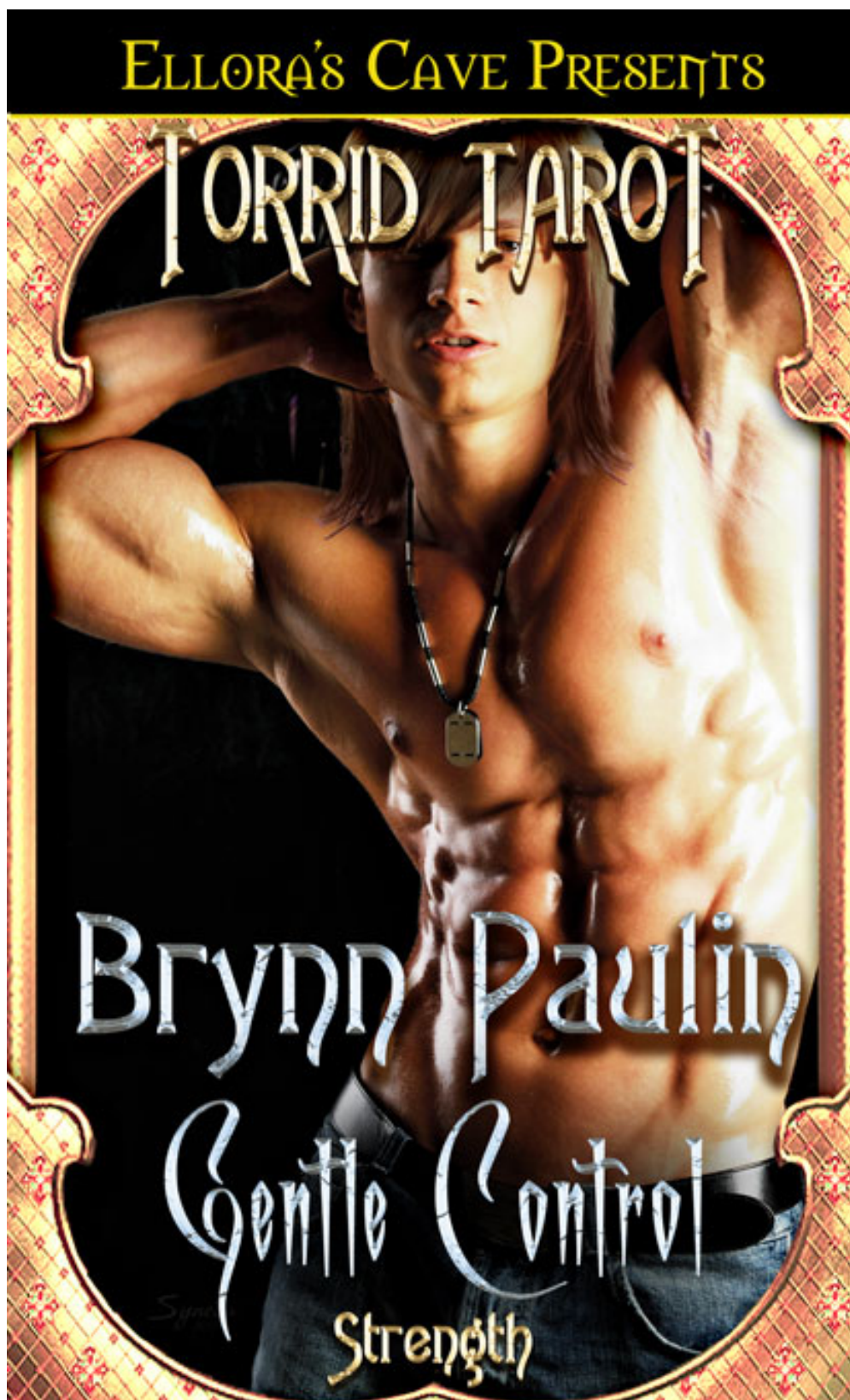


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

TORRID TAROT

Brynn Paulin

Gentle Control
Strength



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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Gentle Control

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GENTLE CONTROL

Brynn Paulin

Dedication

To Chuck – the hero of my story

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the great William Shakespeare for letting me borrow a famous line from one of my favorite plays, *The Tempest*. Hearing “we are such stuff as dreams are made on” will never be the same.

Author Note

Gentle Control portrays some aspects of Domination/submission and BDSM but is not intended as a true-to-life account of this lifestyle.

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Strength

Dear Reader,

Strength. When some people hear this word, they think of physical power. Given this, a glance at the Strength card can be confusing. In most tarot decks, a maiden is shown with a lion. The lion is not overpowering her. She is gently closing its mouth. This is because the card doesn't represent brute strength—it signifies inner power. When this card comes up in a reading, it means one may face a challenging situation, a family matter or a problem from the past. In *Gentle Control*, the hero, Josh Cress, experiences all three in the prim package of Tempest Montgomery, the challenging submissive from his past.

In this story, we are presented with both aspects of the Strength card. Josh represents the upright manifestation. Throughout the story, he exhibits inner strength. A Dom by nature, he controls Tempest's mind and body through gentle signals, eventually bringing her under his mastery. His quiet compassion breaks through her defenses and in turn gives her strength to face her own challenges.

On the other hand, Tempest's father, John, represents the shadow side of strength. A man full of pride, he prizes appearances and tends to lose his temper. He's an emotional tyrant. He uses manipulation, fear and social power to control others, including his daughter.

Faced with both sides of the Strength card, Tempest must decide in which direction she will bend. Toward inner strength or toward fear and manipulation.

Chapter One

There he was. The worst mistake of her life and she had to talk to him. Tempest Montgomery looked across the nearly empty restaurant to the area where Josh Cress sat with his family. She recognized his three brothers but not the women with them. Wives, perhaps? None was Josh's wife. She knew that.

She wasn't into stalking but it had taken exactly two phone calls to find out what she needed to know. Josh was still single, unattached and could be found having breakfast at Manolo's on Thursday morning. His brother Max, who remembered her from years ago and apparently was sympathetic to her cause, had provided that information. She hadn't needed him to tell her why the family was gathered. She remembered why. Josh's birthday.

She'd left him on his birthday. Eight years ago.

And she'd never spoken to him again.

She needed to talk with him now.

For a moment she studied his profile. Thick brown hair fell to his wide shoulders framing one of the most masculinely beautiful faces she'd ever seen. A glint of a tiny hoop winked from one of his dark brows. That was new. Her fingers itched to flick over it then trace across his strong forehead and nose. He'd always closed his beautiful gray eyes while she investigated the smooth lines of his cheekbones.

His head tilted to the side as he gave the woman across from him a half-smile.

Beautiful, Tempest thought again, remembering how self-conscious she'd been in public with him. Women had fawned over him and she'd gotten the look that said "Why the hell is he with her?". Perhaps it was that condemnation which had made it so easy to walk away. She bit the inside of her lip. It hadn't been easy. At the time it had seemed she'd never recover but she'd had no choice. Her father had seen to that.

With slow steps, she headed toward the party. She would have preferred to speak to Josh alone with no witnesses but she couldn't wait for the opportunity to catch him off-guard and alone. Only Josh could give her the peace of mind and closure she needed before she took the next step of her life. He just didn't know it.

Josh tried not to make faces while his sister-in-law Keera spoke. This was so hokey. Let me spread out these tarot cards and do my woo-woo thing and I'll tell you everything you don't already know about your life. Right. A bunch of useless cards weren't going to answer the burning questions that didn't actually linger in his soul.

Trying not to look bored – his siblings and his three sisters-in-law were watching – he rubbed his tongue piercing on the roof of his mouth and studied the odd cards. Everyone had insisted he should have a birthday reading and as much as he'd tried, he hadn't been able to get out of it.

"This is the most important card in the spread," Keera said as she examined the tarot spread. "It's what all the other cards were leading toward."

"Okay..." he replied slowly. This was a bunch of crap. He needed to get home to finish packing for his trip to the Upper Peninsula and call in to the office to check on his team. Though he was on a two-month sabbatical, he couldn't blithely take off without knowing his second-in-command had figured out the annoying glitch sending all the company's spam into the CEO's inbox. His father – said CEO – wasn't pleased about it. It had caused such a problem that he'd skipped this morning's breakfast in order to sort legitimate business correspondence from junk. He'd insisted that Josh still go with his siblings.

He sighed. He couldn't in good conscience leave town until he knew the email fubar was fixed.

"Oh, look it's the Strength card!" Keera exclaimed.

Big freaking deal. He barely restrained a derisive snort. "Yeah. Cool," he said dryly.

“Josh, don’t be a big stick-in-the-mud. This is a great card. It’s not about physical power. It’s about gentle control and compassion. It’s about being freed from fears and discovering love is stronger than fear or hate.”

He stiffened, glancing around the table. “I’m not scared of anything, Keera.”

She sighed. “Everyone’s afraid of something. And even more, this card signifies digging deep inside yourself for inner strength to deal with a situation.”

“That’s the last card, right?” he asked. Time to leave. The insistence that he’d conquer his fears was beginning to make him uncomfortable. He only had two Achilles’ heels and the one that worried him most was far in his past. He’d put his weaknesses far behind him.

He stood. “Well, this has been fun. I need to go.”

“This may mean you’ll resolve a difficult situation from your past, using your inner strength.”

Josh froze, a brand of trepidation he hadn’t felt in eight years crawling up his spine. The fingers of one hand fisted and he took a deep breath. All of his brothers were staring at him. It was his oldest brother, Theo, who spoke.

“Tempest.”

Josh’s teeth ground together. Yeah, she would be that worrisome Achilles’ heel. From time to time, thoughts of her still woke him at night with a raging hard-on. It was damned annoying. Tempest was over and done with.

“Who’s Tempest?” Keera asked.

“No one,” he answered quickly.

“Gee thanks, Josh. It’s good to know how you feel right up front.”

Josh turned toward the soft voice and looked into a pair of the darkest brown eyes he’d ever seen. Eyes he’d never thought to see again. Hurt eyes.

He was good at hurting her. Well that and being an ass, he acknowledged. Why else would she have taken off and never given him the time of day again? Still, he couldn't stop his next words. "What do you want?"

Behind him, he heard Keera gathering up her cards and chairs sliding back. "I think it's time to get back to the office, don't you think?" Max said. The others agreed and in moments the three couples and his sister were gone, leaving him alone with Tempest. His past. He needed to remember that. Tempest was his past.

"I need to talk to you," she said.

He stared at her in disbelief. *She what?* "You're about eight years too late."

Her eyes momentarily dropped shut as she acknowledged her action. "I know. I had no choice."

"You chose your family—your father—over me. I can't accept that." He swiped his hand through the air. "It doesn't matter. It's all ancient history. Which leads me back to...what do you want?"

She looked around and he suspected she was uncomfortable talking to him about whatever it was she wanted while they stood in the middle of a restaurant. It must be some doozy of a topic.

"Is there somewhere we can talk? Privately?" she asked. "Your car?"

He shook his head. "No. I'm on my way back to my apartment." He lifted an eyebrow. "I'm sure you don't want to go there. Probably the best thing for you to do is to get into whatever sporty car Daddy bought you and go back to your ivory tower. I have things to do."

"I took a cab here."

"You took a cab from Grand Rapids?" Grand Rapids was a good three hours from Brandywine, which was one of the reasons he'd never expected to see her here. Part of him wanted to know why she was here after all this time. Another part wanted to run

like hell. The most powerful part of him, however, wanted to grab her into his arms and kiss her until neither of them could breathe.

“No. I’m staying with my brother for a few weeks—in Westfield. I’ve been doing some company business with Miracles and Hope.”

Josh frowned knowing “company business” was her way of describing charity work, which was a euphemism for slave work. Even while he and Tempest had been in college, her father had her chasing all over God’s green acre disbursing money and services to needy organizations on behalf of Montgomery Enterprises. Apparently things hadn’t changed. According to John Montgomery, her father, caring for the needs of their fellow man was the utmost priority. A worthy goal but Josh would beg to differ. Basic care and nurture of self and one’s relationships should rank just as high, if not higher. Sure Tempest always looked perfectly coifed but the business owned her life and soul. It had pushed everything else out—including him.

He shoved aside his irritation. Tempest’s dysfunctional family commitments weren’t his problem anymore. It unsettled him that she was apparently staying a mere twenty minutes from Brandywine. He’d rested easier knowing she was hours away. That far away, he could pretend she hadn’t chosen her family over him. He could pretend someone named Tempest had never existed in his life and had never gouged out the center of his heart.

“And you just thought you’d stop by?” he grated. She shook her head, her light blonde hair brushing her shoulders. For the first time, he let his gaze stray from her face. A mistake. Immediate reaction grabbed his gut. He shouldn’t have allowed the weakness.

She still had those killer curves and he’d bet his best computer that she was still trying to lose them with everything in her. Pudge, she once told him, did not fit the Montgomery image. He lightly ran his hand over his washboard stomach, feeling the ridges through his oxford shirt. If Tempest was pudgy, he was too. God, she was Marilyn Monroe gorgeous. He couldn’t understand what she was thinking.

And she was still trying to hide all that loveliness behind those prissy clothes she felt she had to wear. He remembered her in curve-hugging jeans. He almost smiled. He recalled her in *only* jeans and nothing else, her beautiful breasts free for his taking. Those lush breasts pressed against her white silk blouse. The nipples peaked beneath his perusal.

His fingers flexed with his desire to cup the firm mounds.

Tempest shifted and crossed her arms. He glanced at the swivel of her hips.

"Are you about finished?" she snapped.

"It depends on what you want," he replied, wanting to drag her to the nearest deserted place and take her until neither of them could move. His cock concurred as it pressed against the fly of his jeans. He wouldn't succumb. "Are you going to tell me what brought you all the way to Brandywine?"

"Josh, please..."

He looked away remembering the last time she'd uttered those words to him. In a different tone, for a different reason. Minutes later she'd called him Master, begging him to let her find release. Neither of them had known her father had discovered the Dominant/submissive relationship they'd begun. Or that he'd force his way between them by the weekend.

"Do you remember the last time you said that?" he asked quietly.

A rose tinge crawled up her neck and into her cheeks. She looked away and closed her eyes for a second, obviously gathering her thoughts and perhaps courage. "I've been doing a lot of thinking and evaluating lately. I've never set things right with you. It seems like this big festering spot in my past. So I—"

"Festering? Nice." What the hell was this? After eight years, she showed up in the middle of his birthday breakfast, three hours from her home and asked him to give her closure? *Closure*? What about his peace of mind? Tempest was the one woman he'd ever wanted for his own and damn it from the moment he'd turned to see her beside him, his heart had been pounding with that need again.

She made a face.

"Back then, I didn't know how to handle things. There was my father. And you were so..." she trailed off.

Different, he finished silently. She'd wanted someone who wouldn't fit Daddy's bill of perfect escort material and he'd been the one. What did that make him? Rebellion?

Hell, this shouldn't bother him after all this time.

"Look, all this time I—"

"I think you've said enough," he interrupted sharply. Steeling himself for the blow of leaving her in the past again, he started for the door. Someone shouldn't have to leave behind their other half twice in a lifetime. But he couldn't not stay.

"Wait. Josh, please," she hissed following him through the heavy glass door to the sidewalk. "Listen to me."

"It seems to me that this is a repeat of a place we've been before. You should probably go inside and call that cab. Go home to your brother's house. Or Grand Rapids."

Her small hand curled around his arm. "Will you listen, please?"

He looked at her, trying to keep his face blank and not show the temptation running through him. "*What?*"

She looked around again as someone brushed past them. The sidewalk was quite busy.

"I'm engaged," she said suddenly. Just as suddenly, he thought he might hurl. She'd come to Brandywine to tell him she was engaged? After eight years? She'd claimed to want closure. Was he supposed to give his blessing?

That wasn't happening.

He started walking toward his bike. *Happy birthday, Josh. This is your life. Do you remember the woman who ripped your heart out? Well she's back for more. Only this time, there's a catch —*

"If you're engaged, what the fuck do you want with me? Does your precious fiancé know you're here?"

Her prissy little heels clattered on the sidewalk as she sprinted along beside him. He was just pissed enough that he didn't slow down. Angrily, he reached in his pocket for his keys. Suddenly, Tempest stopped. "Phillip doesn't know about you."

"Phillip," he repeated, tasting bile in his throat and wishing he didn't know the enemy's name. He turned, glaring at her across the five feet that separated them. Slowly he sized up the battleground. Now that she was here, could he let her merrily walk away with the "closure" she wanted? Not as easily as she might like. The decent thing would be to let bygones be bygones and wave her away with a well-wish.

The hell with decency. There was pain in her eyes again.

"You don't want to marry him?" he guessed.

She shrugged. "It just sort of...happened. He works for Daddy. And everyone thinks it's a great idea. He's a nice guy and I'll be happy enough. He wants kids. I want kids." She shrugged again. "He's supportive of my work. Nice."

Josh fought the overwhelming need to growl. He personally thought it was a horrible idea, but he had no say. The guy was "nice". She made him sound like goddamned Wally Cleaver. Josh knew exactly how happy she'd be with that. Unless she'd dramatically changed, Tempest didn't particularly get off on nice. Not the kind of nice she was describing. Phillip sounded like even more of a submissive than she was.

"So you've found Mr. Right?" he asked dryly. "And then suddenly you were struck with the undeniable need to track down the black mark on your pristine past. Are you still reading those self-help books about thinking yourself to a good future and karma and all that crap?"

She looked away. "If I have, it's not working. Look, it's like this. The closer I get to the wedding, the more you've been in my head not Phillip. That tells me something. I have an unresolved issue and if I want to be happy in my marriage, I'd better figure out what the heck my problem is."

Strange that she'd say that, especially in light of his upcoming trip. The sole reason for his sabbatical was to figure out what the hell was his problem. Funny, he suddenly seemed to have a very good idea why he'd been so unhappy and dissatisfied.

"You've been in my head. Unresolved and waiting. What is that?" she bit out in frustration and stomped her foot.

Josh tried not to laugh at the familiar display of anger. His cock went hard at the delightful jiggle of her breasts. He loved when she vibrated with emotion, tension drawing the lines of her body tight—tension he wanted to relieve. As she'd gotten worked up, her breathing had increased. It reminded him of the rapid-fire rise and fall of her chest after sex. It was enough to kill his minimal restraint, especially with the breeze pressing her skirt to her and outlining her strong thighs.

He'd apparently fucked up in a previous life. His sister-in-law was always spouting about karma and here it was. He put his hands on his hips and dropped his head forward, staring at the ground. There was no way he could share what he was thinking right now. She'd see it in his eyes if he looked at her.

She'd know he wanted to take her home and wrap himself in her body.

"I told everyone I needed more time before the wedding," she continued, unaware of his reaction. "They all think the little bride is nervous. I don't know what the hell little bride they're talking about." She drew a hand in front of her. "This isn't little."

"Tempest..." he warned reflexively. He couldn't help it. He'd always protested when she'd disparaged herself. Something broke inside him and all his carefully contained emotion flooded to his core. It exploded protective, possessive and needy. "You're not marrying him. You're mine."

"What do you mean?" she asked. Josh couldn't mean his statement the way it sounded. Tempest stared at him, sure he'd say more. He didn't. Nevertheless, there had to be something else to this. How could there not be after all this time?

The side of his mouth turned up while his gaze devoured her and spoke of all the things he'd been waiting to do. She couldn't help thinking she'd just jumped straight out of the frying pan and into the fire. And if the flames in Josh's eyes were any indication, she'd be reduced to ashes as soon as he touched her.

And there was no way she'd refuse him, even with Phillip waiting in the wings. She'd tried to break it off with him—something she didn't want to tell Josh. It was enough for him to know no one was listening to her. He didn't need to know that when she went home, she was as good as married. She'd been railroaded to this point. She didn't see that changing no matter how much she protested.

Really, as far as futures went, Phillip wasn't intolerable. He wanted most of the same things she did. He encouraged her "little photography hobby" and wanted a family, just like she did and he was up and coming at Montgomery Enterprises. Everything a woman could want, wasn't it?

Somehow she'd have to convince Phillip it was over. There was no question.

"I mean that you're right. There is something unresolved between us." He paused letting her see all the hunger in his gaze. A shiver ran down her spine before he continued. "I want to explore it and find...closure...too."

Her eyes narrowed. "How?"

"I want closure too. I never had a chance to get you out of my system. So...I want submission. Yours. To me. For two weeks."

Two weeks? She had to be back in Grand Rapids in ten days. Yet if they allowed their relationship go its natural course, maybe it wouldn't haunt her anymore and there'd be no more what ifs. Maybe...

It might be too late for them now, but she was willing to test those waters.

She clasped her hands behind her back, realizing afterward what she'd unconsciously done. She didn't suppose Josh had completely changed his sexual preferences. He was a Dominant, and if he wanted her for the next two weeks that would mean he wanted her as his submissive. Now.

She didn't change her position. Let him think what he wanted about her submissive pose.

Josh's lips parted, his eyes growing darker. He swallowed as he backed toward the motorcycle a few feet behind him. "Come here, angel," he growled.

Slowly she walked toward him, drawn by the same magnet that had held her for years. It was stronger now, undeniable. She wanted to be close to him, smell his scent, feel the heat that radiated from him. She'd missed him so much.

As soon as she was within arms' reach, he reached for her and lifted her to sit on the bike without so much as the grunt she expected when he hefted her weight. Without pause, he stepped between her legs, pushing her skirt up over her knees when it would have hindered him getting close. His hand slid into her hair and he brought her mouth to his.

Tempest sighed in pleasure at the taste of the mouth she'd missed so much. His tongue stabbed between her lips in long lazy strokes, a lethal mix of coffee and maple syrup. Agony for a girl on a diet. Arching into him, she wrapped her arms around his waist. Her hands splayed on his strong back. She wished he was wearing one of the soft cotton T-shirts he'd favored when they were together. She'd bunch her hands in it and pull it up so she could feel his smooth, satiny skin under her fingers. Now she contented herself with clasping the stiff fabric of his oxford and dragging him closer.

The spicy cologne he'd always worn enveloped her and filled her with sweet nostalgia as she welcomed his tongue. Being in his arms with his mouth on hers was like coming home. How on earth would she leave this embrace of belonging when the time came? She could only hope he was right about getting this desire out of their systems.

The piercing in the center of his tongue rubbed along the roof of her mouth, sending a decadent shiver down her spine. He hadn't had that before. What would it feel like on her skin? Her nipples? Her clit tingled as she remembered his mouth there and desired the sensation of that little metal ball running over her and driving her mad.

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes as he feasted on her mouth with tender, biting kisses. Every minute that she'd missed him and been without his dominance slammed down on her. The tears slithered down her cheek pooling at their joined lips.

"Hey," he said quietly, pulling back. He slid his thumb through the damp moisture. "What's this?"

"I didn't realize how much I missed you."

He swallowed hard. "The way I see it...we have a two-part problem here."

"Problem?" she echoed.

Her stomach churned while she stared at his shirt buttons. She didn't want to hear about problems, not after a kiss that would have brought her to her knees if she hadn't been sitting on a motorcycle and clinging to him for dear life.

Oh mercy. They were in the middle of a very public parking lot, right beside a very busy street and making out like...like the long-lost lovers they were. It went against every statute of decent behavior that had been pounded into her since childhood but she couldn't bring herself to care much. At one time, he could have stripped her practically naked before she'd have voiced an initial protest. She'd trusted him that much.

"I'm just about to leave on a trip," he replied, tracing her lips with his finger. It was as if they'd been apart forever yet the intimacy remained as strong as if they'd never separated. Shouldn't she feel uncomfortable about this? What she felt wasn't even close.

"Oh," she replied in disappointment. Did he plan to claim his two weeks later, when he returned? Or hadn't he been serious about that? She started to pull back. He halted her progress, dropping his hand to her waist. His thumb massaged her middle, the touch imprinted on her senses.

"I want you to come with me," he told her.

"Okay." That was easy. Just like that. Her family might freak out if she disappeared without prior warning. She'd deal with them.

"And," he continued, "you've always depended on your father for everything. I made the mistake of not seeing that before."

She sighed, seeing his point. Her father and her need of his support had been one of the main issues between them in the end. She tilted her head, waiting.

"I have money, Tempest. When I'm with you I don't want anything to do with your cash. That includes even *you* using it. I will provide for your needs."

She wanted to protest, the thought of total dependence cinching tightly around her. "For two weeks?"

For two weeks? he thought. His gut reaction was to add "or as long as it takes". Good lord, it had already been eight years. "As long as it takes" could take forever. He pushed a burst of hope aside. Determination settled in its place. He'd take the allotted time then somehow convince her to give him more. Somehow.

She bit her lip, sadness flitting through her guileless brown eyes. Her emotions were so easy to read. The sadness kicked him in the ass. Had he read her wrongly? Did she find being with him for two weeks distasteful? Was she upset by his demand? A good man would probably have offered his forgiveness or whatever and sent her on her way. A man like this Phillip. A shocking surge of blind jealousy shot through him. Josh had never claimed to be a good man and he wasn't planning to make a life change now.

Damn it. It didn't matter how much time had passed. Tempest was his and by the time two weeks were over, she'd know it.

She took a deep breath as if strengthening herself for a battle and her lips turned up, all signs of her brief sadness disappearing. "You'll be bored with me before then. Look at you. You probably have hoards of gorgeous woman banging down your door."

His hands tightened on her hips. Apparently, her family had shot to hell her self-esteem while they'd been parted. All the more reason to get her firmly back where she belonged. "You know damned well that I won't get bored with you."

"I'm overweight."

"And I couldn't possibly be attracted to you because of that?" How could she not know how beautiful she was and how much he wanted between her lush thighs again—well more than he was now? Just holding her like this or watching her walk, even watching her breathe, made him hard. He shifted his hips slightly so she'd know exactly how hard. With her position on the bike and all the clothes between them, he couldn't get close enough.

She stared at his shirt to avoid his gaze. Though she dropped occasional jabs about her size, discussing weight made Tempest uncomfortable. He'd learned early on that she made fun of herself as self-protection. If she joked about it, then maybe no one else would. Maybe she wouldn't be hurt. The problem was that her tactics worked on most people, but those closest to her, those who should have treated her best, were often the most hurtful.

As a result, Tempest saw an undesirable woman in the mirror instead of the goddess who could bring him to his knees.

"Why *would* you want me when you can have any woman who looks like a model from a fashion magazine?"

"I'm not particularly into pouting sticks." He stroked his hand over her soft belly, unbelievably turned on to have Tempest in his grasp. "I do however love to have a woman who fills my arms, who feels good against me. A woman who is soft and feminine and makes me feel even more a man." He pulled her close so her full breasts were pressed to him, her mouth inches from his. "How could I get bored exploring these killer curves?"

Her breath feathered across him. "Okay. You can have what you want."

He grinned, knowing he wanted far more than she thought she'd agreed to. This fourteen days was only the beginning. If he had his way, this would last as long as he could make it. He turned to the saddle bags of the motorcycle before she saw his smile fade. He'd claim his time with her but what would he do if she walked away? Prissy

socialites just didn't stick with rough-around-the-edges guys like him. He'd learned that the first time around. His family might be wealthy, but hers was far wealthier. She was a goddess and he was a working-class acolyte. That she was a submissive and he was her Dominant, didn't play into it at all – though it should.

He wouldn't let her walk away this time. Not without one hell of a fight. He should have fought last time, yet he'd let her go. He might have been a Dom before, just as he was now, but he'd been young. He hadn't known what to do especially when John Montgomery had threatened his father's company. An idle threat. He recognized it now.

Youth, threats and stupidity made a great recipe for regret. It was time for something new. Wiser and more mature.

He'd spent the last eight years ensuring no one could push him around ever again. Even someone as powerful as John Montgomery.

He pulled a spare helmet from the storage compartment and handed it to Tempest. Fighting the temptation to lose himself in their embrace again, he lifted her from the seat. "Time to go."

"To go?" She trailed off as his meaning sank in. "I can't ride that."

He eyed her, liking the idea of her skirt hiked up while she clung to his back. "You can. And you will. Get on the bike, Tempest."

To an outsider, he knew his words would sound harsh. Not to Tempest. She'd recognize his demand for what it was. The sooner he reasserted his dominance, the sooner they'd return to familiar ground where their desire could again take deep root.

She pursed her lips, a battle warring on her face as she looked away. It was always a battle with them and right now she was deciding whether or not to let him resume his role as her Dominant. It didn't matter that she was a natural submissive, that she'd been his before or that she'd verbally agreed. She was fighting against the mental chains that would soon bind her. They fit her so well, yet she had to decide.

Josh carefully kept his face noncommittal. This was Tempest's battle. He would not persuade. She had to decide without his influence. He didn't want anyone to say she'd been coerced, though her father would likely bellow that accusation loudly.

Tempest considered him, the chin strap of the helmet rolling between her fingers. Uncertainty played over her face. Should she? Shouldn't she? It was all there plainly for him to see. She'd said yes to his earlier dictate, nevertheless until she took this first order, she wasn't his submissive. At least...she didn't think so. He knew the truth. She'd never stopped belonging to him.

He climbed onto the motorcycle while her teeth sank into her plump bottom lip. Slowly she raised her hands and shoved the helmet over her blonde locks. Determination filled her features now that she'd chosen her path. Hiking up her skirt, she climbed behind him. He smiled at the space she left between their bodies. Reaching back, he pulled her flush to him.

"You know how this works, angel," he said, fighting a groan at the feel of her lush thighs bracketing his. Soon they'd be around his hips again while he sank into her. Unable to resist, he slid his palm back over her leg. Her skirt enveloped his hand as he slipped his fingers inside her panties and cupped her smooth ass.

Happy birthday, Josh. If he'd taken months to consider what he wanted, he couldn't have thought of a better present. This would be damn perfect.

* * * * *

Tempest tightened her arms around Josh's waist as he took a sharp curve. She squeezed her eyes shut. She hadn't been on a motorcycle since she'd been on his in college. Phillip and the few men she'd dated before him all drove nondescript luxury cars, usually black. She doubted any of them would consider the beast roaring between her legs. It was the perfect match for the beast who'd soon be taking the motorcycle's place between her thighs.

Her clit tingled when she thought of Josh surging inside her. Would her memories of his wide cock match reality? She didn't doubt she'd discover that as soon as they arrived wherever he was taking her. One corner of her mouth turned up as she realized she hadn't bothered to find out where they were going.

She took a deep breath to calm the excitement tearing through her. The butterflies cascading around her stomach would burst free if she didn't get a grip. When she'd come to Josh, she hadn't envisioned she'd end up in his bed. Well, that wasn't exactly true. She'd fantasized about it. Maybe this was part of that visualization thing she'd heard so much about lately. Maybe she'd visualized herself straight into his bed. If that was the case, perhaps she should put more weight in the whole New Age-y thing.

Her father would have a fit when he found out about this, especially in light of the upcoming wedding. There was no manifestation or imagination needed to know that. Of course if Phillip and her father would listen to her, they wouldn't still be counting on her merger with Phillip—in her head that's what it was. A sterile business transaction with each person getting something they wanted.

Perhaps this was the best course of action to make it clear she did not want to go through with the wedding. Lord knew, she'd talked herself blue and they still ignored her decision, segueing from her announcement that she absolutely would not marry Phillip to a discussion of how many guests to invite to the ceremony. After several frustrating minutes of arguing and being ignored, she'd stormed out. No matter what she'd said, her words had been brushed away. The time for words had passed. Now was time for action. Being with Josh would get her point across even if her father had a figurative coronary. The thought seemed coldly calculated except that she wanted this brief time with Josh more than anything.

A temporary liaison.

Even if he suddenly offered forever, she couldn't have it. She knew that. There were too many factors to consider. Her family. Her career. Her freedom. She couldn't see having any of those things if she was with Josh. In the end, she might actually end up

married to Phillip but that would be her clear-headed decision. It wouldn't be the result of her father's approval of his hand-picked man and her residual regrets over Josh wouldn't remain over her head.

You're a complete idiot, Tempest. Hmm. Nice self talk. She made a face, thinking of the self-help books that told her to speak nicely to herself. *You're the world's greatest idiot,* she revised. How on earth was she supposed to banish her desires for Josh when she had her arms wrapped around his rock-hard belly? The roar of the motorcycle and the brush of his long hair against her cheek reminded her how different he was from her fiancé. Josh had always been a bad boy but now he seemed even rougher around the edges.

Phillip was the polar opposite of Josh. He'd never consider piercings, long hair or a motorcycle. The low-slung jeans stretched over Josh's powerful thighs would have been out of the question, even on cleaning day. Perfect Phillip was John Montgomery's perfect choice for his less-than-perfect daughter. Her father liked Phillip. He didn't like Josh a bit—had never even given him a chance. When she'd been in college, her father had freaked when he'd discovered the BDSM aspect of her relationship with her boyfriend. He'd yanked her from college, telling her he would yank all financial support too, including her tuition, if she didn't cooperate.

At the time, she'd thought she had no choices. Josh was new in comparison to her family. How could she choose him over them? When her father had arrived at her apartment and discovered them in the midst of a tame but nonetheless clearly D/s scene, he'd demanded she get dressed and go to the car immediately.

She'd obeyed him while Josh demanded then begged her not to go. She didn't know what her father had said to him after she'd left. It had been her last contact with Josh. Movers had been hired to get her things.

She'd cried for weeks afterward. As an adult she knew how she would do things differently if she were in the same situation now. But being older and wiser didn't make

a difference. That experience was in the past and she couldn't change it. Time hadn't done much to dull the blow she'd dealt to Josh nor his anger at it.

How desperate did it make her that she'd agree to whatever he wanted to gain closure from him—not that she objected much to being under him for the next two weeks. As soon as she'd seen him, she'd known she wanted him again. Maybe she *could* get him out of her system and move on with her plans for her life. They both could move on. Josh needed this too. One look into his red-hot gaze and it was obvious he still battled the same memory demons that haunted her.

She wished she could see his face now. Actually maybe it was good that she couldn't. She was already all melty inside. Her front quivered where they were pressed together and she ached to feel his bare skin against hers even if she wasn't too keen on him seeing her naked.

Josh had always seemed to like her body, but that was when they were younger and he was a horny college student. He'd been gorgeous before as a lanky youth. Now all grown up and filled out in all the right places, he was the hottest thing this side of hell.

Before she was ready, Josh swung into a tree-lined driveway and rolled to a stop in front of a two-stall garage attached to a sprawling two-story house. Silently, he led her into his home. Filtered light slashed across a neat living room. She barely had time to register it, before he pushed her against the door. His mouth slanted over hers, pressing her lips apart for his invading tongue. The warm little ball in the center of it rubbed sensuously against her.

The urgency...the intimacy...it was everything she'd imagined for years. Heat licked at her core, softening her body for him. Suddenly, her clothes seemed tight over her breasts as her body begged for his attention. Almost as if reading her thoughts, he held her in place with his hips while he insinuated his hands between them. His fingers tore at her shirt. She couldn't bring herself to care that he might rip the fabric or pop off a pearly button.

A tremor racked through her womb. She *wanted* him to wrench them off. She wanted the wild abandon. Her entire life was control and politeness. Josh freed the animal in her. As her cream flooded her cleft, she nipped at his lips, lifting into his kiss and the heady taste of his demanding mouth.

Impatiently, he pulled her shirttails from her waistband. A moment later, he wrenched back his head and growled as he stared down at where his hand splayed over her silk-covered abdomen. Frowning he plucked at the camisole. "You're wearing too many clothes," he complained. Reaching up to where it came to a vee above her breasts, he bunched the fabric in his hands and wrenched them apart. The hiss of tearing material filled the room. Her knees buckled. His body was all that held her up.

Desperately, she tried to regain her strength. If he stepped back, she'd fall into a pudgy lump in his entryway. Unaware of her struggle, he shoved her blouse and destroyed camisole down her shoulders, leaving them hooked on her elbows. His fingers spread over her neck. She swallowed, remembering when she'd worn the mark of his possession there. The sudden vulnerability aroused her as did the slight pressure of his fingertips. His thumb explored the slight hollow at the base of her neck. Josh could do anything to her—his strength surpassed hers and their position left her open to his whim. With her clothes tangled around her elbows she could barely move her arms let alone fight him.

Her breath shallow, she waited.

"Do you remember?" he asked.

"Yes." The warm cloak of their past wrapped this moment and dragged her back to other times when they'd been like this. Instinctively, her thighs parted so her feet were shoulder width and she was open to him. If he touched her now, he'd find a quivering mass of want.

He raised an eyebrow. The small silver ring there winked at her. "Yes? I don't think you do. You seem to be forgetting..."

“Master,” she added. Arching slightly, she pressed her aching nipples against him. The position pressed her neck a little more into his hand. Forbidden excitement stalked her. She shouldn’t enjoy what this position did to her, but only Josh understood how much she liked to be physically restrained. Nothing got her off like being tied or held still by his hands. Josh would never choke her, but the danger of his hand on her throat made her wet faster than anything else in the world.

He wanted her right now. That’s what this meant.

Never easing the pressure, he took her lips again, mashing her to the molded metal door with his entire body. Tempest gasped into his mouth. A violent storm inside her stole her breath. Desperately, she met his tongue stab for stab, adjusted to every tilt of his head. Surprising him, she sucked her lips around his tongue. She wanted his thick cock surging to her throat and stretching her mouth wide.

His free hand curled into her ass, dragging her tight to his rock-hard arousal. Oh yeah, it would feel so good in her mouth. Almost as good as he felt when he drove inside her pussy, claiming every tender fold as his own.

Suddenly, he stepped back. She nearly slithered down the door before she braced her knees.

“Get undressed but don’t move from that spot,” he ordered, making the submissive in her shiver in delight. She liked when he stepped into his Dom persona. It fit him so well. He fit her so well.

Her delight, however, turned to icy despair when she realized what he’d said. Undressed. He wanted her naked. With all her layers of clothes stripped away. Josh knew. He knew how she used the layers to disguise the weight she couldn’t get rid of. He wanted that disguise peeled away with all her skin showing.

It would have been so much easier if he’d dragged her to the bed, both of them blinded by passion as they ripped their clothes away and fell on each other. It was so much harder when she stood like a slave on the block, waiting for inspection. Every

insecurity would assail her. Damn him, he knew that, too. This was part of his asserting the upper hand.

He caught her chin between his thumb and fingers. "All your clothes, Tempest. Understood?"

More than she wanted to. She couldn't turn her face from him, but she shifted her eyes away. Her jaw locked, her teeth clenched together. "Yes, Master," she replied through them. She wanted closure. If he was disgusted by her appearance, that would be that. She straightened her arms and shook free her blouse and camisole.

Josh turned and walked toward the doorway across the room. "Stay there. I'll be back in a few minutes."

She reached for the clasp of her bra. *And I'll be here. Clinging to my shredded pride.*

Too bad it was invisible.

Chapter Two

The cool metal of the front door chilled Tempest's overheated skin while she waited for Josh at slave-attention position, feet parted and hands tucked behind her back. Her clothes were tossed onto an overstuffed chair several feet away. She eyed them longingly. Josh wouldn't let her go unpunished if she disobeyed him. Some things were never forgotten.

Cream trickled to her thigh. Even punishment aroused her? Was there nothing about him that didn't turn her on? Wryly, she wondered if he still stuffed his socks down the couch. That didn't turn her on. It pissed her off. The recollection, however, lead to thoughts of his perfectly shaped feet.

Her mind raced with questions. How would he react to her nakedness? Would he notice her shaved pussy or her fat? Would he like her shorn folds? What would he do to her?

Her clit itched with the possibilities. Hearing him moving around in the other room, she dropped her hand and trailed her fingers over her thigh. With a sigh, she leaned her shoulders against the door and slipped her palm over her mound. Just a little touch... She'd stop before he returned.

The gentle slide of her fingertips over her clit drew a silent sigh and she dropped her head against the door, closing her eyes. God, she was wet. Opening the dream file where all her fantasies starred Josh, she pretended it was his fingers sliding over her, spreading her folds. Release coiled tightly in her belly. Her other hand slid up to her breast. She pinched and rolled her hard nipples just as Josh always had. Relentlessly, she worked the peaks while she plunged her fingers into her pussy. Her teeth sank into her bottom lip.

A choked sound shocked her from her play. Eyes wide, she snapped back to her position leaving her needy flesh open to the chill of the room.

Josh stood in the doorway watching her, his own teeth sunk into his bottom lip. Her mouth watered at the sight of his bare chest and feet. His unbuttoned jeans dipped low on his hips, revealing the black tattoo over his navel and an enticing curve of hip bone disappearing into his pants.

"Go ahead," he said. "Finish."

"I—"

His brow raised again cutting her off. Pleasure herself in front of him? *While he watched?* Oh man. Slowly, she returned her hands to where they'd been when he'd re-entered the room. And froze. She couldn't do this. She had to. Her eyes started to close. If she could pretend to be alone—

"No. Look at me," he commanded.

Her eyelids heavy, she gazed at him. He had a tiny gold ring piercing one nipple. Good lord how many other piercings did he have? One in his cock? How would it feel abrading her pussy? Her fingers began to move, gliding over her slippery folds.

"So fucking beautiful," he said. A ribbon of happiness worked through her. Of all the things she'd expected him to say, all the reactions she expected him to have, that wasn't one. Empowered by his admiration, her touch grew more aggressive and she stopped biting back her small cries at the sensations arcing through her body.

He walked toward her. "What do you think about when you touch yourself?"

"You."

"Hmm." He dropped to his knees before her and pulled her hand from her folds. Slowly, he sucked the juice from her fingers.

Tempest's breath hitched in her throat. All the muscles in her pelvis pulled tight as he continued to draw on her fingers. Slowly, he let them slide free. "I've missed the taste of you, Tempest. I want more."

She could only nod as he parted her with his thumbs and pressed his mouth to her. Her palms pressed flat to the door as she widened her stance for him. No one had done this for her since Josh. Certainly not Phillip. She pushed that thought away, focusing on the white-hot sensations Josh elicited as he scraped his teeth lightly over her clit before sucking at it. As the pinnacle of release raced closer, he released the bud and gathered her cream with his tongue, before plunging inside her.

Her whole being quivered, her lips moving in silence as her world dimmed, narrowing on the coming storm. Suddenly, he thrust two fingers into her while his teeth closed around her throbbing clit. Her hips jerked toward him and toward the completion that had waited so many years. She needed him beyond reason. Inside her. Now.

Desperately, she tried to stay still as he drank of her. This position brought back memories of submission she hadn't realized she'd forgotten. The welcome helplessness, the overwhelming pleasure, his effortless control over her...

She'd never forget again.

Josh delved deep inside her, finding the place that jerked her hips forward again. A tiny cry shuddered from her, heralding the start of the orgasm about to boil forth. Immediately, he pulled back. "No, not yet, angel."

The firm command dragged her a few inches from the chasm waiting to engulf her. Release taunted her, dangling in his hand just outside of her grasp. This was her punishment. He wouldn't let her come.

"Please," she begged.

"No." He stood and held out his hand. "Can you walk?"

"Since I was ten months old," she snapped.

Josh sighed and trailed his fingers on the outside of her hip while he held her gaze. He didn't say a word, but he didn't need to. She remembered. The simple touch was a warning—one he'd often used in public places to preserve their privacy and dignity. She knew what it meant. Pull back this behavior or be punished.

She bit her lip and lowered her gaze. She wasn't one who deliberately sought punishment. Josh had a way of turning it into pleasure in the end, but she still avoided it whenever possible.

"I'm sorry."

He gave a single nod. "Come with me."

Josh led the way toward the bedroom, knowing Tempest would be surprised not only by the room but by what awaited her. She likely expected him to fall on her like a ravening beast, and truly that was what he wanted most, but instead he had other plans. Not-so-sexual plans. Sex between them had always been explosive. Her intense reactions to his domination fueled the fire until they both burned out of control. It was outside the bedroom where her submission needed work.

As he'd predicted, she came to an abrupt halt inside his bedroom. Her eyes wide, she surveyed the black and white décor but barely noted the furniture. She gazed transfixed at the black and white vintage prints that banded the room at eye-level. Each print, dating back to the 1950s, showed scenes of BDSM and featured women with the same beautiful physique as Tempest. When he'd first come across them at an auction, he knew he had to have them. How many times had he touched himself and envisioned Tempest as the woman and himself as the Dom?

"Pick one," he rasped. "We'll play it out later."

"There are so many..."

"There are lots of games for us to play then." Perhaps more than they had time for if she insisted on leaving in two weeks. He picked up the shirt he'd tossed on the bed and shrugged into it. He'd been in the process of changing when he heard the suspicious sounds from Tempest earlier. When he'd seen her...it was as if a train had slammed into him. A lust train. "We'll play later. Right now, we're going out. You need clothes for our trip and I want to pick them out."

"I have—"

He pressed a finger over her lips as she started to protest. "Your submission. For two weeks," he reminded.

Tempest sighed, the breath wafting around his finger in a warm caress. Silently, she nodded. The way she'd easily returned to the practices they'd had eight years ago amazed and delighted him. When he'd given her the warning touch earlier, he hadn't been sure she would remember. She had. Instantly. Keera's words returned to him. Gentle control. He shoved aside the thought. He didn't believe in that hocus pocus. It was a coincidence that the card had come up. Just because he preferred to dominate his sub through quiet signals, it didn't mean the card was right.

He followed Tempest's gaze which was fixed on a photo of a submissive draped over an ottoman, her hands tied to the furniture's legs. What the woman awaited was left to the imagination.

He nuzzled Tempest's ear. "Do you want to do that? I bet you want to know what comes next. I do, too. Do you think she's waiting to be punished? Or maybe she's waiting for her Master to return and fuck her. Or maybe there's something we can't see." He reached into his pocket and removed a small egg-shaped vibrator. "Something like this."

"Maybe..." she agreed.

"Shall we find out later?"

She nodded. "I'd like that."

He slid the egg through her molten folds. "I think we should investigate this now."

"How?" she whispered.

He slipped the toy inside her, fighting the urge to bury his fingers there again. "This goes here. The strap I laid out will hold it in place while we shop."

Excitement zipped across her face and he saw Prissy Tempest depart. Burning Hot Tempest was here to stay. "Put it on me," she murmured.

Unable to resist touching his vibrant woman, he stroked her folds while he nibbled the sensitive flesh behind her ear. "I have the control for it in my pocket. I may or may not use it while we're out. You never know. I may just let the feel of it inside you turn you on."

She shuddered, her arousal already taking her.

"You like feeling my possession even when I'm standing away from you, don't you?" he murmured. "It marks you from the inside out. Tell me who owns you?"

She hesitated. It was a moment, a millisecond, but it was a breath too long. "You do," she replied. Next time there would be no faltering. She'd answer immediately without a shadow of a doubt.

Shoving back his irrational irritation, he secured the device then lifted a pair of jeans from the bed. "I want you to wear these."

"They won't fit."

"I think they will. They're yours. The movers your father hired didn't take everything."

"I can't believe you still have them."

God it made him sound obsessive. It wasn't as if he'd created a shrine to her. At first, he'd stuffed them in a box with some of her other things because he'd believed she would come back. Later, he'd forgotten that he had them, the box just moving from home to home as storage items often did. But when he'd seen her today and remembered her in only her jeans...

"Put them on."

"My panties..."

He shook his head, ending the protest. Between the egg and the stiff seam of her jeans rubbing her naked clit, she'd be hard pressed not to come before they returned home. She was so responsive. Playing with her, driving her to the brink of frenzy, had always been a favorite pastime.

For both of them.

He bit the inside of his lip as she bent to put on the jeans, the smooth curve of her rounded ass beckoning him. Tempest wasn't the only one tortured to the edge of frenzy. Maintaining control when they finally hit the bed would be difficult. And he didn't plan relief for either of them until their first stop tonight. God help Tempest. It would probably be fast and hard.

His cock throbbed behind the fly of his jeans, begging him to reconsider, to take her now. Ignoring the arousal, he fished a red T-shirt from his drawer and handed it to Tempest. It would be loose on her, but he didn't necessarily want the world to see her pert nipples.

"Bra?" she asked in a resigned voice.

"No."

She made a face accompanied by an eye roll and yanked the shirt over her head. He almost sighed in relief when her breasts were hidden from view. Almost. The soft cotton draped over the soft mounds, emphasizing them.

They had to get out of here before he lost it. "Where's your purse?" he asked.

"With my clothes."

"Go get it and give me your cash and credit cards."

Her brows drew together.

"Remember," he added. "Dependent on me. You can have them back later. Don't worry, angel. I'll be sure you have everything you need."

"I'm not worried about that."

"Then what?"

She hesitated, then shook her head. "It's nothing."

Josh caught her chin. "Don't hide from me. No secrets. That's always been our rule, remember?"

"It's not my father's money. It's mine. I earn a paycheck. I pay my own bills."

“Doesn’t matter.”

Her irritation was plain as she padded past him into the living room but she didn’t argue. Josh followed, feeling like a modern version of Simon Legree.

So it wasn’t her daddy’s money. Josh still wanted that crutch out from beneath her. He had nothing against his sub earning her own money and using it as she pleased. He just didn’t want that of Tempest. Not right now. Not until he trusted her. She’d left him once—he wouldn’t leave the door open for her to leave him again.

It irked him that he couldn’t trust her more. He couldn’t shake the feeling that he’d spook her and she’d take off faster than a skittish colt. He didn’t want to hold back and for that he felt compelled to be sure it would take some doing on her part should she choose to run. Or she’d have to ask him to let her go—and he would.

Tempest had agreed to be his. She wasn’t his prisoner.

She was his submissive.

The muscles in his groin tightened. She was his. Period. By the time their allotted agreement was finished, she’d be ready to tell Phillip goodbye forever.

Fishing her purse from the pile of clothes, Tempest dug inside then handed him three major credit cards with a ten-dollar bill. She shrugged. “That’s it.”

Feeling even more uncomfortable with his demand, he took the offering. He wouldn’t back down now. This was for the betterment of their relationship and as a Dom it was his right to place this restriction on her. She knew that.

He shoved the cards and cash in his pants pocket. He’d lock them up in the safe in his bedroom when they returned with their purchases later. First he had to get his keys or they weren’t going anywhere. He stifled a sigh. They were in the bedroom...

“Wait here,” he told her, already backing toward the hallway. If she followed him, he’d have her on the floor and be in her in five seconds flat.

Damn, he needed to regain some control.

From the corner of his eye, he saw Tempest shift, squeezing her thighs together as he stalked into the other room. He really wanted to stomp and get some of the frustration out of his system. But he wasn't the stomping type.

Behind him she let out a quiet moan and his nerve endings jumped. *Breathe, Josh, breathe.* The egg must have shifted, sliding slightly as her body coated it with her arousal. It wasn't going anywhere with the strap he'd laced around her. The binding fit like an erotic thong and wouldn't allow the vibe to escape.

He fingered the controller. Tempting...but he didn't want her to have her release just yet. Besides, they had to shop for her clothes and get on the road. Practicality took precedence over burning desire. This desire wouldn't go away—it hadn't in eight years. He doubted a few more hours would change that. Check-in at their first stop, a bed and breakfast literally in the middle of Michigan's Upper Peninsula, a.k.a. the middle of nowhere, was at four. If they missed check-in, they'd miss dinner and supposedly there was nowhere, absolutely nowhere, nearby for them to eat. He grinned. They'd better be on time. Tempest would need nourishment to keep up with him.

The outing to get clothes ended up being uneventful despite Tempest's occasional argument about his choices—most stemming from the poor self-image fostered by her family. She seemed to think she couldn't wear anything alluring without looking silly or fat. He didn't understand how she could be upset by the clothes he picked when the thought of her in them made his mouth dry and his cock rock hard.

She'd balked but he knew he was right. His sister was the same size as Tempest and he'd been shopping with her enough times to know the right sizes. That torture had paid off though he didn't want to imagine his sister in most of the clothing he'd purchased for Tempest.

He didn't argue with her. Drawing his fingers lightly over her hip was enough to remind her who was in charge and who had the final say. He didn't allow her anything prissy. Within two hours, the suitcase he'd gotten her was filled with jeans, sexy shirts, scandalous lingerie...anything she'd need for the weekend.

He couldn't believe how much he liked knowing that she wore the panties and bra he'd selected. It fed the Dominant inside him, feeding the beast who'd been without sustenance for too long.

As they drove down the highway in his truck, her head rested on his shoulder, her floral scent filling every breath he took. Being with Tempest changed everything about his vacation. Aside from the bed and breakfast, he'd planned to stop wherever the whim took him. Instead, with the assistance of his cell phone and administrative assistant, he'd made reservations at specific spots along the route. He'd planned to take his bike. Instead they were cruising along in his truck. He'd planned on soul-searching. Instead the soul he'd always wanted was curled up on the seat beside him.

He couldn't be happier.

Well, yes he could. Before this morning, the idea of being with Tempest again hadn't occurred to him in anything other than far-fetched fantasy. So why was it he couldn't fully appreciate this miraculous interlude for what it was? Impending dread crowded in on him. If he couldn't convince her otherwise, she'd leave him again. The thought of the fiancé waiting in the wings filled him with surprising jealousy too. He knew there must have been other men but this one... He had a claim on her. Josh resented it more than he liked to admit.

Tempest was his. There was no way he'd easily let her go again.

His fingers clenched on the steering wheel.

He wouldn't think about that—any of it. He'd focus on the pleasure Tempest brought him. Dropping his hand to his pocket, he flicked on the controller for the egg still lodged inside her.

Tempest sucked in a breath. "Josh..."

"We're almost there, angel." Two miles, in fact. He maneuvered onto a gravel road, canopied by thick trees and edged by wildflowers.

“G-g-good.” Her fingernails dug into his thigh, much like they had earlier when they’d crossed the Mackinac Bridge, and distracted him from everything. Driving took all his will. Perhaps switching on the vibe hadn’t been such a good idea.

Tempest squirmed making tiny aroused noises that yanked on his cock. The vibrations probably weren’t enough to make her come but they’d certainly take her down that path. God, he couldn’t wait to be inside her. In his whole life there’d never been anything to compare with being buried deep inside Tempest while she thrashed beneath him, overtaken by her release.

Soon. Very soon.

The trees started to clear and the bed and breakfast came into sight. Josh almost slammed his foot onto the brake. What the hell? His “four star bed and breakfast on wooded grounds” was Four Star Bed—the motel name, he assumed—with breakfast available. There *were* woods surrounding the clustered buildings—however this wasn’t what he’d had in mind. Something quiet, relaxing, romantic...not seedy. The place might be off the beaten track, but it looked like a place to take a hooker for an hour.

He really needn’t have worried about the four o’clock check in.

“This is it?” Tempest asked.

“Yeah.” His irritation sharpened his tone. It pissed him off that his plan had spun awry. How was he going to win her if he brought her to the most redneck hole-in-the-wall on the map?

“It’s nice...rustic,” she commented.

His head snapped from the abomination before him and he stared at her in disbelief. Her grin told him she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“It’s a little...rundown, but it looks clean,” she added.

“That’s good,” he said in a low voice and grinned. “I wouldn’t want you kneeling on a dirty floor.”

Her eyes went dark, filled with a desire that had nothing to do with the constant rhythm of the toy inside her. "Will you let me suck you off?" she whispered.

"We'll see. You've proven to be a very naughty submissive today." Man, he loved her that way.

Her lips tipped upward. Even with the years that had passed, she knew him too well. She knew how much she'd satisfied him.

"Let me please you then...Master."

Their room had better be ready.

Josh jerked into a parking space and nearly dragged Tempest into the office. It had been a freaking stupid idea to wait until they reached the bed and breakfast before he toppled her to a mattress. He glanced around again. *Really* stupid.

Way to botch up "romantic", idiot.

He reached into his pocket and flicked the vibe's switch a notch higher. Tempest jolted, her breath leaving in a hiss. He leaned toward her to whisper in her ear. "Do you think you can keep from coming while we check in?"

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip as she fought to keep control. Damn he wanted to feel those teeth on his cock, lightly scraping upward as she wrapped her lips around him. His balls drew tight in anticipation. On second thought, they'd better wait on that part. It had been too long for them both.

Fighting for the control required of a Dom, he willed his erection to subside. Fat chance of overcoming his body this time. Being aroused by some woman for whom he had marginal feelings and lusting after Tempest were two vastly different things.

She made another strangled noise and he glanced at the man running the reception desk. "Or will you explode right in front to the complete stranger checking us in?"

Why the hell did that thought just about set *him* off?

Tempest's eyes were slightly glazed and her fingertips brushed her thigh, much like his did when he silently reined her in. She was trying to pull herself back from the edge, the same way he did when he disciplined her. It wouldn't work. It wasn't him.

"I'll be okay," she murmured.

He bit back a smile. No, she wouldn't "be okay". She was too close to the edge. Still, he didn't argue as he held open the door to usher her inside. She waited just inside the door then trailed behind him as he approached the clerk. Josh wasn't stupid. She sought to hide her wobbling steps as her release overtook her. Each rapid breath taunted him. He should have fucked her before. If he didn't come in his pants now he'd be lucky. Chances of restraint were fifty-fifty with his odds rapidly decreasing. A sudden vision of shoving her against the counter and taking her for the world to see almost undid him.

Especially when he considered that Tempest probably wouldn't protest.

Damn it. He needed to get a grip—and not of her. Doms didn't act this way. He was in control, *not* his hormones. Redoubling his efforts to will his erection down, somewhat unsuccessfully, he thought about ice-cold water and big, hairy spiders as he approached the counter and the clerk behind it.

The man appeared perfectly matched to the outback surroundings. Grizzly Adams couldn't have done a better one-with-the-wilderness impression. Of course Adams wouldn't have leered at Tempest the way this man had. His ire rising, Josh watched as the man's blue eyes scanned up and down her frame while he licked his bottom lip. The gaze lingered on her taut breasts and the hard nipples showing through her T-shirt.

"I have a reservation," Josh ground out as he shoved Tempest behind him, barely overcoming an instinctive need to growl, "Mine". The man seemed unaffected by Josh's territorial move.

"Cress?"

"Yes." Apparently, there weren't a lot of reservations. Josh wasn't surprised. This didn't exactly seem like the hub of upper Michigan. The fact that the board behind the

desk was nearly full of keys confirmed his suspicion. "Your internet listing called this a bed and breakfast. I'm guessing it's not... Where can we eat around here?"

"There's a McDonald's and a Taco Bell about a mile north of here. Fischer's Grocery and Bait is a few minutes' walk." Fast food and a grocery-bait shop. Romantic. Not. This is what he got for being in such a hurry to make reservations. A little investigation would have served him well.

They'd make do. It was only for one night. They'd probably be too busy in bed to worry about where their food came from. If they got around to eating at all.

Behind him, Tempest made a strangled sound and buried her face between his shoulder blades. Her breathing caught, heralding her release as her fingers dug into his sides. It swelled through him, bringing him unexpected pleasure. He fought back his response as she continued to arch into his back, her teeth clenched in his shirt.

Josh fisted his fingers. If this guy didn't hurry with their room, they'd go back to the truck and he'd nail her against the front seat. As her orgasm flattened her against him, the need to be in her — *now* — drove all reason from his mind.

Eyeing her, the clerk shoved a wad of papers at Josh to sign along with the room key. Silently, he pointed to the signature space, more interested in Tempest than whether or not Josh signed John Doe instead of his name. The lust written on the man's craggy face made Josh uneasy and renewed anger surged through him as he scrawled his signature across the line. Who did this guy think he was to stare at a woman who was so obviously taken? If the man so much as touched her... Josh snaked a hand behind himself and cupped Tempest's ass, pulling her flush to him. He'd allow no question as to her availability.

Damn, where the hell had this predatory nature come from? He didn't like being this out of control. It had always been this way with her, though. Some guy would say hi and Josh wanted to pulverize him. He'd thought he'd outgrown this, but apparently not. There was just something about Tempest that shot past any control or maturity

he'd gained over the years and manifested into primal territorialism. This new strain of base jealousy had been building all day, ever since she'd mentioned the fiancé.

He snatched up the key. Turning, he lifted Tempest into his arms, just as another release spasmed through her. She lurched, pressing her face into his shoulder. "Please," she moaned. "Oh God, stop it, please."

He brushed his lips against her temple, tasting a salty trickle of sweat. "Hang on, angel. Almost there."

"Is she okay?" the clerk asked.

"Not feeling well," Josh lied. He carried her outside as fast as he could, considering his throbbing arousal. He didn't bother to move his truck in front of their room, instead carrying her the short distance to the out-building labeled four. Tempest was so far gone she didn't protest for him to put her down because she was supposedly too heavy. A bunch of bull that was. She'd never been too heavy for him to carry and he liked having her in his arms like this. This move was worth repeating. He'd keep her in a sexual haze if need be. Anything to keep her from berating her weight.

Her body was perfect and right now he couldn't think of another place he'd rather be than between her supple thighs.

His hand shook as he fit the key into the lock.

Tempest began to writhe and he almost dropped her. *Open, you goddamn door!* Suddenly, it slammed open. He rushed inside, kicking the door shut, and tossed Tempest on the bed. There would be no waiting, no more foreplay—hell, their entire day had been foreplay. Frantically, he worked at the closure of her jeans. He shoved them down to her knees. Her folds dripped with her cream as he ripped away the egg and the restraints holding it in her. A growl rose in his throat. He wanted to taste her, he wanted to fuck her, he wanted to slide his fingers through the slippery honey and he wanted to tie her up and torment her. The need to be inside her took precedence over everything.

“Please,” she rasped. Her hips lifted toward him, like a supplication to the god of lust. In the shadowy room he couldn’t see her aroused flesh, but her heady scent surrounded him. He had to taste her.

He shoved up her shirt, trapping her arms in the fabric above her head as he kissed a path from her shoulder to the deep valley between her breasts. Agilely, he unfastened the front of the scanty bra they’d purchased on their shopping spree. He peeled back the lacy cups from the firm mounds. He latched onto a pert nipple, pressing the hard peak to the roof of his mouth as he ripped open his fly. She tasted of vanilla and smelled of every dream he’d had for the last eight years. Hungrily, he ate at her breast, sucking, nipping, licking.

Nearly mindless with the need that drove him, he barely remembered to pull the condom from his pocket and roll it on. He’d known it would be like this. Hot and out of control. Thank God, he’d shoved the packet in his jeans earlier. Unable to wait even a second longer he positioned the head of his cock at her fiery opening.

The gate to heaven.

Tempest screamed out as Josh drove inside her, parting her swollen tissues with his wide cock. Her body protested the invasion, unaccustomed to his girth and length. It had been so long since she’d been with anyone—even Phillip. Sex wasn’t part of their relationship and she hadn’t wanted another guy. Every other man had fallen short of Josh. She just hadn’t bothered.

Desperate need clawed into her womb as he pistoned in and out and her body began to swell in welcome around his shaft. She’d never been so sensitive. So ready for a man to fill her. After hours of waiting followed by the orgasms that had rocked relentlessly through her body, feeling Josh moving in her sent her immediately rocketing toward another release. She arched into his frenzied thrusts. Need for him twisted tight in her belly, driving her as she rode the wild storm he built inside her.

She bent her knees higher and opened wide for his thrusts as he laved her breast. The small silver ball in the center of his tongue drove her mad as he flicked it over her tight nipples. She flooded around him in a hot surge. "Yes," she moaned. "Yes..."

He plowed forward, each drive growing harder yet eased by the cream surrounding him.

"God, angel, you feel so good. Yeah, like that," he groaned as she ground her hips into him. Her cries punctuated the darkness of the room, arousing her further. She was his. His slave. Restrained beneath him yet giving him pleasure. Her fingers flexed in the fabric twisted around her wrists. She longed to investigate the tiny ring pierced through his nipple.

Her pussy clenched around him. Every ridge, every inch of his cock taunted her frantic nerve endings. The nipple piercing wasn't the only piercing he had below his neck. She moaned as the extra ridges in his penis stimulated her sheath, touching her most sensitive spots. The sensations blurred together in a mass of pleasure but she knew he had some sort of modification there. More piercings. She ceased to care as he drove wildly inside her.

Suddenly, his teeth sank into her upper breast, hard enough to stake his possession. Not enough to really hurt. She wanted more.

"Yes," she cried and then he was there at her mouth, kissing her as if he'd breathed his last breath and he needed hers to survive. It was desperate and as needy as she felt, taking everything she could give. His tongue plunged between her lips. There was nothing civil in this mating. It was all consuming—wild. They'd left civil hours behind them in the restaurant where they'd reunited.

In this dark, stuffy room their flesh melded, sticking as rivulets of sweat marked their desperation. She struggled to get the jeans off the bottom of her legs so she could wrap her legs around him and draw him even closer. She only managed one leg but it didn't matter as her thighs embraced his waist and her ankles crossed behind his pistoning hips.

Her release tingled in her core while she met him, stroke for stroke. Slowly it seeped outward into her limbs while her center screamed to release lightning throughout her.

"Now Tempest," Josh growled. "God, now."

At his word, the golden warmth mutated into a desperate beast. It suddenly clawed to her extremities, obedient to his word as it had always been. She arched beneath him. Exquisite pleasure held her frozen while he continued to pound into her clenching pussy. Each thrust shoved her orgasm higher and deeper. So deep. She'd never experienced this bone-melting rush with anyone but him. Squeezing her eyes shut, she took gasping breaths between choked cries and unintelligible utterances.

Josh grunted, muttering her name so harshly it seemed half curse. He grasped her hips dragging her tight to his groin as he came and waves of pleasure poured over her. It went on and on, tearing a scream from her until spent, she collapsed onto the mattress and he let her go. His mouth brushed her ear while his fingers feathered over her inner elbow.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on," he murmured.

What? Tempest squinted at him through the inky darkness. He was quoting *Shakespeare*? His fingers traced down her raised arms to her shoulder until he splayed one hand over her neck. Another shudder tore through her. She understood this. His fingers like this, mimicking a wide collar. *His. His dream.*

The silent signals had been an integral part of their relationship before. Josh didn't believe in ruling his submissive with the flogger, whips or spanking. Those things had been an active element in their bedroom but not as punishment. He'd always said she was perfect for him because it took so little for her to obey him and bring him pleasure. She'd rather have had the flogger sometimes. Instead, her Master punished by withholding her release.

His fingers moved slightly and she pushed into them, answering his unspoken statement of ownership.

His. For so long, she'd shared the same dream he had. Living as they wished. A life together. She'd wanted to be his... She almost sighed as regret began to needle her. She only had ten days to erase him from her system. Then finally she'd move on, with her life and her career. Most of her things were already packed and she had the money to support herself while she got her business off the ground.

Being with Josh today had cemented in her head that no matter what, she couldn't be with Phillip. What she felt with him didn't come close to what she felt with Josh. Every moment with Josh was intense yet she had an easy camaraderie with him.

She'd been lying to herself to think she could expunge him from her system in a few days. Josh would always own a part of her. But he could only have these few days—not even the fourteen he'd demanded.

She couldn't tell him. He'd be furious when he discovered but there was little she could do for it. If she hadn't agreed to the two weeks, she wouldn't be here in his arms. Guilt ate at her. What would he do if she told him now? She couldn't risk it. As mercenary as it might seem, she wanted as much time with him as she could get before she had to say goodbye forever.

"What is it?" he asked, stroking her sweaty hair back from her temples. He stared down into her eyes, his gaze concerned as he seemed to search inside her soul.

She glanced away, uncomfortable with his scrutiny. She licked her lips. "Nothing."

"Tempest. Don't lie to me."

She shook her head. She couldn't tell him what she was thinking, so she struck upon another truth. "This is so...unexpected. When I got up this morning, I never thought I'd be in bed with you by dinner."

He nipped her neck. "But what a delightful dinner it is."

Distracting him with sex was a very good idea. If only she could forget her deception...

He buried his nose in her hair. His hips shifted, rubbing into her clit. "It feels so good inside you."

"Mmm, yes," she sighed, temporarily forgetting her worries. They ceased to matter much when he moved over her, his cock still firm and growing harder by the moment. His hand crept up her torso to cup her over-sensitive breast, gently twisting the pearly nipple. Tempest moaned as the heat built in her center once again. How many times would it take before her body was sated? She'd orgasmed countless times. And she still needed more. And more. And more.

It was always this way with Josh. It didn't matter if it had been three minutes since she'd found release or three hours. He could rebuild the fire within her with the slightest of touches.

"That's right, angel," he murmured as she arched beneath him, moaning for more. "Whose are you?"

"Yours, Master," she gasped, her hips jerking. "Yours."

"Always."

She shuddered around him, her pussy squeezing around his ridged cock. She struggled to hold on to reality, turning her head and staring at the slit of late afternoon light fighting its way through the heavy curtains. If she lost herself in his embrace whenever Josh plowed into her, she'd never break free. The tenderness, the mind-blowing emotions and corresponding physical reactions would bind her to him more tightly than chains. He'd haunt her every breath.

Her heart lurching, she disconnected. This was just some guy fucking her. Nothing special...a horny guy in a seedy motel room where hundreds of couples had probably fucked before. Tomorrow, he'd move on... She'd move on... Nothing special.

Fingers turned her face from the light. "Don't do that," Josh rasped, dragging her back to reality. "Stay with me."

She sobbed as starbursts exploded before her eyes, blinding her to the desperation in his eyes. *Stay with him*. If only he knew...

Chapter Three

Josh held Tempest as he stared at the faint light breaking through the curtains he'd cracked open last night when they'd finally settled into sleep. They'd never stopped to eat, each being content to "live on love". He smiled as he remembered Tempest giggling that sometime yesterday evening. As her stomach rumbled beneath his hand, he suspected she wouldn't feel the same this morning. Finding food would be high on their agenda, right after checking out of this place.

With a contented sound, Tempest turned in his arms and snuggled into his chest. Her lips closed around his nipple and tugged at the small gold ring.

"Morning, angel," he gasped.

"Hungry," she murmured. "Need coffee."

She gave the ring another gentle pull, sending a spark straight to his groin. "Tempest..." His fingers dug into her ass, dragging her tight to him. "Keep that up and it will be noon before we eat. And—" Her stomach growled in support of his statement. "I think we need to feed you."

"I'm fine," she grumbled, slipping from his arms and swinging her legs from the bed. She wrenched the sheet up with her, like a shroud to hide her ivory perfection.

She didn't say anything, but he knew. He'd hurt her feelings with his insistence that she needed to eat. For God's sake, she was human, wasn't she? He grabbed her, yanking her back and burying his face in the crook of her neck. He growled, biting her shoulder. "I'm *starving* and before I fall into a faint over your luscious body, I need some serious protein. What kind of a Dom would I be if I couldn't keep up with my lusty wench?"

"I guess we'd better find that McDonald's," she replied. A spark of mirth danced in her eyes when she turned her head toward him. "Do I get to put on some clothes?"

He pretended to consider her question. "I suppose," he teased with a dramatic sigh. Settling her back on the pillows, he straddled her body and kissed her until their moans echoed in the room. "Stay right there," he told her, reluctantly climbing from the bed, then tucking the sheet around her. Her eyes followed his every move as he reached for his jeans. Carefully, he pulled them on, adjusting himself so that he didn't have a zipper mishap. He grabbed the room and truck keys from the floor where he'd dropped them. "I'll be back in a sec with our suitcases."

The birds sang merrily as he slipped outside and headed for his truck. The sun peeked through the leaves to dapple the ground, giving the area an overall peaceful feeling. Despite the rundown motel, it was nice here. He could almost believe he was at the heart of nature primeval. Until he looked behind him at the shabby structures with their peeling paint and torn screens. He kept his gaze on the thick woods, unwilling to let his mood be tarnished by the glaring reminder of how he'd been misled.

He climbed into the truck to pull it around in front of the room. Still deep in thought, he turned the key...and was met with silence. What on earth? He had gas. He kept the vehicle in tiptop condition. He'd just had it in for its regular maintenance and inspection, in fact. Frowning, he turned the key again. He could not be stranded here. *Please, no...*

Nothing.

Squeezing his eyes shut he dropped his forehead onto the steering wheel. Somewhere, for some reason, one of the minions of fate hated him. This could not be happening. For good measure, he turned the key again.

It was happening. Damn it!

Just great. The birds seemed to change their tune, chirping their ridicule in his direction. The dappling turned slightly sinister.

Such a wonderful interlude he had going on here...crappy motel, broken down truck. He shoved a hand through his unruly hair and took a deep breath. This could all be fixed. He'd call a mechanic, get the truck repaired and they'd be on their merry way.

In the meantime, Grizzly Adams had mentioned the grocery-bait shop was nearby. Surely they'd have something to eat if the McDonalds was too far to walk.

Right. Okay. So he had a plan. This wasn't so bad. Call a mechanic. Get some food. Be on their way to his favorite place on Lake Superior, a secluded cove untouched by civilization. God, he couldn't wait to make love to Tempest there.

He pulled his cell phone from where it was clipped to his waistband. Flipping it open, he pressed the speed dial for his secretary. Emma was brilliant. She'd find help with a few clicks of her manicured nails on the keyboard. Three beeps let him know it wouldn't be as easy as that. Incredulous, he stared down at his phone.

No service.

He was in hell.

Reluctantly, he turned toward the main building and scowled at the dented metal trashcan. Someone had painted the wretched thing white and emblazoned it with large black letters spelling *Office*. Perfect. Perhaps Oscar the Grouch was in residence and could point him to a payphone and the nearest mechanic.

* * * * *

Tempest leapt back in bed when she heard the key rattle in the lock. She'd waited forever for Josh to return. When minutes had dragged to a half hour, she'd gotten up and peeked out the window. Not seeing him but figuring he was probably in the office taking care of their checkout, she'd made coffee in the complimentary pot on the dresser.

It would be a dead giveaway that she'd strayed from the bed, but she was willing to deal with the consequences. She needed her coffee.

Josh shouldered into the room, carrying a scrap of paper, a white, wax-coated bag and their suitcases. The luggage dropped to the floor with a thunk as he shut the door. One look at him and instant worry filled her. This wasn't the ebullient man who'd left the room earlier. Strain pulled at his eyes, filling them with shadows that had nothing

to do with their lack of sleep last night. He gave her a half smile that barely reached beyond his upturned lip.

"What is it?" she asked as he crossed the room and sat on the bed beside her. Ignoring the sheet that dropped away as she rose, she knelt beside him and wrapped her arms around his shoulders. She sighed inwardly as her bare breasts and belly flattened against his warm, hard side and her body revved up for a replay of last night. She steadfastly ignored it, her only thought to giving him comfort for whatever had upset him.

"Truck's dead."

Well, that *was* worth being upset. He hadn't been pleased when he'd seen the motel and now to be stuck here...

He turned and dropped a kiss on her shoulder, distracting her. He smoothed his thumb over her forehead. "It will be okay."

Tempest smiled. Josh was so adorable when he was trying to reassure her. When she was younger, she'd occasionally acted worried, just to see his soothing in action. Silly. But back then she'd been a silly girl, unaware of much of the world and its workings. Josh had been her world and she'd liked the way his attention warmed her. Even now his comforting turned her on, warming up the dusty places inside her that nobody else touched. He'd tried to shelter her from everything when she was with him—physical and emotional.

No one else had ever protected her as Josh did.

But she wasn't the one who needed consoling. He was upset and she really didn't care *how* or *where* they spent their scant time as long as they were together.

He shoved the white bag toward her. "There are a couple of doughnuts in here. from the hotel's continental breakfast. I can't vouch for their freshness, but they're something to hold us over until we can walk to the grocery and get a few things."

She sat back on her heels while he stared at the curtained window and they both ignored the bag he dropped on the bed. He shoved a hand through his wild hair and

she fought back a grin as a pleasant sensation of déjà vu prickled over her. He'd always done that and it always made things worse. It would be so easy to slide back into the memories of what had been and forget everything that had happened since they'd last been together.

Absently, she smoothed the long strands, wondering if he'd let her brush his hair later. It seemed an appropriate gesture of a submissive to her Dom. She wanted his comfort and pleasure. She needed it.

His fingers clenched beside his thigh and she drew back her hand. Had she angered him when she'd touched him? As if sensing her worry, he turned to her, again sharing the partial smile that tore at her heart. Lifting her hand, he pressed a hand to the center of her palm.

"You please me, angel. Don't fret."

"Thank you." She bowed her head, hiding her irrational relief. How had she fallen so easily back into the Master and slave routine? As much as she desired to be dominated, she knew deep inside that she'd kneel to no other man. Somehow, Josh had claimed her soul way back when, and she'd never gotten it back. "If I please you," she asked carefully, "then what's wrong? The truck can be fixed. Can't it?"

"We're stuck in this..." He stopped to look around the room, his face crinkling with distaste, "*hovel* until at least tomorrow. I called from the office. That's the soonest the garage can get someone to come out." He chuffed out a breath. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind."

"Okay...so we'll find something to do," she offered. "Remember how we explored when we were in college?"

"Yeah." He smiled, his eyes growing dark as he remembered. His gaze wandered over her, taking in her nakedness and her position. Purposely, she slid her arms behind her and lowered her focus to the rumpled sheets between her parted thighs. Her slave pose had always turned him on. And he seemed to need distracting right about now.

Wasn't that the first precept of submission? See to the Master's wellbeing, whether physical or emotional.

His happiness always led to hers.

As he stared at her, her body responded, growing soft and hot and wet in all the places clamoring for his touch. Her nipples tightened, aching for him. She didn't even care that she was naked with all her flaws visible. Josh didn't seem to care. He even seemed to like her generous curves her clean-shaven pussy. And, man, how she liked his hard-plated muscles.

She bit back a groan as she eyed his belly and the curve of his hipbone disappearing beneath his low-cut jeans. Her center clenched sending a flood to her cleft. God, how she wanted him. She peeked at his face through her lashes. Would this longing ever stop, or would it go on long after they'd parted once again? He hadn't come after her before. He certainly wouldn't chase her this time.

She shoved the thought away, unwilling to taint the moment with the inevitable.

His lids heavy with need, Josh leaned toward her while she fought the urge to arch her chest into him and rub her breasts against his lightly furred body.

"You're so responsive," he murmured. "Even without me touching you...but I wonder...what would happen if I did this?" His fingers stroked down the inside of her elbow, grazing the slightly raised veins.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on," he whispered.

A shudder riffled through her and her body spasmed with the force of a tiny orgasm, threading its way along her languid limbs. *Where the hell did that come from?*

She struggled to breathe and make reason out of her reaction. How had he done that? She'd always thought Shakespeare was okay, but it had never had this kind of an effect on her before. He'd quoted this line every time she came, every time stroking her inner elbow. Goose bumps rose as he trailed the backs of his bent fingers between her breasts and over her quivering belly. Slowly, he slipped one long finger between her folds. "Hmmm...all warmed up."

"Yes," she whispered.

He cupped her chin, lifting her gaze to his. "You're mine, Tempest."

They both startled at the sound of his cell phone ringing. His head dropped to her shoulder. "I can't get service to call out, but someone can call me..." he muttered, reaching for the holder on his belt. "I better answer it. Might be Marv's Garage. Maybe we can still get out of here today."

"Hurry," she whispered as he answered. She leaned back and raised her hands over her head, looping her fingers through the rungs on the headboard. Deliberately, she raised her knees and parted them. "Master..." she mouthed.

"Ryan..." Josh greeted his brother as his chin lowered and he stared at her. Ire mixed with the desire swirling through his eyes, a heady mix that strengthened her arousal. She was in trouble as soon as he got off his call, but she liked it.

"No, I'm not going to Superior today," he said.

She sighed, shifting her body to show him her need. She bit her lip, closing her eyes and tipping back her head.

"The truck died." His voice sounded choked and she heard him moving away from her. What the heck? He wasn't supposed to be walking away from her obvious display. She sighed and reached down for the sheet.

"Don't move."

Her eyes flew open and she returned to her former position, gripping the headboard.

"No not you," he told his brother. "Who? My sub... What is this? Twenty questions? It's Tempest, okay?"

He frowned as Ryan apparently said something he didn't like.

"Yes, I know what I'm doing. Look, lay off the baby brother routine. We're fine. *I'm* fine. Is there a reason you're calling other than to check up on your errant sibling?" He sighed as his suspicion must have been confirmed. "No, we're not in St. Ignace. Do you

think I'd be stranded if the truck had died in St. Ignace? We're north of that. Off one twenty three, on the way to Tahquamenon. In the middle of nowhere..."

Propping the phone on his shoulder, he lifted a small, black carryall from the group of luggage he'd dropped at the door and set it on the end of the bed.

"Well, yeah it's pretty here," he licked his bottom lip, eyeing Tempest in a way that made her think perhaps he was talking about her. No man had ever made her feel so good...so confident.

Touch me now, she wanted to scream. I need you.

The sound of the bag's zipper tensed her nerve endings. His gaze told of surprises inside and a moment later, he confirmed the promise. Excitement winged through her as he withdrew two long strips of red fabric and smiling an evil grin, walked toward the head of the bed. Her cleft flooded as he bound her hands in place, ensuring that she wouldn't move from her position. She was his, helpless to escape. Like she'd even want to.

He splayed his fingers over her neck, claiming her silently. She whimpered unable to stop as she pressed into him in answer. "Please," she mouthed.

He raised an eyebrow, reminding her she was not in charge. He was the Dom. He was in charge. She was his pleasure. At his command. His knuckles dragged down her arm and over the slope of her breast. Slowly, he rolled her erect nipple between his fingers. Bending forward, he flattened his tongue over it, catching the tip with his piercing. Tempest fought back a moan. She could hear the indistinct rumble of Ryan's voice as he continued to talk and she knew he'd hear any sound she made.

Josh molded her other breast, taunting the flesh as he continued to answer his brother noncommittally and torment her with his mouth. Tremors flew through her, amplified by her battle to remain silent. Still, her tormented gasps seemed to explode around her.

Her teeth sank into her bottom lip and she squeezed her eyes closed. It made no difference. His sharp, masculine scent filled her senses. The ring in his nipple scuffed

her belly as he played her. She wanted to feel the tiny barbells on the underside of his cock as he drove into her again. Hell, she wanted to investigate them with her tongue.

He chuckled at something Ryan said—or was it at her struggle? The wood spindles bit into her hands as she clutched them. Each draw of his mouth seemed to tug at an invisible line between her breasts and her pussy. He sucked and her body clenched. He nipped and her body clenched. He...*breathed* and her body clenched.

She started to shudder as her release reached its pinnacle. One “step” and she’d be there, careening to the valley of satiation.

“I need to go,” he told his brother and snapped shut the phone.

Finally. She parted her thighs a bit further.

“You’re very naughty,” he chastised. “Naughty subs don’t get rewarded.”

“Josh...no,” she pleaded. Oh God, she couldn’t stand it if he left her like this.

“What should I do with you, naughty sub?”

“Fuck me,” she offered.

“I don’t think so.” He stood over her, his muscular arms crossed over his magnificent chest. “I have a flogger with me, but I think you’d enjoy that too much.” Opening his pants, he stroked his large hand over his cock. With firm strokes, he drew a glistening droplet to the tip.

Tempest licked her lips, wanting nothing more than to taste him. Okay, that wasn’t true. She wanted him deep inside her.

He smoothed his thumb over the tip. “You want this?”

She nodded, almost unable to speak past the “Yes,” she managed.

“Hmm, that’s too bad. I’d like that, you know. But since you’ve been so naughty.”

“Please, Master,” she begged falling into the play. “Let me please you. I’m sorry.”

He chuckled. “I doubt that.”

Frantically, she shifted on the bed, the inner walls of her pussy contracting wildly. She loved him like this. Controlling the scene. Dominating her. Her gaze blurred

slightly as she stared at his hand moving over his erection and her own hand restlessly stroked the wood spindle she held. He'd be as hard as the wood, yet softer. Her fingers itched to encircle him Damn it she needed him and he knew it. He knew what sweet torture this was for her.

Moisture dripped from her cleft, trickling along the crease of her ass. He'd slide so easily into her, even with the metal posts tracking the length of his cock. She shifted, drawing her knees together to relieve some of her arousal.

More of his fluid escaped the tiny slit on his cock, getting on his fingers. He rubbed it on her belly. "I love watching your muscles roll as you fight your need," he told her, trailing the pad of his thumb around her navel. She groaned as his touch trailed to her pussy, slowly he rubbed her clit.

"Oh God, Josh," she cried.

"Who?" he asked.

Confused, she stared at him. "Master," she said, finally. "Please."

He slipped a finger inside her and she almost came from relief. Her aching tissues closed around it, begging for more. Agitated, she thrust her hips toward him, but he pulled back before she found any true reprieve from the desire pulling taut her nerve-endings.

Slowly, he traced the path of moisture to her ass. "When was the last time you were fucked here, Tempest?" he asked hoarsely.

Her bottom instinctively clenched. There? Forever ago. She wasn't even sure she could. But for him, she'd try. She needed him anyway she could get him. "When was the last time you were there?" she asked. Sudden shyness fell over her. How boring and unsophisticated would he find her now?

Josh almost lost it right then and there. He'd been the last one to slide into her tight passage. Not just the last, but the only. It was his, completely his. He gazed at her

flushed cheeks, the pink staining down her neck and on to her chest. Her tousled blonde hair spread around her head like a damaged halo. Her eyes glazed, her arms tied over her head, she waited for his pleasure.

He dipped his finger into her cunt again and dragged away her lubricant. Slowly, he pushed it against her puckered hole. Slowly, ever so slowly, he gained entrance. Fiery heat surrounded his fingertip, tempting him to rush. He knew better. If either of them was to gain pleasure here, he couldn't hurry. Tempest moaned, her mouth moving with incoherent words as she squeezed shut her eyes.

"Feels...good," she gasped. "Let me go so I can get in the right position."

"No, like this," he insisted. He liked taking a woman from behind as much as the next guy, but he wanted – no needed – to see Tempest's face as he sank inside her to the balls. Reaching to the head of the bed, he grabbed two of the fat pillows and slid them beneath her hips.

The case where he'd stowed some of his gear, still lay on the end of the bed. Less than an arm's length away. Quickly, he retrieved a tube of lube and a condom. In a moment, he was ready and perched at the entrance to her nether passage. A single quiver shot down his thighs as tension held him tight. He needed in.

"If you want me to stop," he said, "Say –"

"I won't. Please J-Master. I need you. Please."

"Fuck, Tempest," he swore.

"Please," she whispered, lifting her hips slightly and pressing her opening to his tip. Her movement forced him inside. The initial band of muscles cinched around the head, taking him to hell. Or was it heaven? At times like this, the line between was too thin. His body was a miasma of pure sensation.

"More," she panted.

"Wait. I don't want to hurt you," he answered through gritted teeth. How humiliating would it be to come when he'd barely gotten inside her?

"Don't care. Need all of you. Please."

Driven by her need, he shoved forward while she screamed. It was as if his body wasn't his. It was hers. A machine reacting to her need. But he wasn't. He knew better. Desperately, he clutched for his retreating control.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," he muttered. Tears streamed down her cheeks. Horrified guilt tore at him. What had he done?

"No. Good. It's good," she told him. Unbelievably, she arched. "More. Again. Please, Master, please..."

She was so tight. The squeeze was almost too much. He waited, breathing shallowly, praying, counting the gouges in the wall above the headboard... Bit by infinitesimal bit she relaxed around him.

And he moved. Drugging pleasure clutched him while her body clutched his cock so tightly he might never get it back. He didn't want it back. She felt too good. Grasping her hips, he drove into her. His thumbs pulled at the fleshy lips hiding her cleft and opened her to him. The dark, sensual scent of her filled him while he rubbed against her clit with every thrust.

Tempest writhed. Screaming, begging, Oh-my-Godding, she stiffened. Her tight nipples pushed toward the ceiling as her orgasm claimed them and her nails added more gouges to the wall. Her passage clamped down on his shaft. He couldn't hold back. With two violent thrusts, he came.

Nothing. *Nothing* would ever come close to Tempest beneath him.

* * * * *

Tempest woke to the smell of coffee. The room smelled of sex too though they'd showered sometime in the night. A moment later, the sensation of her stomach eating its way to her backbone attacked. How late was it? They must have slept for a while if her gnawing hunger was any indication. Well, lack of food wouldn't hurt her. Still she needed something soon or she'd take a bite out of the hunk stretched beside her.

She grinned. She might anyway... He looked so good.

Content in the moment, she rolled toward him, curling her arm over his chest and resting her chin on her hand. Idly, she reached out and traced the black tribal tattoo banding his arm with her fingertip. All the Doms in his family had a similar band. And while most people—like her—would consider it merely tribal symbols, it was actually some ancient language she couldn't dream of comprehending.

"Keeper of the temple," he murmured, signaling he'd woken just before his arm looped around her waist. Her finger moved again and he continued reciting the meaning of the symbols. "Owner of the treasure. Protector of the spirit."

Toying with the tiny, gold ring in the nipple beside his tattoo, she turned her cheek to her hand and gazed up at him. "You're not keeping the temple very well. Your treasure is starving."

He snorted and smacked her behind. "But the spirit is obviously fine."

She made a dramatic sound of suffering, as shimmering heat flooded to every part of her. "For now... Much longer and I may sink into a decline."

"Oh we can't have that." He shifted from beneath her and climbed out of the bed. "Okay, up with you. Since Marv's in no hurry to fix the truck, let's see what we can find in town. Grizzly Adams told me how to take the shortcut through the woods."

"Who?" She bit her lip as she watched the muscles contract in Josh's ass while he moved. The man was perfection walking. Why would he want her? Disgusted with herself, she shoved the thought away. Obviously, he did and that should be good enough for her. He'd never once mentioned a problem with her appearance. It was always her obsession.

Maybe it was time to figure out how to get over that. It would certainly make her happier.

"The desk guy," he said as he pulled on his jeans. "I think he actually owns this place. When I went to the office this morning, he was wearing his pajamas behind the

desk. Hey!" He turned, crossing his arms over his chest. "I thought you were starving. Aren't you getting up?"

"I'm enjoying the view. Turn around again."

His brows drew together but his stern look was ruined by his amused smile. Returning to the bed, he knelt over her and bracketed her body with his arms and legs. "You're a very naughty sub. *Still*. I should have punished you earlier. Get up or I'll spank you and put you in a corner."

"Promise?" she giggled as he got up again. She hadn't felt this sort of euphoria in...eight years. Despite her teasing, she too got up and crossed to her luggage, acutely aware of the new aches in her body. She couldn't help her smile. Each twinge marked her as his. And she liked it.

Quickly, she grabbed a pair of jeans and a T-shirt along with some of the sinful lingerie he'd picked out for her. What had he said? *You have no idea what it does to me to know you're wearing the bra and panties I selected for you.* It did a little something for her too. Her womb gave a little quiver at the remembered words.

"No time for a shower. We'll take one when we get back."

"I really need one to wake up. I feel like I've done nothing but have sex for hours," she protested.

"Haven't you?"

True, but she didn't want the world to know it. She had to look completely debauched. Oh, who cared? It wasn't like she'd see these people again after tomorrow. If Josh said no, it was no. He was in charge. "I've done more than that. I made coffee," she offered weakly.

"You weren't supposed to get out of bed," he gently reminded.

There was that... Without another word, she slipped into her clothes, acutely aware of his eyes on her. If she'd had a little more confidence, she might have tried to be sexy. Instead she put on the garments as quickly as possible. She tugged at the hem of her

shirt which crept up to show a sliver of her belly every time she moved. "This shirt's too small."

"It's perfect. You really do need to eat. You're crabby."

Her lips pressed together. She wouldn't argue with him. She'd only lose—particularly since she was starting to feel a bit crabby. Looking away, she tugged at her shirt.

"Stop," he said, stepping close to her. He closed his fingers around her wrists and pulled them behind her. Carefully he slipped her fingers in her back pockets. "Just like that. Don't move them."

Don't move? Like this, her breasts thrust forward, her nipples no doubt poking against the thin cotton. The position lifted the hem of the top, exposing a few inches of flesh.

Josh circled her navel with his thumb and shook his head. His tender gaze pierced her. "You have no idea... It amazes me how unaware you are. This softness... What more could a man ask for?"

She could think of a whole lot of things.

His fingers splayed and slipped beneath her waistband to graze the upper slope of her mound. "Don't you dare say what you're thinking or I'll force feed you Oreos."

"Oh the torture," she quipped, a little worried that he might actually do that.

What would it take for Tempest to understand how attractive she was? Her family had done some number on her self-image. Her stomach growled loudly, dragging him from his thoughts. Maybe he would feed her those Oreos. He'd love to taste them on her lips. The sugar buzz would keep her going through their next session in bed until it wore off and she collapsed into his arms. In the deep sleep to follow, she wouldn't question her presence here or ridicule her perfectly healthy body.

Holding her took him to a heaven he hadn't visited in years.

Going to the door, he held it open for her. "C'mon, slave. We need to find food and the general store. We have one condom left."

Her eyes widened in surprised, then a sultry smile curved her lips. Obviously, Miss Smarty Pants had mentally calculated and realized that yes, they had fucked enough times to run through the modest box he'd brought. He should have planned better. He couldn't get enough of her.

"I'd guess we'd better hurry then," she conceded. "I'm feeling kinda needy."

His cock jerked back to attention. He'd only just gotten the thing to relax. Tempest was out of control. Purposely angling for punishment.

"Your hands don't come out of your pocket unless you're in danger of being snapped by a branch or you trip and must catch yourself. Understand?"

She lowered her gaze, appearing appropriately submissive, even though he knew she was anything but. "Yes, Master."

He gritted his teeth. She sidled past him to the pitted, crumbling sidewalk outside the cabin. Was it his imagination or were her hips swaying more than usual? She smiled at Grizzly Adams who happened to be crossing the parking lot, presumably on the way to the Dumpster judging from the black trash bag in his hand. He stopped dead in the middle of the pavement, ogling Tempest. Obviously, he didn't see hot women out here in the wilderness. If she didn't watch it, she'd find herself kidnapped and married by some backwoods minister.

Damn it! Josh caught her elbow and guided her toward the path through the woods just as she winked at the man. Obviously at the hands of her Dom her self-confidence was improving, at least a little, and that pleased him. However he was not impressed with the way the Four Star proprietor consumed her with his eyes.

"Who do you belong to?" Josh growled near her ear.

She smiled serenely. "You, Master."

"You like being punished," he accused.

She gave him a “duh” look that had him hard in less than a breath. “Yes, Master,” she replied, her voice husky. Her eyes darkened, obviously, remembering the last time he’d disciplined her. He’d failed there. There was something about Tempest that sent him to his limits and destroyed his control. Yet he needed to dominate her and feel her submission. He swallowed against the tightness in his throat. It didn’t matter how much Tempest misbehaved when it came right down to it—she obeyed him. It didn’t matter if they were parted eight years or eight minutes. It was as if she was programmed to be everything he wanted in a woman. Sassy yet compliant. Subservient yet as naughty as hell.

And strong. The image of the Strength card Keera had shown him on his birthday flashed through his mind. Tempest could easily be the woman pictured closing the lion’s mouth. She had inner strength she’d never recognized. It pleased him that with his guidance, she seemed to be coming into her power.

She swayed seductively as they walked through the woods to the general store. He frowned knowing she was teasing him, yet she didn’t so much as slide her fingers a centimeter from her pockets. Any of his three brothers would turn their sub over their knee for the behavior Tempest displayed. He suspected his sisters-in-law would enjoy it too. That wasn’t the way he operated. He’d always been the rebel in the family. He had a different way, even in the way he lived the D/s lifestyle.

Without a word, he brushed the backs of his fingers in a deliberate line down her hip. She couldn’t mistake it was an intentional touch. She stopped, looking askance at him.

“Behave,” he ordered quietly. “Taunting me won’t get you anywhere. I left the only condom back in the room.” He held up a finger when she opened her mouth. “And don’t suggest something else either.”

She blinked slowly then nodded.

Leaning toward her, he cupped the back of her neck and gently kissed her. “Not that I wouldn’t really like to have you on your knees, bringing me off.”

She bit her lip making a small sound in her throat. Oh yeah, he felt the same way.

Splaying his hand on the small of her back, he guided her in what he hoped was the right direction. There did seem to be a distinct dirt path through this densely wooded stretch. White pine and maple towered over them while unseen birds twittered merrily. As they continued, they passed a secluded waterfall. Josh was tempted to stop. He could easily envision Tempest naked beneath the modest fall, water sluicing over her while he explored her body.

His steps quickened. Food... He needed to feed his woman before surrendering again to the desire zipping between them. There was a lot more to their relationship than sex, but right now when reuniting was so fresh, nothing else really seemed to matter. He needed the reassurance of her body connected with his—and she wanted him just as much. That knowledge only served to incite his drive.

A good ten minutes later, they exited the woods onto the main street of Trent, the only town for miles according to the Four Star owner. It was actually bigger than Josh had imagined. Directly to his right stood Fischer's Grocery and Bait. A small hand-painted placard below the store's sign declared there to be a pharmacy on site, as well.

Condoms, he thought, thankful the pharmacy would be easy to find. A bakery-restaurant was at the end of the street with a Chinese restaurant two doors down. Chinese? He wouldn't have expected something so specialized in such a small place. He glanced at Tempest knowing her fondness for crab rangoon and saw a bright spot in this vacation disaster.

A gas station, the Trent church, a post office and Marv's garage rounded out the town. To the north, a smattering of white houses with peeling paint had sprouted up along the main road leading to and from the main drag.

Josh guided Tempest toward the store. "Snacks," he said.

"Condoms," she retorted, knowing his mind.

He leered at her, sliding his hand down to give her ass a squeeze. "Like I said...snacks."

A blast of stale, cold air hit them as they stepped into the musty store. Except for the long counter doubling as a pharmacy station near the door, the set-up of the place vaguely reminded Josh of the convenience store around the corner from his house. Ignoring the couple standing near the soft drink cooler, he headed down the nearest aisle. It didn't take long to find what they needed. Between the sleep aids and the prenatal vitamins, a sole row of boxed condoms had been slotted.

"Don't people use birth control around here?" Tempest asked as he wiped a thin layer of dust off the box. Considering this was the only store in town, there seemed to be dust on everything. Where did people shop if not here? "Check the expiration date," she suggested. He squinted at the date imprinted on the side, deciphering the garble to the proper numbers.

"We're good," he confirmed, noting the date was still months off. They shouldn't have any mishaps.

"Can I help you two?" the man at the counter called.

"Got what I need, thanks." Heading down the next aisle, Josh grabbed a box of strawberry Pop Tarts and a few juice boxes. It wasn't exactly the fare he'd wanted to provide Tempest on their trip, but it would do for now.

"You all staying at the Four Star?" the clerk asked when Josh set the supplies on the counter a moment later.

"Yeah. We were supposed to be here a night, but this morning my truck wouldn't start."

The couple exchanged a glance. "I'll see what I can do to get Marv over to help you sooner than he may have told you." The man held out his hand. "Tom and Maggie Fischer. I run the store and she's one of the local rangers."

They chatted with the couple for a few minutes while Tom rang up the order and Josh paid. Tom promised once again to speak with Marv, who happened to be his brother, about getting over to the Four Star to check out Josh's truck.

Feeling better about the situation, Josh led Tempest from the store. "Chinese?" he asked. Her eyes lit up and he knew her hunger would override her inner voice, which would chide her to diet. He'd squelch that voice as quickly as possible. He wanted it to be his voice she heard in her head, telling her how beautiful she was and how much he loved her.

He froze, right in the middle of the street stunned by his revelation. Tempest turned to him. "What is it?"

Could he tell her how he felt? Was it too soon? Probably. "Nothing. I'll talk to you about it later." He shrugged and smiled. "Nothing to worry about, angel. Come on." He laced his fingers through hers. "I'm starving."

* * * * *

"I hope the rangoon isn't cold," Tempest commented as they entered their room, although she didn't care if it was cold. She was starving and for some reason. Josh had insisted that they come back to the Four Star to eat their meal.

He constantly surprised her. Even after all this time, he remembered her favorite foods and made sure that they'd ordered them. She honestly wondered what else he remembered. It seemed to be an awful lot.

Sliding a hand to its favorite position on her waist, he led her to the small table in the corner of the room. Setting the grocery and take-out bags on the surface, he started to remove the white take-out boxes. The scent of orange chicken and stir-fried vegetables saturated the air. Her stomach rumbled.

Methodically, he handed her the bottled water and plates the restaurant had provided with their meal. Then he handed her the containers and she took a bit of each. She noticed that Josh took even less. He had to be starving, too.

"I'm not very hungry," he lied when she raised her eyebrows at him. "Saving room for dessert."

"What's for dessert? Pop Tarts?" she asked, putting a bite of chicken in her mouth. The sharp taste exploded across her tongue and she groaned.

"You," he replied.

"What?" she choked. He handed her the bottle of water she'd set near her plate. As she recovered, he took a few bites of his food. Had she imagined what he'd said? He seemed so nonchalant.

"Full already?" he asked.

She shook her head. "What happened to the ragoon?"

He pushed back the food he'd barely touched. "You know, I think I'm ready for dessert."

"But—"

"C'mon, slave...I'm hungry for something sweet. I need you to feed me." He rose, pulling her to her feet. His eyes shone with the devil. Grinning, he removed another white box from the take-out bag along with the jar of sweet and sour sauce he'd purchased at the restaurant. He threaded the metal spoon he'd insisted on needing between two of his fingers.

Good lord, did he intend her to feed him like a Roman prince? No, he'd said *she* was dessert. Her belly clenched and cream flooded her lacy panties. Any desire that had temporarily subsided came rushing back. A bite of Josh was way better than orange chicken.

"Come with me," he directed.

"Come with me," she mimicked in a deep voice, giggling. Josh worked hard, just like the other men she knew—her research had revealed that. But he liked to play, something she'd always valued about him. Her father, her brother, *Phillip*...none of them knew the meaning of play, beyond a rousing round of golf to talk business.

Josh set the food on the table beside the bed and turned to her. His eyes darkened, turning the gray almost black as he drew her toward him and slipped her T-shirt over her head.

"Tempest," he whispered. Her barely there green lace bra revealed more than it hid and he tweaked her nipples, tormenting them with the fabric until she moaned and her head dropped back. A storm of need lashed at her pelvis, electrified by his touch. Lightning surged through her limbs.

She shivered as he skimmed his fingers over her skin to the clasp of her bra. They shook slightly as he released each of the hooks. A moment later, he cupped her freed breasts in his large hands and scraped his thumbs over the hard peaks. Her pussy tightened. She wanted him now. Naked. Beneath *her* this time.

She almost giggled manically at that thought. The likelihood of riding him was slim in his current state of mind if the tension vibrating from him was any indication. He needed her pliant body undulating beneath him. She was happy to comply.

Urgency washing over her, she shoved off his shirt. Leaning forward, she pressed her mouth to his warm chest and tasted his slight saltiness. He grasped her hips and pulled her tight to him while she trailed kisses over his chest. His nipples were tight beneath her mouth. She took the pierced one between her lips. Humming with pleasure, she flicked the tiny ring with her tongue all the while sucking and pulling.

"Jesus, angel," Josh swore. His cock thrust against her, hampered by their clothes. Hurriedly, she reached for his fly, but he stilled her hands. "Not yet."

"I need you."

"You'll have me."

Her world tilted as Josh lowered her onto the mattress but she barely noticed. Josh was her world right now. Nothing else mattered when he sprawled over her. Hungrily, he feasted at her mouth, capturing her gasping breaths. Her fingers threaded into his hair, holding him as her lips widened for his questing tongue. Playfully, she prodded his piercing while he thrust inside.

After a moment he slid a trail of open-mouth kisses across her jaw and down her neck. She whimpered as he sat up, straddling her thighs, and reached for the clasp at her jeans. Her temperature inched up as her zipper inched down. He lost no time pushing her clothing from her body. She reached for his pants as he tossed aside her clothes and returned to straddle her hips. Again, he pushed her hands away.

"Not yet," he said. Reaching over to the table, he lifted the spoon and the sweet and sour sauce off the table. The lid popped as he twisted it off.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He dipped the spoon into the apricot-colored liquid. "Eating lunch." He lifted the utensil and drizzled the sauce between her breasts. She shivered as the cold puddle spread and crept toward her stomach. A moment later, he scraped a ragoon through the trail. He lifted it to her lips and popped it into her mouth.

"Some for you," he murmured and leaned forward, laving his tongue through the sauce. "And some for me."

She couldn't help the "oh" that whispered past her lips. He lifted the spoon again.

"We're gonna make a mess," she gasped as he dribbled a twisting design down to her navel.

"I'll make sure you're not sticky," Josh promised. He swirled his tongue over her. "So sweet," he murmured.

"I'm sure it's the sugar in that stuff," Tempest panted, the final words coming as a squeak when he smoothed the cool bowl of the spoon over one of her erect nipples. Sauce drifted down the sides of her breast, looking like topping on a sundae. This time he didn't bother with a fried morsel before his mouth dived on her.

He didn't stop her this time when she worked on the clasp of his pants. His erection sprang forth into her hand. She encircled him, gently squeezing the heat. Her thumb smoothed over the ridges on the bottom, counting five barbells through the skin on the bottom of the shaft. No wonder he felt so good thrusting in and out of her. Who needed ribbed condoms when they had this?

Josh pushed against her fingers, a movement that seemed somewhat involuntary as he lapped at her. She wasn't the only one sighing in pleasure. He murmured her name. He tossed the spoon to the side and poured sauce along the indentation of muscle leading to her belly. The sticky condiment coated her stomach, pooling in her belly button. She'd definitely need a shower. Hopefully, he'd join her.

Josh reached for a ragoon. "Still hungry?"

Hungry? What?

She nodded, watching as he split one open and squeezed so that the filling oozed from the opening. Grasping the end between his teeth, he dipped it in the sauce at her navel and dragged it lightly over her skin on the way to her mouth. He teased her with it before she snatched it away with her teeth. A moment later, her tongue darted out to lick away the remnants of sauce from his lips and chin.

"There's another half," he rasped, holding it up for her to see. The remaining two points of the ragoon rested in his palm. Taking it in his other hand, Josh scratched the points over her shoulder, then her arm to her hand but snapped it away before she could take it. Dragging it over her torso, he bent and lapped away some of the sweet and sour.

"You're gonna have a huge sugar buzz," Tempest laughed, as a tingle zinged to her toes.

"I already have a Tempest buzz, so I guess that's okay."

She bit her lip. Yeah, she had a Josh buzz, too. Coming down from it in a few days was going to be hell. God, it would hurt.

Josh stalled her thought by continuing the path of the ragoon to her hip then to her sensitive inner thigh. When she thought he'd stop, he teased the back of her knee and then he popped the morsel into his mouth, wagging his eyebrows playfully.

Reaching for another piece, he pushed the cream cheese filling out onto two of his fingers. "Want some?" he whispered, holding it up to her lips.

She opened and darted her tongue over his fingers as he slowly moved them inside. Her teeth came down, firm but gentle, holding him still as she flicked at his fingertips. Josh's eyes widened in surprise before darkening on a new rush of desire. Relishing her power, Tempest sucked at the digits, pulling and releasing while he stared, entranced, at his hand and her mouth. His erection throbbed against the top of her mound and begged for her attention. She smiled smugly as she pulled away and freed him.

Now it was time. Now. Tempest held out her arms to him. "Josh, please..." she whispered.

He shook his head, his gaze intense.

"I haven't finished yet." Reaching up, he covered his fingers in the sauce remaining on her stomach and painted lines on her legs. His fingers arrowed toward her pussy, never quite touching. He reached for the spoon beside them. Tempest closed her eyes, wondering where he'd dollop the sweet next. She jolted in surprise when the cool of the metal patted her clit and sent streams of wild sensation jolting through her.

Her fingers clenched the sheets as she arched into the Morse code he tapped out against the aroused bud. Small, choked cries erupted from her lips, a mix of pleasure and torture as she burned for deliverance and completion. His mouth closing on her was sweet relief.

"Yes," she sighed. This new game, however, was worse than the last. Josh brought her to the edge of release over and over but never allowed her to tumble into her orgasm. Her entire being desired him and cried out for fulfillment.

Pushing Josh from her, she sat up and slid her hands through the remainder of the condiment on her stomach. If he wouldn't complete her voluntarily, she'd make him wild enough to do it. She scrambled to the end of the bed on her knees while Josh sat up, a confused look on his face. Before he could question her, she leapt to the floor. He swung around to follow, freezing when she knelt between his spread knees. Slowly, she pushed her coated hands over his legs and up his cock. He reared up, grunting when

she covered him with her mouth. His sticky fingers pushed into her hair. Clamping her lips tighter, she worked up and down his thick shaft.

"Take it," he said through his teeth. "Yeah, take it." He shoved toward the back of her throat while she massaged his heavy balls, pressing her thumb into the base of his cock. "God, your mouth feels good."

His fingertips dug into her scalp as he neared his peak. Finally, when she suspected he couldn't take more, she sat back on her heels and looked up at him. Very slowly, she leaned forward, watching him and lapped a droplet of cum from him.

Josh immediately clasped her upper arms and dragged her onto the bed with him, rolling over her. The head of his cock poised against the opening of her channel.

"Vixen," he rasped.

"Master," she whispered, batting her eyelashes at him while he jerked on a condom. "Don't punish me..."

"You'd like it too much. I have better ideas."

Her retort died on her lips as he surged inside her. Her cries filled the room. The world shrank to just the two of them, their pulsing heartbeats, their bodies rocking together. Problems, imperfections, faults...they all ceased to exist. In Josh's arms, she was perfection. He was perfection.

She grasped his shoulders, holding on while he drove inside her. Josh cupped the back of her head, drawing her up for a mind-numbing kiss. Almost at once, her body began to tremble beneath his as their personal universe exploded into a world of color before her eyes. She went soaring and with a gruff cry, he went with her.

He collapsed on top of her. He stroked the inside of her elbow, whispering Shakespeare to her while she smoothed her fingers in a lazy motion over his sweat-slicked back. She could get used to this. A sudden need to cry wrung through her and her stomach dropped. This would be gone before she knew it. She pressed her cheek to his damp shoulder, looking away from him, and blinked back the tears burning her eyes.

"I think we're stuck together," she sniffled, hoping she sounded more breathless than sad. Josh's chest shuddered above her as he silently laughed.

"Well, I did promise that I would make sure you're not sticky. Maybe we should shower."

"We?"

He got up, lifted her into his arms and dropped a kiss onto her shoulder. "Of course we." His eyes traveled over her naked body covered only by what remained of the sweet and sour sauce. "You know, you're a messy eater."

"Take a look at yourself."

"I'd rather look at you."

The ringing of her cell phone interrupted her response. A very familiar ring tone split the air. Tempted as she was to ignore it, she knew she couldn't.

"Let me down," she said. Her father beckoned.

Chapter Four

"Dad..." she answered while Josh stared at her. She couldn't ignore the call, as much as she wanted to. She hadn't told her father she was going away or told anyone where she planned to travel. If she didn't explain her whereabouts her father, the head of a powerful conglomerate would have an APB put out on her.

"Where are you?" he demanded. She crossed her arms over her chest as she faced the wall, her back to Josh's anger. The voice across the line brought back all her insecurities. She wanted to pull the blanket from the bed over herself, but it was already sticky enough.

"I'm with a friend. On a trip," she hedged. Behind her Josh grunted. What did he want from her? Her father would go ballistic if he knew who she was with. Eventually, she'd have to deal with his reaction to Josh, but she didn't want to taint her time with Josh any more than this phone call already would.

"Where? How dare you disappear without telling anyone," her father railed.

"Dad..."

"Where are you? I'll come and get you."

"No," she exclaimed. She'd been through that before. She wouldn't be dragged from Josh's presence by her father again. No one needed to live through a scene like that more than once. Besides, she wasn't a teenager anymore. She'd outgrown the necessity of obeying him. He just didn't get that.

"Why not? Who are you with?"

"It's...Dad, it's not really your business."

"Not my business?" he repeated, his tone taking on a lethal edge that could cut his adversaries to the bone. "Young lady —"

Oh great...

"What has gotten into you —"

She almost giggled hysterically at the thought of what exactly had gotten into her.

"You haven't behaved this way since...that boy," he continued, unaware of her irreverent thoughts. "Tempest, who exactly are you with?"

Uh-oh.

"You're with him, aren't you?" her father continued before she could answer.

Bingo.

"It doesn't matter," she defended herself. She turned back to Josh. He leaned against the headboard of the bed, one leg bent up, the other dangling to the floor. He'd thrown an arm across his eye. His displeasure over this call couldn't be any more evident. His silence spoke to her far louder than if he had a fit right now. Strength and confidence emanated from him. He knew that eventually he'd win this battle.

"Look, I'm a grown up, not a kid," she muttered into the phone.

"How could you? You're marrying Phillip —"

"No, I'm not," she protested vehemently. "I've told you both that. Over and over. I'm not marrying him."

Josh's arm dropped from his face and his eyes narrowed. Tension revved within him, evident from the suddenly taut cords in his neck and the throb of a tiny muscle high on his cheekbone. His lips turned white around the edges. He didn't like the talk of another man. The hand on the arm draped over his thigh fisted. He looked away without a word.

She had a feeling she'd hear a whole lot of words about this later. Or perhaps just one. Mine.

"Tempest —"

"No! I'm safe. I'm healthy. I'll call you when I get home —"

"I need you home now," her father interrupted.

"What?"

"The Miracles and Hope benefit is the day after tomorrow. You're the company's liaison. I need you home. I need you to be there."

She sighed, irritated with his apparent helplessness when it came to the company's charity work. He'd agreed to field anything that came up until she returned later this month. "Dad, we've talked about this."

"This last time, Tempest. Please."

She sighed, some of her anger dissipating. She wasn't returning to Grand Rapids early. "You'll need to do it."

"I need you to," he insisted, taking on a much softer tone.

Her brows drew together at his about-face. "Why?"

"I don't want to worry you while you're away from home." He cleared his throat. "It's a little thing. I'm sure my doctor will schedule some sort of procedure and..." His voice cracked and he trailed off, too emotional to go on. "Just...I need you to do this."

"Fine. Fine. Okay." Guilt racked her. He'd told her he was going to the cardiologist and she'd never thought another thing about it, sure he was fine. She'd been wrong and now he needed her. His health wasn't a reason for him to run her life, but she'd do this charity thing for him. Afterward, she'd gently set him straight about her plans and his unwelcome control over her life.

"You'll be there?"

She glanced at Josh. A different guilt resonated in her middle, a dull, insidious emptiness that grew as realization of what she had to do grew. "Yes."

Her father heaved a relieved breath. "Shall I come to get you?" he asked in a brighter voice.

"No. I'll talk to you later." She flipped the phone shut then turned off the power. She wouldn't have her father hustling her away from Josh again. It was bad enough she'd have to leave before they'd even really started.

“Josh—”

“I don’t want to hear about it,” he snapped.

“But—”

“But nothing. That man stole years from us, Tempest. I don’t care what he said. He’s your father so you need to talk to him, but I don’t want to hear what he has to say.”

“But I have to—”

“You don’t have to do anything but be with me, Tempest.” Scooping her into his arms, he drowned her protests with his mouth. He had her almost mindless by the time he reached the bathroom with her. Beneath the shower’s prickling spray, Josh reminded her of all the reasons she didn’t want to leave him. Thankfully, the water cascading over her hid her tears.

* * * * *

Dread plagued Tempest until the next morning when she woke. What could be mocked her as she imagined waking in his arms every morning for the rest of her life. If only... But “if only” only made things worse. How many times had she thought that in her head? If only her mother hadn’t died. If only her father hadn’t remarried that woman who hated Tempest. If only she could lose those stupid extra pounds clinging to her. If only she’d spoken her mind. If only she hadn’t let her father drag her from Josh... That wondering had never served her. It had opened big gaping holes in her psyche.

Slipping free of Josh’s grasp around her wrist, she got up to make coffee. The caffeine might ease the ache throbbing in her head. Nothing would help her throbbing heart.

If only he’d listen to her and she could explain. If only...those damned words again. There was no if only. There was just reality. And her reality said she had to leave. Today.

Standing before the untouched coffeepot on the dresser, she curled her arms under her breasts and stared in the mirror. Signs of Josh's loving marked her body. She smiled faintly touching a red mark on her shoulder. She liked his mark. It would be permanently on her soul marking her as his even when they parted. Staring at the inky circles beneath her eyes, she momentarily considered dealing with her father then returning to Josh. She immediately shoved the idea away. It wouldn't work. Josh wouldn't forgive her for choosing her family over him again.

Despair roiled in her stomach. What had happened to her plans and the independence she'd so desperately wanted when she'd come to Josh to obliterate him from her mind? She'd wanted to be free. To be independent. Now she just wanted to be his.

With Josh, she would be free.

He'd encourage her dreams. He'd support her as no one else ever had. With him, she felt desirable and confident. She belonged because she was his.

Then why, dear God, did she have to leave him? She took a wobbling breath. She'd always second guess her independence if she left things as they were with her father. She needed to deal with him before she could truly be free. Otherwise she'd always feel she had run away. He'd retain control over her complete freedom. He might never understand, but at least she'd know she'd tried and she'd had her say. He'd know where she stood.

She shifted her gaze to the man lying in the bed behind her. He was so strong and determined. He had overcome a lot. As he moved seamlessly through life, few knew the battles he'd fought and conquered. She knew. As the baby brother of the Cress family, he'd fought for respect from his three older brothers. He'd had to prove himself and claim his place as an equal. He'd had to gain respect. He had even overcome dyslexia.

And she was worried about confronting her father?

Josh stirred, sitting up anxiously when he realized she wasn't with him. She smiled at him in the mirror. His hair tangled wildly around his head and a mark from the

pillow creased his cheek. He rubbed a hand over his face as he met her gaze in the mirror, relief filling his eyes.

"Hi," she whispered around the knot in her throat.

"Come back to bed," he urged in a rough morning voice.

Banging on the door stopped her. Her eyes went wide as the sound startled her. Her father couldn't possibly have found her. This was too much like last time.

"Mr. Cress," a voice called. "I'm here about your truck."

Josh jumped out of bed while relief filled her. "I'll be right there," he called. "Thank God," he said to Tempest, giving her a quick kiss before yanking on his pants. "We'll be able to get out of here today."

She nodded mutely. She was going home today. He just didn't know it.

Josh dashed out to meet the mechanic while she mulled over her situation. She rushed into the bathroom for some essential hygiene. Afterward, she pulled on another set of the lacy lingerie Josh had gotten her, promising herself she'd buy herself some when she got home. She liked the way they made her feel. Feminine and desirable. Josh sure liked her in them. She dressed in a cropped blouse that ended just above her waist and another pair of jeans, then pulled out the purse she'd shoved in her suitcase when they'd packed at Josh's home.

After dragging a brush through her hair, she opened the curtains to let in sunlight then sat at the table. A holder near the window held a pad of paper and a pen. Removing them, she stared out the window at Josh talking to the mechanic next to the open hood of the truck.

I'm sorry, she wrote. I have to go home. I'll never regret my time with you. I don't want it to end, but it must.

She frowned at the inadequate and wholly pathetic note. She couldn't do better, not without succumbing to the ache inside her and breaking down. She stared at the words.

All my love, Tempest, she added. Quickly, she folded it and shoved it in her purse. When they went to town later, she'd hire a car and go home. She glanced again at Josh. If only he would listen to her. If only... if only, if only, if only! She didn't have time for it.

Getting up, she straightened the room so Josh wouldn't have to after she was gone. She stowed her dirty clothes in a laundry bag in her luggage and picked up their food boxes. She flushed as she picked up the sauce container. She'd never think of sweet and sour sauce the same way again. The jar thunked into the trashcan. Picking up the nearby spoon, she tucked it into her purse.

She shook her head. A spoon...her only reminder of this trip.

Her fingers splayed over her neck. Being able to take Josh's collar would have been better. He hadn't given it to her though. She sighed. It was a good thing he hadn't. She would have needed to leave that behind, too.

She jumped as he came into the room. "Marv says he can have the truck done tonight."

"You're back," she said. *Lame, Tempest. Lame.*

Josh cocked his head. "Yeah..." His arms slipped around her and he kissed her. "It was life and death. I almost didn't make it. Just about got eaten by a squirrel."

"Oh no," she replied, her words indistinct as he covered her lips again. Immediately, her body leapt to attention. Desire settled low in her belly and she wished for one more time in his arms. Once more at his command.

"Let's go get breakfast," he murmured. "I think I saw that the bakery actually has Starbucks and I'm dying for a doughnut. I need some sustenance for what I have in mind for you this afternoon."

She blushed thinking of last night. "You have a serious sweet tooth." She trailed her fingers over his hard belly. "Better be careful."

"With you around, I'll burn off the calories and more," he laughed. "Trust me, no worries."

She drew back. She wouldn't be here. He talked like they had forever. They had hours.

"What is it?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing. Starbucks you say? I never had my coffee this morning. I really need some." She touched her forehead. "A bit of a headache."

"Oh angel, I'm sorry. Let me get on a shirt and we can get going." He rubbed his thumbs over her brow. "It's probably this musty room."

"Probably," she agreed, giving him a half-smile to hide her lie. Careful of any sticky spots, she sat on the bed and watched him as he finished dressing and brushed his hair. Quickly, he pulled it back, securing it with a rubber band at the back of his neck.

He held her hand as they left the room and headed for the woods. She adjusted the strap of her purse on her shoulder and glanced at his left hand where he'd stuck his fingers in his pocket. She could almost imagine rings on their left hands. If they'd been given the opportunity to stay together, it would have happened. They would have married. She had no doubt.

Despite their sexual preferences, they were very much like a normal couple. No one looking at them would know she liked to be tied up and he liked to dominate her. They were just a pair of people who wanted to be together and share their lives.

Just inside the tree line, she turned to him and curved the hand behind his neck. "I love you," she whispered. Her throat constricted. She couldn't stop the tears that flooded down her cheeks as she realized, she'd never tell him that again.

"Angel," he exclaimed, pulling her into his arms. "Don't cry. I'm so—oh angel..." Speechless from the emotion filling him, he covered her lips with his. Desperate to show her what he hadn't said, he pushed her lips apart, delving inside her mouth.

Lifting her into his arms, he walked deeper into the woods, stopping only when he reached the secluded waterfall they'd come across the day before. Ribbons of water gushed over a ledge several feet above his head, dropping into the shallow river below.

Thankfully, it was hot for a fall day.

He set her on her feet on one of the stone slabs bordering the small river running from the waterfall. "Clothes. Off," he said, already sliding the strap of her purse from her shoulder.

Taking deep breaths, she wiped away her tears with her fingers. "I'm fine, Josh. You don't need to—"

"I'm not. My sub just told me she loves me. I want to be inside her when she says it again."

"Oh..."

Need jumped in his belly at her quiet response. Already his blood began to fill his shaft. He wanted to be in her as she screamed her declaration in rhythm with his thrusting cock. She toed off her shoes then quickly pulled off the rest of her clothes while he did the same.

"Kneel down," he told her when he was naked. She followed his order without hesitation, instinctively placing her hands over her tailbone.

God, she was beautiful. Submissive and kneeling before him. Her knees were parted enough he could see her pink inner lips and damn if they didn't look slick. It didn't take discipline beyond the quiet, mental control he had over her to arouse her. This sort of subjugation alone brought that glistening cream to her folds. His mouth watered at the remembered taste.

Digging in the pocket of his pants, he pulled out a condom packet, which he set beside them on the rock along with a length of thick, gold links.

Tempest's brows pulled together but she didn't speak. Instead, her teeth sank into her bottom lip.

"Do you know what this is?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"It's a collar. Every Cress woman—every one who's a committed sub, anyway—wears one just like it." The chain appeared purely decorative, but wasn't. Loops for bondage and submission were hidden in the design. He shifted the links. "I want you to wear mine."

"Okay."

"It has hidden loops," he told her. "For bondage."

"Useful," she whispered, her voice taking on a husky quality that wrapped around his dick and yanked him to full attention. Her shuddering breath fanned across his groin as he stepped close.

Lifting her hair to the side, he slipped the collar into place and turned the locks on the clasp that would keep her from easily removing it. She was his. Forever.

The pleasant weight of the collar around her neck nearly brought her to tears again. She shouldn't have said yes, but just once she wanted to feel it and know he'd placed his claim on her. Josh ran his fingers over it.

"Beautiful."

Reaching for his jeans, he removed the belt. Tempest's eyes went wide. He intended to whip her?

"Lie on your side," he instructed.

Immediately, she complied. He put their clothes in front of her. Carefully he looped the leather belt around her ankles and pulled it tight through the buckle. Drawing it upward he pulled until her legs were bent behind her then wrapped the other end of the strip around her wrists. He pressed the remainder into her fingers. "Hold on with both hands."

She closed her eyes, wondering why he'd trussed her up. Like this her ankles were a mere foot from her wrists. "Turn onto your belly and lie on the clothes."

The garments partially padded the surface, but the hard surface was still firm beneath her. Josh ran his hands over her ass. "You please me, Tempest," he said.

"Thank you, Master."

She dropped her head onto the clothes. He'd placed his shirt there and his scent filled her senses. Spicy and masculine.

Her fingers clenched on the leather she held.

"Part your legs, angel."

Hampered by her position, she complied as well as she could, feeling open and exposed and incredibly sensual. She shivered as Josh dripped cold river water over her and it trickled over her ass. She screeched a moment later when he slipped an icy-cold rock along her folds. Smooth from tumbling in the river, it slid easily into her, a long, wide oval. She groaned as he worked it in and out while he flicked her clit with an extended finger.

"Oh God," she moaned, unable to tilt into it. She was helpless to do anything but experience this.

"Oh yeah, angel," he answered. Pulling the rock free, he dipped it in the water. A moment later, he was back, working it into the crease in her ass. She trembled as the frigid surface pressed to her anus. He didn't try to gain entrance. In fact, he turned the stone so it lay lengthwise in her crease. Parting her. Tormenting her with the cold. She squirmed against it. Turned on. Tortured. Against any notion she might have had about the cold, her body flooded heat between her thighs. She was so wet. It could have been the water or her juices. It didn't matter. The erotic feel punctuated her desire. She needed Josh inside her. Now.

He drove his fingers in and out of her sheath, massaging the swollen tissues. Bumping her clit. Rubbing her g-spot. He knew she needed him—there was no disguising it in the silky slide she provided him. She jerked, screaming as her body

contracted and flung her into an almost painful orgasm. The violence shook her as her muscles clenched. It drew her body taut, squeezing the stone, squeezing his fingers which continued to work nonstop, driving her higher and prolonging the spasms.

Finally, she collapsed on the slab. The leather slipped free of her grasp. Josh unlooped it and freed her feet. Gently, he lifted her into his arms and carried her into the river. Water sluiced over her body. It invigorated her from her lethargy and turned her nipples to rigid points.

He turned her to straddle him. His cock poised at the entrance to her pussy and she realized he had pulled on a condom while he tortured her. "Say it," he murmured against her lips.

"Master," she groaned as he slowly prodded inside her. So big, so wide, so hot. He outrivaled the rock by three thousand percent.

"Tell me how you feel."

"Perfect. Wonderful." She kissed his neck, sucking at the pulse throbbing there. "I love you—"

"Yes. That," he exclaimed, driving to the hilt. "Oh, angel, take me... You have all of me."

Their cries echoed around them as he took her to the sky again. She would have stayed there forever if she could have. But the sadness looming ahead of her was insidious. As she pressed her face to his neck, safe in his embrace, misery stabbed through her.

He stroked her arm and whispered in her ear, the words now familiar.

She'd never experience this again. Desperately, she kissed him. Silently, she told him she loved him. Would always love him. She would miss him and this was goodbye.

* * * * *

Tempest glanced around the restaurant attached to the bakery, surprised at how busy it was. Apparently, farmers came from miles around to drink coffee, chat about

crops and unless she'd misheard, black bears. That didn't instill any confidence in her, considering the time they'd spent in the woods.

Unaware of Tempest's furtive examination of the place, Josh studied the menu. A waitress came around and filled their coffee cups. Despite her earlier declaration of need, Tempest hadn't touched hers other than to add creamer.

Idly, she fingered the new decoration around her neck.

This was it. This was where she'd step into Josh's past, leaving him alone to find a woman who'd fit into his future. She swallowed back her jealousy. This was the way it would be. The irony of the moment didn't escape her. She had returned to him during breakfast in a restaurant and now she would leave him in almost the same way.

"I'm going to go to the restroom," she murmured. "I need to, um, clean up."

He grinned, a naughty dimple in his right cheek touching her heart. "Hurry back or I'll order you the baked goods breakfast. Doughnuts and muffins and pie." He took a deep breath as she stood. "Doesn't it smell good?"

"Delicious." Without a care for their fellow diners, she bent over him and kissed him. His eyes grew dark.

"Hurry back."

Chains seemed to weigh her down as she headed for the front of the restaurant. She could stop now. She could stay. She took a deep breath. No, she had to get her freedom from her father before she could step forward.

She headed toward the bakery counter, which was out of sight from the restaurant's eating area, to ask the hostess where she could hire a car.

"Tempest?"

Her head jerked up. Maggie stood at the counter, a white bag in one hand and a Styrofoam to-go cup in the other. "Why so gloomy?" the woman asked.

"I have to leave," Tempest admitted. "My dad called and needs me at home. His health isn't good. Josh has to wait for his truck to be fixed so I was just coming to ask where I can hire a car to take me to the airport."

Maggie snorted. "Nowhere around this place."

"Oh..." Well that clinched it. A burst of happiness went through her as she realized she'd have to turn around and return to the table.

"I could take you."

Her stomach fell.

"The Chippewa Airport is about an hour or hour and fifteen minutes from here. There are only a few flights every day. If we hurry, we might be able to get you there in time for the next one."

"Are you sure you have the time?"

Maggie shrugged. "It's my day off. It'll give me a reason to escape my husband for a few hours."

Tempest nodded wanting to tell the woman how lucky she was to have a guy who loved her and wanted to be with her. How lucky she was that she *could* be with him.

She pulled the note to Josh from her purse. Then tried to remove the collar. Try as she might, it wouldn't release. She sighed. She'd mail it to him after she figured out the puzzle release.

Catching the hostess, she gave her the note and asked her to deliver it to him. Tempest brushed away a tear. Had to be like this. Josh wouldn't listen. He wouldn't let her go without a fight—a fight she knew he'd win, too. This wasn't something she wanted to do. It was something she had to do. For her freedom.

She'd call her father. He'd have a ticket waiting. A bitter taste filled her mouth. She hated depending on him. She hated letting him have even this much control over her life. If she knew him—and she knew his MO way too well—he'd try to make the airline ticket an opening for suppressing her independence.

Last time, Tempest, she promised. If her father wanted her home, he could pay for it.

Funny, she'd never felt that way about Josh. He dominated. He didn't oppress. He didn't bully her. He didn't steal her independence. In fact he seemed to like it.

She almost turned around and went back in the restaurant. The man she wanted to be with for the rest of her life was sitting in there.

"Let's go," she told Maggie. She had to deal with her father or she wouldn't have a whole rest of her life. It would be a rest of "their" life and unfortunately, the other half of her "their" wouldn't be Josh—it would be her father.

* * * * *

Josh stared at the note in his hand, sure he was reading the words incorrectly. The paper trembled as realization riffled through him. She'd left him again. Ten minutes ago, if what the hostess said was correct.

No. Denial filled him, along with image after image of the last few days. They'd been so happy together. Tempest couldn't have done this.

He stood and tossed a few bills on the table to cover their coffee.

As he rushed toward the front of the restaurant, determination filled him. He'd stop her. They'd talk about this. *You didn't listen last night.*

She'd said she loved him, for God's sake. That had to mean something.

There was no sign of Tempest as he reached the glass doors leading to the street. She'd left him again. Just like before. He took a deep breath. This time would be different. He'd been heartbroken before. He'd suffered.

That wasn't happening. He wouldn't suffer like he did before. Not this time.

* * * * *

Tempest stood at the far side of the ballroom, trying to keep a pleasant expression on her face when all she really wanted was to find a dark corner and cry. With her luck,

she'd find the dark corner occupied by an amorous couple. Wouldn't *that* make her feel better.

"You should dance. Mingle a little."

"Hi, Dad," she replied without looking his direction. She really didn't want to see his debonair tuxedo and tanned good looks. Make that his tanned, picture-of-perfect-health, good looks, she corrected.

The bastard had lied to her.

"Still angry with me?" he asked.

She glared at him. "What do you think?" Turning on her heel, she marched from the ballroom. She'd stop at a party store for booze and a bakery for the most fat-laden, sugar-coated doughnuts she could find. Perhaps a dozen.

"Tempest, stop. This minute."

She spun on him in the quiet foyer outside. "No more, Dad. Not anymore. You lied to me again to manipulate me into doing what you want. I told you how I felt, last night and again this morning. I'm tired of you controlling my life. I'm tired of being told who I will see. Who I will *marry*. What I will look like."

"You would look better if you'd lose weight. You wouldn't have to settle for Phillip. You'd be a knockout."

She glared at him. The condemnation hurt just like it always had. Surprisingly, though, it made her more angry than anything else. The only thing she'd ever wanted from him was acceptance. She'd fought for it her whole life, never quite meeting his expectations no matter what she did.

She straightened her shoulders. Wonder filled her. She didn't feel small and he couldn't make her feel that way. She was a beautiful, desirable woman. She smiled, knowing he'd lost that power over her. *Thank you, Josh.*

"I'm not settling for Phillip or anyone else. You're not controlling my life anymore."

"I suppose you want that boy."

"He's a man. Not a boy. And yes, if he'd have me, I'd go with him in a second. I love him." As much as it hurt to know Josh was lost to her, it was pretty damned spectacular to admit her feelings to someone else.

Her father's lips pursed and he pushed a disgusted breath through his nose. "Fine. I'm going back in there." He glanced at his watch. "I need you for another hour, then you're free to do whatever the hell you want to with your life."

He took a few steps then spun on her. "What do you expect to do without my support? Without a job or prospects...and apparently without a family since you're writing us off."

Realization opened wide inside her. For the first time, she saw the emotionally needy man who'd used his control as a path to affection. "Dad, I'm not writing off my family."

Misguided triumph flared in his eyes. He held out his hand. "Are you coming back inside with me?"

Ignoring his outstretched arm, she headed back into the ballroom. Oblivion at the feet of baked goods would still be there in an hour. So would this problem with her father. She fingered her collar, thinking of Josh. Somehow she would draw on the strength he'd shared with her.

* * * * *

Josh stepped from the shadows, watching his woman disappear into the party. Her father needed the crap kicked out of him. Josh's fist clenched. How dare John insult her like he had?

Despite his irritation at having to chase after her, Josh was proud of her. Not many people would stand strong against their parent like she had. He couldn't believe she meant to leave everything behind. It was more than he'd expected, but it worried him. Would she want what he offered...a life bound with his? Bound to him. Bound *by* him.

If he had his way, she'd be back in his arms and beneath him before the night was over. Especially since she loved him. His stomach knotted. He might not have his way.

She wanted independence. That wasn't his plan. As his submissive, she'd be cherished as his ultimate treasure. All her needs would be met. But she'd also be his to command. He almost laughed when he thought of the sassy woman who'd shared most of last few days with him. She liked it when he dominated her and she would obey him, but he wasn't fooled into thinking his feisty mate would be forced into something she didn't want to do. She was too strong for that.

Straightening the jacket of his black tuxedo, he followed Tempest's path into the ballroom. Unusual unease assaulted him. He wanted their paths to join.

What if she said no?

She wouldn't. At least, he hoped not. When he'd gotten back yesterday, Keera had given him a crash course on the Strength card—more from her insistence than his desire. He doubted he'd ever be a tarot believer—it was all still hocus pocus to him—but what she'd said made sense. He had inner strength and gentle control, which was signified by the upright card. Tempest's father thrived on the shadow aspects of the card—manipulation and tyrannical behavior. Josh feared he might be assigning values based on what he wanted to see but Keera assured him that if he kept in mind that love would conquer antagonism he'd succeed.

Josh wasn't so sure.

The room was crowded, filled to capacity with men dressed as he was and women wearing gowns in every color of the rainbow. Scanning the sea of bodies, he found John chatting with a group of men near the far wall. John's eyes met his and Josh saw recognition and dread in them. It was the man's furtive glance that directed the way to the one Josh sought.

Tempest stood, near the glass doors leading to a stone balcony that overlooked downtown Grand Rapids and its Grand River. Fairy lights reflected on the dark water below, giving it a magical twinkle.

Josh was far more captivated by Tempest's voluptuous curves and the way her fire-engine-red dress hugged her in all the right places. Her hair was lifted into an upswept twisty thing that exposed her slim neck and the collar he'd placed there. She fingered the links while she stared outside.

He was lucky she didn't have a horde of men knocking each other down to get to her. Approaching her silently, he stood behind her and breathed in her floral scent. His cock grew hard...and decidedly hopeful...at being so close to her again. It shoved against his fly wanting to claim her now.

Gently, he skimmed his finger tips along her inner elbow, knowing the reaction that would come. He'd fostered it in her.

"We are such stuff as dreams are made on," he murmured close to her ear. Tempest trembled, her breath arresting in her throat. Smug satisfaction filled him. Unless he missed his guess, her panties had just gotten very wet.

Tempest's gaze flew up to meet his in the window. She panted as the aftermath of an unexpected orgasm continued to vibrate through her. How *did* he do that? How had he made it so her body recognized him? Her knees wobbled, but Josh pulled her against him to give her support. His hand splayed over her wildly contracting belly while she leaned weakly on him and waited for the room to stop spinning.

"I'm here, angel," he whispered. "Don't fight it. Your body remembers the pleasure between us. You know me. You know what is between us. Even with a touch. Even with a phrase."

"Josh," she gasped, unable to believe he was here and holding her. What was he doing here? How on earth had he found her? Did she really care? For the first time since she'd left him in the restaurant, she didn't feel like crying. Her heart was in one piece, at least temporarily. Judging from the tremors rolling through her like gentle waves, the rest of her body was thrilled as well. He was right. She knew him. Instinctively.

His cock pressed to her back, proving he wanted her too. He held her upright as he guided her through the double doors and into the chill of the autumn night. No one else had braved the sudden cold snap, leaving the balcony deserted.

Turning, she buried her face in the front of Josh's shirt. "You're here. You're *here*."

Relief filled her. This was right. Being in his arms. Being with him.

"I'll never let you go, angel. Not if I have a choice."

"But...I left..." That guilt might never leave her.

He lifted her chin and brushed a kiss over her trembling lips. "And I'm angry. We'll deal with that later." His knowing gaze searched hers. "You'll feel better afterward."

"I'm sorry."

"I know."

She blinked at him. Why wasn't he raging at her? He seemed downright...saintly. It was his eyes that told her. Worry rimmed them, yet determination filled the gray depths. He had every intention of fighting whatever battle he must to claim her. The rest would come later.

Her guilt shifted and a glimmer of happiness started to burn away the emptiness inside her. He might find the battle easier than he thought.

"Your hair," she exclaimed, suddenly realizing he'd changed his appearance.

He sheepishly ran his fingers through the newly shorn locks, the shorter strands curling without the extra weight pulling them down. A few errant curls fell toward his eye. "I hope it's not a deal breaker. It looks like grown-up hair, don't you think?"

He'd done this for her. The thick, wavy strands begged for her fingers. She ran her thumb over his naked eyebrow. He'd removed the ring there and all but a single stud in one of his ears. He'd seemed dangerous before. A good girl's lust-filled dream. Now, with this new, clean-cut appearance, danger hid behind a guise of drop-dead sexy and waited to lure in his woman and capture her.

"I like it," she admitted. "But I liked your long hair too. And the earrings. You don't have to change for me."

"The piercings aren't all gone," he confessed, telling her clearly that her favorites remained.

"Thank goodness for *that*."

"Mmm, yes," he agreed as he waltzed her toward the shadowy corner of the balcony. He scraped his teeth on the sensitive flesh behind her ear. "My brothers flew up in the company chopper when you left. Ryan stayed with my truck and dealt with the motel. He suggested I flog you. I'm not going to."

She could just imagine what his three siblings, Ryan, Max and Theo, had to say about her departure. They'd probably been irate that any woman would dare leave their baby brother—twice. She wasn't surprised Ryan had suggested the flogger. It was mild compared to what they probably thought she deserved.

"I wouldn't mind." She didn't prefer that but if it was what Josh wanted, she'd concede.

"I know. On the way to the airport, Max suggested spanking you." He raised an eyebrow at her. A flutter flew through her belly and her panties grew more damp. She knew how heat flew through her on the few times he'd ever done that in the past.

He palmed her ass. "I might. Anyway, I missed you at the airport by five minutes. That's when Theo suggested, and I quote, that I 'drag Tempest's ass home and chain her' in my dungeon. That's not all he said, but I'll keep his assessment of my Dom qualities to myself."

She winced. He'd dealt with that because of her. "I don't deserve for you to trust me—I've left you twice—but...oh God, Josh. I'm sorry. I'm miserable without you. I knew I would be, but I had to...deal with things. I-I don't ever want to be apart from you."

"What about the independence and freedom you want so badly?"

"I am free with you." She didn't have to hide behind appearances or her fears. With Josh the real Tempest stopped hiding and stood boldly in the sun. "Please believe me. I promise you. I *want* to be with you."

"I guess I could keep you chained up like Theo suggested."

"If you must," she answered, slipping her fingers inside his shirt. He'd never do it. She knew him too well. He preferred mental chains to the physical type.

Pulling her tightly to him, he pressed open her lips, claiming them as fully as she knew he intended to claim the rest of her body when they were alone. She groaned, meeting his thrusting tongue and sucking it into her mouth. Josh's fingers dug into her intricate twist. She didn't care. If she had her way, it would be a disaster within an hour.

"I trust you, Tempest," he admitted against her lips when they were both breathing heavily. "I know why you went and I should have listened to you. If I had, you wouldn't have felt it was necessary to sneak away. I would have come with you."

"So I'm not in trouble."

He nipped her bottom lip. "Don't count on that. I've made lots of plans for you. My sweet tooth has gone completely unfed since you left. I need a lot of Tempest to feed me."

Lifting her onto the stone wall, he shielded her with his body and pushed his hand beneath her dress. He eased aside her panties and thrust his fingers into her with no preliminary. She whimpered. Her body immediately squeezed around him.

"So slick. So hot and ready for me," he said, nuzzling her neck. "You want me to take you right here. Don't you, Tempest? It excites you."

"Yes. I'd let you take me anywhere."

"Mine," he grated through his teeth as he plunged his fingers forward.

"Tempest!"

She jumped at the sound of her father's harsh admonition as it echoed across the balcony. She knew he couldn't see what they'd been doing, but a blush burned up her

neck anyway. Josh withdrew his hand and stepped back. His other arm remained tightly around her as he stared into her eyes. Slowly, he lifted his hand to his mouth and sucked away her essence.

She licked her lips.

"What the hell are you doing with my daughter, Cress?" her father demanded.

Josh turned and pulled her close to his side. "Taking her home."

Her father's face turned red in the moonlight bathing the area where he stood. If he'd truly had a health problem, she might have worried. "I'll have you arrested for trespassing," he exclaimed.

"I don't think so, sir. Upon investigation, you'd find I own a great deal of stock in both Montgomery Enterprises and the Hartley Foundation who sponsor Miracles and Hope. I have every right to be here." His chin lowered, the only indication, outside his sparkling eyes, that fury burned inside him. "I don't take chances. Not when it entails my future. I paid the price for that lesson years ago. This time I don't intend lose." His arm tightened around Tempest but she shifted.

She was a prize? His words made her uneasy until he continued. "I love your daughter. I won't lose her again."

"Something you could have told me privately," she murmured for his ears only.

He leaned down and kissed her. "I thought I did. I've been feeling it long enough."

"You're lying," her father accused.

They both stared at him. Josh deciphered his meaning first. "No, sir, I'm not." He looked at Tempest. "I bought the Montgomery stock a week after you left me last time. I just picked up the Hartley stocks yesterday. I knew you were arguing with him about attending something. After you left I put two and two together and took a chance. This is one of the biggest functions of the year for shareholders."

"It doesn't matter. Owning shares doesn't make you any less of a freak. Tempest, if you go with him now, that's it. I'll disown you. You'll get none of the company. You don't want that. I know you don't." He held out his hand. "Come with me now."

Josh's arm dropped and she knew he was giving her a choice. She also heard his intake of breath when she crossed to her father. *I'm sorry Josh*, she thought, knowing this must pain him. She stopped when she was even her father and kissed him on the cheek. "I love you, Dad. Someday you'll realize that."

She backed away until she was flat against Josh's chest. "I'm staying with Josh."

"He'll destroy you," her father bellowed. "You'll have nothing. You'll have nowhere to go."

"Yes, she will," Josh growled. His arms closed around her. His support bolstered her.

"I'll have everything," she choked, her heart breaking that she had to make this choice. This time she knew she was making the right decision. It didn't make the pain any less.

"That freak will tie you up and treat you like a slave."

She crossed her arms over Josh's. "What we do is none of your business, Dad."

"You're no better than he is."

She glanced up at her Dom. "Nope. No better."

Her father spluttered.

"If you'll excuse me, sir," Josh said. "I'm taking Tempest home." He pulled a card from his pocket. "This is where you can contact her. I won't keep her from seeing you, but I warn you... You'd better treat her well. I will not allow you to insult and degrade her."

Her father's bitter laugh scraped the air around them. "Oh that's rich coming from you."

Josh stiffened, and his voice was razor sharp as he spoke. "I don't expect you to understand, but know this well. I value Tempest more than my life. Don't cross me. I will protect her."

Leaving her father speechless, he guided her from the balcony and through the ballroom to the elevator in the foyer. He pushed the call button for an elevator to take them to the upper floors where the hotel rooms were located. "You don't mind if we don't go home until tomorrow, do you?"

She shrugged. "No. I need to get some of my things from my apartment anyway." She sighed. "I wish it didn't have to be like this. You know, with my dad."

Josh kissed her temple. "He'll come around. He does love you. In his way. When he sees we're happy, things will change."

"I hope you're right." They stood silently, waiting. "It doesn't change my mind," she finally said. "This is what I want."

"Tempest..."

"No. Don't let him put a pall over this. You're right. He will come around. In the meantime I want to start living my life. With you."

He smiled. "Have you ever had a tarot reading?"

"Well, yeah," she replied, looking surprised by the apparent change in conversation. "You know me—self-help books, karma and all that. Why?"

"I had a reading right before you came back. I don't know if I want to believe it... I mean, the metaphysical isn't really my thing. But the Strength card came up. My sister-in-law insists that it's about us. You and me."

She knew the Strength card. "And my father," she added. "I'm surprised," she teased. "A big, tough Dom resorting to tarot cards. My image of you is shattered."

"It solved our problems, didn't it?" he grumbled. His fingers stroked over her hip and she sighed leaning into him. Yeah, Josh was all about gentle control and she was all about complying.

"I like when you do that."

He shook his head. "I love you. You know that?"

The bell over the elevator doors rang and the doors slid open. A moment later, they were enclosed in silence. He pushed the code that would take them directly to the penthouse without any stops. Leaning against the wall, he played with a lock of her hair that had escaped her twist. "I was thinking...maybe you'd like to continue our vacation. Go back to the Four Star. Bob—Grizzly Adams—promised not to disable my car again."

"Disable your car?" she asked, confused.

"That's what happened this time... Bob, Marv and some of the other townspeople like to detain visitors. Marv would have even given me the repair 'on the house'. They're harmless and just want more people to see their town. I should press charges, but I have a bit of an attachment to the place—thanks to you."

"I think I have a bit of an attachment too."

"I thought maybe this time you'd like to bring your camera and take pictures."

She stared at him, mouth open, and suddenly realized he'd had her so distracted while they'd been marooned that she hadn't thought of missed photo opportunities. Yeah, she'd like to have a re-do on that. "I hear there's a good Chinese place," she laughed.

Linking his finger through her collar, he pulled her toward him and nibbled her bottom lip. "There might just be some good Chinese food upstairs, too. That and a whole lot of love."

Mountains of love. Her hands went to his fly as she knelt. "That's good. I'm starving." She looked up at him. "I don't know if I'll ever get enough."

About the Author

When it comes to books and movies, Brynn Paulin has one rule: There must be a happy ending. After that one requirement, anything else goes. And it just might in any of her books.

Brynn lives in Michigan with her husband and two children who love her despite her occasional threats to smite them. They humor her and let her think she's a goddess...as long as she provides homemade chocolate chip cookies on a regular basis.

She attributes her writing success to Seventies music, her local road construction crews, a trusty notebook, and of course, her husband and willing research subject, AKA Mr. Inspiration.

Brynn welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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