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**NAGE ARCHER**

**SLAVE  
HEART**

## **Slave Heart by Nage Archer**

**Genre:** Romantic Suspense, Red Hots!

**ISBN:** 1-59998-499-7

**Length:** Novel

**Price:** 5.50

**Publication Date:** June 5, 2007

*Cover art by Dawn Seewer*

Sandra Castilla is about to discover her true self...if she can survive that long.

Sandra Castilla had never taken a chance in her life until she dreamt of her sister's murder. Driven by forces she couldn't begin to understand, Sandra finds herself thousands of miles from home, about to infiltrate a dark BDSM cult known as the Taleans.

Loved by one man and hopelessly attracted to another, Sandra is plunged into a hidden world where the first wrong move could be her last.

A powerful romantic suspense that will keep you on the edge of your seat to the very last page. Winner of the Enda Award for the Year's Best Erotic Read, a gold star from Just Erotic Romance Reviews and a reviewer's Choice Award from Road to Romance, join Sandra Castilla on an unforgettable journey of self discovery.

**Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, violence, and scenes of dominance and submission.**

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
512 Forest Lake Drive  
Warner Robins, Georgia 31093

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Cover by Dawn Seewer  
ISBN: 1-59998-499-7  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

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First **Samhain Publishing, Ltd.** electronic publication: June 2007

# Slave Heart

*Nage Archer*

# Dedication

For anyone who has dared to make a sacrifice to find what they were looking for...

## Prologue

I'm no longer certain love and hate aren't the same emotion. They say there's a thin line between the two, but I'm not sure such a line exists. If it does, I've crossed it one too many times—in both directions. In the end, there is only one love of which I can be certain. Her name was Jaycee and she was my sister. She was murdered six months ago, on this very beach.

If you had the choice, if you could avenge your sister's death, would you do it? How about if it would cost you the relationship with the man you love? For that is where I stand now, caught between the extremities of love and hate in a game more dangerous than any I've ever played.

I look out over the Tasman Sea and watch the ten-foot high waves caress the base of a nearby cliff. A tongue of seawater laps at a hard stone pillar. If I allow fancy to carry me, I can almost see the act of fellatio. The image leaves me weak with need, yet strong with resolve.

I ignore the hot sand beneath my bare feet, and think about Nicco. Part of me wishes I'd never met him, but it is too small a part to listen to, for I now realize I love him. I have never felt about another man the way I feel about Nicco, but still it is not enough to stay my hand. My sister is dead and her killer will pay in blood—and Nicco will be lost to me forever.

Oh, Jaycee, how did this happen to you? You were always the adventurous one, not me. This is your life I'm living out; your role I'm playing. Perhaps it's appropriate, but I feel I'm not up to the task. I was never as good as you, Jaycee, yet I remain standing, the only person alive who cares enough to avenge your murder. I only hope I'm up to the challenge, so you can finally let go.

The sound of the waves can't drown out the cry of a nearby plover. It reminds me of my pain, my need to scream, my strident desire to shout curses until the universe is forced to listen. I slowly lower myself to the sand, tears suddenly obscuring my vision.

Above me, the Tempest Hotel, twelve stories of glass and steel, thrusts up from the cliff top like a monument to insanity, for that is what it has become. I should have never come here; should have never left New York City—wouldn't have, if it hadn't been for the dream. But that was six months ago in another lifetime. I had thought I'd known something of life. Then the unthinkable occurred.

Three days after her twentieth birthday, my sister Jaycee was murdered. Not in a random act of violence on a city street as one might expect, but in a senseless act of hate I can't begin to understand. She didn't die in New York City, but ten thousand miles away in a place I never thought I'd have occasion to visit. The problem is, no one knows she's dead but me, and I have no proof.

In my old life, I was called Sandra Castilla. While that name is no longer appropriate, it was once mine, and I cannot forget it. Nor can I forget I'd lived in Manhattan, worked for New York University and had been engaged to a man I thought I loved.

Even now, I can't picture him without some of the tenderness returning, though that tenderness is more maternal than it had once been. Scott was tall, with short sandy-blond hair, gray-green eyes and a quirky smile that endeared him to every woman he'd ever met. Scott was considerate, loving, practical, and I might have married him if it hadn't been for the dream.

I'll never forget that night...

Scott was lying next to me in a bed that still smelled of our lovemaking. True to form, he'd fallen asleep before I did. I was restless but eventually drifted off. That was when I had the dream for the first time.

White sands, warm sun, blue-green water that rose in waves to crash against the rocky coastline. The sounds were of gulls and surf, the smells of sea and sorrow.

She lay naked on the beach, face so contorted with fear I almost didn't recognize her as Jaycee. When I did, I tried to call out, to go to her, but couldn't. I was an ethereal observer, nothing more. She couldn't hear or see me, and I couldn't change the outcome of events. My field of vision was limited to my stricken sister. As such, I could not see that which so terrified her.

Without warning, I was drawn forward, closer and closer to Jaycee until, after a moment of supreme disorientation, I found myself inside her. Her face was turned toward the sand to avoid seeing the object of her horror. The sounds were of Jaycee's quickly drawn breaths and almost silent sobs. At the very edge of vision, a man's bare foot appeared, then another.

"You have wasted enough of my time." I had never heard the voice before.

"Please...don't..."

His laughter filled my ears, filled the world, filled me with a sense of dread I had never known. I found myself watching his feet. He drew one back and kicked Jaycee/me. After the third such blow, we stopped counting. Pain suffused us, engulfed us, tore at our sanity. There was blood on the sand. We wanted to get up and run, but couldn't. Hadn't been able to even before his approach, though I didn't know why. Again and again, his foot lashed out. We tried to curl into a ball, but the frenzy of the attack prevented us.

Soon even feeling fear was beyond us, and we retreated further. The attack didn't stop until we were dead.

And I was awake, crying, screaming, trying to believe it had only been a dream. I hadn't talked to Jaycee in a couple of months. She'd been down in Hollywood, Florida. I used to joke about it. In truth, Jaycee was pretty enough to make it in Hollywood, but she'd never shown the interest. I might have been



drawn to the bright lights, but Jaycee had always lived in a darker world than I.

To tell the truth, though we were sisters, we didn't have much in common. Jaycee had no fear. There was nothing she wouldn't try. I was the shy one. Scared of my own shadow, she used to say. I preferred to think of it as common sense, but there was no escaping the fact I'd never willingly risked anything in my life.

Scott was beside me, reaching out, trying to calm me. I leaned into him, then tried to push him away.

"What's wrong?"

"It's Jaycee. She's dead."

"No, baby. It was just a dream."

*Was it just a dream?* "I don't think so."

"Sssssshhh, it's okay. Just relax."

I wanted to believe him...wanted it to be nothing more than a nightmare, but knew otherwise. Somewhere deep within, I knew the truth. I pulled away from him more sharply than I'd intended to, and got out of bed.

"Where are you going?"

"To pack."

"What? Sandra, you're not making any sense."

Did he expect me to make sense at a time like this? "I'm going to find her."

"Look, why don't you give her a call, okay?"

I stopped mid-stride. Yes, the phone! I could call her. I'd probably wake her, but it would be worth it. In a half-panic, I ran from the room into the kitchen. There, beneath the phone, I fumbled through papers until I found my phone book.

The list of numbers on the page confused me. Jaycee was always moving. So many numbers for her. I'd crossed out most of them, but she was such a restless soul, she'd been to so many places, she took up more than a page. I

could only imagine my own entry in her phone book. One number. The same place I'd lived for almost ten years. I pushed the thought from my mind, and tried to think. Nine-five-four; that was the area code for Hollywood. I dialed quickly, but had to hang up when I realized I'd started dialing wrong. I had to calm down.

I drew a deep breath. Scott joined me in the kitchen. He was naked and worried, but didn't say anything or interrupt me. I closed my eyes tight and opened them again. Then, more carefully, I dialed her number.

It rang twice. The voice that spoke was definitely not Jaycee's. "The number you have dialed has been disconnected. No further information is available."

My panic returned full force and I looked at Scott. He didn't need his Master's Degree to know something was wrong.

"Well?"

"It's disconnected. There's no forwarding number."

He came to me and held me, but for once, his warmth did nothing to shield me from the realities of life.

## Chapter One

I had taken a cab to Queens. There are two major airports in New York City, both found in the same borough. I was on my way to JFK. I'd been to La Guardia before, but didn't care for the place.

There was little traffic until we neared the airport. I had plenty of time till my flight and paid little attention to my surroundings. Instead, I thought about Scott. He was too practical a man to accept my conclusions and too caring to support them. I will never forget the look on his face.

"You can't be serious."

Poor Scott. So sure of what is real, he will never truly know reality. "But I *am* serious. I have no choice."

"Sandra, you know your sister. She could be anywhere. There's no evidence she's come to any harm."

"There is evidence. My dream."

I could see his mind working, trying to come up with a flaw in that thinking without insulting my sanity. He couldn't.

"Perhaps you should talk to someone."

"Talk to someone? Who did you have in mind?"

I knew what was coming before he said it. "Perhaps you should talk to a psychiatrist."

I smiled gently. "I'm sorry, Scott. I wish you well. I really do."

There were tears in his eyes. "Don't go, Sandra."

I leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Take care of yourself."

I never looked back, though I got the impression he'd started after me and stopped himself. Scott would do fine. He was bright, had a great personality

and a wonderful career. But I was entering a world far enough removed from his practical day-to-day existence to make our relationship impossible. From his point of view, I lacked common sense. From my point of view, he lacked faith in me.

By the time the cab pulled up at the domestic departure terminal, my mind was already onto other matters. I'd taken a personal leave of absence from the job, but had enough money in the bank where it didn't concern me. Not yet anyway. When our mother had passed, she'd left each of us half of her hundred thousand dollar insurance policy. Predictably, Jaycee had spent her half and I'd saved mine. I was glad now I had.

I grabbed an expensive cup of coffee and a cardboard danish from a snack counter, one of the few places open at that hour of the morning. My 6:00 a.m. flight would get me to Miami in just three hours. I had set only one goal for myself. I would not think about Jaycee during the flight. There was nothing I could do until I got there, and I felt alone enough already.

I'd brought a book with me, *The Cup and the Bucket* by Dean L. Stevens. Strangely enough, I'd picked it up quite some time ago, before I'd had my dream. Little did I know just how involved I'd become in metaphysical matters. I hadn't yet read it, but I'd been told it was a great book. Hopefully it would be good enough to hold my attention when so many more pressing matters still flitted about the edges of my mind.

Less than an hour later, I was on a 727 not quite filled with people. The woman sitting next to me was well into her sixties and pleasant enough, but I wasn't in the mood to chat. I opened my book and started reading, hoping it would distract me for the duration of the flight.

I hadn't slept much however, and found myself reading the same page over and over until I finally drifted off.

The dream was the same as it had been the first time. The hot sand on my feet, my startling journey into Jaycee's head and the subsequent attack by a

man who only existed from the shins down. I'd have given a lot to be able to look up. The view wasn't clear enough to notice any distinguishing features. We were too busy trying to shield ourself to notice much.

I woke with a scream. The old woman beside me tried to do a fair imitation of Scott but failed. I didn't tell her about the dream. This was my burden, a thing I had to handle on my own. I didn't go back to sleep. I didn't dare. As for not thinking about Jaycee, the dream had ended that ambition. So I considered what I would do when I arrived. I played with every possibility I could think of, some of which scared the hell out of me. It was the longest flight of my life. By the time we set down in Miami, I was ready to crawl into a hole and die...but didn't.

I picked up my luggage and the car I'd arranged for and set off north. The sooner I solved the mystery, the sooner I'd be able to sleep again.

Hollywood is about an hour from the Miami airport. Fort Lauderdale would have been closer, but they hadn't had as early a flight. I didn't mind the drive anyway. It helped ground me. Driving was something familiar, and I needed that right now.

I'd never been to Jaycee's house but had gotten directions off the Internet before I'd left. Insomnia gave me plenty of time to memorize them, though I'd printed them as well. The directions were perfect, and I found the house with no trouble. Like everything else in the neighborhood it was single-story, and the white weatherboard looked like it had been recently painted. It made the gray-shingled roof look darker than it was. If it weren't for the front lawn, I might have thought I'd stepped into a black and white movie. Two eye-like windows gazed out over the newly mowed grass, which probably would have had a fence around it with a locked gate, had it been in New York. Here open lawns were the rule rather than the exception. A large sign in the front yard

informed me the house was available for rent and offered a phone number. I pulled my cell phone from my jacket pocket and dialed.

“Seaside Realty.”

“Hello, yes, I’m looking at the house on 56th Avenue and Orange. I understand it’s available.”

“Hold on, let me check that for you.”

I could barely stop from pacing as I waited. “Yes, ma’am, it is.”

“Could I possibly speak to the landlord?”

“Seaside handles that property ma’am.”

“I understand that. I’m trying to find my sister. She used to live there.”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, I’m not allowed to give out the landlord’s phone number.”

I cursed under my breath but kept my voice pleasant. “I understand. Could you possibly give him my number? I wouldn’t trouble you, but this is very important.”

“Of course, ma’am.”

I gave her my cell phone number and thanked her again before hanging up.

I wondered how long ago Jaycee had moved and where she’d ended up. I thought about my dream and knew one thing—those cliffs didn’t exist anywhere in Florida, though where else they might be I couldn’t venture to guess.

I almost got back in the car but decided against it. There was, I felt, a good chance the landlord wouldn’t call back. So I walked from the car up the flagstone path to the front door.

It was a nice house, if small. Having spent most of my life in apartments, the lawn and quiet appealed to me. I checked the mailbox first and found a few advertisements, a few bills and a letter from a video store. I placed them in my purse and walked around the house to the side door. I checked, but it was, of course, locked.

I looked around. There was no one watching. I returned to the front, pried up a flagstone with some difficulty, then carried it to the side of the house. I smashed it against a pane of glass in the door, wincing at the amount of noise it made. I froze, waiting to see if someone would come to investigate. After a minute or so, I reached in and undid the lock.

I felt a thrill of excitement run through me. I'd never done anything like this before and found myself enjoying the sensation. I wondered how long it had been since I had something resembling adrenaline pumping through my veins. The door opened onto a laundry room, which contained a washer and dryer, but nothing else on the concrete floor. I entered the house proper.

The rooms were empty and had already been cleaned, offering no clue as to the life Jaycee had been living. Not even one of her ever-present notebooks, filled with poems, doodles or some silly story she was working on, had been left behind. I took a deep breath, fighting the fact her existence had been erased as easily as her writings. Even that last remnant of my sister had been denied me. Frustrated, I returned to the car and closed my eyes. There had to be something I could do.

Where to now? I couldn't think of anything. To kill time, I started going through the mail. I sorted it, putting the advertising on the side. The letter from the video store was a reminder that she had tapes overdue. I'd never heard of any of the movies she'd rented, but then, I wasn't all that much of a movie buff. Still, the titles were vaguely disturbing; *Chain Mania*, *Whip Song*, *Slave Labor*, *Wet Heat* and *The Executioner*. What had my sister been into?

I set the letter aside with the ads and started opening bills. The phone bill was there, complete with the long distance numbers she'd dialed. That might give me some clue, but I wasn't up to that yet. The very last envelope I opened was her Visa bill. Most of the entries on it were no surprise. The one that deviated from the norm appeared multiple times; The Bondage Shoppe. I shivered as I tried to picture my little sister tortured by some pervert. Then I

realized she would likely be the one holding the whip. I shook my head. I really couldn't picture that either.

At least I had *something* to go on. Finding the address for the Bondage Shoppe wasn't difficult. I'd passed an Internet cafe on the way that had everything I needed. I not only located the shop, but also got directions and checked my email as well. I even took a moment for another coffee and a too-sweet pastry. I'd have to start eating better, but not yet. First, I had a mystery to solve.

From the outside, the Bondage Shoppe appeared unassuming. It had no windows, just a mural of semi-naked women painted on the front and around the sides. I'd never been to such an establishment and didn't know what to expect. A pang of fear gave me a moment of pause before I forced myself into action.

The inside wasn't quite what I expected. It was very low-key and professional, with glass cases, and racks of leather and lace clothing. The man behind the counter looked innocuous enough; brown hair and eyes, a neatly trimmed goatee and a smile that put me immediately at ease.

"Good morning." His voice was deep and not unpleasant. He sounded more like a radio announcer than a salesman. I wanted to trust him, but decided not to—at least not yet. Until I had more of an idea of what had happened to Jaycee, I would take no one into my confidence.

"Hi."

"I haven't seen you here before."

I smiled my most convincing smile and crossed the store, until I was standing across the counter from him. "I've never been here. I'm new in the area."

"Oh, I see." His eyes sparkled and his smile widened. I wasn't sure if I should be scared or flattered. His expression and mannerisms made no secret of the fact he found me attractive. I expect that kind of behavior in bars, not in



shops. I didn't say anything, just gazed blandly at the contents of the glass display case. Inside, a wide range of dildos and vibrators, in all sizes, colors and prices, lined two shelves. I found myself unnerved at the sight of them, but did my best to not let it show.

"So, are you looking for the local scene?" he asked. "I know a lot of people."

"Is that right?"

"There's a party tomorrow night, if you'd like to come. Our group hosts them pretty frequently."

"Sounds nice."

I wasn't in the mood for a party, but if Jaycee had frequented this place, she might have gone to such parties and it might give me more of a clue as to what she'd been into.

The man scribbled down an address on the back of a business card. "My name's Jorge. Just mention it at the door and they'll let you in."

I was going to ask him something else when a man walked through the front door. He was tall, with a shaved head and too many tattoos. I didn't like the look of him. He reminded me of a biker and I grew frightened. I found I didn't want to be in the same place with so dangerous a looking man. When I looked back to the counter, Jorge was studying me.

"What time does it start?"

"Show up any time after eight."

I nodded and smiled. "I'll see you then."

Without another word, I turned and left. I crossed the parking lot quickly, cursing myself. He was just a man with tattoos. Why should I allow myself to react so? I was in a public place, after all. What was he going to do to me? Why was I such a wimp?

I got angry and kicked the tire before unlocking the door. If I were to investigate a murder, I'd better grow a backbone fast.

I went shopping that day for a new outfit. I'd packed enough clothes for a fairly long stay, but hadn't brought anything to wear to a party. I went to Saw Grass Mills, the largest mall I'd ever seen. You could walk for half an hour before you crossed its length. I ended up with a sexy crimson dress, not too revealing, but definitely more daring than anything I'd worn in recent memory. It was, however, the kind of thing Jaycee might have picked up. It was too expensive, but I didn't care. I charged it, then found a place to eat in the food court.

After a light meal of pseudo-Chinese fare (I'd never grown used to the proliferation of Asian fast-food places), I looked down at my worn leather sandals and decided my party outfit was not yet complete. Shopping for shoes is one of the great pleasures of life, a pleasure I embraced wholeheartedly.

The shoes I ended up with, black high-heeled things, were definitely more stylish than comfortable. As soon as I'd tried them on, the knack of walking in heels returned to me as if I'd worn that sort of thing all along. In reality, I hadn't stood this high off the ground since my freshman year at Columbia.

From the mall, I drove back to the main strip, where I found myself a room in a motel that looked clean, but lacked the amenities of many other establishments. I had cable TV, but no pool or exercise room. I didn't care. As long as it had a bed, it would be fine.

I spent the rest of the day worrying. The worst of it was, I still had no idea what I expected to find at the party. What was I thinking? I almost decided not to go, then thought of Jaycee huddling in the sand. I remembered the fear in her eyes and knew I had no choice.

I half-expected the dream to return that night, but was granted a merciful reprieve.

I spent the next day thinking about the party, about Jaycee and about what my next move should be. I thought about the shop and the films she'd rented.

My sister had done stupid things before, but nothing along these lines. I thought of the little I knew about S&M; whips, handcuffs, leather. It was a dark business—one I wanted no part of. But what could I do? The police couldn't help me. I couldn't even prove a crime had been committed. Until I had some hard evidence, I was on my own.

The day passed too slowly, but finally it was time. I showered, dressed and applied makeup carefully. I laid it on heavier than I usually did, because I wanted to get noticed. Looking at my reflection in the mirror. I didn't think I'd have a problem.

It was strange Jaycee and I were sisters, for we looked completely different. Jaycee stood five-two—about six inches shorter than me. She had wavy blonde hair down to the middle of her back, while mine was brown, straight and barely reached my shoulders. Jaycee often had the perfect tan, whereas my own skin burned but remained fair after I healed. We were both slim, but Jaycee was decidedly top-heavy. My breasts, in comparison, were small, but perky. About all we had in common were our sea-green eyes, which were so much the same, we could have swapped them and no one would have noticed.

She used to complain how her “tits” got in the way of things, and I'd just shake my head. I'd have killed for a pair like hers...many women would. Her figure made her popular with the boys and thus, she was always in trouble. I often wondered if I'd have ended up like her had I been better endowed.

I grabbed my purse from the bed, made sure I had everything I needed in it and made for the door. Only then did the fear hit me. I had been invited to a party by a complete stranger, and I was dressed like a call girl. I pulled my hand away from the knob and turned to study my reflection again. What was I doing?

I almost didn't go. To this day, I'm not sure where I found the strength to open the door and get to my car. Only after I started the engine and turned onto the strip, did I realize I was excited as well as scared. It would have been

more prudent to let someone know where I was going, but there was no one. With Jaycee dead, I was alone in the world. I couldn't call Scott. He was out of my life. I was certain of that much. And the people at work, though they were good people, they'd never understand.

I concentrated on driving and, after a few wrong turns, finally found the place. I forced myself to slow down and park on the street, but didn't get out of the car immediately.

"Okay, Sandy, this is it. Show time."

I killed the engine, took my purse and got out of the car. The house was fully lit, and several cars were already parked in the driveway. I could hear music, though not loud enough to identify the song.

It was a private home, far nicer than anything I'd seen on my trip thus far. For one thing, it was a two-story affair, and was constructed of stone, looking more like a medieval monastery than any residence had a right to. There were a couple of balconies evident in the front, open to the night but currently deserted.

The path to the door was cement, but the garden in front was well cared for. There was no bell, but a large brass knocker adorned the front door, which was made from oak and looked to be quite sturdy. I used it, then dropped my hand. I can't remember ever having used a knocker before and that, along with the strange setting, put me more on edge than I already was.

I didn't have long to wait before the door opened. A young woman looked me up and down, before standing to the side. She was tall, leggy, almost blonde and wore no makeup I could see. The way her hair was braided made it impossible to tell how long it was. She wore a French maid's outfit, complete with fishnet stockings, garters and high heels. Her cleavage was on display for all to see. I suddenly felt more like a puritan than a call girl.

"I'm a friend of Jorge," I said, when I realized she wasn't talking.

She smiled. "Please come in and make yourself at home. I'm Jasmine. And you are..."

"Sandy. I'm pleased to meet you."

"Thanks."

I returned her smile and entered, trying not to stare down at her body. It wasn't easy.

It was a warm enough night where I didn't feel I needed a coat, so I had nothing to give her. I certainly wasn't parting with my purse, though I didn't have much in it. I followed her through the wood-paneled foyer into what I assumed was the living room. I don't know what I was expecting, but what greeted me wasn't it.

The music was classical, the people dressed casually. It turns out I was overdressed for the occasion. There was a tray of wine glasses by the door and the room was furnished elegantly, but not ostentatiously. Several overstuffed chairs were scattered about, giving the impression of a country club. Surely the room was big enough to support a healthy population. There were also three love seats hiding amongst the chairs. They were navy blue, quite a bit darker than the carpet, which was thick enough to feel like cushioning, even in my heels. The walls were half-paneled below and stenciled above, with something that looked to me like a Boy Scout merit badge. Lamps and rosewood end tables seemed to be as prevalent as the chairs, and I thought if I studied the scene for long enough, I might discern some pattern to their arrangement.

I recognized Jorge immediately. There were about a dozen others present. The scene was so conservative, it might have been a party on the Upper East Side—with the exception of Jasmine, of course.

She picked up a glass of amber wine and handed it to me, smiled again and lifted the silver tray, carrying it around the room. Several of the men ogled her appreciatively...one even slapped her ass. I felt a bit of indignation for her, but

she didn't seem to mind at all, in fact, she seemed to enjoy it. That was when I saw the man watching me.

I've never believed in love at first sight. Lust, on the other hand, can strike at any time. It did then. He was tall, maybe six feet, with bronze hair and light eyes. His square jaw was clean-shaven and I knew his tanned, well-muscled body would look as at home in a three-piece suit as in shorts and a T-shirt.

At the moment he was wearing navy slacks with a white shirt, open at the collar. He wore no jacket, nor did anyone else. I didn't move. I couldn't. I just stood there and waited for him to approach. Then the man to his left said something and he turned away to answer. Almost at once, the spell was broken.

I wanted to flee. I had every intention of leaving. I hadn't felt like that in many years and the timing was all wrong. I turned toward the door, but found Jorge blocking the way. I was so taken by the stranger, I hadn't noticed anything else.

"Glad you could make it."

To cover the need to speak, I took a swallow of wine. I hoped he hadn't noticed my reaction. It was humiliating enough feeling like a teenager, having someone witness it would have been too much. He showed no sign of having seen though.

"I still don't know your name."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Sandy."

"Well, Sandy, make yourself comfortable. Hors d'oeuvres are coming. Come, let me introduce you around."

"Okay."

"I'm guessing you're a sub?"

I assumed he wasn't talking about an underwater vehicle, but wasn't sure to what else he might be referring. I decided to hedge. "That's a distinct possibility."

He grinned. "Be that way, then."

I had no idea what I was talking about, but smiled back and allowed him to take my arm and lead me around the room. As we approached the handsome man I'd noticed earlier, I realized I hadn't caught a single name. Actually, handsome didn't describe him. Striking was far closer to the truth, though even that didn't do him justice, for once his expressive gray-blue eyes locked onto mine, there might as well have been no one else there.

"And this is Nicco," said Jorge.

I felt myself sinking into those eyes. If I continued much longer, I would surely drown. "A pleasure."

Nicco bowed and kissed my hand. "M'lady." His voice was rich, baritone, demanding of attention, as if I could have ignored him anyway. He looked up at Jorge. As soon as the eye contact was broken, I sagged, as if it had been the only thing holding me up. "Not yours, is she?"

Jorge chuckled. "Think she's out of my league?"

"Of course not. But I wouldn't want to presume, would I?"

Jorge didn't look particularly pleased at the way Nicco looked at me. I shouldn't have been pleased, but was. Nicco turned his attention back to me.

"It's a lovely night. Would you like me to show you the garden?"

My breath caught in my throat. I couldn't say no. I couldn't say anything, even when Nicco disengaged Jorge's hand from my arm and put his own in its place. I did glance back, half-expecting to see Jorge glaring, but he was smiling instead. I didn't understand it, though I was glad he wasn't upset.

The garden was not the one I'd already seen, as I'd expected, but a far more substantial one hidden in plain sight behind the house. While I got the impression of rich colors set against a backdrop of verdant green, I couldn't describe what it looked like. It was as if Nicco's presence was so strong, even the fragile beauty of a formal garden couldn't make an impression. I did,

however, notice a gazebo, which brought to mind some old Fred Astaire movies I hadn't seen since I was a little girl. They used to come on late at night. I could still picture him dancing with Ginger Rogers in a love story as unrealistic as it was beautiful. Being there with Nicco on this moonless night, I had to remind myself how unrealistic they had been.

"So, Sandy, tell me about yourself."

I don't open up to strangers right away and almost said so. Still, I didn't see how it could do me harm and I didn't want to ruin the moment. "What is it you'd like to know?"

"Everything."

I laughed. "You don't do things halfway, do you?"

"Should I? The world is full of men who walk in baby steps. I hope never to be one of them."

"Nicco is an interesting name."

"Short for Nicolas. And Sandy?"

"Short for Sandra."

"Ah, I like that name."

His smile pleased me, though I didn't really know why. He was, after all, a complete stranger, and I had other business he knew nothing about.

"Are you a sub, Sandy?"

"I don't know." At least I didn't lie.

"I see. So you're just curious?"

"You could say that."

"Do you ever answer a question directly?"

"Not if I can help it. I think it's nice to keep an air of mystery for a while, don't you?"

He grew serious and stopped walking. "No. I think two people should be open and honest with each other. I have no room in my life for mysteries."



The quiet intensity with which he spoke the words made me want to hide. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry. Just don’t feel you have to wear a veil of secrecy when I’m around. I won’t hurt you...I promise.”

I couldn’t tell why his words so moved me, but couldn’t deny they did. Still, it was all happening too fast. I think he sensed it too. “Why don’t we go back inside?”

“Okay,” I said. I really didn’t want to, but Nicco had suggested it, and I didn’t want to seem too eager to be alone with him. And I needed time to think. I followed him inside.

A number of people were seated around a chair where Jasmine sat, looking up at a man who hadn’t been there when we’d walked outside. The man held in his hands a device I’d never seen before. It was about two feet long, with an electrically charged ball on the end. It looked like one of the lightning spheres you buy at novelty stores—only smaller.

Nicco stopped and pointed. “Violet wand.”

“Oh.” I didn’t know what else to say.

The man was short, with a full beard and a bald head. His eyes were green, his hands larger than they should have been. He slowly lowered the device and touched it to Jasmine’s inner thigh. She spread her legs and moaned softly.

“What is it?” I whispered.

“It’s for electrical play,” explained Nicco, as if that should make some kind of sense to me.

“It has varying power levels,” announced the man, “so I can turn up the intensity.” He took it from Jasmine’s leg and moved a knob on it, then he touched it to her left breast. She jumped, then giggled. Her eyes were wide with lust and her breathing grew heavy. I had never been a voyeur before and found myself getting turned on.

Just then, the man with the violet wand looked up and noticed me. “Well, well, what have we here?”

Jasmine smiled and watched as he made his way toward me. “What’s your name, little one?”

“Sandy.” I kept my voice level. I didn’t trust him and didn’t know why.

“I was just about to demonstrate my toy, Sandy. Would you like to help?”

“No thanks.”

“Don’t be shy.”

He reached for my hand. I pulled it away. Nicco stepped in front of me.

“I do believe the lady has declined your invitation.”

The man growled. “Stay out of this, Nicco. I don’t see a collar around her neck.”

He reached for me again. Nicco slapped his hand away. “I repeat, I do believe the lady is not interested.”

The man with the violet wand paused, then turned his attention back to me. “Then let her say so herself.”

I wanted to speak, but the look in his eyes scared me. He must have taken my hesitation for acquiescence, for he moved forward and reached for me again.

Nicco’s fist shot out and struck the man square in the jaw. He went over backwards and lay there. Several of the men laughed, but no one made a move to interfere. When he finally made his way to his feet, his eyes held a terrible anger.

Nicco said one word. “Don’t.”

There was a tense moment when I didn’t know what would happen. I feared for Nicco. He’d been protecting me. Whatever occurred would be my fault. I was going to speak, but courage deserted me as soon as I looked into the man’s eyes. Cold, they were. Intense. Angry. No one spoke or moved, and I could

almost believe we had always stood thus. Then, without another word, the man turned and left the party.

## Chapter Two

I was too shaken after that to drive, but didn't want to stay either. Jorge led me to a bedroom with a lock on the door and told me to lie down for a while. He said he'd check on me shortly. After he left, I locked the door, but didn't make use of the bed. Instead, I paced and wondered what I'd gotten myself into.

I was away from home, friendless, alone in a world of strangers—dangerous, depraved men and women. I had no business being here. Jaycee had been involved with these people, and it had cost her her life.

I walked to the window and looked out over the garden. The house lights showed me enough of the layout to get a feel for it. I'd been out there, walking alone with a man I'd just met. A man I had no reason to trust. For all I knew, he could be the one who killed Jaycee.

He may have come to my aid, but how could I know his motives—or anyone's. He was part of something I didn't understand and didn't trust. I would have to move more cautiously, or I'd suffer the same fate as my sister. The only advantage I had was, I knew just how depraved these people were. Jaycee, who always saw the best in people, probably hadn't had a clue. It had cost her. I wouldn't make that mistake. Not even with Nicco.

My eyes found the gazebo we'd passed, and I stared at it. If I'd been attacked there, it was entirely possible no one would have found my body for a long time. A movement drew my eye, the shape of a young woman walking alone. She was too far away to see her features, but she reminded me so much of Jaycee, I started to cry. I watched as she drifted through the garden, almost a part of the night herself. Her movements were tentative, almost graceful. As she drew closer, I recognized her. My sister was alive.

I placed my hand on the window sash and pulled, but it didn't budge. I looked to see how it was locked, but there was no obvious mechanism. When I returned my eyes to the garden, the figure was gone. I turned toward the door, then back to the window. It had been a trick of the night. I wanted to see Jaycee so badly, I'd somehow manufactured the image. I knew with certainty my sister was dead. Whatever I'd seen in the garden couldn't have been her.

By the time the knock arrived, I'd managed to compose myself somewhat. I opened the door. Jorge stood outside, along with one of the women from the party. I couldn't remember her name, but could hardly have forgotten what she looked like—tall, stately, thin, with long straight hair, black as pitch. Her eyes almost matched her hair, and her lips were too red in her pale visage, bringing to mind every vampire movie I'd ever seen. I killed the idea immediately. I was already seeing ghosts. I didn't need to press my imagination further.

"How are you feeling?" asked the woman.

"I'm okay. I don't know what came over me."

The woman placed a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. "It's over now, Sandy. He's gone."

I had expected such words from Jorge. I'd no idea why this woman would be interested in me, and after the events of the evening, wasn't about to venture a guess.

"Really, I'm fine. It's okay."

The woman shook her head. "Not in my house it's not. I don't tolerate that sort of behavior here. You came of your own free will, and I would never allow anyone to force you into something you don't want. In fact, that's why I'm here now."

I raised an eyebrow in surprise. For one thing, I had assumed the house belonged to Jorge, but then, it seemed too large and elaborate for a man who worked in retail. Even if he owned the Bondage Shoppe, this sort of place would have likely been beyond his means.

“I don’t understand.”

“It’s quite simple, my dear. Jorge says he wants to talk to you alone. I told him I’d allow it as long as you gave your consent. I feel you’ve been through enough tonight, and I know Jorge well. He’s a good man, but he’s still a man and a lusty one at that. Not that I think he’s insensitive enough to add to your troubles tonight, but I still had to make certain you would agree to see him.”

“That’s very kind of you, ma’am. Yes, of course I’ll talk to Jorge.”

The woman smiled, inclined her head slightly and closed the door on the way out.

We looked at each other for a long time. I didn’t say anything. Jorge looked like he wanted to, but was searching for the words. I left him to it. I couldn’t think of anything to say anyway.

“You don’t know anything about BDSM, do you?”

I shook my head.

“I thought not. Nicco said as much to me before he left.”

“Is it so obvious?”

“Yes, it is. What I don’t get is this...why come here? If you’re not into the lifestyle, why come to a party...or the shop for that matter?”

I drew a breath. I would have to trust someone at some point, and Jorge seemed the most likely person. Still, I wasn’t about to tell him everything.

“I’m looking for my sister.”

“Your sister?” His eyes widened slightly in understanding. “What’s her name?”

“Jaycee.”

He laughed. “Really? No shit.”

“You find that funny?”

He quickly controlled his mirth. “You’re just so different from her. She used to come to our parties all the time.”

“And?”

“Before I say anything else, why don’t you tell me what’s going on?”

“I haven’t been able to get in touch with her. She moved out of the house she’d rented. Her phone is disconnected. I’m worried about her.”

“I see.”

I wondered if I’d told him too much. I tried to read his face, but beyond looking pensive, I could glean no hint of what he would do next. He walked across the room and sat in a chair by the desk.

“Your sister got involved with a group that’s somewhat harder core than we are.”

“I have to find them.”

Jorge laughed. “Hon, they’d spot you in a second. Hell, if you can’t infiltrate our group, you have no chance of getting into theirs. If you suspect something’s happened to her, go to the cops.”

“I have no proof anything’s happened. I’ve only my intuition to go on.”

“Then go home. You’re going to get hurt if you keep playing this game.” I shook my head, but he kept talking. “Look, I don’t know you from Adam. You came into the shop, I thought you were into the lifestyle, so I invited you to a party. But if this isn’t your scene, you’re just going to get yourself into trouble. Trust me, I know.”

“Then help me. Teach me what I need to know.”

He looked at me, thought about it and shook his head. “No.”

“Please. I have no one else to turn to.” It didn’t take much acting ability to display my vulnerability. In fact, I’d seldom felt so helpless in my life.

“Do you truly understand what you’re asking?”

“No, not really.”

“I’m into D/s, which is Dominance and submission. In order to train you, you’d have to listen to and *obey* everything I told you.”

“Okay.”

“No, it’s not okay. It requires trust and trust takes time.”

"I trust you." I wasn't sure it was true, but I had to convince Jorge it was. I was running out of options.

"Do you? Do you really?"

"Yes."

"Very well. Strip."

"What?"

"Take off your clothes. All of them. Now."

I hesitated, and he smirked. He didn't believe I had it in me. Neither did I. But I thought about Jaycee and knew if I wanted to find out what had happened to her, I had little choice. Deftly I reached behind me and undid the zipper of my dress. I jerked it off my shoulders and let it fall to the floor, then stepped from it. Scott would have turned away and allowed me my privacy. Jorge simply watched, the hint of a smile playing about his lips.

Before I could change my mind, I reached behind me and undid my bra, red like my dress, though a bit more understated. I took it off and dropped it. I removed my black silk panties in one defiant movement. I stood there in my heels, placed my hands on my hips and stared back at him, ignoring the embarrassment. I had never before stood so defiantly in front of a man. The sensation was not unpleasant. Perhaps, under other circumstances, it might have aroused me, but I wasn't about to let that happen.

Jorge's voice was hoarse. "Get dressed."

I didn't know what to expect, but that wasn't it. Yes, I was ready to bed Jorge if he'd help me find out what happened to Jaycee, though I didn't realize it until that moment. A wave of relief washed over me, and I dressed quickly. True to form, Jorge watched the entire time.

"Well?" I said.

"What?"

"Will you help me?"



He considered for another minute or so, before nodding. “I get off at seven tomorrow night. Meet me at the shop and your training will begin, but I warn you now—from this moment on, I treat you like any other submissive.”

“Okay.”

“You may address me as Sir.”

“Sir?”

“Yes, Sandy. Submissives call Doms they respect Sir. I don’t say you need to call every Dominant Sir, but if I’m to be training you, I *will* be respected.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I thought he might hug or kiss me, but he didn’t. He simply turned and walked from the room, leaving me with far more questions than answers.

Though I didn’t reach the hotel till the wee hours of the morning, I didn’t feel tired, but almost as soon as I lay down, sleep engulfed me. The emotions of the evening had drained me enough to sleep. So it wasn’t until I woke the next morning that I started to worry.

I enjoyed a quick breakfast at the IHOP—pancakes and coffee. Comfort food. Then I returned to the Internet cafe, paid for six hours of time and typed BDSM into a search engine. To my astonishment, there were over twelve million hits. I bypassed the sites selling something and looked for instructional sites instead. It didn’t take long to find some very informative web pages.

I didn’t leave for lunch, but kept myself going with coffee and the occasional pastry. I had a lot to learn and not much time to learn it. What I did learn stunned me to the core of my being.

Apparently, there were men and women who enjoyed handing control of their lives over to another human being. I had trouble with this. While I believed men and women were different—almost to the point of being separate species—I didn’t believe either gender superior. I’d certainly never considered

giving anyone power over me, though I had done so just the night before, and hadn't come to harm. Jorge had mentioned trust last night. At the time I didn't understand, but was beginning to.

I realized Jasmine was a submissive woman, and that she served a dominant, quite probably the woman who owned the house. I tried to think of her name, but it continued to elude me. Anyway, I had more pressing matters to deal with.

I looked through site after site, read article after article, forcing my already tired brain to absorb what it could. There was so much to remember, I despaired ever learning it all. I did the best I could.

By the end of the third hour, I felt I had at least a basic understanding of, if nothing else, the terms used in BDSM, though I had to admit to a certain amount of scepticism. I wondered how many of the sites I'd looked at were simply tall tales or even blatant lies. Surely you can't believe everything you see on the Net. Having endured enough "learning", I decided to turn my attention to the fiction.

Many of the stories I came across were badly written, but a few were all right. Most were written by submissive women, but masters and mistresses wrote some as well. There were even one or two from male slaves. I read through a couple, then tried more. I moved from one site to another, sampling the fiction on each.

After a few hours of reading, I realized something. The women in most of these stories seemed to love with a fervor I'd never known. Perhaps the only thing I could compare it to, was how I used to feel back in high school when I was in love with a boy. Such feelings never lasted though, more's the pity.

I considered my relationship with Scott. He was caring, good-looking, charming, well off, yet there was something about him that always kept him at arm's length. He hadn't supported me, and I'd walked away. It was that simple. I somehow got the idea being a submissive was a different ball game altogether.

A submissive woman put herself on the line completely—gave her all. I found myself smiling. As if there were a man who deserved that much of me. For some reason Nicco popped into my mind, and my smile turned to a scowl. No. Not even Nicco would get that much of me. I was born a free woman and would die that way.

The decision made, I felt better. I checked my email again, cleaned up the pastry crumbs, threw away my coffee container and returned to the motel to shower and change. Tonight was going to be interesting.

When I arrived at the shop, Jorge was waiting outside. He was wearing jeans and a Jethro Tull T-shirt. My mind retreated ten years. I once had a friend who loved Tull, and seeing the shirt took me back to simpler times. I had a feeling my life would never be quite so simple again.

The door was already locked. I looked at my watch, but was still fifteen minutes early.

“Hello, Sandy.”

“Hello, Sir.”

“Are you ready?”

I was certainly more ready than I’d been a day earlier. He gestured to his car, a blue Chevy that was old enough to vote. I moved in that direction, not certain what to expect. Still, I had agreed to obey. Getting into his car seemed like a fairly small sacrifice. I hoped I wasn’t making a fatal mistake.

“Where are we going?” I asked, as I lowered myself into the passenger seat.

“We’re going to eat, ’cause I’m starved. And while we’re eating, I’ll give you more of an idea of what’s expected of you.”

We were silent for the short drive to a local steakhouse. Jorge looked comfortable. I, on the other hand, was on edge. Not for the first time, I asked myself how I’d gotten myself into this. I was relieved when we pulled into the

parking lot. In spite of what I'd said, Jorge was a complete stranger, and I didn't have a whole lot of reason to trust him.

We were shown to a table and given menus. I picked up mine, looked it over and put it down.

"Do you know what you're having?" he asked.

"Whatever you want me to have, Sir."

He looked at me strangely. "Sandy, I have no idea what you like."

This surprised me. I hadn't thought it mattered and said as much. Jorge laughed and closed his menu.

"Look, submissives are submissives because it fulfills them. But before a submissive collars to a master, generally, they spend a lot of time talking. They get to know each other. Believe me when I say, most masters want a happy girl. Surely you won't be happy if I order something you don't like."

"But I thought..."

He held up a hand and I stopped talking. "It doesn't matter to me what you order. I have no reason to want you to order one thing or another. But say I hated the smell of garlic, I would simply not allow you to order a garlic dish. Since I have nothing to gain or lose by what you order, I have no reason to order for you. Eat what you like."

I shook my head and opened the menu. I hadn't expected it to be like this, but then, what did I really know about BDSM. The minimal research I'd done did little to prepare me for the realities of the situation. I had a lot to learn.

I ordered a green salad and a steak. Jorge ordered some kind of seafood pasta dish. As soon as the waitress was out of earshot, he began speaking. I soon learned speaking was something Jorge was well known for—with good reason. If you handed him a silence, he'd use it.

"Welcome to D/s 101. I'm Jorge, your professor. If you have questions at any time, please don't hesitate to ask. Because this is an accelerated course,

we'll skip some of the preliminaries and move right into the practice of Dominance and submission. There'll be a short quiz next period."

I stared at him, and he broke into laughter. I was still staring by the time he was done. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I just thought..."

"What? That we'd be back at my place having wild sex?"

I nodded.

"Sandy, I'm a Dom, and a fairly popular one at that. While I don't have a steady girl right now, I do okay for myself. I'm not interested in having sex with you just because I can."

The night was full of revelations. "You're not? But if I have to obey you..."

He shrugged. "D/s is about consent. The question is, what will and won't you consent to."

"Then I have a choice?"

"Within boundaries, yes. Okay, listen. When a Dom and a sub first get together, they talk for a long time. Honesty, trust and communication are the key to a successful D/s relationship. The Dom and sub will talk about what's expected and what's not. Subs have limits, and no Dom worth his salt would stray beyond them."

"What about pushing the boundaries? I thought that was a Dom's job too."

He raised an eyebrow. "Did your homework, I see. There are two kinds of limits...soft and hard. Hard limits are things you will not try. Bestiality. Necrophilia. Golden showers, or whatever your particular hard limits are. Soft limits are things you've never tried, but might, or things you have tried, didn't particularly like, but are willing to tolerate. A master will push your boundaries as long as they aren't hard boundaries. Remember, in the end, it's still consensual. When you collar to a Dom, or even if you agree to just play with him, what you're really saying is, 'I'm going to do anything within these limits.' As I said before, a good Dom respects limits."

"I see." My mind raced. "So Jaycee would have had limits too."

Jorge grinned. "Not so as you'd notice. She was pretty wild."

It had occurred to me before that he might have been intimate with her, but the casual way with which he said it put me on edge. She was, after all, my kid sister. Yet I needed to know everything I could, so forced down my reticence. "You've been with her then?"

"A couple of times. It was very casual. As I said before, she became involved with another group that was into darker things."

"Darker? Such as?"

"Slavery."

I'd been reading the word all afternoon and found myself desensitized. If D/s was truly consensual, then slavery wasn't the right word anyway. At least, if I kept telling that to myself, I might someday believe it. Yet there was something in the way Jorge said it that made me shiver.

"So you don't believe in slavery?"

"Not the way they practice it."

He was silent for a long time. Our food came and I was saved asking about it. However, I knew I couldn't put it off forever.

My steak was thick and tasty. I savored it. It was the best meal I'd laid eyes on since New York City and wasn't sure when I'd have another. Finally, it was done and time to talk. "Tell me about them."

"Them?"

"The group Jaycee got involved with."

"They practice slavery, as in the abolishing of all rights. Women are trained, collared, sold and expected to obey at all times. And *their* slaves aren't allowed limits."

"Oh."

"Mind you, there are consensual slaves that aren't owned in that way, but still consider themselves slaves. You could call them love slaves, I suppose,

who will do just about anything for their Masters. However, this group is different. They are Talean.”

“Talean?”

“They built a subculture based on a set of fantasy novels. But they take it too far. Tal is a fantasy world in which slavery is the rule...the law. Taleans live that way on Earth. It’s not legal of course, but as the slaves voluntarily submit to that fate, there’s no one to prosecute their owners. Unfortunately, too many Talean masters use that platform as an excuse for abuse. D/s is *not* about abuse.”

“Are you saying my sister was part of that group?”

“Yes. She was training to be a Talean slave.”

I studied him. I couldn’t see Jaycee like that, no matter what circumstance. Apparently, there was a lot about my sister I didn’t know.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Sure.”

He asked for the check and when it arrived, paid. This surprised me. I had thought he’d ask me to pay. He was, after all, doing me a favor. The more I learned about Jorge, the more surprising he became.

Our next stop was his house, which was a lot less run down than his car. I didn’t know what to expect after the car, so I was pleasantly surprised to find Jorge lived in a nice suburban house, with a white picket fence, a dog named Woody and all the comforts of home. But I wasn’t there to be comfortable. I was there to learn.

“Do you have any questions?”

“About a million. What’s in it for the girls?”

“They get fulfilment out of it. It turns them on to be out of control. Haven’t you ever been out of control before?”

I shook my head. “No. I think the idea terrifies me. I’ve always been sort of a control freak.”

“Then you might make a good little sub after all.”

“That makes no sense.”

“Sandy, what kind of woman do you think becomes a sub or slave? Do you think all subs are weak-willed women with no minds of their own?”

“I guess I thought that.”

“Was Jaycee like that?”

“Hell no!”

He laughed. “Right. She’s a typical submissive. She knows what she wants. She flies in the face of her upbringing to have it. She *wants* to give away that control, because she was always in control, see? That’s what makes it seductive. Do you know how many businessmen who run large corporations are secretly submissives, paying mistresses to control and humiliate them for a short period, so they can feel what it’s like to not have to make decisions all the time?”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I still don’t know if I’d like it.”

Jorge rose. “Come with me.”

I followed him to his garage, which was set up like something out of a medieval dungeon. The mere sight of the place terrified me. He must have realized it immediately.

“Don’t worry. I won’t do anything you don’t want me to.”

“Okay.”

“Remember, this is about consent. Also, I’m going to give you a safe word. In fact, you pick one. Pick a word you wouldn’t normally say during a sexual encounter. One you can easily remember.”

I’d read about safe words earlier in the day. I just didn’t think I’d be needing one quite so soon. “Ummmm, how about library?”



“Will you really remember that in the heat of the moment? How about Jaycee?”

I nodded. “Yes, all right.”

He brought me to a table that looked like some sort of torture device. It was about six feet long with a hole in it, where your head would go.

“Strip down to your panties and lie on your stomach. Put your face in the hole.”

I pointed to the table. “What is that?”

He looked surprised. “It’s a massage table. Haven’t you ever gotten a massage?”

I’d never had a professional massage, and felt relieved and mildly embarrassed. I had allowed the thoughts of what I might expect to influence what I saw. No doubt, if he’d had a dentist’s or barber’s chair in the room, I’d have seen it as something far more sinister as well.

Jorge watched me, and I decided to surprise him. I’d already been completely naked in front of him, so it wasn’t terribly difficult to strip to my panties, though admittedly, it took longer this time, as I had to hop out of my jeans, which were too tight. Too many pastries. I’d have to cut down.

He waited patiently, watching the entire time, until I was lying on my stomach on the table. It was cool when I first lay down on it, and I felt my nipples harden. Just the thought of being there was a turn on. I didn’t know what to expect, but that was part of the thrill. And Jorge was an attractive man. Perhaps the tension of the past few days also added to my feelings of excitement. I had no doubt I needed release.

Jorge moved until he was out of my field of vision. I started to turn my head, but he stopped me with a word.

“No. Stay exactly as you are. You don’t need to see what I’m doing.”

That frightened me more than anything else. What *was* he doing? Was he going for a knife? A gun? A baseball bat? The range of possibilities was

staggering. And there I was, alone in his house. What if he were the one? What if he had murdered Jaycee? I almost stood up, but remembered my plight. For one thing, Jaycee was murdered far from here. I knew those cliffs weren't in Florida. For that reason alone, I didn't think Jorge was the killer. Also, he seemed so understanding and benevolent. He'd agreed to help me, and though I'd stripped for him the night before, he hadn't taken advantage of me. Of course, that didn't mean he wouldn't at some point. Still, I'd already decided I'd have sex with him if he'd help me find Jaycee's killer. I wondered if that would qualify as prostitution. If I lowered my standards, gave my body away to a man for something other than love, would I not be a whore? For here I was, practically naked, lying on a massage table in the garage of a man I'd only just met.

Only the thought of Jaycee kept me there. I was going to see this through to the end, whatever it cost. I just hoped it wouldn't cost me my life. Something warm seeped onto my back. I started at first, then held perfectly still.

"Relax," said Jorge. "It's just oil."

Oil? Was he going to set me on fire? I pushed the thought from my mind. Of course not. It was massage oil. I thought it smelled a bit like sandalwood. I'd always loved that scent. I felt his hands on my naked back. My body stiffened, then relaxed. He used his palms to spread the oil over my back, shoulders and arms. He worked slowly, methodically, and it felt absolutely wonderful. When I got back to New York, if I ever did, I would make it my business to get regular massages. His hands were strong, and they moved up and down my back, soothing me. I should have been more scared, but wasn't. He kept working his hands up and down my spine, across the small of my back, then up again past my shoulder blades. I felt his thumbs dig into the juncture of my shoulders and neck. I moaned with pleasure, then started to giggle, embarrassed by the sound.

"Is something funny?"

“Not really. It just feels good.”

He sounded surprised. “Well, what did you expect?”

“I thought D/s is about pain.”

Jorge laughed. “S&M is about pain. D/s is about control. There are two ways to control a woman, or anybody, I suppose. You can use either pain, or pleasure. I’ve never much liked hurting people.”

His hands continued to work on me and, in spite of myself, I began to let go. Slowly, as the minutes slipped by, as I started to feel better and better, he shifted his attention to my legs and feet, hands kneading and stroking up and down, giving wide berth to my most private areas. My legs and calves revelled in the sensation of his hands, slightly rough but coated in oil, working deeply into my tense muscles. It was almost as good as the back. He worked his way down to my feet and massaged them as well, first one, then the other. By the time he was done. I was feeling better than I had in a long time.

He didn’t stop though. He started working on my legs again, higher and higher. My legs were slightly spread, enough for him to get his fingers between, but he didn’t go there. I don’t know why. I was feeling so good, I almost wouldn’t have minded.

The thought surprised me. I’d never been one to have casual sex. I’d had a few partners in my life and each had come with a relationship attached. I’d never had a one-night stand, never picked up a guy in a club, never had sex with a guy on the first date—and this wasn’t even a date. What was happening to me?

His hands continued to work. He was on my back again, and I sighed in relief. I didn’t want him down there. Especially because down there was beginning to tingle. He worked for a time on my shoulders again, before returning to my lower back. It felt so damned good I could have lay there forever. However, his hands were getting lower, dangerously close to my backside.

“Have you ever had your ass rubbed?” he asked.

“Ummmmm, no.”

“Would you like to?”

I thought about it. If it felt like the rest of the massage, I didn’t want to discourage him, but I was starting to get horny, which was the last thing I wanted. Jorge was helping me to find my sister, nothing more. I couldn’t afford to develop feelings for him.

“I don’t think so.”

“Suit yourself,” he said. I tried to detect a hint of anger in his voice, but there was none. He kept rubbing my lower back though, ever so close, as if he were teasing me, trying to wear me down. Several times he slid his hands to my middle back, but they always returned to my lower back, and even circled around to include my hips. I had long ago stopped trying to hide my moans, but as he continued, they became more needy. I didn’t want them to sound that way, but I was getting more and more turned on. The only thing I could ask him to do was stop, which I really didn’t want. So I endured as best I could, until I literally felt I couldn’t take anymore.

I had to do something. “You know, if you’re still offering, perhaps I’d like to have my behind rubbed.”

I could feel him smiling. “I’m sorry, the offer is no longer open.”

Just like that, I began to realize the game he was playing. Mind games. Dominance and submission. Control.

“Okay. That’s fine.” I tried to sound chipper, but wasn’t certain I hid my disappointment.

“Perhaps the next time, you’ll think twice before saying no to me.”

“I’m sorry.” I didn’t know why I said it.

“I’m sure you are.”

He withdrew his hands and backed away. It was almost a physical pain. I was afraid I not only might have offended him, but also that he wouldn't help me find out what had happened to Jaycee.

"Please...don't stop."

"Please?"

"Are you angry?"

"Do I sound angry?"

The fact was, he sounded quite calm, but I was still worried I might have upset him. "You can rub my ass if you want," I said lamely.

"Oh, can I now." I could sense the amusement in his voice.

"Please."

"Please what?"

"Will you please rub my ass?"

He didn't answer right away. Then... "No."

Much to my embarrassment, I started to cry. I didn't know why at the time, but looking back, I realize what he was doing. I was crying because I felt I had displeased him. He was legitimately trying to help me, had asked me for nothing, and I felt I'd let him down. I had told him I would do anything, but had expected him to tell me what to do. I didn't think he'd ask. Worse still, he didn't seem angry, but that didn't matter. Somehow, I had failed him. At the thought, I cried harder. He made no move to comfort me. Scott would have been beside me in a moment, but not Jorge.

I cried for a while longer, but his lack of response left me confused. Oddly, I felt myself grow angry at his apathy. I sat up on the table, then stood unsteadily, my tired muscles protesting the sudden call to work.

"Most men would comfort a woman in distress," I said.

"Is that right?"

"Yes, I believe it is."

“Is that the reason for your outburst? Were you expecting me to comfort you?”

“Well I...” I stopped speaking. What *was* the reason? “It’s not that. It’s just that...well...”

“You thought I’d relent if you shed tears, didn’t you?”

I didn’t answer.

“Of course you did. Men have always responded. It’s very common for women to use tears to manipulate men. As long as men continue to respond, you continue to perform. I’m willing to bet it’s one way in which you’ve kept control of your relationships. If things went against you, you’d turn on the waterworks and the guys would back down. Correct me if I’m wrong.”

“I’m just emotional.”

“Is that so? Seems as soon as you realized I wasn’t going to charge in and save you, you stopped crying pretty quickly. What happened to your emotion? Did you lose it? Did it evaporate? You don’t sound very emotional now.”

I wanted to deny it, but couldn’t. Not completely. There was always a little girl in me, looking out, waiting for daddy to come and fix things. My experiences did teach me that men went out of their way to be nice to me when I was crying. But was I really using it as a way to manipulate?

“Well?” he asked. “Where is all the emotion?”

I didn’t have an answer. “You’re a very clever man.”

He shook his head. “No. I’m just a man, possibly the first you’ve met in your entire life.”

“I hardly think...”

“Most men are taught to be sensitive. Effeminate even. It’s politically correct. It’s the new age man. I bet your last boyfriend was sensitive.”

“As a matter of fact, he was.”

“I see. And he treated you well.”

“Yes.”

“Bought you nice things?”

“Yes.”

“And were you satisfied with the relationship?”

I started to answer, but stopped. Could I have walked away if I had been truly satisfied? Did I miss Scott so much? If not, what had been missing?

He continued on, without waiting for my answer. “To quote the movie, *Fight Club*, ‘we’re a generation of men raised by women’. How can any woman be satisfied, when men are so few and far between? Political correctness is just a game people play. It’s not honesty. It’s not who we are. I’m what I suppose you would call an alpha male. Should I hide it? Sit in the back seat and keep my head down like a good little boy? Should I deny my own nature, just ‘cause some moron in a thousand dollar suit says it’s wrong? What’s wrong with being who and what we are? Your sister...your sister decided she wanted to be a slave. That it would fulfill her to be that way. Are you saying you know what’s better for her? Have you ever been inside her head?”

My mind returned to the dream, and I started to nod, but stopped. I didn’t want to talk about the dream, or explain how or when I’d been inside her head. “I get your point,” I said finally.

“Maybe you do, but I’m not convinced. We’ll see.”

I didn’t know what he wanted from me, so I didn’t say anything else. I felt on display, still wearing only my panties while he was fully clothed. I’d read earlier this is something that places the power in the dom’s hands, though I didn’t understand it until then. It is hard for someone naked, or almost so, to feel superior to someone fully dressed. I didn’t know why, but it was apparently true. I couldn’t stand up to him. Couldn’t say anything. I only stood there, waiting for what he would say next. In fact, I found myself so focused on him, so attentive, I almost laughed. Had I ever focused so on Scott? I didn’t think so.

When he finally spoke, I felt my legs go weak. “It’s time for you to go.”

Panic made my head spin. Was he done with me? Did he want me to come back? Had I displeased him so badly? I felt the tears start, but fought them off, remembering how little they affected him. What did he want from me?

“What can I do?” I asked.

“You can get dressed. I’ll drive you back to your car.”

I was so upset, I found myself mute. He had spoken and stood rigidly, waiting for me to obey. I didn’t want to go yet. I had so much I still needed to learn from him. That’s what this was all about, I told myself. If it weren’t for Jaycee, I would never be here. He had no real power over me. But even as I thought it, I had to question whether there was any truth to the premise. I’d never met a man like Jorge, though I suspected there would be others like him involved in D/s or BDSM. I still wasn’t sure if there were differences between the two and if so, what they were. I wanted to ask, but didn’t dare upset him further.

When I was done dressing, he moved toward the door to his house. He could have just opened the garage, but probably didn’t want the neighbors to see his playroom.

Nothing was said on the trip back to his shop, where my car was still parked. He pulled up next to it and waited for me to get out. I was still waiting for him to speak, but he didn’t. The silence unnerved me more than anything he could have said. Finally, I knew it was up to me. I had already opened the door and stood beside the car. If I closed that door without speaking, he might not continue my lessons. I drew a deep breath.

“Will you continue to teach me, Sir?”

“For now. But you have to up your game if you wish to come back to my house.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“You may return to the shop tomorrow, at closing time. Don’t be late.”



I felt my heart leap. “Yes, Sir.” He couldn’t miss the enthusiasm in my voice, but he didn’t respond to it.

I closed the car door, and he pulled out, leaving me alone in the parking lot. I quickly got in my car and drove off, mind awlirl with all I had learned.

## Chapter Three

When I got back to the motel, I showered to get the oil off, and thought about what had happened. There was so much I didn't know. So much I had yet to learn. While the water ran over my body, I let my mind drift back to my arrival and everything that had happened since—until I thought of Nicco.

The room spun, my legs weakened and breath deserted me. As attractive as Jorge was, it was Nicco I thought about. That wasn't good, but it made little difference. Before I even realized what I was doing, I found myself stroking my breasts. My nipples were so hard and sensitive, they were beginning to ache. I imagined what Nicco's hands might feel like on my breasts—strong certainly. Would they be rough or smooth? Would he touch me gently, or grasp me with the conviction of one who feels he's entitled. Surely the latter.

I felt a slow burn begin between my legs and moaned softly. The hot water felt good on my body, too good, I realized. Just the thought of Nicco sent me into a sexual frenzy. How was that possible?

I pinched both nipples, pulled on them. I bit my lip against another moan. No. I couldn't do this. Not now.

With more effort than should have been necessary, I stopped. I couldn't afford the luxury of lust, not with so much at stake. Nicco, for all his good looks and sex appeal, was very much an unknown quantity. Who was he? What role did he play in things? Had he also known Jaycee? I should have asked Jorge, but didn't want to let on about my feelings toward Nicco, such as they were. I wasn't sure how he'd react, and I needed him still.

My thoughts turned to Jorge. What about him? Was I truly experiencing what a submissive felt so soon after our meeting? It didn't seem possible, yet

how else could I explain the depth of my reactions? Even though I didn't love him, I was certain he could have his way with me. There was little I could do about it. Was my decision to sleep with him if it came to it based purely upon my need for his help, or was there another motive, something deeper? Could it be I made the decision to protect myself from the knowledge he could have me if he wanted?

The thought sobered me immediately. I turned off the water and stepped dripping from the shower. I was glad the mirror had steamed up. I didn't want to see the myriad doubts reflected in the lines of my face. I dried off quickly and went immediately to bed, but didn't fall asleep straight away. I realized I was scared of the dream. I needn't have worried. My dreams were of Jorge, the massage table and what might have happened had I allowed him to continue.

When I woke, I was hornier than I'd been the night before. What was happening to me? I was torn between taking matters into my own hands, a thing I'd done rarely, or trying to ignore it. I tried to imagine what would happen if, in my current state of arousal, I did end up back at Jorge's house. That would be completely unacceptable. Yet touching myself, bringing myself to orgasm, as appealing as it sounded, was also an admission of sorts—one I didn't want to deal with.

The phone rang, and I jumped. No one knew I was here. I hadn't even mentioned it to Jorge. I picked it up before it rang a second time.

"Hello."

"Hi, it's me. Get dressed and be downstairs in ten minutes."

Before I could respond, I heard a click and a few seconds later, a dial tone. The voice had been Jorge's. Terror engulfed me. How had he known where to find me? Was he stalking me? What should I do?

I could ignore his command, in which case I was on my own again. As scary as what he told me to do was, it was infinitely less scary than having to navigate this labyrinth alone.

I dressed quickly and made my way to the lobby, glad I had taken the time to shower the night before.

He didn't show up in ten, or even fifteen minutes. I was hungry and tired. In the past, I'd have left after half an hour, but didn't. I couldn't afford to. So I sat, tensing at each car that looked like it was slowing to pull into the carport. By the time Jorge pulled up, I was shaking with a mixture of relief and anger. He looked at me, but didn't come inside. He gestured and, like a good little girl, I went to him. Part of me was furious, but I dared not show it. I got into the car and closed the door. He started driving without saying anything.

After a couple of silent minutes, he spoke. "When I come into your presence, you will greet me politely. It's part of being pleasing."

I didn't know what to say. No man had ever treated me this way. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Just do it."

"Yes, Sir. Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning, Sandy. How are you feeling today?"

Just like that, the incident was in the past and he was acting like nothing had happened. Was this somehow part of the training?

"I'm fine, Sir."

He took his eyes from the road to glance at me, then returned his concentration to driving. "Never lie to me. Never lie to anyone, but particularly a dom."

"I'm sor...yes, Sir."

"Good. Let's try that again. How are you feeling?"

"What if you don't like my answer?"

"It's my option to punish you or not, but I've found most doms reward honesty, and punish lies and the withholding of information."

"I see."

"This is the third and final time I'm asking. How are you?"

"I'm confused, tired and a bit angry."

"Excellent." He looked pleased.

I felt a warmth spread through me at his approval and didn't like it at all.

"Is it?"

"Yes. It's exactly what I expected you to feel."

That unnerved me, for I hadn't thought myself that easy to read.

"You think you know me so well, after so short a time?"

"Well, I'd say you're in a state of arousal, increased awareness, you're probably shaken, if not downright terrified, and you resent me, but you're also curious about me. Did you masturbate last night?"

"No."

"Really?" I was pleased he sounded surprised.

"Yes, Sir."

He didn't say anything, and I wondered if his inability to predict my actions pissed him off. Part of me would have been happy, but I was forced to admit, a much larger part was scared by the prospect.

"May I ask where we're going, Sir?"

"Yes."

He didn't sound angry. "Where are we going?"

"To meet someone. Have you eaten?"

"No, Sir."

"Good. Neither have I. Hope you don't mind the IHOP."

"Not at all, Sir."

"Good."

He didn't speak again until we were seated at a table.

I surprised myself by ordering fruit salad and coffee. I'd been eating terribly, but that had never concerned me before. Yet if I were to move into the

realm of Dominance and submission, I'd need every advantage I could get. Gaining weight would be counterproductive. I vowed to start exercising as well. I figured I could lose five or ten pounds without too much effort. The thought surprised me, and I analyzed it. Was I doing it for Jorge, so he might find me more attractive? I didn't think so, but it was such an odd thought I couldn't stop playing with it.

Breakfast conversation was, happily, casual, which was good, because I didn't have the head for any more of Jorge's mind games. Only after the dishes were cleared, and I was on my third cup of coffee, did he speak of what was to come.

"There is a man I want you to meet. His name is Dr. Levine. I want you to listen to what he has to say."

"Yes, Sir."

"Good girl. We'll go see him now."

I had no idea what I was in for, but Jorge's serious demeanor made me nervous. Indeed, I had never seen him so somber.

After breakfast, he drove me to an ordinary-looking house in a suburb of Fort Lauderdale. He got out of the car and motioned for me to do the same. Together, we walked up the path to the front door. Jorge rang the bell.

The door was answered by a man in his sixties, though he still had a sprightly step and a twinkle in his eye. I liked him immediately. He ushered us into the living room and invited us to sit on the sofa. He sat in a large plush chair and looked at me.

"I understand you have an interest in the Taleans."

Jorge must have told him of my plans. I hoped he hadn't said more. "Yes."

"What do you know about them?"

"Only what I've read."

The man smiled. "I'm an authority on the Taleans. I've written several books about their subculture, while I was still practicing."

“Practicing?”

“I am a psychologist by trade. The Taleans are what you’d call a side interest. Fascinating culture.”

“Yes, I agree.”

“A more dangerous group of deluded men I’ve yet to find anywhere.”

I didn’t say anything, so he kept talking.

“Why are you interested in the Taleans? Do you know what they do to women?”

“They keep slaves,” I said, hoping he wouldn’t quiz me further, for that was all I knew.

“That’s true, as far as it goes. Most Taleans are abusive egomaniacs, out to humiliate women and use them badly. The atrocities they’ve committed would take too long to list, but among their crimes are assault, rape and murder.”

I sat up straight. Was my sister killed by a Talean man? I felt I had to keep him talking, so I thought back to the day I’d spent reading and a single line popped into my mind. “You can’t rape a slave. Though it would seem to be a contradiction, slavery is consensual.”

“You are partially correct, m’dear. But the Taleans don’t care whether you consent or not. They have methods of brainwashing you’d need a degree to understand, but trust me when I tell you, they are as dangerous as anyone on God’s green Earth.”

“You speak with passion. How is it you know so much about them?”

“My daughter, Isabelle, was a Talean slave. She was murdered by them.”

I felt my blood run cold. “I’m sorry. What happened to her killer?”

“The police can do nothing. There is not enough evidence, but I know what I know. My daughter’s murderer walks free. Since that time, I’ve spent my life, my fortune, all my time, trying to stop others from making the same mistake. Look...I don’t know what you’re running from, but you’re beautiful, you’re

young and even from the few minutes we've spent together, I can tell you're intelligent. I implore you, please, don't join them. Don't throw your life away."

"I'm sorry. I have no choice."

"Everyone has a choice."

His gaze was so intense, I could barely breathe. He was warning me. He believed what he said with such conviction, I had little doubt he'd give anything to stop me. Part of me wanted to tell him about my sister, but I couldn't bring myself to add to his worries. Jaycee was my problem—not his.

"Tell me about them. I'll listen."

That seemed to appease him, at least for the moment, for he leaned back in his chair and relaxed. "Many years ago, an author named Steve Lazarowitz wrote a book. It was the first of a series of fantasy novels, nothing more. It took place on another world, a violent world very different from Earth. Lazarowitz populated his world with the most unlikely creatures and peoples, and he made slavery a cultural institution. His intention in writing this was for the sole purpose of entertainment, but he was too good at his job, for there are many who believe he was sending a message about the true nature of men and women, the true nature of humanity.

"Most of those people are happy to debate it in Internet forums, but some have created actual Talean societies right here on Earth. Not for entertainment, but for the subjugation of women, whom they consider inferior. Women must serve, must obey and the penalties for failure are severe. Neglect, starvation, torture...death. To the average Talean, women are animals with no rights at all. They would as soon kill a woman as sleep with her. They are an evil people. If you know what's good for you, you'll stay away from them."

He stopped speaking and studied me. I didn't say anything. I felt ill, though I tried not to let it show. Somewhere within me, I felt despair such as I'd never felt in my life. *Oh Jaycee, what happened to you? How can I take on these people? How will I live among them? Would your restless spirit ever forgive me if*



*I turn away now? If I return to New York and let your killer escape?* I knew the answers before the questions had finished forming in my mind. There was no way back for me. Nowhere for me to go. I couldn't live the rest of my life without knowing what had happened...without at least trying to find out. That it would be dangerous, I had no doubt, but I would do what I had to. There was no turning back now.

The rest of the morning was more of the same. For an hour I sat spellbound, as Dr. Levine spun story after story of women who had been violated, murdered or both. I listened with a mixture of fascination and horror, as he no doubt intended. Could men really be like that? Could people be so cruel?

By the time we left, I was thoroughly indoctrinated into the ways of the Taleans and felt as if I had already died. So many women, so cruelly treated. Only as we were leaving the house, did I realize I was no longer doing this just for Jaycee.

Whatever happened to me no longer mattered. Someone would have to reveal to the world the truth about the Taleans and make the depth of their depravity known. Perhaps there was a reason for all of this. Perhaps my life would come to have some meaning after all.

I didn't say a word on the way back to the hotel, and Jorge didn't either. He dropped me off and went to work, leaving me alone with the pain of all I had learned that morning.

It was a different Sandra Castilla who drove to The Bondage Shoppe that night. A cold fire burned within me, for I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt my sister had been murdered by Taleans. Somehow, some way, I would make them pay. I would exact a price from them that would make God's wrath pale in comparison. Jorge noticed the change immediately. I could tell by the expression on his face and the way he treated me. Tonight, I was all business.

“Do you want to talk about it?” he asked.

“No.”

“You really should.”

I grew angry. “Did you take Jaycee to Dr. Levine too?”

“No.”

“Why not? Why do I get special treatment?”

He looked surprised. “I believe everyone has free will. Jaycee knew what she was getting herself into. She wanted that. Who am I to tell her she was wrong? Everyone has a choice and Jaycee made hers. Sure I advised her to be careful, but she didn’t listen, not that I expected her to. For a slave, she sure had a mind of her own. But with you, it’s different. You aren’t drawn to the Taleans...you’re repelled by them. Hell, you didn’t even know what BDSM stood for! So why put yourself into danger? It’s not like you can bring her back.

“Sandy, Dr. Levine’s advice shouldn’t be ignored. These men are dangerous. What are you going to do?”

“Whatever I have to.”

“Even if it means your death?”

I looked at him. “How can you live knowing this goes on? How can you wake up every morning and look at yourself in the mirror while people are being raped, tortured and killed?”

“People are raped, tortured and killed every day. The papers are full of it. Haven’t you ever *watched* the news? Hell, Sandy, you’re from New York. You should know how dangerous men can be. It’s human nature. In every century since recorded history began, there have been men who have committed atrocities. Many of them were political or religious leaders. Rape isn’t something invented by Taleans, nor is murder. So now you find out a group of men are committing murders and you’re going to infiltrate them and bring them down all by yourself? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“Someone has to.”

“You’re wrong. No one has to. If you kill a hundred murderers, there will still be a million left. We’re responsible for ourselves, no one else. I take responsibility for what I do. What others do is their choice. Some make bad choices, some make good choices. Let me ask you this...after you’re done wiping Taleans off the face of the Earth, will you be going after the drug lords? Terrorist organizations? The military? Who’ll be your next target? Do you really think you can make a difference? That you can change human nature?”

I didn’t know what to say. On some level I knew he was right, but the Taleans hadn’t killed a stranger. They’d killed my baby sister, my last living relative. The funny part was, I’d hardly ever spoken to Jaycee, but she had been there. She had been a phone call away. Perhaps my wrath was selfish, but I’d seen what had happened to her on the beach. I knew what her last moments were like. I’d experienced her death. Jorge’s words, as logical as they must have sounded to his ears, didn’t have enough magic to sway me, for they hadn’t the strength to bring Jaycee back and nothing else would suffice.

“Are you going to help me or not?”

“If you’re still interested, I’ll continue your training. But once you join them, there’s nothing I can do.”

I nodded. “I know.”

He gestured to his car and I got in. We didn’t talk again until we were in his house.

“Since you’re determined to go through with this,” said Jorge, “I’m going to dispense with the formalities. You’ve got a lot to learn and very little time.”

I nodded. We were in the living room this time. Jorge sat on a recliner. It was just a chair, but looked like a throne. I wondered if it was intentional. I sat on the sofa to his right. Though we were sitting on different pieces of furniture, we were in very close proximity. He could easily reach over and touch me from where he was. The thought was never far from my mind.

“I’m going to tell you something,” he said, “that most doms will never admit. Perhaps most don’t even realize it.”

I looked at him expectantly.

“It is impossible to dom a woman.”

“What?”

“It is impossible to dom a woman...or a man either, I suppose.”

“Haven’t you had submissive...”

“Sure I’ve had subs. They called me Master. Sometimes even subs that weren’t mine have called me Master as a term of respect. But I’ve never *dommed* anyone.”

“Okay, I’m confused.”

“I don’t dom women. Women dom *themselves*.”

I considered what he said, and thought I understood, but he was in talking mode now, so I waited patiently and listened to the rest of it.

“Every submissive is different, but they are unified in that they need to give control of their lives to another. That’s their need, not mine. I only provide them an outlet to satisfy that need.

“In the past, I’ve been with a number of women. Some were into pain, some weren’t. Some were into rape fantasies. Others weren’t. I ‘dommed’ them by giving them exactly what they needed. The trick is to be sharp enough to accurately determine their needs, for once you give a woman what she needs, something no one else has ever given her, she’s yours. Questions?”

“Tons.”

“Go for it.”

“How did you know where I was staying?”

He stared at me for a moment, then broke out laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

"I meant questions about what I was talking about...nevertheless...I followed you last night. I wanted to make sure you got home safely, but also, I had planned today's encounter yesterday."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "Part of being a dom is keeping women off balance. If you don't know what to expect, you can't have expectations, can you? Last night, you thought I'd sleep with you. You talked yourself into it. Then, when it didn't happen, it bothered you that I didn't."

"Your actions are deliberate, aren't they?"

"Completely."

"So you weren't mad at me for saying no last night."

"I expected you to. It was, to some degree, a test. You passed with flying colors."

"I did?"

He laughed again. "Of course. Don't you realize how submissive you were acting last night—and this morning? A man making you wait for him. You've never done that before. A man telling you what to do and you blindly obeying. When you felt I was pleased, you radiated joy and when you thought I was angry, you felt horrible. True?"

I didn't want to admit it. It couldn't be true. I was not a submissive woman. I controlled my relationships. I controlled everything in my life. Yet somehow, he had turned the tables on me in ways that made me most uncomfortable. His control over me drove me to distraction. I wanted to beat him at his own game, but there were other issues, and I couldn't let this become a power struggle. Still, when I replied, my voice was like ice.

"Yes."

"Does that surprise you?"

"Yes."

"Well, stick around, girl. The surprises are only beginning."

He smirked, and I blushed, not sure where he was leading me, but fairly certain it would be in a direction I didn't expect.

We didn't return to the garage that night. It was a shame too, for tense as I was, I could've really used a massage. Instead, the night was about Jorge talking and me learning, and learn I did.

It would be difficult to impart everything we spoke about, but in general, the more I learned about submissive women, the more I had to question my own credentials. I had always seen myself as fiercely independent, yet I'd never truly been happy in life. I'd simply existed from day to day, and allowed myself to believe security and happiness were the same thing. I was beginning to suspect they had nothing to do with each other.

That night, lying in my motel room bed, I thought about what I'd learned and tried to apply it to my life.

Scott had been secure. I had him wrapped around my finger, so it was easy to take him for granted. Not that I'm proud of myself for acting that way, but in retrospect it was obvious. He always did what I wanted. He was always scared of hurting me. He always did things to prove himself, and I let him. Had I somehow been the dom in that relationship without even realizing it?

In the end, I had walked away. I had thought it was because he couldn't see eye to eye with me, but found myself wondering. There was something about Jorge I found attractive. I was certainly more attracted to him than I had been to Scott, even at the beginning. Jorge was different from other men I'd known. Perhaps that was it. He represented a challenge. But I wasn't interested in Jorge as a potential partner. He had information I needed. As long as I was getting it, I was giving myself over to him. Wasn't that what he said all submissives do?

Instead of learning what I needed to know, I was becoming more and more confused, no longer even sure where I stood in the cosmic scheme of things. I'd

always been sure in the past, yet two days into my “training”, I was rapidly losing my way. I had no idea what I would do about it, but had to think of something fast.

In the meantime, Jorge would continue to work on me, throwing me new concepts at an alarming rate, trying to keep me off balance.

He came to me that night in my dreams. Jorge wasn't a tall man, but his presence made him seem larger than life. We were at an amusement park, surrounded by rides I'd never before imagined. They were fast and colorful, dangerous looking. I had stepped into the future, with Jorge, walking between rides and attractions too numerous to count.

Yet the place we finally entered was an old-fashioned house of mirrors. Everywhere I looked, we were reflected, but each reflection was distorted in unexpected ways. In some mirrors I was small next to Jorge. In others, Jorge didn't appear at all...I was alone, but either skeletally thin, or disproportionately busty, or even, as in one case, made from metal.

I wore a red-plaid skirt and white blouse from my high school days. On my feet, white tennis shoes, though I'd never owned a pair. Jorge was dressed in faded black jeans and a black T-shirt, sporting the slogan, “Real men don't send flowers”. As always his hair and beard were meticulous—not a single strand out of place. I wondered what his pubic hair looked like.

I felt a hand on my shoulder and turned slowly. Jorge's brown eyes pulled at me. His lips were so close. His hands were...what was he doing? He was unbuttoning my blouse. I turned and ran. I smashed into one mirror after another in my attempt to escape, but no matter where I ran, he was still with me.

I turned into a large mirror-filled room and ran right into him. His hands closed on my arms, holding me from him, then pulling me close. My lips touched his and I struggled to get away. It felt amazing, but I didn't want it to. I

didn't want to feel anything for Jorge. I was using him. He didn't mean anything to me.

But his tongue was probing my lips, coaxing me to open for him and against my will, I did. His tongue stroked mine, seducing me, teasing me, driving me mad. I could feel juices gushing down my legs. The feeling filled me with panic.

*Please, Jorge, stop. No more. Don't do this to me.*

Except his mouth was on mine, and I couldn't help but respond. I felt need build in me as I'd never known. I grew desperate to escape what I now knew was a trap. With every ounce of control I could muster, I pushed him away. I couldn't do this. Not here. Not with Jorge.

The mirrors around us were gone, replaced by curtains. Jorge's hands still held me. I could escape. I turned back to him, but it was no longer Jorge.

"Nicco...please..."

"Aren't you happy to see me?"

"Yes...no...I don't know."

"I think you are."

And again, those lips on mine, no...different lips. Nicco's mouth was hotter, drew me in even more. The flow of my juices doubled. I almost came just from that kiss. Nicco's body pressed against mine. I tried to back away, but there was a wall behind me. I felt his vertical weight against me. I was trapped by his hands, his tongue, the feel of his body. When I looked down again, we were both naked. My nipples rubbed against his chest hair. Already erect, they screamed for attention and Nicco heard them.

His mouth deserted mine and moved down my body. He signed his name on my flesh with his tongue, and I was his as if he'd branded me. His lips encircled my right nipple, caressed it. The wet warmth made me so hot, I almost fainted. *Please, Nicco, oh God, please. Don't do this to me...but I could*



only think it. He owned my mouth, and I could not speak against him, not now...perhaps not ever.

His hands were moving, sliding up and down my arms. His mouth never stopped sucking. He parted my legs with a strong thigh. I could feel his hardness pressed against my hip. His leg, already soaked from my juices, became almost frictionless as I slid against it. I cried out and my arms went around him, pulling him closer to me, as if I could merge us into one being through force alone.

I wanted him so bad...knew I shouldn't, but couldn't remember why. I didn't think about Jaycee. Didn't think about anything but my own pleasure, and Nicco's shaft pressed against me, beginning to leak cum. I moaned when I realized it. My entire body shuddered. I wanted to come so bad, I'd have done anything...anything at all. I felt a scream building in the back of my throat, but Nicco's thigh moved away.

Tears streamed down my cheeks. I was so close to coming, so frustrated, I couldn't even think. Then his fingers pulled my lips apart and stroked the sides of my clit so gently, I thought I would die. He jerked it off as if I were a man, and my clit was hard and throbbing. I tingled all over. I knew he was going to take me. I was going to gush cum and we'd drown in it. I wanted him to keep going and wanted him to stop before I was so totally owned, I had no choice but to serve him.

A sound that should have never been there drew my attention. I fought against it, knowing well what it was, but not willing to relinquish Nicco. It came again and again, delaying my orgasm until, finally, I opened my eyes.

I jerked awake and grabbed the phone.

"Hello?"

"It's me. Ten minutes, downstairs."

I was about to protest, but the dial tone wouldn't have cared. I sighed, stretched and ran to the bathroom. Just enough time to wash, brush my teeth,

relieve myself and put on some deodorant before dressing. I had planned on showering that morning, as I'd been too tired the night before. After that strangely surreal and intense dream, I needed release more than ever. I knew where to find it too, but couldn't afford to be late. I thought about how long it had taken Jorge to get there the day before and almost stayed. The shower, and opportunity to touch myself, beckoned.

No. I had to play the part of a submissive woman. I would have to learn to obey. With great regret, I turned my back to the shower, left my room and locked the door behind me.

To my surprise, Jorge was already waiting in the carport.

"I thought I'd have to wait again."

He stared at me.

"Good morning, Sir."

"Good morning, Sandy. How was your night?"

"Short," I mumbled.

He laughed and motioned for me to get in. I complied and he started driving.

"May I ask where we're going, Sir?"

"No."

I smiled. It was all about head games. I knew that now, and so could deal with it. Still, being in the car with an almost stranger, driving to God-knows-where, was not a fun feeling. He drove for quite some time, until finally, he pulled into the parking lot of the Bondage Shoppe. I was certain we'd gone a long way out of the way.

"You took that route to throw me off," I said.

"Of course."

He got out. I started to remove my safety belt and he said, "No. You stay in the car."

I looked at him. He didn't say anything else, but went about the business of opening the shop.

I looked at the sun through the side window. It was warm already. It would be a hot day. I wondered how long he expected me to sit there. I knew the answer immediately...until he told me not to. I sighed, wishing I'd brought a book along. I wondered how long I'd wait. Was this another test? I had no idea, but if it were, it would be in my best interest to pass it.

So I sat, thinking and baking in the Florida sun. Fortunately, the windows were manual and I was able to roll them down, but I was not happy. He kept me sitting there for two hours, during which time I did nothing but think.

When he came to get me, I was so angry, I wanted to punch him, but I'd agreed to the terms and couldn't blame him. After all, he was helping me, and had asked for nothing but obedience in return. It was his right to test me, to make sure he was getting his side of the bargain.

The thought blew me away, for truly that's what submissives did. They gave obedience to have their needs met. He was meeting my needs, so I was obedient. The thought made me more than a little uncomfortable, so I pushed it from my mind and refused to entertain it again.

## Chapter Four

It was the first time I'd been in the shop since the day I'd arrived. Unlike my first visit, I now had enough background to appreciate the range of products, and looked around with unfeigned interest. These were things I had to know about to successfully infiltrate the Taleans. I moved from aisle to aisle, display to display, until I reached the counter. Before me, in a glass case, a dozen collars sat on a shelf. They ranged from very simple plain leather bands to leather collars with studs, to metal ones with locks. I had read about collaring on the Internet and studied them with interest.

A collar is given to a sub by a Dom, the D/s equivalent of a wedding band, except a collar can be removed without the expense and aggravation of a divorce. In the fiction and articles I'd read, women cherished their collars. I thought about it and wondered how it would feel to wear one.

Jorge noticed me looking at the case and walked over. I still wasn't talking to him—he just didn't know it. The thought made me smile.

"You like them?"

"Yes." Okay, so I was talking to him, but what else was there to do?

"Would you like one?"

On the bottom shelf, several more ornate collars stared up at me. Most were made of silver, a couple of gold and all had either cut glass or actual gemstones mounted along their length. I had never thought of how I might look in a collar, nor had I ever wanted to wear one, though I don't think I'd have minded wearing something so opulent. I tried to picture how I might look in one and failed completely.

"Yes."

“I thought you might.”

He opened the case and pulled out the most plain leather collar—something you might put on a dog.

“Oh, very nice.” There was no way he could miss the sarcasm in my voice.

“You don’t think this collar is good enough for you?”

I was going to answer, but he moved too quickly. He took the collar and replaced it in the case.

“Collars aren’t for the benefit of slaves...they’re symbolic. They link a girl to her Master. It’s not the collar a girl cherishes, but what that collar symbolizes. It’s not so you’ll look better, it’s so others will know you’re taken and off limits. Most wedding bands are plain gold rings, but it doesn’t matter. It’s what the ring symbolizes that’s important. I hadn’t thought you were quite so shallow.”

I bit back a response. How dare he talk to me like that!

“If you want a collar, you’re going to have to beg for one. And I guarantee you, it won’t be any of the ones on the bottom shelf.”

I thought about it. He was making it hard, but I knew he was doing it on purpose. He couldn’t possibly expect me to beg for a collar, yet if I couldn’t, how could I possibly succeed with the Taleans?

“Please, Sir. I beg you. Please give me a collar.” I hadn’t meant it to sound quite so contrite and surprised even myself.

He shook his head. “When you beg, you’re supposed to be on your knees, girl.”

I bit my lip, looked at the collars again and knelt. He smiled down at me. His expression of pleasure sent a jolt through me. Of course, having knelt in front of men before, I couldn’t consider this anything but sexual. It was hard not to be aware of how close my face was to his crotch.

“Please, Sir. Would you offer me a collar?”

Jorge smiled. “Excellent. I can almost believe you want one.”

Was he daft? Of course I wanted one. The thought brought me up short. What I had meant was, I wanted one so I could feel what it felt like, so I'd feel more like a sub. Not that I wanted *his* collar.

"I do want one, Sir."

He looked a bit surprised, but walked away from the counter. I almost cried and wasn't sure why. He walked to the cash register and opened it. From inside, he removed a large rubber band.

"Here. This is your training collar. You're to wear it at all times."

He tossed it over to me. It landed on the counter. I rose to my feet and walked to it. A rubber band. He wanted me to wear a rubber band.

"What does it mean if I put this on?" I asked.

"Nothing really. I know you're not going to stay with me. It's what you can expect if you act like a spoiled cow."

I almost said something, but again forced down my ire. "Yes, Sir."

I took the rubber band and pulled it over my head. I was scared it might break, but it didn't and soon rested around my neck, tight, but not uncomfortably so. I thought I could get used to it.

"Thank you, Sir."

He didn't answer. A customer had walked in and he moved away to help her.

The days that followed became a blur of images. I never knew when Jorge would show up, when he would call, where he would take me, what we would do, or what subject he would broach next, but he never tried to have sex with me or touch me intimately since the massage on that first night.

That ended on the fifth night when we returned to his house. He must have had the handcuffs by the door. Before I knew what he was doing, he had my hands behind my back, secured so tightly I didn't even try to struggle.

"What...what are you doing?"

“If you’re going to be a slave, you need to be prepared for anything. Do you think the Taleans will warn or prepare you before they bind you? Do you think they’ll hesitate to strike you if you disobey, or even question their orders?”

I hadn’t thought it through to that point, but on some level, I did know. I was placing myself at the mercy of murderers and rapists. I was placing myself in danger to avenge my sister’s death. I couldn’t kid myself any longer. It was vengeance I craved, not just information. What would I do when I came face to face with the man who’d killed my sister? Would I take his life? I remembered the frenzied attack on the beach all too well, though I hadn’t had the dream again. Still, the memory of that attack convinced me Jaycee’s killer didn’t deserve to live. Surely, if he could do that to my sister, who everyone liked, he could do it to anyone and probably had. I would be doing the world a service. Whatever price I’d eventually end up paying, I’d accept, whether it be the death penalty, a prison sentence, a guilty conscience, or even being murdered myself. If I were willing to pay that price, how much worse would torture or rape be? No, I decided. I was in this for the long haul.

“Do what you want to me. What does it matter?”

He shook his head, frustrated. “Don’t you see? It *does* matter. This is your life we’re talking about. Not some theoretical paper you’re reading on the Net. These people are dangerous, and you’re throwing your life away. Don’t do this.”

“And what should I do instead?”

“Stay here...with me.”

I stood, stunned to the core of my being. Did he really know what he was asking? Was I misinterpreting his words?

“I’m sorry. I can’t.”

“Sandy, please...don’t do this. You can stay here as long as you like. You don’t have to risk yourself this way. You’re too young to walk away from life.”

I was flattered but would not be swayed. “And what about my sister?”

“You’ve already said you think Jaycee is dead, didn’t you? Maybe she is. You certainly think she is. Going after her killer will not bring her back.”

“I know that, but there are other people like me out there...people with kid sisters, older sisters, nieces, friends. How many women has he killed, Jorge? How many will die before he’s stopped? Will he *ever* be stopped?”

“You’re not an officer of the law. You’re not trained for this. Maybe if I had you for a couple of years, you’d be able to successfully infiltrate Talean society, but as you are now...they’ll know immediately you’re not who you say you are.”

“Do anything to me. You’ll see.”

He looked me in the eyes and shook his head. “You’re fucking insane, do you know that?”

He spun me around and removed the handcuffs almost as fast as he’d placed them on. Then, more gently, he turned me to face him. “Is staying with me such a bad thing that you’d rather risk torture and death?”

At once, I softened. “Oh, Jorge. This isn’t about me and you. This is about what’s right. You’re a good guy. You’re attractive, intelligent, even sensitive. Hard to believe you’re a dom, really. Under other circumstances, I would seriously consider your offer, but if I don’t do this, I’ll never be able to live with myself, let alone anyone else.”

He looked into my eyes, trying to find something he could reach, but I was too far gone. There was nothing in me but the pain of losing my sister to some psycho. Until that was purged, I couldn’t control myself. Perhaps, in some ways, I was a slave already—a slave to my need for vengeance. If there were a merciful God in heaven watching over me, he probably wouldn’t understand either. I wasn’t sure I understood it myself.

I stood there, rubbing my chaffed wrists, watching Jorge watch me.

“Jesus!” He turned away and stormed from the room, leaving me alone with my thoughts.



When Jorge dropped me off later that night, he showed no signs of feeling rejected. He was upbeat, still talking, still teaching. I had grown fond of Jorge during our days together, though I wasn't in love with him. I knew that much. Still, he had been good to me, and the temptation to stay with someone I knew, someone safe, loomed in the corner of my consciousness.

I hated the thought, but let myself play with it for a while. Certainly I'd never expected a dom to be like Jorge. I couldn't believe how his quiet strength had buoyed my own courage, or the way he obviously cared about me. I don't think he was in love with me either, but he was a decent man, trying to stop me from making a deadly mistake. I could almost love him for it—almost. But that wasn't a reason to be with someone.

Perhaps when this was all over, if I survived, if I was still free, I would return to take Jorge up on his offer. For some reason Nicco's face popped into my mind, and it annoyed me.

I didn't know him at all. He was just a guy. I'd seen handsome guys before, so why did my mind keep dredging him up? Was it because he'd protected me that night? Was it because of his straightforward nature, and self-assured, quiet confidence? Or was it something else? It didn't matter. Whatever it was, I didn't have time to explore it. Goodbye Nicco, forever. I forced him from my mind, yet suspected I hadn't banished him completely and sooner or later, he'd be making another cameo.

My room was dark, empty. I wished to hell my mind was. What insanity had driven me to this place, turning me into the antithesis of all I had ever been? If only Scott could see me now. What would he think of the new, "improved" Sandra Castilla? The thought made me laugh aloud, though it sounded odd coming from my mouth, as if the path I'd chosen automatically cut me off from any source of joy. This latter thought chilled me. I lay down in bed, but it took me a very long time to find sleep.

The next day, Jorge didn't call in the morning. This surprised me more than anything. By noon, I figured he was at the shop already, and I wouldn't be hearing from him till later. He had my cell phone number, so there was no reason why I should sit in the motel and wait for his call.

That decided, I showered, dressed and made my way back to the Internet cafe I'd visited twice before. Time was precious and I had to learn everything I could. I didn't look up BDSM. I looked up Taleans.

There were a surprising number of hits. Apparently the books were far more popular than I'd imagined, though admittedly, fantasy was not something I'd often read. I paid for another six hours, it was cheaper that way, and spent the rest of the day reading. I wouldn't have been ready for most of this, had I known to look it up the first time, but Jorge's lectures had prepared me. I bounced around the various pages, wondering why anyone would buy into this lifestyle, particularly women. Yet many of the stories, poems and articles were written by slaves, most of them defending the life they'd chosen. It didn't take a college degree to realize these girls would write anything their Masters told them to. They'd have no choice. Perhaps they'd been sitting there, guns pointed to their heads, taking dictation, or more likely, it was all written by masters and placed on the web to ensnare young girls who didn't know any better.

Yet the more I read, the more confused I became. Not only did everything I'd read sound sincere, but also, it seemed unlikely men could ever truly understand women to such a degree. Then I thought about Jorge and smiled. On that count, at least, I had learned better. Jorge could read me like a book, whereas I couldn't read him at all. He was completely inscrutable, which was part of his attraction.

It was almost five when my phone rang. It was Jorge, of course. Who else could it be?

"Hello."

"Hi there. I'll be by your place in ten minutes."

He hung up. He always did. I didn't have time to tell him I wasn't at home, but he must have suspected. Surely he'd called the motel phone first, as he usually did. I logged off, downed the rest of my now cold coffee, and headed toward my car. It took me fifteen minutes to make it back. Jorge was already waiting. Much to my surprise, I felt fear.

He waited until I opened the car door.

"Good evening, Sir."

"Hello, Sandy. You're late."

"I'm sorry, but..."

"Doesn't matter. It wouldn't matter to a Talean, would it? You're late, and you must be punished."

I didn't like the sound of that, but Jorge was quite correct. If I were going to be living that lifestyle, he was obliged to teach it to me. Part of me wondered if this was somehow vengeance for last night's rejection. I didn't know, but thought it might be. I deserved it. He'd been so good to me, and I'd brushed him off, though there had been no other option. It didn't matter anyway. Whatever he dished out I could take, for surely the Taleans would be far stricter. If I couldn't take this, how could I possibly fool them long enough to work out what happened to Jaycee?

We drove in silence, but unlike past times, it was an uncomfortable silence. I had no idea what he had in store for me, and didn't dare ask. So I sat and waited, each minute building the fear within, as Jorge no doubt intended. This was what I'd signed on for...I could hardly complain at this point.

It took twenty minutes to reach our destination, a small house in Hollywood I'd never seen before. It reminded me of my sister's house, though the paint wasn't as fresh and the lawn was bordered by a row of hedges, making the place seem somehow off-limits. Though it was entirely likely my reason for being there made the house seem more forbidding than it would have been at another time.

Jorge didn't get out of the car at first, but parked in the driveway and looked at me. "You're not to speak unless spoken to. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Good."

Jorge reached to the back seat and produced a paper bag. He tossed it to me. His voice was cold. "Put it on."

I opened it. Inside was the plain leather collar he'd offered me at the shop. I didn't know what it symbolized, but knew I had to obey. Jorge, from everything he'd said, firmly believed D/s was consensual. He'd hold me to nothing I didn't want to be held to. I knew that. Without hesitation I put it on my neck, though it took me several minutes to buckle properly. Jorge made no move to help. I hadn't expected him to.

"Sir?"

He raised an eyebrow. I thought he was going to hit me for disobeying and speaking.

"Yes, Sandy?"

"May I keep the rubber band too?" The words surprised me.

Jorge smiled and nodded once, before getting out of the car, motioning for me to do the same. My heart began to pound. I thought I was breathing more heavily than normal, though Jorge didn't seem to notice. He walked to the door of the house and rapped on it.

A young woman opened the door, dressed in a black lacy thing I'd have been embarrassed to wear in my bedroom in the dark. It did nothing to conceal her obvious charms, nor did she seem at all put off by wearing it in front of us. In fact, she'd opened the door all the way so anyone passing could see her clearly.

"Hello, Sir. Please come in. My Master called to say he'll be here in about ten minutes."

“Thank you. This is Sandy. You’ll forgive her for not greeting you, but I’ve told her to remain silent.”

The girl looked at me for the first time. I tried to read the expression in her eyes, but couldn’t tell if they contained sympathy, envy, some other emotion conjured by an overactive imagination, or something of each. She stood back and Jorge entered. I followed on his heels.

The inside of the house was clean and smelled fresh, as if it had just been aired. An archway in the wall immediately to the right opened into the living room. Jorge nudged me in that direction and I preceded him. I couldn’t help but notice the linoleum in the entrance foyer, ruddy and boldly patterned, oddly contrasted with the adjacent living room carpet, furniture and walls, which were shades of lavender, very understated. A pair of paintings hung on opposite walls. I’d never liked abstracts. I’d always thought it was some sort of racket. Just put anything on a piece of canvas and voila...a masterpiece. For some reason, this time, I could see something I’d never noticed within the boundaries of the twin frames. It was perhaps further evidence I was changing each day.

Jorge sat on the sofa and pointed to the floor at his feet. I knew what he wanted. I glanced briefly at the girl, whose name I still hadn’t been told. She didn’t even look at me. She kept watching the door, no doubt awaiting the return of her Master. I almost shrugged, but instead lowered myself to my knees beside Jorge. I knew from online reading, the position isn’t uncommon in BDSM social situations, though it’s not often required, except in more formal circumstances. I assumed punishment must be one of those times.

I sat back on my heels, happy to be kneeling on carpeting instead of wooden floorboards. It still wasn’t comfortable, but I dealt with it, as I knew Jorge expected me to. Then the door opened and he walked in. I gasped. Jorge rose and crossed the distance between them, gave him a half hug and spoke.

“Em, it’s good to see you, bro.

The newcomer looked at me. It was the man from the party. The one Nicco had punched in the face. I started to panic, but tried to keep my wits about me. Jorge wouldn't let anything happen to me—or would he? He knew as well as I that in a few days he wouldn't be around to protect me. Maybe he wanted me to see what it was really like to be a Talean Slave. I drew a deep breath, found something resembling resolve deep inside and steeled myself for what was to come. Whatever it was, I didn't think it would be pleasant.

"Well, well, what have we here?" asked the man Jorge had called Em. I couldn't help but notice they were the same words he'd used at the party. "Jorge, man, you've been holding out on me. You didn't say a fucking word."

Jorge shrugged. "It's a recent development. Sandy, say hello to Em."

"Hello, Sir." I knew I had to treat him with respect. Jorge apparently knew and liked him. I tried to keep the fear from my eyes, with mixed success. I wondered if that turned the bastard on.

"Hello, Sandy. We meet again—under different circumstances. How...fortunate."

*Not for me.* "Yes, Sir."

He studied me frankly, and I felt myself blush. He turned to Jorge. "You know, bro, I think she's overdressed for the occasion."

Jorge nodded and leaned back. "Take your clothes off, Sandy. All of them."

I was incensed. Did he think I'd strip in front of his friend just because he told me to? Of course he did, and I had to obey. In a Talean house I'd be given no choice. They'd whip or beat me if I didn't do as instructed. Perhaps even torture or murder me."

"Yes, Sir."

I rose, stepped out of my shoes, and moved to the center of the room. It wasn't that I wanted to be on display, so much as I wanted to put distance between myself and Jorge. Suddenly, trusting him was a problem.

I unbuttoned my blouse. Nervous fingers stumbled over buttons, but I didn't allow myself to think about it. After the last button was undone, I pulled it off. I had read somewhere subs were supposed to display themselves without being self-conscious, as Em's girl did. I just wanted to get it over with. Jorge wasn't about to let that happen.

"No!" At his shout, I stopped. "Slowly. Let us savor it."

I bit my lip and continued. I slowly unhooked my bra and pulled it off my shoulders before letting it drop to the floor. Em joined Jorge on the sofa. Both watched, making no attempt to disguise their pleasure. To my surprise, the girl watched too, eyes shining, mouth half-open. It stunned me to think this might arouse her.

I had never before been topless in front of multiple strangers and was terrified. I tried not to let it show. I concentrated on my "performance" for that was what it had to be. That's exactly what I'd be doing for the Taleans. If I couldn't do it here, I had no chance of success.

Acting! That was the answer. I'd taken acting classes back in college. I had wanted to be an actress at one point, when I was young and stupid. If I could somehow get into character, see this as improvisation, I could get through this. All I had to do was think of my acting class.

I slowed, turned around and bent over, allowing my breasts to fall free while I played with the button on my jeans. I could see my switch in attitude confused Jorge, but he was the only one who seemed to notice. I unbuttoned and unzipped my jeans, then straightened and pulled the two halves apart as far as they would go before pulling down, literally peeling them off my thighs. I did this intentionally, so my panties wouldn't come down with them. I also knew it looked sexy and that was what a slave would do.

In one of the stories I'd read, a slave got out of more serious punishment by getting the Master to have sex with her. While I had no plans of sleeping with

Jorge, it certainly couldn't hurt to play the tease. After all, my life would soon depend on it.

While it had been years since I'd taken dance, I was certainly capable of swaying to music. I did so now, moving to an improvised piece of jazz only I could hear. I could tell I was having the desired affect by observing the men on the couch. To the girl, who had moved herself out of my field of vision, I paid no attention.

I worked my jeans all the way down, then stepped from them. The only stitch of clothing left was my panties, royal blue cotton—not quite the pair I would have worn had I known I'd be stripping. I almost laughed at the thought.

I turned around so I was facing away from them, bent all the way over and grabbed my ankles. My spread legs framed the men on the sofa perfectly. No one moved, no eye strayed. For that moment, I was the center of their world, and I wondered if I would ever grow to like the feeling. Probably not, I decided.

Still bending over, I reached up and worked my panties down, first baring my backside, then working them all the way down my legs. It was entirely likely the men could see my most intimate parts from their vantage point. The girl probably couldn't. I didn't care. She had no say over my future.

When I had the panties off completely, I held them up with two fingers, then deliberately let them fall to the floor. I watched until they landed, then looked back at the sofa.

Both men stared at me, eyes starting to glaze. Even Jorge's reaction was transparent, and I could swear he had a hard-on, though it could just be the way his jeans had settled. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse. I was pleased.

"Em, you have that violet wand handy?"

"Tonya, fetch."

"Yes, Master." The slave's voice came from almost behind me. She had apparently moved herself to a place to get an unobstructed view. I wondered briefly how much of me she'd seen, and what affect it had had on her. I wasn't



sure how I felt about Tonya seeing me naked, and certainly didn't have the time to work it out. I could lose sleep over it later.

The tone of Em's voice and the enthusiasm of Tonya's response angered me, but I was playing a part, and refused to let it show. I stood insolently, before realizing that might not be the best attitude to convey. Wasn't I being punished? Shouldn't I seem contrite or apologetic? Perhaps even scared?

The girl was back so fast, I was sure she must have run. I had no time to reevaluate my strategy. After kneeling, she handed her Master a black case. I got the distinct impression she was trying to show what a good little slave she was. Again I felt irked, but realized it was her Master I had the problem with, not Tonya. Had I seen her kneeling to Jorge, I'd have had far less of a problem. I simply didn't feel Em was deserving of such devotion, while Jorge, in spite of tonight's episode, almost certainly was.

I stood, watching, waiting, wondering where I should next take my performance. As long as it was an act, I could handle it. The only problem was, it wasn't an act. Whatever came next would actually be done to me. It wouldn't be a prop, or some special effect. The results would be real, not applied by some makeup artist. I had seen Jasmine touched by the violet wand, and she seemed to like it. I didn't suspect I would feel the same.

Em opened the case and removed the wand. Jorge held out his hand. Em passed it to him, never taking his eyes off me. Jorge flicked a switch and suddenly, at the sight of the pulsing energy within the sphere, I wasn't acting. I grew scared. I backed away toward a chair behind me. Jorge approached. I watched the play of seemingly random blue lightning within the transparent ball. I couldn't look away any more than they could turn from my naked body. I found my breath coming faster and was more scared than I'd ever been.

I sank back into the chair and cowered. Jorge stood in front of me, eyes intent, mouth open slightly. I'll never forget that look as long as I live. The

violet wand came closer and closer. I could hear the hum. I thought I could feel the heat of it. Jorge sighed and switched it off.

“What?” I was confused. Em echoed my sentiment.

“Get dressed.”

I had my clothes on almost before he finished the sentence.

“What the fuck...” started Em.

“I’m sorry, man. There are reasons and no, I can’t tell you what they are.”

“Don’t be a dick, man. I cancelled plans to be here tonight.”

Jorge glanced at Tonya. “Well, I’m sure you can use the time effectively. I have to go.”

A few minutes later, we were out the door. Em made no effort to hide his anger, and I was certain I felt Tonya’s disappointment. What was wrong with these people?

Once outside, I started to shake, my body reacting to the surge of adrenaline I no longer needed. Jorge, in front of me, didn’t notice.

In the car, he leaned back, eyes shut. He was pale and trembling. I realized I was somehow responsible for the reaction and hated it. I didn’t know what to say or do. I didn’t cry, because I knew it would anger him. He had reason to punish me, had power over me, but chose not to exercise it. Considering the situation, it must have taken all his willpower. Finally, I could remain silent no longer.

“Why didn’t you use the violet wand on me?”

He opened his eyes, looked at me and chuckled, but there was no humor in the sound. “Why not indeed? What would you have done had I punished you?”

“Nothing. I’d have taken it.”

“I know. I was trying to show you what you could expect. I wanted you to be scared.”

“I was scared.”

“But not scared enough. You’d have endured whatever I subjected you to, and then some. Thus, my whole reason for being here was moot.”

“What did you think I’d do?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter. Just because a man has power, doesn’t mean he has to use it, or even that he should. The fact I do have power gives me responsibility. You were wearing a collar. I gave it to you. Your well-being is my responsibility. I wasn’t angry and you really hadn’t done anything wrong. I was just trying to throw some fear or sense into you. I guess it didn’t work.”

“Oh, Jorge.” Before I knew what I was doing, I leaned over and hugged him. “C’mon. Let’s get you home.”

He nodded and laughed. “When did you become Master?”

I giggled, then grew serious. “Sir, can I ask a question?”

The look in his eyes showed defeat, more than anything else. “Sure.”

“Why did you give me the collar?”

“It’s the only thing Emilio would respect. If you weren’t collared, he’d believe he had a right to do anything he wanted to you in his house. It was for your protection. You can take it off now.”

I thought about leaving it on, but didn’t want to give Jorge the wrong idea. I would be leaving him as soon as I could. With only the slightest regret, I removed it from my neck and replaced it in the bag I’d left on the dashboard. After tonight, I knew I could do what was necessary. Jorge wouldn’t try to stop me again.

I was glad he’d finally come to *his* senses. I wouldn’t change my mind. I had a killer to catch.

Two hours later, and a bottle of Chianti behind us, we sat in Jorge’s living room. His mood had improved somewhat, but I knew he was still concerned. I could feel it, and it touched me.

“You know the funny thing?” he asked.

“Tell me.”

“I’ve never used a violet wand in my life. I was sort of looking forward to it.” He started giggling. We were on our second bottle and hadn’t stopped to eat.

“You could have.”

He grew momentarily serious. “No, I couldn’t.” Then he broke out laughing and I joined him. “Do you know what I’m going to do when you leave?”

“What’s that?”

“I’m going to call a girl, I’m going to have her come over here, and I’m going to fuck her six ways to Sunday.”

He laughed again, but this time, I didn’t join him. I think I knew then he’d fallen in love with me. I was torn between anger and sympathy. He had no right. I’d told him what I was going to do. Then I realized I was probably drunk and had no right to be angry at anyone, particularly Jorge. I leaned forward so my lips were beside his ear.

“Who are you going to call?” Perhaps part of me was jealous, though I had no reason to be. I had no claim on him.

“I don’t know. I might have borrowed Tonya, but after tonight, I don’t think Em will be very generous.”

“Borrow Tonya? Have you had sex with her before?”

“No, but I could have on more than one occasion. Em has offered.”

“What does Tonya think?”

He looked surprised. “Tonya does what her Master tells her to. She’s a good girl.”

“Why Emilio though? I don’t understand.” And I didn’t. The guy wasn’t worth his weight in dung.

“It’s not something you choose, Sandy. When you meet the right master, you’ll know it immediately. You can try to talk yourself out of it, you can fool yourself, but once you meet the One, there’s no turning back.”

I had come across this concept on various web pages and found it fascinating. “Is there only One?”

Jorge picked up the bottle and took a swig, ignoring the half-full glass on the coffee table beside it. Of course, some would see it as half-empty. “Who knows? Once you’ve found your One, that’s it. If there’s another One, you’ve already stopped looking, so how can anyone know?”

“Did anyone ever tell you you’re a very clever man?”

“I think I heard that once. I don’t remember where.”

It was my turn to laugh. Almost without realizing it, I nipped his ear. He jerked his head away and turned to face me. I could see the anger in his eyes. “Don’t *do* that!”

“Why not?” I was no longer scared of him. At that moment, there wasn’t a man in the world I trusted more.

“Because I don’t want to sleep with you.”

I found myself growing angry. “And why is that?”

He didn’t answer, but his eyes grew distant, and I immediately felt sorry. Of course he didn’t want to sleep with me. He was already falling for me. Yet I was drunk and horny and this might well be the very last time I would be able to do what I wanted.

The thought surprised me. Did I truly want Jorge, or did I just not want another woman to have him? No, that didn’t make sense. Oh what the hell.

He’d moved away, and I lunged at him, planting my lips firmly on his. I thought he was going to fight, but he didn’t. His arms were around me, and he was crying and laughing at the same time. I might have been doing the same. We kissed for a long time before his lips finally parted, as if he were finally accepting the inevitable. I don’t know when it became inevitable, but I’d known it would all along. He had complete power over me. I was supposed to obey him. Why wouldn’t he make use of me?

Perhaps that was why I did what I did. His restraint was an insult to my femininity. At that realization, I kissed him more passionately than I'd ever kissed a man, devouring him as if he were a condemned woman's last meal. In retrospect, it wasn't far from the truth.

Any thoughts he had of resistance vanished, and he returned my passion, stroking my tongue with his in a way I'd never before experienced. We were two desperate people in a world of desperate people, taking what pleasure we could for the short time we had the opportunity. Before I knew what was happening, he was unbuttoning my blouse. He had a bit of trouble, until he jerked on the two sides, sending a shower of plastic buttons into the air. I was already in the process of unhooking my bra.

In short order, pants and underwear were shed. I was naked first, save for the rubber band around my neck. Jorge joined me a moment later. Our lips had barely separated during the entire process and our tongues continued dancing as if that were their sole destiny. My entire body flushed with excitement. For some reason, I thought of Scott, the last man I'd made love to, though it was a pale thing compared to this carnal coupling. It was the difference between civilized humans making love and savage animals mating. Now that I'd shed the veneer of civilization, I doubted I could ever again return to its embrace.

I screamed when he pushed me away, and screamed again when he dropped his head between my legs and parted my lips with his tongue. From that point on, the screaming never stopped. I clenched my legs around his head, which likely muffled what he heard, though he didn't need to hear me, for the way I arched my back and writhed against him told the story in far greater detail.

His tongue was powerful, lusty, relentless, exploring my body as no man ever had, probing and snaking its way inside me, then sliding back out to engulf my clit. I can't imagine how many times I came, but he drank everything

I gave him and kept licking, sucking and nibbling until I couldn't take it anymore. My hands clawed at his curly brown hair, attempting to pull his head closer. My throat was raw from screaming. I drew huge lungfuls of air and still couldn't catch my breath. Finally, I squeezed my legs together as hard as I could, putting literal pressure on him to turn his tongue from its torturous invasion.

He forced my legs apart and threw himself on me. His chest hair rubbed on my nipples, already hard and sensitive to even the slightest touch. Then he entered me, holding my wrists stretched above my head, driving into me so hard my shoulder rammed into the arm of the sofa. I met each thrust with my hips, forcing him deeper and deeper. My lust knew no bounds. I struggled to free my hands, for I wanted to feel him, but he wouldn't let go. I growled in frustration and, even in my frenzied state, was stunned by the ferocity of the sound.

He started moving faster, harder, and I felt my own need building yet again, beyond anything I'd ever needed before. His cock swelled just before he came, and I clamped down on it, writhing with every ounce of strength I still possessed. When he finally pumped his cum into me, I threw my head back and screamed until I could scream no more. My orgasm became all there was in the world, sending wave after wave of electric bliss through me. By the time he collapsed on top of me, I didn't even know who or where I was.

I think I slept, but can't be certain. When I finally figured out what had happened, it was the next morning and Jorge, who had taken me like no man ever had, was nowhere to be found.

I dressed because I couldn't think of what else to do. I needed to shower, but would wait until I got back to the motel. Jorge's car was gone and I was stranded, or would have been if I didn't have money for a cab. It took me only minutes to locate a phone. I dialed directory assistance, because I didn't want

to start searching for a phone book. A short time later, I was on my way back to the motel for a shower, a decent meal and some very serious soul searching.

Jorge called me later that day. The passion of the previous night gave way to an almost formal briefing, during which, for once, he told me what we'd be doing later. I admit to being a bit hurt, but knew he'd been smart to distance himself, for I couldn't afford to stay, and there was nothing he could say or do to stop me from leaving. As great as last night had been, my destiny lay along a different path and Jorge had no part in that.

"I'm going to introduce you to a Talean tonight, so you need to dress sexy. Remember, Talean slaves strive to look their finest, always looking to please their Master. When you come to the shop tonight, he'll be here. You kneel and wait for me to speak before greeting me, then ask my permission before greeting him. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Sir." It felt odd using the formality after last night, but it was important to do so. We would not be repeating our encounter, even if I were to stay with Jorge another week. It was out of our system and we both needed to move on.

"Good girl. You can wear makeup, but only apply it lightly. It shouldn't be obvious you're wearing any. Whatever you do, don't wear perfume. Talean men don't believe in scents for women and often sample a woman's natural scent before they consider buying. For that reason, take your shower as early as possible, so that you don't smell of soap when you show up. That's a big no-no."

"Yes, Sir."

There was a long pause. Finally... "I had a good time last night."

"I could tell."



“I wanted to remember it that way. It’s why I left this morning. There was nothing we could have said that would add to or improve on last night. Do you understand?”

Was he asking me to forgive him for leaving me alone? “Yes, Sir.”

Again, silence. I wondered if he had somehow intuited just how I felt about his unexpected departure. When he spoke again, his voice was all business. “Be here at closing.”

I didn’t have to hear the click to know he’d already hung up.

I spent the day resting. I was tired and sore from the night before, as might be expected. Sex with Jorge had been on a level I’d never experienced. Only the memory of Jaycee’s murder drove me onward. Well, that and the fact I wasn’t in love. I found myself wondering if I couldn’t love him because of my agenda, or was there something about him that disturbed me? Jorge had said I would know my One from the moment we met. I hadn’t known it with him.

Still, it was hands above anything I’d previously enjoyed, at least in the sex department. Just for that I might have considered staying, though of course, if that was all there was, the relationship wouldn’t last. Perhaps also, I was scared of loving Jorge, for that would make my hard task so much harder. I considered the idea, but shook it off. I didn’t love Jorge, and whatever the reason, it was enough. Soon I’d be meeting my first Talean.

I prepared myself exactly as Jorge had instructed. I still wore the rubber band about my neck and wondered if I should leave it behind. No. If I weren’t supposed to wear it, Jorge would have said so.

As the time of departure approached, I became more and more nervous. What would happen when I got there? Would I be immediately sold into slavery? It didn’t seem possible. Why had he arranged this meeting anyway? What was he trying to accomplish? Was it so I could observe and learn, or was there more to it? I wish I’d questioned him more carefully on the phone. Only

then did it occur to me...I'd never actually called Jorge. He'd always been the one to call me.

I looked at the phone and sat on the bed beside it. I tried to make it ring by strength of will, but couldn't. I picked up the receiver three times and placed it back down on each occasion. Why was I scared to call him?

Was it because of last night? I rejected the idea immediately. That wasn't it at all. It took me a long time before I admitted I didn't call him because I was scared of his reaction. It was, in my mind, exactly the way a submissive woman might act. I didn't know that for sure, but the very thought gave me something further to consider.

Finally, I could wait no longer. I got into the car, filled it up with gas and drove around until it was time for the meeting. When I arrived, there was a second car in the lot, sky blue and far more expensive-looking than Jorge's. I didn't know enough about cars to begin to guess the year of that vintage Chrysler convertible, but had no doubt it cost a pretty penny. This told me something I should have suspected, but hadn't. At least some Taleans had money. A cynical voice within wondered how they earned it. How much did a typical woman sell for?

I was torn between my need to find out what awaited me, and my fear of that very fate. Still, standing in the parking lot in my newly washed dress, the same one I'd worn to the party, would get me nowhere. I drew a deep breath and walked to the front door. I entered and immediately dropped to my knees.

"Hello, Sandy."

"Hello, Sir."

I could see the man from behind. He was tall and well built. When he turned, I almost collapsed. My throat was impossibly dry.

"May I greet your guest, Sir?"

"Yes, Sandy, you may."

"It's good to see you again, Nicco."

Why I didn't faint is a mystery I'll never be able to answer.

## Chapter Five

I had thought the week I'd spent with Jorge had prepared me for anything, but here, on my first step forward, I was already in over my head. Nicco couldn't be a Talean, he just couldn't. Not after the way he'd stood up for me. I'm certain my wan smile left something to be desired. My stomach churned, though the reaction didn't make sense. I knew nothing at all about Nicco, except that I was attracted to him, even at that moment. He was the same man who made my knees weak. The same man who'd leapt to my defense. Yet he was a monster, possibly even the man who had killed my sister.

I turned the thought over in my head and wanted to vomit. It couldn't be. It wasn't possible. Yet part of me knew it was eminently possible. Nicco was a Talean. He might also be a murderer.

Surely Jorge must have suspected I liked Nicco. Why hadn't he warned me? Was this his way of getting back at me for going off with Nicco that first night? I refused to believe it. Jorge was just so used to playing his damned mind games, it never occurred to him to stop. I was angry at Jorge for putting me in this position. It didn't matter that he hadn't...that I was here by my own choice. I was angry anyway. Scott used to call it a "woman's prerogative" to ignore anything resembling logic. The only problem was, I would only be a woman for a bit longer. Soon I'd be a slave, with no rights, no recourse and, quite possibly, no chance for escape.

Nicco raised an eyebrow, but couldn't know what I was thinking. "Hello, Sandy. Jorge tells me you've been asking about Taleans. He invited me over to explain a few things."

I wondered if Jorge had told him more. I'd trusted that bastard. If he said anything about Jaycee, I'd string him up by his balls. Not a very slave-like sentiment, I must admit, but I was new to the mindset and the shock of seeing Nicco was enough to raise whatever defenses I'd counted on over the years. Defenses that might get me killed if I didn't get them under control.

"Yes, Sir. I've been reading a lot about the Taleans online."

"Oh, online." His smile was maddening. I clamped my mouth shut against saying something stupid. "Okay, Sandy, what do you think you know about Taleans?"

*They're evil control freaks who sell and abuse women.* "Only what I've read. It sounds fascinating."

Again he raised an eyebrow. I suspected I was going about this the wrong way, but didn't know what he wanted from me. "Sandy, this is not a summer class, or a part-time fetish. It's a lifestyle, one we believe in very strongly. It's not for everyone and, I have to admit, I'm almost positive it's not for you."

"You don't know anything about me."

"That's true, I don't, besides what my perception tells me. Yet over the years, I've come to trust my perception and it says there's something else at work here...something you're not telling me."

My heart started to pound. He couldn't know. Not unless Jorge had told him. Yet Jorge looked surprised and probably hadn't said anything, after all. "I'm telling you the idea of giving away my freedom has great appeal to me. I've always liked strong men, but somehow it was never enough. I want to be taken. Dominated. I want to serve a man." I felt sick saying it, but knew it was something he wanted to hear. I'd read enough Talean fiction to know the catchwords, even though I knew I could never feel that way myself.

Nicco's intense appraisal sent a shiver down my spine. I've seen men look at women. Even Jorge had regarded me with frank scrutiny, but this was something of a different order. I could almost feel his eyes boring into my skull,

reading my mind without consent. I pushed the thought from me and worked on controlling my breathing. He could only know what I told him, so if I stuck to my story, I'd be safe.

"Sandy, Talean women are strong, independent women."

I had to stop myself from contradicting him. "I want to be a slave."

"Do you now?"

"Yes, Sir."

"What do you know of slavery?"

"What I've read."

"I see. Frankly, I don't think you're ready. If you..."

I cut him off. "How do you know? You've been talking to me for three minutes. You don't know me at all."

"That might be true, but a slave would never interrupt a Talean man while he's speaking."

I dropped my head. Had I screwed this whole thing up already? No, not yet. I thought back to the stories I'd read, and prostrated myself at his feet. "I'm sorry, Sir. I beg forgiveness."

I didn't move. I didn't dare look up. I knew I had to maintain that position silently, until he again addressed me. And he didn't. He waited. I thought I could hear him breathing, or it might have been Jorge. I could feel the muscles in my back and legs, stretching. For now, they were only uncomfortable, but a few minutes more and it would become painful. It was a waiting game. He wanted to see if I'd get up before he answered. So I stayed that way through countless minutes, listening for even the barest hint I wasn't alone. Finally, he spoke.

"Forgiven, girl. Get up."

Slowly, I rose to my knees. There was something about being on my knees before him that felt right, yet I was still angry. It was acting, that's all. I'd put

myself into the role and was playing it to perfection. My drama teacher would have been proud.

“You need to be trained to be a Talean slave.”

The thought excited me. Would Nicco be the one training me? Part of me wanted him to, but a larger part hoped it wouldn't come to that. I was far more attracted to Nicco than I was to Jorge. If Nicco undertook my training, what defense could I possibly employ? Would I really be able to control my body if Nicco were to have me kneel naked before him?

I thought of Jaycee and realized I had to get a grip on myself. Nicco might have murdered her, and that was one thing I could never forgive, no matter how attractive I found him.

As it turned out, my worries were for naught.

“There's a slave trainer in the area. She's not cheap, but she's the best there is. If she agrees to take you on, you'd have to pay her, unless you find someone to sponsor you.”

“How much does she get?” I asked. *A Slave trainer? Unreal.*

“I don't know, but it's a fair sum. She won't take on anyone without recommendation. I'll give her a call. Keep one thing in mind...she might not accept you, even with my recommendation, and if that's the case, no amount of money will sway her. Marika is *very* particular.”

The name rang a bell and I wasn't sure why. Perhaps I'd seen something on the Net about her. “I appreciate anything you can do, Sir. I won't let you down.”

“No. I don't suppose you will.”

He didn't say another word. He nodded to Jorge and started toward the door. I wanted to turn to watch him, but remained kneeling until I heard the door close and even waited until I heard his car pull away. Only then did I climb to my feet.

Jorge was watching. I didn't understand the look on his face, but couldn't help but hear the concern in his voice. "I sure hope you know what you're doing."

"Yeah, me too."

He kept his distance from me, and I from him, as if we both knew the previous night's activity would remain forever buried in our past.

I *had* recognized the name Marika, but not because I'd seen it online. She was the woman who owned the house where I'd first met Nicco. I remembered that night with complete clarity—my first reaction to Jasmine when she answered the door in that French maid's outfit; my first sight of Nicco, strong, confident, perfect. No, he wasn't perfect—not really. It was his demeanor, the way he carried himself that made him seem so. Was he really any better looking than Jorge? I didn't think so, but there was an intensity about him I found dangerously attractive. Just the thought of him made me hot.

I had to remind myself this visit to Marika's house would be different. It was the middle of the day, there would be no party and neither Nicco nor Jorge would be there. Marika was going to interview me. The interview would determine whether or not she wanted to take me on.

I'd purchased a new outfit for the occasion, a short, yellow sleeveless dress, sexier than anything I'd worn previously. I did my makeup carefully, but understated. My hair was already growing longer than I usually wore it. I understood long hair was preferred by Talean men and decided I wouldn't have it cut. Jorge's rubber band was no longer around my neck. I wore it in my hair to keep it out of my face.

The house looked just as bizarre by daylight as it did at night. The only difference was that in the daytime it looked completely deserted. Perhaps that type of structure serves no purpose before dusk. I remembered I'd compared Marika to a vampire, and shuddered as I realized the house wouldn't have been



out of place in a horror film. I told myself it was just my imagination playing up. After all, it was the middle of the day, and Marika would be interviewing me. I doubted very much I'd have to wait for her to emerge from her coffin. The thought made me laugh.

At my knock, Jasmine answered the door. I was surprised to find her stark naked. She didn't seem self-conscious at all. I wondered if I could ever feel that way, standing naked before someone I'd only met once. I did my best not to stare.

"Hello, Sandy. Come in." There was something in her manner that bespoke coldness, though I couldn't put my finger on precisely what it was. Her greeting was perfunctory. Perhaps she was just being formal, since I was here on business. "My lady Marika will see you in the library."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and led the way. It was two doors down on the left. Jasmine knocked and opened the door. My immediate impression was one of wealth. The shelves were polished to a sheen, the desk, which sat perpendicular to the far wall, was cherry wood, and books, many in foreign languages, were everywhere. I admit I was surprised. I wondered just how educated Marika was. Only after the door closed did I speak.

"Hello, ma'am." Jorge had told me to address her that way.

"Hello, Sandy. I want you to take your clothes off."

I had thought she might want to see me naked, so wasn't surprised by the request, which didn't necessarily make it any easier. I placed my hands on the zipper of my dress and froze. I couldn't understand my discomfort. I'd stripped for Jorge. I'd even suffered Emilio's hungry gaze. Yet removing my clothes in front of Marika seemed different somehow. The only other woman I'd ever undressed in front of was Tonya, Emilio's slave. My mind had been filled at the time with trying to guess the nature of my punishment and, in any case, it had been the men I'd been undressing for. Tonya was merely an incidental bystander, who never entered into the equation.

This was an entirely different situation, and I was extremely self-conscious. I didn't look at Marika. I undressed quickly, wondering if she watched me as the men had. Then I remembered the relish with which Tonya had watched. That unnerved me even more. Yet if this were the hardest sacrifice I'd have to make, it was nothing. Once I said that to myself, I moved more confidently until I stood naked before her. I wondered if she thought I was attractive.

She gestured to the expensive-looking antique chair across the desk from her. I sat, but kept my legs together, totally conscious of the way I must have looked.

"Where were you born?"

"New York City."

"Excellent. What was your last job?"

"I worked in the admissions office at New York University."

"Good. Why do you want to be a slave?"

"I want to be controlled."

"Bad reason."

"It is?"

"Yes. As a slave, you must learn to control yourself. Most masters aren't interested in baby-sitting. You'll be trained to act a certain way and you'll be expected to do what's right at all times—*without* being told. A good slave anticipates her Master."

"I see. I've always wanted to serve a man."

"But as a Talean, you don't get your choice of who you serve. You serve whoever buys you. He's free to sell you again, give you away as a gift, punish you if you are found lacking in any way—or even if you aren't."

"I know. I can be beaten, even killed if I disobey."

She looked startled. "Killed? That's a bit much. As a slave, you're an investment. I doubt very much anyone wants to throw away money when they can just as easily sell you, even if they take a loss in doing so."

“Yet it is possible I could be killed, is it not? I mean, there’s nothing in Talean law that prohibits it.”

“That’s true enough, but I’ve never heard of it happening.”

*I have.* “It doesn’t matter to me. I will serve to the best of my ability and hope I am not found lacking.”

“Good. I need you to fill out a questionnaire. You need to be completely honest. A single lie will disqualify you. Do you understand?”

“Yes, ma’am.” I knew she was likely to check anything I told her.

“The cost for training is ten thousand dollars. I require a two thousand dollar non-refundable deposit. Even if I don’t take you on, you lose at least that much.”

“Yes, ma’am.” I realized then how she was able to afford this house and its furnishings.

“The training process is likely to take months. At the end of that time, you’ll be auctioned off. Where you’re auctioned off depends on your assessed value.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Good.” She flicked a switch on a box on her desk, which I now realized was an intercom. “Jasmine, please bring my notebook. I left it in the living room.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“You’re a pretty girl,” she said to me.

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“But being pretty is not the same as being pleasing. You must learn to be both.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

She regarded me thoughtfully. “Perhaps.”

Before I could reply, the door opened and Jasmine walked in carrying a notebook computer. She placed it on the desk in front of Marika, who waved her away, opened it and turned it on. Jasmine left quickly, closing the door behind her. She hadn’t spared me a glance.

Marika used the built-in touch pad, then turned the machine to face me. "This is the questionnaire. Fill it out completely. Take your time and get it right. You won't have a second chance."

Without another word, she rose and left the room.

The questions weren't hard. They included entering information about my physical details such as my height, weight, birth date, hair and eye color, medical history, social security number (this surprised me), as well as a rather detailed background information section. It also had a number of questions on how I felt about men, and about myself. I answered as I thought a Talean slave would, but only on the questions I knew couldn't be checked. When it came time to list past relationships, I entered none. If she did locate Scott and somehow got him to talk about me, the game would be over before it had started. She returned just as I was finishing. I wondered if she'd somehow been watching.

When I was done, I sat back and waited.

"All finished?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I require a two thousand dollar deposit. Your invoice will reflect that you hired a computer consulting service, since I obviously can't advertise my real business. That's why I asked you to strip. It wouldn't do if you'd been wired."

I raised my eyebrows in surprise. "Has anyone ever been?"

She nodded. "A journalist tried to infiltrate the Taleans a couple of years ago, but when she refused to strip, I knew something was up."

"What did you do?" I hadn't meant to blurt out the question, but was fascinated in spite of myself.

"I spoke to her as if she were a call girl. I offered nothing incriminating, other than the fact I'd called a prostitute, which doesn't bother me at all. My only concern was protecting myself from the media. I take my privacy very seriously. I do hope you understand that."

“Yes, ma’am.”

“So, how do you want to pay?”

“Will you take a personal check?”

“Of course. Make it out to Hard Drive Consulting.”

I pulled the checkbook from my purse and wrote the check using the pen she offered. Then it was all over and I had nothing to do but wait to find out if I’d wasted two grand of my inheritance.

By the end of the week, I was beginning to grow agitated. I considered calling Jorge several times, but never did. I was done with him and the sooner he accepted it, the sooner he would take his life back. He didn’t call me either, though I didn’t expect him to.

Each day I went to the Internet cafe and read more about Taleans. There was so much to learn, so much to know, that even with an entire week of research, I felt as if I’d only scratched the surface. I even bought the first few Talean books and read them at night, lying alone in a room I’d come to think of as home.

They weren’t bad books, though they were more fantasy adventure than a treatise on any particular lifestyle. Perhaps the later books would give more details on the lifestyle itself, but the first books were merely entertaining fiction. Not for the first time, I wondered how the Talean culture had taken its start from a set of books that had nothing at all to do with reality.

There was far less abuse and a lot more romance than I’d expected. I’d read on the web many people who became Talean didn’t know the first thing about it, and in many cases hadn’t so much as read the books. The subculture seemed to attract misogynists, though the books didn’t encourage that kind of behavior. On the world of Tal, masters loved their slaves in ways that made me long to live there. Of course, it was folly. Real people don’t have feelings that deep.

Exactly one week after the interview, I got my answer. To my surprise, I didn't get a call, but received a visit instead. Marika showed up at the motel and knocked on my door.

"Hello, Sandy."

"Hello, ma'am."

I stepped aside to let her in. She was dressed in ripped blue jeans, a plain white T-shirt and a pair of sandals. I could never have imagined her wearing such casual clothing, though her outfit did nothing to detract from her beauty. She sat on the bed and looked up at me. "I think we need to talk."

"Yes, ma'am."

"I'm going to ask you a few questions, and you're going to answer them *honestly*. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." Had she caught me in a lie on the application?

"Do you have a sister named Jaycee?"

My breath caught in my throat. My heart pounded. Then I realized...if she had gone to the trouble of checking me out, of course she'd find out about my family.

"Yes, ma'am."

"It's not on your application."

"I know that, ma'am."

"You were told to be honest."

"Yes, ma'am."

My panic grew with each second. Surely she wouldn't take me on now that she knew the truth.

"Sandy, why do you want to be a slave?"

This was it. If I told her about the dream she'd think me mad. "I need to find my sister."

"I see." She got up and started pacing. "You might have just asked."

"Would you have told me?"

“Your sister was sent off to the Australian auction. It’s the big one we have every six months. The girls there are very expensive, but Jaycee was very, very good.”

“She vanished, ma’am, and I didn’t know what to do. It’s just that...”

“Yes?”

I didn’t want to say more, yet what else could I do. “I had a dream she was beaten to death.”

She looked at me. “You’re trying to become a Talean slave because of a *dream*?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but it was real.”

“As soon as I realized who you were, I took the liberty of checking up on your sister. She was to be auctioned off in Australia, but I was told she escaped.”

“Escaped! She’s alive?”

“I can’t say for sure. Word is she’s an escaped slave, but of course, that’s what a murderer would say, don’t you think?”

I couldn’t believe she was taking me seriously. “I need your help, ma’am.”

“I have my reputation to consider.”

“Ma’am, if you don’t help me, I have nothing.”

“You have your life, Sandy. And if you had any brains at all, you’d go back to it. You’re going to get hurt.”

“I don’t care. I have to know.”

“Are you willing to sell yourself into a life of slavery to find out the truth?”

“Yes, ma’am, I am.”

“Once they have you, it’s not so easy to escape. That’s why I truly believe something did happen to Jaycee. Talean men are very good at keeping their women. The odds of anyone escaping are negligible.”

“Will you help me, ma’am?”

“Yes, Sandy. I’ll help you. You’ll have to pay the balance of my fee, but I’ll train you, under the condition that you do your best to make me look good. My entire enterprise works on reputation. If I help you to find out what happened to your sister, you have to promise to do me proud. You will have to live with servitude.”

I should have been appalled, but wasn’t. It was no less than I expected. “Yes, ma’am. But I need to know. Jaycee was all I had left.” I didn’t mention it wasn’t information I was after, but vengeance. I didn’t think Marika would go for that. I wasn’t sure I could sell myself into slavery just to learn the truth, but for a crack at my sister’s killer, a lifetime of misery was a price I’d willingly pay. I fought down the anger rising in my throat like bile. Marika had continued talking and I had to think hard to catch up with her instructions.

“Check out of this place. Pack up and be at my house tomorrow at noon. You’ll be staying there from now on. I’ll train you, after which you’re on your own. Your job, while you’re with me, will be to learn as fast as you can. You need to be ready for the next Australian auction.”

My heart leapt. “Yes, ma’am.” I knew I shouldn’t take her at her word, but couldn’t help it. I’d believed in Jorge, and he had helped me. Now I had to trust Marika. Still, a bit of precaution wouldn’t hurt. “Ma’am, may I ask a question?”

“Yes, Sandy.”

“Why are you doing this?”

She didn’t answer right away. When she did, there was pain in her eyes. “First of all, Jaycee was a wonderful girl, one of the best I’ve ever trained. She was always upbeat, enthusiastic, willing to do anything. I can’t imagine a set of circumstances that would drive her from the lifestyle, so I can’t believe she escaped. That’s one reason I’m going to help you, but there’s another. I believe in Talean law, but don’t believe anyone has the right to commit murder or abuse another person. Talean slaves are valuable commodities. Being rich doesn’t give you the right to take a life.”



“Even the life of a slave?”

She spoke slowly, as if speaking to a child. “Yes, Sandy. Even the life of a slave. Talean society isn’t about abuse, as you’ll find out. It’s about doing what’s right. Being true to yourself.”

It was my turn to be surprised. “Yes, ma’am.” I didn’t ask about it, but hoped that somehow, during the training, I would learn more. The fact was, if Talean law wasn’t about abuse, there was still some slight hope for Nicco.

I wrote out a check for the balance of my training. Eight thousand dollars would strain my bank account, but if it would help me find out what had happened to Jaycee, it was money well spent. Virtually all my bills were automatically deducted from my savings, which meant I wouldn’t be overdue on anything. One less thing to worry about. I was one of the few people I knew who lived debt free. I’ve always hated owing money on anything, even so much as a credit card. Though I kept a couple for emergencies, I always paid them off at the end of each month.

Marika accepted my check with a smile and bade me good day. For a long time after she left, I thought about her words. Nothing else from her visit stuck in my mind but the way she’d spoken to me, as if I were some stupid kid who didn’t have a clue.

Everything I’d learned about the Taleans had portrayed them as violent abusers, yet there was nothing of violence or abuse in the books. Women in the novels were Talean slaves because it was natural for them to be so. There were women in the books who weren’t, but no one ever seemed to mention them. The books focused on slavery, and though it wasn’t always consensual in each aspect, the slaves seemed happy and fulfilled. Could anyone truly feel that way living a life of servitude? It didn’t seem possible, but then, what did I know?

I didn’t sleep well that night. For the first time since I’d arrived in Florida, I had the dream again and woke up screaming. I didn’t go back to sleep. Instead I packed up my bags and checked out at first light.

I spent most of the morning driving around, trying to tell myself everything would be okay, yet part of me knew that wasn't the case. Furthermore, I knew I was taking the biggest risk of my life for the smallest possible return.

What insanity had driven me to this particular twist of fate? I couldn't explain it. I eventually ended up at the Internet cafe, where I checked my email and surfed the web until it was time to go.

My life as a slave trainee was about to begin.

## Chapter Six

Marika wasn't home when I arrived, but Jasmine was expecting me. Still naked, she opened the door and smiled, though it was a perfunctory gesture at best. She was definitely cool toward me, if not cold. It didn't matter. I wasn't there to please Jasmine. I was there to find out what happened to my sister. Jasmine was the least of my problems.

She showed me to a room on the second level with four beds and virtually no furniture. The word Spartan would have been generous. In contrast to the rest of the house, which was bright and cheerful in some areas and wood-paneled in others, the off-white walls were stark and devoid of anything that might resemble decoration. Yet the floor and walls were clean, if boring to look at. I imagined this was the sort of environment a slave would have to adapt to. I wondered if it would be against the rules to change things around to make the room more like home. It probably depended on the master. I had brought my luggage up with me, but Jasmine grasped the handle as I walked past. I stopped, surprised, then let go.

"Remove your clothes."

I was going to answer, but since she was naked, it was likely all the slave trainees had to be so. I wasn't about to start causing ripples one way or another. I undressed quickly and folded my jeans and blouse neatly, placing them on the only dresser in the room.

"You won't have to worry about those. We'll be giving your clothes to charity."

"Is that right?"

She eyed me up and down, clearly disapproving. "You're wasting your time, you know. You're never going to please a man."

"What makes you think so?" I was starting to grow angry, but managed to control myself.

"You don't have the body for it. You don't have the heart. There's something not right about you, Sandy. I don't know what it is, but there's one thing I do know. You won't make it."

"Does Marika know you talk to new girls like this?"

She laughed. "What slaves say amongst themselves doesn't bother trainers. Even if you told her, there's no way you could prove it. You'd just be the new girl starting trouble. But go ahead. I can take the heat. Can you?"

Part of me, the New Yorker, wanted to strike out at her. I'm not often competitive, but there's something about living in New York City that puts you on the offensive when dealing with people like Jasmine. I had to remind myself I wasn't here for Jasmine's benefit. I had no idea what her game was, and it didn't matter. The only thing that did was finding Jaycee's killer, and the only way to do it was to act like a good little submissive. At any other time, I'd have opened up both barrels, but not then. The end result was far too important to risk.

"Look, Jasmine. I don't know what you're on about and really don't care. I'm here for one thing, and one thing only—to learn how to be a slave. The sooner I complete my training, the sooner I'm out of here, and out of your hair."

"You really don't get it, do you? You want me to draw a picture for you?"

"Sure."

"If you think I'm going to stay here with Marika, while you go off to be a slave for some master, you're dead wrong. Auction space is limited, and I'm going to make sure I'll be standing on that block. If it means you have to wait until the next time around, so be it."

I almost blurted out I couldn't wait, but that would do no good. Not with Jasmine. It would take brains rather than brawn to handle this situation. "I'm in no rush. You've been at this much longer than me. I'm sure you'll be ready long before I am. You'll be out of here and on the block before I master even the basics, so just lighten up, okay?"

Her face grew dark. "Don't you *ever* tell me what to do."

"Whatever you say."

I didn't wait for an answer. I walked from the room, down the stairs and to the living room, leaving Jasmine and her animosity behind.

I didn't have long to wait before Marika returned. She wore a stunning red dress that made her look absolutely gorgeous, accentuating her ample breasts, hugging her wide hips. Her makeup had been applied expertly, though I suspected it was heavier than Talean men preferred. Her black hair, which she'd worn loose on each previous occasion, was built up like a crown upon her head. Indeed, she could have passed for royalty. I'd always known she was pretty, but had never dreamed she could look like that.

"Hello, ma'am."

"Hello, Sandy. How are you?"

"I'm well, ma'am."

"Did Jasmine give you a tour of the house?"

"No, ma'am. She only showed me the bedroom."

"How odd. She usually delights in taking people around."

"Yes, ma'am, but I'm afraid Jasmine and I got off on the wrong foot."

She looked at me oddly, but didn't address me again. Instead, she called out. "Jasmine, can I see you for a moment?"

Jasmine came running, I could hear her feet on the stairs. As soon as she entered the room, she dropped immediately to her knees. "Yes, Mistress."

"Stand."

Jasmine rose gracefully, without using her hands. She didn't so much as glance in my direction.

"Jasmine, why didn't you show Sandy the house?"

"She only just got here a little while ago. I would have shown her, Mistress, but time did not permit it."

"Can you think of any reason why Sandy would say the two of you had gotten off on the wrong foot?"

"No, ma'am. I was pleasant to her, as I am to everyone. I take great pride in cultivating my attitude."

I was too stunned to react. The lying bitch was already making me look like a troublemaker. If I continued to accuse her, she would just deny it. Jasmine had been right...it was her word against mine.

Marika turned to look at me. She didn't look particularly pleased, and I couldn't blame her. Already I'd been outmaneuvered by Jasmine.

"Well, Sandy, what have you to say for yourself?"

"Nothing, ma'am. I said I thought I'd gotten off on the wrong foot with Jasmine, but I had assumed I'd done something to warrant her ire. I'm so new to all of this. It's possible I misread her."

Marika didn't say anything. I could see she was processing what I said. She didn't seem impressed. "Very well. Jasmine...show Sandy around the house please."

"It would be my pleasure, ma'am." The arrogant bitch actually beamed at me. "C'mon, Sandy. I'll get you settled in and show you some of what we do here."

Not to be outdone, I smiled my best smile back. "I'd much appreciate that, Jasmine."

Marika looked from one of us to the other, but I could tell she wasn't buying it.

No sooner were we out of earshot than she started in on me again. “You stupid cow. Do you really think you’ll rid yourself of my wrath so easily?”

“I didn’t start this, Jasmine. You did.”

“So? What are you going to do about it, little girl? Are you going to cry?”

“No. I’m going to ignore you, unless I have no other choice in the matter.”

“Try your best, girl.”

“I intend to.”

We did a lot of walking, but she didn’t say another word, thus I got the physical layout of the house with none of the context. If there were things I was expected to know, she could tell Marika she’d told me, and I’d look like an idiot. I’d have to be sharp from here on in.

The only thing that stood out on the tour was a door protected by a security keypad, the only locked door in the house. I wondered about it. Even Marika’s office was open to anyone who wished to enter. I wanted to ask Jasmine about it, but didn’t want her help with anything. When I later inquired about the door, I found no one willing to tell me what went on behind it. From that point on, it took on a sinister aspect, though I had to admit, it was entirely possible my imagination painted a darker picture than was warranted. Eventually, I would learn what the room contained, but not for some time.

Oddly enough, after the first few minutes, I grew used to nudity. What had at first been uncomfortable, I barely noticed, unless I thought about it. It helped that Jasmine was naked as well. I had been far more aware of my nudity in Marika’s presence because she’d been clothed.

That brought to mind an article I’d read online, talking about the psychology of submission. It claimed, and I didn’t understand this at the time, a naked person felt somehow less in the presence of a clothed person. I didn’t know if I felt inferior to Marika, but certainly felt self-conscious around her, which could well be the first step. In that same article, I’d learned access to things like food and clothing was one way Taleans controlled their slaves. I

hadn't taken it seriously at the time, but more and more, was beginning to see how that could happen. Talean slave training wasn't just training, but a form of brainwashing. If I weren't careful, I would be trapped before I could accomplish my purpose. It scared me that I didn't particularly care what happened to me afterwards.

"Get on your knees," said Jasmine.

"Why?"

She glared. I didn't want to obey, but thought it would be better if I listened, especially after I'd already made a fool of myself. I sank to my knees and looked up at her.

"Good. The sooner you understand who's in charge here, the happier you'll be. You obey me in all things, do you understand?"

"Yes."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Yes, ma'am."

"You will always call me ma'am if my lady Marika is not around. Do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." My blood boiled. I was humiliated and growing angrier by the second. Yet if I couldn't control myself now, what hope did I have later when the things I was asked to do might involve pain, or *real* humiliation. In a sense, Jasmine was doing me a favor, accelerating my training without realizing it. Very well, I would use her. And she'd never know she was helping me along.

She wasn't done with me yet. "And one more thing. When Nicco comes here, you keep away from him."

And there it was. She was upset because Nicco had recommended me for the training. She must have really liked him. Maybe she fantasized about being purchased by him. After all, he was a *very* attractive man. The thought of him sent a flush through my body Jasmine couldn't have helped but notice. Yet it



was that very reason I couldn't afford to be purchased by him. I had another agenda, and being with Nicco wasn't part of my plan.

"He's all yours," I said, though I hated those words coming from my mouth.

"That's fine then. Just make sure it stays that way."

She turned and left me kneeling. I waited until she was gone to get to my feet.

My training began in earnest the next morning. I didn't know what I expected, but it wasn't what I got. My first chore was to clean the house from top to bottom; dusting, vacuuming, washing windows, even shining the glass of the china cabinet. I hadn't pictured myself as a maid and wondered just what I'd gotten into. Mind you, I didn't do it alone. Jasmine was also working, though I think I worked harder. I really wanted to make up for yesterday's faux pas and get back on Marika's good side. I hated being so dependent on other people.

Jasmine was right in thinking I wouldn't be allowed clothes; in fact, everything I owned had been taken from me. I understood this as the first step toward slavery. My credit cards, cell phone, identification and checkbook were locked in the safe in Marika's office. I no longer had access to any of it.

The mere thought of it made me understand much better what it was to be a slave. Without cash or clothes, where was I going to go? Is that how Talean men kept their slaves? The thought appalled me, but I also realized it was part of life. How many women stayed with their man for security rather than love? Or convinced themselves they loved a man in order to feel secure? Had I really loved Scott? I had thought so at the time, yet the ease with which I'd walked away spoke volumes about how I really felt. Scott was safe, convenient, comfortable, but the chemistry I'd shared with Jorge hadn't been there. Nicco popped into my mind, and I pushed him back out. I didn't dare start thinking about him in those terms.

However, it wasn't till dinnertime that I finally began to understand what being a slave might be like. It was six o'clock when Marika called us to the dining room. The night before, Jasmine had prepared a nice meal, a thick stew that made my taste buds sing. I hadn't known cooking would be part of the training, but then, it made sense. The more we knew, the more we would be worth on the auction block.

That second night, Marika took us into the dining room, sat at the table, but did not motion for us to sit. I almost took a seat, but didn't when I saw Jasmine made no move to. I stood as she stood, wondering what would happen next.

"Kneel," said Marika.

Jasmine lowered herself to her knees. Her movements were fluid and graceful. I felt clumsy beside her as I assumed the position, yet somehow, she was there first. I envied her that, then hated myself for it. Learning such things would surely make my captivity easier.

"Good," said Marika. When she didn't elucidate, relief washed through me. I had thought she might comment on my movements.

Neither Jasmine nor I spoke. Marika addressed us.

"Part of being a slave is doing what you're told, no matter what it is. You've both done well at cleaning house today, but that doesn't guarantee a Talean slave a seat at the table, or even a meal. You're fed when and *if* your Master feels like feeding you. It's the same reason a slave can't snack. Any food you get comes from your Master. Mind you, there are masters who allow you to eat the food basics if you're hungry and makes them available to you. Almost no master will allow things like cookies or pastries, unless you have been particularly pleasing. A good girl is treated like gold. A poor slave is beaten. It wouldn't be fair to say that it makes no difference to the master. The master wants an obedient, well-trained slave. He doesn't thrill to taking a whip or belt to you. He does it to protect his investment. Just about the only general truth I

can offer is this; most masters will not mark you, other than with a tattoo or possibly a brand.”

This should have come as a shock, but I’d read fiction where Talean slaves fantasized about being branded. It made them feel they truly belonged, which is part of the entire experience. I didn’t see myself ever getting to that point. In fact, I knew I couldn’t ever allow anyone that much power over me. Yet I would have to allow it, were I to continue with this charade. That it was a charade, I had no doubt. Acting like a slave was one of the hardest things I’d ever done.

The doorbell rang, and Jasmine started to rise.

“No,” said Marika. “I’ll get it.”

She rose and left us there. I wanted to ask Jasmine what was going on, but didn’t. While she hadn’t exactly been cold to me during the day, she seldom volunteered information. She was definitely playing mind games with me. And there wasn’t a damn thing I could do about it either.

I was starting to feel uncomfortable in that position, on my knees, back straight, butt resting on my heels. I could feel the muscles in the front of my thighs stretching. My lower back was starting to ache. When Jasmine had shown me the proper kneeling position, I had been assured I’d get used to it soon enough, but that time hadn’t yet arrived, and I was suffering. To take my mind from the pain, I thought about last night.

Jasmine and I shared the bedroom. Before bed, we were both allowed a two-minute shower. We had only the most basic glycerine soap—unscented of course. There was also a bargain shampoo of some kind, a brand I’d never heard of. We were both instructed to brush our teeth after the shower. I was provided with a new toothbrush. I had been told I would have to see a dentist and would have to pay for any dental work needed, but my teeth, I knew, were pretty much in perfect condition. I’d always taken care of them, and my

parents had both gone to the grave with their teeth intact. Not for the first time, I thanked the powers that be for my genetic makeup.

After we'd showered and brushed, we were put to bed. We had a 10:00 p.m. curfew, unless something special was going on. Jasmine had the corner bed, the one furthest from the door. She sat on it and gestured to the bed across from her.

"That one's yours."

"Yes, ma'am."

There were two of us and four beds. I'd have preferred one of the others, ideally the one furthest from Jasmine, but didn't want to say so. After our initial showdown, Jasmine had been aloof, but not aggressive toward me, and I was relieved. I knew I should have been angry, but the situation was so strange and I was so dependent on the people around me, I didn't dare risk their ire. I sat on my bed and waited until she lay down. I followed suit. To my surprise, she spoke to me.

"Do you have any questions so far?"

I had tons of questions, but couldn't yet elucidate them. It was all too new. Too weird. "No, ma'am."

She looked surprised. "Nothing at all? Surely you must be curious about something."

I didn't want to talk to her, but had to look at it as part of my training. If I were to be a slave, my own desires meant nothing. "What made you want to be a slave? What were you before you came here?"

She had been propped on one arm, but now leaned back in bed and stared at the ceiling. "I didn't have a choice in the matter."

"I thought everyone has a choice."

"That's not completely true. My mother and father were Taleans. My mother was a slave, and all her female children are slaves too. I was raised to be a slave from birth."

I tried to picture what that was like and failed utterly. “Then what are you doing here? I thought Mistress Marika trained slaves.”

“Yes, she does. My last Master found me lacking. He feels being trained by Mistress will solve the problem, so he paid for it.”

I wanted to ask her what he’d found wrong with her, but didn’t dare. I didn’t want to test the boundaries of this new relationship yet.

Strangely enough, I felt a pang of unwanted sympathy. It wouldn’t do to feel anything for Jasmine, not after the way she’d treated me, but suddenly I understood her desire to get out of there. I started to cry for a woman I had no reason to like.

“I think you’re a terrific slave,” I said, softly.

If she heard me, she didn’t answer. I eventually fell into a deep sleep that consumed me so totally, when I awoke I didn’t know where I was.

The sound of voices brought me back to the moment. I strained to hear what was being said, but couldn’t. I could tell the people talking were women. If a man was with them, he hadn’t yet opened his mouth. My curiosity was soon satisfied when two young ladies entered the room just behind Marika.

They were both undeniably beautiful, if completely different from each other. One was brown-haired, though a darker shade of brown than mine, one a redhead. Both were tall, but one was very thin, while the other was larger, not precisely fat, or even overweight. She was just a big woman. They wore matching floral dresses, more modest than any outfits I’d seen around here, except of course, for Marika’s. She wore whatever the hell she wanted. Part of me envied her that power.

To my surprise, both women disrobed as soon as they entered the dining room. They dropped their dresses where they’d been standing. They wore nothing beneath. Was Marika the only woman allowed clothes in her house? The women didn’t seem embarrassed. They laughed between themselves, but

spoke in whispers. I didn't understand any of it, no matter how hard I strained to hear. Only when I realized they were whispering in a foreign language did I know why. When I did get to hear a swatch of it, it sounded like Italian, but I couldn't be certain.

At Marika's request they sat at the table. Marika listened to their animated conversation, occasionally interrupting with a comment of her own in the same language. After only a few minutes, I was pretty certain it was Italian, though I didn't know the language at all. If I hadn't caught the occasional foreign film on cable, I'd never have been able to guess.

I felt stupid, kneeling there in front of those women. They weren't at all self-conscious about their bodies, nor did they have any reason to be. They moved fluidly, completely comfortable with themselves. I felt awkward, clumsy, even ugly beside them. I hated the feeling and tried to push it from my mind, but an occasional movement or tilt of the head reminded me just how awkward I was and how far I had to go.

Finally, after too long a time to contemplate sanely, Marika looked at us. She clapped her hands twice. "Dinner, now."

Jasmine rose perfectly, without seeming to strain at all. Much to my embarrassment, I grunted on the way to my feet. I felt ashamed, but no one commented. I followed Jasmine into the kitchen and stood watching, waiting for her to tell me what was going on.

Yet she didn't speak. She was busy preparing the meal. I'd yet to see her cook and to say I was impressed would be to understate the matter. I'd often marveled at how easy chefs on TV make it look. Jasmine not only made it look easy, but watching was almost like watching some odd ballet broadcast late at night on PBS. I found myself almost hypnotized by the confident movements of her body. Occasionally, she would ask me to get something from the counter or the refrigerator. I tried to move as she did, but was certain I failed utterly.

In too short a time, the meal was ready. It looked truly wonderful. It was some sort of beef dish with steamed vegetables and scalloped potatoes. Any chef in the world would have been proud of a meal presented as it was that night. My stomach rumbled, and I bade it be silent. I felt self-conscious enough without making unwanted noises.

I helped Jasmine carry the dishes to the table, after which, much to my dismay, she resumed her position on the floor. I knelt beside her, unable to avoid the aroma of the fine meal laid out on the table. Marika and her two guests chatted amicably, though I couldn't understand a word. Then, something happened that nothing in life had prepared me for. One of the women, the larger of the two, cut off a piece of meat and threw it on the floor in front of Jasmine. Jasmine leaned all the way down and ate the food from the floor without using her hands. I was horrified, but managed to catch myself before I allowed it to show. They didn't seriously expect me to eat off the floor, did they?

The other girl cut off a small piece and threw it in front of me. I was so hungry. And I knew what was expected of me. Tentatively I reached for it. Marika cut me off. "No, Sandy. No hands. Follow your sister's example please."

I knew she meant Jasmine. I felt a wave of anguish pass over me as I considered Jaycee. My sister. I had read slaves under the same roof were often referred to as sisters, but to place Jasmine in my sister's esteemed position upset me. To cover my reaction, I leaned down low and ate off the floor, my entire body rebelling against the act. Fortunately, we'd tackled that floor thoroughly earlier in the day, and I knew it was clean. Still, it was humiliating, which I gather was the point.

Throughout the rest of the meal, either of the two women would throw us a scrap and, like dogs, we would eat. To make matters worse, we were each given a bowl of water, which we had to lap at like some family pet. I had never felt so low in my life and hated the feeling more than anything I'd yet experienced. No

one should be treated like this. No one. That Jaycee had been treated this way, even if by her own choice, filled me with pain and sorrow.

Then, toward the end of dinner, it happened. Lady Marika threw a piece of meat on the floor, directly between us. I moved for it, almost instinctively. I was still hungry. Jasmine was as fast and we both struggled over it for a moment, before I realized what I was doing. I felt sick. I pulled away, leaving Jasmine her prize. She lifted it with her lips and chewed it slowly, watching me with a superior sneer. I vowed then, I would never be like Jasmine. I wanted nothing to do with her or this lifestyle.

I almost walked away. I could have. I hadn't yet been sold. But something hard and angry within me refused to be defeated. I would not be turned from my task. I had pictured rape and torture, so how bad was this?

The only problem was, I couldn't be sure rape and torture wouldn't be tomorrow's lesson.

After our meal, such as it was, and the long process of cleaning the dining room and kitchen, Jasmine and I were given the night off. We spent it in the bedroom, the only place in the house that was remotely ours. It wasn't, of course. Slaves owned nothing and as easily as being housed here, I could be locked in a garage, or even a closet. I could be caged, chained, hung over a pit of spikes—there was no limit to what could be done to a slave.

Soon Jasmine took her leave and left me blissfully alone. Finally, I stretched out, no longer feeling on display. It wasn't that I was still uncomfortable with nakedness, so much as I was concerned about the way I moved and looked. This was probably the way I was supposed to feel, which annoyed me somewhat, but I didn't care at the moment. I was happy for the privacy.



My newfound happiness didn't last all that long. Jasmine returned a short time later, a pastry in her right hand. I stared at it. I hadn't had nearly enough to eat and wasn't used to going without.

She smiled at me and took a bite. I wanted to beat her to death.

"Mmmmm. I love cannolis." Her smile infuriated me.

I loved them too, fattening though they be. I watched her, mouth watering. "Where did you get that?"

"The fridge. There's a whole fucking plate of them. They're not going to miss one."

My mind did a back flip. "You just took it?"

"Sure. I always do. Never been caught yet. If you think you can live on what you get from Lady Marika, you'll soon find out differently."

I didn't want to think about the pastry, so I changed the subject. "Who were those two women?" *You know, the ones who threw us table scraps, like we were nothing more than animals.*

She looked at me between bites. I turned away, determined not to watch her, though the sounds of her eating and her tiny moans of pleasure I was unable to block out. "They're slaves, like us, but further along in the training. Lady Marika uses them to help train us, as if they were men."

"Where have they been?"

"On a field trip. They each spent the week with a real life Master, who used them as any master would. It's part of the training."

I grew pale. I hadn't considered such a thing possible, but then, I hadn't really thought it through, or any of this. Each new idea blew me away all over again. What did that say about me? Still, something more important was on my mind.

"I can't believe you just took it. Do you have any idea what would happen if you were caught?"

"Nothing."

“What?”

“I’ve been caught before in my old place. I got yelled at. No biggie. It’s worth it. This is truly divine.”

I looked at her again and regretted it, since I got to see her place the last piece in her mouth. Had I thought she’d share? Of course I didn’t. Still, now that it was gone, my world felt emptier.

“That was awesome. You know, if you’re going to try it, you should do it now, while they’re all on the back porch. They’ll be there for hours, discussing what they’d learned and asking any questions they might have.”

I thought about it. There was no way in hell I could just walk into the kitchen and take a pastry. So I lay back and closed my eyes, but my empty stomach wouldn’t leave the idea alone. I knew it was stupid, but then, I was so new to this, and I really was hungry. I sat up. “I’ll be back.”

“Where are you going?”

“The bathroom.”

“Have fun.”

I left the room and walked past the bathroom to the stairs that led to the lower level. The house was dark beneath me, but I didn’t think I’d need much light. The bit that came through the windows would be enough to get me to the kitchen. It was a relatively straight trip, once I turned right. Slowly, as quietly as possible, I slipped through empty rooms. In the distance, I thought I heard laughter. I recognized one of the voices as Marika’s. That meant she couldn’t catch me. So much the better.

The kitchen linoleum, much colder on my bare feet than the carpet, informed me I was near my goal. I crossed quickly, no longer worried about being discovered. No one was here. Even if there had been video surveillance, it wouldn’t catch me in the dark.

All I could think about was an Italian pastry with my name on it.

I held my breath and pulled open the refrigerator door. Immediately the kitchen lights flashed on and a siren began to wail. I froze, wondering what would happen next.

Whatever it was, I was certain I wasn't going to like it.

## Chapter Seven

I didn't move, even though I knew they'd be coming for me. I closed the refrigerator door, knelt and waited for them to arrive. In short order, three women stood over me.

Marika shook her head disapprovingly. "I suppose you have an explanation for this?"

"I'm sorry, Mistress."

"Not yet, you're not. What did you think you were doing?"

I wasn't going to go down for this alone. If I were going to be punished, so would Jasmine. After all, Jasmine must have known about the alarm and hadn't said a word.

"When I saw Jasmine eating the pastry, I just..."

Marika cut me off. "I gave that pastry to Jasmine to reward her for the fine meal she prepared. I don't believe you helped all that much. Jasmine deserved that pastry." Marika turned to the larger of the two women. "Lonnie, would you do the honors?"

"As you wish, Mistress."

She motioned for me to follow, and I did, barely able to control my anger, not just at Jasmine but at myself. She'd played me. I had been naive...worse still, I had been gullible. I allowed my hunger to affect my judgment. I wouldn't do so again. I suspected my decision would be reinforced by whatever punishment I was about to suffer.

Lonnie, when she spoke, surprised me. "Don't worry, hon. You'll learn the ropes soon enough."

I hadn't expected kindness from her, not after the way Jasmine had treated me. Yet I didn't trust her enough to tell her what had happened. If she didn't believe me, my punishment, whatever it was to be, might be worse. "I hope so. I'm scared."

"I wish I could reassure you, but this is going to hurt."

"Oh God."

I didn't say anything else. There didn't seem to be anything to say. I followed her to a room upstairs, far away from the front of the house. The walls of the room were padded. I didn't have to have a friend with a recording studio to know soundproofing when I saw it. The room had a number of chairs and a few tables, arranged in a haphazard fashion, giving the impression of a storage area. I hated the place immediately, though it could be because I suspected what was going to happen next.

Lonnie pointed to an oldish-looking coffee table sitting off to the side. "Kneel there."

I didn't have to be told twice. Part of my mind kept telling me it was insane to stay, but the alternative, to run naked into the streets, was not something I could bring myself to do. And if I did, Jaycee's murderer would walk away without paying for his crime.

I heard her moving around the far end of the room, but didn't look back. I waited, fear growing with each passing second. It took every ounce of control I had to wait without craning my neck to see what was going on.

Presently, she approached. "Lean over. Breasts flat on the table, please."

I did so. The surface was cold and my nipples hardened immediately, though I can safely say I felt nothing that resembled arousal.

"I'm sorry I have to do this. It will be over soon. You can scream if it makes it easier."

I wished she'd shut up and get on with it.

Crack!

The pain followed a moment after the sound. I'd never been spanked before, not even as a child, but this hurt worse than any spanking had a right to. I bit my lip, whimpered, but didn't turn around. The sound was too loud, the pain too real. I wanted to move, but didn't dare.

Crack!

The second blow, delivered atop the first, hurt even more. I felt a single tear slide down my cheek. I heard myself cry out and didn't recognize the voice.

Crack!

She never varied where the blow fell, or the tempo of the beating. Each blow left me in more pain, crying harder, screaming louder. I had heard some people take pleasure from being spanked and knew then I'd never be one of them.

There were ten blows in all. Once it was over, I looked back and saw briefly the paddle Lonnie had used. I crawled from that room rather than try to find my legs. I crawled down the long hallway to the bedroom and into bed. Across from me, Jasmine watched, a half smirk on her lips.

"Why?" I croaked. My voice was hoarse from screaming.

"I told you to call me ma'am when Lady Marika isn't around. You ignored me. You were punished."

"I hate you."

She chuckled softly. "That is completely irrelevant. I don't require your love, only your obedience. Do not disobey me again."

"I was wrong before. You aren't a slave at all."

"I'd sleep on my stomach if I were you."

She didn't say anything else, and I no longer had the energy to answer her. I cried for a long time that night and knew I'd never forget the lesson for the rest of my life.

When I woke the next morning, all four beds were in use. I had slept so soundly, I hadn't heard the others retire, though when I woke, it was still dark.

My backside stung badly. Sitting would be uncomfortable for days, if not weeks. And still, I would be required to perform my chores. It was then, lying in the soon to be failing darkness, I decided Jasmine would pay. I didn't know how. I didn't know when. But before my days were counted, Jasmine would suffer for what she had done to me.

I eventually drifted back to sleep, only to reawaken far too early. Before I went downstairs, I looked out the window. Below, the garden sprawled out, though the vantage point was completely different from the last room I'd stayed in, which was on the other side of the house. Strangely enough, I saw the same woman I'd seen from that other window. A quick glance around the room confirmed all three girls were still there.

"Who's that?" I asked Jasmine. I still hadn't been formally introduced to the others.

She walked to the window. "Who's what?"

When I looked back, the girl was gone as if she'd never been there. "I thought I saw..."

"Yes?"

What had I seen? A girl who looked like Jaycee? Was it wishful thinking? Did last night's beating take a greater toll on me than I knew? I looked again, but whatever I had seen had vanished.

"Never mind."

Jasmine shrugged and stretched, working the kinks out of her back. I had thought she'd look insufferably pleased with herself, but she didn't. It was just another day for her...and for me. However, I wouldn't have to do as much today, since Lonnie and Leila would be helping with the chores.

Jasmine treated me as if nothing had happened. Much to my displeasure, I called her ma'am every time we were alone. I know she loved having that power over me. I wondered how empty her life must be to require that authority over another. That caused me to wonder about Talean masters as well. Why do they

need to be so controlling? Had they no confidence? I thought about Jorge and then, reluctantly, about Nicco. Would either of them ever treat a woman so? I knew Jorge wouldn't, but had to keep reminding myself that I didn't know Nicco at all. The way things were going, I wasn't sure I wanted to.

Later that day, after the chores were finished, we were called into the presence of Marika. I had thought she would mention yesterday's transgression and was relieved when she did not. Not that she had to—the pain in my rear constantly reminded me how stupid I'd been.

We knelt on the living room carpet. The place where my heel met the bruising was particularly uncomfortable, but I tried to ignore it. I certainly couldn't complain.

Marika sat on the sofa wearing shorts and a T-shirt. It didn't matter what she wore...she always looked good. She didn't speak at first, nor did we. We knelt, awaiting our Mistress's pleasure. She seemed in good spirits.

She turned her attention to me, and I felt uncomfortable. "How do you like the training so far?"

I listened for even a trace of sarcasm but was unable to find any. "The truth, Mistress?"

"Always."

"I can't say I love it."

She smiled. "Very diplomatic. It's not all chores, you know. Pleasing men is what this is about, and you need to learn to do that. Most of our women have the basic skills necessary, but in the brief time we have together, it doesn't pay to try to teach you something you know nothing about. For example, Leila here," she gestured to the redhead, "is quite an accomplished pianist. So we gave her lessons and time to practice. It would raise her price at auction, should her Master decide to sell her. There is no way to know what talent a potential buyer might be in the market for. Jasmine is a first rate cook and so



we concentrated on that with her, though all our girls are given the basics. So, Sandy, what do you do?”

What did I do? I was pretty good at accounting, but that was in my questionnaire. I didn’t think it was the sort of thing that might entertain a master. Not like cooking or playing the piano. Then I thought back to my years in drama class. “I can act. Sing and dance too.”

“Excellent. Show us.”

“May I stand, Mistress?”

“Yes.”

I rose slowly, determined not to grunt this time, though it was that much harder pushing off the bruise. I was sure I winced. The others pretended not to notice, for which I was grateful. The only problem was, I couldn’t think of anything to perform. When something did come to me, it was so completely incongruous, I almost laughed. Still, a command is a command.

There, in front of Mistress Marika and three slaves, I performed “Comedy Tonight”, the opening song from the musical *A Funny Thing Happened to Me on the Way to the Forum*. At first, I was met with a shocked silence, but soon they warmed to the song, and I to the performance. It was something familiar and comforting.

When I was done, they gave me a standing ovation. It would have been a bright moment in an otherwise dark day, if not for the obvious threat in Jasmine’s eyes.

That evening, I got my first chance to talk to Leila and Lonnie. Jasmine was cooking, while we relaxed in the living room. They sat on the sofa. I stood. I’d already tried sitting and decided to give it up for a while.

“How are you holding up, hon?” asked Lonnie. I’d already decided I liked her, but as time passed, I grew even fonder. She was a wonderful girl. They both were.

“Well, you know...I hurt, but I deserved it.” The comment startled me, but I realized as soon as I said it, I did feel like I deserved it. Not for trying to steal a pastry, but for being stupid enough to fall into Jasmine’s little trap. At least I knew I wouldn’t let her influence me again. That was something.

“Yes, I do know. We’ve all gone through it.”

Leila nodded her confirmation.

“So,” I asked, trying to sound casual, “what attracted you to the Talean lifestyle?”

It was Leila who answered. “Oh, we’re not Talean.”

“You're not?”

“Hell no! We’re the proud property of Master Thomas in Montana.”

“You both belong to the same Master?”

“Oh yes, he’s very good to us. We both love him so much.”

It was Lonnie’s turn to nod.

“Your Master isn’t Talean?”

They both shook their heads and, for that moment, they did look like sisters.

“So why are you here?”

“Master believes Talean training is the best training a girl can get,” said Lonnie. “That’s why he paid for us to come here.”

“And the two of you have no problem sharing a master?”

“It’s not our choice.” They both spoke at the same time and giggled, but Leila picked up the rest of the answer. “We both love our Master and fortunately, love each other too. There might be some petty jealousy upon occasion, but we both take steps to make the other feel important. That’s the only way this sort of relationship can work.”

“It doesn’t hurt that we’re both bi.” Lonnie laughed.

“No, I don’t suppose it does,” I said. The more I learned about D/s the more confused I became. Leila and Lonnie seemed so happy, happier than most of

my married friends had been. How was that possible when they had to share a man? Of course, it was entirely likely I'd have to share one too, not that it mattered. I'd worry about that once I'd accomplished my objective.

"Hey, can I ask another question?"

"Sure." I would, it turned out, have to get used to both of them answering in unison.

"Is there anyone else living on the property besides Mistress Marika and us?"

They looked at each other, but Lonnie answered. "Not that I know of. Why?"

I thought she was telling the truth. I decided I could do the same. "Nothing really. I just thought I saw someone walking in the garden this morning while we were all still in the room. It wasn't Mistress Marika either."

"Probably just a trick of shadow," said Leila. "It can do that sometimes."

"Yeah, I know." I might have agreed, but part of me knew better. I *had* seen someone in the gardens, though who it was, or why she reminded me of Jaycee, I couldn't imagine.

I resolved to check the garden thoroughly at the first opportunity.

Life proceeded in an orderly fashion, and I soon grew accustomed to it. Chores, meals—most of which we were allowed to sit at the table for—and lessons in everything from cooking to sewing, from how to walk to how to speak. I was also given time for singing and dance lessons. I valued this time more than any other, for I could leave the house, wear my old clothes and avoid Jasmine for the best part of an afternoon.

She alternated between being disinterested and aggressive, but even that I got used to. I'd have been more than happy to beat her to death with her own stupidity, but had to play the hand I'd been dealt. I consoled myself with the thought that one day, Jasmine would get what was coming to her.

Strangely enough, I wasn't unhappy. Lonnie and Leila were terrific. I never tired of talking to them and, in fact, learned as much from them as I did from Marika—perhaps even more. Yet they were a mystery to me, completely beyond understanding.

They loved their Master so much, they would do anything for him. Anything at all. Yet he owned them. He hadn't actually purchased them, but they'd gifted themselves to him—lock, stock and barrel. How could any woman so give herself to a man? It seemed impossible.

Then one day, Leila said the strangest thing anyone ever said to me. To this day, I can't recall that conversation without crying. It was two weeks after I'd first arrived at Marika's house. Leila and I were alone in the bedroom, enjoying a fifteen minute break before we had to get working. Fifteen minutes was a lot of leisure, and we spent it talking. Usually I was the one who started it, but today Leila did. I watched her work up to it, intuitively sensing she had something to say, but knowing as well she didn't want to say it. When she did, I felt dizzy.

"We'll be leaving next week."

"Leaving?" That meant I'd be alone with Jasmine.

"Yes. Our training is all but done. We're both so anxious to see Master again. It's been too long."

"Yes, of course." I didn't know what else to say.

"We really like you, Sandy. I mean that."

"I like you too." Only then did I realize how true it was. "This place won't be the same without you...both of you."

"And we'll miss you terribly. I hope you'll be allowed to write us."

Be allowed to write. The thought stuck in my mind. I would be owned. Property. I couldn't even write a letter without permission. I couldn't afford so much as a postage stamp. How could anyone choose this lifestyle? The conflict within finally became so great, I had to ask about it.

“Leila, can I ask you something?”

“Sure, hon.”

“Do you ever miss your freedom?”

She looked at me surprised, then rose from the bed and embraced me tightly. “Oh Sandy! I *am* free.”

“But you’re a slave!”

She pushed me away and held me at arm’s length. When she looked into my eyes, I saw compassion. I’d never been held so by a woman and felt uncomfortable, though I didn’t pull away.

“For the first twenty-plus years of my life, I wasn’t a slave. I was everything else...a friend, a lover, a teacher, a student, a confidante, an employee. I had time for everyone but myself. I gave to everyone. I couldn’t bear to see anyone hurting, so I always offered my shoulder to cry on, my home to stay in, even my money if someone needed it. I was always giving, wasn’t happy unless I was giving. And people walked all over me because of it. I was an easy touch. Yet I never learned my lesson.”

I listened, spellbound. I’d never asked about her life before slavery.

“When I discovered the world of Dominance and submission, I let myself go. When I finally found a man I felt was worth giving to on that level, I was ecstatic. Here was a man who not only made me feel loved and wanted and beautiful, but also accepted what I had to give him and truly appreciated me for the first time in my life. He pushed me. Made me give more. Made me give in ways I’d never given before.

“You asked if I missed my freedom. I *am* free, Sandy. I’m freer than I’ve ever been. I belong to Master by choice, nothing else matters. My giving nature can be expressed without societal pressures telling me to be skeptical or suspicious or self-centered. For years now, women have been told to take time for themselves. To look after their own interests. Well, every woman is different. *I’m* different. I’m happiest when I’m serving. I’m free because I no longer buy

into the dogma that you have to be independent or you have to be wary, or that you can't trust men. I found a man I can trust. A man I trust implicitly. I'm free, because serving him *sets* me free in ways I never knew existed. I'm free because serving my Master is my choice, my life, my heart. It's truly what I want to do, more than anything else. By imposing other choices on me, by giving me my external freedom, you take away my rights. Every woman, every *person* should have the right to choose. It's my choice to serve and I make that choice proudly. How much more freedom could I ask for?"

I stood, unable to move, completely stunned by this revelation. Could it be true? I thought back to all the stories, poems and articles I'd read on the Internet. They'd all been saying this very thing, yet I had thought masters might be the ones writing them. Now I believed otherwise. Just looking into her eyes, there was no way I could possibly think she didn't mean every single word she'd said. And Lonnie, apparently, felt exactly the same way.

"Thank you," I breathed.

"For what?"

"For helping me. For being here. For everything you've done for me. You and Lonnie both, of course."

"It was our pleasure, hon. It's our giving nature. Not every slave is like Jasmine."

The comment surprised me, for I had no idea Leila had any feelings at all about Jasmine. She treated Jasmine as she did me. To be sure, they didn't talk as much in their free time, but I attributed that more to Jasmine's temperament than anything else.

"What do you mean?"

"Jasmine is a right bitch. We all know it. Even Mistress Marika knows it."

"She does?"

"Of course she does. Lonnie and I have both overheard you calling her ma'am. The truth is, it's not bad training for you. The newest slave is almost

always abused by those already in place, who fear their Master's attention might go elsewhere. It's hardly uncommon. That's why Mistress Marika allows it."

"But I thought..."

"Sandy, Mistress Marika is a very intelligent woman. Never underestimate her. She's a genius at slave training and knows what she's doing. Believe me, in the end, Jasmine will get hers."

All of a sudden, I started to laugh. I laughed so long and hard, Leila must have thought I was insane. When we left that day to finish our chores, I was happier than I had been since the day I'd arrived.

For once, I was one up on Jasmine.

I never got to say goodbye to Leila or Lonnie. I returned from dance lessons one day and was told Marika had packed them into a cab, and sent them to the airport. I was incensed I hadn't been there to see them off, until I realized Marika had almost certainly chosen the time on purpose.

The more I learned, the more I realized Mistress Marika did nothing by chance. In that, she was very much like Jorge. Grudgingly, as the days passed, she earned my respect. I was even beginning to think of her as Mistress, instead of Marika, which was the point of this whole exercise, though I was uncomfortable with just how much the training had infiltrated my thought processes.

I was always conscious of how I looked; always on display. I made sure to hold my stomach in, keep my back straight. I moved more gracefully each day, though I had a long way to go before I was as proficient as Jasmine.

The training was doing exactly what it was supposed to. I wondered what would happen after this was all over. Even now, I knew I could never go back to my old life, yet just as surely, I would never feel at home as a Talean slave. Suddenly, I was a woman without a kingdom. There was nowhere I belonged.

Leila and Lonnie had been my friends, family and coworkers, all rolled into one. They were gone, and I was devastated, far more than I normally would have been. Barely thinking about what I was doing, I let myself into the garden to shed my tears alone. If I got in trouble for it, so be it.

Twilight gave a dreamlike feel to everything around me. I wandered between rows of bushes and flowers, their colors muted, almost as if I were no longer in the same world. I felt like a distant reflection of myself, a me who should never have been. I longed for New York City, my desk at NYU, my co-op on the upper west side. I would have to sell it eventually. I certainly couldn't go back there. Not after this.

Sandra Castilla was no more. I was simply Sandy, a woman well on her way to being a Talean slave. I had told Marika I would serve my Master once I finished my business with Jaycee's killer and had meant it. What did I have left anyway? What was there to go back to?

Yet I feared the day I ascended the block. Who would buy me? How much would I go for? The latter question surprised me, for it was a slave question. Slaves had egos too, always wondering how much they were worth. Now I was asking the same questions. What was happening to me?

I was so lost in thought, I barely knew where I was wandering. The gardens were extensive, and I was already lost amongst the high hedges and multitudinous garden paths. Of course, it was too small to really get lost in, but I allowed myself to believe I was further from the house than I probably was. The belief comforted me.

Then, from the corner of my eye, I caught a movement. Just a wisp of light in the darkness surrounding me. I moved toward it, curious as to what it might be.

Each time I turned a corner I saw it again, always ahead of me. It might have been a trick of the failing light, but I didn't think so. I kept following, faster and faster until I was almost running.



Finally, I turned into the gazebo I'd seen from the bedroom window that first night, and she was there, facing away from me. I knew her name before she turned.

"Jaycee?"

She looked at me over her shoulder, stared for a moment, first confused then surprised. I took a single step toward her. She vanished as if she'd never been there. I was alone.

Somehow, while my mind was otherwise occupied, darkness had fallen. I wanted to scream but didn't. I took the opportunity to faint instead.

## Chapter Eight

I don't know how long I was out before they found me. When I first opened my eyes, I had no idea where I was or how I had gotten there...then I remembered.

"Jayceel!" I sat bolt upright. Mistress Marika was there, a concerned look clearly visible in the shine of her flashlight.

"You were dreaming," she said softly.

But I hadn't been dreaming and knew it. I was about to say so, when I noticed Jasmine standing off to the side. I'd never say anything personal in front of her if I could help it. So I nodded instead. "Yes, Mistress."

"Let me help you inside."

I had thought she'd have Jasmine help me, but apparently Mistresses can work, if and when they feel like it. The truth is, I had no doubt Mistress Marika worked very hard. I berated myself for my previous thought, and again when I realized a slave might berate herself for such ideas. I was many things but was not, and would never be, a slave. Not in this lifetime.

Mistress Marika helped me into the house, moving slowly, guiding me with more care than I thought her capable of. When we reached the house, she sat me down on the living room sofa and turned to Jasmine.

"Bed. Now."

Jasmine looked surprised, but veiled her anger quickly enough that I wasn't even certain it had been there, or wouldn't have been, if I didn't know her. She was angry and I would pay, but I didn't care at the moment.

Once Jasmine was out of sight, Mistress Marika spoke. "What happened, Sandy?"

“Nothing, Mistress.”

She looked at me sternly. “I’m helping you. A lie is a bad way to repay the favor.”

“I thought I saw my sister. She vanished. It was a trick of dusk, nothing more.”

She looked thoughtful, but didn’t say anything else.

“Mistress, may I speak?”

“Yes, Sandy.”

“Do you know how Jasmine treats me?”

She smiled. “Yes, I do. Talean masters do not involve themselves with the private squabbles of their slaves. If I become involved, it would be contrary to proper training. You would not be learning the right lessons. Whatever your problems with Jasmine, you have to deal with them yourself.”

“You can’t be saying what I think you are.”

She shrugged. “If you insist.”

She didn’t say anything else, and I was too lost in memories of my vision to push the conversation further. It didn’t matter. I had heard all I needed to hear.

More weeks, more lessons. I often looked from the window but didn’t see Jaycee again. Jasmine treated me like a redheaded stepchild. Mistress Marika ignored it. I hadn’t been a bad cook before but learned a lot watching Jasmine. I practiced dancing and singing almost every day. I did my chores to the best of my ability and tried not to think about what would happen next. I didn’t always succeed.

Often my thoughts turned to vengeance. I thought about what I’d do to my sister’s killer when I finally found out his identity. I thought about Jasmine and how I’d get back at her. I had never been one to hold a grudge, but I’d never been put in these types of situations before either. Still, I never really believed I

would do anything to hurt Jasmine. It was a game I played to help pass time. I told myself I was waiting for the right opportunity when she started acting smug, bossy or arrogant. Yet I couldn't help but feel that was more her problem than mine, and she would suffer for it down the road. I simply couldn't allow myself to become judge, jury and executioner. I had little doubt Jasmine deserved payback, but suspected I would not be the one to dish it out.

One afternoon, I heard a knock at the door. We didn't get many visitors, so I was surprised. I was also naked. I hadn't thought about it in a week or more, but suddenly, I was self-conscious. I had no idea where Jasmine was, but I was near the front hallway. I was expected to answer the door...wearing nothing but the rubber band in my hair.

I drew a deep breath, walked forward and opened it. Outside stood a man dressed in black jeans, a black shirt and a leather jacket. His green eyes followed my every motion. His black hair was short, brushed back from the temple. He was perhaps in his mid-twenties with a body many women would kill for, but it was my body I was concerned about at the moment.

"You must be Sandy," he said.

"Yes, Sir."

He smiled. "May I come in?"

"Yes, Sir, I'm sorry. Of course you can." I stepped back, and he entered, taking in my nakedness. A gentleman would have turned his head, but not this man. I knew instinctively he was Talean.

I felt completely conscious of my movements. I had been told that would happen in front of men but only now believed it. He followed me into the living room.

"Please wait here, Sir. I'll go fetch my Mistress."

"Thank you."

I felt the flush throughout my entire body. It was everything I could do to keep from running. I found Mistress Marika in her office. I knelt as soon as I entered.

“Yes, Sandy?”

“There’s a gentleman here to see you.”

“Does this gentleman have a name?”

My jaw dropped. I had been so distracted by my nudity, so lost in the way he’d stared at me, I hadn’t even asked. “I assume he does, Mistress, but I forgot to ask for it.”

“You need to get the names of visitors, Sandy. Would you like to be punished?”

I didn’t want to be punished, but knew I deserved to be for such a basic mistake. “Whatever Mistress wishes.”

“Return to the man and get his name, girl.” She only called me girl when she was angry.

I found myself fighting back tears. Why was this happening to me? Had the training been that effective? “Yes, Mistress.”

I rose and ran to the living room, only slowing when he turned toward me. “In my earlier haste, Sir, I forgot to ask your name.”

“Indeed.”

“May I have it now please? My Mistress would like to know who is calling.”

“Tell her Zane is here.”

“Thank you, Sir.”

I left again, this time at a more leisurely pace. I wouldn’t embarrass myself by moving awkwardly. I knew how to move, had been practicing every day. If I could do it alone or in front of women, it was no different in front of a man. It was all in my head. It didn’t matter if I were naked. I walked proudly back to Mistress Marika’s office, where I knelt with all the grace I could muster.

“His name is Zane, Mistress.”

"I know," she said. "I was expecting him."

I raised my eyes, only concealing my annoyance at the last second. I was chastised by Mistress Marika's amused expression. I dropped my gaze when she smiled.

"Stay and maintain position," she said.

She didn't wait for an answer. She walked past me and left me kneeling alone in her office.

When Mistress Marika returned ten minutes later, she was alone. I hadn't moved and even when she entered, forced myself not to look. I was in exact position she'd left me in.

"Excellent. You can get up, Sandy."

I rose to my feet slowly, without apparent effort. My lessons were indeed paying off.

"Come with me."

"May I ask where we're going, Mistress?"

"Yes."

"Where are we going?"

"To spy on Jasmine."

"Really?"

"Come on." I needed no second invitation.

I followed her upstairs to the locked door. She quickly punched in a security code. I heard a click. She turned the knob and pushed the door open.

I leaned forward trying to glimpse the inside. I was disappointed. The room contained only a table and a couple of comfortable chairs. On the table was a plain white vase, from which extended two long-stemmed, red roses. There was a window on the wall, but it wasn't until I sat down that I realized its purpose. I was looking through a one-way mirror.

In the room, Jasmine knelt before Zane. Her body was flushed, her eyes downcast. She had always been an excellent actress, but I didn't think she was acting.

Zane stood above her, looking down. His leather jacket lay on a chair in the corner. Only then did I recognize the room from night of the party. I'd rested there after Nicco had punched Emilio. When I looked at Mistress Marika, she shook her head.

"I didn't spy on you that night."

I nodded, unsure why she should answer a slave's unasked question, but happy she did. She had whispered, so I didn't speak at all. Instead, I turned my attention back to the window, watching as Zane gestured to his shirt.

"Take it off."

Jasmine moved like a dancer. I envied her the ability. No matter how proficient I became, she was always better. I had to keep reminding myself she had years of practice, but it galled me anyway. If there was one person on this Earth I wanted to be better than, it was Jasmine.

She approached him slowly, eyes intent. Her fingers moved as if she had no control over them. She was breathing hard. She unbuttoned first his shirtsleeves, then the front buttons, starting at the top and working down.

As Zane's body was slowly revealed, I felt myself starting to grow excited. Part of me, Sandra Castilla, knew it was wrong to watch a person without their knowledge. Yet I wasn't running this show, nor was I the same person who'd come to Florida to find my sister. The realization shocked me. I was someone else completely, someone I hadn't lived with long enough to get a handle on. We hadn't even been properly introduced.

Despite the intensity of my thoughts, I couldn't help watching as Jasmine unbuttoned his jeans. Though he hadn't touched them, her nipples had already grown hard. Her whole demeanor had changed. I wondered what I would be like if I were in that room, until I realized it might happen to me any

day. Jasmine might one day watch me in the next room. I hated the thought and pushed it away as soon as it arose.

She pulled down his zipper. It stuck for a moment, and she scowled but recovered immediately when it continued its downward journey. Beneath, I could see navy boxers. She yanked his pants down and the shorts came with it, but not far enough to reveal him completely.

I could hear my own breathing. She worked his jeans off when he sat on the bed. His boxers followed shortly after. He was already hard. I swallowed at the sight of him and clenched the arms of my chair.

“What do you see?” whispered Mistress Marika.

“A good-looking guy with an erection.”

“Do you mean his cock is hard?”

Mistress Marika’s use of the term startled me. She had never before used profanity in my presence. “Yes, Mistress.”

“Say it.”

“His cock is hard.” I had never used the word before, had never been tempted to, yet it felt okay. In fact, it sent a shiver through me. “His cock is hard,” I repeated.

“It’s okay to call things what they are, Sandy.”

I didn’t respond.

Jasmine was again kneeling before him, right before his cock. It wasn’t the first time I’d seen a man naked, of course. I’d even seen a porno movie once, but watching this way was beyond my experience. I had trouble dealing with the flow of emotions threatening to overwhelm me. I squeezed the wooden arms of the chair until my fingers hurt.

“What do you want, girl?” I could hear him clearly and realized this room was designed for just such surveillance. I never thought I would be the type of person who enjoyed voyeurism, but again, I had never been in anything



approaching a situation like this and my disobedient body responded against my will.

Jasmine's voice quavered. "Whatever you wish, Master."

I was surprised she'd called him that. Master was reserved for one person—the man who owned you. Everyone else was Sir. Was this the man who owned Jasmine, come to use his property? For a moment I envied her, then realized how ridiculous that was. I didn't need a master. I didn't want one. Whether I would end up with one, I didn't yet know.

Of course, if Nicco were the one...no, not even Nicco. If I had to serve a man it would be an act, no more. When I focused again on the room, Zane was gone and Nicco was there. Then it was Zane again, a trick played by an over-stimulated mind. The thought of Jasmine and Nicco together made my blood boil, though I had no claim on him.

"Suck my cock, girl...slowly."

"Yes, Master."

Palms flat on the floor, she strained upward, stretching her neck, indeed her entire body, to reach his cock. She took just the tip into her mouth. I could see her lips working around the head, applying pressure and releasing it, over and over again. Zane gasped the first time, then reached behind her head and grabbed her hair. Slowly, he pulled his head from her. I heard her whimper as it slipped from her mouth.

"All of it, not just the tip."

"Yes, Master."

He released her. Again she leaned forward, this time sheathing his entire cock in her mouth. Just the thought of the word cock was enough to make me wet. I hadn't had much sex lately, hadn't even masturbated, though I didn't do that frequently anyway. The last time I'd had sex was with Jorge and, though I wasn't a slut by anyone's definition, I thought if Zane came in here after he was done with Jasmine, I'd have been up for almost anything.

Mistress Marika had to know it too, but that wasn't enough for her. She wanted to hear me say it. "What do you want, Sandy?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't take my eyes off them. Jasmine's head moved up and down. Zane's hand returned to her head. She stiffened, but he didn't pull her away this time. Zane threw back his head and growled, a sound so primal it startled me, but also turned me on as nothing in my experience ever had.

"Suck my cock. Suck it hard, girl."

Jasmine didn't need the encouragement.

"How are you feeling, Sandy?"

Mistress Marika's eyes held a curious intensity. It had to be obvious to her, but that didn't seem to matter.

"Hot, Mistress."

"Hot? Horny?"

"Yes, Mistress."

"Do you want to touch yourself?"

Of course I wanted to touch myself, but I was far too private a person to do so in front of others. Yet, I could not bring myself to lie to her. "Yes, Mistress."

"You may do so."

I wanted to look at her, but couldn't take my eyes off Zane. I watched, as he reached down and pinched one of Jasmine's nipples between his thumb and index finger, rolling it slowly this way and that. Jasmine moaned around his cock. Almost without realizing it, I mimicked the gesture with my fingers, playing with my right breast, almost believing it was Zane. I had rarely been this horny and never while sober. I wanted to stop touching myself, didn't want to do it in front of Mistress Marika, but it felt so damn good. I wondered if she were watching me. Then, I felt something touch my other nipple. I almost jumped, but couldn't tell if pleasure or surprise caused the reaction.

In the room, Zane had once again pulled Jasmine's head away from him. She whimpered, eyes pleading. She strained to taste him, ignoring, or perhaps

not feeling, the pain. Still, Zane did not release her. He pulled her slowly to her feet and kissed her hard, crushing her mouth under his, hands wrapping around to support her, holding her to him as his mouth explored hers.

The sensation on my breast drew my attention, and I looked down. Mistress Marika had taken a rose from the vase and was touching me with it across the distance between us. The rose petals tortured my nipple, already so hard it almost hurt. I tried to lean into it, but the pressure remained the same. I gasped and returned my hands to the arms of the chair.

Mistress Marika leaned closer and whispered in my ear. “Keep them there. Do not move your hands again.”

I groaned and gripped the wood tighter, desperate to touch myself, but unable to disobey. I continued to watch the scene unfolding in the room. Part of me wondered if Jasmine knew I was watching, not that it mattered at that moment.

Mistress Marika moved the rose from one nipple to the other. That she had done this before, I had no doubt. She moved it with such gentleness, it was almost like the shadow of a touch, but each place where the petal grazed my skin, I felt as if I’d been burned. My entire body spasmed in response, my need building beyond anything I’d ever known.

Zane, without breaking the kiss, turned around so Jasmine was between him and the bed. He pushed her back and she fell, screaming in either surprise or frustration. He was on her in a second, holding her wrists to her sides, moving his mouth to her neck and sucking. I could hear the rustle of their bodies beneath the sounds of their moans.

The rose had moved down my tummy, to the patch of neatly trimmed pubic hair that marked the path to my most intimate areas.

“What do you want?” asked Mistress Marika. The intensity of her voice was not to be denied.

“I want to come, Mistress.”

"I'm sure you do. Specifically, what do you want?"

"Touch me."

"Where?"

I had, in the past, used many names for my secret places, but suspected none of my euphemisms would satisfy her, a thing I desperately needed to do. "My pussy. Touch my pussy."

"I don't see a cat here."

I moaned with frustrated pleasure. "Please, touch me."

"Where?"

What did she want from me? "Please..."

"Please what?"

"Touch me."

"Where?"

I moaned again, so frustrated, I wanted to grab the rose from her hand and do it myself, but didn't dare. "Please, Mistress, tell me what to say."

"Your cunt, Sandy. Tell me you want me to touch your cunt."

The rose never stopped moving, never stopped teasing, never stopped building the tension within. "Please, Mistress, touch my...cunt." I had never used the word before and though I hated it, it gave me a thrill to say it in this situation.

"Louder."

"Touch my cunt."

"LOUDER!"

"MY CUNT!" I screamed it. If Jasmine or Zane could hear me, they didn't show it. I sort of doubted either could hear anything right now. Zane was sucking Jasmine's nipples, first one then the other, slowly, tantalizingly. Meanwhile, his hand, strong and certain, moved across the surface of her body, down toward her pussy...her cunt.

My juices were flowing at the thought of the word, a word I'd always hated. Admittedly, I'd never pictured a woman saying it, nor had I ever had the desire to do so myself. I said it again, because my need outweighed any inhibitions I might have once held.

"Please, Mistress, touch my cunt."

Mistress Marika moved the rose lower, touching my lips so lightly I wanted to scream. At the same time, Zane's hand reached down and brushed Jasmine's lips. We moaned as one. I wanted to move my hands so badly, but kept them clasped tightly. I writhed in the chair, thrusting against the rose petal...the most supremely erotic and unsatisfying moment of my life. I needed more pressure and was unable to get it. I felt tears of frustration slide down my face.

"Please, Mistress, harder."

"How wet is your cunt, Sandy?"

"So wet, Mistress."

"How bad do you want it?"

"So...so bad," I gasped.

"Beg me to rub your cunt."

"Please Mistress, I beg you. Rub my cunt."

She laughed. "Beg harder."

"Oh God! Please, please, *touch my cunt! I beg it!*"

"Take your hands from the chair and spread your lips for me. Spread them good, girl."

It took me a second to convince my hands to react, as if my brain were so focused on sexual pleasure, everything else took more effort. Panting heavily, I spread my lips for a woman for the first time in my life, exposing myself completely. She could see every inch of me, and I didn't care. I cared only about release.

In the next room, Zane's mouth was on the move again, working lower and lower, closer and closer to Jasmine's cunt. There was a freedom in the word I never expected, and I kept repeating it over and over again in my mind. *Touch my cunt, Mistress. Touch it good, please, PLEASE touch my cunt.*

The rose moved up, over my clit and back down again, spreading the juices from my parted lips to my clit. Again and again it dipped down, only to return to my aching, swollen clit. My moans grew in volume, my need taking me places I'd never been before.

Zane moved his head down between her legs. Fortunately, they were lying across the bed, and I had a perfect view. As Mistress Marika continued dancing the rose across my clit, I imagined Zane's tongue, working up and down, in and out. I could almost see him kneeling there, working on my clit, my cunt, licking it so good I wanted to die. Then he raised his head and it wasn't Zane at all, but Nicco.

My entire body spasmed at the thought. *Oh God, Nicco, lick me, suck me, make me come for you. Drink my juices, Nicco, and make me yours.*

I had told myself I didn't want to think this way about him, but there was no denying my feelings, not now, perhaps not ever. I wanted him so bad, I'd have done anything at that moment to feel his hands on my body. *Nicco, Nicco, Nicco, lick my cunt. Lap it, please. Eat me so good, oh God, it feels so good, take me, take all of me, make me come, make me yours...*

My breath came faster and faster as the rose flicked harder, but it was Nicco's tongue that took me, his hands that held my lips apart, his body that lay spread out before me. I cried out as the first waves of orgasm rocked me. I screamed, bucked my hips, felt juices gushing. I never wanted it to stop. *Oh God, Nicco, please, don't stop, don't ever stop.*

Jasmine was coming too, clutching Zane's head as he had clutched hers, pulling him deeper into her as if there was nothing that mattered but the feel of his tongue between her parted thighs. He licked and sucked hard, harder,

taking her, making her scream even as I had screamed. Her entire body convulsed against him for what seemed like minutes, but his tongue never stopped moving.

Watching Jasmine's orgasm made me come again, more intensely this time. I moaned loudly, allowing the waves of pleasure to control my body, rock me, drive me mad until I ceased to exist, and there was nothing left but pure sensation.

Then Zane climbed on top of her and positioned his cock right at the entrance of her waiting cunt, teasing it. I could hear her whimper his name, crying with a need I knew all too well. As he drove his cock into her, I felt it myself and realized Mistress Marika had mirrored the act with two fingers, driving them so deep inside, I nearly came again. I had never had a woman touch me so, but was far too weak with desire to protest.

Her fingers moved relentlessly, but I didn't care, because it was Nicco—riding me, fucking me, raping me, all the while my body helpless to do anything but respond exactly as he demanded.

"Oh God, please, Mistress, don't stop. Don't ever stop. I beg you."

I had said Mistress, but it was Nicco's cock inside me, driving me to the point of no return. Again my cum was building in a way I'd never before experienced. I cried, laughed, moaned, fought and found myself unable to do anything but what was required of me. If this was slavery, I could find a way to live with it.

Part of my mind wanted to rebel against my feelings of submission, but that would have to come later, after my own needs were finally satisfied. Jasmine started to come again, but it wasn't her orgasm that pushed me over the edge this time—it was Zane's. He thrust harder and faster, his urgency more and more obvious with each thrust. The strain on his face, the muscles bulging in his back and neck, the sheen of sweat that seemed to cover his body told of his own struggle to hold back until the very last second...a battle he soon lost.

Then he was coming, shooting his hot cum inside her. Jasmine came again, as did I, thrusting harder and harder against the fingers inside me, wanting to die and live forever at the same time as each wave crashed down upon me harder than the one before. And then it was over and I collapsed on the seat, completely spent.

In the room, Zane lay atop Jasmine, who sobbed gently, arms wrapped around him as if she never wanted to let him go—and knew she wouldn't be given a choice. As much as I hated her, I felt for her, but there was nothing I could do about it.

I somehow dozed right there in the chair. When I opened my eyes, I was alone in the room, and both Zane and Jasmine were sound asleep.



## Chapter Nine

As soon as I rejoined the land of the living, I was put to doing chores. I wasn't in the least bit surprised. It didn't matter that I was exhausted from my ordeal, any more than it would matter to a Talean master. Work had to be done, even when you could barely move. Yet strangely, my initial fatigue fell away and left me feeling energetic. I was in such a good mood, I began to whistle. I had always thought the seven dwarves were unrealistic...no one whistled while they worked. Once again, I was proven wrong.

Dinnertime came and went, and neither Mistress Marika nor Jasmine brought up Zane or what had happened. I wondered why. I certainly wanted to talk about them. I didn't though. I pushed them out of my mind until after lights out when I could finally be alone with my jumbled emotions.

I had allowed a woman to touch me, not only allowed, but actually begged for it. I had never thought I could do anything like that, but apparently, there were all sorts of things about me I hadn't suspected.

Jasmine lay in her bed, exhausted from her experience with Zane. I had heard her crying earlier, but didn't speak. I had nothing to say to Jasmine that wouldn't make it worse. In truth, I had no reason to want to help her. Still, curiosity overcame resolve and I asked her the one question that had been on my mind all day.

"Was that your Master, Jasmine?"

"What? No, of course not."

This surprised me. "Who was he?"

"His name is Zane."

"I know his name, I mean who is he in relation to you."

“No one. I just met him tonight.”

The thought horrified me. “He was a stranger?”

“Yes, of course.”

“But you called him Master.”

“It’s part of the training, Sandy. Sir is pretty formal for someone you’re about to fuck, don’t you think?”

“But how do you perform with a stranger? Weren’t you scared?”

She sat up and looked at me. “Believe me, you get used to it. After a while, any kind of sexual attention from any man is the greatest thing in the world. That’s how we’re trained and that’s what we become. You’ll see. It won’t be long before you’re given to a stranger to teach you just how far you’ll go to be satisfied.”

“No.” I wanted to deny it. I wanted to deny it with all my being, but I couldn’t, not after the events of the day.

When I finally did get to sleep, I kept waking up. If I didn’t get out of here soon, by the time I was auctioned off, I’d be more than just playing the role of slave.

The next day, I spoke to Mistress Marika about it. She had been very pleased with my performance and told me so. As much as I hated to admit it, I felt good that I’d pleased her. More and more, I was responding exactly as a slave responds.

“Mistress, may I ask a question?”

“Of course, Sandy.”

“Will I be...I mean...will a man...”

“No, Sandy, you won’t.”

Relief filled me, but also surprise. “Why?”

“You don’t have to sound so disappointed.”

I giggled, but stopped when she continued speaking.

“Because you’ve never been dominated by a man and that’s worth big bucks to me on the block. If you’re unbroken, you’re valuable. That’s why I’m being so careful with your training.”

“I see.” I felt a hint of anger stir within. She wasn’t protecting me, just her investment. I felt rebellious for the first time in recent history. I had been told I would feel that way, but this was the first time it happened.

There was nothing I could do about it, so forced myself to calm down and waited to hear what Mistress Marika would say next.

“You have a background in both accounting and computers, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mistress.”

“Come with me.”

I followed her into the office and, following her instructions, sat on the chair on the far side of the desk. It was odd to sit in Mistress’s chair, but I didn’t think I’d have trouble getting used to it.

“I have a few things that need to be done, paperwork, backups, that sort of thing. I thought you might like to help out. I have a list of instructions on the desktop. Follow them as best you can.”

Her laptop was already open on the desk. I checked the instruction file while she was still there, but didn’t see any problems. The instructions were clear, and I was computer literate enough to find my way around most systems.

I didn’t wait for Mistress Marika to leave, but started following the instructions immediately. When I again looked up, she was gone and had closed the door behind her. I set to work. About twenty minutes later, there was a knock.

“Come in.”

Jasmine entered, dragging the vacuum cleaner behind her. The look she gave me made me apprehensive, yet happy at the same time. Here was

something I could do for Mistress that Jasmine couldn't. It gave me an edge, and Jasmine knew it.

Jasmine looked like she was about to say something, but didn't. Not until she turned to close the door. I don't know what reflex made me think of it, but, before she turned back, I flicked the switch on the intercom, hoping that whatever she said would be broadcast someplace where Mistress Marika could hear it.

"I suppose you think you're pretty clever, bitch."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Ma'am. You fucking call me ma'am, do you understand?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. I suppose you think your new job will get you special privileges. Just remember, I can set you up and take you down any time."

"Like you did with the pastry."

"Something like that."

"You're a right bitch, Jasmine."

"So? What are you going to do about it, little girl?"

"I'm not going to do anything."

The door burst open, and Mistress Marika was there. "But *I* will. How *dare* you insist another slave refer to you as ma'am. What makes you think you're worthy of that title?"

"I'm sorry, Mistress. It was Sandy. She tricked me into this."

"I'm sure she did. And with your superior experience you fell for it, so what does that say about you?"

She fell to her knees and bowed her head. "Please, please, Mistress, I'm sorry. Don't punish me, Mistress."

"Oh don't worry. I won't punish you."

"Oh thank you, thank you, Mistress."

She leaned down and actually kissed Mistress Marika's foot. "Thank you, Mistress!"

"Sandy will punish you."

Her head shot up and fear lit her eyes. I wanted to laugh, but remembered all too well the pain of punishment.

"No, Mistress, please, anything, anything but that!"

"Anything?"

"Yes, Mistress, anything."

"You would accept a judgment of mine, rather than allow Sandy to punish you?"

"Yes, Mistress, anything!" The fear was so obviously real, I was stunned. What did she think I would do to her? As much as I couldn't stand her, I doubted I would be very effective at administering punishment.

"Very well, pick up the phone."

"Mistress?"

"I don't want to tell you again. *Phone!*"

Jasmine leapt to her feet and ran to the phone.

"Dial your Master's number."

"Please Mistress, not that, anything but that!"

"You've already made your choice, Jasmine. How many favors do you want? Dial his number, *Now!*"

Jasmine's fingers fumbled several times before she got the number right. Tears streamed down her face. She went to hand the phone over, but Mistress Marika shook her head.

"No. You're going to talk to him."

"What should I tell him? Oh...greetings, Master."

"Tell him you've failed your training, and he should come and get you."

Panic lit her eyes, but she dared not disobey. "Master, I'm sorry. I failed my training. Mistress Marika said to come get me."

I could, of course, only hear her side of the conversation.

"No, Master, please. I'll be good. Please don't. Master, please. Oh God!"

She hung up the phone.

"When is he coming?" asked Mistress Marika.

"He said he's not, you're to do with me as you would."

"I have no use for a slave, Jasmine. Particularly not a piece of shit like you."

Jasmine collapsed on the floor in tears. In spite of myself, I felt so bad for her, so bad for bringing her to this, I started crying myself.

"Please, Mistress, let me stay. I'll be good!"

Mistress Marika shook her head. I had never seen a face that hard before. For the very first time, I was scared of her.

"You've run out of chances, Jasmine. No one wants a vain, selfish, disobedient slave. I'll just have to put you out."

"But where will I go?"

"You should have thought of that before you acted the way you did. It's not my problem." Mistress Marika looked at me. "Stop crying, Sandy. This mess is of Jasmine's making, not yours."

"Yes, Mistress." I sniffed a few more times, but managed to hold back tears.

"Please, Mistress, I don't know how to live out there. I've never had to."

"You should have thought of that, too."

"Please, Mistress, punish me, let Sandy punish me. Don't throw me out."

Again she shook her head. To my surprise, I spoke. "Please, Mistress, I beg you, give her one more chance."

Jasmine turned to me, surprised. Her tears returned full force. Mistress Marika didn't answer. When she did, her voice was like the crack of a whip. "*Jasmine. Room, now!*"

Jasmine was up and gone before I even realized she was moving. When she was out of earshot, Mistress Marika turned to me. "Why, Sandy? Give me one good reason why you would help Jasmine."

"I'm sorry, Mistress. Don't be mad at me. Please."

"I'm not mad, just tell me why."

"She doesn't know any better. Let me work with her. If she fails again, you can always kick her out. If not, if you can train her, she could bring you a nice profit."

Mistress Marika raised an eyebrow, but nodded. "Very well, but it will be made clear to her that if you even whisper a complaint about her, she's out."

"Thank you, Mistress."

"My pleasure. Of course, I probably won't have to tell her, unless you've turned off the intercom."

I winced and switched it off. "I'm sorry, Mistress."

"Don't be sorry. That was very clever of you. You're going to make a fine slave."

"You know why I'm doing this."

Her eyes sparkled. "Of course I do."

She didn't say anything else, and I was too scared to ask her what she meant.

From the bedroom window I watched the garden. What had I seen that night? Had I been hallucinating? Did being alone with Jasmine after Leila and Lonnie left, cause me undue stress? I didn't think so, yet there was only one other possible explanation for what had happened, and I wasn't ready to accept it. It's one thing to believe a dream to be a true vision—another entirely to believe in ghosts.

Yet as much as I couldn't believe, I often found myself at the windowsill, staring at the fairy-lit garden, hoping or not to see the image of my sister one more time. I couldn't say which frightened me more.

I heard a sound behind me and turned. Jasmine had entered and was staring at me. I turned back to the window. I had nothing to say to her. She

walked to the window and looked out into the night, though I'm sure the ghosts she saw were of a different nature.

When she spoke, her voice was far away—or I was. “I don’t understand.”

I studied her. “What don’t you understand?”

“After the way I treated you...why stick your neck out for me?”

*Why indeed?* “I don’t know.”

“You can’t know what it’s like.”

“What’s what like?”

Her voice trembled as she confided in me. As her story unfolded, I wondered if she’d ever shared it with another soul.

“When I was young, a teenager, I was purchased for the first time. Before then, I’d lived with my mother. The man who owned her was my biological father, but that was as far as it went. I was a commodity, nothing more. It’s not often children are sold, but teenagers, that’s another matter. Almost from the time you start menstruating you’re fair game, at least according to some.

“I was sold into a house for use as a kettle girl, nothing more. A house slave. Which didn’t mean the Master couldn’t use me if he wanted to.”

“He raped you?”

“No, he never did. He wasn’t a bad man. It was Tama the head slave who feared me. She was getting on in years, and she loved our Master. I didn’t, but it didn’t matter. I was new meat. Young, fresh. She couldn’t see the plain truth of the matter. Master loved her. I could see it in his eyes, but she was never sure. She was so insecure. She’d take any opportunity to reprimand or even punish me. Since she was in charge of slave discipline, she did so often. As I grew older and started to blossom, she hated me more and more.”

I didn’t have to see her face to feel her pain. It was so evident in her voice, I wanted to crawl away and hide rather than hear the rest of the story. Still, I was responsible for her and needed to know why I had done what I did.



“It got to the point where she was beating me daily. She almost never left a mark. The Master trusted her and let her run the house. I tried to tell him what was going on, but he took her word over mine. The night I accused her, she beat me badly, but I was too scared to go before the Master again.

“Afterwards, it wasn’t so bad. She didn’t really bother with me. The pain from that beating was worth having a couple of weeks without harassment, but I couldn’t know what she really had planned for me.

“One night, I was lying on my mat in the kitchen when the Master of the house came for me. He grabbed my arm and jerked me to my feet. I had been sound asleep. I was scared and disoriented. I had no idea what was going on, but it was clear from the expression on his face he was horribly angry. He kept yelling, but I didn’t understand. I didn’t know what he was yelling for. I tried to tell him, but he struck me, grabbed me by the hair and dragged me into the hallway. Tama had her own room and he took me there. She was sitting on a chair. She’d been badly beaten. As soon as she saw me, she got this terrified look in her eyes and tried to flee. I knew she was faking. She’d either hurt herself or got one of the others to do it for her. Any of them would have gladly done her the favor. I’d have done it myself, if she’d approached me.”

I felt a knot in the pit of my stomach. “What happened?”

“She told our Master I’d gone berserk and tried to kill her. He placed an iron collar around my neck and chained me to a ring set in the floor of the garage. The chain was short. I couldn’t straighten up. I was given no food or water that day. No blanket. I had to relieve myself right there on the floor. The concrete was cold, but I had to lie on it. I stayed there until someone came to take me. I didn’t even find out I’d been sold until after I arrived at my new home.

“My new Master was a monster. He’d use me two, three times a day, violently, then expect me to do my chores. Of course, I had no choice.”

“Of course.”

"I decided I'd never let anyone do that to me again. I had to protect myself. Can you understand that?"

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak.

"You're the first slave to ever do anything for me. I'm sorry, Sandy. I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"It's okay. It wasn't that bad." And I was right, compared to what she'd been through, it wasn't.

Jasmine cried herself to sleep. I listened to her the whole time and continued to listen long after her breathing grew steady. Several times, she moaned or cried out. I didn't envy her her dreams.

As for myself, I didn't sleep at all. I just lay there, hearing Jasmine's story over and over, wondering if one day I would be telling a similar story to a new slave.

About two weeks after the day I rescued Jasmine from freedom, Mistress Marika called me to her office. She motioned for me to close the door and sit, which I did.

"Hello, Mistress."

"You've done well, Sandy. Better than I expected you to."

"Thank you, Mistress." I beamed at the praise.

"You're sure you've had no practice with this slave thing?"

"Yes, Mistress."

She chuckled. "Well, I'm certifying you. Your training is officially over."

I felt a moment of supreme panic. There was no way I was ready. "Mistress?"

"You'll be collected this afternoon and taken to Australia to prepare you for the auction. I expect I'll make a pretty penny on you."

I smiled. "Thank you, Mistress."

“Just remember, these men are good men, but like all men, they can be dangerous. If you have to get out of there, do it before the auction. Once someone pays for you, you’re not likely to be going anywhere.”

“But I thought you said I had to serve...”

“And I believe you will. But if you decide you can’t, for whatever reason, don’t wait till the auction to flee.”

“Yes, Mistress...thank you.”

“You’re quite welcome, Sandy. You’d better shower and get ready. Nicco will be picking you up by three.”

“Nicco!” My heart skipped.

“Yes. He’s in charge of the Australian auction. I thought you knew.”

“No, Mistress, he never told me.”

“Well, until you’re sold, you’re to refer to him as Master.”

My eyes widened. She couldn’t be telling me what I thought she was. “Mistress, can he do...whatever he wants with me?”

“Not precisely, no. There is still the matter of you being unbroken. I’ll get more for that, and since he gets a percentage, I doubt he’ll be all that eager to bed you.”

I felt relieved and bereft at the same time.

“Get going, girl, you want to look nice for Nicco, don’t you?”

“Yes, Mistress!”

As I left that office for the last time, I realized she was correct. I did indeed want to look nice for Nicco.

When I got out of the shower, I found Jasmine waiting for me in the bedroom.

“I can’t believe you’re leaving,” she said as soon as I walked through the door. Mistress Marika must have told her.

“I can’t either. You’re not going?”

“Oh, hon, of course not. This is the Australian auction...the big one. I’m not the kind of quality merchandise they’re looking for. In a few weeks, I’ll probably be sold in Colorado.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. You deserve to be in that auction...I don’t. I wanted to thank you.”

“You don’t have to...”

She cut me off. “I was horrible to you, and you stuck up for me. I won’t forget that.”

“Don’t worry about it. Just do me one favor.”

“Anything.” She sounded sincere.

“Be nice to any new girls who come here. The training is hard enough, without having to deal with...you know what I mean.”

She looked at me, as if in awe. “You are truly a good person.”

“I don’t know about that, but I try.”

She ran to me and hugged me tight. I returned the gesture. At that moment, though it really made no sense, I felt as if I was once again losing a sister.

“You take care of yourself,” she said.

“And you. Just remember, you can do it if you want to. I believe in you.”

I’ll never forget the gratitude in her eyes. We hugged for a long time, but didn’t actually say goodbye. I felt as if a chapter of my life was closing.

If only I could forget the story she’d shared with me that night in the darkness...

The knock came at precisely three. Jasmine, naked, answered the door, greeted Nicco and retreated.

He was dressed in full-length khakis with a matching tan, button-down shirt. He removed a pair of expensive Raybans as soon as he entered and placed them in his shirt pocket.

I was dressed in jeans and a T-shirt. I had initially thought to dress comfortably for the long flight, but instead wore the pair of jeans that most flattered me, though they were the least comfortable. I could no longer tell myself I didn't care for Nicco, though I knew how ridiculous it was.

I knelt and greeted him as soon as he entered the room. He smiled warmly at me, then turned his attention to Mistress Marika.

What was beneath that confident smile and intense gaze? Was he truly the man I hoped he was, or was I deluding myself? I couldn't rule out either possibility, any more than I could rule out the possibility that he was somehow responsible for my sister's death. I didn't want to believe it, but knew I had to keep an open mind. Each assumption I made from this point on could cost me my life.

For the umpteenth time, I tried to reconcile everything I knew about Talean men with what I knew about Nicco. Was he a monster in the guise of a prince? I had to be careful—so very careful. He was in charge of the auction where Jaycee was murdered and that made him a suspect. My attraction to him was probably more dangerous than anything else at this stage of the game. Walking into the lion's den was bad enough—I didn't have to lie down and expose my throat.

Yet as soon as he entered, whatever resolve I'd had was gone. I didn't even send out a search party for it. My mind returned to the fantasy I'd had about him, and I blushed from head to toe. He couldn't have helped noticing, but was talking to Mistress Marika, not me. Fortunately, I had a passport already (it was one of the questions on the interview I'd filled out), so there had been no problem getting a ticket, which had been done without my knowledge. I was

like a pet or something. The free people made arrangements, and I followed blindly along. I hoped I'd be in a seat, instead of a kennel.

Eventually he finished his business with Mistress Marika and motioned for me to follow. A silver Rover Discovery was parked outside. I wondered, briefly, what had happened to the vintage Chevy I'd seen parked outside the Bondage Shoppe, but was too flustered to ask.

Naturally I had no luggage to speak of, just a duffle bag Mistress Marika had given me to throw a few things into. I was told I wouldn't need clothes once I got to where I was going.

Strangely, I was excited rather than scared. Nicco looked like a million bucks and the car he drove looked like it might have cost that much.

As soon as we were on our way, he addressed me. "So, how did you like your training?"

"I loved it, Master." It wasn't all that far from the truth.

"Marika has some very nice things to say about you."

I blushed. "My skills are a testament to her ability to teach. She's a remarkable woman."

He smiled, though he didn't take his eyes from the road. "I would tend to agree."

I wanted to be jealous, but couldn't—not of Mistress Marika. She had been good to me. I wouldn't soon forget it.

How strange it seemed to be leaving, going to Australia of all places. Part of me had always wanted to go, but I never would have taken a flight that long. Yet here I was on the way to the airport, sitting beside one of the hottest guys I'd ever known, a man I was to call Master, at least for the time being. How I wished it was Nicco who would be purchasing me at the auction, but of course, that was silly. If he ran the auction, he wouldn't likely bid on me. At the thought, I felt a wave of sadness threaten to engulf me and fought it off. I had to keep reminding myself how dangerous he could be.

"I understand you're quite a singer."

"If you say so, Master."

"I don't know. I've never heard you sing. Perhaps you'd like to demonstrate and let me make up my mind."

*Sing? For Nicco. Oh God no!* "What would Master like to hear?"

"Anything you like. I just want to hear you sing."

"Yes, Master."

My mind raced. I wanted it to be the perfect song, but nothing came to mind. I would be damned if I were going to sing "Comedy Tonight" again. Then, the moment struck me and I had my song. I had sung it since childhood, and it fit the situation well enough to please me, and hopefully Nicco as well.

When I started, he burst out laughing and joined in himself when I got to the chorus. It was true, literally. I *was* leaving on a jet plane and didn't know when I'd be back again. We sang all the way to the airport. I could hardly remember a time when I'd been happier.

It was a long drive. I had thought we'd be leaving from Fort Lauderdale or Miami, but as it turned out, we'd be flying that night out of Orlando. Our flight would take us non-stop to Los Angeles, where we'd change for a Qantas flight to Melbourne. Once there, we'd have to pass through customs, after which we'd board a plane for our final destination—Tasmania.

The thought of traveling to such a remote location literally numbed my mind. It was completely inconceivable I could make such a trip, much less not pack for it. I was sure Jaycee had taken it in stride, but I was so excited I could barely contain myself.

Nicco's company was wonderful, no matter how much I cautioned myself about my feelings. He was funny, clever and good-natured. I don't know many women who would have said no to Nicco. I found myself wondering if he'd ever been with Jaycee, but knew better than to ask. I hadn't come this far to give myself away.

Nicco's car turned out to be a rental, though an expensive one to be sure. After he dropped it off, we made our way to the terminal building. We were over an hour early for the flight, so Nicco bought me dinner. It wasn't like being on a date, of course. If he didn't pay for my meals, I wouldn't eat. The very thought made me feel completely out of control for the first time in my life.

When I'd been at Marika's house, I still had credit cards and a checkbook in my purse in her safe. Only now did I realize I'd left them behind and felt a moment of panic. How could I be so stupid? Not that I didn't trust her, but at the very least, I should have cancelled the cards. I wasn't going to bring it up, but my growing panic wouldn't allow me to ignore it.

"I just realized something, Master."

"Yes, Sandy?"

"I don't have any ID or anything."

"I have all your personal belongings. Marika gave them to me just before we left. I have your purse, checkbook, credit cards, passport...everything. Of course, it's not really yours now, though you don't have to worry about anyone defrauding you by writing bad checks or anything. Believe me, the very last thing the Taleans want to do is call attention to themselves."

I started to nod, but froze. He spoke of the Taleans as if he were an outsider. He'd said "themselves", not "ourselves". Could it be possible? "Aren't you one of *them*?"

He laughed. "Oh you're sharp. This *will* be a fun trip. Well, I am, and I'm not. I do believe some of their tenets, because they make sense to me. Yet I wouldn't say I'm fully part of their brotherhood. I guess you could say I'm a satellite. I'm my own man, though part of my personal philosophy is borrowed from them."

"I see." My heart began to race. If he weren't Talean, there was hope. Of course, since I would most likely be sold to someone else, that hope was in short supply.



“Hey, you’re not eating. You should, you know. Airline food is *not* exactly gourmet dining.”

I smiled to hide the urgency of my thoughts and took a forkful of fried shrimp. I almost ordered the garlic shrimp, but decided against ordering anything that might prevent Nicco from kissing me, as unlikely as that might have been. A girl can dream, can’t she?

An hour later, we were on a plane west, leaving behind the East coast and everything I’d ever thought of as home.

The five hour flight was the most comfortable I’d ever had, as we had first class tickets. That surprised me. Why would anyone buy a first class ticket for a slave? When I asked him about it, he smiled conspiratorially, leaned closer and whispered into my ear three words I’d never thought I’d hear from him: frequent flyer miles. Nicco definitely did a lot of traveling.

We both slept a bit, Nicco more than me. When we were awake at the same time, we chatted amiably. It was hard to believe someone so nice could be involved in auctioning off women. By the time we landed, Nicco and I had established such an easy rapport, it would have been no hardship to stay with him forever. I had to keep reminding myself it couldn’t happen.

Los Angeles International Airport was large and confusing, but apparently Nicco knew his way around. We didn’t have much time to catch our connecting flight, but fortunately his bags had been checked through, so we didn’t have to worry about them. My duffle bag was small enough to carry on the plane.

While we waited for our international flight to arrive, I decided to use the time to get to know Nicco better.

“Master, you said you agreed with some of what the Taleans do. May I ask the particulars?”

He looked thoughtful. "It's not the philosophy I have so much trouble with, as the attitude. I've always seen the servitude of a woman as something to be respected and honored. I'm not certain most Taleans feel that way."

"A slave is property. Owned. If you buy a television, you own it as well. You might use it every night, but I doubt you'd respect or honor it."

Nicco laughed. "So you think of yourself as a television? How...interesting. Tell me, if you were a television, what channel would you most likely be on."

I realized he'd changed the subject, but had no choice but to answer. "Either a science channel or maybe movie classics. I'd have trouble choosing between the two."

I had thought he'd comment on my answer, but he fooled me by swapping back to the original topic. "The difference between a girl and a television is self-evident."

"Master?"

"Girls don't have antennae."

It was so not what I expected to hear, I couldn't help but laugh. "Sure we do. We just hide them better than televisions do."

He shook his head, but before he could reply, our flight was called and we stood and moved toward the gate.

By the time we'd boarded and found our seats, the conversation had been entirely forgotten.

On the second leg of the journey, we crossed the Pacific Ocean. The trip would last fifteen hours, during which I had Nicco all to myself. I was too excited to sleep, and he didn't seem tired either, so we talked the entire time. Looking back, I can't remember most of what was said, except for the one conversation that remains burned into my mind forever.

We'd already been talking for hours when it began.

"Master, how did you get involved with the Taleans in the first place?"

He didn't answer at first, and I was worried I'd put him off. We'd been having such a good time until then. When he did answer, his voice was laced with pain. I was sorry I'd brought it up.

"I got married too young. I suppose that's a common enough bit of stupidity, but the woman I married screwed me six ways till Sunday. She deserved to be horsewhipped, but instead got half of my savings, the house—and sole custody of my son. I could have fought it, but the truth was, I was too angry and bitter to be a good parent. I visited him for a time, till she upped and moved. I suppose I could have found them, but I'm not up for the chase. I wouldn't put my son through a custody battle in any event. I know my wife is good to him, no matter how she treated me, so why mix him up? Why uproot his life? How selfish could I possibly be to think of my own desires and needs rather than the needs of my child? If my son wants to get in touch with me, he'll find a way when he's old enough.

"Anyway, shortly after she moved away, I first read the Talean books and thought, this is more like it. Women are loyal. Men protect and take care of them. Sure it's old-fashioned...so what? At least no slave would risk fucking over her Master. Not if she knows what's good for her."

"You're still mad at your wife, huh?"

"No, not really. Not anymore. I can't say I've forgiven her, but I don't think about it. I was stupid, I've learned, end of story."

"So," I asked, trying to sound casual, "how many slaves do you own?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Ummmmm...that would be none."

"None? You don't have any slaves?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I'm waiting for the right one to come along."

"But why? Talean masters can have as many slaves as they want. There's no way you can convince me you can't afford one."

“I’m not interested in just any slave. I’m looking for the *right* slave. She’s out there, waiting for me somewhere. When I was young, I rushed into a relationship before I was ready. I paid dearly for that. I have no intention of repeating the mistake.”

I felt panic rising in me. Was it possible I could be the woman he’d been waiting for? I wanted it to be true and, at the same time, was terrified it might be. I tried to calm myself and made sure my voice was steady before I spoke again. “Master, what if she’s right in front of you, and you don’t see her for fear of making a mistake?”

He shook his head. “No. I’ll know her when she comes along. I’m sure of it.”

He seemed so certain, I was almost convinced. I had to keep reminding myself I had other work to do, and couldn’t afford to be the one he spoke of. Yet no matter how hard I tried to deny it, I knew there was only one thing that could prevent me from being the girl of his dreams.

There was still a chance he was responsible for Jaycee’s death.

In Melbourne, we passed through customs and caught a much smaller plane to Hobart, the capital of Tasmania. This final leg of the flight was only an hour, after which I’d be happy to never see another plane again. Actually, plane is a generous word for a vehicle that wasn’t much more than a shoe box with wings.

The man sitting in front of us was from Darwin and didn’t shut up for the entire flight. I understood about every fourth word he said, which led me to wonder anew just what I’d gotten into. I wondered if I’d have to take Australian as a second language course.

Nicco didn’t have an Australian accent since he’d been born in the States, though he worked at least part of the time in Tasmania. I had teased him about the length of his commute when I’d found out. He mentioned his commute wasn’t the only thing about him that was lengthy. I glanced at his crotch, until

I realized what I was doing, then looked away. The way he smiled made me want him right there. I'd heard of the mile high club, but had never understood how anyone could do such things—until now. Yet Nicco had been teasing, and I knew it wouldn't happen. It was probably for the best anyway.

Hobart Airport, in contrast to the three I'd seen on the trip thus far, was small enough to be a bus terminal. I had never seen an airport that small—had never even pictured one. There were no shops, no ticket counters, no separate gates, nothing but a big open space in which the carousel would have deposited my luggage had I had any. It was odd to think such places existed, though on some level I must have known about them. We didn't wait for Nicco's luggage either. When I asked about it, he told me it would be sent on by messenger.

Who was this man? Where did he get his money? I'd learned almost nothing about him on the flight, though we'd talked almost constantly. I hadn't asked anything personal, as I didn't want to seem nosy. Unfortunately, he didn't volunteer much, so I was left wondering.

I didn't think Nicco could be a murderer. It wasn't in him. Yet I'd seen him punch Em the very first night we'd met. That it was to protect me didn't matter. Nicco was capable of violence should the need arise, and the threat I saw in his eyes that night was unmistakable. Em, who seemed dangerous enough to my untrained eye, had been scared of him. I needed to be too, but couldn't find the emotion within. I was starting to trust Nicco, and that was a very bad thing indeed.

Nicco's car, this one wasn't a rental, surprised me. I'd expected something along the lines of a convertible sports car, rather than an SUV. When I commented, Nicco said the southwest of the state had some pretty rough roads, and no one in their right mind would own anything else. It wasn't long before I got to see exactly what he'd been talking about.

The drive to our final destination took almost three hours. I had never been much for long car trips, so being out in rural farmland and even areas of wilderness were a novelty. The landscape was beautiful, varying from lush green valleys, to rolling hills, to wooded areas filled with tall, slender gum trees. After the first hour of the trip, I started wondering why I hadn't driven upstate more often. Why did I wait so long to learn about the world around me? It seems many people in New York City suffer the same delusions. I was embarrassed I could count myself among them. It was just too easy to think of New York as the center of the world.

Nothing I saw during the trip prepared me for what awaited when we finally reached our destination. It was the tallest structure I'd seen since we'd set down in Hobart—a huge hotel, circular, thrusting into the air, with the words “The Tempest” written proudly across the entire third story. It was so out of place, I almost couldn't accept it as real. It was as if someone had cut off a piece of a major metropolis and transplanted it in the middle of the African Savannah. It was so incongruous, I could only stare.

Nicco chuckled at my reaction as he pulled up to the carport before the structure. I got out, took a step forward, then turned to look back at him, mouth agape, waiting for some sort of explanation.

“Welcome to The Tempest, your home for the time being.”

Finally, I found my voice. “Do you put all your slaves up in such luxurious accommodations?” I could barely catch my breath.

“Only if I happen to own the place.”

I shook my head. He couldn't be suggesting what I thought he was.

“Come. I want to show you something.”

“Yes, Master.” Admittedly, the words emerged as if from underwater. I was drowning in awe and wondered if I'd ever find my way back to shore again.

He took my hand and numbly, I allowed him to lead me around the back of the hotel to a cliff overlooking the sea.

From the moment I saw it, I knew that place, for at the base of the cliff, clearly visible from my aerial viewpoint, I found myself staring at the very place Jaycee had been murdered.

## Chapter Ten

I paled and lost my balance. Nicco caught me in his arms, offering more than just physical support.

“Are you all right?”

I nodded, transfixed by the sudden knowledge I had been right all along.

He must have mistaken my reaction for fatigue or fear of heights, for he guided me back to the hotel, sat me down in the lobby and told me to stay put. Not trusting myself to speak, I nodded and he was off, surrounded by a gaggle of employees who needed answers to questions too vital to wait until he’d taken off his jacket.

Being on my own suited me for I needed time to cope with what I’d seen. The beach was real, as I’d known it would be, yet I still felt the shock. A small part of me had been able to remain skeptical, but no more. I found myself in the very place I’d dreamt about, the same place my sister had drawn her last breath. It was real, and Nicco owned it. Horror spread through me as I realized he might actually be the murderer.

It was real. I turned the fact over again in my mind, tasted it. It wasn’t any more palatable than it had been when I’d stood atop the cliff. My sister Jaycee *had been* murdered. In all likelihood, I’d seen her ghost, and now was infiltrating a dangerous group of fanatics, who could take my freedom if I allowed it. I wanted to scream but couldn’t. I had to get a grip on myself. As hard as it was, I couldn’t let Nicco think anything had changed. I had to remain calm. I would have to call upon every acting lesson I’d ever taken.

With great effort, I set aside my feelings and got into character. I wasn’t Sandra Castilla, a New York City resident, only Sandy the slave. I owned



nothing, had no rights, no freedom. I did what I was told, because I wanted to be a good girl and wanted also to get a high price at the auction for my Mistress. The thought made me want to vomit.

I was so lost in myself, I didn't see her until she stood before me. To my surprise, she was naked. She was also blonde and voluptuous, though not petite in any way. She reminded me more of an athlete than a model, though her eyes were blue enough and her face pretty enough for the position.

"Hi, Sandy, I'm Kate."

"Hi, Kate."

"Master Bernard told me to expect you. Think of me as your big sister while you're here. I'll answer any questions you might have, as well as help further your studies."

"Studies?"

She giggled. "You don't think you know everything, do you?"

I blushed. "Of course not. It's just that I've only recently come from training."

"Yes, I know. Mistress Marika is a great trainer, but she's only one person. And a true slave never stops learning. I study very hard even though my Master purchased me more than a year ago."

"Master Bernard?"

"Yes."

"What's he like?"

"He's absolutely the best Master in the world. I adore him." If she were acting, she was far better at it than I. Her face radiated joy at the mere mention of his name.

"Well, it's nice to meet you, Kate."

"Nice to meet you too. I'm sure we'll be great friends. Come on, I'll show you to your room."

"Thank you."

I looked around for Nicco, but he wasn't anywhere in sight. "Kate, my Master told me to wait here. I can't leave."

She looked pleased. "Oh, you're good. I have to admit, I was testing you. I wanted to see what you'd do."

I frowned, but didn't say anything.

"Don't take it like that, hon. I wouldn't have told anyone, just would have set you straight. Believe me, I desire nothing more than to see you happy. And I'm sure you will be."

"How's that? How can you be sure?"

She looked surprised. "Because there's nothing better than finding your true Master. Nothing at all. Once you do, you'll be happier than you've ever been."

Nicco popped into my mind, again. He was really starting to piss me off. "How do you know the man who buys me will be my perfect Master?"

"He might not be, but if he's not, you won't be suitable and he'll sell you on. Eventually, you will meet your perfect Master as I have met mine."

"But what if Master Bernard decides to sell you?"

"Why would he? No one will ever love him more than I. I'd do anything for him. Anything." Her eyes shone with the light of fanaticism. How could anyone so give themselves to another?

"Yes, I'm sure." I didn't know what else to say.

Her mind had wandered but returned now, and settled on her chores. "I'll be back, Sandy. You wait here."

"I will, unless my Master instructs me otherwise."

She favored me with a broad grin most horses couldn't compete with and walked quickly from the area. My eyes followed until she turned a corner and was lost to sight.

Only then did I notice the lobby. It could have been any five-star hotel in New York City, from huge fountain opposite the revolving glass doors, to the

long, mahogany counter, behind which stood a naked woman. I shook my head at the strangeness of the image, and let it go, continuing my visual exploration. Overly ornate columns supported the ceiling. A piano bar, separated from the lobby proper by a glass divider, took up most of the right wall. A sign just to the left indicated the way to the restaurant. I looked down, realizing for the first time I stood on a black marble floor. I sank back into the plush leather chair I'd vacated. Nicco owned this place? It was hard to believe.

I was still gawking when Kate returned. Nicco followed. He smiled when he saw me. "I believe you're a bit overdressed."

"Yes, Master. Shall I remove my clothes?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Master."

I performed as I had been trained to. I still thought I couldn't hold a candle to Jasmine, but did the best I could. Both Nicco and Kate watched as I pulled my T-shirt over my head. Unfortunately, there is no way to do that gracefully, but I tried. I started swaying as if to invisible music. I knew dancing was one of my strong points, and I'd use it. I took my time unhooking my bra, then slowly let it fall to the floor. Other people were about as well, but I had eyes only for Nicco. It was as if some alien entity had possessed my mind. I felt brazen, free, totally sexual, and I wanted him to want me as much as I wanted him. I had never been like this before, and wondered how that change had occurred in so short a time.

Nicco's face remained completely impassive. His eyes followed my every move. What was he thinking? Did he desire me? Was he trying to guess how much I'd make him at the auction? It was possible, even likely, but I couldn't be angry at him for it. That was Nicco. There was no pretense, at least, I didn't think so. What you saw, you got—you certainly couldn't complain if you didn't like it.

I slid my jeans down around my calves, still moving rhythmically. I put everything I had into that moment and felt myself grow excited. I was, on some level, aware Kate was watching too, but she didn't enter my thinking. All that existed in the world was Nicco, myself and the dance, the only way I could express how I felt about him.

When a film of sweat appeared on his forehead, I knew I was having the desired effect. If anything, I moved slower, more deliberately, fueled by the knowledge I could turn him on. If only I could end up with Nicco, if only...

I felt anger at my own stupidity, and it came out in my dance. I whirled suddenly, jumped into the air and removed my jeans before I'd landed. Nicco's eyes widened, and I danced my anger for him, defiantly daring him to use me, as I knew he wanted to. I wanted him to feel as I did, just so he would understand what he was putting me through.

I could see the maneuver had the desired effect by looking at the front of his khakis. I didn't stare at his hardness, though I longed too. This was my moment, my dance, my chance to seduce him without his consent. It was freeing, invigorating, dangerous, all words I'd never before associated with myself. The effect it had on Nicco made it so hot I could barely contain myself. I could tell I was flushed with excitement. I knew if I touched myself, I'd be wet. I wanted to, started to, slid my hands down my body, over my bare breasts, pausing briefly to pinch my nipples before continuing, hooking my thumbs into the waistband of my black silk panties. I repeated my earlier maneuver, and removed them airborne, happy I'd spent time practicing that back in Florida.

I was totally naked, but the idea of stopping never crossed my mind. I spun wildly, wishing I'd thought to take the rubber band from my hair. I wasn't about to do it at this point. I was lost in the moment, enjoying the freedom of movement in a way I'd never enjoyed before. Even Nicco was gone now, except in my mind's eye. This was my private dance for him, an act of both

submission and defiance. If he were going to take my will, he wouldn't take it without a fight.

I whirled faster and faster, moving to an increasing tempo that existed only in my mind. I could feel my ponytail slap against my shoulders each time I stopped or spun suddenly. Then, I dropped to my knees before him, panting, aching, longing for something I'd probably never have. I looked up at him, met his eyes from my position at his feet. For the first time, his expression held something that resembled interest. I felt vindicated.

"Well done." The only two words he said, but he said them in a voice that told me his battle for control was not yet over.

"Thank you, Master."

I took a moment to glance at Kate and the approval in her eyes, a thing I didn't expect to find there, made me feel even better.

"Go with Kate," said Nicco. "She'll show you around."

"Yes, Master."

I rose arrogantly, turned to consider the girl, as if dismissing the man. It was a calculated thing, and perhaps dangerous as well, but I was tired of wanting someone who didn't want me back.

I was certain Nicco wouldn't soon forget my performance.

I learned a lot during that tour. For ten months a year, The Tempest operated as a normal hotel, but never booked reservations for three weeks before or one week after the biannual auction, giving Nicco the opportunity to parade us around completely nude for the benefit of the rich Taleans who traveled here to bid on us.

I met Master Bernard that same day, and he seemed to me everything Nicco was not. He was a large man, but he didn't seem to be in great physical shape. He was older than Nicco, slightly balding and had gray in his untrimmed beard. He might be a great guy, but my first impression was not positive. He

looked to me like a hillbilly rather than a Talean. Yet I could tell from the way Kate acted in front of him, he was the center of her world. I wondered if I envied her that.

There was something about the man that was off, though I couldn't put my finger on what it was. He was certainly less relaxed than Nicco, but there was something more. He seemed almost too wary, too calculating in the way he looked at me. It wasn't Jorge's direct scrutiny, but more like a wolf sizing up a sheep. I was immediately uncomfortable and couldn't wait to get out of there.

I also got to see the beach, a place I would have preferred to avoid. I was afraid seeing the place Jaycee died would bring back the dreaded nightmare.

A cable car arrangement ran from the cliff top to the sands below. I've never been thrilled with heights and the fact the cars were open rather than enclosed made me more than a little nervous. The view on the way down was one of the attractions that drew tourists to The Tempest, or so I assumed. I couldn't tell with my eyes closed.

Somehow, I survived the six-minute trip to the bottom, though I didn't think I would. I was happy to step onto the sand, even if it were stained with my sister's blood.

When I got to the bottom, I noticed a beachside bar with a man standing behind it looking rather bored. He was certainly not the image of a Talean I had come to expect. He was short and nice-looking in a boyish sort of way. He wore his long brown hair in a ponytail like mine. His face was clean-shaven. Actually, he looked like he was too young to grow a beard, though on further consideration, I couldn't figure out how old he was. His brown eyes were nervous, but his smile was brilliant and lit up as soon as we approached.

"G'day, Katie," he laughed. "Who's ya friend?"

He was the first Talean who hadn't ogled since I'd arrived.

"This is Sandy. Sandy, meet Ted, our beachside bartender."

"Hi, Ted."

“Hiya, hon. How ya goin’? Wanna drink?”

I shook my head. “Thanks anyway.”

“No worries, mate. I’m just bored, ’cos it’s always slow in March. Oh well. So howya girls doin’?”

“Just fine,” said Kate. “I’m showing Sandy around. She just got in earlier.”

“Mind the water. Thought I’d seen a shark earlier.”

“We will.”

She walked away down the beach, and I followed, waiting until we were out of earshot to speak again. “Don’t tell me he’s Talean.”

“He’s not. He’s a local. Owns a shack up that way, past the promontory. He’s been here for a while. When Nicco bought the hotel, Ted approached him for a job, and thus our beachside bar was born.”

“But if he’s not Talean...”

“Nicco and Ted have an understanding. Ted gets to stay on the beach and Nicco lets him use the hotel facilities. Guess you could call it a symbiotic relationship.”

“So what’s Ted like?”

She laughed. “Harmless. He’s a nice enough guy, but it’s hard to see him as a man with all the testosterone at the top of the cliff. He’s friendly with most of the girls. A lot of them confide in Ted, *because* he’s not Talean.”

Was it possible Ted knew something about my sister’s disappearance? He did work on the beach, after all. Perhaps he’d seen or heard something. Maybe he was even responsible. I couldn’t take anything for granted from here on in.

“Come on, let’s get back.” Kate was already walking toward the cable car.

“So soon?”

“I think so. Dinner will be ready, and I’m sure you’ll want to shower first.”

Reluctantly, I followed her back to the cable car, taking care to note how she controlled it. It was information I might need before long.

I met two more masters at dinner that night. Both were good looking enough, though one was quite young, in his mid-twenties, and the other was over fifty. The Taleans certainly were a diverse group.

I learned all the masters at dinner, including Nicco, lived at the hotel year round, except when they were traveling. Each had some area of expertise. Nicco was management and recruitment. Bernard handled all the accounting and was the auctioneer as well.

The youngest master, Samual, had short, sandy hair and was built like a model. He had a thin mustache, but no beard. From what I could tell, he ran the hotel while Nicco was away.

The older man seemed to be the most powerful of all of them, being one of the highest-ranking Taleans on the planet. I hadn't realized they were so organized until that moment. His name was Master Tane and he was genial, but also frightening, for even the other masters deferred to him and treated him with the utmost respect. What if he had been the one to kill Jaycee? What could I do about it? With all these people around, how would I ever find out who was responsible?

Master Tane had two slaves, and Master Samual one, though none were present at dinner. Only Kate and I were there. At least I didn't have to include women in my suspect list. It was definitely a man who had killed Jaycee.

The dinner conversation was casual for the first half of the meal. I was glad I didn't have to kneel beside the table. In fact, I was stunned we'd been allowed to sit at the table with the masters at all. I had read many masters don't allow it. I made a mental note to ask Kate about that later.

I was just starting on the main course, a piece of steak cooked very rare, much to my pleasure, when the argument started. I'd been listening all along, though I couldn't immediately tell what it was about.

"Well, she seems all right," said Master Bernard. I wondered if he were talking about me.



Nicco smiled. "I told you. I don't make many mistakes when it comes to women."

Master Bernard took a forkful of scalloped potatoes before answering. "Yet you have no slave. How do you expect to understand our ways if you don't participate in them?"

"Is that all being Talean means to you?" asked Nicco. "Is it just an excuse to own a woman? I had thought there was more to it than that."

"There is," said Samual. I got the impression he would stand up for Nicco under any circumstance. Even from the short time I'd seen them together, I suspected he idolized Nicco.

"Bullock!" shouted Bernard. "What is it with you two? Are you sleeping together?"

Samual leapt to his feet, but Nicco held up a placating hand, and laughed. "Why, Bernard, are you jealous? There's plenty left for you."

Bernard growled, but before he could answer, Master Tane stepped in. "There is nothing in Talean law that says a man must have a slave. Nicco is well within his rights. Bernard, you started this, I think you need to make amends."

I thought he would balk. He didn't, though his eyes burned as he spoke. "I apologize, Nicco. I was wrong."

I wondered how Nicco would react. He didn't speak right away, obviously giving his response some time. He didn't want to say the wrong thing in front of Master Tane, I realized.

"Bernard, I'm sorry you find my personal choices so upsetting, but I assure you, I have reasons for being the way I am. I will buy a slave when the right one comes along, not until."

"You've been saying that for two years now."

"And it's been true for two years. The right slave will come along, and I'll buy her. Until then, there is nothing to discuss."

But the situation wasn't over. "A challenge," said Master Samual, so low I barely heard him.

"What?" asked Bernard, more surprised than inquisitive.

"A challenge," repeated Samual, louder. "I challenge you to defend your words."

Nicco shook his head. "Master Tane has stepped in, Samual. Honor has been satisfied."

"My honor hasn't. He accused me of being gay. Frankly, I think he's just being hopeful, but I won't back down. I'm offended and have my rights. One of them is the challenge."

Bernard sneered. "Very well. No weapons. Till first blood is drawn."

Nicco looked to Master Tane, but the older man didn't say anything. He just stood, shook his head and left the room.

When I looked at Kate, further down the table, I could see there were tears in her eyes.

All anyone spoke about that night and the next day was the upcoming challenge between Bernard and Samual. I thought Samual was in far better shape than Bernard, but there was something about the older man I didn't trust. I didn't see Kate after dinner at all, and wondered if she was okay. I would have asked, but there was no one to ask. It was as if I'd been forgotten, left to my own devices until the challenge was settled.

Having nothing else to do, I walked to the cable car and sat down in the one parked there. It wasn't that hard to operate the thing, though it took me fifteen minutes to get up the nerve to press the ignition button and push the lever forward. It only continued moving as long as the lever was held in place. I tried going backwards, but found it impossible. It wasn't designed that way. Both cars moved along the same circular line—simultaneously. The one on the bottom docked at the same moment the one on the top did. As I descended,

clutching the sides of the car for dear life, I noticed the empty bottom car pass me on the way to the top.

By the time I reached the beach, my hand hurt. The machine stopped automatically as soon as it was in position. I'd have to restart it should I wish to return to the top.

A glance in the direction of the bar told me Ted wasn't there, so I wandered past, alone on the beach, enjoying the company of the salt breeze and the cry of seabirds. The beach was like a world of its own and here, away from the Taleans and their culture, I could almost relax—until I came upon the place where it happened, the very spot my sister had been taken from me.

I looked out over the Tasman Sea and watched the ten-foot high waves caress the base of a nearby cliff. A tongue of seawater lapped at a hard stone pillar. If I allowed fancy to carry me, I could almost see the act of fellatio. The image left me weak with need, yet strong with resolve.

I ignored the hot sand beneath my bare feet, and thought about Nicco. Part of me wished I'd never met him, but it was too small a part to listen to, for I realized I loved him. I had never felt about another man the way I felt about Nicco, but still it was not enough to stay my hand. My sister was dead and her killer would pay in blood. And Nicco would be lost to me forever.

The sound of the waves didn't drown out the cry of a nearby plover. It reminded me of my pain, my need to scream, my strident desire to shout curses until the universe was forced to listen. I slowly lowered myself to the sand, tears suddenly obscuring my vision.

I sobbed myself out on the beach, crying for all I'd lost and what I still might lose. When I rose, I walked to the sea and washed my face. The water was cold and sobered me. I was here for a reason and the sooner I realized it, the sooner I could put this all behind me. I remained at the edge of the world long enough to regain my composure, then started toward the cable car. I was going to return to the hotel, but noticed Ted was back behind the bar, as he

had been yesterday. I was glad he was alone. I had some questions for him, if I could figure out how to ask them.

As soon as he saw me, he smiled that boyish smile. I smiled back and approached, trying to figure out the best way to broach the subject. As it turned out, I needn't have worried.

"G'day, Sandy, how ya goin'?"

"I'm just fine."

"Wanna drink, luv? Orange juice? On the 'ouse."

"That would be delightful," I replied and meant it. After the precarious trip from the cliff top, and my subsequent breakdown, I needed something to settle me.

Before long, a cold beverage stood before me, and Ted was on the way to reminding me just how much danger I was in.

"Ya shouldna be 'ere, ya know."

"Why do you say that?" I asked between sips.

"Those big strong Taleans bring in sheilas by the boatload, but they're also bloody dangerous."

"Oh?"

"They are."

"How so?"

He studied me, as if not sure how much he could trust me. "A wolf's a wolf, no matter 'ow 'es dressed, luv."

"Well, it all seems aboveboard so far." I didn't really feel that way, but wanted to draw him out.

He looked thoughtful and poured himself a glass of juice before answering. "A while back, there was a girl 'ere. Word is she escaped, but I'm thinkin' she didn't."

My heart started beating faster. "Really?"

"Yep."

“What was her name?” I knew what he’d say before the words emerged.

“Said ’er name wos Jaycee. Can’t tell as the bloody Taleans keep renamin’ their girls. One day she wos ’ere, next gone. Just afore the auction, but if ya ask me, she didn’t run.”

“How do you know?”

“Cos she wudda told me. She told me heaps ’bout what went on up there. Didn’t believe ’er at first, but then I started watchin’...listenin’. Some funny business goin’ on topside.”

“Tell me about Jaycee.”

“Why?”

I’d trusted Jorge and Marika. Was it time to trust another? He was, after all, being extremely candid with me. Not yet, I decided. I was too close to where it had happened, and I didn’t yet know enough.

“Because I want to understand.”

He sighed, leaned back on a stool behind the bar, and closed his eyes. “Well luv, she wos great. Lovely smile, doncha know. She wos a bewdy, pretty as a rosella. Shouldna been ’ere.”

I fought to control my tears.

“Used to come down ’ere an’ tell me ’bout ’er training. Kept me company. This can be a lonely place. But she never seemed blue. She got all excited ’bout the auction. Talked ’bout almost nothin’ else. Kept wonderin’ who’d buy ’er. I tried to talk sense into ’er, but she wuddna listen, silly kid.”

I nodded to myself. Jaycee never listened to anyone. She did what she wanted—which is why it was so hard for me to picture her as a slave.

“So what ’appened?” I asked, purposely imitating his accent. I don’t think he noticed.

“One day, she wos ’ere, talkin’ like any other. ’appy, excited—then, vanished like a sheep at shearin’ time. I knew she wos missin’, cos I wos asked ’bout the last time I’d seen ’er. I answered all the questions and didn’t think

much of it. Not at the time. But to tell ya the truth, some of those blokes are really scary.”

*Tell me about it.* “But maybe something happened, and she did escape.”

“I dunno. They seem to treat ya sheilas well enuff before they sell ya, and after they drop the hammer.”

That was precisely the sort of thing I’d been worried about, but then, I’d seen Kate, living as a slave for an entire year. She seemed practically euphoric, though I still couldn’t help wondering what would happen if her Master ever got tired of her. It was hard enough breaking up with someone you didn’t have that kind of emotional response to. What would happen if the man you served completely found a new plaything? I certainly couldn’t discount the possibility and didn’t know how she could.

“Wow, that’s tough about Jaycee. It seems like you really liked her.”

“She wos a real bewt. Truth...if I ever find out someone hurt ’er, I’ll hunt ’em down. Whatever ’appened to ’er, she didn’t deserve it. Poor kid.”

“You sound so sure something happened to her.”

“Justa feelin’. Can’t really explain it.”

I didn’t say anything else. I was too tempted to confide in him and couldn’t risk it—not yet. Perhaps not ever.

Ted continued to try to talk “sense” into me, and I let him, without letting on he was preaching to the choir. I don’t know how long he might have gone on for, because we were soon interrupted as a number of people appeared from the direction of the cable car. I recognized Nicco even that far away, and could guess who accompanied him. Nor was I wrong.

The duel between Bernard and Samual would be fought on the beach, and I was going to have a front row seat.

## Chapter Eleven

I never really understood the concept of honor. Honor was an excuse for men to beat each other senseless, but beyond that, it made little impression on me. Yet to Talean men, honor was very important. They had all sorts of rules that guided etiquette, and yet more rules to deal with breaches of that etiquette. Last night at dinner, one master had insulted another and though he apologized, today they were going to settle their differences.

I didn't see how Master Bernard could beat Master Samuel. Samuel was younger, and quite probably both quicker and stronger. Bernard might have experience on his side, but I assumed both men had had their share of fights. It seemed inevitable in Talean society.

Both men stopped not far in front of me and stripped to the waist. Samuel's eyes never left his opponent. By contrast, Bernard never looked up, giving the impression of boredom rather than fear. It was as if the result of the match was a foregone conclusion in his mind. It was most likely a psychological tactic. Taleans are big on head games.

I didn't see any obvious signal to start the fight, but suddenly, they were circling, feinting, moving in and out trying to gain the advantage of superior position. Early moves were tentative, careful, neither allowing his opponent the opportunity to grab or close.

Ted had moved around the bar and sat on the stool next to me. From his posturing, he was being protective, which was endearing, if futile. Any of the men there could have mopped the floor with him. I had to assume he knew it, which made his gesture that much nicer. I did like him, though I could never see myself with him after fantasizing about Nicco.

The contest started to heat up, each man moving faster, with more confidence. Master Bernard landed the first blow, a punch to the shoulder, but it didn't seem to do much, other than make Samual mad.

I had often heard angry men make mistakes, but Samual suddenly became wild and Bernard, immediately, was forced to retreat. Samual's fists moved like pistons and several body shots landed, but, possibly because Bernard was already moving away, he didn't sustain as much damage as he might have.

Just when I thought it was over, Bernard kicked out low and swept the younger man off his feet. He tried to follow up with another kick, but Samual, ready for the move, rolled away and regained his footing before suffering another blow.

As I watched, I could feel myself growing both scared and excited. I was rooting for Samual, if for no other reason than Nicco supported him. Of course, Kate would be very upset if I told her that, so it would have to remain my secret. I wondered what she was doing now...how she was handling the knowledge her Master might soon be injured, perhaps badly.

From the looks of things, she needn't have worried. Master Bernard seemed quite capable of taking care of himself. Of course, Samual showed a similar propensity, and I began to think this might be a long fight.

As soon as the thought popped into my head, Samual launched himself forward, fists moving faster than I could follow. Yet, to my amazement, it was Bernard who scored the next point, punching Samual hard in the jaw. How he landed that punch I can't imagine, but it was enough to end the fight.

Samual backed off, wiped his mouth with his hand, saw the blood on it and stopped. First blood had been drawn. He'd lost.

In victory, Master Bernard was less than conciliatory. "Any time you want to try me, you're welcome to, whelp. Just remember, you don't remain a Talean as long as I have without knowing how to defend yourself."



Yet in spite of the bravado of his words, Master Bernard limped back to the cable car. Only then did Nicco approach me.

“Hello, Sandy.”

I knelt immediately on the sand. “Greetings, Master.”

“Why are you down here?”

“I’m sorry, Master, I didn’t know it wasn’t permitted. Everyone else was busy so I thought I’d come and look at the sea. Then Ted offered me an orange juice and well, we just got to talking.”

“About what?”

Ted didn’t say anything, nor did he look at me. I was certain if I revealed the nature of our conversation, Nicco would be forced to take action. I hated lying to him, yet what choice did I have. “Ted was just telling me about sheep shearing, Master.”

“Did he touch you?”

I was surprised by the question. “No, Master. He only came around this side of the bar when the fight started.”

Nicco looked from Ted to me and back again. Behind him, Samual stood, holding a shirt to his cut lip to stop the bleeding.

Finally Nicco spoke. “Very well, come on up. It’s time for dinner.”

“Yes, Master.”

I left without saying goodbye to Ted. I was sure he’d understand. On the way up in the cable car, Nicco spoke again.

“I don’t want you talking to that man.”

“Yes, Master.”

I didn’t ask for a reason, and Nicco didn’t offer one. I certainly hoped it wasn’t because he thought Ted might know something he shouldn’t. The way Nicco looked at me, had looked at Ted, scared me. It hurt to admit Nicco was moving higher and higher on my list of suspects.

Dinner that night was uneventful. I was the only slave at the table, which was a novelty. I served the masters before I sat down, but they didn't require me to pour drinks for them. They did that themselves.

Strangely enough, Master Bernard wasn't at dinner, but Master Samual was. I suppose Samual needed to be there, to show he wasn't hiding away, licking his wounds. I had expected Master Bernard to be there, if for no other reason than to gloat, though perhaps I'd misjudged the man, or more probably, some of those body shots had left painful bruises. In any event, the meal was far more peaceful than the night before.

Once again I was left to my own devices after dinner. I used the time to try to piece together what I knew so far.

I'd dreamt my sister's murder. Subsequent events, including a visit to the crime scene, lent the dream validity. My sister had been viciously murdered by a barefooted man. It was possible the murderer was a complete stranger, but I doubted it, due to the ferocity of the attack. That level of violence came from a deep, personal hatred. My sister was in Tasmania, because she wanted to be sold as a slave. This was very hard for me to accept, but I had seen enough evidence to quell whatever doubts I'd initially had. The attack occurred before the day of the auction. Did that have something to do with it? Why would someone want Jaycee dead?

I turned over the facts in my mind. So many players. So many possibilities. I needed more information and needed it fast, but couldn't ask people without giving away my reason for being there. Would that make me a potential target? It certainly would for the killer. Who could I trust? Nicco was a possible suspect, everyone was. The Taleans didn't value women's lives, so any one of them could have killed her—but again, why? I thought about it until my head ached, but came to no new conclusions.

When I next looked up, Nicco was there watching me. Startled, I leapt to my feet and fell to my knees so hard, they hurt. I dropped my head, while I

composed myself. "I'm sorry, Master, I was lost in thought. I didn't know you were here."

"I know that."

He didn't say anything, so I didn't either. There was nothing to say unless he asked a question. The easiness I'd felt on the flight was gone, replaced by nameless suspicions and the need to keep myself from becoming more emotionally involved with him than I already was.

"I want to apologize," he said.

"I'm a slave. No one apologizes to a slave."

"Is that right? What led you to that conclusion?"

"Why would you?"

He smiled and sat down near to where I knelt. "Sandy, a man must take responsibility for his actions. I apologize when I'm wrong. It doesn't matter who I'm wrong to. I apologize for myself, not for anyone else."

"Yes, Master. But you don't have to apologize to me."

"Of course I don't, but I apologize anyway."

"For what, Master, if I might ask?"

"Down on the sand, I told you not to talk to Ted because I was jealous."

The confession struck me like a physical blow. I almost reeled. "Master?"

"It's true. I was jealous. I've never acted like that before, which leads me to believe you may well be the one I've been waiting for."

I swallowed. When I spoke again, my voice was a low rasp. "Are you sure, Master?"

"No. But I'm certainly considering it. I do believe I'll bid on you at the auction."

My head spun. This couldn't be happening. Not now, not with Nicco. I had to put him off somehow, though I really didn't want to. I started to shake. "So you didn't mean what you said about Ted, Master?"

His eyes grew hard. "Don't push me, girl."

I dropped my head again. "I'm sorry, Master."

"Why is it so important for you to talk to Ted? Tell me. I'm curious."

"Ted is the only man here who isn't a master, so I feel safe talking to him. It's more like talking to one of the girls. If I say the wrong thing, Ted won't punish me. In truth, he reminds me of a little lost puppy. Surely you can't be jealous of one such as he."

I thought he'd get angry, but he broke out laughing instead. He didn't speak again until he caught his breath. "And does Ted know you see him as one of the girls?"

"No, Master. It would be hurtful to say that. I don't wish to hurt his feelings."

"No, I don't suppose you do."

"I won't talk to Ted, Master."

"I know you won't."

The way he said it made my skin crawl.

For the next several days, Nicco spent time with me, talking about all matters Talean, as well as his own life and past. We talked for hours every day. He'd often ask questions, and I'd answer to the best of my ability, though I said nothing that would put my mission in danger.

On the third day, we had a conversation I'd never forget.

"Remember one thing, girl. A slave must be completely honest with her Master. That doesn't only mean telling the truth. It means full disclosure. The Master doesn't just own the slave's body, but her mind as well. Whatever is on your mind is his for the asking, but even if he doesn't ask, that's no excuse for you to keep things from him."

We were on the roof of the hotel, looking out into the distance. I could see boats, sea birds, and further to the east and west, more cliffs. Behind me were forest and hills, but I wasn't looking that way.

I wondered if this was a part of my lessons, or if Nicco thought I might be hiding something. He continued before I could think of anything to say.

“If you have anything you wish to tell me, now is the time to do it. I won’t hold anything against you that you’ve kept from me to this point. But after today, the clock is running. I’ll never purchase a slave that’s lied to, or kept something important from me. So how about it, Sandy? Do you have anything you want to say?”

I felt the blood drain from my face. I had to say something fast to cover myself. “Master? I mean, I’ve lived my whole life before meeting you. Surely there are things you don’t know about me. How would I know what to disclose and what not to? What is important and what is not? Suppose I make a mistake?”

It didn’t take any acting to show my fear. I was certain he was on to me.

“That’s a good point, but surely there are things about you I should know and you’re smart enough to figure those out, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Master, but I’ve told you all the important things in my life I can think of. Obviously, I’ll tell you anything you want to know.”

“That’s not good enough. I want to know everything.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Tell me.”

The intensity with which he regarded me, made me want to trust him, but I couldn’t. I’d come no closer to finding Jaycee’s killer, but it surely could have been Nicco as much as anyone. What was I going to do?

I did the only thing I could think of. I launched into a telling of my life from the time I was born till now, leaving out any mention of my sister. If Nicco ever found out, he wouldn’t bid on me. The thought was almost a physical pain, though I didn’t know why. I kept telling myself he could have killed Jaycee, but couldn’t bring myself to believe it. Perhaps that would be my downfall.

My conversations with Nicco continued to occur with increasing frequency. I still couldn't make up my mind about him. I knew I was already in love, as certainly as I knew I couldn't afford to be. The paradox was a bitter one, a string I could never hope to unravel. I spent far more time thinking about the problem, than I did investigating Jaycee's murder, which was a pity, because that's what I was there for.

Finally, one afternoon, I steered the conversation in a beneficial direction.

"Master, may I ask a question?"

"Of course."

"I'd been told Talean men keep their girls under lock and key, yet I've seen no evidence of it. They say you can't escape a Talean master, but what's to stop a girl from walking away. There seems to be almost no security."

Nicco looked thoughtful. I hoped he didn't think I'd be running. Even if it weren't for Jaycee, I wouldn't leave Nicco at this point.

"For one thing," began Nicco, "all the slaves waiting to be sold are here because they chose to be. They made a conscious decision to hand over their freedom to a stranger. A lot of people would find that hard to believe, but in reality it happens all the time. How many women end up in abusive relationships each year and stay anyway?"

"Yes, Master. I know you're right. I've never understood that."

"There are many reasons why a woman stays. Fear of retribution is probably the most common, but there are more. Some women stay because they're being supported by the man, and don't think they can make it on their own. Or they think they deserve to be beaten for some reason. Or they think that's the way life has to be, because they'd grown up seeing their father pummel their mother. The human psyche is very complicated and often people don't even know why they do what they do."

I could certainly relate to that. I didn't say so though, because Nicco was still talking.

"The reason we don't watch girls that carefully before the auction is because if they're going to run, it's better that it happens now than after someone has paid for them. That would be a nightmare. If a girl runs at this point, only the seller is inconvenienced, not the buyer. It doesn't happen often."

"But it has happened." I held my breath, waiting to hear his response.

"Yes, it has. About six months ago, one of our slaves vanished. One day she didn't show up for dinner. No one knew what happened to her."

"She didn't say anything to anyone?"

"Not a word. It's entirely likely one of the masters scared her somehow. There were so many here already, probably twenty or thirty."

My heart sank. Twenty or thirty masters, any of whom might be a suspect. I had until now assumed it was someone already here, but what if it had been another master. What if someone had made unwanted advances against her, and when she refused to respond, he beat her to death. A sinking feeling embedded itself in the pit of my stomach. The odds of finding Jaycee's killer had become astronomical. It wasn't like anyone was going to offer me a guest list. Even if I could get one, how would I know who it might be, unless of course they showed up last time and didn't return this time? That might show some guilt, though I didn't suspect a Talean man would avoid the scene of a crime. The arrogant bastard would probably return just to gloat over her grave. The thought incensed me.

"Are you okay?" asked Nicco.

I recovered quickly. "Yes, Master. I'm fine. I just don't understand why a girl would say she wanted to be here, and then change her mind. I would never run."

"I know that, Sandy."

"Master?"

"Yes?"

“You said that before the auction, you gave girls more freedom, because if they were going to leave, that would be the best time for it, but a lot of the girls here aren’t watched at all. Kate’s on her own a lot of the time, so are the others. Surely any of them could escape if they wanted to.”

Nicco smiled. “No. They can’t.”

“But what’s to stop...”

“Their feelings, Sandy. Talean masters don’t tie their slaves up or keep them in chains, at least not for the most part. We work on a girl’s emotions, on her mind. The chains worn by Talean slaves are more mental than physical, but I believe you’ll find they’re every bit as effective.”

I thought about what he said and knew it to be right. Even though I denied my slavery, I still couldn’t have walked away from Nicco, and I had more reason to than anyone. Kate couldn’t have left Master Bernard if she’d wanted to, though I knew she didn’t want to. Hell, I wasn’t sure he could get rid of her if *he* wanted to. Perhaps that was the real truth of things. The chains worn by women were self-imposed. It was what Jorge had been trying to tell me, when he confessed he’d never dommed a woman. What was it he’d said? Women dom themselves.

Suddenly, the entire Talean subculture was starting to make sense, and I didn’t like it. And one thought resounded in my mind stronger than any other. I couldn’t leave.

Nicco didn’t say anything else, and I didn’t ask any more questions. The realization the training had somehow beaten me was quite enough to digest in one sitting.

Several hours later, Kate found me brooding. I couldn’t get the idea out of my head. I didn’t want to admit to being a slave, but still couldn’t have walked away, so what else could I be? Did love make slaves of us all?



Kate must have sensed my mood, for she sat by me, but didn't say anything. At first I was annoyed, until I realized how nice it was for her to sit with me. Unwilling to think about my dilemma any more, I cleared my throat. "Hi."

She smiled. "Hello, Sandy. How are you feeling?"

"I don't know."

"What's wrong, hon?"

"Do you think Nicco will buy me?" It wasn't what I had meant to say, but it came out all the same. My slavery seemed more certain with each passing minute.

"Oh, hon, of course he will. Don't you see the way he looks at you?"

I dropped my head. My feelings were so screwed when it came to Nicco, I couldn't hope to figure him out.

"Nicco will buy you, Sandy. I'm sure of it. It's not the first time I've seen that look in a master's eyes."

"What look?"

"The fire. They say slaves burn, but masters do too, you just never hear them talk about it."

"Oh?"

She hugged me. "Yes, hon. Nicco burns for you, I promise."

I felt better then and knew I shouldn't have. "Kate?"

"Yes?"

"How did you know you were a slave?"

"Are you having doubts?"

"Yes," I lied. "I'm not sure."

Her laughter was kind. She pushed me away from her and held me at arm's length. The compassion in her eyes almost brought me to tears. "You shouldn't. You're a slave through and through. I knew it the moment I saw you dance."

"You did?"

“Yes, Sandy. I did. You were so wanton, so much the wild animal. ‘Free’ women don’t dance that way. Mind you, that you might not dance that way for anyone but Nicco is another story. He’s your One.”

I started to cry, and she embraced me again. With every hour, Jaycee’s killer slipped further away, and my own looming servitude grew more certain. Yet I was no longer sure I objected. For a long time I cried, and she held me throughout.

When she finally let me compose myself, I felt a bit better. And Kate sat with me through the long afternoon, talking with me like the sister I’d had but lost.

That evening, guests began to arrive at the hotel—Talean men with Talean slaves. Some had more than one. Nicco was busy greeting men he hadn’t seen in six months, though he’d spoken to most of them on the phone. I learned from some of the girls that there were slave traders in the crowd, men who purchased slaves to resell in scattered Talean societies across the world. It amazed and disturbed me that this sort of thing went on in virtually every country, even America. The men who came to bid all had one thing in common—they were all incredibly wealthy.

I was on my own once more. I couldn’t find Kate anywhere. I wondered what she was up to and whether or not it was pleasant. I saw a few other slaves about, but paid them little mind. No doubt they thought me standoffish. The feeling was mutual. None of them were as friendly as Kate and, since I was only passing through, they didn’t pay me much attention either.

So I did the only thing I could think of. I waited until I was certain no one was watching and slipped away to the cable car. From what I understood, during the normal tourist season, there was an employee on duty at all times to make sure things ran smoothly. This time of year, the cable cars were left unguarded, so I made use of them.

It was already getting dark, and the lack of visual cues made the descent even more harrowing. I was so happy to touch the sand, I almost wept, but I had work to do and no time to waste. I forced myself to get a grip on my emotions and moved toward the bar. It was so dark, I was almost on top of it before I realized it was closed and shuttered. Ted was not there.

I looked toward the rocky promontory in the distance, behind which lay Ted's shack. I hadn't yet ventured that far along the beach, as if the place where Jaycee's life had ended was a barrier I couldn't transcend. Still, I didn't think Ted would mind me stopping by. I hoped he didn't have company.

I set out into the darkness, judging my position by the few vague outlines suggesting large rocks and the sound of the surf pounding the shore. The waves grew large here and surfing was practically a national past time. The very waves that drew thrill seekers to The Tempest, comforted me and kept me company as I walked along the sand.

Only by chance did I turn my head and look back. Atop the cliff, I could see the hotel lights. I knew from the angle, I was standing approximately where Jaycee had been killed. I looked down at the sand half-expecting to see blood—a pointless exercise, since it was already too dark to make out such detail.

I hurried from that place, feeling colder than I had only moments before. It wasn't just in my mind either. Tasmanian weather was freakishly variable. In just a few minutes the temperature could plummet. And I was naked, though turning back was not an option.

I moved as fast as I dared, until I reached the promontory, a pile of rocks that stretched all the way from the cliffs to the water...and beyond. I assumed it was man-made. There was a big enough break in it for me to pass through, though it took me a while to find it. Once on the other side, it wasn't difficult at all to find the shack. It was just a short distance away, the only man-made structure in the vicinity.

It was also completely dark, which meant Ted was either away or sleeping. Or dead, I suddenly realized. The conversation with Nicco popped into my head.

*"I won't talk to Ted, Master."*

*"I know you won't."*

It had scared me at the time, but subsequent events had pushed it from my mind. It returned now, full force. What would I do if I went into that shack and found him lying there? I hadn't seen Ted since the day of the fight.

More slowly, I approached, the cold suddenly more than just physical.

It was small, and I suspected dilapidated, though I couldn't really tell in the darkness. It reminded me of a tool shed more than the type of place in which someone might live. I circled it until I found the door, then knocked. I had wanted to look through a window, but there didn't seem to be any. I knocked again, more loudly.

*"Ted? It's me, Sandy."*

Still no answer. I shivered and tried the knob.

The door swung silently inward. I felt for a light switch, not even sure the place had electricity. To my surprise I found one and flicked it. A light came on, but not in the main room. Strange that the switch by the door should operate a light elsewhere, but I was too scared to worry about it. Slowly I entered, waiting for my eyes to make sense of what I was seeing.

The place stank of sweat and stale air. With no windows, that didn't surprise me. There were two rooms total, a bedroom and the room with the light, which cast just enough illumination for me to get my bearings. An unmade bed lay against the far wall of the room. There was a small writing desk on the wall to the right and a small chest of drawers on the same wall as the door to the left. I didn't see anything that resembled a body, for which I was grateful. It suddenly occurred to me how far out of my element I was.

Women in movies did this sort of thing, not me. I was Sandra Castilla, not Jessica bloody Fletcher. I had no business being here, yet there was no one else. No one to avenge my sister's death. Nor was there any way I could prove she was murdered. Whether I liked it or not, I was on my own.

I walked to the other room slowly, barely daring to breathe. It was a small bathroom, complete with a toilet and sink, but no bathtub or shower. I had to assume Ted showered at the hotel. It might even be where he was now. Of course, he might have been murdered and deposited elsewhere, but that I had no way of knowing. It was enough that he wasn't here.

The bathroom was lit by a desk lamp, the only electrical appliance in sight. It was plugged into an extension cord that ran all the way back to an outlet under the light switch by the door. As far as I could tell, it was the only outlet in the place.

When I looked at the sink and saw the straight razor, I understood. This is where he shaved, so he needed light in the bathroom. Most likely, he carried the light from room to room as he needed it. How could anyone live like this?

I heard a sound behind me and turned.

On the bed, eyes wide with fear, lay Jaycee—bound, gagged and struggling.

## Chapter Twelve

I didn't move. I couldn't. I was paralyzed with fear and pain. My sister wasn't there. I was somehow watching a replay of what had happened. I couldn't change the past, only watch helplessly as it repeated itself. I felt sick to my stomach. I wanted to die.

She maneuvered herself off the bed and landed hard on the shack's rough wooden floor. I could see why she hadn't been able to stand in the dream...someone had slashed her Achilles tendons. The bed sheets were covered in blood, and when she moved across the floor, looking for all the world like a crippled inchworm, she left a trail of red behind.

I shouldn't have been able to see it in the dim light, which was when I realized it was daytime. This had happened during the daylight hours. It was as if I were no longer in the hut in the present, but in the past. That's when I looked up and saw the window I'd missed.

It was small and flat, near the top of the hut. I could see how blue the sky was, completely out of sync with the scene inside.

I turned my attention back to Jaycee, who had already made it to the desk. The lines of exertion on her face made her seem older than her years. She picked up the chair in her bound hands and lifted it. I could see the price she paid for the action in her eyes. It took her three tries to get the chair onto the desk. The pain was so clear I felt it myself, but, like the dream, I could do nothing but watch.

She pulled herself onto the desk, pushing the chair further back as she did so. She somehow got to her knees without knocking the chair off. How she could be so brave and competent, bound as she was with two cut tendons, I'll

never know. Only then did it occur to me that Ted had murdered her. I found it hard to reconcile the fact. I had assumed the killer to be Talean.

She maneuvered the chair upright against the wall, then managed to kneel on the seat. She propped herself up and strained skyward. I held my breath. In one great heave, like a dolphin leaping through a hoop, she propelled herself upwards toward the small opening. She didn't make it. Not quite.

Her aim had been true, but she didn't have enough power to get through—her head and upper torso had made it outside, her legs and lower body remained in plain sight. My heart pounded in sympathy as she struggled and squirmed, inching her way further and further. I could imagine how the rough sill scraped against the flesh of her stomach. I could visualize the strain in her eyes, the way she clenched her teeth, the sweat beading on her forehead, dripping into her eyes. Finally, with the aid of gravity, she fell through the window and was lost to view.

I didn't need to see anymore. I knew what had happened—somehow I had been there. The room grew dark again and I realized the vision had ended. Then it occurred to me I was alone in the murderer's shack. I told myself to run, knew I had to, but my legs didn't move.

A clue! If I could find some evidence of foul play, I could go to the police and let them take care of it. There had to be something. I started toward the desk, but never made it, for at that moment, the door swung open and Ted entered. He didn't say a word, but stared at me, apparently awaiting an explanation. If I ever needed to act, this was the moment.

"Hi, Ted."

"Whatcha doin' here, Sandy?"

"I came to see you. Since you weren't here, I thought I'd wait."

"Is that right?" His voice was completely different than it had been at the bar. Gone was the boyish grin and the look in his eyes would have been

enough to chill me, without the aid of supernatural visions. I felt weak, but tried to cover it.

"I didn't think you'd mind."

"Course ya didn't."

He didn't say anything else, and I fought for ways to keep him talking. It was better than the alternative.

"So, how have you been?"

He looked around the place, as if making sure I hadn't run off with anything. Like there was anything to run off with. I glanced into the corner and saw a broken chair between the desk and far wall. It must have collapsed when Jaycee had made her escape. She'd been so brave and had died anyway.

"Doin' great, thanks, how 'bout you? Didja find what ya was lookin' for?"

"Yes. I told you, I've been waiting for you."

"Of course."

He closed the door behind him, removed a key from his pocket and locked it. I hadn't noticed the old-fashioned lock until now—just too late. I was locked in a shack with the man who'd murdered my sister, and my only chance of getting out was to act like I didn't suspect him at all.

"I don't suppose you have anything to drink in here." If I could get him back to the bar, I might have a chance to get away.

He looked surprised. "Nope."

"Oh." I tried to sound disappointed.

"Tell me, luv, what are ya *really* doin' 'ere?"

"What...what do you mean?"

"Did Nicco send ya to spy on me?"

I almost sagged with relief. "Oh Ted, of course not. Nicco didn't want me to talk to you, but I came anyway. You were so nice to me, I figured...well, I don't know what I figured, but I did want to see you."



"Before ya get sold to some stranger and leave me forever, is that it? Well, Sandy, it's not gonna 'appen. I'm not gonna let ya go through with it."

*Oh God! This couldn't be happening.* "What...do you mean?"

"You're not goin' anywhere. It's for ya own good."

"You can't keep me here against my will."

"Can't I?"

I thought about Jaycee and realized he could. I didn't have the strength to escape the way she did, even if the chair she'd used hadn't lost a leg. Rage tempered my fear, made me bold. He'd killed my sister. If I didn't do something, he'd kill me as well. I walked toward him, putting as much strength as I could into my voice. "Let me out, Ted. I'm not playing with you."

At first, he looked like he might relent. Then he struck me hard across the face. I had never been struck so by a man. Terror suffused me even before the pain had a chance to make itself known. He took a step forward, and I cowered, trying to get away from him, but making little progress.

"You *ain't* goin' back to them. I won't allow it. I'm doin' this for ya own good."

"Like you did for Jaycee?" I shouldn't have said anything, but the fear, pain and anger combined to betray me. Until that moment, I'd had a chance.

"Don't speak of 'er that way. I loved 'er. She was my girl, not theirs."

"Which is why you cut her...why you killed her. You're sick."

"How'd ya know that? How...?"

"She was my sister." As if that would explain it all.

Realization lit his eyes. "You've come looking for 'er. You stupid bitch! Did ya think ya'd just waltz in 'ere an' make me confess? I don't know how ya figured it out, an' don't much care. It's funny. Thought I'd feel bad about killing 'er, but I don't. I saved 'er, I did."

"Saved her." I couldn't even feel the anger now. Just tired...so very tired.

"Of course. They'd never let 'er go."

“You dolt, she *wanted* to serve them.”

“Is that what ya think? Is that what ya *really* think?”

“Yes, it’s what I really think.”

He started laughing. I wanted to stand, but my legs felt like Jello. I couldn’t even roll into a more comfortable position.

He went to the desk and opened a drawer. Then he walked to me. He held a notebook in his right hand. His eyes were clear and distant as he dropped it on the floor in front of me.

“Look at it. *Look at it!*”

It took me no small amount of effort to pick it up. Even before I opened it, I was scared of what I’d see. The words inside were written in Jaycee’s neat, compact script. I’d have recognized it anywhere. There were pages and pages of notes detailing every aspect of Talean society. She wasn’t there to become a slave. She was writing a book. A fucking book. She was going to take it public and expose their practices. My sister wasn’t a slave, she was a writer, as she’d always been. She’d been taking the chance of a lifetime for her craft, but the danger had come from a place she hadn’t expected. With a heavy heart, I closed the book and looked at him.

“You say you were doing this for her protection, yet if she was leaving, she didn’t need protection, did she?”

“She was gonna leave. I asked if I could go with ’er.”

“She said no.”

He nodded. I’d never seen a man in so much pain, but couldn’t feel anything for him but disdain.

“You bastard. You murdered my sister because she wasn’t interested in you? What kind of fucking monster are you?”

He looked up sharply, and I knew I’d hit a nerve. “No one would ’ave ever loved ’er like I did. No one. I would ’ave done anything for ’er, but she was leavin’. Do ya know what that feels like?”

“No.”

“I wasn’t about to let ’er use me as she did an’ walk away.”

“Use you?”

“Sure. She pumped me for information, stored ’er notes in my shack. And in the end, she was going to leave, like all the sheilas. They all leave. I tried to stop ’er. I couldn’t allow it.”

“So you killed her.”

“She wouldn’t stay. Even after I cut ’er, she wouldn’t stay. What else could I do?”

He said it as if it were so plausible anyone would understand, which is what made him so dangerous. He didn’t even realize how evil he was.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Not sure yet. But for now, you’ll be my guest. I love havin’ company.”

“Let me go.”

His laughter filled me with dread. “I lost ya sister. I won’t make the same mistake with *you*.”

The tone of his voice left little doubt he meant exactly what he said.

He tied my wrists too tightly together with thick rope. He tied my ankles as well. He removed the straight razor from the bathroom and put it in his pocket. It must have been what he’d used to cut Jaycee’s tendons. When he picked it up, I thought he’d do the same to me, but he didn’t. He was just making sure I couldn’t use it to free myself.

After I was bound, he gagged me as well, and left me in the bathroom. I was dizzy, nauseous. Fear suffused me. I’d never been more terrified in my life. And no one knew I was there. I’d disappear just like Jaycee and everyone would say I’d escaped. Suddenly, being a Talean slave didn’t look like such a bad deal. I thought of Nicco and started to cry. He was going to bid on me. He’d said as much.

I thought about the auction and wondered how much I would have gone for. I'd heard people talking and ten thousand was what an average girl brought in. I wondered what his cut was. In any event, it was entirely likely I'd never see the auction, never see Nicco again. I cried silently for a long time until I drifted off. I awoke a short time later to a pounding on the door.

I heard Ted get out of bed. I heard the key turn in the lock. I struggled into a sitting position, strained to hear what was happening. I heard voices, but they were muffled. Distant. I realized I was probably in shock. I needed to think...to focus. Who could possibly be at the door?

*Nicco! Nicco is that you?* I tossed myself forward and rolled into the bedroom. By the time I'd made it that far, the door was already closed and locked. Ted stood there watching me. Since the light was still in the bathroom, I couldn't see him that well. He looked at me and shook his head.

"Just where do ya think you're goin'?"

Obviously, I couldn't answer.

He walked toward me and kicked me hard in the side. I slid further from the door and grunted into my gag.

"Get ya arse back to where I put ya and stay put. Clear?"

I nodded. I tried to comply as best I could. The new pain didn't make the task any easier.

"That was Nicco. Seems ya missin'. He was looking for ya. Had no reason to believe ya might be 'ere, so took me at my word. Ya didn't tell anyone, did ya?"

Tears streamed down my face. I shook my head.

"Foolish, foolish little girl. Ya shudda stayed in New York. Less Taleans there."

Without another word, he returned to his bed and lay down. I spent the next ten minutes returning to the very place he'd left me. If I were going to survive, I'd have to do exactly what he wanted.

I don't know how I slept. When I awoke, it was morning, I could see that much, even from where I lay. My body hurt in ways I'd never known before, but I forced myself to think anyway. I had to figure out a way to escape.

I squirmed my way into the next room, where I thought I'd find Ted sleeping. I was thinking about attacking him in his sleep. Perhaps I could get the razor blade from him. It was a stupid idea that never would have worked—but I was desperate. Fortunately, Ted wasn't there. I was alone.

Naturally, the door was locked. I was able to get to my feet and try the knob, as my hands had been bound in front of me. I could barely feel them. I didn't bother straining against the rope, there was no way I could have gotten out of it.

Where had he gone? Why had he left me alone? I looked up at the only window and realized there was no way I could reach it. Nor could I get through the locked door. Where was I going?

If only I had a weapon, but the razor was gone and there didn't seem to be anything else. I jumped to the far side of the room, wincing each time I landed. I surveyed the landscape. The broken chair would be too unwieldy. I'd never be able to use it with my hands bound. I almost missed it, but at the last moment realized a leg had broken off. Light enough to hold in my hands. I wondered if I'd be able to swing hard enough to do any damage. I jumped back to the bed and fell on it, then struggled into a sitting position and stared at the door.

The light was still on in the bathroom. It had been on the entire time. I didn't need it, but didn't want to expend the extra energy turning it off. I realized how inane the thought was and almost laughed...would have, but for the gag. I thought about removing it—weighed the possibility of anyone hearing me against what he would do if he returned and found it missing. I should have known I wasn't thinking clearly when I decided to leave the gag in place, as if that might somehow mollify my captor.

I tried to imagine how it would be when he returned. He'd open the door. He might well be ready for something. How would I be able to take him, when I was tied up and he wasn't? He was stronger than me and more violent by nature. But what else could I do? I couldn't just sit and wait for the end. This might be the only opportunity I'd get.

I thought about banging on the door with the chair leg, but realized it was very unlikely anyone would be close enough to hear. You'd have to be pretty much on top of the shack to hear it over the pounding of the waves. Still, I couldn't just wait for him to kill me. I had to think of something—anything—that would give me an advantage. Unfortunately, I couldn't.

As time passed, I grew more and more nervous. An injured, bound woman with a piece of wood against a psychopathic killer with a razor. It was completely insane. There was no way I could take him.

My stomach growled. I hadn't eaten since the previous night's dinner. I was parched too. Dehydrated and hungry. Surely there had to be some way to distract him. If only I could...

The lamp. I made my way to my feet and jumped to the bathroom. My side throbbed, my head pounded. The lamp had a simple push button, something I could easily turn off from the source, instead of the switch by the door. I jumped back to the front door and studied the setup. The switch was over the outlet. If the light went off as soon as he opened the door, he'd know I was in the bathroom. It was the only other way to turn the light off.

I jumped back to the bed and sat again, dropping the chair leg. I hoped Ted wouldn't return before I finished my business. With great effort, I raised my hands up as high as I could, ignoring the pain of protesting muscles. I reached behind my head, and carefully, oh so carefully, removed the rubber band from my hair. I didn't dare drop it, because if I couldn't find it, I was in trouble.

When I had it, I stood and jumped back to the door. As carefully as I could, I placed the rubber band on the light switch, then pulled it carefully down, hoping it wouldn't snap the light off before it was in position.

It was just a bit long, but would work. At least I hoped it would. I looped the other end of the rubber band around the door knob, so when the door opened, if all went as planned, it would turn off the switch. The light would go out, and Ted would think I was in the bathroom, the only place from which I could turn off the light.

I wouldn't be there, though. I'd be behind the door, waiting for him to step into the room so I could strike. Perhaps the element of surprise would allow me to do some damage. If I could knock him out, I could get the razor from his pocket and at least free my legs. It was the only chance I had to escape.

I didn't sit on the bed. It was too far out of position and he might hear me crossing the room. I sat on the desk instead. It wasn't comfortable, but that wasn't a bad thing. I needed to be alert. The hardest part was waiting. I had no idea of where he'd gone or how long he'd be. I soon grew tired. What if I fell asleep? I didn't think it was possible, yet I'd felt the same way last night and had slept anyway. The hard wood of the desk helped. It wouldn't be easy to sleep on a surface that uncomfortable.

I was so busy running through possible scenarios, I almost missed the sound of a key turning in the lock. I stood and shuffled into position. The door opened. Even from behind it, I could tell the light went off as planned. I heard the killer chuckle.

"C'mon, Sandy. What do ya think killin' the light will do? That's funny, get it? Killin'."

I didn't answer.

"Why don't ya be a good girl an' put the lamp down? Ya can't take me."

He slammed the door behind him, eyes intent on the opening to the bathroom. He was only a few steps in front of me. I jumped forward and swung

down with all my strength. I was scared I wouldn't make contact, but I heard a satisfying smack and his legs gave way. I dropped to my knees (something I'd had lots of practice on in recent weeks) and struck him again for good measure. Then I struggled to position myself so I could go through his pockets. I found the key, but didn't think I'd need it. He hadn't taken the time to lock the door again. I found the razor next and took it out carefully. I set to work on the ropes that bound my ankles, trying to be careful not to cut myself in the process. I had thought it would go faster, but it was long, hard, tedious work, particularly because my hands were still bound. I kept thinking he'd regain consciousness, but he didn't. I don't know how long I worked on the ropes before they finally fell away. I rubbed my chaffed ankles and tried to stand, but couldn't. Not yet. I had to wait for the blood to return to my feet.

I wasn't sure if he were dead or alive. I should have cut his throat, but he groaned, and I lost my nerve. I half crawled, half squirmed to the desk where he kept my sister's book. This would provide the proof I needed to have my sister's death investigated. Surely they'd have to investigate now.

Half-crawling I made my way from the hut. Ted still hadn't stirred. I said a prayer of thanks for the first time in ages. Then I was out of the shack and into the sunlight. It was warm outside, though the sun wasn't yet high in the sky. I worked my way along the beach until my legs felt a bit better. As soon as I could stand, I started running, or at least made the attempt to. That was when I stumbled and started crying.

The sounds of the beach were all about me. I couldn't convince my body to move. All I could think about was Jaycee, lying on the sand, blood still flowing from the cruel wounds she'd received at the hands of a madman. Like her, I couldn't walk, though I would be able to in the near future. Jaycee had been maimed. Yet I could barely move. When I looked around, I realized I was once again lying in the very spot Jaycee had died. I knew it with certainty. I could feel the attack. I remembered it as if it had happened to me.



Then I realized this wasn't a dream and I wasn't a bystander. This was my life. If I didn't get moving, I would end up like my sister. So I forced myself to my feet and stumbled forward. I looked over my shoulder, and he was there just before the promontory, running in my direction. I'd have screamed, but didn't have the time.

I moved as fast as I could, but knew it wasn't fast enough. I had to get to the cable car before he did. If I could reach the cliff top before him, I'd be safe. But Ted was rapidly gaining and my own disobedient legs were already moving as fast as they could.

When I reached the lift, I dropped the book on the floor and turned, brandishing the razor as best I could in my two hands. He wasn't that close! I still had time!

I started the car, and pushed the lever forward. I gained altitude slowly. I was too scared of the thing that pursued me to worry about heights. I held the control as far forward as I could, trying to get it to move faster just by pushing harder. It didn't work, of course.

I was off the ground and ascending. Six minutes to the top. Six minutes of sheer terror. When I looked back, I couldn't see him. I cursed and scanned the area. Perhaps he was on the other side and the cable car itself was blocking my view. I started to move, and he was there. He must have managed to grab hold of something on the outside of the car. I no longer held the razor and wondered why. Shit! I'd put it down to operate the lift. I had no time to look for it. He was already climbing aboard.

I kicked at him as best I could, but it wasn't easy. The car began to rock and I stumbled. He was standing on something outside, holding on to the edge. In just a second he'd step over, and I'd be at his mercy. I wondered how long I had until the car reached the top. I wondered if it mattered at all.

I lay frozen, hands still bound, waiting for that one last step, but it never happened. Ted's face contorted into a horrible sneer. He had me and knew it.

Then something caught his attention. I couldn't see it from where I lay, but it must have scared him. Then Jaycee was there, eyes blazing, looking ten times more terrifying than she ever had in life. She charged, and Ted screamed, pushing himself away from the car. His scream continued until he hit the rocks. We were far too high for him to have survived, that much I knew. When I looked back, Jaycee was gone and I was alone. I clawed at the gag until I managed to rip it from my mouth. I clutched Jaycee's notebook and held it to my chest, then sobbed so hard I almost choked.

I lay there for a very long time, finally realizing the lift wouldn't continue if I didn't stand up and push the lever. When it came to a stop, I stood there, crying quietly, alone with thoughts of Jaycee who had returned from the grave to avenge herself on the man who'd murdered her.

## Chapter Thirteen

Nicco didn't say anything. I was in his office at the hotel, face swollen from where Ted had struck me. I had told him the whole story from beginning to end. Everything from the dream to the present. What else could I do? One way or another, he'd have found out anyway, and I had to explain Ted's body.

When he spoke, the pain was evident in his voice. It killed me to think I had something to do with it.

"You should have told me."

How could I tell him that I couldn't, because I wasn't sure he wasn't the killer. "I'm sorry, Master."

"How can I ever trust you if you can lie to me like that?"

"Please."

"*Silence!* I'm not finished. I told you I wouldn't tolerate lies and gave you the chance to tell me everything with no penalty. You chose to ignore that. I can't abide a liar, I can't. My wife lied to me, often and successfully. I trusted her and she screwed me. In the end, even my own child was taken from me. That's why I told you what I did. I knew I could never live with a liar."

I wanted to protest, but he hadn't given me permission to speak.

"And this...this...fairytale you tell me of dreams and ghosts. What do I look like...an imbecile? Did you really think you were just so irresistible that I would accept an obviously manufactured tale as real?"

"Oh don't worry your pretty little head about it. We'll clean up your mess, girl. We'll clean it up, because we can't afford a police investigation. We'll figure out something to do with the bartender's body, but if you think I'm just going

to take your word at face value, particularly after all the lies...well, you must have a very low opinion of my intelligence.”

“No...”

“Get out...I’m done with you. You’re not the woman I thought you were.”

I didn’t cry. Not then. He didn’t deserve that from me. I waited until I was alone before I broke down, crying for all I had been through. First I’d lost Jaycee, then Nicco. He’d warned me, and I’d ignored him. Now I had to pay the price.

Mistress Marika had told me if I were going to escape, I should do so before the auction, which was still two weeks away. I didn’t make the attempt. Nothing mattered anymore. Without Nicco, I found I didn’t care. I couldn’t return to my old life, not after what I’d been through, nor was there anywhere else I could be. Allowing myself to be auctioned off seemed my only sane alternative, as crazy as that might sound. At least I wouldn’t have to think anymore. I could put it all aside and let others decide for me. It was out of my hands.

I had accomplished what I’d come for, but could glean no pleasure from it considering what it had cost me. I had avenged Jaycee’s death—or she had. In either event, she would be able to rest in peace, but it didn’t stop me from feeling like I wanted to die.

For two weeks, I said little, ate little and did little more than was required of me. Kate trained me every day, working me harder than Mistress Marika had. I took everything she dished out apathetically. Since I’d lost Nicco, nothing mattered. Nothing at all.

I wanted to go to him, to try to explain, but I knew it would be hopeless. He had warned me, and I’d been a fool. Yet what else could I have done?

The day of the auction drew closer. More Taleans arrived. More slaves for sale. I met a few slave trainers as well. I didn’t see Nicco at all. I had to assume he had been avoiding me—not that there was anything I could do about it.

The day before the auction, I was given an outfit that would have embarrassed a whore. It was little more than a single piece of white cloth twisted into a figure eight with a half twist. The top half went around my neck, the bottom between my thighs. Though it was clean, the edges were frayed as if it were made from torn rags. When I first received it, I was stunned, yet I had to admit, after I tried it on, it exposed every part of my body in the most effective manner, while still making me look like a sexy street urchin. I looked more naked wearing it than I did in the buff.

After weeks of being nude all the time, it was actually embarrassing to wear something like that. It didn't matter. Whatever would bring up my price was a good thing. If I sold for more, Nicco would get a bigger cut. It was the only thing I could still do for him.

As soon as I came to that realization, I knew what I had to do. I would go into that auction and would command the highest price of anyone. It was my last hope. The only way I could show my feelings for the man I loved. The only problem was, he wouldn't be bidding on me.

On the morning of the auction, I shaved the hair from my body, including my pubic hair. I wanted to give the impression of clean. I showered as I was taught and used no fragrance. I practiced moving gracefully for the first time since I'd escaped from Ted...escaped into a life of slavery. The universe could indeed be ironic.

It wasn't that I didn't move passably as a slave, but there is a difference between a girl moving gracefully by rote and a woman who wants to turn men on, which was evident in everything she did. It was something I'd learned under Mistress Marika's brilliant tutelage and confirmed that day. I felt alive, vivacious, still hurting, but at least I felt like I was doing something, however little, for Nicco.

I had thought much about it and couldn't blame him. He had warned me. I hadn't trusted him...it was as simple as that. I berated myself for not going

with my gut instinct. I hadn't been able to believe Nicco was capable of murdering a girl, because he wasn't. But instead of going with my instincts, I'd tried to use logic instead. I should have known better. Logic had never been one of my strong points.

Perhaps there was another reason for my renewed interest in how much I made on the block. It wasn't just to make Nicco a few bucks, but to show him what he'd be losing if he didn't bid—a last desperate attempt at salvation. An attempt I was certain wouldn't pay off. Talean men were intractable, and Nicco was cut from that same cloth. He was a man of principle and would not compromise, not on something this important. Yet, if he was going to let me go, he would see what he was losing.

I wasn't going to go to the block with my head down, looking as if I had lost the man of my dreams, even if it were true. I was going to go there and show Nicco just how many men wanted me, and let him chew on that.

I looked myself over in the mirror, flipped my hair and decided I liked it loose. Of course, I hadn't worn the rubber band since I'd taken it off in the shack. It was as if that part of my life was over. I'd never forget Jorge or what he'd done for me, but he was in the past. My future would be with some other master. Part of me dreaded finding out who that would be, part of me only wanted to get it over with.

Two hours before the auction, the girls were gathered and taken down to the large ballroom. I wondered what the world at large would say if they knew this sort of thing went on. A month ago, families and businessmen vacationed in this place. Perhaps this very room had been used for a convention or banquet. Now it was being used to auction off slaves. It's always what people don't realize is going on that's the most fascinating.

We were displayed openly in the ballroom, our lot numbers on a sign before us. Masters walked around, checking us carefully. Several asked me to open my mouth. A few asked me questions about my sexual preferences. One asked

me how I would feel about sleeping with another woman. I answered them all honestly, surprised the attention made me feel good about myself. A few months earlier, I'd have thought it sick, now it just seemed like life.

I looked over the other girls who were to be auctioned off that day. They were young, some younger than me. Many were prettier, but I knew it wasn't just about looks. It was about attitude, posture, movement, showmanship, and today, I was going to steal the spotlight.

It felt good to have a goal that didn't involve vengeance. For the first time since I'd dreamt Jaycee's murder, I felt free. I was doing something I chose to do. What was freedom, but that?

I hadn't really been free when I worked at NYU. Though I came and went as I pleased, the cost of living in New York was so high, I had to get a job with a certain minimum salary and had to work too many hours a week doing it. Who wants to spend most of their days answering phones, photocopying and talking to irate faculty members? The people were nice enough, but it wasn't much fun. It was something I *had* to do, or I didn't eat. Was what I was about to do any different?

I suppose most women would see things differently, but at that moment I realized something of a deeper truth in the universe. On one level or another, we're all slaves, whether it be slaves to our jobs, fortunes, families, spouses, children or some great religious cause. Willing slaves in some cases, but slaves nonetheless. I was about to become a willing slave as well—strange as that would have sounded six months earlier. Yet perhaps it was more honest than odd, for now that I think about it, there was never a time in my life I could truly say I was free.

They lined us up backstage in the order in which we'd be auctioned off. There were fifteen girls in all. I was third in line. I planned to watch the first two carefully to see what would be required of me. More than ever, I was determined to show what I was made of.

The room outside filled up, and I started to get excited. The feelings of the girls about to share my fate ranged from excitement, to nerves, to fear bordering on terror, though each of the women was there because they chose to be. We were consensual slaves. We had each made this choice. Perhaps they were like me. Perhaps something in their lives had gone so wrong, they were ready to throw in the towel. Maybe some of them enjoyed serving and couldn't feel fulfilled doing anything else. Certainly I'd heard that enough times in the two weeks leading up to the auction. And for some, life had been just so wretched that even a life of servitude would be a vast improvement.

Somewhere in the world, there might be Taleans who were less responsible or more dangerous, but the masters I'd met and spent time with to that point weren't bad men. They were men who knew what they wanted, and they'd found women to give it to them. If that's a crime, then most corporate executives and politicians are just as malign. The Talean way expressed a certain truth and within the confines of that truth, held an honesty that appealed to me. They may be forced to hide their dealings from the world at large, but within their hidden society, all cards were on the table. I wouldn't be ashamed to be one of them, even if it meant serving.

More noise, more people arrived. The auctioneer took the stage to a great cheer from the audience. The more exquisite girls were toward the end of the line. I knew being third in line wasn't an honor. At least the swelling on my face had faded, and not a day too soon.

The auctioneer banged a gavel on the podium. Silence ensued.

"Masters, welcome to the seventh biannual Tasmanian slave auction. The girls you are about to bid on are from all over the world, representing eight countries, three races and countless backgrounds. They are young, beautiful and skilled in many ways, not the least of which is how to please a man."

There were a few isolated cheers that settled quickly when the perpetrators realized no one had joined them.



“Take for example, our very first girl, a twenty-four-year-old blonde from Dallas, Texas. Come on out here, Delilah. Delilah was trained in Kansas City by none other than Mistress Rachel.”

She strutted onto the stage like a tigress. Her movements were compact, almost angry. I had to admire her style. She was utterly convincing in her feigned contempt.

“Bidding on lot #604 will start at five thousand dollars. Do I have five thousand?”

The bidding started. It stopped at fifty-five hundred, until the auctioneer told her to dance. She looked at him, shook her head and took the mic from his hand. “Do you know why they’re not bidding? It’s because they’re afraid of me. A real Talean would take a girl like me and show her the meaning of obedience. I don’t suppose there are any real Taleans in the vicinity.”

I was stunned. Her announcement was followed by laughter, more bidding and quite a few called comments about just what they’d do to her if they had her kneeling before them. When the bidding slowed again, at eight thousand, she suddenly leapt into the air, screamed like a banshee and started dancing.

Her movements were completely different from mine. She moved like a hunting cat, deadly, aggressive, and totally unslavelike. But the bidding started again and by the end of her dance, she’d broken the ten thousand mark. But it wasn’t done yet. The auctioneer began the next part of his pitch.

“If you’ve read the catalog, you’d know Delilah is a practicing bisexual, a trained masseuse, a student of Hokkaido and an artist of no small skill. With a combination of skills like that, I say ten thousand is a great bargain. However, I happen to know she’s worth more than that.”

There were a couple of more bids, bringing her close to eleven thousand, but she didn’t reach it. I had thought she’d get more and wondered, if she could only break ten thousand, how much could I possibly go for.

She was sold to a master from Spain whose name I didn't catch. When she left the stage, she didn't look pleased. I caught her arm as she passed. "Are you okay?"

"Low bidding tonight. I think a lot of them are waiting for the best girls at the end."

"That sucks."

"Tell me about it. I'd better get going. Good luck out there."

She gave me a brief hug and a kiss on the cheek. Then she was gone, just as the second girl was being announced.

"And now from Tokyo, Japan, lot #312, trained in Tokyo by Master Nim, welcome to the stage...Sashi! No spitfire this girl, but an obedient twenty-two year old that knows her place and manners. The bidding begins at four thousand for this exquisitely trained Japanese masseuse."

The second set of bids didn't go as well. Sashi displayed well on stage, but didn't have the fire of the first girl and though she danced and even stripped completely, the bidding died down just shy of seven thousand dollars.

She seemed quite upset as she passed me, but I didn't speak to her for I was about to be called.

"And now, from New York City, lot #714, a twenty-seven year old, new to the collar. That's right, a woman never before mastered by any man. She's an actress, a dancer, a bookkeeper, trained in Florida by Mistress Marika. She's a perfect addition to any collection. Come on out, Sandy."

I walked out slowly, demurely, head down, as I'd been instructed. I almost shuffled. Several of the men called out lewd comments, a few laughed.

"Let's start the bidding at five thousand. Five thousand. Anyone?"

There was no answer, and I started to grow angry, which I suppose is what they wanted. Without warning, a drummer started playing, and I began to sway, slowly at first, then seeming to find the rhythm. No one moved or spoke as I slowly warmed to the growing desire I could feel in the audience. The first

bid was called then, and I danced in that direction, kneeling for the bidder, but still swaying, dancing, moving.

I danced my little slave heart out and by the time I was done, I'd hit the seven thousand mark. Then I danced to the podium, knelt before it, and licked up its length, slowly, while moaning and writhing as if in heat. The bidding continued up to over eight thousand. I rolled onto my stomach and looked up at them, then slowly pushed myself up, arching my back, head thrown back as if in orgasm. One more bid, then nothing.

I'd realized before I came out that I wasn't likely to get a huge amount, but I did want to hit at least ten thousand. I rose, whirled and took the mic from the auctioneer. This wasn't something planned, and he looked a bit nervous, but relinquished it anyway. I didn't say anything, not at first, but looked out over the expectant crowd. I suppose I was looking for Nicco, but didn't see him anywhere.

In my sexiest voice I sang, "I Want to Be Loved By You", to a suddenly active crowd. I worked the stage as only an actress could, and suddenly the bids were on the verge of the ten thousand mark. When I was done, I handed the mic back to the auctioneer. He smiled his gratitude.

"Oh come on. Will no one bid ten thousand for this unconquered woman?"

"Ten thousand." I didn't recognize the voice. I thought the accent was eastern European.

"Ten thousand, one hundred."

And then, silence. I knelt, back arched proudly, waiting for another bid, but none was forthcoming.

"The current bid stands at ten thousand one hundred. Do I hear two hundred? You've seen her dance, you've heard her sing...what about it? Ten thousand two hundred, anyone?"

Not a sound from the audience. I had no idea what my Master even looked like. I wanted to try to find him in the crowd, but would not break position.

“Going once, going twice, going three...”

“Fifty thousand dollars.”

A great rumble spread through the audience. I almost leapt up, would have, had my training been less effective. The voice had been Nicco’s.

The auctioneer almost dropped his gavel. “Did I hear that right?”

He had told me he wouldn’t bid on me. Why? Why the sudden change of heart? I felt a presence and looked to my right. Another girl knelt on stage beside me. She turned to face me. It was all I could do to keep from fainting. Beside me, wearing a smile I’d despaired of ever seeing again, knelt Jaycee. I turned back to the audience and saw Nicco was staring right at her.

“Yes, you heard right. Fifty thousand American dollars.”

The crowd fell silent. The auctioneer cleared his throat. “The current bid is fifty thousand. Any final offers.”

No one budged.

“Sold, to Nicco for fifty thousand...at his own auction.”

There was much cheering. I didn’t understand it at the time, but later learned many people were waiting for Nicco to make that first purchase, and they felt he’d done well, even though he’d overpaid by quite a bit.

I could barely contain my excitement. I had freed Jaycee, and she’d returned the favor. The auctioneer was talking to me, instructing me to go backstage, but I didn’t. I only had eyes for Nicco. I rose and jumped off the stage into the crowd. Several of the men tried to catch me, not that I needed them to, but they did a passable job anyway. They set me down on the floor. I saw Nicco coming toward me and moved to meet him.

When he reached me, I knelt before him. He pulled me to my feet and embraced me tightly. I was certain I was the only person who could hear his whispered words.

“I thought I’d lost you.”

“No, my Master, my love, you haven’t lost me. I’m all yours.”

A cheer went up from the crowd. They parted for us as we made our way to the ballroom door. Several masters congratulated Nicco on the way out, but I was certain he heard none of it.

Only when we'd left and the doors were closed behind us, did I finally talk again.

"I love you, Nicco."

I thought he might cry, but of course, he didn't. He was Talean and had more control than that. "And I love you."

"You saw her, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"So, you believe me now?"

"Yes, I do."

I embraced him again and this time stayed there, knowing that somehow, in a world of men, I'd found my perfect Master on the very first shot.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get you home."

Home. It was just what I was looking for. When I walked away from that auction, a free woman no longer, I realized what Kate had been trying to tell me since I'd arrived, for in my twenty-seven years of life, I'd never felt as free as I did at that moment.

## Epilogue

Nicco took me to his private apartments on the top floor of the hotel. It was the first time I'd been there and was amazed. The view was astounding, the furnishings antique and there was plenty of art on the walls and even some statues. Nicco, apparently, collected art. In the days to come, I would spend many hours studying every detail of Nicco's apartment, but just then, it didn't matter where I was. That I was with Nicco was enough.

He took me into the living room and sat on the black leather couch. I knelt before him, body still flushed, still wearing the flimsy excuse for a garment I'd been given.

"You don't have to kneel."

"What?"

"You're free. You don't have to kneel to me."

I looked up confused. "Master?"

"You're free, Sandy. I'm not going to hold you."

I felt as if I might cry. "I don't understand."

He sighed, leaned back and stared at the ceiling. "You came here to find out what happened to your sister. You succeeded. I think it would be unfair to make you pay for your loyalty by having to spend your life as a slave. I'm freeing you, because you deserve to be free."

"What if I don't want that?"

He sat up, stunned. "What?"

"What if I want to be your slave?" I couldn't believe what I was saying.

"Then you may do so as long as you desire. How does that sound?"

I smiled, truly happy for the first time in months. "It sounds perfect, my Master."

I leaned forward and placed my head against his thigh. He stroked my hair and sighed contentedly. We stayed that way for a long time, happy to finally be together, but the longer I knelt there, the hotter I got. Every fantasy I'd ever had about Nicco came to mind. It didn't hurt that my mouth was so close to his cock. I remembered my dream in vivid detail, how he had kissed me...how he'd touched me. He was touching me now too.

Nicco's hand on my cheek, my neck, my ear, was beginning to have the desired effect. I had been stroking his thigh in response without even realizing it. I watched as if hypnotized, as my hand slid higher and higher, closer and closer to the bulge in his trousers. His hand on my neck and face felt so good, so soothing so...right, but I was rapidly approaching the point where it wasn't enough. My hand slid still closer, mouth open, eyes beginning to unfocus, when Nicco caught my wrist.

"No, Sandy."

"No?"

"Not yet."

He pulled me up onto the sofa, so I was sitting next to him, then pushed me gently back against the plush leather. I could feel my heart in my throat. He was so strong, so powerful, there was nothing I could do but let him have his way. At the thought, my juices began to flow. I shuddered with pleasure, and he'd barely done anything...yet.

His hands slid over my body, slowly, up and down under my skimpy slave garment, leaving no inch of my skin untouched. He alternated between using his nails, palms, the tips of his fingers. He stroked my sides, my tummy, my throat, my thighs...reached beneath to rub my back, my ass, then turned his attention to my breasts. I gasped and writhed under his touch, almost crying at the intensity of the sensations he aroused in me. He didn't stop. His hands

were strong, slightly rough, relentless in their pursuit of my pleasure, and I melted under their expertise.

Without warning, he pinched my left nipple, then released it and stroked it with three fingers. I arched my back, arms encircling, pulling him closer, wanting him inside me, but it was like trying to move a mountain. He continued to work on my nipples, first one, then the other. At some point, the slave garment was removed from my body, but I don't recall when, or understand how he accomplished it. I was so lost in need, I could barely think of anything but his hands...until he lowered his mouth and started kissing me.

His first area of attack was my throat. His warm, strong lips kissed gently at first, then harder. He started sucking at my neck, and I convulsed, hands clawing at his back. I almost came from that, but Nicco wasn't done with me, and I didn't want him to be. His thigh was between my legs, knee pressed into the sofa. When I arched, my pussy rubbed against the fabric of his slacks. He pushed his thigh hard between my legs, and I writhed against him, moaning, panting with need, wanting to feel this way forever.

His lips moved to mine, covering my mouth, drawing me in to the most passionate kiss of my life. I did come then, my body pressing against his with need so urgent it blocked out all else. It was the most intense orgasm of my life, yet it was only the beginning. Making love to Nicco was like being caught in a current, inexorably dragging me into the depths. His passion was a force of nature. There was no way to fight it, no resistance I could offer, nothing I could do but pray I didn't drown. And still his lips pushed against mine, harder now, bruising them, while his tongue conquered my mouth.

And while he kissed me, his hands were still busy wandering the landscape of my body. He could do as he wanted with me, and I could do nothing but respond, as if my body truly belonged to him, had always belonged to him, would be his forever more.



When his lips finally left mine, it was as if a hole had opened in the universe, and I was bereft, my mouth straining to find the only thing that could sustain it. The feeling of loss lasted only seconds, before his lips alighted on my breasts.

Then he was kissing, suckling, licking my nipples and the areas surrounding them. He used his tongue, his lips, his teeth. He nibbled, pulled and sucked me into his mouth, until I wanted to scream, did scream, coming again, with an intensity even greater than before. Still, he was not done with me.

Suddenly, his weight was on me no longer and I cried out, grasping air. His departure was like the setting of the sun, and I was left cold and alone. I wanted him inside me so bad, wanted to feel the heat of his skin against me, wanted to breathe in the scent of him, yet I just lay panting, aching, dying each second we were apart.

His strong arms slid under my back and he lifted me from the sofa. My arms went instinctively to his neck, my lips to his chest and I kissed the hairs there, breathed him in as if my life depended on his presence. I was no longer certain it wasn't true.

He moved through the apartment with confident strides, but I didn't notice anything but the feel of my body against his, the way his muscles moved under me as he carried me down the long carpeted hallway to his bedroom.

The bed was king-sized, circular and sported a canopy above that contained a mirror spanning its length. When I opened my eyes, I could see his back. He was removing his shirt. I wanted to help, but felt powerless. All I could do was watch as the muscles of his back were revealed, moving and bunching as he opened his trousers and worked both them and his briefs off at the same time.

Nicco's body was tanned, muscular. Women are often compared to cats, but he was like a lion, a predator so dangerous, so powerful, it was hard to imagine

doing anything but submitting to his will. Yet he also showed he could be gentle, thoughtful, attentive, a combination I couldn't resist.

His lips and tongue were on me again, back to my throat, but working their way down my body, past my aching breasts, sliding along my tummy, then down, down to the fronts of my thighs. My legs parted, hands above my head, back arched, body ready for whatever he wanted next, yet nothing prepared me for the feel of his tongue inside me.

The first thrust was hard, unexpected. His tongue entered me. I screamed and pushed into his face, trying to drive it deeper. He circled, painting my inner walls, the walls of my cunt, with such strength. I was a puppet, his tongue the hand, and he controlled me as might any puppeteer. I was powerless, yet empowered, dying, yet more alive than I'd ever been. His tongue continued to work within, building me to heights that made the pleasure of minutes ago seem almost insignificant.

My hands went to his head, pushing him into me, but his hands found my wrists and moved them to my sides, held them captive, while his tongue continued to work its magic. Then he removed it, traced the length of my slit until he reached my clit. He teased it so gently, I wasn't sure he was even touching it, then harder, until he was literally spanking it with his tongue. Then I was coming, spasming, surrendering my juices to this man who had taken me so utterly.

Before I could catch my breath, he was face to face with me and his cock was inside, the head rubbing my already sensitive walls, the thickness of it filling me as I'd never been filled before. I circled my pelvis, jerking that cock off, wanting to feel him release inside me. I wanted it all, every drop, my need to feel it became a frenzy. I wanted to eat him alive, devour him, pull the cum from his balls.

I wanted to embrace him, but he still held my hands pinioned to my sides and no matter how I struggled, I couldn't budge them. His lips sought mine

again, and I could taste myself, smell my submission on his mouth. I wanted to come again, but wouldn't until I felt him shoot his cum inside.

His thrusts became more urgent, his body began to stiffen, I could feel his need building and it was like a drug. I moved harder, faster, demanding the cum from him. He drove into me, body slamming against mine, sweat making our bodies slick, almost frictionless. His control was godlike. He kept going until I couldn't breathe. Then his cock swelled within, grew impossibly huge and with one mighty thrust, he let go. His scream of triumph/pleasure tore at me...shattered me. I clung to him, so I wouldn't be lost in the maelstrom of his strength. I could feel the muscles in his shaft clenching and relaxing, pumping hot cum into me, each spurt pushing me to a new high.

At that moment, I knew I was owned...completely. There was nothing left in me but my desire to be Nicco's...to please him...serve him. To be whatever he needed, whenever he needed. It was the most satisfying feeling in the world.

I came again, one last time, surrendering to Nicco my mind, heart and soul. Finally my hands were free, and they moved to his ass, pulling him into me, never wanting it to end. I don't know which of us screamed louder in that final moment, when the muscles of his magnificent body finally let go and he collapsed onto me, completely spent. And still I could feel his cock pulsing within, matching my own satisfied spasms.

We slept like that for a long time, Nicco inside, pressing down on me, my hands still on his ass.

When I woke, I stared at him, this man who was my Master, now more than ever before. I observed him for the first time as only a lover could, the small wrinkles at the corners of his eyes, the set of his lips, the way his chest raised and lowered in the gentle rhythm of sleep. Gently I licked his lips, tasting the remnants of our lovemaking. He opened his gray-blue eyes and the corners of his lips turned upwards into a smile. His eyes danced, though he was still exhausted from the conquering.

“Hello, beautiful.”

I returned his smile with a tired one of my own. “Hello, my Master.”

He burrowed his head into my shoulder, then bit it gently. I moaned.

“Oh God, I love you, Nicco.” And I realized it was truer than I had previously believed.

“And I love you...have for some time.”

“Tell me you’ll never sell me.”

His eyes widened in surprise or perhaps reproach. “No.”

“What?”

He laughed. “I wouldn’t want you to get too comfortable. You know, comfortable slaves are complacent. It wouldn’t do to let you get too secure.”

I giggled and kissed him. “You’re a bad, bad man.”

“Of course. I’m a Talean. We’re all bad men.”

I shook my head. “No. No you aren’t. You’re just men.”

He rolled off me, but kept his hand draped possessively over my body, though I could tell from his expression, he had grown serious.

“Are you sure, Sandy? Is this what you really want? You can go back you know. You still have your apartment, your job, your friends.”

It was my turn to laugh. “I had nothing in New York City. Nothing real anyway. This is more real than anything I’ve had in my entire life. I’d be insane to go back to what and who I was.”

Nicco’s grin made me glad to be alive. “I’m glad to hear you say that, because I don’t want to let you go.”

“You don’t have to. Don’t ever let me go.”

As I lay there, wrapped in the warmth of Nicco’s love, I finally knew what Leila had meant when she had spoken of her freedom. Jaycee wasn’t the only one who had died. Sandra Castilla had died as well, leaving behind only a Talean slave named Sandy, who would serve her Master for as long as she was allowed.

## About the Author

To learn more about Nage Archer, please visit [www.nagearcher.com](http://www.nagearcher.com). Send an email to Nage Archer at [www.nagearcher.com](mailto:www.nagearcher.com) or join his Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well at [http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Master\\_Nage\\_Speaks](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Master_Nage_Speaks)

Look for these titles by Nage Archer

*Now Available:*

Scorch

*Sex can be the most devastating weapon*

## Scorch

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Frank Aston has what most men would consider a dream job. As bodyguard to Lady Jacqueline, the heir to Baron Ceston's throne and fortune, he gets to watch her every moment of every day. He knows each inch of her cruel, tantalizing body from her almost black eyes to her long, sensuous legs. But he can never lay a hand on her, not even to save his own life. He can't even reveal a conspiracy against his own liege, the baron, for fear some harm will come to her. On the other hand, Lady Jacqueline has absolutely no regard for his safety or sanity at all.

Lady Jacqueline's dangerous string of seductions leads Frank deeper and deeper into a conspiracy he's unable to reveal. Worse still, the heiress is hell bent on dominating him, breaking his will until he becomes just another man willing to do anything to please his Mistress.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Scorch*:

And just like that, he was gone, leaving me alone with Dr. Naran.

"Come."

She turned and entered the inner office. I had never been here before and I didn't like the look of the place at all. The room wasn't very large. Off to the side was something that looked like a cross between a bed of nails and a clam. There were obvious protrusions on both the top and the bottom, suspended in some sort of gray cushion. The other side of the room consisted of a large panel, hosting a number of buttons, levers and dials, which obviously controlled the table.

“Get undressed.”

I began to unbutton my shirt. She watched, focusing on me in a way that made me most uncomfortable. I shrugged the shirt from my shoulders and pulled it off. Her eyes never wavered. I wondered if this is what women felt like when they stripped for me.

Of course, this woman was a complete stranger. I didn't know her at all, had never seen her before our recent introduction. I couldn't remember the last time I'd been embarrassed undressing in front of a woman. I had thought those days were behind me, but I was wrong.

She must have sensed my mood, for she spoke. “There is nothing to be embarrassed about, Frank. During the next couple of weeks, I'm going to be working with your body and your mind, inside and out. You will have no secrets from me. I will share your darkest nightmares and your most intimate experiences. I will know you better than you even know yourself. I will surf your most secret thoughts and mold them to my will. When I am done with you, you will be what I want you to be, no more, no less.”

I didn't say anything, but noticed my hand shaking as I placed it on the strips that held up my pants. It amazed me that after all these years, men's trousers were still fastened in this manner. I jerked and the sound of my fly coming undone tore through the room. It was the only act of defiance I would be allowed. I let my pants drop to the floor and stepped from them.

“All of it.”

I shrugged, bent over and slid off my briefs. Then I rose and stood before her, the very act almost a defiance in and of itself. I would not cower or act embarrassed. Nor would I allow her to make me her toy. I had a will and would use it.

“Now what?” I asked.

She gestured to the machine. “Make yourself comfortable.”



I turned to regard it. I had a feeling this would be horribly unpleasant, but then, disobeying a direct order would be worse. I approached it and reached out a hand. The foam was comfortable and even the protrusions were softer than I'd thought they would be. Without wasting any more time, I sat on the edge of the table, then lay down. I felt my naked body sink into the foam.

Dr. Naran walked to her control panel and pressed a button. The top half of the machine closed over me until my body was engulfed. I wondered how I'd breathe. I couldn't speak. I felt a moment of profound claustrophobia and fought it down. I soon realized I could feel nothing, see nothing, hear nothing. I had once been in a sensory deprivation chamber and it was much like this.

I seemed to have no trouble breathing, which was something of a relief. Still, I felt anything but relaxed. Then Dr. Naran's voice entered my mind.

"Hello, Frank. Ah, good, I see you can hear me. I'm going to run a few tests on you. Primarily responses to different stimuli. I need to know what makes you react and how. Some of this will, no doubt, be painful. At other times you may feel pleasure. Just relax and let yourself go. The more you fight, the longer this session will last."

I found myself holding my breath and released it. What seemed like a long time later, I felt the temperature drop. An icy wind passed through my entire body, starting with my toes and working its way up. It was as if someone had decided to pull a sheet of frost over me. Then, just as suddenly, it was gone.

It grew hot. Perspiration coated my body. I wanted nothing more than to withdraw from the sensation, but that wasn't allowed and in fact, after a short while, the heat increased in intensity until I could no longer stand it. My muffled screams didn't alter the level of pain, but I was powerless to struggle. Even if the machine didn't hold me in place, it

seemed I had no control over my muscles. I mentally writhed in agony, until, many minutes later, the heat faded, leaving me gasping and sobbing.

For a long time, nothing happened. Then I felt tiny electric shocks touch various portions of my anatomy. My fingers, toes, nipples. Here and there, as if some tiny flying insect were circling my body, irritating me each time it landed. The charges increased in both frequency and power and it was more than just irritation. The back of my neck, behind my left eye, my right knee, my left testicle. The sensation grew more unpleasant, bordering on painful and the intensity continued to increase. Each new shock took me to a higher level of pain, until I thought I would die from it. This time, however, I found I could not scream. I had to lie motionless and endure it. I had no way to measure the passage of time, but I was sure it went on for hours. When it stopped, I was no longer certain I was within the boundaries of sanity.

I felt my body shudder and felt my cock begin to harden. I didn't want it to and fought the sensation. It was uncomfortable, considering it was pointing in the wrong direction. I could feel it pushing up into the foam. But as it grew harder, I felt my desire grow as well, until I couldn't think of anything but release. I found myself gasping for air and uselessly tried to grab my cock. I had never known such desire and when it ended, I wept as I'd never wept before. But this was only the beginning of the torment.

"I can see your thoughts, Frank. You're angry with me. You want to hurt me, but you can't. You're powerless to do anything against me."

The next voice that spoke was that of my mother, who had died when I was ten. "Frankie, you know better than that. Behave yourself, young man."

Then I heard a new voice, belonging to one of my teachers. She had taught Interstellar History and I'd barely been able to concentrate, as I'd

been distracted by her large, firm breasts and narrow waist. Her long brown hair reached almost all the way to her nicely rounded ass. I couldn't even remember her name, but I recognized her voice immediately.

"I know you want me, Frank. Why don't you come here. That's a good boy. Suck on my tit, Frank. Suck! Suck hard! Ohhh yes, that's good. Suck it, boy. Suck my tit!"

In my altered state of consciousness, I almost didn't recognize this as one of my own adolescent fantasies. My cock grew hard again, as hard as before and I sucked and sucked, as she bade me. On some level I knew I was still in the machine, but that no longer mattered. I finally had my tutor where I'd always wanted her. I sucked even harder, hands sliding down over her curves.

Her own hands responded, touching me, trailing down my cheek, neck, chest, lower and lower, until I thought I would die from anticipation. She touched my cock and I felt it jump. I moaned and tried to fight the sensation. I was still in the clam and Dr. Naran was still watching. I wondered if she was doing anything else. I wondered what her body looked like, beneath that white lab coat.

Then my teacher's hand grabbed my cock more firmly and I was returned to the moment. Her eyes glazed over as she stroked, up and down. I clenched my teeth, but couldn't stop myself from thrusting into her.

"That's very good, Frank. Sooo good."

Her hand moved harder and faster, until I was panting. I couldn't think anymore. I could barely see. The only sensation in the world was that of her fingers on my cock, stroking and squeezing. I needed to come more than I'd ever needed anything in my life.

*A young woman from the mean streets of modern Europe finds true love in the ranks of the aristocracy...in the most untraditional way.*

## La Bonne

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How do you get a playboy prince to take an arranged marriage seriously, especially when his fiancée is eighteen and as innocent as fresh snow? Hire a young woman from the wrong part of town to turn her into a mantrap, of course.

But what happens when the maid discovers that awakening passion in her noble mistress touches her in ways she had not expected? And when the prince decides he's ready to settle down for good...with the maid!

Now the maid must find a way to answer the age-old question. Was Marie Antoinette right—can she have her cake and eat it too?

A light-hearted and very erotic romp through France and the Mediterranean, with a prince, a princess, an unruly ex-boyfriend, wicked paparazzi, fabulous jewelry, a royal wedding, and the luckiest maid in the world.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *La Bonne*:

Over the next few nights, we conducted regular kissing sessions. Amanda was a quick learner, and I began to realize that we had passed what she could learn from practicing. I continued to indulge, because it was my job to indulge her, or so I told myself. I would not admit just how much I enjoyed it, how flattering it was that she found my company and my touch so desirable, or how exhilarating it was that this golden goddess would so gladly stoop to obey me.

But obedience was the problem, I realized. Amanda did what I asked, but not more, because she did not know there was more. It was like the thunder without the lightning. Amanda's kisses needed desire, hunger, a promise of things to come.

"I think you're ready to move to the next step," I told her one night.

"The next step?" she asked, wide-eyed. More than ready, I thought.

"You know there are, um, other things that Petros will do, right?"

"Yes," she blushed, "at least, I assumed there were."

So she didn't know.

"Here's the thing, Amanda. It's not going to work for you, unless you are ready." I remembered my first time. Then I remembered much later, when I finally discovered why everybody thought it was so much fun.

"Petros won't hurt me," she said. "I know that much."

"That's not what I mean. There's more to it than what he does."

"Like what?" She was truly innocent.

"Like what happens to you. Like being carried away on an ocean wave. Like being enveloped in a lake of glorious fire."

Now I had her attention.

"But to get there, Amanda, you have to help him. He can't take you there alone."

"Show me," she begged, "show me how to help him."

"Have you ever, you know...touched...yourself?"

Her eyebrows arched, and I knew the answer was no. Now I was tongue-tied and feeling foolish. How was I going to explain this to her?

"Touched myself where? What do you mean? Could you show me?" she asked shyly, and I almost died from shame.

"No, of course not!" She flinched and I realized how harsh my words sounded. "I'm sorry, Amanda. I didn't mean it that way. It's just, you know, something you do in private."

"Then how will I learn?" she almost wailed.

“Bathtub,” I said, relieved to finally have an idea. The bathtub was perfect—a place where you were naked, relaxed, and with a rough yet soft washcloth close at hand. “When you take a bath, I’ll show you.”

“Let’s do it now,” she suggested. “I feel like a bath anyway.” We’d been kissing for half an hour by now, and I felt like I could use a cold shower too.

I went to draw the water, turning on the silver taps in her huge marble private bath. She stepped out of the white silk slip of a nightgown she had been wearing and walked into the bathroom with me.

There was a brief embarrassed moment over her nakedness. Then it was past, and we were comfortable together, two close friends with nothing between us.

I watched her step demurely into that clear water, her breasts full, her nipples standing up like they always did during our practice sessions. The gentle rise between her thighs called to me, and that dark hunger to possess welled up inside me like a black fountain. Now clear-headed and unrestrained, I helped her down into the warm water.

Taking a cloth, I began to wash her back. “Just relax,” I told her, bizarrely confident. “Just let yourself go, and don’t worry about anything.” The words seemed strangely familiar, but of course they did—they were the sort of words men had said to me.

Stroking her gently, I washed her arms and legs. I could see her melting. “Close your eyes,” I whispered, and began to wipe the cloth over her perfect breasts. She breathed in heavily, and that affected me so much that I squeezed my hand, firmly grasping her breast, the nipple pressing through the cloth to my hand.

She did not pull away, but sat there with her eyes closed, willing to submit to whatever I chose to do to her.

“Relax,” I commanded, and slowly moved the cloth south, letting it trickle against her skin the entire way. When I reached that perfect,

feathery strip of gold, I let the cloth pile up on it, one fold at a time, and then I pressed down with my hand and rubbed.

Her eyes opened now, and I smiled at her with that hungry look I had seen so many times before on the faces of the men who had touched me like that. “Just let it happen,” I told her, and kept rubbing tenderly.

When she began to arch her hips into my hand, my sensibilities got the better of me. “Now you,” I told her, and replaced my hand with hers. “Do that yourself.”

“Will you watch me?” she asked, so innocently I could not say no.

“Of course,” I said, and sitting there at the edge of the vast marble tub, I did. The sight could not have failed to move anyone. She was a beautiful and pure creature discovering the ultimate pleasure. It was like watching an angel learn to fly.

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