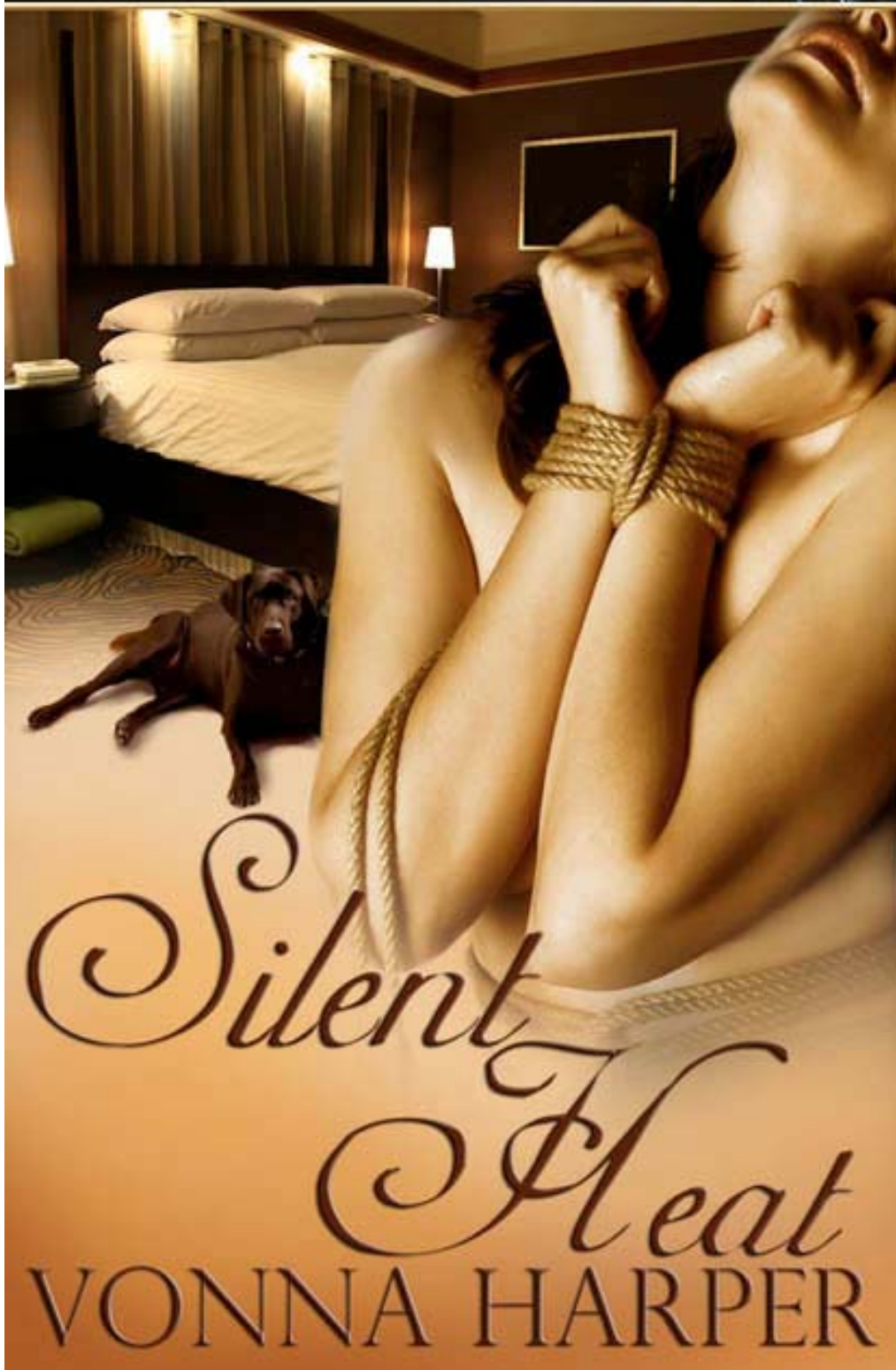


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Silent Heat

Vonna Harper

Deaf since age ten, Carlee Cooper has become a master gardener. She has developed a teaching greenhouse, funded by her rich landlord, at the local high school and she lives in the small guest cottage behind his home. Although she's attracted to him, she doesn't have much self-confidence when it comes to men.

Her landlord, BDSM Dom York Bridges, knows a sub when he sees one—when he touches and smells her. Carlee is drawn to York's control and power. She'll submit to the red collar her Master places around her neck and his cuffs on her wrists, for now...

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Silent Heat

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SILENT HEAT

Vonna Harper

Chapter One

Opening the driver's door, York Bridges swiveled and planted his feet on the ground. He stood, slowly unfolding his six-foot-one-inch frame to ensure himself that his spine wouldn't protest. Fortunately, unlike all through his growing up, it didn't. Even weighed down by a transcendental flight followed by another hour behind the wheel, sexual need gnawed at him. Determined not to let it get the best of him, after emptying his stuffed mailbox, he turned his attention to the old rosebushes flanking his driveway.

The last time he'd been home the better part of a month ago the buds had been swelling. Now the deep yellow bush was in full bloom with the others close behind. After too many hours of recycled air followed by exhaust fumes, the sweet scents of spring revived him as no amount of coffee ever could. At the same time, the smell stirred what didn't need stirring given that no female body would be sharing his bed tonight.

He stretched. If he hadn't already discarded his tie and unbuttoned the two top shirt buttons, he'd be doing just that.

Home. For a good two weeks before he had to take off again. Maybe he should celebrate by going to The Club for some mutually satisfying BDSM play. One thing about having just been in Germany, he'd been able to add to his collection of X-rated videos to say nothing of the bright red handcuffs and matching leather collar in his suitcase. Both would be hits.

It was spring, Friday night, the air warm and clean. He'd go into his house, open windows, kick off his shoes, pour himself a drink and sit on the front porch. Maybe he'd bring the mail out with him, but maybe he'd settle for the sports magazine he seldom had time to read.

Pleased with the sense of direction that hopefully would keep his libido tamped down, he reached in his open car window and triggered the garage door opener. Instead of driving into the garage, however, he focused on the gravel path leading around his house to the cottage behind it. Was his tenant home? If Carlee was, she might be inclined to bring him up to date about how she was spending the sizeable donation his corporation had given her nursery project at the local high school.

Forget it. Being around Carlee was always unsettling. The manager of a specialty plant nursery oozed something he couldn't quite get a handle on, mixes of sexuality and remoteness, a don't-touch air guaranteed to have him seriously considering heading for The Club when the truth was that the thought of getting back in his car exhausted him.

Bottom line, his tenant kept him off balance, something he wasn't used to.

Hearing about her efforts to get a greenhouse off the ground could wait. Their paths would undoubtedly cross over the next few days. When they did, he'd be sure to compliment her green thumb that had transformed his twenty-some rosebushes from sad survivors to the pride of the neighborhood.

A moment ago he hadn't cared about anything except kicking out of his dress shoes and dropping a couple of ice cubes in a glass. Now he debated cruising the yard first, trusting that step-by-step and moment-by-moment, reconnecting with his land would do more for him than any number of drinks ever could.

As for whether he wanted Carlee walking beside him explaining what she'd been doing to said land—her stride matching his, her small but strong body exuding health—of course he did.

Back when she'd asked if he minded if she did what she could to revive the roses, her eyes had sparked with an energy that had caught him in his gut. Intrigued and unsettled him. He'd been used to her silent ways. He'd even made his peace with the large hazel eyes that never left his face yet reached beyond the surface.

For all he knew, she'd seen what he was beneath the professional exterior. If knowing her landlord was part of the city's BDSM community shocked her, she'd given no indication.

Not that he'd ask.

After depositing the car in the garage, he realized he'd made a decision after all, or rather his aching feet had. The inside air had been around too long, prompting him to open the front door. That done, he returned to the living room where he kicked off his shoes and peeled off his dress socks. Sliding his bare feet over the short carpet, he made his way into the kitchen. Instead of heading for his liquor cabinet, he opened the window over the sink. Now not only could he see the cottage, if Carlee was outside, he could call out to let her know her landlord was home.

No, he amended. He couldn't do that.

Distracted by the question of what her world was like, he propped his hands on the sink. Birds were proclaiming their approval of spring, and weren't those crickets? There was just enough of a breeze to make the tree branches dance with rustling leaves serving as a background for the birds. Yes, there was her SUV, the back open and full of potted plants and empty planting containers.

An ache in the small of his back prompted him to lean forward and stretch his spine. The older he got—not that thirty-six was ancient—the longer it took for his body to recover from long flights. If he kept up this pace much longer, it would take more than early-morning runs to keep things going.

* * * * *

A few minutes later, York had discarded his dress-for-success attire and covered himself with baggy running shorts and a faded pullover shirt. Well-broken-in tennis shoes and no socks allowed his feet to breathe.

The latest in his stockpile of Dom equipment lay on his bed, the red cuffs and collar garish against the light brown spread. He knew better than to linger over possibilities

and fantasies. It was enough to know that the women who played sub to his Dom would squeal with delight and demand to be the first to wear them. Strange, he couldn't decide who he wanted to give that honor to.

Instead of the drink he'd thought he'd be having, he filled a sports bottle with ice water and headed for his porch. He was pulling the all-weather chair into the waning sunlight when a dog barked. Concentrating, he determined that the sound had come from behind his house.

A dog? Carlee Cooper didn't have one. She knew better.

Frowning, he descended the stairs and headed around back. The dog barked again followed by a chorus of excited yips.

His house and the cottage were on the same oversized lot, but he'd had a low fence built between the two structures so whomever he rented to would have his or her own turf, so to speak. The cottage came with a yard, but he'd always made it clear that his renters weren't to have pets. The last thing he needed was to have the lawn and/or house torn up and complaints from neighbors. However, before he jumped to conclusions, he'd first talk to Carlee. For all he knew, some stray had followed her home.

Carlee. Guess he'd be seeing her tonight after all.

His tenant was standing in the middle of the lawn and angled away from him. Although what appeared to be a man's worn white T-shirt tented her spare frame, he read excitement in every line of what he could see of her body. Because of the fencing, he couldn't see her from the hips down.

Instead of playing the landlord card, he watched as she repeatedly leaned over, her arms in constant movement. He concluded she was both petting and playing with the dog. More yips left no doubt that the dog was having the time of his or her life. Carlee didn't try to silence the dog, not that he expected her to.

This wasn't the measured, responsible, reclusive, buttoned-up woman he'd rented to, not by a long shot. She'd shed most of her somewhat off-putting maturity, if that's what it was, her body fairly dancing. She clapped, twisted, turned, laughed.

Laughter? So that's what it sounds like coming from her.

And that's how my cock responds...

Groaning, he repositioned his shorts and pulled his shirt out of the waistband. If she spotted his hard-on, experience told him she wouldn't react. Hell, from everything he'd observed about the attractive young woman, she was sexless.

"Hello," he said, then shook his head at the useless gesture. However, before he could decide what to do, the dog switched from yipping to full-out barking. It must have jumped straight up, because for the first time, he saw a stubby body, oversized head, and out-to-there ears. The obvious mutt collided with Carlee, front paws raking her bare thighs.

Carlee crouched with her arms extended, obviously keeping the dog from jumping on her again. Still crouched, she turned toward him. Even from here, the hazel eyes connected with his. They turned wary, not that he expected anything different. Opting for making things easier on both of them, he didn't speak until his hands were on the fence.

"Remind me not to try to sneak up on you," he said, enunciating carefully. "Your new friend would never let me get away with it."

Under her oversized shirt, Carlee wore faded blue shorts briefer than his. Her long legs sported thin white scratch marks compliments of the dog. She was barefoot, her thick, dark hair caught in something at the back of her neck. If she was wearing makeup, it was minimal.

His damn unmanageable cock throbbed. Before he could stop himself, an image of her with his collar around her slender neck and his cuffs capturing her arms behind her surged front and center in his mind. She'd be naked of course, nipples hard, pussy hot and wet. As turned on as he, her *Master* was.

"Welcome home," she said, her attention fixed on his mouth and body language saying she was clueless to his thoughts. "How was your trip?"

He swallowed. Damn but she'd look good in his bonds. "Too long, but then they always are. Made some important contacts. Who is your friend?"

"Farley."

"Farley? What kind of —"

"It fits him, don't you think?"

Maybe, if Farley meant homely and mismatched with short legs and a barrel chest.

"Look," she said. "I'm sorry. I should have texted you about him. I kept putting it off, thinking you needed to see him to understand."

Yeah, she should have. If she thought he'd let her break the lease's rules because she was *different* or because she was sexy and single and he was on the prowl for something he couldn't put his finger on, she was wrong.

There didn't seem to be any reason to keep the fence between them now that his cock was returning to normal, so he walked over to the gate and through it. Farley's long, skinny tail whipped about, slapping him on his flanks. The dog gifted him with a white-toothed grin but stayed next to Carlee. The bond between them caught his attention.

"Why did you think my seeing him would make things easier?" he asked. "You know what your lease says."

Carlee's expression shifted, going from welcoming and kid-on-Christmas morning to guarded. Yet it wasn't the self-contained look he was used to from her. She wasn't defensive so much as determined. He wasn't sure how he felt about the change, a little off balance, a lot intrigued. It was, he decided, as if he'd just been given a glimpse into a side of her personality he hadn't known existed.

"This is different," she said. "Farley isn't a pet."

What then? Was she fostering him for the humane society? Maybe she was babysitting for one of the other employees at the nursery where she worked or at the high school. The explanation should have been a simple one, right, a few well-chosen words designed to bring him into the light. Once she'd spelled out the reason behind Farley's temporary existence in her life, they could talk about other things.

Maybe she'd stop looking as if she'd been backed into a corner and was ready to come out fighting.

"All right," he said and plopped his tired ass on the wooden step leading into the cottage. It took him a moment to look up at her instead of gazing at her tanned and slightly scratched legs. "Explain. If Farley isn't a pet, what is he?"

Her eyes closed then opened. "What I've always wanted. Needed."

Her voice had dropped to a near whisper at the end. There was something else, emotion breaking through the carefully modulated tone. Her eyes had widened, and was that a hint of moisture in them? She wasn't going to cry, was she, and if she did, what was he supposed to do? It wasn't as if he knew her well enough to offer her comfort, yet he wanted nothing more than to fold his arms around her and pull her slight yet competent body against his, to tap into the woman beneath the sexless clothes.

To ask her how she felt about fucking him.

"What have you always wanted?"

"A hearing ear companion."

Chapter Two

Much as she wanted to sit before her legs gave out from under her, Carlee remained standing. York was looking directly at her, something too many people forgot to do. At the moment, however, she was less interested in reading his lips than the expression in the dark eyes sheltered by thick lashes.

Darn it, enough with being drawn to his eyes! And the rest of him, like hard calves and powerful thighs, a solid chest draped in limp cotton that clung to muscle and bone. If she wasn't careful, her gaze would slide lower to settle on what she could see of his crotch. If that happened – damn it, no playing with fire!

Her relationship with her handsome landlord was supposed to be casual and professional. He was co-owner of a medical equipment manufacturing company, self-confident, creative and sophisticated, all traits that would never fit on her. Besides, there was something about him she couldn't get a handle on, a powerful roughness maybe, elements that made her draw comparisons between him and a stallion.

If he indeed thought like a stud beneath the civilized exterior, no wonder he hadn't come on to her. She'd never been a mare in heat.

Even if tonight felt different.

Hell, right now was new.

Why? What had changed?

"Hearing ear?" York repeated. "I don't – what's that?"

"Kind of like a seeing eye dog," she said, grateful for some place solid and safe to put her thoughts.

His frown intensified. At the same time, she caught a hint of the last thing she wanted to see – sympathy. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Why didn't I tell you what? You know I'm deaf."

"Of course I do. What I'm getting at—" He started to extend a hand toward Farley only to pull back. "Maybe I shouldn't be touching him. If he's supposed to be a one-man, ah woman, dog—"

"That's all right." From the moment she'd gotten the email saying the nonprofit Dogs for the Deaf program had a trained service dog for her, she'd known she'd have to tell York. As for why coming clean with him was so hard, she couldn't say. Or maybe the truth was, she was loath to admit her deficiencies to this man who exuded confidence. "These dogs are trained to accept attention from everyone. What's important is that they truly connect with the person they work for."

"Service dog. In other words, he can go wherever you do? Do you intend to take him to work and the school?"

It took her a moment to choose the right words. "That's one of the reasons I went through the application process." *Just not the most important one.* "It'll make it easier for my coworkers. No longer will other staff members have to come looking for me if I'm out in the nursery. They can ring a bell and Farley will let me know. He'll alert me to any number of sounds."

"This isn't some spur-of-the-moment whim. Getting a hearing ear dog had to have been in the works for a long time."

Even though she didn't know much about his business, she had no doubt his success in developing surgical equipment for hospitals worldwide was tied in to his direct nature. He came right to the point with hospital administrators and surgeons, just as he'd done when she'd approached him about his company financing a greenhouse at the local high school. How much did she need, he'd asked. How many students would be involved, what skills would they be learning, how much did she estimate the spring plant sale would raise?

After she'd provided him with the answers, he'd written a check for twice what she'd asked for.

"Yes," she belatedly replied. "The whole process has taken a long time."

"Why didn't you tell me back when you signed the lease?"

Don't look away. Meet his gaze. "For all I knew, my application would be rejected. There are other deaf people with greater need for a service dog. Also, the dogs' training is intensive. I'd accepted that being matched up with one might take years."

"Okay, that makes sense. But the agency or whatever it is didn't just drop by one day with Farley in tow. You knew —"

"Yes."

He reached out, a man's large and strong hand reaching up for her less than clean one. She should pull back instead of joining him on the step. Instead she let him capture her. *Capture?*

"Did you think I'd make you move?" He made room next to himself.

Farley obviously couldn't care less about the conversation as witnessed by the way he'd sprawled on his belly on the grass. Watching him, she relaxed a little. It would be easier if York wasn't still holding her hand and her body wouldn't tingle. "I didn't know."

"I wouldn't," he said, and she would have given a great deal to be able to hear his tone. Not grasping the layers beneath words was the hardest thing about having been deaf since age ten. "Service animals are hardly the same as the family pet. I'd probably have human-rights agencies after me if I objected."

"Look, I'm sorry. You have every right to be upset. I —"

"I'm not upset, just confused." He released her hand. "So how long have you had him?"

Dividing her attention among York, Farley and her still-buzzing body, she filled him in starting with going to the airport and picking up Farley and his handler. The handler-trainer had spent a week here showing her how to interact with the new creature in her life.

"I had some misconceptions," she admitted. "Mostly because I hadn't fully grasped that Farley needs constant reinforcement in order to remember his role, lots of praise."

"Do you have any doubts that it's going to work out?"

"I was nervous the first couple of days, but fortunately Farley is patient. He doesn't hold it against me when I make mistakes. As long as he gets his treats, he's a happy camper."

"In other words –" Smiling a smile she couldn't get to the bottom of, he pressed his hand against his belly, not that he had one, just muscle. "The way to a man's heart is through his stomach, particularly a four-legged man."

She started to laugh only to stop when heat spiraled up from her sex and circled her breasts. "He'd love to share my cooking, but I seldom eat meat."

"You're a vegetarian?"

"Pretty much."

The evening smelled of spring, warm earth blending with roses and lilacs. The sun had set and shadows seeped over them. Until Farley had come into her life, her nights had been marked by isolation, but in the short time he'd been here, the aloneness had become less intense. Tonight, with her landlord sharing the space with her, she ached.

Needed.

"I'll never understand that," he said, pulling her back to the conversation. "I have to have red meat." Lifting his water bottle to his lips, he swallowed repeatedly while she watched his throat work and wondered what his lips tasted like. The heat she couldn't begin to control now reached every part of her. "Okay, so you're all over vegetables. What else don't I know about you that I'd find fascinating?"

It was Friday night. Surely he had more important things to do than talk to her, women to see and have sex with.

"I like to read," she came up with. Her cheeks felt flushed, just like her crotch. "Mostly nonfiction, some political history."

"You're kidding."

"That's a turnoff? Sorry, I didn't mean for it to come out that way. I—"

"No problem. I'm surprised, that's all."

"What did you think I like to read?"

When he didn't immediately answer, she came to the only conclusion that made sense; he'd never concerned himself with what kinds of books, if any, his tenant read. The word deaf was all but painted on her forehead. Most men weren't interested in learning what else she might be.

Proving herself in the world was why she'd put so much energy into establishing herself as a master gardener. She'd make her mark. No one needed to know about nights spent alone.

"I was about to say gardening books, but you could probably write them," he said, pressing his water bottle against the back of his neck. "Damn. Too much time spent sitting."

"You have back problems?"

"Just stiff."

"I'm sorry." That wasn't right. He was everything the word masculine represented. He should be immune to the kinds of limitations that had defined her life since she'd started losing her hearing.

"Don't be. I can keep things in working order. You, on the other hand..."

"Can't buy new ears." Not long ago she wouldn't have been so upfront. "What do you do to, as you say, keep things in working order?"

Before he could respond, if he was going to, Farley stood and ambled over to her. As he rubbed the side of his head against her leg, she was again struck by how much having the dog around was changing her life. Her world was still silent, but her sense of security was growing. Maybe that's why being this close to York tonight had turned her on.

"I love him," she whispered. "At the beginning they sent me a picture along with a note warning me that he'd never win a beauty contest, but I don't care."

York claimed her hand again. Hot and bothered, she dropped her gaze. York slid his free hand under her chin and lifted her head. "He really has touched you, hasn't he?"

"Touched?" she managed. Too much time passed before she pulled herself together enough to continue. "Scratched is more like it." She indicated her legs. "It's a good thing I'm not wearing hose."

He again let her go. A quieting breeze brushed her exposed skin and riffled through her hair, increasing her awareness of her body. He was a man, she a woman—one with oversensitive skin and growing awareness between her legs.

"I wish I had a dog," he said. "I did growing up, but now with the traveling—what about you? Did you have pets?"

"When I was little, yes. But then I lost my hearing, and my parents decided that was all they could deal with."

"That's too bad."

"It was a traumatic time for them."

"Not as much as it was for you. To rob you of the affection a pet's capable of—"

"Water under the bridge."

"Is it?" He looked pointedly at Farley leaning against her leg and her scratching the mutt's head. "What's this, a mutual admiration society?"

"You bet."

Back to studying her features again, he cocked his head. "You know, I think this is the most we've talked since you answered my ad."

"Maybe," she hedged even though he was right.

"I figured, because your speech has a fairly natural sound, that at one point you could hear. I just didn't know how to bring the subject up."

"I don't mind. I'm hardly ever asked."

"Probably because people don't know what to say. However, much as I'd like to know what you're asked and by whom, I'm starving."

"Oh, okay."

"What about you? Have you eaten?"

"No."

"Then how about we go get something, unless you have other plans. A boyfriend."

"No boyfriend," she admitted, not giving herself time to dodge.

What was that, a proprietary look? No, couldn't be. "Works for me. How about we pick a place where you can get your veggie kick while I gnaw on raw meat and Farley makes sure we leave with a doggy bag."

He wasn't asking her out on a date, nothing like that. "I'm hardly dressed to be seen in public. Besides, I'd think you'd had enough of eating out."

"You've got that right. However, I haven't had time to pick up groceries."

"I have something in the slow cooker."

The way his expression lit up, she half expected him to wipe drool off his mouth. "What kind of something?"

"Vegetables. Three kinds of beans. I started it before I left for work this morning."

"Onions? Carrots? Celery. Maybe potatoes?"

"All of the above plus peas and asparagus."

"Oh my god!" he exclaimed. Taking hold of her shoulders, he kissed her on the forehead, which rattled her bones and more. He held her at arms' length. "Do you have any idea how long it's been since I've had a carrot that isn't rubbery? You're sure you have enough for —"

"I'm sure." *Much more touching on your part and I won't be able to keep my hands off you.*

"Okay, okay, here's the deal. I scarf down some home cooking. Then we head for town and ice cream."

"You? Me? Ice cream?" Hopefully cooling this heat.

"Unless you have something against dessert."

"Not in this world." Especially the kind I'd love to indulge in with you.

Chapter Three

York's presence in her small, clean kitchen short-circuited Carlee's mind and more. She wound up going to the silverware drawer three times before getting everything she needed. When she asked if he wanted a glass of wine, his slow nod hinted that white wasn't his first choice, but she didn't care. In truth, nothing mattered except perching on a high stool with York next to her and their plates on the countertop.

Farley had positioned himself as close to her as possible. In the short time since the mutt had come into her life, she'd gone from seeing meals as no more interesting than brushing her teeth to a companionable experience. If York wasn't here, she'd be telling Farley about her day. Instead, struggling to hold heat and need at bay, she told her non-date things she never thought she would.

In response to his question about the cause of her deafness, she detailed the seemingly endless hearing tests followed by a single word—sensorineural—or insensitivity of the inner ear. As for how or why a normal girl's inner ears stopped functioning, no one knew. The experts' recommendation—that her parents enroll her in a residential school for the deaf.

"I did for a while," she admitted. "Long enough to learn how to read lips and some sign language, but I was homesick. Also, because people could understand me, I was determined to function in the hearing world."

"You've done an admirable job. There's nothing you can't do, is there?"

Although that wasn't true, she nodded. Maybe, a million miles down the road, she'd open up and truly let him into her world, but they were landlord and tenant sharing a simple meal.

Sharing a growing darkness outside and his warmth only inches away.

"I admire you," he said. "That's the main reason I responded the way I did when you approached me about backing the high school greenhouse. What gave you the idea?"

She could give him the short course, the surface answer, but her mind's ear heard a deep and sensual voice, and her skin was still on fire. Wanting something she wasn't sure she understood, she put down her fork.

"I lost direction after my hearing went. Every day became a chore, frightening. There was this world of kids who belonged and then there was me, set apart. Looking back, I think if there'd been something I could have participated in to mitigate the isolation, it would have been easier. At work we get dropouts applying all the time, but too many don't have basic skills. I can't solve the whole problem, but hopefully through the greenhouse, I can give a few kids a reason to stay in school."

Why had she said so much? And why this powerful desire to know what he looked like naked?

"With you behind it it'll work." Before she could pull something together to say, he kissed her cheek. An electric jolt slammed into her, forcing her to grip the counter. Ignoring her cramping fingers, she went in search of an explanation for her reaction to a simple kiss.

York had kissed her, touched his mouth to her flesh.

Again.

"What was that?"

"I'm not sure. Do you mind?"

Mind? Not in this world. "It's all right. I just didn't expect..."

"Then that makes two of us."

She half expected him to promise it wouldn't happen again. When he didn't, she released her breath. Fantasizing about having sex with her landlord had been a

harmless way to pass an evening, a prelude to pleasuring herself. But now a line had been crossed.

The thought excited the hell out of her.

Fingers still aching, she leaned down and rubbed Farley behind his ears. Looking more content than any animal had a reason to be, he stared slack-jawed up at her. His coat was coarse, and he had too much skin. He drooled and every morning she had to wipe his eyes; she'd been told he didn't like having his nails trimmed.

I love you.

She again met York's gaze. It was now nearly dark, but because she'd turned on the overhead kitchen light, she had no trouble studying his features, or rather she could have if other things didn't get in the way.

He was man, male. Beneath his over-the-hill shorts lay a cock. If they had sex, she'd be changed.

She might say too much, feel too deeply, crave —

"Ah, do you want more?" she stumbled. "Food I mean?"

"No, no. What about that ice cream? Are you ready?"

If only you knew what for. "As soon as I put things away."

"You need help?"

Not that kind. "We'd just get in each other's way."

"I wouldn't complain. How about you?"

"York, I don't know what to say."

"Coming on too fast, am I?"

"No," she blurted. "It's just —"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to fluster you." His expression left no doubt that he'd just lied. Darn it, his experience in the sack surely left hers in his dust. He had to beat women off with whatever he had handy, if he was so inclined. "How about Farley and I

hang out in the living room while you do the domestic thing? It's time your companion and I got to know each other."

Watching him head for the living room, she noted how neatly the well-worn fabric draped his ass. For someone who said he spent a lot of time sitting, that was one tight and toned rear end. How about if he detailed his workout routine. Better yet, what if he demonstrated? She'd been wanting to step into the weight room at school. If he was in there, she'd be pumping iron instead of just thinking about it.

Blindsided by a hot flash, she started to pick up the dishes only to stop because she didn't trust her suddenly numb fingers. What the hell was going on? It wasn't as if she'd never been around a man. She was surrounded by male bodies at work and the high school fairly pulsed with newly awakened hormones.

But that was there while this was here, specifically York in her space. Okay, strictly speaking, this was his space. York was firm ass, out-to-there shoulders, a waist made for wrapping her arms around, flat belly just waiting to be licked. He was a bulge where a male bulge should be.

Fairly panting, she turned on the faucet, dipped her hands in the cold water and bathed her cheeks. Doing so helped a little. Unfortunately she couldn't think of a way to get cold water to the part of her anatomy that needed cooling the most. Teeth and legs clenched, she started washing.

What was happening? She'd never ached to jump a man's bones the way she ached to jump York's tonight.

* * * * *

Okay, maybe not the best idea of his life, York allowed. Most times he loved being behind the wheel with music playing, windows down and the engine humming. Tonight, however, the combination had him on edge instead of mellow.

Glancing over at Carlee, he wondered what she was experiencing. She could feel the wind and tire vibrations, but the music was lost to her. Much as he wanted to

express sympathy, surely she wouldn't want to hear it. Besides, he didn't dare take his attention off the traffic long enough to let her read his lips, which left him with little to do except react to her presence. Every time he reached for the floor shift, his knuckles brushed her bare thighs. The wind was having a field day with her hair. Unlike most women he knew, she didn't seem to care.

Of course not, he reasoned. Deprived of the ability to hear, she drew on other senses and sensations.

How would she respond to his hands all over her, his breath on the side of her neck, his cuffs?

In what passed for a backseat in the sports car, Farley yawned, providing him with a needed albeit temporary distraction.

Something was different about Carlee tonight. He couldn't put his finger on it, knew only that his body was responding to her in a new way. She had a fresh energy, a way of carrying herself he hadn't noted before.

Bottom line, the Dom in him was intrigued in a way he hadn't experienced for a long time. What would she think of The Club? Maybe bringing her there would rekindle his interest in what the scene provided.

They had to share the space with several families with young children. Just the same, York was glad she'd agreed that sitting outside was preferable to the parlor's cramped interior. Besides, as she'd pointed out, Farley wanted to be outside.

They sat at a small, bolted-down plastic table with equally bolted-down benches across from each other with Farley on her bench, his attention fixed on her peppermint cone and drooling. Several children had come by to pet Farley. He admired Carlee's easy explanation that the dog served as her ears. She'd even laughed when a maybe-three-year-old girl had walked around so she could study her ears. Watching her interacting with the children stirred something in him that went beyond lust.

"Kids are so honest," she said. Her tongue worked the side of her cone. "Adults get all tied up worrying about hurting my feelings, but kids get right to the point."

Trying not to think what her tongue would feel like on his cock, he gave her what he hoped was a studied nod. "What about teens? How do they react to your deafness?"

"It's not high on their priority list. York?"

When he'd first met her, her flat affect had bothered him a bit. Either he'd gotten used to it or she'd become more animated. His guess, animation. "What?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"Being direct. I hate it when people pretend they aren't aware of my handicap."

She licked again, slow and long, rattling him. Reaching out, he took hold of her wrist and drew her arm toward him. "There's a drip." He ran his tongue over her knuckles, tasting dish detergent and hand lotion but no peppermint.

Knocked even more off balance by her taste, he continued to hold on. No doubt about it, he'd give a week's pay to see his cuffs on her.

"Got it, did you?" she asked.

"Think so."

"Then can I have my hand back?"

No. "Sure, sure." Hoping the flickering glow from the neon lights afforded him a small measure of privacy, he released her. "Far as I know, you've never had a man spend the night."

"What?"

Keeping his gaze on her so she could read his lips was easier than he thought it would be. Or maybe the truth was, he didn't trust himself to study the rest of her body.

"I'm just making an observation."

"I didn't know you were keeping track."

The strange thing was, he hadn't. Now he couldn't understand why because the woman fairly exuded sexuality, either that or he needed to get laid, now.

"Do you have a boyfriend?"

Her eyes went wide. "No. What about you? Anybody special?"

"Not really," he said because what he had with women was more than he intended to get into tonight.

"Because you're gone so much?"

He'd been the one to take the conversation in a personal direction, only she'd just grabbed the wheel. "In part. Given how full my life is these days, there isn't time for that kind of relationship. What about you? What's keeping you out of the dating game, if that's what it's called anymore?"

One moment he'd been gazing into soft, honest hazel eyes. Now, suddenly, the softness disappeared, leaving him wondering how the hell to get past the wall she'd just thrown up.

"I said something wrong?"

Her shrug did wonderful things to her shoulders and breasts. "It's complex," she said. "More than I want to get into tonight."

At least she hadn't used the word *ever*, but if he had any sense, he'd watch what he said. After a no-doubt-about-it awkward silence, he asked about her family. Her still-working parents lived on the other side of town. Her younger brother was stationed in Iraq with another six months before he could come home while her baby sister attended college in California.

"Would your parents like you living closer?"

Yet another unnerving lick later, she nodded. "It's hard for them especially with Jake in the army, but this is healthier for me. What about your family?"

The family with three children had left and another with a couple of active boys was gathering their belongings. People continued to go in and out of the ice-cream

parlor, but in a minute they'd have this area to themselves. How would she react if he picked her up and laid her out on the table? Spread her legs and nibbled on her breasts? Tied her to the bench?

Fighting down the message from his once-more-erect cock, he stumbled through the basics. His parents had divorced when he was in high school. Both had remarried and seemed to be happy. He got along reasonably well with his stepparents, was an only child.

She'd finished her cone while he was talking, all except for the base, which she was breaking into pieces and feeding to Farley. She had small hands for someone who earned her living doing physical work. As a result of his unnecessary lick, he'd learned how soft the skin was over her knuckles. Her forearms were toned; her grip would be firm.

Unless she was holding his cock, that is. Wise in the way of women, she'd lightly slide her fingertips over his hard-as-hell veins, laughing softly while he squirmed.

"What is it?" she asked. "The way you're moving around, I'm guessing these hard seats are getting to you. I'm ready to leave if you are."

Chapter Four

York's car's humming was going to be the death of her. Although the night had cooled a bit, she'd left her window down just as he'd done. Watching the lights of approaching cars, she wondered what he was thinking, but mostly she fought the need to tighten her buttocks.

Unfortunately she'd conditioned her sex to respond to vibrations. If she hadn't relied on her toys so much, she might have stood a chance of getting through the ride home without putting her so-called sanity at risk. However, facts were facts.

Pretending she wanted to sit up straighter gave her relief that lasted the better part of a second. Then her butt came back in contact with the arousing motion and she was in trouble again.

Driving two miles had never taken longer but finally, thankfully, York pulled into their shared driveway. Instead of stopping and letting her out, he engaged the garage door opener and eased into the expansive space. The door closed behind them. Confused, she looked his way but held off saying anything because he was exiting. She did the same, patting her thigh to let Farley know he was to join her.

If York had any opposition to having a dog in his house, he didn't let on. Leading the way, he stepped into what her mother would have called a mudroom, turning on a light as he did. Next came his living room, which was sparsely filled with masculine furniture, a handful of framed artwork and no knickknacks. She'd only been here once on the day she'd signed the lease.

She waited until he'd turned on the nearest lamp before tapping his shoulder. When he spun toward her, she said, "Well, I'd better be going. Thanks for the outing."

"You don't have to leave yet."

Distracted by a frisson of sensation down her spine, she muttered, "I don't?"

“Nope. Not until I do this.”

She hadn't seen it coming, hadn't so much as guessed what he had in mind. One moment she was standing there with her arms by her sides. The next, he'd taken hold of those same arms and was pulling her into his space. She didn't need to tip her head up, didn't need to shuffle so close that her breasts brushed his chest. But she did.

And the kiss—starting on her lips and spiraling down and through and around until she couldn't breathe.

It wasn't a bruiser, nothing that risked dislocated teeth, but it kept going, causing more spiraling and a serious loss of breath. Eyes closed and lungs expanding, she realized she was in danger of falling in a heap. She couldn't think, not that she wanted to. Her belly clenched, followed by an electric shock in the one part of her body she had no control over. Unlike a lightning strike, whatever this was kept coming.

Throwing caution in a distant corner, she parted her lips, turning her head a little as she did. Skin slid over skin, moisture bleeding into moisture. Arousal drenched her panties. Sucking in air despite her pressed-against-him nose, she rocked her pelvis toward him. Her sense of balance failed her.

His hold on her arms tightened. Instead of righting her, he drew her arms behind her and placed one wrist over the other. Easily capturing both hands in a single masculine paw, he forced her backward until her shoulders encountered a wall. She should say something, ask him what the hell he thought he was doing, but she needed his mouth again. Hell, she needed more than that.

His body loomed over hers with one hand still engulfing her wrists while the other—oh hell, the other was sliding soft as silk over her throat. Close as they were, she couldn't make out his features, so if he was saying something, he was speaking to himself.

Trapped. By a man a foot taller than she. A man who'd eaten her dinner and bought her ice cream. One Farley approved of. One her spiraling-out-of-control body sure as hell did.

If this had been another time or place and another man had been in the picture, she'd be kicking him where it would do the most good, but the idea of hurting him was the last thing on her mind right now.

Her breasts reached for him, nipples hard, everything hot and swollen because inch by insanity-producing inch, the fingers that had been stroking her throat were now sliding lower. Somewhere in the middle of whatever this was, she'd widened her stance. A masculine leg filled the space. His strong, hard thigh settled against her crotch.

He had her. Made her his prisoner. What did it matter that she could wrench free? She had no interest in doing so. Neither did any part of her anatomy want to be rid of him.

Closer. Male fingers gliding along her right breast only to stop, followed by fingers closing over her nipple. Her top and bra got in the way of a really good hold, but she could imagine, anticipate.

Moaning, she arched her spine. The silence she accepted like a second skin wrapped tightly around her. She prayed he was in the cocoon with her and knowing nothing except this moment, feeling only her body and his response to it.

He said something. She could tell by the way his chest worked and his breath brushed her forehead.

"I don't know what you said," she admitted. "I can't—this way I don't—"

He stopped her with another kiss, this one hard and demanding. Wild to give him the same in return, she parted her lips. Finding his lower lip, she started to close down on it only to have him do the same to her.

Her nostrils flared. She didn't need to hear what rolled up from her chest to know she was moaning. Before discomfort could replace pleasure, he freed her lip, followed by another kiss that hit her like shockwaves. Made crazy by her pleading crotch, she ground it against his leg.

Even splintered and out of control, she sensed his response. Like her, he couldn't remain still. Like her, his breathing rasped. Leaving her breast, he wrapped his arm around her and pulled her hard against him. She wanted to hug in return and intertwine her legs with his but her arms remained locked behind her, compromising her balance. She had no option but to rest the side of her head against his chest. Twice and then three times she thrust herself at him.

Spinning her around so her back was to him, he switched his hold from her wrists to her elbows. Not resisting, she waited unafraid and excited as he drew her elbows together until they nearly touched. The sense of helplessness and being controlled increased. A fresh wash of heat ignited her veins. Whatever he had in mind, she was along for the ride.

She'd seen dogs in heat. That was her, all hormones and her flooded pussy wanting nothing except York's cock buried deep.

"Oh god, god damn! Yes! Yes!"

Maybe he responded; maybe he knew not to waste his breath.

Hating their inability to communicate, she whimpered and thrust out her chest. From where he stood behind her, he couldn't see what her breasts were trying to tell him, but he had to know. A man like this, worldly and sophisticated and attractive to women, had long ago learned how to turn them on.

She was, all right, half sick with hunger and excited beyond all reason in part because of his mastery over her.

That too he knew. Maybe that most of all.

Not relaxing his grip on her elbows, he propelled her forward. Out of the corner of her eye she caught a glimpse of Farley. The dog was watching, but his body language clearly said he wasn't alarmed.

Farley approved. Her dog understood.

They were entering York's bedroom, shuffling along together with her breasts still out-thrust and his legs on either side of hers. This wasn't happening. In the real world, they'd already said goodnight and she'd be stepping into her cottage. She'd peel off her clothes, slip a nightgown over her head and fall into bed, but not before reaching into her dresser and pulling out—

No, that wasn't the real world after all. The one in York's bedroom was. Shoving disbelief aside, she waited while he switched on the overhead light. Darkness dispensed with, he turned her around. As he did, he took hold of her wrists again and placed her hands on his chest. She felt his lungs fill and empty and his heart beat. Awed, she looked up at him.

"Any objections so far?" he asked.

"No." She didn't try to get more than the one word out.

"Good. I needed to see how you'd react. So far so good. Something you should know about me, control turns me on. If it's not what the woman wants, nothing happens. But you want."

"How—do you know?" Why hadn't she told him he was wrong?

"Experience."

She couldn't move her arms. His grip, although kind to her wrists, was that strong.

"You're changing. Becoming more of a sexual creature." He shook his head. "That's what I don't yet understand. What's responsible for the woman you are tonight? How about it? Are you interested in learning what I mean about control on my part?"

She nodded.

"What about submission on your part?"

He was waiting for her response, his gaze sweeping through her and his lower body just out of reach. A downward glance reaffirmed what she already knew, he was aroused. So was she, maybe more on fire than she'd ever been.

She spread her fingers over his chest. Still holding her wrists, he granted her enough freedom that she was able to brush her nails along his collarbone.

"That's your answer?" he asked.

"Yes." She swallowed and repeated herself, hoping she was more than whispering.

The side of his mouth lifted in what wasn't quite a smile. His eyes remained serious. "One step at a time with me leading the way."

"You're really – we're going – damn it, I don't know what I'm saying."

"I don't expect you to. This is new for you."

"And you're an old hand, a pro, a – damn it, what are you?"

"It doesn't matter yet. Like I said, one step at a time."

As he'd done before, he easily spun her around. Her first thought was that she couldn't read his lips anymore. Then she spotted his bed, or more to the point, what was on it. The red handcuffs were simple enough to figure out. They appeared to be made of metal, but the insides were padded with something undoubtedly designed to keep wrists from chafing. As for the other red item –

Oh hell, no doubt about it, a collar, complete with a locking device and metal ring embedded in what appeared to be leather.

Had he gotten them out because he'd known he'd be using them on her?

Because of the bondage items, she'd paid only scant attention to how he was holding her. Once again he gripped her elbows. The strain on her shoulders was less than earlier, but her breasts still fought bra and top.

She complied when, using his leg, he *encouraged* her to widen her stance. Instead of giving her time to settle into the change, he forced her to lean far forward until her cheek rested on the spread, her ass high and handsome.

He leaned into her, folded his body over hers really, with his legs against hers. When he began drawing her back toward him, she offered no resistance. Having her

head lower than her heart caused blood to rush to it, which heated her cheeks and made the veins in her forehead pulse.

Feeling good.

No matter that the move caused her back to protest, she slid her legs farther apart. If not for her shorts, she might be doing the splits.

Something pressed against her buttocks. What did she mean, *something*? It had to be his cock. No other explanation. Nothing else she wanted.

Eyes open but vision blurred, she imagined his knees bent and arms outstretched so he wouldn't lose his hold on her elbows. He rocked forward, drew back, attacked again.

He was fucking her. Clothes on. Cock trapped. Neck veins straining. Sweating. Thigh muscles tight. Head thrown back. Teeth clenched.

Oh yes, yes! His every thrust ground his cock against her. Lifting her head off the bed, she offered her ass to him. A second later, she collapsed only to rise up again aided by him.

Whatever was coming from her throat couldn't be human. What about him? Was he silent? Loud and harsh?

The burning between her shoulders increased. She tried to ignore it while locking her knees and handing her body over to him, but the fire kept growing. Her spine threatened to give out.

"Can't—York, I can't do this."

Suddenly her arms were beside her on the bed. The strain in her shoulders and back was becoming less. She tried to look behind and up at him only to sigh and sag when he slid his arms under her at the waist and lifted her off the bed. She faced him.

"I wasn't—" His chest rose and fell. "Sure how that was going to work. Not particularly well. You're all right?"

Ignoring the wanting in her pussy wasn't easy. If not for the look in his eyes, she might not have succeeded. Just like her, he was near the edge. This wasn't the

expensively suited executive she'd sometimes spotted leaving his house early in the morning. That man had been replaced by pure male.

"I'm fine," she said, when the truth was she had no idea what *fine* might feel like.

"Good." He readjusted his shorts. "Whew, good."

Much as she wanted to unstick her panties from her soaked crotch, she'd already given away enough. Casting around for something to focus on, she spotted the paraphernalia on the bed. "Was that for me?"

"No. Tell me, are you shocked?"

Hoping for a return to something approaching normality, she smiled. "Surprised."

York's chest rose and fell, rose and fell. Not caring what he might think, she studied what rested between his legs. One thing about being a woman, she'd never have to put up with a swollen organ jammed into a too-small space. Another thing in her favor, she stood a chance of having this one inside her.

"I'm not immune. Is that what you wanted to know?"

"I don't know what I'm thinking right now. What just happened is the last thing I expected."

Reaching past her, he picked up the collar and held it so she was compelled to shift her attention from his cock to the, ah, hardware. "What's your reaction? Horrified that your landlord is into bondage?"

"That's what — Holy crap."

His smile returned. Even though she felt a little silly grinning about her landlord's lifestyle, if that's what it truly was, the mood in here definitely needed lightening.

"Hmm." Still holding up the deep red collar, he cocked his head. "I'm not sure how to interpret 'holy crap'. You want to elaborate?"

Oh no, she wasn't reaching for the collar! Oh yes she was. It was heavier than she'd expected. No way could the wearer forget its presence.

"I'm not sure I can," she admitted. "You're asking me to process a lot."

"But you're up for it, aren't you?"

A tad unnerved, she tried to hand the collar back to him. When he didn't take it, she dropped it on the bed.

"Don't back down now, Carlee."

She rubbed her elbows, which did nothing to erase the feel of his hands on her there. Her pussy remained so sensitive she wasn't sure she could walk.

"All right," she said belatedly, "I won't, back down, that is." She jerked her head at the bed. "What is this, your fetish?"

"You might call it that. I prefer another label, *the scene*."

"What scene?"

"BDSM."

Each letter hit her like a small drum. She knew what the initials stood for, of course, and had indulged her curiosity by checking things out online, but she'd never expected the Master/slave lifestyle to rear its head in her life.

"Wow." Before she knew what she had in mind, she was pulling on a bra strap in hopes of getting her breast to settle more comfortably in the cup.

Just as she'd gawked while he tended to his cock, he stared at what she was doing. "Wow what?" he pressed.

"I'm not sure. Just...trying to put it all together."

"I kind of figured that. Question—does knowing what you do now change your opinion of me?"

Laughter bubbled out of her. "I'm not sure how I thought of you before." *A hunk of course, unattainable.* "You're out of my league." She couldn't believe she'd just said that.

"No, I'm not. And if I gave you that impression, I'm sorry."

The conversation was headed in a direction she wasn't ready for. "Don't be." She ran her fingers over her ear.

"It's not that," he said and drew her hand away from her ear. "I don't want you to ever think it is."

Neither did she, but the reality neither of them could deny was that her lack of hearing placed a barrier between her and much of the world. She'd warned herself not to expect too much from men. Why should they take a chance on her when there were so many *normal* women out there?

"But it was before tonight," she said with her hand still in his. "What made tonight different?"

He looked down at their linked hands then up at her. "You."

"Me?"

"Yes. You've changed."

Chapter Five

York had been wrong. She was still the same unglamorous woman. Her clothes fit the same, her hair still defied her attempts to get it to curl, and on this Monday evening like every Monday since school started, she was in the greenhouse. The students had left for the day, but she'd learned the hard way not to take off before making sure the vegetable starts had been watered. The students meant well. They wanted to learn and most enjoyed watching things grow, but they didn't yet understand how fragile new plantings were.

Thank goodness it was Monday. Getting through the weekend wondering if she'd see York, which she hadn't, had turned what should have been the most relaxing days of the week into a slog. She'd vacillated between trying to convince herself that he was catching up on work and acknowledging he'd probably gone to wherever the city's BDSM community hung out.

One thing she was sure of, he'd never take her there—not that she wanted to go. Well, not much.

Maybe she owed it to herself to check out *the scene* and become better educated about alternative lifestyles. See if watching Masters and slaves in action turned her on as much as York had done via his demonstration Friday night. Just replaying what had taken place in his bedroom required too much of her lungs.

Farley, who'd been patiently following her from one row to another, bumped his nose into her leg.

"I know, you're ready to leave. Just a few more minutes."

The way he cocked his head made her realize how seldom he heard his mistress' voice. However, when he yawned, she concluded that silence didn't bother him any more than it did her.

She was hungry. Funny, until Farley had gotten her attention, she hadn't given thought to her digestive system. Grabbing some fast food sounded appealing even though she'd have to go inside to place her order. Too bad she hadn't put anything in the crock pot this morning. If she had –

Don't go there. You've had your shot at getting York's attention via his belly.

Water running over her shoe made her look down. What was the matter with her? She was much too conscientious to waste water, yet she'd obviously overfilled this tray. Letting up on the nozzle, she shook her foot. Thank goodness for tennis shoes.

"We're done," she told Farley. "Let me roll up this hose and we're out of here. How about you do the cooking tonight? I could go for some seafood. Just caught, of course, and done to perfection with the right presentation."

Farley cocked his head one way and then the other, perhaps trying to decide whether he was in the mood for the same thing. Laughing, she crouched and cradled his head. "You're so damn good for me. Whatever I do, you're on board with it."

She'd started to straighten when Farley's body language changed. His head lifted, and his tail stuck straight out. Looking in the same direction he was, she spotted a male body heading her way. For an instant she told herself it was York, but this man was built like a truck. Recognizing the head football coach, she waited as Bruce Lorge approached.

"I thought I heard your voice," he said, speaking so slowly she grew impatient waiting for each word. "Were you talking to someone?"

"Just my dog." Not long ago the admission would have embarrassed her, but if Coach Bruce didn't understand, it was his problem. "Fortunately he's a good listener."

"Unlike too many of the jocks I deal with. Do you have a minute?"

Coach Bruce was about her age and seemed to always be on the campus, yet she believed she'd only spoken to him once when a couple of his players had indicated interest in joining her project now that football season was over.

"Sure," she said, hoping she wouldn't have to explain her wet foot. "What's up?"

He folded his arms over a chest that looked capable of bench-pressing a car. "I've been meaning to tell you something. The two meatheads of mine you've been working with, I just checked their grades. They're both improving, and their teachers say they're more focused."

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Me too. Neither was a starter. They just didn't have the drive, not even when I rode them. A fire's something that has to come from within."

Wondering if the coach realized he was now speaking in a normal tone, she nodded agreement.

"If you ever have the time, I'd like you to watch them work out. They're spending extra time in the weight room and talking about starting next year. I don't know what you did, but I'll give you credit for lighting that fire."

"I don't know if it's me," she said around a broad smile.

"Has to be. Nothing else has changed and why the turn-around for both of them. What about this place," he indicated the greenhouse, "turns them on?"

"They get a kick out of watching something they've planted poke through the dirt and take off. It's a hands-on experience. Maybe that's it."

"Maybe." Coach Bruce didn't seem to know what to do with his hands. "They talk about you a lot."

"Oh? What do they say?"

He screwed up his round face. "That if you can succeed in spite of your, ah, handicap, so can they. Also, they say you've been more outgoing since you got Farley." Still looking uncomfortable, he shook his head. "Hell, what they really said was it's like you've blossomed. I noticed the same thing."

Alerted by the less than subtle change in his body language, she noted the space between them. As far as she knew, no one else was around. If Coach Bruce said or did anything that made her uncomfortable—

“I mean it, Carlee. You’re changing.”

“In what way?” she asked, relaxing a bit. Not only did the coach have too much to lose by doing something she didn’t approve of, Farley was leaning against his leg in an obvious play for attention.

A huge hand scratched between Farley’s ears. “Hell, I’m not good at this kind of thing but—I’m not married. Do you think—anyway, if you ever feel like going out with me, let me know. As a coach it doesn’t cost me to go to baseball games, and I’d spring for you.”

* * * * *

Only a handful of vehicles remained in the faculty parking lot as she and Farley headed for her SUV. She was still trying to wrap her mind about Coach Bruce’s awkward invitation and how surprised she’d been to learn he was interested in dating her when she spotted York’s sports car. The door opened. York exited one measured move at a time. He must have had the window down, because his hair was a breath-stopping mess.

Sorry Bruce. I can only deal with one male at a time, and this one has turned me every which way and nowhere near loose.

As she’d done Friday night, she rued her casual attire. Hopefully he wouldn’t ask how she’d gotten her shoe wet. Should she mention that tan slacks and a light-blue, collared knit shirt over his firm form was guaranteed to draw even high school girls? Maybe she should limit her comments to admitting what the body under the clothes was doing to her libido.

Yeah, right.

"What are you doing here?" she asked when she was close enough to read his lips but not so close she risked jumping him. This man had imprisoned her, *forced* himself on her, kind of.

His smile lifted one corner of his mouth more than the other. "Thinking about going back to school. If I do, will you go to the prom with me?"

No way would she point out she didn't dance because she couldn't hear the music and had spent her prom nights home with her parents. Water under the bridge.

"It depends. Do you intend to pick me up in a limo?"

He seemed to consider. "That's what it'll take for you to say yes?"

"And a corsage, nothing that will clash with my dress, of course. Rare endangered orchids from deep in the jungle."

"This is getting complicated. How about we settle for the malt shop?"

Lordy but he made it easy for her to smile. "I don't think they have malt shops anymore."

"They don't? What do you say to lobster or steak at Arthur's?"

"I've never been."

He looked at her as if she'd just admitted she didn't believe in Santa Claus, not that that distracted her from thoughts about what he'd look like naked and stretched over her. Arthur's was one of the most upscale restaurants in the city and way too expensive for her pocketbook even if she'd thought she'd feel comfortable there.

"The lighting is pretty subdued, isn't it?" she asked, determined to stay on task.

"The light – oh, you're thinking about us carrying on a conversation."

Letting a nod suffice, she pointed at Farley. Darn it, her palms were sweating. "And he really isn't dressed for it. Me either."

"They'd have to let him in, but you have a point. Okay, here's plan B. You head home while I pick something up. How about pizza?"

She hadn't seen him as a pizza kind of guy, but if he wanted to, who was she to turn him down? Not seeing him for several days hadn't given her enough time to restore her equilibrium. Just acknowledging his hands triggered a response that made her sex ache and dampened her panties. Hopefully she could keep that from him. Her breasts, specifically her now hard nipples, were another story.

Not sure how she pulled it off, she reminded him she wanted her half to be vegetarian.

"Got it." His smile faded a little. "It's good to see you."

Oh shit! Like I can handle that. "It's good to see you too. You were, ah, busy this weekend?"

"Yes but it wasn't what you're thinking."

"You don't know what I'm thinking."

"Yes I do." Extending his arm, he ran his fingertips over her wrist. She was still trying to catch her breath when those same fingers circled her wrist and he drew her closer. "For the record, I only stayed at The Club for a few minutes Saturday night. The rest of the time was spent catching up at the office."

Say something. Don't let him know – too much. "Only a few minutes? Why?"

"You really want to know?"

"I wouldn't be asking if I didn't."

* * * * *

Ballsy. Yes, that's what she'd been.

"You know," she told Farley as York's car pulled into the driveway, "I've been entirely too uptight. I didn't realize it until you came into my life. Now everything feels easier. Okay, it's easier most of the time. Our landlord's in a class by himself. I'm not sure how to handle that."

Farley had finished eating and was curled up next to her on the couch that offered the best view of the driveway. She'd placed her wet shoe on a windowsill in the sun but

hadn't bothered with putting anything on her feet. Her mouth watered, just not over thoughts of food. When she'd first moved in, she'd given York her cell number and told him to text her if he needed to get in touch. Maybe she should wait for him to give her the all-clear, but her body plainly said it was more than ready to be near him again.

"There's being laid back, then there's putting yourself out there," she informed Farley. "Never thought that was me, but guess I was wrong. Too young for a midlife crisis so I'm not sure what's going on."

Farley licked the back of her hand. He started to lay his head on her lap only to sit up, staring at the front door. She waited. After a moment the dog jumped off the couch and ran to the door only to whirl and run back to her and head butt her legs.

"Good job." She reinforced the compliment by patting Farley and standing. Together they walked to the door.

"Dinner's served," York announced as she opened it. "However, it's at my house so we'll have to trek over there." He indicated Farley. "I knocked. He let you know?"

"Just as he was trained to. It still thrills me."

York, who'd exchanged his slacks for denim shorts that left most of his thighs on display, handed her another of his bone-melting smiles. "I can tell. Your eyes are positively sparkling. However, maybe you're just excited over the thought of getting fed."

"You know what they say about the way to a woman's stomach," she said, when truth was the state of her stomach was the least of her concerns. She didn't get turned on simply from seeing a male body.

Okay, York was the exception.

"I think you've got that wrong," he pointed out. "Its male bellies that are uncomplicated. So, you ready to eat?"

I'm ready for something more basic than that like sucking you so far in me you might never get out. "What about a salad to go with all that cholesterol-producing stuff?" she asked as her image of them fucking grew. "I, ah, have the makings."

"Hmm. Good idea. What if I head on back and get us something to drink. Iced tea okay? The pizza might be a little spicy."

She needed cooling down all right, only spices had nothing to do with it.

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Carlee's feet fascinated him. Okay, truth was, her naked feet were only part of the package. Her lively eyes were almost as much of a turn-on as her curves. For a man who'd *worked with* an uncounted number of women, a handful of them knockouts, he should have gotten over bare toes and insteps.

Going into the kitchen, he checked on the pizza, which he'd put in the oven to keep warm before heading for his bedroom. Spotting his suitcase, he groaned. The older he got, the less he enjoyed traveling. One reason was the difficulty in finding places to work out. Other people might consider lack of physical activity an unavoidable consequence of their career, but for him exercise was vital.

Leaning over, he touched his fingers to the floor. Good, his back felt limber and ready for whatever he might require of it tonight. What was this, a half erection? Well, yeah. He knew how to push things into a full-blown hard-on, by thinking about his dinner guest.

What was going on? Not only hadn't he been able to concentrate while at the office both over the weekend and today, he'd nearly talked himself out of going to The Club Saturday night even though he hadn't been there for the better part of the month while out of town. He'd gone because the owners had called and practically begged.

There was some fresh entertainment, he'd been told, three young women who'd pooled their courage and curiosity and had come together to give submission a try.

They'd done so in part because they'd talked to a longtime Club sub who'd touted York's expertise. If he was up to it, the trio wanted him to *work* with all of them.

One look at their fresh albeit overly made-up faces and he'd felt tired. Leaving who knew how many people with their mouths hanging open, he'd walked out.

He'd thought about Carlee most of the time he'd been awake.

He felt vulnerable, suspicious even. The woman had shaken his confidence and left him off balance. He hadn't felt that way since when he'd first given into his desire to control women who wanted to be controlled.

Was Carlee one of those?

She'd shown some indication when he'd manhandled her Friday night, but he still had a lot to learn about her.

He couldn't think of anything he'd rather do.

* * * * *

"Nice sandals," York said when he let Carlee and Farley in.

Surprised because he'd noted the pair she'd grabbed during a rushed trip to a department store who knew when, she stared at the simple pieces of leather. "They fit."

"That's important."

Oh lordy, his shorts were even shorter than she remembered, and the way the knit shirt caressed his muscles – "And they're dry."

"What?"

They were standing just inside the door with the salad bowl tightly clenched to her chest while she wondered how he'd react if she drooled. "I got my tennis shoe wet at work. Occupational hazard."

After nodding as if she'd just told him a vital piece of information, he indicated she should head for the kitchen. He waited until she'd put down the salad bowl and then opened the refrigerator. He held up a glass bottle. "I don't know if you're going to want

this so-called tea. The label lists some stuff I've never heard of. I'm not much on soft drinks so if —"

"I'm not either. Water will be fine."

"That I can recommend. How about beer?"

Beer sounded reckless. "Works for me."

When he handed her a frosty bottle, their fingers touched. Something on the level of a flash fire zipped through her. Either he'd experienced the same thing or he'd deliberately zapped her, because, cocking his head, he studied her.

"What?" she asked. "I checked. No dirt on my cheeks or nose."

"I'm not thinking about dirt, and I don't think you are either."

"No, I'm not."

"How about you spell it out."

Reality had taught her not to crave what she'd never have but right now she'd give anything to hear his tone. On second thought, maybe she wouldn't. A throaty growl — she remembered that from watching romantic movies with her mother — might have her on her knees before him while her fingers fumbled with his zipper.

"You know this game much better than I do," she said, only marginally distracted by the smell of garlic and onions. "What are the rules?"

He ran a finger over her sweating beer bottle and deposited what he'd collected on her cheek. Seriously short of breath, she shivered.

"The rules, as you call them, hinge on your level of trust."

She might be on the ground floor when it came to sexual experience, but that didn't mean she couldn't decipher what he'd just said and done. If she was so inclined, tonight wasn't about vanilla sex.

"I, ah, liked what you did to me the other night."

A smile that started things zinging again erased a little of her nervousness. "I came to the same conclusion. Now, before we go any further, I have a serious question to ask."

"What?" she fairly gulped.

"Are we going to eat this pizza before it gets cold? Oh, two questions. Do we need bowls for the salad?"

The tension she hadn't been able to separate from desire whooshed out of her. Giving him what she hoped was an impatient look, she said she'd been wondering if he'd ever get around to offering her a slice. Bowls weren't necessary if his plates were large enough.

Sitting side by side at his counter and turned so she could see his mouth, they gave food priority, or rather he seemed to care about little except filling his belly while she swallowed lump after tasteless lump. Without the beer to wash it down, she probably would have choked.

After asking permission, York gave Farley a few bites of crust. By the time she turned down the offer of a third piece, it was obvious Farley considered York a near god.

"If you're trying to win my dog over," she said, "you're doing a damn good job of it."

"You know why, don't you?" He winked.

Geez. A wink was nearly as hard on her nervous system as his wet finger on her cheek had been. "Tell me."

"This way he'll always put in the good word for me."

"Why do you think that's necessary?"

"Because of what I'm involved in."

They weren't talking about his day job. Neither was this about their landlord-tenant relationship.

"This thing you're involved in—"

"BDSM."

"Yeah." She swallowed. "That."

"What do you want to know?"

"Everything." Oh darn, she was having another hot flash. Given how heated her cheeks felt, she didn't dare try to convince herself he didn't notice. "How, ah, did you get into—what do you call it?—the scene?"

"Curiosity was part of it." He started to smile only to let it fade and take hold of her hand. Both sets of fingers were lightly greased. "There was something else but— Like the majority of the male sex, I've been thinking about getting laid since my teens."

What did you start to say? "It's the same for women."

"So I figured out." He licked her fingertips one at a time. This last shiver threatened to unseat her. Her pussy clenched. "Now that's the way to finish off a pizza," he announced.

"You're trying to turn me on." She didn't need to make it a question.

"Going by the way you're squirming, I believe I'm right in concluding that you've reached that state. You might not be aware of this but your voice is getting lower, the whole throaty thing."

"Then you have me at a disadvantage."

"Because I have one more sense working for me than you do? Damn it, Carlee, that's the last thing I want you thinking about."

So many people didn't know how to handle her deafness and York's directness was refreshing. It also contributed to her awareness of him. After giving their interlocked hands a long look, she lifted her head. Their knees were within a millimeter of touching. "How did adolescent hormones transition into an interest in dominance and bondage?"

His quick blink said he hadn't expected the question. Good. "Like everything else in life, it's complex. Wanting to be in control is part of the way I'm wired. That's not to say

I don't dig straight sex. I do. But ropes on a willing woman add another layer. If I do it right, both the woman and I come out of the experience satisfied."

Swallowing was becoming nearly impossible. "What if you're attracted to a woman who isn't into BDSM?"

"That hasn't happened for a while," he said after a brief silence. "Maybe there's some kind of homing device that brings like-minded people together."

"What if," she swallowed, "I discover that isn't my thing?"

"We'll address that when and if it happens, Carlee."

She'd give anything to hear her name on his tongue, anything. However, she'd have to settle for touch, which wasn't all that bad. Reaching out, she placed her free hand on his knee. Fortunately that one didn't have as much grease on it, but undoubtedly his knee was getting lightly coated. His look said he didn't mind.

"You're ready to give submission another try, aren't you?" he asked. "Let me show you what I'm capable of."

Chapter Six

Carlee reminded him of a skittish mare torn between a full grain bucket and the corral gate. He loved the way she shifted from foot to foot in his bedroom with her eyes roaming. Although she occasionally looked at the door where Farley sat watching, she hadn't made a move toward it. Yet. How she'd feel at the end of the night depended on his expertise. Done right, she'd be content to remain within the corral. Then he'd have to decide if that's what he wanted.

Any other time he would have turned off the light, maybe blindfolded her. Instead he decided to reach her in a way he believed would be mutually satisfying. Leaving her to stand by the side of his bed, he walked over to his dresser and opened the top drawer. He didn't have to look at her to know she was watching his every move.

The red collar was on top. He held it up. After giving her a few seconds to wrap her mind around what he was suggesting, he selected four long silk scarves. Only then did he face her. The skittish mare was still there, her arms tight around her middle and her thick, long hair loose and sexy. Her flared nostrils and huge eyes sent desire spiraling through him. He hadn't had sex in the better part of a month. Hopefully that would change tonight, but he had no guarantee.

Much of his success as a Dom came because he focused on getting inside a woman's head. Knock one off balance specifically by stimulating her helpless body and things changed. The more sexually charged she became, the more barriers fell away. The primitive beast lurking inside broke free.

That's when the fun began.

Relying on her lack of hearing instead of a blindfold or gag to enhance her experience, he rejoined her, the tools of his trade in plain view. Her gaze darted from them to his face then back again.

"What are you going to do?" The flat tone was gone, replaced by tension and excitement.

Hoping he wasn't giving away his excitement, he dropped the scarves on the bed and ran one end of the collar over her shoulder. She didn't pull away. Moving in front of her, he let the collar caress her other shoulder. Nostrils flaring, she closed her hands over his forearms but gave no indication she wanted him to stop.

When he was fourteen, his parents had arranged for him to go an uncle's ranch for the summer. The uncle's wife was a nurse, which had been the only reason they'd let him go. His chores had included getting several foals accustomed to human touch. Much as he'd enjoyed their crazy energy, his attempts to get them to accept a halter hadn't been all that successful, resulting in several bruises from well-placed hooves. These days whenever he hooked up with a new sub, he thought back to that earlier experience. So far he hadn't been kicked.

Shaking his head at the memory, he slipped the collar around Carlee's neck and brought the ends together over her throat. Still gripping his forearms, she tried to see what he'd done. Leaving the collar draped over one shoulder, he dropped his arms to his sides indicating he wanted her to let him go.

She did, arms fluttering and belly sucked in.

"What are we doing?" she asked. "Damn it, York, speak to me."

Holding a finger to his mouth, he waited as a little of the tension left her. Then, making sure there was nothing threatening in his expression, he took hold of her shirt hem and pulled up. Her gasp lasted so long he thought she'd emptied her lungs, and she lifted her arms. The fabric hid her face, then he dragged the shirt over her, taking it slow even as his cock tightened and his own breath went out of control. Removing her top had dislodged the collar. It was now tangled in the cotton.

"What happens now?" she asked.

Again putting a finger to his lips, he shook his head.

"You're doing this deliberately," she snapped. "Making me crazy."

It's no different from what's happening to me. Not looking at her while he freed the collar allowed him to regain his equilibrium, but then he turned his attention to her face, specifically her expressive eyes.

The half-wild mare wasn't settling down so much as deciding that staying held the most promise. Determined to take advantage of her desire, he again placed the collar around her neck.

Instead of moving onto what his overstimulated body demanded, he cupped her chin and kissed her. Short. Hard. Lips parted and tongue insisting. Groaning, she gave back with her fingers digging into his waist and his cock demanding to be touched.

Later, he warned his cock. She's needs to learn things about herself first.

Fixing her with his best I'm-in-charge look, he placed her hands against the small of her back. Then he stepped back to watch her reaction. She opened her mouth only to close it. If she was trembling, he couldn't tell. Every bit of concentration she possessed was locked on him. Out of nowhere, he wondered if Farley's presence had anything to do with her acceptance. As long as her dog didn't object, she'd go along with the program.

Oh yes, the program, that practiced combination of moves designed to melt a woman into a quivering puddle. Problem was, he wanted nothing to do with drawing on experience. Tonight should be free floating, both of them going where their nervous systems demanded.

Holding with the in-charge glare, he reached behind her and unfastened her bra. When she started to drop her arms so the straps would slide off, he shook his head. Frowning, she held her position. He pulled the straps as far off her shoulders as they'd go and finished by lifting the bra over her breasts so they were exposed.

Her nipples were darker than he'd expected, contrasting sharply and deliciously with her pale flesh. Hard and swollen, they screamed at him to touch them. Well hell, who was he to refuse? His mouth flooding in anticipation, he closed his lips around one while cradling the other.

"I hoped," she rocked back on her heels then rose onto her toes, "you were going to do that."

Whether she was trying to hold still was a moot point. Reality was she kept moving, just a little, up and down or back and forth, the small movements demanding he increase his hold on the rigid nub. After giving her damp breast a long suck, he set that part of her anatomy free. Upright again, he tightened his hold on her other breast. Pleasure warred with nervousness in her eyes.

An unnerving rage in his groin distracted him from planning his next move. He could fight the damn insistent thing or make a no-nonsense statement of how he intended things to end tonight. Before he could decide which, another hot and heavy wave rolled through him. Kicking caution to the curb, he wrapped his arms around her with his hands circling her wrists so they touched from chest to belly.

Not giving either of them time to make their peace with his latest move, he thrust his cock at her. She tried to lean away.

"No! There's no getting away from this." He again drove forward.

"You're saying something," she muttered, "but I can't see your lips."

Instead of making sure she could, he widened his stance and continued his attack. She tried to brace herself on widespread legs, but he kept her off balance. To call what he was doing fucking with his clothes on was a stretch. Still, dry humping felt good. Pumping his body while making sure she didn't fall served as a necessary outlet for the energy that had clamped on to him when he'd first spotted her tonight.

She was his strong little submissive, recipient of his strength, her legs touching his, breasts jiggling and nipples pressing into his chest. At length he released her and stepped back. Her newly exposed breasts rose and fell.

"Take off your bra," he commanded.

Although she was having trouble getting her fingers to obey, she kept after it, head high and shoulders back, looking just a bit smug. He waited until she bent her elbow and slid the strap over it.

“What’s that smile?” he asked, remembering to look stern to make up for her not hearing his tone. “You think you’re in some kind of control just because you’re doing a striptease?”

The smug expression held as she indicated his cock. “Part of your anatomy approves of my technique.”

What could he say, that she didn’t know what she was talking about, and where did she get off thinking she had the upper hand when he was the Dom? Hell, truth was, they had a long way to go before she called him Master or saw herself as a slave.

But the journey, ah, yes, there was that.

Glaring, he stepped into her space and locked the collar in place. The way it clung to her throat made him wish he could take the red leather’s place. She touched it, her eyes again going big. Head still high, she dropped her bra. It landed at his feet. “Now what?” she asked, cheeks flushed anew.

Dragging up what he hoped was a noncommittal shrug, he reached for one of the scarves and slid it from a slender shoulder down her arm. Shivering, she licked her lips. Damn, if she did that one more time —

Slightly pissed, but whether at her or himself he didn’t know, he wrapped one end of the scarf around her wrist and executed a square knot. Her wrist was now lost beneath the expensive fabric, but because he knew what he was doing, her circulation wasn’t compromised.

“Oh shit.”

Feeling her heartfelt gasp in his gut, he captured her other wrist and knotted a second scarf in place. “On the bed,” he commanded. “On your back, arms above your head.”

“You’re really going — we’re going...”

A sound behind him turned him toward Farley who stood looking at them with his ears perked forward.

"I don't think we're going to want him to be part of this," he told Carlee.

She nodded and, trailing the scarves behind her, walked over to the dog. "Come on, buddy. Time for you to take a nap."

Wanting to see what she had in mind, he followed his half-naked woman and her companion dog into his living room. She didn't ask permission before ordering Farley to crawl onto his couch. After turning in a couple of tight circles, Farley settled in. "Stay," she said, patting Farley's head. "Stay."

Arms at her sides and scarves brushing her thighs, she faced him. "He'll be okay."

On a nod that made him more than a bit dizzy, he took hold of one length of silk and led her back into the bedroom. He'd intended to double-check to make sure she was on board with his plans, but her actions had spelled out her willingness to play along.

Play? It didn't feel that way.

* * * * *

Try as she did, Carlee couldn't remember when or how she'd gotten rid of her sandals. Her top and bra were another thing. If York was accustomed to silicone enhancement, he was going to be disappointed, but if he got off on the real thing, she could give him that.

Got off? Could give? Yes, it was down to that, wasn't it? If she wasn't interested in what he was offering, she wouldn't be lying flat on his bed with her arms over her head while he fastened the exotic restraints to the metal headboard. The way her arms were stretched sent the word vulnerable zinging through her. The sensation settled in her breasts and crotch.

"You're not going to turn off the lights, are you?"

Done with his task, he ran his hand over her cheek. "No. I'd like to because it adds to the atmosphere, but I don't want you freaking out."

She tugged on her restraints. They fit comfortably around her wrists, yet no way could she get loose. "This is about trust, isn't it?"

"Yeah." He again caressed her cheek. "If the woman doesn't trust me, nothing happens. I need you to believe that."

Filling her lungs helped a little. "I do. It's, ah, me I'm not sure of."

"I am."

Before she could ask how he could be so confident, he sat down beside her. His weight drew her toward him. A strong yet gentle hand slid under the collar. She looked down but saw only a blurry outline of his arm.

For what might be the first time since she'd met York, she closed her eyes. If he had something to tell her, he'd let her know. In the meantime she'd trace his journey from her collarbone to her shoulder, along her arm and around to the underside of her elbow. Less pressure and she'd be begging him not to tickle her. More and she might jump out of her skin.

His breath ran over the base of her throat, making her shiver. Eyes still shut, she waited for his next breath. It touched the upper mound of one breast and then the other. Squirming, she clenched her fingers. Thank god for the scarves holding her in place. Otherwise, she didn't know what she might do.

Moisture coated her breasts. When he ran his fingers over them, her pussy flooded. Teeth clenched, she pressed her buttocks against the mattress.

He kept working her breasts, his fingertips dancing over and under them, sometimes tracing their outer boundaries, occasionally circling her nipples. By the time she'd figured out how to relax a little, his hip was pressing against hers, and she sensed a weight over her.

When she first opened her eyes, she saw little. Her vision soon cleared, which reaffirmed her guess that he'd leaned over her so his chest, or rather his damnable shirt was less than an inch from her erect nipples.

"Take it off," she demanded. "It's not fair my being the only one without anything on."

"You aren't naked yet."

"Then take care of that for both of us."

His outstretched arms remained on either side of her ribs. "That's not the way things work here. I'm the one in charge. You do and experience what I want you to."

Before she could point out that she didn't know the rules, he again blanketed her. Waiting for what, she had no idea, she squeezed her legs together. It didn't help. As the saying went, the fire within raged.

Holy shit! Had to be his tongue! Licking between her breasts. Making her shiver uncontrollably. Compelling her to grind her hips against the bed and twist from side to side. Deliciously helpless, she panted as he bathed her breasts, ribs, sides, even her armpits.

When he drew the breast closest to him into his mouth, she arched toward him. She didn't need to hear her sounds to know they came from a woman stretched thin and wild with wanting.

The pressure in her captured breast kept growing, sliding into hot and from there to something that would soon become painful. She tried to tell him so but wasn't sure she'd gotten out any recognizable words.

Freedom. Relief running over her so-sensitive mound. Then loss so profound she bent the leg closest to him and pressed her knee against him. "Don't stop, damn it!"

He straightened. "I'm taking inventory, making sure you're still with me. There can be a fine line between pleasure and pain. When it comes to BDSM, every player is different."

"I'm not a player."

"Not yet and maybe never. Tonight is about lesson number two."

"Two?"

“Friday night was the first, remember?”

Vaguely. In truth, everything except this moment hid in a fog she couldn't care less about. Accustomed as she was to satisfying her own lust, not being able to respond to need was beyond frustrating.

“Okay,” he said, “where were we?”

She might have fallen for his offhand comment if she hadn't glimpsed a certain prominent something between his legs. Besides, his cheeks looked as flushed as hers felt. What was BDSM like for an experienced Dom? Could he distance himself from his body while concentrating on the woman under his control?

“Oh, that's right, getting you naked.”

He waited a beat, making her wonder if he expected a response. However, other than the urge to yell hurry, she couldn't think of anything. Sliding off the bed, he positioned himself at the end. She lifted her head but couldn't bring his features into focus. Trusting in that dumb turned-on way she was falling in love with, she let the bed support her.

He began by running his magical, electrified fingers over the outsides of both thighs.

“Oh shit. Oh damn. Shit.”

If her curses bothered him, he gave no indication as witness by his slow, steady, and nerve-shattering march up her legs. By turn, she pressed her legs together, twisted from side to side, even splayed herself hoping to draw his attention to her pitifully hungry cunt.

Although he'd told her what he had in mind, she wasn't ready when he started working his way up her belly heading for her shorts' fastening. Having cotton and nylon between her sex and him should have helped her hold on to sanity, right? Just try telling that to her constantly short-circuiting nerve endings.

When, after what felt like half of her lifetime, he reached his goal, she stopped moving. Panting helped a little. Still she longed to scream or kick or bite, anything to get him going again.

He did, finally. One thing she could say about York, when he put his mind to getting a woman out of her clothes, he got right down to business. In less time than it took for her to process it, he'd unhooked her shorts, unzipped the zipper and tugged both shorts and panties down her limp-as-wet-noodles legs.

Oh shit, no doubt about it, he could see her pussy.

Obviously spotting that part of her anatomy wasn't enough for him. Equally obviously, he knew how to remedy that—by encasing her ankles in more silk and pulling her legs apart. She made no attempt to stop him. She'd gone this far; there was no turning back.

Sunk deep in disbelief and anticipation, she again lifted her head, hoping for a glimpse of her naked and helpless body, but saw little beyond her breasts.

"Perfect," he said as he cupped her chin. "What are you feeling right now?"

Like a pinned butterfly. "I don't know. I've never..."

"First time. That's what makes you so beautiful, part of it anyway."

Had anyone other than her parents called her beautiful? Maybe this was standard operation for York, but she'd take what he'd given her and wrap her mind and heart around it.

An unexpected burning sensation in her eyes distracted her from the form looming over her. No, she wasn't on the brink of crying!

"Part of the beauty of a Master-sub session is the unknown," he told her. "Keeping the sub off balance and me going with the flow. You're good with that?"

Chapter Seven

Telling him yes was too revealing so Carlee settled for a nod. What was she getting herself into?

This, she answered a moment later, because now he was at the side of the bed down near the end where she couldn't keep an eye on him. His hands on her ankles and heading for her calves became everything. Gentle, so gentle, he claimed what was under his command. By turn he used the pads of his fingers, nails, even knuckles. She wasn't sure but thought the heels of his hands were what pressed against her knees.

"Shit, shit. Oh York, shit."

Hoping not to repeat herself, she tried to distract herself by staring at the ceiling. That lasted maybe an entire second.

Done with doing his thing to her knees, he continued his upward journey. Earlier he'd caressed her inner and outer calves as well as her shinbones. Now he seemed to have only one goal in mind, reaching her cunt.

The insides of her thighs were so terribly sensitive. It didn't matter what part of his hands touched her where, she twitched and tugged on her bonds. Even when sanity became a thin line, however, she didn't really want to be free.

To say her body was on fire wasn't enough. It didn't belong to her and had entered a space she'd never suspected existed. For all she knew, she kept having mini-climaxes, but maybe not because her body remained tight and hungry.

Just like that, he reached her pussy. "Oh, oh okay."

One good thing about being deaf. She couldn't hear him laugh. Something else, there was nothing wrong with her sense of touch or nerve endings.

Slipping deeper into herself, she surrendered to sensations. She remained aware of her restrained arms and legs, and her tight, swollen breasts added to the overload, but only her pussy really mattered. His fingers weren't what she'd call gentle. He touched and retreated, brushed her labia and scooped up some of the juices flowing from her. What he intended to do with the heated liquid didn't occur to her until he deposited it on an inner thigh. He did the same to her other thigh, making her wonder if she might provide enough to paint her entire body.

She needed to move, not to escape, but this hot, hard grinding in her core might kill her if she didn't.

Judging by her burning lungs, she guessed she was crying out. Realization of how much she was giving away briefly froze her, but the truth was already there in front of them. He knew everything about her.

Filling her lungs gave her the strength to face the latest. York must have shifted to the foot of the bed, because—*oh lordy!*—a knowing finger was slipping into her. Fascinated, she held still as the invasion deepened. He entered a little at a time, inching forward only to draw back while caressing her inner walls. What might be a never-ending shiver enveloped her. The top of her head felt about to explode.

Pressure on her mons pulled her attention there. Yes, he was pressing the heel of his hand on her. At the same time, the invading finger reached farther, bolder.

Had he touched her clit? Didn't know, couldn't wrap her mind around something so complex. His finger stroking her hot walls might be enough. Might get her there.

"Yes. Oh shit, yes."

If he responded she didn't know or care, yet she needed his voice as much as she did his hands, his throat thick with emotion, saying things she'd never dreamed of hearing from a man.

Suddenly she was alone. Untouched. Shaking. As she started to lift her head, weight on the end of the bed indicated he was climbing onto it. Wondering how he'd

fit, she tried to roll to the side. He hadn't crawled up with her after all but had stretched out so the mattress supported much of his upper body.

He spread his hands over her thighs, warmth against warmth with just enough pressure to again make her question her safety.

"What are you doing?" she asked, then clenched her teeth. He'd said he wouldn't turn off the lights or blindfold her, but was this any better? Would she have to beg him to bring her off, finish what he'd begun?

Her next thought was that it was possible for the top of her head to blow off. A heartbeat later, she dug her nails into her palms and curled her toes. Her body went ripcord taut only to sag and shiver.

He's licking my sex.

Everything went on overdrive. Sweat slickened her flesh. She didn't give a damn whether she ever breathed again. Her heart could explode and it wouldn't make an impact. Only his tongue on her cunt mattered, that and her imagination. He'd found a home for his head between her legs. His hands on her thighs kept them far apart and exposed her sex. This was no clinical and dispatched examination, far, far, far from it.

York, his breath bleeding over her, lapped at her. He worked her slow and long then short and hard, drinking of her constant gift to him. She vaguely realized that he had yet to touch her clit. Much as she longed to beg him to change that, something held her back.

She was so damn close to climaxing. The slightest trigger and she'd go off, shatter and maybe die.

"Oh god, god, hel—oh god."

Speaking, babbling really, helped. Letting it out kept pressure from overwhelming her. But it wasn't enough, not with him licking and tasting and blowing his breath over her followed by —

There! The tip of his tongue on her nub! Pressing down, moving, teasing, owning!

Screaming, she bucked. Instead of the release she craved, she felt as if she were clawing up a mountain. The slope became steeper, higher, harder to hold on to. Determined to be there when the volcano erupted, she envisioned herself clinging to the rocky sides.

Suddenly rock and stone became a whirlpool. Heated water sucked her down and in and she reached that place where everything was good and right and wonderful. Her sex muscles tightened and released, tightened again. Her throat grew raw. The world both blinked out and tunneled down into freedom—ecstasy.

After what might have been forever, the whirlpool finished with her. Exhausted and brainless, she floated. Her pussy continued to give out sparks, but she was no longer in awe of the power in her.

The power York had tapped.

Although he would have loved to sit beside Carlee while continuing to tease her helpless body, York untied her. Experience had taught him that sometimes a newcomer to BDSM panicked in the aftermath of a forced climax. He dealt with her ankles first, not surprised when he had to encourage her to close her legs.

If she asked what he was thinking, he wasn't sure he could answer, though maybe the truth was, digging into his thoughts was the last thing he wanted to do. An unwanted memory of lying strapped to a hospital bed threatened to emerge, prompting him to shake it off.

"Holy shit," she breathed.

"Does that mean you have no complaints?"

She didn't answer. He placed his hands over her cheeks.

"You want to talk about it?"

"How? I don't have the words." Her attention slipped to his chest. "Why are you still dressed?"

"My focus was on you."

"What about now?"

"Don't worry about me."

"Let me decide that. You aren't going to leave me like this, are you?" Staring at his crotch, she tugged on her bonds.

He wasn't, not that he didn't love seeing her helpless. Besides, he acknowledged as he freed her wrists, he'd spotted an unexpected fierceness at odds with the collar. One way or the other, he'd get to the bottom of it.

Not waiting for him to back away, Carlee sat up. Expecting her to rub her wrists, he pulled together the words to offer to massage her shoulders, but before he could voice them, she grabbed his shirt hem. The fabric tightened around his waist, further exciting a cock that didn't need it.

"I don't get you." Her words came fast, almost angry. "Is this how it usually is for you? If the woman gets off, you grab a cold shower and call it a night? Sorry, I don't buy that."

"This isn't about 'usually'."

"So what is it?"

"What do you want me to say?" Had he ever asked a woman that?

"Nothing."

Leaning close, she aimed her open mouth at the side of his neck. Startled, he reared back. Unfortunately he was so close to the edge of the bed that he started to lose his balance. Instead of helping him via her hold on his shirt, she planted her free hand on his chest and shoved. Instinct took over as he grabbed her arms. They toppled off together with his backside hitting the carpet first. Straddling his hips, she reached between his legs and cupped his cock. He went still.

"Okay, this is good," she said.

"What is?" He eyed her suspiciously.

"Let me think." She wrinkled her forehead. "Yeah, this will work."

“What will?” What had happened to the submissive he’d tied to his bed? Had he been wrong to think of her as one?

“Giving you an idea of what it feels like to be helpless. Have you ever experienced that?”

Yes. “None of your business.”

“You’re wrong about that.” With every word, her voice grew stronger. “Now if you know what’s good for you, you’ll get flat on your back. Otherwise—” Her grip tightened. “You’re going to learn what it feels like to be punished.”

Who was this woman? Surely not the quiet and shy mouse he’d rented his cabin to. Fascinated by the change, he did as she’d commanded. As soon as he was stretched out on the carpet, she scooted down his legs while still holding on to his cock.

“First things first,” she said. “Why are you a Dom? What in your makeup sent you in this direction?”

Her tone mirrored the intensity in her stare. Determined to deflect it, he placed his hands under his head. He even managed a casual shrug he didn’t feel. “That’s what this game of yours is about, trying to psychoanalyze me?”

“Why not? It’s no different from what you’ve been doing.” Frowning, she glanced at his cock or rather her hands bracketing it. “Damn but you’re big.”

“Is that a compliment?”

She started out nodding only to wind up frowning again. “I don’t know what I’m thinking. It’s possible you’ve created a monster.”

“Never.” Hopefully that was the right thing to say to the woman in charge of the family jewels. Damn but thinking was hard.

“Don’t be so sure.”

Struck by her pensive tone, he was slow to catch on to what she was doing. His shirt had twisted some when he lost his battle with gravity so his midsection was no longer covered. Her hot fingers made short work of his shorts’ fastening. They didn’t so

much as hesitate before pulling down on the zipper. He didn't need a bird's-eye view of that part of his anatomy to know his cock had taken advantage of the freedom it had been granted.

"I just thought of something," she said so softly that he had to strain to hear. "If I want to ignore any protests you might come up with, I just won't watch your mouth."

Since her attention was firmly on his cock, there was no arguing the point. He was the one at a disadvantage. Unless he bucked her off—something he had no intention of doing right now—she could have her way with him.

He hadn't seen that coming.

Maybe she hadn't either.

Ignoring the question of what she intended to do, Carlee lifted herself off York. The undeniable difference between body mass meant no way could she outmuscle him, but so far he hadn't thrown her out or tied her up again. Until he did either of those things, she'd heed the powerful inner voice speaking from her gut, her soul.

Resolutely avoiding locking her gaze to his, she tugged down on his shorts. By alternating between waistband and hem, she managed to get the garment off him, but she wouldn't have succeeded if he hadn't lifted his buttocks. Dealing with his briefs—oh lordy they weren't just brief but snug—took longer and broke what passed for a fingernail, but she didn't care. She'd accomplished the first part of her plan, whatever it was.

Instead of returning to his crotch, she ran her fingers over his anklebones, barely touching, not fully believing what she was doing. Maybe the collar had something to do with it. Rather than feeling spent and satiated by her recent climax, awareness slipped into her nerve endings and over her skin. Other women might feel comfortable being naked in their own homes, but they could hear. They'd know what sounds didn't fit. In contrast, she'd always shied away from anything that added to her vulnerability.

Tonight was different. Not only were they in York's house, her body was telling her things she'd never heard from it. Tonight it took pride in its nudity and cared nothing

about imperfections. Her so-called curves would never grace a fashion magazine, but her body was strong and healthy. Even more important, the man whose leg she'd just lifted found it at least acceptable.

Weighed down by the complexity of her thoughts, she drew his toe into her mouth. He shuddered, reminding her of earlier when she hadn't been able to control her body. She'd loved the helplessness that came with trembling muscles and pussy.

Again wondering if York ever embraced helplessness, she coated his toe with saliva. Then she closed her lips around it. In her mind she heard him gasp. Embracing everything the sound signified, she supported his leg with one hand while raking her nails over shinbone and calf. She'd barely ended her first pass and was heading for his knee when he pulled free.

Still avoiding eye contact, she waited until he relaxed. The whore he'd unleashed drew his legs apart and crawled on hands and knees into the challenging space she'd created. Sensing he was studying the line of her spine, she lowered herself onto her elbows and touched her tongue to his cock. He smelled of heat, soap and cock. Her mind spun as she drew his tip into her mouth. Her pussy tightened.

York's cock belonged to her. She'd paid her dues, played his game with his rules, offered up her helpless body to him and now it was her turn.

His cock had so many fascinating parts. There was, of course, the sweet, sleek skin stretched over blood-swollen veins. His tip was pure magic, smooth yet strong, and beneath that the hard ridge she kept running her tongue over. Sticking her ass higher into the air, she supported her upper body on one arm and gripped his base. The side of her hand resting on his balls further splintered her concentration.

Out of the corner of her eye she noted that he was digging his fingers into the carpet. He could touch her head and shoulders or tug at the collar, but maybe he didn't want to. How could that matter when she held him like this with his cock sheltered in and expanding her mouth while she took him as deep as she could?

In the adult videos she'd watched, the women's movements had been smooth and rhythmic. Try as she did, however, she couldn't hit on a comfortable pace. What if she lost him? Would he laugh? Maybe he'd offer suggestions or give her tips, ask how she'd gotten to her midtwenties without knowing how to suck cock.

Her jaw ached. Telling herself otherwise didn't work. Neither did trying to convince herself that her pathetic attempts at arousing him were having the desired effect. Admitting defeat, she lifted her head, losing him an inch at a time until her mouth was empty.

Still avoiding his eyes, she sat up and back until her buttocks rested on her heels. His cock glistened. Giving into curiosity, she cupped his scrotum and lifted it. She loved its weight and the loose flesh sheltering his balls, loved the sense of power rushing back into her.

So she might need lesson one in sucking cock. Holding him this way sent heat over her breasts and along her inner thighs to reach her pussy. Instead of trying to press her legs together to quiet the sensation, she rocked forward and then back. Again and again she simulated a fucking motion, growing hotter with each thrust and not caring that he was watching. Her breasts shook. She wondered if she'd ever ask him if he preferred a shaved pussy.

Like several other things she'd tried tonight, all too soon the burning in her muscles signaled that she couldn't hold to this pace much longer. Throwing back her head, she groaned.

Then, wishing she could do anything but, she released York's balls and struggled to her feet. Only then did she look at him. His jaw was clenched and his fingers remained buried in the carpet. Proof that he was in physical hell?

A mind's-eye image of what could be enveloped her. Tonight was about sex for both of them, done her way.

"Get up," she ordered. "Back on the bed but not before getting rid of that damn shirt."

"What do—"

"Did you hear me?" She nudged his leg with her foot. "My turn, York, got that?"

"No," he muttered, "I don't *got*. What's this about?"

Something was building inside her, not anger or rage, more like strength and need and self-confidence. Those things might not last long, but she intended to ride her new courage for as long as it lasted.

"You were wrong when you tagged me as a submissive or your sex slave or whatever you want to call it. It isn't all about me anymore."

His frown left no doubt that he didn't understand what she'd said any more than she did, but it didn't matter. She intended to make good on her promise, if that's what it had been.

Determined to hurry things along, she grabbed his shirt and pulled. Fortunately for the garment's future, he sat up and eased the strain on it. Excitement ran through her as he got to his feet. He took way too long to pull the shirt over his head. Obviously the slow striptease was deliberate.

"Okay," he said, "now what?"

Anticipation was going to be a constant for the foreseeable future. She could deal with that. What she couldn't handle was not touching him or staring at that broad, strong chest, nonexistent belly and squeezable hips. "Like I said, on the bed."

"And your intention is what?"

Say it. Hold nothing back. "To fuck and be fucked."

"No."

"What?"

"Not without a condom."

Damn, couldn't she get it right? "Where? I'm sure you have a large supply."

"A supply, yes. But not large."

His admission reassured her. He seemed to be in no hurry as he dug into the top drawer, tore open the package and pulled out the rubber.

For the first time since they'd met, she was looking at his back. Instead of the perfection that defined the rest of him, the skin over his spine was marred in places. She had only a few seconds in which to study the marks, but unless she was mistaken, they were scars, three of them evenly spaced and maybe dime size and shape.

"What are those?" she asked when he was facing her again. "You've had surgery on your back?"

"Yeah."

"What for?"

"Long time ago, Carlee. Ancient history."

"Why don't you want to talk about it?"

His expression intense, he held it the rubber aloft. "You want to do the honors?"

"Not a problem."

Hating the barrier he'd just thrown up, she held out her hand, but when he dropped it into her palm, she admitted she'd never done this. Still, how hard could rolling a condom over an erect penis be?

Not very, unless your hands were shaking so they could barely hold on and the memory of his surgery scars remained.

Finally, thank goodness, the deed had been done. York was dressed and ready for business. Ready for whatever the beast inside her needed.

Instead of reminding him that she wanted him on the bed, she took his wrist and tugged him in that direction. Except for his rubber and her collar, they were both naked, skin about to touch skin. Despite the difference in their height, she saw herself as his equal. Her body was capable of experiencing so much. It was open to so many pleasures.

There was no holding back, no restraint, no longer feeling out of touch with the *normal* world.

York climbed onto the bed without needing direction from her. He stretched out on his back with his arms dramatically spread and legs gaping. "Now what?"

Oh shit! Just do it. "Getting fucked."

Chapter Eight

"With the emphasis on which of us?" York asked. If he'd ever felt more unsure of what a woman might do, he couldn't remember. She'd crawled onto the bed and was back on her hands and knees. This time, however, she hadn't positioned herself between his legs.

Carlee hadn't answered his question. Maybe she intended to let action serve, but maybe, and this was what he suspected, she was running on instinct while going where she'd never gone before.

Scooting a little closer, she cupped her hands over her breasts, which flattened them. After a moment she lifted one, ducking her head and extending her tongue toward it at the same time. Her breasts weren't large enough to make the connection, not that that made a difference in what he felt looking at her. The untamed mare was back, free of all restraints and full of wild prairie wind.

"You want to touch me like this, don't you?" she asked, her voice throaty. "Maybe I'll let you, maybe I won't. Hell, maybe we won't fuck after all."

"I don't believe you."

Slender yet strong fingers glided over her breasts. "You think I'm so under your spell that if you tell me to climb onto your cock, I'll twist myself in a knot obeying?"

"I never said you were under my spell." To hell with keeping his arms over his head. Even though he risked revealing more, he wrapped his hand around his aching cock. It wouldn't take much to send him hurtling over the edge so he willed himself to simply cradle.

"You acted like it by doing this." Touching the collar, she slipped her fingers between her legs. "Turning me on and making me climax."

"Making? Are you saying you didn't want to get off?"

Her response came in the form of a vigorous shake of her head. When she looked down to where her palm rested against her mons, her eyes became self-absorbed.

"I don't want things to be complicated," she whispered. "Life's been like that for so long, my trying to get the pieces into place and everything, dealing with things that take too long because of the communication thing, looking over my shoulder all the time and wondering what people are saying, knowing I'm sometimes taken advantage of and not being able to do anything about it."

Because she wasn't looking at him, he had no choice except to let her continue, but maybe it was best to let her get it all out. She was massaging her pussy, the strokes slow yet satisfying if her quickened breath was any indication.

"You want to know how many men I've slept with." It didn't seem to be a question. "A grand total of two. One a deaf classmate who never learned to speak and uses sign language. He has incredible hands." She shivered. "Unfortunately, I can't say the same thing about his penis. I was a virgin, him nearly so. He nearly came before doing in my, ah, cherry."

A moment ago he'd been self-absorbed. Now he wanted to geld the damn man, followed by asking Carlee not to talk like that.

"The other—" She sighed. "We went together the better part of a year. He was okay in bed."

"Okay?"

"Considerate. Sensitive. With not much of a sex drive. Finally we stopped being lovers and slid into friendship. He moved away."

"Good."

He could have let her know how he felt about what she'd just told him but continued to watch her pleasure herself. Whatever was going on inside her was garnering more of her attention as witnessed by her rapidly rising and falling chest and her hand's increased tempo.

"I try not to think too much about having sex," she went on in a dreamy tone. "Like wishing I were rich, it doesn't do me any good. Or wanting to hear."

I don't care. I'll take you the way you are.

Spreading her legs, she let her other hand join the one already on her sex. Her mouth sagged and color painted her cheeks and neck. "I think my parents believe I'm sexless. We never talk about it. My so-called sex education consisted of Mom telling me what was happening when I started having periods. She asked what was being discussed in health class. Birds and bees I told her. That must have satisfied her."

Going by her singsong tone and focus on what was going on between her legs, he wondered if she'd forgotten he was there. Maybe not completely but his presence had been shoved aside while she let certain things out. Why that was happening tonight he couldn't say. Maybe wearing his collar and remembering what it felt like to be spread-eagle on a man's bed had provided the trigger.

"Learning about the birds and bees didn't satisfy me," she whispered, "but other than doing this..."

Although he waited her out, she didn't say anything more. She seemed disinclined to do more than lightly stroke herself. He looked to see if she was crying, but even with her eyes glittering, she seemed to be in control.

Maybe.

Needing connection, he rolled onto his side and caressed her thigh. Staring at him, she blinked repeatedly. "What did I say?"

"Not much," he lied, leaving his hand on her thigh.

"I don't believe it."

"I won't tell anyone if that's what you're worried about."

She shrugged. "I asked before, I'm going to again. What draws you to BDSM? You're successful, rich, intelligent, sexy, healthy. Isn't that enough?"

I wasn't always healthy. "Did anyone tell you that you talk too much, particularly when it isn't appropriate?" He indicated her pussy.

Her eyes widening, she jerked her hands free. The look she gave him said she didn't know how *that* had happened. Before he could ponder how that was possible, she pushed on his shoulders making it clear she wanted him on his back again. As his spine came in contact with the spread, his attention shifted to that part of his anatomy.

He hadn't thought about the scars for a while. If he'd been thinking clearly, he wouldn't have turned away from her earlier. What had she'd said? That he was healthy. Now, yes, but not until the surgery during his senior year of high school that had delayed his graduation.

Water under the bridge. History. Unlike her disability.

"So," she said, sounding strong again, "the deal is, you treated me to a new experience. I can't match your expertise or show you a new trick. However, I believe I can make up for some of my shortfalls with enthusiasm. Determination."

The smile he loved seeing was back in place, and if her gaze darted around instead of settling on him, well, kneeling over a naked and aroused man wasn't an everyday occurrence for her.

"I like the enthusiasm part," he told her. Capturing her wrist, he brought her hand to his cock. "Not sure what you mean by determination."

Growling, she lifted a leg over him, keeping her hold on him as she did. Instead of settling onto his thighs as she'd done when they were on the floor, she scooted forward and aimed his erection at her pussy. Even as he held his breath in anticipation, he realized he'd never once assumed the submissive position. Tempted as he was to take control, he instead studied her.

Her eyes closed as she eased his tip into her. There was something soft and loose about her body, muscles easy and awareness narrowing despite her squatting position. Wanting to join her in that nothing place, he grasped her deeply bent knees. She leaned forward, making him wonder when or if she'd stroke his chest.

Little by little she took him deeper while controlling pace and depth. Her thighs trembled, prompting him to caress them. Driven by pent-up desire, he tried to lift his buttocks off the bed, but her weight held him down. Hoping he had enough self-control to match whatever she had in mind, he filled his lungs.

After too long, she took all of him into her, her inner muscles tight around him. Growling again, she leaned back with her arms behind her. As she did, he bent his knees. Her hands clutched him. If anything her spaced-out look growing.

She'd have to do this, because other than rocking a little, there was nothing he could offer. "Go," he said though her eyes were still closed. "Bring us both off."

Head back and chest arched, she repeatedly lifted herself off him followed by a settling down he felt throughout, not just his cock, but his entire body. Her inner muscles relaxed. She glided over him, taking him deep and then nearly releasing him. Time after time she pushed away only to collapse against him. Sweat glistened on her throat. A drop trickled between her breasts.

Mesmerized by that and the power in her compact body, he propped his elbows under him and half sat up. Doing so caused his cock to shift inside her. Her eyes opened. She looked at him without comprehension.

"Keep going," he got out. "You can do this."

Stopping, she nodded.

The brief rest must have revived her, because when she leaned back and started fucking him again, she did so in double time. Her breasts shuddered and shook, making his fingers ache with the desire to hold them. Because he couldn't, he lightly scratched her shins. His neck and between his shoulders burned but damned if he'd fall back onto the bed.

"Damn," she hissed. "Oh god, damn."

Her voice was a trigger, a bolt of lightning. A familiar yet always new sensation tightened him, and his cock all but screamed. Pulling strength and need from his core, he shoved himself into her. Lost himself.

Ripples of release tore at him. The river current she'd created had him in its grip. He couldn't stop. Couldn't find himself.

York ran a knuckle over her spine, causing her to turn and look at him. "Farley's scratching," he said. "Do you want to let him in?"

Until York's question, she had been sitting on the side of the bed with her legs dangling and her thoughts bouncing around like crazy things. She hadn't climaxed when he did but had taken care of things by teasing her clit after crawling off him. She'd lain beside him with her back to him so he couldn't see her expression as she brought herself to the edge and beyond. After, she'd put more distance between them but hadn't come up with the strength or reason to walk away.

Limp spaghetti pretty much described how she felt as she planted her legs under her and walked over to the door. The carpet felt strange, York's bedroom unfamiliar. Even the doorknob was unlike any she'd ever tried to open.

Farley's inquisitive face looking up at her was like coming home. Dropping to her knees, she embraced her dog. Despite his wiggling, she held on to him until he tried to stick his nose between her legs.

"Sorry, pal. Some things about me are off limits for you."

What she'd just said continued to resonate. Protecting her physical space had been part of her determination to be seen as a fully functioning member of society. In a few days York had laid waste to that. Not only had he hauled her, not protesting, into his lifestyle, she'd maybe turned the tables on him by jumping his bones. Even more unsettling, she'd told him things she believed belonged to her alone.

Too fast. Too much. Not understanding enough.

Turning toward him, she slid her attention to his limp cock. She couldn't remember what had happened to the condom or whether she'd had a hand in its removal. He was still naked. Beautiful and unnerving.

"He needs to go outside," she said, when the truth probably was that Farley had heard her and York fucking. "I'll take —"

"Let him out. He won't go anywhere."

"No."

"No?"

York was a Dom, a man who took being in control for granted. Her climbing on top might have been a novelty while it was happening. Now, however, he was having second and maybe third thoughts. Same as her.

"I've been here long enough." Done with looking at him, she stood up and retrieved her clothes. "Time for me to go home."

As she headed through the door with Farley close beside, her nerves said York had gotten off the bed. What would she do if he tried to stop her?

An image of her knee hard between his legs stopped her. It wouldn't come to that. Buoyed, she spun around, her breasts jiggling as she did.

"Where's the key to this?" She fingered her collar. "I want it off."

York's lips thinned and his nostrils flared. Despite his obvious anger, she couldn't tear her mind off his body. It had been so good to hers.

By the time he'd taken the small key out of his dresser and walked over her—no way was she going to let his bedroom swallow her again—his features had relaxed a little. Not speaking, he slid a finger under the collar and lifted it so the key would fit. It slid off. Only the memory remained.

* * * * *

Thank god for showers, especially this one. By the time she'd scrubbed her body and shampooed her hair, Carlee felt renewed. Granted, she was tired, and under the usual circumstances she would have selected one of the three books she was reading and let it relax her enough that she could sleep. Instead, after slipping into a knee-length nightgown, she opted for sitting on her small porch—York's porch.

Obviously delighted to have her company, Farley patrolled the yard. As she watched him, she pondered the smells he found so fascinating. Oh to be a dog and be mesmerized by scents.

Get a grip, damn it.

For a moment she thought she'd spoken out loud, but Farley gave no indication he'd heard anything. Most likely, even in her current state, she knew enough not to risk catching York's attention even though he didn't strike her as the kind to sit out in the dark waiting for mosquitoes to find him.

Who the hell had the woman who'd fucked her landlord been?

Rocking forward, she planted her elbows on her knees and propped her chin in a palm.

You must be sex crazy.

No, she was neither of those things. She would have known if she was, right?

But the woman she thought she knew so well had done things tonight she'd never expected she would, things that hadn't so much as lurked in the back of her mind.

She wasn't ashamed. Shocked and excited, but far from filled with shame. Bottom line, she'd turned out to be more of a sexual creature than she'd ever expected. If York had brought out that side of her, what else might he be capable of?

As Farley rolled onto his back and rubbed it against the grass, her mind turned even more inward. What if York put the collar and scarves back on her?

Shit, what would that be like? Living as his what, his sub or sex slave or whatever he decided to mold her into. Dancing to his tunes. Wearing high collars to work so people wouldn't know about the collar he'd declared she'd always wear. Sleeping in a cage. Being dragged to The Club and paraded about as his latest conquest.

No! That woman didn't live in her.

Did it?

Her head felt as if it might blow as she clapped her hands to get Farley's attention. Springing to his feet, he raced over to her and placed his front paws on her knees, staring at her in adoration and trust.

"You're so good for me. Even if I don't, you understand me."

Chapter Nine

Carlee's legs were on either side of the weight bench with her feet flat on the floor. Taking a deep breath, she lifted. Her arms strained, but she was going to make it! Nothing but success.

Once her elbows straightened, she made sure the barbell was well balanced. Smiling, she looked around as best she could.

Most of the jocks who'd come into the workout room remained intent on what they were doing, but a few were watching her lift. Coach Bruce stood at her head with his hands above the barbell in case she needed help.

"Do it again," he said. At least that's what she thought he'd said. She hadn't perfected reading lips upside down.

"Piece of cake." Despite her declaration, she grimaced as she lowered the weight until the barbell brushed her breasts. This was only her third time in the gym, but she knew not to wait too long before extending her arms again because her muscles might say "to hell with this". They quivered a little but went along with the program. Holding the weight aloft, she exhaled.

Shaking his head, Coach Bruce pointed down.

Okay, he was right, it was time to call it a day. That didn't mean she liked being told she was a flyweight so far. As the barbell reached her breasts, Coach took it out of her hands. Instead of sitting up, she lay staring at the ceiling. A wet nose on her calf let her know Farley was there, and wasn't it getting to be dinnertime?

Running had long been her exercise of choice. She sometimes watched jocks of both sexes in here, but only now did she feel ready to prove herself. Bottom line, she needed to tire herself out if she was going to stand a chance of sleeping tonight.

Another touch, this one on her shoulder, turned her in that direction. Instead of Coach Bruce, she stared up at York. Shaken, she sat up.

"This is the last place I expected to see you," he said.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to see you."

Would he credit her workout for her flushed cheeks? Maybe he knew her body so well the truth was written all over her. "In here?"

"It isn't my first choice. People are staring at me."

No wonder. His suit stood in sharp contrast to sweats and workout wear. "Your attire doesn't bother Farley."

Nodding, he scratched under Farley's chin. "I'll wait if you aren't done."

His serious expression cut into her irrational excitement at seeing him for the first time in a week, eight days to be exact. If his intention was to tell her he was taking off again or had renewed his membership in The Club, he could have told her those things in a text message.

"I'm finished. I was heading home. You could have waited —"

"Yeah, but I didn't want to. You want to go for a walk?"

Ignoring the others including Coach Bruce, she led the way through the heavy door. The workout room was at the rear of the gym and closest to the football field. If York really wanted to walk, the field would provide them with the most privacy. Her tennis shoes were perfect for the packed gravel track that ran around the field's parameter, his dress shoes not so much. Still, this was his idea.

Delighted to be outside, Farley led the way. They spoke only infrequently because walking and looking at him wasn't a skill she'd perfected. At length they reached the stands. York pointed at it.

Nodding, she led the way up the stairs but stopped when he touched the middle of her back, a touch that instantly slid south. Stepping into a row, she sat down and angled toward him. He remained standing.

"A couple of things," he said. "First, I don't want you thinking that I did what I did to impress you."

Him wanting to impress her? She couldn't wrap her mind around that. Granted, her ability to process anything was undoubtedly compromised by his proximity. If she was so inclined – or so crazy – she could easily press her mouth to his cock.

"I've made a donation."

"You have?"

"To Dogs for the Deaf."

"Oh."

"Do you want to know how much?" Looking irritated, he raked his hand through his hair. "Damn it, wrong thing to say. This isn't about impressing you."

"Why did you do it?" He'd have to be deaf not to pick up on her emotion.

"Because I've seen the good the program does."

Looking as if he wasn't sure what he was doing, he held out his hand, and she placed hers in his. Even as his fingers closed around hers, the heat she'd tried to convince herself she'd left in the gym swooped over her. Would he always turn her on?

"I'm sure they'll appreciate it. The need is never ending."

"Which is as it should be." Still holding her hand, he sat down. Their knees touched. "I mean it, Carlee. You're not the same woman I rented my place to. Your lifting weights is just one example of how you've come out of your shell."

"I didn't know I was in one."

"I'm not sure anyone sees themselves the way the rest of the world does."

They weren't talking about his donation anymore. She just wished she understood where he was taking the conversation so she could help. She also wished he'd get rid of the tie and slacks.

"The other night you asked why I became a Dom."

"I remember."

"It isn't the first time I've been asked that." He glanced out at the field where in the fall teenage boys from rival teams had fought for possession of a leather ball. "I always thought it was because I get off on controlling women, but it isn't that simple."

They hadn't known each other long enough to get into serious conversations. Sex, yes, but no digging beneath the surface. Only that was changing.

"There's more than the control thing?" Oh no, he wasn't going to tell her things were over between them because she didn't fit the sub mold, was he? But she couldn't be anything except what she was.

"Yeah." He touched his free hand to the small of his back. "You might have noticed that I could be more limber."

"I—guess so."

To her relief, his somber expression lifted. "Are you saying you were distracted?"

"Yes, I'm saying that."

"That's understandable." He again looked at the field and then back at her. "I haven't been fair to you."

"You haven't?" *Here it comes, the end.*

"I let you believe you were the only one with a handicap. The difference is, I was able to do something about it, or rather my folks and insurance plus medical advances were responsible."

Everything was coming at her at once, making concentrating difficult. Farley must have sensed something in York's tone because he placed his front paws on York's knees and looked up him with moist eyes.

"I was born with a spinal defect. Specifically fucked-up discs. Instead of being filled with a jellylike material, it was as if the jelly had been squeezed out of mine. As a result, I could barely bend."

"It was like that since birth?"

"As far as we know. Instead of giving you the whole story of not being able to participate in sports as a kid, I'll jump ahead."

For now, but later – "All right."

When he studied Farley instead of continuing, she acknowledged how difficult this was for him. He'd thought he'd put the past behind him, only now, for reasons she hoped had everything to do with her, he'd decided to open that door.

"Fast forward to high school and my parents' never-ending search for a solution that didn't involve spinal fusion. There was a lot of risk in agreeing to let me participate in a trial involving artificial spinal discs. It worked."

The thought of him submitting to unproven surgery had her squeezing his hand. "And after that you could function normally?"

"I needed physical therapy, but yes, as a result of that surgery, everything changed for me."

While before he'd had to stand at the sidelines of life.

Understanding ran through her, first freezing her and then flowing free. Needing to concentrate on what she needed to say, she pulled her hand out of his and stood with her back to the field and her legs inches from him.

"Your dominating women is what, an affirmation of your ability to control your world? You're making up for lost time."

"And because I enjoyed what I did."

"Did?"

"Yeah." He eased Farley back onto all fours. "Even before you and I— What turned me on no longer did the way it once did. Maybe I'd gotten the control thing out of my

system.” He again raked his hand through his hair. “Maybe I’ve finally gotten past a case of arrested development.”

“Don’t say that. You wouldn’t have the career you do if that was the case.” Enlightenment dawned, causing her to cover her mouth. She spoke around her fingers. “You work in the medical field because, what, this is your way of paying back the gift you were given?”

“And because I love what I do. Improving surgery via technology is exciting.”

“As exciting as putting a collar on a woman?”

Her fear that she’d asked the wrong question at the wrong time faded when he smiled and shook his head. “I should know to expect directness from you. Surgical tools and collars aren’t in the same universe.”

“But you enjoy living in both universes.”

“Not as much as I dig doing this.” On a wink he ran his fingers down her bare leg. “Lady, all week I’ve felt as if I’ve been turned every way but loose. This is new for me, almost like discovering what it’s like to walk without pain.”

Even with her nerves singing his praises, she fought tears. “I hate hearing that.”

“That’s just it, Carlee, you can’t hear. Maybe you’ll always need Farley, but who knows, my company might develop what you need to turn all that around.”

She wouldn’t go there today. Maybe tomorrow.

“So,” he said, “now for the most important part of this conversation.”

No longer afraid he’d come to end things, she planted her hands on his knees. “And that’s what?”

“Actually it’s a two-parter. First, where can we go for dinner where you won’t look underdressed and me over? And second—your place or mine?”

* * * * *

His place again, Carlee not too brilliantly concluded as York flung her over his shoulder and marched toward his front door. After going to a casual Mexican restaurant for steak fajitas for him and a bean burrito for her, they'd driven their separate vehicles home. He'd been waiting when she got out of hers. She hadn't protested when he grabbed her around her waist and lifted.

Farley squeezed in ahead of them and headed for *his* couch. She had concerns that leftover Mexican wasn't the best thing for his digestive system, but at least her dog was full. He'd soon fall asleep.

York carried her into the bedroom, but instead of depositing her on the bed, he tightened his hold on her midsection. His other hand went between her legs. One moment his fingers were on her thigh, the next he pressed against her crotch. Mewling, she started to squirm but stopped. The last thing she wanted to happen tonight was to be dropped on her head.

The pressure ended, prompting her to slap his butt. Blood had pooled in her head, a not unpleasant sensation. Even as he bounced her up and down, she continued to lightly pummel his ass.

Then—oh god—his fingers slid under her loose shorts. A finger slipped under her panties, stroked—

"Oh god, York!"

The intimate strokes built one upon the other. Undone, she ran her fingers over his spine.

He leaned forward. Unable to stop herself, she slid off his shoulder and onto the bed with her legs dangling off the side. Smiling a smile she couldn't call anything but feral, he grabbed her shorts and hauled them down to her knees. He did the same to her panties so the fabric held her legs together.

"Are you going to finish the job?" She tried to run a hand between her legs. "I can't— This isn't—"

"Isn't total freedom. By golly, I think you're right."

The night smelled of anticipation, and the air had become hot. No, not the air. The heat came from both of them.

Holding his smile, York planted his hands on the bed on either side of her hips. "I might be coming out of my Dom phase, but I'm not there yet."

"Good."

"You mean it? You're interested in some roleplay?"

Shaking her head reminded her that not all of the blood had returned to where it belonged. However, enough had found her pussy. His swollen cock pressed against her thighs.

"What did you have in mind, *Master*?"

"As much as you can take. Carlee?"

"What?"

"I've changed my agenda. I'm staying home for a while."

Tears clogged her throat. "Because?"

He kissed her, then straightened. "Because of you."

About the Author

“Of course I’ve time-traveled to the ancient Everglades, infiltrated bondage strongholds, done wilderness search and rescue, and spent a night trapped in a workout gym with Mr. Universe. How can I possibly write about something I haven’t experienced?”

Although I love telling readers that, the truth is much more mundane. In my “day” jobs, I’ve been a commercial pilot, brain surgeon, worked as a white-water river guide, bee keeper, snake charmer and garbage collector.

And if you buy all that, let me pitch the bridge I have listed on eBay.

Vonna 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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