

THE DARKER SIDE OF PLEASURE

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Bantam

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*Bondage.* The word reverberated through Jillian's head, through her body, making her muscles tense and quiver.

Her stomach clenched as she pulled her sporty BMW into the driveway after a long day at work. She peered up at the sleek, modern expanse of redwood and glass her husband had designed for them six years ago, right after they'd married and moved to Seattle.

She took a deep breath and forced her hands to stop gripping the steering wheel. Tonight was the night. The night she and Cameron were going to start trying to put their marriage back together.

She yanked a little too hard on the parking brake, then grabbed her purse and the pretty pink shopping bag that held the new lingerie she'd bought for the occasion. Cameron was right. It had been ages since she'd dressed up for him. Hell, she'd been sleeping in the guest room for months. Not that that was his fault. It was her. She knew that. She just couldn't stand to be so close to him, with so much distance between them. It hurt too much.

Her nerves jangled as much as her keys did when she opened the front door. "Cam? You home?"

No answer. She exhaled on a sigh of relief. She needed some time to make herself ready. Not just physically, but emotionally, too. Even though they'd talked about this almost a week ago. Maybe she'd had too much time to think about it. She did have a tendency to over-analyze things. She let her purse fall to the hardwood floor, gripped the lingerie bag and headed down the hall.

Stripping off her clothes in the half-dark bedroom felt like a ritual, somehow. The house was quiet. The soft glow of twilight filtered through the Japanese paper shades that covered the ceiling-high bedroom windows. There was the faint scent of him in the air, that sense of intimacy in the room where they'd slept up until she'd moved into the guest room a few months ago. But they hadn't made love for too long before that. And on those rare occasions when they had, she felt as though she weren't entirely present in her own body, like she was watching it from the outside. But tonight was supposed to help change that. The idea made her stomach clench up again.

She stepped into the slate-tiled bathroom and blasted the hot water, wanting the sheer force and heat of it to wash her nerves away. This was her own husband, after all. She closed

her eyes as she moved beneath the spray and let the water sluice over her, trying to steer her mind down a more positive path.

Cameron. He'd been so young when they'd first met, only twenty-one. She was an old lady of twenty-five at the time. But he was so mature for his age, so somber and responsible. And there was always something of the darkness about him that made him seem older than he was. Perhaps it was the tattoo that circled his right bicep, a sinuous circle in a dark tribal design. Maori, he'd told her. She loved it. She'd loved his tall, lean, yet muscular body. God, he had the greatest abs she'd ever seen on a human being. And she loved the way his straight, coal-black hair fell into his eyes, even the dark-framed glasses he wore for reading.

That's how Jillian had first seen him, in her English Lit class in college. He was bent over a book, and he glanced up as she passed a printed handout to him. And those smoky gray eyes peered up at her. Eyes fringed in thick, sooty lashes any woman would envy. Those startling eyes and that serious expression on his angular features, yet his mouth was lush and sensual, a stark contrast.

He still wore those glasses. And even after all they'd been through, a small shiver of excitement would course through her

whenever he put them on. If only he had come to bed early enough to read, while she was still awake, while she'd still been sleeping in their bed.

But no, she shouldn't think about that. Tonight was for new beginnings, not old pain.

She shut off the water, stepped out onto the cool tiles and began to rub scented lotion into her skin. It was Cameron's favorite vanilla scent, the one he used to say made him want to run his tongue all over her body. Her sex gave a quick, involuntary squeeze, surprising her.

Drawing her pale green silk summer robe around her shoulders, she went to pull her purchase out of the bag. The bra was black and lacy, with demi-cups that barely covered her breasts. The matching thong was a whisper of lace. It made her feel sexy, she had to admit, admiring her reflection in the big full-length mirror in her walk-in closet. Despite her breasts and thighs, which weren't as firm at the age of thirty-three as they'd been when she and Cam had met eight years ago.

*No, don't think about that now.*

She pulled her long honey-blond hair up with her hands, considering, then decided to leave it down. Cam liked it better that way.

When she drew the first black lace stocking over one leg, she began to get a real sense of ritual, of formal preparation. For some reason she didn't understand it sent a small thrill through her, raising gooseflesh on the back of her neck. And when she slid her feet into the impossibly high black pumps Cam had insisted she buy the feeling was complete. She understood suddenly that she was doing this for him, but that it also fulfilled some need in her. To please in order to feel whole.

This was a new concept for her. She'd been inside her own head for so long, immersed in her grief, that she'd forgotten to look outside. To look at her husband.

When Cam had first suggested they try to find their way back to one another through sex, she'd balked. In fact, that was putting it lightly. She'd flat out refused, thought he was being selfish and ridiculous. But then he'd reminded her that sex was intimacy, and that bondage was the purest form of mutual trust. It took her a while to absorb that, but she eventually came to realize he had a valid point. And they needed to try something, anything, before the gap between them grew any wider. Tonight was to be a true test.

She drew the stockings up her legs, her hand brushing the honey-colored curls at the apex of her thighs. Blood rushed to

the area so fast, she had to cup her mound with her hand and press there. Strange! Why was she so hyper-sensitive, when she'd been completely shut down for almost a year?

The loud rumbling of her husband's prized Harley pulling into the driveway brought her head and her hand up fast. Cam!

She took one last, desperate look in the mirror, added a little lip gloss with a shaking hand. She was ready for him.

She thought she was. She shivered in fear and anticipation as his steps drew nearer. The door opened with a graceful swing, and there he was. Her husband. He looked so damn good standing there, she had to smile.

He smiled back. "Almost like the old Jillian. I love it when you smile like that. Like you mean it."

"I do." She dropped her head, suddenly shy.

He crossed the room, slid his hands around her waist, ran them up her sides, traced the curve of her breasts. "God, you're beautiful."

His words warmed her, but it was still hard for her to look at him. He tipped her chin up with his fingers. She thought he'd want to talk more, but he just leaned in and kissed her. That lush, kissable mouth of his covered hers, and when he parted his lips she could taste mint, and underneath it the faint sweetness of scotch. So he'd been nervous, too. She

suddenly wanted to cry. This was why she'd been avoiding him, why she hadn't been able to sleep in the bed next to his big, warm body.

He pulled away and said simply, "Are you ready?"

Her stomach grabbed again, but she nodded. "Yes. But what are you...I mean, how is this all going to happen?"

"We talked about it, remember? If this is going to work, you have to trust me enough to turn yourself over to me. That's what tonight is all about. We have to learn to trust each other again. Do you remember your safe words?"

"Yes. Yellow for slow down, red for stop."

"Good."

He stepped back and his eyes roamed over her. She knew she looked better than usual in this outfit, so she didn't mind. And she could see his eyes glittering as he looked at her, his pupils widening with lust. He placed his hands on his hips, licked his lips. He gestured toward the bed with his chin.

"Sit down."

She just looked at him for a moment. She wasn't used to this simple, commanding tone from him. He didn't sound mean, but it was clear she shouldn't try to argue with him. A chill of pleasure ran up her spine.

"Now."

Another command, this time his tone was low and demanding. Her sex exploded with heat. She sat.

Cam paced the room slowly, looking at her from all angles, before he said, "Get rid of the bra."

She unhooked it immediately, her full breasts springing from the lacy confines. They felt plump and tender and wanted to be touched, something she hadn't felt in a long time. The fact that she could have this sort of reaction to nothing more than a certain tone of voice was almost shocking. She was trying hard not to analyze it.

Cam walked up to her and touched her breasts with his fingertips, just lazily brushed them over the curved underside, traced them around the edge of the areolas. Her nipples sprang up, hard and ready. But he didn't touch them.

When she looked up at his face he was smiling, just one corner of his mouth quirked up. Rakish, sexy.

He stepped back again and unbuttoned his shirt. She had always loved him without a shirt. He had one of those long, lean, cut torsos, with just the right amount of silky black hair in a line down the center of his well-defined abs. He was built like a pro basketball player: well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and those lanky, beautifully defined muscles. His black work slacks hung low on his narrow hips and

she could see that he was hard already, the outline of his large erection shadowed against the fine wool.

She squirmed on the edge of the bed, her lace thong growing damp.

"I'm going to ask you to do things for me tonight you've never done before. Are you ready to do that, Jillian"?

She swallowed, hard. Was she? Her natural mental response was to fight against the whole idea. She was normally someone who was strong, in control. But her body was rebelling already. Still, how could it be this simple? She knew that Cam's angle had been that bondage was all about trust, that there had to be complete trust in order to make it work. He saw it as a way to get back to each other. It made a sort of weird sense, but she still had her doubts.

Cam repeated, "Are you ready?"

His voice seemed so different tonight; his whole persona was different. Confident. Commanding. But it was still Cam. She could do this. She would do it for him. For them. And judging from the unexpected way her body was responding already, for herself.

"Yes. I'm ready."