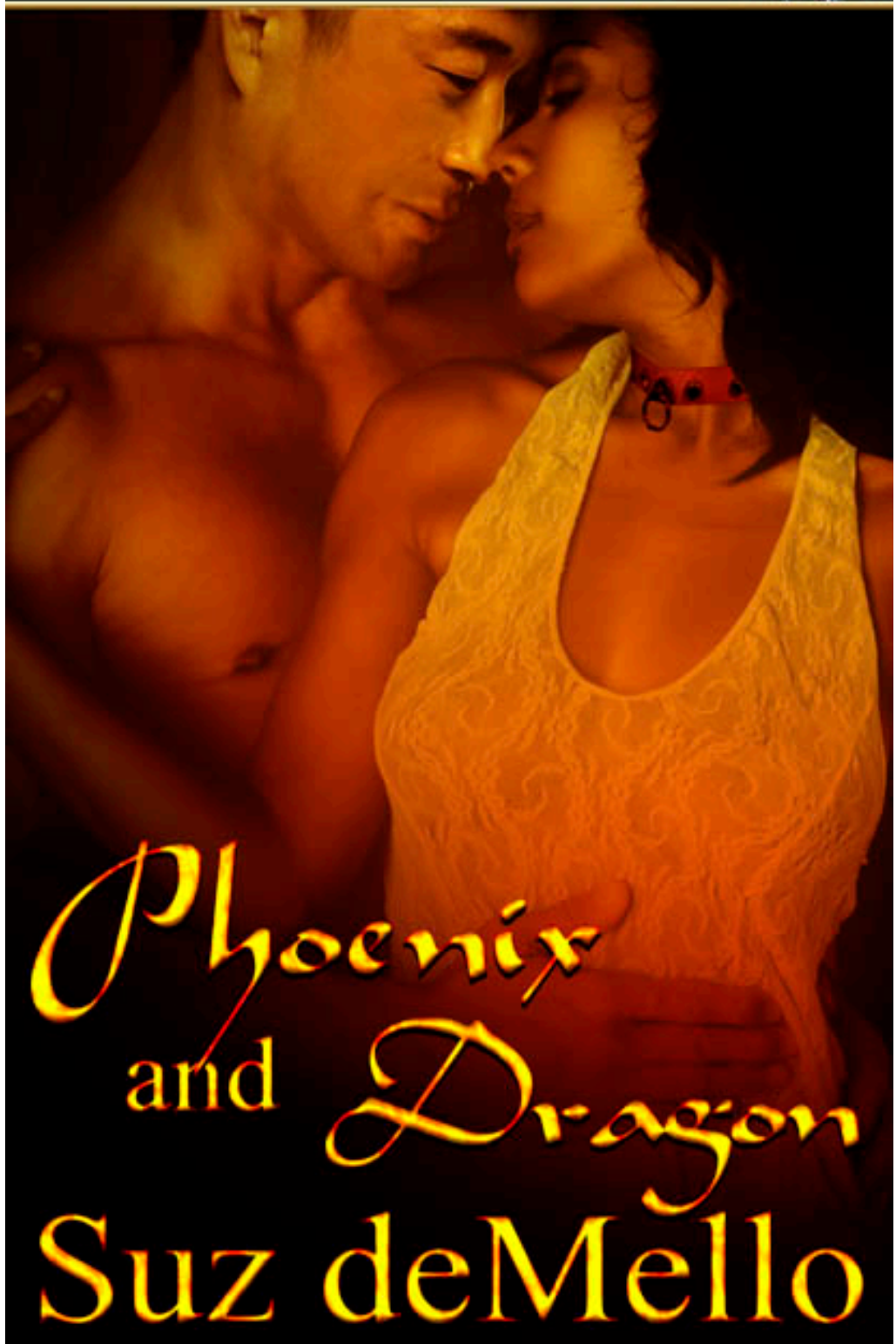


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Phoenix
and *Dragon*
Suz deMello

Phoenix and Dragon

Suz deMello

Tough, clever and beautiful, biracial detective Liza Bowman struggles with a San Francisco kidnapping case until she finds the victim's secret sex diary, which reveals that the young female vic went to a bar dressed in scanty red leather and read *The Story of O*. She hasn't been seen since.

Liza recklessly imitates the vic's last known activities and falls into the hands of James Li, the most notorious whoremaster in the city. Wealthy and handsome, James has already crossed paths with Liza – when she dared to arrest him.

In James' view, reading a famous bondage novel in public is a blatant come-on, and he's eager and ready to give his nemesis what she wants.

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Phoenix and Dragon

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PHOENIX AND DRAGON

Suz deMello

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Chapter One

San Francisco, California

After securing the crime scene and filing their preliminary report, Detective Eliza Blue Bowman and her partner Tom Hardwick went to Liza's apartment for a little R, R and S—rest, relaxation and sex.

Their assignment, major crimes, was no sleigh ride...more like a slay ride. Liza had learned that she needed this break after opening a new file. They'd work the case the next day.

She always liked to shower after her shift, rinse the day's stress down the drain. Her bathroom, unusually large for a flat in the Avenues, had been renovated by the prior owner into a tile-floored, luxurious spa, with an oversized, glass-brick shower with two showerheads.

She turned them both on full blast. Sconces set into the glass wall held a dozen vanilla-scented pillar candles, and a row of red, cinnamon candles lined the creamy, marble counter. She lit all of them then flicked off the electric light. The flames seemed to multiply, their light bouncing off the gold-toned fixtures and mirrored walls. Steam billowed out of the shower, mixing with the candles' heady scent, obscuring their brightness.

While she undressed, Tom strolled into the room, already naked. The mellow candlelight shimmered along the lines and planes of his toned body and glittered on the sharply cut edges of the etched, crystal champagne flutes he carried, their stems dangling from his fingers. A bottle of Domaine Chandon Napa Valley Brut—her favorite—hung from his other hand.

Neither spoke. Words weren't necessary and would have been drowned out by the thundering shower.

While he popped the cork and poured, his blue eyes surveyed her as she stripped. Aware of his gaze, she slowed her movements, unbuttoning her plain, Oxford-style blouse with deliberation to expose a pale-pink bra. She dropped the blouse's shoulders to her elbows, turning to display herself. The steam turned the flimsy silk translucent. Tom spilled the sparkling wine, his attention shifting to the dark nipples of her small, high breasts. They tingled with anticipation, beading tight and hard.

She pulled off the blouse and, stretching it out like a band, rubbed it across her breasts, shuddering with pleasure.

Tom set down the glasses, and she glided toward him, dropping the blouse on the floor. He gathered her into his arms, bringing her in close. She twisted from side to side, rubbing her silk-clad nipples over his bare chest. It was a game she liked to play, trying to rub his nipples with hers, even though the task was impossible. He was big and broad, she small and finely boned. She had to strain onto her tiptoes to push her breasts up his torso, but she did it anyhow, enjoying the caress of silk on flesh and the subtle rasp of his curly blond chest hair against her bra.

With a sigh, he buried his hands and face in her hair. She'd found that men loved her black, wavy hair, which she wore shoulder-length and perfumed with an exotic jasmine fragrance. Then his fingers traveled lightly down, stroking her sensitive neck. She shivered, with every tiny hair lifting.

He drew his fingertips down her throat to her shoulders until he encountered her bra straps. He hooked his thumbs under and slid them down to her elbows, passing his palms over her nipples. She felt them harden into tighter points. Her flesh zinging with delight, a happy moan sang from deep in her throat.

He cupped her breasts, and desire rocketed through her. When she gasped, he smiled and said, "Have some champagne." She took the glass he picked up and handed to her, and as they sipped, she regarded him.

Tom was about her age—twenty-nine. He had stubbly blond hair, blue eyes, a gentle touch and a nice, serviceable cock, thick but not too long. In the last four months, they'd learned a lot about each other's bodies, and the sex was generally fabulous.

It was too bad, Liza reflected as she took him in her hand, that she wasn't in love with him. But she needed the wonderful, mindless sex they had. She always needed to escape her job after checking out a fresh crime scene.

She pumped his cock with her right hand, watched Tom throw back his head and close his eyes, groaning. The hand holding his glass began to shake. She smiled and let go of him long enough to put the flute on the counter.

"No," he said. "Don't stop. Please."

She squeezed him again. He opened his eyes and reached for her, unsnapping the bra clasp between her breasts with nimble fingers. Her breasts leaped out of the cups, straining for his touch. He massaged them, rolling her nipples between his fingers until they ached.

Tense with need, she thrust her hips toward his cock. The tip brushed her skirt, and he lifted it, exposing her pink thong panties. Taking her by the hips, he hitched her onto the wide countertop. The marble was cool beneath her butt and thighs, and she enjoyed the contrast between the counter and the heavy, hot steam filling the room.

Tom eased her knees apart and lifted them high and wide. Kneeling, he ran his lips along one thigh toward the thong then skipped across to the other leg, leaving a tingling trail in his wake.

Liza groaned. "Don't make me wait!"

He laughed and danced his tongue over her clit, an elusive feather of a touch. She moaned with desire and grabbed his head, forcing him closer.

He used his tongue to push aside the silk thong, which scraped across her clit, sending thrills through her pelvis. He sucked her clit hard, just the way she liked it. A delightful languor pervaded her limbs, hot and relaxing all at once, presaging her release.

She sighed with sheer joy. It was good, but she hadn't yet come. He hugged her tight and walked her into the shower, barely giving her time to tug off her rumpled skirt and thong. Torrents of hot water pummeled her skin, drenched her hair, running in streams down her body. Tom pulled the showerhead out of its rack and aimed its flow at her pussy. Liza leaned her shoulders against the cool glass wall for support and opened her legs, letting the pleasure build. Her first orgasm swept over her in hot, rippling waves. While it was happening, Tom dropped the showerhead and advanced toward her, his bulky, muscled torso glimmering in the shifting light, a stray beam catching the moisture coating his shaft.

He pressed his big body against Liza, forcing her harder against the glass wall. She sucked in a surprised breath at the contrast. Reaching down, he grasped her left knee and pulled her high and open. He rubbed his cock head over her clit then back toward the slit. He lifted her a bit, lowering her onto his rod.

Being opened by his cock drove her higher. The head rubbed against her G-spot, sending arrows of ecstasy through her. She groaned, close, so close. Grasping his shoulders, she let her body writhe around him, glorying in the sensations. She closed her eyes and let her orgasm carry away her life.

When she could, she hooked her ankles together firmly at the small of his back, using the leverage to ride his thick, hard cock. She pushed her clit against his pubic bone, chasing another orgasm, and her pussy clenched him in a hot, tight grip. Tom pushed her more securely against the glass wall, letting it take her weight.

She flexed her internal muscles to heighten their pleasure. Bucking, he flooded her, his come hotter than the steamy water, his groans of ecstasy filling her with a heady satisfaction. She enjoyed making him come, reveled in her ability to reduce him to a panting animal wholly in her control.

But there was something missing, and she knew it. She just didn't know what that elusive something was.

Love? Nah. Love had no place in her life. She didn't believe in the concept. Friendship and good sex would have to do.

* * * * *

Thoroughly soaked, very clean and unbelievably relaxed, they staggered out of the shower and dried off. Liza donned a thick, white robe and wrapped her wet hair in a turban while Tom tied a towel around his waist. Their relationship hadn't yet progressed to leaving fresh clothes at the other's place. Maybe later, she reflected. Maybe.

Her kitchen was small but adequate for two, tiled in white with a yellow pine table and a couple of chairs. During the day, a small window gave her a view of the far-off ocean but now showed a gray, foggy square. She sliced and sautéed vegetables for a frittata while he grated cheese and beat eggs. As usual, they talked about the case.

"That the neighbors heard her screaming is a bad sign," he said about the kidnap victim.

"That was days ago," she said. "I'm not sure she was abducted. Maybe she just took off for a break."

He shook his head. "Her absence wasn't planned. She didn't forward her mail or stop her newspaper."

"But there's no ransom note." She eyed a jar of minced garlic and decided against adding some. Its smell tended to stick around too long. "Despite the pile of mail and newspapers, her apartment was very neat. No sign of a struggle."

Tom scowled. "Too neat, as though her abductor had cleaned up after himself." He re-wrapped a hunk of Parmesan cheese in plastic and put it into Liza's fridge.

"Maybe. But she hadn't taken any toiletries. Everything was there. If she was abducted—a big if—maybe she wasn't kidnapped from her apartment." She sniffed the appetizing aroma of onions and tomatoes frying in olive oil. She stirred the mixture then added a handful of shredded spinach. It wilted rapidly.

“But she was last seen there. Um, what do you make of Ms. Lansky’s statement?”

“The woman at the vic’s workplace?” She poured the beaten eggs into the heavy iron skillet with the veggies and sprinkled the grated cheese on top. “She sounded jealous of the vic.”

He shrugged. “Whatever. I thought that the fact the vic has never missed a day at work without calling in was significant. At least her boss thinks so.”

“And her boss is a good buddy of the chief’s. When was her last day at work?” She opened the oven door. Hot air billowed pleasantly around her. She slid in the frittata then thumped the oven door closed.

“A week ago.”

Liza tossed her oven mitts onto the counter. She nibbled on her index finger, a nervous habit. “What do you want to do tomorrow?”

“What do I want to do?” He caught her around the waist, pulled her in close and kissed her, pushing his tongue into her mouth. Pulling away, she flicked her tongue across his lips. He tried to continue making out, but she stopped him, thinking, *Always leave them begging for more.*

He apparently got the message, saying, “I have to testify about the search in the Fernandez case. It could take the rest of the week.”

“Okay, while you’re doing that, I’ll go back to the vic’s place and complete the witness statements. Maybe look around her apartment again and see if I can come up with anything new.”

* * * * *

Two days later, Liza, steaming with frustration, returned to the vic’s apartment. Tom was still stuck in court, but she’d talked to every possible witness and reviewed the evidence time and again. Worse, she hadn’t found any solutions to the questions presented by this case and this victim, but more conundrums had emerged.

A white female, age twenty-one, Sindie Keller worked as a paralegal at the law firm of White and Manning yet lived in an exclusive neighborhood on Nob Hill, where the monthly rent for a parking space cost as much as a house would in many cities.

Liza had speculated that perhaps the vic's family had money, but when she researched them, she discovered that Sindie's parents, Sam and Wanda Keller, had resided in Akron, Ohio, all their lives. Wanda, a receptionist, worked at a local attorney's office while Sam managed a car wash. Not a prescription for great wealth, Liza thought as she learned that the Kellers were on vacation in Florida. No one knew where, so they couldn't be consulted regarding their child's whereabouts.

But there was no way Sindie Keller was living high on Nob Hill due to Mom and Dad's money. Dammit, there had to be something Liza had overlooked. Had to be a clue somewhere.

Criminals always screwed up. They generally thought they were smart, but they really weren't. The vast majority of cases were easy because most criminals left a calling card, a map to their identity or whereabouts that could be read by someone of only moderate intelligence and training. She knew she had more of both.

But she was at a standstill. She hoped she'd find previously overlooked evidence in the vic's apartment. But what could that be?

Had Sindie Keller been turning tricks? That would explain the chic apartment, but none of the neighbors had noticed unusual activity.

Liza pushed aside the yellow-and-black crime scene tape, and using the key she'd taken from Evidence, opened the door. The studio was small but had a number of charming touches typical of older San Francisco apartments—a Murphy bed, wood floors and glass-fronted, built-in cabinetry in both the small kitchen and the adjoining bedroom-living area.

But for the untidiness caused by the investigation—black powder brushed onto most surfaces and open drawers—the kitchen was tidy, more evidence that the vic's absence was either voluntary or she'd been abducted elsewhere. Anything that looked

like a weapon appeared normal. No blades were missing from a set of knives thrust into a wooden block. A baseball mitt and a bat were tucked neatly into a closet. A hammer sat peacefully in a drawer with other household tools—screwdrivers, nails and the like.

She strolled into the living area, letting her mind open, wander, trying to be the vic. “I’m Sindie Keller,” she murmured. “I’m from a small, dull town in the Midwest. Maybe my parents wanted me to stay close to home, but...I have a streak of rebellion in me,” she said slowly. Maybe she was getting somewhere. “I headed west to an exciting city, somewhere I could become a new person, get away from my mom and dad.”

She sat on the open Murphy bed. Being evidence, it had been pulled out of the wall and stripped. She’d personally bagged the sheets and comforter. So far, no evidence of rape had been found on the bedclothes.

A nearby bookcase was stuffed with reading material. Curious, she slid off the bed and knelt beside the bookshelf.

Erotica, some very wild stuff, along with several bottles of sensual oils and a vibrator. Liza wasn’t interested in stroke books—she preferred the real thing—but she recognized some of the titles. *The Pearl*. An illustrated version of the *Kama Sutra*. *Delta of Venus*. *My Secret Life*, a thick volume. When she pulled out that one, it opened and another, smaller book fell out. It was bound in pink leather and secured by a brass lock.

A diary. “Yesss!” She pumped her fist into the air. She would read it of course—crime victims had no privacy—but first, she checked out its hiding place. Evidently Sindie Keller hadn’t cared for *My Secret Life* because she’d pasted half the pages together and carved a square inside, creating a secret cubby where she concealed her diary.

Using a metal nail file, Liza pried open the flimsy excuse for a lock and began to read, flipping through the pages at random.

I think that Raymond White wants me...

She recognized the name of one of the city’s top attorneys, the managing partner of the firm Sindie had worked for. Sindie’s boss, who’d phoned the police chief and made

such a fuss about his missing employee. Now Liza knew why. Raymond White's favorite fuck had gone missing, and Ray wanted the SFPD to find his sweet, little, twenty-one-year-old piece of tail.

She took the diary home to read that night.

He came in when I was doing research in the library. I was on a ladder, getting one of the older volumes down. He stood below me and peeked up my skirt. It was funny, most times men who do that are real slimes, but this was Raymond White, and it was sexy, even if he's older than my dad. He sure didn't make me feel like my dad does! He always wears the most gorgeous suits and he doesn't have a potbelly or smell like beer the way Daddy does...

Ray asked me to lunch, and I told him that we'd need longer than a lunch. :-)

Liza winced. She didn't know how long she could stand to read a diary punctuated by smiley faces. At least Sindie didn't dot every "I" with a smiley face. That would have been intolerable.

He asked me to come in and work with him on Saturday. That he was working on a big case and needed my help. Of course I said yes – I really need the extra money, and it was Raymond White asking. Ooh, he's so sexy, he's a big guy with thick, white hair and big hands, and everyone knows what that means...

We worked for a couple of hours and then he took me to lunch, just as he'd said. We went to Galway's Pub and had Irish coffees and corned beef sandwiches in honor of St. Patrick's Day.

The freakiest thing happened when we were there. This gorgeous Asian dude came in. He was wearing a dark-gray suit and a red tie, though it was noon on a Saturday. Even Ray, who usually wears suits to work, was in khaki pants and a sweater, but this Asian guy was dressed as though he was going to a party.

He was so hot that everyone in the bar stopped what they were doing to look at him. I did too, but then I noticed the look on Ray's face. I'd never seen him scowl like that!

"Who's that guy?" I asked.

Ray's frown deepened. "That's James Li."

James Li. Liza sucked in her breath. Despite what she knew about him, a thrill raced down her spine and coiled around her pussy. James Li. The plot thickens. Was the notorious James Li a major player in this mess?

"Is he a movie star or something?" I craned my head to watch James Li, who went to the bar and ordered coffee.

Ray huffed. "He's a pimp."

"A real pimp? With hos?"

"One of the biggest whoremasters in the city."

Liza agreed with White. But James Li was shrewd, damn shrewd, and although everyone knew what he did, the law had never caught up with him.

I couldn't believe it. James Li looked so young and clean-cut! He didn't look like a criminal at all.

Then he did the freakiest thing. He paid for his coffee with a fifty-dollar bill then walked out of the bar, with a wink and a grin at the security camera set above the door.

"What did he do that for?" I asked Ray.

"James Li and Derrick Galway are enemies," Ray told me. "Li comes in here several times every week, orders coffee, pays for it with a fifty or a C-note then leaves. He knows it drives Derrick crazy."

"Why?" Free money, what's wrong with that?

"Derrick doesn't need Li's charity."

"Does he ever drink the coffee?"

"No. He's telling Derrick it's not good enough for him."

I sat back. Way weird, I thought. Must be a guy thing.

The interaction between James Li and Derrick Galway was beyond interesting. Evidently Ray either didn't know or he didn't tell Sindie that Derrick Galway and James Li were engaged in the same line of work. Business rivals, with their boys and girls caught in the middle.

Ray leaned forward and took my hand, and I forgot about James Li. I couldn't help it, I got so hot!!!

Then he said he wanted to take me home!!!! I knew he wanted to do it, but I had to tell him that I live in San Leandro. He frowned and said, "You know, that could change."

I asked how. I can't afford anything in the city. He smiled and told me that he'd find me an apartment closer to work. The way he looked at me, I knew he'd want to have sex with me there.

And that was fine with me. A girl's gotta get ahead!

A few pages later, Liza read about how Raymond White installed his young mistress into the Nob Hill studio.

I don't know what he told his wife, but that night he took me to the Top of the Mark... Ha! That's funny. He nailed my bottom at the top of the Mark! :-O!!!

Even though he stuck his finger in first, it hurt, but it felt good in a freaky way, especially when he played with my clitty when he was in my butt. I came really hard and so did he.

I'd do anything for Ray. Anything.

He takes me to the best places and he treats me so nice. He's taking me to this exclusive spa for massages...he says he wants me happy and relaxed when he sees me.

His wife is bedridden, has been for years, and he really needs me. I'm just a kid from Ohio, and this handsome, important man really needs ME. :-) :-) :-)

A few pages later, Liza read—I think Ray likes it kinky... We went to Eva Appel Spa today, and he insisted on being there when I was all naked. It was like being in a three-way when the masseur did me. Ray was watching the whole time.

Then he asked for something called a Brazilian. I didn't know what that was and, oh God, it was terrible! This lady came in, and then Ray blindfolded me. I didn't want to, but he asked me, "Don't you trust me?"

Of course I said yes. More than anyone.

So, I'm blindfolded and naked, and they spread my legs apart.

Liza winced. For the first time, she was feeling some empathy for this vic.

Then I found out that a Brazilian is a Brazilian wax. They rip everything off, and I mean everything. It hurts like the dickens, even more than Ray fucking me in the ass.

He held me down when they were doing it and laughed when I screamed, but then he cuddled me in his arms.

Yes, Ray is definitely kinky.

Duh, Liza thought.

The lady, Gracinha, told me that in a day or two I'd completely change my mind. I doubt it.

Ray took me home and licked me for, like, an hour. Even though I was sore, I came a lot. He told me I have the softest, sweetest pussy he'd ever eaten, that he couldn't get enough of me, that he couldn't go back to his wife after having me.

I asked him, "What do you mean by that?" After all, she's sick and can't do it. He said he didn't even want to go home, he just wanted to lick my tasty ass all day and all night.

He's soooo sweet!

So the vic was fucking her boss. Interesting, but not necessarily a clue. Flipping a few pages, Liza read—*We were shorthanded and I had to go down to the courthouse to file the complaint against China Doll Enterprises today.*

That name rang a tiny bell in Liza's mind, but she couldn't remember what—she hoped it would come to her.

Man, that place is full of sexy dudes in uniform. I don't know what it is about cops. The heavy, leather belt slung low on their hips makes me hot. I saw one guy there, dark with a moustache, and I wondered how he'd look naked, with just that belt on, with his guns... Why do guns make me hot? Am I a pervert?

Ya think?

Anyway, I caught this stud's eye and we started to talk. I'm meeting him for a drink at that bar near me...handy.

Liza wondered if she knew the cop. A few pages later, she read Sindie had taken the cop home.

We didn't even make it to the bed. He kissed me good night at the door and one thing led to another. When he put his hand under my skirt, he looked verrrry pleased to find my naked pussy already wet and purring for him.

Gracinha was right. Brazilians are hot. They make me feel hot, and for men...wow. They can't stop sucking and licking a bare pussy.

We got the door closed and gave each other sixty-nine 'til we both got off. He has a really nice rod, not so long that he choked me. It was great.

Liza's hand strayed to her mound, but she didn't buff the muffin. Her wild streak didn't extend to jerking off to a kidnap victim's secret diary, and she just didn't have time for kicks. She read on.

I'm bored. Ray's all involved with that China Doll case. I want – I don't know what I want, but I want something, someone... I read in a book, Exit to Eden, that a woman went to a transvestite bar to watch the freaks. I wonder what would happen if I did that?

On the last written page of the diary, Liza read Sindie's final entry.

May 9,

Ray wants to play a game. He brought me some special clothes – a red, leather bustier and skirt – and told me to go to Galway's and wait for him. While I was waiting, I was to order coffee and read one of the books he gave me, The Story of O.

"Huh," Liza said out loud. The vic's boss-lover had sent her into Derrick Galway's pub dressed like a street ho to read a famous bondage novel in public. That was an erotic invitation few men could turn down, a young blonde reading an S&M book... But what had happened? Had Raymond White shown up and faked his lover's abduction? Had their kinky sex games gone wrong, and had he filed a fake police report to cover up her death?

Chapter Two

The next morning found Liza in court, testifying. That afternoon, after an unsatisfactory talk with her boss, she strolled into a tall, office building at Pine and Montgomery Streets. She took the elevator to the eleventh floor, occupied by the offices of White and Manning, Attorneys and Counselors at Law.

The head of the Major Crimes Unit had scoffed at Sindie's sex diary. Though it was the only evidence they had, he refused to allow Liza to bring Ray White in for questioning. "The chief will have my ass in a sling," he told her. "Yours too."

So she'd interview White in a less-formal setting, a setting in which he'd be in control—his office. The waiting room was dark and masculine, with polished, wood floors punctuated with sculptured, forest-green rugs bearing a geometric pattern.

Places like this used to make her nervous. She was a rough-edged kid from the back streets of West Oakland. Her mom was a waitress who'd worked her way up to managing a bar. Liza had never met her white father, a trucker. All she knew about him was that he had blue eyes, which she'd inherited.

She approached the business-suited receptionist busy with the phones behind a heavy, wood desk, and when she could get the receptionist's attention, said, "Detective Eliza Bowman." She flipped open her wallet to show her badge. "SFPD to see Raymond White."

Without showing a shred of emotion, the receptionist pressed a button that opened a security door to the firm's offices. Within two minutes, Liza was ushered into the inner sanctum, the office of the managing partner, Raymond White.

Sindie hadn't exaggerated. The attorney was what Liza's mother called a "silver fox", a mature but attractive man. White looked as though he worked out, and not just in the bedroom. His well-cut, navy, pinstriped suit complemented a full head of white

hair brushed back from his broad forehead into a pompadour. With full lips and expressive eyes, Raymond White looked like Elvis, if The King had kept himself up and avoided the peanut butter, banana and bacon sandwiches.

“Well,” he said in a booming voice, “am I glad to see you! Any news about my missing paralegal?” He came from behind his desk, a well-kept hand extended.

She took it, trying not to think about where that hand, those fingers had been. Sure, she knew everyone had sex, but she didn’t want to know the details. Having read large chunks of Sindie’s sex diary, Liza was aware that Raymond White’s big, beefy hands had probed and explored every nook, cranny and hole of his young mistress’s body, had opened her backside for anal sex, had seduced her into becoming his human sex toy.

It was bizarre, to say the least.

“We have some clues about Sindie Keller’s disappearance,” Liza said, picking her words carefully. “Her last known plans were to get coffee at Galway’s in North Beach. Do you know anything about that?”

He blinked in an unconvincing show of ignorance. “No. I’m aware that she liked the place, but that’s all I know.”

She smiled. White was lying, but why? She took out the pink diary and laid it on his desk. When he showed no reaction, she flipped to the last entry and read it aloud, watching Raymond White’s ruddy face bleach pale.

“She kept a diary? That dumb bitch.” He sat down heavily. Behind him, wide windows showed early afternoon fog rolling in from the Bay. “Look, Detective. This can’t get back to my wife or her family. They...they own me.”

Lifting an eyebrow, she gestured at the lavishly appointed office.

“Yes, yes, I know.” He swiped a shaky hand through his pompadour. “It looks good, but it’s all a house of cards. One strong wind and it all blows over. We’re in deep on some P.I. cases—you know, personal injury cases where the firm puts up all the

money for investigation and case preparation. Environmental stuff. We're talking hundreds of thousands in expert fees long before we get to trial or settlement."

"How are you involved with Derrick Galway and James Li?"

"Galway, no. But I represent a group of folks suing James Li's front company, China Doll Enterprises."

Oh yeah. That was why China Doll seemed so familiar to Liza. "What for?"

"Nuisance. They're trying to get his Pacific Heights cathouse declared a neighborhood nuisance and closed."

She shrugged. "That's one way of doing it, I guess."

White examined her with narrowed eyes. "It might prove to be more effective than the SFPD's vice squad."

She pressed her lips together. James Li had been one of her few failures. She'd sworn she'd bring him to justice but hadn't been able to make an arrest turn into a conviction before she'd been transferred to Major Crimes.

"You told Sindie Keller your wife was bedridden." She took out a photocopy of a month-old article from the *S.F. Chron.* A picture showed Sheila White, looking quite chipper at a ball with her husband Ray on her bejeweled arm.

"I'm not saying I'm a perfect person. In many ways, I know I'm pretty...twisted." He picked up the diary and fiddled with its brass clasp. "I did ask Sindie to, umm, play a game with me. When I showed up, she wasn't there."

"Did you ask anyone if she actually arrived?"

"No, I was a little embarrassed about asking anyone if they'd seen a young blonde in red leather reading *L'histoire d'O*." White grimaced.

"I can understand that." Liza took the diary from his grasp and tucked it safely back into her satchel.

"Look, Detective Bowman." He was sweating freely now. "I really can't let this information get back to Sheila and her family. If she divorces me—" He grimaced.

“If she dumps you, you’re ruined.” She kept her voice flat.

“That’s about the size of it.”

She wanted to tell the old leech to keep his dick in his pants, but that would be unprofessional. “I won’t disguise from you the seriousness of the situation. As you know, we don’t often investigate adults who stray out of their normal routines. People take off for vacations, whatever.” She shrugged. “It’s really not our business. But we’ve expended a lot of time and energy on this case, on your demand, and now it seems that she disappeared while playing a sex game with you, one that you didn’t reveal. That could be interpreted as filing a false police report or even obstruction of justice. We don’t like to spin our wheels. Anything else we should know?”

“No. No. That’s all I know. I swear. Sindie was... I was going to meet her, but she wasn’t at Galway’s. Someone else must have picked her up.”

“One more question. Did you see Ms. Keller in her apartment on May ninth?”

“Yes. We, umm—”

“You don’t have to go on. A witness heard screaming. Would you know anything about that?”

A smirk crossed White’s face. “Sindie was, well, loud, if you know what I mean.”

“I can imagine.” Liza left.

She returned the pink diary to Evidence before going to her place, mind racing.

Did she dare?

Yes, she did. Why not? She’d faced worse. Hell, there was at least a fifty percent chance that little sexpot Sindie was holed up somewhere fucking her brains out. And maybe Liza could find out where by retracing the vic’s steps.

But she wasn’t stupid. First, she phoned Galway’s Pub, asked to talk with the manager and identified herself. After inquiring about the security tapes, she learned that Galway’s, in common with many establishments, kept a week’s worth of tapes. If

nothing occurred to justify keeping the tapes, they were reused. Any evidence showing what had happened to Sindie Keller on May ninth was gone.

She tried to phone Tom for backup, but he was out on another case. She left a voice mail message asking him to go to Galway's, to watch and follow her, not to approach unless she signaled.

Then she changed into a short, black, leather skirt and a peekaboo-lace top. On a whim, she skipped underwear and picked out high-heeled black pumps to complete her outfit. She left her satchel at home, taking only her keys and some money in her pocket before mounting her bike.

She set out for North Beach at about four o'clock. The spring day was mild, and the evening fog wouldn't roll in for another hour or two. Her motorcycle's engine hummed pleasantly between her bare legs, like riding a giant vibrator. She always enjoyed the mild turn-on she got from riding her bike. Though she wore a helmet, the sense of freedom and control made her feel strong, powerful. Sexy.

In a state of heightened sensation, she rode her bike to City Lights Bookstore, a few blocks from Galway's. She bought a copy of the *Story of O* then went to the pub and ordered a cup of coffee.

She sat at a table in the middle of the room. For a few minutes, she watched her surroundings. Galway's was a classic pub, one of many that did business in the city. Most followed the same pattern with few variations. Wooden floors with sawdust, large-screen TVs set to sports, liar's dice played at the bar. The heavy aroma of free popcorn filled the air.

Upscale Galway's served a score of beers, including Guinness on tap. It had cut glass panels in the wooden front door, and rock music, Irish ballads and hip-hop in the juke. This Friday afternoon, the mostly male patrons wore everything from jeans to three-piece suits. She caught a few curious glances, but no one approached her.

For a while, she divided her attention between the pub and the book, but gradually O's story seized control of her mind. She'd never before read the novel but was aware

of it. Knew it was a classic. Knew it was about a young French photographer who allowed her lover to take her to a mysterious chateau outside Paris, where she was brutalized, prostituted, reduced to a sex slave.

The subject matter had never interested Liza, but as she turned the pages, she reluctantly found herself fascinated. The writing transported her into another world, one where sexual domination became a holy rite of passage. O, a woman defined only by her female orifice, found her degradation ennobling.

Liza didn't understand that, but to her horror, she found that as she read, fire ran through her body to her core. Her nipples hardened and her pussy wept with need. What was wrong with her? Did she secretly wish for enslavement?

She bit her finger then turned back to read the part when James, one of O's torturers, forced dildoes into O's backside to loosen her ass for his pleasure.

Despite herself, she sweated and shuddered with dark desire.

Then a man's hand came over her shoulder and pushed the open book down in front of her, smacking it hard onto the table.

"No, don't turn around," he said.

She felt him, a presence behind her, his other hand tight on the nape of her neck, holding her immobile. She couldn't move to see him, even if she wanted to. Her heartbeat jumped.

The hand, clad in a well-cut sleeve, lifted from the book to rest on her shoulder, gripping firmly. "Get up and walk outside," he said. "I'll be right behind you."

Liza stood, looking around, but she didn't see Tom. Horrified, her heartbeat tripled. What had she gotten into? She didn't want to become anyone's sex slave...did she?

She liked sex, but she'd never done anything really kinky. Once Tom had asked her to handcuff him to a chair and go down on him. She'd done it, but nothing about the experience had tempted her to go for a repeat.

Now she was in for it, whether she liked it or not.

Her captor's hands slid down her back, imprisoning each wrist. "Go on now," he said, his voice soft and cajoling. His hands tightened. "Go."

She went. She caught a quick glimpse of his face in the tiny, glass inserts in Galway's door. Darkly handsome, with almond eyes, beautifully cut lips and an extraordinary bone structure. Not young and not old, in his thirties perhaps... Oh no, she thought. It couldn't be!

Her pulse tripped and thudded. Had she allowed her nemesis to take her?

He released one wrist to open the door for her, the gentlemanly act at odds with his obvious intentions.

Though she couldn't identify him for sure or even see much of him, he seemed strong but not husky, at least judging by the well-kept hands and the shape of his arms in the dark suit.

Maybe she could take him if she had to. Maybe.

But not if he was the man she thought...

While she'd sat in Galway's, the day had darkened into a misty, cool dusk. Fog pressed down upon the city, upon the street, upon her, damp and dank. She slowed, and the warmth of the man behind her enveloped her body.

"Keep walking toward the street," he said. "The Jag there, get into it."

Gleaming in the night, a cream-colored Jaguar sedan with dark-tinted windows sat by the curb. She tried to read the license plate, but the streetlights, obscured by the mist, didn't illuminate it. She heard a click behind her. The Jag's door locks clattered, and its lights flashed.

He stroked her back. "Get in."

She shivered with fear. Why had she done this? What was she thinking? She turned and, quick as light, his hand covered her eyes. "You know you want to," he whispered.

She did. Yes, she did. He wasn't a big man. She could take him if need be. Maybe. And she'd find out what had happened to Sindie Keller.

She reached for the car door, opened it, got in. She turned her head but saw only a trim body clad in a dark suit. His head and face were above her, blocked by the car's roof.

"Lean forward and press your forehead against the dashboard."

Breathing heavily, she did, and found she could see nothing.

"Hands behind you, please."

He said please. She giggled.

"Hands behind you." Steel entered the voice. "Now."

She obeyed, and he bound her wrists at the small of her back. With a handkerchief, she imagined, because the bond didn't feel rough like a rope or metallic like handcuffs.

"Sit up." He tied another handkerchief around her eyes, blinding her.

Her body jerked, and she realized what danger she was in.

His hand gripped her neck again, and she gasped. Seated in the car, with his body blocking her from freedom, she was his. With her hands tied behind her, the position thrust her breasts up and out. They rubbed against her blouse, her nipples rasping on the rough lace.

She sensed movement, heard the slide of a seat belt, felt the warmth of his body over her. Heard the click of the metal halves joining.

She was tied, blindfolded, trapped by the seat belt in the car of an unknown assailant. And she'd done it to herself.

What had she been thinking?

The door closed. She was alone.

Chapter Three

There were many ugly words for what James Li did for a living, and being a Scrabble fanatic, he knew them all. *Pimp, whoremaster, procurer, ponce, panderer...* He didn't care. All of his employees were well-paid, happy men and women—*whores, prostitutes, courtesans, harlots*—who liked to have sex and get paid for it. No customer—*john, trick*—left any one of his houses—*knocking shop, bagnio, bordello, brothel, cathouse*—dissatisfied, and if they were unhappy, well, they could just walk right back in and get licked, sucked, fucked or blown again—he didn't care. Whatever worked.

He'd always been a fortunate man. When he'd been born, his mother had taken him to his great-grandfather, a wise, old man experienced in the ways of the I Ching, the classic method of Chinese divination. The old man had cast the yarrow sticks into hexagram number fifty-five, meaning *feng*, abundance. The old man had predicted that James would be successful in whatever enterprise he chose.

Even so, he couldn't believe his luck. Eliza Blue Bowman, in his complete control. This was beyond any fantasy he'd ever entertained.

They'd first met when she busted him at his Chinatown house. He'd been swinging with three of the girls, no money exchanged, just for fun. After, they'd showered together, dressed in their best and went out onto the gambling floor for different fun and games.

The girls had flanked him at the table, he remembered, clad in slinky red Mandarin-style gowns slit so high that they flashed their plump, satisfied pussies at customers as they strutted. He'd eschewed a tux that night, preferring to blend with the crowd in one of his closetful of suits, this one a sober charcoal Armani.

As he'd played Texas hold 'em, he'd become aware of someone's scrutiny. He'd cashed out of the game and met her gaze. Dressed plainly in black jeans and a jacket,

she'd tapped short, buffed fingernails on the table's side as she examined him, her blue eyes clear, unclouded by booze or drugs. His cock instantly hardened. That had startled him since he'd already taken three women that evening. Despite that, something about this woman turned him on.

They'd exchanged a long glance, the kind of look that often foretold sex. But not this time. She was certainly beautiful enough to attract him, but her glance was too intelligent, too calculating. She wasn't in his club to have fun. Ignoring his body's reaction to her, he'd immediately fingered her as a cop since the card counters tended to hang around the twenty-one tables.

He didn't say anything, just trusted his employees to do what they were supposed to do. Turned out that Detective Bowman, the lead officer in the bust, had assigned herself to him. To handle him in case he turned violent. When he'd found that out, he'd felt vaguely insulted. Sending a petite brunette to control him was a mistake, but he wasn't a violent man, despite his black belts in a half-dozen different disciplines.

Now she'd learn about discipline. Now he had the opportunity to control her, and clearly the lady wanted to be controlled. Dominated. Reading the *Story of O* in public was a blatant come-on.

But something was up. Within a couple of weeks, two young ladies had shown up in one of his haunts, both clad in leather, both carrying the *Story of O*. He wondered if it would be wise to take up Detective Bowman's invitation.

They'd last seen each other in a hall at the San Francisco Courthouse. Bowman hadn't screwed up the bust—she was too smart for that—but James was smarter. The way he ran his businesses, the D.A. would never get a conviction. Never. He'd walked. Again.

She'd stared at him, her eyes narrowed with contempt. "I'll bring you down, Li," she'd hissed.

He'd winked. "I'll get down and dirty with you any time, Liza, baby."

"Don't call me that. You have no right—"

“I’ll do whatever the hell I want. Remember that, Liza. What I say goes.”

So they’d joined in a battle of wills. That had been just four months ago, and then he’d learned she’d been kicked upstairs to Major Crimes. He regretted that. Though he was sure she’d deserved the promotion, it meant he wouldn’t see her again. Detective Eliza Blue Bowman was a straight shooter, and she’d never come into one of his houses for kicks.

What game was she playing?

He walked around the car, one hand jingling the antique Chinese coins he kept in his pocket for good luck.

Liza heard the scrape of his shoes on the damp pavement outside, was acutely aware of the creak and slam of the driver’s door as he got into the Jag. His warmth and male aroma pervaded the car. He was wearing a spicy cologne, or was that how James Li naturally smelled? She didn’t remember. In the past, she’d been in his presence maybe a total of ten minutes, but the impression he’d left was indelible. She remembered what he wore, a dark, well-cut suit, like a businessman. Li was lean but not thin, obviously fit but not bulgy or misshapen like a bodybuilder. Perfect.

As she and her team had prepared the case, she’d found herself mooning over his mug shot. She’d never seen a mug shot that looked good—they were sort of like driver’s license pictures—but his was great, although he’d been booked into the jail at two a.m.

She remembered all that, but didn’t remember his scent.

She was titillated by the thought that James Li might be her captor. At the same time, she hated the possibility that he’d abducted and killed Sindie Keller. That kind of evil seemed out of character for Li. Difficult to understand, but he did run clean whorehouses.

What was she thinking? James Li was a pimp. Pimps weren’t clean. Period. He was a slimeball and a criminal, and she was wicked, wanton and just plain wrong for wanting this, wanting him.

Behind the blindfold, she closed her eyes, forced to acknowledge that she did want him, had wanted him since she'd laid eyes on him, sleek and assured, gambling in his casino. Master of all he surveyed.

Except her.

But now she'd given herself to him. Intentionally or not, that was what she'd done.

The Jag's leather seat squeaked as he leaned toward her. "Lift up," he said.

"Wha-what?" She hated the quiver in her voice.

"Lift your butt up, off the seat." He sounded amused, and she wanted to slap him but couldn't.

Instead, she obeyed, pushing her heels into the floor mat for leverage. His hand stroked her thigh then tugged up her leather skirt, bunching it around her waist, leaving her exposed.

"Nice." A finger ran from her tailbone, along her crack to her slit, sliding in the moisture. "Very nice. You may sit down. Keep your knees apart."

She eased down to the seat. It clung to her pussy, which throbbed against the slick leather. She could smell her scent, the scent of an aroused woman, mingling with the rich aroma of the Jag's leather interior. Her face heated with shame. It was as though she wasn't a detective, wasn't Liza Bowman, but had been reduced to a sex toy. Like Sindie Keller.

And she'd done it to herself. What did she think she was going to find out? She cleared her throat. "Umm, have you done this before?"

"Did I give you leave to speak?" His tone was calm, conversational, but she heard the threat that underlaid his words.

Will he punish me for talking? "I wasn't aware it was necessary," she said rigidly.

"You've read that book. You know the score. Your mouth, your lips have only one purpose now – to take my cock whenever and wherever I choose." He leaned over her again and unbuttoned her blouse to caress her breasts, first weighing them in his hands

then plucking her nipples, one after the other. "These lovely little tits belong to me. Your cunt and ass are mine. You are mine, to use as I please or even to share with others."

Her body jolted.

"Oh yes." He laughed softly and started to drive.

She tried to count off the seconds but quickly forgot her task as his free hand began to fondle her inner thigh, sometimes coming close to her core then backing off before moving in again to tug on her muff, opening her labia and revealing her clit to his probing finger. He toyed with her until she was wet and ready and about to come.

She threw back her head, gasping, the blood thundering through her veins.

He withdrew his hand then played with her nipples again. He didn't hurt her, and she cherished the hope that he wouldn't, but in her heart, she guessed that he would take full advantage of what she'd offered.

Herself.

She forced her mind into its usual, investigation-oriented paths. Nothing in Li's rap sheet or history would indicate he'd turned violent, although he trained in several martial arts. She bet that Li had picked up Sindie Keller, given that he'd snapped at the bait Liza had offered. Chances were that Sindie, with her taste for bizarre, sexual kicks, had left her boring, old life as a paralegal to turn tricks in one of Li's houses. If Liza were lucky, they'd encounter each other, and she'd leave with another notch on her badge. A happy ending for all.

If she escaped unscathed. With her life. For there were darker possibilities.

If this wasn't James Li or if Li had turned violent...

The hand on her left nipple roved back to her pussy. "Set your feet onto the dashboard."

She couldn't see and could only guess where the dash was, so her legs flailed in the air before her high heels found purchase.

“Knees open, please.”

When she hesitated, she was punished with a sharp smack on her upper thigh. “When I make a request, you move. Fast. *Capiche?*”

She opened her knees, ashamed for wanting his hand there, ashamed for wanting more of him. He slapped her pussy once, twice, three times, smacks that didn’t hurt but sent shockwaves thrilling through her.

She didn’t know how long he drove but sensed he’d crossed one of the bridges before driving some more. But she didn’t know where they were. They could be in Oakland or Marin or he could have doubled back into San Francisco. She simply didn’t know, especially since his probing, curious hands had brought her to a state of sexual heat.

Her mind, focused only on gaining release, was a haze of frustration. Her cunt burned from his slaps, his strokes, his clever, explorative fingers tugging on her clit, now swollen and tender. Every touch sent fierce stabs of pleasure through her, darting out from her pussy to wrap her in a flaming need she’d never felt before, a need born of her desperation. If she didn’t come, she’d explode from sheer wanting.

She was on the brink, where only one more touch would have brought her to a climax. Then he withdrew his hand, and the car slowed to a stop. Startled out of her erotic fog, she dropped her feet to the car’s floor as her door opened. “Good evening,” her captor said.

“Good evening, sir.” The valet’s voice was low and respectful.

“Let’s help the young lady into the penthouse. Please send Cherise and Veronica to prepare her.” His heat again surrounded her as he leaned toward her and unfastened her seat belt with a click.

Who were Cherise and Veronica? While the valet took her elbow and urged her out of the Jag, Liza mentally shuffled through the police reports regarding the Li bust. She didn’t remember any witnesses or perps with those names.

Now she sensed that both men flanked her. Firm hands grasped her upper arms, jolting her out of her thoughts, and walked her forward. Every step she took increased her arousal as her flesh rubbed against her engorged, needy clit. Her pulse increased to an impossibly fast beat, a beat of fear, of anticipation.

Of erotic anticipation.

But had she made a mistake? Perhaps her captor wasn't James Li, though everything she'd heard or seen added up. According to Sindie Keller's diary, James Li frequented Galway's. Or so Raymond White had said, but White could be playing some deep game of his own. He was, after all, suing Li. But Liza had caught a glimpse of a man in the glass door panel who might have been Asian, who looked one hell of a lot like James Li.

She was walked into...somewhere. A house? A restaurant? She didn't know. She heard soft, sophisticated jazz and the murmur of voices, which quickly dissipated as she was taken into another, smaller room. A door slid closed, and then she heard keys jingling followed by the unmistakable groan and hiss of an elevator.

Who was inside with her? Only one of her arms was pinioned, and she tested that grasp, tugging gently. The instant she moved, a strong body slammed her against the wall. His penis, hard and ready, jabbed her belly. A tongue thrust into her mouth, filling her so she couldn't scream.

But she wanted to—with ecstasy or fear...she didn't know which.

The elevator stopped, and the doors slid open. Perfumed air wafted into her face. "Come along now," her captor said, urging her forward. His voice was serene, as though the event in the elevator had never happened.

He stopped her in the middle of the room, releasing her arm. She heard his footsteps recede and a door close as he left. She sank to the floor, boneless with dread, her mind racing. If this ritual followed the book she would be...prepared.

Prepared for a gangbang. Four men would rape her. Two would take her pussy, one her ass, one her mouth.

She told herself she could handle that. After all, she'd pulled a train once before. Back when she was fourteen and stupid.

Liza didn't know how long she sat on the carpeted floor in the room, but she took some time to steady her breathing and pull herself together. She imagined that the room was soundproofed because she heard nothing except the crackling of a fire, though she figured she wasn't near the hearth since she couldn't feel its warmth. She could smell wood smoke and perfume and a faint aroma of food cooking, but she couldn't identify the dish.

She tested her bonds. Though the fabric that tied her was soft, its knots were solid. She couldn't loosen her wrists. Then she heard feminine giggles and sat straighter. She guessed that a couple of women had entered. A door behind her opened and closed while they lifted Liza to her feet, took off the blindfold and untied her. When she rubbed her wrists, one of them slapped her hands. "Don't touch yourself."

Liza glowered at her. The woman was dressed in a yellow merry widow trimmed in black lace, with garters supporting black stockings and black high heels. A white twenty-something, she had red hair and very pale skin. Her rose-nippled breasts were lifted high by the corset, as though offered to the touch. Framed by the black garters, her pussy was an eye-catching red triangle.

Liza cleared her throat. It was time to find something, anything out about what the hell was going on. "Veronica and Cherise, I presume?"

The women giggled some more. "We can't tell you," the other one sang, her voice mocking. She was dark-skinned, with startling platinum hair, and wore an outfit similar to her cohort's but in teal. Liza checked to see if her rug matched the roof. It did.

The blonde carried a basket overflowing with swaths of red satin and a collection of what looked like red, leather, dog collars studded with rhinestones. While the women stripped Liza of her blouse, skirt and shoes, she studied her surroundings.

They were in what appeared to be a large, comfortable living room. A couch and chairs upholstered in deep gold velvet faced a crackling fire. The carpet was a cream

pile, matching the hearth and mantel, which were flanked by shelves holding books and a variety of knickknacks. A nearby table held, incongruously, an elaborate Scrabble set made out of what looked like onyx and white marble.

After the women had stripped Liza naked, they fitted her with collars around her neck, wrists and ankles, securing her wrists by clipping the collars together behind her back. They draped the red cloak over her body then blindfolded her, this time with a black mask.

The last details Liza noticed before the women placed the mask on her face were the thick curtains of ivory brocade over the windows. Neither sound nor sight would penetrate those heavy drapes. If she screamed, no one would hear.

And she saw the leather hassock set in front of the fire.

A scene from O's story leaped into her mind. O had been taken over and over again with her helpless, bound body draped over a hassock in front of a fireplace.

Liza went limp and sank to the floor. Behind her, a door opened, and she heard the hiss of elevator doors. Footsteps advanced into the room. It sounded like several men converging on her. Strong arms raised her, and someone opened her cloak, exposing her front.

"Awesome," one voice said. He sounded young. "Where did you find her? This is one hot babe. Does she really want this?"

She opened her mouth to deny, but Li cut her off. "Oh yes," he said. "The lady has been very clear."

She shut her mouth, reminding herself that she could break the case in the next few hours if she played her cards right.

Hands weighed her breasts, tweaking the nipples. A flashing, fleeting pleasure darted. Not enough. "Petite and perfect." This second man had a slight Hispanic accent.

A hand caressed her neck, fondling the nape then pulled off the sheltering cape. Fingers with a delicate touch slid, cool and sensual, down the length of her back and

into her crack, penetrating her anus and slit at the same time. The invasion was so startling that she let out a sharp scream, and her body writhed involuntarily.

Someone laughed. "Is she wet?" The young voice again.

"Yes, she's a wanton bitch." Appreciation laced James Li's voice.

She wrenched away, and several sets of hands reached to clutch her, control her. The fingers worked deeper inside her, and she couldn't restrain her moan. She wanted to come, but knowing what she did about what was going to happen, she wanted to leave. The case, she told herself. The case.

The fingers withdrew, and she ground her teeth with frustration. She wanted... She didn't want to be gang-banged, did she? But she needed sex, and she needed it right away.

"She'll have to be opened up. Her ass is real tight." A thumb wiggled in her anus. She was on the verge of coming, her pussy flexing, mouth open and panting.

"I'll take care of that." James Li sounded assertive.

"Has she been ass-fucked before?" The Hispanic voice again.

"I don't know," Li said. "Perhaps not, since she is so small."

A mouth attached to her breast, sucking her nipple. Her orgasm began washing over her, and she sighed with joy. At last.

"Don't let her come!"

The mouth withdrew, and she wanted to weep. "Why not?" the Hispanic asked.

"We have other business first. Bend her over."

Hands pushed her down until she was kneeling over the hassock, her breasts pressed into the leather, her haunches higher than her torso. Someone kned her thighs apart so she was spread wide, offered for their use and pleasure. Heat washed over her, heat from the fire, heat from her sex, radiating through her body. She was humiliated by their control over her, but at the same time, she sensed she was the focus of their attention, the center of their world. Pussy power in its purest form.

And she loved getting it doggy style. She creamed anew in anticipation. She wanted cock, and she wanted it now.

“God,” the young voice said. He sounded...awed. She flushed with pleasure at the admiration in his voice. His hand slid along her pussy, tugging at her fleece, prying apart the folds of flesh to reveal her to their gaze. He touched her clit with a reverent hand, and she moaned in response.

“What are you waiting for?” James asked. “Take a rubber and dive in.”

“Okay.” A zipper rasped and a packet crackled. Then he grabbed her hips and sank into her. He was big, and though she was beyond ready, he shoved into her pussy until his cock hit her cervix. It stabbed through her haze of pleasure, and she tried to wiggle away. But the hands, so many hands, held her in place.

The first man—the young one, she guessed—banged away without either stamina or technique. Was it his first time? Dammit, she was too wet, and there was no friction. She was so ready, so tense that her body was vibrating, but she couldn’t come.

She wanted to shriek with frustration but didn’t want to give Li the satisfaction of knowing he’d gotten to her.

The first one finished fast, his come spurting, hot even through the condom. Then another, smaller dick invaded her, thrashing around in her open, wet vagina. He came slower, but it wasn’t enough, he wasn’t enough.

She bet Li was the third man, bet that he’d never let anyone else take what was the only virgin orifice of his prey. He started out in her pussy for a couple of thrusts, wetting himself. When he was ready, he positioned himself at the portal of her ass. She trembled with fear and, yes, desire...the same dark desire and secret need that had shaken her when she’d read the story back in the pub.

How long ago had that been? It hadn’t been long, but it felt like forever. And he took forever to penetrate her tight, back hole. With every inch of flesh he sank into her, she quivered and moaned, helpless to do anything except feel, feel his cock stretch her beyond what she’d thought she could take, feel him plunge into the darkness of her

incomprehensible desires. Feel pain lance through her body as though he'd speared her soul.

She could tell that he was long, thicker than the second cock she'd taken but not as blunt and harsh as the first. An elegant cock, refined like James himself. When he was all the way in, seated so deeply she could feel his pubic hair scratch her backside, he began to pump her slowly, leisurely, as though he had nothing to do for the next century except fuck her ass. Long, slow strokes with his long, elegant cock that felt like a burning brand piercing to the heart of her.

She screamed and writhed, a butterfly impaled on a pin, wholly his, wholly his slave.

She felt his body heat as he bent over her and murmured into her ear, "Remember this moment, Liza. Remember that you're mine, all mine."

He bit her earlobe, and just when she thought he couldn't take her more completely, reared back and pressed open her buttocks more widely, wedging in more of his cock.

"Please!" she screamed.

He leaned over her again, still inside her, impossibly big, impossibly deep. "Please what, baby?"

"Please let me come," she whimpered.

"I was going to save that for later." His tone was soft, gentle, mesmerizing.

She shook her head, whipping her hair from side to side. "Please," she whimpered.

"Well, since you're asking so nicely..." He reached beneath her and gripped her breasts, lifting her. She gasped as his cock shifted inside her ass with a new pain and a new pleasure arching from her breasts to her wanting, aching clit.

"Take her mouth," he said, wrapping one hand in her hair and pulling her head back.

A penis pushed at her face, and she must not have opened her lips fast enough because James slapped her ass with two hard, fast swats. Her body wrenched. "Do it," he snapped. "Now. And drink it all up, every drop."

He spanked her again, which stung, so she opened her mouth and let in the erection, tasting the chemical flavor a condom must have left. As the cock head reached her throat, she tried not to gag. Hands captured each side of her head, holding her in place.

James pinched her nipple with one hand as his other wrapped around her body to seek her muff. He found her clit, rubbing her juices over her.

Slick and hot and incredibly raunchy, each pass of his hand shoved her higher and higher until her body erupted. Liza came so fast and so hard that she went limp, supported by the hands holding her head, James' hands on her breasts and her pussy and his cock in her rear. The orgasm went on and on, fueled by the knowing caress of his fingers.

She hadn't thought he could get any bigger, but the rod in her ass swelled as he came, roaring, with his fingers holding her fast, digging into her hips. Another shout when the shaft in her mouth spurted. She swallowed as best she could, gulping and choking. He withdrew, and she bent over, coughing uncontrollably.

James swatted her back. "Easy, baby. Someone get her water, okay?" He slipped out of her rear and released her wrists before tugging off the blindfold.

On all fours over the hassock, she controlled her coughing, tears in her eyes, and blinked, rocking back onto her heels. Someone offered her a tissue, and she took it, looking up to see a young Asian kid, no older than a teenager. He wore a blue polo-style shirt and a slight, almost shy smile. His fly was still open and he zipped up, blushing when she eyed his crotch.

She dabbed at her face with the tissue. A forty-something Hispanic man in a suit handed her a glass of water and she drank thirstily. She hadn't had anything since the coffee at Galway's, hours and hours ago.

She turned to face the last man in the room. Unlike the others, who were in street clothes, James Li wore a paisley-patterned, red silk robe, loosely tied, which had allowed him to take her. She could see that he was a superb physical specimen—washboard abs, muscular chest and solid legs, shapely in a masculine way. There probably wasn't enough fat on his body to butter toast.

"So, it is you," she said.

"Of course. Who did you think it was?"

"I wasn't sure."

He lifted a brow. "You mean you gave yourself to a total stranger?"

She nodded.

He stroked her hair away from her sweaty face with an almost tender gesture. "I'd heard you had a wild streak, but that was foolhardy."

Frenzied laughter rose. "You're telling me that I'm—"

He put a finger vertically against her lips. "Enough talk. You forget that you're still my slave, and this night has just begun." He gestured at the coffee table where four objects lay.

A riding crop.

A paddle.

A whip.

And, incongruously, a glove.

Chapter Four

"Choose one," he said.

Liza gulped and regarded the three weapons.

"Let me help you with this decision." James stood, picked up the crop and swished it through the air. It struck the couch with a resounding *whack*.

The sound sent fear shooting through her. She flinched.

He smoothed out the mark the crop scored into the sofa's cushion then continued, his tone resembling a news reporter's, calm and conversational. "It will leave long, thin, bleeding welts. In a day or two, you'll scab over and bruise. The scars will last a long time." He looked directly at her. "You'll be marked as a slave."

That was out of the question. She didn't want to have to explain to anyone what she'd done. How could she when she didn't understand herself?

He put down the crop and picked up the second weapon. "The paddle." Of polished wood, the flats bore Chinese characters that looked as though they'd been burned in. "This will redden your pretty bottom most attractively but could bruise later. You'll heal completely, but for a couple of weeks, you won't be able to sit. A useful reminder, but not as effective as the crop."

Despite her arousal when she'd read O's story, she wasn't sure about the pain thing. Aware that the other men in the room were shifting, moving to stare at the weapons, she cleared her throat.

"Umm, may I ask a question?"

"Certainly."

"What do the characters mean?"

He traced them with a long finger. "Strength and courage."

Her mouth made an O. "Strength and c—"

"The whip."

She stared at it, unable to speak, terrified. What the hell had she gotten herself into?

"Your discipline with the whip can last a very long time. Its leather will sting but won't draw blood."

She sucked in a breath. "I'll take the glove."

He smiled at her. "But you don't know what that means."

"I don't mind being spanked by a glove."

"The glove isn't a weapon, it's a symbol."

"A symbol," she repeated, her mind numb. How could she have been so stupid? James Li was a puzzle, layer upon layer of mystery. She should have guessed that nothing was simple with this man. "So, what did I just agree to?" she asked.

Before he could answer, the teenager cleared his throat and said, "Umm, Uncle Jimmy, I don't know if I'm into this."

"Uncle Jimmy?" She turned to him, incredulous.

He ignored her. "That's okay, Kevin."

Kevin reached out and hugged James. "But this was the best birthday present ever. Thanks so much."

"Anytime, dude." James playfully punched his nephew on the arm as they walked to the elevator. "Later."

Its door slid open, and Kevin got in, giving Liza a little half wave goodbye. She watched, still amazed. James Li had given her to his nephew as a birthday present. Never in her wildest dreams...

The Hispanic man followed. "Truly a memorable experience." Glancing at Liza, he extended his hand to James. "Don't worry about the planning commission. I'm satisfied as to the, umm, quality of your operation."

While she wondered which planning commissioner James had bribed using her body, he shook the proffered hand. "Thank you, Rigo. Go down to the casino. There's a chit there for you."

The elevator closed, leaving Liza alone with James. Her gaze swung back to the weapons. A whisper sounded in her ear. "You both fear and desire the whip, don't you?" His breath caressed her neck, lifting the tiny hairs at her nape and sending wanton shivers along her flesh.

Damn him, he was right. She wanted the experience, but was afraid. What would this weekend do to her? Would she still be the tough girl who'd grown up on the Oakland streets, ready to best every enemy? The competent detective who'd mastered every challenge?

How would becoming James Li's slave change her?

Did she want this?

She closed her eyes. Hot tears she couldn't control escaped and tracked down her cheeks, leaving a warm, wet trail of shame.

He licked and kissed them away. "My sweet darling."

She didn't know what to make of that. She turned her head, blinked, stared at him. He smiled at her, utterly still, utterly contained.

She tried to take in the entirety of him. Black hair, neatly styled, parted on one side. Amber skin, maybe a shade richer than her own. Handsome eyes and bones. Masculine, chiseled lips. A boyish smile completed his deceptively innocent façade. If she passed him on a street in the Financial District, dressed in one of his well-cut, dark suits, she'd take him for a banker or an attorney, if she didn't know better. Indeed, interviews had revealed that he thought of himself as a businessman.

But James Li was the proverbial enigma wrapped in a mystery.

Taking her hand, he kissed the back of it and led her into the next room.

The sumptuous bedroom was richly decorated in an eclectic mix of styles with Asian predominating. Polished chests and wardrobes with elaborate brass fittings presumably held James' clothes. A custom bed, larger than any bed Liza had ever seen, dominated the room. A four-poster, it was covered by a red, Chinese-patterned comforter with a pile of red, gold and black satin pillows at one end. Nightstands on each side held an array of objects—lamps, books and so forth. Mosquito netting shot with gold thread hung from the ceiling and was tied back at each post with red silk ropes. The headboard and wall behind it were mirrored.

It was more than a bed. With the mirrors, the pillows of every size and shape, and ropes wound around each post, it was designed for sex, an adult playpen. She stopped and stared, unable to stop visualizing herself and James on that bed, entwined and writhing on the middle of that opulent, red, satin comforter. She shuddered with desire, hot flames of need leaping through her blood, igniting her.

A tug on her wristband yanked her out of her erotic dream. James led her to the bed. Two feet away, he stuck out a foot and tripped her. With a startled yelp, she fell, but he caught her around the waist and tossed her onto the mattress's middle. When he landed atop her, they became a flailing tangle of limbs. She tried to sort herself out but he quickly controlled her with his lean, powerful body. He opened her thighs with one knee, grabbed her hip and shoved into her wet, ready pussy then pushed his tongue into her mouth.

He banged and came without a condom or any apparent regard for her, pulling out when he was done and flipping her over so she lay across his lap. The whole fuck happened so fast she barely had time to think, let alone feel, before he gave her ass five hard swats.

The slaps reverberated through her like a gong. She squirmed and shrieked, more with surprise than pain, but he held her tight and continued to spank her. "You're getting nice and red, but not enough."

He began to spank her with steady swats on her rump and thighs that stung then heated. Her cunt burned from the repeated entries while her slit dripped from his come and her need.

She struggled and moaned, overwhelmed by complex emotions she couldn't understand or explain. The pain was explicitly sexual and transported her into another realm. With the mirrored headboard two feet away from her face, she was forced to watch, to see her open, panting mouth, and eyes, eyes that went from frantic to wanton.

When he moved, gold glinted from beneath his open robe. His left nipple was pierced by a gold ring with a charm hanging from it. Her mind flashed on an image of her tonguing it. She wanted to kiss it, nip it, suck on it and watch his reaction.

She wanted to make him want her as much as she wanted him. Although he'd taken her again and again, she couldn't rid herself of the notion that she was merely a play toy for his amusement. She wanted to change that.

But why?

Her gaze shifted, and she saw that he was completely absorbed in his task, intent upon her.

Their eyes met in a moment of terrifying intimacy. Wedged between her thighs, his cock swelled.

She lunged, wrenching herself out of his grasp and off the bed. She ran into the living room and, seeing the elevator, stopped.

Behind her, James said, "Just so."

She turned. He was leaning against the doorjamb. His red robe gaped open so she could see his gold nipple ring and his cock at half-mast.

He walked toward her and took her hands. "To leave, you'd have to wait for the elevator, go downstairs and walk through the casino to the street. Naked. Is that what you want?"

"No," she whispered.

He looked into her eyes, his gaze calm, friendly, unflinching. "Liza, you can leave now or anytime if you truly want to. But have you gotten everything you came for?"

She remembered Sindie Keller. "No," she said firmly.

"Then stay. I promise to give you everything you need."

"How do you know what I need?"

He smiled. "I know quite a lot about you. You're twenty-nine years old, and your birthday is April eighteenth. Your mother is LaDonna Bowman, an Oakland bartender who named you after the heroine of *My Fair Lady*. You like raspberry gelato and Napa Valley sparkling wine. You prefer coffee black, men white and cocks cut."

Her lips parted. "How do you know all this?"

"Later."

"Later? Later when?"

He put a finger vertically over her mouth. "By the end of the weekend, you'll know. I promise to answer every question, tell you every secret."

She nibbled on his finger then took his hand away. "By Sunday night, two nights from now, you'll answer all my questions? Truthfully?"

He caressed the underside of her wrist with circling fingertips. "Yes. But you must give yourself to me completely between now and then."

She pressed her lips together. Should she make a deal with the devil? But James hadn't hurt her, not really. The anal sex hadn't felt great at first, but she'd come harder and longer than ever before. But her butt cheeks burned and her ass was sore...and what would come next?

She tried to recall the details of O's degradation, but did they matter? James had already departed from the book.

Watching her, he laughed. "What's there to think about? You've been turned-on every second since I took you out of Galway's, and that was hours ago."

She took a deep breath. Then another. And another. "Okay. It's a deal."

His smile illuminated his face, and her. "Good. This is gonna be fun." He led her back to the bedroom, took off his robe and dropped it to the floor. "Now lie facedown, and reach for the bedposts."

The bed was far too big for her to actually hold on to the posts, but she tried, stretching her arms and legs into an X. He tied her to each post by slipping the red silk ropes through metal loops on the dog collars around her wrists and ankles.

She watched him in the mirrors as he did all this, watched him and wondered at herself. Okay, so she'd find what James knew about Keller's disappearance, if he kept his word.

She believed he would. Nothing in his rap sheet, criminal history or rumor said that James was a liar. But was Sindie Keller worth it?

He finished tying her up then slid a long, cylindrical pillow, like a bolster, beneath her hips, lifting, opening and displaying her to his gaze. "You're so beautiful," he breathed. He took a bottle from the nightstand and squeezed a thick, shining liquid onto his hands. He knelt between her legs and placed his cool, oiled palms onto her still-burning bottom.

She drew a tremulous breath. He rubbed her butt in slow circles, circles that burned then settled into a sensual ache. Her moan spoke of desire, longing, need.

"So beautiful. You have the most gorgeous ass... Were you an anal virgin?"

"Yeah."

"I thought so, because you were so tight. I loved being your first." He nuzzled her neck then nipped her earlobe, sending a red flare of lust rocketing through her. "I'll open you more. But now..."

In the mirror, she saw him bend over before something warm and wet touched her. His tongue.

He licked her pussy, along her furrow, rimmed her asshole. The delicate flicks of his tongue around her tender back door were a unique experience for her. She breathed deeply, trying to center, trying to decide if she liked it or not. It was good but strange.

“Yeah,” he said, sounding appreciative. He sat up and sipped from a water glass on the nightstand. “Liza, are you thirsty?”

When she nodded, he helped her drink without untying her. Then he set down the glass and squeezed more oil onto his hands. He rubbed it onto his cock then knelt again between her legs. “Yeah, baby.” He pressed her cheeks apart with his palms, put his cock head to her ass and pushed inside.

Her sheath was still swollen from his first entry, but he was slick with the fragrant oil he’d used and slid inside her easily, faster than she expected. Pain pierced her alongside an unexpected wave of pleasure, as though her body remembered coming so intensely the first time he’d taken her rear.

He lay full length on her, and the sense of being dominated, possessed, was unbearable. She couldn’t breathe. His cock in her ass stretched her, seemed to fill up all her insides as the ache settled into an acute need for release. She wiggled her hips, causing a new pain and a new pleasure.

“Yeah, you do need to be opened more. You’re too tight.” His cock twitched against a hot, throbbing pulse at the opening of her anus.

She gasped. “It feels like you’re doing that.”

“Not enough.” His cock burned.

“It’s not as bad as the first time.”

“You’re a little looser, and I’m not wearing a rubber now. Don’t worry, I get tested every month. I’m clean.”

“You had one on before?”

“Yeah, that was how I could last so long. I wanted our first time to be...memorable.”

Using the mirror, she cut him a glare. He laughed and said, "Okay, I'm going to come now." He gave her four, hard, heavy thrusts that seared her tender channel before he groaned in her ear and filled her backside with liquid heat.

He'd hung her out to dry. Again. "That," she said, "was selfish."

"Do you want to come, baby? Awwwww." He pulled away, and his limp cock fell out of her with a soft plop. He slapped her rump hard. It stung, and she winced. "You don't get it, do you? You'll come when I allow it, and not before."

Rising, he left the room. He returned with the riding crop, stroking it with long, elegant fingers. "I hadn't thought it necessary to use this, but it is."

"No!" Tense with fear, Liza yanked at her bonds. "I picked the glove, the hand."

"You don't understand what the glove means," he said. "I said that the glove is a symbol, and it is. Not of my hand, but of my control, my choice. And right now, I choose the rod. Not because hurting you turns me on. It doesn't. But I do want to mark you as mine, and you need the discipline. You want the rod, Liza." He came closer and ran the crop's tip along the furrow between her butt cheeks. That was sexy. How could she find anything about the riding crop sexy? She had to be out of her mind. "No!"

"Aren't you at least curious?"

She fell silent. Once again, James Li had cut through her bullshit and nailed her with the truth.

"I thought so," he said. "Now kiss the rod."

She didn't want to do it, but he was serious, and she didn't want to make matters worse or earn extra punishment. So when he presented the crop to her lips, and though she closed her eyes, she puckered, extended, touched her lips to it.

Using the crop, he tapped her on the shoulder. "Open your eyes, watch and learn."

She caught one glimpse of his dark, intent face as he brought the rod swishing through the air onto her buttocks. Agony lanced through her, and her shriek hadn't subsided before he whipped her again.

"X marks the spot, your lovely back door." He slashed her one more time across the top of her thighs. "This is so you'll remember me when you sit down."

Liza screamed and fainted.

Sweating, James dropped the crop and sprang to her side, checking for a pulse at her neck. He found it at once, beating steadily against his fingers. Exhaling a relieved sigh, he rang for help. While he waited, he fetched a washcloth soaked in cold water and bathed her forehead.

Veronica stepped off the elevator in three minutes, and he showed her into his bedroom.

"Holy shit," the dark-skinned blonde said, leaning over Liza. "She asked for this?"

James pursed his lips. "Yes." He pushed Liza's hair, damp with sweat, away from her face.

"She hasn't done this before, has she?" Veronica stroked Liza's flank, unblemished except for the fresh weals.

"She's even less experienced at S&M than I am," he said. "She's just taking a walk on the wild side. At least, I hope so. I don't think I can do this every day."

"Every day, boss?" Veronica gave him a wide-eyed stare.

He smiled slightly. "You heard me right."

She gazed at Liza with new interest and respect.

"Don't awaken her," he said. "She's exhausted. She usually gets up at six in the morning."

Veronica winced. "She's been up for nearly eighteen hours."

"Yes, she's a busy lady. Clean her as best you can. Give her a sponge bath or something, very gently, and let her rest."

Leaving Veronica, James called down to the kitchen for a light meal then took a shower. When his food arrived—a delicate egg flower soup—he ate while seated on the couch, staring moodily into the fire.

He hadn't liked the side of him that the evening had uncovered. He enjoyed bending Liza to his will but loathed hurting her. Could they ever find a middle ground?

Chapter Five

Having slept on her belly, Liza awoke sometime around noon, she guessed, judging by the golden light streaming through the open curtains. She stretched, grimacing as her sore bottom reminded her of where she was and what she'd done.

She blinked, meeting her own eyes in the mirrored headboard and using it to scan the room. The gold-shot netting had been draped around the bed, obscuring her view, but the lack of movement revealed she was alone.

Parting the nets, she rolled cautiously out of bed. Set on the nightstand were a coffee carafe, a mug and warm croissants in a napkin-covered basket. After pouring herself some coffee, she considered her situation.

The door to the living room was closed and the bedroom was peaceful, quiet. A dent in the pillow beside her held James' lingering scent, so he'd slept with her but hadn't disturbed her rest. That surprised her, given his capacity for sex.

Standing, she realized she wasn't as sticky as she should have been. Someone had taken off the dog collars and sponged her privates, but as far as she was concerned, she wasn't clean enough. She took coffee with her to the adjoining bathroom and set her mug onto the red-tiled counter, checking herself out in the mirror.

Except for the tips of her dark nipples, which seemed a little reddened and swollen, she looked completely normal. When she turned, she could see the weals that the crop had left. Just as James had said, an X marked the spot over her anus. Another welt lay along the top of her thighs. All had started to scab, with a thin line of new bruising along the length of each, red against her amber skin.

She winced. She wouldn't be able to sit comfortably for some weeks. How the hell was she going to explain this to Tom? Or anyone else she might want to strip for?

With a start, she realized she didn't particularly want to get naked for anyone but James. He was the only person who'd understand, the only person who understood her. Tom didn't know she liked raspberry gelato or that she was named after Eliza Doolittle.

How the hell did James Li know so much?

Well, she'd find out Sunday night.

The bathroom was more spacious than hers, boasting red tile, gold-plated fixtures, and a large bathtub with Jacuzzi-style jets as well as a big walk-in shower with several heads and a built-in, tiled bench. A row of bath oils, shampoos and conditioners glowed in the light filtering through the glass brick wall.

She figured that the shower's spray might hurt her behind, so she chose a bath. Tepid would be best, and she skipped the bath salts and gels that sat nearby. She didn't know what was in them and wouldn't take the chance that they'd irritate her sores.

She adjusted the taps before going back to the bedroom to top off her coffee and grab a croissant. She set everything on the wide, flat rim of the tiled tub. When the tub was three-quarters full, she stepped in, stretched out and sank down to her chin, careful not to let her tender backside touch the tub's bottom. She sipped coffee, wiggled her toes and wondered what surprises, delights and horrors the rest of the weekend would bring.

After she'd drained the mug, eaten the croissant and washed from head to toe, she used towels hanging from a heated rail to dry off. She paused before rifling the drawers for a comb—what if James got mad at her? She didn't want another whipping, but hated wet, uncombed hair. After a few moments of hesitation, she used the comb and dried her hair off as best she could with another towel, hanging them all up to dry. The heated railing was a nice touch in San Francisco, a city that could stay cold even in midsummer.

Back in the bedroom, she arranged pillows so she could sit without putting any pressure on her butt. She poured more coffee, enjoying the flavor and aroma of the bitter brew. Like her, he apparently enjoyed his coffee strong. She pulled apart another

croissant, finding it flaky and fresh, like the first one. He was evidently a perfectionist about pastry as well, and she made a mental note to get the name of his bakery.

She lay back on the pillows with a deep sigh, allowing herself to relax, letting her mind go blank as she watched shafts of golden light march across the walls. Then she remembered. Tom. Where the hell had he been last night?

She spied a phone on James' bedside table and picked it up. An operator immediately answered. "Uh, I need an outside line, please," Liza stuttered.

"What number, ma'am?"

She paused. She didn't want to call the SFPD from here, didn't want to leave any traces of what had happened. How could she explain to anyone about what she'd experienced with James? Biting her lip, she gave the operator Tom's cell phone number and hung on for the connection.

While she waited, she took the handset and walked to the window, hoping to see a street sign so she could tell her partner where she was. Unfortunately, the view four stories below showed only a small back garden, typical of homes in San Francisco. It was beautifully landscaped with Japanese maples and azaleas, which were in bloom. A small stone bench sat by a pond. Nice, but nothing to show her location.

She'd just have to stick it out.

A mechanical voice informed her that her call couldn't be completed as dialed and could she check her number and try again? "No, I can't," she snarled into the phone. She didn't feel comfortable using James Li's phone to call out—what if he got mad and whipped her again?

Damn. She replaced the handset and picked up a croissant, chewing thoughtfully, questioning herself some more.

What had she learned? Nothing about the Keller case, but she continued to believe that James either held the key or by the end of the weekend could be eliminated as a suspect. She had to admit to herself that she preferred the latter result.

She'd learned far more about herself. She'd thought of herself as sexually experienced, but now realized she'd only scraped the surface of who she was as a woman. She recalled the riding crop swishing down on her butt and shuddered.

Some paths were best left untrodden. But others? She sat on the bed, again nestling into the cushions.

James was nothing short of astounding, in every way. Handsome. Smart. Wealthy. Potentially great in the sack, if she could either curb his more arcane pleasures or get used to them. She couldn't live with the threat of the rod hanging over her. She didn't want that kind of relationship.

The door to the room opened, and James came in, followed by Kevin. Her hand shook and she dropped the croissant.

James, again in his red robe, picked it up and placed it on the nightstand. He scooted onto the bed behind her and kissed her mouth. His lips were warm and soft, and his kiss a friendly one. "Happy Saturday, sleepyhead."

She blinked, trying to get a grip on herself and her emotions. But fear ruled, forcing adrenaline through her veins, clouding her thinking.

"Umm, hi," Kevin said, shuffling closer. His eyes were heavy, and his polo shirt wrinkled.

James caressed her shoulders, holding her. "She's all yours, buddy."

"Geez, what's your name, umm, Liza? God, you're so beautiful." Kevin sat next to her and leaned over. "Your boobs, they're like coffee ice cream with, uh, raisins or something."

She smiled. She couldn't help finding him, well, cute.

He licked her nipples then sucked, starting a thin curl of arousal.

But last night had been such a wild ride...was she ready for more?

Kevin suckled her left breast and fondled the right, his eyes closed in ecstasy.

Did she have a choice?

He climbed onto the bed, which creaked, parted her legs and knelt between them. He looked at her crotch then buried his face in her muff. "God, you smell so good."

Lifting his head, he poked her with a curious finger. She guessed that he'd never been with a woman before last night or had never met one who'd allowed him to really check her out. She remembered her first, hurried, sexual encounters. She hadn't seen a penis in the light until she'd moved out of her mother's home into an apartment. In a weird sort of way, she envied Kevin.

He parted her labia and looked inside her vagina. He found her clitoris, touching it delicately. She moaned to encourage him, thinking she might as well get the kid started off right. He bent his head and licked her, and she wiggled to press herself against his mouth.

He learned quickly, taking her clit in a long, sucking kiss and adding the tiniest of nips at the end.

"Wow!" Liza would have come off the bed but for James holding her shoulders and kissing her neck. The combined stimulation was too much, and her breath came short as her pleasure built.

Kevin's tongue slid down to her slit, pushing inside, Frenching her channel. Then he stopped. She bucked, wanting more. James kissed her mouth, penetrating her, commanding her response. She kissed back, reaching for him and sliding her fingers through his hair.

Their tongues danced together...for the first time, she realized. It was heavenly. He really knew how to kiss, how to use his mouth to communicate demand, desire, want.

She distantly heard the scrape of a zipper followed by the crackle of a condom wrapper. Then Kevin's cock slowly entered her wet pussy, his weight pressing her into the mattress. Her sore butt protested, and she squirmed.

Then the ridge at the base of his cock head rubbed her G-spot. She yanked her mouth away from James and panted. "Right there! Right there!" She closed her eyes to focus on the pleasure.

Kevin stopped. "Right where? What?"

"You hit her G-spot." James sounded amused.

"Oh, I've heard about that, but I didn't know where it was."

"Don't go in much farther. Go back and forth, just a little bit."

Kevin obeyed, and she moaned. "Oh God, yes, yes, yes, yes. Just like that."

"I want to come. I want to pound right in." Kevin's voice was strained.

"Try to hold out. Learn to let your lady come first."

Curious, Liza opened her eyes to see Kevin grit his teeth. His forehead started to sweat as he sawed back and forth inside her. She deliberately clenched around him, driving herself higher, sure he couldn't hang on much longer. One—two—three—four pulses, and she gasped, "Okay, I'm coming," and let herself go. James kissed her lips and caressed her breasts. His tenderness added a dimension to the orgasm she didn't expect but didn't have time to analyze.

Kevin groaned and pushed hard, driving deep. "Oh God, Liza, thank you, thank you, thank you." His cries became incoherent, and he came in a fast, hot rush. He draped himself over her, limp from his release.

Satisfaction, warm and heady, pervaded her while James continued to kiss her mouth, her face, stroking her neck with his lips. She shivered with a little residual orgasm. Her throat was very sensitive, and he seemed to understand that, nibbling and licking to heighten her pleasure.

Rousing himself, Kevin kissed the inside of her knee.

"Dude, grab the rubber," James said. "Use a tissue. You don't want to get it all over the place." He seemed more concerned about his bedspread than the possibility she could get pregnant. She was on the Pill, but how could he know that?

Kevin went to the bathroom, and James rolled her onto her side and pushed into her from behind but didn't take her aggressively, instead cuddling her close. "You were very kind to Kevin," he murmured into her ear.

"He seems like a nice kid," she said.

"Oh, he's great. You're his first, you know."

"I had guessed that."

"He's young and a little geeky."

"Well, he's got a good start with women, thanks to his Uncle Jimmy."

He chuckled. "Did you come?"

"Yeah, a little one."

"Want more?"

"Umm, yeah, but I'm kinda sore."

"I'll be gentle." He seated himself in her more securely and reached around to finger her clit. "How's that?"

"Good...the other side's more sensitive."

He moved his hand. "Yeah, you have a little extra fold on the right side." He pressed and fondled, slicking her pussy juices along her sensitive nub.

"Oooohhhh..." She came in a languid flow of heated pleasure, like a summer tide streaming through her body. She dropped off to sleep with James' arms around her.

* * * * *

"I can't believe how much I've slept today." Liza stretched her arms over her head, bent her knees and rolled her hips from side to side, careful not to abrade her bottom, which still hurt. One of her vertebrae popped, and she sighed with relief.

"Oh, I can believe it." Gorgeously naked, James leaned against the bathroom doorjamb. His nipple ring gleamed, its charm swinging. "You need the rest. You work too hard."

She shrugged. "That's a cop's life. Our work is never done, in part because of people like you."

He raised his brows. "People like me? I'm a legitimate businessman, as our case together should have taught you."

"Huh. You dance on the edge of the law."

"Yes, but I never cross the line—like some cops." He grinned at her. "We're more alike than you know."

She let that go by. "What time is it?"

"Time for a little snack."

"What did you have in mind?"

He held out a hand. "For you, raspberry gelato. For me, hot, green tea."

"Is it teatime?" She got out of bed on unsteady feet and followed him into the living room.

"Close enough."

Their snacks sat on the coffee table between the sofa and the fireplace, now filled only with cold ash and cinders. She also saw a root she recognized as ginger, and a knife with a silver handle enameled in orange and turquoise cloisonné.

Curiosity jabbed. By now she knew never to underestimate James, but trying to guess what he had planned was impossible. She resolved to just enjoy whatever he had in mind...if she could.

He seated himself in the middle of the couch, and she moved to his side. "No," he said. "At my feet."

She darted him a resentful glance.

"Do I have to whip you again? I really don't want to."

She pressed her lips together. "No." She sat at his feet, kneeling so her sore bottom wouldn't touch the carpet.

"Good girl." He handed her a celadon-glazed china bowl with three rounds of raspberry gelato in it. "You have to earn your snack though."

"Earn it? How?"

He gave her a spoon. "It's hummer time, baby."

"Oh. Well, I can do that."

"I just bet you can." Smiling, he poured tea from a matching pot. "Anytime you're ready."

She ate a spoonful of the icy gelato, letting it melt in her mouth, enjoying its sweet-tart flavor. Then another, and while it was still chilly on her tongue, she parted James' knees and crawled between them.

"What's this tattoo?" She stroked his belly just above his pubic hair, where dark lines marked his otherwise smooth skin. There were six horizontal lines arranged in a square shape, with the first two and the fifth broken.

"It's an I Ching hexagram. Means abundance." He leered at her.

"You do think a lot of yourself, don't you?" Chuckling, she bent her head and sucked the tip of his cock into her mouth.

With a happy sigh, James poured himself some tea and relaxed into the couch's cushions. He looked down at Liza's black head while she bobbed back and forth, his dick in her mouth. His entire body tingled, the ecstasy centering on his penis. "Baby, your mouth is made for cock."

Her blue eyes opened, went wide as he thickened and grew, filling her. In just a few seconds, her full lips working him brought him from limpness to full arousal.

He laughed. "Yeah, baby. When I first met you, I thought about only one thing. Getting you on your knees with your pretty lips around my dick."

She let him pop almost all the way out then took him in again, tightening her mouth into a small ring

"I wanted you the moment I saw you." He groaned. Ready to come, he felt himself swell, reaching the back of her throat. Damn her, she stopped to nuzzle his balls and eat more gelato. "Bitch."

She laughed. "I'm just doing what you asked, master." Her tone was mocking.

"I'll get you for that." But he liked what she was doing too much to put any sting into his words.

Her little pink tongue darted out and licked around her lips before she took him again. The contrast between the frozen gelato and the moist heat in her mouth turned him on even more.

Lightning flashed along his skin, and he began to sweat. He fondled his nipple ring, imagining Liza nipping the sensitive tip. He wanted her to suck him off forever but didn't know how long he could last.

His scrumptious little slave ate more gelato and went down on him some more, flicking her talented tongue into his ultrasensitive slit then rimming the plummy head.

Watching her doubled his pleasure, but he'd never last. And he wanted it to last a long, long time. He needed a distraction. Picking up the gingerroot and the knife, he began to carve.

He worked until her sucking became more intense. Her eyes were closed, her cheeks hollow with effort, and she emitted charming hums and moans of pleasure. He was delighted to discover that his Liza was one of those women who truly loved to suck dick.

Fearing he'd hurt himself, James put down the knife and the ginger. He breathed, looked at the ceiling and sipped tea. When his hand began to shake with his impending orgasm, he set down the cup with a clatter. "Stop," he said.

She rocked back on her heels, small breasts swaying with the motion.

He refilled his cup and handed it to her, full of steaming liquid. "Drink."

She obeyed, grimacing. "It's bitter."

"Green tea is full of healthy antioxidants."

"Give me gelato anytime."

"Not right now. Sip some more tea and finish me up."

With the heat of her mouth turned up to “high”, he lost control, grabbing her hair and fucking her face. Her muscles clasped his dick as she deep-throated him, a talent few women knew. She was fabulous.

He’d already decided that he didn’t want to give her up Sunday night, and now he was sure he’d never let her go.

But how to keep her?

Not even he could imprison a city cop. She had to choose to stay.

To choose him.

Liza reached up and stirred his balls with her index finger. Her nail’s gentle scrape across his scrotum shot him into the stratosphere. Groaning her name, he spurted hot jets of come into the back of her throat. His hands clenched spasmodically around her head, forcing her to take everything he had to give.

And she did, her throat muscles working overtime to swallow, flexing around his dick and prolonging the rapture. Then she ran her tongue along his limp shaft, licking every inch before she finished the gelato.

Every muscle limp and sated, he dropped back against the sofa and closed his eyes, letting himself drift. He sensed her get up and leave before hearing the shower run.

He joined her. “Baby, you’re a marvel.”

Rinsing her hair, she turned and laughed. “Your bed slave has pleased you, master?”

He slapped her ass, which made her yelp. “Silly girl. Now scrub my back and I’ll do yours.”

“With what?”

“Just a moment.” He reached over her shoulder and turned on a second showerhead and then a third, his favorite, a big, round one set in the shower’s ceiling. Its flow replicated a waterfall or a heavy rainstorm.

“Woo-hoo!” She threw back her head, bathing her face in the fall.

“You’re such a wonderfully sensuous woman,” he murmured in her ear. “Now try this.”

Nestled on a glass block shelf were a row of oils, scrubs, shampoos and conditioners. He picked out a plastic tub filled with a salt scrub and told her, “This is for me. It’s pretty abrasive, and you don’t want it on your butt...yet.” He leered at her. “But scrub my back with it. Actually, you can do me all over. Just be nice to my cock, okay? I’ll want to put it in you later.”

Liza opened the plastic tub. The citrus’ sharp scent must have tickled her nose because she sneezed. “What is this stuff?”

“It’s sea salt in lime oil. Very invigorating. Keeps skin real smooth.” He watched her through narrow, almond eyes. “Veronica introduced me to it.”

She stiffened, obviously jealous, and he liked that.

Liza clamped her lips together and tried not to get upset. But she couldn’t help being jealous. That was stupid, wasn’t it? He was a pimp. He had to have been with hundreds of women, if not thousands. To keep up the quality of the goods offered in his houses, he’d have to try them out, wouldn’t he?

What exactly did that mean? During her bust of his Chinatown house, she’d learned that he employed men as well as women. Did James swing both ways? Would he expect her to do the same?

She shut those weird-ass thoughts out of her head in favor of enjoying the moment, shoving a finger into the oily scrub. “Bend over,” she told James.

“Excuse me?”

“You want me to do your back or not?”

He raised his brows. “As long as it’s not my back door.”

She chuckled as he bent over and rested his palms on the tiled bench built into one end of the shower. She started at his neck, digging into his developed trapezoids, where

a dragon tattoo done in red, black and gold curled around his left shoulder halfway down his back. Though partly obscured by the rising steam and flowing water, it was still gorgeous. "Awesome tattoo," she said, appreciating that he'd apparently loosened up on his "seen but not heard" rule. She couldn't help it, she was a chatterbox from day one.

"Thanks." He glanced behind at her. "You'd look good with one too."

"You think? A dragon?" She brushed her wet hair out of her face, enjoying the lime oil's bracing fragrance.

"That's up to you. Does it call to you?"

She examined it. "I'm not sure. Suits you though." She worked her way down to his taut, tight buttocks, wanting to play with his asshole but not daring to probe deeply, not after what he'd said. She ran a finger along his crack, following the water that streamed along the lines of his magnificent body.

His breath whistled between his teeth. "Stop."

"Too much?"

"With the salt, yeah."

"Okay." She took another palmful of salt scrub, knelt and did his legs. When he turned around and sat, she picked up one foot and then the other, rubbing between each toe and around his heel. His feet were as well-kept as his hands, and she wondered if he got manicures and pedicures. Must be nice, she thought. For weeks, she hadn't found the time to have her hands and feet properly tended.

She slid her oiled hands up the front of his body, bypassing his swelling cock with regret. But orders were orders. She fluttered her tongue along his length just to tease then ran her fingers over his six-pack and arrived at his chest. She rubbed his flat pecs, finding them solid as brass plates.

She wanted him again, and she wondered how? He'd been inside her more times than she could count in the last twenty-four hours. She'd come over and over again,

wept, pleaded from need, fainted from pain, exhaustion and sheer sensory overload, and still, her pussy wept for his cock.

She met his eyes as she pinched his pierced nipple, which hardened into a taut, dark bead.

His breath again hissed through his teeth. "Oh baby." Reaching for her, he said, "Wrap your legs around my waist and sit on me. Now."

She put down the scrub and climbed around him as best she could with slippery hands and the water cascading around them. He helped, pulling her onto his cock with frantic haste. She stuck her hands underneath his armpits and over his shoulders to anchor herself. When she was seated on him, with his arms around her, holding her fast, she laid her head onto his chest and licked his nipple, flicking the ring and its charm with her tongue then nibbling on the hard nub.

His breath quickening, he bucked beneath her. He hit her cervix, and she winced, adjusting. She pushed forward with her hips, grinding her clit into his pubic bone, chasing pleasure. Reaching down, she separated her labia for fuller contact, swung her pelvis from side to side, rubbing her most sensitive parts against him.

She threw back her head again, glorying in everything—the hard cock inside her, James' fingers plucking her nipples, the torrents of warm water flowing over her, over him, over everything.

James wanted to come and wanted her to join him. He banged her harder, lifting her up off his lap at the end of every thrust. She screamed as she came, and he followed her, slapping her rear, enjoying her delighted, surprised shrieks.

He gave her sweet, round butt five hard swats. She yelped and came harder. He caressed her bottom and shoved a finger into her ass, pushing her higher.

In up to his second knuckle, he kept still, feeling her flex and relax, flex and relax around him.

“Yeah, baby,” he breathed into her ear. “Just let it happen... It’s okay.”

She buried her head in his shoulder and came again while he held her tight. Neither moved until the hot water ran out, turning first tepid then cold.

Chapter Six

Wearing James' robe, Liza sat on his bed, combing her hair. Outside, night was beginning to drape San Francisco in gray, foggy shadows. Inside, a naked James bustled around the room, opening wardrobes to remove clothes. He laid out his choices on the bed – one of his dark suits, a red tie and a crisp, French blue shirt with white cuffs and collar. Silk boxers and socks.

She watched him, trying to sort out her feelings. If her butt weren't still sore, if she weren't his slave, the scene would be similar to one she'd played out many times with men in the past.

"What are you doing tonight?" she asked.

"We are going out to dinner at my Oakland house."

"We? Why?"

"You may get weekends off, but this is prime time for my businesses. Oakland tends to get rowdy on Saturday night, and I like to make sure everything's running smoothly."

She fidgeted, not sure it was wise to tell him what was on her mind. "Umm, I probably shouldn't be seen with you."

He turned and nailed her with a glare.

She nibbled on her fingertip but decided she had to hold her ground. "I'm sorry, but I have a life after Sunday night. I'm a cop. I can't keep company with James Li. I won't have a career."

"Are you sure?" He arched a brow. "All kinds of people come into my houses. Trust me – no one will give you a second glance, at least not above your chin."

She flushed.

He crossed his arms over his torso. "I've been too nice to you."

"Really?"

"Yes, really. You need a lesson."

She felt blood drain out of her face, leaving her lightheaded.

"Not the crop," he said. "Been there, done that. Drop the robe and lie facedown."

What did James have in mind? His kit of dirty tricks was apparently inexhaustible. Her fingers shook as she placed the comb onto one of the nightstands with care.

He pushed her shoulder. "Faster. You've forgotten lesson number one. When I tell you to do something, do it immediately, no protesting, no negotiating, no bullshit. You gave yourself to me for this weekend, remember?"

She did as he demanded, spreading out her arms and legs into an X. Without wrist or ankle bands, she wondered how he was going to restrain her for whatever punishment he planned.

"I'm going to ask you do something that will...challenge your commitment."

She tensed, her butt cheeks tightening.

"You're going to take what I give without being tied down. Voluntarily. Do you understand?"

Oh my God. "Yes."

"Good." He patted her fanny, caressed the healing welts.

She moaned. In a way, obedience without physical force was worse. Knowing she was bound only by her word, that she chose enslavement was more humiliating than being overcome by James' brute strength, which, despite his lean frame, was much greater than hers. She wasn't a weak or stupid woman—far from it—but he was more than her match in many ways.

He found the piece of ginger he'd carved during the blowjob. It was now shaped like a penis roughly half James' length and girth, with a notch at one end before it flared out wider. He pushed it into her pussy. "You'll find this interesting."

“Hmm.” It felt cool, not uncomfortable at all, and she wriggled, wondering what kind of punishment this could be. Then an unexpected heat pulsed through her walls and into her clit. She moaned and tightened around the ginger stick, wondering if this was some kind of arcane Chinese sex magic.

He slapped her butt and took out the ginger. “Don’t come.”

She panted, and he slowly thrust it into her ass. This felt distinctly different. The entry wasn’t easy, the burn starting fast. Her hips jerked, and she clenched her fists into the bedclothes. She wanted to come, but she couldn’t without more stimulation, which he might or might not provide.

Her pleasure was totally in his power, not hers.

He plunged in the ginger stick until the notch sat in the tight ring of muscle at her entrance, stretching the opening. The flaring crown he’d carved held it in place. A peculiar cold-hot fire surged through her, a piercing flame that ignited her from the inside out. She groaned with unfulfilled need, pounding her fists onto the mattress. Her body shook with pent-up energy, energy she was expending just staying in place, facedown and submissive as he demanded.

“How do you feel?” He stroked her back.

She thrashed. “Good. Sexy. I didn’t know —”

“There’s a chemical in ginger that stimulates. You’ll swell, tingle, burn a little bit while it’s opening you up. Are you hot?”

Her breath came short and fast. “Yeah.”

“Do you want to come?”

“Oh yeah.” She tried not to whine.

“But you’re not begging.”

“I’m begging!”

He smacked her bottom. “Don’t try to fake me out.” He spanked her again, and she gasped.

"I'm not, I'm not. The more you do that, I'm not," she blurted. Realizing she spoke the truth, her mind shorted out.

She, Eliza Blue Bowman, was a masochist. She liked being spanked, found the sting and the burn sexy. It made her hot.

Or was it James?

Now her captor leaned over her, enveloping her in his warmth. "Do you like being mine?" he murmured in her ear.

"Yes," she whispered, trying not to sob.

"Good." He nipped her earlobe then rotated the ginger stick in her ass.

She whimpered and bucked, clutching the sheet in desperate fists.

He stopped. "Not just yet, love."

She released a sigh that trembled from the heart of her.

"Now sit."

Blinking away frustrated tears, she rolled over and sat on the side of the bed, leaning forward so the ginger stick wouldn't push in farther. The slash across her thighs... Yes, James was right. She was reminded of him when she sat. Her back sheath flamed with an icy fire she didn't think she could stand.

He again licked and kissed away her tears, finally reaching her mouth, first gently touching his mouth to hers then probing the seam of her lips with his tongue. She opened to him, and he slid his tongue inside, searching for hers. Responding in kind, she reached for his shoulders and caressed him, delighting in his smooth, satiny skin underlaid by solid muscle.

She dared to stroke the dragon, gloried in his strength and mastery. Her fire and desire built, raging through her white-hot and uncontainable. Craving release, she reached for her clit.

He slapped her hand away. "You know better than that. Do I have to tie you up again?"

She shook her head.

“Good girl.” He played with her hair.

Damn him, he praised her as if she were an obedient puppy. And she’d asked for this, accepted it. Liked it.

James went to a bureau and took out a pair of black thong panties. He knelt beside her. Kissing her ankle, he slipped the loops over her feet. “Now stand.”

She managed to obey him, but she didn’t know how. He pulled on the panties, tugging the sides high, so the tight, stretchy fabric held the ginger stick in place.

“Perfect. Now don’t move.” With the silver and cloisonné knife, he scored a neat slit into the thong’s crotch over her labia.

Her clit popped out, and he helped by pressing his lips to her mound and sucking the swollen nubbin. She swayed, grabbing a bedpost. Her butt clenched around the ginger. The mingled pain and pleasure were uncontrollable. Her emotions in a confused frenzy, tears filled her eyes.

He raised his head to look at his handiwork. The slit was small, and where he’d licked, the flesh thickened, pushing out until her clit looked like a pink tongue protruding from the black material. “Nice,” he said. “It’s like a clit clip. You’ll stay turned-on all night. But don’t you dare come until I tell you to.”

She swiped away her tears and scrabbled at the thong’s waistband. They were tight and small... A shock of recognition cut through her erotic fog. “These are—these are mine!”

“Of course. I wouldn’t give you someone else’s panties. That’s gross.” He stood and stretched, raising his arms above his head.

“You broke into my house and took my panties?” Her voice rose with outrage. She knew she was courting another brutal punishment, but she didn’t care. “That’s not just gross, that’s a freakin’ felony.”

“Dammit, Liza, haven’t you learned anything?” He turned and threw the knife into the doorjamb. It struck with a loud *thwok*, embedding halfway down the blade. “I am not a criminal.”

The fury on James’ face stunned her. And did she see hurt shadowing his eyes?

He shook her by the shoulders. “While you were sleeping, I took your keys and went to North Beach. I rode your bike to your apartment, where I parked legally. I went into your home and got some clothes for you. I won’t apologize for that.”

She clapped her hands to her burning face. “James, I—”

“Shut up. Just shut up and listen. Stop thinking like a cop, okay? And stop acting like an abandoned, distrustful child. Stop making me and every man you meet pay for what your father did.”

His words slashed her scarred heart.

“I don’t—”

“Yes, you do. Have you ever truly loved a man?”

She thought. She’d first had sex when she was fourteen, with a local gang wannabe, but that had turned out worse than badly. After she’d been scared straight, she’d screwed around a lot, but... “N-no.”

“At your age, that’s a little odd. And you know I was right when I said that you prefer to fuck white men. Why do you think that’s true?”

She swallowed. “Are you saying I want to fuck my father?”

“Your white lovers are surrogates, little girl, nothing more.” He shook a finger in her face. “Grow up, get over it or fuck around forever and never find love. Is that what you want?”

She stuck her chin into the air. “Love has no place in my life.”

“That’s because you don’t make a place for it to grow.” His bitterness startled her.

“What do you care?” she snapped.

He didn't answer, instead picking up a phone and punching some numbers. "Hey, lady," he said into the handset. "Come on up here and get her. Fix her up for tonight, the full-scale treatment, hair up, lots of makeup. I want her ready at seven thirty, sharp." He glanced at Liza. "Play with her if you wish, but don't let her come."

Without another word, he went into the bathroom and closed the door, leaving her standing in the middle of his sumptuous, silent, empty bedroom.

Loneliness stabbed, and so did guilt. She'd misjudged him, and she could have sworn she'd seen hurt in his eyes, hurt as well as anger.

What the hell was all that about her father? How could she miss someone she never knew? Wasn't she better off not knowing the slimeball who'd knocked up her mom and walked away without a single look back?

That LaDonna Bowman had led a full, successful life was a tribute to her, not to the nameless white trucker who'd left her his seed and nothing else. James was flat-out wrong, wrong about Liza and her feelings, and wrong to hurl that accusation at her.

But she wouldn't let it bother her. She'd just survive this weekend, go back to her life, and sort it all out later. She couldn't think with her butt cheeks flexing around the blaze in her rear, her pussy soaking her panties and her clit throbbing for release.

She stood in the center of James' bedroom until two people came in, one the dark-skinned blonde of the previous night, the other a man who could have been Dennis Rodman's brother, a tall, black guy with platinum curls. Heavily made up, he wore full bondage garb, consisting mostly of leather straps and boots. In contrast, the woman wore a demure schoolgirl's outfit—pleated, checked skirt topped by a starched, white blouse with a tie. Her hair was in braids, and her face free of cosmetics.

"We're Bobby and Veronica," the Rodman clone said, taking Liza's arm. "Come with us, and we'll make you all pretty for the man."

Though still naked but for the panties, she went with them toward the elevator. "First lesson," Veronica said. "Department. You're James Li's woman, so walk proud. Head high, pretty titties to the wind." She pinched Liza's left nipple.

A zinging awareness leaped through her. She was surprised. She'd never made the lesbian scene, but Veronica's touch magnified her arousal.

And the woman was right. Liza decided that she wouldn't let the situation wear her down. She straightened her back, squared her shoulders, walked as best she could with a ginger plug burning up her ass and her entire body screaming for an orgasm.

She followed the pair into the elevator, watching as Bobby used a key to access a private floor. As they descended, she visualized herself in the elevator the night before—James in one of his dark suits, she shaking with fear in scraps of lace and leather as he forced her against the wall and plundered her mouth.

She held up one hand and saw that her fingers quivered. With fear? Adrenaline? Passion? She didn't know.

Bobby and Veronica were staring at Liza with blatant astonishment and curiosity, so she dropped her hand. He ran curious fingers around her buttocks, finding the welts and the plug. "The man's going all-out for you," he mused. "That's interesting."

"Why?" Liza asked.

"We probably shouldn't tell you this," he said, "but I've never seen this before from James. He's really rather vanilla, sexually speaking."

"Oh, he'll go for a group, usually women," Veronica said, "but I've never seen him go all out for someone the way he's doing you."

Before Liza had a chance to respond, the doors opened, revealing a hall resembling a fine hotel's. Lacquered tables held bouquets. The walls were papered with a nubby silk and hung with mirrors. Green and cream carpet with a vine pattern softened and quieted their footfalls.

As she walked, she caught a glimpse of her face—wide eyes set in amber skin, flushed cheeks and a startled expression.

"Your place or mine?" Veronica asked.

"Mine," Bobby said. "I have better makeup."

“Do not. I have Chanel.”

“Do too. I have Shiseido.”

Veronica sulked. “You’re going to stick me with the mani-pedi.”

Bickering amiably, the pair led Liza into a suite on the left side of the hall. A sign on the door read *Bobby’s Boudoir*.

Bobby’s Boudoir was decorated in elaborate Victoriana, all of which looked authentic but couldn’t be, given that everything was in excellent shape. Carved Aubusson rugs covered the floor with rose and cream colors predominating. A rose, velvet, fainting couch, inlaid furniture and lamps with beaded, fringed shades completed the period décor.

Hauling Liza, Bobby pranced through the parlor into an adjoining dressing room where a wall-length mirror topped with a row of makeup lights dominated the space. Beneath it, an equally huge counter was crowded with makeup. Three low, round chairs set before it.

Bobby picked up a hairbrush. “Sit down,” he told Liza, his eyes gleaming.

She sat, leaning forward on the padded chair. When she crossed her ankles, Bobby slapped her breast. “Legs apart.”

She complied.

“Excellent.” He stroked her inner thigh but didn’t go near her pussy.

She remembered that James had given this pair permission to “play with her”. After what she’d already experienced, that sounded fun, except for the part about not coming.

“Where do you keep your oils, Bob?” Veronica asked.

“In the bedroom of course.” He began to brush Liza’s hair with firm strokes.

Veronica left but soon returned with a plastic bottle. “I hope the boss likes this scent.”

“If it’s gardenia or jasmine, he does,” Bobby said.

Liza didn't want to think about how Bobby would know that. She said, "We just showered with a lime-scented scrub."

"Okay," Veronica said. "We'll stick to citrus." She left and came back with a different bottle before kneeling to massage Liza's feet.

She sighed, finally starting to relax as Veronica's clever fingers pressed and rubbed away the tension in her feet. Bobby finished brushing her hair and started to experiment with updos. After about twenty minutes, he had piled her hair on top of her head, securing it with crystal-tipped skewers and a multitude of crystal hairpins. He'd pulled out several strands, braiding them before tucking them back into the topknot.

While Veronica gave Liza a pedicure, Bobby massaged her neck, shoulders and breasts, with special attention to her nipples, tugging, pinching and pulling on them. They swelled and stiffened as her arousal renewed, built, grew.

Liza threw her head back, panting, and he stopped, slapping her across the breasts until they stung. "No coming, slave." With a rough washcloth, he wiped away the excess oil, rubbing her nipples until they reddened.

Veronica took the washcloth and rubbed the oily cloth up and down Liza's legs. She closed in on Liza's pussy and gave her swollen, needy clit a fast, brutal swipe.

Lightning tore through her. She squealed, closed her eyes and gripped the edge of the counter, grinding her cunt hard into the cushioned chair. The ginger still burned, but the fire seemed to be flaming out at last. It had decreased over the last twenty minutes. She thanked her lucky stars for that. She didn't know how long she could take it. But she was close, so close...

"Stop it!" Veronica's voice was like the crack of a whip. "Stand up, slave."

Liza didn't move fast enough, and Bobby slapped her breast.

"She said stand up. Now!"

Liza got to her feet, her eyes filling.

"Stop your sobbing," he said. "We haven't hurt you."

She shook her head. "It's not pain. I just need... If I came, James wouldn't know. Please!"

Both of them laughed. "No way, baby," Veronica said. "What the boss says goes."

"Does he own you or something?" she asked, both curious and resentful.

"No, but he's a good landlord." Bobby chuckled. "The best."

"Landlord? You think of your pimp as your landlord?"

"He doesn't pimp anyone out," Veronica said. "You don't know much about him, do you?"

"I thought I did."

"So what's your name, honey, and what's your game?" Bobby asked.

She wet her lips. "I'm Liza Bowman. I'm a detective with the SFPD."

Bobby stilled, as did Veronica. After a pause, he said, "Everyone's got a life, honey, and I won't pry. But James is a good guy."

"The best," Veronica said. "You won't find a better man in this town."

"Let's get back to what we're doing," Bobby said, his voice businesslike. "I still have a lot to do. Sit back down."

Liza sat, and he found a pair of eyebrow tweezers. "Honey, the Brooke Shields look went out before you were born." He spent about ten minutes plucking her brows then made up her face, trying different tints of foundation and blush until he'd matched her unique skin tone. He painted on more eyeliner and mascara than she'd wear in a year. Veronica finished Liza's pedicure and started her manicure, choosing a cranberry-red polish for both her fingers and toes.

"What color are you wearing?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know," Liza said. "I'm sure James has something in mind, but I don't know what it is."

He pressed a button next to a speakerphone. A moment later, a voice came on the line. "Yes?"

“Boss,” Veronica said, “we can’t make up her lips unless we know what she’s going to wear.”

“Red,” James said. “Red for my scarlet woman.”

Bobby and Veronica cracked up as though the man had channeled Robin Williams. They really like him, Liza thought. It’s as though he can do no wrong.

“If she’s done, bring her up.” James’ voice was calm, as though his blowup with Liza hadn’t happened. Nevertheless, she tensed, and she resisted the impulse to bite one of her newly manicured nails.

“I’ll match your polish,” Veronica told Liza. While Veronica chose a lipstick, Liza’s heartbeat sped. Naked, she could see her left breast tremble with the force of her pounding pulse.

She was going back to James, back to that suite where she’d experienced so much pain...and so much pleasure.

As Bobby and Veronica led her to the elevator, she regarded herself in one of the mirrors. She didn’t look like the Liza Bowman she knew. She rarely bothered to put up her hair, and when she did, she just twisted it high and secured it with a clawed clip, not in the elaborate style Bobby had created. She wore makeup, but never more than a little lip gloss and mascara.

When they stopped in front of the elevator, it opened and out stepped the redheaded woman Liza had seen the night before. She was wearing a black-and-white French maid’s outfit, which contrasted nicely with her red hair and pale skin. “Hi, Cherise,” Bobby and Veronica chorused.

Then Liza saw the man with her. Her boss, the head of the SFPD’s Major Crimes unit. She wanted to crawl beneath the carpet, but it was too late.

His head had swiveled around, and his eyes popped. “Can I have her too?” he asked Cherise. “How much would that cost?” His gaze avidly raked Liza from the top of her sophisticated coiffure and down her naked body, lingering on her flushed breasts

and tight, black panties with her clit hanging out. His gaze held not a feather of recognition.

Nevertheless, a hot flush stole over her face. She struggled to keep her composure. "I'm sorry, sir," she said quietly, but proudly. "I'm with Mr. Li." She walked into the elevator, head high, followed by her two companions.

The elevator door closed, and Bobby said, "Well done. Excellent deportment."

Liza slumped against the wall. "I don't know if I can stand too much more of this."

Veronica gave her an unreadable stare just before the door opened to James' suite. "Thank you both, very much," Liza told them.

Bobby hugged her. "Knock 'em dead."

She winked. "I just did." She stepped out into the suite.

Veronica smiled. "Have fun. He really likes you, you know."

"He does? He has some odd ways of showing it." Liza gingerly rubbed her ass.

"It's just another way to swing, baby," Bobby said as the elevator closed behind them.

Liza turned to face James.

Chapter Seven

Freshly shaved and clad in the clothes he'd selected, James' masculine aura again hit Liza, sweeping through her with a whirlwind of emotion. She realized that she'd be proud to stand by his side anytime, anywhere.

Embarrassed by her feelings and sure he didn't share them, she cleared her throat. "If we're going to Oakland tonight, I'd like to see my mother."

He didn't seem surprised or bothered by her request. "Certainly, but I think you should get dressed first."

"Well, I only have the one outfit and pair of shoes, unless you brought others."

"Come with me." He led her into the bedroom again, opened a wardrobe door and leaned over. "You're a five, aren't you?" He handed her a pair of high-heeled, gold lamé slides.

She tried them on. "These fit perfectly."

"I found them for you in my sister's boutique on Clement Street. Slides and sandals usually fit more easily than pumps, and I didn't see anything in your closet I liked. You have more boots and athletic shoes than dress pumps, but I did see a horrible pair of fuchsia, satin, platform sandals —"

"Bridesmaid shoes." She shuddered.

"And an absolutely appalling gown to match, in tulle and taffeta. Same occasion?"

"Yep."

"Forcing you to wear them would be a unique torture, but it would kill both of us." He leered at her. "As for your dress, red or black would be the obvious choices for you, but since nothing about you is obvious —"

"Funny, I think the same about you."

He chuckled. "I wanted to see you in something different." He took a sleeveless, navy-blue Mandarin-style dress from the wardrobe. The silk brocade was embroidered with red and gold thread, complementing her nail and skin tones without overpowering either.

He held it up to her. "Perfect. You'll wear the dress, it won't wear you."

"You look pretty fine yourself." She smiled at him. "Like any other successful Bay Area businessman."

He beamed at her, his grin disarming. "I'm glad we've come to an understanding."

"I suppose so. Am I still your slave?"

"Of course, and I am your obedient servant."

She raised her brows. "How so?"

"You need clothes. I supply them. Oh, I also picked up your contraceptive pills. If you take one now, you're safe for this month." He poured her water from a pitcher in the nightstand.

"Thank you." She downed the pill. She was startled, but by now, why should she be? She should have learned that James sweated the details.

"You had a phone message from your partner," he told her. "On your home machine."

She looked into James' face, which held not a trace of jealousy or anxiety.

He continued. "Detective Hardwick said he went to Galway's, but you had already left. He's out of town, had to fly to Minnesota because his grandfather is ill and might not make it."

"Oh." No wonder she couldn't get hold of Tom. "Did he tell anyone else to follow up?"

He shook his head. "If he did, he didn't say so in the message. He seemed a little distracted. Is he close to his grandparents?"

"Yeah. Umm, I tried to call him earlier from here."

"I know. It's okay."

"It is?"

"Of course. Once again, Liza, you're not a prisoner. You're here because you choose to be with me, right?"

"Right. Sort of. I—"

"No more questions. We can discuss all of that stuff tomorrow evening. I just want to have fun tonight, okay?"

"I thought you're working."

"I could be." He shrugged. "But most of the time, merely showing up at the Oakland store stops the shenanigans anyone might want to pull. Now get dressed and let's get going. I'm hungry."

She stepped into the gown. James helped her with the red, silk frog fasteners that ran along her left side. The ankle-length, sheath-style dress encased her from neck to hips, and two long slits up each thigh allowed her to walk. Plus, the slides weren't so high as to encumber her stride.

She handed him the lipstick Veronica had given her. With a frown, he said, "I'm your obedient servant, but guys like me don't carry cosmetics."

"Sorry, but Bobby isn't my date tonight."

He grinned. "Here." From a chest of drawers, he produced a cunning handbag made of the same silk brocade as Liza's dress. With a heavy silver wire handle, it was designed to look like a Chinese takeout box.

She snatched it from him. "This is the cutest little bag I've ever seen. Is it from your sister's shop?"

"Yeah, she carries some nice stuff."

"I'll have to stop by there."

"We can go together. I'll get you the family discount."

Handling it reverently, she opened the top to find folded bills and a few tissues. She took out the money and asked, "What's this for?" Was it her payoff? She wasn't a whore.

"In case we're separated, which I don't expect." He gave her a boyish smile. "When I was growing up, my Popo—that's what Chinese call their moms—always told me never to leave the house without a dollar and a dime. A dime to call home and a dollar for cab fare. These days, it's more like a cell phone and ten bucks, but the principle's the same."

"Yeah, that's good advice." Mollified, she replaced the money and added her lipstick before closing the bag. She hung it on one wrist and patted it fondly then slipped her feet into the gold lamé shoes. "Okay, ready to go."

"Not quite. Here's something else I want you to wear." He opened the same chest of drawers and took out a wide, flat spiral of hammered gold, a bracelet he wrapped around her left biceps. It gleamed against her amber skin, putting a savage edge onto the otherwise elegant ensemble. He continued. "Your arms are too gorgeous not to decorate. I guess handling that big Harley of yours really develops the muscles."

"Yeah," she said. "And I occasionally work out."

He took her elbow and escorted her to the elevator. "You look wonderful tonight." He kissed the back of her hand.

She tried not to show she was flustered, but he was treating her like a lover, and she didn't know what to make of it. Was he a potential boyfriend or her torturer? "I, umm, don't know how I feel about you dressing me up. Like a doll."

He chuckled. "Believe me, I don't see you as Police Girl Barbie."

"How do you see me?"

"Tomorrow. Remember our deal? No questions now, just fun. You can interrogate me all afternoon and all night if you want—tomorrow."

They stepped out onto the first floor. This time she wasn't blindfolded so she was able to quickly identify her location. "This is your Pacific Heights house." She'd seen photos of the lavishly restored, four-story Victorian.

"Right in one. I'm very proud of this place. It was a wreck when I bought it. Renovated it myself."

"You did a terrific job." The elevator opened onto the casino, which was quiet for the moment. It looked like an exceptionally luxurious living room, with wood paneling, a plethora of large indoor plants and red-patterned carpet. A few early customers schmoozed around a bar placed at one end. Gaming tables with tuxedo-clad croupiers filled the rest of the card room. Her trained eye quickly took in everyone, but nobody matched Sindie Keller's description or photo.

"It's early, so it's pretty quiet now. By nine p.m., it'll be hopping." He led her through the casino to a foyer, floored with pale-yellow marble.

"Was the Chinatown house your first property?"

"Actually, that house has been in my family for generations. The Lis have lived in San Francisco since the Gold Rush era when my great-great-grandfather came over to make his fortune. He earned nothing in the gold fields but became a merchant and bought up a lot of property in the city. I run three houses and am thinking about opening two others. Each conforms to the same basic plan."

Liza remembered details of the Chinatown house where she'd busted James months before. "The lower floors have a card room, bar and restaurant. There's a floor with your whores and a penthouse flat. Your flat."

He opened one side of a huge wooden double door, ushering her outside. "Correct, except they're not my whores. I don't pimp out anyone. They rent rooms here. Of course the rents are so high that few people but high-class prostitutes can afford them, but anyone with twenty-thousand dollars per month can rent from me. Except for a drug dealer. The federal penalties for that are too steep, and we'd lose our properties.

Other than drug dealing, I don't care how they come up with the rent as long as they pay it."

The misty air was cool, with San Francisco's usual fog dampening the night. She took his arm to descend several stone steps to the sidewalk. "Does anyone else ever rent rooms from you?"

"Every once in a while. A year or two ago, a Russian chess master was in town preparing for a big match. He stayed here for about six months. He didn't do anything except fuck, eat and play chess against a computer. I thought it was a little wacko, but hell, he paid the rent and made a lot of the girls – and several of the guys – very happy."

"It's all perfectly legal," Liza said slowly. "That's why we've never managed to make a bust stick."

"Exactly."

"Very clever."

"Thank you." He sounded smug, damn him.

Parked at the curb was a cream-colored Bentley limo. "We're not taking the Jag?" she asked.

"No, the limo's more fun." His voice was sly. "You'll see."

The chauffeur helped her to crawl inside, and she seated herself on the back bench seat. The limo was so large that she could stretch out her legs. James scrambled in after her and immediately pushed the button to raise the smoked-glass panel between them and the driver, affording them complete privacy. With the tap of another button, soft jazz filled the space.

The chauffeur closed the door. With James inside, the limo's interior suddenly felt too small. His overpowering male presence enveloped her. She leaned back and tried to breathe rather than pant, but it was tough. When she moved, the ginger stick wiggled in her ass. The crop's marks, though they'd ceased to hurt so much, itched as they healed. She couldn't forget for a moment that she belonged to him.

She smiled. She felt good, sexy, relaxed but with an edge of anticipation and excitement. After all, she was with James, so who knew what would happen?

“Knees apart, sweetheart,” he said. “Remember?”

She did, and obeyed. The flap of silk between the two slits dropped between her parted legs. He flipped it aside, baring her lower body clad only in the tight thong panties. Trapped in the thong’s narrow slit, her clit twitched, sending arousal shooting through her pelvis.

The car started. James opened a small refrigerator and took out a bottle of champagne. “It’s not Domaine Chandon, but I think you’ll like this also.”

She looked. “Cristal. Yes, I think I’ll like that a lot. But how did you know that I like—”

“Hold the flutes, will you?”

While she held the glasses, he popped the cork and filled them. “To an extraordinary weekend with an extraordinary woman.” He toasted her with a gleam in his eyes she didn’t understand.

“Hmm. Am I supposed to drink to myself?”

“I’ll let you get away with it.”

“How about, to an extraordinary weekend and the man who’s made it possible.”

“Yeah, baby.” His smile was genuine—she hoped.

They drank, with Liza unable to tear her gaze away from James. He was such an enigma, with his open, boyish smile and dark eyes hiding secrets she couldn’t begin to imagine. And she was his for another twenty-four hours. What did he plan for her?

He took the glass out of her hand, and set both flutes into cup holders. “Let me show you another advantage of your gown.”

He reached for the frog fastener at her throat and slipped its knot out of the loop. Then he undid two others, and the dress fell open to the waist.

With her legs parted and the skirt's panel tossed to one side, she was now almost completely bared and available for his pleasure. Cool air washed over her breasts, tightening her nipples. She sucked in a breath. "I see what you mean, by, umm, an advantage."

He knelt between her legs. Cupping her naked breasts, he kissed the valley between them then transferred his attention to her left nipple, tonguing and nibbling until she moaned and dug her fingers into his hair, drawing him in closer.

"Yeah, baby," he said again, sounding appreciative. "I'd kiss your sexy mouth but I don't want to ruin your makeup."

"Later, maybe."

"Later. But now I have a gift for you." He took a golden chain out of his jacket pocket.

"More jewelry? For me?" Her heartbeat quickened.

His smile took on a lascivious edge. "For us."

She checked it out. At each end of the foot-long chain was an odd wire part shaped like a U, with a dangling charm in gold and jade. It looked like the one he wore from his nipple ring. "What's that?"

"I'll show you. Lean back and spread your arms over the top of the seat." The position forced her to arch her back a little, pushing out her breasts. He kissed her left nipple again, turned the U upside down then pushed it over her nipple's engorged point. The golden wire hugged the tender nubbin in a relentless grasp.

This was a sensual torture that, like much of what had happened during the last twenty-four hours, she'd never before experienced. She tried to keep her equanimity but couldn't help digging her fingers into the upholstery. "That's, uh, a nipple clamp?"

"A clip, if you want to get technical about it." He sucked on her other nipple and tugged the tip, stretching it before he shoved the swollen flesh into the curved wire on

the other end of the chain. He tugged on the chain, and twin fires lit in the tips of her breasts. "The gold looks beautiful against your skin."

Her breath came short as desire built. He pinched her exposed clit then tugged on it. Her arousal had subsided while she'd dressed and they'd bantered, but he'd renewed the craving, which gnawed her from the inside out.

Her hips jerked, and she bucked.

"I think I need to calm you down." He picked up the champagne bottle and pressed the cool, damp glass onto her throbbing clitoris. Her flesh rippled with awareness. She breathed deeply, her heartbeat slowing. Outside the dark window, she could see the lights of the city recede as they crossed the Bay Bridge into Oakland.

"That's better. Now button up and have more champagne. We'll be there in a few minutes."

* * * * *

The sports bar LaDonna managed was in Rockridge, a lively neighborhood jammed between Berkeley and Oakland. Despite the financial stress, she moved there from the Fruitridge area after Liza's foray into the gang life nearly got them both killed.

Liza, with her dress now properly buttoned and her lipstick freshened, stepped out of the limo using James' hand for support. He took her elbow and escorted her inside. Even without her hand in his, every step reminded her of him. Her butt clenched around the ginger stick, her needy clit wanted his tongue, and now her imprisoned nipples rubbed against her dress with every movement. She remembered what Veronica said, "*Head high, pretty titties to the wind.*"

Though early in the evening, the place was already busy, jammed with a mixed-race crowd that accepted James and Liza without a second glance. The jukebox played hip-hop, competing with big-screen TVs showing basketball playoffs. At the big, oval wooden bar, rowdy groups downed pitchers of brew, betting on the games' outcomes

while in the darker corners of the room, twenty-something couples shared kamikazes and Jell-O shooters. The aromas of fried bar food and beer thickened the air.

“Oh. My. God.” LaDonna Bowman came out from behind the bar. “My daughter with James Li? Sweet heavens, my prayers have been answered.”

Her mouth dropping open, Liza stared as James lightly kissed her mother on both cheeks. LaDonna then embraced Liza.

“I-I didn’t know you knew James,” Liza stuttered, her mind in a whirl.

“I didn’t know you knew him either, but I shouldn’t be surprised by anything he maneuvers,” her mother said.

“Well, that’s a fact,” Liza said.

“James, I have to talk to my daughter.” LaDonna gave James a commanding stare.

She was a strong, shapely woman who looked like a mature Queen Latifah. Few disobeyed her, and James was no exception. He threw up his hands. “Message received. I’ll be at the bar.”

After leading Liza into the small back room where she handled the bar’s accounts, LaDonna pushed Liza into a chair then sat behind her desk. On it, a laptop glowed and flickered.

“Spill,” her mother said.

Liza rubbed her forehead then recalled that she was wearing foundation. She didn’t want to smear it, so she stopped, reaching for a tissue from the box on the desk. She dabbed it on her forehead while trying to decide what to tell her mother. Nothing, if she could get away with it. “I, uh, don’t you like James?”

“I like James, but he’s not your type.”

“Maybe he is.”

“He’s not white.”

“Do I have to go only with white men?”

“Not by me.” LaDonna shrugged. “But your patterns are clear. You’ve never brought a brother home to meet me. Is this your first date?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“Good. I’m glad you’re not holding out on me. He’s a good guy.”

“Everyone seems to think so, except my colleagues in Vice.”

LaDonna laughed. “They’re probably jealous. Look at him! He’s the heir to a fortune. He’s hot, can have any pretty woman he wants. He’s everything they wish they could be.”

“There might be some truth to that. I don’t know.” Liza guessed it was time to get down to it, as uncomfortable as the conversation could become. “Mom, why did you have me?”

Her mother started. “For the entertainment value.” She guffawed, a rich, hearty laugh.

“No, really. I mean, I haven’t asked about my father for a long time, but the impression I got was that you two had a quickie, he went on his way and that was that. So why did you have me?”

Still grinning, LaDonna leaned back into her padded chair. “It was a little more than a quickie. It was a weekend, a really crazy, wonderful weekend. Then he went away, which I expected since he was a trucker. He came back three weeks later and we had another fling. He left, saying he’d be back, but I never saw him again. He phoned once to tell me that his family in Kentucky was in some trouble—his brother had cancer, I think, and needed help. Then I never heard anything more.”

Liza’s belly churned. “I bet he left you because of me.”

Her mother shook her head. “He didn’t know about you. But what we had was so good that when I found I was pregnant, I couldn’t abort you. Your blue eyes remind me of him.”

“James thinks that I go with white men because of my father.”

"Maybe you do. But James isn't white like your father. He isn't Hispanic or black like the gangbangers."

"He's just...James."

"Maybe that means that anything you have with James is real." LaDonna smiled.

"I don't know." Liza crumpled the tissue and dropped it into a wastebasket. "It sure feels real, but it's too soon to tell. I haven't felt so involved and emotional since, since...Eddie."

"That's a sad situation." LaDonna sighed. "I see his parents every once in a while. I don't know what to say to them except how sorry I am. Eduardo was a confused fourteen-year-old who paid with his life."

"We were both confused." Remembering, Liza shuddered.

Her mother leaned forward and took Liza's hand. "When I saw you shootin' up that gang, it was the proudest moment of my life."

Liza jerked away. "It was the worst moment of mine. I was so stupid. I nearly got us both killed!"

"But you didn't."

Liza's burgeoning tears threatened to ruin her makeup. She scrabbled for another tissue. "Mom, I wanted to be a part of that gang so much that I— That I—"

"You participated in a gang initiation without knowing that they planned to kill me and leave you with the blame." LaDonna's voice was calm.

Liza twisted her hands together. "How can you forgive me?"

"Easy. I didn't raise a fool. You ended up nailing them all."

"I wish I'd seen it," James said from the doorway.

LaDonna gave him another sharp glance. "You spyin' on us, boy?"

His smile was ingratiating. "I guess I am, and a very interesting conversation it is too. That was when I first heard of Liza, when she got that commendation from the mayor. I thought, what a cool chick...I wish I could meet her."

“Yeah, right,” Liza said.

“It’s true. But you seem ashamed. What exactly happened?” Carrying a bottle of Perrier, he sat in the chair next to Liza’s.

She closed her eyes, recalling the noise, the blood... First they’d initiated her sexually. She’d pulled a train with every gangbanger taking his fill of her. She’d never told anyone about that and wouldn’t now. She said, “This was when we lived in the Fruitridge area. I was about fourteen.”

“Rough neighborhood,” James said.

“Yeah. Mom had been active there. She’d started an anti-gang block patrol. It cut into their drug profits. So they planned to take her out, except they didn’t tell me that. Only that they wanted me to help knock over a bar. They blindfolded me so I didn’t know where I was then sent me in first with a sawed-off shotgun. But I hadn’t drunk or smoked very much that day, ’cause I wanted to be clear. Eddie – my boyfriend – he was totally out of it, and he didn’t see what I saw just before I went in.”

“What?” James asked, his voice gentle.

“They wiped the gun clean. Of their prints. I wondered, why? Then I realized that they were gonna stick me with it. I was the only girl there, and it was clear they didn’t respect females.”

He eyed her, his dark glance discerning. “Go on,” he said.

She gulped. “I went in first, turned and blew the next guy away. It was Eddie.”

Desolation had swept her soul, a shrieking Arctic wind. “The blast – it took him apart. Literally. At that point, I didn’t care about anything else. The next guy was the leader, and I...kept firing. Same thing happened. I remember his look of total surprise.”

“The rest of the gang got hit by the spreading pellets,” LaDonna said. “Those who still could ran out screamin’. My Liza got an award from the mayor and a boatload of guilt, though I don’t understand why.”

Liza pressed her lips together.

"What is it?" James asked.

"I was just thinking that whenever you turn over a rock, a scorpion crawls out." She remembered her boss avidly ogling her.

"True enough. And if you dig under any pile of money, you're gonna find some dirt." James leaned back into his chair and stared at her, his gaze fraught with meaning.

"Don't look down on James for what he does for a living," LaDonna said. "He runs a cleaner shop than most."

"Have you been in there?" Liza asked.

"Of course she has," James said. "Your mother is a *pai gow* addict."

"Mom!"

"James, you hush up. Child, I limit myself to twenty dollars a week." LaDonna sounded virtuous.

"*Pai gow*? It sounds like something to eat."

"On that note, let's go get dinner." James tugged lightly at Liza's arm. "LaDonna, will you join us?"

"No, no." LaDonna waved them out. "Gotta keep an eye on the store, just like you."

Chapter Eight

After they'd scrambled into the limo, with Liza careful not to crumple her dress, she scooted over to James and cuddled against his side.

His arm, strong and comforting, drew her close. "Feeling emotional?" he asked.

She drew in a shuddery breath, trying not to weep and ruin her makeup. "Yeah."

"I got the impression that there was more to the story than you told your mother."

"Uh-huh... You've probably heard about what gangs do to women—what they make women do—to join."

"You pulled a train? At age fourteen?" Uninhibited James sounded horrified.

"Yep." Nausea roiled in her belly. "On top of that, my boyfriend egged them on. I realized later that I was the price of his gang membership, that he'd used me to get in."

His hand tightened on her shoulder. "Did you think about all that last night?"

She heaved a sigh. "I remembered it...before... I remembered that I'd done it once and could do it again."

He shot her a curious glance. "I want to remind you...none of this is forced. You were reading the *Story of O*. You knew what was going to happen. You chose that, and now choose to be with me. Right?"

"Oh yes." She cuddled closer.

His lips caressed her temple. "Do you understand why you crave the spanking? The punishment?"

"Yes," she whispered, on the verge of crying.

"I'll give you what you need." His voice was soft with understanding.

Her heart twisted. "But how weird is that?"

“Shhh. Don’t judge us. Or yourself. That’s the root of all your...issues. You think you’re alone?”

“I don’t know.”

Turning, he framed her face in his hands. “Liza, right this minute, millions of couples all over the world are spanking each other and loving it. So don’t feel that you’re weird or abnormal. Okay?”

She swallowed hard against the tears clotting her throat. “Okay.”

“I’m going to risk messing your makeup.” Lifting her chin with one finger, he bent his head and met her lips with his in a sweet, gentle kiss that went on and on. This time, his mouth didn’t demand or possess. Instead, he seduced, cajoled, stroked her tongue with rising passion.

She met him stroke for stroke, letting desire wipe her mind blank of her personal problems. But despite his kiss’s distraction, she knew that James wouldn’t let her evade forever. She’d have to deal...but not at the moment.

He kissed the side of her neck while undoing her dress’s fastenings. “I want to check out how these babies are doing.” He tugged on the chain connecting her nipples then cupped her breasts and sucked the tips.

Her nipples had grown numb, but now a sharp-edged pleasure darted, centering in her imprisoned breasts, dropping to her core. She gasped, and he slid his hand between her knees and up toward her muff. Pushing aside the thong, he inserted a finger into her pussy, probing inside her. “Yeah, baby. All nice and creamy for me.”

She clenched around him, and he rubbed against her G-spot. She threw back her head, moaning. Arousal spiraled through her, a tight, hot corkscrew tensing her muscles.

Withdrawing his hand, he spread her juices over her clit then licked his finger. “Delicious.”

Her clit throbbed, missing his touch. In only a few seconds, he'd pushed her to her emotional limit. "James, I want you." She couldn't stop the plea in her voice.

"I want you too." His voice growled, low and intense. He took her hand and placed it on his straining erection, which tented his pants. "But we're almost there, so we'll both have to wait. When we go home, I promise to make you come so hard you'll pass out." He kissed her again and didn't stop until the limo halted.

James' Oakland house was located at the end of a cul-de-sac high in the hills above the city. The charming Queen-Anne-style mansion was isolated from its neighbors, which was a good thing, Liza thought as she clambered out of the limo with James' help. Especially given the amount of noise and light spilling out of its many bay and picture windows.

"Definitely a party house," she said, smoothing her skirt.

"Yeah. It tends to be rowdier than even Chinatown." He took her elbow and escorted her along a walkway paved with slate and edged with roses. Pale in the moonlight, the blooms' fragrance perfumed the mild night.

They trod up a short, wide set of stairs to the porch, crowded with James' tuxedo-clad personnel and a motley group of guests.

"Good evening, sir." Greeting James was a black man wearing a formal dinner jacket. He must have outweighed Liza by at least a hundred pounds, give or take a few. A subtle bulge beneath his armpit told her that he was strapped.

"Good evening, Franklin." James winked at her. "This is my very close friend, Elizabeth."

Caught off guard, Liza stammered, "Uh, hi." His very close friend? Elizabeth? This must be James' way of safeguarding her identity. Thoughtful of him, but couldn't he have told her in advance?

At the big, wooden, double doors, painted pale peach, tuxedoed security guards patted down the guests. She turned to James, eyes wide. He said, "Any hassles tonight, Frank?"

“No sir.”

“Good.” James glanced at her. “Like I said, it can get rowdy here.”

“Has there been any violence?”

“Off the record?”

“Sure. This isn’t my beat.”

He led her past the tangle of folks at the door. “Yes, there have been a few...incidents. We’ve increased security. Frankly, it’s so expensive that I’m thinking of closing this house. It’s not worth the headaches.”

“No electronic security?”

He wrinkled his nose. “Inelegant. No way.”

As she entered, window-rattling rap assaulted her. “This is definitely not a San Francisco house.”

James put his lips to her ear and said, “I’m introducing you as Elizabeth to protect your identity. No one needs to know you’re a cop or related to LaDonna.”

About time he told me. “Okay.”

Their progress through the casino to the restaurant was noticed not only by James’ employees but by the guests. Gangbangers dressed in an array of garb from athletic suits to brightly colored jackets and festooned with plenty of bling—diamond-encrusted gold crosses predominating—briefly stopped gambling to cast interested glances at James and Liza. Their scantily clad women competed with the whores for James’ attention, cutting envious glares at Liza. She stared back, eyeballing each one, but no Sindie Keller.

But what if Keller were among the throng? What could Liza do? She clung to James’ arm, feeling vulnerable without her badge and her gun.

She told herself, *Walk proud, you’re James Li’s woman.* She straightened to her full height atop the heeled slides, threw back her shoulders and smiled. The nipple clips pinched, forcing the tips of her breasts to rub sensuously against her silk gown. She

tightened her butt around the ginger stick. As she moved, self-consciously swinging her hips, blood engorged her clit, clamped in the snug panties. Her arousal renewed. She knew it wouldn't be fulfilled until James chose to satisfy her, but she was content to wait. To wait and see what delights he had in store for her. *I promise to make you come so hard you'll pass out.*

She liked being James Li's woman, but would she see him again after tomorrow evening? What revelations would Sunday bring?

He led her into a dark restaurant, quieter than the casino, though three-quarters full of diners and aromatic with the rich smells of good Asian food—garlic and ginger, sesame and soy. Paneled in black lacquer, with cultural art and tropical plants, the restaurant's décor was distinctly and luxuriously Asian. In the back, a table was tucked in a small alcove and lit by red pillar candles in a lacquered tray. The settings were cut crystal, and the flatware sterling trimmed with gold.

"Very Zen," she said as James seated her.

"Yes, the staff here is quite attentive." He sat opposite her.

A server picked up Liza's napkin, shook it out and draped it across her lap then did the same for him. "What can I get for you, sir?"

"The full order should already be in the computer," he said. The server left, and he told Liza, "I text messaged it in while you were talking with your mother."

"So, that's why you interrupted us," she said. "You were thinking about food."

"And drink."

A different server appeared with another bottle of Cristal and filled their glasses. The champagne was rapidly followed by three more servers with the appetizers—chicken satay and spring rolls—the kind Liza liked, the Southeast Asian type that weren't fried but dipped in either a peanut sauce or chili oil. Another pair of servers brought the sauces in little pitchers and poured them into tiny porcelain bowls that looked hand-painted. Hand-carved ivory chopsticks were placed at the ready, next to her hands.

The rolls were delectable, flavored delicately with fresh basil and mint. Two more servers brought egg flower soup. With narrowed, displeased eyes, James watched them lay out more lovely handmade bowls and ladle soup. "This is ridiculous," he muttered before standing. He dropped his napkin on his seat and told Liza, "Wait here."

He returned a minute later. With a sigh, he said to her, "You might as well come with me."

She took his arm as they walked, her slides clacking on the tiled floor. "What on earth is going on?"

"Franklin got on the walkie-talkie and told the staff about you. Everyone wants to meet you or at least see you."

"What?"

"So, I'll take you into the kitchen. I guess I ought to tell you that I've never brought a woman here." He shoved his dark forelock of hair out of his face. "Oh, I might play with one or two of the girls, but I've never brought anyone here or introduced anyone as my, umm, very close friend. I did it to – well, it's true, right? – and to make sure the staff takes care of you, but it's had unintended consequences."

"All the different servers?"

"Yes. Apparently they decided to take turns to make sure everyone could check you out." He glanced at her. "Sorry about that, but I can't blame them. I like looking at you too."

She smiled as they headed through swinging doors into the kitchen. "Thanks. It's okay. I've never been inside a fine restaurant's kitchen. This is interesting."

She looked around. Behind the soundproof door lay an entire new world, a brightly lit world of clanging pans, spitting oil in woks swirled by skilled sous-chefs, hot ovens banged open and closed by impatient hands. The aromas were incredible, even better than out in the restaurant's dining room.

“Eh, what ye doin’ ’ere?” A large, white-toqued fellow swathed in grubby whites recoiled in horror. “Jamie, mon, one of the conditions of my employment was no boss in the kitchen!”

What kind of accent was that? Liza wondered as the man advanced on James, brandishing a cleaver. James, dragging Liza, fell back a step. “Seamas, my apologies—”

“There’d be no need for apologizin’ if ye were in yer seat where ye belong. Get on, mon.”

Another wave of the cleaver, and James retreated out of the double doors amidst giggles from the staff.

“You can stay, little lady,” Seamas leered at her. “We’re very interested in you.”

“Th-thanks. I’m, um, Elizabeth.”

“So I hear.” Now Liza could identify the rich brogue as Scottish. “What are ye doing with that rapsCALLION?”

RapsCALLION? This guy was superb. Where had James found him? She shrugged. “Just lucky, I guess. What are you doing with that, um, rapsCALLION yourself?”

She earned a laugh. “He pays mightily well, does our Mr. Li, and there are the fringe benefits...upstairs.” Seamas pointed.

“I see. Are they included with the pay?”

“Och, no. But the way to a lady’s fickle heart is through her stomach, just like any self-respectin’ man. A bowl of me good egg flower soup will get me into any bedroom in this house.”

“Where did you learn to cook Asian food?”

“Would you believe me if I said Edinburgh?”

“Probably not.”

“You’d be a clever one then, miss. In Hong Kong of course.”

She sensed that the line cooks, though appearing to go on with their work, were peeking at her from the corners of their eyes. After she figured they’d all had a chance,

she said, "Well, I guess I better get back to dinner. No point letting that good egg flower soup get cold."

"Och, no," Seamas said promptly. "You can go, now that we've all looked our fill. And thank ye."

She giggled and scampered out. James was outside the doors, wiping sweat off his brow with his pocket square. "That was a close one. If we were to lose Seamas..." He shuddered. "The girls are a draw for sure, but lose Seamas, and this house goes down."

"But you're thinking of closing it anyhow." Liza followed him back to their table.

"I want to do that on my timetable, not Seamas'." James seated her then waved at a waiter and asked for fresh soup. The old, cold bowls were removed and hot soup brought. "Serves him right," James muttered to Liza. "Making me wait while he grilled you."

"He was grilling fish, not me," Liza said demurely, sampling the soup with a traditional wide-bowled Chinese spoon.

"Yeah, right. I know how he is with the ladies. Invites them downstairs every night for a taste of his fine sausage."

A phalanx of staff brought dinner, which consisted of steamed rice, a delicately breaded and fried whole fish, phoenix and dragon, which was chicken and lobster in a light sauce, Chinese long bean, and—

"James, these are all my favorite dishes. How did you know?"

He deftly flaked a portion of fish off the bones and laid it on her plate. "All these questions! I guess it's okay to tell you that I know Mr. Lum, of Chester's Fish House."

"That's just a block from my place."

"Umm-hmm. You eat there or get takeout at least weekly. Do you want some spicy eggplant in garlic sauce? I know you're fond of it."

"James, have you—have you been stalking me?"

He sat back into his chair, looking a little abashed. "I wouldn't call it stalking, exactly –"

"What would you call it?"

"Hey, I thought the questions were for tomorrow."

"Umm, no. No. I want to change the rules."

He folded his arms over his chest and tried to scowl. "Do I have to teach you another lesson?"

She arched her brows. "Right here, right now?"

"I can take you upstairs, you know."

A silence fell, and then she said, "But you won't, will you."

It wasn't a question. She knew. She didn't know how, but she did. The S&M game didn't come easily to James. Though he was a perfectionist, he got his way through persuasion, not cruelty. He spanked her because she needed it. He might enjoy it, but he didn't suffer the deep craving that clawed at her soul. He didn't carry her guilt.

He tapped his manicured fingers against the table. "You're right. At the moment, I want to eat more than I want to spank you."

Her heartbeat picked up. "Darn."

He chuckled. "Later then. Very well. This is what happened. After the Chinatown bust, I found myself, umm, intrigued. By you."

A blush heated her face. "You're kidding." Amazing that James had the same thoughts as she. Had he read and reread her police report the same way she'd mooned over his mug shot?

"I remembered who you were, you know, I connected Detective Bowman with the fourteen-year-old who had – half her life ago – heroically defeated a gang in Oakland. I was interested. I investigated you. I didn't stalk you."

"You don't have to get pissy about it." She hid her smug smile behind a piece of eggplant.

"I'm not pissy. Knowing one's adversary is smart. It's not stalking."

"I'm not your adversary."

"You were at the time. Then you were transferred to Major Crimes." He met her glance. "But I remained interested. You're full of surprises, Liza Bowman."

"I think the same about you, James Li. Or should I call you Jamie?" She winked before eating some long bean.

He pointed his chopsticks at her. "Don't. That would earn you the paddle."

"Ooh." She feigned a shiver. "On top of the riding crop? Ouch." Her buttocks clenched, in fear or anticipation—she didn't know which.

"So watch yourself, young lady." His smile robbed his words of their sting.

"You need to watch something else," she said.

"What?" Using his chopsticks, he swirled a bite of lobster around in sauce.

"The kitchen. Do you have security outside the delivery door?" She helped herself to more phoenix and dragon.

"Actually, I don't, and that's a good observation." He frowned and ate the lobster. "This house is more trouble than it's worth. I hope you don't mind me dissing your hometown, but Oakland has no class."

"Spoken like a true San Franciscan."

"I can't help it. Like I told you, my family's roots dig deep."

"Hmm." She munched on some chicken, wondering how it must feel to be secure in a large family's embrace. She and her mom had done okay, but it wasn't the same.

Maybe James was right. Maybe her father's abandonment had affected her in unexpected ways. Her love for Eddie, which had nearly led to her death. Her drive to become part of his gang and, later, the SFPD. Her selection of white lovers.

She looked across the table and watched James, peacefully tucking away fish and long bean. He raised his eyes from his plate, met her glance and smiled.

"Had enough to eat?"

"I've had enough...food." She winked.

"Nice double entendre," he said. "I'll take you up on that. Let's go upstairs."

James' apartment in the Oakland house was smaller than the flat in Pacific Heights, but because it was located in a fanciful turret, it had a charm that enchanted. The furnishings were in shades of moss green and peach, with bleached woods giving the large, round living room a graceful air without being overly frou-frou or feminine.

But she didn't have much time to look around before James grabbed her by the arms and whirled her around, forcing her against a wall. His rock-solid body pressed against hers while his sensual mouth pressed against her lips, demanding entrance. She opened to him and their tongues clashed, fighting a sexual combat that both would win.

While he made love to her mouth, his fingers scrabbled at her dress's fastenings. She tore at his jacket and tie so she could touch his chest, hard and hot as sun-warmed rock. He pulled her hands down to her sides, and her dress fell to her feet. While he tugged her over to a sofa, she continued undressing him.

Naked to the waist, he sat on the moss-green, velvet couch. "You're hungry, but not for food? Show me." He pushed away a coffee table with his foot to give her more room.

She knelt between his knees and fumbled with his belt, smiling into his eyes. He stroked the sides of her face, tracing her bones, the ridge above her brows, the curve of her ears. She unzipped his trousers, and his cock sprang free through the slit in his silk boxers, already hard and erect to its fullest extent. He was big, and she remembered how that bigness had felt piercing her virgin ass. Her anus twitched around the ginger stick and she closed her eyes, her limbs trembling.

She knew what would happen in just a very few minutes. Here, perhaps, or in the limo or back in the city. It didn't matter where. He'd push her farther and further than ever, and she could hardly wait.

I promise to make you come so hard you'll pass out.

She took off his shoes, yanked off his pants and boxers, her hands shaking, with rough, jerky movements. She sucked him into her mouth all the way to the balls. He gasped and buried his hands in her updo. Crystal-headed pins dropped to the carpet as he ruined the artful hairstyle, tugging her in so close her nose burrowed into his pubic hair. Grazing her teeth along his length, she pulled all the way out then tightened her lips over the edges of her teeth and took him back inside her as far as she could.

His groan sounded like the sweetest music. He smelled like ginger and male musk. His pre-come oozed forth, tasting sweet and salty and with a flavor unlike any other. She could feast on this cock forever.

James. The joy of pleasuring him brought tears to her eyes.

Oh God. Had she fallen for him? Fallen in love with James Li, known criminal and whoremaster?

Liza was so startled that she clamped down on his dick.

“Aaaahhhh...” He tightened his hands around her head and began to fuck her face with long, commanding strokes. “Deep throat me, baby.”

Thought fled, replaced by the urgency of his desire. She flexed her throat around his length and reached up with one hand to play with his balls. He bucked harder, faster. She tried to reach around to fondle his ass. He had a great ass, tight and muscular.

His cock swelled, and he lay back against the sofa’s cushions. “Oh baby, stop. I don’t wanna come yet.”

She stood, stretching her legs and arms. He reached for her to caress her head, playing with her hair then kissing her. “You have the best mouth ever. And now it’s your turn. Bend over the seat, baby.”

They switched places, and when she was in position, he pulled down the thong panties. Blood flowed back into her clit and she moaned, reaching for it.

He slapped her hand away. "No, baby. That's mine, remember?" He curved a possessive hand around her pussy, rubbing her tingling clitoris. Slipping a finger inside, he spread her cream onto her pulsing clit until her need mounted, a coiling want that tensed every muscle.

After kissing the panties, he tucked them into his trousers, which she'd tossed nearby. "I'll always cherish these, even if they dug into your beautiful body." He massaged the marks the tight thongs had made across her buttocks, and she sighed with pleasure.

He kissed the crop's healing welts, bringing a sharper joy, then ran his tongue from her tailbone to her anus. He bit the ginger stick, wiggling it around inside her butt. She squealed with surprise, and he laughed. Using his fingers, he spread her labia, opening her wide. He licked her clit, sucked, delved his tongue into her pussy.

She rode his face, grinding so the pressure on her clit took her higher. She was panting and ready to come, but he stopped again, damn him.

"I'm going to fuck your pussy, baby." He caressed her back, and her skin shivered with anticipation.

"James, what about the butt plug?"

"What about it?" He played with the ginger stick, and she sucked in a breath. "Are you sore?" he asked.

"I'm, umm, I'm not sure."

He nibbled on her ear. "You'll appreciate it, believe me."

He pushed his cock into her wet, ready cunt. With her eyes closed to focus on the sensations, she could feel his glans rub the ginger stick through the thin membrane separating vagina and anus. It was unbelievably erotic, and she pushed back hard, rocking, wanting more of him, every inch of his big, rigid shaft.

But he controlled her frenzied bucking, gripping her hips with a sure and steady hand, easing in only so far as to rub her G-spot with his dick. When she struggled,

denying his mastery, demanding control, he spanked her, the slaps reverberating around the turret's peaked ceiling.

He alternated between butt cheeks, swatting her in rhythm with his steady thrusts. Each stinging smack snapped through her. Wave after wave of pleasure buffeted her, unstoppable and powerful as the tide. His cock surged in and out, digging ever more deeply until it knocked against her womb. Her orgasmic cries rose until she didn't recognize the frantic, pleading voice as her own.

He bent over her, his body heat encompassing her, riding her hard, his balls slapping her ass with each heavy thrust. He gripped her breasts, pinching her nipples, already achy from the clips. His body shoved against the ginger stick, stretching her, opening her to him as never before. The sense of being utterly possessed by him, owned by him, overwhelmed her.

She could do nothing but abandon herself to ecstasy. He reared back, banging her harder as heat enflamed her ass sheath. He was easing out the ginger. Her body reluctantly released it, with a fierce, fiery trail following in its wake. She was crying out her release, and when it popped free, her cries rose to a scream.

"Easy, baby," he breathed into her ear. "There's more."

She quivered, guessing what would come next. Could she handle it? Handle him?

He pulled out of her pussy and put the wet head of his penis to her throbbing anus, prodding until the muscular ring accepted his cock head. She gripped the couch's cushions, in the thrall of an ecstasy edged by pure terror. A sob escaped her lips as he held her hips tightly and plunged fully into her. A long, low wail burst from her lips when he filled her open ass.

Deep, deeper, deepest. With him so wet and her so stretched, she felt no pain, and her wail rose to a shout of delight. She pushed back against his rod, taking him inside her rear as far as she could.

He withdrew, and she whimpered, empty. He drilled back inside, and her whimper turned to a scream. His heavy, hard, slow thrusts hurled her into another world, a

world where nothing existed except James' big, rigid cock sinking into her butt until he plumbed her darkest depths.

She tightened around him, and he groaned, pulling out so only his cock head stretched her anus. It was the widest part of his penis and she moaned, poised between pain and pleasure. She reveled in that fierce, kinky pleasure, wiggling her rump to entice him to fuck her more wildly.

He did, slapping her ass each time he skewered her. She spasmed around his dick with each spank. He thickened inside her and she screamed, her cries blending with his, reaching a crescendo as they came.

* * * * *

When he could, James forced himself away from Liza's prone body, sprawled over the couch. She was glorious. Her amber skin against the moss-green velvet gleamed with a slight sheen of erotic sweat. Her curvy backside was reddened by his spanks and crisscrossed by the crop he'd wielded. His cock had distended her ass, leaving a thin trail of semen leaking from her back door.

She was his woman, and he'd never give her up. He prayed that by tomorrow evening, she'd believe in their relationship as fervently as he did.

He went to the bathroom and cleaned himself up. Wringing out the washcloth, he brought it back and gently bathed her pussy and butt.

The coolness of the wet cloth roused her, as he hoped it would. He kissed her forehead. "Let's get you cleaned up and back home."

Chapter Nine

Back in the limo, James didn't wait. He immediately raised the privacy panel and asked her, "Are you mine?" The growl in his voice presaged more demands, more ecstasy. *I promise to make you come so hard you'll pass out...*

With Liza still tingling from their last bout, the tiny hairs on her nape and her arms lifted. Her breath ragged, she said, "I'm yours."

He took off his jacket and tossed it on the backward-facing seat. He sprawled onto the seat opposite. "Onto your knees. Strip."

She put her handbag next to his jacket, taking her time. She kicked off the slides. Tossing aside her dress's flapping skirt, she knelt in front of him and undid the frog fasteners, looking into his intent face.

She had his total attention and loved it. As the dress opened, exposing more of her naked flesh, his gaze dropped to her breasts. She continued along the left side of the dress until it fell away.

She was again completely nude but for her jewelry. He was still clothed, and the contrast made her want to rip off his sober, formal suit, have her way with him, force him to sweat and pant and want her the way she wanted him.

Before she reached for him, he pushed her down onto the limo's carpeted floor between the seats and wrenched off the nipple clips. Blood rushed back into the aching nubs of flesh, bringing a blast of sensation rocketing through her body, fierce and powerful. He pressed her breasts together so he could suck both at once, tonguing and nipping at them until she writhed, screaming his name. He covered her breasts with his hands and squeezed, pinching the tips.

She scrabbled for his belt while he made things harder by reversing over her. He pried her legs wide apart and went down on her, starting slow by brushing his tongue

over her sensitive labia. He slid a finger into her wet slit and found her G-spot before opening her pussy lips and sucking on her clit, now impossibly sensitive from the night's slow, sensual torture.

Another two fingers inside her threatened to shove her over the brink in seconds. She tried to make it last, but he pushed harder, rubbing her clit with his tongue and finger-fucking her pussy. She lost whatever tenuous control she had. She squeezed her eyes shut and let it happen, sparks of intense pleasure flowing from his mouth into her cunt, light and feeling cascading through her body, behind her eyelids, bathing her in rapture.

The orgasm seemed to go on and on, fueled by the knowing caress of his mouth and her bottomless well of neediness. But she wasn't done. Would she ever be done? She didn't know, but right now, she wanted more. She bent her knees and tucked them alongside his head, holding him securely in place while he continued to devour her. She tore her mouth away from him and panted, about to come again.

He pulled her knees higher, opened her wider, so he could lick her anus. The gentle swirl of his tongue over her most sensitive, secret flesh sent her spiraling into space once more, sobbing with completion.

She closed her eyes and let herself soar into a dazzling oblivion.

* * * * *

"I told you so." James' voice was smug with male satisfaction.

"You sure did," Liza said. "That's the second time I passed out."

"And the night's only half over."

She tried to open her eyes but failed. "Uhhh, I think my makeup has stuck my lashes together."

"Don't move."

"Okay." In fact, nothing was moving, including the limo. "Where are we?"

Cool moisture bathed her eyes. James' hand behind her back raised her to a sitting position on the limo floor. "We're stopped at the Bay Bridge."

"Traffic? At this time of night?" Blinking, she eased her lids apart then craned her head to look out the window, but all she could see through the smoked glass were glowing lights and her own reflection.

"You know it's unpredictable. Hold still." He knelt in front of her, carefully wiping her lower eyelids with a damp tissue. "There, no more raccoon eyes."

"Oh thanks. We'd better try to put my hair back or Bobby will be very upset."

"He's probably occupied." James leered. "If you know what I mean."

She grinned. "I do. Gotta pay for the Shiseido. Boy, I bet your driver got an eyeful and an earful tonight."

"Don't worry about him. He's paid to be blind and deaf."

"James, he's a driver."

"Blind and deaf to anything that goes on back here."

That meant that he'd laid other women in the limo. She struggled against her jealousy since it was stupid. They weren't committed to each other and could never be. A relationship between them was impossible, given that he danced at the edges of the law – at best – and she was sworn to uphold it.

A leaden glove squeezed her heart. She swallowed against it, breathed and said, "Umm, where's my dress?"

James handed her the silk gown. For the first time, she noticed that the embroidered pattern echoed the dinner they'd eaten – dragon and phoenix, fanciful winged creatures eternally intertwined.

"I wonder if I can get a phoenix tattoo," she said.

"That would be very appropriate. Look at how you shaped your life after that gang incident. Rose from the ashes of death, you did."

He helped her slip on her dress and fasten the frogs. Then her shoes, and together they unsuccessfully tried to twist her hair back upon her head in a semblance of its previous style.

“Am I presentable?” she asked.

“Presentable is too bland a word for you. You’re gorgeous.” He handed her a bottle of water.

“Thank you. I’ll settle for, umm, not attracting attention when we walk through your casino to the elevator.” She drank, relishing every swallow.

He shook his head. “Nope, not possible. I like my staff and my renters, but I’ll admit that they love to gossip. I bet everyone knows about you in all three houses. By this time, Bobby and Veronica have told everyone. They’ve probably talked with Franklin and Seamas. Too late, babe. I know how the staff’s minds work. We’re Topic A.”

She eyed him worriedly. “Do I look okay?”

“I think that getting the hair back up is a losing battle. Here.” He took back the water, moistened his fingers and ran them over her hair. “He’s put so much goop on here that it ought to stand up on its own, but I think I can do something with it...”

“James, how do you know so much about women’s hair and clothes and, and stuff?”

“Two sisters and one hell of a lot of female renters. And boys like Bobby. Comes with the territory, sweetheart. Well, I couldn’t get it back up, but it should look okay until we’re back in the suite.”

Liza scrutinized herself in the dark window. Her hair, a puffy black cloud, framed her face. “I look more like myself.” She hoped she wouldn’t encounter anyone she knew. She wasn’t ashamed of James, but she wasn’t quite ready to merge her workaday life with the intimacy she shared with him.

“Who else? Touch up your lipstick, we’re almost there.”

* * * * *

After midnight on a Saturday, James' Pacific Heights house was jammed, with the casino doing an especially brisk business.

As they walked across the gaming floor toward the elevator, Liza asked, "James, how do you get around the laws against running a casino in California?"

He smiled. "The law is riddled with exceptions. Card rooms are perfectly legal."

"Aha. So that's why we arrested you under the P and P statute."

"P and P?"

"Pimping and pandering."

Irony gleamed in his dark eyes. "Are you still thinking about ways to bust me? That might be fun. I have to admit that I got really turned-on when you handcuffed me."

She felt her face redden. "So did I."

"Ha. I knew it." He punched the elevator's call button.

When the elevator opened, it revealed Liza's boss, Bill Hester of the Major Crimes Unit, with Cherise's arm tucked into his elbow.

This time, he recognized her. "Bowman! What are you doing here?" His glance strayed to James.

"Detective Bowman is my guest, Bill," James said, utterly composed.

Liza thanked her lucky stars that most of her makeup had worn off. She'd enjoyed the glamorous look that Bobby had created but knew that a man who hired whores could misinterpret what was going on. "Good evening, sir," she said formally. "Hi, Cherise." She nodded at the redhead, whose wrinkled French maid's outfit seemed somewhat the worse for wear, as did Bill Hester's rumpled blue blazer and sloppily knotted tie.

"Hi," Cherise chirped. "How's it goin', James?"

"Great." Moving aside, James gestured Bill and Cherise out of the elevator.

Liza stepped in as soon as she could, hoping to cut short the embarrassing encounter. Shit. She and her boss would have to deal with the night's revelations, that Bill Hester, a married man, bought sex while Liza was spending the weekend with James Li, a man who skirted the unsavory edges of the law. Damn, damn, damn.

Would her boss believe her when she told him she was working the Keller case? Maybe, if she could get her report on his desk before he came in.

And why couldn't life be simple?

"Hang on a second," James said. "Hold the door, okay?"

After following Bill and Cherise to the bar, James talked to the bartender for a couple of seconds.

When he returned, Liza asked, "What's up?"

"I comped your boss a few drinks and arranged for some free gambling." Using his key, he directed the elevator to his private floor. He glanced at her. "That should eliminate any problems you could have with him at work."

"I don't know how I feel about that."

"Look at it this way. It buys you some time to figure out how you feel."

"Umm, what could he say to me? I'm not paying a whore for sex."

"Ah, but you're boinking the most notorious whoremaster in the city." He winked.

"I thought that was Derrick Galway. You're a legitimate businessman."

"Lesson learned. Well done, slave."

When they reached James' apartment, Liza noticed subtle changes that told her that his staff had been in to tidy up. In his bedroom, the bed had been made and steam billowed from the bathroom door.

"I called ahead to have the tub filled for us." Ever the tidy one, he removed his jacket and hung it up in one of the wardrobes.

She followed suit, handing her dress to James, who hung it in a different wardrobe, next to the lace blouse and leather skirt she'd worn on Friday night. He put her shoes on

the wardrobe's floor with her black leather pumps. She set her new armlet atop one of the bedside tables.

A sense of unreality stole over her. She had possessions in a closet in James Li's flat. How had that happened? She'd been seeing Tom Hardwick for four months, and not even a hairpin of hers was at his place.

"There's face creams in the bathroom," James told her while he was taking off his trousers. He took her panties out of the pocket, smiled at her, and tucked them in his bedside drawer. "You should be able to find something to take off your makeup. I imagine you'll also want to wash your hair. That style took a lot of spray."

"It did," she said. "Bobby basically glued my hair to the top of my head."

He grinned and loosened his tie. While he finished undressing, Liza went into the bathroom, found cleansing cream and a washcloth and carefully took off what remained of her elaborate makeup before stepping into the big bathtub. Full of very hot water, it was like nirvana on earth. She let herself drop to the bottom of the tub, holding her breath when her head sank beneath the surface. She rubbed her scalp until she could feel the hot water penetrate to her skin then came up, found shampoo and set to briskly washing her hair.

Without warning, strong fingers dug into her scalp, massaging. "Aaahhhh... James, do you want me to fall in love with you? Massaging my head will do it, you know."

"Oh, so that's the secret."

"Seamas thinks the way to a woman's heart is through her stomach, but he's wrong. For me, it's massage. Rub my head or feet and I'll follow you anywhere."

"You just love to be touched. I told you, you're a very sensual woman. We're a match, since I love to touch you. Rinse."

Eyes closed, she dunked her head before leaning against the tub's rim. Coolness splodged onto her scalp. Conditioner, she guessed. It carried a flowery scent. Jasmine perhaps.

He slicked it through her hair, rubbing so the conditioner reached the ends. "You could let that stay on for a few minutes." He climbed into the tub and sat next to her. "The steam will really get it to soak in."

"It's amazing how much you know about women."

"Like I said, comes with the territory. Plus, my family is really, umm, how can I put it? Full of strong women. My dad isn't a pushover, but we're outnumbered. Didn't I mention I have two sisters?"

She sighed. "It's been a long time since I was able to take so much time to pamper myself."

"I told you, you work too hard. Stick with me, baby, and I'll show you how to live."

Opening her eyes, she grinned at him. "I bet you could." But how could she make their relationship work?

Heaven only knew what would happen Monday morning.

She cast questions out of her mind and let herself drift. Fifteen minutes later, happily boneless after the long soak in hot water, she dragged herself out of the tub to wrap her body and hair in thick, warm towels. James wasn't there, but she could see through the half-open bathroom door that he was reading in bed, with round, wire-framed glasses giving him an almost nerdy look.

She sat on the side of the bed. "You look like an Asian Harry Potter. I like the round rims."

He put aside his copy of *Forbes* magazine. "You think I look like Harry? That's cool. I love Harry Potter. I can hardly wait for the next movie."

"Me too. I always preordered the books online."

"I like to go to pick it up. I want it the first day."

"My copies came the first day," she said.

"I liked the bookstore's Harry Potter parties."

"I never did that," Liza said, intrigued. "Were they fun?"

He nodded vigorously.

"I shouldda done that."

He stretched his legs out beneath the duvet. "Everyone here is so into Harry Potter that the last time a movie came out I had to close this house at eleven thirty. Everyone wanted to go to the first screening at midnight. I took wagers on the identity of the half-blood prince and on who would be cast as Lord Voldemort in the movies."

Laughing, she rubbed her hair with the towel. "That's so cool. You know, for the first time, I'm seeing what you do as, well, really fun."

"It is. I'm selling fun and good times, so I hire and rent to only fun people, folks with a sense of humor. Ready for bed?" He drew back the comforter invitingly.

"I have to comb out my hair."

"Bring a comb and I'll do it. And get dry towels."

Surprised, she cast him a startled glance. "Okay." She found towels and the same large-toothed comb she'd used before and returned to his side.

Now who's the slave? she wondered as James began to comb out her hair. He was gentle too, carefully working out any snarls he encountered.

"I guess that leaving the conditioner on for a while was a good idea," she said. "I'm surprised that there aren't more knots."

"Does your hair get real tangled?" Finished, he dropped the comb onto his bedside table on top of the magazine then turned out the light. The room was now illuminated only by a soft glow seeping through the half-drawn curtains. The darkness urged Liza toward slumber.

She yawned. "Yeah, it's somewhere between wavy and kinky."

"You have beautiful hair. Come here and get under the covers." He pulled her down by his side and buried his face in the curve of her shoulder. "Mmmm."

She gave a tired chuckle and fell asleep.

She awakened sometime in the night, with James caressing her breasts. "Are you awake?" he whispered.

"Now I am."

"Good." His hand strayed down her body to her pussy. She parted her legs for him, and he delved in a finger. "Umm, nice and wet."

"I didn't think I had anything left."

"I want to make love to you again, Liza. But only if you want to." His voice was soft.

"I want to."

He rolled on top of her and she spread her legs wider, so his hips could rest between her thighs. He set his hands on either side of her face and kissed her. Long and slow, the kiss was meant to arouse, seduce, even though she'd already given her permission. But why? She was his slave for the weekend. He didn't have to ask, but he did. What did that mean?

With James' kiss growing more languorous, more sensual, she couldn't keep her mind on the questions... He was right. Tomorrow was Sunday and soon enough for questions.

She stroked down his back to his lean buns, running a hesitant nail along his furrow. His hardening cock pressing against her clit told her that he liked it and might be open to more.

"Bend your knees, sweetheart, so I can get inside you."

She did, and he stuck one hand beneath her right thigh, drawing her knee up so her pussy was accessible. He rocked his hips back and forth, rubbing the hard ridge of his shaft across her cunt before he slid inside. She sighed from pure joy at his long, slow, steady thrusts.

It was good but she didn't want to come yet, not while she had him exactly where she wanted him. She licked her finger and reached for his ass, fumbling for his back door. A quick slide down his crack, and she found it—a tight, wrinkled rosette.

She put in her finger hesitantly, not knowing how he'd react.

"Oh God, Liza, that's so hot..." James moaned and bucked harder, finding the back of her vagina.

She tightened around his cock while fumbling inside him for his prostate. She'd read in a women's magazine that it could be stroked from the inside, and that some uninhibited men adored it. Since she couldn't think of anything that repulsed James, she wanted to try.

She gloried in the new, strange feeling of being inside his ass. The tight clench of his narrow sheath on her finger was mind-blowing, erotic, giving her a sense of what it must be like for James to buttfuck her. She understood why he'd opened her, since his ass's grip on her finger threatened to cut off her circulation. Wiggling her fingertip, she found his prostate, a hard walnut near the bottom of his anus.

"Oh God, oh God, oh God..." James' moans echoed in her ears as he came, his body convulsing, out of control.

He sprawled atop her in complete relaxation. In a few moments, his deep, even breathing told her he'd passed out.

She'd done it. He'd surrendered to her the way she gave herself completely to him.

Chapter Ten

Late the next morning, they dressed in robes. James led Liza into the living room, where a small, round dining table had been set up with breakfast and the Sunday *S.F. Chronicle*. She smelled coffee, fried eggs, potatoes... Her belly rumbled.

"The call of the wild?" He laughed and gestured her to a chair. It was wooden, with a caned bottom and sides.

"Umm, are there any cushions I can use? My butt's still a little sore."

"There are cushions, but are you sure you want to use them?"

"Maybe not, but I don't see how I can ever forget what we've shared." She sat gingerly, leaning to minimize contact between the chair and the tender areas of her ass.

"Me either." His dark gaze was serious. "I didn't enjoy whipping you, but you seemed to want it."

She hesitated. "After reading *O*, the idea intrigued me. But it wasn't fun and I don't want a repeat."

"At least the marks will heal." He sat.

"I don't mind being marked by you, but not with a whip."

He leaned back in his chair and fondled his nipple ring, his eyes on her chest, partially visible through the half-open robe. Lashed by his scrutiny, her breasts swelled and tingled at the tips.

"Would you wear my mark?" he asked.

"What is that charm?" Liza left her chair and came closer to look, kneeling by his side. The position put her head on a level with James' groin. She glanced at his crotch, inhaling his male scent, before lifting her gaze to his admirable pecs.

He put one finger beneath his nipple jewelry, which consisted of a gold D ring with a charm attached, a tiny, flat square of jade caged in gold filigree. "This side is my family name, and on the back is a character meaning happiness."

She beamed at him. "You and happiness work for me. But do you want me to pierce my nipple?" *Eek.*

"Yes, I do, but this isn't an order. I want you to make this choice, freely and for yourself, not for me. One other thing you don't have to decide now." He stroked her hair. "Now sit down and let's have some breakfast."

He uncovered serving dishes to reveal lox benedict with sides of home fried potatoes and fresh fruit.

Remembering last night's feast, she sighed. "You have a naturally fast metabolism, right?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. How did you know?"

"Just a guess."

Popping a cork, he opened a bottle of Domaine Chandon Napa Valley Brut.

"This is great," she said. "It's my favorite."

"I know." He poured for them both. Picking up his glass, he said, "To a mellow Sunday."

"Yeah, baby." She clinked her glass to his and drank.

As they ate, she was overwhelmed by the strangeness of it all. She was eating Sunday brunch in James Li's penthouse flat after giving herself to him for the weekend. But between Friday night and Sunday morning their relationship had changed from captor and slave to equals, freely giving each other pleasure.

She liked that.

"What part of the paper do you want?" he asked.

"The Sporting Green, the pink section and the comics first then the front section. Then everything else except the ads." She served herself more fruit.

His brow wrinkled. "Hmm. You read the paper in the same order as I do."

"Ouch. Our first real conflict as a couple." She eyed the Sporting Green covetously before meeting James' gaze. She winked. "How can we resolve this fair and square?"

"What if we gamble for the right to read the Sporting Green first?" He raised innocent eyes to her.

"Gamble against the owner of several casinos? I must look stupid this morning."

"How about a different game, say, Trivial Pursuit or Scrabble?"

"Okay." She was good at both...or so she believed.

"All right then." He set the Sporting Green aside and extended his hand across the table. They shook on the deal.

After breakfast, they poured more coffee and took their mugs over to the Scrabble board, a three-by-three square table with a swiveling top and an inset game board. It was not the Scrabble board of an ordinary player. This was custom-made mostly out of onyx and white marble, and all of the special squares like double letter score and triple word score were carved out of semiprecious stones such as turquoise, lapis and carnelian.

It was not merely nice, it was exquisite, and for the first time Liza wondered if she was being conned. She remembered seeing it Friday night when she'd arrived. Was James a Scrabble expert? And if so, why hadn't her extensive investigation revealed this fact? But as the game progressed, she regained her confidence. They were neck and neck at two fifty-four and two fifty-three when James began to falter. Perhaps he'd drunk too much because she pulled ahead and won, two sixty-six to two fifty-seven.

She triumphantly snatched the Sporting Green and started to read about the basketball playoffs.

"Sweetheart?" He gave her a guileless smile. "How about if we raise the stakes?"

Uh-oh. She'd come to distrust that smile. It often meant he was hatching some diabolical plan. "What kind of stakes?" she asked.

“Hmm...” He leaned back in his chair and regarded her with narrowed, thoughtful eyes. “Next week I have to go to a Chamber of Commerce banquet. How about coming as my date?”

She stared back. “That would be a public declaration.”

“Yes, from both of us.”

“That we’re together.”

“Yes. It’s only fair to tell you that your boss, the police chief, will probably be there.”

“That’s risky for me.”

He smiled. “Raising the stakes involves risk. So how about it?” He tossed a couple of tiles from one hand to the other. “You gonna go for it or wimp out?”

She clenched her jaw then remembered she’d beaten him. “I’ll go for it.”

He dropped the remaining tiles into their velvet bag and shook it. “Pick to see who goes first.”

She picked a K and he an F, but going first didn’t matter much. The game went downhill from there.

* * * * *

“Ip is not a word.”

“Is so.”

“Is not.”

“Is too.” James picked up and waved his Scrabble Dictionary at her. “If it’s in here, it’s a word.”

Liza scowled. She had come to detest that book. With it, he’d wormed in obscurities like wyn, jabiru and ennead. And now, ip. On top of that, he wanted to put the P on a red square. She couldn’t allow that. “What the hell is an ip?”

“I don’t know and I don’t care. As long as it’s a word, it’s good to go.”

“But those are the last two letters!”

He shrugged.

He was trouncing her three thirty-five to one sixty-seven, and she couldn't stand it. Okay, she found stupid men boring, but now she'd discovered that too smart was just that – too smart.

She bet he'd allowed her to win the first game. She hated being patronized.

Damn it, she'd been conned by a master. Oh well. At least she'd read the Sporting Green first for the rest of her life.

The rest of her life.

When had she begun to think of her relationship with James as something that would last beyond this weekend? Before he'd challenged her to play Scrabble for the Sporting Green, that was for sure.

Maybe when she'd discussed him with her mother. Maybe when she'd told him she wanted to wear his mark and was seriously considering getting her nipple pierced like his. The tacit understanding behind much of what had happened, now that she thought about it, was that they'd be seeing each other.

And now, she'd accompany him to a very public event – a Chamber of Commerce dinner – as his date.

She was about to lose the game anyhow...maybe she could distract James and he'd forget their deal. “Is it time for our talk yet?” she asked.

“Sure. Umm, do I get ip?”

“Okay, if you promise not to get mad.”

He eyed her. “O-kay. Uh, what am I agreeing to?”

“Just...don't get mad, whatever you hear, okay? Please?”

She took a deep breath. She didn't know quite how to broach the subject, considering that her relationship with James had grown far beyond detective and

suspect. She didn't want to risk the odd new love she'd found with him, but she had to do her job, didn't she?

She figured she should just bull ahead as best she could. "Where is Sindie Keller?"

"Who?" With a satisfied smile, he totted up his score for ip and added it to the scoresheet. "I'm sorry, but I can't focus on your question. I'm too busy figuring out how badly I beat you." He smirked at her.

She persisted. "You don't know anyone named Sindie Keller? A twenty-one-year-old, white blonde?"

He crinkled his brow. "There's at least one or two women renting rooms from me with that description, but I don't know a Sindie Keller."

"How long have they been your tenants?"

He reached for her leftover letters and began to add them to his score. "Hmm. There's a woman meeting that description with a room at the Oakland house and she's been there for about eight months. At the Chinatown house, there's a young blonde who's been there for, oh, nearly a year."

"You frequent Galway's in North Beach," Liza said. "According to my information, Sindie Keller went there on May ninth, dressed in red leather and reading the *Story of O*. She hasn't been seen since."

"So, that's what you were doing." Putting down his pencil, he stared at her with dawning comprehension on his face. He started to laugh. Between guffaws, he managed to choke out, "You're not into the *Story of O* at all. You merely reenacted the scenario of a kidnap victim."

"Yeah."

He controlled his laughter, shaking his head. "I've heard of hardworking cops, but you blow my mind, Liza. Was this necessary?"

"We had no other clues."

"Perhaps you'd better explain with more detail." He pushed away the game board.

As she talked about Sindie Keller, her relationship with attorney Ray White and her sex diary, James' expression grew grimmer. "I'm beginning to understand," he said. "You know, Ray White is a close associate of Derrick Galway."

"I didn't know that. White denied any connection."

"He lied. White and Galway are trying to run me out of business. Most recently, they bribed some locals to form a phony neighborhood group here in Pacific Heights. They've sued me to close this house on grounds that it's a nuisance." James rose and paced, his silk robe swishing around his calves.

"That's the lawsuit against your front company, China Doll Enterprises."

"It's not a front. China Doll is a legitimate real estate business, started decades ago by my grandfather. I'm guessing here, but I imagine that Ms. Keller was dangled out to me as bait."

"Bait?"

"Galway and I don't get along," James said. "Not because of anything I do—I think there's room in this town for both of us. His interests are completely different from mine—he owns strip clubs on O'Farrell, the bar in North Beach and runs his whores out of those businesses. But Galway wants to dominate the sex trade in the city. Frankly, I know he loathes me and I can't resist yanking on his chain, so to speak."

"I've heard that you regularly go into Galway's bar and order coffee, never drink it but pay with a fifty."

"Exactly. It's my little joke on Derrick. I've heard he hates it, so of course I keep doing it."

"And Sindie Keller?"

"That the young lady was asked by Ray White to read the *Story of O* in Galway's suggests to me that she was bait to trap me. To frame me for her abduction."

"Derrick Galway wants to get rid of you that bad?"

“Oh yes. In the past, he’s stalked my renters, even had his goons beat one of them up. You met him. Bobby.”

“He beat up Bobby?” Totally pissed off, Liza’s eyes narrowed and her heartbeat sped. “Can you prove this?”

“Of course not, otherwise Galway’d be under arrest. As it is, he skates on thin ice with me. I’ve been too busy to deal with him, but...”

“Sindie Keller?” Liza prodded.

“Yes. I did see someone of her description in Galway’s a couple of weeks before you showed up. I was intrigued, of course, and had planned to pick her up.”

Liza held her breath. “And...”

“I went to the bar and ordered coffee. I was on the way to the men’s room to take a leak when I saw her. When I came out, she was gone. I figured that someone got to her before me.”

“I wonder who—”

“I can guess. Come along.” James’ voice was calm, as usual. “It’s time to defang the snake.”

He strode into his bedroom. “Get showered and dressed.” He went to a chest of drawers and took out jeans and a sweater. He tossed them onto the bed and went into the bathroom.

She followed, stepping into the shower with him. He kissed her, but she didn’t close her eyes and neither did he. Appearing distracted, he didn’t initiate sex.

She dressed in the clothes he’d given her and her black heels. “These are my size,” she said of the jeans and the fisherman’s sweater. “But I’m not surprised anymore.”

He had donned a similar outfit, topping his sweater with a black leather jacket. Because he usually wore suits, the street clothes gave him a rawer, more savage air than she’d seen.

He didn't answer but hustled her out of the house to his Jag, speeding to O'Farrell Street and parking near the corner of Leavenworth. Even on a Sunday afternoon, the area, jammed with tawdry strip clubs and adult stores, was busy, mostly with men, Liza noticed. Typical.

James said to her, "Keep up with me."

He moved faster than she expected, sprinting with a whippet-like grace across an alley and through an open doorway to approach Galway's club from the back of the adjoining shop rather than using the front entrance. In her heels, Liza had reached only the neighboring shop's exit when James rammed his shoulder against the back door and burst in.

He didn't stop or wait for her. That was okay because she realized he couldn't without endangering both of them. The advantage lay in surprise. He glanced over his shoulder to see her stumbling along in her high-heeled pumps, maybe ten steps behind him. His lips quirked, and she guessed he was smothering a grin, the jerk.

He disappeared into Derrick Galway's strip club, and she gritted her teeth, ignored the pain in her feet and ran to catch up. Using the same door, she strode along a dark corridor, following him to a back room, her toes jamming into the tips of her tight, pointed shoes.

Even though smoking indoors had been forbidden for some years, a sickening stench of cigarettes still fouled the thick air, as if it had permeated the peeling paint on the walls and the beat-up wood floor. Trying not to breathe deeply, Liza shouldered past a group of heavily painted she-males who'd just performed onstage. The next act, fan dancers dressed in feathers, clogged the hallway.

When she arrived at the back room, she could see James. Before any of Galway's goons had the chance to react, he grabbed an obese, red-faced man by his greasy ponytail and pounded his forehead into the table at which he sat.

Shocked at his violence, she stopped short.

"Don't move," James snarled to the heavies. "Or I'll snap his neck."

One of them shifted his weight, and James nailed Derrick Galway again. He croaked, "Back off! Back off!"

James threw Galway into his chair. His thick body lolled against the chair's high back. In a too-small T-shirt and old jeans that rode beneath his beer belly, Galway was the unappealing personification of a low-class pimp.

"Where is Sindie Keller?" James demanded.

Galway grunted in surprise. "This is about gash? Jesus Christ, Li!"

"I don't like being framed," James snarled. "Are you acquainted with Detective Bowman?"

Galway's green, bloodshot eyes swiveled over to Liza. "I've heard of her, uh, you."

Liza nodded. "Likewise," she said.

"What are you doing here?" Galway rubbed his abused forehead and glared at James. "I thought you'd been promoted to Major Crimes."

"How did you know that?" she asked.

He chuckled, but before he could answer, James snapped, "Let's quit bullshitting. I'm here because of a missing person case that Detective Bowman is investigating."

"A young woman named Sindie Keller was reported missing since May ninth," Liza said. "The trail led through your North Beach bar to James Li, who frequents that bar."

"Tee-hee-hee." Galway's girlish giggle contrasted with his overweight, sweaty body and slimeball demeanor. "About time that your little joke backfired and bit you on the butt, Li."

"The person who reported her missing was your attorney Ray White, who also happened to be Keller's lover." Liza kept her tone of voice calm and matter-of-fact. "White sent her to your saloon."

"Shit," Galway said. "That dumb fuck. I told him to take care of you, Li, but I guess I wasn't specific enough. Asshole."

"Excuse me?" James asked.

"Not you. White. What the hell has he done? Was he trying to frame you or something?"

"Apparently," Liza said. "I believe he planned for James Li to pick up Keller, but she's disappeared. From your saloon."

"And I don't know where she is," James said.

Galway pointed upward.

"She's here?" Liza asked.

"Been here, yeah, since May ninth, I guess. Caught her trolling in North Beach, in my bar no less." Galway scowled. "Stupid cunt."

"Can I talk to her?" Liza asked.

Galway glanced at his watch. "Sure, she should be done about now."

"She's working for you?"

"Yeah. That ho could suck the chrome off a trailer hitch."

Liza winced at the cliché.

"And she likes it too. Johns, they can always tell the difference. You'll see. Come on, I'll take you up." Rising, Galway lumbered out the door, followed by Liza and James.

When one of Galway's heavies started after them, James turned on the goon with a glare. "We don't need you. *Capiche?*" He flicked out a glittering switchblade.

Again, Liza shook inwardly, but hoped she didn't look scared. However, in the last five minutes, James had shown her aspects of his character she hadn't known about.

Or maybe she'd been deceiving herself.

Could she really have a relationship with him?

She shunted personal matters out of her mind in favor of doing her job. She was going to break the Keller case. This was what she lived for.

Wasn't it?

Wooden stairs, narrow and old, creaked under Galway's bulk as he climbed. They passed the second floor, and as they ascended, the air grew hotter, steamier, redolent of perfume and sex.

A hand caressed her bottom then squeezed. James caught up with her. "When this is over, I'm going to fuck you mindless," he murmured into her ear.

"Good," she whispered, perspiring beneath her fisherman's sweater. She needed some nice, clean sex with James to erase this event from her psyche.

She trailed Galway along the third-floor hall to a plain wooden door. From behind the closed door came grunting followed by a woman's scream.

Galway opened the door and stood aside to let Liza and James see.

The small room was almost filled by a raised, padded platform covered in fake black leather. Upon it, a blonde woman knelt. She was bound in black leather, wearing forearm restraints that were laced together behind her back. The position thrust out her corseted breasts, their pink nipples hard and wet with saliva.

A man held her by a studded dog collar while he fucked her face, using a leash to whip her on the shoulders, left bare by the black leather corset. While Liza watched, a second man rammed into her ass, and the woman cried out again.

The scene was so reminiscent of what Liza had experienced and enjoyed that she began to sweat. Her clit twitched against her tight, denim jeans. When James grabbed her by the nape of her neck, she couldn't restrain a gasp.

Galway laughed. "So that's the way of it, Li? Smart move, fucking a detective from Major Crimes."

James glowered at Galway, who shut up. Liza asked tightly, "When is she supposed to be done?"

"Now. I'll make a mental note to charge them overtime." He looked at Liza. "Are you gonna bust me?"

"Not today. No warrant. I just want to solve the Keller case."

She scrutinized the woman. Though her face was contorted with lust and streaked with a whore's harsh makeup, she appeared to match the file photograph of Sindie Keller. "Umm, where should we wait?"

"Right here, if you want to watch the show," Galway said. "No extra charge, Detective."

She exchanged a glance with James. He shrugged. "If we go someplace else, we risk losing your witness," he said.

"True." She leaned against the doorpost, trying at least to look nonchalant when her pussy was weeping tears of need.

"You can use a room if you want."

No doubt Galway wished to be generous to an SFPD detective, but Liza didn't want to be on his hook. She said, "That would be too much for me, but thanks."

Galway's hand strayed to his pants, but Liza nailed him with a quelling glare. She was sure she couldn't take watching Derrick Galway spank the monkey while watching one of his whores.

"Well, I'll, uh, just be on my way." Galway backed out of the hallway, his nervous eyes on James.

James moved in closer to Liza, rocking his hips against her rear, left so sensitive by his discipline. She could feel his erection, hot and hard, even through two layers of denim. "Can you come this way?" he whispered into her ear.

"Maybe."

The man behind Keller had grabbed her buttocks and was opening her crack wider to push more of himself inside. Reaching for a bottle of oil that sat on the far side of the platform, he missed it and had to pull out of her ass. He had to be at least ten impressive inches long, and very thick.

Liza gasped.

“Like what you see?” James murmured into her ear. He reached underneath her sweater and slid his hands around her waist and up, up, up...

“I like what I’m feeling,” she murmured as James’ busy fingers approached her breasts, unbound by a bra under the bulky sweater.

The man buttfucking Keller squeezed more lube onto his dick and into her ass. She turned her head, releasing the cock in her mouth. “Hurry up,” she begged.

That was all Liza had to hear to convince herself that the so-called victim’s presence at Galway’s whorehouse was voluntary, but she figured she ought to stay to take a statement.

The man getting the blowjob grabbed Keller’s head by her blonde hair and growled, “Take it, bitch.” He shoved his dick down her throat again. Liza could see Keller’s cheeks hollow from the effort of sucking him off.

The john behind her dropped the lube, grabbed her ass cheeks and opened her crack wider. Her back hole gaped, round and shiny with oil, red from the hard fucking. The knob of the john’s dick was only a little smaller than a pool ball, and Liza wondered how the hell he’d get it inside.

James gripped her breasts, squeezing her nipples hard as the john forced his way into Keller’s butt sheath. Even with the lube, he didn’t get in far on the first thrust. He pulled out partway, leaving his head inside to stretch her anus. With a grunt, he shoved in again, about halfway. Keller gasped and choked as the john in her mouth was coming.

Liza watched, fascinated, aroused, not only by the spectacle but by James’ clever fingers plucking and pulling at her nipples, his hard-on rocking against her ass, reminding her that he’d been inside there just a few hours before.

The john who’d come rubbed his limp dick across Keller’s breasts as the other drove his entire length into her rear. She screamed and writhed against the bonds pinioning her arms. “Please! Please, God, let me come!”

The john inside her slapped her buttocks as the other man sprawled to lick Keller's cunt through her blonde bush.

Liza came with a gush of cream flowing from her pussy. Her knees weakened, and James supported her with one strong arm around her waist, the other caressing her breasts. His breath, his lips tickled her throat, taking her higher.

Eyes closed, she could hear Keller squeal, "I'm coming, I'm coming..."

Liza collapsed against James, who pulled her out of the overheated room and into the cooler hallway, quietly closing the door. "Are you all right?" he murmured into her ear. "I don't want you to pass out."

She blinked, recovering herself. "Yeah, I'm okay. But that was totally sleazy. I can't believe I got so turned-on."

"It was sexy as hell because it was exactly what we did on Friday night. Except, of course, that I'm better." He winked at her.

"Yeah, you are. Better technique, I'm sure."

"Experience will out."

* * * * *

About five minutes later, the johns emerged, shooting James and Liza suspicious glares. She wondered if they knew they'd been watched.

"Let's go in," James said. "I'm tired of this sleaze pit." His lip curled as his boot toed dirt rimming the wooden wainscoting. "I swear, Liza, I'd dig ditches before I ran a shithole like this."

She knocked at the door and waited until she heard a soprano voice call, "Cut me a break. I'm not ready yet."

"I just want to talk," Liza said.

The door opened, and Sindie Keller stood on the other side, dressed in a short, flowered robe. She held a damp washcloth to her face, wiping at her raccoon eyelids.

Her hard blue eyes took them in, widening. Liza guessed that she and James didn't look like her usual johns.

"Uh, hi. Who are you?"

"SFPD," Liza said.

Keller dropped the washcloth.

"I'm not here to bust you. Did you know you were reported missing?" Liza asked.

"Uh, no. You've been looking for me?"

"Yes ma'am."

Keller's glance slid over to take in James, but apparently she didn't recognize him. "You could have asked my boss," she said. "I mean, my former boss, Ray White. He knows I'm here."

Liza smiled. "Mind if I come in and take a statement?"

Chapter Eleven

Liza and James didn't talk as they left the strip club to walk through the early evening mist toward his Jag. When they found it, he opened the passenger door and let her in. He asked, "Where to?"

"How about my place? I want to write my report ASAP and take a shower."

"We just got out of the shower."

She sniffed. "My hair stinks of Galway's strip club. Ick."

He leaned over to inhale her scent. "I can't smell it. You're dreaming, baby."

"Well, I feel...fouled."

He started the car. "You must feel fouled every day, having to deal with dickheads like Derrick Galway and Ray White."

She bit her finger. "Yeah, true. After work every day, I come home and take a shower before I do anything else."

"Your job sucks. Of course I'm grateful there are cops around to keep order, but I sure don't envy you." He headed westward, toward her neighborhood.

Liza's building was typical of that area of San Francisco, a cream-colored, multi-story apartment building with red brick trim that housed only two units on each floor. On the third floor, her place had an ocean view when the weather was decent, which wasn't often, since she was only a couple of blocks from Ocean Beach. Despite the ever-present fog, she loved her place and wondered what real estate magnate James Li would think of it.

First thing she noticed was that he was intensely curious, briskly walking around the entire structure and scrutinizing it. "I didn't have much time yesterday morning," he told her. "I didn't know when you would wake up, and I wanted to get your bike

here, get your stuff and get back. And it was strange being in your place without you. I felt peculiar, checking everything out behind your back.”

She smiled. “It’s okay. I appreciate what you did.” They’d fought about this subject yesterday, and she was happy to get the air cleared about it. “So, umm, what do you think?”

“I’ve always liked this area, and I like this building. Built in the late forties, I’d guess, and renovated about, umm, seven or ten years ago?” He raised inquiring eyes to her.

She nodded, impressed by his insights. “So I’ve been told.”

“It looks as though it’s in pretty good shape. Let me know if it comes on the market.” He stuck his hand in his pocket, took out her keys and opened the front door.

Inside the vestibule—mostly dark wood and white walls—Liza picked up her mail and her newspaper then led James to the wooden staircase. Lit by crystal wall sconces, its creaks were muffled by a red runner. On a Sunday afternoon, her building was quiet, as usual. Most people were either out or relaxing. The aromas of the morning’s Sunday brunches, mostly bacon and coffee, lingered in the halls.

She unlocked her door, opened it and ushered James in. Her apartment consisted of four rooms—her bedroom, a sitting room in which she kept a small desk as well as a sofa, the kitchen and her lavish bathroom. She’d furnished the entire place from IKEA, figuring that was simplest. The building’s dark wood and white walls predominated, but she’d bought aqua leather furniture to give her place a lighter feel.

James took off his jacket and looked at everything, picking up all her knickknacks, especially interested in the photos of LaDonna and Liza taken on special days—her college graduation, police academy, the day she got her detective’s badge. While he poked around, she went to her desk and opened her laptop, clicking to the Keller file. It was too bad Liza couldn’t get Keller to sign a statement—going back to that sleaze pit was out of the question—but having had James present as a corroborating witness was good enough.

Absorbed in her work, she didn't notice when he slipped behind her. He rubbed her stiff shoulders, digging into the knots that had developed. "You're all tense again, honey," he remarked. "Do we need a nice suck in the shower to relax?"

"Yeah, baby." She stretched her arms above her head, twisting her torso. Vertebrae popped and snapped. She hit the *Save* key then clicked more buttons to send the document to her computer at the SFPD. "Okay, I'm done."

He pulled her up out of the chair and kissed her. "You were so hot today," he murmured in her ear. "You're so sexy when you do the cop thing."

"Umm, so maybe being a cop is okay?"

"Whatever you decide is okay. But never throw away your handcuffs, hmm? I might want you to cuff me to the bed and have your wicked way with me."

"Or vice versa."

His eyes gleamed. "Yeah, baby." He walked her over to the couch and kissed her some more while he eased her down onto the cushions. When she put her hand on his fly, his cock practically jumped into her hand.

He raised his head long enough to say, "Open my pants and take me into your mouth."

"My, aren't we greedy?"

"I didn't get to come at Galway's. You did."

She laughed. "Sauce for the goose. You've been teasing me all weekend."

"Yeah, and you love it."

Grinning, she wrestled his snug jeans and boxers to his knees. His cock wasn't fully erect, and she went down on him, first licking his length and, as he thickened, running her tongue up and down him while he groaned with pleasure.

She sucked hard on the round head, squeezing the rim with her lips before flicking the sensitive slit in the top. Pre-come flowed, bathing her tongue with its unique slickness. He was close...should she prolong his pleasure or bring him off quickly?

She played with his balls, bouncing them up and down in their cozy sac while considering the question. She was enjoying the power she had over James' pleasure. *Putty in my hands*, she thought with delight.

His cock jerked in her mouth, bumping against the back of her throat. His groans grew in volume, and she decided it wouldn't be fair to make him wait. What for? She deep throated him, flexing hard while running a nail over his ball sac.

"Oh baby, I'm gonna come..." His body wrenched and he shot spurt after spurt of hot come down her throat. She took it all, swallowing as fast as she could, with only a thin trail escaping. His flavor was salty, sweet, acrid, spicy...incredible.

When he finished, he licked his come off her cheek then kissed her mouth. "Thank you, baby. That was sweet. Do you want to fool around some more?"

"I'm not sure I can. I think we rubbed all the skin off my pussy and clit."

"Can I check?"

"Sure, why not?" She went to her bedroom.

After stripping, James followed her like an eager puppy on the trail of an especially tasty snack. She stopped short near her bed, and he bumped into her.

"What?" he asked.

"It's as though we haven't touched each other at all." Turning, she regarded him, her heart filling. "I still want you. So much."

He took her into her arms. "Me too."

She shivered.

"Don't be afraid of us, baby. What we have is so special." His persuasive mouth covered hers while he walked her over to her bed. He tore off her clothes as he kissed, pulling away from her only to yank her sweater over her head. He licked her breasts, lighting twin fires in the tips then ran his tongue down her midline to her navel, leaving a cool trail in his wake. He blew on the damp line he'd drawn, and every tiny hair on her belly lifted.

After unbuttoning her jeans, he dragged the tight fabric past her hips and down to her ankles but not off. She remained confined, bound, by the jeans wrapped around her feet. He snared both wrists in one hand. She tried to kick off her pants while he grabbed her feet, holding them high. "Be still," he commanded.

Resistance didn't work, so she stopped struggling. His hold on her wrists strengthened, showing her who was boss. He reached between her upraised legs and fumbled for her clit, tugging on her labia.

"I like to tie you up and make you come." His voice was low and intense. Releasing her wrists, he knelt behind her legs. He dove between her bent knees to her wet pussy like a hot, thirsty man into an August stream.

Grabbing the headboard, Liza abandoned herself to pleasure. Her skin seemed sensually supercharged. She was aware of every crease in her white, cutwork counterpane, every line of embroidery scoring her back, every stroke of James' talented tongue on her cunt.

He opened her lower lips to examine her clit. "Looks gorgeous to me." Using his teeth, he tugged the tender nubbin of flesh.

Arousal snapped through her like a whip cracking. Her hips jerked, and she groaned.

"How did that feel?" he asked, his voice gently mocking.

Her ragged breath ripped through her throat. "You – you know how it feels."

"Tell me."

"F-fine."

"Just fine?"

"B-better than fine. Marvy. Super-deluxe. James, you're killing me!"

"Want more?"

"Yes!"

"Say please."

“You bastard.”

He slapped her thigh, and the smack vibrated through her flesh to her tingling clit. “Bad girl,” he said. “Be sweet or I’ll stop right now.”

“Please!”

“Okay, baby. I’m yours.” He lowered his mouth to her again. The touch of his lips caressing her hungry pussy flooded her with bliss.

She moaned beneath the thorough tongue-lashing, her pleasure heightened by the jeans restricting her ankles. He licked her through her first orgasm then pushed her legs over her head to shove his thick, hot erection into her slit. He hadn’t opened her with his fingers, and her sheath had tightened when she’d come. Now she could feel his cock head pushing into the snug channel, breaching her fast and hard. One orgasm merged into the next. Her hips jerked and pumped and banged against his, the slap of flesh against flesh raunchy, sexy, a total turn-on.

The aroma of their lovemaking scented the air, pungent and different than the smell of sex with anyone else. With Liza drinking his come and James eating her pussy juices, they’d combined essences into a new and unique flavor, one particular to them alone.

He pumped hard and long and forever, pounding relentlessly in and out while she wondered how he could do it. He’d just come, had come countless times in the last thirty-six hours—how did he have more to give?

But he did, lasting until he tore off her jeans so he could open her legs and bend over her, covering her body with his. He slid his tongue in and out of her mouth, penetrating her with the same rhythm as his cock.

The sense of being taken by him, dominated by him was indescribable, sexy, arousing to her heart as well as her body. It turned him on too. She could tell because his dick swelled inside her and he hammered into her faster, harder, coming in a rush of hot come and heated groans of completion.

“Oh darling...you’re going to stay with me, aren’t you?”

She rubbed her face against his. "Of course. I read the Sporting Green first, right? Who else would I get that with?"

His chuckle was strained. "Please. I love your sense of humor, but no joking...I need to know. I need to know you'll be mine."

"I'm yours," she whispered. "Forever, if you like."

His smile was brilliant, the sun glittering on the summer sea. "I like."

She paused then said, "I have another question."

"Okay." He propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at her, still covering her body with his.

"I noticed that on Friday night, everyone was using condoms, but later, you didn't. What was that about? I'm not worried about getting pregnant or contracting an STD, but I'm, umm, curious."

"I already told you why I used a rubber in your ass the first time. I wanted to last for longer than two strokes. Later, it didn't matter." He rubbed his nose against hers. "As for Rigo and Kevin...frankly, I didn't want anyone but me coming inside you. If you're going to get pregnant, it'll be by me."

"What?"

He sighed. "The thought mystified me also, but I had to accept my feelings."

"Is it a guy thing?"

"Yeah, I guess. I feel very possessive about you and...I've, uh, never felt that way before. I'm usually not dog in the manger about women."

"I'm not either. Until now. I don't want to think about what you do with other, umm, people."

More silence as each absorbed the implications.

"Are we, like, going steady? Should I pin you or something?"

James laughed.

Liza chuckled. "Can I wear your letterman's jacket?"

"I don't even know where it is."

"Did you letter in a sport in high school or college?"

"Actually, I did, in wrestling."

"Cool."

"I bet my mom has that jacket," he said thoughtfully. He rolled off her to one side.

"Umm, where do your parents live?"

"Near Chinatown, but sort of off the beaten track. Their house is on a little street near Broadway and Stockton." He shot her a quick, assessing glance. "We could go there for dinner next Sunday if you want."

"Whoa." She blinked. "We really are going steady."

* * * * *

2:00 p.m., Monday

"Bowman, into my office." His voice brusque, her boss loomed at the opening of her cubicle.

He slammed shut his office door and didn't mince words. "I saw you with James Li. What case did that concern?"

She swallowed. "Sindie Keller. Here's my report." She tossed it onto his desk.

"You nailed Li for the Keller kidnapping?"

"No, Mr. Li didn't have anything to do with it, but we jointly pried the truth from Derrick Galway. Keller was found working in Galway's O'Farrell house. You'll find a statement from her in my report."

He cast her a shrewd look. "Li helped you?"

"Yes, he did. He, umm, got to the truth a lot faster than I could have."

"He use some, ah, unorthodox methods?"

“Yeah. I was concerned that there could be, umm, repercussions, but Galway seemed to be in a forgiving mood. I don’t think he’ll be filing against anyone for assault and battery.”

“You sound a little too grateful, Bowman.”

She shrugged. “Just giving credit where credit’s due. Listen, I don’t think we can let what Ray White did go by.”

Her boss leaned back in his chair. “Talk to me.”

“Keller’s alleged disappearance was a setup to frame Li for abduction. Galway says he didn’t know about it and showing he had prior knowledge would be hard to prove unless White fingers Galway. According to Galway, White said he’d take care of the James Li problem but didn’t say how. Galway assumed that the lawsuit White filed against China Doll Enterprises, the Li family real estate company, was how White planned to take care of Li. Apparently it wasn’t. The sex diary shows that Keller was White’s mistress, and that he sent her into a known haunt of James Li’s...I believe in order to trap him.”

“Galway’s bar in North Beach,” her boss said.

“Yeah. But Ray White didn’t tell Galway what he was doing, and Galway assumed that Keller was a working girl poaching on his territory. On Galway’s orders, Keller was drugged and taken to work in Galway’s O’Farrell Street strip club. I took her statement there.”

Her boss fingered the report. “What’s her story?”

“It’s consistent with her diary and with what both Galway and Li said. But not with what Ray White has said. She stated that she went to Galway’s bar, drank several coffees and passed out. When she awakened, she was being raped. She thought that Ray White, who’s apparently more than a little kinky, had set up the whole thing.”

“Ray White’s kinky? Hoo-boy. Maybe we can nail him on something.”

She laughed. “Fortunately for most of this city, kinkiness isn’t a crime.”

"But White's dirty."

"Oh yeah. He's Galway's man all the way, and overextended financially. He'll do...whatever." She shrugged. "Keller told me that she phoned White and told him she was at Galway's strip club, so we can certainly nail him on filing a false police report and obstruction. Anyway, Galway told Keller she could work for him or die. She chose to stick with Galway. As far as I know, she's still happily turning tricks."

"Well done, Bowman."

"Thank you."

"Now explain to me why I saw you two hours ago at Max's with James Li."

"I was eating lunch." She shot him a stony stare. With whom she ate lunch was none of his business.

He glared back. "You don't want to get too big for your britches, Bowman. Already, a lot of people don't like you. They don't like the way you've risen through the ranks on your back."

She jumped to her feet. "I've aced every promotional test I've ever taken. I've solved every case that's come my way. Name names, Bill. Who in this department thinks I don't deserve my rank?"

"You know I can't name names. Sit back down."

She did, still steaming with fury.

"Look, I'm just trying to help you out. You're a cop. You can't have, uh, a social relationship with someone like James Li."

She hated the way her boss sneered James' name. As far as she was concerned, Bill Hester wasn't good enough to shine James' shoes.

"A social relationship? Is that what you call it?" she asked. "Were you seeing Cherise, uh, socially?"

"Your question's out of line, Bowman."

"Excuse me, but I wasn't paying for my pleasure. Were you?"

“That’s not the point. I was just using one of Li’s whores.”

“Cherise is a person. A rather nice person.” Liza loathed the contemptuous way he talked about James’ renters. So far, Cherise, Veronica and the gang had treated her better than most people at the department. “The people who rent from James are just trying to get along, same as the rest of us.”

“You see James Li again, unconnected to a pending case, and...” He shook his head slowly. “You don’t have the pull to get away with that.”

She pointed a finger at him. “You can pay for sex, clearly a misdemeanor, and I can’t see someone I like? Without money changing hands? That’s wacko.”

“That’s enough.” He slammed his fist down onto his desk. His mug jumped and coffee sloshed out onto Liza’s report.

“Yes, it certainly is.” Liza opened her handbag and took out her wallet. She threw her badge onto her boss’s desk, followed by her gun.

She was surprised at the relief she felt.

* * * * *

One year later

The weather was mild but windy, and when Liza stepped out of her taxi to meet James at City Hall, she had to clip her hair back to keep it from blowing into her eyes. She wore a demure powder blue suit that set off her sapphire engagement ring and her blue eyes while thoroughly covering her phoenix tattoo and nipple ring with James’ charm.

The diamond watch circling her left wrist hadn’t been a gift from James. She’d bought it for herself when her new business, Bowman Security Services, had hit ten thousand dollars per month in receipts.

Her heels clattered on the pavement as she walked across the sidewalk toward her fiancé, who stood near City Hall’s big double doors. She stopped for a moment to take

him in. His hair was newly trimmed in a style that emphasized his high cheekbones and firm jaw. The remarkable body she knew and loved so thoroughly was clad in a custom-tailored, navy, pinstripe three-piece.

He was gorgeous, and he was hers. Just as she belonged to him, completely and forever.

Others waited with James. His father, nephew and brothers-in-law, who also wore navy suits. Kevin, James' nephew, looked embarrassed but proud to be included. All the males had pinned tiny orchids to their lapels. James' mother, sisters and LaDonna all wore mauve with white orchid corsages.

After Liza greeted James with a kiss, he handed her a bouquet of white and mauve orchids. Embracing her with one arm around her shoulders, he whispered into her ear, "Ready?"

She looked around her family, unable to stop a huge smile from wreathing her face. "Yeah, baby."

The family walked into the County Clerk's office to pick up James and Liza's marriage license.

About the Author

Best-selling, award-winning author Sue Swift has written over a dozen novels, plus several short stories and non-fiction articles. She writes in numerous subgenres, including paranormal, historical, contemporary comedy and erotica, the latter of which she publishes as Suz deMello. A former trial attorney, her hobbies are yoga and world travel. She is currently teaching in China and working on her next manuscript.

The author 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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