



Incognito: Collaring Kat

By

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Incognito: Collaring Kat

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Chapter One

Dalton Carrington let his brand new Valkyrie Rune rumble beneath him as his gaze took in the hundred-year-old red brick mansion. *Incognito*. Not what he'd pictured in his mind. Definitely not what his club had looked like in New York.

He hit the kill switch on the motorcycle and slipped off his helmet. In the darkness of the night, he could hear the surf rolling against the nearby shore.

Damn, he loved Florida. Loved the sun, air, and ocean. His new beachfront cottage was perfect and afforded him some freedoms that living in a large city didn't. He ran his hand down the sleek contour of the motorcycle's gas tank. New York would always be his home, but—he breathed in the tangy scent of the sea air—this wasn't a bad second.

He swung his leg over the motorcycle and rubbed his thigh. He'd been riding most of the day, stopping here and there to take in the sights, sounds, and feel of the small coastal towns. He touched the bridge of his slightly sunburned nose.

"Note to self," he murmured as he pulled the Incognito special invitation from the back pocket of his leather pants. "Buy sunscreen."

As he sauntered up the cobblestone walk toward the front door of Incognito, he noted the cars and SUVs in the nearly full lot. Jaguar, Mercedes, Lexus. He even spotted a uniformed valet round the corner and, with a jaunty toss of car keys, take up his post near the front door.

This establishment was definitely upscale. And busy.

When he neared the door and heard muffled sounds of music from beyond, he glanced at the invitation again. Embossed in gold, the size of a business card, it simply said, *Invitation to attend*. On the reverse side was the logo for Incognito, also gold embossed, and a line that read, *Unleash your darkest desires*. He'd needed to search long and hard to find the club's exact location, finally obtaining it from another club owner two towns over.

Dalton made a face as he remembered the little hole-in-the-wall fetish club. What a pit it had been. Where the dregs of society met to play out their fantasies with no rules or regulations in place. Dalton had beaten a hasty retreat from there.

He reached for the brass knob on the door. This place was much more his style. Pushing the door open, he stepped onto the black marble tiles of an unusual foyer. Lit only by dancing flames within wall sconces, the space reflected an aura of mystery. Of excited intrigue for what lay through the next portal.

From a darkened corner to his left, a willowy figure clad entirely in black latex approached. Even before he saw the face, his body zinged with anticipation.

"What have we here?" The voice was husky and purely feminine.

Five-inch fuck-me heels of thigh-high boots clicked on the marble. She came into the light, and his breath lodged in his throat.

Dark, exotic gypsy eyes widened slightly as recognition dawned. So, she did remember him.

Good. He damn sure remembered her.

She tightened her full, red lips. The same luscious pair he'd imagined wrapped around his thrusting cock during more than one late-night erotic dream. She slapped a riding crop against her thigh, and those black eyes narrowed.

"Doctor Carrington." Her tone was as cool as a glacier, yet smooth as twenty-year-old scotch.

"Mistress Katriona."

She gave a slight nod. "To what do I owe this honor?"

Though the words were welcoming, her tone left no room for misinterpretation of her meaning. She wanted him gone.

His lips kicked up in a half grin. He couldn't blame her. At the International Owner's Conference, where they'd met last fall, they'd had quite a debate.

"I believe *you* are the reason I'm here."

Her mouth opened just a bit, and her knuckles whitened with a tighter grip on the riding crop. She appeared poised to strike. Or bolt.

"I can't imagine anything that would warrant you seeking me out, especially this far south of your usual haunts." One finely arched brow rose in mocking challenge.

"Actually, I live here now. Closed on a piece of property just last week." Her frozen expression didn't disappoint him. A dominatrix of her caliber should easily be able to shield her thoughts. She'd done a rather nice job of it so far, at least after recovering from the initial surprise.

"And you what? Expect me to throw you a house-warming party? Not everyone in the South is that hospitable, Doctor."

He let her sarcasm go. Her response was no more or less than he'd expected.

When the silence stretched beyond comfort, she asked, "What is it you want?"

You. He bit the inside of his mouth to prevent that thought from coming out. "I've decided Incognito would be the perfect place to spend time while I research my next book."

Her gaze flickered away from him then returned with hardened resolve. "No."

"You wouldn't welcome the chance to increase business by being featured in a national publication?" Not that he would expose the real name and location of the club. Private establishments of this nature were *private* for a reason. But that didn't curb his urge to prick at her icy façade. He knew she could stand up to his teasing. She didn't let him down.

"This is a private club, Doctor, for members only. Not your own collection of lab mice. Membership is by referral. And as you can no doubt hear for yourself, business is just fine without your interference." Her

hand rose as if to show him to the door. "If you are not a member, you may not enter. I can't allow anyone to disturb my patrons."

He took a step toward her, closing the gap between them to less than a foot. She didn't back away, not that he expected her to. But as he watched, the pulse at the base of her throat sped up. Her small breasts, pressed tightly into the latex bustier, rose and fell a bit faster.

He raised his hand, the invitation between two fingers. "You will deny me entrance after you extended an invitation?"

Her jaw tightened in obvious annoyance, and he had the urge to laugh. She slipped the card from his fingers, careful not to touch him, and examined it, as if checking its authenticity. As her head tilted, her jet-black hair fell forward, obscuring her exotic features. He breathed in her scent, her heat. She was as magnificent as he remembered.

As hard as he remembered. Fierce. Fiery. The urge to touch, to command, to *dominate*, had him fisting his hands at his sides.

"Where did you get this?"

"You didn't pass them out at the Owner's Conference?"

Her frown deepened. "Of course I did. But to fellow attendees, not guest speakers."

He shrugged. What did it matter that he'd gotten the card from his editor who'd accompanied him to the conference? He had the card. All that mattered now was whether the woman in front of him would honor it.

She raised her head, and her onyx eyes flashed with anger. "You may not interrogate my patrons."

He gave a single nod of understanding. He hadn't intended to do so, but he again gave in to the urge to tease her. "Perhaps *you* will grant me an interview then?"

"No." The word was curt. Final.

"Come now, Mistress Katriona," he said, keeping his tone light while his body raged at him to drag her into his arms and taste her.

"Surely you'd like to continue the debate we were so rudely interrupted from months ago."

"Slave," she snapped with a quick glance over her shoulder. The

riding crop struck her thigh once more in sharp agitation.

Another shadow emerged from a darkened doorway. This one male. Clad in black spandex shorts, a collar around his neck and wrist cuffs chained to a belt at his waist, the man knelt and bowed before Katriona, his face nearly touching the floor.

"Carl, find Doctor Carrington a table in the main hall so he can...*observe*."

"Yes, Mistress." Carl stood and turned toward the door, which apparently led into the heart of the club.

Dalton raised an eyebrow at her words.

"You are not to disturb my patrons, Doctor. Under no circumstances are you to discuss your book, your occupation, or your idiotic ideas—" She cut herself off, pursed her lips, and sucked in a small breath. Dalton enjoyed watching the rise and fall of her breasts beneath the second skin of latex.

"You may enjoy any amenities offered. There are a few strays, both female and male, near the bar. You are free to use them as you wish. Carl will show you to your table and brief you on club rules. I suggest you listen; break one, and you're out."

"And if I wish to have a drink with you?"

She crossed her arms over her middle. The riding crop, held firmly in her blood-red tipped fingers, tapped against her hip. "The invitation is for one visit only, Doctor. I am not part of the...entertainment."

He chuckled and gave her a gallant bow. "As you wish...Kat."

* * * * *

Shit. Shit. Double shit.

Kat paced a furious line across her private office.

Dalton Carrington was here. In *her* club.

"Shit!"

And now she was hiding out, trapped like a caged tigress.

"That man has no business invading my domain." He was supposed to be in fucking New York, hundreds of miles away.

“By ‘that man’ I suspect you’re referring to the doctor you had me personally escort to an observation post in the main hall?”

Kat spun to see Carl peeking around the door, his face alight with a cheeky grin. At her glare, though, his expression sobered. He stepped inside and shut the door.

“My apologies...Mistress.”

She waved a dismissive hand at him and scowled. “Oh, knock it off with the Mistress talk in here.”

His grin returned as brilliant as before.

“But one never knows when someone might be eavesdropping through keyholes,” he said with a wink.

Carl had worked for her since the inception of Incognito, had become a cornerstone of the club, and her closest friend and confidant. An accountant by trade, he kept the books, paid the bills, and handled the annual tax audits.

He also helped maintain her persona as the dominate half of their happy couple, an illusion that kept the prowling members at bay and enabled her to conduct business without hindrance. A woman in her line of work had to fulfill a certain expectation. A strong take-charge businesswoman, mysterious and amicable, yet unattainable. Otherwise, she became a target and lacked the authority necessary to handle the domineering clientele.

The club members believed Carl was her slave, for which she paid him handsomely, but their contract defined clear boundaries. Business was business after all. So despite the smoke and mirrors offered to patrons, they’d never so much as kissed.

Come to think of it, she hadn’t kissed a man since... *No, better not go there.* She had more important things to deal with than dating and romantic relationships. She had her career, her livelihood, to manage. And club employees, like Carl, counted on her.

Of course, employment at an exclusive fetish club did offer some unique job benefits. For everyone but her, that is. As a slave, Carl considered the occasional consensual sex with others at the club—should it be required to keep up appearances—an enjoyable boon. Although she

might *order* him to participate in a scene, reality was he had a say in who and when, and communicated such through a series of subtle signals only she was privy to.

Carl leaned a hip on her desk, pressing the tiny buttons to release each handcuff at his wrist. The cuffs fell to hang from short chains attached to his belt. Stretching his arms overhead, he closed his eyes and groaned as muscles expanded and flexed.

She admired his washboard stomach and toned muscles, but easily kept her gaze from straying to the lower, more impressive regions of his anatomy that were barely covered by biker shorts. The spandex was his idea of comfortable, which suited her fine. She preferred men's assets in tight, soft leather.

Damn it. That thought brought to mind images of Dalton's backside encased in sleek black leather pants, not something she cared to ponder now.

"So what's up...Doc?"

"What?"

"I asked what's up with the Doc. You two old college sweethearts or something?"

She snorted. "Not hardly."

"Good, because last time I checked, my contract didn't include hand-to-hand combat with old boyfriends, especially ones that are imbued with the dominant gene."

"Rest easy, my hero," she said with teasing sarcasm. "We've met only once before, and that wasn't exactly amicable."

He studied her a moment. "Want to talk about it?"

"I'd rather not."

He shrugged and then picked up a miniature paperweight of a couple engaged in fellatio. As he tilted the bronze figurine, the woman's head bobbed suggestively.

Kat turned away and paced across the room. She didn't need anything else giving her ideas about sex. Especially with the face of a man who had proven he could shake her foundations so visible in her mind.

Dalton...no. *Doctor* Carrington hadn't changed much since the last

time she saw him. Maybe a little more salt, just around the temples, in that pepper-colored head of hair. A few more fine lines bracketed his deep green eyes, which still shone with amusement, but that only made him look more distinguished. More disturbing to her equilibrium.

He was too observant. Too clever. Dangerous to her psyche, to her way of life.

Thank goodness he had only the one invitation and not a referral form. After tonight, he'd be out, and she could return to business as usual. Then she recalled that he'd said he lived nearby now. A groan rumbled from the pit of her stomach as she whipped around without a misstep in stride.

Maybe he'd get enough of whatever the hell he needed for that damn book with one night of observation. Maybe he'd get bored and find another club owner to hassle. She sighed. And maybe the sun wouldn't rise tomorrow.

"...buy a new one if you don't."

Carl's words penetrated her musings, making her stop to stare at him. "What are you yammering about?"

"Nothing of import. Just talking to myself as I watch you wear a path in the area rug. I believe I saw some imported rugs on sale at that new little Asian store near my gym. Do you have a preference on color?"

She cocked a brow.

"Okay. Rugs and the doctor are off-limit topics. Check." He fingered a checkmark off in midair. "If you don't want to talk about the man on your mind, that's fine. I can take a hint. Want to debate the benefits of the latest tax cuts?"

She narrowed her eyes at him.

He held up his hands. "What?"

Fists on hips, she tapped the toe of one spiked, thigh-high boot. "Why are you in here when I need you out there keeping an eye on things?"

"Ah!" He began reattaching the handcuffs on his own wrists.

"Well, I figured Jon could handle him for a while. Besides, you wouldn't want him to get suspicious over your slave wandering around the club

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without you there to protect me, would you? I mean, if you really want me out there, too, then I can—”

“What did you say?”

“I said if you want me out there—”

“No, did you say Jon?” She mentally scanned the membership for that name and came up with a few possibilities.

He nodded. “Yeah, Dr. Sinclair’s sitting with him.”

“Shit!”

Chapter Two

"Here you go," Dalton's newfound companion said, sliding the signed document across the table. "Now that that's settled, have you seen the latest *New England Journal of Medicine*? The article on post-traumatic stress in correlation to abusive relationships?"

Dalton took a sip of the aged scotch and smiled, his other hand thumbing the treasured sheet of paper. What a boon, meeting up with Doctor Jonathan Sinclair. They'd met briefly at a medical convention in Aspen a few years ago. Jon's line of work with sexual dysfunction had intrigued him, but they hadn't had much time to delve into deep conversation. And Dalton had had no clue Jon was into fetish.

"No, I haven't. My mail is just now being forwarded to my new address here." Dalton leaned back in the chair and glanced around the room. The variety never ceased to amaze him. From enthusiasts of Goth to more conservatively attired corporate executives, the crowd contained a melting pot of people from all walks of life. Surrounding them was an air of raw sensuality that underscored basic human nature. He looked at Jon. "Have you been a member of Incognito long?"

Jon nodded. "About eight years or so. My brother and — ah, here he comes now." He raised his hand, and Dalton turned to see who he was signaling. A man, who looked remarkably like Jon, and a stunning, dark-haired woman made their way to the table.

"Dalton, I'd like you to meet my brother, Jackson, and our wife, Rachel." He turned toward his brother. "Doctor Dalton Carrington

recently moved to our neck of the woods.”

Rachel dropped her gaze in sign of respect for a Dom. Jackson held out his hand, and Dalton shook it. “Call me Jack. We’ve all read your books.”

Jon grazed his hand over Rachel’s. “Say hello to Doctor Carrington, pet.”

“Pleasure to meet you, sir.”

Jack kissed her cheek and whispered something in her ear before she moved into Jon’s arms. Jon pulled her down to his lap and kissed her soundly before tucking her head against his shoulder and murmuring something to her. She giggled and kissed his neck, then settled against him with a sigh of obvious contentment. Jack slipped into the chair next to the couple and raised his hand to grab the attention of one of the waiters.

Jon grinned like a fool in love. “Sorry, we had a slight disciplinary problem which needed tending to, but I believe our pet will behave from now on.”

Dalton gave a nod of understanding, intrigued by the triad. “I hope I’m not being too presumptuous, but I’d like to interview the three of you for my next book.”

The snap of a leather crop striking the tabletop exploded mere inches from his right arm. “I thought I told you not to disturb my patrons.”

Dalton released a cocky grin as he turned to greet the furious dominatrix he’d like to take down a peg or two. Or down to her knees in front of him. *Damn, what an empowering image.*

“Kat,” he said, leaving off the obligatory title of Mistress on purpose. “Won’t you join us?”

Enhanced by exotic strokes of black coal liner, her dark eyes narrowed with deadly intent. She resembled a cat ready to claw his eyes out, and the thought of scrapping with the beauty made his cock twitch in anticipation.

“I said *observe only*. How dare you disregard my orders and approach members with—”

“That would be my fault, Kat,” Jon said as he held up a halting

hand. "I initiated contact with him, not the other way around."

"You...?" She turned to Jon, giving Dalton an unintended chance to admire the delicate line of her profile, the attractive curve of her neck, her cute little nose.

Jon grinned boyishly. "Imagine my surprise seeing the one and only Doctor Carrington. I couldn't possibly pass up this rare opportunity to exchange shoptalk with a fellow intellectual."

"Far be it for me to be rude to your patrons," Dalton said, lacing his words with a teasing challenge.

She drew herself up straight with rigid purpose and eyed him. "That doesn't give you the right to disregard my demand that you not discuss your book or interrogate club members. I'm quite certain that as an *intellectual*, you have the mental capacity to understand the guidelines governing your visit here as a guest. Consequently, you've worn out your welcome, Doctor. Please leave."

The woman was spectacular, he thought, fingering the ace in hand, which in her ire she'd been too distracted to notice as it lay in plain view on the table. He held his treasured document up for her now.

"Oh, but I'm no longer a guest at Incognito. I've accepted a recommendation for membership."

He'd surprised her, though she did well in trying to hide all emotions but anger.

"I believe that makes me a prospective member, which allows for my admittance until the paperwork is finalized."

"Impossible. Let me see that." Without waiting, she snatched the paper from his hand. "Who..." Her voice drifted away as her gaze lifted from the page to pin Jon to his seat.

Jon gave him a curious glance before venturing, "He'll make a splendid addition to the clientele, don't you think?"

Her lips pressed together as she again scanned the referral form. "I cannot accept this."

A spark of offended anger struck deep in his gut, and he struggled to hide it. Would she disregard the rules of her own club just to keep him out? "Why not?"

She held up the form. "Membership requires the backing of two existing members. That's two signatures. You have only one." Her lips twitched as if holding back a smirk.

Jack immediately reached for the form. "Allow me."

Her lips parted slightly before snapping once more into a thin line.

Rachel drew Dalton's attention with a muffled laugh as she buried her face against Jon's neck. Dalton agreed with the sub, but he didn't dare show the slightest hint of a smile at how easily Jackson Sinclair filled in Kat's loophole and thwarted her attempt to keep him out.

Kat's arms crossed at her middle, that ever present crop tapping against her hip, while Jack pulled a pen from his jacket pocket and signed the document without ceremony.

When she had the form back in hand, Kat again looked at him.

"You are not a member—"

"Yet," he interrupted. Admittedly, the club was hers, but even she had to follow the rules or lose face before the other Doms at the table.

"You must first pass a thorough background check."

"I can personally vouch..." Jon began, but stopped when she frowned at him.

"After the fiasco with Master Harold, every new member *must* pass such scrutiny," she said. "I will not risk the protection of current members regardless of a prospect's status in your illustrious psychological community."

Jon shrugged, casting him a look of apology and, if he wasn't mistaken, a trace of amused curiosity.

"There is also the matter of dues," Kat continued.

"How much?" Dalton asked, reclining in his chair.

She met his gaze with a hard visage of determination for a suspended pause and then spouted off a high, four-figure sum. Jon's suppressed cough told him she'd no doubt doubled or tripled the actual cost for membership, and that—for some reason he didn't care to evaluate now—made him even more determined to join.

"Done." He pulled his wallet out. "Do you have a preference for credit card, check or cash?"

"Slave," she hissed, calling the man he recognized as Carl to her side. "Deal with this...*ass*-piring prospective member." With that clipped order, she turned abruptly and stalked away, her back ramrod straight, but the sweet sway of her narrow hips could never escape his attention.

After Carl left with his credit card, Dalton faced the intrigued gazes of his sponsors. Even Rachel risked her husbands' wrath by looking directly at him.

"What?"

"How is it you and Katriona know each other?" Jack asked, leaning forward to rest forearms on the table.

"I don't know her, exactly." Seeing skepticism mar their faces, he added, "Not personally. I mean, we've only met once before."

"Must have been one hell of a meeting," Jon said with a chuckle. "Kat isn't one to get riled so easily."

Dalton recalled that amazing moment when, in frustrated challenge, their lips had met and their tongues dueled, when he'd pinned her lithe body within a hard embrace. She'd fit against his body as if she'd been formed exclusively for him. Yes, it had indeed been a memorable meeting, of the body if not the mind. But he tried to downplay their initial confrontation to the Sinclair triad.

"When my last book on ingrained sexuality was released, I was asked to be the guest speaker at the International Owners' Conference."

"Owners' having a duel meaning," Jon said with a knowing smile. "I'm familiar with the organization."

"Yes, well, I met the unforgettable owner of Incognito there when she bluntly refuted a conclusion I'd made in my presentation."

"So all of this is because she voiced a fundamental disagreement with your philosophy?" Jack shook his head. "I don't buy it."

Dalton released a silent breath. "No. I believe her attitude is about the way I choose to handle hecklers in the audience." He paused when Carl returned with his credit card and a charge slip for him to sign.

"This is your temporary membership ID." Carl handed him the laminated card.

"Thank you."

"You're welcome...Master Carrington."

At the subtle change in Carl's tone of voice, Dalton studied the slave. "What makes you call me that? I've not worn anything to indicate which preference I have."

The slave surprised him by meeting his gaze, his lips lifting as a set of pearly whites flashed. "Any man bold or crazy enough to face the ire and riding crop of Mistress Katriona is, without a doubt, a certifiable master." He lowered his gaze and respectfully bowed, although not as low as he had toward his mistress. "Welcome to Incognito." With that, Carl departed.

When he was gone, Rachel said to Jon, "Permission to speak, Sire?"

"Granted."

"How exactly did you choose to handle your heckler?" she asked, giving Dalton a curious glance.

He smiled, remembering again the stolen kiss that had surprised him as much as it had the argumentative dominatrix. "I called her to the stage and challenged her to a demonstrative debate." His only regret was that the kiss, which ended their heated dialogue, had not been in a more secluded setting. Instead, they'd been interrupted by unexpected applause. "I do believe she holds a grudge from that match up."

"I think you're quite right, my friend." With a laugh, Jon patted him on the shoulder. "I second Carl's statement. Welcome to Incognito."

He waited for another round of drinks to be served before venturing a question on his mind. "So tell me about Carl. Would he make a good subject for a chapter in my book on submissive males?"

"Possibly," Jack answered, "if you wish to really piss Kat off by questioning her property. Carl's been Kat's slave for as long as we've known them."

Dalton hid his frown by taking a sip of his scotch.

"Next Thursday night," Jon said, "Jack and I are having a small get-together at our place." He patted Rachel's hip. "It's our anniversary. We'd love for you to attend. It'll give you a chance to meet quite a few Incognito members who have become close friends."

Jack lifted his glass and nodded. "And if you think we're an

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interesting enough trio to interview, you'll enjoy meeting another triad with its very own submissive dominatrix."

Dalton lifted an eyebrow, intrigued. "I wouldn't miss it."

Chapter Three

Kat puffed as she completed another rep of crunches, the toes of her tennis shoes tucked under the edge of her nightstand. Her abs burned as she forced her body to surpass her usual set in hopes that her workout would help settle her down. And keep thoughts of her nemesis at bay.

Nothing worked. Every night since Doctor Carrington had reappeared in her life, dread scratched at her insides for fear of having to deal with him at the club. Fortunately, he hadn't returned, but that didn't stop her body from anticipating another chance at watching him saunter into the club in those tight leather pants.

"Shit!" She stood, swiping her face as sweat beaded her forehead and stung her eyes.

Dodging her basset hound curled up on the floor, she stripped on her way to the closet. "Don't mind me, Bogie. I'm just losing my mind." Her aging, sad-eyed pet didn't bother to lift his head in reply.

Sliding hangers of jeans and shirts to the side, she yanked out the latex outfit she intended to wear tonight. When she tossed it on the bed, her calico cat startled and hissed. "Get over it, Hep," she ordered as she rifled through a dresser drawer and then walked into the bathroom. "I can only afford to have one antsy *Kat* in this place right now."

She stepped under the shower's warm spray. With one hand braced against the wall, she stilled, hoping the powerful jet could pound her body into submission. After several minutes, she determined the water alone wasn't enough. She grabbed her waterproof dildo from the

shampoo rack, flicked the switch, and rubbed the vibrating toy between her legs.

Desperation urged her to find something, anything, to help sate the nervous energy zinging through her system. She had a party to go to, a party that would surely have numerous members of her club in attendance. They would expect her to be her usual outrageously bold self. Confident. *In Command*.

Muttering a curse, she tried to clear her mind and focus on the sensual stimulation circling her clitoris. "Come on," she pleaded in frustration.

She wouldn't be in this mess if a certain arrogant know-it-all *intellectual* hadn't kissed her on that damn stage in front of her peers. Since when did public debates include such underhanded tactics? She'd barely had enough sense left at the time to come up with a flippant comeback, or her reputation as a dominatrix would not have survived the encounter. She'd salvaged her public persona, but he'd left her personally hollow. She'd just managed to convince herself that she was back to normal when he walked through Incognito's front door.

"Damn it." Pushing the device deep into her vagina, she quickened her pace. She'd been content pleasuring herself for years, until...

Why did he have to kiss her? Show her what she'd been missing?

"Damn him. Why couldn't he have stayed gone?"

Her efforts weren't working. The vibrations spread throughout her body, dissipating as they encountered her tense frame. With a frustrated groan, she closed her eyes, switched hands to piston the impersonal device into her channel, and let her mind conjure up the mood-setting images necessary to reach climax.

She thought of Dalton's lips, softening from that arrogant quirk as they brushed hers once. Twice. His tongue forced its way into her mouth, to seek, to duel, to conquer.

Her wet body responded. Reclining against the shower wall, she imagined his hard body pressed against hers.

His hands had branded their warmth into her back, a heat that now spread through her system with recollection. His rigid cock had aligned

perfectly with the apex of her thighs, making her want to surrender. To let him rip their clothes free.

The orgasm that had resisted her efforts struck hard and quick, yet the post-climactic sense of victorious satisfaction eluded her. Instead, while her body relaxed, her mind shrank away from what felt like impending doom.

* * * * *

"Why the hell aren't you dressed?"

"I am dressed," Carl said with an impudent grin, holding out his arms to show off his faded blue jeans and T-shirt. "I'll undress in the Sinclairs' driveway."

"Pussy." Kat slid behind the wheel of her victory red Corvette convertible and turned the key. A tingle skittered up her spine when the smooth engine roared to life. She breathed in the scent of leather surrounding her, bringing a much-needed smile to her lips.

Carl slid into the passenger seat and tucked a black gym bag beneath his feet. "Meow."

Kat rolled her eyes. "Just because that cop eyed you a bit funny..."

With a chuckle, Carl fastened his seatbelt. "If you didn't have such a lead foot, I wouldn't live in fear of winding up behind bars in my costume."

Kat gunned the engine, and the tires squealed as she peeled out of the private lot behind Incognito. Carl grabbed the window frame as if his life depended on it. Kat grinned.

"Bitch," Carl muttered.

Raising an eyebrow, Kat's lip curled with humor. "Man whore."

"Only for you, Boss Lady." He tossed a wink at her that made her laugh. "Do I get a bonus for every ass rub you give me like last time?"

"Watch your mouth or you'll spend the evening licking my boots like last time."

"Much better."

Downshifting for a stoplight, Kat threw him a glance. "What's

much better?"

"You're laughing again. You've been very tense. And dare I say...irritable."

Kat reached for the riding crop she'd stowed between the front seats. "Do you dare?" she challenged with a wicked grin, but inside she shriveled a bit. Carl was right. She'd been tense and irritable for months with no real clue to the reason. Her business was booming, her bank account afforded her plenty of leeway to purchase her dream car, but...she wasn't happy.

No, unhappy wasn't the right word. Discontent. Agitated. *Unfulfilled*. Which was ridiculous. She'd achieved everything she'd set her mind to from the day she inherited her grandmother's mansion almost ten years ago and the inception of the idea of Incognito had been born.

But she was thirty-seven years old and—she glanced at Carl who was watching her like a bird of prey—alone.

"Talk to me," he said, raising his voice above the wind as they traveled down the coastal highway toward the Sinclairs' estate.

"Tell me again why we're going to this party," she said, changing the subject.

"Because the Masters of Sin are two of your favorite clients and good friends."

"Good friends don't stab me in the back," she murmured with a sneer.

"Tell me the story between you and Carrington."

"Jump in a lake."

Carl laughed. "You know I'll get it out of you eventually, so you might as well spill."

"He's an arrogant asshole I had the misfortune of meeting at the Owner's Conference last year."

He cleared his throat, which was a lame excuse for covering a laugh. She slid him a narrow-eyed glare as she turned off the highway onto a long, winding rural road. After several minutes of travel, she turned onto a narrow street that would lead to Jon and Jack's place and slowed the Vette to a crawl. They were less than a quarter mile from the

house.

“Strip, slave.”

“Yes, Mistress.” Carl unbuckled his seatbelt and stripped down to his spandex.

As he pulled the collar and cuffs from his gym bag, a thunderous roar startled Kat, and she slammed on the breaks.

Son of a bitch!

“Hey, watch—” Carl’s words cut off as his head whipped around to see what she already saw.

Sitting on a sleek black motorcycle, dressed in leather from neck to toe, Dalton came to a stop right next to her car. Close enough to reach out and touch, if she chose. He flipped up the visor on his helmet and sent her a slow, seductive smile that made her nipples tighten behind the latex bustier she wore.

“Good evening, Kitty Kat.”

Shit. Shit. Shit.

She gripped the steering wheel and prayed it was too dark for him to see her physical reaction to his presence. He was an ass, she reminded herself.

“Doctor Carrington,” she said with cool detachment.

His gaze flicked to Carl, then back to her. “Let the slave off the leash for a while?”

She glanced at Carl to see him holding his collar. At least he’d lost the jeans. Hard to keep up appearances if her slave looks like everyone else.

She raised an eyebrow at Dalton as she forced an arrogant tone. “Are you such a harsh master you’d make your slaves ride in a private vehicle without the comfort of a bit of freedom?”

“Afraid he’ll damage the leather?”

“My slave is well trained.”

Carrington winked. “I can’t wait for a demonstration.” With that, he flipped down his visor and sped off into the night.

“Don’t even think about it, Kat.”

She turned toward Carl and narrowed her eyes. “Sorry, honey. A

girl's gotta do what a girl's gotta do to protect her rep."

No way was she going to let Dalton Carrington ruin everything she'd spent her entire life building.

"Take me home. I don't want to be a part of whatever your mind is conjuring up for me."

"Put your collar on."

"I swear you're going to pay if you —"

Kat laughed and put the car in gear. "You're my accountant. I'm sure you'll write yourself a nice fat check to cover whatever pain and suffering you think I've inflicted."

"Don't think I won't." Carl clicked his cuffs into place just as she pulled to a stop between Dalton's motorcycle and what she recognized as Paul Baxter's silver SUV.

She turned slightly in the seat to face Carl. "Look, I'll be honest here." She sucked in a deep breath and slowly released it. "He thinks he can use me to make a point for his stupid book. He tried at the Owners' Conference. The problem is, with my business, that point absolutely cannot be made. Do you get what I'm saying?"

His head tipped to the side as he studied her. His brow furrowed in a frown. "I think so."

"Good." She reached for the door release.

"You're attracted to him."

Her head whipped around. "Excuse me?"

"I've never seen this particular look on you before, but it's not pretty. Let me tell you that." He stepped from the car and came around the front as she stared in astonishment at him. When he opened her door, he bowed low. "Mistress?"

"I can't believe that you would think that I had any interest in that...that...that..." That lust-provoking hunk of a man in skintight leather who could kiss better than any man she'd ever met in her life. Oh, damn, she was in trouble.

"Yes, *Mistress*."

She grabbed the riding crop from between the seats and stepped from the car. "Don't take that tone with me, slave."

He chuckled.

"I mean it, Carl. Behave tonight."

He closed the door gently and turned to face her, crossing his chained arms over his bare chest. "Kat. Chill out. When have I ever let you down?"

Feeling foolish and completely out of sorts, she huffed a breath. "Never."

"Then loosen up and have a little fun." He grinned, dropped his arms to his side, and stepped just behind her as she made her way toward the front door of the mansion. "It's a party, after all."

* * * * *

Dalton scooped a bit of caviar onto a cracker and tried not to stare at the doorway. What was taking her so long? he wondered, then chastised himself for caring one way or the other.

"Here you go," Jon said, handing him a crystal flute. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

He washed down the caviar with a sparkling sip of champagne and then said, "No. Thank you for the invitation. I must say my schedule with the move hasn't allowed me much time to meet many neighbors." He grinned. "A death sentence to a people-watcher like myself."

Jon chuckled. "Then you're in for a treat tonight." He gestured toward the loveseat where a couple sat snuggled together.

As Dalton watched, the man leaned over to whisper something that brought out a blushing grin to the redheaded woman in his arms.

"That's Master Paul Baxter and his new bride, Heather. Just got back from a honeymoon to Ireland. He's Incognito's resident member with a badge."

Dalton cocked a brow but said nothing as Jon pointed out a distinguished duo with chiseled Latino features that stood off to the right, chatting with Jon's brother, Jackson.

"Over there are Masters Dylan and Ryan Montgomery."

"Twins," Dalton assumed aloud.

"Yes, identical in both appearance and preference for women." Jon drew his attention to a stunning figure in a form-hugging red dress and heels with straps that crisscrossed up sleek calves. "The woman speaking with Rachel is their wife and pet, Olivia."

Dalton lifted a toothpick of meat and cheese from a nearby serving dish. "Is she the one you mentioned at the club?"

"No. That would be Angela." Jon smiled and scanned the room. "There she is."

Dalton turned to see a pixie in leather seated on the lap of a well-dressed blond man, one arm draped around his shoulders as he fed her a grape. The bracelet on his wrist clearly marked him as the submissive of the pair. Yet a tall, darker man in denim stood behind the chair talking with another guest named Bastian, whom he'd met earlier. The darker man's hand settled comfortably—and possessively—on the pixie's bare shoulder. She glanced up and gave him a smile. That's when he noticed the padlocked collar around her slender neck.

"Remarkable..."

Jon laughed.

"I mean, in theory, I suspected it was possible. I even devoted a chapter to it in my last book."

Jon sipped his own drink and studied the triad across the room. "I know. I concur with your psychological conclusions, by the way. The heart is an amazingly adaptable organ."

"That's Blaine in the chair," Jon continued. "He works for Jack. The Dom is Garrett Storm, a good friend and excellent craftsman if you're ever in the market to redecorate your home."

Just then, a feminine hand with long, coral-painted nails slithered over Dalton's shoulder to splay across his chest, making him still. "And who do we have here?" a woman's voice purred in his left ear. "I *love* leather."

"Master Dalton Carrington, meet Tara, one of Incognito's more mischievous strays," Jon said by way of introduction.

The woman giggled at the description. As Dalton turned to see her, his gaze landed on a more interesting vision in the doorway.

Katriona stood like a statuesque wet dream in latex. Her thigh-high boots drew his hungry gaze up from spike heels to several inches of creamy, pale thigh. Shiny black material coiled tightly around her athletic hourglass figure, stopping one millimeter too late above the perky peaks of a pair of compact breasts. How he longed to latch onto them.

Matching gloves encased her arms, topped by porcelain shoulders held in rigid repose. Her hair swept up and away from her face to cascade like a wavy whip of black pitch that reached her ass. Her lips were strikingly red and full. Her onyx eyes sparked with challenge as her gaze collided with his. One finely arched ebony brow rose.

She snapped her riding crop against her own thigh, and he wondered whether she subconsciously enjoyed the sharp feel of such a strike on her own flesh.

"A pleasure indeed to meet you, Master Dalton." Tara's murmured words barely registered on his senses as he forced himself to look at the submissive woman at his side, and away from the erotic vision in the doorway.

Tara had lowered her gaze, and a smile spread across her face as she noticed the hardening evidence of arousal beneath his snug pants. He swallowed the groan that threatened to erupt from his lungs and allowed the woman to misinterpret his physical reaction.

He lifted Tara's hand to his lips, but couldn't prevent a quick glance toward the door. To his disappointment, Kat had turned away to speak with Jack, who'd crossed the room to greet the latest arrivals. Her slave, brazenly draped in chains, remained like a sentinel at her side.

"The pleasure's mine," he remembered to say to Tara as he continued to watch the couple over her shoulder.

His eyes narrowed when Carl bowed low to greet Jack, and Kat caressed her slave's ass, but not before casting a quick peek in his direction.

What's the minx up to?

"Interesting friends you have, boss," another woman said with a chuckle to Jon as she passed. "Love the costumes."

Dalton glanced at her and noticed her conservative attire. He gave

Jon a curious look.

"My secretary, Sharon. No, not everyone here is involved in alternative lifestyles." He shot Tara a firm look. "So behave for now, Tara. You were lucky this time."

She chewed her lip and took a step back. "Yes, sir. My apologies."

Dalton looked again at Kat, with Sharon's words fixed firmly in mind. Was it a costume? Was it all just an act?

As the night progressed, Dalton observed the differences between the couples at the party. Mainly those he could determine dabbled in fetish lifestyles. While there were several singles sprinkled throughout the gathering, and he engaged in meaningless small-talk when necessary, his curiosity centered on Kat and Carl's relationship compared to the other match ups.

Her boldness in outfit selection, particularly for her slave who was the least-dressed partygoer, contradicted her tamer behavior toward the man. She seldom touched him, and he never touched her, at least not in what Dalton considered an intimate way. He wondered whether she curbed their risqué activities in light of the more conservative guests. Was she biding her time until later? If so, then why the glaring attire?

He'd about given up on discovering answers to his growing list of questions when Paul and Heather Baxter approached the Sinclairs to say their goodbyes. Several of the more conservative couples and guests departed shortly thereafter, including Jon's secretary.

That's when Jackson tugged Rachel to the center of the room and tapped his glass. As Jon joined his brother and wife, Dalton weaved his way through the remaining group of fetish enthusiasts.

He'd attempted to close the gap between himself and Incognito's notorious owner all evening, but she appeared determined to play cat and mouse with him. Every opportunity he'd had to approach her, she'd found an excuse to cross the room. Now, while she and the remaining group listened to their hosts, he used the opportunity to draw close.

"I'm still waiting for that demonstration," he murmured from behind her.

She sucked in a breath, and he longed to see her expression.

She turned slightly, showing him her profile as her eyes glared a hole in the floor. "I'm not a circus monkey to perform at your bidding," she murmured over her shoulder.

He chuckled and stepped closer, invading her space. Her hair caressed his front, and he caught a whiff of a floral scent that was surprisingly erotic in its innocence.

He watched her closely. She puzzled him.

"A monkey? No, but a performer? Maybe. Tell me, Kat. Are you an exhibitionist?" He leaned nearer, dropping his voice to a soft whisper at her ear. "I think you are."

"You know nothing about me."

"I know you enjoyed that kiss we shared on stage. I know it affected you, turned you on—"

"*Back off,*" she warned under her breath. She raised her crop and would've struck his cheek if he hadn't caught her wrist in a tight fist. With his other hand he gripped her waist, and he barely resisted the urge to pull her against his body in a hard hold.

"Mistress?" Carl asked, walking up with a martini in one hand and a balloon of brandy in the other.

Her chest rose in quick pants. Her nostrils flared and lips parted. Her teeth gritted in fury. One of the most volatile of human emotions, anger. It could explode into a fiery passion if handled correctly.

In the background, applause broke out at their hosts' announcement, which Dalton missed but assumed it had something to do with their anniversary. As the other guests raised their glasses and toasted the triad, he murmured, "Until later." He released his hold on Kat, and stepped back.

As he walked away, he met the concerned gaze of her slave, who blatantly broke from decorum to watch him leave.

Chapter Four

Dalton leaned against the bar situated along the left wall of Incognito's main hall and turned to watch the swirl of bodies flow and ebb. Sensual music played in the background, mingling with the hum of conversations and sounds of sexual play in the shadows, nooks and crannies of the vast room.

"What's your pleasure?" The bass voice came from a burly bald man standing behind him. The bartender was a mahogany-skinned giant with large hands and even larger biceps. He'd introduced himself earlier as Tyrone. Although his expression was pleasant, his size advertised his secondary club duties as a bouncer.

"I beg your pardon?"

The man gave a deep bark of laughter. "Drink, man. What do you want to drink?"

Dalton chuckled. "Scotch, thanks."

When Tyrone returned with his drink, Dalton said, "May I ask a question?"

The gentle giant grinned and wiped down the counter. "You already did, but if you have another, ask away."

He gestured to a vacant platform spotlighted in the center of the room. "What's the stage for? Having a show here tonight?"

"Maybe. It depends on who wants to perform, and if anyone's interested in watching."

Understanding, he said, "Exhibitionism."

"Or voyeurism, depending on your point of view."

A wiry, middle-aged man sidled up to the bar next to him and ordered a shot of tequila. He smiled and downed the shot after the bartender gave it to him, then ordered another.

"So tell me," Dalton said, "has Incognito's owner ever performed?"

The bartender froze, his voice rising with unexpected surprise.

"Mistress Kat, perform?"

The tipsy man next to Dalton chose that moment for clarity, or rather lack of it. "Mistress Kat's gonna perform? Damn, I gotta tell... Shit, what's his name? Thanks, man." He darted into the throng with drunken determination.

"Oh, hell," Tyrone said, making Dalton wince.

"I take it the answer to my question is no."

The bartender lifted a beefy finger to point at him. "If I get fired for this, you're a dead man."

Dalton figured he'd have to take a number and wait in line behind the club's owner. Feeling safer with his back to the bartender rather than the room, Dalton turned to search the crowd for Kat.

When the excited buzz of rumor swept the room, he debated sneaking out to live and fight another day, but then he saw her.

* * * * *

Katriona had just left Carl in his office to handle the Saturday night payroll when the first signs of trouble prickled her spine.

"Mistress Kat, the stage is ready for you." The messenger was a young, twenty-something stray named Brian. His uncharacteristic eagerness unnerved her, as did his suspected crush. He spent as much time watching her as he did in the voyeur rooms at the back of the mansion.

"What are you talking about? What stage?"

He frowned. "I knew it. I told Eddie he got it wrong, but they're all talking about it. About you. Performing."

Who in the hell? Fury gripped her lungs and set them on fire. Her

riding crop slapped hard against her thigh, but she barely noticed the sting.

Stalking toward the main hall, determined to put a stop to the jokester, she froze in the doorway. The crowd had parted, leaving a path straight to the circular platform at the center of the room. A soft white beam spotlighted the area.

Conversation ceased as everyone—her customers—faced her with expressions of curiosity and excitement. Anticipation.

Oh, shit.

She made her way slowly to the stage amid reserved applause. Words failed her.

How in hell was she going to get out of this one?

Stepping onto the stage, she said, "Turn the lights up for a moment."

Darkness receded as disappointed groans rumbled through the room. She feared a riot if too many had imbibed, but better to see the attack coming than be the only idiot standing center-stage like a backlit target.

Scanning the crowd, she forced a smile and began. "I understand rumor has it that I intended to perform for you tonight."

Murmurs of affirmation surrounded her.

Her gaze halted on the familiar figure of her nemesis. *Dalton Carrington*. She should've known he'd be here. That he'd be at the center of her discomfort. Acid roiled in her gut as anger churned with unsteady nerves.

The lights didn't allow her to see his face clearly, but she knew he watched her, waited for her to fail his test. *Damn the man!*

She would not fuck just anybody for his viewing pleasure, or anyone else's for that matter.

"I'm afraid I can't possibly perform without my slave—"

As if some unseen force was out to thwart her, Carl had to pick that exact moment to slide to a stop in the doorway.

"Uh... You sent for me, Mistress?" He appeared baffled, as if someone had told him the place was on fire, and now he couldn't find the

smoke.

She motioned to him. He slid uneasy glances from side to side as he obeyed. When he stepped onto the stage, she looked him straight in the eye and tried like hell to convey everything she needed, praying he understood how upset she was without her actually showing it. She reached to unlock his cuffs and chains, using the excuse to pull him closer.

"They expect a performance," she told him softly as she flicked the tiny buttons to release him. Then she turned her gaze pointedly toward the bar and sighed in thanks as Carl followed her lead.

Dalton raised his glass to her in salute and then downed the entire drink. If she ever got her hands—no, her riding crop—screw it, a whip was too lenient for him....

"Remember the other night when you said you'd never let me down?" she whispered for Carl's ears only.

"Mmm hmm."

"I think you're about to earn yourself a really big bonus."

Carl glared at Dalton for a moment, then took her hand and murmured, "This one's on me."

She leaned toward him as if to plant a kiss on his cheek. "Whatever you do," she whispered, "just make it look real."

Raising her voice, she announced, "Well, now that my slave is here..." Her words trailed off into husky laughter that felt more nervous than sexy. The crowd erupted in applause and then settled in seats arranged around the stage.

Carl lowered himself to his knees and bowed, kissing the top of her boot. "Permission to select some items from the Pleasure Table, Mistress?"

"Granted," she said, looking toward the bar and raising her voice. "You know what I like, slave." Silently, she prayed he picked something with clitoral stimulation. Otherwise, this would truly test her acting skills.

Moments later Carl returned along with two other men who placed a cushioned, oblong ottoman on the stage. "For your comfort, Mistress," he explained just loud enough for the audience to hear.

She smiled at him and ran her riding crop up his arm in what she hoped passed for an approving, appraising caress. As she made to sit, she

teasingly glanced from side to side then slid her skin-tight skirt higher.

Anticipatory murmurs of appreciation from the audience awarded her efforts. Then the room's lights dimmed, leaving her once more in the spotlight. Her smile wavered, froze. Her nerves splintered.

With legs together, she sat facing the bar and leaned back on her hands, letting her ponytail drape over the edge of the seat.

Carl knelt in front of her, met her gaze for a suspended moment, and then lifted one foot and planted her heel on his bare shoulder. As he did, her skirt hitched higher.

She swallowed hard, knowing he now had a clear view of a part of her body he'd never been privy to before. To avoid unsightly lines, she never wore underwear with her costumes. Of course, her reasons didn't matter a damn now. Not with her assets unveiled for the whole club to see.

He closed his eyes and pressed his lips to the side of her foot, and then ran his hands up her leg, following the curve of her thigh. When his fingertips brushed her skin just above the boots, she watched his face, but he refused to look up as he slid the zipper down and removed it.

Thank God I shaved this morning. She fought against a nervous chuckle at the sudden thought. The crazy things that came to mind at moments like this.

A timid smile though was still in place when she glanced up to catch Dalton still there, watching. Her expression sobered.

With her other boot gone, she bent her arms to rest on her elbows and stared at the ceiling. Carl moved around to cradle her head against his chest. His hands rubbed her gloved arms, his fingers twining with hers.

"Comfortable, Mistress?"

"Yes, slave."

"Allow me to make it even better." His voice took on a husky tone, and she couldn't tell which part of it was an act until he whispered, "Forgive me," just before his hands skimmed over her shoulders to fondle her breasts.

She closed her eyes and gnawed the inside of her cheek. When he pulled down her strapless top, her back went ramrod straight.

"Relax," he murmured.

That's easy for him to say. Embarrassment warmed her cheeks. Why hadn't she ever thought this might be necessary? Why hadn't she come up with a contingency plan?

The good doctor would pay for this. She'd figure out some way to exact punishment. Very slowly. And painfully.

With her jaw aching from clenched teeth, she tried to block out thoughts of the voyeurs encircling them and focused her mind instead on Carl's hands.

Not bad, really. His touch was gentle, like hers would be if she were in her bedroom. Alone.

He continued to massage her breasts, thumbing the nipples until they finally puckered in response. His breaths were hot across her neck, his mouth almost touching her ear.

Then he whispered, "Moan."

Her eyelids snapped open, blinking at the diffused spotlight. "Hmm?"

"Moan."

Oh, right. Enjoyment. She let out a husky moan, arching her back as if to press her chest firmly into his hands.

When he moved away, she licked her lips and eyed his butt, hoping she looked like a pleased cat instead of a woman with cotton in her mouth.

Carl flicked a switch on a dildo not unlike the one she used on herself at home. When he approached her with a smile, she rose off her elbows and watched him warily.

Kneeling again, he lifted her left foot and ran the vibrating cock along the instep. A giggle burst from her lungs before she was able to stop it.

Recovering quickly, she scowled and slapped her riding crop on the ottoman. "Get on with it, slave, or I'll chain you to the wall for a much deserved whipping."

He bowed his head, but not before she saw an arrogant glint appear in one eye. "My apologies, Mistress."

Carl wedged his hips between her knees as he knelt before her, and then reached forward with the vibrator to circle the tip around each nipple.

She let her head fall back, her eyes closing when he drew the device down over her exposed navel. The dildo moved lower. She felt fingers open her labia. Her breath hitched. The vibrations touched her clit, rubbing and teasing the nub.

Then he slipped the thick, fake cock deep into her moist depths. Her moan was real this time.

As he pushed and pulled the dildo in her, Carl thumbed and tweaked her clit, his arms pressing her reluctant legs wider.

She hadn't realized he had such talented fingers. Her body responded to the physical stimulations, yet the climax remained elusive. When she peered at his face, the very image of intense concentration, she could see discomfort in his tightened lips, worry in the deep brackets around his mouth.

How could she ask this of him? Demand this of him. Her *employee*. Her *friend*. Regret struck like a cold shower on her libido. A burning sensation stung her eyes as they watered. She clamped her eyelids shut to hold back the tears. Neither of them wanted this, yet neither could stop it. Not now. Not while surrounded by an expectant crowd with the potential to tear the place apart.

Panic settled in her stomach. She needed to put a stop to this. End it. Apologize to Carl.

She looked at him and bit her bottom lip, then her gaze flickered away to the surrounding shadows. A movement caught her eye. There. Near the edge of the stage.

Dalton. He stepped close enough for the light to touch his face, highlight his dark green eyes. His gaze clashed with hers.

She chewed on her lip.

Carl pumped the fake cock harder into her and pinched her clit. But Dalton's heated stare was the spark that ignited a warm blaze inside her, which spread from her core to every extremity.

Her hands fisted and flexed, fingers tingling. Her thighs trembled.

The vibrations pummeling her channel ricocheted through her nervous system.

Dalton's gaze slid along her body like a lover's caress before making a slow return to her face. He stripped her bare with that look.

Her breaths quickened. She couldn't turn away from him. Tension coiled inside. So close. So close.

Then his lips moved. Silently, he mouthed one word. *Come.*

Like a forest fire, her orgasm raged through her body, consuming her with its intensity. With a sharp cry, she lost herself amid embers of aftershocks.

Panting, she collapsed back onto the ottoman. Her riding crop dropped to the floor.

Seconds later, Carl's lips skimmed her cheek in what would seem a kiss to the audience. "Okay?" There was no mistaking the concern in his whispered question.

She nodded and raised a heavy hand to pat his cheek. "Yeah."

"Wow," Carl murmured with a tender smile before moving away to zip her boots back into place. He stepped around to lend a hand and lift her to her feet. As she pulled her skirt down and her top up, he picked up her crop and handed it to her. Meeting her gaze, he silently motioned toward the audience.

Forcing a smile she hoped wasn't as weary as it felt, she took a tiny bow. Applause, nods, and broad grins greeted her. God, she never wanted to do this again as long as she lived. She squeezed Carl's hand in silent thank you as she looked into the crowd, searching for Dalton.

He was gone.

Chapter Five

Dalton dismounted his Valkyrie Rune and hooked the helmet over the handlebar. Incognito's red brick mansion shone like a dark garnet in the light of the setting sun. A lush carpet of grass blanketed the well-manicured grounds. A rainbow of flowers sprang from overflowing beds. Trees as old as the building stood watch like silent sentinels along cobblestone paths.

He swallowed and leaned against the bike. He'd spent the past thirty-nine hours trying to rein in his volatile emotions. Anger, yes. Fury, even. He understood that one. Seeing Kat sexually stimulated by another man while he lusted after her had driven him to the edge of madness. He wanted to throttle Carl, yet he knew they were only on that damn stage because of his own impulsive, ill-timed curiosity. A fucking misunderstanding. A mistake. And he'd played a role in that, for which he stood condemned.

Regret and guilt weighed heavily on him. As entrenched as he was in his alternative lifestyle, sharing had never been something he enjoyed personally. So forcing others into a scene that exceeded their comfort level, however unintentional his part, was anathema to him.

But what had him puzzled most was the unexpected desire that had flared within him when she'd looked him in the eyes and come at his command. Then there was the inexplicable and overwhelming urge to protect.... Feelings that were too strong to ignore and too new for him to fully grasp or understand.

He was a leading psychologist in the field of human sexuality. Why the fuck couldn't he psychoanalyze himself this time?

He pushed away from the motorcycle and headed toward the front door. Locked, he realized when he pulled on the handle. Closed on Monday.

Damn it. For some stupid reason he'd expected Kat to be here. It was her club. He pictured her here 24/7.

He truly needed to get his head out of his ass.

Deciding to take a look around in the daylight since he was already here, he jogged down the steps and followed a cobbled path around the east side of the building. Through the trees, he could just make out the color of the ocean, its surf rolling and receding against a ribbon of beige sand.

Behind the club was a crushed seashell parking lot with four cars parked in the shade beneath a scattering of oak trees. The blood red Corvette convertible he'd seen Kat driving the other night was one of them.

He smiled. So, she *was* here.

He tried to ignore the jump in his pulse as he walked along the back of the mansion. A short hedge separated him from the building, but he was close enough to realize the windows weren't blacked out as they were in the front.

He stepped over the hedge and peered through the leaded glass. The view was wavy and the light within dim, but he could make out a high-tech kitchen with double ovens and a six-burner grill. Massive pots hung from a rack, as did ladles and spoons.

The next few windows had blinds pulled down, so he couldn't tell what was behind them, but then an open window brought him to a halt. An office. Maybe the mansion's library in a former life. Bookshelves lined the walls surrounding rich oriental rugs over shiny hardwood floors. And a big mahogany desk, behind which sat one slave named Carl in a black leather executive chair.

But this wasn't the Carl of spandex shorts and collar. This man, bent forward and intent on the papers in front of him, a yellow pencil

poised in his hand, looked like—

Gravel crunched under his foot.

Carl's head snapped up, and his gaze locked on him. The man's eyes narrowed, and he dropped the pencil, pushing away from the desk.

Feeling as if he'd been caught like a peeping tom, Dalton stepped back from the window, but not out of view.

With one quick move of his hand, Carl motioned toward the side of the building.

Dalton nodded and rounded the corner. A door opened to reveal one very pissed off slave.

Faded denims, a white button down shirt and running shoes gave him a casual appearance. But combined with a scowl, arms firmly crossed over his wide chest, and a solid stance, the man broadcast an unanticipated air of authority. This was no meek submissive to be bullied.

"Incognito is closed on Mondays, or did you miss that in your membership packet?"

Yep, the man was ticked. "I need to see Kat."

"She's not here."

"Her car is here."

Carl raised an eyebrow. "Perhaps she got a ride home last night."

Dalton sighed and shoved his hands in his jeans pockets. "Okay. Let's you and I talk, then."

"Sorry. My mistress forbids me from submitting to any of your interviews."

"I'm not interviewing you. But we do need to talk."

Carl's eyes were penetrating as he glared. The man was definitely on guard. Couldn't blame him, really. Not if his suspicions about Carl and Kat were true.

Finally, Carl stepped aside and unfolded his arms. "Come in."

Dalton followed Carl down a long, wide hallway and into the room he'd spied from outside. The bookshelves were filled with books and knickknacks. Upon closer inspection, he realized most of the baubles were of a sexual nature. A remarkable blown glass phallus. A sculpture of a couple entwined in fellatio. A marble carving of a woman in repose, a look

of ecstasy etched in intricate detail on her face.

"Beautiful pieces," he commented when he turned away to find Carl seated behind his desk, eyes narrowed on him.

"I'm a bit of a collector. Have a seat."

Dalton moved to a leather chair opposite Carl and sat. "What else do you do, Carl?"

The man's jaw ticked once. "You mean, am I more than Kat's slave? Yes, I am." He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms once more. A sure sign of closure, as any sub knows.

But Dalton wasn't ready to close the book on Carl just yet. The slave's vague answer and the manner in which he delivered it only stimulated more questions in his mind.

"Why do you want to see Kat? What is so important it couldn't wait until we're open tomorrow night?"

Dalton nodded once, signaling his acceptance that Carl would be in charge of this conversation...for now. "I'll answer your questions if you answer mine."

"I'm not in the mood to negotiate with you, Doctor." He swept his hand over the desk. "As you can see, I have work to do."

"Kat's your employer."

His statement made Carl frown. "I happen to be Incognito's accountant, among other things."

"Call me Dalton."

"I'd rather not."

"Do you feel threatened by me?"

Carl threw back his head and laughed. "Threatened? No. Annoyed? Yes. Now tell me why you're here."

"I need to speak with Kat." When Carl merely stared, he added, "About what happened the other night."

"And you would be referring to...?"

Aggressive protectiveness from a sub. Interesting, though not unheard of. Dalton got the impression Carl wasn't anyone's pushover, which again led him to conclude that what went on between Kat and Carl for the benefit of club attendees was merely an act. A well-rehearsed play,

with a strict script. He'd wager they'd never been intimate away from prying eyes. Kat had been too stiff on that stage. The look of panic in her eyes too real.

"The scene you two played out."

Carl's expression became wary. More guarded.

"I'd like to apologize for any part I played, however minor, in the misunderstanding that forced Kat into such an untenable position."

"I'll pass on your apology." He made to rise. "Now if that's all."

Carl hadn't denied it was forced. Dalton's stomach clenched at the reality of his assumptions. "My involvement was purely accidental. A mistake. I want to tell her myself...face to face."

"I assure you it's forgotten. Now if you don't mind." He motioned toward the door.

Dalton remained seated. "How long have you been working here?"

"Since before Kat opened the doors. Why?"

So, they'd known each other at least ten years. He'd done some digging through the Owner's union and found out she'd been in business that long.

"And personally you've been together...?"

"Where's this going, Doctor Carrington?"

It wasn't going anywhere if he couldn't get past Carl the watchdog. He bit back an angry retort at being denied access to Kat and let out a slow breath.

"I would *never* intentionally do anything to hurt her. Or anyone else for that matter," he added with a pointed stare at Carl. "I want you to know that. Regardless of what you think of me, of what Kat might think, I'm not her enemy or yours. I've no desire to see her ruined."

The man sank back into his chair. "Go on."

"Safe, sane, and consensual. I've lived by that motto for over twenty years. I fear what I witnessed Saturday night was not consensual in the broadest sense of the word."

Carl sat silent for a long moment, his eyes watchful, his expression void of emotions. Then he sat forward. "There is no better businesswoman in the state of Florida. She is savvy and extremely intelligent. She started

with nothing more than a rundown old building and a dream, and built it into a beautiful place for people like us. Incognito is her life.”

Dalton nodded.

“Never has anyone made her fear for her future. Made a mockery of all she stands for.”

“I never meant for—”

Carl held up his hand. “I realize that. But the fact remains. You scare her.”

Slowly shaking his head, Dalton couldn’t understand. “Why? I... That’s not what I want.”

The man ran a hand through his hair and stared out the window for a long moment. “I swear if she knew I was saying this, she’d flay me.” He turned back and met Dalton’s gaze straight on.

Dalton’s breathing suspended while he waited for Carl’s next words.

“In all the years I’ve known her, no man has made her feel...vulnerable.”

* * * * *

Kat pulled on a set of pastel plaid pajama shorts and a matching short-sleeved top after dropping her towel on the floor near her bed. With a sigh, she smiled and stretched. Her whirlpool tub did wonders to work out the kinks and strains she received from a punishing workout.

She headed to the kitchen where she slid a bag of movie-style buttered popcorn in the microwave. Then she went to the living room to flip through her selection of DVDs. “Ah, perfect,” she said to Bogie, who reclined like His Majesty on the loveseat. “Who can beat *Casablanca*?”

She pulled the blackout curtains against the glare of the setting sun, sending the room into near darkness. With the remote, she flipped on the television. A beep signaled that her snack was ready. In the kitchen, she poured herself a frosty glass of cream soda and dumped her buttery treat into a plastic mixing bowl.

Refreshed and relaxed, she took her munchies across the room to

the sofa and nudged Bogie with her hip as she squeezed onto the cushion next to the armrest. "Couch hog," she said with a chuckle at Bogie's grumbled harrumph as he pulled in his legs and collapsed onto his side, taking up even more room.

Hepburn came sauntering in from the kitchen, gave a disgruntled meow at being ignored, and plopped all twelve pounds of herself in Kat's lap, her tail flicking as she eyed the bowl of popcorn.

The opening credits rolled, and Kat was in heaven. She had her favorite movie of all time and her babies. She'd sweated off at least a thousand calories that afternoon, and was now going to stuff herself silly on junk food the rest of the night. Life couldn't get much sweeter.

A half hour later, the popcorn demolished by the three of them, Kat was contemplating getting up to get another glass of soda when a knock sounded on the door.

She groaned and dropped her head back. "I knew it was too good to be true," she mumbled. "Just one day is all I ask." One day with no work.

She'd begged Carl to take the day off and stay away from the books because she knew if he didn't, there'd be some pressing matter he'd need to discuss with her at some point. It never failed. The man was as diligent as they came. Every T crossed and I dotted. Or was that decimal dotted to an accountant?

She chuckled to herself. "Come on in. It's open!" She flipped on the lamp next to the sofa and reached for the remote to pause the movie.

The door opened behind her.

"There's soda in the fridge," she said as she fumbled with the misbehaving remote. Must need new batteries. "Missed out on the popcorn, though. Hep and Bogie ate most of it."

When Carl didn't say anything, she turned toward the door.

Her hand jerked, and the popcorn bowl upturned on top of her basset hound. Bogie didn't so much as move. Hepburn hissed and jumped off her lap, digging her claws into Kat's thigh as she went.

"What the hell are you doing here?" She shot to her feet with the unnerving urge to flee her own house. Her sanctuary. Not a single patron

of Incognito knew that she lived in the refurbished caretaker's cottage at the back of Incognito property.

How the hell did he know?

Dalton quietly closed the door behind him and stepped into her private domain. Damn him. Damn him to hell. He didn't belong here. He belonged in her other life. Not this one.

"You told me to come in."

She shook her head. Tendrils of hair flew loose from her French braid to cling to her suddenly damp neck. She pushed them away with agitated hands. "I thought you were Carl."

"You make your lover knock?"

She opened her mouth to deny Carl as her lover, but then snapped her mouth shut so hard that her teeth clacked. Carl *was* her lover. At least as far as Dalton was concerned.

"Get out."

Dalton's observant gaze scanned her quaint retreat. She knew what he was seeing, and it made her stomach clench. Her heart was in this house. Her soul. He had no right.

"What do you want?" She balled her fists and planted them on her hips. No latex. Soft flannel. Dear God, she wanted to groan.

"To talk."

He moved farther into the room. Toward her. Damn, he was big. Without the five-inch heels she wore every night at the club, he towered over her. When had his shoulders gotten so broad?

"We have nothing to discuss. Get out."

His gaze, which had wandered into every visible corner of the room, settled on her. She was wearing more clothing than she wore at the club each night, but she'd never felt so naked. So exposed. More so than when she'd been on that stage with her assets exposed to the world.

"I came to say I'm sorry." His voice was low, little more than a whisper.

Slowly she shook her head, confused.

He reached forward and clasped her fisted hands, drew them forward until he held them between their much-too-close bodies. She

wanted to pull away, but the look in those deep, forest green eyes stopped her. Even her breath seemed to stall in her lungs.

"I need you to know that what happened Saturday was unintentional on my part. A misunderstanding. A mistake. I hate that I... That you felt pressured into performing."

Heat flooded her cheeks. He would have to bring that up, wouldn't he? She yanked her hands from his and moved into the kitchen, behind the counter, using it like a shield.

He followed, but halted before invading her space. "Don't run from me."

"You ran. Saturday night, you ran." She bit her tongue hard, silently chastising herself for the outburst. She'd gotten past the fact that she'd laid herself out for all of Incognito. She and Carl had pushed past the awkwardness of the situation. But she was still furious that after she'd come at his command, something that hadn't happened to her since she was very young and naïve, he'd disappeared into the night.

He gave a slight nod. His voice dropped even lower when he said, "Again, I ask your forgiveness."

Huffing out a breath, Kat frowned. This humbleness was getting on her nerves. She didn't buy it for a minute. What were his ulterior motives? He was a cocky, arrogant asshole. Had been since their first meeting at the Owner's Conference, and he'd only instilled that belief a hundred fold since appearing at Incognito mere days ago.

"Fine. Apology accepted." She pointed toward the door. "You may leave now. I'm busy." Without waiting, she rounded the counter and marched toward the sofa.

He caught her arm and spun her around so fast she lost her balance and landed against his rock-solid chest with an "umph."

"Not so fast, Kitty Kat."

Chapter Six

With a growl of frustration, she jerked against his hold, but he didn't release her arms. As close as he was now, she couldn't escape the assault his body made on her senses. His spicy, erotic scent. The alluring depths of his eyes. That husky base of his voice.

"Now that you've accepted my apology, we have another matter to discuss." His grip remained gentle, yet firm.

Through gritted teeth she demanded, "What?"

"Carl."

"What about him? He'll be home in a few minutes. You should leave."

A cocky half grin curled his lips as he glanced around the room once again. "If a man lives here, he's not one who fucks women. You're a phony, Kitty Kat."

"How dare you —"

"I don't think I've met a bigger phony than you. I'd wager my life savings that you live alone here, except for a lazy dog and a fat cat." His fingers loosened, the grip turning into a caress that sent a wave of goose bumps racing down her arms. "You wear flannel, and..." His right hand traveled the length of her bare arm to her hand. He lifted it and kissed her knuckles, his soft lips sending an even stronger wave of excitement coursing through her blood. "...even those red claws of yours are fake."

She glanced at her fingertips, bare of her press-on nails, and nearly cried. He was so right. About everything. "You need to leave, Doctor

Carrington." Her voice came out breathy and uneven. She couldn't help it. This man sent her senses into overload and turned her brain to oatmeal.

"Say my name," he whispered. Ducking his head, his mouth poised just scant inches from hers.

She could smell mint and coffee on his warm breath. Knew he'd taste like ambrosia. But she wouldn't succumb to him. Couldn't. Ever.

Neither could she pull away.

"Doctor..."

His mouth settled against hers with soft censure. No invasion of tongue, only a seductive pressure and gentle suction that pulled yearning from the center of her empty soul.

"Say my name."

To her horror, her legs wobbled. She gripped the sleeves of his denim shirt to remain upright. Her breath came in short bursts. As she gazed into his incredible eyes, she couldn't remember why she was fighting him. Why she couldn't just...

"Say my name. Give me this one submission."

Submission. The word echoed in her brain like a shotgun blast. Submit to this man and throw away everything she'd worked a lifetime to achieve.

Incognito.

Her life.

Her future.

She jerked upright and shoved at his shoulder. "Do you have any idea who you're talking to?" Her voice came out strong and arrogant, as she'd hoped. "I'm Mistress Katriona. I submit to no one."

"You battle your own heart."

She laughed. "You have no idea what's in my heart, Doctor. You may think you're the almighty, all-seeing shrink from an Ivy League school, but you'll never *know* me."

A sly smile appeared. "I *already* know you, kitten. Everything I need to know stands before me like a neon sign. You're an enterprising businesswoman who has built a fetish club to rival the best in the country. Incognito is fresh, clean, safe...beautiful, like the woman who founded it."

His voice dropped a bit. "But here, in your sanctuary, you're a strong, solitary woman. Beautiful in your own right, yet alone. And for what?" He pointed toward the front door. "Out there you put on a thick shell when you don that latex and leather garb. You're a damn fine actress, kitten, but I've seen the real you underneath all that makeup and armor."

She shook her head.

"Deep inside, you want a man who understands you...all of you...even that inner urge to lose control. You need a dominate lover, don't you?"

"No." The denial came out soft. Uncertain.

His hands nearly spanned her waist. His fingers flexed into her sensitized flesh, while hers dug into his biceps. She couldn't say whether she wanted to cause him pain or cling to him so he couldn't escape.

"You argued against my lecture because I was right. A woman's heart—your heart—is submissive in the right hands."

"Ha!"

His grin grew into something dangerous and so damned attractive she nearly melted. "If I'm wrong, why are your nipples beaded like pebbles beneath that top? Why does your body tremble at my touch? You're so aroused you can't hide it."

She swallowed hard, unable to deny his claim. His nearness and touch aroused her more than she'd ever been before. She throbbed with an unfulfilled need that longed for the tender caress of his lips. She wanted his mouth on hers. On her body. She wanted him to demand she come again, but this time his cock would be inside her, not some piece of impersonal plastic.

But why should she be the one to submit? He was here in *her* house. She glanced down and saw the undeniable ridge of his erection pressing against the worn denim of his jeans. He was as turned on as she was. He wanted her as much as she wanted him.

Why should she have to show weakness for them to enjoy one fast, hard fuck? Once should be enough to get the man out of her head. Why not sate herself on him and finish what they'd started with that one flaming kiss on the stage months ago? Experience what she'd fantasized

about since that kiss. And then she'd move on.

After giving him a pointed look toward his crotch, she raised her gaze to meet his with challenge.

"Let's finish this." She led the way to her bedroom and flipped on a small lamp, which cast a subdued glow into the room. Dalton followed, as she knew he would. She lifted Hepburn from the center of the bed and put her on the floor. The cat strolled out of the room with an annoyed meow.

"Shut the door unless you like cat claws dug in your ass."

The door clicked shut as she pulled her top over her head. She faced him, met him with a bold stare so there'd be no mistaking her intentions, and then pushed the pajama bottoms down her legs.

"The only *Kat* claws I want to feel on my ass are yours."

She grinned and moved toward him, unashamed of her nudity, yet a bit nervous nonetheless. His perusal of her body let her know he more than approved of what he saw. She reached up and clasped the back of his neck, pulling his head down. Her lips latched on to his as she rubbed her sensitive nipples against the soft denim of his shirt.

He groaned, and her body sizzled in response. His arms wound around her, and his big, heated hands kneaded her ass, rubbing her against his solid, denim-clad form.

Oh, yeah. It'd been so damn long—years in fact—since she had a man in her arms. She turned him and moved him backward until he tumbled onto the bed—*her* bed—pulling her down on top of him.

She pressed her lips to his, and his tongue invaded her mouth, making her moan. He was good. Real good.

Blindly she struggled to open his shirt, yank it from his pants, and then she pulled back to straddle him as he finished what she started. Seconds later the shirt sailed over the edge of the bed, and she claimed his mouth once more. Her hands rushed over bare flesh to roam through soft chest hair and caress firm muscles. Explore. Seize.

Without breaking contact in any way, he reversed their positions so he lay over her. His legs and hips weighed her down. She arched against the bulge in his jeans, but he lifted himself just out reach.

Ripping her mouth from his, she sucked in a deep breath and

glared. "Fuck me, damn you."

"Safe word?"

"Don't need one. This is just a fuck. Nothing more, nothing less."

He took her hands and pinned them to the bed on either side of her head. A disturbing, arrogant grin split his face. "Don't fool yourself. This is so much more."

As Dalton watched his words sink in, her agitation was evident, as was her arousal, but he'd be damned before he'd let her make light of the situation. She may want a quick finish, but he was just getting started.

He decided the safe word could wait for now, but they still had some other unfinished business.

"Say my name," he said, repeating his earlier order.

Pure stubbornness set her jaw as she rolled her eyes. "What's the matter, Doc? Afraid I'll call you slave?"

He fought to contain his smile. "You could try, but by the time I'm through with you, you'll be calling me Master."

She gave a sharp bark of laughter and smirked. "I think I'll call you, D.C. because you are so Damn Cocky."

He gave her a serious look, leaned closer, and warned, "Male arrogance has nothing to do with it." He latched onto one silky breast, sucking hard on the coral peak to state his point. She hissed, arched against him, and tried to pull her hands free. He tightened his grip, lifting them above her head, and then shifted his attentions to her other breast.

His cock strained against his zipper, the tight fit painful. Still he refused to seek his own comfort. He needed the barrier for now, or he'd be too tempted to sink into her hot depths and find relief. His senses told him this first lesson would take time and patience.

"I can make you say my name," he murmured after kissing a moist path up the slender column of her neck. He'd make her scream it as she climaxed even if it was the last thing he ever did.

"Nev—"

He took her mouth in a punishing kiss, cutting off her denial, while he transferred her wrists into a single-fisted grip. With his other hand, he opened his belt and slid it from the loops.

He set it aside briefly to run a hand up her side and fondle one small, firm breast. He kissed her jaw line, nipped her earlobe, and suckled his way up and down her neck. She smelled of flowers and tasted as sweet as honey. Her body vibrated beneath him, yet when he raised his head to see her face, her jaw was set in a stubborn jut. He nudged the apex of her thighs with one of his, pulling a tight moan from her throat.

Still holding her wrists, he slipped his other hand between their bodies. Her skin was sleek and smooth, her downy curls as black as pitch. He dipped one finger through the triangle of hair to gently streak over her tightly budded clit. She was so hot, so wet, he bit back a groan as deep need coursed through his veins.

Her hips jerked in what he took as a silent demand to hurry. Rubbing and teasing her slowly, torturously, he delved once into her hot, slick channel. Tearing his attention away from her luscious body, he noticed her eyes clamped shut, her lips parted a bit as she panted, reveling in the foreplay.

"Never say never," he whispered.

She whined when he removed his hand from her pussy to quickly wrap her wrists with the braided leather of his belt before she had a chance to react.

Her eyelids snapped open. "Damn it, Carrington!"

"That's *Dalton* Carrington, sweetheart," he said as he threaded the end through the buckle and secured her makeshift cuffs. "Are you ready to say my name?"

"Fuck you," she snarled, bucking her hips against his thighs that pinned her to the bed.

"Patience, Kitty Kat," he said with a grin. "You can fuck me all you want after you learn to behave."

When he sat up, she tried to strike him with her bound hands, but he caught them and rolled her onto her stomach, bringing them closer to the bed's headboard. He used the last stretch of the belt to form a tight knot around a narrow brass pole.

As he scooted off of her and the bed, one long, lean leg swiped at him. He swatted her ass with a satisfactory *slap*.

“Ow! Let me go, you Deranged Control-freak.”

He laughed at her efforts to struggle and her forced fury. “You’re rather talented at coming up with alternatives for my initials.” As he spoke, he rifled through her dresser drawers for... *Ah, perfect.* He lifted numerous pairs of stockings and discovered another unexpected treat hidden beneath.

“I’ll show you talented,” she said with a huff as she struggled to free her hands.

Unwilling to let that happen, he took his findings back to the bed, which shook from her efforts.

“Just as soon as I get free, I’m gonna kick your high and mighty ass.”

He chuckled, bent over to plant a kiss on her butt cheek, and pushed a single finger into her drenched pussy.

She froze with a sharp intake of air.

Adding a second finger, noticing how her thighs spread a bit to accommodate him, he said, “If you somehow manage to free your hands, I’ll be forced to stop this so I can rebind them. Is that really what you want?”

Her head dropped facedown into the plush, white comforter.

He pushed his fingers deeper into her warm, slick depths, bending and twisting for maximum pleasure. “I didn’t think so. And I warn you now. If you bruise those delicate wrists with your stubborn struggles, I’ll be forced to punish you.”

A muffled groan was her only answer.

As he pulled his wet fingers from her heat, he let one brush suggestively across her anus. Her aroused shiver made him smile.

Since her long, braided ponytail had gotten twisted around her body, he gently tugged it free. He was glad to see that her hair hadn’t proven to be as false as her nails. The ebony strands were soft, thick, and eye-catching. If not her finest feature, it ranked in the top five of his favorites. He had ideas for those gorgeous strands, but not now. Not yet.

“Up you go,” he said, lifting her hips so that she rose onto her knees and elbows. Obviously intrigued, she peered at him over her

shoulder, but he offered no explanation other than a simple command. "Don't move."

Using the stockings, he created ropes that looped around each thigh—just above the knees, which he tugged apart. The other ends he secured to the bed's headboard and foot posts. When he finished, he tested the tension to ensure she couldn't move or close her legs.

"These are nylon, so don't struggle against them or they may tighten, and I'll have to cut them off." As he spoke, he ran his palm over her back, buttocks, and thighs. She rested her forehead on her forearms. "I want to pleasure you, Kat, not hurt you. Understand?"

She gave him a humored smirk, and said, "Damn Considerate of you, D.C."

He chuckled and smacked her ass, making her jolt. "Minx."

He stepped back and studied her athletic, feminine body, enjoying the view of her bound and waiting for his touch.

Careful to watch for any signs of distress since she refused to give him a safe word, he began the erotic torture at her feet, remembering how ticklish she'd been at the club.

He grasped her ankles, then taking the surprise he'd discovered in her dresser—her own personal battery-powered dildo—he brushed the tip across the bottom of each foot. Even though he hadn't turned the device on, her reaction didn't disappoint.

"No! Fuck," she cursed amid unrestrained giggles. "Sssstop. Oh, damn."

"Ready to say my name?"

Laughing hard, she frantically shook her head. When her movements became so strong that he worried the bindings would tighten, he moved onto her calves and flicked on the device.

Immediately she relaxed, subdued by the massaging vibrations. As he rubbed the toy up and down each calf, he caressed her ass with one hand, unable to avoid touching her. He struggled with the urge to take more than that small pleasure for himself. Each cheek was soft and smooth, a little rosy from his earlier swats. Her pussy was pale pink and so wet it tested his control.

He longed to power into her, to sate his hunger, but taking what he wanted of her body without first gaining ground in her mind would undermine any future bonds between them.

Moving the device up her thighs, he massaged every inch of flesh except where he knew she wanted him most. His fingers moved gingerly over her back and around to her flat stomach, where he drew soothing circles across her skin.

Her respiration slowed. Her body arched against his hands like a cat seeking attention. He ran the device along the crack of her ass, but stopped short of her cunt. As he moved away again, her fingers dug into the sheets, and she buried her face in the comforter.

Reclining beside her, he reached underneath to brush the back of his hand around her breasts, careful to avoid the nipples. "Say my name," he whispered. "Submit to me, Kat. Let me bring you more pleasure than you ever thought possible."

When she didn't respond, he rose and positioned himself behind her. Turning off the dildo, he set it on the bed between her knees. With slow deliberation, he spread her pussy lips wide with his fingers and leaned over to lap at her slick, heated juices. As sweet as he'd dreamed. Sweeter than his fantasies.

He tugged, suckled, and licked her clit until she was rocking against him and erotic little moans she couldn't disguise slipped from her lips. When he'd brought her to the edge of climax, he stopped, leaving her unfulfilled.

As he got off the bed, he could hear her harsh breaths and knew her heart must be racing. A tender caress along her neck confirmed the suspicion as he felt her pounding pulse.

Her body quivered. Her hands fisted the sheets beneath her.

Stepping back, he toed off his shoes and removed his socks. Then he waited in patient silence for her to recover enough to look up at him. When she did, he unzipped his jeans, pushed them down, and stepped out of them. His cock sprang free, hard, throbbing, and ready to give her what she most wanted, needed. If only she'd give in to his wishes.

"Tell me, kitten," he said, taking his cock in hand, giving himself a

long, slow stroke, "about your deepest, darkest fantasies. Are you alone, without the feel of another's touch? Does self-masturbation with a mechanical piece of plastic that cares nothing for you fulfill your every desire?"

Her eyes glistened. Her lips drew into a moue.

He sat beside her, casually pumping his dick. "Or do you long for a man to care for you, touch you when and where you need it...?" He grazed the tip of her left breast with the back of his fingers. "A man who takes command to ensure your pleasure as well as his own."

He leaned over to cup the back of her head and bestow a slow, sensual kiss on her mouth. His tongue dove deep inside before he pulled away, but he kept his lips next to hers, their breaths mingling. "Do you long to kiss and be kissed?" He nipped her bottom lip.

Her whimper gave him hope.

After one more heart-tugging kiss, he again backed away and moved to kneel behind her. With both hands, he rubbed her firm, round ass, and then took his cock and ran the tip along her damp folds. His eyes closed. He lifted his face to the ceiling and begged for control. She felt so hot, wet and ready for him. Never had a woman stripped him of so much discipline.

"Ask me for what you need," he whispered through gritted teeth. "Say my name."

She moaned in reply, stubborn to the end.

He squeezed her ass, barely able to hold himself back from giving up and fucking her hard to sate his own desires. "What do you want, Kat?"

"Fuck me, damn it."

He spanked her once on each cheek.

"Ow!" Her fingers flexed, and her head reared. She tried to back into his cock, which still teased her cunt.

"I don't take orders. You need something? You're going to have to ask me for it."

"Please...I-I need...cock."

He sat back on his heels, lifted the dildo and without fanfare,

slipped it deep into her pussy.

Her breath hitched.

He didn't move it or turn it on. "There. Is that all you need, Kat? A lifeless cock to fill you?"

Tears spilled from her eyes then, and he could hear the telltale sounds of a snuffle.

His hands fisted so tight, his short nails dug into both palms. He wanted to caress her, soothe her, pleasure her until they both passed out. But he wouldn't. Not as long as she considered this nothing but a one-time fuck, or him nothing but a cock to be used and thrown aside.

His heart beating too hard for fear of what she might or might not do, he rose as if to leave. "If all you want is a cock, then that fake one should do. Enjoy it."

"No, please...Dalton."

His heart soared, even as it broke to hear the catch in her voice. She'd crossed the line, that imaginary barrier she'd erected between them. It was enough. For now.

He removed the dildo, sheathed himself in a condom he got out of his wallet, and then positioned himself at her opening. "Say it again. Tell me who you want to feel deep inside you."

"Dalton." The word was little more than a murmur. Tentative and new.

He slid home. She cried out and shoved her ass against him as well as she could, being bound so effectively.

God, she was perfect. So tight. Hot. He knew in that instant between pleasure and pain that he'd never have enough of her. No woman challenged him more or needed so much from him, whether she admitted it or not.

His fingers bit into her soft flesh as he powered into her like a piston, driven to bury himself so deep inside her that no one could ever separate them. Ecstasy. Her body had been made for his.

Her breaths came quick and hard. Her fingers gripped the brass post of the headboard.

"Please... Dalton, please..."

“Yes, kitten,” he hissed through clenched teeth.

With one hand on her shoulder, he reached around with the other to finger her clit. He quickened his pace as he felt her inner muscles contract around his cock. The pressure grew.

“Again,” he ordered.

“*Dalton!*”

“Come *now*.”

His words sent them both over the edge into a swirl of shouted orgasmic bliss.

Chapter Seven

Floating on a euphoric cloud, Kat felt Dalton's strong, warm hands untying her bindings, guiding her legs to lower her to the bed. The down comforter had never felt so soft. So luxurious. Next, he removed the makeshift cuffs and gently massaged her wrists. His soft chest hairs tickled her shoulder as he moved over her back, taking such care as he saw to her comfort.

Care.

A man who sought to pleasure her. A beautiful, sexy partner who had seen inside her heart. Had known exactly what she needed.

A small smile curved her lips, and she sighed, possibly for the first time in years, in complete and utter contentment.

His hands...so warm...coasted over her back, her butt, and down her legs to massage the tightened muscles. The moan that slipped from her lips couldn't be stopped. Sated, yet amazingly aroused by his touch, she lay still as tremors of post-orgasmic fire pulsed through her.

"Beautiful," he whispered, his lips brushing lightly against her ear. "The most beautiful woman I've ever met."

She shivered.

"Come here, my pet. Let me hold you."

As his arms surrounded her, snuggling her against his chest, his words struck like a lightning bolt to her brain.

"Pet?" She jerked from his arms and rolled off the bed, nearly wiping out against the brass and glass nightstand. "I'm not your pet. I am

no one's pet." Her heart set up a hard, heavy staccato in her chest as panic flared through her.

Reclined on the bed, gorgeous in his nudity, Dalton raised up on one elbow and that cocky eyebrow rose in challenge.

Her insides quivered. She wanted to dive back onto the bed and bury her face against his shoulder. Beg him to hold her. Love her. Make her feel alive.

But her future was at stake. She couldn't let him see any further weakness. Already he'd witnessed too much. Dear God! She'd submitted to him. Begged him to stay. Played his game and lost.

"And you are *not* my master."

He had the audacity to chuckle. No one laughed at Mistress Katriona and got away with it.

With a quick glance about the room, she spotted his clothing. She scooped his shirt and pants into her arms and dumped them on the bed. "Don't get comfortable, Doc. It was a great fuck, I'll grant you that, but once was enough, thank you."

Ha. That wiped the annoying smirk off his smug face. "You'll be a popular addition to the club. The strays are going to love your technique." Her stomach tightened at the thought of him with another woman. Any woman. He belonged to her.

No!

With a flick of her head, she sent her braid behind her back and fled to the bathroom. "We're done here," she said without looking back. "I need a shower. Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

The bathroom door barely shut, she sank to the floor against it. Her hands shook. Her whole body shook. With fury, she told herself. Regret. Remorse. God, how would she face him at the club knowing what they'd done? What she'd let him do to her?

He could ruin her. Professionally, financially, and emotionally. What if he wrote about this in his damn book? She'd be a laughing stock among the Doms who frequented Incognito. No, she'd be the laughing stock among any Doms anywhere who read Dalton's book. She'd lose all the respect she'd worked so long to achieve.

Tears gathered in her eyes, but she refused to let them fall. She had to redeem herself. Never show Doctor Dalton Carrington another sign of weakness.

She groaned and rubbed her hand over her face. She'd *begged* him not to leave. *Mistress Katriona doesn't beg for anything!*

Her chin quivered. She bit her bottom lip and buried her face in her hands. No, Mistress Kat wouldn't beg. Not her public persona. But the softer, sweeter, lonely woman inside her would. Her real self. Her private self. So long ago she'd put submissive Kathy Smith on a shelf, hidden from the world, so she could achieve her dreams.

Damn Dalton for unearthing her. He was bent on destroying her. She could not, *would not* let that happen. *Ever*.

"You can lick your wounds as long as you need to, kitten," came Dalton's voice through the thin wooden door. "But mark my words. We are not finished."

She wanted to scream, to rail against him, but she heard the front door open and close and knew she was, once again, alone.

* * * * *

Kat narrowed her eyes at the back of Dalton's head as she made her way across the room toward the table he shared with the triad of Garrett, Blaine, and Angie. As she neared their seats in the center of Incognito's lounge, she heard his deep, rich laughter.

The ass, she thought, even as she fought the wave of goose bumps traveling down her arms at the sound of his voice. He had a small spiral notebook open, pen poised over it. Conducting interviews in her establishment after she'd forbidden him to do so? This had to be grounds for removal.

"We've been living together as a triad for about six months," Angie said. "Blaine was the reluctant one. He'd never been exposed to the world of alternate lifestyles."

"Have there been any major, or minor for that matter, obstacles you've had to overcome?" The question came from Dalton.

At the last second, she decided that making a scene in the middle of the club on a somewhat busy evening was not the smartest choice. Especially since Tara chose that same moment to make a beeline for Dalton. The little vamp had her eye on the newest member of the club, and Kat could practically hear her drooling as the woman brushed past her.

Son of a bitch.

Kat had to turn away. She gripped her riding crop so hard her fingertips went numb. She had the illogical urge to throttle the woman, but why should she care?

Because he's the best thing to happen in your personal life in more years than you can count, a little, annoying voice in her head answered back.

With a heavy sigh, deflated and defeated, Kat took up her post by the door so she could keep an eye on the main hall as well as the front foyer.

She glanced back just in time to see Tara land on Dalton's lap and let out a throaty laugh that could be heard even at this distance. The short, busty brunette wrapped her arms around Dalton's neck and, from where she stood, Kat could see his grin as he looked into Tara's bright eyes.

Asshole. The fact that she was the one to tell him the strays of the club would love him did little to assuage her ire at seeing another woman in his lap. The riding crop stung as she slapped it against her bare thigh. How she'd love to use it on his smug face right now. "Damn it, get a grip."

"I beg your pardon?"

She swung around and nearly collided with Bastian Ridgcroft, a dashing thirty-year-old Dom who'd been trained in the arts of seduction at a very private fetish club in the Keys.

Damn, she hadn't meant to voice her thoughts aloud. She chuckled to hide her embarrassment and greeted Bastian with a kiss to both cheeks and a sultry murmur of his name. Pulling back, she quirked an eyebrow, drawing out an alluring smile from the Dom before her.

"Good evening, Kat." In a tight gray T-shirt and jeans stylishly ripped in a few interesting areas, no one would guess he came from an

exceedingly wealthy family and was heir to a fortune.

She gave him an approving appraisal with a saucy grin. "A very good evening, Bastian, now that you've joined us."

He chuckled. "Ah, Kat, you know how to make a man feel wanted."

She traced his well-defined bicep with her riding crop. "And you, dear sir, are always wanted," she purred, leaning in close once more, "at Incognito."

He wore the most intriguing scent she'd ever smelled on a man. One Sunday afternoon she'd spent an hour sniffing bottles at Macy's just trying to find it. She hadn't been successful.

She had found, however, that the Doms enjoyed her teasing. It made them comfortable, helped ease them into the atmosphere of the club. And their reaction gave her a clear indication of the kind of mood they were in. By Bastian's quick grin and the sparkle in his baby blues, she knew that some stray—or two—was in for a good time.

"You're in a playful mood tonight," he commented as his gaze scanned the room, probably seeking out the stray he'd spend the evening with.

"You know me, Bastian. Always ready for a little fun." She tacked on a throaty laugh for good measure. "Any time you're ready for a real woman..." The riding crop descended over his rock hard abs before she lightly smacked him on the hip with it.

He laughed and winked, then sidestepped the crop. "Maybe someday when I'm feeling more adventurous. I think I'll have a drink with Connie tonight."

Kat let out a real laugh at that comment. "Good luck with stopping at a drink." No Dom got away with just buying Connie a drink. Not only was she a stray sub, she had the sex drive of a rabbit.

Bastian wiggled his eyebrows in a teasing way. "Who said anything about stopping?" He gave her a quick nod of farewell before heading straight for Connie, who sat alone at the bar in the heart of the club.

"A word."

Kat's breath sucked in and lodged in her throat, nearly choking her. She hadn't seen, let alone heard, Dalton's approach. His deep voice vibrated through every nerve ending, and his whisky-scented breath brushing against her cheek made her want to lick his lips.

"I'm busy," she said as a man and woman came through the front door. Stepping away from Dalton's heat, she greeted the couple.

As soon as the twosome moved on, Dalton wrapped long, warm fingers around her bicep. "We need to talk, now."

His high-handed tactic set her teeth on edge. "So, speak."

"In private."

"No."

"Damn it, Kat. You've been avoiding me for the past two days. Every time you see me coming, you run the other way. I let you get away with it until now, but it ends here."

With a hard jerk, she stepped back to put some much-needed space between them. She gripped the riding crop, ready to use it against him if necessary. "I *ended* it Monday evening."

With slow deliberation, he shook his head in denial of her statement. Damn the man. Even in the softly glowing lamps of the foyer, his rich green eyes burned with an intensity she couldn't deny. Or escape.

"I told you it wasn't over. Not by a long shot. Monday night was just the beginning."

"Do you not understand the word *no*? With all your fancy degrees, I think you'd at least know the definition." She planted her hands on her hips and stepped toward him, nearly eye level with him in her heeled boots. "And while we're on the topic of 'no', how about the fact that you have blatantly disregarded my rule about pestering my patrons? You will not conduct your interviews in my club, and if you so much as mention Incognito in that book of yours, I'll sue your ass off."

His lips tipped into a sexy grin. One that made her want to slap his arrogant face and kiss him senseless. "I won't stand here and defend myself, not when we have more important things of concern. However, I'm willing to discuss the matter someplace more private."

With a growl of pure frustration, Kat dropped her hands to her

sides and spun away to stalk across the wide foyer, her heels making a satisfying click at each step. "Discussion over." She waved her hand toward the interior of the club. "Go back to your little toy. Have some fun. Quit bothering me and my customers."

"Little toy?" The confusion in his tone made her stop and face him. His brow knitted into a frown. "What are you talking about?"

"You forgot her name that fast? Tara, the booby brunette slave draped all over you. The one who drools every time you walk into the room."

Anger, fast and hot, changed his features in the blink of an eye. His jaw went rigid. His eyes narrowed. He clasped his big hands around her arms. "You listen to me, Kat, and listen carefully. First, I'm not toying with Tara. I don't want her. I'm only interested in you." He gave her the slightest shake, which made her mouth fall open in surprise. "Do you hear me, you stubborn, stubborn woman?"

She gave a tiny nod.

"Good." He released her arms to lift her chin with an index finger. "Second, you're the one who can't keep her hands off the merchandise. For two days I've watched you paw and flirt and practically throw yourself at every eligible Dom who comes through the door." He slid his hands down her neck to grip her shoulders. "You even hit on Garrett, who is happily and permanently attached. So you tell me who has her toys. How many Doms does it take to keep you satisfied?"

White-hot fury shot through her, and she twisted from his grasp. Who was he to accuse her? She never *threw* herself at her patrons. Flirted and teased, yes. That was her job. They expected her to be a domineering seductress. She was a mistress of a fetish club, for crying out loud. They never took her up on her outrageous comments, because she didn't pick on just any Dom. She wasn't stupid. Of course, she only hit on Doms already attached or those exclusively interested in subs. And she had her own slave, or so they thought.

She leveled a hard look at Dalton. She didn't have to explain her business practices to him. "Fuck you."

"Been there, done that, and plan to do it a lot more. But just so you

know, I hate sharing. Now answer my question. I know you're not screwing your *slave*. So who is it that keeps you satisfied?"

She swallowed another curse when the front door opened. Brian came into the foyer and sent her a warm, welcoming smile. "Good evening, Mistress."

"Brian. Good to see you." Her hands shook so hard she gripped both ends of the riding crop to keep them steady. "You enjoy yourself tonight."

Adoration filled his eyes. The young man hadn't made a decision yet if he was a top or bottom and dabbled in both, so the direct eye contact wasn't a taboo where he was concerned. When his gaze skittered toward Dalton, however, the smile slipped a notch.

"Is everything okay, Mistress?"

She forced a stiff smile. "Of course." She moved toward the inner door and opened it for him. "Go right on in."

With a nod and a wary glance at Dalton, who hadn't moved a muscle, he went through the door.

"I think you'd better leave, Doctor. You're causing a scene."

"You haven't seen anything yet, kitten."

She glared at him. "Not here. Not now."

He cocked a brow and cast a quick gaze about the foyer. "Not here, but definitely now. Meet me in the first unoccupied voyeur room on the right in two minutes."

"Like hell." She crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not going anywhere, especially there, with you."

He glanced at his watch. "One minute fifty-five seconds. Be there, Kat, or I'll find you." He closed the distance between them. "Don't think I won't toss your pretty ass over my shoulder and cause the biggest scandal Incognito has ever seen. What would your patrons say after they see the infamous Katriona hauled off like a misbehaving slave?"

Before she could get a word out, he jerked open the inner door and walked into the main room, heading for the hall of voyeur rooms.

On shaky legs, she moved to the wall and rested her forehead against the cold marble. "Arrogant bastard," she muttered. How dare he

come into her place of business and treat her like this?

"You going?"

A groan spilled from her lips before she could stop it. She turned toward Carl as he stepped from the shadows. Concern warmed his eyes, but then something else played across his face. Something like... amusement?

"No. Why should I?"

Carl crossed his arms and cocked his head to the side. "Why not?"

Pushing to her full height, she frowned at him. "What do you mean, *why not*? How much did you hear?"

"Enough to know you accepted more than his apology Monday night."

A cold wave of understanding flooded over her. "*You!* Oh, I could fire your sorry ass for this. You told him where I lived, didn't you?"

A small smile tipped his lips. "Maybe."

She narrowed her eyes on him as betrayal churned in her gut. "I thought you were my friend. I thought I could trust you."

"Kat..."

She shook her head as unshed tears burned behind her eyes. "I can't believe—"

"Why don't you give the guy a break?"

Why don't you twist the knife? "He's a Dom looking for a sub. He doesn't need me."

"Maybe he prefers subs that are more...dominant."

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought you hated him as much as I do. After what happened last week, after what he made us do."

"You don't hate him in the least, and you know it, even if you won't admit it to yourself." He shrugged. "And he didn't *make* us perform. It was a misunderstanding. We had a meeting of minds. I believe him. He's apologized for his participation in it."

Kat swallowed hard. She wanted to run to her cottage and hide behind locked doors. Get the hell away from Dalton and his snitch.

"You're down to thirty seconds. I suggest you hurry. I doubt the good doctor is one to make idle threats."

The riding crop snapped against the marble wall, but that was all the defiance she could muster. With a sharp exhalation, she pulled open the door to the main hall. She'd deal with Carl's defection later, when she wasn't ready to fire his sorry ass.

Right now she had one arrogant psychologist to put in his place. Once and for all.

Chapter Eight

The second hand of his watch failed to keep up with the rapid beat of his heart.

Thirty seconds. Would she obey or test him? Force his hand and run?

Maybe he shouldn't have pressured her so hard so soon. His hands fisted. But a man could take only so much. Watching her flirt with and caress other men who smiled and eyed her like a tasty treat stretched his nerves to the breaking point.

He'd wanted to beat the men up and spank her ass for each infraction. Then she'd shocked him with her jealous snit over Tara's presumptuousness. For a woman who claimed their relationship over before it started, her reaction to Tara was intriguing, and he'd realized he felt the same way each time a man got too close to her.

A couple entered the room next door, flicking on the light. Unlike the one he stood in, which showcased the luxuriousness of a sultan's silken harem, theirs was decorated like a stable with rough wood slats on the walls and hay bales strewn about. Through the large voyeur window, Dalton watched the Dom Kat had playfully kissed on the cheek in the foyer tug a buxom blonde farther into the room and pin her against the window. With a growl of irritation, Dalton yanked the curtains closed before the pair unlocked their lips long enough to notice him on the other side of the thick Plexiglas.

Another glance at his watch showed time was up. But as he turned

to hunt Kat down, she threw open the door, which slammed against the wall with a resounding crash.

The sound stopped him in his tracks, and he wondered how best to handle the furious woman who stalked toward him with riding crop raised as if to strike. Her dark eyes narrowed to slits as she stopped, her face mere inches from his. "You listen to me you Dictatorial, Conniving—"

He kissed her.

Not a forceful take over, but a sudden meeting of lips, followed by a soft coaxing of the tongue and a gentle caress of fingers along her jaw and neck. His hissing Kat needed soothing. He was more than happy to oblige.

She startled and could've pulled away with ease since he hadn't physically restrained her in any way. Warm relief stole through his heart when she didn't. She tasted of peppermint and paradise, and he never wanted to leave.

He deepened the kiss, sealing their mouths together with tender temptation. His hands cupped her face, a subtle support, nothing more.

Countless moments passed—an eternity that vanished all too soon.

Breaking the kiss, her head fell back as she caught her breath. He took what was offered and nibbled a path along her jaw, sucked her earlobe with gentle care, and nuzzled his lips along her slender neck.

Her fingers clung to his shirt, fisted, and then pushed hard, forcing him back a step.

"Damn it, why does this always happen with you?" Not waiting for an answer, she paced across the room with a furious stride.

Deciding a verbal response was unnecessary, he closed the door and locked it to ensure their privacy. When he turned, he had to bite back a chuckle as he leaned against the wall and watched her rant.

"I don't give a damn how good you look in leather. You're too arrogant for your own good. You won't listen. You steal my friends. You don't take orders worth a damn."

He wasn't sure what she meant by stealing her friends, but he smiled inside at her opinion of his leather pants. The soft material gave a

whispered sigh as he adjusted his stance to cross his ankles.

She stalked past him without a single glance.

"You piss me off," she continued, "and then, just when I'm good and angry enough to kick the shit out of you...you go and kiss me like *that*." She threw her arms up as if he'd committed the gravest of sins and his salvation or punishment was out of her hands.

She stopped less than three feet from him and met his gaze head-on with one brimming with fire and smoke. She jabbed her riding crop at him like an accusing finger. "You. Make. Me. Crazy."

He laughed then. He couldn't help it. She was a gorgeous mix of spitfire and baffled innocence, wrapped in a package that could charm a saint into sinning. And... "You make me love you."

Her mouth opened. Shut. Opened again.

"Damn it, Dalton! See? That's just what I mean."

The riding crop struck him in the shoulder, but there was no force behind the blow. He barely felt it. He was too busy reeling from his own words. Yet, as they echoed in his mind, he realized they were true. How in the hell had he fallen so fast?

"Just when I get my bearings, you pull the rug right out from under me. How am I supposed to respond to that?"

"Is that a rhetorical question?"

"Ugh!" Pivoting on her heel, she tracked across the room like a cornered jungle cat looking for a hole in its cage. Her long black ponytail brushed across her ass like a natural flogger.

He loved her like this. Flushed with agitated passion. Hopelessly lost in the moment.

"Love... He just had to go and say that, didn't he?" she muttered to herself, although he heard her clearly.

Regardless of her emotional state, she met life full-force. Whether piqued, confused, crying or coming, she gave it her all. Damn. Even when riled, she was the sexiest woman he'd ever laid eyes on.

"How could you love me? No, you can't. You're a Dom. I'm a mistress. This is ludicrous. I can't deal with this—with you—right now."

When she headed for the door, he captured her by the arm and

spun her around. Surprised, she dropped her riding crop and stared wide-eyed at him.

"You have no choice but to deal with me now. I'm not going anywhere, and neither are you. Not until you tell me why you're fighting this so hard."

Her gaze slid away; her lips pressed into a stubborn line.

Rather than turn her over his knee, which he felt a strong urge to do, he pulled her into an embrace. One hand cupped the back of her head until it lay against his shoulder.

Her hands remained at her side, her back straight.

"Coward," he gently chastised. She stiffened in his arms, so he hugged her lithe, soft body a bit closer. "Why are you so afraid to let someone inside that heart of yours?"

A muffled sniff was all the answer he got. Wrapping a portion of her ponytail around his wrist, he tugged her head back to see her face. A tear had left a damp trail of evidence down one cheek. He tasted salt as he pressed a brief, tender kiss there. Then he pulled back a bit harder on her hair and saw arousal spark in her eyes, even as a soft, angry hiss escaped her lips.

A dull ache punched his chest, but the rest of his body responded to the need he saw in her dark gaze. The need she refused to acknowledge or profess. If he couldn't yet have her heart, he'd take what she was willing to share.

His mouth landed over hers in a fierce kiss that claimed his right.

He lifted her and carried her to the circular mattress. Jewel-toned silks draped the bed in a rainbow of colors beneath a muted spotlight. Setting her against the array of plush pillows, he slowly, deliberately released the ties on the front of her bustier. As he kissed each tantalizing piece of flesh his efforts revealed, he felt her pulse jump beneath his lips, heard her breath hitch. When he peeled away the warm latex skirt from her heated flesh, leaving her bare except for the thigh-high boots, he stepped back to take in his fill. Her eyes were closed, features a mask of anticipation and worry, arms spread at her sides like a sacrifice. His own blood heated to the point of combustion. Unable to stand the distance any

longer, he yanked his shirt off and came down over her on the plush cushion.

The silk of the sheets felt good against his flesh, but it couldn't compare to having her silky-smooth curves beneath him.

Stretched out on top of her, he murmured in her ear. "Mistress or not, you're mine. Every inch of you. Now. Today." He punctuated each sentence with a kiss. "Tomorrow... Always... You can't deny it. Your body knows it."

Her hands slid over his back and clasped his leather-clad butt. He allowed her exploration for a moment, then took her hands and forced them over her head. Unwilling to move away from her, he took her ponytail and formed makeshift bonds around her wrists. The strands would never really hold her without assistance, but they were enough for now.

Then he kissed, suckled, and laved every exposed inch of her flesh. Her head shifted from side to side in weak denial, but her nipples hardened, her pulse accelerated, and her breaths grew shallow. Labored.

She uttered incoherent sounds of encouragement. Urgent pleas to soothe an ache he knew he'd unearthed. A need that no doubt rivaled his own.

His hands joined the fray, blazing a trail of sensual caresses over every hill and valley, across every plain of her body. Her heels plowed into the layers of slippery silk sheets, seeking a foothold, as she rocked her hips against him.

Reluctantly, he pulled away.

"Don't move." He yanked off his boots, followed quickly by the remainder of his clothes. He slowed his jerky motions when he spied her gaze on him. Then, pausing only long enough to retrieve a couple of condom packets from a nearby table, he crawled onto the bed to stretch over her once more.

When her eyelids drifted shut, he ordered, "Look at me," and waited for her to obey. The smoky, passion-filled gaze that met his brought a smile to his face. "Now that I've had you, tasted you, I'll never let you go, Kat." He shifted his hips between her spread thighs as his

hands slid down her arms to cup each breast. "You are mine. After tonight, you may try to hide it, deny it, or run from it. But you'll damn sure never forget it."

She groaned and arched against him, but he had other plans.

"Sit up." He helped her up to sit before him, her arms bent at the elbows, hands still bound by her hair at the back of her head.

Rising onto his knees, straddling her outstretched legs, he aligned his cock with her mouth. Her lips parted slightly as her surprised gaze snapped to his. With a tender smile, he coasted the back of his knuckles down her smooth cheek. "Relationships work both ways, kitten. I'm as much yours as you are mine."

He guided her forward, sucking in a harsh breath as her warm, wet mouth enclosed the tip of his cock. Her tentative, almost innocent licks drove him wild, and he fought against his body's demand to fuck her mouth hard and deep.

"Ah, kitten." He watched his cock slide in and out as he pumped repeatedly into her mouth. The sight of her pouty, red lips stretched wide around his flesh shoved him to the edge, and only his tight grip in her hair helped keep him grounded enough to hold on for a little longer. "Don't stop," he said between gritted teeth.

A sound rumbled from her throat—half moan, half purr. Her dark gaze snared his, and it was all he could do not to shout. He threw back his head and quickened the pace of his thrusts. She lapped at his pre-cum and sucked him in again so deep he went lightheaded.

His heart raced. His lungs struggled to keep up. And neither listened to his brain as he fought to regain control.

Abruptly, he pulled away. Ignoring her whimper, he lifted her legs. She fell back, her eyes widening at the sudden shift in position. Her hands, impossibly tangled in her hair, were pinned beneath her head. Gorgeous, he thought as he rolled on a condom in record time.

Bracing one of her legs over each of his shoulders, he planted his hands beside her. His shout joined her cry when, with one brutal stroke, he filled her to the hilt.

"Mine," he said, his lips poised over hers. "Say it for me."

He pulled back and rammed home once more.

"Ah..." He kissed her hard, nipping her bottom lip then sucking it in apology. "Say it, Kat. Who do you belong to?" He thrust deep only to withdraw and repeat the splendid stroke again and again.

"I—" She panted. "Dalton..." Her head thrashed from side to side as her climax approached.

Feeling his own imminent release sweep through his body, he reached between them and thumbed her clit to ensure they'd reach the peak together. Still, he wanted to hold off just long enough to hear her....
"Tell me, damn it!"

"I-I'm yours!"

* * * * *

Shit. Shit. Shit.

Kat sucked in deep breaths and fought back the sting of tears as Dalton lay beside her and held her snug against his sweat-dampened chest. With care that tugged at her heart, he disentangled her hands from her hair and smoothed the wavy locks down her back.

How had she let this happen? Again? He commanded her so effortlessly. He'd taken control and made her forget who she was. Made her feel wanted. But worse, he'd made her feel loved. Cherished.

She tried not to snifle, but couldn't hide it.

"Shh, kitten." His soothing baritone rumbled through his chest and into her ear, rippling throughout her body.

She wanted to stay in his embrace forever. To let him claim her as he'd tried. He was wrong about her not letting anyone into her heart. He'd seized that fragile organ as easily as he'd taken her body to heights she'd never before reached. But claiming her body—her heart—didn't mean he could have her soul. To let him own her as he wanted meant losing everything she'd spent her adult life striving toward.

How could she remain Mistress Katriona and be his pet, too? The two were polar opposites. Like night and day. They couldn't coexist.

She pushed against him.

"Stop it." The command was harsh, and she jerked back, but he held her tight and didn't release her. "You're not running this time, Kat. Never again."

Denial on the tip of her tongue, she shook her head and tried again to disengage from his arms. They tightened around her, nearly squeezing the breath from her.

"Listen to me," he said.

"No..." The protest sounded puny even to her, and she bit her lip as punishment for her own weakness.

He'd said he loved her. *Loved* her. How many years had she kept her loneliness locked inside the private sanctum of her heart? She'd longed to hear a man say those words. A man who knew her true self.

"I love you," he whispered in her ear, as if hearing her most subconscious wishes. "You're mine."

"I'm not. You can't." She squeezed her eyes shut and prayed she'd escape without making an utter fool of herself. "You've only been here a week. We barely know each other."

"Not true. I know you like popcorn, peppermint, and old black and white movies. You love sad-looking animals named after classic film stars and pastel colors of the sea in your home." He lifted a few strands of her hair to his face. "You prefer floral-scents in your bath and are ticklish on your feet. And you have the most adorable mole on your right hip." A tear tracked down her cheek, and he kissed it before she could swipe it away. "You're a no-holds-barred business woman who, I bet, secretly cries while watching a tragedy on TV."

She frowned. Damn him for making it so hard for her to fight him. "You're observant, I'll give you that, but that doesn't negate the fact you've only been here a week. Nobody falls in love that fast."

Except her, that annoying little voice chimed in.

"I think I've loved you since you stomped onto that stage and glared at me. Challenged me. The second our lips met, I knew I held the one woman who could capture my hardened, bachelor heart."

She snorted at that, closing her heart to his words. "Nice line. How many women have you used it on?"

She must have shocked him with her words because, when she shoved again, he released her. Rolling to the edge of the bed, she sat with her back to him. "I don't buy it. You came to Incognito with an agenda. To do your research, like you said. I'm not a lab rat, Doc." She squeezed her eyes tight and gripped the edge of the mattress so hard a couple of her fake nails popped off. "I don't want to be part of your next experiment."

With a low growl, he shot off the mattress, rounded the bed and gripped her shoulders. When she refused to look at him, he forced her chin up. "You are the most infuriating woman I've ever met, Katriona."

My name's Kathy, she wanted to shout. Instead, she bit her lip. His use of her pseudonym only proved her point. He didn't really know her.

"Why are you fighting me? *Us*? What's wrong with wanting a lifetime of amazing moments like the ones we just shared? A lifetime of loving and being loved? What the fuck are you so scared of?"

You!

She bit her tongue hard. Mistress Katriona did not admit fear to anyone. She feared nothing. She was the proprietor of Incognito. The head Domme. The one in control at all times.

At all times except when one arrogant, beautiful man said he loved her and then made love to her like no man ever had.

Shoving to her feet, she pushed past Dalton and grabbed her clothes from the floor beside the bed.

"You're not leaving this room until you answer me."

"I'm not your damn prisoner." She shimmied into her skin-tight latex skirt.

"Don't push me on this."

She whirled around to face him. He was serious. She could see it in his eyes. He wasn't going to let her out.

She glanced toward the wall where a small, white button sat recessed into the silk wall covering. The panic button. After an attack on one of the subs last year, she'd had them installed in every room. Press the button and the cavalry came running.

"Don't bother," he said. "That would only cause you more embarrassment, and you know it." With a sigh, he sank down on the edge

of the bed and dangled his hands between his knees. "Would you please just talk to me? Stop running for ten minutes, and tell me why you're afraid to pursue a relationship with me."

Damn it. His beautiful eyes were almost pleading. The arrogant asshole was nowhere in sight, and this new Dalton was ten times more disturbing than the other one.

He held out his hand toward her, palm up. She stared at it, then into his eyes. She stood on the brink, on the edge of the Grand Canyon. If she took his hand, she might as well throw herself into the abyss. Life as she knew it would end. Her career. Her future would have to be rewritten. She couldn't keep her club or the status she'd worked years to achieve.

Was one man—a couple amazing fucks—worth her life's work?

She shook her head as she started the tedious recovery of lacing her corset. Giving up, she grabbed Dalton's black silk shirt from the floor and slipped it over her head. It was so big it fell almost to her knees. His spicy scent wafted to her nose, and she took a surreptitious whiff.

God, he smelled good. Like sandalwood and leather.

"Kat..."

After picking up her riding crop, she stopped her fidgeting and faced Dalton from several feet away. Far enough to keep him from reaching her. "There's too much to consider right this second, Doc. Don't pressure me into something I'm not ready for, because it won't work."

He looked around, and then reached for his pants. "But you'll admit to a possibility?"

A possibility? Of what? Of giving up everything she knew for a man?

He stuck one foot into a pant leg and peered at her. "I'm not asking for more than you can give. Just that you give us a chance."

"Carl will return your shirt in a few minutes." Before he could stop her, she dashed out the door and down the hall toward her office.

The sudden onslaught of tears as she slammed her office door shut caught her totally off guard. *Damn him!* Why'd he have to mention love?

She stumbled toward her desk, sank down on the thickly padded chair, and slumped forward, her forehead thumping against the desk.

Incognito: Collaring Kat by Madison Layle & Anna Leigh Keaton

Love. He *loved* her.

She rolled her head against the desk in denial even as her tears
dropped to the polished mahogany.

At a knock on her door, she sprang upright and swiped at her eyes.
Then, seeing the smeared eyeliner on her hands, she groaned.

“Kat? It’s Carl. Can I come in?”

Chapter Nine

Before she could tell the traitor to leave her the hell alone, Carl opened the door and peeked around the edge. "Aw, shit, Kat." The door shut with a soft *snick*, and he crossed the room.

She spun her chair away and furiously swiped at her tears, but realized it was hopeless. She had raccoon eyes for sure now.

Carl came around the desk and turned her, chair and all, toward him. He went down on his knees and clasped her hands in his. "What happened?"

There was no mistaking his concern and, for some stupid reason, her eyes wanted to tear up all over again.

"Talk to me."

Why was every guy in her life saying that right now? She opened her mouth, but nothing came out. Her throat felt as thick as a sequoia tree trunk.

Finally venturing to look him in the face, she wished she hadn't. His brow furrowed, his lips pressed tight, and he looked so sweet and worried. Like her best friend. She bit her lip to keep it from trembling.

"I can't do this." The words slipped out before she could stop them. An anguished whisper that surprised her as much as it made her want to scream in frustration.

When had Katriona, businesswoman extraordinaire and Mistress of Incognito, become a weepy weakling?

Carl's fingers tightened around hers. "Can't do what?"

I can't have the man of my dreams.

Tears poured from her eyes, and a sob ripped from her soul. Carl released her hands and wrapped his arms around her. She had no will to fight the comfort he offered. Burying her face against his shoulder, she rode out the crying jag.

When she could breathe normally, she sat back in the chair and rubbed her eyes with the heels of her palms.

"Sorry," she mumbled.

"S'okay. All better now?"

She nodded and tried for a smile. "Tell anyone about this, and I'll beat you."

Carl grinned and patted her knee. "My lips are sealed. Now, you wanna tell me what's going on? Carrington found me in the main lounge and practically ordered me to check on you. And when I do, here you sit. Crying and wearing his shirt."

Kat reached up beneath the soft silk shirt to work at the laces on her corset. "I need you to return it to him."

Pushing to his feet, Carl leaned against the edge of the desk and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did he hurt you?"

With a furious headshake, she pulled the shirt over her head and handed it to him. "No. I'm just..." She swiped her hand down her face and then pushed her bangs off her forehead. "...confused."

"About?"

"Don't push."

"I'm worried about my best friend. If you can't talk to me, who can you talk to?"

She sighed, laid her head against the chair, and closed her eyes. "Have you ever wanted two things with all your heart?" She swallowed hard, realizing that maybe, just *maybe*, Dalton wasn't the only one with love on his mind.

"Go on," Carl urged, nudging her knee with his.

"You want two things, but you have to choose between them. To have one is to lose the other. But both feel vitally important to your happiness."

When Carl didn't respond, she raised her head and looked at him. "Carrington would be one of those things, right?" he asked. "So what's the other?"

Was he a dunce? She made a face. "Incognito."

He shook his head. "I don't get it. Why would you have to choose between him and the club? What does one have to do with the other?"

She opened her mouth to tell him a sub couldn't effectively run the club, but clamped her teeth over her tongue. He might be her best friend, but Carl was still an employee. No way could she tell him that her relationship with Dalton was...that she was...oh, hell. She couldn't lose Carl's respect, too. She was having enough problems dealing with how she felt about herself at the moment.

"I'm not an idiot, Kat, or blind. I see what's going on, I think." His smile was tender and understanding. "Just because someone comes along and spins your world off its axis doesn't mean you're any less of the, uh, dominating bitch you try so hard to be."

A laugh burst out of her, and she smacked his arm. "You're an ass."

"And you need to follow your heart."

The smile slipped from her lips, and she glanced down at her hands in her lap. Two of her nails had come off. Her claws. Her image.

She sighed, opened the top drawer of her desk, and pulled out a package of vermilion press on nails.

"Did you hear me?"

"Yeah, I heard you. My heart doesn't know which path to take, so how the hell can I follow it?" She ripped open the package and found a couple of nails that were the right fit. "Besides, he hasn't been here long. For all I know, he could move on as fast as he arrived."

"He bought a beach house in the area where Heather and Paul live. I don't think he's going anywhere."

She shrugged and concentrated on putting the false nail on straight. "It might be a vacation place. And houses can be sold, you know. Who's to say he won't get homesick for New York and hightail it north?"

Carl pushed away from the desk and headed for the door, Dalton's shirt in his fist. "You know, he's right about you."

That brought her head up and made her eyes narrow. "Right about what?"

"You are a stubborn, stubborn woman."

"Piss off."

He chuckled, but sobered when he turned back with one hand on the doorknob. "I respect you, Kat. You and everything you've accomplished. No matter what you do, that'll never change. And frankly, anyone who thinks poorly of you because of your choice of men doesn't need to be here. I wish you would see that."

She appreciated his words, but he didn't get it. She wasn't worried about her reputation. Well, not much. No, she was more concerned about losing her authority. As a mistress, she met other Doms on their level. As a sub, she'd be at a disadvantage. How could she live the life she would want with Dalton—the life he wanted—if she remained Mistress of Incognito?

"I'll let him know you're okay," Carl said. "Why don't you take the rest of the night off?" She opened her mouth to argue, but he cut her off. "I'll keep an eye on things and call you if there's a problem."

The pinky nail went on crooked, damn it. "Fine. I'll be at home."

"Good." He pulled the door open and was halfway through when he stopped again. "You know what? I think..." His brows pulled into a look of concentration. "Yeah, dominant submissive. Where have I heard that before?"

Dominant submissive? Before she could respond, the door closed behind him, leaving her alone in the quiet room.

Angela Patterson. How many times had she introduced the woman as the club's resident submissive dominatrix? Was it possible to live in both worlds?

Angela proved it was, but she was *naturally* dominating and submissive. She enjoyed both worlds when it came to her triad relationship. Kat wasn't like that. She wanted to be a submissive in the bedroom and a dominatrix to the rest of the world. Angela had always walked a tight rope between dominance and submission at the club. Kat had made it a point of never showing any signs of submissive tendencies

at Incognito. What would club members think of her the first time she walked into the club wearing a man's collar? If she let the world know she was a phony?

Angered. Fooled. That's what they'd be. She shook her head at the thought.

She'd always hidden her personal desires before, but how could she accept Dalton's love without giving him the respect of showing that she belonged to him?

With a groan, she pushed to her feet and flipped off the desk lamp, sending the room into darkness. So, what was more important to her? Spending her life with a man who loved her, or spending her life alone but running the business she'd built with her own blood, sweat, and tears? She'd have to choose, because she could not see where both worlds could live in harmony.

"A submissive dominatrix," she murmured as she rushed to fix her makeup. Maybe if she hurried, she could catch Angela before she left.

* * * * *

"She's fine. A little shaken up, but she'll be okay."

"Thanks," Dalton said, taking the shirt from Carl and then slipping it on. "You sure she's okay? She was pretty upset when she ran out of there."

Carl nodded. "Give her time. Maybe back off a bit. I think she's feeling cornered."

Dalton downed the scotch in one gulp and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Damn, he wanted a smoke. He'd quit nearly ten years ago and hardly ever thought about it anymore, but right this second he'd kill for a Marlboro.

"Can't back off, man," he said, meeting Carl's gaze. "I'm afraid if I give her any wiggle room, she'll slip away and never come back."

"Or you're going to chase her away with the same results."

His fist landed against the bar. "Damn it. If she'd just talk to me, it would help. How am I supposed to know what to do if I don't know

what's wrong with her?"

Carl pressed his lips tight.

"You know something. What did she say?"

"I've already said too much. Just take it easy on her. Let her breathe."

The object of their conversation stalked into the room, not even sparing them a glance. She went straight to the table where Garrett, Blaine, and Angela sat, and then said something to Garrett, which earned her a nod. A few seconds later she passed a slip of paper to Angela, reversed her steps, and headed out the door.

Dalton started to go after her, but stopped when Carl grabbed his arm and shook his head.

"What's that about?"

Carl shrugged, but Dalton didn't miss the hint of a smile curving the slave's lips.

* * * * *

The door chimed as Kat entered the spa where Angela Patterson worked. The lobby was elegant in its simplicity. Lush ivy poured from pots around the space onto smooth hardwood floors. Muted colors of blues and greens surrounded a pair of plush sofas provided for those awaiting services.

Kat approached the receptionist seated behind a granite counter.

"May I help you?" the woman asked with a welcoming smile.

"I have an appointment with Angela."

"Your name?"

"Kat—"

"Katriona? Oh my gosh." Angela gave her a wide grin as she came down the hall behind the desk.

The excitement in Angela's voice should've put her at ease, but the reaction made her nervous instead. She fisted her right hand to keep from fidgeting with the cotton T-shirt she wore.

Angela whipped around the counter and took both her wrists,

holding her arms away from her sides.

"Wow. I don't think I've ever seen you in..." She stopped, glanced at the receptionist. "Come on back. We can catch up on everything while I pamper you." Angela released only one wrist as she led her around the front desk and back down the hall.

Had she made a big mistake coming here?

Angela pulled her into a room decorated in subtle, soothing earth tones. A padded table filled the center of the floor, and soft instrumental music played from speakers recessed in the ceiling.

"You can change behind the screen over there. Towels are on a warmer in the corner."

Kat stepped behind the tri-fold screen.

"You look great in civvies."

"Thanks." She slipped out of her sneakers and then removed her jeans, T-shirt and underwear.

Angela chuckled. "I almost didn't recognize you with your hair up like that and no eyeliner. You look so fab without all that makeup, I think I'm jealous. Leave the scrunchie in, by the way. It'll help keep your hair out of the way."

Feeling uncomfortable without her usual costume, and despite Angela's compliment, Kat didn't respond as she wrapped herself in a fluffy white towel.

"Lie face down and prepare to be pampered," Angela said with a broad grin when Kat came out from behind the screen.

She could use some pampering, but what she really wanted were answers to questions she was suddenly too afraid to ask.

For long minutes, she lay still and silent as Angela worked her magic. Slowly, her muscles relaxed and the stress of an uncertain future dimmed.

"How does that feel?" Angela asked.

"Mmm." She didn't bother to lift her head from the small pillow.

Angela chuckled. "Ready to get something else off your shoulders?"

"Hmm?"

"Your reason for coming here today. You said you wanted to meet some place private to talk to me." Angela's hands pressed circular paths along her spine. "It doesn't get any more private than here and now."

"Oh..." Kat squeezed her eyes shut tight, gritted her teeth, then took a deep breath. *Now or never.* "I wanted to ask you how you manage to live as both a Domme and a sub. I don't see how it's possible."

Angela's hands never paused as she replied, "To tell the truth, I wasn't sure it would ever work out, but I got lucky in finding Garrett and Blaine. Without them I wouldn't feel complete." Angela squirted more heavenly-scented oil on her back and rubbed it in.

"I'm a very demanding woman at work and at home. My job is to pamper others. That need to control and nurture carries over into the bedroom. But sometimes I like to lose control...to be the one being pampered." Angela's hands traveled down her calf muscles. Kat could hear the smile in her voice. "Sometimes I need to be tamed."

Pampered. Tamed. Two words that didn't seem to fit together, yet they perfectly explained how she felt when Dalton took control in bed.

"How does Blaine handle being a sub to a sub?"

"I doubt he'd handle it well if he wasn't madly in love with me, but he is, and he knows I love him to distraction. Our relationship has been one of give and take. See what works for both of us and what doesn't."

Kat's leg jerked a bit when Angela moved on to her feet.

"The hardest part was getting him to accept Garrett." Angela laughed. "Now that he has, he turns the tables on me sometimes by teaming up with Garrett, which makes for some really exciting surprises. And I *love* surprises."

"I bet," Kat murmured into the pillow.

"So, has Carl found a sub or have you found a master?"

"Carl?" *Find a sub?* She'd never thought of that, but now that she did, it was possible. The club was like a never-ending play to him. Act one, scene two. He'd always been such a good actor as a sub that she hadn't considered what his true sexual preference was. She sat up, careful to keep herself covered with the fluffy towel.

"You don't sound very sure about that." Angela was grinning at

her as she wiped the body oils from her hands.

Kat forced a carefree chuckle. "You're not the only sub who likes surprises," she said, hoping to avoid further probes. "A mistress has a responsibility to consider any and all possibilities."

Angela's expression flattened into serious scrutiny for a suspended moment, and then she smiled. "Just remember to be open and honest with your partner. Always remain true to yourself. Nothing else matters as much. If you do that, everything else will fall into place. Otherwise, you risk leaving an empty hole inside yourself that can fester."

Angela helped her from the table and, as she moved behind the screen, Angela's words echoed in her mind.

Remain true to yourself.

Chapter Ten

Kat glanced at the number on her cell phone's caller ID display. *Dalton*. She didn't waste time wondering how he'd gotten her number. If she had to guess, only one slave's name came to mind.

Dalton had called her twice before. This time her response was no different. She slipped the flip phone back into her pants pocket and pressed the Up button to signal the elevator.

She couldn't talk to him. Not yet. She had things, important things, to do first.

Angela's words glowed in her mind like a pulsing neon sign as she boarded the elevator.

Remain true to yourself.

She'd driven along the coast earlier, stopped to stroll barefoot across a sandy beach, and thought about those words.

For years she'd lived a lie, pushed her true self into the shadows to build a successful business, and fooled herself into thinking she had everything under control. She'd wanted a secure future and had sacrificed a lot to achieve it.

But she hadn't remained true to herself. She'd denied her personal desires for success and notoriety. And just as Angela warned, the hollow ache in her heart had festered unnoticed, until now. It had taken an unexpected kiss, and the determination of a man who readily admitted his love for her, to knock the spotlight into those shadows and uncover the lonely woman she'd hidden inside for so long.

The elevator chimed. The doors slid open.

It was time to let Kathy Smith back into the light.

Bolstering her courage with a deep breath, Kat pushed through the heavy wooden door into the silent lobby of Sinclair Securities and Brokerage Corp. Hopefully her friend would be able to help her on such short notice.

"May I help you?" the petite, middle-aged receptionist asked from behind a cherry wood desk that was set in front of a wall-sized window overlooking the ocean.

Kat nodded. "My name's Kat—Kathy Smith. I'd like to speak with Mr. Sinclair about the sale of a beachfront estate."

"Do you have an appointment?"

Kat shook her head. "We're, um, old friends."

The woman's brows puckered slightly in a frown. "One moment, please." She got up from her desk and went to a door on the right of the lobby, knocked once, then walked in, firmly closing the door behind her.

Kat wandered a circle in the wide lobby, stopping to admire a flourishing fuchsia set on a soapstone table. Her tennis shoes were silent against the plush beige rug.

She shouldn't have come unannounced. She should have called and set up an appointment. Or better yet, talked to him at the club. Damn, he didn't even know who the hell Kathy Smith was. She shouldn't have used her real name.

"Mr. Sinclair has a few moments before a meeting," the receptionist announced as she held open the door she'd gone through moments earlier. "He'll see you."

Kat gave her a quick smile and strode past the diminutive woman into Jackson's inner sanctum. No less than she expected from the businessman, the office showed class and style in its simplicity and elegance. Dark wood furniture, a couple of well-tended potted plants, leather seating for his guests.

The door clicked softly as the receptionist left the room. Jackson stood from behind his desk, his gaze lowered as he closed some folders on his desk. "Ms. Smith," he said in his low, cultured voice. "Pam said we're

old friends?"

She saw the instant recognition dawned. Jack rounded the desk with hand outstretched, stopped walking, and then stared. Heat infused her face, and she smiled nervously. "Hi, Jack."

"Kat?"

She nodded. "Kathy Smith."

He chuckled and stepped up to her, clasped her shoulders lightly and kissed her cheek. "Nice to meet you, Kathy."

With a relieved sigh, more tension eased from her shoulders. Jack and Jon Sinclair had been members of Incognito for almost as long as it'd been open. Coming out of the closet, so to speak, to one of her oldest and dearest patrons was less difficult than she'd thought it would be.

"Have a seat. Can I get you something to drink?"

She slipped into the soft leather armchair in front of his desk. "Ice water would be lovely, thanks."

He moved to a small bar in one wall and opened a short fridge, withdrawing a bottle of water. Ice clinked in a glass. "Pam said you mentioned beachfront property you'd like to sell?" He handed her the glass, then took the seat next to her instead of going back behind his desk.

She sipped the icy drink. Nodded. "I want to sell the club, and you're the only one I know who might have the connections to find a good buyer for it. I want it to go to someone who will keep it going. Sold as a fetish club, not a private residence."

Jack nodded once. His brows furrowed. "May I ask why you're selling?"

She nibbled on her bottom lip for a moment and shrugged. "My life is leading me in a different direction. It's time to move on."

"I see." He settled himself more comfortably in the chair. "You'll be leaving the area, then?"

Would Dalton want to move back to New York once he was done researching his book? "I...I don't know. I don't think so." She loved Florida. Had never cared for New York. Too enclosed. Too cold in the winter. Could she live there if she was with Dalton?

"Is this a sudden decision, or have you had time to truly think it

through?"

Her head snapped up at Jack's question. Sudden? Oh, hell yes, it was sudden. How long had she known Dalton? A week and a half? But...but she knew this was the right thing. Even if it wasn't for Dalton. After Carl's comment about following her heart, and Angela's emphatic statement telling her to be true to herself, how could she go on like this? She wanted home and hearth, a man to love and be loved by. A man she'd never find while holding her position as head Domme at Incognito.

Well, that wasn't quite true. Dalton had been at Incognito, but how many men would take the time to see beyond her façade and disregard her position because they wanted her—the real her—so badly?

A shiver raced through her like an electric current. There would never be anyone except Dalton. He was the one. She was sure of it. She just had to set everything to rights before she could accept him as her master.

"Kat?"

"Um. Yeah. No. I mean... This may seem sudden, but it's the right thing to do. I want to sell, and the sooner the better."

Jackson nodded and gave her a warm smile. "Well then, if you're sure, I see no reason I can't find a buyer. Though I'm not sure how quickly one will come to light. Your estate has to be worth, what? Two million at least?"

"It's on six acres. The tax assessor set the property at three point five last year."

Jack's eyebrows rose. "Very nice." He grinned and held out his hand. When she shook it, he said, "I look forward to working with you."

With a freed heart, Kat laughed and leaned over to hug Jackson. "Thank you. This means so much to me."

He chuckled and returned the brief embrace. "And my bank account will no doubt thank *you*."

* * * * *

Dalton stared at the blinking cursor on his flat-panel computer

screen, his fingers poised over the keys. He'd never finish the chapter at this rate.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he rubbed them, and then glanced at the time. Late. Very late.

When Kat hadn't returned his calls, he'd had little choice but to take Carl's advice and give her some time alone. So he'd spent the rest of the day working on his manuscript. Or trying to work on it. Maybe he should've staked out the club or Kat's cottage instead of wasting time at his desk. He damn sure wasn't getting anywhere on the book. He took a deep breath and focused harder on the text, rereading the same paragraph for the umpteenth time.

Banging on the front door startled him, but was a welcome distraction. The fierce racket continued as he made his way to the door.

"Hang on." With a quick peek through the beveled side window, he frowned and yanked open the solid oak door.

Carl shoved him. "This is your damned fault. I ought to beat the shit out of you."

"What's wrong? Is Kat all right?" Panic nearly choked him as he thought of Kat being hurt or...or worse.

Carl stalked into the foyer and then turned on him, his finger raised in accusation. "If you hadn't fucked her, screwed with her mind, she wouldn't be selling out."

"Selling out?" His clenched muscles eased. Kat wasn't in danger. But then he scowled at the presumptuous slave. "What the devil are you talking about?"

"Incognito."

Dalton slashed his hand through his hair "Slow down. You aren't making any sense."

"I don't have time to slow down. I've got to liquidate my assets and make an offer before—"

After slamming the door shut, he grabbed Carl by the arm and dragged him into the study. "Sit."

The damn man was so wired he'd barged in still dressed in his ludicrous costume, albeit the cuffs dangled from the belt at his waist

instead of securing his wrists.

"But—"

"I said, 'Sit!'" After Carl collapsed on the sofa, he took the chair opposite him. "Now, slowly, explain what the hell is going on."

"Kat is selling Incognito."

"What the hell for?"

Carl's eyes narrowed. "You didn't know? You didn't demand it?"

"Hell no. You said yourself that the club is her life. Why would I want her to give it up?"

"If you didn't order her to, then why's she doing it?"

Dalton sat back and frowned. It just didn't make sense. She loved that place. "Who told you about the sale?"

"She told me."

"*She* told you?" Why hadn't she told *him*?

"Yeah. She gave me this long oration about how she needed a change of pace." Carl sneered. "Says she has to get away, make a clean break. Whatever the hell that means."

Get away? *From him*? His jaw clenched tight against uttering those words. Still, Carl seemed to read his mind.

"You spooked her. That has to be it. She hasn't been the same since you butted into her life."

Dalton's fingers bit into the armrests. She was running from him. He hadn't expected her to go to such an extreme to avoid him, but what else could explain why she hadn't returned any of his calls all day? The urge to go to her and demand an explanation was strong, but she was already in flight mode. He knew better than to give chase now.

"I told you to not push her. Give her some time. Didn't I tell you that?"

"Calm down." Carl's rambling accusations were getting on his nerves.

"Don't tell me to calm down. Now I've gotta raid my savings, find some financing, and call Jackson ASAP to salvage this fiasco before she goes and does something we're all going to regret."

"Don't be hasty—"

Carl's angry gaze snapped to his. "That club is as much my livelihood as it is hers. Hell, she and I live on the property. And she will regret selling out. Maybe not today or tomorrow, but one day..."

"I know, damn it!" He already regretted her decision. He'd been as open and honest with her as he could. He'd shared his feelings and all but pleaded with her to do the same. Had he pushed her too far?

He didn't know whether to be angrier at her skittish stubbornness or his own single-minded stupidity. Pushing to his feet, he stalked to the front window and drew aside the thick drapes to gaze out at the darkness.

Vacant blackness. Empty. Alone. Is that what she really wanted? Was she willing to throw away everything she held dear just to avoid him?

His fist slammed the wall.

"... 'bout it?"

Carl's voice sliced through his mind, making him turn to study the man dressed as a slave. "What?"

"I asked what you intend to do about it?"

"Don't worry. She's not getting away so easily." He'd think of something.

* * * * *

Kat unlocked the door to the laundry room and flipped on the overhead fluorescent lights. She chewed her bottom lip as she opened the three industrial-sized washing machines and began transferring the club's satin bed sheets to the dryers along one wall.

She had employees that normally did this, but she needed something to occupy herself for an hour or so. At least until Jackson got to his office so she could take him the stack of files he'd requested — last years' financial statements for the club, the tax assessor's findings, and a few other things she hadn't thought of him needing.

She glanced at the clock on the wall and sighed. Still too early to go to his office and give him the paperwork. Too damn early for her to be out of bed after staying up half the night worrying about Carl's reaction to the

announcement that she was selling the club.

The guy had freaked. Yelled. Actually *yelled* at her and told her she was being an idiot. God, she'd wanted to explain when he begged her to, but she couldn't. Not to him. He'd been hurt by her silence. He'd come right out and told her so, which had in turn ripped her heart out. She loved Carl like the brother she'd never had. Her best friend for the past ten years. He'd been with her from the inception of Incognito, and now he was feeling abandoned and betrayed.

But how the hell could she tell her best friend that all these years she'd been living a lie? She *had* lied to him, to the rest of her staff, and her clients. How could she make this right with him?

She set the dials on the dryers and pushed the Start buttons. Last night had been busy, she thought as she opened the sterilization washers. Packed full of dildos, ben wa balls, anal beads and butt plugs, the unit held a myriad of sexual pleasure aids, evidence of the variety of clientele who frequented her club.

Heaving the cardboard box of batteries onto the top of the washer, she pulled out a big, black, waterproof vibrator first, fitted in the batteries, and turned it on to check the power levels. Couldn't have any upset customers.

She prided herself on the cleanliness and safety of the supplied toys. Each one had been purchased by her for its durability and the fact that it could be run through a washer at extreme temperatures for sterilization purposes and still work. Just the items in this washer were worth thousands of dollars.

And damn it, she'd miss them.

She laughed at her thoughts as she fitted more batteries into more vibrators. But it was true. She'd miss this time of the day, taking pleasure in the fine points of the club. Making sure every detail was set to provide her patrons with the perfect fantasies they needed to experience the things that some people didn't talk about in the light of day.

Her cell phone buzzed softly in her back jeans pocket. She tested the dildo. Satisfied with its strong vibrations against her fingers, she turned it off, and then reached for her phone.

"Katriona speaking, how can I help you?"

"Good morning, Kat. It's Jackson."

She smiled at his formal tone. "Hey, Jack. I have all the papers you need. I'll bring them right over, if you're already at the office."

He chuckled. "I've been in the office for a couple hours already. Truth is, Kat, we've got a buyer for the club."

She sighed. Damn, Carl moved fast. He'd dashed out of the office after midnight last night mumbling about liquidating his assets and getting a loan. "I didn't expect it to be so quick, but when he gets his teeth in a bone, he just doesn't let go."

After a short pause, Jack cleared his throat. "Yes, it seems that way. He's very persistent. He'd like to sign the papers today."

"What?" She fingered a soft latex dildo, squishing the tip between her fingers. Was Carl that pissed off at her? Was he going to take over and throw her off the property? He'd been furious when he stormed out last night, telling her he wouldn't let her destroy everything. He hadn't answered his door when she knocked on his cottage an hour ago, but why would he rush this? And how had he gathered all of the funds for a down payment in the last eight hours?

"He made an offer before I told him the asking price. And it's considerably more than we were going to ask. But he says it has to be now. I don't think we want to pass this up, Kat. He's paying cash."

"That's insane. He doesn't have that kind of money lying around."

"Trust me, he does. I can have the papers drawn up as soon as you get here with those legal docs I asked for. Will that work for you?"

Kat's hand shook as she gripped the phone. She glanced around the laundry room, pictured the rest of the club in a kaleidoscope of images in her mind. Her second home for the past ten years. Once Carl owned the place, everything would change. This wouldn't be hers anymore.

Oh my god, what have I done?

Think of Dalton, she reminded herself. Think of a life of freedom. A life lived the way it should be lived, not in hiding from your true self. *Be true to yourself, Kathy.*

She drew in a steadying breath. At least with Carl she knew the

club was going to someone who'd love it as much as she did.

"Kat? You still want to do this?" Jack asked.

"Yes," she said softly. "I'm on my way."

"Great!" She couldn't miss Jack's excitement. His commission was going to be more than sweet. "See you soon."

She carefully closed the phone and drew in another deep breath. Okay, she thought. She was doing this. Everything would be fine. It was what she wanted more than anything.

Why so fast? Glancing down at the sex toys in front of her, she sighed. No way would Carl kick her out of her cottage, no matter how ticked off he might be. But soon she'd need to move on.

Dalton. Should she call him now? No. After it was all over, she'd contact Dalton. With the way Carl reacted, she didn't think bringing Dalton into the picture yet was a good idea.

She dialed Carl's cottage. After ten rings, she hung up and dialed his cell number. No answer. She left a brief message on his voice mail asking him to call her. There was no reason for him to pay more than the property was worth. She wasn't greedy. She valued their friendship more than the money anyway. They'd had their squabbles in the past; she just prayed he could get past this one.

It would get better. Everything would be fine, she told herself. It wasn't as if they'd never speak again. And at least Incognito would be in good hands.

But where had Carl come up with millions in cash?

Chapter Eleven

“She still out there?”

Dalton nodded in answer to Jackson’s question. “She’s going to wear a groove in the pavement,” he said, watching Kat pace back and forth in front of her car in the parking lot eighteen floors below. He’d been at the window, watching her stiff, agitated movements from the lobby of Jackson’s office for the past fifteen minutes.

“She’s going to change her mind,” Carl said, moving up beside him and peering out the window. “There’s no way she really wants to sell the club. I think she was just panicking last night.”

Jackson took a position on his other side. “She seemed awfully sure when she came to see me yesterday afternoon. She said it was time to move on with her life.”

Dalton shook his head. Damn the woman. He should be with her, giving her whatever support she needed. Only, he feared that Carl was right and she was running. Had she already packed? Once the papers were signed, would she leave town? Leave Florida?

He shoved his hands in his jeans pockets and fingered the folded cashier’s check. With the cash he was handing her for the purchase of Incognito, she could easily disappear from his life to any corner of the world, never to be found by him.

Would she honestly go to such extremes because he’d spooked her?

He glanced at Carl and was met by a censoring glare. Carl probably knew her better than anyone, and that was what Carl thought. She was

running scared.

Could he convince her to give them a chance? Could he convince her that Incognito, even if he were the legal owner, needed her? That it was her brainchild, and it was what it was all because of her?

He just didn't know. He hated this feeling of disjointed...*fear*.

Never in his entire life had he told a woman he loved her. Never. He'd not once contemplated the long haul, the happily ever after, all the things he'd mentioned to her when she had a look of supreme terror in her eyes that ripped his heart to shreds.

He'd met the woman of his heart, the one that made his soul feel complete, and she was going to run.

Damn, that hurt.

"I can't believe you're doing this to her."

He turned back to Carl and frowned. "I'm not doing anything."

"Like hell. You swoop in, turn her world upside down, and now you're going to buy the one thing that has meant everything to her."

Shaking his head, he had the urge to shake Carl. "I'm buying it so that she can have it back if she wants. What do you think I'm going to do, hold this over her? Hell no. I want her to be happy, and if she turns around in a month or a year or, hell, ten years, and wants it back, at least the club is in hands that know how to take care of it for her."

"I've been around since Incognito was just a dream of hers. You don't think I could effectively run the place?"

Dalton sighed. "I didn't say that. I'm sure you're more than capable, and I'm counting on you to keep your position and help run it. But, if you bought it, no doubt you'd go into debt up to your eyeballs, and then what happens when she wants to return?"

Carl shrugged, but the glare never left his eyes. "I'd sell it back to her."

Dalton didn't want to sell it back to Kat. He'd give it back, no questions asked, if she'd just...

"I think you're the biggest jackass I've ever met."

"Excuse me?" Dalton could take a lot, but the insults were getting annoying. He stepped toward Carl, going toe-to-toe with the man. They

were of equal height and build, and Dalton was angry and upset enough to relish a good knockdown, drag-out fight.

“What the fuck did you do to her?”

Between gritted teeth, Dalton said, “I didn’t do a damn thing to her she didn’t want.” His hands clenched at his sides, and he wanted nothing more than to pound his fist into the slave’s face.

“You made her cry. No one makes Kat cry. I’ve known her for over a decade, and the only time she ever cried was when her cat, Duke, died. She knows you less than two weeks, and she’s sitting in her office bawling like a baby and won’t talk to me anymore. You fucked her up bad!”

Dalton grabbed Carl by the collar of his dress shirt and shoved. “I fell in love with her, you goddamn idiot! Is it my fault she’s so tied up inside she doesn’t know top from bottom? I can’t help it if she doesn’t know what it is she truly wants.”

Carl shoved right back, his fingers digging into Dalton’s chest. “She was happy before you showed up. Happy and content.”

Fury exploded inside his head, and he went for the slave. “She was not content!” He grabbed the front of Carl’s shirt and drew his other hand back to swing a fist into the man’s face. “She was hurting, and you as her friend should have seen that!”

“Boys!” Jackson’s sharp reprimand drew Dalton up short and stopped the swing of his fist just inches from Carl’s face. Carl had a grip on his forearm, trying to dislodge Dalton’s fingers from his clothing. Nose-to-nose they glared, both breathing heavily.

Dalton let go with another shove and took a step back, ready if Carl decided to get in a sucker punch. His fisted hands shook, and he felt nearly light-headed from the adrenaline rush.

Carl’s jaw flexed in agitation, as did his hands. “I love Kat as much as you do,” he said, his voice low and deadly. “Maybe not in the same way, but I love her. We’re family. She wouldn’t be running if you hadn’t hurt her, and so help me God, I want to kill you right now for that.”

Some of the fight drained from Dalton’s shoulders. “I never, ever meant to hurt her. How would any man know that confessing his love to a woman would scare the shit out of her and cause her to make foolish

decisions?"

"I told you to back off."

"I tried."

"I told you that you terrified her," Carl added.

"I know. But I still don't understand it."

"It's because, in all the years I've run Incognito, no one has ever looked deep enough to see the real me." Kat's voice made Dalton turn to see her standing in the doorway to the lobby, her hands clenched together in front of her, tears streaming down her pale cheeks. "I thought you'd destroy me."

His heart squeezed tight at her words, at the unmistakable distress on her beautiful face, in her dark eyes.

He stepped toward her, but she held up one hand to stop him.

"I'd never do anything to destroy you, babe. How could you ever think that?"

She shook her head and took a shuddery breath, then swiped the tears from her face. She glanced at the receptionist behind the desk, who was avidly listening to the conversation, then at Jackson and Carl. Pink tinged her cheeks, and she ducked her head.

"Why don't you two go into my office for some privacy?" Jackson said, his voice low and calm. He put a hand on Carl's shoulder to stay him.

She nodded, turned toward the open door, and walked through. Dalton glanced at Jackson, who gave him a look of sympathy and nodded.

He followed Kat into the spacious office and shut the door behind him, but he didn't move toward her. Not knowing what to expect from her, but wanting to keep her stuck in this room until she explained herself, he was willing to guard the door like a rabid pit bull if needed.

She stopped in the center of the room and slowly turned to face him. She'd schooled her features into that mask of cool control. Only the leftover tear tracks on her cheeks remained as evidence of her small breakdown.

"Why are you here?" she asked, her voice that of Katriona, the detached mistress.

He swallowed, leaned back against the door, and folded his arms over his chest, fighting the battle waging inside. He wanted to grab her up, turn her over his knee, and spank her beautiful ass. He needed to gather her against his chest and hold her, comfort her. Keep her safe. He fought the urge to yell at her and tell her what a fool she was.

He decided to tell her what he'd spent all last night telling himself, which was only part of the truth. "To either stop you from making a mistake, or to buy the club from you and keep it safe until you decide you're ready to resume control of it."

Her brow puckered in a confused frown. "You're the buyer Jack called me about."

He nodded.

She shook her head. "I won't ever be ready to go back in the same capacity. I don't know if I can ever go back there."

The sadness in her voice cut him as deep as her words did. "Why?"

"Because you were right. I'm a phony. A fake. Mistress Katriona is all an act. How could I ever face my patrons as anyone but Katriona? That's the person they know and trust. *Trust*, Dalton. Do you understand that?" she said, her eyes pleading with him to understand. "Trust is the basis of the alternative lifestyle, and I've been lying to these people for so long."

She had the most tender heart he'd ever known. Leaving her baby behind because she feared hurting her patrons. But he couldn't help think she was full of it and that her patrons would accept her in whatever form or name she chose. Time for a little tough love, he thought.

"And abandoning all those people who love you and care about you is a better solution? What about them? The ones who've found a safe place to be the people they are, who have come to depend on Incognito and Mistress Katriona to help lead them in the right direction?"

A soft sob slipped out of her, and she covered her mouth with her hand. She scrunched her eyes tight and turned away, her shoulders hunching forward.

Fisting his hands, he fought back the need to go to her, to hold her, to comfort.

"What about them, Kat? What makes you think that leaving them is a better solution than admitting who you really are? Trust, Kat, is the name of the game. You don't trust them to accept you for who you are."

"You don't get it!" she cried, turning back and glaring at him through tear-filled eyes. "I'm not a Domme, and I never wanted to be one." She swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand. "But I had to become that person to maintain control. Who is going to follow the rules of a sub? Huh? Answer me that, Master Dalton? Would you? I had to keep the club a safe place, and no one is going to fear a...a..." Her voice trailed off until she whispered, "Me."

"You scare me shitless," he said in all honesty.

A humorless bark of laughter came out of her, and she shook her head. "I think you have that backwards, D.C. You come in and break all the rules I set out for you. You force my submission. You take notes for that damn book of yours, which will make me a laughing stock of the entire BDSM community—"

"You hold it right there, lady." He shoved away from the door and stalked toward her, his anger returning full force. He ticked off on his fingers as he said, "Number one, the only way to get past the front door was to break a few rules because you were so dead set against me being there. Number two, if I forced anything, it was to get to the real you buried under all that latex and a shell tougher than a hundred year old tortoise. And number three, if you think I'd ever do anything as underhanded and sneaky as exposing you as a test subject, then..." He pressed his lips together. "You might as well just kick me in the balls, because that wouldn't hurt as bad as that last accusation."

Her gaze never wavered from his. "How was I supposed to know that? You came in wanting to use Incognito and its members as research. You wanted to interview me and Carl and everyone else. Why would I think I'd ever be safe with you once you started digging?"

Planting his hands on his hips, he dropped his head back, let out a slow breath, and stared at the ceiling. "Have you ever read any of my books, Kat?"

"Um. No."

A chuckle slipped out as he looked back down at her. "If you had, you would have realized that I've never used real names. Ever. Not of clubs and certainly not of my research subjects. I couldn't, because most of the research I conducted was right in my own club in New York. You're not the only one who had to maintain the trust, secrecy, and security of patrons."

She dropped her gaze. "Oh."

He raised a hand and cupped her cheek, tipping her head back so he could see her face. "You let me tie you to your bed, but you couldn't trust me enough not to send you and Incognito into ruin?"

Kat closed her eyes for a moment and savored his touch. Her insides felt as if a herd of butterflies were stampeding in it. Her emotions had been haywire all morning, and then she'd come into Jackson's office to sign away everything she'd worked so hard for only to find the two most important men in her life ready to rip each others' head off.

She didn't know what to do or say.

"Kat," he whispered, his face so close to hers she could feel his breath on her cheek, smell his spicy cologne, and feel his body heat. "I love you. I want a future with you. If you need to be Mistress Katriona during the day, I understand. But I know what's in your heart, baby." His other hand came up to her other cheek, and she slowly opened her eyes to look into his beautiful green gaze. "I know what you need in a man, and I want—*need*—to be that man. Please don't run away from me or the club."

Time held no relevance as she stood there, trapped within his warm hands, looking into the eyes of a man—the only man—to ever love the real her. The only man with whom she could see spending the rest of her life.

She gave a slow nod, and then pulled away from him.

When he reached for her, she shook her head. It was time he met her. All of her.

"Kat, don't..."

Holding his gaze, she went down on her knees before him, a position she hadn't taken in well over a decade. She spread her legs, put her hands behind her back, and then, with a fearful twinge of rejection in

her heart, she dropped her gaze and tipped her head forward.

He said nothing. Didn't so much as move a muscle while she stared at the tips of his biker boots. She swallowed hard, tears rushing to her eyes.

"My name is Kathy Smith." She had to clear her throat around the lump lodged there. "And if it would please you, Master Dalton..." Tears dripped from her eyes onto the floor, and she bit her lip for an instant to keep it from trembling too hard. "...I wish to give myself over to you."

Dalton was too stunned to move, to speak. He'd never in his wildest dreams imagined total submission from Kat. He shook his head. Kathy. Sweet, submissive Kathy. The woman of his heart.

"Please say something," she whispered, her words so quiet he nearly missed them.

He grinned as a humongous weight lifted from his chest, which he hadn't even realized was there. But then he quickly schooled his features. She wanted Master Dalton. She expected him. Right now, he needed to be commanding, to let her know that he accepted her offer of submission. That he intended to keep her as his forever.

His pulse spiked with the sudden turn of events, and he glanced behind him at the door. Surely Jackson would give them all the time they needed. Jackson was no idiot when it came to their way of life. He unbuckled his belt and popped open the button fly of his jeans.

"Show me how much you need me, Kitty Kat."

Her head slowly tipped up, and her gaze stopped on his cock. She rose up on her knees and, keeping her hands behind her back like a good little pet, leaned forward slightly and took him fully into her mouth.

He stifled his groan of ecstasy and braced his legs. His erection lengthened and thickened under her tender assault, and he fisted his hands at his sides. The suck and pull of her hot, wet mouth was almost more than he could bear. Knowing that she was his, that she willingly submitted to him, was a heady aphrodisiac. He wondered if he could survive.

Kathy Smith was his. Forever.

She moaned low in her throat, and the vibrations shot through him.

He buried his hands in her hair, knocking her hair band from her head. Warm, silky strands swept over the backs of his hands, even as he couldn't stop from thrusting his hips forward and burying himself more than ever before.

She whimpered and looked up at him as she took him deep. Her eyes were so dark, so filled with love and passion, it was his undoing.

"Stop," he commanded.

She froze, her shiny lips still closed over the head of his cock, and he held her gaze.

"Release," he said, barely able to contain his grin. She did follow directions well when she wanted to.

She opened her mouth and moved back just a scant inch, then licked her lips like a kitten. The groan escaped his throat before he could stop it. She bit her bottom lip, but the motion couldn't hide her smile.

"Stand up, pet."

Lithe and fluid, her hands still behind her back, she rose in front of him, and then dropped her gaze.

God, he thought, she was the most sensual creature he'd ever seen. Even in jeans and a T-shirt that should have been anything but flattering, she was gorgeous. Beyond gorgeous.

"I accept you, Kathy Smith," he said, his voice gravelly with his love for her and the fact that his balls were ready to burst. He tipped her head up with a finger under her chin. "I accept you, and I love you, and I vow to take care of you as long as you need me."

Her lips trembled, but with a smile this time.

His own mouth curved into a grin. "You may speak."

"I love you, too, Master."

He sucked in a deep breath as his heart lightened. He cupped her cheeks in his palms and dipped his head to claim her mouth.

She moaned and leaned into him, opening her lips beneath his. Her hands came up and wrapped around his neck. Her tongue thrust into his mouth once, twice, taking command and making him grin. He could work on the training later. After so many years as a Domme, she might have forgotten a few things. Things like, he was in control.

Breathing hard, he tore his mouth away and spun her around. "Say my name, Kitty Kat." He wrapped one hand around her waist; with the other, he covered her breast.

She rubbed her ass against his erection and purred. "Master Dalton," she said in that sultry, sexy voice that almost made him come.

"Again," he said, lowering his hand from her waist to the snap of her jeans.

"Dalton. My master."

He jerked open the fly of her jeans and buried his hand in her panties, fingering her hot, slick cunt. "Again."

"Dalton!" Her hips bucked when he inserted his finger deep inside her

He leaned closer at the same time, and she rubbed his cock with her ass. "Do you let go and let me command you?" He withdrew from her pussy to circle her clit with his fingertip.

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, Master."

"Do you submit to me and only me?" He nibbled her earlobe and lightly pinched her nipple through her bra and shirt.

"Oh, yes, Master."

He walked her two steps to the back of one of the leather guest chairs, bent her upper body forward over it, and shoved her pants and panties down her legs.

"Forever?" he asked, his heart in his throat.

Without hesitation, she cried out, "Forever," and he slammed his cock into her tight, slick pussy.

She moaned and thrust back against him. He shoved his hands under her shirt and bra to cup her breasts.

"More please, Master," she said in that whisky voice.

Her words released the beast inside him, and he claimed her as his. Pounding into her, his balls tightening, he fought his own release until she could catch up to him. She whimpered at every stroke and gripped the back of the chair, pushing back against him. Flesh smacked flesh.

He pinched her nipple, and she hissed. Dropping one hand, he dove through her silky, damp pubic hair, found the hard little nub of her clit, and lightly tugged on it.

She cried out, and her inner muscles pulsed around his cock as the orgasm claimed her. With a growl, he came hard, holding her against him while he pumped his hips repeatedly, milking every last sensation from her.

He buried his face against the back of her neck and breathed in her warm, flowery scent.

“Mine,” he whispered in her ear as she gasped for air. “Mine.”

Chapter Twelve

Kat couldn't catch her breath. Her mind spun with what she'd just done. What she'd just promised. Though it was what she wanted, now that the act had been committed, she was terrified.

Dalton's hot breath caressed the back of her neck. One of his hands still clasped her right breast, while the other lightly stroked her pussy. Damn, he made her lose control fast.

She was committed now, and though it scared her and made her uncertain how everything else would turn out, she knew she belonged with this man.

She raised her head and glanced up at the wall of windows overlooking the ocean as Dalton slowly withdrew his hand from her tender folds. "Oh, shit," she said. A giggle slipped out.

Dalton skimmed his thumb over her nipple before standing up straight and reaching down to pull her pants up. "Not exactly the reaction I'd hoped for," he said, his tone laced with humor.

"I just had sex in Jackson's office." She laughed as she zipped her jeans. "I can't believe I did that."

Dalton chuckled and turned her around to face him. He'd tucked everything back in where it belonged, his black polo shirt stretched over his sexy pecs. "And he's never had sex in yours?"

She giggled again and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Not in my *office*."

Still grinning, he leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. "We

didn't do it on any of the furniture, so it's not as if there's anything to clean up."

Kat snorted.

His smile slowly faded, and he shook his head. "What now?"

Leaning forward, she laid her head against his chest, and he wound his arms around her waist to hold her comfortably secure against his big, hard body. "How about we just run away together? Move to Barbados or something where no one knows either of us."

His hand coasted over her back, then he lightly tugged a fistful of hair until she leaned back to look at him. "No can do, babe. No running."

"I wasn't going to run, exactly."

"You were selling the club."

She sighed. "Men."

His arm tightened around her until she squeaked. "Don't be impertinent, or I'll have to punish you."

She grinned. "Spank me, big boy."

His lips quirked into that sexy-as-sin grin. "Don't tempt me. There'll have to be enough retraining with you as it is."

She laughed, hugged him, and breathed in his spicy scent. "Ground rules first."

"Okay," he said, his voice rumbling through his chest against her ear.

"First of all, keep your hands off Carl. No more fistfights."

"I didn't hit him."

"I know, but you wanted to."

"Tell me you've never been intimate with him."

She sucked in a breath. "Only that one time on stage."

"I'm so sorry about—"

"Shush. I know. It's done, and we've moved on." She leaned back so she could see his face when she revealed the next part. "You're the first man I've been with since the club opened."

His jaw dropped a bit, his lips parting and eyes widening.

She grinned. "The man of many words is speechless, I see."

"How?"

"How have I remained celibate when I work in a place that oozes sex?"

He nodded and reached up to touch her cheek.

She so loved it when he did that. She closed her eyes and leaned into his palm. "I was trained in a club in Los Angeles. As you know, complete training involves knowing both the top and the bottom side of things, but I've always preferred being a submissive." She opened her eyes and leaned up on tiptoe to kiss his lips. "Since the day the club opened and Mistress Katriona was born..." She shrugged.

"Aw, babe," he whispered before lightly brushing his lips against hers. His tongue flicked her upper lip. "I'm a selfish man, and I can't tell you how pleased I am with this revelation."

She laughed and swatted his chest, which made him chuckle. She loved that sound. Loved the way his eyes crinkled when he grinned. Loved...him.

"Okay, so beating Carl up is off limits. What else?"

She touched his cheek with her fingertips. "I will gladly give myself to you as your pet, but only in the bedroom. I may enjoy being dominated during sex and play, but that is the only place. I'm my own woman, and the first time you order me to do something outside the realm of our private life, you may find yourself in a world of hurt."

He grinned. "I wouldn't want it any other way, babe."

"Good."

"Anything else?" He quirked a brow.

"Yeah. One more thing." And this was the clincher for her. If he didn't agree, she couldn't be with him.

"Go on."

"I am the only woman you will ever touch. I don't share."

He stared down at her, his face impassive. Her heart clenched, and she started to pull away, but he pinned her against his chest and swooped down to capture her lips with his. The kiss was deep and demanding, and her body betrayed her mind as she melted against him.

He nipped her bottom lip. "The same goes for you, Kitty Kat. No more touching the Doms. No more teasing others with that riding crop of

yours or the sexy voice that I want reserved for me. You belong to me, and only me."

"Next time Tara lands in your lap," she said as she fought her lighthearted grin, "you better not give her that sinful smile that can melt any woman's...heart."

He chuckled. "I have absolutely no problem with any of your rules."

She nodded. "Good. Then it's settled." She made to pull away again, but his arms banded her to him.

"Not so fast, babe. You haven't heard my terms yet."

Her smile fled as fear spiked through her. What more could he possibly want?

"We still have the club to discuss. What happens there?" His voice dropped. "Who is going to own and run it?"

She shook her head and pushed against his chest. He released her, but didn't look happy about it.

"I can't run it as Kathy Smith, Dalton. I just can't see it working. And...and I don't want to be Mistress Katriona any longer. I can't live in both worlds. The best advice I got in this whole mess I've made with you is to follow my heart. That's why I was selling the club. I wanted to be with you as I am in here." She splayed her hand over her heart. "I made my fortune and, although it kills me to lose Incognito as much as selling my grandma's estate hurts, I just... I can't do it alone like that anymore."

"Then don't." He crossed his arms and widened his stance, as if going into battle. "We're a couple now, right?"

She nodded.

"We're in this for the long haul? Grow old together and all that kind of stuff?"

She couldn't help but smile at his terminology. "Yes. I hope so."

"Then why can't we run Incognito together? As partners?"

She opened her mouth to argue that she wouldn't be comfortable, but he stopped her with a narrowing of his eyes.

"Do you trust me, Kathy?"

She swallowed hard, hearing him use her given name. She nodded.

She trusted him with her body, mind, and soul.

"Then trust me when I say you need to reveal your true self to your clients, your friends. You can't run and hide behind me. I won't allow it."

"But—"

"No buts, babe. I firmly believe that you need Incognito. It's your baby, your life. If you think that I will fulfill your creative side, you're sadly mistaken. You built that club, and I can't watch you throw it away."

"You could still take over and run it if you want."

He shook his head. "Partners, babe. Or nothing."

The fear she'd pushed aside came back full force. How could he push this on her? How could he expect her to face all those people as someone different, as the real her? She'd lived her lie for ten years. A few of her patrons had been members that long.

Dalton dropped his arms and took the two steps separating them. He cupped her cheeks and stared into her eyes. "Trust me," he said, and it sounded like a command.

She did trust him, but he just didn't understand.

"Trust me," he said again, this time softer. "I love you and will never hurt you. I'll protect you from all your real or imagined fears. I don't want the club without you by my side. You're the creative one. Incognito is such a beautiful, welcoming place because of you. I don't want to see that lost. And I don't want to own it if you're not part of the everyday running of it."

She bit her lip, losing herself in those deep green eyes of his.

"And I don't want you if part of your heart is missing."

Oh, how could he read her so well? Incognito was a big part of her heart. Had been long before its doors ever opened.

"I'm scared," she admitted softly.

"I know, love. But I'll be with you every step of the way. You can do it in your own time and your own way."

She drew in a shaky breath and released it. Share. Be part of a partnership. God, it'd been so long since she ever thought it possible, she almost didn't believe it could happen. Could she still be part of Incognito if she was Kathy and not Katriona? She wanted to.

And Jackson, she remembered, accepted her as Kathy without a single question.

"Okay," she said softly.

"Yeah?" Dalton's eyes crinkled with his grin.

"Yeah."

He wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off her feet as he swung her around. "Good girl."

She threw her arms around his neck and laughed. "I'm hardly a girl."

Still holding her off the floor, he kissed her hard. "You're my girl, and you always will be."

Her heart melted into her shoes, and she kissed him back. When he pulled away, they were both breathing hard, and there was no doubt about his excitement pressed against the apex of her thighs. She giggled and wrapped her legs around his waist. "You're insatiable."

"And we're still in Jackson's office." He growled and nuzzled her neck. "We should probably let him know we didn't kill each other, and..."

"And?" She lowered her legs and slid down his body.

"How legal do you want this partnership to be?"

Her skin prickled with excitement at the thought of marriage. Her breath lodged in her throat. *Yes!* she wanted to shout.

"Do you want me to buy half of the club?"

Oh. Not marriage. Not that partnership. She schooled her features to hide the hurt and shrugged. "That would be best, if you're going to be the head Dom. Gives more credit to your position."

"Do you think Jackson can handle the paperwork?"

She nodded. "I'm sure he'd be more than happy to do it."

He smiled and smacked a kiss on her cheek. "Great. Let's go." He took her hand and practically dragged her to the door. "Can't wait to get you home and in a proper bed. I have plans for you tonight, Kitty Kat."

Don't be an idiot, Kat told herself. She'd known him less than two weeks. Sure, her life was taking drastic steps in directions she never expected, but marriage was an extremely serious step she might not be ready to make.

Like hell, she thought with a frown. The commitment she'd just given him was as binding to her heart and soul as any wedding vows ever would be.

Maybe he's not ready....

He pulled open the office door and threw his arm around her shoulder. "Hey, Jackson," he said as they walked into the lobby together. "A bit of a change of plans..."

Kat looked up at Dalton's profile. *He loves me. He told me so. We're in a committed, monogamous relationship. He wants to be business partners. Why am I being a big baby about the thought that marriage isn't really on his mind? Get over it.*

"Kat?"

She jerked her thoughts back to the conversation at hand to see Jack and Carl watching her.

"Hmm?"

Dalton squeezed her shoulder. "Jackson asked if you were comfortable with him representing both sides in this...merger."

"Oh." She gave Jack a sheepish grin. "Yes, of course I am."

"Great." Jack grinned, sweeping his arm toward his office. "If you'll step back into the office, we can start going over the details."

Dalton pulled away to follow Jack, but Carl caught her arm before she could follow.

"What the hell happened in there? You were in there so long I was getting worried, but Jack wouldn't let me check on you."

She laughed and did something she'd done rarely in their entire relationship. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and hugged him, then kissed his cheek. "You're too sweet for your own good," she said as she pulled back and held his hand in hers. "I'm fine." She blew out a breath. "And I'm not selling Incognito. Just half of it."

Carl's brow furrowed. "I don't get it."

She smiled and patted his cheek. "You will. There's going to be some major changes in the next little while, but rest assured your job is safe."

"Kat, I don't give a damn about my job. I'm only worried about

you and that overbearing Neanderthal."

She laughed. "That overbearing Neanderthal is about to be your boss, so you should probably curb your comments about him. And you don't want to piss me off, either, because I happen to love that man."

Carl's strained features softened. "I know you do. But that doesn't mean I'm going to stop worrying about you. We've been too close for way too long for me to do that."

"And I love you for it."

He pulled her into another hug. "I love you, too. I'm happy for you."

"Thank you."

Dalton cleared his throat. She pulled back and grinned at him. He raised one censoring eyebrow at her.

She shook her head and made a face. "Carl doesn't count."

"Count for what?" Carl wanted to know.

She felt light and happy, and forcefully pushed the thought of marriage out of her mind. "I'm not allowed to touch men."

Carl's brows drew together, making her laugh again. "Lunch tomorrow," she said to him. "We need to sit down and iron all this out. But right now, I have some paperwork to straighten out with Dalton and Jack."

Looking adorably confused, Carl shook his head. "All right. You going to be at the club tonight?"

She nodded. Katriona would live another day, at least. She had a lot to figure out first, and she needed her lover and her best friend to help her iron out the details for the changes that needed to be made.

"She might be a little late, though," Dalton warned.

Carl glanced at his watch. "Damn, I better get over there, then."

She gripped his hand. "Thank you. For everything."

He nodded and squeezed her hand in return. "You know I'm always here for you."

"I know," she said softly. "Get going."

He turned and headed for the lobby exit to the elevators. "One more thing," he said, stopping before he reached the door.

“What?”

He gave Dalton a pointed glare. “Hurt her, and you answer to me.”

Kat turned to see Dalton’s response and wasn’t surprised by his cocky grin and lazy stance against the doorjamb. “She’s safe with me.”

She grinned and walked toward him. She heard the door softly click shut behind Carl as she wound her arms around Dalton’s waist. “I love you.” Saying the words was so freeing, so...good. A feeling of peace settled over her. They could work out all the details later.

He dropped a kiss on her forehead. “I love you, too, but if Jack’s rates are by the hour, we better get on with this.” His voice dropped to a whisper. “And I’m dying to get you home.”

Chapter Thirteen

Kat hummed out of key as she seasoned the chicken to throw on the grill. The salad was tossed, and the freshly squeezed lemonade was in the ice bucket on the patio.

She grinned to herself when she heard the shower come on in the bathroom. Last night had been about the best night of her life. Dalton had been everything he'd promised to be. Commanding and tender. He'd taken her to sexual heights she'd forgotten were possible. Hell, she'd never experienced anything like him in her life. And he was so loving her heart ached to overflowing with it.

She sprinkled rosemary and thyme on the chicken breasts and then reached into the fridge for the barbeque sauce. Jackson would have the paperwork ready by tomorrow morning. She and Dalton would be official partners once it was all signed, though part of her felt very odd about taking his money now.

She'd been on her own so long, this whole partner thing would take some time to get used to.

A knock sounded on the front door of her cottage as she lifted the plate to take outside.

"Come on in, Carl," she called.

The door opened, and he came in wearing raggedy denim cut-offs and a faded Miami Dolphins T-shirt. "Sorry I'm late," he said as he shut the door. "Got caught up in some paperwork."

She smiled and motioned toward the patio doors. "Come on

outside. I'm just putting the chicken on." She laughed as he collapsed into one of the four cushioned wrought iron chairs next to the glass patio table. "You look like you haven't slept in days. You okay?"

She lifted the lid to the heated grill and placed the chicken on the rack, then sat across from him and poured them each a glass of lemonade.

"No, Kat, I'm not okay. And no, I haven't slept much since you announced you were selling the club. Would you please explain everything now?"

After setting a glass in front of him, she sipped from her own. Carl slashed his hand through his hair. *Uh oh*, she thought. *Time to do some major damage control.*

Where to start?

"Look, Kat, I don't mean to sound like a total bastard, and yes, I'd sided with him—"

"Yes, you did." She couldn't hide the accusation in her tone and didn't try.

He gave her a bemused frown. "That was different...before..."

"Before he stood a chance at becoming your boss?"

Carl looked so exasperated. "Yes. I guess. I mean, you tell me you don't even know this guy. And now you're partnering your business with him? Come on, you're not being reasonable."

She raised her eyebrows in surprise. "It was okay when he wanted to buy the whole thing?"

He shook his head then gazed off to the side at the towering trees and small lawn. "You selling the club at all isn't okay. It's yours, should always be yours."

"But you were willing to buy it, if you'll recall." She settled back into her chair and folded her hands over her belly.

"Because I thought you were running scared, and I wanted it to be safe from some moron coming in and changing everything."

"Well, Carl," she said and then licked her lips, trying to find the right words to use. "Things are going to change. A lot."

He groaned and dropped his head back on the cushion. "I knew it. What has he talked you into doing?"

She felt bad that Carl was feeling out of the loop but, on the other side, his antagonistic attitude was really starting to rub her the wrong way. Just a few days back he was trying to talk her into following her heart, now he was pissed off that she had.

"Listen up," she said, sitting forward and leaning her elbows on the table. "You can cut the attitude right now. You know I need you and count on you for a hell of a lot, and I don't foresee that changing at all. But what I don't need is the two most important people in my life snarling at each other like rabid dogs."

"Woof."

She turned her head to see Dalton step out on the porch wearing nothing but a pair of black jeans. God, he was gorgeous. And he was all hers.

He grinned at her and landed a kiss on her forehead before pulling out a chair and sitting down between her and Carl.

Carl rolled his eyes and stared off at the trees again. "You didn't tell me *he* was going to be here today."

"You never asked." Kat sighed. "Why don't we just get it all out and clear the air, okay? What is it you're so pissed off about? And remember, we may be best friends, but the club does belong to me. I have every right to sell it or not sell it as I see fit."

He pressed his lips tight. "Point taken, Boss."

Kat glanced at Dalton, and he shrugged. "I'll just go check the chicken." He got up from his chair and moved toward the grill. Okay, his ass looked just as great in his jeans as it did in leather. She was convinced now. The man was big and broad, and muscles rippled under the smooth skin of his back when he moved. She loved his biceps, the way they bunched as he lifted the meat fork.

"That's what I'm pissed off about," Carl whispered from the other side of the table. "You can barely make up your mind what you want." He leaned forward, his eyes narrowing. "First you try to throw him out of the club. Then you can't keep your hands off him. Then he sends you into fits, and you keep saying you can't do it—whatever *it* might be—I don't know, because suddenly you stopped talking to me about anything important."

Then you announce you're selling the club. Now..." He made a face and shook his head. "Now the guy has practically moved in, he's going to share ownership with you, and if that fucking lovesick, sappy grin on your face was any more blatant, I think I'd be sick."

"I wouldn't speak to my woman that way if I were you," Dalton said in a casual tone, but one glance at his fierce green eyes let her know that she had a warrior in her corner.

"Stop it," Kat said, pushing to her feet. "Both of you are acting like spoiled children fighting over a toy. Guess what. I'm not a toy, and I will not have you two acting like this."

Carl sneered. Dalton's low growl was less obvious, but she heard it.

"Jeez, maybe I should just let you two have it out. Would a good brawl help things? A couple bloody noses and fat lips? Well, there it is," she said, sweeping her hand toward the lawn. "Go for it." She turned to the patio door. "Come get me when the two of you are ready to act like civilized *adult* men."

Dalton winced as the glass door slammed behind Kat. His kitten had some pretty sharp claws. And one hell of a tongue when she was riled.

Carl picked up his drink and downed it in a few gulps, then stood. "If I thought pounding the shit out of you would help, don't think I wouldn't do it. But it'd probably just piss her off more if I injured you."

"I feel the same way about you right now," Dalton said, setting the meat fork on the plate by the grill. "But I think what we need is to do what she said. Let's clear the air." He flipped off the gas so the chicken wouldn't burn and took a seat at the table.

Carl hesitated, but then sat down, too. "Fine. But be warned, Dr. Carrington. You hurt her in any way, physically, emotionally, or financially, and I'll come down on you so fast and so hard you won't know what hit you."

Dalton nodded, conceding that Carl wanted to protect Kat. But... "I thought you two weren't involved."

Carl gave an evil grin. "Ten years working together as closely as we have, there's no way to *not* be involved."

Positive that Kat would never lie to him, he discredited Carl's insinuation and moved on. "What are you?"

Carl frowned. "Meaning?"

"You do an admirable job of playing a slave to Kat's mistress..." He shook his head and let his smile show. "But I get the distinct impression that you're no one's pushover."

Leaning back in his chair, Carl crossed his arms over his chest and didn't answer.

Dalton sighed. "Look. As of tomorrow, I own half of Incognito, which makes me your employer. If you don't start talking, we're going to have one hell of a working relationship. And Kat considers you her best friend, which means I'll probably have to see you even when we're not at the club, and I really don't need her getting pissy every time we're in the same room together."

Carl chuckled. "Scares you, does she?"

With all seriousness, Dalton nodded. "More than anyone I've ever known." But not how Carl meant. She scared the hell out of him because she was who she was, and that was the woman he'd fallen in love with. Something he'd never thought possible. She was everything he'd ever dreamed of in a woman all rolled up in one gorgeous package.

"Good. And don't you forget it." Carl shook his head. "So if I piss you off, I suppose you'd fire me."

Dalton shrugged. "I suppose it depends on your infraction, but probably not. Kat would skin me alive." He reached into the ice bucket for the lemonade and poured himself a glass. "On the other hand, if we can't get along, something will need to be done."

"I don't even know what my position is now. I don't understand any of this. Is she still a Domme? I know you're not sub, so I can only assume she's submitted to you. Does that carry over to the club? What exactly is my role now?"

"Good question," Dalton said, and then took a sip of the tart drink. "Kat is still undecided about how to handle the club members regarding her change in status. My suggestion is that she remains as she is in the club, with the only exception being that she's now...taken."

Carl nodded for him to continue.

"You are her accountant, and I see absolutely no reason for that to change. As far as I can tell from my limited exposure, you've done a remarkable job. I also assume you are her muscle if anything should go wrong. Am I correct?"

Carl nodded. "Tyrone, the bartender, is added muscle if we need him. But for her protection, it was just easier to have me where she needed me as her slave. We've been playing our roles almost from the beginning. There were a few mishaps the first year the club was open, some unruly guests before she started screening everyone, and it was easier for her if I was nearby. She had no one else she could count on."

Dalton was beginning to see just how deep and long their friendship extended. Good thing he didn't really hate the guy. Though, if he had been intimate with Kat, the story might be different.

"It's always helpful to have an extra set of eyes and ears keeping a lookout for trouble in a place like the club. But with the tough screening, I can't imagine there's much of a chance of things getting out of hand."

"There was an incident just last year. A Dom beat the hell out of a sub in one of the voyeur rooms before anyone could get in to stop it. That's the reason for the panic buttons that have been placed in them. Thank God there was a triad with common sense who saw it happen and called for help."

Dalton thought about it, and knew that Carl was definitely more of an asset than a liability. He knew much more about the running of Incognito than Dalton did.

"Okay," Dalton said. "So help me convince Kat that the club members aren't going to tar and feather her if she reveals she's not the ultimate Domme." He grinned. "That she's been tamed."

Carl snorted a laugh. "A submissive dominatrix."

"You are referring to Angela Patterson? I met the triad at the Sinclairs' party."

"Is that what Kat is?"

"I think for the sake of her position as owner of Incognito, it would be wise for her to let the patrons think so. As much as I want her to live

the type of life she's comfortable with, I don't think walking into the club on my leash would be a wise decision."

A belly laugh rolled out of Carl at that comment, and Dalton grinned.

"I see you think that's unlikely."

"You may have tamed her enough for her to submit to you, Doc, but you'll never collar that woman."

Dalton raised an eyebrow in silent acceptance of the challenge.

"Okay. So basically things will stay status quo, except you're in the picture now?" Carl said and reached for the juice pitcher.

"For the most part. I have a few ideas I'd like to run past Kat, but nothing major. But, Kat has to agree to..." He waved his hand in the air and gave a self-deprecating laugh. "To what we think is best for her in this situation."

Carl laughed along with him. "Yeah. That should be easy." He rolled his eyes. "You do know you're involved with the most stubborn person on the face of the earth, don't you?"

Dalton grinned. "Funny. Some people have said that very same thing about me."

Chapter Fourteen

“Babe, you look fine.”

Kat stared at her reflection in the full-length mirror on the back of the bedroom door and smoothed her hands down the sides of her black silk dress. She did look fine—damn good in fact—but this was one big night. The night that everything changed.

She looked at Dalton’s reflection in the mirror and sighed. God, to be as confident as him. He looked like sin personified in his black tuxedo. Her sexy devil. She found her first smile of the day.

“That’s better,” he whispered in her ear as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. “You are the most gorgeous woman in all of Florida. And tonight is going to be your biggest success.”

“*Our* biggest success,” she corrected, since the fund-raising auction was his idea from the start.

He grinned at her reflection. “Ours.”

She loved the sound of that. In the past two months, other than a quick jaunt up to New York that Dalton had to take to meet with his editor, they’d been inseparable. They worked together side-by-side like a well-oiled machine. They played together, reveling in the time away from the club to go surfing and swimming, taking drives along the coast and finding quaint, out of the way places to lunch. Whatever they did, Kat found the contentment she’d been yearning for but never believed she’d find. Even he and Carl had formed a strong bond of friendship that warmed her heart. It was as if she was building a replacement for the

family she'd lost so many years ago when she became a twenty-year-old orphan.

"I love you," she whispered, her gaze caught in his through their reflections.

"Do you?" he asked with a teasing grin.

She nodded. "With all my heart."

"Hmm," he rumbled before pulling away. "That gives me an idea."

She turned around and frowned. "We can't. We've got to be at the club in a half hour. Besides, I don't want to have to redo my hair. It took me forever to get all these damn curls right."

He chuckled and went to the walk-in closet. "Get your mind out of the gutter, kitten."

She did love this house. It was so spacious, and the closets were to die for. She wasn't officially moved in, but she used some minor remodeling of the cottage as an excuse to spend more time at his place. Although the work had wrapped up already, she still hadn't been back to her cottage in over a week. He hadn't really asked her to make the move permanent, yet, but she suspected he would soon. Or maybe it was just a given?

She plopped down in the easy chair by the window. They did work and play and make love perfectly, but he never mentioned anything beyond what they already had. And as liberated as she was, she still thought it should be the man's prerogative to do the asking. Any asking. Even asking her to move in with him permanently would be nice.

She scowled as she double-checked to make sure all her nails were on straight. Lotion. Her hands were a bit dry. She pushed out of the comfy chair and moved across the room to the dresser where her gardenia-scented lotion sat next to his cologne.

My God, she thought, staring at the mixture of their things. Her brush, his comb. Her perfume, his cologne. She was turning into the biggest sap in the world when just the sight of their stuff paired up together made her want to weep with happiness.

No, no crying, she thought as she glanced at the mirror over the dresser. Can't let the eyeliner smudge. Tonight was way too important for

raccoon eyes.

"You have got the strangest expression on your face."

She squirted some lotion into her palm and started smoothing it in as she turned. "Forgive me for being a little uptight about tonight, Doc. We can't all be as confident as you."

"Hmm. Uptight *and* snippy. Should prove to be a fun night."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't start with me."

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. "Come here." He took her hand and led her to the edge of the bed, then waited until she sat down.

"What are you doing? We should be leaving. Would you put on your tie so we can go? We can't be late. Not tonight. I told you—"

"Hush up, Kathy."

She clamped her teeth over her tongue. He was in his Damn Commanding mode. She knew better than to argue, or he was likely to turn her over his knee, and they didn't have time for that, even if she might enjoy it.

Her heart leaped to her throat when he went down on one knee in front of her. No. Not now, she thought. *He couldn't be...*

He took both her hands in his and raised them to his lips, kissing each palm in turn. "I hope, in the past couple of months, I've shown you how much I love you."

Oh, God. He is. Her heart thudded so hard she thought it would bounce right out of her chest. She nodded.

"You've never brought up the subject, which I was sure you would at some point because, well, you don't ever keep your mouth shut about anything that's on your mind. But..."

He gazed up at her with those gorgeous deep green eyes, and she knew she was about to lose it. Tears stung the back of her eyes. Reaching over to the nightstand, he lifted a flat, square, velvet box.

Oh, no. It wasn't a ring. She'd seen those boxes before. The Sinclairs and the Montgomerys had purchased their wives' collars from the same specialty jeweler, and they came in those boxes. Dalton wanted to *collar* her?

She shook her head.

"Don't say anything yet."

"Dalt—"

"Shh."

She bit her lip to keep from blurting out a resounding *no*. She had to look at this logically. She was his pet; at least at home, she was. She'd let him and Carl convince her that Mistress Katriona was still needed at the club, and so far there'd been no questions one way or another. They weren't overtly affectionate at the club, and she maintained the same working relationship with Carl that had been in place for so many years, but she was sure that the majority of the regulars knew she and Dalton were an item.

"I love you, babe. With all my heart and soul."

Every time he said it, her heart turned to goo and seemed to ooze to her extremities. His sincerity weakened her, yet made her love for him that much stronger.

"I want to spend the rest of my life taking care of you, Kathy. In every way you'll allow me. You're an independent woman, and I respect that. I never ever want you to think that I don't. You're stubborn and..." He grinned. "You have one hell of a mouth on you when you're pissed."

She couldn't help smiling, because it was true. They'd had a few arguments here and there, and she hated losing, but when she did... *Mmm*. He made it worth it.

"You already know that I admire the club you built out of nothing, and I know there's no one who could run it with the confidence that you do."

She nodded. He always deferred to her wishes where the club was involved.

He licked his lips and paused. "I always dreamed of a woman like you, but I never knew she truly existed. You're my dream come true."

Oh, damn it. She was never going to keep the tears at bay this way.

He opened the box. "Let me claim you as mine in all ways."

But to wear a collar? I didn't even do that when I was in training.

He turned the box so she could see the jewelry. "Marry me, Kathy Smith."

Her breath whooshed out in surprise. Yes, there was a collar, a gorgeous platinum and gold choker, but in the center of the box, sitting atop the black velvet, was a sparkling diamond ring—the Incognito logo with three diamonds set inside each intricately shaped swirl.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered, reaching out to run her finger over the ring.

“Aw, shit, you’re crying.”

She laughed and threw her arms around his neck. He chuckled and held her tight.

“Is that a yes?”

She nodded and choked out, “Yes,” despite her tight throat. “Yes. I love you so much, Dalton. And yes, I’ve been waiting for what feels like forever for this.”

He laughed. “The woman can keep her mouth shut, huh?”

She playfully slapped his bicep as she pulled away, then she grabbed a tissue from the box on the nightstand and carefully swiped under each eye. She probably looked like a raccoon by now. *Damn it.*

When she lowered her hand, Dalton caught it in his and slipped the ring onto her finger. More tears welled.

“Forever, babe.”

She nodded. Grinned. Swiped another happy tear from her cheek. She glanced at the jewelry box lying open on the bed next to her. The platinum choker gleamed in the bedroom’s lamplight. She knew the collar was as important to Dalton as the ring was to her. She could do this for him. Wanted to do it for him.

“Where’s the key?” she asked softly as she lifted the collar from the velvet.

Dalton opened the top two buttons of his shirt and drew out a chain he’d never worn before. On the end was a tiny platinum key that would fit in the glistening gold lock pendant on the front of the choker. He’d been awfully sure of himself, she thought with a grin.

She handed it to him and pushed him slightly. He scooted back a bit, and she went to her knees in front of him, bowing her head. “I give myself to you, Master Dalton. Forever.”

* * * * *

Dalton watched Kat fidget with the lock on her collar and then glance down at the papers in her hand. She couldn't seem to stand still.

He still couldn't believe she'd wanted to wear the collar tonight. Hadn't expected that much from her so soon. He felt like puffing out his chest and doing a Tarzan yell. She truly was his dream come true. And he couldn't be prouder of his mate.

"And now, please welcome a woman we all know well," Carl said from the podium set on the center stage. Silence stretched for a long moment as Carl stared into the crowd. For dramatic effect or not, Dalton was relieved when Carl finally announced her. "Mistress Katriona."

Kat froze, her eyes wide as she stared up at him. "I can't," she said, her voice barely there.

Dalton kissed her cheek and gave her left hand a squeeze. "Make me proud, babe."

She shook her head.

"Don't make me turn you over my knee in front of all these people," he warned, even though he'd never do such a thing to her. For being in the BDSM industry, she was extremely private with her personal life. And he knew what this announcement meant. She was taking the leap into a different realm. She feared her patrons' reactions to her public subjugation, but he had no qualms. Incognito's members loved her; she just needed to realize that.

"Go, babe," he said, turning her by the shoulders and giving her a little shove into the spotlight.

She hesitated only a second before she straightened her shoulders and sashayed her way to the podium. Damn, she was gorgeous.

He moved to the bar so he could see her better, keep an eye on her to make sure she didn't pass out from nerves or something.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen," she said, then cleared her throat. Stronger now, she said, "Thank you for coming out to join us for this special occasion."

She raised her hand as if to fiddle with the lock again, but then dropped it to the podium and shuffled her papers. "Tonight we're raising money for a cause near and dear to many of our hearts. I'd like to thank Detective Paul Baxter and Doctor Jonathan Sinclair for their guidance and support in helping us link up with the Southern Florida Battered Women's Shelter."

She paused as a round of applause resounded through the club. A smile flitted over her lips.

"We sincerely hope this will become an annual event to help those who are desperately in need."

She took in a deep breath and slowly let it out. Dalton wished he could take away her anxiety, but this was something she needed to do on her own.

"I'd like to take a moment for a special announcement before we commence with the auction." Her hands fluttered over the papers on the podium before she looked up toward the audience. "Our emcee for tonight is a member you've all come to know over the past couple of months, Dr. Dalton Carrington."

There was a murmur through the crowd. She turned her head, snared his gaze for a second, and smiled. He gave her a nod of approval and blew her a kiss.

"Master Dalton is a new resident to Florida. He's a leading psychologist in the area of sexuality, and an award-winning author. He owned and ran his own alternative lifestyle club, not unlike Incognito, in New York City for over fifteen years."

She took another deep breath and caught his eye for an instant before turning back to her patrons. "Now I'd like to introduce him as...half owner of Incognito and..." She faltered for a second before she pushed on. "My fiancé."

The club went silent.

She turned wide, frightened eyes on him.

Dalton pushed away from the bar and strode to the stage, leaped up onto it, and went to her. Without giving her any warning, he wrapped his arms around her, dipped her over his arm, and kissed her hard,

cutting off her startled gasp.

"Let's hear it for the man who collared Mistress Katriona!" he heard Carl shout, and applause and whistles resounded. He grinned against Kat's mouth. Carl owed him a hundred bucks now.

"You're an ass," she said when he pulled away enough for her to speak.

"I know, and you love me that way."

She chuckled as he stood her upright. The applause was still thunderous.

He leaned over and licked the shell of her ear. "You made me a very proud man. I'll never let you down."

"You better not, or I'll hurt you," she said and popped him lightly with her riding crop. "Get to work, big boy. Make some money for the shelter."

"Yes, ma'am," he said around a chuckle. He patted her ass, but he doubted the members could see the caress because of the podium. "And then I get to take you home."

As the clapping subsided, she smiled into his eyes. "Every night." Damn, he was a lucky son of a bitch.

The End

Author Bios

Anna Leigh has been reading and penning romances for as long as she can remember. After she met and married her very own real-life hero, romance took on a whole new meaning. She now knows married life can sizzle, and romance can be erotic—even in her own home.

Madison Layle avoided her childhood chores on the family farm by curling up with books and disappearing into other worlds of fantasy, adventure, and romance. With maturity came the love of her own real-life hero (a.k.a. “my darling hubby”), and a real understanding of why her parents locked their bedroom door.

Madison and Anna Leigh first met online through a critique group, a meeting which sparked a strong friendship and a fun partnership. Together, their writing has taken on a spicier flavor, so while their hubbies are off at work, they let their imaginations soar....

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