

Kept

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Chapter I

The flight into Tampa from New Hampshire was interminable - crowded, stuffy . . . not to mention the molestation prior to boarding. Trish adjusted her position again, cursing both the small airline seats and her own not inconsiderable bulk. Although the romance novel on her lap was the latest from one of her favorite authors, it held no interest for her. Painful, gut-wrenching scenes from the past months kept playing in her mind, bringing tears to already sore, swollen eyes until she finally shook her head vigorously to clear her thoughts. But she was beginning to learn how useless that was, because the visions crept right back to huddle around her, smothering her usually optimistic personality in a shroud of depression.

Luckily, the jarring bump of the landing gear on solid ground brought her attention back to the mundane necessity of joining the herd of passengers as they crowded the center aisle to exit the plane. Uncharacteristically, her head was bowed as she walked into the airport, but an excited voice caught her ear.

"Trish! Over here!" It was her younger cousin, Maggie, jumping up and down and waving her arms in a manner that was most undignified for a woman of her advanced position. It was one of the few sights in this world right now that could make Trish smile broadly as she changed course and headed for the nattily dressed young woman in the Donna Karan suit.

The two women came together in a long, unselfconsciously affectionate hug, which only made unbidden tears spill down Trish's cheeks that much faster as her cousin held and rocked her, whispering, "I'm so sorry, honey."

Afraid that she would dissolve into a mindless puddle if she didn't assert some control over her wayward emotions, Trish was the first to move away, fishing an ever-present tissue from her pocket and handing a clean one to Maggie. "Sheesh, where are my manners?" Maggie was saying, although Trish was completely preoccupied by her own misery. "Patricia Barton, I was to introduce you to my boss, Reed Douglas. Reed, this is my infamous cousin, Trish Barton."

Trish shook the hand of a man who, had she been her usual self, would have made her eyes roll back into her head - he was drop-dead sexy. Not gorgeous in the traditional sense, but he fit her requirements down to a "t". Short feathered black hair, graying at the temples but not completely, framed disgustingly tanned skin. Stark blue eyes missed nothing as he deftly assumed her carryon bag himself, turning the three of them towards the baggage area.

"Isn't he wonderful? Isn't he . . . well, sexy as hell?" her cousin gushed as they followed meekly behind the Adonis in Armani. Six-three at least, very broad shouldered, and not a spare ounce on him. Although she didn't chase men in the least, Trish was usually extremely appreciative of any male eye-candy in her vicinity, especially dark haired hunks, which were her preference - although she often found in her own relationships that she was more attracted to personalities than looks.

"Mmmm." She gave the man no more than a cursory glance.

Maggie sighed. Trish's distinct lack of response made her even more worried than she already was.

Trish spotted her gray tapestry suitcase, with the handle wrapped with a bright pink ribbon, and was just in the act of trying to wrestle its overstuffed weight to the floor when a long, bulging, pinstriped arm reached past her and lifted it effortlessly away from her. "Thank you," she mumbled awkwardly.

"You're welcome," rumbled back to her ears as she set off ahead of him to fall into step beside Maggie.

Before she knew it, they were more than comfortably ensconced in the back of an impressively long limousine, Maggie and Trish on one butter-soft leather side and Mr. High-Powered-Executive on the opposite seat, facing them.

Maggie reached across and caught Trish's hand. "Are you okay?" she asked quietly.

The tears returned instantly, and she barely choked out, "Yeah. I'll live – it's just not easy." Her tone did not invite further conversation as she stared out the window.

Reed took the opportunity to study her and make comparisons between the cousins. Physically, they were opposites, with exception of the fact that neither of them was as fashionably skinny as they were "supposed" to be. Where Maggie had shortish, almost silver blonde hair, her older cousin's longer locks tended towards a darker blonde, with a lot of reddish highlights. Trish was a few inches taller, but was just as well-blessed with a lovely, ample figured as Maggie. He'd heard a lot about Miss Tricia Barton from his gushing right-hand woman, and he was interested to see if any of the advanced publicity held true.

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When they arrived at her cousin's house, Trish reached for her three heavy bags, but got "the look" from Reed until she backed off. Jeez, the man was potent, came the errant thought, even in a three piece suit! Maggie laughed and put her arm around Trish's shoulders as they walked into the new colonial style house. "He's a great boss, but everywhere except the boardroom he leans a little towards chauvinistic – in a good way," she hastened to add, chiding herself for saying too much.

Maggie and her husband, Kell, were blissfully in love and almost parental in their concern for their favorite relative, even though Trish was four years older than Maggie and tended towards almost rabid independence - especially since the messy divorce - even to her own detriment at times. It had been Kell's idea to invite her down for some R & R. Trish taught the fifth grade and generally adored it, but this past year had been hellish in more ways than one, and the cousins were frankly worried about her. Her mother's passing after a long, debilitating illness threw her into a deep depression, and the lively, sparkling, funny person they adored was only just beginning to resurface.

Mr. Douglas seemed to know without direction exactly where to put her bags, so Trish took a moment for an all-over stretch, taking a deep breath in and out through her nose just the way Dave, her Yoga instructor, wanted her to and she – a confirmed, mouth-breathing asthmatic – rarely did. Maggie's house was gorgeous and spotless, as usual, but somehow not sterile-feeling at all. It felt very much like home.

When Reed reappeared, Trish excused herself to change out of her pretty – but irretrievably wrinkled – travel clothes and into jeans and a flowered cotton blouse. A quick look at the mirror in the adjoining bathroom told her she looked only a little less worn and harried than usual, and could use a touch up of her light makeup since there was a disgustingly rich, eligible bachelor downstairs. Sometimes her Mother decided to pop into her head at

the most inopportune times. Instead, she wrinkled her upturned nose at her reflection and huffed as she turned away. She descended the stairs slowly and could hear quiet voices coming from the eat-in kitchen. " – never really been the same since her Mom died. She's been so depressed lately. We're worried about her."

A deep, firm tone suggested, "If you're that concerned, then she probably needs professional help."

Trish frowned. Sometimes excellent hearing isn't a good thing. Looking up at the ceiling, she lamented, "Well, Mom, I've only known the guy for five minutes, I'm not even my usual self, and he already thinks I'm a candidate for the loony bin! I think you can scratch him off the list of potential husbands, which is fine by me." Reed Douglas was just a bit too potent for her, she'd already decided, which was great because it meant the pressure was off for her to impress him, or even behave particularly well.

That thought – that she was, under normal circumstances, not the best behaved person – brought a genuine smile to her lips.

Maggie crossed over and hugged her tightly. "Well, that's it. Tennessee agrees with you already – you're smiling! You'll have to stay the rest of the summer!"

Trish snorted. "I don't think so! I'm not much fun right now – I'll probably be wearing out my welcome within the next five minutes!"

The conversation wandered aimlessly from there, with Reed only contributing slightly. He was busy watching Miss Patricia Barton as she moved easily about her cousin's kitchen. It was obvious that these two were more than cousins – they were good friends. Both seemed to enjoy cooking, and dinner preparation was a team effort where the two women's styles blended well. They finished each other's sentences and added to each other's recipes

with the casual familiarity of long time association. Once or twice, he even thought he caught an almost smile on Trish's sad face, a quick flash of humor that couldn't quite be suppressed. It lit her face from within, and Reed found himself wondering what she'd be like when she surfaced from beneath the shroud of melancholy she'd wrapped so tightly around herself. It surprised him to realize that he wanted to be there when that happened, and even try to help extricate her, maybe.

Hmmmmmmm.

Kell's arrival was cause for more tears and kisses and openly affectionate hugs. Kell kept Trish by his side with a casual arm around her waist, and Reed's hands clenched into fists involuntarily, so that he had to consciously relax them. It was the most unusual reaction he'd ever had to a woman, and he wasn't at all sure he liked it.

Reed could afford to have pretty much any woman he wanted. Generally, they leaned towards world-weary socialites who had the same interest in commitment that he had – none – but who enjoyed the finer things in life and was used to having them. He could take them to the ballet or the opera or an exclusive restaurant and not worry that they were going to say or do the wrong thing. And in bed . . . his sex drive was legendary; he wore out most of his partners, had them crying "uncle" well before he would have felt the need to stop. An overachiever in most things, Reed made damned sure that lovemaking was one of the things he excelled at. No woman ever left his bed wanting more, or in any doubt that she was a desirable, beautiful woman.

Reed required monogamy from his women while they were together and remained entirely faithful himself for the duration of the relationship. Personally, he had always been a one-woman man, the result of having been raised by a wonderful, loving mother who was hurt too many times by her two-timing husband who seemed to

think that women – even his wife – were a convenience, like Kleenex, to be used up and thrown away. He'd left them when Reed was two years old. Although he had grown up in complete and utter poverty, he had always known that he was loved, and his mother had always told him that he could become anything he wanted. Reed knew from a very young age that the one thing he wanted to do in life was to take care of his mother in the way she should have been cared for, and he'd done exactly that. His mother had died several years ago, but not before he'd given her everything her heart desired – not that she'd ever asked for anything, the stubborn pain! She'd hated the cold, so he'd bought her a house in Florida, staffed it, took her on trips with him, made sure that, even the last moments of life she'd spent in his arms, were as comfortable as his buckets of money could make them.

His Dad had contacted him once – only once. And, if he was smart, never again.

Still, with his "one at a time" attitude, he'd never cared enough about any one woman to feel jealous. Anger and annoyance, yes, especially if they tried to cling after he'd decided it was over. But that was what had just happened when he watched Kell push Trish close. Jealousy.

Interesting.

Maybe, though, it was just the fact that he hadn't had much time lately – hell, in the past year - to indulge his rampant sex drive. That was one of the problems with being rich – there were very few situations beyond complete retirement that afforded you the ability to lie back and enjoy the ride. You always had to be on top of everything. And although that was his favorite position – in sex and everything else - he barely had time to take a deep breath, much less spend valuable time courting and romancing a woman, even at the bare-bones level, which no woman he knew would accept.

It was expected that he would stay to dinner, as he had in the past. It was a more subdued affair than it might have been, given Tricia's current state of mind. Normally, the three of them caused a ruckus whether they were at home or in a restaurant, discussing in no uncertain terms their opinions on whatever happened to be the most controversial topic they could come up with – everything from religion to politics, and none of the three of them were shy about expressing themselves . . . but no one ever changed anyone else's mind about anything, either. It was unusual to have three such strong personalities blend so well, but theirs did.

But tonight the dinner table conversation was quiet but not strained, until Maggie recounted a story about Tricia's mother, which made twin tears roll down the older cousin's face. Maggie was beside herself, apologizing profusely and patting Trish's hand.

"No, no. I want to remember her, even though it hurts right now," Trish whispered, stabbing at a garlic-roasted potato with a vengeance, although she couldn't really see it.

Reed felt the compulsive need to comfort - to hold her and touch her, stroke her hair and massage those tense shoulders, but instead he started to ask her about her work, which seemed to relax everyone noticeably.

While they were sipping coffee over dessert, Kell asked blithely, "So how's your writing coming?"

Both women nearly spit out their swallows of coffee, fixing him with glares fit to bore a hole through his head. Reed watched a blush fall over Tricia's face like a heavy velvet curtain falling onto a stage at the end of a play. She was embarrassed, but she was almost smiling about it. "Fine."

Intrigued, Reed turned in his chair to face her, watching her closely. "What do you write?"

Maggie began coughing spasmodically. "Don't ask her that; you don't want to know," she warned as she took her coffee cup into the kitchen for a pretense of something to do. Maggie didn't know if she wanted her cousin and her boss to get into this kind of conversation – at least, not in front of her, anyway, and definitely not in front of Kell. Might give him ideas, and he had too many damned ideas of his own!

But Trish was used to this type of question, and, much to her cousin's relief, gave the pat answer. "I write romance novels." Now, both Maggie and Kell knew that Trish considered what she wrote to be just a couple of steps more erotic than a paperback romance novel, but the general public might disagree with that watered-down description.

"Have you been published?"

Trish got up and started to help clear the table. "On the web, yes, but I have a story that I'm thinking of pitching to a paperback publisher, eventually."

Reed picked up his own plates and headed for the kitchen, too. He was too intrigued by everyone's reaction to let this go. "I have some connections in the publishing industry – when you think it's ready, let me know and I'll see what I can do."

His more than generous offer stopped traffic in the kitchen for a moment, while the two cousins' eyes met in silent communication. "Thank you, Mr. Douglas –"

"Reed, please."

"Reed," Tricia began again, loading the dishwasher hurriedly so she wouldn't have to look into that intent gaze. "It's going to be a while yet." Yeah, she thought, and a cold day in hell before I'll let you read what I write! The embarrassing idea of a man like Reed Douglas reading any of her stories made her blush

come back full bloom. If he was into the same thing that she was into – with that build and that "ask how high" temperament, he'd be a force to be reckoned with for whatever lucky woman – lucky? – that made him responsible for monitoring her behavior. It was the penalties for misbehavior he'd exact out of her hide that made Trish shudder – and it wasn't with revulsion.

Although they all retired to the living room once the dishes were taken care of, Reed could see that Tricia was failing fast. He rose, saying, "Well, some of us have to go into work tomorrow – "

Maggie crossed the room just to smack him sharply for that comment. "I'm on vacation. I know you – the workaholic - don't know the meaning of the word, but it means to rest and relax."

"Ohhhhhh, is that what it means?" Reed asked innocently as everyone gathered around the front door to see him off, Trish with her hand over her mouth as she yawned impolitely. That sharp gaze settled on her again like a touch. "You should be in bed. You're exhausted."

The imp in Trish decided to make an appearance. "Thanks, Dad."

Kell and Maggie "ooohed" dramatically at the dig.

Pulling himself up to his full height, Reed looked down at her. "I'm only forty-five. How old are you?"

Despite its inherent impoliteness, she answered the question. "Thirty-seven."

A devilish grin spread over his face. "Even I'm not that precocious!" That got a laugh out of her, and her smile was radiant.

Trish held out her hand. "It was nice to meet you."

Reed shook it solemnly, noting its delicate slenderness. "It was nice meeting you, too. Maybe I'll wander over here again on the pretext of work – "

"Don't you dare!" came an indignant cry from Maggie.

With a bold wink at Trish, Reed sang out, "Ni-ight." He barely let go of her hand before turning to walk out the door.

"Well, you sure made an impression on him," Maggie teased as Trish walked past her to head up the stairs.

"Yeah, right," Trish replied, her voice full of doubt. "I'm going to bed. I'm beat."

But as her head hit the pillow, unbidden thoughts filled her mind – not the usual sad memories of her mother's last days, but rather snapshots of a hard, craggy face with full lips and a soft, deep voice that resonated in her ear and made shivers dance unbidden up her spine.

Tricia punched the pillows hard, and forced herself to relax into sleep. Ah, well. She'd probably never see him again, anyway, so there was no sense mooning over drop-dead sexy Mr. Reed Douglas.

Chapter II

Trish'd been at Kell and Maggie's for three days. She was the only one home; everyone else was at various dental or doctor appointments, and she was hard at work on the story she'd brought down with her. It was funny how sometimes just a change in scenery was enough to get her unblocked. Trish'd been pouring words out into her laptop since early that morning, with "All My Juvenile Delinquents" and "One Wife to Give" playing in the background, until she heard the doorbell ring.

Reed Douglas was the last person she expected to see, and she barely caught herself before she about said as much to him. "Hi," Trish forced a patently false smile to her lips. She really didn't want to be interrupted, especially not by someone who was so imminently interruption-worthy.

"Hi." He waited for her to invite him in, but she was standing there like someone lost in a fog, almost as if she was oblivious to his presence, which made his mouth twist in a frown. He disliked the idea that he'd spent the past three days thinking about her at the most inopportune times while she'd apparently dismissed him from her mind without a second thought.

Suddenly embarrassed, Trish stood aside, saying, "Please forgive me. Come in." Purely for something to keep her hands

occupied that she couldn't get arrested for, she headed for the kitchen. "Would you like some coffee?"

"No, thanks, but I'll take some spring water, though, if you have it."

When she'd gotten him settled at the snack bar/island, she kept herself busy by checking on dinner, which had been simmering all day in the crock-pot, and really didn't need the benefit of her attention, but it was better than succumbing to the temptation to throw herself at him. She'd felt a modicum of attraction to him a few days ago, but it was tons worse now. He must've been taking a day off, and there was no button-up collar in sight. Instead, he was in wonderfully faded jeans that looked like he'd been born in them, and a maroon t-shirt that advertised an area restaurant as it stretched lovingly across disgustingly well-developed chest muscles.

While her back was still to him, she asked, "So, do you have paperwork or something that Maggie needs to see?"

"Nope. I came to see you."

The spoon she was using to test the doneness of the pork loin roast clattered to the counter unexpectedly. Well, there was nothing shy about this man, she thought. "Oh?" That's it, girl, play it casual. He's way out of your league. She busied herself adding unneeded spices to the broth.

"Are you that fascinated by dinner or are you just trying to avoid me for some reason?"

Annoyed at his disgustingly accurate perception, Trish took a seat opposite him. "Why would I avoid you? I barely know you."

He sat there, staring at her, not fidgeting or even looking away, but he didn't make her feel threatened, either, despite the fact

that she knew that he wanted her. The feeling was definitely mutual, although she'd be damned if she'd be blatant about it. "You told your cousin last night, while you two were in the kitchen and Kell and I were having coffee, that you wanted to be kept. Is that a true statement?"

Oh, God, of all the conversations she'd had in her life, he would have to overhear that one! Hell, he'd been the first man Maggie'd suggested for the position when Trish had made an offhand comment about it over the phone to her months and months ago. Far from being scandalized, Maggie had practically offered Douglas on a silver platter. Her comment in the kitchen had just been a casual whine, but Maggie had, again, suggested that the man sitting not fifteen feet away from them would be the perfect candidate. "First of all, why were you eavesdropping on my conversation with my cousin?" she countered.

Reed leaned back in his chair, appearing more relaxed than he really was. "I wasn't eavesdropping. You were both talking loud enough that Kell and I both heard it. If it was privileged information then you should have kept your voices down."

Unphased, she continued, "And why are you all of a sudden sounding like a lawyer?"

"Probably because I've just spend the morning with mine. Answer my question."

Feeling a sudden need to move, Trish tried to slide out of her chair, but Reed grabbed her wrist – not in a stranglehold, not tightly, but firmly enough that she knew he wanted her to sit back down, which she did - slowly, and in her own damned time. "Oh, I don't know. It's always been a fantasy of mine – lazybones that I am – to be some rich old man's mistress. You know - not have to work, do lunch with my friends, have a nice house or apartment . . . and it would really let me concentrate on my writing instead of having to spend seven to three at work most of the year then

another two hours at home correcting papers . . . it's a lovely daydream." She looked at him consideringly. "Why?"

Instead of answering her question, he released her wrist and asked her another. "Would it have to be an old man? And how old is old?"

Her eyebrow went up sardonically. "Why, Mr. Douglas, are you applying for the position of Sugar Daddy? Somehow, I would have said that paying money for sex would go against type with you. And I can't imagine that you'd need to, frankly."

Reed grinned, but it didn't lessen the inherent strength of his features. "Thank you, I think." Trish inclined her head, acknowledging the truth of the somewhat backhanded compliment. "Indulge me and answer my question – just how old would a man have to be to be your . . . sole provider?"

What a delicate way of putting it, Trish thought. "I don't know. I suppose it would depend on the man. I guess I just assumed it would be an old guy with bags of money who was okay with paying for female companionship. It's not like this is something I've put a huge amount of thought into. It's a daydream, a fantasy. Like winning the lottery."

He wasn't that easily deterred. "What would you expect from the man who kept you? You mentioned not having to work, a house or an apartment, what else?"

Trish snorted. "Oh, I dunno." She was wondering just how far he was going to take this audacious topic. So she listed things that came to mind off the top of her head. "Hypothetically, a car and driver, house, allowance, credit card, 401k, stocks, travel, jewels, clothes . . . " Reed didn't seem to be reacting much to any of it, but hadn't taken his eyes off her.

He didn't say anything, didn't protest any of it. "And in return, you would . . . ?"

She squirmed in her chair, uncomfortable with the intimate turn in the conversation. Her eyes flicked to the clock on the wall. Four thirty. Well, either Kell or Maggie should be home soon in case things got wiggy with Mr. Douglas. Until then, Trish replied neutrally in third-person. "Well, if a woman was going to ask that much of a man, she should expect to be available to him twenty-four-seven – travel with him, organize her schedule around him . . ."

"Sexually available?"

"Yes."

"With what sort of do's and don'ts?"

"That would depend on the woman – and the man – wouldn't it? On what each of them liked or didn't like?" Reed nodded. "I mean, if they're sexually incompatible, then the man isn't getting much for what he's shelling out, is he?"

"We're hooo-ooooomme!" came the cry from the front door. Trish heaved a huge sigh of relief, but the tension returned to her body when she realized that Reed was, of course, going to be invited to dinner.

She was definitely different around him since their little discussion. Wary, almost, Reed decided, and that was exactly what he didn't want. When their hosts were both out of the room, Reed turned to Trish and said, "Look, I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable earlier this afternoon. But I do think the idea of keeping a woman – you, in particular – would have a lot of advantages, and I'd like to explore it further." Tricia had moved just about as far away from him as she could manage to be without leaving the room, looking like a deer caught in headlights, dammit.

He was so goal oriented that he tended to bowl people over trying to get to the objective and he sometimes left bodies along side the road. In business that was fine, but, although this was, ultimately a business deal, there were still people involved, and it wouldn't work if she was afraid of him.

"Will you go out with me tomorrow night? Dinner? Just the two of us, so we can talk?"

Trish really wasn't sure what she should say.

"You look scared, and you don't have to." There it was again, that damned soft, cajoling voice and that depressingly accurate perceptiveness. "I won't touch you, I won't kiss you, I won't even hold your arm. If you like, we won't even discuss what we were talking about before. We'll just have a date and Maggie'll be over the moon." She still looked like she was about to say no. "I won't keep you out past ten. I'll pick you up at seven. Bring your cell phone and keep it on at the table. Bring mace and pepper spray, and you can use both of them on me if I break my word." This got him a smile. "I'm really not a jerk. I'm a busy, rich man who doesn't have time to wine and dine any more, and your idea is very intriguing to me." His tone dropped lower still. "And I'm attracted to you, and I think you are attracted to me. If we weren't, we couldn't even discuss this. I think it would work really well for both of us."

"Okay, okay – jeez, you're a freaking bulldozer!"

Reed rose as Maggie and Kell came back into the room. "No, I just go after what I want, and I get it."

Maggie took one look at Reed and said, "I know that look. What did you just go after and get?"

"Your cousin has agreed to accompany me to dinner tomorrow evening."

Maggie was practically beside herself, but Kell kept her in check. "Great! Dinner and a movie?"

"Just dinner," Trish corrected quickly, and Reed inclined his head in agreement.

"Whatever the lady wants," Reed demurred. He pecked Maggie on the cheek in thanks for dinner, then departed, leaving chaos in his wake.

"Oh, I just knew you two would hit it off!" Maggie was practically dancing around the room. Nothing Trish did or said seemed to diffuse her.

Finally, she gave up and went to bed, her mind occupied for the second night by thoughts of a dark, sexy almost-stranger.

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It was six forty-five, and the compulsively early Trish sat in her cousin's living room, reading the terminally heavy tome, "Fiery Cross", which she could barely lift. The doorbell sounded at exactly seven, and Maggie raced to open the door, but Trish got there first.

Reed was wearing a nice suit, but nothing ostentatious, which was good because Trish hadn't brought anything expensive and she was sure that, even if she had, New Hampshire expensive and Knoxville, Tennessee expensive would not be the same thing at all. Just another little reminder of how far she was out of her league, here, but what the hell? Nothing ventured, and all that rot. Trish was wearing a beige linen suit with embroidery and cut outs along the hem of the top and the skirt, and matching wheat colored pumps. Two of the holes in her ears sported simple gold studs, with the bottom hole in each ear pierced by a good-sized diamond.

Okay, so even on a teacher's meager salary she could afford QVC diamonds. So shoot her. Anyone who came at her with a jewelers' loop was going to get smacked.

Their grandmother's solid gold beads hung around her neck, courtesy of a comically anxious Maggie, and the only ring that graced her hands was her "divorce ring" – a hideously expensive, gorgeously beautiful heart tourmaline in a princess setting. "Divorce rings" had slowly become a macabre tradition amongst Trish's women friends as each woman in turn got an engagement ring and a wedding ring, then got divorced. Someone, somewhere along the line came up with a great idea – why not buy yourself a "divorce" ring? It was your money now; hell, spend some of it on yourself!!

So, that became the battle cry as each of her friends and family left the ranks of the blissfully wed to become the bitterly – or even just sadly – divorced. One of Trish's friends had gotten a credit card in the mail the day before her final divorce papers arrived. She blew the whole credit line at once on a flawless emerald – and was still paying the thing off three years later. But every time she put that ring on, she knew had gotten something beautiful and wonderful out of the ashes of a failed relationship. And, if she hadn't bought it for herself, no one else would have bought it for her.

When the finally extricated themselves from Maggie and landed at the restaurant, Reed was pleasantly surprised to hear her turn him down when he asked if she wanted a drink.

"Just a Diet Coke, please."

"Religious reasons?"

"Excuse me?"

"Do you not drink because of religious reasons?"

"No, because of taste reasons. I've never developed a taste for it, and besides, I hate the way it makes me feel. All woozy and out of control."

"Ahhh. I'm not one for being out of control much myself." He caught her eye quite deliberately. "With a couple of situations being obvious exceptions."

Dinner went surprisingly well. The restaurant Reed had chosen was one of casual elegance, nothing that made her inherently uncomfortable. He kept a light, entirely non-threatening discussion going through the entire meal, until the dessert menu was presented. Trish declined a sweet, but Reed indulged himself in a decadent vanilla cream Brule, offering a heaping spoonful to Trish, who was hard put to resist her favorite dessert.

"I shoulda just taken that spoonful and applied it directly to my hips," she groaned, licking her lips unselfconsciously.

"Don't tell me you're one of the dieting masses, too?"

"I should be, but I'm not. I certainly could be skinnier than I am, but –"

"No. You're probably, what, a size fourteen?"

Oh my God! He'd pegged her perfectly! Had he looked at a tag in her clothes?

The outraged look confirmed his accuracy without a word from her. "You don't look fat to me. You look like you're about the right size for your height."

"Yeah, but I'm supposed to be a size six."

"Says who?"

"Society."

"Society said I should have ended up in jail."

Because she didn't even voice the question, and seemed genuinely interested, he told her what it had been like for him to grow up. "Wow. You've really come a long way."

"And now here I am. Alone. No one to share it with."

"You should be looking for a wife, not a mistress," Trish chided gently.

Reed tilted his head and pinned her with a look. "Are you opening the door for that discussion?"

"Well, let's just say that my hand is on the doorknob and leave it at that."

"Chicken," he teased with no animosity, laughing when she did a very bad imitation of that bird over her shoulder as they left the restaurant.

On the ride home, he got her to agree to go out again the next night. "And now that you know I'm not an axe murder –"

"I know no such thing," she countered. "I can't imagine that you'd be cheap enough to show someone your axe on the first date."

When he finished laughing, he continued, " – tomorrow, I want to discuss the topic that we've been dancing around all evening."

He'd been scrupulous about keeping to their agreement – he never touched her once that night, to Maggie's complete disgust.

Reed was thinking on the drive home that he'd been very well behaved. This time.

Chapter III

The next night, however, Trish discovered early in the evening that the gloves were definitely off. They were in a very private booth of an atrociously shi-shi restaurant, with a Diet Coke and a Scotch, neat, in front of them, respectively.

The first thing he said to her was, "I want to keep you, if you're really interested in an arrangement like that."

Trish congratulated herself on not choking on her soda. "I don't know whether I'd be interested or not. I'm certainly lacking enough scruples to entertain the offer, however."

Reed chuckled. "That was an interesting way to backhandedly insult yourself."

"Well, you see, it's like this: I'm alone. I don't have a boyfriend, just an ex I don't talk to. My parents are dead. Maggie is the relative that I'm closest to, and if you gave her the chance she'd lay me out on a platter with an apple in my mouth for you." She saw his eyebrow rise at that. "My friends would all applaud me and ask where they could get clones of you, so there's no one around to really object if I decided to take you up on it."

"Then you have put some thought into it," he said, satisfaction rife in his tone.

Trish shrugged. "I did when you seemed interested in it, yes."

Reed leaned back in his chair, giving her a considering look. "And what you listed before – is that what you want?"

Frankly embarrassed by that list, Trish blushed. "No. I have no illusions that sex with me would be worth all of that."

"Well, what would you want?" Reed was finding himself more and more intrigued by this woman. Not many would have declined the things she'd mentioned and most would have taken one look at his net worth and been asking for more – much more.

Tricia took her time answering that question while studying the man before her. The uppermost thought in her mind was, why would a man like him need a paid mistress? He must have to check under the bed every night and shake the women out of his bedclothes each evening! Reed Douglas might not be classically handsome, but he was still an incredibly attractive man – to say nothing of the fact that his money alone would make him irresistible to some women. He was tall – taller than she liked, frankly – and very broad in the chest and shoulders, as if he was a weightlifter or professional wrestler in his off hours. He was healthily tanned but not to a George Hamilton extent and his eyes were an intelligent, clear gray. Tricia bet that very little – in business or elsewhere – got by him.

She gave an involuntary shiver.

"Are you cold?" he asked solicitously, immediately standing to shrug out of his jacket, placing it around her shoulders so that she was cocooned in the remnants of his body heat.

Although Trish absently caressed a lapel of the jacket, she murmured distractedly, "No, I'm not, really." Her eyes met his boldly. "I think that a lot of what I would want would depend on what you would want . . . sexually."

Their waiter chose that inopportune moment to reappear at his elbow, refilling their drinks. "Would you like to place your order now, Sir?"

Reed replied firmly, "We do not wish to be disturbed. When I want you, I will let you know." The man bowed, and left. "Are you okay discussing this here?"

Trish shook her head. "Yes, this is neutral territory, which is perfect right now."

"I kinda thought that my place would probably be uncomfortable for you, and I don't think Kell and Maggie's is really the place, either."

"You're right." Trish grinned. "Well, the waiter won't come back for fear of his life, so I think this is pretty safe."

His eyebrow rose. "Was I just insulted?"

"I doubt it. You're a very aggressive and dominant man, or you wouldn't have gotten where you are in life, so why would you be insulted just because I recognize those traits in you?"

"And does my aggression and dominance concern you?"

Readjusting her position a little awkwardly, Trish nonetheless said exactly what was on her mind. "No, not as long as you don't turn it on me."

Reed snorted. "I think you're too much like your cousin to be a shrinking violet."

"I'm more sensitive emotionally than my cousin is, in general, but I was referring more to physical and/or sexual aggression."

"Well, let me soothe your mind. I can provide references, if you require. I have never before nor would I ever in the future raise my fist to a woman, despite the ample provocation my mother could provide when she was alive." His dig at his mother made the moment lighter than it might have been, and Reed was rewarded with the smile he was looking for. "Actually, I adored my mom, and she was smart as a whip, but she couldn't have balanced a checkbook if her life had depended on it."

Trish involuntarily teared up, even though they were discussing his mother, not hers. "You still haven't answered my question."

He reached across the table and caught her hand, holding it gently, turning it over so that it was palm up. While he spoke, his thick fingers traced her life and love lines, and tickled her palm. "Well, I'm a normal, red blooded American male. I like sex. Frequent sex. More frequent with someone I'm attracted to, and I'm attracted to you." While he was drawing on her skin, he was watching her face intently for any hint of reaction one way or another. But Trish would have made a fantastic poker player. She fidgeted occasionally, but her face was a careful mask. It annoyed him that she could hide her feelings that well.

"What would your definition of frequent sex be?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"I would want it spelled out exactly how many times a week."

"Why? If I said ten times a week and initiated the eleventh time, would you turn me down?"

Tricia reclaimed her hand. "No, I just would want things spelled out very concisely. I would want to know exactly what was expected of me." She cleared her throat, appearing more nervous than before. "Are there any particular positions or – ahem – interests that you have that I should be aware of?"

"You mean am I kinky? Do I like feathers and leather and am I going to want to wear your underwear?"

She couldn't help it – the vision of him in her lacy turquoise bra and panties set made her giggle. "Uh, something like that, yeah."

"You can rest assured, I'm pretty normal about sex, I think. I'm not much into acrobatics, either. I'm getting too old for swinging from the chandeliers, anyway." His voice dropped to an intimate level. "But I would want access to you at any and all times. If I were paying out all of what you listed, I wouldn't take kindly to you telling me 'no' even if it was the fifty-fifth time I slid into you."

Trish gulped hard. "I have a distinct feeling that you wouldn't like being told 'no' at any other time, either. Barring illness or injury, I can't see that I would have a reason to. It's not like I'm going to give the typical 'headache' line. Besides, I've always had a decent work ethic, despite my general laziness."

Hmmmmmm. He didn't know if he liked the idea of the woman in his bed considering sex with him to be work. An important question struck him. "Do you like sex?"

"Ahhhhh, yes, I do," she answered, truthfully but carefully. "And I'm pretty normal about it, too, I think," she discreetly crossed her fingers as they lay in her lap. "My husband was the only man I'd ever slept with; we've been divorced for three years and I haven't slept with anyone else since him." She caught Reed's stunned look. "I don't do casual sex. This would not be an easy

thing for me to do." She drew a deep breath. "But, then, I'm not paying you. My pleasure, if there is any, would be a very secondary consideration to your own, which would be my goal."

He was frowning, frankly annoyed with her assessment of the situation. "Have you ever had an orgasm?"

"Yes," Trish choked out around a swallow of her drink.

"Well then, why would you think that you wouldn't with me?" Reed demanded. He sounded downright incensed at the idea that she didn't think he would be as concerned about her pleasure as he was his own.

She'd managed to insult him without even trying. It almost made her giggle again, but the look on his face made her think twice about laughing. "I'm not trying to call into question your skill as a lover," Trish soothed. "I don't know anything about your style in bed. You could be one of those 'man-on-top-get-it-over-with-quick' types who thinks an orgasm is something a biologist looks at under a microscope. Besides, as I said, I would never assume that my . . . enjoyment would ever even enter the picture."

She found her hand recaptured in both of his, and when he spoke she knew it was from between tightly clenched teeth. "I am not a selfish lover. A big part of what gets me off is getting my woman off."

Trish had no idea what to say to that, so she kept quiet.

His fingers traced her knuckles. "I like to touch and fondle and tease . . . "

"Those are pretty normal male tendencies."

"Not just with my fingers."

Oh, God – at this point, his fingers were doing just fine as far as she was concerned. "Uh, me, too."

Reed sat back in his chair, looking comfortable. "So. Give me the list."

"What list?" she asked blankly.

"The list of where I won't be able to touch, at what times, and where I could never touch at any time."

"Huh?"

"Every woman I've ever been with has had a list of things they preferred I not do – even casual things: 'don't touch my hair when I've just washed it', or 'I really don't like to have my breasts touched – especially at this time of the month'. 'Don't kiss me there, that's disgusting' – " his pathetic attempt at a high-pitched female voice was a riot. It came out a combination of Fran Fine and Gracie Allen on steroids.

She was on the verge of giggling again, he could tell and he liked that, as long as she wasn't laughing at him. "Jeez, who have you been sleeping with?" Then she stopped short with a frown. "Or maybe I'm just a big ho, but I don't have a lot of rules like that."

He looked surprised, and eager. "You don't?"

"No. Maybe I should develop some, though – "

"No, no, no. That's not necessary." Trish laughed at his insistence. "But you must have likes and dislikes?"

"Yeah, I do, but I can't list them on an empty stomach. I'm starving. Can we eat?"

Comically disgruntled at the interruption, Reed summoned the waiter, adding that there'd be an extra large tip in it if he could

get them their dinners in ten minutes. He could hear Trish giggling in the background, but the waiter looked like he was game for it.

When he turned back to her, she had her napkin to her mouth and was snorting very indelicately behind it. "Well, I've never much been one for delayed gratification . . . I want what I want, when I want it."

"You sound like me!"

"How so?"

"Oh, I am the queen of spoiled rotten brats, and I feel exactly that way – especially about computer gadgets and – oh, God - keep me away from the TV shopping channels! Yesterday is too late for me to get something once I decide I've got to have it."

"You don't come across that way – bratty, I mean."

Trish looked up at him from under her brows. "That's because there's no one around to tell me no. I get myself what I damned well please nowadays - within reason - so there's no reason to be bratty, not that my parents put up with it much when I was a kid anyway."

"Did you get your little butt spanked?"

She bit her lip, willing him not to go there. "No, thank you, I didn't. I was smart enough to stop at 'the look'. But there were very few things a little judicious whining couldn't get me. I knew just when to stop."

Their dinner arrived at just exactly the ten minute mark, and he made her laugh again when he refused to talk to her while they were eating because he didn't want them to waste time talking when they could be eating. He meant to have an answer from her as soon as he could finagle it.

When the waiter had removed their plates after the fastest gourmet meal in history, Reed again instructed him not to reappear until he was called for. He leaned towards her, elbows on the table, and said, "Okay, spill your guts – likes and dislikes."

Adopting a vacuous look, Trish answered, "Oh, I like sunsets and kitties and – "

Someone who sounded frustrated was emitting a low growl at the other end of the table, so she took pity on him before he got rabid. "Hmmmmmm. Armpits. Feet. Having my face licked."

"Are these likes or dislikes?"

She shuddered. "Dislikes, definitely."

"Good. I was having nightmares about how I was going to lick your face, tickle your feet, and – "

Trish held up her hand. "Don't go there, please!"

"Anything else?"

"Do I have to have a complete list here and now?"

"Just give me the biggies."

"Uh, biggies: tattoos – on me, I don't much care about you. Nothing illegal – not even drugs, frankly. You know I barely drink, but I also don't participate in recreational pharmaceuticals, nor would I tolerate anyone who drinks to excess or does illegal drugs."

"No problems there."

"Nothing sexually illegal, either. That children and animals are out should go without saying."

It was his turn to shudder as he nodded in agreement.

"I don't divide myself well, and I would want it to be a completely monogamous relationship, for reasons of health, also. I won't even entertain the idea of 'adding' someone to the relationship. That's completely out."

"Again, we are in complete agreement." So far, there wasn't anything she'd mentioned that surprised him, really. But what wasn't she saying? There had to be more than this, didn't there? "What positions won't you do?"

"Well, I'm no Flying Wolenda myself, and frankly I prefer a nice comfortable bed, but I've done sex on a beach, and sex on a couch, and sex in the back – and front – of a car . . . The bed still wins out over everywhere else, even the beach, and I'm a very 'beach oriented' person. I love the ocean. What I don't love is trying to flush sand out of areas where sand was never intended to go, if you get my drift?"

He grinned in understanding, and she decided in that moment that she liked making him smile and laugh. "Okay, on that note, let's get down to the nitty-gritty." Reed waited a minute for her to stop groaning. "Oral sex?"

Trish took a deep breath. "Giving and receiving is great. And before you go there, most every other type of sex is fine, too, except what's previously been mentioned, although I'm sure I'll think of some other things along the way." She sighed. "If there was one good thing I got out of my ex husband, it's my attitude towards sex – unless I hear a complaint, I'm going to assume that what I'm doing is pleasurable. It's up to whichever partner is feeling uncomfortable to speak up – neither person is a mind reader. And there really is very little that I don't like, and if I didn't like it, believe me, you'd know. And most things – with those few basic, unwavering exceptions – are negotiable."

He was leaning forward again, searching her face. "I would like to enter into this type of a relationship with you, as soon as we

can come to an agreement about compensation. I've already run the idea by my lawyer on a tentative basis, and although she was appalled, she'll draw up what I tell her to draw up. You will want to get your own lawyer to look over the papers."

Trish nodded, biting her lip, wondering if she could afford a lawyer . . . When she looked up, he was still staring at her. "What? Do I have béarnaise on my nose?"

"No," he mused, drawing the word out thoughtfully, "I was just wondering if we should do a test run before we sign any papers."

Her eyes got big. "A test run?"

"Yes." Reed leaned forward again, bringing his face near hers. "Don't you think we should sleep together at least once before we finalize things?"

Trish's mouth went completely dry at the thought of lying naked beneath this big behemoth of a man, letting him cover her with his body, dwarf her with his size, and enter her body for his own pleasure, with nothing between them beyond a lot of legal documents – completely without love? What if he wasn't what he seemed? What if he attacked her? Or what if he was a sloppy, wet, bad kisser who thought nipples were radio dials? She prefaced her answer with, "Like I said, I don't do casual sex. But I do think that a trial run is probably a good idea. That way you will also know that you're not getting a pig in a poke."

Reed chuckled. "I'm not particularly concerned about that. It's not like I think you're really a man under there – " he gestured towards her.

"Uh, not last time I checked, anyway. But I could have hideous scars or be really hairy – "

He was laughing again, and her nipples peaked unexpectedly as her body was suffused with a familiar warm ache. Oh, God, please don't let him be a slob in bed! She found herself fervently praying.

"Well, then," he was saying, while her body ran away in its own little daydream about what he would be like, "why don't we plan on getting together next Friday night. Would you prefer a hotel or my place?"

"Hotel," she answered immediately, surprising him, but he kept it to himself. She was such a little homebody; he wondered why she hadn't decided to stay at his house, but then, again, a hotel was neutral territory.

Reed helped her into her light wrap, saying, "Leave everything to me. When should I pick you up? I'm not going to be able to see you until then, but don't think I've forgotten about you."

"I'm on vacation; you're the one with a schedule. You tell me when it would be convenient for you to pick me up and I'll be ready. And I don't need to be coddled. I understand that you're a busy person. I will try not to be high-maintenance."

Reed grinned as he settled her into the back of the limo. "All women are inherently high-maintenance." He felt a smack on his shoulder, and heard her muttering under her breath something about chauvinistic remarks getting him hurt.

He escorted her to the door, and then turned her into his arms to lay his lips gently but firmly over hers. Mmmmmmmmm. Nice and slow and dry and ohmygod hot! Well, one of her prayers had been answered, she mused as she readied herself for bed. He was a fantastic kisser. And he hadn't even made any other advances beyond that, either – his hands hadn't wandered – like hers had, up his broad back – and he hadn't even held her that tightly.

But when he'd pulled back, she knew that tight-lipped look. He wanted her. "Friday – I'll call you as soon as I can and let you know when. Be ready," he'd growled, then turned and walked back to the car without looking back.

Trish was more ready than she wanted to admit – to herself or to him.

Chapter IV

Friday drew closer, Trish found herself growing more and more nervous, until the phone rang at about seven Thursday evening and it was for her.

"Hello?"

"Trish? It's Reed."

"Hi."

That was a truly unenthusiastic greeting, but he sloughed it off. Maybe she was ticked that he hadn't called in three days. "Are we still on for Friday?"

"Yes."

Again, a very emotionless, level, neutral response. "If it's all right with you, I'll pick you up tomorrow night at around six or so? We'll have dinner and maybe see a movie?"

She didn't think she'd live through the dinner or the movie, but whatever. "That's fine. Where will we be, so I can let Kell and Maggs know where they can get a hold of me?"

He gave her the name of one of the most expensive and elegant hotels in town, and there was no response on the other end. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine. Are you all right?"

Reed couldn't help a smile at the question. "I'm definitely looking forward to seeing you again."

"I'm shaking in my boots, personally," Trish confessed blithely, to a deafening silence.

"You're not kidding, are you?"

"No, I'm not. When you pick me up tomorrow you'll be able to hear my knees knocking together . . ."

She heard a heavy sigh. "Would you rather not?"

"No, I'm not going to chicken out."

"So, tomorrow at six?"

"Tomorrow at six."

"I'll see you then."

That was saying something, Trish thought. "Okay," she responded, hanging up the phone.

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It was a quiet drive after he'd picked her up and loaded her overnight bag into the back of his Mercedes. Reed finally put his

hand over hers, and found it ice cold. "Are you sure you're okay with this?"

Trish was staring diligently out the window. "Uh-huh."

"You're certain?"

He sounded really concerned, so once they got settled into their beautiful suite, she sat down on the end of the bed while he stowed their suitcases. "Reed, I would probably be close to this nervous even if we were madly in love. I don't do new things well."

His head shot up. "You're not trying to tell me you're a virgin, are you?"

"God, no! You're new to me, not sex."

He sat down beside her, gently patting her leg. "Shall we go down to dinner, or would you prefer to order up room service?"

Trish got up and started to pace nervously. It didn't help that he was watching her like a hawk, with a worried look on his face. "Look. If we go to dinner now, I'm not going to taste anything I eat. I'm so nervous that I'm nauseous. Would you mind if we just did it once now and got it over with?"

Reed snorted, shaking his head. He knew she didn't mean it to sound insulting, but it was a damned good thing he had a healthy ego in this department. "If that's what you want."

Trish nodded, and Reed rose, unbuttoning his shirt to hang it in the closet. When he returned to stand in front of her, she hadn't moved. "Uhhhhh, it's gonna be kinda hard for me to make love to you while you're fully clothed . . ." he hinted, spurring her into action.

Paying scrupulous attention to her clothing, she hung her jacket on the other side of the closet from his, then pulled the silk shell over her head, only to slide it back down and head towards her suitcase, then into the bathroom.

Reed sank down on the bed with a sigh. He wondered if she'd really go through with this, or if he was going to have to chase her down the hall. He couldn't believe how uneasy she was – like she thought he was going to jump her or something.

Nude, and totally unselfconscious about it, he turned down both sides of the bed, then put the lights down low. Personally, he liked them full on while making love, but most women in his experience preferred total darkness. Dimmed lights were a nice compromise.

He sat back against the headboard and waited for her. And waited. And waited. Just before he was about to get up and go knock on the bathroom door, Trish reappeared in a very pretty, frothy pink nightgown, and made her way to the opposite side of the bed. She got in facing him, which surprised Reed a little, and scootched her way over to sit close to him.

A small, freezing hand burrowed its way into his as she met his eyes and said, "Kiss me, please?"

Lord knows, it was an invitation that Reed was not about to turn down. His warm lips settled over hers, just kissing her – eagerly but carefully, as if he was afraid he'd scare her off. When it came to a natural end, she leaned a little away, saying, "Ahhhhh. That was wonderful. You're an exceptional kisser."

"Thank you, Madame," he mocked gravely, taking her other hand in his, trying to warm them both between his own.

"Can I – can I touch you?" His chest was crying out to her fingers, inviting them to explore the plates of muscle beneath the lightly hairy flesh.

"By all means – any time, any where you like." Lying back, Reed brought her palms to rest on his well-defined pectorals, and Trish moved closer to him, sitting tailor fashioned as she ran her fingertips over every inch of his skin – except his nipples and genitals. She dragged just the ends of her fingers down the inside of his arms and wrists, then into his sensitive palms, circling once then moving out again over across to his other side and repeating the teasingly soft caresses. No woman had ever touched him so gently, as if she was afraid of hurting him, when it would always be the other way around; he was a big, strapping, strong man and was always very aware of the delicate vulnerability of the woman sharing his bed.

She found the pale flesh of his sides, tickling it quickly then exploring the taut flesh just below his navel with those barely-there teases before leaning over to suckle a small hard nipple for only a few seconds before leaving it bereft and aching for more, treating its twin the same callous way, then repeating the process until he wanted to capture her against him and force her to make a more satisfying effort.

"Do you like this?"

He was hard as a rock and already starting to pant, and she was still in her nightgown. "Hell, yes," he growled. "Take off your nightgown."

It was like flipping a switch; the wary look returned to her eyes, and she bit her lip.

"Would you like me to do it, honey?" Although he found her natural hesitation puzzling, it was also shyly endearing. He'd forgotten what a modest, reserved woman was like. Most of the

women he dated lately left their clothes at the front door and raced him to the bed.

Trish nodded slowly, her heavy hair hiding her eyes. Reed leaned forward and found the hem of the frothy confection, then delved his big hands beneath it, running them slowly but surely up her thighs, pooling the pink material at his thick wrists and forearms as he raised his arms, sliding them up her vulnerable sides. "Put your arms up, sweetie," he whispered, pulling the gown over her head in one final motion.

Despite her considerable experience, she could not keep herself from crossing her arms over her breasts and hunching over a bit self-consciously. Reed clucked his tongue softly. "None of that, now," he chided softly. "Put your hands on my chest."

Trish looked up at him, trying to decide if she could ignore him or not. He didn't look like he was going to tolerate being ignored, as usual, so she complied. "Now, why would you ever want to cover a body as beautiful as yours, Tricia?" He tried not to stare, instead pressing a kiss to the side of her cheek. "If you end up as my mistress I'm going to have it written into the agreement that you be nude at all times when we're home alone." His mouth blazed a trail down her shoulder to her collar bone, stopping just at the slope of her breasts. "I am burning up at the idea of being able to reach out and touch you any time I like."

The hot wetness of his mouth captured and teased a nipple mercilessly, making her draw in a breath so deep she nearly fainted, but arching her back to allow him better access. Oh, God, it had been so long she'd forgotten the searing hot magic of having a man's hands and mouth on her body. "That's it, baby," came the encouraging murmur against her breast as his hands smoothed their way down her body, arranging her on her back as he claimed the right to touch every inch of her, contract or no contract. "There's no need to be scared. The only thing I want is your pleasure."

And he coaxed it from her by not taking "no" for an answer. From the moment her back met the silk sheets, she was lost in the sensuality he conjured and commanded from her body, shivering wildly with each stroke of his hand, each erotic nip he took out of her sensitive flesh. Being laid out before him like a sexual buffet made her feel vulnerable while at the same time she found his size and strength strangely comforting. His movements were slow and sure, never grabby or rough, without seeming too practiced. Trish knew she was really no longer in control of her own body, but somehow, with him, that was okay. She knew he heard every moan she couldn't suppress, that his watchful eyes catalogued each twitch and squirm.

When her nipples were tight and pleasure-sore, he sat up a bit. "Spread your legs for me, Trish. Let me see if you're ready for me."

She couldn't help the hot blush that suffused her skin at his words, legs treading in place futilely while her mind battled with her already throbbing genitals.

Reed only waited a short time before touching his hand to her knee, a silent reminder of his presence and the fact that his patience was not limitless. But he wanted her to open herself to him, to acknowledge that she wanted him, despite the fact that it still embarrassed her a little. Slowly, very slowly, her legs parted – but he did not rush in to claim the ultimate prize. Instead he rewarded her with tiny kisses at her hairline, then a few insistent tugs at each tight, hard nipple. Christ, hearing this woman moan in pleasure got to him like nothing and no one else!

His hand followed its way up the exposed inside of her thigh to that wonderful, welcoming delta. Index and middle fingers carefully parted her outer lips, making her start just a little. "Shh-shhhh-shhh," Reed soothed, taking her mouth with his as surely as his fingers were taking her pussy. He was elated to find copious

honey and gathered moisture on his fingertips to bring up to that swollen button of flesh, feeling it become even larger and harder beneath his very slow, very deliberate ministrations.

Trish was breathing heavily, trying to back away from his kiss, but he caught her hair at the back of her neck and held her still while his fingers worked their ceaseless magic, rubbing over and over and over . . . He seemed to sense when more lubricant was needed and made the occasional foray to collect her tribute and bring it to where it was needed, but mostly he simply drew those two strong, slightly rough-skinned fingers across the top and down around each side of the most sensitive spot on her body, feeling her tense with each stroke until she screamed long and hard as he continued to make the same circuit; slowly and insistently drawing out every ounce of pleasure he could from her body.

Trish collapsed beneath him, her lips and teeth tingling from hyperventilation. She didn't think she could have said where in the world she was at that moment. She was lost, and she wanted to stay lost for a while.

Reed was only too happy to oblige, kissing his way down her body just a few scant minutes later to press his claim with his mouth. Surprised and shocked and a little concerned that she probably couldn't survive another orgasm like the first one, Tricia tried to move away from him, but her hips were in his hands, legs draped naturally over his shoulders, forcing them obscenely apart and giving him the unrestricted access he was seeking.

"No, please, I don't think – " she panted, to no avail. As she was talking, her head whipping restlessly back and forth, he licked the index and middle fingers of his right hand, then pressed them slowly into her. Good God she was tight . . . and hot . . . and wet . . . Reed swallowed hard. It was all he could do not to lever himself up and into her right now. But he wanted to see her explode in pleasure at his behest one more time before he lost himself in her.

That glistening, pulsing bud was calling to him, and he soothed it with his lips and tongue while those two thick fingers pumped in and out of one of the most beautiful places he'd ever touched. She was wild beneath him, crying out with each deep plunge, whimpering as he flicked her ultra-sensitive, engorged clitty relentlessly until she climaxed in his mouth, arching and writhing uncontrollably, begging him to stop. Or not to stop. She couldn't seem to decide which one she wanted more.

That same wicked mouth trailed wetly up her body as he mounted her with a devastating lack of haste. Tricia hadn't paid much attention to his size, but he certainly had her attention now as he drove into her, splitting her wide open – legs splayed ungraciously and still hooked over his shoulders, pussy stretched to the absolute limit as he sank within her to the hilt.

Oh, those delicious little whimpers of pleasure-pain she was emitting drove him absolutely over the edge and he just had to move even though he would have preferred to savor the moment. Hips plunged and rocked him even further into her as she hung on for dear life. An impudent nipple was caught and suckled hard – six, seven, eight tremendous strokes and he lost it, lost himself, lost her, damned near lost his life, he was sure.

His heart was hammering so hard inside his chest it was a wonder he didn't have a heart attack right then and there, Reed thought as he struggled for breath.

A few minutes later, a tentative finger tapped his shoulder.

"What?" he was barely able to get out.

Her voice was muffled against his neck. She was still clinging to him, still pulsing around his half-engorged shaft. "I don't think we're at all sexually compatible, do you?"

He started to laugh, which didn't help his breathing. Finally, he rolled off her to sprawl on the other side of the bed, still giggling at her audacious understatement. "I think we're compatible enough that one or the both of us is likely to perish one day during the act."

Trish snorted and answered paradoxically, "Coming and going at the same time - I could live with that."

Chapter V

Things progressed more rapidly from that evening than Trish would have thought possible, but then, as she experienced before, the man was a human bulldozer. They spent the night exploring each other, and Reed seemed positively insatiable. When he left her at Maggie's with a passionate kiss at the door, he growled, "I'll give you whatever you want. Can you be ready to go over the paperwork in my lawyer's office Tuesday at ten?"

Stunned, Tricia leaned as far away from him as his tight arms would allow, which wasn't very far. She ended up craning her neck back awkwardly. "Tuesday? No way! I don't even have a lawyer yet!"

"Didn't I tell you last week that you should get one?" Reed sighed impatiently.

Trish tightened her lips and glared up at him. "And Lord knows I just run to do your bidding at the drop of a hat, Mr. Douglas. I don't think so."

"Watch your tone of voice, young lady. You're not at all too big to put over my knee." He didn't sound like he was making an idle threat, and somehow Trish figured he didn't know the meaning

of those two words, anyway. A broad hand covered her bottom and gave her a sharp warning pat.

Hoping he couldn't read in her face how much this byplay was turning her on, Trish shot back, "Oh, bite me. I'll talk to Kell and see who he recommends. How about Thursday?" The man was frighteningly perceptive, and all she needed was for him to realize that she wanted him to take her in hand – oh, Lord, what was she thinking? To have a man like Reed Douglas watching over her protectively, keeping tabs on her behavior and curbing her more self-destructive tendencies with regular, thorough discipline delivered while she was lying naked over his strong thighs . . .

She felt him shake her gently. "Trish? Are you listening to me? Thursday at ten, will that work?" She knew he was chafing about the fact that she hadn't jumped at his Tuesday suggestion, and decided to be gracious.

"Thursday. If I have any problems about that, I'll call." In the car this morning he'd given her his business card with his office information, then had written both his personal email and his home telephone number on the back in case she needed to reach him.

Another passionate, wild kiss and he was gone, and she faced the lions of Maggie and Kell.

To their credit, they were not trying to talk her out of it . . . well, at least Maggie wasn't. She was very excited and happy for her. But Kell out and out hated the idea, and he let her know it in no uncertain terms. He couldn't seem to sway her, so when she asked him to recommend a good lawyer, he knew he wouldn't be happy with any other choice.

"I'll do it."

Kell had one of the most prestigious practices in the state, and there was no way that Trish could afford his hourly rate, which is exactly what she told him, but he wouldn't hear any of it. "It's on me," he offered in a tone that brooked no disagreement, but then he amended the thought. "Maybe I can even find a way to charge it to him."

Kell and Trish spent several hours deciding exactly what she would ask for, and were greatly assisted when a large envelope was messengered to Trish on Tuesday afternoon, spelling out exactly what he expected of her, and Kell translated the legalese as he read it:

Access to her body for purposes of mutual sexual gratification at all times

She was not to work or accept any type of job – even volunteer – that would interfere with the above requirement.

She would live in a residence that he provided, and would not maintain a separate residence of any sort.

She would be required to undergo a physical, inclusive of AIDS and Hepatitis tests, and would be subject to both physicals and AIDS/Hepatitis tests yearly while the agreement was in effect.

She would be required to act as his hostess/date for his business and personal functions

If at any time she engaged in sexual activity with another person during their association, the agreement was null and void and she would be required to vacate whatever residence she was in at that point if he was the one paying the rent or mortgage on the property.

Any illegal activity – drug use, etc – would also negate the agreement.

The agreement was for a term of one year, renewable if agreed by both parties.

If he wished to end the agreement prior to the one year term, he would be obligated to pay out the remainder of the contract, as well as allow her to live in whatever residence until such time as the contract would naturally have expired.

If she wished to end the contract at any time she could but he was requiring a thirty day notice.

That last idea made Trish chuckle. "So, no getting pissed off at him and storming out, huh? That sucks."

"Yeah. If you spend more than two nights away from him that is not the result of an emergency situation or an agreed upon absence, then you're fired."

Those only made her laugh harder. "Oh, man, this is totally surreal, isn't it?"

Kell was not amused. "Yeah. Surreal."

"Hey, birth control isn't mentioned anywhere in there."

Kell jotted notes in the margins as she spoke. "What do you want to say about it?"

This stopped her cold. After a few moments, she said, "I'll take responsibility, but I want a stipulation in there that if there should be a child as a result of this relationship that I would retain custody."

Kell knew that there was no way in hell that Reed would go along with that, but they'd cross that bridge when they came to it. "Nor is there anything about compensation, but I imagine he's waiting for you to ask for what you want and then he'll negotiate from there."

Trish stretched out on the big leather couch. "So, what do I want?"

"You tell me."

"Well, I have no idea what I should ask for a salary."

The end of Kell's pen was getting a workout between his sharp teeth. "I would say let's ask for a hundred K, and we can negotiate down from there."

Seconds later, he got up to slap Trish on the back, hard, as she choked loudly on a swallow of Diet Coke. "A hundred thousand dollars? For sex?"

It seemed these days that Kell wore a perpetual frown. "It's not just sex. You're giving up a promising teaching career, moving away from friends and family, giving up the possibility of developing a relationship that might end in marriage and children, giving up children, traveling with him at the drop of a hat regardless of your preferences . . . "

"That's still not worth a hundred thousand dollars a year as far as I'm concerned. Fifty would be pushin' it."

"No. That's a very bad attitude and he can definitely afford it." Trish still looked like she was going to insist that he only ask for fifty thousand – which means that Reed's lawyer would probably make them settle at about thirty, and that was totally unacceptable, as far as he was concerned. "It's not like this is going to be money coming out of his own pocket, not that he couldn't afford that, either. He'll probably just put you on the payroll of one of his companies as a personal assistant." Kell rifled through some of the papers. "There's something in here about a list you had mentioned to him . . . ?"

"Oh, God, I don't even remember what was on that list – "

" - Car and driver, house, allowance, credit card, 401k, stocks, travel, jewels, clothes . . ."

Trish sighed. "That was just a stupid thing I put together off the top of my head when I thought we were just discussing this casually."

Kell looked at her questioningly. "Seems like a pretty good list to me."

"No, no, no. Now, I'm not going to try to soak the poor man. It's not like having sex with him is such a hardship, for God's sake."

Kell winced. "I think I could have gone my whole life without hearing that, thank you." He sighed.

Annoyed, Tricia got up and paced while she spoke, rubbing her forehead as if she had a bad headache. "Well, I can tell you I'm keeping my own damned car. And the 401k and stocks – and health care, for that matter - would be a part of the employee package, assuming that that is what he's going to do with me. I'll buy my own damned clothes, thank you very much, and I certainly don't want him buying me jewelry – expensive or not."

A loud flopping sound occurred behind her as Kell dropped negligently into his desk chair. "You know, you are going to be the cheapest mistress any filthy rich guy ever had."

"Have I just been insulted?" Trish wondered out loud.

"If you'll excuse how apropos the expression is, you're selling yourself short here."

"Well, I have my own damned credit cards, thank you very much – "

"Now, that one I'm not going to let you give up. Take it for emergency's sake, if nothing else." God, he hated to hear himself pleading.

Her answer was a non-committal snort. "I do want him to pay all of the things associated with wherever I end up living – and I want the choice of apartment, house, or condo. And, if I stay with him, say for five years, by annual mutual agreement, I want the house put in my name – but I still want him to pay all the bills for it."

Well, that was something, anyway, Kell mused. "Annual bonuses – "

"Based on performance reviews?" Trish threw in, just to see him blush a fire engine red, which, of course, he did. "I don't think so. Oh, that's another thing – he is to give me absolutely no birthday and no Christmas presents." She could hear the exasperated sigh from across the room, but that was tough. "Also, I want a month of paid vacation to be taken whenever I like. AWAY from him." She thought for a few more seconds. "Let me see his list of requirements, please."

Kell handed her a copy. "Access to my body at all times, barring illness or injury . . . I want him subject to the same medical requirements as I am . . . I'll be a date if I absolutely have to, but I won't act as a hostess . . . " This puzzled Kell, but he was too busy furiously writing to question her. "The monogamy and the illegality clauses are reciprocal . . . I don't know about that stupid thirty day notice thing." Trish tapped her front tooth thoughtfully. "What do you think?"

"Knowing the woman of your family, I think it's ingenious." A soft, overstuffed pillow hit him square in the side of the face.

Trish sat forward a little. "Do you think we've about covered it?"

He looked weary, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers. "I think so, unless there's something else you can think of."

"If I do, you'll be the first to know," Trish patted his shoulder as she left the room.

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They were early for the appointment, and Reed was five minutes late. He entered apologizing and looking angry. Not a great start to this type of negotiation, she didn't think.

They sat in a very casual meeting area with couches and chairs rather than at a conference table. Kell passed out the papers he had composed with Trish's input, showing the points to which she'd agreed, the changes she required, and her salary and compensation requests.

Reed's lawyer, who was a woman, seemed surprised by what she was reading, and Reed just looked angrier than ever. He practically came out of his chair at Kell, saying, "What the hell kind of lawyer are you – letting her sell herself to me so cheaply? Just how big do you think the annual bonuses are going to be?"

Kell was no lightweight, and he wasn't one bit afraid of the seething man in front of him. He leaned back in his chair as if he hadn't a care in the world. "I'm a lawyer who presents my best advice to my client and then lets her make the decision."

That laser glare swung to her next, and he ground out, "Did you think that, by asking for less, that I'd be a sex-blinded fool and offer you more?"

His accusation that she was trying to underhandedly manipulate him into giving her more money when nothing could have been further from the truth hurt her, though she didn't want it to, and she refused to let him see her pain. Drawing what little dignity she possessed around her, Trish sat up straight in her chair, answering him in a calm monotone. "I don't want any annual bonuses – I hadn't realized that Kell left that in there after I'd told him to take it out." Kell groaned, but she didn't spare him a glance. "I asked for what I want – no more, no less. If that is not agreeable to you, then we needn't discuss this any further." She swung her pocketbook onto her shoulder and stood up, turning to leave.

"Wait." The order was barked impatiently from behind her, but it didn't even slow her down.

She'd already reached the door, with Kell standing protectively at her back when she said, "I don't think so, Mr. Douglas." The door opened a few inches, but then she found it slammed shut as a huge paw appeared from behind her and pressed it closed.

"Wait, please," the word sounded as if it was torn from the back of his throat. Reed Douglas wasn't used to having to say "please".

Trish stood stock still, feeling his overwhelming presence at her back, the spicy scent of his cologne drifting into her nostrils. "I over-reacted. I'm sorry." Another rarity in his life – an apology. What this woman did to him was criminal. "Come back and talk with me, please."

She didn't move, and he grew worried that he'd blown it entirely. One hand still held the door shut, but the other fit itself into the familiar curve of her waist. "Please, Trish."

That soft, deep voice wormed its way into her mind, calling forth an immediate response from her body as her nipples peaked with remembered pleasure, making her turn around despite her better judgment.

She walked back to her previous seat, but not before he saw that she was blinking back tears. It was like a kick in the gut. He'd never felt anything worse, except maybe when he'd seen his mom cry, damn it.

Although he tried – against his lawyer's advice – to get her to accept more money and things in general from him, she flatly refused. One of their biggest battles was over whether or not he could buy her birthday or Christmas gifts. Trish remained adamant that theirs was not that type of relationship – they were not in love. They were not boyfriend and girlfriend. There was no reason for him to get her presents on those occasions.

"As a matter of fact," she ordered Kell, "add Valentine's Day in there, too." Trish heard Reed growling from across the coffee table, but he finally backed down.

They fought over the credit limit on the credit card he would give her – she wanted five hundred and he wanted five thousand, countering that five hundred wouldn't go very far in his world. Kell suggested a compromise of two thousand five hundred, and Trish conceded.

"Thanks," Reed commented sarcastically.

Tricia stuck her thumbs in her ears, wiggled her splayed fingers, and blew a loud raspberry at him, at which point Reed's lawyer coughed discreetly into her green tea.

The birth control issue was settled with one word from Reed. "Vasectomy."

Eyes popping, Trish asked, "You're going to have one?"

"I've already had one," he replied.

"I want medical proof, and I still want the clause about retaining custody of any child."

Reed leaned towards her. "I'll be glad to provide the proof to you. But if I should, somehow, end up becoming fertile again, there is no way I would give anyone sole custody of my child."

He sounded like a fiercely protective father, and Trish knew that any child of his would never doubt for one moment that it was loved.

Katherine, Reed's lawyer, stepped in with, "Joint. Could you both agree to joint custody of a fictional child?"

They both said yes at the same time, but then Reed said, "But the first thing I would want is to get married, so that my child would have my last name."

Trish was stunned, as was Kell. "Yes, I would agree to that – but then there should be a separate pre-nup about that, too, because although the child should have your name, I wouldn't really be your wife."

All three of the people in the room turned to look at her as if she'd suddenly sprouted a second head. It was Reed who broke the silence. "Bullshit. You'd cease being my mistress and you'd become my wife, in every single aspect of the word. End of discussion."

With a shrug Tricia let it go, knowing that, in that circumstance where they were marrying merely because of a

pregnancy, that she wouldn't feel like his wife, regardless of what he said or did.

"What's the problem with acting as my hostess?"

"I'm a country bumpkin fifth grade teacher from New Hampshire – what do I know about entertaining on your level?"

"That's what caterers are for." Her reticence about this surprised him.

"I don't like parties, and I'm not going to do it. Be happy I agreed to the date part," she said from between clenched teeth.

Reed could see she was digging in her heels, and watched her compulsively clutching her pocketbook. This certainly wasn't a deal breaker for him, but it seemed to be for her. He wondered why. "Fine," he inclined his head towards Katherine, and she made the appropriate notes.

"About that stupid thirty day notice crap . . . "

His eyebrow rose at her tone. "It stays." There was no room for compromise at all in his voice, so Trish agreed. She didn't really care.

"Well," Katherine shuffled papers around, "is there anything else we need to discuss?"

Everyone was shaking their heads. "When will all of this take place?" Trish asked as she stood. "I need to know when to give my notice to the school board."

She felt him walk up behind her and slide his hands around her waist possessively, pulling her back against him. "Do it now. Today. This'll be wrapped up by tomorrow – " he gave each of the lawyers a threatening glare when they both groaned at his pronouncement – "I'd like you to move into my place this

weekend, and then you can take your time and find a place you like."

"What about my house in New Hampshire and all of my stuff?" Trish turned within his arms to face him.

"I'll take care of all of that." She was frowning and biting her lip. He totally misinterpreted her concern. "Don't worry. I'll cover the difference if you lose money on the sale – " and got his shoulder slapped for his trouble.

"You certainly will not. I was just thinking of the logistics – I really should go back – "

"No," he settled his lips over hers in a warm, slow kiss.

"No?" God, he was good at distracting her.

"I'll take care of it." More wonderful, stirring kisses.

"But – "

Reed pulled away just enough to catch her chin with his fingers. "No 'buts'. Stop being so contrary, woman. I said I would handle it, and I will. Now shut up and kiss me."

"Yes, Boss," Trish agreed, and she did just that.

Chapter VI

She couldn't believe it, but he bullied them into doing exactly what he wanted – she was ensconced in his huge apartment by Saturday afternoon, wandering aimlessly around through a place she knew she would never feel comfortable in.

Reed had given her keys and told her to make herself at home – yeah, right – then had gone into the office, which had surprised her. Trish was very careful not to say anything about being left alone on their first day together – Lord knows, she didn't want to turn into a nagging mistress. None of her things from her own house had arrived yet, so she decided to keep herself busy and started a load of laundry, then set up her laptop on the coffee table in what she hoped was the den and started to work on the story she'd been writing for what seemed like forever.

Long about three or so, she realized that she was hungry, and while she was snacking on some crackers and cheese she made a pot of spaghetti sauce and left it to simmer on the stove. He didn't get home until after five, when she was just pulling the garlic bread out of the oven.

The first words out of his mouth were more of a tantalized moan as he smelled the garlic and onion wafting from the kitchen.

When she heard him come in, Trish set another plate at the snack bar and piled pasta and sauce on it for him. Reed wandered into the kitchen with his nose still in the air, sniffing appreciatively and walking as if he was in a trance. "How did you know that I was starving?"

Dinner conversation consisted of a lot of moans and groans of true appreciation. He all but licked the plate before depositing it into the dishwasher. Trish cleaned up awkwardly, not really knowing where things were, and it didn't help that he couldn't seem to keep his hands to himself. When she was done, he took her in his arms, just as the buzzer for the drier went off and she tried to struggle away. Reed was not about to let her go. "For the record, I have a cook and a housekeeper, so although I heartily appreciate the wonderful meal, that is not one of your duties." His mouth descended on hers. "But this is."

Trish didn't think she was going to have a hard time putting up with this job at all. Reed carried her into his bedroom to lay her on the bed, undressing her slowly, leaving her nude and spread out for his delectation. She shivered, and he immediately asked, "Cold?"

"No," Tricia whispered.

That insistent hand she remembered from a week ago or so claimed her most private area, fingers delving into just the spot he wanted. "Mmm," he sighed, "excited."

Embarrassed that he'd discovered her secret so easily, Trish buried her burning face into the curve of his neck as she felt him press those seeking fingers deeply into her body. "Ahhh – I – unnnhhhh – oooohh, God!" She was being fucked, not roughly but not gently, either, as his mouth caught each nipple in turn, suckling them to unbearably aching peaks.

Her whimpers and moans multiplied as he manipulated her willing body. "Does that feel good, Trish?" he asked, already knowing the answer. Reed adored her uninhibited responsiveness. "Tell me."

"Yes – yes!"

"Yes what?" His thumb joined the fray, rubbing over and over her sensitive nub while she writhed beneath his hand.

"Oh – God – that – feels – sooooo – good!" She didn't know how she got the sentence out, considering that she couldn't think straight while he was touching her like this.

"That's it," Reed watched avidly as she came to pleasure against his palm, riding his fingers, dragging his thumb over and over her until he'd milked that last, hard spasm from her. He mounted her while she was still recovering, still throbbing involuntarily, and sank deep and hard on the first thrust. Reed wanted to draw it out, but it seemed he never could with his prim and proper mistress. She got him hot enough to practically explode in his pants, and when he was able to get inside her, it was all over much sooner than he would have liked.

After his own mind-numbing explosion, he rolled slightly to the side, gathering her close to him. He was going to love having her with him all the time and he was sure that, eventually, he'd be able to love her slow and steady, until she begged him for release.

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Her things finally arrived from up North at the end of the week, and they were put into storage until she found a place to live. Reed had recommended a real estate agent, but Trish had quietly gone out and found one of her own after the first day. The houses

Reed's agent was showing her were way out of her league. She wanted a nice place that she could afford after he let her go, if she lasted five years, that is. Trice was trying to be businesslike and unemotional, trying not to plan on being around too long; mistresses generally didn't have much in the way of job security.

The real estate market was so hot, it took her almost a month of looking fairly regularly until she found the perfect place. It was a beautiful old Victorian-style home, not too big, not too small. Just right for one or two people, and wonderfully sound – although the insides needed some work. It was currently unoccupied, but whoever had owned it last had absolutely no sense of color or style: the living room was unrelentingly brown – brown shag carpet and brown and red and cream wallpaper in big horrible diamonds. One of the spare bedrooms was done totally in purple, even the ceiling, and the upstairs bathroom was done in a startlingly patriotic red, white, and blue theme. When Trish saw it, she just had to laugh.

But the house felt like home to her, and that's what she went on. Reed, however, was not thrilled with the more pedestrian neighborhood, and he said as much when they pulled into the driveway. Trish's enthusiasm was dampened a little, but she knew that, according to their agreement, she had the last say as to what was bought, not him. Although he didn't know much about houses, Reed had already contacted a contractor friend of his and asked him to come check the house out when he had the chance.

It was easy to see why Trish liked the place – once some major redecorating was done. It had a big, bright kitchen and a small dining room across the back, and a parlor on either side of the foyer. There was a beautiful mahogany staircase, which ended at in a small landing, off which there were two small bedrooms, the guest bath, and the master bedroom, which ran one whole side of the house. There was a good-sized master bath, along with a large walk-in closet. Reed stopped and stared into the Purple Room,

declaring that he liked it. Trish rolled her eyes and tried to walk past him, but he caught her around the waist. "Are you sure you don't want something bigger, in a better part of town? It's not like I can't afford it, ya' know."

He felt her stiffen. "I know what you can afford, Mr. Douglas. I'm thinking about what I can afford once you are no longer paying the mortgage and the taxes."

Again, she tried to get away, and again he held her in place, drawing her back against him tightly. "Settle down, Patricia." Already she was learning that he wouldn't put up with much in the way of what he considered bad behavior out of her, and that he tended to use her full name when he was about to lay down the law. Even though they didn't have a spanking relationship, she wouldn't be the least surprised to find herself upended over his lap as a natural result of his very dominant personality. Sometimes she got the distinct feeling that he was only seconds away from doing just that when he got aggravated with her. "I think you're misunderstanding something about the agreement, namely that if we are together for five years, I will transfer whatever house or property you decide on into your name – and it will be paid in full at that time."

Trish began to struggle in earnest at his words, muttering "Oh, no you're not! I'll get a mortgage for the remaining balance, but you're not going to buy the whole freaking thing for me. Uh-uh."

Swat!

It really didn't hurt or even sting, but it sure did bring her up short, effectively silencing her as she glared up at him. "Hmmmm. That works really nicely! I'm gonna have to start remembering that and doing it a lot more often!" He held her jaw in his hand. "You signed the agreement, and that's the way it is. And I'm not going to let you out of the agreement, nor am I going to

allow any changes. Do you read me?" He could hear her teeth grinding angrily together, but she nodded. "Besides," he bent to whisper in her ear, "if we're together for the whole five years, I can guarantee that you're going to have earned every penny of it!"

Reed released her with another solid crack to her rounded bottom that was sharp enough to have her rubbing the offended area as she descended the stairs. Jeez! Even if the man wasn't a recreational spanker, he was a natural enough one to give her real cause for concern!

When they were on their way back to his place, she asked excitedly, "So, when can I move in?"

He caught her hand and put it on his thigh, covering it with his own. She was so happy she was practically vibrating. "Well, I want to have the place looked over by a friend of mine to make sure that it's structurally sound – "

"Of course it's sound, Reed – it's beautiful – the roofline is straight as an arrow and I didn't see any evidence of water damage from roof leaks or anything – all it needs is a makeover." Trish knew she sounded whiney, but didn't like the idea that he was going to have the property inspected. She could just see the guy finding something major and then she wouldn't get the house.

"Trish, I will buy the house as soon as Rob tells me in no uncertain terms that it's not going to crumble around our ears in two years, and not before then."

Trish was just glad she wasn't standing within hand's reach of him during this speech, or she had the feeling he might have accented it with a few more well-placed smacks. He was very used to ordering people around, and as time went on, she realized that just naturally extended to her.

The inspector liked the house a lot; it was older, and therefore better built than most newer houses. He mentioned that the roof would probably need to be replaced within the next three to four years, and the insulation could stand to be beefed up a bit, but the plumbing was all new, the furnace was only about three years old, and the wiring was fine. Rob recommended more smoke detectors, that the central air conditioning unit be serviced and, when it finally died, that it be replaced with a better made unit, but in general he said that the people who owned it before might not have been the best interior decorators, but they had taken care of the rest of the house very well.

Trish was ecstatic, practically beside herself when Reed gave her her own set of keys and kept one for himself. She insisted that they spend the first night in the house, so Reed had just his bed brought over, muttering the whole time about it but smiling whenever he saw her face as she wandered through the rooms. He puttered along behind her, making note of what she was musing out loud about regarding the redecorating she wanted to do, but when Trish got to the Purple Room, he raced ahead of her and threw himself against the door dramatically.

"No! You have to leave this room alone."

Tricia poked her finger into his ribs, making him squeal like a girl, - she'd found out his one vulnerability - he was ticklish - but barely making a dent into his layers of muscle. "Not on your old lady's tin-type, buddy boy. This room is the first to go."

"No no no! I want to leave it the way it is. It'll be fun - we'll stick any company we have in here and they'll go away faster . . . "

She was giggling, and he loved it. He liked to think, egotistically, that she was happier since they'd been together. Reed knew she was sleeping and eating well, knew that she went to sleep every night exhausted by their lovemaking, and even so sometimes

he couldn't help himself and he woke her in the middle of the night with his mouth on her eminently suckable nipples, or with his hands or his cock already between her legs. Exploring that warm, welcoming wetness was rapidly becoming an obsession, and he found himself delegating more things at work than he ever had in the past so that he could spend as much time as possible with Trish.

But the wild, explosive sex was not the only reason why he liked to be with her. She made him laugh, and sometimes even laughed at him or things he said, which made a bubble form in his chest that was almost painful. They could discuss anything, and did - loudly, but neither bent to the other's position. Sometimes, though, when things were very quiet and they had finally settled into what he had come to think of as their home, he would sometimes catch her staring out the window with the most melancholy expression on her face, as if she had never smiled in her life and never expected to in the future. It ripped his gut open from the inside out, and he wanted to fix it, to banish that look from her face forever, and his most immediate solution was to throw money at her in hopes of making her happy. Reed found though, that he was involved with a very stubborn and independent woman, and his attempts to smooth her way through life with his money only seemed to truly annoy her.

The worst arguments they had were over money. He wanted to bankroll her life, but at the very least, her redecorating. She refused to even consider it. The money he was paying her every two weeks was just sitting in her checking account, because he was paying for absolutely everything. Trish was not about to allow him to pay for that, too. Reed countered that, since he was living there, too, shouldn't he have some input into what the inside of the house looked like?

Tricia was only too happy to inform him that he was more than welcome to come along with her as she looked at endless samples of wallpaper and paint, but that the final decision was hers

alone. Reed managed to conjure a fake injured look, but she wasn't buying it. In the end, she did a beautiful job, and did it herself with only a little help from her cousins and their friends. He had arrived home one afternoon and interrupted a painting party, where she'd supplied the beer and pizza (after the painting was done, of course) and everyone chipped in to paint. All of the painting that needed to be done was accomplished in one longish day, and by the time he got there they were just breaking into the keg and placing an order at Pizza Slut.

That night, after everyone had gone home, he joined her in a long, hot shower, gently helping her get speckles of melon madness paint out of her hair and her ears and off her elbows and knees. Then he dried her and lifted her into their bed, where Reed stretched out on his back and arranged her on her back on top of him. He was already hard, as usual around her, and joined her body with his immediately, then spent a long time leisurely stroking his palms up and down her tummy and over her oh-so-sensitive breasts while he buried his mouth at that very vulnerable spot where neck became shoulder and slowly, very slowly, he drove them both absolutely crazy.

Chapter VII

Several months later, they were very happily settled into their lives and their routine. At least he was, he thought, leaning back in his desk chair. They had no real need for a formal living room – Reed had retained his place, and if he needed to do any business entertaining it would be done there. She had not backed down one iota about not wanting to act as his hostess, but he was learning that when she said something, she stuck to it. But he was working on her. So they had turned what had probably been intended originally as the "back parlor" or family room into an office, which they shared. Trish was busily typing away on her desktop just a few feet away, and Reed found himself sighing contentedly as he watched her.

Despite his own deep sense of contentment, though, he was truly concerned about her. She was listless and quiet and sad, and that was definitely not her. For a while there, Trish had seemed to recover a little from the bad spell she'd come down to her cousins' place to break. Buying the house and decorating it had helped a lot, giving her something to divert her attention. He worried that it was more than that, that she wasn't happy with him, with their arrangement, and nothing he did seemed to help – as a matter of fact, she totally resented it any time he tried to make things easier

for her by paying for something, and Reed had had to reign in his propensity to want to spend money on her so as not to upset her too much. He knew that she cried sometimes when she thought he wasn't watching her, and that she wasn't sleeping well. Sometimes he'd reach for her in the middle of the night and she wouldn't be there, and he would get up and find her sitting in the dark on the screened back porch.

Reed always made her come back to bed with him, ignoring her protests to the point sometimes that he just lifted her into his arms and brought her upstairs, but he could feel the wetness on her cheek when she lay it on his bare shoulder. His body overrode his intellect every time, making him instantly lay claim to her when he put her on their bed, but she never seemed to object. Her body was always slick and welcoming, and her arms clasped him tightly to her as pleasure drowned him within her silken depths.

In fact, Trish had turned out to be the perfect mistress – almost frighteningly perfect. She never turned him down for sex, and God knows he was a right and proper sex maniac around her; he was at her all the time. She never asked him for anything; indeed was the least demanding woman he'd ever known. She even avoided asking him for things she should have asked for that called for a man's strength or sensibilities. It annoyed the piss out of him that she turned to Kell to help her move some heavy furniture around in the living room, and then again the next week to help her bring the big, heavy, awkward boxes of the new computer she'd bought into the house from the store. Kell was left scratching his head, too, and when Reed came home he nearly blew his top at the innocent bystander.

Kell was holding up his hands, proclaiming his innocence. "Look, I'm just doin' a friend a favor here, buddy."

Reed ran his hand through his hair. "But what the hell am I? Chopped liver? I could've done all of this for her, without her having to bother you."

Trish had gone to the kitchen to get a pair of scissors, and she reappeared at just that moment, putting her hand on Kell's arm. "Thank you so much for the help. I really appreciate it, Kell."

Kell was watching Reed's eyes narrow at the sight of Trish's hand on him, and he could practically see the steam blowing horizontally out of the other man's ears. "Not a problem. I'm glad to help. Well, I'd better get home."

She was already digging into the boxes, but Trish called back over her shoulder, "Thanks again, Kell – we'll have to have you and Maggie back over for dinner."

"I'll have her call you," he promised, grinning to himself at Reed's predicament as he let himself out the front door. He would have liked to have been a fly on the wall for the discussion he knew was going to be forthcoming in this household!

"What the hell was Kell doing over here?"

Startled at the vehemence of his tone, Trish sat back on her heels and looked at him. He was positively seething about something. She wondered what it was; probably something at the office. Knowing it couldn't have been anything she'd done, she went back to pulling out pieces of her new toy, spewing Styrofoam and plastic bags all over the floor of the office. "I asked him to help me lift the boxes of my new computer – he has that big Jeep Cherokee whatever thingie, with room in the back for all of it, and then he had the strength to lift them up the stairs and into the house." A long, exasperated sigh sounded behind her, but she kept on talking. "I coulda done the getting it into the house part myself –" If she had seen the truly thunderous frown on his face at that

statement, she might have taken the hint and shut up, but she couldn't " – but my little car really doesn't have the room – "

All of a sudden, she felt a band of strong fingers closing around her upper arm as she was unceremoniously hauled up against him.

"Why the hell would you call Kell to do that? Or to move the furniture last week, for that matter?" Trish grimaced. She knew he hadn't let go of that one. Somehow she'd inadvertently managed to insult his masculinity by getting Kell to help her instead of him. Was that what this was about again? That hand left her arm to descend in a very hard swat on her bottom while he kept her captive against him. "Don't you think I'm strong enough to do it for you without you bothering Kell all the time?"

"Ow! Cut that out! I just asked a friend to do a favor for me. What the hell is wrong with that?"

Reed turned her loose, before he totally lost his temper and did what he desperately wanted to do – haul her over his lap and wale the living daylights out of her plump, wonderful, naughty bottom. He didn't want to frighten her away, but she was probably just about as close to getting a good spanking from him as she'd ever be – Reed frankly didn't know if he was going to be able to talk himself out of giving her what she so desperately needed. Trish wasn't looking frightened right now, though, she was looking annoyed. She had absolutely no idea what he was talking about or why he was so angry.

Reed sighed. "Look, what I'm getting at here is why didn't you get me to do this for you? I would have gladly moved the furniture with you last week, and, hell, I'd've taken time off today to go get the computer with you, if that's what you wanted. Why didn't you ask me to help you?"

Trish shrugged, genuinely puzzled at his behavior, still rubbing her offended bottom. "I dunno. Like I said, I called a friend _ "

He literally pounced on that. "And I'm not your friend?"

"No," she answered with the bald truth of the matter, "you're my employer. And you were at work, and I don't disturb you at work. You're a busy man. I would never ask you to do something like that."

"You never ask me to do anything for you." It was very close to a true statement.

She didn't know what to say to that. Trish was trying like hell to keep the relationship on as businesslike a level as possible. She was trying, without much success, to remain separate from him, and as unemotional and uninvolved as she could. It wasn't long after they'd moved in together that she realized it would be very, very easy for her to fall in love with this man, but that was not what he wanted and was not what she'd signed papers agreeing to. So she was always on guard against treating him too much like the typical "boyfriend", because that wasn't what he was to her; it wasn't what he wanted to be.

So she answered him with brutal honesty. "You don't pay me to be your friend. My friends don't make enormous bi-weekly direct deposits into my checking account. We didn't sign legal documents in a lawyer's office to create a friendship, and I won't impose on you that way."

He was stunned. He hadn't realized just how much she was holding herself away from him – she was bound and determined to cram him into the role of Sugar Daddy, and didn't seem to want much else from him, when he wanted to demand absolutely everything from her. Everything. Reed sank into his desk chair with

a feeling of defeat unlike anything he had ever felt before. What had he gotten himself into?

His voice was hoarse when he said, "I thought we had the beginnings of a decent friendship. Don't get me wrong, I adore being in bed with you – we're dynamite together that way. But I also just like to be around you. I thought you felt the same way."

Hearing the diffidence in his voice made the hair stand up on the back of her neck. It was totally uncharacteristic for Reed Douglas to have even a second of indecision, or a millisecond where he lacked the usual steamroller-like self confidence. "I do like to spend time with you. I just – " Trish's hands dropped to her sides as she turned to stare out the bow window. "I just don't know where the lines are drawn in this type of relationship and I guess I didn't want to assume – "

"You didn't want to assume that I would want more than just your presence in my bed whenever I demanded it?" She could feel him come to stand beside her, her body already hyper-aware of him and automatically readying itself to receive him if he should want to take her then and there. It was embarrassing how quickly she responded to him – her body recognizing her mate without the advice or consent of her intellect.

Her throat knotted so tightly she was unable to speak, Trish nodded.

He rested his chin on her shoulder and bumped his body up against hers. "Well, let me tell you here and now that you're completely and totally wrong. I want you to be my friend, and I want to be yours. I want you to use me shamelessly, and not just in the bedroom. I want you to call me at work whenever you feel like talking, and I want to be the one you come to with all of your troubles. Even, shudder, female problems."

That idea had Trish giggling softly. "You mean the next time I need to borrow some Midol, I should call you?"

Reed turned her around to face him, catching her eye to give her the "look". "You know what I mean. And I don't ever want to come home again and find out that you've had Kell working and slaving at something that you should have asked me to do. Am I making myself perfectly clear, Ms. Barton?"

"Yes, Boss," she saluted smartly, only to receive another good swat on the bottom. "EEEEEE – owww! Stop that, I said!"

The same hand that had swatted her now caressed that stinging flesh as Reed's mouth settled over hers for a passionate kiss. "I don't think so. I like smacking your bottom. It's just the right roundedness, and it cries out to be given a good smack every once in a while. And, Lord knows, your behavior fairly demands it, frankly on a longer and much more frequent basis."

Trish wiggled out of his arms, not wanting him to guess that that's what she wanted, also, and skittered across the room. "It does not! And besides, you told me that first night we went out that you had never and never would raise your hand to a wo – " He was considering her with a frankly dangerous look in his eye that made her begin to back slowly away from him. " – man."

"No, that's not exactly what I said, Miss Barton." Reed was advancing on her rapidly while she backpedaled through the office door and into the foyer, her hand up in front of her in a futile attempt to ward him off. "I said I had never raised my fist to a woman. And I never would. But that doesn't mean that I would hesitate to take the flat of my hand to the naughty bottom of a woman who is driving me absolutely crazy with her obtuse stubbornness."

A delicious shiver ran up her spine at his dominant tone, enough of one that she could ignore the insult for now. "Don't you even think about doing that to me, Reed Douglas!"

He just kept coming, sauntering ever closer, never taking those sharp eyes off her. "Oh, I think I will. I think you're way more than overdue for a good spanking, Patricia. And I'm just the man to give it to you – be careful of the stairs!" He warned before the backs of her heels touched the bottom step.

Trish whirled and ran quickly up the stairs, yelling, "You stay away from me!"

As inexorable as the tide, Reed ascended the stairs with deliberate lack of haste, while Trish darted up frantically in front of him, running down the short hall to their room. But there were no locks on any of the doors, and she knew he was going to catch her; it was just a matter of time. So, although she had practically slammed the bedroom door in his face, and was right now leaning all of her weight against it, Trish had already admitted defeat. Hell, he was so damned strong there was no way he wasn't going to be able to push his way into the room.

And she was right. Reed warned her before he did it that he was going to push against the door, not wanting to hurt her, and told her to get away from it; an order which, of course, she totally ignored. When he got in after pushing very carefully against her – knowing she was too stubborn to have moved - all he had to do was keep her trapped against the wall with the door until he could replace it with his body and a strategic hand on the wall at each of her shoulders. "Didn't I tell you to move out of my way, Patricia Barton?" he asked as he kissed her, hoping to soothe the almost frightened look in her eyes. Unless he'd missed his guess, she was extremely turned on by the idea of a little play spanking, and he'd been hard as a spike since he'd given her those little love pats downstairs.

Trish huffed, her lower lip protruding just a little. "Yes, but
_ "

"No 'buts'. I could have hurt you when I had to barge my way in. That's another naughtiness that you'll have to pay for." Reed felt the shiver of anticipation that she couldn't quite suppress at his words. He took her hand, pulling her towards the bed. "Come with me and we'll get it over with right now."

Tricia was leaning as far away from him as his grasp would allow, which, unfortunately, wasn't very far. "No! Please! I don't want you to spank me!"

Reed grinned almost evilly, standing her directly in front of him where he proceeded to pull down her jersey knit shorts, then slip his fingers into the waistband of her peach lace panties while she was still trying to pull her shorts back up. "Reed – no! Stop!"

Before she knew it, she was bare-bottomed over his lap, red faced and completely embarrassed to be in this position. Trish could feel his big hand resting on her naked butt, covering nearly all of her at once. She wiggled and twisted, but then his left arm wrapped around her waist, capturing both of the hands she was using to try to dislodge herself from her lap, or, failing that, his hand from her bottom, holding them together against her back. When she'd been pretty much immobilized, he began to speak to her in a very low, somehow soothing voice. "I think my lady protests waaaaay too much." Oh, God, his hand was moving lower and lower, burrowing between her legs even though she tried like hell to tighten her muscles enough to keep him out. Still, he was more than a match for her, and without hurting her, his fingers found ample proof to support his claim. "Oh, baby, you are soaking wet!"

Trish kicked her legs uselessly, already crying tears of humiliation that her secret was out. This wasn't something she ever

planned on telling him. Then the spanking began, and she was given a real reason to cry.

Reed was an experienced spanker, but he had no idea what her pain tolerance was. Hell, he wouldn't have said she had one at all – a hangnail gave her fits. So although he covered all of her luscious curves, and a little of the tops of her thighs, turning the skin a nice shade of carnation pink, he didn't go all out by any means. Regardless, Trish was kicking her legs and crying and wiggling for all she was worth, even after he stopped, but held her in place. "Now," he began, rubbing that tender flesh. "I want you to understand that I am your friend – "

Her guffaw was automatic, and earned her instant retribution in the form of a volley of five very hard slaps to her already stinging butt. "Ow – ow - oooh – no – don't!!"

His voice took on a stricter, warning tone, "And that I expect you to treat me as such. Also, that when I tell you to do something – like move away from the door – especially something that is in consideration of your health – then I expect that you will do as you're told!"

She was still trying to recover from those last five stingers, and her response was unthinking. "Y-Yes, Sir."

"Good girl. I think fifteen more will help you remember." Reed completely ignored her whining protests, and her tears, as he proceeded to deliver hard, unforgiving slaps that left his hand imprinted like a brand on her bottom.

When he finally let her go, it was only to lift her onto the bed with him so that he could lean against the headboard and hold her while she sobbed onto his chest. This was one of the best parts of spanking a woman – the holding and comforting afterwards. Reed brushed the tears from her cheeks along with the wet hair that was plastered there, holding her tightly to him. God, he couldn't

believe that she had taken a spanking from him! It was absolutely un-freaking believable! He felt like he had just won the lottery – he'd finally found a woman who fulfilled his needs and wants on every level – even those levels that he kept buried deep within himself.

Trish struggled against his hold until he let her turn away from him, still within the confines of his arms. He wasn't letting her go anywhere! Her still-hot little bottom was pressed up against the rigid pole behind his zipper, teasing him with its warmth. Reed's eager hands found the mounds of her breasts, tweaking and pulling those sensitive tips in just the way he knew she loved until she was writhing and moaning, in much the same way she had while he was blistering her bottom.

He turned her over onto her bare bottom, loving the startled moan that told him she was still tender. The loose white t-shirt was discarded quickly, but he barely got his pants and underwear down before he mounted her, driving into her harder and faster than he ever had. Trish's legs wrapped high around his waist, opening herself completely to him. She cried out in with each sharp thrust until it and he overwhelmed her with pleasure, even though – or maybe because – her bottom stung every time he drove it into the mattress.

When Reed rolled off her, his teeth were tingling because he was breathing so hard. He kept one hand on her flank, but his other arm was flung over his eyes.

The stark truth occurred to him at that moment that he had found the woman of his dreams – and she didn't even consider him a friend.

Chapter VIII

Reed wouldn't have thought that their sex life could get better, but it did. He naturally took on a more dominant demeanor with her, and she responded to it like a flower naturally turned towards the sun. Trish started getting herself spanked quite regularly, and in some cases – like those where she compromised her own safety or deliberately disobeyed him – somewhat harshly. But even after a harder session with the paddle he'd hidden away in the back of his closet, she came to him literally dripping wet, and he was more than willing to assuage her obvious need.

But the depression and unhappiness was still there and if anything it was getting worse. Reed was one step away from dragging her to counseling to see if that would help, when they were at Maggie and Kell's one night and he heard Maggie mention something that caught his attention.

It was during a break in the usual rabble rousing conversation. Everyone had noticed that Trish was unusually subdued, and when she excused herself to powder her nose, Maggie leaned over to him and whispered, "It's almost a year since her Mom died."

Bingo. The light bulb went off over his head, and he coulda smacked himself with it. He watched her even more closely this

evening – seeing her tear up when she thought no one was looking and stare listlessly out the car window on the ride home.

But he was totally unprepared for what she announced as they were getting into bed. "I'm going to take a couple weeks of my vacation and go away tomorrow. I need some time to myself right now."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her that there was no way in hell that he was going to allow her to go away in the condition she was in, but there was no codicil in the agreement that gave him any real way to keep her from marching out the door to go do who-knew-what who-knew-where. He wouldn't have liked letting her go even if she was in a good mental state, possessive clod that he was – but as depressed as she was, spending time alone was the last thing she needed to do. The mere thought sent a cold chill up his spine.

"Are you sure you don't want some company, honey?" he asked as casually as he could.

In the mood she was in, Trish was just gunning for a fight, even if it earned her a trip over his lap. He almost never used endearments with her, less so since the agreement was put into effect, and yet he was pulling one out now. How suspicious. "No, thank you. And I am entitled to a month off with pay, according to our agreement."

Reed was just about ready to flush that stinking thing down the toilet so he could deal with her without it getting in the way. Sometime she used it as a shield to force him to maintain a certain distance from her, as if she didn't want him getting too close. "Yes, you are," he tried to answer civilly, but it came out more like a growl. "Do you need anything?"

The answer was the same as he expected. "No."

He knew he had no right to ask the question, but he asked it anyway. "Where are you going – in case I have to get a hold of you in an emergency?"

Trish rolled away from him, curled in a fetal ball, the covers pulled tightly around her neck like she expected a plague of vampires in the night. "What kind of emergency is it that you'd need to get a hold of your mistress for? Got a hard-on and nowhere to put it – "

In two seconds flat she was beneath him and he was inside her, stiff and hard and big enough to never be easy to accept, even now. He insisted that she sleep naked, so he could get to her without having to fight his way through her clothes, and Reed liked keeping her just a little vulnerable to him. In this case, however, his words and his actions were at odds. "No." He stroked slowly, deliberately in and out of her, making her accommodate him, stretching her open and giving her no chance to get used to his bulk within her sensitive flesh. "I'm your friend, and I'm asking you to tell me where you'll be."

Good grief, this man always seemed to know exactly how to turn her on, like flipping a switch. There wasn't a fumbling, groping, or grabbing bone in his body – he knew his way around the female body like a Degas knew ballerinas. Sometimes the sex was hot and wild and uncontrolled and uncontrollable. Sometimes it was wickedly slow and sizzling, building up until Trish thought that she would die in that aching, arching unfulfilled state. But he never fell short of the goal – their pleasure – and was genuinely as goal-oriented about hers as he was about his own.

She had never said a word about enjoying being held down during sex, but his hands were planted right above her elbows and she really couldn't move her arms. His weight kept her lower body pinned in place beneath him, helpless and vulnerable to his repeated invasions . . . all the way in, and all the way out again.

Reed used the broad head of his penis – wet with her love juices – to rub over and over her exposed clitty, making her moan and struggle sensuously, but he wouldn't let her escape him.

Ever.

Tricia lost track of reality, lost track of how many times he brought her allllmmmmooooossttt there, only to stop because she was getting too close. There was nothing she could do but endure it, live through pleasure that was almost pain until he chose to allow her release.

In the end, it was his own pleasure that demanded that he free hers, and he did, leaning back a little to put her legs over his shoulders then leaning back into her to the hilt while his thumb remained on that tiny bud between her legs. It only took a few deep strokes, a few sure, firm drags of that broad flat digit over her poor, swollen little peak to make her convulse wildly, bucking her hips into his, demanding loudly that he fuck her, and he was more than ready, willing, and able to comply. It was the only time in his life that he had ever fucked a woman and not paid any attention to her responses while doing so. The only thing on his mind was flooding her inner passage with himself, spurting deep inside her, and it didn't take him very long to reach his own ecstatic peak.

In the aftermath, she broke down and sobbed, and Reed held her close, enjoying the way she clung to him. Just before she fell asleep on his shoulder, she murmured, "I'm going back to New Hampshire. It's the anniversary of my mother's death, and I just need to be there and – and go put flowers on her grave."

His arms contracted tightly around her. "I understand, baby. You take all the time you need." Slowly, softly, he rocked her to sleep within the safety and comfort of his arms.

The twenty-fifth of October turned out to be one of those cold, gray, dreary days that foreshadowed winter, and Trish found herself standing alone at her mother's hillside grave. Oh, she had bunches of friends who offered to accompany her, but she really did want to be alone. If there was anyone she wanted with her right now, it was a thoroughly annoying pit-bull of a man who was hundreds of miles away, figuratively and literally. Besides, she wasn't fit company for man nor beast right now, with ever-present tears streaking down her cheeks. She couldn't seem to control them – they'd stop for five minutes then begin leaking out again, and even though she'd stuffed wads and wads of Kleenex into her pockets, she couldn't seem to locate a clean one for the life of her –

While she was occupied with that task, her eyes were blurry with unshed tears; someone stepped up to her and pressed a hanky into her hand. Trish murmured a watery thank you and brushed it over her face quickly when she was unceremoniously jerked up against a very familiar hard body.

"Wha – what the hell are you doing here?" She strained to look up at him, but he was holding her so closely that she really couldn't.

"Comforting you. So stand there and cry on me, like you're supposed to," he ground out, in what still managed to sound like a soothing voice. But then, even his angry voice would be a welcome sound right now.

"But your work – "

He leaned his chin on the top of her head. "If I haven't built a business that can withstand the boss taking some time off, then I haven't built much of a business."

Trish sniffed loudly from her position with her wet face buried against his warm coat. "But don't you have to – "

A hand unerringly found her bottom, even through multiple layers of clothing. "Are you trying for a spanking, Patricia?"

"N-no," came the squeaky reply.

"Then I suggest that you cease and desist before I decide that you need one. What kind of a friend would I be if I left you alone at a time like this? You take your time – my car is just over the hill. I'll be right over there when you're ready to go."

He turned to leave, but Trish grabbed his arm and held him close instead. "No, stay, please."

"Certainly, sweetie." Reed was pleased that she had asked him to stay with her, and he held her through a few more tearstorms, until – long after he wanted desperately to bundle her into his nice warm car - she decided it was time to leave. He drove them to the hotel he had a suite at, and she got all blustery that he had been high-handed enough to go get her stuff from the much cheaper place she had checked into. Although he kept his voice very low and gentle, Reed let her know in no uncertain terms that he was not going to allow her to speak to him like that. He made allowances for the difficult time she was having – if she had gotten that huffy with him under normal circumstances, he wouldn't have hesitated to flip her skirt up, push her hose and panties down, and reddened that tempting butt of hers.

Instead, once she was all settled in, he put her to bed for a nap; she had dark circles down to her ankles. Reed knew she truly was not herself right now because she didn't even protest when he tucked her under the covers and rubbed her back until she fell asleep.

When she awoke, he helped her into some warm, comfortable clothes and took her out to dinner, making sure she ate most of the steak she'd ordered, whether she wanted to or not, hovering like a mother hen in football padding. After dinner, he

tucked her back into bed over her not too vociferous protests, soothing her fretfulness at being stuffed into bed again by renting a movie off the TV, but, just as he thought, she fell asleep in the middle of it.

The next day, over breakfast, Reed asked her what she had planned next.

Trish shrugged listlessly. "Nothing, really. I was gonna see some friends and see Momma one more time, but nothing special. Why?"

It chafed him to ask, but he did. "Would you mind if I made another suggestion?"

His suggestion won out, hands down. They did go visit her Mother one last time before they left, but then, unwilling to allow her to wallow, he whisked them off in his private jet. Their flight was short, and a limo met them at the airport in Scranton. They had a leisurely ride through the Pocanos, where it had already snowed enough to cover the ground, ending up in the middle of the woods, in someone's driveway.

Reed got out first then helped her out. The limo driver brought in their bags while Tricia wandered through the place, her eyes bugged practically out of her head. "Oh, my word, this is gorgeous!" she said when he caught up to her in the master bedroom suite, which had a bathroom the size of most people's living room – complete with a huge tub, sauna, and shower stall for eight - and a bedroom the size of a football field. "Is this place yours?" She stood in front of a huge bow window – complete with window seat - that looked out into the smallish backyard, then beyond that into a deep green forest. This was one of the most truly secluded places she'd ever been; the closest neighbor was probably three or four miles away.

"No, it belongs to a friend of mine who likes to ski up here in the winter. I thought you might want to take some time to unwind, and I can be very . . . distracting." Trish turned and caught his eye, blushing at the blatant heat she saw there. "Do you like it?"

She snorted. "What's not to like?" The house was open and light with a lot of natural wood, but the furnishings were overstuffed and welcoming, although a quite masculine color scheme ran throughout – there were even green and cream flannel moose sheets on the bed. "It's absolutely beautiful."

Just to get a rise out of her, he asked as he crossed the room to her, "Want me to buy it?"

Trish slapped him lightly, but knew that he was kidding – she thought. "Don't you dare."

He pressed his lips to her temple, feeling her collapse into him. "Tired, Trish?"

"No, and stop trying to put me to bed!"

Grinning, he countered in a teasing tone, "But I thought you liked being in my bed, Miss Barton?" She snuggled closer, and he wrapped her in his arms, loving the fact that she was leaning on him, letting him take care of her.

"I do." Her words were muffled by his Harvard sweatshirt. "But I've had enough sleep lately for twelve people. Someone keeps tucking me in every five seconds!"

Strong hands rubbed up and down her back in a motion that she would give him at least three years to stop. "Yes, but you're all stressed out and unhappy and you need someone to watch over you or you'll compromise your health." She could feel Reed kiss the top of her head. "And I'm just the person for that very tasking job –"

Her smack this time was intended to be harder, but he caught her hand before it connected with his bicep. He was quick for an old man, she told him, and he growled at her impudence. "Watch it, my girl, or you'll be sent to bed with no supper and a very sore bottom," he warned, turning her loose with a proprietary pat on the bottom.

Trish sniffed. "I'm not worried about the 'no supper' part; if you feed me any more you're going to have to roll me home!"

"But you should definitely worry about the 'sore bottom' part," he threatened, chasing after her playfully when she stuck her tongue out at him.

That week with him was positively magical, and he did everything he could to make it that way. If a stranger had looked in on them, he or she would have wondered which of them was the employer and which was the employee. She got a tiny cold – just the sniffles, really - and he danced attendance, cooking for her, worrying over her, running errands into the small town ten miles away to get her favorite foods. And, of course, making her nap and go to bed early. It wasn't until one of the last nights they were there that he allowed her to make use of a surprise he had shown her about the house – the secluded outdoor hot tub that was surrounded by pines and small drifts, where they saw a herd of deer at the edge of the forest one dusk as they were giggling and stroking and soaking.

Reed was entirely unable to keep his hands to himself, of course, except when she was sick those two nights. Trish had even said it was fine to make love then, but he wouldn't; he wanted her to get her rest. But once she'd recovered, it was no holds barred, and he barely let her out bed, in fact he kept her mostly nude or in one of his big sweatshirts with no panties pretty much all of the time so that he could fondle her whenever the mood struck him,

which was almost embarrassingly often. It always amazed him how responsive she was, and that never seemed to change. He hoped it never did.

~ ~ ~

A few months later, what was technically their one year anniversary rolled around. They had arranged an appointment with their lawyers later in the week to discuss the agreement for the next year, and Trish spent her time fervently hoping that he would not make a big deal about it, but then, this was Reed. That night, he took her out to her favorite restaurant for dinner and bought her two dozen pink roses, then took her home and made exquisite love to her until she fell asleep in his arms just before dawn.

The meeting at the lawyers, however, did not go so well. Trish just wanted to sign the exact same contract again. Everything was fine about it, and there wasn't really anything she wanted to change. But Reed wanted to give her at least a ten percent raise in salary. She flatly refused.

"C'mon, Trish, don't tell me that if you were in a more normal job you wouldn't be getting an annual raise?" he pointed out sharply.

She stuck to her guns, saying, "I won't sign off on a raise and that's final. If it's a deal breaker, then so be it."

Reed swallowed hard, not wanting to back down at all, but mindful of the fact that she seemed to be completely willing to walk away from him if he pressed the point. "Oh, all right," he agreed ungraciously. Damn stubborn woman.

Kell was grinning from ear to ear. He loved seeing Reed stonewalled by a woman. It was one of those rarities in Nature – a charging bull stopped in his tracks by a feisty little domestic feline.

The second row started innocently enough when Reed presented Trish with her annual bonus. It was a check for twenty-five thousand dollars. When Trish saw the amount, she knew she couldn't take it.

"It's way too much. I can't accept it." She tried to press it back into his hands, but he wouldn't take it.

"The contract says that I can give you a yearly bonus. It doesn't specify any particular amount. I gave you what I wanted to give you. Don't insult me by returning it." His words were slow and even, but Trish recognized the look on his face. She wouldn't at all put it past him to spank her until she agreed to accept that ungodly amount of money.

So, after what she considered to be an appropriate silence, she folded the check and put it in her purse. "All right."

Chapter IX

Her innocent act wasn't at all well accepted, especially by Reed, who watched her suspiciously for the rest of the meeting, not trusting her easy acquiescence at all. He then personally escorted her to her bank and watched her deposit the funds into her account. Reed continued to keep a close eye on her all day, and, finally, when they crawled into bed that night, Trish had had enough of him looking at her like she was an alien from the X-Files.

"All right, this is quite enough of the prison guard act, you know. I did what you wanted; I deposited the money. So why aren't you happy?" She sat up in bed, arms folded across her chest, looking as businesslike as one small, determined woman could when she was naked in a man's bed. She meant to have some answers.

Second in the shower, as usual, Reed was still toweling off while standing at the end of the bed. He couldn't suppress the stupid grin that settled on his face, which ticked her off that much more. "You are getting very sassy, young lady. Did you know that?"

Trish glared at him, not deigning to dignify that question with an answer.

"Maybe you're getting a little too big for your britches, hmmmm?" Reed discarded the towel and crawled naked up the bed to push her over onto her back as he settled himself between her legs.

"I can't be getting too big for something you never let me wear!" she informed him in a sarcastic tone, keeping her arms folded tightly across her chest despite the intimacy of their position.

Pinning her arms at her sides was disgustingly easy for him; he was so much stronger than she was. He busily worried a nipple with his teeth. "All the better for you – you're just a bit more submissive when you're naked, Trish. You fight it less."

Oh, God, if he was trying to distract her, it was working a little too well!

Then he casually dropped a bomb while exploring the other nipple. "Maybe that's something you should include in your next spanking story?"

"Wha – what? How do you know what I write?" Trish had never told him the specifics of what her stories were about, or for what site she wrote them. He hadn't asked, so she had never volunteered the information. Had Maggie spilled the beans?

Reed positioned himself at her entrance then worked his way in slowly, making her writhe and moan beneath him. When she was completely full of him, he said, "You know how much I adore spanking you – " this made her wiggle and squirm until he held her fast. "Well, I happened upon a site that had spanking stories, and, shall we say, that your writing style is unmistakable, Miss Katherine Templeton."

Damn him – he was always freaking right!

"Didn't you mention something to me last year when we first met about having a manuscript that you might want to run by a print publisher?"

Exasperated, Trish asked, "Do we have to have this discussion in bed, for crying out loud?"

In answer, he disengaged himself from within her and set himself to work at an even more intimate spot, one that had her screaming his name within minutes.

Reed never forgot anything, though, and he nagged at her gently for almost a month before she agreed to show him the story she was working on. He loved it, and promised to get back to her about meeting a publisher friend of his.

In the mean time, he'd gotten a call at home from his CPA, Harrold Davidson, who handled his personal accounts. That was never a good thing. It was Friday night, and he was in his office at home, with Trish tap-tap-tapping away at her keyboard with her back to him, less than ten feet away. The night was gorgeous, dry and cool, and they had all of the windows open to let the air in. Billy Joel's *The Stranger* album was playing in the background, and, in general, all was right with his world, except this niggling thing, whatever it was, with his accounts.

So he called the meticulous nudge at home and got the skinny. It seemed that the problem was in his favor, which was nice, but his checking account balance was exactly twenty-five thousand dollars more than it should have been, according Harrold's calculations. Harrold didn't have a deposit slip to account for the difference, and he was calling Reed to see if he might have made a deposit and not told him, or if he had any idea why he'd be off such a large amount.

Reed turned his chair to look right at what he considered to be the source of the problem, no doubt at all – Trish. He told Harrold he'd get back to him, and hung up the phone absently, not taking his eye off his recalcitrant woman.

Without missing a beat of her typing, Trish asked, "Did you finally get a hold of that Harrold Davidson person? He called like three or four times today – he was driving me crazy! Who is he, anyway, for crying out loud?"

Crossing his ankle over his knee, Reed pushed his chair back and answered with exaggerated casualness, "Hal Davidson is my CPA." Trish's back straightened and her typing stumbled, but she recovered herself quickly and started clacking away again.

"Oh?" just the right touch of lightness there. Good going, girl.

"Yeah. He handles my personal finances," the typing faltered badly, "and it seems there's a bit of a discrepancy in my checking account," and then halted abruptly.

Trish began smoothly gliding her comfy office chair towards the door. She felt like a rabbit moving stealthily, desperately trying not to attract the attention of a big, bad hawk. "What kind of discrepancy would that be, dear?" she asked with false sweetness as her quest to get to the door became a tad more desperate.

Suddenly, the chair halted, and, to her horror, began making the return trip without any help from her, only she didn't end up at her own desk, but instead she was dragged over to him, where Reed positioned her chair right directly in front of him.

"I think I need a glass of – " Trish tried to get up.

"If you want to be able to sit down in a week, you'll park it right now," he warned silkily. Reed leaned forward, planting his hands on the arms of her chair and getting directly into her face. "Now, little lady, we are going to have a chat about that bonus that I gave you."

She didn't want to babble but she couldn't seem to help it. "It was a very, very generous bonus, yes, Sir. Extremely generous. You've always been very – "

"Did you or did you not deposit that check into your checking account when I took you to the bank that day, Patricia Ann Barton?"

Her full name. Gulp. "Yes, Sir, I did."

"Well then, please explain to me," oh, God, his voice was all the more frightening for its lack of volume and complete levelness, "how exactly that amount ended up in my checking account?"

Should I take a chance and try to come up with a decent lie on the spur of the moment? she wondered.

His next emphatic statement answered her unspoken question. "And don't even think of telling me anything other than the God's honest truth, because, believe me, Patricia Ann, you are already in enough trouble that you really don't want to compound what you've already got coming by lying to me."

Double gulp.

Trish tried to smile, but he wasn't having any of that, either. "Weeeeellllllll, you see, it's like this: I accepted that bonus – knowing it was really way too much money. I don't deserve all that money for what I do – " She could see that she wasn't making any points with him running herself down like that – his expression was

thunderously dark and she wasn't helping herself at all, so she left that tract. "Weeeelllll, you see, banks don't really care who deposits money into whose accounts. They just won't show you the account number or the balance in the other account if you're not named on it. So I waited a week or so and went back to the bank." He looked like he was going to have a stroke.

"And then you did what?" he growled.

Tricia bit her lip and confessed her sin, "I transferred the money from my account into yours."

"Expressly against my wishes," he finished for her. She would have sworn his teeth were bared.

"Ooooooh no. I accepted the money when you gave it to me, Reed. You didn't say how long I had to keep it, and I know I didn't agree to any specific timeframe, so . . ." A nervous giggle escaped her at the most inopportune moment. "I gave it back."

Reed was truly afraid he was going to throttle the woman sitting in front of him. Truly. His hands were itching, but that wasn't really what they wanted to do. Oh, they would get their chance to blister her butt, but not just now. He was just too pissed – slightly amused, mind you, and admiring of her gutsy, if sneaky move – but definitely royally pissed.

Sitting back in his chair again, Reed dragged his hand over his forehead, then over his eyes and down to his jaw before he spoke again, calmly and quietly. "Get your butt upstairs to our bedroom and wait for me in the corner." She was still sitting there. "Don't make me have to repeat myself." Trish disappeared like the wind. "And take off that t-shirt!" he hollered after her, shaking his head as he listened to her feet pounding quickly up the stairs.

Why couldn't he have been interested in a normal, average woman who would revel in the luxuries his hard earned money

could provide? Who had the intelligence that God gave a gnat to know that if he had only wanted to give her a dollar-ninety-eight as a bonus, then that's what he would have given her? Didn't she realize that he was trying to tell her that she was special to him, and to make sure that money was never an issue in her life again, so that she never felt the need to sell herself to make time for a creative endeavor?

What if she decided to sell herself to someone else? The idea had him literally shaking in his boots. Tricia didn't seem to be unhappy with him, but his money was supposed to be an attraction for her, not a bone of contention. Why was it that she never let him give her anything?

Well, he didn't give a rat's ass whether she wanted the money or not. It was her bonus – she'd certainly earned it by putting up with him for a year - and she was damned well going to accept it, and keep it, if he had to beat her every night for the rest of her life to get her to do it!

When he arrived at the doorway to their room after locking up the house for the night, Tricia was standing where he'd told her to stand, in the only available corner in the room, diagonal from the end of the bed. And he could hear her already sobbing softly. Reed crossed to her, letting his palms reach out and grasp those naked twin globes of her bottom. With his mouth at her ear, he said, "I am very disappointed in you, Patricia Ann Barton. Not only am I disappointed, but I am thoroughly insulted by what you did." Her weeping became more pronounced as he spoke. "And you are going to be one very sorry girl for having done it."

He took her hand and brought her back to the end of their bed, placing her over his lap and positioning her butt well up in the air. Reed knew how much she hated being in this position, even more so when he deliberately hauled her up like this to make her bottom an easier target. "Now. You might not have violated the

letter of the agreement, but I know you know that you violated the spirit of it. You knew that when I gave you that money, that I never wanted to get it back, didn't you?"

There were only about three seconds between the time he stopped talking and the time he began spanking. Hard. Harder than he'd ever spanked her before. "Yesyesyesyesyesyes!!!" Trish fairly screamed, and the spanking stopped.

"Yes what?"

Sniffles. Sobs. "Yes I know that you didn't want the money back."

"So you deliberately disobeyed me? Yes or no?"

"Well – but – I – "

Slap! The spanking began again and he got several more crisp swats in before she began her "yes" chant again.

"Are you ever going to go behind my back like that again?"

This time, she had learned, and answered immediately, "Nonononono!"

"Are you ever going to disobey me again?"

"Nononononono! Please, I'm so sorry. I won't do it again, I promise. Please let me up!"

"Let you up? I don't think so. You've got a good hard punishment coming, and – " Reed paused suddenly, and let go of her. Trish couldn't believe what he was doing until he said, "Get up and go close those windows. I don't want the neighbors to call the cops on me while I'm disciplining you."

Oh, man! She accomplished her task as slowly as she possibly could, and when she was done she couldn't believe that he meant for her to walk all the way back and drape herself over his lap docilely for what he'd already said was going to be a severe session. Reed saw her hesitation, and crooked his finger at her, peeking out at her from under his furrowed brow. "Don't make me have to come get you, Patricia Ann."

Although she dreaded what was to come, she did as she was told and found herself embarrassingly upended for the second time in less than five minutes.

There were no preliminaries. Reed just began smacking away, reddening her bottom briskly and efficiently, lecturing occasionally as he went along. "Let this be a lesson to you, my girl. I won't have you shorting yourself money you've rightfully earned because of this misplaced sense of I don't know what that you've got in that head of yours." It seemed the more he talked the angrier he got, and the harder he spanked, up and down each rounded hemisphere, then down the tender backs of her thighs. "I don't know what your problem is, but your phobia about money has just ended, right here and now. Am I making myself absolutely clear?" He didn't wait for an answer, which she couldn't have given him anyway because she was crying much too hard. "I certainly hope so, but if you need me to do this again, I will. As a matter of fact, I think you're going to get it again every night for the next couple of nights – " her wailing increased in volume exponentially at that pronouncement " – until I think that you're truly repentant. I'm gonna wear my hand out on your bottom, you little brat, and then I'm going to call in the reinforcements."

Reed paused for mere seconds, long enough to reach behind him on the bed and produce the paddle he had bought on the Internet – the one with holes to make each stroke hurt more – and began cracking away at her already crimson butt with enough

strength behind each stroke that she knew he meant what he was saying.

He didn't stop again until he'd covered her whole sit-upon from stem to stern – twice – with sharp, stinging swats of that unforgiving wooden paddle. Then Reed laid it on the floor and held her close as she sobbed it out, then put her, still huffing and weeping lightly, under the covers gently while he undressed and got ready for bed. The paddle found its way back to hang from the nail in her closet before he joined her, holding her closely, one hand rubbing her back soothingly while the other cupped her woman's heart. A thick bold finger delved between those private lips, discovering the copious honey there despite – or maybe because of – the thorough spanking she'd just been given. Sometimes Reed just couldn't believe how much being disciplined by him turned her on, but then, he didn't want to question his good fortune too closely lest it disappear somehow.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm sorry I had to give you such a hard punishment," that finger was joined by another, stretching and filling her almost past her capacity as his soothing voice washed over her, "but you know that I only do it for your own good, don't you?" Trish shivered, stroking her hands up and down the arm that lay between her legs. Reed kissed her, deeply, and was surprised but pleased when she moved out from under him to push him over onto his back and mount him suddenly.

He couldn't control the groan of pleasure that escaped his mouth at the pleasure that was always achingly sharp when he filled her with himself. Trish caught his hands and placed them on her breasts, asking in a soft, submissive tone, "May I ride you?"

"Oh, God, yes!" the hungry sigh slipped out without his having to think about it, and she began a wild dance on his body as he claimed the points of her breasts and twisted gently, making her moan as uncontrollably as he was.

As Reed grew closer and closer to his end, his hands grasped her bottom, squeezing and lifting, making her suck in her breath as the heat of her punished bottom filled his palms and he irritated her striped flesh, but he would not let her go. Reed took control of her body, setting a frantic pace, driving into her mindlessly, almost violently, catching a nipple and suckling it, pulling it against the roof of his mouth and rubbing the tip with his tongue while he plunged into her again and again, finally crying out her name at the moment of his explosion.

Chapter X

As the months went by, Trish became more and more important to Reed, and he became more comfortable with his dominant role within their relationship. It was something that happened very naturally, and Tricia seemed to respond very well to it, although she did tend to grouse and grump, especially when he put the kibosh on her staying up until all hours of the night or made her eat more healthy food and exercise with him three times a week. He found himself spanking her fairly regularly, and although she protested the way he thought she would – like a little girl trying to weasel out of a punishment – Trish seemed to accept it without very much real fuss, and he did not go easy on her. For his part, Reed loved having the freedom to swat her bottom whenever he thought she needed it.

The paddle got some company – a leather tawse, a Vermont Country Store bath brush, one of his old belts, and a rubber strap. Her bottom became intimately acquainted with each implement, and Reed had to put up hooks in the closet to hold each of them. He spanked her in longer, more painful sessions over his lap or over pillows on their bed, and also on the spur of the moment, bending her over the snack bar in the kitchen or his desk in the office if the situation warranted a little reminder to watch her tone of voice or language.

It was almost the end of their second year together, and Trish hadn't taken any of the vacation that was hers to take. Frankly, she didn't want to – the way the agreement read, she pretty much had to take it without him, and she no longer wanted to be away from him. But how could she tell him that she had come to think of him as more than her Sugar Daddy - much, much more, despite how carefully she had tried to keep their relationship on an unemotional level? Oh, he was pushy and autocratic and annoyingly right all the time, damn him, but he was also solicitous and smart and very caring in his own gruff way.

Finally, she decided to buck up and go up to Maine for a couple of weeks – at least she could console herself with fresh seafood and the beach. Trish let him know that night that she was leaving on the coming weekend. Reed did not look at all happy with the idea. In fact, he looked downright annoyed. "I had hoped that you were going to forego the 'four weeks of vacation away from me' bit. Wait a week and I'll take you to London and Paris."

Apparently, he considered the matter quite settled and went back to work. But Trish did not. There was no way she was going to let him spend all that money on her – despite her previous spanking for just that reason. "No. I'm going to Maine this weekend."

Reed closed his laptop and the weight of all of his attention fell on her. "Are you so eager to get away from me that you can't wait a week so that I can go with you?"

Nothing could have been further from the truth. But could she say that to him? No. "I – No, I'm not. I just still have the full four weeks left – all the traveling we've done this year has been 'on the job' for me," she missed his wince at her terminology, "so I figured I'd use some of it. The agreement doesn't specify whether or not it can be accrued."

Blast that damned contract! Reed thought. "Of course it can! But I could use a vacation, too, you know, unless you really would prefer that I not accompany you. I mean," Oh, God, he was sounding like a blithering idiot. "you have the right to spend your vacation by yourself, of course. I don't mean to invite myself along – dammit, yes, I do." Reed grabbed a hold of her upper arm and dragged her up against him. "I don't want you away from me long enough to let you use the bathroom. I want to be on you and in you all the time, and I sure as hell don't want you by yourself in Maine for two weeks while I'm here rambling around all alone in this house when I could be making love to you in every chateau in France."

Her mouth racing ahead of her thoughts, Trish blurted out, "I don't want you spending –"

Reed eyebrow met his hairline. "What did you just say?"

"I – I mean, I want to go to Maine, not to London or France. And I would enjoy your company if you would like to join me – as my friend, not my boss."

He pulled her even closer, tipping her face up to his. "How about as your bossy friend? Wherever we go, though, I will pay for everything and I don't want to hear a word about it from you."

Trish drew a breath as if to protest, but found his finger across her lips.

"Not one word or I'll send you to bring me the bathbrush." That shut her up immediately. "Now, are you married to the idea of Maine, or would you like to see London, or Paris, or Hawaii . . ."

They ended up in London for most of what became a three week holiday – although they did cross the channel and explore Paris, which was gorgeous. But Trish was a British history buff – all those Masterpiece Theatres, she said – and she liked London

better so they spent most of their time there in a hideously expensive hotel, gorging themselves on cream teas and Yorkshire pudding, making love, visiting all of the tourist places before collapsing in their luxurious suite at night to make love again.

When they returned to reality and Tennessee, it was their second anniversary and, instead of taking her out, Reed blindfolded her in their office and led her carefully up to their bedroom. When he removed the scarf, Tricia found that he had lit the room with candles, and filled it with roses of every color, even strewing petals on their bed. He dedicated himself entirely to her that night, every word he said, every move he made was designed to enhance her pleasure.

When, after several explosive orgasms, she tried to reciprocate for him, he gently rebuffed her although he was rock hard, turning her to cuddle her against him tightly and hold her while she drifted to sleep. Reed woke her several times that night, each time with a new pleasure, with his mouth at her breast or at the juncture of her thighs, making her ache before she was even conscious. He kept her in a constant state of arousal, despite her frequent and wild culminations. It wasn't until just before dawn that Reed allowed himself to indulge his own best pleasure, feeling her warm moistness engulfing him, parting for him, surrounding him with her heat, surrendering her body to his ever rampant lust.

~ ~ ~

The meeting with their lawyers went a little differently from usual – especially when Reed stood up and asked Kell and Katherine to leave the room. Trish's eyebrows rose, and when they were alone she turned to look at him questioningly.

Reed looked almost nervous, pacing back and forth, and that had her worried. She didn't think she'd ever seen him this agitated in almost three years. Oh, crap, she wondered. How big is that damned check this year? Well, it didn't really matter. Whatever amount it was, she certainly wasn't going to give it back again. Trish rubbed her bottom reflexively at the memory of the spankings she got over several consecutive days for pulling that stunt last year.

"I guess there's just no easy way to say this," he began.

Trish became immediately alarmed, her heart sinking into her stomach like lead. He was going to let her go! He hadn't said a thing about it, but he wasn't going to ask her to stay with him another year. That was why he'd asked the lawyers leave the room – so he could break it to her gently while they were alone! What was she going to do? She didn't even know if she could function without him any more . . .

Trish was so wrapped up in worrying that Reed was going to fire her that she missed practically all of what he was saying, until some of it caught her attention.

" – and I know that this isn't what you bargained for, but I love you so much," he dropped to one knee in front of a completely stunned woman, holding a blue ring box opened to reveal a modest two carat diamond solitaire surrounded by two good-sized baguettes on either side in one hand and pressing the back of her hand to his lips with the other. "Patricia Ann Barton, would you do me the very great honor of becoming my wife?"

For a long moment, all she could do was stare at him, tears running down her face. Finally, she began to nod her head. "Yes, yes, yes," she whispered, and Reed slipped the ring on her finger during a passionate kiss.

Their foreheads pressed together, Reed asked, as if he couldn't really believe it, "You'll marry me? You're sure?"

Trish caressed his precious face. "Yes, I will, if you're sure."

"Very, very. I want to keep you for all time."

"For all time," she vowed back to him.

End

Kept

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Backside of Love: the *Intimacy of Authority*

<http://BacksideOfLove.com>

Dearest reader:

Are you... *there* yet? ☺

If the sorts of loving, unyielding attentions that make up these characters' days is the stuff of fantasies you thought you could never share, then please join Carolyn and UB (her husband) at their *Backside of Love* community.

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