

Chapter One

She was his. He stared at the faded black and white picture that stared boldly back at him from the computer screen. His woman.

Not by any word of his own or hers, nor of any solemn declaration before a person of religious stature. Legally, it was true, though. He had the email bill of sale, which stated the obscene amount he had paid for her in fuel, batteries, and generators. He owned her; short of death she was his to do with as he pleased...and the State pleased that he should impregnate her.

Well, if that happened, he thought, it happened, although he wasn't sure he could sire a child, and at her age, he wasn't sure she could conceive one, either.

It had been the ad that had intrigued him while he was casually surfing what now passed for the World Wide Web. In truth, it had almost reverted to its origins as a method of communication between small clusters of universities and governmental workers. Nowadays, since the Cultural Retrofit – as he liked to call it with dark humor – it was a connection between clusters of survivors around the world, spotty at best and rife with talk of insurrection, revolution, and, of course, tons of spam.

Like roaches, spam survived anything.

What had caught his eye was not that the solicitation was flashy; it almost consciously wasn't. He had been casually surfing in the eBay listings for a woman, not thinking to find one he particularly wanted in this day and age. He thought they were all too young, with chronoages of twelve and thirteen or even younger, staring out at him with big, frightened eyes.

But this one was different. The ad was wistfully sad and disillusioned. The author was obviously reluctant to give up his treasure, only – unlike the rest of the world, currently – it was abundantly clear that he did not look on this female as merely a commodity to be sold for great financial reward.

The man shook his head. Women were at a premium now and fairly scarce. As had happened so many times in history after a devastating plague, society had returned to its patriarchal roots, and women were relegated to lives as virtual slaves. Although this time, it was worse than slavery. No 'freed slave' status existed for a female in this new world. They were

valued for their ability to produce children and were expected to do so from an appallingly early age for whatever man – or in some cases, men – their father/uncle/brother sold them to. Females no longer had any rights. Joseph was old enough in chronoyears to remember the Before Time, the time of the super mom and the soccer mom, when women were women and men ran scared.

Well, the plague had put an end to that. The ERA was long dead, he chuckled to himself. The pendulum had swung back with a vengeance, and women were in a worse situation now than they probably ever had been in the past, true and utter slaves with only one law that protected them: anyone whose actions resulted in the death of a woman of childbearing age – even by accident – would be killed. Killing a pregnant woman meant a slow, public death by torture.

No, the seller in this ad was obviously what had once been known as a doting father. He probably found himself in dire need of money to fund a Patch habit or who owed bad debts incurred in the Circus Caesarea, betting dearly gotten meager wages on when – if – a pregnant slave would miscarry, miscarriages being so much more common in this day and age than live births.

Beyond the sheer magnitude of the price, a lot of bidders were probably put off by several questions they were required to answer in order to be considered, regardless of the size of their bid. Questioning a man's qualifications to own a woman was unheard of; the only requirements were that he had the goods to back his bid if he won. But Joseph answered the queries truthfully. They were, as he'd expected, inquiries about his philosophies regarding the treatment of women as well as about his financial stability, and whether or not he owned a home or a vehicle.

Still, there was something about her that tugged at his heart, which he ruthlessly suppressed. In some ways, he had always subscribed to the current philosophy that a woman was to be treated much as a child – kindly, and with care for her worth – but strictly. The days of children being put in 'time outs' or being restricted to a room full of toys were officially over, and Joseph heartily concurred with that. Nowadays, a wide range of spanking and punishment implements were available in nearly any retail establishment, even the corner store, and no man ever hesitated to physically correct either his child or his woman, regardless of where they were. As women were never given any money, no woman would ever technically own an implement, and they were not even allowed to discipline the children within their care. Joseph smiled wryly.

It was much more likely that the well-made and readily available straps, tawses, canes, hairbrushes, and paddles owned the woman, making her dance to their terrible, stinging tunes at the slightest inclination of her owner.

His woman, though, would be well-cared for, even coddled to a certain extent, especially in comparison to many of her sisters in slavery. Although his house was extremely isolated up in the hills, he was a wealthy man for these times. He owned a field of generators that had become a premium in the After Time, which he rented out as one part of many lucrative pies he had his big, thick fingers in. His house was humongous – three bedrooms, and he was the only occupant. That was practically unheard of nowadays, but he had electricity to burn, and he did. He owned one of the few automobiles that were still functional, due mainly to his incessant puttering. Gas was free for the taking to those who were willing to siphon it from the underground storage tanks of old gas stations – fewer people used it any longer – generally, those who did would be considered rich now. They were unwilling to get themselves dirty retrieving it, so he had become all too willing to support their habit with a little elbow grease, and he charged them exorbitantly for the honor. Funny, though, he still carried his old Texaco and Exxon credit cards in his wallet as reminders of the old days.

He would see to his woman's every physical need and would scrupulously attend to some needs she likely didn't know she had. The ad had made a bold claim – that she was twenty-nine years old, uncut, and a State Certified virgin – license number available upon request. The first two statements may well have driven off a lot of potential bidders, but the last may have made some of them reconsider. A twenty-nine-year-old virgin. Unheard of, even in the Before Time! As to her uncut status, the State now practiced female circumcision at birth as readily as it had male circumcision in the nineteen fifties. It was only the older women who could enjoy sex nowadays, and the woman's age had probably worked for her in that she had not been cut since. It would be unwise for even the state to risk the possibility of killing a woman of childbearing age.

Joseph's chronoage was thirty-eight, although he was well beyond that now. He didn't need or want a mindless, tittering twelve-year-old passing for a woman in his house or his bed. The ad had raised the hairs on the back of his neck when he'd read it, and he had frankly questioned its validity. It sounded a little too damned good to be true. So he called in a couple of favors from people he knew who were not as law abiding as he was, and they found out the

whole story: the seller was an old man; it was his oldest daughter that he had to sell. He'd been right that the man had not wanted to part with the girl; she'd been his caretaker for many years. But he was reaching his End Time and wanted to see her safely placed. This was the only way he'd known how to do it.

And Joseph's bid had won – it should have, considering how large it was. He shook his head thoughtfully and hoped she proved worth it. If she was anything less than what the ad said, however, he would be well within his rights to bring charges against the old man that would likely result in his meeting his maker even earlier than he'd planned.

He'd know in a few hours. Female Express was bringing her to him. He'd paid extra to have her sent that way, and handled as 'Fragile,' as opposed to merely stuffed into a cattle-car with fifty or so other women, driven into what passed for a town and left, where she could easily be stolen. FemExpress would deliver her to his doorstep, and he would be able to see whether or not they had treated her as he'd requested before he signed for her, before the delivery man unlocked their special neon orange travel bracelets from her wrists.

A loud knock interrupted his reverie. When he opened the front door, the first thing he noticed was that the picture on the internet had not done her justice. She was lovely. Not one to miss anything, he also took in the angry blue bruises beneath the tight cuffs and the way the label 'Fragile' had been plastered all over her faded blue cotton shift, so that there was barely any material showing through the warnings. Betraying her training, her eyes met his for a fleeting second before she looked down as she was required to. But in that tiny second, he had read her thoughts and feelings with amazing accuracy: fear and uncertainty, stubbornness and bravery all at the same time.

As a man, even during the sickness and resolution and rebuilding, he had always been in control of his fate, his life. No one, not even his best boss in the Before Time, had really ever been able to tell him what to do. There were too many other opportunities, and when none had readily presented themselves, he had made his own. How horrible it must be to have known such freedom as she had, only to have it cruelly yanked away from her. Whatever – whoever she had been – nun, prostitute, CEO, or stay-at-home mom, she had become the property of either her husband, her father, or her nearest male relative within a matter of months after the devastation of the plague. And he could do with her as he saw fit – short of killing her. There was precious little in her life that was actually within her control, and this situation was entirely out of it.

The armed guard asked him the required question, "Do you assume responsibility for this woman and any children you might breed on her?"

When he stated clearly, "I do," the young man reclaimed the bracelets with absolutely no care for her at all, winked at Joseph, and patted the woman familiarly on her bottom before turning to leave. Anger burned through him so quickly that he didn't think but merely reacted, pulling the girl behind him and into his house in almost the same movement as he flattened the cocky asshole with one vicious punch.

Joseph was no lightweight. He had been trained to fight in a short stint in the military, and had found he had a knack for it, despite his considerable size. When he'd boxed, it was as a heavyweight; there was no mistaking the bulk of those muscles, and a smart man would take it as a silent warning that they were visible even under the rough cloth of his shirt.

But no one had ever accused Female Express of hiring geniuses.

The embarrassed young man decided against striking back at the big behemoth, instead scrambling back to his truck and peeling out on the rough dirt driveway.

She forgot herself again and met his eyes with her big round ones, remembering a second later that she wasn't allowed to do that, lowering them modestly to the ground. Joseph did not bother correcting her for something he considered at this stage to be a normal impulse and moved into the living room, closing the door behind them. He noticed that she had her hands clasped behind her, rubbing her wrists absently.

Suddenly uncomfortable, Joseph ordered gruffly, "Follow me." It was probably an unnecessary statement, as a woman was required by law to walk several paces behind the man that owned her, but he didn't want to get to the kitchen and find she was still standing by the door with that sad, lost look. She complied obediently, watching his every move as he dug around in the old chest freezer and came up with a couple of big bags of frozen vegetables, one corn, one peas. He could see her curiosity was piqued, but she held her tongue.

Joseph pulled a chair out from the eat-in kitchen table, commanding, "Sit."

Again, she did exactly as she was told without a moment's hesitation. Her hands lay in her lap until he reached for them, the gentleness of his touch belying his size. She'd seen him deck that man with one well-aimed punch, but he was handling her like she was fine china, arranging her arms in front of her on the table then draping cold bags of veggies over each wrist.

She started at the cold and would have pulled her hands away, but his sharp command to be still made her reconsider.

She was biting her lip and looking frightened again when there was no need, so he began to talk to her as if he was talking to one of the animals he used to train when he was in the K-9 Corp of the Air Force. "Give it a few minutes on each side. It'll help reduce the swelling." That was why the cuffs were so tight. Joseph grimaced at the raw red and blue scrapes on her delicate flesh. She was so white, he could see the tiny veins beneath her skin. If he'd had that deliveryman in front of him after he'd had a chance to examine the evidence of her mistreatment more closely, the asshole wouldn't have gotten away so easily.

No one touched or damaged his property. Ever.

He almost couldn't believe she was here; his eyes trying to look everywhere on her at once, her eyes trying to look anywhere but at him. Suddenly, he asked, "What's your name?"

"Prima, Sir," she answered quietly. Her voice was soft and strong. He had forgotten how pleasant a woman's voice was.

The usual name for a first daughter. Joseph sat back and considered this, watching her closely. "What is your real name?" His voice was low and soft as he asked the illegal question, though he hardly had fear of legal reprisals within his own fortress.

When she bit her lip, he knew what thought was running through her head from the re-education training she had undoubtedly received: you are nothing but what we men make you. Your name is what we say it is. To answer with anything else is to be punished, immediately and severely.

"Prima, you don't know me, but I am a man of my word, and I am telling you that you will not be punished for answering me truthfully."

That lip was going to need ice shortly, too, if she didn't stop gnawing on it. "Sir –"

Joseph shifted lazily in his chair, never taking his eyes off her. "I will not punish you for answering me, Prima, but I will punish you for not answering me." A second passed, and then another. "I will not wait forever." It was not delivered as a threat, merely a statement of fact. If she did not obey him, he would punish her. Action and consequence. Relentless consistency. Even in the Before Time, Joseph had found women who appreciated his philosophy.

"M-my name was Katherine. Katherine Marie Cassidy, Sir." It had been so long since she'd mouthed her own name, it truly sounded like someone else's.

A small smile played about his lips. "Very good, my girl. Next time, though, I will not be as patient." Joseph rose and began walking down the hall towards his bedroom. "Come."

Prima almost had to run to catch up with his long strides, but remained a respectful distance behind him until he walked into his bedroom and motioned her inside. He could tell by the fearful expression on her face that she thought he was going to expect her to service him now, only a few minutes after they'd met, as would be his right as her owner. But he was not about to set the precedent of explaining himself to her. He would demand her obedience to his commands, regardless of whether she understood his intent.

She came forward, and he pushed the door closed, but not latched, behind her, then said casually as he ducked into his bathroom, "Strip."

Alert to her expressions and sounds like he'd never been to any other woman, Joseph heard her sharply indrawn breath as he grabbed what he needed and returned to her. He wondered if she would comply or rebel.

He was pleased that she had done as he'd asked, and his breath was literally taken away by her pale golden beauty. Although the rest of current culture might lean towards taking a girl to bed, Joseph much preferred a woman, a woman like Prima, who was softly rounded in all the right places, almost overly full breasts with largish, taut pink nipples and...a hair covered mound.

Joseph frowned. That was highly illegal, and would have to go, although he would require that she keep herself hairless because of his own preferences, not the State's. "Turn around." When she blushed, her whole body suffused with a light pink glow, probably close to that of what she would be like if she were bred. But she did as she was told, and would have turned all the way back around, but he commanded her to stop when she had her bottom to him, making her blush all that more acutely.

A woman's bottom was truly a thing of beauty, Joseph thought, and Prima's was as overly generous as her beautiful breasts. It fairly begged for the kiss of the strap or cane, or anything else he could – and would – use on it, including his own two lips.

The rampaging spike in his pants nearly exploded as he stood and stared at her wonderful perfection, imagining all the ways he was going to punish that lovely bottom. Why, he could almost hear her cries now of how she'd be better behaved, pleas for him to stop that would go entirely unheeded, screams and sobs that would be music to his ears.

"You're very lovely," he complimented. Joseph put a box next to him as he sat on the far side of the bed and patted his leg. "Lay over my lap."

Prima had never felt more vulnerable and exposed in her life. The man who owned her was fully clothed, she was in his house, totally naked and subject to anything he would do to her with absolutely no recourse. There was nothing she could do but obey him, so she did, draping herself over the trunks of his thighs, feeling the rough denim and scratchy wool of his clothing prickling her sensitive skin. A broad palm rested on her vulnerable cheeks, but he did not hit her as she expected, although she tensed when the hand was removed. Instead, she heard something being unwrapped, and then he was positioning her far leg out and away from its twin, deliberately exposing her most private, secret area.

Experimentally, Prima tried to close her legs against his grip, but only received two viciously hard smacks to each of her wobbling bottom cheeks for her troubles. "No," Joseph said sharply.

Her head was practically touching the floor, and she had to grab his leg, upside down, after he spanked her to keep her balance. Her small voice drifted up to him. "I'm sorry, Sir."

Soothingly, Joseph crooned, rubbing her bottom gently, "That's okay, my girl. You'll learn quickly enough. I want you to relax now while I give you some pain medicine to help your wrists feel better, then I'm going to put you down for a nap. You must be exhausted after your trip."

Medicine? Prima wondered. The only kind of medicine she'd ever had applied in the area he was now examining was an enema, which was a most unpleasant experience, despite the fact that it usually stirred uncomfortably embarrassing feelings in her that she had absolutely no interest in exploring.

Before she knew it, he was pressing a large something against the entrance to her bottom hole, while issuing a firm command to be still, which she only partially succeeded in obeying. The intruder was soft and slippery, expanding her rosette uncomfortably as he administered it, watching it pop inside her while practically salivating all over her. Prima jerked suddenly when his middle finger, coated with something slippery, followed the suppository's path, boldly pressing inside her to adjust the position of the little bullet so that it was lodged deeply in her bowels.

"Shh-shh-shh," he soothed, moving his finger around as he rubbed the small of her back, keeping her legs well apart so that she had no hope of alleviating his embarrassing intrusion into her body. "That's my good girl."

By the time he lodged the third capsule into her bottom, she was getting uncomfortably full, and she couldn't keep herself from struggling against his hold. "Please, Sir –"

Ten searing swats rained down on those defenseless, parted cheeks. Joseph put his considerable strength into each crisp stroke, listening to her scream from the third one, but not lessening his cruel intent one iota.

After the tenth slap, he went back to what he was doing, and she was almost too occupied with the fire in her bottom to protest the insistent invasion of his finger as it probed and pushed within her. Finally, he was satisfied that she was not going to be able to get those out of herself easily. But just in case, he presented a trailer hitch butt plug against that tight little hole, pressing, pressing, watching intently as her body was forced to accept it, listening to her sobs and moans, although he knew this was more humiliating and mildly uncomfortable than truly painful.

Once it had been absorbed to the hilt into her unwilling orifice, he pulled her off his lap and tucked her under the covers of his bed, which had her wide-eyed through her choking sobs. "But, Sir –"

He cut her off. "In my house, I make the rules and no one else." It was against the law for a man to allow a woman to sleep in the same bed with him. His bed was supposedly to be used for copulation or punishment, but never sleeping. It was too intimate and gave women ideas above their stations.

Joseph sat next to her, for some reason unwilling to leave, his hand gently stroking her bare back beneath the covers. "Sir?"

"Yes, Prima?"

"May I have a nightgown?"

Joseph smiled wryly. "No, little girl. You will always share my bed, and you will always be naked in it." He patted her rosy red bottom and then checked how the butt plug was seated one last time, purposely making her jump a little when he pressed it hard into her. "Now go to sleep. I will stay with you until you fall asleep, but when you wake you must call to me. You are not to get out of bed without my permission."

Wordlessly, he got up and turned on one of the few MP3s still in existence, and a soft, haunting melody filled the room. When he returned to take his place at her side, she felt something very like a butt plug being pressed to her lips. "Open." She did as she was told, and found one of the latest methods of quieting a slave popped into her mouth – an adult-sized pacifier that filled her mouth almost like a gag. He had dipped it in something sweet, and, despite herself, she found herself sucking on it, which was proving to be disgustingly soothing added to that strong, hard hand caressing her back lazily.

Within minutes, she was sleeping deeply, and Joseph slipped quietly out of the room.