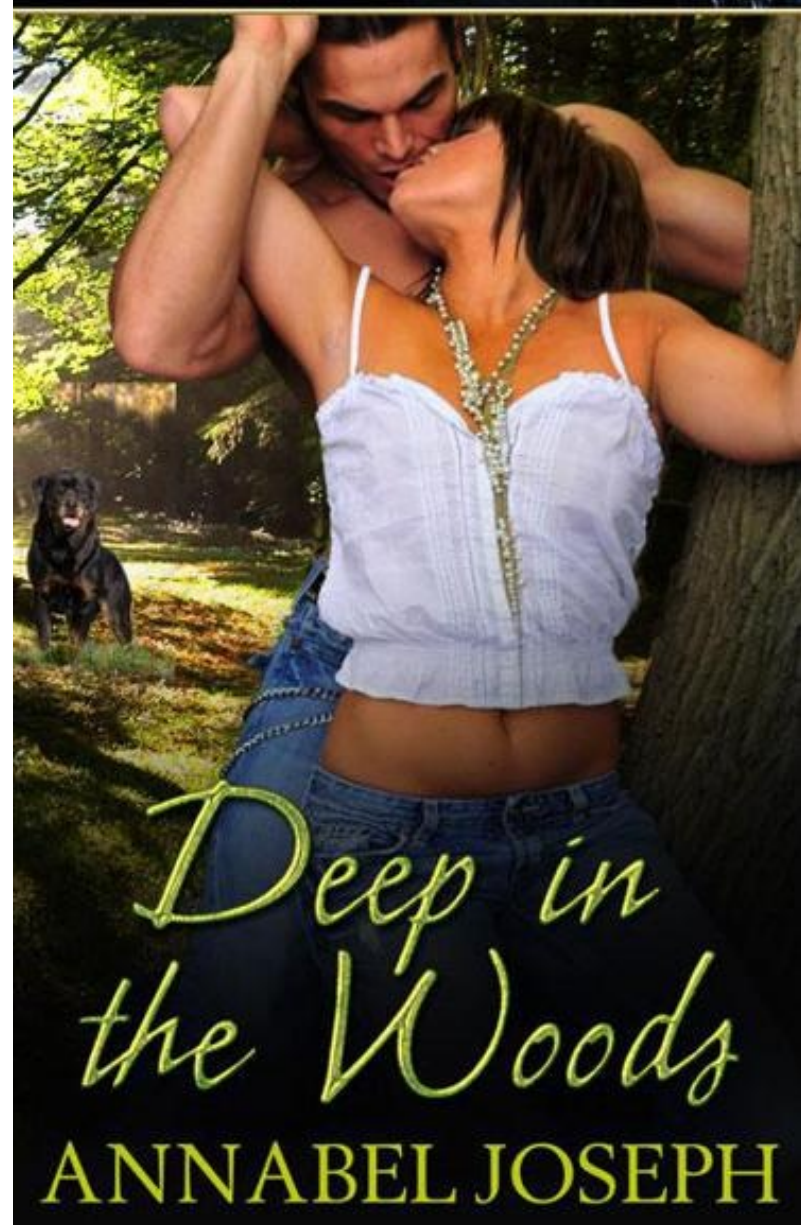


ELLORA'S CAVE TABOO



*Deep in
the Woods*

ANNABEL JOSEPH



Deep in the Woods

[Annabel Joseph](#)

Sophie finally finds the courage to reenter the Atlanta BDSM scene after extricating herself from an abusive relationship. At a local munch, she meets Dave, a funny, laid-back erotic photographer. When she sees him again later at a dungeon, Sophie is surprised by her strong attraction, and nervous about starting a new relationship, but Dave eases her fears. They embark on a sexy, thrilling D/s relationship, and Sophie finds healing and fulfillment in Dave's arms.

But Sophie is still haunted by nightmares of her past. On a dark night in the woods with Dave and his friend Ryan, frightening memories overtake her. She knows that in order to move on, she must uncover the tragedy that haunts her subconscious.

Sophie's quest for answers brings her face-to-face with her previous tormentor. She finds herself once more in the deep woods, not only fighting for answers...but also for her life.



An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication

www.ellorascave.com

Deep in the Woods

ISBN 9781419928680

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Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book publication July 2010

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DEEP IN THE WOODS

Annabel Joseph

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Chris S., for his help on darkroom processes; Venator-Hominum, for the martial arts and fight-fucking inspiration; and Hollis, for turning me on to the eroticism of the chase.

I would also like readers to know that while I live in the Atlanta area and occasionally participate in the scene, none of the characters or situations in this book is based on real people or events, except for the descriptions of the trees, which truly are beautiful.

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Annabel Joseph

Chapter One

Dave stretched in bed, pushing the covers down. Saturday morning. Nowhere to be, nothing to do. What to do? Masturbate? Listen to music? Read the stack of photography mags piled up beside the bed? A whine issued from the depths of the comforter as he shifted.

“Shove over, Cerby. Big baby.” Dave lifted the covers to find black luminous eyes staring back at him. “That’s right, I called you a baby. You’re a disgrace to your breed.

Whatever your breed is.” He reached down to scratch his dog’s ears. Although he was named after the mythological dog Cerberus, this Cerberus was no three-headed, ferocious defender of the Underworld. More like a shaggy black overgrown lapdog that needed a bath. Well, the name had seemed like a good idea at the time. Cerby crept closer and licked Dave on the face.

“You need a bath today, you mutt. I might want to bring home a girl from the play party tonight. And if I do...” He fixed the dog with a look. “If I do, you will behave yourself. No barking, no licking. I’m the only one who licks the girls. Do you understand?” He chuckled at Cerby’s forlorn look, then scratched him under the chin.

“I think that last girl would have come back if you hadn’t made such a nuisance of yourself.”

Cerberus gave a comic half-groan of disappointment, as if he understood Dave’s words. Perhaps he did. Dave had picked him up on a photo shoot, an abandoned puppy skulking around a deserted train yard, starved and riddled with parasites. The girl he’d been photographing had shrieked with horror that Dave would even touch him. Fetish models. Bunch of narcissistic babies. If he’d left the dog there, it would have haunted his dreams. The vet bills had been astronomical, but a small price to pay for the adoring loyalty he enjoyed now. Within months, the medium-sized puppy had grown into a hundred-pound ball of reckless playfulness and fierce love.

But man, he was a bed hog. “Shove over, Cerb. I mean it.” Cerberus stuck his muzzle into Dave’s armpit, then withdrew it with a snort. “Well, I haven’t showered yet. Anyway, I asked you nicely for some personal space.” Dave turned over and looked at the clock. Midmorning already. It was late summer in Atlanta, and much hotter than he’d ever expected it to get, even in a place that called itself “Hotlanta”.

He’d almost rather be back in Boston. It was fucking hot. He’d moved south last winter, looking for warmer climes and lovely women to photograph. He’d found both.

Southern girls were sweet all over. The way they talked was sweet, the way they dressed was sweet, the way they fucked was sweet.

But his last subject, Lara, hadn’t been too fond of Cerberus and had declined to sleep over. Too bad because he’d been quite attracted to her. But, love him, love his 6

Deep in the Woods

dog. He'd thanked her for her time and shown her the door. His proffered kiss had ended up a peck on her cheek.

No matter. There was another munch today and a play party afterward. He'd found a welcoming home in the Atlanta BDSM scene. Plenty of fun, plenty of girls to chat with and plenty of would-be models who were willing to bare themselves for his thriving fetish-photography business. And later bare themselves for some fun. What was it about guys and cameras? Since he'd picked his up, he'd had more women like he'd never had in his life.

He thought maybe it had to do with the exposure. With the eye of the camera, and the eye of the photographer. It was one thing to look at a pretty woman. It was another thing altogether to turn your camera on her, to capture lust or sex. Or fear. Shyness or boldness. Who ever knew? Each photograph he took surprised him in some way.

He rolled out of bed and shuffled to the bathroom. His shoulder-length brown hair was a tousled mess. He brushed it back, trying to tame the wavy strands, then shrugged and turned on the shower. He looked back in the mirror. Yes, it was definitely the eyes.

He narrowed his, then widened them, pulling faces. He tried to look soulful and deep.

Oh yeah, slick. Cerb snorted again from the door. Dave flexed his arms, did a curl to check out his abs. He was nothing spectacular in the looks department, but his body was pretty tight and girls always commented on his hazel eyes. *My eyes see more.* Was he trying to convince himself? He'd failed as a fine arts photographer. Well, failed monetarily. Fetish photography paid the bills, and God knew he enjoyed it, particularly the fringe benefits.

Whatever. He could pretend all he wanted that he was an artist, that he was making high art, but photographing pompous D-types and their preening, precious submissives was hardly going to win him a Pulitzer Prize. He had won a Hot Flesh award last year.

Not really something to write home to Mom about. But the award and publicity had solidified his name in the business, and bills were no longer a problem.

No, he had a good life, he thought, stepping under the cool water and letting it roll over his shoulders and down his back. It felt wonderful in the sluggish heat of the Saturday morning. He felt himself waking up, coming to life. He would have to drag Cerby into the shower and get him cleaned up too. If he was lucky enough to bring a girl home, he didn't want to be making excuses for his huge, over-pungent pet. He wanted her to spend the night. He loved to wake up next to a beautiful, drowsy woman, cuddling under light, crisp sheets. And what cuddling usually led to—he loved that even more.

* * * * *

“Daaaaave!”

Dave fielded a hug from “Special One”, and another shortly afterward from “Pretty Punkin”, who was helpfully, quite a punk. It was hard to keep the lifestyle names straight sometimes, much less the re-

names. The girls got mad when you forgot their 7

Annabel Joseph

real names, but when they called themselves by made-up nicknames at most of the social gatherings it was kind of hard to keep it all straight. Add a couple beers at your average play party and there were lots of opportunities to offend.

The men also had their scene names. Dave had never come up with a good one, not for lack of trying. All the best ones were taken. “Lord Pain”, “Gentle Dom”, “Master Disaster”, or Dave’s personal favorite, “Dick Hammer”. There was even a “Master Dave” already in Atlanta. Not that Dave considered himself a Master of anything. He was just a garden-variety perv. And a bit of a playful sadist. Somehow “Playful Sadistic Pervert” didn’t have that certain élan the women were looking for. So he went by Dave.

“Dave!”

Another big hug from, oh god. What was her name? The one who was into needles.

That had been an interesting session. And Lara was there, eyeing him from across the room. She made no move to come see him and she didn’t crack a smile. He got the message loud and clear and found a place on the other side of the room near the moderator. He went to the buffet and came back to eat, making small talk with a young petite Domme and her little boi. After a while he offered them his card. They would make great subjects. They were both photogenic as hell, and judging from the conversation, quite open to a variety of kinky play.

His eyes went back to Lara. She was definitely running cold. Ah, well. She had seemed a little too controlled and inhibited for his tastes anyway. He liked to take girls out of their comfort zones, see them gasp and watch their eyes go wide as he took them to a place they’d never gone before, but a place they found they liked very much. He liked to give women erotic pain, push their boundaries, although he made sure safe words were in place first. He was all about negotiating.

But he still felt guilt at times. Sometimes he wondered if what he was doing was wrong, even with safe, sane and consensual niceties in place. Even if a girl enjoyed it, did it harm her to be hurt, pinched, spanked? Shamed? Humiliated? What if he took her out to dinner beforehand? Did that make it more acceptable?

His tastes hadn’t always been so extreme. He used to be perfectly content just to slap a girl on the ass and fuck her vanilla-style. It wasn’t until he started delving deeper into the lifestyle, until he started photographing others’ scenes, that his own threshold of perversion began to ramp up. He could still be vanilla if he had to, he could still turn it on and off. Barely. Which is why he very much preferred to go to the munches around Atlanta and try to meet kinky girls. So many of them were already paired up though.

He was taking another bite of chicken when he heard the room go silent. Not totally silent, but silent for a munch as crowded as this one. He looked around to see what was going on and then he saw the focus of all the attention. She stood just inside the door, arms crossed over her chest. She looked as

she didn't want to be there. He looked around to see who she belonged to, who had made her come to the munch against her will.

8

Deep in the Woods

"Sophie," said the moderator, a man called Jerry. "Come sit here." Jerry pointed to an empty chair between him and Dave.

So she was with Jerry. Interesting. Jerry was probably sixty-five if not older, and this girl looked twenty-five if she was a day. Strange that he'd never seen her at any of the munches or parties. If he had seen her, he would have remembered. She was gorgeous. Black, black hair. Blue-black. Blacker even than Cerberus' fur. It fell to her shoulders and across her face in wispy locks. She had a pale, almost leonine face that gave her a wild, intent look, especially since she was frowning. He knew at once that he wanted to photograph her. He *had* to photograph her.

But everyone stared at her as if she had the three heads of Cerberus' namesake.

Stared at her to the point of rudeness, stared to the point that Dave wanted to tell them to cut it out. To the point where he wanted to stand up and shield her from their eyes, because she looked as if she didn't want to be stared at. She was blushing when she fell into the chair next to him. She didn't have any food, just a drink. She was so perfectly proportioned that her small size wasn't apparent until she was right next to him. She was probably right around five feet tall, and he was six-four, give or take. His legs crowded hers under the table.

"Sorry," he said as their knees bumped. She looked up at him and any further words went still in his throat. My god. Her eyes. It was all about the eyes. What was that saying? "Eyes are a window to the soul." He gazed into her soul and, God fucking help him, he couldn't look away. It was only a moment, a millisecond that he saw her there before some shutter clicked closed and she looked away.

"Sorry," he said again. He rubbed his hands on his jeans. His palms were sweating.

She gave a small smile, staring at the table. *Look up at me again. Look up.* Blue, blue eyes.

Violet. Pale violet-blue eyes, and a soul full of raw, intense emotion. Jerry patted her hand and conversation started up again in the room.

Don't stare. Everyone's staring had upset her, so he couldn't stare at her now, no matter how much he wanted to. He shifted his plate over. Why were the munches always so crowded? His knee knocked hers again and she shifted away.

"I'm so sorry."

"It's okay." She shrugged. No, she wasn't Jerry's sub. Aside from a glance or two in her direction Jerry had given her no more attention, and she held herself away from him almost defensively. In fact she hunched herself into the smallest area possible and kept her eyes down.

Dave glanced around the room. People were still looking. He considered asking something silly like “So, who did you kill?” but thought better of it. Instead he held out his hand and said, “Hi, I’m Dave.”

After a short pause in which he thought she wouldn’t reply at all, she took his hand.

“Sophie.”

She didn’t meet his eyes, and the way she said her name sounded like, *Please don’t talk to me anymore*. Part of him wanted to comply, but part of him was too fascinated and 9

Annabel Joseph

curious. He didn’t even know for sure she was a sub, although considering he was one hundred percent dominant, he hoped she was. He leaned back and tried again to engage her.

“Aren’t you hungry?”

“No. Not really.”

He had the sudden impulse to feed her something from his plate, or offer to go get her something. He pictured a poster on the MARTA train—FEED THE SUBS, with an image of poor Sophie and her violet-blue eyes. Jesus, she’d probably eaten a late lunch or something. What was wrong with him? He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so stupid and bothered over a girl.

“So, Sophie. Is that your real name, or the name you use in the scene?”

“It’s my real name. I don’t really have a scene name.”

“I don’t either. I mean, not that there’s anything wrong with having one. It’s just too schizo for me. I’ve answered to Dave for too long now. Although I did toy with the name ‘Bringer of Pain’.”

She made a small sound, and then smiled wide. He realized the sound had been a laugh. He took it as encouragement and forged ahead. “I also thought about ‘Spider-Dave’. You know, instead of Spider-Man? Except then girls might think I was into spider play or something, and that doesn’t exactly have them beating down the door.

I’m not into spider play, by the way,” he added as he saw her shift closer to Jerry. “And

‘Dave the Flav’ was another one, you know, like Flavor Flav? I was drunk when I thought of that. Actually, I was drunk when I thought of both of those. I don’t know why I try to think up BDSM handles when I’m drunk, but I do.” She laughed again, and he knew it was because he was acting like an idiot, but he didn’t care.

“I like Dave better than any of those,” she said. Her smile was so enthralling, wide with gorgeous straight white teeth. Dave’s camera finger twitched.

“Yeah, me too.” *Idiot. Is this the best conversation you can come up with?*

Jerry turned to her then and patted her hand again.

“Sophie. I’m so glad you came out. We’ve missed you.” She looked down and bit her lip. “Well...”

“Are you coming out later? To the play party at the Studio?”

“I might. I’m not sure.”

“Are you seeing anyone new?” Jerry’s eyes flicked to Dave’s momentarily before darting back to Sophie’s rather spectacular rack. She made a quiet negative sound, shaking her head and looking out at the other guests at the munch.

“Well, all in good time,” said Jerry, tearing his gaze from her chest. “There’s no hurry to get back out there.”

“No.” She clasped her hands together on the table. “I really just came out to see what everyone’s been up to.”

10

Deep in the Woods

Jerry launched into some of the local goings-on and she listened, sipping her drink.

Since she was distracted, Dave took the opportunity to finally stare. God, her hair was so black. Her skin so pale. Her lips so red. Holy fuck, he was sitting next to Snow White.

And she wore white—a slim-fitting T-shirt over dark jeans. Would she let him photograph her? What would he see in the darkroom when he developed her photos?

What would he see in her eyes? He would have to use film with her. Digital would be too cold, too stark. He would have to use film and chemicals to draw shades of meaning from the planes of her face, from the depths of her blue-black hair, from those eyes...those eyes... He would...he would...

Jesus, she was leaving. Her knee bumped his again as she pushed her chair back.

He had to stand to let her pass. He hoped she was just going to get some food or go to the ladies room. He watched her stalk out the same way she’d stalked in, her eyes shuttered, her chin held high. She was subjected to the same silent stares. No, she wasn’t coming back.

He turned to Jerry. “Nice girl.”

“Yes. A very sweet girl. Been in the community for several years now.” Dave waited for him to say more, but Jerry’s voice trailed off and he turned his attention to someone else. Dave finished his food and made his way to a group of friends in the opposite corner, skirting Lara, who frowned at him. Now he didn’t feel like talking to her now.

“Darling, come give me a kiss.” Madame M was a statuesque Domme he’d had the pleasure

photograph on several occasions. “I see you met the little bitch. She surfaces every so often.”

“M.” Veronica, an older, motherly woman, scolded her. “That’s not very kind of you.”

“Well, that’s what she is.”

“She’s not the only bitch in this group,” said a Dom named Clark, frowning at M.

“Sheathe your claws. I think it took a lot of courage for her to show up here.”

“That girl I was talking to? With the black hair?” asked Dave, confused. “She didn’t seem like a bitch.”

“Sophie,” said Madame M, waving her hand in irritation. “Too good to play by the rules. You know it’s true, Clark.”

“The jury is out on whether it was her or him who broke the rules,” Clark retorted.

“It was him,” Veronica interjected. Veronica was a longtime slave with a soft heart and a surprisingly sharp tongue. “He was the one who was all about no limits, and that consensual non-consensual nonsense.”

“And she was the one who agreed to it,” said Madame M. “She was the one who stayed with him when everyone tried to help her. That was her decision. She made her bed.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Dave. “I’m lost.” 11

Annabel Joseph

Clark turned to him. “Last year Sophie started seeing a man named...what was his name?”

“Depraved,” said Veronica with a frown.

“Yes, Depraved. No one knew his real name. Anyway, he was an abuser. A fake.

We all told her. We all knew what was going on. They came together to the munches, the play parties, and the things he did to her—the way he treated her—”

“Sophie let him treat her that way,” M said with a wag of her finger. “We tried to step in. I did step in on several occasions, and was told by Sophie to fuck off.” Clark shook his head. “It was a terrible situation. One night at Studio Erotica, he went too far with her. Master Lawrence and Lady Mar called the police, and still Sophie did nothing. Wouldn’t make a statement, wouldn’t press charges. Nothing changed. The police started showing up at all the local fetish events, even to any play parties we advertised online. They were always hovering around because of this thing with Sophie and Depraved.”

“She’s just an attention whore,” Madame M said. “Before Depraved, there was that other one, you remember?”

“But he wasn’t as bad,” said Veronica.

“Well, he was bad enough. Anyway,” M continued, “eventually Sophie and Depraved were no longer welcome at the munches and parties anymore. They were blacklisted from Studio Erotica. Lawrence and Marie had to do it, otherwise the police would have found a way to shut them down.”

They all fell silent. Dave looked from one face to the other. “Then what? What happened?”

“Well,” said M. “They disappeared. We didn’t know. None of us knew what was going on until it was too late. Sophie’s parents came sniffing around, saying their daughter hadn’t contacted them in weeks. Again, the cops were all over us. No one knew who this ‘Depraved’ character was, where he lived, where he worked. No one had seen them, but the cops were at every venue, at every event looking for Sophie.

Sophie’s father is some high-placed local businessman or something—”

“That wasn’t the point, that the cops were everywhere,” said Clark. “So you had to answer a few questions. What about her?” He turned to Dave. “They found Sophie when she turned up in the emergency room. She had been abused. Drugged.” He went silent, searching for words. “Broken. She was a mess. She might have died.” He scowled at M. “No one would have asked to be treated like that. So calling her a bitch—”

“She was a bitch. She made trouble for a lot of people—”

“I cried,” said Veronica. “I felt so guilty.”

“Exactly.” Madame M frowned. “We all felt guilty, but it was none of our faults.

And when she failed again and again to report him, she endangered every other submissive in Atlanta because he didn’t go away. He hasn’t gone away. She never did bring any charges against him, although as far as I know, he’s gone to ground. He 12

Deep in the Woods

couldn’t come anywhere near any munch or club in Atlanta without getting beaten to a bloody pulp, that’s for sure.”

Dave thought that sounded like a good time, beating to a bloody pulp a man who had put Sophie in the hospital. A man who had done it in the name of BDSM. A

“sadist”. That’s probably what this “Depraved” imagined himself. A kinky sadist, just like Dave, only he hadn’t known when to stop. He remembered how Jerry, a “daddy dom”-type player, had scowled at him as he’d chatted Sophie up. Jerry had probably thought, *Oh, no, she can’t fall into the hands of another sadist. Not on my watch.* But there were sadists, and then there were sociopaths.

“So why do you think she came back?” Dave asked.

“Lonely, maybe?” offered Veronica.

“God, I can’t imagine why she would show her face here,” said M with a snort.

“You saw the reception she got. Just needs more attention, I suppose.” Well, she had gotten Dave’s attention. She definitely had his attention now.

13

Annabel Joseph

Chapter Two

Sophie moved to the side in the hallway to let her neighbor pass. He lived right across from her, but she didn't think he even knew who she was. She recognized him.

When she was sure he was gone, she dug in her purse for her keys and let herself into her small apartment. She was so suspicious of everyone now. She thought she might have post-traumatic stress disorder after all. Or some other complicated syndrome that her parent-appointed therapist explained to her while she zoned out on the leather couch. Damn, she thought she probably had a session next week. If she didn't go, her dad would come bother her. Maybe she could pretend she had work.

She dropped her bag and collapsed on the sofa. She felt like shit. What was wrong with her? Why had she gone to the munch? They all judged her and made her feel even worse than she felt when she was alone.

Maybe she had just wanted to show them. Show them that she had survived, and that she had every right to be there, as much right as they had. They were, after all, her people. If she belonged anywhere, she belonged among them. Maybe she had made things complicated for the group for a while. But they were just like her, exactly like her, deep inside. They liked power exchange, and most of them liked sadomasochism too. Hell, half of them liked it harder than she did. Who were they to judge?

She stood up and went to the mirror. She was still Sophie. She had gone into the woods for a while, but she'd come back out again. She'd survived. The scars she had were mostly hidden when she had her clothes on. She wasn't going to take her clothes off, not ever again.

Well, maybe if she found the right person. But it would have to be a really special person. Someone she could really trust. Someone safe.

Safe. Her mind wandered again to the man who'd sat beside her at the munch. She hadn't seen him before, not since she met Barry and ended up out of the group. If she'd seen him she would have remembered. Dave. He had such a masculine, sculpted face, a tan healthiness and fitness that was instantly attractive. His sensual lips and mouth made her have *thoughts* about him, and he had the most beautiful hazel eyes. But what did that mean? That didn't mean he was safer or more trustworthy than anyone else.

But he'd also had lovely, soft-looking, chestnut-brown hair she wanted to run her fingers through, and long, strong legs that he'd bumped her with twice. Probably not intentionally. Well, perhaps she'd intentionally bumped him the second time. And his hands...he was a nail biter. His nails had been bitten practically to the quick. She'd looked at his hands because she couldn't look at his face. His face, his easy smile, his kind laugh had made her start to think...start to think that maybe she might.

14

Deep in the Woods

No. Not anytime soon. She was lonely, but she wasn't that lonely yet. For all she knew, he was a su

himself. You could never really tell, not really. He certainly hadn't been pulling any domly crap with her. But then neither had Barry the first time they met. He had been very quiet and circumspect, all the harsh reality hidden underneath a handsome exterior. What was hidden underneath Dave's polite and humorous veneer?

There was no way to tell. That was the really scary thing. Sophie looked at herself in the mirror and started to brush out her hair, thinking how strange it was that you could look right in someone's eyes and still not be certain what was going on in there. You never really knew. And when you did finally know, sometimes you found yourself in a position you might not have chosen if you had known how things would really be. But then of course, sometimes it was too late. Sometimes you realized it was just too, too late and you were truly fucked.

She put the brush down with a clatter on the countertop and gripped the edge of it.

Past. *Past*. Let bygones be bygones. She took a deep breath and willed the heavy pounding in her chest to subside. She swallowed down the hot panic, the tight ball of emotion in her throat. There was nothing to be done about it now, except to go on living. She should pull herself together and show up for the play party. She should ease back into the community. It would be a good thing.

She pulled out a black dress and black tights. Low-heeled Mary Jane shoes. She wanted to blend in. She wanted to go, watch, soak in the scene, but not play. She didn't really want to be approached, although she figured no one would approach her judging from the way they'd acted at the munchies. Jerry had been nice to her, but then he had always been protective of her. It was sweet, but she knew it was only because he wanted her. She wasn't looking for a daddy-type thing, though. She wasn't looking for *nice*.

But she wasn't looking for psycho either. There had to be some middle ground there.

She applied makeup, dark eyeliner and crimson lipstick. She even painted her nails.

It was nice to feel human again, to feel alive and pretty. If she wanted to dress up, she could. She could smile at whomever she wanted to smile at, and chat with whomever she chose. No one could make her do anything, at least for now. At least until she chose to give someone that power again. And she knew she eventually would, because that was just the way she was.

* * * * *

It was ladies' night at Studio Erotica so they let Sophie in without a cover charge.

The play party was already rollicking along. Studio Erotica was a full-service dungeon, one that Sophie and Barry had played at often before they were driven away. She had always loved the decor—dark plum and crimson velvet drapes, goth art and iron candlesticks on the wall. Tapestries and velvet upholstered sofas and divans. Campy?

Sure. But effective. The low trance music was the perfect background to the moans and squeals Studio's patrons, already entrenched in erotic scenes.

So much skin. Sophie wanted to look but she wasn't quite ready yet. She made a detour into the lounge area, but there was nowhere to sit. She scooted into a corner and looked around at everyone enjoying themselves. The chatter and laughter was kept respectfully low, but all the faces were smiling. Sophie had always loved it here. People came to Studio Erotica for one reason and one reason only—to have fun and feel good.

From the lounge, Sophie could barely see a male sub bent over a spanking bench, being lovingly, harshly, paddled by his mistress. She saw a woman in the back being hooked up to the footboard of a huge iron bed. The tall bedposts had so many attachment points it was almost funny. Sophie had always been fascinated by that bed. She used to watch submissives and slaves being fixed to it and imagine the endless permutations of how it could be done. Sophie had never been tied to the bed. When Barry had played with her at the dungeon, he'd used the cross or the stocks. He had always bound her tightly, because he'd always played with her hard.

Lawrence and Marie, the owners, circulated around the room. They maintained a constant presence, making sure everyone was playing safe and playing fair. For a moment, Sophie was afraid they might escort her out. She and Barry had been banned from the dungeon last year. But that had been to keep Barry away, she knew. She never did anything, only took it. Barry had been a hard-core sadist, so the things he liked to do to her weren't that enjoyable to other people. Slapping, torments, humiliations, whippings that went on and on. They didn't use safe words. At home, he did worse things. Choking her, burning her. Scaring her with guns and knives just to make her cry and beg for mercy. Once he had nailed her hands to a wall in the woodshed. She'd been surprised that it bled so little, and more surprised that it left almost no scar once it healed. He had done a lot of bad things to her. At that time in her life, she hadn't considered them bad. It had been all about the rush, the surrender. It was only in hindsight, when she looked back on their activities, that she realized he had done dangerous things to her. Evil things. She could remember in hindsight when their activities changed from games to evil, but by that point she had become afflicted by some kind of mental incapacity. She had wanted only to please him, her terrible Master.

There had been no "Sophie" left to utter *no* or ask for negotiations. No will, no self-protective impulses. It had happened so gradually, she hadn't even realized it.

But she wasn't like that anymore. She knew now how it had happened. She had experienced the sinister slide and survived it. She would recognize the signs if it happened again, she was almost sure of it.

Sophie smiled. The girl was completely bound to the iron bedposts now. She was standing up, legs spread, hands held out in their cuffs as if she welcomed the coming pain with open arms. Her Dominant stood beside her holding a flogger, watching with an enraptured smile. The sub was gorgeous. Blonde hair, tall and curvy. The man started to whip her with steady, controlled movements. She arched, unable to escape. Sophie was certain the woman didn't want to. Her Dominant was short but fit, and clearly 16

tuned in to her reactions and needs. Sophie thought if she was closer, she could have heard the sound of the sub was making and enjoyed the expressions on her face.

Sophie noticed then that the couple was being photographed. How wonderful, she thought, to preserve something so intimate with the help of a lens. The photographer was a tall, solid man, but he was unobtrusive in his work. His movements were subtle and controlled. His shoulder-length hair was pulled back in a ponytail, but a few locks had escaped. He brushed them back from his face with a gesture she remembered. It was the man from the munch, Dave. As the scene went on, she found herself watching him instead of them. His plain gray T-shirt was understated and yet somehow very masculine. Maybe it was the way it stretched across his chest and hinted at tight muscles underneath. Each time he shifted and looked for a shot, his body seemed to rearrange itself with a natural grace. His arms flexed and his muscles realigned as he lifted the camera to his eye—

“Sophie!”

Sophie jumped and looked over to see an old friend, Tara, holding out her arms to give her a hug.

“I heard you were at the munch this afternoon. Good for you. You look wonderful, honey.” The bubbly blonde clasped Sophie in a tight hug, then backed away. “Oh god, he’s not here, is he?”

“Barry? No. They wouldn’t have let him in anyway.”

“I should hope not.” Tara looked embarrassed that she’d spoken so sharply. “So are you here looking for another—”

Sophie shook her head. “No, not really looking. Just easing back into things.” Her gaze darted over Tara’s shoulder. Dave was gone. Where had he gone? She subdued the urge to whip her head around and locate him, instead looking back at Tara. “It feels weird being here again. A lot of memories. But I feel sort of happy to be here too. Like I persevered. I survived.”

Tara hugged her again, just before her Sir came and pulled her away with a wink.

“You did survive, honey. I’ll see you later.”

Sophie laughed and waved as Tara was dragged away smiling. Tara was in a gorgeous pink and red corset and drool-worthy stilettos, and little else. She remembered Tara’s boyfriend, remembered he had a thing for cages. He still seemed to, as he led her to a cage in the corner that was open for use. Barry had caged Sophie a lot. But then, it hadn’t been games at a play party. Once he’d caged her for nearly a week, hadn’t even let her out to use the bathroom. When he’d finally pulled her out, her legs had refused to work. He’d laughed at her for stumbling around the room crying.

She had been terrified he would shove her back in and tried to run, but she’d fallen. She couldn’t run. She couldn’t escape. His hands had fallen on her, grabbing her. The terror had been so acute she could smell it. She could taste it in her spit. But he hadn’t pushed her back in. He had held her down and—

Annabel Joseph

Sophie shook her head and turned to the wall. *Not now. Don't think about it.* She pulled herself together and thought she should circulate a little. Mingle. Get her mind on other things.

* * * * *

Dave watched from across the play space. What was wrong with her? She'd been smiling at her friend a moment ago but now she looked on the verge of tears. He raised his camera and zoomed in on her. Not to photograph her. He only photographed people at Studio Erotica with permission, a requirement of the owners. No, he just wanted to get a closer look.

She was biting her lip with a pained expression. Her eyes were distant, distraught.

She turned to the wall. What was she watching that upset her so much? He looked around at the various play spaces and could see nothing overly dramatic going on. A puppy play session, Sophie's friend and her boyfriend playing in a cage, a few women being flogged, a male sub being paraded around and humiliated. He looked back at her, lowering the camera. She was extricating herself from the corner where she was huddled. Was she leaving? He didn't want her to run off again. Her shoulder-length black hair fell over her face, hiding her features.

His gaze followed her. She was moving among the chatting, watching groups.

Aside from the one girl, Tara, no one else really talked to her. A few people nudged friends and gestured at her. He saw a few D-types sliding interested looks her way and suddenly Dave felt jealous. He could stand around staring at her like some lovesick schoolkid, or he could go try to make something happen. He started toward her, only to be stopped by a couple he knew. They were frequent customers, a handsome Master and his very sexy slave. He spoke to them for a while, trying to concentrate, trying not to spin around and look for her. After an interminable amount of polite conversation, he had set up a time and place the following week to do an outdoor session with the couple. They said goodbye and moved off into one of the private back rooms.

Dave took off his camera and put it in the bag. He was done working. He was going to talk to her. The girl looked like she needed a friend, for God's sake.

His attention was arrested by a scene developing in the center of the dungeon. A hard-playing masochist was being fixed to the square frame. He recognized the woman, an older slave. Her Master bared her back while she moaned. She looked as if she were already falling down into subspace. He took a few steps back as a crowd gathered in the area, drawn to the drama of the scene. The woman's Master snapped a single-tailed whip at his side, a faint smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Dave watched the scene begin. *Crack!* The sound of the whip was amazing against her bared skin. The whip left red streaks that stood out in stark relief against her pale back. Dave felt his breath coming a bit faster. It was beautiful to him, as a sadist. The amazing dance of pleasure and pain, the way the woman willingly bared herself to be hurt. The trust and 18

care involved. The woman screamed and moaned, but was clearly enjoying the encounter. Dave turned to Sophie to see her reaction.

She was not enjoying it nearly as much. She watched with her hands clutched in front of her. Her cheeks rose and fell quickly and her lips were set in a tense line. Her eyes were wide open and communicated distress. As he watched, she turned and fled.

The woman's cries grew louder, more animallike, but Dave wasn't listening anymore. All his attention was centered on Sophie's retreating figure. She dodged her friend Tara, who looked after her helplessly. "I'll go to her," he said to Tara as he passed. Sophie pushed out the door and started down the street. He followed, his footsteps echoing on the sidewalk. She spun on him with a gasp.

He held out his hands. "It's okay. It's me, Dave. Do you remember me from the munch today?"

Her breath was coming in short little pants. She ducked her head and started walking again. He fell into step beside her.

"Sophie?"

She didn't answer.

"Are you okay?"

She just hugged herself and walked faster.

"You know, that woman was fine. She was enjoying herself. Sometimes it can appear as if someone is going too far with someone else, but usually everything's okay—"

"Oh, is it?" She spun on him. "Usually everything's okay? Really? How do you know?"

He was taken aback by the vitriol in her words. "I don't know. No one knows for sure but her. But I assumed, based on her body language, and the fact that she wasn't safe-wording—"

"Sure. Whatever."

He held up his hands. "Okay, Sophie. Don't get mad at me. I was just concerned when I saw you run out. You seemed really upset."

"I'm just... I'm just... I haven't been to the Studio in a while. I just..." For a moment, she looked as if she were about to cry, but then she seemed to master herself.

She brushed her hair back behind her ears and raised her chin. "It just wasn't my thing."

He looked at her. Not her thing? From what the others had told him, it had been very much her thing one time. God, those eyes of hers. He had no idea what to say next. People passed back and forth on the street, glancing over at the two of them. What did they think? Did they see two lovers fighting?

Her stance was defensive.

“Would you like to go get some coffee?”

“No. Why would you think I want coffee?”

19

Annabel Joseph

Dave shrugged. “Okay. No coffee. How about a walk? Would you like to just walk for a while?”

“Why?”

“Because you look like you’re in a bad place. Let’s just go walking.” He stood back and gestured to the sidewalk ahead of them. “You don’t have to talk.” She was agitated, anxious. Why did he want to go walking with her? To calm her, yes, but he wanted more than that. He wanted to know her, to learn more about the upheaval behind her eyes.

“Walk where?”

“Anywhere. Nowhere.” He shrugged. “Just walk around downtown for a while.”

“It’s not safe to just stroll around this part of Atlanta at night.”

“We’ll be safe.”

“How do you know?”

“I know because I can defend myself. And you.”

“How?”

His lips quirked into a patient smile. “You’re full of questions, aren’t you? I know because I’ve trained in self-defense, for one.”

She was silent, looking at her feet.

“Come walk with me,” he asked one last time. “I won’t let anything happen to you.”

Finally, to his relief, she nodded yes.

She was so annoyed with herself. Running out of Studio Erotica, making a scene. It was so embarrassing. They all already thought she was a whack job. Her behavior only reinforced what they already suspected about her.

Take a deep breath, Sophie. Let it go. The night air was comfortable, warm but not muggy. The streets were quiet. She would never have walked around at night alone, not like this. She slid a look at the

man walking beside her. Strangely, she felt secure with him. She believed him when he said he could protect her. ~~The way he'd moved in the dungeon, even the way he loped along beside her~~ hinted at special physicality, a quiet strength. He finally broke the silence with a casual question.

“So how long have you lived in Atlanta?”

“Oh, years now. When I dropped out of college—” She stopped. *Yes, talk about how you dropped out of college, Soph. Talk about how you work at The UPS Store and live in your hole of an apartment alone.*

“What were you studying?” he asked when she went no further. “Why did you drop out?”

“I couldn't pass freshman biology and chem. Or the math courses I needed to go pre-med.”

20

Deep in the Woods

She hadn't thought about college in a long time. One more failure in a long line of failures. She wanted to become a doctor since a childhood hospital stay for pneumonia, but the courses, even the introductory ones, had proved too difficult for her. She still remembered the excruciating conference with her college counselor. *You simply do not have an aptitude for this.* Her lifelong dream had slipped away in the space of one semester. Her father's face when she'd told her parents she was dropping out...

“What do you do?” she asked to change the subject.

He held up his camera bag with a smile. “This is what I do. Photography. Mostly arts photography. Well, kink photography now, but it pays the bills pretty nicely. I teach classes too, every now and then again.”

“Photography classes?”

“Martial arts. Would you like me to show you some moves?” He came at her then, too quickly. She flinched and felt ridiculous. The awkward silence made her want to run.

“I was just playing,” he said in apology. “I wouldn't have hit you.” She set her teeth and stalked on, feeling very near to crying. She concentrated on the clop-clop of her wedge heels on the pavement to drive the sudden emotion away. “Let's just walk,” she muttered. “Isn't that what you wanted, to walk?”

“Okay, sure. Let's walk. Look, I'm sorry I'm such a dork. I just find you really interesting. And really beautiful. I mean, I'm a photographer,” he said, gesturing to his camera bag. “I notice these things.”

“You find me interesting? You mean I'm weird, right?”

“I never said you were weird. Are you weird? I'm a little weird,” he added with a crooked smile. “I d

meet you for the first time at a BDSM munch. So how weird are you?"

"I don't tell that to just anyone. Only people I'm trying to scare away." He laughed, and she was amazed to realize she'd just made a joke. Wow, and his laughter. Low and masculine, but light and playful at the same time. His eyes were so warm and relaxed. He made her want to let her guard down and play along, but as soon as she felt that, she wanted to run away. Why did she want to run? God, everyone was right, she was a psycho. She wanted him to hug her. She wanted him to hold her.

He was so strong, so vital. So confident and assured. Why was she so attracted to him?

Because he was dominant and she was submissive? Or because she was lonely and sad, and he seemed so kind?

"Please—" She clamped her lips shut. *No. No.*

"Please what?"

"Please...will you?" She stopped and reached out to him, feeling foolish and vulnerable. He didn't hesitate. He took her in his arms and clasped her against his chest.

He didn't grope her or try to kiss her. He seemed to understand that wasn't what she needed. She needed to be held. She needed to feel the warmth of another human being 21

Annabel Joseph

who didn't mean her harm. She needed strong arms around her that were soothing her, not holding her down.

Oh, no. No. Tears flooded her eyes before she could stop them. No, she didn't want to start crying. She couldn't. He would know. He would know she was every bit as messed up as he probably suspected. *Shit. Shit.* Stupid tears. She tried to wipe them away before he noticed them. Her entire body tensed, and more tears flowed, more than she could hide, more than she could control. Her face grew hot with embarrassment.

"I... I... I..." she stammered, trying to explain it all. But she couldn't explain. She couldn't do anything.

And Dave said nothing, asked no prying questions. He didn't ask "What?" or

"Why?" or make her explain. He just pulled her closer and held her. He was so solid.

He smelled clean, like soap tinged with cigarette smoke from the Studio. He held her even after she soaked his shirt and turned the heather gray material dark and wet.

"Please, please don't let go of me," she whispered to the thump of his heartbeat in her ear.

He threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her closer still. "I'll hold you as long as you need me to. All night, if you like."

All night. *All night.*

* * * * *

She knew it was a bad idea to go to his house. Of course it was. She had only met him for the first time earlier that afternoon, and then they'd only spoken briefly. But when he'd walked her to her car and asked if she wanted to follow him to his house so she didn't have to be alone, she'd agreed. Ridiculous. Even now, driving there, she fought the urge to peel off and retreat to her safe, lonely place.

But there was something about him she couldn't resist.

He looked at her and something in his eyes both terrified and drew her closer. Not terrified her in the way that Barry's eyes had terrified her. No. Terrified her in the way that he seemed to understand how badly she was hurting, even though they'd barely talked. He seemed to know the secrets she tried so hard to hide.

But of course that was ridiculous. How could he know? Her secrets were her own.

Any secrets that troubled her, any secrets that hurt and made her feel as if she might die from exposure and pain, all those secrets could be buried away—by choice. The choice was Sophie's, David Perez said, and Sophie had made her choice. She had buried the secrets away. She didn't want them anymore, and she most certainly didn't want anyone else to know them in all their horrible ugliness. She had begun to feel better now that they were buried. Still sad, still isolated, but better.

Isolation was safe, if lonely. Doing what she was doing now...it didn't feel safe at all.

22

Deep in the Woods

But she didn't turn around. She followed his car down city block after city block, until they left the industrialized part of the city and entered a sleepy residential section.

The homes were small and close together, but she was quite sure they cost more than she could even afford. They passed a small neighborhood park, a community garden, and then turned into a narrow lane. He stopped and put his car in park. She stopped behind him and did the same, taking deep gulps of air. It was after midnight and there was no moon, so that when she cut her headlights the night turned black, lit only by a faint streetlight down the road.

He came to her window. "Did you call someone?"

"Call someone?"

"Tell them where you are? Who you're with?"

"N...no. No, I didn't. I don't really have anyone to call. Except my parents. I don't really want to call

either one of them right this second and tell them I'm at the house of some guy I just met."

He laughed. "Well...maybe not the best idea. But you should call someone. I could be a maniac, you know."

Sophie looked up at him. Her heart was doing flip-flops. He *was* a stranger, and he could be a maniac. But then she shook her head. "I know maniacs. I don't think you are one. And if you are, you won't be the first maniac I've tangled with." She opened the car door, got out, and slammed it behind her.

"I'm not a maniac. And your friend Tara saw me go after you when you left the dungeon. So I suppose we'll call you safe enough this time." He wanted her to be safe. It was a novel experience. Had Barbara twisted her view of men so much? Of course Dave wanted her to be safe. Most men didn't mean women harm. *Safe, safe, safe*, her mind repeated. *Relax. You're safe.* He held out his hand and she took it. It was warm and rough. He led her up the walk to the covered porch of his small bungalow.

"I suppose I should have asked you this sooner, but how do you feel about dogs?"

Large, smelly, affectionate ones?"

Sophie could hear deep barking from inside the house. "How large?"

"Massive. But he's a good dog." He started to laugh as the scrabbling of claws on the door intensified. "He's mostly a good dog. Here, let me go first." Sophie watched as he turned the key and inched in, pushing back what appeared to be a black bear.

"Down, Cerby. Come on, I've got a visitor. Don't embarrass me." She grinned listening to him cajole his dog. Cerby— *Cerby?* —was barking and straining to get to her. She held out a hand gingerly. The huge black dog sniffed it and then licked it with a warm tongue full of drool.

"He likes to give kisses." Dave sighed. "I'm so sorry. I'll hold him. Come in please."

He'll settle down in a minute. He really is somewhat trained when he's not excited." 23

Annabel Joseph

Sophie wasn't that comfortable around dogs, especially dogs of this size, but she trusted Dave and she decided to trust his dog. She smiled at the huge black beast and he stared back with big, dark eyes.

"His name is...Cerby?"

"Yeah. Short for Cerberus, the three-headed watchdog of—"

"Of the Underworld. Yes." She laughed. "He looks like he could be quite the watchdog."

"Aw, he's a big pushover." He finally released his dog's collar with a strict warning.

"Be good."

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