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Thea's Goal

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Electronic book Publication: August 2006

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THEA'S GOAL

Bonnie Hamre

Chapter One

Carefully, slowly, holding her breath, Thea Cooper unwrapped the protective coverings of the artifact from the lending museum. Her fingers, deft with experience, peeled back the last layer.

"What on earth?" she whispered, though there was no one in her small workspace to hear. Two floors above her head, patrons, school tours and researchers moved through the brightly lit display areas of the museum, but down here, tucked away behind the storage cabinets of European whatnots too valuable to discard but not important enough to display, she was on her own.

Thea stared down at the red clay figurine resting in its nest of packing material. Why had anyone sent her this figurine? She wasn't up on primitive art, if this was a sample of that, but what else could it be? What value could it have? And why her? She was an archivist, not a curator.

There was nothing remotely attractive about the figure. Childish, grotesque and anatomically incorrect, it was almost eleven inches tall and at the widest, nearly three inches where the arms extended in a curiously aggressive posture. The limbs were of unequal proportions, the face a rudimentary sketch of overlarge eyes, bulbous nose and wide-open mouth. The only distinctive feature was the etching on the broad forehead.

Thea moved her magnifying glass closer and studied the scratchings. The marks looked like letters carved into the clay, but she had no idea what they signified. Touching the tip of her finger to the markings, she traced the slight gouging in the clay. Could the symbols be an inscription or some sort of identification?

She put down the magnifying glass, reached for the packet of documentation that came with the figurine and tsked at her actions. If she'd read the letters of provenance

first, she'd have known she was in receipt of a golem, undated, but thought to have survived from the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century.

"A what?" Thea murmured and read on, understanding now that the lending museum needed assistance in dating the figure. "Must be a mistake in sending it to my department. This is so not my subject area." She set the documents aside and rewrapped the figurine to forward to the appropriate department.

As she worked, her hands gently handling the hardened clay, she couldn't help thinking of the fairy tale of the gingerbread boy who came to life and ran around creating mayhem. She didn't need havoc in her life, she reflected. She could do with some order, particularly since she had just moved here and hadn't settled her home or made any friends yet. Once she got herself organized at work, she'd think about the other things, but in the meantime, she had work to do. Thea sighed. Working in the bowels of this building did nothing to solve her biggest problem. She was lonely.

So lonely that she craved companionship. Rather than place the golem artifact in her internal out-basket for the inter-office courier to pick up and deliver to the right department, she studied the floor layout tacked to one wall. By now, only a few weeks into her job, she knew her way from the employee parking lot to her workroom, the bathroom and not much else. Beyond her cramped patch, endless dim corridors crammed with shelves of tightly packed containers and rooms full of statuary, large relics and the museum's miscellany made a maze out of the area. Her workroom was one of many scattered wherever a small niche could be eked from the growing collections, but if they did not know exactly where to look, people could pass her workspace and never even notice it.

Thea consulted the guide and studied the map until she found the dating department. *Wish it were a true dating department,* she thought ruefully. Instead of radiocarbon analysis that dated once living things by the amount of carbon 14 in their systems and the rate of decay since death, she needed living breathing things, people,

all right, be specific, she needed men in her life now. Not just any man, but a certain type of man. She needed a Master.

Accepting this job meant big changes in her life. On one hand, it was a step up her career ladder. However, it also meant leaving her old life behind. In addition to her comfortable job, cozy apartment and social life, it meant leaving her Master, the man who had led her into the world of submission and made her revel in her obeisance. She'd debated staying where she was until He'd taken matters into His own hands and released her from their D/s contract. She missed Him, missed being under His care and protection. It was hard living alone after being with her ex-Master for so long.

Their relationship had no love involved. In fact, she'd veered from being more than a little frightened of Him to being wildly satisfied and sated when He allowed her to come. Love hadn't been important, not when her body felt so fulfilled. Maybe one day she'd crave the emotional sustenance as much as she'd gotten off on the physical, but she hadn't yet met a man who could give her both.

In the meantime, she was lonely, restless and unsatisfied. She needed another relationship like that, but hadn't had the time or the inclination to find another Dominant. Her ex-Master had given her a letter of introduction to a Dom here, but she had yet to seek him out.

Sighing, missing her Master's fine hand with both whip and flogger, then His forceful command of her body, Thea memorized the route through the museum's basement, picked up the golem and headed out to find human contact. The corridors resembled dark caverns and she couldn't help peering over her shoulder as if something unseen tracked her footsteps muffled by the stacks of boxes and cabinets on her way. The feeling was almost of anticipation, like holding her breath waiting for that first lick of leather against her bare skin. Fear and suspense fused to make her breathing shallow and excited. Uneasily, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck standing at attention, she picked her way through the maze of corridors until she came to the office she wanted.

Thea found the door locked, but after she knocked several times, a tall man ventured out of an inner room and peered through the glass at her. She held up the golem package.

The man frowned but opened the door. "What is it?"

Thea handed him the package. "This came to my department by mistake. It needs dating."

"So?" Obviously impatient, his forehead was creased and his dark blue eyes skimmed over her. "What department are you?" His eyeglasses didn't hide the impatient look in his eyes.

"Archivals."

He snorted. "Damn right it's not yours."

Thea recoiled. She was lonely, aching for a man in her life, but never enough to accept professional discourtesy, not even from a guy who exuded testosterone. If you took away the rough dark beard and the disgruntled look, he wouldn't be too hard to look at. Not attractive, she amended, but not a gargoyle either. His hair was brown, so dark it looked almost black and he wore it on the long side. It looked mussed, as if he ran a hand through it.

His open lab coat revealed a lean torso in a dark T-shirt. His rumpled brown cords led down to old, scuffed boots better suited to the field than the lab. She figured him for a recent grad student. Heavy on scientific knowledge, way light on social grace. You didn't learn manners facedown on a dig.

"It's all yours," she snapped.

"You can't come in here and expect me to drop everything." He took the golem's package and placed it on a table already heaped with other bundles, opened boxes and mounds of packing material.

7

"Did I ask you to do that?" Thea glanced around. Beyond this room, there were halls, brightly lit labs and tons of testing equipment. Curiosity led her a step or two forward. "You guys rate. All I have is a cubby tucked into a broom closet."

The man ignored her as he headed back the way he had come.

"Hey, wait."

He slowed and looked over his shoulder at her. "I'm busy."

"So am I. I need a receipt for that."

He shrugged. "Wait."

She followed him into a small office. It was as cluttered as her own but it had better lighting and more shelving. She watched as he leaned over a desk and worked his keyboard. When he looked down, she took her time to note his shoulders stretching his lab coat. Long, muscular forearms led to strong hands with broad palms and surprising long, slender fingers. His fingernails were short, cleanly trimmed.

He frowned at her inspection. "So what is it?"

Sighing, telling herself she'd imagined a flicker of interest in his eyes, Thea retrieved the package and documentation from the other room and scanned the paperwork. "It's a golem, circa 1590, more precise dating requested."

"It's pronounced *goilem*," he corrected her as he glanced up, interest growing in his eyes. This close, she noted they were dark blue, the whites bright and clear. "A golem, hah? Haven't seen one of those in ages." He keyed in a few entries and then held out his hand. "Let me see."

She handed it to him, watching as he unwrapped the package with care. He unfolded the last wrapping and blew out his breath. "This is a good one."

"What is it?" Why hadn't she learned about this golem thing?

"A golem." He ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "A manlike creature created to serve man. Very big in Jewish mythology, particularly Kabbalistic lore."

"That's silly," she scoffed, earning a laugh.

"Don't knock it. Legend has it that golems aren't exactly bright. You tell it what to do and it does it over and over again. But better watch it, they can get too big and turn on their creators."

"Yeah, right."

"Sneer all you want." He glanced up at her. "They're also big in the movies. And in computers, the old master-slave thing."

"Master?" she echoed. Although this guy didn't use the word in the same context, Thea couldn't help making the connection to her Master. Longing for Him, or rather, for the sensations He aroused in her, swept over her, arousing her instantly. She grabbed the corner of the desk and hung on, suddenly dizzy with want.

The guy didn't seem to notice as he worked the keyboard. "You know, it's a communication process. One device or process is the master and controls devices or processes – the slaves. Once the master-slave relationship is established, the direction of control is always from the master to the slave. Now they call it client-server."

"Much more politically correct," she murmured, trying to keep her balance. Master and slave. She yearned for the security of that kind of relationship, knowing all her sexual wants and needs would be satisfied. Her Dom had controlled their relationship in all matters, from what she wore, or didn't wear, to how long He made her wait for release, but always, always, He protected her and disciplined her when she didn't follow the rules or was slow to respond to His commands. The better she served Him, catering to all his desires, the better He made her feel.

Just thinking about how Her Master had rewarded her for proper submissive behavior made her breasts swollen and hard, the nipples pebbling. Even as heat arrowed down her belly, she felt moisture bead under her panties.

Her eyelids felt heavy. Thea forced them open, blinking as she caught the grad student gazing at her, his focus frankly lingering on her breasts. Could he see her nipples pushing out the soft cloth of her T-shirt?

"You were saying?" Thea forced the words out. Tried not to squirm.

After a moment, he licked his bottom lip. "You know, the master and slave thing?"

"Oh, right. Client-servers." She knew exactly what he was talking about. In her profession, she had to keep up with all the advances in technology. So much of her work involved electronic information storage. It was her job to maintain strict control over the long-term preservation and easy retrieval of the documents related to the museum's treasures. "How do you know that?"

He rolled his eyes and tapped his employee identification badge. "I'm a scientist. It's my job to know these things."

Thea snorted at his arrogance. "So what's this clay thing all about? How did it get into computer technology if it's centuries old?"

"Golems are supposed to come to life from clay and then do whatever you want them to do. Like robots. There are some legends about an old rabbi who used mystical rituals to create one to save the Jewish community, but the golem got too big and powerful, so he had to kill it."

"Yeah, right," she sniggered. "All that from a bit of clay?"

He grinned. "So they say."

When he grinned, he looked almost approachable. A few crinkles around the eyes, straight white teeth and a dimple in one cheek made her throat go dry. Thea leaned closer then forced her gaze back to the golem. "What's that on the forehead? Looks like chicken scratch."

"I'm not up on old Hebrew, but I'd bet it's the words for life and death."

"You're putting me on."

"Nope. That's how the old guys made them. You recite certain words to bring the little guy to life. Others to take life away. All part of the myth. Or maybe you have to erase the first word and the golem goes poof." He snapped his fingers and put the figurine back in its wrappings. "I'll get to this when I can. Want a copy of the findings?"

"Might as well. It came to me by mistake, but someone might check up on that."

The printer spun out a receipt. She took it, glanced at it and headed for the door. "Thanks."

"Wait." His gaze roved over her from head to toe, lingering on her breasts and then drifting down. She wished she had on something better than a pair of old, faded jeans, running shoes and a discolored T-shirt under her own lab coat. "What's your name?" he demanded his voice as gruff as it had been earlier.

She motioned to her badge. "Thea Cooper. And you are?"

"Nick Jones."

"See you around, Nick Jones."

Darkness coated the city by the time Thea left work, stopped for a meal and parked in the assigned slot for her apartment complex. The summer night was still hot, humid and airless, crushing down on her skull and robbing breath from her lungs. Exhausted, still twitchy from the unexpected and uncomfortable arousal in Nick Jones' office and her muscles tense from hunching over her workspace for hours, all she wanted was to soak in a cool tub, sip a glass of wine then crawl under the covers.

Unfortunately, unless she did more unpacking and ran some things through the laundry, she'd be wearing dirty clothes tomorrow. No way to know, but if she met Nick Jones again, she'd like to be wearing something more attractive than grubbies. Down in the sometimes dusty corridors of the museum, no one cared what she wore. It was a small rebellion, one she'd have been disciplined for. Her Master, when He hadn't required her to be naked, had liked seeing her dressed neatly, almost prudishly. He didn't like other men guessing about her figure, the shape of her full breasts or ass. He owned her, owned her body and didn't like sharing. If He'd seen her today, He'd have done something about it, disciplining her until He'd chastised her sufficiently for displeasing Him. The nerves under her skin flickered in memory of other instances of discipline.

Although they'd severed their BDSM relationship when she'd moved here, it was hard to let go of her habit of deference and obedience. She missed that, missed the

refuge of knowing that He was there to guide her and take care of her. In return, she'd been everything He wanted in a sexual slave. Anything He wanted, He took. Any pleasure, any task, she performed for Him with her whole heart and being. It hadn't been a love affair, but intensely satisfying and fulfilling all the same. She'd relied on Him for so many things.

He'd have frowned over her hidden wardrobe of casual jeans and sweats. What would He want her to wear now? Maybe a decent pair of slacks and her pale blue sweater set with the scooped neckline. If she could find it. And if it was clean. Though she'd performed many duties for her old Master, what she needed now was a maid, someone to pick up, clean up and bring her coffee in the morning. That would be bliss.

The steps to her second floor apartment seemed longer than ever. She trudged up, dreading the mess she'd find in her apartment. *After three weeks here, you'd think I'd have settled in.*

Thea unlocked her door and flipped on the light. Just as she'd left them that morning, her moving boxes cluttered the floor. Some were open and partially unpacked, some still had tape tightly attached. Blowing out her breath, she tossed her purse on the kitchen counter, opened the refrigerator and poured herself a full tumbler of wine. She had the appropriate wineglasses somewhere, maybe even in the box marked *crystal*. They'd have to wait.

Sipping her wine, she moved to the boxes in the living room. She hated this part of moving but until she had everything unpacked and put away and her place arranged, she wouldn't feel at home. It was her own fault. While she'd dived right into her new job and given it all her attention, she'd slacked off in getting her new home in order. Somehow, with no one to see it but herself, getting boxes unpacked and her possessions in order hadn't seemed that crucial.

Her Master would have disciplined her severely for her untidiness.

Thea closed her eyes, remembering and yearning. Sighing, she set to work, tearing tape off boxes and unpacking the contents. One box emptied, the books piled to one

side until she could assemble her bookcases, Thea sat back on her heels and surveyed the mess. She swallowed the rest of her wine and opened the next carton. Out of season clothing. Lifting the carton, she headed to her bedroom.

In her doorway, Thea paused. Two open suitcases gaped at the foot of the bed, but one looked less full. Dropping the carton on the end of her bed, she searched through the suitcases, looking for the blue sweater set, then stood, one hand on her hip, to survey the room. She frowned. She'd left in a hurry this morning. Surely she hadn't taken the time to fold her sweaters and place them in the partly open second drawer down.

And why the second drawer?

Underwear, top drawer. Sleepwear, second drawer. Sweaters and T-shirts in the third and fourth drawers. She'd been doing that since second grade. It was habitual. Why would she have done it different now?

Still puzzled, she found her laundry bag in the bathroom, stuffed clothing in it and started the search for her laundry supplies. The partly open door in the short hall between living room and her bedroom caught her attention. How odd. She knew she hadn't taken the time to stock the linen closet, but there, next to clean towels and sheets, were her detergent and dryer sheets.

Breath whooshed out of her lungs. She was a creature of habit. Clothes in certain drawers. Laundry supplies in a bathroom cabinet. Who had done this? And why?

What was going on here?

No one would break in, organize her linen cabinet and leave without a trace. Not a vandal. A thief? She rushed to the suitcase shoved under her bed. She didn't have much jewelry and what she had was inherited from her mother, but there was a pretty cocktail diamond and aquamarine ring and a good pearl necklace. Flipping open the lid, Thea reached under a layer of clothes and pulled out a small jewelry box.

Almost afraid to open the case, she hated the thought of losing the mementos of her mother, but there they were. Nestled in a bed of worn red velvet, the ring and the

necklace just as she had packed them. Next to them, the only piece of jewelry her Master had given her, a heavy set of nipple rings, the clamps decorated with real rubies. He'd claimed He liked to see her nipples turn as red as those gems.

Rocking back on her heels, Thea held the case to her chest and tried to control her alarm. Who had changed things?

She had to have done it herself. She just couldn't remember doing it.

After a few moments of panic control, Thea replaced the jewelry box and got to her feet. Taking the time to pour herself another glass of wine to calm her nerves, she cleared a space on her couch and tucked herself into it.

Should she call someone? Who? The landlord? The cops? What would they do? Take a look around, see she was unhurt, no forcible entry and nothing stolen or vandalized. Unseen bogeymen? Or a product of her imagination? For sure they'd spot the opened bottle of wine. She'd really look like a fool.

Thea shook off her fluster. She'd just be more careful about locking her door. With that in mind, she shoved her door key into her pants pocket, gathered up her laundry and headed down to the communal laundry room where she got the machines going and returned to her apartment. This time, she walked through the rooms slowly, noting what more had to be done and what she'd already accomplished. She opened the kitchen cabinets. They held little in the way of groceries, since she hadn't shopped for more than the essentials, but glasses and plates were stored neatly if in the wrong cupboards.

There was no one else to do these things but herself. Glancing at her almost full glass of wine, Thea debated and then poured the wine out in the sink. It was too easy to drink alone and she'd indulged too often. Maybe that accounted for the changes in her apartment. She'd had one glass too many and then done things she couldn't remember. That explanation didn't feel right, but how else could she account for the weird things going on?

Thea upended the wine bottle over the sink and emptied that too. If she couldn't remember from one day to the next, then she was in bad shape. No more wine. No booze of any kind.

She rearranged the cabinets, slit open a box marked *kitchen*, unpacked that and placed the pots and pans it had contained in drawers next to the kitchen range. When it was time to transfer her clothes into the dryers, she scooped more coins from the conch shell she used as a catchall and went downstairs.

Heat enclosed her like a wet blanket. The air was more oppressive than it had been earlier, the calm before a storm. Maybe rain would wash away the sluggish feeling of too much city and not enough fresh air. Thea glanced up at the dark and starless sky, shrugged and went into the empty laundry room and got the dryers going.

Hopping up on a closed washing machine to wait, Thea felt the heat in the room increase with the dryers' output, yet suddenly, she shivered as the tiny hairs on the back of her neck stirred. She glanced out the open door.

There was no one there but she spotted the leaves on a low hanging tree quiver as if someone passed underneath them. Nothing else moved. There was no wind. Her mouth went dry yet her palms were wet. Had someone been looking in at her? She rubbed her palms on her thighs and waited, senses trained on the open door, afraid to stay, afraid to risk going out into the dark. The only sound came from the dryers rumbling.

A minute passed, then another and another. A slight breeze wafted in. She saw the leaves rustle and relaxed. It was only her imagination! The change in the air pressure announced the coming rain. That was all. Thea went to the door and checked the sky again. Heavy dark clouds made a black on black pattern above the reflected glow of the city lights. A patter of raindrops sizzled on the sidewalk and then the rain came – hard, fast and drenching.

As soon as the dryers stopped, Thea grabbed her clothing, stuffed it in her basket and dashed through the rain and up the stairs. Once inside her apartment, she locked

and bolted the door. Breathing hard, she dumped her clean clothes on the couch and picked through them. With clean clothes for tomorrow, all she needed now was to calm down and sleep.

Wishing she hadn't dumped out her wine, Thea skipped her bath and tumbled into bed. With a news program and talking heads murmuring her to sleep, she drifted off to the sound of the rain pelting her windows. Wouldn't it be nice to have someone to cuddle with, to talk over their days and sleep securely in strong, warm arms? Wouldn't it be even better to have her Master there, to show him by her submission how much she longed for His touch, His Dominance, His cum.

He'd never allowed her to satisfy herself. No matter how aroused she was and He purposely kept her that way, she was not to come until He allowed it.

But He wasn't here. He wouldn't know if she played with herself. He wasn't her Dom anymore. He couldn't tell her what to do. Still, she twisted and turned, fighting the heat in her belly and the fire in her veins.

He'd trained her too well.

Chapter Two

Arriving early at work the next morning, Thea darted from the parking lot through the steady rain and into the employee's entrance. The washed air was fresh and clean and she regretted leaving it as she descended into the staler air of the basement. In her little cubbyhole workspace, she took a minute to check her appearance and find her way back to Nick's office. She got lost once, but eventually she stood outside his door and knocked.

A slight, older woman in a spotless lab coat came to the door. "Yes?"

Thea shifted her weight. "I'm looking for Nick. Nick Jones," she clarified.

The woman almost smiled. "Ah, yes. Nick." She cast a once-over glance at Thea, noting the blue sweater set, the snug black pants and the sensible shoes. "Dr. Jones is not here."

Doctor Jones? She'd taken him for a grad student, not one of the museum's muckety-mucks. "Um, he was going to look at something for me. Maybe I'll come back later."

This time the smile was understanding. "You do that. Shall I tell him you came by?"

"Oh, no need." Forcing a bright smile, Thea spun on her heel and left. What was that woman thinking! Thea bristled at the thought that she'd taken her for an archaeology groupie lusting after the young PhD. There was nothing between Nick and herself, no matter that she'd felt aroused and attracted to him. Their meeting was purely professional and she'd enjoyed their conversation, brief and brusque as it was. Shaking off the woman's attitude, she found her way back to her own workspace.

Just think. She'd talked to two people in as many days.

The hours passed quickly. Thea loved her work, archiving and sorting incoming items, helping choose which artifacts would be cycled for display, which would be

placed in storage for future use and which would be returned to donors with a carefully worded – thank you but no thank you – letter of regret. After all, you never knew when those donors might have an actual treasure to bequeath to the museum.

By the time her shift was over, she'd forgotten that she'd intended to walk by Nick's lab again. She headed instead for the exit and her car, pleased to see the rain had stopped, leaving behind the tang of ozone. Breathing deeply, she remembered she had to stop by a grocery store on her way home. It was time to stock up on more than the basics.

"Hey, Thea!"

She stopped, turning quickly to see Nick Jones getting into an older pickup truck, one that would have looked at home out on the range but at odds in an urban parking lot. He got out and walked toward her. Even his gait looked as if he should be striding across the plains rather than over asphalt and concrete. She hid a grin as he stomped through puddles with as much relish as a kid.

"Have you found out anything more about that golem thing?" she asked.

"Haven't even looked at it." He peered at her, bending his head a bit and she realized he wasn't wearing his glasses. "Want a beer?"

She blinked. "I don't like beer."

Nick lifted a shoulder. "Wine or something else?"

Thea remembered her newly made decision not to drink. "Um, sorry. I've got things to do. Another time, maybe?"

What was she doing, refusing a chance to mingle? She could unpack anytime. Those boxes weren't going anywhere. "Uh, on second thought, I'd like that."

He looked at her as if reconsidering his offer. "Fine. You want to go with me?"

She glanced at his truck. "Why don't I follow you? Then I can head home without you having to drive me back here."

"Sure." He waited until she unlocked her small sedan and got behind the wheel before he hoisted himself into his truck. He eased out into traffic, checking once to make sure she was following him and drove sedately down the street.

Grinning, Thea trailed behind him, sure that he drove extra-cautiously on her behalf. He signaled his turns, looking into his rear view mirror now and then until he found a parking spot outside a rowdy-looking tavern, gestured her into it then found another for himself. Touched by his courtesy, Thea parked, got out of her car and waited for him to join her. She scanned the tavern, not sure she wanted to go in, but the sound of music and laughter kept her until Nick stood beside her.

"It's not much," he offered as if he could read her mind. "But it's better inside." He held the door open for her.

Thea ventured in then relaxed as she looked around. The exterior was shabby, but the interior resembled a cozy British pub. Small tables, a large bar area, dart boards, even a fireplace, empty now with the summer's heat filling the room. She smiled at Nick. "You're right."

"Table or bar?"

"Table," she said and spotted one near a small stage. "That one?"

They seated themselves and a waitress took their orders. After a small silence, Nick broke the ice. "Haven't seen you around the museum."

"I've only been there a few weeks."

"Doing what?"

"I told you. Archivals."

He made a face. She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't put it down. I may not be out in the field digging up bits of bone and pottery shards, but without people like me taking care of the photographs, films, video and sound recordings," she ticked each item off on her fingers, "computer tapes and video and optical disks as well as paper

records, letters and documents, where would guys like you be, Dr. Jones?" She paused to take a breath.

"Hey, don't get your back up! What are you, a walking job description?"

Exhaling, Thea managed a smile. "Sorry. I get carried away sometimes by the lopsided bureaucracy."

"Your job is important," he conceded. Grin flashing, he added, "I know that we couldn't find a thing if you archivists didn't record it someplace."

"You and researchers, students, genealogists, curators, exhibitors-"

"Okay, okay! You don't have to beat me over the head."

Thea paused to consider the head in question. His hair was still in a tangle, making him seem boyish. All male. With his blue eyes scanning her, his mouth in a big smile, it was easy to let indignation fade. "I guess I came on a little strong."

"Forget it. What are you working on now?"

Thea was happy to tell him about her job. "I haven't had the chance yet to work on an exhibition, but I'm looking forward to working with the curators and technicians. Sometimes it gets a little lonely in my cubby. It feels like I'm the only living thing down there."

He chuckled. "I know the feeling. Maybe I should bring in my drums just to make noise."

"Enough to raise the dead?"

He laughed, showing his teeth. "That would be too damn scary for me. Imagine, walking mummies threatening you, their arms and hands ready to tear off your head, robots like your golem friend -"

"Hush! You see too many movies."

"Want to see some with me?"

The change in subject made her blink. She sipped her lemonade and studied the man across the table. Today his dark beard looked smoother, as if he'd trimmed it since

yesterday. His blue eyes still watched her intently. She gazed back, wondering why he was friendly today and a curmudgeon yesterday. *Was she missing something here?*

He wore another dark T-shirt that fit him snugly across his torso. He was lean but very fit. Athletic. Maybe he ran or worked out, but somehow she couldn't see him toning those muscles in a gym. She'd noted the tight fit of his jeans as he'd walked toward her earlier and knew his legs were long with well-muscled thighs. It made her think of other muscles... She licked her bottom lip.

"Well?"

"Why?"

"Why what?" He leaned a little closer. His blue eyes studied her face then dropped to her bust. "Is there a problem?"

Thea edged back. "Is there?"

"What is this? Twenty questions?" He frowned.

Now he looked like the surly man she'd met last night. Surprising herself, she relaxed. He wasn't making much effort to weasel himself into her affections. Or her bed. Still, something skittered down her back, making her uneasy, as if someone watched her from the darker shadows of the bar. "I'm new here. A woman on her own has to be cautious."

"You're afraid of me?" He looked confused.

Thea looked over her shoulder. A few guys clustered around a pool table, talking in low voices and razzing each other over the click of the billiard balls. They didn't seem to be paying her any attention. Still, the feeling of being watched lingered. Swiveling to face the bar, again she noted no one paying her any attention.

"What's up?"

Thea turned back to Nick. "Just a funny feeling. Like you get when someone stares at you."

Nick's gaze scoured the bar. "I don't see anyone staring. Though I wouldn't be surprised if they did," he added with a quirky, flattering grin. His dimple deepened.

Reassured, Thea grinned back. "I guess it's just strange men and all that."

His eyes focused on her mouth. "I don't think we'll be strangers very long."

She sat back and sipped her lemonade to moisten her suddenly parched throat. There was no mistaking the gleam in his eyes or the sudden heat blooming deep inside her. She didn't trust either. Sure, she'd dressed up a little today in the hope that they'd meet and he'd see her as more attractive than she'd been in her dress-downs, but this heated flare, coming after the scare she'd had last night, made her uncertain.

Until she figured out what was going on, she'd do better to hold back her hormones. Nick had something about him that talked to her, made her very aware of his masculinity, but sexy as he was, he wasn't Dominant material. No sense in wasting either of their time no matter how he looked at her. No matter how her pussy let her know it was lonely too.

She wanted sex, but she wanted it a certain way. She wanted to be dominated, possessed, craving the feelings that sent her into subspace, that region where she floated on physical sensations, a high induced by pain and pleasure until she was exquisitely ready for orgasm. Sex on an equal basis wasn't something she knew how to handle. Kneeling, accepting her Master's will and his usage, was her comfort zone.

Boundaries. That was what she wanted, not this heart-fluttering uneasiness that made her hands shake and her knees tremble. She acknowledged her transitional stage, adrift after leaving her long-term submissive status, longing for a master to help her feel sheltered and protected.

Nick didn't make her feel any of those things. Instead she felt edgy, unconnected, scared. Thea placed her glass on the table between them and stood. "Thanks for the drink. I've got to go."

He stood too, another mark of courtesy. "So soon? We're just getting to know each other."

"Yeah, well... I've got things to do." She knew it sounded lame, but her internal alarm was working overtime. There was something about him, nothing tangible, but it scared her nonetheless. Nick Jones appeared to be a healthy sexy male interested in her on a physical level. Okay, she could relate to that. But it was the shadowy nuances, the hint of a deeper current that kept her guard up. He walked her to her car, saying nothing, but when she unlocked her door and scooted behind the wheel, he leaned in. "See you tomorrow?"

She flicked an upward glance at him. His figure blocked the light from the parking lot lamps, obscuring his face and making him seem larger than life. He was a tall man with broad shoulders and long legs. Seen this way, he seemed even bigger and bulkier through the torso. Powerful and an unknown threat.

Thea revved the engine. Nick backed away and closed her door. With a small wave, she backed out of the space and sped home. To safety. Her apartment might be boring, cluttered with moving boxes and not yet her own space, but it offered protection.

When she got there, she ran up the stairs and once behind her locked and bolted door, stood still for a moment while her racing heartbeat calmed. She leaned back against the door and closed her eyes, willing her choppy breaths to even out and slow down. It was silly to run from Nick. He'd offered friendship, well, maybe not that exactly, but definitely a closer, physical relationship. All right, to put it bluntly, he'd offered sex.

And wasn't that what she craved? A taut masculine body surrounding her with heat and a hard cock embedded in her? Hard, thrusting and demanding. Her breasts pebbled at the thought. She could have taken him up on his offer and by now they'd be in bed together. Maybe not bed, but he'd be in her, pumping, arousing and eventually sating her need. Why had she run? What scared her about Nick?

When she opened her eyes, she forgot all about him.

How? Who? Why?

The shambles of overturned furniture, her dresser drawers ransacked and belongings dumped on the floor was nothing new. She'd been robbed and her home vandalized once before.

But this wasn't anything like that!

Just the opposite!

Who had organized her apartment? She sucked in her breath as she stared at the furniture in her living room, neatly placed in a functional arrangement. She'd left the couch littered with unpacked boxes, an open suitcase and the clothing she'd laundered last night. Books were now arranged neatly in her assembled bookcases.

Who had put those things away? Where and *ohmigod*, how had they gotten in?

She'd made sure the door was locked when she left this morning. She'd left the windows locked too. They were the only way in and she could see no signs of entry. Gingerly, she edged along the wall to the nearest window, the one overlooking the parking lot below. Securely locked, the window didn't budge when she tried to open it. Next, she tried the small window over the kitchen sink. This was too small for more than a child to squirm through and it was locked tight as well. So were her bedroom and bathroom windows.

Stunned, she sank down on the edge of her bed, her mouth gaping as she stared at the clothes neatly hanging in the closet, her suitcases unpacked and stacked by the dresser. She reached out and slowly opened the drawer by her bedside. Tissues, a box of condoms, her pink vibrator, dildos and a tube of lube and her favorite pair of nipple clamps. How had whoever had unpacked for her known where to put them?

On the shelf of her bedside table, she spied the familiar wooden chest. From the outside, it looked no different than an oversized jewelry chest, but inside, she knew even as she lifted the lid to make sure, were the well-used flogger and the coiled whip. Her heart in her throat, she sifted the worn leather strands through her fingers. Closing her eyes, she held the whip tight to her chest. Oh, she needed this, needed to feel the flick and sting of leather against her bare skin, needed the heat, the sensation...

Jumping up, she opened dresser drawer after drawer. She hadn't taken the time to rearrange them last night, but here they were, just as she liked them. Underwear, top drawer. Sleepwear, second drawer. Sweaters and T-shirts in the third and fourth drawers. She went back to the top drawer. Everything folded just so, the panties in one stack, her bras in another. Her teddies made a third pile. Who had done this? Who had handled her most intimate clothing and taken the time to organize it so meticulously?

She opened the next drawer. Her nighties were folded and separated by season. Warm flannels in one stack, casual sleep shirts in another and by themselves, her skimpy lace and silks. And when she checked, the bottom drawers were as neat as the others, with her clothing precisely arranged.

Quickly, she reached under her bed. The suitcase was gone! She reared back, hitting her head on the bed frame so hard her eyes crossed. She blinked away the confusion and looked around her bedroom. There was the suitcase, stacked with the others, but when she opened it, it was empty! Where was her mother's jewelry?

She'd had a safety deposit box at her old bank, but hadn't gotten around to getting one here. Was losing her ring and pearls the price she'd have to pay for that oversight? Thea sank to her haunches against the bedroom wall, sorrow welling up in her throat. She missed her mother. She hadn't known her father. He'd been killed before she was born and she and her mother had been all the family they'd needed until her mother had succumbed to lung cancer a year ago.

Until she'd been taken in by her Master, she'd been all alone. She missed Him more than anything. Who had stolen her memories? Angry, she rose from the floor and began searching. She opened every drawer, felt through it, disregarding how she messed the contents. Flinging open the closet doors, she pushed hangers to one side and the other. Finding nothing but her clothing, she sank back on her heels to check every pair of shoes on the closet floor. There weren't many and they were all empty.

Thea scrambled to her feet and shoved everything off the shelf above the clothes rod. Everything tumbled about her head and cascaded to the floor. A hatbox bounced off her shoulder and fell, its lid bouncing off and rolling across the floor.

And there was her jewelry case! She opened it and let loose a long sigh. Everything was there. Her ring, pearls and the nipple clamps. Holding the clamps to her chest, she heard the chain clinking as her breasts rose and fell with the effort to calm herself.

She'd found her jewelry but not answers she needed.

Who had done this? Should she call the police? She reached for her bedside phone and hesitated. *No officer, nothing was taken. There's no sign of a break-in. Why am I calling? Someone unpacked, organized my apartment and made it livable. No, no one's harmed me. In fact, I feel curiously warm, excited, as if someone has taken me into his protection.*

Who would take her seriously?

This was too weird, too bizarre. Who could have done this? Had her Master arranged this? Perhaps called on someone here to ease her entrance into the D/s community here? She thought about that, but quickly discarded that theory. If her old Master had organized this, He would have let her know, would have insisted she clean and tidy her apartment to welcome others. He would not have allowed her to live in such disorder for more than a day at most. He would have instructed her to prepare herself to be assessed by a new Dom.

A new feeling grew within her, bloomed and emerged full blown.

How could He have let her go so easily? Resentment that she'd been the one to waver, lose sleep over her chance to move up in her career with this relocation while He'd only shrugged his shoulders, canceled their contract and said goodbye. Oh, He'd given her the name of a possible new Dominant partner, but why hadn't He at least voiced some regret about having to train a new submissive?

She'd done her utmost to please Him in all things. The least he could have done was say He'd miss her.

26

Bitterness clawed at her throat, tasting like bile. No, her ex-Master wouldn't have put himself out for her.

Who then? And how?

The questions nagged her throughout her solitary dinner and late into the night as she cleaned away the mess she'd made and completed tidying her apartment. By the time she'd showered and fallen into bed, she was exhausted, but her mind was still busy trying to solve the puzzle. By rights, she should be too scared to sleep, but her body was relaxed and open. Receptive to a lover's touch, but there was no lover.

She rolled to her side and opened her nightstand drawer. With her favorite vibrator in hand, she rolled back and opened her legs. Even as the vibrator buzzed and circled her clit, Thea knew this wasn't going to do it. Good as it was, it wasn't enough. She needed a real man, not this pink silicone replacement. In frustration, she let the vibrator drop. It fell, still vibrating, between her spread thighs.

She closed her eyes, recalling the last time she'd been with her Master. He'd taken her to such heights, made her weep and cry, aching with pain and pleasure, silently begging Him to allow her release and then, when she'd thought she was beyond endurance, He'd done something He rarely did. Surprising her, He'd flipped her on her back, lifted her knees and spread them wide. Then after playing with her exposed shaven pussy and pinching her clit until she cried out, He'd lowered his head and lapped at her pussy, nibbling and circling her clit, even thrusting his tongue inside her, devouring her.

Those remembered sensations of shock and almost unbearable arousal were so real. She could feel His tongue pushing in as deep as it could then withdrawing to circle her clit, sucking on it, pulling it into His mouth, nipping it. When she thought she'd explode, He'd risen to his knees, lifted her legs over his shoulder and impaled her with His cock.

She panted, vividly recalling the way she'd felt, speared and possessed by his cock shoving into her then pulling out before plunging impossibly deep within her. He

gripped her hips to lift her even higher then thrust so deep she could feel his cock against her womb. Thea cried out at the shocking pain and reeled as He thrust again. He kept her writhing on the crest of agonized pleasure as he rode her unmercifully. Her heart raced, her breath came in heated gasps as she thrashed about under the unendurable combination of delayed orgasm and ratcheting sensations.

At last He allowed her release. An immense orgasm shook her from head to toe, racking her with barely receding spasms, wringing from her every drop of strength. Thea lay limp, barely conscious. For a memory, this was so real, so intense. Slowly, unbelieving, opened her eyes.

This was real!

Ohmigod, how...what...who was this man?

She looked up through the dim light of her bedroom into the shadowed face of a man, his body visible against the pale outline of the window. She couldn't see his features, but she felt him, taut and strong and muscular. Embedded in her still.

Frightened beyond belief, Thea opened her mouth to scream, but all she could manage was a whimper as he pulled out of her. Her mouth was dry, her throat parched with the heat that still rushed through her veins.

The man withdrew, letting her legs slide down his broad chest, bare of hair but thickly muscled. She noted the strength of his arms as he ran his hands down her thighs then her calves, feeling his caress when he lifted her ankle to his mouth and kissed her the arch of her foot.

Without a word, he assured her he meant no harm, intended only to pleasure her. Would a rapist, a man intent on his own purposes, take the time or make the effort to reassure her? Express his gratitude?

It couldn't be! Yet, somehow, even as she trembled, she sensed his message and took comfort that a master would come to her. As her senses returned to her, fear faded, leaving only confusion. Nodding, the man backed off the bed and stood beside it,

watching her for a moment before he retreated into the deeper shadows and disappeared.

Thea rose up on her elbows and peered into the darkness. One minute he was there, the next he was gone. Vanished. She flicked on her bedside lamp, her heart racing and blinked. There was no one there.

But she hadn't imagined it. There were marks on her hips where large hands had gripped her hard. She'd have bruises tomorrow. The liquid still oozing from her she could dismiss as involuntary reaction to a sexy fantasy, but when she hopped off the bed and angled a hand mirror to peer at her pussy, there was no dismissing the reddened marks on her fleshy lips. Those were teeth marks, tiny bites on her labia.

She hadn't imagined it. A phantom man had made love to her exactly as her Master had. And he'd required nothing in return.

How bizarre. How exciting. Collapsing on the end of her bed, Thea smelled the scent of sex lingering in the air. She crossed her arms over her chest, rocking back and forth, trying to make sense of the impossible.

Impossible and overwhelmingly thrilling.

When would it happen again?

Chapter Three

Her body slightly achy but sated, Thea sat at her desk the next day, deeply engrossed in her task. She'd arrived at work early, pleased with the sight of her rearranged living room, her possessions sorted and put where they belonged.

She stretched, rotating her neck to ease the muscles and as she tipped her head back, she noted Nick standing behind her. "What are you doing here?" she yelped.

He moved to stand beside her. In the cramped confines of her workspace, he was so close she noted the faint aromas of aftershave and breath mint.

"God, this is a hellhole. What's with this space?"

Thea pushed her chair back as far as it would go, only an inch or two before it collided with her file cabinets. "I'm only here temporarily until a bigger space is ready for me."

"I'd go crazy if I had to work in here. It's claustrophobic, you know that?"

"Tell me something I don't know. Like why you're here."

"I came to see if you're all right. I didn't mean to scare you away last night."

Thea heard the concern in his voice. His blue eyes were on hers, concerned and warm. "Um, I-"

"Look, I apologize, okay? Can we start over?"

"I wasn't aware we'd started anything," she began then hesitated as his gaze speared her.

"Don't tell me you didn't feel it," he murmured his voice low and intense.

She felt the power of his gaze wrap around her, surrounding her with heat and a demand for truthfulness. "I felt it," she whispered. "I just didn't know how to handle it."

He blinked. "A woman like you?"

"A woman like me," she echoed. "A woman like what?"

"You know. Gorgeous." He gestured at her figure. "Sexy. I was going crazy wondering what you'd look like without the lab coat. And what I saw was better than any guesses."

Thea frowned. It was a compliment, no doubt. Not very graceful or tactful, but a compliment.

"So, what I'm saying if I came on too strong, I'm sorry, but I want to see you again."

Go on, say yes. You wanted to meet men. Here's one, live and in the flesh.

Thea edged back into her chair, considering the prospect of going to bed with Nick. *So he's not a dream lover and he's not a Dom, but he's a man with all the right equipment.* Her gaze flickered down his chest, past his trim waist and centered unerringly on his groin. *See, he can give you what you need right now.*

She dragged her gaze up again. "Fine."

Nick blinked again. "Fine? That means yes?"

"Yes. Want to come for dinner?"

"Dinner? I was thinking a drink, maybe a movie."

She shrugged. "Whatever you want."

"Dinner's fine. What time?"

She thought. What could she cook in a hurry and still be halfway decent? "Eight."

He nodded, a glazed look in his eyes. He wrote down her address and left. Thea watched him shamble away, grinning. If dinner went well, maybe they'd satisfy that heat between them...

Dinner went very well. She sat back, watching him eat the last bite of baked potato slathered with sour cream. He'd already devoured the steak smothered with mushrooms, the sliced tomato salad and half the loaf of French bread. It was by no

means an inspired demonstration of her cooking skills, but as a means of pleasing a man, it went very well indeed.

Thea sipped her wine, smiling in anticipation. Nick might be clumsy with his compliments, but he knew enough to bring her a bouquet of flowers, to hold her chair while she sat and to make dinner conversation.

"I can't tell you how good it is to get a home-cooked meal," he said as he pushed his plate away. "Thank you."

"You don't cook for yourself?"

"I'm a mean hand with a microwave and a barbecue grill, but that's about it."

She couldn't help it. She laughed. "You and a million other men. What is it with barbecues?"

He shrugged a shoulder, making the muscles in his chest ripple. "Guess it's a throwback to living in a cave. Go out. Slay woolly mammoth. Drag home. Burn. Eat."

"And let the little woman worry about the rest of it?"

Nick eyed her with a speculative glance. "I'm not touching that one. No matter what I say, I'll be wrong."

"Too true." She smiled to take the sting from her words.

His answering grin melted her bones. That sexy little dimple winked at her. He ran his fingers over his beard as he gazed at her with a contemplative look. She expected him to say something flirtatious.

Instead, he leaned back in his chair. "You said you'd been at the museum only a few weeks. Where were you before?"

"Chicago." It took her a moment to get her mind off the expanse of chest he displayed. He'd cleaned up for dinner, and he looked delicious in a chocolate brown and white striped shirt—unbuttoned just enough for her to catch a glimpse of that muscled chest. "I got my undergrad degree, did some post grad work and worked at the Field Museum—"

He nodded. "Great place. Why did you come here?"

"What is this? An inquisition?"

"Anything wrong with telling me?"

Thea shrugged. "I guess not. Better position, better pay. The usual."

"What's so hard about that?"

She glanced away, not willing to let him see there were other reasons. Her Master willing to cut her loose, for one. That still rankled. Even though there'd been no talk of love or long term between them, it still hurt that He could let her go so easily. Forcing her resentment under control, Thea brought her gaze back to Nick. He looked curious, interested in her. "What about you? How did you get here?" she asked.

"Like you, better opportunities. I did some field work in South America, met some guys from here and the rest is history."

There was more to his story than that. Why was he being discreet? He was a PhD and she'd never known one to be modest about his accomplishments. "Where did you get your degree, Doctor Jones?"

He sat back. "Is that a problem for you?"

"Should it be?"

Nick leaned forward, tenting his fingers under his chin. "If you want it to be. I'm not into titles."

"Just false modesty?"

"Where did that come from? One moment we're talking about work then next I'm arrogant?"

Thea caught herself before she answered. This wasn't getting them anywhere. She'd invited Nick for dinner to seduce him, or at least figure out if she wanted to seduce him. Getting into an argument with him wasn't the way to get his clothes off and into bed — and into her.

33

"Sorry. I guess my social skills got lost in that basement." Thea made herself comfortable. "What's the thing you like best about your job?"

"That's easy. Getting a dig. Finding something no one has seen for who knows how many years. Figuring out all I can about the people or culture who lived there."

As he spoke, his voice enthusiastic and compelling, Thea listened, understanding his zeal and searching into his character. It was clear he was committed to his job, seeing it as more than a paycheck, but a real passion. She liked that about him. It didn't hurt that when he spoke about a dig, his blue eyes lit up, sparkling with enthusiasm and his voice rose and fell with excitement.

From there, they went on to talk about other things, but avoided the risky topics of politics, religion and finances. They laughed at each other's funny remarks. He didn't belch or make rude eating noises. Someone had trained him right.

Speaking of training, she sighed. It was again abundantly clear he wasn't Dom material. He was all around nice and she'd find out soon if he satisfied her in bed, but she couldn't see a long-standing relationship. He couldn't give her what she wanted for the long term. Still, for the here and now, maybe he'd do.

"Are you ready for dessert?" she asked when they fell into an awkward silence.

"Dessert too?" He looked boyish and eager when she brought a cheesecake to the table. She'd sliced some fresh strawberries for a topping and served him a huge hunk. He licked his lips as she placed a generous serving of berries on top of his portion.

Thea contented herself with a tiny slice and some berries while he attacked his cheesecake. When he came up for air, she laughed at the sated, pleased expression on his face.

Oh, yeah, the way to a man's heart and all that... She didn't want his heart. Just his body, muscular and athletic and looking like he could go the distance and then some.

She lifted her eyes from his torso and caught him looking at her the same way she looked at him. As if each other were the real dessert, the sweet and satisfying end to their meal.

34

"Coffee?" she managed as she broke the connection between them.

"Ah, sure."

She rose and took their plates into the kitchen. He followed with another load.

"Thanks but you don't need to help. There's not enough room in this kitchen for two." She said the last with a little breathless gulp as the heat from his body reached her. "I'll just be a moment."

She took their coffee to the couch where she had background music playing, had lit some candles and the message was clear – time for romance.

Nick didn't need the hint as he edged closer, took her coffee cup and placed it next to his on a table. He took her hand in his and brought it to his lips. Thea's belly fluttered as he pressed his lips to her hand.

"I enjoyed dinner, thank you." He kissed the tip of her index finger. "The steak was perfect." He kissed the next finger, adding a little lick. "I love baked potatoes." Now he was at her ring finger, pressing a little kiss on the tip before drawing it into his mouth and sucking.

Thea inhaled, drawing a deep breath into her lungs. It did nothing to cool her down.

"How could you guess I'm a sucker for cheesecake?" Her little finger disappeared into his mouth. "And strawberries." He sucked and nibbled, his eyes watching her face.

She felt the heat in her cheeks spread down her throat and circle her breasts. Her Master had never indulged in such romantic gestures. How amazing! She'd never realized the tips of her fingers had direct connections to her pussy. "I took a chance," she murmured on a barely there breath.

"Are you going to take another chance with me?"

There was no mistaking his intent. Thea's breasts felt swollen, her nipples pebbling against the ecru lace in her bra. The one she'd selected after her shower where she'd prepared herself for sex. She glanced down, sure she'd see her nipples poking through

the lace and tenting her silky green wraparound top. Sensing his look, she glanced up to see his gaze fixed on her breasts, on the rise and fall becoming more rapid as her body readied itself.

He met her look, his eyes narrowing and the heat from them almost scorching. She licked her lips. "It's happening a little fast," she made herself say, just for form's sake.

Nick nodded. "Let's not pretend, okay?" He flicked a glanced at her lips as she moistened the lower one.

Thea's throat all but closed. "No pretending." Her fingers shook as she undid the tie at her waist.

Nick took over, parting the fabric slowly as if unwrapping a gift, his fingers warm against her flesh. When he folded it back to uncover first the valley between her breasts then her breasts themselves, a slow smile grew on his lips.

The lips he lowered to her skin, the lips he opened to run his tongue down the warm shadowy cleft to the single clasp of her bra. He murmured deep in his throat and released the catch. Edging the lace apart with his tongue, he continued his exploration.

It was almost too much for Thea. This sweet, tender and appreciative caress made her unsure. Her Master had always made her suffer and earn the privilege of sexual release and here she was about to cum with only Nick's tongue busy at her breast.

She squirmed. His tongue still occupied, Nick found the zipper to her black linen trousers and eased it down far enough to slip his hand inside. His fingers were hard, calloused at the tips and Thea squirmed again as he slid them into the top of her panties and down.

She heard his muffled exclamation when he found her pussy bare, freshly shaved and smooth. He raised his head and smiled, surprised but obviously liking the feel of her bare flesh heating under his touch. There was no hiding her reaction to the tip of his finger questing lower, lower, lower, ohmigod, he was at her clit!

He stopped.

Thea tightened her thigh muscles around his hand. "Don't stop."

"Not a chance." He pulled his hand back and quickly, before she could react, he pulled her trousers and panties down to her ankles then stripped them from her. "That's better."

He drew back, his eyes studying her from head to toe. It wasn't hard to tell that he liked what he saw. He swallowed hard and as she watched, the muscles in his chest tensed under his T-shirt and at his groin, an unmistakable bulge formed and pressed against his zipper.

She reached for it.

"Not yet." But he took her hand and pressed it against his erection. She could feel the heat through his soft brown corduroy trousers as she tried to make a fist around his cock. "I brought only one condom and I want this to last."

"I have some." She thought of the supplies in her bedroom. She had more condoms, enough for a week of nonstop fucking. She also had a number of sexual toys and devices, but would he want to play with her playthings? Or would they repel him?

"In that case," he sucked in his breath and his belly as he eased the zipper down over his cock. "I'm all yours."

Smiling, Thea reached for his cock, drawing it out past his green and blue plaid boxers and resting it on the palm of her hand. He was long, uncut and behind the plumflared cap, pulsing. She licked her lips in anticipation. Used to arousing her Master, she knew just how to suck cock.

A stroke here, a lick there, a swirl of the tongue around the head...oh, yes! But as she lowered her head to take him in her mouth, he stopped her.

"Not yet."

"What now?" she grumbled, eager to have at him, to have him primed to take her and show her his stuff.

He bent to undo his boots and kicked them off. While she watched, he stood and pushed his pants down and then whipped his T-shirt over his head. Thea's breath caught in her throat. He was lean, athletic, muscled where he ought to be and not an ounce of fat on him. Long legs, sturdy thighs and trim hips showcased his cock. She couldn't wait to get that delicious rod inside her.

"Bedroom," she invited as she got to her feet, resisting the urge to touch him. If she did, she wouldn't be able to wait. He touched her though, following her to stand behind her and cup her full breasts in his hands. He kissed her nape, concentrating on the spot where her shoulder and neck met and inhaling her scent. She tipped her head back in silent encouragement, but he needed none. One hand still at her breast playing with her nipple, pulling it and circling it, his other hand drifted down her belly, rested there a moment as if absorbing the softness of her skin.

Thea went still, wanting more, calling on her training to wait until he gave her what she craved. Nick didn't keep her waiting as he slid his fingers over her mound to slip between her fleshy lips and found the tip of her clit again. Her breath shivered as pleasure wafted through her.

"Okay?" he whispered against tender skin of her nape. His breath was warm and moist and sent heat straight to her center.

"More," she instructed, amazed how easily he picked up on her sensitive spots. "You got it. Whatever you want." Nick played with her clit, teasing it to grow longer, harder and when it did, he rewarded her with a bite on her neck. It didn't hurt, but it reminded her that he was male, he was large and as of now, he was in charge.

That made it even better. She spread her legs, inviting a deeper touch. He accepted, probing then pushing a finger into her hard and fast. Oh yes...

He pulled at her nipple, alternating that with a finger going deep, withdrawing to circle her clit then plunging back in as far as it would go. This was new for her, a man taking the time and effort to arouse her first. It was an exhilarating and exciting sensation, feeling the heat rise and flood her without having to work for it, or suffer

pain for it. Gripped in novelty, Thea reached back, gripped his hips and hung on as he pleasured her. When she was so close, so near the edge, he whispered, "Want to come?"

It wasn't the same as being given permission to come, but right now, that didn't seem all that crucial. Thea nodded, words couldn't get past her dry throat and then suddenly, she was awash. She came with his teeth in her nape, his finger up her pussy and his hand pinching her nipple. While she stood shaking, he pulled back and covered himself with a condom. Before she could turn to face him, he bent her over so far her fingers brushed the carpet and shoved his cock into her.

Ohmigod! Every nerve in her body snapped to attention. His groin fitted her like a second skin. With his cock so deep in her she could feel his pulse, his breath hot on her spine, he rested a moment.

"I knew it would be good," he rasped. "You're so hot. I can feel every bit of your pussy."

She rotated her hips against him.

"No, don't do that. I'll come too fast."

"I want you." She pushed back against him, taking him impossibly deeper. "Fuck me!" she cried, daring to issue a command she'd never risked voicing before.

Her words set him off. He reared back, plunging into her once more then set up a fast and hard rhythm that had her gasping for breath, her head dizzy, her body shaking under his rampage.

With that pace, he couldn't last long, but he made it incredibly good. Thea came again then again when his orgasm had them both shaking and spasming. Her knees gave out and she slumped to the floor, Nick following her down as his cock slipped out of her pussy. They lay bonelessly for a moment or two then Nick rolled off her and blew out a breath.

"Not exactly the way I should have done it."

She managed to prop herself up on an elbow to peer at his face. "What was wrong with that?"

He wiped the sweat from his chest. "I should have taken it slower, romanced you. Made it sweet."

Thea blinked. *Sweet?* She didn't want sweet. She wanted to be possessed, Dominated. Her pussy ached for more. She opened her mouth to tell him that then thought better of it. He was male, he was here and by the feel of his cock growing against her thigh, he was ready for round two.

She leaned over and kissed him, keeping it slow and seductive. She ran her tongue around his lips, teasing him by edging it in just past his lips and retreating. She poked her tongue into that sexy little dimple and scooted back to his lips. When his tongue came out to capture hers, she evaded it then taking him by surprise, snuck it past his and explored his mouth. He tasted sweet, like cheesecake and hot, like coffee. From a slow, almost leisurely greeting, the kiss turned hot and explicit, provocatively taunting, a come-and-get-me invitation Nick accepted with a thorough and devastating possession of her mouth. Their breaths clogged, steamed and echoed in her head as she gave herself up to the drugging sweetness of his mouth.

She took one last taste then eased back and sat up. "Let's take this to bed." Her voice sounded raw and needy even to her own ears.

He groaned, but got to his feet in one sure motion. He bent down and gripped her hand to lift her up. "What would you like to do next?"

"You'll see." She rose and pressed herself against him, feeling his chest expand and his cock swell against her body. He wrapped his arms around her and tilted his hips, shoving his now hard and erect cock between her legs.

"Where's your bed?" he grunted, his voice as raw as hers.

Thea walked backward, not letting go of Nick as she led him into her bedroom, only slightly surprised to see candles lit on the dresser, their vanilla fragrance floating through the darkened room. The sheets on her bed were turned back, the pillows

plumped. She caught sight of her wooden toy chest, the lid open, exposing her collection of sex toys. She should be frightened, knowing she hadn't done any of this, but Nick didn't have to know that. Instead, she felt exhilarated, turned on by the mystery, the unknowingness of it all.

Nick detached himself from her and detoured into the bathroom, throwing a *don't move* look at her as he closed the door behind him. Thea waited and dabbed a bit of perfume behind her ears, between her breasts and on her clit.

When he came back, condom gone, she took his hand and pushed him down on the bed. He landed heavily, legs open, displaying his erection and his balls. Thea licked her lips, openly enjoying the sight of him spread open for pleasure. When he grabbed her wrist and brought her down on top of him, she spread her knees and sat on his thighs. She evaded his seeking cock even as she rubbed herself against him. Nick groaned and put his big hands on her hips to keep her in place.

"Not yet." Rolling off him, she scooted to the side of her bed and retrieved her toy box. She sat tailor style beside him and displayed the contents. "Want to play with any of this stuff?"

He peered at the whips, the tawse and when she lifted them to show him the rest of her toys, he gulped. "You use those things?"

Thea flicked a glance at him. Even in the dim light, she could see the shock on his face. And the growing curiosity.

"What's that?" Nick ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

Thea picked up the restraints. "These are for tying me up." She lifted the cuffs and let them dangle from her hand. "Bondage can be a lot of fun."

He swallowed hard. "So I've heard. You like to be tied up?"

Her throat went dry. Oh yes, she liked it. Immobile, controlled, accepting anything her Master chose to hand out. Pain and pleasure, it all led to the intense orgasms she craved. "It can be fun," she agreed, her tone mild.

41

Nick sent her an assessing glance and gestured at the tawse and paddle. "How do you use them?"

"Shall I show you?'

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed again. Beads of sweat popped out on his forehead. "On you or me?"

"On me. Then you, if you want," she added as an afterthought.

Chapter Four

A combination of curiosity and excitement on his face, Nick asked, "What do you want me to do?"

"Look, this is a paddle. See, it's hard on one side, soft on the other."

Nick took the paddle from her, turning it from the wood to the furry side and back again. "You want me to spank you with this?"

Nodding, Thea explained, "Spanking brings heat to the skin. That makes the nerves more sensitive. That makes me more aroused."

"Spank your butt? Like a kid?"

"Oh, no," she laughed. "Not like a kid at all. It can be for discipline, but more to lead to pleasure." She rolled over and stuck her bottom in the air. "Smack me."

Nick looked at the paddle in his hand then lifted it and brought the furry side down against her cheek.

"Harder!"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"But I want you to. Do it again." It felt strange to be issuing instructions but how else would Nick know what she wanted? What she needed. "Use the other side."

He complied.

"You've got to mean it."

This time, he put a bit of force behind the paddle. Thea heard the swish of air an instant before the wood side hit her behind. She controlled her yelp. "That's it! Do you see a mark on my butt?"

"I don't want to hurt you!" Nick repeated, sounding upset.

"I want it. Do it again, please."

Again he complied, but this time he used the furry side, as if making up for the earlier hard swat. "That's it. No more."

Thea peeked at him from under her lashes. His face was furrowed, his mouth a grim line. Rolling onto her back, she reached up to smooth the frown away. "Okay. If that doesn't grab you, we can do something else."

His face brightened. "Like what?"

"You choose."

Nick pulled the box closer and rummaged through it. Thea watched his expression as he pushed aside the whip and two-tailed leather tawse to fondle a pair of metal Ben Wa balls and examine the two headed vibrator. "This does what I think it does?"

"Yeah. Pussy and ass."

"You like that?"

Controlling the need welling up her spine, Thea nodded. "There's nothing in there that I don't like."

"These?" Nick lifted the nipple clamps, holding one in each hand, the linking chain bouncing against his belly as he held them to his own chest. "They must hurt like hell."

"That's the point."

Thoughtfully, he stored everything back in the box. "I'm not into this."

"Okay." Thea tried to keep the disappointment from showing in her face and body language. "There's plenty we can do without those things."

"You won't need that stuff with me," he promised, boastful, a male sure of his prowess.

Thea nodded, hoping he could live up to his claim. Her Master had trained her so well that she still yearned for His possession, His knowing without words what she wanted. What she deserved. Being with Nick, even though he'd surprised her with that explosive orgasm, was new and tentative.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked in some confusion.

"Nothing. Just lie back and let me do all the work."

Again, something new. Thea didn't know how to act in this situation, but obligingly, she lay back against her pillows and let Nick arrange her body.

He placed her hands out to the side and nudged her thighs apart. Lifting one leg, opening her, he scooted down until he was at eye level with her pussy.

"Why do you shave here?"

"Uh, I feel more," she temporized, knowing he wouldn't be at all happy to learn her Master had required it and she'd kept the habit.

Nick traced her plump folds with a fingertip. "I can see everything," he murmured. "Your pussy, your clit. The way it tries to hide but I can see it." He tickled it.

Thea squirmed. "That feels good."

Nick moistened his lips as he bent his head to her. She waited, holding her breath, until his tongue tickled her, once, twice then settled in. Murmuring his pleasure, he licked one side of her creases then the other. When she moaned, he twirled his tongue over her clit.

She gripped his ears. "Don't stop!"

"Not a chance." His breath gusted hot and damp over her hot flesh as he used his tongue to push against her swollen pussy lips. This is too good. I like it this way."

"Ohmigod," she groaned as one fierce sensation after another arrowed into her pussy and shot up her spine. When she began to squirm, Nick put one hand on her stomach to hold her in place.

"Hold still." His words came harshly and instantly she obeyed, stilling her muscles. Nick's finger was hard and sure as he entered her, first one finger then two, twisting and spreading her open. With his tongue busy on her clit then breaking away to follow his fingers, Thea quivered in ecstasy.

"Ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod," she cried. "I need you now!"

In response, Nick took one more swipe of his tongue over her clit and reared back. Lifting her knees to make a cradle for his body, he took his rigid cock in hand, rolled on a condom and guided himself to her waiting cleft.

"Now?" he panted.

Thea couldn't talk, couldn't say a word. Instead, she lifted her hips and arched upward. She noted his control as he sank into her, just the crown then as she moaned, the shaft inch by inch until she was mad for him. "More," she managed when she finally caught her breath.

Her heart raced, she could feel her pulse as she grabbed his shoulders and brought him down to her. Face to face, his body a heavy and welcome weight on hers, she pressed her knees to his sides to bring him even closer.

His thrusts turned hard, deep and still she wanted him deeper. She clutched his butt with one hand, nails digging into the tense muscle, urging him on, as his shoulders lifted off the bed and his hips rocked back and forth.

In and out.

Harder. Deeper. Hotter.

Possessing her.

She bucked beneath him, not to dislodge him, but to take him even deeper into her body. Without his permission, she clenched, shuddered and creamed in an explosive, screaming orgasm.

Nick shouted then thrust into her fast and furious, his head thrown back, the muscles in his neck cording and his chest heaving until he plunged one last time, his cock thudding in her with the force of his heartbeat and finally, finally, his spine stiffened and he came hard in a jarring, pulsing climax.

His shattering release coming so soon after hers left her mindless, floating in a form of subspace that she would never have believed possible. Nick's weight wasn't a

46

burden, but a delight. His sweat, his hot breath still coming in gusts and pants washed over her neck and shoulders. His chest flexed against hers as he fought for breath.

Finding it, he rolled off her to collapse at her side. She rolled with him, not wanting to let go, not yet, not when her blood wasn't yet cool, her body not yet free of his imprint. Holding him close, she licked his nipple, taking the flavor of his body and making it a memory.

"Hold the thought, baby," he groaned. "I'm wiped out."

Thea forced air into her lungs and blew across his wet nipple. "Me too."

"Give me a few minutes."

"And then what?"

"I'll be ready for more," he managed through a huge yawn.

"Promises, promises," she murmured but he was already asleep.

She woke to feel him spooned behind her, his cock already delving in her pussy and his hands busy on her breasts. He tweaked and pulled at her nipples, hard and distended in his hands. This wasn't her Master, using her body as He pleased, but it was Nick, who had already proved he could give her what she needed. She murmured her pleasure and relaxed, letting him do what he wanted to her.

And what he wanted was to explore her body. With the hand under her clasping her breast, the other explored her wherever he could reach. It roamed from her chin to her belly, under her arm to trace the curve of her shaved armpit, down to her elbow, between her fingers, back to her rib cage and finally, when she was ready to scream in frustration, to her cleft.

It wasn't the same as waiting for her Master to allow her to come. Not at all. Not when she could reach back, grasp his fully engorged cock in her hand and squeeze then pull in a slow, gripping caress that had his breath hissing even as he grew impossibly longer and harder in her hand.

Touching him, controlling him even in this tiny way was mind-bending. Thea thought she'd known how good sex could be when release was held off until the very last minute. With every nerve screaming, every inch of her attuned to each and every sensation, holding, holding, hold, she'd grown used to the obedient control that delayed her orgasm until her Master allowed it.

This feeling, however, was way beyond that. Even as Nick pushed one finger then two, in and out of her pussy, making her blood steam and her pussy walls grab at his hand for more, she felt the same anticipation, only different. The sensation of her body crying for satisfaction was as it always was, only different.

And the difference was Nick, behind her, encouraging, whispering in her ear, coaxing forth every bit of pleasure. When she begged, something she'd learned never to do, he reared back and unerringly found her pussy with his cock.

Her breath exploded with the heat of him. The hard, pulsing, thrumming length of cock plunging into her as if he owned her. As if she owned him.

This was new. Unbelievable. With his cock pumping into her from behind, his fingers pulling and coaxing her clit, all she could feel was Nick, surrounding her, taking her.

It was good. Very, very good.

A long time later, when dawn was near, Thea rolled onto her stomach, her hand going to the spot where Nick had been. The sheets were cool now, but still rumpled from their sex. She smiled, fully sated. Nick hadn't disappointed her, in fact, he'd made it an evening to remember before he got up, kissed her and hunted down his clothes. She'd gone to the door with him, making sure that it was locked securely after him and had stumbled back to bed, eager for sleep now that her body was pleasantly exhausted.

"Ow," she yelped then yelped again as another blow landed on her bare butt.

"Quiet," a low, threatening voice said.

She turned her head to see who had smacked her then frowned as fear climbed her throat. "Who—"

"Did you not hear me? I told you to be quiet."

At those masterful tones, Thea's protest died in her mouth. Without another word, she got off the bed and on her knees to assume her submissive posture. With her eyes lowered and her hands on her thighs, palms open, she waited.

"You were told to wait for another Dom," the harsh voice continued. "Instead you acted like a slut and took the first man you met to bed."

She couldn't deny it. She had no idea who this man was, or how he got into her bedroom through a locked door and secured windows. Surprising and shocking herself, she had no fear for her safety, even as she knew she was about to be punished. Peeking from beneath her lowered lids, she saw a large, fleshy hand reach into her bedside box.

Withdrawing the whip, the hand moved out of sight. She heard the slight whistle as the leather thong uncoiled then a whisper of air before the lash landed on her lower back.

"On your knees."

"Yessir." She scrambled to obey and without further instruction, lowered her head to rest on the floor and raised her butt into the air for the next blow. It wasn't long in coming and as she counted the successive lashes, she felt the familiar and welcome heat spreading from her butt cheeks to her pussy. Thea felt herself moisten and her inner muscles clench and unclench in preparation of the stranger's possession. How she could feel this way, so quickly aroused and ready after the sex she'd shared with Nick was beyond her. She didn't question it.

"You have a strange way of showing your gratitude, slut."

Thea gasped as a particularly strong lash broke the skin on her butt cheek. The tip of the lash flicked the fleshy lip of her pussy, but she bit her lip, absorbing the pain along with her confusion. Gratitude for what? This wasn't her Master, she knew that. The voice, the attitude, the Dominance weren't the same. No matter how her old Master

had disciplined her, he'd never sounded...was it jealousy she heard in his voice? Yes, petulant and jealous, that's how the man sounded, but who?

"How did you get in?" she whispered between blows. "Who sent you?"

"Not a sound. Do not speak until I give you permission."

Another lash bit at her ass, harder than the ones before.

Swallowing her cries, Thea reached deep into herself. Controlling her reactions, feeling sensations rise within her was nothing new. She could handle the physical. It was curiosity that undid her. "Was it you who snuck in and made love to me? Did you clean-" The rest of her questions dissolved into a lingering cry as the force behind the lashes escalated.

"I told you not to speak. Have you forgotten your training so quickly? Do you need more lashing to help you remember?"

Thea shook her head, no. Her breasts swelled and her nipples hardened painfully as she waited, holding her breath, for whatever he would do next. He didn't keep her waiting.

"On the bed. On your belly."

Thea rushed to obey. The mattress dipped as he climbed behind her. His hands grabbed her hips, spreading her cheeks apart. Oh no, not like this! Not when she was unprepared, unlubed and so tight she knew he'd hurt her if he attempted anal sex. Her breath whooshed out as he held her still and plunged into her pussy.

"Like that, do you?" he grunted close to her ear. "Like a cock shoved high into you?"

She whimpered her reply.

He grabbed the back of her neck and turned her head to his. "What's that, slut?"

"Yes, yes, I like it," she confessed. Opening her eyes, she blinked then focused on his face. Or what should be a face, but there was nothing there. No facial features, only the merest suggestion of the shape of a large nose. No mask, either, just a blank. And

50

yet, she could feel his hard, rough body, feel his hands clasping her close to his groin and *ohmigod*, feel his cock plowing into her without pause.

He reached under her and pinched her clit. Pain! Heat. Need. The sensations flowing upward through her were overwhelming, rich, dark and searing. She came with a gush, her juices flowing. The man withdrew his hand and slapped her hard.

"Who gave you permission to come?" He withdrew but stayed close behind her. Thea felt his cock pulsing against her butt but he didn't enter her again. "Have you forgotten everything?"

She hung her head in apology. "Please, I couldn't help it. Please."

He got off the bed. "You don't deserve my cum."

Thea rolled over, trying to see him in the dim light of her bedroom, but one moment she could make out the silhouette of his body as he stood, the next, he was gone. No smoke, no mirrors, just nowhere.

She sat up, her mouth agape and her breath caught painfully in her throat. This couldn't happen! She switched on her lamp and stared. There was no trace of him. Her sheets were rumpled, the whip lay on the floor where it had fallen and there was the telltale aroma of sex in the air, but nothing else. The clothes she'd discarded in a hurry to get Nick to bed were now folded neatly on a chair. Her shoes were lined side by side under them.

Thea edged out of bed and tiptoed out of her bedroom into the living room, turning on lights as she went. The living room was tidy, as if she and Nick had never sprawled on the couch, exploring each other and leaving their coffee cups on the coffee table.

Where were the cups? Following a hunch, Thea glanced into the kitchen. There were no dirty dishes. The counters were clean. It appeared as though no one had cooked or eaten a meal there. She peered inside the dishwasher. Empty, but all the dishes they'd used were now clean, dry and stacked in the appropriate cabinets.

What was happening here? She was going mad! Thea reached out and grabbed the counter. It was hard and cold under her fingers, a grim reminder that she was here,

naked and shivering, in her kitchen. This was real, no dream. Someone had actually cleaned up after her dinner with Nick.

Who?

It couldn't have been Nick. Even if he had thought of it, there'd been no time. They'd had dinner, dessert and foreplay on the couch, followed by fantastic sex. Then he'd left. She'd have heard him moving about the kitchen and her small living room. And surely she'd have noticed the mess was gone when she walked him to the door.

No, it hadn't been Nick.

She didn't want to consider the alternative, but there was no other choice.

It had to be the same man who had just spanked her and made her come so easily. There couldn't be two weird guys getting into a locked apartment and doing things for her that no one had ever done.

But why? How?

Supporting herself with a hand on the wall, Thea stumbled back to her bedroom and paused in the doorway. *Ohmigod*, she was going crazy! She was the only one in her apartment and yet, while she'd been in the other room, someone had changed the sheets and freshened her bedroom. The old candles were gone. A new, freshly lit vanilla candle scented the air. She swiveled, looking for someone, something, but she was totally alone. She'd heard nothing, sensed nothing.

Thea grabbed a blanket and wrapped it around her shoulders. Shivering, she retreated into the living room and huddled on the couch. There was something seriously wrong here. No one snuck into other people's apartments and made like the good fairy and left without a trace other than a clean kitchen and a newly made bed. She had to be going mad. She needed to talk to someone, but who?

Thea eyed her phone. She could call her old Master...no she couldn't. How could she explain all that had happened and confess her lapse? Who then? The only person she'd met here was Nick and knowing his scientific mind, he'd laugh and think her bonkers.

What to do?

Chapter Five

"It's me, Master."

On the other end of the phone, Thea heard a small sigh. "I'm not your Master anymore, Thea."

"Yes, yes, I know, but I need to talk to you."

"Have you gotten in touch with the Dom I suggested?"

"No, Sir."

"Why not? It's not like you to be disobedient. Have you forgotten your training?"

"No, Sir," she repeated. "May I please speak?"

Another sigh. "Go ahead."

"Did you send someone to me?" she asked in a rush.

"I? Why would I do that? It's up to you to seek out another master and ask for his consideration."

"I know, Sir, but something very weird is happening to me."

"Explain."

Thea looked for the right words. None came. Instead, she mangled her explanation.

"Wait a moment," her ex-Master said, not bothering to hide his impatience. "You're telling me that someone, or something, is coming to your new place. Cleaning and organizing, getting you settled? Why didn't you do that yourself?"

"I had a ton of catch-up work at the museum," Thea mumbled, knowing her explanation sounded weak "I worked late."

"So you lived like a slattern?"

That hurt. Thea had always been wary of his temper and sarcastic nature and had gone to extraordinary lengths to keep him calm and happy. To have him vent his temper on her now stung. "You don't understand! Someone is breaking into my apartment! I don't know who!"

"Have you called the police?"

"There's nothing they can do. Nothing's gone, nothing's missing. I supposed I could charge someone with rape, but who? The invisible man? No one broke in. They'll think I let him in myself.

"Who was it?" he asked harshly.

"I just told you. I don't know. I've only got a glimpse. I couldn't see his face."

"He frightened you?"

Thea thought back. She should have been scared out of her wits, but somehow, she'd felt comforted and protected. Someone was taking care of her. "Not really. Not until he disciplined me."

"Sounds as if you needed it. What happened?"

Thea moistened her dry mouth. "First he came in and had sex with me and disappeared. Then, another time after I'd had er, someone over, he came back and whipped me."

After a few moments silence, her ex-Master said, "This *someone* also had sex with you? He's a Dom?"

"Yes. No, he isn't."

"And after that this vanishing disciplinarian appeared?" He didn't wait for her to respond. "This is serious. You need to get out of there. Why don't you move?"

"I just got settled. I don't want to go through all that again."

"What about your someone? Is he sneaking in?"

"No way. Besides, I'd know if it was him. And until I invited him, he didn't know where I live. I saw him out and locked the door after him." Thea took a deep breath. One thing she wasn't going to admit was how good Nick made her feel with consensual sex. He didn't need to exert masculine control over her. All he needed to do was touch her, explore her and let her body respond.

She liked that, liked it a lot. Yet, it didn't explain this other guy. "Did you send someone?" she asked again.

"Why would I do that? You're no longer my sub. What you do is up to you."

"But..."

"You'll have to handle this yourself, Thea."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"You'll have to figure that out for yourself."

Thea glared at the phone in her hand then dropped it on the couch beside her. Some help that was! All the resentments and anger she'd stored up or repressed during the time with her ex-Master came surging up, making her blood run hot and her breathing fast and raspy. Damn the man! Always so arrogant, commanding and demanding! She'd tried so hard to please Him, signing that contract that gave Him absolute sexual power over her. And when she needed Him, was He there for her?

Seething, she pulled herself to her feet. She was achy from sleeping in a cramped position and sore across the back, her butt and the tops of her thighs. Tempted to call in sick, tend her injuries and go back to bed, nonetheless she stumbled into the bathroom.

When she dropped her blanket and looked over her shoulder to see the welts, she was relieved to see they weren't as bad as she'd expected. She turned on the taps and stepped into the shower. Yelping as the blast of water hit her spine, she endured, keeping the water as hot as she could stand it. Shaving would have to wait until later, but she shampooed and conditioned before washing herself.

More limber, she completed her morning routine, but when she tried to put on panties and jeans, she couldn't bear the pressure on a particularly painful welt across her middle. She wiggled into a bra then took that off too. Today, she'd go commando,

or whatever the feminine equivalent of that was. All she could bear was a lightweight top that whispered over her bare breasts and a loose, full skirt.

Feeling tremendously conspicuous, she left her apartment a little later. If her old Dominant partner couldn't help her, she know only one other person who could.

But before she could ask him, she had some research to do. She went to work and scurried into the building and down into her tiny workspace. There she started looking. Online accounts, museum reports, historical and folkloric sites, seeking whatever she could find out about golems. She searched the Internet and read every word she could find. Golems were said to have powers of invisibility. They were said to have a heated touch and able to summon spirits from the dead.

Okay. She exhaled slowly. Two out of three. The last she didn't dare think about. It was too creepy to even consider.

The whole thing was too weird.

It was ridiculous to think that something as folklorish as a mythical man made of clay could have anything to do with the strange happenings in her apartment and to her, but what else?

She'd met two men since moving here and only one was real flesh and blood.

What was the other?

Chapter Six

"Hi, beautiful." Dropping a kiss on the top of her head, Nick came around to perch on the end of her worktable.

Thea glanced up, feeling warmth color her cheeks. She wanted to talk to him, but she needed to have more information at hand before she broached her theory.

He grinned and lowered his glasses to peer at her. "You okay?"

"Fine." She turned away from that tempting dimple and back to the book of Jewish folklore in her hand. "I'm busy."

"Yeah. Want to have lunch?"

"No."

"Dinner then. If I bring it, will you show me your toys again?"

"I thought you didn't like them."

"Always willing to learn something new," he replied, a gleam in his blue eyes.

Thea looked up, considering. She didn't have enough real data to make an educated guess, much less a deduction, but suddenly she reversed her earlier decision. Maybe Nick had some additional information. "Do you have a minute? Can I talk to you about something?"

"Now?" He checked his watch. "I thought you were busy?"

She turned to face him. "Something's been going on. Something weird."

"Besides your toy box?"

Thea shook her head. "I'm serious. Listen, ever since I moved here, something strange has been happening." She paused, counting back. "No, that's not quite right. It's only been in the last week."

"What are you talking about?"

She took a deep breath, released it and said with a rush, "Someone's been breaking into my apartment. Changing things."

His face grew grim. "Breaking into... Are you hurt?"

Thea evaded his questioning stare. "No, no, nothing like that. Just coming in, putting things away. Cleaning up."

Nick's brow furrowed. "Did you call the police?"

Why was that always the first question? "And say what? Someone broke in and cleaned up? Put my things away? It happened again after you left."

"Last night?" He leaned closer, gripping her chin, forcing her to look up at him and stared into her eyes. "What happened?"

"He – whoever, did the dishes. Remade the bed. And that's not all," she continued and told him about unpacking and organizing her closets and cabinets. Now that she repeated herself, it was easier, but no less crazy-sounding. "It's a perfect roommate, or maid," she tried a smile. "Cleans and leaves. Except – "

"What? What aren't you telling me?"

She pushed back her chair and stood. Turning her back to him, she slipped off her lab coat and raised the back of her loose silky top.

"What the hell?" He hissed in a breath. "You're hurt! Who did that?"

She pulled her top down over the lash marks. "After you left, something, him, I don't know who came in and was mad that you'd been there."

Nick cursed. "You have to call the cops, Thea. This isn't right."

"What can they do?" She shook her head. "Besides, I've had worse."

Nick put his hands on her shoulders, his fingers tracing the curves caressingly. "Those whips and things. God, Thea, how can you put up with it? This is cruel, inhumane."

"It's not like that, honest it's not." She placed her hands on his. Under her palms, her fingers were strong and hot. A momentary flash of how they'd felt deep in her

pussy made her go wet with want. Forcing the memory to one side, she focused on his question. "I'm used to this. It's the other things that are driving me crazy."

Moving his hands with hers still on his, Nick cupped her breasts and lightly squeezed, just hard enough to make her nipples pop. "I don't want you hurt."

"It's more than that." Thea leaned into his hand. "I need to figure out what's going on."

He pressed her closer, careful not to touch the wounds on her back. "All right, from the beginning. When did this start?"

She turned and burrowed into his chest. This morning he smelled of coffee, toothpaste and laundry softener. The homey aromas comforted her. and astonishing her, created a feeling of security. Wrapping her arms around his waist, she murmured, "The day we met. When I got home."

Nick stiffened and held her away from him. "And you think I did this?"

"No, of course not!" He relaxed slightly, but his body remained tense and unyielding. She cuddled closer, seeking reassurance. "But that's when it began. Little things at first. Like I'd be thinking I needed to do something and it'd be done. I thought I'd done it myself and just forgotten."

"But you didn't." Nick pushed back to examine her face. "What else?"

She told him of all the little and not so little things that had happened. She hesitated, "Sometimes it scares me. Sometimes it feels good, like someone is looking after me, taking care of me."

Nick's frown creased his forehead. His eyes turned wary. "Are you saying you're not scared?"

"I guess so. In some ways, it's what every woman wants, a wife to take care of all the house stuff."

He grunted. "Yeah, like that's what happened last night." His hands gripped her hips and tightened. "What did happen?"

60

Thea hesitated. How much could she tell him? She moistened her lips. "After you left, I went back to bed. Somebody...something was there. Uh-"

"What did he do? Who was it?"

"I don't know. I couldn't see his face. He spanked me then he...he..."

"Raped you?" Nick asked, his voice raw. "Oh, God, Thea, you have to report this!"

"No, not rape. It was like...like before."

"Before what? When you were with me?"

"Oh, no," she refuted, shaking her head. "Like a relationship I was in before. I..." she paused, wondering how to explain how it was with her old Master. How glad she was to be out of that particular D/s relationship.

"With someone who used those whips and things on you?"

Thea nodded. "But I agreed to it," she stressed. "I wanted it."

"You like feeling pain? With sex?"

"Sometimes. It adds to the pleasure."

He stepped back, clapping a hand to his forehead. "God, how stupid can I be? You were in one of those dominance things?"

"I'm a submissive," she confessed. "I need a male Dominant, a Master."

He blew out his breath. "Then what are you doing with me? Am I just a fill-in until some heavy-handed man comes along?"

Her glance fluttered away.

"I am." He lifted her chin, forcing her to look at him. "That's all it meant to you?" She lowered her eyes. "It was good."

He shook his head. Stepped back. At the door, he stopped, studying her. "I don't feel right about this, but I can't let you stay alone with someone coming in and forcing you to have sex. I'll bring an overnight bag with me tonight."

"You still want to come over?" she asked in confusion.

"Oh, yeah. I do."

Thea licked her lips. "Could you do something for me first?

"What is it?"

"Could you hold me again? Like you mean it? I'd like to feel something else other than that thing's hands on me."

Nick hesitated. "Here?"

Pointedly, she looked around her small, enclosed space. No one could see in. They were alone. "Unless I disgust you."

"No. Not that. I don't want to hurt you."

"If you stand behind me and put your arms around me, it won't hurt." She rose from her chair and pushed it out of the way. There was very little room left in the work area, but she turned, giving him her back and eased into him.

Hesitating, Nick stood still and she thought he wasn't going to touch her, but then his hands came up, slowly and gently, to caress her bare arms and slide around to cup her breasts. "Is this okay? Anything hurting?" he murmured in her ear.

"Nothing I can't handle." She eased back, fitting herself to him. "If feels good."

Closing her eyes, she concentrated on his hands, large with long slender fingers, caressing her breasts. She glanced down, enjoying the sight of his tanned fingers, the knuckles scarred with old scabs, the tips rough and catching against the fabric of her top.

"Is this what you want?" he whispered, his breath warm and moist against her ear. His hand stilled on her body.

"You know I do."

"Even though I'm not a Dom?"

"You're my lover. Aren't you?" Thea waited, holding still while his hands didn't move.

"Guess I am." Nick went still, as if absorbing the meaning. "You want more?"

"Everything you want to give me," she whispered.

"I can do that," Nick promised.

Thea shivered as he caressed the curve of her shoulder before edging his thumbs into the valley between her breasts. He delved deeper, his finger hard and calloused against the soft, sensitive flesh. "You're not wearing a bra," he noted, his voice getting lower, raspier.

"No panties, either," she murmured and moved her hips suggestively against him.

"Yeah"? He tilted his hips and pressed his cock, already hard and pulsing behind his jeans, into the space between her legs. "I'd better check that out."

Nick lifted her skirt, dragging it up her leg, past her thigh and into her hand. "Hold this," he commanded. "I have to do a little scientific research."

Thea chuckled. "Oh, all in the advancement of science."

His hand smoothed over her belly and down over the bare skin of her most intimate place. "I like this," he whispered and ran his tongue around her ear. "I can feel everything."

Shivering with anticipation, Thea moaned. "I like it too. Touch me. Please."

A finger snaked between her thighs and went unerringly to her joy spot. Now that he knew where she liked to be touched, he applied himself to circling her clit and flicking it until he coaxed it to come out and play. Thea felt his skin get hot, his breathing change and opened her legs, spreading herself for him.

"Now? Here?"

In response, she reached back and palmed his cock through his clothes. She tried to get his zipper down, but it wouldn't move over the bulge he made. He pulled back and slid it down himself, but before he could bring out his cock, she reached in and did it herself. Hot in her hand, pulsing with heat and engorged, ready for action, he was smooth on the surface and hard beneath. She couldn't wait until he put it in her.

63

"Ah," he groaned as he found his place and slid slowly, teasingly into her. It felt so good, so welcome, just right.

"Just a taste," he groaned again. "No condom." He pulled out and tucked himself away again.

Thea turned. "I could help," she offered, already salivating at the way he'd taste in her mouth.

Nick swatted away her hands at his zipper. "Later."

Hours later, after catching herself daydreaming about the next time with Nick, Thea folded the tiny white carton from Nick's Chinese takeout dinner and dumped it in the trash. Her gaze kept returning to his suitcase in the hall. He'd said an overnight bag, but this one looked like he was moving in.

And what's wrong with that? You wanted a man and here one is. He's already proved he can satisfy you. Agreed to be your lover. Thea frowned. He'd done that, but he wasn't a Dom.

"Are you finished in there?" Nick asked.

She wiped the counter and turned off the light. "Do you want the shower first?"

"I did some online research this afternoon," he said instead of answering her question.

"You too? About what?"

"Two things." He held up a finger. "One, this dominance thing. It doesn't always have to be about hurting. A man can be a Dom without hurting his submissive."

"Or the other way around," Thea corrected. "Women are Dominants too."

Nick frowned. "That doesn't seem right to me. I like women who know their own minds the way you do, but I don't think I could get off being some woman's whipping boy."

"But being the Master appeals to you?"

64

"I think I could get into it. I like being in control." Nick wriggled his eyebrows in an old-fashioned leer. "Yeah. Men have been the strong ones, in power since caveman days. I see no reason to change something that works."

She grinned at his reasoning. Something told her that he had done more than research. Or rather, that his research had led him into some graphic imaginings. She'd find out more about that soon enough. "And the other subject you researched?"

"Your golem."

"Mine? Hardly. In fact, I haven't even thought about it." That was true. After the time she'd spent this morning in research, her job and thoughts of Nick naked and deep in her had funneled her concentration in other directions. "Don't tell me you believe in that nonsense?" She spoke like a kid whistling in the dark, trying to convince herself that no bogeyman waited to leap out of the shadows.

"Think about it. You unwrap the golem. You need help and somehow, after you've handled the thing, you get it."

"Too weird." Her protest sounded weak, but then she'd already come to much the same conclusion. She merely needed Nick to verify her findings, prove to her she wasn't going insane.

"But you did think about things you wanted. Your place, a lover."

She laughed. "And you think the golem supplied them?"

"Laugh if you want to, but it fits."

"You think I brought the golem to life?" Even after considering the possibility, saying the words make the whole idea absurd. Impossible. Still...

She considered his theory. If it was the golem, ridiculous as that notion was, his actions were escalating. They'd surprised, confused and scared her at first, but he'd done nothing threatening. All his activity was focused on making her life easier. Laundry, unpacking, cleaning up and organizing. Thea sighed. She had nothing to complain about there.

She remembered playing with herself, finding the vibrator unsatisfying and wishing she was under her Master's control. The thing, someone, the golem, she reluctantly admitted, had appeared and granted her wish, Dominating her and allowing her a shattering release. It was only after Nick and she had indulged in lavish sex that the golem had shown displeasure. He'd acted like a man whose pride had been hurt.

"That's too crazy. It's way beyond woo-woo land. I can't believe a clay figure can be animated and act like a jealous lover."

"Who else? You touched it, thought about the things you needed and bingo, your slave goes to work on them. Your apartment gets cleaned up, you get sex. Great sex if I say so myself."

Thea grinned. "You can say so."

His eyes turned a deep, dark blue. She read desire and something more, deeper, a bit frightening, but tremendously exciting at the same time. She forced herself to look away, breaking the heated connection between them. "There's a flaw in your reasoning."

When he frowned at her, she explained. "If the golem thinks it's my slave, how come it got mad when I slept with you?"

His grin flashed. The dimple in his cheek deepened. "Maybe it was jealous?"

"Slaves are supposed to do what the master wants. Not the other way around."

"Well, maybe he thinks you have a committed relationship? After all, if I was folding your undies and changing your sheets, I'd be pretty damn possessive myself."

"You would?" The idea made her pulse beat faster. "Would you do that for me?"

"Not a chance! Though if you wanted to do the same for me, I guess I could live with it."

"Sexist pig." She smiled as she said it, testing the link between them.

Nick shrugged. "Just getting into this master thing."

"Right. I wanted a new Master and you think you fit the bill? Maybe the golem didn't approve of your technique?"

"How was the golem supposed to know I wasn't into kinky?" He didn't sound hurt that she'd put down his mastering skills. Instead, he appeared serious.

"And now you think you can be? 'Kinky'?"

"I'm willing to try. If you're willing to try with me."

"You have to be joking. You have to learn how to be a Dominant. It takes time and effort. Serious practice. You have to believe in the lifestyle."

"If it's something you want, hey, I'm willing to give it my best shot."

Even as anticipation of helping Nick practice bloomed within her, she smiled. Her ex-Master had never considered switching, but maybe that would work with Nick. They could trade functions as necessary, while she instructed him and then switching back into her preferred role as the submissive one. "You're nuts. You know that?"

He moved to her and took her into his arms. "Nuts about you."

Thea rested her head against his chest. "I must be crazy too."

"So where do we start?"

With a long, thoughtful look at him, she made up her mind. Sinking to her knees, she assumed a submissive position and lowered her head to the floor.

"What are you doing?"

"This is a submissive pose," she answered without lifting her head. "I use it to tell you I'm ready for whatever you want of me."

"Hm. How fast can you get your clothes off?"

She laughed and got to her feet. "Doms tell their subs what they expect, not ask them to do things."

"Well, I'll get the hang of it. You mentioned something about a shower?"

Thea nodded.

"We'll take one together," he said, making it an order.

Bowing her head submissively, but then, peeking at him from under her lowered eyes, Thea spied his grin and laughed again. She caught his hand and tugged him to her bathroom. Nick wasted no time casting off his T-shirt, cords and boots.

"Hey, wait a minute," she protested, "I'm supposed to do that for you!"

"Too slow." Then in his boxers and socks, he stripped her bare.

Thea turned on the water while he tugged off his remaining clothes then stopped, her hand still on the faucet while she stared at his nude body. Last night, they'd been in such a fever to get naked she hadn't taken the time to get a good look at him. Now, in the bright light of her bathroom, she took a long, thorough look. He was lean, but well muscled and athletic, his biceps cleanly defined, his hips trim and his butt pattable.

"Nice butt." Thea patted it then ran her hand down the curve of his cheek, letting her fingers trail the warm furrow. He stilled, his glance startled then he relaxed and let her explore. She did, running her fingers down between his legs, to the incredibly soft and tender space below his balls then clasped them gently in the palm of her hand. She rolled them in her fingers and looked up to see his face.

His expression told it all. With his head was tipped back, eyes closed, his mouth half open as his chest expanded to take in a fresh breath, his posture gave him away. He was a man tipping over the edge. Smiling, Thea moved a bit to take his cock in her free hand and with a slow caress, drew her fingers down the base.

Shuddering, Nick got himself under control. He removed her hands and gestured her into the shower. It was a tight squeeze and in order to bathe, they had to take turns under the water. Thea braced for the sting of water against her welts, but by now they had subsided enough to be bearable.

Gently, Nick soaped her down, taking care of her breasts then slowly, delicately, he washed between her legs. He fingered her clit, pushing first one then two fingers into her pussy. She quivered as the pleasure washed through her and then, when he mimicked her earlier action and ran a finger between the cheeks of her butt, she leaned away from him, presenting her ass for his pleasure.

The motion was instinctive, a result of careful training and response to cues learned from her ex-Master. Nick, although he had no training, seemed to know what to do without a cue. He positioned her in front of him and ran a hand down her cheek, before smacking it with his hand.

Thea bit back a groan, hiding not a flicker of pain, but the huge satisfaction spreading from her stinging butt throughout every vein in her body. She put her hands on her knees and braced herself for whatever he wanted to do next.

"Like that?" Nick queried, even as he slapped her butt again, this time harder.

Thea nodded, not trusting herself to speak. His smacks should hurt, but then she realized he was careful to touch her where her skin was unbroken, unbruised.

"I could get into this," she heard him murmur, his voice low and almost indistinct, but threaded with a masculine note that made her knees tremble.

For an instant, it reminded her of the low tones of the unseen man, the man who'd disciplined her after she and Nick had made love the first time. The next instant, that thought was gone, as Nick pushed her to her knees facing him.

"Suck me," he commanded.

Joy trilled through her as she hastened to obey. She lapped the tip of his cock, reveling in the taste of him then sucked him into her mouth and went to work. It wasn't work, however, but satisfaction in giving him pleasure that had her throat muscles and her tongue busy. She lapped. She tickled, she caressed every inch of his swelling cock until he shuddered and pushed her head away.

"I have to be in you," he groaned as he gripped her shoulders and hauled her upright. He lifted her and on the downswing, impaled his cock in her tight pussy. Water cascading over his shoulders drowned their mingled gasps. She spread her legs and gripped his waist, clinging to his shoulders as he lifted then lowered her repeatedly, each stroke of his cock going deeper, deeper still, until she thought she'd be split in two.

69

The steam from their bodies misted around them. The water cooled and yet he didn't pull out. She clung to him, bracing herself against the slippery tiles and moaned each time her inner muscles clenched and released his cock. It couldn't last. It was too good to last, but when she came, it was much too soon. His orgasm, following hers, speared her to the wall. She felt his cock, his whole body, spasming as he came in a great gush.

His muscles trembled as she released him from her grip and slid down to collapse in a heap at his feet. Nick leaned against the wall, his chest heaving as he fought for air. The water dripped down his chest, cleansing his cock as she tipped her neck back to swallow what she could get of him.

At last, shivering, he turned off the taps and reached down to lift her to her feet and clasped her to him. She cuddled with her head lo his chest, hearing the thunder of his heart ease as he recovered. With a slight tug, she freed herself, stepped out of the shower, her toes squishing the soggy bath mat, and handed him a towel. He took it, but instead of using it on himself, he dried her with slow strokes, seducing her all over again. Then he handed her a fresh towel and with a gesture, allowed her to minister to him.

"Come to bed," she whispered, confused by his combined tenderness and the burgeoning Dominance in him. She edged past him to the bathroom door, but he stood where he was, his eyes on his reflection in the mirror.

Puzzled by his lack of response, Thea moved closer. "Nick?"

His eyes flickered to hers then back to his own reflection. She dropped the wet towel and lowered herself to her knees before him and bent to put her forehead on his toes. His startled gasp gave way to a pleased murmur when he realized she prostrated herself as his submissive.

"Does this mean you still want me to Dominate you?"

Thea recognized the deeper tones in his voice and rejoiced. She nodded then pressed a kiss on each of his toes. She tasted fresh, clean male flesh, but under her lips,

it changed, becoming dry, hard, rigid. She lifted her head, staring as unbelievably, his feet turned to clay.

Her mouth parted as the clay rose up his long legs, changing flesh to hard-baked mud. Cracks appeared and spread over his belly, his chest and up past his throat into his face. Now she recognized the figure before her, a life-sized creature, the golem. Nick's face altered, the familiar planes and angles disappearing under overlarge eyes, bulbous nose and wide open mouth. His facial hair disappeared, as did his dimple, coated with a thick layer of clay.

Ohmigod! She rose to her feet, her own mouth opened in a silent scream as the tracing of words in an unknown language appeared on the golem's forehead. Only the expression in the eyes was Nick's. It commanded her to do something, but what?

Mind racing, she thought back, struggling to remember all she'd researched and everything Nick had told her about golems. Something about a command to give the golem life. Something about erasing the first word... She snatched up the still damp towel and darted in close to the figure.

Thea rose to her tiptoes and lifted the towel. She could just reach the golem's forehead and extending her arm up, dabbed at the first letters. A howl broke forth from the golem's open mouth and its arms came up to push her away. The clay cracked and bits of it fell to the bathroom floor.

More came off in her hand as she held on to its shoulder and scrubbed as hard as she could at his forehead. He howled again, the sound wordless and agonizing, blasting her ears. He threw her off and she landed hard against the edge of the tub.

Forcing the pain in her shoulder away, Thea scrambled to her feet and dragged the edge of the towel through the water remaining on the bathroom floor. She climbed onto the porcelain edge of the tub and propping herself with one hand on the tile, she whacked the wet towel against the golem's forehead. He screamed and lifted one hand to protect himself, but Thea was quicker and scrubbed at the etchings again.

The golem howled, his arms flailing wildly, but she dodged them and neither connected with her. Toiletries went crashing to the floor. His fist smacked the mirror so hard it cracked. She wet the towel again and slapped it against his head.

Slowly, so slowly she wasn't sure it would work before he managed to dislodge her from her perch, the words on his head dissolved.

Thea held her breath. As the etching on the golem's forehead disappeared, the clay changed. It grew moist and supple, becoming warm as clay turned into flesh before her eyes.

Nick's flesh!

Nick's nose, eyes, cheeks and mouth. He turned his head from side to side, releasing tension from his stiff neck and as the clay receded down his body, dropping from his torso, his arms grew strong and hard again.

Thea tore her gaze from his bewildered face to his legs. The clay there fell away, revealing the sturdy muscles in his thighs, the curve of calf and finally, ankles and feet. In a moment, the clay was gone as quickly as it had appeared. Not even a crumble remained on the wet bathroom rug.

Drawing in a huge, shattering breath, Nick held her to him, gasping as his lungs expanded and his heart raced. He shook himself, shaking off the effects of the clay and then stared at her. "What the hell happened?"

"You..." She stopped to gather her senses. "It was you! The golem, you, in my bed, doing all those things."

Nick blinked. His eyes narrowed then opened wide. "What do you mean, the golem?"

"Don't you see?" she cried. "Somehow it heard what I wished for, even if I didn't say the words." She paused, remembering then rushed on. "I wanted a man and there you were -"

72

"Now, wait a minute," Nick interrupted. "I wanted you the minute we met. He stopped short. "Well, maybe not the minute we met, but by the time you left my office. That wasn't any golem acting for me. Besides, I'm a scientist. I don't believe in things taking over my body."

"I wanted a lover," she continued, ignoring his disbelief.

"And there I was?" he asked, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

"I wanted a Dom," she whispered, as realization sank in. "And it, he came to me and disciplined me."

Nick's eyes darkened. "Instead of being the slave, he acted like the master you wanted."

Thea nodded. "Ohmigod, Nick, it really was him and you, all mixed together."

He folded his arms over his bare chest. "This doesn't make sense."

She sat down on the edge of her bed. "Maybe not, but I wanted those things and here you are. I had certain goals and they've come true. Or almost true. We've made love and you..."

"You unwrapped the golem too," she breathed, certain now she had the explanation. "In your office. I wasn't the only one who touched it. Did you have thoughts about me then?"

Nick narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, I guess so. There you were, all gorgeous and sexy. Why wouldn't I think about you?"

"You see? That's what happened!" she crowed triumphantly. "The golem obeyed us both!"

"Fucking unbelievable."

"Yeah, right," she whispered. Thea stared at their reflections in the mirror. Nick still appeared dazed, his body taut and ready to repel another invasion. His blue eyes burned into her reflection and in an instant, Thea knew what she had to do. She turned to look directly at him. "Are you still willing to be my Dom? My Master?"

Before her eyes, his cock grew, swelling to its full extent. She wanted it, wanted it desperately, but until he answered her, she didn't dare touch him.

"Is that what you want? This golem thing hasn't scared you away?"

In answer, she sank into her submissive position. "If you agree, we'll figure out what works for us. I'll be the best submissive you'll ever have." She paused. "On second thought, the *only* submissive."

Nick's laugh took over the space around them, banishing any doubt in her mind. "My new goal is to be the only Dom you'll ever want or need."

"Aah." Gratefully, Thea bent her head lower, touching her forehead to his bare toes. "What do you want of me, Master?"

Nick's toes flexed under her touch. She smiled to herself, knowing that at least in the beginning, she would be doing as much instructing as obeying. It wasn't exactly in the Dominator's Handbook, if there was such a thing, but she and Nick could make up their own rules as they explored the mutual exchange of power so necessary to the D/s life.

"Let's see," Nick said. "We're already naked. You're at my feet in a humble position. It feels good to be in control."

Thea glanced up his long, sturdy legs. There were scars on his kneecaps, which she kissed, then tongued him slowly up his thighs. The long muscles jumped under her lips and she heard his quick intake of breath. She paused, her mouth almost level with his cock.

Nick needed no coaching. "Make me hard, Thea."

"Yes, Sir," she murmured, her mouth already opening to take him in. That first taste, so new, so manly. His skin was clean and fresh with no lingering hint of his being overtaken by the golem. Thea breathed in his scent and closed her eyes to control her joy.

Remembering all her training and wanting to make this first time extra special for Nick, she took her time, retreating to kiss the tip of his cock. He was already hard and she wanted to make it last for him. Learning him, letting him learn from her, Thea teased the side of his shaft with her fingernails, then slid her lips down until she could feel her finger and thumb at the base of his cock.

Nick felt it too. His gasp was all she needed to know. Smiling, she brought her head back up, making an O with her mouth and sliding back down his cock. He quivered. She felt rewarded.

"That's it. Ah, do that again," he instructed, his voice harsh and needy.

Thea nodded. Easing back just a bit, she kept one hand playing in his dark pubic hair while she made a second mouth with her other thumb and finger just below her lips. When she sucked him in as deep as she could take him, she tasted a bit pf pre-cum on his tip. Like his body, his juice was fresh and clean, slightly salty and slightly sweet.

She wanted more, wanted all of him, but she could wait. This was for him, bringing him every bit of pleasure she could give him. She licked the underside of the head, flicking her tongue against the little nubbin of flesh. He gasped and gripped her shoulders hard. When she slid off, her second mouth grasping him until he was almost free of her, he lost it.

"No more. I have to be in you. Now!" Nick stepped back, freeing himself. With one quick, sure movement, he lifted her to her knees, positioned her over the side of the tub and came down behind her.

Thea spread her legs, giving him better access and waited, breath heaving as her breasts touched the cold porcelain. In a moment, she forgot the chill as the heat of his body enveloped her. He gripped her hips, nudged in and with a forceful thrust, unerringly found his way.

Thea gritted her teeth at the initial plunge. It was good, so good! To be taken in this masterful way by a man who knew her body, knew what she wanted.

In. Deep. Hard. Hot!

Out. Aching, craving, submitting.

In again. Ohmigod, could she hang on?

Nick plunged and plunged again. Her hips buckled, her knees hurt and her entire body trembled under his passionate assault. His cock teased and tormented her into deeper and more frantic sensations. Thea gripped the tub, holding on, holding off, wanting to come but unable to until he gave her permission.

"Please please please," the words tumbled from her lips.

"No! Not yet."

Thea closed her eyes, struggling for the last bit of control to withstand the sensations surging through her body. Her head whirled, her body floated on a tide of need. Against her training, she felt her orgasm starting and couldn't hold back. Her juices flooded, cascading down her thighs and setting off his spasms.

She felt his body stiffen behind her, her breathing harsh and rasping against her shoulders as he bent over her. Pleasure still cascaded through her as he took one last heavy inhalation and then erupted into her. On and on he convulsed, shooting his cum high into her, sending them both crashing to the bathroom floor.

Incredibly, he managed to land beneath her, softening her fall. She sprawled over him, her head on his chest, their legs entwined. His body heat blanketed her, making her feel protected and safe. Words escaped her. She could only struggle for breath as he did. She felt his cock on her thigh relaxing and cupped it gently in her hand. It curled up in her palm, at ease in her care.

Cradling his cock, she managed to lift her face and look into his. His eyes were closed, his mouth open as he fought to regain his breath. As she watched, his expression lost the intense look of satiated pleasure and eased into his normal appearance.

Nick opened his eyes. They were still dark, hazed and drowsy but they told her everything she needed to know. Still, she waited for him to tell her.

He didn't keep her waiting. His breath still uneven, his voice rasping, he murmured, "You pleased me, Thea."

"I'm glad, Master. Anytime you want me, I'm yours."

"Mmm." Nick's eyes closed. "Soon. We'll get into that bondage thing. I want you tied up so I can do what I want to you."

Thea watched him as he drifted into sleep. He might not know it yet, but Nick was going to be a marvelous dominating Master.

Her Master.

Hers.

About the Author

A degreed historian, Bonnie Hamre puts her travels in the US, South America and Europe to good use in her novels. Multi-published in contemporary and historical fiction, Bonnie has recently moved to the Northwest, where new adventures await her.

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