

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



Soul Master
REESE
GABRIEL

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Soul Master

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SOUL MASTER

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

"Cindy, I want to talk to you."

Cindy froze, the stern voice of Colonel Conrad DeWitt holding her fast.

So much for making a quick getaway after the ceremony.

Now what? The last thing she needed to do was turn and face the hypnotizing blue eyes and chiseled features of the soldier turned mercenary.

"We can talk later," she said, giving a quick, safe glance over her shoulder. "Gordon and Chels are expecting us for dinner."

Hopefully later would turn into never.

It had been hard enough having to stand so close to him during the private seaside service, maid of honor to his best man, pretending to concentrate as Conrad's brother Gordon married her best friend Chelsea.

They were supposed to be like family, the four of them having met up on the island of St. Crysanthum, the Caribbean paradise famous for its wedding photo ops.

Except Cindy didn't feel like a member of Conrad's family. She wasn't interested in getting together for Thanksgiving or sitting around the Christmas tree once a year. She wanted Conrad for herself—his lips on her skin, his hands on her body exploring her curves, igniting her long buried passions.

Conrad wasn't satisfied with her answer. Taking her arm gently but firmly, he turned her on her heels.

Her knees went weak at the sight of his furrowed brow, full lips and broad shoulders.

"There's something I need to know first. You've been avoiding me. Why?"

Cindy's heart slammed in her chest.

What was wrong with her? So he was attractive and charismatic. She had run across plenty of good looking men and a lot of them had made advances, mostly to her annoyance.

Conrad was different, though. Intense, serious, a sea of emotions behind his azure eyes. He was a mystery waiting to be solved. She could hardly believe she had only known him for a day.

Like a moth to a flame, she thought.

Was she taken by his secretive military background or could it be because she knew Conrad's brother was a sexual Dominant and that he might be one too?

The idea was more than a little disturbing, because Cindy wasn't like Chelsea. She wasn't into whips and chains, and she was not looking for a Master.

Still, the idea of a man powerful enough to make a woman obey intrigued Cindy. She liked her men strong. She was a little old-fashioned that way and her dreams tended to be populated by pirates and gentleman soldiers and such.

Say something, Cindy, he's waiting.

"What do you mean I'm trying to avoid you?" she said. "We only just met."

"That's exactly my point," he countered. "I haven't had enough time to piss you off."

"I'm not pissed off."

"In that case," he said, studying her expression, "something else is going on."

"There isn't anything going on," she insisted, imagining his lips pressed to hers, searing her mouth, stealing away her breath to the point of hot, surrendered moans.

Damn, he looked so good in that dark suit, all crisp and fresh, with his short hair and broad shoulders.

And the way he stood during the service, he would make one hell of a groom himself. What woman wouldn't dream of a man like that?

Cindy didn't want marriage, though, least of all to a mercenary with a tendency to pop in and out of civilian life.

He had barely arrived on the island to meet them and already he was due to depart tomorrow morning. Chelsea didn't know for sure but she suspected he was going to Iraq or Afghanistan to work for a private security company.

She tried not to squirm under his gaze.

What was his problem, anyway?

"I'll be the judge of what's going on," he determined. "Over dinner."

Cindy bit her lower lip. Was he asking her on a date?

"We have dinner plans with the bride and groom," she reminded.

"Cancelled," he said. "I worked it out with Gordon. The two of them should have the time to themselves, anyway. It will work out perfectly all the way around."

Cindy's emotions whirled. She tried to hold her temper. "Did you plan on consulting me at any point?"

If she had expected some sort of apology or backpedalling, she was sorely disappointed.

"I'm telling you now, aren't I?"

"A woman likes to be asked, Conrad."

"We need to talk." He dismissed her objections. "This will be the only chance we have for a long time. I won't be back again for at least six months."

Cindy frowned. "So are you ordering me to dinner? I'm not in the military, you know."

"Neither am I, not anymore. It's simply my habit to be direct. Life is too short."

"So why wait until dinner? Talk to me now."

His eyes were stormy, belying his stony expression. "It isn't just talking I want. I think you know that."

A gorgeous man who knew what he wanted...her.

How could that not be a turn on?

"I'll be direct too," she said, determined to hold her ground despite her increasing desperation for this quintessential alpha male. "I would prefer to be alone tonight."

"I don't think so, Cindy."

"You don't think what?" she snapped. "That I am allowed to be alone?"

"No, I just don't think it's what you want. You are lonely, you are jealous of Chelsea. How long has it been since a man has loved you properly?"

Cindy couldn't believe her ears. Had he no sense of discretion? She took him by the elbow, guiding him off the dais, out of possible ear shot of the handful of hotel workers who were busy setting up for a steel drum party.

It was so incredibly beautiful out here with the beach and the waves just below them, a light breeze blowing through the palm trees.

This was a million times better than an indoor wedding.

Where were Gordon and Chelsea to rescue her, anyhow?

"Look, Conrad," she said between gritted teeth. "I'm going to cut you some slack because we are family and because you have probably been away at the front too long to remember your manners, but I will not tolerate those kinds of questions. Are we clear?"

"So you're not attracted to me?"

The million dollar question. Answer wrong and he would have her.

"We have nothing in common," she evaded. "Your big accomplishment last year was probably overthrowing some Latin American dictator. I took a candle making class."

"You would be surprised," he deadpanned, "how often homemade candles come in handy in overthrowing Latin American dictators. Now answer my question. Attracted to me — yes or no?"

Cindy steeled herself. "No."

His lips curled downward very slightly. She felt her defenses giving way.

"You're lying, Cindy."

"I am not," she insisted.

"If you were a man, I would challenge you. It's a little different with women."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

She knew she would regret asking.

"Women can be weakened with kisses, Cindy. Women can be spanked."

Her body's reaction alarmed her.

She became instantly wet and her nipples tightened.

"What's to keep me from slapping you?" she demanded.

"Try it," he said, his voice perfectly calm and steady, "and find out."

"I would rather say goodbye, Colonel DeWitt."

"You can leave now, but we're still having dinner."

"You can't force me."

"No," he agreed. "I can't. I think you would like to, though."

"I'm not hungry." She offered as a final defense.

His smile curled her toes. It wasn't exactly evil but it was hardly angelic either.

"There are other things you can be hungry for besides food, Cindy."

"Don't be vulgar."

"I didn't mean sex," he said, blowing her away yet again. "I meant obedience. You'll go to dinner because you want to please me."

She nearly swooned. How could he guess secrets about her she had not known herself?

"I'm not like Chelsea," she said quickly. "I don't want to be tied up and I most certainly don't want to crawl to someone holding a whip."

"And I'm not like my brother," he said. "I don't make women crawl and I don't hold whips. I'm not much into bondage, either. Takes the fun out of it."

"In that case, I am perfectly free to head back to my room. I do wish you the best on your mission."

He held her arm gently but firmly. "Not so fast."

The feel of his skin sent chills through her, hot and cold at the same time. He was as strong as she had imagined. What would a man like that, a touch like that, do to a helpless, naked female?

Would there be anything she could deny him?

"Let go of me," she said, confused, nervous and terribly aroused.

She prayed he would not pick up on the scent of her jasmine perfume mixed with her arousal.

With casual, insolent ease he drew her close, lifting her onto her tiptoes so their lips were only a few inches apart.

"I will release your arm," he said, his voice a hot, intense rasp. "But I am not going to free you."

She struggled to keep her own voice intact. "But you said...you weren't a Master."

"I said no whips, no ropes," he explained. "There are other ways to keep a female in her place."

Like spanking, she thought.

"You have no right." She squirmed in his arms. "I'm not your slave."

Conrad settled the matter with a kiss. It was a straightforward taking. Cindy gasped, offering momentary resistance. All too quickly it crumbled, leaving her in a state of heated openness, her lips molding to his.

She half expected the invasion of his tongue or a strong hand to come sliding down her back to rest possessively on her buttocks. Instead, he broke the contact just as abruptly as it had begun.

Cindy exhaled, feeling herself plunging forward into an abyss of need. She wanted — *needed* — what Conrad had to offer. And she would take it on his terms.

As if there would be any other way.

"I'll pick you up at your room at eight," he said. "For dinner."

Cindy nodded, hating herself.

She must have walked back to her room, said goodnight to Chelsea and Gordon along the way, though she had no conscious memory. It was more like floating.

The next thing she was truly aware of was seeing her own reflection in the mirror of her hotel room bathroom.

"What did I just do?" she asked herself aloud. "Tell me I can get out of this, please?"

Her reflection had no answer.

"Thanks for nothing," she grumbled to the pixie-haired blonde with the button nose in the polished glass. "Remind me to return the favor someday."

According to the clock it was six-thirty. That gave her ninety minutes to make up a good excuse.

Either that or book a ticket off the island.

A plane would do, or maybe she could make her own raft out of busted up pieces of furniture from her room.

They might take her to jail but at least she wouldn't have to face Conrad again...or her own unleashed libido.

* * * * *

Conrad listed all the reasons why it was not a good idea to seduce Cindy tonight.

To begin with, she was way too close to Chelsea and Gordon. Sooner or later he would have a falling out with the gorgeous blonde and then his brother and his new sister-in-law would be all over him.

They would make him the bad guy and they wouldn't listen no matter what he said. And who could blame them? Conrad's track record wasn't strong. Being a professional soldier made it hard to be in a relationship.

Nowadays he preferred to find beautiful women for no-strings, mutual pleasure. Cindy qualified in the looks department. She would certainly bring him pleasure and he would not leave her wanting.

A woman like Cindy would never settle for sex alone, though. She would want love, a relationship. And who could blame her? She deserved it. He had a hard time figuring out why she didn't have a husband or boyfriend as it was.

From what little he had heard she tended to attract the wrong kind of men—self-absorbed, shallow pretty boys who thought they ought to have a picture-perfect blonde bombshell on their arms.

Men looking for commitment, on the other hand, tended to be scared of beautiful females, feeling they could never hold them in a marriage.

Was Conrad the wrong kind of man? He certainly didn't aim to deceive her. He intended to ask her for one night and, after that, no promises. Could it really be no strings attached though, or would something linger in the morning, making his inevitable departure all the harder?

He couldn't ignore the possibility they would hit it off outside of bed. Chelsea and Gordon certainly got along.

How was that for a list?

More than enough reason for a man to keep his distance.

A different kind of man, but definitely not Conrad.

Calm, alert and ready for battle, Conrad walked down the hall toward Cindy's room. He had no intention of missing this opportunity. The way she had responded to his kiss told him everything he needed to know.

Her lips might say no but they kissed yes.

He knocked on her door, tapping firmly.

She opened on the second knock.

The chain was on the door.

"I won't be able to go with you," she said through the crack. "I'm really sorry. I wish you the best and I hope you understand."

"I don't understand, Cindy. Open the door so we can talk."

"I can't, Conrad."

"Cindy, I'm not in the habit of begging."

She was silent.

"Cindy, I'm waiting."

"Why are you doing this, Conrad?"

"You know why."

"You want sex," she said. "And it's not right."

"Open the door," he repeated.

"Go away. You're making a scene."

"If I need to break down the door, I will."

Cindy closed the door. A few moments passed before the knob turned again.

Cindy stood in the doorway with the bedspread draped around her.

"That's a fetching look," he said dryly. "I'm not sure it's right for dinner, though."

"I told you, I'm not going."

He closed the door behind him. "Fine, we'll order room service."

Her mouth hung open. Clearly she had not been expecting this possibility. "You can't be serious?"

"I said we would talk over dinner," he said. "And I meant it."

"Not if I don't want you here."

"It's your own fault for not getting dressed," he told her.

"Fine," she spat. "I'll get dressed now." He didn't budge. "Didn't you hear me? I'm going to get dressed. Go wait in the hall."

"I'll wait here, thank you."

She fumed. "How dare you? You've been nothing but rude to me. I have a mind to tell your brother."

Conrad scoffed. "You think he'll send me to my room?"

"Is everything a joke to you?" she spat.

"No," he said. "At this moment I am looking at you, going out of my mind wanting to have you. That is no joke."

Her bare toes curled in the carpet. "You can't talk like that," she insisted.

"Why not? I need you naked, in bed, writhing underneath me, conquered by my cock."

"Get out," she said, pointing to the door. "Just get out."

"You really want that?" He called her bluff. "This is a one time offer, you know. You and me, tonight. I will make love to you any way you like and maybe show you a thing or two, no strings attached. Otherwise I leave. Your choice but don't keep me waiting."

She was silent.

"In that case, I'll see you for egg nog next Christmas." His hand was on the knob.

"Wait," she said.

Conrad's cock tightened. She was weakening. She would be putty in his hands in short order.

"Yes, Cindy?"

She lowered her eyes, embarrassed to speak the words. "I don't...I don't want you to go."

"Why not?" he said, determined to hear the confession from her lips.

"I want to talk," she said, grasping at his original proposal.

"I'm not interested in talking anymore. It's gone too far for me."

Her eyes were wide as she grasped the next step. "You can't expect me to...to..."

"To do anything you don't want to? No. But the woman I kissed wasn't all that interested in talking either, was she?" He could see the conflict on her face, the want, the resistance. This was definitely not the time for him to back down. "Let me spell it out. There's a bed behind you. If we enter it together, I will call the shots, you will yield full control to me."

She took a step backward. "I told you, I'm not a slave."

"In your life, of course not, but I think you are curious about submission in sex. That kiss revealed a good deal, you know."

"Fuck the kiss, I didn't even want it," she snapped.

"So you don't wonder what it would be like? Surrendering to me?"

"I already know. It would be a ménage a trios. You and me and your colossal ego."

"Just answer a question, Cindy. What are you wearing under that bedspread?"

Anger and embarrassment flashed across her face. "None of your damn business."

"You're naked underneath, aren't you?"

"If you think I am trying to seduce you, buddy, you're barking up the wrong tree. I was taking a bath, that's all."

"Your hair isn't wet."

"Go to hell, Conrad."

"You want me to see your body," he said huskily. "Why don't you show it to me...now?"

She hugged her breasts. "I will do nothing of the sort."

"You needn't feel self-conscious. I am quite smitten with you."

"I'm not self-conscious," she insisted. "I hardly know you, we don't have a relationship. It's entirely inappropriate."

"Not for a one night stand."

"A one night stand? What kind of woman do you think I am?"

"The kind who deserves pleasure. I'll give it to you. I won't hurt you and I will protect your honor. We're both lonely. We need love tonight. Tomorrow, we walk away, back to our lives, no more contact."

"Until we have to sit across each other at dinner the next time Gordon and Chelsea invite us over."

"I can handle that and so can you."

"What if I don't want to handle it?"

"Everything has a price. Trust me, Cindy, I am offering exactly what I say. You will part ways with me a happy woman."

"For the last time, I don't want anything sexual."

"Your nipples are hard, aren't they?"

"None of your damn business."

"Would you like us to play a power game, is that it?"

"You're a stranger. I don't play games with strangers."

"My brother is your best friend's soul mate. That has to mean something," he said.

"Yes, it means we should be with them, celebrating."

"They are making love by now," he rasped. "And so should we."

"You're insane," she declared, exasperated. "You know that?"

"Maybe. So what game would you like to play? Prostitute and customer? Sultan and concubine? Burglar and unsuspecting housewife?"

Her lip disappeared between her teeth again. She was thinking, she was choosing.

There was no way Cindy could go through with this. It ran counter to everything she knew and believed about male-female relationships. But this man turned her on like

no other. And he was offering her something discreet, fun, without long-term entanglements.

She wished she were a man. Men seemed to have it so much easier. If they were horny, they could do something about it without repercussions. Women were supposed to think about feelings and reputations.

Women got hurt, invariably. Why was that?

Men knew how to play. Conrad wanted to play. What would it be like being a hooker, taking money from him for services, following his instructions? What if he were a sultan who actually owned her body?

"It wouldn't work," she insisted.

"Why not?"

"We don't trust each other," she began to trumpet excuses. "I don't know what your favorite color is, where you like to go for vacation, what scares you most in life. And we've only kissed once. That's not enough."

Conrad closed the gap between them. Finger under her chin, he angled her face for another meeting of lips.

This time it was gentle, soulful, mind-blowing.

Time and space disappeared, melting under her feet.

She clutched at the spread, pulling it tight.

The heat built underneath. Her nipples tightened. Why, oh why hadn't she worn clothes? It wasn't like she had planned to come to the door this way. For the past hour she had been running around like a chicken with its head cut off, changing outfits.

When he had knocked on the door, she had made her escape down the hall and decided not to open the door at all. She had planned to take a bath, truly she had. Instead she had opened the door to him after grabbing the nearest non-sexy thing she could find.

She had meant nothing by it.

It was a bedspread, for god's sake.

Conrad's hands moved to her back, fingers splayed. He was remarkably tender and gentle. He did not try to take advantage, but *was* caressing her ass.

At last he let her breathe.

"Blue. Hawaii and dying alone."

She blinked, momentarily lost. "Hmm?"

"Those are the answers to your questions."

"Oh..."

He smiled rakishly, a sharp angle to his lips that made her tingle. "So, can we play now?"

"I really wouldn't know how," she admitted, figuring she owed him the same honesty he had just given her. "Sex has never been very colorful for me."

"That needs to change," he murmured, brushing stray hairs from in front of her face. "Don't you think?"

"I-I don't know." She licked her lips, thinking about another kiss.

"We're going to take this off you. You look like a tepee."

His hands moved to her cheeks, fingers lightly caressing, then lower, down to her neck.

She held her breath as he tugged at the edges of the spread.

"Let go," he whispered.

Her toes curled.

"Let go," he repeated, leaning in to graze her earlobe with his lips.

She moaned.

The bedspread fell away. Over her shoulders, her hips, her legs, to puddle on the floor at her ankles.

"Don't move," he commanded.

Cindy trembled, her body screaming out, awaiting his next move. Why didn't he simply ravish her and get it over with?

"Oh, god," she gasped, tensing as his fingers grazed her thigh.

"You're too beautiful not to touch," he declared. "I wanted to do this the moment I saw you. And the more you tried to distance yourself, the more I had to have you. All day yesterday, it was ridiculous. At lunch, all I could do was watch your lips moving...and those silly dangling earrings."

Her breathing quickened. She was throbbing, moist, ready, almost painfully so.

"I had to distance myself," she admitted. "You were driving me crazy. I was sure you saw me staring at you on the boat. And when you jumped into the water, I wanted to go in after you and pull off your swim suit."

He pressed her clit, just for an agonizing instant.

"I wish you had. I would have made short work of that little bikini, trust me. I had fantasies of throwing everyone else overboard and taking you to a deserted island to serve my pleasure twenty-four/seven."

Cindy squirmed. "What if I had refused to serve you? Would you have served me?"

He smacked her bottom lightly. "What do you think?"

The spank elicited a moan.

Conrad chuckled. "I can see we'll have to do more of that."

"No," she said insistently. "I'm not that kind of woman."

"Sure you are." He pinched her ass. "You just don't know it yet. Besides, you're not in charge tonight, so get used to it."

She issued a mild yelp. "Y-you said I could choose."

"The game, yes. Not who's on top."

Conrad moved his fingers to her breasts.

She sucked in her breath but didn't move.

"Good girl," he said, caressing, molding the firm, ripe globes.

"How long?" he asked, repeating his earlier question about her last sexual experience.

"Eight months," she croaked.

"Did he make you come?" When she hesitated he took hold of her nipples, lightly squeezing between his thumbs and forefingers.

She arched her back. "N-no."

"You will come for me. But not until I tell you. You will be obedient for me...or you'll be punished. Is that clear?"

"Yes," she heard herself say.

"Good." He gave her a crisp blow on her still-tingling bottom just to drive the point home. "So what game are we going to play?"

Cindy writhed at the contact of his palm. Her imagination moved in a hundred directions. He was freeing her, giving her permission to let loose.

There was one thing she had always wondered. Something forbidden she would never approach in real life.

"Prostitute," she said, barely audible. "And customer."

He smiled in approval. "That strikes your fancy, does it?"

She hoped the question was rhetorical. At the moment she was caught up in a spell. Did she even know what she was saying?

Conrad blazed a trail of kisses along her neck, his lips claiming. "Your name is Belle. I picked you up in the lobby of the hotel."

She fell against him, sighing. Her fingers moved to unbutton his shirt.

"Not just yet," he pushed her gently back. "I want to know how much."

"How...much?"

"How much do I have to pay for your body, Belle? Bear in mind I want everything."

Everything. Her senses exploded at the word. She had made a mistake. "I..."

Conrad bent to capture her breast in his mouth. She groaned in reply, arching her back. "You're worth at least a thousand," he said, releasing her.

Cindy couldn't speak.

"How about two?" He suckled at her other breast.

"Y-yes," she managed. "T-two."

He stared her in the eye. "I can fuck you for two thousand? And oral, too?"

She imagined his cock, long and firm and hard between her wicked lips. His flesh—velvet wrapped steel—pulsing. "I'll suck you, yes," she said.

"We'll start with this." He lowered himself to one knee.

"Conrad!" she exclaimed, seeing what he was about to do. "No."

"I want to taste your pussy, Belle. I'm paying two grand for it, I have the right."

She backed away. "Not that. Anything but that."

He studied her, once again seeing straight to her soul. "You had a bad experience. Some guy rejected you."

Her lip trembled.

"He was an ass, Cindy, whoever he was. Tasting you is something a real man would give his left arm for."

It had been in college, the one and only time she had agreed to let a man perform oral sex. They were both drunk, which was the only thing that had given her the courage to accept. Freddie'd had no clue what he was doing. He had started laughing and then told her it was gross. A few moments later he had passed out. She had cried herself to sleep, vowing never to let a man get her into such a vulnerable position again.

"Please, Conrad, can we let it go?"

She should have known he wouldn't. He stood and held her tightly for a kiss, which was his preferred way of getting her to do things.

His tongue moved swiftly inside her mouth. She gave him access, letting him explore, take his pleasure. Next thing she knew she was rubbing herself against him, her nipples hard as bullets, her belly hot and charged.

"Much better, Belle. Now I won't have to spank you...yet." His hand moved possessively over her bottom. She writhed in reply, lips begging for another kiss. Conrad denied her. "I want you in bed," he ordered. "On your back, legs spread nice and wide."

The way he said it, so matter-of-factly, made her feel like the wanton woman she was supposed to be.

"Yes," she said. She might as well have said 'Yes, Sir'. Languorously, all too aware of his eyes hot on her ass, she walked to the bed, climbed on and put herself in position. She flushed all over as his lust-filled eyes raked her flesh. He took his time examining her pussy.

Conrad winked. "I can see we're going to get on fine, assuming you take credit cards."

Cindy smiled. "With proper ID."

"I'll see what I can do." He shed his jacket, eyes glued on her. Either he was completely taken with her or he was one damn fine actor.

For her part, she was plenty taken by the man's chest. Her mouth practically watered as he unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off. The T-shirt followed. His chest was bronzed and sculpted, as she remembered from the boat.

But, this time she would get to see the rest of him too.

Conrad removed his shoes and socks and undid his belt. She thought of Chelsea and how she had confided once that it made her wet just to see Gordon wearing a belt, knowing that later he might tie her up with it.

For Cindy, it was just one more impediment to nudity. Her heart leapt to her throat as Conrad stepped from his pants. His large cock tented his boxers. She held her breath in anticipation as he hooked his thumbs under the waistband.

Yes...

He lowered the material, freeing his erection. He was huge. His cock sprang to life, all business as it pointed straight at her.

Her pussy tingled. That cock would be inside her soon. Once he had finished the other thing, that is.

Could a man really enjoy putting his tongue in a woman's sex?

She was going to find out.

Chapter Two

Conrad climbed onto the bed. He took hold of her ankle, tickling the bottom of her foot. "Relax, woman, I'm not going to devour you...too much."

Cindy squealed. He took hold of her other ankle, holding them apart. "You know how bad I want you?" he said.

Conrad promptly showed her, lowering his head between her thighs. He kissed her moist, throbbing sex. Cindy gasped.

"Sweet as honey," he said.

She tensed, anticipating his next move.

His tongue pierced the opening, snaking its way between her swollen labia.

"Oh, god," she moaned.

He was using it like a miniature cock, probing, penetrating.

Conrad quickly found her clitoris. Cindy thrashed her head. He knew what he was doing. In a few moments he had her on the verge of orgasm.

"Not until I say so," he reminded, coming up for air.

"Conrad," she exclaimed. "How can I hold back?"

He reached up and tweaked a nipple. "It's called discipline, girl."

"That doesn't help," she said with a groan.

Conrad returned to his central task, driving her mad.

Her pussy muscles clenched, craving the sensation of fullness. "Fuck me," she begged, wanting out-and-out conquest. "Please?"

He ignored her, continuing to lap at her dripping sex. The scent of her arousal filled the room. Was it her imagination, or was it mixed with the vague saltiness of the ocean and the pungent aroma of rum?

"You're addictive," he said. "You know that?"

Cindy arched her back, whimpering. "Please..."

"Now," he growled. "Come for me...now."

Cindy exploded on command, clutching his head, pushing him down into place, the tip of his rolled tongue pushing at her swollen clit, flicking it.

"Yes," she cried. "Yes, yes!"

The orgasm hit her like an explosion—tight organic, ripping through her flesh, stripping her down to her soul. Conrad was right there to coax it all out, wave after wave, until there was nothing left.

Pleasure surged from every nerve ending as his fingers manipulated her breasts. She undulated—sweaty, glorying in her femaleness.

At last she collapsed onto the bed, spent, fulfilled.

"Conrad..." she murmured his name in awe and thankfulness.

He rose above her, face to face, chest to chest. "Not so bad, eh?" he said with a grin.

"Not...bad...at...all," she breathed, making the understatement of the century.

He chuckled, taking her lower lip between his. She surrendered to his rising lust.

She wanted that cock and she wasn't about to take no for an answer. "Two thousand is a lot," she said, her voice husky as she reached for him. "Don't you think you should start getting your money's worth?"

Her fingers circled his erection. He was pulsing, thick and more than ready.

"Indeed, it is." He held firm, refusing to let her guide him between her legs just yet. "Do you think you're worth it?"

Catching his playful tone, she stayed in character. "I don't get complaints." She could hardly believe she was saying these things.

"We'll see," he said, shifting positions.

Cindy felt the miniature shock waves pass through her as his cock slid home, pushing deep into her waiting pussy.

Echoes of orgasm, mingled with the promise of more to come.

She locked her ankles behind him, pulling him as deep as she could. "That's it," she encouraged. "Take me."

He settled himself to the hilt, relishing the feel. She loved that he was all man, bold enough to have what he wanted, strong enough to let her be the woman.

She pushed her pelvis hard against him, encouraging him to let loose.

Conrad obliged, retracting his long cock only to push it back into her.

The bedsprings creaked beneath them.

"Is this what you need?" Cindy asked.

"Yes, Belle. Oh...yes." He went at her, establishing a dominant rhythm that laid her bare. She pushed her breasts and belly against him, their heat commingled. She sensed the joining of heartbeats, the mixing of sweat.

They were rocking, fucking, moving.

His fingers interlaced with hers as he held her hands down, just the way he wanted.

So good to be female, to be had, to be wanted.

Conrad groaned. He was moving with a fury, lifting himself to orgasm.

"Come," she encouraged, writhing beneath him, captured by his need. "Come inside me."

"Come with me," he commanded, his voice low, powerful and transformed.

He was a lion about to roar.

The sound filled the room. Pure masculine joy. His cock swelled just before, the heat searing her. His semen poured into her in thick spurts that set her off.

She sank her teeth into his shoulder to keep from screaming. The orgasm was like nothing she had ever known, nothing from this world.

They wrapped around one another, as close as two humans could get. Remarkably, his climax was not the end. Turning them both over, he put her on top, astride him. He was still hard.

She leaned forward, pressing her hands against his chest, clenching her vaginal muscles tightly, holding him.

He took hold of her breasts, cupping them. "Good, Belle, that's right."

Cindy was operating on pure instinct. She had never considered herself particularly good at sex but Conrad seemed pretty happy.

Either that or he was a really great actor.

"I want to suck you," she said impulsively. "I want your cock in my mouth."

Conrad reached around to give her bottom a playful smack. "Greedy little thing, aren't you?"

"I like to give the customer his money's worth," she said, feeling a nice wicked glow from the impact of his hand.

Conrad put his hands behind his head. "Fuck me a while," he ordered. "And we'll see."

Cindy felt a fresh tide of wetness as Conrad laid down the law. He did not intend to relinquish control, even to accept her offer of oral pleasure.

She proceeded to ride his cock, sliding her sex up and down the length of him. He was barely diminished. "How do you stay so hard?"

"It's you."

Cindy fought the compliment. "Oh, come on, I can't be that different from other women you've known."

"As a matter of fact, you are. You're the type a man can trust, the type who sticks by him."

"And that makes you hard?"

"No." His hands moved to her face, fingers spreading across her cheeks. "Having the attention of that kind of woman makes me hard."

Cindy felt the rush, the combination of power and tenderness in his touch. "You have my attention, all right," she acknowledged. "Though it's more about conquest, don't you think?"

He clasped her hips, his grip like iron. Slowly, agonizingly, he took control of her motions, lifting her up and down. He had her whimpering in seconds.

"And are you conquered...Belle?"

Cindy drew a breath. "For now."

His luscious lips turned downward ever so slightly. His brows creased, as well.

Could it be he wanted something more?

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing. Just deciding what to do with you next."

"You said you'd spank me."

Tomorrow he will be gone, she thought. No strings between them, no attachments.

It was better that way.

Certainly those were the initial terms.

"You've never been spanked," he mused. "I'm surprised you're so anxious."

"Customer's always right, remember?"

Conrad took hold of her hair, pulling it taut. She felt the tension straight down to her sex. "For two thousand I've purchased more than your body. I want your thoughts, your desires, your will. Either it turns you on or..."

He released her hair, leaving the sentence unfinished.

"Or what?" she asked, confused and unnerved by the cooling, waning look in his eyes.

"Or it doesn't," he said simply.

"Conrad, don't be like that," she pleaded. "Talk to me."

He lifted her off and set her on the bed beside him. "I need a drink of water. If I come back from the bathroom and find you on all fours ready to beg for it, I'll know you're serious about a spanking."

Cindy hugged her breasts. "You're an ass."

His hand settled between her legs – proprietary, decisive.

She tried to push him away but lacked the will. Despite herself, she began to move against him. How had this man managed to gain so much control over her body in such a short period of time?"

"We are playing power games," he reminded, his voice exasperatingly calm and gentle. "This is about pleasure for both of us, true? We are playing roles and you don't have to do anything that doesn't feel right."

"Yes," she said grudgingly.

"Then it's hardly fair to call me as ass, is it?"

"I suppose not."

Something bothered her about his logic but she couldn't put her finger on it. Maybe she didn't want it to be just about roles?

She had tacitly agreed to the terms, though—free sex, no strings attached. This wasn't going to be a relationship. It was a glorified, exceedingly polite one night stand.

Conrad stopped her short of another orgasm. Putting his fingers to her lips, he bade her open her mouth and taste herself.

"I let you pick the last game," he said as she suckled his fingers one by one. "I pick the next. You will still be Belle but I want you as my slave girl."

Cindy's belly clenched, hot and tight. "You mean like Gordon and Chelsea?"

"No, I told you, I don't like the trappings. But we'll have the mindset. You'll submit as my property."

The very words made her want to scream out with the need to belong to Conrad and submit as his slave girl.

But what if her emotions got involved?

This role playing could get dangerous.

"Unless you would rather I go," he said, kissing her hand, leaving a hot blazing trail up her forearm. "I won't be insulted."

Cindy shivered. Did he have to make all his points with his lips on her skin?

"Good," he said, patting her thigh. "I'll be right back. You'll wait for me on all fours as instructed."

She nodded.

"Yes, Master," he directed.

"Yes, Master," she repeated, the words a scandalous whisper that ignited her parched insides.

It was all a game, she reminded herself.

As real as this fire felt, though, where was the water?

Cindy watched Conrad get up from the bed and walk to the bathroom, his sculpted body like living marble. He moved like a big cat, sauntering, almost a swagger.

That was no role. That was something born and bred in a man, reinforced by a lifetime of courage.

He had said she was the kind of woman who stood by a man but a man like him would be easy to stand by. Any woman would do so proudly.

He was a colonel, a hero according to Gordon and Chelsea's accounts. He had been awarded medals, saved countless lives under fire. At the moment, however, he wished only to be her Master, the commander of her flesh.

You'll wait for me on all fours.

She was in for a spanking. And after that, who knew?

It wasn't too late to leave. She could slip out, get another room and send a note to him later, through Gordon. The night would end anyway. What was one scene more or less between them?

Her mind told her it would be nothing, but her body did not agree.

Slowly, she lifted herself into position on her hands and knees.

She dared not breathe. She was facing away from the bathroom door. She would not be able to see him as he approached. He could touch, punish at will. Her ass and her pussy were supremely vulnerable.

Cindy heard the water running. He was taking his time.

Eventually the door opened. She dug her nails into the bed. He was coming. She braced herself. She could feel his eyes on her.

She lowered her head, giving in to a soft moan.

Why didn't he get on with it?

Likely the torture was part of the game.

She nearly jumped through the ceiling when he put his hand on her ass.

His touch was light but it felt like the sting of a whip.

"Easy, slave girl," he murmured.

"Yes," she replied. "Master."

He had something for her eyes—his silk tie. He secured it behind her neck, temporarily robbing her of sight.

Her helplessness was immediately reinforced.

"Are you ready to beg?" he asked.

"Yes, Master." She steeled herself. "I beg for you to spank me."

His hands seemed to come from everywhere at once, caressing her breasts, her belly, even the soles of her feet.

She gasped at this last contact, inducing him to administer a crisp smack to her naked bottom. "Be still, Belle and you will have what you ask."

Cindy whimpered as he teased her earlobe.

Not being able to respond was hell. But there was pleasure in it too, of a kind she couldn't describe.

Conrad spanked her without warning. Three sharp blows, presumably to test her discipline.

"Good girl," he praised as she maintained her position.

Her pussy throbbed. The heat of his hand and the tone of his voice combined to bring her to fever pitch.

She pushed out her ass, inviting his further attention.

He chuckled, smacking her again. "I knew this would be right up your alley."

Her bottom continued to pulse. She imagined the sight of it, bright red.

Throwing caution to the wind, she dared to ask for what she needed.

"Master, please, may I suck your cock?"

She felt him shifting positions. This time he did not refuse her request. His cock was at her lips and she parted to receive him. Extending her tongue, she licked along the bottom ridge, inducing a long, deep moan from him.

Applying her mouth, she began to suck in and out, taking only the end.

He took hold of her head, guiding her farther. She accepted him deeper, as far as he would go. His approving sighs made her heart warm and encouraged her to push herself to the limit.

His cock reached the back of her throat. She was relaxed, proud and eager.

"Yes, slave," he said. "That's perfect."

How sexy he made her feel. She could happily do this forever. His cock began to swell. She could sense he was close to climax.

Pulling himself free for a moment he asked, "Do you swallow? It won't offend me if you don't," he said.

"I want you to," she replied, pulling him back into place.

A few thrusts—intense, steady motions—and he was there, ready to give her the gift of his ejaculation. His taste was pungent, exotic. His emission was warm and thick. She took it down easily, happily swallowing spurt after spurt.

Conrad collapsed on his back after first removing the blindfold. “Now that is what I call service,” he declared.

Cindy lay down with him, her head on his chest. She was half asleep, her eyes heavy lidded.

“You were right,” she murmured.

“About what?”

“That games could be fun.”

He rested his hand on her back, making her feel safe and protected.

A lump came to her throat when she realized how quickly this was going to end.

“You have to have good players,” he said. “I knew you would be the best.”

She kissed his chest. “You’re not curious about how it could be between us, with more practice, that is?”

“We would be good.”

She tried not to read too much into his words. Was he leaving the door open?

“Would be good,” she said cautiously. “Or could be?”

“Does it make any difference?”

All the difference in the world, actually.

“I just wouldn’t want to throw away a good thing, that’s all.”

He tousled her hair. “You’re not getting serious on me, are you, Belle? I might have to ask for a refund on the two thousand I never gave you.”

“Perish the thought.” She tried to sound light but her mood was darkening.

“Where are you going?” He grabbed her wrist as she tried to get up.

“To the bathroom. Does it matter?”

His features darkened. His smile was downright diabolical. "I haven't given permission."

Something in her rebelled. "I don't have to ask to use the bathroom."

He pulled her down, rolled on top and pinned her, all in the space of a heartbeat. "You do now."

She tried to hide her arousal at his show of power. "This isn't Belle you're dealing with, it's Cindy."

His knee parted her thighs. "You can be the Queen of Sheba," he said. "The way I see it you're at my mercy. Besides, you don't really need to go to the bathroom. You just want to get away from me."

She stiffened. "So what if I do?"

"I told you, I don't like females who lie to me."

"I'm not lying, just role playing."

His lips curled downward in that little frown of his, the one that drove her crazy. "Have you ever been taken anally, Cindy?"

Her buttocks clenched instinctively. "No."

"There's a first time for everything," he replied, lifting himself off her body.

"Conrad, wait."

He turned her onto her belly.

"I don't want to wait," he said. "Now put your ass in the air for me, like a good girl."

Once again, his imperious style made her much too wet and compliant for her own good. "What if it hurts?" she said, even as she complied with his wishes.

"It won't, not the way I do it," he said as he pushed a pillow up under her belly.

Cindy was fully exposed, her body angled up for maximum penetration. He used his fingers inside her pussy to collect the liquids so he could moisten her narrower opening.

"Oh, god," she shivered as his fingers entered her – warm, stimulating, relentless.

He lubricated her, preparing the way.

"Where do you keep getting these hard-ons? And don't tell me I am responsible for this one too."

"I'll take the blame."

"How magnanimous of you," she replied.

"Mind your tongue, slave girl." He gave her a small admonitory smack on the bottom. Just enough to inflame her.

She pushed her behind out, falling right into his trap.

His cock was there, between her pussy lips.

He slid the head of it inside her. Clamping her hips, he held her steady.

She marveled at the strange sensation, the decadent sense of fullness. She wanted more. He obliged, claiming more of her waiting opening. She must have been relaxed because she was taking him fairly easily.

"How far in are you?" she asked. "Five, six inches?"

Conrad laughed lightly. "Just an inch or two, sweetheart but you're doing fine."

As if to encourage her, he fingered her clitoris.

She began to move her body in reply. The motion allowed him to penetrate a little farther.

He made low groaning sounds of male pleasure. Yes, she was doing something right.

As Conrad rocked forward and back, seeking ever deeper penetration, she felt like she was going to come again.

Incredible.

How many orgasms would she have by night's end?

"We'll come together," he informed her.

“Yes, Master.”

As if she needed to have her arm twisted.

With one hand he continued to stimulate her. The other rested on her back, fingers splayed. Their bodies shook together, a silent quake which neither of them wanted to end.

He carried her to the bathroom and set her in the sunken tub, then climbed in with her. The suds surrounded his delicious body.

For some time they merely kissed and groped and fondled, waiting for the next erection, the next opportunity.

* * * * *

Conrad had gotten as close as a man could in one night. Had he taken advantage of Cindy, putting her in a place where disengagement would be difficult if not impossible?

He was going off to combat, a situation made for clean breaks and sudden drastic ends to things.

His world was about to turn upside down...and he was going to get paid for it. No room for mooning over lost loves.

Cindy, on the other hand, would be home, with lots of time for thinking and mooning over things.

Listening to her breathing, beside him in bed, naked and clean, he waited to make sure she was asleep.

Walking out on her would not be cowardice, just a strategic retreat, one designed to eliminate the possibility of pain.

After allowing himself a few extra moments of peace, her body snuggled up to him, trusting and pure, he made the break at last.

This was never easy. But, better to screw and leave than never to have screwed at all.

Cindy was so much more than that, though.

He hoped she could find the right kind of man, one who could settle down, give her the white picket fence and pretty children she deserved.

Conrad was halfway to the door, jacket in hand when he heard her stirring.

"Where are you going?"

The sweetness of her voice nearly cracked his heart.

Honest to god, he had never meant to hurt her.

Now it was his turn to be reluctant to answer the other's question.

"It's almost dawn. I wanted to get an early start."

Her eyes were blue seas, filled with emotions way too complex for a simple military man. "Without a goodbye?"

"I'm not very good at goodbyes, I'm afraid."

She sat up. "No one is. That doesn't let you get out of them."

"You're right, I'm sorry."

Depriving him of her breasts, she gathered the sheet below her neck. "Will I hear from you again?"

He clenched his fists. "We had an agreement."

"I don't mean like that." She shook out her hair. "I mean, just an occasional e-mail or something, you know, letting me know how you are."

"I can do that."

She nodded, head lowered. "That would be good."

Her lips were still moving, indicating something unsaid.

He should let it go. "What is it, Cindy?"

"I was just wondering if a kiss would be appropriate."

"Probably not." Unless you want me ravishing you all over again.

"You're right. It's not appropriate."

"In that case." He prepared to take his leave. "I'll be going."

"Wait," she called to him as he reached the door.

"What is it?"

"The kiss. It's not appropriate...but I want it, anyway."

Conrad summoned all his willpower. "I'm sorry, Cindy."

"Do I have to beg?"

His cock stirred in his pants. "We aren't playing games anymore."

"Just one kiss," she said in a sultry voice designed to push him to the dark side.

"For your slave girl to remember you by."

"There's no such thing as one kiss with you, woman," he said. "And you know it."

"Then take more kisses," she challenged, giving him a glimpse of one long leg and thigh. "Take anything you want. You know my body won't refuse you."

His eyes followed to the prize between her thighs. "Cindy, that's enough."

"If I'm bad, you should punish me," she said.

She was certainly pulling out all the stops.

"This will only make it harder to walk away. I can't afford to get addicted to you, good as you are in bed."

Something in his words stung her. She pulled her leg back under the sheet. "Sorry I'm not making it easy enough for you," she said acidly. "Guess I should stay in character."

"I don't see any reason for animosity."

"Of course you don't. You're a man."

"Cindy, things were laid out very clearly last night. I don't think you can be angry at me now."

"I'm not angry at you," she snapped. "I'm angry at myself. Did it ever occur to you a woman might fool herself with a guy like you, maybe get greedy and start thinking about tomorrow?"

She might as well have hit him in the solar plexus. He had done everything he could to keep this from getting complicated. He was not a relationship person.

"Cindy, there is something I haven't told you. I was engaged once. Her name was Marcia. We had everything set and I backed out. No good reason, either. She was kind and gentle, as good a woman as you could get. It was me. I had to tell her and she cried, not a damn thing I could do, knowing I was the cause. What you had last night? That was the best of me."

"All's well that end's well?" she questioned.

"You're obviously upset, Cindy."

She shrugged, eyes moist. "Like you said, I had the best of you. Thanks for not fucking it up by hanging around."

Logically, Conrad knew he needed to cut his losses. She would see there were good things they enjoyed, she would eventually forget him.

So why couldn't he let it go?

This really wasn't like him.

Seeing Cindy in pain was doing something to him.

As if he were in pain himself.

Worse, as if *he* were under attack, both of them facing some enemy barrage.

Fumbling, he sought some mutual out. "It seems to me we can be friends."

Her reaction was swift and vicious. "I don't fuck my friends and I don't let them fuck me."

"I should be going," he said, sizing up the virulence of her reaction.

"Do you think?" she shot back sarcastically.

"I truly enjoyed myself," he concluded.

Cindy reacted by taking the clock radio from the nightstand and throwing it at him. It soared over his head smashing into the door.

He didn't flinch.

"Thank you," he said. "For helping prepare me for combat."

As he closed the door behind him, he heard her crying.

Women, he thought, were ever so much more complicated than war.

Chapter Three

Cindy roused to the knocking at her door. It came from a million miles away. From under the layers of blackness and sleep and self-pity she extricated herself, the memories continuing to zap through her mind, reminding her that this fresh hell of loneliness and regret was just beginning.

For a brief moment she thought it might be him.

But the knocking was too light. And there was a feminine voice called her name.

"Cin? Are you in there? Are you okay?"

It was Chelsea.

Cindy pulled on a short silk robe and staggered to the door to let in her best friend. "What are you doing here?" she mumbled. "It's your honeymoon."

"I'm here because you need me." Chelsea pushed her way in, closing the door behind her. "Lord, you look terrible. Sit down over there. Gordon is bringing black coffee."

"I'm fine. I don't have a hangover."

"You would look better if you did," said Chelsea, looking chipper and refreshed in a short white skirt and halter top.

Cindy allowed herself to be led to an armchair in the corner of the room.

"I know why you look like hell," said Chelsea. "He is six foot one, dark haired, built like a Greek god, blue eyed. Don't deny it, we saw him come in here last night. You obviously spent the night together and then he took off, right? We figured something was up when he didn't even say goodbye to us this morning."

Cindy's lip trembled. So he was really gone.

"I don't want to talk about it, Chelsea."

"Well you need to. It's good for you."

Good for you, maybe.

"Please, Chelsea, I would rather be alone."

There was another knock at the door—loud, masculine. Gordon entered without waiting for a reply. "Got the coffee. I checked with the front desk, Conrad took off around six a.m. Didn't even say anything to his own brother, can you believe it?"

"Gordon," snapped Chelsea, "please stop thinking of yourself. We are here for Cindy."

"Sorry." Gordon handed her a cup of coffee, dark as sin. "Listen, for what it's worth, Conrad's never been very reliable. You shouldn't take it personally."

"How can she not take it personally, Gordon?" Chelsea's green eyes flashed fire. "He made love to her and ditched her."

Gordon rubbed the back of his neck. "Just trying to help."

"If you want to help, give us some peace and quiet," said Chelsea.

Gordon gave her a kiss on the forehead. "All right, baby."

Cindy raised an eyebrow after his departure. "I thought he was supposed to be your Master?"

"Submission has its time and place," she said, with a flip of her shiny dark curls. "We meet each other's needs, trust me."

Cindy managed a small smile at her friend's show of stubborn pride. "Whatever you say, Scarlett O'Hara."

"So what happened?" Chelsea sat down on the edge of the bed, facing her. "And don't say 'nothing', like you always do, because I am sitting here until I get a straight answer."

Cindy took a sip of the bitter beverage, barely drinkable. She wondered what kind of coffee Conrad would get wherever he was going. She hadn't even bothered to ask.

Some friend she was.

But wait, she had refused to be his friend. *Who has the stubborn pride?* she thought glumly.

"We had a one night stand," said Cindy, presenting a carefully edited version. "Two grown adults enjoying each other and now we move on."

Chelsea narrowed her gaze. "You don't seem real 'moved on' to me. And Conrad obviously wasn't either, judging by how he took off like a bat out of hell."

She rolled her eyes. "Couldn't get away from me fast enough, right? Guess I still know how to scare them off."

"I don't think he was scared off. Men like he and Gordon don't scare easily. And it was pretty obvious how much Conrad likes you. Dare I say he has been entranced with you since he met you."

"He has a funny way of showing it."

Chelsea exhaled. "I'm not supposed to tell you this —"

"Then don't."

"No, I have to. Conrad broke up with his fiancée, Marcia."

"He told me, I know."

"But did he tell you why?"

"He said he messed things up."

"No. He broke up with her because his best buddy, Joe, had just been killed on a mission with him. Conrad blamed himself because he was in command of the squad. They were in the jungle, under heavy fire. They had to crawl under machine gun fire and Joe got bitten by a snake and jumped up. He got shot on the spot."

"So how was that Conrad's fault?" asked Cindy.

"He took responsibility as commanding officer. He was watching out for the others. He didn't see the snake in time."

Cindy could see Conrad letting that eat him alive. A man like that never let go of his duty or his perceived failures.

"But why end his relationship to Marcia?"

"The psychologists called it some kind of relationship freeze. He couldn't deal with any emotion anymore. He was too afraid of losing anyone else he cared about. It was easier to shut her out."

Cindy's mind raced. She had made a much bigger mistake than she realized.

Chelsea saw it on her face. "Cin, what's wrong? You look like you saw a ghost."

"Oh, Chelsea, I rejected him. He...he wanted my friendship, he wanted to know I was pulling for him, as I went on with my life but I told him I couldn't. I was so selfish. I...I wanted more time with him as my lover, but I didn't have the right. He never promised me anything. We were clear about that with each other..."

Chelsea was there to hold her tight. "It's not your fault."

Empty words. Cindy understood that now. Things said could never be taken back. Any more than bullets or snake bites.

But what could she do?

Was there time to reach him?

"Chelsea, do you think we could find him before he goes on his next mission? Does Gordon know anything about his destination?"

"He is going to Afghanistan, we know that for sure," said Chelsea.

Cindy's heart sank as she remembered all those stories on the news about suicide bombers. "Oh my god."

"He and his team will be escorting dignitaries and supply convoys."

Cindy clutched at her friend. "We have to find him. Please tell me we will."

"I promise," said Chelsea.

Oh, God, thought Cindy, don't let him die. She knew the fear was irrational. Likely she meant nothing to him, but suppose she had affected him as powerfully as he had affected her?

Then he would need to know she was still in the world, thinking of him.

For her part, Cindy was not the same woman. Conrad had changed something in her, given her wings she didn't know she had.

It was no wonder she had reacted so strongly to his departure. Starting a fight was the only way she had been able to manage it.

And now it was up to her to end that fight.

* * * * *

"Colonel DeWitt," said the gray-haired briefing officer. "There is a phone call for you. It's urgent. From your family."

"From my family?" Conrad frowned. The only family he had was his brother and sister-in-law. Had something happened to them back on the island?

"Thank you, Major.". While they were no longer soldiers, they recognized each other by rank. Once upon a time, Conrad had been in Special Forces, fighting uniformed enemies. These days he did equally dangerous work in the war on terror.

The phone was in a small gray-walled office down the hall. They were in a nondescript underground facility near an airbase. In a matter of hours they would be headed for Kabul, with refueling stops unknown even to him. Every precaution was made for security. This particular phone was scrambled, untraceable.

Only Gordon had this number and that was because of his links to the company Conrad worked for. Gordon, in fact, was on its board of directors.

"Hello?" he said, picking up the receiver.

"Conrad?"

It wasn't Gordon or Chelsea.

He stiffened. His pulse raced. "Cindy?"

"Yes, it's me. Thank heaven I got through."

For a moment he couldn't breathe. "I ran off without giving you a simple kiss," he acknowledged finally. "I was a colossal asshole."

"No, you weren't," she insisted.

Her soft voice intoxicated him. It created an ache inside him. For the first time in his life he did not want to go on a mission.

"You had every right to be upset, Conrad. You were nothing but honest and direct and honorable and you were right, a kiss would have led to more and we would have never stopped. I was the one who was unreasonable. Please forgive me? I will be your friend, always, until the day I die."

His throat constricted. "I would like that, Cin. And you can count on the same from me." How could he tell her it was so much more? Friends didn't burn for each other. A friend wouldn't give everything he had, every breath in his body for one more chance to see her, to touch her. "Cindy?"

"Yes, Conrad?"

"I...miss you."

"I miss you too, Conrad. Last night was the best night of my life."

He grinned. "It was pretty good for me too."

"Pretty good?"

He heard her sweet indignance. "Okay, it was fucking phenomenal."

"Oh, hell," she said. "We're friends. Tell you what, next time we get together, we will do friend things. We'll bowl, go eat pizza, whatever."

"Sounds good."

Was that what she wanted? It sure sounded that way. Well he had asked for this. Served him right.

"Are you okay, Conrad?"

"I'm fine. I just get quiet before a mission."

"You know I am with you, right? I will think of you every minute, I promise."

"I'll think of you too." *I will do more than think of you. I will burn each and every second, yearning to touch you, possess you.*

The smell of her hair, the scent of her surrender, the glow of her skin just after orgasm, the pout of her lips, the movement of her eyes, so sensitive and wise and wild. How could a man get enough of a woman like that? She was so much more than the conventional beauty she appeared to be. She was everything he had ever dreamed of. He would never do better.

"I should get going." He cleared his throat. "Thanks for calling."

"No, Conrad, thank you for taking my call. I felt so terrible."

"Don't you give it a second thought. Just sleep well, okay?"

She laughed uneasily. "It's going to be a little quiet, compared to last night."

"Yeah, for me too. Of course, you will have a much easier time solving that problem than me. Not many bed mates where I'm going, unless you're into camels."

"Um, no thanks." She giggled.

He was on the verge of telling her to be faithful. But that wasn't fair. He would be faithful to her. That would have to do. "If you do meet somebody, Cin, he will have to pass my inspection," he said.

She snickered. "I can imagine the poor guy. He would never survive it."

"Not if I could help it."

There was a moment of silence.

"You take care, Conrad. Please be safe?"

"I will. Don't worry. I'll come home."

To you...

"Goodbye, Conrad."

"Goodbye, Cindy." He clicked off.

It was time to get to work.

Time to forget himself.

And her.

Chapter Four

Conrad watched the dusty street warily from the back seat of the sedan, his finger tight on the trigger of his assault rifle. The man beside him was known simply as Mr. Khan and he had come to Kabul, bringing hope in the form of several million US dollars to be invested in schools and in decent housing for the poor. The Taliban weren't interested in housing, however, or education. They wanted chaos.

And they wanted Mr. Khan dead.

Conrad's job was to protect him. Ideally he and the other three in the mercenary detail would have had backup from KFOR, the international military force made up of various western nations.

But Afghanistan was far from an ideal situation these days.

Conrad had urged Mr. Khan not to tour this particular neighborhood but he had insisted on seeing everything and running from nothing. Conrad had to respect that, even if it did make his job a nightmare.

The first sign of trouble came in the form of a loud thundering noise off to the left. On the other side of the street, from the doorway of a crumbling building, a rocket had been launched – poorly aimed, Russian made.

Their police escort drove off at once. Spineless bastards.

Fuck. This was going to be bad. Conrad pushed Mr. Khan down to the floor and shouted orders to Oswald on the other side of the seat.

The air was quickly filled with the tooth-jarring pop of automatic weapons. The sedan windows were bullet proof and the tires puncture proof. Unfortunately, there wasn't much they could do about the speeding truck.

It was heading straight for them, with a terrified looking driver, foot probably duct taped to the accelerator with a brick on top. And a few hundred pounds of plastic explosives in the back.

Funny how things kick into slow motion at a point like that. A child running down the street, laughing, waving a stick. Did he even realize what would happen? Music from the upstairs window of one of the buildings, tinny Middle Eastern tune. The restaurant next door, fragrance of strong tea and spiced meat wafting into the air. Hot, dusty street, multi-colored, beat-up vehicles mingled with bicycles and some newer cars, boons of the Western liberation, some would call occupation.

The child's voice, lilting Pashto, a variation of Farsi.

Damn language always did annoy the heck out of Conrad.

He saw Cindy's face and made the decision to live. It was a long shot. First he had to save Khan. Flinging open the door, he grabbed the bearded businessman, a dead ringer for Karzai, the President.

This was not Mr. Khan's day. A bullet found his head the moment they left the black sedan. Cindy's face came to him again, her sweet smile, her hope-filled eyes. He had promised to come home.

He would not die.

There were four gunmen in long white robes—traditional male dress. They held assault rifles. Conrad dove at them. Running away was pointless. Bullets shot his legs out from underneath him. He returned fire—two of them fell, the other two turned tail. They had not expected him to fight.

The ground met him hard, the cracked, unrepaired street showing no mercy. Just then the truck hit, exploding gaseous doom, sending fiery shrapnel in every direction. A wave of heat passed overhead, oven hot. Conrad tried to breathe. Smoke filled his lungs.

Sirens blared, fast approaching, an eerie alien wail. A helicopter roared overhead, the familiar sound comforting. The gunmen were gone. They had achieved their

objective. Mr. Khan was dead. Conrad coughed up blood as a medic crouched over him. Two others were yelling at each other, arguing in Pashto, deciding what to do.

Try moving your asses, Conrad thought or there will be a follow-up Taliban hit squad on the way.

They loaded him onto a stretcher.

I can't feel my goddamn legs.

He shouted to them. No one was listening. Didn't they understand English? Or was he already dead?

* * * * *

"Colonel DeWitt?" The nurse poked her head through the door. "You have a visitor."

"I said I don't want to see anyone," Conrad growled. "What part of that don't you understand?"

"But Colonel —"

"But nothing." Conrad pulled himself upright in the bed, his hands clenching the metal trapeze. "No visitors and that's final."

Gordon walked past the nurse. "It's all right. I can handle the son of a bitch."

"Gordon." His heart raced. "You shouldn't have come."

"Come on, Conrad, did you think I wouldn't see my only brother? I would have seen you sooner but they only just told me."

"So what happens now?" he grumbled. "Do you give me some lecture about how it was my own fault I got my ass shot off?"

Gordon smiled slantedly, hiding the obvious torture in his eyes. "I should just let you stew here, wallowing in your self pity."

"Here is exactly where I'm staying. This room and the rehab down the hall. You won't be seeing me until I'm back on my feet."

"But that could be a year or more."

"Fine by me," he said stubbornly. "I have nothing but time."

"No, Conrad, that's not true, you have a family too."

"You and Chelsea don't need to be worrying about me. You have your own lives to lead."

"You're forgetting someone else, aren't you?"

"No, I'm not."

Gordon studied him. "What about Cindy?"

"What about her?" He tensed. "She doesn't know, does she?"

"Not yet, but don't you think she would like to be with you, to offer support?"

"That's my decision."

"Wrong, Conrad. As usual, when it comes to people you have it all mixed up. You don't get to control your friends. And unless I am mistaken, you asked Cindy to be your friend."

Conrad picked up the remote control to the television. The screen lit up, a splash of color in an otherwise white room, pale walls, floor, and sheets. "This conversation is over."

Gordon's features tightened. When they were kids they would fight and Gordon would always get that look just before. Conrad didn't think his big brother would attack a severely injured man, though.

"I never thought I would say this, Conrad. I have admired you your whole adult life for your bravery, your commitment, but brother, you are making a mistake. Don't shut Cindy out. You're afraid to be with her because you've lost so much in your life. I can't even imagine all you have seen, but whatever it is, you are still a man and you need a woman to love. She wants to love you and I think you want to love her."

"Don't think, Gordon. That's your problem. Just make money. You're good at that."

"So what should I tell Cindy?"

"Nothing." Conrad flipped channels. "Do me a favor on your way out, will you? Order me a pizza. The food in this place sucks."

Gordon shook his head. "You'll never change will you?"

"You wouldn't know me if I did."

"You got me there." He gave a wave. "Take care, brother."

"Yep," said Conrad, not bothering to turn his eyes from the television. "You too." Conrad's eyes glazed. He barely saw the images on the screen. I will walk, he told himself, I will survive, because that's what I've always done. And I will do it alone.

* * * * *

Cindy hunched over her kitchen table, absorbing the news. "How long ago did it happen?"

"Ten days," said Chelsea, sitting next to her. "Gordon and I only found out today. It was a security thing. Gordon flew right to the hospital to see him."

Cindy's eyes watered. "How bad is it?"

"He took shrapnel in both legs...and bullet wounds. He has a lot of nerve damage. But he's vowed to walk again. I know he will. Gordon is sure of it. No one is tougher than Conrad."

"I knew something like this would happen," Cindy whispered. "I had nightmares. Why did he go, Chelsea? Why didn't he let someone else?"

Chelsea smiled, taking her friend's hand. "You know the answer to that, Cin. He is who he is. Would you love him if he was any different?"

"I never said I loved him."

"Cin...come on, this is me you're talking to. I know you, and I know what love looks like. You fell for Conrad the moment you laid eyes on him."

Cindy sighed. "You're right. But what's the point? You can't love a man like Conrad. He won't let you. I bet he didn't even want me to know about this did he? *Did he?*"

Chelsea shook her head. "No, and I am going to catch hell for telling you."

"Oh, Chels, I didn't mean for that to happen..."

"It's all right." Chelsea winked. "I am aching for a good spanking."

Cindy rolled her eyes. "I forgot you enjoy that stuff."

"I do, but seriously, we have to figure out what to do about Conrad."

"What can we do?" Cindy shrugged. She was close to some serious tears and she hated that feeling.

"We can get you to that hospital, for one thing."

"Oh, yeah. Conrad would love that."

"Well he's a captive audience," said Chelsea. "It's not like he can stop you."

"I don't want to upset him, Chelsea."

"Would you rather leave him alone? He needs you, Cindy."

"He doesn't need anyone."

"You don't believe that."

Cindy lowered her eyes. "Do you want the truth, Chelsea? I'm afraid. What if this is more than I can handle? We didn't know each other that well, and I have never dealt with anything like this. I could let him down. I could hurt him."

"More than he's been hurt?"

"You know what I mean."

"And you know what I mean, Cindy. You are a very strong person. You hide it most of the time but you are my heroine. Did you know that?"

Cindy rolled her eyes through tears. "Please."

"I'm very serious. Who else would have had the courage to stand up to my fears and get me together with Gordon? I couldn't have done that on my own."

"But I have fears too."

"So tell Conrad that. Give him a chance to be strong again – for you."

Cindy thought about that. "You know, you might be onto something there."

"Good, because you are booked on a flight this afternoon."

"I am?"

"Yes. You are going to see Conrad by tonight."

The words echoed in Cindy's ears. She had never been more frightened in her life, or more hopeful.

She was going to see Conrad...by tonight.

Chapter Five

Conrad grunted, working on his toe flexes as he waited for Nina, the physical therapist, to come in for the final daily session. There was no way he was going to let this rehab take a year. Six months tops and he would be out of here.

Hopefully Gordon wouldn't make any further attempts to contact him. He needed to focus on getting his body repaired. After that he would go back to work.

There would be a big fight over that. The big shots would want him pinned to some desk somewhere—Gordon included. But Conrad would be damned before he would fade quietly into any sunset.

Nina waltzed in with a wink. "You know I don't get overtime for this."

"Neither do I," he said.

She smiled, helping him with the deep knee bends. Conrad pushed for all he was worth, his face a study in intensity.

"That's excellent, Colonel. You are doing amazingly," she encouraged.

"It's not good enough," he grumbled.

She paused to make a note in her chart. "You're awfully tough on yourself."

"Tell that to the men I left behind," he said. "Tell that to the man I was supposed to die protecting. The one I let die instead of me."

Nina shook out her red curls. She was young, barely twenty-five and full of energy. He got along with her well—she was tough and smart. "You can't save everyone, Colonel. Doctors and soldiers have to know that."

"It's not our place to forgive or explain away," Conrad dismissed. "Mr. Khan had a family, a country counting on him. That's why I need to get back. I owe him."

"You owe yourself a chance to heal properly," she reminded. "In body and spirit."

"Now you're sounding like the chaplain."

"I just want you to have some peace of mind." Nina set his leg down and covered him with the sheet.

"Is that it? My time can't be up already."

"It was up at lunch time, Colonel. Now will you please let me go?"

"All right. And thanks for staying so late."

"No problem. I have been downstairs visiting Jon, he's pulling a twenty-four-hour shift in the ER."

Jon was her fiancé, a handsome blond intern.

"Sounds exciting. Is the new copy of Therapy Today in yet?"

"No." She laughed. "I swear you are the only person in the world excited to read that stuff."

"There's been new research on electrostimulation," he said. "It could be a breakthrough."

"I am sure you will tell me all about it in the morning." She raised a brow pointedly, letting him know this day was over.

"Leave the lights on," he told her. "Got a little more reading still."

"Will do. Goodnight, Colonel."

"Night, Nina."

Not that it made any difference. Night, day – it was all the same.

One long battle that would never end.

What he would never tell Nina or anyone else was that he didn't like the dark. It created shadows. Worse still, it made him close his eyes for too long. Closed eyes could bring sleep.

And sleep would bring on the nightmares.

Damn, he was exhausted. How had that happened? He turned on the television, trying to keep awake. What was wrong with him to make him so weak? He had been through worse than this.

Slipping in and out of consciousness, he tried to keep it all at bay.

The fire, the explosion, the laughing of the child. And the heartbeat of beautiful Cindy, long gone, never to be found again.

Why go on at all?

Maybe it wasn't worth it.

Conrad was choking. He had to get out of here. This bed was like a prison. He had to walk...now.

All he had to do was swing his feet over the edge and make his muscles work.

* * * * *

Cindy almost bumped into the slender, red-haired woman in the white coat.

"May I help you find something?" she asked.

"Yes," said Cindy, forcing a smile. How she hated hospitals, the clinical whiteness, a constant reminder that this was no one's home, that everyone here was ill and struggling. "I am looking for Colonel DeWitt's room."

The woman showed mild surprise. "His room is down here on the left but..."

"Oh, is he sleeping?" Cindy said hastily. "I don't want to disturb him."

The woman laughed knowingly. "Colonel DeWitt rarely sleeps. He has just finished up therapy. If you don't mind my asking, who are you?"

"I don't mind." Cindy knew instinctively that the woman was neither prying nor trying to force her away. "My name is Cindy. I'm a friend of the Colonel."

"Cindy..." The look conveyed a thousand words.

"Yes, has the Colonel mentioned me?" Cindy could barely breathe.

"Not while awake. But when he's tossing and turning, he says your name. Woe unto anyone who asks him about it, though."

Cindy pursed her lips. "I am not sure I should be here."

"No," said the woman. "I think you should. At the risk of offending you even more with my nosiness, you two are more than friends, aren't you?"

Cindy blushed. "Yes, we are more than friends. What exactly...I'm not sure."

"Well, it's got to be love on his end or he wouldn't get so angry about it," the woman reasoned. "I'm Nina, by the way. I'm his physical therapist."

They shook hands.

"Nice to meet you, Nina. I don't suppose you are allowed to tell me how he's doing?"

"Can't release medical information without clearance, sorry. I am bending the rules a little already. But something tells me I need to do what I can to get you involved in the Colonel's case. I'm in love too. I guess women see it in each other."

Cindy smiled. "Conrad and I really haven't known each other long. I'm not sure how deep it goes."

"You're here," said Nina. "And that's as deep as it gets."

Nina extended her arms. Cindy accepted the hug, drawing strength. "The Colonel is a tough nut to crack," Nina said.

"I feel so helpless where he's concerned," Cindy said.

"Don't we all?" said Nina, offering a wink. "The Colonel is in two-oh-five."

"Thank you," said Cindy. "For everything."

She went straight down the hall to his room.

Nothing could have prepared her for what she saw.

Conrad was at the edge of his bed, in a T-shirt and shorts, grimacing, trying to stand. It was not going well.

She cried out his name.

He looked up, his eyes on fire. His expression was tortured, as if he was somewhere else in his mind.

"You mustn't," she said, running to him. "Your legs aren't strong enough."

"Get the hell away from me," he said. "You are like the others. You're holding me back."

"No, I'm not." She knelt at his feet. "I'm not like any of them. I'm here begging. Please don't hurt yourself anymore."

He tried to push her away. "I won't hurt myself. I can take it."

Nina was there by now, with several nurses.

"Colonel," Nina said sharply. "You will get back in bed now. That's an order."

"You don't outrank me," he said.

"Then I will get someone who does," she threatened.

Conrad swore under his breath about interfering nurses and staff holding him back.

"I want to be left alone," he said. "And get her out of here. She's making this worse."

He was pointing straight at Cindy.

"Colonel, you are being rude." Nina had fire in her eyes.

His jaw was firm as steel. "This isn't your concern."

"It is," insisted Nina. "Either you apologize or find yourself another therapist."

"You wouldn't."

"I would," she insisted.

Conrad frowned. "Fine. But I don't want witnesses. Everybody out. You too, Nina."

"Not until I get you back into bed and covered up," she said firmly.

Conrad grudgingly accepted her help.

When she was done, Nina turned to Cindy, who had recovered herself and was standing numbly in the middle of the room. "Are you okay to be alone with him?"

"Yes," said Cindy.

Deep down, she still believed she could reach Conrad, no matter where he had retreated to in his mind.

For a long time there was no sound in the room but their breathing and the faint hum of the air system. Cindy dared not move. She was a prisoner of his will.

Bed bound though he might be, he had captured her completely.

"Cindy, I wish you had not come here," he said at length. "You shouldn't have to see a man reduced to this."

"You're not just any man, Conrad."

"You are right," he said cynically. "I'm half a man."

"Don't you dare tell me that!" Cindy had heard enough. "You aren't half anything—you are the one I care about in this world. I have been sick and miserable without you and if you want me gone I will have to be taken out kicking and screaming."

He pursed his lips, expressionless. "You haven't even heard my apology."

"I don't need to," she said. "I'm yours, Conrad. My heart, my soul, my body."

He folded his arms. "It was going to be a damn good apology too."

She smiled, wiping tears from her eyes. "Well if you insist."

Conrad extended his hand. "Come here, Cindy."

She went to him, happy, obedient.

He clasped her hand, enveloping, protecting, dominating but not oppressing. "I am a stubborn son of a bitch, Cin. I'm a soldier born in the wrong century. I should have been around a hundred years ago when men really died for honor and put their women on pedestals, too beautiful to touch. Nothing's the same. The world is messy, war is messy. Maybe it's always been this way.

"I'm not foolish enough to think I handle things well in my life. I push people away. I don't know why my brother even bothers. And you, you could have any man.

Someone more sensitive, with more money, who won't muck everything up at the key moment."

"Oh, Conrad. You can't muck it up with me. Don't you see? You did what no other man could. You dared to go deep inside me, to claim me, to master me. You weren't afraid of my femininity, my secret desire for submission. You captured me, you tamed me. And I want more."

He pursed his lips. "I will admit...I don't find the idea repulsive."

"Neither does your cock," Cindy teased.

Conrad looked down, marveling at the tent underneath the sheet. "Son of a gun."

Cindy had a wicked idea. "Sir, let me pleasure you. Let me show you I want to be with you, through this trial, into the future."

"In a hospital room?"

"Technically, this is a rehab section." She went over to lock the door, one of the advantages of the special unit.

Conrad watched, mesmerized. Her heart swelled to see the lust and want in his eyes, not to mention the erection in his shorts. "May I strip for you?" she asked.

"You had better," he said. "Unless you want me getting out of bed and coming after you."

"No, you stay put." She came up close to the bed. Licking her lips, she began to unbutton her blouse. Her hips began to gyrate, slowly, naturally. The blouse fell to the floor. Reaching back, she undid her bra.

"These breasts," she breathed, "are yours."

He released a sigh of satisfaction.

She unhooked her skirt and slid it down. Her panties were sopping wet. Stepping from her sandals, running her hands along her hips, she said, "You own me, Conrad. These thighs, this pussy."

She teased her fingers under the waistband of the black lace.

“No other man will have this. I am for you, only you.”

He reached for her breast, cupping it. It was her turn to moan. “Do I please you?” she whispered. “Do you enjoy owning me?”

“More than anything in the world,” he said huskily. “You’re my princess, my queen, but I still think you deserve better. I don’t know the first thing about keeping a relationship going.”

“We will learn together,” she said firmly. “Life only comes one day at a time, anyway. I am just glad you are alive. I can’t let you go again.” Cindy removed her panties. She climbed up on the bed and pulled away the sheet. Very carefully, together, they worked his muscles so his shorts could be pulled down.

His cock emerged, tall and proud.

She positioned herself between his legs. Lightly, tantalizingly, she rubbed his shaft across her cheeks. “I want you to be able to have this from me, Conrad, any time you want.”

She kissed the tip of his cock and then ran her tongue around it. “I want to know you’ll say the words. I want there to be a look in your eyes that tells me to go to you. No chains, no whips, just our understanding.”

He ran his hand over her hair. “I never dared to expect so much. I’ve always known how to survive, but I’ve never had someone to live for, someone to fight for. I’ll give you everything I have, if you’ll let me be your man.”

“You are the only man I want, baby, now or ever.” With that she lowered her head, taking his hot, throbbing cock between her lips. He tasted salty, sweet—living flesh, iron hard. She sucked him slowly, reverently, with deep pleasure.

No lord in history, no master on the planet had ever received a more devoted caress. His moans in reply were the music to her ears she had waited for all her life.

She took him deep, letting him know how much she wanted it.

He was close to orgasm but he did not release himself.

"Cindy," he said, tugging her gently upward. "I want you on top of me."

Her man's orders superseded her fantasy, no matter how submissive it might be. She straddled his hips, naked, sinking his shaft deep inside her.

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply.

"Is that good, baby?" She wanted to know.

"The best...you're the best." He cupped her breasts.

She shuddered, already on the verge. "Can I come for you? Can I show you what you do to my body?"

"Yes, Cin, show me."

His words ignited her. Pleasure rippled through her, a million sweet firecrackers. She stifled the scream, even as he began to erupt. They were together again and this time nothing would separate them.

There would be challenges, of course. A long uphill road of rehabilitation, restoring Conrad's body to its full strength. And they would have to do much work together as a couple, as well—getting to know each other, building upon the foundation they had laid. With every touch their love would be more real, with every conversation, with every discovery of each other's needs and wants and desires they would feel that confirmation.

A lifetime lay ahead of them, and wherever he went in the future, no matter what war zone, he would take her heart. And she would hold his memories, his deepest self.

For their souls were each other's shelters, each other's home.

And he was most definitely the master of hers.

Chapter Six

Conrad walked on strong legs. The khaki rubbed against his thighs, a welcome feeling, almost miraculous, reminding him of just how fortunate he was to be alive with his full capacities restored.

The sight of the blonde siren at the tiki bar gave proof to him of why that life was worth living. Cindy, his wife and partner, best friend and ally in all life's battles to come.

Tonight, however, it was time for play. Conrad had not been certain about role play at first but his brother had pointed out to him the advantages. It was like getting to conquer Cindy all over again for the very first time.

There were a million games to play and decades in which to play them. At the moment, they were acting out a scenario of two strangers meeting at a tropical locale.

It was the very island where they had first consummated their love. They had managed to get the same room, the one where Cindy had surrendered to him so beautifully. Conrad could think of no more fitting setting to renew their love.

Technically, this was their honeymoon. After being re-united at the hospital, Conrad had taken no chances on letting her go again. He had proposed to her, right there on the spot.

Of course he had insisted on kneeling on one knee to do so.

The therapists had not been keen on the idea but he had been far too insistent to be denied. He had required help but had gotten the job done. They were married in the hospital chapel, with Gordon and Chelsea as best man and matron of honor. A number of the hospital staff had attended, including Nina and her fiancé.

The service had been simple and beautiful. Cindy had told him she was the happiest woman in the world but in his mind, it was not complete until they'd had a proper honeymoon.

Three nights into it and they were just getting started.

Conrad took a moment now to enjoy the sight of his bride sipping a pink, frothy drink from a fancy glass. There was fruit in it and an umbrella. Her sensuous red lips pouted as she sucked at the straw – slowly, seductively.

Damn, she was good. He had an instant hard-on seeing how she stood, her sarong-clad hip pushed out just a little. She was in profile. His eyes traced her curves up and down, enjoying the swell of full, lush bikini-clad breasts and the tight, smooth belly.

She had on a pair of sandals. He licked his lips, seeing the painted nails, the sexy turn of her calf and her hair loose about her shoulders. He ached to run his fingers through it, to nibble at her earlobe, to take possession of her sighs and shivers, to bed her thoroughly, properly as a woman like her should be bedded.

Conrad could see other men's eyes on her. How could any man fail to look? Just as long as no one crossed the line. Though he was retired from active mercenary service, there was no telling how his highly trained body would react if anyone ever threatened Cindy.

He would go on instinct, probably, and the results would not be pretty for the offender.

Conrad's senses went on high alert. A man was moving toward her. He was young, reasonably attractive. He moved to the bar beside her. He wanted to buy Cindy a drink.

Conrad moved in. Up to this point he had been observing, leaning against one of the bamboo poles, looking into the firelight, the air heavy with rum and fruit and the salt of the nearby waves slapping the beach.

The time for reverie was over.

He needed to re-claim his bride.

Cindy's skin was almost translucent under the silvery moonlight. She was smiling at the young man, though he could see her shaking her head no. She did not want the him to buy her a drink.

Conrad came up from behind and put his hand on the man's shoulder. He did so with just enough firmness to let him know he meant business. "I'll take over from here, sport," he said.

The young man scowled, looking back and forth between Cindy and Conrad. "You know him?" the young man asked her.

Cindy pursed her lips. "Never laid eyes on him in my life," she said.

Conrad's heart thumped in his chest. This was the game. They had agreed to encounter each other tonight as two strangers. She would appear to be alone, though he would watch over her, invisible in the background. The moment another man showed interest, he would move in.

The young man's expression turned smug. "In that case," he said to Conrad. "You and me are on a level playing field, aren't we?"

Conrad's gaze narrowed, his eyes like laser beams. "No," he said, his voice low and firm. "We are not."

The young man's mouth opened to say something but he thought better of it. Conrad would never hurt him, of course, that would hardly be fair since he could have no clue he was coming between a husband and wife.

"I will be buying the lady a drink," said Conrad. "Not you."

"Shouldn't we let her decide that?" the young man asked, finding his voice.

Conrad smiled, his lips angled sharply. "By all means, let's."

Both men turned to face the beautiful Cindy. She looked a million times more desirable to Conrad now that she was prey. He could see from the way her breasts rose and fell, the excitement on her face, that she felt it too.

"What's your name?" asked Conrad.

"Gloria," she said softly.

Conrad nodded in approval. She had chosen well for the night. She was certainly his glory in this world.

"I'm Brain," said the young man. "It's nice to meet you. Gloria's a beautiful name."

Conrad dispensed with formalities. "You have to decide, Gloria. Which one of us buys your next drink?"

She shook out her silky tresses. "Why do I have to pick either one of you?"

Conrad's blood raced at her playful spunk. She was outdoing herself tonight.

"It's true," said the young man quickly, obviously trying to endear himself to her. "She doesn't have to do anything she doesn't want to. She can walk away from us both."

"She will have to kiss me first," said Conrad.

The young man laughed. "Dude, you're tripping."

Conrad had tuned him out. He was background, nothing more. "What's it going to be, Gloria? Are you going to choose like a big girl or do I have to make up your mind for you?"

"Hey," said the young man. "You can't talk to her that way."

"I absolutely can," said Conrad. "Unless Gloria says otherwise."

"Gloria," said the young man. "You want me to call security or something and get rid of this guy?"

"No," Conrad spoke for her. "Gloria wouldn't like that at all. She likes being pursued by a strong man. Isn't that right, Gloria?"

"Sometimes," she admitted, half reluctantly. "When I can control the outcome, I suppose."

Conrad shook his head. "That's not what you want deep down. You want to let go. You want someone else in control."

"Someone like you, naturally?" she said, imbuing her voice with a tinge of sarcasm.

"Me or someone like me," he said. "But let's put it to the test. Brian and I will each tell you our intentions with you and you can see what strikes a chord. Brian, why did you come up and talk to Gloria?" he asked.

Brian looked uncomfortable. He was in over his head by a mile. "I don't know. I just wanted to chill with her. I mean she's hot, you know? I figured she might think I was hot too."

"Is that all?" asked Conrad.

"Yes," said Brian, frowning as if he already knew the outcome.

"Very well," said Conrad. "It's my turn. I came up to Gloria because she is the most beautiful woman I've ever laid eyes on and I want her. Tonight, naked, in my bed."

The young man swallowed. Conrad could sense Cindy's desire. She would be wet by now, more than responsive and ready.

"So what's it going to be, Gloria?" Conrad asked.

She turned to the young man. "You should go," she said in a hoarse whisper.

The young man snorted. "Whatever," he said, moving to walk away. "You probably wouldn't have been any good, anyway."

Conrad blocked his path. The young man might be ignorant of the real relationship between he and Cindy, but there was no call for rudeness.

"Take that back," said Conrad, blocking his way.

The young man was an inch or so shorter and about a million miles shy of Conrad's strength and experience.

"I take it back," he said.

"Now apologize," said Conrad.

"I'm sorry," he said to Cindy.

"Apology accepted," she replied.

Conrad stepped aside but not before giving him a piece of advice. "If I were you, I would be careful how you talk about women. Not everyone's as forgiving as I am."

The young man lowered his eyes and made a hasty retreat. Hopefully he had learned something.

Conrad was left alone with his wife. "How about that drink...Gloria?"

She smiled coyly. "You haven't even told me your name."

"Why don't you take a guess," he said.

"You look like a Jake," she decided after a moment's consideration.

He raised a brow, trying it on for size. "Jake, huh?"

"Uh-huh? Was I close?" she said.

"Actually, you hit the nail on the head," he replied. "I am Jake."

Cindy's smile broadened. "Can you guess what I'm drinking?"

"An Island Wave, with extra pineapple," he recited her favorite drink.

"Very good. What about my room number?"

"You're on the beach, Number 11," he said.

"That's impressive," she conceded. "Too bad I don't date men on vacation. I have a feeling we'd hit it off."

"Who says I want to date you?" Conrad swept her into his arms.

She responded with just the right amount of feigned surprise before melting obediently.

He stole her breath, molding her perfect body to his. Her nipples peaked pleasingly under the halter top. He let his hand move to her ass, possessive, squeezing.

Conrad did not release her until he was sure he had robbed her completely of the ability to think straight.

"I think we might dispense with the drink," he decided.

"I hardly know you," she said, her breathing uneven.

"You'll find out everything you need to while I'm inside you," he said.

Her eyes lit—his fiery little actress. Desire mixed with defiance, the dance of lust and love. “I should slap you for that,” she hissed.

His smile was cruel, dominant. “Are you telling me you don’t want it? Be careful. I can check right now, you know.”

She reacted with proper indignation and arousal. “You wouldn’t dare. Not in public.”

“We could go down to the beach,” he said. “That’s not public.”

“It sure as hell is,” she said.

“It’s private enough for me.” He put his hands on her waist. “You can stand there, hands behind your back, while I check for myself.”

His cock throbbed as he imagined sexy Cindy at his mercy, forced to stand there while he inspected her, searching out her magical wetness. He would take his time, probing, inducing her impassioned moans as she writhed against his fingers.

“You have no right,” she protested, her resistance all the more sexy because he knew it was only a veneer over a depthless desire to submit to his power.

“I have every right,” he countered. “You’re mine.”

“After ten minutes?” she challenged.

He moved his lips to her ear. “Actually,” he said, nibbling. “You were mine the moment I laid eyes on you, you just didn’t know it.”

She arched her neck, sighing. Her fingers clutched at his upper arm. “Oh, god,” she gasped.

“It’s up to you, Gloria. Are you going to tell me the truth?” he said. “Or must I find the answer between your thighs?”

“I’m...aroused,” she confessed. “I’m wet for you.”

“Good,” he said. “Now we can go to the beach.”

She stiffened. “But you said if I told you, you wouldn’t inspect me.”

“We’re not going to the beach for inspection,” he said. “We’re going to make love.”

Cindy's expression betrayed her emotions, the mix of fear and longing in the face of possible public exposure. He couldn't help but smile. This was going to be fun.

Cindy's knees nearly buckled as she heard the words.

He couldn't be serious.

"You want to go to the beach...to make love?" Her reaction wasn't play acting. They had never done that before. "But...someone could see."

"Yes, Gloria," he said, keeping in character. "That's possible. Does the idea repulse you?"

Cindy licked her lips. She was dizzy with excitement, but scandalized at the same time. "Not...exactly."

Did she dare let go of all her inhibitions in such a dramatic way?

"Perhaps I should let you go," he teased. "Another man might be more to your liking, someone more conventional."

She clung to him. "Please don't."

His will was strong, his dominance supreme. While he would remain her loving spouse forever, he would certainly deny her here and now, leaving her as a very frustrated, horny Gloria. "I won't proceed without your complete acquiescence."

"You have it," she promised. "I am ready to go with you to the beach. I want to go with you."

"Beg for it," he said, taking complete control, forcing her verbal surrender.

Cindy gasped softly. "Please...take me to the beach?"

His gaze searched hers. Each time he looked at her seemed as if it were the first, and yet he was forever seeing deeper, knowing her better. She would never tire of this man, never tire of their love.

How real this play was, how much a part of the growth of their relationship.

"You will submit to me, Gloria. Completely. I will have your naked body on the sand, writhing, moaning, completely abandoned to lust, or not at all."

Her heart slammed in her chest. How she loved this man. How he captivated and entranced her.

"Decide," he demanded.

"I submit," she said without hesitation. "I'm yours."

"In that case..."

Conrad swept her off her feet, sending her spirit soaring and her senses exploding with desire.

She clung to him, feeling his heat and power, his raw need. He carried her, light as a feather, to the beach. He could not get her there fast enough.

* * * * *

Cindy felt light as a feather, safe and secure and full of wonder as "Jake" laid her down in the sand. The rest of the world was a million miles away. There was only the two of them under a blanket of stars. The water was inches away, lapping at the shore. She watched in awe as he unbuttoned his shirt, shedding the material over his shoulders. He was the strongest, most beautiful man she had ever seen.

All the more for his lion's heart and warrior's soul as for his splendid body, though that did nothing to dampen her libido. Placing her hands overhead, palms up in surrender, as she awaited her taking.

He came to her naked, having removed his pants and sandals as well. She could cry, looking at his scars. A lesser man would have given in to the pain. According to the doctors it was a miracle he was alive at all. And he gave her the credit for that.

Imagine such a thing—being the object of devotion of such an incredible man. She had never felt so safe, so secure...and so lusted after. Conrad's desire to devour her was nothing more than a wish to overwhelm and disarm with pleasure.

This too, made him a man, a real man.

"Take me," she said, conveying her helplessness.

Gently, he parted her legs. "My angel," he said, kneeling in the sand. Her mouth watered at the sight of his erection, large and thick and hungry. How she loved him when he was hard and horny. She wanted him to find every bit of satisfaction his heart desired, as long as it was with her.

He slid his fingertips over her belly, inducing her to arch her back. Slowly, agonizingly, he tugged at the knot on her sarong. Parting the halves of it, he cupped his hand over her sex, barely contained by the skimpy bikini bottom.

"Tell me what you want."

"I want you inside me," she said without hesitation. "I want you to fill my pussy with your gorgeous cock."

He reached behind her neck for the string of the halter he had bought for her two days ago. Pulling the material forward he exposed her heaving breasts, silver white under the moon, tender and needy as hell.

"Caress yourself," he ordered. "Touch your nipples."

Cindy complied. The sensation of her fingertips made her whimper.

"Pinch them," he said.

She winced, the pleasure mixed with a guilty, secret pleasure.

"I'm going to fuck you like an animal, here in the sand," he announced.

Her pussy flooded. "Yes..."

He untied the tiny strings on the side of her bikini bottom. She held her breath, waiting. He made her continue to play with her breasts, anticipation building.

"Would you like me to play with your pussy?" he asked at last.

"Oh, yes," she cried, lifting her ass from the sand in frustration. "Please."

"It's good and wet for me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"If I touch it," he said, "it will be mine forever."

"You already own it and me," she reminded. "From the moment you laid eyes on me."

"Indeed I do, Gloria." Conrad pulled the material aside, baring her. She was glistening and pulsing. He touched her briefly – a maddening, promising caress.

And then he possessed her. Positioning himself over her, his cock pressed gently against her labia, the heat of flesh to flesh tantalizing her with penetration to come.

"I love you," he said. "My love slave. My wife."

"I love you," she replied. "My soul master. My husband."

Conrad descended in one smooth, full thrust, claiming her all the way to the hilt. She cried out from the sensation, the complete bliss of being taken, of being coupled with the one man she loved and trusted in this world. It was a dream come true. Something she had never thought possible.

And yet it was real, as surely as she was alive at this moment, aflame and needing to touch him.

He sealed his lips to hers for a kiss, their mouths communicating all the things that words could not say. It would take a lifetime to play it all out—the fantasies, the incredible desires between them.

Fortunately, a lifetime was exactly what they had.

Conrad moved quickly toward climax. There was no holding either of them back. As if they were two animals on the sand, sealed by lust and blind passion. Grunts and moans, the explosive rise of orgasmic pressure until at last they reached the pinnacle, her ankles locked behind her back, his cock moving like a piston, claiming every last crevice of her sex. She clutched at him, pussy muscles spasming—they were one giant "yes", a proclaiming of love beneath the stars.

His semen filled her and she renewed herself, she was his. Soon they would play again and she would yield again. His angel, protected, treasured...possessed.

About the Author

Reese Gabriel is a born romantic with a taste for the edgier side of love. Having traveled the world and sampled many of the finer things, Reese now enjoys the greater simplicities; barefoot walks by the ocean, kisses under moonlight and whispers of passion in the darkness with that one special person.

Preferring to remain behind the scenes, cherished by a precious few, Reese hopes to awaken in the lives of many the possibilities of true love through stories of far off places and enchanted lives.

For the sake of love and hope and imagination, these stories are told. May they be enjoyed as much in the reading of them as in the writing.

Reese welcomes comments from readers. You can find Reese's website and email address on the author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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