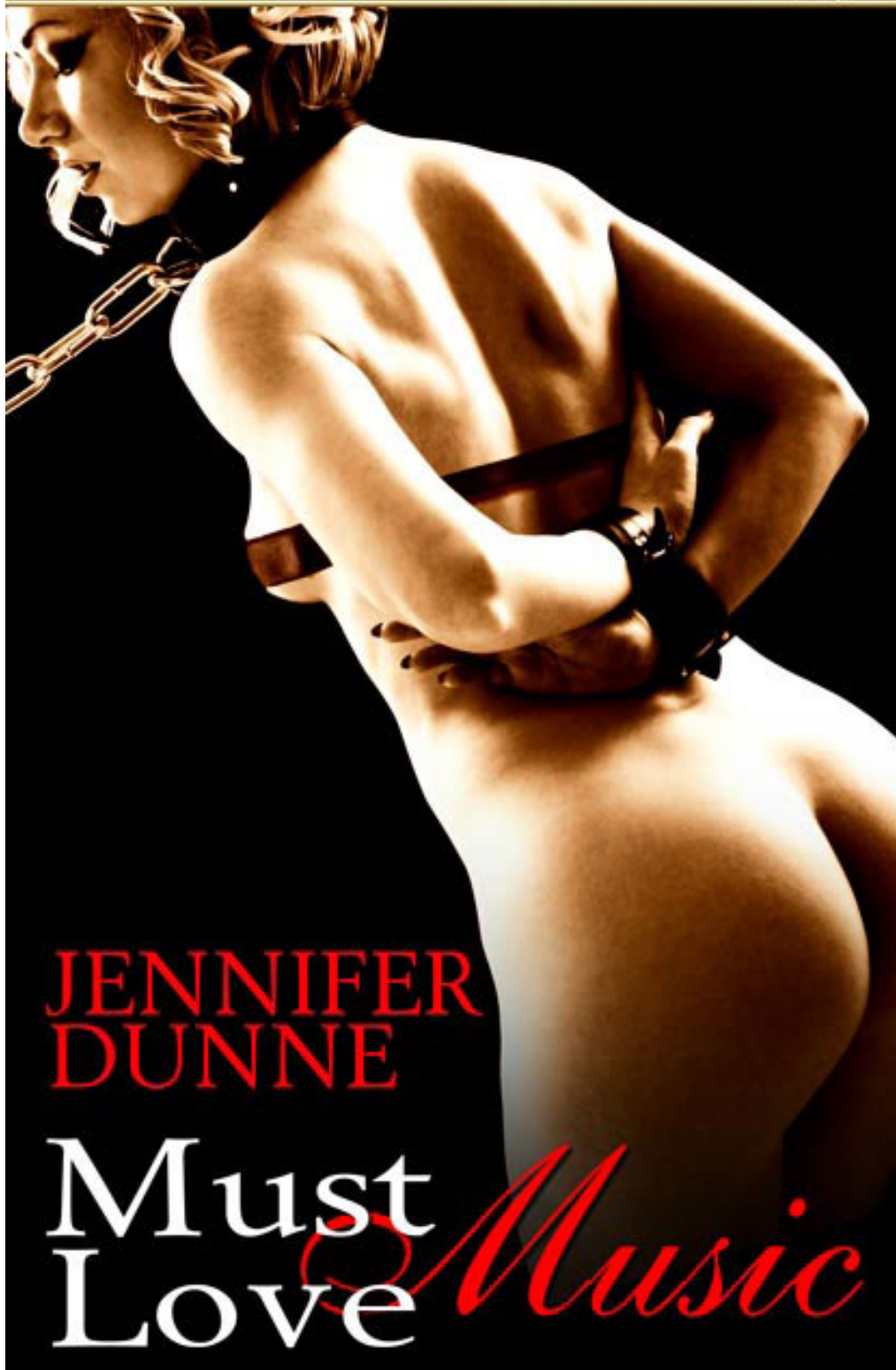


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



JENNIFER  
DUNNE

Must  
Love *Music*

## **Must Love Music**

*Jennifer Dunne*

Possessing perfect pitch, a penchant for leather and a predilection for gourmet cooking, Master Rikard is a sub's dream.

After answering his compelling personal ad, Gayle begins a relationship with the mysterious masked Dom. His hypnotic voice spins wicked erotic fantasies as he takes her to sexual heights she'd never believed possible, while glimpses of his tortured soul awaken her desire for more than just sex.

Their mutual love of music could be the beginning of much more, but his tragic past presents a barrier. Then Gayle's innocent discovery forces them to face the truth.

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Must Love Music

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# ***MUST LOVE MUSIC***

**Jennifer Dunne**

### *Dedication*

To Sister Jane Theresa Murphy—you taught me how to make my song take flight. Thank you. You're surrounded by the music of God's angels now, but I still think of you every time I sing.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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Google: Google, Inc.

## Chapter One

*Let me help your spirit to sing. Leather-loving dominant seeks submissive for scene play, potential relationship. Must love music. Reply to voicemail box 665.*

Gayle bought a newspaper along with her customary strawberry-cream-cheese-covered bagel and grande chai, and unfolded it on the spindly café table to peruse while she cooled down from her morning run. Ignoring the news, she flipped immediately to the classifieds.

The Thursday paper was the Arts and Entertainment edition. A special supplement listed all of the activities available for the weekend. More importantly, it also listed all of the auditions for the coming week.

She'd been in this city for a month now, and had yet to form any friendships with the people in the local branch office where she worked. They were all either in sales or management, and had nothing in common with her, their designated technical support person. Oh, they were polite and friendly, in an impersonal way – especially the ones in sales. But it was like she spoke a different language from them, or something.

So she was turning to her hobbies. She had a good voice, and had enjoyed doing community theatre before her unpredictable work schedule had forced her to give it up. Now that she had a standard work-week again, she could connect with the local theatre scene. She'd be bound to find friends there. Or, at any rate, find out where all the good bars, clubs and other hot spots were in this city.

She ran her gaze down the column of auditions, looking for musicals. The local opera company was casting bit parts for *Faust*, with the possibility of joining the company after the production ended.

Gayle shook her head. She was good, but not that good.

The high school honors theatre program was staging a production of *Grease*. Even if she got one of the adult parts, she'd be surrounded by children. Hardly a likely source of friends to go clubbing with.

The Gilbert and Sullivan operetta was a possibility. A lot of work to spit those patter songs out, but definitely for adults.

Then she spotted a notice for Sondheim's *Into the Woods*. Perfect! A challenging but not impossible score. A large enough cast to get to know a bunch of people. She'd need to bring music to the audition. Next Tuesday at 7:00 p.m.

She ripped out the audition notice, and tucked it into the zippered pocket of her jogging set's jacket.

Just having a plan already improved her spirits. Nibbling at her bagel, she glanced at the section of the paper revealed by the missing audition notice. The personals.

Smiling, she flipped the page and started to read the ads. There was more than one way to find a friend in a new city. Maybe a new boyfriend was what she should be looking for.

The first few ads were predictably from losers.

“Discreet afternoon fun? He's a married guy, looking for a little on the side. 'Not interested in head games, players, or women who can't commit'? That's a guy who still has issues with his last girlfriend. 'Single father of three who do not live with him'? Sounds like a guy who can't be bothered to wear a condom.”

The rest were similarly mock-worthy, or sounded as dry and uninteresting as an all-day meeting. Then she came to a new headline.

“Alternative lifestyle personals? What's that?”

Her eyes widened at the first entry. “Skilled master seeks slave for 24/7 D/s lifestyle. I'll whip and beat you until you cry, then make you beg for more.”

Gayle shook her head. She'd tried a little bondage with her last boyfriend. It had been fun. Okay, more than fun, it had been a huge turn-on for her. But that guy sounded more like a psychopath than a sexual partner.

Her breath caught at the next ad.

"Let me help your spirit to sing. Leather-loving dominant seeks submissive for scene play, potential relationship. Must love music."

Heat pooled low in her groin, her panties growing damp as the blood pulsed between her legs. She didn't know why the words affected her so deeply. But she knew she couldn't let this opportunity get away from her. Fingers trembling, she tore out the ad.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that morning, showered and dressed in a neatly professional skirt and blouse, Gayle was still thinking about the ad while working at her computer. She kicked off a database compaction, then leaned back in her desk chair and stretched her arms high above her head. It would be fifteen minutes at least before she could do the next task on her list.

A smile teased her lips. There was a voicemail box associated with the ad. Fifteen minutes was plenty of time to call and leave a message.

She dug the ad out of her wallet and nervously dialed the paper's personals number, then carefully entered the extension at the prompt. The system clicked, transferring her to the voicemail box she'd chosen. And then the man who'd placed the ad spoke.

"Thank you for your interest in my ad," he said, his rich and resonant voice reaching through the phone line to wrap around her lungs and squeeze. Her heart hammered. God, she could come just by listening to him talk. His words slid across her skin like a velvet caress, and her body arched, aching to bring him closer.



"Leave a message, and a way to reach you. If I like the sound of your message, I'll contact you."

"No pressure," Gayle muttered, her fingers tightening around the handset. Instinctively, she straightened her back, lifting her head to relax her throat and breathing deep into her diaphragm. This was just as much an audition as the Sondheim production would be.

The phone beeped, cueing her message.

"Your ad intrigued me," she began, pitching her voice to be as clear and carrying as if she was onstage. "I love to sing, and tremble at the thought of putting myself in your hands. If you would be interested in making music with me, call me. My name is Gayle."

Then she rattled off the phone number for the unassigned extension in her office that she used to test the marketing team's modems. It had an old, analog phone plugged in to it. His would be the only incoming call on that line.

She ate her lunch at her desk, mocking her own foolishness. He probably wouldn't even check his voicemail messages until the evening, when he got home from work. And if he liked her message enough to call her, he'd call back when she didn't answer. But she couldn't take the chance that he wouldn't. So she grabbed a microwavable bowl of macaroni and cheese from the vending machines and a diet cola, her ears straining to hear the distinctive ring of the analog phone.

She was completely absorbed in debugging a glitch with one of the manager's email accounts when the clanging bell of the phone startled her. Taking a deep breath, she sat up straight and relaxed her throat, then answered the phone.

"Hello, this is Gayle."

"Hello, Gayle. This is Rikard. I got your response to my ad."

A wave of warmth curled through her as his voice stroked and caressed her. The soft, slightly husky tone welcomed her to an intimate conversation, and suggested he might have been as moved by her response as she was by his initial ad.

Or, she might be reading way too much into the whole thing, and the poor man was getting over a cold.

She chuckled, half in nervousness and half at her own overblown imagination. "So, I guess you liked the sound of it, since you called back."

"Yes, I did. Are you a musician?"

"Programmer. But I do some community theatre on the side."

"Ah. I thought you sounded like you'd had training."

"Sister Jane would be pleased to know some of her lessons stuck. How about you? Are you a musician?"

He hesitated just a moment before saying, "Composer."

"Really? What do you write?"

"A little of everything. Jazz. Pop songs. Jingles."

"Jingles?"

"It pays the rent." He laughed, the sound spearing to her core as if he'd suddenly appeared in her office, thrown her onto her desk, spread her legs and thrust deep inside her.

Gayle smothered a moan. Her breasts were tight and tingling, aching for his fingers to squeeze the pebbled nipples, or for his hot mouth to cover the tips and suck deeply. Her stomach quivered. And the flesh between her legs pulsed with every heartbeat, wet and steaming, ready for his fingers, his mouth, or his long, hard cock to push deep, again and again, until she screamed her release. Or shrilled it over and over like a demented Mozart aria.

"If you're a programmer, you're probably at work."

Gayle answered with an affirmative noise.

"I won't keep you long, then. Would you like to get together to talk more in person?"

"I'd love to," she answered immediately. Then thoughts of all the horror stories about blind dates prompted her to caution. "How about Saturday? We could meet for lunch or coffee at the café on the corner of Washington and Twelfth."

"Coffee. Say, two o'clock?"

"Sounds great. How will I recognize you?"

"I'm tall, shoulder-length blond hair, and will be wearing green sunglasses and a black leather jacket. You?"

"My hair's dark brown, in a kind of pageboy, although my stylist had a more expensive name for it. I'll probably be wearing a denim barn jacket with black velvet trim."

"Sounds like you're very sensual."

"Wait until Saturday, and you can see for yourself."

He chuckled, a dark rumble of sound that wasn't quite as intense as his earlier laugh had been—more like he was leaning over her for some intense French kissing, while his hand fondled beneath her skirt.

"I'll count the hours."

"Me too."

After he hung up, Gayle remained clutching the handset, panting for breath, while her clit throbbed, begging for his touch. If he was half as scrumptious in person as he sounded over the phone, she was a goner. She hung up, and furtively pinched her nipples. The sharp pain triggered a wave of heat that rolled over her. It wasn't as good as an orgasm, but it was some relief.

She'd treat herself to a long, hot bubble bath tonight when she got home, soaping herself all over and pretending it was Rikard's hands sliding over her slick skin, imagining Rikard's mouth on hers, dreaming of his cock thrusting in and out, harder and faster, until she came beneath him in a sobbing, screaming rush.

She groaned, already aching and swollen with desire. It was going to be a long afternoon.

\* \* \* \* \*

Saturday afternoon, Gayle abandoned the pile of rejected clothes on her bed, and headed for her date wearing a chic black leather miniskirt and pink angora sweater under her denim coat. After all, Rikard's ad said he liked leather. And she recalled reading somewhere that pink was a good color to wear to a first date, because it sent signals saying you were gentle and feminine. Fuzzy textures implied you were soft and invited thoughts of touching.

Plus, she knew pink looked good with her skin tone. She'd actually bothered with full makeup, as if she was going to a customer site, instead of just her usual tinted moisturizer and lip gloss, and knew she looked good.

Her cell phone was tucked into her black and pink purse, with her friend Carrie on the speed dial. Carrie was more than willing to act as her safety net for the date, provided she got all the juicy details in return.

As the blocks melted away beneath Gayle's determined stride, the nervous quiver in her stomach grew progressively stronger. What if he was a complete troll? Or had some odious personal habit? What if he was drop-dead gorgeous, with the elegant and sophisticated manners of a James Bond? She took a deep breath, straightened her spine, and forced herself to smile cheerily. Just another audition.

She turned the corner to the café three minutes before two o'clock. A tall, blond man in a fitted black leather jacket was bending his head to talk to the hostess. Was that him?

He straightened and turned to scan the tables on the sidewalk, revealing his rectangular sunglasses of pale green, and a strong profile of high cheekbones, firm jaw, and well-shaped nose. His blond hair was artfully styled to give a rumped, just out of

bed look, falling across his forehead in graceful arcs, covering his ears and brushing his neck and shoulders.

Gayle hurried up to the hostess stand. "Rikard?"

He smiled, his gaze flicking down and up her body, lingering for just a moment on her leather skirt. "Gayle."

A shiver rippled across her skin at the sound of her name being said in his rich voice. The false sexual purr of the hostess startled her out of her reverie.

"This way, please."

She followed the hostess' swinging hips, the woman working her clinging Hawaiian print silk sarong to full effect. Gayle was aware of Rikard's presence behind her, and casually shrugged off her barn coat while she walked. She was rewarded with a soft intake of breath, and felt the heat of his gaze on her formfitting fuzzy sweater. Oddly, the hostess's blatant attempt to hijack his attention made Gayle feel better. She wasn't the only one to fall under the spell of Rikard's voice.

When they reached the table, Rikard held out a chair for her, giving her the better seat, with a view overlooking the sidewalk. He took the facing chair, looking back at the café.

The hostess handed them their menus, lingered a moment longer, then returned to her station. Rikard and Gayle stared at each other in silence, then both began speaking.

"So, what do you —?"

"Is this your first —?"

They both broke off, chuckling, and any lingering nervousness dissipated.

"You first," he offered, gesturing her on with one gloved hand.

He wore black leather driving gloves, the supple leather clinging to his hands like a second skin. Gayle's heart sped up as she pictured those gloved fingers stroking her body, circling gently around her ear, slipping along the edge of her jaw, and finally dipping down to fondle and caress her breasts.

"Thanks. I was just wondering how many responses you'd followed up with so far."

"Judging the competition?" Rikard smiled, although something seemed vaguely wrong with his expression. The green lenses of his glasses made it difficult to read the look in his eyes, and even though the sun was behind him, he hadn't removed them.

She shrugged, inexplicably nervous again. "Just curious."

"Yours is the first message I returned," he admitted. "I have a musician's ear, and the other respondents' voices were frankly painful to listen to. Whereas yours is a pleasure."

"Well, I am always the first one asked to make phone recordings at work."

"You said you were a programmer. Of telecom equipment?"

The waiter interrupted them before she could answer. She ordered a grande chai, with whipped cream. Rikard ordered a tall cinnamon coffee. They turned in their menus, then he indicated she should continue with a wave of his gloved hand and another of those oddly off smiles.

"No, I'm a general purpose programmer. I do tech support for a marketing branch office, keep the sales people's laptops running, clear the viruses off the manager's system, and do back office databases and demo code off the server." She paused, then laughed and shook her head. "That probably made no sense to you whatsoever."

The corner of his mouth crooked up. "I was with you until back office databases. What are those?"

Gayle launched into an explanation of the difference between the front office systems used by the sales people, and the back office systems which ran automatically, collecting and compiling data and taking appropriate actions, such as issuing bills or prompting follow-up work. She kept the front office systems patched and running, holding the sales people's hands and talking them through the various screens when they had to do anything unfamiliar. But to the back office systems, she was a god.

“And do you like being a god?” Rikard asked.

A joking reply was on the tip of her tongue, when she realized he was asking a serious question. Fortunately, the waiter delivered their drinks, and she bought some time to think by stirring the whipped cream into her chai, licking the spoon, cradling the mug in her hands, blowing on it, then taking her first sip.

“No, I don’t think so,” she finally answered. “I like not having to clean up other people’s messes, or waste my time redoing something because a sales guy with a one-week database class behind him thought he could ‘improve’ the system. But that’s not the same.”

“Good. Because if we decide to go forward with this, there’s only room for one god, and it’ll be me.”

She trembled at the dark promise in his voice, her stomach bouncing like she’d swallowed rubber balls instead of silky chai. “Okay,” she whispered.

“You have whipped cream on your lip.”

She licked it off, feeling his eyes tracking the movement of her tongue behind the green shield of his sunglasses. Suddenly her lips felt parched, and she nervously wet them.

Rikard lifted his coffee and took a hasty sip.

“Speaking of going forward, I’ve never done this before. What would we do next?”

“You’ve never been in a BDSM relationship, or you’ve never started one via a personal ad?”

“A little of both, I think. I tried some bondage games with my old boyfriend, after we’d been lovers for a while, and really enjoyed them. But that was on top of an existing relationship. I never had it *be* the relationship.”

“We wouldn’t jump straight into our first scene. There needs to be trust on both sides—you trusting that I have your best interests at heart, and me trusting that you’ll tell me how you’re really feeling during a scene. So I’d start by asking you to do things,

little things, like wear a certain item of clothing, or sit a certain way. I'd touch you, non-sexually, and learn your reactions to things. And we'd talk, about what you wanted, what you feared. Then, when we felt comfortable with each other, we'd move on to scene work, where I'd force you to face your fears and desires. Again, starting small, with things like binding your body but leaving your breasts exposed, and tickling your nipples with feathers, furs, and other things, until you came from the pleasure." The corner of his mouth quirked in his lopsided grin again. "It would take a very long time."

Gayle's breasts tightened, the nipples hardening and stretching her clinging sweater, as if he was already teasing them. She imagined ghostly caresses—wisps of feathers, soft strokes of fur, a quick rasp of something rough like sandpaper, a sharp nip of teeth.

She gasped, her panties growing not just damp but actually wet. "No, I don't think it would take long at all."

Rikard's smile broadened into smug self-satisfaction as he leaned back in his chair and studied her through lidded eyes. She felt like a partially devoured bowl of cream being examined by a not-yet-sated cat.

Yet somehow, the blatantly sexual expression didn't trouble her the way his earlier smiles had. With a jolt of surprise, she recognized what had bothered her previously. Now that his eyes were half-closed, they were even. When he smiled with amusement, one was slightly wider than the other. That was why his crooked grin didn't disturb her. She expected one eye to close more when he only moved one side of his mouth.

Her logical nature immediately kicked in, tossing out hypotheses as fast as she could test them. Coupled with the sunglasses, and the way he sat with the light behind him, she suspected he'd had some sort of eye treatment recently. Maybe he'd gotten laser eye surgery to cure his nearsightedness, or been given some sort of drops that affected his eye muscles for an infection.



As if recognizing her change of mood, he straightened and returned to his previous easygoing manner. "There are a few other things. I mentioned my fondness for leather in my ad."

"Yes. But I wasn't sure what you meant by that."

"When I touch you, I'll be wearing gloves." He extended his hand, displaying the soft leather driving glove that encased his skin. "And I also have a mask of black leather that covers most of my face. Without the mask, I'm just Rikard, your equal and, hopefully, your friend. In the mask, however, I'm Master Rikard, and expect your complete and total obedience."

His voice darkened and deepened, hinting at dire consequences should she fail to obey Master Rikard. He made no movement, other than returning his outstretched hand to wrap around his coffee mug, which could hardly be considered threatening. Yet she trembled in fear. And excitement.

"Obedience like we talked about. Little things until we trust each other."

"Yes." He paused, then added, "Since this is the first time you've entered a relationship with someone unknown to you, you'd probably feel safer the first time if you set up a safe call with a friend. Every hour or so, check in with someone you trust who knows where you've gone and who you are with, and can inform the police if you don't respond to her calls."

Gayle blushed. "I already did that. My friend Carrie will be calling in about ten more minutes."

The crooked grin tugged at his lips again. "I hope you anticipate all of my other suggestions as well."

Reaching into his jacket's inside chest pocket, he withdrew a business card which he placed on the table in front of her.

*Rikard Sorenson, Composer.* Below that, in smaller print, was listed his phone number and address, a semi-rural area to the west of the city that was in transition from farms

to housing developments. She'd looked at houses there when she'd moved down, but they were executive homes well outside of her price range.

"Those jingles must pay really well to afford the rent out there."

He shrugged. "There's my phone number. Take the night to think it over, then call me with your answer. If you want to go ahead, I'll expect you at my house tomorrow at one o'clock."

Her hand closed around the card, the blood pulsing through her fingers making the card seem to throb beneath her touch.

"That's it? Just show up at one o'clock?"

"I'll give you more instructions when you call. *If* you call. You may change your mind once you're alone and have a chance to think things over."

He tipped back his head and downed the rest of his coffee, effectively ending the discussion. Setting the empty mug on the table, the tip of his tongue darted out to lick the stray droplets of coffee from his lips.

Gayle swallowed a hasty gulp of her chai, fighting the urge to lean across the table and taste his coffee-flavored mouth. But she couldn't tear her gaze from the gleaming track of wetness.

"Oh! The coffee must have been too hot. Your lip is peeling."

Rikard stiffened, his gloved hand rising to pat his lips. "You're right. Fortunately I have a tube of lip balm in my car. But I should take care of it as soon as possible."

He stood, pulling out his wallet and dropping a ten-dollar bill on the table.

"That should cover the drinks. It was a pleasure meeting you. I look forward to receiving your call tomorrow."

He bent his head in a gesture reminiscent of a bow, turned, and walked away from the café without a backwards glance.

Gayle sat at the table, stunned by his sudden departure. There was something strange about him, no doubt about it.

Smiling, she leaned back in her chair and sipped her chai, the spicy warmth heating her mouth as thoughts of what tomorrow might hold heated her blood. Her heart pounded. Rikard had been quite clear that they wouldn't have sex until they trusted each other. But how long would it take to build that trust? Not long, she hoped.

Although, if he planned on talking to her to build trust, she'd probably be orgasming anyway. The man's voice could charm the panties off a nun. And despite six years of Catholic school, Gayle was most definitely not a nun.

Picking up his business card, she memorized his phone number and address. She was taking no chances that it might get lost before she could call him. Sunday afternoon, she fully intended to have her first session with Master Rikard.

## **Chapter Two**

Recounting her date with Rikard to her friend Carrie, Gayle was at a loss to explain her reaction to him. Her willingness to blindly accept his comments with no question seemed, in retrospect, strangely suspicious.

Yet, he obviously recognized the effect he had on her, or else why would he tell her to take the night to think it over rather than asking for her answer then and there?

"So, what are you going to tell him?"

Gayle rolled over on her bed, the cell phone tucked against her cheek, and braced her stocking feet against the beige wall that she hadn't yet found time to decorate.

"I'm going to say yes, of course."

"Even though he's giving off these weird vibes?"

"God, Carrie! He's giving off sex-on-a-stick vibes. The man could have had any woman in the café just by opening his mouth and asking."

Just remembering the warm darkness of his voice made her hot all over again. Idly, she stroked her fingertips across her nipples, wishing it was Rikard's hand caressing her.

"Did I mention his gloves?"

"No."

"He was wearing black leather driving gloves. They hugged his hands like they'd been painted on. And they were incredibly sexy."

"Driving gloves were sexy? Next you'll say you get turned on by those woolen crosses between baseball hats and berets that British guys wear to drive around the countryside."

Gayle laughed with her friend. "Don't worry. I'm not that far gone."

"Uh-huh. Only because Rikard the Super Stud hasn't worn one yet."

They giggled like schoolgirls.

"So what are you planning on wearing tomorrow?"

"I don't know. I kind of figured he'd tell me what he wanted me to wear."

"And you're okay with that?"

"Yeah. It's one of the first steps for establishing trust. I show I'm willing to do what he tells me, and he shows he won't tell me to do something stupid, like wear high heels, a matching bra and panty set, and nothing else."

Carrie's next question was filled with awkward hesitation. "Gayle? How, uh, far are you willing to go? I mean, if he asks you, or tells you, to do something. You can still say no. But would you?"

Gayle stared at her toes, wiggling restlessly against the wall. "I...don't know. It's like he's some sort of Svengali, his voice leading me wherever he wants me to go, and I just follow like a little sheep. That's one of the reasons we need to build trust."

"So you can follow him even more blindly?"

"No, so I can be comfortable that he won't lead me astray."

"But what about until you build that trust? What about tomorrow?"

"Will you be my safety net again? Call my cell every hour. If I don't pick up, call again in fifteen minutes. If I still don't pick up, call the cops."

"I hope you know what you're doing."

Gayle sighed, her vision drifting back to the remembered sight of Rikard lounging in his chair, gazing lazily at her through his green-tinted sunglasses, while a smug smile pulled at his lips. A languorous warmth slowly uncurled deep within her. Would he touch her tomorrow the way she ached to be touched? Leave her hungry for his possession? Or transport her to a rapturous state she'd never even dreamed existed?

"I hope I know what I'm doing, too."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gayle spent the rest of the night working on her audition number. She wasn't foolish enough to try and learn something new only three days before the tryout, but there were plenty of songs she'd sung in previous productions that she could brush up on with just a little practice.

Since Sondheim songs were notorious for their difficulty, the vocal line just one of many in the instrumentation, she'd win major bonus points from the casting director if she could prove that she'd already mastered one. Back in college, she'd played the role of Beth in a production of *Merrily We Roll Along*. It was one of Sondheim's lesser known works, having lasted all of sixteen performances on Broadway. That was why her school had been able to afford to perform it. But the musical included the fabulous number "Not a Day Goes By", which Carly Simon had later turned into a hit. The song just happened to be sung by the character of Beth.

She found the marked-up music in her stack from past shows. The recorded accompaniment for her numbers was buried at the bottom of her box of cassette tapes.

Over and over again, she practiced the song, working until she got the tricky shifts in meter to flow smoothly, and started jumbling the words because she was so tired. But she'd successfully kept herself from thinking about her upcoming date with Rikard.

In the morning, she busied herself with laundry and other household chores until ten o'clock, when she judged it was late enough to call Rikard without risk of waking him. She paced back and forth across the kitchen while she waited for him to pick up. He answered on the second ring.

"Good morning, Gayle." His velvety voice wrapped around her, making her shiver.

"How did you know it was me?"

"Caller ID. It's a local number I don't recognize, so I guessed it was you."

Gayle laughed self-consciously, leaning back against the counter. She'd expected to hear him say he was psychic, or confess to some other bizarre power. His voice seemed to drive all rational thoughts from her brain.

"I'm glad you called," he continued. "I've planned a late lunch for us, to get to know each other better. Do you have any food allergies I need to be aware of?"

"No. Well, I'm not allergic to them, but avocados make my lips go numb."

He chuckled. "Most people would call that an allergy."

Her knees went weak, and she collapsed into one of the chairs at her kitchen table. His voice should be registered with the FBI as a lethal weapon.

"So what did you do when you left the café yesterday?" he asked.

"I had a long talk with my friend, Carrie. She's the one who will be doing the safe calls today, too."

Rikard's voice was noticeably cooler when he asked, "What did you tell her?"

Gayle blinked in confusion. "Just what you told me. I thought you wanted me to set up safe calls."

"Yes, I did. That's fine. I'm sorry. I thought you meant you'd discussed me."

"Well, but we did. I mean, that was part of the deal for her doing the safe calls, that I had to dish about how my date went. I didn't say anything bad, though. Just about how good-looking you were, and how your voice made my stomach do back flips, and—"

"Back flips, hmm?"

"At least. Possibly an Olympic floor routine."

"What about after your call?"

"I worked on the song for my audition next week. I'm trying out for *Into the Woods*."

"What song are you singing?"

"I thought I'd sing 'Not a Day Goes By' from—"

"*Merrily We Roll Along*. Good choice."

Gail sat upright in surprise. "You know it?"

"A cautionary tale about a composer who gives up everything that matters in a fruitless pursuit of meaningless fame and fortune, by one of the greats of American musical theatre? It would be surprising if I didn't know it."

"Oh, right. Because you're a composer."

"Bring your music with you. I'd like you to sing for me."

Her cheeks heated. "I'm not that good."

"I'm not expecting a concert. And it will be good practice for obeying me even when my orders make you a little uncomfortable, and push you outside your comfort zone."

"Oh. When you put it that way..."

He chuckled, sending another shiver quivering through her. "And speaking of pushing you outside your comfort zone, I'd like you to wear that leather miniskirt again, but no panties, and no pantyhose. So that if I wanted to, at any moment, I could reach up under it and put my fingers inside you, teasing you until you trembled and came on my hand."

Gayle's breath caught, her breasts tightening and heat pooling between her legs at his suggestive words.

"Did you hear me, Gayle?"

"Yes," she breathed. "I heard you."

He chuckled again. "Ah. Imagining my fingers inside you already, are you? Stroking in and out, sliding between your slick folds, then pressing deep, my thumb rubbing your clit—"

She gasped, her legs falling open and her head lolling back as waves of warmth crested within her. She shuddered, and cupped her pulsing flesh through the heavy interference of her jeans.

"Yes," she whimpered.



"I'm the only one allowed to touch you," he cautioned, as if he knew where her hand was and what she was doing.

"But I'm –"

"That's an order, Gayle."

Reluctantly, she lifted her hand away from her hot, throbbing crotch. "Yes, Master Rikard."

"Don't sound so sad. Think of the anticipation, the constant state of arousal as you wonder when I'll finally touch you and give you the climax you deserve."

"Soon, I hope."

"Oh, no. You're going to have to work for that reward. When you get here, we'll start with our light lunch. Then you'll sing for me. And then, maybe, if you've been good, I'll give you what you want."

"I'll be good. I'll be very, very good."

"That's what I wanted to hear. I'll expect you at one o'clock. Don't be late."

"Wait! You didn't tell me what top you wanted me to wear."

"Something clingy, so I can see how tight and hard your nipples are. And no bra."

Gayle moaned softly, the idea of displaying herself before Rikard's avid gaze making her insides clench. Her breasts were already tingling, the nipples tightening as if he was looking at them right now.

She shifted, trying to get comfortable on the hard wooden chair. But what she really wanted was to straddle the curved arm, riding the wood and crushing it against her clit until she came, screaming Rikard's name.

"I'm going to be in agony for the next three hours," she protested.

"I have it on the best authority that suffering is good for the soul."

"Then I'm going to be damn near angelic by the time I get to your house."

"I look forward to helping you fall. One o'clock. Bring your music. Don't be late."

\* \* \* \* \*

Once again, the sensual haze consuming her faded once Rikard was no longer speaking to her. After some time spent staring into her closet, Gayle dressed in a bright blue exercise top that hugged her curves, clearly outlining her nipples. It also showed the slight pudginess in her upper arms, and a thickness around her waist that she'd rather not reveal. She needed to start wearing wrist weights when she jogged.

She pulled on the leather miniskirt, the leather cupping her bare ass like a pair of hands. Like Rikard's hands.

Forcing the image away, she concentrated on finding a pair of sandals to match the skirt. She wouldn't think about Rikard's long, graceful fingers, sheathed in leather, stroking and caressing her sensitive skin.

"Oh, hell."

She leaned against the closet door, eyes closed, and let her imagination run riot. She pictured him doing her against the wall as soon as she entered his home. Or maybe stripping her and serving the late lunch he'd mentioned on her quivering body, licking and nibbling his way through a three-course meal that included her for dessert. Or setting her down, legs spread, on the keyboard of a piano, while he coaxed melodious cries of passion from her.

"No." She shoved away from the door, stalking out of her room to the computer set up in the living room. Quickly logging on, she surfed over to an online mapping site and printed out driving directions to Rikard's home. She wanted to trust him, but found herself filling in his name in the Google search box, just to be sure he was who he said he was. Nothing. She frowned, and tried R. Sorenson. Some lyric sites popped up, attributing various songs she didn't recognize to R. Sorenson, as well as listings for diatribes from a political activist in California and genealogical information on the Sorenson clan. But no news articles, and no home page. She wasn't sure if that was a good or bad thing. Then she checked her email and surfed the news sites, killing time with distractions until she needed to leave her house.

She'd allowed an extra ten minutes for traffic downtown, and cruised into the suburbs with a comfortable cushion of time, allowing her to arrive with leisurely grace. Rikard's home was a two-story modern design of angled cedar planks and plate glass windows. It appeared to be situated to maximize the view of the sprawling apple and pear orchards behind the house, as well as the distant green hills. A stone wall, high enough to keep out animals but easily scaled by a determined person, surrounded his property, or as much of it as she could see before it faded into the distance. The black scrollwork gates at the end of his crushed stone drive stood open, and didn't appear to have been moved since the last time the drive was graded.

The gravel crunched beneath her tires as she rolled slowly up the drive, stopping next to the flagstone path that curved gracefully to his front door. After giving herself one last once-over in the rearview mirror, Gayle grabbed her purse and sheet music, and exited the car. It chirped as she engaged the locks, but her attention was already focused on the path beneath her feet, and the man awaiting her inside. A decorative wall fountain bubbled happily beside a stone bench, the feet carved to resemble two squirrels. Their cheerful welcome counteracted the subdued menace of the wrought iron safety door that matched the gates at the end of the drive.

The inner door swung open before she could ring the bell. Rikard must have been watching for her. Then he stepped around the door to open the safety door, letting her see him for the first time.

His features were hidden behind a black mask of boiled leather that covered his face from just above his jaw to mid-forehead. His eyes—a medium blue, she could see now that he'd gotten rid of his green sunglasses—looked through cutouts their precise size and shape, and the lower edge of the mask curved up to reveal his lips but no more. The mask had clearly been designed specifically for him.

If the mask had left her in any doubt, the rest of his outfit showed his fondness for leather. Black riding boots encased his narrow feet in elegance. Tight black leather pants clung to his legs, laced up the sides rather than zipping in front. They were tight

enough that she could appreciate his endowments, a moderate bulge between his legs promising that he had enough to satisfy her, without being uncomfortably overlarge.

He wore his black leather driving gloves, the cuffs hidden beneath the flowing sleeves of a white poet shirt, the only thing he was wearing that was neither black nor leather. She wondered if that meant he planned on taking it off, later, and found the thought made her throat dry with anticipation.

His gaze slid up and down her body, checking her out with all the thoroughness she'd given him. He smiled, his attention lingering on her pebbled nipples, clearly visible beneath the clinging exercise top.

"Very obedient. Good."

Gayle felt her nipples tighten in response, and her breath quickened. "Thank you, Master Rikard."

Her fingers clenched, rustling her music. Rikard's gaze focused on the sheet music clutched in her hand.

"May I?" he asked, already reaching for it.

She handed the pages over without a word. Odd, that he felt he could order her to dress in a certain way, speaking casually of touching her body as if it was his right, but had to ask for permission to touch her music.

He stepped back, inviting her to enter the spacious two-story foyer with a casual wave of his gloved hand, even as he eagerly studied the fanfold of pages. More wrought iron decorated the sweeping stairway to the second floor, and lined the upstairs balconies overlooking the flagstone entryway. He closed the doors without looking, his attention on the papers in his hands. His foot tapped softly, unconsciously keeping the beat as he scanned the music.

Reaching the end of the piece, he shook himself out of his fugue state. He folded the music and tucked it under his arm, then took her hand and lifted it to his lips, brushing the lightest of kisses across the backs of her fingers.

"Welcome to my home."

Gayle shivered, the drumbeat of desire beginning to pulse in her ears. "It's lovely."

"The first floor holds the kitchen, living room, music room and home theater. Upstairs are the bedrooms, playroom, and my studio. We'll be visiting the playroom later." His fingers tightened on hers with relentless promise, then he turned and led her through an arch into the music room.

A grand piano claimed pride of place in the room, the mahogany gleaming in the sunlight that streamed through windows covered by rich gold sheers. Gold satin padded the walls above mahogany wainscoting, and she realized the room was designed to soak up sound, so the music of the piano would not echo off the walls and windows.

A neatly folded, padded drape sat on the chair nearest the piano. The instrument was normally covered, then. Rikard had removed the drape in preparation for her visit.

Cold chills collected in her stomach, and she stopped dead in her tracks. "I can't do this."

"You can, and you will. While I wear this mask, I am your master, and you are mine to command." Rikard's voice was cold and implacable, then gentled as he brushed a gloved finger across her cheek. "Come, we will make a game of it. You will sit with me at the piano, and I will pick out the tune with one hand. See if you can sing along with me."

Swallowing against the lump in her throat, she nodded. "Yes, Master Rikard." He wasn't expecting perfection. It was just a game.

He pushed the piano bench to the left, so that he could sit on the end and still be centered in front of the keyboard. Placing the score on the music rest, he accidentally hit the corner with the trailing sleeve of his poet shirt, sending the pages flying.

Gayle bent and grabbed the music, then arranged it before him, no longer worried about needing to be perfect. She suspected he might have fumbled the pages on purpose, to put her at her ease. If so, it had worked. Rikard took his position on the

bench, shifting bench and music slightly until everything was aligned as he desired. Then he patted the bench beside him.

"Join me."

She slipped onto the bench, her leather skirt sliding smoothly across the glossy mahogany. Rikard wrapped his left arm around her shoulders, holding her close, then proceeded to "pick out the tune" with his right hand.

He played the melody line flawlessly, interspersing it with accent notes from the accompaniment, his fingers dancing across the keys. She frowned. If he was this good, he should be playing professionally, not composing music for other people to play.

"Now sing," he ordered, as he began the piece again.

Gayle breathed deeply, cleared her mind of everything except the music, and sang. When she finished, she turned to face him, eagerly anticipating his reaction. She'd nailed it.

Rikard's head was bent, his hand curled loosely in his lap.

"You sang every note as written, no easy task in a Sondheim piece."

"So why do you sound disappointed?"

"Music is not about getting the notes right, any more than poetry is about spelling the words correctly. It's about freeing your soul."

"I don't understand."

"Listen."

He began the piece again, his voice light and wistful as he described a love who was with him every single day. Then his voice broke on a ragged inhalation, and shook with agony as he cried, "And you *won't* go away!"

His love would not leave him alone, no matter how much he wished she would. Gayle's heart ached for his pain. Then his voice shifted again, turning flat and toneless as he revealed if she ever did leave, it would kill him. Dull and hollow with hopelessness, he whispered, "Dying day after day after day, as the days go by."

Gayle blinked her blurry eyes, focusing on Rikard's bent head, the fall of his blond hair screening his black mask from her sight. His right hand was fisted on the keyboard, the leather of his glove stretched taut across his knuckles.

"Did you love her so very much?" she whispered.

"With all my heart and soul."

"What happened?"

"A car accident. Four years ago. A truck's tire blew, and the driver swerved out of control, jackknifed and skidded across the highway. A minute later or a minute earlier, and the road would have been deserted. Instead, I got there just as he crossed into the oncoming traffic lane. The truck's fuel line ruptured. The dragging chassis struck a spark. My windshield blew out, glass everywhere. The doctors were afraid I was going to be blind. I wish I had been, rather than—"

His jaw clenched, his entire body going rigid as he fought the demons in his memory. He breathed deeply, then again, and slowly relaxed. His fist uncurled.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I'm alive, even if it's not the life I intended." He turned to face her, then smiled sadly as he wiped her cheeks with his gloved thumb. "It's I who should apologize to you. I've made you cry."

She bit her lip, good manners warring with turbulent emotions. Emotion won. "Would it be too hard for you to play it once more? I'd like to try it again."

Rikard straightened, his fingers returning to the keyboard. After a deep breath, he began playing the song from the beginning, although this time, he played only the melody line, without any of the embellishments.

Gayle couldn't match the strength of his loving and losing, but she'd experienced her own losses over the years. Her beloved aunt, dying of a lung infection. Her dog, Tiger, who had been her inseparable childhood companion. Even the slow corporate death of spending more and more time on the road, until her life became a series of

disconnected hotel rooms with no goal beyond reaching the next assignment, the next contract, and her hobbies, interests, and existence outside of her job faded away.

She put all of that emotion into the song. And when it ended, she sat, stunned, as the last notes faded. She'd heard the difference. It was unbelievable.

Rikard brushed his gloved fingers across the keys in a caress too light to sound them, then closed the piano with a snap. The music fluttered to the floor.

"Yes. That time you let me hear your soul."

He stood, gracefully sliding off the bench in a well-practiced move. Offering his hand to her, he said, "Come. It is time for that lunch I promised you."

Gayle slipped her hand into his, and allowed him to pull her off the bench and out of the music room. She felt somehow lighter than she had before, yet at the same time, her heart was weighted by what she'd learned of him. It explained how come such a dishy guy wasn't already taken. Another woman had won his heart, a woman he'd loved so fiercely that it had taken him four years after her death before he was able to reenter the dating scene. No wonder he was only interested in scene play, at first, rather than a relationship.

That was okay. They'd go slow. It would be better for both of them that way.



## **Chapter Three**

The eat-in kitchen boasted a glass-walled breakfast nook that overlooked the back deck with a panoramic view of the well established orchards. The round table and chairs were of white-painted wrought iron, the table topped by a thick piece of beveled glass and the chairs cushioned with pale blue and white striped pillows.

Blue- and white-striped placemats were already set kitty-corner on the table, the matching linen napkins folded in graceful fans beside them. Condensation frosted the chilled white china plates resting on top of pale blue chargers. Swirls of blue glass patterned the water goblets, already filled with ice water and a thin slice of lemon. Condensation frosted their sides as well.

Gayle shook her head. This was not what she was expecting.

"I was just filling the water glasses when you arrived," Rikard told her. He released her hand and walked over to the stainless-steel refrigerator, opening it and withdrawing a pale blue salad bowl. From what she could see over his shoulder, the refrigerator was well stocked, but neatly, rather than filled with things stuffed haphazardly where there was room.

"It's more Martha than Marquis de Sade."

Rikard laughed, the sound wrapping her in warmth that made her stomach flutter. "But I told you, the goal for today was to get to know each other better, and establish trust. There's plenty of time to torture you with food later."

She stood awkwardly next to one of the chairs. "Do you want me to serve you?"

"No. I'm not one of those dominants who equates submission with household service."

He held out a chair for her, giving her the better view of the apple trees to the south, and leaving the eastern view of the deck and kitchen for himself. Once she was seated,

he grabbed salad tongs and served the mix of field greens, sliced strawberries, and a balsamic vinaigrette dressing onto her plate.

After helping himself, he returned the bowl to the refrigerator. Then he set a covered platter, no doubt the second course, on the counter to warm up to room temperature. Finally, he returned to the table and claimed his seat.

He snapped his napkin open with a sharp crack, making Gayle jump. A hint of a smile played about his lips, although his mask made it difficult to read his expression.

She spread her own napkin, waiting until he picked up his salad fork before reaching for her own. "What kind of a dominant are you, then?"

"I enjoy caring for my submissives, surrounding them with elegance and comfort, so that they may give themselves completely to the moment, with no petty worries to distract them. Skin that has grown accustomed to fine silks and velvet, redolent perfumes and exotic oils, will feel the contrast of a loving lash far more than one dulled and deadened by overwork and uncomfortable clothing."

Gayle stopped with the first forkful of salad halfway to her mouth. She could almost feel his gloved hands stroking and caressing her body, smoothing massage oil into her skin, and trailing wisps of silk across her sensitive breasts and between her legs.

She jumped, certain she'd felt a light swat against her ass. But that was impossible. She was sitting in a padded chair. Unless he'd hidden some sort of spanking device under the cushion?

Rikard's low chuckle swirled around her. "You're very responsive. Are you that responsive in bed, too? Are you a moaner or a shouter?"

Gayle licked her lips, her gaze locking on his blue eyes glimmering in the depths of the black leather mask. "I like to beg."

He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply, as if she was a fine wine and he was sampling her bouquet.

"Eat your salad."

Obediently, she slipped the forgotten forkful of greens into her mouth. Her eyes widened in surprise. It was unexpectedly good, with a hint of...was that ginger? And something sweet besides just the strawberries – brown sugar or maybe honey.

"This is great!" She forked up another mouthful.

Rikard had already regained his composure after her confession, and turned his attention to his own plate. "Thank you. It pleases me to know you enjoy it."

They ate in silence for a brief interval, giving the delicious salad the attention it deserved. Then he asked, "What things give you pleasure?"

"You mean, in bed?"

"In bed or out. What warms your soul?"

She considered. "Well, I like performing, singing onstage."

"What exactly about performing do you enjoy? The adulation of a crowd? Making a public act out of your private emotions? Touching their hearts and minds?"

She blinked. "I never really thought about it. Are those some of the reasons the performers you know like performing?"

"Don't dodge the question."

"Yes, Master Rikard." She bent her head, staring at the half-eaten salad while she puzzled out what she enjoyed about singing onstage. "I think it's the challenge. I like working hard to get it right, and the audience reaction is like a grade, telling me how close I came to doing it."

"Ah. So as your Master, I should set challenging tasks for you, and provide feedback so you know whether or not you succeeded."

The flesh between her legs began to pulse, hot and wet with arousal. Her breasts tingled, the nipples tightening, and her breath came in short, quick gasps. She loved to learn new things. The constant training was the best part of her job. But it had never occurred to her that a skilled Master would want to train her.

"Oh, yes," she whispered. "Please, Master."

"Very well, then. Here is your first task. Finish your salad."

A muffled sigh escaped her lips as Gayle picked up her fork.

"You don't think it's a challenge? Perhaps if I tell you, you aren't allowed to make any noise while you eat?"

She looked up at him, her mouth opening to ask what he meant before she realized that would be disobeying his instruction. Instead, she shook her head.

"I'll just have to make it more challenging, then. You eat, and I'll tell you all the things I plan on teaching you."

He began with the simple things, that he would teach her how to speak to him with proper deference yet still giving him all the information he needed to care for her, and how to sit beside him so that he could touch her at his leisure. He would teach her how to remove her clothes so that each item stroking across her flesh enflamed her desire. He would teach her how to position herself so that she was completely open to him, her hot, wet pussy his for the taking, and how she would beg him to take it.

Gayle felt the moisture growing between her legs, instinctively spreading her legs as wide as her tight leather skirt would allow. She wriggled against the cushion, struggling for relief. At least, if she'd been wearing underwear, the friction of the cotton or lace against her swollen clit and wet lips would have offered some pleasure. But she was bare beneath her skirt, with nothing to rub against.

A soft whimper broke from her lips.

Rikard's hand slapped the glass tabletop, making the plates bounce. "No!"

She jumped, her wide-eyed gaze locking on his face. Was he angry? No, he was smiling.

"You made a noise," he said. "Perhaps this is a challenging task after all?"

She nodded vigorously.

“Finish your salad. We will begin again. And since the task is more challenging than you expected, I think you deserve a reward if you complete it. What reward shall I give you?”

His blue eyes glittered with desire, and the ambrosia of power, as he pondered his answer out loud.

“You seem to be having trouble sitting. Perhaps I should investigate, and do a thorough probing between your legs to determine what is causing the problem.”

Gayle bit her lip to keep from moaning. Hot liquid ran down the inside crease of her thigh, to pool beneath her ass on the supple leather of her skirt. She wriggled her hips, imagining his gloved fingers pressing between her folds, slipping inside her, stretching her opening as he slowly added fingers, until his entire hand forced its way over the ridge of muscle into her vagina.

Her vision was blurring, her breath coming sharp and fast. Her nipples were so tight they hurt. And all she could do was shovel strawberries and lettuce into her mouth as fast as possible, to end this torture.

“You’re not savoring your food,” Rikard warned her. “If I think you’re not appreciating it, I’ll have to give you a second helping.”

Gayle wanted to scream in frustration, but she didn’t make a sound. She slowed the pace of her eating, her trembling hand making it difficult to carry the salad to her mouth, and slowing her even further.

She’d never felt so turned on in her life.

“Very good.”

She glowed, warmed by his praise. All she wanted was to please him, to make him happy. Then he would reward her. But pleasing him was its own reward. He’d gone to so much trouble to put together a nice lunch for her. The least she could do was enjoy it properly.

Her tongue swept out, licking the dressing from her lips. Looking deep into his eyes, she opened her mouth and sucked the dressing from the tines of her fork.

His eyes darkened, and she could hear his labored breathing in the silence of the kitchen.

"You seem to enjoy that salad dressing," he said, a rough huskiness marring the smooth fluidity of his voice. "Perhaps I should anoint you with it, drizzle it on your breasts, let it drip onto your thighs. Then I could lick it off you."

Gayle fisted her free hand, her nails digging into her palm. The sharp pain distracted her from phantom sensations of liquid running across her skin, followed by a warm, wet tongue.

Triumphantly, she popped the last slice of strawberry into her mouth, and laid her fork down with a clatter.

"Excellent," Rikard purred. "You have done very well. And that was a challenge, indeed. Come here."

He held out his hand. Gayle rose, unsteady on quivering legs, and tottered over to his side. He drew her onto his lap, her leather skirt squeaking softly as it slid across his leather pants. His gloved hand cupped her hip, anchoring her yet burning her with the heat of his banked passion.

His velvety voice was low and strained as he asked, "I know I said I would not touch you sexually until we'd established trust, but am I right in thinking that's what you want me to do now?"

She nodded.

"You may speak now. Your challenge is completed."

"Yes, Master. Please. Touch me."

"Where?"

"Put your fingers inside me. Make me come in your hand."

He smiled tightly, recognizing his own words. Then he reached beneath her skirt, his gloved fingers trailing lightly up the inside of her thigh. They were soft, and warm, and everything she'd dreamed of.

Gayle's head tipped back and she moaned, arching against his supporting arm behind her back, lifting her hips and spreading her legs. His fingers brushed her clit, and she gasped, jolted by a sharp rush of pleasure. He worked his way between her folds by touch, guided by her breathy moans. Then his fingers slid over the edge of her opening, and she cried out, "Master!"

He pressed two fingers inside her, thrusting up to the second knuckle.

"Yes! Yes! More!"

A third finger joined the other two on the next thrust, stretching her to the edge of pain. His thumb worked her clit, sliding over and around it, his glove wet with her fluids, as his fingers stroked in and out. He found her nerves and pressed them against the bone, wrenching a scream of ecstasy from her.

"Beg me," he rasped, his breath hot against her neck. "Beg."

"Please, Master. Please. That feels so good. Touch me. Deep. Deeper. Ahhh." A rush of pleasure blanked all thought for a moment.

"Beg!" he growled.

In a flash of insight, she knew what he needed her to say. He wanted to fist her, the way she'd imagined earlier, but he wouldn't risk hurting her unless she gave her permission. "I want you. All of you. I need your whole hand inside me. Please, Master. I'm yours. Take me. Take me now. Please. Make me scream for you. Only for you."

His shuddering breath told her she'd guessed correctly. Gently, he stretched her opening even wider, until the muscle burned. All four of his fingers slipped inside her, to the first joint. The second. And still he stretched her, wider and wider, until his knuckles thrust past her opening.

She gasped, the brief pain swirling streamers of red and black through her vision.

Then his hand was inside her, filling her as she'd never been filled. His fingers stroked the walls of her vagina, rubbing and circling, as slowly, slowly, he reached deeper and deeper. Her muscles clenched his fist, seizing and releasing him again and again. Each time, he moved just a little bit further inside her.

She was going to go insane from the pleasure. He was killing her. She never wanted it to end.

"Please, Master. Please. Please."

She didn't know what she was begging for, to have him put her out of her agony now or to keep her writhing in his lap for hours.

Then the tip of his middle finger brushed her cervix, and she exploded. She screamed, a wordless howl of ecstasy, as she bent back over his arm, lifting her hips in a final thrust against his fist. The force of her shudders pushed his hand out of her in a wet rush, as if she was in the final stages of giving birth, and she screamed again as his hand stretched her opening on the way out.

He held her, cradled against his soft poet shirt, as she sobbed into the warm cotton. And continued sobbing, helpless to stop the tears. She felt the tension that rippled through him as he realized this was more than a simple release.

He brushed the hair away from her face, tipping her head back to look at him.

"Gayle, look at me. Did I hurt you?"

The fear in his voice only made her cry harder.

"Gayle."

She shook her head no. Then yes. "Just a little. It was worth it."

"Then why are you crying?"

"Because I'm twenty-six years old, and I never knew an orgasm could feel like that. If it hadn't been for you, I never would have known. I'd have grown old and died, thinking I knew what good sex felt like. And I would have been wrong!"

Rikard chuckled in relief. "Oh, is that all?"



A giggle slipped out between sobs, then another, and soon she was laughing instead of crying. She slapped weakly at his chest, until he caught her hand and stopped her. Slowly, her laughter faded.

She wiped roughly at her eyes.

"God, I probably look a fright."

"I think you're beautiful."

She stared up into his incredibly blue eyes, shining through the black leather of his mask. The moment stretched out like a note held impossibly long at the end of an aria.

Then her cell phone rang.

"Oh! Where's my purse?"

Rikard pulled it from the back of the chair she'd been sitting in and handed it to her. She fumbled for the cell phone, flipping it open and pressing the button to answer the incoming call.

"Sorry it took so long. I couldn't find my phone."

"I was starting to get worried," her friend Carrie answered.

"No, everything's fine here." Gayle covered the phone with her hand and whispered to Rikard, "My safety call."

"Take the call. I have to prepare the next course, anyway," he murmured.

Deftly, he slid out from beneath her. He cleared the table of the salad plates and forks, and carried them to the sink. She heard the clink of plates and a rush of water, followed by the throaty whoosh of a gas range, and the soft opening and closing of kitchen cabinets.

"Gayle?" Carrie asked. "You sound kind of funny. Are you sure you're all right?"

"I have just had the most amazing orgasm of my life," Gayle whispered.

There was a moment of silence. "I thought you were having lunch."

"We are. The orgasm came after the strawberry salad. It was to die for." She turned and looked over her shoulder into the kitchen. Rikard was spraying oil onto a griddle

pan. He'd taken the cover off the platter he'd placed on the counter earlier, revealing two red slabs of meat, liberally coated with seasonings. "I think we're having steak for the entrée."

"You had sex right there among the salad plates?"

"No, it wasn't like that."

"You did it on the floor? Up against the wall?"

"On a kitchen chair, actually."

"Gayle, honey, are you listening to yourself? You aren't a 'sex on the first date' kind of girl."

"Technically, this is our second date."

"And you slept with him less than an hour into it! The man is messing with your head somehow. Maybe calling him a Svengali wasn't so far off the mark."

Vigorous sizzles came from the kitchen, along with a heavenly aroma blending Asian spices and seafood. Gayle moaned, her mouth watering, and closed her eyes to better focus on the delicious smell.

"Good grief! Is he touching you now?" Carrie demanded.

"No. He just put the steaks on the grill. I think they're tuna steaks. They smell so good."

Rikard called, "Two minutes."

"I've got to go. The food's almost done."

"I'll call you back in an hour."

"There's no need. I'll be fine with him."

"Uh-huh. Then you won't mind me calling back in an hour."

"Okay, but if I don't answer right away, it's not because something's wrong. It's because we're having incredibly hot sex and I don't want to stop to answer the damned phone."

"Hey, *you* asked *me* to do this for you. Don't get all snotty with me just because I'm doing what you asked me to."

"Oh, Carrie, I'm sorry. I know, you're just trying to help. But that's what I'm telling you. I don't need your help on this anymore."

"Humor me. Okay?"

"You're wasting your time. But if it'll make you feel better, fine. Call back in an hour. I have to go now. Lunch is almost ready."

"All right. But tonight, after you get home, you're giving me the whole story about what went on during this date."

"Deal."

Gayle closed the phone and stuffed it back into her purse. She hadn't realized Carrie was such a worrywart.

Although usually Carrie was incredibly laidback, unless it involved a shoe sale. Maybe there was something to her concern. Now that Gayle thought about it, she *was* acting out of character. She normally took forever to make important decisions, preferring to thoroughly research all the aspects of whatever she was deciding. She should have spent hours debating the pros and cons of having sex with Rikard, instead of just opening her legs and melting beneath his touch.

And letting him fist her! Never mind that it had been the most mind-blowing experience ever. The point is, she hadn't even kissed him yet. She'd jumped right in to the kinky sex, with no thought other than satisfying the raging need churning within her. That definitely wasn't like her.

The sizzling stopped, and she heard the rapid strike of a knife against a cutting board. Then Rikard carried two plates to the table.

"Take your seat," he prompted.

She blushed, realizing she was still in his chair. Hanging her purse over her chair back, she switched seats.

He set her plate down on her charger, then put down his own plate and sat. She'd guessed correctly. A slab of tuna steak, coated in red, brown, black and white spices, rested on a colorful bed of sliced cucumbers and radishes. The tuna was sliced in ten narrow pieces, each one shading from gray through pink to a hint of red, then back to gray. A golden brown sauce was drizzled decoratively back and forth across the entire plate.

Gayle closed her eyes and inhaled the sharp aroma. Her eyes watered, and she blinked rapidly.

"Does this have a lot of pepper in it?"

"Wasabi."

"Pardon me?"

"Wasabi paste. It's Japanese. And very strong. Really opens up the sinuses." He smiled. "If hot foods aren't to your taste, just avoid the sauce. But you ordered chai at the café, so I figured you'd like it."

A warm glow suffused her. He'd paid attention to what she'd ordered at the café, and used that to decide what kind of lunch she'd like. He really meant it when he'd said he wanted to care and cosset any woman who became his submissive.

Carefully, she separated one of the slices of tuna. Feeling his eyes upon her, she lifted the fork up and slid the fish into her mouth.

Flavors burst to life on her tongue. The sauce held a hint of acidity—soy sauce or vinegar—and heat, which must be the wasabi. But the tuna itself was seasoned with warm spices like cinnamon and ginger, and the unexpected taste of licorice, as well as the more prosaic salt, pepper, onion and garlic.

Gayle groaned. "Oh God, that's good."

"Try the vegetables."

The radishes and cucumbers were crisp and crunchy, perfect counterpoints to the sharp sauce. "Fabulous."

Rikard relaxed and picked up his own fork. "I hope you'll have room for dessert."

She gulped and swallowed her mouthful of tuna and cucumber. "There's more?"

When she'd fantasized about him serving a three-course meal on her body, it had been just a fantasy. She hadn't seriously expected such a lavish lunch.

"Of course. But if you'd prefer, I can show you the rest of the house first, then we can come back for dessert later."

"After I've worked up more of an appetite?" she teased.

He laughed. "I'll show you the playroom. Then you can decide if you'd like to work up an appetite or not."

His molten gaze scorched the skin of her neck and chest, her nipples tingling and tightening as his attention slipped lower. Her pulse beat, slow and heavy between her thighs.

"I want to play," she whispered.

## Chapter Four

Rikard smiled at Gayle's admission. "We can play after lunch. But we're supposed to be learning about each other. Tell me about some of the productions you've been in."

He listened attentively, asking pointed and intelligent questions, as she described her theatrical background. She'd had lead roles in a slate of standard musicals—*Annie Get Your Gun*, *Oklahoma!*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *My Fair Lady*, and *Camelot*—as well as innovative and experimental works like *Merrily We Roll Along*, which started at the end and went backwards to the beginning, and *archy and mehitabel*, the story of Don Marquis' literary cockroach and the cat who befriended him.

Rikard didn't seem to care all that much about the staging or dance details, although he did listen politely. But when she described the songs, he came alive.

All too soon, the delicious lunch was consumed. She set her fork down, and drank the last of her water.

"But I've been going on and on about me. What about you? What are some of the things you've worked on?"

Gently, he sang, "Everything's sweeter in the dark of night. Dark desire. Dark chocolate."

"Earworm!" she shouted. "I'm going to have that stuck in my head for days, now."

"I told you the jingles paid the rent."

"Do you have any idea how many bars of Desire chocolate I scarfed down because of that damn jingle? I'd be in the store, see the candy, the tune would start running through my head, and next thing I knew, I had half a pound of chocolate in my cart."

His warm gaze stroked her body with admiration. "It couldn't have been too many bars."

"That's why I have to go jogging every morning."

"Every morning?" Horizontal creases formed across his forehead, even though his raised eyebrows were hidden behind the mask.

"Yeah. The office only opens at nine o'clock. The last place I worked started earlier, and I had a longer commute, so I'm used to getting up at six. I have a nice jog and leisurely breakfast, then shower and dress for work."

"I never worked a regular schedule," he admitted. "Sometimes I'd spend all day slaving over a single phrase, twisting and turning it every way possible until it sounded like how I wanted it to sound. And sometimes everything would flow so perfectly, I was done in two hours. That was for home days. During tours, the schedule was more regimented, although still not what anyone would call regular."

"Tours? I didn't know composers went on tour."

"I did." He stood, and cleared the table. "Speaking of tours, are you ready for your tour of the house, now?"

A shiver rippled over her skin. "Yes."

Taking her hand in his gloved one, Rikard led her out of the kitchen.

"Hey, your glove's all wet."

"Damp, not wet. I washed my hands earlier, before cooking the tuna steaks."

"With your gloves on? Can you do that?" She hadn't been paying attention, since she was on the phone at the time, but she'd just assumed he'd taken the gloves off while cooking, then put them back on when it was time to serve the meal.

"They're deerskin. It's washable." They returned to the open entryway, and he led her through the arch opposite the music room. "This is the home theater."

A huge flat-screen television that was at least four feet across was mounted on the wall. A modular reclining sofa with built-in cup holders and snack tables faced the television. Trim black speakers were mounted in the corners of the room and bolted to

the floor. The only other furniture was a wrought iron cabinet, filled two-thirds of the way full with DVDs.

"Do you watch a lot of movies?"

"Not so much now. For a while that was pretty much all I did."

She nodded. That would be after his car accident, while he was recovering from the injuries that had nearly blinded him. He probably had broken bones, too, and wasn't supposed to move much.

He turned and led her out of the room, back to the foyer. She followed him up the stairs to the spacious landing. Four doors radiated off it, two before them and two to the sides.

"My bedroom and the master bathroom," he indicated, pointing to the left-hand door before them. Then he pointed to the right. "The guest bedroom. It shares a bathroom with my recording studio."

Gayle tensed with anticipation, knowing where the remaining door must lead. Rikard turned her to face the door, and gave her a gentle push forward.

"The playroom. Open the door."

Unlike the other doors, this one had a heavy silver lock, with an antique key in it. She tested the doorknob, and when the door didn't move, turned the key. The lock snapped open with a loud click of its tumblers, and the door swung outward.

"I warn you, it was decorated in a fit of self-indulgence," Rikard cautioned.

She stepped inside, her eyes going wide. Any windows the room had once possessed had been blocked up. The walls were covered, floor to ceiling, with *trompe l'oeil* paintings that gave the appearance of being in a rocky cave, softened by sweeps of burgundy velvet. She glanced upward. The ceiling was painted, too. Flickering torches were mounted on the walls, and branches of lit candelabra were scattered around the room. Despite knowing that she was on the second floor of a modern house, her mind



insisted she was standing in a cave belowground. Even the air seemed different, cool and damp.

"Isn't all this open flame a fire safety violation?" she asked, the mundane question the only thing she could think of to say in response to the bizarre setting.

"They're not real candles or torches. The candles are a flickering bulb designed to simulate candlelight. And the torches are just orange satin, blown by a fan."

She glanced over her shoulder and saw his gloved hand resting beside the doorway, where a light switch would normally be. Where a light switch no doubt actually was, camouflaged by paint, to control the candles and torches.

She nodded, allowing her eyes to focus on the contents of the room. Black padded benches in different heights, with triangular leather pillow wedges, occupied much of the floor space. A wrought iron wine table had been repurposed to hold a collection of floggers instead of stemware and paddles instead of wine bottles, with two black woven baskets hiding their contents from view inside the base cupboard of the unit. And a number of heavy eyebolts had been screwed into the wall and ceiling. Some had chains dangling from them, while others were bare.

"I feel like I've stepped back in time," she whispered.

"To a time when a man was truly the lord of his castle, and had the power to enforce his desires?"

She nodded, her legs beginning to tremble. "You said you were interested in scene play. What scenes play out in here?"

He stepped up behind her, hands wrapping loosely around her waist to pull her against him. His masked cheek rested against her hair.

"What scenes would you like to play?"

"I don't know. I told you, I'd only ever done a little bondage before. And that was straightforward, let's-tie-you-to-the-bedposts sex."

"Then perhaps you are a lovely Victorian maid, innocently sailing to Spain, when your ship is attacked by pirates. The pirate captain is captivated by your beauty." Rikard reached up and stroked her cheek with the back of one gloved finger. "And so, rather than killing you, he takes you back to his hideout. He will spare your life, if you can convince him that it is worth his while to keep you as a slave. A slave to service all of his sexual needs."

She shivered, leaning against Rikard's warmth. In his black mask, laced leather pants and poet shirt, he looked like a pirate. Her imagination ran wild, inspired by his words, until she smelled the cordite, and squinted against the fog of gunsmoke that blurred her vision. Distantly, she heard the cries of men fighting and dying.

"And if I am unable to convince you, Captain?"

"Then I will give you to my men. They deserve a treat." He trailed his finger between her breasts, down to her pussy. "I'm afraid you wouldn't survive the experience."

Fear flushed her body, even though she knew Rikard was not a pirate, that there was no crew waiting to ravish her to death if she failed to satisfy him. Her heart pounded, and her palms sweated, as if the scene he'd described was real.

He stroked her cheek again, turning her face so that he could read her expression.

"So, my sweet pirate prize. Do you want to play?"

"Yes, Master Rikard. I want to play."

"Pirate booty does not wear clothing. Take it off."

He released her, stepping back so that he was out of her way. Quickly, Gayle pulled off the clinging top, then unzipped the leather skirt and stepped out of it. She dropped her clothing to the floor, and stood naked before Rikard.

His blue eyes gleamed within his mask as he approached her. Softly, slowly, he reached out and glided his gloved fingers over her shoulders, down her arms, around

her breasts, across her nipples, down her stomach, over her hips, and around her ass. Closing her eyes, she tilted her head back and sighed with pleasure.

Something warm and wet touched her shoulder, and her eyes flew open. Rikard was kissing her, with a gentle openmouthed kiss that was barely firmer than a breath. He licked her shoulder, then traced the line of her muscles and vein with his tongue, placing another soft kiss in the hollow of her neck.

"From now until the end of the scene, you will address me as Captain. If you need to stop the scene for any reason, refer to me as Master Rikard."

"Yes, Captain."

"The first thing I must do is make sure you can't jump ship and try to swim to safety." He opened the wine cabinet and dug in one of the baskets. Triumphantly, he turned to her holding a pair of black leather wrist restraints and a rough length of hemp rope.

"Turn around, and put your hands behind your back."

Quivering, Gayle did as he instructed. She was giving him her trust and belief in addition to her obedience. With her hands bound behind her, she'd be unable to fight him off if he decided to try something she didn't want him to do. But she had no doubt that she could stop him with a word.

Getting into the game, she pleaded, "Please, Captain. Don't tie me up. I promise I'll do everything you ask. *Everything*."

He chuckled. "Saucy wench."

The length of rope flicked out, rasping lightly across her ass cheeks. She gasped, more surprised than pained.

"You'll do everything I demand anyhow, or I'll see you walk the plank."

A delightful tendril of fear skittered up her spine, her skin turning icy. Her nipples tightened into hard buds, from the cold, her growing excitement, or both.

Rikard's gentle hands placed the restraints around her wrists, testing the fit and ensuring that her shoulders were not pulled too severely. Then he wrapped the length of rope around the restraints, not tying it, but letting the rough hemp brush against her wrists and forearms. Her mind transformed the padded restraints into heavy loops of rough rope.

He circled around her, admiring her naked body. Gayle held up her head and stood rigidly beneath his examination.

"Yes, you're a proper lady. I can tell. But you're my prisoner now. I'll break you of that soon enough, and have you begging and moaning like the commonest of gutter trash."

She tipped up her chin in defiance. "Never! I am a lady, Captain. And nothing you do to me will make me less of one."

He sucked in a deep breath, a slow grin lighting his face. "I do love a challenge. But I can't have you disagreeing with me. This is my ship, and what I say goes. If one of my crew dared to contradict me as you've done, it would be twenty lashes of the cat, until he learned to keep a civil tongue."

Rikard stalked closer, his gloved hand shooting out and gripping her chin in a firm hold. She couldn't pull away or twist out of his grasp, but his fingers merely rested against her skin rather than digging into her flesh.

"But I'll forgive you this time, if you beg. Get down on your knees and beg me not to whip you."

Gayle stiffened her back, completely lost in character. "A lady does not beg, Captain."

He laughed, deep and low in his throat. "Right. It's the cat for you, then."

Grabbing her by her upper arm, he dragged her over to a waist-high bench, and bent her across it. He loosed the rope and unlinked the wrist restraints, then pulled her arms out to the side, clipping the restraints to rings at the top and bottom of the bench.

Gayle tried to lift her upper body, and found herself unable to move. She had never felt so completely helpless.

Hot fluid gathered between her legs. When Rikard slipped his booted foot between hers and kicked her ankles apart with a gentle nudge, flattening her completely against the bench, a trickle of fluid coursed down the inside of her thigh.

He moved away, returning a moment later swishing something back and forth through the air with ominous snaps. Narrow strips of leather trailed across her shoulder blades.

"This is the cat. Twenty strips of leather, each with an edge sharp enough to rip open that delicate skin. And you're getting twenty lashes with it. You'll be nothing but a bloody wreck from your graceful neck to your sweet, tight ass. Sure you don't want to beg?"

Gayle trembled. Rikard wouldn't really slice her back open. She remembered his desperate panic in the kitchen when he feared he'd hurt her. But stretched across the bench, the lashes of the cat sweeping back and forth across her quivering skin in teasing caresses, she had trouble believing she was not at the mercy of a bloodthirsty pirate.

"Never," she whispered.

"One." The whip rose and fell, the tips of the lashes flicking across her shoulder blade before the body of the cat smacked her upper back.

Gayle cried out in shock and surprise. She hadn't expected he'd hit her with no warning. But it hadn't hurt.

"Two." The lash tips flicked across her other shoulder blade, followed by the heavy smack of the body.

"Eighteen more to go. Are you certain you don't want to beg?"

"Do your worst!"

Rikard laughed again, the low sound chillingly unlike his normal melodic laughter. The cat smacked her shoulders over and over, as Rikard counted his strokes.

"That makes ten." He trailed the whip's lashes down her sensitive spine. "Halfway there."

"You'll never break me, Captain."

"Your skin is a lovely shade of pink, blushing like a virgin bride's. Where else could my whip touch you? Where else are you a virgin?"

The lashes stroked down, feathering across her ass, and tickling her crack.

"Are you a virgin here?" he whispered, one leather-clad finger following the path of the whip to press lightly at her hole.

Gayle moaned, her ass clenching tightly in reaction to his invading finger. What would it feel like to have him press his finger not just against the entrance, but actually inside? Two fingers? His cock, slicking in and out of her ass?

"Captain, please."

"Please stop? Or please continue?"

"You're right. I am a virgin, there."

"And...?"

"You're a pirate. I'm a lady."

"No, I'm a pirate and you're my prisoner. If I wanted to slide inside that tight hole, pumping in and out until you screamed, I could do it, and no one would stop me. I'm the captain of this ship. My word is law."

His fingertip tapped lightly on her sensitive nerves. Gayle gasped, her muscles tightening and contracting. More fluid trickled down her leg.

"But you didn't finish whipping me. Or do you want to leave my challenge to your authority unmet?"

"I answer every challenge."

The cat tickled and struck the firm globes of her ass, once on each side. She didn't think he'd hit her harder than he had before, but what had felt like a weird kind of massage on her shoulders felt mildly painful on her ass.

"Thirteen." The whip hit her first ass cheek exactly where it had struck before, wringing a soft whimper from her. It didn't hurt, so much as burn.

"Fourteen." He slapped the cat against her other ass cheek, again in the exact same spot as his first strike.

Gayle moaned low in her throat.

"Fifteen." Another smack, falling on her already tender skin, then again on the opposite side.

"Sixteen. Are you ready to beg yet?"

"Never," she panted.

Rikard slapped her with his gloved hand. She clenched her ass muscles, determined to resist him, even as her breath grew short, and her body trembled, eager for him to claim her.

"I said I was giving you twenty strokes with the cat." His leather-clad palm smacked her ass with short, sharp strokes, rocking her against the bench. "If I hit you with something else, it doesn't count."

"Vile pirate! I might have known you wouldn't keep your word."

His right hand continued to fall rhythmically on her ass cheeks, his left pressing lightly at the top of her ass, covering the base of her spine, while his thumb gently spread her cheeks. Her ass burned, each stroke a brief sting, followed by a glorious heat that spread down her thighs, and pooled deep in her sex like a hot spring just waiting to burst forth into a steaming geyser.

"Master..." she moaned.

Rikard's next slap never fell. "Master...?"

Belatedly, she remembered she was to call him Captain, and to call him Master Rikard would end the scene. She had not used his full name, so he wasn't sure if she wanted him to stop or not.

“Captain. I mean Captain. You can spank me and whip me until the deck of your ship runs with blood, I will never beg!”

“Oh, you will beg, my pretty slave.”

His fingertips smoothed across her stinging ass, cool upon her heated flesh. She shivered beneath his soft caress, desire flaring hot and wet, even as fear rippled through her, tensing her muscles.

“You will beg for me to let you come, for me to end your torture. You will beg for me to hit you, again and again, until you explode from the ecstasy. And if you beg sweetly enough, I just might give you what you need.”

He slapped her ass, hard enough to hurt instead of just sting. Gayle’s knees buckled, and all of her weight rested on her chest and stomach, stretched across the bench. Warmth trickled down her inner thigh. She moaned, crushed beneath a landslide of fear and desire.

“No. Never,” she whispered.

“Have I not warned you not to contradict me? That merits another twenty lashes with the cat.”

Gayle whimpered. He teased her with the body of lashes, stroking them over her hot and swollen ass. Was he going to whip her there?

He lifted the hand holding her down. Oh, God, he was.

The cat smacked her ass, wrenching a cry from her. She couldn’t endure twenty of those. She couldn’t.

“Seventeen. Eighteen.” The cat smacked the other side of her ass, pulling another cry from her lips. “We never finished the first set.”

She moaned. She was going to die. Her entire body was on fire, rivers of flame coursing through her veins with every pulse, driven by the beating tempo of his strokes.



"Nineteen. Twenty." He paused, and this time, it was the cessation of blows that made her give a pained cry of helpless need.

Rikard inhaled deeply, his shuddering breath hinting that he was growing as excited as she.

"Yes," he whispered. "You begin to understand."

The cat's lashes landed on her shoulder blade, harder than the previous blows, and spreading further. The tips swept outward from her spine, then outward from her spine on the other side, as if Rikard was tracing giant figure eights. Sometimes harder, sometimes softer, sometimes faster and sometimes slower, he varied the whip's caress so that she never knew what to expect. Then she stopped trying, and just allowed herself to feel.

Sting. Smack. Pain. Heat. Pleasure, thick and heady, coiling deep within. She began to grunt, low and guttural, with each blow.

Rikard paused, his gentle fingers stroking soft caresses over her ass, reminding her that she was still delightfully sensitive there.

"Do not grunt like a pig," he admonished. "God gave you a voice. Use it. Sing for me."

"I don't understand." She nearly cried, devastated that she might not be able to please him.

"Relax your throat. Open your mouth. Hold in your mind the sound of a perfect high C."

The whip fell on her ass, and she released a high, shrill note of pain and pleasure.

"That was more like an E-flat. But much better."

She was being ravished by a pirate with perfect pitch.

Then his whip landed on her shoulder blades, and she cried out in joy, careful to lower her tone a minor third. Again and again, the whip stroked her with flaming lashes, and she sang out in need and hunger.

She waited, trembling in anticipation, but the whip did not fall.

"That was twenty," he said softly.

"No. Please. Don't stop. I'm so close. Please. Don't stop."

"Are you begging?"

"Yes. Please. Whip me again. Please. I'm begging you."

Rikard stroked her shoulders with trembling fingers, then smoothed her skin with his gloved palms. Gayle was certain that he molded her body anew out of sheets of living flame, holding her untouched in the center of the blaze.

"Please, Captain. Please. Let me come. Don't stop."

"I can refuse you nothing when you sing."

The whip fell again, and she sang. Slowly, relentlessly, she climbed the scale, a quarter-step at a time like some strange Indian modulation. Each blow drove her higher, deeper into the heat and flames, surrounded by music that pulsed and rippled like nothing she'd ever heard before. Finally, with a long, drawn-out A above high C, she climaxed, shuddering and shaking as the orgasm thundered through her body like a surging series of arpeggios.

And then the music claimed her, and she was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rikard smiled at the limp, sweat-soaked woman sprawled across the whipping bench. He felt sated with power, relaxed and replete. Her charming insistence that she would never beg had made him as hard as the leather-wrapped handle of his whip, eager to prove her wrong. And her voice as she came! Perfection.

His lips twisted, self-mockery spoiling the moment. His proficiency in playing the human body had grown over the past two years, after he realized the scar tissue in his left hand would never allow him to play the piano again. Like a blind man whose hearing grows acute to compensate, he'd been given another instrument to assuage his loss. Sometimes it helped.

Now, though, his ears were filled with Gayle's slow rise to that final, drawn-out note. His mind stacked chord progressions beneath, with a series of descending sevenths in staccato triplets as counterpoints.

He freed her arms from the restraints, then lifted her up to lay her on her side on the bench. Popping the recessed latch on the concealed closet, he retrieved a thick white robe in soft French terry. The logo of some hotel he no longer remembered was embroidered on the breast in gold thread.

Carefully, he wrapped her in the fluffy embrace of the robe. She gave no sign of awareness, letting him dress her as if she was a rag doll.

Another thrill of power surged through him, stiffening his cock. He'd well and thoroughly pleased her, his touch shooting her deep into whatever place subs went when their minds left their bodies. If all went well, when she woke, she'd be eager for sex. He didn't always want sex with his submissives. Often, the rush of dominating them was enough. But he wanted sex with Gayle.

He'd take her from behind, the reddened marks of his whipping visible on her pale, perfect skin as he thrust into her, again and again, driving him into a frenzy until she came in a crying symphony of delight.

But first, she needed to rest in warmth and safety. Swinging her up into his arms, he carried her from the room.

He was almost at the doorway to the home theater when an annoyingly chirped rendition of an old Motown classic stopped him in his tracks. What the hell was that?

"Shit!" Gayle's cell phone.

## **Chapter Five**

Rikard hurried into the kitchen. Placing Gayle's limp body in one of the chairs, he held her steady with one hand while he dumped her purse out on the table. There!

Grabbing the chirping phone, he flipped it open and took the call.

"Hello. Gayle can't come to the phone right now."

There was a moment of silence, followed by a woman's accusing voice demanding, "Where is she, and what have you done to her?"

"She's right here, but she's asleep. And as for what I did, I'll say she enjoyed it, and leave it at that."

"I don't believe you. Put Gayle on the phone."

Rikard took a deep breath, and flipped the switch in his mind that engaged the other new instrument he'd been gifted with after his accident. He'd studied self-hypnosis as a way to manage the agonizing pain of the third-degree burns, working with the visualizations his therapists suggested. It hadn't been very effective until he'd tried recording himself, and playing back his spoken suggestions. Then it was surprisingly successful. Even more surprisingly, he developed the ability to hypnotize others into sharing his visualizations—or any other belief he wanted them to hold.

"Gayle is asleep," he repeated, his voice vibrating with hidden emphasis. "She is safe, and you have no cause for fear. Call back in an hour, and she'll speak to you then."

"Well, if she's really asleep, I suppose you shouldn't wake her. I'll call back in an hour. But if I still can't talk to her then, I'm calling the cops!"

"You are a good friend to her. She will thank you for your concern when she wakes."

"She'd better."

The phone went dead in his hand.

He dropped it onto the table, ignoring the scattered debris from Gayle's purse, and lifted her into his arms again. That had been close. He'd sworn that she'd told her friend all was well and not to call again. Then again, he hadn't heard her entire conversation, just snippets between the sizzles of the tuna steaks. It's possible her friend had convinced her to continue the calls. Or else, her friend had called back despite Gayle's request to leave them alone.

Carrying her into the home theater, he sighed. He wasn't sure how long she'd sleep, but it would probably be long enough that any sex would have to wait until after her friend's damnable follow-up call.

He kicked out the recliner, then settled into it with Gayle cradled in his arms. She snuggled closer, her cheek resting just above his heart. One-handed, he flipped the top of the built-in table, exposing the storage area beneath housing his remote controls, as well as one of his ever-present notepads of staff paper. After all, inspiration could strike anywhere.

The DVD in the player spun up. *Amadeus*. Damn, he had been feeling melancholy the last time he'd watched a movie, hadn't he? Well, he wasn't about to get up and disturb Gayle's sleep again. And you couldn't argue with the beauty of Mozart's music. He'd just fast-forward through the bits with Salieri falling into a suicidal depression because he'd been given the desire to create music but not the ability.

He was smiling, nodding in time with the music, until he reached the scene where Mozart attended a party, and was asked to play a piece of music in the style of Bach. When that triumph was not enough, the party guests flipped him on his back and demanded he play that way, reaching behind his head to the keyboard. He did, gloriously, until his father's ominous displeasure ruined everything.

Rikard thumbed the DVD off, his throat tight and his eyes burning. He'd once tried that trick at a party. Had it been the tour in Munich? Although not on a par with Mozart's movie performance, he'd done a credible job.

He'd had a gift, and he'd wasted it, playing tricks at parties. What he wouldn't give to just once be able to play the piano again, to let his soul fly free on the waves of sound, and carry the audience with him to heights they'd never dreamed existed. Hell, he'd play in a deserted basement, as long as the piano was in tune. But that would never happen. The scarring on his left hand had damaged his extensor tendons. He could hit the notes just fine, but he couldn't lift his fingers away from the keys, not at anything approaching the right speed.

Softly, he began singing the Sondheim melody he'd played for Beth earlier. Not a day went by that he didn't think of the music he could no longer play. It had been his life, his heart and his soul. Sometimes, he thought it would be easier if he could just forget. But that way lay madness and death. If he ever lost the memories as well as the music, he knew it would kill him. A man may be able to live with a blade of ice imbedded in his heart, but he could not withstand the removal of his soul.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gayle woke slowly, aware of warmth and a soft thudding drumbeat. And music. Rikard was humming softly to himself, occasionally punctuated by "No, that's not right", or "Yes, that's it". A pencil scratched frantically across paper.

Awareness returned to her body. She was sitting curled on his lap, wearing something heavy yet soft, her cheek pressed to his chest. His left hand was cupped loosely around her hip. Her ass throbbed in time with her pulse, still sensitive from the thorough whipping and spanking he'd given her.

Experimentally, she rolled her shoulders. No stiffness there, although she could feel the muscles, like the burn of pressing a stretch when working out.

Rikard's humming stopped.

"I didn't mean to disturb you."

"No, that's all right. I was just waiting for you to wake up."

Gayle sat up, hissing as her weight rolled onto her ass. The brief flash of pain was followed by a delicious warmth, spreading out over her skin while at the same time spiraling deep to ignite the slumbering desire within her. She wriggled on his lap, stoking the flames.

He inhaled sharply, and tightened his grip on her hip, holding her still. She recognized the firm pressure against the back of her thigh as his suddenly hard cock.

"I don't have any condoms in this room. And if you keep that up, I'm not going to remember why I need to go get them."

She froze at the low threat in his voice, more than the words he used. When she remained still, his hold loosened and he released his breath in a soft gust.

"Thank you."

Careful to move only her head, she glanced around the room. They were no longer in the playroom. He'd carried her downstairs, to the reclining couch in the home theater.

Her glance dipped down to the fluffy white robe she was wearing. The breast was embroidered in gold thread with a fat bird. A bird wearing antennae. At least that's what it looked like upside down. She struggled to read the scrolling print beneath. *L'Perdrix*. That didn't help.

She flicked her gaze upwards to Rikard, meaning to ask him about the logo. His blue eyes watched her from within the dark depths of his black mask.

"You're still wearing your mask."

"Yes."

"Then you're still Master Rikard, and not just Rikard?" She couldn't explain the sadness this caused. After all, Master Rikard was the one who had given her the best orgasm of her life in the kitchen, then topped that with the full-body meltdown of ecstasy in the playroom.

Maybe that was it. Master Rikard was about the sex. Held close in his arms, cuddled and cared for, she wanted an emotional connection. If it had been Rikard holding her, she'd have thought that's what he wanted, too. But it wasn't Rikard. It was Master Rikard who held her on his lap while his cock pressed hard and solid against her thigh. Master Rikard who wasn't done with her yet.

Her breath quickened, her breasts tensing and tightening despite herself. He was watching her reaction carefully. When her breathing shifted, he slipped his gloved hand between the folds of her robe, the black leather dramatic against the fluffy white terry.

His warm hand cupped one of her breasts, his thumb rubbing gently across the nipple. Gayle arched into his touch with a sigh, her eyes closing to focus all her attention on the feel of his hand upon her. Her nipple tightened even further, to a hard point.

He tugged lightly with his thumb and forefinger, ripping a gasp from her lips. Her hips bounced without conscious volition, pulling an equally sharp gasp from him. His cock dug into the soft flesh of her thigh.

"Where are those condoms?" she asked.

"Upstairs, in the guest bedroom. But we can't go up just yet. Your friend will be calling soon, and she'll be distressed if you don't answer the phone."

Gayle blinked. "How did you know...?"

"She already called once, while you were asleep."

The blood drained from her face. "Oh my God! What did you say? What did she say?"

"It's fine. I told her you were sleeping, and she promised to call back in an hour."

"An hour? How long was I out?"

"Forty, forty-five minutes. Something like that."

"Wow."



He tugged on her nipple again, soothing and inflaming her at the same time. Gently, he untied the belt on her robe, and pushed the collar off her shoulders, exposing her body to his gaze. His hand stroked her thigh and hip beneath the robe, then glided up her rib cage to once again cup her breast, while his head bent, and he pressed a soft kiss to the pulse point in her neck.

She shivered and moaned. Reaching up, she thrust her fingers into his thick blond hair, clutching his head and pressing his mouth against her neck.

Rikard stiffened, just long enough for her to fear she'd done something wrong, before he relaxed and resumed kissing and licking her neck. His hand dropped away from her breast, making her whimper softly in disappointment. He chuckled softly, the sound rolling through her like a wave of pure delight.

"I'm not stopping," he whispered. "Just moving us to the kitchen, so we're not unduly interrupted by your friend's call."

He slipped his arm beneath her thighs. Then, with a fluid surge of graceful power, he rose with Gayle in his arms. He carried her through the house, into the kitchen, and sat down at the table. Her purse was upended, with the contents strewn across the glass tabletop. She had a brief spike of worry. Was there anything in her purse she'd have preferred him not to see? Although, since her cell phone was sitting on top of the pile, she doubted he'd looked at anything else.

Then he lowered his head, this time covering her breast with his mouth. His tongue swirled around the tight nipple, then he tugged lightly on it with his teeth. She groaned, already hot and wet for him.

His fingers stroked up her thigh, making soft circles that drove her insane with need. Then he slipped his hand higher, slicking his fingers between her folds.

She moaned, letting her legs fall open, encouraging him to touch her deeper.

"Are you going to fist me again?" she asked breathlessly.

"Would you like that?"

"Oh, yes. Please."

"Then I will. But you must take your friend's call when it comes. Even if my hand is all the way inside you, and you're writhing with pleasure, you must take the call. Can you do that?"

"Yes, Master Rikard." She'd promise anything to feel him inside her again.

He stroked the circle of her opening with his fingers, probing with first one, then two. "You're not ready, yet."

The leg supporting her jiggled, bouncing her up and down, awakening her sensitive ass. Gayle moaned, and felt the change in his touch as his gloved fingers became coated in her fluids. He found her clit with his thumb, and worked her, swirling around the thickening bud, then brushing back and forth across the tip, and finally pressing against it.

She gasped, and his fingers slid inside her.

"Now you're ready," he whispered.

Licking and kissing the tender tip of one breast, he built her to a frenzy of need, then scraped his teeth across her nipple. When the wave rippled through her, he slipped a third finger inside her. Shifting position slightly, he turned his attention to her other breast, and repeated the process. This time when the wave broke, he slid a fourth finger through her opening.

He moved on to kiss and lick her neck, sensitizing her pulse points with openmouthed kisses then blowing lightly across the damp skin to make her shiver with need. Each time, his fingers pressed ever so slightly further into her. His fingers were in her up to the second joint, his thumb stroking her opening preparatory to joining them. Then the phone rang.

She didn't recognize the cheerful chirping at first, focused on the feelings coursing through her body.

"Answer it," Rikard ordered.

Gayle fumbled for the phone and flipped it open. "Hello?"

"Gayle! Are you okay? Is everything all right?"

"Everything's fine." She gasped as Rikard's thumb joined his fingers, stretching her even further. He wasn't planning on stopping his assault while she was on the phone.

A rush of wet warmth filled her, at how completely he controlled her body and its response. His hand slipped further inside, almost up to the knuckles, and Gayle moaned with pleasure.

"What's going on? Are you sure you're okay?" Carrie demanded. She sounded ready to hop on a plane and check out the situation in person if Gayle didn't give her the answers she was looking for.

"What's going on is we're having sex, okay? Hot, sweaty, kinky sex. And your call came right in the middle of it. Stop calling me. I'll phone you when I get home, and we can talk then."

Carrie was silent for so long, Gayle was afraid they'd lost the connection, then Carrie said softly, "I'm sorry. I was worried about you. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"Oh, Carrie, I'm the one who's sorry. You're the best friend ever, and I know I asked you to call. But your timing stinks! I'm halfway out of my head with what Master Rikard is doing to me. I can't talk now."

Rikard bit lightly on her neck, making her whimper, and murmured, "Only halfway?"

"But you are okay, right?" Carrie pressed.

"Never better in my life."

"Okay. I'll wait for your call tonight. But if I don't hear from you by nine, I'm still calling the cops."

"Great. Wonderful. Call by nine. Got it. Bye."

She shut the phone and tossed it onto the table.

"Open for me," Rikard whispered. "Open as wide as you can go."

His hand spread her opening the last fraction of an inch, then he slid fully inside her, up to his wrist. Her muscles clenched and gripped his hand, as she shivered and moaned.

Unlike the first time, when he'd reached deep inside her, this time, he immediately started to pull his hand out. The wide part of his hand pressed her vaginal muscle, stretching her fully open again, before he pushed his fist deep inside her once more.

She gasped, bucking against his hand.

"Shh," he said softly. "Let me do all the moving."

"Yes, Master." Gayle spread her legs wide, tipped her hips, and leaned back against his other arm. She was his to control.

His fist pumped slowly in and out, eliciting soft groans of pleasure with each stroke. Then he began speaking, softly, gently, in time with his hand movements.

"You're so hot. So wet. It's like putting my hand into a steam bath. A paraffin dip. Warm and wet and closing tight around me. So tight. Tighter."

She clenched her inner muscles, wrapping them around his fist. He filled her completely, pressing back against her with his sheer size. His knuckles rubbed the wall of her vagina as he slid back and forth. She gasped, her hand once more thrusting into his hair and clenching tightly.

"Please, Master. Please."

"What do you want, Gayle? You were very good, and followed my orders about the phone. You deserve a reward."

"Please. Do me faster."

His fist stroked steadily in and out, building speed, while his hand on her hip kept her where he wanted her to be. Her gasps and groans became short, sharp cries at the apex of each stroke.

"Sing for me, Gayle. Sing."

Her next cry was a warbled note.

"That's it. Sing."

His fist pumped harder, faster, driving her cries of passion higher and higher up the scale. With a series of high notes worthy of Mozart's "Queen of the Night", Gayle gave a final shriek and came in a shuddering rush. Rikard's hand spurted clear of her body.

His mouth closed over hers, his lips tender and gentle as he pulled her lower lip into his mouth to suckle. Slowly, he soothed her down from the heights where he'd taken her. Her trembles subsided, leaving her filled with warm lethargy.

"I think you need to build your energy up after that performance," he said. "We should have dessert now."

"Dessert?" Gayle opened blurred eyes, then closed them again when it was too much effort to resolve the wavering images into a scene that made any sense. "I couldn't possibly eat dessert. I can barely keep my eyes open."

"I'll just have to feed you, then."

A ripple of anticipation coursed through the sluggish circulation of her body. He would care for her. Completely.

"First you dressed me. Now you're going to feed me. When do I do something for you?"

"I told you, I believe my role as dominant is to ensure you're surrounded by luxury, and have all your needs met."

"I thought your role as dominant was to blow my mind with incredible sex."

He laughed, the sound washing over her in benediction, filling her with joy. "That's one of your needs, isn't it? You can satisfy my desires later."

Gayle frowned. "Have you had...any...?"

"Satisfaction?"

She nodded.

He lifted his hand from her hip and stroked her cheek with the backs of his fingers. "Yes. There's more to satisfaction than simply coming. Helping you with your music

was satisfying. Watching you enjoy the meal I prepared for you was satisfying. Having my touch send you into orbit was extremely satisfying."

She closed her eyes and relaxed into his gentle caress.

"That being said, I would like you to make me come, hard and long."

"Yes, Master Rikard." She swallowed, inexplicably nervous. "What do you want me to do?"

"I want you to let me make love to you."

She blinked. "That's it?"

"That's it. Ready for your dessert now?"

He lifted her off his lap, and set her down in her previous chair. While she stuffed her belongings back into her purse, he washed his gloved hands, then dished the dessert out onto two plates.

Gayle's eyes widened at the confection he placed before her. A half pear glistened in a coating of thick golden syrup, topped by a scoop of French vanilla ice cream, the whole thing drizzled with swirling loops of caramel and garnished with chopped pistachio nuts. "It almost looks too good to eat."

"It's just poached pears."

"Just poached pears. Like you have them for dessert all the time?"

"Actually, I had one for dessert last night, and will have one for dessert tomorrow night. The recipe is for two pears, and it'll keep for two days."

"So what do you have the rest of the time? Crème Brûlée?" she mocked.

Rikard's eyes narrowed. "What is your problem, Gayle?"

She threw her spoon onto the table, and buried her face in her hands. "I don't know!"

Instantly, he pulled her into his lap, tucking her head against his shoulder and rubbing soothing strokes up and down her arm. "Shush, now. Forget the dessert. What's bothering you?"

She sniffed. "I don't understand this. I thought it was an even trade. But you're doing everything for me. And then you don't even want me to do anything to get you off, just have sex!"

"So you'd be happier if I wanted you to kneel and suck my cock until I came?"

Despite the confused tone of his voice, she nodded. She could taste his smooth length filling her mouth, hot and hard, thrusting deep into her throat almost farther than it was possible to take him. She swallowed, her throat suddenly thick.

"At least that would make sense."

He sighed, and trailed damp fingertips along her jawline. "I wasn't going to mention this until you were ready to go to bed with me, but I do have a request. I want to take you from behind, so I can see the marks of my whip and my hand on your skin as I'm plunging into you. I want to claim you completely, and know every inch of your body belongs to me, to do with as I will."

Beneath her thighs, his cock rose and pressed against her, illustrating just how much he wanted that.

His fingers trembled as he stroked them down her throat, then reached inside her bathrobe to skim her breast. "You are my instrument. I will play you, and create beautiful music with you. Through you, my soul will take flight. And in return I will give you all the care a musician lavishes upon his most valued possession. You will want for nothing. But only if you will be completely mine."

Gayle shivered beneath his touch, aching to erase the note of desperate isolation in his voice. It was almost as though he expected her to refuse him.

"Yes."

His hand stilled. "Yes?"

"Yes. I will be yours."

For a moment, he clutched her tightly, burying his masked face in her hair. Then he stood abruptly, setting her on her feet and stepping away from her.

"You don't know what you're agreeing to. I'll ask you again once you understand what I'm asking."

Pain lanced through her. "Are you rejecting me?"

"No! Never that." He thrust both hands through his hair, the thick elastic band holding his mask catching in his fingers and snapping loudly. He winced at the blow. "Forget dessert. Come upstairs with me. Now."

"Yes, Master Rikard."

Taking her hand in his gloved one, he led her from the kitchen, shaking his head. "You want to serve me? I'll show you how to serve."



## Chapter Six

Rikard hauled her up the stairs to the second floor, then dragged her into the guest bedroom. Gayle had only a moment to note the décor—a dresser and nightstand of natural oak with wrought iron accents, a wrought iron bed with swirling spires topping each corner post, and matching curtain rods covered with black and white sheers—before he ripped off her robe and pushed her onto the bed.

“Is this what you wanted?” he spat.

Gayle scrambled into the center of the bed and turned to face him, crouched ready to spring to freedom if he gave her a chance. “No.”

He ignored her protest. This was not going down the way she’d expected, and she braced herself to fight if he tried to take more than she was prepared to give.

“So eager to serve, you don’t care what will be asked of you.”

He untied the laces of his leather pants with sharp, savage jerks. His pants fell to the floor, tangling with his boots. He kicked them off, his motions full of anger rather than his usual grace. One boot flew across the room to strike the dresser with a solid thud. He wrenched off his poet shirt next, flinging it aside to stand naked before her in only his leather mask and gloves.

His rampant erection jutted forcefully at her, red and angry-looking.

She tried one last time to get through to him. “Please, Rikard, what did I say?”

“That’s Master Rikard. I still wear the mask.”

“Master Rikard. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you angry. Only tell me what I said, and I’ll never say it again.”

Terror choked her voice. Carrie had been right. She didn't know enough about Rikard to trust him. What insanity had possessed her to spend the whole day having sex with him? They were just supposed to be getting to know one another.

"First you vow you'll belong only and ever to me, now you promise to never give yourself to me again? I find I'm having trouble believing you."

Okay. That's what had set him off. She could think this through logically. That's what she was good at. Given a problem to solve, she forced the fear to keep at bay. It helped that he wasn't advancing on her, merely clutching the nearest bedpost in a death grip and glaring at her.

"I didn't vow to belong only and ever to you. All I said was that I wanted to be yours. I wanted to be your submissive."

He hesitated, his voice losing its strident tone. "My submissive only."

"All right. I'll give you the only. But not the ever. I wasn't talking a lifetime arrangement. I was thinking of right now."

A shudder rippled through him, his eyes closing as his head bent. He released the bedpost, and took a step backwards. Then another. She noted with relief that his cock had softened to semi-erect. Sighing, he bent to pick up her fallen robe and his discarded clothing. Gayle started to relax. He folded the robe and placed it on the bed beside her, then turned away to set his folded clothing on top of the dresser.

Softly, he whispered, "Nothing lasts forever. Not even when you want it to."

"The accident."

She hadn't realized she'd spoken until he whipped around to face her. "What did you say?"

"The woman you loved and lost in the accident. She'd vowed to be with you forever, hadn't she?"

“Actually, I’d vowed to devote my life to her.” His lips twitched, as if he was trying to smile, but the effort was beyond him. “I would still, if fate hadn’t taken that choice from me.”

The raw pain in his voice reminded her of the lyrics he’d sung earlier, overwhelming her fear with shared suffering and understanding. He hadn’t wanted to attack her just now. He’d been trying to drive her away. Whether he did so because he was afraid of being hurt again, or from some twisted loyalty to his dead love was unimportant. All that mattered was that her first impression of him had been correct.

Gayle shifted position, from a crouch to a cross-legged seat, and patted the bedspread. “Why don’t you come sit over here?”

Rikard’s brow furrowed. “Don’t you want to get dressed and leave?”

“No. I want to talk to you. And I don’t want to do it from across the room.”

Hesitantly, he crossed the room to the bed. He lingered a long moment beside it, then slowly climbed on top and crawled over to where she sat. She watched him with avid appreciation. No longer terrified, the adrenaline flooding her bloodstream had made her incredibly horny. All she wanted right now was to get laid.

“I still want to be your submissive. I still want you to make love to me, whatever way gives you pleasure. But I can’t say it’s forever. I don’t know. Maybe we’ll discover we’re so good together, we want to make this a permanent relationship. Maybe we’ll find out we get on each other’s nerves and go our separate ways. The only way to find out is to try.”

He reached toward her, checking his gesture when his hand was still half an inch from her face. “You want to try?”

She leaned forward, pressing her cheek to his gloved palm. “Yes.”

His breath caught. Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

He clutched her to him, stroking his cool, damp gloves over her heated back in a frenzied effort to press her body closer to his. His mouth devoured hers, his tongue

plunging deeply to capture her every soft whimper and moan. His cock rose between them, but he didn't break the kiss until she was growing lightheaded from lack of oxygen.

When he finally lifted his head, his breathing was harsh and ragged, as he struggled to pull air into his lungs.

"Say you're mine," he rasped. "At least for now."

"I'm yours."

He plunged into another kiss, the warm leather of his gloves gliding across the thin sheen of sweat on her back. Gone was the slow and careful buildup of passion that had characterized their earlier loveplay. He used no games or skillful tricks to whet her appetite. There was only crushing need, threatening to engulf them both in a firestorm that would burn them to cinders if they didn't find a way to express it.

This was not a Master, controlling his submissive's actions and reactions. This was a man, driven past his ability for self-restraint. This was Rikard.

She reached for his mask, wanting to remove the symbol of his mastery, freeing them both to be nothing more than a man and a woman, making love. He chose that moment to lift his head again, out of her reach, as he dragged in another gasping breath.

"Let me make love to you," he whispered.

"Yes."

"Let me see my marks on your skin while I love you."

"Yes." She could refuse him nothing.

Gently, with hands that trembled, he lowered her to the bedspread, then rolled her onto her stomach.

"Kneel," he whispered, his hands on her hips guiding her ass into the air as she pulled her knees up, her head pillowed on her crossed arms. Reverently, he kissed the swollen results of his earlier scene play.

Gayle shuddered, his soft lips reawakening the painful pleasure of his hand and whip striking her ass. Her folds parted, plump and wet, ready for his possession.

The bed shook as he clambered over to the nightstand and the supply of condoms in the drawer. She heard the packet tear, then his soft groan as he rolled the condom onto his engorged cock. A moment later, he was kneeling between her legs, one hand on her hip, holding her steady, while his other guided his cock to her entrance.

The tip slid between her folds, then found her opening and thrust deep. They both groaned in pleasure.

The angle was unlike anything she'd experienced before, his cock pressing hard against her vaginal muscles with every deep stroke. He thrust twice, then groaned low in his throat and folded himself over her, his chest pressed to her back. He kissed the lines of the cat across her shoulders, trailing his tongue over the faint welts and swellings.

She moaned. "Yes. Please, yes."

Sheets of fire cascaded over her skin from where his lips touched her, all that she had felt earlier and then some. She felt her fluids pouring forth, coating his cock and running down both of their legs.

Rikard reached around to caress her swollen, aching breasts. His blind fingers found the nipples, first stroking, then squeezing them.

She gasped, her hips jerking in response.

"Like that," he groaned. "Again."

They found their rhythm, her hips bucking beneath him as he pumped in and out, squeezing her nipples with every thrust. Kisses landed scattershot on her shoulders, his mouth finding new territory each time he lunged forward.

He moaned, a note of utter purity that nearly stopped her breath with its beauty. Twice more, he thrust in time with his cries. Then he thrust deep and exploded, shaking as his body covered hers.

Her hips continued to rock, and he fumbled between her slick folds, his fingers questing for her clit. When he found it, two quick squeezes were all she needed before she shrilled her own release and collapsed, her knees no longer able to support her. The heavy weight of his body pinned her to the bed, as his knees gave out too.

His arms still around her, he rolled them to their sides so they'd be able to breathe. His limp cock slid free, wringing one last shaking moan of pleasure from her.

He tightened his hold, nearly crushing her lungs despite freeing her from his weight. His arms shook, his ragged breathing rasping hot and damp across the back of her neck where his face was pressed tight against the hollow of her shoulder.

She froze, her brain refusing her interpretation of what she was feeling. She cataloged the sensations again, feeling moisture trickle down the back of her neck, and hearing his wet gulps of air as his chest shook with the effort of breathing.

He was crying.

"Rikard? Master?"

He drew a deep, shuddering breath, then a second with more control. His arms loosened, and he lifted his head. Brushing one last kiss across her shoulder, he whispered, "Thank you."

"I enjoyed it, too."

He chuckled softly, the sound vibrating through her ribs where her back pressed against his chest. "That, too. But I meant for being willing to try. It's been...a while."

"I'd think women would be throwing themselves at you, for the hot sex and fabulous food."

He bolted upright. "Shit! Dessert. It's probably melted all over the kitchen table by now. I've got to go clean that up before it runs onto the floor."

Rolling out of bed, he hurried to take care of the culinary disaster, grabbing his leather pants off the dresser as he passed. Gayle heard his footsteps pound down the staircase, and a cry of horror when he entered the kitchen.

She shook her head. "And, he cleans."

Figuring he'd be a while—he seemed the type to clean each individual swirl of wrought iron with a cotton swab—she put on the robe and walked back to the playroom to get her clothes. She got dressed, then headed downstairs.

Rikard had shoved the table and chairs aside, and had built a levee of paper towels surrounding the vanilla lake on the kitchen floor to keep it from spreading. He was busy mopping the glass top of the table with yet more paper towels when Gayle poked her head in the doorway.

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"No. Thanks. I just have to get it all up before it crystallizes. The ice cream's not so bad, it's the caramel." He paused to toss out his sodden towels and rip new ones off the roll. "This isn't how I planned on ending our date, but there's no point in you hanging around to watch me clean. I'll be another half hour at this."

"Half an hour just to wipe up a spill?"

"It's the table and chairs. I love the look of the wrought iron, but it's a bitch to clean. And with a milk-based spill, if I miss anything, pretty soon it'll be stinking worse than a dead skunk."

She winced in sympathy, remembering the misplaced creamer for the coffee at work that had cleared half her floor with its stench. "Okay. You want me to call you?"

He tossed out another handful of towels, and smiled over his shoulder at her. "Give me a call Tuesday night, and let me know how your audition went. We can set up our next date then."

She hesitated, wanting to kiss him goodbye, or at least give him a hug. But he was already scrubbing at the table top with his newest handful of paper towels, and she wasn't sure how to safely cross the lake of melted ice cream to reach him. "Bye, then."

"Bye. Have a safe drive home."

She waited a moment longer, then turned and walked away. A detour through the music room to pick up her music, then on to the front door. She paused again after pulling it open, but he didn't call out to her. Pushing through the safety door with more force than was necessary, she wished the hydraulics would let it slam behind her. Instead, it closed with a soft *snick*.

"That was anticlimactic," she muttered, throwing her purse and music on the front seat of her car. Then, thinking of her last sight of Rikard, she started to laugh. Low-slung black leather pants, high black leather gloves, a black leather mask ... and a pile of sopping wet paper towels dripping vanilla ice cream over everything. She could hardly wait to tell Carrie. Her friend would really appreciate the irony.



## **Chapter Seven**

Gayle picked up a pizza for dinner on her way home. All that vigorous exercise had made her ravenous. As she devoured the perfect balance of tomato sauce, crisp crust, and gooey cheese, she couldn't help contrasting the meal with the gourmet fare Rikard had served her. One wasn't better than the other, but they were definitely different.

Once her hunger was satisfied, she called her friend Carrie for the promised gossip session. She sat down on her couch, kicked off her shoes, and put her feet up on the coffee table, ready for a lengthy call. True to her word, she told her friend everything, starting with Rikard answering the door dressed like a pirate, to the way he'd helped her with her audition piece, the fabulous lunch...and the sex. When she explained that Rikard had fisted her between the salad and entrée courses of their lunch, Carrie dropped her phone with a painfully loud clatter.

Gayle held the phone away from her ear. "Ow."

"Sorry. I can't believe you let him... Didn't it hurt?"

"God, no! It was...it was... I can't describe what it was like. But it was the best orgasm I'd ever had. Up 'til then, at least. It got even better, later." She sprawled across her couch, the familiar hot pulse beginning between her legs. "I'm getting wet just thinking about it."

"But I still don't understand how it happened. I know you, Gayle. You don't usually even kiss a guy on the first date. How'd he get you to agree to...that?"

She hesitated, thinking back to their lunch. The memory was strangely blurry. She remembered the taste of the strawberry salad, the blue and white dishes and white wrought iron table and chairs. She clearly remembered the beginning of her conversation with Rikard. But then it all got fuzzy.

"We were talking, about what I expected from a Dominant/submissive relationship, and he gave me a challenge, to finish eating my salad without making a sound. The fisting was my reward for completing the challenge. But I'm not really sure how it happened... I was so turned on by then, I wasn't really thinking clearly."

"Maybe he put something in your salad."

"No. He doesn't need any help. He's sexualicious."

"He's certainly persuasive. I still can't believe I let him talk me into hanging up without speaking to you when I called the second time."

Gayle smiled. So that's why Carrie was fixating on how Gayle let herself be talked into sex. She was feeling guilty. Gayle hurried to set her friend's mind at ease.

"Well, I'd already told you I expected to be having sex, and not to disturb me when you called back. He was just reiterating that."

"I guess. So what happened after I called and you had tuna steaks?"

"After lunch we went upstairs and played pirate."

"You hoisted his mainsail?"

Gayle laughed. "No. He spun this wicked fantasy, about my being a proper Victorian lady captured by pirates. If I wanted to live, I had to become the pirate captain's sex slave. He vowed he'd make me beg for his attention, and I vowed that as a proper Englishwoman, I would never beg."

"And...?" Carrie breathed.

"And I begged. Oh, God, I begged. And then passed out because it was so good." Her back and ass burned with remembered pleasure.

"You passed out?"

"Well, it's not like I was unconscious. I was just flying, off in the stratosphere somewhere. If he'd tried hard enough, he could have roused me."

"That must've been the second time I called."

"Right. I woke up cradled in his lap while he composed music. He fisted me again, which is when you called the last time, then we went upstairs and had sex in his guest room. And then I came home."

"You can't just skip over all the details!"

So Gayle recounted all the details that she could remember, and was willing to admit to. She explained what Rikard had been doing, exactly where his hand had been, and why she'd been so impatient when Carrie had called. She skipped their strange argument, and her resulting fear, and just described how they made love, the way he'd kissed her with such reverence before finally coming inside her. Then how it ended when he ran off to clean up the melting ice cream.

"You'll get a kick out of this. My last sight of him was in the kitchen, barefoot, his black leather pants slung low on his hips and barely laced, black leather mask, and his black leather gloves full of wadded-up paper towels dripping vanilla ice cream everywhere." Gayle laughed merrily at the memory, but stopped when she realized Carrie wasn't joining in. "Don't you think that's funny?"

"He wore the mask the whole time?"

"Well, yeah. It's his Master mask. When he wears it, he's Master Rikard. Without it, he's just Rikard."

"You've seen what he looks like without it, right? He's not hiding anything."

"When we met for coffee. He's a total hunk."

"He cooks, he cleans, he gives you half a dozen orgasms before getting his own, and he's a total hunk. What's wrong with this picture?"

"Uh...nothing?"

"How old is he?"

"I don't know...late twenties, early thirties."

"Why isn't he already taken? Someone that good doesn't stay on the market unless there's a serious problem with him."

"Oh. Well, he was. His girlfriend was killed in a car accident four years ago. I think he's only just beginning to date again."

"So you're competing with a ghost? Is he still in love with her?"

Gayle thought back to Rikard's agonized confession. "Yeah. Big time."

"Oh, honey, I'm sorry. Enjoy the sex, because that's all you're getting from this guy."

"Maybe." Remembering that moment on the couch when she'd realized she was still with Master Rikard instead of just Rikard, she was inclined to agree. But then there was their final lovemaking. "Or maybe not. He cried when we made love."

"He cried? Really? How come?"

"I don't know. But that's got to mean he's emotionally involved, doesn't it?"

"Or else it reminded him of his dead girlfriend, and how much he loved her."

Gayle sighed. That was also a possibility. "I guess I'll have to wait and find out if he can have a relationship, or if it'll just be about the sex. But the sex was so good..."

"A relationship would be better."

"You're right. As usual. Guess that's why I keep you around, huh?"

"Nah, you keep me around because I know where all the bodies are buried."

Together, they said, "In the graveyard," then laughed at the familiar refrain that had amused them since they were college roommates.

"But Gayle, if he does the Bluebeard thing and tells you there's a locked room in his house you can't go into, for God's sake don't check to see if it's a shrine to his ex. Just get out, while you can."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Tuesday night rolled around, Gayle arrived early at the theater. She took her time filling out the audition form, and ended up assigned the fifth spot. Close enough to the beginning that she didn't have too much time for nerves to tighten her throat, but

with a few other songs first to get a feel for how the accompanist played. He was good, but nowhere near as talented as Rikard.

Gayle handed her sheet music to the accompanist, and took her place at center stage. Closing her eyes briefly, she imagined Rikard sitting in the darkness at the back of the theater, hidden in the shadows underneath the overhanging balcony.

She sang to him, letting her voice fill with all of her emotions, the way he'd shown her during their date. He was the one whom she couldn't get out of her head, thinking of him constantly. And now that he'd brought her body to life, she'd die without his masterful touch.

There was a moment of silence when she finished her song, and she inclined her head in the slightest of grateful bows. Her competition had stopped talking and humming in preparation of their own auditions to listen to her, the best compliment they could give her.

She darted a glance at the director as she walked back to the piano. He was nodding, a faint smile on his face. The accompanist was also smiling, holding out her music to her.

"Good job."

"Thanks."

He traded a look with the director, then added, "You should probably stick around to the end of the auditions."

"Okay."

She walked off stage, her knees starting to wobble as she descended the steps. She managed to stagger back to the eighth row before she collapsed into a seat. Then the delayed reaction of her audition hit, and she began to shake, her heart pounding and every breath a struggle through her tight throat. She couldn't have left the theater if she'd wanted to.

By the time the eighteenth auditionee had performed, her reaction had run its course. She settled back to watch the remaining candidates, idly critiquing their performances and judging which she would choose if she was casting the show.

A pair of young women who auditioned one after the other had sweet voices, but couldn't project past the third row without microphones. A young man allowed his nerves to throw him out of tune, growing worse as he realized his mistake, until the dissonance between his voice and the piano made her cringe. A blonde woman sang Rizzo's solo from *Grease*, her stylized movements and perfect delivery indicating she'd performed the role many times in the past.

Finally, the last candidate completed his audition, and the director stood to address the two-dozen people who'd been asked to remain.

"Steve has some handouts for you. I'd like to hear you read them, please. Number five. The witch's speech."

Gayle returned to the stage, picking up the paper from the pianist. It contained five short paragraphs, from different characters. She read over the witch's speech to the baker, settled her body to mimic the witch's stance, and read it for real.

"Thank you. Number nine. The baker's wife."

Gayle walked off stage as the next woman came up, returning to her seat in the audience.

The director and pianist conferred briefly after the last person had given their reading, then the director announced his choices.

"The baker, number fourteen. The baker's wife, number thirty-two. The witch, number five."

Gayle didn't hear the rest of the casting announcements. All she could think of was that she'd scored her favorite part in the show. And that she couldn't wait to tell Rikard.

As soon as she got home, she called him.

"Hello, Gayle. How'd it go?"

"I got the part! The witch. I got it!"

"That's fabulous."

"I'm so excited. I'm sure it's because you helped me with the audition song. Would you like to go out and celebrate?"

Rikard paused. "Now?"

"Well, no, it doesn't have to be now. It's late, and tomorrow's a workday. But later this week."

"Okay. You can come here tomorrow night, and I'll make you a celebratory dinner. Then we can have a...private celebration. Unless you have rehearsal tomorrow?"

"No, rehearsals don't start until next week."

"Fine, then. I'll see you tomorrow for dinner." His voice dropped to a low, seductive purr. "Congratulations, Gayle. I knew you could do it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Wednesday night, Gayle went straight from work to Rikard's house. She didn't wear anything special, since her tropical-print circle skirt and teal blue microfiber blouse were both comfortable and flattering, and she'd thought this would be more of a friendly celebration than a sex date. So she was surprised when Rikard answered the door wearing his leather mask and pants again, although this time coupled with a black tunic top that laced up the chest.

"Did I misunderstand? I thought it was going to be just Rikard tonight, not Master Rikard," Gayle asked.

"But it was Master Rikard who helped you with your song." Rikard captured her hand in his gloved one and drew her into the house. "Besides, you deserve to be spoiled and pampered for your success, and Master Rikard is far better at that than just Rikard."

His lips curved, and good humor laced his voice, as though he found speaking of himself as two separate people extremely amusing. Then he led her into the kitchen, and all thoughts of protest evaporated.

Tray after tray of tapas covered the glass tabletop. Some fillings were pinkish, some golden brown, some a deep russet. Then there were the small bowls filled with hot sauces in every shade from bright red to dark brown, sour cream, and a green chili paste.

"You must have spent all day cooking!"

"It was for a worthy cause." Smiling, he held out a chair for her.

She sat. He offered her a crisp damask napkin, snapping it open and holding it out for her. Disappearing behind her, he returned carrying two goblets and a bottle of white wine. Then he took his own chair, opened his own napkin, and gestured to the expanse of food on the table.

"What would you like to try first? Seafood? Beef? Chicken? Vegetarian?"

Gayle shook her head, overwhelmed by all the possibilities. "You choose."

He selected a neatly rolled white-and-pink offering, and held it to her lips. "Try this. Crabmeat."

She relaxed and let him feed her, enjoying the complete pampering of delicious food and exquisite service. All of the tapas were good, but some prompted her to close her eyes and groan with pleasure as she savored their flavor. She worried at first that she was taking advantage of Rikard's generosity, but his soft smile and the gleam in his blue eyes proved he was enjoying the meal as much as she was. The final offerings, combining cinnamon and a rich chocolate sauce, were positively heavenly.

"That was wonderful. You're a marvelous cook."

"Thank you. It's good to have an appreciative audience."

"Have you always enjoyed cooking?"



"No, it's a recent hobby. I used to have the typical bachelor diet of takeout food and pizza. But I spent far too long drinking all my meals from a straw, and began to obsess about all the foods I couldn't have. I vowed that once I could eat solid food again, I would make all my future meals memorable ones."

"I'm sorry you had to suffer, but I appreciate the result."

"I think you'll appreciate the rest of what I have planned for you, too. Finish your wine, and we'll go upstairs."

Her heart and lungs picked up a rapid rhythm, and her panties grew damp. "To the playroom?"

"Yes."

She tossed back her wine, then shoved her chair away from the table and jumped to her feet. "I'm ready."

Rikard's gaze slid down to her breasts, and her pebbled nipples, before skimming down to her pussy. "I bet you are."

Heat flamed her cheeks, but she couldn't protest, because he was right. She was ready for him to take her right here and now. Waiting was going to be an exquisite torture.

Placing her hand in his gloved grasp, she allowed him to lead her upstairs. The first thing she saw upon entering the playroom was a scarlet fandango dress draped across one of the tables.

"Put on the dress."

Gayle obediently stripped down to her underwear, then hesitated, looking a question at Master Rikard.

"Only the dress," he clarified.

She pulled off the bra and panties, as well, then lifted the layers of satin ruffles over her head and slithered into the dress. It clung to her chest, then flared out over her hips to cascade in a ruffled fall down past her knees.

Rikard picked up a black cloak that had been laid out beside the dress, and swirled it around his shoulders.

"I am Zorro, the masked avenger of the oppressed people of Los Angeles. You are the lovely and spirited Consuela, owner of the taverna. You are cooperating with the evil Don Rafael, to try and trap Zorro, and now Zorro has trapped you."

"But I'm not evil, right? Don Rafael has something on me to force me to cooperate with him."

Rikard's slow smile promised a wealth of torturous delights. "That is what Zorro needs to determine, using all the skills at his disposal."

He uncoiled a huge bullwhip, and cracked it three times—tracing two horizontal slashes and a diagonal slash connecting them in the air. Gayle shivered, picturing the whip connecting with her flesh and carving the trademark Z into her skin. Or perhaps he'd take a page from Antonio Banderas' Zorro and use the whip to strip away her gown, leaving her bare before him.

Instead, he lunged forward, grabbing her wrists. He cracked the whip, coiling the tail of it around the wooden frame that had been mounted to the wall since her last visit, then used the remaining length to lash her wrists together, binding her to the frame. Gayle gave a halfhearted tug against the restraint, not at all eager to escape. Her rapid breathing threatened to spill her breasts out of the low-cut dress, and she felt the first beads of moisture pooling between her legs.

Rikard crushed his body against hers, his hard thighs forcing her legs apart, while his gloved hands skimmed from her bound wrists down her arms to her flattened breasts.

"I'll scream," she whispered. "Don Rafael's men will come running to investigate."

"Not if I silence you first."

His mouth captured hers, his kiss hard and merciless. But she didn't scream. She could barely breathe.

She returned his kiss, opening her mouth to draw his tongue inside as she tipped her hips, straining to press her throbbing pussy against the solid bulge in his leather pants.

Rikard's kiss softened, his lips nibbling hers instead of grinding against them. One of his hands glided up to cradle the back of her neck, supporting her head as he tilted it to deepen his kiss. His other hand drifted down to her hip. Tugging on her thigh, he lifted her leg up to his waist.

He reached beneath her billowing skirt and cupped her ass. The smooth leather of his glove caressed her skin, and she moaned into his mouth. Hot fluid dripped down her standing leg. She rolled her hips, wide open and pressed against him.

It wasn't enough. She wanted him out of those pants and inside her. Whimpering a protest, she struggled against the whip restraining her hands, writhing against him.

Rikard broke the kiss and lifted his head, even as he dropped his other hand to her thigh and lifted her remaining leg to his waist, pinning her to the wooden frame with his hips. "Trying to escape, Consuela? Do you plan to run to Don Rafael as soon as I give you a chance?"

"No, Zorro. I have no love for Don Rafael. He forced me to help him. If I did not cooperate, he would destroy my tavern. I would lose everything."

He kneaded her ass with both hands, rolling his hips to stroke his cock against her throbbing clit. "If he catches me, I will lose my head."

"But he won't catch you. You are too clever to fall into his traps."

"Then he will destroy your tavern."

"Not if I can convince him I did as he asked. It won't be my fault if his guards fail to catch you."

"And what did Don Rafael ask you to do?"

"Lure you here. Signal the soldiers. And then distract you with my feminine wiles until they could respond."

"What is the signal?"

"I was to blow out the candle in the window."

"Then I shall have to keep you away from the window."

He unwrapped the whip from around her wrists, and she immediately put her arms around his neck. Easily bearing her weight, he carried her across the room to one of the padded tables. He set her down, then untangled himself from her grasp and stepped back to study her.

Her skirt was rucked up, exposing her legs to the thighs, and her bodice had twisted to one side, one shoulder strap slipping down her arm while the other dug into her neck. One nipple peeked out over the skewed neckline. She sat without moving, enduring his scrutiny.

"What can I do to prove I'm telling you the truth? I will not betray you to Don Rafael."

Rikard reached beneath the table and withdrew a wicked curved knife with a forked tip, like the kind that would be used for gutting hunted animals. Gayle sucked in a sharp breath, and cringed away from it, even as the fear flooded between her legs with wet desire.

"I could mark you with my Z. Carve my symbol into your soft flesh. Here." His gloved fingertips traced the letter on the rapidly rising and falling curve of her breast. Then he pushed her skirt aside and traced a Z on her damp inner thigh. "Or here."

"No. Please," she whispered. "Don't cut me."

He rested the flat of the blade against her exposed nipple. The cold shock stabbed straight to her groin, making her gasp from the pleasure, even as she froze and stared in terror at the deadly blade pressed against her vulnerable breast.

He twisted the knife, sliding the blade beneath her bodice strap. Gayle didn't dare to breathe as the knife stroked upward, over the curve of her breast and up to her

shoulder. With a savage wrench, Rikard sliced through the strap. It fluttered down against her breast and folded down her back.

Her breath gusted out, and she sobbed in relief. She barely noticed when he lifted the other strap away from her skin and sliced through that one as well.

Rikard put down the knife and cupped both of her exposed breasts in his gloved hands, his thumbs flicking back and forth across her pebbled nipples.

"I had to be sure of you," he whispered huskily. "You could have screamed."

"I will never betray you," she choked out through her tears.

He grabbed her savaged dress and pulled it over her head, tossing it aside as soon as the heavy skirt cleared her face. Her legs were spread, exposing her pulsing need for him. He cupped her pussy, and she groaned in agonized pleasure. Her entire body throbbed in time to her heartbeat, from her tingling breasts all the way down to her toes. He slipped two fingers inside her soaking wet channel.

"Please," she sobbed. "Please. I need you inside me."

"Enough games," he growled. "Let Zorro have Consuela. Master Rikard wants to make love to Gayle."

"Yes! Please."

"And I want to do it in a comfortable bed."

Swinging her up into his arms, he carried her into the guest room. A moment later, his pants were down, a condom sheathed his cock, and he was kneeling between her widespread legs.

"Please, Rikard. Don't make me wait any longer."

He thrust, hard and sure, filling her with one strong stroke. Gayle arched up off the bed, screaming her fulfillment as the orgasm ripped through her. Rikard just held her, letting her shake and shudder with his cock buried deep inside her. When she finally began to breathe normally, he started to move slowly in and out, quickly whipping her

into another frenzy. His pace accelerated, faster and harder, until they were slamming together in mindless need, both straining desperately toward release.

Rikard stiffened, his arms locking and his spine bowing as he trembled, then came in a powerful explosion. Gayle writhed against him, then arched upward, coming in a shuddering rush. They collapsed onto the bed, hot, sweaty and tangled in each other, but neither willing to move.

"God," she breathed. "I had no idea being scared out of my mind was such a turn-on."

"As was scaring you. I think we'd better back off on that scenario for a while."

"Why? It was great!"

"Because I need to be able to remain in control during a scene. And now that I know what fear of knives does to you, I don't think I could. That makes it too dangerous. I won't risk you getting hurt, no matter how great the sex is."

Gayle smiled, a warm glow of contentment settling deep within her chest. He might not know what he was saying, but she did. He wasn't just interested in sex. He wanted a real relationship.

## **Chapter Eight**

Gayle woke disoriented and alone. Amazingly soft sheets scented lightly with citrus caressed her naked body, and a pillow so fluffy it had to be one-hundred percent goose down cradled her head. Light streamed into the room from the wrong direction, allowing her to recognize the furniture in Rikard's guest room. She stretched, feeling the stiffness of last night's vigorous lovemaking in her hips and thighs. No jogging this morning for her.

She glanced around the room, until she located a small clock on the dresser. Quarter after six. She had plenty of time to drive back home, shower, dress, and still get to work. But only if she got a move on.

Tossing back the covers, she encountered heavy resistance. Rikard had left the bathrobe she'd used before draped across the bottom of the bed. She shrugged into it, then went looking for him.

She checked the attached bathroom and studio first. Both dark and empty, although she took the time to admire the décor of the bathroom. Black and white tiles set off towels, fixtures, and shower curtain patterned with swirls of musical notes and flowing staves, and black-framed prints of pianists graced the walls. It was the first obvious nod to his career she'd seen, other than the music room and studio, and those had been purely practical. Idly, she wondered if the bathroom decorations had been Rikard's idea, or simply a way to use up music-themed gifts he'd accumulated from friends and family over the years.

She frowned. She assumed he had friends and family. But he'd never spoken about them. Oh, he'd made general references, like saying his family was from New York, which had made it easy for him to attend Columbia. But nothing recent. She didn't even know if his parents were still living, or if he had any brothers or sisters.

Her next stop was the playroom. It was empty, except for her neatly folded clothes on one of the tables. As she was getting dressed, she heard water running on the other side of the wall in the master bathroom.

She went back out into the upstairs foyer, and politely knocked on the doorframe before poking her head inside the open door of Rikard's bedroom. It shared the same oak-and-iron furniture as the guest room, but the walls and linens were all soothing blues and greens, shading from dark to light as they swirled upward. It felt like she was standing at the bottom of the ocean looking up through the water toward the light of the surface.

"Rikard?"

"In here," he called from the bathroom.

She followed his voice, and found him leaning against a cream and white marble countertop, wearing only black silk pajama bottoms. Droplets of water clung to his broad back, and his wet blond hair was slicked back into a ponytail. In the mirror, she could see that shaving foam coated his face from eyes to halfway down his neck, except for a stripe the width of his razor on the right cheek and jaw.

He glanced over his shoulder at her. "I'll be another few minutes shaving. But if you're willing to wait, I can make you breakfast. How do blueberry pancakes sound?"

Gayle grinned. She loved a man who was so willing to cook for her. "It sounds heavenly. But I'm afraid I can't wait. I've got to get home, or I'll be late for work."

"No jogging this morning?"

"I got enough exercise last night."

He grinned, the shaving foam puffing up on his cheeks. A slight dimple was visible in the thin strip of shaved skin, where it would be covered by his Master's mask. She hadn't noticed the dimple when they met for coffee, and thought it was a sign that he was more relaxed around her now. His eyelids were much more even when he smiled now, too, the faint offset no more than most people's side-to-side discrepancies.



He dropped his razor onto the counter and turned to face her, leaning back against the edge of the counter and stuffing his hands into the pockets of his pajamas.

"If you want to bring some clothes over next time, go ahead. Then you won't have to run away in the morning." He tossed out the suggestion with a studiously neutral tone that implied he didn't care if she did or not. Recalling his reactions the first time they'd made love, she suspected he cared, and cared deeply, about her answer.

"I'd like that. A lot." She shook her head. "But I don't know when I'll see you again."

"Friday?"

"Works for me. And then I can spend Saturday with you, too."

He stiffened, his eyes widening, the right opening wider than the left. "I won't be available during the day. I have a previous obligation. But I can see you Saturday night."

"Oh." He didn't have to look so panicked at the thought of spending the day with her. "Are you busy Sunday, too?"

"Afraid so."

Gayle pursed her lips, trying to give him the benefit of the doubt. "What are you doing?"

"I have to meet with someone about a song. It's a four-hour drive."

Her eyes widened. "And you're driving there and back in the same day?"

"I've done it before. It's no big deal."

"Well, would you like company for the drive?"

He shook his head, bits of foam flying off to spatter on the thick blue carpet. "No. I won't be good company. I will, in fact, be the stereotypical neurotic artist, obsessed with what they think of the song."

He hesitated, then asked, "Would you like to hear it?"

"I'd love to." She was going to be late for work. Maybe she could skip the shower, and just do a quick rinse-and-go. She knew an olive branch when she saw one, and she wasn't about to refuse.

"Come on. It's already cued up in the deck."

He bounded out the door, making her run to catch up with him. He crossed directly to his studio, bypassing the guest room and bath, and fired up the banks of electronic equipment. After a few minor adjustments to various switches and dials whose purpose escaped her, he punched a button and the opening power chords of a pop ballad thundered through the room.

It started like so many other songs, extolling the virtues of the bad boy who stole the singer's heart. Hearing Rikard's voice singing lyrics obviously meant for a woman was a little strange, but his knife-like delivery didn't give her room to think about it, cutting straight to her heart with his pain and anger.

*"I thought it was forever. You thought it was one night. Now I'm hotter than hot, and you're sniffing at my heels like you never went away. Gonna buy me a lover, make him big and strong and dumb. Gonna buy me a lover, one who's never gonna run. Gonna buy me a lover, and we'll have all kinds of fun. Gonna buy me a lover, and he'll love me until the money's all gone."*

Tears streamed down her cheeks as verse after verse hammered her with Rikard's pain and desperation. Despite the upbeat, perky music that practically begged her feet to dance, the lyrics spoke of a bleak, meaningless future. She'd known he had issues. Carrie had warned her that he couldn't commit to a real relationship. Had losing his girlfriend in the accident really crushed him that badly, that he couldn't risk loving again?

Oh, God. He wanted to buy a lover because it put him in the position of control, and that way he wouldn't be hurt again. Was that why he was so adamant about staying in his Master persona?

Gradually, she became aware that the room was silent, and Rikard was watching her intently.

"You're crying. Why are you crying?"

"It's just so sad."

"But sad in a good way?"

Gayle gave a strangled laugh as she wiped her cheeks. "I see what you mean about not being a good traveling companion. It's a powerful song. Who's it for?"

He hesitated, then turned away to shut down his equipment. Talking to the bank of dials and switches, he mumbled, "Amanda Tiegg."

"The pop princess?" Gayle squeaked.

"Yeah. She wanted something darker, to try and change her image."

"Well, that's darker, all right. But still perky, if you know what I mean."

"That's what I was going for. So her fans who want mindless dance music will still be happy. But the music critics will have lyrics they can take seriously."

"So how does that work? Did she give you the subject for the song?"

"Well, we talked about some general ideas. It had to be something believable. She mentioned how annoying it was for people who had treated her like dirt in high school to now be treating her like they'd been best friends."

Then maybe it didn't reflect his attitude. After all, mystery writers wrote believable murderers without ever killing anyone.

Gayle smiled. "I'm sure she'll love it. You can tell me all about it Saturday night."

"So I'll see you Saturday night, then? Instead of Friday?"

"You'll need a full night's sleep before your drive. And if I spend the night, you're not going to be doing a lot of sleeping. I'll see you Saturday. But speaking of drives, I need to start mine. Or I'll really be late for work."

"Go. I'll see you Saturday."

She moved forward, kissing him goodbye despite the foam covering most of his face. Laughing, she wiped her nose and cheek with her sleeve. "Finish shaving. I'll let myself out."

As she drove away, she caught herself humming "Gonna Buy Me a Lover". Great. Another earworm.

\* \* \* \* \*

The good news was, pop princess Amanda Tiegg loved "Gonna Buy Me a Lover", and planned to use it on her next album. And in honor of the sale, Rikard and Gayle played a game where she was, as he put it, "a woman with love for hire". He ordered her to do a wide variety of sexually explicit tasks, including pleasuring herself to orgasm while he watched and offered direction, which she found unexpectedly liberating. But the bad news was that he stayed in his role of Master the entire time, even the next morning as he fed her the promised blueberry pancakes. The sex was incredible, but it did nothing to reassure her that he was interested in having a relationship.

She continued seeing him on Wednesday and Saturday nights, sometimes spending all day Sunday with him as well. They often played pirate-and-lady again, each time with her getting a thorough flogging that sent her sailing among the stars. They played Batman and Catwoman, and she finally understood why Rikard felt so powerful behind his mask. Knowing that your face was hidden allowed your true self to surface in a way she'd never expected. They played Spanish Inquisition, where Rikard tortured her with fiendishly erotic torments, making her come again and again until she finally passed out in exhausted delight—although she successfully refrained from admitting she was a witch.

The sex was phenomenal. All she had to do was hear his voice saying, "I have a special treat planned for you", or see his blue eyes sparkling with that telltale glint in the depths of his mask, and her heart pounded, her breath turned quick and shallow, her nipples tightened into hard nubs, and her pussy throbbed with wet heat. Pavlov's

dogs had nothing on her for salivating on a signal. And every time, after the sex, it seemed as though he wanted more, holding her with fierce desperation, and starting half a dozen times to say something, only to fall silent, and, when she asked, insist it was nothing.

But Rikard dodged her every attempt to establish a relationship based on anything other than sex. He cooked for her, elaborate gourmet meals that were feasts for the senses of sight, smell and touch as well as taste. He helped her with her music for *Into the Woods*. Sometimes he sang for her, baring his soul until she bled for his pain and ached with his desire. But he wouldn't come to any of her rehearsals, like other cast members' significant others did, insisting he preferred to get the full effect on opening night. He wasn't interested in going out to the movies, or even renting a DVD and watching it companionably in his home theater, saying he'd spent too many months watching films to find them entertaining any longer. He saw no reason to eat out when he could cook a better meal at home.

Whatever they did, he did it as Master Rikard. Aside from that one morning she'd surprised him while he was shaving, he was never just Rikard. She liked Master Rikard. She needed Master Rikard. But she suspected she could love plain old Rikard, if he ever gave her the chance.

She woke up one Sunday morning, alone as usual. He'd admitted that he didn't sleep much since his accident, and what sleep he did get was restless. She'd peeked into his room once while he was still in the shower, and seen the shambles he'd made of his bed before he had a chance to tidy it. Restless was an understatement. The covers were on the floor, the bottom sheet torn off the mattress, and the pillows flung into the far corners of the room. She didn't mind not sharing a bed after sex, since unlike him, she actually needed something approaching eight hours of uninterrupted sleep.

Shrugging into her robe, she belted it loosely, so that he could reach inside it to fondle her during breakfast. She visited her bathroom, to brush her teeth and use the toilet, and finished the roll of toilet paper. Since the guest bathroom was a peculiar

oversight of Rikard's—he entered the guest bedroom and studio through the hall doors, never through the connecting bath—she knew he'd never notice the roll was gone. She had to change it.

A brief inspection of the cabinets revealed towels, drain clearer, and more piano knickknacks, but no toilet paper. He must keep the spares in his bathroom.

She padded across to his room, ignoring the enticing aromas of breakfast drifting up the stairs. Something with bacon or sausage this morning. Mouth watering, she entered the master bathroom. This wouldn't take long.

Rikard's bathroom was divided into two sections by the marble basin and counter top, which was directly opposite the door. To the right was the toilet and a combination sit-in shower/steam bath unit. On the left was a lower counter and padded stool, originally designed to serve as a vanity, but which now held his whimsical collection of rubber ducks. There were two sets of cabinets, one below the basin and one on the wall facing the vanity. She guessed he'd keep toilet tissue in the cabinet near the vanity, since that was likely to be drier.

She opened the cabinet on the wall and looked inside. Rikard's face looked back at her.

Gayle screamed. Backing away, she bumped into the vanity, and sat on a duck. It quacked an insulting raspberry at her.

Footsteps pounded up the stairs.

"Gayle? What is it? What's..." Rikard's question faded into silence, as he saw the open cabinet. "Oh."

"Oh? That's all you have to say? Oh?"

She forced herself to look inside the vanity cabinet again. It wasn't his head on the shelf. It was an incredibly realistic mask, complete with hair, on a foam head. In fact, except for the fact that it had no eyes, and ended at the upper lip, it looked exactly like Rikard.

There was another mask beside it, but this one rested on a plaster head that bore Rikard's features. The second mask was made of clear plastic, with eye and nose holes and a tiny opening around the mouth, although half of it had been painted white in the style of the Phantom of the Opera's mask. Heavy straps secured it to the plaster head.

She shook her head. No. Impossible. And yet...

"Take off your Master's mask, Rikard."

His hesitation was all the confirmation she needed.

"I've never seen your face, have I?"

"Not all of it, no."

"You lied to me."

"No!"

"What do you call that?" She stabbed an accusing finger at the face in the cabinet.

He sighed, and pulled off the leather mask she'd grown so accustomed to seeing. She didn't know what to expect, but the features he revealed looked almost exactly like the ones she was familiar with. The only difference was on the left side of his face. Dark purple-red scar tissue covered from the corner of his eye to just below his cheekbone, shining dully in the florescent light.

"I call that a memory," he answered softly.

She hadn't asked, but he removed his gloves as well. His right hand, which she'd seen holding his razor, was as beautiful and graceful as she recalled. His left hand, though, was covered with a mix of thin white scars and shiny patches of scar tissue, especially across the palm.

"When the truck exploded, I instinctively threw my arm up across my eyes. It probably would have killed me if I hadn't. But that limited the third-degree burns to my cheek, instead of my entire face. And my arm. I also got shards of glass in my arm. They were so busy making sure I didn't bleed to death, lose my hand, or lose my eye, they didn't have time to worry about cosmetics."

He spoke in a toneless, matter-of-fact voice. Yet she could feel his pain and terror, the agony of being engulfed in a fireball, followed by the pain of recovery. Absently, she massaged her aching left hand.

His gaze tracked her motion, and a wry smile twisted his lips. "Sorry."

Abruptly, the sensations stopped.

She fumbled behind herself, searching for the edge of the counter to grip, scattering obscenely cheerful ducks in her blind quest for something stable and real to hold onto. "You did that. You made me feel...what you felt?"

He shrugged. "I didn't mean to. It's this thing I've been able to do since the accident. I picture something in my mind, and when I speak, people see it in their minds, too. For some reason, you seem to pick up on things even when I'm not trying to send them."

As he calmed down, the scar on his cheek faded to a dull pink, barely darker than his natural skin tone.

She frowned. Was it fading because he was growing calmer, or had it faded because he was no longer transmitting a mental image of what he believed his scar looked like?

This was insane. She couldn't believe she was actually considering his explanation. And yet, it explained so many things she hadn't even thought to question. If the accident had happened the way she'd felt it...

She shook her head, and stared at him. If she believed him, that she'd experienced what he'd experienced, then he'd been driving alone in that car.

"Who was with you when the accident happened?"

"No one."

"But when we were rehearsing 'Not a Day Goes By', you said you'd lost your girlfriend in the accident."



“Actually, I think I said I lost my love.” He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. Gayle instinctively braced herself for whatever further revelation he was about to toss her way.

“I was a jazz pianist. An interpretive singer and songwriter. That’s all I ever wanted to be, since I started taking piano lessons when I was three years old. I performed at music festivals around the world, and was just starting to build a real name for myself. My first CD had been released, to critical acclaim and decent sales, and I’d started working on a second one. I was sure I was one step away from success beyond my wildest dreams.”

He swallowed audibly, and lifted his left hand, closing and opening it.

“I can’t play anymore.”

Gayle shook her head. “I heard your recording for Amanda Tiegg.”

“Track after track of one note at a time, layered on top of each other. It takes forever, but when it’s done, you can’t tell they weren’t played together. I build the bass that way, then play the treble against it, and record the words last. You must have noticed I only play the right hand line when we rehearsed your songs.”

“Well, your left is usually occupied.” She blushed. “I Googled you, and nothing came up about a CD.”

“It was under Richard, not Rikard. The marketing gurus thought that would sell better. If I’d known it was going to be my only CD, I’d have insisted on my own name.”

“Oh.” Quickly, she changed the topic. “What’s the other mask for?”

“I had to wear it for two years after the accident, pressing against the skin of my face so that it wouldn’t grow back all knobby and gross.”

“Didn’t that hurt?”

“Compared to burning the skin off in the first place? No. Eventually, I found it comforting. The same with the gloves. It started as a pressure glove. When I no longer had to wear it, I found I wanted to wear a glove.”

He didn't say it, but she could hear the unspoken end to that thought. He wanted to hide his scars, from the world, but more importantly, from himself.

She took a deep breath. "So that's why you didn't want to go out?"

He nodded. "I knew wearing that mask would be lying to you. And that's the real reason I didn't want you to go with me on my trip. I knew you'd notice it, confined to a car for eight hours. You almost spotted it on our first date, when the latex adhesive started to come loose."

"Your lip wasn't peeling."

"No. The mask was separating. The hot coffee, the steam, or both loosened the adhesive on the lip."

"Swear to me that that's the only thing you've lied about."

Rikard blinked. "What?"

"You lied about not being scarred. Did you lie about anything else?"

He frowned, thinking hard. "No. Just about that, or anything that touched on that, like not being able to play the piano anymore."

"And since the secret came out, everything you've told me is one hundred percent true?"

"To the best of my knowledge, yes."

Was this the secret he'd tried so many times to tell her after they made love? Or had it been this lie that kept him silent?

"Do you love me?"

He blinked again. "What?"

"It's a simple question. Do you love me?"

"Yes." He shrugged his shoulders and stared at his feet. "But I understand —"

"No, you don't."

"What?"

She smiled, and captured his hands in hers. Both hands, the one clutching the safety and security of his black leather mask, and the one revealed in all the scars of reality.

"If you don't stop saying 'What?' I'm going to think that accident affected your hearing."

His mouth moved, but he stopped the word before he actually spoke it.

"As I was saying, you don't understand. I love you, too. Or I'm pretty sure I could, if you let me close enough to find out. Will you do that?"

His eyes widened. Without his mask in the way, she could see that the scar pulled down the corner of his eye, which was why his left eye wouldn't open as wide as the right one. "But I lied to you."

"Yes. You did. Are you going to do it again?"

"No."

"It's okay, then."

He blinked rapidly. "You're not leaving?"

"I'm not leaving."

She released his hands, stepped forward, and cradled his face in her palms. He stiffened, eyes wide in panicked alarm that slowly changed to wonder as he realized she was not reacting with horror to the touch of his scarred flesh.

Leaning in, she brushed his lips lightly with her own, sealing her pledge.

"Now, can I finally get to spend time with just Rikard, instead of Master Rikard?"

"Whatever you want." He held out the mask to her. "I don't have to wear this if you'd prefer."

"Keep it. I think it's kind of sexy. Just don't wear it when we're not actually playing."

"You really don't mind...?" He gestured weakly toward his cheek.

"Honestly, it's not as bad as you think it is. When you're not upset, it's hardly even noticeable. And even when it is, it's no worse than a birthmark would be."

"You're amazing. You have no idea. What can I do for you to show you how much this means to me?"

"Well, I am kind of hungry. And breakfast smelled delicious."

"Shit!"

That wasn't the reaction she'd expected. Before he could elaborate, the strident bleep of the smoke alarm made his explanation for him.

"Go!" She shoved him toward the door.

He raced for the kitchen, and whatever disaster had occurred there. Idly, she wondered if his racing to clean up kitchen disasters caused by her distracting him was going to be a pattern of their lives together. Considering how much she usually enjoyed his distractions, she kind of hoped so.

Bending down, she picked up the mask he'd dropped in his flight. She cleared a space among the fallen ducks, and set the mask on the vanity counter. They weren't going to need that. Not today. But tonight...she was in the mood for a pirate captain and a very saucy lady.

## About the Author

Jennifer Dunne is the author of over a dozen novels and novellas spanning the genres of fantasy, science fiction and romance. (She's either a unique individual who is difficult to categorize, or easily bored—you decide.) Beyond that, there's no point describing her hobbies or activities, since they'll have changed by the time you read this. (Score one for "easily bored".) She lives in upstate New York, where she happily plays the lead role in her very own love story, thankfully with fewer explosions, occult happenings and dire situations than in her fiction. Although, there was that one time...

Jennifer welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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