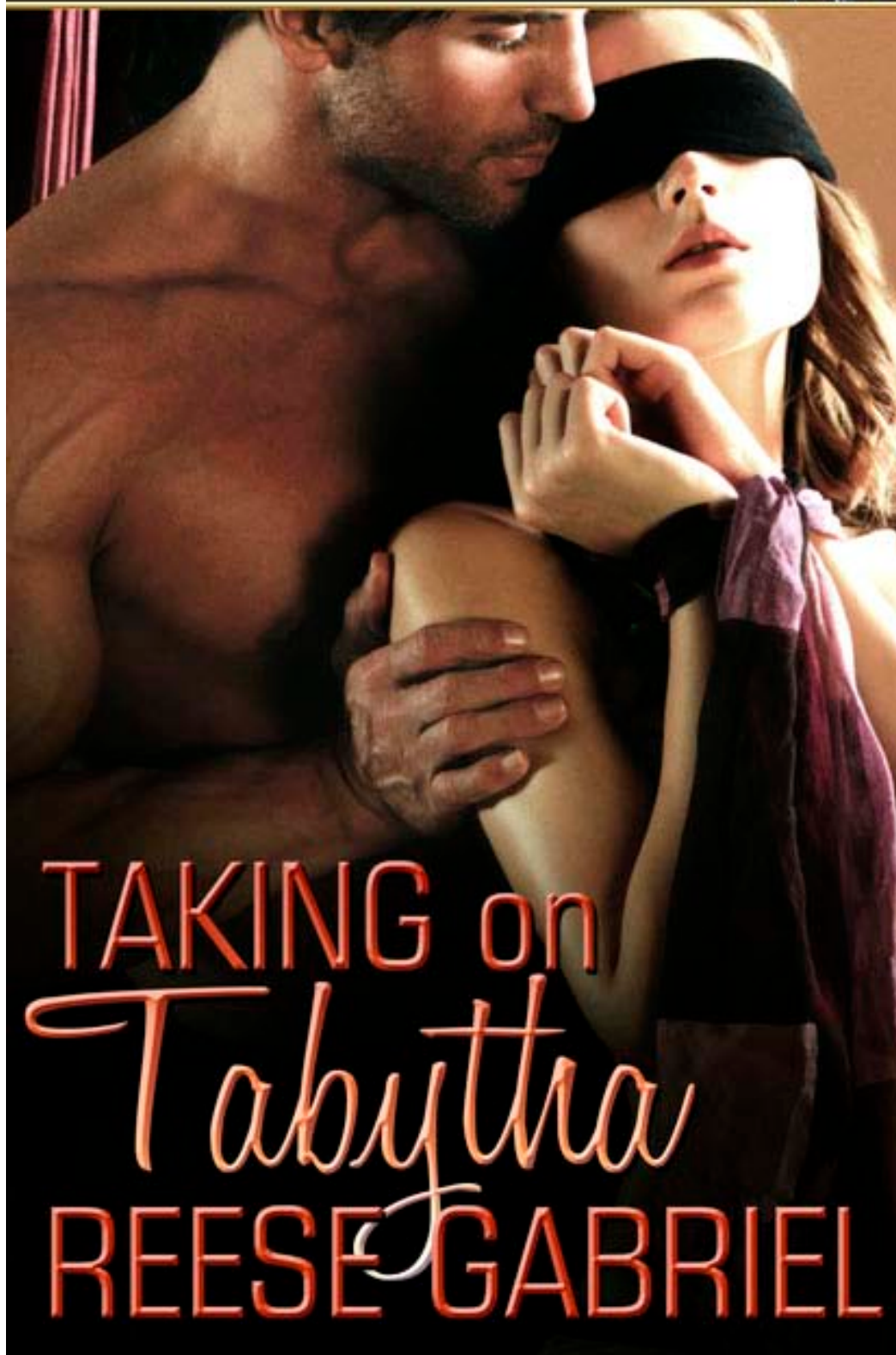


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



Taking on Tabytha

Reese Gabriel

Book 2 in the Tall, Dark and Dominant series.

Tabytha Quillen is used to having the last word, both in the bedroom and in her sassy column, “Tabbytha Takes On”. Self-described sexual dominant and a trainer of submissive females, Harlan Blake is exactly the kind of target she lives for. A quick interview over coffee ought to be all it takes to make mincemeat of the man and his ideas, but when he turns out to be handsome as sin and as quick on his feet as she is, all bets are off.

Tabytha can hardly get a word in or a breath out. Is she a subconscious submissive? Harlan intends to find out by inviting her to his BDSM club for a little innocent entertainment. Tabytha knows she’s playing with fire but surely she can keep the upper hand with Harlan for a single night? It’s the ultimate cat-and-mouse, and fate may have a surprise for both of them in the form of a passion far deeper than mere sex.

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Taking on Tabytha

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TAKING ON TABYTHA

Reese Gabriel

Chapter One

Tabytha Quillen almost felt sorry for this Harlan Blake character, agreeing to an interview for her cheeky column, “Tabbytha Takes On”. *Almost*. Because when it came down to it, any man who claimed to be an expert in training submissive women deserved everything he got.

Training! Seriously?

Did this Harlan Blake character not know she was an advocate for the uber-sophisticated and savvy, tongue-in-cheeking her way across the mottled landscape of modern culture – the metro area a specialty?

He was going to come across as a joke, he had to know that. Or was he that delusional? Some guys were after all – cocksure and inflated with more hot air than a Thanksgiving Day parade float.

She should know, she’d been engaged to one – and dated two or three others.

But they were ancient history. It was all about Mr. Harlan Thomas Blake, Esquire, now, the unsuspecting Goliath to her David, pen mightier than the sword, etcetera, etcetera, deadline Thursday midnight for the Sunday magazine feature.

Talk about a prime chop to sink one’s teeth into. And to think she’d found him in one of her random online sex and relationship searches. An entire site devoted to the ideas and practices of this one man, who claimed he could bring out the best in any sub, making her ready for any and all activities, including the 24/7 BDSM lifestyle.

Lions and tigers and whips and chains, oh my.

Unreal.

It was no wonder he had no photos of himself. He was probably a troll.

Blake had agreed to meet her at Nouvelle Java, one of those trendy post-internet cafés that featured pads of paper and antique typewriters for customers to write back and forth. Imagine that. You could bet that little innovation was worth a fifty-cent hike or more on a cup of coffee.

Face it, nouvelle was in. Heck, at this rate, Blake's nouvelle slavery might make a go of it too.

One thing about Nouvelle Java, it was central, lots of witnesses, minimal chance of being hijacked to the Barbary Coast or wherever else her latest subject plied his sordid trade.

Entering the establishment precisely on time—Tabytha time that is—she scanned the arrayed Javites, a half dozen in all, two talking sports, one using a laptop and a couple engaged in an activity halfway between kissing and a YouTube flash dance.

That left the lone man sipping espresso at a table on the far wall, midway back. It was a power position, designed to give clear view of everyone and everything.

It had to be him.

Heavens to Jimmy Olson Cub Reporter, he was a looker, a million miles from the Ted Bundy, bearded Neanderthal type she'd expected. The tailored suit, impeccable haircut and beautiful baby-blue eyes didn't hurt either.

No, scratch that, it was a deeper shade, like some unnamed gem or faraway star capable of cutting through any darkness.

The potential Harlan stood to welcome her, perfectly poised, like he'd had a lifetime to prepare for this moment. "You must be Tabytha Quillen."

"Yes," she replied, too stunned to prevent him taking her hand.

His grip was enveloping, not overwhelming.

It was precisely the kind of contact that put ideas in a woman's mind, especially a woman who hadn't been to the café in some time, so to speak.

"I see you ordered for me."

He smiled. What a package he was, with that deep musk cologne and the way he'd said her name, rolling it off his tongue with such authority, like, if she hadn't actually *been* Tabytha Quillen she would have felt obligated to run straight to the courthouse to get her name legally changed.

"I took a guess," he said, referencing the steaming cup in front of the empty seat across from his. "Sort of a hobby of mine, coffee black, three sugars, right?"

She hid her shock. As a matter of fact that was exactly how she took it.

"Sorry, I prefer tea."

"Allow me." He outflanked her, pulling out the chair as she tried to make a dive for the wicker-back seat.

Showboater.

"Be right back with that tea," he chimed, already halfway to the counter with those long, easy strides of his.

Tabytha watched his back end, firm muscles, narrow waist and broad shoulders, he was probably ripped as hell underneath. Guys like this always were.

He didn't look like a gym rat though. His muscles looked...honest, if that made any sense.

One thing was for sure. A man like Harlan Blake was in no need of whips or chains to get women into his bed.

She tried to sneak some of the coffee before he came back. It smelled so damn good and she was jonesing for caffeine.

The contents were way hotter than she'd expected.

Crap.

She sputtered it on the table.

Great.

"I've got it," said Sir Galahad, magically appearing with napkins.

Thankfully her pearl white blouse had been spared.

"You burn yourself?"

"No, I'm fine."

Other than her bruised ego, because not only did she end up revealing she really liked coffee, she'd made it clear she was trying to hide the fact just to prove him wrong.

Setting the fresh cup of tea in front of her, he went to work cleaning the puddle of coffee.

"Happens to the best of us," he quipped, giving her an eyeful of his large, capable hand sweeping the surface—ring-less.

She kicked herself mentally for noticing that.

What is it with us females, she thought, why can't we ogle body parts like guys, treating the opposite sex like so much scrap metal to be dissected—chassis, engine, whatever.

Relationships.

Blah.

"I'd like to get started if we could." Tabytha pulled a micro-recorder from her purse, a clear violation of Nouvelle Java's au naturel policy, but rather a necessity in her profession.

Later she could sort through—read pick apart—his answers.

The man wouldn't know what hit him.

"How about we get down to brass tacks, Mr. Blake? I can see the male appeal to your line of work—helpless girls, bosoms all asway, swooning over the Great White Hunter, but what's in it for us females? Any particular reason I should surrender all those pesky little rights of mine and hop in the Way Back Machine so we can all party down in the land of 'Me, Caveman, You Pretty Little Chattel'?"

Harlan smiled, which *really* annoyed her, first because her opening salvo wasn't meant to be cute and amusing and second because he had dimples to die for.

She thought of her best friend cum perpetual thorn in the side Martinique. *Get his number, for Neptune's sake, he's hot so screw the BDSM, fake it, Lord knows we've faked enough other things for their gender over the centuries.*

"I've never heard it put quite that way, Miss Quillen, but really the words that come to me are unbridled pleasure."

"*Yours*, of course." She tried not to gloat. This was going to be like taking the perpetual candy from a baby.

Harlan shook his head. "No, it's not the dominant's power. The submissive controls all things, time, mood, intensity, the lead is entirely hers, the dominant must follow. Truth be known, he is the slave, not her. Your average vanilla woman has much less power if you think about it. In the BDSM world absolutely everything is negotiated, no room whatsoever for male abuse, plus there is a safety word to stop things at any point."

Tabytha screwed up her face. A telltale sign she was over-thinking—and therefore vulnerable. She'd make a terrible poker player. All her friends had told her that.

"Well that *sounds* nice," she stalled.

Harlan's eyes locked on hers. Did the man never blink?

"No, Miss Quillen, it *is* nice, spectacular as a matter of fact."

So much for shock and awe, if anything he was picking up steam while she felt more and more off base.

Was it the gem-sharp glare, his voice, or was it the stupid way she'd rattled herself, spitting up the coffee she'd claimed not to want?

"You should try your tea," he suggested.

"Sweetened to perfection, I'm sure."

He laughed. "Actually I cheated on the coffee thing. You mentioned it once in your column."

Tabytha frowned. It hadn't occurred to her Google worked both ways.

The thought of a man like this, knowing detailed things about her.

What made her tick, what made her hum.

He wouldn't fight fair, he'd take advantage, pressing and pressing until...

"You went to Yale," she said, steering Harlan away from her and onto him. "Summa cum laude, followed by Harvard Law School, after which you clerked for a Supreme Court justice and went to work for a prestigious law firm in Manhattan, and then..."

She trailed off at this point, lost somewhere in his expression, trying to guess what really made *him* tick. Why make women kneel? Why demand they come to his bed to be bound and gagged? Why excite their flesh with the sting of pain, poignant and bittersweet? Surely he could manage to conquer with just those lips, a mere suggestion of his pleasure?

He arched a brow. "And then what?"

Tabytha shot back her reply only to find herself tongue tied midway through. "You tell me. You gave it all up, went off the grid, somewhere in Asia the rumor goes, only to resurface a couple of years ago as..."

Harlan smiled, enigmatic. "Go on, say it, Tabytha, you won't offend me. I've heard it all. I'm a whip-wielding Svengali, a whacked-out playboy pervert, a giant political stain on the cultural conscience."

Wow. He had heard it all.

"I don't worry about politics or labels."

He nodded. "Good girl."

She frowned. Something about the remark, glib, patronizing but intimate at the same time, ticked her off all over again. "Do I get a cookie, Mr. Blake, or just a pat on the head?"

"So..." He leaned back. "Now we get to the heart of things. You take my work personally."

“Personally?” She laughed icily. “I assure you, I am about as personally connected to you as I am to the average python. Feel free to verify with anyone in my life. I am anything but submissive.”

“I never said you were. But if you are truly curious, BDSM isn’t about letting people run your life, in bed or out. It’s only the strongest of women, and men, for that matter, who can open themselves to their fantasies of letting go and trust another to fulfill them. For some people it’s a lifestyle, while others simply seek a discreet refuge from the daily pressure, pretending just for a few hours. Do you ever think about a refuge, Miss Quillen?”

She rolled her eyes. “Oh I just knew it would come to this. Deep down I really want you to whip me, please, Master, don’t keep me waiting.”

Harlan’s face held no expression. It was maddening.

“Give me your hand.”

“Excuse me?” The sheer gall of the request caught her off guard, making her cheeks feel instantly hot.

“I won’t bite, Tabytha.”

He was using her first name, rolling it off his tongue like it belonged to him, like it was his to give — or take away.

She stared down at his waiting palms.

What could it hurt, just to touch him, for a minute or so?

She looked about. None of the other Javites were watching and if they were to turn this way they’d have no idea what was happening anyway.

Drawing a breath, surprisingly ragged, she extended her fingers, her hand so soft and delicate in comparison to his.

He took hold of it without reservation — like they’d done it a hundred times before.

At once she felt wanted, treasured...desired.

“Close your eyes, Tabytha. Go on, don’t be frightened.”

She was about to tell him she wasn't the least bit frightened, just cautious, but her lids just felt so heavy, and hadn't she been fighting for so long, so many battles against the world and all the people in it?

Yes, a little peace, a little darkness would be nice.

"Good girl."

There he'd said it again and this time Tabytha's toes curled. She wanted to be good for Harlan Blake, god help her, just for this little instant, for purposes of this totally meaningless game.

Would she be good for him too, kissing him, caressing his bare chest with her tongue, feeling his hand stroking her hair, relieving the tension?

"I want you to let go of everything. Just picture yourself on a beach, the sun is setting. You are barefoot, Tabytha, your beautiful golden hair is down around your shoulders. You can feel the sunshine, the breeze, the sound of the birds skimming over the water, you can smell the salt and feel the sand, you've never felt more alive, never had your beauty shine so much, indeed you have never felt more like a woman."

The compliment stunned her, even as she felt the invisible sun on her cheeks and the sand between her bare toes.

"This place is not our world, Tabytha, but deep down you know it should be."

He was murmuring the words. She could feel him move closer, his head, his face, leaning toward her, intimate, confident. "It is a place where true feminine beauty is recognized, where it needn't hide out of political correctness. And you, Tabytha, are the truest, most beautiful creature. Your body, your smile, your mind, all of it is a million times more potent and men notice you for it, they aspire to you, they want you more than anything. And they aren't the kind of men we have here, they aren't tame men."

Her heart thudded. She wanted to run, breaking this spell and the implications of his words, not to mention the destination it might take her.

It's a trap, you fool! He's a master manipulator.

"You are wearing a white gown. It is translucent. The silk caresses your skin, your hips and your smooth belly."

A moan escaped her lips. The silk was making her nipples hard too, or was that happening right here in this world?

"You're walking along the shore, Tabytha, the water licks at your heels. You are walking into the sunset. A breeze blows at your back and everything is silent, no signs of civilization, no worry. It's paradise. You feel like the only person alive. But you aren't alone."

She bit her lip in anticipation.

"Yes, Tabytha, a man is coming for you, as you breathe, your pulse quickening, you hear him as he rides on his horse, so fast, faster as he approaches from behind. He has purpose. His blood beats, his heart is pure and singular and focused. He cares about no one else, Tabytha. He would overcome any obstacle. He desires you. *Only you*. You hear the hoof beats. You won't outrun him. It is a matter of time. And the question is *why*? What does he want? And who...who is he, Tabytha?"

Tabytha's heart slammed in her chest, her pulse marking the time of that rider's approach, the powerful mystery man, closer, closer. She was running, feeling the water soaking her as he gained on her, just a matter of time. And then...

A rush of images flashed in Tabytha's mind, overwhelming like the pounding waves. Hours, days seemed to elapse in seconds.

The mystery was solved, the fantasy unfolded.

She knew – she knew it all.

Abruptly she felt Harlan letting go of her hand. He was snapping his fingers in front of her face.

"Tabytha, can you hear me?"

She opened her eyes.

What in blazes?

He looked as stunned as she felt. Something in his eyes cut straight through her to the core, those damn laser beacons.

Had he somehow been able to see what was in her mind?

"I have to go." She was on her feet, stuffing the recorder in her purse, feeling totally flustered, totally un-cool, totally un-Tabytha.

"But your interview."

"Forget it. I'll run the Arbor Day piece I'm working on."

She headed straight for the door now, no looking back. She tried not to think about it on the way out, but there was no avoiding the knowledge he was watching her with those eyes of his, still locked and loaded, studying the sway of her ass under her pencil skirt, unavoidable given her shape and need for speed.

Those buttocks were well covered now but not in that damn fantasy.

There they'd been thinly veiled in silk, the twin globes aggravatingly obvious to the man on horseback, the one who had ridden up behind her.

The one she had tried in vain to outrun. The one she hadn't really *wanted* to outrun.

Yes, Harlan had fed her mind enough to fill in the blanks of his little thought exercise.

And she'd done it with a vengeance. As it turned out the rider had been no stranger. He had been her husband...and he'd come to settle an earlier spat between them with something other than words.

Namely a firm spanking over his knee, his hand cupped against her bottom again and again with a power and purity that would make her squirm and beg to be taken on the sand. And taken she had been, his thick, hard cock piercing her, pushing its way through her hot wetness as she squeezed helplessly, shamelessly against him with the walls of her canal, making her ache from the tips of her breasts all the way to her tingling toes.

Such a familiar feeling, though she'd never lived it before to her knowledge, that wonderful captivation, his fingers interlaced with hers, holding her down, arms overhead, locking her with all the firmness of steel but all the gentleness of love. Lips kissing, suckling, enjoying her flesh, never getting to the bottom of her mysteries, never tiring of having, owning.

This so-called husband had had a bloody familiar face too.

One she was going to have a very hard time getting out of her mind.

Oh yes, she was going to have to do a lot of debriefing tonight and she would not be doing it alone.

Reaching for her cell, she hit speed dial.

She got voice mail.

"Martinique, Code One." She employed their time-honored code for an immediately needed guy-crisis session. "ASAP."

Chapter Two

You would have thought the café had caught fire.

In a way it had, Harlan mused as he watched the quixotic, snarky, sexy-as-hell blonde make a beeline for the door.

She had to know she was waving a red flag in front of a bull. What the hell had she seen with her eyes closed, anyway? The imagery exercise was one of those open-ended deals, designed to cut through a person's conventional arousal sphere to the unconscious. Honestly, he'd expected her to make a joke of it, rubbing it in about seeing UFOs or dancing harem girls.

Instead she'd freaked, but not before getting noticeably hot and bothered. Her pulse had shot up, her breathing had gone totally shallow and when she had opened those beautiful green eyes, they had been anything but emerald cool anymore.

It was all he could do to keep from reaching across and taking those lips, kissing the truth right out of her.

So why hadn't he?

Respect for the sovereignty of the press?

Bullshit.

The minute he'd heard it was Tabytha Quillen who wanted to interview him from the *City Times* he'd perked right up, making it his special mission to rock her world.

Tabytha represented everything free and wild and feminine, the total opposite of his existence, so tied down and controlled, pardon the pun.

He had the club, where BDSM players let down their hair. He had the alternate sexuality foundation and the society as well as his investments. As a hobby he worked

with submissives, helping them understand their sexuality in ways that allowed them to keep self-esteem and sanity.

Other than Trina, his right-hand associate, he was used to deference, almost ad nauseam.

That was how it had been with the monks too, back when he was taking all that training in sexual discipline and meditation.

But Tabytha represented a god's honest challenge, a woman determined to make a fool of him. There was no way he could back down now. Something had been tapped inside him and he would find out what.

Ego, Trina would call it, the downfall of every lion.

It might have all turned out as a lark, but Tabytha had actually responded more strongly to the imagery exercise than any woman he had ever met.

Maybe it was the intense way he had set it up. He really could see her on that beach. She was so goddamn beautiful, not just because of her face and her body, though they were certainly to die for. She had inner radiance. He had wanted her so fiercely. He was the rider, he had become that unknown sexual pursuer, and that had never happened before.

So what *had* she seen exactly?

Were they sharing a fantasy, the two of them?

No mystery what would have happened on his end. He had been ready to hop off that horse, seize hold of her and kiss her into oblivion. Because they weren't strangers, they were partners somehow, and her running was a game...a complicated way they played with each other.

That kiss would have burnt her down to the ground and yet it was something they did often, even daily.

"My lord," she would have panted.

And he would have whispered in her ear the consequences of her escape and the reward he was to enjoy for his capture of her.

She would go across his knee. Her buttocks mockingly covered in that soaked chemise, her buttocks twitching, taunting and silently crying out their wicked secret.

The fantasy-world version of Tabytha liked to be spanked.

It made her hot and ready to be taken.

She liked her hands held down too, and when it pleased her lover, she accepted his bonds, his ropes and chains on her luscious body. And she was no stranger to the erotic lure of the whip either.

The little vixen, she liked the petty arguments, liked to tease him and run so he could come after, so he could feel the fire burning inside him that made him drive to capture her all over again.

That absolute unspeakable ecstasy of being inside her too, like he had felt a home, a sheath for his cock, a resting place for his soul. By god, there were no words for the absolute perfect feisty submissive who needed time and again to be reminded who he was and how he loved her and how he would burn heaven and hell to keep her from the hands of another man.

He would have it no other way. She would come for him, she would moan and beg and surrender and she would kiss and caress only him. She would curl up in his arms, seek his protection, his counsel, and in so doing she would be his perfect partner.

It was true.

Tabytha Quillen was his on that other world.

She was his queen, his goddess.

And his absolute property.

Harlan downed the rest of his forgotten espresso, cold and bitter, and pulled out his wallet. Leaving a tip wasn't necessary but he felt a little guilty because he was about to break the cardinal rule of Nouvelle Java.

A silly rule, but contrary to the myths about dominant men, Harlan paid attention to civilities.

"Trina," he said in a low voice, having hit the number one speed dial on his sleek black phone, a model not available to the general public. "I want you to do me a favor."

Naturally Trina had her own agenda. "You're calling me already? That was a quick interview. Or did you chicken out?"

"The interview was what it was. What I need *you* to do is invite Tabytha Quillen to the club tomorrow night at eight o'clock for dinner."

"Why didn't you ask her yourself?"

"Because that isn't how it's done. I want you to make a formal call, from my office."

Trina sighed. "Okay, fine, play the mysterious Dom."

"But don't call right away." Harlan cursed himself for the slight anxiety in his voice. She would pounce on it for sure. "Wait until this evening."

He heard her breathing, no doubt grousing. "You know I'm not your dating service, right?"

"I'm not dating her, and you're cruising for a spanking, missy."

As if their relationship would ever cross professional boundaries. BDSM was a joke between them, nothing more.

"Promises, promises," she quipped. "Don't forget your four o'clock teleconference with the new Japanese investors."

"Oh joy, can't wait."

The only thing he wanted to think about right now was Tabytha. The way she smelled of spring rain and wildflowers. And the way she pursed her lips and furrowed her brow a little when she was thinking. She was so damn adorable.

He wanted to inhale her scent, nibble on her earlobes and whisper to her all the things that would happen between them. He wanted to hear the halfhearted noes, which he would kiss out of her, caressing and undressing and teasing her gorgeous

body until she begged him to take control, to own her orgasms, to mingle the pleasure and the pain, to bind and release her, to take her into the magical, semi-evil world of domination.

And then he wanted her back for more, star struck, lost, utterly dependent on the lovemaking needs he'd awoken inside her.

In short, Harlan wanted her as his love slave.

Heading to the door, he made a second call to Trina.

"I want her in black. All black. And I don't care how you tell her, work it into the conversation if you have to. Just make it happen."

A lot of ifs. First Tabytha Quillen would have to show up. Then she'd have to stick around past dinner for the fun part. At that point he could find out if she'd be a team player.

The luscious little green-eyed blonde in silk lingerie or maybe satin and lace, jet black, her creamy breasts straining at the flimsy cups, her delicate pink lips and smooth sex beckoning under the panel of her maddening little panties.

Would she be a good girl, obedient and eager, or would she be naughty and wear white or red?

Harlan had handled his share of naughty girls, made them squirm and beg.

Whatever she wore, she'd be taking it off.

On that much you could bet her newspaper career – and his as a dominant.

* * * * *

"Seriously," said Martinique, sometime after midnight as she passed the gelato across the overstuffed zebra couch in the living room of her upscale loft. "You could have at least gotten his number."

Tabytha sighed as she accepted the medicinal offering. Martinique St. Claire believed in settling nothing without gelato – chocolate chip – washed down with wine,

Pinot Noir preferably or a good Zinfandel at least, and always drank from crystal stemware given by an ex.

Personally, Tabytha had never had anyone give her crystal stemware, but Martinique had managed to furnish her entire life based on failed relationships.

Certainly she had furnished enough anecdotes for Tabytha's columns over the years.

"I'm really not sure where the Taby-fied me ends and the real me picks up anymore." Martinique always loved to complain, though she loved the attention more.

Martinique St. Claire was born to radiate energy, absorbing and reflecting it with a fierce equality to make a physicist jealous. Tabytha thought of her as her own tropical island and indeed her name sounded like one. A Caribbean place, complete with annual carnival, pink and yellow fireworks in the gentle blue sky, a sensuous, half-naked dance, never quite legal, but not the sort of thing you could really win a conviction on.

The fact that she was actually born on Antigua was strictly a coincidence. Her father, an English lawyer, had spirited away her island mother during Martinique's second year of life and she'd grown up in Philadelphia from that point forward.

Tabytha had met her in college and it was love at first sight. If by love you meant instant fire-meets-water chemistry.

"I'm Tabytha," had announced the young blonde with a pen tucked behind her ear and a pair of nerdy glasses. "Your new roommate."

Martinique had looked her up and down the way one looks at a street urchin, a poor unfortunate from the days of Dickens. "Not with that getup you aren't. Please, tell me I have overslept and it's Halloween?"

Tabytha had assured her it was still September, the first week of classes. Martinique had rolled her eyes. "Help me, Hecate."

Even then Tabytha had loved Martinique's randomly referencing ancient mythologies.

Tabytha promptly impressed her with a biographical rundown of her own.

Within a month they were bosom buddies, sharing everything from outfits to music. Never guys, though, their tastes were too different.

"You like to talk sex, I like to do it," Martinique had summed it up years ago.

Still, Tabytha would be lost without her best friend, which was precisely why she'd invited herself over tonight to decompress after her scary, strange meeting with Harlan Blake, Esquire.

Martinique had been immediately biased, of course, having run across a picture of him in the online album of a friend of a friend. She was a hairdresser who reported the man was not only hot as hell, he was totally standup, all of which was leading Martinique to come back to the same point over and over.

Why had Tabytha run out on him just when things were getting interesting?

"Or you could have given him yours," Martinique added now, going for the jugular. "You do have a personal cell, in case you forgot. It's one of those things you never use like your —"

Tabytha waved her off with the monogrammed spoon, a gift to Martinique from the head of some computer company, or was it a duke?

"Don't you dare make any references to my anatomy, Nikky, I take care of it just fine."

"Take care of it? I bet you don't even know where to find it anymore, although Mr. Blake seemed to remind you. So tell me details, what actually happened? When you held hands and he went all Yoda on your ass..."

Tabytha rolled her eyes. "Honestly, you should be the writer not me. There wasn't any Yoda stuff. He just told me I was on a beach and —"

"He *told* you? A man told *you*?" Martinique's wide eyes scared her straight.

"He didn't tell me, I gave permission."

"So you wanted to be mind-fucked then."

"Would you stop being a cross examiner for one minute, Nikky, it was a silly thing, I was walking on a beach in this gown, there was a breeze and I was...barefoot."

Martinique was snickering.

Tabytha knew that last part would get her going.

"I swear to god, Nikky."

She covered her mouth, employing slender, cocoa-colored fingers, electric-blue tipped. "Sorry."

"He said it was this other world, where beauty reigned, and he said I was the most beautiful. And he told me...I wasn't alone."

"You never are in a mind-fuck dream."

"A man was following me," Tabytha ignored her. "He was a rider on horseback. Harlan just had me imagine the man coming closer and closer and left it up to me who he was, what he wanted me for and..."

"And?"

Tabytha swallowed. "He knew me. He was...my husband. He took me in his arms and kissed me. Seems we had a habit of playing this way often, I would kind of run off on him and he would catch me."

"Now I see the BDSM coming in," said Martinique, downing the rest of her wine and pouring some more.

"Not BDSM, just..."

Martinique's brow shot up. "Just what?"

Tabytha drained her glass too. "He-he liked to spank me. It was his way of showing his love. And it made me hot, I don't know why, but it did."

"It is hot. I assume he was fine, this dream spouse?"

"Yeah, well that's the problem. He looked like Harlan Blake." Tabytha winced, waiting for the inevitable grilling. "I know, I internalized my desire, blah, blah, and then I ruined the whole thing before we could hook up in real life."

Martinique looked somber. "You know he claims that he can touch women's souls, right? Spells it out right on his website, assuming they *want* to submit? Maybe you two really did mind-fuck. Like my grandmother always said —"

"No quoting voodoo please." Tabytha covered her ears. It was bad enough what the wine was doing and the endorphins from the chocolate making her relive the whole damn scenario for the millionth time. Not to mention all the little memorized expressions on Harlan's face she couldn't get out of her mind, the playfulness around the eyes and the way his lips moved when he was thinking.

"Did you have sex in the fantasy?"

"Well, it was all pretty fast and I opened my eyes before I could get lost in it but...yes. Harlan Blake took me."

There, it feels good to say it, Tabytha thought. She had just made the first step to ridding herself of any residual effects.

Martinique looked thoughtfully at her glass. "You remember Tommy Owens, don't you?"

Tabytha regarded her friend, perfect cinnamon beauty, almond eyes, the blend of two cultures, a feminine phenomenon waiting to be unleashed, in the right hands. "You mean the handcuff boy, senior year?"

"Yes. He was all gung ho, wanting to chain up some lucky lass. I was all set to give it a go and you talked me out of it."

"Well, he was all wrong for you, just using you to brag to his frat brothers."

"Is that all it was? Or did you have a design on those cuffs for yourself?"

"Please." Tabytha rolled her eyes. "I never competed with you."

"I don't mean you were trying to deprive *me*, girl, I just think at some level it was your fantasy and not mine."

"No, the whole thing freaked me out and you know it."

"All the more reason to think there was something in it, something deep, for me it would be just one more thing, but for you it was...deep," said Nikky.

"Whatever. And don't tell me you heard me moaning in my sleep to be whipped and chained."

"Just tell *me* there was no chemistry with this guy today, Tab."

"I couldn't stand him, he was a total..." Tabytha stopped midsentence. Everyone knew strong emotions turned quickly to their opposites. "He left me indifferent," she corrected.

"But you let him take your hand, you, Take-No-Prisoners Tabytha, you let him guide you to Fantasy Island and then you let him waltz right into your pants. Oh, I forgot, you weren't wearing any."

Tabytha flushed red all over again, thinking how vulnerable she had been, exposing her body, rendering herself nude at the suggestion of a stranger.

"But it wasn't real," Tabytha protested.

"And that's why you ran out of there like a scared teenager?"

"I just decided I have better things to write about, that's all."

"Right, the Arbor Day column, I almost forgot. That one will win you a Pulitzer for sure."

"You know, friends support each other," Tabytha reminded.

"I am supporting you."

Tabytha's phone picked that particular moment to chirp, very injudiciously in her opinion.

"Get it," said Martinique. "It might be him."

"It isn't him."

Martinique reached for Tabytha's purse and after a brief wrestling match she took control of the phone. "Tabytha DeSade's House of Tortures. How may we serve you up? What? Oh, you're an associate of Mr. Blake's? How nice."

Tabytha tried to tackle Martinique and was promptly pushed back. That's what she got for turning down all those invitations of Martinique's to play tennis and build up her arm strength.

"What? You are calling with an invitation to Mr. Blake's private club? You don't say."

"No, absolutely not," Tabytha whispered fiercely.

"Tomorrow at eight you say? Absolutely, she'd be delighted. Shall I tell her what to wear? I'm afraid her leather onesies are all at the cleaner's. Uh huh, okay, thank you...and cheerio."

Cheerio? Onesies? Could this get more surreal?

"You're going to a BDSM club tomorrow," Martinique said, handing Tabytha back her phone.

"Have you any idea how much I hate you right now?" Tabytha declared.

"You won't hate me once I find you a killer outfit. You have to wear black, *all* black."

Tabytha felt a stab of heat between her thighs as she considered the implications.

Black panties smoothing the curves of her buttocks, black bra cups over her pert breasts.

Did the bastard actually expect to see her that way, stripped of her outer clothes, all dolled up and sexy for his titillation, like one of his brainless little submissives?

"I'm not going and that's final."

"Really?" Martinique challenged. "And what if he comes after you?"

"He wouldn't dare."

At least he'd better not because in her current condition she might not be able to do much to stop him.

Chapter Three

Tabytha spent the bulk of the next day psyching herself up. She'd been ready to cancel on Harlan after leaving Martinique's place for the night, but with the arrival of the new day she decided that regardless of how she'd been hoodwinked into the situation, she was a Quillen and Quillens were not quitters.

"Really," she told her Randy "You Can Do It" Rooster alarm clock at eight a.m. sharp. "How hard could this be?"

Club or no club, dinner was dinner. As for the rest of it, the so-called consensual BDSM dungeon, that was pure hokum.

"I mean, come on," she told the ever-attentive Randy, her stalwart night guardian since college. "An urbanized Dracula's castle, complete with writhing maidens on the rack, bottomless bottles and well drinks until midnight every Saturday?"

If Harlan was smart he wouldn't let her within a hundred feet of it.

She'd make intellectual mincemeat of the establishment.

He had asked for it and it was gloves off from here on out.

Did he have *no* idea who she was? She was Slice 'Em and Dice 'Em, Send 'Em Home To Mama, Tails Between Their Legs Tabytha Quillen, that's who. Did he think she was one of those dishrag women, low self-esteem, craving the love of a manipulative bullying male? And the whole thing was supposed to be intimate and spiritual?

Please.

Fine. So she'd been a little restless the night before and lost a little sleep.

Okay, a lot of sleep.

But that wasn't because of Harlan Blake. Just her own stress, all those accumulated months without a break, week after week feeding the blog and the column, always more words, having to be funnier, wittier and ever more concise.

Was she a machine, for crying out loud, some kind of living word processor?

And yes, maybe a little companionship would be nice, a date, a boyfriend.

Such was the journalist's life, though, no apologies, no regrets and no social life to speak of but hey, no one could have it all, right?

After a hearty breakfast of bran flakes and egg whites, Tabytha settled in to work. It was a research day mostly, a new freelance piece for a website catering to agoraphobics—try arranging a meet-up for *that* lot—and some stuff on mystery shopping she planned to use for a column next month. Then there was the blog stuff, the social media page and so on and so on.

About half past one she realized she was going on about two hours sleep and promptly scheduled an impromptu nap, the TV on for company.

She was pretty sure it was Dr. Phil talking to her as she lulled off to dreamland but at a certain point the voice changed from a concerned Texas drawl to that mildly cocky, deep and vaguely dangerous voice from the café.

His voice.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

"Tab, you really shouldn't fight this."

"I will fight," she murmured. "And don't call me Tab."

"The harder you resist the more you will think about it."

"Want to bet?"

She felt a hand, caressing her hip. "You belong to me."

"Stop..."

"Is that what you want?"

"I... Yes..."

"Liar," he teased. "You know what happens to young ladies who lie, don't you?"

Sighing, Tabytha gave in fully to the fantasy. Harlan Blake was with her in bed, his rock-hard body alongside hers. They were both nude.

She turned away to her side, he moved behind her.

"Feel that?"

It was his cock, pulsing, erect, pressing between her buttock cheeks.

"Please," she whispered.

"Please what, Tab? Please take you? Put my cock deep inside you, roll you onto your belly and have my way?"

Invisible hands caressed her breasts, squeezing, molding them, her treacherous nipples responding to every contact, rubbery, swollen.

"You need a spanking, Tab."

"No!"

"It's not for you to decide."

She shook her head, trying to free herself. She had no will, no strength.

It was so damn real!

"You're wet," he observed.

A finger was inside her, lightly pushing against her slick open walls.

"Take your pleasure, Tab, you have my permission."

"Go to hell." She didn't want to give him the satisfaction but holding out was next to impossible. His hands seemed to be everywhere, on her breasts, thighs, over her belly, pressing, pushing. He nuzzled her neck, kissed until he finally got her attention, his teeth nibbling.

"It's no longer a request, Tab. Move for me, show me your pleasure."

She moaned, releasing the tension, shaking and writhing. He'd found her clitoris, the bastard.

"Do not come without permission."

"Oh...god...what do you want?"

The invisible fingers pinched her ass.

A hand cracked against her behind.

"Everything, Tab, everything."

"Don't call me that, I told you!"

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

All at once the dream imploded.

She awoke fighting and shaking.

Harlan or whatever she was dealing with was gone.

The phone was ringing. It was Martinique.

As usual she offered no preamble. "I've been doing some reading. This BDSM stuff, it's all head trips, ninety percent talk and ten percent real fucking. It's got to be right up your alley. You need to get it on with this guy. It's your fate, like my grandmother used to say –"

"Goodbye, Martinique. This is me hanging up on you."

Martinique called back a second later. It would go on like this all day if Tabytha didn't give in.

"Just tell me that you're going to the club, Tab. And you're going to follow his instructions."

Tabytha bristled. "I don't follow anyone's instructions."

"You still have that lacy push-up number, don't you, the black one? How hot would that be with your silk thong, the one we got in Bermuda?"

"I'm not wearing a fucking thong for this guy," she fumed.

"It makes you pissed off, doesn't it? Finally, some passion, I knew I was onto something."

"You're onto nothing. I'll wear red or white or...nothing."

"Ooh, gonna be a bad girl, huh? Maybe he'll put you over his knee. Or cuff you to his bed and teach you a real lesson."

Images flashed in Tabytha's brain, like raging fires too fast to put out.

What would Harlan Blake do with a girl...handcuffed to his bed?

He wouldn't beat about the bush, giggle or apologize like handcuff boy back in college would have.

"Face it, Tabytha, he's chosen you for whatever reason, he's sending a car tonight to take you to his club. You know what goes on there, right?"

"For all you know this guy could be a serial killer. Has that ever occurred to you?"

"He went to Harvard, remember? Besides, I checked him out. You forget the contacts I have."

Five years with the district attorney's office, three in private practice, not to mention the resources of her father that went deep on both sides of the law.

"BDSM is for insecure, maladapted people," Tabytha pronounced, determined to put the thing to rest once and for all.

"Like I said," Martinique quipped. "It's the perfect thing for you."

"Ha ha, frigging ha."

"Remember, the black push-up bra."

"When hell freezes over."

"I can call his assistant and find out later if you complied, you know."

"You wouldn't dare."

Martinique laughed. It was her devil's laugh, pure salt and green-blue sea, island rum and pure grandmother voodoo.

If Tabytha hadn't felt doomed already this most certainly sealed the deal.

"The hell I won't. And I'll be over in a half hour to supervise getting you ready, no argument."

Tabytha sighed. "You know, Nikky, I really don't need another dominant in my life, I have you."

"Guess you're just lucky, girl. Put on some black tea for me, will you?"

Tabytha didn't bother putting up a fight. She hadn't won one yet so what made her think she would start now?

* * * * *

Harlan watched keen eyed as the limousine pulled up in front of the club, right on time, his prize safe and sound in the backseat. The scrumptious Tabytha Quillen looking distinctly wary – and wearing a black dress no less.

He was right there to open the door for her.

Smoothly, he took her hand, bringing her to her feet, the very picture of reluctant grace.

She frowned slightly as he drank her in. It was all he could do to keep focus on those fierce green eyes and not on her body, the way that dress hugged her curves, the bodice thrusting her breasts up and out, the tight waistline emphasizing her hourglass figure.

Really it was a bit risqué, off the shoulder, above the knee.

What effect was she going for? In-your-face inaccessibility? Or was it a taunt?

If so it was working. He would give just about anything for a taste of those full lips, cherry red, just a little appetizer to the main course. And why stop there when he could run his hands down her rib cage, cradling her waist, holding her tight and then reaching behind for that ass—the impertinent, saucy, spectacular ass of Tabytha Quillen.

"What the hell is that look for?" she demanded.

As if she didn't know.

Clearly she did.

Still, the game deserved to be played.

"You've dressed for me."

Her eyes shot fire. "Don't flatter yourself. It's called the little black dress. Every woman has one, they are practical and neutral and ninety-nine percent of the time we wear them it has nothing to do with the stupid thoughts on men's minds."

"Dare I hope I'm in the one percent?" Harlan took her hand and kissed it, taking advantage of her momentary confusion in the wake of his charming smile.

Her skin tasted sweet. He inhaled the familiar perfume and with it the smooth scent of vanilla. Bath gel, maybe? He pictured her all soaped up, reclined in the tub, the bubbles up to the top of her breasts. He needed to be there, of course, to watch...to tell her what to do, how to move.

Touching, caressing, and arching her back, surrendering to the softness.

Harlan let the kiss linger.

She wanted to pull away but she didn't. Good.

He held her prisoner, just a moment or two longer, but well past the time of conventional propriety.

"If you don't mind." Tabytha wrenched her hand free.

There it was again, the look from yesterday. All that emotion bottled up. Was she on the beach again with her mystery man? Is that where the kiss had taken her?

He liked his odds now. She was close, so very easy to sweep into his arms. *Nice heels*, he thought, letting his eyes sweep down, lingering on those beautiful long legs. Just made to wrap around a man's torso.

"Dinner is waiting," he said.

"I hope so," she replied pointedly. "I'm on deadline."

"Your experience awaits," he declared with a sweep of his arm across the backdrop of the subtly named Traveler's Club. Occupying the better part of a twenty-room Victorian mansion, it represented a work of art all its own.

Built originally for a general from the early Indian Wars, it had passed through generations of dominant men before finally being sold to a cooperative on whose board Harlan now served as chairman.

"Feel free," he said, "to be impressed. I certainly was the first time I saw it."

Taking her arm, he led her through the carved, antique door into the foyer with its red velvet settee and mahogany fixtures, including a priceless umbrella stand that had once belonged to an Indian maharaja. Personally, he'd become inured to such things, but he could see Tabytha pretending not to look.

"Not exactly the dive you expected?"

"I had no expectations. I'm a journalist."

"Oh yes, of course, you're totally objective."

From the walls eyes watched, stern as they had been in life. These were the portraits of past members of the club, all the way back to its roots, when maids in petticoats could be ever so easily turned over the master's knee—and the wives for good measure.

The main dining room was quiet tonight, only a few couples along with a table of four. He knew them all but it wasn't really club form to go about slapping backs and waving.

A special table had been prepared in the corner, dimly lit, with a candle already in place.

"What do you think?"

Tabytha frowned, a definite victory in his book. "I won't be able to take notes."

"I'll make sure you get the cheat version on the way out. Besides I thought you used a recorder?"

"I couldn't fit it in my purse."

"Yes." He noted the tiny black clutch. "It is rather small."

Harlan held her chair out for her. She offered no resistance and no complaint.

Another small victory.

He took his place across from her, promptly unfurling his napkin and placing it on his lap. Harlan would rather have her in its place, ass up, subject to his itching, spanking hand.

"I took the liberty of selecting our menu for the evening, Tabytha."

"Of course you did."

He signaled for the waiter to bring the wine. "You doubt my tastes?"

"Why should that concern you? I'm only a female."

"Oh I care a great deal. I want to know you, your likes and dislikes, everything."

She squirmed slightly. "We're not here for me. Why don't you tell me how this little club works?"

"Why don't you tell me? You see the couples here. Do they look like BDSM players to you?"

"Do you mean would the women hop down off these fancy chairs and bark like dogs if their masters asked?"

Harlan laughed. "I hadn't thought of that. But obviously you have."

"Oh no." She leveled her gaze. "Don't go twisting this. I am employing sarcasm. I am sure it's foreign in your mumbo-jumbo world but it's quite real in mine."

"What is the mumbo jumbo? BDSM people are very direct. We don't hide behind false jokes."

"I am not hiding," she said, trying not to sound defensive.

The waiter was standing behind him, waiting for him to approve the selection. He watched her the whole time, enjoying her annoyance.

"This will do nicely," he said.

"I am not having any," said Tabytha.

"Suit yourself," said Harlan.

He had all night, after all. And then some.

* * * * *

Not having any wine was the smartest thing Tabytha had done all night.

The only smart thing, really.

Had she a lick of common sense she would still be home, researching on the net, finishing her story the safe, sane and consensual way, with absolutely no hot, possessively dangerous Doms in the area.

At least Tabytha was not falling for Harlan's little gimmicks, pretending to be so suave, trying to pass off his silly establishment as some sort of elegant Victorian mystery theater with miles of catacombs and happy De Sade clones in the basement.

He'd probably hired actors. Sure the food was good, one excellent course after another. But come dessert she was out of here.

"You haven't relented on the wine," he said as she continued to work diligently on her almond-crusted tilapia. "You're really missing something."

"I doubt it."

Harlan put down his fork. She pretended not to notice.

"Tabytha, may I be frank with you?"

She feigned annoyance. "I'd rather you weren't."

Frankness was a bad thing because then it might come down to him asking her about the black outfit. It was true, she had this proverbial dress for just such mystery occasions.

But why the silk panties and bra, black on black, trimmed in lace?

Yes, Martinique had badgered her, but she could have said no.

Tabytha told herself she was doing this to spite the man, to tease him.

He would never see them, ha, ha.

Like waving a red flag in front of a bull, that's what it meant to taunt a man like Harlan Blake.

Well so what? He could go stuff himself.

"I've never met a woman who intrigued me like you do, Tabytha."

She pursed her lips. "And you want to know if there's any more like me at home?"

"No, you're the one I want."

The way he said it, not a trace of subtlety, not an ounce of polite, politically correct reserve.

"We all want something..."

"But I get it, Tab, whatever I'm after."

"I'm not up for grabs."

He raised his glass. "Here's to tonight, and you being in my bed before sunlight."

Tabytha's heart leaped to her throat. It was one thing to know a man was trying to seduce you but to have him put so much on the line before he'd even delivered a kiss.

It was infuriating, but dangerously arousing at the same time. "Wow, that's right up there with 'baby, what's your sign'."

The insult left him unfazed. "Why did you come here tonight, Tabytha, really?"

"Obviously to swoon at your feet, Master," she exaggerated, somewhere between Scarlett O'Hara and Marilyn Monroe.

"I would rather see you tethered to my bed," he countered.

She contemplated tossing the wine in his face but he would probably take it as a badge of honor, a sure sign he was getting to her.

"And that's the only way, partner, because I would never go willingly."

Harlan laughed. He was enjoying himself and it pissed her off to no end.

"You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?" he asked.

"I loathe everything you stand for."

"Loathing is a strong thing, Tabytha, a very potent, easily malleable emotion."

She pointed her fork dead on. "I know what you're getting at. You're like Martinique, twisting things. Well, the truth is I don't secretly lust or love you or whatever. I am indifferent. Cold."

"Your cheeks are flush, but you haven't had any wine. Are you sure you aren't a *little* warm?"

"Sure," she spat. "I'm totally head over heels. Why don't you drag me out to the alley or the backseat of your car and be done with it."

"I don't need to do that. There are adequate facilities downstairs. Besides, I want you in bed, not pushed against some dingy brick wall."

"You've no idea what I could do to you in a column," she warned.

"And you don't know what I could do to you in my bedroom."

"Is that a threat?"

"Just a statement of fact, I have a good deal of toys and I am very, very creative."

"You have no shame, do you?"

"We both felt something at the café, Tabytha, when I held your hand, when I had you close your eyes. What did you see? I saw a strong woman who wants to let go, who wants to be in a man's arms...in his power, surrendering."

"I've heard enough." She wanted to slap him; then again she wanted him to kiss her, to see what it was made him different, his promise of domination.

"Stay and watch the show." He seized on her indecisiveness. "We arranged it just for you."

Tabytha felt dangerously, wickedly trapped. She wanted to fight, to run...but another part of her wanted to go with him wherever he might lead her.

"No."

Harlan drained his glass. "Are you sure? This is a chance to see BDSM as the work of art it's really meant to be."

She tried not to focus on his voice, deep and rich. Or his eyes either. And then there was the problem of his lips. "I can find plenty of *art* on the internet, thank you."

He smiled, ever the wolf. Damned if she would be his prey though.

"And if I told you it would please me to have you there, Tabby Cat?"

Her toes curled at the absurd name. "You really don't want an answer to that one."

"A toast instead," he said, moving to fill her glass.

She lost herself in the steady glugging of the magic red contents and next thing she knew she was clinking her crystal to his.

"To wonderful beginnings, Tabytha Quillen."

"To tidy endings," she countered.

As she gulped the wine she remembered her earlier promise, not to fall for anything. Over at the next table a pretty brunette was watching. She wore a diamond choker and a black halter dress. She was gorgeous and her smile was electric...and so peaceful at the same time. A long-haired man across from her occupied himself slicing up his steak. They were lovers, Master and slave, and the girl, the slave wanted her to know it was all right, whatever happened it would be okay.

The hell it will.

Tabytha averted her gaze. "I need a refill," she decided.

And this time the tables were turned. "You've had enough, my dear."

She clenched her fists.

The brunette nodded as if she'd somehow heard and turned away.

Tabytha hated them, every last one.

"I am going home," she announced.

"I wish you wouldn't."

"Say one thing," she challenged, "to stop me."

This he did, catching her utterly off guard and taking her breath away.

"Please, Tabytha, I would like you to stay."

Chapter Four

Sometime later Harlan led Tabytha back through the dining room to a circular staircase in the foyer. She was a bit unsteady on her feet, though not from alcohol. They had been talking and not about BDSM. Harlan had been sharing his travel experiences, his views of life. They were so dead-on similar to hers it was scary. He too loved mountains but got bored climbing them. He loved eagles but would personally have preferred to be an owl if he were to be a flying creature.

He was quite sure dolphins knew a lot more than they were saying. And he couldn't stand jazz.

She found herself following him closely as they walked. The club was a little more crowded and some of the people, the women in particular, appeared to have eyes for the newcomer.

All of them looked beautiful, though some were closer to the standards of perfection. The one thing they all shared was the proximity of at least one confident, proud-looking male.

Most wore tuxedos, a few had expensive suits. Their ladies all wore dresses and had expensive jewelry.

This certainly matches no stereotype of leather-loving deviants, Tabytha thought.

Harlan led them downstairs. At the bottom was an open area with elaborate corridors leading off like spokes from a wheel. The corridors came complete with sets of armor and torches built into the stone walls. It was an odd mix of modern and medieval with slate-gray floors and designer wooden doorways.

They stopped before a particular set of double doors made of heavy, carved wood, magnificent as anything in a European palace. Clearly Harlan was pulling out all the stops for his little show, or maybe she should say his macabre circus.

"This is where we part ways," he said blithely, touching her elbow. "Do watch your step, it may be a little dark in there."

"Excuse me?"

"I have business elsewhere, but we can meet up afterward."

"The hell we will."

Harlan opened the left door and before she could say a word he was ushering her in, his hand at the small of her back.

Before she could protest he had closed it again with himself on the outside.

Fucking bastard.

Everything was dark, almost pitch black.

Oh well, might as well get it over with.

"Come on, bogeyman, come get me," she called out.

Squinting her eyes, she began to make out shapes, shadows facing her like some kind of Star Chamber.

This was what she got for not staying home with the gelato.

A light ignited, the quick flash of a burning torch. Others followed and soon the place was bathed in a soft orange glow.

She was in some kind of theater, very velvet and very Victorian, everything in purple, red or black.

They certainly had a flare for the dramatic.

"Your place is here, miss," said a man in a black robe, his voice deep, his face hidden by a monk-like cowl. "The others will arrive soon."

Her place as he called it was more like a throne, one of two.

Was the other for Harlan, assuming he deigned to return to her before the show started?

He had said afterward, though, and he didn't seem like a man to lie.

Without looking left or right, one foot in front of the other, she took her place on the velvet cushion.

It was like heaven.

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all.

Harlan was just trying to scare her.

Tabytha decided to resume her proper journalist's role of observer and describer. Words came into her mind, little mnemonic devices to help her write about the scene later.

The room itself was fairly small, less than two dozen seats arranged in a semicircle in front of a low stage. The two thrones were along the side. She was the only occupant of the room other than a small collection of the robed men, who at the moment were congregating in the back of the room.

A moment later they processed forward. Some kind of horn was blown and the door was opened. The men and women, a few of whom she recognized from upstairs, entered in couples. They had donned white and black masks and with their long tails and sequined dresses, they reminded Tabytha of an archaic audience en route to the opera.

She wondered if anyone would sit next to her.

They did not.

As soon as the people were seated, Tabytha turned her attention to the stage, which at this point was brightly lit by a number of candles lining the edge. There was no curtain, just a gray marble-inlaid floor and a black background with white designs, suns and moons mostly.

To the left was a rack of implements, whips and paddles and such.

Tabytha's stomach clenched.

A chain hung from the ceiling right over the center of the stage. There was a pair of leather cuffs dangling from the end at about eye level.

She told herself this was all nothing, a gag, research for a funny column, a humorous anecdote to share with Martinique over wine and ice cream later on.

Yeah right.

Just a gag, my ass, the elegant audience, enraptured, anticipating the spectacle to come. And somewhere backstage a victim or victims waiting. *Just get this over with*, she thought.

A few minutes later, or maybe it was an hour, the door was finally closed and the torches were extinguished, leaving only the white shimmer of the candles. Instinctively Tabytha grasped the arm rests.

The whole thing felt like some pagan ritual, like they were about to wheel out a human sacrifice.

If Harlan were here she'd have made some sarcastic remark about the cheesy effects.

Or maybe I'd have grabbed his hand for comfort instead, she thought, with a chill down her spine.

Good thing he wasn't.

Tabytha drew a sharp breath now. Something was happening. A woman was coming out onto the stage. Incredible and beautiful beyond words, so frail and exquisitely alluring in the light glow of the candles.

The woman was probably in her early twenties, long brown hair, combed out, a flower tucked behind her left ear.

She wore a chemise, very thin and sheer, hanging mid-thigh, the neckline plunging.

The costume did little to hide her attributes. The full breasts tenting the material, nipples subtly pressed, and the long, coltish legs, the flat belly and thin waist.

She was barefoot and around her neck she wore a diamond choker.

Tabytha's heart skipped a beat as she remembered. The girl in the dining room.

They were the same!

Yes, her eyes were downcast, not in fear or self-pity, but in serenity, almost reverence. But one look at the rack behind her told the story.

Was she truly going to be whipped?

Suddenly the men began to applaud, not for the woman but for one of their own, walking toward the stage from the back of the room.

Was there some kind of secret entrance?

Surely she wouldn't have missed such a specimen, so powerful and graceful and mysterious in his black mask and black silk shirt. For good measure, his pants were tight, like stockings, and tucked into a pair of leather boots.

He had leather gloves too, also black.

She'd never before thought of a man being beautiful, but this one was.

He also seemed vaguely familiar, if only her mind would let her connect the dots.

Was it the man dining with the girl in the choker? No, that one had long hair and this man's hair was distinctly clipped short.

Like a panther now, she watched him move toward the girl who lowered her head at his approach. She was a good eight inches shorter and very slight in comparison to his build.

He put his hand under her chin, lifting her head, inclining her eyes to his.

"Do you consent?"

"Yes Sir."

"To what do you consent?"

She licked her lips, so moist and soft.

Something about that man's voice.

"You may mark me, my lord, and use me for your pleasure."

He smiled with the look of a predator about to dine on his favorite prey.

"You can do better, Vanessa."

He moved to touch her breast, skimming the material, lightly flicking her already distended nipple.

Vanessa moaned, arching her back.

The whole time she kept her arms at her sides.

He gave the same treatment to her other nipple.

"I'm waiting," he declared, his hand moving over her flat belly.

"Please...Master...use me."

Vanessa groaned as his finger found the apex of her thighs.

She wore no underwear.

As if against her will she began to move against him, lightly rocking.

So helpless and so sweetly taken away.

He brought her swiftly to orgasm, his fingers moving in and out, the glove pleasuring her and claiming her, wringing from the depths of her ecstasy.

She laid her head on his chest once the spasms had subsided. He encircled her in his arms, kissed the top of her head.

Then he told her to raise her arms overhead and lift herself onto her tiptoes so she could reach the chain.

When she had done all this, he affixed the cuffs to her delicate wrists, one after the other.

Tabytha was rapt. The girl was totally immobile, open to pleasure and pain.

The man put his leather-covered fingers to her lips. Slowly, obediently, she licked away the glistening come.

Her come.

He let her take the fingers deep, simulating the motions of suckling a cock.

Abruptly he denied her.

Grabbing her chemise, he tore down the front of it, exposing her neck to knee.

She was scarcely breathing but Tabytha could feel the woman's pulse racing, the heat that must have been surging inside her.

He circled around her now and did the same thing in back. Again and again he tore off strips until she was naked, her chemise hanging in rags.

Grasping hold of her buttocks, he moved in close behind. Her eyes were wild. He sank his teeth into her neck while lightly caressing her waist.

She must have been going out of her mind.

Tabytha leaped as he spanked her, delivering a crisp blow to her posterior for which she promptly thanked him. Again he struck, this time leaving a red mark. She was sucking air through her teeth, clearly experiencing something other than raw pain.

The man stopped and turned. He was looking right up at Tabytha. Slowly, accusingly, he pointed.

So familiar and yet her mind wouldn't, couldn't register the identity.

What? What the hell did he want?

"Your permission is needed," he called out as if reading her mind. "You must give approval or I won't continue."

Tabytha grabbed the armrests, wishing she could make the seat into some kind of rocket ejector to take her a million miles away. "You can't expect me to do that."

The man strode across the stage, utterly in command of all he surveyed. He selected a small whip, a riding crop. Several times he tested it in the air.

"You hear me?" she cried. "I won't sanction this."

"The ceremony can't go on without you."

There was no denying that voice anymore, the identity of Vanessa's punisher.

Damn Harlan Blake, damn him to hell.

"No!" she defied.

Harlan ignored her. He was speaking to Vanessa now, whispering in her ear.

"Please," Vanessa called out in response, her voice so haunting and beautiful in its captivity. "Let my Master mark me, don't be afraid, I want it."

"You need it," the man prompted, caressing her lips with the tip of the crop.

"Oh god, yes," she groaned.

Tabytha groaned with her. There was no way to refuse and yet she had no wish to implicate herself in the torture of a fellow female.

"Please," implored Vanessa to anyone listening. "Please."

Her body twisted, so torturously perfect.

"For god's sake," Tabytha called out, springing to her feet. "Do it already!"

Harlan smiled. He'd won. Again.

Tabytha collapsed into her seat. Totally spent.

And now the show began for real.

He did not whip her at first.

The man took his time, taunting, building, and brushing the instrument of torture against her skin. Barely an inch of the girl was spared, her cheeks, her lips, her graceful neck, everywhere he touched, caressing with the brutal little stalk of leather.

When he reached her nipples he slapped lightly, causing her to thrash her head.

He did the same to her smooth, flat stomach.

Tabytha looked away as he placed the tip of the whip between her legs, finding her pussy, the delicate lips and the softness inside.

She wanted to turn away.

A voice told her to keep watching, it was the voice in her dream.

You need to watch. You want to.

She turned her head forward, compliant, mortified that she was obeying a ghost in her head, worse still that she might derive pleasure from the act.

Tabytha squeezed her thighs. She remembered now that she was wearing the black panties for him. They were getting steadily damper. Under the black lace bra her nipples throbbed, stung with every touch of that whip as though she were the one on stage.

Harlan must never know about the underwear...he must never know how sheer and how wet it was.

Vanessa was thrashing, shaking her head back and forth. The man had made her spread her legs, dainty little motions on her big toes so he could use the whip on her pussy. Slight little taps and slaps that clearly were pushing her to the brink.

This time she was denied orgasm.

Giving no respite, the man took up a position slightly behind the girl's left flank.

Several times he tested the crop in the air. "You will count for us, Vanessa."

The shuddering girl braced herself but clearly there was no preparing. The sound ripped from her lips was half moan half scream as he landed the whip on her bottom.

Crack.

Tabytha turned away again, this time the voice in her head did not attempt to stop her. She could hear the whip rising and falling, one, two, three, four, the steady cadence of consensual submission, Vanessa's sweet, rasping voice calling the ever increasing number.

One, two, three, four...

"Five," she called out now, her voice a broken sob.

Then everything grew quiet.

After a few minutes Tabytha couldn't stand it anymore, she had to know what was happening.

A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words.

Vanessa, unchained now and on her knees, kissing and licking the man's unfurled cock, as if thanking him for the beating.

After a few moments more the spotlight turned off and everything went black.

A hand touched Tabytha's shoulder.

She felt her heart leap to her throat.

It was at this moment everything went black. Then someone touched her hand and Tabytha cried out.

"I didn't mean to startle you." It was Harlan, back so fast.

Had she been mistaken about the man onstage being him?

"So what did you think?"

Tabytha squeezed her thighs, fighting the moisture, the pulsing.

"I think this is all staged," she dismissed, "like pro wrestling."

Harlan laughed. "How about we go backstage and meet the star?"

"What star?"

As if Tabytha didn't know.

"Vanessa. She's dying to meet you. I've told her quite a bit about you."

Tabytha could only imagine what that meant.

"Fine, but it won't change my opinion," she declared, though at this point she wouldn't know the truth if it banged her over the head.

* * * * *

Tabytha Quillen was ripe for the picking. Harlan would bet his fortune on it. The more she denied and argued, the more she ridiculed the more clear it became. She craved to know what it felt like. Her body was one huge question mark seeking the bondage, the domination, the whip on her body. She wanted it and needed it. Yes, Harlan knew this. It was his business. But a man didn't go around forcing things, not a true dominant. He had to be subtle, had to hang back and let her draw her own conclusions.

The way he saw it, meeting Vanessa would be quite an eye opener.

They found her in the aftercare room, having just received some salve for the welts and a little bit of TLC from the handlers. The injury was slight, but Harlan was very exacting about such matters.

Besides, like most subs, Vanessa needed time and space to come down and she was generally pretty sweet and loving after a session, even more so than usual.

"Harlan," she cried, seeing him the moment they entered.

Not waiting for the handler's clearance, she jumped down off the table, running to him, still naked, though with a nice pink glow from the shot of bourbon they'd given her.

"Was I just the best girl or what?" she purred, burying herself against his chest.

"You were just great. I was very proud," he soothed, stroking her damp hair.

"Mmm," she moaned. "I do wish you'd play with me for real."

"It's nothing personal, sweetheart."

"I know." She sighed exaggeratedly. "You're still waiting for Miss Whip Me Right. Hey...who's this?"

Vanessa had just now seen Tabytha and she was all abuzz with female interest. "So this is the little chassis that caused you to finally break your dry spell. I saw her at dinner and thought it was an illusion. Harlan Blake with a playmate."

Tabytha looked both angry and embarrassed. "Do you mind, I'm standing right here. And I'm not anybody's automobile, or show-and-tell project or whatever. I am here doing a feature story."

Vanessa giggled. "She's hot, sassy, just a smidge bitchy, right up your alley."

Harlan frowned in mock irritation. "Do not go there. I just need you to show our lady reporter you are on the up and up. She saw the show and doesn't believe."

"You mean these?" Vanessa turned about and bent over, proudly displaying her freshly punished ass. "A work of art, huh?"

Tabytha turned pale and underneath he could see the storm brewing, the equal attraction and repulsion. "How can you let a man do that to you?"

Vanessa approached her bold as brass. For a moment Harlan thought it might come to blows. "Same reason you watch, honey. It makes me hot."

"You know nothing about me," said Tabytha. "And trust me. You don't want to get my Irish temper up."

Harlan could hardly imagine *that* little scenario.

"Vanessa, that's enough," he said.

The young submissive backed off.

Tabytha did not. "And for your information, young lady, I'm not even lukewarm."

Vanessa smiled knowingly at Harlan, upsetting Tabytha even more.

"I'm not," she insisted. "Read my next column and you'll see just what I think of all this."

Vanessa frowned. "Maybe I was wrong, maybe you're *all* bitch."

"I don't have to listen to this," Tabytha said.

Harlan followed her out of the aftercare room and caught up to her halfway down the hall. "Tab, what gives?"

She whirled on him, some kind of crazy look in her eyes. "What did you call me?"

"Tabby Cat, why?"

"You don't get to rename me, got it?" She was pointing a finger and she looked so fiercely sexy Harlan could not resist.

"Got it," he said, his lips finding hers.

She made a protesting noise that was promptly drowned by the kiss, hot and tight, their bodies sealing, round female breasts against solid male chest, pelvis touching pelvis, communicating a language all on their own. For a few moments the world disappeared, people walking by on their way to and from private rooms, the sound of the violins playing in the drawing room upstairs.

He let his hands rest on her waist. She was his. She had to be.

"Come to bed with me," he whispered.

"I already told you. No."

"I am not a man to beg, Tabytha Quillen."

"Of course not, you like to make the woman do the begging."

He stroked her hair, sending electric waves through her, hot passion mixed with a delicious, liberating weakness. "Is that so terrible?"

"Yes," she replied. "Now let me go."

"I will," he said. "If you can look me in the eye and tell me your underwear isn't black."

Tabytha's silence said it all.

He moved directly to her ear, whispering the words, intimate, scandalous. "Be my slave tonight, Tabytha, if you dare."

She stiffened, as if debating whether to fight back, denying the way he was touching her, moving in so close, as though she'd already said yes.

"Please," she rasped.

He lifted her chin, making eye contact. "Please what? Yes...or no?"

Tabytha tried to breathe. It was all happening so fast. But her body wanted it, god help her poor little heart.

What should she do? What should she say?

"You can decide in the car," he said at last. "I'll take you where you like."

Taking her hand, he led them to the limousine.

She walked as if in a dream. Somewhere in the distant haze of consciousness, beyond the feel of his hand enveloping hers, she heard him speak.

"Just circle around for a while until the young lady makes her mind up."

I hope you have enough gas, she thought.

The back of the limo smelled like fresh leather and as soon as Tabytha pressed her buttocks to the soft, buttery material she had felt instantly aroused. This was *his* world, just like that club and the stage upon which a beautiful woman could be taken naked, chained and played with in front of a casually observing audience.

"I shouldn't be here," she announced even as her mind raced, wondering what his devious mind might come up with in such a tiny, enclosed space.

"Hush," he said, placing a single finger against her lips. "You're so worked up. Just lean back, relax."

"But I'm not anyone's slave," she said, even as her head fell weary and compliant against the seat cushion behind her.

"It's all about fantasy, love. It's play time for grown-ups." He leaned over letting his lips brush hers. "But say the word and it all stops. You'll be home snug in your bunny slippers and bathrobe in no time."

She moaned softly, cooperating just enough for him to take her mouth, his tongue exploring, promising. "I-I don't have bunny slippers."

He released her. She counted the heartbeats in her chest rising and falling. She was doing her best not to let it show. He was so close to her, his hot, firm body, his powerful muscles concealed under smooth, bronzed skin.

"Do you have any idea how adorable you are, darling?"

She shook her head no, trying to keep her eyes off his crotch. It was damn hard not to and soon enough he caught her, much to her chagrin.

"And you are wicked as the devil too, aren't you?" he murmured, letting his fingertips graze her cheek. Tabytha sighed in response, imagining she was in Vanessa's place, helpless, secured and at his mercy.

"The chauffer," she groaned by way of protest as he moved to her breasts, lightly touching her peaked nipples through the dress.

"He can't hear or see anything. Besides, that's not your concern, is it...slave girl."

Tabytha arched her back as he smoothed his hand over her belly, his motions at once soft and gentle, but also possessive, as if he were taking hold of her, readying her for a journey.

She dearly wanted to go along, anywhere he would take her.

Still, her will was at stake, and her pride.

"I'm not like Vanessa."

"No, you are much more submissive."

"You're...wrong," she gasped.

His hand moved up her inner thigh now, quietly demanding, as though he had rights to be there, to do as he pleased.

"Open your legs, sweetheart."

He said it so sweetly she was nearly hypnotized.

"No, Harlan."

Harlan left his hand where it was, just resting on the waistband of her panties. Then he kissed her...again. Gone was anything tentative, all the newness of the first time as her mouth opened to him, to his pillaging, probing tongue.

Tabytha had never been kissed like this, never had a man focus his attention, the whole of his will like he had all the time in the world and nothing else to concern himself with.

For her part, she could feel his lips, their power and contours just as she felt his chest muscles.

She could only imagine if he were bare-chested, if he had the freedom of motion, the range...and if she were naked too.

"Open," he said at last, and this time Tabytha could only whimper, letting her thighs fall apart as he had willed them to do.

"Good girl," he murmured and she felt wicked, hotly scandalous for wanting to please him, to be good, as his sex toy, his slave.

Harlan's hand moved into place, exactly where he wanted to be, lightly exploring the exterior of her mons, the damp material of her silk underwear against his knuckles.

"You're quite turned on, Tabby Cat."

She turned her head away, cheeks flush. If it was a confession he was looking for, it was one she was not prepared to make.

The tips of his fingers pressed a little deeper, making contact with her throbbing sex. "How did it make you feel, seeing Vanessa dominated?"

To each their own she wanted to say or something else similarly snarky, but nothing came out now, positive or negative.

"Did you wish it was you?"

Tabytha groaned as he found her clit.

"You'd like to come," he said.

She was practically there.

"But you won't," he told her. "Do you know why?"

Her teeth chattered. She couldn't even manage a weak reply.

"Because you haven't my permission."

Tabytha's body fell limp. In that one second the power transferred, quite as much by her desire as his.

"Oh god..."

"If you come before I tell you, Tabytha, I shall have to punish you."

Tabytha whimpered, his wicked, sexually charged threat doing little to calm the raging torrents of passion.

"Place your hands behind your back."

Tabytha did so, feeling herself prisoner to his will.

It was like the dream or the fantasy on the beach, nothing compelling her, no bonds or use of force.

So what *was* the power?

"That's better. Now tell me, where are we going tonight?"

"To...to your place."

"You trust me?"

"Yes."

"Good. You'll have a safety word. Journalist. Say it and everything stops. Otherwise I will stay in control, I will push you, test your limits, find that devilish female who's inside you, the sexy beast who gets off on whips and chains."

She wanted to deny it, to fight him, but he had his fingertip on the very pinnacle of her pleasure, swelling, teasing. With a single word he'd told her she could stop it all, but the only thing worse than this torture would be losing his touch entirely.

"Could you...go slower?"

"No."

"But I can't hold on..."

"I suggest you try, darling," he said with exasperating detachment. "Or this will be quite a long night for you."

Tabytha swore under her breath as the orgasm welled up, nothing to keep it down, no power in the universe to keep her from coming all over his hand, her fragrant juices gushing from the folds of her pussy, her clit throbbing like a tiny supernova.

And all this without taking off her underwear.

On and on it went.

Tabytha continued to moan, arching her back, helpless, no longer caring who might hear. She was in Harlan's power, like it or not.

So far her body liked it just fine even if her mind was far from made up.

"You're incredible," he rasped, pulling her close so she could rest her head on his chest. "You're a wild little beast waiting to be tamed."

She looked up at him, spent, her flesh limp and drenched on the leather seat. "Does this mean I'm spared punishment?"

He returned her cheeky look. "Oh no, you've been bad, you just happen to be good at it."

"Like Mae West?"

"Something like that. Fancy a drink?"

Tabytha watched him as he slid over to the bar. "Sure, whatever you're having."

He handed her a vodka on the rocks. She swallowed it down in one gulp, very, very out of character.

A minute later the limousine stopped in front of a luxurious building on the upper east side.

Her stomach knotted.

Too late to turn back now.

Chapter Five

Harlan took Tabytha's hand, leading her out of the private elevator. They were on the top floor, the entirety of which belonged to him.

She pretended not to be bowled over by the décor, sleek, modern, smart, sexy, clean white lines and angles, with surprising splashes of softness and color.

The handful of paintings and sculptures were clearly originals and the furniture looked hand designed in Stockholm.

"Not bad," she said, feeling stronger and more herself with each passing minute. "But I thought there would be a rack or at least an iron maiden in the living room."

"They're in the game room. Better Homes and Dungeons did a nice spread on them last spring. Something else to drink, another vodka or are you afraid to get too loopy on the hard stuff?"

He was behind the bar, the perfect host. He had the black silk shirt on and his dress pants, no undershirt. She was itching to see that chest of his close up. "A little chardonnay would be nice."

"Yes it would." He brought two glasses. "Cheers."

Tabytha shook her head. "I still can't believe I'm here. Tell me again why I should be trusting you in the least?"

"Because I have an honest face."

She wasn't thinking about his face. She was wondering about that body, how it would look naked, the powerful muscles, the sinews, the statuesque lines.

"Actually it's because of my friend. She had you investigated."

"Didn't find any skeletons in my closet? Maybe she didn't know where to look."

"Oh she knows. And she's got GPS on me right now."

Maybe she was exaggerating a little, but not much. Martinique might be annoying but no one could say she never had her friends' backs.

"I wondered about that strange humming noise in your purse on the way over. I thought you'd brought a vibrator along for me to use on you," he quipped.

"If she doesn't hear from me in an hour —"

"I think she probably heard you climaxing in the limo, along with the rest of the city."

"You aren't a gentleman," she informed him, wary as he took the glass from her hand and returned it to the bar with his own. "But then you already know that."

He returned with a smile, his lips on a sharp slant. "Kiss me."

"What?" The request caught her off guard.

"It's quite simple, you get on your pretty tiptoes, you slide over nice and sweet and you pucker up."

Tabytha frowned. "If you think I'm afraid, you're wrong. I've already survived this little ordeal twice."

She proved her point, daring to press her body and her lips to his.

So far it felt similar, if not entirely pacifying, the power and desire, the sheer will to make use of her exactly as he wanted.

He made a good case.

Her breasts pressed like they belonged against him, for pleasure, hers and his, along with her ass, which he was cupping now in his large firm hands.

His cock was hard against her. He was large, she could tell, and thick too. Her knees went weak as he ground his pelvis against her. She moaned, wanting him to lift her, to take her then and there.

Okay, this was new.

"No, lover," he crooned, reading her need. "You're a long way from that kind of satisfaction. I've a lot planned for you first."

In a move that would have broken the will of ninety-nine point-nine percent of the male population, she brushed her fingertips over his zipper, suggesting what it might feel like on his cock. "Sure you want to wait that long, cowboy? I could take pretty good care of you right here and now."

He took hold of her wrist, confining it, lightly but firmly enough to let her know who was in control. "I can see we're going to need to restrain your enthusiasm a little. There are rules here about touching."

"Does that make you feel all warm and fuzzy inside, having rules?" She meant it as a taunt but his eyes lit up like a flame as he grasped her hair in his fist.

Tugging it tight, bending back her neck just to the edge of pain and no further, he addressed the matter once and for all. "Why I have them is my business, my little Tabby Cat. I would concentrate on learning them and obeying if I were you."

Tabytha winced. "Don't call me that."

"Rule One," he declared, his free hand caressing her flat, bowed belly. "You are here for my amusement. I will do as I wish with you and say what I wish to you. I'll treat you as the lovely little toy you secretly long to be. Unless..."

"Unless what?"

"Unless you exercise the safety word."

"Journalist, I know. So original. Must have taxed your brain on that one."

"You're right, I can do better." His eyes lit with mischief. "Your new word is 'I am a spoiled brat'."

"That's five words," she bristled, half in indignation and half in hot embarrassment.

"You can argue all you like, darling," said Harlan, forcing her tight against him, body to body so that she had little choice but to feel his hard muscles, his unyielding power. "But life isn't always fair, is it?"

Tabytha moaned, trying not to move, trying not to arch herself, pressing her breasts and thrusting her pelvis.

"You're a bastard."

He chuckled, taking it as a compliment. Then he spanked her, a single open palm strategically delivered, the hardness of his hand cracking against the soft roundedness of her bottom.

She squealed and tried to move but he held her fast. He was simply too large and strong and too good with his hands.

For all her struggling she only ended up where she'd started, tightly held and under control.

He waited for her breathing to calm.

When she was fully passive once more he delivered a spank to her opposite cheek, even harder and more stinging.

She cried out, cursing him. "What the hell? I gave up, what was that for?"

"This is not a negotiation, Tabby Cat. You will submit to me absolutely, to the pleasure and the punishment."

"Like hell," she defied. "I demand you let go of me."

"No."

"No? What do you mean no," she spat.

"You know what you have to say."

The safety words. Tabytha strongly contemplated using them and ending the game once and for all. Except the thought of giving him the satisfaction was too much to bear.

"I can take it, if you can."

Tabytha regretted the challenge at once.

"Oh I can take it just fine."

Next thing she knew she was in his arms, feeling both safe and ultimately vulnerable.

"Let's go somewhere where we can exercise a few more possibilities, shall we?"

He carried her down the hall, past the splendid, colorful paintings, all those splashes of color, wall after wall until finally he reached a set of simple, black double doors, polished and made out of some kind of stone. He pushed a button on the wall and they began to slowly open outward.

"I see we've reached the Gates of Hell," she quipped.

"Abandon all hope, ye who enter."

Harlan brought her to the center of the room. It was large and circular, sparsely furnished with a single dresser, a large armoire and a bed, which was anything but ordinary.

Composed of wrought iron, it had built-in rings at all four posts as well as an overhead structure that allowed for chains and shackles, conveniently spaced up and down the length. There was also a rack of implements against the wall where a nightstand would be.

She held her breath as she saw the various floggers, paddles and riding crops.

"I won't take you past what you're ready for," he said, reading her trepidation perfectly. "But make no mistake, Tabby Cat, within these walls you are mine."

She could barely stand as he set her down on her feet, just inches from the edge of the bed.

"You are so incredibly beautiful," he said, brushing the errant strands of hair from her face. "And you are a mystery, one I intend to figure out."

He told her to stay perfectly still now as he went about the task of disrobing her, first unzipping her dress, so painfully slow she could almost hear the metal teeth, disengaging one by one.

As the material fell loose at last he bid her lift her arms so he could pull the garment over her head. Instantly the cool air rushed against her skin, jolting her for the moment back to reality and away from the spell of his words, his gestures and touches. Sucking in her lower lip, she bit down as he reached for her panties.

He was surprisingly gentle as he tugged down the material over her hips, letting it slide down her legs and pool at her feet, thus baring her sex against his overwhelming strength. She flushed, knowing how wet he would find her.

The last garment was the bra and this he dealt with by reaching behind her, his gaze never leaving hers. As he released the catch, the garment gave way, allowing the full weight of her breasts to spill forward against the confining cups.

A kiss and the press of his chest held them momentarily in place.

Very casually as though testing, he ran his fingers across her back, exploring, down, down until his fingertips brushed her bare ass.

She tensed ever so slightly, whimpering as he squeezed her ass cheeks.

"Are you worried I'll spank you? That's good. It means your own fantasies are springing to life."

"You still have your clothes on," she observed, in a vain effort to change the subject.

"That's correct, now you understand that the sub is nude at the Dominant's discretion."

"It gives you an advantage."

He smiled wryly. "Everything does, haven't you figured that out?"

"I'm starting to. Tell me, why haven't you slept with Vanessa?"

"Are you asking as my lover or as a reporter?"

"Both."

"Vanessa needs more of a commitment than I can give her. She would grow attached to me. Wait here," he said. "I have to do something, just for a moment."

The moment stretched to a lifetime as she watched him cross the room, the same man who'd gotten her tea but he was a whole lot more now. He went to the dresser and opened the top drawer.

"Is that where you keep the Spanish fly?" she teased.

Actually it was a blindfold he was after and a pair of gleaming handcuffs.

She hid her excitement and the dark bite of sexual dread. "Is that the best you can come up with? Kind of cliché, don't you think?"

"Enslavement is in the mind, Tabby Cat."

He let her feel the velvet, trailing the black material over her shoulders, then he put the blindfold over her head, sealing her eyes. It was the expensive kind, one that shut out the light on the sides too.

No hope for peeking, she thought glumly.

"So this is part of your brainwashing?"

She felt his hand at her wrist, the click of cool metal.

A shiver went down her spine. He was cuffing her.

A second later he took her other wrist, braceleting her hands in front of her.

This allowed her to shield her pussy, though try as she might she could do nothing to keep her arms from pressing at the side of her breasts, forcing them up and out in what must have made for a very enticing display.

For a painfully long time he said nothing.

"Enjoying yourself?" she asked, as much to reassure herself he was still there as to engage in any real dialogue.

"Completely, and you?"

"I've been better."

"I strongly doubt that."

She groaned as his hip brushed hers. He was naked now like her. When had that happened?

His cock was thick and hard and pointed directly against her inner thigh.

"I had promised myself I would make this first time last but you won't allow that, will you?"

"I thought you were in charge," she teased.

"You forgot the first thing I told you about who has the real power."

"I don't feel powerful."

"You will."

"Harlan, what..."

He was kissing her shoulder, lightly working his way over her collar bone and then down to her breast bone, light searing hot nibbles that managed to reverberate all the way down to her belly.

His hands were busy as well, toying with her poor, defenseless little nipples, making them swell and throb.

"You're so damn predictable," he growled softly. "I love that about you."

Her knees went weak. He took full advantage, lifting her hips and placing her down on the mattress.

He was so strong.

"I want you to put your hands over your head, Tabytha. Relax for me, completely."

"Easy for you to say."

"Do I have to bind you further, darling?"

"You make it sound it like a treat."

Or was it a threat?

"It can be, if done well."

"I need to...go home," she decided, trying not to cry out as he lightly teased the bottom of her foot.

"And I need to taste you."

"T-taste me?"

"You are familiar with the concept," he said dryly.

Mildly at first, building in intensity, he worked his way up, grasping her ankle as he kissed the instep of her foot and then her calf.

"S-sure, but that seems kind of submissive, worshipping my foot."

"Why shouldn't I worship what I adore, what I possess?"

His fingertips played just as unfairly as his lips, appearing and disappearing, her kneecaps, her thighs, everything was fair game.

Then he reached her quivering stomach, circling her bellybutton. She could only thrash her head in response, clenching and unclenching her fists.

She swore at him. Though it was herself she was mad at for giving in so easily.

There had to be a way to resist this.

For a moment he stopped and she held her breath. Was it over before it had begun?

No. He was only repositioning himself, moving his mouth into place, his tongue.

She moaned softly as he penetrated, licking the swollen crack of her labia, pressing downward with the tips of his fingers to splay her wide.

"Don't."

"You have the safety words," he reminded.

Yes, she really should, but it felt so good, how could she want it to end? He had to step up to the plate, be a gentleman and be strong enough for both of them. "Say them for me?" she pleaded.

Harlan laughed. "Oh I don't think so, Tabby Cat. How about we raise the stakes instead? I will continue to enjoy your lovely pussy and you will not come no matter what. If you do I will flip you over and warm that fine ass of yours."

"Bastard."

"That's no way to talk to the man in control of your body."

He had managed to find her clitoris, swelling and manipulating with the tiniest application of his rolled tongue.

Tabytha nearly exploded from the sensation.

Would he really warm her ass? Why not call his bluff?

Because Harlan Blake didn't bluff, that's why.

He reached up, sliding his hands along her rib cage. She drew a sharp breath as he reached her swollen breasts.

"No," she hissed through clenched teeth, writhing as he worked both nipples simultaneously. "I hate you, do you understand me?"

There was no resisting this. A robot couldn't hold out, assuming robots could be made love to in the first place.

"I can't help it," she moaned.

The first orgasm was like a wall, crashing into her, or was she crashing into it? There was no bottom beneath the wall and no top, just the crushing, the roar of utter desolation.

And then came the second, a slow-motion earthquake that made her writhe and twist, seeking out as much of his perverse attentions as she could get.

Abruptly he stopped touching her.

"Harlan!" she cried out.

She reached for him, arching her back, terrified and ecstatic all at once. She'd never craved a man's flesh, never sought to have her heat merge with another's in such a way before.

"On your belly," he commanded.

Tabytha did her best to roll over. He had to help her considerably given her weakened, flush state.

Oh god, it was so amazing, the sensations, multiplied a million times as she finally reached her new position, facedown on the sheets, stomach, breasts, pussy.

She pressed down hard, clenching and unclenching her buttocks. She felt full this way, less alone.

She might make it through the orgasm after all.

Harlan's hand brought her back to the reality — his reality.

A single crack across the taut, pert bottom he'd made so easily accessible.

"You...mother...fucker."

Harlan spanked her again.

He paused a moment and she dared not breathe.

What was going on?

She could feel the weight shifting on the bed. He wouldn't leave her, not now.

No, he was only leaving for a second. She could feel it in her heart.

Like in that crazy fantasy on the beach, where she had guessed the man's every motion before it happened, like some kind of game of dominance and submission, a gorgeous tango, infinitely practiced.

"You were so patient," he whispered as he returned.

He had something to put on her, first on one ankle and then the other.

Each had a tiny clasp and wrapped snugly, rather like the strap of a fancy shoe, except these were no fashion statements.

They were leather cuffs.

Oh god, he was going to bind her down to the bed. Face down, legs spread.

"Nothing personal," he said. "I just don't want you jumping around on me too much, it spoils the concentration."

"Sorry to inconvenience you."

"I meant your concentration. I wouldn't want to spoil your fun."

"Thanks."

Bastard.

He meant to chain her down.

Now she understood better the built-in features of the bed, the rings to attach ropes, or in this case chains.

This she knew as he let the smooth links touch her skin, the metal cool and agonizing. He played with her, trailing them down her back before finally attaching them to the cuffs.

A few moments after that she felt the give disappear in her legs. She could no longer close them. Nor could she get up and run away. Something she should have done ages ago.

"Remember the safety word," he said.

"Sure," she grumbled. "Rub it in what a masochist I am because I haven't used it so far."

He chuckled. "You're no masochist and I am no sadist. We enjoy this, both of us."

He had another chain.

This one he used to connect her already attached wrists to the headboard, dead center.

"Try to move now."

She did.

Tabytha moaned as she realized the effect.

The friction on her belly, the up and down that ground her pelvis against the sheets. It was definitely obscene.

"Now we resume our regularly scheduled spanking."

He delivered a rounded blow, cupping his hands. She felt the reverberation, the opening of her nerve endings contrasting to the tightness of the confinement.

Oh yeah, this was new.

Harlan struck her again.

It wasn't his hand.

What the f—?

Crack.

He had a paddle.

Tap, tap, tap, crack again.

Her bottom screamed. She clenched in anticipation but he was having none of it.

A single finger moved into her soft, helpless, open sex. He played with her lips. He penetrated.

She swore at him.

"You're dripping wet."

She swore some more.

He pinched her, delivering a fierce sudden rush that utterly confused her senses.

"Language, Tabby Cat."

Tabytha clenched her teeth.

Was she supposed to just...take it?

Apparently so.

Another blow of the paddle quickly cleared her head and then he went back to her pussy. She had no power to stop as he inserted two fingers deep.

"May I?"

"Yes, oh god, f-fuck me!"

"How the mighty have fallen," he teased.

She lifted her ass for him, trying to give better access. Shameless, she rubbed her nipples against the bed. And panted.

"You may come," he said magnanimously.

It was no reward though, as his fingers suddenly vanished, leaving her with no viable means to accomplish the task.

"I-I can't."

He spanked her raw and hard, crashing into her reality.

"You can and you will."

Tabytha cried out, letting the sound of his voice take her, the absolute and overwhelming sensations it induced.

She clenched and unclenched her fists.

Something about being fixed like this, poised in time and space, an exotic butterfly pinned to this man's bed.

"Mine," said Harlan.

Tabytha lost all restraint as he put her out of her misery, his finger finding her clitoris.

The barest touch was all it took, sending her out of her mind, blowing her reality, exposing her every desire, her very soul, wave after wave, washing away, exposing.

The ultimate freedom...with the maximum restraint.

As the first orgasm bled into the second he started spanking her again, hard thwacks that invited her participation, her self-betrayal.

She began to move in time to his blows, almost anticipating them.

Three times more he spanked her and then he stopped. He let his hand rest on her smooth back.

She could hear him breathing – deep, satisfied inhalations.

She wanted to tell herself no, this wasn't real, but who could argue how her body had reacted and how it was reacting now.

So warm and satisfied, so at peace.

"Your ass is red," he said. "The most beautiful shade I've ever seen."

Tabytha felt his lips, cool and moist against the dry heat. He was kissing her, along her spine and now over her backside.

She winced from the heat, the mild pain, the overwhelming pleasure.

"I'm going to take you," he said softly. "I am going to possess you with my cock now."

His words sent electrical shocks all along her nerve endings, head to toe. He was still kissing her, this time up her back, and he did not rest until he reached her shoulders. One after the other he nibbled at them then he went to work on her handcuffs.

He released the lock mechanisms. Then he freed her ankles.

She whimpered as he climbed on top of her now.

It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what was coming next.

Again he helped, taking hold of her waist and lifting her into place as effortlessly as if she were a rag doll.

Harlan was going to take her from behind.

He was going to have sex with her after having just spanked her.

She'd asked for it too, every last bit. By coming to the club and by accepting his ridiculous idea of research, she had signed up.

Or had she?

Perhaps sensing her inklings of buyer's remorse, he said, "Deep down we know how much you want it and how you need it, Tabytha. Are you ashamed to feel this way? Don't be, it's natural. It doesn't matter what others say, for us this is right."

This was the presence of his cock at the crack of her ass now, rock-hard, velvet sheathed over steel, prepared to spear her to the depth.

As conquests went, it was to be expected. What she did not expect was the accompanying softness.

"You don't fight fair," she cried as he pressed his pectorals to her shoulder blades and bent to nibble her earlobes.

"Sweetheart, there is nothing fair about me. Tonight I will learn everything about you, I will try your body, see all that it can do."

Her pulse raced. She could hear her heart slamming. How did a woman fight this?

"Are you ready?" he asked with deceptive sweetness.

She shook her head. She would not give in, no fucking way.

He plunged the head of his cock inside her, hot and burning, making her pussy clench. She wanted more, she needed all of it but he denied her.

"Not so fast."

"Just do it," she said, expressing the maximum disdain. "Add me to your notches."

"Oh there's no hurry. Besides, I intend for you to beg."

"Never."

He said not another word as he impaled her, suddenly filling her body, her world with hot, throbbing cock.

"Oh..."

She braced herself, waiting for the onslaught, but he didn't move, not a bloody inch, one way or the other.

"Nothing happens until you are still," he said. "You thought chains were a challenge, try being bound only by your own will."

Tabytha whimpered. Being still was the most difficult thing in the universe right now, he had to know that.

Harlan extracted his cock, leaving her utterly, inexplicably empty.

"What...are you doing?"

"You aren't serious," he decided.

"I am, I am," she heard herself say, cursing her own weakness.

Have I no pride?

"You don't want it bad enough."

Tabytha called him a cocksucker and it was at this point he sat up.

A moment later he was gone.

When he came back he had the *thing*.

The vibrator.

An insidious little devil that worked and liquefied her pussy, one layer stripped away after another.

"Harlan, fuck my pussy, please?"

There she had said it.

"No."

No?

"You said I had to beg."

"That wasn't proper begging."

He turned the little device up to high, whirring her out of her mind for the umpteenth time. Then just before she could rally around it and bring herself off, he turned it down to low.

Tabytha whispered the words.

He wanted them repeated, of course, and much louder.

"Fuck me, please, Harlan, I...I beg you."

"Ordinarily a girl says Sir," he critiqued.

"Fuck me, Sir!"

This time Harlan pressed his shaft into her for real. No playing now, he grunted hard and thrust once, twice, three times. With each deep penetration, her body pushed to the mattress, knees, cheeks and elbows, she could feel him getting larger. Her mind swirled back to the first time she'd seen him, the way he looked at her at the coffee house, the way he'd fielded her questions.

Did she see foresee this moment?

Had she longed for it with every waking breath?

Yes, oh hell yes.

"You may come now," he said, though she hadn't asked.

Something about the way he said it, the calm possessiveness and the way he dominated and utilized her body while still maintaining the civility, the gravitas.

This was a male power she'd never dreamed of much less encountered in real life.

It was a dream, of falling and rising, of belonging.

She scarcely knew where he ended and she began. She could hear him roaring above her, like a lion, his body overwhelming and swallowing hers even as she swallowed his center, his heat and finally his come.

Like a surge, it blasted into her, upending the final moorings of her mind and sending her over the edge. She clutched at him, held him tight, biting into his shoulder and screaming out the reality of his taking.

Two creatures, hearts slammed together into one.

Raw power.

Definitely real, palpable.

The question was, who had it...and where did it go from here?

She wanted answers, like any good reporter.

But she was so damn sleepy.

Her last conscious thought was of Harlan, undoing the handcuffs and stretching out beside her, reassuring, strong and enveloping.

She could feel his heartbeat.

She could stay this way forever.

And that's when she knew just how big a mistake she'd just made.

Chapter Six

Harlan thought he'd been dreaming. It was one of those deep ones you never want to get out of because it's so hot and so fucking good. But then he felt the tickle of silky hair, the press of lips to his chest, soft in sleep, one full breast, a hip, warm skin, and he remembered.

Tabytha.

So he had brought her back here.

To the infamous dungeon as she'd dubbed it.

Abandon all hope ye who enter.

It had been an inferno, all right.

The heat of their bodies, the delicious, indescribable combination of Tabytha's willing body and warring spirit, the way she'd begged him, yes and then no and then yes again, a million times yes.

His cock stirred afresh as he thought of the names she'd called him, the way she'd writhed and strained against the handcuffs, letting herself go as he teased her into oblivion.

And then there was the sex itself.

He needed more. He needed a fix.

His hand moved to cup her ass cheek, so smooth and round and available.

Tabytha sighed in reply. She sidled against him, his in sleep.

How would she move in response to the whip? Harlan wondered.

What a sight it would be to see her secured on tiptoes like Vanessa, his to play with, for an hour, maybe more.

What about...forever?

The thought chilled him to the core even as it made his pulse race.

Damn. Where the hell had that come from?

Harlan Blake had had his fill of forever. Commitment was an illusion. It was about the chase now, the conquest.

Tabytha was waking up. It was anyone's guess what sort of mood she'd be in.

"Morning, darling."

Her eyes opened slowly. Curiously blinking, gauging her surroundings. Abruptly she sat up. Hair tousled, her breasts and belly inviting his touch, his teasing.

She pulled the sheet up. "Stop looking at me."

He grinned. "I think we're a little past that."

Her gaze narrowed as if processing. "You bastard. What did you do to me?"

"Nothing that hasn't been done from the beginning of time."

"Screwing me over?" she supplied. "Dragging me back to your cave?"

"You called it my dungeon last night."

"I was on drugs."

"I don't think so."

"Well, I should have been."

"You seemed to have a good time."

"It was...research."

He arched a brow. "Didn't I tell you what happens to little girls who lie?"

"I'm not a little girl."

"No, you are all woman." He reached for her.

She recoiled, scrambling backward.

Harlan grabbed her ankle and pulled her back toward him.

"Let go of me," she squealed.

"Not until we fix this little problem."

Tabytha gasped at the sight of his cock. "Holy crap, did you...put that inside me?"

"Don't even act like you don't remember." He dragged her over his lap.

She squirmed on top of him, which only made it more enjoyable.

"Keep that thing away from me, damn it!"

He lowered his palm onto her ass, a wakeup call if ever there was one.

She groaned.

"That is sense memory, darling."

"Sure, I remember how I hated it!"

He slid his hand to the crack of her pussy, moist and ready. "Care to explain this?"

"I have nothing to say."

"That will be the day."

He rubbed her ass, warming it. "This morning you will be on top."

"In your dreams."

"In my fantasies, you mean. Do you want to know the details?"

"No!"

"You would be at my mercy, chained up like Vanessa, except you would be in front of a huge crowd."

"I said I didn't want to know."

"You would be utterly naked, like you are now." He rubbed her back, caressed the little place on the back of her knees, her elbows and her earlobes too.

Basically he was everywhere, any place he could use to drive her wild.

"How many frigging hands do you have?" she complained.

"For you? Not enough. Shall we continue with my fantasy? Your hands are over your head, chained, like Vanessa, as I said, and your eyes are covered in a velvet blindfold, luxurious, decadent. You can see only blackness and you can hear only the sound of the man breathing."

She tensed and then tried to crawl away. Her most foolish move yet.

Re-positioning her was child's play.

Tabytha cried out as he swung her up and over.

Impaling her.

She slid down onto his cock, warm and soft, pulsing.

They were face-to-face now.

Oh god, he remembered this feeling from last night. It was like...home.

"You don't play fair, Harlan Blake."

She was ready to fight her new fate, but she quickly saw the results, the stimulation she was giving herself. She tried to stay very still after that, but he was having none of it.

He took both nipples, lightly tugging them to get her attention. "I want you to move for me, darling."

Tabytha groaned.

Harlan waited for her compliance. He might as well have been waiting on the air for his lungs.

There was no living without this.

"He has a whip, the man who comes for you," Harlan continued the fantasy. "Do you know who he is?"

"Gee, I have no idea."

He rolled her nipples between thumbs and forefingers now. "I can picture it, can't you? As I go over every inch of you with that whip, as I listen for every breath, teasing you, never once touching you where you needed it most? Can you imagine that?"

Tabytha leaned forward, wanting the friction on her clit. "Sure I can. You're a cocksucker even in your dreams."

Harlan smiled. "There was one thing different between my fantasy and the scene with Vanessa. Shall I tell you?"

"I can hardly wait."

"When I released you, you sank down to your knees."

She closed her eyes.

"You begged for my cock, Tabytha, your Master's cock."

Her breathing came in short stabs. She was on the edge.

He lifted her by the waist, nearly liberating his cock only to thrust her back down upon him. Harlan did it again and this time she was utterly undone. Falling forward, her head on his chest, she clung to him.

"Come for me, baby doll," he whispered. "Come as hard as you can."

She shuddered and quaked, her thigh muscles clinging, her pussy moving from spasm to spasm.

His only regret was not being able to see her beautiful face.

When her orgasm dissipated at long last he rolled her onto her back.

"Look at me," he commanded as she tried to shut her eyes.

Her lip trembled as she tried to hold it together.

Harlan had been told more than once how intense he was.

"This is your doing," he said evenly. "The passion you see in me, only a woman like you could awaken it."

Her mouth opened slightly, but no words came.

The Great Tabytha Quillen driven to silence.

Their fingers intertwined, as if of their own volition. He told himself it was all of his scripting but as he braced himself for his final assault he knew something was happening.

Something he could no more explain with his experience than she could with all her smart-aleck journalism.

Only one thing to do and that was follow it through to the end.

Assuming she was up for the journey.

It might require a little subterfuge but it would be for a good cause.

"So you got any plans today?" he deadpanned.

"Nothing that involves you."

"Are you sure? It could be great research."

The glimmer in her eye gave her away.

He had her, only she didn't know it yet.

* * * * *

Tabytha tried to wrap her head around things with a nice, long shower.

Unbelievable. After all he'd done last night and then again this morning, Harlan Blake wanted more. More of her time, her attention, and probably her body too, though he'd sworn it would be strictly platonic.

Platonic my ass, she thought, running the warm water over her aching, still-tingling body. Hell's bells, it was like the man was still filling her with his cock, driving himself deeper and deeper, making her take anything and everything.

He had actually handcuffed her and tied her and made her say...things.

No one would believe it.

Scratch that, no one would ever find out.

The column idea was officially DOA.

So why was she actually entertaining his ridiculous idea of spending the day with him so she could do more "research"?

His kind of research landed a woman in more trouble than she could manage.

But you're not afraid, are you?

"No, of course not," she told the little voice in her head, the one that never knew when to call it quits. "It's called common sense. Look it up."

Why don't you? It's right before coward and right after cock.

"What do you know?"

"Are you okay in there?" called a voice from the hall, a real one belonging to her so-called host.

Great, now he was going to think she was crazy on top of everything else.

"I'm fine," she called out.

"Good, because I have breakfast waiting for us, we'll need it before our car ride."

"I have nothing to wear," she called out, which was a very poor substitute for no, in anyone's book.

"Not a problem, I had my assistant get you a few things to choose from."

Awesome.

"Be right there."

"Everything's in the bedroom, I will meet you in the kitchen."

"Goodie," said Tabytha, turning off the shower and reaching for an oversized bath towel the size of Rhode Island.

Peeking out the door for a clear coast, she made a run for the bedroom.

Closing the door behind her, she turned around her to see Christmas, birthday and Labor Day rolled into one.

A few things?

The man had purchased her half the city.

Blinking, she surveyed the piles, boxes and moving coat rack.

Was she frigging moving in with him in now?

Skirts, blouses, sneakers, sandals and dresses, as far as the eye could see.

And underwear, lots of frilly underwear.

She tried to keep her breath under control as she fingered the camisoles, the lacy panties and wicked-looking underwire bras.

Only one way out, she decided, and that was the course of least resistance. Choosing the simplest, least sexy ensemble possible, a sundress and simple blue silk panties and bra.

Had he offered something with nether closure, or better yet a fully locking chastity belt to which she held the key, you could bet she'd opt for it.

As it was, she was going to do her best to stay resolved, no matter how good he looked all cleaned and scrubbed up as he no doubt was and no matter what sort of charm he laid on her.

I am ice, she vowed, grabbing a pair of thong sandals almost as an afterthought, *pure polar ice*.

* * * * *

Harlan knew two things as soon as he saw Tabytha enter the room. One, he was absolutely not going to be able to live without her today and two, she was going to do everything in her power to resist him.

"The answer is no," he said dryly.

She frowned, a delicious little pout. "I didn't ask you anything."

"You're thinking it. You want me or preferably my driver to take you straight home. You will later return the dress to me along with payment for the undergarments, which you will not return for sake of modesty."

"I was thinking no such thing," she declared.

He smiled. He had her boxed into a corner now. "So you don't want to go home? You will spend the day with me?"

"You know what you did is ridiculous," she changed the topic. "Buying all those clothes. Did you actually expect to win me over?"

"My assistant picked it all out. She knows what I like to see a woman in."

"Anything but pants, right, so she has no chance to shield herself?"

He shrugged. "Dresses and skirts are pretty and flirty and they can be flipped up easier."

"I am calling a cab," she said.

"Not before breakfast."

She sighed. "Do you ever stop?"

"Not when I want something."

Her eyes flashed. "I think you already got it, don't you?"

"Not even close."

"Hah," she snorted.

"Hah?"

"Yes, hah. And don't even try to look all sexy, leaning against the counter like that."

"I wasn't aware I was doing anything."

"With those jeans on and that shirt, could you at least button it?"

"You're welcome to do it for me."

"No thanks, *Master*."

"Do I sense some passion?"

"Nope, and it's a good thing you're not a psychologist, because you suck at reading people. What you're sensing is me trying to let you down easy. Sorry, big fella, I already looked behind the curtain, the scary wizard act won't work on me anymore."

"I see." He held out a banana from a bunch on the counter. "Fruit?"

"Subtle." She rolled her eyes. "Real subtle."

Harlan unpeeled one for himself. "So I shouldn't expect any soft balls for the rest of the interview, huh?"

"The only soft balls are in your pocket."

"We can fix that."

"That's what Vanessa is for."

"I don't have sex with Vanessa, but it's nice to know you're jealous."

"Do I look jealous?"

"What you look like is paradise."

Another roll of the eyes. "Are you going to call me a cab or not?"

"You're a cab."

"You're an ass."

"Give me one reason not to spend the day with me, Tabby Cat."

"Only one?"

Harlan laughed. "All right, let me drive you, it'll be a compromise."

She narrowed her gaze. "Since when is that word in your vocabulary?"

"Since I'm desperate to spend more time with you, even if it's another five minutes."

"Five minutes? I live in the Valley, how freaking fast is this car of yours?"

"I respect the speed limits, more or less."

"Like you respected mine?"

"You didn't enjoy it? We could check the video if you're unsure."

Tabytha turned white.

"Relax, it was a joke."

She marched up to him. "How's the banana?" With the heel of her hand she shoved it straight into his mouth.

He spit it out in the sink, laughing.

"You'll pay for that."

"I'm so scared. Now where's your fucking Batmobile? I've got a column to write."

Chapter Seven

Tabytha knew he was watching her like a hawk, waiting for some reaction as he did his best to show off behind the wheel.

She was bound and determined to give him nothing.

"Pretty good pickup, huh?"

"It's okay," she said as he down-shifted the Italian sport vehicle whose name sounded more like a fancy pasta dish than a road-worthy vehicle.

It was red and racy, of course, exactly the kind of thing to draw attention.

"Cops must love it, and the ladies too. Kind of like a cock on wheels."

Harlan just grinned the way he always did, exasperating, impervious and kissable as hell. The worst part was he made no effort to hide how much he enjoyed messing with her.

"Hey, that was my exit back there!"

"This is a shortcut."

"The fuck it is." She looked over her shoulder at the rapidly disappearing familiarity of Poinsettia Avenue, her philodendrons, a nice pot of coffee waiting to be brewed, a humming laptop.

"Relax, Tabby Cat, you've got all day."

She bristled. Why was he so intent on that name? Nicknames were not her thing. They were for sappy girls, foolish, silly cheerleaders and sorority sisters who specialized in throwing up their cucumber salad to make room for the eighty-proof dessert.

"Sure thing, Harlan the..."

Harlan the what? Hippo? Hummingbird?

"You wouldn't play this game if you had a name I could figure out how to make fun of."

He chuckled, putting his hand on her knee.

She froze as if it were a snake.

Entirely out of order, needed to be gotten rid of, but she sure wasn't up to touching it.

"Now what are you doing?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"Cruising for a bruising, I'd say."

"Can I help not being able to keep my hands off you?"

"You could at least work on it."

"Duly noted."

"You could also work on getting me home."

"I thought you wanted to get to know me."

She snorted.

"What was that for?"

"Typical male ego, you assume since you've been in my pants I must have fallen for you, right? I need emotional validation for the sex?"

"I think you are capable of taking things at face value, just like me."

"Really? Because if you did you would have seen last night will never ever happen again so kidnapping me is pointless."

"It did happen again." He slid his hand higher. "This morning."

She pried him loose, squirming. "You know what I mean."

He put both hands on the wheel just long enough to weave lane to lane between a series of slow-moving vehicles. Tabytha took the opportunity to wedge herself as close to the passenger door as possible.

"If I really wanted to kidnap you, I would use a white van and chloroform," he teased. "Not a quarter-of-a-million-dollar performance roadster."

"This is worse."

"Why? Are you having fun, god forbid?"

"Do I look like I'm having fun?"

"I'm the wrong one to ask. To me you always look gorgeous and amazing. Why don't you ask me some questions? That should calm you down."

"Okay, where are you taking me and can you give me a reason not to scratch your eyes out?"

"It's a surprise and you shouldn't attack me because I would crash, killing us both. I meant journalistic questions. And don't worry, it will be a place you'll enjoy, no pressure."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine. You asked for it. Studies show men involved in BDSM have low self-esteem, how do you comment?"

"I don't. Next question."

"You're an ass."

"Is that a question?"

"It's a fact. Tell me why you left the practice of law."

"I was tired of lies and power games."

"So you took up sadomasochism. That's rich."

"People decide the roles in BDSM. Why does that frighten you so?"

"I have daddy issues."

"You can be sarcastic all you like, but you know we're onto something."

"Yeah, it's called a freeway going the wrong way."

"Open the glove box," he said.

"What for?" She did it anyway. "I should have known."

"See anything you like?"

Tabytha rifled through the items in question, settling on a collar, black leather. "Oh this is right up your alley."

"It would look adorable on you."

"Let's see." She wrapped it around her neck, cinching it between her fingers.

Harlan's cock strained at the material of his jeans.

"You're such a beast," she said, noting the response.

"I dare you to do something about it."

"Never dare a Quillen, dear boy."

Tabytha scooted over, reaching for him with her hand. "You've never had the tables turned, I'll wager."

"Is that what you're doing?"

"Let's find out, shall we?"

Her heart thundered. She didn't know where inside her the change was coming from, the desire to play, to be yin to his yang. She only knew she couldn't let him get the better of her, even if it meant beating him at his own perverted games.

Harlan recognized a battle of wills when he saw one. She wanted him to cry uncle, to surrender and whine and beg. He was prepared to meet that challenge, provided he could keep from crashing the car.

"Your cock is so hard, *Master*."

She was rubbing him blatantly. "Slow down, girl, we've plenty of time."

Tabytha fumbled for his zipper. "I don't think you've got time, the way that cock of yours must be boiling over."

He reached across, finding her breast. "How about you, do you have time?"

Her nipple was hard. He played with it, his foot depressing the accelerator.

"Try me," she said. "You're the one who will be spraying all over this nice leather interior."

They were in the left lane doing close to ninety-five. "You have balls of steel. I'll give you that, Tabby Cat."

"Let's look at your balls, shall we?"

He seized her wrist. "Say pretty please."

"You say it." She leaned in and kissed him, the slightest brush of her lips against his neck.

Harlan growled. She was asking for it.

"What's the matter?" she asked innocently.

She had him by the zipper.

"Easy."

"Ooh, no underwear," she purred. "What a slut you are, Master."

His cock burst free, throbbing in the cool air, the veins pulsing.

"I bet he tastes good. I do so love to hear a man beg first though."

"Too bad for you, Tabby Cat." Harlan didn't bother with the indicator as he veered back through traffic, lane by lane, until he'd reached the exit.

If she was nervous about the destination she didn't show it.

Really she should have been.

Harlan was way past niceties. Taking a left at State Route 46, a truck bypass, he brought them through the tunnel and then down a dirt road he knew all too well.

It was time for an unscheduled stop.

"What's the matter, you need to go pee?" she rasped.

"Nope."

Harlan shut the engine off, got out of the car and pocketed the keys. He felt the hood as he crossed to her side. Nice and warm, perfect.

"If you think I am getting out in the middle of nowhere," she announced, "you can just—"

Harlan opened her door and took hold of her hand. He pulled her firmly, a worthy display of strength, overwhelming but not forceful.

Taking her in his arms, he kissed her, the way she needed to be kissed.

Silencing all that sauciness, redirecting it.

It was clear she wanted to resist but his tongue gave no quarter, penetrating her mouth, working between her lips, his body pressed hard, until he turned her protests into soft and ready moans.

He waited until she yielded against him, his.

"That's much better, Tabby Cat. I've only just begun." His hand was under her skirt, massaging.

"We're out in the open," she protested. "The owner could come along."

"I own this land for miles around, try again."

"I give in," she said. "Take me somewhere."

Harlan spun her about and walked her to the car. These were the words he'd been waiting for.

"What are you doing?" she cried.

"I'm taking you somewhere." He bent her at the waist, until her cheek was down against the warm metal of the hood. She struggled, trying to employ her hands, but he had all the leverage.

Skillfully, and with great satisfaction, he flipped up her skirt and yanked down her panties.

"I hate you," she groaned.

"But you don't hate the sex."

Clasping her waist, he slid deep inside, one motion to conquer her eager wetness.

"Who is the slut now?" he teased.

"I won't come," she vowed. "I'll be like stone."

"Is that a challenge?"

"Jeezus, no," she groaned.

He laughed. "Smart girl. Let's just face facts, you belong to me right now and you'll come —"

"When I beg, I know!"

"Interrupting isn't polite." Harlan pinched her ass, making her squeal. "Say 'sorry'."

"Sorry, motherfucker!"

He did his best not to laugh. Really she was so damn cute but there were rules.

And rules had to be enforced.

Withdrawing slowly, very, very slowly, he began to talk into her ear, telling her what she was going to do, what he would do for her.

Over and over she denied it, but they both knew it would happen exactly as he said.

* * * * *

Tabytha awoke to the vibrations of the road. She felt the hardness of Harlan's shoulder and realized she'd fallen asleep next to him. She sat up like a shot.

"I won't bite, Tabby Cat."

"You did worse than that."

It was all coming back to her now, the whole miserable morning culminating with the stop by the side of the road where Harlan had literally fucked her into submission, pinching, teasing and spanking.

After that he had carried her back to the car, at which point she had promptly fallen asleep.

"Where are we?" she demanded as she gauged the unfamiliar steppes and mountains backed by a chalky blue sky.

It was mantra by now, figuring out what the hell Harlan Blake was up to. She did her best to figure it out. The sun was already declining, which meant they'd wasted a good deal of the day. They were also still headed west. Away from home.

"We're almost there."

"I want my phone, where is it?" She felt about for her bag. "And the rest of my stuff too."

"It's safe in back."

"It will be safer with *me*, thank you. Never mind, give me yours, I'm calling the police."

"If you prefer I can drive you to the Highway Patrol station, it would be faster."

"You think this is a joke?"

"No, but it would be a little hard for you to explain how I'm such a monster, don't you think, given all that's gone on between us?"

She folded her arms. "Maybe from your point of view."

"Tell me you'd change any of it." He was looking right at her, the damn laser thing. "If you had it to do over."

"I absolutely would," she declared. "I would have skipped you and wrote about Arbor Day."

"That would thrill your editor, I'm sure, and your fans."

"What do you care?"

He arched a brow. "You think I don't? You think I bed women just for the hell of it?"

"Sure seems like it."

"That's where you're wrong."

“Ooh, was that a trace of real emotion? Careful, you might turn into an actual person, all vulnerable and everything.”

“I wish I knew who he was,” Harlan declared now.

“What are you talking about?”

“The guy who hurt you so bad, I would show him a thing or two.”

“Would you beat him up for me at recess?”

He grinned. “Maybe.”

She settled back in the seat, forgetting 9-1-1 for the moment. “So where is it you’re so gung-ho about taking me—other than your little forty-acres-of-dirt paradise behind the access tunnel?”

He winked at her. “I’ve accessed your tunnel pretty good, haven’t I? Seriously, I want to take you to the place where I learned everything I know about sex. We are going to stay there overnight.”

Tabytha arched a brow. “It will be crowded considering everything you know comes off the walls of your average men’s room stall.”

“I won’t ask how you would know that. Actually, we are going to a monastery.”

She had to laugh at that one. “Oh I get it, monks and whips, right, you have an Inquisition fetish?”

“That was a long time ago, monks don’t do that anymore.”

“So what do they do now, besides pray?”

“They enlighten themselves, Tabby Cat.”

“You mean like you are enlightened? Great, I can’t wait.”

He just grinned, giving her the last word.

For once.

You would think she’d enjoy it.

But it sucked.

"I know what you're doing, buddy."

"And what is that?"

"Getting inside my head with the silent treatment."

"If you say so."

"I do."

She gritted her teeth, irritation steadily mounting as he began to hum.

The bastard.

Chapter Eight

The monastery was too beautiful for words. Harlan held her hand as they walked up the stone steps that had been carved into the mountainside. Here and there flat spaces had been etched out for the planting of exotic flowers. Bees hovered, their buzzing sounds lending an air of lazy passion.

Up above them at the very top the bell was ringing, six gongs for evening meditation, or so Harlan had informed her.

"At one time there were dozens of monks, now it's down to three or four," he explained.

"I can't imagine ever wanting to leave," she said, already feeling the weight and stress of the city lifting away.

"It's pretty amazing at first," he acknowledged. "But it wears thin after a while."

Tabytha's stomach was rumbling. How long had it been since they'd eaten?

"I hope there's a good cook here."

"The best, and you are looking at him, if you must know."

"In that case," she teased, "I will fast." She bumped against him, hip to hip for emphasis. Ever since they'd decided on a truce, just before arriving, she had felt dangerously calm, almost peaceful in his company.

Bad Tabytha.

The two hooded monks were waiting for them at the top of the steps. Even without seeing beneath the heavy brown material, belted about their waists, she could tell their genders.

The female was on the left, the male on the right.

"Greetings, Brother Harlan," said the man with a slight bow.

"Greetings, Brother Gordon," Harlan replied in kind. Turning to the woman, he said, "And to you, Sister Ophelia."

"Greetings," came the woman's melodious voice. "Master Harlan."

Tabytha felt a chill down her spine. Even here, a thousand feet above the earth, in the middle of paradise, they could not escape the BDSM vibe, the slight hint of dominance and submission.

"Sister Ophelia," said Brother Gordon. "Go and fetch the belongings of our guests."

"Yes," said Ophelia. "Master."

The way the word rolled off her tongue made Tabytha's body heat up in uncomfortable, though not unfamiliar ways.

Not again.

"This is your new girl, Brother Harlan?" Gordon asked, sizing Tabytha up.

"No," she said indignantly. "I am nothing of the kind."

"Tabytha is a reporter," said Harlan.

"Damn straight I am."

"I see," said Brother Gordon.

"You don't *see* anything," defied Tabytha.

Harlan put his hand on her elbow. "Down, Tabby Cat."

"I'm sleeping in the car," she announced.

"You'll miss my mac and cheese."

She arched a brow. "That's your fabulous monk cooking?"

"He makes a very fine macaroni and cheese," said Gordon.

Tabytha rolled her eyes. "Spare me."

Gordon laughed before turning on his heel and walking ahead of them to the rounded wooden entrance doors. "Oh I am sure he will."

"Don't mind him," said Harlan, leaning across to whisper in her ear. "They don't get much company up here."

"Gosh, I wonder why."

The inside of the monastery was spectacular—if you were a fan of the early Frankenstein period—stone walls with medieval tapestries, candelabras and huge cathedral windows and such.

"Who built this, anyway?" she asked Harlan.

"A Romanian architect, a mad genius they say."

"I see the mad part, anyway." Tabytha noted the themes on the tapestries, sexual, depicting two or more partners engaged primarily in S&M activities. "I can also see the appeal for people like you."

"But not like you," he mused.

Tabytha cleared her throat. "I need to make a phone call. And don't tell me the best reception is in the dungeon on the rack or some such nonsense."

He chuckled. "Actually, upstairs is fine. Ophelia will show you to your room."

"My room? As in a room without you?"

"You don't have to sound so thrilled."

Truth be told, her feelings were mixed. For the moment she focused on following the brown-robed submissive up the circular stairs.

"This is lovely," said Tabytha, awestruck at the sheer beauty of the guest room.

"I am glad you find it acceptable."

Four-post bed, exquisite wooden furniture, Persian rugs, how could she not be?

"What are you doing?" Ophelia asked now as Tabytha peeked here and there along the wall.

"Looking for booby traps and such."

"You won't find any," Ophelia assured.

Tabytha plopped down on the bed. "So what's your story? Why are you here? You a runaway or something?"

Ophelia laughed. "Hardly. I am the great-granddaughter of Count Grakujo, the builder of this castle."

Tabytha whistled. "And you fetch luggage for a living?"

"I enjoy serving."

"I'm sure you do. Listen, if you don't mind, I need to make a call."

"Of course. Shall I close the door on the way out?"

"Definitely." Tabytha was already all over the speed dial.

Please, Martinique, pick up, if ever you've been free in your life let it be now.

She got it by the third ring. "Wow, so you're surfacing at last."

"By the skin of my teeth, I can't believe you didn't send out the cavalry," Tabytha chided.

"You're with Harlan, you're just fine."

"What? How do you know that? Wait, I don't want to know how."

Martinique knew lots of things, through her family connections in the intelligence business not to mention a slew of former VIP boyfriends.

There was probably a satellite on her right now.

"Just tell me why you think I am fine, Nikky. Have you any idea what he did to me just on the way here, on the side of the road no less?"

"Did you have it coming?"

Tabytha resisted tossing the phone. "Of course I didn't."

Martinique laughed. "You're having a ball, I can tell."

"No, I am not, I hate it, I hate—" She was about to say she hated him but stopped herself just in time.

Hate was a strong emotion, easily twisted.

Everyone was always saying that.

"I hate the whole thing," she completed her thought.

"Methinks the lady doth get off too much."

"That is not Shakespeare."

"If the quote fits."

"I don't get *off* on Harlan Blake. He drives like a maniac, he's rude, he's a sex-starved maniac."

Martinique was practically cackling. "Girlfriend, you should hear yourself."

Tabytha tried not to laugh too. "And the worst part is he's making macaroni and cheese as we speak."

"Oh the horror."

"And we're in a castle, did I mention that?"

It was like college all over again, the two of them in hysterics, Tabytha lying on her bed, rolling about, chatting endlessly about boys.

"Tabytha? Is that you?"

She froze. It was Harlan in the hallway.

She could smell something burning.

"Gotta go," she told Martinique. "Talk later."

Running to the door, she opened it just in time to see him with the most sheepish look, utterly adorable. He had the pot in his hand, smoking and smoldering.

"Don't tell me," she gasped.

He nodded. "Apparently it's been longer since I cooked than I realized."

"Harlan Blake made a mistake?"

Finally, he'd done something human. Tabytha rewarded him with a peck on the cheek.

"What was that for?"

"I'm really not sure, but I was hoping we could just go with it."

"I'll be flexible if you will, especially given that we have no dinner left to speak of."

Tabytha took his hand. "How about you show me where the kitchen is and we'll see what I can come up with."

"I'd like that," he said, his voice soft as velvet, firm and determined as steel, making her melt all over again.

Just like the first time.

* * * * *

Harlan wasn't sure what had changed but he was just thrilled that it had.

All that attempt at control he had been making and ironically it was something he couldn't control, like burning the noodles and finding himself the butt of a joke, that seemed to warm her most.

Tabytha's phone conversation had made a difference too. He made a note to thank whoever it was on the other end of the line. Maybe it was that friend of hers, Martinique, she had mentioned a couple of times at dinner.

Watching her now, Harlan felt his heart swell. It wasn't that she had any particular culinary skills—banging about on the pots and pans, she seemed as lost as he had.

Worse, even.

But she had such joy, such simple childish wonder in her every motion. How had he missed this before? In unlocking her secret fantasies to submit how had he missed her natural playfulness?

Like a butterfly, too precious and beautiful to capture.

Had he been approaching this too simply, just thinking of the sex?

"I hope you like French cooking," she announced as she broke egg after egg into an enormous bowl.

Eying the pile of fresh bread, he said, "If you mean French toast, I'm a great fan."

She feigned outrage. "And who's been leaking my culinary secrets?"

He grinned, leaning against the counter of the refurbished, fully equipped twenty-first-century galley he'd had put in just a few years earlier. "There are spies everywhere, mademoiselle."

Tabytha wrinkled her nose at his appalling French accent. "And you are not among them."

He handed her a slice of bread. "I am starving, let's get a move on."

Pushing out her hip, she reached for his ass.

Harlan quickly found himself the recipient of a rather generous smack to the hindquarter.

"Keep a civil tongue, slave boy."

That was all he needed to hear. She giggled, delighted to have him give chase. After a brief struggle he had her pinned, her back to the counter, exactly where he had been standing a moment ago.

His hands moved up her hips, lifting her dress.

She read his expression. "Someone could walk in, you know."

"In that case I will have to share you."

"You'd never share," she predicted.

"Why not, there's plenty to go around."

She grabbed at him greedily. "You're like me. We don't play well with others."

"Is that a declaration of intent, Tabby Cat?"

Tabytha scooted forward, allowing him to pull up her dress and slip down her panties. Just how many times could a man fuck a woman in one day? He'd like to find out.

He'd also like to try out that dungeon downstairs.

"I intend to give you hell, if that's what you mean."

Harlan cried out as she leaned forward, this time not for a kiss but a quick nip of his lower lip. "What was that for?"

"Letting you know my intentions. Also for calling me Tabby Cat."

Harlan impaled her. "The only thing I want coming from your mouth in the next five minutes is 'Yes Sir' and 'Oh god, please, more, Sir'."

"Only five minutes? I was hoping for at least ten."

"That's it." He lifted her, screaming and laughing, over to the table, a great stone and wood structure with matching chairs. Laying her across it, he looked for the contents of a particular cabinet.

"Good grief," she cried out, seeing the contents. "You keep ropes in the kitchen."

"A good chef is prepared at all times."

"You know I could escape any time, right?"

"Apparently, you don't want to," he observed as he encircled one wrist and then the other in the braided silk cords. Using a simple sailor's knot, he tied down both arms and then moved on to her legs.

"You are so beautiful." He kissed her left instep, caressed her ankle and secured it before moving on to the right. In short order he had her splayed over the table, as vulnerable as a Thanksgiving turkey waiting to be carved.

"And you, Mr. Blake," she informed him, "are a very naughty man."

"Consider it a fresh opportunity to interview me."

She snorted. "I can't exactly hold a pen, can I?"

"I'll remember everything for you. May I?" he said, taking hold of her dress, one hand on either side of the plunging neck line.

"No, absolutely –"

He shredded it before she could get the word not out.

"You fucking jerk!"

Harlan pulled the sides of the ruined dress away. "I would offer to pay for it, but I already did."

She sighed, fighting the pleasure as he laid his hand on her belly. "You can deny all you want, but your body knows what it wants."

"A decent night's sleep would be nice."

He bent to kiss her bellybutton. She squirmed, arching her back.

"No, no, stop it," she moaned, but when he did stop she began to whimper, wanting him to continue.

"For what it's worth," he told her, "I don't think you are submissive."

"Fine time to tell me!"

"I think you are something else." He stroked her rib cage and moved onto her breasts, pulling them one by one from her bra cups.

"You are something else too, and when you read my column you'll find out what."

"Seriously, Tabytha, you are in your own category. You are kinky."

"Go me."

He took her lips, dry and so full of life, responsive, humming.

He didn't know how he would ever get his fill of them and this frightened him more than a little.

They barely knew each other.

"That means you enjoy the play, but you'll never really submit to another."

Harlan rested his palm on her pussy, pulsing, damp through the material.

"In fact, Tabby Cat, you are rather inclined to enslave your mates."

"Yep, got you right where I want you," she quipped.

He chuckled. "Be right back."

She watched with wide, alarmed eyes as he fetched the tools of his trade, spatulas, a serving spoon, a dish of leftover fruit from the refrigerator and of course the whipped cream.

"You are a total prick," she informed him as he shook the whipped cream. "Can I just get that on the record now?"

Using a small knife, Harlan cut away the bra and panties. Naked and hot and writhing, that was how he liked her.

"Delicious," he rasped, spraying a narrow line of whipped cream down her stomach to the very edge of her pussy lips. He circled the mounds of her breasts next and then put a dab on top of each nipple.

She alternated watching and not watching, thrashing her head and gritting her teeth. She was so sensitive, so curvaceous.

"One for each," he said, producing a pair of maraschino cherries.

Tabytha groaned as he placed the first one on her nipple, delicate, gentle as could be. The flesh was so swollen, so edible, almost cherry red itself.

Taking the spatula, he tenderized her hips, light taps, tiny slaps, along both sides, the motion making her undulate and gyrate.

"Don't lose those cherries," he warned.

When the first fell off he punished her by applying the cool metal spoon to her pussy, just grazing her clit, causing explosions of pleasure that he had no intention of letting her fulfill, not yet anyway.

"All right, all right, I'll be still, please, let me come..."

He laughed. "If you come I don't think you'll be very still, do you?"

"Oh god, I don't know what I mean," she exclaimed.

Her fists clenched and unclenched. "My sweet, little, kinky Tabby Cat," he said, kissing her gently and soft then hot and firm.

Her lips opened, she drew him in, her tongue as aggressive as his. It was a perfect combination.

His cock raged hard in his pants.

It was time to get this show on the road.

"Okay," he said, kissing her earlobe.

"Okay, what?"

"Do I have to say it twice?" His thumb moved into place and she lifted her pelvis, pressing herself against it. She was like a woman possessed, straining against her bonds, using them to increase her pleasure, to multiply the moment.

Harlan let her climax again and again until she begged him to stop.

It wasn't a slave asking.

But definitely someone intimately connected and wanting to play.

Untying her, he wrapped her in towels fetched by Ophelia.

Harlan made sure the woman didn't see a thing.

Not one inch of his Tabby Cat.

"It's time to take you home," he told her.

She looked at him strangely. "This is the end? We aren't staying overnight?"

"The air is stifling." He winked. "I think I need a break from castles and dungeons."

Tabytha kissed the tip of his nose. "Do you need a break from me?"

"Not necessarily."

"Good."

Her next move caught him off guard, if such a thing was possible.

"Tabytha, are you sure?"

"Zip it," she said, moving her fingers into place. "Or should I say unzip it."

He groaned as she sank to her knees before him. His cock had never felt so huge, so full of need, so totally primed for relief.

She took her time, kissing the head and dabbing her tongue to remove the tiny drop of fluid deposited there. Then she kissed her way along the shaft, working the vein underneath, all the way to his full, aching balls, which she weighed in her hands one by one.

“Tabytha—”

“Call me Tabby Cat,” she said, and he was gone, lost to the sensations of her sweet mouth, sliding the length of him, suctioning, enveloping.

If he’d hoped to hang on long, he would be sorely disappointed.

The need was too great and Tabytha was too intense.

He hadn’t expected her to go the full mile as he felt the first spurt from the end of his cock and she made no move to jerk away. Instead she grasped his buttocks, breathing him deeply, taking him nearly to the back of her throat.

He groaned, leaning back, like a lion in the midst of sheer pleasure.

Tabytha milked him then, getting out every single drop. Even afterward, when he was exhausted, leaning on her shoulders, she continued to lick and nibble and suck.

“I’ll be hard again at this rate.”

“Save it for the ride,” she said.

He looked at the mischief in her eye.

Son of a gun.

Harlan pulled her to her feet.

Embracing, they let the moment go.

Neutral, no points, no last words.

For now.

Epilogue

Tabytha shivered even in the warm waiting area. The robe they had given her ought to cut the chill but nothing was going to give comfort to her body now.

Nothing but the touch of the man she had fallen for so hard.

The man whose touch could bring pleasure...and sweet agony at the same time.

It was her third session in front of the club members and you would think she would be used to the exposure, the sense of utter domination and wicked self-imposed humiliation.

It was dream humiliation, the sort you fantasize about but would never want in real life.

Harlan would never hurt her. He was master of her dreams, not to mention her growing companion in waking time. In the weeks since visiting the monastery they had built a steady connection, no formalities, no commitments.

It was perfect for a quirky journalist and a dashing playboy.

They did insist on monogamy, though, which was a problem for neither one of them. The only issue was having enough time together, finding the hours to play and explore and laugh and share.

Tabytha had grown acquainted with most of the implements on Harlan's rack by now, allowing him to test and tease her with crops and paddles and even a little brush with the cane every now and again.

She liked his hand best, though, for the warmth it brought, the intimate sense of hard and soft, yin and yang.

Sometimes he could bring her to tears. They would hold one another afterward and whisper stories from their backgrounds, structures woven of hopes and dreams, things no one else would ever know.

The sweat would drip off them, the smell of their sex in the air, their fingers interwoven, like maybe, just maybe they were born for this.

But it could only go so far.

Couldn't it?

A knock came at the door.

It was Trina, Harlan's assistant.

"You ready, kiddo?"

"As ready as you can ever be."

"No one's ever ready for Harlan," Trina quipped.

Tabytha nearly asked her the question, the one so recently on her lips. Instead she stood perfectly still for the blindfold.

It slid across her eyes like an old friend, shutting out one world, awakening her to a new one.

Always new, no matter the time, the exact circumstances.

There would be men watching, and women.

But only he would matter.

Symbolically now, Trina attached the slender chain to Tabytha's wrist. It would be her only marking, her only identification.

The chain had a long lead.

As if in a dream she felt herself led down the familiar corridor, the flats of her feet had memorized every little indentation in the rug. How many others had helped to wear it thin, with their submission, their inevitable walks toward the domination they craved?

She craved Harlan. That was certain. She never had done the column either. The BDSM was their thing and for his part he had taken down his shingle as a trainer.

But where did it go from here?

Once they had crossed the threshold of the punishment room, Tabytha was transferred to the custody of the monks, part of the very same order she had been introduced to in the mountains.

It was their responsibility to strip and prepare her.

First they removed the robe, not a single finger upon her flesh.

Then they removed the chain.

Finally she felt them taking her hands, one on either side.

She gripped tightly as they took her to the center of the stage, the slate cold beneath her feet, the invisible eyes all too obvious to her overactive imagination.

The room was full tonight. She could sense it.

Unbidden, Tabytha lifted her arms. The cuffs were affixed and then the chains.

A bit of adjustment and she was brought taut, on tiptoes, the way everyone liked.

Then came the waiting.

The air upon her body, her nipples taut, her sex moist, labia puffy, skin pinkened, all signs of her arousal, her need, her desperate anticipation.

It was shameful to be in front of so many.

And yet she was proud.

Proud and full of...love?

What a strange word to employ at such a time and yet...

The applause began. Her tormentor had arrived.

She strained her ears so as not to miss a thing, the sound of boot steps, the light swing of the crop against his thigh, even the scent of his cologne.

He stood close, very, very close.

"Before I whip you tonight," he said, utterly breaking protocol, "there is something else."

Something else?

She stiffened, not daring to breathe.

"You know what you have meant to me."

Tabytha sensed another person's presence. She imagined him handing off the crop. But why?

"I could think of no better way," he said as she felt his hands caress her cheeks and move higher, up her captive arms. He was holding something else, not the whip. Her heart skipped a beat.

It was metal.

He slipped it over her finger.

"Will you..." he began.

"Yes, oh yes," she cried before he could finish the words.

"It won't be anything ordinary," he warned.

"I should hope not," she laughed, the tears running from her eyes.

Harlan pulled down the blindfold. It was real, he was here and he had just slipped a diamond on her finger.

"People will say it's sudden, Tabytha."

"People can kiss my —"

He put a finger to her lips. "Language, Tabby Cat."

She grinned. "Good luck curing me of that habit."

"I have a lifetime to try," he replied with a wink.

Tabytha leaned forward, wanting a kiss, a whipping, a spanking, everything all at once.

She'd nearly forgotten their audience.

The small crowd was on its feet, cheering and applauding.

This was a dream come true.

But hardly a vanilla fantasy.

Tabytha wouldn't have it any other way, of course, and neither would he.

Losing each other in a kiss, they sealed the deal, fiancée and erstwhile part-time Master, better known as Harlan and his Tabby Cat.

The End

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 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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