into a hallucinogenic.

He stared at her where she lay against the pillows. It seemed as if fog and mist surrounded her, the embodiment of decadent dreams and tantalizing mystery. Yes, he was dreaming. She couldn't really be there with him. She hated him—despised him actually. She was somewhere in... Somewhere. No one knew exactly where she was.

No, that wasn't true, he realized as she stretched lazily, her breasts jutting out. *He* knew where she was. In his mind, nude, inviting, telling him she'd missed him.

"I've missed you, too, love," he responded, his voice hoarse and husky. He stretched his naked length against her and pulled her into his arms. She drew in a sharp breath, the pulse point at her neck suddenly skittering uncontrollably. The scent of alcohol overpowered her Clive Christian Perfume.

"Zach—"

Refusing to have this moment ruined, he didn't let her finish. This was his fantasy and he wouldn't waste it on words and apologies. He'd said them to her so many times before in other dreams and nightmares.

He claimed her lips, crushing her body to his. She tensed beneath him and he feared she'd push him away.

Madigan's mouth had been made for kissing and Zach nipped at her full lower lip, coaxing her to surrender. Cupping her face, he showered kisses along her brow, down her jawline, finally focusing on the tender, sensitive areas around her mouth. Slowly, her lips parted for him and triumph surged through him. He moved his mouth over hers, devouring her sweet recesses. He pinned her arms above her head, his fingers twining with hers. His mouth demanded her full and complete surrender. She whimpered against his lips, the one sound her capitulation. In his fantasy world, she always cooperated with him. His tongue darted in and out of her mouth, caressing, exploring. He ravished her lips, the delicate rim of her ear, the column of her neck.

His blood flowed through his veins like molten lava, hot and swift, surging through his body in a torrent of anticipation. Pulling his mouth from hers, he leaned back. A flush tinted her skin, the pink of it making her skin glow like warmed honey. Desire softened her topaz eyes to a clear, glittering gold. She licked her lips, seeming to search for his taste. His cock pulsed. Madigan moved, positioning herself so that he lay almost atop her. Her thighs fell open and she lifted her hips, pressing against his manhood, her soft, wet folds quivering against his hard length.

"Hurry," she breathed, restless, her breath fanning his cheek, stoking his need.

"Madi," he groaned, moving away from her and sitting up. He squinted at the powdery lines on the tray, uncertain.

Dismissing his lingering unease, he laughed softly. This was *his* fantasy. He could have her do whatever he wanted to. Unlike the real girl. Reaching over, he ran his fingertip over the coke, then massaged it over the aching head of his cock and fell back against the pillows.

A snore greeted him and he frowned. Leave it to Madigan to do what she wasn't supposed to. Even the Madigan his mind conjured up.

Annoyed, he shook her awake and she bolted upright.

"I want your mouth on me," he said, extending his arm, dipping his finger into the coke again, and rubbing it on himself once more for good measure.

Madigan blinked, trying to get her bearings. Swaying again, she gazed at him, a wicked little smile curving her mouth. "Do you?" She bent down, wrapping her lips around his hard flesh. Her fingers gently massaged his tight balls, her tongue skimming his head down to his base

and back again.

He surged upward, lifting his hips off the bed and further into her mouth. The head of his cock had gone numb on him, a temporary effect of the drug. But he pumped his hips, waiting for that surge of bliss.

It came upon him suddenly, a rush of blood roaring through him, tingles spreading out from his balls and shooting through his penis. He shuddered. The warm flicks of her tongue and the sucking motion of her mouth were more intense, the tingles turning to tactile sensation. Each of the thousands of sensory nerve endings in his body was alive, on fire, the pleasure almost painful. He arched his head back, his hands going to her hair and anchoring her head, his thrusts into her mouth hard and brutal.

For a short time, he kept her there, but the coke wasn't going to allow him to come anytime soon. Thank heavens for small miracles. He hadn't touched drugs in at least a dozen years, but his high had conjured up Madigan, made her more real to him, and would allow his cock stand to remain longer than normal.

Finally, he relaxed his grip on her and eased his hips back onto the bed, pulling out of her mouth. Panting, her gaze even more cloudy and unfocused, she licked her lips and pressed her fingertips against her swollen mouth. She stared at her hands, then alternated between licking and chewing at her lower lip. Zach realized the problem immediately. Some of the coke had gotten into her system. He even managed to corrupt Madigan in his fantasies, he thought ruefully.

Forcing the thought away, he gently guided her back onto the pillows. Her legs fell open, her swollen, wet clit winking at him from the thin line of pubic hair she kept neatly trimmed. He dabbed his finger in the coke again, then rubbed it against her little nub, but she was almost too slippery for it to stick to her body. Another idea struck him and he quickly rubbed the drug on his gums. His mouth went numb within moments, the feeling not unlike the Novocain a dentist might use.

His hands caressed her flat belly, his lips following the same path, kissing each inch of silken skin that he encountered. When his mouth finally reached the core of her femininity, he stroked her pink flesh with one, long finger, massaging and manipulating her bud, reacquainting himself with the feel and texture of her body. The thin strip of hair grazed his cheek, the scent of her desire a drug even headier than the cocaine. Raising her legs so that her knees rested on her shoulders and imprisoning her in that position with his hands, he buried his mouth against her wet heat.

Madigan screamed, jerking against his swiftly moving tongue. Some of the coke must have gotten onto her clit. The numbness had worn off, leaving her extra sensitive to touch. Even as she came, he continued to lave her, alternating between slow and tender, and fast and unrelenting. She was neatly shaved, with just a thin line of stubble surrounding her outer lips. He tongued her exposed clit, his strokes centered firmly on the pulse point of nerves to be found there. His nose and mouth pressed against her wet flesh with the barest pressure. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he wanted to punish her for remaining so firmly embedded in his psyche. Then she went wild against him and he forgot about punishments. Her body was spasming against his tongue, her cries, her pleas incoherent. Her back arched and she used her hands to push his face against her. She ground hard against him, convulsing and wild, sobbing and screaming his name. Wetness flooded his mouth and Zach breathed in her scent, high now on her taste.

Wiping his mouth on the crook of his arms, he raised himself on his knees and kept her

legs imprisoned. She hadn't yet recovered from her last orgasm. But as he buried himself inside her and settled her heels on his shoulders, she bucked against him, clawing at his back, her vaginal walls clenching around him. She moved her head from side to side, bathing his cock with the hot flood of her release. He lay motionless inside her, allowing the aftershocks of her latest orgasm to subside. After a moment, he began to move, gritting his teeth against the pleasure. He was so very deep inside of her that each small shudder she made vibrated through him.

She groaned, then whimpered. Her eyes were glistening. "I've never stopped loving you," she said, her voice unsteady from the effects of her orgasm, the coke and champagne, and emotion. Her lower lip trembled.

"Madigan, don't look at me like that," he said hoarsely and he briefly closed his eyes against her wounded look. A wound that reached deep into her soul and scarred his own. He went still once more, unable to withdraw, resting his head in the curve of her neck and shoulder and breathing heavily. When he looked at her again and saw the adoration in her gaze, tenderness welled inside him and he smoothed some damp strands of hair behind her ears. "You bring me to my knees." God help him, she always would. "What do you want from me?"

"Just love me," she said simply. "That's all I've ever wanted from you."

"I already do. I always have."

"Then show me. I don't want us to do it this way. Make love to me. You always said there was a difference."

A difference between raw sex and lovemaking, she meant.

He freed her legs so she could entwine them with his. They were closer now, her taut nipples pressing into his chest. He laid his cheek against the crown of her head and began thrusting slowly into her, her lips against his neck, at the bridge of his shoulder and on his chest whisper-soft and intoxicating.

She bent her legs at her knees, opening wider for him. He pressed into her, his strokes firmer, faster. But she still loved him and his heart melted at the thought. After everything he'd done, she still loved him.

His brain rebelled. His conjured-up Madigan still loved him. The real woman would gladly cut his balls off. It didn't matter. If this was where he found peace and forgiveness for his past mistakes with her and reclaimed her love, he would. In this suspended reality, she was his and he was hers.

He bent his head, his lips seeking hers. The kiss was gentle and tender and their orgasm burst upon them, her body convulsing around him as his seed exploded into her belly.

At last, Zachary thought, as he waited for his breathing to return to normal. Madigan was his again, at last.

"Holy shit!"

"Hell, wrap her in the sheet, Brianna, while I get Ricky to carry Madigan back to her room.

The voices of her sisters reached Madigan through an alcoholic haze. They were looming over her like specters from a horror movie. The top sheet was mercilessly tangled around her legs and she cursed, trying to free herself. Each movement vibrated through her head. The scent of sex and musk, alcohol and cologne jammed through her nose and stirred up the contents of her stomach, like a nefarious witches' brew.

Beside her, a hard body pressed against her back, jolting her to awareness. She raised her

head. The room spun and she groaned.

Well, semi-awareness, then.

“Madi, can you walk to your room?” Kelly asked, her topaz eyes filled with concern.

They all had topaz eyes like their father. Her and her two sisters. DeLeon genes were strong.

Madigan blinked as her sister’s words sank in. “I’m not in my room?” Her tongue felt funny, almost too heavy to roll out words, and her breath hissed out in a warm mist of champagne-laced fumes.

“No!” Brianna almost snarled. “You’re in a guestroom. With Zachary.” Kelly jerked the sheet free from the tangle of Madigan’s and Zach’s legs. “Yeah, if Momma finds you here, she’s going to tear you a new asshole. Get up and let’s get you to your room before she comes in here and finds you with Zachary.”

“I’m with Zach? Zachary Steele?” She squinted at the body next to her. Lamplight flooded the hard planes and angles of the perfect specimen. Broad chest with a dousing of hair. Trim, tapered waist. Long, muscular legs and thighs. The thick, long length of him, impressive even in its relaxed state, nestled amidst a thicket of dark curls.

Brianna grabbed her arm and yanked her to a sitting position. Immediately, she fell back, like she’d been kicked in the head. Kelly threw aside the comforter and snapped the black sheet in an effort to straighten it out. Soon, the cool silk sheet was fluttering over Madigan’s heated skin, covering her and Zach’s nudity.

“Go get Ricky, Kelly,” Brianna ordered. At twenty-six, Brianna was the oldest and the bossiest. “And hurry!”

Madigan stared at her sister through the fringes of her lashes. “Why invade my privacy? I’m an adult and well over twenty-one; therefore, legally able to fuck whomever I please!” An inexplicable sadness dampened the breezy words. Months ago, her heart had finally caught up with her brain and she’d ceased to wonder or care about Zach.

“Madigan! Tell me you didn’t come home to start this shit again, girl,” Brianna snapped. “That’s the alcohol talking. From the smell of it, one match flick would blow your ass away. What did you drink anyway?” Frowning into the darkness, Madigan shrugged. “Bout two, three bottles of champagne,” she slurred, not sure if she was exaggerating. She nudged Zach, but he didn’t move.

“Excellent,” Brianna said cheerfully. “You won’t remember a thing when you sober up. But I don’t know how you’re going to get to the airport to catch your plane.

You’ll never sober up before Momma wakes up in the morning.” Madigan searched her mind, trying to make sense of Brianna’s words. “Why would I want to do that?” she finally asked, relenting when she couldn’t remember anything that remotely made sense. She certainly didn’t remember how she ended up in bed with Zach.

“You tell me, little sister. You wanted to sneak here and sneak out without Momma ever knowing you’d come to her birthday party.”

Odd, that. If she didn’t want her mother to know, why had she come at all?

This couldn’t be real. To prove her point, she pinched Zach. He didn’t so much as flinch. Madigan yawned and beckoned Brianna over.

“Come closer, Bri,” she ordered when her sister stopped at the edge of the bed, out of reach of her drunken grasp.

“What, Madi?” Brianna asked as she leaned closer.

Madigan pinched her sister’s bare arm as hard as she could.

“Ouch! What the hell’s wrong with you?” Brianna stormed, a flush of anger rising to her cheeks.

“I’m trying to see if I’m dreaming.”

Brianna pinched Madigan’s cheeks and Madigan yelped. “Does that answer your question, Madi?”

Kelly returned at that moment, her fiancé in tow. Ricky was just an inch or so taller than Kelly, which still made him quite a distance below six feet.

“Carry her to her room for us, Ricky,” Kelly said frantically, the curls of her elaborate up-do framing her face but doing nothing to soften the worry. “We can’t have Momma finding them together. All hell will break loose. She wants Madigan and Zach to stay separated because Zach is a faithless womanizer.”

“Yeah, especially after all the trouble she went through to break them up,” Brianna mumbled.

“Shut up, Bri,” Kelly growled.

They were going too fast for Madigan’s hazy brain to fully understand the import of Brianna’s words.

“Come on, Ricky,” Kelly urged. “Hurry.”

Ricky breathed in deeply and glared at each of them. If her person wouldn’t be in jeopardy, this could get interesting. But how her sisters thought his little short ass could pick her up was something they’d never discover.

“I’m fine right where I am, thank you,” Madigan said primly, turning on her side and letting her eyes slip blissfully closed. The lamp lit on Zach’s side was soft, barely lighting the length and breadth of the bed; still, the glare was beginning to hurt. “I’m staying here.”

“No, you’re not!” Brianna’s voice pounded through Madigan’s head. “Kelly is getting married in a few weeks. We’d prefer not to attend your funeral and have Momma arrested for your murder. She doesn’t like to be crossed and she doesn’t want you with Zach. Please, Madi. Let Ricky carry you.”

Zach didn’t want her with Zach, so there was nothing to worry about. “Ricky’ll drop me.”

“Drop you?” Ricky asked incredulously, his football shaped head appearing to contract and expand to Madigan’s inebriated eyes. She giggled and fanned her hand through the air.

“You’re smaller than your sisters and I carry Kelly sometimes.”

“Only short distances, I’m sure,” Madigan grumbled.

“Not funny, Madigan,” Ricky said coldly.

“Wasn’t trying to be,” Madigan retorted sweetly. She’d only met the man hours ago and she already knew he was so wrong for her sister. The chemical engineer with the Napoleon complex. He should be marrying Karolyn. They were both control-freaks.

“Is there a problem in here?”

Just as that thought crossed Madigan’s mind, the strident voice of her mother rang loud and clear. Her heels clicked against the marble floors. Unceremoniously, a sheet was thrown over Madigan’s head and she went as still as one of the statues in their tropical garden. Her sisters were hiding her from her mother. She searched her mind trying to remember what she’d done this time. She was always butting heads with Karolyn.

They just couldn't seem to get along since she'd left Madigan's father. Karolyn was—
Dead silence suddenly descended and interrupted Madigan's thoughts. It was the type of silence only an awful shock could bring on.

"Yes, what's going on, girls?"

Madigan stiffened and blew at the sheet covering her face. Daddy? What was her daddy doing there? He couldn't have attended Karolyn's birthday party. Her mother had broken his heart when she'd decided to end their marriage. Two years later, Zachary had broken Madigan's heart when he'd decided to end their relationship.

Oh, yes, that was it. Zachary was with her and they couldn't allow Karolyn to know that.

"What are you doing here, Daddy?" Kelly finally got out.

Madigan nodded in approval. Thank God somebody had the sense to ask that million-dollar question.

"I can't come to visit your mother?" Jack DeLeon asked with some amusement and Madigan's heart lurched. She hoped he didn't still love Karolyn.

"Daddy, um, it's just that mom, er—"

"Yes?" Karolyn intoned, daring Kelly to say anything else.

"Well, er, um, we thought... Kelly didn't mean..." Brianna's hedging trailed off.

"We're not running off to get married, Bri," Karolyn relented, sounding distracted.

Madigan tensed. Brianna was right. She had no wish to restart that whole drama again about Zachary. Whether or not finding Madigan in Zachary's bed would actually anger Karolyn, Madigan wasn't sure. She only knew she couldn't risk it.

"Why are you all staring at Zachary?" Suspicion laced Karolyn's tone and those heels clicked against the marble again.

Madigan might be petite but she was sure the imprint of her body was outlined through the silk sheet. But the room was nearly dark, with just the single lamp giving off any light. That didn't mean a thing. Karolyn could detect deceit a mile away since she herself was such a master at it. The heavy comforter was suddenly pulled over Madigan's head.

"We came to tuck Zach in," Kelly announced and Madigan felt the tug of the bedclothes as they were tucked under the mattress.

Could she smother with the comforter and sheet taut across her mouth and nose?

Probably so. That meant she should be worried. All she felt was nauseated and light-headed. The champagne, so lovely as she'd drunk it, now tasted foul in her mouth.

"Blah!" The material of the sheet fell into her mouth and she huffed, shifting as someone climbed onto the bed.

"Oomph!" she gasped as a weight settled onto her legs. The sheet and comforter was loosened, allowing more air to breath.

"You'll smother her with that sheet pulled so tight, dummy," Brianna whispered in a furious rush. "And why the hell are you sitting on her?"

"So Momma won't see her," Kelly said, fast and low.

"Why would you have to tuck Zachary in, Kelly?" Her mother's voice sounded closer, as if she'd moved to Madigan's side of the bed. Things were deteriorating by the second, Madigan thought woefully, tensing in anticipation of her mother snatching the sheet away.

"He seemed rather unsteady when he was leaving the party," Kelly answered nervously. A moan caught in Madigan's throat at the continued weight of Kelly on her legs.

"Guess he would be from the coke he did," Ricky sneered.

Karolyn drew in a sharp breath, drowning out Madigan's own shocked gasp. Zach had

used cocaine? No, Zach wouldn't—

Madigan didn't know what Zach would do and never really had. Hadn't she always said he was a puzzle that even a Rhodes Scholar wouldn't be able to cipher?

"I see." Her mother's voice dripped with fury. "Then all I can say is 'thank you'.

Good night, girls. Ricky." The heels clicked away, fading as Karolyn reached the hallway.

"Good night, girls," her father rumbled. "I'll see you in the morning."

"G'night, Papi," Brianna said nervously. Their father would skin Zachary alive if he found Madigan with him, both of them naked as the day they were born.

"Night, Dad," Kelly told him on a swallow.

A heartbeat of silence followed and Madigan waited with baited breath to hear the departing tread of Jack's footsteps. "I thought I saw Madigan tonight," he finally said.

"Madigan?" Kelly blurted, the word infused with innocence.

"You'd have known if she was here," Brianna said in a high voice. "We wouldn't have had any champagne left. She would've been swilling it like it was water." Another nerve-racking bout of silence before her father murmured with skepticism,

"Indeed," and exited the room.

The comforter and sheet was snatched off her head as suddenly and as quickly as she'd been covered with it.

"Zach doesn't do coke anymore," she managed, surprised that those were the first words out of her mouth.

"That's not what those lines over there are saying," Ricky countered with a smirk, pointing in the direction of the bedside table.

Madigan's heart sank. Zach was using drugs again. He'd always said that he was just a hair's breadth away from indulging his baser instincts.

"It doesn't matter right now, Madigan," Kelly cried. "We have to get you out of here before one of them returns."

Her mother and father. One finding her here was just as bad as the other.

"She's not going to allow Ricky to carry her, Kelly," Brianna said. "We're just going to have to try to support her on each side."

They pulled her to a sitting position and the sheet slipped down to her waist. A blast of cold air hit her and she shivered. "I'm naked," she said, biting down on her lower lip.

"Quite," Ricky agreed, not bothering to avert his eyes; instead, he seemed to be leering at her breasts.

"Asshole," Kelly hissed, shoving him away. "Get out of here." His plodding footsteps only increased Madi's headache. She curled against Zach, enjoying the scent and feel of him. She wanted to sleep. She needed to sleep. Or, maybe she didn't. When she woke up, she might discover this was all some magical dream that she and Zach were in each other's arms.

"Where are your clothes, Madi?"

"Go away, Bri, and take Kelly with you."

"No, you're naked. As far as I can tell, so's Zachary. Obviously, the two of you did more than sleep in this bed."

"Your mind is forever in the gutter, Brianna. Must be the Hollywood lifestyle. Zach wasn't even here when I came to this room." At least, she didn't think he was. "I didn't wake up until you and Kelly woke me up."

"Fine. Whatever," Brianna snapped, her body taut with tension. "You two were like

brother and sister in here. Remember that if you turn up pregnant.”

“She has a new boyfriend,” Kelly announced, fisting her hands on her hips and warning Brianna to back off with a single lift of her brow. “She is supposed to be back on the pill.”

Kyle was only her second boyfriend since she and Zach separated, Madigan thought morosely, and the only one she was contemplating sleeping with. Oh, she’d gone on lots of dates, but she’d always compared those men to Zach. A year ago, she’d decided to settle in San Francisco, across the country from her mother. Madi had finally faced the fact that Zach wasn’t the man she’d thought him to be. She’d made peace with herself and had been gratified that she’d at least loved even if she’d lost. She could honestly say that Zach had turned her into a woman in every way possible—physically, emotionally, and mentally.

Determined to get on with her life, she’d put her degree to good use and took a job as a junior vice president of development at a multimedia company. Convinced that she was over Zach, she’d decided to allow herself to make another attempt at a serious relationship. For the past two months, she’d dated Kyle but she hadn’t made the final leap of faith and went to bed with him yet.

Now, she knew why. Maybe, she wasn’t really over Zach and never would be. Her notion that she’d moved on had been just an illusion to save her sanity. “Why are we discussing this now?” she asked, truly aggravated, the old emotions and hurts returning in painful clarity. “It’s the middle of the night and I want to sleep. Not talk about birth control.”

“And we’re not going to let you sleep until we get you out of here, Madi,” Brianna countered stubbornly. “Where are your clothes?” With a long suffering sigh, she said, “I don’t know. Either the hallway or the bathroom.” She indicated each direction with a thrust of her thumb. “Or, maybe, the closet.”

“Bingo!” Kelly called after a moment, from somewhere far across the room. “Your panties were on the floor in the closet and your dress was in the bathroom.” She dropped the scrap of white satin next to her. “Put them on.”

“No. If I do all that wiggling and pulling, I’ll throw up.”

“Let’s just put the dress on her, Kelly,” Brianna said with exasperation.

“I swear the two of you will be responsible for one of Momma’s maids cleaning up vomit.”

They jerked her up and shoved the dress over her head, then thrust her arms through the thin straps. Hefting her to her feet, Kelly gripped her firmly under one arm while Brianna clasped the other.

“I think my dress is still above my waist,” Madigan said, nausea churning in her stomach.

With a huff, Brianna jerked the tight little red dress down, covering her bare ass.

“Come on, Madigan,” she said, half dragging her with Kelly’s help across the floor and toward the door.

She tried to turn her head to steal a last glimpse of Zach, who was sleeping like the dead. Only the rise and fall of his chest let her know he was actually alive.

She needed to see him just once more. But the motion was too much and she went slack in her sisters’ grasps. She only hoped that, come morning, she’d at least remember that she’d slept next to Zachary one more time.