

ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Necessary Roughness

**BEST
RECEPTION**

ANN JACOBS

Best Reception

Ann Jacobs

Book 3 in the Necessary Roughness series.

Wide receiver Sid Conyers is hot, dominant, an expert in rope bondage and almost any woman's dream. He's played in BDSM dungeons for years, with many women, but none he ever truly cared for. Now he finally has the woman he's coveted...by default. He wants to be her lover as well as her Master.

Talia survived physical and emotional abuse from her former Master that has left her emotionally scarred and insecure. A true submissive, she yearns for Sid to master her despite her fear that she can't win his heart...doesn't deserve his love.

Sid is determined to mend Talia's battered psyche. He will bind her with rope, but he'll convince her with tenderness that she deserves all the love he has to give.

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Best Reception

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Chapter One

"I miss you, too, baby, but I'm glad Vanessa and Victoria are there to keep you company." Sid Conyers grinned when Talia described how the cat sisters he'd brought home to keep her company were curled up at the foot of her bed, their motors purring so loudly he heard them through the phone.

"I'm happy to hear you're getting around so well without that cast. But you mustn't try to do too much. Knees are funny. They sometimes fool you into thinking they're okay and then they tell you they aren't, in a very painful way." Two years ago he'd learned that the hard way and spent an extra month in rehab because he'd pushed too hard, too soon, after having arthroscopic surgery.

He could practically see Talia smiling through the phone. "I'll be careful, I promise. I can hardly wait to show you how well I can get around now."

"Do that. I'll be expecting you to greet me when I walk in the door with a great big hug and a kiss." Sid had been taking it easy on Talia, waiting until she recovered from most of her bumps, bruises and fractures, biding his time until he felt she was ready for him to take her the way he'd been dreaming of since she'd arrived on his doorstep a little over a month ago.

"Mmm. I like the sound of that, Mr. Conyers."

He could hardly believe Talia had built up this much self-confidence so quickly, since she'd been an emotional basket case at first, afraid to look him in the eye, much less interact with him the way she'd been doing tonight. Maybe it was time for him to start making motions toward what he'd wanted all along—in fact, as long as he'd known her if he were being honest with himself. Start acting like the Master and see where it took them.

"You're getting me hard, Ms. Quinn. And you know what that can mean once this game is over and I get home."

"I think I'll like whatever it is you have in mind," she told him in a teasing tone he'd never heard from her before.

"Hold that thought, sweetheart. Much as I hate to, I'm gonna have to let you go. I have to get some sleep before the game tomorrow. I want you to rest and get well," he said before shutting off his cell phone and stretching out under the comforter.

Sid had only meant to check in with Talia and make sure she was okay. But he clearly was out of his mind because he'd kept the conversation going for more than half an hour when he should have been preparing mentally for tomorrow's game. As hard as he tried to put her out of his mind, the sound of her sweet Alabama drawl stuck like glue in his brain.

It didn't make sense that just listening to her voice got his dick as hard as stone, especially since he'd never laid a hand on her. Not that he didn't fantasize about dominating her, and not that he wasn't planning her seduction nearly every waking moment. But that hadn't happened yet and might not happen anytime soon. She sounded as though she was ready to play with him, but he couldn't be sure. She'd taken one hell of a farewell beating from the asshole who used to be her Master, and that had to be stuck in her mind, making her leery of starting a sexual relationship with him. Sid shifted onto his side, hoping the change of position would help his hard-on go away.

That wasn't likely to happen as long as he was picturing Talia in his house, in a guest room less than twenty-five feet from his own bed. "Hey, Jack," he said, talking pretty loudly to draw his road-trip roommate's attention away from the Western movie that was playing on TV.

Jack Winters stuck another pillow behind his head and shut off the sound. "Yeah?"

"I didn't mean you had to turn off your program."

"The movie sucks anyhow. What's up?"

"That thing you wear..."

"This?" Jack tossed back the covers and put his hand over the chastity device Sid had first noticed him wearing during spring training before his rookie year. "What about it?"

If they weren't good friends as well as teammates and road-trip roommates, Sid wouldn't bring up the chastity device. Even so he hesitated, but he reminded himself that Jack never made any effort to hide it, other than from nosy reporters who invaded locker rooms. "What made you decide to wear it?" When Jack moved his hand over to his thigh, Sid took a good look at the clear cage attached to a ring that clamped securely around the base of Jack's dick and his balls. "Or was it Tawny's idea?"

"I wanted the restraint. I was pretty wild in college, but crazy in love with Tawny and scared shitless that I'd do something to fuck up and throw away our future. I had to do some serious persuading to get her to agree to hold the key." He grinned. "I will say, though, she's gotten to like having my dick under her control. And while I've grown up enough that I'm pretty sure I can control my wayward urges on my own, I like being reminded this way that she holds the only key to my sexual satisfaction. Why do you ask? Don't tell me you're thinking about making a switch."

"Maybe. Temporarily. I've spent the month hard as a rock."

"Thanks to your house guest?"

"I'm afraid so."

Jack flipped the sheet back up over his crotch. "Seems to me you could take care of that hard-on pretty easily once you get home. Talia is a sub if I ever saw one. And she did come to you all the way across the country, so I imagine she expects that you two will play. It's not as though you she doesn't know you're a Dom. Or as if you two didn't see each other playing in the dungeon at Rebels' Roost often enough, before Vic got traded."

Just hearing Jack mention Vic Reinhart, Talia's former Master, made Sid see red. Before he realized it, he had curled both hands into tight fists. He took a deep breath and forced himself to relax. "Yeah. Talia as much as said she was ready to be my

playmate, the day she arrived. But the motherfucker hurt her. Bad. She needs time to heal, not just on the outside, but in here, too." Sid tapped his temple. "Don't suggest that I go play with one of the club subs on dungeon night at Rebels' Roost, either. My dick seems to have become inconveniently selective since Talia's come back here."

It struck Sid then that he'd deliberately avoided emotional connections with his playmates for the past few years. Had that been because he'd wanted Talia and didn't want to develop a relationship with anybody else even though she'd been with another Master, out of his reach? He was beginning to think so.

"Somehow that doesn't surprise me. If you weren't hot for her, you wouldn't have gotten so furious every time Reinhart treated her so rough. Still, before you lock your stuff up, let me tell you something I learned the hard way. It takes time and practice to train yourself to chastity. For the first five or six months, I spent a lot of time in agony, until my cock figured out it just wasn't gonna get hard inside the cage no matter how hard it tried. And that it's only going to get loose when my Mistress decides it's time." He looked over at Sid, a serious look on his face. "Talia isn't hurt so bad that she couldn't enjoy some gentle play, is she?"

Sid wasn't sure. Her bruises had already faded and the cast had just come off her knee yesterday. Before he'd left her this morning she'd seemed to be feeling pretty good, a sharp contrast with the way she'd been a month ago when he'd found her collapsed in a heap at his front door, her body a mass of bruises and her ears and nose practically frostbitten from the cold. "I don't guess so, at least not physically, although it will probably take at least six months before her knee's completely healed. It's— Fuck, if a lover ever beat me that way, I don't know if I'd ever forget it enough to want anybody else to touch me sexually again. Would you?"

Jack didn't answer right away, as though he was thinking about Sid's question as it applied to him, a happily married, submissive male. "Probably not. I can't see myself lying still and letting my Mistress hurt me. There are such things as safe words, you know."

“Not that Reinhart would ever listen to one.” As far as Sid was concerned, their former teammate was nothing but an animal. He hadn’t shown as much concern for the welfare of the tiny woman who’d called him Master as most people would show for an injured animal.

“Maybe not.” Jack lay back and glanced over at Sid. “But I’m a sexual submissive, not a fucking masochist. I don’t put up with opposing linebackers whacking me without giving them back twice as much pain. No way, even in a sexual situation, would I let anybody break my bones without exacting a pound of flesh in return.”

Sid couldn’t imagine Jack turning on his beautiful wife. “You don’t mean you’d –”

“Of course I would never hit Tawny. I’d never harm any woman, but I certainly would physically restrain her if she suddenly took a notion to hurt me. Not that she would. Tawny would never dream of causing me any physical pain. We tried a little of the rough stuff when we first started with BDSM play, but she hated it. I’m pretty sure that her dislike for punishing me with the cat or flogger had a lot to do with her being willing to try locking me up to keep me under control.” Jack paused then met Sid’s questioning gaze. “I trust Tawny more than I trust myself. She would never do anything to injure me.”

“Sorry, buddy. I guess the dynamics are different when the woman’s the Domme. Unless she’s Keisha Harris.” He wouldn’t want to tangle with the gorgeous Amazon who often played with her apparently devoted slave at Rebels’ Roost. “I can’t think of any other Domme I know who’s big enough to threaten a guy physically – especially a pro football player.”

Jack laughed. “Keisha probably outweighs you, Runt, and she might be able to put a hurt on you if you two ever decided to play. Still, I doubt that she could hurt Killer Rubin unless he let her. I doubt if she outweighs him, but even if she does, he’s bound to have the edge on her when it comes to strength.”

Sid didn’t take exception to Jack’s insult because he was used to it. At five-ten and a hundred eighty pounds, he was the smallest guy on the team, so “Runt” was one of the

kinder nicknames his teammates had hung on him. "Yeah. The way Matt tears into opposing quarterbacks every Sunday, I'm sure he could handle his Mistress if he wanted to. Nonetheless, Keisha scares the hell out of me."

Sid lay back against the pillow, imagining how he'd feel if he opted for chastity. He was comfortable in his dominant skin, even now when he was fighting a constant hard-on.

Jack looked thoughtfully at Sid from his spot on the other bed. "From the scenes I saw Talia and Vic play out in the dungeon last year, I'd say she could very well be into serious pain."

"Could be." Sid hoped she wasn't, because he wasn't a Dom who got off by inflicting serious pain on his playmates. He recalled one scene last year at Rebels' Roost where Reinhart had seemed out of control. Sid, Jack and several other Rebels in the dungeon had paused their own play and hurried to pry the big offensive tackle away from Talia. They'd stopped, however, when she'd come loudly in spite of—or maybe because of—the beating that had looked to everybody as though Reinhart was about to kill her. "It could be she's not into pain and the bastard would wait until she was in subspace and then inflict some torment on her to cut into her climax, so the climax would finish but she'd be hurting. That would make it look as though a sub was asking for the pain."

"You're right. When you two start to play, I'm sure you'll find out pretty quickly what makes her tick." Jack adjusted the pillow under his head and closed his eyes.

That was one reason Sid had hesitated—still hesitated—to push a sexual relationship on her too fast. "It may be awhile, because I'll be damned if I'll risk giving her any more pain. Looking at her battered body damn near made me cry when I was getting her into bed after I brought her in from the cold."

"What are you gonna do, let her stay with you and torture yourself with wanting her until you think she's completely well?"

Sid guessed he was. He certainly wasn't about to toss Talia out in the street. "I was thinking I might give chastity a try."

"I've never run across a chaste Dom, my friend." Yawning, Jack reached over and shut off the lamp over his bed. "You should probably give it some thought before locking yourself up, unless you believe you don't have the balls to exercise self-control on your own. Meanwhile, we'd both better get some sleep. The game tomorrow's likely to be a bitch."

* * * * *

Talia lay curled up on the sofa watching the sports commentators dissect the last of three Sunday pro football games that had just ended, thrilled to hear that because the Chicago team had just lost, the Rebels had made the playoffs again. Victoria, the shy kitty, lay stretched out on the rug in front of the door to the sun porch, while Vanessa purred in her lap.

When Talia heard the distinctive sound of Sid's car in the drive, she set Vanessa gently on the floor and hurried to the door. *I want you to greet me with a hug and kiss*, he'd said last night. She was anxious to do just that, and to congratulate him for a great game and the Rebels' win.

She heard his footsteps on the porch and then the door opened. "Welcome home," she said, stretching up on tiptoe and wrapping her arms around his neck. "You're gonna have to kiss me, because you're too tall for me to get up to your lips."

He did, and the kiss went on for what seemed like forever—sweet, soft. His lips teased her mouth open, but he gave her just a hint of tongue. Though the arms he wrapped around her felt cold at first, they made her feel warm and tingly inside. One of the cats—Vanessa she was sure—twined around their legs, asking for her share of her Master's attention.

"That's the way I like to be welcomed when I come home," he said when he broke the kiss and untangled Vanessa from around his legs. "Did you watch the game?"

Talia smiled. "The kitties and I curled up in front of your giant-screen TV and spent the entire afternoon and evening watching football. I just heard one of the announcers say the Rebels made the playoffs. Congratulations."

"Thanks, sweetheart." She loved the way his smile lit up his handsome face.

"Do you want something to eat? I could —"

He shook his head. "There's no need. We ate on the plane. What I want to do now is crawl into the Jacuzzi and then hit the bed. I feel every muscle in my body, and they're all protesting. Our defense did a good job of stopping the Sentinels, so we spent more time than usual on the field."

"I liked seeing you catch all those balls." She'd kept her eyes glued on Sid's number-seventeen jersey whenever he was on the field. "You're really good."

He ruffled her hair as they walked down the hallway and then bent to kiss her at the guest bedroom door. "Thanks, sweetheart. I'm also beyond beat. Go on, sleep tight. I'll be okay in the morning once I get to the training room and let the guys there have at my bumps and bruises."

Talia tried not to show her disappointment as she watched him walk down the hall to his own room. But it took her lips a long time to let go the memory of how soft his felt on hers.

Too long. He'd gotten her hot and then walked away, and she wasn't going to stand for it much longer.

She stood there for a long time, wishing she had the nerve to go to him now. She'd crawl in his big bed next to him and hope he'd take the hint. All he could do would be to reject her.

Summoning her courage, she left her room and moved purposefully down the hallway to his room. For a long time she stood there, her hand on the doorknob. Trembling, she turned the knob a little and the door opened a crack.

His big bed was empty, the rumpled bedclothes hanging half off the bed as though he'd been lying down but hadn't been able to sleep. As though fear had glued her feet to the floor, she stood there, unable to move as she saw him looking out the window toward the river. Moonlight bathed his hard, naked body as he jerked off. The words she wanted to say — *may I come in and make love with you* — stuck in her throat along with her silent cries of frustration at being such a coward.

His need practically saturated the space between them, but she was afraid to step inside, scared that he'd laugh and turn her down. Talia guessed that made her not only a sexual submissive but also a weenie.

Reluctantly turning away from his door, she tiptoed back to her lonely room, but she couldn't put Sid out of her daydreams. The picture of his dark, unruly hair that tumbled over his brow, his handsome features shadowed by a two-day growth of scruffy beard and his striking dark blue eyes had imprinted itself on her memory. She couldn't help imagining those eyes lighting up with delicious passion when he met her equally hot gaze. With that thought in mind she closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

* * * * *

The next morning Sid went to the Rebels' training facility, promising he'd be home as soon as he could. Talia decided to do as he suggested and have a lazy day, so she curled up in her favorite spot on the sun porch and gazed out at the river.

Funny. She'd lived with Vic on the opposite bank of the Savannah River for nearly three years, but she'd never noticed back then how peaceful it could be, just sitting and watching boats move up and down the river. She stretched out on the upholstered chaise lounge and adjusted a fleece throw over her shoulders. Vanessa and Victoria shot the fleece a pair of longing catty looks then stretched out near an unshuttered window to sunbathe on the hardwood floor.

As the sun's warmth kissed her cheeks and the soft material of the throw caressed her throat and hands, she looked out at the river, focusing on a small boat's bright-

colored sail as it swayed at its mooring on the opposite bank. Marsh grass, brown from the cold, still was flexible enough to bend gracefully in the breeze that set the water near the shore to rippling.

It was a typical early January day—cold, with frost still dappling the grass and ice glittering on the limbs of a winter-bare sweet gum tree perched on the riverbank—but Talia felt cozy. For the first time in her recent memory, she felt safe. Secure.

She figured she'd ignored so many of these sweet sensations before because Vic had demanded all her attention the last few years they were together, even when he wasn't around. He'd even started chaining her in the bedroom once they'd moved to Savannah, before he left for practice or a game, intimating that he thought she'd take up with another man if he gave her half a chance. Talia wondered now why she'd silently endured Vic's increasing meanness and lack of trust until he'd finally beaten her up and thrown her away like the broken toy she was.

She knew why. She'd loved Vic. And he'd been good to her at first. It was only after he'd been traded from his first team in Atlanta five years ago that he'd started really hurting her when they played. She'd excused him, thinking that once he settled in with a new team he'd go back to being the loving Master who'd taken her away from a miserable home life as soon as he'd been able to. For some reason, though, he'd never fit in, swearing each time he was traded that some coach or teammates had it in for him and wanted him gone.

Talia figured it was a miracle Vic had lasted as long as he had with the Rebels—three years, the first of which got him his Super Bowl ring. He'd played in the big game last year, too, and he'd told her he got traded after the Rebels lost because Coach blamed him for not keeping the pass rushers away from the team's veteran, all-Pro quarterback.

Her mind started to drift back to that last, awful day two months earlier, when Vic had thrown her down the stairs of their apartment complex in Phoenix and told her not to come back. He hadn't meant it, of course. He'd told her to go, before. This time,

though, she'd known deep inside that if she crawled back to him, he eventually would have killed her.

No. Don't go there. You're safe now, he'll never hurt you again.

Actually she'd given a lot of thought to Vic over the time she'd been here with Sid. Not that she was sorry she'd left, but that she needed to figure out what had made Vic change from a decent man to someone she didn't know – somebody who scared her so much she'd had to get away.

It had to have been the concussions. The violent headaches that had seemed to plague Vic more each year. The hard hits and the denials that he'd been hurt. With every hit he took, he seemed to grow meaner, more erratic in the way he treated her.

Sid had helped her come to that conclusion a dozen times since she had gotten there, on nights when she was hurting and certain that she'd failed Vic somehow. Sid had helped her realize she'd made the right decision by walking away, so that each day now she was starting to reclaim a little of who Talia Quinn was.

And miracle of miracles, he wanted her to have her own identity, not just as his slave.

She'd concentrate on Sid. He was different. She loved the way he acted as though she were important to him...as though he wanted to take care of her instead of having her always catering to him. As though he wanted her to experience all the things going on around her, not just the feelings he generated for his own pleasure.

Every day she stayed with Sid, she learned more about him. Before, she'd known him only from watching him play at Rebels' Roost. If he hadn't come up to Vic's car a year ago and pressed a piece of paper with his address and phone number into her hand while Vic had been picking up his stuff from the team's training facility, whispering that she should come to him if she ever needed help, she never would have thought of dumping herself at his front door. She wouldn't have done it anyhow, if she could have thought of any place else she might go, other than to a homeless shelter.

After all, it wasn't as though she had family back home who'd welcome her with open arms. Ever since she could remember, she'd felt like a burden her mother wanted to get rid of as quickly and easily as she could manage.

While Sid had struck Talia back then as a guy who kept himself under strict control, radiating intense concentration on what he was doing at BDSM play, living with him had shown her new layers of the man. His intelligence. The guy wasn't your typical football player. At least he wasn't like the ones who'd hung out with Vic back when they'd socialized with teammates.

Sid had graduated from Pitt with a degree in microbiology, and he said he was thinking about going to medical school once his football-playing days were done. But he wasn't only smart. He had a wicked sense of humor—never mean like some guys, just funny.

She'd never have guessed a year ago that Sid loved finding and restoring antique furniture, but he did. He was furnishing his house with his finds, one piece at a time. Her favorite was the massive oak wardrobe with its curlicues and gleaming beveled mirrors that sat against the living room wall, opposite the fireplace.

It had also surprised Talia, since Sid hadn't had any pets until he brought the two cats home soon after she arrived, to learn he devoted a lot of his free time to helping out at the pet rescue organization. He told her Vanessa and Victoria, the black-and-white tuxedo cats, had been brought to the shelter by an elderly woman who couldn't care for them anymore. He'd said he knew she'd fall in love with the cats when he first saw them, and he was right. She looked down at her sleeping companions and smiled.

From the way Sid talked about the big dogs he worked with at the shelter, Talia got the idea he was a dog person. A week or so ago she'd asked him why he didn't adopt one of the homeless dogs he liked so much. He'd shrugged and then pointed out the difficulty of having a dog when he was away so much for road games and training camps. "It would be unfair to a dog if I got one when I'm away so much. Unlike

Vanessa and Victoria, they need to be exercised regularly. Maybe when your knee is better, I'll take you to the shelter and we'll pick out one together," he'd told her.

Did Sid really want her to stay with him beyond the time it would take for her knee to heal enough so she could try to get a job? Talia wasn't sure. Sometimes she was pretty sure he wanted her, but other times she wondered why he hadn't thrown her out by now.

It bothered her that he hadn't already insisted she become more than a housemate. Didn't he want her? She wouldn't blame him if he didn't. After all, though Sid had told her he wanted her sexually, she knew enough to figure out that she wasn't worthy of his attention. It wasn't just that he was practically a genius and she'd barely finished high school, or that he was a millionaire football player and she was pretty much an unemployable bum.

I'm just plain not good enough for a good man. She'd had that proven to her more than once in her twenty-eight years of living.

After all, she'd been Vic's 24/7 slave for close to ten years, and for the past three or four he'd pretty much treated her the way he did his week-old garbage. And before Vic, her mom and stepfathers had made it obvious that they could hardly wait until she found a sucker to live with and got out of their way.

Talia couldn't understand why Sid hadn't kicked her out or at least asked more from her than an occasional meal and a little light housework. But when she tried to analyze the situation rationally, she was glad he'd been giving her time to get over her injuries – the ones in her head as well as her body.

At first she'd been too much a physical wreck to think about having sex except as a possible way to pay Sid back for his charity, but now she'd healed. The cast was off her knee, and the brace that the doctor had fitted her with hardly restricted her activities. Yesterday, she had even taken a mile-long hike along the river and barely broken a sweat.

She wasn't the delicate flower Sid seemed to think she was. His chaste kisses and casual touches were driving her insane, reminding her she'd come here because she used to love watching him play with his partners at Rebels' Roost. Damn it, she wanted him to play with her, too.

She'd read through some of his books on Japanese rope bondage and even tackled a couple volumes he had about the psychology of the BDSM lifestyle. She needed for him to take her, conquer the deeply rooted fears that drove her and force her to a state of sexual nirvana.

Of course a voice in Talia's head kept reminding her that Sid might not want Vic's leftovers. But he'd admitted when she had first gotten there that he lusted after her. Wouldn't he have tossed her out as soon as the cast had come off her leg if he'd decided he didn't want her after all? She'd occasionally wondered if he'd been playing in the dungeon at Rebels' Roost, but she didn't think so. He'd been sticking pretty close to home every night since she'd arrived, except for the weekends when he was out of town for games.

Stretching, she tried not to think of all the times last year when she'd surreptitiously watched Sid play at Rebels' Roost, his strands of rope gliding with sensual promise over the skin of the club submissives he usually chose for playmates. He'd never made them cry or beg for mercy, but Talia had sensed their arousal, heard their ecstatic moans when they came. She'd envied every one of Sid's playmates.

Vic had gone for less sensuous methods of exercising control. She remembered his frequent scoffing assessments of Sid's personal fetish. *Why spend all that time and energy tying your slave up in pretty knots when handcuffs and shackles do a better job and go on so much faster?*

Talia wanted Sid to dominate her. She wanted it so much she could barely keep herself from going down on her knees and begging him to take her.

Getting up, she went in the living room, found one of his books on rope bondage and curled up with it on the couch. As she studied the pictures she remembered watching Sid playing at Rebels' Roost.

I wish he'd play with me this way.

Chapter Two

When he got home from practice, Sid found Talia in the living room, looking at one of his books about *shibari*. She moved quickly to get her hand out of the baggy sweats she had on, but not so fast that he didn't see what she'd been doing. "Enjoying yourself, sweetheart?"

Her cheeks turned bright red when she looked up at him, as hot looking as his dick felt as he realized she shared his fetish on some level. "Were you imagining yourself in one of those pictures? Were you wishing I'd wrap you up that way? I want to do it, you know."

Long ago he'd etched those pictures on his brain, and over the past few years he'd perfected the art on casual playmates. When Talia became his playmate, it wouldn't be casual.

He imagined playing with her at Rebels' Roost, wrapping her in the blue nylon rope he planned to buy, rope that had played in all his erotic dreams of her. For their first play, he'd use a simple pattern. One that would have her flesh straining against snug but not painfully tight bonds that would emphasize her breasts, her tiny waist. A knot at the base of her mound would stimulate her swollen clit, make it stand up and beg for his attention. Her nipples would become rigid, rosy nubs, beckoning his tongue. His teeth. He'd suspend her so her sweet, wet cunt would be level with his mouth. And he'd feast on her slick, salty musk.

"You do?" When she spoke in that sweet, submissive voice, blood slammed into his groin. "I didn't hear you come in. Otherwise I wouldn't have..."

"Embarrassed yourself? You mustn't ever be embarrassed around me. You have no idea how much it arouses me, knowing that looking at rope bondage gets you so hot."

"I'm sorry."

"No need to be, sweetheart." Sid wanted to scoop her up and take her to his bed, but now wasn't the time, no matter how much his cock tried to tell him otherwise, so he lightened up the conversation. "Coach let us off early today. Want to go shopping?"

Seeing her wearing a pair of his old sweats every day was getting to him. They reminded him of the sad shape she'd been in when he'd found her on his doorstep with nothing but the clothes on her back. Remembering her battered and bruised that way made him think about that ass-wipe Reinhart, and he didn't like it. "I'm tired of seeing you wearing my hand-me-downs. I'd have gone out and bought you some stuff, but I've got no clue about how to pick out things you'll like. How about it? Shall we go get you some girly things?"

"Okay." She paused and her smile faded. "I don't have any money."

He refused to let her dwell on the fact that Reinhart had left her destitute. "I do. And I'd like to spend some of it on you. I thought we might go play at Rebels' Roost some night soon if you're feeling up to it. I hear there's some sort of get-together for Rebels' wives and girlfriends in a couple of days, and then of course there's the game on Sunday. I'd look like a stingy SOB if I let you go out wearing my old clothes."

She smiled up at him, her beautiful blue eyes sparkling as though he'd just offered her the moon. "I'd love to play with you. And I'll go to the team events if you're sure you want me to."

"I've been sure I want you since the first time I saw you with *him*." Sid paused, hesitating to say it. But then he figured, what the hell? Talia seemed ready to accept him as her new Dom, and she deserved to know he'd been lusting after her for a long time. "You've got no idea how much I envied him."

"He's in the past. I'm ready to move on." Talia's eyes widened, as though Sid's revelation amazed her. She had to have known for a good while that he cared about her, but he couldn't expect that she'd have realized the extent of his attraction to her.

Sid wasn't sure he'd realized that until just recently. At least not on a conscious level. But the certainty in Talia's voice gave him the courage to push forward. "With me? Are you ready to take me as your Master?"

"I was ready for you to be my Master when I rode buses all the way here from Phoenix and passed out on your front porch." Her shy smile made him want to hug her. And her words made him feel ten feet tall. Invincible.

He had to lighten up or he'd start shedding tears, and he didn't want her to know how deeply her admission affected him. "I'm glad. Come on, though, time's going by fast. I want to buy you some new clothes first, and if we get through soon enough, we can stop at a seafood place for dinner."

"All right. If you're sure you want to spend a little of your hard-earned money on me."

"I can't think of any way I'd rather spend it. Not only am I running out of sweats and dress shirts that don't have your scent and drive me nuts, I'm anxious to see you wearing something pretty. Sexy. Tight jeans and sweaters that show off your hot little body. Maybe even some stilettos and some silky lingerie."

"I can't wear high heels yet. My knee..."

"I was just kidding about the high heels, sweetheart. We'll get you some new cross-trainers and flats. And while we're out I'll stop by the toy store and see if I can find some new, soft rope that won't chafe your tender skin when we go and play at Rebels' Roost." He imagined her wrapped in blue rope, its bright color contrasting with her pale, creamy skin and bringing out the color of her eyes. When he imagined looking at her tied up for his pleasure, his mouth literally began to water. "I'm gonna wrap you up like a present, just for me."

She looked up and met his gaze then lowered it, reminding him she was a natural submissive who'd been well trained. While he didn't mind the breach of BDSM etiquette, he didn't like wondering if her motivation for submission included a large dose of fear. "Talia, I'm a Dom, but I don't want you scared to look me in the eye. I

don't want you afraid of me, period. We'll have to experiment, find out each other's likes and dislikes."

"I don't know..."

Sid made his jaw loosen up, forced a smile. "My style of sexual mastery is nothing like you've experienced if *he* was your only Master. I'm going to show you a lot of pain's not necessary to bring you pleasure." Bending, he brushed his lips over hers, tasted her hope...and her fear. "C'mon, let's go shopping."

* * * * *

A couple hours later, Talia glanced behind her at the bags and boxes that practically filled the backseat of Sid's Acura ZDX. The man had insisted on clothing her from the skin out, and not in the sleazy-sexy styles Vic used to like whenever he let her wear clothes at all, but as a lady. A sexy lady, Sid had whispered at the lingerie shop when he'd laid a few pale, silky nighties beside the underwear a clerk had been ringing up.

When she looked out and saw they'd stopped outside a seafood restaurant next to the Intracoastal Waterway, she tried not to tremble at the prospect of going into the weathered building that already had quite a crowd, judging by the crowded parking lot. It had been so long since she'd been out with other people.

She froze, certain things must have changed in the years Vic had kept her isolated. What if she'd forgotten which fork to use for what, or what foods it was okay to pick up with her fingers? She'd die if she embarrassed Sid in this restaurant. When he got out of the car and closed the door, she couldn't make herself open the passenger door.

"Hungry?" He opened her door, framing himself in the light of a bright, new moon. The changing colors of a fish-shaped neon sign played across his handsome, smiling face.

"I'm starved." But not so much for food as for the taste of his lips, the feel of his heavy beard stubble against her sensitive skin. She longed to smell his cologne and experience the heat and pressure of his substantial weight on her. Talia wanted to feel

his muscular arms around her, holding her, taking her. Making her his own, the way he'd said he intended to do.

She gave him her hand and he enveloped it with his own. For as long as she dared, she ran her thumb over his calloused palm, enjoying its warmth, its rough texture. He radiated heat despite the cold wind when he drew her out of the car and up against his hard, fit body. It felt so good, resting her head on his broad shoulder, listening to his steady heartbeat against her ear.

"Come on, then. I see Coach Zanardi's Porsche over there, and I want to show off my woman. The guys on the team have been accusing me of making you up." Bending and kissing the tip of Talia's nose, Sid grinned. "You remember Coach, don't you?"

"I remember seeing him a few times at Rebels' Roost." Talia wouldn't say she actually knew Coach because by the time she and Vic had landed in Savannah, Vic had stopped taking her out in public. Pretty much the only time he'd allowed her contact with his coaches and fellow players had been in the dungeon. "If I remember correctly, he did his playing with club submissives."

"That was right, before this season. Coach went back to his old hometown in Texas last summer and fell for Susan. He brought her back with him. They're married now and expecting a baby. Come on, I'd like to introduce you to them before they finish eating."

Oh no. Talia doubted she was up to socializing with the man who held Sid's job in his hands. It had been so long since she'd gone out, except to dungeons, that she had no clue what she should say and how she should act with Sid's coach and his pregnant wife. She couldn't help trembling at the prospect of embarrassing Sid.

"Don't act as if you're scared to death. Coach only bites players at practice. Otherwise he's an okay guy. And Susan's a pretty, sweet submissive who is making the coach a very happy Dom." Sid bent and laid some soft kisses along her jaw, and that made Talia feel ashamed of hanging back by the door to Sid's car.

“Okay. I just hope I won’t do anything to get you in trouble.” She remembered Vic telling her more than once that she was a dumb hick, a slut he didn’t want to show off to the people he worked for. But Sid wasn’t Vic. He seemed anxious for her to meet his friends, so she’d do her best.

“You won’t, sweetheart. Trust me.” Sid took Talia’s hand and started moving toward the restaurant. “If you aren’t up for it, I won’t angle for an invitation to join them at their table, but I thought you might like to enjoy some company besides me. And to see how a healthy Dom/sub relationship works. I’ve been pretty much your only contact since you’ve been back here, and I’m sure you’re tired of being isolated at the house.”

“I’ve never gotten tired of being with you.” And while she realized he hadn’t kept her isolated on purpose, she didn’t know if she felt ready to interact with anybody but Sid.

Talia told herself not to be silly, that it would be okay. Sid did seem to want to show her off in the designer jeans outfit he’d insisted she wear out of the first store where they’d shopped. When a strong gust of cold wind bombarded them off the waterway beyond the restaurant, Talia turned up the hood of her new fleece-lined jacket and leaned into the shelter of Sid’s body. “I guess you’re right. I have been sort of a hermit.”

“That’s over now, baby. I want to be your Master in the bedroom and playrooms, but otherwise we’ll be equals. I expect you to have friends, and to go out and do things with them. The logical place for you to begin making female friends will be getting to know the other Rebels’ wives and significant others.”

He had no idea how long it had been since she’d had contact with others outside the dungeons. While Talia looked forward to having friends again, part of her held back, but she managed a smile for Sid. “I think I’ll like that. But it may take me a little while to get used to all this freedom. I’m starting to freeze out here. Please, let’s go inside where it’s warm.”

Sid wrapped his arm around her, sheltering her from the wind as they made their way to the restaurant's double doors. "Come with me, beautiful. I'm anxious to show you off."

* * * * *

After they dropped by Coach's table and Sid introduced Talia to him and Susan, he wangled an invitation to join them since they were just starting to eat their salads.

In one way Sid liked the way Talia deferred to him—but then again, he didn't. Every time she lowered her eyelids, each furtive glance she shot his way, even the timid way she sometimes laid her hand against his thigh as if asking permission to speak, reminded him she'd literally been the 24/7 sex slave of a cruel Dom whom Sid despised. He caught her hand and covered it with his own as he ordered for both of them.

"We're glad you're back in Savannah, Talia," Coach Zanardi mentioned after the waiter had moved away from their table. "I'm glad you found a way to leave Reinhart. He's bad news, and not just in the dungeon."

"Well—"

Sid silenced Talia with a hard look and a squeeze on her thigh. He didn't want her to blurt out that her bastard of a Master had thrown her out instead of the other way around. "What Talia's trying to say is that she's looking forward to making a fresh start with me," he said to fill the silence.

"Being submissive doesn't usually mean being a 24/7 slave. Doing your own thing part of the time doesn't mean you're any less loyal to your Master or Mistress. Right, honey?" Coach turned to his beautiful dark-haired wife and stroked her cheek.

"You're right. I've been enjoying the freedom you give me, a lot." Susan caught her husband's hand and brought it to her lips, laughing softly. "I spent too many years with a Master who wanted to control everything I did, all the time."

Sid felt Talia's hand tighten against his leg, so he stroked it the way a trainer might soothe a restless animal. "You see?" he asked. "I want to be your Master, but like Coach I still expect you to have a life of your own."

* * * * *

Their evening ended early, because both men had to be at the practice facility early the next morning for the Rebels' first playoff game, scheduled for Sunday afternoon. Talia had surprised herself by agreeing to go with Susan to the game.

"That was fun." Talia felt warm and fuzzy, almost like a teenager coming home from a surprisingly enjoyable first date, as she and Sid unloaded the boxes and bags of her new clothes from the car and took them inside where they laid them on her bed. The cats sniffed at the purchases they apparently thought were taking too much room on the bed where they'd been sleeping. "Thank you for everything."

"Thank you, what?" Sid's tone was teasing, not at all ominous as Vic's would have been if she'd ever forgotten to acknowledge his dominance.

"Thank you, Master." When she met his gaze, she saw amusement and desire that he didn't even try to hide. "What would you like from your slave?"

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her. It was a long, sweet kiss with just a hint of tongue. Their bodies merged—his hard and fit, hers soft and malleable at his touch. "For a start, I'd like for you to put on one of those new nighties—surprise me—and come join me in my bed."

"Yes, Master," she whispered against his lips before he let her go.

"Take your time. I'll be waiting when you're ready." With that he brushed her cheek with one finger, smiled and left her to follow his gently worded command.

Trembling, Talia undressed, taking a moment to stroke the soft, fleece-lined jacket Sid said he'd chosen because it matched her eyes. *I want so much to please him. Please don't let me fuck this up.* Snapping out of her momentary trance, she finished undressing,

hung up her jeans and top and rifled through the bags looking for the nighties and other lingerie they'd bought.

By the time she found the right bag, dumped it and decided to wear the pale blue, lace-trimmed gown that would brush the floor when she put it on, she was nearly frantic. What if her new Master didn't like waiting? Taking a deep breath and telling herself Sid wasn't Vic and that he'd told her to take her time, Talia took off her knee brace and showered quickly. Her heart beating fast—she wasn't sure whether with fear or anticipation or a little of both—she slipped the sheer silk over her head, ran a brush through her tousled curls and made her way to the master bedroom.

Chapter Three

He was waiting, just as he'd said he'd be, his room lit only by the antique lamp on the oak, Victorian-period chest near the door. Through its stained-glass shade, the light bulb cast a faint, golden glow that surrounded her in warmth as soon as she stepped inside.

Bathed in the soft light, his compact body glowed, hard muscle accentuated by shadow. When he moved away from the window toward her—toward the queen-size bed with its pale gray comforter, turned back to show silky, black sheets—she couldn't help taking a deep breath when she saw the impressive length and thickness of his cock.

He was so gorgeous that he took her breath away. Not massive all over the way most football players were, and Sid didn't have an ounce of fat padding those well-defined muscles. Perfectly proportioned, with a gracefulness she appreciated, he still towered over her when he joined her and took her hand. Big enough to make her feel small and protected, he wasn't so tall that she couldn't stretch on tiptoe and rest her forehead on his broad shoulder. She liked that.

Talia started to drop down on her knees in front of him but he stopped her with a firm touch of his large, strong hands. "Let's go to bed, sweetheart." Using his hand on her bottom to keep her upright, he guided her toward the expanse of black sheets and fat pillows. "You're beautiful." He lifted her in his arms as though she weighed no more than a small child and laid her out in the middle of his bed. Smiling, he sat cross-legged beside her.

Her skin tingled when he stroked along the length of her body, pressing the sheer silk of her gown against her skin. She felt the heat of his gaze, his need, in the almost reverent way he touched her.

"It's been almost nine weeks since I had sex. I'd better apologize in advance, in case I lose control," he said, smiling as he stretched out beside her.

Nine weeks? Was Sid telling her he hadn't had a woman since before she'd come to him? Talia took a deep breath and tried to take in what he'd just said. Had he really been waiting for tonight? Waiting for her to heal before taking what she considered his right as her savior? Her Master? "Please take me, Master. Don't worry, I'm fine now."

He looked at her, his eyes bright with dark blue fire as he lowered the spaghetti straps on her nightgown one at a time, baring her breasts to his gaze. The gentle rasp of his long, tapered fingers on her sensitive flesh sent shards of desire shivering through her, and when he cupped one breast in a hand that seemed almost too big for the rest of him, she let out a sigh.

"You okay?" Concern resonated in his husky voice as he bent his head and laid gentle kisses along her throat and collarbone.

"Oh yes." If she died in the next minute, she'd go happy because of how Sid was making her feel right now. "May I touch you, Master?"

"Feel free." His breath tickled her shoulder as he nuzzled her collar bone, seemingly in no hurry to go faster and relieve the pulsating hardness she felt pressing insistently against her upper thigh. "You smell good."

"Like the orange stuff I just showered with?"

He laughed. "No, baby, you smell like you. Sweet and clean and sexy as hell."

She lifted her hand and ran her fingers through his dark brown hair, loving the contrast in textures. Crisp at the hairline in back, soft on top where he let it grow a bit, it felt clean and warm. Like him. When he moved lower and took her nipple between his straight, white teeth, she shivered at the pleasure-pain that coursed through her body. "Oh, yes, Master," she whispered, sliding her hand down one broad shoulder and over his hard-muscled arm.

"You like this?" He raised his head, and the smile he gave her when he met her gaze made her feel wanted. Cherished as she'd never felt before.

"I love it."

"Good." He slipped one arm around her and pulled her body flush with his. She wanted the nightgown gone, needed to experience the heat of his muscular body without that barrier, however flimsy it might be.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he gathered the silk in his fists and dragged the gown down her body until it pooled around her ankles. "Kick it off now," he said, his order no less a command because he issued it in a low, controlled tone of voice.

When she did, she felt free, ready to soar with him wherever he took her. Talia rubbed her hand along Sid's ridged belly then slid it around to cup his taut buttock. In response to her touch, he splayed one big hand over her ass and drew her hard into his throbbing erection. His heat and hardness made her want him to fuck her now, ease the tension she felt mounting low in her belly. "Please, Master."

He slid one hand between her legs and found her damp, swollen pussy. "Please, what, sweetheart? You'll have to tell me what you need."

"You." She took a deep breath then curled her fingers around his cock. "Please fuck me, Master."

His cock had begun to think she'd never ask. "Oh yeah. Hold on just a minute, though."

Sid rolled away from Talia and fumbled in the drawer of the table by the bed. His balls felt as though they'd burst as he rolled the condom over his erection and moved between Talia's legs. "Wrap your pretty legs around my waist and hold on tight."

Keep it light, Conyers. Don't ruin it by thinking about her with Reinhart.

She felt like heaven and hell rolled into one when he sank inside her. Soft, tight, wet and as hot as he'd dreamed she'd be. He slipped his hands under her butt to change the angle of his penetration and then drove deeper, harder. Her little moans were making him crazy, so he bent and took her mouth, nudging her lips apart and sliding his tongue

inside. When she tangled hers with his and clamped down with her inner muscles on his driving cock, he just about lost it.

He didn't want it to be over, not yet. Rolling to his back, he brought her on top of him. "Fuck me, sweetheart," he ordered, his tone harsher than he intended as he took in her dazed, passion-drugged expression and tried to concentrate on how the multicolored glow from the Tiffany lamp cast its light against her soft, pale skin.

She moved on him, slow at first then faster. When he reached up and cupped her beautiful rose-tipped breasts in his hands, she let out a little moan but didn't slow the pace.

Sid always relied on his self-control, but he felt it slipping away. His balls tightened painfully each time she sank down on his shaft, her muscles clamping down on him, milking him.

Hell, he had to quit thinking about coming or his cock would explode, and he wanted Talia to come for him, without him hurting her the way he remembered having seen Reinhart deliberately cause her pain at the club. Sid loosened his hold on her full, soft breasts and began to stroke gently along her rib cage as she moved up and down on him. "Let go, baby. Come for me."

"I'm trying," she grated out between clenched teeth. "Please help me." She came down on his cock, hard, and when she did, she let out a little cry. A cry of pain, not of pleasure.

For a second he exulted in the knowledge that she wasn't aroused by pain. Then he lifted her off him and rolled her onto her side. "I ought to spank you for not telling me your knee was hurting."

Fuck, he was an idiot. No stranger to torn ligaments and the pain they could cause, Sid kicked himself figuratively for not realizing Talia was in no shape to ride him. He shouldn't have ordered her to wrap that injured leg around his waist earlier, either. "On second thought, I ought to slug myself. Want to quit for now and cuddle a bit?"

"I'm sorry, Master." Lying beside him, her blonde curls pale against the black sheet, Talia looked and sounded beaten. Broken. And more than half afraid that he would punish her.

Clenching his jaw, he propped himself up on his elbows and looked into her glistening, tear-filled eyes. "Stop it. I'm not Reinhart, and I'm not about to blame you when I should have remembered about your knee."

"But you didn't—"

"No, I didn't come. You didn't, either. There will be plenty of other times, so it's not the end of the world. I'm not about to do anything that may do some further damage to your knee. Lie back and let me taste you."

She stirred against him then raised her head. "Would you let me suck your cock?"

"My cock is your cock, sweetheart. But not right now. I want you to lie back and enjoy." He hated the fact that she sounded so afraid, as though something horrible might happen to her if she didn't get him off. Sid held back a vicious curse, pissed that once again the ghost of her former Master was intruding into his head. Then he sat up and ruffled Talia's hair. "Spread your legs for me, but don't strain your knee."

"Yes, Master."

He stroked along the sides of her soft, curvy body, gentling her the way he'd soothe an agitated kitten as he stretched out on his belly between her legs and blew on her damp, musky cunt. Then he found her clit and began to flail it with his tongue. When she let out a little moan that let him know she liked what he was doing, he slid his hands down and spread her outer lips.

Her soft pubic curls tickled his lips and fingers, reminding him he preferred his pussies shaved. When he'd watched her playing at Rebels' Roost, he'd noticed she didn't shave her pubic hair and promised himself he'd do it for her if he ever had the opportunity.

Fuck, Conyers. Don't go there. She's yours now, and you don't need to torture yourself, thinking about the past. After all, he reminded himself, he was hardly a virgin. She'd seen

him playing at the dungeon, too. And with many different partners. As Sid recalled, Reinhart had never offered to share Talia. "Would you let me shave your pussy, sweetheart?" he asked, lifting his head to look up at Talia's beautiful face.

"Of course, if you'd like to. Or I could do it for you, Master."

He lowered his face again, found her damp cunt and tongued it while he ringed her anus with his fingers. By God, if it took him the rest of his life, he'd show her that her submission didn't mean unquestioning acceptance of his every suggestion. It unnerved him that she lay beneath him as though she was afraid that any reaction she showed might result in him hurting or humiliating her.

He wanted her to come. And he damn sure didn't want her to be afraid of him. Sid raised his head again, stopping as he did to nibble at her clit. "Come for me, sweetheart."

"I'm trying, Master." When she laid her small, cool hand against his cheek, as though to calm a fractious beast, he felt a tiny tremor in her fingers. "I love what you're doing to me."

"You do? Then relax. Let go of whatever's bottled up inside you." He lowered his lips to her clit, worried the tight little nub with the tip of his tongue. "Feel good?"

"Oh, yes." He felt her movement when she angled her hips to give him more room. Her soft, wet heat enveloped his fingers when he sank them inside her cunt and began a slow, rhythmic motion. "Mmm," she moaned, and he felt her thread her fingers through his hair. His balls ached like crazy, but he was determined that this would be for her.

Please, sweetheart. I know it's not pain that makes you come. "Concentrate. Feel me inside you, stretching and filling you. Feel the heat building up. Let go of everything else in your head and give me your climax." Sid kept finger-fucking her, deeper and faster, until Talia rewarded his efforts with a shudder that racked her whole body. Her little scream of satisfaction sounded better to his ears than any music.

"Thank you, Master." Talia wanted to return the favor. No, she wanted to taste her Master's long, thick cock, to serve his needs as he'd just served hers. Her pussy still tingled and twitched from Sid's gentle touch. "May I—"

"As long as you don't hurt your knee." When Sid spoke, his words sounded low and sexy, almost like a growl. "Lie back and relax. I'll do all the work this time."

He shifted, but instead of moving up her body and straddling her face as she expected, he slipped on a fresh condom. Then he fitted his body to hers, belly to belly, and slid his hard cock into her pussy. "Oh."

"Yeah, you were expecting something else, weren't you?" He bent and took her lips again as he began to move. "I'll feed you my cock sometime soon, but I want to be inside your warm, wet pussy, the first time I come with you. Like this." He sank deeper then almost withdrew, over and over until she felt his cock grow impossibly harder.

His face was taut, tanned skin straining over chiseled bone. His teeth clenched, he sank into her all the way, filled her completely. He held himself up on his hands, and when he did, the well-defined muscles in his arms bunched up and twitched.

"God yes, sweetheart. Let me feel you clamping down on my cock. Hold me as though you're never gonna let me go." He let out a guttural cry, and she felt him coming. It left her feeling warm and almost loved.

A long time later he went in the bathroom and she heard water running. It stopped, and he came back to the bed and fitted his warm body around her back, his cock now relaxed and velvety against her butt. "Go to sleep. I've got to get to practice early in the morning, and I want to wake up this way—with you in my arms."

* * * * *

The next morning Sid woke to the smell of freshly brewed coffee. Soft, fat snowflakes drifted past his bedroom window and Talia lay curled up under the blanket next to him like a docile kitten. "Good morning, Master," she said, her smile as bright as the day outside promised to be dreary.

“Good morning. Something tells me you’ve been up already.”

“Only long enough to make your coffee and bring you some so you can enjoy it while you get dressed. I came right back, so I’d be here when you woke up, the way you told me to.”

He couldn’t argue with the aroma, or with the warm, sexy woman in his bed. When she started to get up, he pressed her back against the pillows. “Stay, sweetheart. There’s no need for you to get up just because I have to. If the snow lets up later this morning, you may want to bundle up, take the car and stock us up on groceries.” He picked up his wallet, took out a credit card and set it on the nightstand for her. “Get whatever you think we need, and maybe get your nails and hair done, too.” Talia looked great to him, but he’d observed that women seemed to enjoy a having a day to pamper themselves every once in a while.

“Are you sure you don’t mind taking the truck?” When he rolled out of bed she burrowed under the covers, in the spot he’d just vacated.

“It needs to be driven some, or the battery will go dead. It’s been sitting out in the garage so long, I’m afraid that if I don’t use it once in a while, it won’t move.” Sid had seen Talia drive and knew she wasn’t all that comfortable behind the wheel. He figured she’d have a hard time with the stick-shift, four-wheel-drive Honda Ridgeline. He’d bought it four years ago when he had gotten his rookie signing bonus and had kept it after upgrading to the Acura because it came in handy for hauling furniture finds as well as lawn supplies. He picked up the mug and took a sip of the hot, sweet liquid. “Good coffee. Thanks for getting up to make it for me.”

“I wanted to. If you’d let me get up, I’d fix you breakfast before you go out in the cold,” she said, stirring under the covers and making him wish he had time to crawl back in bed with her.

Sid laughed. “They’ll have a good spread for us at the training facility. There’s no need for you to wait on me. Coach Zanardi wants us well-fed as well as well-practiced for these playoffs, since we weren’t expected to squeak in this year.”

"All right. Do you think you'll go to the Super Bowl again?"

Sid didn't hold out much hope that the Rebels would go very deep in the playoffs. It surprised him that Talia apparently wasn't aware that the team was in a rebuilding mode after last year's Super Bowl loss.

"I doubt it, if you want the truth. Yancey has a way to go before anybody starts comparing him with Dave Delaney, and the Rebels' defense has barely held its own against some of the competition so far this year. I hope I'm wrong, though. I'd like to make some big plays for you to see this weekend."

"Dave? Yancey? I'm sorry, Master. I don't recognize those guys' names."

Shit. Reinhart had been the Rebels' left offensive tackle. Surely he'd have mentioned the name of the star quarterback whose blind side he'd been brought in to protect. "You never heard of Dave Delaney?"

Talia shook her head. "Vic didn't talk to me about football. And I've never gone to a Rebels' game."

"Dave was the Rebels' all-pro quarterback until he retired after getting hurt in the Super Bowl last year. Yancey Daniels is the second-year guy who replaced him."

"Oh. Did you play in the Super Bowl that the Rebels won? That was Vic's first year with the Rebels. I don't remember seeing you at Rebels' Roost that year, though."

"Nope. I was still in college then." Sid managed a grin. He did remember, though, that the bastard hadn't brought Talia to New Orleans to watch the Super Bowl they had lost last year. "If we make it to the big game again this year, you're going to come and be my good luck charm."

"Thank you, Master. Vic never would —"

"Damn it, I don't want to hear that asshole's name coming out of your sweet little mouth. If I ever see him again, I'll have a hard enough time restraining myself from killing him, even without you mentioning him all the time."

He thought he'd held his temper well, considering that Talia had just admitted Reinhart had pretty much kept her in the dark about what had been going on in his life. But the moment she'd said that name, Sid proved his anger management skills to be a big fat lie. Unfortunately his outburst had set Talia to trembling so hard that the blanket shook around her.

Shit. He sat on the edge of the bed and took her hand. "I'm not mad at you, sweetheart, but every time I think about what he did to you, I see red."

"I'm sorry. It's just that you're so different—in a good way. I've always wanted to go to games. And to go out and socialize, the way regular people do."

Sid clenched his fists and felt his jaw tighten as he mentally drove another nail into Vic Reinhart's coffin. Apparently the only times he'd let Talia out had been when he'd taken her to the dungeon. "Did he keep you locked up in the house so you couldn't get out except with him?"

"Sometimes." Talia lowered her gaze. "Not at first, though. You know, I think part of the reason he turned so mean might have been the concussions he kept having over and over again."

So the bastard hadn't always isolated her. So he kept getting his brain scrambled by head hits. Big fucking deal. For whatever reason, Reinhart obviously had turned into a monster by the time he'd come to the Rebels, since he'd kept her locked away so tightly that she didn't even recognize the name of the team's all-pro former quarterback. "I'm not about to hide my sweet, beautiful Talia from the world. You might as well know that now."

She managed a timid smile when he tilted her face so she had to look him in the eye. "You're a good Master."

He intended to be. "Pretty soon, after the season's over, we'll do family night at Rebels' Roost. I wish I'd thought to take you there before, but I had no idea you hadn't already met most of the players and their families." Sid leaned over Talia and gave her a long, hard kiss.

“Not all of us play in the dungeon at Rebels’ Roost,” he said when she looked confused. “Some of the guys are plain vanilla. Close those pretty eyes and get a few more hours of sleep. I’ll be home after practice.” He made a mental note to ask Jack to have Tawny call Talia and invite her to the luncheon that was scheduled for later this week for Rebels’ wives and girlfriends.

Chapter Four

In spite of the constant spit of wet snowflakes against his face, sweat poured off Sid's body and he was breathing hard. Head Coach Zanardi had taken over the offense's practice. He'd pushed Yancey hard this morning, which in turn had pushed Sid and the other receivers to run a lot of complex routes and dive for Yancey's passes, which often were barely catchable. Now Yancey was standing back, watching the receivers run the routes he'd had trouble throwing to, so Coach could show the young quarterback where the football needed to go.

Along with Jack, Ty and the other wide receivers and tight ends, Sid ran the routes again and again. When Coach threw, the balls hit him between the numbers. No heroics were necessary, just grab the ball, tuck it and run. Unfortunately, Colin Zanardi wouldn't be throwing the passes in Sunday's game. A Hall of Famer, he'd retired from playing before Sid had moved up from Pop Warner Football, but he still could throw with the best of them.

Hopefully some of Coach's tutoring would rub off on Yancey. God help them if they had to resort to using either of their two backup quarterbacks. Sid figured he could throw better than either of them, and he hadn't played quarterback since his sophomore year of college, when his coach had talked him in to switching to wide receiver because of his shorter stature and his speed.

When Coach called them off the field, Sid rubbed his sore neck. "You okay, Sid?" Coach asked.

"Fine. Just a little sore."

"You and the others did good, dragging down some of Yancey's high passes. I'm gonna work with him and the quarterback coach a little more this afternoon. I want you and Jack to join us in the field house for more passing drills."

"Okay, Coach. I hope you'll be the one doing most of the throwing," Sid said.

Jack shot Sid a thumbs-up. "Second that."

"Don't let Yancey hear you. I want him feeling confident when he steps onto the field Sunday." Coach gave them both stern looks. "I'll be doing some of the throwing, though. I don't want my receivers ragged out before the game starts. Besides, I've put Yancey on a pitch count to rest his arm. We've noticed he's more accurate when he's fresh."

What time do you want us back out here?" Sid didn't look forward to having to dive for another fifty or so of Yancey's passes.

"About two o'clock. I sent Yancey in to ice his arm. You two might want to spend an hour with the trainers."

"Good idea. Jack?"

"Sure."

Sid turned to his friend. "Do me a favor. Have Tawny call and ask Talia to meet her at that luncheon thing the wives are having later this week."

"I would, but she had to fly to Chicago yesterday. Her mom's having what she hopes will be some minor surgery. If it turns out to be not so minor, she may not get back in time to make it to the game." Jack shook his head. "Why don't you ask Coach to get his wife to invite her? You mentioned having had dinner with them last night."

Sid looked over at his friend. "Thanks for the suggestion. I'll do that. Tell Tawny I hope her mom doesn't have anything major."

* * * * *

Talia set down the land-line phone and just enjoyed the warm feeling it had given her, talking with Sid. It was sweet of him to call and say he'd be home late, and to tell her what he'd be doing at practice for the rest of the afternoon. Vic had never bothered.

Damn it, you've got to get Vic out of your mind, even if you are thinking how much better a Master you have now in Sid.

Closing her eyes, she stood there in the kitchen wearing a cozy velour sweatsuit and cozy slippers, waiting for the buzzer to go off and let her know the brownies were ready. She couldn't help reliving what had happened last night, how Sid had patiently coaxed her until she came—something she'd never done before except in BDSM scenes. He'd honestly cared that her knee still hurt, and that meant a lot.

He even seemed to enjoy being with her, and he'd made it pretty obvious that he wanted to show her off to his teammates, so maybe he thought she was good enough. Good for more than being a convenient sex slave in a dungeon. That gave her a warm, fuzzy feeling she hadn't experienced for a long, long time—if ever.

The least she could do for Sid was to bury Vic Reinhart in the farthest reaches of her memory, because the mere mention of him made Sid furious, and she didn't want that. Not that she was seriously afraid that he'd hurt her. He treated her as though he thought she'd crack at the least harsh word. But she worried that he'd do something stupid like going after her ex, and if he did she knew he'd get hurt.

Was that disloyal? Talia didn't know, but as fit and athletic as Sid was, he'd be outweighed by at least a hundred pounds. Worse, his scruples would keep him from using the dirty tricks she knew Vic—*there I am, thinking his name again*—wouldn't hesitate to use to destroy an opponent.

When the oven timer rang, she opened her eyes and shoved those worries to the back of her mind. The brownies smelled so good she wanted to dig into them right away, but she resisted the urge and set them on a rack to cool. She'd found the mix in the pantry and figured Sid must like them. She hoped so, because as she watched the snow falling harder now, she knew she wouldn't make it out to the store.

Having gone since high school without driving a car until the last couple of weeks when Sid had started sending her on small errands in his Acura every few days, Talia wasn't anxious to go sliding all over Savannah's streets during this unusual winter storm. They'd have to make do tonight with what was already on hand in the way of food.

Good thing I put those chicken breasts in the refrigerator to thaw. She'd bake them with brown rice and vegetables, and they'd have their meal. It was good, too, that Sid seemed to enjoy just about every dish she'd made so far. She went to the living room, picked one of his books and curled up to read.

* * * * *

Talia had just started cooking dinner when she heard Sid come in from the garage. "It looks cold out there."

Grinning, he came up behind her and slipped an icy hand inside the waistband of her sweatpants and around to cup her butt and draw her hard against him. "It is. I'm glad I have you here to warm me up."

She lifted her face as he lowered his head and gave her an icy-hot kiss. When she slid her fingers through his hair, she felt melting snowflakes there and let out a little shiver that made him break the kiss.

"Dinner will be ready in a few minutes. Maybe you ought to go shower off the snow and get yourself warm before you catch a cold."

"Yes, Mom," he said, his tone teasing. "I think I'll go soak in the hot tub. Want to join me?"

"I-I should keep an eye on your food." She wasn't sure whether he was asking or telling her he wanted her to come with him right now. "Unless..."

Sid reached over and turned the oven temperature down. Then he lifted Talia in his arms. "I doubt if dinner's going to burn now, sweetheart. If it does, it's no big deal. We can always call for a pizza."

"All right, Master." At least he didn't seem angry that she'd hesitated at first.

Lowering his head, he nuzzled the bare skin around her collar. "I wouldn't risk missing out on whatever it is you're making that smells so good, but practice was a bitch. I need you to rub some of the soreness out of my back and shoulders. And my legs."

"Carrying me around won't do much toward soothing your tired muscles, will it?" she asked as he headed toward his bedroom.

"Oh yeah. It helps. At least it doesn't hurt me." She felt his muscles tense. "You're such a tiny thing, even a runt like me can handle you without straining anything."

"Runt? You're no runt. You're—"

"I'm the smallest guy on the team. 'Runt' is what my teammates have been calling me ever since I got here four years ago. Come to think of it, some of the guys at Pitt hung that name on me, too. I don't mind. I may be little but I'm damn good at catching footballs and dodging tacklers."

He sounded defensive, and that bothered Talia. When he set her down outside the master bathroom door he stepped inside and turned on the hot tub. As he started stripping off his cold, damp sweats, she felt his tension. Could it be that he was sensitive about his size?

She had trouble believing there could be any chinks in Sid's brash self-confidence, but maybe she was wrong. Maybe she should say something to diffuse the tension that had suddenly come between them.

"You're awfully good at other things, too. You may not be the biggest guy on your team, but you're plenty big enough to handle me...Master." When he grinned, she let out a sigh of relief.

"Aren't you going to get naked? I'd hate for you to get that pretty outfit all wet when I dump you in the hot tub."

Maybe he hadn't taken her comment as an insult after all. She was going to have to relax, not let herself be scared to death that every time she opened her mouth she'd be setting off his temper. She had to keep remembering Sid wasn't—she wouldn't even think *his* name.

Talia smiled up at Sid. "Yes, Master. I'm looking forward to getting my hands on all your beautiful muscles."

"Now that's something I've been waiting to hear ever since you arrived, sweetheart." He shot her a lascivious look when she pulled her top over her head and reached behind her back to unsnap her bra. "May I help?"

Oh yeah. He could put his hands on her anytime he wanted. Talia held her arms out and gave him free rein. "Please do."

She loved the feel of his long fingers and calloused palms brushing her skin as he pushed her bra straps down her arms. His warm breath tickled her cheek when he hooked his fingers into her waistband and dragged her pants down and off. "I think this can do without a dunking, too," he said, unbuckling her knee brace and taking it off. "Now we're ready for the tub."

Steam started to rise off the bubbling water, producing a deep, fragrant fog in the master bathroom when he stepped back so Talia could go first. When she hesitated, he wrapped an arm around her and coaxed her to step down into the sunken tub.

"You first, sweetheart. I'll be in there right behind you." Damn it, every time she acted as if she were afraid he'd bite if she didn't treat him like a fucking king, she made him think about her ex. He took a deep breath and then spoke to her gently. "Try to remember who's your Master now."

When she stepped in the tub, the swirling water practically hid her beautiful breasts, so full and ripe for such a tiny woman. She swayed as the Jacuzzi jets pushed her first in one direction and then another. Sid joined her, wrapping his arms around her waist to hold her steady. "Lean on me. I like coming home to you after a hard day at work."

She laid her hands on his shoulders, kneading them rhythmically as they stood in the tub. "Where are you sore?"

“Right where you’re rubbing me. Also my upper back. My legs. Coach Zanardi took over the offensive practice this morning. He ran us hard, especially during passing drills.” Sid leaned into her hands, let out a sigh. “That feels good. What say we sit on the bench and let the jets do their thing?”

“All right, Master.” As always, she agreed with his suggestion, which he’d have liked more if he believed her cooperation wasn’t partly fueled by fear.

Sid lifted her and sat against the pulsating jets, holding her on his lap and enjoying the feeling of closeness, in mind as well as body.

This was what he’d been missing the past few years, confining his sexual activities to Rebels’ Roost and avoiding the sort of emotional connection he was feeling now with Talia. Those feelings were growing stronger every day. “You know, sweetheart, I don’t think I’ll ever let you go.”

A tiny shudder moved through her body, and he saw fear in her eyes when she met his gaze. “What? Does the idea of always being with me scare you that much?”

“Vi— Somebody told me that once, when I was about fifteen years old. Like my mom’s promises that we’d someday win the lottery and be rich, that promise was too good to be true. I’ll be your slave as long as you want me, but please don’t let me wish—”

Sid laid a finger over her lips. Damn it, he didn’t want to hear any more. He knew how much she’d been hurt. The man had lived with her for years but apparently had never offered the security of marriage. That had to have fucked with Talia’s head. “Hush, baby. I want you to wish. And I want to give you everything you’ve ever wished for.”

She dug her fingers through his hair and stretched up until she could taste his lips. Whether to silence him or arouse him, he wasn’t sure. After a minute, though, he didn’t care because her tongue was darting in and out of his mouth. She pressed her breasts against his chest and squirmed in his lap. Not surprisingly, his dick responded,

apparently not discouraged by the heat of the water or the knowledge that he had no protection within easy reach.

Reluctantly he cupped her face in his hands and broke the kiss. "Hey, if you don't take it easy, I won't be responsible for what's going to happen, the least of which will be that we let that dinner you were making for us burn to a crisp."

When she looked up at him, he saw tears glistening in her eyes, but the smile on her lips sent him another message. "You're my Master. We'll do whatever you want."

His dick could wait, because the last thing he wanted to do was make Talia think he didn't appreciate her efforts to nourish all his appetites. "Let's dry off and eat in front of the fireplace. You serve up the food, and while you do I'll build a fire. We'll play some more, afterward."

* * * * *

A big log crackled in the fireplace. Mellow strains of love songs from one of Keith Urban's CDs seemed to fill the large room, almost as intoxicating as the feel of Sid's strong arms supporting her on the couch, against his chest. His regular breathing seemed in time with the music.

Too good to be true. With near desperation, Talia kept repeating that mantra. She tried not to think about how natural it had felt to share their dinner in the firelight, or heaven help her to work together afterward to rinse their dishes and load them in the dishwasher. Or to listen to Sid tell her about what he and his teammates had done at practice while he'd been gone.

But then he scooped her up and carried her back to the bathroom. "It's time for that shave I promised you."

"All right, Master," she said when he set her on her feet and untied their robes. Eagerly, she shrugged hers off and stood before him, enjoying the blue heat of his gaze on her mound.

Then he lifted her onto the granite countertop and nudged her legs apart. Using his fingers, he combed through her blonde pubic curls, his touch incredibly sensuous. "Tell me this is my pussy."

"Oh yes, Master, it's yours." The way he scissored his fingers over her clit made her want to forget about everything but that rigid nub that grew harder and longer by the second. Until he moved his hands and picked up a clipper that felt ever so good when he moved it over her sex.

The vibration of the motor had her panting by the time he finished and set the tool aside. "I can hardly wait to taste my smooth, wet pussy, but first I've got to do this."

He cupped one hand, filled it with hot lather from the machine on the vanity and spread the foam over her sex. "Now for the best part." Taking up a safety razor, he moved it carefully over her mound, her outer lips, even in the crack of her ass. "So smooth. So damn sexy. So mine," he murmured as he ran his fingers over every inch where the razor had just passed.

His smile dazzled her when he straightened and ran a hand over the stubble on his chin. "This won't do for what I have in mind."

"I like seeing you look all scruffy, Master." The dark stubble gave him a dangerous look that made her cunt clench with anticipation.

He bent and kissed her, hard and fast. Then he reached again for the lather machine. "Trust me, baby. You wouldn't like feeling this on your beautiful, silky-smooth cunt. Getting rid of it won't take me long," he promised when she pouted a little.

There was something sexy about watching a man shave his face. By the time he finished and splashed hot water over his tanned skin that still bore a telltale shadow of stubble that would reappear within hours, she was practically squirming with need to have him touch her. Fuck her. Soothe the insistent aching deep in her belly.

When he went down on his knees and buried his face between her legs, the heat and moisture from his breath startled her at first. But it felt so good. She loved feeling

the silky texture of his tongue moving across her bare mound, the rasp of his calloused fingers holding her open for his delightful exploration.

He lifted his head and looked up at her, his expression heated. "You taste so damn good. Hot and wet and a little salty. I could stay here and eat you all night long, but I want to fuck you, too. You're like a banquet, full of so many good things I can hardly make up my mind what to sample first."

The stark sensuality of what he was doing to her was all she could believe, because her body couldn't deny it. But she dared not dwell on the other – the ordinary actions that made her want to wish, to hope for a vanilla-tinted forever.

That wasn't going to happen. Not to her. Years ago she'd embraced complete sexual submission. Over time she'd accepted that she deserved not a man who loved her, but a strong Master she could only satisfy for a while, until he tired of her.

"Master?"

Sid looked at her and grinned. "What's going through your pretty head?"

She sensed that he wouldn't want to hear her doubts about herself, so she decided to bring up his fetish. It had fascinated her since she'd first seen him practicing it at Rebels' Roost. "I was wondering about that rope you bought. I looked through that book about *shibari*..."

"And?"

"And I was imagining how it will feel when you use it to wrap me up."

He traced a path around her breasts, over her rib cage and across her hips, pressing at certain points that seemed to trigger a slow, lazy arousal that radiated through her body. "Like this, sweetheart, only stronger. Want to try a little sample now, before we play at the dungeon?"

"If you'd like to, Master."

"I'd like." He held her robe while she put it on. As he tied the belt, he smiled at her. "We need to go in the living room by the fireplace. I don't want you catching a cold." Then he put on his own robe and took her hand.

"Besides, I've got some rope out there. I want to save the blue rope for our first play date at Rebels' Roost. Come with me."

Chapter Five

He wished she'd sometimes come out and tell him what she wanted instead of always deferring to his wishes. Still, he'd been dreaming of wrapping her up for his pleasure since the day she'd come to him. Apparently she was a stranger to rope bondage, so he figured it would be a good idea to break her in to it gently and in private. "I think I would. Go open the right side of the wardrobe and bring me those pieces of rope from the bottom shelf. And a couple of the round acrylic rings that should be right beside them." Bought to be used as lines to tie his boat to the dock but so far never used, the nylon ropes would be perfect for what he had in mind.

Sid stood when she came back with the rope and rings. She handed them to him before untying her robe and letting it slide off her shoulders to the floor. The sight of her naked body made his mouth go dry and his balls ache, but he could wait.

He stowed the acrylic rings and a couple short pieces of rope in the pocket of his robe and then uncoiled the longest one to its full length, about twenty feet. When he held it out toward Talia, he smiled. "This isn't long enough to do a full body wrap, but it's just about right for what I have in mind." He'd do simple breast bondage, stimulating yet not too painful. "Want to get an idea what you're going to feel, sweetheart?"

"Oh, yes, Master."

"I'm going to bind you in a way that constricts your breasts so they'll swell and get more sensitive in response to the stimulation." He brought the rope up along the under curve of her breasts and then covered the tender flesh with his hands. "When they swell for me, they'll expand and press against the rope bindings, and that will trap the blood that's responsible for making them swell. The feeling the binding produces will be highly intense, for you as well as for me."

She practically purred when he rubbed his palms over her hard little nipples. "I saw a picture in your book where the woman's breasts were bound. They were very swollen. They looked shiny – almost as red as that rope."

"Yours will look that way, too, and your pretty nipples will grow bigger and get incredibly hard. They'll burn for my touch, but when I put my hands on you the feeling will be so intense you can barely stand it." He bent and took one hardened nub between his teeth. "You'll feel some pain along with the pleasure, but I won't let any harm come to these beautiful breasts. I promise. Will you give me your complete trust?"

"Yes. I trust you, Master." She threaded her fingers through his hair, drew him closer. "Please, bind me."

"All right. Turn around and face the wardrobe. I want you to watch in the mirror." Releasing Talia, he made a loop at one end of the rope.

When she turned, Sid brought the rope taut around her rib cage, just below her breasts. "Now lock your hands behind your neck, sweetheart." She did, and her beautiful breasts rose and flattened, resting against the rope. Then he lowered the loop so it lay just below her rib cage and started wrapping more loops around her ribs. "Hold still now, I want to get these loops flush against the ones below them." Carefully, he applied tension, enough to make the rope indent the tender flesh beneath it but not enough to cause severe discomfort.

She was so damn tiny, it only took a few turns of the rope to reach the lower edge of her breasts. "Just a minute," he muttered, holding the rope with one hand while he dug in his pocket and pulled out a ring that he slipped along the top loop and centered at the base of her cleavage. He took care, winding the last loop below her breasts and securing it.

"Lower your arms for me now." When she did, her breasts settled back over the rope, which supported part of their weight. "How does that feel?"

"Mmm. Different, but tingly, Master."

"It doesn't feel too tight?"

"No sir. It feels good."

He hoped she'd tell him if it was too much, but he wasn't sure, knowing as he did that she'd accepted a lot of pain in the past to get to sexual oblivion. He chose another rope. "Okay. Next I'm going to run this rope around the back of your neck and knot it to the ring in front. I want you to tell me if you feel severe pain at any time." He secured that tie and then stepped behind Talia. When he reached around and placed his palms on the undersides of her breasts, he could tell they'd already grown fuller and warmer. "Sweetheart, look in the mirror. Can you see how your breasts have begun to swell?"

"Oh, yes, Master. They feel hot, too." She leaned back against him, letting out a sensual moan. "And my nipples are starting to tingle."

Sid was feeling it, too. When he glanced over her head into the mirror, he couldn't help noticing how her nipples were lengthening, how their areolas were darkening to a deep brownish red. "I can hardly wait to take them in my mouth."

"Please, Master," she said, her whisper barely audible.

"Later. We've got a long way to go yet." Sid untied the knot he'd made and continued wrapping the rope, this time around her upper chest. He threaded the first loop under her arms and worked down from there to the upper curve of her breasts. "I'm taking it easy on you, sweetheart, barely putting enough tension on the rope to indent your tender flesh." Still, by the time he had wound the final loop, the rope bra firmly cradled Talia's breasts.

His cock stood rock-hard against his belly and his balls ached as he looked at her breasts, held at rigid attention as they protruded from the bra. Breathing hard but determined to hold on to his control, he re-fastened the rope to the ring and used three shorter pieces to add strands along her cleavage and at her sides. God help him, the sight of her breasts pointing straight out from her body had him on the verge of losing it.

"Oh my God, Master." Talia lifted her arms, attempting to hide her breasts behind her hands.

Sid reached around her and gently moved her hands back to her sides. "I can tell it embarrasses you to have your breasts displayed this way, but it excites me to see them so vulnerable, so exquisitely available to me. Turn around now. Use your hands to hold onto your pretty little butt, push back your shoulders and let me look at your breasts."

Talia showed that she was a well-trained sub. Too well-trained. She did as he'd ordered, but instead of looking him in the eye, she lowered her gaze. "Don't be shy, sweetheart. Remember, I bound you like this for my pleasure. Come on, look at me and tell me I'm your Master."

"You're my Master." When she looked up at him, he saw pain in her beautiful eyes – but passion, too.

Guiding her by gently tugging on her distended nipples, Sid moved backward to the couch where he sat and shrugged out of his robe. Drawing Talia forward to straddle his legs, he took first one and then the other engorged nipple in his mouth. "Your breasts will keep swelling for a few minutes, and then they'll stay full as long as they're bound."

She moaned.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" Sid had bound dozens of women many times, but none as small or vulnerable as Talia, at least in his mind. The thought of hurting her terrified him, even though he knew she found pleasure in pain.

"I-I need your cock inside me. Please, Master."

He lifted her by the buttocks and lowered her onto his erection, loving the feel of her hot, wet pussy clutching his naked flesh. *No*. He had to stop, get a condom. Or not. Maybe he could maintain control if they just stayed like this, not moving. "Don't move. Let's stay still and watch you grow your pearls."

"Pearls?" She looked up at him then focused again on her bound breasts.

"According to the Japanese masters, your breasts should form the shape and color of gorgeous natural pearls when they're bound this way. I've heard some other rope bondage practitioners say the word *shibari* is also Japanese for pearl, though I'm not

sure that's true. Have you heard that, too?" Maybe if they kept talking he could resist the compulsion to fuck her hard, come *now*.

"No, Master."

Obviously he was going to have to make her talk in more than monosyllables if this was going to work. "Tell me how your breasts feel. I've always wondered."

Her gaze on her bound breasts, she spoke softly, the sound so sensual he almost ordered her to be quiet. "They feel heavy, really heavy. It feels as though the glands underneath are growing along with the surface skin. Almost like something is tugging at my nipples from the inside."

"And how does that make you feel?"

"Frustrated. Sort of like having an itch I can't reach but not being sure I want to reach it." The words came out almost harshly, and Sid noticed her breathing had grown fast and shallow.

"Does anything help?"

"Oh..." Her lips turned up in a hint of a smile. "It helps a little when I clamp down on your cock."

His cock twitched when she did that again, reminding him he was riding bareback and too damn close to coming. "It looks as though the swelling has stopped now. Hop off and stand up. It seems to me your nipples are begging for attention."

"They're so big. So hard." Talia's cheeks turned beet-red, but she lifted her pussy off his aching flesh. None too soon.

They stood in front of the fireplace, the banked flames shedding red-orange light on them. Sid lowered his head to her distended nipples. He nibbled, bit and bent the hard nubs, twisting them back and forth in tight circles. It amazed him, how one snapped back when he stopped to switch his attention from one to the other.

"Please, Master. That hurts." Her anguished words belied her actions, for she grasped her breast and thrust the nipple deeper into his mouth. "Don't...don't... Oh my God, don't stop."

He sucked harder, using his fingers to tug and twist the other nipple while he molded the rigid flesh below it against his palm. The immense shudder that went through her body was all the proof he needed about the intensity of her orgasm.

She went to her knees, overcome by the waves of intense pleasure-pain that were still rolling through her body. Her Master's cock beckoned her, impossibly long and thick and as red and rigid as her bound breasts. Taking the bulging head in her mouth, she used both hands to surround his tightened ball sac. Her nipples grazed his muscular inner thighs, keeping her need at a fever pitch.

His agonized moans spurred her to give him the pleasure she had just experienced. Selfishly, she wanted that pleasure again, for herself.

When he tangled his fingers in her hair and made her take him deeper in her mouth, she began to suck his beautiful cock and roll his balls between her palms. The musky smell of sex swirled around them, mingling with a sweet, smoky scent from the wood fire.

"Yeah, baby, do it like that. Suck me hard. God yes, make me come."

Swallowing hard, she took his big cock down her throat. His neatly trimmed pubic hair tickled her lips. When she felt the first bursts of semen bounce against her throat, her cunt began to contract again as she swallowed over and over, wanting it all. God, but she loved this. He made her forget everything except him and the way he'd just taken her to heights she'd never imagined.

When they were able to breathe easily again, Sid lifted her in his arms and took her straight to the master bathroom. "I'm going to unwrap my present now," he told her between kisses.

When Sid unwrapped the last coil of rope, freeing Talia from her bondage, he bent and laid short, sweet kisses along the red marks that marred her beautiful skin. "I'll have to be more careful next time, sweetheart. I don't like seeing these rope marks on you. Come on, let's take a quick shower and then I'll rub you down with some lotion." He turned around, stepped inside the shower stall and turned on the water.

"I'm not sore, Master. Really."

"Don't argue with your Master. I'm not in to inflicting injuries on my partners." *On you. I've never worried too much before about leaving rope burns on my playmates.*

He wasn't ready to tell her yet and he was sure she wasn't ready to hear it, but Talia was a hell of a lot more to him than his sex partner and playmate. She was coming to mean way more than that in his life. Though he welcomed the emotional connection that was growing stronger every day, on one level that scared him more than an oversize cornerback bearing down on him in a game.

"Come on, get in. The water's warm," he said more brusquely than he meant.

When she did, she wrapped her arms around his waist and pressed against his back. "You're warmer, Master." From the tension in her body he could tell she'd gone up on tiptoe to whisper in his ear.

She'd called him "Master" twice in the last thirty seconds, and that bugged him so he turned around and bent to her ear to whisper back. "I'm Sid. Unless we're at the club or playing a scene here at home, I want you to call me by my name. 'Master' gets pretty old. Understand?"

"Yes, Mas — I mean Sid." When she looked up at him, she had a confused look on her face that made him want to kiss her.

That would lead to more sex, though, and what Sid needed now was sleep if he was going to be worth crap at practice in the morning. "That's better, beautiful. Now grab that soap and lather me up, and afterward I'll do you."

She soaped him from head to toe while he tried to enjoy her touch without revving his body up for more of her right now. When she finished and he stood under the

shower spray, he ran his soapy hands over her, tracing the rope marks around her breasts and back. *Bad idea!* Though he tried to think about pass routes, his dick got hard as stone.

It didn't help when she put her hand around his testicles, and when she moved up and started jacking his dick, all thoughts of football left his mind. He growled as he turned her into the shower spray. "Stop that, baby. You've wrung me out already. I won't be worth shit in the morning if you keep me up all night, and we've got a playoff game on Sunday."

"I'm sorry, Master."

When she hung her head as though he'd slapped her, he clenched his fists. "Sid, not Master. And you don't need to feel like you've got to keep me horny 24/7." It didn't make him feel too good, wondering if Reinhart had been so damn insatiable that he'd kept her up all night even before important games.

He turned off the water and wrapped Talia in a big bath sheet before pulling one around his waist. "Come on, let's crawl in bed and get some sleep. Six o'clock will be here too damn soon." Putting an arm over her shoulder, he herded her to his bed.

Tears glistened in her eyes when he looked at her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"I'm just being silly. Don't mind me. Do you want me to go to the guest room so you can sleep?" She stroked the rope marks on her chest, but her lips trembled. From the look in her eyes, she was hurt. Really hurt.

He sat and pulled her down beside him. "No, sweetheart. I want to wake up in the morning with you cuddled up right next to me."

"All right." Talia lay back against his black sheets, her pale body a study in contrasts. "I'll go to sleep if you don't want sex."

Is she upset that I kept it simple in the shower? Does she expect 24/7 sex? Did she get it from that bastard Reinhart? Sid lay back and closed his eyes, trying to dispel the notion that he wasn't giving her what she needed. Finally he rolled over on his side, rose on one elbow and looked Talia in the eye.

"It's not that I wouldn't love to play all night long, but I have practice in the morning for a playoff game I want us to win. Some guys, particularly linemen, may be able to practice without a lot of sleep, but I put out a lot of energy running after balls and dodging defensive backs. Practice takes almost as much out of me as a game."

"It's okay. Really." She reached up and stroked his cheek. "Would you like for me to rub your back?"

"Yeah, but if you do I wouldn't go to sleep. Come over here and I'll pretend I'm still a little boy and you're my favorite teddy bear." Shoving thoughts of Vic Reinhart to the back of his mind, Sid drew Talia to him and rested one hand around her back, the other on her soft, rounded ass. "Doesn't this feel good?"

"Oh, yes. You're so warm. G'night."

The tension flowed out of his body, leaving him feeling lethargic yet more satisfied than he could remember having been before. "Sweet dreams, baby. See you in the morning."

Contentment flowed through Talia, a feeling so rare that she didn't want to sleep right away. Instead she watched Sid sleep, taking in the features that made her think he was the handsomest man she had ever seen. His dark brown hair spilled over onto his forehead, making her wonder if he'd been such a charmer when he was a little boy.

His chiseled cheekbones and strong jaw, where stubble already was ruining his clean-shaven look, reminded her he was no boy but a man. A Dom. Her Master. Her gaze shifted to his straight, generous nose and soft, sculpted lips.

His gorgeous, dark blue eyes that turned almost fiery with passion were now closed so his lashes rested against his cheeks. No man should be blessed with lashes most women would kill to have, but he was. Talia looked away, practically overwhelmed with emotion.

With her hand resting above his heart, she measured the warmth of his skin, the reassuring beat of his heart and the slow rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

Overwhelmed by emotion, she closed her eyes and just enjoyed being close to him. Feeling cared for and protected, she drifted off to sleep.

Chapter Six

The next morning the snow had let up, and a combination of warmer temperatures and a brilliant sun melted off most of the accumulation before ten o'clock. Talia showered and dressed carefully, excited that Susan Zanardi had called and invited her to lunch so she could meet some of the other Rebels' wives and girlfriends.

Although Susan had mentioned that the private club where the lunch was being held was somewhat of a Savannah landmark, Talia had never been there. Fortunately Sid had shown her how to use the GPS in his Acura, otherwise she would never have found it—a white-brick building at the end of a tree-shaded street not far from the historic district.

The butterflies in her stomach started as she drove through the open gates and drove up to a columned portico. She pulled up at the end of a line of Porsches and Mercedes and one lone Cadillac. She hesitated a minute before handing Sid's car over to the parking attendant when he opened her door, but she told herself to relax. She got out and stepped up three stairs to a heavy front door with gleaming brass hardware.

That's when Vic's voice rang out in her head. *You little hick, don't think you're fit to socialize with savvy, educated women. Be glad I keep you around, just never get the idea in your head that you're anything but a slut I put up with because you sometimes manage to give good head.*

Talia stood there like a statue, her outstretched hand on the brass door handle. When she looked down, she saw how bad she was shaking. *You can do this. Sid wants you to. And the coach's wife invited you. It isn't as though you don't know anybody.* Her knuckles white from clutching the icy metal, she pulled the handle and stepped inside.

The white-coated attendant behind a dark-wood counter smiled. She tried to smile back, hoping she wasn't trembling so much that he could tell all the way through her

heavy coat and the soft, clingy sweater dress she'd chosen with such care from her new wardrobe. "May I take your coat, miss?"

His softly worded question drew her out of the terror that had claimed her. "Thank you," she said, taking off the coat and handing it over in exchange for a claim check.

"The Rebels wives' luncheon is in the Blue Room," the attendant said. "Down the hall, first door on your right. Which player is your husband?"

Husband? "I-I'm Sid Conyers' girlfriend." She'd said it out loud, and surprisingly she felt no conflict. Acknowledging her relationship with Sid made her feel good, gave her a boost of confidence she needed to get through this ordeal.

"I'm sorry I didn't recognize you, miss. Sid's one of the Rebels' best players now that Dave Delaney has retired." Thankfully the attendant turned his attention to a tall, elegant-looking brunette who had just come in, so Talia headed in the direction of the meeting room.

Did she look all right? Talia looked down at her plain black flats, wishing she could have worn high heels to give herself at least the illusion of a little height. She loved her blue cashmere sweater-dress, but it wasn't long enough to completely cover the brace on her knee. Talia grasped her small, black purse. She knew it didn't make the fashion statement that the brunette's huge, multicolored designer bag did.

Part of Talia wanted to shrink enough that nobody would notice her once she got into the large banquet room, but she felt better when Susan got up and came to give her a hug. "I'm glad you could come. Come on, I want to introduce you to everybody."

Talia hoped she didn't cringe because she certainly didn't want anybody to see how scared she was. She recognized a few familiar faces she'd seen last year at Rebels' Roost and managed a shy smile when Susan introduced them by name. She'd never remember everybody, though. There were at least fifty women of various ages, shapes and sizes—tall, short, slender, voluptuous. A good many looked pregnant, including the tall brunette who'd come in right behind Talia. Susan, whom she'd only seen sitting

down at the restaurant the other night, was so big that Talia thought she might have her baby before they finished lunch.

"I'm expecting more or less at any minute, but you probably figured that out for yourself," Susan told Talia, probably because she'd seen Talia taking in the size of her belly.

"Yes." Talia hoped Susan didn't think she was unbearably rude for staring.

"It's okay. Everybody's been taking bets about whether I'll wait until after the playoffs to deliver. Come on, our table's over here."

Talia followed Susan to a table where the brunette—her name was Julie Bronson—and Keisha Harris were already seated.

Talia remembered Keisha from Rebels' Roost. The Domme's beautiful cocoa-colored skin and sparkling dark eyes couldn't draw Talia's attention away from the fact that Keisha, whom Vic used to call an Amazon when he wasn't making disparaging comments about her weight, looked even heavier than she had last year. She kept up a constant conversation about the team and the prospects for a lockout next year if the players and owners couldn't get together about a new contract. A lawyer who apparently acted as the agent for lots of pro athletes, Keisha intimidated Talia with her obvious expertise.

"Keisha, how about talking about more pleasant things than the possibility of a strike or lockout? We're here to celebrate that we're in the playoffs," Susan said mildly when the conversation began to get too heavy.

"Okay by me." Keisha shot Susan a sharp look and then turned to Talia. "I'm glad to see you're with Sid now. It's one thing, being submissive. It's another, letting a Master treat you like a punching bag."

Talia didn't know what to say. From what she remembered, Keisha seemed to take fiendish pleasure in humiliating her brawny football-player sex slave. She'd had no idea Keisha even noticed what anybody else in the club was doing while she played. "Uh..."

"You don't have to say anything. Just listen to me, girl. Vic Reinhart was bad news. And not only in the dungeon. Why do you think the Rebels traded him?"

"I don't know." Vic had railed about the coach dumping him as punishment for not having blocked well enough to protect the Rebels' "pansy quarterback", but Talia had a feeling that wasn't true.

"They got rid of him because he attacked one of the assistant coaches after last year's Super Bowl. Put the guy in the hospital. It's one thing to be a mean SOB on the field, but off it? Reinhart was insane, and we all worried about what he'd do to you. Anyway, I'm glad you managed to get away. Sid's one of the good ones."

One of the good ones. Yes, he was. Talia smiled, hoped her doubts didn't show. Not about Sid, but about herself. But he apparently thought she was good enough. If only she could convince herself.

* * * * *

Wet from the shower after a short practice, Sid hurried to his locker, annoyed by the insistent ringing of his cell phone. Who the hell was calling him when everybody who had his number should know he was at work?

Oh, no. Was Talia having a problem with the car? Or had somebody upset her at that luncheon he'd pretty much insisted that she attend? He dropped the towel from around his waist and snatched up the phone, not bothering to check the caller ID. "Talia?"

When he heard his mother's voice, he let out a sigh. "Hey, Mom, what's up?"

"Your dad managed to get a few days off from work. If you can get us tickets, we're coming down to Savannah for your game. By the way, who is Talia?" she asked, her tone teasing.

"The prettiest woman on Earth, Mom, except for you." Sid imagined his mom's eyes widening, the way they always had when something surprised her. "You'll meet her when you're here."

“Good. It’s about time you started to think about settling down and providing us with a couple grandkids. Your cousins are way ahead of you.”

Sid groaned. He’d been hearing that tune for nearly five years now, ever since he’d graduated from college. For some reason, though, he didn’t feel like protesting. And he knew that while his mother wanted the satisfaction of knowing he was permanently paired up, she wouldn’t appreciate finding out he was living with his lover without any sort of promise between them. She would find out, because she and his dad always stayed at the house when they visited. And Sid had no intention of letting Talia go anywhere else.

“I’ll get your tickets, Mom. But you caught me in the shower. Right now I’m shivering and dripping water all over the locker room floor, and I need to get dressed and out of here. What time will you and Dad be arriving?”

When his mother told him their flight was scheduled so they’d get to his place Friday night in time for dinner, Sid suppressed a protest. “See you then,” he said before shutting off the phone and sinking onto the bench in front of his locker.

“Hey, Runt, you look like you just got hit by a freight train.” Jack stepped into a pair of sweatpants as he shot a puzzled look at Sid.

“Not quite. But I’m wondering what the hell I ought to do. Mom and Dad are coming for the game. They’ll be here tomorrow night.”

“So? I’m sure they’re still holding some game tickets for players’ families.” Jack paused. “Oh. They don’t know about Talia, right?”

“I told Mom about her, but not that we’re living together. She won’t be pleased and neither will Dad. They’re small-town conventional, in spades. Parksville, Pennsylvania’s still mired in a 1950s mentality.” Sid pictured the disappointment he’d certainly see on his parents’ faces. Worse, he imagined how hurt Talia would be when she sensed that disapproval. “Fuck. What bothers me is how they’ll make Talia feel. They won’t say anything, but they won’t be able to hide what they’re thinking.”

Jack shook his head. "Talía could spend the weekend at my place, if you don't mind her being there when Tawny's away."

"No. Damn it, I won't hide her from anybody, my parents included. I love her." There. He'd said it. He'd never dared even think it out loud before, but it was true. "I think I've loved her ever since the first time I had to stand by and watch Reinhart hurt her at Rebels' Roost."

"Hell, I should have guessed you had a hard-on for her from the way you went ballistic every time you saw Reinhart playing rough with her."

"Yeah, I guess I did, though I didn't realize it at the time—at least not consciously. I'm damn certain now that I love her. How about telling me what I ought to do about it." Sid towed his hair dry while he waited for Jack to answer.

"Well, if you're a hundred percent sure how you feel about Talía and you're sure she's not an emotional basket case after what Vic did to her, why not put a ring on her finger? That ought to take care of your parents' sense of moral outrage."

"Get married? Today?" Sid didn't know if he could manage that, either persuading Talía or taking care of the legalities.

Jack laughed. "Not married, at least not by tomorrow. Get engaged. That will give you time to change your mind if it turns out she's still hung up on Reinhart. Surely your folks can't be so old-fashioned that they'll mind you living with your fiancée."

"I wouldn't be too sure about that. I remember a miserable month I spent practically locked in my room, just because a sheriff's deputy back home caught me making it with one of the hometown fun girls out at an old rock quarry."

"Really?" Jack sounded skeptical. "How old were you?"

Sid grinned. "Sixteen."

"Well, you're not sixteen anymore. I have a hard time believing your folks will really be that bent out of shape."

Sid thought about it for a minute. Mom and Dad would probably be okay with him living with a woman if they were engaged. At least they'd be better with that than if they thought he was shacking up with a casual lover. "They probably wouldn't say anything to hurt Talia's feelings, but I don't know if Talia's ready for that kind of commitment." Then he remembered the sincerity in her voice the other night.

I'll be your slave as long as you want me...

Sid tossed his towel into the big laundry hamper in the center of the room. "I'm willing to take a chance that she'll say yes. Want to go to a jewelry store with me and help me pick out a ring?"

Jack grinned. "Sure. Hurry up and get some clothes on. We'd better get our game tickets first. I have to pick up a couple extras, too. Tawny's aunt and uncle decided to fly down with their kids, more or less at the last minute."

* * * * *

When Sid got home he opened the door quietly and detoured by his bedroom, slipping the small, square jewelry box out of his sweatpants pocket and into the drawer of the table by the bed. Then he went looking for Talia. When he found her out on the sun porch, watching a tugboat move a barge down the river, he paused in the doorway.

And just looked at her. Her blonde hair swung from a high ponytail, and even with that additional height, she couldn't be much more than five feet two, a pocket Venus meant just for him. She made him feel ten feet tall, damn near invincible, and he loved the feeling. Loved her. When she turned and saw him, the look on her beautiful face made him confident that she loved him, too.

"Hey, sweetheart," he said as he wrapped his arms around her and gave her a long, hard kiss. The pink robe she had on felt soft and slippery on his hands, the way he'd known it would when he selected it out. "How was the lunch party?"

She kept her hands on his shoulders when he broke the kiss. Then she tilted her head back and smiled up at him—a sweet, incredibly sexy smile. "Wonderful. I wish I

could have brought some of the crab cakes home to you. And you wouldn't believe all the fantastic desserts. They even had little chocolate-frosted cakes the shape of footballs. I don't think I ever saw so much pretty food in one place before."

"Did you enjoy the company?"

Talia's expression sobered, but then her smile returned. "At first I was scared stiff, but everyone was real nice to me. Susan introduced me to a lot of people, but I'm afraid I won't remember everybody's names. Some of the women were betting on whether she'd wait until after the playoffs to have her baby."

"Did you see anybody you knew from Rebels' Roost?"

"We sat at the table with Keisha Harris. I'd never realized before that she's a lawyer, much less that she works as a players' agent. She's almost as scary outside as she is in the dungeon. I sat with her and Susan and this tall, drop-dead-gorgeous pregnant woman named Julie."

What she said sounded promising. If it was the last thing he did, he was going to cure Talia of her fear that she somehow wasn't worthy of respect. "That would be Julie Bronson, Jimmy's wife. They got married at the beginning of the season. You remember Jimmy, don't you?"

Talia pursed her lips. "Isn't he the one who shaved the head of one of the club submissives?"

"Yeah. He shaved Julie, too, first time he brought her to Rebels' Roost."

Her eyes widened. "Have you ever done that?" She shuddered, as though wondering if he might share Bronson's fetish.

He bent and nibbled her ear. "No, baby. I like my pussies bare, but I've never gotten aroused over the idea of women with bald heads. To each his own."

"I'm glad." She smiled up at him, but then her expression clouded and she nibbled at her lower lip. "I hope I didn't do anything today to embarrass you."

"Damn it, if you just be your sweet self, everybody will love you. And if they don't, I don't care. I like you, and that's what matters. Can't you accept that?"

"I'm trying, Sir, I really am. But I've been afraid for so long..." Her words trailed off, and she looked away as though she was worried about what he might do. "Susan said I did fine while we were waiting for the parking attendants to get our cars after lunch was over."

He squelched the urge to shake some confidence into her. Instead he took her in his arms. "I'm sure you did. I want you to forget whatever it was that bastard shoved down your throat and believe you're the hottest, most beautiful woman on Earth. Because that's how I see you."

She laid her head against his chest and sighed. "I'll try. You're home a little early. Shall I get started on dinner now?"

"Later, sweetheart. I'm hungry, but not for food. Come on, let's take a little nap and see what comes up." When she shot him a shy smile, he scooped her up in his arms and strode to the bedroom.

* * * * *

After she folded the comforter at the end of the bed, Talia shrugged off her robe and lay back against the pillows, watching Sid undress. He was so damn nice. It was hard to believe that he could be so sweet and also so incredibly hot with his broad shoulders, washboard abs and powerfully muscled thighs and calves. When he moved he reminded her of a sleek jungle cat who liked knowing she was watching him.

She wanted to pinch herself just to be sure she wasn't dreaming. Instead, she held out her arms and welcomed him. His hands still felt cold, and so did his face. The rest of him was warm, though. Warm and solid and safe. When he rolled onto his side and pulled her next to him, Talia snuggled up to his chest and ran her free hand along the muscular plane of his back. "You're so big and strong. You make me feel safe."

"You make me feel big and strong, and I like it." He stroked her cheek, his touch light, almost tender. "Did you mean it when you said you'd be my slave as long as I wanted?"

Puzzled by his question, she met his questioning gaze. "Yes, I meant it."

"What would you say if I told you I wanted you for always?"

Talia could barely believe her ears. "What did you say, Mas – Sid?"

When he tilted her chin up so she couldn't look away, she'd have been afraid if his touch hadn't been so gentle. "I'm not very good at this, am I?" he asked, giving a little shake of his head.

"At what?" She'd never felt so confused.

"At proposing. I've never done it before. What I want is for you to be my slave, my lover – God, but this is hard." He lowered his hand and cupped her breast, rolling the nipple between his fingers.

Even as her body reacted to him, Talia's brain was spinning. Had Sid really... Was he really offering to marry her? She couldn't imagine it. He must have meant something else.

Right now her Master was hard and ready for her, and she wasn't about to make him wait. She'd focus on his pleasure, because she was hot and eager for him as well. She'd figure it out later. They'd figure it out together.

"So are you," she murmured, reaching between them and encircling his rigid cock with her fingers. "I got wet and ready, just watching you get out of your clothes."

Sid groaned. Then he rolled her on her back and braced himself just above her body. "We need to get this out of the way first." Bending his head, he took her mouth and plunged his tongue inside.

She raked his back with her nails, trying to draw him closer. He took her breath away and made her crazy with wanting him.

Breaking the kiss, he pulled away and reached on the nightstand for a condom. "Here, let me," she said, taking the package and ripping away the plastic wrapper. With trembling fingers she rolled the condom over his rigid erection. "Please don't make me wait. I need you now."

"You've got me." Spreading her legs farther with his knees, he positioned himself and slid inside her. "God, but you're wet for me. I love it."

"Oh God. Fuck me hard. Please." When he moved, she met his thrusts and clutched him to her as if that could hold him forever. His breath seared her skin as he bent to suck a nipple into his mouth.

Pressure built in her thighs, her pussy. She clamped down on his cock when he drove so deep it felt as if he'd touched her womb. Oh yeah, she wished they could stay this way forever. But the urgency she sensed in him transferred to her, made her desperate to come.

He shifted, raised his upper body and grabbed her ass with hands that were hot, no longer cold from the out-of-doors. Raising her up to meet his thrusts, he slammed into her over and over as she trembled from the waves of ecstasy that were rolling through her body. By the time he shouted with satisfaction and she felt him coming in long, steamy bursts inside her pussy, she'd collapsed beneath him, her passion spent along with his.

Proposing. She thought he'd said he was proposing. *I must have been dreaming. Or he must have meant something else*, she thought as she began to regain some measure of conscious thought.

* * * * *

An hour later, Sid untangled himself from Talia and went to dispose of the condom.

"Well, will you?" he asked when he came back to bed, finally able to think about something other than Talia's wet, welcoming pussy.

"Huh?" Talia rolled over to face him, her cheeks still flushed with the afterglow of great sex. Though he'd felt wrung out moments earlier, his dick twitched when he looked at his lover.

"Marry me." There, he'd said it. In a way she couldn't possibly misunderstand.

He'd never seen her look quite so shocked. "You want us to get married?"

"Yeah. Not today or tomorrow, but soon."

"Why?" As though she thought he'd gone insane, she sat up and looked down at him.

What the hell should Sid say? He'd been dreaming of forever with Talia ever since she'd belonged to another Master, but he doubted she would want to hear that. He didn't think she'd much like knowing the immediate, practical reason for his proposal, either. After a long pause, he came up with something he thought she might buy. "Because I care for you, more than I've ever cared for another woman. Because I want us to spend our lives together."

"I-I don't know. Sometimes 'forever' isn't really forever."

Damn it, Sid knew that. He'd seen friends who'd seemed perfect for each other splitting up after mere months of married bliss, and from what he knew about Talia's background he figured she'd seen more than her share of fractured romances. But he didn't care. He loved her and he was willing to put his heart on the line.

Sitting up and propping pillows behind his back, he took both of her trembling hands. "Forever will be just that for us, sweetheart, because I can't imagine that I'll ever let you go. If you're willing to be my slave for as long as I want you to, the way you said, you should be willing to make the arrangement legal."

She lowered her gaze but didn't pull away from him. "I'd be glad to wear your collar, you know."

"You will. But I also want you to wear my rings. I want to know I've got the right and the responsibility to take care of you for the rest of our lives. Someday I'd like to have a kid or two, wouldn't you?"

She finally looked up at him. "Well, yes. But I never thought much—"

"I don't want to hear what I think you're about to say. I'm not Vic Reinhart and I don't like for you to think about him and me in the same breath. Fuck it, Talia, I might as well tell you I've been halfway in love with you ever since I saw you playing with him at Rebels' Roost. I wanted to pull the bastard off you and kill him every time I saw him hurt you."

"Why didn't you, Master?"

"Because it was obvious after a while that you were enjoying it, sweetheart. At least you were coming for him in spite of everything." He thought a minute then decided she deserved the unvarnished truth even if it revealed a few of his insecurities. "And because I was afraid he'd make mincemeat out of you for attracting my attention—after he'd ground me into the floor."

Tears welled in her eyes. "I was afraid to leave him. He took me away from a horrible situation at home as soon as he'd finished college and I got out of high school, and for a long while he took good care of me. I don't know what I did the last few years that made him turn so mean. Sometimes I think it wasn't me at all, but all the times he got hit in the head and went back on the field."

Maybe that was true, and maybe he and Talia needed to talk this out, though Sid didn't like thinking anything but bad about Reinhart. "You never married him. Why?"

"He didn't believe in it. I didn't either, at least not much. My mom went through two husbands besides my dad while I was a kid, and she was working through number four before I left. Besides, Vic didn't want kids, so there wasn't any reason for him to marry me."

"What about you? Were you ever happy with him?"

"I thought I was. The first few years, when he played in Atlanta, life was better than I'd had it back home. He took me out, acted like he cared about me. We didn't go to clubs until after he got traded the first time. I'll always have good memories..."

Sid tried to tamp down the jealousy that threatened to spill over in anger. "You lived vanilla until then?"

"Not really. We just didn't go to BDSM clubs. He was afraid he'd get in trouble with the team. Especially after he started getting fined so often for illegal hits on other players."

"I see." Other than Reinhart, Sid had never run across an offensive lineman who seemed to be more interested in inflicting damage on defensive players than he was in protecting his own quarterback. "When did he start treating you as if you were one of his opponents on the football field, sweetheart?"

She shook her head. "I can't say, really. At first it was just a bruise or two. A welt. A sprained wrist, just once. By the time he got traded to the Rebels, he'd gotten it in his head that I was out to two-time him, so he started locking me in the house whenever he was gone, refusing to let me go anywhere. We'd played at clubs with other Doms and subs before, but he stopped that, too, until he decided to take me to Rebels' Roost." When a tear rolled down her cheek, she wiped it away and met his gaze. "I never would have been unfaithful to him, any more than I'd do it to you now."

"I know you wouldn't." From what she'd told him, Sid wondered if Talia was right and Vic had suffered a few too many concussions during those early years. It wouldn't surprise him. Lately the league had been clamping down on teams for letting players play after hard hits to the helmet. Before that, though, most players, particularly linemen, prided themselves on being able to play through anything, fuzzy brains and all. "That's why I love you the way I do."

At first he was afraid he'd said too much when tears started pouring from her eyes, but then she smiled. "You know, a few weeks ago I would have doubted that you could love me. I'd have told myself I wasn't smart enough, and that I didn't know how to act

around other people. But you've opened up so many possibilities that I'm thinking maybe, just maybe I'm what you see. And that with your help I can become even more."

"Sweetheart, you're everything I want and need. I love you so damn much it sometimes hurts." He found himself holding his breath, hoping.

"I love you, too. I think I started loving you when I watched you playing with those subs at Rebels' Roost, being dominant but never cruel. When you gave me that paper with your address and phone number before we left for Arizona, I wished I'd had the nerve to walk away from my Master and into your arms."

Sid would have liked to shout for joy because he knew now that Talia had felt that early attraction, too, but instead he simply wrapped his arms around her and settled them both back against the stack of pillows at the head of the bed. "I wish you'd done that, too, but if you had, it wouldn't have been you. You had to stay until he let you go, didn't you?"

"Yes," she said thoughtfully, past pain creasing her brow. He saw more than pain in the resolute set of her chin, in the courageous way she met his gaze. "That was the kind of person I was. I wanted to serve and please my Master. But, Sid, I think... I think you're helping me see that I should expect more from my Master as well. Because of that, I'm different."

"When I tell you now that I'll stay as long as you want me, it means something different than what it meant with him. Now it's my choice, too. My desire." Lifting her hand, she traced the laugh lines around Sid's mouth, her touch light yet adoring. "Master."

He felt the weight of doubt lift off his heart, and he knew the time was right. "Since you feel that way, sweetheart, you'll wear this for me." He turned, opened the nightstand drawer and brought out the small, dark blue velvet box he'd put there when he came home.

As though it were a precious offering, he laid it in her hands. "Open the box and see if you like it."

Her fingers trembling, she lifted the lid and looked at the diamond winking up from its nest. For a minute he worried, because it suddenly seemed smaller than it had in the store. Too small to adequately express what he felt about Talia.

Then she shot him a thousand-watt smile and he knew he'd chosen well. "It's beautiful, but you shouldn't have done it. If you really want to marry me, all you need to give me is a plain gold band."

"You'll get one of those soon enough, sweetheart, but I couldn't resist staking my claim with something a little flashier. Put it on and see if I guessed your size right."

Her hand was still shaking when she took out the ring and handed it to him. "Will you put it on me? I used to dream about a scene like this, back when I was twelve years old and still hoping I'd find my prince. The way Cinderella did."

For the first time, Sid realized, Talia had asked for something for herself. He was no prince, charming or otherwise, but for her, he'd try his best. "It will be my pleasure." Lifting her left hand, he brought it to his lips. Then he slid the two-carat diamond solitaire onto her finger and pulled her hand down so he could look at it there. "It looks absolutely perfect on you, much better than it did in the box. I want you to start thinking about what sort of wedding you'd like and when you want to do it, only don't make me wait too long."

"I won't." When she leaned over him and placed soft kisses over his chest and belly, he wanted nothing more than to stay there with her all night long, sealing their promises in the very best way. But he remembered who was coming the next day and reluctantly slid off the bed. "Come on, sweetheart, we need to get the house ready for some guests."

Chapter Seven

When Sid had started moving her things from the guest room into his bedroom last night, Talia had gotten the idea they were expecting overnight guests. When he told her that morning, before leaving for practice, that his parents would be flying in from Pittsburgh that evening to see the game on Sunday, she had gone into a feverish frenzy, cleaning and straightening and fixing food she desperately hoped would meet with their approval.

At four o'clock, after Sid had called and said he was on the way home, she sank onto the sofa in front of the fireplace and stared down at the beautiful ring he'd given her. It should have given her confidence, but it didn't. She was petrified. Getting up, she paced over to the mantel and lifted the picture he'd identified the day after she arrived.

His mom and dad. Mary and Doug Conyers. They were a good-looking couple, their dark hair barely tinged with gray. Sid looked more like his dad, but he had the same dark blue eyes as his mom. They'd dressed up for the photo, she guessed, taking in Doug's brown tweed sport coat and tie and Mary's stylish burgundy dress.

Talia tried to stop her hands from shaking. These people were going to hate her, she just knew it, because she was nowhere near good enough for their only son. Their only child.

Oh yeah. Talia closed her eyes, trying to imagine how they'd see her. Blonde—she was sure they'd think she bleached her hair even though she did no more than have it highlighted once in a while. They'd see her petite frame and decide she was too scrawny to be much good around the house, or so her mom had always said. And she imagined they'd think she was too old, even though the two years' age difference between her and their son wasn't really all that much. Most of all, she figured they'd think she was too uneducated, too dumb to be a fit match for their pride and joy. It

wouldn't surprise her at all if Sid's parents tried to make him throw her out. She honestly couldn't say she'd blame them if they did.

"What's the matter, sweetheart?" Coming straight to her once he stepped inside the door, Sid lifted the picture from her hand and set it back on the mantel. "Have you been worrying yourself to death? I told you not to. Mom and Dad won't expect everything to be perfect since they just told me yesterday that they're coming."

They'll hate me. Talia bit her tongue to keep from blurting that out. No need to let Sid know how scared she was. "I hope they like pot roast with carrots and potatoes." She'd found there was very little she could do to ruin a good piece of meat when she cooked it in Sid's slow cooker. "I made a cake for dessert, too." Cake mixes were pretty foolproof, too.

His expression serious, he reached out and laid his hands on her shoulders. "Listen to me. You need to take a deep breath and calm down. I hadn't meant for you to cook tonight, but I'm sure they'll enjoy whatever you fixed. Believe me, my parents will be thrilled that I've finally found somebody I want to settle down with, and they'll love you as much as I do."

She doubted that, but she managed a smile. "Are you going to the airport to pick them up?"

"They'll rent a car and come here as soon as the plane lands. Meanwhile, I want you to stop fussing and relax with me for a little while. I'll help you set the table once Mom and Dad call and say the plane has landed."

"I'll take you up on that offer," Talia said, feeling better once they sat on the sofa and Sid put his arm around her. They divided their attention between the five o'clock news and the cozy fire crackling in the fireplace.

* * * * *

Sid's parents seemed as nice as Sid, and by all indications they were as pleased as Sid had insisted they would be about their engagement. Though Talia sensed his mom

would have liked it better if it weren't so obvious she and Sid were living together, the evening had gone way better than she'd expected.

"I told you they'd love you," Sid said when he came in the bedroom and closed the door behind him. "Mom's already bugging me about when and where we're getting married. She'll grill you about it tomorrow, I'm sure."

"While you're at the practice facility?" She dreaded the thought of being left alone with Mary and Doug, as they'd told her to call them, but she wouldn't worry Sid about her silly fears.

Sid bent and dropped a playful kiss on the tip of her nose. "I'm afraid so, sweetheart. I told her the date and place is up to you. Come with me. I told Mom and Dad to get some sleep, and that we're going out for a while."

Talia didn't understand. "Where are we going? Do I need to change?"

"I want you to put on that hot-pink bodysuit we got at the toy store while I get this on." Grinning, he took a black leather cock harness out of a dresser drawer and held it up so she could get a good look. "We're gonna drop in at Rebels' Roost, just a little later than I'd planned. I'm not about to miss out on our first play date."

Once she'd slithered into the bodysuit that covered her from neck to ankle, except for the open crotch and nipple slits, she took a good look at Sid. She thought he looked incredibly hot all the time, but now he'd be irresistible to any sexual submissive. Naked except for the harness, he drew her gaze not only to his big, thick cock but also to those well-developed muscles and his golden-tanned skin with a light dusting of fine, dark hair. "Oh, Master. You look even hotter than I remember."

"I'm glad you think so. Come on, let's put on sweats, grab our coats, and go. If we wait much longer, I'll be tempted to forget about playing at the dungeon and get down to business right here."

* * * * *

Rebels' Roost didn't seem to have changed much in the year Talia had been away. Set in a secluded clearing off a two-lane beach highway, the sparse lighting still stood out against a pitch-black night sky, and the sensuous beat of hard rock music wafted through the fog after she and Sid got out of his car and moved toward the building.

As they walked across the parking lot, she couldn't help watching the coil of rope he'd taken from the backseat and looped over his arm. When she imagined the feel of it slithering over her body, the stimulation of each knot against her sensitized flesh, her heart beat faster with anticipation.

Sid swiped a card in a slot and the door opened. That was new. The players used to have old-fashioned keys. Once inside, though, she saw nothing had changed except the Master who'd brought her here to play. And the fact that she now felt no fear, just a tingle of anticipation.

After going downstairs to the dungeon, and putting away their coats and sweats, Sid took her hand and led her to a platform in the same large public room where she'd first seen him play. A little shiver of anticipation went through her body when she saw the suspension apparatus. She focused again on the brilliant blue rope and imagined how she'd feel, bound with it by her Master's hand, delightfully helpless to his desires.

The crowd must have already thinned out, Talia figured, because there seemed to be just five people there besides her and Sid. That, or else most of the Rebels who indulged in BDSM play had decided to skip dungeon night to rest up for Sunday's big game.

During a quick glance around the room, she noticed Keisha and a female club submissive Talia recalled from last year. The two were playing with Keisha's slave, who was naked and chained to a St. Andrew's Cross along the wall. It looked as though he must be suffering tonight as he licked his Mistress's cunt while the sub worked a plug in and out of his ass and sucked his testicles.

Sid squeezed her hand. "Don't worry about Matt, sweetheart. He may be protesting, but my guess is that he's enjoying that attention. If he didn't, he wouldn't

stand for being strung up that way.” Sid squeezed Talia’s hand as they passed by two black players she didn’t recognize – at least she guessed both of them were players. One guy was tall and skinny, the other shorter and more filled out.

“Does that surprise you, sweetheart?” Sid lowered his voice as they passed close by the two. “I doubt they expected anybody else to come in tonight. I’ve always thought they’d like to do each other, but they usually play here with Jack and Tawny or one of the other couples.” He nodded toward them, and the tall guy nodded back.

“Oh.” Talia forced herself to look away. The muscular guy was strapped face-down on a fucking table while the skinny one fucked his ass so hard it made the sturdy piece of equipment shake. Somehow she felt like an intruder.

“To each his own. I just want to play with you. Come here, now.” Sid smiled and lifted her onto the platform before joining her there and holding up a blue satin blindfold that he fitted over her eyes. “Stand very still. I want you to concentrate on what I’m doing to you. Forget about everything else that’s going on in here. Don’t think. Just feel. I’m gonna give you the full treatment tonight.” She felt his warm, damp breath on her cheek and then along her throat and lower, where he was laying kisses in a path down her body.

The music changed, heavy metal was replaced with the mellow, sensuous sounds of guitars and muted percussion instruments. The sounds surrounded her, caressing her as though they’d been created at her Master’s command.

His movements leisurely, as though he was in no hurry to get to the main event, he kissed her stomach through her skintight bodysuit. Then, his motions maddeningly slow, he bypassed her exposed pussy, instead kissing his way down both legs, all the way to her toes. His shadow of a beard caught against the thin fabric of her bodysuit, tickling a little and sending shivers up her body as he made his way back up.

When he stopped and sucked her clit between his lips she couldn’t help the way her breathing grew ragged.

Her senses heightened in the total darkness, lulled by the sound of his breathing and her own that seemed in concert with the beat of the music. She felt him smiling before he drew back and blew on her wet, swollen sex. Then he rubbed his cheeks along her lower belly and up her torso, until she felt him go still just below her breasts. The hot moisture of his breath seared her through the bodysuit.

"You like this, don't you?"

"Yes, Master." When he raised his head a little and took one taut nipple between his teeth, a hot curl of arousal began deep in her belly and started to spread like wildfire through her body. But she didn't get to savor it for long.

Moisture gathered in Talia's mouth when Sid straightened and cupped her face between his calloused palms. "Trust me, sweetheart," he ordered.

"I do." How could she not trust this gentle Master?

"Put your hands above your head," he whispered, and when she did he quickly tied them together and fastened the rope to a hook suspended from the ceiling. The cool rope dug into her flesh, not painfully but enough to feed the arousal that had begun back home when she'd seen him in his Master's gear, all male strength and displaying the dominance she craved.

Her sexual excitement intensified as he began applying rope in a crisscross pattern around her torso, making knots in places that made her nipples bead up and her cunt grow moist. When he reached her rib cage and wrapped the rope just below her breasts, her body remembered what he'd done to her at home, though now the sensations were muted because of the thin layer of stretchy fabric protecting her skin.

It was as though each strand of rope, every precisely placed knot were binding her to her Master. She wanted the feelings, needed to experience every nuance of sensation because *he* was doing it to her. For her. For them.

He moved the rope in time with the music, a sensual ballet that ended when he had her entire torso and legs wrapped and tied. The pressure intensified when he raised her

off the floor and fastened the rope at her waist to an overhead hook. Once he'd adjusted the height to where he wanted her, he told her to spread her legs.

"Ooh." When she followed his order, the rope tightened, putting delicious pressure on her cunt, her belly, her breasts. An increase in the cool air between her legs let her know her moist, swollen flesh was now completely exposed. The feelings intensified as her Master positioned first one leg and then the other and tied them off, leaving her suspended on four ropes.

"Delightfully helpless. And as beautiful as a rare, bright butterfly." His voice was deep, hoarse, as though he was painfully aroused. She knew she was, and when she felt his hands sliding up her calves, bending her knees to open her further to his gaze, she wanted to beg him to hurry, relieve the raging need he'd built up in her.

"Having to wait will be your punishment, sweetheart," he said as he nibbled his way up her inner thighs until he reached her pussy and blew on her tingling clit.

Talia had imagined herself this way, helpless to Sid's desires. The reality was so much more than she had dreamed about. She hung, suspended for her Master's pleasure, the pressure from each knot feeding her arousal and reminding her of his power. His possession. Most of all, they reminded her of his dominance and the love he'd professed for her last night.

When he stepped away for a minute, she realized how much she needed him in order to feel whole, desirable.

Sid put on a condom and then fit a slender dildo into place in the ring of the double-penetration harness, above his own rigid cock. Not wanting to cause Talia undue pain, he rolled another lubricated condom onto the dildo before stepping behind his suspended slave and adjusting the ropes to position her. The little sigh she let out when he put his hands on her beautifully rounded ass sent a surge of blood to his already raging hard-on, but he held back, using fingers slippery with lube to tease her tight rear hole.

"I want this pretty hole, too, sweetheart." He slipped one finger past her anal sphincter and then another. "Have you ever taken two cocks at the same time?"

"Not that way, Master." When she spoke, he could tell she was on the edge. "Are you..."

Did it bother her to think he'd share her with another Dom so soon? "Does the idea excite you?" He rubbed his cock over her damp, swollen pussy,

"If it pleases you, Master." She didn't sound especially pleased, and her gasp of surprise when he positioned himself and pressed his cock and the dildo against her wet, waiting flesh made him laugh.

"It's just me, sweetheart. Me and a dildo. Didn't you notice the harness has a ring to hold an extra cock?"

She shook her head, and that made her suspended body move enough to fire up his arousal. Grasping her hips, he held her steady and slowly penetrated her. Double penetration. He felt her clamp down on his cock with her strong inner muscles as he began to move. In, deeper with every thrust. Out, until he nearly withdrew. Then back in again, over and over. Her deep moans mingled with his own, echoing off the walls of the cavernous dungeon room.

He tried to hold back, even counting the patterns of his blue rope against the hot-pink material of her bodysuit. But he knew he wouldn't last long, not with five pairs of eyes on them, feeding the exhibitionist in him...and not when his beautiful slave's hot, wet cunt was clutching his cock as though she'd never let it go.

"God yes, Master. Fuck me hard. Please..."

He dug his fingers into her firm, luscious butt and fucked her hard. His cock had never been so hard, so ready. He forgot about the curious eyes. The ropes that suspended her for his pleasure. The only thing left on his mind was the friction on his dick, the tight urgency in his balls and the incredible sensation of her vaginal muscles squeezing...letting go. Milking him, demanding his climax.

No. He mustn't come, not yet. He reached around her, caught her nipples between his thumb and forefinger, pulled them hard. "Come for me now, my hot little butterfly."

She let out a scream that morphed into a high, keening moan. Her cunt clamped down on his cock. Pressure built in his balls and the first burst of hot, wet semen flooded the condom.

It didn't stop. Over and over, waves of heat flooded his brain, left him shuddering, drained. Empty of everything but Talia and the force of their joining.

When he finally could think again, he withdrew, lowered her to her feet and began unwrapping the rope from around her gorgeous body. Laying kisses over the places where he'd bound her, he came down slowly from the highest high he'd ever experienced. Her look of love and wonder when he removed the blindfold was the best gift she could have given him, other than her promise to marry him and be his submissive lover forever.

Chapter Eight

I believe Sid loves me.

Talia had kept repeating that in her head the next day, every time Mary or Doug asked her a question that made her uncomfortable. And she'd smiled a lot. By the time Sid had come home from the run-through practice, she'd dredged up the courage to give them her thoughts about the wedding.

Before they left the following day for the game, the four of them had agreed that the smartest thing to do was hold the wedding in Savannah before the start of next year's regular season. Thankfully none of them wanted a three-ring circus—just a day for immediate family and friends from Sid's team. By the time Talia settled in the stands with her future in-laws to watch the game, she was feeling better about herself than she had for years.

She couldn't help, though, remembering the last football game Vic had let her attend. It had been a sunny, brisk October day in Atlanta. Vic had kissed her goodbye in the parking lot, something she'd almost forgotten during the nightmare years that had followed. She'd watched him run onto the field with his teammates, the way she'd be watching Sid today.

Oh, God. She pictured Vic in her head the way he'd looked halfway through that game, laid out on the field, broken and unconscious. And she recalled how that hit had seemed to change him.

Not only had Vic not been the same player after his shattered upper arm had healed, he also hadn't been the same man. And every time after that when he'd had another concussion, he'd become meaner and more erratic, until that day when he'd come home from a game in Phoenix and thrown her down the stairs and out of his life.

Could something like that happen with Sid?

Talia tried to stop shivering at the sudden chill that coursed through her body despite the noontime sunshine and the cozy team hoodie Sid had insisted she wear over his team jersey, against the January cold.

"Are you cold, honey?" Sid's dad asked. "Here, wrap up in this stadium blanket."

"I'm okay. I'm just being silly, worrying that Sid will get hurt."

Doug patted her hand. "He'll be okay. His mom worries, too, but he's been doing this since he was nine years old. I played football, too, in high school and college. The worst that happened to either of us was when Sid broke his wrist when he was sixteen. Relax and enjoy the game."

"I'll try." Talia shaded her eyes from the sun and looked out on the field where the players were warming up. She spied Sid's number seventeen. He'd had to jump to haul down a football that had been thrown way over his head. "I can't believe he caught that."

"Watch him throw. I'll bet he puts the ball right on Yancey's numbers," Mary said. "Did you know he played quarterback in high school and his first year of college?"

Talia nodded, but her eyes stayed glued on Sid, who did pass the ball back to Yancey, right on the money. "Why did he switch positions?"

"He was too short to find his receivers over the linemen." Doug shook his head. "Or so his college coach told him. I've always thought the guy figured Sid would do him more good, with his speed, as a receiver."

"Oh." It was obvious that Sid's parents adored him, and that they were proud of what he'd accomplished so far on the football field. Talia guessed that was understandable since Mary and Doug were both avid fans. She was, too, but she couldn't help worrying that he'd get hurt—or that one of the inevitable injuries that players got might make him change from the wonderful, loving Master he was.

Please, don't let that happen. Talia kept repeating that prayer in her head all through the game, whenever Sid was on the field. She hardly noticed the score going back and

forth, only that number seventeen caught a lot of passes and kept getting up whenever he got knocked down.

During the first two quarters, the score seesawed back and forth, with the Rebels on top. Susan Zanardi left at halftime with Coach's father. According to Keisha, who was sitting in the row behind them, Susan was headed to the hospital but hoping her baby wouldn't be born until the game was over and her husband could be with her for the birth. Talia hoped the baby would wait, too. Recalling that Sid had mentioned wanting a child someday, she decided she wouldn't want to have that baby with him anywhere but at her side.

When the teams came back on the field, the noise level grew in proportion to the quantity of beer being sold in huge paper cups to a restless crowd. Talia watched red-and-blue Rebels' pennants flutter in an escalating wind that carried familiar smells of hot dogs and sausages from the grills scattered around the stadium. Her stomach growled but she was too nervous to eat.

Neither team scored in the third quarter, but in the fourth, the other team suddenly came alive and the Rebels found themselves behind by six. Along with thousands of Rebels fans, Talia let out a loud groan when Yancey's pass flew six feet over Jack Winters' head and into the hands of an opponent.

After that, silence hung in the air. Along with the fans surrounding her, Talia came to her feet and screamed with new hope when Jimmy Bronson hauled down a deflected pass and gave the Rebels back the ball just thirty yards from the opponents' goal. Since there was less than a minute on the clock, a Rebels' touchdown should mean victory.

Talia clenched her fists when she saw Sid running an outside route into the end zone, two defenders hot on his tail. She followed the ball as it flew from Yancey's hands, arced high. Oh no, it seemed to be hanging in the brisk wind, its forward motion stilled. Sid backpedaled but couldn't get to it in time as the slower of the two defenders hauled it in.

Sid tackled him hard and they both went down. Another defender piled on top of Sid. Talia closed her eyes and held her breath after seeing the three of them lying in a heap of tangled legs, stained jerseys and shoulder pads yanked out of place.

"Relax, our boy's okay. They're all on their feet now." When she followed Doug's gaze to her white-knuckled fingers, she tried to let go of the tension that had claimed her.

"Thank God." The clock wound down and the Rebels lost, but all Talia cared about right then was that Sid was okay.

* * * * *

As Sid finished saying a few words to the reporters who'd gathered around his locker, he still was pissed that the Rebels hadn't won. There would always be next year, though. They'd given it their best shot today, and who was to say Yancey's last pass wouldn't have been catchable if it hadn't been for the gust of headwind that made it hang and fall ten yards short of where it was supposed to go?

Now all Sid wanted was to forget football for a while and enjoy some down time with his brand-new fiancée. Hurrying outside, he spotted Talia with his parents and made his way through a crowd of autograph hounds, stopping to scribble his name on papers and jerseys people kept shoving in his path.

"Sorry I took so long," he said when he finally got to Talia and wrapped his arm around her, herding her through the crowd. "Are you okay, sweetheart?"

"I am now that I know you're okay." When she smiled up at him he felt as if he hadn't just been part of a heartbreaking loss. "Have you heard whether Susan has had her baby?"

"Nope. Coach took off for the hospital right after the game was over. That was probably a good thing, especially for Yancey, since Coach certainly would have had more than a few choice words to say about that last underthrown pass."

Talia looked up at him, concern evident in her expression. "That was an awful throw, if he was trying to throw the ball to you. I nearly died when I saw you and those two guys piled up in a heap on the turf. You're really all right, aren't you?"

"I'm okay. I've got a few ugly bruises and a nice impression of a cleat on the back of my thigh, but nothing serious enough to worry about. After Mom and Dad head off to catch their plane, what say we go over to Julie and Jimmy's? They're having a few players over for a game postmortem, and Jimmy has promised plenty of snacks and drinks."

"I'd like that." Stretching up to kiss his cheek, Talia gave his arm a squeeze before getting into his car and holding his hand as he drove them home.

* * * * *

"I like Talia, son. But she's terrified that you'll get hurt," Sid's dad told him a little later as he and Mom were preparing to leave for the airport. "You might want to reassure her that most football players manage to survive to a ripe old age, especially if you intend to keep on playing awhile longer."

Sid fit his mom's suitcase into the hatchback then turned to his dad. "Terrified? That bad? I know most women worry, but—"

"But nothing. It's a wonder her palms aren't bloodied, because every time you went out on the field she clenched her fists so hard her knuckles turned white. I know fear when I see it."

Fear for him? Or was it something more? Could Talia be worried sick that he'd get his head bashed in and turn from Dr. Jekyll to Mr. Hyde, figuratively speaking, the way Reinhart apparently had? Damn it, what he wanted was to put the bastard out of his mind as well as Talia's, but he was afraid that wouldn't happen any time soon. When his dad gave him a strange look, he cleared his throat and made what he thought was a fairly benign response. "Thanks for warning me, Dad. I'll have a talk with her."

"Doug, come on. We'll miss our flight if you don't get a move on," Mary called from her spot in the passenger seat.

Sid's dad shook his head as he opened the car door. "The boss has spoken, so I'd better get going. Take care of that pretty little lady of yours, and let us know as soon as you set the date for your wedding. We wouldn't miss it for anything."

"Thanks, Dad." Sid hugged his dad and then walked around the car to kiss his mother's cheek. "Thanks for coming, Mom."

* * * * *

"I'm sorry you didn't win the game, but I'm glad the season's over," Talia said late that night, after they got home from Jimmy and Julie's place and headed straight for the bedroom. "I'm also glad Coach let us know Susan and the baby are — Oh my God," she cried when he took off his shirt.

Her eyes darkened, and she reached out to touch him but jerked her hand back as though she'd been scorched. "They aren't pretty, but they're just bruises, sweetheart." Sid followed her horrified gaze to the ugly purplish masses around his rib cage. "They're not the first ones I've ever had, and I don't imagine they'll be the last." He toed off his shoes then dropped his jeans and boxers in one motion before sitting on the edge of the bed.

He patted the spot beside him. "Come here."

When she did, he took her hand and brought it to his lips. "I want you to tell me what's got you so scared."

"Have you ever had a concussion?" Her shoulders shook almost imperceptibly, as though she was trying hard not to show her fear.

Hating to see her so worried, he tried to keep the conversation light. "Not since high school, when I came out on the short end of a collision with a nasty-tempered defensive end who outweighed me by about a hundred pounds. Are you worried that I'll scramble my brain?"

“Vic had lots of concussions. He used to brag about keeping the team doctors from finding out about them, so the coaches wouldn’t bench him.” She spoke so softly he barely heard her.

Sid thought her suspicions as to why the bastard might have turned mean were spot-on, and he tried to show as little dislike as he could manage. “Reinhart is a lineman. Concussions are occupational hazards for them, and I imagine a good many of them are stupid enough to think it’s macho to stay in games even after their brains have gotten scrambled. Skill players other than quarterbacks, who get hit every way but Sunday when their pass protection’s not working, suffer more from broken bones and torn-up knees and shoulders than from head injuries.” Sid saw doubt in Talia’s eyes, so he tried to reassure her. “If I ever get hit on the helmet again, I’m sure I’ll have enough sense left to listen to the docs and take myself out of the game. I promise I won’t cheat on my baseline concussion tests, either.”

“Tests?” She sounded confused.

“For the past few years the league has required players to take tests that establish how their brains normally work. The tests are simple—they hand us a page full of shapes, have us look at it and then turn the paper over. We try to re-create the shapes from memory. Then they do the same thing with a page full of single words. Some players brag that they intentionally make mistakes on the tests, so they won’t look bad when they’re tested after taking a helmet shot. From what he told you, it sounds as if Reinhart may be one of those idiots who worries more about losing his job than maybe losing his life.”

Talia nodded. “I imagine he is. I’m glad you’re smart.”

“Me, too. I might accidentally get concussed again, but if it happens, you can be sure I won’t go back on the field until I’m completely recovered. I really want to enjoy a lot of years with you.”

“Thank you. I want that, too.”

He tilted her head back and met her sober gaze. "I love you, sweetheart, and I don't want you to worry. I intend to take very good care of myself so I can keep on making love with you until both of us are old and gray." Ignoring his sore ribs, he lay back on the bed and pulled Talia on top of him. "Now I want you to let me take care of you."

Her heart bursting with love, Talia bent and placed tiny kisses over Sid's face as she smoothed his soft, unruly curls off his forehead. He tasted good, like a mixture of his woodsy shampoo and warm, clean male. Mindful of his bumps and bruises, she balanced on her hands and knees, trying to avoid adding to the pain she knew he must be feeling in spite of his denials.

He tangled one hand in her hair while he used the other to stroke along her spine, his motion mesmerizing, drawing out all her thoughts and focusing her mind on him. Her Master. "I love you so very much," she whispered against his lips before taking them and tasting him the way he tasted her. When their tongues tangled a shot of desire shot through her – and him, too, if she wasn't mistaken.

"Let me in, baby. I need to be inside you." His rigid cock found its way between her legs, seeking her heat, and she felt hot moisture gush from her cunt. "You're so wet, so welcoming. Please, sweetheart, fuck me. Don't make me wait any longer."

"Yes, Master. You have to know I want you as much as you want me." She rotated her hips, taking him in just a little then moving away only to come back and impale herself. It felt so good, the closeness as much as the erotic sensations coursing through her body. He felt incredible, hot and hard and so big he stretched her inner muscles almost beyond pleasure. "I love the way you fill me."

"You feel like heaven and hell, so tight and wet. God, baby, I don't know how I got along before. Oh yeah, squeeze my cock. Like that." When she did, he let out a groan that came from deep in his muscular chest, reminding her of the low-pitched rumbling of a fierce jungle cat. "Let me feel you coming."

When she heard his hoarse plea, her muscles clenched deep in her belly. Delicious sensations coursed along her nerve endings, even to the ends of her fingers and toes. When her inner muscles clamped down on his swollen cock he let out another groan and came—long, staccato bursts of heat that bathed her in ecstasy like she'd never felt before.

Afterward she lay in his arms, their sweaty bodies still joined as their breathing slowed. Slowly, when her brain began to function again, she realized the cats had joined them.

"One big, happy family," Sid said sleepily as he stroked Victoria with one hand while Talia petted Vanessa. He looked at Talia and smiled. "You know, we may be adding to our family sooner than we thought."

"We're going to go pick out a dog soon?" Good thing she shared Sid's love for animals, Talia thought as she smiled back at him.

"That, too, sweetheart." When he raised one brow and shot a self-satisfied grin her way, she got the double entendre.

Strangely, the thought that they'd risked an unplanned pregnancy didn't scare her the way it would have a few weeks earlier. For once in her life she felt confident—certain of her Master's love, but more important, sure of her own self-worth. "I hope you won't mind if you're right."

Sid laid a hand on her belly and she reached over to hold him there. "Whenever it happens, sweetheart, I'll be thrilled. Right now I'm satisfied with you and our two feline buddies."

"So am I." Less than two months ago she'd come here a physical and emotional wreck, but now Talia felt she could climb a mountain as long as she had Sid by her side.

She had no more fear. No worries. Her Master had given her the forever kind of love she'd once thought didn't exist, the kind where he'd shown her how to reach out, claim and give back in equal measure.

Epilogue

The following summer at Rebels' Roost

Family night. Sid had promised her a long time ago that he'd bring her to the next one, and now they were here. Talia guessed at least a hundred people—players and significant others—must be milling around the buffet tables and on the patio, apparently happy to be seeing old friends for the first time since the Rebels had lost in the playoffs.

She saw a few women she knew, Julie Bronson and Susan Zanardi, laughing with their husbands as they showed off their babies to anybody who would stop and look.

Tawny was there with Jack, looking relaxed as they spoke with the two of Sid's teammates who'd been playing together in the dungeon that night before the playoff game. Neither of them had brought along a wife or girlfriend, Talia noticed.

She looked around some more then turned to Sid. "I don't see Keisha Harris. Isn't that her...her slave, over there?"

"Yeah, that's Matt. He told me yesterday when we were working out in the weight room that she's in the hospital. He found her passed out at home when he got home from minicamp the other day."

"Oh, no. I hope it's nothing serious." Talia liked the brash Domme, admired her smarts and her football savvy.

Sid smoothed the windblown hair out of Talia's eyes. "It looks like it may rain, sweetheart. What say we get out of here and go home?"

As always, her skin got hot when he looked at her in that incredibly sexy way. "I'm ready." She was always ready for whatever Sid had in mind. He'd made her the happiest she'd ever been, and it just kept getting better.

The End

About the Author

Ann Jacobs is a sucker for lusty Alpha heroes and happy endings, which makes Ellora's Cave an ideal publisher for her work. Romantica®, to her, is the perfect combination of sex, sensuality, deep emotional involvement and lifelong commitment—the elusive fantasy women often dream about but seldom achieve.

First published in 1996, Jacobs has sold over forty books and novellas, some of which have earned awards including the Passionate Plume (best novella, 2006), the Desert Rose (best hot and spicy romance, 2004) and More Than Magic (best erotic romance, 2004). She has been a double finalist in separate categories of the EPPIES and From the Heart RWA Chapter's contest. Three of her books have been translated and sold in several European countries.

A CPA and former hospital financial manager, Jacobs now writes full-time, with the help of Mr. Blue, the family cat who sometimes likes to perch on the back of her desk chair and lend his sage advice. He sometimes even contributes a few random letters when he decides he wants to try out the keyboard. She loves to hear from readers, and to put faces with names at signings and conventions.

Ann 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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