

Enduring Love
Crystal's Story, Rules of Love Book Three

By

Sage Delouise

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Chapter 1

Crystal Tremblay's heels clacked and echoed as she strode through the cement space of the parking garage under her office building. After three months with Nick, her heart still pounded with anticipation before every date, and tonight, Friday, was their date night, the first of the weekend. Tomorrow would be another. At her silver sedan, she pulled off the sensible pumps she had worn for the trial, and switched to higher heels to make her legs look more elegant for her sweetheart.

That makes sense, she thought sarcastically. For the courtroom, where she would only walk a few feet in any given direction, she wore one-inch heels. But to hike three blocks to restaurant, she wore spikes. *My feet, my pain, my choice.*

She had timed the walk to the restaurant planning on a brisk stride. There would be no hope of parking any closer on a Friday night anyway, and she was grateful, taking advantage of every opportunity to exercise. And this way, as she had no choice, Nick couldn't question her reason for walking. He'd told her what he would do if he thought she was, as he said, "obsessing about her weight."

She'd always believed one had to suffer to be beautiful, and dieting and exercise constituted pain to her. She hadn't been blessed with the willowy body she'd always longed for. But since she'd been with Nick, she had lost weight, for the most part, without trying. She'd gotten off the diet-lose-weight-gain-it-back roller coaster she'd been on since adolescence, but, though she'd never tell Nick, she still felt plump.

A car door slammed on the level above her and she jumped and pulled her briefcase in close to her body. The case that had wrapped up today involved a gang related murder, and the courtroom had been filled with spectators who she knew were gang affiliates, there to show support for the accused. She had prosecuted him and won, and the hooded eyes of his 'brothers', which had drilled into her throughout the proceedings, had darkened with menace when the judge passed sentence.

She would never leave client files in her car, but holy crow, the notes she planned to make tonight required some heavy paperwork.

The stairs up to the street were steep, and with her usual determination, she pushed herself to climb as fast as she could, ignoring the high-heel strain in her calves. According to her last speed walk to La Notte, in sixteen minutes she should be sitting across from Nick, faced with a pasta menu and no low calorie choices. The October evening air, thankfully dry, was cold enough to wake the skin on her face like an astringent cleanser as she marched toward her date.

Waiting at their usual table, Nick rose to greet her, took her arms to pull her in for two cheek kisses and then pulled out the chair for her.

“Your legs look fantastic, agapi mou,” he murmured the now familiar Greek term of endearment in her ear as she sat. “I hope those shoes do not do damage to your toes.”

“My feet are fine.” She smiled and pretended to study the menu. She had it memorized and was only looking at it to pray for a miracle. She loved having a special place with her man, but always hoped for a trendy change in selections, something in the salad and protein line that wasn’t drowned in cream sauce and cheese.

The linguini with pan-fried bacon would be smothered in a sinful dousing of oil, a perfect combination of salty and slightly sweet flavors, and rich, rich, rich. She couldn’t resist. The waiter took their orders, which included Nick’s addition of a bruschetta appetizer to share. Not helpful, toast soaked in oil and butter. Maybe the balsamic would cancel out the calories.

“You’re going to eat pasta?” Nick smiled at her. “I’m glad.” He reached across the checkered tablecloth and brushed the side of her face with his fingertips. “I’m relieved I don’t have to argue you into eating. Those conversations with me are probably the only arguments you lose, brilliant attorney that you are. I guess my little demonstration worked its magic.”

The flush began to creep up from the base of her throat and into her face. “I remember,” she said. *That should stop him from describing it.*

“You wouldn’t eat anything but the lettuce in your salad, and you tried to shake off the dressing. It was the little mountain of croutons at the bottom of your bowl that gave you away.”

“I know.” She tried to stop him again. Their dinner salads arrived and she deliberately crunched her fork into a crouton and chewed.

“When I asked if you didn’t like the salad, you blushed, like you’re doing now.”

Her face had heated from warm to burning as she silently begged him not to continue.

“Then I knew you were trying to lose weight. I told you to take off your clothes and stood you in front of your mirror and told you how beautiful you are, your luscious breasts, gorgeously rounded hips. I turned you around so you could admire, as I do, your exquisite rump. I gave you one smack to show you how it would feel if I had to punish you.”

Face flaming furiously now, her bottom burned as well as she remembered the shocking sting, and the red mark in the shape of his hand that blossomed as he’d held her there, looking over her shoulder at the full length mirror.

“New subject,” she said. “You haven’t asked me about the trial.”

“Of course. I’m sorry,” he said around a bite of lettuce. “Did it go well? Did you win? Is it over?”

“Got a conviction,” she said.

He clapped his hands. “Good job, Attorney Tremblay.” He held up his wineglass and they toasted. “Were there gang members in the courtroom again?”

She nodded. “It’s the way it is. They’d never be stupid enough to go after an attorney or a judge. Not that gang.”

“I can’t help worrying.” He took her hand and kissed it. “I just hope you look around when you’re walking through that garage, and be extra careful during a trial like that. I respect what you do, you know that.” He held onto the hand he’d kissed, “Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“You know I will.” She speared a piece of bacon and bit off half, chewing blissfully. “So how much alone time will we have this weekend?”

Now it was Nick’s turn to look uncomfortable. But he kept his eyes on hers. “I have to talk to you about that. My parents are flying in tomorrow for their anniversary. They emailed that they’d wanted to surprise me, but decided they should at least tell me before they left Athens. They’re staying in a hotel, one of theirs, a couple of blocks from here, and they’ll expect to meet you, and to be entertained and shown around. And I’m glad to do it. Their English is pretty good, but you might want to brush up on your Greek so you’ll know if they’re talking about you.” The corner of his mouth lifted in his irresistible, sexy smile.

Her fork clattered onto her plate. “I’m going to meet your parents? Tomorrow? Lord, Nick, I mean it’s wonderful, but that’s pretty nerve wracking. I know you’re a close family. What if they don’t like me?”

This time he took both her hands in his. “First, they’ll adore you. And second, nothing, and no one can change the way I feel about you. Ever, for any reason. Do you hear me?”

With a nod, and blinking back tears, she leaned across the table and kissed him on the lips.

When she sat back again, she studied her salad and eyed him, looking up through her lashes. He was so close to perfect. But the one thing that bothered her deeply was too important to ignore. He wanted her to feel so gorgeous when she was with him that she would never think of herself as needing to watch her figure. But she was self-conscious, and counting calories was an old habit that would die hard, if it ever did. And his “demonstration”, as he called it, told her that if he ever suspected she was denying herself food, or over-exercising, he would actually spank her bare bottom. If he ever carried through with his threat, she’d be so humiliated she’d die. No she wouldn’t die, but she would leave him. She couldn’t commit to a man who believed in treating a woman with such draconian measures.

* * *

At the restaurant door, Nick helped Crystal on with her coat. “I’ll walk to your car with you.”

“You always do. I love that about you, such a gentleman, even if I can’t spend the night with you because I have so much work.” She hefted her briefcase up higher to show him. He took it from her.

They walked slowly through the chilly night to the garage, took the elevator down to her level, and walked through the space, now filled with unfamiliar cars belonging to theatergoers and people dining out.

Again, the slam of a door reverberating through the garage startled her.

“What is it?” His hand tightened on her arm and he pulled her in tight beside him.

She snuggled in. “Nothing. I just wanted an excuse to cuddle.” If he suspected she was nervous, if she told him about the hate-filled eyes in the courtroom, shooting daggers at her through half closed lids, he’d become so protective he’d have her watched twenty-four / seven, escorted everywhere by private security. If the Naja, the gang whose name had roots in the Greek word for a species of cobra, really wanted to get to her, they would. It was pointless to worry, and she refused to live in fear.

“If you’re in any danger, you know you have to tell me.” He took her other arm and turned her to face him.

“I will.” Lord, she was lying now. She’d come clean when she knew he had learned to respect her ability to stay safe. When he trusted her judgment.

“Believe me.” He let go of one arm and tightened the other around her back. “If I find out there’s any threat that you’re not telling me about, you know what I’ll do.”

She froze. The warmth she had been feeling, circled by his arm, grew to a puzzling heat level she’d only experienced during lovemaking. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him raise his free arm, the hand around her back slid down, over her bottom and lifted the hem of her coat up exposing her dress, and in the next second, the hand he’d raised up behind her slapped down hard on her seat. Much harder than the one smack he’d delivered in front of the mirror. Her buttocks burned and she could picture the red mark he must have left on her skin.

Just as suddenly, He dropped her coat back into place and, with one arm around her, guided her to her parking space. She walked beside him in a daze.

“That was just a warning,” he said. “Don’t make it worse for yourself by ignoring me. You let me know if you see anyone who looks suspicious.”

He held her face between his palms and kissed her, a hard, melting kiss. “We both have an early morning tomorrow, you have work to do, and I am meeting my parents’ plane. If I come back to your place, neither of us will get any sleep.”

She backed out of her space, Nick watching her as she headed up the exit ramp, confusion blurring her brain. God she loved this man, she’d never felt so loved, and such fiery tingling at any other man’s touch. But no one had ever suggested that he had a right to punish her in such a humiliating way as a spanking.

Headlights showed in her mirror, following her out the exit and down the block. Anyone leaving the garage would be right behind her. The car followed her down the block and around the corner. Not unusual, she reasoned, many people took the same route to leave the downtown area. Across the bridge to her side of the city, she couldn’t be sure, but the same headlights seemed to be on her tail.

It was dark, another car could have slipped in, the headlights could belong to someone else. At her house, she opened the car door and got out, taking her time retrieving her work shoes from the trunk. The car behind her waited a long, unnerving minute and then passed slowly. A low-slung car with a snarling engine and tinted windows. She gave herself a shake. There were a million cars like that on the road.

* * *

Saturday evening, Crystal spent longer than she had since her first date with Nick, checking and re-checking her hair, her make-up and her dress. She had to please Nick's parents. She knew, despite the geographical distance, that they were a close family. If the Andris weren't pleased with her, it could tear their relationship apart, or, at the very least, create conflict between Nick and his family, and between Crystal and Nick.

So nervous that her fingers couldn't fasten the clasp on her pearl necklace, she jumped when Nick rang her doorbell. She'd insisted that they drive to her office parking space downtown, and walk to the hotel, hoping that she could collect and calm herself on the walk to meet his parents. Nick had argued that they should take advantage of the valet parking at the hotel, which had its own vast parking lot – until he saw how shaky Crystal was.

“You want to walk a bit, don't you?” he asked. “Park in a familiar place before we go to my parents. You know there's nothing to worry about.”

“Thank you for understanding.” She stood on her toes and kissed his just shaved cheek.

She knew that Nick's family came from old Greek money. They owned hotels in several countries in Europe and in America. But even with her own successful career, she'd never stayed in a hotel like the Andris Hotel they owned, right here in her own city. They walked around the broad driveway that wound gently from the street, circled a fountain that held a statue of a Greek goddess pouring multicolored streams of water into a pool the size of a small, round swimming pool, past a garage entrance, and then to an expanse of well-lit space for limousines or taxis to stop in front of the entrance to the enormous lobby. Inside, giving warm, even light, modern chandeliers the size of small rooms hung from the gold ceiling in strategic places.

As soon as the Nick told the receptionist they were looking for the Andris family, a bellboy appeared and ushered them up, fourteen floors in the elevator, to his parents' suite.

The man who opened the door was not tall, like Nick, but compact and muscular beneath his suit jacket. He slapped his hand hard into Nick's for a quick shake, and then pulled him in for a strong hug. Behind him, the suite looked as big as Crystal's condo.

When they separated, Nick held out his hand toward Crystal. “Crystal, my father, Alexandros.”

“Mr. Andris.” Crystal held out her hand.

“Alex, please,” Nick's father said, his English thickly accented. He bent low over Crystal's proffered hand and kissed it lightly. “So this goddess is the marvel my son has been raving about. Welcome, my dear.”

His dark eyes, so like Nick's, sparkled, and a sprinkling of white salted his black hair. “Marina,” he called, “come out and meet our future daughter-in-law.”

A flush bloomed in Crystal's face. She and Nick hadn't discussed marriage, but his father was an imposing figure and she was not about to argue the point.