

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

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Southern Holly
Submissives



HOLLY

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HOLLY

Dominique Adair

Dedication

For the real 'Holly'

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Prologue

It's about time!

Footsteps sounded on the steps alerting Holly to the return of her Master. She rubbed her nose against the padded leather spanking bench that supported her upper torso. How long had she been handcuffed to this dratted thing? One hour? Two? More?

Raising her head, she tried to arch her back, anything to work the kink from her upper spine and shoulders. The handcuffs rattled against the steel bench legs restricting her movement to only a few inches. Her ankles were also secured to the bench leaving her legs spread and her sex exposed and vulnerable to whoever might walk into the room.

On most occasions, this only added to the excitement of bondage games. Tonight was a rare exception.

After attending a disastrous bondage party scene in the French Quarter, they'd returned to Greg's house where he'd immediately escorted her downstairs to his dungeon. He'd ordered her to remove her clothing before cuffing her to the spanking bench then left her alone with her thoughts.

She sighed and rested her chin against the bench. To say she was conflicted would be an understatement. In their time together they'd attended many scenes but never had he commanded her to have sex with one of his friends. Holly realized this was a common request between Masters and slaves though it was one she'd never considered he would make of her.

When they'd begun their relationship little more than a year ago, she'd made it clear to him that while she craved bondage, she drew the line at engaging in sexual relations with strangers. There were only a few things she wouldn't do for her Master and that was number one on her list.

Up until tonight her choice had never been challenged as Greg had respected her wishes. She bit her lower lip. Holly had no idea why he'd decided to issue the request in front of a roomful of partygoers as he had to have known what her response would be. True, he'd drank quite a bit this evening and he was upset over something that had gone wrong at work, but that was no excuse to violate their relationship boundaries in such a manner.

Needless to say she'd refused though she had tried to make it as least embarrassing for him as possible. When he'd refused to yield to her wishes, she'd been forced to stand her ground and create a bit of a scene before he'd agreed to leave with her.

It would be an understatement to say that Greg was angry with her for disobeying him publicly and she wasn't terribly happy with him for making the request in the first place.

Maybe it was time to rethink the boundaries of their relationship.

The door opened and Greg entered the dungeon. Dressed in black slacks and a loose-fitting white shirt, his sandy-blond hair was tumbled as if the wind had played havoc with it. His handsome face was set in stern lines as he walked toward her, his gait purposeful. In his hand he carried a cocktail glass, Dewar's on the rocks, no doubt.

"You haven't been a very obedient slave lately, Holly."

"I'm sorry, Master." She kept her voice contrite. Even though she was irritated with him for his earlier request and for keeping her bound for so long, her body knew this particular game well. A soft ache blossomed between her thighs.

"I've spoiled you, ruined you, in fact. Once you were the perfect submissive and lately I've grown lax with your training." The clink of ice against the glass sounded as he swirled the amber liquid. "This is evidenced by your impudent behavior this evening."

Her chin came off the bench. "Impudent? I never meant —"

"Silence, whore!" He slapped her across the cheek so hard she bit her tongue.

The taste of blood permeated her mouth and Holly stifled a moan, shocked to her very core. Her cheek burning, she stared up at her lover. What in the devil had gotten into him? They'd played some very explicit role-playing games but he'd never resorted to calling her names or striking her across the face. Had he lost his mind?

"How could you humiliate me like that?" Standing so close to her she could smell the liquor on his breath, his voice rose with each word. "You refused a direct order from your Master in front of my friends. Now they'll believe I'm weak, that I've been lenient with my slave." He tossed back the contents of the glass.

"Master, you know how I feel about having sex with a stranger." She shook her head. The taste of blood was making her nauseous. "I just can't do it."

He lifted his arm and flung the glass against the wall where it shattered. She winced when glass shards struck the back of her bare legs.

"You've accepted me as your Master and I will decide what you will do and with whom you will do it with. Do you hear me, slave?"

Her stomach roiled and she spat blood and saliva onto the tile floor. He had lost his mind.

Greg walked to a table where a variety of bondage implements were arranged. "I will flay the arrogant flesh from your bottom and remind you that it is I who calls the shots in this relationship." He picked up a short-handled whip. "You've bound yourself to me, you are mine to command. You will be made to obey."

He's drunk.

Panicked, Holly rattled the cuffs against the legs of the bench. "I don't think this is a good idea. Please release me and we'll talk about this."

"You don't need to think, whore. That's my job." He gave her a dark look—anger blazed in the depths of his eyes. Laying his hand on her back, he walked around the foot of the bench and out of her line of sight. Broken crystal crunched beneath his shoes.

I no longer trust him...

Her skin crawled where he'd touched her. "You've been drinking, Greg." She rattled the cuffs louder this time. "I want out of here. Release me this instant."

"You're mine, Holly." His tone was singsong. "It doesn't matter what you want as you're here to serve me. My pleasure will be yours."

She heard the whistle of descent just moments before the whip struck across her buttocks. Her body jerked in response and she bit her lip as pain licked over her skin leaving a trail of fire in its wake.

"Greg—"

She yelped when the second blow landed and she sank her teeth into her lower lip until she drew blood. Before tonight, he'd never dared to strike her this hard. Her mind scrambled for an escape but there was none at hand. His house was secluded and it didn't matter how loud she'd scream as the nearest neighbor was almost a mile away. Her only recourse was to use her safe word before he went too far...

"Eleanor!"

Her body braced for a lash that never fell. For a moment, she was still, her spine tight and her breathing harsh. Silence. After a few moments she allowed her forehead to come to rest against the bench. Her breath came in harsh gulps and her skin was slick with sweat.

It was over, it was over.

"Bitch," Greg snarled. "Don't you dare try and command me—"

Without warning the whip fell again. She screamed, her body bowed against the pain.

"Eleanor!"

This time the blows continued and soon her buttocks and thighs were burning. Tears fell in earnest now. No matter how loud she screamed, the whip continued its fiery caress until her mind went hazy with the pain. Her muscles strained, the cuffs dug

into her skin, though she knew she could never get free on her own. She was truly at his mercy.

"Master," she sobbed.

"Shut up, whore."

Another lash tore at her skin and she jerked as if he'd touched her with a cattle prod. Sobbing, she sagged against the bench, her knees refusing to support her weight any longer. Behind her she heard the whip fall to the floor and she shuddered. Something wet ran down the back of her leg.

"You drove me to this." Greg's breathing was ragged and he grabbed her by the hips. "You have no one to blame but yourself."

She heard the rasp of his zipper and that was enough to jerk her out of her pain-induced delirium. She thrashed against her bonds, desperate to free herself and escape the dungeon.

"Don't do this, Greg. I'll never forgive you." Her voice was hoarse and her throat ached from her screams.

His laugh was hollow and her heart dropped into the pit of her stomach.

"I don't need your forgiveness. You seem to keep forgetting that you're my slave and I can do with you what I will."

His fingers sunk into her flesh and she began to scream.

Chapter One

Eight months later

“You’ve got to be joking.”

Aghast, Holly stared at the man who’d been her friend for the past seven years. Doug Mains was pushing fifty though he didn’t look a day over thirty-eight. Always well-groomed, today he wore a perfectly tailored black suit with a crisp white shirt and a blood-red silk tie. His still-blond hair—he saw his hairdresser religiously every three weeks—was combed back from his handsome face. Even now she was aware of the admiring looks he received from other women in the restaurant.

“I would never joke about something like this, Holly.” Doug’s chocolate-brown gaze was sympathetic. “With the rising interest rates and the skyrocketing prices for properties in the French Quarter, we felt we couldn’t turn it down. The economy is slow, our sales numbers were down for the past two quarters and we have to make up for it somewhere.” He gave a slight, embarrassed shrug. “Consequently we opted to sell the bulk of the mortgages we held in the Quarter and yours was one of them.”

Her hand clenched the napkin in her lap. “You and Greg both promised me you’d notify me before any changes were made to our agreement—”

“I think, in the long run, you’ll see this will work out in your favor,” he continued speaking as if she’d said nothing. “You should be receiving a letter in the next day or so outlining the details of the deal.”

Irritated beyond words, Holly slapped her crumpled napkin on the table. “How can this be for my own good, Doug? You just sold my mortgage to a complete stranger who gave you the best price.” She hissed, “Why didn’t you just sell it to one of those vulture bookstore chains? I’m sure they’d love to have my location and you probably could’ve pocketed more profits that way.”

He shook his head. "Now you know I'd never do that to you..."

"Oh look, scruples. I thought maybe you'd left those at home in your other suit." She crossed her arms over her chest, not caring if she sounded like a complete bitch. Even though his brother, Greg, had messed with her royally, she'd thought her relationship with Doug was still solid.

It appeared she was mistaken.

"Holly..." Doug's voice took on the tone that told her he wasn't pleased with her behavior. "This is business, not personal, and there is no need to be nasty or feel hurt about it. I had no choice but to sell the mortgages as we're looking to expand our business. I told you months ago about our impending acquisition of the Braymen bank chain. This is a multimillion-dollar deal and we had to put quite a bit of cash down upfront in order to get the deal we wanted. Unfortunately, thanks to the economy, our liquidity report wasn't quite up to snuff to get the loan at an acceptable rate and we were forced to liquidate a few properties for a quick influx of cash. It is regrettable that your property was included in the deal but we had to help our bottom line."

"But you know how much that building, my bookstore means to me. I was so pleased when you and your brother agreed to our business loan arrangement because I thought I could trust you—" Her voice broke. Holly snatched up her napkin and spread it over her lap just to give her hands something to do. "You also know how that damned bookstore chain—"

"The one you call the Evil Empire?"

"That would be them and trust me, they deserve the name." The napkin knotted in her hands. "They've been after me, doing anything they can to try and drive me out of business so they can pick at my corpse. How do I know the new owner won't just up and sell my mortgage to them?"

Doug shook his head. "I don't think you have to worry about that, my dear." He picked up his knife and fork and began cutting his grilled salmon into neat, bite-sized pieces. "The sale negotiator asked quite a few questions about you on behalf of the new

holder.” His eyes glinted with amusement. “And most of them were personal questions, not just about the mortgage or the state of your business.”

She relaxed her grip on the abused linen. “Why would a banker ask personal questions about me?” Holly’s stomach turned when he speared a salmon cube and popped it into his mouth. Her exquisite Bourbon Street Chicken Salad lay in her stomach like lead and there was no way she could even think about eating any more. She pushed away her plate. That was too bad as it was a favored lunch and she hated to waste good food.

“Your mortgage wasn’t bought by a banker.” Grimacing, he poked at his rice until he’d unearthed a tiny sliver of hot pepper. He scooped it up and put it to the side where it wouldn’t contaminate the rest of his lunch.

Her mama had always told her it wasn’t natural for a southerner to turn their nose up at spicy foods and to never trust anyone who did.

Score one for Mama.

“It was bought by a local company, Clarke & Sons. Their main business is importing furniture and goods from Europe and the East.” He picked out another piece of hot pepper, the distaste on his face evident. “They are a conglomerate and one of their sidelines, Clarke Mortgage, specializes in real estate.”

Holly picked up her wineglass. She usually confined herself to one glass at lunch but this day would be an exception. “How many mortgages did you sell to them?” She drained the glass and caught the eye of the wine steward to indicate she’d need a refill.

“Seven. They’re based here in New Orleans and are looking to expand their business.” Doug shrugged and speared another piece of salmon. “In this economy it’s the smart thing to do. A growing company cannot be too careful and place all their faith in one line of business as it’ll spell disaster in the long run.”

“Doug, why didn’t you tell me about this before now? You and I have lunch at least every other week. There were ample opportunities to bring this up before today.”

He didn’t look up. “It was a spur of the moment decision—”

Holly's gaze slid over his immaculate appearance. With his thousand-dollar suit and handmade Italian leather shoes, this was a man who didn't make a move until everything had been double- and triple-checked. It took him at least a half hour to place a simple restaurant order, or weeks of research before deciding on a vacation destination. Nothing was spur of the moment in his orderly, tight life.

"Even I know better than that. It takes weeks if not months to iron out a contract and proceed with a sale such as this." She gave her thanks to the wine steward who'd arrived with a fresh glass.

Doug gave her a pained look. "Holly, I didn't want to worry you. I knew this was the best thing to do for my company. The business really did need to liquidate some quick cash and since you and my brother are no longer involved in an intimate relationship..."

Holly's feet turned to ice. Greg. She should have known that bastard was behind the whole deal. That little weasel had been after blood ever since she'd kicked him out of her bed and her life. Struggling to remain calm, she placed her glass on the table. Her hand curled into a fist.

"Is that what this is about?" Her voice was low, hard. "My failed relationship with *The Bastard*?"

Doug looked distinctly uncomfortable and he gave up any pretense of eating his lunch. "He was devastated when you left him, Holly." He dabbed his lips with the napkin, a prissy movement that only served to irritate her more. "He is family and also my business partner. The fact is he's quite bitter where you're concerned and I tried to dissuade him from this course of action as I knew you'd get hurt. He feels that you reneged on your promises to him—"

She leaned forward, her anger bubbling just below the surface. "I reneged? How did I renege?" She braced her elbows on the table. "Your brother whipped me so severely as to leave a scar across my lower back and buttocks." Her voice was sharp but she couldn't seem to help herself. "When we entered into our relationship, we made

several agreements and one of the most important ones was that stop meant stop, not hit me harder.”

“Holly, please—” Doug gave apologetic nods toward the tables nearest them. “Please lower your voice, you’re making a scene.”

Seething, Holly grabbed her glass of wine and polished it off. “Greg is an immature bastard and I must have been mentally ill to even have considered fucking him let alone taking him on as my Master.” She picked up her purse and rose. “You and I have known each other for a long time, Doug, and even though I am feeling betrayed right now, I still consider you a friend. As such it pains me to say this but it is for *your* own good. Grow up and quit letting Greg run your life and your business. You can make your own decisions and it’s about time to step out of his shadow and take charge of your life.”

Doug gaped at her, his mouth opening and closing like a fish out of water. Feeling sick to her stomach at his lunchtime revelations and chugging the second glass of wine, Holly turned and headed for the door, panic nipping at her heels.

* * * * *

Doug was right about one thing—Greg had indeed sent her a letter.

Even though her hand was shaking which made the printing hard to read, she couldn’t tear her gaze from the familiar cream-colored letterhead.

Dear Ms. Broussard,

This letter is to inform you that your mortgage has been sold to the mortgage firm, Clarke Mortgage. This sale is nonnegotiable and should you have any questions, their contact information is located in the phone book.

Sincerely,

Greg Mains, CEO

Mains Mortgage & Trust

No doubt about it, her ex-lover was a cowardly bastard.

She choked back a bitter laugh and dropped the letter onto her cluttered desk. In the past eight months her ex-lover had done everything possible to try and win her back into his bed. He'd sent her hundreds of flowers and a mountain of expensive gifts, all of which ended up in the dumpster.

Just a few weeks ago he'd become more persistent and he'd taken to calling her at all hours of the day and night and arriving on her doorstep unannounced. When she failed to respond to his attempts at reconciliation, he'd hired a private detective to document her every move. Every time she'd stepped out the front door of her bookstore or her apartment above, she'd been aware of the man armed with a video camera who'd watched her from his nondescript midsize car across the street.

She'd been forced to change her phone number and keep her blinds drawn at all times. Late last week she'd gone to court and obtained a restraining order against both the detective and The Bastard.

Her gaze landed on the letter. She didn't buy Doug's explanation that the Mains brothers wanted to boost their earnings reports by selling off a few mortgages. She smelled Greg behind this deal. He knew he couldn't get to her any other way and he'd opted to strike at the heart of her life, her store. She sighed and rubbed her hand over her eyes. Even though they were at complete odds and the chances of their reconciling were nonexistent, it had never occurred to her that he'd try and take his frustrations out on her business. She wasn't nearly as devious as he.

Book Ends, the bookstore her parents had opened in the early Sixties, meant everything to her. The three-hundred-year-old store building was paid off though it required a great deal of expensive maintenance. To Holly, it was worth every penny.

Even though she'd known Doug for years, she'd never met his brother until two years ago when she'd taken out a sizable mortgage from his family's bank to make

improvements on her building. She'd found out after the fact that he'd granted her the loan at a minimal interest rate because he'd wanted her in his bed.

After using most of the money to upgrade the wiring and replace the roof and plumbing in the aging building, she and her junior partners had opted to expand the bookstore café with the balance. When they'd originally opened the café, they'd started out serving only coffee and desserts. After the expansion, the menu now boasted designer sandwiches and salads and the larger menu brought the customers in by the hundreds. While the café was breaking even, it would take some time, possibly another year, to recoup the amount spent to expand the kitchen and serving area.

They were making the loan payments, but there were months when it was pretty tight and The Bastard knew it. The economy was slow and the bookstore's saving grace was that they sold both new and used books. Just in the past few months two other independent bookstores had gone under in New Orleans and Holly was determined that Book Ends did not become number three.

The bottom line for her was that if the new lender chose to change the terms of her loan and increase the monthly payment, her store could be facing hard times. She sighed. One of the problems of owning your own business was that you never ceased to worry about it. And speaking of hard times, she had some bills to get out or the business phone and internet access was in danger of being disconnected.

Holly reached into her in-box and picked up a pale gray envelope with her name written across the front in bold script. It was probably a party invitation though she hadn't gone out since breaking up with The Bastard and most of her friends knew it.

She opened the envelope then removed a single sheet of gray paper. Her gaze skimmed the letterhead and her heart stuttered. It was from the company who now held her loan.

Ms. Broussard,

Holly

I'd like to invite you to meet with me to discuss the new terms of your loan and possible payment options. Please join me on Thursday evening at seven o'clock at my office. If you have any questions or scheduling conflicts, please contact my secretary at the number above.

Sincerely,

E. Nathaniel Clarke

Holly stared at the bold signature. Thursday, that was tomorrow night.

Her gut tightened. "New terms" were enough to strike fear into any business owner's heart. Technically, a change in which bank held her loan should mean very little as the lending companies were bound by state laws. As long as she made her payments on time and kept her credit clean there would be no issue. However, as far as she knew, the state could do nothing should this new company decide to increase the interest rate or payment amount.

He who held the mortgage made the rules.

Dropping the letter, she rose and walked to the railing of her loft office. Originally a warehouse, her parents had done most of the building renovations themselves from plastering the walls to refinishing the wood floor. Her stomach constricted as her gaze moved over the neat rows of shelves stuffed with thousands of books. Her father had built those shelves and her mother had painted them while Holly had played at her feet.

A few customers milled about in the aisles, while others were seated in comfortable rocking chairs and overstuffed armchairs scattered throughout the store. Surrounded by stacks of books, two teenage girls were seated on the couch near the front windows, poring over fashion magazines with the intensity of a neurosurgeon.

Her heart swelled with pride. Even though she was biased, she thought Book Ends was a fantastic bookstore. They boasted a customer list in the tens of thousands and their author book signings were always well attended. The café was almost always packed and the phones rang incessantly.

Her business was a success.

For her, the best part was that many of her favorite childhood memories centered on this magical place. As a child she'd run up and down the aisles before collapsing in the children's book section where she'd get lost in make-believe worlds where lions could speak and fauns really existed. Every Saturday, Holly hosted a children's reading hour and she wasn't sure who looked forward to it more, the kids or her.

The storeroom door opened and her junior partner, Katie, hurried out with a sheaf of plastic shopping bags over one arm. Her dark hair was its usual tumbled mess and Holly spied at least three pencils sticking out of the do.

Talking on the telephone, Melissa, her other junior partner, stood at the register. With her artfully tousled blondish-brown hair and trendy clothing, she was the picture of a fresh-faced college student. When Katie reached the desk, Melissa hung up the phone before she reached over and plucked two pencils from the other woman's hair. Both women started laughing and Holly couldn't help but smile.

These women depended upon her to keep Book Ends afloat. Katie was an only child who supported her ailing mother and her finances were always strained to the limit. Melissa was a single mother who was struggling to put herself through college to earn her business degree. Graduation would be a culmination of a lifelong dream as she was the first person in her family to make it all the way through high school, let alone go to college.

Holly wrapped her arms around her waist as if to give herself a hug. Her parents were gone and these women were her family now. Book Ends was her legacy, her life, and she would do anything to protect it.

Chapter Two

Holly's nerves were in a knot by the time she walked through the gleaming doors of Clarke & Sons. The spacious lobby was understated with its muted grays and blues, and the marble floors gleamed. To her right was an impressive waterfall surrounded by lush foliage, and a circular reception desk was located in the center of the lobby between the doors and a bank of elevators. Two security guards were seated at the desk and one rose from his chair before he slipped on his suit jacket. She didn't miss the gun holster strapped under his left arm.

"Good evening, ma'am. How can I help you?" His smile was sharp, assessing, and she had no doubt that even if she never again set foot in this building, this man would remember her face.

"Holly Broussard, Mr. Clarke is expecting me." She offered him a bright smile that screamed "look how harmless I am", or so she hoped.

"Do you have some identification?"

Whoa, now this was some serious security.

Holly retrieved her driver's license from her purse and handed it to him. That sharp gaze focused on the slip of plastic then returned to her face. "Nice to meet you, Ms. Broussard." He handed her the license then stepped out from behind the desk. "If you will follow me, ma'am."

Holly tucked her license into her purse then fell into step behind the guard and he led her away from the main elevators toward another door with no buttons, only a small flat red screen where they should have been located. He placed his hand over the screen and after a few seconds the panel flickered green and the door slid open.

"Here you are, Ms. Broussard. This elevator will take you directly to Mr. Clarke's office on the top floor." He moved to the side, his arm straight out to hold the door open. "Have a good evening, ma'am."

"Thank you." She stepped into the elevator and he moved away, allowing the door to slide shut.

The elevator rose, leaving her stomach on the first floor. Her grip tightened on the leather portfolio. This afternoon she'd spent several hours poking around on the Internet researching Clarke & Sons. With twin brothers, Ethan and Eric Clarke at the helm, it was a family-owned firm specializing in import and real estate, though they'd recently purchased a popular restaurant chain. In the last year alone the company had grossed more than ten million in profits.

But why would they have purchased her loan? The amount due was less than one hundred thousand, not even a flyspeck in comparison to their ambitious business ventures. What would a multimillion-dollar company gain by purchasing her loan unless they wanted her to default so they could assume her commercial property?

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. Squaring her shoulders, Holly stepped out into the lobby.

It was show time.

* * * * *

Ethan Clarke stared hard at the closed-circuit television as Holly Broussard entered the outer office. Her expression was both curious and wary as she looked around his secretary's domain. Her flame-red hair was scraped back into a casual twist at the nape of her neck and her black suit was impeccably cut to her hourglass figure. Her heels were so high he marveled she could walk at all.

Without a doubt she was one of the most beautiful women he'd ever seen. He'd first been introduced to her at a bondage scene in the Quarter last year. Even though she'd been on the arm of Greg Mains, her brilliant red locks and mile-long legs had

captivated Ethan. The moment their hands had touched he knew he had to claim her as his own and soon he would.

In the monitor, his secretary, Gwen, ushered Holly toward a chair in the outer office. She sank into a leather chair and when she crossed those spectacular legs, he thought his heart would stop.

He'd toyed with the idea of stealing her away from Mains. Knowing the man and his weaknesses, Ethan knew it wouldn't have taken much to accomplish his mission. Instead, he'd learned Holly had left her Master after he'd violated her trust and beaten her, leaving her both scarred and mistrustful of men in general.

Ethan had bided his time, just barely managing to resist the urge to kill Mains with his bare hands. The bastard deserved a taste of his own medicine, a whipping like none other, but Ethan was a patient man. He knew sooner or later fate would deal Mains a crushing blow.

If it were up to him, it would be sooner.

When he'd learned Mains was intent on selling Holly's business loan to a national bookstore chain. Ethan had jumped on the chance to purchase it. Granted, he'd had to pay more than double the face value of the loan but in his opinion she was more than worth it.

Holly hadn't been seen on the bondage scene since her breakup and he had it on good authority that she did little else than work and escape to her apartment over the bookstore. Even though his twin, Eric, had urged his brother to seduce Holly via the normal means, Ethan knew it wouldn't work with her. Through the grapevine he'd learned she'd made it clear to her friends she wasn't interested in pursuing a relationship with anyone right now. Whether this was a side effect of the broken relationship or the abuse she'd suffered, he wasn't sure, but he was determined to find out more about this woman.

Ethan switched off the monitor. Holly Broussard was the woman for him, she just didn't know it yet.

* * * * *

"Mr. Clarke." Holly held her hand out toward the man who now had control of her mortgage. He looked very familiar. Did he shop at her store?

"Please, call me Ethan." He took her hand in his and a jolt of awareness raced up her arm. His grip was firm, strong. "It is a pleasure to see you again, Ms. Broussard."

"Please, call me Holly." She tilted her head to the side. "Have we met before? Do you shop at the store?"

He shook his head. "I haven't had the pleasure of visiting Book Ends. We did meet though. Last year, I believe. It was at a social gathering in the Quarter." His smile was smooth, earthy and her toes curled in sheer pleasure of just looking at him.

"The Governor's Ball?"

"Ah, no. Nothing quite so auspicious, I'm afraid."

A particular glint in his eye alerted her to the fact he was probably referring to one of the bondage parties of which The Bastard had been so fond. Her stomach tightened. She'd always known at some point her after-hours activities would intrude upon her business life but it was too late to worry about it now. What's done was done.

"I hear you have an amazing bookstore," he continued. "I must make an attempt to pay you a visit sometime soon."

"Please do."

"Will you need me to stay, Mr. Clarke?" the sultry-voiced secretary spoke.

"No, thank you, Gwen. On your way home can you drop these at the post office?" With his focus on the stack of envelopes he was gathering together, Holly seized the opportunity to check him out.

He was tall, several inches taller than her own five-foot-ten and his muscular build fairly screamed *sex*! Dressed simply in dark slacks and a white dress shirt, he was a specimen to behold. His sleeves were rolled back to reveal tanned, muscular forearms liberally sprinkled with dark hair. His hair was black and neatly cut and styled, slightly

longer on the top allowing a single lock to fall against his forehead. His features were even and his nose sported a slight bump as if it had been broken at some point. But it was his mouth that garnered most of her attention. Generous and sensual, and if his face weren't quite so sharply hewn, it would have looked feminine. Holly felt curiously breathless just looking at him, a feeling she hadn't experienced in quite a while, since well before The Bastard had entered her life.

"Please, have a seat." He flashed her a thigh-melting smile. "Can I get you a drink? Wine perhaps?" He gestured toward a low-slung leather couch grouped with several comfortable-looking chairs.

"That would be lovely, thank you." Holly sank into a sumptuous armchair before opening her portfolio.

"I apologize for this last-minute meeting. This week has been very hectic and I wanted to talk to you about your loan and maybe set your mind at ease." He walked to a small refrigerator and removed a bottle of wine. "I'm sure you have quite a few questions."

"That I do. Obviously I'd like to go over the terms of the loan." She looked down at the list of questions she'd created earlier. "The current interest rate when the loan was held by —"

"The terms of the loan will not be changing." Ethan handed her a glass of white wine. "The interest rate, payment schedule and finer points of the contract will remain as they were. My legal department is already drafting up a new contract and you should have it by the end of next week. Once everything is signed and notarized we can move on with our lives."

Startled, Holly set her glass on the table without tasting it. He wasn't changing the terms of the mortgage? So his company hadn't purchased the loan in an attempt to acquire her property? Then why had they gone through the trouble to purchase it in the first place? Something very strange was going on here.

"Mr. Clarke —"

“Ethan, please.”

Holly smiled. “Ethan, I have to admit to being curious as to why your company decided to purchase the loan to begin with. The interest income is a mere pittance to a company the size of yours.”

He shrugged. “There are several reasons why I made this move, the question is, are you ready to hear them?”

Her stomach began to churn. Just what the heck did he mean by that? “Of course I’m ready to hear the reasons, I did ask.”

He gave her a slight smile. “My grandfather and his brothers created this company more than sixty years ago. They worked hard, put in long hours and they loved every minute of it. Clarke & Sons is still a family-run business and it will remain that way. We understand the importance of heritage and we strive to preserve it.

“My cousin Niki Chaubert, who is a customer of yours, was researching some properties in the Quarter and she heard that Mains was beginning negotiations with one of those chain bookstores. It appears the chain was very interested in gaining control of your loan and ultimately your building. Niki felt this was an underhanded thing to do so she called and gave me the details of your situation and here we are.”

Holly blinked. The Bastard had been negotiating to sell her loan to one of the chains? Her hands fisted. He knew how she felt about those characterless chain stores, the most persistent chain which she referred to as the Evil Empire. Considering his obvious animosity toward her it was the perfect move to make, as he knew it would have destroyed her business and broken her heart. She rubbed her hand over her stomach. Just the thought of someone hating her that much was enough to make her physically ill.

“Are you okay, Holly?” Ethan leaned forward. “Do you need a glass of water?”

“No, I think I need wine, lots of wine.” Holly picked up her glass and took a healthy swallow.

"I realize some of this information is a bit of a shock to you. Chances are that Mains hadn't informed you he was negotiating to sell the loan. This is just my opinion but it seems he was quite intent upon selling the building out from under you."

Feeling steadier, Holly closed her portfolio and set it aside. "Why do you feel that way?"

"Mains was dead-set on selling to the chain. It took quite a bit of legal maneuvering and outbidding to remove them from the picture."

Holly's grip tightened on her glass. "Outbidding? You mean the mortgage wasn't purchased for the balance due?"

"No. My negotiator had to perform an elaborate dance to seal the deal and the price was considerably more than the amount due."

She took a deep, steadying breath. If the mortgage had been purchased for more than its current value, how much would that increase her monthly payment?

"Ethan, just how much was the mortgage purchased for?" Her voice was squeaky.

He named a figure that made her gulp.

"That much?" The urge to run across the room and chug the bottle of wine now sitting on the bar was almost irresistible.

His brow rose. "You don't think your business, your heritage is worth that much money?"

She shook her head. "That isn't it at all. I can't put a price on what my business means to me. My reality is that in light of the recent expansions I simply can't afford to pay back that kind of money. We recently underwent some major renovations and for the next few months our cash flow is rather restricted—"

He held up his hand. "I've already told you the terms of your loan would not change, Holly. Your payments and everything else will remain the same."

"But the original loan won't cover this new amount. I cannot allow you to absorb the additional cost of the negotiated amount—"

"We have no intentions of doing so and I also realize you cannot possibly pay the amount we bought the loan for." He set his glass on the table. "This is why I'm prepared to make an unusual proposition. As I see it, we have two options on the table. You can agree to pay back the negotiated amount that Clarke & Sons paid out in order to acquire the loan, plus a modest interest rate. Once the loan is paid in full, the deed will be returned to you free and clear."

Holly's heart sank. There was no way she could pay that amount, not with the way the economy was headed. What would Katie and Melissa do if she let them down? What would she do if she lost the very roof over her head?

She had to clear her throat before she could speak. "And the second option?"

"The second option is a little more unusual. I am willing to write off the entire amount of the loan, more than a quarter of a million dollars, in exchange for a verbal agreement from you and three days of your time."

Her gaze narrowed. No company would be willing to undertake something this large unless it was illegal...or immoral. Her stomach cramped and she had a feeling she wasn't going to like the answer to the question, but she had to ask anyway.

"And what would that be?"

"Your agreement that you will become my lover for one weekend."

Chapter Three

She wanted to start screaming and never stop.

Holly stared at her computer screen, her back, shoulders and neck ached from the long hours she'd sat hunched over her keyboard going through the store financial records. She'd known even before she'd started this exhaustive review that the only way she could afford to pay the negotiated amount of the loan was to sell the business. The value of Book Ends as a business entity exceeded the loan amount by tens of thousands of dollars. On paper, she could sell the business and have more than enough to start over.

A sob caught in her throat.

Selling her heritage wasn't an option, as her pride wouldn't allow it. Her hands fisted. Over her dead body would she let The Bastard have the last word...

A burst of laughter from the store tore her attention away from her computer. It was a busy Friday morning and all of the tables in the café were filled to capacity. Melissa had a line of customers waiting to pay for their purchases while Katie and their part-time help, Serena, assisted those in the aisles.

This was all she'd ever wanted—to run the bookstore as her parents had for so many years. She loved working with the stock for the sheer joy of holding a book in her hands. The thrill of discovering a new author or helping someone find a book they'd been searching for was immeasurable. She couldn't imagine doing anything else with her life.

As much as she needed to breathe or eat, she needed Book Ends.

Propped against her utilitarian telephone was the gray linen business card Ethan had given her last night. All she had to do was pick up the phone, make one call and her future along with the employment future of her junior partners and employees

would be secured. But what was she going to tell them? Katie and Melissa were more than just partners, they were her best friends and confidantes. How could she ever explain what she was about to do?

You can't...

She rubbed the tense spot between her eyes. The thought of having sex with a man, any man, made her half-sick to her stomach. Greg's abuse may have left physical scars, but the ones that couldn't be seen were far deeper and more paralyzing than the ones on her skin. She dropped her arm. She didn't know if she'd ever be able to trust enough to take a man into her bed anytime soon.

What choice do you have? Money doesn't grow on trees so unless you plan on winning the lottery next week...

She groaned. She had to be crazy to seriously entertain the idea of spending the weekend in bed with a complete stranger. She picked up the card.

It was funny but Ethan didn't *feel* like a stranger to her. According to him they'd met at a party though she didn't remember the incident. Oddly enough she'd felt at ease with him from the moment she'd entered his office, until he brought up the sex angle, that is.

She bit her lip, her gaze scanned the raised black letters. What kind of a man would want to have sex with a woman for a quarter of a million dollars? It was mind-boggling to say the least and she wasn't entirely sure she was up to the task. None of her previous lovers had ever had any complaints when it came to sex but that didn't mean she was worth *that* much money in the sack.

Why would a man as handsome as he even want to have sex with a woman at least five years his senior? Surely he could find his own women without having to buy her? Was he some kind of pervert, was that why he'd made her this offer? If he'd attended one of the party scenes, Ethan could be into any kind of kink. What if she ended up in the same position she'd found herself in with The Bastard?

Tied up...

Helpless...

Unable to defend herself...

She sighed.

Lying to herself would be pointless. She was reluctant to venture into a sexual relationship with anyone, let alone a complete stranger. Her relationship with The Bastard had turned into a nightmare and she'd never seen it coming. She'd trusted him implicitly and had ended up scarred both physically and mentally for her trouble. At this point she wasn't sure she could ever trust a man enough to have sex with him, let alone tie her up.

They'd had a Master-submissive relationship from the very beginning. The ultimate turn-on for her was the thrill of being restrained and submitting to a strong, dominant male. Not that she had anything against straight, vanilla sex—far from it. It was fine on certain occasions, but it was bondage and the concept that the sexual decisions were removed from her control and she was purely a vessel for pleasure. It was the only way she'd ever achieved multiple orgasms with a partner.

Ethan could be just like The Bastard...

It was very possible. Maybe he'd met her at a party and decided she was an anything-goes kind of woman and that was why he'd procured the loan in the first place. He'd also assured her that the decision regarding their loan arrangements was strictly up to her. She could either pay the astronomical amount of the note or submit to his less than business-like proposal.

But could she have sex with a complete stranger?

She bit her lower lip. There was no doubt Ethan was hot, really hot. He was sexy, rich, intelligent and straight. What more could a girl ask for?

Trust...

She sighed. Regardless of what she really wanted, Katie and Melissa were counting on her to secure the roof over their heads. Though she was reluctant, she was a practical woman who saw the writing on the wall.

Holly reached for the phone.

* * * * *

Ethan's attention was focused on his computer screen when the phone rang. Without shifting his gaze, he hit the speaker button.

"Yes?"

"Ms. Broussard called while you were out to lunch." Gwen's sexy voice floated out of the speaker. "She says she will accept your proposal."

He sat back and a rush of pleasure spread through his limbs to center in his groin. "Gwen, please contact her and make arrangements to send the car to her apartment at 7 p.m. this evening."

"Yes, sir. Is there anything else you need?"

"Not a thing. Thank you."

He hit the speaker button and disconnected. After all this time he could hardly believe it was true. The lovely Holly Broussard in his house, in his bed for three whole days. Ever since the night they'd met he'd dreamed of the moment he could stake his claim.

His blood heated at the thought of her coming to his bed. Yes, his methods were drastic and if his twin brother had any inkling of what he was doing he'd go through the roof. Ethan was personally going to have to eat a quarter of a million dollars just to pull this off, but that was superfluous in the face of being able to claim the woman who'd captivated his imagination for the past year. He had a feeling that she was *The One*.

* * * * *

The boxes had arrived just minutes before Holly was due to leave work. In a hurry to get her bags packed, she'd tucked them under her arm and dashed up the steps to her apartment over the store. She only had an hour before the car would be arriving and she still had a great deal to accomplish.

Laying the boxes on the kitchen table, she removed the top of the first one. A card lay on a bed of scarlet tissue paper and it read, *Looking forward to seeing you this evening,* E in black, masculine scrawl. A cool sweat broke out on her lip and she set aside the card. Opening the tissue paper, her eyes widened when she saw the blood-red roses. There were at least two dozen of them.

She trailed her fingers over the delicate blooms, marveling at their sheer beauty. The only time The Bastard had sent her flowers was after she'd broken off their relationship. Not once had he thought about sending them while they'd been together. What a jerk.

Holly set aside the flowers. The smaller box had the label of a high-end lingerie store on one corner. She removed the lid then opened the ivory tissue paper, her eyes widened when she saw the emerald green silk. It was a short chemise with delicate spaghetti straps and a saucy, fluted hem. The bodice was trimmed with tiny clear beads and accented with embroidery. Nestled beneath the garment was the matching thong.

Ethan definitely had class. This was quite an expensive gift for a temporary sex toy. Holly rubbed the silk between her fingers. This wasn't quite what she'd imagined when she'd agreed to this arrangement. She'd figured there would be very little seduction involved as, let's face it, the moment she'd picked up the phone she'd become a sure thing.

She dropped the silk. If she didn't know better she'd suspect he was trying to seduce her.

Chapter Four

Holly was convinced she was going to throw up in the middle of the living room. She pressed her damp palm against her stomach and said a silent prayer that she wouldn't disgrace herself. She'd arrived at Ethan's house just minutes ago to be greeted by a friendly woman who'd introduced herself as, Ellen, the housekeeper. She'd led her here to await her host.

Looking down at the beautiful Oriental rug, Holly hoped vomit wouldn't ruin it. Rubbing a damp palm over her queasy stomach, she turned her attention to the room.

It was warm, cozy with a fire in the large fireplace and walls lined with bookshelves stuffed to overflowing. The furniture looked comfortable with an abundance of oversized pillows scattered about.

To calm her nerves, she drifted over to one of the shelves, her gaze automatically scanning the titles. It would appear that her host was very well-read. The collection of recent bestsellers, classics and technical manuals would make any bibliophile envious.

"Find anything interesting?"

Holly jumped when the deep masculine voice sounded behind her. She spun around, her cheeks going from ice-cold to blazing in seconds. Dressed in black from head to toe, Ethan stood in the doorway watching her.

"Occupational hazard." She nodded toward the shelves. "You have an impressive collection."

He walked into the room, his movements, lazy, easy. "You could say that books are a passion of mine."

He was dressed casually in black jeans, a turtleneck and suede moccasins. His dark hair, which had been perfectly styled in the office, was ruffled and a thick lock tumbled over his forehead giving him a boyish appeal. His blue eyes were sharp, intensely

focused upon her and she could almost feel the heat of his gaze. Without the suit and the neatly styled hair, he possessed a raw, edgy, sexy quality she hadn't picked up on during their meeting.

This man was more than hot, he was blazing.

She cleared her throat. "Um, yes. I could say the same thing. Books are a passion with me as well."

His smile was faint. "And in a way it is books that bring us together. You seek to save your store and I seek to save a New Orleans treasure." He gestured toward the bar. "Can I fix you something to drink?"

"Please." She sank into a chair before the fireplace. The heat from the fire was welcome. "My store means a great deal to me and I practically grew up in that building. After school I would go there and my mother would be waiting in the doorway every day. She spoiled me with chocolate chip cookies and free range of the shelves."

He walked toward her bearing two glasses of wine. "I can see why you would be so attached to it. Memories like that are a precious thing and they should be preserved if at all possible."

When he handed her the glass their fingers brushed, sending a bolt of electricity up her arm. Startled, she jerked away. His gaze sharpened and she knew he hadn't missed her reaction but to her relief, he moved away without commenting.

"Holly, I admit I was a little surprised you accepted my offer." He picked up a fireplace poker and began rearranging the burning logs. "I know you recently left a relationship and that it ended badly for you. In light of that I would imagine you are a little reticent about this situation." The golden flames cast shadows over his sharp cheekbones giving him a vaguely Heathcliff-esque air.

She looked away, fixing her gaze on the pale gold of her wine. "You've done your homework."

"You expected any less from a co-president of multimillion-dollar company?"

"No, I guess not." Normally Holly was a very private person but for some reason it didn't bother her that this man knew about her relationship with The Bastard. "And what did you learn about me?" She took a sip from her glass, enjoying the crisp flavor of the ice-cold chardonnay.

"That you dated Greg Mains for approximately a year and you left him when his play became too rough."

Their gazes met and she gave him a slight nod. "Well, you are thorough."

His lips tightened. "I'm very sorry that happened to you as you deserve so much better. A Master's first and most important responsibility is the safety and welfare of his submissive, not his own lust."

Holly's gaze danced away. "I can't argue with you there."

"I give you my word that won't occur between us. I promise you when you're with me you will be safe as you'll call the shots." He gave her a slight smile. "In bed at least."

Her gut tightened. "So, you expect a Master-submissive relationship with me. This weekend."

"I have no expectations here, Holly. I understand that you would be reluctant to enter into this type of relationship with a man you know, let alone a complete stranger." He replaced the poker. "However, I would like the opportunity to remind you what a Master, a real Master, can do for his lover."

Judging from the seriousness of his expression, Ethan believed everything he was telling her. But did she believe him? Could she trust this man with both her mind and her body?

She took another sip of her wine, allowing the tension to build before she spoke. "And what if I say no to that arrangement?"

"Then we negotiate."

She blinked. This wasn't quite what she'd expected. She was grateful that Ethan was being upfront with her and she did appreciate that aspect of his personality. While

Holly couldn't deny her desire to learn more about this man, she also wouldn't deny the fear she held in her heart. Right now both emotions weighed heavily upon her.

"How about this as an added incentive?" Ethan walked over to his desk and picked up a beige folder. "Here are the loan papers along with the deed to the property which you'd put up for collateral. I will hand these over to you this evening, no questions asked if you agree to a submissive-Master relationship."

Shocked, all Holly could do was stare at him for a moment. He would do that? Just let her walk away with no questions asked? Was this man totally insane?

"I want you to walk into this arrangement knowing that at any time you feel uncomfortable or that I have abused our relationship, you are free to leave and your debt will be erased."

"If I get uncomfortable I can just walk away?" Doubt laced her words. "You would eat a quarter of a million dollars, just like that?"

"In these circumstances, yes I would." He walked toward her with the folder in his hand. "I want you to trust me and if it takes handing you the keys to securing your future then so be it."

The folder was so tantalizingly close, her financial freedom and the future of her business was within her grasp. She reached for it, surprised to see that her hand was shaking. Opening the folder, her gaze skimmed over the papers. It was as he'd said, the deed to her property was in the folder along with the release paperwork. Little cellophane arrows pointed to the lines where her signature was needed, Ethan's end was already taken care of.

She closed the folder. He was showing her that he trusted her to carry out her end of the bargain, now the question was, could she afford to grant him the same amount of trust?

With her gaze fixed on the folder, she laid it in her lap, her folded hands resting on top. "And you'll listen to me when and if I tell you to stop?" The words came from a distance as if it were someone else who was speaking.

“Without hesitation.”

Her body felt cold and shaky while her palms grew moist. Even though she was hesitant, she realized that she wanted this badly. For once and for all she needed to rid herself of the fear hanging over her head that The Bastard had inflicted upon her. To feel a man’s hands on her body once more, to submit her sensual side to a man’s pleasure thus securing her own, and knowing all the while she was safe with him, would go a long way to healing her scarred psyche and Ethan was just the man to help her.

“Only for this weekend.” Her lips felt oddly numb as she spoke.

“If that is your wish.”

Did he hesitate before answering? Their gazes met. “That is what I wish. This relationship will go no further than Sunday evening and after that you will make no attempt to call or pressure me in any way.”

His brow arched. “I see you’ve thought about this.”

She shook her head. “I just want to ensure we’re on the same page before we begin. I don’t want anything but complete honesty and understanding between us.”

He raised his glass. “As you wish.”

She swallowed hard. “Okay, it’s a deal.” Her voice was faint.

“You won’t regret this, Holly.” He reached for her, taking her hand. “This will be a mutually satisfying experience for both of us.”

Her skin tingled where his fingers touched hers. Ethan raised her hand to his mouth and her breath left in a rush when his lips touched her knuckles. Her knees felt liquid and her body went warm, damp.

“What would you like your safe word to be, Holly?” he whispered against her skin.

“M-my middle name, Eleanor.”

“Lovely name.” He stepped back, pulling her with him. “Come, let’s head upstairs and make ourselves more comfortable.”

Like a security blanket, Holly tucked the folder under her arm. With her hand nestled in the crook of his arm, she walked beside him on wobbly legs. He led her up a wide staircase and into the upper hall. The floors were covered in heavy canvas drop cloths, and scaffolds lined one wall.

"Please excuse the mess, the ceilings are being redone up here. The spring rains really did a number on the ceiling as the roof sprang a few small leaks. Nothing like owning a house that is several hundred years old, something is always falling apart."

Holly smiled. "I am familiar with the syndrome. It seems like I'm constantly repairing my building as well."

"And you live above the store?"

"I do. When I took over the business I converted part of the loft area into an apartment for myself. Saved on commuting time."

He chuckled. "I'll bet." Ethan led her through a set of double doors and into a small sitting room. "This is the master suite. Your room is to the right and mine is here on the left." He pointed to each door.

Startled, Holly looked up at him. "We aren't sharing a room?"

"I'm leaving that decision totally up to you." His expression was enigmatic. "If you feel comfortable in doing so, I would love to have you in my bed for the entire time you're under my roof. If you don't feel comfortable in doing that then you can retreat to your room for some privacy and quiet time."

Touched, she had to clear her throat before she could respond. "Thank you, I appreciate that."

She slipped her hand from his arm and walked toward the fireplace where a fire was already warming the room. A chaise lounge and a wing chair were situated before the crackling fire, and between them was a coffee table with a tray covered with a silk scarf.

"Have you much experience as a Master?" She took a gulp of her wine to steady her nerves. She perched on the edge of the wing chair, the folder clutched in one hand and her wineglass in the other.

"Quite." He stretched out on the chaise looking every inch the master of the house, crossing his legs at the ankle. "I've had three long-term submissives and several other casual relationships."

"And what happened with your last submissive?" She placed her precious folder on the floor next to her chair, reluctant to release it but knowing that her death grip on it was doing nothing to loosen her nerves.

"The lady fell in love with my best friend." He shrugged. "We weren't in love and I'm the last person to stand in the way of another's happiness. I threw his bachelor party last year and they're expecting their first child in September."

"That was very nice of you."

"It was the least I could do." He smiled. "It seems to me that, as your Master, I should be the one asking you the questions."

"Go ahead."

"What turns you on sexually?"

Holly almost choked on her wine.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She nodded and took a few seconds to regain her breath. "Well, that was direct."

He shrugged. "That's how I like to live my life. Life is too short to dance around intimate topics and I prefer to tackle issues head-on."

She nodded. "As do I."

"Besides, how can I please you if I don't know what you enjoy in bed?" He sipped his wine. "Do you enjoy being bound?"

Her cheeks warmed and she squirmed in her chair. "Very much."

"Spanked?"

"Yes." Her nipples beaded, the soft lace of her bra chafed the tender tips.

"How about anal sex?"

A strong rush of liquid warmth ran through her body and she didn't trust her voice, so instead of speaking she nodded before tossing back the remains of her wine.

"This pleases me very much." Ethan finished his wine before setting the glass aside. He crossed his arms over his stomach, his gaze intent upon her. "Please remove your panties, Holly."

After years of being a submissive, it never occurred to her to not do as he bid. Rising from the chair, she pulled up her skirt to shimmy the emerald green thong down her legs. Stepping out of them, she left them lying on the carpet.

His look was approving. "Very nice. You may sit down."

Holly sat and primly crossed her legs, wondering if the flesh between her legs was wetter than her slick palms. Arousal and nervousness warred in her stomach and she regretted chugging the last of her wine.

"While you're in my home you'll be forbidden to wear panties. I enjoy knowing that my woman is bare beneath her clothing. It excites me."

"Now, I want you to touch yourself while I watch." He leaned forward to remove the silk scarf from the tray to reveal an array of sexual devices. There were dildos of varying sizes in materials from glass to latex to hard plastic. Several vibrators along with butt plugs of varying sizes were lined up beside and a fresh tube of lubricant.

Her mind screamed for her to run from this situation even as her body went liquid and her sex grew wet. Arousal was winning the battle against her nervousness. Slowly, she spread her legs, draping one over the arm of the chair. Shifting forward, her hips rested on the edge of the chair, facing Ethan.

Just those few, non-threatening movements had her sex weeping for release. Just the feel of his hot gaze moving over her body and she was ready to come. Blowing out a long breath, she steadied herself before pulling up her skirt to bare her sex to his gaze.

She knew what he'd see as she'd had a Brazilian bikini wax only a week ago leaving her mound nearly bare with only a strip of silky red curls.

At the first touch of her fingers, she sighed and pressed her hips harder against the chair. Moving deeper, she began stroking her clit, sending lightning bolts of sensual excess through her body. She stroked her clit and her vagina clenched, desperate for something, anything to penetrate her. With her free hand she reached between her thighs and entered herself with a finger. A soft moan escaped her when her vagina clamped down as if to draw it deeper.

Adding a second finger, her hips bucked against the increased sensation and a soft whimper broke from her throat. After a few strokes she knew it felt good but it just wasn't quite enough to give her the release she craved.

Removing her fingers, she sat up and inspected the toys on the tray before choosing a sleek, glass dildo. In the depths of the glass, colored strands swirled, red, purple and gold in the firelight. The cool glass would feel like heaven against her heated flesh. She took a small amount of the lubricant and began oiling up the smooth glass, all the while very aware of the man sitting across from her. Once it was slick, she leaned back in her seat.

Spreading her pussy wide, she settled the cold glass against her vagina and pushed. She moaned as the dildo stretched her flesh as it penetrated her, teasing the nerve endings into awareness. It was smaller than most men's cocks she'd experienced but it had been so long, too long since she'd taken a man into her body it felt like she was a virgin all over again. Her inner muscles contracted and she squirmed against the icy invasion of her glass lover. It was hard, impossibly hard and it stretched her just enough to jolt her body into responsiveness. Grasping the base, she began to ride the glass cock.

What would it be like to be possessed by the man watching her? Was he a tender, thoughtful Master or did he enjoy the darker, more dangerous side of the bondage scene? Her gaze moved to his groin where his hardened cock pressed against his jeans.

Judging from the size of the bulge, Ethan Clarke was a big man among men. Her gaze met his and she licked her lips.

Very aware of his hot, dark gaze upon her, she leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Working her glass lover in and out of her pussy she began the climb to release. Stroking her clit with her free hand, her breathing grew ragged and her body begged for release. With every thrust, her greedy cunt, thrilled at being relieved of its forced celibacy, sucked at the dildo. Her inner muscles clamped down even as her back arched, a cry broke from her mouth as shudders racked her body.

Chapter Five

Holly tilted her head and allowed the hot water from the showerhead to rinse the shampoo from her hair. She felt...good. No, more than good.

She felt, empowered.

Having Ethan play the voyeur as she'd pleased herself had been liberating in a way that was difficult to contemplate. It was as if with the simple act of taking satisfaction in her body's responses, she'd reclaimed something that had been stolen from her. When The Bastard had taken away her choice by ignoring her use of the safe word, he'd not only damaged her trust in her own judgment, he'd also destroyed her faith in men.

In handing her the loan papers and deed to her property, Ethan had earned her trust and ultimately granted her a complete sense of freedom. Though Holly realized she wasn't healed, for the first time in many months she felt as if the darkness had been dispelled, if only a little bit. She was truly alive and well on her way to moving on with her life.

Holly hugged the knowledge to her heart as she finished rinsing her hair. Her mama had always maintained that the best revenge was gained by living well, and wouldn't it burn The Bastard's butt to know that she was doing so much better emotionally—

She heard a clatter in the bathroom just before the door to the oversized shower cubicle opened. She gasped and spun around, looking for something with which to cover herself but she only had a washcloth and a bar of soap.

Ethan stood in the doorway, his heated gaze moved over her damp, soapy flesh. "You're very beautiful."

She shivered. "Thank you." With him she felt beautiful for the first time in a long while. She dropped the washcloth.

"How do you feel about water sports?" A glint entered his eye that ignited a slow buzz of heat in her blood. Ethan reached for his belt buckle to release it before opening the front of his jeans. She swallowed hard, her insides going liquid-soft when he removed his turtleneck to reveal a hard, sculpted, masculine chest. He wasn't a bodybuilder but he was strong, sturdy and well-defined. Muscles rippled across his chest and belly and her fingers ached to explore their terrain.

"I feel...wet," she whispered.

"Mission accomplished."

She licked her dry lips when he removed the rest of his clothing. Jutting proudly from a thatch of black hair, his cock was a thing of beauty. Long and thick, it begged for the caress of her tongue. He stepped into the shower with her and her breathing grew shallow.

"I want you very badly, Holly." He stood near her, water sluicing over their bodies so close yet so far apart. "I want to touch every inch of you, with my hands." He skimmed his fingers over her shoulder then the plump curve of her breast. She whimpered when he thumbed her nipple. "With my mouth."

Oh my god...

He leaned forward and brushed his lips against her jaw. "I want to taste you as you come against my mouth."

Her knees began to shake and she put her hands on his shoulders for balance.

"Kiss me," she whispered.

"With pleasure."

With her back against the slick wall of the shower and his big, hard body pressing into her, his head dipped low. His mouth was hard against hers, strong and possessive

as his tongue touched hers. She moaned deep in her throat when he began sucking at her flesh.

Her nails dug into his shoulder before he removed them. Pulling her arms over her head, he pinned her to the wall with one hand. A wave of arousal slammed through her body when he pressed into her, completing the illusion of her helplessness in the face of his need. He kissed his way down her throat and she arched to give him better access. The scent of his aftershave mixed with hot, male arousal and soap, was causing her to melt both inside and out.

“You’re so sweet.” He licked the hollow of her throat. “Hot.”

Her breathing hitched and he leaned into her, crowding her against the wall. Her nipples tightened and they ached to be touched. She barely resisted the urge to rub against him like a cat in heat. The flesh between her thighs ached even though only minutes before she’d experienced a mind-blowing orgasm in the sitting room.

He bit her shoulder and the resulting rush of arousal told her once would never be enough with this man.

“I want you to touch me,” he gritted out. His eyes were dark with heat and his jaw was hard. He released his grip on her wrists and guided her hands to his cock where it was nestled against her belly. He pulled back slightly to give her room to move, his hands coming to rest on her hips.

Her fingers curled around his cock and he moaned when she gave him a gentle squeeze. He was as hard as steel and hot as the late afternoon sun. She ran her thumbs over the broad tip and he shuddered. She pressed closer and rubbed her nipples against his chest and his groan almost sent her over the edge. Cupping his balls, she moved against him like a cat, dragging her nipples against his chest. The sensations made her head spin. Even though it had been a long time since she’d had a man, she was sure she’d never experienced something quite this primal.

He took her by the waist then lifted her until her breasts were level with his mouth. She wrapped her legs around him like a vine and braced her hands on his shoulders.

He caught one hardened bud and gave it a firm suckle. Her head fell back and she cried out as sensation zinged from her breasts down to her mound in one fell swoop.

"Brace yourself, I'm coming inside you," he gritted out.

Her mind melted at the erotic image. He then worked his arms under her legs and grabbed her ass, holding her in place. He pressed her knees up toward her chest and with her legs over his arms it left her spread and vulnerable.

"You're mine, Holly."

He entered her with a slow thrust that stole her breath. Her body stretched to envelop him and when he began to thrust, the friction was incredible. The position he'd arranged gave her no defenses against him. His thick cock worked her flesh, his thrusts deep and rhythmic and she took every one, all the while begging for more.

Tension curled just below the skin then spun wildly out of control. She felt her climax coalesce low in her belly as his cock stroked her clit with each thrust. Her nails dug into his shoulders and he vaulted her over the edge. Stars sparked against her eyelids as her release tore through her body.

She arched her back and let loose with a wild scream of completion then promptly burst into tears.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry." Her words were muffled against the thick collar of her bathrobe.

"I'm not." Still nude, Ethan scooped her up in his arms and carried her into the bedroom. She smelled good, of soap and warm female flesh. "You obviously needed to cry or it wouldn't have happened."

"Talk about lousy timing," she sniffed.

He chuckled. "No, lousy timing would have been about thirty seconds earlier." He set her on the edge of the bed. "That might have deflated my..." he looked down at his cock, "...ego."

Giggling, she slipped under the covers. "Somehow I doubt that."

"You think?" He moved around the room and turned off the lights. "It could happen." Climbing into bed with her, he was gratified when she immediately snuggled against him.

"When did we meet? What party was it?"

"It was Vance's annual Halloween party." He slid his arm around her shoulders and rested his cheek against her fragrant head. "You were dressed as a harem girl in emerald green and sapphire blue."

"That was a while back." She yawned. "You remembered me after all that time?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to say that a man always remembered the moment he fell in love, but he couldn't say it, not yet.

"That dress of yours didn't leave a great deal to the imagination. I always remember a great rack."

"You're such a *guy*." She gave a sleepy laugh and her arm snaked across his stomach. "Lucky me."

"Go to sleep, slave. I have plans for you later."

She gave a sleepy purr, then snuggled closer. Within moments she'd fallen asleep.

Ethan lay in the darkness, his arm around Holly, their bodies separated by her thick terrycloth robe. He hadn't been kidding when he'd said her dress hadn't left much to the imagination. For months, the thought of her nubile body wrapped in that sheer green material had been enough to give him a king-sized erection. Nothing, nothing in his wildest imagination had prepared him for the reality of having Holly in his arms. His fantasies hadn't even come close to how making love to the woman had been.

Magical.

He ran his fingers over the curve of her shoulder. When he'd heard what Mains had done to her, it had taken all of his restraint to prevent himself from tracking the bastard down and throttling him where he stood. No woman should ever be hurt by a man, and certainly not his woman.

Ethan kissed her forehead and inhaled the soft, floral fragrance of her hair. His eyes slid closed, contentment flooded his body. He had her exactly where he wanted her, now he just needed to deal a crushing blow of retribution to Greg Mains.

Chapter Six

"It's time."

Rubbing her eyes, Holly rolled onto her back. The sheets were tangled beneath her and her body resonated with a lovely sense of bonelessness that came from having really excellent sex. She shoved her tumbled hair out of her eyes.

Dressed in black sweatpants and nothing else, Ethan towered over the bed. His hair was sleep-tousled and he looked sexy in a rumped, I-just-got-out-of-bed-after-having-wild-sex kind of a way.

Yummy. Just the way she liked her men.

"What is it time for?" She glanced at the clock, her eyes widening when she saw the time. "It's only 2 a.m., it's time to sleep."

"On the contrary, it's time to play."

The playful, sensual gleam in his eyes ignited an answering heat in her body. Slipping from the bed she snagged a T-shirt from her bag before falling into step behind him. Ethan waited for her to put on some slippers before he led her the short distance down the hallway to a door at the end. Opening the door, he stepped aside to allow her to enter first.

It was pitch-black and the scent of vanilla and leather teased her senses. He hit the wall switch and muted lighting flooded the room causing her to blink. When her eyes adjusted, her breath caught as she took in the chamber of delights he'd led her to.

Erotic artwork depicting various sexual acts with bondage and discipline being the predominant theme adorned the ivory walls. An impressive selection of whips, paddles and blindfolds along with some devices she'd never seen before were neatly arranged in a mahogany armoire on the far wall. A padded massage table with leather restraints was situated next to it along with something that looked like a padded sawhorse. In the

opposite corner was an ornate wrought iron cage large enough to contain a full-sized adult. In the center of the room, a sling was hung from the ceiling and around it there were several leather couches.

"Come." Ethan took her hand and led her to a massage table, her feet sinking into the plush red carpeting. "I think you will find this to your liking." The table was equipped with leather restraint devices for the hands and feet. At the sight of the straps, her body went cold.

"I'm not sure I'm ready." Her voice came out a little wobbly.

"Holly, you don't have to be afraid." He raised her hand and touched her knuckles with his mouth. "We won't do anything you aren't ready for." He released her hand then picked up one of the wrist restraints. "These are probably a little different than what you've used before now. Instead of being secured with a buckle this one has a pin." He slipped the restraint around his own wrist and slid the metal pin into place to secure it. "You can release this type of restraint without my assistance and this leaves you in total control of what happens."

Control.

Ethan removed the cuff with his bound hand then allowed Holly to inspect it. She slipped on the cuff and saw that she could easily release herself with the same hand. Ingenious. There was no way he could keep her prisoner with a design such as this. With her heart in her throat she gave him a tentative nod.

"That's my girl."

Holly removed her T-shirt then allowed Ethan to help her onto the table. The padded leather was cool beneath her buttocks and she shivered.

"It will warm up soon enough." He kissed the inside of her wrists as he secured each one. When he moved to fasten a restraint to one of her legs, he skimmed his hand down the inside of her thigh. "You're an exquisite submissive, Holly." He slipped the restraint around her ankle. "More so than I'd ever dared to dream."

"Dreamed?" She checked to see that she could still reach the release pins on her wrists before giving the restraints a tentative tug. "Why on earth would you be dreaming of me?"

He gave her a wicked grin. "I'm telling you, it was that green dress of yours." He kissed her knee sending a jolt of sensation dancing along her nerves. "It has haunted me."

She laughed. "I still have it at home if you want me to bust it out for you."

He gave her a mock leer. "Now, that's what I'm talking about. That dress and a pair of high heels—what more could a man desire from his woman?"

She laughed and he picked up her other leg. Giving it the same treatment, he teased and caressed her flesh until she was bound to the table with her thighs splayed wide.

"You're utterly responsive." Her vagina clenched when she felt the gentle brush of his fingertips against the narrow strip of pubic hair. "Are you comfortable?"

She flexed her shoulders. "Yes, Master."

"Very good, my pet. It is very important for you to understand that in my domain, you must ask permission for release." He trailed his fingers over the soft swell of her belly then between her breasts. His eyes were hot with sensual promise. "You must not come without my permission and, just because you ask, doesn't necessarily mean that you shall receive." He swirled his finger around one erect nipple. "Do you understand?"

"Yes," her voice came out as a hiss. When he plucked the hardened bead, her vagina clenched. While an edge of doubt lingered in the back of her mind, arousal was quickly overshadowing what few fears she harbored about being vulnerable to this man.

"Do you know what really turns me on?" he asked.

Her tongue felt thick and she didn't trust herself to make a coherent sentence so she opted to shake her head.

"Seeing you, like this." He touched her nipple, a faint caress that earned a sound of protest from her when he moved away. "Your hair spread out on the table, your body so open to me and ready to slake my desires. You're so beautiful, I almost forget how to breathe."

He bent and covered her nipple with his mouth, suckling one then the other. A sigh escaped her and she allowed her eyes to close as she gave herself over to his masterful mouth. In a silent invitation she arched her back, pressing her buttocks into the soft leather.

He moved his hand between her thighs as he sucked harder on her nipple. Stroking the inside of her thigh, he released her nipple to trace a damp path of fire over her abdomen with his tongue, pausing only to nip at her belly button. He stroked his fingers over her pussy and she gave a low moan.

"Soon I will be inside you again," he spoke against her lower belly.

"Yes, Master —"

Her words were cut off when he entered her with one finger. Twisting against her restraints, she was both delighted and dismayed to find that they held her almost immobile. Her fists knotted as he began to finger-fuck her.

"Your pussy is so sweet." His voice was strained. "I want to sink my cock into you. I want to make you come beneath me until thoughts of any other man having you are obliterated from your memory."

At the first heated lap of his tongue over her clit, her hips arched as far as the restraints would allow. She moaned and tried to spread her thighs even farther to invite him in but the restraints held her in place. Never had she been so aroused yet frustrated at the same time.

"My God, but you're the perfect submissive and I have to have you," he muttered. Stripping out of his sweatpants, he climbed onto the table between her thighs.

"Hurry," she panted.

She sucked in a harsh breath when he lowered his body over hers, and the broad head of his cock brushed the opening of her aching pussy. With his arms braced on either side of her body, his eyes were closed as he entered her inch by slow inch. His expression was dreamy and he pulled back slightly, before pushing in further until he was buried to the hilt. He pulled out then entered her again with a slow, rolling thrust. His cock hit her sweet spot and she gave a long, low moan, needing something yet not quite sure what she wanted other than release.

“Please, Master. Harder,” she whispered.

He picked up the pace, thrusting in and out in deep, even strokes. The table squeaked in unison to his movements and Holly lost herself in his effortless sensuality. Arousal shimmered over her flesh in arcs of light and soon she was beyond coherent thought other than the need for release.

“More, please Master,” she panted.

He looked down at her, his expression strained yet tender. “Greedy wench. I think you forget who is in charge here.”

He stopped thrusting and pulled out completely. She opened her mouth to protest until she felt him release her from the ankle restraints. Overjoyed that she could move, Holly wrapped her legs around his waist after he entered her again with a slow thrust. She gave an earthy moan as he began hammering into her, back and forth in fast, deep movements, each one stroking her clit at just the right angle. His expression grew hard, perspiration dotted his brow and his eyes darkened as he fucked her into mindless, animal awareness of him.

Her eyes slid shut as the pressure built low and hard in her belly, her pussy and thighs. She was unable to do anything other than feel what he gave her, the incredible pleasure his body brought to hers. Without warning her orgasm broke over her like the sea against the rocks. Lightning streaks blinded her closed eyes and she came around him in a wave of pleasure.

Slowly reality reasserted itself and she opened her eyes. His upper body was braced on his arms, his expression was dark, sensual. A slow smile curved his handsome sculpted mouth.

"It looks like a punishment is in order. You didn't ask permission for release, my beautiful slave."

* * * * *

Holly sat on her heels in the center of the bed staring at her lover. "You want me to do what?"

Ethan stretched his arms behind his head, his posture one of complete relaxation. He was nude, his big body sprawled in the midst of the rumpled sheets and she was struck by the urge to lick him from head to toe.

Too bad he was intent upon spanking her right now.

"You disobeyed a direct order from your Master and now, you must take your punishment. We'll begin once you present yourself to me."

She cocked her head. "What do you mean by that?"

"Lay across my knees so that I can see your beautiful ass."

Her stomach quivered and her indecision must have shown on her face.

"Holly, what is your safe word?"

"E-Eleanor."

"Good girl. Do you wish to use it now?"

She licked her dry lips, her heart thundered in her chest. She shook her head then slowly crawled across the bed. Lying facedown across his thighs, she balanced her chin on her crossed arms on the edge of the bed and tried to relax.

"That's better."

His warm hands landed on the small of her back before following the curve of her rump. She tensed when they reached the thin scar that marred her buttocks. He said

nothing, only shifting forward until she felt the tender touch of his mouth on the narrow mark.

"He should be flayed alive for this." Ethan's voice was little more than a rage-filled whisper.

Tears stung her eyes and she blinked to prevent them from falling. "Trust me, karma will deal with The Bastard in its own leisurely time."

"With a little help it can be sooner rather than later."

She chuckled. "He really isn't worth the effort. Revenge is a bitter dish that will only serve to lower me to his standards should I give in to it."

He nipped at the curve of her buttock, eliciting a squeak from her. "You're a smart woman, Holly."

She grinned. "I'd like to think so."

His big hands resumed their leisurely stroking. "I don't relish punishing you, my pet."

His impressive erection pressed into her hip, belied his words. She gave a silky squirm, deliberately pressing into his cock. "Somehow I doubt that."

"Hush, my impudent slave." He gave her a gentle slap on the butt. "You must understand who the Master is in this relationship. It is I who give you the commands and you who must obey them." He began to rub her buttocks and upper thighs in long, sensual strokes. "I want you to be nothing less than totally willing when you come to me, Holly."

Need streaked through her body when he nudged her thighs apart leaving her exposed. The air was cool against her damp flesh. She squirmed, helpless and needy, so very needy.

"Yes, Master."

He gave her a gentle spank on one buttock, then the other. Her flesh heated and she squirmed with pleasure. Her back arched, pushing her buttocks even higher and her eyes drifted shut and she gave a soft purr...

His hand came down again, only this time it wasn't quite so gentle. She gave a startled squeal and her head came up off her crossed arms. Warmth blossomed across her buttocks as the blows rained down, some lighter, some heavier and all were arousing.

The sound of his hand against her buttocks mingled with their harsh breathing and her occasional groans. Fire spread across her buttocks as he spread the punishment around, taking care that no two slaps landed in the same place. With each stroke her hips followed the movement until she struggled to find something to relieve the unending arousal at the apex of her thighs.

"Your ass is a beautiful shade of pale pink, Holly." He sounded breathless.

The blows had slowed but each one was more painful, thanks to the previous ones. She spread her thighs in an effort to relieve some of the discomfort.

"Are you sorry you disobeyed your Master, Holly?"

"Yes," she panted.

The blows stopped.

"Are you wet for me?" he whispered.

Unable to speak, she nodded. A sharp slap landed across her ass and her cunt tightened even as liquid arousal flooded her vagina.

"You will speak when I ask you a question."

"Yes, I'm wet for you," she sobbed.

His hand came down for one last swat and she screamed. Before the pain faded he slid his hand between her thighs and parted her flesh. She moaned as his fingers brushed her clit.

"Come for me, now."

She was helpless in the face of her dark desire and his masterful touch. It took only a few swift strokes to bring her to climax. Her nails dug into the sheets as heat raced along her spine and she came against his hand.

* * * * *

Ethan disconnected his cell phone and laid it on the desk. In light of recent events he couldn't help but feel victorious. He had the woman of his dreams waiting for him upstairs and the man who'd dared to hurt her would be broken in half within the next two days.

He exited the library and headed for the steps. In reality it hadn't taken much to find dirt on Greg Mains. While his brother Doug was as clean as a choirboy, it would seem that Greg had a taste for cocaine and embezzlement. And all it had taken was one well-paid private detective with a head for numbers and a long-range camera lens. Within hours, copies of incriminating photographs and supporting documentation would be on their way to the largest television and newspapers in New Orleans. Once they were made public, the demise of Greg Mains would be complete.

Life didn't get any better than this.

He shut the sitting room door behind him then headed for the bedroom, shedding his robe as he moved. Holly lay in the middle of the bed where he'd left her. Early morning sunlight illuminated the lush curves of her ass causing his mouth to water. Only a few hours before they'd had explosive, mind-blowing sex in the dungeon and already he wanted her again. He climbed onto the bed, his movements causing her to stir.

"Ethan?" Her voice was sleepy-soft.

"Yeah, babe." He covered her, settling his body over hers.

"Just making sure it's you," she purred.

He chuckled and nuzzled the curve of her shoulder. Her plump backside cradled his cock and he braced his arms on his elbows to prevent crushing her. She was made

for lovemaking, her body was lush and womanly and the noises she made when she was aroused were music to his ears. Much to his gratification she was wildly responsive to every little touch, caress. His teeth grazed the tender skin at the base of her neck eliciting a purr from her mouth. Now he'd have to see how responsive she was to his next command.

"Holly, have you ever been fucked in the ass?"

She lifted her head from the pillows, her hair a tangled halo of fire. "Oh, yes." She looked over her shoulder at him and gave him a wicked smile. "Did you know the anus has more nerve endings than the vagina?"

"No I didn't. I think this might be something I'll need to investigate further."

"Mmm, so I get to fuck you in the ass?" Amusement laced her words.

Ethan laughed. "I don't think so." He rose and reached for a tube of lubricant from the bedside table.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm getting ready to fuck you in the ass."

Beneath him her hips gave a silky shimmy. "Shall I assume the position?" she sounded breathless, aroused.

"On your knees, slave, prepare to be taken by your Master."

Holly flashed him an excited grin and together they gathered the pillows and made a mound in the center of the bed. When they were done she stretched out, her hips on the top of the mound and her body draped on each side, her head resting on her crossed arms.

"Are you comfortable?" He patted her on the ass.

"Mmm, very."

"Good." He parted her thighs, spreading them wide until her glistening cunt and puckered ass was exposed. He couldn't resist tasting her, his tongue zeroing in on her

slick clit. She made a breathy sound, her back arching to give him better access. He pulled away. "Patience."

She groaned.

Ethan removed the top from the tube. "This will probably be a little cool. I'm going to squirt some lubricant in your ass."

"Use a lot, please."

"I will. I don't wish to hurt you." He slipped his hand between her thighs, sliding one finger into her cunt. "You're very wet, Holly. I see the thought of my taking you from behind has you aroused."

He began stroking her, his fingers sliding in and out of her wet flesh. She moaned and her hips picked up his rhythm. Slipping the narrow mouth of the lubricant tube into her anus, he gave it a healthy squeeze. The sound of her fingernails digging into the sheets caused his hair to stand on end.

"How are you feeling?" he asked.

"Hot."

"I'm going to enter you with my finger." He applied more lubricant to her anus, taking time to spread it around before attempting to enter her. He pressed his finger against the tight ring of protective muscle until she relaxed and let him inside.

"More." She squirmed, her anus tightening around him.

"As you command." He chuckled and added a second finger to spread the lubricant across her needy flesh. "Feel good?" He leaned forward and kissed the base of her spine.

"Oh, yes."

She was ready.

Ethan slipped his fingers out of her anus then rose onto his knees. "I'm coming inside, Holly."

He pressed his cock against her glossy ass, pressing back and forth until her hips began to follow the movement. Sliding his slick hand over his cock, he lubed up until it glistened with slickness. He grasped her by the hips and positioned himself against her tight opening.

“Relax, baby.”

He reached around and began to massage her clit until she sighed with need, her body going liquid-soft. The head of his cock probed her anus, pressing forward until the tight muscle released and gave him entrance. She gasped and he entered her, one slow inch at a time. He continued stroking her clit, all the while slowly sinking his cock into her sweet ass. The sensations were mind-blowing, the tightness combined with the fact he could feel every little quiver she made guaranteed that he wouldn’t be able to last very long once he was inside her.

“Slow down, baby.” He sank in to the hilt, his entire being focused on his cock and the woman beneath him. He leaned forward and nipped the curve of her shoulder. “You may come when you wish.”

Continuing the rhythmic caress of her clit, he began to thrust. Her cries increased in volume and intensity as his hips hammered at hers. The gentleness with which he’d entered her was long gone and in its place was pure unadulterated male need. The exquisite slide of his flesh against hers set his senses on fire and all too soon he was lost. He grasped her hips and their cries melded as he came deep inside her.

* * * * *

Several hours later they were sprawled across the bed, the sheets clinging to their sweaty skin. Never in her life had she experienced such an excessive appetite for release. It was as if they couldn’t keep their hands off of each other and each time was like the very first.

“I think I’m dead,” he groaned.

Holly rose, her gaze moving over his handsome features. Was his twin nearly as handsome as Ethan?

"What is your brother like?"

His eyes flew open. "Where did that come from?"

"My mouth," she grinned. "Is he as handsome as you are?"

"We're identical though he wears his hair shorter than I do."

"Is he like you?"

"No, he's boring."

She laughed and sat up. "If he's your twin then I don't see how he could be boring."

He shrugged. "We aren't very much alike. He's a go-getter and I'm more likely to be found behind a computer."

"Oh really." She straddled him. "You seem to be a go-getter to me." Placing her hands across the muscled terrain of his chest, she enjoyed the warmth of his skin against her palms. "You don't have the chest of a computer nerd." She dipped her head to tease a flat male nipple with her tongue.

Air hissed between his teeth. "You think so?"

He reached for her hips and she moved away, shimmying down his body. She ran her hands down his thighs, enjoying the coarse hair tickling her palms. "I do indeed. I dated a few geeks in high school and I don't remember them being as well-built as you are. Especially right here..."

She slid her fingers around the thick base of his cock, luxuriating in the silk over steel feel of him. His breath hissed through his teeth and his hips jerked as she ran her thumb along the base of his shaft. She dipped her head and swiped her tongue across the broad tip. He tasted of the sea and warm, virile male. His hips twitched when she stroked her thumb along the sensitive underside of his shaft near the head.

"Holly—" Warning laced that one word.

"I can't hear you..." she purred.

A rush of feminine power surged through her body as she ran her tongue over his heated length. He might be her sexual master but that didn't mean she couldn't bring him to his knees. Wrapping her hand around his thick length, she began moving up and down in long, bold strokes as she worked his hardened flesh with her mouth. With each movement, his hips thrust and his breathing grew more strained.

He gave a low, earthy groan and his fingers tangled in her hair. She closed her eyes to concentrate on taking more of him with her mouth. He tried to control her movements, but she resisted his touch, wanting to keep him at her mercy, at her command. His cock jerked against her tongue and she tasted the sweet, salty essence of him. He was close now, very close.

She swirled her tongue around his sensitive head until she elicited an earthy groan from him. Increasing her movements, her hand stroked his thick root as she took him deep into her throat.

"Stop, Holly –" He was begging now.

She ignored him and continued her sensual assault with her mouth and hand working in unison. Within moments, his body tensed and his hips jerked as he climaxed into her mouth with an anguished groan.

Holly swallowed and continued stroking him for a few moments, allowing him to relax before she released him. She let his cock slip from her lips and she rested her cheek against his thigh before letting her eyes drift closed.

This man had shaken her world and restored her faith in herself. He made her laugh, held her when she cried and all too soon she would have to leave him. She bit her lip and wondered how she would bear it.

Chapter Seven

After three days of sensual excess, Ethan knew he wouldn't let her go without a fight. He picked up a thick, silken lock of her hair, the fat curl wrapping around his finger as if to capture his hand in the same way she'd captured his heart.

He'd known even before setting his plan in motion that a great deal was at risk and it had nothing to do with money. The biggest thing at stake was his heart, which he'd lost the moment his lips touched hers. When he'd seen the fear and hesitation reflected in her eyes when he'd broached the idea of them entering into a Master-submissive relationship he'd begun the fall. Only when he'd watched her muster her courage and take his hand was his fall complete.

The major stumbling block to his finally wooing her into his life and accepting his ring was their agreement. On that first night she'd made it very clear that she wasn't interested in having a real relationship. The extent of their involvement would be three days, in bed, nothing more.

The sun was setting outside the windows of their bedroom and while he longed to get out of bed and shut out the outside world, moving just wasn't an option. Holly lay across him like a human blanket, her bright red hair tickled his nose and her soft, sexy snore amused the hell out of him. His fingers tangled in her hair.

Just what did he have to do to gain her love?

* * * * *

Holly concentrated on packing her things. Even though she'd barely worn any of the clothes she'd brought with her, she had taken the time to unpack her toiletries and consequently they were strewn across the marble vanity. Grabbing her hairbrush, she thrust it into her makeup bag to be followed by her moisturizer and deodorant. Her

gaze skimmed the gleaming surface of the sink. With her possessions safely packed away, only a damp towel hanging on the rack reminded her that this weekend hadn't been a dream.

She froze when she caught sight of herself in the full-length mirror. Her lips quirked.

No one would know by looking at her that she'd spent her weekend in the arms of a lover. Her long hair was bound into a fat braid and her face was scrubbed free of makeup. Dressed in baggy green sweats, a white T-shirt and tennis shoes, she looked about twenty-five years old rather than a mature business woman on the downhill slope toward forty.

She reached for her bag and began pawing through it to locate her lip-gloss. All she had to do was grab her clothing then say goodbye to her temporary Master and she'd be home in time to finish up her laundry and prepare for another work week.

Her heart gave a twinge. She needed to speak with him, to see where his thoughts were headed. She'd made him agree that their relationship would be temporary, but would he be open to continuing their relationship? She bit her lip. He certainly seemed to be interested in her though they'd spent very little time just talking. Both had been very aware of their agreement and Holly had been reluctant to get too personal with him. Even though she knew just about everything about him sexually, she knew very little about his personal life.

Just a few days ago she'd thought it was inconceivable for her to ever entertain the thought of a romantic relationship and now, here she was, getting ready to proposition Ethan about carrying on.

She stifled a giggle. She liked him very much. He was intelligent, well-read and he definitely made her laugh. He wasn't afraid to show his tender side and she knew in her heart that she would always be safe with him. She'd be a fool to walk away without asking him how he felt. Seeing that he'd gone through all this trouble to arrange this elaborate weekend, surely he felt something for her as well.

After coating her lips with the shiny gloss, she rubbed them together then checked her appearance. Her mama always said a lady should never leave the house without her lipstick and perfume – everything else was negotiable.

“Thank you, Mama,” she murmured.

Dropping her gloss in the bag, she zipped it shut then headed out to the bedroom. Now to grab her clothing, then –

“Are you almost ready?”

Ethan’s voice startled her and she almost dropped her makeup bag. The room was dim and she could barely see him sitting in the corner near the terrace doors. He wore all black and his face was but a pale oval in the darkness.

“Almost.” She laid the bag on the bed. “I just need to gather my clothing.”

“Can you sit for a moment?” His voice was low, solemn.

“Of course.” Her stomach came alive with butterflies and she perched on the edge of the bed. Here it comes. Either he was going to give her the brush-off or declare his undying love for her. She hoped it was the latter.

“I wanted to kill Mains when I heard what had happened to you. Not only had he violated the trust of his submissive, but I knew he’d damaged you in some intrinsic way. It’s more than just the scarring of your body, your mind is involved as well.” He shook his head. “I’ve seen it happen too many times with men who think the dominance and submissive lifestyle is a kick, and their lovers can be cast off when they’re through. The relationship is about trust and to violate that trust is to violate the very tenants of human nature. For every man who came after, that wall would be a hard one to scale and with each failure, the rows of bricks would increase to the point you’d never be able to see your way out without outside help.

“I’d only seen you that one time, had touched your hand at the costume party but I was so taken by your smile and laugh. I wasn’t kidding when I said I’d become obsessed with you. You’d only said a few words to me and it didn’t take any more than that for me. The moment I heard about Mains, your beautiful face invaded every hour

of my day and I couldn't get you out of my mind. I spent weeks working on this arrangement, buying the loan, working up the papers." He chuckled. "If my brother ever gets wind of this he'll think I'd lost my mind."

"Ethan—"

He held up his hand to stem the flow of words. "Please let me finish. I wanted more than to bed you, Holly. I wanted to help you heal from what that prick did to you. I wanted to remind you that you are an incredible, vivacious, desirable, beautiful woman and Mains never deserved you for a moment."

Tears stung her eyes and she had to place her hand over her mouth to stifle a sob.

"Tell me, Holly, did I accomplish this task?" he asked.

Unable to speak, she nodded as the tears spilled over.

"Good. I'm pleased." His gaze fixed upon hers. "When this weekend began you stated up front that this was a one-shot deal and no future relationship was possible. I'd like to ask you that, after you leave here today, you think about the possibilities of us continuing our relationship." His smile was gentle. "I know I would like to do so as I think I loved you from the moment I first saw you."

Yes!

Holly bit her lip so hard that she was afraid she'd draw blood. On shaky legs, she rose and walked toward him. Stopping by his chair, she sank to the floor at his feet and bowed her head, her gaze fixed on the carpet and a wide smile on her face.

"I'm yours to command, Master."

Epilogue

Monday morning

Holly trailed her fingertip over the delicate clutch of violets in a dainty basket-shaped china dish. They'd arrived at her apartment just moments before she'd been due to leave for work and she couldn't bear to leave them behind. A smile danced across her lips. She didn't even have to look at the card to know who'd sent them as only Ethan would've chosen violets.

Her heart swelled at the thought of her handsome Master. He was working late tonight but they'd made arrangements to get together afterwards at her place. She planned on cooking a simple pasta dish with tons of carbohydrates to keep them going late into the night –

A screech from below caught Holly's attention.

"You are *not* going to believe this!" Katie's voice rang out through the quiet store. "Come down here, Holly. You have got to see this."

"Oh, my God –" Mel spoke.

Fearing the worst, Holly ran down the steps. The other women were standing near the bundled newspapers with a copy of the *Times Picayune* clutched in their hands.

"What is it? Another politician caught with their pants down around their ankles?" Holly grinned. "Louisiana politics are a mix of a hockey game and wrestling, unconventional and never dull."

"I knew that bastard was as crooked as a dog's hind leg." Katie shoved the paper at her. "You are so better off without him in your life."

"Amen, sister," Mel said.

Holly's breath caught when she saw the front page photograph of Greg "The Bastard" Mains. The headline read, LOCAL BANKER CAUGHT WITH HANDS IN THE TILL.

"It would seem that Greg was arrested yesterday morning by the New Orleans police department on drug and embezzlement charges." Mel shrugged. "Who knew the bastard had it in him?"

"It gets even better. Someone ratted him out and sent evidence directly to the television studio who in turn notified the police." Katie picked up a stack of books and headed for the aisles. "It just doesn't get any better than that."

Holly almost dropped the paper as Ethan's words came back to her.

"With a little help it can be sooner rather than later."

Could he have done this?

"It would appear that Greg has some very high-placed enemies," Mel said. "Well, to hell with him, and good riddance."

Holly dropped the paper onto the pile to be sold. She felt bad for Doug, but her ex-Master had tried to destroy her business, her life and he didn't deserve any soft feelings from her. "You've got that right, good riddance."

"Shall I officially open us for business?" Mel picked up the keys and headed toward the doors, her slim hips swaying gracefully beneath her tight leather skirt.

Holly frowned, her gaze taking in her friend's high heels and tight, white shirt. Since when did her friend wear clothing that was so obviously sexy?

"Holly, can you give me a hand in the human sexuality section? That dratted shelf has fallen down again." Katie's voice was muffled.

Holly glanced at the clock. Her workday had just begun but in nine hours and twenty-two minutes she'd be back in Ethan's arms. She headed for the stacks. Now, if she could only find time to run to the local sex shop on her lunch break...

About the Author

Dominique Adair is the pen name of award-winning novelist J.C. Wilder. Adair/Wilder (she chooses her name according to her mood—if she's feeling sassy and brazen, it's Adair; if she's feeling dark and dangerous, it's Wilder) lives just outside of Columbus, Ohio, where she skulks around town plotting her next book and contemplating where to hide the bodies (from her books, of course—everyone knows that you can't really hide a body as they always pop up at the worst times).

Dominique welcomes mail from readers. You can write to her c/o Ellora's Cave Publishing at 1337 Commerce Drive, #13, Stow, OH 44224.

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