

THE DARK GARDEN

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Bantam

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"Mistress Rowan. Good evening."

"Christian. Hello."

Was that a flush on her pale cheeks? Her eyes were dark and shining, her lips full and painted a deep red that made him think of sex. Red on that hooker's mouth of hers; it was too tempting.

"Have you just arrived?" he asked her.

"I had to work today and I was late. Are you enjoying the dungeon?"

So, she wanted to make small talk. But he could see her breasts rising and falling in short, quick breaths beneath the sheer fabric of her top. Spectacular breasts, full and high, but not too large. They would fill his hands beautifully. "Not as much as I could be if you were here to play with me."

Rowan bit her lip, anger suffusing her, even as lust curled hot in the pit of her stomach. God, she could smell him, he was so close. Something woodsy and all male. Why should she feel this terrible attraction to him when he was being so arrogant? But damn it, something about him made her melt, the heat at the core of her body making her legs weak.

She was furious.

"May I remind you that I am no submissive girl, Mr. Thorne?"

"Aren't you?" His voice was low, smoky.

"If you attended the mandatory introductory lecture, you will know that all submissives at Club Privé not owned by anyone wear a collar of protection. Do you see a collar around my neck?"

"Only metaphorically speaking."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

He smiled down at her with those ocean eyes. He looked as though he were considering his answer.

She didn't wait for him to speak. "You're just like all the others who think that because I'm a woman, you can be the one to bring me to my knees. It's not going to happen, so don't waste your time. There are plenty of unattached subs here to choose from."

"But I only want you." He moved closer until she could feel his breath warm on her hair as he spoke. "And you're wrong. About me, about yourself."

"What are you saying?" A quick shiver of heat ran down her spine.

"I'm not playing at converting you to submission, Rowan. I

understand you are not to be toyed with. But I can see a side of you that perhaps others can't. You hide it well. But not well enough."

"You're very full of yourself, aren't you?"

"Perhaps. Or perhaps I'm right. Why don't we try to find out?"

"I don't think so." But her body was belying her words. Her nipples had gone taut beneath the silky fabric of her bra just from his nearness, from his solid presence so close to her, from his scent, which was making her wild with need whether she wanted to admit it or not.

"It's not that I don't believe you," he said in conciliatory tones, his gaze calm on hers. "But I do believe there can be parts of ourselves that are hidden. Hidden beneath layers of what we think we should be, or what others expect from us. Digging down and discovering what lies beneath the surface can be freeing."

"And of course, you think you're the one who can free me?" Her temper was rising as quickly as her desire, making each all the more potent.

"I have a proposition for you."

"Of course you do."

"Give me thirty days to show you that I'm right about

you."

"You must be joking. Why should I?"

"Because you have nothing to lose and everything to gain."

"That's a ridiculous cliché!"

"Maybe not. Everyone knows the best tops are those who have bottomed, who have experienced the other side. If I'm wrong about you, you'll have that experience and will be a better top for it. And if I'm right, you will have discovered your true self. A gift either way."

He was looking down at her; his strong, beautiful face was perfectly serious. He wasn't playing games. But how could she? There were reasons why she was a dominant. Reasons she didn't want to discuss with him.

But he was right. It would make her better at what she did. And she would love to feel the smug satisfaction of proving him wrong. Needed to, maybe.

"Come on," he whispered right next to her ear. "What have you got to be afraid of?"

That warm, whispering breath sent a hot shiver through her. He was standing so close, he was almost touching her. Every cell in her body cried out for him to move closer, as though she wouldn't be satisfied until her flesh met his.

God, she was a fool.

"I'm not afraid of anything." She was trembling all over, and desperate that he not see it.

"Shall we find out together?" That soft breathy whisper again.

Why did she feel this intense need to prove him wrong? Perhaps it was more that she had to prove it to herself, had to test her strength.

"Alright. Thirty days."