

# FOCUS OF DESIRE

*by*

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## CHAPTER ONE

*New York City*  
*October*

Natasha Kashnikova wouldn't ordinarily have given the model a second glance. She favored blondes, and three delicious specimens were currently being made up there in her Manhattan studio for the cosmetics ad shoot, so chances were excellent she could have one or more of them later. But it was the short-haired brunette who caught her attention when she arrived wearing a sexy black minidress that looked like something a dominatrix might wear. *Well, aren't you just yummy?*

"Hello, Kash. I'm Fawn, and I am *very* happy to meet you."

Fawn squeezed the hand Kash held out, prolonging the contact. She was young—probably nineteen or twenty—and short for a model, only five-six or so, but her classically beautiful face and flawless complexion had obviously won her this opportunity. *And that smile. I bet you've practiced it in the mirror more than a few times.* Showcasing her full, rosy lips and perfect teeth, her smile oozed naughty sensuality and was guaranteed to sell a lot of lipstick.

Fawn released her finally, but maintained the smile and seriously direct eye contact as she took a deliberate step closer. "I can't tell you how thrilled and excited I am to finally get the chance to work under you."

Kash made her choice, but decided to let this one sweat a while before she acknowledged her acceptance. "Pleased to meet you, Fawn." She gestured toward the blondes, who were in the corner of her spacious loft studio. "If you'll join the others, we'll start soon."

Only a fleeting glance of disappointment passed over the brunette's face, enough for Kash to notice, but not so much as to appear unprofessional. "Of course."

The assignment was a breeze—two or three hours' work with four beautiful women. She took this kind of job almost exclusively these days because she made good money and invested little time, and also enjoyed an endless supply of beautiful sex partners.

She took the group shots first, then did the blondes individually, saving the brunette for last. Even after they were alone she remained all business, not because of any professional ethics but because the distance would enhance the moment when she let the model know she would get what she wanted.

Night fell as they finished the shoot, and the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park became mirrors in which Kash glimpsed herself in her low-cut black jeans and snug black T-shirt, her apparel of choice most days. She had begun to avoid her reflection lately because she could no longer ignore the small lines by her eyes and mouth and between her eyebrows. But the likeness in the window was kind, erasing the last decade of hard play and making her appear thirty again.

The layered, collar-length cut of her medium brown hair complemented her androgyny. Her face was strong, almost masculine, but full, feminine lips and long eyelashes over soft hazel eyes balanced her square jaw and chiseled features. Her enviable metabolism gave her the same lean, taut frame at nearly forty that she'd had two decades earlier.

"I think we're done." Kash wasn't surprised that Fawn didn't budge from her stool, even when she started turning off the lights that illuminated her from three sides.

"Before I leave I want to make sure that I've impressed you enough that I get to work with you again," Fawn said.

"Well, I know you can follow directions very well." Kash knelt to stow her cameras and lenses carefully in their bags. "That's very important."

"Oh, yes. You tell me what to do, and I'm there." The model slipped off the stool and approached Kash slowly, stopping only a couple of feet away.

"And I have to say your dress has made a favorable impression," Kash added as she stood and, for the first time, gave Fawn the benefit

of an open, appreciative head-to-toe appraisal. "Is it meant to make a statement?"

"Let's say it was intended to get your attention," she replied, smiling that naughty bedroom smile.

"Attention or reaction?" Kash slowly circled the model to drink in the dress from every angle.

"Both."

"Then it's certainly done the trick." She let her gaze linger on the high, tight ass. The sheer, clingy fabric made it clear that Fawn wore nothing underneath. *Nice. Very nice.* She felt a sharp twitch low in her belly. "If I didn't know better, I'd say the design of this dress..." She feathered her hand over the large *X* the straps created on the silky skin of the model's back.

"Lets you know I like to play?" Fawn slowly faced her.

Kash stepped forward so that their bodies almost touched. "So, what's your game?"

Fawn didn't answer immediately. Instead she started to stroke Kash's face, but Kash intercepted her before she could and grasped her wrist firmly. Then she pinned both of the girl's hands behind her back and spoke into her ear. "Is this your game?"

Kash could feel her tremble as she nodded.

"Nothing too rough," Fawn whispered.

The spasm in Kash's belly became a steady throb. "Keep your hands right there."

She removed the long, silky scarf from Fawn's neck, tied it around her eyes, and smiled at her sharp intake of breath. Then she held Fawn's wrists behind her again while she kissed her neck, her shoulders, and the exposed skin of her back. Lightly at first, making her want more. Soon the kisses became bites. Not too hard, nothing to leave marks around that million-dollar face, but enough to elicit the first moans of excitement.

Glancing around the sparsely furnished loft, Kash dismissed the couch and half dozen comfortable chairs. The coffee table that held a tidy stack of recent magazines wouldn't do either. Her photo backdrops, lighting equipment, and a couple of sturdy stools filled the other side of the large loft, and her glass-and-chrome desk, crowded with papers and photos in neat piles, stood at the back. None of these were appropriate. She even considered the sink in the bathroom off to the left, and the other one, in her darkroom, next to it. But the last time she'd tried using

a sink for something like this, it had broken off the wall right as the woman she was fucking was getting there, and both of them had gotten soaked.

No, the big off-white easy chair was the right choice today, she decided, visually gauging Fawn's height against it. She led the model over and stopped beside the waist-high, padded back. *Perfect.*

"Put your hands here. That's right."

Once Fawn had braced herself on the chair, Kash pressed down on her back until she was bent forward over it, invitingly poised.

She ran her hands down the model's sides to her hips and thighs, rewarded with more breathy moans, and when she reached the hem of the minidress and lifted it up to expose the firm, round ass, Fawn gasped and held her breath.

Kash put one of her legs between the girl's and used it to spread her thighs farther apart, opening her up. "Don't move." The model trembled again, and her hips swayed and rocked, clearly seeking some kind of direct stimulation. As Kash stepped back to admire the view, she unzipped her jeans and shoved her hand inside, quickly stroking her clit.

Whether it was her own arousal or the model's scent didn't matter. She knelt and positioned herself behind and beneath Fawn, and as she tasted the wetness, she wrapped her hands around the model's thighs, now fully controlling the amount and depth of contact.

Fawn's moans grew louder, intermingled with groans and sighs, and Kash held fast as the girl writhed.

"Fuck, that feels good," Fawn managed shakily. "Much more and you'll make me come."

Kash knew it was true; the girl was incredibly wet, and her clit was swollen and ready. She teased her with a few more strokes of her tongue, but stopped short of satisfaction. When she took her mouth away and stood, Fawn blew out a long, shaky breath of disappointment, but said nothing.

Abruptly, Kash thrust her pelvis against the model's ass and grabbed a fistful of her short hair. Fawn cried out and powered her hips back against Kash—hard, demanding.

"You want it so much." Kash wedged her hand between their bodies and pushed into her, penetrating her hard and deep, then began a hard, driving rhythm that matched the urgent pistoning of Fawn's hips.

The shrill ringing of her phone startled them both, but Kash barely paused. After three rings, the answering machine picked up, and a woman's voice came on after Kash's recorded greeting.

"I know you're there, Kash."

*Fuck. Miranda.* She didn't stop, but her distraction slowed her strokes.

"I'm waiting. And I'm going to keep talking until you pick up. Tell me, is she blond? Should I be jealous?"

At this remark, the model stiffened and turned her head toward Kash, but didn't take the blindfold off.

"Aw, damn. Stay there. Ignore that." Kash withdrew her hand and headed for the phone on a small table two feet away as the voice continued.

"And on our anniversary? You're screwing around while I'm waiting for you on our anniversary?"

As Kash snatched up the phone, she glanced at Fawn. She had straightened, but still hadn't removed the blindfold, though it was clear from her posture and uncertain expression that she was thinking about it.

"Damn it, Miranda. Not funny!"

The sound of laughter answered her. "You are so predictable, Kash."

"Let me call you back." Kash put her hand over the receiver and tried to head off a premature end to the evening's festivities. "Sorry, Fawn, I'll be right with you."

The model nodded, but Kash could tell from her restless fidgeting that she was ready to bolt.

"Hey, you're the one who told me this would be a good time to phone, and what I have to say will only take a couple of minutes," Miranda said. "I'm about to catch a flight to L.A., so I can't call you back."

Kash sighed. "All right. What's up?"

"I'm begging a favor. And before you say no, let me remind you that you still owe me big time for hitting on Stef. Consider this your requisite paycheck."

"Hey, come on with that already. I didn't know you were together," Kash argued, but she knew it was futile. It had been ten months since she had propositioned Miranda's girlfriend at a Christmas party, but her friend hadn't let her forget it.

“You would have known if you’d asked her name or whether she was available before you started describing in detail what you wanted to do to her,” Miranda replied. “This is what you get for being the cad that we both know you are.”

“What do I get?” Kash braced herself. Miranda had waited a long time to collect on her faux pas, so this had to be good.

“We’re going to run a contest for *Sophisticated Women*, and I want you to photograph the winner for our October cover.”

Miranda Claridge published *Sophisticated Women*, a glossy magazine she liked to claim showed up *Vogue* for nothing but shallow advertorial with pretty pictures. Miranda took her magazine seriously. *Sophisticated Women* covered all the usual bases—makeup, relationship, and career advice—but she also assumed chic urban women had brains and wanted in-depth articles as well. Even her international fashion spreads often included what Kash called “the conscience quota”—inserts on worthy local charities for maimed children, or whatever else had tugged Miranda’s usually impervious heartstrings.

“What’s the catch?” Kash cut to the chase, wanting to get back to Fawn. She knew if this was a routine cover shoot, Miranda would not be collecting the debt she owed.

“Well, you’re also going to photograph her while she takes the dream vacation she wins.”

“Vacation?” Kash glanced over at Fawn. She had pulled her dress back down. *Damn*. She had to wrap this conversation up quickly. “That sounds like it involves travel and time. How long, and how far?”

“Think of it as a vacation for you, too,” Miranda coaxed. “Business class and four- and five-star hotels all the way, of course.”

“Don’t be sparse with the details, Miranda.” Kash watched Fawn take the blindfold off. *Shit*. Her face said *I’m feeling pretty uncomfortable*. “Spell it out. I’m busy.”

“Three weeks, late June into July. Since I’m giving you almost nine months’ notice, you can’t pretend your schedule is full.”

“Three weeks?”

“The trip will really be fabulous, Kash. Four days each in Paris, Rome, and Cairo, and then a week in the Bahamas. Easy photo ops. You’ll get lots of free time to explore all the nightlife. Please? Your name attached to this will be a huge plus.”

Under ordinary circumstances, Kash would never have agreed to any assignment that required that kind of time commitment. But she

did owe Miranda, and now Miranda would owe her back. And the itinerary *was* certainly tempting. Truth be told, she was restless for a change of scenery and a shakeup in the status quo. This constant diet of narcissistic and ambitious airheads had gotten kind of stale.

When Fawn shrugged and tentatively waved good-bye, Kash made a fast decision.

“Okay, Miranda. We’ll negotiate the fine print when you get back from L.A. Now if you’ll excuse me.”

Kash didn’t wait for a response. She slammed down the phone and caught the model as she turned for the door.

“Leaving so soon? Now you know I’ll reward you with something extra special for your patience, don’t you, Fawn?”

*Madison, Wisconsin*

*Five months later*

Isabel Sterling plaited her long honey blond hair into a loose braid and tucked it under her pink knit hat. She owned hats, scarves, and mittens in all colors and patterns, too many to be able to wear, so she stuck to the ones that her current crop of swimming students had given her for Christmas. Pink wasn’t her favorite color, but tonight’s chapeau and matching accessories had been hand made by Mrs. Eldrid, who never missed a class *or* a chance to complain about how her arthritis made knitting so much harder these days.

The community center had an Olympic-sized pool but a Little League-sized locker room, which felt cramped with her fifteen students. Nearly all were widows, the youngest fifty-five. Her Thursday senior swim class contained more of the same.

Isabel’s hair was still damp but she didn’t want to take time to dry it because Gillian would already be waiting outside, and temperatures this early March evening were only in the teens. After she wrapped her matching pink scarf around her neck, she stuffed her hands into pink gloves at least two sizes too large. She’d exchange them for her favorite fleece ones as soon as she got in her truck.

Nearly all the mittens and gloves her students knitted for her were too large. Though of rather average height and weight—five foot five and 118 pounds—Isabel’s body was anything but average, honed by swimming laps in the closest pool for more years than she could

remember. She was secretly proud of her woman's rounded curves, enhanced by the soft musculature built by her athletic endeavors.

A rotund woman wearing a bright orange one-piece, a Chicago Bulls towel, and a flowery swim cap appeared at her elbow. "Isabel, honey, aren't you the cutest thing. You coming with us to the Country Kitchen? It's all-you-can-eat cod and haddock night."

"Our treat," another of the women chimed in.

"Oh yes, Isabel, do!"

"Ordinarily, ladies, I'd love to," Isabel said agreeably. "But I'm meeting a friend, and I'm already late. Can I beg a rain check? Good night."

A chorus of good-byes and pleas to drive safely heralded her departure.

Her battered red pickup, a college graduation gift from her parents, really needed new tires, she noticed for the umpteenth time. And the driver's side door was frozen shut again, so she crawled in through the passenger side. *A little WD-40 on that when I get home.* She reached the music store where Gillian worked ten minutes after it closed. Her upstairs neighbor and best friend sat on a bench outside.

"Sorry, I got here as fast as I could," she said as Gillian got in. "You freezing?"

Gillian Menard, auburn-haired, chic, and lithely tall, was appropriately dressed for the weather in a long wool coat, hat, and gloves. But her nose was bright red and her eyes were watering. "That's safe to assume unless the calendar is somewhere between May and September," she replied, twisting the nearest vents to direct the warm air toward her face. "Want to do Chinese back at my place? We can watch a film."

"Sounds like a plan." The truck fishtailed as Isabel took a right, a slight detour from their usual route home, to stop by their favorite take-out place.

Twenty minutes later, armed with a sack of fragrant paper cartons, they were checking the mailboxes in the lobby of their apartment building. Isabel had two bills, an advertising flyer, and an envelope that proclaimed her the Grand Prize Winner of some contest.

It didn't look like the typical gaudy come-on. *They're sure making these things more convincing all the time.* High-quality envelope, and even sent priority mail, not bulk. Studying it closer, she saw that the

return address was *Sophisticated Women* magazine. She'd heard of it, seen it on newsstands. She was curious enough to open it.

The notification inside appeared even more authentic than the outside. Written on embossed *Sophisticated Women* stationery, it was addressed to her personally and was purportedly from the publisher of the magazine, Miranda Claridge. It didn't seem mass-produced. In fact, she could have sworn the signature was freshly penned. It read:

*Congratulations Ms. Isabel Sterling,*

*I am pleased to inform you that you have won the grand prize in our Make Your Dreams Come True contest! Your entry was selected from more than four million, three hundred thousand submitted by mail and through our Web site. So get ready to pack your bags—you and a guest are about to embark on the adventure of a lifetime—three weeks, all expenses paid, to some of the hottest destinations on three continents. Renowned photographer Kash will accompany you to document your trip for Sophisticated Women, and one of her photos of you will appear on the cover of our October issue.*

The letter certainly looked authentic, but Isabel still didn't believe it was for real.

"Coming?"

Gillian was holding the elevator, so Isabel slammed the mailbox shut and hurried to join her. Once inside, she continued reading the letter.

*And that's not all.*

*You've also won ten thousand dollars in cash...a makeover by Clifton, stylist to the stars...and a new designer wardrobe selected by the fashion editors of Sophisticated Women.*

"Whatcha got?" Gillian asked, peering over her shoulder.

"I won a trip, ten thousand dollars, and a makeover," Isabel said without enthusiasm. "To go with the laptop I supposedly won last week

by being the ten-millionth person to visit whatever Web site I clicked on.”

“It sure seems...well, classier than most...” Gillian touched the paper, felt the weight of it between her fingers. “Let me see that, huh?”

“Oh, sure.” Isabel handed it over as they reached her floor. “I was pretty well done with it anyway...just hadn’t gotten to the disclaimers yet.” She stepped out of the elevator. “Be right up.”

After a quick change into sweats, she grabbed a couple of bags of microwave popcorn and headed up the stairs to the apartment directly above hers. She let herself in and spotted Gillian sitting statue-like on the couch, still in her coat, staring in disbelief at the contest letter clutched in her hand.

“Gill? What is it?”

“You’re not going to believe this, Izzy. It’s true!” Gillian sprang to her feet and waved the letter as she hurried toward her. “This is for real. You’ve actually won this trip. Well, I hope *we* have, ’cause you damn well better take me since I entered you in the first place. Three continents...and ten grand. Though you certainly don’t have to split *that* with me—”

“Slow down.” Isabel snatched the letter from her. “What the hell are you talking about? You entered me?”

Gillian nodded her head so vigorously it looked like it might fly off.

Isabel knew her friend was contest crazy, entering every sweepstakes and free offer and lottery she came across. But this was the first time she’d ever heard that Gillian had been putting *her* name on any of the forms.

“I enter us both in anything that allows only one entry per person, if the prize is a trip for two,” Gillian explained. “I mean, you always say you want to travel, and I figure I’m doubling my odds of winning since I know you’ll take me.” She batted her eyelashes playfully at Isabel.

“It’s for real? You’re sure?” Isabel held the letter up to read it again.

“Absolutely,” Gillian enthused as she finally shed her coat. “I remember this trip because they’re keeping the destinations secret until they announce the winner.”

“Golly.” She dropped into the nearest chair, realization finally sinking in. *An all-expense-paid trip to three continents.* Her mind

raced, considering the possible destinations. She'd be happy with most anywhere. *Somewhere in Europe, I bet. Oh, how great is this.* "And ten thousand dollars, Gill!"

"And don't forget the new wardrobe," Gillian pointed out. "Man, I hope you get some things I can fit into, because I bet you get a lot of designer clothes."

"Well, that's more your thing than mine, and where would I wear that kind of stuff?" Excitement bubbled over, and Isabel scanned the letter again for details of when she'd collect her winnings. Then she seriously noted what else she'd won.

"Okay, so the trip and the money are unbelievably cool," she said. "But the rest of this... getting a makeover and appearing on the cover of *Sophisticated Women*? I mean, come on, that is so not me. I like how I am. And I've never even picked up the magazine."

"So you get a great new haircut, which you desperately need, and your picture taken by a hot celebrity photographer. No heavy lifting there, Izzy. I'm sure you can stand it. Now come on, grab your coat. We have some serious celebrating to do."

*New York*

*Three and a half months later*

Kash was in absolutely no mood for that day's shoot, whatever it was. The miserable hangover was bad enough, but she particularly hated that she had awakened in a stranger's bed and had to face that awkward morning-after scenario with no time to go home for a proper shower and change of clothes.

When she stumbled in, yawning like a fiend, and headed straight for the espresso machine, her jack-of-all-trades assistant, Ramona Dean, was setting lights.

Ramona, a five-foot-ten skeleton with purple hair and piercings in nearly every body part, glanced up from what she was doing and studied Kash for several seconds before she spoke. "Has it ever occurred to you to keep a change of clothes here?"

It was a brilliant blue-sky day outside—bright enough in the airy studio that Kash kept her sunglasses on. She glanced down at herself and frowned. Okay, so there were a few wrinkles now in what had been a crisp white button-down, and being the neat freak she was, they

displeased her no small amount. But she also knew the average person probably wouldn't have cared or noticed. "What's the problem?"

Ramona's twice-pierced lip curled upward in a smirk. "I'm trying to picture how the hell you got that stain on the back of your shirt, and exactly what it is."

"Stain?" Kash hurriedly unbuttoned the shirt and slipped it off, examining the oily patch the size of a fist in the middle of it. Sniffed. Wild cherry. The flavor of the lube that her companion for the night had produced from her bedside drawer. *Great*. She wasn't quite sure *exactly* how it had gotten there, but she knew the shirt had ended up on the bed because that's where she had discovered it this morning. And they had used a good bit of the bottle of lube while on that bed, too, so the stain was no real surprise.

"Christ. Say, I'll finish setting up. Go get me something to wear, will you? Plain black T-shirt or something." She fished a fifty-dollar bill from her wallet. "You know what I like. What the hell do we have today, anyway? I haven't seen the schedule."

"The Montrose Agency is sending models over for publicity shots this morning." Ramona glanced at her watch. "They're due any minute. The usual portfolio stuff. And then nothing after that till four, when you're shooting Ellen Degeneres for the next cover of *Animal Advocates* magazine."

"That's today?" Kash's mood brightened considerably, though her head still ached from too much vodka. "Then get going and hurry back. I want to get through the publicity stuff fast so I have time to go home for a shower and change in between."

"Okay, I'm gone." Between Kash's studio and the elevators was an exterior office and reception area that contained Ramona's desk and comfortable seating for a dozen people. Various examples of Kash's work were displayed around the walls, and her name was emblazoned over the desk as an artistic logo recognized worldwide.

As Ramona passed through the outer office, she met three women, all with the tall, thin silhouettes and practiced poses of runway wannabes. "Hello, ladies. From Montrose?" When they nodded, she gestured toward the door to the studio. "Go ahead, she's expecting you."

Four more women were getting off the elevator when it stopped to let her on. It was a safe bet they were there for the same reason, since

it was Saturday and all the other tenants of the twenty-ninth floor were closed. “If you’re here to see Kash, it’s that way.” She pointed, stepping past them. “Go right on through reception—she’s in the studio.”

As Ramona hit the button to the lobby and waited for the doors to close, she studied the latest group of women. Three were more of the typical runway fare, all starvation-framed and unaffected expressions. The fourth stuck out. She was at least three or four inches shorter. Nice body, but not right for a runway girl—too athletic. And obviously expecting star treatment because she wasn’t even in makeup yet and was dressed way too casual for publicity photos. Hadn’t the agency briefed her or what? *Kash will not be pleased.*

