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Taming Jeremy

An Erotic Romance

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Chapter One

Meet Boy Wonder

One of these days, someone would have to probe Tia's subconscious to find out why she devised her wildest paintings when she was asleep and restrained. Monday, before sunrise, Mark had her tied to his bedframe, her wrists bound with the sash of her emerald satin kimono. A morning man to the core, he was drinking his daily stimulant from the well between Tia's thighs while scenes from a weird art-sex dream still jangled her subconscious.

In her dream Tia stood in front of a cement wall beside the convention centre downtown, holding a wet paintbrush in one hand as she studied a mural she'd just painted: a Gaugin-like image of three muscular blue men making love to a voluptuous ochre woman under a papaya tree. Tia was wearing a leopard-print bra and matching panties that she'd seen in a Frederick's of Hollywood catalogue, but had never dreamt (until now) that she'd wear. It was morning rush hour, and thirty or forty commuters had gathered to gawk at Tia's painting. Out of the crowd stepped Mr Wilkins, her high-school driver's ed teacher, who had somehow been transformed into a modern-day Adonis. In reality, he had looked like the Skipper from *Gilligan's Island.*

'Tell us what you've done here, Tia,' said Mr Wilkins, in the fawning tone of an afternoon talk-show host who's scored a celebrity he doesn't deserve.

Tia stepped back and surveyed her work. Pretty spectacular, she had to admit. She'd never painted anything

like it: crazy, vibrant, outrageously sexual. The golds and sapphires and crimsons were sexy in their own right; the colours made you want to lick them.

'This isn't just a mural, it's a sex spell,' Tia explained. 'I wanted to call up the primitive eroticism of the stressed-out, overworked, modern female.'

Mr Wilkins was hanging on Tia's every word, but his eyes were wandering up and down – mostly down – her body. She suddenly felt a draft down south and realised that her panties were crotchless.

'So what do you call this masterpiece?' Mr Wilkins asked.

Tia tilted her head and tapped her chin thoughtfully with the handle of her paintbrush. 'It's called *The Temple of the Crotchless Papayas.*'

'Wow. I always knew you were gifted, but I had no idea you could do anything like this,' Mr Wilkins breathed, getting down on his knees. 'Speaking of temples, would it be OK if I worshipped at yours?'

'Of course,' Tia said.

Mr Wilkins parted Tia's lips, which were already ripe for attention, and nibbled adoringly at her inner flesh. The yuppie audience, holding attaché cases and Starbuck's cups, murmured their approval.

Tia roused herself with a moan. She opened her eyes to see Mark's head between her legs, his hair caressing her thighs while his tongue lavished attention on the knot at the heart of her folds. She was a bit disappointed that the mural wasn't real, and that she wasn't actually a genius, but she didn't mind seeing her hunky lover down there instead of a man who looked like the Skipper.

Mark lifted his head. Though her eyes were still unfocused, Tia could see the expression on his face: the fanatic grin of a control freak.

'Don't say a word, Tia. You're still mine.'

Tia shifted her arms, but her wrists were restrained.

That didn't surprise her. Mark was an expert at stealth bondage, and Tia often woke up with some part of her tied to the furniture. What did surprise her was how close she was to a climax; she could already feel the wavelets gathering into a tidal wave. A few more licks, and she'd come crashing down on Orgasm Beach. Her nipples still ached from the things Mark had done to them last night, and the nubs throbbed as Mark's tongue drummed at her clit.

Sensing the tension in her muscles, Mark cupped Tia's bottom in his hands. He drew her into his mouth when she rose into her climax, her body curving in a quivering bridge. She hovered there for a few seconds, coasting along on the spasms, then sank back down and came to rest on Mark's mattress. Just then, Mark's alarm went off, a chorus of liquid rainforest noises and exotic animal calls. Mark didn't need any electronic screeches to wake him up in the morning. He was always up before sunrise, and he proved it to Tia, sliding into her with one slow, capable motion. He was going over his allotted time, but Tia wasn't about to complain.

She raised her legs and wrapped them around his lower back, coaxing him deeper inside her. They rocked together at a sweet, unhurried pace, until the friction set off a wildfire. Tia loved the way his face looked when he was about to climax: his eyes widened at first, then squeezed shut, as if he were about to sneeze. With the birds in his alarm clock still hooting in the background, he exploded into Tia.

'Who's Mr Wilkins?' Mark asked, as they were catching their breath. 'You were mumbling his name just before you woke up.'

'Don't even ask,' Tia shuddered. 'I don't want to spoil the afterglow.'

Mark glanced at his clock. 'Sorry. It's past six.'

'I know. You kind of spilt over your time,' Tia said, giving his butt a playful smack. Mark reached up to

untie Tia's wrists. She watched his cock, still half-hard, swing heavily as he climbed out of bed and padded off to take his shower.

Mark and Tia had an arrangement. Twelve hours out of Tia's day belonged to her, and her alone; the other twelve belonged to Mark. From six in the morning until six in the evening, she did whatever she had to do. After six p.m., all bets were off. She had to follow Mark's instructions, no matter how kinky, shaping her time to his desires. Tia's law-student roommate thought the arrangement was outrageously weird, 'a throwback to authoritarian patriarchy', Noelle said. But, to Tia, her deal with Mark was a form of behaviour management, not so different from what she did at work. As an art therapist, she had to help her patients find outlets for their thoughts and urges. She gave them a space where they could go wild, at least with tempera paints or salt dough. It was the same thing with Mark. She was channelling his dominant drives, giving him a safe area to get crazy without letting him take over her life.

'Tia! What are you still doing in bed?'

Mark was stepping out of the bathroom. He'd towelled his body dry, but his skin was still ruddy and glowing from the hot shower. His blond hair, dark with water, was combed back against his head like an actor from an Italian porno movie, and his sleek goatee glistened with droplets. His tightly knit muscles showed the payoff of his memberships at two different gyms. His pendulous cock, hanging long and loose, was the cherry on top of the sundae. Forty minutes from now, Mark would be standing in front of a portable whiteboard, telling a gaggle of city officials about his plans for a new annex to the downtown public library. Right now he was looking a lot like Tia's breakfast.

'Waiting for you,' said Tia. 'Get over here.'

She sat up on one elbow and lowered her eyes to Mark's pride and joy. The thick root was stirring, and Mark was walking towards her, already hypnotised. Tia

loved being able to do that to him. Mark might be a control fiend, but the offer of a morning blowjob could turn his whole body, with one critical exception, into putty. When the tip of Tia's tongue met the tip of his erection, he groaned and sank his fingers into her messy hair. Tia sucked him, feeling him stiffen against her lips. Even after he'd showered, Mark couldn't totally wash away the flavour of his sex. His musky scent set off another rush of juice between Tia's legs. When he came into Tia's mouth, her body got warm all over, in a flush of pride. Tia couldn't exactly put 'expert fellatrix' on her résumé, but she counted it as one of her most valuable skills.

'You're in for it tonight,' Mark warned. 'I'm going to be late for my meeting.'

'Too bad.' Tia stretched like a cat and smiled up at him. 'I guess you'll have to punish me, Sir.'

'Damn right I will. And you won't be smiling about it, young lady.'

Young lady. She'd be hot over that all day. At 28, Mark was two years younger than Tia, but you'd never know it from the way he bossed her around.

'Wear your purple bra and panties today,' he said. 'And the pink T-shirt I like, the stretchy one with the buttons.'

'We're on my time now,' Tia reminded him. 'And the bra and panties you're referring to are "eggplant", not "purple", if you must know.'

'Hey,' Mark said, spreading his hands innocently. 'I'm just a guy with a suggestion.'

'OK. I'll wear the bra and panties, but I'll have to wear something decent on top. Tight T-shirts aren't the thing to wear on a locked psych unit.'

'I see what you mean,' Mark said with a grimace.

Sometimes Tia got the feeling that he didn't like her job, but he knew better than to say anything. The sour look vanished when he bent down to kiss her goodbye.

'I might have to work late if my afternoon meeting

runs over. But I'll be calling you at six on the dot. Be ready.'

'Oh, I'm ready already,' Tia said and laughed.

As soon as Mark left, she would have to do something about the swelling warmth down below. No matter how many times he made her come, Tia never seemed to get her fill these days. Three months ago, before she met Mark, Tia never would have guessed that her weekly quota of orgasms would climb up to the double digits. Who would have thought an art geek with a weakness for overpriced lingerie could get so lucky?

If she'd known better, Tia never would have unwrapped her nude body from Mark's Egyptian cotton sheets. She could have called the hospital and told them she had a nasty, contagious stomach bug; the nurses could have filled in for her with a group therapy session. But she'd promised Kim that they'd be painting ceramic turtles on Monday, and Tia had sworn to herself that she'd never break a promise to a patient.

When Tia showed up on the inpatient psych unit, the charge nurse told her that Kim had been placed in seclusion. She'd had a rough night, had broken her safety contract and wouldn't be painting any turtles while she was in four-point restraints. Tia managed to round up three other patients, but the session didn't go well. Frank wouldn't touch the plaster turtles because their blank white eyes frightened him (Frank had phobias about everything, but apparently albino turtles held a special terror). Samantha, an incessant talker whose manic repartée usually lent a cocktail-party atmosphere to therapy, was broody and distant. Darrell was enthusiastic for once, but he insisted on painting his turtle pitch black and decorating its shell with a blood-red pentagram.

While Tia was making a note in Darrell's chart about the satanic turtle, all hell broke loose in the day room. Kim, still in restraints, started screaming about her civil

rights, which escalated two of the other patients, who were already mad because they'd lost their smoking privileges. Soon the morning snacks were flying around the room and, before Tia could run for cover, she was hit on the side of the head with a boomerang banana. The fruit was green enough to cause some serious pain, and one of the nurses insisted that she should go downstairs to the ER and have it checked out.

'You might have a concussion. Unripe fruit can be a deadly weapon,' said the nurse in an ominous tone. 'I'll have to talk to Dietary about that.'

She sent Tia packing down to the ER, where Tia waited for the triage nurse to call her name. The waiting room was packed with people, most of whom looked like their only emergent concern was a need for air-conditioning. On a sweltering summer day, a lot of patients didn't mind waiting for two hours, but Tia couldn't spare the time. She had just decided that the gentle throbbing in her skull wasn't worth the trouble, when she spotted a familiar figure crossing the waiting room. You couldn't mistake Leo Baines; he was the only man in town wearing a fat green parka in the middle of July. Tia flagged him down.

'Leo! Over here!'

The psychiatric resident looked around the lobby with his characteristic expression of curiosity mingled with irritation. When he recognised Tia, he hurried over, each step counterbalanced by the weight of his bulging leather briefcase.

'God,' he sighed, plopping down in the seat next to Tia. 'I hate consulting in the ER. I just had a psychotic teenager scream obscenities at me for forty-five minutes. Someone should have put Haldol in her Froot Loops this morning.'

'Sounds like your day is worse than mine,' Tia said, rubbing her temple. 'I got hit in the head with a green banana. The nurse sent me down to see if I had brain damage.'

'Let me take a look.' Leo pulled a pen light out of the depths of his parka and shone it into Tia's eyes. Then he waggled his fingers in the air on either side of her head, touched her nose, and made what looked like a priestly benediction in front of her face.

'What was that?' Tia asked.

'A neurological assessment. You're fine,' Leo said. 'Drink three stone-cold martinis and call me in the morning.' He sat back in his chair, pulled off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. 'Tell me, Tia, why are we here? I should have followed my mother's advice and become a professional violinist.'

'And I should have been an artist,' Tia agreed.

'You're still an artist. You haven't stopped painting.'

'You mean I haven't stopped *trying* to paint. I haven't done anything that I like in months, except in my dreams.'

'How many months has it been, exactly?' Leo asked, stroking his chin. 'Three, maybe?'

'If you're implying that I stopped painting when I started dating Mark, you're absolutely wrong,' Tia declared. 'I've been taking a break. Getting a new perspective on my art.'

'Mmm, hmm. You know, Tia, I could revolutionise your perspective, if you'd let me.'

Leo's myopic eyes lingered on the top button on Tia's blouse. No doubt he was remembering the steamy make-out session that the two of them had had after sharing a pitcher of margaritas at the hospital's Christmas party. The hospital really should stop throwing parties, Tia thought. The state of American healthcare was bad enough without encouraging the staff to get drunk and grope each other. Actually, she had always known that Leo could be cute if he would burn his beloved parka and stop letting his mother cut his hair with a mixing bowl. From what she recalled of that tequila-fogged evening, he had looked almost handsome without his glasses.

'Don't go there, Leo,' she said. 'We've already been there. We don't want to go back.'

Leo sighed and got to his feet. 'One day you'll see the light. Mark is just too . . . organised for you. You're a free spirit. Too much structure will suffocate your soul.'

'I'm thirty years old. I need a little structure in my life.'

'A little structure, yes. A golden cage, no. Now, my pretty nightingale, I really have to run.'

Leo lifted Tia's hand and kissed it, then lurched away, his briefcase keeping him off-balance. What did he mean by 'organised'? Tia wondered. Was he implying that Tia was disorganised? And what were those cryptic references to cages and nightingales? Leo would make a great Jungian analyst some day, if he survived his residency.

Tia realised that she was chewing her nails: a definite sign that she was thinking too much – and that she was starving. She should take the rest of the day off; no one would notice if she slipped away for a four-hour lunch. But, as she stepped out of the ER into the hot summer day, she ran head first into the charge nurse, who reminded her that she was supposed to evaluate two newly admitted patients that afternoon. The wait had eaten up Tia's lunch break, so she bought a Hershey bar with almonds (protein bonus) from the vending machine and gobbled it in the elevator on the way upstairs. The first patient she evaluated scored so low on cognitive function that she thought he might belong on the neuro floor, and the second refused to be tested at all.

'I don't belong in this pigsty,' he announced. 'There's no one here but a bunch of nut-jobs. I am from the Lost City of Atlantis.' He looked at Tia's neck, then folded his arms and turned his back on her. 'I'm not even going to speak to you,' he announced. 'You don't have gills.'

Like all bad days, this one finally limped to an end. When Tia got back to her apartment, the first thing she

did was take off her high-necked paisley blouse and straight black skirt. She tossed her sedate work clothes on the floor of her closet and put on her favourite pair of jeans and the pink T-shirt Mark liked so much.

'Hey, Tia. Can we talk?'

Noelle leant against the doorframe. Something about her casual slouch made tiny hairs bristle on the back of Tia's neck. Red alert: Noelle never did anything casually.

'I'm not much in the mood for talk,' Tia said. 'I had a rotten day.'

'Really? What happened?' Noelle cooed.

'Cut the crap, Noelle. Just tell me what you want.'

Tia's roommate drew back with a sharp little sniff. 'Why do you assume I want something from you? Don't you think I care about your day?'

'Nope.'

'Well, all right,' Noelle grumbled. The Selfless Friend act had already broken down. 'I need to talk to you about my brother.'

Tia looked up at Noelle in surprise. 'What brother? You don't have one.'

'Yes, I do. His name's Jeremy. I don't talk about him much.'

'You mean you don't talk about him at all. Why not?'

'Jeremy has . . . issues.'

'Such as?'

'He had a few problems at college. Dropped out. Disappeared. Lived on the streets, hitchhiked around the country, got arrested for painting bizarre stuff on public buildings. He's brilliant, and he's talented, but he's never been like other kids.' Noelle spewed all this information in a single rush, without taking a breath. 'He's back in the city now. He's got everything he needs to make things work. He's got a case manager and a therapist, he's taking his meds, he's committed to making his treatment work. He just needs a place to live.'

'And what else?' Tia prompted.

'He needs a friend. Someone who's not officially part of his treatment team, but who could keep an eye on his mental status. Someone who could watch his moods and keep him under control.'

'Co-dependent nanny, at your service,' Tia sang, clicking the heels of her mules.

Noelle held up her hand like a traffic cop. 'No, Tia. That's not it at all.'

'So what does he need me for? He has a whole team at his disposal.'

'You can help him find productive things to do with his time. Channel his creative energy. If he starts making weird art again, you'll be the first to know. You'll be right there with him, monitoring his mental status.'

'Look, if Jeremy ever ends up getting admitted to my unit and I work with him on a professional basis, I'd be happy to monitor his mental status. Can't you see how warped it is to monitor someone who doesn't know he's being monitored?'

'Oh, he knows,' Noelle said breezily. 'I told him what you do for a living. It's fine with him if you watch what he's doing. Jeremy loves to be analysed. His biggest complaint about his current treatment team is that no one wants to spend any time using his art to explore the depths of his psyche.'

'Well, I don't want to do that, either.' Tia burrowed into the sofa and gave the coffee table a petulant kick.

Noelle's ears pricked up as she heard the whine creep into Tia's voice. Her lips curved into a small, self-satisfied smile. 'Yes, you do,' she said seductively. 'Intensive analysis was exactly what you wanted to do when you decided to go into art therapy. When you wrote your dissertation on sculpture and psychosis, did you really think you'd end up in a grubby public hospital watching your patients paint ashtrays and make caterpillars out of egg cartons?'

Tia pouted. 'There's nothing wrong with working in

a public hospital. And stop practising your prosecutor tactics on me. You know how I feel about artists. Remember Steffen?'

After she broke up with Steffen, Tia swore she'd never get personally involved with another creative type. She'd done her time on the mood-swing trapeze and, besides, she couldn't take the mess. She'd never forget the day she came home and found Steffen using her favourite pair of French-cut silk panties to smear paint on a wall-size canvas. The sight of that intimate apricot scrap crumpled up in his meaty hand made her cry, especially when she saw the colour he was using. Burnt sienna: an exotic term for brown. Freud would have had a field day analysing that passive-aggressive manoeuvre.

Steffen had almost carried it off. He claimed he'd found her panties lying on the bedroom floor, and the texture of the fabric combined with the traces of her musk had driven him wild with inspiration. This romantic touch might have saved the day, except that Steffen got even more excited by the scent of turpentine than by the scent of Tia. Every clear surface in Tia's loft apartment turned into a grove of jelly jars half-filled with coloured water and paintbrushes. Crumpled pencil sketches overflowed his drawing table and drifted on to the floor, and chunks of charcoal littered the carpets like deer droppings. Tia managed to put up with Steffen's mess for the four months he lived with her but, when they stopped having sex because Steffen was 'exhausted by his muse', Tia swore off artists. When she found out that his muse was a chunky blonde figure model named Liesl, she almost swore off men altogether.

So it was out with Steffen, in with Noelle. After having Steffen as a room mate, Noelle was refreshingly sane, maybe a bit too sane. She was efficient and neat to the point of being scary, making Tia feel like a pink frosted flake by comparison. Noelle was a health-food freak, a devoted runner and the top student in her class

at law school. That's why Tia couldn't believe that Noelle had a brother like Jeremy, much less that she was dumping him in Tia's lap.

'Steffen was totally different. You were romantically involved with him. Nothing like that is going to happen between you and Jeremy,' Noelle soothed. 'Look, won't you at least meet him before you make a final decision?'

'Fine.' With the world's heaviest sigh, Tia caved in. 'I'll meet the kid, if it will make you stop harassing me.'

Noelle stood up straight and crossed her arms over her chest. 'Great. Then we're set. Now would be the perfect time. He's upstairs, decorating his new apartment.'

'What? You mean he's going to live in the building?'

'Relax, Tia. He's on a month-to-month lease. I co-signed, just to reassure the landlady that things would be OK. If this doesn't work out, he's going straight back home to live with Mom. Trust me, if he thinks there's a chance of getting sent to Mom's, he'll be on his best behaviour.'

'You are such a manipulative bitch, Noelle.'

'Thanks. I do what I can.' She twirled on her bare foot as she turned to leave the room. She always executed that little spin after a professional victory, only it looked a lot more lethal when she was wearing her favourite pair of Ferragamo pumps.

If manipulation ran in the family, Tia was already in deep trouble with this boy.

Jeremy's front door stood partially open. Tia knocked but, when no one appeared, she decided to venture inside. The living room was empty, except for a pile of boxes, a sway-backed couch and a gaggle of mismatched wooden chairs. Tia found Jeremy in his bedroom. He was perched on a stepladder, doing something to the ceiling. The first thing Tia saw was his bare back, taut and sinewy, heartbreakingly strong and young. Several inches of plaid boxer shorts rose above the

waistband of his faded Levi's, which covered an ass so tight and firm that Tia had to do a half-pirouette to pull her eyes off it.

Noelle's brother, she reminded herself sternly. Noelle's wild, unstable baby brother.

'Hi there,' Tia said. Lame intro, but what else could you say when you were face to face with a backside like that?

Jeremy looked down. His hair, tied back in a blue bandanna, was black and wavy, the way Noelle's would be if she didn't discipline the spirit out of it with gel. In fact, Jeremy could be a younger, masculine duplicate of Noelle, *sans* glasses and tight-assed frown.

'Hey,' he replied. Shy pleasure with a touch of surprise. 'Wait a second. Let me get off this thing.'

Jeremy spread his arms, winglike, and leapt off the stepladder. He landed on the floor as gracefully as a gymnast and bounded over to Tia. He skidded to a halt only six or seven inches from her – poor sense of spatial boundaries, she noted, but at least he wasn't exhibiting any superhuman energy. He had a frank, gritty-sweet smell, like a child after a long day at the playground. She took a couple of steps back. His lean, ropy muscles were dewed with perspiration, and his pecs rose and fell with each breath. She could hear the air sifting faintly through his open mouth. Her knees almost gave way.

'What are you doing?' Tia asked.

'I'm making constellations,' he said, waving a sheet of glow-in-the-dark stars. 'These help me sleep at night. I pretend that I'm navigating on the ocean in the dark, like the Polynesians used to do in their canoes. Of course, it's more fun to navigate with someone else.'

'I hope you're not going to have too many overnight guests.' Somebody help me, Tia thought, I'm possessed by my mother. 'This is a quiet building. Your sister will go nuts if you start making a lot of noise.'

Jeremy laughed. 'Don't worry. I don't know very

many people around here.' He cocked his head and gave Tia an eager, assessing look, like a puppy checking out a new chew toy. 'Not yet, anyway.'

He was cute. Not just in a garden-variety way, but in a metaphysical sense: cute as an existential category. Way too cute, and too young, for Tia to be having the kinds of thoughts that were swirling through her brain right now.

'So what's your name?' he asked.

'Tia.'

'Oh, yeah. You're Noelle's best friend. She told me all about you. You're an art therapist. That's way cool. You're a real redhead, which is even cooler. You're lactose-intolerant, so, if I take you out for coffee, I should order you a soy latte with Sweet 'n Low. Your bra size is a 36D; you smoked clove cigarettes in college; you spend way too much money on underwear, and you've got a kinky thing for Russian sable – paintbrushes, I mean.'

Tia's jaw dangled. She couldn't say a word. She ought to be used to this kind of thing from kids like Jeremy, but his thumbnail portrait floored her. 'Noelle told you my bra size?' she managed to squeak.

'Uh, no. I guessed that part. It's a gift I have. I've been able to do it since I was twelve.'

'A gift,' Tia echoed weakly, wrapping her arms around her chest. Her nipples were hard, and her breasts felt warm and heavy and way too lush. 'You should be in lingerie sales.'

'Maybe I will be, one of these days.' Jeremy grinned. 'I'm pretty much capable of anything.'

Jeremy's right canine tooth was crooked. The cocky fang overlapped its neighbour in a way that strummed at her libido more than any set of perfect teeth. For Tia, sex appeal lived in the details of a man's face. A flawless surface offered nothing to cling to, nothing to snag her heart.

'Tia,' he said slowly, as if he were tasting the name

in his mouth. 'Like Tia Maria. I got wrecked drinking that stuff once. Tia means aunt, you know. Are you going to be my surrogate aunt or something?'

Or *something*. She definitely wanted to be his something. Tia didn't want to be an older female relative to this smart, sexy, metaphysically cute . . .

Tia's cell phone went off, playing the opening bars of Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyrie*. It was the special ring that she chose for Mark, who was an opera fanatic. In fact, she had bought the phone at Mark's request. She didn't need a cell phone for work – what would the hospital need to call her about urgently? A mass explosion of ceramic ashtrays? – but Mark wanted to make sure he could reach her at all times.

Tia's hand dove into the pocket of her jeans. Her fingers fumbled as she tried to answer the call; the phone felt slick and alien in her hand, like a transmitter from another planet.

'Hello?'

'It took you almost a minute to answer.' Mark's voice was rich, smoky, and deeply reproachful. 'How do you think I should punish you for making me wait?'

'Uh, I'm not sure about that. Why don't you tell me?'

'Imagine something cruel and unusual, something perfect for a naughty little redhead.'

Tia's face reddened. Her jeans felt too tight all of a sudden. She could feel her eggplant satin panties riding up between her lower lips. There was a reason why Mark wanted her to buy her panties a size too small. Jeremy was watching her, his head tilted again at that quizzical puppy-dog angle.

'How about a cauliflower casserole?' Tia suggested. It was the most cruel and unusual punishment she could name in front of Jeremy.

'Someone's there with you, right?' Mark asked. He sounded pleased. Tia could hear him revving up his engine.

'Right,' Tia chirped.

'You're not still at work, are you?'

'No . . . not exactly.'

Tia squirmed. Mark had touched a sensitive spot, one that she'd been avoiding ever since she caught the first glimpse of Jeremy's naked back. Would her time with Jeremy be considered work? Noelle wanted her to watch him, to manage his behaviour. That was basically what she did at the hospital. So did her time with him fall inside the bounds of professional behaviour?

God, she hoped not. Jeremy was too cute to be an ethical dilemma.

'Great. Are you wearing your pink cotton T-shirt with the button-down neckline? The one I asked you to wear.'

'Yes.'

'Good. Then I want you to run your finger down the collar. Play with the buttons till you get to the first one that's still fastened. Then I want you to unbutton it. After you're done with that one, keep undoing the buttons till the person you're with can see the top of your bra.'

'Mark, I don't think that's such a great idea right now.'

'One button, then.' His voice deepened. 'I've been waiting for this all day. You know how horny I get when I wait.'

Tia played with her collar, casually, as if she were scratching a bug bite under the fabric. Jeremy watched. She slid her finger down the neckline and hooked a pearly button. Here goes nothing, she thought, as the button sprang out of its hole, revealing a good inch of cleavage.

Jeremy didn't think it was nothing, apparently. He swallowed hard. Tia thought she heard him give a small whimper. Tia couldn't go on. This was too cruel and, besides, she'd already flashed her purple bra strap. That should be good enough for Mr Control.

'Done,' Tia announced.

'I hope the person you're with appreciates your assets.'

'I don't think that's a problem.'

'Good. You have amazing breasts,' Mark said. A lion's purr. She could hear him licking his chops. 'Guess where I am right now.'

'At the office?'

'Nope.'

'Starbuck's?'

'Closer. Keep guessing.'

'On the corner?'

'Getting warmer.'

Damn. He was somewhere in the building, probably prowling up the stairs. Tia should have suspected he was near by; the reception on that call was too clear. She crammed the cell phone into her pocket and gave Jeremy a brilliant smile. 'Why don't we get together tomorrow morning?' she asked. 'I've got to go – something just came up.'

'Sure. I'll be here.'

Jeremy looked confused. His full mouth drooped. Tia fought back the urge to kiss him on the cheek. He had a hint of dark stubble on his jaw. The contrast of that masculine shadow with his childish, crestfallen expression made a starburst of lust spread through Tia's loins.

'Or we could get together later, after it gets dark,' he suggested. 'We could look at the stars.'

Tia fought the urge to blurt out a big, sloppy 'yes'. She had to keep this situation under control. 'I think it's supposed to stay cloudy till tomorrow morning,' she said. 'It wouldn't be a good night for star-gazing.'

'I wasn't talking about the stars outside,' he said, motioning to the ceiling above his bed. 'You'll be able to see stars in here any time you want.'

'Right,' Tia gulped. 'I'm sure I will. Now I've really got to go.'

She wheeled around before Jeremy could give her another sexy, soulful look. He should have been born with a licence for those eyes; they were nothing less than sex lasers, the weapons of a supercharged wonder boy. Tia had always thought Noelle's turquoise eyes were stunning, but they looked washed out compared to Jeremy's. It had to be his brain that generated that dazzling light, reflecting those blues and greens and golds from the prismatic colours of his imagination.

As she clattered down the stairs, Tia tried to forget about Jeremy's eyes. She was too busy trying to think about how she would tell Mark about Jeremy.

'Sexual Overlord, meet Boy Wonder,' she muttered to herself, rehearsing the scene in her mind. Somehow, it didn't quite work.