

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO

POWER
Struggle

KELLY JAMIESON

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Kelly Jamieson

Tori is the vice president of her company. Her career is all about being in charge, solving problems, making decisions. But in the bedroom she likes to give up control. She likes to be taken to the edge, likes the heady pleasure of pain, likes how it sets her free.

Dev is a physician. In his career, he has sworn to do no harm and was taught that raising a hand to a woman is wrong. And he is nearly a decade younger than Tori.

The attraction between Tori and Dev is more than just physical—they both feel a connection of spirit. They begin a relationship that seems to work despite their age difference. But when Tori reveals what she really wants in bed, Dev's not sure if he has it in him to give it to her. And Tori isn't sure she can have a relationship with someone who can't accept her for who she is. It's a *power struggle*.

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Chapter One

Oh no. No freakin' way. This kid was barely out of high school, no way was he old enough to be a doctor, and he was *not* touching her ankle.

Her swollen, discoloring, throbbing ankle.

Tori Markham pressed her lips together as another wave of pain threatened her usual unflappable composure and she blinked at the stinging in her eyes. She looked up at Doogie Howser.

"You're the doctor?" she asked, annoyed at the breathy quiver in her voice.

It was the pain. Not because young Doogie here was about the hottest guy she'd seen in...well...too long to count. And then shame washed over her at the fact she could even think about how good-looking he was in that way when he was probably not even old enough to legally drink.

"I'm Dr. Fillmore," he replied. "What seems to be the problem here?"

She gazed back at him mutely, at his thick brown hair tousled as if he kept running his hands through it, at the dimples that briefly appeared in his smooth golden-tan cheeks when he gave her a perfunctory smile, at the smallish nose and square chin. So what if he was tall and broad and apparently muscular beneath that white jacket? Being big and...uh...physically grown up didn't necessarily mean he was a qualified doctor.

The stethoscope hanging around his neck was oddly sexy.

Tori sucked in a breath. "My ankle," she finally said. "I twisted it."

He looked down at her legs, bare from the knee-length hem of her suit skirt down. Her Kenneth Cole pumps lay on the tile floor in the small examination room, where she sat perched on the side of an exam bed covered in crinkly white paper. She'd had to carry her precious shoes in with her, hopping along holding the arm of her business associate, Fletcher Dene. They'd been on their way back to the office from a client meeting when she'd stepped into a hole in the sidewalk and her ankle had rolled to the side.

"You've hurt your knees too," Dr. Fillmore murmured. "Did you fall?"

"Yes." And hadn't that been just too mortifying for words, lying there on the sidewalk in downtown Santa Barbara in her suit and heels. Her knees were scraped up and burning with pain, but not nearly as bad as the ankle that felt as big as a basketball.

Dr. Fillmore frowned at her high-heeled shoes. "How did it happen?"

She told him the story as he lifted her swollen ankle in both hands. When he moved it, fire flashed up her leg and her words evaporated on a sharp hiss of pain.

"That hurt?" he asked.

"Not at all," she said through gritted teeth. "Jesus Christ!"

His lips twitched and his gentle hands continued to explore her ankle. She watched his long tanned fingers on what would normally be a slender calf. She gave a little sniff as more pain shot through her.

Thankfully she'd shaved her legs that morning.

Now that was an inane and inappropriate thought.

"I don't think you've broken anything," Doogie Howser, er, Dr. Fillmore, said, straightening. "But we'll get an x-ray just to make sure."

She peered up at him, way above her even though she was on a raised table, and frowned. "Uh...okay. And maybe someone else should check the x-ray."

His cheeks flushed a little and his eyes narrowed. Nice eyes, dark brown, with thick eyelashes and straight eyebrows above. "That shouldn't be necessary."

She licked her lips, the pain starting to make her feel a little queasy. His expression turned concerned and he moved toward her and guided her down to lying on the exam bed.

"Are you all right?" he asked. He laid a hand on her forehead. That felt nice.

"Felt a little dizzy," she managed to say, ears buzzing. "It sort of hurts."

The corners of his mouth lifted, this time into a smile, and he reached for her legs, easing them up on to the table. "Just lay here for a few minutes," he said. "We'll get you something for the pain right away. I'll go order that x-ray."

She watched him leave the small room with a long-legged athletic grace, then turned her gaze up to the ceiling.

She didn't have time for this. She had a million things to do at the office. Fletcher had been annoyed at having to take time out of his day to drive her there, and there was no way he was sticking around for the couple hours wait she'd had to endure, so he'd left. She was going to have to take a taxi back to work. They'd just met with a new client and she had a gazillion things to do on their account. Not to mention several other problems to attend to that had cropped up just before they'd left for their meeting. She sighed and rolled her lips inward when a tear leaked out of one corner of her eye and down into her hair.

Shit.

She had to do something while she waited, so she sat up and reached for her purse. She was busy sending her assistant an email when Dr. McHottie returned with some tablets and a glass of water.

He frowned. "You'll have to turn your phone off in here."

Tori's shoulders slumped and she pursed her lips as she shut her phone down and tossed it into her purse with an exaggerated sigh.

"Here's some pain medication for you," the doctor said, but when she looked up at him and met his eyes, a shiver ran over her and her pulse leaped.

He was looking at her. He was completely professional, certainly not leering or ogling by any stretch of the imagination, but he was *looking* at her. Looking at her with male interest—the way a man looks at a woman.

Her stomach swooped and heat slid through her veins. She couldn't help but be flattered. She was way too old for him, and it had been way too long since she'd attracted that kind of attention from *any* man, let alone one young enough to be her son. Okay, that might be a slight exaggeration. If he was seriously a doctor he couldn't be as young as he looked.

She accepted the pills from him, popped them in her mouth, took the cup of water and washed them down, then nearly choked on them in her flustered excitement.

"Why are you bringing me pills?" she asked with a cough and a touch of irritation that she knew was because he'd rattled her. "Why isn't the nurse doing it?"

His cheeks flushed a little. "Er. She was busy."

"Oh. Well. Thanks." She took another sip of water. "How long will it be for the x-ray? I need to get back to work."

"You're not going back to work."

She drew back. "Excuse me?"

He held her gaze steadily. "You've got at least a grade two sprain. You're going to need an air cast. You'll need to keep your ankle elevated and iced for the next twenty-four hours minimum."

She nibbled her bottom lip. "I can do that at the office."

She'd find an ice pack somewhere, turn her waste basket upside down beneath her desk and prop her foot on it.

"That's if there's no fracture," he continued, those nice eyebrows pulling together. He spoke with an air of authority that belied his boyish good looks and gave her a little flutter way down deep inside.

Dear god. She needed to give her head a shake.

"Once the drugs kick in I'll be fine," she insisted, straightening her shoulders. But the pain was sapping her energy and making her all weak and shaky. Dammit.

"Mmhmm," he said. "Someone will take you for the x-ray and I'll be back in to see you after that."

And he disappeared again. She lowered herself back down and again stared up at the white ceiling tiles, the pain radiating from her ankle up her leg, filling her head.

She knew pain. She was intimately acquainted with pain. But this was different. This pain wasn't going to stop in a few minutes and this pain was interfering with her busy life at that moment. She closed her eyes, searching for strength and finding instead that she just wanted to cry.

Geez, what a wimp. This was so not like her.

A nurse came and helped her into a wheelchair, pushed her like an invalid down a series of hallways through the urgent care department of the hospital and into a small x-ray room. Once the x-ray was done, the nurse took her back to the examination room she'd been in earlier. She didn't bother getting out of the wheelchair, it seemed too much effort, just sat there with her head propped on one hand. And waited.

It seemed like hours but wasn't really that long before Dr. Fillmore returned with the films. He pushed them into place on some kind of screen, flicked a switch and then studied them. The way his eyes intently moved over the films with an air of competence and expertise was somewhat reassuring. Tori bit her bottom lip as she watched him. *Please, don't let it be broken. I so don't need this right now.*

Then he turned and gave her a small smile. "Good news. No fractures. You've got a good sprain though. We'll get you fixed up with a splint and some crutches and a prescription and you'll be good to go."

"Great."

"Is someone here with you?"

"No."

"Oh." He eyed her as he paused at the door. "How are you going to get home?"

"I guess I'll call a taxi. And I'm not going home."

"You're *not* going back to work," he said again with calm authority. "You're in pain and the meds are going to make you feel woozy. At least you're not driving."

She blew out a breath and raked a hand through her hair. "Yeah. Right."

"I'll drive you home."

Her mouth fell open. "Uh...aren't you working?"

"My shift actually ended an hour ago. We've been really busy with a big crash on the 101." He lifted a big shoulder. "So I'm outta here anyway. I'll drive you home." His eyes gleamed. "But not back to work."

She pressed her lips together. She wanted to argue. Frustration and impatience mounted inside her but she pushed them down. The truth was, she did feel exhausted and aching and her head did seem a little fuzzy. She sighed. "Fine."

"You're welcome." Amusement roughened his voice and she gave him a sharp glance, then made a face.

"Thank you." Her grudging gratitude brought out a full smile on his face, white teeth, dimples and all, and she went soft and warm and damp in her panties. She blinked at him, a little spellbound.

"I'll be right back."

He returned a short time later with a nurse who cleaned and bandaged her scraped-up knees, helped fit her with the air cast and gave her the bottle of painkillers. "These have an anti-inflammatory in them," she advised Tori. "Which will also help with the swelling." She handed her the crutches. "Ever use crutches before?"

"No."

A brief lesson followed—who knew it was so tricky to use them right? And then Dr. Fillmore was wheeling her out the entrance of the urgent care center in the wheelchair.

"Wait here," he instructed her, parking her on the sidewalk next to the loading zone. "I'll go get my vehicle and pull around."

She waited in the late afternoon sun, sitting there next to a big urn with bright red and purple petunias spilling out of it, inhaling the deliciously fresh air after the smell of antiseptic and sickness in the hospital. Moments later an ancient, somewhat battered Audi sedan pulled up. Dr. Fillmore jumped out and rounded the hood, opened the passenger door then turned to her. When he reached for her and lifted her right out of the wheelchair she gasped. What the...?

He was strong. She clutched his shoulders, but he had a good solid grip on her and easily transferred her to the passenger seat. "That wasn't necessary," she informed him coolly as he loaded her crutches into the backseat.

He ignored her, returned the wheelchair to the entrance of the hospital and then jumped back into the driver's seat, full of a lot of energy for someone who'd just finished an extra long shift. Ah, he was young.

She eyed him as he pulled out onto State Street. Sunglasses shaded his eyes, and those long, attractive fingers held the steering wheel with a sexy ease. She sank back into the seat and closed her eyes against the flood of lustful thoughts. What was wrong with her? He was a kid!

But kids weren't doctors.

She licked her lips again and forced her eyes open.

"I live just off Alameda Padre Serra," she told him.

"I know." He made a swift lane change. "I looked at your chart."

"Oh." Of course he did.

"I know where it is."

"Okay." She fell silent again for a moment, then started thinking about work again. "Do you mind if I make a phone call?"

"Not at all."

She fished her cell phone out of her purse and called her assistant.

"Omigod!" Brenda cried when she answered. "Are you okay, Tori?"

"Yeah. I sprained my ankle. I'm on my way home."

"Oh that's awful!"

"I'll be fine. Listen, Fletcher brought back all my notes from the meeting earlier. Did he give them to you?"

"Yes, he did."

"Okay, good. Can you type them up and email them to me? I'll look at them when I'm home." She gave Brenda instructions on a few other things she could follow up on for her. "I'll call you back if I need anything more."

"Uh, Tori...it's almost five o'clock."

"Really? Already? Geez." She glanced at her watch. "Dammit, the whole day is wasted!"

"Will you be in tomorrow?"

"Of course." Tori swallowed another sigh. "Okay, do what you can with that and I'll see you in the morning."

"Okay. Hope you're all right."

Tori ended the call and dropped the cell phone into her lap, then leaned her head back.

"You sound like a busy woman," Dr. Fillmore commented, swinging the car onto Alameda Padre Serra.

"Yes. This isn't good timing. We just landed a new contract with a major client this morning and there's a lot to do to get this project started."

"What do you do?"

"I'm Vice President of Consumer Products at SDI. Strategic Directions Inc. We're a management and marketing consulting company."

"Vice President. Wow. But uh...what do you do?"

She smiled. "We do marketing research and management consulting. Basically we solve problems for companies. The company we did a presentation to this morning is a cosmetics manufacturer looking for another business to acquire. We research key information on sales data, performance, new product activity, distribution and market forecasts to help find a new acquisition."

"Impressive."

"Well." She gave a little shrug. She loved her job, no question—it was challenging, exhilarating, interesting. "It's not like saving lives. Like a doctor." Turning a little in her seat, she studied his profile, that short nose giving his strong profile a boyish air. "So you're really a doctor?"

His lips thinned. "Yes. I'm really a doctor."

"Sorry. I don't mean to be insulting. You just look really young to be so...qualified."

"I'm twenty-nine," he said evenly. "And you look younger than your age too."

Ah. Ah, yes. He'd looked at her chart. He knew she was thirty-seven.

She couldn't read his eyes behind the dark glasses. "Um, thanks. I guess." She'd heard that before too. She knew being small made her seem younger. At only five foot two and small-boned, she made a point of always wearing heels and tailored suits at work.

He took the winding, climbing road at a good speed, but she didn't feel nervous—he seemed very confident in his control of the automobile. "I graduated nearly two years ago, did my residency in Los Angeles. I just moved back to start taking over my dad's practice," he continued. "I'm also putting in some extra shifts in urgent care."

"I'm sorry," she said again, sensing his annoyance. "I gather you get that a lot?"

He gave a short laugh. "Yeah. You could say that."

"I'm sure you're a very good doctor. Turn right at that stop sign—that's my street."

He did so, and she pointed out her house, one of the smaller ones in the neighborhood of lush, gated mansions. She lived alone so didn't need a lot of space and the house had appealed to her with its ocean and city views. He stopped in the driveway and was out and around to her side of the car before she had her seat belt unfastened.

"You don't have to carry me..." she began, but once again he'd lifted her up and out of the car with impressive strength. He carried her up the steps to her front door where he eased her down. She took her weight on her uninjured ankle while she unlocked her door.

"Wait here," he said. "I'll get your crutches."

He jumped down the steps and bounded over to his car, retrieved the crutches and took all four steps in two leaps back to her side. "Here you go."

She tossed her purse into the foyer and tucked the crutches under her arms. Geez, what a pain in the ass this was going to be.

He stepped into her foyer behind her. She turned to him.

"So," he said. He shoved the sunglasses up on top of his head. "You going to be okay?"

"Of course." Not. She wanted to curl up in a ball and die. The pain had dulled to a low simmer, but fatigue swept through her. She just wanted to hobble up her stairs—oh god, that was going to be fun—and crawl into her bed. But she gave him the brightest smile she could. "Thank you so much for driving me home. It really wasn't necessary, but thank you."

"Rest. Ice. Compression. Elevation."

She nodded dutifully. "I remember."

He pointed a finger at her. "Don't overdo it."

She bit her lip and looked up at him through her eyelashes. "What makes you think I'd do that?"

He reached out and lifted her chin, tilting it up. His smile sent her pulse into a frenzy and excitement fluttered in her stomach. "Just a hunch. You seem a little...driven."

She swallowed, the warmth of his big hand on her face and the concern in his eyes mesmerizing.

"Oh hell," he said with a sigh. "Do you live alone?" His eyes shifted to the staircase behind her.

"Yes. But I'm fine."

He sighed, and stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

Chapter Two

He knew she wasn't going to follow doctor's orders.

"Do you have ice?" Dev asked, moving past her.

"What are you doing?" She hopped along after him on her crutches—borrowed from pediatrics, for Chrissake, she was so tiny.

"I suppose your bedroom is upstairs?"

"Yes, but..."

"Bathroom?"

"I have a powder room down here. But..."

Dev found his way to her kitchen. He got an impression of clean, minimal décor, lots of windows and light, but barely spared a glance around him as he located the refrigerator. He yanked open the freezer door and squinted. Stacks of frozen dinners. A can of orange juice. And yes, thank the lord, a big party bag of ice.

"You don't have to do this..." she tried to start again but he ignored her.

"Got a Ziploc bag?" he asked.

"Um...yes." She sighed and slid open a drawer. She handed him the bag and he dumped ice into it, banged it on the granite counter a few times to break it up then added a little water from the tap. He sealed it up and found a towel in another drawer.

"Hey..."

He sensed her rising agitation and paused. He looked down at her, all cute frustration. Pain darkened her big blue eyes and tightened the pretty little mouth. "I can't leave you here alone," he said, resisting the urge to touch her. "Let me get you settled. Is there someone you can call to come and help you out?"

"I don't need any help."

Tough. Stubborn. Independent. Damn, she was hot. Even in pain and on meds.

Why did he feel this powerful need to make her obey him?

"I'll go get some things from your bedroom," he said. "Come sit down." He led the way to her couch in the living room adjoining the kitchen. Vast windows overlooked the city, which fell away beneath them down to the ocean, blue and hazy in the distance. "Nice view."

"Thanks." Her short response made him want to smile.

He arranged a cushion on her coffee table, helped get her seated and her injured leg lifted onto the cushion. "What would you like me to get you? Pajamas?"

"No," she said. "No, no. no. Quit bossing me around. I don't even know you."

"I'm a doctor. Consider this a house call."

"Doctors don't make house calls anymore," she snapped. "And I don't think their services include undressing their patients."

"I'm not going to undress you," he said mildly. Although that was a hell of an idea. "I'll just get you some things to change into. Save you from going upstairs. I'll bring you a pillow and some blankets too, so you can sleep down here." He eyed the big blue leather sofa.

"I can get upstairs," she said, teeth gritted. "This is ridiculous."

"What do you want me to get?" he asked again with great patience.

She glared at him, but then exhaustion visibly overcame her and she sank back into the cushions. "I don't have the energy to argue with you right now," she murmured. "Otherwise I would."

"I know." He grinned.

"My pajamas are under my pillow. Bedroom is the first door on the right at the top of the stairs. You can just bring the duvet off my bed, and my pillow."

He took the stairs two at a time and walked into her bedroom. This gave him pause, and he did look around. The drawn shades and dark painted walls, a brown or taupe color, it was hard to tell, gave the room an intimate feel. The frame of her bed was leather too, which made him blink. Piles of clothing lay heaped on a chair in the corner and makeup and girly stuff covered the long dresser. The room smelled girly too, something flowery, exotic, like...orchids.

He strode across the room to the big bed, the duvet pulled up in a half-assed bed-making attempt. He lifted the pillow and found some things—a tiny pair of shorts, silky gray with pink lace edges, and a matching camisole. The softness of the feminine lace and satin in his hand and the exotic scent rising from it made him go hard. He scooped them up along with the pillow and duvet and turned to leave, then spied an electronic reader on the table next to the bed. He grabbed it too, in case she wanted to read.

He carried the armful back downstairs. With her eyes closed and her mouth and face relaxed, she looked even younger than she had earlier. When he'd first seen her in the exam room—a cute little blonde sitting there with sexy bare legs—a shock of attraction had zinged through him. Staring at her legs had been nearly enough to distract him from his job—even with a swollen ankle and scraped knees they were still exceptionally pretty legs, slender and smooth. Then he'd been a bit taken aback when he looked at her chart and saw she was eight years older than him. Not that he could hit on a patient anyway.

Then what the hell was he doing here? This was really going above and beyond.

But how could he leave her all on her own with a bum ankle?

The fact that she lived alone had pleased him, though, despite his concern for her. With a sigh, he approached her and dropped the soft load onto the couch beside her. He pulled out her pajamas and handed them to her. Her eyes fluttered open, a bit foggy.

There was a small dose of narcotic in that pain med and considering her size, she was probably feeling it. "Here," he said, his tone gruff. "Let me help you to the bathroom. You can change and I'll make a bed for you."

She put out a hand, but, hell, it was easier just to pick her up and carry her, and she was such a little thing, it was easy. So he scooped her up once more and headed down the hall where he assumed the powder room she'd mentioned was.

"Don't have to carry me," she mumbled. "Makes me feel like a baby."

He smiled. He'd just bet she hated that.

He set her down in the small room. "Sure you don't need help?"

She tried to glare but it didn't quite come off. "I'm sure."

"I'll leave your crutches outside the door for you."

A short while later he had her on the couch, ankle elevated and iced, cozy in her duvet with her crutches, reader, cordless telephone and TV remote control close at hand.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"No."

"Thirsty?"

"Mmm. Glass of water would be nice."

He fetched that for her, then stood looking down at her. He found himself strangely reluctant to leave her. But staying any longer might be kind of creepy, and he was supposed to hook up with Bryson tonight for beers since it was his only free night this week.

Her eyes met his. Soft, hazy blue drew him in.

"Thank you," she whispered, her eyes already drifting closed again.

He huffed out a breath. "You're welcome, sweet thing." And *that* was totally inappropriate, but he didn't think she'd even heard him as she drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

It had not been a good week.

Tori hobbled into her doctor's office at the Coast Village Clinic on crutches a few days later for the recommended follow-up appointment. She'd gone back to work the day after her little accident to find that Fletcher had gone ahead and made some key staffing decisions on the Coup d'œil Cosmetics project. She'd had to call him into her office and deal with that, ignoring his protests that he thought he was helping her and showing initiative by moving forward when she wasn't available.

It was *her* project. *She* would decide who was going to make up the team.

She sank onto one of the hard chairs in the waiting room, crutches stacked at her side. She'd gotten pretty mobile with those, although stairs were still a challenge. She'd

discovered it was easier to go down stairs on her butt. She sighed, picked up an ancient magazine then tossed it down.

Everything seemed to take so much more effort when you were on crutches and in pain and the medication just made her want to sleep, so she hadn't been taking it. She knew she'd been grouchy and even more controlling than she usually was, but dammit, this was pissing her off. Like anything she couldn't control.

"Victoria?"

Huh. Nobody called her Victoria. She looked up and blinked.

Dr. Fillmore.

Her breath left her all at once and her heart picked up speed. "Tori," she said.

His eyebrows rose in a question.

"Tori," she repeated. "I go by Tori."

"Ah." He smiled and her heartbeat kicked up another notch. "Sorry. That's what it said on your chart. What are you doing here?"

"Seeing my doctor. For follow-up. Like you said." She squinted at him. "What are you doing here?"

"This is where I work. My dad owns this clinic."

Holy crap. "Oh."

"He's retiring. Sort of." He made a face. "I'm taking over his practice."

"That's right, you said that the other day. I didn't realize it was here."

"Who's your doctor?"

"Dr. Scott. Crystal Scott."

He nodded. "She's a good doctor."

"Tori Markham."

Tori looked behind Dr. Fillmore to the nurse standing there with her chart calling her in. She rose, and as she did so Dr. Fillmore held out a hand to help her, assisted her with the crutches.

"How's the ankle?" he asked.

"It's better." Her mouth twisted. "Sort of."

"It'll take a few weeks."

"Yeah."

She paused, the nurse waiting for her, eyeing the two of them. "Well...thanks again for helping me the other day."

"Not a problem."

Their eyes met and held. Damn, he was good-looking. Heat expanded around them and she had to drag her gaze away from him. "I have to go. Um...nice to see you again."

"You too. Take care. Tori."

His smile tugged at something inside her, almost making her ditch the nurse and the doctor waiting to see her and throw herself into Dr. Fillmore's arms. Whoa. She sent him a smile in return—hopefully a polite, impersonal smile—and hopped down the corridor after the nurse.

The appointment was only minutes long. Her doctor confirmed the swelling was going down, made sure the air cast fit properly, chided her for not taking the anti-inflammatory medication and sent her on her way. "You can start weight bearing as tolerated," Dr. Scott told her.

Tori couldn't help look for Dr. McHottie as she hopped through the clinic on her way out but she didn't catch so much as a glimpse of him. And disappointment had her shaking her head.

Thankfully it was her left ankle that was injured, so she was able to drive. She'd be really screwed without transportation. She had things to do at the office but realistically knew she needed to get home and change for the business dinner she had to attend that evening.

Nice, going to a big charity event on crutches. At least her dress was ankle length and the stupid boot on her stupid foot wouldn't be that obvious. Oh what did she care anyway. She and Fletcher were putting in an appearance on behalf of SDI and all she needed to do was schmooze a bit, mingle with a few people, drink a martini or two and then she was outta there.

Fletcher picked her up a few hours later and drove them to the Four Seasons Hotel. A doorman hurried over to assist her as she emerged from his Mercedes—hah, Fletcher didn't even bother coming around to help, the jerk—and she gratefully let the doorman tug her out, then balanced on her good foot as she reached back in for the crutches. *Pain in the ass!* She gritted her teeth and smiled, though, her small evening purse slung over her shoulder. She wore one pretty flat-soled sandal and the ugly cast but her long black chiffon dress swirled around her knees and ankles as she moved and mostly hid it.

They entered the hotel lobby and crossed the terra cotta tile floor toward the ballroom where the event was being held—a casino-themed event with Rat Pack-style music, martinis and blackjack tables. Black and silver balloons hung from the ceiling. People dressed in tuxedos and designer dresses and diamonds filled the room, laughter and talk mingling with the jazzy strains of *That Old Black Magic*. She and Fletcher immediately recognized people they knew through business and stopped to make small talk. A passing waiter offered up martinis and Tori sighed as she declined the offer. How was she supposed to hold a drink and crutches? Ah well, all she needed was more embarrassment by getting tipsy and losing her footing again.

She smiled and chitchatted, explaining over and over again why she was on crutches, until she wished she'd worn a sign around her neck so she didn't have to repeat the story one more time. She did her schmoozing duty until her cheeks hurt and her head pounded. She so did not want to be doing this tonight. But there was the CEO of Coup d'œil Cosmetics and certainly they had to spend a few minutes chatting up their newest client. Fletcher nodded when she murmured that suggestion in his ear and

moved with her across the ballroom to where Dominic Bouchard stood with a small group of people.

Standing and hobbling on the crutches was sucking the energy out of her. She really wanted a drink, and surely she'd networked enough? She eyed some tables and chairs arranged around the perimeter of the room. Fletcher didn't seem ready to leave, so she was going to go sit and rest. She started off across the ballroom in her jerky hop and swing toward an empty table.

She'd just reached the table and turned to sit when someone appeared in front of her. She looked way up. Into Dr. Fillmore's boyish face.

Chapter Three

Dev paused next to Tori Markham. He'd spotted her from across the room—the little blonde in a strapless black gown speeding across the ballroom on crutches had attracted looks from more than just him.

"Okay, seriously, I think three times is a sign," he said, smiling down at her.

Her lips curved into what appeared to be a reluctant smile. "Three times?"

"Yeah." He was crazy, but dammit, he was attracted to her. "Three times we've run into each other now. It has to be a sign. That maybe we should go out, or something."

Her smile disappeared and she lowered herself into the chair at the table. "Sorry," she said. "I have to sit down. I got really tired and my ankle hurts."

He pulled out another chair and dropped into it, sliding it close enough that their knees touched. "Are you okay? Want me to get you something?"

"I'd love a drink, but I'm afraid of getting drunk and falling down again."

"You fall down drunk often?"

Her laughter warmed him inside. "No, of course not."

"Then have a drink. What can I get you?"

"Um...maybe a glass of wine. Those martinis pack a punch."

"Okay. Be right back."

He'd ditched his parents and their friends to chase Tori, but they'd be fine without him. They'd just dragged him to this shindig to introduce him as the newest partner at the clinic. He snagged two glasses of white wine—shit. Did she want red or white? He paused. He'd go with the white. He wasn't wasting any time when Tori was sitting there alone. No doubt some other guy would be putting the moves on her if he didn't get right back there. An urgent possessiveness gripped him.

But she still sat there alone, listening to the music judging by the small movements of her body. He handed her a glass of wine.

"Thank you."

"No problem. So. Are you here alone?" Crap. What if she had a date with her?

"I'm with my director. It's a business thing."

"Oh. Okay." What did that mean, her director? Her boss? Whatever. He swallowed a mouthful of wine.

"What about you?" She eyed him with those sapphire blue eyes over the rim of her glass as she sipped.

He rolled his eyes. "My parents dragged me here." At the look on her face, he instantly regretted his words. She already thought he was a dorky kid, and then he had to say that. Christ! He gave himself a mental smack on the back of the head. "I'm taking over my dad's practice," he continued. "He's retiring. Well, he's supposed to be retiring. They thought it would be good PR to come to this."

She nodded. "I guess so."

He almost started telling her about how annoying his dad was being about this whole retirement thing, but his problems were kind of a downer and not something she likely wanted to hear. "I guess dancing is out of the question tonight, huh?" he said instead with a grin.

She gave him a crooked smile. "I guess so." She sighed. "This is such a pain."

"Don't worry, you'll be better in no time."

"If you say so, Dr. Fillmore."

Was she making a joke by calling him that? But no...duh ! He *was* a complete dork! She probably didn't know his name!

"I guess we weren't really properly introduced, were we?" he said.

"No," she murmured.

He stuck out his hand. "Devlin Fillmore. Dev for short."

"Well, you know my name. Victoria Markham. Tori for short."

They shook hands, smiling into each other's eyes, maintaining both the eye contact and the hand contact for a long, drawn-out moment. Her hand was small and fragile in his and his body tightened. He dragged his gaze away from her face, letting it slide over small bare shoulders, down over delicate breasts outlined by layers of sheer black fabric. An urge to lean forward and lick her shoulder swept over him, an intense burning desire to taste her skin, to put his mouth on her, to eat her up. His body started to move toward her...

Get a grip, man.

"So," he croaked. "About that going out thing."

She yanked her hand back out of his and frowned. "Don't be silly."

Not quite the answer he'd been hoping for. "What's silly about it?" He frowned too. She gave him a stern look back, but he'd seen the heat and feminine interest in her eyes seconds ago.

"First of all, I don't think doctors are supposed to date their patients."

"You're not my patient. Not since you walked out of the urgent care center the other day."

She pressed her lips together briefly. "Well, there's also the fact that I'm way too old for you."

He laughed.

Her eyes widened.

"That's ridiculous," he scoffed.

"You're twenty-nine. You're a baby."

Heat swept up from beneath his dress shirt and tie and into his cheeks, and surged through his veins. Jesus, he was sick of hearing that. He narrowed his eyes at her. She squirmed a bit in her seat. "A baby, huh?" Now he did lean forward, close enough to brush his mouth over her ear. "I don't think so, sweet thing." She tried to ease away from him but the back of her chair kept her in place. "I am most definitely...all...grown...up." He nuzzled her exotic-scented hair, drifted his lips over the curve of her jaw, hovered near her mouth, her lips parted. He waited. Neither of them breathed. Then he kissed her, a slow, soft brush of mouths with just a hint of tongue lingering on her bottom lip.

He pulled back and met her gaze, her blue eyes wide and dark. She swallowed and lifted a hand to her hair. They sat there, nearly nose to nose, just looking at each other. Heat curled inside him.

"Don't give me that bullshit about age," he finally said, very softly. "You know that doesn't make a damn bit of difference."

She just stared back at him.

His lips lifted into a satisfied smile.

"I doubt if we're looking for the same things," she croaked.

He lifted a shoulder. "I'm not really looking for anything. What are you looking for?"

She studied him. "I'm not looking for anything either. I'm too old for romance and happy ever after."

He lifted a brow, surprised at her words. "You're not old."

He watched her face, the flicker in her eyes, the brief dip of the corners of her mouth. Surely she didn't see herself as some lonely old spinster or something? She was young and vibrant and gorgeous and he wanted her more than he'd wanted anyone for a helluva long time. Determination to make her see things his way, to convince her they could have some fun together, to...well...*have* her, surged fiercely inside him. Jesus. Aggression flared to life.

"Do you have to leave with Fletcher or whatever his name is?"

"Uh...I guess not. I wanted to leave a while ago but he was still schmoozing."

"Good. Finish your wine."

She blinked. "Why?"

The one word was like pushing a button inside him and his aggression grew. "Because we're leaving. I'm taking you home."

He held her gaze as she lowered her chin and looked up at him through long eyelashes, letting her see exactly what he was feeling, his determination, his desire. He'd never been aggressive with women—hell, he'd never *had* to, they'd almost always come on to him, and anyone he'd ever been interested had returned the feelings,

making conquests easy. If you could even call them conquests. He'd never thought about it much. Now her resistance made him even more determined to show her there was something between them.

They'd both felt it. He knew that. He'd sensed it even in the exam room when he'd looked at her ankle, his hands on her bare leg. He knew he wasn't wrong about this, wasn't trying to desperately pick up a woman who wasn't interested. Why was she fighting it?

"I don't think so," she murmured.

He shook his head slowly, smiling. "Do you want me to carry you out of here?"

Her eyes went dark again and her lips parted on an indrawn breath. "You wouldn't."

He sat back in his chair, holding her gaze. "Don't bet on it, sweet thing."

Her tongue came out to sweep over her bottom lip and his dick went hard as rock. He'd been half hard since he'd sat down to talk to her, but he was really getting revved up here.

She wasn't unaffected. Her breasts rose and fell rapidly and a pulse fluttered wildly at her throat. He wanted to lean over and suck on the soft flesh there, feel her pulse against his mouth.

"So this is where you got to."

Dev looked up at his dad standing there, looking back and forth between him and Tori, smiling. Ah, hell. The excitement buzzing inside him dimmed.

"Should have known there was a woman involved," Dad said.

Tori swept her gaze up to his dad, looking a little dazed. Dev swallowed a groan, and smiled. "Tori, this is my dad, Dr. Chad Fillmore. Dad, Tori Markham."

His dad extended a hand and Tori went to rise out of her seat, but Dev laid a hand on her arm. "Tori's got a sprained ankle," he told his dad.

"Ah." Dad's gaze flickered to her feet. "How did that happen?"

"Just a stupid accident," she replied, smiling.

Dev watched his dad studying Tori. What was he thinking? Probably thinking she was too old for his son. Yeah, she was a few years older than him, but really, she didn't look it. "Nice to meet you," his dad said. "Dev, there are still some people I want you to meet."

"Actually, Tori and I are just leaving."

Dad frowned. "Already?"

"Yup." Dev rose to his feet and tugged Tori out of her chair. "Already."

He sensed his dad's annoyance, but he had more important things to do than schmooze with bigwigs and keep his dad happy. "Night, Dad. See you later."

"I'll be in the clinic tomorrow," Dad said.

Dev paused. "Why?"

"There are a couple of patients I need to see."

Dev opened his mouth to protest, then snapped it shut. This wasn't the time or the place to have this discussion. Though they'd had it a few times already. His dad was having a hard time letting go of his medical career for retirement, even at sixty-eight years of age. He should be playing golf every day, for Chrissakes.

He helped Tori with her crutches and then led her out of the ballroom. She followed him with a set expression on her face.

"See? You're actually helping me," he said to her, biting the inside of his cheek at her put-out look.

"Really."

"Yeah. Really."

As they moved through a crowd of people near the door, Tori paused and Dev turned to see her greeting a man. Big, dark-haired with heavy stubble on his hard jaw.

"Hey, Tori," the man said, looking at her with a warm fondness. "How are you?"

She returned the look and Dev got a bad burning feeling in his gut.

"I'm good," she said with a smile.

"Haven't seen you for a while."

"No. I've been...busy. At work."

"Ah. Maybe soon?"

She licked her lips and nodded, still smiling at the man. Dev wanted to drive his fist into the guy's face. Who the hell was that and why was she looking at him that way? And why did they guy look at her like he owned her? Christ!

"Maybe." She gave him a small nod as they parted and she continued on.

"Who was that?" Dev tried to keep his tone light.

"Oh. Just a friend."

"Looked like a pretty good friend."

She turned her sexy eyes up to him. "Yes. He's a pretty good friend."

He wanted to ask more questions, to know everything, but she said nothing more and he sensed asking wasn't a good plan just then. Jealousy simmering inside him, he led her out of the hotel with one hand on the small of her back. They waited for the valet to bring his car around and he helped her into the passenger seat, distracted by thoughts of who that guy had been until he realized Tori was sitting in *his* car with him and was actually leaving with *him*.

Okay. *He* was the one she was with. He could take comfort in that, and to hell with any other guy.

"Have you ever been married?" he asked. Christ, where'd that come from?

She slanted him a look. "No."

"Why not?"

He sent her a couple of sideways glances during the long pause that followed his question. Shit. "Never mind," he growled. "It's none of my business."

She bent her head, then looked up, straight ahead. "I've never been married because I'm weird and different and have never found a guy who got that."

Weird and different? What the fuck?

He scowled at her. "What the hell are you talking about?"

She smiled at him. "Never mind. You're not married either." She paused. "Or are you?"

"Jesus..." Then he caught the twitch of her mouth. Hell. She was teasing him. He was getting way too intense here and seriously needed to chill. "You know I'm not."

She laughed. "Yeah."

He sighed. Maybe he needed to slow down a bit. "I'm hungry. Let's get something to eat."

She shifted in her seat to face him. "I didn't think food was what you had in mind. If I'd known that, we could have left half an hour ago."

Everything inside him eased and softened and he couldn't help the broad grin that pulled his mouth. He wanted to grab her and hug her. "It wasn't what I had in mind," he admitted. "But I'm trying to slow down here."

She nodded. "Okay. Where should we go?"

"Mickey D's. Where else is there?"

"What!" She sputtered a laugh. "In your tux and this dress, we're going to McDonald's?"

He grinned. "You bet. I'm craving a Big Mac."

Shaking her head, she leaned back in her seat. "Okay. Sure."

Uncaring of the looks they attracted, they ordered at the counter, then he carried the tray to a table in the back corner of the restaurant. The smell of the burgers and fries filled his head and tempted him. He handed Tori her hamburger and Diet Coke and then opened the box of his own burger. "Yum," he said. "I'm addicted to these."

"Big Macs? Or any kind of burger?"

"Pretty much any kind." He took a big bite.

"You know it's not really that healthy. You're a doctor, for heaven's sake."

He smiled as he chewed and swallowed, enjoying the tang of ketchup and mustard and pickles. "I know. Don't do as I do, do as I say."

She laughed and shook her head, picking up a French fry. "Okay."

They talked as they ate, about all kinds of things—families, work, school, living in Santa Barbara. Talking to her was easy and fun and he wanted to know everything about her. By the time they left the fast-food restaurant he felt more in control of himself, a little less like throwing her over his shoulder like a caveman and carrying her back to her place to have his way with her. The thought made him grin.

"What's so funny?"

He turned to her beside the car, having unlocked the door for her. "Me."

She nodded, lips quirked. "It's good to laugh at yourself."

"Yeah. I'm a laugh a minute for myself. Seriously."

Her expression warmed and heat expanded between them again. He looked down at her for a long moment. So damn pretty. He gave in to a brief sigh, then bent his head and kissed her, unable to stop himself. He brushed his mouth over hers, so soft and sweet. Her softly indrawn breath sent a spike of lust through him, straight to his dick, and he let his tongue slide over her lower lip. Her mouth opened for his and heat poured through him, coalescing in his groin, hard and hot. He almost groaned aloud. His tongue licked into her mouth, played with hers, his body on fire for her. One hand cupped her cheek, his thumb brushing the corner of her mouth. He loved her mouth. Loved the softness of her tongue. Loved the graze of her teeth. Loved the way she kissed him back. Blood rushed like fire through his veins and his heart pounded against his ribs. *Jesus.*

With determined self-control, he pulled back. "I'm going to take you home now," he whispered against her mouth, fighting for breath. "And I'm not coming in with you. But I am going to call you. And we *are* going to go out."

"Another fabulous dinner date?"

Laughter sprang up inside him as he moved away from her, every nerve ending in his body on fire. Christ, never mind laughing at himself, *she* made him laugh and he loved it. "Maybe I'll spring for pizza."

She laid a hand on his cheek. "That sounds great."

* * * * *

When Tori was alone in her house, she hopped slowly into her living room and dropped onto her couch. She stared across the room, sitting in the dark, the lights of the city spread below her window out to the blackness of the Pacific.

She touched her fingertips to her mouth, where Dev had kissed her.

Dev. His name was Dev. Dev Fillmore. A doctor.

A man.

Why had she made that crack about him being a baby? It had annoyed him, and she'd hated herself for that, and plus, he was so far from a baby, or even a boy, it was ridiculous.

She leaned back into the softness of the couch and closed her eyes, remembering the smell of his skin, a sexy male scent mingled with spicy sandalwood and sage, remembering the roughness of his face against hers, the faint abrasion of his whiskers another reminder of his masculinity, his maturity. Remembering the strength in his hands, the width of his shoulders in that elegant black tux jacket, the power of his gaze when he'd looked into her eyes and threatened to carry her out of there.

Remembering how she'd melted, how her panties had literally grown wet, how she'd ached between her thighs, how...she'd *wanted* him to carry her out of there.

Dear god, she'd wanted him to carry her out of there.

She knew her own weaknesses, her own triggers and hot buttons, and Dev had been pushing them all evening. Wow.

She dragged herself upright, her body buzzing with excitement, an excitement she hadn't felt for a long time, disappointment washing over her that Dev hadn't pushed harder to come in. Was he seriously going to call her for a date?

It was really crazy. He was a lot younger than her. The idea of dating a man in his twenties was...wickedly exciting.

Why? That was just wrong. She was thirty-seven years old, had pretty much given up on a happy ever after for herself. She worked long hours, dedicated herself to her career. She enjoyed spending time with her niece and nephews, accepting of the fact she'd never have kids of her own. She'd been let down too many times in the past, had her youthful heart broken by men who didn't get her, who didn't know how to give her what she needed. It was crazy to think that Dev could do that, when he was so young.

She rose off the couch with a sigh and headed up stairs to bed, heaving herself up by the railing, hopping on one foot, her long dress tangling around her ankles and making the whole process onerous and irritating. Almost enough to kill the sexual buzz. Almost.

What did she really know about Dev? Sure, he was good-looking. With a killer body. He was a doctor, which meant he was smart. Funny. Caring. Jesus, he was damn near perfect. There had to be something wrong with him. Oh yeah—he was *twenty-nine*.

Why did she have to make this more than it was? He was hot. She was interested. So was he. Why did it have to be anything more than that? She hadn't been on a date in months, hadn't had a real relationship for years. Her needs had been filled by visits to the club.

Which reminded her of bumping into Gabe earlier.

Heat swept over her thinking about Dev's questions after the encounter. He'd clearly sensed something between her and Gabe. God, he would die if he knew the truth. A nice, clean-cut doctor like him.

Maybe a visit to the club and some play time was what she needed, not a date with a twenty-nine-year-old doctor.

Chapter Four

"Tori, we have a problem."

She swallowed her sigh and impulse question, *now what?*

She looked up at Fletcher and smiled. "What is it?"

"Jennifer is pregnant."

She lowered her chin and looked at him. Oh shit. She tightened her lips. "Crap."

"Yeah. I know."

"Okay. That's not the right reaction." She knew that. She should be happy for her senior researcher. But they had several projects going and this could very possibly mess up their schedules. "We're happy for her. Right?"

"Right." Fletcher made a face and threw himself into a chair in front of her desk. "She's due in five months."

Tori considered that. "Well. That's not so bad."

"Might work out okay. But she's having some problems and she hinted that her doctor might take her off work."

"Crap," she said again. She leaned back in her chair.

"What are we going to do?" Fletcher looked at her expectantly.

She frowned. How the hell was she supposed to answer that? He'd just told her about this, she hadn't had time to even process the problem, never mind come up with a solution. And why didn't he give it some thought before he came in here and asked her to fix things?

"Leave it with me," she finally said. "I'll think about it. And maybe she won't even have to go off."

"Maybe. But we should have a contingency plan. Just in case."

"I know that." Her tone came out a little more snappish than she wanted it to. But god, she had so much on her plate right now! She shoved her hair back from her face. "I have to get to a meeting," she told him. "We can talk more about this later."

"Okay." He rose and walked out, passing Brenda on his way.

"Tori, Mr. Elham needs you in his office," Brenda said.

"Now?"

"Yes."

"But I'm just on my way to a meeting. Status meeting on the Steele-Huber project."

"He said it's urgent."

Tori once again pushed down her annoyance. Jim Elham, the CEO of SDI, didn't care about anyone else's schedule. When he wanted to meet, you dropped everything and met with him. Fortunately it didn't happen often, but Tori hated blowing off a meeting that she had scheduled when she knew how busy everyone was.

"Call Luke. Tell him I'm going to be a few minutes late for the meeting." Hopefully it would only be a few minutes.

"Okay."

Tori hastened down the hall as fast as she could. She no longer needed the crutches, but still wore flats, her ankle still tender. She'd grown tired of everyone looking down at her and making comments like, "You're really short, aren't you?", resisting the urge to roll her eyes and instead laughing good-naturedly.

She dealt with the "emergency" with Jim as quickly as she could, got to the meeting fifteen minutes late, breathless and apologetic. There she learned about some glitches in their planning that had put them behind schedule. And everyone expected her to fix it.

Pressure built inside her, a feeling of being overwhelmed, responsible for too many things, for too many people, for too many problems that everyone looked to her to solve. Yeah, she was good at it—she *loved* it—but sometimes it all just got too much.

Back in her office she dropped into her chair. Bit her lip. She was letting things get to her. And what made it worse was, she hadn't heard from Dev.

He'd said he'd call. And they'd go out. But he hadn't and it had been a whole week since then.

She could call him, of course.

She bit her lip and picked up her BlackBerry. They'd exchanged numbers that night he'd taken her home from the fundraiser at the Four Seasons, even though she'd tried to pretend she thought it was crazy. And now here she was disappointed, like a teenage girl waiting for her crush to call. How pathetic.

She didn't need him. She didn't need any man. She could get what she needed at the club. And hey—there was an idea. That was exactly what she needed. And that's where she'd be going tonight.

After she dealt with yet one more crisis, this time a client who was freaking out about how long it was taking to get the research report they needed.

* * * * *

After a week from hell, Dev finally had a free evening. He knew he was working way too hard, but he was determined to pay off those damn student loans as fast as he could. Long days at the clinic—long, *frustrating* days at the clinic—and evenings and weekends picking up shifts at the hospital's urgent care center were killing him.

Now he had a Friday night—and Saturday—free and he wanted to see Tori again, but hell, calling her at the last minute on a Friday night was sketchy. What choice did he have, though, if he wanted to see her? After showering and changing he decided to skip

the phone call and drive over to her place, taking a chance on her being there. He pulled into her empty driveway. Her car could be in her garage. More likely she wasn't even home. He climbed her front steps and rang the doorbell, fully expecting her to not be there.

So the sound of the lock clicking and the door opening made his heart leap in his chest. Tori stood there in the open door, looking at him. Damn, she was pretty. One eyebrow lifted and she didn't smile.

Hell.

"Hey," he said. "How are you?"

"I'm fine." She continued to regard him coolly.

"I'm sorry I didn't call." He rubbed his forehead. "I had a really busy week."

She still just looked at him but her mouth softened.

"I was hoping you'd be here." Okay, this was getting awkward. "Say something, dammit."

Her lips quirked. "I'm actually just getting ready to go out."

"Oh." Disappointment washed over him.

"Oh, come in." She stepped aside and he walked past her into her house. Last time he'd barely noticed it, this time he had to admit to being impressed. A short hall led past stairs going up to the second floor, into the great room at the back of the house. The entire back half of the house was one room—an open kitchen with island, a small dining area and the living room, with a vaulted ceiling, a set of French garden doors leading out onto a terrace, and a window the same size as the doors. The incredible view of Santa Barbara and the Pacific Ocean sprawled out beneath them.

"Your house is fantastic," he said, standing there on an oriental carpet next to the big teal-blue leather couch he'd left her on the last time he was there.

"Thanks."

Especially compared to the apartment just off Upper State Street he'd been renting since moving back to Santa Barbara. Ah well, that wasn't going to be forever.

"So where are you off to?" he asked lightly, shoving his hands into the front pockets of his jeans.

She didn't answer right away. "Oh. Just...out."

Now he lifted a brow. Was she making that up to get rid of him?

She waved a hand. "It's not anything...I was just going out by myself."

"Oh."

She nibbled her bottom lip. "Have a seat."

He did, sitting on the couch.

"I wanted to call you all week," he told her, voice low. "This is the first evening off I've had."

She pursed her lips and took a seat at the other end of the couch. "It only takes a minute to pick up the phone."

"Yeah. I'm sorry. But seriously, I didn't even have many spare minutes. My days at the clinic are packed with patients, I usually end up working late to see them all, and I've been putting in all these extra shifts—every night this week. Those are crazy too."

Her eyes softened. "You look tired. Why are you working so hard?"

"Because I love it." He smiled. "Well, and because I have huge student loans to pay off. That's why I work all the extra. I'm determined to get out of debt as fast as I can."

She studied him and he sensed her unspoken question.

"My parents offered to pay for my education," he said. "Many times, in fact. But I wanted to do it on my own."

"I see."

He lifted one shoulder. "I got scholarship money too. But med school is long and expensive."

"I'm sure it is."

Her posture relaxed a little more.

"That's really admirable," she said softly. "To achieve that on your own."

He shrugged. "I guess." He looked down at his faded jeans. "Taking over my dad's practice isn't going all that smoothly, either."

"How so?"

He hesitated. "I'm not sure if it's that he doesn't trust me—or he's just having a hard time letting go. It's causing some problems for me." He shook his head. "Some of the patients he's had for a long time don't even want to see me. Or if they do, they insist on seeing Dad too."

"Ouch."

He grimaced and leaned back. "Yeah. Dad doesn't help when he goes along with it. When he tells people I'm their new doctor but then agrees to see them anyway, it's not very convincing."

Her chin lowered and her bottom lip pushed out a bit. "That must be hard."

"Bah. It'll get better. Eventually." He forced a smile. "I didn't come here to dump on you. Just wanted to tell you why my week was so crazy. So, I guess going for pizza's out tonight, huh?"

Her slow smile made his heart stutter. "Pizza."

She was the kind of woman who no doubt went on dinner dates at the Four Seasons or restaurants like Insatiable, with sky-high menu prices, full of the wealthiest people in Santa Barbara County. And where did he take her? McDonald's and Rocco's Pizza.

"Pizza sounds great," she said with a small sigh.

He sat up straight. "Really? What about your plans?"

"Like I said, they weren't really plans. I was just going to do something...you know, to pass the time."

"Do something like what?"

Her eyelids lowered over her eyes as she looked down at her hands in her lap. "Oh just...something. Not important." She looked up at him. "I'll go change."

"Sure." She looked good to him in a pair of tailored black pants and a blue silk blouse. "Do you like Rocco's?"

"It's my favorite."

He grinned. "Hey. Me too. Best pizza in town."

They shared a smile that started heat building inside him. Oh man, he wanted this woman. It was almost scary how much. Then she rose from the couch.

"I'll be right back. Make yourself at home."

She disappeared down the hall and he heard her light footsteps climbing the stairs. He rose and walked to the windows to look out. Real estate in this neighborhood was pricey. She must make a whack of cash as vice president. Good for her. He moved around the room, looked at an arrangement of photographs on a narrow table—lots of happy, laughing people, couples, kids, and how about that, a picture of Tori holding a baby. Looking so happy and tender. He picked up the silver frame and studied that one closer. His heart squeezed in his chest as he regarded the image.

She returned a short time later wearing a pair of capri-length jeans and a fluttery pink top. She held a pair of sneakers in one hand and a pair of flip-flops in the other. She looked at him and made a face. "I still can't wear heels. And I'm not sure if the flip flops are a good idea, either."

"The ankle's still sore?" Concern rose in him and he moved toward her.

"A bit."

He gently pushed her down into a chair and dropped to a crouch in front of her. He picked up her left foot, small in his hands, and ran his fingers over the fine bones of her ankle. "Does that hurt?"

"No."

"Good." He put her ankle through a few range of motion moves, getting a small wince from her at one point. "It's doing good, I'd say. But you're right—those Nikes give more support."

She looked at them glumly. "They're ugly, though. Damn, I miss my heels."

He laughed. "You look gorgeous." He looked up at her, still holding her foot, and their eyes met with a small explosion of sparks. His gaze locked with hers, and he caressed her ankle and calf slowly, wanting to run his hands all the way up her leg and then back down, preferably with her jeans coming off, and then he'd part her legs and slide her closer and...*fuck*. His cock swelled and lengthened, heat lit up every nerve ending on his body and he almost groaned out loud.

Unable to resist, he lifted her small foot and laid his mouth on her instep. He closed his eyes, kissed his way across the top of her foot, paused at the soft spot behind her ankle, breathed in the warm scent of her skin.

Her breath hitched, her fingers curled over the edge of the chair cushion and she made a low, soft sound. And then she said, "Does Rocco's deliver?"

Chapter Five

An achy knot of need tightened inside Tori as she watched Dev's face, the way his eyes drifted closed, the way his mouth opened on the skin of her ankle. Warm pleasure slid over her and she melted into the chair. Oh god. Oh dear god.

When he opened his eyes and looked at her again, the erotic hunger in them seared her and her breath left her all at once. Her pussy clenched and her breasts ached.

"Yes," he murmured in answer to her question. "Yes, I believe they do."

"Okay then." Her breathless words were barely audible. "That solves the problem of what shoes to wear."

He sat back with a snort of laughter and shook his head. "You kill me, sweet thing."

Her body buzzing with heat and desire, she smiled back at him. "Is that good?"

"It's very good." He rose to his feet, taking her hand and pulling her with him. "So damn good. You make me laugh."

He hauled her up against him and wrapped his arms around her. She went on her toes for his kiss, a blistering, full-bodied kiss full of heat and longing. She pushed her hands into his hair, pressing up into his body. She couldn't get close enough, wanted to inhale him. She made a needy little sound in her throat and then he lifted her by her ass and she wrapped her legs around him and held on. God, that was hot!

He ended the kiss and started walking, carrying her like that easily down the hall and up the stairs. "Dev," she said, "be careful."

"I won't drop you."

"I know. I don't want you to hurt yourself."

"You weigh next to nothing." He paused at the top of the stairs for one more breath-stealing kiss, then carried her into her bedroom. He knew exactly where he was going. Oh yeah, he'd been in here before, the day he'd brought her home from the hospital.

He carried her straight to the bed and laid her down there, coming right down next to her and kissing her again, his hand on her jaw. They moved together, still fully clothed, and she twined her legs around his, seeking pressure where she needed it, where she ached between her legs. She rocked into his big thigh, his tongue sliding in and out of her mouth, his hand slipping into her hair, holding her head in place for his kisses.

He tasted so good, smelled so good, felt so good, moving over her, on top of her, his heavy weight pressing her into the mattress. God! He was taking control, doing it again, pushing her buttons, all of them, and she loved it. His hands moved on her body, still over her clothes. They were laying there making out like teenagers, sensation

ricocheting through her body, heating her up like fire. When one big hand covered her breast she moaned into his mouth.

"Sweet baby," he whispered, brushing his mouth over her jaw. "So sweet."

She made another little wordless noise and moved against him, pushed her breast into his hand.

"What do you need, baby?" He licked the side of her neck and a shiver traveled the length of her body. "Tell me what you need."

Oh god the things she needed. She couldn't tell him the things she needed, not all of it, not now. "Need you," she whispered back. He pushed his thigh between her leg and she arched against him.

"So hot." He squeezed her breast, not hard but not soft, and his teeth grazed her skin where her neck met her shoulder. Heat flared along every nerve ending. "Tell me what you want."

His whispered command sent a shaft of heat stabbing through her core. She didn't answer, not because she couldn't, but because she wanted to wait just a little and see how far he'd go. When he moved over her, straddling her hips with his knees on either side of her, a delicious thrill ran through her. She gazed up at him, his brown hair mussed, cheeks flushed, eyes glittering, mouth wet and she felt as though she was dissolving into the bed.

He reached for her wrists and another shock of electric desire rocked her. With his hands circling her wrists and holding them down he leaned over her, head bent, his gaze fastened on hers. Helpless, she licked her lips, breathing in shallow little pants. "Tell me."

She was lost. Utterly captivated, pulled into his magnetic control. "I want you to fuck me," she whispered. She loved how his eyes darkened and his jaw tightened. She loved his harsh groan.

"Oh yeah." He dipped down for a fast hard kiss on her mouth, still pinning her in place with his hands and his body. She loved it.

Then he released her wrists and slid his hands up under her top, a loose top made of layers of sheer pink fabric. His touch on her skin there sent more shivers cascading over her, as his fingertips cruised over her stomach and ribs, and then...her breasts. He filled both palms with her breasts, the fabric of her bra an annoying barrier to his touch. His fingers found the edge of the lace, stroked over the top curve of her breasts, trailed down between.

"I'm gonna undress you now," he said with sure firmness. She gave a tiny nod, even though she knew he wasn't asking her permission, and she melted even more. He sat her up, lifted her top over her head and looked down at her breasts. "Very pretty." The pink lace bra lifted what little she had and put it on display, and his admiration gave her a rush of pleasure. Then he reached behind her and undid the bra, slowly slid the straps down over her shoulders and arms and then off. She sat there naked from the waist up, the cool air brushing over her breasts making her nipples even tighter, and

she dragged her gaze away from his face to look down at herself, her breasts high and round and tipped with hard points. He sucked in a sharp breath as his gaze moved over her and she loved that she affected him.

"Very pretty," he said again in a thick voice.

He shifted his weight back and gently pushed her down to the mattress again, and then he undid the button and zipper of her jeans. He pulled them off, leaving her panties, pink lace to match the bra, his hands lingering on her bare legs. His palms skated back up her thighs, held her hips tightly for a moment as he paused, and then he worked her panties down her legs too. The way he looked at her thrilled her to her core, a look of hot arousal, of male possession.

He reached behind his head and yanked off his T-shirt and her eyes went wide at seeing his bare chest, finally. He may have had a boyish face, but his chest was all man—wide and tapering down to his lean waist, slabs of muscle dusted with hair between his flat brown nipples. She lifted a hand to touch his defined abs, unable to resist, her fingers bumping over ridges of muscle beneath smooth skin.

His jeans were loose and low—maybe their rolling around on the bed had pushed them lower. A zing of electricity bolted through her as her eyes and fingers traveled down over his abs, over his navel, over a sweet little dip in his stomach. She studied his hip bones and the line of soft hair that disappeared beneath his jeans, and then the bulge beneath the denim.

Heat swept over her from hairline to toes, her heart flip-flopping and she held his gaze as she worked the buttons of his jeans open, one at a time. He gave another guttural groan as her fingers brushed over his erection. She could feel waves of heat coming off his body, even through the denim. When she had the fly open, she reached inside, found him bare and throbbing and hot. He hissed as she drew his cock out and the ache low down inside her intensified to a sharp pinch of need.

His cock was beautiful, so primal and male, jutting from a nest of thick brown hair, long and thick with ridges of veins and a smooth head, glistening with moisture. She swallowed the rush of saliva in her mouth and stroked him from root to tip.

"Fuck," he whispered. *"Your hands are magic, sweet thing. That feels so good."*

"You feel so good." She watched herself stroke him, mesmerized by the visual, enthralled by the feel of him in her hands, thick and heavy. Then he covered her hands with his and stilled them. She looked up at his face, tightened into lines of near pain, his eyes closed, jaw tense.

He looked as if he was on the edge, which gave her another thrill and she released him. He slid off the bed, pulled a package from a pocket of his loosened jeans then let them drop to the floor. She devoured him with her eyes standing there beside her bed, the strong lines of his body, the thick muscles of his thighs, the flex of big biceps as he ripped open the condom package and rolled it on.

He came back down over her, enveloping her in his heat, surrounding her with his spicy male scent, kissing her with hot, wet, sliding kisses as his heavy body pinned her.

She reveled in the sensations, kissed him back, let his tongue slide against hers, ran her hands up and down his back over the ridges of muscle. He shifted into the perfect place, his cock hot between her legs and she bent her knees.

"Oh man," he groaned, dragging his tongue over her collarbone. "Oh Tori, honey, I'm so ready, it's too fast but I can't last any longer. I have to be inside you."

"Yes, yes. I want you inside me." His desperation inflamed her, feminine satisfaction rising in her that she could do that to him. And she wanted him just as desperately. She lifted her knees higher, let him reach between them to find his cock. He stroked the head through the wetness there, oh lord she was so wet, *aching* wet. She gripped his shoulders, anticipating the feel of him but when he pushed inside her flames licked over her body and she cried out.

"Okay, honey?" He held himself above her on powerful arms.

Her fingers dug into muscle. "Yes. Oh yes. Please, Dev."

"Mmm." He brushed a kiss over her mouth. "I like that. Say it again."

Heat sizzled right to her core. She didn't hesitate to say the words, they came from a place so deep inside her, so natural. "Please. Please fuck me."

"Yeah." And he pushed deeper still, stretching her, filling her with white hot pressure that started a tingle, a buzzing that grew with each stroke. She held onto his big body, lifted into him with greedy need. She lifted her legs and hooked her heels behind his back and he groaned again. "Oh honey. So hot. So tight. Take me."

"Yes." She rocked up again. "Mmm, yes."

His skin grew damp against hers as he fucked her, so deep, so perfect, hitting a spot inside her she'd almost forgotten about. She sank her teeth into the muscle of his shoulder, wrapped her arms and legs around him and let him pound into her in the most sensual, fulfilling rhythm she'd ever experienced.

She slid her hand between them to find her clit, and he drew back a little and looked down where their bodies joined, where she touched herself. "Holy shit," he muttered. "Oh baby that's hot."

She bit her bottom lip, gazed up into his eyes as her orgasm began. "Fuck me," she begged him. "Now. Make me come."

"Christ."

His thrusts picked up pace again and pleasure escalated inside her, pinpoints of fiery sensation swirling into a cyclone of intense sweetness, bringing her up higher, and higher. Dev's cock inside her intensified the pleasure, turned it nearly into pain and she loved it, strained for it, exploded with it. She cried out as she came, tightening around him and then he came too, with a shout, going still, eyes closed, head back.

"Fuck, Tori, holy fuck."

With one last hard pulse, he collapsed over her, his weight a delicious pressure. Her hands stroked up and down his back, slick with perspiration, up to his neck, down to the hollows at the base of his spine, lower still to feel the firm resilience of his ass. She

wanted to grab him there, to lick him there, even bite him there, but that would have to wait until later.

"All right," he gasped, face in the pillow next to her head. "I'm good now. Next time will be better."

She choked on a small laugh. "Well thank heavens for that. This was such a disappointment."

He lifted his head and looked at her and when he saw her smile, he gave a small grin, fell back to the bed, and to her everlasting delight, rolled her on top of him and gave her butt a swat.

A jolt of electric sensation tore through her.

Ohgodohgodohgod. A small moan leaked from her lips.

It wasn't a hard swat. It was barely a tap. But once again he'd found one of her triggers and had her turning to liquid.

She buried her face in his neck, breathed in the scent of him. God, this had probably been the most vanilla sex she'd had in years, but it had touched something so deep inside her, given her a rush of intense emotion for this man, a potent mix of lust and affection, and she wasn't sure what it all meant.

* * * * *

Dev fought to get oxygen into his heaving lungs, holding Tori's small body on top of him. Her hair tickled his nose, and he breathed in that exotic floral scent, slid a hand up under the silky length of it and cupped the back of her head. His other hand covered the curve of her ass where he'd just given her a little spank.

"For that I may have to punish you," he murmured. "Smart mouth."

She trembled against him and he hugged her tighter. So sweet. So responsive. And so fucking hot when she'd touched herself. He loved that she'd do that, that she didn't hesitate to make sure she got what she wanted. The fact she knew herself and her body so well was sexy as hell.

"Okay, let's order pizza now," he said after a long moment. Again, she shook against him and he rolled her once more, onto her back, and lifted up on one elbow to look down at her. She was laughing.

She lifted a hand to touch his cheek. "You make me laugh too."

He clasped her fingers and brought them to his mouth. "As long as you're laughing with me, not at me."

They shared a smile and something expanded hot and soft in his chest.

"What kind of pizza do you like?" he asked gruffly.

"Vegetarian."

"Oh hell no."

She laughed again. "What's wrong with that?"

"Too healthy. How about pepperoni, bacon and salami?"

"How about—no."

He grinned. "Pepperoni?" he asked hopefully.

"Okay. I can handle that."

"Hmm. Conflict over pizza." He rolled out of bed and pointed to a door in the wall opposite the bed. "Bathroom?" She nodded and he made a quick trip to get rid of the condom, then scooped up his jeans on the way back to the bed. He fished out his cell phone and thumbed through his contacts for the number for Rocco's.

"You have the number in your phone?"

"I eat there a lot." He placed the order, then snapped the phone shut and tossed it to the small table beside her bed. "Forty-five minutes. Now what could we do to pass the time?"

"Tell me you eat more than just burgers and pizza."

"No." He moved toward her purposefully and she laughed.

"What do you mean no?" She scooted away from him and he paused, struck dumb by her incredible sexiness. Her blonde hair was a tangled mess around her shoulders, her lips were swollen, faint pink marks on her face from his beard stubble. She was tiny but perfect with the kind of breasts he loved—not too big, not too small, but round and high on her small rib cage. Her skin was luminous in the dim room, eyes glowing with laughter and confidence. Jesus. He shook his head.

"I mean, I can't tell you that because it's not true—that's all I eat. Well. I eat steak once in a while. And I'm pretty fond of Doritos. Sometimes I have Doritos and Coke for breakfast."

"Oh my god." She stared at him in horror. "You're a health-care professional."

"Yup." He reached for her and gave her a smacking kiss. "I am. Dr. Fillmore."

"Dr. Fillmore..." Her voice drifted off as he kissed the corner of her mouth, her cheek, her jaw. "You need to set a better example for...for your..."

"Hmm?" He opened his mouth on the side of her neck and sucked gently.

"Your patients..."

"I am patient."

"Not that...oh." Her soft sigh was like a fist squeezing his heart. "Oh, Dev."

He left a small mark on her neck, which he knew wasn't very mature, but the idea of marking her felt very satisfying. Now for those pretty tits...he hadn't spent enough time on them earlier... He laid her down on her back and shifted so he could bend down and take one sweet nipple into his mouth. He covered the other with his hand, filled his palm with her perfect softness, and played with the nipple in his mouth with his tongue, his teeth. She fit perfectly to his tongue, tasted unbearably sweet and the way she shivered and twitched at his touch sent heat sliding through his veins.

Her hands pushed into his hair, held his head to her breast while she made soft noises of pleasure. "Oh that's good," she whispered. "So good."

"Mmm." He moved back and forth between her breasts, his mouth on one, his fingers on the other, playing with her for a long time until she writhed beneath him.

"Dev, oh god, Dev."

He slid a hand down over her smooth tummy, let his fingertips brush over the small patch of dark gold hair, then dip between her thighs. Wet. So wet. He slicked his fingers through her folds, and her thighs fell open for him. He closed his mouth over a nipple and sucked hard again, then lifted his hand and painted her cream over the reddened tip of one breast. She sucked in a breath, watching him with hazy eyes, and he bent his head to lick her taste off her nipple.

"Oh." She breathed out the word.

"You taste sweet, Tori." He plumped the breast with his hand, licked over the tip, her subtle feminine taste teasing him. "I could play with these pretty breasts for hours."

She rolled her head on the pillow.

"I like your bed," he said. "Leather. Kinda hot."

She moaned as he again drew on her nipple.

"Wanna fuck you again," he murmured, kissing his way between her breasts. "Wanna do so much to you."

He sensed her softening, her acceptance of that.

"Everything," he continued softly, licking one soft curve. His fingers moved between her legs again, pushing inside her, making her pant, and then when he grazed over the bump of her clit, she jerked against him. "I wanna do everything to you."

"That makes me so hot," she groaned. "Oh god, Dev."

"Good. I want you hot. Want you to feel good."

His cock had swelled to life again, already, as hard as if he hadn't just fucked her moments ago, aching to be inside her. He had one more condom, that was it, though, and maybe he should save it for later. He could give her one more orgasm right now, right like...this... His fingers swirled over her clit, slick with her cream, and her body shook against his. Her breathing picked up, her back arched, lifting those luscious little tits toward him, and he sucked on her again as she came, hard, with sweet little cries and gasps.

He shifted up and kissed her mouth, slow, soft, with lingering tongue, so hard he hurt, but so gratified by her response.

"There you go," he whispered against her lips.

"Oh wow." Her eyes closed, she lay limp and sprawled on the bed, her hair a lovely mess. He kissed her once more, still cupping her pussy, still feeling the small pulses of her orgasm.

"You're incredible, baby." He lowered himself to lie beside her, his cock throbbing against her hip. When her fingers curled around him, he jerked.

"You're hard."

"Hoo boy, yeah."

She breathed out a little laugh. "Give me a minute."

And then...what? "I only have one more condom. I don't want to use it too soon."

"Well. I think I have some condoms."

"Ah." Relief coursed through him. "Excellent."

"But there are other things we can do."

He pulled her into his arms and they rolled together, legs twining naturally, fitting together as if they were made for each other. For long moments they lay like that, and then Tori squirmed from his arms and started wriggling down his body, kissing his chest, giving erotic little nips to his nipples that made him twitch hard, then licking over his abs and navel. His body tightened, every nerve ending on alert, his balls drawing up tight, cock pulsing. She nuzzled the hair at his groin and he thought he might explode.

"Oh Tori," he groaned, sliding his hands into her hair.

"Mmm." Her fingers curled around his hard length, giving him a stroke that had his toes curling. And when her mouth closed over the head of his cock, scalding hot and sucking like a fucking dream, he thought the top of his head might blow off.

Chapter Six

They were lying there limp and dozing when the doorbell rang. They rolled to face each other, smiled, and then Dev climbed out of bed and shoved his legs into his jeans. He descended the stairs with his wallet in hand to answer the door while Tori found something to put on too. She didn't want to get dressed, but she grabbed her panties, a pair of lace-edged boy shorts, and then picked up Dev's T-shirt. She held it to her nose and breathed in his scent, the desire to wear his shirt a powerful urge. Would that be bad? She heard the door close. Oh hell. She quickly pulled on the shirt and then followed Dev down the stairs.

The spicy aroma of oregano and pepperoni filled her nostrils and her stomach grumbled. Dev held the big box in two hands and eyed her appreciatively as she approached, his gaze lingering on her bare legs. "Nice look," he said.

She grinned. "Thanks."

She led the way to her kitchen, and they sat at the small granite-topped island and ate pizza and drank the cola she found in her fridge, though Dev shook his head because it was "diet".

"Do you know how much sugar is in regular cola?" she demanded.

"Yes. Yes, I do." His grin was delightfully boyish.

"How can you look like that and eat the way you do?" He sat there, all lean and muscular, with messed hair, bare chest and ripped abs, jeans sitting low on his hips, bare feet resting on the rung of his stool.

"I work out."

She narrowed her eyes at him as she took a bite of her pizza. A moment later she said, "I think you eat better than you say you do."

He shook his head with another sexy grin. "I'm a single guy, living on my own, can't cook – my options are limited."

"You could learn to cook."

"True. I haven't had much time. But true. Are you a good cook?"

She pursed her lips. "Well. I can cook. But I don't actually do it very much."

"Why not?"

"Cooking a big meal for myself isn't much fun. I work late a lot of nights, so when I get home I just want something fast and easy."

"Yeah. I hear you. But maybe you can teach me some basics."

She chewed her pizza thoughtfully. What was he suggesting? He made it sound like he was going to be hanging around a lot. Her stomach tightened with excitement at the idea even as she berated herself for being excited about something so silly.

"Maybe," she finally said.

"Who's the baby in the picture?"

His rapid change of subject left her momentarily confused. He nodded his head toward all the family photos on the table in the living room. "Oh. That's my nephew. My sister Molly's new baby, Christian. He's just the sweetest little guy."

"You just have one sister?"

"No. Two. Claire is my sister and Molly is my half-sister."

His eyebrows rose, trying to figure it out. She smiled. "My mom died when I was fourteen."

"I'm sorry." His dark eyes regarded her somberly. "That must have been hard."

"Yeah." She gave a small smile. "Claire was ten at the time. My Dad remarried when I was sixteen and they had Molly."

"Let me guess. You did a lot of babysitting."

She frowned. "Why do you say that?"

"Just a gut feeling. You seem very responsible."

She drew back a little bit. That wasn't exactly a word that conjured up young, fun and sexy. Responsible? Huh. "Claire was only ten, I had to be a mother to her. And then my step-mom wasn't exactly the maternal type, she and my dad liked to go out a lot, so of course I babysat Molly."

"Mmhmm. So Molly is...how old?"

"Now? She's twenty-one."

"And she just had a baby?"

"Yeah." Tori made a face. "She's been married a year. I think it's crazy but, hey, it's not my life. Claire is thirty-three and she has two kids and is ready to pop another one out any time."

"They jumped right into motherhood, didn't they?"

"Yup." She shrugged. "It seems to work for them."

She felt his gaze on her and knew what he was thinking—why was she, at thirty-seven years old, unwed and childless? She bent her head, not really wanting to talk about that. Not that it bothered her.

"Each to their own," she said lightly. "Their lives are crazy with diapers and sick kids and daycare problems."

"Uh-huh." He took another bite of his own pizza.

"How about you? I met your dad the other night, but what other family do you have?"

"I guess I'm kind of like your Molly. My brother is eleven years older than me and my sister is nine years older than me. I believe I was a bit of a late life surprise to my parents."

She smiled. "Really?"

"Yeah." He gave a crooked smile. "It was kind of like being an only child, when I was a teenager and the only one living at home. And I love Mom and Dad, but by that point they were in their late fifties and not exactly wild fun."

"You poor baby."

"Nah. I was fine. You may not believe it, but everyone always said how mature I was. I figured it was from hanging out with all those old people all the time."

Tori gazed at him, the way the dimples appeared in his cheeks when he flashed that boyish grin, the youthful appearance of his handsome face, the strong virility of his fit, muscular body. He was so much fun to be with—and yet in no way would she consider him immature. She recalled how she'd doubted his professional abilities that day at the urgent care center, how she'd insulted him by wanting someone else to look at her x-rays for another opinion.

Something hot and soft unfurled inside her and once again she bent her head, letting her hair fall forward. She reached for the glass of cola and took a big, burning mouthful of the fizzy liquid.

After pizza, Dev trapped her between the kitchen counter and his body and kissed her senseless, then purposefully took her hand and led her back up to the bedroom. Crazy questions flooded her brain, questions about how many lovers he'd had and how old he'd been when he started having sex, because *damn*, he was good at it. The way he took control made her weak with longing, wet with desire for him, and breathing hard with lust.

He stayed all night and well into Saturday afternoon.

She had work to do. She almost always worked on Saturdays. But his bossy charm had her melting with surrender and he somehow convinced her to take him grocery shopping with her and show him how to cook dinner Saturday night.

Cook dinner. She shook her head as she pulled out cookbooks after he'd gone home to change, cookbooks she hadn't used for quite some time. He liked pizza, burgers and Doritos. What the heck were they going to make? Then she remembered his comment about steak. She could do that. She had a darn good marinade recipe that included bourbon—she'd bet he'd like that.

So later that afternoon they shopped together, laughed together, unpacked groceries together in her kitchen, and then she cooked dinner while he sat at the island watching, both of them drinking wine and laughing more and trading heated looks, with the odd kiss and pats on her butt that had tingles radiating from a spot deep inside her.

"You're a very sexy cook," he told her, sitting at the island watching her slice mushrooms. "I think you should cook naked."

She sputtered out a laugh. "Yeah, right. And you're supposed to be helping." She pointed her knife at him.

"I like just watching you." He grinned.

"This was just a ruse, wasn't it? Just to get a home-cooked meal out of me. You don't really want to learn how to cook."

"Ah. You're on to me." He lifted his empty wineglass and she retrieved the bottle from the far end of the counter and poured some of the deep ruby Merlot for him. His smile of thanks ignited a small explosion of heated sparks inside her. Cooking for him, pouring wine for him, serving him, gave her an intense rush of pleasure.

That night in bed, she only hesitated for a moment before she gave voice to the thoughts she'd kept silent before.

"Deeper," she urged him, when he fucked her. "Go deeper. Harder. I want to feel you so deep inside me."

"I don't want to hurt you, baby. You're so small."

"You won't hurt me." Her moan of pleasure spurred him on and he rolled to his back, taking her with him.

On top, the penetration was more intense, his cock bumping her womb in an exquisite near-pain that tore through her. "Yes," she sighed, letting her head fall back as she rode him. "Oh yes."

He filled his hands with her breasts, tugged at her nipples until her body felt like three points of sensation, his cock pressing inside her, his fingers at her nipples, the three sensations coalescing into a firestorm of ecstasy that rocked her body. She fell forward over him, their faces pressed together, his arms banded around her back. Then his hands slid down lower to her ass and he moved her up and down on his cock, holding her by her cheeks there. When his fingers pulled her cheeks apart a little, a sharp thrill raced through her, and then his fingers played with the puckered hole of her ass and she cried out in need and want.

"Oh god!" She was so sensitive there, loved being touched there and it made her want more. "Yes, do that, please. Touch me there."

Other guys had recoiled when she'd asked for that kind of touch—but not Dev.

He gave her what she wanted, one finger slicking up moisture, rubbing over the tight hole, then gently pushing in. His cock inside her pussy, his finger in her ass, sent dark, edgy pleasure sweeping over her.

"Christ you're hot," he whispered. "Is that good, baby?"

"Yes." Eyes closed, she pressed her face against his, his breath fast and warm against her cheek. "Oh god, yes, so good."

She was going to come, pressure building inside her, everything inside her tightening, a twisting red-hot flame spreading heat throughout her. The finger gently pushing in and out of her ass intensified everything, liquid pleasure burning in her

veins. She buried her hot face next to his, held onto his shoulders as she came in hard, wrenching spasms.

One hand stayed on her butt, the other slid up her damp back and fisted in her hair, holding her as she panted and gasped for breath. She kissed his cheek, just pressed her mouth there in a long, open-mouthed caress, loving the feel of his arms around her, his hand in her hair. But he hadn't come yet, and she levered herself back up to sitting, to ride him, his cock still impaling her.

As she moved away from him, his hand accidentally tangled in her hair and pulled. Hard.

She whimpered, delicious tingles cascading from her scalp over her body.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"No. I liked it." The words slipped from her lips. "Do it again."

"Pull your hair?"

"Yes." She moaned softly, shook her hair back as she rose above him. "Yes. Please."

He wound his fingers into the strands and gave a gentle tug.

"More. Please."

She opened her eyes and met his, pleading with him, holding his gaze to show him how she felt. What she wanted. But his next pull still wasn't enough. "That's good," she whispered. "Just a little harder..."

"Tori..."

"Please, Dev. Do it. I want it."

The sharp tug had a flash of fierce pleasure radiating over her skin.

"Oh!"

Supersensitized now, she moved carefully on him, biting her lip, holding his gaze. His thick flesh filling her, his fingers playing in her hair, sent her back up. She watched his face, loving the erotic hunger in his eyes, the way his face tightened into primal male pleasure. Her orgasm built again fast and hard and she slipped her fingers down to her clit and rubbed, sending sparks whipping through her body. "I love it, like that, oh god, Dev!"

He fucked up into her in hard, urgent thrusts, hand in her hair pulling hard and sending fire licking over her flesh while more flames built inside, burning her up from the inside out and the outside in. She came again as he did, exploding inside her in long intense pulses, her body clenching around him.

She collapsed over him again, his hands still clutching her hair but gentle now, his chest heaving beneath her as they both fought for breath. "Wow," she murmured, limp and breathless. "Oh wow."

As she floated back down to reality, Tori's stomach tightened with nerves. Had she gone too far? Revealed too much? She was no longer ashamed of what she needed, had learned to live with it and accept it, but there'd been many men who didn't understand.

Pulling her hair was such a small thing to ask for, and yet Dev had hesitated, clearly torn between wanting to give her what she wanted and not wanting to hurt her. She didn't want to push him outside his own comfort zone too fast, and yet she sensed things inside him—the way he liked to control things in bed, the way he liked to move her around, to be the one in charge—even when being in charge meant *her* pleasure was his goal.

It wasn't much, but hints of it made her think that maybe she could hope for more from Dev.

Dev's blood pounded through his veins and roared in his ears, lungs straining for oxygen. Holy fucking shit. What had just happened? She'd come twice, so hard, so fast, she'd thrown him headlong into a blistering orgasm of his own. The things he'd done to her had seemed to set her on fire and that made him feel like a fucking god. A sex god. Man oh man.

"Tory, baby," he panted. "Are you okay?"

"Oh yeah." She snuggled in closer to him and he tightened his arms around her small body. "Oh *yeah*." Her heartfelt sigh made his chest tighten.

His entire body still sizzled, yet lethargy was creeping over him, fogging his already clouded brain. Her pussy pulsed around his still-hard cock. He swept a hand down her back, over the curve of her butt, lingering there in a gentle squeeze. "I love your ass," he murmured into her hair.

Her moan told him she liked that. That was good to know. He'd always had a fondness for ass play, but some women weren't into that. He'd nearly lost it when she'd encouraged him to do that and when she'd loved it so much...hot *damn*. Thinking of all the things he could do to her there made him twitch inside her. Christ, she was going to kill him.

And she apparently liked a little pain with her pleasure. A little roughness. He could get into that. Except, damn, she was tiny and he was big and the last thing he wanted to do was hurt her.

He lifted a hand to brush her hair away from both their faces, turned his face toward hers, so close he could see tiny golden freckles on her nose and every individual eyelash, a small mole at the corner of her left eye and the sweet curve of her cheek. His fingers lingered in her hair, gentle, dragging over her scalp and through the silky strands.

"I might need to sleep a little bit," he told her, now smoothing her hair with his palm. "And then I want to have a shower."

"Mmm. 'Kay." Her thickened voice told him she was drifting away too.

"Gotta get rid of the condom."

She made a soft noise of protest that pulled at something inside him, and he gently rolled her off him and onto her back. He covered her with the duvet before heading into

her bathroom. He didn't turn on the light, just did what he needed to do, washed his hands, his reflection in the mirror half in dark, half in faint golden light from the other room through the partly open door. He watched the muscles in one arm move as he dried his hands, aware of his body, his size, his strength, like he'd never been before. He met his own gaze in the mirror, eyes shadowed and lifted his chin.

He felt as if he were starting something here, something big and important and maybe even life-altering. He had no idea why he felt that way, other than it had to be Tori.

Tori.

Something about her drew him to her like he'd never before experienced. Yeah, he wanted her. Wanted her body and wanted it bad. But it was more than that.

It didn't scare him. What he was feeling—well, there had to be a name for it but he didn't know what it was. Excited. Anticipatory. Like he was starting on an adventure. Yeah.

A slow smile curved his lips, only half visible in the mirror, and he hung the towel and walked back into the bedroom. She was curled up in the bed, just the top of her head visible, the duvet tucked up under her chin, eyes closed. So damn sweet.

He climbed in beside her and she immediately attached herself to him like a heat-seeking leech, except damn, he liked it, liked the soft little noise she made in her throat, the softness of her skin, her exotic orchid scent mixing with the primal scent of sex. He reached over and flicked off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness and let himself drop into sleep.

Chapter Seven

Dev felt Tori stirring in his arms, and he had no idea how much later it was. When he checked the small clock beside her bed, he saw it had only been about an hour.

He pulled her closer and rubbed his face over her hair. "You awake?"

"Mmm." She kissed his chest and sighed. "You smell good."

"I'd smell better after a shower."

She nuzzled his chest again, which immediately made him hard. She must have felt that as she wriggled against him.

"Come on." He dragged her out of bed and into the bathroom where he cranked on the water. While they waited for it to heat, he kissed her, long and slow and deep, wrapping her naked body in his arms.

He had plans, big plans, for what he wanted to do to her, with her. In the shower and after, in bed. He pulled her in behind him and shut the glass doors. "Nice shower," he said, positioning them both under the spray. Roomy enough for two, tiles in shades of gray and taupe and black lined two walls of the shower, the other two made of frosted glass. Soon they were surrounded by steam, kissing under a downpour of warm rain, wet bodies sliding together.

"Mmm. You feel good wet," he murmured against her mouth, water running down his face.

"So do you."

He reached for a bottle of body wash sitting on a shelf and dumped some into his hands, rubbed them together to lather up. That scent of orchids and lilies filled the space, drifting on the steam. Her scent. He ran his hands over her shoulders, down her arms and back up, then over her breasts. Beneath the slick suds her skin was silky smooth, her breasts firm and resilient in his palms, her nipples hard little nubs. He lingered there for long moments, enjoying the feel of slippery flesh filling his hands, then washed her stomach and hips. When his fingers slipped between her legs, she gasped, grasping his shoulders.

He smiled as he stroked through her folds, so gently, carefully, washing tender flesh then turning her to face the shower spray to rinse away the soap. He poured more soap into his hands and then worked on her back, massaging the muscles in her shoulders, drifting down her back and then playing with her ass. Again with a soft touch, he glided his fingers between her cheeks. Her head fell forward and she braced herself with palms against the tiles. Perfect. Her ass pushed back into his hands.

Again he washed her, gently but thoroughly, paying attention to her puckered anus, around front to her soft pussy and back again, while she made soft moans of

pleasure barely audible over the drizzle of water all around them. Finally he crouched and passed his hands up and down over her legs. Her gorgeous legs, firm and slender, calves nicely muscled.

He turned her again beneath the spray and rinsed again, then kissed her mouth. "Now my turn."

She gazed up at him, her face now bare of makeup. Her eyes especially looked different, her eyelashes gold instead of darkened by mascara. She blinked water away and smiled at him.

"You look like a teenager," he told her.

She snorted. "Hardly."

"Seriously. I'm getting a fantasy going here of sex with a much younger woman."

"That's *my* fantasy. Oh no, wait—it's real."

He laughed. "Sex with a younger woman is your fantasy?"

She gave his shoulder a little swat. "You know what I mean. It's me who's robbing the cradle."

"Yeah right. Here." He handed her the bottle of body wash, but she shook her head.

"You really want to smell like Paradise?"

"Is that the name of it?" He grinned. "Paradise smells damn good to me."

"I have some other stuff." She grabbed another bottle of some drugstore soap. And yeah, him showing up at the hospital tomorrow smelling of sex and flowers might not be such a good idea. Her small hands smoothed over his shoulders and arms, took her time on his chest, rubbing back and forth across his pecs and sensitive nipples. When her fingers trailed down over his abs he tensed, braced his feet wider on the floor. His dick lifted between them, hard and heavy, his balls drawn up tight beneath him. He ached for her touch but she teased her way down his thighs as far as she could reach, then back up. He groaned.

Finally, she circled him with her fingers, slid up and down on his shaft, dipped below to caress his balls with soapy hands. "Christ, that feels good," he muttered, his head falling back.

"Yeah," she whispered back, and he opened his eyes to see her face, her attention focused intently on his cock, her fingers starting up a tingle at the base of his spine. He pulled away and she looked up at him. He smiled, but gave her his back and she set to work washing him, small hands working over the muscles of his shoulders and spine and then his ass. He liked giving ass play but he liked getting it too, and her hands there had his muscles tensing and sensation building at the base of his spine.

When he was about to burst, he turned again, let the spray rinse all the bubbles from his body and then he set his hands on her shoulders. She turned her gaze up to him, wide-eyed, and he held the look as he applied gentle pressure to her shoulders. She slowly went to her knees in front of him and his dick jerked at the sight. "Yeah, that's it, baby," he said hoarsely. "Suck me now."

Her wet hand closed over him and pulled, a long slow glide up then down, and then she licked over the head with her hot little tongue. Jesus! His hands pushed into her wet hair to hold her head as she licked him all over, torturing him, and then finally she took him into her mouth with killer suction. Fuck. He moved his hips, holding her head, and when she looked up at him, her eyelashes like starbursts around her dark blue eyes, his heart jackhammered in his chest. He held her head and fucked her mouth, moving his hips, holding her gaze, watching her cheeks hollow, her mouth stretched around his girth, her tongue dragging over the sensitive head.

He pulled out and lifted his cock up, jacking himself. "Lick my balls."

Her tongue immediately stroked out and over his sensitive flesh there. She licked and kissed and then to his all-consuming pleasure, sucked one testicle right into her mouth, then the other. He made a strangled noise, pumping his cock, holding it up and out of her way as sensation burned and twisted through his body.

"Fucking gorgeous," he murmured, digging his fingertips into her scalp. "God that feels good. Your mouth on me like that. So hot, baby. So good."

She took him in her mouth again, murmuring something in return that hummed and vibrated against his swollen flesh and he lost his breath, lost his mind. He knew he was going deep into her mouth, bumping the back of her throat, her saliva coating him and wetting her lips, but she let him do it, took it all, until he stiffened. His balls grew tighter in her fingers, tingles raced up the back of his thighs. The drag of her lips on his flesh, the curl of her tongue over his glans felt so fucking incredible as pressure built and then sensation exploded inside him.

He wanted to come in her mouth, come on her face, come on her tits, but couldn't do it all, so he let her suck him dry, let her swallow every drop in an impressive, gut-wrenchingly sexy performance. He held her head, gentling his touch as his movements slowed. Then he pulled her up, lifted her right off her feet in a big hug and kissed her mouth, hard and full of emotion. The sight of her on her knees in front of him blowing him would be forever imprinted in his memories, one of the hottest things he'd ever seen. He pulled back, studying her face for any signs she felt used or abused, but she gave him a sexy smile. "Good?"

He groaned and squeezed her tighter in his arms. "So fucking good. You're amazing. Your mouth is amazing."

"I like doing that for you," she whispered. "Making you come in my mouth. Tasting you."

He reached over and turned off the water, opened the door and found the towels hanging just outside, luxurious plush towels in a chocolate brown color. He wrapped one around her, another around his hips, then began drying her off, rubbing her hair between his towel-covered hands, gently stroking the terry cloth over her body. Water dripped from his own hair to his shoulders but he ignored it until she was dry, her body pink and glowing from the hot water.

She lifted on her toes and licked drops of water from his shoulder and heat shot through him again. "You're killing me, baby," he muttered, scooping her and the towel up in his arms. He maneuvered through the bathroom door and carried her back to the bed, dropped her there and dragged the towel away from her.

She lay there, damp-haired and flush-cheeked, smiling at him.

"Now I'm gonna make you come," he promised her, coming down over her. He kissed her breasts, sucked hard little nipples, puckered so tight and sweet, kissed his way down her stomach and then pressed her thighs apart. He'd just washed her there, but already she was slick with feminine cream and smelled so good, like warm woman. He kissed her thighs and hip bones, kissed the tiny patch of damp gold curls, nuzzled his face between her thighs and inhaled deeply. Ah. So good. He kissed her folds, then licked, then used his thumbs to part her, carefully. He licked her inner folds, then lifted his head to study her, all pink and pretty spread for him. She made a small noise in her throat and her head moved back and forth on the pillow.

"Pretty," he whispered. "So pretty." He dragged the blunt tip of his index finger up and down, the pale cream gathering there showing him how aroused she was. Then he bent his head and licked deeper, gathering up her essence on his tongue, so sweet and faintly tangy. So good he wanted more, and he licked deeper, up and down, nibbling on soft folds, sucking gently and then pressing a kiss to her clit. Her body jerked beneath him at that touch, sensitive, and he gently tongued her clit back and forth. She quivered and gasped and arched on the bed.

"Oh god, oh god," she cried out, fingers curled into the sheets. "Yes, yes, please, Dev, please."

"Feel good, baby?"

"Mmm."

"Taste good too. So sweet. Like girl candy. I could eat you forever, baby. God." He was hard as a post again already, and he pressed his hips into the bed as he buried his face between her legs, buried his face in heaven.

He shifted a bit lower, slipped his hands beneath her legs and lifted them, pushing her knees back. Then he slid his hands under her ass and lifted her higher, licking lower still, right down to the tight pucker of her anus.

"Oh my god!" Her entire body jerked, but he pushed her legs farther back so he could nibble and lick her ass, kissing her cheeks, taking little love bites, and then plunging his tongue into her hole. He loved doing this, it fucking made him nuts, and it made it even better feeling her response, feeling the gush of liquid heat from her pussy. He played there, licking and tonguing her until her body vibrated, and then he lowered her body a little, still cupping her ass in both hands and licked her clit. He felt her tighten and then drew it into her mouth as she came, another gush of warmth on his chin, her hips lifting into his face.

He lifted his face to look up her body at her, over the soft mounds of her breasts, his chin and lips wet, and he drew the back of his hand over his mouth as he crawled up

over her, then kissed her. She opened for him immediately, soft and hot and sweet, and he licked inside her mouth, knowing he tasted of her and she accepted him eagerly.

"I'm hard again," he murmured against her mouth. "Hard for you, baby. Look what you do to me."

His cock swelled between them, aching and dripping.

"Fuck me," she begged. "Please, Dev. Fuck me."

That was what he wanted to hear. Her low-voiced plea sent him over and he pushed inside her in slow, heavy strokes, farther, harder, until he was balls-deep inside her sweet pussy. She rippled around him, clung to him, so hot and wet and silky, his balls hitting her as she met each thrust, and he pulled one of her thighs up to his hip. Her hands slid over his shoulders, the nape of his neck, into his hair, holding him as he kissed her, their tongues sliding together. His brain seized up again and then his mind disintegrated, thoughts scattering, pushing into her with his cock, with his tongue, falling, falling, falling over the edge.

* * * * *

"I have to be at the hospital by nine." Dev kissed her cheek. She mumbled a sleepy protest. "Sorry, baby. But you stay in bed. Get some sleep. You didn't get much last night."

"Or the night before," she muttered. "How are you going to work all day? You'll be tired."

"I'm tough. We get used to insane hours." He rolled out of bed, but reached down and tucked the covers back around her, then smoothed a hand over her hair.

She sighed and snuggled back into the bed, which felt decidedly empty without his big warm body in it. "Okay."

"I have a really busy week too," he continued and she peeked through her eyelashes to watch his incredible body as he dressed. "But I'll try to call you, okay?"

"Okay. My week's busy too." She tried to gather her fuzzy thoughts. "I'll be in Los Angeles Wednesday and Thursday."

"Oh. Okay." He buttoned his jeans, drew his T-shirt over his head, then bent to kiss her cheek again. She liked the warm firmness of his lips, the scratchy roughness of his whiskers. "I'm not working next weekend. So I'll see you then. Okay?"

A whole week?

"Okay."

"Go back to sleep. Bye, Tori."

And he was gone.

A whole week. She rolled to her back, sleep evaporating and her mind clearing. She barely knew him, but after the incredible sex and all the fun they'd had together, not

seeing him for a whole week felt like a huge letdown. Damn. That was crazy. She barely knew the guy. Yeah, the sex was hot, but hell, she could get hot sex other places.

She bit her lip.

It was more than hot sex. It was a scary, hopeful feeling, a feeling that she might have found someone who got her, who could give her what she wanted, what she needed...even though he was eight years younger than her.

Totally crazy. She rolled again and buried her face in the pillow where Dev's head had been, and she breathed in his scent. She was acting like a teenager with a crush, and she was so beyond that it was ridiculous. She was a mature woman, a successful professional who didn't have time for breathless heart palpitations and silly daydreams. The next thing she knew, she'd be doodling little hearts with her and Dev's initials in them.

She snorted with laughter, and then insanely wished Dev was there to laugh with.

Oh geez.

She stretched sore and achy limbs in the bed, finding tender places and loving it. She touched her nipples, so sensitive now even brushing her fingertips over them had her twitching with reaction. God, it felt so good! She knew she could take more, so much more, but wow, Dev had been incredible.

Yeah, she was tired, but she felt energized. Like she wanted to bounce out of bed and tackle a million things. But what did she really have to do today?

Whoa. Her life was crazy busy. There were always things to do—housework, laundry, errands, visiting her sisters. She could do some work, the work she'd planned to do yesterday, but it didn't appeal to her as much as it usually did. She'd get it done, of course she would, but at that moment she just wanted to lie there and think about Dev and all the things he'd done to her and how good he'd made her feel. She closed her eyes, fingers still playing with stiff nipples, then slipped a hand between her legs. As if she hadn't had enough orgasms...but she ached for another one.

* * * * *

"Tori, do you have a minute?"

Tori looked up at Fletcher. It was Friday morning and she was still trying to get caught up from her two-day trip to Los Angeles. She frowned at him. From the look on his face, this wasn't going to be good. "I have exactly three minutes before my next meeting."

"There are problems with the market research for Cunningham's."

"What kind of problems?"

"The forecasting model Jennifer used was all wrong. We gave them information that said investing in Smith-Chalfin was a good strategic move and it turns out, it's not."

"Oh dear god." Tori's stomach tightened into knots and she stared at Fletcher. "How the hell did that happen?"

"We're not sure, but Jennifer is sick about it."

"I guess so. Shit, Fletcher."

"What are we going to do?"

She gazed at him. Once again, everyone expected her to fix the problem. She slowly moved her head from side to side, then sighed. "Tell Jennifer to redo the models. Get me the report we have for Cunningham's. I want both of those by the end of the day."

Fletcher's eyes widened. "She's not going to be able to get that done today."

"Yes. She is."

"It might be late."

"That's fine. I just want it done today."

"Tori. It's Friday. You're not going to be able to contact the client until Monday morning anyway."

Tori pressed her lips together, frustration grabbing at her insides, knowing he was right but so pissed off there'd been a screwup, she just wanted it done. Done right and done now. "I want it today."

He pursed his lips and turned to leave her office. "Fine."

After the trip to L.A. where one of the clients she'd been meeting with had decided not to go with their services, after all the time and effort they'd put into the presentation, she'd come back to the office Friday morning feeling stressed and annoyed. Her phone conversations with Dev had been wonderful. Although short, they'd been full of laughter and emotion, and they'd even had phone sex while she was in her hotel in L.A., but they'd all left her wanting more, wanting to be with him.

Tonight they were going out on a real date. Dev had made dinner reservations for seven o'clock, but now she wasn't going to be home until that report was done and it might be too late. She was punishing herself as much as everyone else for the screwup. And she was probably pissing them off too, but at that moment she didn't care.

Now she had back-to-back meetings with different project teams, a business lunch with another client, and then meetings with the executive team all afternoon. Barely time to catch her breath but oh well, that's the way she liked it.

The day passed in a blur of negotiations, problem solving, networking and placating. She preferred to call it placating rather than sucking up, but that's basically what she was doing with the rest of the executive group, reassuring them that targets were being met, clients were happy, minimizing problems and emphasizing successes.

At five o'clock she still didn't have Jennifer's revised forecasts and she slumped in the chair behind her desk. She was going to have to let Dev know she'd be late. Disappointment flooded her that they might not see each other that night after all. She rose out of her chair and strode down the hall to Jennifer's cubicle.

"How's it going?" she asked the other woman.

Jennifer glanced at her, fingers flying on her keyboard. She didn't smile. All her coworkers had left for the day and the open office space was quiet. Tori sensed Jennifer's displeasure. But she was the one who'd screwed up.

"It's going," she replied tersely. "I should be done in another couple of hours."

And then Tori wilted. She herself was dying to get out of there; for once she had something more exciting to tempt her than her work, and she imagined Jennifer probably felt the same. The big diamond ring on Jennifer's hand flashed as she typed reminding Tori of her recent engagement, and more importantly, the fact that she was pregnant and possibly having problems.

"Go home," she said with a sigh. "You can finish it Monday."

Jennifer paused and looked up at her again. "Really?"

"Really. I can't call Brent at Cunningham's until Monday anyway."

"I'll finish it on the weekend," Jennifer said quickly. "I'll come in tomorrow and do it. It will still be done first thing Monday morning."

Tori gave her a wry smile. "That would be great. Thanks, Jennifer."

Jennifer quickly nodded, then turned her attention back to the computer where she was no doubt saving her work.

Tori left and returned to her office to shut down her own computer. Brenda had left for the day as well and even Fletcher's office sat dark and empty. Friday night and people had lives and wanted to go live them. Usually Tori was in no rush to leave the office, Friday night or any night, but this week was...different.

Because of Dev.

He'd offered to take her out for a nice dinner in a fancy restaurant, no doubt feeling he should make it up to her for last weekend when they'd ended up ordering in pizza and then she'd cooked dinner Saturday night. Fancy restaurants and gourmet dinners didn't matter to her, but she had a feeling Dev wanted to do it. To show her how grown up he was.

She smiled at that. She was fully aware of how very grown up he was. And the thought that he was going to spend a whole lot of money on a date with her touched her, knowing how hard he was working to pay off his student loans. She could offer to pay for dinner – hell, her six-figure income would easily allow for that.

But somehow she had a feeling Dev wouldn't like that.

She grabbed her purse and briefcase with the things she wanted to work on over the weekend and headed for home to get ready for her date, excitement tingling in her belly.

She'd quickly showered, shaved her legs, moisturized, perfumed, made up her face and put her hair up into a loose knot when Dev arrived. What she hadn't done yet was get dressed, so she answered the door wearing her gray silk and pink lace wrap.

His eyebrows rose as he took in her appearance and stepped into her foyer. He looked so damn big and handsome and boyish her heart started up an erratic rhythm

and her breath deserted her. Her gaze moved over the crisp white dress shirt, black jacket and gray pants.

"Hi," she managed to say.

"Hi yourself. C'mere." And he pulled her into his arms and up against him for a long, wet, deep kiss. He felt so good, he smelled so good, and she lost herself in it, just let herself go to the overwhelming pleasure of being with him again.

His tongue slid into her mouth and excitement fluttered down low inside her. If she'd been wearing panties, they'd be wet. But she was naked beneath the thin silk wrap and Dev's hands wandering over her body soon discovered that.

"Helluva way to greet me," he muttered, hands on her ass. "How the hell do you think we're going to make our dinner reservation?"

She smiled up at him. "It's not even six-thirty. We have lots of time."

His dimples flashed as his mouth curved into an answering smile. "I like how you think. It'll have to be quick."

"Quickies can be fun."

"Oh man." He groaned and loosened the belt of her wrap. Her breasts tingled as he bared them to his view. "Oh sweet." He ran his hands over them and her nipples tightened almost painfully. "Christ, you're sexy, Tori."

He hoisted her up against him and she wrapped her legs around him. He turned and slammed her against the wall of her foyer. "Here?" she gasped, head thumping against the wall.

"Here. Right here. Right now."

She went liquid at his terse tone, the physical way he moved her, his hand shoving between them to undo his pants. He pulled out his stiff cock, directed it toward her pussy and she shifted against him to help him find the place...yes. There. Oh god, yes.

He pushed up into her and she wrapped her arms around his head, each thrust banging her into the wall. She cried out with the rapture of sensation overload, his cock filling her, his hands on her ass digging in, the hard wall at her back, his soft hair in her hands. "This...is...crazy," she gasped, digging her heels into his lower back.

"I know." He kissed her mouth, hard and bruising. "I fucking know. Crazy."

Heat bloomed in her body, tingles started in her womb, radiating out, making her weak and hot. She tried to move against him, pinned between his body, the buttons of his dress shirt digging into her flesh, and the hard smooth wall behind her. Sensation rose inside her, hot and wild, and she moved against him almost frantically, seeking pressure just where she needed it, loving his cock so deep inside her, and then she exploded in hot, frantic pulses.

"Tori," Dev groaned in her ear. "Your pussy is so...fucking...hot...*ah*." And he came too, fucking up into her in one, two, three hard strokes, then going still.

They sank against the wall together, breathing hard, hearts thudding, and then he said, "Ah, hell."

"What?" She stroked her fingers through his thick hair.

"Didn't use a condom."

Her body so limp, her mind so lax, at that moment she really didn't see the problem with that. "S'okay," she mumbled. "I'm on the Pill."

"Yeah?" He lifted his head and touched her face. "What about...?"

"I'm good." She dragged her eyes open to meet his. He was a doctor. She could talk about stuff like this to him. "I always use protection."

"Me too. I got tested a while ago, just to make sure."

She gave a small nod. "I trust you, Dev."

Their eyes met and held for a long, stretched-out moment. His thumb dragged across her bottom lip. "Thank you. I trust you too."

They shared a smile, then he lowered her so her bare feet touched the cool tiles of her foyer.

Chapter Eight

They had dinner at Insatiable, the hottest restaurant in the city. Dev had managed to score a reservation even though they were usually booked weeks ahead. The prices were astronomical, but what the hell, he wanted to take Tori somewhere she deserved. He'd grown up in a well-off family; his dad owned the clinic and it was very profitable, so it's not like he was unaccustomed to eating in places like this. He just hadn't done it much the last few years while working his way through med school.

She looked gorgeous, sitting across from him, the low light and candles on the tables creating an intimate atmosphere. She'd put her hair up, but their little uh...session up against the wall had loosened it, and the tendrils drifting down around her neck made him crazy. And so did the dress she was wearing—sapphire blue that matched her eyes, leaving her shoulders and arms bare and revealing a hint of cleavage. She still wore a lazy, satisfied smile as she looked over her menu. He'd done that to her.

Masculine pride swelled in him and he returned his attention to his own menu.

"What are you going to have?" she asked in a low husky voice.

"Not sure."

"I don't see burgers on the menu."

He laughed. "What! I can't believe that. I guess we should go somewhere else, then."

Her smile radiated sexy fun.

They finally made their choices and ordered, including a bottle of wine recommended by the sommelier over which Dev had to stop himself from cringing at the price. When they each had a glass of the Cabernet Franc in their hands, he said, "Tell me about your week."

She frowned and he regretted the question. "Not good, huh?"

"Oh it was okay. Just really busy. And stressful."

The tightness in her pretty mouth bothered him. "Wanna talk about it? Or no?"

She gazed at him over the rim of her glass, that shiny mouth pursed on the glass. "Are you interested?"

"Of course I'm interested."

He wanted to hear everything. He still didn't quite get exactly what she did, except it sounded very high-powered. So he listened while she talked, asked a couple of questions and said, "Sounds like you take on a lot of responsibility."

Her eyes narrowed a bit. "I'm a vice president. I have to."

He nodded, though the word "delegation" popped into his mind. She didn't seem real open to that. "Well, it's the weekend." He lifted his wineglass. "Time to relax and have some fun, right?" He sipped the wine, enjoying the smooth, light taste.

She rolled her eyes. "Yeah, right. I usually do some work on the weekend, but this week I actually promised my sister I would take her kids out tomorrow. That should be good for some relaxing fun."

The sarcastic tone in her voice gave him pause. "How old are they?"

"Five and three. Claire's the one who's pregnant. Her husband is a police officer and he's working this weekend, and she's exhausted and retaining water or something, so I offered to take the kids for the afternoon and give her a break."

"That's nice of you." But he felt a touch of disappointment that she was busy. "What are you going to do with them?"

"I was thinking of taking them to the zoo. And then to McDonald's." Their eyes met and she laughed. He knew his own eyes had lit up at the mention of his favorite fast-food restaurant. She tipped her head to one side. "I suppose you want to come with us?"

He studied her. "Yeah," he said slowly, realizing how much he did. "Sure."

"Two wound-up ankle biters won't exactly be relaxing," she reminded him. "Those kids are a handful."

"Can't be that bad."

"Just wait." She shook her head.

He grinned, suddenly curious to see her with the kids. "Are they boys? Girls?"

"One of each. Brandon is five, Hannah is almost three."

"Cool."

Her mouth twitched as the server arrived with their appetizers.

They enjoyed a long, leisurely, delicious dinner and when the bill arrived, Dev glanced at it, then pulled out his credit card. He sensed Tori looking at him and leaning forward as if she wanted to say something. He gave her a level look back, with a raised eyebrow. She bit her lip and sat back in her chair and the server took the bill and the credit card away.

"Thank you, Dev. That was an amazing dinner."

Her quiet thanks warmed him. "It was my pleasure."

Once the bill was paid, they went for a walk along the beach. They considered going out onto Stearns Wharf and maybe having a drink, but Tori's heels were not a good choice for walking on the worn old planks of the wharf.

"Don't want another sprained ankle," Dev murmured, his hand holding hers. "Why do you wear those crazy shoes?"

"Because I'm short."

"That doesn't matter."

She shrugged. "I like being a little taller. Especially at work. And besides." She grinned. "I like shoes and these are pretty."

"Well, yes they are." There was no denying the pale pink shoes with spiky heels were very sexy, especially on her slender legs. "Some time we'll come back when you're wearing better shoes. Uh. You won't wear those to the zoo tomorrow will you?"

"Of course." She gazed up at him with wide-eyed innocence. "I always wear high heels to the zoo."

He shook his head, and lifted her hand to press it to his smiling mouth. "Smart mouth." He lowered her hand. "You know where I'd like to see you wear those shoes?"

"Where?"

"In bed."

She made a small choked noise and he grinned.

"With nothing else," he continued, strolling along the sidewalk. "Or maybe with some nice lace lingerie."

"Black lace, I suppose?"

"Sure. Black lace is nice."

"Kind of cliché, though, don't you think?"

He smiled down at her.

"How about white lace?" she suggested, arching an eyebrow.

"I'm down with that." She could wear cotton granny panties and still be sexy.

"Hmmm." She touched a finger to her lips and her eyes sparkled as if she was thinking what she could wear. Dev's cock hardened, picturing her nearly bare with those sinful shoes, lying on her bed with the chocolate brown leather headboard and footboard.

"Okay," he said roughly, lengthening his stride and tugging her along with him. "Let's go home."

Her soft laughter rang in his ears as he all but ran to his car.

* * * * *

The next afternoon on their way to her sister's place to pick up her kids, Dev kept glancing at Tori sitting in the seat beside him. Dressed in knee-length shorts, a tank top and flip-flops, she really did look like a kid herself, and it made him shake his head remembering the night before when they'd gotten back to her place.

In her bedroom, he'd peeled her out of the sapphire silk dress to reveal a sheer white lace bra and matching thong panties that made him suck in a sharp breath. And she'd laid down on the bed for him, still wearing the sexy shoes, while he stood there in dumbfounded admiration.

She'd parted her slender legs, those sinful shoes sliding over the duvet. Her eyes had gone hazy as she'd watched him and Dev almost came, she was so fucking sexy.

And now sitting beside him with her ponytail and sunglasses she looked completely different. But hell – still fucking sexy.

“Turn left at the stop sign,” she directed him. “It’s the second house on the left.”

Tori’s sister lived in a modest bungalow not far from where he was renting his apartment. He pulled into the driveway and Tori led the way to the front door. She rang the doorbell, but opened the door and walked in.

Loud music blitzed them, some kind of children’s music Dev didn’t recognize and it was coming from the television. Two kids stood in front of the TV, hands on their little waists, hips swaying in a jerky dance. He grinned.

“Hi guys!”

The two turned and spotted Tori. Joy filled their faces and they both threw themselves at her. “Auntie Tori! Auntie Tori!”

She laughed and made out as if they were tackling her and knocking her over and then to Dev’s momentary shock, she tumbled to the floor with the kids. He went to grab her, but then saw her face, the big smile, the sparkling eyes, and the way she wrapped an arm around each kid and hugged them, and he laughed along with their higher-pitched giggles.

She constantly amazed him.

A woman appeared in the door, a hugely pregnant woman, frowning. “What are you two doing to your aunt?”

“We love Auntie Tori!”

Something expanded in Dev’s chest as he watched her untangle herself from their little limbs, still laughing. “They’re fine, Claire,” Tori said sitting up. “We’re just happy to see each other.”

Dev folded his arms across his chest. Tori’s sister looked at him, both hands going to her lower back. “Hi,” she said, giving him a quizzical look.

“Claire, this is Dev Fillmore.”

Dev took in Claire’s assessing gaze and sighed inwardly as he knew what she was thinking.

“Dr. Dev Fillmore,” Tori added, apparently picking up her sister’s thoughts as well. He sent her an amused glance and stepped forward with hand outstretched.

Claire took his hand. “You’re a doctor?”

“Yes.”

“Not an obstetrician, by any chance?”

He laughed. “No. Family medicine.”

“Cool.” She smiled at him, and her smile reminded him of Tori’s. “I’ve been having these Braxton Hicks contractions and...”

“Claire.” Tori shook her head at her sister, the kids still hanging one off each of her hands.

Claire smiled. "Sorry."

"Is he coming to the zoo with us?" demanded the boy. Brandon...?

"Yes he is."

The little girl smiled up at him, one finger in her mouth. Damn, she was cute, with nearly white blonde hair and big blue eyes. Had Tori looked like that when she was little? The thought tickled him.

"I'm Hanna," she said.

"Hi Hanna." Dev dropped to a crouch. "I'm Dev. I like your dress."

She wore a pretty pink sundress and the tiniest pink sandals.

"She's nearly three," Brandon said and Dev turned his attention to him with a smile.

"And how old are you? Ten?"

Brandon giggled. "No! I'm five." He held up his hand.

"Five. Wow. You're almost grown up."

He straightened and caught Tori watching him with cautious approval. "Are we ready to go?"

"You can take our van," Claire said. "The car seats are already in it and I put the stroller in the back." She picked up a set of car keys from a small table. "And here—I'll give you money to pay their admission into the zoo and..."

Tori held up a hand. "Don't be silly, Claire, I'll pay for it."

"But..." Tori gave her a look and Claire shut up. Dev tightened his lips against the smile tugging at them.

"Here's a backpack," Claire said. "Hannah's out of diapers now but I put in a pair of Pull-Ups and a few juice boxes and some snacks..."

Tori's lips twitched but she accepted the backpack.

"And some sunscreen," Claire continued. "I don't suppose it would do any good to tell you not to feed them too much junk food?"

Dev's gaze zeroed in on Tori and now he couldn't help but grin. This was most enlightening. Tori's eyes shifted and she said, "I won't."

"But you're taking them to McDonald's after?"

The kids both squealed.

"Yes," Tori said. She slung the backpack over her shoulders and took both their little hands in hers. "Come on guys, let's go see some animals. Dev, can you drive?"

"You bet." He took the keys from Claire. "Anything I need to know about the van?"

"Um, no." She looked distracted. "It's just your basic Dodge Caravan." Then she leaned closer to him. "You're a doctor," she hissed. "Don't let her go too crazy with snacks. She loves to spoil them."

Tori overheard and snorted. "You're barking up the wrong tree, there, Claire. Dev's a junk food junkie."

"Oh lord." Claire lifted a hand to her forehead.

"I'm not that bad," Tori protested on her way out the door.

"Thank you!" Claire called after them. "Be good, Hannah and Brandon!"

"We will!"

"Too much junk food, huh?" Dev sent her a sideways smirk as they buckled their own seat belts, the kids secured in the backseat. She pursed her lips and lifted her chin.

It didn't take long to get to the zoo, the kids chattering and singing away behind them. They both insisted on walking, or rather running, so Tori pushed an empty stroller for the most part, until little Hannah got tired. Their excitement at seeing the animals—or ainals, as Tori said—was infectious and Dev found himself lifting up Hannah to his shoulders so she could get a better view of a lion, then letting Brandon drag him along because he wanted to see the Madagascar Hissing Cockroaches. Which made Tori shudder.

And yeah, Tori bought them popcorn and candy, but not everything they asked for. They were good kids—they didn't beg for everything in sight. When Tori said no, they listened to her and they both said thank you for what she did buy them. When they looked through the gift shop on their way out, they didn't ask for the toys they each picked up, Brandon an alligator, Hannah a small lion, and when Tori offered to buy them, their delighted smiles spread warmth through Dev. Huh. Kids.

He'd never been around kids much, having been the baby of the family. His older siblings now had children, but Payton lived in San Francisco and Loni in Seattle, so he didn't see them that much. And now he kinda wished he did. Maybe now he was back in Santa Barbara, done with school, ready to stay put, he'd have more time for visiting family.

At McDonald's, Tori let the kids play while the two of them finished off their meals, sharing the last French fries and sipping on sodas.

"Those kids love you," Dev said to her.

She smiled and lowered her eyes. "I guess."

"And you love them."

She dunked her straw in and out of her drink. He reached out and lifted her chin, looked into those sapphire eyes. "I got the impression when we talked last night that this was going to be a huge ordeal for you." He smiled. "That you didn't really like kids that much."

"I don't like kids that much. But..." She hitched one shoulder. "I like *these* kids. They're my niece and nephew. They're special."

"You're special." He leaned over and brushed a kiss across her mouth. Who would've thought the tough, smart business executive rolled around on the floor with

little kids, fed them junk food, bought them toys and had them collapsing into giggles when she imitated the monkeys and pointed out one monkey scratching its behind.

He had the strangest sensation of falling – sliding down a long slope into something warm and soft.

“Did you just kiss Aunti Tori?” Brandon appeared at Dev’s side, scowling.

Dev sat back in his chair. “Yeah. I did.”

“Oh. Okay.”

Dev met Tori’s eyes and she leaned her hand into her forehead and rubbed. “Claire will be hearing about that, no doubt,” she muttered.

“So?”

Hannah appeared then too and climbed onto Dev’s lap with complete comfort, reaching for one of the last fries.

“Ready to go home?” Tori asked the kids.

“I guess so.” They didn’t sound enthusiastic but Dev could see they were tiring out.

Claire met them at the door with hugs and impressed smiles when they showed her their new toys. She hugged Tori too. “Thank you so much,” she said softly. “You have no idea how wonderful it was to have a little quiet time. I’m just so tired lately.”

“When are you due?” Dev asked her.

“Not for another month.” She sighed and rubbed her back again. “I’m ready to get this over with any time, though.”

He smiled sympathetically. “Hang in there. It’s all worth it. Right?”

“Right.” Again she studied him with interest, looked back and forth between them. “Call me tomorrow, Tori. Okay?”

And Dev knew just what the topic of conversation would be. But that was okay with him.

“No wonder she’s so tired,” Tori chatted on the way home. “She’s put on, like, a hundred pounds.”

Dev snorted. “I don’t think so.”

“Really.” She turned to him. “I think she has. How much are you supposed to put on when you’re pregnant?”

“Twenty-five to thirty pounds. She doesn’t look like she’s put on much more than that.”

She frowned. “Really? That’s all? I mean, that sounds like a lot, but...”

“It’s not that much.”

“The baby only weighs about seven or eight pounds.”

He grinned as he drove. “Yeah. The placenta’s another pound and a half, amniotic fluid about two pounds, increased muscle in the womb, increased blood volume and

fluids, increased breast size..." Tori frowned. "And fat to provide energy for breastfeeding all add up to about twenty-five to thirty pounds."

"Well, aren't you the expert?"

He gave her a significant look and she laughed. "Oh yeah. Dr. Fillmore. Did you see how impressed my sister was that you're a doctor?"

"Did you see how she thought how much younger than you I am?"

"Did that bother you?" She didn't bother to deny it.

"No. Did it bother you?"

She tipped her head to one side. "No."

Pleasure expanded inside him. "Good."

* * * * *

Tori felt such a connection with Dev, felt so close to him as they made love that night in her bed. And yet, she yearned for more. She knew herself, knew what she needed. She also knew that telling a man what that was, would have him heading for the door.

It had never worked out in the past. She'd built a life for herself, by herself, finding other ways to get what she needed, and she'd been happy with that.

Until now. Until Dev. What was it about him that made her harbor these wistful hopes and dark dreams?

Was it the way he took control in bed? The way he held her body down and did wicked things to her, giving her so much pleasure? The way he looked at her with quiet command? The way he combined charm and authority and made her do whatever he wanted? God, that made her melt!

And yet, he was so caring and considerate. He was a doctor. He helped people. In some ways that gave her hope and in other ways, took all hope away. How could she ask him to do the things to her she wanted and needed?

"You make me crazy," he muttered against her hair. She grew still at his words. He'd seemed inflamed by her requests, had seemed so into it.

"Is that...good? Or bad?"

He lifted his head, smoothed her hair back and looked down into her face. "I don't know," he said soberly, fingertips rubbing over her scalp, and her stomach clenched hard. "You bring out something in me that... I don't know. I've never felt so...aggressive in bed."

"I like it," she assured him.

"Really?" His eyes gleamed as he continued to stroke her hair.

"Yes. Really. You could do more." Encouraged by the signs she'd seen, the authority and command, the arousal she'd seen in his face and felt in his body when

she'd told him what she wanted, she swallowed. "I want you to hurt me, Dev. I like pain."

She was putting herself out there, way out there, making herself vulnerable. Nerves trembled inside her as she waited for him to respond. She'd been down this path before. Her heart beat wildly in her chest, her lungs tight.

She could backtrack. She could pretend. Maybe that would reassure him that she wasn't a kinky crazy lady and he wouldn't run away in fear. But even if it did reassure him, and even if he stayed, what would they really have together? The sex was hot but she knew herself. She would always want more. She had to be honest with him, or things would never work out anyway.

He stared back at her once again, this time not in the throes of sexual bliss, this time focusing on her. "You like pain," he repeated.

"Yes. Sometimes. I like to be...dominated. In bed."

He blinked, then gave her a slow grin. "Well, good. 'Cause I like to dominate."

Relief shimmered through her, but uncertainty lingered and she bit her lip. "Do you know what I'm talking about?" she whispered.

He sat up and shifted to face her. "Of course I know what you're talking about."

"Really?"

"Sure." He shrugged one big shoulder.

He said he knew, but she was getting a vibe from him that puzzled her. Was it that he didn't approve? Oh hell. Her stomach churned and burned. Regret pulled her down. She'd been foolish to get so involved with him, knowing it would end up this way, the way it always ended. She studied Dev—his tousled brown hair, his strong chin, firm mouth. His big hands resting on the dark duvet cover. She liked him. She liked him so much. A sigh escaped her and she pushed herself up to sitting too, and clasped her hands in front of her. Well, she'd started this; she might as well finish it.

"I discovered a long time ago that I like it when men control me...in bed." She watched his face, taking in the flicker in his eyes at her words. "When all control is taken away from me." She held his gaze meaningfully. "I like to be tied up." The words came out of her dry throat a little scratchy. His eyes widened. "I like to be spanked. I even like more..." She still watched him, searching his expression for revulsion or horror. "I like to be flogged. Paddled. I like the pain. It gives me a rush—in fact, it's like it puts me in a sort of trance. I've learned so much about myself from it."

He said nothing and she continued to watch for his reaction.

"But..." She hesitated and her fingers twisted the sheet between them. "Most times when I've told guys what I need...they disappear. They don't get it. They're not into it." She lifted her lashes and met his gaze squarely. "I'll understand if you're not into it either. I just felt..." Her throat clogged up. "I felt so close to you tonight, I wanted to tell you. And I got the feeling...that you liked it."

"Yeah," he said roughly. "I liked it." But he didn't meet her eyes.

She reached out and laid her hand on his arm, the forearm muscles taut. "Are you sure? Look, I know you're young, and..."

"Oh for fuck's sake," he growled, then he rubbed his forehead. "Sorry."

His throat moved as he swallowed. His eyes remained focused on the bed. She could see his mind working, trying to process what she was telling him. She waited, her stomach a flutter of nerves, trying to resign herself to this being the end, surprised at how much that hurt. She really hardly knew him.

He was young. Although at his age, she'd already been exposed to elements of BDSM, but it wasn't surprising that this might be unfamiliar to him. She could keep trying to make him understand. But she wasn't going to humiliate herself. So she nodded, her throat aching, her eyes burning, and looked down at her hands.

"I'm not a kid," he finally said. "Just because I'm younger than you doesn't mean I don't know what goes on in the world."

"Yes. I know." Hell, she'd insulted him once again. "So...you're okay with it?" She still wasn't entirely convinced. She recognized the domination in him. Or she thought she did, anyway. Maybe she was wrong, but her instincts about things like that were pretty good after all those years. And he said he liked to dominate in bed. Yet he still seemed taken aback by what she'd told him.

"Oh yeah." He reached for her and pushed her to her back. His body came down over hers and he kissed her, hard, until her head was spinning. "I'm okay with it." His hands wrapped around her wrists and pinned them to the bed with nearly bruising force, holding her there as he kissed her. His cock pushed against her insistently and he kneed her thighs apart with hard shoves that made her gasp. And then he was inside her, fucking her, sending sizzles of pleasure rippling out from her womb over her body, down her legs, her arms, up to her hairline.

"Like that?" he whispered and she lifted heavy eyelids to look into his face, at the tight lines of restraint. He *did* like this. In fact, he wanted to do more. She *knew* he did, she could sense it in the barely restrained power in his big, male body, the primal heat blazing in his eyes.

"Yes! I love it. And I want more."

His mouth firmed. "Yeah? What do you want, Tori?"

She licked her lips, holding his gaze. "Hurt me, Dev. Please."

Chapter Nine

Heat flared in his dark eyes, his fingers hard on her wrists. He thrust into her, hard, and she gasped with pleasure. "Yes." A soft moan leaked out of her mouth. "Yes. Do anything you want to me."

"Jesus." He closed his eyes briefly, then opened them, his mouth tight. "I don't want to hurt you, Tori."

"But I want it." She pleaded with her eyes, wanting him to understand. "I want you to..." God, telling someone was so damn hard. "Be rough. Make me do whatever you want. Do whatever you want to me. Spank me. Anything."

He stared back at her fiercely, eyes moving over her face. His body tightened against her and his cock twitched hard inside her. He was aroused by it. She felt it. Hope surged inside her and she lay there submissively beneath him, waiting.

She briefly sucked in her bottom lip, then drew in a long slow breath. Her body quivered with need, an orgasm so close, hovering there on the edge, she needed to *come*, she needed to *feel*.

"Do it," she begged. "Please, Dev."

He pushed into her again, hard, driving, filling her, touching that sensitive spot inside her that made her ache so good.

Their eyes met and held in a powerful connection. Did he understand? Did he really know what she wanted? His fingers tightened on her wrists in a bite of pain. She encouraged him with her eyes, with small nods of her head, with excited whimpers.

"Jesus Christ," he whispered, heat flaring in his eyes again and he moved over her, pounded into her in hard, fast strokes. "Jesus, Tori."

She met his thrusts, cried out at the hot rapture of his body dominating her like that, the sharp ache in her womb when he filled her so deep, the dark sweetness of his hands cuffing her wrists. Heat rose up in her, a hot, tight spiral as she let him take possession of her body.

* * * * *

Dev's chest hurt and his mind whirled as he climbed into his car and started driving home later that night. What the fuck? What the *fuck*? It was all he could think, over and over.

His body still buzzed with arousal. And he hated that he was so turned-on by the things Tori had talked about, so turned-on by how he'd held her down and fucked her so hard.

It was wrong.

He was no innocent prude. God, he was nearly thirty years old, he knew there were all kinds of lifestyles in the world. *Tied up and flogged?* He'd just never in his wildest dreams expected a woman he was with to ask him to do things like that.

Well. Technically, that wasn't one-hundred-percent accurate. He had had some pretty wild dreams, mostly when he was younger, in his teens. He remembered when he'd started exploring sex and the crazy things that had come into his head. He'd always been...well, dominant, in bed, but he'd carefully restrained himself from going too far, always remembering the lectures his father had given him, always aware, afraid...

Dev parked his car in his space behind his apartment building and slowly walked through the cool darkness, shifting his car keys back and forth between both hands with a jingle. He knew where all those lectures had come from and he agreed with everything his father had always told him—never hit a girl. Never raise your hand to a woman in anger. Never use physical strength to abuse someone. Always treat women with respect.

Dev had always been physical. He'd matured early, was a big guy, six feet tall when he was sixteen. He'd played a lot of sports and had built up a lot of muscle.

He entered his dark apartment, feeling disoriented and confused. And pissed off. He went straight to his bedroom, stripped off his jeans and shirt then headed to the shower. He smelled Tori and sex on his body and it made him hard and crazy. Maybe washing it away would get her out of his head. But thoughts of her in the shower with him intruded into his brain and didn't help his aching cock. Soaping up his body brought back memories of her small hands washing him, everywhere... *Christ.*

He was pretty sure he was falling in love with her.

He wasn't looking for that. He'd just started his new life, started a new medical practice, started to settle down back in Santa Barbara. He hadn't even bought a house yet—that was his next goal, once he'd paid off the student loans.

But nor was he a guy who was afraid of commitment. He'd seen his parents' happy marriage for over forty years now, both his siblings married for many years. So if love came along, he wasn't about to slam the door shut on it. Even if she was eight years older than him. That hadn't bothered him. In every way she'd seemed made for him—smart, funny, as dedicated to her career as he was to his. And today he'd seen a surprising soft streak that had sent his heart tumbling.

But *this*...she wanted to be *flogged*? Holy freaking crap.

He turned off the shower, grabbed a towel and dried off, rubbing hard, harder than he had to, trying to ease the ache of need inside him, the stab of disappointment. Then he walked naked into his bedroom and fell onto the bed. Alone.

He tried to reconcile the powerful businesswoman and independent woman she was with the things she'd said. He tried to remember *what* she'd said, exactly. "*It's about letting go, letting someone else have the control.*" Okay. He could get that. If she was always

the one in charge, maybe it felt good to let go, to let someone else take control. And lord knows, when it came to sex, he was good with that. He liked that—being in control in bed. *“That makes me feel...strong.”* That part was a little harder to understand.

He closed his eyes and stacked his hands behind his head on the pillow.

“I felt so close to you tonight, I wanted to tell you. And I got the feeling...that you liked it.”

Hell. She’d known. Somehow, she’d sensed those dark urges deep inside him. The ones he’d hidden from every other woman he’d ever been with. His gut tightened painfully.

“With someone who’s Dominant, I’m giving him something too. Something he needs and wants. And it can be special.”

He could get the control part. He could easily imagine himself restraining Tori—tying her to the bed so he could do whatever he wanted with her. *“Do whatever you want to me.”* His cock surged and his balls tightened. Jesus. That turned him on, oh hell yeah. And he had to admit, it wasn’t the first time he’d ever had the idea. He’d never acted on it, but he’d definitely thought it.

But...flogging? Christ, no! He wouldn’t have a clue, and besides that was just cruel. A little tap on the butt, maybe. He could not see himself turning Tori over his lap and swatting her bare ass...

And his cock lengthened and swelled almost to the point of pain as he did in fact see that image in his mind—her lush little ass he loved to play with displayed right in front of him and him laying his hands on it in a heavy caress...

He rolled on the bed, buried his face in the pillow, hot shame sweeping over him. How could even think such depraved thoughts? And yet, his cock throbbed against the mattress. Hell, a little spanking wasn’t that bad. Was it?

* * * * *

He’d taken the day off Sunday, turned down a shift at the hospital because he’d hoped he and Tori would spend the whole weekend together. But he’d left last night, while she’d been asleep, which was totally chickenshit of him, because he’d been so flabbergasted not only by the things she’d revealed about herself, but by the feelings he’d had when he’d gotten rougher with her. When he woke late on Sunday and realized he was alone in his own bed, sleeping on crappy cheap sheets instead of her silky Egyptian-cotton ones, depression rolled over him.

He rubbed at the ache in his chest as he looked for food in his kitchen. Why he expected anything to be there, he had no idea. Tori didn’t cook much, but unlike his fridge with nothing but beer and cola, hers at least usually had juice and milk, and she had nice crusty loaves of bread and bagels and cream cheese and... He sighed and pulled out a can of Coke and a bag of Doritos.

He glumly sat on his couch and ate and drank, flicking through television channels. There was crap on TV to watch.

After a while, he tossed the chips aside. They were stale and anyway, he wasn't even that hungry. He needed to do something, to burn off some adrenaline. So he picked up the phone and called his buddy, Bryson, to see if he wanted to get some guys together for a little volleyball on the beach.

The physical activity worked—to a certain extent. Afterward, he and Bryson walked over to the snack bar and bought beers. They sat on the low wall looking out toward the ocean, plastic beer cups in hand, feet in the sand.

"Nice scenery," Bryson said, motioning with his beer toward a group of bikini-clad girls sitting on towels.

Dev glanced at them, grunted and shrugged.

"What's with you?" Bryson asked. "Who pissed in your corn flakes today?"

"Nobody. Nothing's wrong."

"Okay. Sure, dude."

The ocean breeze cooled the sweat on Dev's skin he'd worked up during the game. He'd played hard, aggressively, the way he'd played sports in high school and some of college. He liked that.

"I met someone," he said.

Bryson grinned and lifted his beer. "Yeah? Cool."

"Not so much. Things were going great and then she..."

Bryson lifted a brow, the soft wind ruffling his shaggy blonde hair. Tanned and bleached blonde, he looked like a surfer dude—hell, he *was* a surfer dude. He managed a big surf shop only a few blocks away and spent his days off at the beach, surfing, swimming, playing volleyball.

"You need a haircut," Dev said.

"Fuck off," Bryson said. "Then she what?"

Dev stared out at the ocean, the horizon hazy and blue, the sun shimmering on the water. "She's into some...uh...kinky stuff." He glanced at Bryson.

A broad grin split Bryson's face. "Right on, dude! So what's the problem?"

"Like, really kinky."

Bryson tipped his head to one side. "Like what?"

Dev wasn't sure if he really wanted to share the details. "Never mind exactly what. Just stuff I might not feel comfortable with."

"Ah. Too bad, man." Bryson was silent for a moment. "You seem bummed by it, though."

"Yeah." Dev firmed his lips. "I like her."

"Was it that bad? What could she be into that was that bad?"

"She wanted me to hurt her."

After a short pause, Bryson said, "Oh."

Bryson was his oldest friend. They'd grown up together, had been friends since middle school when Bryson's family had moved into the Hope Ranch neighborhood where Dev lived. He knew a little about Dev's family history.

"But what does that mean?" Bryson asked. "There's a whole range of hurt. You know? Like, a little spanking can be fun." He paused. "I went out with a girl like that once. Remember Eliki?"

"Yeah." Dev turned to his friend. How could he forget Eliki? He and Bryson had had a hot threesome with her, a few years ago.

"Except she was the one who wanted to...uh...inflict the pain. She had this fantasy about dressing up in black leather and boots and whipping me."

"Jesus Christ. I never knew that." She certainly hadn't dressed in boots and black leather the night they'd... "Did you let her?"

"Yeah."

Dev choked on his beer. "You're shitting me."

"I was willing to try it. Once. It's not like it sounds—the whipping part I mean. Yeah, it hurts, but it does kind of give you a rush. Adds a little edge to things." He grinned. "But I just couldn't get into being helpless. If we were going to play around with stuff like that, I wanted to be the one in control." He eyed Dev. "I would've thought you'd be the same."

"Well. You know." Dev cleared his throat. "I don't mind being in control. Hey, everybody likes to spice things up once in a while, with some handcuffs or toys or whatever, right?"

"Or a threesome." Bryson grinned, clearly remembering that too.

"Um. Yeah. But you know...I just can't see myself...hurting her."

"Even if she wants you to?"

"Why would someone want that?"

"It wouldn't really be hurting her." He shrugged. "For her, it's probably just a way to intensify the pleasure." He caught Dev's lifted eyebrow. "From what little I know. Different strokes. You know."

"Yeah, I know. Hey, I've seen a lot. But I've seen things gone wrong too—one time this couple came into Emerg—they'd been doing some kind of kinky shit with ropes and she almost strangled. I've seen women with uh...strange things inserted in their vaginas they can't get out. I've also seen women with black eyes and bruises—that they didn't want."

"Yeah." Bryson nodded. "I get it. But if two people are into it and they both want it, and they're careful..." He shrugged.

"I'm open-minded. What people do in the privacy of their homes is their business."

"You just don't want to do that, huh?"

Dev said nothing and Bryson's eyebrows rose again. "You *do* want to," he said slowly.

"No. Well. Fuck. I'm a nice guy."

Bryson laughed. "Yeah, you are. But you know, even nice guys sometimes like to give it to their girl up the ass, or share her with another guy. If that's what she wants."

Dev was silent.

"You really like this chick, don't you?"

"I don't actually know her that well. We only met a few weeks ago."

"Huh." Bryson shook his head, clearly not believing him. "Well, you didn't ask for my advice so feel free to tell me to screw off, but if you like her that much, maybe you should give it a shot."

"You know how much that goes against everything I had drilled into me."

"Yeah. I do. But I also know you're not an abuser. There's a difference."

"Huh." Dev's gut clenched. He tipped his plastic cup and drained the last of the beer. "I'm not sure if I get it."

"If you like her that much, maybe it's worth trying to get it."

Dev gave his friend a long look, then stared back out at the ocean. "Yeah. Maybe."

Bryson's easy acceptance of what he'd told him made him think. Maybe he'd made way too big a deal of it all. So Tori liked a little spanking once in a while. He might be able to do that. If she wanted to be dominated in bed, he could do that too.

He swallowed hard and realized he had a decision to make. He either gave up ever being with Tori, and Christ, that made him feel like someone was ripping his heart out of his chest, or he went back and tried to understand her and tried to make things work. Which meant going against everything he'd ever been taught about how to treat a woman.

Chapter Ten

Tori spent the day Sunday trying to get some work done, but her heavy heart and distracted brain made it difficult. She sat on her couch with her laptop on her knees, staring past it and out the window overlooking the city and in the distance the ocean, the brilliant sun in the clear blue sky, a typical Southern California summer day.

She sighed and tried to focus on the spreadsheet in front of her again, but it was hopeless. All she could think about was Dev and the look on his face when she'd told him what she wanted. And how he'd left in the middle of the night without saying a word. Her lips pushed into a brief pout, then relaxed.

He'd said he understood. He'd said he was into it. And damn, he'd done a good job of pretending if he hadn't been. The way he'd held her down, fucked her so hard... Heat rolled over her at the memory and she closed her eyes for a moment. But she wasn't entirely convinced.

Whatever. It was what it was. Sadness filled her, though, along with worry that she'd misread him and had actually pushed him into doing things he wasn't comfortable with. She'd wanted to please him. She'd loved the heat and arousal in his eyes when she'd talked about what she'd wanted. She wanted to give him that.

And he'd left and she didn't know if she'd ever hear from him again.

She took a big breath and shook her head. It didn't matter. She'd long ago accepted that she was different and was most likely not going to find a committed, happy ever after relationship. And really, her feelings were all out of proportion to how involved they were. They barely knew each other. It wasn't as if they were headed toward any kind of long-term relationship.

The phone rang, but she ignored it. It was likely Claire again, and she did *not* want to answer her interested questions about Dev just then.

She lifted her chin and forced herself to concentrate on the data she was trying to analyze, and was successful enough that when her doorbell rang, she started, nearly knocking her computer to the floor. She pressed a hand to her chest where her heart fluttered, then carefully set the laptop on the coffee table in front of her and rose to her feet. She tugged her T-shirt down as she walked to her front door.

Dev stood there, leaning against the wall, looking unhappy and dismayingly handsome despite his hair being mussed and the sweaty T-shirt he wore along with loose board shorts and flip-flops. He'd apparently been out in the sun, judging from the smooth bronze color of his face. His tanned biceps bulged beneath the sleeves of the shirt, his arms folded across his chest.

She carefully controlled her features as she opened the door to him, though her heart raced wildly.

"Hey," she said.

He gave her a long, smoldering look, brows lowered over his dark brown eyes. "Hey." He pushed away from the wall and looked down at her from his imposing height. "Can I come in?"

"Ah. Sure." Her palms grew sweaty and her mouth went dry but she stepped aside so he could enter her house.

She led the way down her hall, cool and dim compared to the bright sunshine outside, and into the living room. She gestured to the arrangement of couch and chairs and he sat on the couch. She perched on the edge of one chair and set her hands on her knees. She rubbed her damp palms over her bare knees beneath the hem of her knee-length shorts.

"I'm sorry, Tori," Dev said, leaning forward, elbows on knees, hands loosely clasped.

"Sorry for what?"

"For leaving last night without saying goodbye."

"I was asleep." She gave a small shrug to say, no big deal, but searched his face for answers.

"Yeah. I didn't want to wake you."

She knew that wasn't all. "You were upset."

"No I wasn't!"

She lifted one eyebrow. "Then what?"

"I don't know. Confused, I guess."

"I shocked you."

"No!" he said again. He shoved a hand into his hair. "Look. I'm not that innocent." His Adam's apple bobbed. "I know what goes on in the world. I've just never...been involved...in that kind of thing."

"I understand." Her shoulders tight, she sat stiffly.

"I can do it," he continued, and her heart missed a beat. He still held her gaze intently. "I want you help me understand."

It became very hard to breathe and she licked her lips. "Why?"

He broke the connection between them and looked down at his hands. After a brief pause, he said, voice low, "Because I really like you, Tori."

Her heart started knocking against her ribs in a fast beat. "Oh."

He lifted his head and the emotion blazing in his eyes melted her. "I know we haven't known each other long, but I felt a connection with you. You felt it too."

She nodded slowly. She'd told him that.

"So I at least want to try to understand it."

After a long, heavy pause, during which she considered her options, what to say, what to do, she said, "I'm afraid."

His face softened and the corners of his mouth twitched. "You? Afraid?"

Her own mouth lifted in half-smile. "Yeah. Me. Look, I'm putting myself out there. I don't want to strip myself naked in front of you..." His eyes brightened and she repressed her smile. "I mean figuratively. And then you tell me, sorry, you're a freak, I'm outta here."

"I'd never say that," he answered, sobering.

"I know, but you know what I mean."

"We're both taking a risk." They looked at each other. "And we're both hoping things work out. Right?"

She nodded slowly. "Right."

Her heart turned over in her chest, stealing her breath as she looked at him. She wanted this so much, and *that* was what scared her. She put a hand to her mouth and rubbed it. For a moment she almost considered telling him it didn't matter—she'd do without the bondage and the subspace and the pain and the freedom. But if she'd learned anything from her experiences, it was that honesty was the most important thing.

He extended a hand to her.

She reached out and took it. He gave a tug and she came out of the chair, ended up on his lap. He wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in the side of his neck, holding on to him too. They sat like that for long moments, holding each other.

"My job is high pressure, lots of responsibility," she said, drawing back to look at him. "Lots of people depending on me to solve problems. Lots of people who need me to tell them what to do. I have to be assertive and..." She hitched one shoulder. "I *am* assertive. I love my job. I get an adrenaline rush from solving problems, from making decisions, from making a great presentation. Outside of work, sometimes it's hard for me to relax, to let go of that control."

He gave her a crooked smile. "No shit."

One corner of her mouth tipped up in response. "I got the feeling that it wasn't really hard for you to take charge in bed," she said softly. "It seemed to come pretty naturally."

"Yeah," he said slowly. "It does. Sometimes I hold back."

"Don't hold back." She framed his face with her hands. "Please don't hold back."

He nodded, his eyelids dropping. They both moved at the same time until their mouths touched, clinging in a long, sweet kiss that went on and on.

Then Dev leaned his forehead against hers, and said, "I'm hungry."

Tori laughed and lifted a shaky hand to her face. "Okay."

"Let's go get something to eat."

She wouldn't have minded staying home. She wouldn't have minded him grabbing her and dragging her upstairs to bed. She ached for him, way down deep inside, but on the other hand, this wasn't just about sex. She wanted to be with him.

"Wear walking shoes," he said, rising, lifting her with him, his hands on her waist. "Let's go get seafood on the breakwater."

He set her on the floor and she grinned.

"Hell." He looked down at himself. "I'm all sweaty and sandy. I was playing volleyball on the beach with some buddies. I need to shower and change."

She could offer him use of her shower, but the clothing part was a problem.

"We'll stop at my place for a few minutes," he decided. "I'll clean up and change and then we'll go."

"Okay." She smiled, the thought of getting to see where he lived making her happy.

She needed to change too, out of the fleece shorts and worn gray T-shirt she'd been wearing around the house, so she skipped upstairs and hurriedly exchanged those clothes for a short denim skirt, tank top and hoodie in case it got cooler down at the beach, and she slipped her feet into flip-flops.

Dev's apartment was in a small apartment building just off State Street, only about six or eight apartments in the entire building. It wasn't fancy, but was clean and well-kept. She gazed around as she followed him in, trying to take in everything that was Dev.

"It's not much," he said apologetically. "I plan to look for a house once the loans are paid off."

He had a nice new brown leather sofa and chair and a big-screen TV, and that was about it. A nondescript bookcase held a lot of books—looked like a lot of textbooks and medical journals, but some paperbacks too. As he disappeared down the short hall, she picked up a nearly empty bag of taco chips from the couch and shook her head. She folded the bag neatly closed, picked up the empty glass from the table in front of the couch, a low dark wood square table, and went into the small kitchen.

She peeked out the sliding doors onto a small balcony, a single white plastic chair sitting there in the shade beside a pot with a brown and wilted palm tree. Then she moved back to the couch and picked up a copy of *Men's Health* magazine sitting on the table. Dev could have posed for the cover of that magazine with his hard, ripped body, his abs equally as impressive as the model's. Heat flared low inside her and she swallowed.

She heard water running briefly, sounds of Dev moving around, and she wanted to follow him into his bedroom and see it too, but she kept that urge in check and waited patiently for him to return. When he did, his brown hair was damp and combed, and he'd changed into a pair of jeans, faded and sitting low on his hips, and a snug navy T-shirt.

"Feel better now," he stated. "I should have come here and done that before I came to your place. I just got the idea in my head I had to see you, so I went straight there."

She smiled at him, her heart fluttery. "That's okay."

"Let's go eat."

They parked in the lot near the harbor and walked hand in hand to the small restaurant Dev wanted to go to. From their seat at a table on the second floor balcony, the view beyond the jumble of masts in the harbor was stunning in the late-day sunshine—crisply outlined dark mountains against a clear blue sky.

"We're going to have to talk about some things," Dev said after they'd ordered. He played with the cutlery on the table in front of him.

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

She nodded slowly. "I started to tell you last night. Some of it."

"Was it always like that for you?"

"Yes." She bit her lip. "Sort of. I always liked to be dominated in bed. But not out of bed." She flashed him a warning look and he smiled.

"It wasn't until I was in college that I started to feel a need for more. I—" She hesitated. "I'm kind of hard on myself. I put a lot of pressure on myself to do my best. I wanted to get good marks and I started feeling really stressed. I started going out with a man who was into the BDSM lifestyle and he taught me a lot. I discovered a way to escape from the stress. It helped me cope. I learned so much about myself from him."

Dev's mouth tightened and he looked down at the fork in his hands.

Maybe he was a little jealous. She paused at that thought, kind of liking it. "I don't know how much you know about BDSM, but it's not all whips and chains, master and slave, and kinky sex. I don't live the lifestyle. I just found some aspects of it that help me."

He lifted his eyes and nodded and she saw how intent he was on listening to her.

"I like to be restrained. In different ways, though I'm particularly fond of rope bondage." She kept her voice low, aware of other diners at the table behind Dev. "Being tied with ropes can feel like a giant hug—safe and secure. I'm helpless and all I can do is give myself over to it. It strips away everything else—all the stress and worry and pressure—and just lets me go free."

He nodded again, his face serious, eyes fastened on her.

"Control can be exhausting," she continued. "I like someone else taking control, and I can just submit. And being bound is the ultimate submission—because I'm completely helpless and vulnerable."

"Yeah. Vulnerable." He frowned. "You could put yourself at risk, Tori."

"I only do it with people I completely trust."

"Like who?"

Okay. There it was. But they were having a conversation and honesty was important, certainly that was something she'd learned from her experiences. "I belong to a club," she said carefully. "There's a guy I met there...we're play partners."

"Jesus Christ."

He stared back at her, eyes wide, just as their server arrived with their dinners. They remained silent while they were served, and Dev stared hard at the plate in front of him until they were alone again.

"Play partners?" he asked, voice low and raspy.

She nodded and arranged her napkin on her lap. "Yes. That's all it is, Dev. I don't go there very often, but sometimes I just need to. I hardly ever date. Gabe is a good friend who understands what I need, and I understand what he needs. I trust him."

His black frown had her stomach tightening as she picked up her fork, though her appetite had deserted her.

"I haven't been there or seen him since I met you," she told him. "Well, actually we ran into him—that night at the Four Seasons on our way out."

"Oh. Oh yeah." His jaw tightened even more.

"I won't go there. If it bothers you."

"If it bothers me." His grim mouth tightened. "What if it doesn't bother me? Then you'd go and do god knows what with some stranger in some..."

She held a hand up. "Don't say it. You don't know anything about the club, Dev."

He gave a short nod, and cut into the fish he'd ordered. "You're right. I'm trying not to judge."

"I won't go there," she said again, looking down at her dinner. "As long as we're together. Although it might help you understand, to come there with me."

"Christ."

She sighed, and poked at a shrimp with her fork. "Is any of this making any sense to you?"

He pressed his lips together, then said, "Strangely, yes."

"You look angry."

He lifted his head and met her gaze. "I'm not angry at you, Tori. The truth is, I'm horny."

Her eyes went wide and her fork clattered to her plate.

"Thinking about tying you up, and then doing anything I want to you... Christ, Tori, that's hot as hell."

She licked her lips, arousal pooling low in her belly. His intense dark eyes fastened on her.

"When you said that to me...to do anything I want to you...you have no idea how much that turned me on."

Her pussy clenched hard. Excitement clawed inside her. She tried to control the nerves jumping inside her as they ate, not even tasting her food.

Dev told her about talking to his friend Bryson.

"Bryson sounds like a smart guy," she commented.

"He has his moments." Dev gave her a wry smile. "I'll introduce you two some time."

She nodded. But neither of them could ignore the sparks crackling around them, the air electric and hot. Dev studied her across the table, his eyes heated and contemplative.

Tori shifted in her chair. "What?"

"Let's start now."

She blinked at him. "Start what?"

"This." He leaned across the small table and lowered his voice. "Take off your panties."

Her chin nearly hit the table. "What?" she squeaked.

"You heard me."

Her gaze slid past him, then side to side. They were seated in the corner of the small balcony, her back to the wall. She turned her eyes back to him. "You're kidding," she breathed.

His chin lifted. "No. Do it."

"Dev, that's crazy!" she hissed.

He leaned back in his chair and folded his arms across his wide chest, searing her with his gaze. "You said you like someone else in control."

"Yes, but..." Her body went soft and warm, heat sliding from her hairline right down to her toes. She licked her lips. She was wearing a short denim skirt, but... Holy crap. She'd done things many people would think were pretty kinky, but she'd never done anything like that. "I said, *in bed*. Not out of it."

"In bed, out of bed. Whatever. You want to give up control? Do it."

She gazed back at him for a long moment. The command in Dev's voice had sharp tingles of excitement dancing inside her. Then, beneath the table, she slid her hands under her skirt, pushing it high on her thighs, higher, until she could hook her fingers inside her thong underwear. Holding Dev's gaze, she lifted one cheek off the chair, then the other, just enough to tug her panties down. She sank her teeth into her bottom lip as she shifted in the chair, trying not to move too much so as not to attract any attention to what she was doing.

His eyes darkened and his lips parted as he watched her. She pushed her toes into the floor to raise her knees, slid the panties down farther, past her knees, and then they dropped to her ankles. Moving her feet around beneath the table, she bent forward just far enough to scoop them up.

"Give them to me."

She eyed Dev, her breath coming in short ragged bursts, pressing her thighs together against the quivering ache there. She crumpled the scrap of lace into her hand and extended it to him across the table. He took it, pushed her underwear into the front pocket of his jeans, and then said, "Ready to go now?"

Chapter Eleven

He drove them back to her place, tension snapping between them.

Where the hell had that insanity come from? The idea had just popped into his head. It had been so fucking hot, and his cock was still so hard he could hardly walk into her house when they got there. But inside the door, he had to pause. Hell yeah, he wanted her, wanted her bad, but a weird kind of uncertainty filled him too. Jesus, he felt like he was fifteen again.

What would she expect from him? What did she want from him? He jingled his car keys in his hand, and she turned to face him at the bottom of the stairs. They gazed at each other for a long heated moment. She took a small step back from him, almost as if the way he looked at her scared her.

He smiled, dropped his keys on her hall table and reached for her.

Lust exploded in him, his dick throbbing. He closed his hands on her hips and yanked her up against him, hard, knowing she was bare beneath the short skirt. He loved her shocked little gasp, buried a hand in her hair and pulled her mouth up to his. He kissed her hard, teeth grinding, lips bruising, pushed his tongue into her mouth. She whimpered, fisted his T-shirt in her hands and melted into him.

Her breasts pressed against his chest and he twisted his fingers in her hair, remembering, tugging. More hot little whimpers slid between her lips and he gave a tug on her hair, pulling her head back from him. She gazed up at him with wide eyes, sapphire blue, her lips shiny and parted. He gave another small yank, slid his other hand down her back, over the curve of her ass naked beneath the skirt. He curled his fingers around the firm flesh and gave another jerk so her pussy pressed up against his aching cock. Her feet lifted off the floor. The fact that he could do that made him feel strong and powerful.

"Right here," he said through clenched teeth. He lowered her to the floor, releasing her ass and her hair, and turned her sharply. He pushed her forward onto the stairs, her soft cry making him go even harder.

Jesus, what kind of sick fuck was he that this turned him on so outrageously? But in a way it felt like a relief, to give into the urges he suspected had always been lurking in the back of his consciousness.

She went down on hands and knees, her cheek pressed to one step, her fingers curled into fists. He slid his hands up the back of her thighs, pushing the short skirt up until he saw the rounded flesh of her ass. "Gonna fuck you right here, Tori," he growled. He fumbled with the buttons of his jeans, released his shaft and moved closer to her, hauling her ass higher.

This position was so erotic, her ass in the air, bare to him. He smelled her pussy as he bent over her and pressed the head of his cock against her slick heat. Her moan inflamed him, had blood surging through his body, and his dick. Hot and wet—so fucking hot and wet—he slid his cock up and down through her slit, then let it rest between the cheeks of her ass. He throbbed. God, he wanted to take her there, fuck her sweet little ass. He dragged in a breath, fought for control. Then he probed lower, found her silky wetness and pushed into her.

He paused, took a breath. At this point, he found it hard to be rough, knowing he could hurt her. He laid a hand flat on her back, while he pulsed inside her.

“Yes,” she whispered. “Do it, Dev.”

He closed his eyes briefly, then thrust in. Hard. Jesus, the way her body tightened around his cock was fucking incredible, this position different, tighter, deeper. He slid his hand up higher, between her shoulder blades and held her down while he fucked her, his hips slamming into her ass, his balls smacking her pussy. *No condom, shit.* But then maybe they’d already moved past that.

Thoughts spun away from him, his vision went dark as he got lost in the feeling of sliding in and out of her body, possession flooding him. With one hard thrust her head bumped into the stair and he almost came to a full-out halt. He swallowed hard, but kept going, overtaken by the need to come, almost crazy with it, and he pumped into her hard and fast. His balls tightened, his spine tingled, sending sensation shooting down his legs, up his spine and he managed to pull out just as he exploded. Jets of his semen shot out his cock, spurting onto her ass and her lower back, marking her as his.

He fell over her, sweat dampening his forehead, resting it on the carpet on the stair above her, his cock pulsing against her ass. He gasped for air, felt her small body quivering beneath him.

“Shit,” he muttered, realization rolling over him that she hadn’t come. “Shit.”

“It’s okay,” she mumbled, face pressed to the carpet. “S’okay, Dev. Was good.”

“You didn’t come.”

She said nothing and shame washed over him. That was so not like him. Taking her like an animal, from behind, on the stairs, not even making sure she got hers. Damn.

“You can make it up to me,” she continued. “Later.”

Oh yeah, and he could think of a million ways to do that. An image of her tied to the bed and him eating her pussy flashed into his mind, and his dick twitched inside her. Hard.

He groaned and slid out of her body, pushed himself back to standing and then lifted her. Her glazed eyes and flushed cheeks were so sexy. One cheek was reddened from the carpet and he dropped his eyes to her bare knees, rubbed nearly raw. “Hell,” he muttered. “Look at you.”

She stood on the bottom step, putting her closer to his eye level, quivering a bit, and looked down at herself. She smiled on seeing the red marks on her knees. "Oh," she breathed. "Oh wow."

He blinked at her, and then, unable to stop himself, he dropped to his knees in front of her and pressed his mouth to her reddened knees, first one, then the other. Her hand came to rest lightly on his hair and he felt her legs tremble.

"Oh Dev."

When he looked up at her from there at her feet, he realized how un-dominant this position was. Oh yeah, he was so screwing this up. But her tremulous smile and shiny eyes weren't condemning him. Not at all.

"You have no idea what you just did, do you?" she asked, voice breathy and light.

"Uh...fucked you on the stairs?"

Her smile twitched and her fingers moved in his hair in a small stroke. "Well yeah, that too. Come upstairs and let me explain the concept of after care."

He rose to his feet, swung her up into his arms, and carried her up to her bedroom.

* * * * *

Dev cut back on his shifts at the hospital, even though it meant less money coming in. But he expected Tori to do the same—no working late on a night he was off. She'd complained and tried to argue with him about it, but he just laughed at her and called her a workaholic slave driver and then she laughed too and called him a lazy slacker, which he totally knew was sarcastic. And then, he'd grabbed her chin, looked her right in the eye and told her firmly, "No way are you working until eight o'clock at night when I'm sitting around waiting for you to get home. Is that clear?"

And the way she'd obediently nodded, holding his gaze, sent a rush of adrenaline zinging through his veins.

They talked about her childhood and how she'd had to look after her little sisters. About how she'd always had to be the one in charge, her father not there, her new stepmother just wanting to have fun. They talked about Dev's frustration with his father's refusal to let go of his medical practice and Dev's worry that his father didn't trust him as a physician to be able to care for his patients. And they talked about fantasies. Hearing what Tori liked opened Dev's mind even more and put all kinds of wild ideas in there. He confessed to the threesome he'd had with Bryson and Eliki, and even admitted some of the darker ideas he'd always pushed way down deep inside him.

"When I was a teenager and...started having sex...I had these urges."

She encouraged him with her eyes.

"I kept seeing myself holding the girl down, doing dirty things to her... I felt so aggressive in bed, it scared me." He hesitated. There were some things he wasn't ready

to confess. "I'd had it drilled into my head that you cherish a woman, treat her gently and with respect. I didn't know where those crazy ideas came from."

"You never acted on them?"

"No. I wouldn't let myself."

Then when he told her about wanting to try anal sex, the acceptance and respect—and yeah, heated interest—he saw reflected in her eyes made him feel like he was being set free. "Everyone has fantasies, right?"

The bond between them thickened and strengthened, a connection that went far deeper than just adventurous sex. He'd never opened himself up to a woman as much as he did with Tori, never shared those parts of himself with anyone, and when she shared herself with him, he felt he was getting to know her on such an intimate level, the feelings he had for her grew bigger and burned brighter inside him.

And yet there were still things he held back.

They talked about how much she'd loved what he'd done to her on the stairs—how he'd taken control. She told him how that made her feel so satisfied, so free to let go, and it encouraged him to think of other ways he could do that for her. Other ways he could make her feel like that. Opening his mind to the possibilities was exciting—he had to admit it. He'd always been willing to be adventurous in his sex life—there probably wasn't a sexual position he hadn't tried, and he'd freely admit to experimenting with more than a few toys. In some ways, this seemed like a natural extension of that adventurousness.

So one night they were snuggled on Tori's couch, watching a movie, making out a little, kissing, touching, and things were heating up. Dev was getting hard and he knew Tori was getting wet. He pushed her down to her back, moved over her, one thigh between hers, and she arched up into his leg in a needy little movement. He pressed harder, held her face and kissed her, then lifted his mouth from hers and moved off her.

She made a small whimper as he sat back at the other end of the couch, one leg bent, the other foot on the floor, and when he laid his hand over his crotch, she sucked in a breath between her teeth and pushed herself up on one elbow. "Dev..."

He lifted his chin. "Take off your shorts."

She nibbled her bottom lip and glanced down at the knee-length shorts she wore. And then she did it. Just like he told her to. Heat flashed over his body and his cock got harder.

"And your panties."

She lay back, lifted her hips and pulled down her panties. He reached out and took them from her, restraining his smile at the thought of adding them to his collection, the pink lace pair from the restaurant never having been liberated from the pocket of those jeans until he'd gotten home.

"Lie down and masturbate for me."

Her eyes widened, then closed, and she lay back down on the soft arm of the couch. Her hair spread around her head, her cheeks flushed, she looked so damn sexy and soft and pretty. She slowly parted her legs and slipped her hand between them.

Dev's heart knocked hard in his chest as he watched. Hot. So. Fucking. Hot.

Her slender fingers moved over her pussy, and his mouth went dry. Goddammit he wanted to touch her. He pressed a hand to his throbbing cock.

"Wait," he rasped. Her eyes focused on him. "Take off your shirt too. Wanna see you naked."

Her throat moved as she swallowed, her cheeks grew even pinker, but she sat up and pulled the tiny T-shirt over her head. No bra. He knew she wasn't wearing a bra, he'd been feeling her up through the T-shirt moments ago. Her small, firm breasts had been so sexy, bare beneath the thin shirt, but now he almost groaned at the sight of her body, all smooth skin, soft curves, tight little nipples and those lush little pussy lips with her fingers brushing over them.

He licked his lips, focused on her hand between her legs. She used her middle finger to rub her clit and her arousal gleamed in the lamp light. She caught her bottom lip in her teeth and held it, used her other hand to squeeze one of her breasts.

Now a low sound did escape Dev's throat.

"So beautiful, sweet thing," he said. "So hot. Watching you touch yourself like that. Keep going."

She gave a tight little nod, pinched her own nipple, and Dev almost came in his jeans. Her fingers moved faster, the flush from her cheeks spreading down to her chest, her face tightening.

"Yeah," he murmured. "That's it, sweetheart. Make yourself come. Wanna see you come, Tori."

She moaned, the muscles in her thighs tightening, fingers moving faster. Faster. "Ungh!" She gave a soft cry as her stomach muscles contracted, her head lifted and her fingers stilled. And then she relaxed back down onto the couch, eyes closed, breathing fast.

Dev fought hard for control, pressure building inside him so hot and fast, and he pressed a flat hand hard to his dick and took deep breaths. God, he'd almost come in his pants. But he wasn't done with Tori, yet.

He flicked open the button, unzipped and pulled his aching cock out.

Her eyes flickered, probably at the sound of his zipper, and she watched him with hazy eyes.

He debated how he wanted to do this. Made up his mind.

He stood and dropped his jeans and underwear to the floor, then kicked them aside. And then he climbed back onto the couch, over Tori, straddling her, moving up her body so his cock was right in her face.

It was rude. It was disrespectful. He'd never in his life been so deliberately crude with a woman.

But he'd thought about it. Fantasized about it. And he was starting to know what Tori's triggers were.

Her eyes widened and her lips parted as she gazed at his cock, only inches from her face. Pre-cum glistened on the tip.

He tapped her cheek with his fingertips. "Open."

She obeyed immediately, her pretty lips parting wider, and then he fed her his cock. Sizzles shot up his spine, his balls pulled up so tight. Christ, he was going to last about two seconds in her mouth. Liquid ecstasy surrounded him, her velvet tongue licking over him, rubbing over sensitive nerve endings. Flames shot to his balls and he groaned.

He rested one hand on the back of the couch, the other on her cheek, and he fucked her mouth. "So damn good, baby," he muttered, hips moving. "Deeper. Take me deep. You know how."

She blinked at him, opened her throat and took him deeper, then sucked at him hungrily when he withdrew. "Jesus, Tori. Your mouth is incredible." The suction on the head, the drag of her lips along his shaft, sent sensations rocketing through his body, semen boiling in his balls. So close...he pulled out. Exquisite pain streaked through him as her teeth caught the rim. Then he was pulsing into nothingness and her little tongue came out to swipe over the head, licking up more drops. "Christ!" And then he couldn't stop it, his skin tingling all over, pressure gathering hard and fast, and his back arched as he came in her mouth, sensation exploding in his nerves, shooting out his cock, her head trapped between his body and the couch.

She took it all, sucked him dry, licked him clean, making the sweetest, sexiest sounds of delight and satisfaction.

And despite the position of domination and the fact that he'd made her do it, Dev felt a sense of...awe. The way she gazed up at him, the fact that she'd trusted him enough to let him do that to her, and she'd loved it, made him feel...honored.

This was complicated shit.

Chapter Twelve

Dev arrived at the clinic the next morning, feeling damn good from the night before, to find his father in his office.

"Dad," he said, pushing his arms into the sleeves of a white jacket. "What are you doing here?"

"Where's Mrs. Cavell's chart?"

Dev frowned. "Why?"

"She called me yesterday. She wants to see me."

"She was just here."

"I know. She said you didn't seem to know what you were doing with her high blood pressure."

Dev shoved a hand into his hair and stared at his father. "You're fucking kidding me."

His dad frowned and gave him a look of censure. Dev scowled. It's not like his old man had never used that word.

"The medication she was using wasn't working," Dev said. "I'm trialing her on a new one."

"She doesn't like it."

"She hasn't even tried it yet." He was digging deep for patience. "What does she think you're going to do?"

"I don't know, but she wants to see me, so of course I will."

"Dad." Dev's hands curled into loose fists. "You can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

Did he not even realize what he was doing? Christ, he'd have no patients left if Dad didn't stop sabotaging him like this. Was it really subconscious? Surely to god he wasn't that petty that he'd deliberately trash his own son.

No, that was ridiculous. He obviously didn't even know what the impact of his actions was. Dev sucked in a long breath.

"Tulia will know where her chart is," Dad said, heading for the door. "I'll check with her."

Tulia would in fact know; she knew everything, every patient, every chart, every specialist in the city that Dev could possibly refer patients to. He watched his dad walk out of the office and rolled his eyes, getting ready to see his first patient of the day, trying to clamp down on that rising frustration.

A few hours and many patients later, he was sitting tapping notes into the computer in his office when his father reappeared.

"You're still here?" Dev asked coolly.

"Just leaving. Your mom told me to tell you to come for dinner tonight. We haven't seen you for a while."

"I can't. I'm busy."

Dad lifted one gray eyebrow. "Doing what?"

"I have a...date. Sort of."

"Sort of a date. Well." Dad grinned. "I didn't know you were seeing someone."

"Yeah." Dev lowered his hands and turned his chair toward his father. "You met her that night at the Four Seasons. Tori Markham."

"Oh right. Pretty girl. So you're going out tonight with her."

"Well, I'm just going over to her place."

"Bring her to dinner, then. Your mother will want to meet her."

Dev couldn't get out of it, when he'd just said they didn't really have plans. "I'll have to check with her," he said.

"Yeah, sure. Call your mom and let her know."

Was he ready to take Tori home to meet his parents? That was a pretty "boyfriend-girlfriend" thing to do. But yeah, he wanted to. He wanted them to meet Tori. Because she was special.

He didn't have time to call her until a break between patients later in the afternoon.

"Hey," he said, leaning back in his chair, as usual something softening in his chest at talking to her. "How are you?"

"Busy." He heard the tension in her voice.

"I won't keep you. Listen, my mom and dad want me to bring you for dinner tonight."

"Oh."

Silence accumulated.

"It'll be fine, Tori. They're nice people."

"I'm sure they are. I just..."

"I know. But I want them to meet you."

He heard a soft breathy sigh. "Okay."

"Pick you up at seven."

He then called his mom and told her about Tori.

"Oh Dev!"

"Why do you sound mad? Dad said you would want to meet her."

"I'm not mad! I just wish I'd had more notice! You're bringing a new girlfriend and I'm just making a roast chicken for dinner. If I'd known, I'd've made something nicer."

"You make great roast chicken, Mom."

"And all I have for dessert is fruit salad. But I can go out and..."

"Don't worry about it, Mom. Whatever you have is fine. Don't make a big deal."

Another female sigh sounded over the phone line. "I won't embarrass you."

He laughed. "I know. We'll be there a little after seven, okay?"

"Okay." Excitement tinged her voice and he smiled and shook his head as he hung up. Geez, what was he in for?

* * * * *

Tori followed Dev into his parents' Hope Ranch house, a sprawling ranch-style home that felt immense. Wow. And Dev's parents lived here all alone. She tried to relax her tight fingers on the bottle of wine she carried.

Dev's mother hurried to greet them down a hall from the back of the house. "Dev, hi!" She threw her arms around him and hugged him. Then she turned to Tori.

"Mom, this is Tori Markham. Tori, my mom Diane."

"Nice to meet you, Tori." Diane studied Tori, her smile cautious.

"Nice to meet you too." She handed Mrs. Markham the bottle of wine she'd brought. Dev had told her she didn't need to, but she felt she should.

"Oh thank you, how thoughtful! Come back to the kitchen." Diane led the way down the highly polished wood floor of the hall. Her gray hair was short and chic, she was at least six inches taller than Tori, slender and dressed in black pants and a loose silk blouse.

The kitchen was part of a great room that included a small informal dining area, a grouping of furniture around a stone fireplace and a huge kitchen of maple cupboards and granite counters. The rich smell of roasting chicken filled the air.

Dev's dad rose from the couch where he was reading the newspaper.

"You remember my dad, Chad Fillmore," Dev said.

Tori did indeed remember him from that night at the Four Seasons and smiled as he shook her hand. "Nice to see you again."

"Likewise." He smiled, a charming smile just like Dev's, still boyish even though Dev had told her his dad was sixty-eight years old.

Diane poured glasses of Merlot for everyone and they sat in front of the fireplace while she bustled around the kitchen. Tori offered to help, but Diane waved her away. "No, no, everything's almost ready. I just need to steam the vegetables."

Over the course of the evening they chatted about local current events, a recent small earthquake farther down the coast, and Dev's parents asked her questions about her work, seeming impressed at her vice-president position. But through it all, Tori

could sense the question Dev's mom wanted to ask, but was too polite to. She wanted to know how old Tori was. Although Dev frequently told Tori she looked like a teenager, she knew she looked at least a few years older than Dev. Although his parents knew how old *he* was – unlike most people who looked at him and thought *he* was a teenager. A big, sexy teenager. Okay, she was exaggerating, but there was eight years between them and she knew Dev's mom was thinking about that.

And not exactly happy about it.

"You must have been working at SDI for a while, to be a vice president," Diane said.

Tori met Dev's eyes and understanding connected them. His lips quirked and one eyebrow lifted.

Tori turned back to Diane. "I'm thirty-seven," she said evenly.

"Oh." Diane blinked and her cheeks grew a little pink. "I didn't mean..."

"Yes you did, Mom." But Dev grinned. "You've been fishing for the last fifteen minutes."

"Well...I..."

"It's no big deal," Tori added with a smile, although her insides felt tight. "My age isn't a secret." She wanted to add, "How old are you?" with her most charming smile, but bit back the words. She didn't need to make an enemy of Dev's mom the first time they met.

Diane's eyes fell to her plate.

"How was the golf game this afternoon?" Dev asked his dad, changing the subject.

Tori pressed her lips together and listened to them talk about the game.

"Do you golf, Tori?" Chad asked her.

"Yes, I do. I'm a ten handicap."

"Get outta here." Dev spoke up and she glanced at him and grinned.

"What? Don't you golf?"

He gave a lopsided smile. "I haven't had time. Unlike some semi-retired people." He gave his dad a meaningful look, who laughed. "And business people who network on the links." And his gaze landed on her.

"We'll have to play some time," Chad said to Tori. "I'm a member at Ten Palms."

She nodded, having played a number of business golf games there over the years, networking on the links, as Dev had said.

"Dinner was wonderful, Diane," she said.

"Thank you." Diane's smile was still wary.

After dinner they moved out onto a stone patio overlooking the swimming pool, to sit in thickly cushioned teak chairs. The sun had set, but lamps illuminated the area. A cool breeze ruffled Tori's hair and she took a deep breath. Dev had been right. His parents were very nice.

But they didn't like her.

* * * * *

While Tori was using the bathroom just before they left, Dev's mom grabbed hold of his arm.

"Devlin!" she hissed. "What are you doing with a woman that old?"

He stared at his mom, at her softly lined face, anxious eyes and thin mouth.

"That old?" he repeated quietly. "She's not that old."

"She's thirty-seven! You're only twenty-nine! You're barely out of medical school!"

"I'm an adult, Mom. I'm almost thirty, and yeah I haven't been out of school long but I'm a doctor. Fully qualified MD, just like Dad. And Tori is not old."

"But..." She bit her bottom lip. "You're too young to settle down."

"Who's talking about settling down?"

"A woman her age wants to settle down."

"Geez, Mom, I've known her for like three weeks." But even if they *were* talking about settling down, what would be wrong with that? "I know you think I'm still your baby, but I'm not."

She took a step back, eying him with surprise. "Dev."

"What?" He shoved a hand into his hair. "It's the truth. You two both need to face the fact that I'm all grown up."

He'd never talked to his mom so...firmly. She blinked at him.

"Dev. Apologize to your mom."

Dev frowned at his dad. "For what?"

"You were rude."

"I was not rude. I'm making a point here and I'm being polite about it. You don't trust me to look after your patients. Mom doesn't trust my judgment about women. I'm serious. Both of you." He held his dad's gaze, then his mom's. "I care about Tori. I don't want you talking about her like that. And if things get serious between us, there'll be nothing wrong with that."

Mom blinked again and put a hand to her throat. "Oh."

Tori appeared in the kitchen, smiling, her purse over her shoulder, ready to go, but her smile faded as she sensed the tension simmering in the room.

Dev gave his mom a kiss on the cheek, his dad a pat on the shoulder. "Thanks for dinner, Mom, it was awesome."

"What was that about?" Tori whispered as he gripped her arm and led her down the hall to the front door.

"Nothing." Jaw tight, he forced his fingers to relax on her arm.

Her lips tightened. "You were talking about me, weren't you?"

"No."

He let them out the front door and hustled her into his car.

"You're lying."

In the dark car, the dashboard lights glowing softly, he rested his hands on the steering wheel for a moment, then turned to her. She regarded him wide-eyed, her hands twisting the strap of her purse.

"Thank you, Tori."

She blinked. "For what?"

"For being you." He reached out and dragged his fingertips over her velvety cheek. "My parents still think I'm a little kid." He smiled. "I'm not."

"No. You most certainly are not."

Her definite tone made his smile widen and his heart expand in his chest. "And once again, I say thank you."

He put the car in gear.

"I still don't know what for," she huffed, but she smiled too.

Chapter Thirteen

Tori had met with the people at Cunningham's after the problem had been discovered. She'd sucked up big-time, given them the completely new market research with a promise to discount their invoice and had managed to salvage the account. She'd been sweating when she left that meeting.

But of course that wasn't the end of her problems with that account.

"My doctor wants me on bed rest." Jennifer stood in her office Friday morning, hands clasped in front of her, looking pale and unhappy. "I'm really sorry, Tori."

Tori leaned back in her chair. Jennifer was their senior researcher and had several important projects she was working on, including the Cunningham account. While Tori had agreed with Fletcher that they needed a backup plan in case this happened, she hadn't actually gotten around to coming up with one, and now, dammit, it was too late.

What the hell would they do without Jennifer? There was no way they could recruit and hire someone and train them in the timeframes they were working within. They had junior researchers, but pulling them from other projects would create problems elsewhere. Tori forced a smile.

"Oh Jennifer, don't apologize. It's not your fault."

"I feel so bad." She bit her lip. "I might be able to do some work from home."

Tori tipped her head to one side. "Really?"

"I don't see why not."

"I want you to check with your doctor first."

"Okay. I'll do that. I've worked from home before, and I know you do it all the time."

"Technically there's no reason you can't. Other than team meetings or client meetings. But I can step in to those for you."

Jennifer eyes tightened at the corners. "Oh you're so busy already, Tori."

Tori waved a hand and smiled. "We'll do what we have to do. You check with your doctor and we'll see what we can work out. Does Fletcher know?"

"Yeah. I told him."

"I'll talk to him about it too."

"Thanks Tori, I really appreciate this. I thought you might be more upset."

The frustration and pressure building inside her was enough to make her ears pop, but Tori kept it carefully screened with a smile as Jennifer left. Then she lowered her forehead to her maple desk and gently banged it there. Once. Twice.

After last night's dinner with Dev's parents, who clearly did not want their son going out with an older woman, she'd woken up feeling edgy and grouchy. This didn't help.

"You okay, Tori?"

Her head snapped up to see Fletcher standing in her door. "Yeah. Fine. Come in. Jennifer just told me the good news."

Fletcher made a face and gave her a grim look that startled her. "What?" she asked.

He shut the door behind him.

"You knew Jennifer was having problems with her pregnancy and you still made her stay late last week to work on that report."

Her jaw dropped. For a moment, words failed her. "What are you saying?" she demanded.

"I'm saying, thanks a lot. Now she's going off altogether. Thanks to you."

"I can't believe this! You cannot be serious." She laid her palms on her desk, staring at him. "First of all, I didn't make her stay that late. I changed my mind and we both left by six."

"And then she came in on the weekend to finish it."

"She offered to do that! I was okay with her doing it Monday."

"No you weren't. I tried to tell you it could wait 'til Monday and you ignored me and insisted it get done that night."

"I changed my mind." The words were squeezed out between clenched teeth. "Jesus, Fletcher I can't believe we're having this conversation. Are you blaming me for Jennifer having problems with her pregnancy? That is just ridiculous."

He gave her a narrow-eyed look. "Ya think?" He shrugged. "I'm sorry." Clearly, he wasn't. "That's out of line. So what are we going to do?"

"She's going to ask her doctor about working from home," Tori said slowly, and when his eyes flew open wide she almost wished she hadn't told him that. "She offered," she continued hastily. "Truly, Fletcher, I didn't ask her to do that."

"She's pregnant! You're putting her baby at risk."

"I told her to ask her doctor! I'm concerned about her baby too! I would never do something to put her at risk, that is just crazy." She took a breath. "Seriously, she offered and I told her she has to check with her doctor first. If she can do some work at home, and I can step into meetings for her and maybe a few other things here, we might be able to get by until we can hire someone else. I'll call Human Resources right away. Maybe they have some resumes on file."

He gave a tight nod. "Fine. I just hope this doesn't end in disaster."

What was with him? She watched him leave with stiff shoulders and once again slumped in her chair. Did he really think she was that much of a despot that she would

put her staff at risk? That was crazy. Yes, she worked hard, and yes, she had high expectations of her staff, but she wasn't that ruthless. Jesus.

Her head throbbed and she lifted both hands and rubbed her temples. Her neck and shoulders felt rock-hard and with the adrenaline rush of anger fading, weariness rolled over her. She sighed and picked up the phone to call HR.

Things remained tense between her and Fletcher for the rest of that day and she knew they were going to have to have another conversation. She was his boss and she wasn't going to have him going around giving her black looks and talking about her behind her back to other staff. But she had a hundred things on her to-do list and a tense conversation with him was easy to put off until next week.

Late Friday evening she let herself into her house. Dev would be there any minute, expecting her to be ready to go to the movie they'd planned to see. Much as she wanted to see him, oh she wanted to see him so much, she cringed thinking about his reaction if he knew she'd stayed at work this late. Although she knew he worked hard, insanely hard sometimes, with incredible stamina and strength, he preached work-life balance and insisted that it was important to health to have fun sometimes.

And she knew he was right. Like when he said it was important to eat healthy. And then consumed a big of chips and a can of cola for breakfast. She smiled as she ran upstairs and struggled out of her heels and suit as fast as she could. He had just as hard a time as she did relaxing sometimes, and yet they seemed to be a good influence on each other. In trying to make her slow down, he had to slow down himself.

Too impatient to unbutton her blouse, she tried to pull it over her head. A button popped off and she cursed, and then she heard a ripping sound. Shit! One of her nicest silk blouses and she'd just ripped a hole in it in her haste. She balled it up and threw it on the floor, then stomped into her bathroom.

She looked like shit. She eyed her reflection in the mirror, studied the fine lines at mouth and eyes. Dev could joke that she looked like a teenager, but just then she saw every one of her thirty-seven years on her stressed face. She glumly washed her make up off, annoyed when she got her hair wet. Everything was irritating her, stressing her, that pressure building up inside her again.

She heard the chime of her front door opening—Dev had a key now. And she wasn't even close to ready. Maybe she could convince him to just skip the movie. They could watch a movie on TV, order a pizza...just relax. She needed to relax. She needed... She closed her eyes and gripped the edge of the bathroom counter.

She and Dev had had some very hot sex this week since they'd talked, his dominance incredibly arousing to her, but he'd been holding back still, she knew it, and at that moment, frustration spiked in her again. She needed...more.

His heavy footsteps on the stairs reached her ears, and then she heard his deep voice call her name in her bedroom.

"In here."

She walked to the door and stood there in her bra and panties, limp dripping hair, no makeup, hot and tired and annoyed.

"Hey, baby." He crossed her bedroom to her and cupped her chin, then dropped a kiss on her mouth. "You're not ready."

"I knew you were going to say that," she snapped.

He lifted a brow.

"Sorry." She moved away from him. "I had a shitty day."

He lay down on her bed and tucked his hands behind his head. "Wanna talk about it?"

"I don't know." She stood there looking at him, at home on her bed, all gorgeous and sexy male and big muscles, envying his easy acceptance of her bitchiness and his even temper. She'd seen him pissed off, but really not much, he was always so steady and down-to-earth.

"You look hot," he said.

She stared back at him, frowning.

"Uh oh," he said. "What's that look for?"

"I'm just...stressed."

"I can see that. Worked late again, didn't you?"

"Yeah." She sighed. "My senior researcher went off on sick leave today. She might be able to do some work, but I had to step into a couple of her meetings today. Had to get up to speed on where the projects are, plus my own work, and I kept thinking about last night, and..." Her voice got choked and she stood there, half naked, her throat tight and her eyes stinging, and she clenched her hands. "And..." She couldn't get the words through the blockage in her throat.

"And what?" Dev rolled to sitting, eyeing her with concern.

"And Fletcher thinks it's m-my fault she's going off be-because I m-made her work last weekend!" Tears started sliding down her face and she covered it with her hands.

He was right there, instantly taking her into his arms and pulling her against his big warm body. "That's crazy. A little overtime isn't going to make someone sick."

"She's pregnant."

"Oh."

"So you agree with him!" She wrenched herself out of his embrace, swiping at her wet face.

"I didn't say that!"

"Everyone thinks I'm a cold-hearted bitch who works people into the ground."

"Tori..." He reached for her again and she batted his hands away.

"Just leave me alone!" Her chest ached and she choked on a sob, trying for control, but it was slipping away fast.

Dev shoved a hand in his hair. "Tori, I didn't mean..."

"Oh just go away! I need to be alone!"

He moved to her again, took hold of her arm and she jerked back. God, he'd never seen her like this, nearly distraught, crying, so worked up he was afraid she was going into cardiac arrest. And over what? A little stress?

She flailed her arms at him in a wild attempt to evade his grasp, tears running down her face.

He wasn't angry. A little frustrated maybe, but he knew he was in total control of himself. So when he grabbed her, hard, and captured her wrists behind her back to stop her from smacking him, it wasn't because he lost control. She struggled harder, crying, Christ, she was going to hurt herself, or hurt him. Then, again totally on instinct, he picked her up, half naked and writhing in his arms, carried her to the bed and sat with her stretched out on her stomach across his lap.

He held her wrists with one hand, and with the other he laid a heavy tap on her butt. Her feet kicked and she made a little screech, but he sensed her body going still. "Stop it," he ordered her, voice hard. "Just stop, Tori."

He smacked her again, a little harder on the other cheek. Her tiny panties left her cheeks mostly bare to him, and even in the midst of her emotional meltdown he had to admire the smooth curves. Oh yeah, she had the sweetest little ass. He patted her again, and again, and miraculously, amazingly, she moaned and stilled across his lap.

No idea what he was really doing and yet sensing this was helping, he kept it up until her ass was flushed a rosy pink and she was limp across his thighs. Her hair draped over her wet face, she made tiny whimpering noises that sounded like pleasure. Like sex sounds. Like hot little "do me more" sounds.

Inexperienced at this, he didn't want to go too far. But she hadn't told him to stop, so he gave her a couple more swats for good measure, and then let his hand rest there. Heat rose from her flesh and he rubbed in gentle strokes. This time her moan definitely sounded like pleasure.

He almost felt like a pig for doing it, but curiosity won out and he stroked his hand down between her thighs. Sure enough, her panties were soaked and she opened her legs just a bit to make it easier for him to touch her there. She wanted it. Holy shit, she wanted it bad, her smooth folds all plump and wet.

And she wasn't the only one ferociously aroused. His cock throbbed painfully in his jeans.

"Tori," he whispered, releasing her hands, noting almost absently how her wrists had reddened too in his tight grip.

"Mmm."

His first impulse was to ask, but he bit the inside of his mouth. Once again, going on nothing but instinct, he made a decision. He stripped her panties off her, rolled her

over on his lap and lifted her so she sat astride him. Her eyes heavy and still pink, she gazed back at him, not fighting him, placing her small hands on his shoulders. She gave him a slow blink.

"Take out my cock," he ordered her.

She immediately dropped her hands to his fly, working away. Her sweet compliance sent a surge of electricity through him. When she reached inside and her fingers closed around his swollen dick, he hissed. "Oh yeah, baby. That's good. Take it out."

Being free of his jeans was only a small relief, blood surging in his cock with a desperate need to be inside her. Hands on her hips, he lifted her again, bringing her over him, her hand still on him holding him in place. Then the sensitive head of his dick touched her silken heat and he groaned. "Oh yeah, baby. Gonna fuck you. Right now."

"Yes." Her hazy eyes and slow smile gave her the appearance of being in a daze. She was definitely all calmed down, almost in a trance, and he sucked in a breath as her hot pussy closed around him. She tightened her muscles and he twitched.

All she wore now was her bra, so he reached behind her and flicked the clasp, then tugged it off. Her pretty breasts were right there in front of him, little pink nipples all tight and begging to be sucked. So he did. He bent his head and took one in his mouth and sucked — hard.

She gasped and rose up. He peered up at her, still holding her in his mouth, but the rapture on her face encouraged him and he did it again, drawing hard on the tip, using his teeth too, all the while moving her up and down on his shaft in a sublime rhythm.

He moved to the other nipple and her head fell back, fingers digging into his shoulders. He played there while pressure built, sensation whipped through his veins, desire sizzled up his spine. The sweet taste of her filled his senses and then he released her nipple, lifted his head and gazed down, riveted by her swollen breasts and scarlet little peaks. That was so fucking hot! Lust exploded in him, hard and hungry.

He fucked up into her, holding her hips, while she wrapped her arms around his neck and moaned. Then he slid his hands around to her ass and his fingers brushed over the cleft between her cheeks, then down into it, and she gasped. He caressed the puckered opening, gently rubbing it and her body tightened around him, squeezing him.

"Damn, Tori. That's so good." Her hot silky flesh sliding against his dick, creating sweet friction that had his mind spinning. "Your pussy is so tight. So sweet."

She murmured in incoherent response.

"Ride me, Tori. Yeah. Like that."

Holding her ass, he helped her lift and lower herself on his shaft, drag and pull, gripping him and taking him higher. He thrust up into her until their bodies were meeting in hard, urgent percussion.

"Dev!" Her head fell back, hair hanging down her back, arms still around his neck, her breasts bouncing in front of him. Fuck, what a visual, and when his gaze dropped to where they were joined, his dark curls against her tiny blonde patch and smooth lips, his gleaming wet shaft pushing up into her again and again, that dark hunger raged inside him to take her and take her hard. His balls grew tighter at the base of his cock, tingles built at the base of his spine.

"D'you wanna come, baby?" he rasped out.

"Yes."

"Say it."

"I want to come. Make me come, Dev."

He pushed a little harder. "Say it."

She moaned. "Please. Please, Dev, make me come."

Her plea inflamed him and he clenched his jaw and tightened his ass cheeks to keep himself from exploding inside her. Just...a...little...longer... He reached between them and found her clit, pinched it and she cried out, arched into him.

"Yes, yes. Oh God, *yes*."

And as she rippled around his cock and made the sexiest little noises he'd ever heard, he finally let himself go, the pressure about to blow the top of his head off, and he came hard, so damn hard, fire racing up his spine, down his legs and out his cock.

Chapter Fourteen

Tori curled up in a ball under the covers of her bed while Dev was in the bathroom. She needed him, she needed him now, she was coming down from a high and starting to shiver. Did he know that? He should know that.

Light sliced the room as he opened the bathroom door and then darkness immersed the room again when he flicked the light out. The bed dipped as he climbed on beside her. Gentle hands parted her thighs and the warm wetness of a cloth soothed her tender flesh there, wiped her clean. The dry towel he used next was rougher but still careful and then he slid under the covers with her and she turned to him, seeking his warmth.

"Hey," he whispered, wrapping his arms around her. "You're shivering. Are you cold?"

"I'm just... I'm just..." She swallowed. "Yes." She sank into the heat radiating off his body.

He threw a leg over her hip, pulling her even closer against him, and rubbed a hand up and down her back. "You okay, sweet thing?"

She nodded, loving the feel of his hand rubbing her back, and cuddled even closer. "Want to talk to you," she mumbled against his chest. "In a little while."

"Okay."

They lay together like that, twined together so close, for a long time, until the shivering eased and Tori began to feel calmer. The stress that had built inside her earlier was gone and her body felt relaxed and light.

She moved against Dev and stroked his shoulder. "Thank you," she whispered.

He murmured a noise. It sounded like he was almost asleep. She smiled into his chest. Now she was ready to talk and he was crashing. She could be patient, and in fact, she was feeling a little drowsy herself. She let herself drift off, floating, half dreaming, imagining Dev doing dirty things to her, taking her, owning her.

She awoke with his hand between her legs, cupping her pussy in a gently possessive gesture. "Dev."

"Yeah." His voice came out velvet-rough.

"I have to tell you something."

"Okay." His fingers moved on her swollen, sensitive folds. Helplessly, she parted her thighs for him.

"What you did earlier...when you spanked me...that was so good. It was exactly what I needed. How did you know?"

"I have no fucking idea."

She smiled, as heat curled inside her at his touch.

"Well, it was. I loved it. Can I tell you how I felt?"

"Mmm."

His fingers playing there distracted her, sent her thoughts scattering and she tried to focus. "It's like a drug," she whispered. "Like a high. Like I'm floating and all quiet inside my head."

"A drug," he repeated.

"Um...yeah." Did that weird him out?

"Like endorphins."

"Yeah. That's right." She lifted her head and looked at him.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm a doctor. I know about hormones. I know how it works."

"Then you understand that."

"Of course I do."

"And after I...come down. I get kind of shaky and cold and..."

"Like you're in shock."

"Um...maybe."

"More hormones. Adrenaline."

"I never thought about the scientific explanation of it."

He nodded thoughtfully. "Yeah."

"So, when I'm coming down...I need the after care."

"Like we talked about the other night."

"Yes. When you kissed my knees. When you clean me up after we have sex. That's after care. I need to be held and warmed up. I need that especially after I've been..."

"Spanked."

"Well, yeah." Spanked, or whatever had transported her to that place she went—hot, floating, euphoric.

"Oh baby." His arms tightened around her.

"I want to show you something."

"Are you okay? I don't want to let you go."

"I'm okay." She wriggled out of his embrace and reached out to click on the small lamp beside the bed, blinking her eyes a few times against the pierce of light. She pushed a hand down between the mattress and headboard, searching with her fingers for... Yes. She grasped the leather cuff and pulled it out.

"What's that?"

She nibbled her bottom lip. "It's a handcuff."

"Oh." His eyes narrowed, then widened. "Oh."

She smiled. "Yeah." She again reached between the mattress and the headboard and pulled out another identical leather cuff.

He lifted onto one elbow and studied them.

"There are others," she said, eying him, gauging his response. "Along the footboard."

His eyes met hers. He said nothing. Moments built one on the other, Tori's breathing suspended while she awaited his reaction. Then he reached out and took the leather cuff from her hand.

He fingered it, studied it, looked back up at her. She swallowed. And then in one seamless fast move, he had her on her back, wrists captured in one hand and yanked about her head. She gasped as he wrapped the cuff tightly around her wrists.

She gazed up at him. He lifted one eyebrow, then his gaze tracked down her body, over her breasts, her stomach, the juncture of her thighs. Her nipples tightened almost painfully. He laid his palms on her thighs, then drew his hands slowly down her legs and she shivered.

He looked up at her, then at the footboard, slid a hand down and found one of the cuffs there. She didn't fight it when he fastened it around one ankle. Her leg was secured in seconds. When he reached for the other leg, she smiled. He was doing it so slowly and gently.

He parted her legs wide to secure the other ankle. Now Tori bit her lip, feeling the vulnerable exposure of the pose. She trusted Dev, more than any man she'd ever been with, trusted completely that he wouldn't abuse the power he had over her in this position, but even so a little thrill of excitement ran over her. Because she *was* so vulnerable. Helpless.

He trailed his fingertips up the insides of her legs. She was so sensitive there, and every nerve quivered at his touch. He paused at her inner thighs, rubbing gently there, so close to where she ached for him, but not close enough.

"Such a pretty pussy," he murmured, studying her. Heat rolled over her from her chest into her face, down to her fingertips. "So pink and smooth and soft."

She could barely speak. "You've probably seen a lot," she choked out. His gaze snapped up to meet hers. "I mean...because you're a doctor."

He nodded. "Yes."

She didn't really like to think of him studying other women like this, though she knew that had to be completely different when he was working.

"This is different," he continued, affirming her thoughts. "Completely different. This is...hot. And *mine*."

She sank her teeth into her bottom lip, watched him looking at her, his eyes warm and avid. And then he touched her, with one long, blunt finger, stroking over one of her folds. She moaned.

He brushed his fingertips over her, tormenting her with soft caresses, teasing touches, from the small patch of curls she kept, down over bare flesh, down lower to the sensitive back opening. Tingles started gathering low inside her, a heated ache, a needful throb for a deeper touch. A noise vibrated in her throat.

He was torturing her. Never mind pain—*this* was torture, withholding what she wanted, what she needed. Her womb ached and clenched, her clit quivered. “Dev,” she whispered.

“I do believe I like it when you beg,” he remarked, cupping her pussy with his hand. “Oh Tori, I can feel how hot you are in my hand. So tiny and soft and hot.”

She pulsed into his palm. *Jesus*. She tried to lift her hips, but her legs were spread so wide her thigh and lower back muscles strained. The leather dug into her ankles. Oh god, there was the bite of pain she liked, muscles wrenching, ties squeezing. And Dev’s hand playing with her in that most sensitive of places.

“Please,” she groaned, arms stretched above her head. She turned her face into one of her arms, closed her eyes at the sensations building inside her. “Please, Dev.”

“Please, what?”

He parted her folds a little and let his fingers dip deeper.

“That,” she gasped. “More.”

“You’re wet, Tori.” One finger probed into her opening. “So wet.”

“I know, I know.”

“I want to taste you, sweet thing. And you’re gonna come for me, in my mouth.”

His words inflamed her even more, had the heat rising higher, hotter inside her, sweeping over her skin.

“But first I want to play here. Because you’re so pretty and wet.”

Another groan tore from her throat. His fingers moved on her, now slick and damp, gliding over her sensitized flesh, probing deeper, right inside her and then out. And then one wet finger probed lower still, rubbing her anus and sensation rocketed through her. Her hips jerked, thighs painfully tight.

“Like that?” he whispered. “I think you liked it last time I did that.”

“Y-yes.”

“How about this?” And one finger pushed inside her ass while another slid into her vagina.

“Oh God!” Once again her body strained against the bonds, her hips wanting to move against his hand. She wanted to touch herself, to rub her clit and make herself come, already close, so close. But her hands were bound and she couldn’t and she pulsed against nothing. Until Dev bent his head and licked her. She cried out again.

Now he was using his tongue to torture her, his fingers inside her pumping lightly, his tongue teasing and licking over swollen folds. She dragged her eyes open to watch him, his eyes closed as he licked her, tasted her, then kissed her. He nibbled on her

flesh, setting every nerve ending in her body aflame, then kissed again, and then slowly licked around her clit. The straining bud quivered, and she couldn't stop the needy whimpers from leaking out of her mouth.

His fingers continued to move inside her, in both passages, and then his tongue touched her clit. She cried out, fire erupting inside her and racing over her body. "Oh god, yes!" She rolled her head. "Oh Dev."

He took her clit in his mouth and sucked. Heat coiled, intensified, tightened, everything inside her twisting in a tight hard point of exquisite pleasure and then burst open, sparks showering, weakness sliding over her body and down her legs.

He made a noise of pleasure, his mouth still pressed to her pussy, his fingers still inside her, sucking gently as she throbbed into his mouth. Oh dear god, that was good, so good, so amazingly good.

Chapter Fifteen

Okay, so there was something pretty intense about having a woman completely helpless and at your mercy. Being able to do whatever you wanted. Dev couldn't say that his first instinct had been to do anything sadistic...although in retrospect, he *had* enjoyed teasing her and drawing things out until she was a quivering, pleading heap on the bed. Huh. He smiled into Tori's hair, her ankles and wrists now released from the bindings.

When she'd slowly lowered her arms, he'd immediately recognized that she'd had the blood flow restricted to them for quite a while and had been in one position for so long she had to be feeling it in her muscles. So he'd carefully helped her lower her arms and then had massaged her, her deltoids, her traps, letting his fingers dig into tight muscles and release tension. Her soft moans of pleasure sank into his brain and tightened his heart.

He'd done the same for her legs, and then she'd curled into him once more, and he had to say that did something for him too, the way she took whatever he gave her and then attached herself to him like lint to Velcro, radiating gratitude and contentment. A feeling of intense power and satisfaction rolled over him at the thought that he'd done that to her.

Holy crap, it was fierce, this feeling.

He stroked a hand down her bare back, and she murmured a small noise into his throat. His cock throbbed against her hip, having gotten hard all over again while he'd fingered her and licked her to a crashing orgasm. He still tasted her tangy sweetness in his mouth, on his lips.

All of it turned him on like he'd never been, the feeling of power and control, the way she'd submitted to him, but most importantly the way she'd calmed down. This was the subspace she'd told him about. And he'd given it to her. He'd given her what she needed and that gave him an incredible rush.

If he was going to be completely honest, he had to admit he'd gotten something out of it too. He'd given in to those dark urges, his intense sexuality, the needs he'd always tried to cover up and bury deep down inside. He'd done the things he'd sworn never to do—but not out of anger or a desire to hurt. He knew he'd been in complete control and deliberate about it.

It was totally fucking with his mind.

It went beyond the high of controlling, beyond the ease with which he could control her body with his physical size and strength. And a few leather bindings. Yes, he wanted to dominate her. Physically, he could do that with ease. But psychologically—somehow he knew he had much to learn. He wanted help her. He

wanted to see her sweet smile and glowing eyes showing him her satisfaction, her release, her happiness, the way she looked at him that made him feel strong and powerful and ready to take on anything. With a hand on the back of her head, he pressed her against his chest, and rubbed his face against her hair.

He wanted her, all of her, wanted to possess her, her body, her mind, her heart. It was primitive and out of character for him, but there it was. He still wasn't sure if he could ever come to terms with all this, but lying there with her all satisfied and slumberous in his arms, made him feel like he'd done something good and right.

* * * * *

Tori got up in the morning before Dev and went downstairs in her quiet house to make coffee. A sense of well-being filled her, expanded in her lungs with every breath she took and she couldn't help smiling as she scooped coffee grounds into the filter, then clicked on the coffee maker. She brushed her fingers together, then leaned against the counter. Her eyes drifted closed, still smiling, remembering...enjoying every twinge and ache in her body, the way her robe grazed over sensitive nipples, the soreness in her inner thighs reminding her of Dev spreading them apart and entering her from behind, then later tying her with legs spread so wide. Even her butt still tingled from the spanking he'd given her. She sighed with pleasure as liquid heat drizzled through her.

In the last weeks, he'd shown how dominant he was and she'd loved it. But last night was the first night she'd really felt he was letting go. He'd spanked her. Her pussy tightened and ached. Oh lord. She just wanted to go back up there and get into bed with him. So she poured two cups of coffee, adding milk to his as she knew he liked, and carried them back upstairs, the rich fragrant scent drifting warmly to her nose.

In the dark bedroom, she paused to admire Dev stretched out in her bed, taking up nearly the whole damn thing he was so big, on his stomach, arms beneath the pillow, head turned away from her. The sheets were around his waist, exposing his broad muscular back and powerful shoulders, and her eyes roamed lower to the curve of his ass beneath the sheet. Dear god, he had a nice ass, firm and round... She took a breath and moved farther into the room to set the mugs on the table beside the bed.

She sat on the edge of the bed and stroked a hand down the center of his warm satiny back, and he shifted and murmured, then rolled over. Sleep-heavy eyes flickered open to look at her and she smiled down at him and reached out to push some hair back, then trailed her fingers down his cheek, shoulder and came to rest on his chest.

"Morning," she said, her heart squeezing a little at having him here like this, after he'd satisfied her so incredibly last night.

He smiled back at her, slow and slumberous, and he reached for her hand and lifted it to his mouth. He pressed a kiss to her wrist, his eyes closed. As she slowly drew her hand back, completely charmed and melted, he opened his eyes and his gaze focused on her wrist.

His eyebrows jerked together and lowered over his eyes. His fingers tightened on hers and he lifted her arm higher until it was directly in front of his vision. "Jesus Christ, Tori," he whispered.

Her gaze followed his to the faint bruises just above her wrists, paused then lifted to his horrified eyes. Her stomach plummeted.

"It's okay, Dev," she said quickly. "Really."

"It's fucking not okay!" He released her and pushed himself to sitting, shoving both hands into his hair and holding his head. "Look at you! I fucking bruised you, for Chrissake!"

"I know. It's *okay*. I like it."

"You...what?" He stared at her, aghast.

"It's just a few bruises." She licked her lips, nerves quivering inside her. "It's not serious."

"Oh my god." He fell back onto the pillows and covered his face with his hands. "Oh my god. I'm an abuser."

"You are not!" Horror filled her at his words. She tried to grab his hands and pull them away from his face, but he resisted. "Dev, I wanted that! Last night was incredible. You were incredible. You gave me just what I needed."

He made a rough noise.

"Dev, last night I really felt something...the way we connected. It wasn't just you giving me a spanking or tying me up. You were getting something out of it too. You totally got off on it. I think you loved doing me on the stairs. You loved tying me up and having me at your mercy. You loved making me do whatever you wanted. Didn't you?"

He was silent, staring back at her, his mouth a hard line.

"In fact, I think you were still holding back. I think you'd like even more. Deeper domination."

He stared past her, at something across the room, his eyes distant, his expression conflicted. Then his gaze returned to hers. "How do I reconcile that?" he demanded. "With who I think I am? With who I've always been?"

The corners of her eyes tightened. "What do you mean? You are who you are," she said softly, stroking a hand down his arm. "All of you. It was always there."

He was silent for a long time as moments built one on another and another.

"I don't know, Tori."

"I see that part of you, the deep part, the part that wants to dominate. I want you to have that, Dev. You just need to have the guts to do it."

"Guts." His mouth twisted. "That's pretty ironic—that it takes guts to hurt a woman. I was always told it was a coward who would hurt a woman."

"It's more than that, Dev. It's not hurting me. I keep telling you, it's giving me what I want. But yeah, it takes guts if it's something you're afraid of."

"I'm not afraid!" He scowled. "It's just..."

She caught her bottom lip in her teeth briefly. "Did you lose control last night? When you spanked me?"

He thought about it. "No. I was in complete control."

"And you loved it."

He gave a slow blink. "Yeah."

"If you'd lost control and hit me out of anger or frustration, that would be different. But you didn't."

"Oh Christ, Tori."

"I think you should come to the club with me."

His eyebrows slanted down over his eyes, and his jaw tightened. "Jesus."

"Seriously, Dev. Have ever been to a fetish club or a BDSM club?"

He pressed his lips together and didn't answer for a moment. "No."

"It's not an awful place. I've been a member there for years. There are a lot of people who go there—normal people—professionals, lawyers, businessmen, probably other doctors. It's very exclusive and very discreet. No one will know, and anyone you meet there keeps it completely confidential. It's a very strict requirement."

"That isn't what I was worried about."

"What are you worried about then?"

"I don't know." He passed a hand over his face. "It just seems like something...wrong."

"Everything that's done there is consensual. That's the first principle—safe, sane and consensual. Everyone who's there and who's participating wants to be, even if it sometimes seems like they don't."

She paused, still holding his big hand in hers, pleading with him. "Please, Dev. I'm not saying we have to go there ever again after. But I think if you met Gabe and..."

"Jesus Christ!" His eyes flew open wide.

She hastened to reassure him. "We're just friends, Dev."

"I don't want to meet him."

She smiled. "I just thought you could learn from him. He's an experienced Dom and I think he could teach you a lot."

"I don't need to learn from anyone! Fuck. I think I know what I'm doing."

"Yes, you do." She realized what she'd done and her chest tightened. "You absolutely do." She rubbed her hand over his arm. "But we're all learning, Dev. It's not uncommon. Experienced Doms mentor new Doms. We're all learning."

"You are *not* just friends with him."

She pressed her lips together. It was true. They were more than friends. But her feelings for Gabe had never developed into anything like the feelings she had for Dev. Despite the fact that Gabe understood her perfectly and knew exactly what she needed.

"That bothers you," she stated, rather than asking the question.

"Hell, yeah." He raked a hand through his hair. Looked away from her, lips tight. Then looked back at her. "I guess I don't really have a right to feel jealous."

"You have a right to feel whatever you feel." She smiled, warmth curling inside her at his jealousy. Should she admit to him that she kind of liked it? "But my intent isn't to make you jealous. I just want you to see that you are perfectly normal."

"I know I'm normal," he growled, but the look on his face told her he had serious doubts about that.

She bit her lip and lowered her chin, once again, doubts and regret pinching her, making her wonder if she'd made a mistake in sharing all this him. But she so much wanted to give this to him, wanted for him to know himself and accept himself for who he was. She just had to do it in a way that didn't make him feel stupid.

"Dev. If we're going to have anything between us, we both have to be honest. With each other, and with ourselves." She held his gaze meaningfully. "And besides—it might be fun. You can do whatever you want to me there."

As he was learning her triggers, she was learning his. She watched his pupils dilate. She gazed back at him, not hiding anything from him, letting herself be vulnerable once more—maybe even more so than she'd been last night tied to the bed.

"Fine. I'll come."

* * * * *

Le Château sat on the outskirts of town, discreetly housed in a brick mansion that did in fact resemble a castle with a round turret on one corner. There was no signage, nothing to indicate it was anything other than a private residence. Tori directed Dev to park in the lot behind the house, and they entered through the rear door, Tori showing her membership card and signing Dev in as a guest.

"Gabe is here," the big, bald man at the desk told Tori, not even flickering an eyelash at Dev. "He said to tell you he'll meet you at the bar."

"Thanks, Cris."

Jesus, she knew him by name.

"The rules," Cris said to Dev, giving him a stern look. "Members agree to adhere to a safe, sane and consensual code of play. If you are exchanging power as a submissive you agree to ensure that the Dominant knows your wishes, limitations and safe word. If you are taking a Dominant role you agree to ensure that you understand the submissive's wishes, limitations and request a safe word for play. When enjoying fetish play, you agree not to injure or in any way cause any bodily harm to another individual or yourself."

Dev stared at the guy. Holy hell.

“Offering or taking money for any services rendered is strictly forbidden. Behavior is only acceptable if it is consensual. If you wish to join another single, couple or group, always ask permission and accept gracefully, if declined. Anyone forcing unwanted attentions on others or creating a nuisance will be evicted and their membership—or the person they are a guest of—will be cancelled. Male members should not touch a lady without asking and being given permission or without being invited to do so, and should remember that no means no.”

Cris gave a nod of his shaved head, indicating they could go in.

Tori led Dev down a hall and across a red- and gold-lit room to the bar. A man leaning on the bar with a glass in his hand straightened and smiled at her and she moved into his arms for a hug. Dev’s insides clenched hard as he watched the familiarity of their embrace, the easy affection that spoke of long acquaintance and shared experiences. His gut churned.

Gabe turned to him. He was about the same height as Dev, maybe an inch shorter, with black hair, brilliant blue eyes and a dark shadow of stubble on his cheeks and jaw. His build was leaner than Dev’s but he had an air of authority and strength that made him seem more physically powerful. Dev tried to guess at his age—likely about forty. A perfect age for Tori. Dev burned inside.

Gabe extended a hand and Dev took it, Gabe’s grip strong and forceful. And Dev liked that. Nothing annoyed him more than a limp handshake. He returned the firm grip but still eyed the man warily.

And Gabe eyed him back. Assessing him, his eyes cool and guarded.

Dev lifted his chin and returned the look. Studied Gabe in return, looking for what Tori saw in him. Jealousy flared inside him, he couldn’t deny it. She’d had sex with this guy! All kinds of crazy, kinky sex, no doubt.

Dev sucked in a long breath. He was going to have to get past that. Way past that. If he wanted any chance for him and Tori.

A million times he’d asked the question—why was he doing this? It was insane. But Tori...Tori... She was worth it. He felt it in his gut. He cared about her. He wanted her. He wanted to make her happy, like it was his mission in life, as much as being a doctor had been when he was younger. It was fucking nuts, and he didn’t quite get it, but he was going with it.

But there was more to it than even that. He felt he was finally pulling out that part of himself he’d kept hidden, had denied the existence of even to himself. Something drew him further into this, compelling him to dig deep and look inside himself. It felt like it was something he had to do.

He’d had no idea what to expect. Since Tori had told him about her...uh...preferences, he’d done some research. The Internet was an amazing tool. He’d quickly ruled out some sites as ridiculous; found others that he thought were

helpful. He'd learned a lot. He'd gotten ferociously turned on. He'd felt a stirring sense of recognition.

He could just imagine his parents freaking out about him being at a BDSM club.

But he was an adult, had been for quite a while, and what he did was his business, not his parents'. His life was his business. In fact, goddammit, his *business* was his business. A brief irritation at his father's refusal to let go of his practice and his patients rose in him but he quickly forgot that as Gabe asked both of them what they'd like to drink.

"There's no alcohol here," Tori mentioned quietly.

"Coke," Dev said. At Tori's narrowed eyes, he added, "Diet Coke."

She smiled and he shook his head. Christ, he was supposed to dominate *her*? And all she had to do was give him a look and he was drinking wussy diet cola? Jesus.

But, although he could have used a beer right about then, the fact that there was no alcohol there strangely reassured him. This wasn't going to be a drunken orgy at any rate.

Why was he being so goddamn prudish? Christ, most guys would freakin' *kill* to be in a place like this, with—he looked around—sex happening everywhere, on display, hot and open. Even if there *was* a freakin' drunk orgy, most guys would kill to be there!

His parents hadn't reared him to hate sex, for Chrissakes. *That* wasn't him either. In fact, the sex surrounding him was pretty damn distracting.

Tori handed him his drink. Gabe picked up his own half-empty glass and Tori sucked at a tiny straw in a glass of something—Dev had no idea what. He hadn't been paying attention when she ordered. Sex. Sex everywhere.

"Tori tells me you're interested in learning more about being a Dom," Gabe said to him.

Dev met Gabe's eyes and held his gaze steadily. Last night he'd realized if he was going to hold on to Tori he was going to have to face this whole thing head-on. Sink or swim. Balls out. Moment of truth. He'd been going along with Tori on all this, while battling it out inside himself, but he knew at this moment he was going to have to man up and be honest, even if it meant showing his inexperience to this guy. But he wasn't going to let this guy intimidate him. Dev narrowed his eyes and nodded. "Yeah."

Gabe looked at Tori and the flicker in his eyes had Dev's gut clenching. Uh-oh. Tori may say they were just friends, just "play partners", but Gabe looked at her like it was more than that. And yet he was apparently willing to help teach him things.

Tori's hand slid into his and Dev turned his gaze down to her, still so little even in her spiky high heels, sexy white ones to go with the white lace corset and white pencil skirt she wore. Emotion rose up inside him. She was here, with *him*, not with Gabe. The guy was seriously pissed about it, and Dev didn't blame him, because she was... He swallowed hard. She was special.

She met his eyes and gave him a small encouraging smile and Dev mentally straightened his shoulders and drew himself up tall. He could do this. For her. He looked back at Gabe. "Yeah," he said again. Whatever was going to happen tonight, he was ready for it. Sex. Sex was going to happen. *Focus, man.*

"I do a lot of training," Gabe said. "Training in physical techniques—flogging, whipping, caning."

Dev's gut tightened. "Yeah."

"But there's a lot more to it than just technical skills. It has to start inside you."

Dev knew when someone was sizing him up. This guy was wondering if he had what it took to dominate someone. Hey, Dev was wondering the same thing. But one of the first things he'd learned in med school when he'd started seeing patients was never, *ever* let them see you sweat. You faked it, acted confident and knowledgeable, because *nobody* wanted a doctor who seemed nervous or uncertain or hesitant. So, as he'd been trying to all along with Tori, Dev dug deep for that skill now.

"I get that," he said to Gabe, still holding his chin up.

"When you think about how much trust a submissive has to have for a Dominant, you can see how important it is that a Dominant be worthy of that trust. A Dom has to have certain qualities. You have to be able to communicate, negotiate. You have to have empathy. Self-discipline and self-control. You can't control someone else until you're in control of yourself."

"Yeah." Dev nodded, his jaw tight.

"Only then can you learn the technical skills—flogging, spanking, rope bondage, cuffs."

Spanking didn't seem very technical to Dev, but he didn't voice that thought.

"Responsibilities are important too," Gabe continued. He emptied his glass, set it down on the bar and folded his arms across his chest. "It's not only your responsibility as a Dom to give your sub what she wants and needs, but to protect her." He arched one eyebrow and Dev nodded.

"Absolutely." He glanced at Tori. Protecting her. Man, this was hard to get his head around. Of course he would protect her, from anything, any damn thing in the world, but weird to think *he* was going to be the one he needed to protect her from.

"Finding yourself and how you fit in this world can be a long process. It's deeply personal. My idea of what a Dominant is may not be right for you. Even though I do training, the biggest, most fundamental part of it is knowing yourself. Being who you are, being true to yourself and your values."

Something twisted inside Dev—more of those doubts and uncertainties. Being true to yourself and your values. That was exactly what he was struggling with. Values. All those lessons about never using physical force. His vow as a physician to never do harm. How the hell was he supposed to do this when he didn't even know if this was really him? Yeah, he could fake it, but Gabe was practically coming right out and telling

him faking it wasn't going to cut it. It was all about honesty and most importantly, being honest with himself. He swallowed a sigh.

"As you learn more, you'll find you grow, sometimes in ways you might not expect or even see, at first. Your own ideas of what is Dominant or submissive will change as you learn more about yourself, and about the lifestyle."

Dev gulped down some of his cola, nice and cool and fizzy, and shifted on his feet. This lecture was starting to annoy him, but he had to be open to it, had to take it all in.

"Finding your place in BDSM is a journey of self-discovery and broadening horizons. It requires an open mind, and self-honesty."

Christ, was the guy a mind reader? Dev frowned.

"But it's worth it," Gabe added and his eyes flickered toward Tori once more. Dev tightened his fingers around her small hand. "You'll change as a person. Your expectations about sex will change. Your expectations about relationships will change." He studied Dev again for a moment. "So if you're willing to have an open mind and be honest with yourself and with Tori..." Gabe's eyes shifted back to her and lingered there. "I'm willing to help you."

Dev pressed his lips together. His insides churned but he carefully kept his face as expressionless as he could. "Thanks," he said. "I appreciate that."

Gabe nodded once more, and dragged his gaze away from Tori. Who seemed unaware that Gabe had pretty strong feelings for her. Hell. That just complicated the hell out of everything, and Jesus, it was complicated enough to start with. Dev resisted the urge to wipe sweat off his forehead.

"We should show you around," Gabe said, pushing away from the bar. "Let you get a feel for the place. I booked one of the play rooms for us."

Oh Christ.

Tori removed her hand from his, but then slid her arm around his arm and held it, almost hugging it to her. She tugged on it and he turned to her, bent so she could whisper in his ear, "Thank you."

Warmth curled inside him and he reached for her hand with his free arm and squeezed. They followed Gabe across the room. The dim red and gold lights created shadows and deep corners of intimacy, couches grouped in corners, all of them occupied by various groups of people.

"This main area is for socializing," Tori told Dev. He looked at a threesome on a couch, two men with a woman between them. One man kissed her, while the other played with her breasts. Dev's body immediately went hard. Harder.

"Socializing," he repeated.

She smiled. "Pretty much anything goes here. But it's completely public. There are private rooms for those with more extreme tastes."

"Like you."

"No." Gabe spoke up. "Tori is not extreme."

Heat washed up from Dev's chest over his face. "Oh." He swallowed.

"If anything, Tori's on the vanilla end of the scale," Gabe added. "She's not an exhibitionist. And she's not interested in 24/7."

"That's right," she said. "I told Dev that. Any guy who tries to run my life or tell me what to do outside of bed is going to hear from me about that."

The cute way her chin jutted when she said that made Dev smile. And made his insides pull up and tighten, the way they did whenever he faced a challenge. Huh. She thought she didn't want someone telling her what to do. And yeah, okay, maybe not every minute of every day. But he knew he could make her do things...he *had* made her do things...and satisfaction swelled inside him, the knowledge that he knew Tori almost better than she knew herself, that he could dominate her in ways she didn't even know she wanted. Remembering the things he'd made her do flooded his body with hormones that sizzled through his bloodstream and made his dick go even harder. Whoa.

He met Gabe's eyes and for a moment they shared a brief connection, an instant of understanding, and Gabe's mouth twitched. He nodded at Dev. Warmth curled inside him at the implied approval of Gabe's look. Well.

They continued their tour, down a hall past closed doors, until they reached an open room. Gabe led them inside. "This isn't the room we've got booked," he said. "But you can have a look."

Jesus. Dev swept his gaze over some pretty wicked looking equipment—a huge wooden X, a lot of leather and chains and stuff he didn't even know what it was.

"Which room did you book for us?" Tori asked, her voice a little breathy.

"The Rope Room."

"My favorite."

"Yeah."

The warm feeling disappeared in the face of their shared history and Dev sucked in a long breath. Holy crap, this was hard.

They moved past another public area, as hard-core as the private room they'd just visited, and Dev's stomach clenched at the sight and sounds of a woman being whipped. Her cries caused him an almost physical pain, made him want to rush over and put a stop to it. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes briefly, following Gabe and Tori past the scene and farther down the hall.

This was just insane. That kind of thing was wrong, so wrong. Once again, everything he'd ever believed in about how to treat a woman was being ripped to shreds. Not to mention the vow he'd taken as a physician to do no harm. If he was going to be true to his values, he should be high-tailing it out of there.

But he continued after them, jaw aching, eyes narrowed.

They walked into what must be the Rope Room. The glass block wall directly across from the door glimmered with reflected light from the candles arranged in a row on the

floor. Subdued lighting, dark walls and carpet created an edgy, mysterious feel. But the centerpiece of the room was some kind of bizarre-looking contraption, three metal poles in a pyramid shape, with a triangular base. From the top of the pyramid hung several red ropes and...Dev looked closer...what appeared to be black leather cuffs.

A rack on a wall held an assortment of whips, cane and floggers.

Sweat broke out on Dev's forehead. Oh sweet Jesus. No.

He looked at Tori. There could be nothing good about whips and floggers and some kind of device that he just knew was going to be holding Tori in place. Hell. Was he supposed to pick up one of those evil-looking devices and actually hit her with it? More sweat trickled down his back. She caught his eye and reached for his hand and once again he lifted his chin, held her gaze and nodded, as if he was used to watching people being beaten every day.

Chapter Sixteen

"We don't let someone inexperienced pick up a flogger and use it," Gabe said to Dev, once again as if sensing his doubts, but Dev nodded as if he knew that too. "It takes a lot of practice to develop that kind of skill. And while Tori likes a little pain..." His smile hitched up a little. "We don't want to actually cause any damage."

Thank Christ for that. Dev resisted the urge to wipe his brow.

"If you're interested, we can work on those skills," Gabe continued, walking toward the rack and selecting a flogger. He tapped the tails against his palm with an expert flick. "Over time."

Flogging lessons. Jesus. Dev took a breath and let it out slowly, his heart picking up speed.

Gabe walked back toward them and then with a suddenness that had Dev's heart in his throat, Gabe flicked the flogger at Tori and snapped her butt.

"Undress," he ordered, his voice as much of a lash as the flogger.

She began working at the fasteners up the front of her lacy white corset. Dev's mouth went dry and all the blood rushing to his cock was making him lightheaded. She looked at him, though, not at Gabe, as she stripped. In front of both of them. Dev gave his head a small shake, but held her gaze, heat smoldering between them. When she bared her breasts, in front of another man, Dev swallowed. This was bringing back memories of him and Bryson and Eliki, except that had been so off-the-charts different—Eliki had been Bryson's girlfriend, not his. Tori was *his*.

A weirdly possessive thought. Once again his back teeth ground together as he dug deep for control and strength.

As her perfect little body came into view, the skirt falling to the floor along with the corset, leaving her standing there in white lace panties and heels, Dev couldn't drag his eyes away from her. His breath felt hot and sharp as he breathed in and out, and his hands curled into loose fists. The air in the small room grew thick and warm.

"Panties off," Gabe ordered. "Leave the heels on."

She shimmied her hips, the lace slipping down over her legs, and she delicately stepped out of them. The crack of the flogger filled the room, the tails making contact with Tori's ass. She hissed and Dev took a step toward her, tightening his fists at his side. But her eyes met his, head-on, and he stopped.

What was his role in this going to be? Just watching? It was fucking hot, but he could barely keep his hands off Tori at the best of times, never mind in this erotic setting with her naked. And his dick was throbbing painfully.

Once again, as if reading his mind, Gabe said, "Bring Tori over here, Dev."

They moved toward the wicked apparatus. He wasn't sure what she was supposed to do, but she apparently knew. Of course. She rested her hands on two of the black metal poles, feet apart, naked except for the heels. She looked so pale and delicate, her skin light gold, legs slender, spiky shoes on her small feet. Her blonde hair fell forward as she let her head drop.

Gabe got to work, fastening her wrists and ankles in the cuffs and then wrapping the red ropes around her body and tying intricate knots. "Stand in front of her, Dev," he directed. Dev moved in front of Tori and to his surprise, she reached out her arms and hugged his waist. At that moment, Gabe started pulling on the ropes and Tori's feet lifted off the floor. Gabe continued until she was suspended almost flat, still holding Dev's waist, her knees bent and feet raised behind her.

"The beauty of this is all the variety," Gabe murmured, tightening and fastening ropes. Dev couldn't help but admire the way he manipulated the ropes with practiced ease, the focused intensity of his eyes as he looped and tied. He hoped like hell Gabe was careful about this, because Tori would get hurt if something went wrong. Jesus. "But you like this position, don't you, hon?"

Tori murmured agreement.

"Okay, let go of Dev, now." She released him and swung a bit, her arms hanging down, hands nearly touching the floor. She looked up at Dev and her eyes were already a bit hazy. Gabe fastened more ropes to the cuffs at her wrists, tugged her into place, her arms going up and behind her back, attached to the harness of red rope around her torso.

This was insane.

Tori's hair hung down over her face as she let her head go, relaxing into the ropes, gently swaying.

And then Gabe gave her another lash with the flogger across the backs of her thighs.

Tori cried out.

The safe word. What was their safe word? Dev didn't need to know, he wasn't the one dishing out the pain, but he *wanted* to know, wanted to make sure Tori was safe.

"What's your safe word?" he demanded of Gabe.

Gabe smiled. "Tori? What's our safe word?"

"Shareholder."

Dev wanted to roll his eyes. He nodded.

Gabe proceeded to lay more blows on Tori's bare flesh, leaving her glowing pink. She rocked gently in the rope cradle.

She made groaning noises, small whimpers, and Dev wasn't sure if that was pleasure or not. He'd thought he was getting pretty good at knowing her non-verbal vocabulary, but these noises sounded different. Were they the noises she made for Gabe? Jealousy gnawed inside him.

Get over it. That wasn't the point of this. He was supposed to be learning. But what the fuck he was learning, he wasn't sure.

"Dev." Tori's thready voice pierced his thoughts.

He moved closer. "What, baby? What is it?"

"Want you. Want you closer."

Dev flicked a glance at Gabe, whose eyebrows rose slightly. But Dev immediately dropped to a crouch so he could see her face. "I'm right here, baby." He gathered her hair back and held it loosely at the nape of her neck. "You okay?"

"Yes. I think so." She paused. "Are you okay?"

Christ. She was worried about *him*? "I'm okay. What do you need, sweet thing?" He touched her cheek with his other hand. It was fever-hot and her eyes looked glazed. The snap of the flogger had her jolting in her bonds.

"I need you." She turned her eyes up to him.

"D'you want out of this, sweet thing?" He was ready to rip the goddamn ropes off her if that's what she wanted.

"No. I'm okay." Her voice slurred. "I'm trying..."

"Tori." Gabe's deep voice interrupted. "Where are you, hon?"

"I'm...I'm trying..."

Dev looked helplessly at Gabe. "What's she saying?" he demanded. "What is she trying?"

Gabe frowned and lowered the flogger. "Rub her skin," he directed Dev slowly, taking a step back. Dev moved to her side and laid his hands on her back, her ass, hot and rosy-red. He rubbed her gently, up and down, as he knew she liked.

"Shareholder," he heard faintly. "I want out, Gabe. Shareholder." Dev didn't immediately respond, but Gabe instantly grabbed hold of the ropes and lowered her feet to the floor. He quickly undid the cuffs and had her free.

"What happened, Tori?" Gabe asked, rubbing her wrists.

She stared up at him. "I don't know." She looked down for a moment. "It just wasn't working. I was trying but I couldn't get there."

Dev listened to them talk, unsure of what she was saying. Confusion swirled in him. And then he just couldn't take any more. Emotion rose up in him, fast and hard, anger and frustration and distaste. This wasn't supposed to be like this. He didn't know what it was supposed to be. Tori'd wanted him to come here tonight to learn more about himself, and all he'd learned was that it turned his stomach to see someone else flogging her while she was helpless and bound.

His stomach churned and he helped her to her feet, her nakedness now uncomfortable, not sexy. He found her clothes and began to help her dress, shooting Gabe with dark looks. Gabe stood back, arms folded across his chest, an unreadable expression on his face.

He couldn't do this. This wasn't him, no matter what Tori thought she saw. And if this was really what she wanted... Pain lanced through him. He couldn't give her what she wanted.

* * * * *

Tori spent a long, lonely and confused Sunday trying to figure out what exactly had gone wrong Saturday night at Le Château. Dev had looked wrecked. She'd felt just about as bad. He'd walked her into her house, but hadn't closed the door, just paused there in her foyer looking at her.

"I'm sorry," he'd said, touching her cheek. "I can't do it, Tori. That scene tonight was way out of my comfort zone." He shook his head, his eyes full of sorrow. "If that's what you need, I'm not the one who can give it to you. I guess it's better if we just end this now."

Still feeling disoriented and confused herself about what had happened at the club, Tori had stared at him for long moments with burning eyes. "What are you saying, Dev? That's it for us?"

"Yeah." His voice hardened.

"You're a coward."

He flinched and lowered his eyes. "Thanks."

She blew out a breath in frustration. "Dev. I didn't mean..."

"Yeah. You did. That's okay. Maybe I am. But maybe you need to look inside yourself too, and figure out why you need such deviant ways to deal with your problems."

"What! Deviant?"

And he'd turned and walked out, closing the door behind him.

Sleep that night had been restless, her dreams full of chasing something she couldn't catch, and when she awoke she didn't even know what she'd been chasing. Sunday night wasn't much better. Dev's words kept running through her head.

She wasn't deviant. Or maybe she was. She'd long ago accepted herself for who she was and he had no right to be critical of that.

She was better off without him than with someone who was going to judge her so negatively. It felt like a giant hand squeezing her insides, but she'd get over it, like she had every other time. She still had Gabe and the club. Although why it had been so unsatisfying and scary that night, she didn't understand.

After a lack of sleep and a lot of agonized thinking, Monday morning was brutally painful when she arrived at the office, remembering all the problems there she had to deal with.

Sitting at her desk, she remembered how Dev had helped her deal with the stress last week, but now he was gone. Her night at the club hadn't exactly been freeing or

satisfying. Her life was falling apart outside of work, but she couldn't let her job overtake everything. She had to make some changes. Things weren't working for her the way they always had.

Tori knocked on Fletcher's open door and poked her head in. He was sitting at his desk, working on his computer. "Do you have a few minutes to talk? I'd like to talk about our conversation last week."

He kept his face impassive. "Yeah. Sure."

She shut the door behind her and took a seat across from him.

"I just want to say that it's important to me that we have a good working relationship," she began. "So last week, we were talking about Jennifer and her having to go off on leave, you said, 'Now she's going off altogether. Thanks to you.'"

He said nothing, turning a pen in his hand.

"I got the feeling you thought it was my fault she was going off."

"I apologized for implying that."

"It seemed to me that you think I work people too hard, or I'm cold and unfeeling about what they need. I was really hurt by that."

He looked away from her and his lips tightened. "I'm sorry. I know it wasn't your fault. I was frustrated because we're going to be short-staffed and we have so much going on right now."

"I know, I'm frustrated too. Things have been really busy lately and we've had a few problems. And I know I have high expectations of staff, but I want you to know that I truly care about the people who work for me and I would never let Jennifer work from home if it was going to cause her or her baby any health problems."

"Yeah, I know."

"Okay. Thanks. I appreciate that. As I said, it's important that we be able to work together. If you have concerns about how I'm managing things, I'd like you to tell me in a constructive way. I felt like I was being blamed for something that wasn't my fault."

He gave her a long look then said, "Okay."

"Which brings me to something else I want to talk about. I've been stressed lately with everything that's been going on and I think we need to make a few changes."

"Like what?"

"I know you're busy too, but I think it's important that you take on some additional responsibility."

Fletcher stared back at her. He dropped the pen and held up one hand in a "whoa" gesture.

"I'm not suggesting more work, I'm just going to suggest a couple of things. When a problem arises, I'd appreciate it if you'd give some thought to a solution before you bring it to me. I enjoy solving problems, but lately I feel like everything gets dumped in my lap."

"I guess I think if I come up with a solution you won't like it."

"Really? Why?"

"Because you like to be the one making decisions."

His words hit her like a punch. "Yeah. I do." She inhaled a deep breath. "But you're perfectly capable of making decisions and I'm sorry if I've given you the impression you're not. We need to work as a team and that means entrusting you with more of the problem solving and decision making. If you want to run things past me, that's fine. But I trust you to come up with solutions."

"Okay." He nodded. "And I'll try not to let my frustrations come out the way I did last week."

"Okay, thanks. So you'll be giving me constructive feedback and I'll be letting you come up with solutions to problems. We'll both work on those things."

"Sounds good."

Tori walked out of Fletcher's office feeling marginally better, but still heavy and tired. That was one less thing on her long list of problems to deal with.

* * * * *

Dev's week wasn't going well.

After the disaster at that club and then breaking up with Tori, he had to endure his father showing up almost daily at the clinic, looking over charts and commenting on notes he'd made, and dammit, even seeing a few more patients.

"Mrs. Melton doesn't need antidepressants," Dad said, frowning at her chart.

"What does she need, then, Dad?"

He grunted as he scanned the chart. "She just needs someone to talk to."

"And would that be you?"

"No." Dad frowned and looked up. "I meant like a girlfriend or something."

"Her best friend just died of cancer. Her husband left her a year ago. Her kids all live in other cities. I agree that some psychotherapy would help, and I've referred her to a psychologist, but she's not all that open to the idea. The antidepressants are a short-term solution to get her through this."

Impatience swelled and grew inside him, making it difficult to breathe. He should not have to be explaining himself and his treatment plans to his father.

"You know," Dev said, pushing back in his chair in his office. "Maybe this was a mistake coming here."

"Coming where?" His dad didn't look up from the computer.

"Back to Santa Barbara. Taking over your practice. You're clearly not ready to give it up. And maybe I'm not ready to be living here in the same city as you and Mom where you can still think I'm a kid."

Dad's head lifted and his gray eyebrows drew together above his nose. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"You don't trust me. You're second-guessing every decision I make. You're sabotaging any attempts I'm making to build relationships with my new patients by letting them go to you and seeing them and playing into their games."

"What?"

Dev could see his father was genuinely taken aback by the accusations and he sighed. "Tell me honestly, Dad. Do you trust me? Would you be doing this to any other physician who'd taken over your practice?"

Dad stared back at him. "I...I..."

"Never mind." Dev rose to his feet and glanced at his watch. It was nearly six-thirty. He had no idea why his dad was there so late, but he was done for the day. Not that he had anything to go home to besides a six-pack of beer, but he was done. "I really have to give some thought to maybe moving back to L.A."

"Dev."

But Dev had no patience for listening to his dad. At that moment, he had no patience for anything besides getting the hell out of there and hiding in his crappy apartment.

At home, he changed into a pair of baggy sweat shorts and a T-shirt, popped the top off a beer and threw himself down onto his couch. The idea of leaving Santa Barbara seemed suddenly appealing. He never wanted to face Tori again. And it would send his Dad a strong message. The idea of his father scrambling to find another doctor to replace him at the clinic was darkly pleasing.

Coward.

Tori's word whispered through his mind.

He tipped the beer to his mouth and swallowed the bitter liquid, the bubbles tingling over his tongue and throat. He drank deeply, then tipped his head back and stared at the ceiling.

Was he a coward?

When it came to Tori, no. He refused to accept that it was cowardly to not want to hurt her. Maybe it had been cowardly to not want to see Tori like that with someone else. He'd go that far. He didn't get it and he didn't want to get it and he didn't want to endure that ever again. Every lash of that flogger had resonated inside him as if it were landing on his own flesh. And all that crap she'd said about subspace and floating and a high of endorphins—bullshit. She had not been happy that night.

When it came to dealing with his dad—maybe running back to L.A. *would* be cowardly. It would be running away from the fact that his parents still saw him as a kid, not responsible enough to manage patients, not mature enough to date a woman a few years older than him.

The mature, responsible, brave thing to do would be to stay and deal with them.

And what about Tori? Did he have the balls to deal with her too?

He wiped his mouth and stared at the label of the beer bottle, then his eyes fell on the card on his coffee table.

Gabe Pejovic. His phone number. That was all that was on the card Gabe had slid to him as they'd left Le Château the other night. "Call me if you want to talk," Gabe had murmured to him quietly as Dev had hustled Tori out of there.

It would be crazy to call him. But Dev still felt confused and conflicted about what had happened that night, along with a miserable feeling of loss and dejection and even —yes— guilt at walking out on Tori.

He'd called her deviant.

Christ. He closed his eyes.

Chapter Seventeen

Tori had arranged to meet Gabe at Le Château Friday night. A heavy feeling had dragged her down all week. Things had gone okay at work—after she and Fletcher had talked, some of the burden had felt lifted from her shoulders and she was able to tackle most of the problems and tasks on her lengthy to-do list. Jennifer had gotten the okay from her doctor to work at home, so their tech people were getting some things set up for her and HR had several resumes on file for potential researchers and also had an advertisement all ready to go. So things were moving forward, but Tori still felt...dispirited.

So she thought a night at the club with Gabe might help.

She arrived before he did, and found an empty couch in a dimly lit corner where she could wait for him, sipping her energy drink. Memories of being there last weekend with Dev besieged her, though. She'd had such high hopes for bringing him into this, for showing him how important it was to her. She'd anticipated the things she and Dev could do together, how exciting it would be, how special. But it hadn't worked out like that. And she still wasn't sure exactly why.

Gabe walked in, looking gorgeous as usual, although her heart didn't leap into a crazy sprint like it did when she saw Dev. Gabe had always been a good, trusted friend, and they'd shared a connection that had been pretty damn hot at times. Now Tori felt an uncomfortable twinge of guilt and...disquietude. But she smiled at him as he approached.

He took a seat beside her, leaned forward to kiss her, and she gave him her cheek. He drew back, giving her a crooked smile.

"Hey," he said. "I was surprised to hear from you."

"Why?"

He held her gaze steadily. "Because of Dev."

"Dev and I broke up."

He frowned. A server approached and Gabe ordered a goji and green tea drink. "What happened?" he asked.

"You saw what happened last week." She shrugged, and sucked briefly at the straw in her drink. "He just couldn't handle it."

Gabe regarded her thoughtfully. "Yeah. I saw that."

She tossed her hair back. "It doesn't matter." She smiled brightly. "He's gone, and I'm here."

"Tori."

A frown tugged her brow. "What?"

"I don't know if it was just Dev who couldn't handle things last weekend."

"What are you talking about?" Now she full-out frowned at him.

"I'm talking about you. What happened to you when you were suspended? Normally you totally get off on that."

"I...I don't know." She looked down at her drink, and stayed silent while the server returned with Gabe's. "But it doesn't matter, it's done with. I want to have fun tonight." And she shifted closer to him on the couch.

He slid his arm around her shoulders and pulled her up against his body. She tipped her head to look up into his face—darkly shadowed with beard, intense blue eyes that she'd always found so attractive—and for some reason she wanted to pull away.

"It does matter."

She stared back at him.

"That guy is totally in love with you," Gabe said, his voice a low rasp. "I could see that."

"In love with me?" She shook her head. "I don't think so."

"Oh hell yeah, he is."

"Well, if he cared that much he would've stuck around. Instead he called me..." Her throat tightened up and a shaft of pain stabbed through her. "He called me deviant."

"Ah, Tori." His arm tightened around her in a brief squeeze. "That hurt you, huh?"

She bent her head in a nod. "But it's okay. It's true." She lifted her eyes back to Gabe's face and smiled again, her mouth feeling tight.

"Tori. Are you in love with him too?"

"No! We've only known each other a few weeks. I can't be with someone who doesn't accept me the way I am. And he needs to figure himself out too."

Gabe's mouth pursed. "Yeah. I get that. So." He looked her up and down, taking in the outfit she'd worn—pretty blah, if she did say so herself. White jeans and a white tank top. "Take off your clothes."

She blinked at him. "Here?"

"Yeah."

"But...why?"

"Because I say so. Tori. You should know better than to question me when I tell you what to do. You know that just leads to punishment."

She stared at him. The word "but" rose to her lips and she pressed them together to stop it, years of training and submission taking over. But inside, turmoil heaved. She didn't want to take her clothes off and she didn't want to obey Gabe.

Her eyes narrowed and her mind raced. *What the fuck?*

He stared her down, intense and dominant, and then anger flared in her. What was he doing?

"You don't want to do it, do you?" he asked softly.

She pressed her lips tight, her throat aching, her stomach fluttering wildly. "No," she finally whispered. "Gabe..."

He reached out and touched his fingertips to her cheek, his thumb rubbing across her bottom lip. His face softened. "I know."

"I..."

"Tori. You *are* in love with Dev."

She gazed back at him, confusion swirling inside her.

"You don't want to submit to me anymore," Gabe continued. "You want to submit to him."

Her bottom lip trembled. She swallowed past the huge lump in her throat.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't apologize." He dropped his hand from her face and smiled, but she saw the hint of sadness behind it. "I'm happy for you, hon."

"But...but...the problem is, even if I do want to submit to him...and I do, I mean, I guess I already knew that...he doesn't want to dominate me."

"Are you sure?"

Her eyebrows slanted down.

"Domination and submission looks like different things to different people. Maybe you two need to talk about it. Talk about what it looks like for the two of you."

"We have talked about it." She bit her lip. "I thought Dev was getting into it, and then he freaked out because I got a few bruises on my wrists."

"Ah. Well. Maybe you just need to take things slow with him."

"There is no taking things slow. He called me deviant and walked out on me. I haven't seen him again since that night." Bitterness edged her voice.

"I could see the feelings you two have for each other. I could also see that he knows you pretty well. He gets you, Tori."

"Then...why...?"

"I don't know. I could tell he was trying hard, though. He wanted to do that for you. I know things didn't work out, but that might have been as much your fault as his."

"What do you mean?" Her head whirled and she lifted a hand to her temple. "Why was it my fault?"

"I don't mean it that way. I'm just saying, you didn't get into the scene at all. He was watching me hurt you. He hated that. If you'd gotten into it, maybe it would have showed him more about what you like. But...hey, maybe it was my fault too. I wasn't able to get you to that place. And to him, it just looked like abuse."

"It wasn't your fault." She laid a hand on his big knee and squeezed. "Really, Gabe, it wasn't your fault. I was trying...but..."

"You shouldn't have to try."

"But it was me, not you." She stared at him in distress. "I was worried about Dev—distracted by him and what he was thinking and feeling and I was wishing..."

"You were wishing it was him doing that to you."

That wasn't even completely true, she suddenly saw. It didn't matter if Dev knew how to rig her up in the suspension tripod. It didn't matter if he picked up a flogger. It just mattered that it was...him.

She covered her mouth with her hands and met Gabe's eyes. He smiled at her.

"It's okay, hon." He touched her hair. "I'm here for you as a friend, any time. Okay?"

They weren't going to be playing that night. Or likely any night, ever again. A sweet sadness filled her and her chin quivered.

"Don't be sad, hon. But you need to go and talk to Dev."

"I don't know if I can."

"Think about it. Okay?"

She nodded. Gabe leaned over and kissed her gently on the mouth, then rose from the couch and walked out of the club.

* * * * *

She didn't call Dev. But she did think about it. A lot.

The next day was her niece Hannah's birthday party at Claire's house. The whole family would be there, including her parents who she rarely saw. Since her dad had retired, he and her step-mom been traveling the world, neither of them with much inclination to stick close to home and spend time with the grandchildren, but they happened to be in town for Hannah's birthday. So she had to go to the big family get-together.

Claire's husband Colin was out in the backyard with Hannah and Brandon and their cousins from Colin's side of the family. Tori's parents sat in the sunroom with Colin's parents, Colin's brother and his wife, and Tori's sister Molly with her nine-month-old baby Christian and her husband Armen. Claire waddled around the house with food and drinks.

"Sit down, for heaven's sake," Tori scolded her, taking a tray of appetizers from her hands. "You look ready to burst."

"I feel ready to burst," Claire said. "My back is killing me." She sank into a chair in the sunroom and Tori took over hostess duties, refilling drinks and setting out bowls of chips.

"Colin is going to grill some hamburgers later," Claire said her face pale and lined with fatigue. "I just bought some coleslaw and potato salad at the deli. I didn't feel up to making anything."

"I could've brought something," Tori said. She sighed inwardly. She'd been so wrapped up in her own life she hadn't even thought of it. "Deli food is fine. You're nine months pregnant."

Claire smiled.

"I brought the cake," Molly said. "Wait 'til Hannah sees it!"

"When should she open her presents?" Tori asked, looked out the wall of windows to the yard where Colin pushed Hannah on the swing.

"In a little while. They're happy for now out there. So Tori. Tell us about this guy you're seeing."

"I'm not seeing him anymore." Tori kept her face pleasant.

"Oh." Claire's face fell. "He seemed so nice. And he's a doctor."

Tori shrugged.

Molly leaned forward, having just finished nursing Christian to sleep in her arms. "Claire says he's really young."

Tori glanced at the others in the room. "Younger than me. But not that young."

"Oooh Tori." Molly grinned. "You cradle robber, you."

"Hardly." She shook her head and returned to the kitchen where nobody would bug her about Dev. But Claire appeared a moment later as she sliced pickles for the burgers.

"I told you to sit!" Tori said.

"I'm okay. I can't sit. I feel really...restless. And achy."

"Is everything okay?"

"I guess." Claire leaned on the counter, rubbing her lower back. And then she got a funny look on her face—eyes wide, mouth open—and she looked down at herself. "Oh shit."

"What?" Tori's hands went still.

"My water just broke."

"Oh my god." Panic flared inside Tori. Was Claire going to have the baby? Right now? What the hell were they supposed to do?

"It's okay. It's okay," Claire said, still just standing there. "I guess I should go to the hospital... Oh Jesus!"

"What?" Tori whipped around the end of the counter to where Claire stood, now bent over.

"I think... Oh *fuck*, that hurts! Oh god! I think I'm in labor."

"Oh dear god." Tori rested a hand on Claire's back briefly. "I'll get Colin."

She raced through the sunroom and out the French doors into the backyard. "Colin! Come quickly!"

Then she realized she shouldn't scare the kids by screaming out that their mother was having a baby.

Colin left the kids and moved toward her and she gave a wild gesture to make him move faster. "Claire's in labor," she hissed as he neared her. "Her water just broke."

"Oh Christ." He took off at a run into the house. "Watch the kids."

"Sure."

But the kids had followed their dad, wanting to know what was going on and the house was filled with chaos as Claire cried out in pain, her parents freaked out, Colin's parents sat there stunned, Molly and Armen tried to take charge and the two kids started crying—Hannah, because she wanted to open her presents and have cake.

"It's okay, Hannah," Tori tried to console her, picking her up. "We'll have cake and presents later. But your baby sister is coming. Isn't that the best present?"

"No!" Hannah pouted, arms crossed. "I don't want a baby sister for my birthday!"

They *would* have the same birthday if the baby arrived today. How about that.

Colin got Claire into the car. "Can you bring the kids to the hospital?" he asked Tori. "We want them to be there."

"Are you sure?" She grimaced.

"Yes. Here are the van keys."

So Tori got the kids into the van, and the whole damn family decided to come along too, everyone ending up in the hospital waiting room.

When Tori identified the children to the nurse at the desk and told her their parents wanted them there for the delivery, she frowned. "I'll go check on how things are going," she said.

She took forever to come back, and Tori had had to buy candy from a vending machine to keep the kids quiet and out of trouble.

"I'm sorry," the nurse said. "They can't go back there right now."

"Why not?" Fear gripped Tori by the throat. "Is something wrong?"

The nurse's face told her the answer. "I'll let you know when they can go back."

Tori turned to her family, her insides tight and her hands shaking.

* * * * *

For some reason Dev couldn't get the idea of calling Gabe out of his head. He wanted at least to understand what had happened, and even though he knew he should talk to Tori about that, it almost seemed safer to talk to someone not so emotionally invested. Even though Dev had a gloomy feeling that Gabe actually *was* pretty emotionally invested in Tori. He'd seen the look on the other man's face that night. But maybe he needed to find out about that too, and what it all meant.

So with his heart lodged in his throat, he called the number on Gabe's card Saturday morning. And the next thing he knew, Gabe had arranged to meet with him at a coffee shop on State Street.

They sat on the sidewalk at a sunny table, the morning air still fresh and cool and damp, drinking steaming coffee from cardboard cups.

"So," Dev said, with not a hot clue where to start this conversation. "You were probably surprised to hear from me."

"No."

Dev glanced at him. "No?"

Gabe shook his head a smile playing on his mouth. "No. Not surprised at all, actually."

"Oh." Now Dev was really lost. "Look, just so you know...Tori and I aren't together anymore."

"I know."

"Oh." Fuck. He'd seen her. Talked to her. Jealousy shimmered through him in a wave of heat. He was out of the picture, but Gabe apparently wasn't. Dev pushed back his chair and started to rise, anger simmering.

"Sit down," Gabe said mildly. He picked up his coffee and leaned back in his chair.

Dev gave him a hard stare, then sat.

"What did you want to see me about?" Gabe asked.

Dev sucked in air. "I guess I just want to understand what happened last weekend. At Le Château."

Gabe nodded. "Good."

Ookay.

"But you really should be talking to Tori about it."

"Yeah." He bowed his head. "I know. I don't know if I can, though."

"You hurt her."

Dev's head snapped up. "I hurt her! Are you fucking kidding me? *You* were the one with the—"

Gabe held up a hand. "There's more than one way to hurt someone," he said quietly. "Physical hurt is just one. And let's be clear about this—what I was doing wasn't intended to damage her. But what you did..."

"What did I do?" Dev glared at him.

"You rejected her. You disrespected her. You called her deviant. How's that for a start?"

Dev's mouth opened. Closed. "Hell."

"Yeah." Gabe sipped his coffee. "All things considered, I'd say what you did was far worse. What I was doing was trying to give her pleasure."

Dev sat there, letting Gabe's words sink into his head. "Look. I guess you could tell I was having a hard time with that whole pleasure/pain thing."

"You were doing a good job," Gabe said, and surprise flashed through Dev. "You came across as very confident and dominant."

"Uh...good." Huh. His act had gone over.

"It wasn't all an act, either," Gabe said with a shrewd look in his eyes. "I was getting a pretty good read on you and I got the feeling even though this is new to you—you're dominant."

Dev's mouth tightened as he let Gabe's words filter through his brain. "I don't know what Tori told you about me," Dev said. "But I have a hard time hurting her."

"Physically."

Shame washed over Dev. "Yeah. Physically." Dammit. Why the hell hadn't he thought about the emotional pain? Man, he was a fucking idiot.

"You think you're a good guy," Gabe continued, still relaxing in the white plastic chair in the sun. "You think women should be treated with respect and courtesy. You find violence against women reprehensible. You would never ever raise your hand in anger against someone you love."

Dev stared at him. "That's right."

"The first thing you have to know is that you can still be a good person deep down inside, and do the things she wants you to do. There's a big difference between this and being an abuser. You're doing these things because she enjoys them. In fact—you both enjoy them."

He lifted a brow, challenging Dev, who nodded reluctantly. "Some things, yeah," he admitted.

"It's consensual, safe, and respectful of her limits and desires."

Again Dev nodded. "Tori told me that too."

"You didn't listen to her. Didn't believe her?"

"It's hard to get my head around."

Gabe smiled. "Maybe you need to experience it yourself."

Dev's jaw slackened. Did he mean... "Hell no!"

"Hey, don't close your mind to it." Gabe shrugged. "It might be a good way to understand that edge between pleasure and pain, how a little pain can heighten the pleasure."

The hormone thing again. Being a science guy, he couldn't deny the effect of hormones. But that didn't mean he wanted to experience it.

"There's more to it than that, though," Gabe said quietly. "It's an exchange. I consider myself a good person too. I run a big company. I care about the people who work for me. I make money for my shareholders. I give my time to a couple of charities.

I visit my mother. But I get something out of dominating my partners, something that I need."

"What? What do you get out of it?"

"There are a lot of expectations in society. What's good, what's bad. The biggest reward I get is the freedom to just be me. To be myself. That's the biggest freedom there is. Living a lie is like living in prison." His eyes met Dev's across the table. "I don't know if you know that feeling, but I do. I lived a life that wasn't me for a long time. On top of that, domination and submission creates very intense, intimate relationships. It's a whole different level. When you're both honest with each other as much as with yourself."

Dev's gut clenched. Yeah, he'd felt that. That deep intimacy, that profound connection with Tori. Had he felt the freedom of it? He had to think about that but...yeah. He knew what Gabe was saying. He recalled that sense of relief at giving in to it. The rush of control. The high of power. And the intense pleasure he got from pleasing Tori.

"When someone trusts you enough to let you restrain her—however you do it; it doesn't have to be complicated rope bondage—so she's completely helpless and at your mercy—that, my friend, is a gift."

Dev nodded.

"The biggest gift anyone can ever give you. To be worthy of that kind of trust you have to be honest with her and you have to be honest with yourself."

A gift.

Dev's vision blurred as he stared into the distance past Gabe, not even seeing the shops on the other side of State Street. Thinking about trust.

Thinking about how the lack of his father's trust hurt him. How Tori's trust had made him feel powerful, strong, like a hero who could do anything.

Tori had given him a gift.

And he'd tossed it back in her face.

Agony cramped in his gut as this realization rolled over him. Gabe was silent as Dev took all this in and processed it. Then he said, "Being dominant can enhance your whole life if you accept it as part of who you are. It will fulfill a need inside you. Give you competence and confidence, and if you're lucky—trust and love."

"I like looking after her," Dev said, confusion deepening his voice. "I like treating her with respect—doing things for her. That doesn't seem very dominant."

"Being dominant doesn't mean being an asshole." Gabe's lips quirked. "I like doing things for people I care about too. If she's yours and you care about her, of course you want to look after her. There's nothing contradictory about that. Taking care of someone isn't submissive. It's just part of being in a relationship."

Gabe leaned forward, both hands clasped around his coffee cup. Dev couldn't help but be impressed by the guy's knowledge and confidence and utter self-assurance.

"One thing you need to remember, though, is you have to control yourself and your own life before you can truly dominate someone else. Maybe your problem is you don't have all your shit together in the rest of your life, apart from Tori."

Dev stared at him.

"Just a thought. I don't know. Like I said, you came across as naturally dominant and confident. You could be a good actor, and that's okay. Nobody starts off knowing everything and confidence is important. I faked it too, in the beginning. In fact I still have moments where I wonder what the hell I'm doing." His mouth twisted and he met Dev's eyes. "If we're going to be honest here, I'll admit that I was pissed off that you showed up in Tori's life."

Dev's chest tightened. "I had that feeling."

Gabe's eyes narrowed. "Really?"

"I could tell you care about her. You're in love with her yourself, aren't you?"

Gabe didn't answer for a long moment. The sounds of traffic on State Street mingled with the faint jazz music coming from inside the coffee shop and other voices chattering at tables around them. "Yeah," he finally said, and his blue eyes went shadowy. Then his gaze sharpened on Dev. "Which is why I hate seeing her hurting."

Once gain the irony of him saying that, after he'd taken a flogger to her, struck Dev, but this time he got it.

"She cares about you too," he said, feeling like a knife was twisting in his chest.

"Not the same way," Gabe said, the lines running from nose to mouth deepening. "I could see right away how she felt about you. She never felt that way about me."

"I'm sorry," Dev said quietly. For so many things.

Gabe just nodded. "I still have doubts too," he said quietly. "The journey never ends. There's always more to learn about ourselves. Don't ever be afraid to admit you have things to learn. So go talk to her. And..." His eyes closed and he exhaled slowly, then opened his eyes again. "I'm here if you need me. Just remember—there's not one right way to dominate. Everyone has to find their own way, their own place. Maybe for you it's not floggers and canes and whips. Or maybe someday you'll want to do that. The only right way is the way that works for you and Tori. If it gives both of you pleasure, then that's what's right for you."

Dev nodded. Gabe rose out of his chair and gave him a small salute before walking away.

Chapter Eighteen

"What's wrong?" Molly came up to Tori, holding Christian.

"I don't know," Tori said, frowning. "They won't let the kids go in, but they won't say why."

Molly marched over to the desk and had a heated, if low-volume conversation with the nurse. She returned with flashing eyes and tight mouth. "They won't say a damn thing. Geez." She and Tori exchanged worried glances and Molly nibbled her bottom lip. "Tori, I'm scared."

"Me too. But let's not panic. This is a great hospital. She's in good hands." Tori tried to sound confident though she had no idea who Claire's doctor was and whether he was any good, and her stomach churned with nerves. She tried to focus on keeping the kids happy.

After an hour, Colin's parents and Tori's parents all left. Colin's parents seemed quite worried, but decided they weren't helping any sitting at the hospital. "Call us as soon as you know something," they said to Tori, and she nodded.

Tori's parents left too, but it seemed more because they got bored sitting at the hospital, and Tori's step-mom Lenore said she had a headache from the noise the kids were making and the smell of the hospital.

"Maybe I should take the kids home," Tori said to Claire, who lifted a shoulder.

"I don't know. Geez. Why hasn't Colin even come to tell us what's going on?"

The fact that he hadn't could be a very bad sign. If he didn't even want to leave Claire for a minute... Oh god. "I'll try again." And Tori approached the nurse again. "You have to tell us what's going on," she said. "Our family is worried sick. Could you please go find out and give us an update? That's our sister back there."

The nurse looked annoyed, but did as Tori asked, then returned. "I'm sorry," she said. "There's not much more I can tell you at this point."

"The baby's not born yet?"

"No."

Tori sat heavily on one of the hard plastic chairs, her heart thumping, insides twisted into knots. Hannah climbed onto her lap. "I want my cake," she whined.

Tori sucked in a long breath. She just wanted to know how her sister was and if the baby was okay. God, was that too much to ask?

She thought about Dev and the day she'd come here with her sprained ankle. He knew people here. He was a doctor. Maybe he was working today?

She bounded out of her chair and carried Hannah back to the desk. "Is Dr. Fillmore on duty today?" she asked in a rush.

"Dr. Chad Fillmore?"

"No." Tori frowned. "Dr. Devlin Fillmore."

"Oh. Just a moment, I'll check." She went into the computer and clicked with her mouse a few times. "No, I'm sorry. He's not."

Damn. Jaw clenched, Tori returned to her chair, then leaped out again as she saw Brandon standing on a chair he'd pulled over to reach the television in the waiting room. As he leaned up the chair tilted. Tori dropped Hannah to her feet and grabbed for Brandon, saving him as the chair tumbled over with a crash. That got them nasty looks from the others in the waiting room including the nurse behind the desk.

"Brandon! What are you doing?"

"I wanted to change the channel."

"We can't do that," she said. "People are watching this."

"But I want to watch cartoons!"

Again Tori looked at Molly. They both sighed.

"Please, just sit here and look at these books," Tori begged.

"We already read them."

"Well, read them again."

She pulled her cell phone out of her purse and gazed at it. Nibbled her bottom lip. Closed her eyes. Then flipped it open and pressed a few buttons.

"Hello?" Dev's curt response came over the line. "Tori?"

He must have call display.

"Yes. It's me. Dev..."

"What is it?"

"Where are you?"

She heard his short huff of laughter. "I'm at your place."

"What!" Her heart lurched in her chest then beat unevenly. "What are you doing there?"

"Looking for you."

"I'm not there."

He laughed softly. "No shit."

She bit her lip. "Dev, I'm at the hospital. My sister's in labor but it's taking forever and her husband is still with her and nobody will tell us what's going on."

"Oh."

"I'm scared. We're all scared."

"I'll be there in ten minutes."

"Okay."

"D'you want to keep talking?"

"What could it be? I mean, the problem with Claire?"

"I don't know, sweet thing. Many things. Has she had any problems with her pregnancy?"

"Not that I know of. Oh lord. Where's Hannah?" She glanced wildly around the waiting room. "Molly, where did Hannah go?"

Molly stumbled to her feet, still holding her baby. "Oh god, I don't know."

"I better go," Tori said into the phone.

"I'll be there soon."

"Thank you." She flicked her phone shut and started out of the waiting room, searching for Hannah. Oh thank heaven, there she was at the vending machine again, staring into it at the offerings.

"Hannah. You have to stay where I can see you."

Hannah turned to her. "No birthday cake in dere."

"I know, sweetie. Come on." She took her hand and led her back to the waiting room.

Molly spoke up. "Tori, Armen's going to take Christian and the kids back to Claire's place. We can stay here and see if we can find out what's going on."

"Oh. Okay. Dev's on his way."

"Dev? Oh. Is that the doctor?"

"Yes."

"I thought you broke up with him."

"I did. But...I called him." She swallowed then smiled at Armen. "Thanks, Armen. They're going crazy here. If Colin and Claire want them, we'll let you know."

"Yeah. They'll be better off at home."

Gratitude swelled inside her and she hugged her brother-in-law. Then she and Molly collapsed into chairs, just the two of them now. Tori reached for her sister's hand and their fingers twined together.

"Tori."

"Mmm."

"What if Claire's dead?"

"Oh my god, don't even say that! Of course she's not dead." But Tori's tummy tightened even more. "Everything will be fine, Molly."

"If she loses the baby..."

Tori squeezed Molly's hand. "That won't happen."

Moments later Dev charged into the waiting room. The sight of him had Tori's heart swelling up big enough to burst. His eyes swept the room, looking for her and

when they landed on her, she rose out of her chair, releasing Molly's hand. Dev headed straight to her and grabbed her upper arms. "Are you okay?" he asked, his face intense.

"Yes, yes, I'm fine, it's Claire we're worried about."

He pulled her in for a brief but fierce hug, and she sank into his embrace, absorbing his energy and strength. "Ah, Tori."

She hugged him back, and then they stepped apart. Heat warmed Tori's cheeks and she gave him a shaky smile.

"I'll go see what I can find out."

"Thank you." The words came from deep, deep inside her, gratitude filling her, along with total trust that he would find out what was going on and somehow make things right. He gave her mouth a quick kiss, then disappeared.

Tori touched her fingertips to her cheeks and stood there for a moment, then turned back to Molly who watched wide-eyed. Molly smiled. "You two broke up?"

"Uh...yeah."

"Why on earth would you dump him?"

"What makes you think I dumped him? Maybe he broke up with me."

"I don't think so. The man is clearly nuts about you."

Oh. Tori's heart tilted. "It's a long story." One she didn't intend to share with her baby sister.

"He's gorgeous, Tori. What's wrong with him?"

Tori gave Molly a look. "What's wrong with him?"

"I mean, yeah, he's young, but geez, he's hot and he must be smart if he's a doctor and... What's the catch?"

Tori thought about that for a long moment. What was the catch? He was too... principled. Too nice. She almost groaned aloud. How stupid did that sound? She'd sound like one of those women who was attracted to bad boys who abused them and broke their hearts, who refused to date a guy who was "too nice". She wasn't that young and stupid and insecure.

Was she?

Did she seriously think Dev was too nice for her?

She leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and buried her face in her hands. Molly's hand touched her back and gently rubbed up and down.

"Hey," she said. "It's okay, Tori."

Tori turned her head from side to side. "Oh, Molly. I think I screwed up big time."

"It'll be okay." Molly leaned closer. "I saw the way he looked at you. If you like him, you can work things out."

"First we have to make sure Claire is okay."

"Yeah."

"Dev'll find out. I know he will."

"Yeah." Molly's hand rubbed her back again. How unusual it was for one of her baby sisters to be consoling her, looking after her. She'd always been the one who looked after them. Nobody'd ever looked after her, not since Mom had died.

She wasn't feeling sorry for herself. It was just a fact. She'd been the responsible big sister. Dad hadn't been all that nurturing and his new wife even less so, despite having one daughter and immediately having another baby with her new husband.

She thought she knew what had led her to BDSM but now she wondered if this too had contributed to the needs she had. Another thing that made her want to submit, to give up control—to be looked after.

She remembered the things Dev had done for her—looked after her when she sprained her ankle, took care of her after sex, took the kids to the zoo with her, was so good to them, rushed to the hospital to help her even now. Her eyes stung and her throat thickened as she sat there, face in her hands. How many times had she thought she needed more, when the truth was—he'd given her *everything* she needed. In fact, he'd given her more than she'd even *known* she needed.

She sat up and dragged air into her lungs, brushed some dampness from her cheeks, then rubbed her palms over the knees of her jeans.

She gave Molly a soggy smile. "Thanks, Moll."

Molly smiled back at her, concern darkening her eyes.

And then Dev was standing there in front of her.

She leaped to her feet and grabbed his arm, strong and warm.

"Sit down, Tori." His authoritative voice had her immediately subsiding back into her chair. Her skin crawled and her tongue adhered to the roof of her mouth looking at his serious face.

"Okay, listen." He took the seat next to her and clasped her hands, glancing at Molly.

"My sister Molly. Molly, this is Dev."

He gave Molly a brief nod. "I'm going back in there to help. Claire has some complications from her delivery. Amniotic fluid embolism."

Tori blinked at him, holding on to him, gaze fastened on him.

"It's a very rare complication," he continued, fingers warm and firm and steady on hers. "Some of the amniotic fluid entered her bloodstream. She's having a reaction to it and it's very serious."

"Oh my god." The room faded to black around her and a buzzing started in her ears. "Oh my god."

"Her blood pressure dropped and she went into cardiac arrest."

Molly gasped beside her and Tori stared at Dev.

"Then she went into a sort of shock. Her blood's not clotting and she's bleeding heavily. We need to give her a transfusion."

"You...?"

"This is really rare," Dev replied. "Her obstetrician has never encountered it, but of course he knew what it was. I had two cases of this when I was a resident in Los Angeles. So I'm going to go back and help. Okay?"

"Yes. Yes. Okay. Yes." She gripped his hands. "Dev. Is she okay? What about the baby?"

"They're going to do an emergency c-section."

"Oh, no. Is Colin...?"

"He's there with her. He's okay."

"No wonder he didn't come out. Oh Dev."

He rose. "I'll be back as soon as I can." He kissed her mouth, hard. "Hang in there, Tori. You're strong."

No. She wasn't. She didn't want to let go of him, but on the other hand she wanted him back there looking after Claire. He spoke with a composed competence despite the emergency situation, and made her feel calmer. A bit calmer.

She turned to Molly when he'd gone. Molly's face had gone even paler. Then Molly's cell phone rang. She answered it. "Hi, honey," she said. She must be talking to Armen. "Oh god. He won't take the bottle?" She shoved her hair back. "Okay. Bring him here. No, I'll come there. No, wait, I don't have a car." She listened. "Of course you can't leave the kids. Okay. Okay. I'll take a taxi there." She told him what they'd learned about Claire. She closed her phone and turned to Tori. "Christian won't take the bottle. We just started trying that and he's not so good at it. I have to go feed him."

Tori squeezed her hand. "Of course! Go. You have to look after your little guy."

Molly blew out a breath. "I don't want to leave you alone."

"I'll be okay. I'm fine. I'll just hang out and see if Dev comes back with any news. If he does, I'll call you."

"I'll be back in...less than an hour."

"It's okay. I'll call you," she repeated. "Don't rush back."

"Tori."

Tori looked at Molly.

"You make things right with that doctor. He's amazing."

Tori smiled a wobbly smile. "Yes. He is." He was one big contradiction—a man who could make her do whatever he wanted, but who made her feel completely safe and looked after. He was sure and confident. She completely trusted that he was going to make things right for Claire. And yet he didn't seem to recognize all that about himself.

He was amazing.

Chapter Nineteen

"Thirty-three year old, G3. P3 at thirty-nine weeks, developed late decelerations when she was eight centimetres. Soon after, the patient suddenly became unconscious, tachypneic and had a thready pulse with unrecordable blood pressure. CPR was started, and patient was taken to the OR for a crash section. A provisional diagnosis of amniotic fluid embolus was made based on the presentation of symptoms and later confirmed with D-dimer levels over three hundred and oozing from the surgical sites."

Dev listened to the obstetrician report to the attending, nodding his confirmation.

"In the OR, the patient was intubated, and CPR was continued while the emergency c-section was being performed. The baby was delivered five minutes after maternal collapse in the delivery suite and one minute after intubation. Adrenaline one milligram IV was given to the mother, after which she developed transient ventricular tachycardia, but this resolved spontaneously and normal sinus rhythm was detected. She's currently still sedated and intubated, on three micrograms per kilogram per minute of dopamine to maintain pressure, and ten units of pitocin per hour to control uterine bleeding. She's received two units of packed red blood cells and three units of FFP. Latest labs show..." He glanced at Dev.

"Gibrinogen levels are at one-twenty-seven," Dev added. "INR is two-point-six, hematacrit is at thirty-one, and platelets are at thirty-seven. Creatinine levels have remained stable at two-point-one, indicating no worsening in her renal function despite her urine output of approximately ten cc per hour."

"Great job," Dr. Gill said, looking at both of them. "Amniotic fluid emboli are rare. The maternal mortality rate is sixty percent."

"Yeah." Dev shoved a hand into his hair. The adrenaline rush was fading and he was starting to feel a little shaky. And he was feeling a desperate need to get back to Tori.

He emerged into the waiting room still wearing scrubs.

She sat there alone, head in one hand, almost asleep. When he said her name, she jumped up, terror flashing in her eyes. "Dev!" She threw herself at him. "Is she okay?"

"Yeah. She's okay."

He wrapped his arms around her and held on tight. She hugged him back around the neck, her feet lifting off the floor, and he felt her shaking.

"And the baby?"

"The baby's okay now too. A girl, nearly eight pounds."

He pressed her head into his shoulder, then drew back to look at her face. "It was serious, Tori. We don't know for sure what kind of sequelae she might have. There

could be some neurological problems, but hopefully if there are, they'll resolve. We don't know yet."

"But she's alive and the baby's okay."

"Yes. They'll both have to stay in the hospital. Not sure how long."

"Oh Dev." She fell against him again, and this time her body shook with quiet sobs. "Oh Dev."

"Sssh. It's okay. She's okay. It'll be fine, Tori."

"Oh thank god you came, thank you, thank you."

"Of course I came. Jesus, Tori."

He became aware of the other people in the waiting room watching them with interest. "Come with me." He led her into a small empty office.

"Tori. We have to talk."

"Yes." She nodded vigorously, swiped her eyes and sniffed. "Yes, we do. I want to. But first can I see Claire?"

"She's in the ICU. She's still intubated and sedated."

"Oh god." Her eyes clouded again.

"Colin's with her. He said he'll come see you in a few minutes. Now she's stable."

"Okay." She buried her face against his chest again. He felt her inhaling deep breaths, obviously striving for control.

She talked to Colin, gave him big hugs and wiped his tears. Jesus, the guy'd come *that* close to losing his wife and baby. Dev was used to dealing with difficult situations, delivering bad news to families, but this was hitting close to home and ripping his guts out.

"Don't worry about the kids," Tori told Colin. "Molly and Armen are there right now and if they can't stay, I'll go stay with them. We'll look after them. You stay with Claire."

"Thanks, Tori," Colin croaked.

Then Tori called Molly and told her the good news. Or the cautiously good news, anyway. "I can come stay with Brandon and Hannah," she offered to her sister. A pause. "Are you sure? Okay, then I'll come over in the morning. Everything there's okay?" She nodded. "Good. See you tomorrow."

"Tomorrow you should be able to see both of them," Dev told her. "Mom and baby."

She relayed this information to Molly, then hung up. "Stephanie."

"Is that her name?" He smiled at her.

"Yes. They knew they were having a girl. And that's her name."

"Cool."

They stood there in the entrance of the hospital and memories flooded back of him wheeling her out of there in a wheelchair, entranced with her stubborn determination and sweet vulnerability. "How'd you get here?" he asked.

"We all came in the van. But they took it back to Claire's place."

"I'll drive you home."

"My car's at Claire's."

"Do you want to get it?"

She looked at him. He'd take her there, if she wanted, drop her off and let her drive home. But somehow, somewhere they were going to talk. Because he'd done a lot of hard thinking since he'd left the coffee shop where he'd met Gabe earlier. He'd also had an interesting visit with his parents.

"That's okay," she murmured. "I can get it tomorrow."

"Okay. Let's go."

He led the way to his ancient Audi and helped her in.

"You're such a gentleman," she murmured when he slid into the driver's seat. He shot her a startled look.

"Uh...okay."

"I love you, Dev."

He froze, one hand on the key in the ignition, the other on the steering wheel. His heartbeat kicked up a notch, his breathing went rough and raw. He stared straight ahead for a long moment.

"Helluva time to tell me," he finally said. He shook his head and turned to face her. "Tori. I love you too."

Her luminous smile lit up the inside of the car, lit up his insides, lit up his world. "I've been so stupid, Dev."

"No. No, you haven't."

"I have! I didn't..."

He held up a hand. "Let's do this when we get to your place. 'Cause I have a feeling I'm gonna want to jump your bones, and I can't do that here."

Her soft laugh made his insides quiver.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry I called you a coward."

They sat on her couch, Tori in Dev's arms, her legs across his lap, her arms around his neck. Their talk was punctuated with soft kisses and touches, with nuzzles to the side of his neck so she could breathe in his scent, with brushes of his hand over her hair.

"I *was* being a coward."

"No you weren't. I was trying to push you to do things you didn't believe in."

"Oh Tori." He sighed. "I met with Gabe this morning."

Tori's head snapped back. "You did?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"I wanted to understand what happened last weekend."

"Oh." She played with the top button of his shirt. "Well. I talked to Gabe too."

"Yeah. I figured that, from what he said. He knew about what happened...after. When I brought you home. And I have to apologize to you, sweet thing. I should never have called you deviant. I'm so sorry I hurt you."

"I *am* deviant."

He laughed. "Oh baby, everyone's deviant in some way, I think. But even more than that, I'm sorry I rejected you. I was... Okay, I still am a little freaked out by some of this. But I *was* being a coward and if that's what it takes to keep you, I'll do whatever you want me to. I'll take flogging lessons from Gabe, I'll learn how to..."

"No." She met his eyes and stared straight into them. "No," she said again. "You don't need to do that."

"I love you, Tori. If that's what you need, I'll do it."

"No." She shook her head. "Here's the thing I didn't realize. The reason the scene last weekend didn't go so well. It was because it wasn't *you* who was doing that to me."

"Then I'll learn..."

She laid her hand over his mouth. His eyes widened and then narrowed and he reached up and removed her hand. The look of authority in his eyes had her apologizing. "Sorry. I just wanted to finish."

"Go ahead."

"It doesn't matter what you do to me," she continued in a rush. "You dominate me with just a look, for heaven's sake." She laughed. "Like you just did."

Satisfaction tugged Dev's mouth into a smile. "Yeah."

"Yes, you spanked me and pulled my hair and tied me up and I loved it. But I loved it because it was *you* doing that to me. I loved it when you made me take my panties off in the restaurant. I loved it when you made me touch myself in front of you. You did those things without tying me up or using any kind of physical force. Just the power of your personality."

His smile broadened with just a touch of cockiness that melted her heart.

"Because it was *you*," she whispered, laying a palm on his cheek. He turned his head slightly and rubbed into her hand, his whiskers rough. "Because I love you. Last night I met Gabe at Le Château. I thought I needed to go there... I wanted to play...but then I discovered I really didn't want to—without you."

"You didn't do anything?"

"No. And I realized that was what went wrong that night. I only wanted to be with *you*. It just felt wrong and I was so confused, because I never felt like that before. So we just talked. Gabe's pretty smart."

Dev's mouth twisted. "Yeah. I'll give him that. You know he's in love with you, don't you?"

Tori bent her head, tightness gripping her chest. "He's never told me that, but yeah... I guess I know." She lifted her eyes to Dev's face. "I never knew it before, though. I just thought he felt the same way about me as I did about him—we were play partners."

Dev nodded and stroked her hair off her face.

"What did you talk to him about?" she asked.

"A bunch of stuff." He lifted one shoulder. "He made me think about things. He made me feel okay about myself. Yeah, maybe right now I don't want to hang you upside down and whip you..." She laughed. "But maybe one day I will. If you think you can be satisfied with me while I learn my way through all this."

"I can't be satisfied *without* you," she said softly.

"Oh Tori, baby." He crushed her up against his chest, eyes squeezed shut, mouth tight. He held her like that for a long time, and she absorbed the emotion she felt vibrating in his body. "When Gabe made me realize what a gift you give me with your trust and your submission, it was like a light bulb going off in my head. I realized how good you make me feel. How strong. How confident." He rubbed his face against her hair and she felt the fine trembling of emotion in his big, hot body. "After Gabe left, I sat there for a while and thought about stuff. And then I went to my parents' place and had a long talk with them. Especially my dad."

"Really?" She drew back again in his arms to look at him.

"I was actually thinking of moving back to Los Angeles," he said. "After last weekend and I was so pissed at my dad for refusing to let go and sabotaging my career. And pissed about losing you. And then I talked to Gabe and I knew I wasn't going to give you up. So I wasn't leaving Santa Barbara. And so I had to face up to my dad. Both my parents. You were right—they weren't impressed that I was seeing someone eight years older than me. But I told them I love you and you're part of my life and they have to deal with it. I'm not a kid any more. And I told my dad if he doesn't butt out and let me look after my patients the way I want to, I'll go practice medicine somewhere else. And this time...I mean it." He gave a dry chuckle. "I've tried to talk to him before, but this time I'm serious. One more interference and I'm gone. I don't need that shit."

A feeling of pride swelled inside her. "Oh Dev. Whatever you do, I'm with you." Her face tightened. "But I don't want to come between you and your parents. If they don't like me..."

"They don't even know you. My mom just had this weird idea that I was too young to settle down with anyone. I'm almost thirty, for Chrissakes. They've just always seen me as the baby, still do. When they get to know you, they'll love you."

She hoped so. But the fact that he'd stood up to them, for her, made her heart squeeze.

"There's something else I need to tell you. About them."

The solemnity of his voice had her body tensing, but she nodded.

"My mom's dad abused her when she was growing up. Her and her mom. Her life was pretty tough."

Tori sat back in little in her chair and blinked at him, sank her teeth into her bottom lip. "That's awful."

"Yeah. Her dad was an alcoholic and I know now he probably had some kind of personality disorder. He died before I ever met him, but when my dad met my mom she had a lot of...issues. He drilled it into my head every day of my life that you never lay a hand on a woman. Ever."

Oh. Her heart contracted and she lifted a hand to her throat. "Oh Dev."

He met her gaze, his expression fierce, his mouth tight. "I've always taken that seriously."

"That's good." She felt herself soften as she held his gaze. Of course he would take that seriously. Since the first moment they'd met, he'd treated her with respect and gentlemanly courtesy—opening doors for her, helping her with gentle care. She'd liked that about him. She gave him a small smile. "I have no doubt of that."

"They didn't even believe in spanking me when I was a kid, for Chrissake."

"I don't believe in spanking kids, either." She met his gaze steadily.

"But every time..." He closed his eyes, grooves deepening from the corners of his nose to his mouth, his jaw tight. "Every time I had those urges...I wondered if I was just like him."

She frowned. "Like who? Oh." Then she got it.

He'd worried he was an abuser like his grandfather.

Her heart ached for him. Her whole body ached for him. No wonder he'd been so conflicted. She'd sensed that all along, but she'd had no idea why. Tears stung the corners of her eyes and her throat constricted for the battles he'd fought with himself. She lifted her hand to his face and laid her palm on his cheek. He closed his eyes and turned his face into her hand.

Admiration swelled inside her for his strong principles, for the courage it had taken for him to acknowledge who he was, knowing the intensity of the struggle that had gone on inside him. Probably still *was* going on inside him.

"I think I understand now — the difference between abuse and giving you what you need."

"Maybe I don't need what I thought I did," she whispered, her throat still tight.

Their gaze held for a long moment, then he nodded.

"After I talked to my parents, I came here to find you, but you weren't home. I was about to call your cell when you called me."

"Oh. I'd been thinking about you too, Dev. I was going to call you. After I got through the birthday party." She told him about the family gathering and how Claire had gone into labor in the middle of it. "At the hospital I felt so scared and all I wanted was you there. I knew you'd find out what was wrong. I didn't know you'd take care of Claire, but I'm so glad you did. Thank you for coming. And thank you for being you. You're like..." She stopped, feeling a little silly.

"Like what, sweet thing?"

"Like my knight in shining armor." Her voice went thin and a little high.

Dev cleared his throat. "Aw, baby." He pressed her face against him again and they sat like that for a long moment, hearts thudding in tandem.

It was crazy. She was an executive with a big company, making big dollar business decisions every day, constantly telling people what to do and solving problems. All her life she'd looked after her family, and she didn't need a man or a knight in shining armor, but...she needed Dev.

Then he lifted her legs off his lap and lowered them to the floor. He rose from the couch and stood in front of her. "Go upstairs," he said.

A thrill ran through her at the command in his voice and the heat in his eyes.

She too rose to her feet, then turned and started up the stairs.

Chapter Twenty

Dev followed Tori up the stairs, admiring her ass in her low-rise jeans. He loved her ass. Heat rose inside him along with a feeling of freedom, in intense joy, a deep satisfaction. He'd felt that sense of relief before, when he'd given in to his urges with Tori. But tonight...he felt like the whole world was at his feet. Like he could do anything.

What a rush!

Adrenaline surged through his veins, his heartbeat deepening to a drumbeat, his skin tingling. Power and confidence rose in him.

In her bedroom, she turned to him. The setting sun flooded the room with rich golden light through her bedroom window, gilding her hair, making her skin glow.

She was beautiful.

She was magical.

She was his.

His. Possession and protection. Love and lust. Domination and responsibility.

"Take your clothes off."

He watched her strip, shimmying out of the snug jeans, the loose floaty top she wore, the tiny thong panties and last, the sheer bra. She stood before him, brave and beautiful. The trust he saw shining in her eyes made his chest go hot and tight. It made him feel huge and powerful. He wanted to be worthy of that trust. He wanted to give it all back to her, all his trust, all his love, like a mirror, reflecting it all back at her. Or was she reflecting it back at him?

The rush of emotion almost sent him to his knees.

"Get on the bed." His voice came out in a dark rasp.

She obeyed immediately, crawling onto the bed and lying down on her back.

He slowly unbuttoned his shirt and dropped it to the floor, then unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. He pulled out his heavy cock, aching for her, gave it several long, slow strokes while she watched. He kicked his pants aside and walked over to the table beside her bed, slid open the drawer, then reached in for the bottle of lube he knew was there.

He kept his gaze focused on her, and she watched him in return.

"Anything I want," he said.

She gave a tiny nod.

"Do you trust me?"

She nodded again.

"I want you to know...we don't need a safe word." Her eyes widened a bit. "All you ever have to say is no, Tori. I promise you. Just say no and I'll stop. Trust me?" he asked again.

"Yes."

"Roll over. Onto your stomach."

She did so, lifting her arms above her head. Perfect. He leaned over and cuffed her wrists together, tightened the strap so she was held in place. He pulled her hair to one side and kissed the back of her neck, so gently. He still struggled with it, with his commitment to her and his conscience, told himself he was going to make it good for her, so good – because it was what she wanted.

And it was what he wanted.

He dragged his tongue over her shoulder, opened his mouth on her skin, nipped with his teeth, drawing a gasp from her. Then licked his way back to the center of her back and down her spine, right to the hollows at the base, just above her ass.

He moved over her, his cock thrusting heavy in front of him, and he let it rest on her back. Brushed the head of it over her satiny skin, leaving a damp trail. She moaned.

He shifted lower so he was over her legs. Oh yeah, he loved the firm globes of flesh of her ass, the way they filled his hands, molded to his palms. Heat rushed through his body, sizzling in his veins, scorching his nerve endings as he massaged her, letting his thumbs slip between the cheeks, deeper, and deeper. And then he laid a smack on one round cheek. She jolted and gave a tiny cry.

He landed his hand on the curve of her ass again. And again, firing her up. One cheek, then the other.

"Sweet, Tori. So sweet," he murmured. "Love your ass, all pink and glowing like this. God, what I want to do to you."

She shifted on the bed, hips moving in needy supplication.

"Trust me?" he asked again.

"Yes."

He moved between her legs then, pushing them apart, lifting her hips, spreading her so all her pink and pretty treasures were visible to him. His thumbs again parted her ass cheeks, revealing the puckered little asshole, and he brushed one thumb over it again and again. Tori's moan inflamed his senses, ignited every nerve ending.

"I want your ass, Tori," he groaned. "I want to fuck your ass."

Her hair had fallen back over her face but he could see her sink her teeth into her bottom lip.

When her butt cheeks were nicely blushed, he leaned forward to kiss them, slid his tongue over smooth flesh, then between her legs. Her female scent filled his head, made him nearly insane with lust. His tongue licked over her, over plump folds, between them, down to tease the quivering bud of her clit, back up to that tight little hole that tempted him so much. He licked there too, probing with his tongue, parting her with

his fingers, then licking lower again, sucking gently on soft flesh, letting her sweet taste fill his mouth.

Her soft cries and whimpers drove him nuts, went straight to his groin, where he throbbed and pulsed.

"This is it, sweet thing," he muttered, lifting up for a moment. "This is it. You and me."

He didn't know where the words came from or what exactly they even meant, but she nodded her head on the pillow, arms stretched above her.

"Your ass is mine," he continued, voice rough. "All of you. You're mine, Tori."

"Yes."

He paused to open the bottle of lube and drizzle it all over her ass, making her twitch, then poured some into his hand. He snapped the bottle shut and tossed it aside, the thunk of it hitting the floor somewhere of no consequence. He slicked up his cock with both hands, letting his head fall back as sensation poured over him, thick and hot.

He fisted his cock, gave a couple more pulls, then pushed inside the wet heat of her pussy. Hot silk. Claspings him tight. He thrust in and out a few times, holding her hips, his thighs pushing hers farther apart, then withdrew completely and laid his wet cock against the crevice between her ass cheeks. She whimpered again.

He paused to just enjoy the visual for a moment, his heart thudding. So damn hot, those pretty ass cheeks, pink and round. He swallowed, burning up, heat radiating over his flesh, his balls rock hard and tight at the base of his cock. He reached for her ass and massaged the lube into her fever-hot flesh, down between the cheeks, right over the tiny, tight entrance. And then rubbed his cock head there, over the sweet pucker. All slicked up from her arousal and the lubricant, he rubbed harder, then slowly, carefully tucked the head against her and eased into her.

She cried out, her head lifting from the bed.

He laid a hand on her back between her shoulder blades. "Okay, sweet thing. It's okay. Breathe."

"Dev. Oh *god*, Dev."

He stayed still, just barely inside her, fire raging in his balls, threatening to erupt.

"Does it burn, baby?"

"Yes."

"Can you take it?"

"Yesss." Her ass lifted and he pushed in a little deeper, and another harsh groan tore from deep inside her.

"That's it baby. That's it. Take me. God, watching my cock sink into your sweet little ass is so fucking hot." He rubbed his hand over her back and pressed again, holding her down. So tight, so forbidden. Dark and edgy excitement raced through him. He'd always wanted to do this, and again that feeling of being set free soared through him.

He slid his free hand beneath her, found her clit with his fingers and rubbed, giving her pleasure to go with the burn. She moved with him, as much as she could with his weight on her, his cock inside her, his hand on her back, tight little noises of pleasure and pain pouring from her mouth.

"That's it, sweet thing. Come for me. Come with my cock in your ass."

Her body tightened beneath him, her breathing changed and a strangled cry ripped from her throat, and then he lost it, lost it all, let himself go inside her, pouring himself into her and not just his seed but everything he had – his heart, his soul.

He fell over her, pulsing inside her tight channel, sweat dripping from his forehead, chilling on his back. Holy, holy fuck.

After long heart-pounding, lung-burning moments, he reached up and fumbled at the cuff at her wrists and released her. His cock slid slowly out of her, softening, and he rolled off her. On rubber legs, he staggered into her bathroom to clean himself up, washed his semi-erect cock with soap and water, then dried off. He found another cloth, soaked it in hot water and carried it and a towel back into the bedroom.

Seated beside her on the bed, he carefully washed between Tori's legs, gently stroked the cloth over her ass where she'd be tender, wiped the lube from her cheeks and thighs. He remembered his talk with Gabe, how Gabe had reassured him that taking care of her was a part of it. He loved taking care of her. And then once more he bent and laid his mouth on the soft pinkened flesh in a long, open-mouthed kiss.

He rolled her limp body over to her back and kissed her mouth. Her dazed eyes fluttered open and her arms lay slack at her sides.

"Love you. So much," he murmured.

"I love you too."

He tugged back the covers and got them both underneath, pulled her in close and wrapped his arms around her, pressing her face to his heart.

"Dev."

"Mmm."

"I don't want to be tied up every time we have sex."

For an instant those doubts roared back to life and his heart leaped up into his throat. Had he screwed up? Then he felt her smile against his chest. A choking laugh rose up into his throat. "No?"

"No. Sometimes I want to touch you."

"Well. We'll see."

She chuckled and gave his shoulder a lethargic swat. "Don't get carried away, Master."

"Master. Hmm. I kinda like that. Maybe you should start calling me that all the time."

"Maybe not."

He laughed softly. She was submissive but she was strong and independent. And he loved that. She snuggled in closer, and her hands started wandering over his body, up his back, over his chest, down over his ass, lingering there. Ah. He snuck a hand between them and lifted her chin with his knuckles. "I guess touching me will be allowed," he said thickly.

Her fingers played with the crack of his ass, and tingles spread from her touch up his spine and down his legs. Her slow smile had his brain sizzling, her playful fingers had his cocking hardening again, already, and he was done, sinking down into bliss, into the perfect bliss of Tori. He covered her mouth with his and slid his tongue into her mouth, slowly, deeply, again and again.

He felt consumed by her softness, her generosity, her hands all over him, her tongue in his mouth, and his mind went foggy. His fingers spread on her cheek, his thumb below her jaw and he held her face as he moved her to her back and slid over her.

"I want to be on top," she said in a breathless voice.

"Next time."

"But Dev..."

He kissed her again, sliding his tongue over hers, sucking on her, cupping one breast in his hand. He loved the idea of her being on top, loved the view he would have, breasts bouncing, her sliding up and down on him, but right now, he had to fuck her again, on top of her, inside her, taking her, because she was *his*. "Never gonna let you go," he muttered against her mouth. "Never. Just so you know."

"Mmm." She kissed him back and moved against him, so small and delicate and soft and yet so strong. Heat surrounded them, lush, thick heat, and he inhaled the familiar exotic floral and spice scent of her bed mingled with the erotic scent of sex. His cock surged again, and he kissed her cheek, licked her mouth and dragged his tongue down the side of her neck. She shivered against him, opened her legs to him and he sank down deeper into ecstasy as his cock found its way inside her with a little help from her. Her fingers on his shaft, his cock head buried in her silky wetness, had his head spinning, his skin burning up.

He rose up off her, still buried inside her, lifted her knees and then her feet to his shoulders and watched her face. Her eyes met his, a powerful connection, the most intimate connection, joined body, heart and soul. He let his feelings show on his face, opening himself, knowing he was vulnerable—but so was she, her eyes full of emotion. He turned his head and opened his mouth on her leg, a long, slow kiss, turned back to her face, her eyes alight with love and devotion and submission. Emotion rolled over him in great swamping waves that took his breath away. "I love you," he gasped.

"Love...you...too."

Then he watched in awe as her fingers found her clit while he thrust in and out, her pussy clinging and gripping him, pressure building, his breathing harsh and heavy, his body burning with pleasure.

"Make me come," she begged. "Harder, Dev. Fuck me harder."

Fire swept over him, blood rushing hot through his veins, his heart about to explode. When her pussy rippled around him and she cried out, he fell over her and fucked into her hard, letting the pressure inside him rip through him and tear him apart in the most exquisite pain, the most beautiful agony.

"I never knew," she whispered long moments later, opening her mouth on his shoulder and grazing her teeth over his skin.

"Never knew what, sweet thing?" He nuzzled her ear, breathed her in.

"I never knew submission would be so much more. With someone you love. I never knew the giving would be so much more intense. I want to give you everything, Dev."

"You do give me everything. You give me your honesty. Your acceptance. And you give me the ultimate gift, Tori—your trust. Your submission."

"I trust you with everything I have."

"I want you to know how much that means to me."

She nodded, her fingers stroking over his shoulders.

"I want to be worthy of that," he whispered, his throat squeezing.

"I know. You are, Dev. And you make me want to be worthy of you. Your caring, your compassion. Your love."

At that moment he realized that when she gave up control to him, she wasn't giving up control—she was exchanging it. Exchanging it for something else, something that gave her what she wanted in return. And when he gave it to her, he got something back too. Knowing she saw him as heroic and strong made him recognize that part of himself too.

That sense of liberation from everything that restrained him in his life—every expectation about how to treat a woman, how he should act, how he should feel—expanded inside him. In loving her and in being loved by her, he'd been set free. Free to be himself, who he truly wanted to be. He might still be learning who that was, but now he knew—that journey never ended. He was starting out—it was a beginning. But he was sharing it with Tori. They were in it together.

She was who he wanted to take the journey with.

About the Author

Kelly Jamieson is the author of several sexy romance novels. Her writing has been described as “blisteringly sexy” and “a spicy delicious read”. If she can stop herself from reading or writing, she loves to cook. She has shelves of cookbooks that she reads at length. She also enjoys gardening in the summer, and in the winter she likes to read gardening magazines and seed catalogues. She also loves shopping, especially for clothes and shoes.

But her family takes precedence over everything else (yes, even writing). She has two teenage children who are the best kids in the world, not that she’s biased, and a wonderful husband who does loads of laundry while she plays on the computer writing stories. She loves hearing from readers.

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

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