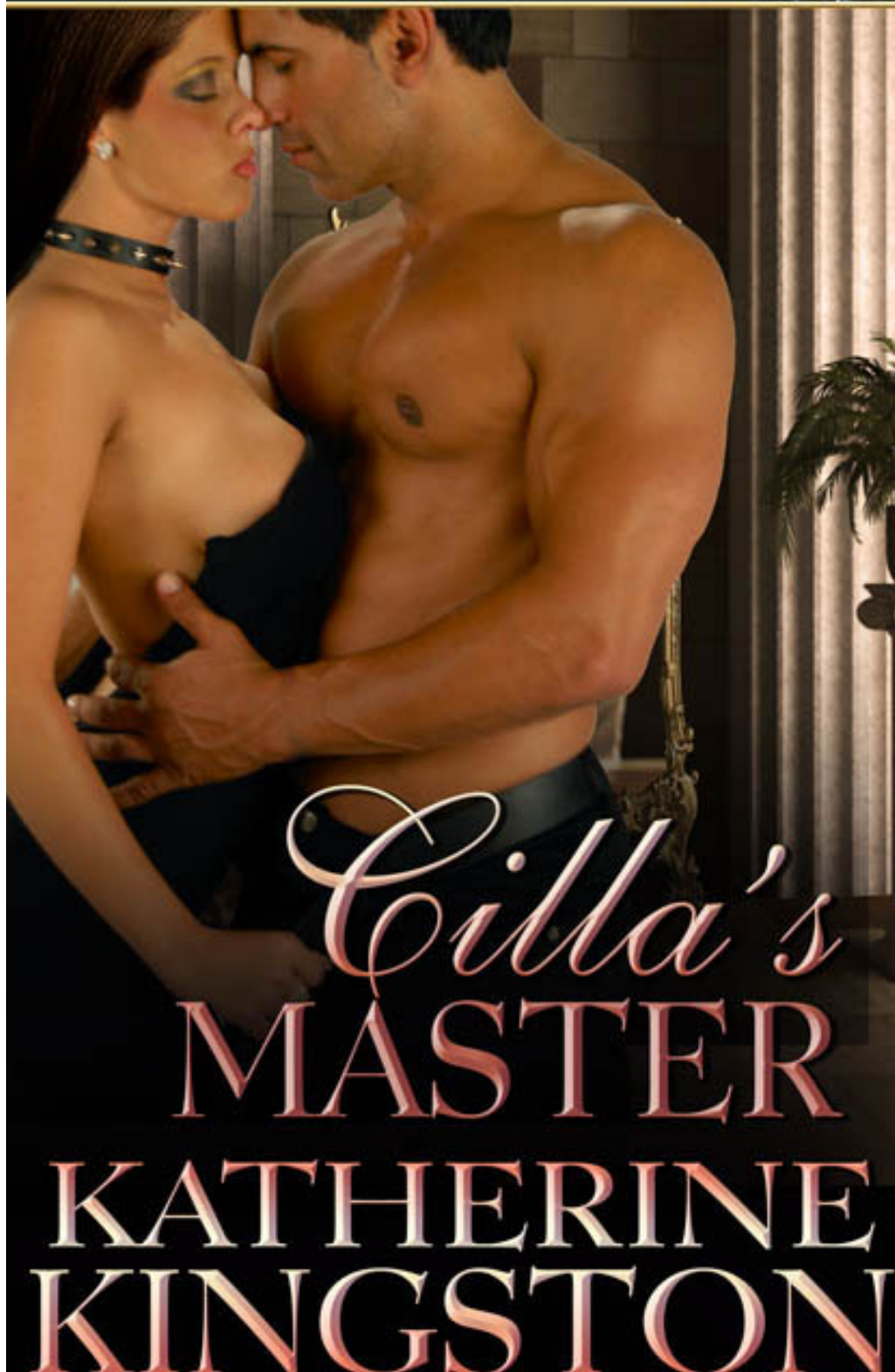


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Cilla's Master

Katherine Kingston

Longtime divorcee Charles and recently widowed Cilla have been friends for years. They play together and put on BDSM demonstrations at the club they both frequent. But when their feelings for each other heat up to match the fiery sexual chemistry they generate, other issues come between them. Cilla knows Charles wants a full-time relationship, but having been married to a control freak once, she's wary of allowing another man that much power over her, especially another who plays the Master role in the BDSM scene.

Cilla wants a family and a safer relationship with a man who'll be her partner and lover, not a full-time Master. She challenges Charles to prove his love transcends their play. Can he leave the Master at the club and give Cilla what she needs?

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Cilla's Master

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Chapter One

The dungeon room was one of the larger ones at the club, but even so it felt crowded with at least a dozen people in it. Cilla Renfield looked at the eager Doms and subs gathered to watch a Master Dominant and an experienced sub work together. Word had gotten around that she and Charles did amazing BDSM demos, and more people showed up each time they offered one. They'd need a bigger room next time.

Cilla didn't kid herself, though. It was Master Charles they came to watch and learn from, not her. He was the one with the brilliant touch, the one who could read a sub's slightest movements and breath changes and know exactly what he or she needed. The man controlled a flogger with an artist's touch.

For some people, knowing you had an audience would make it harder to relax into the right submissive mindset. To Cilla it was a complication but a welcome one, even if the group was larger than usual. Letting go and ignoring the onlookers wiped away the distraction, but knowing they were there actually added to the thrill. And it helped to have Charles as the Master. Sometimes just the sound of his voice could send her into that mysterious place in her head where nothing mattered but him and what he wanted from her.

As she knelt by his side, listening to him lecture about the BDSM mantra of "safe, sane and consensual", explaining how each term applied, she snuck a glance upward at him. It was forbidden for a sub to look at her Master and she'd be punished for it if he caught her, but she voted it worth the risk.

Charles was a hair above medium height, with a lean build and attractive but austere features. He looked elegant and sophisticated in dark slacks, black leather wingtips and a white shirt with French cuffs, open at the neck. In the artificial candlelight of the faux dungeon theater, the gray streaks in his conservatively cut dark

hair glittered silver. He looked more like a high-level businessman – which was also part of the truth of him – than most people's conception of a sexual Dominant.

He turned his head before she could lower her gaze. "Cilla, you know you're not to look up at your Master without his permission."

She nodded.

Charles bent forward to put a hand under her chin. "What is the correct response?" The words came out stern but not harsh. His voice washed over her skin warm and sweet as hot fudge rippling down over a sundae.

"Yes, Master."

"You know better, don't you?"

"Yes, Master." She put just the right amount of submission into it and he smiled.

"You'll be punished for it. You know that and accept it?"

"Yes, Master."

"Good. Let's have a test of your obedience now. Stand up and unbutton your blouse."

For doing demos she always wore a blouse that buttoned down the front and a skirt or slacks with a zipper. It made a good show when she removed them. It gave her an excuse to collect nice underwear as well. Charles would appreciate the lace-edged silk bra and panties before he ordered her to remove them.

The temptation to look at him again almost drove her to commit another error, but she restrained the impulse. It worried her to realize how much she liked looking at him. That had been getting worse lately too. She focused her gaze on his feet as she slowly undid the buttons of her green silk blouse. Once she removed the blouse, she waited for his next order.

"Take it off," he said.

She shrugged the green silk fabric off her shoulders. The movement emphasized her breasts in the paler green bra. Allowing the blouse to slide down her arms, she wiggled a bit from side to side to help it along until it dropped to the floor behind her.

Charles leaned down, picked it up and hung it over the back of a nearby chair. "Stand up." He offered a hand to help her comply with the order and she clung to its warmth and strength as she rose from her knees to her feet.

"The pants now."

He released her hand as she reached for the zipper. After sliding it down, she undid the hook and let the pants fall down her legs to pool at her feet. Knowing he would want it, she kept on the high-heeled sandals when she stepped out of the slacks.

Under other circumstances, she'd be embarrassed to undress in front of this audience of a dozen or so people, mostly men. But doing it here at the club, at Charles' direction, made all the difference. She trusted him, though she knew he'd be showing her off and hurting her. It didn't matter as long as it pleased him. Her Master. And he knew what she wanted, what she needed, what made her melt inside and let her give herself completely.

"Lovely, isn't she?" Charles asked the audience.

She'd never been more than modestly pretty, and her figure wasn't perfect by any means. At thirty-one she'd added a few extra pounds to her five-foot-seven-inch frame, mostly around her hips and thighs, which had always been fuller than her breasts. Still, if Charles said she was attractive, the murmurs of assent from the audience couldn't surprise her.

"The bra now, please," he said. Typical of Charles to couch an order in such polite terms. She'd first met him almost six years ago, eight months or so before she and Edward were married. Edward had introduced her to his best friend at the club the third or fourth time they'd gone there as a couple. The three of them had played together occasionally before their marriage, but Edward's increasing possessiveness meant that had ended shortly after the wedding. They rarely went to the club thereafter.

Even before her marriage, Charles had said that if she hadn't met Edward first, he would have claimed her for himself. They'd laughed it off as a joke, but she wondered if Edward had guessed how serious Charles was. It was likely the reason their visits to the club had trailed off.

Still, when he heard about Edward's accident, Charles got in touch with her and offered his help and support. It had saved her sanity at the time and during the long, slow decline in her husband's health that followed. Charles had also convinced her to come back to the club eight months after Edward's death.

She fumbled a bit with the clasp of the bra before she got it undone. Once again she let the material slide from her shoulders and down her arms. To shake it off completely she had to roll her arms backward, which thrust her breasts forward. At least being not too large up top meant she didn't sag.

"The panties now," he said, the tone still almost impersonally polite.

She stuck her fingers under the waistband and pushed them down her legs until she could step out of them. A few gasps sounded from the audience and she felt the blood rise to her face. They'd never done this with quite such a large crowd viewing it. Charles must have noticed her color because he stepped toward her and raised her face with a finger under her chin until she stared straight into his eyes. Light eyes that could change from bright, warm crystal to icy gray. His expression was gentle now, which surprised her since he usually remained carefully neutral when he was doing a scene.

"You have a safe word," he reminded her, holding her gaze. "Code Red. Don't forget it."

"No, Master, I won't," she promised.

His smile—brief but sweet and so rare—sent tingling little curls of heat rushing through her. Her blood fizzed with the joy of it and a fire ignited in her gut. He'd barely even touched her yet.

"Don't be afraid to use it." He said that softly so only the two of them would hear. "I know this is pushing you beyond what you're used to, so stop it if you're

uncomfortable with it. It'll be a good teaching opportunity for how a Master should react when his sub uses the safe word."

"Thank you, Master," she said.

He nodded. "Good." More loudly he added, "But now there is the matter of your disobedience earlier when you looked me in the face without permission."

"Yes, Master. I'm very sorry, Master."

She loved saying that to him. She could sound very submissive when she wanted to. And maybe that was the heart of the problem. Edward had never been able to see beyond it. He bought the part of her that was a submissive without understanding it wasn't the whole story of who she was. Charles was smarter, but she wondered if he really wanted more than that either.

Regret stabbed through her as he turned her to face the rear of the stage area, where an X-shaped wooden cross had cuffs and chains hanging at different heights. His hands were warm and supportive even when he fastened the bands around her wrists and raised her arms until they were over her head. She grabbed the pegs near the tops of the beams. He spread her legs wider and attached the padded cuffs to her ankles as well. He tested the tightness to be sure none of the straps bound her too closely before he stepped back. From this angle she couldn't see the crowd without stretching her neck.

Charles was damn near the perfect Master. Edward had been good, but Charles was better, at least with her, somehow more in tune with what she wanted and needed. She sighed and tried to turn off her thoughts, to make herself relax into what was coming. The whizzing sound interrupted her unhappy musing. As usual he took a few practice swings. A light to medium flogger, she guessed from the sound as the tails cut through the air. Her bottom would know better in moments. He swung again and this time it connected with her rear end. Not hard. Just enough to cause a slight burn. One of the lighter floggers then. That would make sense if these were mostly beginners. A second stroke landed across her bottom. It had just the right heft, created just the right amount

of sizzle. Charles knew it worked best to start slowly, warming her up with a few lighter smacks that would blaze a trail for the harder ones to come.

The heat of them curled into her sweetly, making her bottom come alive with the prickly tingle. A few strokes later, the heat grew into fire and her rear blazed with the burning accumulation of lashes. As usual, though, the sting burrowed down into her, spreading its glorious zing to every limb and extremity before settling in her core. Her pussy swelled and grew moist. Pulsing need throbbed there. She tried to separate her mind from it. Experience said it would be a while before she got the fulfillment she craved. It would come. She trusted Charles for that. But she'd have to earn it. She trusted him for that also.

The flogger struck the backs of her thighs repeatedly, almost softly the first few times, creating a tingly warmth that spread and prickled more deeply with each lash.

"You want to make sure it builds," Charles explained to his audience. "Start light and gradually get harder. The sub will be able to take a lot more that way. And she'll enjoy it more. So will you."

He suited his actions to his word, making each stroke just a shade harder than the previous as he whipped the flogger across her bottom cheeks.

He addressed the onlookers at the same time. "You can keep the strokes clustered in the same spot or spread them out, but be careful not to lay too many on very sensitive places at one time. The insides of the thighs are particularly tender," he said. The flogger splayed its fire along the inner part of her right thigh. Cilla yelped, then moaned as the sting dug deep and sent a jagged streak of pleasure straight to her pussy.

"Of course, you can go higher for the most sensitive place, but I don't advise it until you've had a lot more practice. It's very tricky to hit there without doing it too hard and ruining the scene. However, there's another sensitive place you can use."

The flogger whizzed and this time the tails caught her on the spot right where her bottom and thighs met. It made her jump and squeal.

"Right there at the joint is very tender."

He continued to lecture as he rained blows on her, lashes that stung in the usual thrilling, satisfying way. Even as she responded to the strokes, Cilla wondered why she got aroused by something most people found incomprehensible if not downright strange. Why did she welcome pain and find pleasure in it? But it was only certain kinds of pain. She hated a toothache just as much as anyone else. And the pain had to be administered in the right way, in the right circumstances.

Charles was the best at it she'd ever known, though she'd tried to be sure Edward had never realized that. He'd had his own virtues.

When the burn from the flogger grew to a tide of sensation that drove her close to the edge of an orgasm, he stopped. To his audience he said, "You have to pay close attention to your sub's state. I can see that Cilla is close to coming, so it's time to change things up a bit."

She heard him move across the stage area and then return. She couldn't guess what he'd brought back until she felt the soft strokes of a feather over the burning patches of skin he'd lashed. The contrast made her hotter and needier than ever as the tiny prickles of the quill's ends roused shivery waves of desire.

The feather ran up the inside of her thigh to her slit and back down the other, then up again. She began to wriggle as the sensation grew almost beyond bearing. Again she was swelling, throbbing, her breath heaving in and out on harsh pants. When she was on the verge of exploding, he stopped.

"The sub has to know that while you're considerate of her limitations, you are still the one in charge. To the sub, the Master's wishes and pleasure must be paramount." He released her hands from the cuffs and caught her when she stumbled back. Steadying her, he turned back to the audience. "You—" She couldn't see who he pointed at. "Come here." The only other person in the room she knew was Josh, one of Charles' protégés. She turned to look. That wasn't Josh stepping forward.

When he was sure she could stand with no trouble, he went over to the young man he'd called and whispered something to him. The man's eyebrows rose, but he nodded.

Charles turned to Cilla again. "Undress him. One bit at a time."

Cilla drew a breath. Another thing she didn't understand about herself—her exhibitionist tendencies. She liked working with strangers, as long as it was at the command of a Master she trusted. She went to the man Charles designated. He wore a loose shirt with a leather vest over it, tight jeans and tennis shoes. The vest had three buttons down the front. She undid those and then pulled it off. Up close the man wasn't as young as she'd feared, likely in his mid or even late twenties. He stood still, barely breathing as she worked on his clothes. The shirt was loose enough to pull over his head. It took some effort since he was half a foot taller than her, but after some struggle she managed.

The button on his jeans gave her even more trouble. He stood still and watched her wrestle it loose but did nothing to help. The button finally released and slid through the hole. Cilla pushed the man's jeans down, then knelt to remove his shoes and socks. That part didn't thrill her, but it did lead up to what she liked most.

She pushed the jeans down and off, waiting for him to step out before she reached for the waistband of his boxers. They bulged out over the lump of his erection. She paused a moment to savor the anticipation of the last step.

After hooking her fingers in the elastic band, she lifted the cotton over the bulge and rolled the boxers down the man's thighs to his feet. An impressive cock sprang loose. She took a moment to stare at it, to inhale the lovely masculine aroma.

Charles handed her a condom packet. "Put it on him."

She tore it open and extracted the rubber. The man groaned aloud when she set it at the head of his cock and rolled it along the hard length.

"Suck him off."

Cilla drew a deep breath and bent in toward the erect shaft. She wrapped her arms around the man's legs for support and took the rubber-clad cock in her mouth. She grinned around it as she tasted the condom. Strawberry. Trust Charles to remember her favorite flavor.

The man's breath already came in pants and bursts and his cock throbbed. Cilla used her lips and tongue to caress up and down the shaft, taking him deeper in her throat each time. She released one leg to wrap her fingers around his balls and knead them gently.

His groans swelled, breaking into moaning sobs, until she felt him stiffen all over and draw in a long breath. A moment later he expelled the breath on a shout that accompanied the release of his seed. The condom meant she didn't have to worry about swallowing, something she didn't do with strangers.

She held on to his legs again, steadying him now rather than herself, as his ragged breathing gradually calmed. The man reached down and cupped either side of her head in his hands, brushing his fingers gently through her hair as he said, "Thank you!"

She whispered back, "You're welcome."

Charles came to her side and said, "Well done. Stand up and come over here." Gentleman that he was, Charles extended a hand to help her up. The man beside her also helped as she rose to her feet. "There are tissues over there," Charles said to the stranger who'd just orgasmed.

Charles brought a long padded bench from the side of the room and set it down in the middle of the dais. He nodded to Cilla. "Lie down on it. On your back. Spread your legs."

When she complied, letting her legs drop on either side of the bench, he invited the others present to come up on the dais and gather around.

"A bit more stimulation is needed before we give the lady the reward she's earned," Charles added. He moved to the side again and returned bearing a riding crop with a broad, flat slapper at the end. "You have to be very careful with this instrument," he warned his viewers. "It doesn't take much force to have an impact." He tapped the slapper down on her left breast, above the nipple. That light contact stung just enough to thrill her as it rode the line between pleasurable stimulation and pain. He tapped the other breast with the same force.

He repeated those on the undersides this time, just a shade harder. A couple of the people gathered sucked in breaths or squirmed. Cilla kept herself still, knowing Charles wouldn't allow her to move too much. Two quick pats on either side of the right nipple were followed by the same treatment on her left breast. Each sent a ripple of sweet tingling through her. Then he slapped the leather tab down directly on the nipple. A fiery initial shock was followed by an odd wave of cold, then by rivers of heat that made her jerk and moan. The burning quickly turned into a delicious throbbing in her pussy. He struck the other nipple and the same sensations plowed through her, rousing a swelling need. She couldn't help panting and moaning as heat spread out to every extremity.

But Charles wasn't done yet. He moved a few steps and brought the crop down on her right thigh, aiming for the tender skin of the inside, a few inches down from her slit. She squealed. It burned more brightly than the ones on her breast and sent streaks of electricity straight up to her pussy. A few more slaps on that side ended with the last one just below the crease. By then she moaned and twisted, unable to be still with the sting and the fire of need it roused.

He moved around to the other side so he could repeat the series of strokes on the inside of the other thigh. Jolts of fire and ragged bolts of electric shocks spiraled along her nerves until she could barely contain the pressure, the need.

"You'll notice she's very close to coming again," Charles said. "If you listen to her breathe and look at the way all her muscles are tensed up, you can see and hear she's on the verge. But we don't want to let her come yet." He stepped back away but addressed his next words to her. "You're not permitted to come until I say you can. You'll get a major flogging if you do. Understood?"

Cilla drew a breath and shivered. "Yes, Master." She loved it when he used that stern tone, and she knew the threat wasn't idle. Twice before, she'd accidentally come before he'd given permission and she learned the difference between a flogging given for pleasure and one done for punishment. Both were exciting in their own ways, but

when she reached this point in a scene, she didn't want more punishment. Still, she did appreciate his severity, and the way she could count on him. If he promised it, he would deliver.

Another thing other people would find incomprehensible. She didn't want mercy during a scene. It was more exciting to know there would be none. At the same time, she could depend on Charles to be sure there were compensations for even the most severe punishment.

Even more than the threat of punishment, though, she valued Charles' trust and friendship so much, she wanted to be the best for him, to make him proud of her.

He looked around at the others. "Everyone participates in this if they want. Remember, 'safe, sane and consensual'. No one is ever forced to do anything they're uncomfortable with unless they want to be. That includes manipulation, verbal bullying or group persuasion. So if any of you prefer to just watch, that's *fine*." He looked at each of the viewers in turn. "For those of you who want to, free your cocks or breasts or whatever and touch Cilla with them. Stroke her with your hands if you prefer. Bringing yourself off is acceptable so long as men use a condom. We have a box of them right here."

He took one himself, lowered the zipper of his trousers and pushed his briefs down until his hard shaft sprang loose. After rolling on the condom, he reached for Cilla's hand and wrapped it around the base. "You know what to do," he said to her.

Several of the men reached immediately for a packet, unzipped or pushed down their pants to free themselves as well and rolled on rubbers. One of the two women shrugged out of her shirt, showing she wore nothing beneath it. The entire group surged forward. A few of the men rubbed their sheathed cocks on Cilla's skin. One of them put a hand on her breast and squeezed lightly.

As she worked her fingers up and down Charles' shaft, loving the pulse of his hard length, he ran a hand along the sore flesh of her inner thigh and cupped her pussy. Cilla sobbed as the pressure squeezed her control almost to the point of eruption. He knew to

a fine point just how much would drive her to the edge and test her will. His palm remained in place, keeping the others from touching her there, though fingers and penises explored her thighs, belly, sides, throat and breasts.

Sensation overran her system in a tide so strong she thought she'd drown in it. Not orgasm—not yet—but a decidedly sexual thrill. All those cocks about to erupt in response to her. And maybe a pussy or two. How could it not be exciting?

Most especially Charles'. He trusted her with his most vulnerable area, trusted her to take care of him, to bring him pleasure rather than harm, just as she trusted him.

His fingers stroked her clit now, gently, but it was enough to drive her wild. Her muscles clenched to rock hardness, pulling her so tight she felt like a rubber band stretched to the limit. Sweat dripped down her temples as she struggled to hold back the orgasm.

Charles was close himself. His rod vibrated with urgency, hardening to a point that must be almost past bearing. She worked him faster even as she wrestled to keep her own furious need in check.

The aroma of so many men and women on the verge of orgasm didn't hide the subtle spicy scent of the fragrance Charles wore. Amid all the moans and pants, she could still make out the sounds of his gasping breaths and soft words. The others were all there and that increased her pleasure, but only one of them mattered. Charles.

Eventually she'd have to figure out what that meant for her, but all thought quickly drowned in the flood of tension and pleasure and the struggle to keep from letting go. The orgasm was so close, right on top of her, ready to pounce, and she couldn't hold it back much longer.

Then the first of the group let out an exultant shout as he climaxed. Another followed rapidly with a couple more only moments behind. Still Cilla hung on, kneading Charles' rod while she held herself at the precipice and fought the need to go over.

His fingers froze on her pussy and his cock jerked in her hands, once, twice, several more times as he came. His low gasping groan was the most wonderful sound in the room, though there were much louder yells and moans as others came.

Tears burned her cheeks at the combination of pride and terror she felt. She couldn't hold it much longer and she dreaded disappointing him. Breath froze in her throat as she struggled to hold back.

He had to let her come... He had to—

"You can come now," Charles said. His fingers stroked up and down her clit in the way he knew she loved. It took no more than a couple of those before her control shattered and the tide of orgasm jerked her into an agonizing bliss.

After they'd all had a few minutes to recover and straighten clothes, the spectators began to file out. Most stopped to thank both Charles and Cilla and said the display had really helped them understand more about how a Dominant should work a scene. Charles reminded them there were many styles of dominance, but that no matter how it worked, the 'safe, sane and consensual' mantra should always apply. "It's always about safety first and enjoyment for *all* parties next," he said. "If it's not good for everyone involved, it's not good for anyone."

Josh stopped to say thanks to both of them.

"You're going to be handling a scene yourself very soon," Charles told him.

"I'm not sure..."

"I am." Charles clapped him on a shoulder. "I've watched you in the last few we've done. You're ready. We'll talk more about it later."

Cilla dressed while the last of them departed, but Charles waited for her. She'd expected it.

She didn't expect him to take her in his arms and draw her against him, holding her firmly but not too tightly. "You always make me proud," he told her. His breath rippled warmly against her cheek. "Thank you."

She had to draw in air so her voice didn't betray her when she answered. "With the perfect Master to guide me, how could I do anything else?"

He sighed and stepped back. "I'm not perfect. I'm still a man who makes a lot of mistakes," he said. "But right now I'm a hungry man. Would you be interested in a late dinner?"

Cilla had anticipated that and it worried her. Whether from long acquaintance or a sort of radar she had about this man, she suspected he had more on his mind than just food.

Chapter Two

She wanted to decline. Charles could see it in her face and figured it from her hesitation and the way she struggled for words. She wanted to make some excuse, maybe tell him she had to get up early the next day. They both knew the next day was Sunday, and even if she were working, the library wouldn't open until one. She wouldn't lie anyway. Cilla had too much fundamental integrity for that.

"Yes," she answered. "But I'll need a few minutes to freshen up."

Someone who didn't know her so well might have been put off by the lack of enthusiasm in her voice. But he thought he understood the source of her hesitation. "Of course. I'll wait for you in the lounge."

He went upstairs and got a glass of water from the bar. He'd be driving and wanted to be able to have wine with dinner, so he limited himself to water right then. Twenty minutes later, Cilla joined him. Except for the slight flush that still stained her cheeks, it would be hard to tell she'd just been the centerpiece of one of the hottest displays of submission he'd ever seen. Her long dark hair had been combed and arranged into a neat twist at the back of her head and she'd put on fresh makeup—not that she needed anything but the lovely color in her face to make her beautiful.

He watched her approach, appreciating the elegant way she moved and the nicely rounded figure that looked as good in her clothes as out of them. He loved her curves. He loved the dark eyes that could sparkle with laughter, though she hadn't done nearly as much of that in the last few years as she used to. He loved the way she could discuss just about anything intelligently, from movies to television to art and books, both popular and literary. He loved everything about her. He loved *her*.

He thought she loved him too, but he suspected her emotions were so muddled she didn't realize it. For years now he'd waited for her. Tonight he stopped waiting.

Charles stood as she approached. "Ready? I thought the Porter Grill in Bethesda. Have you been there?"

She smiled at him. Though she tried to hide it, beneath her calm exterior he saw the raw nerves. "I haven't been there," she said. "I really haven't been out much since..."

"Since Edward's accident."

She shrugged. "Pretty much. Tell me about the food."

"Steaks and seafood done on a grill. All fresh and beautifully seasoned. It's a favorite of mine. I read a review of it in the *Post* a couple of years ago and have been visiting regularly ever since. I take clients there pretty often." He didn't want her to have too much time to think right then, so he steered the conversation to a discussion of business, segueing to a couple of movies he'd seen recently and books he'd read, asking her about the same. Once her interest was engaged he didn't have to work to keep the conversation rolling, even through the short wait to be seated and then for food.

Her reaction to the grilled shrimp she'd ordered was everything he'd hoped for. "This is great," she said. "Nice atmosphere here too." She scanned the room's understated, elegant decor.

He'd ordered a half bottle of wine and made sure he kept her glass filled. At one point she raised an eyebrow as he topped her off while not pouring any for himself, but she didn't say anything.

They discussed general topics and had a lively debate on the politics of food distribution while they ate and into dessert.

Finally when they were at the coffee stage, he brought up the subject weighing on his mind. "We've known each other for a long time," he said, watching for her reaction.

Her glance showed curiosity but not much else yet. "Years now. Six, I think."

He nodded. "You remember the time I told you if Edward hadn't married you first, I would have?"

Her expression tightened and a look of pain swept across her face before leaving it sadder and concerned. "I don't remember it exactly that way, but yes, basically I do."

"It's still true. I respect marriage, so I backed off and left you alone except when Edward was willing to share you. And then when he was so ill with the complications from the accident, and after he died..."

"You were the best friend I could have had," she said. "I don't know if I've ever told you how much I appreciated it."

Charles shrugged. "Ulterior motives. But I had to give you time to get over the shock and grief. It's been a year now and I..." He stopped and drew a breath. "I don't want to take a chance you'll meet someone else without saying something myself."

"You... Are you saying you want more than what we have at the club?"

"What we have at the club is great and it makes for a good start. But yes, I want more. A lot more. I want you in my life all the time."

She set down her coffee and drew a breath. "I...I'm not sure what to say."

He glanced at her cup, which was down to the dregs. "Are you done?"

She nodded. The waiter came up with the bill and took his credit card. After a moment she continued, "I'm flattered, of course. Who wouldn't be? And if I'm hesitating, it's nothing to do with you. You're pretty much everything a woman could ever want in a man, especially a woman with submissive leanings. But..."

The waiter returned with his card. Charles added in tip, signed the slip, stood and went around to hold Cilla's chair as she got up. "Are you up for a walk?" he asked. "Just up and down the street a bit."

"Sure."

The restaurant was on one of Bethesda's main streets, an area of broad, well-lit sidewalks and a fair amount of pedestrian traffic, even at ten thirty at night. She didn't resist when he took her hand and held it as they walked. For a few minutes they ambled in silence, glancing in at other restaurants and window displays. At one shopfront, an

antiques store, Cilla stopped to admire an old desk set with a pen and inkstand. Had the store been open, he would've suggested they go in and take a closer look.

After a moment she turned to him and heaved a deep sigh. "Charles, you're a wonderful man and you know I adore you, but I'm not sure... You really want to try out a closer relationship?"

He put his hands on her shoulders and stared down at her for a second before he said, "Cilla, I'm asking you to marry me. I'll get down on my knees if you want a more traditional proposal, but it doesn't exactly fit with who we are."

"*Marry?*" The dismay in her voice didn't thrill him.

"It's what people do when they want to make a real and serious commitment to each other. I want that with you."

"Just because we're sexually compatible? I'm afraid that's part of the problem. Maybe the crux of it."

"Cilla..." He wanted to drag her against himself and tell her what was going to happen, as he would have in a BDSM scene. But he couldn't do that. This was so much more delicate and the stakes way higher. "It's much more than sexual compatibility. I like you—no, love you—in so many more ways. I admire the way you handled things with Edward throughout your marriage and his death. I enjoy just talking to you, being with you, even in a non-sexual situation. But why is it a problem that we're sexually compatible?"

She stopped and drew a breath. "Maybe we better walk again. This is a bit complicated."

He nodded and laced her arm with his instead of taking her hand again.

After a minute she sighed and said, "Let me back up a bit. When Ed and I first met, I was just twenty-four and still incredibly naive in some ways. But I was so thrilled to discover that all those secret fantasies I had weren't just...well, perversions. That lots of people had the same kinds of desires, and there were ways to act on them that were

reasonably safe. It was even more exciting to find a man who not only fit my sexual fantasies, but that I liked to be with outside the club and dungeons.”

Two couples wound around each other approached, forcing them to move to the right to let them pass. Cilla was quiet until they’d gone by. “I thought it was enough to build a life together. It should have been. But Edward’s need for mastery ran deeper than I anticipated.

“At first I thought it was pretty neat that he took such an interest in everything I did, everywhere I went, everyone I spoke to. And I loved the way he could be so strong and dominating in the bedroom, and sometimes out of it too. But it didn’t take long before it got...suffocating.”

Again she got quiet for a few moments. Charles kept silent, waiting, figuring she had more to say.

“It got to where I could barely move without having to account to him for it. I dreaded going anywhere because of the explanations I’d have to make. And sometimes he’d punish me if I...if I did something like stop for a cup of coffee without getting his permission first.”

She drew in a long breath. “I know that for some people that’s the ideal of the submissive lifestyle, to belong to your Master so completely that everything you do and say is an extension of him. That he has complete control of your life.” Cilla shook her head, bouncing a few strands of hair that had escaped from the knot. “It didn’t work for me.”

“There is no one right way to be a submissive. The only right way is the way that works for both partners.”

“I know that. My head knows that. In my heart I felt like I was failing Edward, even though at the same time I knew and felt that, As hard as I tried, it was wrong. I loved Edward, but I couldn’t be what he needed me to be. And he wasn’t what I needed.”

He stared at her. “All this time I thought the two of you were happy together.”

"We were, at first. Or he was. I knew pretty quickly it wasn't going to work for me. I tried to talk to him about it. I even threatened to leave. I was going to do it, but then he had the accident..."

"You feel guilty about that too."

She gave him a startled look. "It happened right after one of our arguments about my leaving."

He tightened the arm he had looped around hers. "You've never told me this before." It shook him to learn she'd kept so much inside for so long. This might be more complicated than he expected. "Likely he was upset and not paying enough attention to what he was doing. That's *not* your fault. When someone gets behind the wheel of a car, it's his responsibility to watch what's happening. You can't force it. And even if there's a reason for their inattention, you didn't *make* him get in the car."

"No, I know that. It's just a piece of the whole. The end result was I vowed that if I ever married again, it wouldn't be to a man who was a sexual Dominant."

He sighed this time. "And here I am, a sexual Dominant, asking you to marry me."

She let out a sound like a strangled sob, stopped and turned to face him again. "Charles, you're the only man I can think of who could make me have any second thoughts about that resolution." She shook her head. "But there's more. I want to have a family, children, and I don't see how the lifestyle fits in with that at all."

"Cilla..." He stared at her for a moment. This too he hadn't seen coming. It knocked him for a bit of a loop. "You know, I'd like to have more children too, even if I am getting a bit old for it. But the sexual relationship has nothing—absolutely nothing—to do with raising a family. The way adults make love is a private thing between adults and would have no carry-over to my relationship with my children." He hesitated before saying, "It doesn't have to carry over to my day-to-day relationship with my wife either. I could live with that part of the relationship being confined to play at the club or in specific situations."

"You're not too old for it at all. You're what, forty?"

"Forty-two in October. And I have an eighteen-year-old daughter from my first marriage."

"I didn't know that."

"The marriage ended years ago, but I've tried to stay in touch with Kathy, to be as good a father as I could from a distance."

"I'll be thirty-two next month and my biological clock is ticking down. If I'm not too old for it, you're certainly not. But I really wonder—given how marvelous you are at dominance—if you could really be happy in a relationship so vanilla."

"It wouldn't have to be completely vanilla, would it?"

"At home, yes. I'd be willing to go out and play at the club occasionally."

"That's pretty limiting," Charles admitted. "I wonder if you could be happy in a relationship like that."

"I've tried the other way and it didn't work. I think I'd be much happier limiting my submission to outside the house."

"There are middle ways. Ways to practice BDSM that don't eliminate it from the home completely but don't let it take over your life, either."

"You may be right. But my admittedly limited experience says otherwise. I really think I'd be better off trying to find a good man who's not into kinky sex."

"You'd be bored silly within a year and frustrated to boot." Charles sighed. A hard knot formed in his gut as he realized just how serious she was about this. Desperation made him cast about for solutions or arguments. There were none. "I'd be willing to try it with you," he heard himself saying. "Just a vanilla relationship outside the club."

She stopped so abruptly he almost stumbled, pulled backward by their linked arms. "You would?"

"For you? Yes." A glimmer of an idea occurred to him. "Would you be willing to give it a trial run?"

"How would that work?"

He considered the mechanics. "Probably neither one of us wants to move completely right now, so why don't we plan on meeting most evenings, at least for dinner, and spending the weekends together. Vanilla sex only at either of our places. Shall we give it a few months and see what happens?"

"You'd really give up being my Master for this? Do you really think you can do it?"

"We'd still go to the club occasionally, right? And play there?"

She nodded.

"Then I think I can manage the rest."

"It's going to be hard for you," she ventured.

"Not as hard as you think. I have a pretty good grasp on what's real and important. I have an entire life outside the club, you know. Just as you do." He guided her back into the shadow of an overhanging store entrance so he could pull her close. "I don't think I've said it to you before, but I love you. Not just because you're the most glorious submissive I've ever worked with. Because you're the most glorious *woman* I've ever known. I love your warmth, your concern, your gentleness, your sense of humor, your intelligence and the way I just feel more complete when I'm with you." He tipped her head up and leaned over to press his lips to hers. Odd that despite the number of times they'd touched each other, undressed each other and brought each other off, they'd never really kissed mouth-to-mouth very often.

And now that he knew what he'd been missing, he'd have a hard time keeping himself from doing it every time he got near her.

The touch of her lips to his sent a blast of heat rushing through him. It made the blood rush to his cock, but it also warmed up places in his heart he hadn't realized were cold and filled empty spots in his soul. The intimacy of it stunned him. It was a surrender of a different type. He gave her access to the deepest, most hidden parts of himself and felt her yield the same in turn.

He slanted his mouth over hers and pushed his tongue through to swipe over the tender flesh. She tasted of coffee and wine and woman, a sweet, heady mix. He wanted

more. More of her, more of the thrilling, wild desire that rushed through him. He nipped at her lip, needing to leave his mark on her. God, he wanted to leave all sorts of marks on her. He wanted the world to know she belonged to him.

But of course, she didn't.

Cilla sighed gently and softened, melting against him. He wrapped his arms around her. After a few wonderful minutes, she drew back and he let her move away.

"Charles." She stopped and sighed, pushed back a few tendrils of hair that had come loose and fallen into her face. Her hand quivered. "I love you too, but I'm still not sure."

"That's why we're going for a trial run. See if we can do it. And for more kisses like that, I'll try really, really hard."

She smiled at him.

"I plan to court you," he warned, "and wow you in every way I know how. Seduce you, charm you, completely bowl you over. And impress you with how uncontrolling I can be. So be prepared to be blown away."

She laughed.

"I haven't heard that sound in a long time," he told her. "Too long."

"You know, I don't think I *have* laughed in a long time. Maybe too long. For a while it seemed almost, I don't know, disloyal somehow."

"But now you realize that Edward's gone and nothing you do is going to bring him back. You have to go on with your own life."

"Something like that. I honestly think that in his better moments, that's what he would have wanted for me."

"The Edward I prefer to remember wouldn't have wanted you to spend the rest of your life mourning him."

By mutual consent they turned and headed back to the restaurant parking lot and his car. Cilla looped her arm through his again, though they walked mostly in silence.

"True," she answered a minute or so later. "But I'm not sure *this* is right for me."

"I'm going to convince you it is."

Charles wished he felt as confident as he sounded. In truth, most of his sexual encounters the past few years had been at the club. He'd had a few casual dates with women he met outside the club and some had ended in sex, but those had all been less than satisfying. Whether that owed more to the sex being too bland or the fact that it wasn't with Cilla, he couldn't say.

He planned to do his damndest to give her whatever she wanted and hoped it would be enough.

Chapter Three

Cilla glanced at her watch for the third time in half an hour. How could those hands move so slowly? She shook her head at her own foolishness. She was acting like a teenager with a hot date instead of a grown woman meeting an old friend for dinner and the theater. Theater was her favorite entertainment, though she'd rarely been able to attend in the last few years. Odd that she hadn't known Charles shared that love. When he'd related the list of plays and musicals he'd seen in the past couple of years, she had a pang of envy, followed by the uncomfortable realization that he was right about them having more in common than kinky sexual tastes. Still...

Quitting time normally meant the time she was supposed to leave but almost never did. That day she was out the door as soon as the big hand hit the hour. Half an hour later, after a quick change of clothes and makeup redo, she was ready when Charles knocked on her door.

He always looked good. Expensive suits only enhanced the impact of great posture, a body he kept in good shape and a face endowed by nature with terrific bone structure. His hairline had receded a bit, and gray streaked the dark hair at his temples, but that imparted an aura of elegant maturity. At forty-one, he was still an incredibly handsome man. She'd never been intimidated by his looks or his wealth before.

None of that mattered when you played a BDSM scene at the club. Not to her, anyway, though it probably did to some. For her it was all about what each person brought to the experience.

Seeing him like this forced her to view him in a different way—not as just a play partner, but as a man and a potential lifemate. She had a moment of vertigo, as she sometimes got in a movie when the film cut to a different angle on a scene. Suddenly

the difference in their income level and social status mattered. Everything about each of them mattered because it could all have an impact on their future.

Some of the sensitivity to body language and expression that made him such a good Master must have been at work right then. He set aside the gift bag he carried and came over to her.

"You're worrying too much. We're just going out to have a good time tonight. Nothing more. Whatever else happens, tonight is just for having fun. I suspect you haven't had much fun in your life in the last few years. So relax. You're not going to get graded or failed or thrown out of anything based on what happens. Okay?"

"I'll try," she promised.

"Good." He took a couple of steps back to get the bag and returned. "Now, before you get excited again, this isn't any big thing. But I did warn you I planned to court you, didn't I?" He held the bag out to her.

"You did." She took it from him. Digging around in the tissue paper produced a hard box about two inches to a side and an inch thick. She extracted it and recognized the logo of a local jewelry store.

Her fingers shook with a mix of dread and excitement as she opened it.

Gold and deep red gems glinted at her. The gold was a series of links that formed a loop just large enough to go around her wrist. Set into every other link was a small red faceted stone. She sucked in a breath. "It's beautiful. But..."

"No buts," he said in his "Master" tone. Then realizing it he added, "I'd be honored if you'd accept it, if only as a token of friendship." He looked at her. "You know I can afford it. Is that going to be an issue?" he asked.

"It's something we need to talk about," she said. "But I'll accept this. With gratitude." She went over and kissed him firmly on the mouth. She was careful to make it a peck only. Anything more and they'd never get out of her apartment this evening.

As he drove them to the restaurant, Charles kept the conversation flowing in ways that helped her relax, join in and forget about everything else. Dinner was wonderful, though afterward she could barely remember what she ate.

He didn't bring up the money issue until they got to dessert and coffee. "I'm not wealthy," he said, apparently out of the blue as he set down his coffee cup after taking a sip. "Well off, certainly, and since I have only one daughter to support, I have quite a bit of disposable income as well as significant savings. But I'm not really a rich man."

"Which is still a lot better off than I am."

He watched her steadily. "Why is that a problem? Most women consider a good income a desirable thing in a husband. I could support you and any family we have comfortably. That's usually counted a virtue."

"I know," she admitted. "I suppose it's mostly pride."

"Pride because you're not matching my income, or pride because you think people will see you as being a gold digger?"

"Maybe some of both."

"Does it make it any better if I say that I see the work you do as tremendously important? And that I admire it? Heck, I was fortunate enough to inherit a good bit of my money from my parents, and then made some lucky investments. I didn't get here entirely on my own efforts."

"Actually, the word I hear most often is 'shrewd' not 'lucky'," Cilla answered. "And I hear you work quite hard managing your venture capital firm."

He shrugged. "None of it would've happened if I hadn't inherited the starting capital. It's irrelevant to us, anyway. Since when has either of us been the sort to worry about what other people would think?"

"There's that," she admitted. "So maybe the pride thing is something I need to deal with."

"If it stands between us, it's something *we* need to deal with."

Cilla sighed. "It doesn't really stand between us. It's just an excuse I'm using because I have so many doubts about the real issues."

"And it's my pride too, or maybe it's that primitive instinct to show off what a he-man mighty hunter I am, one who can keep my woman in buffalo meat and furs. And yet at the same time I'm trying to demonstrate I'm a civilized, sophisticated man of the world with exquisite taste and sense of style."

She laughed and reached across the table to take his hand. "Charles, you are an extraordinary man. You don't have to prove *that* to me." And that was another part of the problem. She knew what an incredible man he was, and she wanted that man. She just wasn't sure about some of the other things that came with him.

He smiled back but there was a trace of sadness in it at the same time. "Let me be myself, then. Let me give you those gifts because it gives me pleasure. They're no mark of possession either. If things don't work out... If this can't be, I still want to be your friend. And I want you to have the things I give you as markers of that friendship."

It couldn't ever be quite that simple. Whatever his intentions, stated and unstated, expensive gifts would link them in a way she might not be able to deal with if the other things didn't work out. But she could worry about that later. They were both taking risks and didn't know where this would go.

"We'd better get going," he said, shooting back his sleeve to glance at his watch. An expensive, tasteful watch. Tag Heuer.

The play lived up to its billing as a romantic comedy with more depth than average. It took their minds off the issues between them and gave them something to talk about afterward. He invited her back to his place for a nightcap.

Cilla wavered. She had to work the next day, but it wasn't all that late and she enjoyed Charles' company. She wanted to spend more time with him. "All right."

She expected his home to be a small mansion, but in fact, he had a nice condo in a gated complex. It featured a spacious kitchen, a living room with a gas fireplace, and three bedrooms, one fitted out as a home office. He turned on the fire, even though the

night wasn't really cool. With the only other light coming from the kitchen, the flames imparted a warm glow to the room.

Charles brought out a bottle of white wine that he uncorked before pouring a glass for each of them. "I think you'll like this," he said.

"Tell me the bottle cost less than fifty dollars," she asked. "Please. I want to know if I'm sipping liquid gold and I don't trust my taste buds for it."

"This is only twenty dollars a bottle, but I happen to think it's a good deal for the price." Before he handed the glass to her he raised the bottle and asked, "Am I a snob? Honest answer, please."

She didn't hesitate. "Sort of. You're a sophisticated and experienced man. Intelligent and...discerning. You're a snob in the sense that you don't like to settle for anything less than the best. But you're not mean or nasty about it. You don't rub it in other people's faces or flaunt it."

"What a nice way to say yes."

"You have excellent taste, and I appreciate that," Cilla said. "Even if I can't afford to indulge it myself."

"You—" He stopped and shook his head.

Cilla had no trouble finishing the thought for him. "I could if I married you."

A faint flush of color tainted his cheeks. "I'm sorry. I know better."

"You stopped in time."

"Thank you." He finally handed the glass to her and sat beside her on the sofa that faced the fireplace. "I have plenty of flaws in addition to being a snob," he said.

"Oh?"

"I can be ruthless and selfish in pursuit of what I want. I'm not always kind or gentle and I'm rarely patient. I tend to be sarcastic and thoughtless."

"I haven't found you that way," Cilla said.

"But I like you. And I want you, so I'm on my best behavior with you."

"Oh." She considered that for a minute, matching it against what she'd seen of him, and decided it could well be true. Mostly. "I'm not exactly a saint myself."

"You acted like it with Edward."

"When you were around," she pointed out.

"I talked to him at times when you weren't there. He knew he wasn't always the best husband to you. He said you were a saint to put up with him."

"I wasn't always nice about it, though. I growled and argued and even raged at him sometimes. Other times I was cold and distant."

"But you stayed with him and took care of him right to the end."

"Crazy loyalty *is* one of my virtues," she admitted. "And a deep, abiding respect for vows made. Like marriage vows. That's why I won't do it again lightly."

"I'm single now for the same reason. You know I was married once before, years ago. It didn't work out. And it made me incredibly choosy because I respect those vows as well. You're the only woman I've met in many years who could make me consider saying them again."

"That's a responsibility."

"No it's not!" The anger in the words shocked her. "It's my problem entirely and imposes no obligation on you."

She drew a deep breath so she could say calmly, "I'm your friend, Charles. And I want to stay a friend, whether anything else works out between us or not."

He breathed out a sigh that took some of the tension with it. "Thank you." He took a long sip of wine, put the glass down on the table and turned to her. "Can I kiss you? Please?"

"It will probably lead to other things."

"I hope so," he admitted. "Do you want me, Cilla? Not as a Master, but as a man?"

"All I have to do is look at you." She squeezed the words out through a tight throat as she realized how true it was. Part of that owed to all the wonderful memories she

had of him as Master at the club. But another part was just because he was who he was, a man with looks that attracted her and a personality that intrigued her. "My pulse speeds up and my muscles get tense."

His smile sent her heartbeat straight into overdrive. She set down her wineglass and he took that as his cue to lean over and press his mouth to hers. Mouth-to-mouth kissing wasn't something she did often at the club, and now she understood why. The intimacy of it was too personal. The warm pressure of his lips on hers communicated his desire, but also told her he wanted the connection with her, that he knew her wants and those were his too. And when he nudged her to open for him, allowing his tongue entrance, she accepted the link, temporary though it might be.

As his tongue stroked the inside of her mouth, heat roused in her core, scooted through her nerves and veins and settled back in her pussy. His hand went to the back of her head and fingers threaded through her hair to hold her against him. An unconscious gesture of possession and mastery, but she didn't object to it because it held her where she wanted to be anyway, close to his warm, hard body.

Even before he made that movement, though, she'd gotten the definitive answer to the question he'd raised earlier. It wasn't just Charles the Master she responded to. It was Charles the man.

The scent of his body mingled with the expensive fragrance he wore in a heady aroma that called to the most essentially female part of her. She wanted her hands on his skin. After undoing the knot of his tie, she reached for the buttons of his shirt. He obliged her by removing the tie. He held on to it for a moment as though contemplating its bondage potential, then tossed it at the table while Cilla worked on his buttons. A quick jerk pulled the hem of the shirt loose from his trousers and let her undo the last few at the bottom. He shrugged out of it, letting it drop to the couch. He wore no undershirt.

She pressed her hands against the warm flesh of his chest. A chest she'd always adored but rarely got to touch as much as she wanted to. The hair tickled her palms as

she molded them to the strong pectoral muscles. The thump of his heartbeat drummed against her as the heat sank in. This was usually what he ordered her to do for him—undress him and touch him. The pants would be next.

Instead he reached over and began to unbutton her blouse. That was a change. He almost always had her strip for him. Sometimes, if there was a trainee around, he or she would have the privilege, but generally Cilla put on a show for him as she undressed. Now he carefully undid the buttons of her blouse and helped her out of it. He stared at the bra for a moment. "Lean forward." He made it a request rather than an order. When she complied, he unsnapped the hook and slid the straps down her shoulders.

He sighed as he stared at the flesh revealed. "You have the most perfectly beautiful breasts."

"Thank you."

He put a hand under one and lifted it so he could kiss the nipple, then repeated the action on the other breast. He touched them almost reverently, pressing his lips to the tip of each for a long moment.

A slightly awkward pause ensued as they tried to figure out what to do next. In a scene he would have ordered her to finish undressing or to undress him. Here he finally settled for getting rid of the rest of his clothes after she unbuckled his belt for him.

He stood up, gloriously naked, and nodded for her to follow him down the hall. His bedroom was almost exactly what she would have predicted for him—tasteful, expensively decorated and pristinely neat. A few family pictures of him with his ex-wife and daughter stood on the dresser, the only personal note in the room unless he'd chosen the set of Cubist paintings on the wall.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, nuzzling her neck and fingering her nipples. Rational thought drowned in a flood of heat that sizzled along her nerves. For a few minutes they stood there with her back against his chest as she leaned against him. His cock pressed into her bottom, showing how much he wanted her.

He fumbled with the button of her skirt but slid the zipper down easily. A quick push and the fabric brushed down her hips and landed on the floor, leaving her in only underpants and shoes. He turned her in his arms, backed off a step and surveyed her from top to bottom. "You're so beautiful it blinds me."

She'd never been so free to stare back at him. A sub didn't look at her Master without permission. "You're a beautiful man yourself," she told him, and meant every syllable of it. He was. "But it's not the most important thing about either of us."

"No. But it doesn't hurt anything."

There was another odd pause before he brought her over to the bed with him. Kissing her again, he tipped her back, then lay down beside her. His fingers explored her breasts and skimmed down over her stomach. Heat bubbled inside and the pressure built in her womb. He played over her slit, still protected by the fabric of her panties, rubbing his hand along the gap between her legs, moving back and forth, up and down until she was moaning softly.

A strange feeling swept over her. Even while she was getting aroused and turned on, it was flat and sort of...just...something. It wasn't a lack of chemistry between her and Charles. Lord knew they were attracted to each other.

Okay, so she did know what was missing. It couldn't matter. They needed to be able to do it this way if they were to have any future.

And she was aroused. Each pass of his fingers over sensitive areas sent rivers of heat tearing through her. The pressure built in her pussy, a rising tide of need clamoring for completion. He pushed her panties down her legs and off and removed her shoes, tossing them to the floor, before he nudged her legs apart.

When he touched her pussy this time, she jolted and squealed. Pleasure tore through her in jagged shards. It was so good and thrilling, she needed to share it. She reached for his cock and wrapped her hands around it.

He drew in a sharp breath, almost like a sob. From experience she knew where he liked to be touched, how hard to squeeze and how to match the rhythm as his cock

began to throb. She loved the feel of his soft skin, especially the silky smoothness of the tip, the slickness of the pre-cum, the scent of his arousal. She loved everything about him.

And she wanted him inside her. Right now.

"Charles," she moaned. "Please."

"Cilla?" He sounded so oddly humble. "Are you ready for me?"

"Dear heaven, yes, please."

He moved to kneel between her legs, but reached over to the bedside table, opened a drawer and pulled out a condom.

"You keep those ready for guests?" she asked while he rolled it on.

He shook his head and watched her steadily. "Bought them yesterday."

Her heart twisted in on itself, but he didn't give her time to dwell on it. He moved, positioning himself over her, his cock seeking the entrance. He filled her vision with his face above her, filled her other senses with his scent, his voice whispering endearments, the touch of him pushing into her. Love for him filled her heart. Fear for herself and their future wound around it, but she wanted this too much to give the doubts any toehold.

With a quick push he buried himself deep inside her. She clenched around him, wanting to hold him close. This was actually a rare treat. When playing at the club, they rarely had face-to-face intercourse. She almost never got to wrap her arms and legs around him, to bring him closer, hold him to her, try to match her own spasms to the rhythm of his thrusts.

Thought floated away again in the tide of sensation as her muscles tightened to steel-hardness and pressure threatened to explode within. Each time he thrust, he pressed against the magic spot inside that made her jerk with an astonishing thrill.

A piece of her kept expecting him to tell her to hold back, that she couldn't come until he gave permission, but that didn't happen.

He reached down between them and stroked her clit with his thumb. The dam holding back the rising pressure broke spectacularly. She groaned aloud as the jolts squeezing her milked him into a matching orgasm.

For a few long moments they jerked and jolted together as one's spasms affected the other. She wrapped her arms around him, relishing the feel of his strong body joined to hers. It would be heaven to stay here forever, enveloped in this peace and joy.

When the aftershocks calmed down, he rolled to the side but pulled her against him. She hated to have him draw out, to be separated from him, but she laid her cheek against his chest and that was almost as good. He shifted so he could thread his fingers through her hair and kiss her temple and cheek.

The warmth and comfort and peace of completion overwhelmed her. She dozed off in his arms. When she woke, light peeked in around the curtains of Charles' bedroom. She had a moment of disorientation and panic, thinking she was late for work before she realized she had a late shift that day.

Her jolt must have roused Charles. He smiled at her, ruffled her no-doubt thoroughly scruffy-looking hair and got out of bed. The door he left through wasn't the one to the hall, so she assumed it was a bathroom. When he returned he stood beside her and said, "There are extra toothbrushes and towels in the closet, toothpaste in the drawer, and shampoo and conditioner on the shelf in the shower. Use whatever you want." He grinned at her. "Next time pack an overnight bag, okay? I'm going to make coffee."

He left the room. Okay, so he wasn't a morning romantic. All right with her. She wasn't much of a morning person herself.

But he made wonderful coffee, she discovered after she'd brushed her teeth, showered, donned the terry cloth robe she found hanging on a hook behind the door and followed the alluring aroma to the kitchen. He had a cup waiting for her, prepared the way she liked it with just a little cream but no sugar. This was her kind of morning romance.

"Delicious," she said after the first sip. "You make great coffee."

"A point in my favor?"

"Maybe several. I really like coffee."

"So do I. Another thing we have in common. Do you work today?"

"Fraid so. But I'm on the later shift. I don't have to be there until noon." She glanced at the clock. It showed eight thirty, so she had plenty of time.

"Is that a subtle way of telling me dinner tonight is out?"

"I haven't even finished the first cup of coffee," she protested. "I don't do subtlety before the second cup. But it's true, anyway."

"Okay. Tomorrow night is Nick and Andi Tysinger's housewarming. Would you do me the honor of having dinner with me and accompanying me to it?"

Their friends from the club had married a few months ago. "With pleasure. I hear their house is quite something."

Charles nodded. "Nick said it has some unusual and interesting features."

"I can hardly wait to see. I have no idea what to get them for a housewarming gift."

"A nice pair of padded handcuffs?" The twinkle in his eyes belied the serious tone.

"Given what I know of Nick, Andi might just need them."

He laughed. "You might be right."

Charles didn't laugh often, but she wished he would. It transformed his face, easing the harsh lines at his brow and mouth, putting a delicious sparkle in his eyes.

She could do that for him, bring humor into a life that seemed terribly devoid of any kindness or warmth.

He could bring her the same, she realized. Already had, in fact. He'd been the only man who really stirred her since Edward's death. The only bright spot. That and the satisfaction she felt at work. Otherwise her personal life was a cold and empty thing. For a while the emptiness had been good. It had helped heal her after Edward's death

and the release from the prison of his possessiveness. She'd had to find out how to live her own life and be her own person.

She'd learned the lesson, made a reasonable success of her own life since then. She didn't think Charles would subjugate her the same way Edward had. But how could she know for sure? And how could she risk it happening again? Or worse yet, risk her children to a man who might abuse them? Not that she really believed Charles would. But did she have the right to take any risk with her future offspring?

Chapter Four

Charles couldn't figure out why his stomach churned as he went to pick Cilla up for dinner and the Tysingers' housewarming party. He'd dated quite a few women in his time. Women more beautiful than Cilla. Many who were more sophisticated, richer, smarter and wittier. But not one of them had her combination of beauty, warmth, sweetness, sense of adventure and glorious sexual submissiveness.

She was the only one he loved. The only person he'd fallen in love with since the break-up of his marriage to Marilyn fifteen years ago. That infatuation hadn't survived the tests of life, financial struggle and a small child. He had no bad feelings toward his ex-wife and could only be glad that she'd found happiness with another man. She'd done well with Kathy.

He'd managed. As Cilla had after Edward's death. How had he missed the problems they had? Possibly because both Edward and Cilla herself went to some lengths to keep those troubles private. Cilla was so much more mature than Marilyn. So much more focused on the same things he thought were important.

He was pretty sure she was in love with him. They were compatible on levels other than the sexual. So how could he convince her that he wouldn't treat her the same way Edward had? He wouldn't insist on owning every bit of her life. How did he win her trust? Their vanilla sex arrangement might do it in the long run, but he wanted more than that with her.

No answer had presented itself by the time he got to her door. As always she looked beautiful. Just seeing her and smelling that light, crisp perfume she wore lifted his spirits.

They went to his favorite Chinese restaurant for dinner. It wasn't an expensive or tony place, but it had the best Oriental food in town. That night he barely tasted the

shrimp egg foo yong for the joy of her company. Cilla asked him about his travels and listened to his stories about places he'd visited. When he said he wanted to take her to some of those and named specific cities, she smiled sadly but said nothing.

He didn't push it but described a few of his favorite places in the world on the drive to the party.

The house Nick Tysinger had built for his wife was an impressive brick structure on a roomy lot at the edge of a cul-de-sac. Half a dozen or more cars already parked out front. He had to pull in behind one down the street.

Nick's wife Andrea answered the door. She greeted and hugged each of them and invited them in. Along with another couple who'd just arrived, she took them on a quick tour of the house. The public rooms—dining room, kitchen, den and living room—were beautiful in a tasteful, understated way. The master bedroom had all the luxuries and amenities including walk-in closets, and the private master bath featured a walk-in shower, whirlpool tub and an exit to the deck. Two bedrooms sat on the other side of the hall, along with another room that could either be a fourth bedroom or an office.

The hall ended at another room which Andi described as the fitness and entertainment center. A very large carpeted area held a set of cabinets on one wall, a pull-down screen on another, lounge chairs at the opposite side, a rack of weights, a bench and an elliptical trainer and exercise bike in the center. The gleam in her eye as she looked toward him suggested there might be other uses for some of the equipment as well. He wondered what the cabinets held. They had discreet locks built in.

As they proceeded down the long hall back to the living room, Cilla whispered to him, "I'll bet they do some interesting exercises in there."

He leaned into her to answer, "Great place for a workout."

She gave him a wicked grin in return that made the blood flow to his groin. A vivid image assaulted him of Cilla stretched out on the bench, then Cilla working on the elliptical totally nude. He drew a deep breath to get control of himself.

Once back in the now crowded and noisy living room, Andi abandoned them to take another group around. He and Cilla joined the throng in the living room. When Rick Harrison called out to him, they went to say hello. Rick's shy wife Lindy clung to his side, but Cilla managed to involve her in a conversation about Lindy's favorite science fiction and fantasy books. Rick mentioned that Kyle and Meg had wanted to come but they had a family birthday that conflicted.

Nick's longtime best friend, Dave, was there with his very pregnant wife, Julie. They didn't come to the club to play, but Charles had met them at Nick and Andi's wedding. Even before then Nick had consulted with him when he began to suspect that Julie was a sub herself, but neither she nor Dave knew it.

At first it seemed odd to meet and socialize with those people outside the club in normal everyday clothes, having normal conversations about weather and homes and jobs, but he knew most of them well enough to be comfortable with them. They didn't talk about their sexual activities since the Tysingers had relatives and neighbors present as well. Cilla took it in stride, but then she always seemed at ease. Possibly working in the library had taught her to be comfortable with everyone.

He enjoyed the evening but wasn't surprised when Nick stopped by to whisper in his ear an invitation to stay late to enjoy a private demonstration of one features of the house they hadn't shown off earlier. In small groups and pairs, the rest of the guests left until finally only he and Cilla, Rick and Lindy, and Dave and Julie remained, along with Andi and Nick.

Nick refilled the wineglasses of those who were drinking and got Dave and Julie each another soda before inviting everyone back to the exercise room. He wore a wicked grin when he stood in the middle of the room and said, "First, to give credit where it's due, we owe this idea to Dave and Julie. I'm sure you've guessed there's more to this room than meets the uneducated eye."

"I see quite a lot of potential," Charles said, glancing around.

"And you don't see all of it by any means," Nick answered. "Do I have a volunteer to sub? Julie and Andi are both out right now." Which left the very shy Lindy and Cilla. All four men in the room were already looking at her.

Cilla sighed. "Why do I always get roped into this?"

"You're so good at it?" Charles suggested.

"You do it beautifully," Nick added.

She turned a mock glare from Charles to Nick. "Flattery."

"It works, doesn't it?" he asked.

"All right," she agreed. "But the sub has a few stipulations. Tomorrow is a workday for me, so this has to be short and light."

Nick agreed. "I can do short and light."

"And still make it memorable," Andi added.

"Your turn's coming," her husband warned. To Cilla, he said, "Take off the skirt and blouse."

If Charles had issued the order himself, she'd know he wanted it slow and seductive. He didn't think that's what Nick was after. Cilla didn't either. She stripped off the clothes with her usual grace but no wasted time. As Charles watched her undress, a surge of possessive lust shocked him with its fiery intensity. He'd never been one for that sort of caveman response before, but he fought a momentary urge to tackle Nick and slug him just for looking at his woman.

Nick unlocked the largest of the cabinets built into the far wall and swung back the door. Shelves lined half the space, while the other held hooks and hangers, with drawers at the bottom. Various sized paddles, canes, switches and floggers hung from pegs.

"An impressive collection," Charles said.

Nick smiled again. "Andi likes it."

"I'm reserving judgment," Cilla said.

"But we have some other interesting things," Nick said, pulling a strange-looking item from a drawer. "This one takes more time to appreciate than we have, but a quick demo should give you the idea." He went over to the exercise cycle and with a flip of a lever removed the padded seat and replaced it with the thing he held. Instead of a seat, the exercise bike now had a narrow wedge, about eight inches long with a triangular profile, sitting flat on one side so that an edge faced up. Whoever sat on that would have to rest their tender genitals on the pointed top.

"Care to give this a try?" Nick asked Cilla.

She gave it a dubious glance and climbed up on it, resting her slit against the sharp edge of the wedge with care. The panties she still wore provided some protection, but she winced as she pressed against the edge. Then she stood and began to pedal. After a few seconds, Nick signaled her to stop.

"As I said, this one really takes some time to appreciate." He glanced at Cilla. "How would it feel to be on this completely nude and committed to staying on it for twenty minutes?"

"Exhausting," she shot back. "And agonizing."

"That's the idea." He helped her to climb off it. "For something a bit different, we have the standard exercise bench." He nodded to it. "You can have a sub lie on her stomach with legs flat out or splayed at the end, or you can raise it to waist height and have her bend across it, but there are even more creative things you can do with it." Nick moved the bar that would hold weights for bench presses to the end of the bench. To Cilla he said, "Lie down on your back."

Cilla did as Nick asked, but shot a glance his way first. A flash of pride and love swelled Charles' heart to know she wanted his reassurance. His nod brought a faint smile to her lips before she turned her attention back to Nick. The man slid the weight bar along the bench until it was above her hips, then he raised it to its maximum height, which put it almost three feet above her. Instead of setting any weights on the holders, he took one of her ankles and raised the leg. Using a strap he'd left nearby, he fastened

her ankle to one of the corners of the weight bar, then he did the same for the other. It left her with her back, head and upper hips on the bench, but her legs raised and spread wide.

"This position offers a lot of interesting possibilities." Nick went to the closet and gathered a handful of items he brought back and set down on another bench near the one Cilla occupied. He picked up a flogger with about a dozen leather tails some eighteen inches long. "For one thing, this puts her in a perfect position for a nice warming with this."

He lifted the flogger and brought it down, not hard, on the backs of her thighs. Cilla gave a soft sigh. Twice more he spanked her with the tails, then he moved to the other side and did the same from that angle. For his finale, he moved to the end of the bench where he stood between her legs. Raising the instrument, he brought it straight down, splaying the tails across the tops of her thighs and her panty-covered slit. Cilla sucked in a sharp breath and wriggled for the first time, but Charles didn't think it was from pain. A damp spot stained her panties.

Nick put the flogger aside. "If you want to do something a bit more severe, you can also try this," he said, picking up a narrow rod about eighteen inches long with a leather slapper at the end. He stood at the end of the bench again.

Charles found himself clenching his fists. Nick could seriously hurt Cilla with that if he struck her slit and he almost tackled the man when he raised it and brought it down. Fortunately Nick knew what he was doing. He slapped it on the inside of her right thigh. Cilla jolted and let out a hissing breath but didn't complain. A pink mark stood out from the flesh. Nick struck again, painting a matching stripe on the opposite thigh. Then he put down the rod. He picked up several others, holding them up in show. "You can use pretty much any of these in this position. Here's another option." He put them all down long enough to draw Cilla's hands below the bench and fasten them there. "This gives you all sorts of options but is especially good if you want to do some light breast treatment."

Nick picked out another flogger, lighter and shorter than the previous one, and brought it down on her bra-covered breast. With the fabric for protection, Cilla would probably barely feel it. He struck a few more times, then turned it on the front of her thighs, where it left several light pink streaks. After the third one, Cilla sighed again.

Nick laid a few more lashes on her, then released all the bindings and helped her up. He leaned in and whispered something to her, and she said a few words back. Charles guessed she reassured him that she was fine.

"One more thing to show you and then we'd better call it a night," he said. "Cilla, I need you to take off the bra for this."

She reached around to unclasp it and tossed it onto the stack with the rest of her clothes. Charles didn't know if Cilla had exhibitionist tendencies or was just so comfortable with her body it didn't matter, but she never seemed concerned to be undressed in company, whether friends or strangers.

But when Nick got out two sets of nipple clamps, her eyes widened and a hint of strain tightened her grin. Interesting reaction. Nick led her over to the elliptical trainer. Before she climbed on it, though, he attached a clamp on one end of each chain to each of her nipples. She gasped lightly on the first and emitted a small groan when the second closed on the tip of a breast. Leaving both chains dangling, Nick helped her get onto the machine. Once she had her feet on the steps and hands on the handles, he attached the other end of each chain to small hooks set in either side of the display screen, adjusting the length so that each had little slack. That clever arrangement ensured that as she started to walk the machine, the tightening chains alternately tugged at either nipple.

Cilla groaned after just a few steps. "This is fiendish," she said to Nick.

"It could get worse," he said, crossing the room to pick up a multi-tailed short whip. "If I wasn't happy with your speed, I could do this." He smacked the whip lightly across her bottom. Cilla pedaled faster and squealed as the chains tightened, pulling her nipples out.

"Still not fast enough," he said, and slapped the whip down on the backs of her thighs. Cilla yelped and jumped, which tugged at her breasts even more, drawing an even louder groan. But she increased her speed again.

Nick turned to look at him. "How long do we give her, Charles?"

"Count of ten," he answered. "Slow count."

Nick nodded and began to count, "One...two...three..." By five she'd started to flag in her pedaling, so he gave her another whack on the bottom. He also slowed the count even more. At eight, her breath had accelerated to rapid, harsh pants that were almost sobs. Sweat began to bead on her brow. Nick left a long gap between nine and ten. Cilla continued to pump her legs as the clamps tugged one nipple then the other.

When Nick finally said she could stop, she slowed gradually and let out a breath. "You're a hell of a slave driver," she said on a sigh. It ended in a squeal when he pulled the first clamp off her nipple. A second yelp resulted from his removing the other.

He grinned at her. "Good thing my wife likes playing slave occasionally," he answered. "Thank you for helping out. As always, you're magnificent."

"You're an inventive and creative slave driver," Cilla admitted. "Your wife is a lucky lady."

"And she's glad that her husband doesn't mind occasionally taking a taste of his own medicine," Andrea pointed out.

Nick shrugged one shoulder. "I like trying all sorts of things." He handed Cilla a towel to wipe the sweat off before she began to dress again. Charles moved toward her to help her. He didn't want to admit that he was really showing his claim on her, reasserting his own mastery after Nick's display.

Cilla gave him a wry grin that suggested she saw the effort for what it was, but she didn't object.

By the time they left the Tysingers' home it was after one. He wanted her badly and sensed she was at least as aroused, but since Cilla had to work the next morning, he

took her straight home. The kiss goodnight almost led to more, but he finally found the willpower to tear himself away from her and leave. He hated it. Even without the sex he wanted to have her lying beside him that night. He wanted to be able to reach out and touch her, to wrap her up and hold on to her.

The only consolation was that she seemed as reluctant to break their embrace as he was. The rooms almost echoed when he got home, and his bed felt too big and too empty.

They had dinner together the next night. He warned her that he'd be going out of town the following weekend for a couple of days to watch his daughter perform in a musical at her school near Boston. Cilla didn't wince or withdraw when he bragged about his daughter's wonderful singing voice. In fact she looked pleased for him. "You're still close to your daughter," she said.

"She's my daughter—the only one I've got right now. How could I not want to be close?"

"A lot of fathers wouldn't take the time or care enough."

"I'm not a lot of fathers," he said.

She went quiet and thoughtful for a bit.

Afterward they had sex again, long, slow, sweet and relaxing. It released some of his tension and was wonderful because it was with Cilla. He couldn't help but remember her marvelous show of submission the previous night. He wanted that with her in private too, but for now the memory would have to serve. If it didn't totally fill a void in him, that was his problem. He'd need to get used to it if he wanted to have her and it was a sacrifice he had to be willing to make. They would still play at the club. It would be enough.

It would have to be enough.

Chapter Five

They had dinner together every evening for the next week and she spent the nights with him. Cilla began to move some of her clothes over to his apartment after he cleaned out drawer and closet space for her. One night she cooked spaghetti and meatballs for the two of them, then the next night he did a roast beef with vegetables. They had their first real argument, a disagreement over whether she'd let him buy her a new car to replace the aging but still functional Chevrolet she drove. It ended in a draw when they agreed to put off the decision for a while, and the making up was sweet indeed.

She had to fight a cloud of depression after she dropped him at the airport Friday morning before she went to work. The three days Charles was gone dragged. Cilla worked on Friday and Saturday and spent her free time catching up on chores and cleaning her own apartment. The place seemed too empty and too quiet. Her whole life felt emptier than usual. How had he become so ingrained a part of it in just a few short weeks?

On Saturday the library was full of people, but few of them needed her services as a reference consultant, so she helped out at the front desk, assisting people with finding what they needed and handling problems with checkout. Ralph was one of the newer librarians, an attractive man, probably a couple of years older than herself. She knew he was single and interested in her, but she'd tried not to encourage him.

When they found themselves alone behind the desk, with the crowd momentarily dissipated into the reading rooms, computer carrels and stacks, he turned to her. "I wondered... That is, I know from talking to the others around here that you aren't married or...anything. Would you consider going out to dinner tonight with me?"

Cilla kept her sigh inside and her expression gentle, even as the thought crossed her mind that this nice man would never do for someone like herself. How shocked would he be to find out what she did for recreation? Most of her colleagues would be stunned—and appalled—to discover that quiet, conservative-looking Cilla frequented a BDSM club where she put on exhibitions of all sorts of kinky sexual techniques in front of small crowds or played with small groups, using toys that no one even talked about in public.

Her hesitation probably told him as much as her answer when she said, “I really appreciate the thought, but I’m... I’m seeing someone right now and we’re getting pretty serious.”

He nodded and gave her a wry grin. “You’re telling me I’m too late.”

That wasn’t what she’d intended, but it would do nicely to refuse him without denting his ego too much. “I’m sorry.”

“Molly didn’t say anything about it.”

“Molly doesn’t know.” None of the resident gossips knew. She’d worked hard to keep her secret life very secret.

A wave of depression swept over her as it occurred to her that she’d narrowed her choices in men down to practically none. As nice a man as Ralph seemed to be, she needed someone bolder, someone with more drive, more willingness to take charge, than him. Someone more like Charles, a sexual Master. But she’d sworn that she wouldn’t marry another dominating man. Which left her with what?

“I’m sorry,” Ralph said again. “I didn’t mean to make you sad.”

“No, it’s all right.” She sighed and forced more cheer into her voice. “I’m very flattered. Some woman is going to be very fortunate to fall in love with you.”

“Are you having problems with this guy you’re seeing?” he asked. “You don’t seem as...well, happy, as I would expect from someone getting serious about a relationship.”

She forced a smile. "We have some issues we need to work on. Family things," she said. Fortunately several people approached the desk at that time, seeking assistance, so they turned their attention back to work. By the time she looked up again after helping several more people, Ralph had gone, either off duty or to some other part of the library.

Just as well. She had a lot to think about. Not pleasant or happy things. There really were some family issues, just not the sort she'd let Ralph think they were.

For the first time she confronted the unwelcome fact that she didn't really want a nice, safe man. All her sexual instincts led her to men who kept her on edge, the edge of arousal, the edge of pain, even the edge of danger. Common sense dictated that she confine those activities to the club, where plenty of safeguards did their best to ensure the health and well-being of their clients. Well, and among friends she knew and trusted.

But she wanted a family as well. She wanted children, a husband, a normal home life. Charles was trying hard to show her that he could give her that. But what about the wild sexual activity he craved? He loved her, she had little doubt. She loved him too. And people did manage to combine unusual sexual proclivities with normal life. Nick and Andrea managed it. Their friends Dave and Julie were having a baby now. But they didn't have the same issues she did.

She hated to have to choose, but if Charles really could live with a vanilla sex life, he was the only man she could imagine sharing it with. But would she be cheating him by making him sacrifice that part of himself?

It seemed like a long wait until Charles got back. She picked him up at the airport Sunday evening. As she watched him approach in the baggage claim area, her heart clenched. His lean height, his elegance, his chiseled looks all appealed to her, but it was the smile he gave her, the one that said it was for her alone and told her how thrilled he was to see her again, that robbed her of breath and pulse for a moment or two. They

stopped at a restaurant for dinner. During the meal he told her about his daughter's recital and how well she'd done. His love for and pride in the girl shone through vividly. She wanted that for her own children.

"What does your schedule look like next weekend?" he asked over dessert. "Isn't it your weekend off?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's take off and head for New York," he said. "There are things I want to do and show you. Plus there's an exhibit of French neoclassical paintings at the Metropolitan."

"Sounds great, but don't we have a demo at the club this weekend?" Cilla asked.

"Not this week. It's a week from Saturday. Anything particular you want to show off then?"

"What a fabulous Master you are?" Cilla suggested.

"You manage that for me all the time."

"It takes two. And you do your role very well."

He grinned but another part of his mind had something else going on. "How would you feel if I turned this one over to Josh and let him run the show? I think he's ready." Charles' protégé had joined them in their play sessions and helped out with demos for most of the past year.

"He is ready to be working on his own," Cilla agreed, trying to analyze her own hesitation about it. "I'm just not sure..."

"What? That you're the right person to work with him? I can't think of anyone better, except that I get this stab of jealousy and possessiveness at the idea."

That was it. "Me too," she admitted. "It's not that I have a problem with Josh. It's just that I'm so used to working with you." *And I think I love you.* She didn't say the last part aloud. "You'll be there, won't you?"

"Of course. And I'll ask him to include me. Damn, this is awkward."

"No, it's not," she said, on another flash of insight. "You're doing it in your role as ultimate Master. My Master and his. You order him to work with me for this demonstration and we're both performing at your command."

Charles shrugged. "Maybe that will help him too. We're still working on the confidence thing."

"He's still afraid of losing control in a scene? Someone did a number on that boy." At twenty-five or six, Josh was hardly a boy, in fact, but he sometimes seemed like one to her.

"His parents, I gather. He doesn't talk about it."

"He probably should. But that's not really our business."

Charles shrugged. "Maybe it is. We're the ones teaching him to be a sexual Dominant."

"He's a sexual Dominant by nature. We're teaching him how to do it right."

Charles drew a deep breath. "I worry about him, but not that way. He's got more self-control than any other two people I know. Maybe too much."

"That's between him and his therapist. We're not and it's not our place even to try. You're just doing what he asked you to do and teaching how him to be the right kind of sexual Dominant."

He nodded, smiled at her and put down his napkin. "Let's go home and make some plans for a trip this coming weekend."

Cilla spent the rest of the week in a sort of daze, the kind generally suffered by lovestruck teenage girls. She was no teenager and had no excuse, except she wasn't sure she'd ever actually been in love before. She'd thought she was with Edward, but she'd realized the mistake soon after the wedding. She'd loved the man she thought he was, and hadn't taken enough time to find the real person beneath the "Master" at the club.

Strange how this was going the opposite way. She'd been acquainted with Charles for ages, liked him for almost as long and had loved him in a way for a good part of that time, but she'd never let herself really acknowledge it. She wouldn't have dared to actually *fall in love* with him. She still wasn't convinced it was a good idea. But did she even have a choice anymore?

How could she trust that he wouldn't turn into the more demanding kind of Master once he had the legal ties in place? She wouldn't have believed Edward could deceive her so much. How could she know Charles wouldn't transform in the same way?

The next five days went quickly, taken up with work, dinners with Charles, planning, packing and some shopping. Before her head completely got around the idea, the two of them were on a plane to New York. The flight went without incident. They got a taxi to the hotel in midtown Manhattan, checked in and dumped their bags before they headed right out to walk up to Fifth Avenue.

The weather cooperated, serving up a mild, sunny afternoon, perfect for exploring the city. They stopped into various stores, though Cilla's favorite was the amazing toy store across the street from the Plaza Hotel. They had high tea at the hotel before setting off again into Central Park. They didn't cover all of it, but made their way through part of the zoo before sunset shut it down. They walked back to Rockefeller Center for dinner and a trip to the Top of the Rock.

Standing on the observation deck, they were shrouded in velvet darkness by the night sky. The city spread out below in a sea of brightness threaded by ribbons of lighted streets. "Amazing," she breathed, awed by the view that went on for miles and stretched out over the patchwork pattern of blocks and buildings. "It's magical."

"It is," Charles agreed, working an arm around her as he stared out over the city. "Like being on top of the world." He turned her in his arms and leaned down to kiss her. "It's hard to imagine anything better than this."

Cilla agreed as she kissed him back. Mindful of the tourists surrounding them, she restrained herself from tearing off clothes right then and there to make love to him.

Instead she met his eyes, noted the gleam of lust there, and without discussing it, they went back to the elevator to get a cab back to the hotel. In the taxi he stroked her thighs, pushing up beneath her skirt to caress the bare flesh.

She reached for his belt and tried to unbuckle it, but the cab ride was so short, they arrived at the hotel before she got it undone.

They raced inside once Charles had paid the driver and were fortunate to catch an elevator right away. If it had been empty, she couldn't have kept her hands off him, but three other people got on with them, so she restrained herself.

Once the room door shut behind them, restraint got tossed off faster than their clothes—and those didn't stay on long. Cilla didn't remember ripping off her sweater or pants or how she got to the bed exactly, but moments later they were there and locked together, both naked, with his hands running up and down her back. He'd grabbed a condom on the way and got it on before he rolled them over together until she lay on top of him.

Cilla pushed herself up to a sitting position with her knees on either side of his hips, his sheathed cock trapped beneath her. She rubbed it along her pussy as she rocked forward and then back. "I like this," she said, reaching down to run a hand through his tousled dark hair and then brushing it down the now-bristly cheek. Her fingers drifted down farther to his chest, tweaking his nipples on their way through the hair almost hiding them. The position gave her an odd feeling of power, something she rarely experienced during sex.

The light in Charles' gray eyes turned the flame inside her to a roaring fire. She'd never wanted any other man, not even Edward, in this burning, aggressive, almost violent way. Sometimes, in a scene at the club, she'd want the sex that way. And, in truth, those scenes almost always involved Charles too.

He reached up and put both hands on her breasts, massaging, then squeezing gently. Rivers of energy rushed through her, heating her blood, making her pulse race

and pussy weep. His cock swelled and throbbed against her cunt, caressing her clit in a way that made her rub herself against him harder.

His face screwed up in a tense frown, his breath heaving in gulps. "Cilla," he gasped. "I'm going to..."

She shifted, lifting herself and reaching down to guide his cock inside as she settled back on him. The gentle rocking forced out a series of moans as fiery jolts tore along her nerves and muscles. Charles huffed, straining upward into her. And then she was bouncing as he pushed harder and faster and she rocked against him. They matched rhythms until they moved almost as one, crashing together and pulling apart harder and harder until the crescendo exploded over them both.

Afterward they lay together, sipping the wine Charles had brought and watching a movie before they drifted off to sleep.

The next day they took a tour bus around the city, visited the Statue of Liberty and then went on to the Metropolitan for the exhibit Charles had wanted to see. It was while they were discussing some of the paintings that Cilla realized the real purpose of the trip. Charles wanted her to experience how much they had in common aside from the sex. It worked too. They enjoyed each other's company no matter what they did. From sampling the fare at various restaurants to riding the tour bus to discussing French neoclassical and impressionist paintings, they laughed together, discussed and even argued gently, but found an amazing comfort with each other.

It suggested the kind of life they could have together, and she was about ready to sign on for it. She only had to sacrifice some of her wild sexuality to get it. It wasn't that big a thing to give up, was it? For her, no. It would be a sacrifice, but one she'd willingly make.

But she was asking Charles to do that same, and she wasn't sure she had the right to do that. No matter how willing he said he was now, would he someday decide he'd paid too high a price for her?

Charles woke on Sunday morning with heaven in his arms, in the form of Cilla Renfield. Yesterday had been terrific from beginning to end, a gourmet feast for all his hungers. It had confirmed for him that he and Cilla were compatible in all the ways that counted, not just sexually. She could keep up with him and even outthink him when it came to the intellectual, and she seemed to appreciate art in much the same way he did. They could laugh at the same jokes and even find humor in minor discomforts like the wind on the tour bus.

Best of all, the heat between them was personal to the two of them and not just a side effect of their play dates at the club. He still had doubts—some rather major ones, in fact—about keeping their BDSM leanings out of their everyday sex lives, but if that was the price he had to pay to keep her, he'd do it. Yesterday had convinced him the chemistry between them was hot enough on its own to keep the fires lit.

It still worried him that in the long term, the vanilla sex she insisted on might not be enough to keep Cilla satisfied. He could only do his best to make her happy and hope that someday she would trust him enough to let that aspect of themselves be part of the relationship again. There were ways to integrate it into their lives without it dominating. Or without him dominating her to the point of imprisoning her or running her life, as Edward apparently had.

He swallowed down his anger at the man he'd once considered a friend. Edward was gone, even if his ghost still haunted their relationship. He'd make it his goal to lay that ghost for the woman he loved.

Cilla roused. "What are you grinning about?" she asked, her voice still thick from sleep.

"Just happy," he said.

"Mmm... Glad." She curled up next to him and dozed off again.

Later they packed up and dropped their bags at the bell stand before checking out, getting a late breakfast and fitting in a visit to the Museum of Modern Art. Cilla admitted she preferred more traditional paintings, but she listened with interest when

he explained what he liked about some of the less representational works. They even argued about it a bit, and it thrilled him that she was willing to disagree and more than able to explain her reasons with logic and sense.

They left New York reluctantly, in his case not so much because he wanted to stay in the city as because he loved having her all to himself the entire time.

Over the next few days he came to realize the trip had marked a turning point in their relationship on her side, as she began to spend more time at his apartment and parked more of her things there. He cleared a shelf in the bathroom cabinet and more space in the dresser. Their lives began to intertwine as they made plans around each other's schedules and spent almost all their free time together. Sometimes that meant making love, but at other times they watched television or movies or just read quietly.

As the next weekend approached, Charles asked Cilla during Friday breakfast, "Are you still okay with turning the scene over to Josh tomorrow night?"

"As long as you're there, I'm okay with it," she said.

Josh looked both pleased and dubious when Charles told him he was putting him in charge of the demo scene.

"I appreciate your trust, but are you sure it's a good idea? You'll be there, won't you?"

"I'll be there," Charles answered. "But I won't interfere unless you ask me to. I'm doing that now. I want you to use me in your scene. I'm going to be another sub for you." He smiled at Josh's wry grin and his dubious glance toward the hallway where Cilla waited with the other sub and Masters who'd be participating. Charles nodded at them. "You can handle it."

Josh drew a deep breath. His light blue eyes showed every shadow of doubt and sadness that crossed his mind, and there were plenty of those. "Okay."

Charles clapped Josh on the shoulder. "Let's do it, then."

"Cilla's okay with it?"

"She's eager. I think she gets tired of having me order her around all the time. It'll be a nice change to have someone else."

Josh's laugh was harsh. "Cilla adores you and we both know it. She's only doing this because you told her to."

"No," Charles answered. "I asked her. She's more than happy to do it. She likes you. I don't own her. If she'd said no, we wouldn't be having this discussion."

Josh blushed. "You know that's the thing that worries me most," he admitted. "I'm not sure I can always tell where to draw the line between being a Master and being a bully."

"You know that there *is* a difference, and that's the most important thing. The rest is dictated by the sub. Figuring out what he or she needs and wants is the real trick to being a good Master. Sometimes you can sense it, but mostly you're better off asking." He shook his head. "You know all this. You've just got to start believing it. Let's do this scene."

Josh nodded. Moments later Cilla arrived with a pair of young men and one woman in tow. She introduced Josh and Charles to Peter, Webb and Liz, who would be joining them that evening. Peter was the dominant member of the pair of men. Liz was a Dominant without a current partner. Peter shook hands with Josh and nodded to Charles. Josh nodded for all of them to go into the room.

Because he was right behind them, he heard Cilla whisper to Josh, "The Dominants need to learn how to handle rods, straps and floggers."

Josh stopped, almost causing Charles to plow into them. "I'm not sure I..."

"Yes, you do," Cilla said. "You've watched Charles often enough and practiced with me. You're quite adept with the flogger."

Josh drew a breath, nodded and moved again. Once inside, with the door shut behind them, he announced, "Peter, Liz and I are the Masters for this session. Subs

Charles, Cilla and Webb, you will do as ordered. Subs remove shoes and socks right now, then get up on the platform and strip to the waist."

Interesting approach, Charles decided. Not the way he preferred to do it, but direct and effective. He kicked off his shoes and removed his socks, then stood behind Cilla as the three of them climbed the two steps to the round dais in the center of the room. They formed a row in the middle of it. He couldn't help watching her undress as he unbuttoned his shirt and removed it. Her grace, her beauty never failed to move him. Webb was a large, heavysset young man who looked fascinated and apprehensive by the scene, but pulled his tee shirt over his head as directed.

Charles had played sub before, but not for some time. There were always more subs than Masters available, and it felt more natural to him to be in control. Still, taking the sub role had its rewards and he enjoyed it as an occasional change of pace.

For Josh this would be a significant challenge, but actually, it was a fairly safe way to experiment with running a scene. More people involved meant a more complicated scenario, but it also diminished the likelihood of a Master pushing a sub too far too fast. The trick would be keeping the pace right and staying aware of the reactions to adjust on the fly based on them.

"Unbuckle your belts, open the buttons and zippers of your pants," Josh said. Cilla had worn slacks tonight, so the order applied to all three of them. Once they'd done that, Josh added, "Hands on heads, turn around and get those pants off without using your hands." Charles hid his grin until he was turned completely away. His lean waist and hips gave him a definite advantage. A couple of quick jerks to the side had his trousers sliding down. He let his gaze slide to where Cilla wriggled until her pants finally slipped over her hips and puddled on the floor. Webb, on the other side of her, was already out of his as well.

"Subs, you will each get a bench and bring it onto the dais," Josh said.

Charles led them over to where the padded benches were stacked and handed one each to Webb in his white briefs and Cilla in her pink silk panties before grabbing one

for himself. They weren't heavy so they had hooks that would fit into secret latches in the floor to hold them in place. At Josh's request, Charles showed Webb how to fit his into a space and fasten it.

"Face the benches, feet outside the legs and touching them, bend over and put your hands flat on the top." Charles turned his head just enough to watch Josh go to the cabinet and pull out a set of floggers. He couldn't see him return, but guessed he handed them out as he said, "Mistress Liz, you will take sub Charles. Master Peter, you're with your sub, Webb." Which left Josh with Cilla.

That was what he and Cilla had both wanted. Nonetheless he had to fight down a moment of outraged possessiveness, when every primitive male molecule in his body screamed that she belonged to him and he'd fight any other man who put a hand on her. Fortunately at that moment, Mistress Liz swung the flogger and landed it cleanly on his bottom, without much force but with a nice snap. It was enough to distract him with a reminder of how sweet the bite of a crisp lash could be.

Mistress Liz might claim to be inexperienced and want training, but she had a nice way with a flogger, not too light or too harsh, smacking just sharply enough to sting in an arousing way. He hadn't been on the receiving end for a while. Would Cilla feel more comfortable with having this in their relationship if he volunteered to play sub sometimes? He wouldn't mind doing it on occasion.

The burn from the flogger grew, but it was still more arousing than painful. Of course, this was just a warm-up. It would undoubtedly get harder later. It should get harder.

Then one lash snapped across the backs of his thighs with bruising force and he sucked in a sharp breath. It took an effort to keep himself in position. He wanted to reach back and rub the welts that crack would leave. He knew better.

The next few blows were lighter, more tentative. Both the harsh and light ones aroused him, though. His cock filled and grew rock hard with a need that wouldn't be satisfied for some time.

Beside him Cilla breathed harder, but not from pain. Josh knew how to wield a flogger. But Webb was hissing and groaning. That might just be his way, but Charles worried about him and his partner. Apparently Josh recognized a problem too. He called a time out to demonstrate ways to handle and control a flogger. Good for him. After showing both Peter and Liz the wrist motions and positioning, they resumed their efforts.

A few minutes later, Josh said, "That should be enough for a good warm-up. Let's move on. Subs, stand up. It's time for the next challenge."

Charles straightened. He managed to catch Cilla's eye for a moment as they did so, before they turned around. When she winked at him, his heart did a strange clenching thing in his chest. A small voice inside said, "She's the one." A louder, more primitive voice shouted, "She's mine." He chose to ignore the second one. For now.

Josh didn't give him time to dwell on it. "The next challenge," he said. "Subs will undress their assigned Masters or Mistresses – using only one hand. And you will each have five minutes to finish the job."

Charles recognized this contest as a variation on one he frequently used in a scene. That didn't confer any particular advantage for him, however. Five minutes probably wasn't enough, but that was half the fun of the game.

He approached Liz, studying her clothes for the best way to remove them. The woman wore tight black leather pants and a laced-up leather corset-type vest. Those shouldn't be too hard. But the leather boots fastened with a series of buckles running up the fronts would pose a challenge. He met the woman's brown eyes for a moment. What he saw there disturbed him. Not the sexual excitement, which he expected, but the more personal interest in him. He'd have to find a way to deflect it – gently, if possible. Sometimes gentle didn't do it, though.

Josh pulled out a stop watch and set it. "Subs, one hand behind your back. Begin now."

Charles put his left hand behind him and went straight for the boots. Using just his right, he managed to get most of the buckles released without much trouble, but a couple of them proved sticky, and one even needed the use of his mouth as well. A glance up showed Webb struggling with the zipper of Peter's jeans and Cilla working on Josh's shoelaces. He judged two to three minutes had passed and none of them were very close.

Even more challenging than the buckles was pulling the boots off with only one hand. Mistress Liz cooperated to a point, resting a palm on his shoulder and lifting her foot, but the boot fit tightly and it wasn't easy to tug it free. He'd just gotten both off and was reaching for the laces of her vest when Josh said, "Time. Subs, back up a step."

None of the subs had succeeded. Webb was closest, with Peter wearing only his unbuttoned jeans. Cilla had removed Josh's shoes, socks, and opened his belt buckle, but had undone only half the buttons on the man's dress shirt.

"Not very good results," Josh said. "All three of you failed in your assignment. Back to the benches. This time you will lay yourselves over them with hands and feet on the floor on either side."

A good position for using a paddle or even the bare hand. Not bad for a crop or switch either. Charles glanced sideways to see what Josh planned. Short straps. That should be exciting. Josh spent a moment explaining techniques for using the strap, where to place the whacks. He demonstrated on Cilla with a couple of lashes that looked more like caresses and drew a soft sigh from her.

Charles had a different perspective when the first smack landed on his own bottom. She might have a subtle hand with a flogger, but Mistress Liz could really whack with the strap. It stung from the very first and with repeated blows grew rapidly to a prickly burn even through the protection of his briefs.

The odd rhythmic cracking sounds of a series of straps being applied to bottoms suggested the others were being treated more harshly as well. Charles managed to

make no sound, but Webb began moaning after the fourth or fifth smack. Cilla's breath came a little faster, but it would take more than this to draw a reaction from her.

Each whack bit into his skin with an unpleasant jolt followed by a sweet, arousing burn. Most subs he knew accepted the jolt as the price for the fire it lit. Each little sting accumulated into an overall blaze that worked its way through veins and nerves to get to the core, where it sent the blood flooding to his cock and balls. A few more smacks and his buttocks and upper thighs smarted with an itchy throb. Worse yet, in this position, each blow also mashed his body down onto the bench, with his cock trapped between his belly and padded surface. It hurt and it made him ache with arousal. A few more of those and he might have an unplanned explosion.

Fortunately, Josh must have made some motion to stop them. The noise of the descending straps ceased before he said, "Subs will remove all remaining clothing." He had to wiggle a bit to get the briefs off. It gave him the opportunity to rearrange the family jewels more comfortably.

A good thing. As soon as the three of them were naked, the Masters went back to work with the straps. With no fabric to shield his flesh, his buttocks soon felt wildly hot, tender and raw. The repeated grating of the leather cracking against his backside sent the rest of him into a zone of fire and need that shut out everything else, even thought. He sank into it, trying to maintain enough control to prevent an unintended orgasm, but letting the sensation pile up as his flesh blazed. He was nearly lost in it when Josh said, "Enough. Let's let the subs finish the job of undressing us now."

Charles drew a deep breath and yanked himself out of the sub zone he'd been falling into. Webb sobbed a loud gasp of relief. Cilla straightened quietly, though she gave him a quick glance in the process. He wanted to take a minute to hold her and kiss her, but that would break the scene. Instead he just winked back at her.

He turned to Mistress Liz. She'd already kicked off the second boot, but waited for him to work on the laces of her vest. Using both hands, he had no trouble getting them loosened enough to slide the garment over her head. She wore nothing beneath it, and

he couldn't restrain a moment's stare. The woman had a nice pair of breasts, large and full, with half-dollar-sized nipples. They went well with her slimmer waist and rounded hips. He shook himself out of the distraction and glanced over at Cilla to see if she'd noticed.

Her attention focused on getting Josh's trousers off, but a flush showed on the side of her face he could see. Did that mean she'd noticed him admiring, or was it just a sign of her own self-consciousness at undressing another man in the presence of one who was in love with her?

He repressed a sigh as he undid the button and zipper that secured Mistress Liz's leather pants. Sliding them down revealed brilliant red silk panties beneath. The scent of her arousal combined with her perfume in a heady aroma. He hooked his fingers in the elastic waistband and pushed those down her legs as well. Bare sleek skin highlighted the sharp triangle at the base of her abdomen.

His cock was already hard and his balls achingly full, so he didn't worry about the physical reaction giving anything away. If it weren't for Cilla, this woman would be attractive enough to interest him, at least on the superficial level.

Cilla finally slid down the zipper on Josh's trousers. As she lowered them, she couldn't help but be aware of Charles nearby, undressing another woman. She deliberately avoided looking that way and tried to ignore the stabs of curiosity that poked her. They'd done this kind of scene before, scores of times, and she'd seen Charles work with other women, though generally as Master rather than sub. Given that she'd refused his proposal, she had no right to complain. And he barely knew the woman he was partnered with, Mistress Liz. It was all part of a show they were putting on. Still. She wasn't exactly jealous. Not exactly happy about it either, but not angry.

Josh made a small noise and Cilla jerked her attention back to the present and her current task. His trousers lay in a puddle on the floor at his feet, and he wore only a pair of skimpy black briefs. Very sexy, she had to admit, especially on Josh's lean, well-toned

body. She should feel guilty even thinking that way. Not only was she in a relationship with another man, Josh was younger than her. But he was definitely an adult, and in fact she was sort of functioning as his teacher right then, so perhaps she got a pass on that aspect.

She hooked the briefs and pulled them off, lifting the front over his full cock. His wasn't the largest she'd ever seen, but it was a good size, with an endearing tendency to curve upward near the tip. He hadn't said the subs should do any more than undress the Masters, so once he was bare, she sat back on her rather sore bottom. It sent another wisp of heat through her. Josh had wielded that strap with a stern hand, and she'd appreciated it. Judging by the sounds, the other Masters had done well that way too. Webb had been close to sobbing before it was over and even Charles had been breathing hard.

Cilla followed Josh's gaze as he glanced right and then left. The other two Dominants were now naked as well. "Time to bring your Masters satisfaction." He reached back, got the bowl of wrapped condoms and handed one each to her and Charles, two to Webb. "Masters, you may choose how you want your sub to satisfy you, as long as the condom is used."

Cilla wondered if Josh would choose her mouth or her pussy. He'd have a moment to decide, since being in charge of the scene meant he had to be sure that the rules of safe intercourse were observed. On their left, Webb was busy putting the condom on Peter, and on the right Charles had just rolled his down and was lowering Mistress Liz carefully to the floor.

"Hands and mouth," Josh told her, backing up to lean against a pillar behind him. He wasn't going to enter her. It surprised and concerned her, as his teacher. He might have chosen that just to be sure he could keep an eye on things, in which case it was good thing. But he might also be intimidated by Charles' presence, knowing that Charles was in love with her. That was reasonable but not the right mindset for the scene they were doing.

As she unwrapped the condom and rolled it over his cock, she wondered if the real reason had to do with Josh's issues getting in the way. Not that she could do anything about that. She and Charles had tried to work on his fears of losing control in the context of various scenes, and they'd made some progress. But this was the first time he'd run a scene involving multiple couples by himself, so she gave him some slack.

Cilla also made him shudder and draw a deep, groaning breath when she ran her fingers up and down his shaft, carefully brushing the very sensitive area just below the head. She reached down and cupped one hand under his balls, squeezing gently, massaging them. That drove Charles wild and it worked on Josh as well. His cock got even harder and pulsed with the blood rushing through it.

She slid her hand up and down along his cock until his rapid, gasping breaths indicated he was on the verge of coming. Too soon. She didn't want him to explode yet. Risking his irritation, she sat back for a moment and rubbed her hands up and down his thighs, moving inside to touch close to his balls and slide away again. His breathing slowed.

Cilla leaned in and brushed the tip of her tongue across the base of his cock. Gasping, Josh reached down and buried his hands in her hair, holding her closer. "God, that's good," he said on a long exhale. She had to turn her head a little to maneuver her tongue up along the shaft.

It gave her a glimpse of Mistress Liz stretched out on the floor, with one of Charles' hands on her breast and the other on her upper thigh. The woman's hand wrapped around his cock. A rush of jealousy flashed through Cilla but disappeared almost as quickly into a strange calm and acceptance. Not just because she didn't have the right to be jealous, but more because she realized she didn't need to be—which was an odd thought to have while she had her mouth on another man's penis.

Charles had said he was in love with her, and she trusted that, believed it, because everything he did showed her it was true. She paused, frozen a moment, as the

implications of that insight spread out to other thoughts. Only Josh's sharp hissing breath brought her attention back to the present effort.

Cilla bent over and took the entire length of him into her mouth, sliding down on it, using lips only. On the third pass up and down she added teeth, scraping gently to avoid damaging the condom or the flesh beneath it.

Beside them Peter let out a yell as he came, startling her into releasing Josh again. She turned to look their way, saw that Peter had his cock in Webb's mouth and Webb's arms wrapped around Peter's legs, holding him close.

She turned her attention back to Josh. Pursing her lips over the head of his shaft, she sucked on it, hard enough to draw a loud grown.

His rapid breath and the quivering tension told her Josh wouldn't last much longer, but she did all she could to stretch out the time, releasing him and playing with his nipples, massaging his balls and thighs before she went down on his cock again. A few strokes along it and the orgasm shook him, his rod throbbing in her mouth, though the condom contained the seed.

Josh's head fell back against the pillar while a series of jolts shook him. Cilla turned to watch Charles plunging a finger deep into Liz while tonguing her nipple. The woman moaned and wriggled beneath him. Again Cilla experienced that odd pang of emotion that wasn't jealousy. It took her a moment to recognize it as a sort of pride, with a dash of desire and a large portion of love mixed in.

While Josh recovered, she followed her earlier thought about trust to its logical conclusion. She'd been trusting Charles to take care of her and others in scenes here at the club for years. She'd relied on him for help during the last of Edward's downward spiral and death. It was only at the personal level that she refused to trust him, trying to make him prove that he wouldn't be another Edward to her if she married him.

In truth, though, there was no way he *could* prove that to her beforehand. She either trusted him enough to take the leap of faith with him, or she didn't. And everything she knew about Charles told her that he was a man who kept his word when he gave it,

who would protect those he cared about without smothering them, who acted honorably and lovingly with the family he already had.

He loved her enough to sacrifice this piece of himself in their life together outside the club. Over the past few weeks he'd shown her he took that promise seriously and could do it. It was just pure selfishness on her part to ask him to give up his sexual Mastery to calm her fear. All she'd learned about Charles, from both inside the club and outside, demonstrated he had a firm grasp on the line between fantasy and reality, probably better than she did.

Mistress Liz groaned loudly, drawing her attention back to them. The woman's body arched up against Charles' mouth on her breast and his hand on her clit. She jolted suddenly, sharply, and shrieked as she came in a series of spasms that followed.

Charles smiled down at the woman, then looked past her to meet Cilla's gaze. His expression warmed another degree and he winked at her. Her heart twisted, flopped and turned over in her chest. God, she loved that man. And she felt bad for trying to cheat him out of an important part of their relationship.

She'd let the fear from her own bad experience blind her.

Josh drew a deep breath and straightened up. He shook his head as if to clear it before he said, "Good job, subs. You'll have your reward in just a moment. First, a quick reminder of your places, though. Stand up, get back to your benches and bend over them, hands on the seats again."

Josh reached down to help her to her feet, and she smiled her thanks at him. Beside them Charles did the same for Mistress Liz. They went back to the stools and bent over. Cilla still had a bit of residual buzz from the previous spanking, but it was more pleasantly stimulating than painful.

Once again Josh took a few minutes to demonstrate the ways to use whatever it was he held. Cilla was too lost in her own thoughts to take much notice.

The whack of a stiff rod or switch across her bottom jolted, and a line of heat burned into both cheeks of her bottom. The sound of the same or similar instruments being used on others made an odd counterpoint to the gasps of each.

Josh spanked hard. It stung deeply and it was just what she needed to rouse the residual fire to bright life again. Several more harsh strokes landed, setting her bottom ablaze. As usual that fire dug down into her, making her womb tighten and her pussy weep and throb with need. Beside her Webb moaned and yelped with each stroke, but she heard arousal in his cries as well. Charles hissed once, but otherwise made no sound.

Cilla wondered how he was handling this. He enjoyed playing the sub role occasionally, but he wasn't the pain slut she was. He didn't get off on it the same way. For her, the fire in her bottom stoked a blaze in her pussy that would produce an untimely orgasm if she didn't take care. Josh seemed to take note of how close she and Webb were, though, because the sounds abruptly quieted and the strokes got softer, more taps than whacks. They were torture of a different kind because these teased and aroused, almost to the point of madness.

Josh knew his business, though, and didn't let it continue too long. He announced, "Subs, you will not come until I give you permission." Then the Masters set about making it a challenge to obey, by caressing them with the instruments. Josh ran the tip of the rod along the top of her buttocks, then into the crack at the center of her ass, drawing it down over her anus and across her clit. She shuddered and gasped again. The impending orgasm was a tidal wave she kept dammed up with an effort of will. When the thing prodded her nipples, waves of pleasure rippled through her, nearly sending her over the edge.

A few more lighter strokes with the rod and then Josh stepped back. "Subs, turn around and lie down on your backs on the benches, legs spread wide." Cilla did as directed. Given the way her bench was oriented, she could see Charles by turning her head a little to the side.

“Now is your time. I hope you’re all hot and bothered from the warming up you just got. Enough to bring yourselves off in ten minutes. Go ahead now.”

It wouldn’t take her that long. She reached down and put a finger on her clit, stroking it softly. No more encouragement was needed, but the sight of Charles rubbing his own cock up and down made her even hotter and tenser.

Her nerves were stretched so tight, burning up from the fire in her rear and the throbbing in her pussy, that within moments she was stroking faster and faster, desperately rushing toward that sweet explosion. Beside her Charles gave a short, sharp groan as he came. Then the rush of glory flooded through, jerking her up and down, almost rolling her off the bench.

After a minute the spasms wore themselves out and her sobbing gasps settled down. Webb gave a shout as he came, the last of the three of them.

Once she’d recovered enough to think, Cilla considered how best to tell Charles about her realization and change of heart.

Chapter Six

Charles got his clothes back on as fast as he could when the scene ended. The moment he looked at Cilla, especially if she was still naked, he'd be hard again and he didn't want to advertise that fact. He had several more things he needed to do.

He turned to Liz first, going over to her and kissing her forehead. "Thank you for a wonderful time. You're a fine Mistress with a deft touch."

She gave him a look from wistful brown eyes. "Thank you. You're a fine sub, though I get the feeling it's not the most comfortable role for you. I like to switch sometimes myself." She waited a moment before adding "If you ever want to..."

He'd hoped to avoid this. "Thank you and I'm very flattered. You'll make someone a fine Mistress, but I'm already committed."

The woman drew in a breath and the color rose in her face. "I'm sorry. I should have guessed. It's her, isn't it?" She looked toward where Cilla was putting her bra back on.

"We sometimes work with other partners for demos," he said.

"But she's got your heart." Liz drew a deep breath. "I didn't want to admit it, but I could see it in your eyes when you looked at her. Good luck to both of you." She turned away to finish dressing, dismissing him.

He went to Josh and clapped him on the shoulder. "Nice job. You handled that like a pro."

"Thanks. I'm not sure about the ending. It seems kind of anticlimactic." He heard his own words and laughed. "I guess that's the nature of the business, isn't it?"

Charles smiled. "It's hard to end a scene gracefully. Most of the time it's best to just let it go once everyone's satisfied. I sometimes just turn off the lights to say 'that's it'.

Let's everyone kind of see an end to it. But you did fine. Good pacing and control." He looked at the younger man. "You're ready to handle it on your own, you know."

Josh nodded. "I know. I just... I guess I'm ready."

"Is there someone you want to work with?"

Josh looked toward Cilla, and Charles had an *oh shit* moment until the man said, "Not until I meet someone who looks at me the way she looks at you. For now I'll just play with whoever's around."

"She's out there somewhere. I just hope you don't have to wait as long for her as I've waited for Cilla."

"Is it definite?" Josh lowered his voice so the others wouldn't hear the question.

"Close, I hope. Not definite yet."

"It will be soon. And you're very lucky."

It was Charles' turn to thank him before he went over to a now fully dressed Cilla. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yes. Your place?"

"I hope so," he said. As they went down the hall to the exit, he added, "That was fun but less than satisfactory."

"Oh?" She gave him an arch grin complete with raised eyebrows.

"You know damned good and well why," he said.

"I know you're not as thrilled to play the sub role," she teased.

"I have no objection to playing the sub role. With the right woman."

Once they were in his car, pulling out of the parking lot, she said, "Charles, I realized something while we were playing this evening."

Her tone made his muscles tighten. Was she going to call off whatever was between them? "That sounds serious."

"It is. I'm a fool. A really stupid, selfish fool."

"Those aren't the first words that come to my mind when I think about you," he said.

"Maybe they should be."

"Why?"

"I've been so wrapped up in my own fears that I didn't see the bigger picture. I didn't see how I was shorting and undervaluing you and asking you to cut out an important piece of both our lives just to indulge my worry."

"They're legitimate fears," he answered.

"But then I asked you to do the impossible."

"Confining our sexual activity to just vanilla sex outside the club? Uncomfortable maybe, but certainly not impossible. I hope I've been proving to you that it is possible."

"Not that. Trying to make you prove that you wouldn't be another Edward. There's no way you can prove that. It's something I have to take on faith or not, based on what I know of you. And that's where I was wrong, because—dammit!—I do know you well enough already. You've kept your word time after time. And you've shown me hundreds of ways that I can rely on you. I was just being stupid and blinded by bad experience."

He braked and pulled to the curb before stopping the car and turning to her. "Does this mean you've changed your mind about my offer of marriage?"

"Yes." She faced him and said, "There's more. That vanilla sex thing? We don't have to do it, except when we want. I realized that it was cheating both of us. Our kinky sex doesn't define who we are, but it's an important part for both us. So I want you to take me home and punish me for what I've put you through the last few weeks."

"That's not the right way to go about it."

She gave a harsh laugh. "You're right and I'm sorry. Charles, would you please do me the honor of punishing me for my selfishness and short-sightedness?"

He wanted to kiss her right then and there, but aside from the fact that if he started it would be hard to stop again, it wasn't what she needed.

"Yes, but you've got to follow my orders exactly. While we're on the way home, I want you to remove your underwear, leaving just your blouse and slacks in place." It was dark enough that no one should be able to see her struggling with her clothes. He could barely see her himself until they drove up to a traffic light and he had a moment to watch her wrestling her slacks and panties down by its red glow. She'd just gotten them off when the light changed, so he heard more than saw her sliding the slacks back up.

By the time they pulled up to his apartment building, she'd removed both bra and panties and stuffed them in her purse. She followed him into the building and waited for his orders once they were inside.

"Down the hall to my bedroom," he told her. "Take off the slacks but leave the blouse. I'll be there in a moment."

He went to the kitchen, poured a glass of wine for each of them and took them back to the bedroom. Cilla waited for him there, her slacks folded neatly on his dresser top. He gave her the glass and let her have time enough for a few sips before he said, "Take my belt off and hand it to me."

She gave him a wry grin, unbuckled his belt, slid it from the loops and handed it to him. The strap was an inch and a half wide, thirty-eight inches long and made from several layers of heavy leather stitched together. It could pack a powerful wallop but he knew exactly how hard she could take it, what would drive her to the edge but not over. Cilla trusted that.

"Kneel on the chair." He pointed to the upholstered arm chair in the corner. "Facing the wall. Stay quiet for this. The walls are pretty soundproof but I don't want my neighbors coming to investigate any screams."

Cilla did as instructed, kneeling on the chair, leaning forward so that her head rested against the wall and her fingers grasped the back edge of the top. It presented

her lovely bottom gracefully. One small smudge on her left buttock reminded him that she'd already taken some spanking earlier. He'd need to keep that in mind.

This was much more his style than being on the other side of the strap, though that had its interesting features as well.

He doubled up the belt and held both ends in his hand, letting fourteen inches of leather hang loose. She tensed when he swung it back, then braced herself as it whizzed forward. The crack was sharper than even he anticipated. Cilla jumped but made no sound as the leather smacked her bottom and came away, leaving a pink mark on the center of both buttocks.

He struck again, putting this one more on the left side, then matched it with one on the right. More streaks shone on her bottom. Her breath sped up but that was the only reaction she gave for a time, as he continued to spank her. After nine or ten strokes, her bottom was bright pink and she wriggled a bit with each one. Maybe someone less experienced wouldn't be able to tell, but he knew her and her body language well enough to see she was getting aroused again by the punishment. A sheen of moisture slicked her upper thigh and its perfume made his already hard cock go even stiffer.

He smacked a bit harder and she still made no sound beyond a muffled gasp. She'd told him on more than one occasion that she liked it hard and long. And she knew how to signal him when she couldn't handle any more. They'd established their safe words long ago and she'd use them if needed. But she was a long way from needing them and he didn't intend to take her that far. He needed her too much to last that long.

Still, he let it go on for a while, delivering a couple of dozen hard spansks that had her buttocks showing a brilliant, rosy red color. To finish it off he gave each cheek an extra-hard whack that made her jump and moan both times. They made deep rose streaks that swelled to sore-looking welts.

Charles threw the belt aside and reached for her, drawing her off the chair and upright. She turned in his arms and leaned against him, putting her head on his shoulder.

"You forgive me?" she asked.

"Anything." He tipped her head back and pressed his mouth to hers, exploring the sweet, hot depths when she opened for him. She submitted so joyously in every possible way. It made him feel like twice the man he knew himself to be.

His hands roved down her back and across the rough, welted flesh of her bottom, drawing her closer against him, but then he released her and stepped back.

* * * * *

For a moment Cilla wondered if he was rejecting her despite his words, until he all but tore off his clothes. It stunned her to watch this fastidious man pop buttons from his shirt in his haste and let his pants lie where they dropped to the floor. His cock jutted toward her, rampantly ready to claim her submission.

She looked up and met his gaze. The warmth, the sheer joy that showed there made her heart do flip-flops again. It was worth taking the chance just to see that expression on his face. His eyes crinkled and the two of them laughed, for no reason other than the sheer joy of being together and being who they were.

He kissed her again and it sent a sizzling heat ripping through her, compounding the fire from her grated bottom. Answering a sudden desperate urge to have him inside her, filling and completing her, she dragged him over to the bed and down onto it.

"Is that the way a sub is supposed to act?" He pulled back long enough to move them both away from the edge.

"When she's totally wild for the man she calls Master? I think so," Cilla said as he nudged her knees apart.

"We've got work to do on your training." Instead of pushing into her when he moved into the gap, Charles knelt, leaned forward and pressed his mouth to her slit.

She did almost scream then as the moist heat steamed her most sensitive flesh, sending razor-sharp shocks of pleasure skimming all through her. A fireball formed deep in her womb, growing and expanding when his tongue brushed up and down,

finding her clit and caressing it. The glory of it made her feel incandescent, like a glowing cloud enveloped her and carried her off to somewhere else.

One hand tweaked her nipple while he sucked gently on her clit, and it was more than she could bear. The fireball inside exploded, rocketing her into a glorious place where her body jerked with pleasure too huge to contain. It was violent and thrilling and amazing.

After a few minutes of reveling in it, though, she became aware that it wasn't done, that she needed something more. He reached over to the nightstand for a condom and put it on before he plunged into her in one fast, deep claiming. She realized what was lacking. Him. Charles. The man she loved. The man who fulfilled and completed her. The feel of him inside gave her another blast of raw pleasure, both physical and emotional. This was far from her first time with him, yet it felt new and different due to the change in their relationship. She watched his face as he pumped in and out, thrilling to the way it screwed up in almost unbearable tension. To know she could do that for him would be a joy always.

Then he threw back his head as he came into her. She exploded in another orgasmic wave of fulfillment and pleasure at the same time. They held on to each other as both bodies jerked and spasmed. It went on for some time before they finally began to calm. Charles lowered himself on top of her then rolled to the side, keeping her in his arms.

His fingers ran through her hair, playing with strands while he kissed her lips, her cheek, her forehead. He pulled back to look at her and said, "That was the best sex of my entire life. In fact, only one thing could make it any better."

"What's that?"

"Just a minute. Wait here." He sprang up off the bed, a man in a hurry to accomplish something all of a sudden. The mission didn't take him far, just across the room to the dresser where she'd laid her slacks. A drawer squeaked as it opened and moments later he returned. He didn't get back in bed, though.

"Sit up, please," he asked, and extended a hand to help her up and turned her so she was on the edge of the bed. The other hand remained behind his back even as he sank to his knees on the floor, kneeling between her legs. Then he brought out a small jeweler's box, opened it to show a ring with a gorgeous diamond surrounded by a circle of smaller ones. "Priscilla Renee Morgan Renfield, would you do me the honor of marrying me?"

The tears took her by surprise, gushing out before she had a chance to control them. But she leaned forward to kiss him and said, "Yes, Charles James Brennan, I'll marry you, but the honor is all mine."

He took the ring out of the box and slipped it on her finger. "I have some house plans I want to show you as well. I had an architect friend draw them up for me, but I want your input before they're finalized."

"I assume they include a soundproofed home-entertainment room?"

He grinned. "Of course."

"Good. Come here." She drew him back up onto the bed.

Fortunately, she didn't have to be at work until after noon the next day, because they didn't get a whole lot of sleep that night.

About the Author

Katherine Kingston welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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