



BY INVITATION ONLY

KIT TUNSTALL

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Edited by Ann Richardson

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Warning:

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Chapter One

The dress arrived with a cryptic note. Tessa opened the door at the first knock, after the broken doorbell gave a strident peal that faded into a torturous shriek. A UPS driver, wearing a dark brown uniform, handed her a clipboard. "Delivery for T. Grenville."

"That's me."

"Sign in the electronic box." He indicated the laser pen attached to the clipboard, and Tessa scrawled her name.

She took the large box from him, and he left, whistling *Old Susannah* off-key. Tessa brought the box in the house and closed the door behind her.

After she set the box on the threadbare couch, Tessa searched for a pair of scissors or a box cutter. She settled for a kitchen knife and returned to the box. She carefully opened the tape. She expected to find the wallpaper and carpet samples Linden-Ashby Interiors had promised to send by mid-week. It was already Friday.

Tessa removed the tissue paper and gasped at what lay beneath it. It was a garment of some kind, made of emerald green velvet and satin. Tessa lifted the lid of the box to verify the address.

T. Grenville

624 Bluegate Rd., Rt. 2

Naples, Oregon

It was supposed to be her package, but she knew it couldn't actually be hers.

Even though she was positive it was a mistake, Tessa lifted out the material. It fell to the floor with a soft whisper, as the velvet slid through her fingers. It was an elegant evening dress, reminiscent of a ball gown from more than a century ago, minus the bustle.

The fitted bodice plunged daringly, and was trimmed with shiny satin in the same shade of green as the dress. The sleeves were tiny caps of wispy lawn, in a paler shade of green. The skirt flared out at the waist, and the hemline was piped with satin. When she turned the dress, Tessa found a discreet zipper at the back.

Very gently, Tessa laid the dress across the worn couch and looked into the box. She hoped to find an explanation. Instead, she found a pair of emerald green kid slippers—just her size, a seven narrow—a long black cloak, and a mask. She lifted the mask from the paper to admire its beauty. It was plain green satin, with tiny seed pearls stitched at the corners of the eyes to imitate feathers. It was a half-mask, meant to cover only from her eyebrows to the bridge of her nose. Satin ribbons extended from the sides, to fasten the mask around her face.

She gave into temptation and lifted the mask over her face before she walked to the cracked mirror in the hallway that had hung there since long before she was born. The mask brightened the hint of green in her brown eyes and minimized her blunt nose. Her mouth appeared full and lush, and the color of the mask was very complimentary with her russet curls.

With a sigh, Tessa removed the mask and laid it beside the dress and slippers, before she delved back into the box. When she found a small cream card, at first she assumed it would have the owner's name listed. Instead, in bold, slashed letters, the note read:

A car will be sent for you at eight this evening, and will wait exactly five minutes. If you don't come out, or if you aren't alone, the car will drive off. The dress and accessories are

yours with my compliments, regardless of your decision, Tessa.

There was no signature or clue as to who had sent the note. The sight of her name in the black scrawl sent a frisson of excitement darting through her. The UPS driver had not accidentally delivered this box to her. Clearly, the sender had intended she receive it.

It was probably Sue Ellen. Her best friend was notorious for strange gifts and games of intrigue, and Tessa didn't imagine the four hundred miles that now separated her from Portland would keep Sue Ellen from her fun. Tessa put the card and dress back in the box, then haphazardly tossed the shoes and mask atop it, before she covered it all with the cloak.

It was a shame the dress would go to waste, but she didn't believe in taking chances. Both times she had done so, it had cost her too dearly. First a broken heart, followed by a ruined career years later.

She returned to the kitchen where she had been cleaning. Tessa replaced the rubber gloves she had removed in her haste to open the door and attacked the years of gunk left on the stove by her disinterested father. She had been at it less than five minutes when she impatiently ripped off the gloves and tossed them aside.

She muttered to herself as she stomped into the living room. Tessa tripped on a hole in the carpet and barely regained her balance. She kicked the spot before she returned to the couch and gently lifted the dress, shoes, and mask from the box. With an impatient sigh, she walked up the creaking stairs and hung the dress in the closet of the room she was using.

Whoever had bought it had obviously spent a large sum, and she didn't want it wrinkled beyond recognition. Tessa wanted to return it in good shape, as soon as she figured out whom to return it to.

Satisfied, Tessa left the master bedroom, which had stood unused for over a year before she moved back to the house. She returned to her chores in the kitchen, but the dress beckoned to her.

If it was a prank by Sue Ellen, there was no harm in indulging her friend. She couldn't think of anyone else who would do such a thing, and the thought of wearing the dress was tempting.

Be reasonable, she chided herself. If the person who sent the dress wasn't her friend, they could have any number of motives. It was better to be safe than sorry.

But would she be sorry if she played it safe?

Chapter Two

The car arrived promptly at eight. Tessa peeked out the ancient curtains, worn thin with age. Only a coating of dust maintained any semblance of privacy. The car was dark and sleek, and a uniformed driver got out from behind the wheel and stood by the rear passenger door.

Tessa straightened the dress, although she knew it was perfect. It seemed to have been made for her personally. With one last automatic glance in the aged mirror, she opened the door and stepped into the chilly night. The cloak was woolen and surprisingly warm. She huddled into it as she walked down the cracked stones of the walk her father had redone when she was nine. Twenty-two years ago, she realized with a start.

When she got to the car, the man doffed his hat and bowed to her. “Good evening, madam.”

“Hello.” Tessa's stomach clenched with nerves, and a fine sheen of sweat glistened on her brow. When she got her hands on Sue Ellen, she was going to give her a tongue-lashing.

The driver held open the door, but Tessa hesitated. “Whom do you work for? Where are you taking me?”

He smiled. “I was told not to answer any questions. I'm also to remind you to put on the mask before we arrive, Ms. Grenville.”

Tessa stared at the opened door, into the interior of the car. This was her last chance to back out. *Take a chance*, urged the part of her that had never left behind her teenage years; the spontaneous side of her that had led her into trouble many times, many years ago.

Look what happened last time.

Take a chance, the voice repeated.

With a last, wistful look at the decrepit farmhouse, with its sagging fence and forlorn air, Tessa slid into the car. The driver closed the door behind her with a resounding thunk, and Tessa imagined how an inmate felt when the bars slammed shut behind them for the first time.

The seat was plush and comfortable. Tessa leaned back and eyed the inside of the car. It contained a small mini-bar, a television, and a sound system, along with a panel of buttons and switches. Not too elaborate, but elegant enough for tonight's mystery.

Was she doing the right thing? Impulsiveness tended to lead her into trouble. She had made many mistakes as a foolish teenager, back when she'd allowed impulse to rule her nature.

She still could not completely forget the biggest mistake of her young life. She winced at the memory, and the inevitable tide of embarrassment it brought with it. She struggled to push it away, but it insisted on playing through her mind, despite her best efforts.

When the car pulled to a halt, she was jarred out of her thoughts of the past. With a start, Tessa realized she had daydreamed away the time and hadn't even bothered to look out the window to see which direction the driver went. She could be anywhere, in any direction from town. "Idiot," she said under her breath.

"Excuse me?" The driver opened the door in time to catch part of her mutterings. "Did you say something, ma'am?"

Tessa forced a smile as she slid from the car. "Never mind."

He cleared his throat. "Your mask, Ms. Grenville."

Tessa grimaced as she dug the mask from her evening bag and tied the satin straps around the back of her head. The mask partially obscured her peripheral vision, but she was still able to see well enough to make out the house.

It was large, built of pine, and stained to accentuate the natural beauty. A large garage was attached to the side, and a privacy fence extended around the property.

"Just go on up to the house."

"Thank you." Tessa walked up the steep drive and approached the front door. There was no doorbell, so she lifted the brass knocker and rapped firmly against the door.

A tall man wearing a dark suit opened it. He had thick, chestnut hair, but the mask that completely covered his face obscured his features. "Tessa." His voice was deep and smoky, but didn't sound familiar.

"Who are you?"

"Save the questions for later. Right now, dinner is waiting."

She bit her lip and slowly entered the house, poised to flee at a second's notice. She surveyed the well-lit interior, admiring the art deco furniture and glass topped tables. They appeared to be alone in the elegant room.

Tessa reached for the strings of her mask, but stopped when he said, "Leave it, Tessa. We will stay behind our masks awhile longer, I think."

She dropped her hands and eyed him warily. He made no move to pounce upon her, and

Tessa slowly relaxed enough to remove her cloak. He took it from her and draped it over a coat rack by the door.

“Why have you brought me here?”

The mask revealed his lips, and he merely placed a finger to his mouth. “Dinner.” He started walking, and she followed him through the house, which was as lovely and as expensively decorated as the living room.

He led her into a small dining room, where a round table, set for two, awaited them. Candles provided the only illumination since the overhead lights were off. They lent the room a romantic glow. Fine china, crystal, and flatware awaited their use, and he seated her in the brocade-upholstered chair.

Tessa blinked as he moved to a cart laden with dishes and began to place them on the table. The evening grew more surreal by the moment. Her stomach growled as he lifted off the cover of a metal tray containing poached salmon, and she was reminded she hadn't eaten since early afternoon.

“Poached salmon, almandine green beans, arugula salad, and potato leek soup.” He waved at the dishes. “Help yourself, Tessa.”

Almost as if in a dream state, Tessa served herself from the dishes, and then watched as he transferred the food to his plate with efficient movements. His fingers were long and elegant, and his hands were the perfect size—not bearish, yet not feminine either. After they had selected, he stacked the serving dishes back on the cart and took the seat across from her.

“Why have you returned to Naples?”

Tessa nearly choked on a mouthful of soup. She sipped from her wine, both to regain her breath and to stall. She had expected this question, had rehearsed an answer, and she hoped her response was glib.

“I felt it was time to return home to renew old ties.”

“But you have no ties. Your mother passed away seven years ago, and your father last year. All your friends have gone. Even the Hawthorne family left after they sold the lumber mill, and it was shut down.”

Tessa winced at the mention of the Hawthornes, but raised her chin and didn't answer.

“Cat got your tongue?” His lips twisted. “Perhaps you just don't want to tell me the real reason? Maybe you don't want me to know you published a piece in the newspaper, and the man you accused of misconduct was, in fact, an ordained minister. You dragged his name

through the mud, and he was innocent. His accuser was simply seeking his fifteen minutes, if I'm not mistaken."

Heat suffused her face, and Tessa found herself stuttering, "I believed my sources were reliable. I had to move quickly, before another reporter got the story."

He inclined his head. "I'm not criticizing or judging you. I'm merely letting you know I know everything about you."

Tessa tightened her grip on the glass as the fear she had gamely ignored swam to the surface of her mind. "How? Why?"

"No questions."

"You can ask questions, but I'm not allowed to?" She couldn't hide her outrage.

He nodded. "That's about the size of things. You're free not to answer, and at any time, you may walk out. But if you leave too soon, you'll never know who I am, or why I've brought you here."

"I don't really care." She lifted her glass and drank to moisten her dry throat.

He laughed. "Then why are you here? I've heard you used to have an insatiable curiosity, Tessa. I imagine that hasn't changed."

She shrugged. "Maybe not, but I've gained wisdom and common sense throughout the years."

He grinned. "Really?" His tone clearly revealed he didn't believe her. "I find it—interesting—that you chose to accept my invitation."

Tessa slammed down her glass. "Have you asked me here merely to torment me?"

"The reason behind my invitation will be revealed in good time." He returned to his meal, and, after a brief hesitation, Tessa did the same. She couldn't deny her curiosity, and he had said she was free to leave at any time.

He seemed to sense her temporary acquiescence, and he resumed asking her questions. "What will you do now?"

Seeing no harm in answering his questions—as long as they didn't get too personal—she said, "I believe I'll write a book."

"Can you afford to?"

Her finances were a bit pinched, but that was none of his affair. "I'll manage. If not, Lou told me he'd give me a job writing Arts for the Naples Gazette."

"How the mighty have fallen."

Her eyes narrowed at his tone. "I get the impression you don't like me, for some reason. Why go through this charade? Is it just to humiliate me?"

Some emotion flashed through his eyes, fast as quicksilver, before it was gone. "I don't dislike you. I apologize for my comment." His voice was oddly wistful.

Tessa remained stubbornly silent.

"Is there a man in your life?"

"I thought you knew everything about me?" she challenged, with a toss of her long hair.

"I was making small talk, but if you want, we can do this another way. Jorge Garcia was your last lover, gone for more than eighteen months. You didn't like his possessiveness or quick temper, and his family did not approve of your relationship. Before him, there was Bill Perkins, who left you for a cellist. Then there was the banker, the police officer, and your boss at the paper, many years ago, before he was your boss. Shall I continue back through college? Maybe even into high school?"

His voice dropped lower, to a whisper. "Should we discuss what your intimate preferences are?"

She had a feeling he knew everything about her, and it was definitely creepy. Tessa removed the napkin from her lap and laid it on the table. "I'm leaving now."

His voice lost its cool superiority and became almost earnest. "Please, don't. I know I'm not doing this right, but this is the first time I've done anything like this. Please bear with me a little longer."

Her brows furrowed. "No more personal topics?"

He hesitated. "I'll try."

Tessa returned her attention to the food, though she had lost her appetite. She picked at her plate and waited for the next question.

"How are the renovations coming along?"

Finally, a safe topic. “Slowly. The house has fallen into disrepair.”

“It's quite old. Something like sixty years, isn't it?”

Tessa shrugged. “Could be. My parents bought it the year they married.” She counted back through her memory. “Forty-seven years ago?”

“Are you doing all the work yourself?”

“As much as possible...” she trailed off. “This conversation is getting us nowhere. Why have you brought me here?”

“Patience.” He rose and left her there. For a moment, Tessa thought she had angered him into leaving, and she was debating about leaving herself when he returned with dessert. He set *crème brûlée* before her. “I hope you like this.”

The experience was becoming more surreal by the moment. She was surprised by her ability to respond so inanely, in light of the situation. “It looks wonderful.”

It could have been as banal as a business dinner, if not for the mystery that surrounded the evening. They ate the dessert in silence. Tessa studied him thoughtfully, but each time he met her eyes, she slid hers away. There was something disturbing about his blue eyes. In fact, the entire situation was disturbing. What was she doing here? More importantly, when had she last felt this frisson of awareness at the back of her neck in the company of a man? How could she be drawn to a stranger?

After he cleared dessert and wheeled the tray into the kitchen, he returned with a tray of coffee. “I thought we might have a cup in front of the fire.”

Tessa shrugged and rose from the table. She followed him into a lounge, where a fire blazed in the hearth. Throw pillows dotted the floor, and a white sofa took up most of one wall. He set the tray on a low table and settled himself on the floor. Tessa hesitated, and he patted a space beside him. “My dress ...”

“What are a few wrinkles?”

He had paid for it, so if he didn't mind, why should she? She knelt beside him and gingerly settled herself until she was comfortable. The dress pooled around her and contrasted beautifully with the cream carpet. The fire was warm, and the coffee was rich. She added a dab of cream before she sipped the brew. They didn't speak.

There was an awkward quality to their silence, as if they were both searching for something to say. Could it be that her mysterious host was as unsure as she was?

When they finished the coffee, Tessa knew there was no reason to linger. “Tell me why I'm here.”

He ignored her as he busied himself with stacking their cups and saucers on the tray.

“You promised to tell me why you brought me here.”

He didn't look up. “When the time is right.”

“Now is right.”

“Not yet.”

Groaning with frustration, Tessa rose to her feet and walked to the nearby window, staring out into the night. White flakes fell from the sky steadily, and already the thick, wet snow covered the ground. This was not powder that would melt as soon as it landed, but the kind of snow that stuck. She had no intention of being trapped in this house with this crazy person.

“I'm going now. I don't care why you've brought me here.”

He came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. Tessa stiffened at his familiarity and tried to pull away. When his head descended, she held her breath. His lips tickled her ear as he asked, “Don't you?”

She gasped when he kissed her earlobe. “Let go of me.”

“You're free to leave at any time,” he reminded her, but he didn't release her. Instead, he put his mouth on her neck and nipped her. Tessa stiffened with fear, but also surprise. His mouth felt good on her neck. She had never imagined herself to be the kind of person who could respond to a stranger, but she had to reevaluate her self-opinion as his mouth slid higher. He nibbled on her earlobe and caused her to moan.

Drawing forth a reserve of willpower she hadn't known she possessed, Tessa turned in his arms. “Stop right now ...” she trailed off when their eyes locked. His were dark with passion, and his arms tightened around her. Illogically, she felt no fear. Instead, his passion seemed to feed her arousal.

She didn't protest as his lips settled on hers to gently explore their plump contours. When his tongue slid inside her mouth, she groaned. Her hands came up, at first to push him away, but she plunged them into his thick hair. Her entire body began to tingle as he deepened the kiss, and liquid heat flooded her pussy.

When he lifted his head, she protested, then blushed at her forwardness. What was she

doing, making love with a stranger? Sanity started to return, but before it could find more than a tenuous purchase, his hands were on her breasts, and he stroked them through the velvet of the dress.

Her nipples hardened in response to his palms as he massaged her through the velvet. Tessa arched her back and cried out as his left hand made its way to her zipper and slowly pulled it down far enough to free her breasts.

Due to the design of the dress, Tessa was not wearing a bra, and her breasts sprang free eagerly. He cupped one in his hand and tweaked the nipple. "Beautiful," he growled in a voice full of passion.

His deep, rough purr sent shivers through Tessa's body. Part of her was aware that it was wrong to allow this man to touch her in such an intimate way. Another part of her rejoiced in the liberties he took. Apparently, there was a dark side to her passions she had never known of before.

When his mouth supplanted his smooth hand, Tessa couldn't hold in a moan. His tongue flicked around the engorged peak before it darted away, only to return seconds later to increase her tension. Tessa grew even wetter and arched her hips as his mouth continued to wreak havoc on her senses.

His hands were at her zipper, and he lowered it the rest of the way. The dress fell in a puddle at her feet. She stood nearly naked before him, wearing only thigh-high stockings and a miniscule pair of white, satin panties. He peeled off the hose and stopped every few inches to kiss a newly exposed area of flesh.

Tessa abandoned herself to the sensations he provoked and tore at his jacket with urgent hands. He chuckled and raised his head to remove the jacket, tie, and black shirt with three efficient moves. Then she was in his arms again, with her soft breasts pressed against his lightly haired chest. His hands cupped her ass and massaged her cleft through the slippery material of the panties.

She ached for him to touch the very heat of her and wriggled impatiently. He kissed her again as he moved one hand from her ass to stroke the outer lips of her pussy. One finger teased her clit through the panties, and Tessa's body shuddered.

Her legs went limp, and he held her up as he brought her to the white sofa, where he pushed her down. He crouched on the floor in front of her and gazed at the damp crotch of her panties. His fingers stroked the side of her panties and occasionally flicked over her swollen, but neglected, clit. "You're so wet your panties are translucent."

Rather than be embarrassed, his words emboldened her. "Touch me." Tessa didn't recognize her own voice. It was rough with passion, and there was an urgency she couldn't remember

ever having experienced.

“Your wish is my command.” He cupped her with his hand, gently grinding the palm of his hand against her lips.

“Higher.”

He laughed and slipped a finger inside her panties. His touch was light and expert, and her pulse quickened. Her hips thrust in time with his caresses, and soon her body shuddered with climax. Her pussy continued to contract, and he slipped two fingers inside her.

“Are you ready for me?”

She hesitated. If she said yes, there was no backing out. She had already gone too far with a stranger, but if they completed their union, she might not respect herself ever again.

He wiggled his fingers, and she nodded. She ached, deep inside, when he withdrew his fingers from her pussy lips and rose to his feet. He felt around in the pocket of the trousers he still wore, until he had produced a condom. Then he unzipped his pants, and they fell to the floor. He stepped out of them and pushed off his briefs. When he returned to her, he wore nothing.

His cock was thick, and pulsed with each beat of his heart. The head was engorged and so large it caused her eyes to widen. He wasn't overly long, but she knew he would fill her completely. Curly brown hair nestled at the base of his cock and obscured his balls. Tessa reclined as he knelt between her thighs.

He gave her one last questioning look, obviously needing to hear her consent. “Yes,” she whispered.

He moved forward to lie on her and used one hand to guide his cock into her tight pussy. As she had known, he was a snug fit. If she hadn't been so wet, their union wouldn't have worked. He stretched her almost to the point of pain before he stopped deep inside her. She could feel his heart beating through his cock, as they remained motionless for a moment, until she was accustomed to his breadth. Then he rocked his hips, and she matched the age-old rhythm he set.

He thrust into her as deeply as he could, using one hand to grasp her hip, while his other hand tangled in her hair. Sharp pain flashed through her head when he tugged, and her pussy spasmed with the unique stimuli. Tessa tightened her thighs around his waist and strove to take in all of his cock. Once her pussy had adjusted to his size, it seemed to thirst for more of him. She pressed her breasts against his chest, and she moaned when the changed position caused his cock to rub against her clit.

Tessa could feel herself building towards another orgasm, and she tightened her pussy to bring it about sooner. She hovered at the edge as he continued to thrust into her, and she whimpered when she couldn't find release. She dug her nails into his back so deeply she heard him yelp. She ignored his verbal protests and clutched him against her. She ached for release only he could provide.

Their gazes locked, and she was temporarily transfixed by the naked need reflected in his eyes, rimmed by thick, dark lashes. Did his need mirror hers? The heady sensation of giving into the forbidden swept through her, and she couldn't have torn her gaze from his if she tried. The fluid way they reflected his emotions—passion, hunger, tenderness, and something less definable—fascinated her. A flush swept across his cheeks as she continued to stare into his eyes, and his gaze slid from hers.

He kissed her on the mouth, and their tongues dueled, as his hand moved between their thrusting bodies. He pressed in on her clit and rotated slowly, until she started to come. Tessa's pussy tightened around his suddenly bulging cock, and she was distracted from trying to catch his eyes again. He had grown so hard that it hurt. He lightly pinched her clit as he thrust into her deeper than ever.

She bit her lip to avoid screaming when an orgasm swept through her. It ravaged her body and caused her to shudder. Her pussy squeezed around him several times, and she clamped her thighs around his waist tight enough to cause him to grunt. With a muted cry, he spilled his seed and flooded her pussy with warm wetness, though the condom muted the sensation.

When the last wave of pleasure had faded, he did not immediately withdraw. Instead, he gathered her close to him, with her head on his chest. She could hear the rocketing beat of his heart as her ear was pressed against it. It slowly faded in crescendo, until it approached almost normal. He finally withdrew from her and left the room to deal with the condom.

Doubts immediately assailed her. Tessa chastised herself for giving into desire with a man she didn't know. A one-night stand would have been bad enough, but this man was a complete stranger.

She had worked herself into quite a state when he returned. "I have to go," she said as soon as he entered the room. "I have to get out of here."

He frowned. "Come upstairs with me."

"What?"

"I had it all set up to happen upstairs. Instead, my desire overwhelmed me, and I took you on the couch. Please come upstairs with me."

How could she when she had tarnished her own perception of herself so much already?

How could she compound her error by repeating it? As Tessa asked herself those questions, she followed him up the stairs, with him holding tightly to her hand, as though he was determined she would stay. It seemed like her legs were independent of her brain, and even self-disgust could not break the thrall he held for her.

The carpet was soft under her bare feet, and Tessa felt discomfited by her nudity. “Are we alone?”

“Yes.”

Although she should have been frightened by his admission, she felt relief. There was no one to see her nakedness, to know of her folly, to disturb them as they made love again.

He opened the first door on the left, and she could see he had indeed prepared the room. White satin sheets covered the bed, several candles in holders were scattered throughout the room, and a bucket of iced champagne was on the nightstand, along with a selection of silk scarves. Near the scarves was a small collection of other things. She recognized lubes, feathers, a vibrator, and a cock ring amid the assortment.

“Lie down.” His firm tone allowed no room for protest.

Although not generally a timid or submissive lover, Tessa did as he asked, sprawling across the cool comfort of the satin. It sensuously caressed her body wherever it touched, heightening her renewed sense of arousal.

“You have no idea how beautiful you are like that. How many times I've fantasized about seeing you lying across my bed, nude, with that glorious red hair spread across the pillows.” His voice held a note of awe, almost sublimated by raw anguish.

Tessa blushed at his effusive compliments and was glad the mask partially hid her cheeks. When she remembered the mask, it began to itch. She slipped a finger under the satin to scratch, but could find no relief unless she took it off. “May I remove the mask now?”

“Yes, but I'm keeping mine.”

She frowned. “For how long?”

“Just a little longer.” A small smile was evident on his lips.

Tessa's hands shook as she removed the mask and tossed it on the floor. Then she settled more comfortably and spread her arms and legs wide. “What will you do to me?”

“I want to taste you.” Where his eyes strayed left no doubt about his intentions. “But I must blindfold you.”

Her eyes widened. “What?”

“I want to remove my mask to enjoy you completely, but I don't want you to see me until the time is right.”

She resisted the urge to smirk. “I can remove a blindfold anytime I'd like.”

He nodded. “That's why I also want to tie your hands.”

Tessa frowned, unsure if she wanted to surrender that degree of control to him. She had never trusted anyone enough to do so before. “I don't know ...”

“Have I hurt you once this evening, Tessa?”

“No—”

“I promise not to abuse your trust.”

“You could try trusting me not to look.”

He laughed and shook his head. “I don't think so.”

“It seems a bit unfair that you expect my trust when you won't extend any.”

“I suppose it does,” he agreed and held up a bright purple scarf. “May I?”

With a deep breath, Tessa nodded and closed her eyes as he wound the scarf around her wrist. He pulled her arm lightly to bring it closer to the bedpost, where he secured it with a knot.

The first wrist had been difficult for her, but she found letting him tie her second wrist to be nearly impossible. Only the reassuring smile curving his lips and the warmth in his eyes allowed her to go through with it. He fastened that wrist with a green scarf before he tied a black scarf around her eyes.

She lay there, for all intents, helpless. Tessa was unable to move and unable to see. Her stomach clenched in knots as she tried to anticipate what he would do next.

Tessa stiffened and relaxed, as she felt his warm breath caressing her thighs before his mouth settled on her pussy. He ran his tongue down her neatly trimmed lips, then quickly darted it out to touch her clit. The feeling was intense, heightened by her inability to see him. The anticipation was intense and caused her juices to flow faster as her stomach quivered.

She felt the soft brush of his lips against her skin, then the soft wetness of his tongue as he gently laved her clit. Her thighs tightened automatically when his hand slid between them. She made an effort to relax as he stroked her. She gasped when his fingers parted her folds to allow his tongue better access. One impudent finger sought out the opening of her pussy and slipped inside, only to be followed by another.

His tongue's tempo increased, and his fingers thrust in time with his darting tongue, until Tessa could not keep her hips on the mattress. She thrust impatiently against him, moaning when he took her clit completely in his mouth. His other hand slipped under her ass to gently squeeze her cheeks. She pressed herself against his hand, then moaned and arched against his tongue and fingers. She was unable to decide which she wanted more.

He stopped squeezing her ass and began to stroke the cleft between her cheeks. As one finger probed her asshole, he grazed her clit with his teeth before he suddenly sucked all of her clit into his mouth. He flicked his tongue across the hood of her clitoris. His finger continued to probe her back passage, and she writhed against the double torture, until he sucked once, twice, three times in quick succession, and she came with a harsh sob.

Tessa dug her heels, shoulders, and hips into the mattress and arched her back. The pulse waves of her orgasm hadn't even begun to fade when his cock plunged into her dripping pussy. She was still sensitive, and it was combination of pleasure and pain to have him filling her so completely. His cock stimulated her swollen clit and caused her to whimper.

When he started to pull away, she gripped his ass with her hands, digging her nails into his cheeks, and held him against her. "Stay," she whispered.

"Yes." He sounded breathless, and his voice was hoarse. He thrust into her a very few times before they were both moaning. She cried out as another orgasm engulfed her, simultaneously with his. He buried himself deep inside her for a long moment, and neither of them breathed.

Suddenly her breath exploded from her, and he relaxed slightly before he withdrew from her body. Tessa waited until her heartbeat had slowed before she spoke. "Tell me your name."

There was dead silence, and then he untied the scarves around her wrists. A few seconds later, she felt the blindfold being untied with gentle hands. She blinked a few times to get acquainted with the dim light before she turned her gaze on him.

His face was older, with lines that hadn't been there before. It was still as ruggedly handsome as she remembered, and he carried his age well. His dark-brown hair was still untouched by gray. "You're looking well, Kendall." A sense of calm had filled her upon seeing his face. In fact, she suspected she had known it was him on some deeper level all along.

Tessa cringed when she remembered the way she had thrown herself at Kendall Hawthorne, the night before leaving town for college and forever, or so she had imagined. He was several years older than she, and Kendall's father was her father's employer, as he had been for more than half the town. She should have known Kendall wouldn't be interested in her, but she had foolishly built up his glances and teasing conversations into something more than they were.

She had imagined herself in love with him and had believed she was ready to make a lifetime's commitment, even though she wasn't quite eighteen. When she'd seen Kendall's blue eyes fasten on her, or heard the rich timbre of his voice, she fantasized he would sweep her off her feet, to live with him in his father's house forever.

Reality had been strikingly different. She had gone to his office late one evening after she phoned ahead to ensure he would still be there. She filched a sexy dress from her mother's closet and made up her face.

He had been surprised to see her, but his smile was warm. "Your father isn't working late, is he, Tessa?"

"No, I came to see you," she had tried to purr, but her voice sounded husky.

"Are you coming down with a cold?" His concern was evident.

Tessa decided to abandon the seductive voice and returned to her normal alto. "No, I'm fine."

"What did you need?" His voice had trailed off as she removed the Berber raincoat to reveal the mauve dress. He swallowed, and if Tessa had been more perceptive, less naïve, she would have recognized his discomfort.

"You."

"Excuse me?"

"I love you, Kendall." She walked over to him, deliberately swaying her hips in a parody of the models she had seen on television. It felt awkward, as if she might trip at any moment.

He backed away from her. "This isn't funny."

"I'm not joking."

"I think you are." His voice had sounded firm, insistent, but with a touch of appeal, as if he was begging her to suddenly laugh. Maybe he was hoping she would say, "Ha! Fooled you."

Tessa blushed as she remembered how she had ignored his signs and persisted with her clumsy attempts at seduction. Kendall had ruthlessly rejected her, and his words were still burned into her memory. “You’re a child, and this display only illustrates that. I have no interest in a child, Tessa. For the sake of your father, I’m going to pretend this never happened, but there had better never be a repeat episode.”

In her humiliation, Tessa had flung on her coat and ran from his office, screaming behind her, “I hate you.” The words had hung between them for thirteen years now, as neither had seen the other since Tessa left town—until tonight.

Suddenly, the disappointment she had been feeling at her wanton behavior turned to anger, directed against him. “How dare you do this to me? Why would you want to humiliate me like this?”

Kendall shook his head. “It’s not like that—”

Before he could finish his sentence, Tessa’s impulsive urges gained the upper hand. Four years of Tae Bo came to her assistance as she formed a fist and struck him on the chin. She gasped when his eyes widened with surprise, and he reeled backwards. By itself, her punch wouldn’t have done much to him, but his head connected with the footboard. He slumped on his back, and his eyes closed.

She scrambled off the bed and felt his neck for a pulse. It was strong under her fingers, and when she knew he was okay, her anger returned. Tessa walked to the window and looked out. The snow had stopped falling, but had left behind a thick layer on the ground, as she had feared. She would be his guest for the rest of the night, until the plows came in the morning.

She turned around to eye his unconscious form. She might as well have fun.

She returned to the bed and pulled him up against the pillows. The scarves were still draped over the headboard, and she tied him as quickly as possible. She could see his eyes flickering under his lids, and she knew she was almost out of time.

She picked up the black scarf he had used for a blindfold and tied it around his eyes. Then she scanned the room to find something to use as a gag. She walked over to the armoire and opened the doors. She found a selection of ties and selected a pretty, dark-blue one made from silk.

In his sock drawer, she picked up a pair of socks rolled into a ball and took them with her. He was almost awake, and she stuffed the socks in his mouth in one quick motion. She secured them with the tie, though she thought it might be unnecessary.

Then she curled up at the foot of the bed and waited for him to awaken. Within minutes, frantic sounds issued from his mouth, and he struggled against his bonds. She touched his leg, and he stiffened. “Relax, lover,” she said with heavy sarcasm.

He tried to say something, but it came out muffled.

She trailed her fingers up his thigh and brushed against his cock. Like an obedient boy, it immediately saluted her. “I imagine you’re wondering what’s going on?”

He grunted and tugged his wrists vigorously, trying to break the scarves.

She slapped him lightly across the stomach. “Don’t fight. It’s my turn, Kendall. You owe me.”

His back arched, and he moved his leg to push her away.

Tessa sighed. “Do you want me to bind your ankles too?”

He immediately stilled, and there was air of apprehension surrounding him.

She let a silence lapse between them. Partly to increase his agitation, but also to figure out what she was going to do with the tiger, now that she had him by the tail—or the cock, as the case may be. She scrunched her brow and struggled to remember the bedroom games one of her college boyfriends had been into. He liked to be in control, and she hadn’t been able to surrender to him, so the relationship ended before he showed her much of what he enjoyed.

Her eyes fell on the candles burning on the nightstand, and she bit her lip. Was that too much? She didn’t mind causing Kendall some discomfort, but did she want to hurt him?

When she saw the bucket of iced champagne, it offered the solution. She got up from the bed and walked to the nightstand. She saw Kendall turn his head in the direction she walked, and she smiled. Let him wonder what she had planned for him. She saw his head tilt when she lifted the champagne from the bucket and caused the nearly melted ice cubes to slosh without enthusiasm. She twisted off the wire cage, then worked on the cork, and he visibly jumped when it popped.

She sat on the bed on his other side, with the ice and champagne within easy reach. The nearest candleholder had about two inches of candle drippings pooled in the bottom. She lifted it and winced at the warm glass. She hadn’t expected it to be so hot. Tessa plunged her hand in the ice bucket and numbed it. She brought a handful of ice cubes and cold water with her when she took out her hand.

She placed them on the hard abs of his stomach and grinned when she heard him hiss. “The

first time won't be so bad, with the ice," she said in a soothing voice. She moved her palm around his stomach, holding the ice cubes against his skin as they melted. When they had turned to water, she moved her hand and lifted the candleholder again. "This might hurt a little."

She saw his muscles tighten, and she brought the glass cup over his stomach. She poured out a tiny amount of the liquid wax, and it hit his iced skin with a soft hiss. He stiffened, and a muffled sound issued from him, but she ignored him. Tessa leaned down to blow on the wax, and it congealed quickly. "More, I think," she said decisively.

His muscles bunched, and his legs kicked.

"Don't make me tie your feet." Tessa waited until he stilled before she dotted wax across his stomach and torso. When she placed some of the melted liquid on his chest, where she hadn't numbed his skin, his cock twitched, and his pectoral muscles spasmed. She heard him moan, but she couldn't tell if it was from pleasure or pain.

She set the candleholder on the nightstand and admired her handiwork. Several small patches of light pink wax covered his chest and stomach. She petted his hair. "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

He turned his face away from her.

She giggled, absurdly pleased by his stubbornness. She was surprised when her pussy clenched, and she realized she was aroused by what she had done to Kendall. Perhaps her boyfriend had been onto something with his power games. She couldn't imagine doing this everyday, but for special occasions, certainly.

She began the process of peeling the wax from his skin. She used the fingernails on her left hand to pry up the hardened disks, and applied ice with her right hand. When she had collected all of the wax, she took the champagne from the nightstand and splashed it liberally across his chest.

He moaned, and his cock thickened and turned dark red as blood filled it.

"You like that?" Tessa stood up and repositioned herself so that she was straddling his thighs. She rubbed her wet pussy against one of his legs to show him how much she liked it too. Then she bent her head and lapped at the champagne trailing down his skin. She kept one hand near his cock to fondle his balls as she licked him. She could feel his pulse beating strongly through the vein on his cock when she gripped it in her hand. "I can see you do."

He nodded.

"Would you like me to fuck you, Kendall? Do you want to come like you've never come

before?”

He nodded again, more emphatically.

Tessa eyed the small cock-shaped vibrator on the nightstand. Had he suffered enough to make up for the humiliation he had caused her? Just thinking about how vulnerable she had made herself to him caused her anger to swell again. Her nipples hardened to the point of pain as she imagined pressing the vibrator into his asshole.

She slid up his body, positioning her pussy to graze against his throbbing cock, while she retrieved the lube and vibrator. She heard him groan when she slid down his body again. She settled on his thighs and sat upright as she generously lubed the metallic-green, plastic cock. She smiled. She had always loved green.

“Are you ready for me?”

Tessa tried to figure out the logistics of what she had in mind. She finally decided the best way was to swing his legs up toward the headboard and bend his legs against his chest.

She spread his legs and sat between them. She draped his thighs over each of her shoulders, and then firmly held onto each thigh as she slowly leaned forward to drop a brief kiss on his lips. As she backed off slightly, she whispered, “Hold on, lover,” and moved his feet into his own hands.

She leaned back and enjoyed the sight of him tangled up before her. Her desire threatened to overwhelm her, and then she remembered what she wanted to do to him.

She reigned in her impulses as she picked up the vibrator. Tessa leaned forward so she could position it. “Remember, hold tight.”

He hesitated and tried to say something.

She sighed with exasperation. “If you want my pussy, do as I say.”

She touched the vibrator against his anus, and he stiffened. Tessa slapped him hard across the thigh. “Hold still.” She ignored his protests as she massaged his hole with her finger after coating it liberally with lube. His sphincter loosened under her careful ministrations, and she eased the vibrator inside a cautious inch. She heard him groan, and she waited for his muscles to loosen again.

Slowly, she worked the plastic cock completely inside him and rotated the base. She felt his body twitch when it started vibrating. The toy started to dislodge with his movements. “Hold still,” she said firmly, with a smack against his buttocks for emphasis.

He growled something, but stopped moving.

When she was certain he would stay still, she leaned forward again and took control of his feet while she whispered against his lips, “You’re going to love this.”

After lowering his legs, she maneuvered him around so his legs were closed and locked in place by her own knees. She faced the footboard. Tessa eased her pussy completely over his cock and began to thrust. He tried pushing against her, and she sighed again. “I told you not to move, Kendall. If you don’t obey me, I won’t fuck you.”

His thighs quivered as she ground herself on him in a circular motion. She supported herself with her knees and moved her other hand to stroke his balls. His cock swelled inside her when she squeezed the base of his shaft. She heard him cry out seconds before his cock surged inside her. She let him orgasm without trying to attain satisfaction, but the sensation of his cock spasming to release his come caused her to climax too. She braced her hand on the footboard as the orgasm ravaged her. She moaned and convulsed around him.

When the aftermath of the orgasm passed, Tessa moved away from him. A wave of exhaustion swept through her, and she glanced at the clock. She was surprised to find more than three hours had passed since she came for dinner.

She put the vibrator on the nightstand and lay down beside him. She tuned out the sounds of his voice muffled through the socks and snuggled closer to him. Tessa put her head on a pillow and dozed off without releasing him.

Chapter 3

When she awoke, sunlight streamed through the bedroom. She felt an urgent need to urinate, and she hopped up from the bed, where she had remained snuggled against Kendall. He was awake and working at his wrist bindings. He had nearly freed himself from the purple one. She rushed into the *en suite* bathroom and used the facilities quickly.

When she returned, he had freed one of his hands. The socks and tie were on the floor, beside the blindfold. He was working at the other tie, but stopped when he saw her. His eyes burned with anger. “You’d better be gone before I get free.”

She tossed her hair and put her hands on her hips. “Or what?”

Kendall glared at her. “I’ll give you a taste of your game.”

She returned his glare. “You got what you deserved, after you set out to deliberately humiliate me.”

He frowned. "I didn't do this to humiliate you."

"But you did. So why do all this?" She lost all pretenses of being the cool, in-control temptress she had been last night, and she knew her pain was nakedly displayed in her eyes.

"I wanted to be with you, but I knew I'd blown it. I messed up thirteen years ago." He resumed picking at the triple-knot on the scarf. "When I rejected you, I was unnecessarily harsh."

"I'll say."

"I wanted you that night." He succeeded in removing the other scarf, but he sat on the bed instead of coming after her as he had warned. He met her eyes with forthright directness. "But I didn't love you. I knew it would be wrong to have an affair with you. You were so young, but I couldn't get rid of my desire for you."

"Is that what tonight was about? Purging me from your system?" She said with umbrage.

He shook his head and waved a hand impatiently. "Just listen, Tessa. I told myself I was worried about how you would handle my rejection. I knew I had hurt you, so I used that as an excuse to check up on you."

"Check up on me?"

"I hired an investigator. At first, it was just to see how you were, but then I kept making excuses to continue the service."

Tessa's eyes narrowed. "When did you fire the snoop?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Not until you moved back to Naples."

"Thirteen years?" she shouted in disbelief. "How could you invade my privacy for so long?"

"Because I fell in love with you." He raked a hand through his hair. "You have no idea what it was like to watch you fall in love with other people, always afraid that guy would be the one you'd marry. Yet, I was too afraid to make a move myself."

"Why?" Tessa asked the question on autopilot, having suddenly and vividly remembered the agony she had experienced when Kendall used to date Nancy Welsher.

"I was afraid you still hated me."

“What makes you think I even thought of you in all that time?” Tessa avoided his eyes, lest he see the truth.

He shrugged. “Ego? Hope? Blind love?”

She gnawed on her lip. “Maybe I thought about you a few times.” *Maybe I compared all other men I met to you, and found them wanting. Maybe that's why I never married. That doesn't mean I've been in love with you for thirteen years. I was a child when I thought I loved you. I definitely wasn't old enough to know real love—was I?*

Kendall sighed and stood up. “I'm not foolish enough to imagine you're in love with me, Tessa. After what I did last night, I can only pray I haven't totally ruined any chances of us ever being together. I don't blame you if you hate me forever. I know I have no right to ask for anything, but would you please give me a chance to get to know you?” He walked over to her, but paused just out of arm's reach.

Her brow furrowed with confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Date you, take you out, court you.” There was a hint of frustration in his voice.

“I don't think I can,” Tessa said softly.

His shoulders slumped with defeat. “What about last night?” His blue eyes darkened. “Didn't it mean anything to you?”

The grim lines around his eyes and mouth bit into her heart. “I don't know what to say,” she said. “This is overwhelming. You deliberately lured me here to seduce me ...”

He shook his head frantically. “No, I didn't plan to seduce you. I prepared the bedroom only out of optimism. I planned to tell you who I was before I made love to you. I didn't even expect to get that far once you knew who I was. I only hoped.” He grimaced. “And I certainly had no idea you would do what you did when you found out who I was.”

She blushed, remembering how aggressive she had been with him. She forced herself to concentrate on his face. She didn't doubt his sincerity, but she didn't know if it was enough to allow her to trust him. “I'm going to have to think about this. I really don't know how I feel right now.”

Hope quickly darted through his eyes, only to be replaced by grim resignation. “Whatever you decide, I'll abide by your wishes.”

“I'd like to go home now.”

“All right.”

Epilogue

Two years later

“He has your eyes, my boy.” Kendall's father gave a hearty laugh and slapped his son on the back, which nearly dislodged his newborn grandson from Kendall's arms.

“Careful, Pop,” Tessa admonished. “Kendall hasn't gotten used to holding Sam yet.”

“No, I suppose not. He'll learn.”

“Yes.”

“Let me hold the boy.” Fredrick removed his grandson from Kendall's arms. “Your wife looks tired, Kendall. Why don't you settle her upstairs for a nap?”

Tessa couldn't bite back a yawn, and she followed Kendall up the stairs of their home. They had decided to stay in Naples after they married eighteen months ago. Once Tessa agreed to give Kendall a chance, the courtship had been a whirlwind, followed quickly by a wedding, then a few months later, a pregnancy.

When they got to the bedroom, Tessa yawned again. “Have I told you lately how happy you make me?”

“Not since this morning.”

“How about how much I love you?”

“Not since I said I love you an hour ago.”

“That's much too long. I love you, Kendall.”

He kissed her forehead, “I love you too, Tessa.”

She watched him as he watched her remove her clothes and slide on a nightgown. Tessa grinned at the desire that flashed through his eyes. Even after two years, it had not diminished. “Soon,” she whispered throatily.

He chuckled. "I'll make sure we have plenty of scarves on hand."

"I trust that you will."

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