

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO

*Dancing*  
in  
the *Dark*

Jennifer  
DUNNE



## Dancing in the Dark

Jennifer Dunne

*A humdrum life...* Keri Montero lives a boring life. Work, TV, volunteering, and her quilting hardly make the stuff of fantasy and dreams.

*A mistaken invitation...* All this changes when she receives an invitation to a charity Halloween costume party to benefit the local opera house. She decides to go, even if the tickets are — *gasp* — \$100 each.

*A walk on the wild side...* Her costume can be anything, and Keri decides to live on the wild side for once. Going as a submissive slave girl might invite trouble. But when she meets the man of her dreams, she decides to go even wilder. Keri wants to submit to his *every...sexual...whim*.

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Dancing in the Dark

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# *DANCING IN THE DARK*

Jennifer Dunne

## Chapter One

Keri Montero clicked on the television remote and sat down on the couch to leaf through her mail while she waited for tonight's rerun of *Charmed* to begin. It was one of the episodes with Cole.

The darkly powerful demon transformed by love made her weak in the knees. Even though she had every episode from his three seasons on tape, she still watched the reruns. Knowing that women across the country were sighing and swooning over the same man at the same time made her feel less alone in the empty apartment. And she was still trying to place the accent of Julian McMahon, the Australian actor who played Cole. It changed throughout his three years on the show, from a strangely delivered but undeniably American accent to something indefinable yet incredibly sexy. The closest she'd come to identifying it was that it sounded vaguely French Canadian.

A black envelope with gold lettering drew her attention away from thoughts of hunky half-demons. It was the size of a greeting card, made of heavy, high-quality paper. Wherever it was from, it hadn't come from Hallmark.

There was no name on the return address, just an address, somewhere in the newly renovated arts plaza. She volunteered as an usher at the theatre once or twice a month, allowing her to attend operas and concerts for free. Maybe it was something connected with that?

Slowly, she slid her finger beneath the loosely glued flap and pried the envelope open, prolonging the suspense. Nothing unusual ever happened in her neat and orderly life, and she was strangely reluctant to end the mystery. But finally, the envelope parted, and she pulled out the invitation tucked inside.

"I'm invited to a Halloween costume party to benefit the opera? They must have confused the names of the volunteers with the names of the donors." She glanced at the

price tag for the evening. \$100 per person. These definitely hadn't been meant for the volunteers.

She watched the good-natured squabbling of the sisters on the television, but their witty dialogue no longer captivated her. Instead, her thoughts turned to the invitation. Should she go?

Cost wasn't an issue. She could afford the ticket. She volunteered as an usher because it was the most efficient solution, helping the theatre and other theatre patrons at the same time as it allowed her to see the performances.

A car salesman shouted from the screen, bragging about the huge discounts his stores offered. First commercial break. Unthinkingly, Keri stood up and walked into the kitchen to put a frozen dinner in the microwave.

She stopped, staring at the box in her hand. "What am I doing?"

Her nights all fell into the same routine, if she wasn't volunteering or working on an urgent project she'd brought home from the office. Read the mail while watching *Charmed*. At the first commercial break, heat up a dinner. Eat dinner and watch the rest of the show, cleaning up at the second commercial break. At the third commercial break, write checks for any bills that came in the mail, discard junk mail, and otherwise handle all incoming papers. When the show was over, turn off the TV and head to her craft room to work on her latest quilt. Efficient. Predictable. Boring.

She tossed the box in the microwave and gave it three minutes on high, while she retrieved silverware and a plate. Regardless of her sudden dissatisfaction, she still needed to eat.

As she settled back down in front of the television, her mind continued to worry at the problem of the opera party. Normally, she avoided parties. She'd never Mastered the polite chitchat and small talk required for social mingling. It all seemed so pointless. No one really cared about the weather, or the traffic, or any of the other things people discussed at these events. Why, then, did they spend so much time and effort conversing on these subjects? It was one of those things she'd just never understood.

She wasn't shy, and she was perfectly capable of holding her own in a discussion on any number of a wide variety of topics, from the latest in network security protocols to the intricacies of creating a double wedding ring quilt. As the team leader for her group of consultants, she'd led plenty of meetings over the years, both internally and with customers. Efficient, well-run meetings that accomplished more than any of her peers, which was reflected in her high contract closure rate.

The problem was that she just couldn't grasp the subtleties of the social roles. They'd moved frequently when she was growing up, following her father from job to job. As a freelance efficiency expert, he never spent more than two years in the same place. No sooner had she learned the complex rules governing social interactions at one school, than she was thrust into another school where those rules didn't apply at all. The other children ostracized her for her missteps, until she gave up trying to fit in with them, and focused on the student-teacher interaction that remained essentially the same from place to place.

Her parents approved of her good grades, which were high enough to get her a full scholarship to college. And she wasn't a complete loner. She had friends, gregarious people, who made the first move and approached her.

She'd even had a boyfriend at college, who'd been determined to thaw her ice princess reputation. The reputation mystified her. She wasn't frigid. She just didn't like wasting her time. Brian seemed to understand her feelings, because he hadn't wasted any time before getting her into bed. They were together for three years, but both knew it would end when they graduated.

With her grades, she easily found a job as a well-paid computer consultant, where the analytical skills she'd learned at her father's knee were highly prized. She understood her role. She fit in. So why the sudden feeling of discontent?

She reread the invitation. "Live a legend. Come dressed as your favorite character from any opera."

If she went to a party as a character from an opera, she didn't have to make pointless chitchat or wonder what the correct social niceties were. It wouldn't be her attending the party, it would be the character.

Keri smiled, picturing herself as the Merry Widow throwing one of her famous masquerades. Or perhaps Carmen, enticing all the soldiers present. They had well-defined, thoroughly understood roles. She could follow their social rules for an evening, and enjoy herself with no risk.

But which was her favorite? What part did she want to play?

She cleaned up her dinner according to schedule, reviewing all the parts she knew. She quickly discarded the ingenues. They simply looked beautiful and waited for someone to rescue them. They'd be no fun at a party.

Someone like Carmen, on the other hand, would be tons of fun at a party. Perhaps too much fun. Did she really want to spend an entire evening doing nothing but teasing and flirting? She'd be exhausted by the time the party ended.

No, what she needed was a role that was similar to her own personality. Something that would allow her to be herself, yet give her the security of an external endorsement of her behavior.

That was harder. They didn't write operas about computer consultants.

She needed to think outside the box. Not the lead roles, but supporting characters, ones who were similar to her. She laughed. The stereotypical spear-carrier, that was her. Marching straightforwardly from one side of the stage to the other, in the most efficient and expedient manner, speaking to the leads only when spoken to.

Spear-carriers tended to be male, though. Keri vaguely recalled an opera with Amazon women warriors—maybe Aida? But she didn't want to be an Amazon. She wanted to be soft and feminine. Like...Images of opera scenes flipped through her mind's eye, one after another, too quickly for her to get more than a quick impression. She could almost sense the unifying thread. Almost.

The common character burst into her awareness. A slave girl.



Perfect! A warm glow of contentment settled in her stomach, as if she'd just eaten a big bowl of cinnamon-sugar oatmeal. As a slave, she couldn't possibly make any social errors. She'd just be doing what she'd been told to do. Complete freedom.

Ignoring her usual habit, Keri didn't wait for the show to end before unpacking her laptop and connecting to the Internet. She needed to find a costume, and order it to arrive before Halloween.

She quickly disregarded the usual Halloween slave girl costumes. They'd be fine for a house party, but not if she was planning on donating it to the opera after the event, as the invitation discreetly suggested. She needed an authentic stage costume.

Finally, she found one. There was no picture, but the description sounded promising. "Authentic female slave costume. Silver colored chains, belt, and halter. Pale blue harem pants/skirt of washable gauze."

She blinked at the price. The costume cost more than the ticket. But that made her realize it must be authentic. She knew that stage costumes were terribly expensive, which is why they were designed to be easily altered to fit a wide variety of sizes. And why the always-short-on-money opera company was hoping to pick up some free costumes from this party.

She clicked the appropriate buttons to purchase the costume and typed in her credit card information. An entire evening of partying with the A-list of the city, without having to worry about any of the rules of social mingling. It was worth the money.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keri's heavy laptop case swung in front of her body, getting in the way as she struggled to pull the stack of mail out of her box. She hitched the strap firmly over her shoulder, twisting her upper body so that the padded case thumped into her back. From experience, she knew she'd have about fifteen seconds to finish retrieving the mail before the awkward case overbalanced in some other direction.

The piece of yellow card stock that had wedged itself into one of the box's metal seams finally ripped free, and Keri staggered backward, bumping into the mailboxes lining the opposite wall of the vestibule.

"Ow." She slammed her mailbox closed with more vehemence than was necessary. Then she realized what she was holding. She had a package.

Finally! The Halloween party was tomorrow night, and her costume had yet to arrive. She'd worried that she wouldn't be able to go to the party after all. There was no point in attending if she couldn't dress as a slave girl. Her normal social shyness would keep her hidden in a corner, and fumbling for words on the few occasions she ventured out into the crowd. And she refused to wear some cheap nylon and spandex Halloween costume from the nearest party store, not to a party where some of the guests would be wearing outfits that cost thousands of dollars.

She unlocked the inner door and turned to the supervisor's apartment. One of his duties was accepting all packages for building residents. A trim, energetic man in his mid-40's, he traded his maintenance skills for a rent-free apartment and workshop, spending his off-hours on the scale reconstructions of steam trains that he crafted and sold. Instead of aftershave or cologne, he always smelled of metal filings and solder.

Dave answered his doorbell immediately, still stuffing the rag he'd wiped his hands on back into his jeans.

"Keri. I was expecting you. I've got your package."

A standard shipping box sat on his kitchen table, surrounded by tiny pieces of cast metal, delicate rasps, and a large magnifying glass on a stand. He waved her inside the apartment as he got the box for her.

It was smaller than she expected, not much larger than the box her Nikes had come in. But when she took it from him, the box was reassuringly heavy.

"Thanks, Dave. I was waiting for this."

"Costume supply, huh? Going to a Halloween party this year?"

Keri smiled, thinking of her plans. "Yes. At the Opera."

The supervisor raised an eyebrow. "Mingling with the jet-set, now? What, did you win the lottery and forget to give me my share of the winnings?"

She laughed. "Just my reward for being an unpaid usher the rest of the year."

"Well you have fun, kiddo. You deserve it."

Her smile faltered. The conversation was heading into personal territory not defined by the tenant/supervisor dynamic she understood. As if realizing his comment had made her uneasy, Dave broke the tension with his normal affability. "Smuggle some hors d'oeuvres out in your napkin for me, okay? I can't sit through hours of people yowling in some language I don't understand, but they always put on a great spread."

Keri blinked. "You've been to the opera? I never saw you."

"You couldn't have missed us. Twenty old guys wearing engineer's caps."

She laughed, remembering her fellow ushers' horror at the group of men who'd worn *baseball caps* to the *opera*. "I wasn't volunteering that night. But why'd the train society go to the opera?"

"It was a mix-up. We were supposed to be seeing a traveling production of Starlight Express." He hesitated, then obviously feeling he should say something nice about the opera that she donated so much of her time to, he added, "The show wasn't bad, for something that had no trains in it."

"And the food was great, right?"

"Right! Remember, bring me back some hors d'oeuvres."

"I don't think the costume has pockets."

"Too bad. Eat some for me, then."

Still chuckling, Keri headed up to her apartment to open the package. But when she slit open the shipping tape and looked inside, her eyes widened with horror. This was no stage costume.

A printed flyer lay on top of a pile of folded blue gauze. It featured three eye-popping photos illustrating how the outfit could be worn.

“Authentic slave costume,” she read. “Designed to cater to all styles of slaves, whether your desires are for submission, bondage, or discipline.”

The first photograph showed a woman wearing blue gauze harem pants with a calf-length gauze overskirt, also in blue. The interlocking rings of a chain mail bikini glistened beneath the overlapping layers of gauze, and the metal disks covering her nipples were clearly visible beneath her halter top of twisted blue gauze. Her head was bent subserviently, and her arms were extended in supplication. Bold red letters beneath the photo proclaimed “Submission”.

The second photo, labeled “Bondage”, showed the same woman, standing on tiptoe with her arms stretched above her head. The gauze had been wrapped tightly around her legs and chest until she looked like a mummy, but from her expression, she clearly enjoyed being rolled up like a carpet. Keri’s nipples tightened in sympathy.

Almost afraid to see what the final picture showed, she turned her attention to the image labeled “Discipline.” The woman knelt on her hands and knees on the floor, at an angle to the camera. She wore no overskirt or halter top. The gauze panels that formed her harem pants were bunched at her hips, exposing the pale skin of her ass, bisected by the thin silver chain of her thong. A reddened handprint was clearly visible on one ass cheek. Her breasts hung down, a second chain connecting the disks clipped to her nipples. Just visible in the picture, a man’s hand tugged lightly on the chain. The woman’s head was thrown back, an expression of wild ecstasy transforming her features.

Keri’s breath came quickly, embarrassment heating her cheeks and flooding over her tingling breasts to pool in her stomach. No, below her stomach. And it wasn’t embarrassment.

Desire pulsed between her legs. Oh, God. These pictures were turning her on. She wanted to be that woman. She wanted to be the slave girl whose nipples were tugged

upon until her breasts were hot and swollen. She wanted her ass slapped until her Master pushed apart the tender flesh and thrust his cock inside her, making her subjugation complete.

She opened the flyer, eagerly reading the instructions for how to assemble and wear the costume. She could wear the Submission design to the Halloween party at the opera. It covered enough to be considered acceptable, if somewhat daring, clothing. If she wore a mask, so that no one recognized her, she could have a fantastic time playing the part of a slave girl for the evening.

But tonight, she wanted to wear the Discipline costume. She had no Master to whip her into a frenzy, but she could pretend.

She emptied the contents of the box onto the table. The two panels of blue gauze, four feet long by three feet wide, with an open hem on one narrow side, looked like nothing so much as sheer curtains. A second set of shorter panels were only three feet long. The final gauze panel was only two feet wide, but was five feet long. In addition to the fabric, there were lengths of fine gauge steel chain, the serpentine metal broken by half-inch loops at odd intervals. Some of the chains ended in sturdy lobster-claw clasps, which no doubt attached to the loops in patterns that the instruction manual would describe. She recognized the piece of steel mesh in the shape of a thin rectangle coming to a point at the end as the front of the panty visible beneath the Submissive model's harem pants.

The final item had appeared in none of the photos that she could see. It consisted of two six-inch bars joined by five toggle closures. She flipped it over to check the reverse side, and saw a series of thin metal rods running the length of the bars. The central rod slid from left to right, with a small switch to lock it in position.

She frowned, wondering what it could be, and puzzled by a nagging sense of familiarity. Glancing at the instructions, she ran her finger down the list of contents until she reached the name, "Halter clasp." Suddenly she recognized the familiar positioning of the rods. She had adjustable belts like this, whose buckle could be

repositioned anywhere along their length simply by releasing the tension rods, passing a loop of the belt through, then locking the tension rods in the new location. The ends of the long, narrow strip of gauze must run through the bars, then get locked in place when it was at the right length.

Flipping the pages in the instruction booklet, she found the Discipline instructions, and assembled the pieces she needed. The six-foot chain with the ring a third of the way down its length, three six-inch chains, and one two-foot chain. Apparently, she had a choice for the medium length chain between a smooth one and a heavier one with an additional ring part way down its length.

She checked the notes below the instructions, hoping for guidance. "The crotch chain comes in two varieties—a narrow gauge for maximum penetration, and one designed to hold a dildo fully inserted during play."

A rush of heat pooled between her legs, and her mouth went dry. Oh, God. A dildo. She'd never owned one, but suddenly she wanted one. She imagined it shoved all the way, deep into her vagina, held tight by the chains as her muscles contracted around it, every slap of her Master's hand on her ass driving her against it.

She moaned softly. And what if it wasn't her Master's hand, but his cock, pounding into her ass, while she was already filled with the hard length of the dildo? How good would that feel?

She was definitely going to buy a dildo. But for now, she'd use the fine-gauge chain.

"Maximum penetration," she whispered. The words alone made her hot. When she imagined the chain sawing against her clit, sliding between her folds and pressing deeply, she shivered with anticipation.

The long panels of gauze were threaded onto the waist chain, one on either side of the ring, with plenty of chain left over. The lobster clasp on the crotch chain snapped onto the ring, hanging down between the panels. It was starting to look like the picture. Keri's ass tightened, eager to feel the weight of the chains.

She stripped off her work clothes, standing naked in her living room, and picked up the costume. Centering the ring on the back of her waist, the crotch chain hung down the cleft of her ass. It was cold, and heavy, and completely alien. Her vision swam with the delicious sensation, knowing it was just the beginning of the erotic invasion of her body.

The waist chain crossed in front of her then the long end wrapped completely around her waist a second time. The instructions implied the two ends of the chain could be attached at either the front or back, depending on the waistline of the slave, and which of the small rings you affixed the lobster clasp to. A sizable length of chain could be left over, if desired, and used during play.

Keri wondered how. Would the Master beat the slave with it? Tow the slave around on a leash? Run it up to the chain hanging between the breasts and keep a constant pressure on them?

She groaned, imagining that. Now her nipples ached, begging to be tugged and squeezed, while the hot flesh between her legs pulsed in needy demand.

Clipping the ends of the waist chain in front of her, she let the weight settle on her hips. She adjusted the gauze panels so that the ends met beneath her belly button, then gathered the panels so that they clustered over her hips, exposing her ass and her pubic hair.

She reached between her legs and grabbed the dangling end of the crotch chain. Slowly, she pulled it up until it touched her skin. Reaching one hand between her legs, she spread her labia, her fingers sliding over the slick flesh, and pulled the crotch chain until it slipped between the spread folds.

A pulse of pleasure throbbed through her, and she moaned, tightening the chain. She felt the pressure on her hips as it pulled down on the waist chain, taking the little bit of slack she'd left. The waist chain pulled taut, and still she tightened the crotch chain. It dug into the cleft of her ass, pressing against her anus. Her muscles tightened

in instinctive response, forcing the chain to bite deeper. She thought she was going to come right then from the pleasure.

Barely able to see what she was doing, she passed the end of the crotch chain around the strands of the waist chain in front of her and clipped it in place. Experimenting, she bent down in a squat and stood again. The chain stroked her deeply, slick with lubrication and tantalizingly cool. She whimpered. Unable to stop herself, she bent and straightened again and again, until the chain burned her sensitive flesh and she wanted to beg for release. But there was no one to beg. No one was forcing her to endure this relentless torture, and no one could free her from the teasing strokes by plunging deeply inside her.

Grabbing the edge of her counter, she stood completely still, panting for control, until the frenzied need faded.

“What’s next?” she whispered.

The loose panels became harem pants by rolling the bottom edge around a short length of chain until they were the right length, then clipping the chain closed around her ankle. She very carefully lowered herself to the floor to do this, gasping when the crotch chain rasped across her swollen clitoris. But soon the “pants” were tied around her ankles.

Now she needed to attach the clips to her breasts. The backs of the silver disks were hinged, hiding a keyhole-shaped piece of brass wire.

The wires slid around her nipples, the narrow sections pinching the nipples and making them erect so that the rounded sections would cling to them. The slight pressure was just enough to keep her nipples tight.

Closing the hinges, she gasped as the disks tweaked the tips of her nipples. The small chain clipped on brass rings soldered to the back of the disks. The added weight tugged on her nipples, a flash of fire that connected straight to the smoldering crotch chain.



She walked—slowly, as each step rubbed the crotch chain between her labia and over her clitoris—into her bedroom, and faced the full-length mirror. She didn't recognize herself.

The woman in the mirror radiated sex, from her high, pointed breasts swaying as she moved, to the visibly swollen labia showing deep pink between her widespread legs. Her face was flushed with passion, her eyes glazed and somewhat wild, and her deep red lips parted to let harsh breaths escape.

Keri tugged lightly on the chain connecting her breasts. Fire blazed across her nipples. She tipped her head back and moaned, tugging the chain again, then again.

Her world faded in a red haze. Somehow, she staggered back onto the bed, falling upon it in an ungainly sprawl. She drew her legs up, spreading her knees and thighs wide, and flexed her hips in time to her tugs. The lace of her comforter chafed her ass while the crotch chain rasped up and down over her throbbing clit. She pumped harder, imagining the stroke of her Master's hands.

Sliding one hand down the slippery chain, she slipped her fingers past the teasing metal, deep into her vagina. Her muscles contracted around her fingers, and she yanked the breast chain. The climax overwhelmed her, arching her body up off the bed in a trembling bow for what felt like hours of agony as she teetered on the precipice. Then she fell.

A hoarse scream of triumph ripped from her throat. She collapsed onto the bed, too weak to move, glowing aftershocks pulsing through her body. One thought kept playing over and over in her head. If it was this good when she was alone, how much better would it be if she had a partner?

## Chapter Two

The next evening, Keri flicked on the television as soon as she got home. She needed the reassurance of her *Charmed* fix after the day she'd had.

They'd finished the bid for the Uninational account, and were going over presentation strategies for the Monday meeting, when she got the news that the lead on the competition's bid team had changed. They'd put Andy Thibodeau in charge.

Her team had immediately gone into scramble mode. Thibodeau was a shark, infamous for his ability to destroy his competition's bid proposals with a few well-placed questions. Their bid proposal had already been solid. But with Thibodeau across the table from them, they needed to make their case airtight.

She'd assigned two of her team to scrutinize the competition's initial bid, searching for weaknesses Thibodeau's team might not have solved in their final bid, or areas where their solution used back-level technology compared to her team's solution. Meanwhile, she'd reviewed all of their competitor's proposed efficiencies.

The first time she'd suggested the strategy of analyzing efficiencies, as a junior consultant working her first bid proposal, the team leader had thought she was crazy. He couldn't imagine why she'd want to highlight the opposition's benefits. She'd run the analysis anyway, doing it on overtime so it wouldn't impact the work her team leader had assigned. When her analysis tipped the scales during the presentation meeting, she'd instantly won a convert.

Other consultants had tried to copy her strategy of spiking the opponent's efficiencies, but they'd never equaled her success. It wasn't surprising. She had an innate understanding of efficiency analysis that they could never grasp.

As a child, she'd fallen asleep to her father reading aloud from his efficiency reports. Combining his quality time with his daughter and the overtime reading he

needed to do for work was, of course, the most efficient solution. But one of the truisms she'd quickly learned was that efficiency did not exist in a vacuum. Efficiencies, whether of time, money, or resources, were gained by sacrificing something else. It might be individual power and control, process flexibility, or something as simple as never learning any fairy tales until you were in junior high school. The trick was to give up something you didn't particularly care about, to increase the efficiencies in an area you did care about.

When she reviewed competitors' bids, Keri found that the underlying compromises of the efficiencies jumped out at her. She could tell at a glance what they'd be sacrificing in order to implement their proposed savings. Using the value charts her team drew up for their own proposal, she could make a grid of all the ways that their solution enhanced values that the competitors' solution compromised in the name of "efficiency."

With a little careful questioning during the presentations, she could find out which of those values meant the most to the customer, then play up how their competitor's solution would sacrifice those very things the customer valued most. Invariably, the customer asked the competitor if their solution could be modified so those values wouldn't be sacrificed, at which point the competitor would have to admit to the loss of efficiency. If they didn't admit to it, Keri would ask clarifying questions until it was obvious to the customer.

She was rapidly developing as feared a reputation as Thibodeau's, and she'd looked forward to someday matching her skills against his. But she'd hoped to have more than one day of warning before she was called upon to do so!

Realizing she was working herself into a totally unproductive tizzy, she sat on the couch and breathed deeply, allowing Julian McMahon's resonant voice to wash over her as Cole lectured Phoebe on the dedication needed to fight demons.

Oh, that man looked good shirtless and sweaty. Keri swallowed, her eyes tracking his broad chest and skintight black pants. She wouldn't mind a little hand-to-hand training from a dark demon like him.

Her thoughts skipped to the costume waiting for her in the bedroom, the costume she'd be wearing to the opera party in a little over an hour. Her imagination was a little vague on exactly what other sorts of training a slave might receive, but her blood hummed with the possibility.

Unable to sit still in front of the television, Keri abandoned any attempt to pay attention to the episode, now filled with "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" style martial arts fighting, and hurried into the bedroom to dress for her party.

The Submission outfit started out similarly to the Discipline outfit, with the gauze panels on either side, but they stayed spread out, their edges meeting at the front and back. The two shorter panels were then threaded on to the long section of the waist chain, with their edges meeting at the sides, so that none of her skin was exposed. She rolled up the bottoms of the longer panels around the small chains which she fastened around her ankles, and studied the effect in the mirror.

To the casual observer, she was wearing harem pants, with a slit skirt over them. No one would know that the "pants" left her inner thighs and crotch bare, but every step she took would remind her of her secret nudity.

The crotch chain was attached similarly to how she'd attached it last night, but looser. Instead of sliding between her vulva and pressing against her clit, it hung just below her skin, teasing her with swaying metal caresses as she moved. After all, the party was supposed to run for at least three hours. She'd never make it if her clothing got her so hot she started climaxing in the first fifteen minutes.

A new addition was the chain-link modesty panel that covered the crotch chain in front. A tiny hook at the tip linked it to the crotch chain and the wider part simply folded over one of the inner loops of the waist chain. The weight of the mesh kept it in place.

Keri moaned softly when she attached the nipple clips. The firm embrace of the wire tightened her nipples into hard nubs, aching to be tugged and squeezed. The Submission outfit called for a gauze halter to be wrapped over her breasts, allowing the silvery disks covering her nipples to peak through. But she wanted more than just the occasional brush of gauze to arouse her sensitive breasts.

Opening the box her costume had come in, she found the short chain from the Discipline style, and clipped it to the disks. The added weight tugged gently at her swollen nipples. Keri groaned softly and tugged the chain twice, sending flames leaping from the tip of her breasts to her clit.

She pulled her hand away, torturing herself by not continuing the exquisite torment. Instead, she pleated the remaining gauze panel and threaded the ends through the bar clasp, locking it in place when the panel had been shortened to the correct length. She wrapped the halter around her neck, crossed the gauze between her breasts with a twist, then pulled it behind her. After a moment of awkward fumbling, she managed to link the two sides of the clasp together.

It felt like she had a bar of metal soldered to her spine, it was pressed so tightly. The gauze hugged her breasts, and pushed against the metal disks covering her nipples. She undulated, in a faux belly dance, and moaned with the pleasure. It felt like a lover cupped her breasts in his hands, kneading them gently as she moved.

She should probably avoid the dance floor at the party.

The last part of her costume was an addition she'd picked up on her way home from work. A large white, beaded domino mask covered most of her face. It allowed her to wear her slave costume in public without worrying about who would recognize her, and how she'd react the next time she saw them, back in her normal role.

Tonight, she was a slave girl. Keri had even thought up a story for her slave persona. Her Master had instructed her to go to the party, and treat it as an auction block, displaying her wares so that he could sell her to a new Master. This assured that she would mingle with the maximum number of men, without worrying about how to

act. If any of the men rebuffed her, it only meant they were not in the market for a slave, and she should simply move on to the next.

Checking her appearance one last time in the mirror, she reassured herself that no one who knew her would recognize her. She barely recognized herself.

She slipped on a thin pair of ballet slippers, then pulled on a beige full-length raincoat. It was nothing distinctive, nothing that other guests at the party might recognize as hers. Fortunately the nights were still warm enough that she did not need to wear her wool coat—the brilliant eggplant would give her away to the other ushers immediately.

Knowing she wouldn't be able to carry a purse once she arrived at the party, she dumped out her pocketbook and removed her apartment key and cab fare. They went in the coat's concealed inner pocket, where they'd be safe until the party was over. She retrieved her invitation from the magnets that had held it to her refrigerator door and slid it deep into the coat's side pocket, then checked to make sure it couldn't accidentally fall out.

Ready at last, she hesitated in front of the television, remote in hand. Was she really doing the right thing? Maybe she should be reviewing the proposal again, before facing Thibodeau on Monday, rather than wasting her time at a party.

Her eyes focused on the screen, watching Cole tease Phoebe by pretending to mistake her kiss for her sister's. As if echoing Keri's thoughts, Phoebe asked what element of their training they were going to work on next. He answered that he wanted to take her on a picnic, instead.

"That's right," Keri said. "You can't work all the time. You need to take breaks to rest and recuperate, or you lose your efficiency. Thanks for the reminder, Julian."

She clicked off the television and tossed the remote onto the coffee table. Belting her coat securely, she took a deep breath then left her apartment.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keri accepted the claim check for her coat, sliding it into her halter-top. She felt the coat check attendant's eyes following her motion, his gaze riveted on the glittering silver disks just visible beneath the folds of blue gauze.

A proper slave, she undulated, shifting her breasts to "make certain the ticket wouldn't fall out." Her disks flashed and he sucked in a quick breath.

"Careful, ma'am. You don't want to come out of your costume."

She laughed breathily. "Yes I do. But not until after the party's over."

His gulp was clearly audible as she turned in a flurry of gauze and headed into the main hall. Swirling colors and fantastic shapes surrounded her. Many of the guests had chosen to wear traditional masquerade costumes that could be used for any opera's masquerade scenes. Headdresses in the shape of animals abounded. She spotted two horses, a swan, a peacock, and a glorious red and orange bird that was either a phoenix or a firebird. Other guests wore opulent robes, the diplomatic costumes for imaginary imperial courts, or military costumes full of glitter and brocade that had never been worn in any army. While most of the guests wore more than Keri, some wore less. A tall, toned woman carrying a rubber spear was strikingly dressed in an extremely revealing Amazon costume.

A tuxedoed waiter swept by with a silver tray containing three crystal champagne flutes. "Champagne, ma'am?" he offered.

"Yes, thank you." She took one of the flutes and sipped the sparkling vintage. It was deep and mellow with just a touch of sweetness, not the overly tart drink familiar to countless wedding attendees.

Turning in place, she allowed her gaze to sweep the party, searching for the first man to whom she would display her wares. A young officer dressed in blue and red stood near the wall, tripping himself on his cavalry sword whenever he moved. Keri smiled brilliantly and sashayed over to him.

"Greetings, sir," she purred, pulling back her shoulders to thrust her breasts at him. She swayed lightly from side to side, causing the chain links of her modesty panels to

clink and rattle. The man's eyes widened as his gaze dropped first to her breasts, then to her crotch. He inhaled sharply.

"Good evening." He licked his lips, visibly struggling for composure. "I'm Don José, the soldier from Carmen. Who are you?"

"I am Adina, the slave girl." She winked conspiratorially. "I appear in many operas. I'm a very *popular* character."

"Yes, I can see why." He flushed, then blurted out, "So, are you having fun at the party?"

Keri hesitated a fraction of a second, then decided to stay in character. That was the whole point of dressing as a slave.

"Not as much fun as I could have," she answered.

The conversation stuttered through a few more awkward exchanges, but it was quickly clear to Keri that the young soldier would have no idea what to do with a slave, unlike the real Don José, who had known exactly what to do with Carmen. She needed to move on to her next prospect.

"It was lovely to meet you," she said. "I'll look you up if I'm ever in Carmen. But I'm on a mission from my Master, and must leave now."

Her next prospect was an older man in a gold- and jewel-encrusted purple turban, swathed in layers of purple, blue, and green robes. No sooner had Keri begun speaking to him than a woman wearing a matching outfit in shades of pink, red, and violet, appeared at the man's side, possessively laying her left hand on his shoulder. Keri couldn't miss the flash of light on the 3-carat diamond.

She dipped a curtsy to the woman, smiled at the man, and turned to find another prospect in the milling crowd.

Four prospects later, she was beginning to tire of the game. The teasing brushes of the crotch chain were making it difficult to concentrate, and she longed to find someone



who would know how to treat a slave properly. But so far, none had been willing to play the role of her Master.

She smiled brilliantly at the man before her, laced into the skintight breeches and cutaway coat of a Victorian lord, and introduced herself again.

"Sir Edgar, from Lucia of Livermoor," he responded.

Keri nodded, and dipped a slight curtsy, flushing as the crotch chain stroked her. "A pleasure to meet you, my lord."

"So I see." He chuckled. "But that's nothing to the pleasure of getting to know me better."

"My lord?" She held her breath, hoping.

"Nothing's happening at this party. Why don't we slip away, and you can show me your dance of the seven veils in private."

She hesitated. It was all just pretend. But how far should she go in character?

"Come on," he urged, speaking to her chest instead of her face. "Once I'm out of this frog suit, I can show you a few moves of my own."

She was sure he could. But his eagerness to get her alone and out of her costume did not excite her. She felt vaguely panicked, and quickly reassured herself that there were plenty of people around to prevent him from getting violent when she refused.

"I've been ordered by my Master to stay at the party, and that is what I must do," she said, backing up half a step.

"Your Master, huh? How'd you like a new Master, genie? Let me rub your bottle, and you'll be happy to serve me."

Keri inched back another half step, bumping into someone who'd come up behind her. She spun around, half afraid that Sir Edgar had a partner who had moved to block her retreat.

The man facing her was tall, made even taller by a radiant sun mask of gold-colored metal, covering his entire head except for a cutaway block at the bottom exposing his

mouth and chin. He'd coated the visible part of his face and throat with shimmering gold body paint, even his lips, so that he seemed made entirely of metal.

He put out his arm to steady her, parting his orange and gold robes and revealing a yellow silk shirt and pants that clung lovingly to his body. Keri's mouth went dry at the sheer masculine appeal of him.

His hand, even encased in a gilded leather glove, burned like the sun of his costume where it rested against her arm. She glanced up at his eyes, hidden behind slits in the mask, and mouthed, "Play along. Please."

She curled her fingers around the silk-clad iron of his biceps, and turned to look back at Sir Edgar. "I already have a Master who pleases me."

Sir Edgar glanced up and down the length of the sun god, measuring him, then snorted in disgust. "Tell your girlfriend not to be such a tease."

He turned and stalked into the crowd, aiming for one of the circulating waiters and another glass of champagne.

Keri smiled up at her savior and reluctantly released his arm. "Thanks. I'm Adina, the slave girl."

The sun god's golden lips twisted in a wry smile, and he lifted his hand to brush her cheek with the warm leather of his gloved finger. "I don't recall any operas where the slave wears a mask."

His voice was deep and resonant, with a hint of an accent in his vowels and the cadence of his words. Something melodic. Possibly French, or Spanish, or Gaelic.

Keri couldn't help herself. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, like a flower seeking the sunlight.

She felt his warmth along the length of her body, and knew he'd stepped closer. His thumb gently stroked her cheek, then traced the shape of her lips. Her lips opened on a soft sigh.

His other hand brushed her hip, his fingertips caressing her side and back as he followed the line of the waist chain. He ran his index finger down the length of her spine, dipping below the edge of the chain. Then he hooked his finger in the ring and tugged, pulling the crotch chain up between her legs.

She gasped, her eyes flying wide open. "What are you—?"

He released and tightened his hold on the ring, tapping her clit and labia with the chain. Her words dissolved into a moan. "Would you like to dance?"

She blinked, fighting her way out of the sensual haze he'd surrounded her in. "What?"

"In case it's slipped your notice, we're at a very public party. Dancing is the only socially acceptable reason for me to put my arms around you." He gave another light tug on her chain. "And I very much want to have my arms around you."

"Me too."

He guided her to the wooden floor tiles laid down over the marble to make a dance floor. A string quartet in the corner played a graceful waltz, drowning out the babble of conversation from the rest of the milling and mingling guests.

He clasped her hand in a warm grip, and rested his other hand at the small of her back, where he could toy with her chain at his leisure. Gently, he pressed her body forward, until their hips brushed. She could feel the tip of his erection, hard and hot beneath the thin silk of his pants, brush her stomach, but the chain mesh of her modesty panel shielded her from his more intimate touch. Her free hand clutched his shoulder, bunching the silken layers of his cloak in her fingers as she tried to find a stable point of reference. Her senses were whirling out of control, and she feared she would collapse unless she hung on tightly.

Slowly, they began to move, swaying in time with the music. Pressed against him, she found her feet echoing his movements, circling the dance floor in a flawless box step.

A wave of heat washed over her cheeks, and she knew she must be blushing furiously. She ignored it. "I already told you, I'm Adina, the slave girl. Who are you?"

"I'm the sun god, Apollo. A Mozart creation, for either a lavishly costumed Apollo and Hyacinth, or from the masquerade in *Così fan tutte*."

"You put quite a lot of thought into your costume."

"I put quite a lot of thought into everything I do."

"I'll bet. Your costume suits you."

"As does yours." His golden head bent closer, although he was careful to avoid hitting her with any of the wavy rays extending from the mask. "I've been watching you since you entered the party," he confessed.

"Really?" The thought sent a warm glow through her, that this godlike being had sought her out.

"Yes. But I was trying to figure out who your Master was. I hadn't realized you were unattached, or I'd have approached you much sooner."

"Why?" Her conversational skills were not at their best right now, since all she could think about was the man pressed against her, the heat of his body, the caress of his gloved hands, and the pulsing need flaring to life beneath his skilled touch.

"It's bad form for one Master to approach another Master's slave without permission."

That got through, startling her so that her dance steps faltered. She quickly recovered, once again matching her movements to his.

"You're a Master? A real one?"

"Yes. Aren't you a real slave?"

"No. I never...that is, I'd like to, but I didn't know how."

"It's easy. All you have to do is follow your Master's every instruction, and let him guide you to fulfilling your sensual potential."

"I could do that. If you were the Master."

"It just so happens, I'm in the market for a new slave."

"What happened to your old one? If you don't mind my asking." Keri blurted the apology out, realizing that her question could be considered prying, and not knowing what was allowed within the context of a Master/slave relationship.

"You must never fear asking a question," her new Master told her. "I may answer or not, as I wish, but I will never chastise you for asking."

He tugged rapidly on her chain, stroking her deeply with the crotch chain and rubbing it back and forth across her clit. Keri closed her eyes and sighed with pleasure. She wanted more, much more.

"You were right to ask my permission, though. A good slave always asks her Master for permission. And you see how good slaves are rewarded."

"Oh, yes, Master. I do. I want to be a very good slave."

"Then take your hand off my shoulder and slide it beneath my cloak. Let me feel your fingers caressing my back."

"As you will it, Master." Keri followed his orders, smoothing her palm over the silk, warmed from his body heat, that encased his muscled back. Her fingers played up and down his spine in long strokes, then feathered out over his shoulder blades.

"Nice," he whispered, pulling her chain in time to her leisurely caresses. "Very nice."

She lost all awareness of the string quartet, and of the other dancers surrounding them. Her world narrowed to the man before her, the heat of his body blazing forth, his muscled back bunching and relaxing beneath her touch, and the teasing chain stroking her labia and brushing her clit. And still they danced.

Warm liquid trickled down the inside of her thigh, and she gasped. "Master!"

"What is it?"

"I'm so ready for you, I'm leaking."

"And, of course, you're not wearing any panties."

“No.”

“Well, then, we’ll just have to take you somewhere that this won’t be a problem.”

“Where?” The swollen flesh of her labia pulsed with every beat of her heart, and she wriggled against the taut chain, trying to find relief. Her movement flexed her breasts against their constraining wrap, pressing the disks onto her nipples. Fire blazed through her, and she moaned.

“And when, Master? Soon? Please?”

He pulled away from her, releasing her hand so that he could turn and lead her from the dance floor. “We’ll get our coats now. My apartment is only a short drive away.”

She gave him her coat check ticket, and he claimed both their coats, dropping a five-dollar bill into the bowl for tips. He helped her into her beige raincoat, then tossed back his cloak to free his arms and shrugged into his camel-colored wool coat. The muted gold of the wool made it seem as if he had diffused the splendor of his costume, but been unable to completely conceal it.

They waited while one of the parking attendants retrieved his Magma Red Mercedes glass-topped convertible from Valet Parking. Without his teasing pulls on the chains of her costume, the arousal that had been building in her started to disperse. Instead of burning fire between her legs, an all-over restless itching consumed her.

Keri reached up and pulled off her mask, shaking her hair free then rubbing her eyes.

“Now that I’m respectably clothed, I don’t mind who recognizes me.”

Her sun god turned to respond, then froze in place. She wondered instantly if she’d done something wrong, if he found her looks less than pleasing.

When he finally spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper. “You have lifted your first veil to reveal great beauty. I hope it is only the first of many enjoyable revelations tonight.”

Keri blushed at his extravagant compliment. But it was too smooth and polished, as if it was a line he'd spoken many times before. Whatever had stopped him in his tracks, it hadn't been her great beauty.

His earlier admonition to ask any question she wanted gave her the courage to ask, "What about you? When are you removing your mask?"

"The seats and mirrors of my car are already adjusted, since I drove here in costume. I'd prefer not to waste time resetting them. And haven't you always dreamed of making love to a god?"

He reached over and stroked her cheek with his gloved fingers, caressing the faint line where her mask had rested. Her skin turned to molten flame beneath his soft touch, lava flowing through her veins to burn her face, her neck, her breasts.

Her head tilted back, offering herself to his onslaught. His ornate mask blocked out the bright lights from the marquee under which they waited, reflected lights sparkling from the gold plating on his wavy brilliants, but leaving his face in shadow. Then his gilded lips closed over hers, soft and warm as a kiss of sunshine.

His hand stroked gently from her cheek to her jaw line, then down the column of her throat. Then lower still. His fingers slipped inside the collar of her raincoat, gliding down her chest until the twisted gauze of her halter-top stopped them.

"I will be your god," he whispered. "And you will worship me."

He nipped her lower lip, just hard enough to startle her without hurting, at the same time as he tugged on the chain linking her breasts.

Her climax took her completely by surprise, bursting over her in a fireball of light and heat. He swallowed her startled cry, and wrapped one strong arm around her to steady her until she regained control of her body. She realized she was clutching the lapels of his coat, crushing the fine wool, while he continued nibbling and tasting her lips.

Sensing her return to awareness, he lifted his head and allowed air to invade the space between their bodies. The gold body paint on his lips and chin was smeared, with patches of dark red lip showing through.

“Yes, Master,” she whispered. “I will.”



## **Chapter Three**

The short ride to his apartment in the artists' section of the city passed in a haze. He ordered her to open her raincoat and spread her legs, and reached over to stroke the damp skin of her inner thigh or tug on her crotch chain whenever he didn't need two hands for driving. With her head tilted back, Keri could look out the glass roof up at the distant stars as her sun god fondled her.

She was moaning and writhing in her leather seat, paying attention only to his teasing caresses and the burning need that followed his touch, when the car suddenly became surrounded by darkness.

She blinked, shocked into awareness. "Where are we?"

"Private garage."

He opened his door, the Mercedes illuminating the doorsill for him. It was enough light for her to see that they were in the center stall of an old wooden carriage house, with room for three vehicles. Once he'd carefully maneuvered his large mask out of the car, he moved quickly, coming around to her side and opening the door for her.

Grateful for his steadying hand, she exited the car on trembling legs. Her body hummed with hot anticipation, so that she could hardly think of anything but getting their clothes off and feeling him inside her at last.

He stepped behind her to close the car door, then wrapped her in a tight embrace, the heat of his erection cradled in the cleft of her ass and one of his hands cupping the chain mail mesh of her mock panty. He lifted the gauze panel at the back of her costume, pushing aside the other panels to expose her ass. His cock slid up her cleft, only the thin crotch chain preventing her from completely engulfing his hot length.

His free arm encircled her chest, his fingers resting on the chain connecting her breasts.

"I want you," he whispered, the gloved fingers of his other hand slipping past her slack crotch chain to slide between her wet folds.

She moaned, closing her eyes and leaning back against him, her knees flexing to lower her further onto his sweet caress. He moved with her, rubbing his cock against the chain on her ass, then forcing his way past it to stroke his cock against her bare skin.

They groaned in unison.

"I want to take you now, spread you on the hood of my car and feast on your delights until we're both ready to die from the pleasure."

His fingers stroked deep within her, burning her with a fire that brought shivering ecstasy in its wake. She whimpered, writhing against his hand, feeling his cock hot and solid behind her. It was good, so good, but it could be so much better.

"Yes, Master. Whatever you want."

"My sweet slave. You deserve better for your first time."

He took a deep breath, and gave her one last deep caress, then withdrew his fingers. A moment later, he stepped away from her, depriving her of his warmth. She staggered, and nearly fell.

His arm came around her again, holding her steady without a hint of sexuality. "Come on. My apartment is on the second floor."

She followed her sun god to an enclosed walk connecting the carriage house and the main building. He unlocked the outside door to the building, then entered a code in a surprisingly sophisticated burglar alarm to confirm that he truly belonged in the building. It was a far cry from her building's antique dual-lock system.

"Isn't that an unusual amount of protection in this part of town?" she asked.

"The first floor is an art gallery, with some extremely pricey artwork. The owner doesn't want to take any chances."

They climbed the stairs at the back of the building, then he unlocked the door on the second floor landing. His apartment wasn't just *on* the second floor, it *was* the second floor.

A long hallway stretched the length of the building, hung with black and white photos and brilliantly colored paintings. He hung his keys on the wall beside the door, and flicked on the lights. Recessed spots illuminated the paintings, making the yellows and reds seem to burst into flame.

He steered her toward the second door on the right. It was a bedroom, but a bedroom like none she'd ever seen.

The walls were painted a flat, matte black. A full-size four-poster of wrought iron claimed pride of place in the middle of the room, covered with a black and gold comforter. Heavy black drapes covered the window opposite the door, gold tassels hanging useless beside them. A strange contraption of black leather and wood vaguely resembling a hammock chair hung suspended from the ceiling in one corner of the room, with a padded black massage table underneath it. Artfully arranged on the wall, a collection of whips in all sizes, shapes and colors filled the next corner, providing a welcome splash of color. They ranged in size from a tiny blue one that looked like a nylon feather duster, to one that was easily three feet long, containing a dozen lashes of knotted red leather.

In the third corner, a small bureau of gleaming black lacquer displayed a forest of pristine white candles. The fourth corner contained a door—black, of course—and the room's only artwork, an ebony-framed painting of a blooming red rose under glass.

Her sun god waited patiently, letting her study the entire room. When she did not move, he said softly, "Welcome to my dungeon."

"What are all these things?"

"Suspension sling, whipping bench, whips, bed, bureau, and connecting bathroom," he answered.

"You use them all?" Her voice cracked on the last word.

He folded her reassuringly in his arms, holding her against the warmth of his body. "Not all at once. Certainly not for someone just learning the joys of slavery."

Keri relaxed into his embrace. "That's a relief."

"Ultimately, the decision to use or not use any equipment rests with you. You can stop anything I'm doing just by saying 'red light.' And start it again by saying 'green light.'"

"It's my choice?" She turned, instinctively trying to see his expression, but his golden sun mask merely reflected her own wide-eyed fears at her. "But I don't know..."

"Shh." He placed one gloved finger on her lips, silencing her. "I will tell you what to do, and how and when to do it. I will push your body past the boundaries of what you thought you wanted, into realms you've never dared dream of. That journey may be scary, but trust that I always have your safety and pleasure in mind. If anything I do causes you pain due to an awkward position or incites unwarranted fear, stop me. I can fix your position, and we can discuss your fears."

She shivered, his deep, accented voice stroking her soul the way his touch stroked her body. Keri nodded. "Okay. What do we do first?"

Gently, he opened her overcoat and lifted it off her shoulders.

"First, you dress like a proper slave. Let me see those sweet breasts and honeyed lips."

He turned her to face him, his shielded gaze lowering so that she'd understand he wasn't talking about her mouth.

Keri trembled, filled with excitement and just a hint of fear. She breathed deeply, thrusting out her chest, kicked off her ballet slippers and spread her legs in a wide stance, her hands on her hips.

"Should I remove the chain mesh, Master?"

"Yes."

She pulled the modesty panel free, sighing as the weight was lifted from the chains around her waist. Her sun god scooped up the slippers, then reached out and took the chain mesh from her, deposited them with her coat onto the whipping table.

He walked around her, studying her, then announced, "I still can't see how you hunger for me. Open your pants."

Keri swallowed, remembering how good the Discipline outfit had felt last night. Her eager fingers fumbled on the waist chains, finding and releasing the lobster clasp. Quickly, she pulled the two shorter gauze panels off of the chain, then refastened the clasp. Again, her sun god was there to take the panels out of her hands, adding them to the pile on the table.

She parted the gauze in the back, exposing her ass. Then she opened the front, exposing her damp pubic hair. Her sun god's golden lips turned in a satisfied smile.

"Yes, that's better. Now to transform you into Snow White, with snow white skin and lips as red as blood."

She trembled again at his words, not knowing what to expect. It sounded dark and sinister, something worthy of a powerful demon rather than a sun god. She could hardly wait to find out what he planned to do to her.

He crossed to the bed, and swept aside the covers. There were no sheets on the bed, only a glossy black covering.

"On the bed, slave. On your back, with your legs spread."

Keri eagerly climbed onto the bed, stretching herself spread-eagled across the cool rubber sheet. He strolled slowly to her side, then leisurely reached between her legs and slid one gloved finger beneath her slack crotch chain. His finger stroked over her pubis, then back, the tip caressing the inner folds of her labia, then brushing her clit. She tilted her hips up, and his finger slipped further still, until it circled the entrance of her vagina. She moaned, eager for him to enter her further. Instead, he took his hand away.

"Your lips are honeyed, but they're not yet red as blood. We'll have to fix that."

"How...?" she breathed, following his gaze to the whips hung on the wall. "You're going to whip me? There?"

"Yes. With the softest whip I own. It will feel like a hundred silk threads sliding over your flesh, the teasing caress of a waterfall pounding against you, demanding entrance to your hidden mysteries."

Warm liquid dribbled down the crack of her ass as her body reacted to his words. "Oh yes, Master. Please."

"Turn sideways on the bed, so that I can reach you. And tuck up your knees."

She did as he instructed, bending her knees so that she could fit crosswise on the bed, her eager pussy inches from the edge. She spread her arms wide in a gesture of offering.

While she repositioned herself, he walked over to the wall of whips and lifted down the tiny blue whip, then took the two heavy golden tassels from the drapes. He looped each tassel around a bedpost, and placed the ends in her hands.

"Hold onto the tassels. If you let go, I'll stop whipping. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Master."

He unclipped the crotch chain, letting it slither across her sensitive flesh until it pooled on the bed between her legs. Keri tightened her grasp on the tassels, eager yet afraid at the same time.

Softly, slowly, he stroked the tips of the whip's many lashes across her primed flesh. It felt like hundreds of delicate butterfly caresses. She sighed with pleasure and closed her eyes, the better to devote her attention to the sensations with which he was blessing her.

He flicked the whip sharply, slapping her pussy with the side of it. Keri gasped in shock, but her flesh pulsed and warm liquid trickled over the lip of her vagina. He slapped her again, but when her body tensed for a third blow, he surprised her with

another teasing caress, drawing the tips of the lashes from her ass all the way up to her pubis.

Then he feathered more caresses down the insides of her thighs, for all the world feeling as if he was painting her legs with a thick, soft brush. Keri relaxed, her thighs falling further apart, as she opened herself to his gentle touch.

The whip-slap against her pussy shocked her into half-rising from the bed, her fists clenching the golden tassels and her chest and shoulders lifting up. The lashes continued to flick against her swollen labia, short, sharp taps that teased her wet lips to open for him, pulsing in time to his strikes.

Half-sitting as she was, Keri could see her pussy spread before him, gleaming with the lubricant he'd called from her eager body. The wet red lips of her labia pulsed and clenched with every kiss of his whip. Soon she was rocking her hips, leaning into his strokes, gasping and groaning with each hit.

He whipped her one last time, the nylon lashes of the whip curling deep within the gaping crevice of her exposed pussy, and she came in a powerful rush, screaming in wordless ecstasy.

Shuddering and trembling with the aftershocks, she clutched the golden tassels with aching fingers, knowing only that she could not let go, or this wonderful, blissful feeling might end. His gloved fingers stroked her pulsing flesh, fondling her clit and probing into her vagina. She moaned, unable to form words to beg him to continue touching her that way.

"Now your lips are sweet with honey, and red as blood," he told her. "Time for the kiss from the prince who will awaken the sleeping Snow White."

She heard his robes rustling, then felt the heavy, hot tip of his cock sliding down the path his fingers had just traveled. Keri whimpered, needing him inside her, filling her. She was wide open, hot and wet, and his cock slid smoothly into her in one long thrust.

He grabbed the chains around her waist, pulling her hips closer.

"Lock your legs around my waist," he ordered.

She obeyed instantly, pulling him tight so that his balls brushed her ass, and his thick pubic hair teased her swollen clit.

She expected him to move inside her, thrusting in and out, using his cock like a whip. Instead, he held completely still, sheathed deep inside her. Slowly, he glided one gloved hand up her quivering stomach, over her gauze-covered breasts, to the chain hanging between them.

He tugged the chain. Sharp pain blossomed on her nipples, then flowed in a wave to her center, where his cock was still sheathed tight inside her. Her muscles clenched around him, hot, and hard and oh so good, and she moaned.

“Oh yes, Master. Again. Please. Again and again and again.”

Carefully, he pulled the gauze of her halter top up, freeing her breasts. He tapped lightly on each disk, sending waves of fire through her. Each time, her muscles clenched, tightening around his rigid cock.

Instead of building her to a blazing climax, he smoothed his gloved hands over the curves of her breasts, stroking the sides and swirling around the base where they rose from her rib cage. Keri's eyes drifted closed, her breathing slowing to match his caresses as she sprawled bonelessly on the bed.

Then he tugged on the chain.

She bolted half upright with a gasp, fists clenched around the drapery tassels and shoulder muscles straining to lift her from the bed. Sheets of fire cascaded from her nipples to her core, and she tightened around his cock, the unyielding iron sending spasms of pleasure through her as her muscles clenched and released, again and again. She panted for air, unable to breathe in the sudden heat consuming her.

Then his hands were stroking and gentling her, once again soothing her body until she relaxed. Her shoulders sagged, and she collapsed back onto the bed. Her breathing slowed, but she did not truly relax. Every time his caresses shifted position, she held her breath and tensed her body, wondering if this time, he'd bathe her in a wave of fire that would completely destroy her.



Eventually, even though his hands remained soothing and gentle, the anticipation coursing through her sparked its own restless fire. She panted for breath, fearing that he would not give her the release she desired until she was calm and placid. The fear fed the hunger, and she trembled with need. Her deep muscles quivered, gripping and releasing his hard cock.

"Who's your sun god?" he asked, his accented voice harsh with strain.

"You are," she moaned.

"Who do you worship?"

"You."

"How do you worship me?"

"However you say."

"I am the sun god. Worship me with *fire*!"

On the last word, he yanked on the nipple chain. The pain exploded over her in a ball of fire, lifting her body in a glorious arch between her head, suspended between the taut drapery cords, and her hips, locked to his. He grabbed the chains wrapping her waist and held her tight as he thrust even deeper.

They cried out together, his wordless shout of triumph cutting through her screams of "Yes! Yes! Yes!"

The dim corner of her brain still capable of rational thought noticed the lack of his seed spurting into her, and realized he must have put on a condom at some point. Then the aftershocks claimed her. As she gasped and shivered beneath him, he reached out and squeezed her breasts in time with the flames coursing through her. Instead of subsiding, they built, quickly flaring out of control. Once more, he tugged on her nipple chain.

She went supernova, and the starburst swept her consciousness into a deep black hole, leaving nothing but pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keri blinked her eyes and groaned. She was sore all over, worse than the hardest workout in the gym, and she just wanted to snuggled deep into the soft cloud surrounding her and go back to sleep. But the light was shining directly into her eyes.

She turned her head, pulling the comforter up to her ears, trying to evade the unwelcome reminder of morning. But it had roused her enough for her other senses to kick in. An unfamiliar scent of spices rose from the too-soft pillow. Soft flannel sheets caressed her naked body, instead of crisp cotton sheets and a nightshirt washed until it was softer than the fuzzy fur of a kitten.

Where was she? Her window was at the foot of her bed. Yet the morning light was shining across her face.

She opened her eyes, blinking and trying to focus on the unfamiliar surroundings. She was in an unfamiliar bedroom, with olive walls, antique gold bedding, and burgundy curtains at the windows, held back with golden cords.

The sight of the cords brought back the memory of last night. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back onto the pillow, reliving the exquisite torment her Master had meted out to her. She'd never dreamed that slavery could be so liberating.

Her Master must have carried her into his bedroom after that last glorious orgasm that had shattered her world. He'd also stripped off the remnants of her costume and put her to bed. But where was he?

Keri smiled, anticipation warming her blood. Last night, she had been a slave girl and he had been a sun god. Today, she'd see who had been behind that mask. She tried to imagine what he looked like, but her mind's eye could only picture the demonic Cole from *Charmed*. After all, her mystery lover had a sexy accent that grew stronger when his passions were aroused, just like Julian McMahon's character.

She threw off the covers and swung her legs out of bed, wincing as the movement pulled muscles in her groin that she'd overexerted last night. Tentatively, she reached

between her legs and pressed on the sensitive flesh. It was sore, but it didn't hurt enough to be bruised. Just strained.

A straight-backed leather and chrome chair had been pulled over next to the bed, and her clothes were piled neatly on top of it. A folded piece of paper, inscribed "'Adina'", rested on the pile.

She opened the note. Strong black handwriting filled the page beneath a monogram of the letter A chiseled in stone.

*Thank you for a wonderful night. I hope you enjoyed yourself as much as I did. I regret that I had a previous engagement, and had to leave before you awoke. The bathroom is well stocked for guests – help yourself to whatever toiletries you need. I put out a T-shirt and pair of sweat pants you can wear home, if you'd rather not wear your costume. You may keep them if you're having second thoughts about what we did last night. However, if you would like to continue your training with me, bring them with you when you come back tonight at 8pm. Buzz twice at the door and I will let you in. Here is your first order, if you choose to be my slave: Do not investigate the rest of the apartment. All rooms but the bathroom and bedroom are off limits to you, and as soon as you're ready, leave by the back door. It locks automatically. I will know if you've disobeyed me. Sincerely, Master Alex*

Keri stared at the note, rereading it a second and then third time. He wasn't here. He'd given her the most phenomenal sex of her life, and then left without speaking to her, just leaving a note. Did it mean so little to him?

She shook her head. No. He said right there at the beginning of the note that he thought it was wonderful. And he wanted her to come back again tonight. So then why did he leave? He must've known she'd want to see him this morning. The excuse of a prior engagement seemed flimsy at best.

Puzzling over his strange behavior, she recalled his words when she'd first entered his dungeon. Ultimately, the choice was hers. By making himself scarce, he was giving her the opportunity to choose, with no pressure from him.

She nodded, certain she understood his purpose. After the night they'd shared, if he'd been beside her when she woke, she'd have eagerly begged him to take her back to his dungeon. Her body came to life under his skilled hands, leaving no room for thought.

But she needed to think about her actions. Did she really want to give a man that much power over her? A niggling voice of strident feminism insisted she was betraying her sisters by embracing inequality, by allowing a man to dictate how, when, and where she would feel pleasure. And there was the disturbing insight into her personality that she'd had the strongest orgasm she'd ever experienced when a man was beating her. Did that mean if she continued to see him, she'd turn into one of those women who welcomed abuse from their lover, until one day he hit her hard enough to send her to the hospital, or kill her?

She had a lot to think about. She was glad he'd given her the opportunity to think about it on her own, and take all day before making her decision.

But first things first. She needed to use the bathroom, and take a shower. Her hair was a mess, and her skin itched from dried sweat.

The bathroom was vaguely art deco, with frosted wall sconces and fluid lines to the fixtures. Black and white tiles formed an abstract mosaic on the floor, a theme carried over in the stylized geometric motif on the shower curtain. The room's only color was provided by two sets of towels—red and gold ones that were still slightly damp hanging on the rod, and a dry set in orange and yellow sitting on the counter that he must have put out for her.

A bamboo basket on the back of the toilet contained soaps, shampoos, conditioners, and lotions from a wide range of hotels, as well as a selection of travel sized toothpastes and deodorants. A small plastic comb of the five-for-a-dollar variety and a plastic-wrapped toothbrush embossed with the name of a dentist completed the array of toiletries available. She lingered over the possible choices, finally selecting a glycerin soap and citrus scented shampoo and conditioner.

The showerhead was a six-position shower-massage. Keri let the warm water pound her scalp and her back, finding the tension in her shoulders and kneading it away. She lathered her chest, washing away the salty remains of last night's exertions. When she turned to face the spray, the water pummeled her tender breasts, making her wince and jump back. She reset the showerhead to a gentle fall of rain, and carefully rinsed the soapsuds away.

She stayed longer than necessary in the shower, enjoying the warm water on all of its settings. It was an uncharacteristic waste of both water and time, but her uncertainty about how to proceed kept her in the known environs of the shower. When her skin began to wrinkle, she finally admitted that she'd been in there long enough, turned off the water, and toweled off.

Wrapped sarong-style in the largest of the towels, she combed out her hair while she returned to the bedroom. Her first decision was a simple one. Alex's apartment was much further from her apartment than the opera, and she hadn't brought enough money to take a cab that distance. No way was she riding the train wearing her slave costume! So she'd have to wear the sweat pants and T-shirt Alex had offered. But he'd made it clear they were a no-strings-attached gift. Taking them didn't mean she was accepting anything else from him.

She picked up her pile of clothes from the chair, and found Alex's underneath her folded raincoat. The sweat pants were navy blue 100% cotton that had obviously shrunk in the wash. She pulled them on. A little loose, but better than the alternative.

The T-shirt was red with white lettering, advertising a marathon. Keri considered what that meant. Had Alex competed in the marathon? He'd certainly seemed fit last night. Was his hobby jogging?

She shook her head. She didn't know. She didn't know anything about him. If he hadn't signed his note, she wouldn't even know his name. In fact, he'd never learned hers. His note was addressed to Adina, the character name she'd given him last night.

He'd put the name in quotes, showing he knew it wasn't her real name, but at the same time making it obvious he didn't know anything else to call her.

Keri dropped the T-shirt on the rumpled bed, and found her halter-top from last night. Alex had folded it neatly, but hadn't disassembled it. The clasp was still attached to the gauze panel. She put it on as a makeshift bra, then pulled Alex's T-shirt on over it. The T-shirt hung to her hips.

She wouldn't win any fashion awards, but that didn't matter. She only cared about getting home.

She shrugged into her raincoat, belting it securely around her waist, and stuffed her feet into her ballet slippers. Then she unfolded one of the gauze panels of her costume and rolled the rest of her outfit up in it like a giant blue burrito.

Tucking it under her arm, she followed Alex's instructions and left his apartment the same way she'd arrived, going down the back stairs to the service entrance of the art gallery. Instead of following the walkway to the carriage house, she followed a path that led between the house and its nearest neighbor, through a narrow wooden door that locked behind her, and out to the sidewalk.

People thronged the sidewalks, Saturday tourists visiting art galleries, trendy shops and cafes. Keri followed the crowd, looking for landmarks so she could find a subway stop. She didn't know how long Alex's "engagement" would keep him away from his apartment, and she wanted to be well and truly gone by the time he returned.

## **Chapter Four**

Keri finished tying off her latest quilt, and put her needle and thread away in her sewing box with her scissors. Standing up, she spread the quilt over the back of her couch to study it. A log cabin quilt in over a dozen different blues and greens, it was restful and orderly without being boring. Perfect for the women's shelter she was donating it to.

She'd used the quiet time while sewing to think about her options, and had decided not to see Master Alex again. It wasn't that she thought their relationship would count as abusive. Once she'd considered it, she realized that his attitude toward her had been domineering, but never abusive. He'd placed her needs and desires above his own, which was opposite to the patterns of abuse.

No, the problem was that there was no future in the relationship. Eventually, she wanted a family, children, all the things any girl wants when she imagines where she'll be in twenty years. If she got involved with Master Alex, while she was with him, she wouldn't be looking for a potential life partner. Even though the sex was the best she'd ever had, sex wasn't enough. Sooner or later, passion died. What then? She'd be older, less desirable, and more jaded, so she'd be even less likely to find an acceptable partner.

No. She had to think of her future. She had to plan ahead. A life partner would have common goals and experiences, and would share more with her than just hot sex. It was best not to see Master Alex ever again.

She folded the quilt neatly and tucked it into a shopping bag to carry to the shelter, then placed it next to her computer case by the door where she would be able to grab them when she left for work Monday morning.

She looked at the case for a long moment, then picked it up and started unpacking her laptop. If she wasn't going to see Master Alex tonight, she might as well work. She might get some last brilliant inspiration of how to fight Thibodeau.

The first thing she did when she logged on was check her email. If there was any news about the proposal, she needed to know.

Nothing. Just her father's first of the month bulk mailing to friends and relatives. He found it more efficient to simply write one letter and send it to everyone. Keri hoped he hadn't put any embarrassingly personal messages in it this month.

Feeling much like a motorist driving past an accident scene, who knows she shouldn't look and yet is compelled to slow down and stare, she intended to open the proposal document, and instead found herself opening his letter.

*Hello, all. Hope you had an enjoyable Halloween. We had forty-seven trick-or-treaters stop by the house. Molly counted as they came up the walk, even though we left the bowl filled with candy on the porch for them, rather than waste time and energy getting up to answer the door every time they rang. She said their costumes were even more inventive than last year.*

*In other news, Molly and I bought a new car. One of those new gas/electric hybrids that is so fuel efficient. Molly uses it to drive to her new volunteer job, as a social outreach worker to shut-ins at nursing homes. She enjoys helping others, and this allows her to visit all the area nursing homes, to see how the patients are really treated. That will be good information to have should either of us need assisted care living. We're not getting any younger, and we have to think of our future.*

*Bonnie, hope your no-good ex-husband is history, but if not, tell your father to teach you how to use those hunting rifles of his. You'll feel safer, and you can get some inexpensive venison for Thanksgiving dinner at the same time.*

*'Til next month, all.*

*Bob and Molly*

Keri stared at the letter in horror. Dear God, she was turning into her parents.



"No way am I ending up like that, so busy planning for the future that I never live in the present."

She slammed the laptop closed, and quickly repacked it in its case. There was no time to waste. She had a date to get ready for.

\* \* \* \* \*

At ten of eight, Keri found herself surreptitiously walking past the front entrance to Master Alex's building. Lights blazed from the gallery, which didn't close until eleven. A crowd had gathered inside for some sort of party. Many of the people held wine glasses or napkins full of cheese or fruit. Six men and women robed in white draperies, their costumes completed by white body makeup and powdered hair, circulated through the crowd, occasionally freezing in place like marble statues.

She peered through the window, wondering what the gallery contained that was so valuable. The usual sorts of paintings hung on the walls, some vivid splashes of color that looked like nothing so much as spilled paint to her, and some highly detailed works that could have come from a camera lens, except that their subjects never existed in the real world. Pedestals scattered through the room were picked out by track lighting positioned to highlight the sculpture, pottery, and jewelry upon them.

Suddenly recognizing the subject of the painting closest to the window, Keri choked back a snort of laughter. A menacing tower, ringed all around with briars, had a single window, from which descended a long blonde braid. Bits of cloth waved from the wickedly long spikes of the briars. At the edge of the briars was a somewhat tattered but triumphant bald-headed woman. Rapunzel had apparently tired of waiting for Prince Charming, and rescued herself.

The artist's style looked vaguely familiar. After a moment, she placed it. The same person had done the painting of the rose hanging in Master Alex's dungeon.

Keri smiled, wondering what fairy tale subversion lurked in the depths of Alex's painting. Given his obvious fondness for fairy tales, or at least the adult retellings of them, no wonder he'd found the artist's work appealing.

She glanced at her watch again. Time to go.

Hitching her tote bag more securely over her shoulder, she pushed open the glass door leading to the building's foyer. Instead of going through the second door to the gallery, she turned to the heavy wooden door in the back of the foyer, and pressed the second floor buzzer. Twice.

A moment later, the door buzzed loudly, indicating the lock was now disengaged. She shoved it open, and started up the winding steps. Halfway up the flight, a plaster statue stood in a niche. At first glance, it looked like a copy of Michelangelo's David. Except she'd never seen a David with a rampant hard-on and no fig leaf in sight.

She hesitated on the stairs, suddenly uncertain. What was she letting herself in for? True, the sex had been great. But was that really any basis for a relationship? She should go up there, return the sweat pants and T-shirt she had in her bag, then turn right around and go home where it was safe. And she could become her parents.

Stiffening her shoulders, she marched up the rest of the steps to the second floor landing. The door to Alex's apartment was open, and a note was taped to it.

Welcome back! Come inside and close the door, then follow the trail. You obeyed my instructions this morning, and deserve a reward. It's waiting for you at the end of the trail.

She ripped the note off the door and went inside, closing the door behind her. A trail of deep red rose petals began in a pile at the door, then led down the hall. The sight of them reminded her of the sight she'd had last night of her red and swollen labia, plump and aching for Alex's touch. She felt herself getting wet, and hurried down the trail to the dungeon.

When she entered the dungeon, she was surprised to find it candlelit and empty. The candles had been spread out around the room in addition to being on top of the

bureau. Some stood on the whipping bench, some hung from brass sconces hooked over the whips and the picture frame, and the posts on the bed were topped by four more. All were lit, giving the room a dim, flickering light that was not enough to see any details.

"Master?" she called softly.

"Welcome to your second training session. Please kneel on the floor."

His voice came from the darkness somewhere to the right.

Keri dropped her bag on the floor, swept a spot clear of rose petals, and knelt on the hardwood floor. Images she'd seen during her online research into the world of BDSM earlier today flickered through her mind, of naked slaves kneeling with their arms tied behind them or stretched above them while their Masters flogged or beat them.

"Eyes forward," he ordered.

Keri stared at the bed in front of her. From this angle, she could see that the decorative iron scrollwork of the footboard and posts was actually designed as a series of links to which chains could be attached. She shivered, wondering when he planned to tie her to the bed, and what he'd do to her once she was unable to get free.

The bathroom door creaked slightly, then footsteps echoed across the wooden floor. She felt the warmth of his presence standing behind her, accompanied by a faint scent of spice, but obeyed his command and kept her eyes fixed firmly ahead.

"This is a pretty jacket," he said, his hands stroking her shoulders through the quilted blue satin. "You wore it for me?"

"Yes, Master." She'd taken great pains with her appearance for this date, not at all certain what to wear for someone who'd seen more of her naked than he had clothed. She'd settled at last on flaring black slacks that emphasized her hips and thighs, high-heeled black ankle boots, and a zip-fronted Chinese jacket in deep marine blue, decorated with tiny brass studs in the center of each quilted square.

He knelt behind her, his strong legs bracketing hers. Reaching in front of her, he slowly inched down the zipper. She could barely breathe as his hands glided down her front, following the zip.

Finally, the zipper slipped free, and he parted the front of her jacket. Reaching inside, he cupped her breasts. His thumbs skimmed the edge of her black lace bra.

"What pattern is the lace?" he asked.

"Roses," she whispered.

He breathed a sigh of deep contentment, bending his head and kissing the side of her neck as his fingers found her nipples and squeezed. Keri closed her eyes and let her head loll back, resting on his broad shoulder, while he continued to kiss her neck and fondle her breasts. The soft hair at his temple teased her cheek, and she sighed with pleasure. All of him was caressing her.

Gradually, he pushed the jacket off her shoulders and down her arms, until it landed in a pile on the back of her calves. His hands smoothed over her exposed stomach and ribs before releasing the hooks on her bra and sweeping that away as well.

Slowly, with no sense of urgency, he stroked and caressed all of her available skin. Flickering candlelight painted dancing vistas on the back of her eyelids as she swayed beneath his guiding touch.

"What do you think about making love in the dark like this?" he asked softly, whispering the question against the pulse point in her neck he was licking.

"Mmm. I like it. It heightens all my other senses, like touch."

He licked her neck again. "And taste."

"And taste," she answered. Would she taste him soon? If so, what would he have her taste? Would she taste the spice of his cologne clinging to his throat? Lick the salty sweat from his skin? Sample the dewy drops of cum from his cock?

He shifted position, reaching behind himself for something. A moment later, she felt a cloth draping across her face, and the dim flickering of the candles was extinguished. She was in total darkness.

She jerked upright. "What...?"

Alex's gentle hands stroked and soothed her, caressing her arms and breasts, but at the same time blocking her attempts to reach up and tear the cloth from her eyes.

"It's a blindfold," he told her. "Now you're completely in the dark. You'll be completely focused on what you feel."

"May I touch it?"

"Yes. But don't remove it, or the training session is over."

She nodded her understanding. Wearing the blindfold was tonight's golden tassels—her sign of consent. Delicately, careful not to dislodge it, she reached up and patted the edge of the mask covering her eyes. It was a soft, padded satin the same size and shape as her beaded domino mask, over rigid eye cups that allowed her to open her eyes beneath the mask and further blocked all light.

The mask had a thin elastic band to allow it to be positioned, but both sides also connected to a strong nylon belt. While she felt the front of the mask, Alex fastened the belt behind her head and tightened the slack. The blindfold settled flush against her skin, the eye-cups resting firmly against her face but not digging in.

"Can you see any light at all?" he asked.

"No, Master."

"Good."

The heat of his body vanished from behind her, and she strained her ears, trying to hear where he had gone. A drawer opened and closed in the far corner of the room. He'd gone to the bureau.

She felt the radiant heat of his presence even before he spoke, announcing his return to her side.

"Stand now. Do you need a hand?"

"No, Master." Carefully, Keri placed her hands flat on the polished wood floor, shifted to kneeling on one knee with one foot carefully positioned by her hand, then got the other foot beneath her and rose fluidly to her feet.

"Very graceful, almost as if you were dancing." He stepped behind her, leaning her body back against his so that her shoulders rested against his chest, and her head was pillowed on his shoulder. Holding her lightly around the waist, he swayed sinuously from side to side, brushing the bulging front of his slacks against the back of her hip huggers. Gradually, his movement ceased being side to side, and became a forward and back rocking, pressing his erection into the cleft of her ass.

Keri moaned softly, her buttocks clenching in a futile effort to draw his teasing pressure deeper. Why were they still wearing clothes? Clothes only got in the way of touching, and stroking, and thrusting, and...

"You'll dance with me, here in the dark, won't you?" Alex's deep, accented voice broke into her thoughts. "The two of us, linked together, making our own music."

"Oh yes, Master. Whenever you say."

"Then first, you must be dressed for dancing."

His hands slipped from her hips to the front of her pants, deftly unbuttoning them and lowering the zip. Hooking his thumbs inside the waistband of her panties, he slid pants and panties down, stroking and caressing her hips and thighs as he went. He knelt behind her, his soft hair rubbing against her hip, as he worked the clothing down to her ankles, then helped her out of her shoes.

When she was completely naked, he nudged her legs apart. Damp anticipation misted her lips as she wondered what he would do next. Kiss her? Stroke her? Lick her? Probe her with his fingers? Or simply thrust his cock into her?

The anticipation built as he seemed to ignore the temptation displayed before him, rubbing her calves and caressing her legs. But she was the one who was blindfolded, not him. She knew he could see her, spread in front of his face, her labia growing pinker

and plumper the more she thought about his hard cock slipping between them. The short hairs glistening with the damp lubricant that overflowed her channel.

Alex turned his head, pressing a quick kiss high on her ass, then following it up with a sharp nip. Keri gasped, her knees trembling at the unexpected pain. A wave of pleasure washed over her, and hot fluid rolled down the inside of her thigh.

"Master," she moaned, pleading for something although she didn't know what.

He stood, stepping away briefly before his near presence warmed her back again.

"Put out your arms, away from your body," he instructed.

She did as ordered. He reached beneath her, and wrapped something around her chest. Her first thought was that he was using a gauze panel, like she'd seen illustrated in the Bondage picture for her costume. But it didn't feel soft like gauze. It was clingy and unyielding, wrapping tight around her breasts and ribcage.

A sharp ripping sounded from behind her. Then he passed a second layer of whatever it was around her lower ribs and stomach. Another ripping sound, and a third piece bound her hips and ass. He ripped and applied a fourth piece between her legs, tucking it into her crevices and pulling it tight. The brief caress of his fingers pressing inside her made her pulse with readiness, steaming inside the clinging covering.

"Plastic wrap?" she asked.

"Yes. You're all shrink-wrapped, perfect for preserving you in a state of hot, wet readiness." His fingers slid between her legs again, rubbing the plastic wrap over the skin too slick for it to adhere to.

She groaned, wishing he would punch through the seal and put his fingers deep inside her. Or better yet, his cock.

Instead, he put his hands on her hips and guided her forward half a dozen steps. "Do you know where you are?"

"In front of the bed?" she guessed.

He turned her around, so the bed was behind her, then pushed her slowly backward onto it. She landed on the familiar black rubber sheets.

The bed creaked slightly as Alex climbed onto it after her. He wrapped soft fur around her wrists, buckling the fur in place, then lifted her arms with a rattle of chains. The chains clipped onto the headboard posts with two sharp snaps, holding her arms away from her body at a comfortable angle.

He stroked two more lengths of fur down her thighs, then over her shins, to finally wrap tightly around her ankles. The chains pulled her legs further apart as he spread her ankles and fastened them to the footboard posts.

She quivered, hearing him moving and not knowing where he was or what he was doing. Finally, she felt a puff of hot air brush her cheek.

"You remember the candles decorating the room?" he asked, his voice low and promising the possibility of incredible ecstasy or excruciating torment.

"Yes, Master," she whispered. Was that what was heating the air near her face? She strained her ears, and thought she heard a faint sizzle of wax.

"They're having an artist's reception downstairs. But I'm going to turn you into my own personal work of art. Think of this as a wax casting."

She *did* hear wax sizzling. The heat of the candle was now down by her breasts, dangerously close to her left nipple. Plastic wrap was flammable. What if he lit her on fire? There was no way she could drop and roll, chained to the bed the way she was.

Keri flexed her arms and legs, testing the limits of the chains. She could straighten her arms, but only if she stretched them above her head. The chains prevented her from touching any part of her body, although she could snatch the mask from her eyes if she tilted her head while she reached.

She barely considered it. Alex would not hurt her—not in any way that didn't eventually lead to pleasure. It was just the path to that pleasure she wasn't sure about. Nervously, she began trembling and rolling from side to side.



"Careful!" Alex commanded. "You must lie completely still. You don't want me to accidentally burn you, do you?"

Keri froze, terrified of what might happen if she so much as breathed. A drop of hot wax dripped from the candle he held over her breast, splashing onto the sensitive skin.

She screamed, arching against the chains binding her to the bed frame. At the same time, she felt a rush of fluid between her legs, as her body could not tell the difference between intense arousal and intense fear. She fell back onto the sheets, panting, and completely confused.

The wax had shocked her, but it hadn't been hot enough to burn. Now it was cooling, solidifying against the curve of her breast like a warm caress.

Alex chuckled, no doubt reading her emotions on her face. "Surprise."

A second drop of wax fell, splashing the other breast. Again, her body arched from the shock, her brain screaming that she was burning, and her sex pulsing hot and wet with a fire of its own.

Alex drew his finger through the warm candle wax, spreading it in a thin layer across her breast. She heard a faint clink, as if he'd placed something on a dish, and then the burning heat was applied directly to her nipple.

She screamed, arching against her chains in a futile effort to escape that only pressed her skin deeper into the flame. Alex pulled the flame away, leaving her shaking and gasping for breath, thrashing in her bonds in a desperate bid to escape. But gradually rational thought conquered her unreasoning terror.

She stopped moving. "Why aren't I on fire?"

"The human nervous system processes both extremes of heat and extremes of cold the same way. That was an ice cube." He stroked her cheek gently with warm, slightly waxy fingertips, then brushed her tangled hair back from her face. "I promised I would not hurt you. But I will terrify you, to push your mind and body past the comfortable safety of what you know, into the liberating ecstasy of the darkness beyond."

In the darkness of her blindfold, unable to see his expression, she hung on his every syllable, wringing his softly accented words for each drop of meaning she could squeeze from them.

"That's right. You told me that last night. I forgot."

"No, you didn't. Or you'd have taken off the blindfold." He leaned down and pressed a kiss to her chilled nipple, inside its plastic wrap covering. "You wanted to be frightened."

Recalling her recent panicked frenzy, Keri's heart pounded, her pulse raced, and her breathing turned shallow and harsh, as if she was reliving the fear. But now she was also aware of the tingling in her breasts, straining against the confining plastic wrap, and the hot liquid pooling at her throbbing sex. She wanted him to rip the plastic away and ram his cock into her, to cover her body with scalding wax until she burned for him, and to torture her in ways she hadn't even begun to think of yet.

"Oh, God, yes," she whispered. "Take me. Terrify me. Make me scream."

"I will," he promised. "I will."

Keri lost all concept of time as he covered her wrapped body with molten wax and melting ice. She shivered and screamed and came in a shuddering rush, only to have him push her trembling body into another tense buildup and shattering release.

Alex prodded the plastic wrap between her legs—with his fingers, a candle stump, or his cock, she neither knew nor cared. She tilted her hips, begging him to press harder, further, ripping through the plastic so she could feel him inside her at last.

"I think you might be leaking," he said softly, stroking her swollen labia through the plastic. She moaned and writhed beneath his touch, rattling her chains. "We'll have to plug that leak."

"Plug me," she begged.

"With a wax seal," he answered.

The heat of a candle flame hovered above her open thighs, and a sudden panic gripped her. "No! Not there!"

She tried to close her legs, to move away from his candle, but the chains kept her spread, and rocking her hips only allowed one side of her to escape. The other side rose up, even closer to the blazing candle.

He tilted the candle, the soft hiss of molten wax hitting the flaring wick announcing his intentions. Keri whimpered, frozen with fear, no longer able to think clearly enough even to beg.

The wax dripped, a hot splash knifing through her open sex. Keri screamed, her body spasming uncontrollably, pain, pleasure, heat, and pressure swirling chaotically through her senses until she didn't know what touched her, or where. Then he thrust a blazing firebrand deep into the crevice of the plastic wrap. She screamed again, the muscles of her vagina clenching the fiery invader, trying to pull it deeper, even as she arched up from the bed, trying to escape the overwhelming sensation.

The combination was too much for her. She climaxed, then almost immediately climaxed again, shattering her last hold on rational thought and sending her spiraling into the darkness where the flames of thousands of suns lit her way.

The first thing she noticed when she regained her senses was that Alex was lying beside her, stroking her breast with a soft piece of fur. Her bare breast. The plastic and the wax had been removed while she was floating through the cosmos.

She turned toward him, and realized her arms and legs were no longer chained to the bed. He'd also removed her blindfold, although since he'd extinguished the candles as well, she couldn't see any more than she could when she'd been blindfolded.

"That was...I can't even describe it," she said softly. "What was that you put in me?"

"Another ice cube." Alex moved the fur, stroking her hip and ass, and placed his mouth to her breast. He licked, and kissed, and suckled her, slowly, in time to the gentle sweep of the fur against her skin.

She moaned softly, and buried her fingers deep in his hair to keep his talented mouth on her aching breast. Running her hands through the thickness of his hair, she discovered it had a slight wave, and was neatly trimmed just below his hairline.

Sudden realization froze her hands in mid-caress. She'd had no idea what his hair was like, picturing it like Julian McMahon's simply because he reminded her so strongly of Cole, the dark demon, and she had no real knowledge to supplant that mental picture. She had only the vaguest of notions of what he looked like at all, knowing his height and build, and what his chin and lips looked like when they were painted gold. Her questing fingertips found the edge of his ears, his jaw line, and then tried to construct an image of his cheeks and nose.

He pulled away from her breast. "What is it?"

"I just realized I don't know what you look like."

"Because I did not want you to know. You must promise me that you won't try to see my face."

Her fingertips had encountered no scars or deformities, just a slight stubble of beard shadow. He seemed well proportioned, with sweeping, arched brows, a straight, slender nose, full lips and a strong jaw.

"But—"

He placed his finger on her lips, silencing her protest. "Do not argue with me on this, or I will be unable to train you."

She hesitated, her natural curiosity warring with the fear of never making love with him again. But she trusted that he would do nothing to harm her. Whatever his reason for keeping his face hidden, it was nothing dangerous. She was certain that all would be revealed in time.

"As you will it, Master. I am your obedient slave."

His tense body relaxed, and he rolled her beneath him, his hard cock probing for entrance. "As a good Master, I must reward you for your obedience."

Keri sighed, completely forgetting about finding out what he looked like, caring only about the wonderful way that he made her feel.

## **Chapter Five**

Keri came to her senses in darkness, aware of Alex's warm, toned body beside her, the weight of his arm draped across her, and his deep rhythmic breathing. She nuzzled his chest that had been serving as her pillow, finding and licking his flat nipple.

His breath hitched, and the nipple sprang to life beneath her lips. Another sign of his interest rose to life against her thigh.

"Are you awake?" she whispered.

"I am now."

"Can we make love again?"

"My dear Adina, you're insatiable."

Keri shook her head, brushing his chest with her hair. "My real name's Keri."

She heard the rustle of his hair against the rubber sheet as he shook his head in response. "No. That's your real name, for the real world. Here, in the magical world we create together, you need a magical name. You are Adina, ornament of pleasure."

She blinked in surprise. "Is that what the name means? I just thought it sounded exotic."

"Yes. I looked it up."

"And Alex? Is that your real name or is it just for use here?"

He hesitated, until she thought he wouldn't answer, then finally replied, "It's the name I was given, or part of it, anyway. But I only use it here."

But thinking of the real world reminded her of her job, and her responsibilities. "Is it morning yet?"

He turned away, reaching for something. A bright blue light flared in the darkness, casting strange shadows on the wall of whips, but at the wrong angle to illuminate his face. "No. It's about one o'clock."

The light faded as he released the IndiGlo button on his watch, then turned back toward her. His hand stroked over her ass and hip, then shifted her thigh so that his cock slipped between her legs.

"We have plenty of time," he whispered. "You won't have to wait until tonight for another session."

"I won't be able to see—I mean be with—you tonight. I have to get ready for a big presentation at work. We're planning—"

"Shh." His hissed order came out sharply, but the fingers he laid across her lips were gentle. "No talk of work. That belongs to the real world, out there."

Keri nibbled his fingers, feeling his leap of response between her legs. He growled softly, rolling onto his back and pulling her astride him.

"I obviously didn't tire you out enough earlier. I'll just have to make love to you again and again until you're too exhausted to move."

She shivered, feeling the heat building where he was pressed against her, and rubbed back and forth against his cock, seeking the angle that would put him inside her. "You're not at all tired, either."

He grabbed her by the waist and held her still. "I'm also not wearing a condom, so none of that. No, you're moving too much. That will be our next lesson."

The blood pooled in her sex, throbbing with eager anticipation. Her breathing turned shallow, her skin flushing first hot and then cold. "Will you chain me to the bed again?"

"No. It's the suspension sling for you. But first, I have to find the blindfold. I want you completely at my mercy."

He flipped her over, the tip of his cock stroking her as he moved away. She saw the blue flash of his watch again, out in the room, as he opened the bureau and searched through the drawers, his naked body highlighted in stark relief. A moment later he was back, placing the familiar blindfold over her eyes, then rolling her onto her stomach so that he could buckle it around her head.

She heard him moving about the room, and the click of a light switch, but she remained in complete darkness. He helped her out of the bed and across the floor to the corner of the room where she remembered the hammock-like contraption hung.

“Climb up onto the bench,” he told her, his strong hands guiding and lifting her as she followed his instructions. “Now stand. Turn. Lean back as if you were going to sit down. That’s it. A little further.”

The feel of leather unexpectedly brushed the back of her thighs, and she toppled backwards, her feet flying out from under her. The sling caught her, swaying gently, the curved leather supporting her from her shoulders to her hips.

Alex fastened the familiar fur-lined cuffs around her wrists and ankles, then lifted her arms straight up and clicked the cuffs to the chains supporting the sling. She could move her hands and arms a little bit, and grab the chains to ease the weight on them, but she couldn’t lower them.

A delicious thrill of fear tingled through her, making her heart race, and her sex wet. She was in his power now, and had no idea what he planned on doing to her.

He picked up one of her feet, and kissed the sole of it. She gasped at the unexpected touch. Then he lifted her leg straight up. Resting the outside of her thigh against the support chain, he bent her knee slightly so that the inside of her calf brushed the support chain, then clipped her ankle cuff to the heavy chain. A moment later, her other leg was similarly chained in the air, wrapped around the heavy support chain.

Hanging on her back with her arms and legs above her and her sex spread wide open, Keri felt incredibly vulnerable. She was completely exposed to him. Blindfolded,



she couldn't see his reaction, or know what he had planned. She was literally in the dark.

Her fears rushed to the surface. He gave her no clues. She didn't know how to behave. She'd do something wrong and displease him, then he'd send her away. The same pattern had repeated throughout her school years, again and again. Who was she to think it would be any different now?

Then his mouth closed over her sex, his tongue sweeping between her folds, searching for her clit. She gasped, then moaned as he found it. His lips closed around the tiny bud, sucking and nibbling until it bloomed.

Keri clenched her fingers around the cold chains, seeking some point of reference as she swung in the darkness, waves of fire cascading over her from his skilled teeth and tongue. She lost all sense of direction, feeling as if she floated, or perhaps flew, and still his mouth plundered her wide-open sex, the rough stubble on his cheeks scraping the tender skin on the inside of her thighs as he feasted on her flesh.

She came in a crackling burst, like lightning flashing across her skin, quivering and jerking against the chains that contained her. Alex's tongue moved faster, lapping the fluid that flowed from her body, and she moaned, recognizing the buildup to a second orgasm. She wanted to move, to rock her hips in time with his tongue, to urge him on, but she had no leverage, no solid ground on which to brace herself. Only the chains, twisting and swaying, and his mouth, devouring her with single-minded intent.

He placed his mouth directly over her opening, his tongue plunging deep inside. She moaned and whimpered, shivering and twitching, clattering her chains and spinning the sling until she felt dizzy. Then he sucked on her, hard, and she burst again, flooding his mouth as she screamed in mindless passion.

She panted, suddenly bereft of his touch, feeling alone and exposed as her wet sex pulsed with heat. Then his cock slid into her, thrusting deep in a single motion. Her muscles clenched around him, but he pulled out as quickly as he'd entered.

"Please," she begged. "Please, Master."

"I will," he promised.

He thrust into her again, pulling the sling toward him as he did, so that he pierced deeper than before. With her legs chained up and out of the way, nothing interfered with his access to her, and he rocked her back and forth as he slid in and out, tipping her body so that the angle changed every time. Sometimes his cock thrust straight back, almost entering her womb, sometimes the head of it pressed along the walls of her vagina, stretching her to take him, and sometimes he ground his cock against the sensitive nerves at her entrance as he pushed inside her. She never knew what to expect. Soon she lost all sense of their bodies as separate entities, and felt only that they were joined together, stirring and churning to create an overwhelming ecstasy.

Buried deep within her, he swung her up and down and side to side on the chains, rocking her against him as she moaned and begged, tears pooling inside the eyecups of her blindfold. His breath was loud and ragged, harsh groans escaping from his lips with every brush of his balls against her, every time her muscles gripped his cock.

The rocking motion shifted, changing to short, sharp thrusts, as he crushed her against him, harder and faster, until he cried out and burst. He shuddered and shook with the force of his ejaculation, and she swayed and rocked with him.

"Oh please, Master. Please. Let me come, too."

He didn't answer, but his fingers slipped between their bodies and unerringly found her clit. He rubbed it, squeezed, then pinched, and her world burst into millions of brilliant stars, all floating and flying with her as she soared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Keri finished her presentation to Mr. Carlisle, the President of Uninational, and returned to her seat on her team's side of the oval conference table. She'd felt Thibodeau staring at her the whole time, trying to rattle her, willing her to fail. But she'd kept her cool, and proceeded with a flawless delivery of her team's final proposal.

She preferred to deliver the pitch proposal, watching the client for subtle reactions that she could use to adjust how she stressed various items during the pitch. There were other team leaders, like Thibodeau, who preferred to have one of the team members deliver the pitch proposal, so that he could give his full attention to the client's reactions, and plan the rebuttals and negotiations accordingly. But she always felt it was easier to be the favored proposal going into final negotiations. That put the onus on the other team to refute your claims, rather than forcing you to refute theirs.

Carlisle shuffled the papers in front of him, glanced at his note pad, then turned toward Thibodeau. "The most obvious difference in your solutions is the help desk. You want twice as large a staff, and to use the Internet only to enter problems in lieu of calling. Won't that be more expensive?"

Thibodeau nodded. "If all you consider are the salaries, yes. The 'savings' created by putting more of the front-end solution on the people reporting the problems assumes that this work is in addition to their normal workload. But in four independent studies—the details are in Appendix B with the other supporting documentation—it was shown that what actually happens is that your key employees, the ones driving your sales and development, spend more time suffering from a problem and working unproductively before finally reporting it, take longer to get a problem resolved because of the time they waste trying to navigate the 'tool' supposed to assist them, and feel a greater level of frustration and impotence which leads to unhappiness with the work environment, and ultimately, the company they work for. By trying to save a few dollars on some low-level technical salaries, you risk losing your most productive, experienced people."

Carlisle had listened intently to Thibodeau's speech, nodding his head at the description of frustrated end-users. Thibodeau's polished delivery, his deep, rich voice sounding like a radio announcer or evening newscaster, enhanced the believability of his words.

Keri blessed the added research she'd done on Sunday, accessing the company Win/Loss database and looking up all the proposals they'd lost to Thibodeau for any insight into the strategies he might use. She'd actually hoped he'd take this tack, and had her rebuttal well in hand.

She turned to Carlisle. "Mr. Thibodeau's studies are correct. Our company reviewed the same material, two years ago when they were originally published. Instead of simply throwing up our hands and declaring automation a fool's choice, we put our programmers to work developing a better tool. The key problem with all of the self-help automation used in those studies is that they do text searches for key words. While technical support people may apply technical words to a given situation, the end-user will likely choose different words, reflecting the impact when using the product. So someone reporting an application that 'does not compute the sales ratios correctly' won't find a solution for a 'currency conversion error'. We solved that problem by the use of an innovative thought-mapping system, which allows the end-user to choose among groups of related concepts, rather than being forced to guess specific matching words, as well as by allowing contextual error reports. A sample session of a common problem report is in Appendix C."

Carlisle immediately flipped to Appendix C of her proposal. He hadn't investigated Thibodeau's Appendix B.

She fought back a smile. It wouldn't do to look too smug. But she knew she'd read Carlisle correctly. He considered himself an intelligent, competent man, and his inability to use his company's previous attempt at help desk automation had been a black mark against all future automation attempts. She'd reframed the problem as one of miscommunication, and offered a solution not to the automation problem, which he wasn't convinced needed to be solved, but to the communication problem, which he knew existed.

He nodded his head, flipping the pages to look at other examples. "This is good. Both the engineers and the sales reps could use this."

“And of course there are overrides,” she continued, closing in for the deal. “People who have reported similar problems in the past or who are familiar with the system, such as desk side support technicians, can skip any or all of the prompts to speed their entry of problems.”

The room was silent as Carlisle leafed through the remaining pages of the appendix.

“It’s proprietary, I assume?”

“Of course.” She favored him with a brilliant smile, finally allowing a pleased expression. “This is pre-announce information, which is why you hadn’t heard of it yet. It will be officially launched at next month’s industry trade show, but it’s been going through real-world testing at two of our other clients. They’re willing to serve as references. But the productivity studies we’ve done with them indicate end-users resolve their problems faster, and feel a much greater sense of ownership and accomplishment, enhancing their workplace morale.”

He glanced at Thibodeau. “Any comment?”

Thibodeau shrugged, but Keri knew his mind must be racing, trying to find a counter-argument. “There’s still the issue of trying to capture the information in this new format correctly, populating the database it uses with the knowledge from the support staff. You have a high initial cost of personnel resources that might not be recouped by slight future savings.”

“And that is an issue, if you choose to build an initial comprehensive database,” Keri admitted. “We propose that as our favored solution, because we feel it provides the best results in terms of end-user satisfaction and confidence in the new tool. But the option exists for situations to be entered as they are encountered, allowing the tool to be loaded with the most common problems first, and leaving less common situations until later or not at all. Optional solutions numbers three and four use this methodology, and the resultant cost savings are detailed in the solution breakdowns.”

The meeting continued for another two hours, hammering out the details of Uninational's final solution. But both teams knew Thibodeau's company would be unable to meet Uninational's new criteria. As long as Keri's team didn't do anything to lose the account, the win was hers.

"That's it, then. I look forward to receiving your best and final offers next Monday." Carlisle shook hands all around, and left the room.

The two teams gathered their materials, packing up their laptops and calling their respective offices to get the urgent phonemails that had been left for them during the meeting. Thibodeau extended his hand across the table to Keri, in the manner of a tennis player reaching across the net after a match.

"Well done. That help desk tool wasn't in your initial proposal."

She shook his hand, surprised by how warm it was. She'd expected it to be cool, like him. But their handshake ended before she had a chance to analyze the sensation.

"A girl's got to keep her secrets," she answered, shrugging dismissively. He knew as well as she did that no one ever disclosed their big guns in the initial proposal.

His eyes darkened, and his gaze flitted down and up her quickly, as if searching for any other secrets she might be concealing. Her cheeks blazing, she lowered her head and turned away to continue stuffing her gear into her briefcase. He wasn't reacting the way she expected, and that always threw her. It didn't help that she really did have secrets, now. What would her teammates, or Heaven forbid, Thibodeau and his teammates, think if they knew how she'd spent Friday and Saturday night?

She was saved from further embarrassment by the interruption of one of his team who'd been checking phonemail. "Hey, Andy. Rosenberg moved the Thursday meeting up to Tuesday at ten. He wants to know if you can make it."

He muttered a curse under his breath and immediately went to attack his new problem, leaving Keri feeling curiously abandoned. She didn't question her good luck, and simply grabbed her briefcase and fled.

Her teammates caught up to her in the hall. Jimmy slapped her on the back. "Great job, Keri. You really nailed it."

She felt the heat resurfacing in her cheeks, her mind returning to the weekend, and the way she'd been nailed by Alex. Was there no word that didn't have a sexual connotation, now? She forced the images aside. But it was hard. The memories were so vivid, she fancied she could even smell the spicy scent of his cologne.

"It was a solid proposal. We all worked hard on it, to make it unassailable. The team deserves the credit."

"Yeah, but you uncovered the details of the studies they used to support their proposal. That really sold Carlisle, making their data seem out of date," Susan said.

"That's why they pay me the big bucks."

"We'll all be getting the big bucks for this one," Jimmy answered. "I smell a signing bonus. And I know just what I'm doing with mine. There's a sweet little sailboat down at the marina that's been calling my name."

They chatted casually about their plans for any bonus they received as they drove back to the office in Susan's SUV.

"I thought I might take a vacation," Keri said, after listening to Jimmy's plans for a bigger and better sailboat, and Susan's plans for redoing her kitchen.

"A vacation? This'll be a *big* bonus," Susan reminded her. "You'll have to take a pretty big vacation to use it all."

"Well, there's the vacation wardrobe to be considered."

Jimmy laughed. "Oh, this I've got to see. You? Buying clothes that can only be worn once? Watch your driving, Susan. Frogs are about to start falling from the sky."

Keri grinned at his good-natured teasing, and turned around in her seat to face him. "I never said they could only be worn once. Just that they could only be worn on vacation."

"Oh, so you're not planning one vacation," Susan said. "You're planning a whole string of them. Gallivanting around the world, while we hold down the fort for you back here."

"It was just an idea. I don't even know where I'd go."

But she knew who she wanted to go with. She imagined traveling someplace exotic, someplace that came alive at night, in the company of her mysterious Master Alex.

"Ooh, I know that look!" Susan squealed. "You're going with someone."

Keri's face heated again. It seemed to be a common condition for her today, no doubt related to how Alex had made her blood boil over the weekend.

"It's nothing definite," she mumbled. "Just an idea."

"So who is he? Do we know him?"

"Knock it off, Susan," Jimmy said. "She's practically ready to climb out the window to get away from your questions."

"Well, you'd tell us before you actually went anywhere, right?"

"Of course. Someone would have to cover my workload."

Susan pulled a face. "That wasn't what I meant."

"I know. So, Jimmy, tell me more about this sailboat of yours. How big did you say it was?"

Jimmy cheerfully filled the awkward silence with a loving description of his prospective boat. Keri smiled and nodded at all the right times, but her mind was a million miles away, thinking about Alex.

What could she tell Susan? After all, Keri had made love to him more intimately than she'd ever imagined was possible, and yet, she didn't even know what he looked like. She'd pictured him as looking like Julian McMahon, but she didn't expect that's what he really looked like. It was a sign of how badly Susan's questions had rattled her that she couldn't even do that much, without Andy Thibodeau's features getting tangled in her thoughts.



She stared out at the surrounding city scrolling by, a smile slowly spreading across her face. She'd faced down Andy Thibodeau, "The Shark," and she'd won. She'd dreamed of this day, the day she'd finally prove that she was the best of the best. And she was.

It wouldn't last, of course. There'd be other accounts she wouldn't win, simply because her team couldn't put together a cost-effective proposal that met all of the client's needs. Other cases where her competitors would have proprietary software or services that gave them the edge. But for today, at least, she was on top of the world.

And tonight, she would celebrate. Master Alex had been gone again when she woke Sunday morning, leaving her another dry note of apology, saying he didn't want to unduly tempt her. But he'd invited her to return again tonight at eight o'clock. Sunday night, alone in her bed, she'd ached to be with him. The day had crawled by, fueling her restless need to research, the research that had paid off so handsomely in today's meeting.

She had much to thank Master Alex for. And she would. However he wanted her to thank him.

Her body pulsed, heating with readiness for his touch, and she rolled down the window to get some air. The ride back to the office couldn't be quick enough. She needed to get away from Jimmy and Susan, and be alone with her thoughts of Alex.

## **Chapter Six**

Eight o'clock found Keri bounding up the stairs to Master Alex's apartment. Just the thought of soon being with him had her blood pumping, her nipples tight and tingling, and her sex hot and wet. She was so primed, she'd probably come just from hearing his voice.

Once again, the door was open. This time, a trail of aromatic cedar shavings led back to the dungeon. She inhaled deeply, thinking of secluded meetings in dark woods, of Alex tying her to a tree while he ravished her completely, of lashings with pine boughs whose tiny needles brought her to one shuddering, screaming climax after another.

Oh, God, she wanted him. She was trembling so hard she could hardly walk. There must be something wrong with her, to need Alex so badly. Yet she'd never felt as right as she did with him, as completely loved and cared for, and as certain of her place in the world.

She entered the dungeon, stopping just inside the doorway. Alex was not there, not that she'd expected to see him, but he'd arranged three of the whips artfully on the bed, their bright colors clearly visible on the black and gold comforter.

He'd curled the lashes to make the form of a woman. The handle of the red whip formed the head, with four of the knotted braids separated and spread out to form the woman's arms and sides. The final two lashes curled around to form breasts, the knotted ends rising up like erect nipples.

She imagined the heavy lashes of that whip beating her back, her arms, and her delicate breasts, and trembled with fear. It would be too much to bear. She knew she could never withstand it. But Alex would know that, too. He wasn't planning on using such a brutal whip on such delicate flesh. Was he?

The rest of the whip figure didn't reassure her. A beautifully ornate gold-handled whip with dozens of flat leather lashes of deep green leather was spread to form the woman's legs, bent at the knees, with the handle rising between them. The tiny blue whip nestled against the gold and green handle, mimicking the soft bush of the woman's pubic hair.

That was the whip Alex had used on her the first night. That was where he had used it.

Keri grabbed one of the wrought iron bed posts and held on, no longer certain her legs would support her.

Alex moved quietly, her only awareness of him when she felt the heat of his body behind her, and smelled the spicy scent of his cologne. She closed her eyes and leaned her head back, finding his shoulder.

"Master," she whispered.

He put his arms around her, holding her close, and let her draw strength from his hard, firm body. Slowly, as her shivers abated, he unzipped her quilted jacket and slid his hand inside, gently fondling her breast. She was soothed beneath his touch, and was soon arching into his cupped palm and moaning softly as his fingers tweaked and squeezed her nipples.

"Adina, my ornament," he murmured, kissing the side of her neck and under her jaw. "What troubles you?"

"The knotted whip. It's so...brutal looking. To have it hit *there*..."

She whimpered as she turned her face into his shoulder, nuzzling his neck with her eyes closed. Reaching up, she grabbed his arm to hold him tight, keeping his hand warm and reassuring over her heart.

Alex continued stroking and caressing her until her panic faded. He kissed her temple, her cheek, her ear, and her jaw with soft, feathery kisses that were like gentle caresses of his lips. Then his mouth closed over hers.

The kiss began softly, with a gentle brush of his lips against hers. He nibbled her lower lip, teasing it to fullness, as his fingers brushed and flitted over her nipple in time to his kiss. When he unexpectedly pinched her nipple, Keri gasped, and his tongue thrust into her open mouth.

Soon she was writhing in his arms, the sweep and thrust of his tongue keeping time with the pulls and tweaks of his fingers. She was burning, each touch stoking the fire to blaze hotter and higher. She rocked her hips, leaning back to fit her ass against the bulge of his erection, the friction maddening her with promise but leaving her pulsing core achingly empty.

Alex reached between her legs with his free hand, cupping her sex. She moaned into his mouth, and bucked her hips more urgently. Shifting his hold, he bent one finger so that the knuckle pushed against her clit. Her next pump of her hips drove her against the rigid lump, sparking a climax that had her muscles clenching and spasming in uncontrollable tension and release. He just held her, supporting her and comforting her, until the shaking stopped.

"Feel better now?" he asked.

"You know I do."

"Good. You know that I would never harm you."

"I know."

"The whip was another ice cube, another way to frighten you with possibilities. You're not ready for that whip yet, and would never be ready for it to hit your breasts. It's meant for lashing backs and asses, well-protected areas that can take that kind of punishment."

She shivered, her fear rapidly translating to arousal. Catching herself turning in his arms, she checked the motion before she could accidentally see his face. Instead, she bent her head to lick and nuzzle the pounding vein in his neck, while her hands rubbed and caressed his broad back through the fine cotton of his soft shirt.

"I promised myself that I would thank you, tonight, however I could. What can I do to thank you, Master?"

"Thank me for what?"

She hesitated, not sure how to explain without breaking his rule that she not discuss the real world while she was with him.

"I had a very successful day at work, today. And it was because I was so lonely for you yesterday, I threw myself into the preparations with more passion than usual."

A short laugh escaped him. "Then it seems my loss will be amply rewarded. Although I would have preferred to have you here with me yesterday."

"Me, too."

"I know the perfect way for you to thank me, then. Keep your eyes closed."

He moved away, and she heard the rustle of bedcovers, followed by the zip of his pants and the twin thumps of his shoes being kicked off. Taking her by the hands, he led her to the bed, then sat on the edge while she knelt between his legs. The soft weight of the comforter settled over her head, cocooning her in a dim tent with only his rampant cock for company.

Alex's fingers stroked through her hair. "Open your eyes, now."

She admired the sight of his cock, large and straight, thrusting up toward her face. The musky scent of him made her mouth water.

"Do you want me to take you in my mouth?" she asked. It would be a struggle to fit his entirety. The head of his cock would go all the way to the back of her throat, maybe even sliding down it a ways. She'd be choking on cock, endlessly swallowing until he found his release. The thought terrified her, at the same time as it made her wet with desire.

"Eventually," he answered, his words only slightly muffled by the comforter. The same gaps that allowed light and air to enter let her hear him clearly. "But before I put

my cock down your throat, it needs to be lubricated. Lick it. All over. Until it's as wet as your sex."

Perversely, her mouth went dry at his provocative image. Her sex pulsed and steamed, wetting her panties with her readiness, while her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth.

She bent her head, nuzzling his cock and balls and inhaling deeply of his scent. Heat rose from his balls, and blood pulsed loudly in the artery of his thigh.

Moisture flooded her mouth, and she began kissing and licking, working her way from the hairy base all the way up to the open and eager tip, already beading with desire. She lapped up the salty-sweet droplet, probing the cleft with her tongue.

He groaned, his fingers clenching in her hair. Then she scraped her teeth along the underside of the head. He cried out, his hips lifting from the bed, his hands tightening into painful fists.

Keri slid her hands beneath his raised hips, cupping his firm ass, and continued to kiss and lick his cock while her fingers found the cleft of his ass, probing inside for the sensitive entrance.

He cried out again, his ass muscles tightening around her questing finger, and his cock bobbed and waved with the trembling of his thighs.

"Too much," he gasped. "Too much. Back off."

She pulled her finger away and lifted her mouth from his swaying cock. Above her, he panted in ragged breaths, slowly regaining control. Finally, he was able to speak again.

"God, if you do that again, I won't be able to stop myself from coming. And I want this to last a lot longer than that."

"Yes, Master. Tell me what you want me to do."

He paused, and she suspected he really wanted to tell her to do exactly what she'd just done. But eventually he said, "Suck my balls."

"Yes, Master."

Obedying his order, she pushed her face between his thighs and took his left ball into her mouth. With her tongue, she stroked and caressed the soft skin, while she sucked it deeper into her mouth, pulling it gently. Alex's soft groans of pleasure guided her to discover what he enjoyed the most. Turning her attention to his right side, she repeated all of the things that most pleased the left.

"Now the cock," he whispered, his heavily accented voice hoarse with strain. "Lick it again, then suck it."

She complied, bathing his cock with long strokes of her tongue until it glistened. Then she opened her lips and let the heavy weight of it slide into her mouth. She swept her tongue around the head, teasing the cleft and the tender underside of the head, while Alex groaned and moaned in agonized ecstasy.

Slowly, she swallowed him, one precious quarter of an inch at a time, rejoicing in the slippery slide of his head along the roof of her mouth, and the hard sides of his cock against the inner walls of her cheeks. As he moved further into her mouth, she sucked, pulling him even deeper, drawing reluctant beads of cum from the open head. The first drop hit the back of her throat, and she swallowed convulsively.

Then she had to keep her throat loose and relaxed as he pushed his way to the back, filling her mouth and throat with cock just as she'd imagined. His cock trembled, her head rising and falling with the shaking of his thighs, but always keeping him sealed tightly in her mouth.

His hands found her skull, and guided her mouth to slide up and down his wet cock. Every slick thrust elicited a harsh grunt from him, and every slow release pulled forth a shuddering sigh.

Soon he was gasping for breath, thundering in and out of her mouth while she gripped his ass and struggled to hold on to his writhing, bucking body.

"Now!" he gasped. "Now!"

There was no way she could ask what he meant, not with her mouth full of cock, and she knew better than to interrupt his rhythm for something as trivial as words. Realizing she needed further guidance, he released her head, trusting her to maintain the driving rhythm he'd established, and gripped her wrists.

Oh! She slid her fingers over the taut and straining muscles of his ass, slipping on the sweaty skin, until she found his cleft.

"Yes!" he rasped. "Now!"

His hands once more held her skull, urging her to take his cock faster, deeper, and harder. Meanwhile, she struggled to keep her grip on his sweaty, straining ass, while her fingers probed for the elusive entrance. Finally, she found it, thrusting her finger against his tight bundle of nerves.

Alex screamed his release, flooding her mouth and throat as he spasmed and twitched, his muscles convulsing around her finger. He kept coming and coming, longer than any release he'd ever had with her before, while she swallowed again and again, taking all that he had to give.

Finally, he subsided, his muscles quivering, and his cock slid out of her mouth to lie limp and spent, glistening wetly between his legs. His hands stroked and petted her hair, the only embrace their positions would allow.

"Oh, God," he whispered. "Oh, God. That was... Oh, God."

Keri smiled, thrilled beyond words that she had pleased him so thoroughly. Her heart glowed with gentle radiance as she lay her head in his lap, closing her eyes and resting her cheek upon his still quivering thigh.

"I'm happy that I pleased you, Master."

"Oh, you did." He hesitated. "Are your eyes closed?"

She fought the instinctive urge to open them at his question. "Yes, Master."

"Keep them closed."



He pushed the comforter away, freeing her from the dusky warmth that had contained her, and pulled her up onto the bed with him. Drawing her close, he lay with her in a full embrace, him still wearing his shirt and her fully clothed but with her jacket undone.

As he clung to her, his face buried against her neck and his arms wrapped tight around her, she realized this was not part of their elaborate Master/slave play. This was Alex, needing to hold her close because the gift she'd given him had so stunned him, he couldn't bear to part from her. This was real, true emotion, beyond fleeting passion and great sex, even though it had been the sex that created it.

Softly, gently, unfurling like the tender green shoots of a flower stretching toward the sun in the Springtime, a previously unknown emotion took hold and grew inside her. Her arms settled around him, returning his embrace and holding him close as they breathed in tandem. And she realized that somehow, in the blazing inferno of their lovemaking, passion had been transmuted into love.

They held each other, neither saying a word, just breathing together, for nearly an hour, before Alex finally spoke.

"That wasn't what I had planned for the evening, but I certainly approved of the change. What about you?"

Keri nodded, her hair rubbing up and down against his shirt-clad chest. Suddenly, she started to laugh.

"What is it?"

"I think this is the longest I've been with you fully clothed."

After a moment, he joined in, his laughter rich and fluid. Then his laughter faded, his arms tightening around her again. "We can fix that."

The soft promise in his words sparked a firestorm in her blood, and suddenly she wanted to be completely naked, feeling her body writhing against his. "Yes," she whispered.

“You’ll need to be blindfolded again.”

Suddenly, she hated her promise. It was one thing not to see his face when he was her mysterious Master, giving her the best sex of her life. But she wanted to gaze into the eyes of the man she loved. Maybe not during the sex—she liked being tied up, tied down, and pushed around too much to forego the pleasure just for the benefit of seeing her lover’s face while she came—but before, seeing his expression of anticipation mirroring her own, and after, seeing how satisfied she’d made him. That’s what she wanted.

But if it was a choice between seeing his expression as he said good-bye, and not seeing his expression as he taught her body new meanings of the word “ecstasy,” the choice was simple.

She closed her eyes and released him. “Whenever you’re ready, Master.”

Soon, the blindfold was blocking out all light, and his hands were moving over her body, undressing and caressing her. But in the back of her mind, she wondered why he insisted that his face remain hidden. What was he afraid she’d see?

She kept recalling a scene from the *Charmed* episode when Paige first learns that Cole is half demon. Paige had asked her sister, “How’s Cole? Morphed into any demons lately?”

The words repeated in Keri’s brain, endlessly looping. Morphed into any demons lately? Morphed into any demons lately? She loved Alex. But that hadn’t been enough to save Phoebe and Cole from the disastrous effects of their doomed love. Would her love be enough to overcome Alex’s secrets? Or would those secrets eventually drive them apart?

\* \* \* \* \*

Keri woke to darkness. The rubber sheet beneath her stuck to her sweating skin, so she knew she was still in the dungeon. But where was Alex?

She swept her arm across the bed, searching for him. Nothing.

“Alex? Master? Are you here?”

Her voice was swallowed by the cavernous room, the special paint and ceiling tiles absorbing the sound.

She closed her eyes and rolled over, wincing as she pressed against one of the bruises on her ass. Alex had tied her to the massage table and shown her the wonders of whipping, which had made her forget all her doubts and fears as the sensations flooding her body consumed her. By the time he finished, her back and ass were on fire with desire, although he’d been careful not to break the skin or cause any serious damage. He assured her that the few small bruises would fade by morning.

But that didn’t stop them from hurting now. And not in a good way. In a way that kept her from getting back to sleep.

And now that she was awake, she realized she needed to go to the bathroom. The more she tried to ignore it, the more urgent the need became.

“Fine. Not like I was sleeping, anyhow.”

Careful to avoid any additional pressure on her bruised ass, she put her legs over the side of the bed and stood up. Extending one hand like a player in Blind Man’s Bluff, she stumbled toward the bathroom. The door was already ajar, and she reached out, fumbling for the light switch.

The overhead bulbs flared to brilliance, just as Alex was coming through the connecting door to his bedroom.

“Oh my God! It was an accident! I didn’t mean...” Keri’s apology stuttered to a halt as her sleepy brain recognized the man in front of her. Andy Thibodeau. “You!”

Keri sagged against the doorframe, landed on one of her bruises, then winced and pulled away. She turned back to the dungeon, light from bathroom seeping past her to pool on the floor allowing her to see the bed, although the rest of the room was still in shadow.

The bed where she'd gone down on Thibodeau earlier, thanking him for her successful day at work. She groaned, burying her face in her hands.

"Keri, please, it's not what you think."

"What, that it wasn't all just some sick joke? God, you knew exactly who I was, you knew what happened today, and yet you let me..."

He came up behind her, placing his hand on her shoulder, but she shrugged him off.

"Don't touch me."

"Keri, please —"

"How long have you known? Since the beginning? Is that why you approached me at the party?"

Sickness churned in her stomach. She'd felt so sexy and desirable in her costume. Had it all been a lie? Had he approached her only because he knew he'd be competing against her for a client, and wanted any advantage he could get? It was a low, dirty trick, but something she wouldn't put past The Shark.

"No. I had no idea who you were until you took off your mask. I approached you because you were beautiful, confident, and sexy as hell. Just looking at you from across the room was enough to make me hard."

She'd had proof enough of his desire while dancing with him. And their bodies had never lied to each other. He had desired her. But she remembered his strange hesitancy when she'd removed her mask, and her fear that she'd done something wrong.

"Why didn't you tell me when you found out who I was?"

"Because I wanted you. I wanted you so badly I could hardly think, and I didn't want a simple vanilla affair. I wanted to be your Master, to rock you to your core with the feelings I inspired in you."

He turned her to face him, tipping her chin up so that she had to look him in the eyes. Well, she'd gotten her wish, to look into her lover's eyes, and it made her as miserable as every magically granted wish ever did.

"Answer honestly, Keri. If you'd known who I was, would you have trusted me enough to allow me to do what I did?"

She bit her lip, then shook her head. No. She'd never have trusted The Shark with her body, let alone her heart.

"But then why did you leave the next morning? Why didn't you explain who you were?"

"I admit to being conceited when it comes to my work. I'm damn good, and I know it. You're good, too. That's why, when Steve said he was in trouble on the Uninational account, I jumped at the chance to face off against you. I wanted to see what you were made of."

She nodded, encouraging him. It's what she'd wanted, too. He sighed, and ran his fingers through his hair.

"Saturday morning, I had every intention of telling you who I was, figuring now that you'd had a chance to get to know me better, you'd know I could be trusted to care for you as my slave. But then I started worrying about how it might affect your work. When I defeated you, I wanted it to be because I was the better consultant, not out of any misguided feelings of servitude on your part."

Keri smiled grimly. "Instead, I kicked your ass."

"You did not kick my ass." His eyes glittered for a moment with anger, before he Mastered his emotions. "You had the better product. And you did a hell of a job preparing for the pitch. You deserved to win the bid, although if you'd been a lesser consultant, you might not have. You beat me, but just barely."

She considered his rationale. Would she have fought as hard as she had if she'd known she was facing Master Alex across the table, and not Andy Thibodeau, The Shark? She'd had enough trouble keeping her thoughts away from Alex during the

meeting, although now she realized her subconscious must have made the connection between the two men, even if her conscious mind hadn't.

She frowned, disturbed again by what looked like his obvious pattern of deception.

"But at the meeting, I didn't recognize your voice. You sounded nothing like you do now."

He shrugged. "Professional radio voice. I took training in how to sound sincere, convincing, and corn-fed American back when I started in sales. For some reason, many people were disinclined to trust a salesman with an accent, unless it was British."

"I think it's sexy."

His smile lit up his entire face, and she realized she'd spoken in the present tense, giving him hope that his lie had not destroyed her feelings for him.

"Ah, but sexy is not the same as sincere. And sincere is what sells."

"What kind of accent is it, anyway? I've never been able to place it."

"My father was in the amusement park business. I was born in Florida, then moved to Paris and Australia while I was growing up. So my accent's a sort of Outback French Floridian."

She glanced over her shoulder at his dungeon. "Amusement parks, huh?"

"Let's just say that a passion for satisfying fantasies runs in my blood."

Her blood hummed at the thought of the fantasies he'd already satisfied, and the promise of all the ones he would satisfy in the future. If she let him.

"But there's still tonight. We'd already had the client meeting. You'd already lost. Why insist on the blindfold tonight?"

"I almost told you after the meeting, but you ran away before I got a chance. So I planned to tell you, preferably after you were tied up so you couldn't run away before I explained. But you looked so distressed by the whips that I couldn't add to your pain by revealing the secret then. And once you told me how you wanted to thank me, well, I couldn't resist the opportunity to have one of my own fantasies fulfilled."

"It wasn't what you expected, though, was it? I—what was your phrase?—rocked you to your core."

"You did. And I panicked."

Keri blinked. That wasn't the admission she expected to hear. "You panicked?"

"I'd known we were good in bed together, and made an awesome Master/slave team. But those sorts of relationships come and go all the time. People grow, they move on, their needs no longer mesh the way they did. If you'd changed your mind about being my slave after finding out who I really was, I'd have been saddened, but would have shrugged it off and looked for my next slave."

"But...?" she prompted.

"Something changed tonight. We connected, in a way that took me completely by surprise. I couldn't lose you. I wouldn't lose you. And if the price of that was continuing to hide my face from you, it was a price I was willing to pay."

"I fell in love tonight," she said softly.

His eyes widened, brightening with hope, then his gaze fell and his head drooped. "And I destroyed that by lying to you, didn't I?"

Keri took a deep breath, knowing any possibility for a future in their relationship hinged on her answer. Slowly, she walked forward, until she could feel the heat radiating from his body, then reached out and clasped his hands. Startled, he looked up.

"You didn't lie to me. You gave me a choice, to be with you, allowing you to keep the secret you wanted to conceal, or to insist on knowing all your secrets and having nothing more to do with you. I chose to be with you." She smiled at him, putting all the love she was capable of in her expression. "And if the price of that was you continuing to hide your face from me, it was a price I was willing to pay."

His hands tightened on hers. "Then, we're good? We can still keep seeing each other?"

"I'd like that." She gazed at his body, then stared into his eyes, drinking her fill of the sight of him now that she could. "But one last thing. What am I supposed to call you? Andy? Alex?"

"My real name's Alexander. I hated it as a kid." He drew the name out in an over-the-top French accent. "*Ah-Leek-Sahn-Dre*. So I insisted everyone call me Andy. The name stuck. But I like the way you say Alex. Or Master."

"Master," she whispered.

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply. "I was afraid I'd never hear you say that again."

"Surely someone who enjoys fairy tales as much as you do believed in the happy ending," she teased. "What would this one be, Sleeping Beauty?"

He flipped on the overhead light for the dungeon, then turned her to face the painting on the wall. Walking behind her, he urged her closer until she could see that it was not just a painting of a rose under glass. There were reflections in the glass.

She bent closer, trying to see them better, then gasped as they finally came in to focus. A masked man, dressed entirely in black leather, even his jutting cock, with a wild mane of hair and two lethal-looking horns, held a long black whip in his hand.

Across from him, a beautiful woman was tied naked to some sort of rack, her body crisscrossed with red welts. Her head was thrown back as she uttered a cry of intense passion, her ecstasy visible in every quivering line.

Alex's hands wrapped around Keri's waist, fitting her naked body close against his. "I've always been partial to Beauty and the Beast, myself."

*The End*



## 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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