



EMILY RYAN-DAVIS

CHARLOTTE'S YOUNGER MAN

YEAR OF THE SOUL MATE

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Book 1: Year of the Soulmate

Emily Ryan-Davis

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Email:
raven@LSbooks.com

Editor
Tracey West

Cover Artist
Lyn Taylor

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Blurb

Neither “past life experience” nor “pretty, pierced twenty-something” are on the agenda for legal aide Charlotte Kelley’s thirty-fifth birthday. She’d planned dinner with friends, opening of gifts, a few hours’ work investigating potential trademark violations at an area snuggle party, and a quiet moment with her vibrator before bed.

Journalism grad student and features reporter Heath Breck is working on an assignment, not scouting for a MILF. Women who attend snuggle parties are not his type and women who shop at Jones New York instead of Old Navy are totally out of the question—too expensive, too high-maintenance, and too intent on bedtime by 11 p.m.

A token from Charlotte’s childhood and a circle-of-friends ritual, however, make for a significant change in both partygoers’ plans.

Chapter One

"Wait, I almost forgot!"

Charlotte Kelley stepped on the brake, backed halfway out of her parking spot. Another late-night diner pulled out at the same time and leaned on the horn. She glanced in the mirror in time to see her best friend give the driver the finger as she ran across the pavement in her pointy-toed heels.

Charlotte rolled down her window, laughing. "What? I'm working on a case tonight, and I can't be late. Make it fast."

"It's your turn for the ring. Be late." Her friend Linda flashed expensive, tasteful diamonds at her fingers, ears, and throat as she dug through a designer purse. "I'd never forgive myself if I cursed you to a year without sex, and more than one lesbian friend is unfashionable."

"Poor Jeannie." Charlotte shuddered. "If we were good friends, we'd take her to a lesbian bar and help her meet someone."

"We *are* good friends," Linda retorted as she rifled through her purse. "She's the one who decided silver wasn't fashionable enough to wear to the fireman's ball with Sean. If she hadn't been such a snob, she might have a rock on her finger now."

"I'm not sure fashion decisions were entirely to blame for Jeannie's break-up with Sean." But Charlotte wouldn't deny the ring was important. Linda claimed it held some old magic and attributed her recent engagement to the power of the ring. It hadn't brought *Charlotte* to true love yet, or even true lust, but she was too superstitious to risk breaking tradition. A year without sex. Charlotte shuddered. She didn't want her own love life to turn out like Jeannie's. Jeannie had not only broken up with her lover, but she'd also suddenly decided she was a lesbian. Since she was too much of a coward to go out and meet other lesbians, she hadn't had a single date in two years.

While she waited, a chill crept between her shoulder blades. It was a silly thing, a ritual dreamt up by teenagers looking for a pact that would cement their friendship, but silly didn't matter. The symbolism of friendship did. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten her turn. Her index finger already itched to experience the weight and sensation of heavy twisted silver.

"Do you even have it in there?" Worried, Charlotte put her car in park and eased off the brake.

Linda was right. Her assignment could wait. She had taken it mostly as a favor to a friend, anyway, because the trademark attorney responsible for the case was out of town and Pajama Parties, Ltd., an entertainment business that marketed physical intimacy, wanted a preliminary report on a snuggle party scheduled to take place that night in Annapolis.

If she were honest with herself, she'd admit she appreciated Linda's forgetfulness. She welcomed the opportunity to delay a little longer since she wasn't looking forward to spending the remainder of her birthday working a crowd of socially awkward people ranging in age from recent high school graduate to 40-year-old virgin, all bent on snuggling with similarly awkward strangers.

Not that she had a right to look down her nose. She couldn't be accused of 40-year-

old virgin status but her recent sexcapades weren't much to speak of. A lifetime without cock flashed before Charlotte's eyes. Her scalp tightened. She hadn't entertained a relationship in more than six months. Sixty years of celibacy would be unthinkable.

"Here," she said, shuddering again at the prospect. "I have a flashlight on my keychain."

"No need, I found it. Give me your hand." Linda grabbed Charlotte's fingers and wedged the cool silver circlet over the knuckle of her thumb. The Egyptian infinity knot settled into place as if it had been crafted for the shape of Charlotte's thumb. "There. Happy birthday."

Charlotte pulled her hand back into the car and studied the silverwork, as always mystified by the craftsmanship that went into twisting so much silky metal into such a simple yet intricate design. She didn't need to remove the ring and look to know the inscription etched on the inside of the band: *In this life, may you find the loves of lives past.*

The romantic words never failed to give her goose bumps. She often wondered about the man who'd written the inscription and the woman he wanted to find again. None of her friends ever mentioned the dedication.

Linda ducked and leaned through the window to kiss her cheek. "Love you! Go forth and snuggle. Don't forget to call me in the morning. I need to know all the creepy details as soon as possible. And don't forget Jo's birthday is Tuesday."

Her friend's gleeful curiosity made Charlotte cringe. *Snuggling*. Ugh. "I won't. Move so I don't run over your toes."

Linda stepped back and gave her a diamond-glittery wave. She blew another kiss before Charlotte drove away.

* * * *

"You can change into your pajamas right in here. We'll be downstairs. Waiting." The young woman—Trista—sharpened the last word to a point. Charlotte had arrived late, but not so late that the hosts could turn her away at the door, and it was Trista's job to ensure that all the partygoers were in the circle on time.

"I'll be right there," Charlotte promised. She shut the door in Trista's face and tossed her beach bag up on the vanity. Traffic out of Annapolis had been crazy. She meant to arrive half an hour before kickoff so she could look around before the festivities started. Between the delay with Linda and clogged traffic arteries, her half an hour had turned into five minutes. She barely had time to change.

She hopped from one foot to the other, removing shoes and side-tab trousers while she jotted a few notes. Even though she'd taken this case as a favor, the legal firm that employed her distributed assignments based upon performance. Following a surge in snuggle party interest after a minor celebrity had been spotted attending a workshop in California, the Pajama Parties, Ltd. legal team was looking to expand its reach to the East Coast. She'd be foolish not to make a bid for the cushy paycheck that would come with a long-term permanent assignment.

Charlotte distractedly unbuttoned her shirt while she made notes. Eighteen guests, including herself. Host and hostess called themselves "Pillow King and Queen." Six staff members were "Pillow Team Captains," and two others were "Fluffers". The word made Charlotte slightly nervous—the Pillow King and Queen must have known the porn

industry reference. Snuggle parties, in all their variations—officially sanctioned and organized, or hosted by average citizens who'd caught on to the idea—were non-sexual by definition. Slumber parties that turned into orgy parties gave the whole concept a bad rep, and lent a sinister color to the innocent intimacy exercise.

Notes recorded, she wrapped her clothes around the incriminating little book and shimmied into a pair of orange plaid pajama pants that had little black cats marching across the flannel weave. A black cotton top completed the ensemble. She grimaced at her reflection and sighed over the choice. The dark, bold colors drew attention to the lines at the corners of her mouth and eyes.

"At least I know what to get myself for my birthday," she mumbled, officially designating her 35th as the restorative face cream year.

Pounding on the door jerked her away from birthday blues. Trista called, impatiently, "Everything okay?"

"I'm coming!" Charlotte stashed her bag beneath the counter, wedging it in alongside a collection of backpacks, drawstring totes, and miniature suitcases, before she whipped the door open and pasted an apologetic smile on her face. "Sorry, I lost track of time."

"We're just about to start."

Feeling very *herded*, Charlotte preceded the blonde down the stairs. "Are you a Pillow Team Captain or a Fluffer?"

"We're in here." Trista led her into a huge open room that lacked furniture. She didn't answer the question. Unfriendly witch.

Charlotte drew a deep breath and surveyed the room. Mattresses, pillows, blankets and people of every shape and pattern lined the party space like lumpy, colorful carpet. The party guests and staff sat in a large circle. Seven or eight people wore baby blue or pink shirts with words like "snuggly-esta!" silkscreened across their chests. Dark, light, red, straight, and curly hair framed impatient eyes. Charlotte flushed and wobbled after Trista, who navigated the spongy path like a pro. At the first sign of an opening large enough to accommodate her butt, she plopped herself down.

No sooner did her tailbone bounce on the mattress than a cheerful, smiling woman in pastel pink fleece clapped her hands and chirped, "Wonderful, we're all here now! Let the party begin! I'm LeeAnn and this is Mason. We're your Pillow Queen and King tonight. We'd like to welcome those of you we've snuggled before, and double welcome all of you snuggle newbies."

"We also need to discuss the purpose of a snuggle party and outline a few guidelines for acceptable and unacceptable touching," Mason said. "First, however, let me stress the importance of keeping your clothes on."

"Especially if you're a fat ass," someone muttered sotto voce. A few people laughed. LeeAnn frowned.

"It's also imperative that we show respect for one another, regardless size, skin color, or sexual orientation. Especially when 'no' is spoken," the Pillow Queen said, aiming a chilly look at a redneck-tanned man in a muscle shirt.

Charlotte tuned them out. She knew the nature of the intimacy exercise and the hosts didn't seem to be making something perverse out of the concept. Everybody has a right to have their "no" accepted, no questions asked. Sexuality should be neutralized in a discreet fashion, by retreating for a few moments to oneself or putting a stop to the stimulating touching. Kissing was allowed as long as it didn't cross into making out. Those were all

guidelines outlined in the Pajama Parties, Ltd. materials her office had received. PPL staff went by different titles than those dubbed by LeeAnn and Mason. So far, she hadn't witnessed any real trademark violations. She had, however, witnessed several eager glances directed from one particular 40-year-old virgin to a cluster of whispering recent grads.

The 40-year-old virgin type...his presence surprised her. He was attractive enough with thick, dark hair and a square jaw. His shoulders were straight and broad, his frame fit and muscular. He wore grey and red plaid pajamas. Provided he had personality to go with the sturdy shoulders, she wouldn't turn down a lunch date with him.

As if he sensed her examination, he glanced away from the younger women he'd been watching. She met his eyes. He looked away first, his gaze dropping for a cursory survey of her body. And...his attention to someone else. He'd dismissed her. Raising an eyebrow, Charlotte followed his line of sight to a pale waif of a girl whose high-neck flannel nightgown hid her shape. Lace touched her chin and wrists. She wore her dark hair in two braids and, to Charlotte, looked to be about twelve. So that was 40-year-old virgin's type. No wonder he found himself haunting snuggle parties for a hug.

"Let's start!" LeeAnn cooed, drawing Charlotte from her people-watching distraction. "Mason and I believe strongly in names, so we want to make sure everybody here knows everybody else. Right, Mason?"

Pillow King Mason beamed a smile even brighter than LeeAnn's. "Absolutely right. We could go around the circle and introduce ourselves, but any of you who have ever attended a snuggle party already know that games make the world go 'round."

"So we're going to play the name game." LeeAnn's smile widened. "And after that, we're going to try something new and exciting."

Charlotte stifled a groan. The pair presented as saccharine sweet, fake. They projected too much energy and the crowd reflected their over-sugared attitude back by fidgeting nervously. Great. A wooden party attended by people too stiff and nervous to trust their host and hostess, let alone their fellow attendees.

"I'll call out a letter," Mason explained, "and if your middle name starts with that letter, I want you to lean over to the person to your right and whisper your first name in your neighbor's ear."

LeeAnn chimed in with, "Don't forget the touching rules. This game is usually a hands-off game, but it's always okay to touch—as long as you ask for permission first! Remember to be explicit with the kind of touching you want to do. And remember that it's okay to say no to any requests for touching! Does anybody have any questions?"

A flurry of murmurs traveled around the circle, expressing confusion at Mason's convoluted game. Charlotte shook her head and bit her tongue. LeeAnn and Mason were trying very hard to achieve the same atmosphere that Pajama Party, Ltd. created in its events without violating any trademarks. She surreptitiously checked her watch. Three hours and twenty minutes left to go.

"I'll start," LeeAnn announced before anybody had a chance to put real voice to a request for clarification. "We'll make it easy and go with the letter A!"

Damn. Squashing a sigh, Charlotte twisted to face the guy to her right. Her middle name was poised on her lips, but she had to wait. He was an A-name, too, and had leaned to *his* right, too far away for her to play her part. The stretch lifted his t-shirt, showing off a strip of skin above the elastic waist of his pajama bottoms—dark, shiny satin that called

to her tactile senses. She followed the arch of his ribs, gaze traveling all the way up to a defined shoulder blade and flexed muscle. He wore his bangs long enough that they brushed his cheekbone. Smooth skin, lean throat, lush lips that smiled when he straightened and found her watching him.

"Are you an A too?" he asked.

Charlotte nodded, tongue-tied. Looking at him full-on, the complete effect of his appearance hit her. Too young. Probably not even twenty-five. She tumbled abruptly into 40-year-old virgin's shoes and flushed, embarrassed by her reaction.

His piercings made her squirm—small rings adorned his right eyebrow, his bottom lip...his nipples, too, she discovered when her interest strayed south. Two circlets dimpled the fabric of his t-shirt. While she stared, his nipples hardened. Hell. She knew immediately that she was going to have a very hard time concentrating on her job.

"Arlene?"

What? Arlene? Charlotte shook herself. *Focus*. Focus on something besides her sudden curiosity about his energy in bed. She'd never been attracted to a younger man in her life.

"Anne." She moistened her bottom lip and forced her eyes to meet his. "Charlotte Anne."

"Charlotte Anne." He tilted his head, studying something past her ear, quiet so long she wondered whether she hadn't picked up on some cue to end the brief exchange. She shifted uncertainly and his smile widened, his focus returning to her eyes. "How long is your hair?"

She self-consciously touched the twist at her nape. She knew the answer to that but couldn't make her mouth work to say it. While she scrambled for a way to tell him it reached her ass without actually referring to her anatomy, he reached behind her, then paused.

"I want to touch it." Light glittered off his piercing as he raised his eyebrow. "May I?"

Sensing he only asked out of politeness and in accordance with the snuggle party's rules of touch, she wondered whether he would have bothered with the nicety if she'd somehow caught his attention in a no-rules bar.

Mouth dry, she nodded. He caged her, catching her between his lean chest and muscle-corded bicep, and freed her hair from its clasp. The heavy length unwound down her back, trapping his hand on her nape. His fingertips pressed behind her ears. Charlotte shivered.

He lingered there, cupping her nape a little too long. A frown drew his eyebrows together and his lush lips tightened. After a moment, he shook off whatever occupied his thoughts and released her. He gathered a handful of her hair and pulled it forward, arranging the length over her shoulder. Intimate. Her breasts responded, growing heavier, fuller. The backs of his fingers grazed her shoulder.

"I'm Heath." He offered his hand.

"You have an 'A' middle name?" When she touched his fingers, a spike of heat shot up to her elbow, so unexpected that she jerked back. Her thumb ring jolted, delivering a tiny shock that made her nipples jump. *The ring*. Lord, no, not him. Heath was too young for her. Not her type.

"Alexius," he replied. His frown deepened. A question lit his eyes and he opened his

mouth to say something, but must have thought better of it because he shook his head slightly and didn't say anything else.

A confusing riot of sensations and thoughts raced through her head. She tugged at his hold on her hand. The ring was a mistake. She shouldn't have worn it to a touching event. She'd forgotten how powerfully she reacted to men while wearing the ring, which never failed to behave like an electricity conduit. This shock from Heath, though—it was stronger than she remembered experiencing. The surge charged straight to the base of her skull. Her breath stuttered and stopped as her chest tightened painfully.

"Charlotte?" The confused masculine voice hummed in her ears. Heath's grip flexed around her hand, squeezing her fingers nearly as hard as her ribs squeezed her lungs. The edge of her ring caught between their hands and dug into her skin, burning.

She heard LeeAnn urging the "B" people to greet one another but the instructions didn't make a great deal of sense.

She would *not* pass out. Would. Not.

Chapter Two

She felt faint.

"Sit, Anne. I have a gift." Alexius pressed her down upon the furs carpeting his tent and moved between her bare feet. His hands were sure and strong. Despite her pique, Anne allowed the night-chilled man to guide her.

A low, damp fire spat smoke toward the oilcloth roof that sagged above, nearly brushing the top of his head. She craned her neck, leaning back on her elbows to see up the length of her lover's body. His clothes, wet from the rain and the river, clung to his thighs and delineated the thick muscles that roped from knee to groin. Gaze lingering upon the burgeoning length that betrayed his eagerness to get back to her, she smiled and said, "You are the only gift I care to receive."

"You have been practicing that line," he accused.

"I confess." She allowed her knees to part, secretly satisfied when his gaze dropped to the thin wool that stretched smooth across the space between her thighs. One bare foot tiptoed up the shank of his boot, inviting. "But it is no less true for being rehearsed. Come down to me...you are so tall. So far away."

"If I come to you dressed like this, you will wrinkle your pretty nose and tell me I stink." He peeled off his sodden hat and tossed it toward the flap at the front of the tent.

"You do stink of the Rhine. However, I cannot complain about that. I suspect the river is what brought you back to me." She admired his features from beneath her eyelashes and smoothed her fingers into the furry rug. Alexius's beard had grown since he left her three days past and she ached to touch it, to caress the hard angle of his jaw, the taut line of his throat. "And bearing gifts, no less."

"You claimed no interest in my gift." Long fingers worked down his chest, loosening the ties that held his tunic close.

Firelight cast deep, fickle shadows into seams of muscle and flesh. Her mouth dried—robbed of moisture by the more demanding lips below, which already yearned for the strength in his hands. He always parted her so...thoroughly.

Alexius's shoulders flexed as he shed the damp garment. It joined his hat near the flap. He began to peel off his hose, but Anne stopped him. She hadn't finished admiring the strain and jut of his erection. "Your hair will dry faster if you untie it," she suggested.

His lush mouth curved. "Concerned for my health?"

"Merely for my own warmth." She canted her head, deliberately affecting a haughty tone. "You will dangle your head over me, soon, and wet hair is cold hair. I should not enjoy the chill."

He snorted, but raised his arms and reached to unknot the leather strip that bound his dark tresses. "You refuse my gifts and put conditions upon the appearance I may take when I touch you. At times, I question the truth in your lady title."

The lean line of his ribs, the hollows beneath his arms, made her belly warm. As soon as he came close enough, she would sate her craving for his flavor by licking each brown nipple. The twin discs were already hard, peaked and taunting. Anne closed her eyes and willed her body to behave. She mustn't appear too interested, and she was near to crossing the thin line between wanton and eager. "I owe you no justification. You

should find shame in your audacity—questioning a woman ten years your senior."

"I do not believe you're upon ground high enough to chastise *my* desires," Alexius rumbled. He came to his knees, grasped her ankles and glided his hands up her legs. The hem of her nightdress climbed with his touch. Anne attempted to close her thighs, to hide from his ever-curious eyes, but he persisted.

"Open." He dug his fingertips into the soft hollows behind her knees, his voice switching from easy to hard in a single word. "And look at me when I touch you."

Anne swallowed, disobeyed by squeezing her eyes tight. He knelt too close, had too intimate an insight into the marks of her thirty-five years. She'd taunted him, but never intended to allow him so close—not in the all-telling brightness of the fire light, which surely revealed the way her thighs had gone soft. Fear—of his disgust, of her own reaction to it, of the inexorable march of time—quickened her heart beat and her breath.

"I didn't say you could touch me," she said, striving for calm, so he would not detect her insecurity. She drew her knees back toward her body, seeking protection that way if he would not allow it any other, but Alexius remained firm. He shifted his weight and trapped her toes beneath his shins.

"Lady," he countered, "you've never said I couldn't touch you. I've enjoyed the privilege for many years."

"Two years," Anne managed. "Only two. Hardly so much time that you have earned proprietary rights."

"They have been long. An entire lifetime," he whispered, lips caressing the inner curve of her left thigh. "Do not take permission away. Not now. Raise your skirt. I know you do not want to send me away. I can smell your need. Bare yourself, so I might taste it as well."

"Alexius—"

He stopped her. "Don't tell me no."

Desperation underlined his voice. Anne raised her head to look at him, at the shadow-kissed slope of his jaw, the tired hollows beneath his eyes. "You rode hard tonight, didn't you?"

"The merchant's vessel was guarded," he confirmed, resting his chin atop her knee. "We had to set a fast pace in order to evade them. I had to set a fast pace in order to return to you before sunrise."

"You promised three days." She twisted tufts of fur between her fingers, gauging the strain and stress evident in his shoulders, his throat. Hunger for her touch set his mouth in a grime line. She knew this man, even though he indulged her questions, her diversion from his desires, the want itself had not gone. It waited, biding its time, indulging her command. He *waited*. Stayed. Came back to her arms, even though he'd not been her first, even though entire kingdoms full of young, fresh virgins vied for the opportunity to make themselves his. Her insecurities amounted to nothing, once she drove herself past the initial doubts, because Alexius—

"I want you," he said, finishing her thought, as if he owned it the same as she. He released her knee and pushed between her legs, parting the damp tangle of hair that held him at bay. He spread her lips with two fingers and circled a third around the entrance to her sex. Slid it deep. "Anne. I want you."

He punctuated each word with smooth, deep thrusts that coaxed her hips into the air, weighted her shoulders so heavily that she fell back into the fire-warmed rug. Anger and

lust warred for the upper hand—he knew she couldn't stop him, not once he began. Alexius commanded an unselfishness that strung her emotions thin, a dedication that drew her entire body taut. He worked a second finger into her heat, a third, groaning his appreciation. "I love how much your body can take."

"More," she gasped, moving her feet to his thighs, offering darker, hotter depths. Cloth tangled around her hands as she pawed at her gown, instinctively presenting her belly and ribs. Alexius dipped his head, damp hair cool on her legs, and sucked at her navel. She needed more—he'd coaxed a new spot of sensation to life, and it called for the feel of his touch a second time. Her nipples drew into hard knots, gooseflesh stole up her body and shrank her skin until she thought her heat would burst forth and burn him with its force, if he didn't alleviate the pressure soon.

Granting her demands, he swiveled his wrist and his thumb glided through her wetness, gathering the entirety of her sex in a squeezing embrace that made her eyes roll back, her breath stop flowing. Her chest contracted, poised in anticipation, burning from lack of air...but he didn't release her. Anne's eyes shot open, narrowed on his beautiful, wretchedly satisfied smile. "Alexius—"

"Not yet...shh, not this moment." His touch backed away from her center, slid down to tease the sensitive tissue he'd abused so thoroughly with his long fingers. He spread his palm beneath her buttocks, ensuring that she couldn't withdraw the gift of her body.

She bit her lips, already shaking her head before he spoke. "I should make you sleep in the mud," she hissed, ill temper rising. His chuckle infuriated her. Anne clamped her knees together, shoved her foot against the hard plane of his stomach.

Alexius trapped her ankle with his free hand. He kissed the arch of her foot, the crest of her little toe, and gently placed her foot onto the rug beside his knee. "Answer a question for me," he said.

"I'm not doing anything for you." She fumbled to flick her night dress over her splayed knees. "If I have pity during the night, perhaps I'll throw a blanket outside."

He grinned, damn him, and lowered her hips to the ground so he could help with her gown. "I need no blanket, if you will but answer my question."

She rolled away onto her side, sullenly pressing her thighs together, lowering her own hand to the throbbing, aching arousal he'd tossed away. "I am not interested in your questions."

He'd never done this before, never brought her to the brink and placed a condition upon completion. Anne pressed her face against the furs and breathed deep. What could he possibly need to ask, that he thought to make her so desperate for release she would agree? He wouldn't demand financial sponsorship. Alexius had no need of her wealth. Her bed, she made freely available. Would he ask her approval of another lover? Request admission to her bed, even though he had decided to marry?

"Do not be this way," he murmured, moving behind her. His touch warmed her nape, lifted the heavy tangle of hair from her shoulders. "My lady—"

She exhaled, carefully controlling her fear. "I should take away your right to use that word. *My*."

Behind her, he stiffened. The hand in her hair clenched, drew the fine strands at her nape to painful tension. Anne bit her lip, careful not to move as his shadow shifted on the tent wall. He rose on one arm, his broad shoulder overwhelming hers so their shadows merged, so she diminished to part of him. "Think very carefully before you say another

word," he said, dark and even. "I will not give you a chance to take it back."

If she did not know him as she did, she would have missed the anger lying in wait beneath his modulated tones. Alexius possessed a capacity for subtle temper, and he employed it as a deadly weapon in his dealings. He rarely turned it upon her...but she rarely threatened to end their arrangement.

"Ask your question," she finally said, fear making her words cold.

Alexius straightened. His shadow separated from hers as he moved away. Anne watched her shape emerge, hating the definition that meant they were no longer one. Her imagination balked at envisioning a future where she watched him walk away from her without a promise to return.

"There were women aboard the vessel. We found a young girl hidden in a chest." His shoulders flexed as he reached for his discarded tunic and removed something from a pocket sewn on the inside. "Her lover bargained for her. He paid this."

A coil of rough string and metal fell on Anne's lap. She untangled the string with her fingers and it high. Firelight winked around the smooth, polished edge. She'd never seen such a unique ornament. The silver ring gleamed, a perfect circle of twisted, intertwined lines. "What is it?" she asked, forgetting her fear.

"An infinity knot. It goes on forever. The merchant claimed to have received it from a dark man he met on the farthest shore." Alexius didn't look at her as he spoke.

Anne frowned, reached to spread her fingers beneath his shoulder. The naked heat of his skin jolted up her arm. She rose to her knees, kissed the tight tendon running from his jaw to his collarbone. "Forgive me," she murmured. "Without you near, my mood sours."

He shrugged her off. "Save your regret, lady. I haven't asked my question yet."

Her heart thudded. "Ask it, Alexius. Please."

"He said it is a binding knot. That it holds love—shelters it. All love the silver ever knows strengthens the knot, guaranteeing it will never break."

Silent, she traced the knot with the edge of her thumb. His careful speech worried her. What did the seaman's story matter? Alexius had never given himself to superstitions.

He turned without warning and caught her hand in his, folded the ring in her fist. "Anne—I want you to wear it—to carry my love here." He pressed their entwined hands between her breasts, his eyes fierce and flashing in the dim light.

"Will you do it? Accept and wear a mark that makes you mine?" He squeezed her hand so hard his forearm trembled and her small bones ached. "That makes me yours."

Her beautiful man was a fool but Anne wouldn't be the one to tell him he deserved better than an old woman. He would learn it soon enough on his own, and she was selfish enough to take him until experience taught him better.

"I accept it," she said, quiet so he wouldn't come to his senses too soon. Relief gleamed in his eyes. His shoulders bowed under weight she hadn't realized he carried through his question. How long had he been searching for a time to ask it? He brought their bound fists to his lips and kissed the place where her blood throbbed strongest. The sweetness in his gesture almost convinced her to take it back, to turn him away, to send him after a woman worthy of his heart. Perhaps she would suffer stronger conscience by the light of day, but in this heavy, stingy hour of the night...

"Alexius," she whispered. "Release me and allow me to touch you."

His grip loosened, but instead of giving her hands freedom to roam, he placed them

in her lap. "I want to see it on you."

Anne closed her eyes, blood humming in her ears as he lowered her bodice. The silver slid warm and hard against her bared skin. Alexius knelt over her and knotted the talisman's rope at the back of her neck. The scratchy fiber abraded her skin, heightened her awareness of his palms as they spread over her flesh and weighed the tender weight of her breasts. Arousal flushed down her throat, hardened her nipples. Her spine arched in offering.

"I love you this way," he said roughly. "Marked mine, exposed for my hands, eager for my mouth."

"For your cock," she corrected. "I could not bear your mouth—not now. I'm too—"

"Impatient." He squeezed her breasts together. His hair tickled her chest, a precursor to the tongue that tickled the valley he created. "Demanding. Selfish."

"Sensitive," she added, not denying his words. "You left me too sensitive. Your mouth would be torture."

To convince him, she walked her hands up the cords of muscle marking his thighs and shaped her palm over the ridge of his cock. The hard length jumped, strained to her touch. "You're sensitive too," she murmured.

"I am a man of great patience."

Anne raised her hem and crowded forward, forced him back until she could straddle his thighs. "Bare yourself," she commanded.

He released her breasts but not before pinching her nipples as punishment. His mouth fell upon her throat, sucking, biting as he worked his cock free. It sprang hotly against her abdomen, fit naturally between her lower lips. Anne wrapped her arms around Alexius's shoulders and scooted higher up his thighs, impaled herself upon his cock.

Groaning, he grasped the cheeks of her ass and dragged her higher, mouth latching onto her nipple. Anne buried her face in his hair and her fingernails in his back. She should say something, taunt his strength or tease his urgency, anything to lodge emotional distance, but the love circle pressed hard between her breasts, hotter than his gasp as her wetness clenched and pulled.

Reminded of his sincerity, she pulled his hair until his teeth scraped free of her breast and his throat arched. "Look at me."

He opened his eyes with effort, the pupils dark and unfocused. "Put your legs around me," he replied, angling his hips and thrusting hard. Anne felt the broad head of his cock against her deepest barriers, entreating her body to surrender even more of itself. The shock of sensation made her head reel and numbed her fingers and toes. She forgot what she wanted to say, overcome by the tight, tingling release hovering at the edges of her vision.

An impatient growl vibrated in his chest. He rose up on his knees, dropping her on her back, and fell upon all fours. Caged her in, pinned her to the furs with his ramming hardness. "You look at *me*," he rasped. "Here, while I'm inside."

His thumb nudged the corner of her eye, roughly caressed her temple. He hooked his other hand behind her knee. "Anne." He pushed her knee high, rocked his pelvis so hard his sac rose against her ass. "Look at me when I love you."

Heat suffused her face, spread down her throat. She reached for his chest, needed to touch him, and found the ring clutched in her hand. His forever knot.

"I love you," she blurted, meeting his eyes.

Shock registered, sharpened the passion-glaze that darkened his gaze, but he couldn't respond. His body overtook him, slammed into hers over and over again. He clutched her hair, the back of her head, dropped both hands to the furs to brace himself, cursing as his orgasm tore free. Anne took his face between her palms, tasted his lips and allowed his jerky, powerful rhythm to take her with it.

Chapter Three

She stared at Heath, stunned by that movie that had just reeled through her head, through her body. Her sex pulsed erratically. Everything else felt numb. Heath released her hand and cupped her shoulders. A second dart of power, weaker than the first, rippled up her numb forearm and kept going. The static surge glued her tongue to the roof of her mouth, shot straight to her lower belly and lingered in rippling waves of spiky needle sensation. Her arms and legs felt like they were coming out of a deep sleep, regaining sensation one slow, painful prick at a time.

Heath wore a queer expression, suspicious and startled, and his grip on her shoulders bordered painful. Charlotte flexed her fingers, realizing she was digging her fingernails into her palms. He released her immediately.

She rubbed her hands on her thigh and breathed an anxious laugh, hoping he hadn't shared her weird experience. "Shocked me," she said weakly.

The beautiful, too-young man stared at her a moment longer, probably trying to gauge just how crazy she was. That made two of them. She glanced around the room, grounding herself in her surroundings. Still more than a dozen people, all wearing pajamas. Not even a hint of river odor. She shouldn't have chased her cold tablets with wine at dinner.

"Lots of electricity running around in here. All the flannel and the mattresses," he allowed.

"Yeah, that's probably it." Charlotte averted her eyes. She wasn't so sure of his pat explanation, but didn't say so. The tender spot between her thumb and forefinger still tingled, and her heart line itched like mad. A memory of warm, strong touches haunted the tips of her fingers. Had she blacked out during that hallucination? Nobody else seemed to have noticed anything out of the ordinary. She rubbed her leg a second time, perplexed.

* * * *

The rasp of her palm against her thigh destroyed Heath's ability to concentrate on the icebreaker game. He positioned a pillow over his lap, attempting to hide the erection tenting his pants. It was too early in the night to have a hard-on—he needed to focus. This was a big assignment for his career as a feature writer, a series about the culture of intimacy in the Washington, D.C. region. The topic had potential to earn him a following of readers interested in the area's social pulse. He'd only landed it because he had a young face and a little sister who got him an invitation. He *wasn't* going to blow it by attracting the attention of one of the Fluffers, who would come running over to intervene, "neutralize" the situation, and possibly throw him out. His good name as the Breck family's next generation journalist would be ruined.

Maybe he should leave. He'd lost a dozen letters in the middle name game to vivid medieval fantasies about a woman who looked just like Charlotte. What else had he missed? Somebody spiking drinks at the refreshment table? Everybody seemed to be in the same place they'd been before his cock had jumped to life. He scrubbed a hand

through his hair. *Focus.*

He willed his arousal to fade, to no avail. His gaze kept straying down to Charlotte's fingers, searching for the source of the shock that had stung all the way to his shoulder. She only wore one ring, a gleaming band on her thumb. Did it have a buzzer hidden against her palm? No—not enough zap to shake him. The friction of walking across a carpeted room wouldn't do it either. He'd snored through enough physics lectures to know the extent of energy generated by feet on shag. Casual-touch spikes had never jumpstarted his cock before. *Weird.*

He wanted to ask her about it, find out whether she'd felt the spark as sharply as he had, but Mason called out the letter "W," the game moved on, and the balding jock on Charlotte's other side leaned in to engage her in a short conversation. As soon as the introduction game ended, she excused herself and wobbled off the mattresses. Ignoring LeeAnn's dirty look, Heath followed her.

The door to the upstairs bathroom latched just as he topped the stairs. He paced the length of the hallway, rubbing the back of his neck. His erection persisted. Heath adjusted himself and stopped to knock on the door when she didn't come out after his tenth trip down the hall.

She appeared in the doorway before his knuckles connected with wood. Her face registered surprise, then her expression closed. She finished buttoning her coat over her pajamas. The toe of a shiny black shoe poked from the open top of the tote slung over her arm. She was leaving the party. Heath frowned and lowered his hand. "Are you alright?"

"Fine. A bit too much to drink at dinner. You can have the bathroom now," she said to the floor.

Standing, the top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder. Heath studied the part in her hair. Abruptly, his fingers itched to feel the texture. An uneasy urge to hold her hair and pull her head back so he could see her eyes crept down the back of his neck. He gripped the edges of the door frame to keep himself in check.

"I don't need it. I wanted to ask you to cuddle," he said with forced lightness. "Cuddle" wasn't the verb that had taken over his brain.

Her breath caught, but she didn't say anything. She finished buttoning her coat and curled a slender, strong hand around the handle of her bag, fist to her shoulder, forearm across her chest. Her impressive chest. Even through the layers of her coat, her curves remained distinct, full and generous. Heath dragged his gaze back to her straight part. How had his brain manufactured that elaborate fantasy?

"I'm not in the right frame of mind for party games," she finally said. "You don't seem to be, either."

Something in her voice made him look down past her head. His cock strained against the front of his pajama pants, stabbing straight at her. Heath flushed and stepped aside, brought back to reality. What could he say to defend his condition?

Charlotte didn't ask him to say anything. She averted her face and squeezed past him. Heath watched her walk away, his face hot from the amusement he'd heard in those two little words. Older women didn't usually do it for him. He liked girls who were easy to drink with, interested in being out until three a.m., having a quick fuck at four a.m., and thought nothing of going to their first class still smelling like sex and cigarette smoke. Older women...they had a lot more to maintain. Morning showers, face cream rituals, expensive underwear that wouldn't survive a week beneath his bed. Rubbing his hair,

Heath closed himself into the bathroom. Charlotte was too classy and probably wouldn't even dream of piercing her navel.

She was not for him, even if she did have a great ass under that orange and black plaid.

He'd just locked the door when a gleam in the bottom of the sink caught his eye. Her ring. The sight of the silver band made his balls tighten. Something told him she shouldn't lose it. He retrieved the piece of jewelry and turned to follow her but words on the inside of the band caught his eye. He held it at a better angle and stared at the inscription.

In this life, may you find the loves of lives past.

The hair on his arms stood on end. Before his imagination could venture down scary paths, he folded the ring in his fist and went after her.

Cold cobblestone bit his bare feet as he ran from the house and onto the sidewalk, hoping to catch her before she drove off. In the dark, all the vehicles lining the street looked the same, their only variations related to size. She wouldn't drive an SUV. That was too masculine for the slender woman. It would work for a mom, though. Shit, what if she was a *mom*?

Unsure which direction to check for her car, he went out into the middle of the one-way street and waited.

"An erection's not worth suicide," she called from behind him, amusement in her voice. Heath spun to find her in a tidy four-door parked three cars down up the street. She'd half pulled out, and was leaning out the driver's window to address him. Her hair swung dark against the car's pale paint job.

Feeling stupid, relieved she'd stopped instead of leaving, he jogged over to her and opened his fist. "You left this."

Her eyes widened, this time in horror instead of shock. "Oh, hell. You have no idea how much trouble I'd be in if I lost that."

"I guess that makes me your hero, doesn't it?" He placed the ring on her outstretched hand. His fingertips brushed her palm. Electricity jolted up his arm.

* * * *

"You're still a hero," she said, turning the ring over and holding it closer to the candle centerpiece. "I just expected something with a little more....sparkle."

Alex relaxed against the padded leather behind him and drew a cigar case from inside the jacket of his dress uniform. "Sparkle is for girls who don't stay beautiful, Charlie. Those rocks only shine when the light's directly on them, and once the light goes away they're just dull pieces of mineral."

She pursed her lips, slanting a sideways look his way. Her eyes said she didn't buy a word of it. "That's a pretty line, but it doesn't change the fact this isn't a diamond. Are you tricking me, Alex? You have another box in your pocket? I thought when you came back, settled down right, you'd want to, well, settle down right."

He clipped the end of his cigar and looked past Charlie under the guise of concentrating on the lounge singer's lyrics. In truth, he didn't hear a single word of the song. He did have another box for his lady, the engagement ring she'd expected, but he needed her to accept this one first. It meant more. He'd found it in a little shop in Austria before the war ended. The smooth and sedate curve had been a physical reminder of Charlie waiting back home. She was different now but only on the outside. If he wiped

off the lipstick and heavy eye makeup she wore, if he looked past the beads draped around her slender neck, he'd find the tried and true girl who'd sent him off to war. Only now she was a woman.

"Don't misunderstand, Alex. Your souvenir's the cat's pajamas, but—"

"But not what you counted on." He looked down the shaft of his cigar, studying her face. "You're not what I counted on either, Charlie. You changed."

"Not for the worst," she murmured, sliding closer. Her thigh pressed his. A shot of lust beamed to Alex's groin. He eyed the candle casting their table in a soft golden glow and swallowed hard when Charlie leaned forward, pursed her red lips and extinguished the flame with a breath.

Her slender hand ventured over his knee. She drew a single fingertip up his inseam. Alex carefully placed his cigar in the glass ashtray and tilted his head to study the rouged curve of Charlie's cheek. Her eyelashes, thick and dark with cosmetics, fanned the line of her cheekbone, hiding her wicked intention. Her hand gave everything away, though—he held himself rigid as she tested the stiffness of his cock.

"I have to be honest with you, Alex..." She pressed her unfettered breast to his biceps, her sin-crimson mouth to his ear. "If you want me to be the old girl, I don't want your rocks. Sparkling or not."

He closed his eyes, suppressing a groan. She might not want the ring, but her fingers told a different story about her desire for his rocks. She weighed his bollocks in her palm, squeezing and kneading and driving him mad.

He hadn't been celibate during his tour in Europe, but he had made a point of keeping his activities brief, need-based, and respectful toward his hired partners. No titillating games, no flirtations, not even shared smiles across the round top of a coffee house table. He'd thought of Charlie every time, of how he'd respect her in the marriage bed he hoped for, and hadn't allowed himself to develop unsavory appetites. She hadn't held herself to the same standards, if her eager hand was any indication.

Anger drove his fingers into her short, silky hair. He pulled her head back. "Open your eyes, Charlie, and tell me how you learned to touch a man like this."

His trousers loosened at her touch. Alex ground his teeth together and knocked her hand away. "Charlie—"

Her eyes flew open, bright and irritated. "What do you want to know, Alex? How many men I've slept with? You want to know how many girls, too? Are you going to be mad at me? I had no other choice. How was I supposed to know what experiences you were having? The girls in Europe, they're not like girls in Memphis. I read the fashion magazines, I know about the shaved legs and dark lipstick...what a French girl can do with her mouth. I had to learn, or you wouldn't want to stay with me anymore. You'd want to go back."

She pushed away from him, jerking her head so he had to release her hair, and shocked him by pulling a cigarette case from her handbag. "Why am I surprised?" Head shaking, she lit her cigarette off his cigar and mumbled around the tip, "You're behaving just like a man."

"I was trying to be a good man for you. For the good woman you were being while you waited for me." He threw back the watery remains of his scotch and slammed the glass on the table. The melted ice had stolen the burn from his liquor. Instead of warming him, it left him balanced between cold and hot and no closer to deciding whether

Charlie's adventures cooled his desire for her or ratcheted it up to a blaze.

To distract himself, he turned his attention to the smoky lounge. Their table wasn't the only one with extinguished candles. Through the tobacco haze, he could see shadows melded together, tucked way back in the cushioned privacy of their booths...doing who knew what. No, that was wrong. Charlie knew what. His cock twitched, the strained head bumping the underside of the table as he shifted his weight.

Damnation. She'd invited him to partake of the same intimacy shared by other couples, passion given and accepted freely. Memphis had changed while he was gone. The world had changed. He had counted on Charlie to stay the same. Hell, only he remained the same. Why should she want to spend forever with him?

"You're not interested in the woman I am now?" she asked softly, drawing his gaze. In the dark of their booth, lit dimly by the glow of her cigarette, Charlie's face had softened into a forlorn mask. She stared straight ahead and didn't meet his eyes, even when he reached to take her cigarette.

"I love who you were," he replied cautiously, and meant it. He loved her enough to want forever, even if...if what? He had no idea what she would want out of their marriage bed, and the way she held herself now, fancy beaded dress and bright cosmetics, he suspected she didn't want politeness.

Alex touched the hot, smooth length of his erection under the table. Even though his sensibilities objected to Charlie's new brazen ways, his body expressed keen interest. Mouth dry, he confessed, "I might not know who you are, but I think I might be interested in meeting you again."

"Here?" She moistened her bottom lip, finally looking at him. When he nodded, she rose on her knees and crawled across the curved bench, closing the distance between them. The neck of her bodice sagged. He couldn't look away from the small, bare mounds of her breasts, visible down to the dark tips, and found himself stroking his cock as they swayed.

Charlie shocked him by ducking her head beneath the table. His breath lodged in his throat as her chin bumped his knee, her soft hair fell over his fingers, and she kissed his knuckle. Heart hammering, he tentatively released his cock and caressed her cheek. She made a sound of approval that he felt as a vibration humming in her throat. Did her fashion magazines talk about the cocksucking he'd once been offered by a prostitute in Versailles?

The wet, firm tip of her tongue made a place for itself at the base of his shaft. Alex's neck gave up on holding his head high. His shoulders collapsed, his eyes rolled back in their sockets as she sucked the skin of his sac into her mouth. Without warning, his desires toppled into the realm of sinful. He wanted to grab Charlie's hair and hold her still while he plunged into her mouth. She'd feel like smooth, warm brandy, spicy-hot and going straight to his brain. Christ in Heaven. His fingers twitched. He jerked them from beneath the table and found himself stroking her back, measuring the roundness of her ass.

Charlie licked him from base to head, her hips wiggling as she dealt with the limitations of space beneath the table. Alex suppressed a groan and reached down to adjust himself. The head of his cock bumped her chin, her soft lips parted to suck just the knob into her warmth. A surge of excitement shot to his knees. Unable to help himself, he rocketed deep, shocked when she didn't resist, when his shaft kept going and her mouth

kept receiving.

He rode her generous tongue rapidly, flexing his hips and returning for more of the wet suction she offered, trusting she'd let him know when he outlasted his welcome. Once she finished proving her ability to live up to standards he hadn't allowed himself to develop, he'd take her home and...

"Charlie," he said hoarsely, pushing her chin gently, encouraging her off his shaft. "Tell me what your lovers did for you."

She eased from beneath the table, kneeling so close he could see how hard her nipples were, how plump her lips had become from sucking his cock. Uncertainty registered in her eyes, though, edging away passion. Alex cursed himself for interrupting her. His erection throbbed an echoing reprimand.

Her skin heated under his palm, warming with a blush. Alex smiled secretly. She wasn't as bold as she'd made herself out to be. Brush the glitter aside, and his smooth, sweet Charlie still provided the foundation—new woman or not.

"Tell me," he said, speaking the words into the hollow beneath her bottom lip.

She shoved the edge of the table, moving it far enough away that she straddled his lap with ease. Alex's hands fell to her thighs. His fingers bunched her skirt into wrinkled handfuls of cloth. The tops of her stockings contrasted with the warm, silky skin of her thighs. He swallowed, coasting his middle finger up, higher, until the point of her pelvic bone told him she wasn't wearing any knickers.

Charlie combed through his hair, her palms pressing the back of his head until his nose was buried between her breasts. The smoke and scotch aromas of the lounge faded, overwhelmed by the warm, salty, perfumed scent of her skin. She guided his mouth to her left breast, pushed her hard nipple at his mouth. Above his head, she murmured, "I want to be on top. I want to tell you how to touch me, and have you listen. And do it. I'm not going to lay on my back in long white nightgowns while you poke me through your pajamas."

Shame and want heated him simultaneously. Alex squeezed the backs of her thighs as he latched onto the nipple she thrust upon him. She kneaded his nape, flicked her fingernails behind his ears until he shuddered. Every draw of his mouth lengthened her nipple, drew it to a harder, more selfish point. His cock strained and stretched toward her pussy.

"Promise you'll let me enjoy sex," she demanded, pulling his hair hard.

The sharp pain brought a growl to his throat. He'd taken orders during the war and said a firm goodbye to subservience the minute his feet returned to U.S. soil. No fresh girl was going to have him snapping salutes—no matter how straight his cock stood. Holding her nipple between his teeth so she couldn't move away, he flexed his palm around her hip, then drew back and slapped her ass cheek. She jerked, her grip on his hair going lax. Alex waited for her objection, her next smart comment, but she didn't say a word. Beneath his hands, her flesh quivered. After a stiff moment, the weight of her body sank against his chest, her head pillowed on his shoulder. Her bare pussy nuzzled the head of his cock. Alex swallowed. He only had to bear down on her hips and he'd be inside her—reminded of the virginity she didn't save for him. A second surge of desire to strike her made his whole arm tense. He balled his hand into a fist and closed his eyes, battling the encroachment of violence.

"Charlie—"

"Will you do that again?" she asked, her breath hot behind his ear.

The timid pitch of her voice soothed his anger, aroused his drive to possess her. He couldn't answer, not immediately. His urge to *own* her didn't seem right in his head, but the prospect of slapping her ass a second time...

She licked his earlobe, her small hand searching between their bodies, finding his cock and enveloping the shaft in her fist. Her hips arched in his grip, pitching forward until he felt her cream coating his swollen head. "Please. Spank me, then fuck me. *Please.*"

His reservations snapped. Alex raised his head from the perfume of her body and lifted her from his lap. "Lower your dress," he rasped, busy stuffing his hard-on back into his fly.

Once Charlie had flipped her hem over her knees, he stood, pulled a couple bills from his wallet and threw them on the table, then herded her into the narrow hall that led to the bathrooms. Charlie's elbow trembled in his grasp. In the dim light of the lounge, her face was pale, spotted with two rounds of color at her cheeks. He pushed her up against the wall in a dark corner of the corridor.

She flattened her hands on the dark wood panels, turning her head to stare at him. "What—"

"No talking." He jerked her dress high, displaying the firm round of her ass, and delivered a stinging slap to the back of her thigh. "Spread your legs, Charlie. I don't want to have to wait when I decide to stick it in you."

He watched as she complied, admiring the flex of her calves, the way her knees hugged the wall, as if she thought she could shrink away from him. Rewarding the way her body moved, he reached between her thighs and slid two fingers into her pussy. Charlie groaned and jerked. Her hot muscles quivered as if they sought to pull his fingers deeper. Inside his pants, his cock strained, eager to replace his hand and satisfy her body's demand for more.

He penetrated another inch and stroked slowly, shallow plunges that had her moaning within moments. Resting his chin on her shoulder, he murmured, "You know you deserve this, don't you? That it's not just fun? Look at me."

Her eyelashes lifted, slow and heavy. Even though the corridor was dark, she squinted as if looking into a bright light. "I only wanted respect."

"That's all I wanted too, Charlie." He eased his fingers from her heat and massaged her ass, squeezing and kneading the tense mound. "But you didn't have any for me. None at all. I made sure I didn't let anybody distract me from you, all the time I was away, and then I come home to insults. And you trying to unman me."

I'm sorry. Her lips moved silently, forming words so soft Alex couldn't hear them. Not good enough. He wanted them louder, and punished her for holding out by smacking her behind twice. "If we're going to go any further than we have, if we're going to be together when we walk out of here tonight, you have to say it louder. And mean it."

She did as he asked, delivering her apology loud and clear. Alex rubbed her hip and stepped back, positioning his feet between hers so he could shield her body from view as the men's room door swung open. He pressed his chin to the crown of her head, breathing the scent of her hair, familiarizing himself with the nuances of her aroused body, trying to decide whether he could give her what she wanted every day of her life. If she wanted this...he'd just have to get better at it.

"I love you," he said, shifting to speak against her ear. "I did before I enlisted, the whole time I was gone, and still do right now. If you don't love me—"

"I *do*. Alex, please. I had to wait so long for you to come home..." She rubbed her ass against his groin, her lips parting on a sigh of frustration. "I just don't want to have to keep waiting for a wedding, and that damned ring wasn't what I wanted. It doesn't make *this* happen any sooner."

He stood frozen, stunned. Charlie's physical need had never crossed his mind. He'd assumed she didn't suffer the same temptations he did, had rested easy believing she was calm and happy and in no danger. He wouldn't have wished nights like he'd experienced upon her, alone and wanting, with no outlet except his own hand. A vivid image of her in her small bed, nightgown around her waist, fingers inside her pussy, hit him so hard he had trouble breathing and couldn't wait any longer.

"Say you love me," he demanded, reaching between them to fumble his cock from inside his pants. "Then tell me whether you ever fingered yourself."

Her hands curled into fists against the wall. "Alex—"

"*Tell me.*"

"Fine! *Yes*. I thought about you fucking other women and pretended you were inside *me*, not them. Are you happy?"

"Yes." He bent his knees and rocked between her legs, the fat crown of his cock sliding through her wetness and searching out her entrance.

Charlie's back arched, her hips pushing back to meet him. Her pussy gave easily, stretching to accommodate his girth, snapping tight around his shaft once he'd worked the head inside. She hadn't given him the love words, but he'd wait for those. Right now, his body was more demanding than his heart, and he rammed deep, drew back, hammered into her again. She moaned and lowered one of her hands out of sight. The sensation of her tight grip fastening onto his balls made stars light up behind his eyelids. Later, he'd appreciate the experience she'd gained—however she found it. Right now, though—

Her other hand left the wall. Half a dozen thrusts later, she threw her head back and gasped at the ceiling, her pussy convulsing around his cock. Alex tried to stop himself—he didn't want to finish so fast, wanted to give her more—but she milked him, grinding down and back until he began to shoot, refusing to let go once he'd begun.

Chapter Four

Heath jerked his hand away, narrowing his eyes. "That's the *second* time you...shocked me."

Staring at him through the open window, Charlotte closed her fist tight around her ring. He had been about to say something else—to admit that he'd had the same experience as she? *Had* he? Had *she*? She'd thought the first episode a strange hallucination but couldn't deny the second. The sting of Alex's hand still warmed her buttocks. Charlie's orgasm still heated her cheeks. Beside her car, Heath shifted unsteadily on his feet. She hazarded a glance at his groin, and quickly looked away. His pajama pants sported a wet spot high on the left thigh. His cock was no longer erect. Had he—

"I'd better get back inside," he muttered, interrupting her train of thought. "I have an assignment."

So did she, but she'd already called it a wash. Whatever Heath's job, he wasn't going to be able to finish it with a semen stain on his pants. Besides...her pussy throbbed and the ring clutched against her palm matched the rhythm. She wanted him.

She moistened her lips and suggested, "I could take you home and have my someone from my office come for your clothes in the morning."

Heath rubbed the back of his neck. The motion stretched his t-shirt across his stomach and lifted the hem, showing her a bare strip of lean flesh. Dark blond hair curled around his navel. His pajama pants had dipped low. The elastic band clung to his hipbone.

"I want to take you home," she said, eliminating any uncertainty he might've heard in her suggestion. Did arousal thicken her voice? She had a little trouble speaking around her desire to lick the line of his waistband, to nuzzle lower and roll the head of his cock over her tongue. Blowjobs were not ordinarily her thing—she preferred to receive—but *him*, she wanted to taste. The mere idea of molding her lips to the shape of his head, the suck and pop when she loosed him from her mouth... Her cheeks were hot. She forced herself to stop staring at his crotch and met his eyes. "With me. Come home with me."

He wiped his mouth with the hem of his t-shirt. "I have an assignment due in the morning."

An assignment? Charlotte refused to let her brain go there. So what if he was a college student?

"I'll give you the keys to my car. You can return it to me, or leave it somewhere and I'll have it picked up. Whatever you're most comfortable with." She pressed her thighs together, embarrassed by her haste to eliminate reasons for him to say no—embarrassed by her own eagerness. Was she coming off as desperate?

Leaning down, he reached through the window and cupped her chin, tilted her face, and brought his lips close to hers. His hair fell across his eyes, hiding them from her. His breath was warm, unsteady, but his grip was firm. If he was nervous, he didn't show any signs. Charlotte closed her eyes, slicked her tongue across her bottom lip. Did he enjoy kissing, or avoid that intimacy in favor of more carnal foreplay? Arousal surged between her thighs, soaking her panties. She clutched the steering wheel to keep from reaching for

him. What else could she say to make him agree?

"I can't wait for tomorrow," he said, so close to her lips that the words brushed her chin. "I need to get my things tonight."

He thumbed her bottom lip, nudging her mouth open, and closed the kiss—sweet, probing. His tongue touched hers almost immediately, then stroked deeper, more demanding. Eager to prove she wasn't a passive lover, she kissed him back with equal interest, delving past the ridge of his teeth. He headed off her aggression by capturing her tongue, sucking hard. His fingertips drifted to her throat, lower to palm the weight of her breast. Charlotte moaned. Her nipples stood up against her shirt, jealous of the affection he lavished upon her tongue. Heath teased one of them by pinching the peak between his fingers until her back arched.

Nearby, a driver honked his horn. Charlotte jerked, startled. Heath sucked her bottom lip between his teeth as he lifted his head. "Pull back into the spot and wait for me," he instructed before he left.

Hands shaking, squinting against the high beams of the car waiting to get past her unintentional roadblock, she reversed back to the curb. Reality rippled through the sluggish heat coursing in her veins.

Hurrying, hoping he didn't return too quickly, she fumbled her cell phone from her purse and dialed. Linda answered on the third ring.

"How young is too young?" Charlotte blurted.

Linda hesitated, but seemed to catch on fast. A sly sharpness pitched her voice. "Legal is legal."

"I think he's a *student*," Charlotte whispered. "Isn't there some kind of moral code I'm breaking?"

"Only if you don't intend to teach him something. A student should be taught. Are you still at that party?"

"I—no. We both left." She left out the part about erotic hallucinations. A shadow on the sidewalk alerted her to his return. "He's coming back. I need to go."

"Wait! Call out sick to work tomorrow. If he's that young, he has five or six rounds. Take advantage of it. And *call me* later."

Heath jiggled the passenger door handle. Charlotte snapped her phone shut and dropped it in her bag before depressing a button to unlock the door for him. He slung his backpack—*backpack!*—into the back seat. Mortification washed over her in waves. A *student*.

But, God, could he kiss. The thought of his tongue in her mouth made her clitoris throb all over again.

Not talking, Heath reached down to move the seat back. A plastic bag rustled. Charlotte glanced at the passenger floorboard and gasped. "Wait!"

He'd already seen it. Charlotte covered her eyes as his fingers hooked the edge of the bag. *I'm going to kill Jo.*

"I'm glad I didn't decide to stick around for the rest of the party," he said after a moment. "I'd hate to send you home alone with that."

"Don't laugh," she muttered.

"I'm not."

Right.

She rested her head against the back of the seat, unable to look at him. What the *hell*

had she been thinking? Hitting on a—a kid. Inviting him to her row house. God, had she even made her bed that morning? Remembered to wipe down the tub after the last time she shaved her legs?

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "This is a mistake."

The sound of cardboard being torn answered her regret. Charlotte cringed and opened her eyes, forcing herself to look at him. "Look—"

He canted his head as he lifted the molded-Latex cock and ball assembly from the box. The phallus jiggled comically but she didn't feel like laughing. Heath rested the toy—a birthday gift—on his knees and wrapped his hand around the shaft. "Happy birthday?"

Charlotte flushed. "Thanks."

He flexed his fingers and squeezed the cock tighter. "It's a little skinny."

Her mouth went dry at the sight of his strong fingers gripping the dildo. Some of her larger toys would fit perfectly in his hand. "I—"

"Drive, Charlotte," he said, cutting her off. A half-smile tilted his lips, mischief lighting his eyes. "I don't want to come in my pants this time."

She exhaled and focused her attention between the mirrors and the road, trying to ignore the way her muscles trembled. Just drive. And—she risked a glance to her right—don't think about how big his cock must be, if he thought the inch and a half circumference on that ridiculous dildo was "skinny." At least he hadn't commented upon the length. She couldn't take more than eight inches without some serious preparation...at least, not any other night. Tonight, she might not even be capable of a deeper degree of *readiness*.

Heath didn't talk much during the twenty-minute drive. He replaced the sex toy in its box and sat with his hands in his lap, hiding his half-hard cock. When she pulled into one of the two parking spaces designated for her unit, he finally spoke. "You live alone?"

"Yes."

"Pets?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm not home enough."

"Mm." He opened the door and exited the car, hooking his fingers in the shopping bag handle. Charlotte gaped. He didn't...

"I'll take these in for you," he said from outside.

Unsure how to respond, she retrieved his backpack and her overnight bag from the backseat and stepped out to join him. She knew one thing—she couldn't have a conversation about dildos on the sidewalk outside her front door.

Shoulders tense, she unlocked the door and reached around to flip the light switch. Her lamps were set to low light to save energy. Only one bulb brightened the living room, hopefully hiding any stray socks she may have dropped on her way to or from the laundry. Would it be obvious that she wanted to check for cleanliness if she asked him to wait outside?

Heath moved behind her, his hand finding her hip, his mouth at her ear. "Second thoughts?"

Yes. But they fled as he pressed his fingertips below her hipbone, grazing the elastic of her panties. She forced her feet to move inside. He closed the door, his body shadowing hers. The shopping bag sailed onto the sofa. Heath plucked his backpack and her tote from her grasp and tossed them after the shopping bag. He tugged her purse from

her shoulder, her coat down her arms, and urged her around to face him.

"Sure you want me to stay?" His thumbs stroked her throat.

Charlotte nodded, unable to meet his eyes. She couldn't figure out *why* she was suddenly so terrified—of screwing up, not of him, though she did wonder why her good sense hadn't kicked in to remind her of her stupidity. What if she'd brought a rapist home with her?

"I think I need a drink," she croaked.

Heath's eyes were unreadable. He caressed her bottom lip and dropped his hands from her shoulders. "Bring me one?"

"I will." She fled to the kitchen without asking what he'd like and refused to let herself wonder whether he was legal drinking age.

* * * *

When her mouthwatering ass vanished around a corner, Heath grabbed her purse and started rifling through it. He tried to ignore the sounds of her moving in the kitchen. With her out of sight, some of his desire lifted and his investigative nature climbed to the fore. Doubt descended upon him. Those hallucinations—what caused them?

In this life, may you find the loves of lives past.

No.

Well, probably not.

"Could be drugs," he muttered. Some topical hallucinogen. Charlotte didn't seem the type to rub toxic chemicals into her skin, but by the same turn, he wasn't the type to believe in charms or past lives. Part of him wanted to find drugs in her purse, a rational explanation for the strange events of the night. What else was he supposed to think? She'd touched him and his cock went haywire. Not just that, either—his thoughts, his emotions, his grasp on reality. Only drugs could have created that severity of hallucination. The first time, sure, a weird fluke. The second time, again when he touched her...

His heart thudded as he dug past her wallet, keys, cell phone, MP3 player, lipstick. No drugs? Not even allergy tablets? Headache pills? He wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, wondering whether he'd really gotten it wrong. If no drugs, then what? If he couldn't pin his wild hallucinations, his embarrassing spontaneous ejaculation, on something she had done, he had to look to another source. Only one of two other options: he was losing it, or he and Charlotte had a connection he couldn't explain. If the latter, would she have seen—experienced—the same things he had?

Charlotte's purse vibrated. He tracked the noise down to a zippered pocket inside her bag.

A vibrator? His cock jumped.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't sure what you'd like." Her voice came closer with each word. Heath straightened abruptly, the slender bullet humming in his hand. He thrust it behind his back as she entered the room.

"Nearly a billion people in the world believe in reincarnation," he blurted.

"They..." She shook her head and swallowed from the wine glass she carried in one hand. Wine tinted her upper lip purple. His fist clenched around the vibrator. He wanted to lick the grape residue from the corner of her mouth, to taste it on her tongue.

She ran the tip of her tongue along her upper lip, licking away the stain. Her

eyebrows drew together. "What's that sound?"

Heath swallowed. He didn't want to tell her he'd been rummaging through her purse, but he couldn't figure out how to turn the damned thing off without looking at it. She knew, though. Realization showed in her eyes, which shifted focus from his face to her bag on the sofa. Her blush rocketed him from turned on to aching.

"You went through my purse." She put her glass and a bottle of beer on the coffee table and circled to stand behind him. "That's my vibrator."

Heath expected her to ask him why he'd invaded her privacy, to tell him to get out of her home. She didn't, though. Cool fingers stroked his wrist, his forearm, his biceps. She touched his shoulder blade, the center of his back. "Are you nervous when I stand behind you?"

"Yes." He started to turn. She moved with him, remaining beyond the range of his peripheral vision. Dodge instead of chase. "I can't see what you're doing."

"You can feel, though, can't you?" The heel of her palm came to rest above his fist. "I like this. You unable to see me. It's almost like you're blindfolded."

Her nervousness seemed to have vanished. No, jumped hosts like a virus. Now he suffered the symptoms she'd displayed—skin flushing, heart racing. Cock throbbing. Had her pussy responded the same way? Mixed up anxiety and arousal until they were indistinguishable?

She inched closer. Her breath stirred the hair at the back of his neck. He bit back a groan when she covered his fist with one of her smaller hands. "Will you stay this way? Let me touch you? Let me...use this?"

His cock jumped. The vibrator. She wanted to use it on *him*. He'd entertained a brief fantasy in the car—watching her ride the artificial cock and balls he'd found on the floorboard—but he hadn't dreamed she would want to penetrate him. Or that his cock would lengthen another fraction of an inch at the prospect of her fingers, that slim little bullet, sinking into his ass.

"Heath?" Her lips pressed to his nape. She scored his wrist with her fingernails, waiting for his answer.

Throat dry, he managed a rough "Yes."

She pushed his shirt up and closed in, her breasts flattening beneath his shoulder blades. An image of himself, naked on his knees, cock dripping precum on her carpet, flashed behind his eyes. Heath gasped.

She pulled the vibrator from his fist. "Take off your clothes, please."

He removed his t-shirt carefully and dropped it on the floor. Air currents from the ceiling fan peaked his nipples. Charlotte reached beneath his arm, her fingers finding the stainless steel ring decorating his left nipple. Heath bit his lip and fumbled his pants down his legs. She didn't tell him not to, so he circled his thumb and forefinger around the head of his cock to alleviate some of the ache.

"Have you used lube before?" She rested her cheek between his shoulders, her palm gliding down his stomach. Her touch paused to toy with the ring he wore at his navel. "Did this hurt?"

"They all hurt." He shuddered, rotating his fist back and forth on his shaft. The friction made his thighs weak. Lube would be nice, would allow him to work his hand faster. He had a feeling she didn't intend to squirt it on his cock, though. His balls tightened. Heath loosened his grip before he came in his hand.

"I've used different stuff," he said, and cleared his throat. "Scented oil. That kind of thing."

"For anal sex?" She released his belly button ring. "I bet it was cold on your cock. Why don't you look in that bag you brought in from my car? I think there's something in there."

He started to move away from her but she stopped him with a tug on his pubic hair. "Lean and reach for it."

The sofa was far enough away that he'd have to bend over, baring his ass to her. Perspiration broke out on the back of his neck. He wasn't accustomed to instructions during sex. Hell, he wasn't used to talking at all. Heavy kissing, hands beneath sweaters and skirts, moans and wet flesh—he had experience with that.

"I'm not used to taking orders," he said, eyeing the shopping bag.

"I'm not giving orders. I'm making suggestions." She stroked a single fingertip up his cock, base to head, and lingered at the wet slit. "Would you like me to ask? If I say 'please find some lube so I can start playing with your ass' will you do it?"

He was reaching for the bag before she finished her question. The cock-and-balls slid off the cushion and hit the floor, followed by a fuzzy pussy purse, a tail of neon green condoms, and a pink cloud of tissue paper. As he grabbed the yellow plastic bottle rolling around in the bottom of the bag, Charlotte pushed on his back. His knees buckled, landing hard on the carpet.

She followed. Flannel-clad thighs inched between his calves. Heath supported himself on his forearms, tearing at the plastic wrap that sealed the bottle. Cellophane ripped down a perforated line. He popped the top and sweet banana assaulted his senses.

"I don't think this is for...what you want to do," he said.

"Because it's flavored?"

Her response missed a beat. Heath glanced over his shoulder, searching for her face for the first time since she'd caught him pawing her things. Her gaze was downcast. While he watched, she slicked her tongue across her bottom lip. Charlotte was enjoying herself. Her nipples stood up and pushed insistently against her top. A flush stained her cheeks. She fussed with her hair, pushing it off her neck as if the weight of it made her too hot. Her obvious arousal eased the apprehension he'd felt at being on display like this.

He was tempted to ask whether she saw something she liked, but something told him to hold his silence. The bottle of lube still lay in his palm. He squeezed until a droplet surfaced at the tip and imagined her hand on his cock again.

"Flavored usually means it's for oral sex," he finally answered.

"Give it to me." Charlotte held out her hand. Heath placed the bottle on her palm and held his breath, waiting for the hum of the vibrator. Her fingertip skimmed the crease of his ass, tickled the underside of his sac.

He pressed his forehead to the sofa, groaning. "You're killing me with the waiting."

"I'm sorry." Her touch dropped away.

Frustration pounded behind his eyes. "I didn't mean you should stop. *Please* don't stop."

A moment passed without response, then she whispered, "Alright," and a cool droplet of oil slid between the cheeks of his ass. Heath shuddered and grabbed his cock, squeezing himself.

Charlotte made a strangled noise.

He froze. "What's wrong?"

"Do you have any idea how wet that just made me?" She shifted between his legs. A second trickle of oil slicked toward his anus.

His breath hissed, muscles tightening against the cold. "I hope wet enough that you'll let me fuck you soon."

"Eventually," she murmured, right before her thumbs slipped between his ass cheeks and spread them wide.

The first touch of her tongue made his whole body jerk. Shocked, overwhelmed, Heath hissed, "Christ!"

Charlotte ignored his outburst. Her firm, wet tongue swirled scented lube over his tight pucker. She probed gently, wrenching a whimper from his throat. Her tongue lashed waves of goosebumps over his skin. His nipples ached, painfully hard and peaked around their piercings. He pumped his cock frantically, rhythm erratic until she reached between his legs and covered his hand with her own.

Forcing his eyes open, he looked past his taut stomach to the jut of his cock. She guided his fist past the flared rim of the swollen, purple head, paused there, squeezed his fingers around the sensitive knob. His breath exploded in a rush. She inched the tip of her tongue just inside his anus as she dragged his hand down the length of his shaft, pushed it back to the tip. As he watched, she adjusted her stance and worked her other arm between his legs. Banana-scent burst between them. She squeezed oil over their fingers, slicking the path of their strokes. Suddenly, his speed changed and their joined hands skimmed rapidly back and forth, up and down, rotating in short little twists around his cock. Charlotte licked lower, her tongue flattening and sneaking up on the sensitive flesh between his anus and his sac. Her hair tangled between his knees, dark behind the gold glint of a necklace she wore. As she extended her tongue to catch his balls, her pajama top gaped and he caught a glimpse of her breasts—bare, pale, swaying as she licked and stroked him.

His orgasm broke without warning. She uttered a soft sound, shifting to catch the spurting stream in her palm, to work his fluid back along his cock until he twitched from the pleasure-pain of too much stimulation.

Chapter Five

Heath recovered his strength too soon. Charlotte hadn't finished cuddling him, basking in the salty, sweaty scent of his orgasm, the lazy throb of her swollen clit, before he raised left her hand into view. "Why do you wear this ring?"

She curled her fingers into a fist and stroked the band with her middle finger. "My friends and I pass it around every year."

"Take it off."

Her smile faded. She stared at him, startled by the demand. "Why?"

"Because it's doing something to me." He blew a shock of hair from his eyes and leaned up on his elbow, looking down at her. "You haven't drugged me, or zapped me with some kind of weird taser. You just keep touching me with that hand. And every time you do, something happens."

Visions. They weren't one-sided. What did it mean that he shared those experiences with her? Charlotte shied away from the inscription on the inner band. This was physical attraction. She probably had a decade on him. And she wasn't ready to think about weighty subjects like the reincarnation he'd mentioned earlier, or relationships meant to be.

She could simply remove the ring. She'd already had amazing sex and avoided any negativity that might have resulted from not keeping the birthday tradition.

Having full access to Heath's body had made her hotter than she'd ever been. On a scale of "good to orgasmic," the pleasure of touching him, shocking him and making him shudder, had approached orgasmic. If the talisman made him uncomfortable, if it meant he might leave, she'd have naked hands in a heartbeat.

The fringes of his bangs grazed her eyebrows. He shifted to straddle her thigh, demonstrating his renewing interest. "Take it off, Charlotte. I did what you told *me* to do. Now it's your turn."

His cock already nudged the soft inner line of her leg. This time, her body had no interest in allowing him to empty in his pants or her hand. She slipped the ring from her thumb and Heath swooped, licking her bottom lip, sliding his warm hand beneath her shirt, up her stomach, over her breast. The ring fell from her fingers, onto the carpet.

"You taste like bananas," he murmured. "That's what I want—the right-now you, not some World War I flapper girl or whatever I saw."

Charlotte froze. She hadn't wanted to mention the scenes she'd seen. Experienced. And she hadn't expected Heath to broach the subject. What should she say in response? Ignore his remark? Address it head on?

Heath plumped her breasts and stroked her nipples, treating each swelling point until her back arched.

"Felt," she gasped. Her knees raised and parted, inviting him between her legs. "You felt it. I saw you come."

"Yeah, I know. Twice now. I haven't even seen you once." He straightened away from her and curled his fingers beneath her waistband. "These are in the way."

Moving like molasses, muscles too slow to keep up with her pulse, she rolled onto her knees and stripped out of her clothes.

Heath rested on his elbow, idly stroking his cock and inspecting her nipples. "I want to see your bedroom."

"It's upstairs."

His focus shifted lower. She knew when he registered the smoothness of her pussy—his pupils flared and he inhaled deep, as if trying to smell her arousal from feet away.

"I'll see it later." He turned onto hands and knees and crawled right up to her, his tongue flicking out to taste the cream slicking her labia. Charlotte pitched her hips forward, holding onto his shoulders for balance as she lifted herself onto her old-fashioned wood coffee table. Heath followed with his mouth, his lips fastening on her clit. Darts of pleasure shot to her fingers and toes, which curled around the edge of the table and deep in the carpet's pile.

"I've never licked a pussy this smooth," he confessed, shouldering between her thighs, opening her wider.

She buried her hands in his hair and pulled his face harder against her slit, somehow maintaining enough composure to say, "Better get your fill while you have the chance."

"I was hoping for more than one." The tip of his tongue squirreled beneath slick folds of flesh, exposing her clit to his breath.

Her shoulders shook with the effort of remaining upright. Most men swirled and stabbed and smeared with their tongues, using their whole mouths so clumsily that they completely missed the mark. Not him—Heath operated precisely. He cast his gaze upward, meeting her eyes while he explored her pussy. His tongue disappeared past her entrance, his lips slick from her cream. Watching him added an extra dimension to the pleasure tingling in her ankles. She wanted to watch his cock the same way.

"You're ready for more than this," he murmured, pausing with his lips poised to suck her clit. "My mouth's barely getting a reaction."

"I am. It is. I mean, you're amazing—but I'm past foreplay. I'm sorry. I monopolized all the time—"

"Shhh." He climbed her body and claimed her mouth, a hard kiss that bypassed courtship. Charlotte wrapped her legs around his hips. The head of his cock teased her briefly, then retreated. "I need a condom. Don't move."

She only half obeyed. While Heath tore foil and rolled brilliant green Latex down his cock, she repositioned herself to recline on her elbows on the coffee table. Her ass balanced on the edge, she snuck one hand between her thighs and fingered herself. Heath turned back to her and froze.

"You're so damned hot," he said, staring.

She tilted her head, watching the play of fascination across his features as she worked a third finger into her pussy. Returning to his place between her legs, he added one of his fingers to hers. Head dropping back, she groaned. The extra stretch he provided revived sensations that had been dulling. She started to pull back, to give him complete access, but he held her hand in place and pushed his middle finger deep, twisting away from her jerky rhythm and searching out the knot of flesh hiding behind her pubic bone.

"Sit up so I can suck your tits," he said roughly.

Her stomach quivered. Charlotte maneuvered forward, onto her knees and straddling his cock. He shifted to accommodate her change. His wrist angled and he reached deeper, fingertips tapping her cervix as his teeth caught her nipple.

Clutching his hair, pinning his mouth to her breast, she squirmed until the head of his cock connected with her clit. A tiny tremor skittered to the small of her back. She gasped. "Now. I'm going to come. Fuck me now."

Heath didn't hesitate. His fingers left her empty, but not for long. He squeezed a handful of her ass, his knuckles grazing her clit as he aimed and thrust into her pussy. She'd thought his fingers stretched her, but the thickness of his erection tore a keening moan from her throat. Her arms locked behind his head, anchoring her upper body while her hips lifted and hitched closer. His pubic hair rasped her clit one brief moment, then he grabbed her other ass cheek and began to thrust.

Charlotte threw herself into his rhythm, which grew harder, faster. He buried his face between her breasts and bit the sensitive skin. She squeezed her eyes shut. Concentrated on tightening her pussy, on angling her body to catch friction on her clit. Heath pounded into her until sweat slicked his shoulders and thighs. She came before he did, gasping and stiffening in his arms, clinging when he moved to lower her to the floor. Once down, he hooked his arms beneath her legs and lifted her knees and her ass high. His new angle drove the head of his cock against her g-spot. Charlotte's eyes flew wide, fixing on the young, powerful man between her legs. His cock spread her pussy wide and he held her thighs so far apart the muscles had begun to burn, but discomfort didn't matter. The sight of his cock dipping in and out of her pussy, the sensation of his sac swinging against her ass, drove her to another orgasm. She clapped her hands over her breasts and her nipples stabbed against her palms, brought to new hardness by the release of pleasure.

"Pinch them," he ordered, and her fingers responded before her brain did.

She rolled her nipples and squeezed them tight, plumping the hard points for his eyes, and knew exactly when she triggered his release. The edge of her fingernail caught her aureole and she hissed, startled by the sting, but Heath—his whole body spasmed and he drove hard, deep, ruthlessly grinding the base of his cock against her stretched flesh. Even with the condom in place, Charlotte felt the head swell against her cervix. His cock jerked in her body, jumping with each jet of semen pumping from his sac. She arched her back, curling her toes against his sides, and pinched her nipples until a final tremor twitched from her clit.

Unable to keep her eyes open, she welcomed him blindly when he stretched out over her body. Her arms folded around his back, fingertips tracing his shoulder. She drew a deep breath and exhaled, releasing tension and energy.

Kissing his ear, she thought to ask, "Why were you going through my purse?"

Heath stiffened. He started to pull back but she hugged him tighter. "Don't go."

Raising his head, he blew hair from his eyes and studied her face. "I'm a reporter."

She laughed, immensely relieved. "A reporter. Not a student. Thank God. You think there's a story in my cosmetics bag?"

"No." He wasn't laughing. "I thought you might be carrying date rape drugs."

Charlotte sobered and loosened her hug, surprised to find his expression serious. "Drugs? Seriously? Why would you think that?"

"Because you were doing things to me. I was having hallucinations." His focus shifted, settling on something past her head. "But it wasn't drugs. Your ring..."

"I won't wear it again when I'm with you," she said, then flushed at her presumptuousness in turning a one-time fling into the suggestion of a relationship. "I mean—if I see you again after tonight..."

"It's okay. A few more of those visions and I might start believing in reincarnation myself." He stirred between her legs, his half-hard cock nuzzling in her heat. "Besides, I liked the when better than the if."

"Really?"

"Yeah." Lifting himself from her, he removed the condom and dropped it in the now-empty shopping bag. "Especially if you show me your bedroom. And let me see how that thing works."

Charlotte followed his gaze to the cock and balls rig that half hid beneath her sofa. The vision that snapped behind her eyes had nothing at all to do with jewelry and everything to do with anticipation.

The End

About the Author:

Emily Ryan-Davis is a lifelong East Coaster in thus far lifelong pursuit of a degree in...something. When not writing, she works in music education. Her non-writing loves include shopping, handmade wool socks, high-heeled Crocs and farmer's markets. She's working on a fledgling interest in anime (particularly hentai) and jogging. She may have been a princess in a past life.

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