

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

ELLORA'S CAVEMEN

L.A. Day

Isabelle Drake

Regina Carlisle

Madison Hayes

Aubrey Ross

Brigit Zahara

Flavors of ECSTASY

Volume 4

Companion Operation

L.A. Day

Jewel betrayed Reece, the only man she ever loved, when she confessed to a murder she didn't commit. Sentenced to life on a desolate prison colony, she faces the horror of becoming some warlord's sex slave. Miraculously, she's offered an alternative. Sign on as sexual companion for a long-term space mission. She'll still be a sex slave, but only until the mission ends. Jewel agrees and is introduced to the man who will use her body for the next five years — Reece.

And contempt has replaced the love in his eyes.

Gothic Master by Request

Isabelle Drake

Bound and naked in a training Master's bed, Lorelai struggles to forget her sexually disappointing and emotionally painful past. When her alluring attempts to convince the cloaked man to untie her fail, she challenges him to teach her something new.

Will the Master and his red velvet bag of training tools help her accept her passionate appetites?

Hotter Than Hell

Regina Carlisle

Ellie Grant hasn't had the best luck with men, unless you count her friendship with Sam Dare—a friendship on the cusp of change as the sexy fireman challenges her to a weekend of no-holds-barred, hotter-than-hell sex.

Sam had spent plenty of restless nights aching for Ellie and he's grown tired of waiting for her to notice the attraction. As a firefighter, he knows a little something about heat and, as far as he's concerned, Ellie is the only woman who can make him burn.

Nadia Seduced

Madison Hayes

Tall, dark, sinfully handsome Mikhail is fascinated by stories of the lovely whore who never climaxes. Unable to get her out of his mind, he vows to be the man who makes her scream with pleasure.

Eighteenth-century women belong to their husbands, but Nadia is determined to remain independent. Mikhail must convince the headstrong beauty to face her greatest fear – allowing him to possess her heart as thoroughly as he’s claimed her body.

Silent Abandon

Aubrey Ross

No past, no future, no questions. Tonight there are no words.

Devastated by betrayal, Starla is unwilling to risk heartbreak again. She hides behind a fictitious persona and arranges a purely sexual rendezvous with a coworker she’s been attracted to for years. But Cole knows her true identity and the reason for her fear. He’s determined to fulfill her every fantasy...then help her mend her broken heart.

Stick Up

Brigit Zahara

The wonky thermostat at the historic bank building where Monica works is on the fritz again. Just when she thinks things can’t get any hotter, a pistol-packing stud slides her a note. He’s demands money while his sexy smirk demands her body’s response.

Realizing that he is none other than her old boyfriend from college, there with his appearing-out-of-nowhere sidekick, the couple’s former best friend, Monica gets pretty hot under the collar. But when the daring duo take her hostage and retreat to a rustic hideout, the situation really heats up.

Reader Advisory: This book includes an attempted rape scene by a villain.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



www.ellorascave.com

Ellora's Cavemen: Flavors of Ecstasy IV
ISBN 9781419919763

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Electronic book publication December 2009
Trade paperback publication December 2009

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COMPANION OPERATION

L.A. Day

Chapter One

Heavy boot steps rattled the grated flooring and Jewel Havin raised her head off the thin pad on her bunk.

"You have company," the guard barked at her as Colonel Joel Helton came into view. Out of respect, Jewel quickly jumped to attention. Stripped of her rank as officer in the United Earth Military, she was now a civilian but old habits died hard.

"Colonel?" she questioned as the guard activated the hand scan. A series of coded beeps signaled termination of the electro-shield that sealed her cell.

"At ease, Jewel." Helton sighed heavily.

"I'd offer you refreshment but I'm all out." Jewel tried unsuccessfully to lighten the mood. This was probably the last time she'd see the colonel and she didn't want his last memory of her to be of a sniveling coward. She'd sealed her fate when she confessed to killing Tre Semon. She didn't regret it.

Helton glanced at the guard. "Your services are no longer required."

"Sir." The guard nodded and turned away.

"Hell of a predicament, Jewel."

"You know me." She blinked back tears and flashed a toothy smile.

Helton took off his military-issue cap, folded it in half and laid it on the top bunk. "I *do* know you and that's why I know that you did not murder Semon."

Jewel swallowed the lump in her throat. Not everyone had such faith in her. "I killed him."

Ice-blue eyes narrowed. "Why?"

She hesitated as memories flashed through her mind. Semon had once assisted in saving her life. That didn't entitle him to destroy another. She shook her head and missed the feel of her flowing hair. Reaching up, she touched her short, clipped hair. She felt naked without her long locks but confinement had no place for vanity. A deep sigh shuddered from between her lips. "I was jealous. A lover's quarrel turned deadly," she repeated lies she had rehearsed.

"Bull! You weren't lovers and cold-blooded murder is not your style. You are not talking to some pansy-assed court official. I want the truth."

The colonel knew her well. He should know her well enough to realize that he couldn't break her. "It was personal." She focused her gaze on the crack that ran the length of the concrete wall.

"Ruby."

The one-word proclamation startled her. A barely perceivable jerk of her head, the only outward sign would go unnoticed by most but not Helton. "I'm sorry I won't be around to care for her any longer." Sweat bloomed along her hairline as she attempted to keep her cool.

Helton stepped closer. "In your way, you're still caring for her. She's the one person you'd commit murder to protect."

She pursed her lips. "I'd do anything for my sister but she has nothing to do with this."

"You know you can't lie to me? What did Semon do? Did he attack Ruby? The Sage Me'lo incident unhinged his mind."

She leveled her gaze on Helton's face. "Thank you for coming, Sir."

"If you don't talk, I'll go to Ruby." He rested a hand lightly on her shoulder. "I know she's at your mother's on Alpha Four."

"Let it go," she begged and relaxed her guard enough to let her eyes plead her case.

His returning stare held no emotion but he slowly shook his head. "I can't."

"Damn you! He raped her."

The colonel exhaled sharply. "She let you take the blame for this? She let you face a UEM court-martial?"

She remembered Ruby as she had found her that day, her clothes torn and bloody. Beautiful but mentally fragile, Ruby shouldn't have had to endure Semon's touch. He'd been looking for *her*. "She doesn't remember and I want it to stay that way. After the attack, I took her to my mother." She poked at her chest with one finger. "I *chose* to protect her."

"You could have introduced the evidence even without her testimony. She's not as fragile as you think but I would have vouched for Ruby's condition and for Tre's, if I'd been informed of the hearing."

On extended leave, the colonel had been unaware of her arrest until after sentencing. It had given her an opportunity to save her sister, for she had known Helton would interfere. "It's too late."

"Jewel, they've sentenced you to life on the Awarie prison colony."

She shrugged. "I've been to worse places."

"No you haven't. Not alone and without weapons. You were a UEM officer, if you are lucky they will kill you." His gaze ran over her in a way it never had before. "I doubt it will be that easy for you. You'll be the sex slave to one of the warlords until they tire of you and give you to their men."

Jewel controlled the fear within her. She knew what she faced and her first plan of action was to give them reason to kill her. "I won't change my mind." She stared straight ahead without blinking.

He sighed. "I assumed as much, that's why I've made other arrangements."

"What have you done?"

"I have an alternative to Awarie."

She shifted restlessly. She didn't want anyone's help at the cost of their career. "I won't let you jeopardize your career."

"I haven't. The court has agreed to my offer. The publicity left them with little choice during sentencing but I've quietly arranged an amended sentence. You'll ship out tomorrow as planned but instead of Awarie, you'll transport to Alpha Space Station. I've enrolled you in a new space venture, Companion Operation."

Jewel blinked. "You're joking."

"The amendment is in place."

She released a deep breath. "I'm going free. I can pilot an Explorer?"

The colonel picked up his cap. "You'll be part of the crew."

"Oh. Of course. I lost my commission but still, I'll be free." She paced in the confined space. Freedom was a word she thought she'd forsaken.

"About that," the colonel hesitated.

She raised a brow.

"The Explorers are scheduled for five-year missions into uncharted, possibly uninhabited, space. The only human contact you are sure to encounter is at the biannual meetings with supply haulers," Helton explained without meeting her gaze.

She shrugged. "I can handle that."

"Your role on the ship is as companion."

Unease crawled up her spine as she sensed something behind his words. "What are you telling me?"

"Long years without outside contact initiated the need for Companion Operation. As you can imagine, there were few volunteers. You will be a sexual companion for the crew."

She huffed. "What?"

"After five years, you'll be free. It's the best I could do for you."

"So, I'll still be a sex slave." She closed her eyes as she pictured her future. Explorers held a maximum capacity of six crewmembers. "How many?" She swallowed the lump in her throat. "How many crewmembers?"

"Three counting you. You'll be a sexual companion to the officers. That's better than a lifetime as a sex slave to warlords and criminals."

Two lusty males to satisfy. "I guess I should be grateful."

He nodded. "You should." She should feel damn lucky because he wouldn't go out of his way for just anyone. She was special to him and he had always thought the feelings were mutual. However, she hadn't turned to him when she needed him and for that reason he'd let her stew about her fate for a while longer. "Guard," Helton called out.

"Thank you, Colonel." The softly spoken words reminded him of the young girl he'd taken under his wing when she'd first joined the UEM.

He nodded. His lips twisted with remorse as the guard activated the electro-shield, confining Jewel like a common criminal. The flooring shook beneath his feet as he stomped toward his office.

"Trace, glad you could meet me here," Helton said to the man waiting outside his office.

"Sir." Trace stood at attention.

"At ease." Helton punched in his key code and opened the door. "Come in and shut the door behind you."

"Have you seen Jewel?"

"Just came from her cell." He was pleased at the other man's grimace. He'd hoped to have an ally in Trace. "Have a seat."

Trace settled himself in a chair across the desk from him.

"Reece tells me you agreed to the mission."

Trace combed a hand through his hair. His gaze darted around but zeroed in on nothing. He was obviously nervous. "I did. I just hope I don't live to regret it."

Helton snickered. "Not looking forward to bedding Jewel?"

Trace shrugged. "She's a sexy lady but..."

"But your best friend is in love with her."

Trace lifted his head to meet Helton's gaze. Helton was pleased to see concern in the young man's eyes. Trace was a good soldier but he was a womanizer. Initially, Reece's choice of Trace as the second man on the mission had concerned him. He'd called this meeting to make sure Trace wouldn't take advantage of the situation. He felt confident now that Trace was an asset to the mission.

Trace nodded. "I can't believe she had an affair with Tre. It doesn't seem possible."

"Never happened. She's protecting someone."

"What?" Trace jumped to his feet. "We have to tell Reece."

"Not yet."

"Why? It's killing Reece to think Jewel betrayed him."

Helton nodded at the chair and Trace sat back down. "I never believed Jewel was guilty. You obviously questioned her guilt. Why does Reece believe it?"

"She told him it was the truth."

"She tried that shit with me too but I saw right through it."

Trace nodded. "Reece always thought... Reece thought Jewel was too good for him. He had a hard time believing she really loved him. I think this brought back his insecurities."

Helton nodded. "If they are going to have a relationship, they need to learn to communicate and trust each other. They'll work things out for themselves. Besides, we have another project."

Trace's brows shot upward as he waited.

"We need to prove Jewel is innocent before it's too late. Unfortunately, we don't have much time."

Trace leaned forward. "What do you need me to do?"

"Keep your mouth shut and your hands off Jewel until I have a chance to clear her name."

"I can't imagine touching Reece's woman." Trace fidgeted in his seat. "But the thought of five years without female companionship is killing me."

"It won't take me that long to clear Jewel's name."

Trace nodded. "Good. Reece and Jewel will be relieved too."

"You can't say a word to either of them. They both need to learn a lesson. A little jealousy and fear should bring them both around nicely."

"Sir?" Trace raised an eyebrow.

"It won't hurt it make Reece realize all he has to lose."

"You're a devious man." One corner of Trace's mouth curled upward. "I might enjoy this assignment as long as it doesn't last too long."

* * * * *

"Is there anything I can get you, ma'am?" Lieutenant Andies asked as he escorted her to her assigned quarters on the Alpha Space Station.

"I don't think so but thanks anyway." She flashed a smile as he handed her a regulation duffle containing her new uniform. She closed the door before tossing the bag across the room. The lieutenant was a new recruit, just a kid really. She wondered if he had any idea of her assignment or her record. If he did, he didn't let on. That was more than she could say about some of her acquaintances on the station. In fact, the head of Companion Operation, Admiral Sohan, had looked at her as if she were a piece of meat. A piece of meat he'd very much enjoy eating. Her nose crinkled in distaste.

Jewel paced in the confined space. It wasn't much larger than her cell but at least she had privacy. She wouldn't have that for much longer. Soon, she'd submit to the whims of two men whom she'd never met. Revulsion sent a shudder up her spine.

Five years! She'd be thirty-three by the time her servitude ended. Five years was better than a life sentence or death sentence. She thought of Tre Semon. He had died long before that day in her quarters. The Sage Me'lo incident had killed something inside him. The whole incident was hush-hush. She'd been on another assignment at that time. Through the rumor mill, she'd gleaned sketchy details. A retrieval assignment had gone wrong and two officers died. Captured and ultimately rescued,

Tre had returned a changed man. Speculations abounded about the incident, with no facts released.

Snatching up the discarded bag, she dumped the contents on her table. "Bastard," she cursed. Using her finger and thumb, she held up the bottom of her new uniform. It would be fortunate if it covered her ass. The vest that passed for a top consisted of a stretchy material that latched between her breasts. They'd supplied her with three sets, one red, one white and one blue. How original! The material it took to make all three wouldn't make one of her previous uniforms. She didn't need three guesses to conclude who had designed this harem outfit.

Pursing her lips, Jewel raised her chin. Whatever happened, she wouldn't grovel before Admiral Sohan. Over dinner tonight, she'd meet the crewmembers of Explorer CO1. The call letters stood for Companion Operation One. The admiral had smirked as he called it the "maiden voyage".

Stripping off the one-piece jumper, she tugged the red skirt up and over her hips. Snug was an understatement. The vest was snugger. She stretched it around her chest to hook the latch. Cocking a brow, she studied her reflection in the mirror. Her abs weren't active-duty tight but she'd pass muster. Her lips curled down. "Urgh!" She made a face. The hair took some getting used to. The inch-long, blonde curls made her look like a pixie.

Her head jerked toward the door as a series of beeps alerted her to a call. Crossing the room in three quick strides, she pressed the wall communicator. "Yes?"

"Ms. Havin, you have a visitor."

Jewel grinned. The colonel must have arrived early. "Send him in."

Posing with one hand on her hip and the other behind her thrown-back head, she asked, "What do you think?"

Silence greeted the question and she opened her eyes. "Reece," she croaked, jumped backward a step and crossed her arms over her chest.

"Guess you were expecting someone else." Major Reece Martin's cold black eyes stared at her. She sucked in a shaky breath. He was the last person she expected to visit her. Their last meeting had been less than cordial.

"I thought..." she hesitated. "The colonel is due to arrive."

He nodded. "He'll arrive this afternoon."

She rubbed her arms to chase away the goose bumps on her flesh. "I'm surprised to see you." She averted her gaze, unable to look at him any longer. She had tried to put him out of her mind. Seeing him again wouldn't help her situation. "I assume the colonel told you about my assignment."

"I spoke with him."

"Are you here to gloat?" Her teeth worried her bottom lip as she turned back to face him. If he did, she deserved it. She had hurt him and several others when she'd confessed to killing Tre but she'd had no choice.

He made an indistinguishable sound under his breath. Taking another step into the room, he glanced around and she took the opportunity to study him. Tall, dark and handsome, he oozed power and made the tight quarters seem claustrophobic. Civilian clothes hung loosely on his frame but couldn't disguise his muscled physique, though he did seem a bit thinner. His dark, military haircut was shorter than hers, but on him it looked good.

"Gloating isn't my style."

She swallowed a lump in her throat. "I remember that."

"Do you?" Anger flashed in his midnight gaze. "What else do you remember? Do you remember lying to me about your relationship with Tre?"

"What do you mean?" She blinked and backpedaled.

"What do you think I mean? You said there was nothing between you but friendship. You led me to believe we had a future. I rearranged my life so we could have a life together and then you killed Tre in a jealous rage."

"Oh." For a moment, she'd thought he knew she had lied about the affair with Tre. She could tell him the truth but he wouldn't believe her. It didn't matter anyway. She wasn't a free woman. She shook her head and blinked back tears as gut-wrenching pain lanced through her. It would have been better if he hadn't come. "I wish..."

Grabbing her elbow, he hauled her to him. "What do you wish?" He shook her. "Damn it, answer me."

"I can't," she croaked.

"I'll show you what I wish." His arms tightened around her until she found it hard to breathe. One hand snagged her short hair and tilted her head back until their gazes met. His head lowered then hesitated. Anger pulled his copper-hued lips tight across his face. A few more wrinkles graced the corners of his eyes but it was still the face she'd adored since the academy.

"Reece," she moaned as she melted against him.

His mouth slammed into hers. Parting her lips, she welcomed his tongue, reveled in what she knew was their final kiss. He tasted of coffee and butterscotch, his favorite candy. She clasped both sides of his face, her hands pale against his darker flesh. His brow furrowed, his eyes closed but she couldn't bear to shut hers. She wanted to memorize every second they had left.

A strong hand slid over her hip, clasped her ass beneath the miniskirt and lifted her against the thrust of his erection. She shuddered. Need slickened her pussy. A whimper escaped her lips as he rocked her back and forth. His touch, more intimate than ever before, aroused long-unsatisfied desires. UEM had forced them to keep their passion for each other leashed but nothing held them back now.

Tugging at his shirt, she pulled it up and slid her hands against his hot, firm back. Muscles rippled under her touch.

"Fuck," he moaned and backed her toward the corner cot.

This was wrong. She knew it but she wouldn't refuse him. She couldn't refuse him. She'd wanted him for so long and fate had snatched him away at the last second. A few stolen moments were all they could have but she would live on them for the rest of her life.

Fire scorched his back, or so it felt. Her grasping hands set him aflame. Coming in here, he had not intended to make love to Jewel but she affected him as no other. Although she had betrayed him, he'd still volunteered for this mission. He'd volunteered to spend the next five years exploring uncharted space and Jewel's luscious body. Hell! He had more than volunteered. He'd helped orchestrate the deal and volunteered to make it happen. His mind and his heart still warred over the fact that Jewel had betrayed him. A large part of him had trouble believing it. Looking at her now, her body pliant in his arms, her golden eyes soft with desire, he found it almost impossible.

The tiny uniform she wore strained at the seams and he struggled to contain his lust. He didn't want to restart their relationship this way but just looking at her fired his blood. He had no idea what the admiral had been thinking when he'd designed Jewel's uniform. It was not a uniform conducive to productivity. It certainly wasn't a uniform he wanted her to wear in front of Trace.

Midway to the cot, he stopped and raised his head. He realized for the first time that they were no longer alone. Engrossed as he was, he hadn't heard the door open. His gaze leveled on the intruder as Jewel gasped in gulps of air. Struggling in his arms, she tried to compose herself.

"Trace," she managed to squeak out finally.

Captain Quinton Barrington III, better known as Trace for his unbelievable tracking abilities, stood just inside the door. He grinned from ear to ear. "Glad to see you're happy about the news. Are you going to thank me too?"

Reece stiffened and pulled away. For a few precious moments, he'd forgotten that he had to share Jewel with Trace. It wasn't something he was likely to forget again.

"Thank you?" she questioned.

"For coming to your rescue. I know the admiral planned to introduce us at dinner but we thought we'd let you know ahead of time."

"Are you saying—" Her accusing gaze locked on Reece's face. "You two are—" She drew in a shaky breath. "I'm your..."

Reece huffed. "I think the polite term they are using is 'companion'."

Jewel snapped her jaw closed. "You ice-frosted bastard."

Reece shrugged. "You didn't think so a minute ago."

"A minute ago, I thought we were saying goodbye." She shook her head. She should have realized there was a reason for his visit today but she hadn't taken the time to think. She'd been too busy feeling. A shiver racked her frame as her sexual high plummeted.

"Is that how you said goodbye to Tre before you killed him?" Reece accused.

She didn't realize she'd slapped him until she saw the mark across his cheek. His hands closed on her upper arms and he lifted her until she was eye level. "Slap me again and I'll turn you over my knee."

"I wouldn't try it."

He chuckled. "Sugar, over the next five years, I intend to indulge every fantasy I ever had." He released her and she dropped to her feet. "See you at dinner." In two steps, he strode out the open door.

"I'm sorry, Jewel. I thought he had told you."

She shook her head. "I don't blame *you*."

Trace shifted uneasily from one foot to the other. "I'd hoped you'd be happy we were teaming up again."

"It's not quite the same this time," she muttered, her mind lost in a fog of turmoil. She wasn't sure what was worse, submitting to two strangers or submitting to the man you love knowing that he feels nothing but contempt for you.

* * * * *

Dinner was a nightmare. Flanked by Trace and Colonel Helton, she had to stare across the table at Reece and Admiral Sohan. Reece's smug grin ruined what little appetite she had.

Over dessert, they discussed business. "Colonel Helton insists on a contract. I disagree that a woman in your position deserves such generous terms. However, I'm allowing a precedence to be set, since this is a virgin voyage." He snickered. The perverse gleam in his beady eyes sickened her.

Savarian worm, she cursed silently.

"In fairness to all parties, we've agreed that you shall be available sexually to each crew member for a minimum of six hours each day. The time slots can be negotiated between the parties involved and can coincide with each other or remain separate."

Jewel refused to react.

"That means they can share you if they choose."

"I think that's fair." Reece raised his glass, giving her a mock salute. "Don't you?"

She raised her chin and leveled her stare on him. "That's fine. I doubt, however, that you'll have the stamina to occupy me six hours a day."

The men on each side of her chuckled.

Reece's hungry gaze lowered to her breasts and she cursed herself for the obvious reaction that the thin material had no hope of covering. "Very true. I could get bored. Before I commit to five years, I think I deserve a test run."

"A test run?" Jewel squawked.

"A marvelous idea," the admiral agreed. "I'm sure you'd agree, Quinton."

"It's not necessary," Trace replied.

"Ah, already tasted the wares," Sohan murmured and Reece's eyes narrowed dangerously.

"Maybe you'd prefer we replace you," Colonel Helton threatened Reece.

"No time. No time." The admiral didn't allow Reece a chance to answer. "The voyage is scheduled for the day after tomorrow."

"If it's too late to replace him, why consider his request?"

Admiral Sohan grinned. "Because I can."

* * * * *

"Reece, I don't think this is a good idea."

Reece glared at Trace as they walked down the corridor toward the quarters they shared on the space station. The other man had no idea what it did to him to see Jewel, to know she'd betrayed him with Tre. He didn't understand how it felt to love a woman and hate her at the same time. Jewel had given him everything then she taken it all away. He'd thought she was perfect and the whole time she had been playing a game. Reece snorted. "I don't care what you think."

"The three of us are going to be confined on an Explorer for the next five years."

"I'm not likely to forget that." He wasn't likely to forget he had to share Jewel. He wasn't likely to forget that she never had been, nor ever would be, solely his. But for tonight he wanted to forget that. He wanted to lose himself in Jewel's arms and pretend they were a couple. He wanted to pretend she loved him.

When she had first confessed to the murder and the affair, he'd tried to put her out of his mind. He'd forced himself to stay away from the brief trial but her sentencing had brought him to his knees. The thought of his Jewel on a prison colony was unthinkable. He didn't know what had precipitated the murder but he did know that Tre had been unstable. He doubted that the man had been blameless in his own death.

"Can I ask you something?"

Reece shrugged, pretending nonchalance when really his gut was twisting in turmoil.

"If Helton hadn't devised this plan, what would you have done?"

He met Trace's steady gaze. "I was about to approach you with a plan to break Jewel out of confinement during transportation. Would you have agreed to that mission too?"

Trace snorted. "Hell, yeah."

Chapter Two

"They are Savarian worms, I tell you."

"Calm down, Jewel. You weren't this upset when you faced the Awarie prison camp," Helton commented.

She paced. "You don't understand. He hates me now. He's out for revenge."

"I doubt he'd throw away five years of his life for revenge."

"Why? This is a dream come true for him. He gets to explore uncharted territory and degrade me at every possible moment."

Helton sighed. "Tell him the truth."

"It's too late."

He grabbed her arm, spinning her around as she passed in front of him. "It's never too late. You hurt him but he'll forgive you if you explain."

"I didn't have to explain to you. You knew I was innocent. You never doubted me." She didn't say it but it hurt that Reece had believed her lies with ease.

"I wasn't a jealous, spurned lover."

"We weren't lovers."

"A technicality, the way I hear it. Reece left your unit because of the ban on inner-unit relationships. Everyone who saw you together knew you were headed for a mutually exclusive relationship."

"We won't have that now."

"I'm sorry, Jewel."

"I was shopping for a new outfit for my date with Reece. That's why I wasn't home when Tre arrived. Reece was due home two days later and I wanted to impress him. It would have been our first real date. If I'd been home..." she sobbed.

"You can't change the past. You had no way of knowing. I blame myself. Tre should have been in a treatment facility."

She placed her hand on his, where it rested on her arm. "You were trying to protect him. We all were."

He nodded. "Dry your eyes. Reece will arrive soon. I know you don't want him to see you like this."

She took a deep breath and wiped her cheek. She hadn't managed to reach the rank of major by being a wuss. They'd tried to break her in the academy but she'd more than held her own. "He can dish out his best and I can take it."

"That's my girl. Give him hell."

* * * * *

In the tight quarters of her latrine, Jewel splashed water on her face. She wouldn't enjoy the luxury much longer. Explorers didn't accommodate bathing water, only vaporization cleansers. The fresh spray cooled her flesh but didn't dampen her internal heat. At any moment, Reece would arrive and pick up where he'd left off this afternoon. Nerves churned her stomach but her pussy dampened at the thought.

A shiver raced up her spine. No sound alerted her but she knew Reece awaited her inside her quarters. The time had arrived. She exhaled a shaky breath.

She opened the door and he stood facing the wall that held a holographic image of her and Ruby. Taken the day she had graduated from the academy, she wore an officer's dress suit. She glanced down at her new uniform. Times had changed. "That was a long time ago."

He glanced up. "About five years."

She'd grown up in the last five years. She'd grow up even more over the next five. "Five years *is* a long time."

He set the picture down. "You know why I'm here." His gaze raked her from head to toe.

She nodded. Awareness hung in the air. Obviously, he wasn't wasting time with pleasantries.

"I don't care for the short hair."

She touched it self-consciously. "Sorry. Prison cut."

"I won't let you cut it for the next five years."

She didn't care for his attitude. "You can only control me six hours a day."

He chuckled. "I'm your commanding officer. On my ship, I command you twenty-four/seven."

Anger simmered in her gut and she lashed out. "Are you going to command me during Trace's six hours too?"

His jaw tightened as rage flared in his eyes and she knew she'd hit her target. He might enjoy tormenting her but he still hated the thought of another man touching her.

Grasping the hem of his skintight shirt, he tugged it over his head. Her breath rushed from her body. She'd only seen him without his shirt once but she'd never forgotten his impressive form. Dark, glistening flesh covered the thick muscles of his chest and biceps. She swallowed an overabundance of saliva, before she drooled.

"Are you going to undress or watch me?"

"I don't have much to remove." The calm tone of her voice surprised her, considering the quaking of her thighs.

His large, thick-fingered hand slid across his rippling abs in a teasing caress as he reached for the fastening of his low-slung trousers. He released the clasp and the

trousers pooled at his feet. Body-hugging shorts covered him to mid-thigh but hid nothing.

Her eyes widened in appreciation. She'd always thought of him as physical perfection and never more so than now.

A smug grin cocked one corner of his mouth. "Take your clothes off, Jewel," he whispered huskily.

She took a deep breath. Over the years, this moment had played many times in her mind but never quite this way. Her fingers trembled as she freed the clasp between her breasts.

A low moan escaped Reece's lips and his eyes lit with appreciation. Before she could lose her nerve, she wiggled her skirt over her hips.

"Damn, Jewel," he groaned. "I always knew you were in a class of your own."

She jerked her gaze up to meet his heavy-lidded eyes.

"Did you think I'd say something crude?"

"I didn't know," she whispered.

Snatching her close, he lifted her in his arms and lowered her to the cot. He stretched out half over her and their combined weight smashed the thin pad until she felt the bed-shelf beneath it. She didn't mind a bit as she wrapped her arms around him. He buried his face against her neck, holding her tightly as they breathed in unison.

A chill raced down her spine as his lips moved against the sensitive skin on her neck. "You like that?" he chuckled.

"Yes." She was extremely sensitive to his touch and wondered if he was as affected by her. Raking her nails up his spine, she had her answer when he trembled.

"Heavenly stars, Jewel, touch me." His tongue traveled her jawline before he nipped her lower lip.

She whimpered as his mouth took possession of hers and he rolled them to lie side by side. Her head spun. They were just man and woman, no thoughts of the impending mission intruded as her hands learned the contours of his back, chest and abs.

If her hands were busy, his were too as he charted a course across her thighs, stomach and finally her breasts. "Reece," she gasped into his mouth as he rolled a distended nipple between thumb and finger.

A jolt of desire shot straight to her clit and she bucked up against him. "That's it, baby."

Lowering his head, his mouth took the place of his fingers, freeing his hands to roam. She bucked once more before she found herself flat on her back with him looming over her. She parted her thighs, welcoming him as he shifted between her legs. She wanted him—now. Grasping his shorts, she tried to tug them down. "Not yet," he said.

His hungry gaze traveled the length of her then he lowered his head to the neglected nipple. Burying her fingers in his silky black hair, she held his mouth to her breast. "It feels so good."

A moan rumbled in his chest as his fingers slid up her thigh. This time, instead of traveling across her stomach they dipped between her legs, parting her labia. Her breath hitched in her throat.

His thumb strummed her clit and his fingers explored her wet folds. Pressing her heels to the cot, she bucked against his hand.

Reece growled in his throat. She was so fucking wet that he couldn't stand it. Her thighs clenched against his hand and he almost lost it. "Easy," he cooed as one finger found her opening. Her hands tightened on his scalp as his finger took possession of her hot little cunt.

She trembled around his hand. Hot, tight, hungry muscles pulsed around his finger. Obviously, none of the guards had gotten to her during confinement. Thank the stars above.

"Reece, please."

He raised his head and met her needy gaze. Her golden eyes gleamed with raw hunger and a shudder rocked him to the core. He'd wanted to take his time, to draw out the foreplay until she quivered in uncontrollable need but he couldn't wait any longer. He shifted to his knees, unfastened his shorts and lowered them enough to free his cock.

He couldn't contain his smug grin as her awed gaze zeroed in on his erection. He realized he had a larger than average package since, on missions, he'd often been in close contact with other men.

Her tongue swiped her lower lip, eliciting a moan from him. "See something you want?"

She swallowed audibly. Reaching out, she wrapped her fingers around his cock. Her thumb rode up the thick vein on the underside of his shaft to dip into the slit on his cock head. His stomach clenched as his balls tightened. If he weren't already on his knees, her touch would have dropped him to them.

"Fuck, Jewel." Grasping her hand, he freed his cock before he embarrassed himself. He'd been too long without the touch of a woman and he wasn't going to erupt without easing into the paradise her body offered. Shifting his legs, he forced her sleek, creamy thighs farther apart as his gaze drilled her hairless cunt. "Are you ready for me?"

"Yes." She nodded.

His trembling fingers parted her glistening pink folds. "You're wet." He inserted one then two fingers. "But you're tight." He didn't want to hurt her. He'd imagined this moment a million times in the last several years and he wouldn't spoil it by hurting her.

She rocked her hips. "It doesn't matter, Reece. Please."

Groaning, he stretched over her, taking her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss. His cock pressed against her hot, wet cunt and he shuddered. "Relax for me. I don't want to hurt you," he moaned against her lips.

"You won't."

The head of his cock prodded her opening and he eased forward. Gritting his teeth, he controlled the urge to thrust fast and hard. The force of his restraint caused him to tremble as he inched forward.

"Oh my," she moaned. Nails dug into his hips, raking his flesh as she pulled him closer.

Bracing himself on his arms, he leaned back. His gaze flashed to their joined bodies. He had to see his cock taking possession of her. Her clit pouted with need and the pink mouth of her cunt stretched wide to take the thickness of his cock. Sucking in a shaky breath, he shivered. The sight of her beneath him appeared glorious even to his jaded eyes.

Shifting his weight, he freed his hand to strum her clit as he sank deeper into her heated depths. "It's so beautiful." His gaze flashed up to meet hers. "You're so beautiful."

"Reece." She thrust up to meet him.

Sweat broke out across his brow. "Slow down." He didn't want her to push him over the edge before he satisfied her. This moment had been a long time coming and he was ready to explode. Cupping her ass with one hand, he lifted her hips to better accommodate the thrust of his cock.

Easing back, he thrust forward and a moan shuddered from her lips. He repeated the movement until he'd seated himself balls-deep in her slick cunt. He paused for a deep breath, enjoying the clench of her tight, wet pussy.

From heavy-lidded eyes, she watched him. Raw, masculine power and graceful beauty hovered over her. Her heart pounded just looking at him but lying beneath him, filled with his cock, she thought it might explode. Every move of his body sent ripples of pleasure up and down her spine. She flashed from hot to cold, her clit pulsed and her nipples ached. "Harder. Faster," she begged.

Aching with need, she reached down, trying to encourage a more forceful possession. His fingers laced between hers, forcing her to stroke her wet folds, her sensitive clit.

"Fuck, that's hot." His black eyes gleamed hungrily. "Cup your breast. Pinch your nipple for me," Reece demanded as he thrust deep.

Jewel complied, finding her nipple still damp from his mouth. She tugged on the distended tip and his expression softened with appreciation. "It feels so good. So good," she chanted.

Releasing her fingers, he left her hand on her clit as he grasped her hip. Holding her still, he powered forward and her breath rushed from her body. "I can't last, Jewel." He thrust and rotated his hips.

She pinched her clit as her inner muscles pulsed. "I'm there. I'm there."

Throwing back his head, he moaned as if he might die as he rushed toward completion. Her vision blurred as she watched him and she had to bite her lip to keep from shouting out as intense pleasure washed over her.

Collapsing, Reece caught his weight on his forearms before rolling to the side. Snuggled against his chest, she inhaled his musky scent as she waited for her heart to stop pounding.

Relaxed and safe for the first time in months, she sagged against him and sighed. His fingers stroked the short hair on her head and he tensed. Their lust had temporarily blinded him but she knew, as sanity returned, so would his memories.

She lifted her head and met his wary gaze. "Why did you sign on for this mission?"

Reece hesitated. "Helton's like a father to me and he asked me to do it."

"Oh." Her brow furrowed. The colonel hadn't mentioned asking him for a favor. She looked back toward Reece but he wouldn't meet her eyes. A shiver raced up her spine. She suspected he wasn't being completely honest but an inner voice told her now wasn't the time to press the issue. Besides, she couldn't fault someone for keeping secrets.

"I'll tell the admiral that you'll do as a companion."

The words sliced through her and she closed her eyes to hide her reaction. Easing away from her, he stood and adjusted his shorts. She snatched up the thin blanket and pulled it up to hide her nakedness. A moment ago, they'd been as close as two people could be but now a black hole separated them.

He snorted as he pulled on his clothes. "Why bother hiding, you belong to me for the next five years."

Her gaze narrowed on him. She appreciated that he had reasons for his anger. However, she deserved some respect and she wouldn't allow him to belittle her. "Not just you, I belong to Trace too."

He flinched as she scored a direct hit.

"Me, Trace, Tre, the colonel is such a fan, I'm sure he's had you too. Did you make it with our whole unit?"

She sat up against the wall, drawing the blanket with her. "Fuck you, Reece. It'll take more than you to bring me to my knees."

He grabbed the blanket and snatched it from her grasp. His eyes raked her curves insolently. "I'll have you on your knees and while you're there, you'll wrap those pretty lips around my cock."

Raising her chin, she stared him down. "That's okay. I've had lots of practice, Tre especially enjoyed my mouth."

"Bitch!" He tossed the blanket to the side and stomped out the door.

Sliding down the wall, she buried her face in her pillow to muffle her quiet sobs. She didn't know how she'd make it through the next few days, let alone the next five years. For so long, she'd lived on dreams. She hadn't had sex with a man since she met Reece. She'd always hoped that someday they would find a way to be together. They almost had until she ruined it.

Now they had no choice.

She sighed. The sex had far surpassed her expectations but the contempt she saw in his eyes tore at her insides. Her actions hurt not just herself but Reece and now Trace. It was too late to change her actions and they would all pay the price.

Chapter Three

Strapped in a jump seat in the rec area of the CO1, Jewel appreciated the spacesuit that Trace had thought to supply her. The G-force of hyperdrive would have peeled her vest top from her breasts. She watched the color-bar warning system as the lights climbed from shades of yellow to orange. She sucked in a deep breath and held it as hyperdrive engaged. The force slammed into her chest, pinning her to her seatback for precious seconds. As the ship acclimated, the force dropped away and she sagged against her belts.

"Status, Jewel," Reece's voice sang over the ship-wide communication.

"A-okay," she replied. Unfastening the belts, she stood and stretched. Liftoff had initiated less than an hour ago but her muscles ached from the strain of rapid ascent. Grounded for the last six months, she was a bit out of shape.

Trace appeared in the doorway and she watched him warily. She knew what to expect but they hadn't discussed any specifics, which left her to wonder when and how he would approach her. The waiting made her anxious. She'd known Trace almost as long as Reece and he'd always treated her with respect. They'd been part of the same unit when she'd graduated from the academy. They were comrades, if not friends. Because of her attachment to Reece, she'd never considered Trace as a sexual partner. Now that it was about to change, she looked at him through different eyes. He was an attractive man, a few years older than Reece's thirty-two. Tall and fit, he wore his blond hair cut the same as Reece, military style, slightly longer on top than on the sides. Trace smiled under her obvious scrutiny and she thought his cheeks reddened a shade.

She averted her gaze. She hadn't realized she could embarrass Trace. Rumored to have conquests throughout the galaxy, he had the rep of a first-class player. His exploits and careless attitude hadn't allowed him to advance beyond the rank of captain.

"Reece is positioning us in open spaceway between here and Jo' Kilmr and then he'll switch to unmanned."

"We have to stop for supplies? I wasn't sure if we were already loaded." She frowned. "I'm not in the know on this trip."

"All you have to do is ask."

"Why did you agree to this mission?" she asked the question that had nagged at her for the last few days.

"I wanted to protect you and..." He hesitated. "Reece asked me to accompany him."

She furrowed her brow. "Why did Reece want to help me?"

A halfcocked grin curled up one corner of his lips. "You'd have to ask him."

"Thanks." She rolled her eyes. She didn't tell him that she already had but she didn't believe his excuse.

* * * * *

"Everything travel well?" Reece asked as Trace returned to the bridge.

"Jewel's fine."

"I didn't ask about her."

Trace shook his head. "Lie to her, even lie to yourself if you need to but don't try to lie to me."

Reece turned away. He wasn't ready for this conversation. He was thankful Trace had agreed to this mission but he wouldn't discuss his relationship with Jewel.

Trace expelled a heavy breath behind him. "We haven't talked about what's hanging between us and I think it's time we did."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I mean Jewel and the fact that she is to be a companion to both of us."

Reece closed his eyes as pain lanced through his chest. "You want to discuss who goes first?"

Trace snorted. "Jewel's right. You are a bastard." He moved toward the door. "If that's how you want it, I'm going to find Jewel. If you need me, I'll be in her quarters the next six hours."

The bridge door hissed as it closed and Reece slumped in the nearest chair. Trace's obvious implication tore at his heart. "Jewel," he whispered in a tortured groan. In his mind, he pictured Trace approaching Jewel. Trace had a way with women. Would Jewel respond to him? Would Trace give Jewel more pleasure than he had?

"Damn it! What was I thinking, bringing Trace on this mission?" It was too late now to change anything unless he threw Trace off on Jo' Kilmr and made a run for it with Jewel. If they were caught, they would both end up on a prison colony or dead.

Reece swallowed back a lump in his throat. He couldn't risk Jewel's life. He would have to learn to share. His gut twisted and bile rose in his throat.

* * * * *

"Can I come in?"

Jewel gulped and took a step backward, allowing Trace to enter her quarters.

He spun on his heel to face her. "We need to talk."

Plastering a pleasant look on her face, she nodded. "Okay."

"We've known each other a long time."

She nodded. She could guess where this was headed. They'd known each other a long time so there was no reason to hesitate. He expected her to perform her duties on

this mission, just as she had on every other mission. However, on this mission her duty was to submit sexually to him. She wished the thought excited her but it didn't. Attractive and experienced, no doubt he was a great fuck but her mind and heart were on Reece.

"Our previous association makes this difficult."

She averted her gaze. "I intend to fulfill my obligations."

He huffed. "Your obligations?"

She nibbled her lower lip. That probably wasn't the most welcoming phrase. "I didn't mean —"

"I understand. We've grown accustomed to a certain relationship based on our commitment to the UEM. Now that's changed."

She met his gaze. His eyes were pale green. She'd never noticed.

"I want to spend some time together." He took a step toward her. "To get to know each other." He held up a bag. "Have you ever played Star Zone?"

She chuckled. "The interactive version?"

He nodded, grinning widely.

"I kick ass at Edit Two," she bragged.

"Edit Three." He shook the bag.

"You're fucking me?"

He blinked. "Not yet."

She snatched the bag and tore it open. "This is cosmic." She held out a headset and hung on when he reached for it. "Thanks, Trace." It was only a reprieve but she appreciated it.

"I took the edge off before we lifted. I'm good for a couple days." Flopping in a recline, he adjust his headset and eye screen. "Prepare to have an ass whopping."

They chose an intricate maze and maneuver game to exterminate hostile extraterrestrials while competing against each other. The system worked from brain waves to give one the sense of actuality.

Three levels into The Zone, her score flashed twenty-five megs and her opponent had racked up twenty-seven megs. "You're good at this," she replied in a breathy voice, as if she'd actually run through the maze.

"I'm the best," he retorted then groaned as an ET took out one of his lasers. "Fuck. That was a sweet move."

From outside the door, Reece heard their muted words and his stomach churned. He'd hoped Trace's words were a bluff, though he knew the other man had needs.

"How'd you like that?" He heard Jewel ask and he wondered what she had done to elicit that moan from Trace's lips.

Trace chuckled. "Aw, poor Jewel, was that too hard for you?"

Reece spun away, he couldn't stomach any more of their playful banter. In his mind, he pictured them together, naked on the bed as Trace forced her body this way and that. "Fuck," Reece cursed. He doubted it involved force. Jewel sounded breathless, exhilarated, as if she enjoyed every moment.

* * * * *

A reserved Trace entered the bridge and crossed to his station. Eight hours had passed since he had walked out, not that Reece had counted. Swinging his chair to the side, he considered Trace's relaxed stance.

Trace whistled a low tune under his breath and Reece lunged to his feet. The grated floor rattled under his heavy steps. He exited the room before he hurt the other man. Storming down the corridor, he put distance between them before he did something he would regret. A right turn off the amidships corridor led to his quarters, a left led to Jewel's. He turned left. Her closed door didn't stop him. Thanks to Admiral Sohan, Trace or he could open her door any time they pleased. He placed his right hand on the scanning device.

Dim lighting cloaked most of the room in darkness but his keen vision zeroed in on Jewel. She slept with one hand tucked under her face and her legs curled up. She looked young and innocent. Looks were deceiving.

She wore her flight suit, unfastened at the neck, just a hint of cleavage showed. He wondered if she had put it on after Trace left in hopes of deterring him. If she had, it didn't work. In some ways, he found the formfitting suit more alluring than her companion uniform. The clingy spacesuit hugged her long legs, small waist and abundant breasts. He wasn't the only man to have noticed but in the past he'd done his best to discourage the others.

Stripping to his skin, he stretched alongside her in the bed. She must have used the vaporization cleanser after Trace left because the scent of yalo buds clung to her flesh. Thank the stars, she didn't smell of stale lust and man.

Opening the remaining latches on her suit, he slid a hand inside to cup her breast. Warm, soft skin yielded to his touch. His thumb flicked her nipple and she moaned, "Reece."

Pleasure speared through him to hear his name roll off her tongue. He nuzzled her neck and dropped kisses along her jawline. Her eyelids fluttered before opening. She grinned and her golden eyes sparkled with warmth. She had looked at him that way a thousand times. He knew in his soul he would never tire of it.

"Morning."

Her eyes batted and the warmth faded as she emerged from the cocoon of sleep. "What time is it?"

"Does it matter?" he asked as he peeled the suit down her arms.

"I need to use the facilities." She struggled.

"In a minute, I want a taste of you first." His mouth trailed across her stomach as he pulled the suit down her legs and tossed it aside.

"Reece, I need to go."

He nipped the soft flesh of her mound. The scent of warm, sweet woman teased his senses. "Not until I taste you." Parting her thighs, he lifted her hips and buried his face in her soft, damp folds. His tongue lapped her from clit to anus, savoring her musky flavor.

Her hips jerked in his hands as a purr of pleasure rumbled in her chest. Palming her ass with one hand, the other joined his mouth in plundering her cunt. He plucked at her clit as his tongue dove into her slick, honeyed canal.

"Reece." Her hands ran up and down his back. Twisted as he was on the bed, she couldn't reach much else.

Quick jabs of his tongue had her quivering against his mouth. "Good. So good," she moaned. A mewl of pleasure erupted from her lips as her thighs tightened around his head.

He eased back, lapping her essence from her tender folds. She shivered as he lowered her hips and sat up next to her. Breathing heavily, she flashed a shy smile.

"Did you enjoy yourself?" he asked.

She nodded but her cheeks turned rosy and she averted her gaze. "I still need to get up."

He waved his arm. "Go ahead. I'll be here when you get back."

Naked, she hurried across the room to her private latrine. She had a nice ass with just enough jiggle. The door closed and his troublesome thoughts intruded. *You're good at this.* The words she had said to Trace echoed in his head. *How'd you like that?*

He bolted upright. No matter what she said or did, he couldn't trust her. He couldn't allow her any deeper into his heart.

The door opened and she hesitated. He steeled his heart and held out his hand. "Come here, Jewel." Splaying his thighs, he guided her to stand between his legs. "Kneel down." She flinched before she complied. "I think you know what I want."

She swallowed deeply, her pink tongue wet her full bottom lip and he fought the urge to thrust between her lips. Heat suffused her face and part of him wanted to spare her the act of total submission. Her lips parted and his lust overruled his conscience. At this moment, he would walk naked through the frozen lands of Heriss to see her lips wrap around his cock.

Jewel licked her lips. She knew what he wanted. She wanted it too but not this way. She wanted the right to touch and taste him any way she pleased. She didn't want to feel as if she were following orders. Regardless, she closed her eyes and parted her lips.

"No, Jewel." His hand on her face stopped her. "Open your eyes and look at me while you suck my cock."

Sucking in a shaky breath, she refused to let her lips tremble. Staring into his black eyes, she licked the flared head of his cock. The tip of her tongue dipped into the slit and gathered his salty pre-cum.

The initiation might differ but this was a fantasy come to life. She savored his taste and desire sizzled along her nerve endings. Moaning, she rocked forward, taking him into her mouth and his eyes flashed hungrily. Her mouth slid down then back and repeated the process. Wiggling closer, she cupped his balls in one hand as she circled his lower shaft with the other and pumped.

"Fuck," he moaned.

Reece tensed as a shudder traveled through him. Leaning back, she took a deep breath. She hid a smile as she stared into his heavy-lidded eyes. Regardless of what he said, he still wanted her, now as much as ever. His white-knuckled grip on the bed testified to his control. Puckering her lips, she blew across his damp shaft as she rolled his balls in her hand.

From the base of his shaft to the head, she licked the vein lining the underside of his cock. His arms trembled with restraint.

Taking him deep within her mouth, she raked her teeth across his flesh.

"Fuck." He grasped her head. "You're killing me."

She chuckled as he guided her mouth over him. His control broke and he plunged into her mouth. She sucked as he thrust. "Yes. Hell yes," he moaned and shuddered.

She swallowed as his release hit her in the back of the throat. He thrust hard twice more before his hips slowed. "Damn," he groaned as his softening cock eased in and out of her mouth in a slow rhythm as if neither one of them wanted to break the contact.

Collapsing back on the bed, he panted for breath. Kneeling between his legs, she rested her head on his thigh.

"Did I hurt you?"

She shook her head. "No."

"Come here." He patted the bed next to him.

Rising to her feet, she sat on the bed. His hand snaked out and pulled her down next to him. He cuddled her close and his hand stroked her back. "Did you enjoy tasting me as much as I enjoyed my taste of you?"

Jewel nodded but didn't meet his gaze.

His thumb trailed across her lower, sensitized lip. "For a long time, I've imagined you taking my cock between your lips. It was better than I imagined."

A whimper escaped her lips as she met his sated gaze.

The ship-wide communicator buzzed. "We're three hundred clicks off Jo' Kilmr, if anyone's interested," Trace announced from the bridge.

Reece sighed. "I guess playtime is over for now."

Chapter Four

"I've plotted our course to the Qualra Galaxy," Trace stated as he disengaged the loading ramp and closed the outside cargo hatch.

Reece nodded.

"If you're not in a hurry, I thought I'd take advantage of some off-ship time."

Reece's head jerked up in response to Trace's comment. His pulse raced. If Trace chose to leave Jewel behind to seek comfort elsewhere, he wouldn't complain. "Go ahead. I haven't filed for a clear uplift yet. I'll finish up here and plan for a morning departure."

Trace nodded. "It's the last time we'll see civilization for a while. You want to accompany me?"

Reece shook his head and tried not to smile. "I had better stay with the ship. Stay in the spaceport district."

Trace gave a mock salute. "Yes, Sir." Turning on his heel, he left the hold.

Reece chewed the inside of his cheek as he watched the other man leave. Sometimes he envied Trace's carefree attitude. He sailed through life, one mission to the next, one woman to the next. If Reece had ever been that carefree, it was a long time ago. Turning to the job at hand, he checked off items on his list as he walked through the hold. They didn't have a planned stop for six months so he needed to account for everything. Two cases of instant nutriashake caught his eye. His lips curled upward. Horrible stuff but Jewel loved it. He'd ordered plenty just to keep her happy.

He didn't know why he bothered, then a vision of her from that morning flashed in his mind. Her golden eyes had shimmered with pleasure as she awoke and saw him.

"Fuck," he cursed. "Everything could have been perfect."

"Reece," Jewel called from the open doorway and his head snapped up. "I saw Trace head out. I thought we were lifting straight out."

"He wanted a little R and R with some accommodating locals, if you know what I mean."

Jewel raised a brow.

"Trace isn't a one-woman man, no matter how good it is."

Jewel shrugged. "Never crossed my mind. Why didn't you join him?" In her words, he heard uncertainty and wary need.

The question hung between them like a dagger. He could make a caustic remark and she'd leave or he could give them a chance. His heated gaze raked her form. All the

woman he would ever need, ever want, stood in front of him. Somehow, he was going to have to come to terms with the situation. "I wasn't interested."

"Why?"

He should have known she wouldn't let it rest. "I have everything I need right here."

She raised her chin. Her wide eyes locked onto his gaze, searching for answers. "Everything?"

He swallowed hard. If she smacked him down, she would be very sorry. "Everything I could ever want or need is standing right in front of me."

Her lips trembled and she blinked rapidly. "Reece," she shrieked as she charged and collided with him.

He chuckled as he squeezed her. "I hope that means you're happy."

Her arms hugged his neck and she nodded.

"I'm not saying there won't be problems. The situation..." He shook his head and sighed. "It's difficult but I want to try." He would try to forget about Tre. He'd try not to think of her with Trace. It seemed hopeless but when they were together, when she smiled at him, everything else faded away.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It's my fault. I need to tell you —"

He pressed his fingers to her lips. "Shh, not yet. Later, we'll talk." He backed her toward the wall as one hand cupped the curve of her ass. Hunger flared in her eyes. "I want you."

She shifted against him and a moan escaped her lips.

Their hands tugged at fastenings as they hurriedly stripped each other. "I can't wait to get inside you." One palm lifted a full breast as the other hand tugged her suit off her arms. The sight of her pale breasts capped by tight, pebbled nipples almost buckled his knees.

"I want you too," she confessed. Her hands blazed a path across his chest and back and his heart pounded.

"Fuck it." Dropping to his knees, he pulled her boots off, then her suit. Her womanly scent teased his senses and he moaned. A swollen clit peeked from between her pink folds. He leaned forward and traced her slit with his tongue.

"Reece." Nails dug into his scalp.

Grasping her legs, he parted her thighs and she trembled. "I'll never get enough of this."

"Please. I want you inside me." Her hips rocked against his mouth. A slick, tasty cunt pressed against his lips but his cock agreed with her.

Standing, he shoved his suit out of his way and lifted her over him. Thrusting upward, he parted her tight passage as he let her sink onto him. The sweet, hot sensation brought him to his toes.

Jewel wrapped her legs around him and leaned against the cool metal wall. Frozen in place, heartbeats ticked away as they stared at each other. The clouded wariness had vanished from his eyes, replaced by warmth and need. Finally, she saw a glimpse of the old Reece.

Jewel's lips parted as she sucked in a deep breath. Squeezing her inner muscles, she watched his eyes flare. "Fuck me," she purred.

An unintelligible sound erupted from Reece as he pinned her to the wall. Warmth and strength forced air from her lungs as sharp teeth nibbled her lower lip. Her mouth opened and Reece thrust forward. His tongue and cock filled her and she latched on to both. Grasping his back, she attempted to absorb him as they merged into one continual being. She moved as he shifted, sucked as he thrust and together they reached a shattering climax.

Something jabbed her in the hip and she reached beneath her and pulled out Reece's cargo log. She didn't remember them moving to the floor. "I think this is yours."

Taking it from her, he tossed it onto a crate. His hand returned to her breast. "I think this is mine too."

"Mmm." She arched her back and pressed her distended nipple into his palm.

"Cold?"

"A bit."

"I can't have that." Rising, Reece tied the sleeves of his suit at his waist and pulled her to her feet. She reached for her suit. "Don't bother. You have more."

"Thanks to Trace."

He slapped her bare bottom and the sting sent a jolt straight to her clit. "Trace was the delivery boy. I ordered the suits for you."

"You did?"

"Do you think I want to see him leer at you in your *uniform*?" He stressed the last word. "It's bad enough that—" he stopped.

Jewel knew what he was about to say. She could have put his mind at ease but there was no point. It was going to happen. Trace's trip off ship only bought them time. Instead, she patted Reece's cheek. "You can leer at me any time you want."

He shoved her ahead of him. "I want to leer at your naked ass on the way to my quarters."

"Leer away."

"That's not all I have planned for your ass." He closed in on her and his hands greedily grasped at her naked flesh. "If you don't hurry, I'll bend you over right here."

When she reached the crossroads in the corridor, he guided her toward his quarters and she wondered. "Why your quarters?"

"Why not?"

It could have been a random decision or maybe he avoided her quarters because of Trace. She wondered but obviously, he wasn't ready to discuss it. The commander's quarters were the largest on the ship but not by much. A bigger bed squandered the additional room. Dark brown coverings neatly covered a bed she doubted he had even used. Her gaze darted around. No pictures, awards or medals hung on the walls. He hadn't added any sentimental touches. "It's nice."

"It's a place to sleep."

"Is that what we're going to do?"

He grinned. "Eventually."

She wagged her brows. "Until then?"

He kicked off his boots as he untied his sleeves and let his suit drop. Jewel swallowed hard. Damn, he was hot.

He fisted his erect cock and stroked. "I can think of a few ways to keep you busy."

She licked her lips and his gaze followed the swipe of her tongue. "Can you?" she asked in a raspy, breathy tone she barely recognized. She backed toward his bed and he pursued. When the bed brushed the back of her legs, she turned to kneel on the edge. Looking over her shoulder, she crawled forward.

"Jewel," he moaned. His dark gaze riveted on her upturned bottom and the wet folds between her legs. His hand cupped the curve of her ass as he moved into position behind her. "I wanted to take you slow and easy this time but you're killing me."

"We have plenty of time for slow and easy. Fuck me, Reece."

The breath gushed from her body as he slammed his cock home inside her. "Thank the stars above," Reece groaned.

He ran a hand up her spine then down. Trailing a finger between the cheeks of her ass, he hesitated against the bud of her anus. He circled the tight flesh. Filled with an overwhelming urge to claim every inch of her as his, he licked his finger and pressed against the hole.

"Reece, I've never..."

His chest swelled with relief. He hadn't wanted to consider her time with Trace. Rocking his hips in a slow rhythm, he reached over to the nightstand. The drawer came complete with an assortment of lubes and devices. "I'll take it easy."

Opening the tube, he coated several fingers. It would take some stretching to prepare her for his cock. The thought excited him. He shivered and had to clench his jaw to stop himself from finding an early completion.

"Reece," she gasped as the cold lube touched her hot flesh.

"Relax. I'll take it slow. Just like my cock is sliding in and out of your pussy, my finger will ease in and out of your ass." As she exhaled, he pressed forward.

She whimpered as his finger rimmed the tight little hole. "Damn, this is cosmic." As the bud bloomed under his finger, her cunt tightened around him. The muscles pulsed in an attempt to milk him but he fought back the sensation.

Jewel shifted and rocked against his cock in her search for completion. Holding his finger still, he thrust his hips hard and fast. "I'll take the edge off, baby."

Moaning, she arched her back and he rapid-fired his hips. He'd send her over the edge now then build her back up to another climax when he took her ass.

"Stars above," she groaned.

"Come for me, Jewel. Come all over me."

She thrust back against him and he couldn't help easing his finger a little deeper.

"Yes," she hissed.

"Do you like it?" He circled his finger as his cock plunged long and hard.

"Mmm." She nodded. "Now! Now!" she called out and he had to clench every muscle in his body to stop himself from following her over the edge into paradise.

As she sagged to the bed, he slid his cock free. He needed a reprieve if he intended to hold out for her ass. Grabbing the padded head mats, he adjusted her over them to lie open to his possession.

After a moment, she turned to look at him. "You didn't come."

He smiled. "No. I have other plans."

"I'm not sure I can take you."

"I am." He reached for more lube. He was probably being selfish. He'd seen devices in the drawer made for stretching the anal opening but he wanted to do it. He wanted to open and claim all of her with his body. He wanted to claim her as no other male ever had.

Jewel was sated and relaxed so the press of his finger didn't hurt as he breached her anal opening. Actually, his touch aroused delicious vibrations and she shivered as he abraded raw nerve endings. Taking a shaky breath, she fought the urge to clamp down on his finger.

"You take my breath, baby. You're so beautiful," he said, his voice roughened by hunger.

Closing her eyes, she gave herself up to the sweet, hot burn of sensations. Simmering arousal tingled in her gut and tightened her nipples. Then one finger became two and she cried out, "Stars above."

"Easy, baby."

Need raged and she arched her back opening her body to his demands. "Reece, it feels..." She released a shaky breath and shivered. "I need more."

A growl rumbled in Reece's throat. "I got more to give you." He added another finger.

She bit her lip to silence a cry as intense pain-pleasure tore through her. "Please," she moaned.

"You're almost ready."

She bucked against his hand. "I am."

Her body jerked in reaction as cool lube replaced his fingers. "It's okay." He shifted behind her. "Relax," the word seemed torn from him as the blunt, broad head of his cock pressed against her opening.

His hands held her cheeks apart, not allowing her to tighten as he thrust forward. The breath rushed out of her and her nails dug into the bedding. "Reece," she hissed between clenched teeth.

"I'm in, baby." He eased forward and her body started to vibrate as nerve endings shot out jolts of sensation to every pleasure point on her body.

"Sweet heavens." She pressed backward as he sank deeper into her.

"Jewel." Leaning forward he ran his lips along her spine, up to her neck. His teeth raked along her shoulder as his hips thrust against her, slowly at first and then faster. "Sweet Jewel. Are you okay?"

"Yes." She nodded and his hands came around to circle her waist. He lifted her against him as he rocked inside her.

"I could stay here forever." One hand dipped between her thighs as the other cradled a breast.

Shivering racked her. She couldn't respond verbally but the clenching of her body told the tale.

"That's right, come for me. Take me to the stars." His voice roughened and his hands tightened as completion shuddered through him. "You're mine, Jewel. Mine."

A shattering climax erupted as he poured his release inside her.

* * * * *

The communicator buzzed once then stopped. It buzzed in rapid succession twice more, stopped then buzzed again. "That's the emergency code."

"Fuck! I hope Trace isn't in trouble." Unmindful of his nudity, Reece jogged toward the bridge.

Flopping into his chair, he spun toward the screen and brought up the transcript. His eyes scanned the screen then jumped back to the beginning. His heart pounded furiously and it wasn't from the short jog.

"What is it?" Jewel entered the bridge just moments behind him but fully dressed.

"Oh my stars."

"What?" Jewel moved up behind him and he lunged to his feet.

"Ruby?"

"Is she okay?" She tried to shove him out of the way.

Realization dawned on him and he grabbed her arms, shaking her slightly. "Ruby killed Tre?"

"Who? What?" She blinked rapidly.

Reece relaxed his grip before he hurt her. "It's from Colonel Helton. Ruby regained her memory and confessed. You've been cleared. Our mission is aborted." Reece repeated the words he had just read but they had yet to sink in fully.

Jewel's eyes closed. "Is she...did they charge her?"

"The colonel says she's fine."

She released a shuddering breath and he dropped his hands from her arms. His mind raced with doubts. His chest burned with a hollow, empty ache. If she loved him, how could she have lied? "Why, Jewel? Why didn't you tell me?"

She bit down on her lip and shook her head. "I panicked. You were gone on a mission and I needed to protect Ruby." A tear trailed down her cheek.

He raised a hand toward her face but dropped it. "I could have helped."

She grabbed his hands and squeezed. "How? You would have wanted me to tell the truth. I worried that, if they questioned Ruby, her mind would snap. She isn't strong. I had to protect her."

"The things I've said." He laughed without humor. "I've treated you horribly and Trace..." Reece cringed as his words trailed off. The situation had forced her to accommodate Trace's sexual needs. He wasn't abhorrent but Jewel was fastidious. Before all this had begun, she'd confessed to him that she'd only had one lover. In upper levels, before the academy, she had experimented with one guy. After joining the academy, she had dated no one.

Late one night, after a few drinks, she'd confessed that she'd rather have no one if she couldn't have him. The next day, he'd put in to transfer units so they could be together without fear of repercussions. They were going to have a life together. "I'm sorry, Jewel. Sorry I treated you poorly. I'm sorry you didn't think you could trust me."

"I was afraid for Ruby."

"I understand you did what you thought best to protect her." He could understand taking drastic measures to protect someone you love.

A low whistle snapped Reece's gaze toward the doorway. "New dress code?" Trace asked as he sauntered into the bridge.

"Jewel's been cleared of any wrongdoing. The mission is aborted."

"Thank the stars." Trace held out his arms and Jewel ran into them. "However, this isn't going to change our new relationship."

"Trace." Reece's hands clenched and he took a step toward the man. They couldn't change what had happened but it was over and he'd make sure Trace understood. He didn't know if he had a future with Jewel. He didn't know if they could put all the mistrust and betrayals behind them but he wanted to try.

Jewel chuckled as she playfully patted Trace's cheek. "I knew I was the best partner you ever had."

Trace grinned. "Undoubtedly, but I think you're about to get me killed."

Jewel looked over her shoulder and recognized the jealousy bubbling in Reece's gaze. "Don't worry, there is room for three," she teased.

"Jewel," Reece growled.

"Cool your jets, we're talking Star Zone."

Reece's brow furrowed.

"What did you think we were doing in her quarters? Never mind, don't answer." Trace smirked.

"You two didn't have sex?" Reece sounded incredulous.

"No." She grinned and stepped toward him.

"Why?" He looked disbelieving.

"I intended to last as long as I could without it. The colonel informed me of his plan to clear Jewel's record."

"You knew and you didn't say anything," Reece barked.

"The colonel told you?" Jewel questioned.

Trace threw up his hands. "First off, Jewel should have told you." He pointed at Reece then turned to her. "Secondly, you told the colonel not to tell Reece, you didn't mention me."

"You bastard." Reece grabbed Trace by the shoulder and pulled him close.

"Hey! Watch it. I don't embrace naked men."

"Sorry." Reece patted his back and set him free.

Jewel opened her arms. "I do." Reece snatched her up and crushed her in his embrace.

Trace shook his head. "You two need to head back to your quarters."

Snuggled against Reece, Jewel watched Trace cross the room. He really was a sweet man and someday he'd make someone very happy. She closed her eyes and sighed. "For once, I have to agree with Trace," she whispered.

"Mmm," his agreement rumbled in his chest and she felt his reaction against her stomach. Strong hands cupped her ass as he lifted her and she wrapped her legs around him.

A step away from the exit, Trace's voice halted them. "Did you read the entire message?"

Reece turned his head until they both looked at Trace. "Why?"

"You didn't mention that Ruby had confessed."

"You barely know her. The colonel says she's doing fine. She's waiting at the space station for Jewel's return."

Trace shrugged. "I just thought you might have mentioned it. I didn't know she was involved."

"Guess we didn't think about it." Jewel grinned. "We're just happy to go home."

Trace frowned. "You can go home. We volunteered."

Reece's arms tightened. "What?"

"Obviously, you didn't read the whole message. We are to return to base. Jewel is released from duty and we'll have a new companion provided to us."

"No!" Jewel shook her head. "No. That isn't right." Reece's hands loosened and she slid to her feet.

Crossing the room, she scanned the transcript. It was all there, Ruby's confession, her release and their instructions. "I'm contacting Helton." Her fingers flew across the keys as she composed her urgent request. If anyone could help them, the colonel would.

Sending the document, she turned to face Reece. He leaned forward in a chair, his head hanging. His impressive erection had long waned. Defeat emanated from him. She turned her troubled gaze toward Trace and he shrugged.

Scooting from the chair, she crawled to Reece and wrapped her arms around his neck. He buried his face in her neck. "I thought we'd finally won."

"We have. I love you and nothing will change that."

Reece jerked his head up to meet her gaze. "Jewel." His hand caressed her cheek. "I can't ask you to wait another five years. What about Ruby?"

She combed her fingers through his short hair while her mind raced through their options. There weren't many. Reece would play the hero to the end if she let him. In the message, the colonel assured her Ruby was fine and she'd see for herself soon enough. However, it was time she lived her life. She'd sacrificed her happiness once. She wouldn't do it again. "I'm finished waiting. We stay together. Either we all go free or we all stay."

"But..." His gaze flashed to Trace.

"We'll deal with it."

Reece's eyes shut. "Jewel, I can't ask you to do this."

"You volunteered to protect me, not because Helton asked you to and I won't leave you behind." She swallowed back a lump in her throat. Without a doubt, she knew Reece had volunteered out of love for her. She would do the same for him. "We're in this together, the three of us." Jewel looked over her shoulder at Trace.

He grinned. "I thought I might want to see the alternative."

"Trace!"

Trace held up his hands in surrender. "Just a joke."

The communicator buzzed and all eyes turned to the screen. "It's from Helton," Trace announced.

She met Reece's dark, gleaming gaze. "I love you. Whatever it says doesn't matter."

He nodded. "Our love will see us through it."

"Do you want to know or what?" Trace asked.

"Read it," Reece commanded.

"The colonel has an alternative."

"Oh fuck! This is how it all started." Jewel laughed.

"It didn't work out so bad. It brought us back together." Reece's lips brushed her forehead.

Jewel smiled. "Actually, it worked out perfectly." She wiggled between his legs pleased by his reaction.

"Do you two even care about the alternative?"

"Of course we do," Reece murmured but his eyes were on Jewel.

"Jewel's rank will be restored and she may continue the mission as an officer and another companion will be provided."

"I knew the colonel wouldn't let us down." Jewel grinned then nibbled her lower lip.

"That'll work," Reece replied.

Lowering her hand, she cupped Reece's heavy sac. "Just so we're clear. The companion is for Trace."

Reece snorted. "We're very clear." Shoving off the chair, he gained his feet and threw her across his shoulder.

"Humph." Air spurted from her body. "What are you doing?" she squawked.

"Trace, when will Jewel's rank reinstate?" One arm held her thighs in place and his other hand lifted to roam over her ass.

"Doesn't say. Could be days. Technically, she's still a companion."

Arching her back, she raised her head and looked at Trace. "You're not helping."

"Sure I am. It's important that a companion knows her place and I think Reece knows just the place for you." Crossing his arms, Trace winked.

"I outrank you."

"Not at the moment."

"Savarian worm." She tried to glare but she couldn't stop the laugh that escaped her lips.

"It's time my woman learns a lesson about lying to me."

"Reece, I had to," she shrieked.

"And I have to do what I'm about to do." He delivered a stinging slap to her bottom.

"Trace," she made an appeal to the other man.

"You got this one coming," Trace replied.

"Scheduled liftoff is in four hours. Buzz me in three and a half," Reece ordered.

From her upside-down position, Jewel returned Trace's mocking salute with a finger wag of her own.

The hand on her ass dipped between her thighs as she bounced down the corridor. "You're wet."

"I can't imagine why." Her hand trailed down his smooth, dark-skinned back and across his tightly muscled ass. It was one hell of a view. "You aren't really going to spank me, are you?"

"Your actions almost sent you to prison." His hand squeezed a rounded cheek. "You need punishment and I love you too much not to give it to you."

"But..." His confession took the argument out of her. If he wanted to spank her, she'd let him. She squirmed at the thought. She'd even try not to enjoy it too much.

GOTHIC MASTER BY REQUEST

Isabelle Drake

Dedication

For Walt, who puts up with my obsessive movie watching.

Acknowledgements

With great appreciation for the dedication of “B” horror movie professionals.

Chapter One

Shelter from Icy Winter Winds

"I'd nearly given up hope that you would arrive, I am certainly glad you finally found your way."

Lorelai shook her head, fighting the lavender haze in her mind and the soft, expectant tension coursing through her body.

The man's voice continued, his excitement evident but tempered by years of practicing the art of patience. "Yes, certainly glad. It's been ages since we have had a luscious one in his bed." The voice fell silent, then came back, this time framed by memories. "All the girls before—back before—never mind. You are here now, things will be different."

The world began to present itself more clearly, twin posts came into focus.

She blinked, ignoring the voice, staring through the dim light and willing herself to focus.

Solid bedposts.

A wide, dark wooden door, standing open.

A fireplace, flames hungrily licking cords of wood.

Soft sheets beneath her flushed skin, a heavy down comforter pressed against her, caressing her skin. And a sweet languid sensation running from her spine into her limbs.

"Would you like more tea, dear?"

"Tea?" Her voice was soft, husky, warm, like the sweet, gentle heat that seemed to be everywhere inside her.

"Yes," he encouraged, "you took quite well to the cup you drank upon your arrival."

Images tumbled in, pictures drifting into place. The last one was of herself, covered with snow and chilled from bitter winter wind, accepting hot tea as she inquired after her friend Katherine.

"What hap—"

"No need to be upset with yourself. Many girls are skittish when they first arrive. I saw the anxiety in your eyes, that's why I administered the tea."

Still bleary, she rose up onto her elbows and the cover fell from her shoulders, exposing her bare breasts. She blinked, fighting the liquid softness in her veins, trying to make sense of her situation.

"Do not worry though, miss," he said, "soon enough the Master will have you strutting about with your shoulders thrust back, showing off those gorgeous breasts and swaying that generous bottom. Your sexual power and confid—"

"No, that's not..." But the words *why I came here* fell away as she struggled to sit up and realized that her arms and legs were securely bound, one limb to each of the four bedposts. The bindings were not tight but they were secure. Her legs were spread, her hands tied so that she could not touch her own body.

The world cleared as the last of the fog in her mind lifted and the languid warmth that had been flowing easily through her body turned hot and thick.

She twisted, taking her first thorough look at the silver-haired man seated on the high stool beside the head of the bed. "Untie me," she said, glaring into his flecked hazel eyes, "right now."

The man's mouth twitched, his eyes sparked as he rose but he did not reach for the ties. Instead he scanned the room, his gaze falling on a red silk bag placed on the floor beside the fireplace. "I believe Master has everything he needs to begin your training," he stepped toward the door, "so I'll take my leave."

"I'm not here for training." Lorelai struggled to remember exactly what had occurred upon her arrival. "I must have told you that when I got here. I'm here for Katherine, my friend. Where is she?"

The man paused, turned, smoothing his crisp white shirt with a slow efficient motion. "I—we—have accepted one application in the past seven months. You, my dear, are the only one to knock on the front door these past months." He lifted an eyebrow, emphasizing his slender nose and high cheekbones but his mouth was soft, gentle. "Are you sure you wouldn't like some more tea?"

She jerked her left arm, pulling against the binding. The cover slipped lower, stopping just above her pubic bone. "No. I want to be untied and I want to know what happened to my friend. If you hurt her, I swear to God—"

"No woman has been hurt here." His mouth tightened. "Ever."

Even without evidence, she believed him.

But he didn't believe her, that she had not come for the training.

The other man, the Master, would understand that she had only come to retrieve her friend, an innocent who had no idea what sexual training involved. "When will the Master be here?"

The man moved toward the open door. "He'll come when he thinks you are ready to begin."

Lorelai scanned the room, looked down at her bare breasts, then drifted to the curves of her stomach. "He can see me?"

"Of course." The man's mouth shifted into what might pass for a smile. "No doubt he is watching us now."

A shiver of excitement ran over her exposed skin, making her pulse skitter at the thought of a powerful training master observing her every move.

Yet she clenched her teeth, fighting the familiar sensation and holding back the flood of memories she had worked so hard to erase. "Pull the cover over me. Please."

He turned back, his gaze skimming over her skin, taking in each inch of her naked body. Eventually his eyes connected with hers. "No, that wouldn't do it all."

"But if he – I don't want..."

"Are you quite sure you do, in fact, know what you want?" When she remained silent, he spun on his hard-soled shoes and stepped through the doorway.

Lorelai looked past the outline of the threshold to take in the dim hall lined with low-burning gaslights. The heavy gilt frame of a painting hung at the edge of her view.

Silence settled around her, save the crackle of the fire, the howl of the icy winter wind and the hum of apprehension gathering in her chest.

The emotion made her wild and afraid, not of being bound or seduced but of the sexual demons that dwelled inside her. Demons that once let loose could not be easily confined. Demons she'd spent almost two years learning to control.

She pulled her thoughts together, concentrated all her strength and yelled, "Katherine!"

Nothing. Only the thumping of her heart. The rasp of her breath.

Straining against the ropes, ignoring the way her breasts bounced with her movements, she focused her tension on her friend and shouted again.

And again.

But somehow she knew Katherine was not there. She must have finally listened to reason and canceled the training. But why hadn't she called? She had to know Lorelai was going crazy with worry.

Lorelai dropped against the pillows, her gaze wandering pointlessly back to the doorway as trepidation battled against the lingering effects of the tea.

How long would she have to wait for the Master to show himself?

Once he realized she didn't belong there, he'd untie her. He had to.

The alternative was too unbearable to consider.

All she had to do was wait.

And stay in control. Then explain.

She wiggled, trying to change positions, but it was impossible to do anything other than lie with her legs spread eagerly and her arms outstretched, welcoming.

Beside her the fire crackled, casting a soft glow across the polished wood floor. The heat drifted toward her, caressing her skin like a lover's fingers. Across the room a black velvet chaise lounge was tucked into a corner, beside it was a tall narrow table, its surface bare.

And then she saw the small rings, bolted high up on the legs of the chair. She tugged against the bindings, straining to sit up enough to see a matching ring on the front leg.

Of course.

Immediately she scanned the room again, stopping on the red velvet bag beside the fireplace, then skimming across her bare breasts she noticed a narrow doorway in the corner of the room.

He was beyond that door, she was sure of it.

Waiting.

For what?

She could call him out, insist that he come to her.

She could do that but she wouldn't.

That would look desperate and Lorelai didn't look weak for anything or anyone. Not anymore. Not ever again. Submission was no longer part of who she was.

Pointlessly she tugged against the bindings, trying to shift the heavy comforter over her flushed skin until she finally gave up, settled back and prepared to wait however long the Master deemed necessary.

From her position, her vision was filled with the sight of her own breasts. How long had it been since she'd really looked at them?

Her nipples had become erect from all the tugging and twisting and were now pointed straight up.

Eager to be touched.

She shifted her shoulders, watching the pale mounds shake then resettle, the tight peaks pointed obediently at the ceiling, inviting and expectant.

An unwelcome quiver of want skimmed through her as she imagined rough hands grasping her feet, then sliding up her legs and dipping around to squeeze her ass before gliding up to grab her breasts.

Buried memories of her old Master surfaced—the initial thrill of being possessed, her daily chores followed by nights of fulfilling his desires. The weekends they'd spent together—her giving him everything and him still demanding more.

Sudden want left her breathless, nearly panting.

Needy.

Want was the same thing as weakness and weakness led to regret. She'd learned that lesson well.

She did not want to be weak, so she didn't want to be touched. Even though her body had other ideas.

The charge pulsing through her blood, making her cunt slick and swollen, was only the aftereffects of the tea. Even now her body hummed with something that might have

been desire, if she didn't have her experience to guide her, to tell her that a desire for sex and longing for love were two very different things.

Stay in control, wait and be ready, that was all she needed to do.

She turned to watch the flames and listen to the soft crackle of the wood burn. Calling on months of practice bringing peace to her mind and silencing the unwelcome, deviant hunger of her heart, she slowed her breathing and emptied her mind.

* * * * *

"You agreed, Master, to this last one."

The Master turned away from Phillip, his assistant, and spoke over his shoulder. "I'm regretting my acquiescence already."

"I give you my word, I will accept your decision, no questions asked."

But that was the problem. He had questions. Despite the fact that his assistant had been at his side for over a decade, the other man could not answer them. Because there were no answers to the questions in his heart.

"I'll leave you to your task." Phillip's hard-soled shoes made crisp steps as he stepped off the rug and headed for the door that led to the hall. He paused with his lean palm curved gracefully around the edge of the door. "I doubt you shall need me tonight."

Hesitation crept in, weighing on the Master's chest. "But, should I need you —"

"I will know," he said, referring to the intuitive connection the two men shared.

With that, Phillip slipped out, closing the door behind him.

The Master had seen the woman, stretched across his bed, and was not pleased with the hot stirring in his groin. He hadn't felt such a sudden and intense response in a long time and now, with his cock solid and fully erect, he clenched his teeth, refusing to let his mind take him places he had no intention of going.

It seemed that although he had lost his spirit for the training, his body still ached for the challenge that came with teaching a woman to accept the pleasures of the flesh. An art he had been brought to when Phillip had found him, just twenty then, wandering the streets, tempting women out of money, food and whatever else he wanted. It had been an easy way to live. Too easy.

Phillip took him in, taught him everything. And then he had become the Master and the other man retired, satisfied to select the women and prepare them upon arrival.

Between the two of them they had trained hundreds of women, turned them loose with ample skills to get whatever they desired — love, sexual satisfaction, or even a way to sleep their way to the top.

He tugged on the tie of the black silk robe covering his naked body. Neither he nor Phillip cared where any of those women were now. For a Master, doing his job well was all that mattered.

The well-worn Oriental rug hushed his steps as he crossed the room, halting in front of the tall corner cabinet that held the scotch he had recently been seeking too frequently. He poured some into a short glass, squeezing his eyelids, trying not to see *her* wide, luminous blue eyes.

Where was *she*?

Who now possessed her?

He wanted to curse her name, her memory, but his anguish wasn't her fault. She had come to him in good faith, seeking his service as all who had come before had done. He alone was the one who had broken the rules.

Something he had promised himself not to do again.

But was he strong enough to keep the promise?

At Phillip's urging, he had agreed to begin working again but agreeing and actually beginning were two different actions. One he seemed to have control over, while the other he was beginning to think was beyond him.

What was he, if not a Master?

The answer to that question filled his mind with darkness, swallowed him whole. Because he feared there was no answer, there was nothing else for him. If he could not do the task, he was not fit to instruct another in the sexual arts to fulfill his obligation to the legacy. He would be a complete failure because his heart wanted something his mind could not supply.

As Phillip said, he had to try. At least this once.

The Master moved back to the wall that featured the peephole that gave him a clear view of the bed.

She had ceased her struggles and fallen silent and soft. Her body was completely relaxed as she slept outstretched and waiting for the experience he had planned for her.

The effects of the tea would wear off soon.

He must act.

The Master slipped from the anteroom and set his scotch on the table beside the lounge chair. Careful not to disturb the slumbering woman bound to his bed, he moved forward, his robe falling open as he leaned over, taking in the willing curve of her pink lips and the contrasting tension in her firm jaw. Her shoulders were powerful and well defined but her breasts were full, ultimately feminine.

The juxtaposing characteristics told him this woman was fighting against herself. The gentle approach would not be effective. To be successful he needed something strong, direct.

He stepped softly to the red bag, loosened its tie and peered inside. Calling upon experience to determine which item in the bag spoke to the woman's needs most precisely, he reached into the bag and pulled out a small handcrafted dildo. According to what he had been told about the woman, it had been a long time since she had given

herself to the pleasures of a man, so this custom-designed, small tool was most appropriate.

Next he took out a small vial of oil, specially made by an alchemist Phillip had introduced him to when he'd first begun the trade, and poured a few tiny drops onto the dildo.

With efficient motions, he pulled the comforter down to expose the crisp triangle of hair covering her mound. He placed his fingers lightly on her labia, separating the folds with practiced ease, then began easing the dildo into her tight pussy.

Guided by patience and years of experience, he took his time positioning the object just right, sure it would apply the pressure she needed to stir her lust but would not wake her too soon.

Once his task was accomplished, he poured a few small drops of oil onto his left palm. Then, careful not to crush his jutting penis against her leg, lifted her bottom off the bed with his right hand and applied the oil, massaging her ass with featherlight movements. His hand became warm but the heat would be much more intense on her sensitive, fresh skin. Intense enough to make her ass spark from his touch and her pussy throb for his attention.

Slipping the vial into the pocket of his robe, he pulled the comforter back up to her waist, then dropped into the chaise, running his fingertips over the black velvet of the chair as he stared at her deliciously dark, peaked nipples.

He picked his glass up took a drink and committed himself to waiting.

There was no rush. Minutes or hours, it mattered not. He would wait.

He had no choice, he had to prove to himself he knew who he was, want he was meant for. The past had to remain in the past, not be the beacon of his future.

But as he settled farther back into the chair, letting the heavy, black silk of his floor-length robe skim across his bare thighs, stroking his steel-hard cock, unwelcome images surfaced in his mind.

He gritted his teeth, fighting to push them away.

He fixed his gaze on the woman's generous breasts, then moved down to admire her narrow waist, willing himself to think of her needs, but the gentle strokes of his fingers turned hard and he clenched his shaft, turning his fierce emotions on himself. A sheen of perspiration whispered over his neck as his hand jerked up and down.

Despite the blood pounding in his head, he heard the woman's murmur when she stirred.

The woman turned, tendrils of red hair falling across her freckled cheek. She raised her head, shaking the strands away. The motion slow and awkward with sleep but languid and promising.

He dropped his hand from his pulsing shaft and got to his feet, shoving aside his robe to expose his jutting erection. Holding his drink in his left hand, he set his palms

on the bedpost, positioning himself at the foot of the bed, using his height and size to dominate her view.

Chapter Two

Challenge of the Body

His cock was the first thing Lorelai saw when she opened her eyes. Huge, solid and angled straight at her throbbing pussy.

Still vulnerable with sleep, her gaze lingered, tracing the thick shaft then dropping down to his delicious balls. Without thinking, she widened her view, taking in all of him—his hard stomach, powerful chest and the thin line of hair that pulled her attention back down to the vital erection stirring both her imagination and her blood. The hooded robe he wore emphasized his strength.

Purring softly, she rocked her hips and a familiar, warm fullness shocked her awake. Working to ignore it, she found her voice. “I-I—”

“Have a sweet cunt and it will be mine soon.”

She looked at his face, noting the firm line of his lips. No smile or smirk or frown, only watchful dark eyes so intense she knew he could see her thoughts. Strands of black hair shadowed his sharp cheekbones but she didn’t need to see his entire face to know he possessed unusual masculine beauty.

Fully comfortable with his power, he said, “You will be eager for the flick of my tongue.” He dropped one hand to squeeze the shaft of his penis. “You will beg for the thrust of my cock.”

“I’m not here for that, I came for my friend, she’s the one who wanted...your—”

“Training? Are you saying you don’t seek...” he moved his hand to caress the arch of her foot, sending delicate pulses of pleasure up her thigh, “what I have to offer?”

“No. I don’t.” But she couldn’t take her eyes off his dominating shaft any more than she could ignore the heat circling her core, spiraling to her clit, making it swollen and throbbing.

“Do you know how many times I have heard that? Many of my women get,” he wrapped her toes in his warm palm, “cold feet.” He pulled away to tug on the bindings and she felt the increase in tension thrum all the way to her scalp. “It’s natural to be afraid of the unknown. That is why my man, Phillip, takes these precautions.”

“No, I—”

“Sought me out. I understand what you want better than you understand yourself. You want change. By the time you leave my care you will be a different woman.”

No, not again.

Desperation tingling in her spine, she shook her head. “I came for my friend.”

"Of course, there usually is someone special my clients want to please. Someone on the outside."

For a fleeting second Lorelai paused, considering the slight change in his tone but she set the distraction aside. "I didn't come here for your training, your lessons. I came for my friend, Katherine." She lifted her wrists, her breasts jiggling as she tugged at the bindings, emphasizing her frustration.

"Names are not permitted." His gaze remained unchanged, his control unwavering. "You will call me Master," he said, turning their focus back to himself with his low, husky words.

Her vagina flashed hot, begged for attention. It was as though he had already begun to fuck her. Lorelai tensed, fighting for strength, but instead of gaining control the effort sent a shiver down her spine directly to her pussy.

Her body's betrayal angered her and she wasted no time in directing the emotion at him. "I don't want this. I don't need this."

"You requested it."

"No, Katherine —"

But she stopped short when he took a folded paper from his inside pocket. She recognized the contract she'd signed several months ago. The same day she walked through the office of By Request. "How did you get that?"

"The first of your three questions?"

"Yes," she blurted without considering the fact that the answer was obvious and that she might regret her haste later.

"It was hand-delivered by Sandra, last Tuesday."

Lorelai stared at the contract, remembering the extensive interviews, the hours spent explaining her dark sexual secrets and her reasons for needing to get over her past. She wanted to tell the man that since signing the contract she'd gotten a hold of herself and decided she didn't need a sexual intervention but knew her words would be ignored. And be an outright lie as well.

Her being tied in his bed was her own doing, something she could have prevented had she gone to Sandra in person and signed the cancellation form.

He waited, perhaps checking to see if she had another question, before asking, "I'm required to inquire, do you remember your safety word?"

Orchid.

But there was no way in hell she was going to use it. Not that she cared what he thought of her but she wasn't going to disappoint herself.

She was no longer weighted by the weakness that had sent her to Sandra in the first place.

His gaze wandered across her skin. His eyes gave nothing away, yet the lines in his face shifted.

The tension in the air snapped and Lorelai, who knew a thing or two about lust, realized he too had something at stake.

But what?

No matter. She didn't care.

Frustration flowed through her veins and she kicked. Instead of releasing her anger, the motion intensified the heat in her center. It had been so long since her pussy ached with want she hadn't clearly identified the sensation at first but now she knew.

She also knew the ache couldn't be wished away. Once it took hold, the grip was fierce and consuming.

Squirming, she tried to pull her legs together but of course it was no use. Her thrashing intensified the sensation, sending it back up her spine, retracing the shiver of seconds ago.

Approval heated the Master's gaze. "Yes, let the pressure heat your sweet, tight cunt. If you will only relax you will find the sensation quite pleasurable."

How well she knew that he was right.

But that kind of pleasure led to regret.

No more.

Fighting the rough promise of his words, she pulled in a shallow breath, begging her body to relax, to forget how it felt to be possessed by a skilled lover.

She might have been successful if the man at the foot of the bed had remained there instead of climbing up and kneeling between her bound legs. Once there, he laid one palm across her pubis and grasped her ass with the other. It was then that she realized her body was no longer her own. He had made it his.

Ever so slowly he tilted the dildo up, using the attached clitoral stimulator to put just the smallest amount of pressure on her throbbing clit. She sucked in a sharp breath, already teetering on a wicked release.

"That's right, give me what I want. What we both want. This first lesson isn't so hard, all you have to do is give in to me."

"I don't give in."

"Why?"

Again she pulled in a breath, concentrating on finding her strength and forgetting the wanton thrum in her veins. "What's in it for me?"

He eased the tool out, gradually, letting her feel the loss. "Everything. That's what's in it for you. And of course, everything for – your lover – as well."

There was no lover. Not anymore anyway.

Through the sexual haze in her mind, she remembered. "I don't need to be here. Untie –"

But she knew he wouldn't. Unless, of course, she used her safety word.

She clenched her jaw, bracing as he gently slid the dildo back in, lifting it slightly to bump against her clit.

"I earned my reputation," he said softly, working the tool with obvious talent. "I know my job. You won't be disappointed."

"I don't know anything about you, your services, or your reputation."

For the first time, he smiled. "Maybe so. But you have been assigned to me." He gently took the dildo back out. "Would you have me ignore the responsibilities of my work?" he asked, his gaze lifting from her body to wander the room.

The emptiness of her pussy was becoming impossible to ignore and each beat of her heart reminded her of the slick heat begging for attention. When she caught herself looking longingly at the dildo, she turned her tension outward, using her frustration as a weapon.

"This is your work?" she said, letting anger sharpen her tone. "Teaching women to fuck like whores?"

"What the women do with their lessons is not my concern, although I doubt very much the women who have been with me *fuck like whores*." He moved back, bringing his dark gaze to her face as he nestled the dildo in his palm, turning it slightly when he noticed her staring at it. He ran his index finger down the hard ridge, taunting her. "My work is what I do, it's who I am. I'm sure you can appreciate a job well done."

Lorelai shook her head, looking away from the object "Your work and who you are, those are two different things."

He turned away, moving back and off the bed. "Not for me they're not."

"Why?"

He moved farther, stopping when the back of his leg hit the velvet chair. Still keeping his dark eyes fixed on her face, he sat, his robe sliding aside to reveal the powerful muscles of his torso, the strong curve of his thighs and the thick, ready shaft of his penis.

"Why?" she asked again, realizing as the words left her lips that the answer mattered more to him than it did to her.

Curiosity tempered her lust and she held his silent gaze, knowing what his expression meant because she'd worn it on her own face not too long ago. "Tell me your secret."

"I don't have any secrets."

His reply was so quick she knew he was lying.

She understood how a secret could tear a person apart just as she knew his weakness made him vulnerable. "Untie me," she said simply, watching him work to regain his composure.

His jaw flexed as he swallowed, working to maintain his veil of control.

If she could see his vulnerability maybe she was stronger than she realized and could trick him into getting what she wanted. "You say you're good at your job," she said, challenging him.

He picked up the tumbler and swirled the glass. "Yes. I am the best."

"Come here."

He turned, his dark brows falling low over his gaze as he swallowed the amber liquid. "I decide what we do. Not you."

"Come here," she said again, ignoring his rejection.

Tension hung in the room, pulsing thicker with each thump of her heart. "Master," she said, softly, so softly that he had to lean forward to hear her next words. "Come to me, please."

He glanced at the dildo, set it on the gleaming surface of the table, then turned. He lingered, long enough to let her know he was setting the pace as he saw fit rather than doing her bidding.

"Look at me," she said, opening herself within the bindings. "Touch me. Tell me your professional opinion."

His hands fell to his sides, as though he was willing himself not to touch her.

"Are you afraid?" she asked, lifting one brow as she arched her back, pressing her hips into the bed and forcing her breasts upward. "Or is it that I don't meet your appetites?"

"My appetites are not a concern." For the first time he turned completely away from her, speaking as he turned his gaze to the narrow doorway. "Professional opinion? Explain what you mean."

"Touch me, look at me, tell me whether I seem like a woman who doesn't know what she needs or wants."

"Women come to me for many reasons."

"I'm not interested in other women."

He looked over his broad shoulder, a smile tugging on his mouth.

"Come to me," she said again.

He paused, hesitation and intrigue pulling across his face. The request was not what he was accustomed to. He was fighting his curiosity and, she glanced at his still-erect cock, interest. Understanding that he needed time to make his agreement appear to be his own decision, she laid her head back and squirmed, for the first time letting her body accept the tension humming through her blood.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw the thrum begin in his neck, the tiny flicker of his fingertips as his body tensed still more. Holding in a smile, she stretched, arching her back and lifting her hips off the bed as she spread her legs.

Sensual satisfaction flowed through her. Even tied to the bedposts and half covered by the heavy comforter, she had sexual power. It had been a long time since she had used her body to make a man lustful and it felt surprisingly good.

Pretending to forget the Master was standing only an arm's length away, Lorelai turned her head away from him, licking her lips and letting herself relax. She purred and stretched, rolling her hips, reheating her pussy.

She felt the light touch of his fingertips on her waist just before he spoke, asking, "What is it you want?"

"Put it back in." Closing her eyes, she murmured, "Fuck me with it, Master."

"You wanted something else, I know."

Gradually she moved her head to stare at him with half closed eyes. "I want you to touch me, tell me what you see."

He pulled in a deep breath, swallowed hard. "I see a beautiful woman, tied securely, awaiting my lessons."

"What lesson might you have for me? Tell me what you can teach me tonight that I don't already know."

"We have only just met," he said, brushing his knuckles across her right nipple. "How am I to know what you need?"

"Sandra must have told you about my past." She lifted her head from the silken pillow to gaze across her own bare breasts then pointed her toes to stretch her legs, rocking from side to side until the cover slipped from her legs and pooled on the floor. "Look again, Master, tell me what I need."

Instead of letting his dark gaze roam across her heated skin, he lowered his head and whispered against her ear, "You need a man to control you."

When she'd first begun to taunt him, she had wanted nothing more than to go home. But now she was beginning to recognize that she had the perfect opportunity to test herself, so she could be sure her fears were pointless, that she had truly left her uncontrollable side in the past. "I've changed my mind, I don't want to be untied," she said.

The Master held up his dildo, "What about this? Have you changed your mind about being fucked?"

"Oh, no, Master. Please," she licked her lips and let her knees drop open, "put it inside me so I can pretend it's your cock fucking me."

"If it were my cock inside you, I would fuck you into submitting."

She smiled, challenging him to do her bidding. "My pussy is so hot, Master. All I need is three or four hard thrusts. Steady, long thrusts."

Wordlessly he fell away and reached for a red bag sitting on the table near the chair and pulled out a slender black scarf.

"Oh yes," she purred. "A blindfold, I love —"

The next words were muffled when he flattened the scarf across her mouth. "You are not in control and need to learn your place."

Once he secured the silken gag, he untied one arm, tied it to the opposite post so that both her arms were swept to one side then loosened the binding of the other arm. The sound of his steps was followed by a small jingle.

A few moments later, she recognized the other man's voice, slightly softened by sleep. "Yes, sir?"

"Please untie the lower bindings while I hold her feet. We'll turn her over at my nod."

"She's been misbehaving, is that it? May I stay and watch?" he asked, excitement animating his dry voice. "I'm quite sure the spanking will settle her nicely. And that delicious ass—"

"Phillip, please."

"Yes, sir," he replied, the formal tone returning.

Sexual haze flooded her mind. A flogging, even the lightest one, would send her over the edge. Her world tilted and she feared she'd slide off.

"Mind your arms and shoulders, you'll need to work with us."

Lorelai felt the firm grip of the Master's hands on her feet while the other man worked at the bindings. With her arm crossed over her body she was unable to see, so she guessed at the right time to kick herself free. She was no match for their experience.

Within seconds they had her turned and rebound. Once her feet were secure, the Master adjusted her arms, one to each post again.

"And hand me the small flogger."

The click of a latch was followed by the soft sound of something being passed from one man to the other.

"Good night, sir," the older man said.

After the last of his footsteps faded, Lorelai stiffened, her skin tingling.

"Now, without your distracting chatter, we'll be able to concentrate," the Master said, running his fingertips up the inside of her thigh.

She felt his hand grasp hers. His fingers guided her hand to a silk rope dangling over the headboard. "Tug this, a bell will ring. It is to replace your safety word."

Then she was being lifted, a huge bolster being shoved under her belly, lifting her off the mattress, then rolled down to force her ass high and her thighs apart.

The Master gave her left butt cheek a stinging smack.

"Now where was I?"

She heard a smack as something connected with his palm. The dildo? Or the small whip?

Unwilling to give him the satisfaction of control, she refused to strain for the sight of his palms.

Nevertheless her body responded. Her cunt got hotter and she tilted her hips, trying to use the cushion beneath her to put pressure on her clit.

The weight of one of his hands pressed onto the small of her back. "If you lie still I won't use the flogger on you."

He circled his fingertips, drawing tiny, invisible half-moons on her skin. "Or maybe if you don't move I shall flog your sweet ass. It would be a pleasure to see your pale, delicate flesh turn pink."

He trailed the smooth ends of the flogger along the cleft between her ass cheeks, then pressed the base of the tool against her open pussy. The solid shaft teased her nerve endings, making her desperate for the dildo. Or better still, his wide cock impaling her.

Her blood pounded from months without thorough sexual satisfaction, her body ached and throbbed. She sucked in a sharp puff of air, swallowed the silence of the room.

"If I remove the gag, will you have something pleasing to say to your Master?" He reached under her and skimmed his fingers over the opening of her pussy, the touch much too slight and much too quick. "Or will you misbehave and require punishment?"

Oh, she wanted the quick teasing snap. The heat on her skin that came with the startling twist of pain and pleasure.

Buried memories from her past flickered through her mind, teasing her, reminding her of the bitter end when she'd lost herself to her own weakness and desires.

An end that was followed by months of self-loathing and regrets.

She couldn't let it happen again.

The Master dangled the ends of the flogger, skimming the tiny threads across her bare feet, igniting a trail that shot up the backs of her legs and flooded her center.

One little snap and her skin would awaken.

And then...

What?

She didn't know. The future lay ahead gray and unclear.

Uncontrollable.

Lorelai gritted her teeth, smoothing her fingers over the narrow rope the Master had laced into her fingers. One tiny tug and she would be free to get away from the temptations that clung to the edge of her consciousness.

Fear swelled in her chest and beads of sweat formed along her hairline.

"Perhaps you would do well with some time on your own." He stepped back, taking the flogger with him and leaving her body throbbing. "Think. Imagine." The pad of his footsteps was followed by the click of the door.

Alone, Lorelai retreated into her thoughts. In the back of her mind she realized she did want to imagine. To remember. Not just *him* but the pure physical pleasure they shared. She could have that with someone else, there was no reason to deny herself sex.

She opened her fingers and let the bellpull fall away. She would see this through to the end.

Chapter Three

Challenge of the Heart

The Master tipped the tumbler to take a taste of scotch only to find the glass empty. Scowling, he crossed the small antechamber to the circular bar set up in the corner.

He grasped the decanter of amber liquid and took it with him to the window. No matter how cold or damp the weather outside, Phillip always left the sash open a touch and so the hem of the curtains shifted in the night air.

The edges of the estate were framed with spruces and pines, the gnarled boughs of the century-old trees sagging under the weight of the dense snow. Miles away, lights of the city flickered. No doubt the twinkling glimmer was welcoming to some. But to others, like himself, the glow served as a reminder that outside his isolated home the world pulsed with people.

Not too long ago he had been one of them.

He poured some scotch into the tumbler took a drink. The liquid rolled down his throat, curling into the pit of his stomach and he paused, waiting for the heat to soften the tension burning his limbs.

He waited in vain because he could down the whole decanter and still his skin would be tight with want and his cock would be solid and ready, throbbing for release.

To say his response to the woman in his bed was unexpected would be an understatement.

Without conscious thought, he stepped to the peephole and looked through.

The light from the fire crept across the room, casting a mellow glow over the bound woman. Flame shadows tripped over the smooth skin of her backside, making his hands wish they were the shades of darkness created by the movement of the fire.

She'd stopped struggling and was still, her intriguing face turned away from his view.

On purpose.

She could prevent him from seeing the expectant and needy gaze in her eyes but she couldn't stop him from getting a long, leisurely look at her delicious body.

Her luscious ass was still tipped up, her legs spread and her pussy open, wet and ready. In his mind he smelled her musky scent and felt her slick arousal.

His penis twitched and before he could stop himself he smiled.

That powerful rush which came with thoughtless desire, the hot blood flashing through his veins—it felt good to want. It made him strong and he only now realized how much he missed that sensation of power.

He stepped away from the peephole, set the decanter back on the bar and rolled the tumbler between his palms, scanning the papers scattered across his desk under the window.

When documents had been hand-delivered less than a week ago, he'd read them and made the preparations. Each time he balked, letting his pain get the better of him, Phillip urged him.

It's really quite simple, sir. Mount up and ride.

The Master tapped the papers with his fingertips, pushing the sheets into an untidy pile. He'd read the woman's profile and planned exactly what she needed, a simple scenario to revive her adventurous spirit. To heal the pain of loss and rekindle her belief in herself.

If only there was someone to do the same for him.

But a man who prepared women for other men had no right in wanting one for himself.

Certainly as one of Sandra's clients Lorelai needed special handling but the end result would be the same as every other time. When she left his estate she would be changed. Not changed into a woman for his own sake and according to his own preferences but changed into whoever she wanted to be.

Teaching women to accept their sexual side was his job, something he was good at. It was the only honest job he'd ever had. He set the half-full tumbler down on his desk, pulling in a deep breath as he headed back to the peephole.

Her face was still averted but subtle changes told him it was almost time. Her skin had become moist from the warmth of the fire and her hips were no longer still. He recognized the desperate squirm, the tiny motions of her thighs as she tried to change the angle of her hips to put pressure on her sweet, needy clit.

She'd been lying alone long enough. Her mind would have primed her body by now. It was time to push her past her limit and force her to accept that side of herself that she both feared and desired.

But his own doubts lingered in his mind. No matter how hard he struggled to cast them aside, images of his last woman clung to the edges of his memory.

They had not wanted the same things.

It was that simple.

In the end, though, she had gotten what she wanted. From what he heard, she was quite satisfied with her training. She now had a different man whenever it suited her. And why shouldn't she have the lifestyle she craved?

Because he wanted her for himself was not sufficient reason for her to deny herself what she desired and could get.

Indeed, there was no reason.

He had done his job well. Very well.

And because the woman spread across his bed was depending on him, needed him, he would do his work again.

And if there was a price to his soul?

What then?

He pushed his hesitations down deep because without his work he would have nothing. He would be alone, without purpose.

That was the problem though, he realized suddenly. It was not the woman who had left him that was the problem. He was the problem—he had changed. He wanted different things.

* * * * *

After tonight the past would be behind Lorelai and she would be free to have the sexual adventures she would surely crave once she was over her recent hurt.

The side door opened but she didn't move her head to look. Instead she waited, listening for the sound of him picking up the flogger again.

He did not disappoint her, she heard the light feathery strands glide across his skin. She tensed, anxious for the rasp of the soft leather tassels.

"You want this, don't you? I can tell by the way your sweet hips wiggle, by the way your breath comes out in delicate little pants. But you will not be getting whipped tonight." The flogger clattered to the floor, sliding to a stop near the headboard.

Her skin prickled with disappointment and desperation, sending tiny pinpoints of need-laced pain across her body.

"I have something else in mind for your delicious bottom." His feet thudded across the room toward the fire.

Had he left the red silk bag there?

She strained but heard only the soft sounds of fabric moving across his fingers. And then soft footsteps as he came back to her.

Without warning he lightly smacked her ass with his palm, alternating cheeks as he quickened the tempo of the taps.

Oh yes.

Lorelai felt herself letting go, relaxing as he fully awakened the dormant pleasure center of her body.

She moaned as the heat built, curving around her hips and swelling her womb. She thrashed, tugging on the bindings as he continued to spank her.

The spanking stopped as quickly as it started. "My task is not to give you what you want—but what you need." As he had before, he forced the narrow silk rope attached to the bell into her left hand, silently reminding her that she was ultimately in control.

The bed dipped as he climbed onto the mattress and positioned himself between her legs. Soon, warm lotion was trailed up the backs of her legs.

The heat from the oil sank deep into her flesh and the spicy scent flooded her senses. Her mind filled with pulsating, sexual images she felt rather than saw.

While her ass was still tingling, he covered the backs of her calves with his palms and then slid his hands up, forcing the hot blood pulsing in her veins back to her hips. He repeated the motion, starting with the backs of her knees and then again, slower, starting at the backs of her thighs.

Each time he pushed upward, she bent from the waist and tilted her hips, exposing more of her hot, wet pussy.

The motions were too slow, leisurely. As though she were a client at a spa and he was giving her a calming massage instead of working her body into a sexual frenzy.

She arched her back and pushed against his hands, opening her mouth to demand more but getting a mouthful of silk.

“What you need – not what you want.”

She swiveled her head and sought out his dark gaze.

Looking up from behind her, he shook his head. “No. The gag stays on.”

Her gaze dropped to his dark hands, flattened over the pale fleshy curve of her hips. He noticed her staring but looked back to his hands, putting all his attention on his work. Bending his thumbs, he made tiny circles on her skin.

“I can tell by the look in your eyes, you think you know what I’m about to do.” He pressed harder, still circling his fingers but pulling the cleft of her ass wider with each stroke.

Each time he circled, more and more of her body was exposed.

Vulnerable.

But he was wrong, she had no idea what he would do next.

In front of him, at his knees, she saw the bottle of lotion and the faint outline of something small she couldn’t identify.

It was too small to be another flogger and the dildo had been put away.

She was already bound and gagged.

What?

A thread of panic wove through Lorelai and her muscles fought back.

“You have the bell,” he said, his voice rough.

Involuntarily her fingers tightened on the cord but she had no intention of pulling it. Because if she did she would never find out what he had planned for her.

Willing her muscles to relax, she took a deep breath. He opened his palms and smoothed his hands across her hips, softening her, relaxing her, opening her thighs and ass to him. Gradually he worked his strokes inward to the cleft between her cheeks and began stroking her deeper and deeper, caressing her where she had never been touched.

Again she tensed but this time he said nothing, only continued his constant movements. Then, she felt him push his knuckle into her anus. Her body resisted his entry but he persisted, gentle but determined.

He set one hand on the small of her back, demanding her to relax into his intrusion. Her heart pounded but she didn't tighten her grip on the bell cord.

He pushed his fingers farther into her and she panted with excited curiosity.

With tiny, gentle motions he caressed the opening, easing it wider.

He slipped in another finger.

Lorelai's breathing turned shallow. Only her heart and blood moved, the rest of her body was tense with anticipation and just enough fear of the unknown to keep her pulse skittering.

His fingers continued to explore, the lotion from her legs running down to lubricate his access.

"That's right, now come back. Push against me."

Motion was impossible.

He waited.

"It's a challenge. Isn't it?" his voice was soft and husky with sex but clear and commanding.

He knew her secrets.

"The challenge is for *you*. Not me."

He knew more than her secrets. He knew what she needed.

"You're stretching perfectly. Push back and feel it."

Finally, she leaned into his fingers and was rewarded with a sharp shock of hot lust. With the hand on her back, he pushed her forward then let her rock back. She set the pace, moving back onto his steady fingers.

"A bit more and then you'll be ready."

Release, yes. Wanting to show him she was ready for the thrust of his cock, she obediently continued her steady motion.

"That's right, show me more."

And she did, rocking back and forth, feeling the tightness ease and her nerve endings ignite.

"Good girl." He patted her ass lightly then slid his fingers out.

Expecting him to mount her from behind, she wiggled to offer him better access to her slick nether lips but instead of the steady tip of his penis, she felt a nudge against her anus.

Even though she now understood the pleasure he could offer her there she stilled, unsure of what to do next.

He took control, shoving the bolster out from under her hips and moving his hand around to cup her pussy, pushing against her clit. He had possession of her from both sides.

Liquid pleasure melted through her when he rubbed her clit and pushed the object against her tight entrance at the same time.

Her nerve endings ignited, pleasure and confusion tore through her, uncertainty making her body quiver. "Push back again. A bit harder this time."

Oh, but she wanted to come. Needed to come.

She thrust her pussy into his hand and he rubbed her clit but then eased her back, pushing her anus against the toy in his other hand. She let him guide her back, crying out, the sound muffled by the scarf.

"Take it in," he encouraged with a low rasp.

Every sensation of her body focused on the tight opening.

But her mind was a haze. Without thought she had only sensation and desire. The need to know the unknown.

This wasn't anything like it had been with *him*. This Master wasn't requiring her to submit to his demands. Instead he was letting her decide to accept the challenge of controlling her own body.

It was a gift she'd never been offered but one she eagerly wanted.

With a quick jerk she thrust back. The plug popped into place.

It was thicker and less yielding than his fingers and she held her breath, panting over the silk in her mouth as she willed herself to adjust to the hot pressure rippling through her.

"That's right," the Master said, caressing her skin as he moved away from her, leaving her alone on the bed, her body battling both the unfamiliar fullness in her ass and the needy throb of her pussy.

"I will take the gag off now, if you promise not to abuse the privilege of speaking."

Still delirious with the sensation of new possession she could only dip her head enough to let him know she promised.

The fire had burned down and left the room cast in dark shadows. When he came around to release the scarf, Lorelai could see the firm outline of his constant erection.

As he reached around to unknot the gag, the tip of his cock brushed against her lips. Her mouth watered and her tongue lifted, hungry for a lick of him, but he moved away before she was able to satisfy herself with a taste.

"As much as I would like to feel your mouth on my shaft, I have other matters to attend to."

Tension thrummed through her body, pulsing tightly, twining with the erotic wonderment of what would happen if she wiggled her hips. Her body was becoming

accustomed to the anal invasion, would her movement intensify the pleasure or take it away?

The gentle splash of water was followed by footfalls as the Master stepped around to the foot of the bed and rolled his shoulders back, letting his heavy robe drop to the floor in a soft rush.

He was naked now, his lean muscles exposed, his cock jutting.

Still too tense to move, she waited, held her breath and listened, desperate for him to release the tight coil of need twisting inside her.

The bed dipped, she felt the heat of his hands moving over her calves, the backs of her legs. After flattening his palms across her hips, he settled himself beneath her dripping pussy and covered her swollen nether lips with his open mouth.

Lorelai sagged into him, let him take possession of her body with his determined mouth. At first he used featherlight licks to take control of her by finding her most sensitive spots. The whispery heat of his tongue speared her, feeding her curious hunger and scattering her ability to locate the exact source of her pleasure.

"Harder, please, Master. Lick me harder," she begged.

She was so primed, her clit so ready, that with his first strong stroke her release began. She squeezed her eyes shut, sparks of color flashing behind her tight lids as she gave herself over to him. Hot pleasure pulsed through her and she cried out, the sound low and animalistic.

Ripples rolled through her, so powerful she quivered, making the plug vibrate and prolong the release until it became so intense it bordered on painful.

Finally, the rings of tension eased. The last wave softened her muscles and he slipped the toy from her tight hole, dropping it to the floor with a quiet thump.

The aftershocks lingered and it took several minutes for her mind to clear. When her breathing finally settled she felt him pulling away, growing distant without even moving.

Even though she had no claim to him the distance bothered her.

She rolled to her side as best she could. "You need release too," she said. "Make love to me."

"That's not the way this works," he replied, coming out of his role probably without realizing it. "You're the focus, not me."

Still, he moved up the bed, working his way under her body then settling between her bound arms, their mouths within kissing distance. She pressed against him and his skin buzzed with electricity.

She rubbed her nipples across the hard planes of his chest. "Only until the next woman you take into your bed."

Her voice wasn't loaded with envy, she was just being matter-of-fact. Her honest response gave him confidence to speak the truth.

"No, not again," he murmured, talking mostly to himself, testing his decision aloud. "You are my last."

"For today? This week?" Even though her voice was light, her eyebrows dipped with doubt.

"Forever." Once the words were out he knew it was true.

She shifted back in surprise. When he said nothing more, she smiled, the light in her expression brightening her green eyes.

"Then you have no reason not to do what you want." Still bound, she managed to straddle him, rubbing her wet pussy against his hipbone.

The pretty muscles in her throat rolled as she swallowed. She was letting herself be vulnerable to him. "I need — no, I would like — a piece of you to have with me."

"Your appointment wasn't about that. You didn't come to *me*, you came to the Master."

"But I found you." She nudged his cheek, searched into his eyes and he saw her hesitation. Finally, she found her strength. "Tell me your name."

He shook his head, unwilling to let her into his life. He'd learned from that mistake.

"You pushed me to the edge, got me to..." a smile tugged on her mouth, "do something I never even thought about and you won't even tell me your name?"

"Why do you want it?"

The smile fell away. "I want to say it when you make love to me."

Deep inside him, emotions stirred. Real emotions, not the ones he pretended for his clients. And that scared him.

"I'm not going to make love to you," he said, holding his entire body firm, as though to be sure it did not act on its own accord.

"Then I'll make love to you." She smiled, angling her hips over him and then easily covering his rock-hard shaft with her hot pussy.

Her name spilled from his lips, "Lorelai..."

But the words trailed off. He couldn't stop her. His cock ached for her slick heat as his soul hungered for this most intimate connection.

He would accept what she offered, even though it would only last for a few glorious moments.

He had no intention of hurrying but her pussy was so tight and willing, the perfect match for his demanding cock. Taking hold of her hips, he changed the angle of her body to give him deeper access to her cream-flooded depths.

She let him reposition her then held on to his body with her thighs, riding him as his penis pulsed, thrusting deeper inside her wet core each time she rocked against him.

"Fuck me hard as you like," she murmured against his neck, her voice a husky whisper. "I want what you want."

Her vaginal muscles squeezed and tugged, caressing his shaft with each motion. She gave herself so willingly to him, working her body against his, pulling waves of pleasure from deep inside him.

Who was the last woman to think of his fulfillment?

Had there ever been one?

It was her determination to satisfy him that was his undoing and he gave her what she asked for.

"Christopher," he said on a moan.

She laughed, lifting her face to look into his eyes. "Christopher. Take me however you want."

He took her face in his hands and pulled her mouth to his. He didn't have time for a gentle kiss, he thrust his tongue between her lips, licking her, promising more later to make up for what was surely about to end too quickly.

She sensed his impending climax and moaned. The sound was hot and sweet then turned to a lusty groan when he picked up his speed and thrust faster, deeper, grabbing her ass possessively in his hands as he took her.

When he started to come, she arched her back, filling his view with her gorgeous breasts as she threw her head back, rocking her hips, encouraging his quick, hard thrusts and offering him the opportunity to concentrate fully on his own explosive orgasm.

His cum started to burst out in hot, tight spurts, the ejaculations releasing the sexual tension in his body as his moans let loose some of his buried emotional pain.

She rode him through the fierce pulsing and then held him, silently caressing his shoulders and arms with soft kisses until his breathing slowed.

Several long minutes past in silence, then she spoke again, using that determined tone he was beginning to recognize. "I have one more question, right?"

The Master turned his head. Her eyes were clear and intent.

"I still have one more question," she said again, her lips curving up with amusement.

His mind cleared and he nodded, reluctant to be reminded of the nature of their relationship. "I could gag you again," he replied with a grin, despite his hesitation.

The threat was pointless, she knew he wouldn't. "How did you get into this business?"

He reached up, freeing her wrist bindings as he spoke. "Phillip. He found me on the streets, took me in. He trained me to take over from him."

Her hands moved over his body, eagerly exploring his flesh for first time. "Tell me more," she said.

There was no judgment in her voice. She wasn't asking out of curiosity but because she cared — about him.

"Phillip was the Master before me and another man, Paul, before him. Ever since this manor has been here, there has been a Master."

She nodded, accepting the unusual lifestyle. "The man I was with before, the one who..."

When she stopped, her gaze told him she was looking for words. He said, "I know most of it already. He was a Master too."

"Sandra told you about him?"

He nodded. "Probably not everything but enough for me to know what you needed." He rolled from the bed to unbind her legs.

"I don't think I admitted to Sandra how badly his rejection hurt me," she said, her gaze following each of his movements.

Tossing the bindings onto the nightstand, he thought of *her*, noting the irony of how similar his own situation was to Lorelai's. Thinking of the day *she* turned down his offer to stay on and be his alone, he said, "He wasn't rejecting you, he was rejecting commitment."

She nodded, understanding maybe for the first time. "I wanted to be enough for him. He— I— We—"

"He didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No, not like you mean," she responded quickly. "He taught me to let go of my fears, to feel...well, everything." The corners of her lips curved. "He was an awesome lover. Like you, only he— I wanted one man, one lover. He thrived on the challenge of each woman."

Thinking of himself before he ached to possess one woman of his own, he replied, "I understand that."

"Then why are you quitting?"

"I don't need that challenge anymore. Perhaps I'm getting selfish, needing more than just the training and sex to bring satisfaction to my life."

"A one-man/one-woman relationship?"

He nodded.

"Christopher." She traced the bottom of his jaw with her fingertip, sending a tiny but strong thrill straight down his spine. "That doesn't sound selfish at all."

"The women come to me to be prepared for another. I have no right to them."

"I came here for myself." Her fingers stilled. "You can have a right to me if you wish."

He looked at her again, as though for the first time. One woman? This woman—his and his alone? Yet could she accept him as just a man and not a Master?

His heart thumped at the impossible magnificence of it.

"Why would any man let you go?" he asked, still marveling at the possibility of her acceptance of who he was.

She shrugged and he could see that she was truly over the pain of the past. "He is a good man, excellent at what he does but he didn't know what he had."

"His folly could be my fortune."

She smiled, accepting his statement as fact.

Intuition kicked in and thinking of the legacy he needed to fulfill, he said, "This man, tell me more about him."

Her eyebrows cocked. "Why?"

"If I stop being the Master, I'll need someone to replace me."

"But you could keep your skills honed on me?"

"Absolutely."

She stretched to grab the smooth ropes off the nightstand. "Then I shall tell you all you need to know about him – after I bind and torment you as you did me."

Christopher tugged his arms away, pretending to put up a fight. "No, my bed, my commands."

"It's our bed now." Using more strength than he thought she possessed, she shoved him down. "Lie still or I shall call Phillip."

"He has been my trusty assistant these many years."

Lorelai laughed. "I do believe the man took a special liking to me."

Christopher laughed too, thinking how the old man's face had come alive at the thought of watching him punish Lorelai.

"I have no choice then but to submit," he said, spreading his legs.

"You are correct, Sir," she replied, her gaze on his fully erect penis. "I can see we have much to attend to."

She forced her attention away from his enticing cock to quickly bind both his legs then move around to take care of his powerful arms. Once he was fully restrained, she circled the bed, stepping slowly as she enjoyed the sight of his taut, muscular body. Even tied down he radiated awesome power and dominance.

His dark gaze followed her as she crossed to the fireplace and added a trio of logs.

"I don't think we'll be needing more heat," he said, looking pointedly from her glowing naked body to his solid shaft.

"I have something in mind for you," she murmured, picking his robe off the floor and pulling it on. "I'm off to get some ice to cool off that hot cock of yours."

He laughed when the robe kept falling from her shoulders because it was much too large for her. The combination of the silky fabric and wide sleeves made it nearly impossible for her to wear but she finally tied the belt firmly enough to keep herself mostly covered. "Can you stop laughing long enough to tell me where the kitchen is?"

"Everything you need is right here," he said, emphasizing his point by lifting his lean hips.

"I'm going to the kitchen. If you decide not to tell me where it is I'll just be gone that much longer." Lorelai folded her arms across her chest, the motion causing one side of the robe to fall down and reveal a breast.

"Look at my cock. How can you leave me like this?"

His solid shaft was tempting. She could be on top of him in seconds, straddling his strong body as she did before, riding him hard for a quick release. But after the careful way he'd seen to her sensual satisfaction she wanted to do the same for him.

Before she lost control of herself, she spun on her heels and headed for the door. Just as she was crossing through the threshold he called out, "Turn left at the bottom of the stairs, last door on the right."

Low-burning gas lamps lit the landing, casting shadows across the wide, winding staircase. With Christopher left behind, bound in the bed, she was a little skittish, anxious to get back to his warm, cozy room—and him. Holding the robe to her chest, Lorelai started down the steps, taking them quickly.

After reaching the last stair, she turned left into a narrow hall, also lit with lamps. The manor was silent now, except for the wind howling outside, so she heard only her soft footfalls as she moved down the narrow hall. There were three doors on the right. At the last one, she placed her palm on the door and pushed.

It swung open to reveal a study lined with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves. A huge bay window that must have filled the room with sunlight during the day took nearly an entire wall and a massive desk sat in the corner, facing it. Several books were stacked on the desk, one open, all lit by a desk lamp. On the opposite side of the room was a huge overstuffed chair and ottoman. The room was open and free and obviously used by someone who enjoyed solitude and valued the challenge of learning.

"Phillip leaves it on every night because I come down here and read if I can't sleep."

Lorelai jumped at Christopher's voice. "I—you—"

"If you were going to be a Mistress I'd teach you the proper way to bind your submissive, but I think I like it better this way." He braced himself on the doorjamb, showing off his powerful, naked body and jutting cock. "I'll always know I can get free if I want."

Lorelai gestured to the book-lined walls. "This isn't the kitchen."

"It's where I spent a lot of my free time." He stepped in, his ready penis bobbing confidently with each step but his gaze was uncertain.

She'd didn't need to be told he wanted her to see another side of him, to know he was more than just a Master. The gesture touched her in a way that his sexual skill never could.

She went to him. "I like it," she said, pressing against him and wrapping her arms around his neck. The gesture was both affectionate and seductive because she wanted him to know she was looking forward to learning all about the man he was.

"It?" he asked, grinning as he thrust his shaft between her legs and pulled on the heavy silk robe until it fell to the floor.

She spread her legs, wrapping one leg behind him to offer him easy access to her slick pussy. "I already know I like this." She moaned as he filled her wonderfully – completely. "And I—" she sucked in a sharp breath, "I'm looking forward to discovering everything I like about—" But the words fell away when he withdrew and then thrust his thick shaft deeper still, hitting her G-spot. He took advantage of her open mouth to cover her lips with his and gently glide his tongue across hers. Waves of pleasure rolled through her.

Christopher ended the kiss then grabbed Lorelai's hips and lifted her from the floor. He paused to look into her eyes and she smiled, her eyes bright with lust—not lust for the Master, but lust for him. "You're okay with a man who reads and thinks."

"Not any man—you."

That was everything he needed.

Holding her firmly to him, he carried her to the extra-wide chair and laid her down, arranging her so that her feet were on the floor and her knees were open, revealing her sweet tight pussy.

He knelt between her legs, turning his attention first to her gorgeous breasts. He wrapped his fingers around the soft mounds and flicked his thumbs across her peaked nipples. She arched her back and tried to pull him to her with her legs but he wanted to look at her—his woman—before he made love to her again.

Gliding his hands over her smooth pale skin, he admired the swell of her hips, the curve of her waist, her delicate collarbones and the fine column of her neck.

Caressing each inch of her, he ignored the way the tip of his cock kept brushing against her wet nether lips. Each time she wriggled, trying to get him inside her, he shifted back just enough to keep from gliding into her. His penis was throbbing, his own need for release pulling tight on every nerve but he was determined to take his time and enjoy his new possession.

Her panting and writhing made her breasts bounce the same as they would when he finally let himself impale her.

"Kiss me again," she said, tilting her head to look him in the eye.

How could he refuse that simple request?

But as he moved forward to oblige, he discovered she was even more skilled at getting what she wanted than he realized. As he moved up, she'd scooted down and taken advantage of the tight, throbbing condition of his penis and sheathed his cock with her hot pussy.

Once inside her, there was no turning back. Her silken core fit him perfectly, caressing his entire shaft.

He pumped into her, his motions turning jerky and desperate, matching the emotions tumbling inside him. Never had he known he could feel this way about a

woman. Before, sex had always been about her—his client—but this act was about them.

Each time he rocked into Lorelai, their bodies came closer to becoming one until a single, long, hard thrust of his cock turned his pleasure into hers and hers his. The soft moans rising from Lorelai's throat matched his and their voices blended, making one single cry of passion.

The manor, his past, his doubts about the future—it all fell away. For the first time he could remember, Christopher set his body free, giving himself over to the pleasure Lorelai offered, and giving himself permission to love the woman he was inside.

Grasping her hips, he rose up so he could see her body as he pumped into her. Silken strands of her hair cascaded across the chair and her soft, smooth skin was feverish.

Grinding against her, he sought out the spot deep inside her pussy that needed to be hit by his swollen tip. The second he found it, she gasped and her head dropped back against the chair. Still holding her ass with one hand, he moved the other hand to caress her exposed clit, working his fingers lightly across the tense nub. The onset of her orgasm was instant and her vaginal muscles clenched, squeezing his penis.

Riding her hard and deep, he let himself go. The first sharp pulse of his release took his breath away. There was no end to the circles of painful pleasure wrapping around him, binding him to Lorelai and her to him. When the last of his cum was released, they were one—for that single moment and for always.

HOTTER THAN HELL

Regina Carlisle

Dedication

For my sassy friend and fellow writer, Taylor Tryst.

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

ESPN: ESPN, Inc.

Tic Tac: Ferrero S.P.A.

Chapter One

This just isn't working for me, Ellie. I'm sorry. Scott

Ellie Grant crumpled the note and tossed it into her purse to join her nearly empty wallet, a tube of Red Hot Mama lipstick, assorted gum wrappers, a half-full box of Tic Tacs and a stash of condoms that apparently she wouldn't need tonight. Her best friend, Sam, was right. Damn it. He was always right. She figured he had a jerk-o-meter in his head and tended to sum up her current stream of boyfriends in one word.

Shitheads.

The taxi pulled up in front of the modest Dallas home she'd bought right after her divorce two years ago. Thanking the driver, she handed him the twenty Scott had sent along with his nasty little note and got out of the cab. As the taxi drove off down the quiet residential street, she sighed and stared at her darkened house.

It looked lonely. Yep, it suited her mood at the moment.

Why had she ever thought her life would change dramatically with a move from her small, countrified hometown to the big city? Some things *never* changed. Ellie knew she wasn't a sex goddess by any stretch of the imagination. How on earth had she ever imagined she could lure and entice men with more...um...sophisticated tastes? She'd lost her husband to another woman because of her inability to let go and enjoy herself in the bedroom. Maybe she was lacking somehow. Maybe it just wasn't in her genetic makeup to feel totally free about sex. She was a throwback to another generation and she was pretty damn sick of it.

Glancing across the yard, she saw that Sam's lights were on.

Should she? Or shouldn't she?

Ellie shifted her purse more firmly on her shoulder and stared at the hunky firefighter's house. He was totally yummy but so far out of her league that she'd settled for friendship despite the fact she wished for oh so much more. No one made her laugh like Sam Dare. And when he narrowed those intense chocolate-colored eyes, she knew he listened to her. Really listened. Lately though the whole friendship thing was getting harder and harder to pull off. Every word he said went straight to her pussy. Every move of that lean, rangy body made her want to lick each firm muscle including the one nestled between his thighs. *Lordy, lordy.* Over the past year, she'd seen him in various stages of undress and the man was driving her crazy.

Ellie sighed and ran a hand through her windblown hair and crossed the lawn to his house. In her current mood, she'd love nothing better than to have him strip her clothes off and screw her silly. She wanted to grab a fistful of his black curly hair, yank his head down and plant a long, wet kiss on his scrumptious lips. Looks like she'd have

to settle for a drink. If she couldn't have wild monkey sex with Sam, she'd settle for the friendship. It was the story of her life.

* * * * *

Sam Dare sat sprawled on his couch, his bare feet propped on the littered coffee table as he took in a baseball game on ESPN. Taking a long pull from his bottle of beer, he scowled at the screen and wondered how Ellie's date was going. He'd told her over and over this Scott guy was a prick but the woman never listened to him. Going out over and over with the same kind of loser guy who was gonna break her heart. She was such a sweet little thing and as sexy as hell. He hated to see her hurt but it was about more than that. She was the kind of woman a man could do the *forever thing* with. He'd always been a free and easy guy where women were concerned. Quick, easy sex with no strings attached had been his only rule until Ellie moved in next door and taught him that he wanted more.

Over the din of the television, he heard the sound of a car engine and then the slamming of a door. Had to be Ellie bringing the asshole back to her place. Scowling again, feeling the beginnings of a pissy mood take hold, he took another draw from his beer and tried not to think about that *player* touching Ellie's breasts or fisting his hands in her pretty blonde hair.

Shit!

He was going to have to make a move soon or he'd lose his ever-lovin' mind. Just thinking about Ellie made him go hard beneath the old sweatpants he wore. When he'd first met her, she'd been recovering from a nasty divorce and she was so emotionally bruised it just didn't seem right to move in on her the way he'd wanted too. Instead, he'd done the unthinkable and become her *friend*. How was a man supposed to dig himself out of a hole like that?

Just then his doorbell rang and he opened the door to see Ellie standing there looking as cute as hell and as mad as a hornet.

"Hey, darlin'."

She sighed and stuck out her bottom lip. "Got another one of those?"

He held up his bottle. "A beer? Sure. But I thought you hated this stuff."

Ellie marched past him, tossed the luggage that passed for a purse on an overstuffed chair and marched to the kitchen. "I do, but if that's all you've got, I'll take it. I'm that desperate." She peered into the fridge, giving him a more than healthy look at her mighty fine ass then she turned. "God! Don't you ever eat? Sam, you don't have enough food in here to feed a mouse. Where's the whiskey?"

As usual, she gave him little time to answer. She was a woman who was in constant motion. "Whiskey? That bad?" Sam reached into a cupboard and pulled down a bottle of his finest bourbon and reached for a squat bar glass. "So where's Shithead?"

He dropped a couple of ice cubes into the glass then smiled when she launched herself at him with a groan. "Why don't I listen to you, Sam? You told me. You said Scott was a jerk and I didn't listen."

God, she smelled great. He'd known she was going to a nightclub tonight but there wasn't a whiff of anything stronger than the classy-smelling perfume she always wore. He wrapped his arms around her curvy body as she buried her nose against his bare chest. Sam sank his face in her wavy hair and just breathed her in. "Ah, I'm sorry, sweetheart. What happened?"

She looked up, embarrassment sharp in her soft gray eyes. "Got dumped. He walked out on me at the club. Just left me there. Now Sam, don't go getting all pissed off. I know that *look*. I mean it."

Sam fought down the urge to hunt the bastard down and smash his perfectly capped teeth down his throat. "Okay. All right. I'm listening." Reluctantly, he released her to pour a splash of whiskey over the cubes in her glass. "Come on. Tell Dr. Sam all about it."

He put the glass in her hand and looped an arm over her shoulder before leading her back into the living room. Once she was settled on the couch, he turned off the television.

"Hey! You don't have to do that. You were watching that before I showed up," she protested. "Come on, Sam, don't let me ruin your plans."

Sam turned and smiled, then walked over to the stereo to turn on some tunes. Sexy, smoky jazz filled the room. "Game was boring. You, however, are as fascinating as hell." Facing her, he caught the look of dejection on her face along with something else, something that surprised him and made his heart thump hard. Her pretty eyes were focused on his bare chest. Her tongue brushed along her bottom lip and his cock instantly rose at the temptation she presented. Tonight she was wearing a short little bit of nothing skirt in a soft pink color and a matching tiny tee. She looked like a fluffy bite of cotton candy. Soft and completely edible.

Finally she switched her attention to the glass in her hand and took a tentative sip.

Mm. Interesting. Maybe he wasn't the only one who had dirty dreams these days. He was sick to death of all this friendship stuff. Making a quick decision, he sat beside her on the couch and plucked the glass from her hand to set it on the coffee table.

"Um—"

"Wait. I'll give it back. Let's just get more comfortable."

"I'm fine. Really."

He shook his head. "Nope. Uh-uh. You look like a woman who needs some cuddlin'." He waggled his eyebrows at her. "Come on. Let me be your teddy bear."

Ellie laughed, then gasped when he plucked her up and settled her across his lap. She stiffened a little, no doubt noting his hard-on poking her delicious ass. But then she

settled back in his arms and quietly watched him as he put the glass of false courage back in her hand. "Here, sweetheart. Take another sip and tell me all about it."

As the story unraveled, he got pissed all over again but the guy was history now so he reined in his anger and concentrated on her. Tough work considering the way her soft, delicious body was snuggled up against him.

She sniffed a little then knuckled a tear from her cheek. He wished she wouldn't cry. Damn woman broke his heart.

"So, um, guess I blew it."

"Fuck that! He blew it if he couldn't realize what a good woman you are."

"What does being a good woman have to do with anything? God!" She rolled her eyes and gave him a scathing look. "I've seen the sex kittens who've tromped in and out of here over the past two years and don't tell me you guys are playing cards or something. Or having funner-than-fun missionary sex. Those women didn't look like the missionary type to me. Remember the hunk calendar that charity put out last year, Mr. April? Hot Hunks of the Dallas Fire Department? Jeez. Our street looked like a parking lot after that one. All those women showing up wearing nothing but big red bows and smiles. What in the hell would you know about anything?"

"I know a whole lot actually."

Ellie snorted and he had to laugh. Once again he took the glass and set it aside. She went very still when he looked straight into her eyes and cupped her cheek in his hand. "Let me show you."

"I—"

"Shh. Don't you know I'm dying to kiss you?"

When Ellie opened her mouth to speak, he settled his lips on hers and damn if it didn't feel like a homecoming. Her mouth was a soft, open invitation to sin and he took full advantage, sliding his tongue deep to taste her fully, tenderly. If she didn't want this, he'd stop but it would kill him to do it. Sampling her mouth, he swept his tongue over hers, until she answered him with a soft groan and kissed him back. His heart pounded in his chest. Sam drank her breath, her heavy sigh and drew her closer, turning her body until her lush, sweet breasts were pressed against his chest.

"Ah, those are sweet. Gotta touch 'em."

He palmed her breast, felt the diamond hardness of her nipple prodding him and then took the pebbled flesh in his fingers. Sam moved his mouth to her fragrant throat, pressing open-mouthed kisses on her tender flesh. Teasing, circling the areola, he flicked her nipple and pinched lightly. She arched into his touch as victory uncoiled deep and he grew hard enough to pound stone. Ellie wriggled her ass, her response to him wild and accepting.

When he finally looked down at her, seeing her eyes looking slumberous and sexy, he smiled. "Tonight we're gonna be more than friends, Miss Ellie. That okay with you?"

"Umm. You've got me all worked up, Sam. What am I supposed to say when I want you to fuck me so bad I can't stand it?"

"Good answer. Damn good answer." He sat her up and whipped the tiny tee shirt over her head and then sent it sailing. Her lush breasts were confined in pale pink lace. A little satin bow rested between the heaving mounds right above a front closure.

Sam loved a nice front closure.

He rearranged Ellie on his lap until she was straddling his thighs. "What are we doing, Sam? Are you sure about this? This isn't some kind of pity thing because I got dumped again, is it?"

"Am I gonna have to spank you?"

Sam watched her cheeks flush dark red, a little telltale thing that spoke volumes about her. She might not *be* naughty but she definitely *thought* about naughty things. That was a damn fine start for what he had planned. He was sick of dicking around with this friend stuff and ready to move onto more fertile territory. Smiling slightly, he took her hand and settled it over his cock. "Feel like pity to you, darlin'?"

"Um. No. Lordy, Sam, you're so hard, so thick. Jeez! What am I doing?"

He set his hand over her smaller one and squeezed it around his thickness. Gasping a breath, he drew both their hands over his erection until she was stroking him all by herself. "You're touching me. Is that so bad?"

Ellie shook her head and stared down as she felt him. It was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. Finally he took her hand away and saw her confusion. "You do that so great but I don't want to come. Not yet."

"This is going to ruin everything."

"No, it's not. I won't let it. We've been friends for a long time, honey, and no one is going to fuck you better than a man who knows you. For years you've had this crazy idea that you're somehow lacking. You think maybe your equipment is wonky and I'm going to prove to you once and for all that's not the case."

"How?"

Sam didn't want her to overthink things. He didn't want her thinking at all. Reaching out, he flipped the closure and watched her bra come undone. His mouth went desert dry. He moved the pretty lace cups to the side and just looked at her. "You are the sexiest, prettiest thing I've ever seen, Ellie. I knew your nipples would look this way."

"What way?" she whispered.

"Pink and soft. Everything about you is all pink and soft. Sweet. Gotta taste 'em."

"Yes. Oh, Sam, yes!"

Sam settled his hands just beneath her arms and brought her close enough that he could drag his tongue over one firm nipple. Lured by her, burning from the toes up, he opened his mouth over it and sucked it lightly then harder, alternating the rhythm until Ellie was writhing in his arms, pressing her hot pussy against his cock.

How in the hell had she come to the conclusion that she was a dud? Damn. She was smokin' hot. So responsive.

She settled her face against his shoulder and nipped him there. Dragging her lips over him, she sent her breath to ghost over his flesh. Sam thrust his lower body up and felt her burn him even through the layers of clothes they wore. He switched to the other breast and dipped a hand under her skirt.

Thong alert.

He loved whoever invented those things!

Her lush ass was plump in his palms and he squeezed a globe before sending his fingers into the shadowy crease. Damn, but he wanted to play with her sweet ass. It would be so delicious to fuck her there. Would she let him? How far would she be willing to go in this quest for sexual fulfillment?

Instead of staying to play longer, he sent his fingers lower until his fingers were coated with cream from her pussy. "Damn, woman. You're so hot. So wet. I'm dying to lick you here."

A fresh rain of moisture coated his fingers. Needing more, he dipped his fingers into her opening to finally send them deep. Vaginal muscles clenched and tightened over the two fingers and he sent a third to join them. "You're tight, Ellie. I want in."

"Yes."

"In a minute. Let me play. Do you know how long I've waited to touch you this way?"

She didn't answer because she was too busy whimpering. Sam circled her clit with his thumb and he continued to finger-fuck her tight little pussy. She tensed and came up on her knees. He raked his teeth over her nipple. Over and over. Ellie's fingers grabbed onto his hair as she rode his thrusting hand, rotated in counterpoint to his thumb as it pressed her clit.

"Okay. Now, honey. Show me how fucking responsive you are. Show me what every other man in the world is missing. Yeah, that's it."

Ellie came apart with a little shriek. She shivered and sighed. Undone, she settled down and panted against his chest. "What the hell have we done?" she whispered.

"Pretty damn good stuff, I reckon. Look at me, Ellie."

She looked up, a shattered expression on her face. "Okay. Talk."

"This is what I propose."

She let out a breath and focused on his lips which made him a little crazy all over again. "Go on."

"It's the weekend. Go pack a bag for a couple of days." He couldn't stop touching her, so he drew his hands repeatedly down her bare arms. "I want you to come back. Stay here and we'll spend the weekend fucking. We'll do every position you can think of and more. But before you come over here I want to do something."

"What?"

"Sit down and write a list. A long one, if you want. Tell me every fantasy, every sexual thing you've ever wanted to try and I swear to God I'll make it happen for you. How does that sound? You game?"

Ellie went quiet as she drew the little scrap of lace over her breasts and fastened it. Pulling away, she stood and gave him an uncertain look. Sam forced himself to breathe and then finally she stared at his aching cock. It thrust against his sweatpants, throbbing with his need to come. She licked her swollen lips and the instant vision of her wrapping those beauties around his erection almost did him in. She drew a breath and looked him straight in the eye. "This isn't about a pity fuck?"

He drew a cross over his chest. "Cross my heart. I want you, Ellie, and if it's the last thing I ever do, I want to show you how damn fuckable I think you are."

She nodded sharply, smoothed her skirt and walked away to grab up her purse from the chair. By the time Ellie had her hand on the doorknob, Sam thought he might have blown it completely but then she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Okay, Sam. Sounds like a plan."

Chapter Two

Ellie leaned back against her front door the instant she crossed the threshold and struggled to contain her breathing. Feeling like she'd just stepped into an alternate universe, she kicked off her shoes and stumbled over the couch and flopped down. She buried her face in her hands, moaning low.

God!

The look on Sam's face when he moved his hands over her body would be ingrained in her memory forever. Shivering a little, Ellie leaned back and, realizing her nipples still throbbed, she sent her fingers over them. They were tender and swollen. As she stroked herself, she remembered the look on Sam's face, the intensity in his eyes. Unbelievably, he'd looked at her as if he'd never seen a sexier woman.

Sam would never lie to her. He wanted her. Just thinking about the way she'd stroked his heavy erection made her pussy throb. Seeing Sam nearly every day for years, she'd always dreamed of touching him that way. His body was absolutely a work of art. All that bronzed skin over finely toned muscle made her fingers itch. But could she indulge herself in a weekend of mindless sex with Sam, her best friend, and live with things once they were only friends again? She was already half in love with him. This was a dangerous game she was playing.

Danger.

There was a certain lure about the word. She'd always played it safe and maybe that was her problem. She'd been a dutiful, respectful daughter and had carried that same attitude into her marriage. Ellie rolled her eyes. Yeah, and look what *that* had gotten her. It was way past time she took control of her life and her sexual needs. Sam could help her do that. She trusted him. And yes, she adored him. Loved him even.

Ellie made her decision.

A feeling of excitement and a healthy dose of nerves rushed through her so before she could change her mind, she hurried into the bathroom and jumped into the shower. She wanted to look great for Sam so she carefully shaved her legs, washed and shampooed. Squirting a bit of her favorite shower gel into a sponge, she cleaned every nook and cranny. Expectation soared through her as she dried her hair and rubbed scented lotion over her body. Her physique might not be utterly perfect as Sam's was but she would be well groomed and confident.

Ellie cocked her head and stared at her reflection in the mirror. An average, moderately attractive woman stared back. Her gray eyes were pale and, despite her natural fairness, were surrounded by thick dark lashes. The nose? Small and slightly tilted. Lips? Mm. So-so. Kind of full. She carried a little more weight than she had ten years ago and it showed in the size of her boobs and hips. Turning, she examined her

ass and shook her head. Just moments ago, Sam had squeezed her butt and stroked it. He didn't seem to find a thing wrong with her body but maybe he was just being nice.

Hating this feeling of inadequacy, she recalled the steady stream of women who Sam had dated over the years. Tall, leggy beauties with perfectly manicured hair, nails... Well, perfectly manicured everything, she suspected. She'd always assumed Sam preferred his women flashy, sexy and confident rather than ordinary and as insecure as hell.

Don't think about that!

Ellie dressed in a pair of shorts and a tee shirt and packed a small bag that carried more shorts and tees along with the sexy lingerie that she loved to buy but that few people ever saw. She might be super casual in her style but she'd always loved wearing matching bras and panties even if it was just for herself. As an afterthought she went to her closet and found several red bags that featured the logo of an adult toy store she'd frequented during one of her missions to "think sexy". She set the bags next to her small overnighter and went to her bedside table to fetch her vibrator.

Huffing a breath, she fisted her hands on her hips, considering this moment of insanity. No, she'd promised Sam and she wasn't going to start being a coward now. Before she had time to talk herself out of the whole deal, she carried the bags into her kitchen. Ellie sat at the table with a piece of paper and a pen. Mm. Sexual fantasies.

Maybe she needed a bigger piece of paper.

Then Ellie began to write. Something about it was cathartic and she didn't realize how many things she secretly wanted to try. Positions and toys, it didn't matter. She wrote down everything. The list went on and on. Damn! Sam would think she was crazy! Smiling a little, still fighting nerves, she stood and put the naughty list in her purse, gathered everything up and headed out the door.

She'd made it halfway across Sam's yard, when he opened the door and stood there watching. Cast in shadow, filling up the doorway, he looked suddenly mysterious and sexier than sin. Ellie's mouth went dry.

This is Sam!

The Sam she'd played video games with, watched sports with. She'd helped him entertain guests during many of his backyard barbecues. Releasing a breath, she forced herself to calm down and moved gamely forward. He met her on the front porch step.

"Here, let me take these," he said, grabbing the colorful sacks in one hand. Ellie followed him inside and watched him carry them into his big master bedroom. She'd been in there a million times over the years and wondered fancifully how it would feel to lie in that king-sized bed with him. The fantasy had remained unspoken but now she was going to know for sure. Feeling suddenly unsure of herself, she yanked at the hem of her tee shirt and watched him.

When he got to the doorway, he glanced down at the logo on the festive red bags and turned to give her a look. Ellie saw a dark flush of color stain his high, sculpted

cheekbones as he sent his gaze down and then back up her body. One eyebrow arched wickedly. "I like the way you think, woman."

Before she had a chance to reply, he'd disappeared into the bedroom.

Lordy! Where was that whiskey?

Ellie started thinking. Hard. This could be a huge mistake. She'd never be able to survive it if things went sour with Sam and she lost his friendship forever. And with them living next door to each other, things could turn from bad to completely miserable in a heartbeat. But before she had time to turn into a coward and race for the door, Sam reappeared.

He didn't appear to be rethinking things. The hard expression on his face and the heavy bulge beneath his sweatpants told her he was feeling...um...frisky. Sam walked straight up to her and fisted his hand in her hair. Drawing her head back, he looked her straight in the eye.

"Second thoughts?"

"Um, no," she lied.

His sexy grin flashed white. "Good answer."

He settled his lips on hers, stealing her breath. Sinking his fingers deep into her hair, he sent his tongue into the cavern of her mouth. Sam had showered too. He smelled of soap and his black curly hair was damp when she reached up to touch it. When he changed the angle of the hot, devouring kiss and pulled her body against his, Ellie felt the instant rush of moisture to her panties. Her clit throbbed against the scrap of satin and lace and without thinking, knowing she had to get closer to this big hunk of man, she lifted her leg to settle it along the curve of his hip.

Sam groaned then cursed low as he finally broke the kiss and stared down at her with those dark, dark eyes. "I want inside you so bad, I can't stand it."

"Me too, Sam, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous about this."

"Then let's take care of those nerves. Okay? Grab your list and let me take a look."

Time to face the music.

Ellie lowered her leg and stepped away to grab the note from her purse. When she turned and held it out, Sam smiled and took her hand. He led her across the big living room, through the kitchen and out onto the backyard patio.

"You've been busy," she said as she watched the bubbles churn in his dimly lit hot tub. Steam lifted from it, white against the night sky. Attached to the tub was his small swimming pool. They'd put the pool to good use on many occasions during hot summer months in the past but tonight everything was different. "It's beautiful out here."

"I fixed us a couple of drinks."

"Mm. Reading my mind again," she said as she walked over to the patio table, noting a big citronella candle flickering in the center. Two squat glasses held bourbon over ice and knowing Sam's preferences he'd probably added a bit of water to the

drinks. Ellie sat and watched him hold the paper close to the glow of the candle. His hot gaze flicked up to her once before focusing on the naughty list. What would he think of her? She didn't know what to say in the face of the quiet that settled around him. Nervously, she picked up her glass and took a drink. It burned going down but didn't settle her so she sipped again.

"I see," he said, setting the paper on the table. Sam gave her a look that singed and casually reached into a pocket to withdraw a handful of condoms. Yikes! So many. He walked to the ledge of the hot tub and tossed them down before turning to her. As if he undressed in front of her every day, he pushed the faded gray sweats from his hips and kicked them aside. Light from the heated spa behind him caused shadows to chase across his absolute perfection. Sam spent many days and nights in the downtown firehouse and she knew these men worked out a lot to relieve the monotony when they weren't busy being heroes.

Wow!

His abs stood out prominently, well-defined, as were his arms and legs but those body parts, as gorgeous as they were, didn't capture her attention as much as his long, thick shaft. Maybe it was her imagination but he seemed bigger, heftier there than other men she'd known.

"You're gorgeous, Sam," she managed. She'd wanted to tell him this forever. Her mouth was bone dry and she swallowed, unable to tear her gaze from his cock. His smile kicked up a little at one corner but then he held out his hand. "Come here, Ellie. Bring the drinks."

He spoke the words with a dark edge and she wondered what he'd surmised from her list that had him going all dominant on her. Ellie's cheeks grew warm.

Standing, trying for all she was worth to ignore the shaky status of her legs, she picked up the drinks and walked over to the edge of the spa. Setting them down next to the stash of condoms, she stood and looked at him. "What now?"

"Now you take off your clothes and show me your pretty, curvy body, Ellie."

She laughed a little. "Oh, is that all?"

"Do it, Ellie."

With hands that trembled she shrugged out of her tee shirt and dropped it. Sam watched her every move.

"You have beautiful breasts, Ellie. Show them to me."

"Bossy man."

"Shh. Do it now, sweetheart."

She couldn't fight the tender darkness of his voice. Heat flashed through her body, centering in her aching pussy. Reaching up, she flipped open the front closure of her lacy bra and let it slide off her shoulders and down her arms. If he could tease, so could she. Night air brushed softly over her nipples, making them go hard. Sam sucked in an audible breath.

Ellie focused her complete attention on Sam. He reached down and fisted his hand around the base of his cock. Dragging it slowly over his length, he centered his gaze on her breasts. "They're beautiful, Ellie. And so sweet. Touch yourself."

Blindly willing, she lifted her fingers to her breasts and played with her nipples. A tender ache for more compelled her to pinch them, roll them. A soft moan escaped her lips and she realized she'd closed her eyes to absorb every sensation.

"More," she whispered, shocked to find she'd spoken aloud.

"Squeeze them harder, honey. Get them ready for my mouth."

"Yes. Oh, Sam."

She played for a while longer then her eyes opened as Sam said her name. "Take off the shorts and your panties. I want to see more."

Releasing her nipples, she trailed her hands down her bare torso and dipped her fingers into the waistband of her stretchy shorts. She gave them a little push past the globes of her butt and let them drop to her ankles. She stepped out of the shorts along with the flimsy flip-flops she'd shrugged into earlier.

"Now the panties."

Thankful she'd worn the nicest lingerie she had, she got rid of the panties.

Heat flooded her body as she stood naked in front of him, and felt his eyes take in every bit of her. In response to his quiet intensity, she caught her breath and focused on the way he touched his cock, squeezing and flexing his hand over it. A drop of pearly fluid came from the tip, settling there like a diamond caught in the flickering light. Moisture flowed from her pussy. She thought of how delicious that single drop would taste, how she'd love to run her tongue over him, dipping below the rim to tease before opening her mouth over him to swallow up every inch.

She shivered.

"Are you cold?"

"No," she said. "I'm hot."

Sam laughed softly. "That's good, darlin'. Now touch your pussy. I want you to show me how wet you are. How pink and perfect you are. Spread your legs for me."

Loving the dark tone of his voice, the insidious excitement caused by his words, Ellie opened her stance and splayed her hands across her belly. Sam watched her hands. He drew his tongue across his bottom lip and he stopped stroking his cock as if he were afraid to touch himself any longer without coming in a great blast of heat and lust.

Ellie had thought exposing herself this way would be uncomfortable but this was *Sam*. Emboldened by the expression of hardened lust on his face, she spread her labia with one hand and stroked her drenched flesh. She dipped a finger into her opening, circled there gathering moisture, then covered her clit with cream. The knot of nerves pulsed against her finger. She pressed. She pulled. Keeping eye contact with Sam at that moment was the most erotic, most outrageous sexual thing she'd ever done.

Forcing her eyes open when they wanted desperately to shut, she focused on Sam and the way his hungry gaze took in everything she did. A flash of uncertainty inserted itself in her mind and for a second she wondered what the hell Sam must think as he looked at her. She was so different from the other women he'd dated. The things her ex had said right before he'd left her ripped through her composure.

Stopping, removing her fingers from her wet folds, she looked at him. "I can't do this," she whispered. "This can't be right."

Sam moved close and took her hands. His smile was soft but somehow wickedly sexy. "Nothing is more right than this. Stop second-guessing and just let go. You doubt your sexiness and it's long past time I proved to you how wrong you are."

He backed up and stepped down into the warm water, bringing her with him. Once they were both covered to the waist, Sam lifted her onto the ledge. Despite the warmth of the night, the tiled surface was cool on her skin. Dipping his hands in the water, he drizzled it over her legs and brushed his palms over her breasts. Instantly her nipples contracted at the change in temperature.

"They are so responsive," he murmured. Sam reached down, spread her legs wide and stepped between them, filling up the space as if he'd always belonged there. "Give them to me, Ellie."

With Sam so close, so demanding, she didn't hesitate but lifted her breasts, cupping them in her hands. He leaned close and Ellie felt his hot breath brush over the pebbled flesh of her nipples. Trailing his tongue around the areola of first one then the other, he took his time about it all. His teeth rasped across one before he took it into the heat of his mouth to suck. The other was treated to the touch of his fingers as he lightly pinched and played.

A low moan broke from Ellie's lips when he reached behind her to stroke her ass. Gently, he slid her forward until she was balanced at the very edge of the tub, her cunt in the perfect position for penetration. His thick, heavy cock brushed the pulsing flesh of her pussy. Edgy with desire, she sent her fingers into his dark hair to hold him close as he hungrily devoured her. When he stopped, she wanted to cry but then he held up a tiny, dripping ice cube and stared at one nipple with an arrested expression. "Gonna play here, sweetheart. You game?"

"Do whatever you want," she breathed.

"Mm. Might just do that." Slowly he drew the ice over her nipple and Ellie gasped at the sensation. Then relief spilled over when he replaced the melting cube with the hot lash of his tongue. She cried out at the twin sensations. "Damn, woman. You taste like fine whiskey. Addictive. Let's do it again."

A look of concentration settled on his handsome face as he smoothed the quickly dissolving ice over the other nipple. When he sucked it too, she sighed and struggled to get closer to the exquisite pressure.

Sensation sizzled straight to her center. Ellie gripped fistfuls of his hair, aching to get closer and closer. His fingers went to her pussy and started to stoke the flames,

gathering her cream, making her crazy. He flicked her clit with his thumb then pressed gently.

"Sam!"

Instantly, he went on a slow foray with his lips and tongue. He pressed his mouth to the underside of her breasts and nipped her there, gently, before moving lower. Hot kisses, languorous and devastatingly sexy, rained over her ribs, her belly. Instinctively, she spread her thighs even wider. Her pussy throbbed in response, wanting his mouth, wanting him to suck her there too and when Sam settled his hands on her thighs, she went still.

His hands smoothed over her before focusing, finally, between her thighs. Looking up, he trailed his fingers over the seam of her pussy, parting her labia, pressing gently on her clit. Those sexy-as-hell dark eyes held a world of passion in them. Need, too. Ellie realized in that moment that no man had ever looked at her that way before. The expression of hunger he wore caused her heart to race then pound like a sledgehammer in her chest. "I'm gonna eat you out, Ellie. Are you ready for me?"

Dumb question but she let it go.

She wanted to speak, to say something, anything, but all she managed was a low moan. Gently, he reached out to lay her back against the surface of the patio. It was hard, slightly warm but it could've been a bed of nails and she wouldn't have cared.

Then his mouth was there and a cry broke from her lips. "Sam!"

Sam lifted her legs over his sturdy shoulders, opening her fully and helplessly, Ellie's back bowed. She needed to be closer. Her fingers clawed at the patio floor. Damn it, she needed his mouth more than her next breath. He sent his tongue teasing along the seam of her pussy then he parted her labia with his fingers and circled her opening with his thumb before pressing it deep. Ellie arched again, writhing against the hard tile as she struggled to get closer, to absorb more of the delicious sensations. Sam ate her as if he were starving, sucking her clit as his thumb pressed and rotated. Fire raced through her body. Lucky for her, she had her own personal firefighter.

Damn!

As she met his mouth, demanding more, any thoughts of Sam as "just a friend" fled her mind. He became something more, something dearer. He became her lover.

Sam sucked her clit, bringing her closer and closer to the edge of orgasm. Every nerve screamed for release, balling tightly in her belly. Her nipples tightened painfully and on the very edge of desperation, Ellie took them in her fingers and pinched them hard. At just that instant, Sam removed his thumb and replaced it with two fingers. Sending them deep as he drew on her clit was enough to send her crashing over the edge. With a little cry, she reached for him as she pulsed against his tongue.

Breathing sharply, gasping, Ellie closed her eyes and whispered his name. "S-Sam! I need more. You need to—"

"Come," he said as he raised his face from between her legs and looked at her. The heat in his eyes burned her all over again. "Hell, yeah. I've had enough. I've got to get

inside you, honey. Right now. I've been waiting for two long years and damn it, I'm not waiting a minute longer."

Chapter Three

Sam wrapped his arms around her until she was planted firmly against his chest. The brush of her nipples on his skin was like a little bit of heaven so he wallowed for just a minute in the feel of those lush mounds, rubbing and shifting, as if that simple act could connect her to him permanently. Beneath the surface of the churning water, her legs went around his waist. When he settled his hands over her fine, full ass, he flexed his fingers. His cock nudged the shadowy crease and instinctively he thrust, wanting to sink deep, to pound fast and hot into her creamy flesh. Ellie writhed against his erection.

"Ah, that's better. I need you close like this. I want you, Ellie. Need to fuck you right now."

"We shouldn't," she murmured, her mouth releasing warm breath over his skin. "But we have to."

"Yeah."

Ellie licked drops of water from the center of his chest then shifted to nuzzle his nipple. Responding to her softness, the sweetness of her, he bent his head to nip her shoulder. Flashes of her slow, sexy striptease played at the edge of his mind, burning him. At first she'd seemed so unsure but then she really got into it. Passion suffused her face, changing her from the sassy girl-next-door to a woman who oozed sex appeal, making a man think of nothing but pounding his cock into all that heat and slippery softness.

Sam flexed his fingers again and Ellie squirmed to get closer. Lifting her slightly, he sent his erection between the globes of her ass until her warm pussy pressed his belly. He felt his balls draw up, going hard in response. Releasing her long enough to grab a condom, he tore into the packaging with his teeth. "Hang on."

"Okay. Hurry, Sam."

He changed his position until his cock rose up between their bodies and looked at her before rolling the protection into place. Her soft, gray eyes were heavy, her bottom lip drawn between her teeth. He'd imagined her looking this way, sweet and sexy.

The savage need to claim her, to fuck her consumed him. She was the realization of everything he'd ever wanted in a woman and he was sick of waiting. Sam sucked in a breath and lifted her until her melting pussy was poised over the broad head. The woman made him crazy. She felt fucking incredible.

He plunged high and hard.

Ellie cried out as she clung to him.

"Fuck, yes!"

Ellie whimpered as he began to thrust, deep then deeper. Silky vaginal walls quivered, then tightened around his pulsing flesh. He wanted to slow down, enjoy the moment but damn it, he'd been waiting too long for her to see him as more than a friend. Thrusting higher, harder, Sam felt her body milk him in slow waves. Gritting his teeth, he backed up until she was pressed against the shelf of the tub. "Grab hold, darlin'."

Obviously in tune with him, she stretched her arms across the ledge and held on. In the water, her hips canted up and he held them in his hands. Stroking solidly, Sam slid the head of his cock over her G-spot until Ellie quivered in his arms, crying out softly. Yes. That's what he wanted to hear. He needed to know it wasn't just him who'd been wanting this forever. Again and again, he plunged.

Sam took her swollen clit between two fingers and lightly pinched, holding the knot of nerves then releasing it, only to torment her again.

"Sam!"

"Yeah, honey, that's it. Damn, you're beautiful. Perfect."

Instantly Ellie tightened around him. She went wild as she came with the force of a rocket blasting into space. His head swam, his legs and ass tightened and he held on for the ride and then it was his turn. He sucked in a breath as pleasure ran wicked fingers down his spine and into his balls. God! His scalp tingled as he dropped his head forward and emptied into the condom.

His pulse raced as he rested his face between her breasts. He could feel Ellie's heart pounding fast as her breath escaped in short, staccato puffs. Sam moved his mouth to her nipples, stroking gently with his tongue and he felt her fingers settle on his shoulder. Finally, he lifted his head and smiled. "Do you have any clue how responsive you are? How sexy?"

Time slowed but then suddenly she laughed a little. "I didn't but maybe I do now. Or maybe it's just you. You're so damn hot you brought out the best in me. That has to be it." She hesitated then looked away. "Any woman would react the way I did."

Even now, after what had just happened, she didn't see. She was a sexy, appealing woman who seemed desperate to give him all the credit for what had just happened between them. He hadn't taught her a thing.

Determined to show her how damn wrong she was, he withdrew from her body and removed the spent condom. Sam tossed it onto the ledge and drew her against him, deep into the water. Their legs tangled together as he moved through the warm water until they were on the far side. Ellie seemed perfectly content to wrap herself around him, straddling his lap, resting her head against his chest.

Sam loved holding her this way. She sighed and unable to resist, he took her hair in his fist and drew her head back. Her soft, gray eyes were shining and he wondered if she had a clue how pretty she was. "You're not just any woman, Ellie. It's way past time you understood that."

As they sat together in the warm water sipping whiskey, they fell into the warm talk between friends they'd always had together. Sam was a guy who'd had lots of friends in his life, many were fellow firefighters, but with Ellie he'd learned he could talk about things he'd never discussed with anyone. She was different from the other women he'd known. She was warm and funny, sympathetic when necessary and capable of giving him a verbal kick in the ass too. There was something so appealing about a woman who could chill out in her grubby clothes with no makeup and just play video games or shoot some hoops in the driveway. Yeah, she sucked at basketball but who cared? It was the fact that she tried and was always such a good sport about it.

"I like being here with you like this, Sam."

"Yeah. Pretty good stuff." He took her now empty glass and set it alongside his. "Come on, let's get you dried off before you shrivel into a gorgeous prune."

She laughed and floated from his lap to stand in the tub. Reaching out, she gave him a tug. "Ah, but prunes are good for you. At least that's what Mama always said."

Sam chuckled and pulled her into a hug. "This is a good thing, Ellie. What we're doing here tonight."

He watched uncertainty flash across her face but then she masked it with a smile. Turning, she climbed the shallow steps leading up and he had the pleasure of watching her very fine ass as she moved. He felt his blood begin to heat and it had nothing at all to do with warmth of the bubbling water. Finally he joined her and, reaching down, flipped the switch to the tub and grabbed up a couple of towels he'd set out earlier when he'd planned this little seduction.

Pampering her, he dried her carefully. When she stood there smiling at him, still wearing the towel, he took care of the task of drying off too. He wasn't an idiot. He knew she was watching him with a gaze that had him more than ready to whisk her off to his big bed.

"What are you thinking, Ellie?"

Her wide, mobile mouth split into a grin. "Yum."

Just then the cell phone he'd set on the patio table rang. He was on call at the fire station and he hoped to hell he wasn't needed. He pointed at her as he grabbed the phone. "Hold that thought."

A familiar number lit up. "Mom."

Ellie sighed and sank into a chair. He sat next to her as he answered but kept his gaze on his beautiful friend and now lover. Light from the citronella candle flickered over her face. "Hey, beautiful," he said into the phone. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Checking on you, honey. You're off this weekend, aren't you? I haven't heard a peep from you."

"Yeah, been busy." Sam reached over and stroked a finger down Ellie's arm, satisfied when she shivered a little. "Ellie's here. We're hanging out." When Ellie's eyes went wide, he winked at her.

"I love that girl," his mom said. "Tell her hi for me."

"Mom says hi."

Ellie's grin flashed again and she wiggled her fingers, making Sam laugh. She looked adorable with her hair hanging in damp ringlets, wearing nothing but a big, white towel and a smile.

"She says hi back, Mom."

"When are you going to behave like the smart boy I brought up and ask that woman out, honey? You know what I think about all this friend stuff."

"Workin' on it."

Silence drew out on the other end and finally his mom, Deb, released a wicked little laugh. "Hm. Why do I get the feeling you're telling me the truth?"

He glanced at Ellie who remained sweetly oblivious to his mother's words. "You're pretty smart. Know that?"

"Yep. Now if I could just convince your father," she joked. "You off next weekend?"

"Nope, I'll be at the station next weekend. Off Wednesday and Thursday though."

"Good," she said with finality. "Come to dinner on Thursday. Bring Ellie. Tell her I'm fixing enchiladas."

"Sounds good. And Mom?"

"Yes, honey?"

"Thanks. Love you."

"Love you too, Sam."

Sam clicked the phone off and set it down. He looked up to see Ellie watching him with a soft smile. She was leaning forward with her elbows propped on the table, her chin resting in her hands. "I adore your mom, Sam. You have the nicest family. Makes me miss my own."

"So why did you move so far away?"

She sighed and leaned back, careful to keep the towel tucked around her. He had a sneaking suspicion she wanted to run back to the *friend zone* as quickly as possible. He'd have to do something about that.

"I couldn't stay there, Sam, after what happened with Keith. No matter how much I loved my family, it was a small town. Everyone was talking about how he left me for someone else. I'm just not that strong, that tough. Even though I knew each and every person in that town, I just couldn't face them."

Anger crawled over Sam's flesh to curl up tightly in his belly. Nothing would've made him happier at the moment than to plant his fist in Ellie's ex's face. He blamed that shithhead Keith for every bit of Ellie's current insecurity. "You had nothing to be ashamed of, honey. He was to blame. He was a liar and a cheat."

She shook her head. "I know. At first, I was just indignant. I wasn't about to be a coward but when he married her within weeks after the divorce was final and moved into a house down the street, I just couldn't take it." Sam reached out and took her hand. "No, I needed a fresh start."

"Glad you came to Dallas. I would've missed not having you in my life."

Sam was appalled when tears welled in Ellie's eyes. If he could've, he'd have kicked his own ass for bringing up painful stuff. Instantly his belly ached but he reached out and thumbed the tears from her cheeks. "Aw, honey. You want me to cry too?"

Ellie's quick burst of laughter was strained and watery. "Please, don't. You're too big and tough to cry."

"I'm not that tough when it comes to you."

Boy, did Sam ever know just exactly the right words to say to melt her heart. She wasn't tough at all, although she was learning to develop a harder shell. But she could be tough when it came to Sam. He was the kind of forever sort of guy who made a woman want to leap tall buildings and fight dragons. She'd always harbored a secret fantasy that she could be everything he'd want in a woman but had never in a million years thought he considered her anything other than a buddy. What had begun as another dismal episode in her dating history had turned into something so much more.

Sam watched her with a quiet intensity. Careful to mask how moved she was by everything that had happened between them, she blinked back the sudden surge of tears and smiled. When this weekend was over, she would be devastated to go back to being only friends. She'd have to suck it up. Summoning a bright expression, she squeezed his hand. "Hey! You hungry? Got anything to eat?"

He laughed and stood to whip the towel from his waist and toss it aside. Ellie swallowed and struggled to plant her gaze firmly on his face. Knowing she couldn't resist, she let her eyes skim down the long length of his body. Her mouth promptly went dry.

"I think I can whip something up. Come on."

A few minutes later, they had some of Sam's leftover pizza warmed. Ellie grabbed a beer from the fridge for him and poured herself a tall glass of iced tea. They sat at the kitchen table and talked casually but this wasn't like their usual free and easy conversations. After all, Sam was gorgeously bare-ass naked and she wore only a towel. They'd just fucked like bunnies in the spa out back. An underlying sexual tension settled heavily in the air. Finally Sam stood and held out his hand. "Come with me, Ellie."

She looked away. After all the things they'd done, she was still nervous and feeling a little vulnerable. "Wait. Let me clean up."

"Leave it."

The words were spoken in a low, wickedly sexy voice and, unable to resist, she stood and put her hand in his. Nerves punched her like a fist when they entered his dimly lit bedroom. She'd been in it a million times before but never under these circumstances. Her bag was sitting in a chair near the door but the sexy red sacks from the adult toy store had been placed smack dab in the middle of his king-sized bed. Sam went to a bedside table and opened a drawer. He turned to face her wearing nothing but a sinful smile, holding a handful of condoms and a package of batteries. "I assume you have some things in those bags that might require these?"

"Um. Yeah. I'm pretty sure I do."

"Think this is the first time I've seen you at a loss for words."

She went quiet but when Sam lounged across the middle of the bed and patted the spot next to him, her libido sped into overdrive. After all, they'd already fucked, he'd seen her naked and she wanted this more than her next breath. When she started to join him, Sam held up a hand. "Uh-uh. Lose the towel, sweetheart."

Moisture saturated her pussy. His words were dark and full of promise, his gaze lowered over her body as the towel dropped to the floor and she crawled across the expanse of his bed toward him. She arranged herself next to him, two festive bags between them and Sam reached inside one of them until he held up a box. Sam opened it and took out a hot pink vibrator. "God, I love an adventurous woman. This looks interesting."

"I thought so," she whispered.

Sam fingered the long curved part then followed its lines up to another notched bit of pink. "Don't think I've seen a vibrator like this one before. What does it do?"

Ellie felt her face burn hot. Her pussy quivered in joyous expectation. "It's a G-spot and clit stimulator."

"Hm. Two for the price of one. You're a hell of a bargain hunter, honey. Yeah, we'll have to use this one." Sam gave her a naughty wink and, after opening the package of batteries, inserted two in the end. He pressed a small black button on the side of it. A low hum filled the air.

"Press it again. It has several speeds."

Sam complied and a series of faster hums ensued. Smiling, he set the hot pink vibrator aside and withdrew several more interesting toys before beginning to rummage in the other sack. A few minutes later, he was studying the bottles of lotions and lubes. "What's this?"

He held out a long, slender bottle and she took it in her hand. When she saw what it was, she flipped open the top and sniffed the warming massage lotion. "Umm. Chocolate."

Sam laughed. "What is it with women and chocolate?"

"I could tell you but then I'd have to kill you."

"Sassy." Sam plucked up the bags and swept his arm across the bedspread, effectively moving everything aside and reached for her. "That's what I've always loved about you."

Ellie's heart began a quick tap dance in her chest as she stared up into his melted chocolate eyes.

Love? Did he? Love her?

Ah man! Sam could so break her heart if she wasn't very careful.

Chapter Four

Sam's kiss was deep and delicious. Ellie's back arched from the bed as she tried to get closer to his scrumptious body. The taste of his tongue made her famished for more. Her nipples, harder than gemstones, scraped seductively against the crisp, dark hair on his chest. He tasted so fine. She wanted more. His lips moved to the corner of her mouth with the gentlest of touches leaving her feeling worshipped, adored.

"Ah, Sam," she whispered, her mouth brushing lightly against his shoulder. "What am I gonna do with you?"

"I can think of a few things."

"Bet you can. Kiss me again, Sam."

He obliged her, taking the kiss deep again as his hand slid once down her side, then back up to capture her breast. Without missing a beat, he insinuated his rock-hard thigh between her legs until her drenched pussy was jammed against it. With the precision of a master, he rotated and pressed until she was a writhing mass of flesh beneath him. Her fingernails scraped against the warm flesh of his back as she broke the kiss. "More, Sam, more."

"Hell yeah. I love your clit pressed against me, honey. You're so damn wet." He nipped her neck and sucked the flesh into his mouth.

"It's you. You did it."

"It was both of us. It was us together."

Yes. Yes. Yes.

He skimmed his mouth over her chest and scraped his teeth across one distended nipple and Ellie swore she felt a flashfire burn through her belly and straight to her core. He nipped the sensitive spot beneath her breasts and then moved lower. His teeth scraped her belly. Ellie sent her fingers into his hair and held on for the ride.

But then suddenly he lifted, his fists planted near her shoulders and he looked down at her. Muscles bunched in his toned arms. "Let's turn you over, Ellie. I want to play with you."

She didn't protest when he turned her on her belly and settled a pillow under her head. Carefully, he arranged her arms to his satisfaction until they were drawn up near her face. Ellie felt Sam shift on the bed. Quiet filled the room. Anticipation curled low when he moved her legs apart, spreading her wide.

Tension slithered and curled through her body as Sam moved away. The mattress dipped and she knew he stood at the foot of the bed. He was looking at her. Ellie licked her suddenly dry lips and waited. She'd never felt more exposed.

Yes, she'd had sex before and didn't consider herself a novice but damn it, this was Sam. Everything seemed brand new with him. The way he touched her, looked at her, studied her with a fascinated gaze that she'd never experienced with any other man.

"Sam?"

"Shh. Just let me look. You don't have to do anything but lie there and already you have me ready to go off like a rocket."

Sam gripped her ankles and spread her legs further. "That's better," he murmured. "Let's see what we have here. Oh yeah. Pretty and pink and wet enough for a man to drown in." To emphasize the point, he ran his hands up her calves, then her thighs, until his fingers trailed through the petals of her sex, gathering her cream. "Ah, that's good, sweetheart. Perfect."

She heard a little snick of sound and realized he'd opened the bottle of chocolate-flavored massage cream. Never in a million years had she thought when she bought the decadent stuff that it would be Sam's hands applying it to her quivering flesh. Though she couldn't see, she realized he was warming the lotion in his hands and then, like an answered wish, he began to stroke her feet, her calves, the sensitive spot behind her knees. His touch felt like heaven as he drew his thumbs over the tender flesh of her inner thighs. She was damp there. Sam mumbled something she couldn't hear but then she felt his breath, warm and soft against her pussy. He didn't touch her there or taste her as she expected. He simply breathed as if drawing her scent deeply into his lungs, filling his head with her.

Ellie whispered his name as his hands smoothed over the globes of her ass then dipped between them to play with her anus. His finger circled the opening slowly, repeatedly.

"I want to fuck you here. What do you think?"

What did she think?

Right now she was incapable of thought. She could only feel and want...more.

Ellie closed her eyes, trying to form a coherent sentence. "Yeah," she whispered. "I think I'd like that."

Sam pressed his thumb to the small rosette then teased the opening, causing her to expel a breath, and then his touch was gone. His mouth settled on the curve of her butt to nip and kiss before trailing up to the dip in her spine. As his hands continued to work her heated skin Ellie burned with the need for him to pound deep and hard into her pussy. Sam paused only once to pour more lotion into his hands, saturating the air with the scent of chocolate.

"Does it taste good?" she wondered.

"Not bad." Sam's tongue flicked over her back, making Ellie writhe against the mattress. "I like the taste of you better. You're pretty damn sweet all by yourself."

"Aw, Sam. You're a nice guy."

"Nothing nice about me right now." His hands, then his lips found her shoulders and neck. His breath was hot, whipping against her flesh like a blast. Sam's hard body was pressed against her back, his thick, long cock pillowed between the cheeks of her butt. Unable to resist, she pushed against him, flexing until Sam groaned low and buried his lips against the side of her throat.

Ellie felt the loss of touch when he drew up to his knees behind her. He gripped her shoulders and gently turned her over. She no longer saw the smiling friend she'd known for years. His face was a mask of tension. Heat radiated from his dark eyes and his teeth were clenched. Ellie clearly saw the muscle work in his jaw as he looked down at her with a hungry gaze.

Sam reached out again for the bottle and squeezed another dollop into his palms. Though she was long past the point of wanting a massage, she let him play. His hands trailed from her throat to her chest, lingered over her sternum and then he cupped her breasts gently.

"Harder," she whispered.

Obliging her, he roughened his touch, thumbing her nipples, pinching them until they were hard and aching. Ellie's back arched from the bed. "Fuck me, Sam. Now. I can't wait."

His hands swept her torso, rubbed lightly over her belly until finally, his fingers settled over her pussy. Quivering, needing to be filled, she widened her legs. Ellie watched him stare with rapt fascination as he parted her labia and flicked her clit with this thumb. The breath whipped from her lungs as sensation streaked over her. She cried out.

"Fuck!" Sam's bottom lip was slack, high color rode the blades of his cheekbones and he grabbed her hips and flipped her over. From the corner of her eye, she saw him grab another pillow, which he shoved beneath her belly. "I can't wait. You're making me crazy!"

She heard a whir of sound. Anticipation made her go still. "What are you doing, Sam?"

"Shh. Lubing up this cool toy, sweetheart. Ah, there we go. Feels good, doesn't it?"

Every nerve ending sat up and sang when he slipped the long end of the hot pink vibrator into her vagina. As advertised, it whizzed against her G-spot, making her toes curl. Sam pressed it deeper until the tiny, notched clit stimulator rubbed just where she was aching for relief. A heavy sigh left her and then she sucked in another quick breath. Sam moved the instrument of torturous delight slowly in and out of her body, leaving her with no other option but to writhe against the pleasure, accept it, crave it.

"Feels good, doesn't it? God, I love watching you move, Ellie."

His words were too much when coupled with the devastating pleasure. Sam rotated the toy and pushed again, manipulating it like a master and it was suddenly more than she could bear. Flying apart, gasping into the pillow, she came in great waves.

Sam tossed the toy aside and bent to plant kisses on her ass, her lower back. "Come here, honey." He lifted her to her knees until her butt was canted high. "Gonna fuck this sweet ass now. That okay with you?"

Ellie looked back at him. Still speechless from the fast and furious orgasm, she could only nod but inside, her belly clenched in anticipation. Her ex had considered her the boring, non-adventurous type. Wow. If he could only see her now! Realistically she knew it wasn't just the sex. It was all about Sam. Quietly she watched him cover his hard cock with a condom then drizzle lube into the palm of his hand. The look on his face, hard and filled with raw purpose, made her heart turn over. A huge blast of love caught her unaware.

He ran his slick fingers over the drenched flesh of her pussy then higher to circle her anus. Ellie laid her forehead against the pillow, closed her eyes and absorbed every sensation. He covered her completely with the lube and then his finger probed gently. The forbidden sensation of being filled that way made her go still. He added another finger then slowly pushed them deeper.

"Tight."

Oh yeah. No argument there.

Sam opened those two fingers repeatedly, stretching her for the fucking to come. Ellie's sensitized pussy responded with a fresh flood of moisture. She pushed back against the invasion as a slow burn started up deep inside her. When Sam removed his fingers, she felt the warmth of more lube being applied to her anus and then the broad head of his cock was at her entrance, slowly pushing inside. Ellie bit her lip. She waited.

He grabbed her ass and held on as he inched farther, deeper. "All right?"

Ellie was incapable of answering as pleasure, decadent and dark, speared through her.

"Ellie?"

She nodded sharply. From above her she heard Sam expel a heavy breath. Again he pushed, stroking her butt, until finally he was seated deep inside her. Sam began to move within her and it was like the answer to a prayer. Stretched to capacity, she felt every sensation, every bit of his strong, hard cock as he thrust. A low moan, Sam's, curled darkly through the air. His balls had gone hard. They were settled against her, making Ellie wonder if they could ever fit tighter, be closer, than they were at that moment. Sam reached beneath her and fingered her pussy, squeezing her clit as he fucked her ass.

Then everything he'd had been withholding seemed to coalesce and he came with a low hiss of sound. His fingers clenched over her clit and she fell over that sharp edge with him. She wasn't quite coherent when he withdrew and disposed of the condom. He rose from the bed and she heard water running in the bathroom. Then Sam came down beside her, yanking the pillow from beneath her belly and pulled her close. He was so warm. He smelled so good. Sam buried his lips in her hair and ran his hands over her spent body. "Ah, Ellie."

* * * * *

Sam stood quietly watching as she stuffed things into her overnight bag but inside he was seething with frustration. He leaned against the doorframe and tucked his hands into his back pockets. Anything to keep him from reaching out for her and begging her to stay. For the past two days they'd fucked on every surface of his house but now she seemed so damn distant he wanted to shake her. He wanted her to stay and never leave him again yet Ellie was cool and collected as she tucked the well-used sex toys into her bag. Sure, she lived just next door but, after this weekend, he knew that would never be enough. Not for him.

"Sure you don't want to stay for a while longer? Got a new video game I've been wanting to try out. We could check it out together."

Damn. Could I sound any more of a lame ass?

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she looked up. Her smile seemed a little plastic to him. Her eyes connected then quickly darted back to her open bag. "Um. No. Better not, Sam. I've got a long day tomorrow getting a website put together for a client."

Ellie worked from her home as a graphic artist and website designer. A long time ago he'd helped her convert a small bedroom into a nicely functioning office. He nodded. "Okay. I get that. I also get that you are avoiding discussing what happened between us this weekend."

Sam figured it was best to bring this all out in the open. He straightened from his position against the door and went to her, taking her shoulders in his hands. If he had to force her to look at him, so be it. "This all started with me trying to prove to you how wonderful you are. You believe it now, don't you?"

She drew in a deep breath then released it. The tension seemed to leave her body. Tears welled in her eyes. Sam's heart thudded hard and sharp in his chest and before he could reconsider his actions, he pulled her against him. Why in the hell had he started this now? Dumb. He didn't know a damn thing about dealing with tears! He'd just opened his mouth to speak when his cell phone rang.

Reluctantly he released her and reached into his pocket. The fire station. He'd almost forgotten he was on call.

"Yeah. Sam here."

Sam listened to the words of his chief then disconnected. "An apartment building is burning near downtown. I've gotta run."

Ellie nodded sharply. "Of course. Let me get out of your way."

"You're never in my way but, yeah, I have to head out. But don't think for a minute we're not gonna have a long talk when I get back."

While Sam pulled a tee shirt over his head, Ellie finished up her packing and within minutes, he was walking with her across the yard to her house, her protesting every

step of the way. Sam stopped at her front door and, needing to end their weekend on a lighter note, smiled. "Mom would have my hide if I wasn't a gentleman."

As expected she smiled back. "Like I said. I love your mom." Then her eyes went soft as she reached out for him. She hugged him hard. "Be careful," she whispered.

"I always am. Don't worry."

Chapter Five

Ellie stood there, her heart in her throat, as Sam loped across the yard and got into his truck. When he drove off down the street, she finally closed the front door, leaning back against it with a sigh. Now that she was alone, she let the tears fall. It was hell not knowing where she stood with Sam. What did he think of her now?

Heading into the bedroom she deposited her bag on the floor and looked around the quiet space, feeling loneliness sink into her bones.

Deciding to leave the unpacking for later, she headed into the backyard. It was late afternoon, the Texas sun shone brightly and more than anything, Ellie needed to clear her head. Once she was settled on a patio chair, she glanced toward the fence she shared with Sam. Immediately her mind was filled with the memory of him and the hot tub and then all the things that had come after. No one in her experience had ever brought her to orgasm the way he had. Sam was utterly unselfish both as a lover and a friend but did he want more? She suspected that now that it was all said and done, she'd just been a pity fuck after all. Maybe she'd just made the biggest mistake of her life. He said he wanted to talk and she was pretty damn sure it would be that old standard fare.

Hey, Ellie. You know I care about you, right? We're still friends, aren't we? We shouldn't let this weekend of wild monkey sex affect that in any way.

Closing her suddenly burning eyes, she let her head drop back. That's what Sam wanted to talk about. He was a nice guy. He'd worry that she might read too much into their little weekend of sex games. Tears leaked from beneath her closed lids, trailed down her cheeks and Ellie wanted to kick her own butt a million times over. She should never have let herself give in to what she'd always wanted. It was only going to lead to misery.

She'd been through enough misery with the men in her life. First her ex had abused her trust and left her for another woman and then had come a string of men whose interests had been nothing but selfish. For once, she wanted to love and be loved by someone who was good and decent. Like Sam. It wouldn't be so bad if he was hotter than hell too. Yeah, like Sam.

An hour later, Ellie had pulled herself together. She unpacked and, feeling restless went into her tiny home office to boot up the computer. Thinking that diving headlong into her work might help occupy her mind, she went to work on the website she'd been creating for a Dallas business. When the silence became unbearable, she reached for the remote control to switch on the television in an entertainment center on the other side of the room. Immediately her attention was riveted to the scene unfolding. She barely

heard the voice of the local newsman as she watched the building on the screen. Below the picture were the words, *Breaking News. Fire engulfs downtown apartment complex.*

Sam!

Ellie went still and stared at the television screen. At least half a dozen fire trucks surrounded the area. Water from giant hoses jetted toward the billowing smoke mixed with flame. It was crazy! Squinting her eyes, she looked for Sam but the firemen in their yellow coats looked like tiny ants racing across the screen. It would be impossible to find him among the others. Yes, this was his job and he was highly trained for it but the thought of him being in danger was terrifying.

Fear shook her.

This was a bad one.

Fireman rushed out of the building while others took their places inside the quickly deteriorating building. Worry for Sam made her desperate to do something, anything and then the announcer paused as the roof of the complex collapsed in a cloud of smoke and debris.

Oh my God!

Ellie's hands went over her mouth. Was Sam even now trapped beneath the rubble of what remained of the building? Shaking, trembling, she felt the truth roll through her. She loved him! She loved Sam so much and couldn't imagine a world without him in it.

She had to find out. Something. Anything.

Without hesitation, she dialed Deborah Dare, Sam's mom.

The instant she answered Ellie blurted, "Deb, is he okay? Do you know anything?"

Deb's voice shook. "Nothing. Haven't heard a thing, honey. You'd think I'd be used to this by now but I don't think I'll ever be comfortable with him being in such danger."

Tears fell from Ellie's eyes and she knuckled them away. "Let's keep the phone lines clear but please, please call if you hear anything."

"I will. You do the same."

Nervous energy filled her. Her hands were shaking. She'd always known Sam's job held dangers. These guys were real heroes. But it wasn't until now that she realized she could lose him forever due to the nature of his work. Ellie headed toward her bedroom and into the master bath, stripping as she went. Turning on the shower, she let it run until steam filled the room.

Once she stepped under the spray, she lost it. Memories of the things they'd done, the ways they'd touched each other whispered through her mind. Along with those were the tiny everyday things they'd shared together for over two years now. Ellie lifted her face into the water and let the tears fall, promising herself that she would tell Sam how she felt about him if she was lucky enough to see him again.

Shaky from the aftereffects of her crying jag, she dried her body and dragged the towel over her wet hair. Shrugging into an oversized tee shirt, she turned on the

television in her bedroom and curled up on her bed to watch. The local news station was still running film of the devastating fire. It was all over now and authorities were busy digging through the rubble. Several residents of the apartment building had died and six firefighters were badly injured. Many others had been treated for smoke inhalation.

Ellie thought her heart would stop.

Not knowing what was happening was driving her crazy!

As the newsman's voice continued to drone, she curled up in the center of her bed and tried desperately to think positive thoughts. She didn't know how long she lay there but night had fallen and the room was dark except for the flickering lights from the television. When the phone on her nightstand rang shrilly, she jerked and made a grab for it.

"Hello?"

"Ellie? It's Deb. Sam just called. He's okay, honey."

"Oh, God! Deb, I'm so relieved."

"He's heading home as soon as things settle down. I'm sure you'll be hearing from him."

Ellie hoped it was soon and in person. She was dying to get her hands on him.

* * * * *

Adrenaline raced through Sam's system as he drove down the quiet residential street and pulled into his driveway. His heart still pounding from the ordeal he'd faced with his firefighter brothers, he glanced toward Ellie's house and saw a small light glinting from her bedroom window. It was late but maybe she was still awake.

Didn't matter to him much though. Not at this point. If he had to pound on her door to get her beautiful ass out of bed, so be it, he was game. Feeling fierce and hungry, he got out of his truck and patted his back pocket. One condom. Not nearly enough for what he had in mind. Determination dogging his every step, he entered his house and grabbed an entire box of condoms from a drawer in his bedroom. Sam locked up and headed across the yard that separated him from Ellie. His cock was already hard and ready, throbbing against the fly of his jeans.

Lifting his fist, he pounded on the door. "Ellie? It's Sam. Open up."

He'd never been so eager to get inside a woman. Tormenting himself, he imagined all that hot, drenched flesh surrounding his cock as he thrust high and hard. He pounded again and the door burst open revealing Ellie standing there in nothing but a giant tee shirt. Tears swam in pretty gray eyes that were red and bleary. She wasn't looking her best but Sam didn't give a shit. He loved her. Red eyes and all. He needed her more than his next breath.

"Sam! Oh honey!" Her hands went over her mouth and then she made a little squeaky sound as she leaped against him and practically climbed up his body. Deftly

catching her, his forearm under her ass, he stepped into the living room and kicked the door shut. Tossing the box aside, he buried his face against her throat.

Her hands were everywhere, sliding over his shoulders, neck and back, slipping into his hair as she rained sharp, sweet little kisses on his face. Her legs were wrapped tightly around his waist, her cunt pressed warm against his belly. With a low groan, he backed her against the nearest wall and raked his erection over her pussy. He barely heard Ellie's soft cry over the pounding in his ears. He wanted to take, to fuck, to claim. She was his and he wanted her now.

Thrusting against her, dry-fucking her, sent his libido into overdrive. Sam grabbed the hem of the huge tee shirt, yanked it over her head and tossed it aside. Feeling savage, he took her nipple in his mouth and sucked hard, scraping with his teeth as his fingers found the slick folds of her pussy. Releasing her nipple with a soft pop, he unhooked her legs from around his waist and lowered her until her feet touched the floor. Going to his knees, he trailed open-mouthed kisses over her ribs, her belly.

"Spread your legs for me, darlin'. Damn, you smell sweet. Let me lick your sweet pussy."

"Sam!"

He trailed his fingers over the seam of her cunt, opened her labia and looked his fill at the sweet, damp flesh. Sending two fingers deep into her pussy, he worked her, finger-fucked her until Ellie's cries filled the air. Her clit was swollen, practically begging to be sucked. "Gonna suck this. Sweet."

"Do it!"

He teased the morsel with the tip of his tongue, swearing he could feel it throbbing. Needing her, needing this, he sucked her clit gently and felt Ellie go still for a split second before she began to writhe slowly and push against his devouring mouth. His mouth got busy and then he removed his fingers from her pussy so he could thrust his tongue repeatedly deep into her sheath. Ellie arched against him, then stiffened as she flew apart. Her legs were trembling. Sam ran his palms over her thighs then unzipped to remove his cock from his jeans. He grabbed the condom from his back pocket and covered himself. Looping his arms beneath her knees, Sam surged upward and buried his cock deep, then deeper, until he was seated to the hilt.

"Oh yes, Sam," Ellie breathed against his chest.

Pounding, thrusting repeatedly deep inside her, he felt her muscles clench and relax, squeezing his cock until he thought the top of his head would just blow off. His balls were drawn up, hard and aching and he felt the drenched softness of her flesh tease them with each upward stroke. Suddenly it was too much and Sam came long and hard.

When he released Ellie's legs and she slumped, naked and shuddering, against the wall, Sam kicked off his jeans and disposed of the spent condom in a nearby trash can. He drew his tee shirt over his head and lifted her up. Her bedroom was close so he carried her in and within seconds had her spread out on the bed. Sprawling next to her,

hugging her close, he settled his thigh between hers, loving the feel of her damp flesh against him, her naked breasts pressing tightly against his chest.

Ellie shuddered in his arms.

"You okay?" he whispered against her hair.

She shook her head. "I was so scared, Sam."

"I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry but—"

Ellie's breathing changed and she started to cry. Sam thought his heart would break. "Shh. Shh now. It's okay."

"I-I don't want to be friends anymore, Sam."

Sam went still and drew back to look at her. Her cheeks were damp, her eyes puffy from crying. It didn't matter. He loved her. "What the hell are you talking about, honey?" Even in the shadowy room, he noted the trembling smile on her lips.

"I can't just be your friend, Sam. I want more. Maybe you don't want to hear this but—"

Relief soared through him as he kissed her, deeply then softer. She was the realization of everything he'd wanted for over two years. "How about this," he whispered against her lips. "I love you, Ellie. Why don't we be friends *and* lovers? That works for me."

Ellie laughed and pressed closer, winding her arms around his to hold him tight. "Ah, Sam, that works for me too."

NADIA SEDUCED

Madison Hayes

Chapter One

The man was pure sin, Nadia decided as she gazed at the tall male who stood on her flagstone doorstep. Pure, unadulterated sin and a decidedly dangerous temptation.

The wide brim of his hat and his black shoulder-length hair shadowed most of his face but the small amount of light that leaked from her open door glanced across a well-defined chin with a wisp of dark beard. His rustic clothing didn't meet the standard of her usual clients who, for the most part, dressed in silks and velvets. But everything else about him met their measure...and then some. Without moving her head, she let her gaze slide down his body. Beneath his trousers, where the supple doeskin cupped his sex, the soft leather sagged as though under a bulky weight.

The man was a heartbreak waiting to happen. And Nadia was determined that he wouldn't happen to her. "I'm sorry," she said. "But I'm not taking any customers tonight."

"I've traveled a long way, miss," he pointed out quietly, his handsome chin taking on a stubborn angle.

"I'm sorry," she repeated. "But it's late and I'm tired."

"It won't take long," he promised with a candor that was surprising in a man talking about sex.

Although Nadia was a whore, it wasn't unusual for her to turn down a customer. Indeed, it was most liable to happen when the man was just too damn attractive for her own good. The man standing on her doorstep met that description. She glanced at his practical gray cloak and tried a different approach. "Two gold," she said, quoting him a price that was twice her usual fee and hoping it would dampen his enthusiasm if not his ardor.

He shifted his feet and whistled. "I heard you were high," he murmured artlessly. His sensual mouth drew into a considering knot and the brim of his hat dropped a notch. "And I heard you were worth it."

His tone told her he wasn't discouraged by the high figure. A slight breeze stirred the tangle of wild roses that grew against her home and lifted their gentle scent into the air as Nadia sighed, hardly knowing what to try next to get the stubborn man off her doorstep. Instinctively, she knew that he presented no threat. It was only her heart that felt endangered.

She hadn't felt this way about a man since— But she didn't want to think about Ivan. Or love. She'd made the mistake of falling in love once before and the results had been disastrous. She was never going to let it happen again.

An only child, reared by two doting parents in a small mountain village, Nadia had received offers of marriage as early as fourteen. She couldn't count the number of fine, hardworking, respectable men who would have been glad to marry her, love her and start a family with her. But, with a head full of romantic notions, she'd turned down the proposals from her childhood acquaintances and familiar townsmen, holding out for the magic of passionate love—feelings which she'd thought she'd realized when she'd met Ivan Mayer.

Titled and privileged, Ivan had swept into town, swept her off her feet and married her. Together they'd traveled back to his estate outside Petrov. She'd been surprised when she'd stepped through the doors of his fine old mansion and found the rooms stripped of furniture. His financial resources long since exhausted, all Ivan had left were his title and his good looks, his horses and his carriage. But none of that had troubled Nadia. After all, she hadn't married him for his money and wasn't accustomed to luxury. She had been willing to make a go of it and ready to live on love alone. She figured the mansion could be sold and they could move into a smaller place. While Ivan looked for employment, Nadia could keep a garden like the one at home, where she'd helped her mother raise potatoes, corn and table greens.

Ivan had other ideas. He'd recognized right away the potential of his young wife. After breaking her in bed, he'd shopped her out almost immediately. She'd serviced his rich neighbors and wealthy associates while Ivan benefited from their favor. As soon as he could afford it, he'd hired a burly manservant to keep an eye on Nadia. Inevitably, the mansion had become a prison, every expensive new piece of furniture a haunting reminder of her sacrifice, of the way she was forced to spend her evenings. And on those nights when her husband joined her in bed, she'd felt nothing for him other than horrified loathing.

It had taken two years, but eventually she'd slipped away from her bodyguard during a trip to the city. With no money and nothing but the dress on her back, she'd sold her body at the first opportunity and used the gold to travel far from her husband's reach. She'd changed her last name and hung out her shingle. She could probably have made a good living if she had applied herself but she turned away more than half the men who came knocking, only accepting enough work to pay for food, clothing and rent on the small stone cottage tucked beneath the bridge.

Her rates were high and she was never tempted to lower them. Though she missed her parents and longed to go back home, she didn't dare return to a place where Ivan might find her. Instead, she helped other unfortunate young women who were ready to give up whoring and return to their families.

The passion Nadia had hoped to share with her husband had never had a chance to blossom and she'd never derived any pleasure from coupling. She felt nothing for the men who came to her, their coins clenched in grubby fists or pulled from silk-lined pockets. Nothing until that moment when she stood in her doorway gazing at the long, lithe lines of her visitor's handsome frame.

Nadia had learned her lesson well, however. She'd learned to avoid handsome men. She'd learned to subdue her feelings. She'd learned to be wary of her own heart. And she knew better than to be tempted by this man.

"It will only be hand work," she insisted in a last-ditch effort to discourage him. It wasn't fair to charge two gold for hand work. Normally she charged one gold for much more. But Nadia wasn't trying to cheat the poor man. She was just trying to get rid of him.

Her visitor wasn't easily discouraged. "All ten fingers?" he questioned, his voice roughened with a low note of hunger. "Anywhere I want them? When and where I want them?"

His question reminded her that he was only a customer trying to get a good deal. And she was only a whore. With that in mind, she took a step backward, inside the sheltering walls of her small stone house. Though it was midsummer, the nights were always cool in her cottage by the river and she rubbed her hands down her arms to ward off the late evening chill.

Following her retreat, he moved beneath the lintel, his chin angling up a bit in the shadowed night. Enough for her to catch a glimpse of intense blue eyes reflecting the light of the single candle that flickered in her window embrasure. The eager glow of light caressed the hard angles of his lower face where his gently curving smile revealed a one-sided dimple.

By the gods, he was a fine male specimen. Black hair. Blue eyes. Tall, long-limbed and graceful, a casual strength rippled beneath his skin with every sauntering step, every confident shift of his shoulders and every self-possessed tilt of his hips. Her pulse fluttered as a lust-heavy haze settled around her. Defeated, Nadia felt her resolve crumble as she gave him a helpless nod. "It will only be hand work," she repeated in a mumble.

"We're understood then," he said in a rich rumble of sound that sent shivers of excitement down her spine.

"We're understood," she echoed. As she backed another step into the room, he followed her through the door and pushed it closed behind him. It latched with a soft click. "The room is cold," he said, eying the few sticks of wood beside the dying fire.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, twisting her hands together. "There are a few logs outside but they need to be split."

"I'll take care of that before I leave," he offered in a quiet murmur. "In the meantime, let's get this room warmed up a bit."

Squatting before the hearth, he poked at a few coals and coaxed a small flame to life. As Nadia watched, her gaze slipping surreptitiously over his muscular thighs, he reached for two splits of wood and crossed them over the lick of orange he'd kindled.

While her guest built the fire, Nadia tiptoed across the room to the window. She moved the candle to her small writing table that stood against the wall and drew the curtains closed to signal that she was engaged. Except for the two small points of light,

one in the hearth and one on the table, the room was cloaked in darkness. Slowly, she moved around the dinner table that sat in the middle of the room so she could get a better look at her visitor's face. Before she could satisfy her curiosity about his looks, however, he stood and stepped behind her. She felt his fingers rub gently against her skull as he pulled at the ivory combs that held her hair.

"What are you doing?" she asked as her hair fell to her shoulders in a loose pour of dark honey. She'd never had a client who didn't get straight to business. She'd never had a customer who stoked the fire or offered to cut wood. And she'd certainly never had a customer who undid her hair.

"I'm only using my hands," he argued after the slightest hesitation. "That was the agreement, wasn't it?"

She blinked her eyes wide. "*Your* hands? I thought...I thought we were talking about *my* hands."

"Did you?" His muted voice held the sound of smooth laughter. "If I only wanted hand work, I'd do it myself and save two gold, miss. I'll tell you what, while my hands are learning all the intimate details of your body, you may feel free to put yours anywhere you like.

"No charge," he added on an amused whisper.

Without waiting for her reaction, he pulled her hair away from her neck while tracing her jawline with the fingers of his other hand. The rasping drag of his thumb spoke of long days spent working in the sun. She closed her eyes as his warm breath touched her neck. She shivered with anticipation and waited for his lips on her nape where she longed for the grazing brush of his mouth. But only his knuckles dragged lightly beneath her hairline. The contact lasted a bare instant, followed by a wash of heated breath.

Her eyes closed and she drew in a long shuddering gasp. "Oh please," she whispered as, responding to erotic reflex, she stretched against him, dropping the back of her head to his shoulder and pushing her bottom into his work-hardened thighs.

His breath continued to heat the length of her neck while his hands touched her waist lightly and rested there a moment before sweeping up to loosen the ribbons that drew her light blue blouse tight across her breasts. The fumbling touch of his long fingers made her knees tremble and she leaned back against his chest, hungry for male contact, hungry for his warmth and his strength. After a breathless interval of time that seemed to stretch into forever, one of his fingers rode carelessly over her linen-draped nipple and she sucked in a sharp, gusting breath. Then his fingers slid between the loose ribbons and plucked at her cleavage as he pulled her blouse open.

Nadia held her breath and waited for his hands to skim into her blouse and over her nipples, now aching for attention, begging for the rough touch of the man's weathered fingers and work-toughened palms. When his hands brushed lightly across her tight nipples, the swollen buds stung in a greedy desire for more. But his hands continued away, hard against her ribs, firm against her midriff, encircling her waist

tightly as he pulled her around to face him, his head still angled downward, his face close to hers. She felt the warmth of his lips close to her cheek and without thinking, her mouth automatically lifted to his. But, as though determined to use nothing but his hands, he moved his fingers swiftly between their faces and barred her from the kiss she desired with her entire soul. Gently, he rubbed the thick pad of his fingertip across her bottom lip, tugged down and tested the slick inner surface.

As she surrendered to a deep, unraveling sense of urgency, he stepped away. With his fists wadding the hem of his loose white linen shirt, he ripped it over his head and sent his hat sliding down to the stone-paved floor. Thick muscles bunched on his shoulders and a dusting of hair darkened his wide, sun-bronzed chest. The tight ridges on his abdomen flexed as he tossed his shirt aside. Nadia swallowed hard as she stared at his lithe, narrow waist, her gaze following the dark line of hair that collected beneath his navel and tracked into the soft leather trousers that hung on his hips.

Before she had a chance to return her gaze to his face, he glided close to her side and slid both hands beneath the waistband of her plain, dark blue skirt. One of his large palms captured the small of her back while the other spread to possess her flat stomach.

"Untie the skirt," he whispered, his hands roaming her skin as he waited for the skirt to fall past her hips. Following it downward with his hands, his fingers slid between her legs, both in front and behind, smoothing warmly over her flesh. The presence of his hands, spreading their heat between her legs should have brought her some relief from the burning desire that charred her to her core, but instead, they only teased more need out of her. The thought of his fingers separating her labia and brushing across her damp folds, driving down the length of her slit to play with her tender opening, made a shiver travel her spine. The man's caresses were maddeningly slow and devastatingly insufficient. She wanted more. Needed more. If only he would really *touch* her. At that point, Nadia was almost ready to plead for his fingers in her quim.

She had never in her entire lifetime, felt anything remotely like this. It had been years, in fact, since she had felt anything at all. Years that had witnessed an endless procession of men through the unending train of days and night. Men who had come to her and only taken, leaving nothing in return but cold, hard coins. Men who had kept their hands to themselves, as well as their lips and their love. Men who had covered her with their bodies and thrust between her legs. Men who had stood behind her and mounted her as she gripped the table's edge. Men who had never seen anything beyond the excellence of her body and the beauty of her face.

She'd never known anything like this—the loving slide of a man's touch, reverent and groping, worshipful and greedy. She'd never known what it was to hunger for a man. She'd imagined but never experienced the joy of waking next to a man she loved, his naked limbs stretched out on rumpled sheets while the first colors of dawn seeped into the room and washed over bronzed skin, his arms flung over his head, a fan of masculine hair nestled in the muscled troughs under his arms.

Maddeningly, he caressed the delicate flesh between her legs, the fingers of one hand stroking her nether lips as they grew thick and needy, the fingers of the other pressing tentatively at her damp opening. She looked down at his strong, sun-darkened forearm, lightly haired and powerfully worked with lean sinew and twisting veins as it pressed against her body, his hand manipulating her flesh with a wicked, knowing touch that made her ache for completion. His calloused fingers stroked across the outer lips of her quim and tortured her gently as she tilted her head and rested her temple on his chest where his rich male scent, reminiscent of sun-washed fields, lay on his skin.

"Oh no," she breathed. "No. Don't tease me. I've waited too long. I've waited too long to feel this. To feel anything at all."

"You want more?" he murmured on a lust-roughened breath. She searched for a glimpse of his eyes, but his head tipped downward and the long strands of his night-dark hair fell across his face as he watched his hand ride over the cloud of curls on her mound. With gentle precision, he dipped one finger into the top of her cleft and played her tightly strung clitoris like a trembling note of music.

As Nadia gasped and shuddered under the pressure of building arousal, he took her to what felt like the breaking point of orgasm. Then he left her there, hovering at the edge of something perfect, as he stepped in front of her.

"Spread your legs," he murmured huskily then rumbled a sigh of satisfaction when she slipped her foot across the floor and widened her stance. Glancing behind him to find the table in the middle of the room, he leaned back on its edge and pulled her toward him. With his broad palm warming her skin, he lifted her leg and settled her slipper-clad foot on the table beside his hip then pushed her knee outward before returning his fingers to her slippery seam. His touch trailing through the most private part of her body lifted her in a wild rush to the edge of bliss.

"Gods in dark places," he rasped as his fingers ran through the tender folds between her thighs. "You're so wet. You feel so good, your cunt soaking my fingers."

His hands moved suddenly to his trousers, tugging at the buttons and urging the leather open. As his trousers loosened, he reached inside and eased out the thick length of his rigid cock. Nadia's legs went weak at the sight of his fat, dark cock head cresting the top of his fist. She'd never seen such a long, wide, brutally handsome piece of flesh. Her mouth watered as he stroked out the heavy shaft. She wanted to touch that thick stalk with her lips. She wanted to taste the fine sweat of need that dampened his shaft. At that point she regretted that she'd limited her guest to hand work. At that point she wanted to offer more. But that would hardly be professional.

Slowly, he opened his fist and his cock sprang free for a few seconds before he took her hand and curled it around his veined width then pumped his hand over hers. His other hand returned to slip through the slick seam of her quim, touching and testing the length of her slit before settling on the tight, ripe knot of her clitoris. Nadia whimpered as moisture eased from her opening and coated her folds so that his fingers slid deliciously over the delicate flesh between her labia.

With his hand locking hers around his shaft, he pumped the long, pulsing rod of flesh. He was panting in short, low grunts as he clamped his other hand over hers and threw his hips into the tight, hot, gripping hold of their locked fingers. Watching him in the erotic act of pumping his groin into her hand made her quim flood and the surge of liquid wet the insides of her thighs.

A thick drop of his semen welled at his tip and he stopped the jerk of his hips. Slowly, he pulled the pad of his thumb across his cock head and brushed away the bead of moisture, then raised his thumb and rubbed it across her lower lip while a strangled, airless sound of craving caught in her throat.

"You like that," he stated in an earthy rasp. "Let's see what else you like."

In one smooth, gliding movement, he lifted her. After carrying her a few steps, he settled her on her bed, built up on a high stack of drawers. "Close your eyes," he commanded as he cradled her head and eased her down onto her back. She did as she was told and squeezed her eyes shut but not before she caught a brief glimpse of intense blue targeting the delicate flesh between her thighs. He lifted her feet to the bed's edge and pushed her knees wide. His long fingers cased her rib cage as he rucked her blouse up over her breasts, his thumbs grazing over her nipples so roughly that she had to strangle a crazed sound of longing.

Self-consciously, she bit down on her lip and smothered a whimper. As he returned his fingers to her quim, she knew he watched his hand sliding through her slit, riding up over her clitoris, catching it between two fingers and playing it until she ached and burned and spilled at the mouth of her opening. The hot trickle of liquid seeped down between the cheeks of her bottom while sweat collected at the top of her thighs.

Her fingers clawed at the quilt as she pushed her legs wider and lifted her bottom, pushing her engorged folds to meet his talented hands, indirectly guiding his fingers lower, to a location just above her entrance where his touch delivered greater satisfaction and more dark pleasure. Several times, he allowed her to feed her intimate flesh to his fingers then he took control again. With his hands on her knees, he opened her wide.

"Are you ready?" he whispered. "I am. I'm ready to come all over you at the sight of you spreading your legs for me, stretching them wide enough to part the plump, rosy lips of your quim, offering your tender, fluttering cunt to my fingers. How long has it been for you that you would react with such need? How long has it been since you found satisfaction with a man? How long has it been since you were fucked into pleasure, angel? How long since a man opened you and took you with fingers or tongue or the full, heavy weight of his cock and made you orgasm on him?"

Her head tossed fretfully as she hovered on the sharp edge of release. Her body screamed for his touch, for one more passing scrape of his finger on her burning clitoris, one more press against the drenched opening of her vagina. "Too long!" she cried in anguish. "Please, just touch me."

"How long?" he growled insistently.

"Forever," she moaned. "It's never happened. Please. Just touch me."

"A man has never watched you come?"

"No!" she cried.

"Then I'll be the first," he answered, his throaty voice heavy with satisfaction.

His fingers swept through the wet line of her quim one more time and she started to come in a shivering spill of ecstasy. Automatically, her legs closed in protective reflex but he caught her knees and forced them open so he could watch the contractions of her shuddering cunt. Trapped on the bed, she twisted and cried and whimpered and sobbed, aching and empty where she longed for a man's cock to fill her clutching channel, realizing the error of her ways. In limiting her guest to hand work only, she'd denied herself the pleasure of a full taking.

Finally she sank back down onto the mattress, the soft quilt feeling cool beneath her damp backside. Immediately, his hand moved between her legs again, massaging her sodden lips over her clitoris and bringing her quickly to a second tight orgasm. Then a third. As he gently rubbed his fingers against the fading pleasure, she opened her eyes and stared up at him, her emotions in chaos. She couldn't believe that so many men—the men who paid for her services—could do this sort of thing casually, without involving their hearts. Paying with coins rather than emotion. Because, after what this man done to her, her heart was reaching for him with both hands.

He stood between her legs, the candle's faint gold light licking over the muscular shift of his broad shoulders as he leaned over her and flattened his hands on the mattress. His face hung over hers, his black hair shielding his eyes. She could see only the strong angle of his chin, the hard line of his lower lip and his Adam's apple standing out in the rugged curve of his neck. "That was beautiful," he murmured in a raw, guttural scrape of sound. "Watching you come was beautiful."

Eager to please him after the pleasure he'd given her, she swiftly cased his taut shaft in her hands. As her fingers wrapped around his wide, throbbing girth, he rewarded her with a deep growl, weighted with pleasure. "Are you sure you want to do that?" he rumbled.

"I'm sure," she insisted breathlessly.

"It's going to be messy," he warned her, a satyr's smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"I'm sure," she repeated.

"Then, hold on," he commanded as he threw his hips at her hands again. Obediently, she held his cock against her belly and he shoved into her grip as though he was buried deep inside her streaming cunt that lay just inches away.

The lunge of his hips became more violent until, with a strangled obscenity, he stilled on a final powering thrust. Nadia felt his hot semen slap onto her skin in a thick wet puddle that filled her shallow navel. As the heavy liquid spread over her belly, he fell over her, breathing heavily, his wide chest crushed against her heartbeat, the moist, silken drag of his lips rubbing into her hairline.

Steeped in a sated glow, for several quiet moments she did nothing more than stroke her fingers through his tousled mane. Eventually he sighed, a wealth of contentment in the sound as he levered himself upward again. As she gazed up at his shadowed features, she caught a glimpse of intense blue and the flicker of that elusive but very masculine dimple.

"My name is Nadia," she offered shyly.

He chuckled softly. "I know," he said, pulling a heavy strand of her hair away from her face.

"How do you know?" she asked.

"Men talk. News travels."

"News?" she questioned him anxiously. It had never occurred to her that men might carry news of her to distant places where it could reach Ivan's ears. Too late, she realized she should have changed her first name as well as her last when she had hung out her shingle.

"News of the most beautiful whore in the country," he murmured against her skin. "A woman who couldn't be satisfied."

"They were wrong about that," she purred, shelving for the moment her concerns about Ivan.

"They were wrong," he agreed quietly.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Mikhail," he answered as he straightened between her legs and closed his cock inside his trousers.

"Mikhail," she murmured softly while watching him handle his cock.

"The fire has died," he noted as he fastened the buttons on his trousers. The deep masculine sound filled the small room and made it feel like a home rather than a whore's crib. "I'd better bring in some more wood."

He pulled away from her while her fingers plucked at his forearms. She felt safe while he covered her. The moment he lifted away from her, she missed his heat and the protection she felt in his presence. Immediately, she crossed her arms over her breasts and hugged his warmth close to her skin.

As he turned his back and swept his shirt from the stone-paved floor, he said, "Considering the rates you can demand, I'd think you could afford a bigger place than this."

"I suppose I could," she answered. "If I applied myself."

"But?" he asked, pulling the white shirt over his head.

"But I don't work any more than I must."

He fed his muscle-wrought arms into the loose sleeves and the shirt settled down around his narrow waist as his handsome profile angled toward her. "If you don't like this line of work then why do you keep at it?"

"What else could I do?" she asked.

"You could get married," he suggested reasonably. "You must get offers."

"Yes," she admitted as she pushed up to a sitting position and crossed her feet at the ankles. Even after all the years of whoring, she still received proposals from the men who came to her. She tugged her rumpled blouse down over her breasts and watched him tuck his shirt into his trousers. "I still get offers. But I had a husband once."

"And?" he prompted her as he reached for his hat then tilted it over his eyes.

"It didn't work out." She leveled her serious gaze on what she could see of his face. "It would be difficult to remarry, considering Ivan still holds a wedding contract with my name on it. But I have no intention of marrying again. After I left him, I decided if I had to whore, it would be for myself."

Finally his chin lifted as he turned his head and pinned her with his intense blue gaze. His jaw hardened, a muscle twitching beneath his burnished skin, his body drawing into a rigid line. "Your husband did that to you?"

"I was eighteen," she answered.

"I'd like to meet him," he gritted, his fists bunching at his sides while his eyes narrowed into fierce lines of violence.

"He wasn't a bad man," she argued with a flat little laugh. "Just a poor one."

He shook his head, the silken ends of his hair brushing his shoulders. "He was a poor man and a bad one. Your love should have been enough for him. More than enough. Enough to make him rich."

"Oh, Ivan wasn't opposed to the idea of me making him rich," she stated wryly.

"That's not what I meant," he cut back at her, his back going up at the way she'd turned his words around. The fierce timbre that layered his words aroused her and she watched, fascinated, as he fought to separate himself from his anger. "It's just that...if you were my woman, I wouldn't consider myself a poor man," he finally said in a gruff undertone.

If you were my woman.

It was a seductively tempting idea but Nadia didn't want to encourage his interest in her, no matter how tenuous it might be. Past experience had taught her that offers of that kind must be turned down swiftly, since men tended to hound her to death when they thought they had a chance. "I'll never give up my freedom again," she answered, lifting her chin to a stubborn angle in an effort to express a certainty she did not feel.

He said nothing, though a dissatisfied sound scraped from his throat as he reached for his cloak. "Let me cut some firewood for you before I leave."

The sound of the axe biting into wood echoed beneath the bridge and Nadia hummed softly as she filled her blue and white porcelain bowl with cold water. After stripping off her blouse and securing her hair on top of her head, she took a soft cloth, dipped it in the brisk water and washed. Not long afterward, she stood dressed in clean clothing. Gazing into the small mirror on the wall above the writing table, she tilted her

chin and noted the healthy pink glow on her cheeks, the bright glint of hope in her eyes. She'd never before felt such a deep spark of contentment that seemed to burn from within.

Mikhail's voice at the door startled her and she spun around to face him, automatically smiling as his wide-shouldered frame filled the doorway.

"I'd better be off," he said, a clear note of reluctance in his voice as he tugged down on the brim of his hat. He made no motion to pay her but Nadia had decided that, after the work he'd done splitting wood, she wouldn't mention his fee.

"I'll cut you some more wood when I come back tomorrow."

"I'm sorry," she answered unhappily but swiftly, knowing her heart was already too heavily invested in this beautiful man. She knew that the more often she saw him, the harder it would be to part from him. "But you can't come tomorrow."

"Why not?" he asked, his expression troubled.

"I told you before," she answered with a deliberately casual shrug, "I don't work any more than I have to."

He dipped his head then raised it again, his gaze dangerously bright. "I didn't realize I was so much work," he said quietly.

She wanted to tell him that he wasn't but she held her tongue. Nervously, she tugged at a tendril of hair that had escaped one of her combs.

For several moments he stood in silence, gazing at her as though trying to find a way around her refusal or an argument that might change her mind. But when he finally spoke, he didn't argue. "All right, Nadia. But if you ever change your mind and want to find me, I live just outside Glassburg. Ask anyone in town for directions to the Holender farmstead. In the meantime," he said, pausing thoughtfully, "one of my brothers will be by sometime in the next few days to settle my account."

His leaving filled her with a terrible sense of emptiness, yet the idea that one of his brothers would drop by made their parting seem somehow less final. His brother represented a connection to this man, no matter how tenuous. "One of your brothers?" she queried on a hollow feeling of loss. "How will I know him?"

"My brothers are a lot like me," he answered softly. "You'll know them when you see them." With those words he turned on his heel, his gray cloak flaring in an arc as he stepped across her threshold and out of her life.

Chapter Two

Late the next afternoon, Nadia sat at her dinner table while staring at the drawn curtains on her window. Some light might have helped to lift the deep melancholy that had settled around her but she didn't want anyone to think she was open for business. The memory of Mikhail filled the stone cottage and she didn't want anything or anyone to dispel the peaceful aura he'd left behind. Not just yet. She wanted to hold his memory close to her heart for at least a day. Although she told herself she'd done the right thing in refusing to see him again, in her heart she felt as though she had made the biggest mistake of her life.

No, she reminded herself with a dispirited wave of her hand. Ivan had been the biggest mistake of her life. And she, of all people, knew the dangers of listening to her heart.

The sound of a horse picking its way down the slope beside the bridge reminded her of the promised visit from one of Mikhail's brothers. Plucking at the skirt of her peach silk gown, she left the chair and crossed the stone-paved floor. As she opened the door and narrowed her eyes against the setting sun, she saw the rider. For a moment, her heart fluttered. She thought she was looking at Mikhail. But as she took a closer look, she realized the rider's hair was shorter.

A sudden gust whipped beneath the bridge and tugged his ink-black mane over his eyes and, try as she might, Nadia couldn't get a good look at his face. She could only see that he was clean-shaven and, in the place where Mikhail grew a small beard, he had a shallow cleft in his chin. Automatically, she searched his cheek for a dimple but, again, the wind spilled his collar-length hair across his face.

"I'm Dmitri Holender," he introduced himself as he dismounted and looped his reins around the branch of a sturdy young oak that clawed at the riverbank. His clothing was immaculate without being ostentatious. His heavy linen trousers were of a fashionable cut and his black leather boots had not seen a month's wear. Like Mikhail, he wore a clean, loose white shirt but where his brother's cloak was made of plain gray wool, Dmitri sported a cape of thick blue felt.

"Won't you come in?" she offered, assuming that he was there to pay Mikhail's bill and wanting to get a closer look at him while privately hoping to find in his features a trace of his brother's rugged beauty.

"Did Mikhail cut that wood?" he asked without looking at the neat pile of oak stacked beside the door.

"Yes," she answered, her mood brightening at the mention of his brother's name.

"He's good with his hands," he offered.

"Yes, he is," she replied, the memory of what Mikhail could do with his hands leaving her a little breathless. "And what is your forte?" she asked.

"Aleksander says I have a golden tongue."

"Aleksander?"

"My older brother," he explained in a rough-edged voice that sounded so arousingly familiar. "I do most of the negotiating for the family business."

"And what business is that?" she asked, feeling wide-eyed and charmed and just so enchanted that Dmitri was so much like his brother, Mikhail.

"We have a farm up against the mountains, not far from the coast. While Mikhail works the fields, I'm charged with getting the best prices at market."

"So Mikhail manages the livestock and crops while you do the negotiating. And what does Aleksander do?"

"Aleksander takes care of our security issues."

"Security issues?" A soft burst of laughter spilled from her lips. When his sharp gaze zeroed in on her mouth, she felt it like a touch. Rattled, she stared at him for a long, silent moment. Then, before she lost her train of thought completely, she asked, "What do you farm that requires guarding?"

"You'd be surprised," he murmured almost absently, without shifting his attention from her lips.

Feeling suddenly shy under the intense scrutiny of his stare, she lowered her gaze and turned toward the door of her cottage.

Once inside her small home, Dmitri dragged his wide-brimmed hat from his head. It spun gracefully on the air and landed on her wooden table in the middle of the room. Right away, he tilted his chin downward, regarding her from behind the veil of his night-dark lashes. She found it difficult to catch a glimpse of his eyes as he said, "Mikhail mentioned the sum of two gold. I'd be glad to make you the same deal."

His blunt offer was like a slap in the face. Fancying herself in love with Mikhail, she'd had no intention of adding his brother to her list of clients. Nadia's spine stiffened as she was reminded of her place in life. "Your brother was pleased with my service?" she asked, a chill cooling her words.

"Yes," he answered with a strange depth of emotion. "Very pleased."

"And you don't mind going where your brother has been?" she challenged him.

His gaze locked on hers. "Not at all," he murmured. "My brothers and I have no trouble sharing."

His confession filled her with a deepening sense of sorrow. One word from Mikhail and she'd have turned his brother away. But apparently, he didn't care if she sold herself to Dmitri. In fact, Mikhail had even informed him of her rates. Despite the implied insult, Nadia couldn't help but feel as though she would be betraying Mikhail, or at least her feelings for him, if she were to lie down with his brother. "I'm sorry," she said stiffly, lifting a hand toward her drawn curtains. "But —"

"I'm only looking for a little oral pleasure," he interrupted a little cavalierly. "I won't wear you out."

"I'm sorry," she repeated stubbornly. "But—"

"I'm sorry too," he cut in. "Apparently you've mistaken me for my brother."

"What do you mean by that?" she demanded hotly.

His voice held a husky quality as he said, "That I'm not Mikhail. And I won't take no for an answer."

Nadia stared at the man standing in the middle of her cottage. He looked so much like his brother that it wasn't hard to pretend he was the same man who had stolen her heart only the night before.

"Two gold?" he pressed her quietly.

"Two gold," she reluctantly agreed, reminding herself that Mikhail didn't care and wasn't coming back. After all, she'd told him she didn't want to see him again.

As though he'd been holding himself in check, Dmitri swiftly closed the distance between them. She got a brief, good look at his face, his cheekbones flaring high and strong beneath eyes just as starkly blue as his brother's. His dark lashes shadowing skin bronzed by the sun added a surprisingly vulnerable element to his breathtaking beauty. Then her gaze caught on the rugged sweep of his mouth and she forgot everything else as she glimpsed a predatory flash of white between curved lips. "Done," he said, his voice roughened with a low note of hunger.

Reaching for her, he fisted his hand in her hair and held her head still while he gazed at her lips with an almost ferocious intensity. When he finally opened his mouth on hers, she felt as though she'd waited an eternity to feel the way he made her feel, the flutter of emotion, the spark of arousal that took root deep inside her and flamed to life like a lick of fire. She fed a broken moan into his mouth and his hand tightened in her hair, angling her head so that he could possess her mouth more deeply, his tongue thrusting past her lips and falling into a rhythm suggestive of more carnal acts while he ground his groin against her belly to the same erotic cadence.

"What are you doing?" she murmured against his mouth. She felt unbalanced and adrift. What he was doing didn't feel like the sort of dark deeds a man paid for. It felt like the kind of passion that a man shared with a woman he loved. She was shocked at how swiftly she was falling under his influence. Only yesterday she'd thought she was in love with Mikhail. Now, after nothing more than a brief sample of hot mouth and questing tongue, she wasn't so sure.

"I'm only using my mouth," he answered in a husky rasp as he dragged his lips across her cheek and swirled his tongue around the delicate rim of her ear. The wet prod of his tongue and his humid breath pelting the fragile inner workings of her ear came together in a sensual mix that reached all the way to her toes, making them curl. "That was the agreement, wasn't it?"

"Y-yes," she whispered, realizing that, like his brother, he meant to attend to her pleasure before he took his own release.

"Then don't move," he growled against her ear.

As she held her breath, he dragged his lips along her jawline, leaving in his wake a path of tingling awareness. She whimpered and tilted her head, inviting him to explore the tender flesh beneath her chin.

Like a scorching brand, his lips traveled slowly down her neck then lingered near the base of her throat. She gasped, her nostrils flaring painfully, as he flicked his tongue against the tender hollow that held her fluttering pulse.

"Your skin is so fine. Like petals," he murmured against the wet spot he'd made between her collarbones. A groan broke from his mouth as his lips worked to form the next words. "You smell windblown and fresh. Like the very best things of summer. Wild roses."

Her world tilted and, on a sudden swing of emotion, her heart reached for him. Mikhail had been wonderful as a lover but he'd never expressed any sort of need for her. The urgency of Dmitri's longing, however, was evident in his every touch, every painfully rasped word and in the taut, tense line of his body.

His fingers shook as he opened the bodice of her dress, his eyes burning with an avid male appreciation as he raked his gaze over her high, round breasts. Slowly, he stripped her out of her gown, letting it fall to the floor in a pile of rustling silk. Then, as she watched, the tip of her tongue wetting her upper lip, he drew his shirt over his head, toed off his boots and skimmed his trousers down strong legs that looked as though they'd been cut from stone.

He straightened before her. Powerful muscle clad his lean frame like burnished armor and she couldn't pry her gaze from the shaft that rose broad and thick from a bed of dark curls. He dragged his fist up his cock in a long, languid pull that was at odds with the tension in his wide stance. As he opened his fingers, his shaft pressed forward—thick, hungry and hot, marked with heavy veins that fed the dark, bruised color to his massive cock head. The burning crown, shaped like a broad helmet, touched her bare skin just above her navel and she had to reach behind her and grab the table for support while something deep inside her body responded with a silent cry of longing.

Catching her as the strength left her limbs, he gripped her waist while his mouth stole whisper-soft along her collarbone then teased a rough path around the side of her breast.

Panting, she looked down at him from beneath her eyelashes, her nipples caught up into small, tight rosettes. His humid breath washed across her full, aching flesh as he slid his mouth toward the pebbled crest standing high and hard, tortured with anticipation and craving the silken touch of his lips as well as the rough lick of his tongue.

As his lips locked around the straining bud and pulled gently, a quiet cry spilled from her throat. Her nipples ached beneath the wet touch of his mouth and the wicked tug and pull while, deep inside, a streak of raw hunger burned around her core.

Moisture seeped from her quim and wet her inner thighs, filling the small room with the erotic scent of her arousal.

As good as it had been with Mikhail, this was something else again. There had never been a man who'd drawn this sort of reaction from her body, working her with a sinful precision that implied years of practice.

"Let's get a taste of your cunt," he insisted quietly but firmly as he pulled her leg up at the knee and rested her foot on the chair beside the table. Then, still holding her waist in his powerful grip, he set his lips between her breasts and worked his way downward, going to one knee, his teeth dragging against her skin as he moved over her midriff, his tongue finding the cup of her navel and lingering to give it a slow tongue fuck while her vagina throbbed with every heavy thrust against her bellybutton.

"Mmmm," he murmured, the sound steeped in satisfaction as he dragged his lips across the flesh that stretched tightly over her pelvic wing and on down to the top of her leg. "Maybe it's my imagination, but I could swear you taste like rose hips."

The sensuous touch of his lips trailing along the inside of her thigh caused a heavy eagerness to build inside, an appalling ache of hunger that had her breath hitching in ragged little bursts. Finally he touched his wicked, manipulative mouth against her plump labia. Immediately, she felt his lips slide on her drenched flesh and she experienced a moment's awkward shyness, painfully afraid that he'd judge her a slut by her body's wanton behavior.

"Dark gods," he rasped, his voice graveled with lust. "You are the most charming little whore. And this is the sweetest cunt I've ever tasted."

She pressed her lips together to keep her chin from trembling. Tears filled her eyes and she was forced to tilt her head back to keep them from spilling down her face. She was touched by his words that not only absolved her of any guilt but praised her for reacting in such a brazen manner.

His hands still locked around her waist, he lifted her to the table and shouldered her legs apart. As she sat perched on the table's edge, the tip of his tongue burrowed gently between her nether lips and stroked the damp folds, coaxing her clitoris with short, licking prods. With his hands spread on her inner thighs and his fingers biting against her skin, he pulled her legs wider so that he could move his mouth more deeply into her delicate flesh, his tongue forging through the fragile folds then lapping at the hungry flesh that rimmed her tender opening.

Nadia's fists balled on the table behind her as her cunt fluttered beneath the lapping press of his tongue. The pure lascivious magic he worked with his mouth pulled the pleasure from deep inside her, right to the surface where it threatened to break over her in a sinful wash of bliss. As she hovered there on the expectant edge of orgasm, he stroked his tongue back up the seam of her quim and over the high-strung bundle of nerves centered in her clitoris. When his tongue rode up over the swollen knot of flesh, she sobbed as though she was about to shatter.

How could something feel so wildly fabulous without being aligned with heaven? What dark gods had sent this man to tempt her with this tortured perfection? The heavy, pounding build of arousal that thrummed through her veins bordered on addictive. For one more lick of his wickedly agile tongue she'd sell herself into bondage. For his cock, she'd be his slave for life.

She buried her hands in his dark hair and yanked his face upward so she could look at him. As she gazed into his intensely blue eyes, she almost forgot her purpose. She pulled in a torn breath. "I've changed my mind," she panted. "I want you inside me."

He pulled against her grip, his silken hair sliding through her fingers as his gaze returned to her slit. A wickedly indulgent smile curled his rugged lips as his tongue rubbed against the corner of his mouth.

"Please," she argued frantically, afraid that he was going to turn her down. "I want this. I need this. I'll pay you! I'll pay you one gold for every inch of cock you can get inside me."

"That's not the deal we made," he informed her, his eyes glowing with a sensual light. "And I'm too much of a gentleman to take advantage of...a woman in need."

"But you must," she insisted. "You can name your price."

"I'm sorry, angel," he rasped softly, "but I'm not a whore."

He couldn't have silenced her more swiftly if he'd smacked her. "No," she answered miserably, turning her head. "I am."

"Only because you choose to be," he reminded her gently but sternly.

Pressing her wrist beneath her nose, she nodded without speaking.

"Now lean back on your hands and hold on," he whispered in a dark, provocative slide of words as he lifted both her legs over his shoulders. With her quim spread before his face, he worked his mouth over her sensitized flesh again, nibbling with his lips at her clitoris, sliding his tongue down through her folds then holding her firmly as he fucked her strongly with his tongue.

As everything inside her drew together for the final crash of release, Nadia planted her feet on his broad shoulders and let her knees fall wide so he could work his dark magic over the entire length of her slit. He responded with a feral snarl of approval, his mouth no longer gentle but ravaging as he ate at her fine feminine flesh, his thumbs sliding on the wet skin around her opening, his rough calluses biting at her rim to get a firm hold on her cunt, pulling her wide for the merciless drive of his tongue.

She clawed at the table and cried as pleasure, sharp and disturbingly bright, spilled through her body like a series of churning waterfalls, claiming and cleansing and filling her up then rushing away so that she felt like a rag doll left at the river's edge, the tiny waves lapping at the boundary of her consciousness while tears streamed down her face and her cunt shuddered around his tongue in the last pulses of ecstasy.

Panting heavily, feeling used up and wrung out, Nadia hung her head. Awash in a quiet cloud of completion, she was only vaguely aware of Dmitri moving to his feet.

He cupped her jaw in one hand and lifted her face as he pulled her to her feet. Then he pressed his mouth, heavy with her flavor, against her lips. "If you're satisfied," he murmured, stroking her hair, "I wouldn't mind your mouth stretched around my cock right about now." His fingers spread out and captured the back of her skull. Gently, he forced her head downward.

With his hand guiding her, Nadia slid to her knees, her palms dragging over the hard muscle that clad his long legs, until her face was level with his groin where strong veins tracked beneath his skin and carried blood to his breathtaking erection. She reached for his cock with a sense of gentle devotion, stroking her fingers through the damp curls that sprang around the wide base. She laid her cheek against the taut flesh and felt his fevered heat against her skin as well as his heavy pulse pumping along his length in hot surges. Then she kissed her way up his long, rigid shaft and covered its hooded head with her mouth.

As she swirled her tongue over his cock head, he groaned, the sound a mixture of pure agony and endless ecstasy. Heartened by the sense of power that came with that raw, male sound of desire, she took him as deeply as she could and sucked. With his hands fisting tightly in her hair and holding her in place, he jerked his hips upward. His cock head hit the back of her throat, his sac rock hard where it grazed her chin. His shaft flexed and expanded, stretching her encircling lips. With a final demanding push, he emptied into her mouth and Nadia swallowed his seed as it surged over her tongue.

For several moments Dmitri rubbed his thick, used flesh over her lips. Then he lifted her to her feet, scooped her up and carried her to her bed. When he opened his arms, she tumbled from his hold and rolled onto her stomach.

"What's this?" he asked, his voice suddenly tight, his thumb stroking against an old scar on her bottom.

"Ivan. My husband," she explained.

His long fingers tightened on her hip.

"He was usually careful to avoid marking me. But he'd been drinking."

"He beat you?" he gritted as though holding back the worst of his anger. "The fucking bastard beat you?"

"It could have been worse," she pointed out reasonably, surprised by the heat in his voice.

"Why would he do that? Why would he beat you?"

"It was my fault. I hated servicing his cronies and didn't hide the fact. If I'd been smart, I would have pretended I liked it."

"It wasn't your fault," he admonished her softly as his lips pressed against the old wound. His voice turned suddenly somber as he rubbed his rough palm over her hip. "Let me build up the fire and heat some water so you can bathe," he said gruffly.

After pulling on his clothes, Dmitri moved about the one-room cottage as he built the fire and carried water to heat over the bright, crackling blaze. The pleasant, calming

sound of his boots scuffing against the stone floor gave Nadia a comfortable sense of being cared for. She couldn't help but imagine what her life might be like with this man moving quietly and competently through her life. While Dmitri gradually filled her bronze tub beneath the window, she lay in her bed and listened to a thousand arguments from her heart – all of them telling her why that might not be a bad idea.

As he emptied a final bucket of steaming water into the tub, Nadia turned her head and let her gaze ride across the strong, clean lines of his body. She couldn't help the twinge of lust that rocked her core as he approached her.

"Up we go," he murmured, collecting her into his arms and carrying her to the gleaming bronze tub. Slowly, he lowered her into the bath. As she sat in the deep tub, her chin nestled in the soothingly warm water, Dmitri stepped out the door. When he returned, he stood over her and opened his hands. A light rain of delicate color floated down and settled on the surface of the water while the sweet scent of wild roses lifted toward the ceiling.

Delighted, Nadia watched the pink and white petals rock on the water like dainty rafts while Dmitri lowered himself to one knee beside the tub. He dropped one hand into the water and gently stirred the petals, his gaze unfocused, his thoughts apparently distant. When eventually he spoke, his voice was muted with a low thread of vulnerability that seemed out of place on such a powerfully made male. "Come home with me, Nadia. Let me love you and cherish you."

"I'm sorry," she murmured unhappily. "But I vowed I'd never give up my freedom again."

"And who did you make this vow to?" he demanded, his chin angling upward while his eyes took on a stormy light.

"To myself," she muttered.

"A promise made to yourself isn't a vow," he gritted, his hand slashing through the water and scattering the flowery little boats. "It's just damn stubbornness."

As though to hide from this bleak assessment, Nadia sank lower in the tub.

"You could give it a try," he argued, his voice rising as he flicked his gaze around the tiny cottage. "If you find you miss this place so terribly, you could always come back."

She looked around the small, dark room, knowing there was nothing to hold her there. Nothing but her fear...and her confusion. Did she really love Dmitri? Or was it Mikhail she was in love with? "I'm sorry," she repeated in a low voice. "But there's nothing you could do that would make me surrender my freedom to a man again."

"Freedom?" he muttered, rising to his feet, his hand cutting through the air this time as he dashed the water from his fingers. "You call this freedom, Nadia? You're trapped in a lifestyle you loathe!"

"At least it's a lifestyle I control," she snapped, scowling up at him.

"And you won't be convinced to give it up? Not even for the right man?"

"How do I know you're the right man?" she shot back. "I've been fooled before."

"Because I say so," he growled. "And you're a damn fool if you can't see it."

When she dropped her gaze, he caught her chin with his fist and forced her to look up at him. Under the full power of that mesmerizing blue stare, she felt her resolve start to fray. Maybe she *was* a fool. But only yesterday she'd thought his brother was the right man. It just proved that love was a very unstable commodity. She thrust her chin out at a stubborn angle and firmed her mouth, though her eyes filled with tears of uncertainty.

Finally growling out a sound of dissatisfaction, Dmitri turned and stalked away. As he pulled his blue cape over his shoulders, the determined set of his jaw and his swift, rigid movements betrayed his anger and frustration. She knew that she'd offended him deeply when she'd refused him. She didn't think he'd be offering to come back tomorrow as Mikhail had done. "I take it I won't be seeing you again?" she asked solemnly.

He gave her a sharp look as he picked up his hat. "I didn't say that. That's up to you. You could look me up, if you have a mind to."

She gazed at him, waiting for him to repeat Mikhail's directions to the farm near Glassburg, wishing she had the courage to accept his offer.

"Aleksander will be by tomorrow to settle up my bill," he finally said when she didn't answer, obviously taking her silence as another rejection. "By the way, he asked me to negotiate his price."

"Negotiate his price!" she exclaimed, the words jerking from her throat.

"Why shouldn't I?" he asked flatly. "Since you insist on remaining a whore."

She stared at him, tears burning at the back of her eyes. She wanted to argue but, unfortunately, Dmitri was right. He'd offered her escape, love and companionship. In return, she'd treated him as if he were nothing more than a client. Why should he treat her as anything other than a whore? Still, it hurt that he'd hand her off to his brother without a qualm. She'd thought they'd shared something special. She'd thought she was in love with him. Silently chastising herself, she threw up her chin. She should have known better than to let that particular emotion fool her. "Five gold," she declared as though she was proud of her profession.

Lifting his chin, he seemed to consider the hefty sum a little coldly before saying, "I assume, for that price, you're agreeing to fuck him."

"That's right," she said, rising from her sitting position in the tub and letting him get a good look at her sleek, dripping curves. Although she was furious with him, she forced a sultry smile to her lips. "In fact, I can hardly wait."

"Five gold will be fine," he said hoarsely as he settled his hat on his head. As though he was done with her and all that she represented, he tugged down on the brim, turned and left.

Chapter Three

An early morning knock on Nadia's door roused her from sleep and sent her scrambling to drag a robe from the high chest of drawers beneath her bed. Her skin still scented with the light fragrance of wild roses, she pulled the white satin robe over the thin chemise she slept in. Swiftly, she tied the long robe closed with a narrow sash that hung to the floor.

Another knock was followed by a sudden impatient hammering that had her heart beating in her throat. Despite the animosity that had marred her parting with Dmitri, Nadia's pulse raced at the prospect of seeing the last of the three brothers. She had to assume he would be as attractive as his siblings.

Rubbing her damp palms into her satin robe, she took a deep breath and tiptoed across the chilled stone floor. But when she pulled open the heavy wooden door, all she could see was a man's broad back, his wide shoulders packed into an elegant coat of fine black velvet. As she stood there wordless, her gaze lingering on the straight line of his shoulders, he turned slowly.

The full power of his penetrating blue gaze caught her right where her heart lived and, if it didn't stop, it certainly faltered for several long seconds. There followed a brief instant of mutual attraction in which a frisson of sensual energy crackled between them. She couldn't explain her reaction to Aleksander, not even to herself. Maybe it was because he was Mikhail and Dmitri—everything that she found attractive—rolled into one.

He wore no hat, his midnight hair cut close around his ears, his lean jaw darkened with rough, masculine stubble. His eyes burned as he stared at her, his gaze flickering across her face as though something painful consumed him. In his face and in his tense stance there was a desperate urgency, a tightly reined ferocity. With one hand, he reached out and claimed a thick strand of her honey-colored hair. He curled it around his finger then tucked it behind her ear in an intimate gesture that had her at the edge of a swoon.

His long fingers trailed behind her neck and cradled her nape as, without a word, he pulled her face up to his. With his other palm cupping her jaw, his thumb rubbing across her cheekbone, he drew her into his kiss, his lips sliding across hers like textured silk.

His mouth worked its sensual spell as he pushed into the room. As the door swung closed behind them, he turned her toward the closest wall. His long, hard body moved her across the stone floor, the thick ridge inside his soft woolen trousers pressing against her belly with each herding step that bore her toward the wall behind her. Even after her back met the cool stone, he continued to push, his body surging against hers,

his mouth open, his tongue claiming the hot, wet place behind her lips while the rumbling noises that came from his chest sounded like muted snarls of hunger.

As he dominated her mouth with the fierce savagery of his kiss, he tore out of his jacket and let it slide down his arms to the floor. Wadding the fine silk of his shirt in his fists, he jerked hard and the fabric parted with a harsh, tearing sound. He shook one arm then the other as he fought to rid himself of the shirt without removing his mouth from her lips. Trapped beneath his rolling frame, Nadia's robe fell open and the crisp hair on his chest rubbed against her erect nipples while he worked at the buttons on his trousers.

She never got a chance to see his cock. With a grunt, he lifted her and settled her legs around his hips. While she locked her ankles behind him, something scandalously hot and hard probed through her sensitive folds and nudged at her entrance.

"Oh my God. Oh my God," she chanted against his lips as his massive width strained at the mouth of her quim and stretched the skin that rimmed her entrance. "You're so big."

"This is going to be big," he agreed. "Bigger than anything that's ever happened to you. And when I'm done with you, my precious little whore, you'll know you've been fucked. And you'll know you've been loved."

"Loved?" she echoed, testing the word on her lips, the old dream of what love could be tempting her like an addiction she'd fought for years, her vagina clenching at the prospect of both a passionate joining and tender affection.

"And fucked," he muttered against the corner of her mouth as her channel tightened around his first few inches, her slim sheath fighting his entry despite her utter willingness. "Dark gods. You feel so perfect on my cock. As though you were fucking made for me."

With his hands on her hips, he pushed her down and forced her to take the brutal length of his shaft. A light sheen of sweat collected on his skin as he strained against her, working his cock, inch by thick inch, into her grasping sheath. Finally he stopped, so much of him inside her that it felt as though he was a part of her. As she shifted on him, completely filled by him, she felt his strong pulse feeding his erection.

His fingers gripping her hips, he rocked against her a few times as though testing her, his groin grinding against her clitoris and sending sharp waves of pleasure along her nerve endings. Then he held her in place against the wall while he retracted his hips an inch then slammed home.

His mouth found hers again and he gave her a bruising kiss, his teeth driving against her lower lip, his tongue licking away the bright point of pain as his hips started moving with a savage symmetry. He banged into her again and again, his cock head crushing into her womb while the pressure he kept against her clitoris sent her racing toward release. She clutched his rear as she came, pulling him into her and demanding everything he could force inside her, her cunt clasp in a delicious, long jolt of mind-emptying rapture. Long after she came, he continued to pound his cock into her

streaming, hot channel, fucking her right through the final contractions that shivered through her cunt as he mined her body for every last shred of pleasure.

With a soft sob, she dropped her forehead onto his damp shoulder and clung to him.

"Are you done?" he growled as he jerked her on his cock.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then come with me," he grunted as he pulled his shaft from her clinging heat and she lowered her feet to the floor.

As he led her across the room, she got a glimpse of his cock lifting high and strong, the wicked length of flesh gleaming with her moisture as it rose from the parting in his black trousers. When they reached the high bed, he turned her swiftly and dragged the long sash from the loops on her robe. He pulled her arms behind her back and, with a few deft movements, tied her wrists together.

"That's not too tight?" he murmured.

"No," she panted, a bright new wave of arousal sharpening inside her. She didn't experience a moment's panic. Just the dark thrill of being restrained by the tall, powerful man who stood behind her.

"Lean over the bed," he commanded softly as his hand spread beneath her breasts. With one arm around her midriff and the other in the middle of her back, he angled her over the bed. Then he pulled the back of her robe and chemise up to her waist. The ends of the ties hung past her knees and stirred against her excited skin. "Now there's a pretty sight," he rasped on a ragged breath. "You have the most charming little behind."

"If you say so," she panted, her cheek lying against her smooth sheets.

"I say so," he grunted, leaning over to kiss the small scar that Ivan had left on her skin. She trembled with anticipation as his mouth moved between her legs and kissed the soft, cushioned lips of her quim. His lips feathered across the puffy flesh like the tantalizing drag of rough silk, his breath heating her cunt into a stunned peak of yearning. Then he threaded the tip of his tongue through her long, hot slit before swirling it around the rim of her opening.

Standing with her legs spread, she felt his fingers tugging at her fragile flesh and parting her nether lips. As her wet heat coated her folds, he groaned. Then she felt his flattened tongue lick out the entire length of her slit again and she whimpered at the heavy pleasure that gripped her lower body.

She sensed rather than felt his fingers collecting the ends of the sash and she waited, breath held, excitement stiffening her spine as she wondered what he planned to do next. When the cool fabric touched her backside, she expelled her held breath so swiftly that it came out in a keening cry. He answered her with a low growl of approval. Then he drew the cool, slick fabric over the pouting swell of her labia.

"Does that feel good?" he rasped as he patted her quim with the ends of the satin sash.

She sobbed in answer, her heart rattling her rib cage, her breath jerking from her lungs. With her face turned on the mattress, she could just see his hands folding the satin in his palm.

With the sash doubled in his fist, he patted her again, and again, each time bringing the ties down against her plump flesh a little harder until she widened her legs and angled her rear upward, hoping to catch more of the slapping satin against her excited center.

"You want more?" he asked, turning the sash on its edge, holding it tight and stripping it up through her slit so suddenly that her body surged right up to the jolting edge of orgasm.

"Yes," she gasped, pleaded, begged, her chin trembling in her need.

"Do you want it harder?"

"Just...just a little harder," she said, her voice unsteady.

Shaking out the ends of the sash, he gripped them like two long whips and flicked them against his legs. Her vision darkened around the edges and she tried hard to breathe as she watched him jerk his wrist again and the tapered ends snapped on the air. Her next breath came out in a whimpering sob, the broken sound a testimony to her longing. Without words she was begging for the touch of that polished satin against her clitoris.

"Here it comes," he warned in a whisper of sin. His words sent a line of fire through the length of her vagina and flared at the tip of her clitoris. The tapered ends of the sash landed against her puffy labia with a shock of pleasure. But her clitoris, safely nestled within the thick pout of her outer lips, cried for the light sting of his whip. Desperate for the lick of that sleek fabric, she widened her legs again. This time when the sash flew at her, she got a taste of the whip on that most sensitive part of her body and she screamed at the sinful wash of craving that crashed through her body. Each time the satin smacked lightly against the hungry bundle of nerves, she rode right up to the edge of orgasm then slid back down without reaching it.

"Again," she whimpered "Faster. Now." She ground her teeth together, tears of emotion dampening the sheets beneath her cheek.

"Such a sassy pink cunt," he murmured roughly, the words scraping with a raw edge of need. "I can't wait to fill it with cock again and empty inside you."

"Yes," she sobbed, her legs trembling against the wooden drawers stacked beneath her bed. "I need..."

"What do you need?" he asked, a sharp tension riding his words, the sash landing again with a stark precision that had her shouting.

"I need you!" she cried.

"Do you want me to mount you and fuck you?"

"Yes," she pleaded. "Please. Now."

"All right, angel. I'll fuck you. Just hold on."

She felt the wide, hot crown of his cock touch her bottom. The touch of his heated skin made her cunt clench wildly and for a second she thought she might finish without him. "Now!" she screamed, her cunt spilling in excitement.

He ran the fat cock head around her entrance, the broad tip skidding on her slick flesh. "You're so wet," he grunted.

"That's because I want you," she cried, squirming with an eating need that was about to take her apart.

His brutal width prodded gently at her entrance. "Really? How much do you want me?"

She stilled, suddenly wary. "What do you mean?" she panted.

"Let me take you from this life you hate, Nadia."

"No," she screamed, wanting to fight and kick and finally beginning to question the wisdom of letting herself be bound and pinned against her bed. "Now is not the time! Now is not the time to negotiate."

"You don't want love then?" he asked, his voice turning harsh. "You just want to be fucked?"

Before she could answer, she felt his body tighten behind her, his muscles going steel hard, his fingers biting into her hips. Then he set his cock against her opening and drove forward in a punishing push, not stopping until he slammed up against her limit.

She cried out as he forced his way to the back of her sheath, her inner walls strained almost to the point of tearing. Then she stood quivering as he throbbed inside her. She felt his pulse against the walls of her vagina, in her blood, in her heart.

Without saying a word, he pulled his cock halfway out of her then shoved back in, his fingers tightening on her hips as he held her into the driving thrust of his hips. As his cock ripped deep inside her, she tilted her bottom to take more of him, to get every last inch of his length buried between her legs.

"Not enough?" he muttered. Leaning over her, he braced his hands on the mattress then started a relentless, savage, powering rhythm, his hips jerking back then banging forward, jamming his cock deep inside her on each violent downstroke.

The pure animal strength with which he fucked her shocked her and sent her soaring upward to a new peak of arousal. As a choked scream of pleasure sprang fevered from her lips, she set her feet and pushed against the bed with her forearms so that she could take the full force of his hammering drive. She had never felt so deliciously appreciated, so scandalously used. She had never felt so entirely possessed. There was a dark, perfect joy in surrendering to this man, if only for these short, wild, breathtaking moments.

She came in an obliterating wash of ecstasy, her body juddering beneath his as he ground his groin against her rear and finally stilled, choked curses on his lips as his seed broke against her womb and filled her.

"I can't believe that you're willing to walk away from this," he whispered, his voice cracking with pain as he sagged down onto his forearms, his damp chest sealed against her back. "We're perfect together."

He was right. They were more than perfect together. Somehow, Nadia felt as though they were meant to be together. That everything in her life had brought her to this place, this point in time, so that she could meet this man.

And all of that sounded relatively reasonable until she realized that yesterday she had felt exactly that way about Dmitri and the day before that, she had convinced herself that she was in love with Mikhail. How could she accompany Aleksander to his home where she'd have to face his brothers every day of her life? How could she look those two men in the eye, knowing they'd resent the fact that she'd chosen Aleksander over them? What sort of trouble would that brew between the three brothers? And more to the point, how could she remain faithful to Aleksander with his two brothers there as a constant source of temptation. "I'm sorry," she murmured. "I'm just so confused."

"I'm sorry too," he said as he straightened again, his voice weighted with disappointment.

She felt his lax cock slip from her body and her quim flinched with a twinge of longing. She felt a similar twinge in her heart as his fingers worked on the knot that bound her wrists together. After he freed her and moved away, a chill closed in around her, the cool air of the cottage replacing the intimate heat so recently lavished against her legs and back. As she straightened and rubbed her wrists, he resettled his cock inside his dark trousers. A slight frown marred his forehead as he fastened his buttons. Then, without a word to her, he strode for the door and disappeared outside. Moments later she heard the heavy sound of an axe cleaving wood.

With her gaze fixed on the open doorway, Nadia straightened her rumpled chemise and robe. She tied the sash around her middle as she crossed the room and stepped outside. "What are you doing?" she asked after she moved from the dark shade beneath the bridge into the comforting glow of sunshine.

"I split wood when I'm frustrated...or angry," he answered without looking at her.

"I'm sorry if I've upset you," she said, watching the strength that rippled through his shoulders and along his arms as the axe swung around and cracked against a dry piece of oak. For all his fine clothes and embroidered boots, he split wood as handily as his brother, Mikhail.

"If you can't be persuaded to leave here," he grunted as he picked up one of the larger splits of wood and set it back on the block, "then I'll just have to stay here with you."

"Stay here?" she echoed breathlessly.

"That's right," he answered, the axe's long handle resting against his thigh. "I'm going to stay here and take care of you and make love to you every day. And maybe one day, if I work hard enough, you'll come to love me."

Despite her long-held resolve to remain free, Nadia's heart did a strange flying leap. It was as though the sensitive organ had suddenly sprouted wings. She didn't present one word of argument against Aleksander's proposal. She found his offer too appealing.

"And what are you going to do about my client list?" she asked dryly.

"That's why I'm chopping wood," he answered, a wry twitch pulling at the corner of his mouth. "So we can build a fire and burn that list. I imagine it will make a substantial blaze."

"It's not that big," she told him quietly.

"As for anyone who comes around knocking on the door," he said, dragging the back of his wrist across his brow, "I have the axe."

"I imagine your brothers can manage the farm without you?" she ventured.

"I don't have any brothers," he grunted as he picked up the axe and swung it in a high arc. The sun glinted on the thick blade as it came down and split the oak into two pieces.

Chapter Four

Nadia retrieved one of the larger splits from the ground and placed it on the block. "You don't have any brothers? You...played all three parts?" she asked. The revelation should have come as a shock. But somehow it didn't. In some deep part of her soul she must have known that all three men were the same lover.

He swept his arm away from his side and bowed gracefully. "Mikhail Dmitri Aleksander Holender, at your service."

"But why?" she asked. "Why the charade?"

"After my first visit, you told me I couldn't return," he reminded her as he squinted against the sun. "And I was determined to have you again. So I made up some brothers, changed my appearance as best I could, and came back."

"You acted differently too," she pointed out.

He nodded. "I wasn't sure what kind of lover would tempt you. A lover who was gentle or someone who was more dominant. A simple hardworking man or a man of means. I knew it was a wealthy man who won you before. But it was a wealthy man who let you down."

He swung the axe again. It met the wood with a sharp crack as the piece split in two.

Nadia crossed her arms over her chest. "Did it not occur to you that your little act would make me question my own emotions and end up so confused that my answer to your proposal would *have* to be no?"

His eyes widened as he buried the axe head in the chopping block, his expression so boyishly confused that it pulled on her heartstrings. "How is that?" he asked.

"Did it not occur to you that I would fall in love with Mikhail and that I wouldn't want to betray that love when Dmitri came along? That I would feel guilty when I fell for Dmitri. And that, when he handed me off to his third brother without a qualm that I would think my love had been wasted on him?"

He just stared while a gentle breeze riffed through his hair. "By all the dark gods, women are complicated creatures! You felt all that?"

She sent him a wry smile. "And which of the three brothers represents the real you? Mikhail, Dmitri or Aleksander?"

"All of them to some degree," he answered, his smile a bit crooked, his handsome dimple firmly in place. "I'm a farmer. I like to work the land. But one day while out with my team, I plowed up several gold nuggets. When I explored uphill, I located a rich vein going back into the mountain. I have twenty men working the mine. I'm rich," he said simply. "But I still like the land. I like to work."

"And as a lover? Which of the three brothers best represents you?"

"Again, all of them," he said, his eyes glowing a soft blue as they lingered on her face. "I want to love you gently, thoroughly. I want to pleasure you completely but, deep down, I'm a just your basic male animal."

"What does that mean?" she asked tentatively.

"That I want to possess you entirely. I want to make love to you in the beginning. But in the end, I just want to fuck you. Hard. I want to stamp the shape and feel of my cock into your memories, into your soul so that another man's touch will forever feel foreign."

He slanted a look at her from under his dark brows. His expression was both guarded and sinful at the same time. Like one of hell's darkest denizens trying to pull off saintly. "Which...did you prefer?" he asked hesitantly, his strong voice softened with a note of vulnerability.

"All of them," she answered without hesitation. "All of you."

His brows lifted. "Well, that's a start," he allowed.

"And, for your information," she informed him cheekily, "even when you were gentle, you were pretty dominant."

"Was I?" he asked, his brows winging upward though a satyr's smile tweaked the corner of his lips.

"Do you think you love me?" she asked after a quiet moment of reflection.

"I know I do," he answered without hesitation.

"How do you know?" she challenged him.

"Same way you do. I just know." He rolled his shoulders in a tight shrug. "I'd heard about you. Not only about your beauty but about your life before you married and how your husband used you afterward. I fell in love with the woman I heard about. A woman who was beaten but not broken. A woman fiercely independent. A woman who helped other prostitutes and gave them money when they wanted to return home. But why didn't *you* go back home, Nadia?"

"Ivan would have found me," she answered as a gust of wind pulled a loose strand of hair across her face. "He holds a marriage contract which is legal and binding. He could have forced me to leave with him."

Mikhail Holender stepped forward and captured the long lock of hair that had snagged on her damp lips. Gently, he hooked it behind her ear.

"So you fell in love with me and decided to come rescue me from all this?" she suggested, sweeping her hand through the air.

"Not exactly," he answered on a low, rumbling chuckle. "I'd heard from some of your clients that you never came and never pretended to. I wanted to see you. I wanted to make you come. To finally satisfy you. But it's common knowledge that you seldom service younger men, especially if they're good looking." A slash of dark color burned

across his cheekbones as he continued awkwardly. "So I tried to hide my face in case you...considered me good looking."

Nadia snorted softly. He was trying to be modest but he was well aware of his charms.

"It was only after I'd watched you come," he explained, his voice scraping against what sounded like a tight knot of emotion, "that I knew I had to possess you. Only after I'd witnessed your first orgasm and shared with you that private, intimate moment. Afterward, I knew I'd never be the same. That I'd never be happy without you. If that isn't love, I don't know what is."

She tugged her robe closed across her chest and gave him a small nod. He was very convincing. And she wanted to be convinced.

"Anyhow, since I can't persuade you to leave with me, I'm going to stay here. At least long enough to get to know you. Once I get to know you, maybe I won't want you so badly." Their gazes locked and they shared a painful look, knowing that would never happen.

"You were never meant to be a whore," he rasped. "You were meant to be somebody's wife. My wife."

The sound of a carriage approaching on the road above turned his gaze in that direction. As they watched, a slim, handsome man with long, golden hair stepped from the small gig and made his way down the slope.

Mikhail gave her a sharp look, his brow creased in concern.

"Ivan!" she whispered, her heart going cold at the unwelcome sight of her husband picking his way through the gorse bushes that dotted the hillside.

"Go inside the house, Nadia," Mikhail ordered, moving between her and her visitor, his shoulders braced as though for battle, his fist gripping the axe's heavy wooden haft.

"But...how did he find me?" she whispered, her voice strained with horror.

Ivan flashed his signature charming smile as he sauntered across the sloping riverbed toward her. "News of the most beautiful fuck in the land *does* travel, my dear Nadia. It was only a matter of time before I got wind of you."

Mikhail's knuckles whitened around the axe handle. "Get inside," he repeated from behind clenched teeth.

"But..."

"Now!" he commanded, the force of the word sending her stumbling backward into the shelter of her little home where she flew to the window. But, placed at the far end of the cottage, the window didn't allow her a view of the two men.

Needing something to do, she filled her kettle with water and hung it over the fire. She peeked out the window several times as she went about the task of making tea but the two men remained beyond her line of vision. She couldn't help but worry about Mikhail, though she knew that physically Ivan was no match for her tall, dark lover. As

she poured the steaming water into her teapot, she finally heard footsteps. When Mikhail stepped beneath the lintel, she dropped the kettle. It hit the floor with a ringing clank as she threw herself across the room into Mikhail's arms.

"Hey...hey...hey. What's this about?" he asked gently as he gathered her hair away from her face and tilted her head back.

"I'm just...glad you're all right," she told him while tightening her grip on his waist.

His dark brows lifted in surprise. "Why wouldn't I be?"

"I just thought that...if you were to fight..."

"Fight?" he echoed mildly. "Why would we do that? We're two civilized men."

Two civilized men? Nadia stepped from his embrace, crossed her arms over her chest and surveyed him suspiciously. She'd seen the tension in his shoulders as he'd stepped forward to meet Ivan. She'd seen the flare of anger in his eyes. And she knew how good he was at playing a part. "What did you do to him?" she demanded.

"Don't worry about him," he said, waving his hand through the air as though swatting at a fly. "Ivan will never bother you again."

"Did you...kill him?"

He chuckled. "I'm not a murderer. I simply offered him some gold if he would surrender his marriage contract and leave you alone."

"And?"

Mikhail reached behind his back and produced a folded piece of paper which had probably been tucked into the top of his trousers. "He took the gold and left the contract," he said, tossing the document on the table.

"And you let him go?" she asked sharply, eyeing the contract but still not convinced by his mild-mannered act.

Again he slanted that strange look on her. The look that was half sin and half saint. "Of course I let him go...after I shortened his jaw two inches. Unfortunately, he fell into the river after I hit him. But if he can swim with twenty pounds of gold belted around his waist, he's certainly welcome to it."

"Mikhail!" she cried.

"He climbed out about fifty feet downstream," he reassured her.

"Fifty feet? How do you know that? You can't *see* fifty feet downstream," she exclaimed. "There are too many trees and bushes in the way!"

"I could hear him cursing," he chuckled.

"Oh, Mikhail," she breathed. She lowered her eyes and smiled at him from beneath the fringe of her lashes. For the first time in many years, she felt like a free woman.

"Let's build up the fire," he said softly as he pulled her back into his arms.

"And then?" she asked, her lips moving against his chest.

"Then we'll burn this contract along with your client list."

"Then we'll go to your farm?" she asked happily.

"We'll take you to your parents first. Then we'll go to my farm and start all over," he answered after a quiet moment filled with emotion. "And this time, we'll do it right. You'll know nothing but love for the rest of your life, my precious Nadia."

SILENT ABANDON

Aubrey Ross

Chapter One

"Have you ever had a one-night stand?" Starla Landry leaned toward her best friend and lowered her voice. They sat across from each other in a bustling restaurant. It was unlikely anyone was listening. Still, Starla felt guilty even asking the question.

"Are we talking before or after Mike?"

Mischief twinkled in Lisa's dark eyes and Starla's heart sank. "If you've cheated on Mike I don't want to know about it." Lisa and Mike had been married for six years. They were the perfect couple, an ideal worthy of emulation. When Starla's romantic misfortune pushed her toward depression, she used their happiness to give her hope. "Let me enjoy the illusion."

Lisa smiled and took a sip of her ice tea. "I've never cheated on Mike. Don't look so devastated. We're genuinely happy. But it's fair to say we each took a turn or two around the block while we were in college." She set down the tall glass and settled back in the padded booth. "What's your sudden interest in recreational sex?"

Starla heaved a frustrated sigh and pushed away her half-eaten sandwich. "Do you really need to ask? It's been so long since I had a lover that didn't vibrate, I'm not sure I remember what to do." Heat crawled up her neck and blossomed across her cheeks. Lisa might be her best friend, but not even she knew the sorts of pleasure Starla had explored with Jeff before she learned his claims of devotion and fidelity had been nothing more than hollow words.

Reaching across the table, Lisa gave Starla's hand an affectionate squeeze. "Jeff was a world-class asshole. No one bounces back from that kind of betrayal with a shrug."

"It's been almost two years."

Lisa's gaze moved over her features with compassion and pity. "You haven't been with anyone since Jeff?"

The pity annoyed more than the compassion soothed. She pulled her hand out of Lisa's light grasp and admitted, "I've been chatting with this guy online."

Horror exploded across Lisa's features, the transformation almost comical. "That is *so* dangerous. The internet has become a playground for conmen and perverts."

"I know this guy. I've known him for years."

"Didn't you just say you met him online?"

Starla's lips curved in an enigmatic smile. "I said I've been using the internet to communicate with him. We both work for DMS."

"Digital Media Services has almost a thousand employees. How well do you know this guy and why are you bothering with the internet if you've already met?"

"That's where this gets complicated. I know a lot about him, but we haven't interacted on a personal level, except online."

"Okay, now I'm completely confused."

"He's one of the in-house trainers. I attended one of his workshops eight months ago and he seemed really nice. Our gazes locked several times and I felt a connection. Unfortunately, Ashley Winthrop was in the class and every time I tried to instigate a conversation she drew his attention."

Lisa groaned loud enough to turn a few heads. "Ashley is such a trollop. What did you do?"

"I used Mercury Messenger to contact him and —"

"If you used Mercury, this guy knows who you are. He can access your professional bio from the in-house system."

"He can access the professional bio of someone named 'Amber Star'."

"You hacked the DMS email server and created a fictitious persona?" Lisa covered her eyes with her hand and shook her head. "You're not going to get laid. You're going to get fired."

"It was harmless. I wanted him to know I'm an employee without revealing exactly who I am."

"Amber Star?" Lisa chuckled and lowered her hand. "Where in the world did you come up with that? It sounds like someone on a soap opera."

"My mother's name is Star!"

"She's a freaking hippie!" Lisa's expression calmed before she went on. "You should have tried a little harder to cover your tracks. You've used some variation of Amber as your screen name for as long as I've known you. Are you sure he doesn't know who you are?"

"As soon as he gave me his personal email address and IM identity, I deleted the Mercury profile. We've been using public domains for all our communication now, so I doubt my job is in jeopardy."

"That didn't answer my question. Does he know who Amber Star is?"

"I don't think so. He asked a lot of questions in the beginning, but I told him an air of mystery kept things interesting for me."

"Did he work at DMS while I was there?" Lisa asked.

Starla shook her head and glanced away. Colson Beck was her guilty pleasure and she wasn't ready to share him with anyone. "You don't know him," she lied.

"And neither do you. People can say anything on the internet."

"People can lie to your face just as easily," she reminded as Jeff's image flashed through her mind.

Bracing her elbow on the tabletop, Lisa rested her chin on her palm. "He has to have some idea who you are."

"He knows I work for DMS. He knows I attended at least one of his training sessions, but I won't confirm which one. Everything else we've chatted about has had nothing to do with work."

"I have no doubt." Lisa's gaze narrowed and all amusement left her expression. "Is he pressuring you to meet him?"

"Actually, *I* was thinking about suggesting it. Our exchanges have become rather...stimulating lately and I think we're ready for physical interaction."

"This is so not like you." Tension creased Lisa's brow and her thumb tapped out her worry against the tabletop. "You went out with Jeff for months before you did more than kiss him goodnight."

"And see where that got me. I did exactly what was expected of me. I found the perfect man and planned the perfect life, beginning with the perfect wedding. He told me exactly what I wanted to hear while he fucked all my friends."

"That bastard never touched me," Lisa insisted.

"I know." Starla paused for a sip of coffee. Even that assurance was small consolation after all the other betrayals. "I'm tired of hollow promises and meaningless lies. In fact I'm tired of *words*."

"So your solution is a one-night stand with a man you hardly know?" Lisa shook her head, a strand of hair falling across her forehead. "It will only make you more restless and discontent."

Starla released a harsh little laugh. "There's a freedom online I've never experienced before. The anonymity is empowering. It's exhilarating and addictive. I know it's not real, but I'm ready for a little fantasy. I want animal magnetism and carnal abandon. I want to speak with my body and live in the moment. Bodies don't lie. They either respond or they don't. Desire is honest. Lust is real. Beyond that... I don't care anymore."

Silence descended. Lisa stared at her with sad yet kind eyes while Starla's determination grew.

"This won't make you happy and it won't change what Jeff did to you." Compassion resonated through Lisa's tone.

"This isn't about Jeff."

"Yes it is."

"I need to feel desirable and alive. I've earned a little rebellion."

* * * * *

"Are you sure this is her?" Cole slipped into the chair beside Rex's desk and stared at the computer screen. The lines of code meant little to Cole. That's why he'd asked Rex for assistance.

"This was her access point." Rex indicated a line near the top of the screen. "The only way to bypass our firewall was to start from inside our system. She was clever, but I managed to unravel her knots. Unless someone else used her computer without her knowing about it, Starla Landry is Amber Star."

Excitement spread through Cole with simmering heat. Starla Landry was DMS's vivacious marketing director. With a compelling personality and curvy figure, she effortlessly turned heads wherever she went.

She'd been involved when they first met and a messy breakup a short time later left her seriously gun-shy. By the time she regained her emotional equilibrium, Jennifer had moved in with him.

Cole had always been attracted to Starla, but he ended one relationship before considering a new one. Jennifer had moved out two months ago, and to his knowledge Starla was still unattached, which meant he was free to pursue *Amber Star*.

Possibilities teased his imagination as he pushed to his feet. "Thanks."

"You need to tell me what this is about." Rex rolled back far enough to cross his legs. "It's my job to report any sort of impropriety."

"It's a harmless flirtation, nothing more. We've taken everything offsite. I promise."

Rex shook his head, his gaze narrowed with annoyance. "If this comes back on us, I'll throw you to the wolves."

"Thanks for the warning." They'd been friends long enough for Cole to understand that Rex was *mostly* kidding. "There's nothing to worry about."

The workday had never taken so long to wind down. Cole started to launch an instant messenger program over and over. His last conversation with "Amber Star" had been filled with hints and innuendo. They were restless and ready to move their romance out of cyberspace. If he was going to suggest a face-to-face meeting, the conversation had to wait until he got home.

He paused long enough to change clothes and grab a beer before he turned on his computer. His heart gave a ridiculous leap when he confirmed she was online. Feeling very much like a naughty teenager, he began to type.

ColsonB: Long time, no see.

AmberStar: Did you miss me?

She responded immediately to his greeting and Cole smiled. Anticipation spread through his body. For the first time a tantalizing image formed within his mind. He saw golden hair sweeping away from her lovely features and the bright amber flash of her long-lashed eyes. Should he let her know he'd discovered her identity or continue to play along?

ColsonB: You have no idea. Knowing you're near and not being able to touch you is driving me crazy.

AmberStar: Would you like to touch me?

He could almost hear the husky rasp of her voice.

ColsonB: More than anything.

A lump formed in his throat as he accepted the truth in his statement. He'd been intrigued by Amber Star, found her fascinating and compelling. Yet knowing the woman behind the persona made him all the more anxious to take the next step.

AmberStar: Would touching me be enough?

He scooted closer to his desk, hands shaking a bit as he typed.

ColsonB: I'm not sure what you're asking?

AmberStar: I want to touch you – and taste you – and feel you moving inside me. I need that more than you can imagine, but only if you're willing to accept my conditions.

He hesitated. What conditions would she put on... What was she proposing? An affair? A one-night stand? Mind-blowing sex?

ColsonB: I don't kiss and tell, if that's what you're worried about.

AmberStar: I need more than discretion. I want to revel in the moment without complications or regret. I need a man who will take control and drive me beyond rational thought or meaningless promises. Are you up for the task?

Dominant hunger surged. Fucking Starla was undeniably appealing, but the possibility that she would submit... A frustrated sigh escaped as he read between the lines. She was more vulnerable than she realized. Jeff, her ex, had burned her badly, so she planned to keep her emotions suppressed and offer only her body.

ColsonB: I'm as uncomplicated as they come, but –

She replied before he could complete the thought.

AmberStar: No past, no future, just two consenting adults enjoying each other's bodies. I'm not interested in anything else.

She wouldn't be satisfied with that arrangement for long. Cole had the misfortune of knowing Jeff, and he'd been less than discreet about Starla's adventurous nature. Jeff had manipulated her desires and used her passion to control her. As a result, Starla retreated behind a wall of emotional indifference.

Two years had passed since she learned of Jeff's betrayals and found the courage to end the relationship. Others might take what she offered without a second thought, reinforcing her misconceptions. He couldn't let that happen.

ColsonB: Where and when?

He fidgeted in his chair as he waited for her answer.

AmberStar: Executive Tower Hotel, 8:00 Friday night. I'll text you with the room number.

* * * * *

Cole paced the lobby of the hotel the following Friday night. His hand lightly clutched his phone, willing the device to vibrate. He wanted this interlude, needed it with a passion he didn't fully understand. 8:00 came and went. Had Starla changed her mind?

Before discouragement could completely erode his eagerness, his phone vibrated. He paused for a deep breath then looked at the small display.

Room 624. The simple message made his pulse leap. She was upstairs, waiting for him, ready and willing to spend the night in his arms. He turned off his phone and crossed to the bank of elevators. His mind reeled as he rode to the sixth floor. He'd never done anything like this before. Starting an evening out with the express purpose of having sex took some of the fun out of the encounter. He enjoyed the chase. Flirting, stalking and seducing excited him every bit as much as the actual joining of his body with his lover's. He was a hunter, a trained Dom who reveled in unleashing the most intense responses possible. And that depth of sensation took time and anticipation.

A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. If his erection were any indication, all his hard-won discipline was about to be tested as never before.

He paused in front of her door. She had instigated this. There was no way to misinterpret her actions. Still, a part of him was wary, unwilling to compound her pain. He needed to progress carefully, to protect her from—

The distinct snap of a deadbolt shattered his concerns. The door swung inward and his feet seemed to move of their own volition. She'd obviously been watching for him through the peephole. He'd talk to her, let her know he was attracted to her, was more than willing to satisfy her every desire, but he thought they should slow things down.

Moonlight illuminated the room, revealing shapes while concealing details. She stood beside the king-size bed, nearly lost in shadow. With the slightest nudge from his heel, the door banged closed behind him. The sound was so final, so profound.

She turned on the bedside lamp and motioned him toward her. A sleek blue wig concealed her hair and a cloth mask obscured the upper half of her face. Though constructed of fabric, the mask looked like overlapping peacock feathers, the vivid colors accenting the bright sapphire wig. If he hadn't known who she was, there was no way he would have recognized her.

His gaze met hers and he reconsidered. She'd surrounded her eyes with black, providing a stark contrast to the multicolored mask. Their unique golden-brown hue was all the more striking because of her disguise. No one had eyes like Starla Landry. Even without Rex's help, Cole would have known her anywhere.

"Wow." The word escaped with a sigh as he struggled for composure. He wanted to take her in his arms and drive her fear away. She was beautiful and desirable without this masquerade. He wanted her to understand that she was safe with him. "You look amazing."

A royal blue satin robe outlined every curve and hollow of her voluptuous body. The overlapping front provided a teasing hint of cleavage and the garment ended just above her knees.

She took an index card out of her pocket and handed it to him with an enigmatic smile. *No past, no future, no questions. Tonight there are no words.*

"But I think we should —"

She pressed her fingers against his lips and shook her head.

Heat cascaded through him, countermining his good intentions. Their gazes locked. Her expression was calm yet determined. She'd planned this night, orchestrated each element, creating a surreal fantasy in which to play.

The last of his inhibitions dissolved beneath the heat of her gaze. He took her hand and raised it to his lips, pressing a kiss to the center of her palm. "You're absolutely sure this is what you want?"

Chapter Two

Starla's heart missed a beat as his lips pressed against her skin. He looked rugged and appealing in jeans and a pullover shirt, so different from the trappings of the business world. She wanted to run her fingers through his dark hair and rub against his chest until their clothes became intolerable.

His hair looked black in the shadowy room, but his gaze shimmered with blue intensity. She guided his hand to her collarbone then slid it beneath one side of her robe. His fingertips rested on the upper swell of her breast while she stared into his eyes.

Touch me. Take me. Command me. She spoke with her expression and touch. If there was no elemental connection between them, this was a waste of time. She refused to explain what she wanted. She needed him to sense her desires and anticipate what would please her most. A true Master would know how to read her responses. And she could be satisfied with nothing less.

Jeff had introduced her to the freedom of submission. He had unlocked an element of her soul she'd never dreamed existed. She surrendered without reservation and nothing had ever been so wonderful. Then Jeff twisted her pleasure, corrupting the fragile balance into something ugly and... She wouldn't think about Jeff tonight! Jeff was the past. Cole was the present. And the future didn't exist.

His lips parted and his gaze focused on her mouth. Understanding the signals, she curved her fingers around the back of his neck and pushed to her toes. His warm breath wafted across her lips, making her tingle. Their lips pressed together, soft and hesitant. Then he framed her face with his hands and took control.

Tilting his head to one side, he fit his mouth more securely to hers. His tongue brushed back and forth, asking permission rather than invading. She parted and welcomed his tongue with the soft slide of hers. He tasted of coffee and something faintly sweet. She delved deeper, eager for more.

On and on they kissed. His mouth was firm and insistent. Her head spun and she wrapped her arms around his back. He tugged the robe up along her thigh, bunching the material until he found bare skin. A strangled moan escaped him and his lips moved faster.

His fingers stroked her from knee to waist, tantalizing her skin without increasing the intimacy of his caress. She pulled up his shirt, venturing beneath, exploring his sides and back. They touched and kissed and touched some more, content for a time with the tactile connection.

He turned her suddenly, pressing against her back. His arm banded her waist, holding her close while the unmistakable ridge of his erection demonstrated his desire.

"Can you feel what you do to me? I'm so hard, I'm not sure I can go slow." Tugging the sleeves of her robe to her elbows, he bared her breasts. He cupped one firm mound and rocked his hips against her bottom. "Do you like your nipples rolled?" He demonstrated the technique before offering an alternative. "Or pinched?" The firm pressure made her gasp, yet tingling heat sank along her torso and blossomed between her thighs. He nipped her earlobe. "If you won't talk to me, I have no choice but to experiment. Find out what makes you shiver and moan."

She held perfectly still as he untied her belt and eased the robe past her elbows. The sleek material slid down and pooled around her ankles. She didn't realize he held the belt until he tied one end around her wrist. Excitement tripped across her nerve endings. She knew he was a Dom. That was one of the reasons she'd sought him out. Did he realize she was accustomed to submission or... No questions. She would live in the moment and savor each discovery.

"In front or behind?" he mused. He stood beside her now, his gaze sweeping up and down her body. "In front isn't as restricting yet behind is uncomfortable if I want you on your back." Before she could indicate her preference, he drew her wrists together in front and secured them with the satin belt.

Circling her slowly, he took in every curve and angle. Her nipples tingled and tension gathered between her thighs. Why wasn't he touching her? He hadn't even undressed, for heaven's sake. His handsome features settled into an expressionless mask every bit as concealing as hers, yet his gaze smoldered, alive with passion and longing.

He kicked off his shoes and pulled his shirt off, each movement languid despite the eagerness sparkling in his eyes. His fingertips trailed up her arm then followed the indentation of her spine into the deeper furrow between her bottom cheeks. She squirmed and shivered, unable to suppress her reaction to the bold caress.

"You're breathing fast and a wonderful flush has spread across your skin." His voice was deep yet soft, even more caressing than his fingers. "Apprehension can cause this reaction, but I'd bet on anticipation."

She licked her lips and glanced into his eyes. Why couldn't she recapture the freedom she'd enjoyed online? She'd wanted this to be purely sexual, carnal pleasure without logic or regret. And already she wanted to talk to him, to share her thoughts and feelings.

His fingers ascended, splaying against the small of her back. "Am I wrong? Are you afraid? We can take a more conventional course if this is too much for you."

Emboldened by his concern, she guided his hand to her breast.

He stroked her for a moment, his eyelashes hiding his expression. "Part your thighs, starlight, make room for my hand." The pet name sent a secret thrill to the center of her heart. Even as a child she'd never had a nickname. No one had ever called her anything but Starla. She moved her feet apart, feeling restless and achy. "Now lift your arms and hook your wrists behind your head."

The position sounded more awkward than it was. The belt held her hands behind her head and slightly arched her back. He wrapped one arm around her waist, steadying her as he bent to her breasts.

With his tall form angled toward her chest, she was able to see behind him. A large mirror reflected their image. Her pale body was lushly rounded and brazenly offered. His dark head bent to one breast and the lean muscles flexing beneath his lightly tanned skin mesmerized her. She glared at his jeans, resenting the denim barrier.

His lips pulled firmly on her nipple and pleasure zinged into her chest. As he moved to her other breast, his free hand skimmed along her abdomen and cupped her mound. Seeing the intimate progression in the mirror accelerated the sensations. His fingers petted her dark blonde curls and she couldn't stop herself from wiggling.

"Warm," his mouth moved against her breast and his middle finger ventured deeper, "so very soft, but not very wet." Without warning, he scooped her up in his arms and placed her sideways across the bed. He eased her hands out from behind her head, arranging them more naturally before he pulled her bottom to the edge of the mattress. "Do you like having your pussy licked?"

His wicked smile sent heat cascading through her body.

Pushing her legs wide, he traced her slit with the tip of his tongue. She whimpered and her abdomen tensed. "I think you do." He repeated the teasing motion, pausing every so often to glance at her face. Up and down, up and down, his tongue barely parted her folds, intentionally avoiding her clit.

She whimpered again. What he was doing felt wonderful, but they both knew he was withholding what she really needed. Melting heat invited a more invasive caress. Her pussy warmed and softened, allowing him deeper.

"Oh yes," he whispered.

His lips moved against her folds, the kiss carnal and evocative. Cupping her bottom in both hands, he raised her sex to his mouth and pushed his tongue directly into her core. A mewling cry escaped her as she rocked against him. Her clit pulsed, demanding direct stimulation.

"Now you're wet." He lowered her ass to the bed and pushed two fingers into her slick passage. She shuddered helplessly. His lips encircled her clit, drawing on the sensitive bud in one long, gentle pull. Tension swelled, sweeping her upward and—he released the aching nub. She pressed her lips together, refusing to abandon her silence.

Returning his mouth to her nipples, he suckled firmly while his fingers slid in and out. His tongue swirled and his lips pulled, the sensations rippling between her breasts and her pussy in a dizzying undulation.

He pushed deep with his fingers and covered her clit with his thumb. His hand stilled between her thighs, the fullness insufficient to bring her release. He suckled long and deep, his thumb circling her clit as the pressure built. Back and forth between her breasts, he used her nipples to accent the tension gathering beneath his thumb.

She trembled and her back bowed. The coil wound tighter within her pussy as his teeth scraped over her nipples. Slowly withdrawing from inside her, he caught her clit between his thumb and forefinger as his teeth tightened against her nipple. With a sharp nip, he sent her flying. The sensations rocketed toward pain then his gentle fingers pulled them back into pulsing pleasure. Her nipple continued to sting, but his fingers prolonged the spasms gripping her abdomen.

Overwhelmed by the intensity, she turned her face to the side and closed her eyes. She hadn't known exactly what to expect. First encounters were often awkward, yet Cole touched her as if he'd known her forever. His skill frightened her nearly as much as it excited her. If only she could trust him...

His warm, wet tongue circled her tender nipple. "Too much?" She shook her head and arched into the caress. He guided her face back around. "I know you don't want to talk and I won't pressure you. But I have to know I'm not pushing you too hard. I can be very aggressive once things get heated." He paused for a moment, his warm gaze searching her face. "I want to structure this just a little more. Are you okay with that?"

After a brief hesitation, she nodded.

"If you want me to stop at any time say my name. If you say only my name, I'll leave and we'll both pretend none of this happened. If you say more than my name, you can keep the mask and we'll negotiate the rest of your conditions. But there will be no more silence. Does that seem fair?"

He'd been so confident when he touched her, so masterful and secure. She wasn't disappointed by his desire to negotiate just a bit surprised.

She nodded and parted her lips in unmistakable invitation. He kissed her boldly, each sweep of his tongue filling her mouth with the taste of her pleasure. His fingers pushed back into her pussy and she gasped against his parted lips.

The rhythmic shuttle continued as he kissed his way down her body. He hovered over her breasts then followed the silken plane of her belly to her navel. After circling the tiny indentation, he thrust into the tiny well, matching the motion of his fingers with the teasing thrust of his tongue.

Moist and cool, each place he left behind accented the destinations awaiting his attention. He nibbled at her hipbones and his fingers abandoned her core. "I'm a demanding Master." He caressed his way farther back, painting her flesh with her creamy essence. "Are you willing to pleasure me in any way I choose?" His slick fingers circled her anus, the meaning unmistakable.

Jeff frequently took her like that when he was feeling especially aggressive. After the first few times there had been no real pain, but she had always felt degraded and empty afterward.

"Amber?" His finger continued its teasing orbit, setting off tingling sparks in unexpected places. "Have you ever been fucked up the ass?"

She nodded.

"Did you find pleasure in the act?"

She shook her head.

For a long time he stared into her eyes. His finger gently caressed but he refused to retreat. "I will never hurt you. Never do anything you don't want."

The fierce sincerity in his expression made her insides quiver.

"Do you believe me?"

Starting to regret her self-imposed restriction, she offered another nod.

"Will you allow me to show you how it should have been?"

Her eyes widened and she sucked in an unsteady breath.

"I'm only going to use my finger." A wicked smile parted his lips. "And my mouth."

He was so patient, so caring. How could she help but trust him. She nodded again and relaxed against the bed.

He parted her folds with one hand, exposing her swollen clit. His tongue explored for a moment before settling over the ultrasensitive nub. All the while his finger teased her anus. As if in tandem, his tongue circled her clit while his finger outlined her tight opening. It felt forbidden and thrilling, and Starla's body responded despite her anxiety.

His lips closed around her clit and sucked ever so gently as his finger eased inside. She refused to tense against the odd invasion. Her body surrendered, allowing him deeper and he rewarded her with several soft licks.

"How's that make you feel?"

Answers rushed through her mind. *Edgy, titillated, intrigued*. But she pressed her lips together and arched her hips, driving herself onto his finger.

He smiled. "I see." Pulling out very slowly, he sent pleasure spiraling into her abdomen. "And now?"

She planted her feet against the mattress and moved, impaling herself with sudden demand. He encouraged her boldness with his mouth. The pressure increased as he added a second digit. Her pussy dripped, providing lubrication for his fingers.

Dizzy yet liberated by her brazen response, she rotated her hips and thrust faster. The fullness in her ass accented the emptiness in her pussy. He followed her restless movements, plucking at her clit with his lips.

Her orgasm burst sudden and sharp. She caught his head between her thighs and bit back a scream. He slowly pulled his fingers out and sucked on her tender clit. The spasms went on and on, leaving her limp and breathless.

Cole rocked back on his heels and stared at Starla's flushed body. Sprawled before him, her hands bound above her head. He had never seen anyone so beautiful. He wanted to rip off her mask and clasp her to his chest, whisper her real name as she

snuggled against him. She needed the security of anonymity, even if it was only an illusion.

She obviously knew he was a Dom and the most likely way for her to have found out was her despicable ex. There was so much he wanted to say, so many details he needed to know, but this was more important. She was healing, accepting that a Master could give pleasure without hurtful expectations. He wanted her to feel safe and sheltered, which meant for the time being, he had to respect her wishes.

"Starlight." Her long lashes fluttered and she looked into his eyes. He pulled her up so she sat on the edge of the bed. "Unzip my jeans and touch me."

With almost reverent motions, she opened his jeans and pushed them past his hips. Her hands were remarkably dexterous even with her wrists bound. She stroked up and down his engorged shaft. His throaty moan echoed hers.

She bent toward the tip of his cock, already beading with pre-cum. He blocked the move with his hand, not wanting to dislodge her wig. "Not tonight, sweetheart. I've waited too long already." He fished out a condom from the pocket of his pants and handed it to her. She opened the foil packet and rolled the latex into place with far more contact than was necessary.

After tossing a couple of pillows to the other side of the bed, he supported her shoulders and lowered her upper body onto their fullness. The angle allowed her to see exactly what he was doing and she took full advantage of the position.

He caressed her outer lips with his thumbs, parting them just enough to expose her delicate inner folds. Flushed and creamy from all their foreplay, she had never looked more enticing. He knelt on the bed and positioned himself against her entrance. Her warm heat easily penetrated the thin barrier and he shivered. She surrounded and clung to him and he'd barely begun to push inside.

She held perfectly still. Was she savoring their first joining, or had her uncertainty returned? Holding her hips at a precise angle, he looked at her face. Her gaze was wide and passion-bright, her lips softly parted. Anticipation, definitely anticipation.

He pushed forward, groaning as her snug heat embraced his cock. God, she felt good! She raised her knees high against his sides as he drove deeper. A violent shudder shook him and he clasped her hips to his. She was hot and wet, surrendered—his for the taking.

Words would have intruded, so he pulled back and thrust deep. She gasped and arched to meet his next drive. Keeping her bound hands above her head, she offered her body willingly.

He found a strong, sure rhythm that built the pleasure gradually. Tenderness crashed down upon him, threatening his control. If this was to be the only night she allowed him, he wanted it to be perfect. The thought made his heart lurch. He didn't want this to be their only night. He moved faster and deeper, filling her more completely. She opened for him, surrendered to his demands.

It wasn't enough. His dominant nature surged and he grabbed the backs of her knees, spreading her wide, pinning her against the bed. He thrust his full length into her over and over, afraid she'd be repelled by his aggression yet powerless to stop the overwhelming desire. She bucked and moaned, but her expression was rapturous, her gaze wild and welcoming.

All pretence fell away. He fucked her fast and hard. His dominance fueled her submission and her surrender made him all the more demanding. Orgasm after orgasm contracted her cunt and bathed him in liquid acceptance. Dizzy, barely able to breathe, he struggled with his own elusive climax.

You don't want this to end. You never want it to end!

Glad she couldn't hear his possessive thoughts, he released her legs and grasped her hips, pulling her upward as he pushed to his knees. Only her shoulders rested on the bed now. Her long legs hooked around his hips and his cock filled her.

Silence was alien to him, alien and intolerable. She distanced herself, held herself back by refusing to communicate.

"Look at me," he demanded. Their gazes locked. "Are you stretched tight around my cock?" He accepted her shaky nod in lieu of the customary "Yes Sir". "Do you trust me with your pleasure?" Her nod held more conviction this time. "Then come again. I need to watch your eyes as you offer your submission."

He didn't move his hips. His hand covered her mound, two fingers sliding on either side of her clit. She wiggled, trying to recapture the rocking motion.

"No! Be still." He waited until she obeyed before he resumed his caress. "Your body is mine. I choose when and how we come." Her lips trembled and tears shimmered in her eyes. "Tighten your cunt around me." Her desperate grip tore a hiss from his throat. "Again."

She squeezed and squeezed as his fingers caressed the outer swell of her clit. The rhythmic embrace of her passage snapped the final threads of his self-control. Tingling heat gathered in his balls and blazed down the length of his shaft, spewing forth in shuddering jets. Her clit pulsed and her pussy rippled, assuring him he'd taken her with him.

Her legs loosened and her body went slack against his thighs. Loath to move, he found the upper edge of the condom and held it in place as he separated their bodies. She rolled to her side, facing away from him.

Frustrated by her obvious withdrawal, he rid himself of the condom and pressed against her back, draping his arm around her waist. If he asked if she was all right, she'd only offer a meaningless nod. Instead he asked, "Would you like me to untie your hands?"

To his surprise, she shook her head and turned around, snuggling into the warmth of his chest.

Chapter Three

"It was the most extraordinary experience of your life, but you have no intention of repeating it?" Lisa stared at Starla as if she'd lost her mind.

Perhaps she had. Starla wasn't sure what was more insane, that she'd actually gone through with her rash idea of having sex with Cole or that it had been amazing. "I can't see him again." It had been surreal and perfect. A second attempt would only taint the fantasy.

"Has he tried to contact you?"

"Three times a day for the first few days then once a day since."

"Are you waiting for him to give up? Is there some reason you don't want to see him again?"

"Amber Star is dying to continue the adventure, but Starla Landry can't afford to risk—"

"I've tried so hard to keep my nose out of the *Jeff thing*." Lisa advanced across Starla's living room with her hands on her hips. "I was understanding and supportive. I never pressed for details even when I thought spilling the specifics of what that bastard did to you might be cathartic. If you're hesitating to form another relationship because of that worthless prick, then I'm going to unleash my Irish temper."

Starla couldn't help but smile. Lisa's Irish temper was never on a leash.

"You said your mystery man works in the training department?" Lisa went on. "Was that bullshit? Is he your boss or something?"

Lisa had a way of sniffing out the truth with only fragments of information, so Starla debated what to say. "We're both managers, but we work in different departments."

"Unless DMS has changed their fraternization policies since I worked for them, there isn't a problem." Lisa joined Starla on the sofa and patted her knee. "Which brings us back to Jeff. Are you afraid this new guy will disapprove of the things you and Jeff did together?"

Starla had to fight back a smile before she was able to say, "Believe me, that's not a problem."

"Is he a Dom?"

The question was so unexpected Starla's hand flew to her mouth. "How did you find out about... Who else knows?"

"I'm amazed you could spend three years with Jeff and still retain your naïveté. Have you forgotten Mike has known Jeff since high school? Jeff only revealed bits and

pieces of his cravings to you. For the really nasty stuff he... It doesn't matter. That's all in the past, thank God! But this new guy matters. You obviously like him a lot."

Starla felt as if a weight had been lifted off her shoulders. She had never been able to talk to anyone about the unexpected turn her life had taken. It wasn't as if she wanted to share every graphic detail with Lisa, but knowing her friend wasn't shocked by the concept was remarkably comforting.

"I'd heard rumors this new guy was a Dom, but I wasn't sure until the other night."

"Did he hurt you?"

Starla sighed, frustrated by Lisa's preconception. "Just the opposite. He was the most caring lover I'd ever been with."

"And yet he's a Dom? How does that work?"

"There are so many misconceptions about Dom/sub relationships. A Dom doesn't grab their lover by the hair and throw them to the floor." She paused for a mischievous smile. "Unless, of course, that's what the sub needs."

"I know Jeff got you into all this, but why do you still find it attractive?"

Lisa seemed honestly interested, so Starla answered candidly. "My work is stressful. I'm responsible not only for my own decisions but for the financial ramification of every person in my department. When Jeff first challenged me to surrender control, to just let go and—trust him, I found it incredibly liberating." Speaking of trust in connection with Jeff nearly choked her.

"You just lay back and let him go at it?" A hint of amusement crept into Lisa's tone. "That sounds rather boring."

"There are precise expectations and prearranged codes of behavior. Some Doms are much stricter than others, but then some subs need more structure. Regardless of the specifics, a good Dom will challenge their sub, sometimes using techniques the sub never would have imagined pleasurable. They explore together, allow themselves to be creative and adventurous. But at the heart of any good relationship is trust and mutual respect."

Lisa glanced away as she said, "That's why Jeff's betrayal hurt so badly."

Starla didn't bother with verbal confirmation. They both knew how devastated she'd been by Jeff's behavior.

"You let this guy tie you up?" Lisa's gaze hadn't made it back to Starla's face.

"Haven't you ever been comforted by a nice tight hug? Sometimes restricted movement makes me feel safe. Other times it adds an edge of danger, the uncertainty of knowing I can't stop whatever's about to happen."

A shiver shook Lisa's shoulders while a telling flush crept up her neck. "I wouldn't want to be at the mercy of anyone."

"You and Mike have never experimented?" It seemed only fair to ask.

"Mike and I do just fine without whips and chains."

Starla chuckled. "No one I know has iron manacles stashed under their bed. There are clubs that provide dramatic environments and you can buy almost anything on the internet. Still, with me it has always been more of a mindset than the equipment utilized by many Doms." Lisa was starting to look uncomfortable, so Starla quickly wound up her explanation. BDSM wasn't for everyone. Starla had accepted that fact long ago. "Anything else you want to know? Your window into my sex life is about to slam closed."

"I thought Jeff's insistence on those sorts of pleasures is what made you end the relationship." Lisa was obviously choosing every word with the utmost care. "Why did you intentionally go after the same type of person?"

"I didn't leave Jeff because he was a Dom. I left him because he was a faithless bastard. He allowed me to explore a side of myself I might never have acknowledged if I hadn't been with him. That's one of the few things about Jeff I don't regret."

They stared at each other for a long, strained moment. "I don't know how to ask this without pissing you off."

Starla smiled and nudged Lisa with her shoulder. "You know me. Even if you do piss me off, I'll get over it quickly."

"Women who have been victimized tend to be attracted to the same sort of man. That's why the cycle of abuse repeats over and over."

"Don't think I haven't spent a lot of time reminding myself of the statistics. I know I'm excited by danger, but I don't think I could ever be completely satisfied if I deny my submissive nature."

"Do you trust this mystery man?"

Starla searched her feelings with brutal honesty before she answered. "Yeah, I do. That's part of what scares me so badly. I know how easily I could fall for him."

"You're going to have to trust someone if you ever hope to find your happily ever after. At least with this guy you have an objective perspective on his background."

"I'm not looking for happily ever after and I know how he behaves at work," Starla corrected. "I'm not sure that qualifies as an objective perspective."

"It's better than accepting what a person tells you, which is what most people get when they start dating."

"Then you think I should see him again."

Lisa laughed. "There's no way I'm taking responsibility for what happens next. I think you have a lot to mull over and I'll support whatever *you* decide."

Starla allowed the evasion. It really was her decision and Lisa had already been more helpful than Starla anticipated.

Inevitably, Starla later found herself at her computer rereading Cole's messages. They started out almost casual then a note of longing seeped into the words. His latest message contained only two lines.

It's obvious you need space.

You know how to contact me.

That had been two days before. He probably thought she had no intention of contacting him. How could she start this all over again if she wasn't ready for a real relationship? The mask had made her feel safe, separated enough from the events to participate freely.

She couldn't string him along forever. They worked in the same building. He would eventually figure out who she was.

Or would he? If it hadn't been for that training class, their paths might never have crossed. They hadn't crossed since. If Jeff hadn't mentioned that Cole was a Dom, would she have lusted after him? Cole was undeniably handsome, but so were countless others. What had caused the instantaneous attraction?

Conflicted yet lonelier than she'd felt in years, she changed the status of her IM avatar and launched a private greeting.

AmberStar: Are you still talking to me?

Long moments passed as she waited for him to respond. According to his avatar he was online. Maybe he'd decided she was more trouble than she was worth.

ColsonB: I should have realized starlight only comes out at night. I'm glad you finally responded. I was starting to feel like a stalker.

AmberStar: The other night was...amazing. I've just been a little overwhelmed.

ColsonB: Can I take that as a compliment?

Tingles played havoc with her composure as she remembered all the things they'd done and all the things she still wanted to do with him.

AmberStar: I don't want to confuse the issue, but I'm not sure I can make you understand.

ColsonB: Try. I'm easy to talk to – if you'd give it a try.

AmberStar: I was hurt very badly. Trust is hard for me.

ColsonB: I'd guessed as much.

AmberStar: I'm so tired of being alone, yet I'm so afraid of...

ColsonB: I won't hurt you, starlight. We can take this as slow as you like.

AmberStar: That's where this gets twisted.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Could she admit her desires, her longings without sounding like a sex-starved fool?

AmberStar: I don't want to take it slow, at least not the physical part. I want to be your lover. I've never wanted anything more, but the rest, the getting to know each other, the laughing and sharing past memories. I'm not sure I'll ever be ready to go through that again.

ColsonB: Everything you need is already in place. Don't you remember what I said?

AmberStar: Remind me.

ColsonB: If the mask is on, I'm in control and our relationship remains sexual. If you say my name we walk away, no regrets, no backward glances. But as soon as you're ready for more than amazing sex, take off the mask and we'll turn fantasy into reality.

He'd been a patient lover, satisfying her body with the perfect combination of aggression and tenderness.

AmberStar: If something sounds too good to be true, it usually is.

ColsonB: You survived me once. Is it really so hard to believe we can make this work?

The cursor blinked as her fingers remained paralyzed over the keyboard. This wasn't fair to him. He was obviously ready for more than a sexual outlet.

ColsonB: I really want to see you again, but I want you to feel safe. If the silence makes you feel secure, I can wait for the rest.

She had it all backward. Emotional attachments were supposed to make a woman feel secure enough to have sex. But her body already trusted him. Somehow she had to convince her mind and her reluctant heart that her body wouldn't lead her astray *again*.

Taking a deep breath, she forced her fingers to type.

AmberStar: Are you free this weekend?

ColsonB: Same place and time?

AmberStar: If our room is already taken, I'll text you. If not, I'll see you there.

* * * * *

Oscillating between lust and frustration, Cole stepped off the elevator. He hadn't received a text message, so he presumed the plans remained the same. He couldn't be angry with Starla. Her attitude was grounded in fear, and anger would only compound her insecurities.

Knowing why she was being difficult hadn't kept her from his dreams or provided any more productivity to his workweek. He wanted her, needed her with obsessive intensity. After claiming he'd come down with a virus, he'd spent the majority of his "sick day" pacing, imagining her supple body and expressive amber eyes.

He'd never fallen for someone so hard or fast. Why did it have to happen with someone this complicated?

Shifting his gym bag, he raised his hand to knock on the door. The deadbolt released with a snap and the door swung inward. Silence again. His heart sank. A tiny part of him had hoped she'd be ready to talk, to express her feelings and move beyond her mistrust.

She slammed the door behind him and pushed him back against it, her hands urgently tugging up his shirt. He caught her wrists and smiled into her eyes. "I missed you too." He dropped the gym bag and kicked it aside, focusing entirely on her.

Awareness swept across her expression, the colorful mask unable to hide her hunger. She slipped to her knees and crossed her arms behind her back. Willing and ready, as any sub should be. Somehow her frantic eagerness had pleased him more.

He pulled off his shirt and kicked off his shoes. The last time they'd met he hadn't even fully undressed. He intended to right that oversight now. He wanted to feel every inch of her naked body sliding against his.

"Take off my pants," he instructed, struggling to make his tone stern. "Do not touch my skin. You've yet to earn the privilege."

Gentle furrows creased her brow, but her mask hid the majority of her displeasure. She carefully unfastened his pants and lowered the zipper. Her fingers trembled as they passed over the open fly. She'd kept him in emotional limbo all week. This was no more than she deserved. Besides they'd both enjoy it more for her misbehavior.

She hooked two fingers through his belt loops and tugged his pants down along his legs. He waited until she reached his ankles then drew his feet out of the bunched material. Pausing with her fingers on the top edge of his sock, she looked up for permission.

"You'll probably regret it, but go ahead. My feet tend to be cold."

After removing his socks, she placed a kiss on the top of each foot. The submissive gesture sent scalding lust curling through his groin. Damn it! He wanted to take this slow, savor her surrender before he actually fucked her.

"Now my underwear." The strain in his tone gave too much away. Her fingertips skimmed along his hips as she rid him of the boxers. His shaft lengthened and thickened with enough speed to make him groan. "Open your robe and spread your thighs. I want to see your pussy."

She didn't hesitate and he clenched his fists as his gaze caressed her. High, round breasts, pink nipples, trim waist and sleek hips, every aspect of her body aroused and pleased him. Her legs angled out, but he could only see a teasing peek of her inner folds. Soon he would touch and tease her then feel her stretch tight around his aching cock.

His shaft bucked and pre-cum beaded, revealing the urgency of his need. "Suck me. Now!" His lack of control should have been humiliating, but joy warmed her jewel-bright eyes.

She gently cupped his balls with one hand and closed her lips around him. Hot, silky heaven engulfed him. He closed his eyes, fighting back the need to rock his hips and fill her mouth with cum. Savage. He had gone without sex far longer when he took her the first time. What was wrong with him now?

You'd gone without sex. You hadn't gone without Starla.

He couldn't resist watching her, regardless of how much harder it made holding off his orgasm. Her eager mouth slid up and down his engorged length, tongue swirling, cheeks sucking. His knuckles turned white as he ignored the need to grasp her hair, unable to control her without displacing her wig. He inhaled sharply and braced his feet farther apart.

"Slow down, starlight. I just want you to take the edge off."

Her lips settled around the head of his cock and she sucked until light danced before his eyes. One hand gently rolled his balls while the other stroked his shaft. It was hopeless! He pushed to the back of her mouth and came in hard, pulsing waves. She swallowed and licked until every last tremor escaped him.

He pulled her to her feet and pivoted, pressing her back against the locked door. His mouth claimed hers, his taste only adding to the intimacy of their consuming kiss. His hands roamed boldly, needing the feel of her body as desperately as he'd needed the warm suction of her mouth.

Her hardened nipples abraded his chest and the heat of her pussy quickly rekindled his arousal. "You'd think I was eighteen again," he whispered against her kiss-bruised lips. "I never get hard this fast."

With a wicked little smile, she found his burgeoning cock with her hand and encouraged the reaction.

"Oh no you don't." He caught her wrist and dragged her hand away from his body. "It's my turn to play."

Chapter Four

"Get on the bed."

Cole's imperious command sent excitement zinging through Starla. His taste lingered on her tongue, teasing her anew with each ragged breath. She'd always gone down on Jeff with the hope of reciprocation. But watching Cole lose control had nearly driven her to climax. His face flushed and his shaft expanded until her lips could barely contain him.

"Now!" His voice snapped, reminding her of his directive.

He picked up a gym bag and followed in her wake. Her heart fluttered in her chest. Somehow she didn't think the bag contained running shoes or energy drinks. Some sort of paddle? She quickly turned her head, concealing her smile.

Jeff had tried several times to convince her that pain could heighten their pleasure. She'd never felt anything but pain.

Cole, on the other hand, hadn't done anything she hadn't enjoyed.

She crawled on the bed and lay on her back, raising her arms above her head.

"As delightful as I find that position, I had something else in mind." He dragged a chair to the foot of the bed and placed the gym bag on the floor beside it. "Hands and knees, starlight. And scoot right to the edge of the bed." She rolled over and moved backward until her feet dangled off the foot of the bed. He eased her knees farther apart and guided her shoulders downward. "Rest your forehead on your arms and relax."

He positioned her with her ass in the air and her pussy on display then told her to relax? That seemed a little contradictory. He sat on the chair and unzipped the gym bag. Then his warm hands pressed against her bottom cheeks, giving them an affectionate squeeze. She wiggled just a little, unable to suppress the instinct.

His thumb swept inward, teasing her inner thighs before grazing her delicate folds. "You're really wet. Do you enjoy being naked, or did having my cock in your mouth excite you this much?"

Why did he ask her questions when he knew she wouldn't reply? He caressed her damp flesh, his thumbs sliding easily on her cream.

"We can't let all this go to waste." He nipped the high curve of her bottom, indicating his intent. His hands shifted, parting and lifting so his mouth could access her dewy core.

Damn, the man knew how to use his mouth! He slid his tongue tip into her crease, lapping at her juices. Around and around he licked, never venturing deeper. A persistent ache erupted in her cunt and she wiggled back against him.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" His lips moved against her flesh as he spoke. "Do you want this?" He suddenly thrust his tongue into her passage then withdrew just as quickly. "Or this?" Somehow his tongue found her clit and flicked the sensitive bud. She gasped and canted her hips, trying to give him easier access to the pulsing nub, but he settled back on the chair, taking him away from her.

"You were wonderfully selfless when I first arrived. I hadn't intended on coming, but your mouth is hard to resist." She heard a familiar hum and glanced over her shoulder, eyes wide with concern. "All the toys are new. I just opened the packages to put in the batteries."

That hadn't been the nature of her concern, but it was good to know. The vibrator in his hand wasn't especially large. She just wanted to know where he intended to insert it. She licked her lips, uncertainty tossing within her. If she spoke, he'd expect her to take off the mask and she wasn't ready to abandon her persona.

"Rest your head on your hands."

She couldn't miss the challenge in his tone. He wanted her to speak, was hoping she'd surrender. With stubborn determination, she lowered her forehead to her forearms and raised her ass in silent defiance.

The vibrator followed the path his tongue had blazed, sliding back and forth between her folds then accenting her vaginal opening. Her inner muscles clenched and her clit pulsed. God, she needed to come!

Her fingernails bit into her palms as he pushed the tip of the vibrator inside her. The tantalizing hum radiated through her abdomen, making her nipples tighten. He increased the speed then drove the toy deeper.

"Can you come like this, or does the vibration just drive you crazy?"

It was far more taunt than question. He parted her bottom and stroked his tongue over her other opening. Unexpected sensations drove into her pussy and tingled up her spine. A muffled groan escaped her and he licked her again and again. He was doing it to shock her, to drive her arousal higher.

The vibration stopped, leaving only the fullness.

She closed her eyes and concentrated on what she was feeling. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples stung. Despite the toy, her pussy quivered, ready for movement and friction.

Something drizzled into the crack of her ass. She knew it was lube even before his fingers coated her anus and carefully pushed inside. He rotated his wrist, twisting his fingers as he pulled them nearly out. Tingling heat followed in his wake and echoing sensations spiraled up her vaginal walls.

She shuddered, catching her lower lip between her teeth to keep from crying out. He was silent now, depriving her of his voice and forcing her to focus on his touch. The toy slid out as he pushed his fingers in then he reversed direction. In, out, in, out, the movement never ceasing.

The contrast sent pleasure rippling outward and driving inward, building with alarming speed. She gasped and moaned, shivered and shook, lost in the carnal wonder.

“Cry out for me, starlight. I’ll wait for words, but let me hear your voice.”

Pleasure exploded through her and she cried out, hands tangled in the bedspread. He removed the toy and tingling aftershocks contracted her inner muscles.

“You’re so wonderfully responsive.” With obvious reluctance he withdrew his fingers. “Turn over. I want to watch your face while we fuck.”

Cole grabbed a condom out of the gym bag and rolled it up the length of his cock while Starla repositioned herself on the bed. A rosy flush had spread across her skin and her eyes gleamed behind the mask. He wanted to rip the material from her face and toss aside the ridiculous wig. He wanted no artifice between them while they made love. Made love? He’d used the word fuck out loud. Why was the act so much more significant in his mind?

Pushing the chair out of his way, he pressed his shins against the end of the bed. He cupped her breast, firmly rolling her nipple while he sorted through the emotional muddle. She arched into his touch, obviously enjoying the attention. Lowering his head to her other breast, he suckled in long, deep pulls. Each little mewling sound he dragged from her made him wild and demanding, ravenous for more.

He draped her legs over his shoulders and buried his face between her thighs. He sucked on her folds and thrust his tongue deep inside her, determined to make her scream. His hands clasped her ass, holding her firmly against his mouth. She wiggled and twisted. Her soft, throaty sounds driving him crazy.

Holding her open with his thumbs, he stabbed into her with his tongue. Deeper and harder he drove until his lips smacked her pussy with each urgent thrust. She tangled her fingers in his hair, neither dragging him away nor pulling him closer.

He feasted on her cream, sucking her essence directly from her cunt and still it wasn’t enough. Her body was his, but her heart and mind were locked away, safely removed from the tempest. He closed his lips around her clit and sucked.

She released a short, sharp cry as her flesh throbbed against his lips. Easing the pressure without releasing her clit, he drew out each spasm, prolonging her pleasure.

Her legs slid down his arms, coming to rest in the crook of his elbows. He pulled her forward until her ass rested at the edge of the bed. His gaze bore into hers. She looked dazed and a bit unsure.

The hesitation in her expression made him ask, “Are you all right?” She released a shaky breath and nodded, her eyes focusing on his face. “Do you want me to fuck you?”

He’d already brought her to climax with a toy and his mouth. Could he really doubt her willingness? She reached down and found his cock, bringing it to the opening

of her vagina. The simple gesture made his insides clench and his heart feel clumsy in his chest.

Inch by precious inch, he pushed into her waiting pussy. Her snug passage opened before him, surrounding him in liquid heat. She arranged her arms above her head and stared into his eyes. Warm and welcoming, just like her body, her gaze accepted him without hesitation or insecurity.

"Wrap your legs around my waist," he whispered suddenly. "I have to touch you."

She obeyed and he framed her face with his hands, kissing her deeply as he started to move. His mouth remained on hers but his hands wandered everywhere, exploring her softness as his cock filled her again and again.

Returning his kiss with equal fervor, she tightened her inner muscles and lifted her hips. He hadn't given her permission to touch him and she kept her hands fisted above her head.

"Touch me." The words were muffled against her mouth, but she obviously understood. Her fingers squeezed his shoulders then slid down his arms. She explored his back and clutched his ass, encouraging his deep thrusting.

Pleasure rushed up through him like a geyser. His balls burned and he came in hard, shuddering waves.

"Starla," he panted. "Oh God, that was incredible."

She went stiff beneath him and his whispered words echoed through his head.

Shit!

Her ankles unhooked and she shoved him backward, hard. He stumbled, arms flailing for a moment before he landed on his ass.

She scrambled off the bed and darted into the bathroom before he could stop her.

"Fuck!" Should he wait until she emerged or give her some time to calm?

He listened for the sound of the shower as he slipped into his jeans. She'd gone to great lengths to make sure he didn't know who she was, but he'd never claimed to have been fooled by her deception.

The bathroom door was flung open and Starla stormed out, fully dressed in casual clothes. She tossed the wig and Amber's mask onto the bed without so much as glancing at him.

"Starla, wait." He knew better than to try to touch her. Her mood was far too volatile for that. "Can't we—" the outer door slammed behind her, "talk about this?"

He heaved a frustrated sigh and glared at the disguise she'd left behind. Her message was loud and clear. Amber Star had been interested in him not Starla Landry. Unfortunately for Starla, Colson Beck didn't give up that easily.

* * * * *

Tired and depressed after the longest week of her life, Starla made her way across the parking lot toward her boring sedan. It had only been after meeting Cole that she noticed how many of the things in her life were boring. Her clothes were boring, her apartment was boring, most of her friends were boring. It was as if she had organized her life to make sure no one noticed her.

She glanced around with haphazard carelessness as she remotely triggered the locks on her car. The headlights flashed and someone pushed her forward then spun her around. She yelped and dropped her keys as she stared up into Cole's handsome face.

"You have two choices," he began. "Choice number one, you end this foolishness and you and I go have dinner like ordinary, rational adults who are very attracted to each other."

"I'm not hungry."

He chuckled, snatched her purse from under her arm and tossed it to a dark-haired man standing a couple of paces away. Her keys soon followed and Starla gave herself a firm mental shake. "Wait a goddamn minute! I need those things!"

Cole ignored her protest as the dark-haired man headed for the driver's door of *her* car.

Before she had any concept of what Cole intended, he pulled handcuffs out of the pocket of his jacket and snapped one around her wrist. He pulled her hands together in front of her and secured the other cuff.

"This is kidnapping," she snapped. She looked around helplessly at the nearly empty lot, but all she saw was the dark-haired accomplice driving away in her car. "No, it's carjacking! What are you hoping to accomplish by this?"

He didn't say a word as he dragged her toward a shiny black sports car tucked away in the far corner of the lot. Now that car was anything but boring. With mocking gallantry he opened the door and motioned for her to get inside.

"I'm not going anywhere with you. This isn't funny."

Using a maneuver she's seen on too many cop shows, he guided the top of her head with one hand and firmly helped her into the car. She looked around again, hoping for a stray worker or passerby.

"There are surveillance cameras. I'll have you arrested for this."

One side of his mouth quirked in a challenging grin. "There are cameras almost everywhere anymore, like the lobby of the Executive Towers Hotel for instance. Who's going to believe that I'm actually kidnapping you?"

Her feet were still firmly planted on the pavement, so he bent down to tuck them inside the car. She let him move the first foot then kicked hard with the second. He just laughed and caught her ankle, sliding his hand up under her skirt. She yelped and he had her foot in position before she understood the diversion.

The door closed with a firm bang and she shook her head. This couldn't be happening. Why would he go to all this trouble?

He pulled out of the parking lot, maneuvering the car with obvious familiarity. She refused to look at him. He was too damn appealing.

"I know how hard it was for you to reach out to anyone," he began in a soft, sincere tone. "I understand —"

"You don't know me. Don't pretend you do."

"All I want is the opportunity to get to know you. I suspect we'd be good for each other if you'd give this half a chance."

She'd shared her body with his twice. Why was the prospect of talking to him so intimidating? "When did you figure out who I was? What gave me away?" He took a long time to reply and she finally turned her head. His expressive eyes were narrowed as he debated what to say. "Don't lie to me. If you're serious about...whatever this is, don't you dare lie to me."

"I'd never heard of an Amber Star at DMS, but DMS is a large company. I asked around and no one else had heard of her either, so I had a friend of mine to do some digging. Her trail led back to you."

Accepting the explanation with a stiff nod, she analyzed the revelation. He'd known who she was from the start, so why had he agreed to meet with her? A sickening possibility unfurled within her mind. "How well do you know my ex?"

"I know enough about him to understand why the fantasy setup appeals to you. I was frustrated by your silence but wanted you to feel comfortable enough with me to take it off willingly."

"But you went and called me by another woman's name."

He chuckled, the sound warm and rumbling. "I promise not to forget your name again."

A certain gleam in his eyes made her ask, "What's my name?"

"Starlight."

Tingling warmth washed over her, easing the last of her misgivings. She could do this. Even without the role to protect her she was willing to try. She relaxed against the seat and enjoyed the peaceful silence. She didn't know where he was taking her. It really didn't matter. He'd proved he could be trusted with her pleasure. Now she was ready to risk her heart.

Chapter Five

The restaurant was casual yet intimate with padded booths and defused lighting. He'd released her hands in the parking lot and left the handcuffs on the dashboard. Starla sipped her wine, more interested in her companion than the food. She'd expected to feel awkward after the freedom of the mask, but their conversation flowed smoothly. Cole was attentive without being pushy, so very different from the aggressive lover who commanded her pleasure and instinctively fulfilled her needs.

They talked about work and movies, music and memories. They realized how much they had in common and how interesting it would be to explore their differences. He'd never been to an opera and she'd never been to a professional sporting event.

"Never?" Cole shook his head and leaned back in the booth. "You've never been to a football game?"

She shook her head.

"Baseball?"

"I've been in a baseball stadium, but I was there for a concert."

He chuckled and took a long swig of his beer. "All right. I'll go to the opera with you if you go to a hockey game with me."

"Hockey?" She laughed. "Way to ease me into the sporting world."

"Is it a deal?"

"It's a deal."

They lapsed into companionable silence as the waiter cleared their plates. She knew his past and his work persona. They'd spent hours online chatting, so they were far from strangers. Still, this felt different, more...real.

"This was nice." Cole reached across the table and took her hand. Blue fire smoldered in his eyes. "I hope it's the first of many enjoyable evenings. I want to spend time with you."

"We have the hockey game and the opera ahead of us."

"And what about tonight?" He drew her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, his gaze staring into hers. "How does it end?"

"I don't have sex on a first date. Surely *that's* not what you're expecting." She delivered the lines with sarcastic inflection and he burst out laughing.

"I'm not expecting anything." He leaned toward her and caressed the side of her face. "Hoping, I'll admit. But if you want me to take you home, I will."

"I want you to take me home." She paused, waited for disappointment to cloud his gaze, then added, "With you."

He tossed cash onto the table and rushed her from the restaurant. His haste excited and amused her. He had been so patient during dinner, so calm and polite. She was starting to wonder what happened to the passionate Cole, the man so desperate to be with her that he'd kidnapped her.

The sports car growled to life as he turned the ignition, echoing the change in his mood. "Put the cuffs back on."

A shiver raced down her spine. It hadn't been a request. If she wanted to be his lover, she must willingly submit. His handsome face revealed nothing as he waited for her decision.

Taking the cuffs off the dashboard, she fastened them around her wrists. She'd known only pleasure with Cole, had no doubt she could trust him. The cuffs felt cold against her skin, yet heat gathered between her thighs, making her restless and moist.

He maneuvered the car onto the highway. She knew where he lived, though she'd never been to his house. He had a nice home in a good neighborhood, perfect for setting down roots and raising a family.

A smile curved her lips and she glanced out the window as possibilities rolled through her mind. Long-term plans had never appealed to her before. She had her job and her carefully compartmentalized life. Why even consider shaking things up?

Because with the right man long-term plans might be the most exciting challenge of all.

"What are you thinking about?"

"Nothing."

"Don't lie to me, starlight. If you don't want to share your thoughts, I won't push you, but don't lie to me."

"I was thinking about long-term plans." That was true yet ambiguous enough not to scare him off.

"Personal or professional?" His tone was even, casual.

"Personal." She dared a sidelong glance at him.

He grasped the steering wheel with relaxed confidence and watched the road as he drove. "Did I trigger these thoughts?"

"Yes."

"I've been picturing you in my life ever since I found out who you were. I was intrigued by your ingenuity and impressed by your skill. I've always liked you and finding out you felt the same way sent me off on all sorts of fantasies." He smiled without taking his eyes off the road. "You were naked in most of them, but not all of them were sexual."

Laughter bubbled up within her, warm and comforting. "What does that mean?"

"I pictured our first Christmas together then I fucked you under the Christmas tree. I pictured you cooking in my kitchen then I fucked you on the kitchen table. I pictured you —"

"I get the idea."

"What were you imagining?"

Did she dare admit how far into the future she'd insinuated him into her life? "I...I was picturing our family."

"You want children?"

She looked at him again, concerned by his emotionless tone. "Yes, don't you?"

"Very much, but I want time with you alone before we complicate our lives with children."

A relieved sigh escaped her and she shifted in her seat.

"Would you like to know my most common fantasy?" The sexy purr in his tone assured her his thoughts had returned to the present.

"Am I naked?"

"Naked and bound."

"Tell me more."

"I come home late from work. Another project deadline kept me hours longer than I wanted to stay. I'm tired and edgy. I need a release of some sort. I open the door to my bedroom and there you are, naked and tied to my bed."

"How did I restrain myself?" She didn't want to ruin the mood, but she was a literal thinker.

"That's the first thing I ask you."

"What do I say?"

"You wanted to surprise me, so you had a friend tie you up. You're annoyed and upset because I'm so late."

"Do we argue?"

"Oh no. I kiss and caress you. I pinch your nipples and suck your clit until you beg me to let you come."

"Do you?"

"No. I move between your legs and lick your pussy. You're sopping wet and desperate for my cock. I give you fingers, but it's not enough. You want my entire length inside you, filling you while you come really hard."

Her mind provided the vivid image he described. She could feel his hands and his mouth, imagine the fullness of his cock and the pleasure he would give her. Her pussy clenched and melted, moistening her panties.

"Are you wet, starlight? Does the thought of fucking me make your pussy ache?"

"God, yes."

"Then touch yourself. Lift your skirt so I can watch you rub your clit."

She didn't hesitate. They'd pulled off the highway onto a side street. It was doubtful anyone could see what she was doing, but she honestly didn't care.

Moving her legs as far apart as she could in the sports car, she pulled her panties aside and found her clit. She was slick, hot and oh so ready to come. Circling the swollen nub with her fingertip, she accelerated the gathering tension and sent sparks of pleasure all through her abdomen.

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes," she whispered, closing her eyes.

"You don't have permission to come."

She whimpered and stopped the circular motion until the sensations receded.

"Don't stop. Keep the tension building, just don't let it crest." Her hand resumed its motion and he asked, "Do you want to hear the rest of my fantasy?"

"I thought you'd told me everything."

"Not even close. I pull out of your pussy and straddle your face. I make you suck your cream off my cock. It feels so good I don't want you to stop, but I have something else in mind."

"Tell me." Her hand moved faster and her head tossed against the seat back. "What happens after you pull out of my mouth?"

"I turn you over and stack pillows under your hips. I spread your delectable ass cheeks and lick your puckered little star. You squirm and protest that it's unnatural and dirty, so I push my tongue inside you."

She trembled as her imagination tormented her with images, close up, graphic pictures of his tongue pushing past her sphincter and... "And then?" Her fingers rubbed her cream-soaked folds, avoiding her aching clit. She was so close, so fucking close!

"Then I lube you really well and push my cock inside your tight, hot ass."

Pleasure rushed up to meet her and she quickly pulled her hand away, moaning as the half-formed orgasm slipped beyond her grasp.

His smile was dark and wicked. "Good girl."

Cole dragged his gaze away from her disheveled form, but her image was emblazoned on his memory. Her skirt bunched about her waist and her thighs spread. Her breathing slowed and she started to straighten her clothing.

"No. Take off your panties and leave your sex exposed." She looked around before she obeyed. "You should be calling me Sir. And I only want you to speak if I ask you a question. Do you understand?"

"Yes Sir."

There was no hesitation in her now. Good. He wanted this to feel natural, safe and comfortable.

He pulled into his garage a few minutes later and turned off the car. Without a word he slipped his hand between her legs and traced her exposed slit. She was still damp and hot.

"Choose a safe word before we go inside."

"Dragon."

Accepting her choice with a nod, he opened his car door and started around the car to open hers. She got out on her own and followed him into the house. Her eagerness pleased him. He'd been hard since they left the restaurant and knew release was still a ways off.

She followed him silently, her expression curious as she took in his house. He'd thought about hiring a decorator, but he didn't entertain often enough to justify the expense.

"It might be a bit generic, but I'm clueless when it comes to that sort of thing."

"Most men are." She lowered her gaze and said, "Sorry. I guess that wasn't actually a question."

"I'll suspend the rule until we reach the bedroom. Do you need anything before we get started?" He cupped the side of her face and stared into her eyes. "In fact, is this what you want tonight? If you need to ease back into things, I'm willing to —"

"Suppress who you really are? I trust you, Cole. I want you to be my Dom."

Lust slammed into him with staggering force. He wrapped his arms around her and claimed her mouth. Her lips parted with the first brush of his, her tongue warm and playful. They kissed for a long time, content to be in each other's arms.

"Unless you want me to fuck you on the living room floor, we better get moving."

"Yes Sir," she whispered against his damp lips.

He led her to his bedroom and turned on the bedside lamp. "Take off your clothes."

She kicked off her shoes as she unbuttoned her blouse. He unlocked the handcuffs so she could slip the garment off then unfastened her bra. She quickly shed the rest of her clothing.

The lamplight cast a golden glow across her flawless skin. He took in her beauty in one slow, assessing sweep. "You are so damn beautiful. Turn around." Her long, slender back and rounded ass were just as appealing as her other attributes. He squeezed her firm cheeks and nipped her shoulder. "Bend over the bed and spread your legs wide."

He took out lubricant and the butt plug he'd purchased. She'd thoroughly enjoyed the other toy he'd used on her and suspected this would be no different. He left the lube within easy reach and laid out several condoms. Once they started, he didn't want anything to interrupt the flow.

After preparing the butt plug with a generous coating of lube, he stepped up behind her. He eased her cheeks apart and placed the tapered end of the plug against her anus. "Relax. Accept this into your body." She stilled, her breath escaping in a

ragged sigh. He pushed firmly, watching her body stretch as he drove the plug into her tight rear passage. "Tighten your muscles all you like but don't push it out."

Allowing her a moment to adjust to the intrusion, he caressed the silky skin of her cheeks and hips. "Now get on the bed, on your back, and raise your arms above your head."

She arranged herself as he indicated, parting her thighs without having to be told. "Are you going to restrain me?"

The hope in her tone was nearly his undoing. He groaned and turned his face away while he regained control of his wayward body. "I've been far from celibate, but I've never invited another woman to share my bed. I'll have to buy some things to make our sessions more enjoyable."

Starla couldn't suppress a smile. She didn't want to think of him with anyone else. Knowing he was sharing something with her he hadn't offered to anyone else made her feel special.

The butt plug made her restless as hell. Would he fuck her ass tonight or prolong the anticipation?

He joined her on the bed, pushing her legs farther apart as he lowered his face between her thighs. His tongue explored her folds, rekindling the fire. Sensations built with amazing resilience, rolling and spreading through her body.

"Not yet," he warned. "Let it build."

She groaned, tightening her muscles around the butt plug to ward off her impending climax. He ripped off his shirt while he kicked off his shoes then struggled out of his pants. She wasn't sure if this was another ploy to keep her simmering, or if he'd been so absorbed in her pleasure he'd simply forgotten to undress.

Breathless and flushed, he finally achieved nakedness only to remember he needed a condom. She pushed up on her elbows and watched him, moved by his haste. Even as desperate as he was to be inside, he took time to protect her.

"Finally!" He lifted her hips and entered her slowly.

"Please," she whimpered, unable to prevent the word from escaping.

"Please what, love. I'm inside you. What more could you possibly want?"

"Move. Please fuck me."

He pulled back slowly and thrust in fast. "Like this?"

"Yes. Again." With smooth, steady strokes he drove his cock into her snug heat. She kept her legs wide, reveling in the extra fullness of the butt plug. Pleasure swirled through her, gathering tighter and tighter until—he pulled out. "Cole!"

He crawled up along her trembling body. "I've waited too long to fulfill this fantasy. I want it all, sweetheart." He dragged the condom off and angled his cock toward her mouth.

She parted her lips. His masculine musk filled her nose and his taste coated her tongue, warm and evocative. The slide of his thick cock in and out of her mouth drove rational thought away. She sucked and swirled her tongue, loving the plush softness contrasting with the marble-hard shaft. He straddled her face and fucked her mouth, the position dominant and demanding.

After a few minutes of decadent pleasure, he pulled out and moved to her side. He helped her turn over and she folded her legs beneath her, resting her chin on her folded arms. He kissed his way down her spine then knelt behind her. The butt plug rotated slowly then he drew it out.

He hardly gave her time to adjust to its absence. With frantic movements he opened a fresh condom and rolled it into place. Then he smeared her anus with lubricant. His warm fingers opened her and she felt the blunt head of his cock against her rear entrance. "Push out, love. It will help you take me."

She was taking him? The phrase amused her, helped her relax. She took a deep breath and pushed back as he drove in. Her body stretched, opening for him with far less resistance than she'd expected. The butt plug had done its job beautifully. Cole pushed deeper and she savored the blissful stretch, no longer afraid of the penetration.

He pulled back slowly and tingles erupted in his wake. The fullness was wonderful, but nothing compared to the brutal slide of his cock in and out of her ass. She arched into each strong drive, submitting to him body and soul. He controlled the speed and depth of their joining. She offered herself without reservation.

His hands clasped her hips and his strokes sped. "Rub your clit. I'm not going to last long. You feel too fucking good."

The harsh rasp of his voice played across her senses. She reached between her thighs and whimpered. She was wet, cream coating her inner thighs nearly to her knees. Matching the rocking motion of his hips, she rubbed her fingertips across her clit.

"Now," he cried. "Come with me now." He plowed into her fast and hard, the urgency in his motion driving her over the edge. Her cunt pulsed with strong spasms, tightening her ass around his cock. He shuddered and shook against her.

They rolled to their sides, their bodies still joined. He brushed her hair back from her face and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck. "Are you okay?"

"Yes Sir," she said with a dreamy smile. "Amazing."

"We are amazing," he corrected, his tone soft and tender.

She snuggled into his warmth, utterly content. "Do you have any other fantasies I should know about?"

His soft chuckle made his chest rumble. "Most definitely, but we have the rest of our lives to convert them into memories."

"The rest of our lives?" she asked with a sleepy smile. "I like the sound of that."

STICK UP

Brigit Zahara

Dedication

For Jimmy

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Adidas: Adidas AG Joint Stock Company

Pontiac Parisienne: General Motors Corporation

Stetson: John B. Stetson Company

Chapter One

Monica Carrington was having a bad day.

Her alarm didn't go off, making her late for work. An accident on the freeway had made her even later. The coffee in Fairmont National Bank's overheated staff room was cold—although that was nothing new. The building dated back to 1918 and had officially been declared a historic site by the city back in the nineteen forties and therefore could not be renovated or updated in any way. If all that wasn't enough to fray her nerves, the day had been hellishly busy and now, near closing time, some clown in shades was holding her up.

Just great.

She glanced down again at the note he had slid toward her and slowly reread the words.

This is a stickup. Put all the money from the drawer in the bag and hand it to me.

"Anytime, princess," the guy opposite her said in a low voice. "We don't have all day."

A strong sense of familiarity quickly overtook Monica's mounting fear, gnawing at her for a brief moment, but she was at a loss to pinpoint the reason for the feeling. Then something in the robber's last comment jumped back into Monica's head.

We?

She studied him carefully for a long moment. He was of above average height, had dirty blond hair and wore a faded jean jacket. From her location in the business teller's booth, she could see little else, but given his soft country twang, Monica strongly suspected he wasn't from the city. Hurriedly she reached down to turn the key on her cash drawer but his voice stopped her cold.

"Whoa there, darlin'. I want you to move but you gotta do it real slow. And I'm gonna have to ask that you keep your hands in view at all times."

A fiery burst of nervous anger ignited in Monica.

"Now just how do you propose we do that? The money's below the counter. What am I supposed to take it out with? My teeth?"

In response, the guy merely flashed Monica a gorgeous grin, his straight white teeth and dimpled cheeks sending a fleeting shiver of attraction coursing through her to land in her stomach along with another pang of vague recognition. Slowly drawing open one side of his jacket, he revealed a shoulder holster and the handgun tucked neatly into it. "Now you just simmer down," he said, not raising his voice. "This doesn't have to be a bad thing. I don't think I could live with myself if I was forced to mess up a pretty little thing like you." He cocked his head slightly to one side, his fading smile serving to

show the enticing full curve of his lips as he spoke. "Damn, but you look good. On second thought, maybe I *should* pull out my concealed weapon..."

Monica gawked at him. Was he actually trying to *flirt* while he held her at gunpoint in the middle of robbery?

"Whatcha doing there, 3PO? Making a date?"

3PO?

That had been her boyfriend Josh McGregor's name for his and Monica's best friend, Wesley Preston Orville, when they were in college together a million and a half years ago. Josh gave him the moniker mostly because of Wes' three names, the last of which had the initials P and O. But the number reference had also been an affectionate nod to Wes' third-wheel role in Josh and Monica's relationship as well as being part of their "three musketeers" status—one for all, and all for one.

A second sunglass-toting face, this one topped with a black Stetson, appeared over Wes' shoulder. Turning to look at Monica, his whole body stiffened as he stood statuelike for a long moment, apparently regarding her, his eyes hidden behind the black-mirrored lenses. Recovering, he let out a low whistle before muttering softly, "Can't say as I blame you though." Then to Monica, he barely nodded, a tentative, almost shy smile moving across what could be seen of his face. "How ya doing, sweetheart?"

At the sound of the word on his lips, a memory flashed like lightning in Monica's mind.

* * * * *

Convocation of 1984, Fairmont College, Indiana.

It was the post-ceremony and reception after graduation held in the tiny old-fashioned Hoosier town of Fairmont, population 3500.

With their arms looped around one another's waists, Monica and Josh snuck away from the chaperoned party in the woods. Crazily in love, they casually eased themselves apart from the raucous crowd and festivities looking for a little private time. Scampering past the long row of vehicles that had served as transport to the enthusiastic graduates, they made their way to the dark Pontiac Parisienne belonging to Lucas, Josh's older brother, one of the many designated drivers for the bash. Parked near the end of the queuing cars and encircled in darkness, the late-model vehicle was perhaps not the perfect spot for a romantic rendezvous but neither one of them cared. They had waited four years for this moment and they weren't going to wait another second.

Tumbling into the backseat, Monica and Josh eagerly fell into each other's arms, his hot lips covering hers, his tongue awkwardly filling her mouth as his hands enclosed and caressed her breasts through the cotton fabric of her top. All through college they had only kissed and petted over their clothes, sometimes to the point of mutual orgasm,

but now the time had come to take things to the next level. They had both graduated, they were both twenty-one and they were both ripe and ready to share their first-time experience with each other.

Sliding them down into a horizontal position, Josh's young hard body soon lay atop hers, the feel of every hard ripple in his abdomen heightening Monica's pulse, but none quite like the stiff, sexy weight that pressed so insistently against her pelvis.

"God, I want you," he breathed heavily as he tore his lips away from hers. His breath was hot and moist against her skin as he planted a meandering collection of torrid kisses down the side of her neck, then eventually shifted direction and began to trail down the V of her button-front shirt.

"I want you too," she whispered, her voice soft and shaky in the darkened space. With the celebration now far off, the only noise in the automobile's spacious interior was that of Josh and Monica's heavy breathing, their muted murmurs and the sexy smacking sounds of moist lips on flushed skin. Monica's hands were entangled in the shaggy strands of Josh's hair and seemed to possess a mind of their own, for without any conscious thought on her part, they were gently pushing Josh and the sweet warm suction of his mouth toward her breasts.

Not that he needed a whole lot of pushing.

With trembling fingers, Josh unbuttoned the first few buttons of Monica's blouse, his large hands briskly moving to mold the warm mounds of flesh packed into the skimpy silky bra. His touch was loving but firm, and Monica felt a little twinge of fire flare within her stomach and slither south to her torso's lowest part. As Josh lightly squeezed her nipples, Monica sighed at the feel of the little buttons stiffening in response.

"That's so cool," Josh said in genuine amazement. "They're just like a pair of tiny hard-ons."

Monica giggled, her laugh directly giving away to a gasp, as Josh relocated himself and took one of the fabric-covered tips into his mouth. The warmth and pressure of his lips felt so good but Monica soon ached for a more direct contact. As if reading her mind, Josh reached around Monica's back where he fumbled for a few agonizing moments to unsuccessfully unhook her bra. In frustration, he instantly abandoned Plan A and, returning to the front, pushed the underwire of her bra up and over the dual mounds of soft warmth, freeing them from their satiny restraints and allowing his lips unfettered access to the fleshy globes and the erect rose-beige buds that centered them. Diving back down and shifting eagerly from one to the other, Josh began licking Monica's breasts and sucking her nipples with a renewed vigor, one hand holding the present object of his attention steady while the other moved down to the throbbing region between Monica's legs.

Though his touch was relatively unskilled, Josh's fingers pressing into the dampening material immediately made Monica's body twitch and shudder with need. Somewhere along the way, he took one of Monica's hands from his hair and sliding it

down the front of his body, cupped it against the solid bulge in the front of his jeans. With a slow, firm pressure, he guided her up and down, pushing her palm along his thick, rigid length that strained against the fabric and zipper that imprisoned it.

By this time, their hot and heavy breathing had completely fogged the car windows, ensuring them even more privacy than before. Josh returned to Monica's face where his kiss turned stronger, his teeth biting enticingly into Monica's lips as he eagerly turned his head from one side to the other, never once losing contact with her mouth. Releasing her hand, Josh popped the snap on his pants and lowered the zipper. He steered her hand onto his bulky package that, now only veiled by the thin material of his boxers, felt warm and even harder beneath Monica's fingers. She had only laid a few strokes upon his partially concealed hard-on when Josh redirected her caress once more. He moved her hand up and under the band of his shorts, his fingers soon closing hers around his throbbing cock that gave a little jerk in response to Monica's direct touch.

Then slowly, he guided her all the way down to the base, the soft curls of his pubic hair brushing her knuckles, before sliding her grip all the way back up, the pressure of his hand increasing as they moved over the bulbous knob at the top. Down and up he steered Monica's hand, settling into a slow, steady rhythm that left him moaning and his cock hardening even further within Monica's gentle grasp.

Swiftly, Josh abandoned his hands-on tutorage to unzip Monica's jeans and slide his hand down until it met with the fabric of her panties and the now-slick strip between her legs. Monica moaned uncertainly, arching her hips toward the firm pressure of his touch. In a flash, Josh responded. Dipping his fingers beneath the elastic edging of her underwear that lay snug against her inner thigh, he began caressing the sopping folds hidden within. Tentatively, he moved up and down, the palm of his hand bumping lightly against her burgeoning clit as he slid his fingers up before delicately diving all the way down to rim the entrance of her vagina with lazy but firm circles.

Monica gasped, wrapping her fingers even tighter around his cock as her passion and need grew. Leaving a burning line of kisses that trailed from her lips to her earlobe, Josh timed it just perfectly so that at the exact moment he stuck his hot tongue in her ear, he gently plunged two fingers into her pussy. Slowly he slid them partially in and out a few times before inserting them fully where he steadily flexed them upward, effectively massaging Monica's G-spot even as he continued to palm her tingling mons.

"Oh my God, Josh," she said, winded, as her heart went into overdrive. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

His voice was low and devilishly sexy. "Read about it. Does it feel good?"

Monica opened her mouth to answer but bit her bottom lip as she exploded, her channel clutching at the relentless pressure of Josh's fingers inside her. At the feel of Monica's powerful spasms and the cream that flowed from her to saturate his fingers and palm, Josh came too, his body twitching as he let loose with a series of cadenced jets into the warm enclosure of her undulating grip. Lost in her own orgasm, Monica was only vaguely aware of Josh's groans and the tepid fluid that filled her hand.

When they had both finished, Josh laid his head in the crook of Monica's shoulder. Monica turned her head so her nose was buried in Josh's dark strands and, inhaling deeply, savored the scent she so loved...clean hair. Shifting slightly, she planted a soft kiss on his damp forehead, the faint taste of fresh sweat making her shiver.

"Are you okay?" he mumbled, not moving an inch.

"Um-hmm."

His voice dipped even lower.

"I'm sorry."

Monica eased his face toward her with a shrug-like motion of her shoulder.

"What for?"

"For..." he frowned slightly and but for the dimness within the car, Monica would've seen that he was blushing too. "You know. Finishing so fast."

"Oh?" she replied with a sultry smile. "Are we finished?"

Disengaging his hand from between her legs and hers his, Monica maneuvered Josh around, changing positions so that she was on top. Then using her lubricated hand, she began massaging his limp cock in exactly the same way he had just taught her. As she began covering his ears and neck with warm, wet kisses, Monica felt that part of Josh that she held in her grasp gradually awaken once more. Sitting up, she grabbed his shirt and yanked it open, the "make-out" snaps releasing all at once to reveal his bare chest. Resuming her hand job, she began kissing down the smooth, bare flesh of his pecs, teasingly biting first one and then the other nipple, before licking leisurely down to his bellybutton.

Josh's cock was once again rock hard. The sight of it, angled upward and lying flush against his lower abdomen in a state of ready willingness, excited Monica beyond words. Wiggling down farther, she positioned herself comfortably between Josh's knees, studying his hardened length as she stroked it, the moonglow streaming through the back window giving her ample light.

He was uncircumcised and from all that she had read, his constantly sheathed head was all the more sensitive. Eager to find out just how sensitive, Monica continued pumping up and down Josh's shaft with one hand while she used the fingers of her other hand to ease down his foreskin. Unhurriedly she circled her tongue around the shiny orb beneath, flicking it back and forth against that little anchoring bit of flesh on its underside. Josh groaned, his hands reaching forward to clasp her shoulders as his hips shot forward. Monica stopped and glanced up in obvious alarm. Josh's eyes were wide and bright as if he was in pain but his answer was very much to the contrary.

"Does that hurt?"

"Jesus, no. It just feels so good when you do that."

Monica licked her lips and gave him a warm smile.

"Do you want me to continue?"

"Please."

Lowering herself onto him once more, Monica resumed licking and flicking the cap of his cock, all the while stroking him solidly from its base to just under the corrugated rim. Pursing her lips, she then inserted the now fully exposed crimson bulb into the warm wetness of her mouth, sucking in time with her hand movements upon his shaft. Glancing up the length of his body, Monica watched Josh, turned-on by the extent to which he was. With eyes half closed and his mouth half open, he wavered between a demeanor of pure rapture and something not unlike pain as his torso and hips pulsed toward the sweet suction that surrounded him.

Then suddenly he sat up, gently pushing Monica away.

"No," he said with a heavy breath as he moved Monica onto her back. "Not this time. This time I want to be inside you."

With that, he struggled to get Monica's jeans and panties down to her ankles and off, clearly eager to bury himself in her up to his balls. But at the sight of her glistening pussy a few feet from his face, pure instinct took over and he dived between her legs face first, licking wildly at the soft, slick creases that, so warm and wet, were just begging to be tongue-fucked. Moving his head up and down to further heighten Monica's pleasure, Josh licked her from top to bottom for a few minutes before concentrating on the little nub at the top of her pussy.

Monica grabbed the upholstery, the tactile tension and moisture of Josh's tongue brushing so persistently against her clit promptly pushing her toward another orgasm. Hoarsely he murmured as his mouth moved against her, the vibration adding even more sensation to the soft suction he was applying to the engorged little nub. Just when she thought it couldn't get any better, Josh moved down and drove his tongue into her creamy core, continuously turning his head from side to side while he reached up and with the thumb of his right hand sensuously stroked Monica's trembling clit. Another wave of ecstasy shot through Monica. Her entire body trembled uncontrollably as she came.

Monica was still spiraling down to earth when she felt Josh pull her down and plant himself between her legs, his hard cock bumping roughly once against the supersensitive ridge of her post-climax clit.

"Wait," Monica said, placing her hands on his chest. "Have you got something?"

Josh seemed confused at first.

"Something? I...oh yeah."

Partially straightening up, he groped down into his jeans pocket, the crinkle of plastic soon following. From her vantage point, Monica squirmed in sweet anticipation as she watched him place the condom over the now fully exposed head of his cock and slowly eased it down. Then getting repositioned with his hands on other side of Monica's shoulders, Josh aligned himself with Monica's pussy and, in one forward thrust, plunged into her.

Monica tensed and gasped, the sharp, sudden breadth of him inside her beyond what she was expecting. Josh fell still.

"Are you okay?" he asked for the second time that night. Monica's response was quiet.

"Yeah."

"Are you sure?"

She relaxed a little. And smiled.

"Yes. I'm sure. Keep going."

And he did. But much slower and gentler, his upper body shaking with restraint as he moved in and out of her, his slow, steady strokes gradually building up speed and force until he pushed them both over the edge. At the moment of their simultaneous orgasms, Josh clasped the cheeks of Monica's ass, strongly pulling her even harder onto his ejaculating cock while her canal seized around it.

When at last they lay smiling and spent in each other's arms, Josh spoke the words Monica had been longing to hear since the day they met.

"I love you, sweetheart."

That was the first and only time he said that. Josh's father was in the military and four weeks later, his family moved to Canada. Josh wanted to stay but his mother was ill and he had agreed to make the move with them and help out for a while. He and Monica enjoyed weekly phone calls and exchanged the occasional letter but "a while" soon turned into a year. Then two. Eventually, the long-distance love affair just petered out.

Throughout it all, she and Wes kept in touch, functioning as two-thirds of the "three musketeers" albeit on a strictly platonic basis—well, apart from that one night when they almost ended up in bed together.

Almost.

But it had only happened once and in retrospect, they'd both agreed it was because they'd had too much to drink and just got caught up in reminiscing about the way it used to be. That was the official story. However from time to time Monica was nagged by the feeling that there was more to her near one-nighter with Wes than that. Either way, soon after, like Josh, Wes disappeared from Monica's life, growing up and moving on as people do. Fifteen years had passed but in all that time, hardly a day had gone by that Monica hadn't thought of Wes and Josh and the love she had felt for them both.

* * * * *

"Hello?" Wes prompted, shooting a semi-alarmed glance from Monica to Josh.

Josh remained silent, as did Monica, who was in a state of shock. There now was no doubt in her mind that before her was indeed, her long-lost love. And unless she was way off track, so too stood their best buddy.

"Josh?" Monica whispered as her eyes scanned first one then the other male face before her. "And Wes?"

"Guilty as charged," Josh murmured, that slow, sexy grin that she had never forgotten making Monica's pussy twitch, just as it always had. "But don't say our names again." Crooking his index finger into the top edge of his sunglasses, he leisurely pulled them down the bridge of his nose so he could look Monica square in the eye. "Been a long time."

Monica's voice fell even lower as she leaned forward. "What are you guys doing here?"

Josh gave her a little wink that dampened her panties.

"I'm sticking you up, baby."

Damn but he was a charming pain in the butt!

"No, no, I mean here, in Indiana. But yes, yeah, why are you *here*? I mean why are you doing this?"

His answer was barely audible.

"Long story."

"Yeah and we don't have the time to get into right now," Wes said a little sharply, motioning slightly in Josh's direction.

Monica hardly heard him. Her eyes were glued on Josh's face.

"This isn't like you."

"Monica..."

"Ms. Carrington, is there a problem here?"

The bank manager, a portly, balding man in his late fifties, appeared to Monica's left, a stern frown on his face. Monica jumped, flushing directly as she turned in his direction.

"Ah...ah..." She peered back at Wes and Josh. Wes had eased his jacket back over his piece and now he and Josh stood quite casually awaiting her response. "Ah, no, sir. Not at all."

"Are you sure? You seem a little flustered."

The manager's growing suspicion was noticeable but Monica stuck to her guns even with a concealed one poised to be pointed in her direction at the drop of a hat. Affecting her most sincere smile, she worked hard to reassure her boss.

"No really, Mr. Bartlett. I'm fine. I just had a bit of a harried start to the day."

"Yes. And might I remind you that we here at FNB discourage tardiness. We demand punctuality and professionalism from our employees at all times."

"Of course, sir. Sorry again. And thank you for your concern. Now, if there isn't anything else, I'll just finish up with these customers. I wouldn't want to keep them waiting."

Her tactic appeared to work for Mr. Bartlett slowly backed away, muttering, "Very well. Carry on," before returning to his office across the way.

"What an asswipe," Wes said under his breath.

"Man should learn some manners," Josh echoed quietly, his steady gaze still locked on Monica.

"Never mind," Wes said. "Let's get back to business, shall we? Now are you going to put all them pretty hundred-dollar bills from your last customer's deposit in the gym bag on the floor to your right?"

Gym bag?

"What gym bag?"

The words were no sooner out of Monica's mouth when she looked down and saw a black duffel bag with the word ADIDAS lying a couple of feet from where she stood.

"Uh-huh. That's the one. Josh was good enough to slide it next to you when I first started chatting."

Okay, this was freaky.

"And...which customer are you talking about?"

"Come on now, don't be coy. You know the one. The Main Street Casino. Old Man MacPherson who owns the joint is so stuck in the Dark Ages that he flat out refuses to deal in anything but cold hard cash."

Monica's mouth fell open.

"How'd you know about that?"

Wes tilted his chin downward so he could peek out over the edge of his glasses at Monica. "What do we look like, amateurs? Think we were just going to roll the dice and take our chances that you *might* just have a full drawer back there?"

Monica focused over his shoulder to Josh, who only shrugged in reply to her unspoken question. Her voice remained calm but hushed.

"You've been *casing* the bank?"

"Damn straight. At least I have." He motioned to Josh. "He's purely a backup man and Ned over there handles lookout."

Monica glanced up, spotting the tall guy across the way appearing to leaf offhandedly through the row of pamphlets situated near the door.

"There's *three* of you?"

"Inside, yeah. Strength in numbers, right? But listen, enough chitchat, Mo." Monica hadn't heard that nickname in well over a decade and even then, only on Wes' lips. The sound of it almost made her smile. "Best move it, honey, or I'll be forced to get a little more...forceful."

"Hey."

Wes turned his head to scrutinize at Josh. "What?"

"Don't call her honey."

Monica squinted at Josh, angry that he was clearly more concerned with Wes' term of endearment for her than the latter's not so subtle implication of violence.

"Thanks a lot."

Josh then pivoted slightly to gape at her, confused.

"What?"

"Just hurry it up now," Wes urged tensely, driving the scenario forward.

With shaking hands, Monica complied. Pulling the duffel bag closer, she proceeded to fill it with the nearly one-hundred-fifty-eight-thousand dollars in cash compliments of the previous customer's deposit. Zipping it closed, Monica bent down to lift it up.

"Ah, ah, ah," Wes said. "Just push it over and Josh will pick it up just as easy as he dropped it there."

True to Wes' word, Josh swooped around and picked up the bag. "Much obliged," he said with a grin and nod as he turned to go. "See you again and next time, let's hope it will be under much more pleasant circumstances."

Monica couldn't stop herself.

"Wait..."

Caught up in the moment and suddenly realizing that she might never see Josh, or Wes, again, Monica moved from behind the counter and through the saloon-type door that separated the employee workspace from the customers. Controlling her desire to rush to his side, she walked at an unhurried pace toward him, then and stopped within a few feet.

What was she doing?

Monica could and would be mistaken as some kind of accessory to the crime and yet she couldn't just let him, them, walk out of her life again.

"What are you doing?" Josh spat out quietly from between clenched teeth.

"I don't get any of this," Monica said, biting her lip as it began to tremble, her gaze moving restlessly between him and Wes. A long silence stretched out but when Josh's reply came, it was soft.

"I know, I know. Listen, there's so much I want to say to you, so many things I want you to know but I just can't—*not now*."

A little ripple of hope for something—answers, resolutions, a reunion maybe?—welled up in Monica.

"When?"

Just then a loud alarm went off, its shrill tri-tone causing employees and customers alike to gasp and cover their ears. Josh's eyes locked hard with Monica's, a surge of panic filling the blue depths.

"What did you do?"

Monica vehemently shook her head. "Nothing. I swear." The wail of increasingly loud sirens signified the imminent arrival of fast-approaching squad cars. Her eyes

frantic with fear—fear for Wes and Josh more than for herself—Monica took a step back. “You’d better go. Hurry.”

Whirling about, Wes and Josh ran for the glass doors that fronted the bank but halfway there, two police officers blasted in, their guns pulled and pointed at the robbers. In a heartbeat, Wes and Josh yanked out their firearms and aimed back, the four men frozen in a showdown while screams and gasps filled the air. Some customers hit the ground, others huddled together uncertainly, crying or watching the drama unfold with dazed, slack-jawed expressions. Monica herself screamed, her hand flying up to her mouth in horror.

“Put your weapons down,” the cop on the right yelled, his nostrils flaring as he shouted.

“Sorry, Officer,” Wes said evenly, his face stoic. “But it ain’t gonna go down like that.”

“Now you all know there’s only two options for you boys here—walk out with us or be carried out by the coroner. Your call.”

Out of the blue, Ned lunged forward and, roughly twisting Monica around, dragged her back against his body in a kind of upright spooning position. Raising the gun he had pulled from the waistband of his pants, he pressed its barrel against her temple as he squeezed her painfully tight, his voice a menacing murmur in her ear. “Make you a deal. If you don’t put up a fight, I won’t plant a bullet in your pretty little head.”

Barely absorbing his words, Monica instinctively bucked and kicked against his restraint as Josh’s panicked voice filled Monica’s ears. “What the fuck are you doing?” Halting abruptly, Monica watched in bewilderment as he shifted the direction of his gun from one of the cops to Ned. And her.

Wes’ sharp cry of “Josh!” followed and directly after, Josh returned to his original stance with the gun in his right hand once more trained on one of the two police officers while he clutched the bag of cash in the other. Monica wondered if anyone else noticed that the barrel of the pistol he held now shook ever so slightly.

“Getting us out of here alive, boy,” Ned replied to Josh’s impassioned query, as he began dragging Monica’s struggling form back toward the door. In an attempt to gain some sort of control of the situation, the cop on the left spoke up for the first time since he and his partner burst in on the scene, his comments directed at Ned.

“Come on now, let that woman go. She’s not part of this. You’re making this a lot more complicated than it has to be.”

Wes and Josh exchanged a glance before they too began inching toward the bank’s entrance. And exit.

“It ain’t complicated at all, Officer,” Wes said. “You back up and let us through. If not, the death of one innocent bystander, maybe more, will be on your head, not ours. And that would be *your* call.”

The two cops swapped looks tinged with uncertainty and something else. Josh knew what that meant.

"He's not fooling over there," Josh said. "He's as crazy as a loon. You don't let us pass and as God is my witness, he will take that woman out and I don't mean on a date."

To this, Ned snorted in a half laugh. Squirming within his tight one-armed embrace, Monica balled her hand into a tight fist and shot it backward, effectively landing a hard punch to his groin. He let out a low grunt, his arm curled around the front of her body, contracting even harder. "Listen, bitch, I know you can't keep your hands off me but try to wait until we get in the car, huh?"

"Fuck you."

"Can't wait."

"Ah, now you see? Things are getting out of control over there," Wes said, continuing to ease his way toward the front doors. "You boys better make a choice fast or this could turn real ugly."

Another bout of traded looks between the two cops took place before the one on the right gave a barely perceptible nod to the other. Ever so slowly they lowered their guns.

"That's it," Wes said softly, his voice smooth and strangely seductive. "Nice and easy. Now set them on the floor and kick them over here."

Begrudgingly, the officers complied. With his gun pointed at one cop and Josh aiming at the other, Wes dropped down to one knee and collected the officers' weapons. Now within a few feet of the door, the three robbers with Monica in tow backed their way out of the bank, the sound of a backup squad car wailing in the distance.

"Let me go, you bastards!"

"Ah-ah. Not so fast," Ned said, placing a wet kiss on her cheek that made Monica's skin crawl. "We need a little insurance and guess who gets to play the part?"

Once outside, Wes shot out the tires of the parked police car, then jumped into the passenger side of a late-model sports car that was idling curbside, a redheaded man with sunglasses sitting behind the wheel. Josh bounded into the backseat, followed closely by Ned who dragged Monica in beside him.

"Hit it, Billy," Wes said to the driver.

With a loud rev of the engine, they all sped away, leaving rubber on the pavement as they roared out of sight.

Chapter Two

An hour and a half later, Monica found herself, along with her four captors, in an old farmhouse some thirty miles out of town. The ride to the robbers' deserted hideaway had been circuitous and rough thanks to the gravel roads but not as rough as the brooding silence that had filled the interior of their getaway car.

More than once, Monica had tried to plead for her freedom but with no success. While Ned didn't effectively silence her with his leering ogles and suggestive licking of the gun he kept trained on her, Josh's shouted "Shut up!" finally did. He'd then turned and stared out the window. Wes too remained quiet for the duration of the journey, leaving Monica to fluctuate between feeling fearful of Ned and incensed with Josh and Wes.

Pulling up the long driveway to the worn, secluded veranda-fronted house, the car skidded to a sharp halt alongside a battered white pickup, the spray of gravel kicking up a cloud of dust and announcing their arrival to the empty woods surrounding the property. Before Billy cut the engine, Ned threw open the door and pushed Monica out, his fingers digging into her arm to prevent her from running.

Without a sound they all made their way hastily up the four steps of the porch and through the screen door into a clean but rustic living area. Josh stood rooted by her side, his eyes very noticeably avoiding hers. Wes sauntered in and, turning to face the rest of them, looked at Monica with an expression she couldn't read. Ned released her arm, leaving red welts where his fingers had been, and along with Billy, disappeared through an archway beyond, the crack of beer cans opening following directly.

Monica held her breath, a million emotions coursing through her, but in the end, it all gave way to the dominant one that had built to the point of explosion. When she couldn't contain herself anymore, she spun around to face Josh. Drawing her hand back, Monica then slapped him stiffly across the face, the crack of the sharp blow startlingly loud in the hush of the room.

Dropping the bag to the floor, Josh's eyes widened as he gawked at Monica for the first time since they had roared out of the bank.

"Jesus H. Christ! What the hell?"

Monica was red-faced and wild-eyed as she pointed an accusatory finger at him.

"Don't you say that! Don't even try. If anyone has a right to be asking 'what the hell?' it's me."

"Baby..."

"And don't 'baby' me. You don't get to call me that again. *Ever.*"

Josh sighed heavily, his dark brows knitting together in frustration.

"Monica, you don't understand."

"You're damn right I don't understand. I don't understand one single part of this. Most of all, I don't understand how you think you can just waltz back into my life after you up and left me to—"

Josh like a shot cut her off.

"I didn't up and leave you. You knew exactly where I was and why I had to go."

The sarcasm in Monica's voice was thick and bitter.

"*Whatever*. All I know is you left and never came back. It took me years, *years* to get over you and now you show up acting like nothing's changed. Oh, right, except for one little thing... Now you're a goddamn thief!"

The muscle in Josh's jaw clenched as he fought to get a grip on his mounting anger.

"I told you. It's not like that."

"Really? And just how is it? I'm sorry, did I miss something here? Wasn't it you and your backwoods buddies who just held up the bank I work at and, oh yeah, *kidnapped me*?"

Josh quickly held up his hands.

"That last part was not my idea."

"Uh-huh. Well, you know what? *You* participated, *you* didn't stop it. So as far as I'm concerned, that means you're to blame. And you!" She whirled and glared at Wes.

"Me?"

"You think I'm going to let you off the hook? You know, just because we weren't...we didn't...that doesn't mean I didn't care about you. I did. I loved you. I loved you both. But for what? You both just effed up and turned into outlaws!"

"*Monica!*" Josh yelled, his uncharacteristic frustration clearly having reached its limit. "There are factors at play here that you just don't know anything about."

"Is that so? Like what? Ah, let me see, did you become hardcore gamblers and now resort to doing jobs to feed your addiction? No, no, I got it, you're struggling method actors, on the verge of breaking into Hollywood, who are looking to nail an upcoming audition about Hoosier bank robbers so you thought you'd do a little hands-on research."

Josh and Wes traded a heavy look before Josh resumed.

"Look, I can't talk to you when you're like this."

"Like what? Pissed? Scared? Victimized? You know what? That's just fine. I don't want to talk to you anyway. *Not ever*. Whatever we once had is dead and if I see your face again, it will be too soon. Now get out of my sight!"

Josh chuckled, his blue eyes incredulous.

"Ah, precious? You seem to forget one little detail here. You're the one being held hostage."

Monica glowered at him, the daggers in her eyes mirroring the knives in her heart. "Oh yeah? Well, listen to me, cowboy. Your hold on me is long gone and one thing's for damn certain. You're never going to hold me again. Now *get out!*" she screamed, her throat hurting with the exertion.

A flicker of pain flitted across Josh's face. Heaving an especially deep sigh, he then stormed out the back door, mumbling something about "needing some air". Wes watched Monica for a long moment. Then without a word, he walked over and picked up the bag before turning and retreating into a back room, presumably to count their take.

Not two seconds later, the sound of the back door closing made Monica's heart leap. Had Josh come back in to talk to her? She was still bursting with rage but she hated that he had walked out on her. Again. Her hopes sank as Ned came around the corner. It was then that she realized Billy must have left the house, meaning the task of watching Monica having apparently fallen to Ned by default.

"Wow. You're a feisty one. Well, there won't be any of that shit with me. Now sit down there," he said, motioning to one of two adjacent couches as he flopped down on the other. "Sit down or I'll knock you down."

Monica promptly complied and watched as Ned took a sip from the can of beer he held in his hand. He sneered at her as his eyes traveled up and down her body. Right away, he started in with the lewd comments, leaning back as he shifted his hips forward and opened his legs to reveal the bulge in the front of his pants. The sight of it, and him, made Monica's stomach turn.

"Say, you're awful pretty for a bank teller. I thought y'all were like librarians, you know? Kinda mousy and coyote ugly. But you? You're giving me one hell of a boner, even from way over there. How's about you come a little closer and release the monster from his cage?"

Shaking in fear and revulsion, Monica knew she should keep quiet but a knee-jerk response flew out of her mouth before she could stop it.

"How 'bout you fuck off?"

Surprise registered on Ned's face but it fleetly changed to something much darker.

"See now, that's the second time you've said that to me. Sounds like you're in need of a damn good fuck." He quietly set his beer on the table and then threateningly got to his feet before strolling with a feigned casualness toward her. "And I can guess why. I'll just bet you ain't never had a rod as big as mine in that snug little slit of yours. In fact, I'll bet you're just dying for someone to stuff your cunt so hard and full, your eyes bug plum out of your head. Well, guess what? Today's your lucky day."

Pouncing on Monica and pushing her flat, Ned forced his knee between her legs as his mouth roughly covered hers. Painfully groping at her breasts, he squeezed her nipples so hard, Monica let out a scream that was all but smothered by his violent kiss. Struggling one arm free, she reached up and, flailing wildly, scratched his face, her nails raking down his flesh. Jerking back, Ned brought one hand to his cheek. When he

pulled it back, it was smeared in blood. He glowered fiercely down at Monica, his eyes black with fury.

"So you like it rough, huh, bitch?" He then grinned, a stomach-turning smirk that instantaneously made Monica's blood run cold. "Cool. Bring it on. I'm into that too."

Without warning, he backhanded Monica full force across the face, the rough edges of a cheap metal ring on his left hand cutting a bloody path across her cheek. Then he laid a solid right hook to her jaw with his other hand. Monica's heavy grunt was punctuated by a splatter of blood spraying across the back of the couch. Semiconscious and only dimly aware of the warm liquid that flowed from her nose, Monica was helpless as Ned tore open her shirt and bit harshly down on one nipple before sinking his teeth into the other one. Up through the explosion of pain and lights that twisted and flashed in her head, Monica could feel Ned's hands pushing up her skirt and ripping off her panties.

"Nice cunt, cunt," he growled. "Just you wait," Monica sobbed uncertainly at the dreaded sound of a zipper being lowered, "I'm gonna fuck that pretty little trench so hard you're not going to be able to walk for a week."

A low voice came from somewhere over Ned's shoulder.

"Try it and *you* won't be able to walk at all. *Ever*. Now get off her."

Monica tried to see, her lids fluttering open but all she could assimilate was a blinding, blurry light that made her head throb even harder than it already was. She winced, squeezing her eyes shut but somewhere up through the pain and confusion, she knew who it was who had spoken. Or more accurately, who it *wasn't*.

"What the hell you talking about, boy?" Ned snarled, glancing over his shoulder to gawk at Wes. "Hey, partner, don't worry. If you want a piece of this sweet young thang, I'll save a little for ya. But I can't promise she'll be of much good once I get through with her. I'm fixing to pump every last bit of cum into that tight little cunt."

The click of a trigger sounded freakishly loud in the otherwise hushed space. Monica fought to open her eyes once more and this time through her tears, she could just make out the figure of Wes pointing a pistol directly at the back of Ned's head.

"I said get off her," he said again, his full lips having flattened into a tight unyielding line. "I'm not going to tell you again."

Ned stared slack-jawed at Wes for a long moment before abruptly leaping to his feet, his cock protruding angrily from the opening in his pants. Stuffing it back in, he did his fly up, all the while fixing Wes with a defiant glare.

"What the fuck is your problem?"

"No problem at all. But this here," he motioned in Monica's direction, "it ain't gonna happen."

Ned snorted, squinting hard as he clearly struggled to comprehend the situation.

"That so? Says who?"

Wes neither faltered nor flinched. He merely stood like the stereotypical strong, silent type as he stared Ned down. After a weighty pause, he answered in a low steady voice.

"I say."

"Yeah? And who the hell appointed you King Shit?"

Wes smiled.

"Come on now, Ned. You know I run this operation."

"The hell you do. Last time I checked, Pete was the boss."

Wes nodded, the hint of a barely there smile softening his features a smidgeon as he conceded the point. "No doubt. He's the main man. But you know as well as I do that when we're out on a job, Pete said *I'm* in charge."

Ned appeared flustered.

"Yeah, but...well, sure, when we're on a job, yeah, but this li'l piece of ass ain't got nothing to do with that."

Wes' eyebrows shot up. "Doesn't it?" He tapped the side of his head with a lean index finger. "*Think*, buddy. What we got here is a real, live captive."

"So what?"

"So keep your fucking dick in your pants until the entire job is done. That's the rule."

Ned scoffed. "You're so full of shit. Either that or you've been on the wacky-tabacky again. This here job *is* done. We got the money, we got away." He rubbed the lump between his legs as he cast a glance in Monica's direction. "Time to *celebrate*."

Wes slowly shook his head, a pronounced cast of pity on his face.

"Ned, Ned, Ned, the job is *not* finished. Not yet. Yeah, we got a few bucks but now thanks to you, we got some loose ends to tie up."

Ned seemed to be at a loss as he stared blankly at Wes. Sighing in exasperation, Wes finally prodded him. "The girl?"

"Oh yeah. Right. So what are you saying? You want me to get rid of her?"

Monica whimpered uncertainly as she tried to sit up but a sharp glance from Wes kept her down. Turning his attention back to Ned, he dropped his voice to a conspiratorial tone.

"No, no. I got a better idea."

Ned leaned forward, his eyes sparkling.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, I got to thinking we could make a little money on the side, you know?"

Another dumbfounded expression from Ned hastily gave way to excitement.

"You mean you want to whore her out to some of the locals?"

Wes rolled his eyes.

"No. But I bet you someone, somewhere will pay a pretty penny just to get her back."

"Huh?"

Wes jerked his head in Monica's direction, his eyes never once leaving Ned's face. "Give us money. You know. *For her.*"

A long moment passed before the meaning of Wes' words fully dawned on Ned. Then a look of slow comprehension spread across his face and parted his thin lips, the movement revealing a handful of crooked yellow teeth.

"Oh. You mean like a ransom?"

"Bingo."

"Oh yeah," Ned said, looking back and forth between Wes and Monica. "That would work. And Pete would be happy if we came back with an even bigger score."

Wes sighed.

"No, Ned. See, that's what I meant about money on the side. We wouldn't tell Pete about the ransom part of it."

"Ah. Gotcha. But," Ned halted, the beginning of a pout starting pull the corners his lips down, "can't we have just a little bit of fun with her while she's here?"

Wes shook his head.

"You can't damage the goods, bud. Otherwise they won't pay as much. Besides, remember the rules. Pete wouldn't like it if he found out we broke the rules."

Ned frowned and opened his mouth to ask another question but then shook off whatever it was he was going to say. "Oh yeah. Right. Okay then." Looking down, his gaze fell upon his concealed hard-on. "But what am I supposed to do with a perfectly good boner?"

Wes just shrugged.

"Town of Taymore's only twenty minutes away. There's plenty of bars filled with drunk women there. Maybe you can take Billy with you."

Ned's expression brightened considerably. "Hey, good thinking."

Wes didn't move from where he stood but his posture had relaxed considerably from when he first came into the room. "Best get a move on then. Wouldn't want that puppy to go down."

"No worries there. My dick's so hard I could cut glass with it."

With that, Ned grabbed a set of keys and bolted out the front door. Outside, his enthusiasm was clear as he bellowed out, "Billy? How's about you and me do a little cunt hunting?" Not long after, the sound of the truck firing up and speeding off faded into stillness.

Straight away, Wes moved to where Monica lay, his arms open as he reached for her, his voice soft and warm.

"Come on, Mo. Let me help you."

Monica hesitated.

For an instant, the thought of slapping angrily at his outstretched hands darted through Monica's mind. Better yet, if she wasn't so banged up, she'd love to deliver a good swift kick to his balls.

Wes read her hesitation right off the bat. Dropping down to one knee so he could look Monica in the eye, he worked to gently reassure her.

"It's okay, honey. Really. You can trust me." Then with words that, contrary to the situation, nevertheless still resonated within her, he added, "You *know* me. I would never do anything to hurt you."

As an overwhelming awareness of her own vulnerability sank in, so did an inexplicable belief in what Wes had just said. Cautiously lifting her arms, Monica allowed Wes to move his around her back and slowly ease her into an upright position. Though gradual, the movement still sent the blood rushing from Monica's head and in a sudden wave of dizziness she fell against him, her bloodied face bumping into his chest and staining his shirt. A little groggily, she could feel the delicate touch of his fingers in her hair, holding her head steady.

"Easy now. Just take it slowly. Can you swing your feet onto the floor?"

"Swing?" The motion sounded far too fast for the way she was feeling.

When she didn't move, Wes looped one arm under her knees and another around her back. Then in one fluid movement, he lifted her into his arms and stood up. Without thinking, Monica reached up and loosely linked her fingers around his neck. Carrying her in his arms, Wes started across the wooden floor.

"Where are we going?"

Wes scanned her face, his gray eyes filled with concern.

"Gonna get you cleaned up."

The light in the bathroom seemed ultra harsh to Monica as they entered and she squinted, burying her face in the nook of Wes' neck. Careful not to trip on the long mat in front of the sink, he kicked down the toilet seat and gingerly placed Monica on it, steadying her before he straightened up. Directly he closed and locked the door, then turned the round dimmer switch on the wall, softening the overhead light.

"Okay," he said, the tone in his voice somewhere between a question and a statement. Moving to Monica's side once more, Wes placed one stabilizing hand firmly on her shoulder, before stepping around to the tub. Bending down to turn on the faucets and adjust the temperature, he then flicked the lever for the drain and ran a bath. Returning to stand in front of her, he knelt down to unbutton her shirt, the fingers of one hand wet from the water. More confused than alarmed, Monica lifted her eyes to his face.

"What are you doing?"

He didn't look up.

"I can just imagine how dirty you must feel."

Actually he couldn't possibly imagine. Not fully.

But he had called it right. Dirty was the word. In fact, Monica's skin was positively crawling from Ned's abusive filthy touch and right now, she wanted nothing more than to scrub every inch of her body clean, hoping more than anything that she could wash away the memory of his hands on her.

By now, Wes had removed her top and bra as well as slipped off her shoes. Lightly clasping her forearms, he guided her to a standing position, then bent down to slide her skirt to the floor. Monica waited for a rush of embarrassment to overtake her but it never came. There was only a quiet acceptance, trust, and as she examined her feelings she knew why. She had always known and loved Wes just as much as she had known and loved Josh. The only difference being she and Wes had never taken their relationship to a physical level. But now as he stood before her, caring for her, touching her with such a deep sense of love and reverence, she realized with a bittersweet half-smile that they should have. Monica studied his face and caught him wincing as his gaze fell across her breasts and the reddened teeth marks around her nipple. Mesmerized, he slowly raised one hand to tenderly touch the indentations but, thinking better of it, stopped midair before looking away.

"Let's get you in."

Wes took off his jean jacket and threw it in a heap on the floor, before rolling up his shirtsleeves. He then nudged Monica over to the side of the tub and guided her into the water. Handing her the soap and a washcloth, Wes hovered nearby in case Monica lost her balance while she scoured herself from neck to toes. He even discreetly lowered his eyes as she lathered her breasts and the tender feminine area between her legs. When she was covered with white soapy froth, Monica began to maneuver herself down into a sitting position. Wes' arm was rapidly around her waist, supporting her as she sank into the water. It was warm and soothing and Monica began to relax. Sighing deeply, she closed her eyes.

Leaning over the side, Wes supported her head and neck in the crook of his arm as he slid Monica down onto her back. Cupping his free hand, he filled it with water and drizzled it over her forehead and hair time and time again, careful not to allow any to trickle into her eyes, ears or nose. He then tenderly stroked her cheeks, nose and lips, the moisture from his hand loosening the dried blood and bit by bit, removing the red stains from her face.

"How's that?"

Wes' voice made Monica start a little. She had been steeping in the comforting all-encompassing lull of his water-enclosed embrace. "Good. I mean, better." She opened her eyes, her voice barely above a whisper as she used his name for the first time since the bank.

"Wes?"

"Huh?"

"What's this whole Butch Cassidy and Sundance thing *really* about?"

After dipping her down into the water to wet her hair more thoroughly, Wes then raised Monica back up into a sitting position before reaching for what appeared to be a very old bottle of shampoo that, by the looks of it, belonged to the previous owners. Squeezing a small amount into the palm of his hand, he began lathering up her long tresses.

"Wes?" she prompted, the sound in her voice drawing his gaze to her face. "I need to know."

He returned his attention to washing her hair, his strong fingers massaging her scalp. At long last he answered her.

"It's very complicated, very dangerous and very confidential."

Monica wordlessly waited for him to continue. After a long few minutes he stopped, scratching his nose with the back of his hand that was covered in shampoo foam. He looked at Monica then, his direct gaze making her uneasy.

"I'm not kidding, Mo. If I tell you the score, I'd be jeopardizing not only my job but quite possibly your safety."

"I don't feel very safe right now."

"Believe me, honey, you are. Josh and I are here to protect you. We're not going to let anything bad happen." He dropped his hands down into the water to rinse off the suds, his fingers skimming her outer thigh by accident as he did.

"You mean bad as in what just took place in the other room?"

Wes winced, his expression growing dark.

"I'm so sorry about that. I should *never* have left you alone with that lunatic. It's just that I always pretend to do the tally after each job so I had to leave. If I didn't, it would have raised Ned's suspicions."

"Pretend? And suspicions about what? Wes, what the hell is going on?"

Her voice had grown louder and Wes shushed her, lightly touching a dripping finger to her lips.

"Keep it down. Josh is okay but if Ned or Billy hears us talking, it's curtains for us all. Got it?"

Monica's eyes widened as she nodded in agreement.

"Okay," he said with an excessively deep breath, his voice dropping so low Monica strained to hear him. "Here it is. Josh and I are police officers with the city of Indianapolis police force. For the past eight months, we have been working undercover."

Monica's reply was an astonished whisper.

"Undercover?"

Wes nodded. "We've trying to bring down this gang which is responsible for a series of holdups across the Midwest over the past couple of years. So far we've

managed to get in with the legmen of the operation, Ned and Billy, and do a few jobs with them."

"Why haven't you arrested them yet?"

"We need them to get closer to our real target."

"Who is?"

"The mastermind behind it all. Pete Johanson. We haven't even met him face-to-face yet but we're hoping to very soon. Once we do and we get him laying out a plan, we have him."

Monica shook her head slowly.

"I just can't believe it."

"It's true. Every word. I swear. Do you understand now? Josh wasn't lying when he said it was a long story."

Josh. Oh my God. It was all starting to come together and yet there were still so many unanswered questions.

"But when did he come back to Indiana? When did he join the force? And why didn't either of you contact me?" Another thought suddenly struck Monica and she stared hard at Wes as it resounded in her head. "Did you know it would be *me* at the bank today?"

Wes nodded, understanding all that was racing through Monica's head. With a serious expression he set out to try to explain.

"Josh had been working in law enforcement in North Dakota for a few years and got involved in this case right off the bat. When the gang's movements were tracked to Indiana, he relocated here just under a year ago, right before we made our first contact with Ned and Billy."

Monica opened her mouth to protest but Wes held up a hand to silence her.

"He was undercover, Mo. Just as I was. Under the circumstances, neither of us could contact you. We both wanted to but we just couldn't. And yeah, we knew you worked at the bank but Pete had spoken. The FNB was next on our hit list." He made a funny little motion. "Josh and I were just hoping and praying that you wouldn't be the one at the teller's booth today. But as luck would have it, you were."

"Yeah, some luck."

"Come on," Wes said then, placing a hand around her shoulder and moving to ease her back down. "Let's get this shampoo out of your hair before it dries."

Still baffled, Monica let him lean her back and partially submerge her hair in the water once more, his fingers gently working through the strands.

"But what was all that talk about ransom?"

"Ah, I just said that to keep Ned from touching you. Cop or not, I really wanted to blow him away for what he did to you."

Wes peered down into her face then, a soft light shining in his eyes. His expression caused a sensual warmth to flood through Monica's body. Flustered, she sought to change the subject. With a slight smile, she noted the awkward angle at which he was leaning. "Isn't that hard on your back?"

His eyes twinkled a little, that dead-sexy charm of his rising to the forefront.

"Most good things are."

"You think this is good?"

Wes' face grew suddenly serious and as he continued stroking handfuls of warm water through her hair, his voice once again dropped so low Monica had to strain to hear it.

"Mo, I-I know this whole thing's been bad for you. But here? Right now with you? Yeah, it's good." He looked up at her then, his eyes silently entreating hers. Monica thought she knew what he was trying to say, but she wanted to be sure.

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, girl. You've got to know that I've always carried a torch for you. I've prayed that we would one day share even just one intimate moment together so I could show you how much I love you." He shrugged and looked down to cup more water before his eyes found hers again. "This is so far from what I dreamed of. But even though the circumstances suck, I just can't tell you what it's like to touch you after all this time."

As if to punctuate the point, he traced a long, lazy line along her jaw with one dripping finger. "Tell me something. Did you mean what you said out there?" Wes jerked his head in the direction of the door. "About loving me?"

Monica's breath caught in her throat and her heart pounded. If she wanted to take back what she had said, now was the time. With a trembling voice, she willed herself to answer him. "Yes. I meant it, Wes."

Wes' gaze grew soft. "I always loved you too, Monica. In fact, I still do."

Monica reached up and grasped his hand in hers, bringing it to her lips. She meant only to kiss his fingers but now that she understood everything including Wes' long-hidden feelings of love for her, one gentle kiss led to another and another, each one deeper than the previous one. Soon she took the length of his index finger into her mouth and began sucking it slowly, her eyes fixed on his the whole time. In a flash, Wes' expression changed. Gone was the remorse and agony that had filled his eyes a few seconds earlier. Now his gaze was blazing with unmistakable want.

Turning his hand over, she planted a series of warm, wet kisses into his palm that trembled slightly. Slowly she licked his thumb up and down in a slow, suggestive manner as her lids fluttered shut.

Wes swallowed hard as he watched and when Monica next opened her eyes, the expression within mirrored the look in his.

"Help me out," she whispered.

Wes faltered.

"Out?"

"Either I come out, or you come in."

Wes froze for a long moment, looking deeply into Monica's eyes. Then in a sudden rush of emotion, he reached down and pulled her to her feet. The water sloshed loudly, spilling over the edge of the tub as she leapt into his arms, her bare breasts crushing against his chest and soaking his shirt. Their mouths melded rapidly in a warm, wet kiss that was fifteen years in the coming, and the passion they felt was clear. They kissed with an urgency that could not be denied, their heads moving restlessly from side to side as they each sought to devour one another's lips and tongues. Wes' hands slid down Monica's back to her ass where he clasped it gently, lifting her up and out of the tub. She urgently wrapped her slick legs around his waist, moaning deeply into their kiss at the feel of his hands pulling her firmly against his hard-on.

With a startled gasp, Wes pulled back from Monica's lips. "Is this okay? I mean," he glanced down and then back up, "did he hurt you?"

Monica smoothed his hair back, her damp fingers darkening his golden strands. "A little."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I know you don't," she whispered, kissing along the curve of his jawline. "That's why you won't."

Turning them around, Wes slowly dropped to his knees before lowering them onto the mat on the floor, his hands freeing themselves from Monica's backside to massage her breasts. Eagerly kissing down the front of her body, Wes kissed her nipples tenderly, careful to avoid the bruised area, while his hands danced over her hips and delicately stroked her inner thighs. With a reassuring touch, she guided his hand in between her legs, his palm moving over her trimmed pubic hair that was still wet from the bath and growing wetter by the minute thanks to the cream that was starting to saturate her feminine folds.

"It's okay," she murmured as she directed his fingers up and down her slick trench as her lips moved to suck his earlobe. Wes moaned uncertainly, his hands shifting to relocate her legs up and over either side of his shoulders as he started to kiss his way down Monica's torso, over her bellybutton and through the soft down just below. Once more taking hold of her butt, Wes shifted his body down a bit before lowering his face to the glistening stretch between Monica's thighs.

"God, I've wanted to do this to you for so long," he said hoarsely, his warm breath on Monica's pussy making it ache with need. Ever so gently he began licking her—slow, cautious strokes of his tongue that were both loving in nature and mind-blowing in the sensations they produced. Monica arched her back, her fingers digging hard into the back of Wes' head as he uncertainly kissed up to her slippery clit. His tender series of kisses soon changed to one long kiss in which his lips locked around and unhurriedly

sucked the blossoming nub while his tongue fluttered up and down and back and forth upon it.

Monica tensed, feeling the telltale wave of heat and pressure that forecast an orgasm rise up in her pelvis and concentrating in her pussy. But right before she came, Wes stopped, lowered Monica's feet to the floor and rising to his knees, quickly unbuckled and unzipped his pants to pull out his rigid cock.

Through eyes glazed with desire, Monica reached for the thick hardness he held in his hand, biting her lip at the realization that it was now only inches away from that part of her that was pounding with need. Closing her fingers around the shaft, she moved her hand up and down, savoring every inch and ripple that led up to the smooth cum-spotted globe atop it. She wanted to reposition herself so she could take Wes' cock into her mouth and feel its dual texture of velvet and steel with her lips and tongue, but the need to feel it inside her was more pressing.

Wes must have felt this too for, showing an impressive amount of restraint, he rolled on a condom and entered Monica at a snail's pace.

"Are you okay?" he asked breathlessly once he had fully buried himself in Monica, his stiff cock sheathed in the warm cocoon of her pussy.

Monica frowned, arching against him as the need to feel him moving in and out of her grew more intense.

"Yes," she whispered with a soft whimper. "Wes, please."

She opened her arms to him then, urging him forward and closer. Taking the majority of his weight on his arms which he placed on either side of her, Wes moved his torso down so he was lying more on top of her before pulling his hips back and then pushing them forward. Finding her hands and clasping them gently within his, Wes' moved into Monica faster and harder, his hot, frayed breathing in Monica's ear turning her on more than she could believe. Just like before, her pussy grew warm and constricted as she surged toward a powerful climax.

"Ah!"

"Shhhh," Wes whispered hotly, kissing her ear. Then with a trembling sigh, "Mo, I'm going to come."

Her reply was carried on a soft moan. "So am I."

Without missing a stroke, Wes let go of Monica's hands and maneuvered her legs up and over his shoulders in one easy move, the new position making for even deeper penetration. Monica shuddered at the way the new angle drove his cock so much farther into her, the extreme sensation triggering an explosive climax. While Monica came with an intensity she hadn't felt since Josh, the succession of strong contractions of her pussy around Wes' cock abruptly triggered his orgasm. Wes covered Monica's lips with his, their teeth bumping roughly as their tongues delved deep and desperately into one another's mouths, muffling the groans that erupted from them both. A heartbeat later, Wes came.

"I love you," he said tenderly when they were both still again.

"I love you too."

Neither one of them knew that Billy was standing on the other side of the door. Listening.

Chapter Three

Monica awoke with a start to the sound of shouting.

After Wes had got her settled in one of the back bedrooms, telling her to get some rest while he sat watch outside the closed door to the windowless room, Monica had finally fallen into a fitful sleep. Now unceremoniously jerked awake, she was neither sure of how long she had slept nor what time of the night, or day, it was. She only knew that something major was going down in the other room.

Rising, she tiptoed across the floor, freezing and wincing as one of the floorboards beneath her feet creaked. Holding her breath, she swallowed hard, grimacing at the dryness in her throat. The yelling beyond the door continued without a break. Letting the air out of her lungs at a painstakingly slow rate, she cautiously resumed her course to the door. Once there, Monica summoned all the courage within her as she closed her fingers around the doorknob. Twisting it at a snail's pace to the right, she inched the door open a fraction, just enough for her to peek out.

With her view somewhat blocked by Ned, who stood with his back to her, Monica could just make out Josh's and Wes' profiles as they sat, side by side on the couch, Billy's form partially visible at the far end, the pistol he held in his hand pointed at them. The barking male voice that clearly did not belong to any of the four men Monica could see continued.

"You think you have what it takes to bring me down? Do ya? For years the likes of you have been trying to finger me for all them jobs I planned and saw carried out from the credit union in North Dakota up to that major score we did last month in Illinois but they just can't do it. Better men than you two have tried to bring down ol' Pete Johanson and Ned and Billy here but guess what happened to them all?"

A somber-looking Billy answered. "They died."

Ned snorted, his big shoulders shaking as he stifled laughter. "That's right, Pete. They tried and they died."

"Shut up," the out-of-view voice said, silencing Ned. "But they're right. They bit the big one. And now you're going to too."

Billy's eyes shifted to the speaker, his head moving in a barely noticeable nod before returning to Wes and Josh. Then slowly raising the barrel of his gun, he pulled the trigger just as Ned's gun-toting hand extended and fired as well. Monica's scream was drowned out by the deafening blasts that filled the room, the house nearly shaking with a sudden explosion of gunfire that seemed to come from every angle. Monica fell to her knees, cowering against the doorframe as booming yells of "Get down!", "Freeze!" and "Get the girl" were lost in the smoke-filled air.

Within seconds, Monica was choking on the thick, toxic fumes that had seemingly sprung out of nowhere and now burned her eyes, nose and lungs. Gasping for breath, Monica slumped sideways to the floor. Just before she fell unconscious, her teary gaze took in the hazy sight of Josh blown back against the couch, the large red stain on the front of his shirt growing larger as a thin line of blood trickled from one corner of his mouth.

* * * * *

Four weeks later

Monica clutched the steering wheel with both hands, a piece of paper with the directions Wes had given her on the phone sticking out from between her fingers as she drove her white pickup along the gravel road, loving the bounce and power of the miniature truck.

Half a mile or so down a side road she passed under a wrought iron arch and followed the snaking road that led to the front of the brick house. Wes was standing on porch, watching her. With a deep breath, Monica got out and walked toward him. When she got within a few feet, a sudden rush of awkwardness brought her to a halt. Wes went to her then, pulling her into a loose embrace. His voice was warm and soft in her ear.

"I'm glad you came. He will be too."

Monica returned Wes' hug, her gentle kiss that landed between his cheek and mouth made him turn his head in an unconscious attempt to catch it on his lips. Monica touched his chin lightly.

"Where is he?"

Wes jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Inside."

"I have to talk to him."

"I know."

With a faint smile, Monica moved past Wes and, pulling open the door, stepped through the archway.

Josh was sitting upright in an armchair, one foot resting on an ottoman, his left arm lying across the front of his body in a white cotton sling. He looked up.

"Hi," Monica said.

"Hi."

She fought the temptation to squirm under the weight of his stare that held traces of hurt, anger, surprise and – was she reading it right? – desire?

"I came to see you in the hospital those first couple of weeks until I knew you were going to be okay. I don't suppose you remember."

"No I don't," Josh replied. Then added, "But Wes told me you were there. Every day."

Wes had also told her the whole story, filling in the missing details of that last day. Thanks to a wire Josh had been wearing, the team they were part of rushed the premises at the crucial moment. In an attempt to flush out Pete and his gang, they had shot a smoke bomb into the hideout before charging in and taking the lot into custody. The incriminating evidence collected on the tape was more than enough to put Pete and his cohorts away for a very long time.

Josh smiled a little, giving Monica the encouragement she needed.

Moving across the space, she sat down on the loveseat to Josh's left, resisting the urge to lay a hand on the square shape of his knee. Glancing down, she tried to return his smile but her lips were trembling.

"Josh, I owe you an apology."

His response was immediate.

"No you don't."

"Yeah I do."

Josh leaned forward and with his good hand cupped Monica's face, forcing her eyes up to his. "*No you don't*. I lost you once, Monica. I don't ever want to lose you again. Can't we just put this all behind us and pick up where we left off?"

Monica's eyes shone as she nodded. "I'd like that."

They both leaned forward at the same moment, their lips finding one another in a soft, sensual kiss that very rapidly grew passionate. Careful not to bump his chest or his arm that had been broken by a couple of stray bullets during the gunfight, she moved to sit astride him, continuing to kiss him as she ran her fingers through his dark hair. His hand slipped from Monica's waist to her hip and then her ass, pulling her close against his rigid length, his hips involuntarily surging forward. Josh's moan filled her mouth as Monica unbuttoned his shirt and ran her hands down its smoothness, her fingers brushing against the pitted scar of his bullet wound. At the feel of it, Monica pulled back and looked down at the rounded indentation just over his right pectoral muscle.

"Does it still hurt?"

His hand caressed her cheek as he whispered his reply. "No."

Drawing her legs in so she could slide her body down between his legs, Monica lovingly kissed the purplish mark, her sweet kisses soon trailing down to his nipple. Taking it between her lips, Monica delicately grazed the taut tip with her teeth before alternately sucking and licking it as one hand drifted down to rub the bulge just below Josh's belt. Feeling his immediate response to her touch, his pelvis reaching forward to press against her hand, Monica swiftly unbuckled Josh's belt and lowered his zipper.

Pulling out his engorged cock, she licked at the spot of cum that dotted its head, running her tongue down and inside his foreskin as she stroked his pulsing shaft. Scooting himself forward, Josh leaned back, his chin tilting upward as he closed his

eyes. Every now and again his penis would convulse within the warmth of Monica's grasp, telling her of the pleasure she was giving him as well as his mounting need to ejaculate.

Eager to give him what he wanted, Monica closed her lips around his hard length and slid all the way down, relaxing her throat then swallowing, the movement gently squeezing the sensitive globe that bumped against her tonsils. Sucking her cheeks in, she pulled back up, her tongue doing nonstop spirals around his ever-hardening cock as she withdrew, only to plunge back down and swallow before sucking him back up to the top again. Monica cupped Josh's sac with her free hand, pulling it gently away from his body only to tenderly push it up against the base of his cock, shifting between the two in a back-and-forth rocking motion. She could sense more than directly feel the trembling of his thighs on either side of her head as the pressure built, his cock stiffening under her attention, his balls drawing up tight as a sure indication he was about to come. Monica mumbled a moan as she worked harder to heighten his pleasure.

Monica's efforts were reward by Josh's tremulous groan, the shudder of his body and the warm cum that filled her mouth. Without hesitation she swallowed it, drinking in the man she loved before withdrawing his softening penis from between her lips. Kissing its tip, she held it within the warmth of her hand as she kissed her way back up Josh's chest and neck until she reached his lips. After French-kissing him, the salty taste of his ejaculate transferring from her to him, she pulled back and studied him, her lips spreading in a sultry smile of satisfaction. His face was flushed and his eyes were glazed.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes," he said in an unsteady voice. "I still love you, Monica."

"I love you too. Both of you."

Something sparked in Josh's eyes.

"Both?"

Monica nodded.

"You *and* Wes."

"Oh." He fixed his stare on some point just past and down from her shoulder.

"Is that okay? I mean, are you mad?"

Josh looked back into her eyes. "No. It's what Wes has always wanted – the three of us – but I didn't think you'd go for it."

"Neither did I. Turns out the idea makes sense to me. You know, the three musketeers? It feels right. But how do *you* feel about it?"

He smiled, a super-sexy grin and gave her a little wink.

"I'm good with it. Just so long as I don't have to do anything to Wes."

"Aw, come on," Wes' voice drifted in as he entered the house and walked toward them. "You know I always had a thing for you, Josh."

The three of them laughed as Wes pulled off his boots and then slowly sank to his knees behind Monica.

"Yeah, well, you *and* your thing keep the hell away from me," Josh said, his eyes locking hard with Wes for a long moment before softening.

Wes ran his hands up and down Monica's arms as he began kissing one side of her neck. "Do you feel the same way, Mo?" Her eyes fluttered closed as she leaned back against him.

"No."

Unzipping the hoody Monica wore to expose her bralessness underneath, Wes continued kissing her neck and throat as a hand moved down to cup one of her breasts. His eyes once more locking with Josh's, he pushed the luscious mound of flesh upward in an unspoken offering. Josh only hesitated for a moment before lunging forward, his mouth closing around Monica's nipple, where he proceeded to enthusiastically suck the erect point. Monica gasped, her body arching toward the sweet suction of Josh's lips, one hand tangled in his hair, the other curling back and around to entwine in Wes'.

Wes pulled off her jacket and, dragging her backward, stretched Monica down onto the carpeted floor while Josh struggled, one-handed, to pull down her clingy yoga pants. With a smile, Monica wiggled out of them and her panties, leaving her to lie bare and breathless before the two men she loved most in the world. As Wes peeled off his clothes, Monica flicked her fingers at Josh and with a soft, "Come here," helped him out of his, posthaste. With both now naked and one kneeling at her head and the other at her feet, their stiff cocks jutting out in a pronounced promise of pleasure, Monica held her breath and waited.

Wes moved first, bending down to deftly kiss first one breast then the other, his gentle attempts soon giving away to full-blown licks that just skirted her nipples, the purposeful exclusions making the rigid little tips throb with the need to be sucked. Down south and braced on his uninjured arm, Josh was sucking on the soft, pliable flesh of Monica's inner thighs, the heat and moisture of his mouth so close to her pussy making it cream and pulse. Now teased from two different directions, Monica began squirming, the pleasure Wes and Josh were jointly giving her changing into an uncomfortable must-have.

Finally moving his mouth over to suck slow and strong upon one of her nipples, Wes let one hand skim down over Monica's abdomen and pelvis to massage her slippery folds, his knuckles bumping against Josh's hand that had moved up to do the very same thing. Her lovers fell into a kind of teamwork. Wes stroked the swelling bud of Monica's clit while Josh seductively finger-fucked her, sliding his fingers in and out of her tightening canal. Then at the crucial moment, Josh repositioned himself, and tilting his head to one side so Wes could continue rubbing the little ridge at the top of her pussy, Josh stuck his tongue inside Monica and began swirling it around in wide powerful arcs. Lost in the sweetest of sensations, Monica whimpered at the simultaneous feel of Josh's tongue in her and Wes' mouth on her. It was incredible, delicious, and yet there was a part of Monica that needed them more, deeper.

Josh lifted his face from between her thighs, his supporting arm starting to shake from single-handedly taking the weight of his body.

"Why don't you lie down?" Monica offered faintly. Wes lifted her to a sitting position. In turn, Monica helped lower Josh onto his back. Taking the condom he retrieved from his back pocket and handed her, Monica rolled it down onto his cock before straddling him once more. Lining herself up, Monica then lowered her pussy onto Josh's stiff cock, a winded grunt escaping his lips as she began sliding her satiny snugness up and down his length. Behind her, she could feel Wes' hard-on poking into her back, his hands caressing every inch of her, front and back, his breath hot in her ear. Monica turned her head to him.

"Come around here. I want to kiss you."

Moving to crouch at her side, Wes bent down and kissed her full on the mouth, his tongue lapping around hers in an excited interplay of passion as one hand held the back of her head steady. While she rode Josh, conscious of his one good hand moving back and forth between her left hip and breast, she wildly kissed Wes for a long time until panting, she pulled away.

"I want to kiss more of you. Come stand closer."

At first Wes seemed a little unsure. He got to his feet but didn't move in front of Monica as she wanted. Placing one hand on his outer thigh, she pushed him back and then toward Josh, patting the far side of the floor with her palm. "Put your foot here." Touching the foot she was referring to, Monica guided him into an "at-ease" position facing her with one leg on either side of Josh, his solid cock angling out only a few inches from her face. And her mouth.

Now he got it.

"Come closer," Monica whispered. "Closer."

As soon as he was within reach, Monica took Wes' erect cock into her mouth and began sucking it slowly. Unconsciously, she harmonized her pelvic thrusts against Josh buried inside her, with her mouth's plunges upon Wes' shaft. Pleasure gave way to a type of urgent pressure that was nearly painful in its need to be released. Slamming herself harder and harder onto Josh's cock, his mounting moans indicating his orgasm was close at hand, Monica reached around and clasped the cheeks of Wes' ass, lightly digging her nails in either side of his puckered hole as she doubled the speed with which she sucked him.

With a loud gasp, Wes clutched at her shoulders, his hips repeatedly lurching forward as he sought to drive his hardness into the tight warmth of Monica's mouth. Soon his hot ejaculate hit the roof of her mouth and sprayed against the back of her throat, the feel of Josh twitching and coming beneath her at the same time, initiating her own climax. Covering her teeth with her lips so she wouldn't accidentally bite Wes, Monica shuddered and moaned, tears stinging her eyes as the two men she loved with all her heart filled her with the physical embodiment of their love. Their three-way orgasm seemed to go on forever but when at last they were still, Monica moved to lie

between Josh and Wes, their bodies warm and moist, their heart rates slowing as they lazed in the sweet aftermath of their lovemaking.

“Promise me something,” Monica said, almost swooning as Wes nuzzled her neck from behind and Josh kissed her throat.

In unison, they replied, “Hmmm?”

“No more stickups, okay?”

Without a word, Wes and Josh started kissing and caressing Monica once more, gradually moving her hands to enclose one around each swelling shaft. Chuckling softly, she tried to get the answer she was after.

“That’s not the kind of stickup I was referring to.”

But as the guys’ hands and lips continued to play across her body, the question and its answer faded from Monica’s mind. All she would ever need to know from there on in was she was theirs and they were hers, just like the three musketeers – all for one and one for all.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

L.A. Day

L.A. Day exists only in the mind of Laura. An avid reader since early childhood, she began writing romance in her teens. Now, twenty-plus years later, she's progressed to erotic romance. Supported by her husband of many years, she spends most of her time in front of a computer weaving tales of love and lust.

Multi-published in erotic romance, her stories have been tagged imaginative, steamy and even one of the most erotic stories ever read. Her favorite genre is erotic romance with a paranormal or sci-fi twist. She feels that if you're going to create an alpha male character, why not make him bigger, stronger, more well endowed than any human man could ever be? It is fantasy after all.

Remember, alpha males are only a "Day" away.

Also by L.A. Day

Barbarian Mate

Double Penetration

Faldrion Shifters 1: Feral Domination

Faldrion Shifters 2: Feral Lust

Faldrion Shifters 3: Feral Intensity

Greek Temptation

Made for Me

Prey

Satin Seduction

Savage

Set in Stone

The Last Warrior

They Both Belong To Me

Warrior of the Past

Zarius

Isabelle Drake

Thrill-seeking risk takers, heroes with a dark past, sexy locales, untamed women! Isabelle Drake writes stories featuring men and women who aren't afraid to go after what they want. An avid traveler, she'll go just about anywhere – at least once – to meet people and get story ideas.

Also by Isabelle Drake

Everglades Wildfire

Hard Fall

Show and Tell

Regina Carlysle

Regina Carlysle is an award-winning, multi-published author. She likes writing that is hot, edgy and often humorous, and puts this trademark stamp on all her stories. Regina lives in west Texas with her husband of 25 years and counting, and is a doting, fawning, over-indulgent mother to her two kids. When she's not penning steamy erotic tales or hot contemporary stories, she's indulging in long chats with friends who help her stay sane and keep her laughing.

Also by Regina Carlysle

Feral Moon

High Plains Shifters 1: Highland Beast

High Plains Shifters 2: Lone Star Lycan

High Plains Shifters 3: Ringo's Ride

Killer Curves

Mistletoe Magic: Breath of Magic

Mistletoe Magic: Elven Magic *anthology*

Spanish Topaz

Tempting Tess

Madison Hayes

Employed as an engineer, I've worked in an underground mine that went up—inside a mountain. I've swung over the Ohio River in a tiny cage suspended from a crane in the middle of an electrical storm. I've hung over the Hudson River at midnight in an aluminum boat suspended from a floating barge at the height of a blizzard, while snowplows on the bridge overhead rained slush and salt down on my shoulders. You can't do this sort of work without developing a sense of humor and a taste for adventure.

A relative newcomer to the publishing industry, I read my first romance five years ago and decided to try my hand at writing. Both my reading and writing habits are subject to mood and I usually have several stories going at once. When I need a really good idea for a story, I clean toilets. Now there's an activity that engenders escapism.

I was surveying when I met my husband. He was my "rod man". While I was trying to get my crosshairs on his stadia rod, he dropped his pants and mooned me. Next thing I know, I've got the backside of paradise in my viewfinder. So I grabbed the walkie-talkie. "That's real nice," I told him, "but would you please turn around? I'd rather see the other side."

It was love at first sight.

Also by Madison Hayes

[Alpha Romeos](#) with Rhyannon Byrd

[Calendar Girls: Miss April](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss August](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss December](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss February](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss January](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss March](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss May](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss September](#)

[Calendar Girls: Miss October](#)

[Dye's Kingdom: Wanting It Forever](#)

[Enter the Dragon](#) anthology

[Gryffin Strain: His Female](#)

Gryffin Strain: His Mistress
Half Wild *with Rhyannon Byrd*
In the Arms of Danger
Kingdom of Khal: Redeeming Davik
Kingdom of Yute: Tor's Betrayal
Made For Two Champions
Made For Two Heroes
Made For Two Men
Made For Two Rivals
Playing Hardball
The Call Boys: Brace
Zeke's Hands

Aubrey Ross

Aubrey Ross writes an eclectic assortment of erotic fiction. From power struggles between futuristic clans to adventurous mystic guardians, her stories are filled with passion and imagination. Some of her recent awards include an EPPIE finalist, two Passionate Plume finalists and a CAPA nomination from the Romance Studio.

With a pampered cat curled on the corner of her desk, Aubrey dreams up fascinating words and larger than life adventures – and wouldn't have it any other way!

Also by Aubrey Ross

Crimson Awakening
Crimson Prey
Crimson Thrall
Dream Warriors
Sensual Captivity 1: Shifter
Sensual Captivity 2: Seducer
Sensual Captivity 3: Sorcerer
Sensual Captivity 4: Specter
Soul Kisses
Velvet Deception

Brigit Zahara

A former operative for the CIA, Brigit Zahara previously unleashed her passion for excitement and adventure through her work, spending a good deal of her time traveling throughout the United States and Europe, with lengthy spells in New York, Los Angeles, Louisiana, Venice, London, Florence and Malta.

After Brigit took an early retirement, she then looked to her closet habit of writing fiction as a means of indulging her need for pulse-pounding action. From there, her taste very quickly turned to the tantalizing arena of erotica. Brigit has written a number of sizzling titles for Ellora's Cave. She looks forward to writing and publishing many more torrid tales of love and sensuality with this top publisher of erotic literature.

Currently Brigit lives in a seaside villa in Majorca, spending the steamy days penning even steamier stories and the cool, ocean-breeze-kissed evenings researching love scenes with her heart's destiny and husband of nearly eight years.

Also by Brigit Zahara

[Bar None](#)

[Catch of the Day](#)

[Chocolate Craving](#)

[Conjured Bliss](#)

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[Front Page Fate](#)

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[Lollipop Kings](#)

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We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can email us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at www.ellorascave.com for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

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