

A man with a beard and short dark hair, wearing a dark suit jacket over a white button-down shirt. He is looking directly at the camera with a neutral expression. The background is a dark, textured blue. A white pocket square with a black polka-dot pattern is visible in his jacket pocket.

MIDNIGHT

Dissonance

A Dungeon Singles Night Novel

ANYA SUMMERS

MIDNIGHT DISSONANCE

DUNGEON SINGLES NIGHT, BOOK 13
ANYA SUMMERS

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Midnight Dissonance

Anya Summers

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ABOUT THE BOOK

Seduced by the Irishman...

Lexi is over the players, the creepy lowlifes, and the narcissists. Who needs men, anyway? All she wants is her music, and freedom to be true to herself.

On a whim, she signs up for a singles event in one last-ditch attempt to resuscitate her woeful dating life, praying she'll get matched with an understanding, loyal, caring Dom.

No such luck. To her horror, Lexi gets paired with Josh Ryan. The sexy Irishman goes through submissives like he changes underwear.

Disillusioned and defeated, she refuses to spend the evening with him, and walks away.

Josh can't believe it. Nobody ever rejects him. Why won't Lexi bend to his desires like a good little sub? Other women fall over themselves to spend a night in his bed.

He and Lexi are polar opposites. She's far too young for him. But her denial ignites a sadistic need in him to see her on her knees, begging him for pleasure.

When he finally tastes her, he understands why. She was meant for him. She belongs to him.

Josh will stop at nothing to make Lexi his. But his sordid past could ruin everything...

Fall head over heels into this steamy, age gap, opposites attract, stand-alone romance between a sexy Irish attorney

*and a free-spirited songstress as they traverse the rocky road
of love.*

One last time. One final try.

Lexi held her head high as she strutted out of the women's locker room into the club. She looked damn good in leopard print. Her outfit was a luminescent, see-through halter catsuit that was practically spray painted on. Her long, dark cherry hair was styled in a high ponytail—better for whichever enterprising Dom she wound up with tonight to grab during their scene.

The mood in the Eros Pit most nights was subdued—with the added elements of scenes in progress and muted music.

Tonight's singles night event was Valentine's Day themed, and the place was rocking. Bright splashes of red and pink adorned the club. The normally somber space, with dark gray hardwood floors and black-shaded walls displaying erotic art, was spruced up for the event. Great golden chandeliers spilled light throughout the club, giving it the appearance of a gentlemen's club circa 1890 with its décor. Groupings of black leather Chesterfield sofas were packed with Doms and subs in Valentine's Day costumes, adding to the festive affair.

Almost every submissive in attendance wore red, from scantily clad women in bra and panty sets to red Lycra bodysuits and everything in between. It's why she went with the leopard print. Because she would never be a sheep and conform like the masses. Not when she believed she was born to stand out.

Growing up, Lexi tried fitting in and being normal. Doing the things that were expected. All it ever did was make her miserable.

And two years ago, she decided *fuck it*. Life was too damn short. She resolved to live on her terms and no one else's. And that meant dressing the way she wanted, working where she wanted, and living how she wanted.

She understood she might be viewed as psychotic, considering she was uber-independent in all areas but one—in the bedroom, she craved submission like others did sugary sweets. She needed to submit and be dominated to feel complete.

But too many Doms allowed the overbearing, daddy-knows-best attitude to spill into normal life. And she couldn't live beneath someone's thumb. She'd spent most of her life being told how to act, what to study, and who she should be while her soul shriveled into an unrecognizable lump of coal.

For Lexi, her perfect Dom would respect her independence, would be faithful and loyal, and would tie her up and whip her ass in the bedroom when the mood struck or she needed a slice of pain to feel right as rain.

She doubted he existed.

She wouldn't be here, except it had been ages since she had gotten the satisfaction she needed in the bedroom. And she had an itch that no amount of masturbating would appease.

Unlike most of the simpering submissives, she held her head high, meeting the gazes of interested Doms she passed on her way to the bar. She spied the Ryan enclave in their private section that was surrounded by available submissives, all trying to snag themselves one of the remaining single Ryan men.

Lexi rolled her eyes.

One would think that the Ryan dicks were gold-plated or something with the way submissives lined up for a chance to scene with them. And only Finn remained single. Then there were the Ryan cousins, who moved to the States a few years ago. Josh, Aiden, and Sean were all rakes.

Lexi understood that by entering her name into the participating submissive pool, there was a slim possibility she could wind up with one of them for the night. If she had to pick one of them, she'd prefer Finn. He was less of a player than his cousins.

She didn't do players or narcissists. Lexi had experienced enough of those to last a lifetime.

But there were plenty of Doms she hoped to get paired with. She took an empty seat at the bar and surveyed the crowd. Ronan was in attendance and looking particularly hot this evening in black leather pants, shitkicker boots, and nothing else, leaving the solid expanse of his barrel chest with

its multitude of tattoos on display. He was a professional rugby player who shaved his dark hair close to the scalp.

Beside him were Gage Walker and Henry Sinclair. Those two scened together. They had served together in the Navy and now ran a security company together. Lexi had never been double-teamed or participated in a ménage, but those two were sexy enough she was game to try.

“Lexi, lass, you’re looking fetching this evening. What can I get for you?” Xavier Campbell, the sexy Scot, leaned his massive frame against the bar with a gregarious grin.

Lexi liked Xavier. The Dom didn’t have an ounce of pretension. And she found it sweet the way he doted upon his wife, Emma. They were so stupidly in love with each other that she had a hard time not being jealous. Because she’d never had a man look at her the way Xavier did his wife—as if the sun rose and set with her.

And as much as she enjoyed her independence, as much as she was making her way in the world on her terms, she ached to have one person in her corner who had her back completely.

But she had learned the hard way never to count on anyone.

“Patron double on the rocks, please, Sir.”

“Now there’s a lass. Coming right up.” He winked, grabbed a glass, and filled her drink. He set the tumbler with the clear tequila in front of her. “Enjoy the evening.”

“Thank you, Sir. Where’s Emma tonight?”

“Ah, she’s at home. She wanted to come, but our wee one is being fussy, and she refused to leave them with the sitter.” Xavier sighed, but there was a wealth of love in his eyes as he spoke of his wife and child.

“I’m surprised you came in.”

“I’m here until the festivities begin, and then I’ll be heading home.”

“Well, say hi to her for me.” She liked Emma. The woman was independent and had a good head on her shoulders, in addition to bagging one of the hottest Doms at Eros.

She was better than most of the simpering ninnies who called themselves submissives around here. And she knew she was being a judgmental bitch. Not that she cared; she called it like she saw it.

“Will do, lass,” Xavier nodded before heading off to get someone else a drink.

She sat at the bar surveying the scene, an outcast even in the one place she felt more like herself. Lexi didn’t understand why she never truly fit in anywhere, not even with her family.

Except on stage.

When she stood under the burning lights, strumming her guitar and singing, she felt more alive, more herself, more at home than anywhere else in the world. Performing and playing music was where she belonged. And she was making it happen. Her band, The Celestials, had a decent following and was considered an up-and-coming local band. She knew their

big break was around the corner. It was so close she could taste it.

An announcement over the loudspeakers told participating submissives to line up in the Pit to select their marker and, ultimately, their Dom for the night. Lexi tossed back the rest of her tequila. It burned all the way down and heated her belly. She licked her lips, savoring the last bit of flavor. Then she rose and strutted over to the Pit.

The Pit was a circular section of the club that had been walled off and was a good fifteen feet in diameter. The base of the Pit sat about four feet below the floor level. The floor and walls were glossy black. It was where they did public scenes and disciplined misbehaving submissives.

Ronan's hungry gaze raked up and down her body like she was just the snack he was looking for. She winked at him. A lascivious smirk spread on his face, and he chin nodded in acknowledgment.

Oh yeah, he'd be fun for a night. They'd never scened together, but she would be down if she got his marker.

She filed into line behind subs in red leather and lace. Could they *be* more unoriginal? If they wanted to stand out, they should have chosen a different color. She realized it was a Valentine's Day event, but it was those who dared to be different who made their mark and got noticed.

But when Ronan was paired with another sub, she grimaced at losing out on a chance with him. Okay, she still had hopes for Henry and Gage. They were a damn handsome

pair. They were in their late thirties but had retained their soldiers bearing from their time in the Navy.

Except the sub in front of her drew their marker.

Shit.

Who did that leave her with the possibility of selecting?
How many participating Doms were left?

She didn't have time to try and figure it out before she stared at a smiling Sophia Ryan. The fashionable brunette was married to the club's owner, Gabe, who had always intimidated Lexi. Not that she would ever admit it out loud. "Pick your marker, honey."

With a deep breath, she plunged her hand inside and searched through what was left until a marker slid into her hand. She withdrew her hand, the marker held firmly in her grasp. Before she chickened out, she opened her hand and stared at the name.

No! Not him!

Dear universe, are you fucking kidding me?

It was like she was cursed when it came to men. She'd been saddled with him? The biggest player at the club who went through submissives like the world would run out. The guy that wouldn't know loyalty and faithfulness if it bit him in the ass. That's who she'd been paired with tonight?

"Ah, Josh Ryan. He's down in room seven. Have fun." Sophia winked, like Lexi would enjoy becoming another notch on his bedpost.

She didn't want to be just another sub he screwed and forgot the moment the scene ended. Deep down, she wanted that special Dom she could kneel for and serve, who would care for her and wouldn't mind her flaws. But she was out of luck tonight.

On autopilot, she left the Pit and rode the elevator down one floor to the private rooms level. Her tummy churned the entire way.

She could do this. She could scene with him and move on. She stepped off the elevator. This level had been decorated in the same color motif as the main floor, with black walls and gray floors. But the lighting was even more muted. And there were black doors along the hall, each with a number designating the room. Her heels clicked against the floor. She waltzed to the end of the hall and located the door with the number seven on it.

When she reached the door, she took a deep breath and entered. He wasn't here yet. Lexi noted he had one of the private rooms with a bed. Not that she was picky. But it rankled that she had been matched with Josh. He was attractive, but then all the Ryans were good-looking men. That family had hit the genetics lottery.

All she had to do was submit. If she closed her eyes, she could imagine it was Ronan or one of the other Doms.

Her anxiety knew no bounds. She tried positive self-talk, but it didn't work. She should have ordered another drink before coming down. The club enforced a three-drink maximum before a scene, and her two shots constituted two

drinks. It was dumb, but those were the club rules. Even so, she bet Xavier would have given her another double even though she'd already had one.

But she could do this. From what she'd heard through the submissive grapevine, Josh was exceptionally gifted and knew how to make a sub scream in ecstasy.

She started to kneel but then thought better of it. Lexi understood far too well that kneeling in presentation was a sign of respect.

But Josh needed to prove he was worthy of that respect.

So she remained standing, her arms crossed over her chest while she waited for him to appear.



Josh reclined in his seat in the VIP section with his brothers and his cousins. It had been a hell of a week at the office. He was lead counsel for his cousins' multi-conglomerate corporation. They were in the process of acquiring a new company under the RMD Industries banner. Which meant he and his team were working eighty-hour weeks on the contract negotiations.

It was grueling work. But he fucking loved being able to add to the Ryan coffers. Both his and his cousins' bank accounts would weep for joy once the sale went through.

But it was also why he was here tonight.

He needed to blow off steam in the worst way. And for him, there was no better way than losing himself in a scene and the sweet curves of a submissive.

When it was announced that his marker had been chosen, he checked out the board.

Lexi, huh?

He'd seen her around. She was smoking hot, if a bit on the younger side. But that wouldn't deter him tonight. They'd have a lovely night together. And then they would go their separate ways come morning.

It was a win in his book.

His brothers were still waiting for their marker to be selected. But he finished off his whiskey and rose from his seat.

"A mite eager, are ya?" Aiden teased. He was the youngest of the bunch at thirty-two. And he had the telltale Ryan structure to his face with a mop of inky curls on his head and eyes as blue as the sky over Ireland.

"Aye. Like you aren't, brother. You practically ran to the club on three legs." Josh shot back with a grin. He might be the oldest, but he and his brothers were tight. They were his best mates.

Sean chuckled. "He did at that."

"Oh, and you're one to talk." Sean was between him and Aiden in age. And except for a difference in hair and eye color, those two could be twins. But Sean's hair was a deep chestnut, and his eyes were their dad's sea-green color.

“We’re still having dinner Sunday night?” Aiden asked.

It was a tradition they started when they moved to the States two years prior. A way for them to connect in a place that didn’t quite feel like home. It still didn’t, but he loved it here and had no intention of moving back.

“Aye. Come to my place. We’ll order pizza or something. Enjoy your night, lads.” Josh nodded at his brothers and cousins and exited the private seating area. He sauntered to the elevator, reviewing the scene he had in mind.

As he rode the elevator down with a few other Doms, he layered his control around him. By the time the lift reached the lower level, he was all business and in total Dom headspace. He and Lexi would have a chat about her hard limits and get to know each other a bit.

And then he was going to tie her to the bed and fuck her until every ounce of stress from his week melted away. And she would thank him for it once he finished.

It might sound arrogant, but it was true. The subs at Eros waited for him to choose them. Every night he ventured into the club, he had his pick. And he had enjoyed them all for their different flavors and kinks.

But he had a sound rule—it never ventured beyond the club. And if any sub started to become too clingy, he stopped scening with them immediately.

At the door to the private room, he squared his shoulders, anticipation humming in his body, and headed inside. Yet he was drawn up short the moment he spied Lexi.

She stood near the foot of the bed in her leopard print leotard that was little more than a second skin and hid none of her charms. Her slender arms were crossed over her generous chest, but did nothing to disguise her hourglass figure. Her plump lips were downturned, her brow furrowed. She raised her head, meeting his stare. And the beauty of her face was a total sucker punch. Smooth porcelain skin, graceful high cheekbones, and a delicate nose. Not to mention her lush, tempting lips—he was eager to discover how they looked around his cock. Her dark black cherry hair was in a high ponytail, and he had every intention of twisting it up in his hand and yanking while he was balls deep inside her.

But the defiant glimmer in her amber tiger eyes set off a discordant tone inside him. What the bloody hell was she playing at? He hadn't a feckin' clue.

But that gleam challenged him enough to pique his interest. She had a queenly bearing, surprising for someone so young. Yet her unwillingness to kneel in presentation for his arrival, or even the moment he entered the room, smacked of disrespect.

Before the night was over, she would know the proper way to greet a Dom. “Why aren't you naked and kneeling, lass?”

Her eyes flashed. “Because I could never kneel for you.”

The meaning and vehemence behind her words shocked him to his bloody core. “Excuse me? Are you aching for discipline? Is that why you're being such a brat?”

He stalked to her side, ready to take the impertinent sub over his knee for the offense. Didn't she realize he wasn't a

Dom one trifled with?

“No. But when I signed up for tonight, I didn’t bet on being set up with a player.”

He bristled at the barbed insult. Her comment hit far too close to home. And he seethed. If she wasn’t going to bend, he would break her. With that thought in mind, he grabbed her by the arm and hauled her over to the couch. “Someone is in need of some discipline. I was hoping for a pleasant night. But instead, I’ve been saddled with a spoiled brat. You’ve earned every single one of these.”

Furious, he sat and dragged her onto his lap until her ass was in position. At her yelp, he gritted his teeth and stared at her perfectly formed, heart-shaped ass. Of course the sub with the attitude of hellcat would have the most perfect fecking ass. And bloody hell, her leopard print body suit was so sheer it left nothing to the imagination. But he wasn’t going to think about the way his body sizzled at having her on his lap. Even his cock wanted in on the action, the stupid bastard.

Using his forearm, he held her prisoner against his thighs while she struggled against his hold. Wasting no time, because the sooner he broke her, the sooner they could move on to more pleasant interactions, he brought his hand down hard against her butt. Hard enough to leave a red handprint behind and for the sound to echo in the room.

Lexi screamed, “Red.”

“Excuse me?” Shock filtered over him that she’d used a safeword after one swat.

“It’s my safeword. Or do you ignore those too?” she spat over her shoulder. Her tiny body trembled. And she tossed an angry glare over her shoulder.

Bloody feckin’ hell! He’d been saddled with a damn shrew!

In all his years as a Dom, he’d never had a sub use their safeword. It was always *more please, Sir*. He wasn’t putting up with this tonight. Grinding his teeth, he unceremoniously set her on her feet. Then he rose from the couch and gestured for her to follow him. “Come with me.”

“Like I would go anywhere with you.”

“Master Gabe will want to know we’ve got an impertinent sub who doesn’t think the rules apply to her.” He pegged her with an angry glare, daring her to defy him more.

“I’m not going.” She retreated a few steps. But the defiant gleam persisted.

“Yes. You are.” He wasn’t above tossing the minx over his shoulder and marching upstairs. He’d bet she’d scream bloody murder the whole way too. Why the fuck had he been saddled with a banshee of a sub?

“No, I’m not. I’m going home.” She spun on her heel and marched toward the door.

And when she gripped the door handle, he snarled, “If you even think of leaving, I will haul your ass back inside and tie you to the fucking bed. You are not leaving this room until this matter is dealt with.”

At his threat, she rolled her eyes and marched back toward the bed, putting space and distance between them.

Smart lass.

Yanking his cell out of his back pocket, he called his cousin. He answered on the first ring. “Gabe, we have a problem. I’m down in room seven. Aye, I’ll be here.”

She glared like she was imagining all the ways she would make him pay for keeping her here. Right back at ya, sweetheart.

They stood like boxers in a ring, measuring one another but in a standoff, waiting for the other to make the first move. One of the preemptive rules of the club was safe, sane, and consensual. As an attorney, he understood the letter of the law better than most. And as much as he wanted to tan her fecking hide until it was bright red for the offense, he knew if he touched her without witnesses present, it could be bad for him and the club.

Gabe entered the room with Colin two steps behind him. He loved his cousins. They were good men. And were lucky sons of bitches with the women they called theirs.

They assessed the distance between them and the tension in the room before Gabe addressed him. “Josh, what is the problem? Has Lexi done something to offend you?”

“Aye, she bloody well has. This little sub decided before we even began that she wasn’t going to scene with me, wasn’t even going to kneel out of respect.”

“It’s my right to safeword out when I want nothing to do with a certain Dom. Or are you in the habit of forcing yourself on subs?”

He sneered. “Lass, I don’t need to force them. Ever. They come to me willingly and always ask for more.”

“Not all of them.” She snorted. Every line of her hourglass figure rippled defensively. She jutted her chin out, looking like an angry, hissing kitten standing in a room full of lions.

Gabe pierced her with a hard glare. He might appear calm and merely displeased, but Josh could tell he was fucking pissed as hell. That made two of them. “Lexi, why don’t you want to scene with Josh?”

“Because he’s a total player, and I’m done with those. If you force me, I quit the club. I won’t be pushed to scene with a Dom, regardless of whether he’s your cousin,” she replied disdainfully.

Gabe assessed her with narrowed eyes and a hard set to his jaw. “We never force submissives. Our club thrives on consent. And you are aware that you consented to scene with an unnamed Dom as part of singles night. It was an agreement you signed off on in order to participate tonight. And what I’m hearing is that you lied, that you are ignoring the rules of singles night. Would you like to explain why?”

“I won’t scene with players and be another notch on their bedpost. And I realize there’s a lot of that here. But he’s not even circumspect about it. The dude goes through subs like he’s changing his underwear. I won’t scene with him. If you try to make me, it will be against my will.” She lifted her chin

in defiance. But Josh noticed the tremble in her bottom lip. She knew she was in trouble and wasn't backing down. He wished he didn't find it arousing. But then, he was a feckin' headcase. And she might be young, but she was proving just how formidable an opponent she could be with three Doms glaring at her and still refusing to back down from her stance.

Gabe's face hardened further. "I see. While we would never force you, I'm also vastly disappointed in you, Lexi. If you had come to us before offending Master Josh, we could have corrected this easily enough. But since you have offended him, your punishment is his choice."

Lexi shot him a glare. And in her eyes, he noted her fury, like she was wishing every injury upon him. She spat, "Don't even think about touching me."

His lip curled in scorn. "I would sooner touch a barracuda. But I think a one-month suspension from the club would satisfy me."

"Whatever." She rolled her eyes.

And if she had shown any remorse, he would have left it at that. But she'd messed with the wrong Dom and had pushed far too many of his buttons. "I wasn't finished. And a six-month suspension from participating in singles night events."

She opened her mouth to argue. But then shut her mouth and cast a steely glare in his direction. "Fine. Can I go now?"

Gabe stared, asking him wordlessly if there was anything else. He shook his head in the negative. Those two suspensions should be enough. And he doubted any Dom at

Eros would want to scene with her once word spread. She was young. She would recover or not; he didn't really care.

But Gabe turned to Lexi and said, "At the end of your suspension, before I will readmit you to the club, you must come see me."

"Why? So we can talk about our feelings?"

Josh bit back a smile. She'd be fun to argue with in a courtroom. At every comment lobbed her way, she fought back, never backing down or changing her stance. In any other setting, it would be admirable. But not here and not tonight.

"Lexi, this is nonnegotiable. If you don't contact the office and set up an appointment, your suspension won't be lifted. Do I make myself clear?" Gabe growled with his hands on his hips. She'd even pushed his stalwart cousin to the breaking point.

"Perfectly." She clenched her hands into fists.

"You're free to leave. Colin will escort you to grab your belongings and up to your car. Your access code to the parking garage and club will be disabled within the hour. You will not be welcome back until you meet with me. I hope you take this time for some serious self-reflection. You need to decide whether this is the place for you."

"Lexi." Colin held the door open for her.

She sailed on past him with her head held high.

"Come on, I'll take you up," Colin said sternly.

“Enjoy your suspension.” Josh smirked, needing to get a final dig in before she vanished. She’d ruined his damn night.

She gave him the finger and sailed out the door. Colin closed the door the moment they were out of the room.

“Mind giving me a full rundown of exactly what happened here?” Gabe asked him with exasperation in every line of his body.

He blew out a frustrated breath and nodded in agreement. “Yeah, but let’s head up to your office. I need a drink.”

“You and me both.”

He followed Gabe out of the room in shock. In the two years since he’d become a member, he’d never had a night like this at the club. He’d never met a sub who was so violently opposed to him. And while he was rather cavalier with his dating life, in that he didn’t date and only scened at the club, that was his business.

But her refusal and slight added to the hollow emptiness his life had become.



Lexi couldn’t believe it. Gabe had thrown her out of one of the few places she felt at home, where she felt like herself. She couldn’t help it if she’d been saddled with Mister Fuck Anything With Tits.

“That wasn’t nice,” Colin murmured on their trek down the hall.

She shrugged. Her entire night had gone to shit. She didn't care whether it was nice or not. Maybe she just wasn't a nice person. "Maybe not, but it was well deserved. I know he's your cousin, but he's an asshole."

In the elevator, Colin stood with his muscular arms crossed in front of his chest. With a dark frown, he said, "Josh respected your wishes not to touch you by asking for the suspension. Most subs would have been punished publicly in the Pit. Keep that in mind the next time you call him an asshole."

She ground her teeth. He didn't understand. But then no one did. No one understood what her ex had put her through with his narcissistic tendencies and inability to remain faithful. He'd been her first Dom, and a piss poor one at that. No one realized she'd walked away from everything and that the only thing that mattered to her anymore was her music. She couldn't even consider what would happen if she lost that too.

Colin walked her all the way to her car. "It's only a month. Do as Gabe asked, and you will be welcomed back when your suspension ends."

"Who says I want to come back?" At that quip, she climbed into the fifteen-year-old tan Corolla that belonged to one of her bandmates without looking at him. She didn't want him to see how close to tears she was. Because she was no sniveler when there was an audience present.

And she would never give another man the satisfaction of knowing he made her cry.

*R*eclining in one of the leather chairs in Gabe's office on the fourth floor of the building, he accepted the proffered glass filled with Meath Irish whiskey from Gabe's outstretched hand. Josh swirled the amber liquid, and the lovely fumes hit his nose.

He raised his glass. "Sláinte."

"Sláinte." Gabe toasted him as he sat behind his desk. It was a stunning, handcrafted mahogany number that dominated the office. It suited his cousin. He was a year older and had some silver threads creeping into his inky black hair and trim beard.

Josh took a drink. The potent liquid burned a path into his belly. What had been her deal tonight? Why had Lexi rejected him so soundly? Obviously, she'd been hurt by someone and had taken it out on him.

Gabe huffed out a frustrated breath. "Okay, give me a rundown of exactly what happened in there."

"There's not much. I waltzed into the room. Instead of kneeling in presentation, she was standing defiantly. We traded

a few words. When she refused to do as I asked, I pulled her over to the couch to discipline her. I figured I had a mouthy and bratty sub who was looking for some punishment. But after the first swat, she safeworded out.”

“That’s it?” Gabe frowned. “She didn’t even give you a chance to talk beyond a few barbs?”

“No. It’s been a while since I was turned down.” And it was the first time he’d been turned down at the club.

Gabe grimaced. “You’ll recover, I’m sure. But I’m worried.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Not about you, dingus, about Lexi,” he murmured with a thoughtful expression. But then, Gabe had a soft spot for wounded birds.

“Have other Doms had difficulties with her?” He loathed how curious he was about the sexy termagant. But when a woman turned a man down in such a manner, it raised red flags. Was she always that difficult? Or had something happened to her recently? Because she kept mentioning him being a player. And she wasn’t entirely wrong with her statement. But the derision in her voice around that word told him there was a story behind it—and probably not one he would like.

“Not that I’m aware of, but I’ll put together a message and send it out to our Dom group. Ask any of the members who have scened with her to contact me. That way I can ask if they’ve had any issues with her.”

“What do you know about her?” And why the fuck did he care? That little brat had done nothing to earn his interest. But he could seem to help it, which made him just as mental.

“Beyond her application, not much. She’s always been respectful to me and my brothers. But she’s always been reserved about her life outside of the club. From her application, I know she’s a barista at the Java Hut. She’s twenty-three. A Gemini.”

“So basically, you have no clue.” And she was even younger than he’d thought. There was a fourteen-year age difference between them. She was just starting out. While he was approaching middle age. But why didn’t his cousin know anything about her? That wasn’t like him with Eros Pit club members. They were a small community, and he usually had the lowdown on every member.

“Not really. My advice is to forget her. Why don’t you go back down and find yourself another sub?”

On the way up to Gabe’s office, he had considered doing just that but thought better of it. The fewer people who knew about him striking out, the better. And he didn’t know why, but he wanted to protect Lexi from the gossips. “I’m going to pass. All the single subs will be headlong into a scene with another Dom by now. It’s the way the singles night events happen.”

“You could always head to Eternal Eros and find a little dove for the night.”

The idea had merit, but then he would have to take them to his place. And it’s something he never did with a woman.

Ever. “I could. But I won’t. I don’t have the patience for an untried submissive.”

Gabe heartily sighed, his exasperation evident. “I understand. I’m sorry your night was ruined.”

Josh shrugged nonchalantly, trying to act as if it was no big deal, even though it smarted. “Can’t win them all. And there was no way you could have planned for the night to go sideways like this.” He drained the rest of this scotch. “I’m heading home. Give my love to Sophia.”

Gabe smiled warmly at the mention of his wife. “Will do. And try not to worry about getting rejected tonight. It sounds to me like Lexi’s going through something and took it out on you.”

“I won’t.” But he would since he was an overthinker. It was one of the things that made him such a good attorney, because he would ponder ways around language until he found one. And her rejection rankled, the way she dismissed him as if he was a fuckboy, instead of a Dom who just so happened to enjoy multiple flavors. He had scened with his fair share of subs since becoming a member almost two years ago. Yet until tonight, he never considered the way the submissives looked at him—as a player.

That’s not how he looked at it. The truth was, he just didn’t want a relationship. He’d done the committed relationship gig. And it wasn’t for him. His failed marriage was a testament to how much it wasn’t for him.

“And you should know she will not be allowed back if she doesn’t change her tune and follow my instructions.”

“Don’t bar her on my account. We’ll talk later. I’m for home.”

“You sure you don’t want to head to Eternal Eros? I hear there are a few bachelorette parties in attendance tonight.”

The thought of wrangling a bachelorette back to his place just didn’t sit well with him. “I’m good.”

“Not to worry. You’ll find the sub meant for you. I’m sure of it. When you feel the Ryan click, it will make all this shite matter little.”

“Aye, later.” Josh left his cousin in his office and headed to his car.

The Ryan click. What rubbish. It was an old family legend that when a Ryan met their intended mate in this life, they felt a click inside them. And once they did, they were done for. No one but the person they experienced the click with would ever do.

He might be Irish to the depths of his soul, but he didn’t believe in the Ryan click or soulmates. Even though the Irish even had a saying for it: *Mo Anam Cara*. Which roughly translates to My Soul Mate or My Soul Friend. But that’s because ancient Celts believed that when two individuals formed a deep, lasting bond, their souls would mingle. Hence, the soul mate dribble everyone went on about.

In his sleek black Mercedes sedan, he drove the short distance to his penthouse apartment.

He was pissed, but his feelings about tonight were layered. Because there had been a moment with Lexi where she’d

looked young and vulnerable. But then she fought back like a frightened kitten, swiping at him.

And against his better judgment, it left him wondering what her life was like. What had happened to make her that disagreeable? The understatement of the century, except it was true.

And she was the first woman to turn him down in years. As angry as he should be, he was concerned. A woman didn't refuse like that, safeword out that way, unless there was a bigger problem.

And if she was expelled from the club, how would she find a Dom who could help her? And he wondered if there was something he could do for her.

Bloody hell, the lass didn't want him, and he couldn't stop thinking about her.



Lexi arrived home feeling dejected. Tonight had not gone the way she had hoped. The last thing she planned on was getting suspended from her favorite place to blow off some steam. And potentially get her ass spanked and fucked.

It was all his fault too—Josh Ryan.

Did he have to be her type? Tall, dark hair, and sexy as fuck with his chiseled jawline and broad shoulders that had stretched the material of his sport coat. But it was his eyes, so dark brown they appeared like black flames. The ones that had called her ten times a fool for refusing him. Perhaps she

should have just submitted and scened with him. But the thought of becoming another notch on his bedpost had her seeing red. She didn't want to be one of many. She wanted a Dom to treat her as if she was special. Not to add another notch, but because he was done adding notches and wanted to be with her, wanted to claim her, and be her biggest supporter when the world became too much and she needed to lean.

But players and narcissists would never see beyond their own needs. And she could never see Josh Ryan giving up his love 'em and leave 'em lifestyle for anyone, let alone her.

Why was she still thinking about him when she should be burning his name in effigy for getting her kicked out of the club?

Gah!

All she wanted was to have one person in her corner. Just one. Why was it so hard for her to find anyone who truly gave a shit?

Her less-than-sparkly attitude tended to cause waves. But she couldn't make herself fit into what other people found acceptable. She should know. She'd been trying to fit into spaces that didn't feel right to her all her life.

Her parents were the worst sort of narcissists imaginable. Lexi's older sister, Lisa, was their golden child. Lisa could do no wrong in their eyes. She could announce that she went on a killing spree and was going to jail, and her parents would move heaven and earth to keep her out of prison. And yet, Lexi could do nothing right. If she did something like that, their response would be along the lines of she did the crime, so

now she must do the time. She'd done everything they asked of her, but it never mattered and only made her miserable. Until two years ago, she decided she couldn't continue down the soulless path they'd set for her life.

It was her life. She was the only one who should determine where it was headed. But here's the thing—even after being subjected to crappy parents who she didn't think ever loved her, she still wanted that loving, supportive relationship so much she ached for it.

And her parents, Jill and David Williams, had cut her out of their life and weren't speaking to her because she wouldn't bow to their demands.

And it was why she rented a single room from her sister. The house wasn't bad. It was in a good neighborhood. And she and Lisa got along well enough. Although she seemed to act more and more like their parents every day. It was fine. As soon as she paid off her loan, she was out of here anyway.

Lisa was in the kitchen with a glass of wine and case files on the table. She looked up as she entered the house, given the open floor plan of the home. "You're home early. I thought you were going to a party."

"I did. The party was lame, though, and I bailed," she lied. "I'm taking a bath and going to bed." Because maybe tomorrow the world would look better. And she wouldn't be close to tears over losing a place that she thought of as a sanctuary. Where she wasn't judged for what she wore or what she did.

Josh Ryan had no idea how much he had screwed her. And all because of some misplaced egotistical bullshit.

Her sister arched a brow. “Mom and Dad called.”

Lexi’s soul shriveled. She couldn’t help it. If they called, it was never good. Even when they made offers, it always came laden with fine print. “What did they want?”

“Just checking up on things.”

“You mean they want to see if I’ve fucked up my life more.”

“It’s not like that, Lex—”

“And you still defend them. When are you going to realize all they do is sit in judgment of me? And even if I had continued with their life plan for me, I still wouldn’t be the apple of their eye like you. I would somehow still be disappointing them because I chose the wrong kind of medicine to go into. Or didn’t get the best internship. And the list goes on and on.”

“I know they’re hard on you, but they do it out of love.”

Lexi snorted at the absurdity of Lisa’s statement. “For you they do. Me they tolerate as their great disappointment.”

She sighed. Long ago she realized that no matter what she did, she would never live up to their standards. It didn’t matter how hard she tried or what she accomplished. It was never good enough for them.

Ever.

Lisa scowled, looking more like their mother. Even for a night at home, her blonde hair was perfectly styled without a single hair out of place. “No, they don’t. You’re being dramatic again.”

She bared her teeth in disgust. “You’re just as blind as they are if you truly believe that.”

Lexi sailed out of the kitchen with that as her parting shot. She strode down the hall to the room she rented and slammed the door. Tonight had been a study in just how wrong her life could go.

And it had started going wrong the moment she pulled Josh Ryan’s marker.

During the week following the botched singles night, Josh struggled over how it all went down that night. He hated how worried he was for Lexi. But it was in his nature as a Dom to protect and defend those weaker than him. And Lexi needed help. That much was clear with the way she acted.

He was worried about her enough that last night, he'd contacted Gabe to get Lexi's phone number or address. He figured if he could just check in on her, make sure she was doing all right, then he could drop it. Not that she would want any help from him. But he had to check on her. And once he did, perhaps then he could finally move on and stop thinking about her or her perfect ass or how many times he'd fantasized about taking that ass this week.

Except his cousin had refused to hand it over. The information was confidential, and he wouldn't break members' trust, not even for family.

Josh just wanted to talk to her. Her rejection bothered him.

Maybe if he understood where she was coming from, he could lay his own demons from that night to rest. And sure, he was cavalier with the subs at the club. Was he too cavalier,

though? Had he taken his desire to avoid a committed relationship too far?

Probably. All week long, he'd felt cheap.

He'd vacillated between anger, shame, and concern for Lexi. Josh didn't care for her attitude. Nor did he want to scene with her. But he couldn't move past the idea that she was struggling. And he wondered if he could offer her—what?

It was clear the woman wanted nothing to do with him. He doubted if he appeared on her doorstep that she would even open the door for him.

He wasn't even in the mood to go to dinner. But his coworker Lisa had invited their team to her house for dinner. They had been slaving away the last few weeks on this contract deal for RMD Industries that will make the company a ton of money. And if the acquisition goes through, he and his team stood to make hefty bonuses.

He liked his life here in the States. His mum and da missed him and his brothers, but coming to America had been the best for them. He'd scored a lead counsel position with his own team. In Ireland, he had still been a junior partner, working eighty hours a week for pennies.

Less than two years in Colorado, and he had a penthouse in the city. He had stock options, retirement savings, and a car he adored.

Granted, after moving here, Josh had to learn to drive on the wrong side of the road and the wrong side of the car. But he'd acclimated easily enough.

And he fucking loved the mountains. It's why he bought his place. So he could look at them whenever he was home.

Thornton was a short drive up Interstate 25 from downtown Denver. Although driving Interstate 25 was like entering a demolition derby, and only the strongest would survive. Yet he liked it up here; it was nice up here.

When he'd bought his penthouse, Gabe had warned him he'd eventually want a house out in the suburbs too. And the older he got, the more he saw the appeal. But he didn't want any prefab home or something cookie-cutter. He had been socking money away because he wanted to build on his own land.

He'd already mentioned to Brody to start drawing up plans. He had his eye on a parcel of real estate close to the mountains in Arvada. And when the acquisition deal went through, he would have the funds to buy the land outright.

But he loved his penthouse and had no intention of giving it up anytime soon, if ever. It was the best place for him after a long day at the office.

The tree-lined subdivision was an older one. But it had charm. Although he could do without all the bloody roundabouts. But he found Lisa's home easily enough. It was a modest ranch home in a steel blue.

He parked his Mercedes in the street, grabbed the bottle of wine he'd picked up for the hostess, and headed up the walkway.

He rang the bell and pasted a smile on his face. As much as he appreciated the offer of a free meal, he wanted the evening over. He planned to stay long enough to eat dinner and act like a team player. But then he was heading home for the night.

The front door opened, and he froze.

“Lexi?” The shock of finding her there hit him like a bat to the head. He drank in her form. Her dark red hair lay in soft waves over her slender shoulders. She was dressed in what he could only describe as a punk rock outfit. She wore a black long-sleeve shirt that displayed her ample tits to perfection. But the sleeves were shredded and provided pale glimpses of her arms. She had on a micro-mini jean skirt that barely covered her rump and black fishnet hose with a pair of black combat boots.

Who the hell was this woman? Last weekend she’d been in a leopard print catsuit. And now, she looked like a groupie for a heavy metal band.

Lexi’s blood-red lips curled down. “What the hell are you doing here? Did Gabe give you my address?”

The disdain lacing her words broke him out of his trance. “No. I thought this was Lisa Williams’s house. It’s the address she gave me.”

Lexi crossed her arms in front of her chest. The act smooshed her generous breasts together. He ignored the plump globes as best he could. But she had a stellar rack. “It is Lisa’s house. What do you want with my sister?”

“I work with her. Our team is meeting here for dinner tonight. What are you doing here?” Sister? Lexi was Lisa’s sister? Bloody hell. He hadn’t seen that one coming. Did Gabe know? Surely, his cousin knew he worked with Lexi’s sister. Then again, perhaps not. Gabe tended to stay out of the daily RMD business.

But sisters? He knew Lisa. He’d been working with her for almost two years now. And they were nothing alike.

“I live here.” Lexi rolled her eyes. “Fine. Come in.”

“Does your sister know you were at the club?” She lives with her sister? Well, at least he had her address now. Not that he knew what he would do with it. Because it wasn’t like he could show up here unannounced to speak to Lexi since it was his coworker’s residence. There would be far too many questions he’d be unable to answer. He kept his bedroom preferences out of the office. And he wasn’t going to change his policy on that. His private life was his private life.

But Lexi whipped back around and pointed a finger at his chest. “Let’s get one thing straight. You tattle on me to my sister, and I will cause you a world of hurt. The less my sister and my family know about my life, the better it is for me. Understood?”

“Perfectly.” But he couldn’t help but think how sad. It sounded like she and her family weren’t close. When he didn’t know what he’d do without his brothers. He might be the oldest, but if he needed help, Sean and Aiden would be there for him in a heartbeat. And the reverse was true because if they needed him, he was there, no questions asked.

Lexi retreated a few steps and gave him room to enter. “Follow me.” She swiveled on her heel without another word, and he was presented with her heart-shaped ass. He bit back his groan. Her ass encased in the micro-mini was enough to make him want to get on his knees and beg her to reconsider. Her juicy ass gave him wicked thoughts of bending her over the nearest surface just so he could watch her take his cock while her ass jiggled.

Down, boy! he told the semi in his pants.

Inside the foyer, he spied a comfortable living room off to the right. It was well appointed and what he would expect from Lisa. Clean lines with impressive pieces that she likely handpicked and had added her subtle flair.

How did Lexi fit into this place? It didn't seem like her at all.

He trailed after her into the kitchen and connecting dining room. Lisa was at the stove, her blonde hair in a ponytail, wearing gray slacks and a blouse. Trent and Emily were already here and sipping drinks.

“Look who finally made it.” Trent grinned. He was a bit of a hotshot who looked like a reformed beach bum. But calling him that was well deserved. He had a brain like a whip that seemed to remember every business tort under the fecking sun.

He toasted him with the bottle of wine. “Traffic was brutal getting out of the city.”

Emily smiled and cheered him with her wine glass. A divorced mother of two boys, she was the best lawyer on his

team.

Lisa turned toward him with a beaming smile, which turned into a slight frown when her cornflower gaze flicked to her sister. But she redirected her attention his way. “Glad you came. I was beginning to think you were standing me up.”

What an odd thing for her to say. It made him feel awkward. He covered it up and held out the wine bottle. It was the best chardonnay at the wine store. “For you, as thanks for feeding us all tonight.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Lexi stalk down the hallway and out of view. Josh had more questions than answers. Why did she live with her sister? What was that look Lisa had given her all about? Was Lisa one of the reasons behind Lexi’s attitude? Or was it just Lexi and who she was?

“It’s my pleasure. Can I get you something to drink? Wine? Beer?” Lisa asked, carrying the wine over to the fridge.

“A beer would be grand. And whatever you’re cooking smells wonderful.” His stomach rumbled at the delicious aromas.

“We’re having beef Wellington. Dinner should be ready in about fifteen minutes. There are some appetizers on the table in the dining room if you’re famished. I figured we deserved something spectacular. Something that is not takeout.” She grabbed a beer out of the fridge and handed it to him.

“It sounds fabulous.” He stood talking to his team while Lisa pulled steaming dishes out of the oven. And he wished he could say he paid attention to what they were discussing.

Emily had some ideas on some of the subsidiary language for them to review on Monday.

But his mind was on Lexi and just how out of place she seemed here.

And then Lexi returned to the kitchen hefting a guitar case, looking like a sex kitten in her punk rocker outfit with her keys in hand, heading toward the front door.

“You’re not eating with us?” he blurted and frowned. Why did it matter? She didn’t want him. He needed to move on. But she had him twisted up inside. He had the insane urge to comfort her. Like beneath her prickly exterior was a broken woman in need of a little tenderness.

“Can’t. Band’s got a gig.” She shouldered her purse.

Lisa sighed like a frustrated parent with a derelict teenager instead of a sister who was a grown woman. “I really wish you’d play in a better venue. The Jukebox is in such a rough part of town.”

“It’s a paying gig. I’ll be fine.” She brushed off Lisa’s comment with a cavalier shrug. At the honk outside, Lexi said, “Gotta go. That’s my ride. Don’t wait up.”

And he stared after her as she left. Lexi was in a band? With a paying gig? He never would have figured she was into music. But he caught Lisa studying him with concern before she returned to serving the meal.

Conversation flowed freely around the dinner table. Lisa was quite the cook. And he enjoyed having a home-cooked meal for a change of pace. But while they ate and discussed

the contract negotiations, he couldn't stop thinking about Lexi at the Jukebox. He'd heard about that place. It was in one of the worst parts of town.

And she played guitar?

An unexpected punch of lust hit his system. He'd bet she looked sexy as hell on stage playing a guitar.

After dinner, Trent and Emily were in the living room, admiring the massive flatscreen while Josh helped Lisa collect the dishes off the table. "Why don't you want her going to the Jukebox? Is it that bad? I've never been, but I've heard rumblings."

"Lexi's slimy ex owns the joint. He's gotten handsy with her in the past. But she won't listen to me when I tell her she needs to find another place to play. All she says is that they have a following there," she sighed as she loaded the dishwasher. "Why the interest?"

"I'm not. I just understand what it's like being the oldest with siblings who don't always trust your guidance with things."

At his explanation, Lisa smiled. "Yeah, I love Lexi, but she's made some interesting choices the last few years, and we're all worried about her."

Josh tried to stay longer. They were having a great time chatting. But he faked a yawn because all he'd been doing was watching the clock for the best time to escape. "Sorry, but it's been an insanely long week, and I have to be up early

tomorrow. Lisa, thank you for dinner. It was delicious. Trent. Emily. I'll see you all on Monday."

"Are you sure?" Lisa asked. There was a light of interest in her eyes that made him want to hightail it out of there faster. He had no interest in Lisa in that way. Above and beyond the fact that he refused to dip his wick in the company ink.

Josh kept the smile on his face and nodded, acting like nothing was wrong. "Yes. Sorry, I've got to be up early."

And he wouldn't give her any fuel to add to the hearts and rainbows he spied in her gaze. Because it was never going to happen between them. He'd gotten involved with another attorney once, and it didn't end well.

But when he climbed into his Mercedes, the address he plugged into the GPS wasn't to his penthouse. It was to the Jukebox.

And as he pulled away from the curb with that destination in mind, he knew he had gone mad.

“*T*hanks for picking me up.”

She slid into the passenger seat after stowing her guitar in the back of Cliff’s VW van, which was a relic from the 1980s. Cliff was cool and one of her closest friends. He was tall and lanky, with shaggy brown hair. And he was one of the best drummers she’d ever seen and heard. The dude absolutely crushed it. It was too bad he batted for the other team, or they’d be perfect for one another.

“Not a problem,” he murmured as he sped off, heading south toward the Jukebox. “How’s the voice?”

“All rested and ready to rock it.” And she needed the outlet it provided after the last week. Music was her escape. When she was performing, all her cares slid away, and peace settled throughout her being.

Cliff flashed her a confident grin. “Hells, yeah. You know, I heard they were looking for bands to try out and open for some shows at Red Rocks this summer.”

That grabbed her attention. “Really? Have you talked to the others about it?”

He weaved through traffic on the interstate like it was no big deal. Instead of what it really was—more of a welcome to the thunder dome, best of luck on your survival. “Not yet. Just heard about it. I’ve got the site bookmarked. There’s an online application we need to fill out and send in a demo of our stuff with it.”

She was electrified at the thought of performing at Red Rocks, opening for some big-name band. They were on the cusp of discovery. She could feel it. Between their shows, YouTube channel, and growing social media following, they were headed in the right direction.

“We should have the songs we recorded back next week. When’s the deadline?” This was it. They were going to get their big break. And then she could give anyone who ever doubted her the finger.

He gave her a Cheshire grin. “End of the month.”

There were two weeks left in the month. It meant they had time to toss their band into the ring. “We’ve gotta do it. The music we recorded . . .”

“I know. It’s damn good.”

“Fuck yeah, it is! It’s awesome. While we’re setting up for the show, we should ask Robbie and Nate for their two cents. We get a consensus and vote on it. I’m sure they’ll be down too. I can call the studio Monday and get our demo. Then we get that application submitted this week. If the concert venue organizers like our demo, what then?” Because she knew it couldn’t be as easy as submitting an application and getting accepted.

“Then they call us in to audition. If we do well, they’ll pick us as a local opening band.”

“They’ll like it. I can feel it.” Their band would get a spot. They’d worked too hard and were amazing. The crowd always went wild when they were on stage.

“Me too,” Cliff replied as he pulled into the parking lot of the Jukebox.

The seedy club with its garish neon lights was in Commerce City, which was rough during the day. At night, it was much worse. The building across the street was all boarded up. A block away, the businesses had bars over the windows. There were muggings and shootings in the area daily. And while she didn’t care for the area, the venue was always packed. And they had a following. There was nothing quite like being on stage with the energy of the crowd engaging with your music. It pumped her up, added fuel to the flames, and made her perform even harder.

Cliff pulled his van next to the back entrance. There was always more of a chance back here in the alley for something to go wrong. But at least she was here with Cliff to help act as a deterrent. They started unloading their equipment, carting in Cliff’s drums, her guitar and amplifier, the microphones, and all the rest of their supplies.

And while they carried it all in, she thought about the surprise visit by the last person she expected to find on her doorstep.

Josh, with his sexy smirks and dark glares, was at her house. She’d been dumbfounded when she opened the door

and found him on the front stoop. How had she never known that he worked with her sister?

Although the house didn't belong to her. Her sister owned it. But Lisa was being kind enough to rent her a room. It wasn't ideal, and they didn't see eye to eye on most issues. But on the bright side, she wasn't living with her parents.

Josh Ryan.

Her body zapped to life as she recalled his sexy swagger and the way he filled out a suit. The man was too sexy for his own good. It was no wonder submissives dropped their panties for him without blinking. All he had to do was smile with that rakish charm of his, and they went poof.

He was older, probably in his late thirties given the slight dusting of gray at his temples amid the inky hair he kept trimmed short. Although there was a hint of a curl at the ends that she bet would be sexy as hell if he grew it longer. And she thought the gray made him look distinguished.

The Dom was potently male, even in his suits. The testosterone pumped off him, and there was an aura about him that he could switch from gentleman to a brawler in seconds.

Josh was tall, with a regal presence. Beneath his expensive suits were broad shoulders and an athletic build that she wished she could have seen without his clothes on. His eyes were so dark a brown they appeared black, with hot smoldering flames liable to incinerate the unwary. Add in his chiseled jawline dusted with an inky shadow beard, then toss in his Irish lilt, and it surprised her that she didn't combust simply from being near him.

And when he went all dominant...

She doubted she would ever forget his dark scowl. Nor the way he'd gripped her arm and dragged her over to the couch. The sheer scope of the strength in him had shot a jolt of arousal through her that made her legs weak. It was the only reason she hadn't put up a fight.

Well, that and the moment he touched her, the shockwave of an exploding star enveloped her entire body. His touch was so potent she'd come close to moaning.

It was one of the reasons she'd refused him. A Dom like that, who set off sparks with a simple innocuous touch, was far too dangerous to tangle with.

But she'd wanted him last weekend more than she had wanted another man in a long damn time. And her reaction was a problem. Because she'd never felt such carnal chemistry with anyone. It was the type that would make her lose herself in him.

And she would never get involved with a player again. She had done that once and had earned the damn T-shirt.

Only a self-destructive moron would return for second helpings. And while her family might think she was one step away from total ruin, she was smarter than they gave her credit for and wouldn't destroy her life over a man ever again.

But it made her uncomfortable that he knew where she lived. Not that he would do anything about it, but it unsettled her all the same. Because he knew more about her than most at the club. And she preferred to remain tight-lipped about her

living situation—and life in general. Because she didn't want the censure. She didn't need anyone's advice on how she could better her situation.

She lived her life on her terms and no one else's.

Robbie and Nate had arrived before them. As a group, they worked on getting the stage set up for their gig. And she did her best to avoid Travis, her ex and the owner of the Jukebox. They dated for about six months when she first moved back two years ago. The two-timing, narcissistic jerkwad acted all big and bad, but he was nothing more than a total slimeball. They'd broken things off almost eighteen months ago. But he acted like she would come running back to him any day now and couldn't survive without him.

But she would never touch him again. Not even if her life depended upon it.

Once the stage was set up, she ventured toward the bar to grab a hot tea with lemon to take back to the dressing room.

On her way up to the bar, Travis trapped her in the hall. Dammit.

His blond hair was shaved in a military buzz cut. He bragged he had served in the army. But she'd never seen his dog tags or anything that led her to believe it wasn't just another one of his lies. Every part of his outfit, from his jeans to his tee and leather jacket to his demeanor, projected the appearance he was a tough guy.

But she knew when the chips were down, he would run.

“Hey babe, been a while.” Travis cornered her against the wall with a lewd grin. He checked her out with a nod. “Looking fine tonight. Once your band is done playing, we should have a drink.”

Never. Not even with a gun to her head.

“That’s not a good idea. If you don’t mind, I just need to grab some tea before our set.” She was rabidly obsessed with protecting her voice. She drank hot tea with lemon before a show. And the morning after, she drank hot tea with lemon and honey to soothe her throat.

“Oh, come on. You know how good it was between us, Lex. Have a drink with me after your set. You know you want to.” He backed her against the wall, blocking her exit. And since he was the boss, no one would stop him.

“First off, it wasn’t that great between us. You were controlling, manipulative, and have no sense of loyalty, preferring to fuck any woman who gave you the time of day.”

The guy didn’t even flinch. He gave what she was sure he thought was a remorseful smile. “I know I messed up. But I swear if you give me another chance, you’ll see I’ve changed. Remember how hot it was between us? You know you want me.”

Arching a brow, she shoved at his chest, her anger rising that he wouldn’t take no for an answer. They had to find another venue to play. Because she was over his smarmy shit. “I want nothing of the sort. Take your goddamn hands off me before I lose my mind.”

Her refusal didn't faze him. If anything, it added fuel to his delusion. "Oh, come on, baby."

Fed up with his bullshit, she snarled, "I'm not your baby. Nor do I want to be ever again. I would rather fuck a prison gang than let you touch me ever again. Now back the fuck off, you slimy piece of shit!"

Lexi struggled to push him away. He had almost a hundred pounds of muscle on her. And given he was a foot taller, he dwarfed her. The bar was loud enough that no one would hear her. But she was seconds from calling for help.

She shoved and fought against his hold.

"Calm down." Travis snapped, his face twisted into an angry snarl.

One moment, she was shoving against the wall of his chest. And the next, she almost fell because Travis was yanked away.

Lexi righted herself and stared, dumbfounded. What the hell was Josh doing here? Was he stalking her? Out to cause her more trouble than she was already in at the club?

But then Josh shoved Travis against the wall like the guy weighed nothing—without even wrinkling his suit—and got in his face. "I believe the lady told you to release her."

"This doesn't concern you, asshole. You need to leave my club immediately before I call security and have them bust your fucking kneecaps."

Josh didn't bat an eye at his threat. "Fine. But I'll be contacting the police and will report this assault. I'm sure Lexi

will want to press charges.” He shot me a furious glare to agree with him.

She didn’t want to press charges. It would cause more of a headache than the guy was worth. But she bet he was bluffing Travis. “Yes, I will. I will explain everything you did tonight and have done in the past. My bandmates have caught you harassing me. And I know they’d be happy to testify on my behalf.”

“Fucking bitch. And to think I let you play your shitty music here,” Travis spat with hatred blazing in his eyes.

Josh shoved him again, hard enough that Travis looked scared for a moment. Because he knew in a fight, he would lose against Josh. “That’s no way to speak to a woman. Apologize. Now.”

Lust slammed into her at Josh’s dominance. At the way he handled Travis as if he was a misbehaving toddler instead of a grown man. It was akin to dousing her body in lighter fluid and tossing a lit match her way.

Her entire body throbbed. Her nipples hardened into beaded points. And moisture slicked her sex.

It was another reason she refused to scene with him. Because his dominance struck a chord deep inside her body and soul.

Lexi ached to submit to him. Every submissive instinct clamored for her to kneel at his large feet and bask in his dominance.

But if she caved, she would become nothing more than another notch on his bedpost. It would leave her heartbroken. Because she would have been found lacking once again. When she craved a strong, supportive Dom who had her back against all of life's turmoil and wanted to keep her.

Travis glowered, his face contorted in rage. But Josh didn't back down. He didn't display any fear. He projected a calm, cool, and collected alpha-ness that she found deeply sexy.

Travis finally sighed and relented. The angry starch left his shoulders. He mumbled, "I'm sorry, Lexi. It won't happen again."

Josh nodded curtly. "Good. And from here on out, if she continues to be harassed, I'll help her file a restraining order against you. And with my influence, I'll let it be known to local authorities the owner of this fine establishment harasses women. I'm sure I could find some other musicians you've accosted through the years who would be happy to talk to detectives about what they experienced. Do we understand each other?"

"Yes," Travis seethed, but didn't fight back.

Josh released him and took a few steps back. His entire being was ready to go on the defensive, like he was waiting for Travis to attack. But Travis slunk away with a thunderous expression and a bad attitude.

"Are you all right?" Josh asked the moment he was on the other side of the club.

“Who the hell do you think you are?” she shouted, because it was all too much. The one Dom she should stay away from had stepped in and protected her. She couldn’t remember anyone doing that for her. Ever. She’d been navigating life solo for so long that she’d forgotten what it felt like to have someone care.

“I’m the guy saving your bloody ass, lass.” Josh looked like he wanted to take her over his knee and spank some sense into her.

Her entire body quivered in fucking delight at the mere thought. What the hell was wrong with her? She didn’t let her hormones guide her actions.

“I don’t need you to save me.” That’s not what she needed. All she needed was a Dom to love her unconditionally. Someone who would be loyal and wouldn’t try to change her. Someone who would support her dreams.

Basically a unicorn of a Dom.

But unicorns didn’t exist. And she doubted the Dom of her dreams did either. Not when life had proven otherwise time and again.

Josh scowled. “Lexi, he had you up against the wall and wasn’t letting go. So don’t play this off like you didn’t need anyone when clearly you did. You just don’t like that it was me.”

He hit the nail on the head. “I had it handled.”

“You didn’t. A little thanks wouldn’t hurt you, ya know. But I’m not surprised, given your picture is listed next to the

word stubborn in the dictionary.”

Exasperation filled every line of his solid form. She wasn't normally a suit kind of gal when it came to menswear, but on him, it added an element that made him smoking hot. Her fingers itched to discover if his body was as firm as it looked. Pissed at herself and beating back her desire, she asked, “Why are you even here? Did my sister send you?”

Because she wouldn't put it past Lisa, who treated her like she was ten instead of a grown woman.

“No, Lisa didn't send me. I'm not her errand boy. I came here of my own volition.”

“Why?” She couldn't fathom why else he would be here. It didn't make sense.

“This isn't a safe place for a woman to be.”

Was he kidding? “Do you know how many times I've been here alone without a big, strong man to protect me? Plenty. I'll be fine. I don't need you or anyone else.”

“Lexi.”

“No, Josh. You're not my boyfriend or my Dom. Hell, we're not even friends, and don't pretend like we are because it's a lie. You have no right to interfere in my life.” Even though his desire to protect her touched a deep chord within her. It made her soften toward him. Because she couldn't remember the last time anyone had wanted to protect her.

“You are the most ornery, contrary woman I've ever known.”

And his knight in shining armor routine was breaking through the cracks in her defenses. It made her more resolved than ever to push him away. “If you mean I’m not a pushover, then I take that as a compliment.”

“You would.” Josh snorted with a shake of his head.

“Go home, Josh.”

“No. I’m going to stick around and make sure he doesn’t mess with you again.”

She rolled her eyes, even as her heart sighed. Because it might be overbearing, but it was also super sweet.

Before she thought better of it, she gripped the lapels of his gray suit jacket and laid a lip-smacking scorch on him. She put everything inside her into her kiss, laying one on him that she didn’t want him to forget. She couldn’t seem to help herself where he was concerned.

Josh went still as stone. A sadistic part of her wanted to show him what he was missing out on. She held on tight, going up on her tiptoes as she sucked on his bottom lip.

But then his hands cupped her face. His touch shivered through her, and her sex throbbed. Josh assumed command and dialed the kiss up from a five to a twenty. Her knees went weak. Shifting the angle of the kiss, he plunged his tongue inside, tangling with hers, and dominated her.

Lexi’s panties went up in a flash of smoke, disintegrating at the stunning kaleidoscope of sensations buffeting her.

Holy mother of god! The world stopped moving. He blotted out everything, dragging her into a quagmire of pulse-

pounding need that left her moaning.

She had kissed plenty of men.

But she had never had a man kiss her like she mattered. Most kissed her as a way to get to what they wanted—mainly getting into her pants. Yet not a single one had ever made her feel as if she was priceless. As if kissing her was the point and endgame, not just a bridge to another destination.

Lexi moaned, gripping his jacket even tighter. And with each sure, swift glide of his tongue against hers, her body surrendered to his mastery. God, was it any wonder he had his own fan club at the Eros Pit?

And that thought was like a bucket of ice water tossed over her head. It jolted her out of her lust-infused haze.

Lexi jerked back, breaking the kiss. She released his jacket and retreated, putting a few steps between them.

Shock mingled with lust on his handsome face. And he stared at her oddly, like she had something on her face. But she couldn't deal with his hangups, not when she had a surfeit of her own. Not to mention she had a show to put on.

“Go home, Josh.”

“No. It's a free country.” His refusal sparked the desire in her to pick right back up where they left off.

But that way led to ruin and heartbreak. Lexi rolled her eyes instead of launching herself into his arms. “Just stay away from me.”

She pushed past him and walked away. Her focus had to be on her show and not that Mister Fuck Anything With Tits made her feel as if she was coming out of her skin.

Because she wanted to climb him like a damn tree. And let him own her in the bedroom. After that kiss, she knew he would be an extremely skilled lover. She'd bet a scene with him would destroy her, and make her his most ardent groupie.

And that made him more dangerous than Travis.

She vowed not to see him again. Nor would she kiss him again. What the hell had she been thinking? Between Travis coming on to her and Josh's timely rescue, she was all mixed up inside and scattered. She likely would have kissed an ogre if they had saved her.

But she grabbed her tea and headed backstage, ignoring the yearning in her heart that Josh was different, urging her to give him a try.

*B*loody feckin' hell!

It's real. The Ryan click. A gentle wind could topple him onto his arse.

Josh didn't believe in fate, soulmates, or the woo-woo energy stuff. He believed in the law and order, in what he could see, feel, and touch.

Until Lexi kissed him and blew all his beliefs to smithereens.

The reason behind her sudden kiss remained a total mystery. He touched his lips, where the ghost impression of her mouth still lingered. They still tasted like her and buzzed from the contact. The kiss had given him a semi. His dick roused, sensing a female like no other they'd come into contact with before.

Kissing her had been like he'd wrapped his lips around a downed electrical wire. Volts of lightning zapped through him and left him reeling. The devastation was total. His world would never be the same after that lip-lock. Because he would never forget what it felt like to kiss her.

Nor did he want to.

Desires he had buried a decade ago had been resurrected. A new sense of purpose filled him. He craved more with Lexi. Because if that's what it felt like to kiss her, how would she feel writhing beneath him when he was buried hilt deep inside her? He bit back a groan at the imagery.

And he'd felt it. The Ryan click. It totally spun him for a loop. He'd truly believed it was a myth. One of those family legends passed down through generations with no truth behind it. And while his cousins proclaimed they felt the click with their wives and husband, he'd simply chalked it up to hormones and the honeymoon period in a relationship.

Josh left the short hallway and found a seat at the bar. It was one of the last remaining seats in the entire club. He ordered a beer.

And while he waited for her act—because he wasn't leaving tonight until she did to ensure that creep didn't try anything else—he mentally went through the reasons he was crazy for thinking he'd felt the click.

One. Lexi was far too young for him. She was only twenty-three. A babe in the woods yet, still finding her way in life. He was thirty-seven and rather set in his ways. There was a fourteen-year age gap between them. What could they possibly have in common?

Two. He wasn't sure he liked her. She was ornery and difficult. She fought him at every turn. She drove him nuts with her refusal. But did she drive him crazy because of the tsunami of heat simmering beneath the surface?

Three. She didn't like him. Barring that kiss, which he considered totally out of the ordinary for her, she wasn't going to give him an inch of common ground. But there had been a moment, a few seconds at most, when the kiss ended and he'd spied an aching vulnerability and tender heart. How many people had broken it or had been careless with it to make her so guarded?

Four. That fucking kiss curled his bloody toes. Her curvy body had felt right against him. And he'd wanted to haul her out to his car and take her home, where he could spend the rest of the night worshipping her sweet curves until they were both physically spent.

Wait. He should stating his list of reasons he hadn't felt the click. And why it was a bad idea to pursue anything with her. Not trying to sway himself to pursue a relationship with her.

What the bloody hell had been in her kiss?

Because he didn't sodding do commitment. He'd tried it once and been burned to a bloody crisp in the offing. It was an experience that didn't bear repeating.

But that didn't mean he didn't want her. Because feckin' shite, he wanted her. That kiss had ignited a craving in him. And now he had all manner of wicked fantasies he wanted to enact on her curvaceous form.

By the time Lexi and her band, The Celestials, hit the stage, he had convinced himself he hadn't felt the Ryan click.

Yet he wasn't prepared to watch her rocking out up on stage. The woman was a natural, like she had been born to it.

She had this electrifying presence on stage. It was one he recognized. Because it was an innate quality that meant the difference between someone who was a singer and someone who was a superstar. Or at least someone who was bound for superstardom because they dominated the stage. Her energy spilled over into the crowd as much as the music did.

Josh barely sipped his beer. Far too entranced by the vision she created on stage to do more than stare damn near slack-jawed. She was beyond talented with the voice of a bloody angel. And he wasn't the only one. Every man in the club, and a few of the women too, were all imagining what it would be like to be with her as she commanded their attention.

He had a million questions for her. Starting with why she was playing in such a dump. She should be playing in better clubs. They should be playing sold-out stadiums. Her voice should be crooning through his stereo and on the radio.

He whipped his phone out and texted Gabe.

Josh: *I need you to hire Lexi's band to play at Eternal Eros.*

Gabe: *She's banned from the club for a month. Well, three weeks now. Or do you not remember?*

Josh: *I remember. But will you?*

Gabe: *Sophia is in charge of all club events.*

Josh: *Ask her as a favor to me. Her band The Celestials is damn good. And they would be a crowd pleaser.*

Gabe: *Why the change of heart?*

How to answer and not sound like a total wanker. He considered his response before he typed it.

Josh: *Because her band is playing at the Jukebox. And while she might have offended me, I don't want anything bad to happen to her. And the manager here is a douchebag. He had her cornered against the wall and would have done something to her if I hadn't come along.*

Gabe: *I see your point. I'll talk to Sophia and have her contact Lexi to set it up. Wait, you're there? At the Jukebox? And you're watching Lexi's band?*

Shite! He stepped right into that one, hadn't he? His cousin would never let him hear the end of it. And he wasn't in the position to go into it tonight. Not with what happened with the whole click deal.

Josh: *My battery is almost dead. Talk later.*

He lied. And then switched his phone off. He didn't want to answer his cousin. Mainly because the bloody bastard was damn near always right. And he liked to meddle in people's lives. Especially when it came to the family.

He would deny it, of course.

But Josh couldn't answer the question of why he decided to come here. Especially when Lexi was right. He wasn't her boyfriend or her Dom. He had no reason to look out for her.

Except, after witnessing the way the owner of this joint manhandled her, now he had every reason. They might not be a couple. But he wouldn't allow her to be harmed by that fecker—or anyone, for that matter.

It's why he stayed through the end of their set. And it's why he stayed until they broke down their equipment and the bartenders announced last call.

And it's why he found himself in the hall by the band entrance, waiting for her to emerge from what served as the dressing room in this hovel.

“What are you still doing here?”

“Driving you home.”

“What? No. I have a ride.”

Visions of her with the club owner swam in his mind, and her protest fell on deaf ears. “You're riding with me. Don't argue. I'm not above tossing you over my shoulder and carrying you to my car. In a neighborhood like this, no one will say boo about it.”

Lexi grimaced as she studied him warily before she rolled her eyes, clearly exasperated. But she also didn't fight him. She called to someone named Cliff in the room she'd just exited and shouted that she had a ride home.

She held her guitar case. He reached for it, but she clutched it against her chest defensively. He lifted his hands, trying to impart he meant her and her guitar no harm. But he wouldn't fight her over the guitar, not when she acted like it was her baby. With good reason, because she was a phenomenal player.

He pressed his palm against her back, steering her out of the club and over to his Mercedes parked out front. And he liked touching her, liked what the implications of his hand on

her meant—that she belonged to him. The men they passed as they exited, looked at him like he was a lucky bastard.

And he was, because he'd begun to suspect that she was a hidden gem just waiting for the right Dom to unleash her. A Dom to whom she granted her submission willingly, kneeling not because she was forced but because she wanted to.

The thought of that Dom being him left him dizzy with pulse-pounding desire.

Bloody hell, he wanted her.

It took all the powers of his control to keep his hands to himself. She stored the guitar in the back before sliding into the front passenger seat. Once she was inside, Josh climbed behind the wheel and had them on Interstate 25 in minutes.

“You know this whole overbearing, protective Dom thing? While it's cute, I don't need it.”

“You do. You're just being ornery because it's me.” And he didn't like that she thought he was nothing more than a player. Aye, he had played the field at the club. But he never made the subs he scened with promises he had no intention of keeping. Yet in her eyes, he was no different.

And it left him taking a hard look at himself. But he didn't want to think about it. “Your band's amazing. Why aren't you playing other venues?”

“We have a few other bars we play at, but the music business isn't easy. We count ourselves fortunate that we have paying gigs.”

“You should talk to Gabe and Sophia about playing Eternal Eros.”

“Like Gabe would ever let me play the club.” She scoffed at his suggestion.

“You never know. He just might, if you asked.” And had some help. But she fought for independence like someone who had existed without anyone helping her. What would it take to make her bend?

“Maybe,” she murmured and glanced out the window as he exited off the highway in Thornton.

They drove the remaining distance to her house in silence. Although it wasn't really her house. “How long have you lived at your sister's house?”

“Two lovely years.” She sighed as if it were her cross to bear.

Her response set off alarm bells. “Do you like living with her? Do you guys get along?”

She shrugged. “As well as I do with anybody.”

Her dejected tone struck him. He pulled into the driveway and put his car in park. He shifted in her direction.

“Why did you kiss me?” God, he sounded like such a girl.

She glanced his way and rolled her eyes. “And there it is. I wondered when you were going to bring that up. I don't know why I did it. It seemed right at the time. But then I remembered what a manwhore you are at the club.”

He winced internally. Was that how the subs at Eros thought of him? As a manwhore? His mum would be vastly disappointed in him. Hell, he wasn't too proud of himself either. But he had gone the commitment route, and look where that had landed him.

Divorced before he was thirty, with his heart and dreams sliced to ribbons under his ex-wife's stiletto.

But it smacked of cowardice. It was time he put a stop to it. Because he wasn't getting any younger. And she'd sparked needs in him that had been dormant for years. Perhaps it was time for a different approach. One that ended with Lexi in his bed.

His dick jolted at the thought. Randy moron.

He leaned across the console, pushing his way into her space. "You know what I think?"

"No, but I'm sure you're about to tell me." Her bravado was cute. But he spied the wild thumping pulse at the base of her neck. And noticed the way she licked her lips and her breathing had sped up. All signs she wanted him too.

He leaned even closer, crowding her in the seat. "I think you want me. But it pisses you off. And I think you did it because you wanted to."

A seductive combination of anger and heat flashed in her eyes. "You're delusional."

"Am I?" He cupped her chin, marveling at her soft skin. "Then stop me."

But Josh didn't give her a chance to refuse. He crushed her lips. Claimed them. Took them in a heated exchange that fired every one of his cylinders.

And there it was again. That internal snap. As if his world had finally righted itself after being in a freefall for years.

She tasted like long-lost hopes and dreams. And fuck, but he wanted her. He wanted her on her knees, submitting to his dominance. He wanted her to beg him to fuck her.

He wanted her in a way he'd not wanted another woman. Ever.

Not even his ex-wife had held her same appeal.

It didn't matter that there were fourteen years separating them. It didn't matter that he avoided commitment at all costs.

Lexi was different. Because she was meant to be his. And not simply for a night at the Eros Pit, but forever.

Lexi wrapped her arms around his neck. Her sweet sighs went straight to his dick. But he wasn't going to take her tonight. No, she needed to be seduced.

He broke the kiss but didn't release her right away. He waited for her to lift her gaze. Bolts of pleasure shot through him at the hazy expression on her face. "See. You do want me. And I get your hesitancy."

"Ack! You're so full of yourself. Yes, I kissed you, and you kissed me. But this is where it ends." She pressed against him to release her.

He stroked his knuckle gently down her cheek, loving the sound of her indrawn gasp. “No, this is where we begin, Lexi. You will be mine.”

“And then what? You’ll move on to the next sub at Eros. Thanks, but no.” She shoved her door open and scurried to her front door.

He let her go. She would need time to adjust. Because she was the woman meant for him. And while he’d never ascribed himself as a believer in fate. He couldn’t deny he’d felt the click. Both times.

In his rearview mirror, he caught sight of her guitar case and grinned. She’d come see him. And then he was going to charm her into his bed and his life.

And if he felt a little underhanded over his methods, he ignored it. Because he wanted her. And he always got what he wanted.

*B*y mid-week, the events of the past weekend were little more than a memory. One she couldn't seem to erase from her mind or stop thinking about.

It was still dark out when she let herself in through the front door of the Java Hut. It was blisteringly cold out, with temps not expected to rise about ten degrees Fahrenheit. She would have far preferred to stay snuggled in bed rather than leave it and serve other people coffee. And yet, here she was, slogging through because she needed the cash.

She relocked the front door and headed into the back to store her coat and purse in her locker, where she retrieved her apron.

“Morning, Lexi.” Dillon, the manager of the Java Hut, poked his head out of the office with a grin.

“Morning.” Dillon was nice as far as managers went. He was in his forties with a wife and two kids. His salt and pepper hair always looked disheveled, like he ran his hands through it constantly.

“I haven’t had a chance to get the front stocked and ready yet. I’m still working on payroll. Can you get that done by yourself? If not, I can pause what I’m doing.”

“I got it. And since I happen to think you’re not a horrible boss, I’ll even bring you a cup of coffee before I open the front door,” she replied candidly.

“You’re a peach. Shelly should be in by seven. If you need help before then, just holler, and I’ll come assist.”

“No problem.” She finished fastening her apron and headed out to the front.

She got a regular and decaf pot of coffee brewing before switching on the espresso machines and filling the grinders with fresh beans. Then she removed the pastries from the fridge and stocked the case, making sure to display all the offerings in a pleasing manner like she’d been taught.

They offered breakfast sandwiches too. But if a customer ordered one of those, all she had to do was remove it from the fridge and pop it into the toaster oven that cooked it in under a minute.

Then she double-checked that all the booths and tables were wiped clean. There weren’t many, so they filled up fast even though most people just stopped to pick up their morning jolt to go.

Once she ensured everything was stocked and ready for the morning barrage of customers, she poured her boss a cup of regular coffee. She added cream and two sugars, then took it back to his office.

“Bless you.” He blinked at her and took the coffee with a smile.

“I’m opening us up.”

“Grab me if you get swamped and need assistance.”

“Will do.” Lexi headed back out front, made herself a mocha latte, her favorite, and enjoyed the first few sips in blessed solitude before she checked the time. She sighed. Time to get this show on the road.

She unlocked the front door and spied two cars pulling into the parking lot.

So it began.

She liked her job. It wasn’t necessarily difficult, other than the customers who believed they were god’s gift. And it wasn’t all the customers who acted that way, just a select few who always made her question her life choices.

Because there were customers who were sweet as pecan pie. And then there were others, who she believed had never worked a customer service job in their life, who made her question whether humanity was really worth saving.

It was one of those idiosyncrasies of working with the general public.

She would never understand the entitlement of some of these people. Like they believed they were better than everyone else and the world should bow down and be at their beck and call.

Please. They needed to get over themselves.

And she hated herself for thinking it, but she wondered which category Josh fell into. Most likely the former and not the latter. But it burned her butt that she was even thinking of him.

But in a blink, she had a line of customers almost to the door. It was the early morning pre-work rush, and everyone needed their java jolt. She knew she did. Mornings were always their busiest. And she liked it that way. It made the morning speed by until lunchtime, and they were getting the lunch rush.

It was at the tail end of the lunch rush that she noticed a familiar face standing in line.

What the hell was he doing here?

She ignored him in his three-piece, dark charcoal suit with his black-and-white striped tie. And the little flutter in her abdomen that recognized what a sexy beast he was and how much she'd love to find out what he was hiding underneath.

Shit. She wasn't attracted to him. She wouldn't allow herself to have the hots for him.

And even if she did think he was handsome, it was only because the Ryan clan had hit the gene pool lottery. They were all gorgeous. Although Josh stood out from the crowd.

But she ignored the way his presence made her feel as if she'd plugged herself into a bolt of lightning. Because if she surrendered to the feelings he created inside her, she'd wind up kneeling at his feet and begging for his dominance.

And she couldn't allow herself to go there, no matter what he made her feel.

Instead, Lexi focused on each customer and their drink order. She hated that she was the one at the counter taking the orders and not the one making drinks. They tended to switch back and forth throughout the day. That way no one got stuck behind the hated register all day.

“Lexi.” His cultured Irish lilt played hell on her sensibilities.

She had no idea why, but when he said her name or really opened his mouth to speak, her body dissolved into a puddle at his overly large feet.

Pasting a smile on her face, she lifted her gaze. “Welcome to the Java Hut. What can I get you?”

“We need to talk.” He didn't order anything. Just pierced her with his sizzling black gaze that lit her up inside like a damn Christmas tree.

She kept the smile frozen on her face as she responded. “I can't right now. I'm working. If that's all you're here for, then it's best if you leave.”

“When's your lunch break?”

“I already had it.” One of the perks of reporting to work at five in the morning was having lunch at ten in the morning. And most days she didn't care one way or the other. But today, she was thrilled she'd already had her break.

He frowned and checked his watch. “Look, we need to talk.”

“Josh, this line is for customers. If you’re not planning to order anything, I’m going to have to ask you to step aside so I can help the next customer in line.”

He gritted his teeth and narrowed his eyes. “Fine. I’ll have a large cup of coffee and one of the chocolate chip scones.”

She entered his order into the register. “That will be ten twenty-six.”

Josh handed her a twenty. She counted out his change and handed it over, then grabbed his scone and handed it to him. “Your coffee will be ready at the pickup window.” She nodded toward the station they used for finished drinks.

“We still need to talk.”

“Not when I’m working, we don’t.” She was already looking past his shoulder, or trying, but the guy was at least six feet, his broad shoulders blocking them out.

“Give me your number.”

“No.” Was he insane? Why would he think she would ever give him her phone number? She reserved that for people she liked.

Josh shrugged nonchalantly. “I guess you don’t want your guitar back.”

She narrowed her eyes. It was a dirty play, and they both knew it. If she didn’t need her guitar back, she’d tell him to get lost. But they had a gig Friday night. With a frustrated huff, she held out her hand. “Phone.”

He said nothing as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and entered the code to unlock it. Lexi typed her number in. Saved it. Handed the phone back to him.

“I have a gig Friday night.”

“I’ll call ya.” He winked and then left the register and picked up his coffee before he headed out the door without a backward glance.

She turned to the customer who had been behind him and pretended like she hadn’t just given her number to the enemy.

Only her body didn’t think he was the enemy. Oh no, her body fucking purred when he was within striking distance. It loved his cocky swagger and Irish lilt and the tiny bits of silver threaded into the hair at his temples.

When her phone buzzed in her pocket with an incoming text, she grimaced. Because she knew who it was, most likely.

Her parents didn’t contact her because they were pissed that she had left school and was no longer being a good little drone for them. They’d basically disowned her until she fell back in line.

Her sister only texted if she needed something or to see if she could pick up dinner.

Her bandmates were all at work, and none of them ever texted her during the day unless it was an emergency.

Which left only one person—Josh. The man who had swiftly become the bane of her existence.

The moment she was free, she pulled her phone out.

Josh: *Just checking to make sure this really is your number.*

Lexi: *Middle finger emoji.*

What the hell was his game? Because there was no way he was interested in her. Perhaps it was some type of freak outreach program with the club.

Because Josh Ryan being romantically interested in her, she was certain, was one of the signs of the apocalypse.

*B*y Friday Josh was damn near coming out of his skin.

The ornery woman was avoiding his messages. He spent his week replaying the events of the previous weekend. How long would she wait before she responded about meeting up so he could give her the guitar?

Maybe she had another guitar she could use and was simply being difficult. He wouldn't put it past her. Not when she was avoiding him on purpose.

The woman was giving him a bloody complex. First with her refusal to scene with him, and now this.

After their first kiss, he'd tried to write off that he'd felt the Ryan click. But with their second kiss in his Mercedes, he knew he'd felt it. There was no other logical explanation for the way the world slowed and how everything in life, all the losses and defeats, all the triumphs, finally made sense. Because they had all been directing him down the path to *her*.

Even his failed marriage had led him to this point. And it left him trying to figure out the best strategy for moving forward. Because with Lexi, none of his normal candor or seductive moves had worked.

And then he told himself he was crazy. Lexi wasn't the woman for him. She'd simply thrown him off his game when she rejected him.

Hey, it happened. Guys got rejected all the time.

He tried bargaining with himself. Promising himself that he would head to the club this weekend and find whatever submissive he could to satiate the longing she had stirred up inside him and fuck it out of his system. Because he couldn't possibly have felt the Ryan click with a woman fourteen years younger.

Except he had.

And the longer he went with Lexi ignoring his texts, the more doubt crept in. He didn't want to want her. He didn't want to have experienced the Ryan click with her. She didn't have any type of career. She lived in her sister's house.

And yeah, it was snobbish of him, but so be it.

But their second kiss had put the first one to shame. And he'd jacked off to fantasies involving her every night this week.

"Something bothering you?" Jase asked him.

Josh's head whipped up from the paperwork they'd been reviewing. He enjoyed working with his cousin, Jase. He was a fucking brilliant businessman. He and his sister Emilia shared CEO duties. And he and Jase looked like they could be brothers and not just cousins, but the Ryan blood ran strong through their veins.

And maybe Jase would have an idea about what he should do about Lexi. Because he couldn't get her or their kisses out of his mind. "The Ryan click. What does it feel like exactly?"

Jase leaned back in his seat with an arched brow. His black hair was trimmed and expertly styled. His suit jacket hung on the back of his chair. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and his tie was loosened. "Any reason you want to know about the Ryan click? Did you feel it with a sub at Eros?"

Bloody hell! Jase was too smart for his own good. Of course he would realize he was asking because something had happened with a woman that had rattled his foundation. "Just answer the question, asshole."

Jase chuckled, and a shit-eating grin appeared. "What does the Ryan click feel like? It's as if the world suddenly stops, and everything in your life finally makes perfect sense. Because everything that happened in your life has led you to this point—to her—and you know your life will never be the same. And it's like your life just clicks into place now that she's there."

He had just described in perfect detail the exact emotions swirling in him during each lip-lock with Lexi. But he had to be certain. It was too important, and he didn't want to mess this up. "And that's what you felt for Rose?"

Rose was Jase's wife and the mother of his child. They'd met, had a torrid night together, and he'd knocked her up. It took some finagling on both their parts, but they married over a year ago, and Jase had never appeared so happy.

“Yep. The first time I kissed her.” Jase grinned with a far-off look in his eyes, like he was taking a trip down memory lane and recalling his first kiss with his wife.

The first time. Yep. He knew exactly what that was like. Because the moment Lexi put her lips against his, the world screeched to a grinding halt. And that had never happened with another woman. “Okay. Thanks.”

“And who have you been kissing that you think you felt the click with, hmmm?” Jase asked with a wry grin.

If he told him, the rest of the family would know before nightfall. And he didn’t want the news reaching Lexi. She was already difficult enough. And it was going to take him waging a full-out seduction campaign to get her to change her mind about him. The last thing he needed was his family meddling in his affairs. As well-meaning as they might be. “I’d rather not talk about it until I’m sure.”

Although he was, damn it all. It had felt like choirs of angels had sung the hallelujah chorus when they fecking kissed. Time had stood still. And a desire to cherish and protect her had grabbed him by the bloody throat and had yet to relent. But it was because deep down, he knew she was his and they were meant for one another. It was simply a matter of convincing her of that fact.

“Careful that you don’t try talking yourself out of it. I know I did for a time, much to my profound regret. When I think of the time Rose and I lost because I couldn’t extract my head from my ass, it drives me insane. And I’m gonna make a suggestion that will save you a lot of heartache and time. Stop

kidding yourself. Because if you felt even half of what I described or something similar to it, you felt the Ryan click. Don't try fighting your emotions. Although I'm sure you feel a bit scrambled. I know I did when Rose and I were just beginning. But I'm here to tell you that once you feel the click, your fate is sealed. Because no one but her will suffice."

That's what he was bloody afraid of. He grimaced. "Thanks for that."

"I didn't say it is going to be easy. So, who is she? Someone from the club?"

"We should get back to the acquisition. We have a lot of ground to cover—"

Jase tossed his head back and issued a booming laugh.

The fecker.

"I'm going to enjoy watching you squirm, cousin," he said with a mile-wide grin.

"And I'm sorry I asked." But not really, because he'd given him the clarity he'd so desperately needed. He wasn't crazy. He had felt the click with Lexi. A woman who had rejected and sneered at his every attempt to interact with her.

"Can we get this done? I've got a meeting with my team in thirty."

And the sooner they were finished, the sooner he could look up her band's website and find out where they were playing tomorrow night. Because he was done waiting for her to stop being a brat.

What she needed was a firm hand to guide her. And he would be the Dom to do it.

No, this is where we begin, Lexi.

Gah!

Why had he put that into her head? It had played on a recorded loop all damn week. And then there was his little stunt the other day, showing up at her work and conning her into getting her phone number.

The man had sent her a few texts over the last forty-eight hours. Things like: *Call me. We need to talk. You're acting like a spoiled brat in need of a spanking.*

And it was so fucking wrong, but she couldn't help imagining that big hand of his whacking her butt with the memory of the one swat he had landed at the singles night fresh in her mind. Lexi had masturbated to the fantasy.

And it made her feel like a total headcase.

On the one hand, the little devil on her shoulder told her she should just do it. Then he would swagger back to the club and leave her alone. Because he couldn't possibly be interested in anything other than getting in her pants.

But on the other, the guardian angel on her other shoulder told her to avoid him. She had a music career that needed all her energy to succeed. And she shouldn't invite another player into her life simply because his attention felt like warm sunlight on her face. Or because his kiss melted her brain.

And yet, for the past two days, she caught herself staring off into space, thinking about him and grinning. She was talking full-on cheesy smile like she won the lottery. However, there wasn't much else for her to think about while she was making lattes and pouring coffee. It was the only explanation she could come up with that didn't freak her out for why she kept thinking about him.

She didn't even like him. He was overbearing, cocky, and far too damn sexy for his own good.

But she had to lower herself and text him back. He had her guitar. She'd been so frazzled after the kiss with his possessive comment that she'd climbed out of his car without thinking about it.

If she could afford to buy a new guitar, she would if it meant not seeing him again. She didn't understand his sudden interest. Why would he kiss her and tell her they weren't done?

Lexi battled against the part of herself that wanted to see him again. The man kissed her with a salacious devotion that was utterly devastating. She'd never had a man kiss her and leave her wanting more.

She wiped down the counters. The lunch rush was over, and she only had an hour left on her shift. She had to decide

what to do about the guitar. Cliff had an extra guitar she could use at their gig tonight.

But it wasn't *her* guitar.

Instruments were personal, like a bra. A musician had to find the one that fit them, not the other way around. And she adored her guitar. It was an extension of herself on stage. And she missed it terribly. She didn't want to play tonight without it. Which meant she had to buck up and use her buddy's extra guitar, or she had to respond to Josh.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Think of the devil, and he texted. She saved his number under the name *Mister Stick Up His Ass*.

They weren't supposed to have their phones on them while they worked, but given the state of the world, she wouldn't go without it. And Dillon was cool about it. She grabbed the phone from her pocket.

Josh: *We need to meet up. I've got your guitar. And I know you're playing tonight.*

Lexi: *I was wondering if I was going to hear from you. Where can we meet up?*

Josh: *Are you playing at the Jukebox tonight?*

Lexi: *Yes. We go on at ten.*

Why the hell did she tell him that? Did she want to see him at the show? Of course she didn't. It's preposterous to even think that way. But a part of her did. A part of her wanted to see if they still had this live-wire connection.

Josh: *What time are you planning to arrive?*

Lexi: *Eight-thirty.*

Josh: *I'll meet you there.*

Lexi: *Fine.*

What more could she say? She slid her phone in her back pocket when she felt someone at the counter, then turned on a smile even with the trepidation swirling through her. She wanted to see him again, but she didn't. She was so confused.

He was a player. And yet, he had taken an interest in her with his whole *we're not done yet* blather. What did he even mean by it?

That phrase had kept her tossing and turning all week long. She'd never had a man, Dom or otherwise, make a statement even remotely close to it.

By the time she arrived home after her shift and was getting herself ready for the show that night, she was no closer to an answer.

Although an insidious thought had crept in. Was his interest purely because she turned him down? And now he was on some mission to get in her pants and then drop her like a hot potato?

She didn't want to even consider that potential angle, but the doubt had taken up residence and was battling it out for dominance. Lexi didn't trust his interest.

All her life, she'd been disregarded and mistreated by those closest to her. Between her parents' disapproval, snide

comments from her sister, and Gabe's disappointment with her, she was batting a thousand in the wrong direction.

What would make her think that Josh, a hot, older, cultured man, would be interested in her of all people? They were total opposites. She wondered if it was some sort of freak outreach program being enacted by the Doms at the Eros Pit.

Had Gabe put him up to it? Or was it just Josh because he felt slighted by her refusal to scene with him?

She didn't know. And therein lay the problem. She hated not knowing the motives behind his interest. It was easier if she understood the players in her life and what they wanted from her.

She felt him before she saw him. She was hooking up her microphone when she felt a presence behind her that ignited sparks along her spine. And then morphed into a whispered caress that burned.

On edge, she turned and found him standing in front of the stage, holding her guitar case. Jesus, he looked good, sexier than he had a right to. Tonight, he wore jeans, a soft navy blue cable-knit sweater, and a black leather jacket. Not a single hair was out of place.

And she didn't know why, but she wanted to ruffle him. See how far she could push him before he snapped. Would he go all dominant on her? Or would he run?

There was only one way to find out.

She jerked her head toward the side of the stage, then headed down the stairs. And he was there.

All big, growly Irish Dom. There was a part of her that was tempted to say to hell with it and have a night with him.

She reached for her guitar. “Thanks for bringing—”

“Nice try, lass, but not so fast.”

Plunking her hands on her hips, she glared. “Are you kidding me?”

“Nope. We both know if I hand this over, you will do everything in your power to head out of here without talking to me. And we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Stuff I’m sure you don’t want other people to hear.”

“Like?”

He stepped closer with an arched brow. “You sure you want to do this now?” His eyes trailed over her with an incendiary heat that left her wanting to fan her face. Not that she would give him the satisfaction.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you. I need to know what your hard limits are.”

“You don’t need to know those.” She shot a glance around, but no one was paying them any heed. And the club was busy enough that their conversation wouldn’t be overheard.

He tucked a lock of her hair behind her ear with his free hand. The intensity in his eyes left her unsettled and feeling like she was under a microscope. “Yes, I do. That way when I take you to bed, I’ll know what limits not to cross. It’s for your own good, lass.”

“When you . . . we aren’t going to bed together.”

“Yes, we are. It’s inevitable.”

“And you’re full of yourself. That you would think I’ve had a change of heart in the past two weeks.”

“Lest you forget, you’re the one who kissed me first. You opened the door. I’m just walking through it.”

A slow, seductive grin spread over his face, and her panties went damp. “You’re still going on about that kiss. Are you that hard up?”

His smile grew even wider. “You’re scared. I’ll be. I never thought I would see you back down from anything. Or is all your bravado just an act?”

Of course it was an act, most of the time. But she did her best not to allow fear to control her actions. When she dropped out of college, she promised herself she would spit in the eye of fear and do it anyway.

“I’m not afraid of you,” she protested, but even to her ears, it sounded weak.

“Oh, I think you are. But that’s all right, lass. I’m a bit terrified too.”

“You don’t even like me.”

“On the contrary. I find you fascinating. If I hand this over, I want your word that you will stick around, and we can talk after your show.”

She assessed him as a naughty idea wriggled into her brain. Fighting back a smile, she reached inside her pocket and

withdrew the edible Robbie had given her. “I’ll stick around, and we can talk after my set. But you’ve got to eat a piece of this for me.”

He didn’t argue with her. He grabbed the square of chocolate and popped it into his mouth. After he swallowed, he said, “Done. I’ll see you after your set.”

“Dude. You weren’t supposed to eat the whole thing. That has fifty milligrams of pot in it,” she exclaimed, her eyes wide.

“You gave me drugs?” he snapped, looking perilously close to dragging her out of the club. His hands clenched into fists.

Oh crap, she had given him pot because she thought it would be funny. And in her mind, she figured he would ask her what was in it and refuse when she told him. Problem solved on her end. But he’d done what she asked without question. It made her responsible for him until he came down from his high.

Shit and double damn. “Have you ever done pot?”

“No.”

Oh boy. This could be bad. Why hadn’t she thought this through more? “Okay, sit at the bar. I will find you when I’m done. And then I’ll make sure you get home all right. I swear I won’t leave you.”

“Good enough.” He handed over the guitar and leaned in to murmur next to her ear. “And for giving me drugs, I’m going to tan your fucking ass. I won’t do it while I’m under

the influence. But you've earned yourself one hell of a spanking. Understood?"

Because she felt horrible, she lowered her gaze and whispered, "Yes, Sir."

And then she backed away with her guitar. What had she done? The look in his eyes promised erotic delights and dark discipline. It awoke needs inside her that had never been satiated, that no amount of fantasizing about managed to appease.

Lexi marched up on stage, keeping an eye on Josh while she hooked up her guitar and made sure that it was in tune.

He found a spot at the bar nearest to the stage. Which was good. It meant it would be easier for her to watch him. But it also meant she would feel his eyes on her while she was playing.

As a musician, she was used to being the center of attention, to having a crowded room focus on her. But having Josh's hot gaze on her was another matter. Her entire body felt energized. Heat raced through her veins. And she wondered if spontaneous combustion really was a thing.

Because if she was being totally honest with herself. She did want him. Bad.

B ugger it! The little brat gave him pot.

How had he not seen this coming? Oh, maybe because he'd never had a submissive give him drugs before without his knowledge or consent. How was he supposed to react? The chocolate had tasted funny, but he'd eaten it anyway because he wanted her to agree to speak with him after she was done tonight.

Fuck!

He prayed he didn't have a bad trip and kept his shite together. He didn't feel anything yet. But while he watched her, he looked up the effects of edibles with the amount he'd imbibed.

And shite, it looked like his car was staying there tonight. He wasn't going to be able to drive it. Unless he had her drive his car. The idea had merit. He would rather have her drive his car than leave it here overnight. There was no telling what would happen if he was dumb enough to leave it here.

And the side benefit would get her to his place.

The Celestials took the stage in an array of light and sound. And he was struck again by Lexi's presence on stage. She owned it. Looked like she had been born to be up on stage, performing in front of people. And he wanted to make it happen for her.

But it also meant she wouldn't be in Denver forever.

Because a band had to tour. A band had to play. And there was a part of him that wanted to be selfish. He'd just found the woman fate had ascribed to him. The last thing he wanted to do was send her on the road away from him.

Then again, he wasn't even sure he liked her—but he fucking wanted her more than he had another woman in a long time. And it was because of those two kisses.

Because they'd lit his soul on fire.

He ordered a soda instead of his customary beer. Since he'd never gotten high before, the last thing he would do was mix the two.

Their set started off with a bang. And he found himself enraptured. Lexi owned the crowd with her stunning voice, her ability to jam on her guitar, and the way her body moved on stage.

He'd never seen a more beautiful woman. She came alive on stage.

As the night progressed, he found himself grinning ear to ear. He even joined the crowd, dancing around like it was his last night on Earth and he wanted to make it amazing.

That was his first hint that he was high.

The second came when he was dancing around, and he noticed his entire body had gone loose. But he couldn't take his eyes off her. So, he stood amid the dancing, writhing crowd, wondering how soon he'd be able to get her into his bed.



Throughout the set, Lexi kept a close watch on Josh. And she felt awful. The guy was tripping balls in the audience. Anyone who looked at him could tell he was high.

After the last song, when their set was over, she asked the guys. "Hey, do you mind if I skip out on breakdown? I need to go look after my friend."

Robbie asked with a smirk, "Is he the reason you've been in a funk lately?"

"I haven't been in a funk."

Her bandmates stared with expectant looks that called her ten times a fool for denying it. She tossed her hands up in the air. "Fine. He's the reason I've been so crazy. Happy now. Can I go take care of him, or do you need me to help with teardown?"

They glanced at each other with cheesy grins.

"Isn't he a little old for you?" Nate asked, scratching his chin.

"Never knew you had a daddy fetish." Robbie chuckled.

“Me-ow, he’s a hottie. Are you sure he doesn’t play for the other team? I could use a sugar daddy.” Cliff asked, his gaze roving over Josh with blatant interest.

“First, age is just a number, and if it’s right, it doesn’t mean a lick of difference. I don’t have a daddy fetish. And I’m one hundred percent sure that man is grade A hetero. And even if he wasn’t, I wouldn’t share him with you.” She sucked in a ragged breath, amazed with herself for staking her claim that way, and watched her bandmates’ brows rise.

“Go on. We got this.” Cliff waved her off with nods from Robbie and Nate. Fuckers were grinning ear to ear.

“Thank you.” She stored her guitar in its case, then carried it down the stairs and went searching for Josh.

She didn’t have to go far. He stood by the stage, hands shoved into his pockets, with a dopey grin on his face that did wonders for him. He was a gorgeous man. When he smiled like that, warmth beaming out of him brighter than the sun, her ovaries made kissy noises at him.

And it left her wondering, had she been too quick to dismiss him at the club that night?

Lexi had issues with men because of Travis. He hadn’t been remotely faithful. And when she’d called him on it, he had acted like it was her fault. Because she would rather practice with her band than go out with him.

But she would never be the stay-at-home girlfriend who waited by the phone for her beau to call. She was out making things happen. Music was what made her get out of bed in the

morning. It's what drove her. And she yearned for the band to hit it big. They had the talent and the drive to succeed in the music industry.

“Hey, lass, has anyone ever told you that you're fecking sexy up on that stage? And that every man here was imagining what you'd be like in bed. Me included.”

Heat curled in her belly at his admission. It wasn't fair that he was high and she wasn't. It gave her an unfair advantage over him. Cause if she really wanted to mess with him in this state, she could.

But she wasn't going to, because she felt bad enough about getting him high. “Why don't I get you home?”

“And then we'll talk. You promised.” His Irish lilt was thicker than normal. And she had to lean in and listen closely to what he said.

“I did. And I'll keep my promise. Did you drive?”

“Yep. Me Mercedes is in the parking lot. Bugger it. I don't want to leave it here, though, in a neighborhood such as this.”

“Give me the keys. I'll drive you home.” It was the least she could do.

He grumbled but drew the keys out of his pocket. “A sub giving me orders. Never thought I'd live to see the day.”

“It's only because you're a little high right now,” she explained, trying to be supportive without laughing at him. He was cute when he was grumpy too.

“And whose fault is that?”

“I take full responsibility. Come on.” She jerked her head toward the exit.

“Aye, I will, yeah. You can take me home. I’m not a total gobshite.”

She had no idea what a gobshite was, but she kept her smile to herself. Lexi steered him through the dwindling crowd toward the exit.

“Bollocks, I’m famished. Are you peckish? I think we should give it lash on the way home because I’ve got a mouth on me.”

“You’ve got a what on the what?” she asked as they stepped outside. “Where did you park?”

It was cold, and she didn’t have a coat. Mainly because she had nowhere to store it so that it wouldn’t get taken. She’d learned to put her license and cash in her pocket.

“We should get food.” He pointed at a black sedan. “That’s me there.”

She blew out her breath when she saw the Mercedes. His car cost more than she made in a year, but she kept the eye roll to herself as she helped him into the front passenger seat. After storing her guitar in the back seat, she carefully slid into the driver’s seat.

“Where are we headed?” she asked once she had adjusted the seat so her feet could reach the pedals. Josh had a good foot on her.

“Here.” He fumbled with the navigation system for a minute. “There. Just follow that, and it will get us to my

building.”

“You live downtown?”

“Aye, you’re an astute one. There’s no fooling you, is there?”

She drove out of the lot and followed the navigation system to the highway. “I get fooled plenty. I’m sorry about the pot.”

“S’kay. I had a grand aud time. But now it’s bloody late. I need to eat. You should eat too. You likely burn a hell of a lot of calories up on stage. Have you always wanted to be a musician?”

She liked him when he was high. All his pretenses dropped away, and he was sweet. “If you’re good while I drive, when I get you home, I’ll make you some fancy grilled cheese and then put you to bed.”

Josh scoffed. “I’m always good. But you didn’t answer me question.”

“Which one?” She grinned, enjoying the fact that all his defenses were down and he was being honest with her.

He rolled his eyes with a head shake. And then waved his hands. “Have you always known you wanted to play in a band and be up on stage?”

“It was something I always thought about from the time I was little,” she admitted. It was a dream she kept hidden under lock and key until she couldn’t any longer.

“That still didn’t answer my question.”

“How about a question for a question?” Because while his defenses were down, he wouldn’t lie. And she hated that she was curious about him, except she was. Because no guy had ever gone to the lengths he had to be near her.

He sighed as if it were a great imposition. “Fine. But you need to answer the one I’ve been asking first.”

“No. I haven’t always wanted to play in a band. When I was younger, I wanted to be an astronaut. Now you. Why are you really coming to see me?”

“Because I want you.”

Lust curled in her belly at his response. “That’s it?”

“Yep. And I always get what I want.” He looked at me like he wanted to pounce. “My turn. Why did you really turn me down that night?”

“I explained that to you. Because I don’t like players and manwhores.”

“Is that what that ex of yours was like? Did he cheat on ya and make you think all men are liars?”

“No. I already answered the question. It’s my turn. You want me, but just for a night or until someone else comes along.”

“Was there a question in there?”

“I was getting to that. What are your intentions?” she asked, exiting the highway.

“Tonight? Or overall?”

“Overall—with me.”

And the look he gave her almost made her crash his damn fancy car.

“My intentions are to keep you. But we need to see if we’re compatible first. And as far as tonight, I want to strip you down and—”

She covered his mouth with her hand because he made her want to jump his bones. But then she jerked it away. “Did you just lick my palm?”

“Yep. Because I wanted to. I’ve wanted to taste you for two damn weeks. And that wasn’t nearly enough. I want to feast on your pussy, lass. I’m betting your pussy is damn tasty.”

She cut him off, even as her pussy throbbed. “But why? Is it because I turned you down? Is that why you want me?”

“Mayhap at first. But it’s more than that, because I can’t get you out of my head. And ever since those kisses, I’ve jacked off thinking of every dirty, depraved thing I want to do to your hot little body.”

Whoa! He really wanted her. “Is that a fact?”

“It is. You want to hear one of them?”

“Not yet. I need you to tell me where to go from here.” She gestured to the parking garage entrance.

“Take the far right entrance there.” He pointed to the stall.

She drove on up. He leaned over and waved at the attendant, who opened the gate for them.

“Now drive down to the second level below ground. My parking space is ten fourteen.”

“Got it.” She drove the Mercedes down a level and located his parking spot. It was right by the elevator.

“It’s rather convenient that your space is next to the elevator.”

“I bargained for it. I’m quite good at it most of the time with anyone but you.” He sighed dejectedly.

“Is that why you’re so interested? Because I puzzle you,” she asked as they climbed out of the vehicle. She grabbed her guitar out of the back, figuring she would just take a cab or an Uber once she got him into bed.

“No. Well, slightly. I’ve not been turned down at the club once. You’ve given me a bit of a complex, lass, I’ll have you know.”

She grinned as he pressed the call button on the elevator. “That’s only because your ego was getting too big. Someone had to puncture your balloon eventually.”

They stepped into the elevator. This time of night, they rode it up alone. Josh crowded her against the back wall. Not touching her, just crowding her, in her space with his eyes as intense as she’d ever seen. He smelled amazing, with deep notes of sandalwood and amber. Not that she would tell him she found his cologne appealing.

“Aye. You hurt my ego. Does that make you happy?”

“No.” It didn’t. Her intent had never been to hurt him, only to protect herself from further heartbreak and disappointment.

“But you still didn’t answer me. Why did you turn me down?”

“Because I didn’t want to be another notch on your bedpost.”

He snorted. “I’d have to bring them home to add that notch now, wouldn’t I?”

“Don’t get pedantic. Whether it happened here or at the club is a rather moot point. Because the point was you’ve not been circumspect with women.”

“Yeah, but you want to know now if I’ve brought any women home with me, from the club or otherwise?”

She did. She hated herself for it, but god, did she ever want to know. Far too curious about him for her own good. “Yes.”

“You would be the first. My home is only for me and those I want in it.”

“But you’ve been coming to the club for almost two years now. Almost as long as I’ve been a member.”

“Aye, I have. But this is my home. I only allow the people I want inside.”

“Then I can drop you off at the door and get an Uber.”

“Nonsense. Besides, you promised me a grand grilled cheese. And I’m famished. I don’t remember when I’ve been this fecking hungry.” He tugged her off the elevator and down the hall to the door at the end.

It took him a minute to open the door. But then he hauled her inside, slamming the door shut and locking it before she

could say anything.

“Oh wow!” she exclaimed, walking toward the massive bank of windows.

“Ain’t it a beauty? It’s why I had to live here. It’s even better in the daylight.”

Josh was in the penthouse, because he’s a Ryan, and they have more money than god. And there were multiple stories with a west-facing wall in the living room that was all glass. It provided a clear view of the front range.

Even in the dead of night, they were spectacular. “It’s amazing. I can see why you love it so much.”

“I do. The kitchen is over here.” He left her near the window and trod toward a state-of-the-art kitchen.

She set her guitar by the sectional couch in cool gray with deep seats and then followed him into the kitchen. Her feet padded over hardwood floors. Now that she was fully in his space, she worried he might think she was here to go to bed with him. When that wasn’t the case at all.

Well, mostly.

And if he made a move, she didn’t know if she could resist him. Not with all the smiles and innuendos—and hell, she liked him.

She moved into his kitchen with its clean lines and huge kitchen island. The cabinetry and counters were all ivory, making the kitchen feel bright and warm. “Where are your pans, bread, butter, and cheese?”

The next few minutes were spent rifling through his kitchen. She found all the fixings for grilled cheese. She was sautéing up some onion for the grilled cheese when she asked. “So I’m the first woman you aren’t related to who has been here?”

“Yes.” He sat on one of the stools at the kitchen island and watched her work.

“Why? I don’t mean that in a bitchy way. But you’re an attractive man. Why would someone like you not have a woman up here?”

“Because I haven’t. For me, bringing a woman home signifies the start of a relationship. And none of the women I’ve met at the club, while lovely submissives, have made me want to bring them home.”

She glanced up from buttering the bread slices. “But I’m here now.”

“Aye.”

“Does that mean you want a relationship with me?” Her heart shivered at the implications. Did she want a relationship with him?

“It depends.”

“On?” she asked, too invested to back away from the conversation. It didn’t matter that he might still be high. He was being more honest than any man she’d dated, and it was a heady experience.

“Whether you’ll play something just for me.” He indicated her guitar with a side nod toward the couch.

“You want me to play for you.” It couldn’t be that simple.

“Private show. You show me yours, and I’ll show you mine.”

“We’re still talking about music.”

“There are many kinds, are there not? Lovemaking is just another form of music. The sighs and moans, the slaps of flesh, the grunts and groans. It’s still music, just of another flavor.”

He had her there.

She assembled the grilled cheeses, pondering his statement. There were two for him, considering he was twice her size, and she was betting the pot had made him extra hungry. And then one for her because it had been a long night, and he was right. After a show, she was always hungry.

“I’ll get us some drinks. What would you prefer?” he asked, sliding off his stool and heading toward the stainless steel fridge.

“Do you have any tea with lemon and honey?” She wanted to take care of her vocal cords.

“Aye, lass, that I can do.”

They moved around his kitchen like they had been doing it for years instead of it being the first time. She served up the grilled cheeses while the tea steeped. And they lit into the sandwiches with relish.

Josh didn’t speak again until he had devoured the first one. “That was bloody amazing. I never would have thought it

would taste good, but wow.”

“I know. It’s one of my favorites. Although at home, I usually add blackberry jam, not fig jam, but it really works.”

“So it’s white cheddar, goat cheese, sautéed onions, and fig jam?”

“Yep. I’m just glad you had all the ingredients on hand.”

“And if I hadn’t?”

“You would at least have had bread, butter, and some form of cheese. I would have made it work.” She shrugged.

“I’m sure you would have.” He demolished the second sandwich, slower than the first, but was no less enthusiastic about it.

When she finished her sandwich, she sat with her tea and realized she liked him. And not only in a *he’s hot and bangable* type of way. She liked him, liked him. And she didn’t know how to handle that newest bit of information.

“Are you going to play for me?”

She debated. “One song. And then it’s time to put you to bed.”

His eyes were already beginning to droop heavily. It was the pot. After the high, his body was shutting down, needing sleep more than anything else.

She rose from her spot and started putting dishes in the sink.

“Don’t worry about those. They can be taken care of later. I want to hear you play for me.”

“All right.” She did it because she still felt bad about getting him high without telling him before he ate that the chocolate was laced with THC.

He followed her into the living room. She took her guitar out of the case and sat on the edge of the couch. She tested the strings, ensuring they were each still in tune.

“This is a song we haven’t sung yet. I’m still playing with some of the lyrics. But this is Wake Me.”

She strummed the first chord and lifted her voice for the ballad.

Just wake me in the morning. Cause I don’t want to sleep without you here.

You’ve caught me in your trap. I’m locked up in you. Tied up in knots. Waiting for you to leave me.

So please just wake me in the morning. Cause I want to make sure this is real. And that I’m not dreaming.

Wake me in the morning.

And if you don’t, you will break what’s left of my heart.

Wake you like you need me. Wake me with a promise. That I never have to sleep alone again.

Just wake me in the morning.

She’d watched him the entire time. And it felt like they were the only two people on the planet. And that somehow this song was for him.

“Aye, lass, you’ve got a talent.”

“Thank you. Now I think we should get you to bed.” She stored her guitar back in its case, thinking she would tuck him into bed. And then get an Uber to take her home. Internally, she winced at spending the money on an Uber. But unless she wanted to stay here tonight, she didn’t have another option.

“Come with me.” He gripped her hand, leading her from the living room up a flight of stairs to his bedroom.

His massive bedroom had the same view as his living room. There was a platform king bed against the wall opposite the window, piled with pillows. On the other side of the room was a small sitting area with a gas fireplace. He had thick rugs spaced through the room, covering the hardwood floors.

“Doesn’t it bother you that anyone could see inside?”

“Nope. Watch.” He trod over to the bed and picked up a remote from the nightstand. He pressed a button. And from the ceiling, thick shades descended over the windows, sealing them inside like they were the only two people in the world.

“Nice. Why don’t you brush your teeth and get into bed?”

“Follow me.”

And because she worried he might harm himself in his inebriated state, she trailed after him. His bathroom was huge. It might even be bigger than the room she rented from her sister. There was a gorgeous tiled shower with multiple water spouts. And a tub she could practically swim in. He’d gone with more of the ivory theme in here too.

He handed her a spare toothbrush. And after the onions, she figured she had dragon breath. It wouldn’t hurt her to

brush her teeth. It would appease him too and make it easier for her to get him into bed without any fuss.

Except it was far more intimate than she bargained for. Brushing their teeth together was a homey activity. It was an activity that couples who had been together for a while did. Not two people who barely knew one another and hadn't even slept together.

But the thing was, it didn't feel weird or out of place.

Although she blushed when he headed into the enclosed partition for the toilet and heard him taking a piss. She tried to busy herself with the toothbrush and the water in the faucet to drown out the sound of him peeing.

“Come on. Let's go to bed.”

“I'll be out in just a minute.” It was her turn to hit the toilet. She wasn't ready for him to hear her pee yet. Call her crazy, but that was a line in the sand at this venture.

The moment she stepped into the bedroom, she almost bolted. Heaven help her, she should have stayed in the bathroom a minute longer until he was under the covers.

Because Josh had stripped down. Every last stitch of clothing was gone from his body. Because he apparently slept in the nude.

And wowzers!

With clothes on, he was handsome. Without them, he was smoking hot. The guy was ripped. Impossibly broad shoulders tapered down to a lean waist. Every muscular line and visible ridge made her mouth water. His chest was dusted with inky

hair over his pecs and then picked up again at his navel, trailing down. She knew she shouldn't look, but she couldn't help it. Her gaze automatically went there.

And by god, was he large all over, especially where it counted. She licked her lips at the thought of all those inches, and he wasn't hard.

“Aye, it'll have to wait until morning. Come to bed, lass.” He held out his arm and waved her over to the bed.

“I'm not sleeping with you.” She'd be too tempted to touch him.

“If you don't want to sleep, we can do other things.” He eyed her up and down with hunger burning in his eyes, promising a world of ecstasy if she was brave enough to reach out and take it.

But she wasn't ready. She didn't know if she would ever be ready for him. But god, she wanted him. And therein lay her problem.

“Fine. We can go to sleep.” She really didn't want to pay for an Uber anyway. It was late, and it wouldn't hurt her to stay with him.

Besides, what if he woke up still high and freaked out? It would be all her fault if he hurt himself. Or at least that was the lie she told herself. “I need something to wear.”

“Sleep in the nude. I'll keep you warm, lass.” Was his heavy-lidded suggestion.

She shivered at the carnal look in his eyes. “Of that, I have no doubt. I still need a shirt or something to sleep in.”

He flung his arm toward the closet door. “Pick something and then get your cute ass into bed.”

She went inside his walk-in closet and found a soft black tee shirt that would do the trick. She undressed, leaving only her panties on, and donned his shirt. It smelled like him.

And then she walked out into the bedroom. He’d switched off the lights and lay beneath the covers, with part of it turned down beside him.

For her.

His sweet consideration messed with her head. But she blew out a breath and padded the short distance, crawling into the massive bed with him. She slid beneath the covers. The soft linen made her want to snuggle even deeper.

But she turned onto her side and gave him her back. Then he tossed an arm around her midsection.

“What are you doing?” Her eyes snapped open.

“Sleeping,” he murmured, his breath puffed against her neck and left her shivering.

“With your arm around me?”

“It’s either that or I fuck you. Take your pick.”

“This is nice,” she conceded, thinking there was no way in hell she would fall asleep. Not when she could feel *it* right there against her ass with her flimsy panties as the only barrier. And his scent surrounded her.

But it was nice to be held for a change.

“Turn that brain of yours off, lass. And get some sleep.”

She yawned. “Fine.”

“And promise me you’ll be here in the morning.”

“I promise.”

He pressed a light kiss against her shoulder. “Goodnight.”

He settled behind her. And she fought not to fidget as his breathing deepened and evened out as he fell asleep. But the sound of his breathing, the warmth of being in his arms, safe and protected, lulled her into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Josh blinked the blariness from his eyes and glanced down.

Sometime during the night, he shifted onto his back. And Lexi had trailed his movements, shifting with him so she was cuddled against his side with her head propped up on his shoulder. The wealth of her dark cherry hair was spread out behind her. One of her hands rested against his chest.

Her thick, inky lashes created crescent moons on her ivory cheeks. Her plump lips were slightly parted.

One of her slender, shapely legs was tossed over his. And he couldn't get over that she wore one of his shirts. And not just any shirt, one of his favorites, the black material faded and butter soft.

She stayed. He remembered worrying as he shut his eyes that she wouldn't keep her promise. Because in his experience, women didn't keep their promises. His ex-wife had promised to remain faithful to him, and look how that turned out. He'd given up everything for her, to support her, only to have her cheat and walk out on their marriage the moment the ink was dry on her law degree.

He shook off the depressing memories and focused on the gorgeous woman in his arms.

The click was there beneath the surface. But inside, it felt more like a seismic shift. Jase hadn't been wrong. With every moment he spent in her presence, the deeper under her spell he fell. And she was his north star. The point on the horizon he intended to follow unto the ends of the earth.

But he knew they faced an uphill battle too.

Aside from their age difference, they were also polar opposites. Except, when they'd talked last night, it felt like they had known each other most of their lives.

She stretched against him, and her eyelids fluttered like butterfly wings. And then she looked at him with those stunning amber eyes. This close, he spied flecks of gold amid the amber. At times, her eyes reminded him of molten caramel.

At her shy smile, he went on instinct and lowered his mouth, taking hers in an exploratory kiss. God, even with morning breath plaguing them both, she tasted sweeter than any woman who had come before her.

He growled and deepened the kiss. The arm around her waist tightened, and he cupped her chin with his free hand, directing her where he wanted their kiss to go.

Josh turned into her, rotating onto his side. The craving for her had lost none of its potency.

When she hitched her leg up around his waist, his semi-hard shaft went rock hard in under two seconds at being snug against her hot center.

At her passionate whimper, he let loose, kissing Lexi like the world was going to end tomorrow. And in some ways, it had, because he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt his days as a bachelor were over.

She returned his kiss with equal fervor, her arms wrapped around his neck.

Gliding his hands down her exquisite body, he cupped her ass, grinding his cock against her panties. At the wet heat scorching his member, he growled.

She wanted him—or at least her body did—but it was up to him to seduce her, show her how good it could be between them. He left her mouth and kissed a trail along her jaw to her ear. “Let me have you, Lexi. Feel how much I want you.”

He nipped at her earlobe.

“Yes,” she sighed.

Her consent washed over him like he’d been doused in gasoline. And hunger for her enveloped him. Descended over him until she was all he could see. He rolled her onto her back so that he was wedged between her thighs.

He drew his shirt up her torso. His fingers trailed over her sides. And he tugged it off, tossing it behind them.

And then he finally got a good look at her with only black panties covering her mons and nothing else. Her hair was spread over the pillow. Her amber eyes were glazed with lust. There was no hesitation. She wanted this—wanted him.

Bloody hell, she had the most gorgeous tits. They were large melon-sized beauties with pale pink nipples stiffened

into a point. And he was drawn to them like they were magnets.

He cupped them, testing their weight. He scraped his thumbs over her nipples, and they puckered even tighter for him. Fuck.

He swooped in and sucked a bud into his mouth. Groaning at her exquisite flavor, he laved the bud, teasing it. And then he nipped at it.

Lexi gasped, and her hands threaded into his hair, gripping tight. He should correct her. He should restrain her hands.

But all his normal tricks went right out the window. And something told him to make this time with her more than merely a scene. This was about her pleasure. About getting her to trust him if they were going to have any type of future.

So he took his time, venturing back and forth from one breast to the next and back again.

Her tiny mewls and gasps went straight to his dick.

He worked the buds until they were red and stiff, jutting toward the ceiling. She lifted her gaze as he planted open-mouthed kisses down her belly. When he reached her panties, he dipped his tongue beneath the material, teasing her, but never took his eyes off her face.

Even with her makeup smudged, she was gorgeous. And he could no longer wait to taste her. He gripped the gusset of her panties and yanked, ripping them off her body.

The flimsy material shredded like tissue paper.

“Josh,” she gasped. Her eyes went wide, and she trembled.

He lowered his gaze to her bare pussy and groaned. She was slick and pink—and all for him. “Give me all your sweet cries. I want to hear them all.”

Lexi whimpered, but nodded, “Yes, Sir.”

He parted her thighs wider to give himself better access. And then he lowered his mouth, dragging his tongue along her drenched slit, and groaned as her sweet nectar hit his tastebuds. With a deep, rumbling growl that was ripped from his soul, he lapped at her pussy, licking up all her cream as if it was an elixir that was the secret to immortality.



Lexi gasped at Josh and his marvelous, superb—did they teach oral differently in Ireland?—tongue.

He knew the exact force to exert as he laved and teased her clit. Some were soft, just the barest hint that left her begging for more. Others were slow and sensual, like he had all the time in the world and planned to spend the day eating her pussy. As much as she had revolted the night of the singles night event, not even a planet-killing asteroid could make her move.

And then there were some that left her writhing with pleasure, tightly winding around her body until she felt like one of those spinning tops kid toys. The ones you wound up until you couldn't wind it anymore and then released it, and it spun out of control. It's what he was doing to her pussy. He

kept pushing her, tightening the tension in her body. Until eventually she would unravel.

“Josh,” she whispered on a throaty moan.

The man and his talented tongue, which should be inducted into the hall of fame, appeared determined to make her come screaming his name.

He stirred two fingers at her entrance. She lifted her heavy gaze and stared down her body at his dark head between her thighs.

Lexi groaned at the sight. Dark lust etched itself on his features, turning his eyes as black as his hair. Her mouth rounded as he thrust both digits inside and latched his mouth around her swollen bud and suctioned hard.

Ecstasy built, tautly coiling in her belly. And as she watched him eat her out, she wondered, and not for the first time, why she had been so opposed to him at the singles night. Especially with pleasure of this magnitude in the offing. Who cared if they weren't forever? Who cared if he was a player and simply wanted to add her to his body count?

He was different than she imagined.

She gripped his head, rocking her hips in time to the slow finger fucking. Little by little, he drove her out of her ever-loving mind with ecstasy. Until she was a gasping, moaning, pleading, writhing mess.

“Josh . . . please, Sir. I need to come,” she cried.

His eyes were black flames of desire. He pumped his fingers deep, bowing her back. And then bit down on her

swollen clit.

The explosion was instantaneous.

Her hips bucked as waves of ecstasy crashed over her and dragged her down into blissful oblivion. When her body leveled out, she lifted her lids, certain he would give her his cock now.

Instead, he kept giving her pussy long, thorough kisses as if he was in no hurry to get to the main event.

“Josh. Please.”

He finally lifted his mouth. It was coated with her cream. “I’m not done with your pussy yet.”

“But—” She didn’t even know why she was protesting. Not when he was saying he planned to heap pleasure upon her body and continue eating her out until he had his fill.

He gripped her thighs and held her body steady. Steely determination rippled off him. “No.” He swiped his tongue through her crease. “You’re not directing this show. I’ve imagined eating this pussy for weeks now. And I won’t let you hurry this process. I will fuck you when I’m good and ready and not a moment before. Now just lay back and enjoy.”

Time lost all meaning. Josh kissed her pussy like he had all day. Like he had no intention of doing anything else. And all she could do was hang on for the ride. Her limbs were molten, so heavy she could barely lift them. Even the gentle breeze from the ceiling fan hit her skin and turned her on.

She had never had a man pay homage to her pussy this way. And she loved every decadent, depraved moment of it.

He brought her to her peak twice more before he rose onto his knees.

But then he picked her up and positioned her on all fours. His palm connected with her ass.

“Yeow! What the hell?”

He gripped her hair in one hand and leaned his mouth beside her ear. “This is your punishment for giving me pot last night. Now be a good girl and take it. And then I will fuck you.”

The flip from sensual lover to imperious Dom scrambled her brain. And had her pussy pulsing for what was to come. “Yes, Sir.”

She throatily moaned at the next brutal swat. He peppered her behind with smack after smack. Her butt burned with sizzling heat. But this punishment felt like a cleansing balm. Absolving her of her sins and allowing them to start over fresh in this new direction they found themselves in.

At the next fervent swat, she dropped her head on a groan.

“Fuck, you’re drenched, lass.”

He reached into the bedside table and grabbed a condom. She almost wished he would take her without it. But she knew the responsible thing to do was have him glove up. So she said nothing. Her body vibrated with need.

The head of his cock nudged her entrance. She expelled her breath in a rush.

Josh notched his cock. Gripped her hips. And plowed inside, spreading her, stretching her. Going deeper. Until her eyes rolled into the back of her head at the delicious way he filled her.

He kept sliding inside until his balls pressed against her clit. “Fuck, Lexi. You feel fecking amazing. Don’t hold back on those cries. I want to hear every single one.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He withdrew and then plunged deep, hitting the bundle of nerves inside her that was sure to send her flying. He went slowly at first, withdrawing and thrusting deep, but then he added a few swats to the mix.

“I love the way your ass glows red. And every time I swat this butt, your pussy clenches around my cock. You enjoy being disciplined.”

He said it as a statement, but she answered him anyway. “Yes, Sir. Give me more.”

He grunted, shuttling his length in hard thrusts while adding to her swats. She curled her back like a cat in heat.

And his thrusts turned brutal. She put her hands out in front of her body to hold herself in place. She dug her fingers in the bedding and lowered her face to the bed so only her ass was up in the air.

He leaned down over her and nipped the back of her neck. “Play with that pretty pussy for me.”

At his carnal orders, she shot her hand between her thighs and teased her swollen clit. But she must have had the devil on

her shoulder. Because she took her fingers and created a vee, pressing them on either side of his dick.

“Fuck!” he snarled. And his next thrust stole the breath from her body. The one that followed drove her body the rest of the way down to the mattress.

He shoved her legs wide as he pounded her pussy. She pressed her fingers against his driving shaft until he caught her hand and brought it up to his mouth, sucking the fingers into his mouth. Like he wasn't willing to allow a drop of her cream to go to waste.

And she could only take it. He gave her no quarter or reprieve, hammering his cock inside her, driving her body into the bed.

He gripped her throat. “This pussy is mine. Do you understand? You will not scene with anyone else at the club or give anyone else access to this pussy but me.”

She had never felt this owned before. Too far gone to deliberate over the implications, she agreed. “Yes, Sir.”

“Say it. Tell me who this pussy belongs to.”

“You, Sir. It's yours.”

“That's right.” He grunted. “This is my pussy. Come on my cock, lass. Come for me now.”

He rammed so deep inside her she felt him in the back of her throat. And she came. So fucking hard she blacked out for a moment and wondered if she died. Her pussy clamped down on his cock.

Josh roared, pumping his hips fast and furious as he came. Until he slumped, satiated, on top of her.

Josh pressed a kiss against her neck. And then withdrew and rolled to her side. She lifted her gaze as he tugged her body into his arms and pressed a kiss against her forehead. “Stay.”

“Okay.” It was the best she could do under the circumstances. Because he had fucked her brain right out of her head. And it hadn’t returned yet.

Instead of rising and heading home, she snuggled against him, their limbs tangled together, and closed her eyes.

She knew there was more that she needed to address. She was acting like an ostrich, ignoring the implications of what had just happened. But she didn’t have the strength to fight the tide of bliss working to drag her under.

Because Josh had fucked her into oblivion.

Lexi woke while Josh was still sleeping. But it was her bladder that woke her, and no amount of trying to ignore it would let her go back to sleep.

She extricated herself from Josh, careful not to disturb him. She hissed when she set her foot on the floor. It was damn cold. But then, it was the time of year with winter still hanging on like an ex who just won't take no for an answer.

She padded quietly to the bathroom and silently closed the door. She ignored most of the bathroom and raced to the toilet.

Once she finished emptying her bladder, she went to the sink and glanced at herself.

Gah!

Mascara had smeared itself around her eyes and onto her cheeks. Her hair stuck up at odd angles. And she breathed into her hand. She had dragon morning breath.

Lexi brushed her teeth with the toothbrush he'd given her to use last night, eyeing the shower while she brushed. It was one of the enclosed standup deals with a bench inside and multiple showerheads.

She had to shower. After she finished brushing her teeth, she checked through his supplies and located some face cleanser. Yeah, it was a guy's version and might not do anything for makeup. But she had to do something because she looked a fright and would never be able to leave his house looking like this.

Talk about the walk of shame.

Especially since she did the deed with him.

Stepping into the shower, she started the water, turning up the heat until it was just below boiling. She spied shampoo, body wash, and he had conditioner. Hallelujah! Again, all the male versions, but she would take what she could get. She brought the facial cleanser into the shower with her and took care of her face first.

She scrubbed and rinsed her face twice to ensure she'd removed all the makeup. And then washed her hair and body.

But then she stood beneath the hot spray, enjoying the way the water massaged her muscles. She couldn't believe she slept with Josh. Both the actual sleeping, which she never did with anyone, and the way he commanded her body. And she had enjoyed every minute.

Maybe she should have just scened with him at the club. Then she wouldn't have gotten suspended.

But what they had done this morning—and last night, if she were being honest—was a whole lot more intimate than engaging in a scene at the club. Far more intimate. Lexi didn't really know what to make of it.

He'd gone all possessive. She was sure it was just an act. Something he said during a scene that made it really hot.

But there was a part of her that wanted to belong to him. Which was dumb. She had her music and her job. Although the job at the Java Hut, while affording her a place to sleep each night and to pay her bills, wasn't what she wanted for her life.

Lexi jumped as huge male hands slid around her waist.

"Easy. It's just me."

Those hands trailed up and cupped her breasts. He pressed kisses against her neck. While his hands kneaded her tits, tugging and plucking at the nipples. He pressed his body against hers. And she felt the hard press of his erection against her butt.

"I thought for a minute that you left."

She was going to as soon as she finished the shower. Or at least that was what she told herself.

"I do have a life to get to."

"Today?"

"Well, no." Today was one of her few days off. And the band wasn't meeting to practice either.

"Spend the day with me."

"What? I couldn't possibly. I . . . oh god," she moaned, her head fell back against his powerful chest.

He cupped her pussy, owning her. Telling her without words that she belonged to him. And god, just for a day, she

wanted the freedom to explore his body. She knew it would all end. She understood with perfect clarity that the likelihood he would break her heart was criminally high.

“I don’t have a change of clothes. And I have to be at the Java Hut early tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll buy you clothes.”

She stiffened. “I’m not looking for a sugar daddy. Why can’t we run by my house and pick up some clothes?” She didn’t want him spending money on her. It’s not why she was with him.

“Because it’s best if your sister does not find out about us.”

She tried to push out of his arms. “Because I’m just a dirty little secret. And because all you wanted was to score since I turned you down, is that it?”

He spun her around and trapped her against the tile wall. And he looked too gorgeous for her sensibilities. “It has nothing to do with that. You are not my dirty little secret. Nor am I seeking revenge because of the incident at the club.”

“Then why do we need to hide this from my sister? I mean, we’re not besties, she and me, nor do we tell each other everything, but she’s the only family I have that I’m speaking to. If I’m going to keep something from her, then I need to know why.”

“Because I like to keep my work life and my personal life separate. I’d rather not have the office gossips catch wind of our relationship.”

She narrowed her eyes, still not buying it. “Why? Ashamed to be seen with me?”

“Jesus, woman, you are far and away the most contrary woman I’ve ever known.” He got in my face. “I need you to listen because I don’t make a habit of repeating myself. I’m fucking thrilled to be with you. But we’re just starting out and building our relationship. Until we are comfortable allowing other people to know what we are, until we are comfortable and established in our relationship, I would rather keep other people out. Understood?”

Her anger deflated like a popped balloon. “Yes, Sir.”

He quirked a brow.

She blew out a breath. “I’m sorry.”

“Are you always this combative? I should be able to buy you some clothes without getting my head bitten off.”

“I don’t want anyone buying stuff for me.” People used money to manipulate others.

“Too bad. You need clothes. I’ll buy you some. At least until we can get some of your things moved over here.”

She sputtered at the thought of her stuff over here. “Why would I have anything of mine here?”

Josh cupped her face, his gaze serious. “Because I meant what I said. You belong to me. And for the record, I don’t share.”

“I don’t understand you.” She bit her bottom lip.

“What don’t you understand?”

“Why you’re doing this. We had fun together, sure. But you don’t have to go to these lengths for me. I get you don’t spend long with submissives from the club, and I’m cool with it. We can have fun and let this thing run its course.”

“And when are you going to get it into that thick head of yours that I’m not going anywhere? I want you, Lexi, and not just for a few nights.”

And then his mouth was on hers, and all her thoughts scattered. He couldn’t really want to keep her. The playboy of the Eros Pit, settle down?

He kissed her hungrily until she wrapped her arms around his neck and melted against him. He claimed her with his kiss. Telling her what he thought of her refusal to let him buy her stuff.

He couldn’t understand that in her past, money had always come with conditions. It was how her parents had controlled her for years. To her, someone buying her things was a way to control and manipulate her. There was no such thing as a gift without an ulterior motive. At least not to her.

But . . . oh god, he had the most wicked mouth. He shifted angles and took the kiss even deeper. She hadn’t thought it possible. But she kissed him back with equal fervor.

And those hands of his she was coming to adore slid down the sides of her body. Then he hefted her into his arms, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. The move put the hard blade of his shaft against her sex. She rocked her hips against him, moaning into his mouth.

He tore his mouth away. His face was dark with lust. “See, your body already knows I’m its Master.”

“Prove it.”

The look in his eyes went from hungry to downright depraved. “Don’t say I didn’t warn you. What’s your safeword?”

“The real one is guitar, not red.”

“Cute.” He ground his cock through her folds and then winced. “Shit. I don’t have a condom with me.”

“You don’t need one. I’m on the pill. I’ve been tested in the last month and haven’t been with anyone in three.”

His gaze went nuclear with lust. “Are you sure? If I take you without protection now, I won’t go back.”

Lexi shivered at the dark lust in his eyes. She didn’t want any barrier between them. And even though she knew it was reckless and that there could be consequences, she didn’t care. She wanted him right here, right now. “I’m sure.”

He notched his shaft and then drove inside her with enough force it would have bowed her back had not been up against the tile wall. She moaned at the sensations bombarding her.

Josh watched her as he thrust. Like he was judging which stroke made her sigh, which one made her pant, and which one left her gasping and writhing on his cock, begging for more. But he was controlled, delivering brutal thrust after thrust, like he had made it his mission in life to fuck her senseless.

“See? Your pussy keeps clasping my dick, trying to draw me even deeper inside you. Because your body already knows it belongs to me.”

“I’m still my own person,” she argued.

“Never said you weren’t, lass. But we’re meant for each other. And you can try to deny it all you want, but this pussy is mine.” He snarled and hammered his shaft in short, brutal digs that left her clinging to him.

How had she gone from avoiding him at all costs to having him fuck her brains out? She hadn’t a clue. Except he pursued her until she caved.

With every pounding thrust, he drove her body higher and higher. Until she was on the precipice of coming.

Josh withdrew and set her on her feet. She wobbled and looked up at him in confusion. “Why did you stop?”

“Because you don’t realize you are mine yet. And I won’t let you come until it registers. Considering how thick that skull of yours is, it might take some time.” He shut the water off and tugged her out of the shower.

Her entire equilibrium was off-center. Desire pulsed in her veins. He briskly towed her off.

Anger rose inside her. She didn’t want to play his stupid game. She spun around and marched toward the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home. I’m not going to be played with and mind fucked by you.”

Before she could leave the bathroom, he grabbed her and forced her face down on top of the vanity. She saw him behind her in the mirror. He scowled. “So impatient. Just because I denied you an orgasm.”

She opened her mouth to blast him, but then he shoved his cock back inside her. She moaned loudly, her eyes sliding shut at the pleasure of him filling her. And from this angle, he felt even bigger, harder, more determined to drive her out of her mind.

“Look in the mirror. Tell me who owns this pussy,” he grunted darkly.

She blinked, lifting her heavy lids. The image of Josh taking her from behind filled her gaze. He shoved his cock in balls deep with dark desire illuminating his features.

They looked good together. Right, even. And watching him fuck her was hot as hell and turned her insides molten.

He wasn't gentle. But then, she didn't want him to be. She wanted him to be rough and manhandle her. It was one of life's little conundrums. Because as independent as she was out of the bedroom, inside it she had to be dominated.

He smacked her ass. “Tell me.”

She jolted and moaned, loving the way he pounded her cunt and punished her ass. The combination was like dropping a Molotov cocktail on her system.

She shook her head in denial. “No.”

He bared his teeth and smacked her ass again and again, continuing his total demolition of her pussy as he drove inside

with enough force, she was surprised he didn't break the vanity.

"Tell me," he demanded and slammed inside her so hard she went up on her toes and wailed at the pleasurable pain.

"It's yours. My pussy is yours," she sobbed.

"That's right. This. Pussy. Is. Mine." Then he fucked her like he was pissed at her. Smacking her ass while his cock drove deep enough to make her eyes cross at the unimaginable ecstasy.

Then he yanked her torso up. And in the mirror, she watched his cock slam inside her. By her ear, he growled, "Mine," and smacked her pussy. Hard.

Her body detonated.

There was no other description for how devastating her orgasm was because it smacked into her with enough force her knees gave out. And if it weren't for Josh pulling out and scooping her up into his arms, then carrying her into the bedroom, she would have fallen on the floor.

But then he laid her on the bed and crawled between her thighs, still hard as a rock.

He plowed back inside her. But he was no longer messing around. His need was too great. He gathered her close and fucked her. The headboard hit the wall on repeat while he screwed her brains right out.

And just when she thought she couldn't possibly come again, she found herself wrapped around his body, meeting

him thrust for thrust while another orgasm clawed its way through her.

Josh came, his hot semen filling her pussy, adding a secondary round of spasms.

Against her neck, Josh muttered. "See? You're mine."

Lexi's stomach took that moment to growl.

She felt him smile against her neck. "I guess I should feed you if I plan to keep fucking you."

Too replete to put up a fight, she murmured, "Wouldn't hurt."

With a sigh, he withdrew and rose, holding his hand out. "Come on. Let's go hunt up some grub."

Unable to fight him when he was being charming, she let him help her out of bed and lead her into the kitchen.

It was more like he was leading her into temptation, given neither of them were dressed. But even if this relationship crashed and burned at the end of this weekend, she was going to enjoy it for what it was and try not to look down the road too far.

Fuck, he liked her.

She was different than he originally thought. There were layers she hid behind. And he wanted to peel each one back until he saw every part of her.

“What are you in the mood for? My maid stocked up, so we’ve got a bit of everything.”

“If we’re going to keep this pace up, we need protein and carbs. And can you cook?”

“I’m passable,” he admitted with a slight grimace. That was one of the perks of living downtown. There were restaurants everywhere to choose from.

“Why don’t you make some coffee, and I’ll get the rest.”

“But isn’t making coffee kind of your specialty?” he teased.

She glanced at his rather basic coffeemaker. “A chimp could make coffee with that. If you want me to make coffee, you need a better machine.”

“Done. I’ll pick one up this week. Or better yet, tell me which one to buy, and I’ll order it.” He would do whatever it took to please her and get her so addicted to being with him she would never want to leave him.

“Just like that.”

“Aye.”

“Do you have an apron?” She poked her head into the pantry.

“No. Why?”

“Then I need a shirt to protect my skin from splatters,” she said, pulling ingredients and laying them on the kitchen island.

“I’ll go grab you something. You keep doing what you’re doing.” He left her in the kitchen, taking the stairs two at a time.

And he grabbed a pair of boxers for himself and one of his shirts for her. But he made a mental note to buy her a kitchen apron. The thought of Lexi in nothing but an apron while she cooked had him fighting a semi. He pressed his hand against his randy dick.

One taste of her and his cock was addicted. And it wasn’t the only one. He wanted her every which way. He wanted to take her on every surface in his house. And before the night was through, he was going to take that ass of hers.

He jogged back downstairs. The scent of brewing coffee wafted in the air.

“I could have gotten the coffee going,” he said as he entered the kitchen.

He helped her into his shirt, slipping it over her head and kissing her, because he couldn't seem to go more than a few minutes without touching her in some fashion.

She gifted him with a genuine smile when he lifted his mouth. And it was like he took a blow to the head. She made him dizzy with how much he wanted her. And he knew it had to be the fucking Ryan click. Even his ex-wife never made him feel this way.

Was this how his cousins felt when they met their wives? He and his brothers had given them shite over it. But he regretted it now because, rest assured, this was his karma.

“What?”

“I just like looking at you, lass. You're so fucking beautiful.”

A pink blush spread into her cheeks, charming him further. It made him want to hoist her over his shoulder and cart her back to the bedroom. But he also had to make sure she ate. He tucked a lock of her silken hair behind her ear.

She sighed. “If you keep doing that, we're never going to eat. And I'm starving.”

“Let me help.”

“Okay. Rinse and slice up the strawberries. I just need to finish the batter and pop the bacon in the oven.”

“And what did you decide we’re having?” He headed over to the sink, grabbing the carton of strawberries on his way.

“Cinnamon pecan pancakes, bacon, and strawberries.”

His stomach growled. “Sounds bloody fantastic.”

They spent the next thirty minutes getting breakfast cooked. And they slid into a rhythm like they had been doing this their whole lives. Given the way their relationship began, the ease with which they slid into domesticity was remarkable.

Yet he liked it. He could see them doing this together every weekend. And he knew eventually they would move into a house. Because kids should have a yard to play in and a dog, maybe a cat or two. And this place, as much as he loved it, wasn’t conducive to having a family.

He knew it was soon, but the bloody click had him imagining all sorts of things he never did with any other woman. Like kids, family, the white picket fence, and everything that it entailed. It was a dream for his life he thought had died long ago.

All it took was her entrance into his world to upend every notion and resurrect dreams he thought had turned to dust long ago.

They seated themselves on the other side of the kitchen island, side by side on the barstools, and he took a bite of pancake. And groaned at the nutty cinnamon flavor.

“Where the hell did you learn to cook?”

“It’s something I’ve always had an affinity for because I like food.” Lexi shrugged and took a bite of her own food.

“Yeah, but this is on the same level as my cousin, Colin. Have you talked to him about your cooking skills?”

She frowned. “Why would I? It’s not like I want to be a chef.”

“I’m not talking about that. But I’m sure he would pay you for some of your recipes. And he would pay a hell of a lot more than the Java Hut.” He made a mental note to contact Colin. Josh was certain if he tasted Lexi’s cooking, he’d be begging her for some of her recipes. That grilled cheese last night had been epic. And breakfast this morning wasn’t that far off.

“Hmm. I’ll think about it.”

“Do. Because this is bloody amazing.” He lit into the meal, stuffing himself. It was so exceptional, he went back for seconds, not minding the extra calories because he had every intention of burning it off today—in bed.

Lexi finished before he did. And he watched her while he finished as she moved about his kitchen. Her every move was sensual. And seeing her in his shirt made him feel primal. He wanted to mark her in every way.

And they were only at the tip of the iceberg with his fantasies. But he wanted to know hers. He washed the meal down with his coffee and rose from his seat. Now that they had refueled, it was time for the next round.

He carried his plate and mug over to the sink, where she was putting dishes in the dishwasher. It was such a homey, wifey task.

And for the first time since his marriage went south, he didn't cringe at the thought of getting hitched.

"Let me get those from you." She took his plate and mug, rinsed them, and then put them in the dishwasher.

"You can leave the rest."

"Just let me soak this dish, and I'll be done. You know, just because you have money doesn't mean you should be careless with your things."

"I'll take that into consideration." He slid his hands around her waist and pressed his front against her back, letting her feel how hard he was for her. Her indrawn gasp had his lips curling into a smirk.

His hands drifted south, tugging the material of the shirt up. And then he cupped her pussy. She pulsed hot and wet in his hand, so bloody wet for him. Knowing it was his touch that made her wet made him want to lock her in his dungeon and never let her leave. His desire to own her overrode his logical brain.

"Josh," she murmured, her head falling back against his chest.

He nipped her earlobe. "Tell me what you want. What do you fantasize about at night when no one is around? What do you think about when you play with this pretty pussy and make yourself come?"

Then he slid two digits inside her, pressing his palm against her clit as he slowly finger fucked her, loving the way her pussy clamped down on his fingers.

She moaned. Her body went fluid. She spread her legs wider, granting him access.

But when she didn't respond, he withdrew his fingers and smacked her pussy. "I asked you a question." He swatted her pussy again. "And I expect a reply."

"Um, what were the questions?" she asked breathily.

He smiled, loving that he could make her forget so easily. "What do you think about late at night, when you're in bed alone and put your hand down your panties?"

"Having you fuck my mouth?"

Oh shite! His dick jolted. "What else?"

"Having you take me in front of an audience."

He plunged his fingers back inside her. She rocked her hips and gasped. He loved the way she surrendered. How the moment he touched her, she handed over her trust without question. "I can make that happen. Not today. But when your suspension is up at the club."

She froze. "You're not going to retract it?"

An insidious thought occurred to him. He withdrew his fingers. She whimpered at the loss, but he wasn't going to give her an inch. Then he spun her around, because he needed to see her face. Needed to see her eyes. "Is that why you relented and came to my bed?"

Her mouth dropped open.

"Bloody answer me."

“No. And how could you even think that?” She pushed against his hold, but he wasn’t letting her go.

“Why would you think I would retract the suspension? You offended me and didn’t want me to touch you. So I punished you the only way I could.”

“I know that. Colin said as much when he escorted me from the club. I just thought—never mind.”

“You just thought what?” His Lexi was a firecracker. She went off like a rocket. And he knew she would keep him on his toes.

“That you could punish me here for it instead. And then we could go to the club together.”

He reeled her back into his arms. “No.”

She jerked against him with a scowl. “Let me go.”

“Also no. Stop trying to top from the bottom. You will serve out your punishment for that offense. When the month is up, you will meet with Gabe to discuss your readmittance. I will go with you. And then we will go to the club together.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. You win. Happy?”

“What’s with the attitude?”

“Why ask about my fantasies like you want to give them to me only to deny me?”

Damn. She had a point. “Are you sure you don’t want to be a lawyer? Because you’ve made your case, and it’s a good one. But I’m still going to rule against you on this one.”

She fucking pouted. It was cute as fuck.

And he realized he was doomed. She already had him twisted around her pinky and didn't realize it. Nor was he going to tell her, or she would run roughshod all over him.

“Fine. I get it. But will you at least fuck my mouth?”

He barked a laugh. “Only if you ask nicely.”

A small smile played on her lips. Her hand slid beneath the waistband of his boxers and slid around his shaft. He wanted to be the impervious Dom, but fucking bloody hell, everything she did aroused him to no end.

“Will you please fuck my mouth, Sir?”

Like he would deny her when the thought of watching his shaft disappear in her hot little mouth had precum seeping from the slit. “You could tempt a saint. On your knees.”

At his command, she gracefully slid onto her knees.

“And lose the shirt. I want to see those pretty tits while I fuck that smart mouth of yours.”

She lifted it off without question. Once he got past her tough exterior, she was a perfect submissive. It was getting around her impetuous and rather stubborn nature that would be tricky. But he was up to the challenge.

He shoved his boxers down, kicking them off. Then he gripped his dick with one hand and threaded his fingers into her hair. He tugged her head back, lifting her gaze to his face. “Slap my thigh if it's too much. Now, be a good girl and open up.”

She licked her lips and dropped her mouth open wide.

With his eyes glued on her face, he fed his dick inside her mouth an inch at a time. As he pushed his cock deeper, a blissful expression settled over her face. And she looked up at him with something akin to worship.

Bloody hell!

He prayed he could live up to her expectations, vowing to do whatever it took to earn that look. He went further, past her gag reflex, until he felt her throat constrict around his dick.

“Fuck, that’s a sight, lass.”

And just when she began to squirm from lack of air, he relented and withdrew. Only to repeat the move, sliding deep into the hot cavern of her mouth. And he only hoped he could last. Because her mouth—fuck, if there was a heaven, he’d found it.

She made slurping noises as he picked up the pace. And she moved with him.

“Are you that hungry for my cock, lass?”

She moaned around his dick; the vibration had desire lashing him.

“Then hold on, because I’m going to make you cry,” he grunted. Then he let go of the restraints holding him back and fucked her mouth.

His hands gripped the sides of her head as he fucked her mouth with increasing speed. He wasn’t going to last long. But fuck, in all his years, he’d never had a woman, sub or otherwise, deep throat him this well. She was a treasure, one he wouldn’t take for granted.

“Look at you, being such a good girl and taking my cock all the way inside that mouth of yours. When I’m finished with your mouth, I’m going to eat that pretty pussy until you come screaming my name.”

She moaned around his shaft. Tears streamed from her eyes. If she had makeup on, there would be black trails down her cheeks. He wanted that.

“Next time I fuck your mouth, you will wear mascara and lipstick so I can smear both,” he growled, fucking her mouth hard. Desire rose and gripped him by the throat. He was so close. Her mouth, fuck . . . He wanted to last; he wanted the pleasure to continue. But he wasn’t a superhero. He was only a man.

And he was thoroughly entranced by his little vixen.

Lexi reached up and cupped his balls, rolling them in her hand.

Pleasure exploded, almost knocking him on his ass at the brute force of his climax. Lexi worked her mouth on his, swallowing his come.

“That’s it. Swallow all of it. Don’t let a single drop go to waste.”

He thrust until his balls emptied, and she swallowed every drop. She released his shaft with a long slow suck, like she didn’t want to stop sucking his cock, before she finally freed him and sat back on her heels.

Her amber eyes were glazed with lust.

And he'd never seen anything as beautiful as Lexi on her knees in total submission. Leaning down, he hauled her to her feet. And then he scooped her up and laid her on the kitchen island.

“Lay back for me and spread your thighs.”

She complied instantly. It was good to know that she responded to pleasure. Because it was something that could be withheld for future punishments.

She looked like his own personal buffet, and he intended to gorge.

He caressed her body, drawing his fingers up her thighs to her apex, where he spread her labia. “Fuck, lass, you’re drenched. You really do like getting that smart mouth fucked.”

“Yes. I want it all the time.”

“If at any time you want me to fuck that hot mouth, just kneel for me, and I’m only too happy to oblige. Pluck those nipples for me.” Her hands went to her large tits, and she tugged at the rosy nipples. Her eyes lowered to half-mast as pleasure stole over her features.

Leaning in, he dragged his tongue from her clit all the way to her back door entrance.

She whimpered.

And he flashed a smile of approval before planting long, slow kisses against her pussy. He didn’t want to rush this at all. He intended to savor every cry and whimper. He wanted her writhing, begging him to come.

He nipped at her clit.

And he noticed she stopped playing with her tits and was just holding them. He bit down on the hood of her pussy. She yelped.

“Don’t stop playing with those tits. You stop playing, there will be consequences. Unless you’re aching for punishment.”

She shook her head. “No. Please don’t stop. It feels so good.”

Her hands started moving. Fingers twisted and pulled on the nipples. “That’s good. You stop again, there will be consequences.”

“Yes, Sir. Sorry, Sir. Please don’t stop.”

He resumed his thorough licks, teasing her clit with languid flicks. It had the desired effect too. Lexi rolled her hips. Mewls spilled from her mouth.

“Please,” she gasped.

“Not yet. I’ve only just begun eating this pussy.”

“Oh god.”

“He has nothing to do with it. Your pleasure is solely in my hands. And you will come when I say you can and not a moment before.”

Lexi moaned and arched her back when he resumed eating her out. She tasted sweet. And he was addicted to her flavor. Holding her hips steady, he plundered her pussy. He thrust his tongue inside her quivering channel, enjoying the sounds she made. They echoed in the penthouse. And he wanted his

neighbors to hear her, to know he was giving his woman the fuck of her life.

He latched his mouth around her swollen clit and stirred two fingers at her entrance. She held nothing back. Her cries of ecstasy filled him with the desire to own her, to keep her forever, to not let her leave his place. Because this was where she belonged, with him, letting him work out every single dirty fantasy on her killer body.

Thrusting his fingers inside her, he drove her body toward release, only to back off when he felt her channel clench.

“No!” she wailed.

He edged her toward peak again and again. Her juices dripped down her crease and coated her back channel. It was the one place he'd not taken.

And he needed to, needed to claim every part of her body.

Withdrawing his fingers from her pussy, he gathered more of her cream, coating her anus with it. And he pressed his middle finger against the rosette, pressing it inside. At her choked cry, she bore down on his finger, taking him inside her ass.

His cock jumped, hungry to feel her ass clenching around his shaft.

He pumped his finger in and out while lapping at her pussy. Lexi went wild, rocking her hips with ecstasy shrouding her features.

“Yeah, I’m gonna take this ass. And then you’re mine, lass. No going back.”

“Please,” she wailed.

“Almost. Just give me a little more. You’re being such a good girl, taking my fingers in your ass,” he murmured, adding a second digit, stretching her channel.

And she opened for him, trust written into every line of her body. She knew he would get her where she wanted to go. Her faith in him spun his head and touched his heart, the part of him he believed had died with his divorce.

But Lexi proved with every new faucet revealed just how different she was from all the rest.

“Please, Sir, please let me come,” she sobbed, her hands still working her tits. Her nipples were stiff and red from her attention.

In response, he latched his mouth around her clit, sucking hard on the bud while his fingers pumped in her ass. He added a third finger, ensuring she could take his girth. And her moans increased until she was wailing.

“Oh god, Sir,” she screamed. Her body jerked, her hips bucking against his hold as she came, clenching on his fingers.

And that’s when he knew it was time.

He didn’t give her body time to come down. He lifted her off the island and lowered her to the floor on her hands and knees. He needed to be inside her ass too damn badly to wait. And he spied a jar of Crisco by the stove.

Grabbing it, he knelt behind her and scooped out a dollop. He smeared some over his dick and her rosette. Setting the jar

aside, he wiped his hand on a towel and then fit his crown at her opening.

She lowered her head, tilting her hips up further, granting him access.

“Deep breaths for me, lass.” And he slowly fed his cock into her ass. He groaned when her ass clenched around the head.

“Play with your clit for me,” he demanded.

And fed another inch inside. He thrust slowly, watching his cock disappear into her ass, deeper and deeper until he bottomed out.

And then he held still, giving her body time to adjust to the fullness. And gave himself a moment to gather his control.

“Sir.” She wriggled, rocking her hips and trying to get him to move.

He smacked her ass cheek, and she clenched around him. “Now you’re mine. Every part of you.”

He shuttled his length, taking it slow, holding back even though he wanted to let loose, wanting to draw her pleasure out as long as he could.

Holding her hips steady, he slammed his cock in her ass. She moaned. He did it again, wanting to imprint himself on her body. He might not have been her first, but he was going to be her last. She was his now and forevermore.

Because he was done fighting her pull. She was the proverbial flame, and he was the moth who couldn’t stay

away.

She whimpered, “More.”

He smacked her rump. “More what?”

“Please, Sir, fuck my ass hard and fast. Make me come.”

He grunted. And his thrusts went from zero to sixty in two-point-five seconds. “You going to come on this cock?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“That’s right. You only get to come on my cock, my fingers, or my mouth. No more playing with your pussy. From now on, if you want a climax, you come to me.”

He leaned over her back and wrapped a hand around her throat, driving deep inside her ass. “Say it.”

“I’ll only come with you.”

“That’s right. Because you’re mine.” He nipped her ear. “And I’m yours.”

“Yes, Sir, please let me come.”

“In a minute. I’m enjoying fucking this ass. You feel like electrified silk clamping down on my dick.” He pistoned inside her. His movements became less controlled as desire gripped him by the balls.

Josh drove her hips down to the floor. His body covered hers completely. And he pounded, taking her with an edge of violence.

“Come for me,” he ordered as the first fingers of his orgasm slammed into him.

And then her ass spasmed around his dick, clamping down until he wondered if his dick would be flattened. But it was all it took to tip him over the edge.

Josh buried his cock in her ass and came. His cock shot rope upon rope of semen, filling her clenching ass as he emptied his balls inside her. He collapsed on top of her in bliss. A sense of peace, of rightness, filled him. She really had been crafted with him in mind.

He pressed a tender kiss against her shoulder before he withdrew and rolled off her onto the floor.

He glanced her way. Ecstasy painted every line of her body. And he understood that she was it for him. Perhaps that's why her denial had rubbed him the wrong way so much. Because there had been a part of him that knew, on a fundamental level, that she was meant for him.

“Come on. Let's get cleaned up and go shopping.” He stood first and scooped her up into his arms. She snuggled against his chest as he carried her up to his bathroom.

And in that moment, he knew he would never let her go. He would fight anyone who tried to take her from him, including her.

After her second shower of the day, she dressed in last night's clothes.

Had it really only been last night? It felt longer. Like they had been together for years instead of hours. And the way Josh talked about their relationship, he acted as if it was a forgone conclusion they were going to be together for the long haul.

Lexi didn't know how to feel about it. She wanted him. When she thought about just how much she wanted him, it staggered her. It also terrified her because she wasn't convinced he wouldn't drop her like a hot potato the moment someone else came along.

And she knew she was projecting.

But after a lifetime of fighting to be seen and heard for who she was and not who others wished she was, she couldn't help but be skeptical.

She checked her phone, noting the low battery, and had a text from her sister.

Lisa: *You didn't come home last night. Just want to make sure you're alive and don't need bail money.*

Lexi rolled her eyes. She'd never been arrested, but the way Lisa acted, she expected her to call her from jail at any moment.

Lexi: *This is my proof of life. Don't need bail money. Crashed at a friend's house. Won't be home tonight either.*

And shoved the phone into her pocket. She didn't even have a purse with her.

"Ready?" Josh stood in the doorway to the bedroom in jeans and an ivory sweater. Which shouldn't be hot.

But god, look at him, his inky hair tousled, the ends slightly curled. He hadn't shaved, and the shadow beard really worked on him. It framed his full lips to perfection.

She headed over to him, putting a little sway into her walk to draw his gaze. And yeah, she was tugging the tiger's tail. But she really didn't want to go shopping. A part of her would almost rather he drop her off at home at zero dark thirty so she could grab her clothes. Although she realized he was going to do what he wanted, whether she agreed or not.

But she waltzed right up to him and cupped his cheek. "I like this. You should grow it out like this more often."

A dark, seductive grin split his face. "Is that right? Well, if you're a good girl, I might do just that."

"I'm always good. I just won't allow myself to be pushed around or taken advantage of. If people don't like my boundaries, that's not my problem."

"Do you think I'm taking advantage of you?"

How to answer without offending him. “You’re not taking advantage of me.”

“But?”

“I worry that when someone better comes along, you’ll drop me like a bad habit.”

“I wouldn’t do that.”

“It’s happened multiple times in my life. And while I’m working on trusting you, my experience says otherwise. I don’t mean to doubt you and your desire to be with me. But I’ve never had anyone stick.”

He pulled her close and lowered his forehead until it met hers. “I’m not going anywhere. I’m all in here.”

“For how long?” she blurted, wanting to kick herself at how needy she sounded.

“I need you to listen. And I will repeat this as often as you need me to. You’re mine. I’m not letting you go. And I’m yours. I don’t care about the age difference. I don’t care where you work or what you do. I don’t care what anyone else will think about our relationship. And when you’re ready, I want you moving in here.”

She jolted. “You want me to live with you?”

“For starters. And I know it’s fast. Which is why I said when you’re ready.”

“What if I’m never ready?”

“I’ll wear you down until you eventually see things my way. And just think, if you lived here, you’d get to have this

view every day. And we could start every day with my face buried in your sweet pussy.”

Heat lashed her belly. “You’re crazy.”

“Perhaps. But really, I just know what I want—and it’s you.”

“Just like that?”

“Yep. Now come on, let’s go. Otherwise, I’m simply going to take you to bed and not let you leave.”

“I have a job, you know.”

“But you don’t have to work.” He escorted her down the stairs with a hand on her lower back.

“If you think for one second I’m not going to work and earn my own money, then you’re smoking something.” She didn’t want to be kept or be a housewife. It didn’t mean she wouldn’t get married. But she needed her independence too badly. And having someone else control the purse strings went against everything inside her.

“And I can’t help it if I want to take care of you.”

She needed him to hear her so there was no confusion later. “I don’t need to be taken care of. While I need to submit in the bedroom, outside of it, I would rather cut my nose off than have someone tell me what to do and how to do it. That includes having my own money.”

“That’s the very definition of having a job unless you own your own company.” He kept his hand on her low back as they rode the elevator down to street level.

“Stop being so pedantic. You know what I mean,” she argued.

“Is there a reason you’re so against having anyone help you?”

“My parents,” she blurted—and wished she kept her mouth shut.

His head whipped her way. “What did they do?”

An icy wind whipped through the buildings as they walked toward some shops. “It doesn’t matter. We don’t speak to each other.”

“Lexi. Talk to me.”

She hated talking about her family. Hated when people realized that her family didn’t love her, not really, or they would support her even if they disagreed with her decisions.

Josh stopped. And since he was holding her hand, she had no choice but to stop too.

She took a deep breath and met his intense gaze. “They’re classic narcissists. Nothing I ever did was good enough. Not even when I was toeing the line and following the path they set out for me.”

“What about Lisa?”

“She’s their golden child who can do no wrong. And she’s a lot like them.”

“But you live with her?”

“Correction, I rent a room from her because it’s cheap while the band is working to build our following.”

“And you don’t speak to them at all?”

“Why would I? When I quit school and stopped following their dreams for me, they viewed me as a total screwup. And I don’t want that kind of toxic negativity in my life. But it’s fine. I have a job that pays the bills while the band builds its following.”

“But you’re family. I’m sure they love you and want only what’s best for you.”

“Josh, that may be true for you and your family. But not everyone is as fortunate as the Ryans when it comes to family. Some of us get stuck with people who couldn’t be more different, and no amount of talking it out will make them see you for who you are instead of what they want you to be. To my parents, I’ll always be their greatest failure. And it’s fine. I’ve made peace with it.”

Josh wrapped her in his arms. “I’m sorry. Family should be there for you. And I’m sorry yours weren’t.”

Lexi relaxed into his embrace. She never expected comfort from him. Kinky, break the bed sex, absolutely. But not his compassion. And it made him different, set him apart from all the rest. Even if she was still unsure about his motives for being with her, she couldn’t deny he stirred emotions inside her.

She didn’t want to care about him. And if she weren’t careful, he would matter. Who was she kidding? He already did.

She shivered. Even within the warmth of his embrace, her legs were freezing in the winter wind.

“Let’s get you out of the cold.” He released her but took her hand and threaded their fingers together.

He led her inside the trendy women’s boutique. The moment they stepped inside the airy place, she knew she wouldn’t be able to afford much here. Maybe a pair of socks. The store was light and airy, with chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. Everything was spaced and displayed to draw the eye. When she was used to finding her clothing at the local thrift store.

“Josh, I don’t know about this place. Couldn’t we—”

“Let’s get a few things you’ll need.”

“But Josh, it’s too expensive. And while I have some savings, I would rather not spend it on clothes when I have some perfectly good ones at home.” She was close to paying off a major bill. The last thing she wanted to do was delay getting that monkey off her back.

“Lass, this is nonnegotiable. You need clothes to wear to work tomorrow. And you’re spending the night at my place.”

“But I—”

Josh grew stern. “Either find something you like, or I will pick it out for you.”

“I don’t know why you’re being so difficult on this,” she argued.

“Hi, welcome to Layla’s. Can I help you find anything?” One of the sales clerks approached with a huge smile. She was about ten years older. Her blond hair was in a thick braid over her shoulder. She looked like she should be on the cover of a magazine, not in a clothing store, no matter how upscale it might be.

Lexi opened her mouth to tell her no thanks, that they were leaving. But Josh beat her to the punch.

“Yes, she’s going to need some jeans, tops, bras, and panties if you have them.”

She glared at him. The sales lady’s eyes grew round for a moment, likely calculating how big a commission she’d receive. Because she sized Josh up as a man with deep pockets.

“Sure thing. If you folks want to follow me.”

Josh escorted her, giving her no room to refuse unless she wanted to cause a scene. And then she became a doll, trying on tops, jeans, even a few dresses. With every item of clothing that Josh said yes to, she fought him.

“Here, try this on.” He grabbed another dress off the rack. It was a short, slinky black number threaded vertically with silver that made it look like it was raining precious metal.

And even though she knew it would likely look spectacular on her, she still argued. “No.”

“Fine. It’s your size. Ah miss, add this dress.”

She ground her teeth, refraining from calling him out in front of the clerk. Because she wasn’t stupid. And while she

didn't mind stepping across the line into punishment territory, she knew better than to throw a tantrum in the middle of a store.

By the time they finished, she was fuming. He bought her three pairs of jeans, a few shirts, both low-key and dressy, some leggings and loungewear, bras, panties, socks, and a few pairs of shoes.

And then he dragged her to the shop two doors down. It was a beauty supply shop. He propelled her inside, even with his hands laden with purchases from the previous store.

"Get the makeup and toiletries you need." He nodded when they entered.

The store was brightly lit. And her nose was bombarded with the scents of perfume, makeup, and all manner of beauty products. Normally, she would enjoy searching through the store and finding things she liked, maybe trying a new eye shadow and lipstick. But not like this.

"No." This wasn't right, having him spend money like this on her. How would it be used against her later?

"Either you pick them out, or I will," he told her with an arched brow, daring her to refuse him.

"It's too much." She hated being indebted to anyone. Hated having someone spend money on her.

"Why? It's my money, and I'm choosing to spend it on you."

"That's the point," she exclaimed in frustration.

“Why are you so against this?”

“Because it will be used as a weapon against me later.” She spoke her worst fear aloud and then clamped her trembling lips shut. She loathed how much it bothered her.

Understanding entered his eyes. She wanted to walk out and escape the compassion and the pity she found there. Yes, she had a shitty childhood. Not in the sense that she didn’t have food or new clothes and such; she had everything money could buy.

And that money had been used to control and manipulate her until she finally had enough.

“Never mind. I see the stuff I use.” She marched over to it and grabbed just the basics. She figured she would pay him back for this stuff. She was running low on her foundation and mascara anyhow. It was how she justified allowing him to buy the stuff, because she caved like a dieter standing in a fudge shop.

And she didn’t put up a fight when he insisted on getting her shampoo, conditioner, body wash, and lotion. She simply gave in. Because it was easier than causing a ruckus in public. The moment they were alone, she would give him a piece of her mind.

She winced at the total and began calculating how long it would take for her to repay him. She had one more payment on that loan and her rent on the first. After that, whatever money she made, she could use to repay him for this stuff.

“Want to go look at some other shops?”

“I’d rather we head back to your place.” She was done shopping. It would take her too long to pay this stuff back. She wouldn’t become more indebted to him.

Josh assessed her, giving the impression he was about to steer her toward the next shop. But he could see through her pretenses to the real her.

“Fine. Let’s head home,” he agreed because he must see she was seconds from losing her shit over this stuff.

With their hands laden with bags, they started the trek back. Temperatures had dipped into frigid territory while they shopped. But she was too steamed to really feel it.

The moment they were alone in the elevator, she said, “I’ll pay you back for all of this. It might take me a hot minute, but I will.”

“You’ll do nothing of the sort.” He scoffed with such a deep frown his brows almost touched one another.

“Josh, it’s too much. Either I pay you back, or I’ll march this stuff back and return it. And while I appreciate you doing something nice for me, I won’t let you pay for it.”

Even with his hands laden with bags, he cornered her up against the wall, as imposing as ever. And she hated it, but her body purred at his nearness.

Stupid body.

“Bloody hell, woman, you’ll do nothing of the sort. Consider it a gift because I don’t want you going home tonight.”

A gift? He'd spent upward of a grand on her. Those kinds of gifts always came laden with expectations and strings attached. "Why are you being so difficult? Don't you understand that it makes me uncomfortable?"

Warmth entered his stern gaze. "And it's something you're going to have to get used to, lass. What happens when you move in with me?"

"What do you mean?" Move in with him? Was he kidding?

"Lass, the cost of living downtown is higher than out in the suburbs. And there are things you will need I know your salary won't cover. It's my job to take care of you and provide you with the things you need. You'll need a car for your own safety, if nothing else, when you go out to run errands or go to work or have rehearsal with your band."

She'd cross her arms if they weren't full of bags. He really had bought her way too much. "Who says I'm going to move in? We could break up. I mean, are we going out? We haven't been on an actual date. All we've done is screw. And you could get sick of me."

He growled deep within his chest, sounding almost like an ancient Celt battle cry. "Lexi, get this through that thick skull of yours, woman. This—us—we're happening. And I'm going to buy you things and make sure you have whatever the feck your heart desires. I'll protect you, even when you're being difficult and make me want to spank your ass until the lesson gets through that thick brain. And once your suspension at Eros is up, I'm collaring you, because you're fecking mine."

She sucked in a shocked breath, staring into his eyes to discern the truth behind his words. “You want to collar me?”

The elevator quietly dinged their arrival at his floor.

“When are you going to realize that I’m all in? That I want your ornery ass in my life and my bed. It’s where you belong, lass. And I don’t care if I have to fight you to make it happen.” He pressed the button to keep the doors open but leaned in so his face hovered an inch from hers. “And I’ll take you on our first date. Just not tonight. Because tonight I intend to prove just how right we are for each other. And I’ll start by fucking the resistance out of you.”

He jerked his head toward the hall. “Now let’s get inside, or I’ll fuck you right here in the hall, and I won’t care who sees us.”

Part of her wanted to push him that far. Discover if he would do as he threatened. But then, Josh didn’t back down from a fight and thought better of it. It wasn’t that she minded public sex because she didn’t, but it could harm his standing in the building, and they could get arrested. And she refused to live up to her sister’s expectations.

“If you want me to leave the elevator, you’re going to have to move.”

He retreated three steps. Just enough to allow her to walk past him. But she intentionally brushed her body against him and was rewarded when his gaze narrowed, pulsing with untamed lust.

Lexi headed to his front door at the end of the hall, with Josh a step and a half behind her the entire trek, breathing down her neck. Her body sizzled at his nearness, at the scorching heat throbbing between them. Whatever lesson he planned to teach her would be dirty and depraved, and she would love every naughty second of it.

Josh unlocked the door. The moment they stepped inside, they dropped the bags on the floor, and he had her up against the wall in his foyer. His mouth crushed hers in a hungry, devastating exchange. He slid his hands beneath her skirt and palmed her ass through her tights. She was bare beneath them, and she cursed them because they created a barrier.

She yearned to have him inside her. She moaned into his mouth, returning his kiss with a desire bordering on manic when he lifted her up and wrapped her legs about his waist. The contact of his hips pressing against her sex had them both groaning. He couldn't know what it meant to her that he wanted to collar her. Because in their world, it was as good as a marriage proposal. And it sparked an emotion inside her she wasn't familiar with—hope.

The idea of wearing his collar, of belonging to him permanently, tossed a grenade on her lust. And Lexi couldn't get close enough to him. She rolled her hips as he ground his pelvis, letting her feel all his inches. She needed him inside her. She reached between them, and her nimble fingers undid the clasp and zipper on his jeans. She teased the waistband of his boxers, threatening what she intended.

A throat cleared nearby.

And a voice said, “Bloody hell. Guess we shoulda called first.”

Lexi froze. She couldn't even move her hand from his boxers. Josh lifted his mouth and glanced toward the kitchen and living room beyond. “Aye, you bloody well should have called, you feekin' eejits.”

She followed the direction of Josh's gaze. Standing in the living room with their hands shoved into their slacks were his brothers, Sean and Aiden. The two rascals were grinning ear to ear over the show they had inadvertently given them.

What a damn predicament. Lexi wasn't a prude. In her time at Eros, she performed public scenes. It added extra heat to the scene, and she had enjoyed herself fully. But she also wanted to be mentally prepared for that level of vulnerability. Besides, they were his brothers, which made this whole thing awkward.

She shoved at Josh's chest, signaling he should put her down. He gave her an apologetic look. But he unwrapped her legs from his waist, holding her steady as he lowered her feet to the floor.

The moment she was free, she grabbed all the bags they'd dropped in their hurry and made her escape.

“Um, hi. I'll just let you guys talk.” She power walked past them to the stairs. Holding her head high, she ascended the stairs to his bedroom, fighting mortification and losing.

On the way up, she overheard Sean ask, “Isn't that the same sub who rejected you?”

She winced because the situation painted her in a terrible light.

Josh grunted at Sean's question. Ignoring his brothers because he needed a moment to cool his lust, he waltzed into the kitchen and grabbed a couple beers from the fridge. Lexi had scurried out of sight as fast as her feet would carry her.

Not that he blamed her. He'd seen the pink blush spread over her cheeks. But it puzzled him because it was at odds with the fantasy she mentioned. But then, she was a walking dichotomy with her sass and soulfulness. And the revelations about her family, how they treated her, royally pissed him off. It didn't paint his coworker, Lisa, in a good light either.

How did they not see how amazing she was? Were they blind?

Sean and Aiden had a seat on his couch with mile-wide, cheesy grins on their faces. He carried over the beers and handed them each a bottle.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" He sat across from them, eyeing his brothers. He was two years older than Sean and four years older than Aiden. When his cousins offered him the lead counsel position and he made his plans to move to the

States, these two decided they wanted to leave Ireland as well, much to their mum's dismay.

“We were going to see if you wanted to grab a bite and head to the club with us. But we can see you're already occupied.” Aiden's coloring was similar to his own, with the same inky hair he'd inherited from their dad. But his eyes were their mum with their shape and crystal blue color. And he was two inches taller than him, something Aiden loved teasing him about.

“Aren't you a mite old for her?” Sean asked. He was the opposite of him and Aiden in that his hair color was like their mum's and his sea-green eyes were their dad's.

Josh sipped his beer for a minute, letting his patience quash the rest of his lust. “Appreciate the thought, but I'm not going to the club tonight.”

“And you're with Lexi because?”

At Aiden's question, Josh glanced up the stairs, hoping their intrusion didn't set the progress they'd made back. He didn't want to divulge too much. However, if he didn't cut this off at the knees, these knuckleheads would head straight to their cousins and blather on about what they witnessed.

And he didn't want the rest of his family to know about their relationship yet. Not until they were more solid. Because while he was all in, Lexi still had major doubts he had to help lay to rest. He couldn't do that with his nosy, albeit well-meaning family interfering with his love life.

“I ran into her outside of the club, and we hit it off,” he said by way of explanation.

“But she turned you down flat. Why would you want to hook up with her?” Sean asked, sipping at his beer with an arched look like Josh had lost his marbles.

“He’s right. She’s a looker, that’s for sure, but I don’t know why you would pursue something with her. She doesn’t seem like your normal type.” Aiden scratched at his head.

“This stays between us. No tattling to our cousins or our parents. Understood?” He glared them, imparting the world of hurt he would exact upon them should they break their word.

They nodded. Their bond was impenetrable. When they first moved to the States, they rented a place together to help one another get their bearings in a foreign country. And it worked. But it also deepened their bond. There was no one he trusted more than his brothers, not even his cousins.

“I felt the Ryan click with Lexi,” he admitted out loud for the first time.

“Bollocks,” Sean exclaimed, wide-eyed.

“Bloody hell, you sure?” Aiden asked with a frown marring his brow.

“Aye. Once her suspension is up at Eros, I’m gonna collar her.”

“Well, hell. We should be celebrating.” Aiden chuckled and toasted him with his beer.

“Does she know?” Sean jerked his chin toward the stairs toward his bedroom.

“No, not about the Ryan click. But she does know I plan to collar her and have her move in with me.”

“And you’re the one who didn’t believe in the Ryan click!” Aiden cackled, smacking his thigh as if it was the funniest thing he’d ever heard.

Aye, he was the doubting Thomas in the bunch. “Aye, tis true. But you feckers just wait. Your turn is coming, you bloody wankers. And when it does, I’ll be the one laughing.”

“Have you let Mum and Dad know?” Sean asked, all serious.

“No. Not yet. She’s still not sure of me, given my history at the club.”

“But everyone at the club gets around. I know we certainly have. And the subs tend to line up for our clan. We can’t help it if we’re in high demand.” Sean shrugged as if it was no big deal. But it was only because he hadn’t found the woman he’d felt a click with yet. Because it changed everything.

“She has her reasons.” Which he wouldn’t divulge, not even to his brothers. They were her private pain, and it was up to him to help her heal. “But it’s left her uncertain regarding the truthfulness of my words.”

“You’ll wear her down eventually.” Aiden was far too confident in his abilities.

“And will there be wedding bells in the offing? Because Mum will be beyond pleased. She’s been nagging us lately

about why we're not married and giving her grandbabies," Sean asked.

At the mention of marriage, his normal knee-jerk reaction of never bloody again was absent. Because deep down he knew they were headed in that direction. It wasn't tomorrow, and he wasn't ready to propose just yet. But it would come. Experiencing the click had spun his world, and he was still navigating the new terrain.

In the meantime, he would continue arguing his case to make her fall for him. She was inching closer to trusting him too. If he kept at it, she would be gone over in no time.

"Aye, eventually, so be nice."

Their shite-eating grins made him want to bash their heads together. "How goes it over at New Dublin Table?"

Sean relaxed in his seat. "Good. Colin's thinking of expanding again. I swear he's got one of the best heads for business. He can sniff out a new opportunity and make it shine."

"Aye, that he can, but so do we."

"True, but he's added to the number of restaurants I oversee since my slate has increased revenue by fifty percent. All the changes I implemented worked like a charm. And my restaurants constantly have a wait list." Sean toasted himself and drank deeply from his beer.

"Fantastic, Sean. Proud of you. Aiden, how goes the construction?"

“Can’t complain. Brody’s a grand boss. We’re breaking ground on a new project next month building a new outdoor mall.”

“He got the bid?” Josh asked, surprised because there were a few legal snafus along the way.

“Aye. It’s a massive project. We’ve had to bring on extra crew. And it’s one that will last a year or more, given the size and scope. Brody’s happier than a fly on shit.”

“I can imagine.” Brody didn’t make it into the club as often anymore. But he and his wife Reegan had welcomed twins last spring, and he knew family life was dominating his days.

“What about the acquisition? Jase mentioned in passing that you guys were working on acquiring that local beer brewery that Dean will wind up overseeing.” Aiden asked.

“It’s still in the works. My team and I are hashing out all the final legal details of the contract and will wind up working with their attorneys. But the deal will make RMD a fuck ton of money. And Dean will wind up overseeing the company in addition to his duties at the distillery.”

“Are you hungry? We should order some food,” Aiden said, but then, he was always hungry.

Josh sighed. He loved his brothers. But it was clear they had no intention of leaving soon unless he kicked them out. And one of them would tattle to their mum in jest, and he would never hear the end of it. “I’ll order us some pizzas, but then you’ve got to leave.”

His brothers grinned. “Are we cock blocking you?”

“Aye. And while I enjoy hanging out with you, I’d rather be doing her than shooting the breeze with you feckin’ eejits.”

“Pizza sounds good. Get one loaded.”

“Like I don’t know what you feckers eat on pizza.” He was already entering their order on his phone. He didn’t know what type of pizza Lexi liked. But considering the sheer amount of food his brothers and he could put away, he was sure she would find something in their order she would like. But he added a salad, two orders of breadsticks, and some hot wings just to round it all out.

Just when he was getting worried about Lexi, she came strolling down the stairs in one of her new outfits with makeup on and her hair styled. Even in something as simple as jeans and a soft cashmere sweater in electric blue, she took his breath away.

“Hi, guys.” Lexi smiled at his brothers, her earlier embarrassment vanished as if it had never existed.

“Lexi, nice to see you,” Aiden said, toasting her with his beer bottle.

“Sorry about the interruption earlier,” Sean apologized sheepishly.

At his comment, she blushed. “It’s all right.”

He held out his hand for her. She took it and let him pull her down next to him on the couch. He settled his arm around her shoulders, worried she might reject him. But she leaned in

like they had been sitting this way together for years. “I ordered dinner. Hope you don’t mind pizza.”

“Who doesn’t like pizza?” She snorted and smiled.

“I’m not sure what toppings you prefer,” He explained, ignoring his brothers’ stupid smirks.

Lexi shrugged like his ignorance was no big deal. “Pizza is pizza. Mainly pepperoni. But I can eat most toppings.”

“We got a loaded supreme, a pepperoni, and a Hawaiian. Plus a bunch of sides as well. These bloody feckers eat like they’ve not been fed all week.”

She inched away and stared with a concerned expression. “Please tell me you’re not the one who likes pineapple on your pizza.”

He chuckled. “Nah, that would be Sean.”

“Okay, good, because you’d lose some serious brownie points.” She settled herself back against his side.

“What do you have against pineapple?” Sean asked her.

“Nothing. It’s one of my favorite fruits. But it doesn’t belong on a pizza.”

“That’s what we’ve said, but the wanker keeps putting it on perfectly good pizza and ruining it,” Aiden exclaimed.

When the pizzas arrived, Lexi was up grabbing plates while he and his brothers got the meal set out on the kitchen island.

The four of them sat at his kitchen table, devouring pizza, salad, wings, and breadsticks. And he watched Lexi with his

brothers. She held her own with them. And his brothers were charmed by her; each of them gave him a nod of approval. Not that he needed it, but it was nice to know they did. It meant the rest of the family would welcome her too. And given her history with her own family, he wanted his to be the family she always needed.

But he was certain the debacle at the singles night had made the rounds in the gossip pool at Eros.

By the time they finished dinner, there was a newfound respect for Lexi in Aiden and Sean's eyes. Fuck, if he could, he'd march her to Eros and do the collaring ceremony tonight. But he couldn't allow her suspension to be lifted. With a sub as strong-willed as Lexi, she would keep him on his toes. If he bent the rules, she would walk all over him.

But what she needed most wasn't getting her way all the time—it was to be cared for and protected. She sparked those needs in him. The need to provide. The need to protect. It was a key fitting into a lock. He was certain as their relationship developed and deepened, more compatibilities would arise. But those key pieces were elemental to him.

And she was independent enough that she didn't need him. Without him, he'd bet she would still succeed with her band. But she wanted him, which was an important distinction. Because she had been getting along fine without him.

She submitted because she wanted to, not because she had to. It meant a part of her had chosen him, trusted him enough to gift him with her submission. And it was heady as fuck when such a strong woman offered her surrender.

Aiden leaned back in his chair, tossing his napkin on his empty plate. “We appreciate you feeding us after we barged in like that.”

“Yeah, we promise to call ahead next time.” Sean winked at Lexi.

Josh wanted to kill him for flirting with his woman. But considering their mum would be quite put out with him, he refrained. But just barely. Didn’t mean he wouldn’t add a few extra hits the next time they went to Jase’s gym for a match in the ring.

“I’ll walk you guys out.” He tossed his napkin down before rising.

Sean and Aiden each gave Lexi a hug before heading toward the door. Josh followed them out to the elevator.

“From now on, call before you come over unless it’s an emergency. And say nothing to people at Eros about Lexi and me. It’s still new, and I don’t want to do anything to scare her off. And I’m going to bow out of dinner tomorrow since we had it tonight.”

“We won’t,” Sean and Aiden agreed together.

“Good enough. Have fun tonight.”

“Later.” Sean and Aiden filed into the lift.

With a chin nod in parting, he walked back to his place. He hated that some of his time with Lexi had been eaten up by his brothers’ unannounced visit. But they had the rest of the night.

He stepped inside and flipped the locks, engaging the alarm system. He located her in the kitchen, cleaning up after their dinner. It was such a homey thing. He walked up behind her at the sink and slid his hands around her waist, pressing a kiss against her neck. “Sorry. I didn’t know they were showing up tonight. They are under strict orders to call before coming.”

She leaned against him. “They have a key to your place?”

“Aye. We each have a spare key to one another’s home in case of emergencies and that type of thing. They’ve been known to drop by unannounced, but it was usually at the end of the night at a nearby bar, and they’d have a taxi drop them off here to sleep off the booze.”

“And you like each other? You’re friends?” She sounded so surprised.

“Are you and Lisa not friends?” He couldn’t imagine his life without his brothers. They were his best friends. And even on the days he wanted to knock their heads together, he still didn’t know what he would do without them.

She snorted. “No. We’re more like hostages who survived our parents’ rigorous upbringing.”

“But you live together.” It didn’t make sense to him. Lisa was nice enough at the office, if a mite set in her ways. He could see how that might cause some friction, given Lexi colored outside the lines of what was considered normal.

She turned and faced him, looping her arms around his neck. “When I quit school two years ago, I needed a place to live. My parents had stopped speaking to me and wouldn’t

give me access to the trust my grandparents left me until I turned twenty-five. And considering I work at the Java Hut, it's not like I can afford an apartment on my own without that trust. But it's cool, I don't need much. And I'm hardly there except to shower and sleep."

"Your parents aren't speaking to you just because you left school?"

"Yep. They've cut off all communication because I'm no longer following the life plan they set out for me and am their biggest disappointment."

"Have you tried talking to them, letting them know how you feel?" His mum and da were his most ardent supporters. He missed having them nearby every day and couldn't imagine not having that support growing up.

"They don't care."

"But—"

She put her fingers over his mouth to stop him and gave him a serious look. "I appreciate that you're trying to fix this for me. I know as a Dom, you can't help yourself. But you need to understand my parents are the worst narcissists imaginable. Lisa could do no wrong. She literally could show up for dinner, tell them she murdered someone, and they would celebrate her. While no matter what I did or said or how much I racked my brain to do things they would find worthwhile, they always disapproved of my life choices. They consider me their failure and problem child. Talking to them is futile because they will never listen to what I have to say. They

never criticized Lisa. But me, I bring home a GPA better than my sister, and they found nothing but fault with it.”

The more she described her upbringing, the angrier he became. “What had you been studying in college?”

“I was premed.”

“Bloody hell, seriously, you were premed?” He knew she was smart. But he hadn’t realized she had such a brain on her.

She nodded. “Yep. I attended Northwestern and had already been accepted to their med school. I was a semester away from graduating.”

“Why did you leave?”

“Because I realized the only reason I was pursuing that career was to appease my parents. I didn’t have a passion for it, not like I do music. If I had stayed and continued with my education, I might have made an okay doctor, but it would have leeched out my soul until there was nothing left.”

“But where did you learn to play guitar? Because you’re excellent.”

She grinned at the compliment. “In high school. I had to take an arts elective, and I chose Intro to Guitar. Since it was acoustic, my parents were okay with it. But I was hooked from the moment I started learning. And learning music took on a life of its own. Any free time I had, I spent playing and practicing.”

Fuck, she was amazing and didn’t realize it. And it was part of her charm. “You know, if you have a copy of the trust documents, I’d be happy to review them for you. Free of

charge, of course. And we'll see if there's a loophole where you could gain access to your trust fund now instead of needing to wait until you're twenty-five."

"Really? Do you think there's a possibility of there being one?" She acted so surprised. But he was pissed. Why hadn't her sister done something to help her out? Lisa was a fucking attorney and should have helped her sister. But it made him realize how lucky he had been with his brothers and his parents.

At her question, an uber-confident smirk curled his lips. "I can always find a loophole. If you get me a copy, I'll review the documents and see if there are any stipulations they can enforce to deny you access to it. Because technically, you're an adult who shouldn't be denied access just because your parents don't agree with your life choices. Officially, it's already your money. They've simply been the gatekeepers. But if they are holding on to it because of unreasonable conditions, then there may be a way to get them removed as the executors. I'd have to read the trust documents and will from that estate."

"I've got copies at home. I'll grab them after work tomorrow. But enough about me. Why did you decide to move from Ireland to the States?"

Pleasure zinged through him at her interest. He was making inroads. It was slow going, and they had kinks to work out, but it was progress. "A couple reasons. There was more opportunity for advancement here than back home. Being cousins with Jase and them didn't hurt either. When the lead

counselor position opened up at RMD, Jase contacted me. At the time, I had been working a shit job as a solicitor, making peanuts. The job offer from my cousins was an opportunity I couldn't pass up."

"And what's the other reason?"

"I had to get away from my ex-wife." Something he'd not told any of the subs at Eros. He'd been tight-lipped about his personal life. Partly because he hated how much his ex-wife had played him for a fool. He'd loved her, and she used him to support her through law school. The moment she got her degree, she left him for a partner at the firm where she'd interned.

"You were married?" Her eyes widened.

"Yep. And it didn't end well." Which was the short version. As much as she had divulged, he knew he needed to do the same. But his ex-wife was a sore spot. He didn't want to talk about her.

"How long were you married?" Her fingers teased the ends of his hair. And he wished he could ignore the question. But if he wanted her to trust him, he had to do the same with her, no matter how uncomfortable the topic made him.

"Four difficult years. But we've been divorced almost a decade." And he hadn't been in a serious relationship since. He'd been unwilling to allow any woman into his heart.

"And why did you need to get away from her?"

"Because she's running for public office and is bloody everywhere." Her face had been plastered on street signs, on

every newspaper and television station. It had been bloody infuriating because he'd not been able to escape her. It was bad enough to see how much of a social climber she'd been, but the proof of how effectively she used men to climb her way to the top infuriated him. Because she'd played him for a bloody fool, and he'd not seen it coming until he discovered her infidelity.

But he didn't want to talk about her anymore. He wanted to sink into Lexi and continue his campaign to make her his. He tugged her closer until there wasn't an inch of space between their bodies. He adored her curves and the way her tits pressed against his chest. And since she had to be up early for work, they would start the festivities early. "Enough about my ex and your family. I want to take you to my private playroom."

She gasped. "You have your own playroom? Really?"

"I do." He let his gaze travel over her form. "And as much as I know I should take you out for drinks for our first official date, I need to fuck you."

Her mouth parted on a small moan. With her eyes wide and her pupils dilated, she breathed. "Show me your playroom, Sir. I even promise to kneel for you this time."

*H*and in hand, they headed upstairs. Josh felt her nerves and excitement since this would be their first scene together.

His playroom was located on the third floor of his penthouse. It originally had been another bedroom, but he turned it into his private BDSM playroom with all the toys. The floors were hardwood like the rest of the place, but that's where any resemblance to the rest of the penthouse ended.

He had the walls painted a dark gray to look like a dungeon. The moment they entered, the motion sensor kicked the lights on. He had gone with wall sconces that emitted a warm gold glow. They had a dimmer switch as well, which he lowered to give it the right kind of ambience.

“If you need to use the bathroom, you have five minutes. Then I want you naked and kneeling before the bench for me.”

She licked her lips. “Yes, Sir.” Then she scurried away to the ensuite bathroom.

While she was in the bathroom, he headed to the black wooden armoire in the corner, just past the daybed, and

grabbed the items he wanted to use. He kept the armoire stocked with lube, condoms, and toys. He carried them over and placed the items on a small table beside the bench. Then he removed his shirt, folded it, and stored it on top of the bed. He toed off his shoes and socks, placing them at the foot of the bed before stripping off his jeans and adding them to the pile on the bed. But kept his boxer briefs on for the time being.

He turned just in time to watch Lexi stroll out of the bathroom without her clothes and kneel beside the bench in a picture of perfect submission.

He pressed a hand against his hard cock, attempting to stave off his hunger to sink into her pussy.

Desire pulsed through him as he stalked to her side. And he worried, for the first time since becoming a Dom, if he'd be able to control himself. She tested him, pushing the boundaries of his control.

He caressed her head, trailing his fingers over her silken hair. Then he cupped her chin, drawing her gaze up from the floor. "Good girl. You did so well. Take my hand and rise."

At the compliment, she flushed and beamed. Did she have a praise kink? Considering what she told him about her parents and their horrendous treatment, it made sense. And it was an avenue they would explore.

She placed her hand in his and let him help her to her feet. Gone was the spunky, sarcastic, ready-to-fight woman, and in her place was the perfect submissive.

His gaze lingered on her killer form. Tits a man could drown in. A slender waist with hips that flared out and gave a man a generous handhold. Her legs were amazing, with thighs that touched but made great fucking earmuffs.

“What’s your safeword?” he asked, his voice thick with lust.

“Guitar.”

“Good girl.” He ran his hands through her hair, tilting her head back. Her eyes slid shut at the caress, and bliss painted her stunning face.

He wanted to kiss her but held back, because if he kissed her, he would abort the scene and fuck her senseless. There was something about Lexi’s mouth, with her pouty lips, that made him lose his mind.

He drew his hands down to her amazing tits. Cupping the heavy globes, he growled deep in his chest. He brushed his thumbs against her nipples, and the pink peaks stiffened at his touch. But not enough for what he had in mind. He swooped down, capturing a bud between his teeth, and sucked it deep into his mouth. He flicked his tongue against it, making it swell and harden for him.

Lexi gasped. Her hands gripped his head, and she arched her back, feeding him the mound.

He worked the bud until it was an angry red and stiff. Then he grabbed a set of magnetic ball clamps. “These will pinch. Let me know if the pain’s too much.”

And he affixed the first one. It clamped her nipple tight, pushing the bud out even more. But damn, it made her tit look amazing. She moaned, a breathy, throaty sound that made his cock jolt and precum seep from the head, forming a wet patch on his boxers.

Once he was certain she could handle it, he gave its twin the same wicked treatment, sucking on the bud until it protruded lewdly, and then he attached the magnetic ball clamp.

She winced at the pinch. But he leaned down and flicked his tongue over her abused nipples until she was gasping and arching her back.

“You’re doing so well. Being such a good girl. Let’s get you up on the bench, shall we?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He helped her climb up and position her body the way he wanted, with her belly against the bench and her ass positioned at the edge. It gave him easy access to her pussy and ass. When he had her right where he wanted her, he restrained her legs and arms in leather cuffs and then affixed a leather strap over her lower back. Now her body was on total lockdown, putting her at his mercy.

Josh caressed the slender lines of her back. She sighed into his touch while he marveled that she was meant for him. “Such a good girl. I have a surprise for you. Look toward the windows.”

The bank of windows were currently shielded by thick, heavy blackout curtains. But she had an exhibitionist streak inside her. And since she was barred from the club for another few weeks, this should feed the need inside her. He grabbed the remote on the table and pressed the button for the curtains to open.

They retracted all the way to the walls on either side. And now she had a clear view of downtown Denver and the mountains beyond. The sun had already set, and darkness loomed only broken by city lights. But at her sharp gasp of pleasure, he knew it was the right choice.

“And now anyone could look in this window and see every dirty, filthy thing I intend to do to you.”

She moaned. “Oh god.”

He cupped her pussy and found her sopping wet. “You’re fucking drenched, lass. But before I begin, there’s one last thing. You are not to come until I allow it. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” she whined.

“Good girl.” Josh knelt, inhaling her sweet musk, and parted her labia.

Leaning in, he swiped his tongue through her crease, growling at her exquisite sweetness. He teased her clit, circling the nub as it hardened for him, then latched his mouth around it and sucked hard until she cried out at the pleasure. But that only made him hungrier for her cries.

He ate her cunt until her cream coated his chin and her thighs. Only then did he grab the last of the magnetic clamps

and affixed them to her clit.

She moaned low, and her head dropped onto the bench.

He smacked her rump. “No. Keep those eyes open and look out the window. Or I will fuck your mouth and deny you an orgasm.”

“Yes, Sir,” she grumbled, but lifted her head back up. He rubbed the red handprint on her ass. “Good girl.”

And Josh rose to his feet. Grabbing the lube, he smeared some over her back channel, pressing a single digit inside, stretching her. He thrust his finger in and out past the taut ring of muscle as she relaxed into it. Then he added a second and third finger, and with every deep thrust, he would spread his fingers, preparing her channel to take the large conical butt plug.

He was giving her dual penetration tonight. Moving forward, this was the only way she would ever have it, with him using a butt plug or a dildo. Because he meant what he told her—she belonged to him, and that included every part of her.

When her moans crescendoed with his fingers pumping in and out without obstruction, he removed them and grabbed the plug. Coating the plug with more lube, he pressed the tip of the device against her anus. “Deep breaths for me, lass.”

He began working it inside her channel. Thrusting it in and out, progressing deeper with each pass. This thing would turn her pussy into a clamp for his dick. She’d be tighter than ever before when he finally fucked her.

His cock twitched, and he felt more precum leaking from the tip.

The plug finally slid home. “Now there’s a sight. How are you doing, lass?”

“It feels so good, Sir. But I really want to come.”

He leaned over her back and murmured in her ear. “You’ll come on my cock and not a moment before, understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

He gripped her ass cheek and squeezed. “Good girl.”

And then, because he was a smidgeon sadistic, he turned the vibrations of the butt plug on low and was rewarded by her gasped groan of pleasure.

He couldn’t wait to fuck her.



*F*lames licked across Lexi’s skin, engulfing her entire body.

This man was slowly driving her out of her mind with ecstasy. She fought to keep her eyes open and on the window. But it was difficult with the riot of sensations blasting her body. The tinges of pleasurable pain and the vibrations in her ass.

She was beyond ready for him to fuck her.

But he was a Dom in the purest sense of the word. He wasn’t a pushover, and he’d make her toe the line. Otherwise

he would have contacted Gabe to have her suspension lifted.

But she adored the praise he heaped upon her. It went a long way toward mending all her broken pieces. She'd never had anyone be this attentive or tell her how good she was until Josh. And after years of feeling like she would never measure up, it shifted her internal perception of herself.

Because she believed she would always be the odd man out. The one who never really fit in with anyone. The woman who was always put down and made to feel lesser simply because she wouldn't conform to their ideologies of how they believed life should be.

Leather tresses caressed her back.

Her breath expelled in a rush. It had been ages since she had been properly flogged.

Josh drew the falls down her back and over her ass, teasing the vibrating plug in her rear. If someone had told her a few weeks ago that she would willingly be here with Josh and enjoying the hell of out being with him, she would have asked if they were a few beers shy of a six-pack.

“Remember your safeword, lass.”

“Yes, Sir.” And her sigh turned into a groan at the first strike against her butt. It burned so good. But he barely gave her time before the second swat.

She surrendered, needing this more than she realized. All her stress, from living with her sister to her parents being total assholes, all dissolved as the leather smacked against her flesh.

Josh fell into a rhythm. And her body flew. Every limb relaxed. And everywhere he struck turned molten, the heat flooding her core, building the forge inside her. Until she was so close to coming, her head spun.

“Sir, please, I need to come,” she begged, close to tears.

“Fecking finally,” he growled, and the flogging stopped.

His hands massaged her abused flesh for a minute, then he notched his cock at her entrance.

On a rough male groan, he fed his thick shaft inside her. She was infinitely tighter because of the plug. She dug her nails into the leather bench because it walked the razor’s edge of being too much to take. He kept going deeper, advancing until his balls slapped her clit.

“Josh,” she breathed his name, her eyes slid shut at the torrential pleasure.

“Your hot little pussy is clamping down on my dick. Like dipping my wick in a hot compression.”

She inhaled a steadying breath. The double penetration stole every rational thought from her mind. All she could do was feel, and the sensations bombarding her being were epic. She’d never felt anything like it. But then, everything with Josh felt new and different.

She didn’t understand why he had this effect on her.

Josh’s long, slow withdrawal left her whimpering, only for her mouth to drop open on a loud moan when he thrust, tunneling deep until she wondered if he had become a part of

her. He shuttled his length, driving inside her with a violent edge.

Josh leaned over her back, his hips pumping. He gripped her neck, squeezing lightly. “You’re such a good girl. Remember I told you to keep your eyes open.”

Her lids snapped open, and she gasped. “Oh god.”

Her pussy clenched around his cock. Because outside the window was a helicopter hovering nearby.

“Uh huh, they can see us, see me fucking your tight little pussy. Do you think the pilot is flying the helicopter with a hard-on? I would if it were me.”

She whimpered, loving his dirty talk. She used to think there was something wrong with her, but then becoming a member of the Eros Pit changed everything for her.

“Fuck me harder, Sir,” she begged.

“You want to show them what a dirty girl you are and how you like to be fucked?”

“Yes, Sir. Please!”

At her wail, he pounded inside her, smacking his hips against her abused flesh. But the tinge of pain made the sex even hotter. The helicopter flew closer to his building. Shivers erupted down her spine. And it felt as if flames had enveloped her entire being.

But then Josh withdrew completely, leaving her gasping and whining at the loss. He removed her restraints. She wanted to cry, thinking she’d done something wrong. But he picked

her up and carried her over to the window. He lowered her feet to the floor and had her stand. Then he placed her palms against the glass and moved behind her, funneling his length inside.

“Keep your eyes open and on that helicopter. Show them how prettily you come.”

Lexi moaned. He was giving her her fantasy. Because it mattered to him. Because she mattered. It spun her head. And Josh fucked her like the world was ending, savagely hammering his dick inside her. All she could do was hold on for the ride.

Moans spilled from her lips. Her body was primed to detonate.

The helicopter neared the building. Josh’s hands slid around to her boobs. In a flash, he removed the clamps. Blood rushed back into her nipples, and her wires got crossed at the pain.

Lexi came so hard that her legs trembled and gave out on her. She would have collapsed if it weren’t for Josh. He held her upright, pressing her body firmly against the glass, smooshing her boobs. Her face turned to the side while he rammed inside her again and again.

But then he reached between her legs to the clamp on her clit.

She knew there would be pain. But the moment he removed it, her body fucking dissolved at the ecstasy flooding her. In the distance, she heard the helicopter. And Josh plunged

deep on a guttural roar as he came, his hot come splashing her insides, setting off a secondary round of orgasmic bursts. Had she died and entered the pearly gates?

Because she'd never climaxed like this before.

Still embedded inside her, he cupped her chin and drew her face back until his lips slammed down over hers for the hottest kiss of her life. This man had indelibly changed her. And she wanted to curse herself because her emotions were fully engaged, but she couldn't find the energy.

Not when he kissed her like her lips were the only thing giving him life.

When he finally lifted his mouth and withdrew his shaft, the helicopter was long gone. Not that it mattered, other than it had added to their enjoyment of the scene. He stepped back. And she would have fallen had he not caught her.

He carried her over to the daybed against the far wall. "Rest here a moment while I clean up."

But her ass was still buzzing. "Um, Sir, the plug?"

A satisfied male smirk spread over his face. "You mean you don't want to keep it in your ass? Perhaps I should make you."

She shook her head. "No. Because then I can't be held responsible for my actions."

He chuckled. The rich sound flowed over her and settled within her chest. "Lay on your belly, lass."

She rolled and lifted her hips slightly. His hands parted her globes. And then the plug was removed. She sighed, her body floating on an ecstasy-fueled endorphin high.

“Be right back. And then we can head to bed.”

“Mm’kay.”

It felt like she blinked, and then he was laying her in his bed. Then her stomach growled, and he arched a brow. “Hungry?”

“Yes.”

“I could go down and fix you something.”

“We should eat pizza. There’s plenty. And we don’t even have to heat it up.”

“You want to eat cold pizza?”

“Don’t be so stuffy. Come on.” She rose from bed, driven by a renewed sense of purpose—and hunger. She grabbed his hand, not caring that they were naked.

He dutifully followed her down the stairs.

When they reached the kitchen, he murmured, “Why don’t we heat it up. It will just take a few minutes in the oven.”

“Fine. But I want three pieces.”

“Done.”

She watched him move around his kitchen, admiring his muscular body and the strength in him. He was a sexy beast. Who knew under the cool exterior was a deviant, kinky Dom who enjoyed sex with an audience?

“Stop that.”

“What?”

“Looking at me like that. You keep doing that, I will fuck you before I feed you.”

“I can’t help it if I find you hot. I mean, have you looked in a mirror?” Her gaze caressed his body.

“I thought I wasn’t your type.”

“I might have fibbed a bit.”

He arched a brow with the hint of a smile curling his lips.
“Is that a fact?”

“Yes. And I can’t help admiring when you’re walking around naked.”

“Right back at ya, lass.” He winked, his eyes scorching as he stared at her.

Between the two of them, they devoured the rest of the pepperoni pizza before Josh took her up against the refrigerator. Then he carried her upstairs and into his bedroom.

But instead of going to sleep, they lay in each other’s arms and talked about everything. From the minuscule to the mundane. Things like what their favorite sports were, their favorite movies, songs, and bands, and on down the list to their philosophies on life and what they wanted for their lives.

Wrapped up together, in a way she had never been with anyone, they were both present in the moment. With their guards down and their egos set aside, the explosive chemistry and deep soul connection flowed.

And they fell asleep in each other's arms. Her last conscious thought before sleep claimed her was that he was the best man she'd ever known.

The next morning, Lexi dragged her tired ass out of bed at the ungodly hour of four. It was a necessary evil if she was going to arrive by the start of her shift at five. She needed the hour to get the café ready to open at six. When a person worked at a coffee joint, early morning shifts were par for the course.

She was bleary-eyed as she dressed and put makeup on, thankful Josh made her get the makeup because it was the only way to hide the bags and dark circles beneath her eyes. Both of which she had earned during their night of carnal indulgence. She pressed a hand against her chest. Because last night had been the best night of her life. She'd never felt close to anyone the way she did Josh. They'd shared everything.

Once she was dressed, she headed downstairs and found Josh at the stove scrambling eggs.

“You didn't have to do this.”

“Sit. Eat. You need the protein if you're going to be on your feet all day.” He was already dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved tee.

“I don’t know if there’s—”

“Sit. Eat. I’ll get you to work on time. But you’re going to eat something first. No arguing.”

And because this weekend seemed to be one of firsts, instead of sitting, she went up to him at the stove and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressing a kiss against his neck. “Thank you.”

He glanced over his shoulder with a rakish grin and wiggled his brows. “Not to worry, lass. I’ll exact payment this evening.”

She laughed. She was dog-tired. But her heart and soul felt lighter than they had in forever. She sensed a delicious aroma. “Did you make coffee?”

“Of course.”

“But I work at a coffee place.”

“And if you’re like me, you don’t want to step outside your door without a cup.”

She released him and made a beeline for the coffeepot. He’d set a mug beside it for her. He even had the creamer and sugar sitting out, ready for her to use. Because he’d paid attention yesterday morning to how she made her coffee.

Oh, she was in deep shit.

She was talking epically deep, in over her head, and sinking even further.

How could she keep her heart safe when he did stuff like this? She couldn’t, that’s how. No one had ever taken such a

keen interest in her. No one had ever asked her what she thought of things and what her dreams for her life happened to be.

Not like Josh.

And as she sat on the barstool and ate the scrambled eggs and toast, her resistance melted. There was still fear present because she knew she could fall for him. But she was no longer fighting her attraction or desire to be with him. What was the point when he did things like giving her her fantasies and paying attention to how she took her coffee?

Once she ate, Josh bundled her up and got her into his car with a to-go mug of coffee. Who was this man? She knew so much more about him than she had, but there were layers here for her to explore. And she doubted that even if she spent the rest of her life trying to decipher everything that made him tick, she wouldn't uncover it all.

He fascinated her with his intellect, his dominance that made her hot just thinking about it, and then his overbearing yet well-meaning care of her. She didn't know a woman who could resist.

They rode in companionable silence until he pulled up right in front of the doors.

Before she could exit his car, he said, "Pack a bag when you get home from your shift, enough to last you the week. I have some errands to run this afternoon. But I'll pick you up at five."

“Josh, I have to be at work early all week long. It’s easier if I do it from my sister’s house. It’s closer. And I don’t have a car. Nor am I willing to make you drive me every day. You’ve got a job to worry about that’s far more important than my coffee making.”

“Do you have a license?” he asked, ignoring her diatribe.

“Of course. I just don’t have a car or insurance. We can go out tonight. But it might be simpler—”

“Pack a bag. I’ll take care of your transportation for work this week,” he ordered with an imperious glare.

She opened her mouth to argue. Because, really, she’d been getting herself to work on her own for years without anyone’s help. Did he really think because she was becoming quite addicted to him that she would simply roll over and let him take charge? She might be submissive, but it was in the bedroom only.

Josh cupped her nape, drawing her face near his. “It’s nonnegotiable, so you might as well save your breath because it won’t do you any good.”

And then he planted a soul-devouring kiss on her that spun her head and made her feel punch drunk. Every thought, each argument she’d formulated, slid right out of her consciousness. It didn’t help that her brain melted under the deft, sure strokes of his tongue in her mouth.

He finally released her and murmured, “Pick you up at five. Be ready with a bag of your things.”

“Okay,” she replied with a grin, caving to his demands. There was no point in fighting him.

When she emerged from his Mercedes, she was unsteady. But it was all Josh’s fault, kissing her brainless like that before she had to go and walk.

She waved him off when she got inside and locked the door behind her. Her boss’s wife was already there.

“Hey Lexi, who’s the guy?” Sarah asked, wiggling her eyebrows.

“Um, just someone I started seeing. Which I guess makes him my boyfriend.” But that was too tame a word for him. There was nothing boyish about him.

He was the finest Dom she’d ever known. He had quickly inserted himself into her life. And she wondered if she had done the scene with him that night at the club if their relationship would have begun that much sooner.

He talked about their relationship as if it were inevitable that she would move in with him. He wanted to collar her.

And if, by the end of her club suspension, they were still chugging along, she would accept his collar. She pressed a hand against her belly to stop the riot of emotions tumbling through her.

She lifted her hand to her neck, wondering what it would feel like to wear the proof of his ownership every day. Then she had no more time for pondering life with Josh while she and Sarah readied the café to open.

And from the moment Sarah turned the open sign on and unlocked the front door, they were swamped. It was Sunday, but they had the before-church crowd, followed by the people who didn't attend church. Then there was the after-church crowd and Sunday brunchers.

By the time she finished her shift at two, her feet ached. But she was filled with an air of excitement because she'd be seeing Josh again in a few hours. And because she felt on top of the world, she splurged on an Uber ride home instead of standing out in the cold and waiting for the bus.

The moment she was dropped off in front of her sister's house, she grimaced. It was funny how much she enjoyed being away from this house. For all appearances, the sedate blue house was charming, if a bit cookie-cutter. But two nights away with Josh and this place just felt toxic.

She was already preparing herself mentally as she strode up the walkway and unlocked the door. Inside, there was a fire in the fireplace in deference to the chill outside. Which meant her sister was home. Unbuttoning her coat, she hung it up on a hook by the door. She figured she would take a brief shower and then get the stuff she wanted packed.

She headed for her room, wondering if she could get in and out without her sister noticing. It happened more often than not because her sister didn't really care one way or the other if she was here.

She hotfooted it to her room, wasting no time once she reached it. She hopped in the shower, thankful she had her own bathroom attached to her bedroom.

Then she made herself look presentable with makeup, styled her hair, and dressed in a denim skirt, boots, and a low-cut top she had a feeling Josh would like. What had he done to her? She never dressed with a guy in mind. Even when she dated Travis or any of the other boys.

And it struck her as she packed up her makeup what set Josh apart from all the others, or at least one of the reasons. He was a man comfortable in his own skin and confident in who he was—a Dominant man who enjoyed kinky sex and made no bones about it.

Back in her bedroom, she packed two weeks' worth of panties. They were something she splurged on. She liked wearing sexy underwear. It made her feel naughty, like she had a secret underneath her clothes that only a select few ever got to see. And she grabbed a few of the kinkier outfits she wore to the club. If she was going to be staying with him, maybe one night she could surprise him with dinner and a show.

She gathered everything she might need for the week, including her outfit for her band's show Friday night.

Once she had everything she thought she would need, she hefted the duffel, which weighed a ton, and left her bedroom, flipping the light off. She carried the duffel to the front door.

"Haven't seen you around all weekend," Lisa said from the kitchen.

She stood at the counter chopping vegetables. Lisa meal prepped every Sunday like clockwork. If she ever became that boring and predictable, put her out of her misery.

“I’ve been busy.” She shrugged and continued her trek to the front door. She laid the duffel beneath the coat rack.

“Doing what?”

She hated the suspicion in her voice. Ever since she dropped out of college to follow her dreams, Lisa acted like she couldn’t be trusted to make her own decisions. She was better than their parents, but it irked her. And it always made her feel like shit.

Even though Lexi knew to the furthest reaches of her soul that she was doing what she was supposed to do, it hurt that her family didn’t support her.

“If you must know, I’m seeing someone.” Lexi couldn’t keep the snarky tone out of her response. Just once, she wished her sister would speak to her without being condescending.

“Are you’re packing a bag because?”

“He and I work a lot between the two of us. It’s easier for me to stay with him a few nights so we get to see each other.”

“Please tell me you’re not with Travis again.” Lisa sighed like Lexi’s life was one big travesty.

“No. I wouldn’t be with him if he were the last man alive. Do you really think so little of me?” But Lexi saw it in Lisa’s eyes. The way she second-guessed every decision Lexi made. Like she was an imbecile. But she’d beaten Lisa’s scores on the PSAT, the SAT, and the ACT and graduated high school with a higher GPA.

“Well, you haven’t made the best choices—”

“Yes, I have. I just made ones that fit me and my life, not yours. I’m not you, Lisa. I wasn’t raised with a golden spoon as if I could do no wrong. Nor did I want the life plan our parents set forth for me. They only wanted me to be a doctor to make *them* look good. Not because I enjoyed it or had a passion for it or because it was what I wanted, but so they could tout my accomplishments to their peers. That’s it. And because I bucked their plans for my life, I’m suddenly an irresponsible moron.”

Lisa rolled her eyes at her diatribe. “Why do you have to be so disagreeable?”

“Why do you insist on being a carbon copy of them?” Lexi asked drolly.

“I’m not!”

“Yes, you are. You toe the line they established for you without any fuss. In fact, you enjoy having them gush over you and your accomplishments. The three of you sit in pretentious judgment of anyone who falls short of your expectations. And it’s fine if that’s the way you want to live. But stop trying to push your beliefs and your way of living on me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing.” Lisa looked hurt.

But she was on a roll. It was like once the stopper in the bottle had been removed, she couldn’t stop herself. And it was partly because of Josh, because he didn’t act like her leaving college had been wrong; he praised her instead. And it meant the world to her.

“Oh really? You mean to tell me you’re not standing there passing judgment on my life and my choices just because they aren’t the ones you would make?” Her phone buzzed in her pocket. She yanked it out of her pocket and read his text.

Josh: *I’m here. Were you a good girl for me? Did you pack a bag for the week?*

Heat flushed her skin. Warmth spread through her chest. And she fought a smile, because she was tired of her sister’s questions and refused to give her any more fodder. “I gotta go.”

“When will you be back?”

“Why do you care? You’ll still get paid for the room I’m renting.” Lexi headed for the door and slipped her coat on.

“I care,” Lisa said quietly, sounding hurt. But Lexi was exhausted from the same arguments. It was like she was continually reliving the experience. And they wouldn’t move on from it, as if their disdain for her choices would make her relent.

“Could have fooled me.” She shouldered her bag and glanced at her sister. “I’ll see ya when I see ya.”

And she left her sister’s house without looking back. They would never see eye to eye. And it was fine. She didn’t need their approval. But she wished they would stop treating her as if she were inferior.

Josh had parked a block down the street. With her head held high, she marched the short distance to his Mercedes. She tossed her bag in the back seat and slid into the passenger seat.

“Hey.” She glanced at him and affixed her seatbelt.

“Problem?”

“Can we just get out of here?” Of course he would pick up on her sour mood even when she tried to hide it.

“Only if you swear to tell me what’s bugging you when we get home.”

Home. Funny how after only two days, his place felt more like home than all the other places she had lived. But she had a feeling it had more to do with the man at her side than the penthouse itself. “I will. Just get us home first.”

“Fine.” Josh pulled away from the curb.

She hated how much Lisa’s condescension still hurt. How much she wished it didn’t matter that the people who were supposed to love and support her just didn’t care for her all that much. And never had.

Once they were on the freeway, Josh reached over and took her hand in his, threading their fingers together and giving them a gentle squeeze.

And all she wanted to do was crawl across the center console and have him hold her.

Josh didn't like the mood Lexi was in. The moment she exited the house with her shoulders hunched, he knew something was up. What had happened since this morning? Because something was really wrong. She'd been happy when he dropped her off, flirty and kissing him with such passion he had spent his entire drive home hard as a fucking rock.

And she'd seemed in good spirits when they had texted throughout the day. So he didn't believe it had anything to do with work. But there was an air of grudging acceptance laced with disappointment emanating from her.

"How was work?"

"Fine. The Java Hut isn't what one would call intellectually stimulating."

"Is there anything you like about it?" he asked, navigating the car onto the highway. He wanted to get her back to his place so he could uncover what was going on. Josh wouldn't force it while they were in the car because he promised he wouldn't. And he was nothing if not a man of his word.

Plus, she seemed fragile right now. Totally not in keeping with her usual zesty verve.

“It pays decently enough for someone without a college degree, and I get free coffee while I work. Plus, it gives my mind the space needed to write my songs and even compose them in my head.”

“How many of the songs your band performs are ones you wrote?” He knew music was her passion. And perhaps talking about it would put life back in her eyes.

“All of them. And yes, I have the copyright on them, so no one can steal them.”

“You? Really? All of them?” Lexi blew him away with her talent. And he was even more impressed that she wrote the songs they performed.

“Don’t act so surprised.”

“Lass, I’m not surprised. I’m amazed by you. And good girl yourself for getting your songs copyrighted.”

“Why law? What attracted you to studying it and making it your profession?”

Her question threw him off. The last person to ask him that question had been his ex-wife. But with his ex, they had been comparing notes. They had gotten competitive with each other. But Lexi seemed genuinely interested. And it warmed him. He shot her a cocky grin. “Besides the fact that I make a fuck ton of money?”

She laughed, gifting him with a smile that had him lifting their joined hands and kissing the back of her palm.

“Yes, besides that.”

“I like the structure of it. Society needs laws in order to function. But I love figuring out loopholes around a law simply because of the phrasing.”

“So you like breaking the law? I didn’t realize you were such a bad boy.”

“It’s not breaking the law, it’s exploiting it. They’re two different animals. And I’ll have you know that back home, I was considered quite the party animal when I was your age.”

“Do you miss it? Ireland?”

“Yes and no. Ireland is in my soul. It’s in my blood. I love it. Of course, I miss it, but it’s more the people I miss, like my parents and our extended family of aunts, uncles, and cousins.” And one day he’d take her to meet his parents, show her the land that would always hold his heart.

“You mean there are more Ryans?” she teased.

“Aye, quite a few.”

“Don’t tell the subs at Eros that, or there will be an envoy headed for Dublin by week’s end.”

“Ha! You’re funny.”

“I know. I’m a little ray of sarcastic sunshine.”

Josh chuckled low. This woman, with her quick wit and willingness to laugh at herself, was damn refreshing. She didn’t refrain from answering questions honestly. She might defer her responses for later, but she was brave enough to face anything.

They pulled into the parking garage and his spot near the elevator. His parking spot had been something he had negotiated in the contract before he bought his place. Living downtown, he didn't want to park on the other side of the garage and have to carry groceries or anything else up.

But he'd actually negotiated for two spaces. And it was time he showed Lexi what she would be driving to and from work, or wherever else she needed to go when he couldn't take her.

"I have something to show you before we head upstairs."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

She looked gorgeous tonight. And on the drive, her body had relaxed from its earlier stiffness. "Get out of the car, and I'll show you."

"Oooh, kinky."

He snorted. "Get your mind out of the gutter, woman, at least until we get upstairs."

"I can't help it if I like what I see."

The compliment threw him. He knew he was good-looking. He wasn't being egotistical. Women threw themselves at him because of his looks and money. But coming from Lexi, his stubborn, independent sub, it was different because it was unexpected and so offhand. And she looked at him like he was her favorite treat.

"Likewise, lass. Now move your arse."

She cackled as they emerged from his car, and she opened the back door to retrieve her duffel bag.

“Leave it for a minute. We aren’t going far.”

She eyed him with suspicion. But she approached, and his gaze slid over her form in the jean skirt and black knee-high boots. He wondered if she was wearing any panties.

She took his hand. Josh pulled her to the red BMW sedan in the space beside his Mercedes, then pulled out a key. “This is for you to drive. Insurance is in the glove box. And I’ll get you the access code to get into the garage. This is the assigned parking space.”

“You bought me a car? Josh, just no. I can’t drive that. It’s expensive. It’s—”

“A car I had already been looking at buying. And since I can’t drive two cars at once, the most practical thing to do is have you drive this one.”

And yeah, he knew it was setting a precedent. But she needed a car to get to work. She made peanuts. And since he wanted her with him, he had to bend. While he didn’t want her in this relationship for the money, she fought him at every turn when it came to paying for things.

“Josh, I—don’t understand you. You could have gotten me a gift card for one of the rideshare companies. But a BMW?”

“No, those things aren’t safe. This will get you to and from work and band practice. When is that, by the way?”

“Tuesdays and Thursdays. I can’t—”

“Yes, you can. Stop being difficult. You won’t win this argument. And so help me, if I find you taking one of the rideshare deals, you won’t sit pretty for a week from the spanking I’ll give you.”

“I think you just want an excuse to discipline me,” she murmured with an arched brow.

She wasn’t wrong. Any time he could get his hands on her, whether for pleasure or to dole out some pain, he would take it. She had bewitched him with her siren song. The Ryan click had turned his world upside down. And he would stop at nothing until she was his in every way.

And he had to protect her, even from herself at times. Put her in a rideshare with a complete stranger? Over his dead body.

“You’re not wrong. Any time I can touch you, I will. Because you’re mine.” He tugged her close and pressed the key into her palm. “Why don’t you sit in the driver’s seat and let me know how it feels.”

She begrudgingly accepted the key with an eye roll and then got behind the wheel. He enjoyed the way her skirt slid up her toned legs. And fuck it all, but he was dying to learn whether she was wearing any panties.

He spent the next ten minutes showing her all the features and getting her phone connected to the Bluetooth. That way he could call her, and she only had to press a button on the steering wheel to answer.

He helped her out. And she walked right into him and wrapped her arms around him. “Thank you. It’s still too much. I’m not looking for a sugar daddy. But I do appreciate having a way to get to work. Even if I don’t have insurance.”

“Ah, you do, actually. I called my insurance company and added you to my policy, along with the Beamer.”

“You . . . wait, what? You bought a car and got me insurance. Josh, it’s too much. I can’t afford to pay that back. I —”

He silenced her diatribe with his hand over her mouth. “Now, listen, lass, and listen well so I don’t have to repeat myself. What part of you belong to me don’t you get? You’re acting like this is a fly-by-night relationship. When are you going to realize that I’m all in and not letting you go? Next month we’ll have a collaring ceremony at the club. And from then on, I will consider you mine. I’ve never collared a sub before because I’ve never wanted to keep one. And for me, collaring a sub is deeper than marriage vows. Do you understand? I won’t let you go, Lexi, not when you belong with me.”

Her breath shuddered out, and she searched his face. For what he had no clue, but then she lowered her gaze and murmured, “Yes, Sir.”

“Why don’t we head upstairs and get you settled. I thought we could order in. There’s this great little steak place that can deliver dinner.”

“Sounds fabulous.”

He put his arm around her, locking the Beamer, and then stopped by his car. When she tried to grab her bag, he shooed her off. “Bloody hell, woman, don’t even think about it.”

“It’s my bag.”

“And? I get you’re used to doing everything on your own, but that’s not the way of it anymore.”

She rolled her eyes when he hefted the bag and was shocked by how heavy it was. “What did you put in this thing?” he asked as they climbed aboard the lift.

“You said to pack for a week. If you haven’t noticed, I’m a girl, and we need things. The shoes, the makeup, the hair products, the hair styling tools, outfits, bras, panties, and a few other items that I promise I’ll wear for you.”

“Is that right? Would these items happen to be slutty?”

“Perhaps.” She closed the distance between them. “I’m wearing one of them right now. Would you like to see?”

The doors opened onto his floor. He blew out a ragged breath. His dick was hard from her seductive teasing. Or perhaps it was just being near her. “Not here. No one else gets to see what’s mine unless I say so.”

He squeezed her hip and escorted her down the hall. While he unlocked the door, Lexi leaned over and murmured in his ear. “And just so you know, Sir, I’m not wearing any panties.”

“Fuck.” That did it.

He shoved the door open and tugged her inside, slamming the door shut and flipping the lock. He dropped her bag to the

floor and backed her up against the wall.

He gripped her hands and raised them above her head, pinning them against the wall. Then he drew her skirt up, needing to discover if she was telling the truth and had been walking around without any panties.

Her breaths came out in short pants. She licked her lips as the hem reached the top of her thighs.

And then he spied the lace of some lingerie she wore beneath the layers. But beneath that, she was bare. He cupped her bare pussy.

She moaned.

“Whose pussy is this?”

“Yours, Sir.”

“That’s right. And I gotta admit, I like you being without any panties. Gives me easy access to what belongs to me.” He dipped his fingers inside. “Fuck, you’re drenched for me.”

“Yes.” She admitted on a gasp.

And because he could no longer stand it, when her pink tongue darted out and wet her lips, he swooped down and claimed her mouth. This woman drove him wild. He wanted her all the time. He couldn’t get enough. And he needed her in ways that left his head spinning.

He teased her clit, rubbing circles around the bud while he plundered her mouth. He ate her moans, knowing he wouldn’t be able to wait. He needed to be inside her again. He’d already gone too long without her.

And while he knew he needed to ask her what soured her mood, it would have to wait until his lust had been satisfied. Even now his cock strained against his jeans, leaking precum and aching to feel her soft heat surrounding him.

But he lifted his mouth. “You’re wearing far too many clothes.”

He helped her remove her coat and then her top. The jean skirt he shoved to her waist along with the flimsy lace see-through negligee. The ivory lace drove him mad with lust. It was virginal and made him want to defile her.

He almost ripped his shirt off and tossed it behind him. And then he lifted her into his arms, pressing her back against the wall, in too much of a hurry to be inside her. He slanted his mouth over hers while he undid his pants, shoving them down far enough to free his dick.

And then he rubbed the head through her soaking slit.

She moaned, rocking her hips, trying to take him inside. But he lifted his mouth and repined her hands above her head. Then he notched his cock at her entrance. “Who does this pussy belong to?”

“It’s yours, Sir.”

He plowed inside in a single thrust. Her pussy clamped down on his shaft. “That’s right. It’s mine.”

He withdrew until the head remained before driving back inside hard enough to bow her back. But he wanted to tease her. Make her crazy and make her beg him to go faster. So he

kept his strokes slow but didn't hold back on the force, fucking her hard and deep.

“You like fucking my pussy?”

He stilled. “It's not your pussy. It's my pussy I'm fucking. But you certainly enjoy riding my cock, don't you?”

He withdrew and slammed home. She arched. “Yes, Sir.”

“And no one else gets to have this pussy but me.” He started fucking her in truth, slamming his dick inside her faster and faster.

“No one but you. Oh god,” she cried, her hips bucking.

He released her arms. Needing both hands, he cupped her ass, using the wall for support, and proceeded to fuck her as if his life depended upon it. Her arms circled his neck as she held on, writhing, taking him deep, meeting his fervent thrusts as her cries filled his ears.

Sweat slicked their skin. He pistoned, pumping his shaft deep inside her, claiming her. He wanted to imprint himself on her body.

“I love riding your cock. It's so big and hard and I want to come, Sir, please.”

He grunted. “That's right. You're going to come all over this cock. And I'm going to make a mess of this pussy. Filling it with my come.”

“Yes, please,” she gasped. Her pussy rippled and clenched, a sure sign of her climax approaching.

Josh doubled down, furiously thrusting, working her body. He fucked her like he was mad at her, grunting and groaning as he rutted inside her tight, soaking-wet heat. Lightning electrified his spine. His balls tightened.

And he knew he wasn't going to last much longer. But he needed to send her flying first. He reached between them and pinched her clit.

She wailed, and her body went tense. And then she was coming on his dick, her pussy clamping and squeezing him.

It was all he needed to send him flying to the heavens with her. His dick jolted and spilled his seed inside her, thrusting again and again until every drop had been spent.

He held her while their heart rates returned to normal, still embedded deep inside her. And something happened as he pulled his head up from the crook of her neck and stared at her beautiful face. Because his emotions were involved. It wasn't just physical, or the Ryan click.

Maybe they had been from the start. And it was why he couldn't get her out of his mind.

Before he unwound her legs from his waist, he murmured, "We should get your stuff put away and order dinner."

She arched a brow, satisfaction in every line of her face. "Or you could take me up to bed for round two and let me suck your cock. Then I can make some spaghetti or something, and then we can eat."

"I like the way you think, woman."

"I thought you'd see things my way."

“You best hang on to me. Because I’m not letting you go.”
He headed toward the stairs with her wrapped around him.
And he didn’t simply mean for the night.

She stayed wrapped around Josh like a pretzel as he carried her upstairs to his bedroom. Her emotions were in complete tumult. Because she liked being with Josh. Hell, she adored when he went all dominant and bossed her around. And his filthy, lewd talk drove her wild and got her so hot she couldn't keep her hands off him.

But on the flipside, the money made her wary. Was she entering another situation where someone she cared about would use money to control her? Would they find themselves at odds with him issuing ultimatums that broke her heart because she couldn't stay?

When she left school two years ago and her parents stopped speaking to her, she vowed she would never allow anyone to control her with money ever again. She would rather work at the Java Hut, making barely above minimum wage for the rest of her life, than be under someone else's thumb that way.

She realized she had avoided talking to Josh about her discussion with Lisa. That she had used sex to divert his attention and hopefully make him forget about it. Because

when it came to her sister and their interactions, most of the time it left her disappointed and hurt. It was always the same.

Once she made the last payment on her loan, she could start looking for other places to live. Because she wouldn't stay at Lisa's house indefinitely. Her bandmates were discussing renting a house. Maybe she could rent it with them. All she really needed was a room, a bed, and a shower.

She knew Josh wanted her to move in with him, but it was too fast. She liked being with him. She could see herself living here with him. But before she made such a huge leap, she needed to feel more confident in their relationship.

Although she should have known Josh wouldn't let it go. That even amazing sex wouldn't stop him, only delay it.

He sat on the bed and shifted her body until she was facedown over his lap.

“Josh, what are you doing?” She bucked against his hold. But she knew. And even as she tried to make him release her, inside her body purred at his dominance and what was to come.

“This is for your delaying tactic and trying to control me with sex.”

“I didn't—”

“You did. And I gave in because I can't resist you. I want you too fucking badly. But this is to drive home that you will not control me through sex. That all you did was delay our conversation. There will be no secrets between us.”

“I'm sorry.” She gulped at the anger lacing his voice.

“I’m sure you are. And I know life hasn’t been easy for you. And that the people who were supposed to support you let you down. I’m not them. You’ll take your punishment like a good girl. And if you do, I’ll reward you with another orgasm.”

Lexi lowered her head, allowing her body to relax. There was no use fighting him. He was in control. And the best way she could apologize was by submitting.

Josh cupped her ass, massaging it, lulling her. She leaned into his touch, tilting her hips. He parted the globes.

“I really made a mess of this pussy. And I will again before the night is done.”

It was all the warning she got as his hand cracked against her bottom. The force made her eyes water at the sharp pain. But it was a familiar one. Josh didn’t hold back. He lit her butt on fire with his discipline. His huge hand whacked her bottom time and again. Her flesh ached and burned, with the burn sliding into her veins and coalescing in her core until her entire being was enflamed.

But tears welled in her eyes and began leaking down her face. His spanking cracked open her heart and soul. And all the pain from the past few years spilled out onto her cheeks.

She didn’t understand why her parents’ love came with conditions. She’d tried, harder than they could possibly imagine, to make them love her. But they never did.

Suddenly Josh shifted her again until she was upright on his lap. And with her face buried against his chest, she sobbed.

“That’s it, lass. Let it all out,” he soothed, caressing her back and holding her close while she cried.

Lexi grieved. Sobbing out her loneliness and the pain of being unwanted by her family. He held her through the storm of her emotions. Until her crying dwindled to nothing more than her breath hitching. But she felt spent and didn’t try to move off his lap.

“Good girl,” he murmured against her brow. “Now tell me why you were so upset when I picked you up.”

“It’s just Lisa and her judging my life. I’m the family disappointment, the black sheep if you will, and no matter what I do, it’s never good enough for them. Their love is conditional. As long as I act and live in a way they approve of. When they don’t understand is that trying to make myself fit into the mold they wanted me to was killing me. Not in the physical sense, but it was killing my soul. And it was just the same old, same old, with Lisa acting like I’m an idiot who can’t be trusted to make her own decisions. And I hate that it hurts so bad.”

“I know. And I’m so sorry that your family are such idiots who can’t see what a gem you are. I can’t imagine what it was like growing up, having your dreams squelched that way, not being supported and loved. But you amaze me. I’ve never known anyone with the courage to walk away from what they know isn’t right for their life. It’s a testament to just how bloody amazing you are, woman.”

Lexi’s heart trembled and cracked open. He handed her a tissue. “Blow,” he ordered. And she didn’t fight him. She was

tired of fighting. Tired of never leaning. And instead of pushing him away, instead of deflecting her feelings with sarcasm, she let them flow freely. She wiped her face with the tissue and set it on the nightstand before lifting her face and staring into his eyes. There were laugh lines framing them. And it was at that moment that she knew she could love him. She was already halfway there.

Relying on instinct alone, Lexi kissed him, pouring every ounce of her feelings for him into it. She held nothing back, dropping her shields and giving him all of her, because he was the first person who had ever truly seen her.

She didn't understand why he was the one who could see past all her defenses to the very heart of her. How he wasn't fooled by her bravado or her attempts to redirect conversations to protect herself.

But he could and did.

He never acted like her music was ridiculous. He celebrated it. And he was protective. She couldn't ever remember feeling this safe.

Lexi felt his swelling cock against her ass.

And she shifted until she straddled him, not lifting her mouth, even as she gripped his shaft and fit it against her drenched pussy. She was so aroused from the spanking she lowered herself and took him inside with ease.

He tore his mouth away and groaned. "Fuck, lass."

"I know. You feel so good."

"I had plans."

“Just be with me. I need you,” she admitted. It was the most vulnerable she’d allowed herself to be with anyone in years.

He threaded a hand into her hair while the other gripped her burning ass. “And I can’t seem to deny you.”

And then his mouth was on hers as he moved them. She held on and found herself on her back with Josh between her thighs, assuming command.

Lexi wrapped her legs around his waist, and he slid even deeper. He enfolded her in his arms as he thrust. Her hips rocked, meeting his wicked strokes.

Passion exploded between them. They couldn’t get close enough. Their movements grew desperate. Their kisses turned primal.

And Josh turned feral, beating his hips, driving his shaft deep. No one else had ever loved her the way Josh did. As if she were his everything. And it went directly to her heart.

He mattered so much.

Pleasure radiated outward from her core. It curled her toes. She gasped into his mouth. He wasn’t gentle. But gentle wasn’t what either of them needed. It was as if their bodies, their needs even, had been specifically calibrated for the other. She didn’t want to read too deeply into it, but it felt like they were meant for each other.

She knew he was older and more sophisticated. Yet with every torrid kiss, every hammered thrust, any perceived

obstacle preventing them from being together long term dissolved as if it never existed.

And her last bit of resistance melted away.

She was all in. But there was no rush either. She wanted to get to know him. She wanted to be traditional and date him. And when her suspension was up at the club was up, she wanted him to collar her. She would wear his collar with pride.

She dug her nails into his back. Her hips gyrated. And their lovemaking turned savage. They couldn't get close enough. Gripping each other tight, hips beating a rhythm. And she knew this was what it was supposed to be, this soul-deep connection where everything and everyone but him went away.

And through it all, Josh was present. He was as entranced by their connection.

They came together in a blinding, white-hot orgasm that left her sobbing and quaking in his arms.

Josh collapsed on top of her, his powerful form pressing her down into the mattress. His face was buried against her neck. And she clung to him, still connected, unwilling to let him go.

They turned a corner tonight. One she didn't know if she was ready for, but there was no stopping it now. She was with Josh.

He pressed a sweet kiss against her neck and lifted his face. At the movement, she lifted her heavy lids to find him

staring with a look in his eyes she didn't understand. And it was gone in the next breath.

“We should hunt up some grub.”

She ran her hands down his back. “In a little while. I'm not ready to let you go just yet.”

And she cupped his ass, holding him inside her as she flexed her inner muscles. He groaned, but his dick began hardening once more.

“You're right. One more time and then we can eat.” He took her mouth and dragged her back down into bliss.

And she went with him willingly, knowing her life would never be the same. Because she was falling for him.

After Lexi's shift on Thursday, she drove to Cliff's place. He rented a loft with warehouse space, which made it perfect for their band practices. They'd had to cancel Tuesday night because both Nate and Robbie had to work late. And past nine, she turned into a pumpkin, given she had to be out of bed most mornings by four.

It was fine because it had given her another night with Josh.

She still hadn't surprised him with one of her outfits. But she had plans for Friday night next week to welcome him home with a special dinner wearing one of her raciest outfits. She had a feeling they'd be reheating dinner, but they had a tendency to do that, so she wasn't worried.

When she pulled up to the warehouse, her phone chimed with an incoming text. She smiled because she knew who it was before she even pulled it out of her purse.

Josh: *Leaving work now. Mind if I stop by your practice, and then we can grab a bite to eat together?*

Lexi: *Not at all. Here's the address. Practice shouldn't run too long either.*

She even gave him the access code to enter the building. Tonight was more of a formality to do a full run-through of their set for the following Friday night. They didn't have a gig this week, but that was okay. She had the ballad she wanted to add to the rotation, so that would give them a few practices before performing it in front of others.

She retrieved her guitar from the trunk and headed inside, taking the long hall down past the loft apartments in the rather utilitarian hallway to the warehouse space in the back.

When she entered, the guys were already set up and waiting for her to begin.

“There she is. We were beginning to wonder if you were going to show,” Robbie said.

“Like I'd miss practice a week away from a gig. No, I got out of work late, and then the traffic was a bitch. Did you guys send in the demo?”

Cliff clapped her on the shoulder. “Well, we're glad you're here. Why don't you get set up and we can begin? And yeah, we uploaded the demo last week. Now, we just have to wait to hear back from the event planners on whether we got an audition.”

“That's great. I know we'll get an audition. I can feel it. And once they hear us, we'll be a shoo-in. And uh, just so you know, this guy I'm seeing is going to stop by. I hope that's all right.”

“Is it that old dude we saw you with?” Cliff asked, taking his seat behind the drums.

“His name is Josh, and he’s not that old.” But looking at her bandmates, who were near her age, whom she adored and considered her brothers from other mothers, they seemed so young. Amazing what a solid week with Josh had done to her perception.

But it also made her wonder if his age was something she had always needed. Because even Travis had been a few years older.

“So, you’re looking for a daddy, not a boyfriend?” Nate teased.

“What? Ew, no. It’s not like that. He’s cool. You guys will like him.”

“What does he do?” Robbie asked, connecting his bass up to the amp.

“He’s an attorney. And I know what you’re going to say. No, he’s not my attorney.”

Cliff held his hands up with a shit-eating grin. “I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“So, it’s serious then? Cause you’ve never allowed any other dudes you’ve gone out with to come to rehearsal,” Nate asked from his spot behind the keyboards.

“I know. But it’s headed in that direction.” And she still was uncertain because, in her experience, good things never lasted—at least not for her.

Nate whistled. “Never known you to say that. It must be serious.”

“I like him a lot.” She thought she might be in love with him. Not that she would tell these guys that. Especially when she had not mentioned her feelings to Josh yet. But she figured it was far too soon for the talk. And when she did tell him, she wanted to be certain of her feelings. “Are we going to practice tonight or talk about our feelings?”

The knuckleheads looked at each other and grinned.

“Let’s talk about our feelings,” Robbie said, pressing his hands over his heart with a cheesy smirk.

They busted up laughing and grabbed their instruments. Cliff picked up his drumsticks and played an entertaining *ba dum tss*.

“Y’all are hilarious. Did you have time to look over the new song?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty dope.”

“Let’s add it after the fifth song in the rotation.”

Once her guitar was plugged in, she tested the strings and made sure they were all in tune. Glanced at Cliff to give them the count.

He brought the drumsticks together.

One. Two. Three. Four.

They jumped into the first song, a fast-paced punk rock number that got the crowd on their feet and drew them in for the rest of their set. The next hour passed by in a blur of

music. They poured their hearts out, even though it was rehearsal. This music was her soul on display.

And she loved every damn second of it. This was why she was here—to make music, to take the stage and sing, to give people a reason to get up and dance.

They took a break midway through the set. And while they were sitting there, she asked, “Are you guys still thinking about renting a house together?”

Robbie and Nate winced. “Actually, the other unit across from Cliff became available, and it’s cheaper than the house we were considering. We signed the lease papers Monday and move in the first of the month. Why?”

She shrugged. “I was just wondering because I don’t think I can keep on living with my sister for much longer. And with rent prices being what they are . . . But it’s no biggie. I’ll figure it out.”

She hated that she hadn’t jumped on this sooner.

“Hey. Hope I’m not interrupting.”

Lexi’s head whipped up. Josh stood there in his fancy suit, looking sexy as hell and out of place at their rehearsal. She smiled, thrilled that he made it. She headed over with her guitar still strapped around her shoulder and kissed him on the cheek, not wanting to give her bandmates fodder.

But while he smiled, it was tight. And when he glanced at her, his eyes blazed with fury. She swallowed and cursed herself. He must have heard her ask the guys about the house.

“You’re not. We were taking a quick break before running through the last part of our set.”

“Why don’t you introduce me, lass?”

“Sure. That’s Cliff behind the drums.”

Cliff lifted his drumsticks in acknowledgment. “Hey, man.”

“Over there is Robbie, and that’s Nate.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Um, why don’t you have a seat. We were just about to get started on the second half of our set.” The seat was a lawn chair, but it worked for when they wanted to sit and discuss their songs.

Josh nodded. “Will do.”

Practice took on a surreal bent having Josh present. He was angry, but the guys didn’t pick up on it. They joked with him. But every time his gaze landed on her, they promised retribution.

She messed up. She knew she had. And maybe it had been stupid of her to ask about the house rental. But she wasn’t sure about her moving in with him. It was too soon. Although it was essentially what she was already doing. And she loved being with him.

Yet a part of her was still waiting for him to cut and run.

When they finished their set, Josh rose from his seat, clapping. And while she was packing up her guitar, he chatted with the guys. But the tension radiated off him.

“Ready?”

She glanced at him as she rose from her crouch. “Yes, I’m ready.”

She bent to grab her guitar case.

“I’ve got it.”

And at the look in his eyes, she knew better than to argue. “Hey guys, we’re taking off.”

“Later, dudes. We’ll let you know if our demo is accepted to the festival,” Cliff said.

“Awesome. See you Tuesday.” Lexi turned on her heel and headed out, with Josh behind her. When they reached the parking lot and the cars, she opened her mouth to apologize.

But he glared at her. “Not here. I’m sure you don’t want your friends to overhear the fight we’re about to have. Get in. And I will meet you at home.”

Contrite, she nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

She used the moniker to pacify him. It didn’t work. If anything, his scowl deepened. “Let’s go.”

On the drive home, he followed her, parking beside her two seconds after she had. She didn’t wait for him to climb out of the car. And his gaze darkened further. He grabbed her guitar and escorted her to the elevator. They rode up in silence.

Her skin prickled with awareness. And her heart whimpered. Had she messed things up beyond redemption?

She didn’t know. He felt volatile. Dangerous even.

She knew he would never really hurt her. But she worried that he might be done with her after tonight. That she might have pushed him too far and he decided she was too much trouble.

It's the way her family had been with her. So why not him too? No one else wanted to stick.

He escorted her off the elevator with a firm hand on her lower back. At the front door, he unlocked it and shoved it open. "Inside. Now."

His short, clipped words made her shiver. She hated confrontations. But there was no avoiding this one. Not if she wanted to be with Josh. And she did.

She waltzed inside, setting her purse on the kitchen island. Josh closed the front door. But he didn't slam it. Although the click of the lock had shivers coursing down her spine.

"I know what you're going to say."

"Oh, really." He stalked her way with narrowed eyes.

She held up her hands and backed up. "Look. I'm sorry. I just know I don't want to live at my sister's house much longer —"

"So you think living with other men is the answer?"

"They're my bandmates. They're my brothers from other mothers."

"I don't give a bloody shite. You will not be living with any man but me."

She opened her mouth to argue. But he cut her off before she could reply and backed her up against the counter. He bracketed her in with his hands on either side, forcing her back to look up at him, exerting his dominance.

And her pussy pulsed. She hated how much he could play her body.

“If you’re wanting to move out of your sister’s, then you will be living with me. It’s nonnegotiable, lass. What part of you are mine and belong to me are you not understanding?”

“It’s just so fast. What happens when you get tired of me? Then I won’t have a place to live. Except to go back to my sister’s house with my tail tucked between my legs so I can rent the crappy room from her.”

“Who says I’m going to get tired of you? We’re building something, you and me—or I thought we were. But you seem hell bent on trying to destroy it. Why?”

“My past history does. No one has ever stuck by me, Josh. No one. Not when it mattered. Why would I expect you to be any different? You want me to trust you, great. Tell me why I should? Prove to me why I should believe this isn’t some twisted way of getting back at me for turning you down.”

He growled. “That’s it. Before the night is over, you will no longer question whether I will stick.”

“And how do you plan on doing that? Do a memory wipe?”

“You’re not even sorry, are you?”

“Of course I am,” she argued, frustrated beyond belief at his stubborn stance.

“Prove it.”

“How?” she asked, perilously close to tears. She hated crying. Hated it because it made her seem weak. And it gave others power over her.

He backed off her and strode into the living room, sitting on a chair like a king on his throne. His face a stern mask, he murmured, “You want to apologize? Strip and crawl to me like a good girl. And then we’re going to deal with your pesky refusal to accept that I’m not going anywhere. That this, you and me, is worth fighting for.”

She swallowed past the lump in her throat. She could walk away right now. She didn’t have to subject herself to the humiliation of crawling across the floor.

But to what end?

She wanted to be with him. And if this was how she could apologize, if this was what he wanted as proof of her devotion and her commitment to them, then so be it. Because she messed up. This fight was her fault.

She’d hurt him.

With her head held high, she toed her shoes off and removed her coat, hanging it over the barstool. She tugged her shirt off, the same one she’d worn to work today. Then she slid her jeans down her legs until she stood in only her bra and panties. It was a hot set too. White with black polka dots. The bra hugged her tits and made them look like an offering.

But he wanted her naked. So she reached behind her back and undid the clasp, letting the straps slowly slide down her arms. His gaze smoldered, but he made no move to come to her. No, this was a journey she would have to take on her own.

The bra wound up in a heap with the rest of her clothing. She toyed with the tiny strips of lace covering her sex, inching them down over her hips. Then she let the material fall and stepped out of them.

With a deep inhale, she slid to her knees and lowered her torso until her hands were on the floor. She kept her head held high as she began to crawl, putting some sway into her hips and making her tits jiggle. Because he had a thing for her boobs.

And he didn't move a muscle other than an angry tick in his jaw. For all appearances, he was unmoved by her display. Until you looked in his eyes. They gave him away. Dark hunger pulsed in his black gaze. And she noticed his cock strained against the confines of his slacks.

She licked her lips at the thought of all those inches.

But didn't stop her trek. The hardwood was cool beneath her palms and knees. When she reached his chair, she did something she had never done for another Dom before. She lowered her upper torso to the floor until her forehead touched as a sign of humble submission.

“Good girl. Now, you're going to suck my dick.”

She rose onto her knees and inched closer. He hadn't made a move to undo his slacks. All he'd done was toss his tie over

his shoulder.

She slid her palms up his calves to his muscular thighs to his belt buckle. Biting her bottom lip, she undid his belt. And then lowered the zipper on his pants. She peeled his slacks down. Then palmed his dick through his boxers.

She pulled his boxers down but struggled to get his pants and boxers down far enough for her to suck him off. She blinked at the sudden moisture filling her eyes. Because she didn't want to fail at this too. She was always falling short.

A tear escaped before she could stop it.

“Lexi.”

One word. Just her name. And she cried. “I’m trying.”

“Look at me.”

The command shivered through her, and she lifted her tear-stained gaze, unable to stop the tears from falling.

“Lesson number one: if you need something from me, ask.”

She sniffed and nodded. “Would you please lift your hips, Sir? I need help removing your pants and boxers so I can suck your cock.”

At her request, he lifted his hips, giving her the space and freedom to pull his pants down to his ankles. She removed his shoes and then pulled them off the rest of the way. She even took his socks off for him.

Steadier than before, she circled his cock with her hand and stroked him slowly.

He arched a brow. “I said I wanted you to suck it.”

“I will, Sir. I just like touching you.” And she wanted to take her time and make it the best blowjob he’d ever had. And yes, she was a bit of an overachiever once she was all in.

Which meant she was all in with him.

She leaned in, her gaze trained on his handsome face, and licked him from root to tip. Then she swirled her tongue around his crown, lapping up the few pearly drops of precum seeping from the head.

She opened her mouth and sucked the head inside. His eyes lowered to half-mast. Those eyes of his were black flames of desire. She lowered her mouth, taking more of his shaft inside. She pushed past her gag reflex, taking as much of him down her throat as possible. Until she sealed her mouth over the base of his dick, fighting her gag reflex and needing air. But then she released him, gliding slowly back up his shaft before repeating the move again and again until tears streamed down her face.

“Sit on my lap.”

She released his cock. “But, Sir?”

“Lesson number two: who is the Dom in this relationship?”

“You, Sir.”

“And while I don’t expect you to be my slave, I do expect when I tell you to do something, you comply without question.”

She battled back more tears. Because she was failing. Again.

But she rose to her feet and went to straddle his lap. He held up a hand. “No. Turn and sit on my lap.”

Lexi didn't hesitate, vowing to get it right. She was no slouch. She sat on his lap. His cock pressed against her ass.

“Lean back,” he ordered.

And she did as he instructed, leaning against his firm chest with a sigh. She adored his body.

“Now spread your thighs.”

She popped those suckers open, ready for him to touch her. She swore she'd get this right and earn his forgiveness.

“And now I want you to finger your pussy. But don't make yourself come. If you come, I will use my belt on your tender backside. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

Again, wanting to give him a show while following his commands, she slid her right hand slowly down her belly, parting her labia and dipping two fingers in her slit.

“Are you wet? Did sucking my dick make you wet?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Taste yourself.” His voice was thick with lust, but it had lost none of its dominance.

Lust slammed into her. She didn't know what game he was playing, but if this was what it took to apologize, she was here

for it. She dipped her fingers further and then brought them up to her mouth, coated with her cream, and sucked them into her mouth with a moan.

“Do you like the way you taste?”

She removed her fingers. “Yes, Sir.” Then she dipped them back into her cream and brought her fingers up near his mouth. “Would you like a taste?”

He grabbed her fingers and brought them up to his mouth. “Mmm. Tasty. Now fuck yourself with your fingers. But remember, don’t make yourself come.”

She sighed, her head back against his firm shoulder, and teased her clit, giving it a few good swipes that made her pussy seep with desire. She pushed two fingers inside her, slowly gliding them in and out.

Pleasure coiled as she plunged her digits faster and faster. She whimpered and mewled as her desire rose in cresting waves. She plunged her fingers faster and faster. Her hips got into the motion, caught up in the bliss.

“Now stop.”

She plunged her fingers one more time, and her body broke apart with a groan.

“Did you fucking come? After I expressly forbade you from doing it?”

“I’m sorry, Sir. I—”

He growled and rose with her in his arms. Josh carted her over to the couch and positioned her body so that her ass was

up in the air with her torso on the backrest.

“You’re getting five swats of the belt,” he snarled, his anger palpable. He left her for a moment to retrieve his belt from his pants.

At the snap of leather, she whimpered, “But, Sir.”

“Whose pussy is this?” He cupped her pussy, gripping it tight. And hell, but she flooded his hand with her cream.

“It’s yours, Sir.”

“That’s right, it is. And you don’t get to come unless I say you do. Now take your punishment like a good girl.”

He cracked the belt against her bum. She jerked at the searing pain and whimpered, “I’m sorry, Sir.”

“I’m sure you are. Now tell me why you think it’s okay for you to move in with other guys when I have already said I want you living with me.” The belt smacked her butt again. Her body jolted.

Pain exploded in her backside. Tears formed in her eyes. “Because I’m a screwup. And I’m not someone people keep.”

It was her deepest shame. Her family tossed her away because she wasn’t good enough.

He struck her butt again. “That’s for not seeing how wonderful you are. And this is for thinking for one second I would ever toss you away.” He smacked her bottom again.

“And this last one is to drive home that you’re mine.” He whacked her ass.

And she started sobbing. Great heaping sobs that were ripped from inside her soul. He leaned over her back and gathered her close. His cock pressed against her ass.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, lass. But you need to understand I won’t be letting you go. You’re mine. And I’m yours. And if you’re moving anywhere, it’s in here with me. I’ve already asked, but I will say it again. Move in with me. We can get the rest of your stuff this weekend.”

“It’s too fast.”

“When you know it’s right, what does time really have to do with anything?”

“We haven’t even been out on a date,” she protested, not even sure why she was acting like this wasn’t what she wanted. Because being with him, the way he loved her, the way he took care of her, filled all the cracks, the nook and crannies of all the hurt she’d sustained through the years.

“I’ll rectify that this weekend, lass. But you don’t get to ask other men to live with them, ever. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir. I’m sorry.”

He moved behind her and notched his shaft at her weeping entrance. “I know you are. But I need to fuck you now.”

“Yes,” she groaned as he roughly shoved inside.

Her body welcomed him as he speared deep inside her. He wrapped his arms around her even tighter and pummeled her pussy, driving violently inside her.

“Whose pussy is this?” he growled, ramming deep with brute force.

“Yours, Sir.”

“Tell me again,” he demanded, slamming his hips with increasing force as his desire rose.

“It’s your pussy, Sir.”

“That’s right. My. Fucking. Pussy.” He hammered inside her. Her eyes crossed at the intensity. She ached to come. But she held on, waiting for his permission, vowing to never disappoint him again.

His hand slid around her neck and squeezed. Not enough to cut off her air supply, but enough to threaten it. And then his other hand cupped her pussy while he shuttled his cock in increasingly rough strokes inside her.

Lexi felt beyond owned. She felt cherished. And like nothing and no one could ever harm her again as long as he held her.

“I’m never letting you go, lass. You. Are. Mine.” He pistoned his length, driving her body against the couch’s backrest.

She held on, digging her fingers into the cushions. Holding on as he drove away the darkness inside her, as he proved how evenly matched they were. That they fit one another.

“Come for me now.”

At his command, her body crested, shattering against his driving thrusts. He growled and withdrew, then parted the

globes of her ass. He spit on her back channel, adding extra lube, and fit the crest against her opening.

Her ass wasn't prepared to take him there when he shoved the head inside. She cried out. The pain mingled with her climax, confusing her sensors.

"Take it. Take me," he demanded, inching inside.

"Yes, Sir," she moaned, breathing through the sharp bite of pain as he tunneled deeper, stretching her ass as he claimed her in the basest way possible.

She loved every depraved second of it.

"And this ass is mine. No one else ever gets to touch you again. Tell me."

"My body is yours." She gasped. "And no one else gets to touch you either. Because you're mine too."

"Aye. Now you're fucking getting it. All fucking mine," he grunted, pounding her ass. Clamping his hand on her pussy, he drove inside her as he lost control, the tide of desire sweeping them both up into the storm.

He turned downright feral, rutting inside her ass with increasing speed and brutality. The slapping sound of their fucking echoed in the room, competing with his grunts and her moans.

He smacked her pussy and drove so deep inside her ass she damn near felt him in the back of her throat. And it set her off.

Her climax was akin to a nuclear bomb. The devastation was total. Her entire system erupted in bliss.

Josh came. His grunted roar filled her ears. And then he flooded her ass, filling her up with his come. He held her tight as his hips slowed and then stopped altogether, his pulsing cock buried in her ass.

And he wasn't wrong in his statements. She was his, body and soul. And she didn't know what that meant for her future. She wasn't willing to give up her music for him, but then, he would never ask that of her.

The hand on her neck slid up to her cheek, shifting and turning her face. Josh claimed her lips in a deep, soulful exchange that had her leaning in, wishing they could stay this way where the outside world no longer had any bearing.

Josh lifted his mouth and waited for her to open her eyes. "I meant everything I said. No more trying to back out or sabotage this relationship, lass. We're meant to be, you and me. You'll wear my collar and move in with me."

"Yes," she agreed, her heart trembling.

They still had issues to discuss, like what they wanted for their future together. But she wasn't going to worry about it tonight. Nothing else mattered but being in his arms.

"Come on. Let's get you fed. And then I'm taking you to bed."

He pulled out, and she felt his come leaking out of her ass. He helped her off the couch. Sometime while he was screwing her blind, he'd removed his dress shirt.

Before he led her into the kitchen, she wrapped her arms around him and laid her head against his strong chest. His

arms automatically wrapped around her.

“I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” It was on the tip of her tongue to spill her newfound feelings, but she refrained. Their deepening bond was still too new for her to feel confident in declaring them.

“I know, lass. And I get it. You’ve not had the people who were supposed to love you the most be there to support you. But you need to realize I’m not them. And I’m not going anywhere.”

“Promise?” She glanced up at him, her chin on his chest.

His warm smile was full of affection. “I promise.”

The tether she’d been holding onto, the one keeping her grounded, snapped. And her heart dove right in.

Since she worked both Friday and Saturday at Java Hut but had Sunday off, Josh determined the best night for their first official date was Saturday night. This way, they could be out late and wouldn't have to be overly concerned with getting up the next day at zero dark thirty.

Lexi finished applying her lipstick in the bathroom mirror, a bold, candy-apple red that matched her dress to perfection. She'd straightened her hair, and it fell in a soft waterfall down her back. But it was the Marilyn Monroe-esque dress in deep red that hugged her curves and ended just above the knee that claimed top marks.

Josh was going to lose it when she went downstairs.

She grinned, the mirror reflecting her happiness. She couldn't help it. Since their fight Thursday night and everything that happened afterward, things had been different. They were closer.

The moment he'd walked through the door last night, she'd been on him, dragging him into the bedroom with promises to cook dinner when they were done. It was safe to say they didn't eat dinner until much later that night. And only

because hunger for something other than each other drove them out of bed.

Multiple times the past two days at work, she found herself humming and smiling for no reason. And she knew why.

Lexi was in love with Josh Ryan.

It shocked her too. The man had done the unthinkable. He'd crawled past all her hard-fought defenses and taken up residence in her heart.

And his intentions to collar her, to have her move in, weren't just lip service. While she was at work, he'd spend the day moving things in his closet and clearing out space for her. And he'd hung up all the clothes she'd brought with her.

He'd surprised her with it when she arrived home from work. And it was why they were having a late dinner at this Michelin-star Italian grill. Because the moment he'd shown her what he'd done, she'd jumped him.

He backed up his words with actions. Every day that passed, her belief in them deepened. They had the chance for a real future together. And for the first time in her life, she leaned, realizing she didn't have to do it all on her own because Josh put as much effort into their relationship.

There was more they hadn't discussed yet. Like why she really was living at her sister's house or his marriage and what happened there. But she knew they would get there.

With a final check on her appearance, she grabbed her clutch purse from the nightstand and headed downstairs. Josh stood waiting near the windows in the living room. His back

was to her. He wore a dark charcoal suit that was so dark it was almost black. And boy, did he make an impressive figure.

At the sound of her stilettos on the hardwood, he turned. And she sucked in a breath. He was so damn handsome. And the one shot of color in his outfit was his deep royal blue tie.

Her breath shuddered in her lungs. The man took her breath away with his sexy looks.

He stalked her way, his eyes hot. “You look fecking delectable. Turn.” He motioned with his fingers in a circle.

She did a little three-sixty twirl. And when she finished the rotation, his eyes blazed with an inferno of need.

“Let’s go. Now.” His words were short and clipped through clenched teeth.

“Something wrong?”

“Yep. If we don’t leave now, we’re not leaving. Because all I want to do is find out what you’re wearing underneath that excuse for a dress, bend you over the nearest surface, and fuck you until your legs give out.”

“And if I said I would be okay with it?” She was melting from the dirty image he painted.

He growled with a furious scowl. “Don’t tempt me, woman. You have no idea how close my control is to snapping. I’m taking you on our first fecking date, and that’s final.”

Was it wrong that she wanted to shove him over the edge? She wanted to see what happened when he did lose control.

But she took pity on him. “Well, I am hungry. And once I get some food in me, it will go a long way toward giving me the energy to ride you like a bronco when we get home.”

His eyes narrowed, but he was fighting a smile. “Sassy wench. I’ll make you pay for the fact that I’m going to have a hard-on all night long thinking about that.”

And it’s why she didn’t mention that she wasn’t wearing any panties beneath the dress. There wasn’t room. Because the last thing she wanted to do was have panty lines on their first date. Even her tiniest thong didn’t work in this dress.

“I’m ready to leave when you are.”

He nodded and helped her into her coat, a knee-length black wool number that would help keep the chill at bay. While her legs would freeze, the black stilettos looked amazing with her ensemble.

Then, with a hand on her back, he escorted her out of the penthouse and down to his car. The drive to the restaurant was brief. The only reason they didn’t walk was temperatures had dipped close to zero. Which, to her mind, was too damn cold.

The Grande Toscano was a Michelin-star Italian bistro. Inside, the heady aromas of tomato, basil, garlic, and parmesan greeted her. The lighting was muted in golden tones that gave the restaurant this dreamy, seductive quality.

They were taken to a small private booth near the back. The small circular booth was perfect for them to sit side by side for their intimate dinner.

He really had gone all out. Lexi never would have thought about coming here. But she liked the ambience with the ivory linen tablecloths and the candles on each table in these darling mosaic candle holders. The mood was festive with guests talking and laughing.

She absolutely loved it.

Once they were seated, Josh ordered a bottle of Pinot Noir and calamari. The waiter scurried off to fill the order, leaving them alone.

“I forgot to tell you earlier that I perused the trust your grandparents set up for you.”

“Oh, you did?” She leaned against the table, loving the way he looked at her as if she was his whole world.

“Yep, but someone distracted me.”

He would mention the way she jumped him after showing her the closet. “I can’t help if your domestic prowess turned me on. Really, you have no one to blame but yourself.”

Josh chuckled, and the lines around his eyes deepened. “I’ll have to keep that in mind. So if you walked in on me cleaning up the kitchen when you get home from work, what would you do?”

“Jump your bones and have my way with you. It’s too sexy a combination.”

He played with a strand of her hair. “I’ll keep that in mind. But back to the trust. Your parents can’t legally hold the funds you’re due. In fact, they are the ones who set the age at twenty-five.”

“Excuse me?” Why was she shocked? Her parents had always manipulated her with money. Always. “I don’t understand. It says twenty-five.”

“All it says is you must receive the trust when you are a legal adult and by the time you turn twenty-five. There is no set age allotted for disbursement of those funds. You are just supposed to gain access to them by the time you’re twenty-five. There are no clauses that give them the right to withhold those funds.”

The waiter arrived with their wine and calamari, then took their orders. And she was glad, because it gave her time to get her emotions under control. The betrayal she felt over the way her parents had held on to her inheritance simply to punish her left her reeling.

No matter what she did, she would never be enough for them. If it hadn’t been because she left school a semester before she graduated, they would have found another reason to hold on to her money as a way to control her.

Once it was just them, she asked, “So how do I gain access to it?”

“You can pay me a dollar to represent you to make it legal. We can have a contract drawn up and everything. And then I’ll compose a demand letter, letting them know they have thirty days to disburse the trust, or we’ll take them to court and sue for additional hardship damages it caused. If it’s what you want. Keep in mind that you don’t have to do anything about the trust. Money is not an issue. And I know since they are your family—”

“But I want to contribute to the household. I don’t feel right having anyone support me. And they stopped being my family long ago. I can’t keep hoping they will change because they never do.”

“You don’t have to make any decisions tonight, all right?” He grabbed her hand and lifted it up to his lips, pressing a sweet kiss against her palm.

Lexi couldn’t resist him and his magnetic pull. If she believed in magic, she would think he had ensorcelled her with his magical dick. But he was so much more than that. Stern, yes. But also kind, caring, super protective, and willing to go the extra mile for those he cared about.

Lexi leaned in and pressed her lips against his. She kissed him sweetly, because he made her feel like she could do anything, and he would be there to support her, encourage her, and then take her to bed, where he worshipped her for hours.

Josh lifted his mouth, now covered in her lipstick. “If you keep that up, we will never eat.”

She smiled and wiped his mouth. “Didn’t mean to make you wear my lipstick.”

“If there’s something I don’t mind, it’s your lipstick.” He pressed a kiss to her fingers.

They ate calamari. Drank red wine. Ate warm, crusty Italian bread with an olive oil and balsamic dip. They shared their main dishes, feeding each other bites. And Lexi fell deeper under Josh’s spell. He was the Dom for her. The Dom

of her dreams that she'd begun to believe she would never find.

And yet he was here, doting upon her, giving her a taste of life she'd never known before. He celebrated her accomplishments. Encouraged her to go after her dreams. And loved her in the dark of night like no other.

"I have something for you," he murmured after wiping his mouth with his napkin and setting it on the table beside his plate.

"Oh yeah? Is it something we'll use once we get home?" When did his place start feeling more like home than anywhere else she'd lived?

"No. But I find I can't wait to have you wear it." He withdrew a long, slim jewelry box and placed it on the table beside her. "Open it, lass."

"Josh." She set her napkin down. "You don't have to buy me presents."

She picked it up with trembling hands, then flipped the lid open and gasped. "Is that?"

"Your collar. And while the collaring ceremony has been scheduled for three Saturdays from now, I don't want to wait to have you wear it. Will you let me collar you tonight? Show the world that you're mine."

She stared at the gorgeous platinum chain. There was a sweet treble clef pendant that was encrusted with diamonds. "Josh. I . . . yes. Will you do the honors?"

His eyes heated, and he lifted the necklace off the velvet bed. The diamonds sparkled in the golden lighting. “Turn for me.”

She shifted, giving him her back. And lifted her hair out of the way while he fastened it around her neck. Once it was on, she touched the thick platinum band that was a smidge too long to be a choker. But she knew without looking that it would look fabulous.

She turned his way. His gaze dropped to the necklace. And a dark possessiveness filled his gaze.

God, this man.

Unexpected didn't even begin to cover how much he had changed her world. They leaned in together, kissing each other as if the other's lips were the very air they breathed, and without them, they would perish.

“Oh my god, Lexi!” Her sister's voice broke them apart. She looked up to see Lisa, shock written in every line of her face. “What are you doing here, Lisa?”

“I came with a friend for dinner. You two are dating? This is who you're dating?” She nodded toward Josh, her voice elevated in pitch over her shock.

She opened her mouth to respond. But Josh stepped in, his arm solidly around her. “Your sister and I are an item, yes. And no, we didn't bring it to your attention or anyone else's until we were certain our relationship was headed somewhere. We still don't think it's anyone else's business.”

Lisa's mouth dropped open for a moment. But she recovered quickly. "And she's been staying with you all this time?"

Lexi took over. "Yes, I've been staying with Josh. What does it matter to you, Lisa? It's not like I've heard from you in the last week." Longer, really, but she wasn't going to get into the semantics of it.

"I just hadn't realized you two knew each other. How long has this been going on?"

"For a while now, before the dinner at your house," Josh told her.

"And how did you meet?"

"Mutual friends," Josh explained, his eyes cold as he stared at her sister. "And not to be an ass, but we were in the middle of an intimate dinner for two."

"Um, yeah, sure. I guess I will see you, Lexi. Josh, see you at work on Monday." Lisa walked away.

Lexi couldn't help but feel like Lisa had betrayed her too. She must have read the trust. But she'd done nothing to stop their parents from trying to control her. Tears filled her eyes, lining her lashes. And she wanted to hate her sister. But all she felt was a deep-seated betrayal.

"Hey, look at me, lass."

She did, hating that her sister had interrupted such an important milestone for them.

He cupped her face and wiped away the few stray tears that fell. “Don’t let her take anything away from us. Who cares if she knows? We’re together. Other people will find out about us. And that’s okay. I want the world to know you’re mine. I want you to wear your collar with pride.”

It wasn’t why she was upset. But she didn’t want her sister to spoil their night. Not when he was being this sweet and giving her a night to remember. She pressed a hand against the collar. “I’m just sorry she interrupted our date.”

“Up for dessert? I hear they have a fantastic tiramisu.”

“Could we get it to go for a late-night snack? I’d rather go home.” Because now she felt like her sister was watching, and it made her uncomfortable.

“Aye, we can do that. I’m dying to know what you have underneath that dress.” He signaled the waiter, putting in a to-go order for two pieces of tiramisu and requesting the check. The moment the waiter sped off to grab those, she leaned in.

“You want to know what’s underneath my dress? Just me, Sir, and only me. There’s not a strip of lace anywhere.”

He groaned. But the waiter came back with their check and dessert, and Josh couldn’t pay fast enough. And then he was pulling her from the booth, the bag with their to-go desserts in his other hand, and leading her outside to the valet stand.

They didn’t talk while they waited for his car. But an air of expectancy hung over them.

Josh was silent on the way home. When she glanced over at him, he looked like a man on a mission as he drove. She

fidged in the seat, already hot for him and whatever carnal delights he had planned.

But she hated that Lisa saw them together. She wasn't ashamed of her relationship with Josh, but she'd seen the judgment and indignation in Lisa's eyes. Like her being with Josh was an affront to humanity.

Her sister really could be a bitch.

Maybe she needed to take Josh up on his offer and just move in with him. They were already basically living together anyway. But it hurt, even when she didn't want it to. She would never understand why her family couldn't just love her. Instead, they shamed her for following the path true to her heart.

During the ride home, they were both deep in thought. When they reached his place and headed inside, he led her inside and strode into the kitchen with their desserts, storing them in the fridge.

Then he closed the door and turned her way, undoing his tie. "I'm going to give you a sixty-second head start. If I catch you in the next ten minutes, I will fuck you raw and dirty. But if you evade me for ten minutes, then I will let you have your way with me."

She shivered and opened her mouth to ask him a question. But he barreled right on past any questions or objections she might have.

"Starting now." His hungry gaze flicked to her. "Run."

She squealed, turning on her heel and racing toward the stairs. In the heels, it was damn difficult to run. She figured she should get rid of them. And kicked them off at the base of the stairs.

“Ten, eleven, twelve.” Josh counted from the kitchen.

With a last look at him over her shoulder, she raced barefoot up the stairs, searching for a place to hide. Where could she go that he wouldn't find her in ten minutes? She ran into the bedroom, searching for the best spot to hide.

But the bedroom was too open. She left the bedroom and headed down the hall to the office. She had to find a place she could escape from if he found her. Beneath the desk would be obvious. Instead she hid in the corner behind the door.

“Ready or not, here I come,” he boomed, his heavy footfalls pounding on the stairs.

She shivered and bit her bottom lip. Her heart raced a hundred miles a minute. She never would have pegged him as being into primal play. But she was here for it. And her excitement slicked her thighs.

She heard him head into the bedroom. Now was her chance to run downstairs and hide. She peeked out of the office and heard him searching in the bedroom. He was being loud too.

She raced as fast as her feet would carry her to the stairs.

“There you are,” he said from the doorway of the bedroom.

She screamed and raced downstairs. Her feet flew over the stairs. On the main floor, she ran into the living room, searching for a place to hide. But he was hot on her heels.

His hand brushed her shoulder. With a squeal, she ran faster. Legs pumping, she did a full loop while dodging his attempts to grab her. She headed for the stairs. If she could just reach the bedroom, she could lock the door and wait out the rest of the time.

She dashed by him just out of arm's reach, then took the stairs back up to the bedroom. It felt like he was breathing down her neck the whole way. And she sprinted across the threshold into the bedroom.

It was then she realized her mistake.

Because as she turned to close the door, he was already there, his eyes alight with feral hunger.

She backed away, searching for a place to hide and coming up with none. But really, she wanted him to catch her. She'd never seen him this unhinged, and it thrilled her. Her pussy pulsed. And by god, she was wet for him. So wet it coated the tops of her thighs.

She put her hands up. "Now, Josh, let's be reasonable."

"Reason left the moment you accepted my collar." He unbuttoned his dress shirt as he stalked her, letting it slide off his shoulders and down his arms and exposing the rugged expanse of his chest.

Her thighs bumped into the mattress. And she tried to scurry to the side, but he was too fast and too intent on

catching her.

Her palms connected with his naked chest, sizzling at the contact.

Josh caught her and spun her around. He pushed her face down against the mattress. She gasped at his manhandling, but she loved every damn minute of it. He tugged her hands behind her back, and then he used his leather belt to restrain them, putting her completely at his mercy.

Yanking the skirt of her dress up to her hips, he exposed her lower half before smacking her legs open, shoving them wide. And then he gripped her pussy.

“I should have known. Even this gets you hot. But then, you’ve got a slutty little pussy, don’t you?”

“Only for you, Sir,” she whimpered, loving this side of him.

“That’s right. This slutty little pussy is mine. And I’m going to fuck this pussy raw. The only way I will stop is if you safeword out. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Good.” She heard the sound of his zipper lowering and bit her bottom lip, trying not to squirm. She had no idea how rough he planned to be, but it didn’t matter. Because her body fucking purred at the brutal treatment.

One minute, she was empty. And the next, his cock was balls deep. She hissed at the slice of pain mingled with pleasure. Her body was not ready, even with as wet as she had been.

His hips smacked against her ass. “Look at that, your greedy cunt taking me, not caring that I chased you. If I did this outside in front of other people, would you still let me fuck you like this?”

Her pussy fluttered around his dick at the naughty picture he painted.

“You would, wouldn’t you?” he growled, pumping his dick in hard, brutal digs that left her gasping.

“Yes, Sir. I love your cock.”

He laughed darkly. Gathering her hair in his hands, he held her steady while he pummeled her cunt with a ferocity that stole her breath. The bed shook with his thrusts. And it walked a fine line, a mixture of pleasure and pain that left her whimpering in ecstasy.

“And my dick fucking loves my pussy. And I’m going to fill it up with my come all night long. Until it’s dripping out of you and coating your thighs.”

She clenched around him.

“Jesus, you’re such a dirty girl. You like the thought of being full of my come.”

“Yes, fill me up, Sir.” She didn’t even know what she was saying anymore. Her entire world comprised of Josh and the rigorous fucking he was giving her.

He growled. His hips slammed into hers. Until she wondered how she’d ever gone without him. He was remaking her. Or maybe he was the first Dom she felt comfortable

enough with to explore this side of herself, push her past her boundaries, and try new things.

Again and again, he slammed his way inside. His thrusts bordered on too extreme, too much. But her body didn't care. It wanted more. And she surrendered, letting him fuck her like he needed.

He grunted and sighed as he rutted inside her. His dick drove deep, making her eyes roll back in her head.

Josh was relentless. He reamed her pussy. Drove himself so deep inside that he hit her cervix. The pleasurable pain built in strength and tenor until she howled at the ecstasy blasting her veins.

This man obliterated her resistance.

He pushed her boundaries. He let her be herself. And made her feel priceless. And her reasons for keeping her emotions under lock and key blasted apart.

Love for him surged into every pore, overflowing from her heart into her soul.

On his next impossibly deep thrust, she broke apart like the tide against a cliff. She sobbed, "Josh."

"Oh fuck, lass," he roared, pounding harder and deeper as he spurted his seed, filling her pussy, and igniting a secondary round of sparks.

He collapsed against her back, her hands bound between them. His warm breath puffed against her neck. Her body vibrated with bliss. And he tenderly cupped her cheek, turned her face, and claimed her lips.

Lexi leaned in. The force of her feelings left her humbled and terrified in the same breath. Because she'd never felt for anyone what she felt for Josh. The immensity of it brought tears to her eyes.

Josh lifted his mouth. "Hey. Did I hurt you?" Concern etched his features.

Lexi smiled through her tears. "No. You didn't hurt me. It was just . . . this was everything."

His eyes heated. "Yes, it was. Because you're mine."

"And you're mine," she stated, feeling it for the first time. It was no longer lip service when it was the heat of the moment.

"Always, lass."

Lexi kissed him, shifting her body as he pulled out. And she struggled against her bonds. At her growled frustration, he undid the belt. Because she needed to touch him.

They tumbled into bed. Only this time, there was no rush, just passion intertwined with emotions neither had voiced.

And for what was truly the first time in her life, she made love in the purest sense of the word. And he loved her right back. For the first time, she believed she finally had someone in her corner.

And she was all in. She wanted to be his collared sub. Even though she had no idea what it meant for their future. For the future of her music. But she knew he would be there in the wings, supporting her, pushing her to succeed, and cheering her on.

The truth of it, after feeling alone and like she didn't belong the bulk of her life, ratcheted her desire up to epic heights.

And they spent the night loving each other. After every bout, they would roll away until one of them gravitated back toward the other. Again and again into the early morning hours, where they fell asleep wrapped up in the other.

On Monday, Josh sat in his office, reviewing the latest amendments to the buyout contract and thinking about his weekend with Lexi. Their relationship had changed, but for the better. They'd spent all day yesterday in bed and screwing on every available surface.

He was sunk. He knew she was his future.

They fit. And he knew what it would look like given their age difference. But he didn't give a fuck. His place finally felt like home. And it wasn't because of the place; it was her. She felt like home to him.

Her beauty reminded him of Ireland. She was wild and untamed, but for the right man, she blossomed. He felt her. She had crawled beneath his skin.

And she'd wiggled her way inside his heart. Something he never thought another woman would ever do. But she had him considering a real future with her, not just as Dom and sub, but as husband and wife. And what it would be like for them to have kids.

He knew she was working on her music career. And he was happy to support her. If she wound up having to tour, they would work it out. He couldn't necessarily travel with her all the time, but it was something they could hash out together.

At the knock on his door, his head shot up. "Come in."

Lisa poked her head inside. "Hey Josh, do you have a minute?"

Before he began seeing Lexi, he considered Lisa a respected part of his team. And now, he wanted to chew her out over her treatment of her sister. He knew families were complicated. But they were supposed to be there to support you, not tear a person to shreds.

"Aye, come have a seat." He nodded toward one of the empty leather chairs across his desk.

Lisa sat in her trim lavender suit, her blonde hair in an updo, makeup understated, and her smile fell. "Look, I wanted to talk to you about Lexi."

He arched a brow. "My relationship with your sister is not up for discussion. I apologize if that makes you uncomfortable. But she's an adult who knows her own mind."

"No, there are things about her you don't know." She clasped her hands together in her lap with a somber expression.

His heart stuttered. Worry besieged him. It couldn't be that bad. Lexi had told him about her life. He didn't believe she was hiding anything. But they'd only known each other a few weeks. How much could they really know each other? And he

hated that one simple question mired him in doubts. “Like what? How your parents have no legal standing for withholding her trust? Or the fact that you’ve done nothing to help your sister out in that regard?”

“My parents don’t want her to use it. And she’s so massively in debt because of leaving school like she did. She has almost two hundred thousand in college debt.”

Alarm bells went off inside him. “But your parents are wealthy. Why didn’t they pay for her schooling?”

“They made each of us a deal for college. The basics of it was that we take out the loans to finance our education. And once we had earned our degree, they would pay them off. It was a whole taking responsibility for one’s actions type of deal they wanted to teach us. We even had a contract and everything. She had a partial scholarship, or her loans would have been more. But she left school a semester before she graduated, so it made the contract null and void.”

He kept his face impassive, just like when he was in a courtroom or in heated negotiations. But the news of her huge loan blindsided him. It was like Evelyn all over again. Why hadn’t Lexi told him about this? Had she decided he was her meal ticket? Was that why she had a sudden change of heart regarding their relationship? Was he even now being played for a fool yet again?

He wanted to say no. He wanted to believe in her. But his past wrapped its fingers around his throat and squeezed.

“Be that as it might be, I’ll say again that our relationship is really none of your business.” He wasn’t going to discuss

this with Lisa. It had nothing to do with her. This was about his relationship with Lexi. And the fact that she had hidden something this important from him.

Lisa's face fell. "I understand that. I just thought you should be aware."

"Appreciate it. Now, I've got work I need to see to, if you don't mind." He nodded toward his door, dismissing her.

"All right," she rose and headed for the door. "I really am sorry. You guys seem really happy together."

And then she was out his door before he could respond. He stared at the door, his thoughts churning.

He had thought that they were happy too. But as he tried to work, he chewed over this new bit of information. Over two hundred grand in student loan debt. No wonder she had been living with her sister. His place was quite the upgrade.

The more he thought about the loan and the fact that Lexi hid it from him, the angrier he became. And he started to believe he'd been played for a fool again. That he was being used to support her and pay her bills. But once she got him where she wanted him, where he was willing to do anything for her, she'd drop the bill in his lap. And once it was paid, she'd walk out on him. Just like his ex-wife. Had he really felt the click?

He hated the doubt the revelation had stirred within him.

But he couldn't move past it. Because it burst his happy bubble. It left him questioning if the emotions she felt from

him were real or if they were all part of her act. And once she got him to pay off her loan, she'd be out the door in a flash.

There was a fourteen-year difference between them. How could they possibly be right for each other? She had to be with him because of his money. There was no logical explanation otherwise. Perhaps her refusal to scene with him at the club was all part of the act.

He left work at four because he frankly wasn't getting anything done. And his thoughts and doubts were spiraling out of control. The only thing that would fix it would be to confront her.

On the drive home, he was mired in doubt and anxiety. The last time he'd been this worked up was when he discovered his ex-wife cheated on him. By the time he arrived home, he was fuming. He slammed his way inside and found Lexi in the kitchen cooking.

She smiled at him the moment she saw him. "You're home early. I wanted to surprise you."

"We need to talk." Josh felt like he was about to explode. Because the dreams he had begun building of the two of them were crashing and burning, and he didn't see a way to stop it.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, I don't know. How about the fact that you're massively in debt and failed to tell me." He snarled with such vehemence it felt like the words had been ripped from his soul.

She jolted back and her eyes went wide. "Where did you— Lisa told you."

She didn't deny that she had the loan. Confirming what Lisa told him. And the truth only made him madder. "So it's true then? Is that why you're with me?"

"Is that what you really think?" She crossed her arms in front of her chest.

"I don't know, Lexi. You tell me. Because in all our discussions, you never once mentioned it. You acted like you didn't want me to pay for things. Was that your way of drawing me in and getting me to pay off your debt? And then give me a grand old feck off once it's done."

"You can't possibly believe I would do that."

He exploded, shouting his frustration. "How would I know when you've been hiding it from me? Cause I gotta say, it makes me wonder what else you've been keeping from me."

She slapped the spoon against the counter and shut off the burner. "You were the one who pursued me. You were the one who hounded me until I caved."

"Was it all an act?"

Her bottom lip trembled, and hurt entered her amber eyes. "I can't believe you would take her side over me. After what they've put me through, I thought you were the one person who understood, but I see I was wrong." She marched past him out of the kitchen.

"Where the feck do you think you're going?"

"To pack my shit."

“Like hell you are.” He grabbed her arm and spun her around. “You don’t get to leave until I say so. You’re wearing my collar. You’re my sub. And you don’t get to leave—”

She yanked the chain off and tossed it in his face. “You’re not my Dom. Because I could never be with a man who thought so little of me. Now take your fucking hand off me. If you try to stop me from packing and leaving, I will call the fucking police. And no, I don’t care how it looks at the club or if I’m barred from ever going back.”

“Just proves that you’re delusional, just like you are with your music. And all it shows is that you’re a piss-poor sub,” he spat back, instantly regretting his words.

She jerked back like he struck her and looked devastated. But she’d taken off his collar. He’d never collared another sub in his life. And he felt as if his heart was bleeding out.

“Take your goddamn hands off me.” She yanked against his hold.

“Lexi.”

“Guitar.” Her safeword dropped like a bomb between them. “I was right the night of the singles night event. You really are the worst.” She yanked her arm, wrenching it from his grasp. And he let her go.

She raced up the stairs, and he followed her. He couldn’t believe she used her safeword. Had he been wrong? Had Lisa just been trying to stir up trouble between them? But why? “Where are you going to go, your sister’s house?”

“It’s none of your concern,” she replied, colder than he had ever heard her. The spark of life he’d come to know so well was gone.

He’d extinguished it in his fury.

But now his anger was deflating. And in its place was horror as he watched her pack, shoving clothes haphazardly into her duffel.

“At least take the Beamer if you’re not going to stay and talk this out like an adult,” he snapped, only realizing it was the wrong thing to say when she turned with her mouth open.

“You know what? I don’t care about the rest of my shit. You can fucking keep it.” She reached into her purse and removed the key. She tossed it on the bed and hefted her duffel. And marched out of the room.

Josh followed her down the stairs. She grabbed her guitar from the living room. When she reached the door, he said, “Lexi.”

Everything they’d begun building had slipped through his fingers. She was really leaving. She shot him a snarl. “Have a nice life, asshole. Have fun being the club manwhore.”

And she stormed out of his life.

The door slamming was a dagger to his heart. He wanted to go after her and fix it. But doubt, ever the sneaky bitch, reared its ugly head. Maybe this was part of her act, being all offended and storming out.

He just needed tonight to think it all through.

Josh sank down onto his couch. He replayed the entire afternoon from the moment Lisa had dropped the bomb in his lap and tried figuring out where he messed up.

Bollocks. He should have talked to her about it calmly. Instead he came in accusing her without any proof of malice.

He just needed tonight to get it sorted in his mind. Then he'd contact her tomorrow and apologize.



Lexi took an Uber over to Cliff's place, holding back tears. Her heart was a broken wasteland. She'd been more open and honest with Josh than she had ever been with anyone.

And he turned out to be no better than the rest of them.

How could he think she wanted him for his money? When she had done nothing but fight him every time he bought something for her.

She didn't know what to do. His cruelty had stomped her heart into dust. And she knew she hurt him by taking off the collar. But he'd belittled and accused her. And he'd just been so angry. All the warmth she had come to expect had been absent. Instead, he had looked at her with cold fury. All the emotions that had been in his eyes over the weekend vanished without a trace.

And he acted like she meant nothing to him. She thought she'd finally found someone who understood her, who saw her. But she'd been wrong about him.

His coldness, after feeling like the sun had shone on her face for the first time, ripped her heart to shreds.

And she was left trying to figure out her next move. Was he right? Was she selfish and spoiled and acting like a brat? Was she delusional about her music?

And while she hadn't brought up the student loan, it hadn't been out of spite. The only reason she hadn't mentioned it was because it would be a moot point after this month. She'd saved most of the money she made while working a part-time job through college. Only spending it on things she needed because she wanted her own money to start her life once she was done with college. Money that was free of her parents' control. So by the time she graduated, she had almost a hundred twenty thousand dollars saved from waiting tables. And she'd turned around and used it to pay a good chunk of her loan off. And she'd been renting a crappy room from her sister, using every pare penny she made that didn't need to go toward rent or basic living supplies to pay it off.

But she also couldn't return to living at her sister's house. In the time she had been staying with Josh, she realized how miserable it made her. But it left her fumbling about what to do. It wasn't like Josh would help her get her trust now.

Maybe she should just go back and finish off the semester. She could contact her old roommate and see if she had a couch she could crash on until she could move into the dorms over the summer and fall semesters.

The taxi dropped her off in front of Cliff's building. She sniffled and hefted her guitar and duffel bag.

With trembling fingers, she knocked on his door, seriously trying not to lose it out in the hall. Cliff opened the door and held his arms open. The guy was such a teddy bear. It really was too bad she didn't have any feelings like that toward him and that he played for the other team. At his gesture, she burst into tears before she even stepped inside. Cliff gave her a big hug. He was like the big brother she'd never had.

"It can't be that bad." He held her in the entryway until her tears slowed.

"No. It's worse." Because she'd given him all of her. She'd given him the parts that mattered. And he'd found her lacking.

Told her she was a bad submissive.

She wasn't merely heartbroken; she felt utterly destroyed. Like a bomb had gone off in her chest.

Did he really think she was kidding herself when it came to her music? He'd told her she was amazing. Or had that been a lie to get her into bed and get her to trust him?

She didn't know. And the doubt she'd fought against with every part of her being came rushing in with a vengeance.

"Ah, damn. Well, let's get you situated in my spare room. And if you want, I can order a pizza for dinner."

Tears slid down her face at the mention of dinner. She'd planned on having dinner ready for him. And she was going to greet him in one of her club outfits. Her stomach revolted at the thought of food.

"You do whatever you need. I'm not hungry. I just need a place to crash for a few nights until I figure out my next

move.”

But she had no idea what that was going to be. The only thing she did know was that she couldn't go back to living at Lisa's. Not after living without condescension and judgment and realizing just how toxic it had become at that house.

“That's cool. Mi casa es su casa. For as long as you need.” He led her into the spare room.

She nodded through tears. “Thanks.”

The spare bedroom wasn't much. Just a full-size bed, a hand-me-down dark wooden dresser, and a scarred matching nightstand with a single lamp. It wasn't what she had gotten used to in the penthouse, but it had its own bathroom. And it would give her the space she needed to formulate the best path forward.

“I'm going to order a loaded supreme pizza. If you decide later you want to eat, it will be in the fridge. And I've got a bottle of Patrón I'll set out on the counter if you decide you want to go that route and drown your sorrows.”

“You really are too good to me. Why couldn't I be attracted to you and vice versa?”

“Honey, I adore you, but you've got the wrong equipment. Are you sure there's no salvaging the relationship?”

“No. It's done.” And she was perilously close to tears again.

“I'm sorry. But I'm going to let you get settled. If you want a shoulder, I'll be right out in the living room.”

She hugged him briefly, so thankful they met when she returned from college, scared about her new path, and answered the ad for a lead vocalist and guitar player spot in their band.

The moment he left, she crumpled onto the bed, not caring that she was fully clothed. Her life resembled a dumpster fire. And the tears she'd kept bottled up flowed. She fell asleep sobbing. Nothing felt right. Not when the one person she believed was the one for her turned out to be the biggest disappointment of her life.

Had any of it been real?

On Saturday, Cliff pulled his battered Ford into her sister's driveway. "Are you sure about this? It's not too late to change your mind."

"Yes, I'm sure." Even if it felt like her heart was breaking all over again. She'd pawned her guitar to pay for a plane ticket to get her back to Northwestern. And while she couldn't start taking classes until the summer session, she needed to get out of dodge.

Every place she went reminded her of Josh. The Java Hut, Cliff's place, her sister's house, the Eros Pit—all of it, even the guitar she no longer had, reminded her of everything that happened.

And she couldn't stay here. It was too hard. She hated that she was running back to school. Her old roommate and friend was going to let her crash on her couch for a few weeks until she could move into the dorm.

The thought of dorm living made her grimace. But it was only for half a year.

And her parents couldn't be more thrilled with promises to give her access to her trust upon her graduation. She wasn't going to fight them on the trust. There was no point. Her sister wouldn't help her. She was their parents' mini-me.

"Damn, we're going to miss having you play with us."

"It's only until December. Then I get my trust, and I'll come back. If you guys want me back."

"We need you. We'll find a temporary replacement. But it won't be the same. And it sucks that you won't be playing with us at Red Rocks this summer."

She couldn't even think about everything she'd be missing with her band. They got the invite to play at Red Rocks with a huge band. And she'd miss it. "I only need about fifteen minutes to gather my stuff."

"If you want to take some time, I can go grab a coffee from that shop we passed and come back in thirty minutes."

She sighed and nodded. "Yeah, if you want to do that so you're not just sitting out here waiting for me. I'll be done by the time you get back." And it would give her time to make sure she got it all. Because she was never coming back here.

"Good enough," he murmured as she shut the car door with the extra duffel bags she'd bought with what was left over once the plane ticket was paid for.

Using her key for what would be the last time, she entered Lisa's house. Her sister was in the living room.

"You're home? There's a big surprise."

“Just packing my things. I’m moving out.” She stormed down the hall with Lisa sputtering behind her.

She was still so pissed at her sister. She’d gone behind her back to Josh to tattle on her. Just like she had when they were kids. It was like she had to be the best and do whatever it took to make herself look better.

In the room she never considered hers, only a place to lay her head at night, she started emptying drawers and shoving stuff into the three duffle bags she brought with her. She’d worry about organization once she got back to Cliff’s place. Right now, speed was of the essence. She didn’t want to be here any longer than necessary.

She cleared her stuff out of the bathroom too. It might take her a hot minute to find work and start getting a paycheck. This way, she wouldn’t have to worry about things like shampoo and conditioner with the big liter bottles she’d stockpiled the last time they went on sale.

She was just finishing zipping up the bags when her sister stood in the doorway.

“You could have given me more notice that you’re moving out. He’s too old for you, you know.”

“You know what, Lisa? It’s none of your fucking business. Just like it was none of your business to tell him about my student loans. You deliberately harmed my relationship with him. What the fuck gives you the right?”

“You took the man I was interested in.” She shrugged carelessly, like it was no skin off her nose the damage she had

caused to Lexi's life.

“Like I knew that. Did he know you were interested? Did you guys ever go on a date? Did Josh ever do anything to make you believe you might have a future together?”

“Well, no,” she sputtered.

She'd never fit with her family. Ever. She just never realized how much her sister disliked her too. That she would do something so intentional to hurt her. “So you did it out of spite. I get that Mom and Dad hate me. I just never realized you did too. And so much you saw fit to try and ruin my life. Josh dumped me because of you.”

“Don't be so dramatic. It's not my fault you like to keep secrets. It couldn't have been that good of a relationship if you didn't tell him about the loans. It's really your fault when you think about it. Besides, you're young. You'll find another guy.”

But she didn't want another guy.

She was totally. Irrevocably. In love with Josh.

Damn him.

But Lisa didn't understand. None of her family had ever understood her. She'd always been an outsider, putting up with their toxic barbs. It didn't matter anymore. None of it did. She just knew she couldn't sit around here and wait for things to get better. She couldn't live where she wasn't wanted.

“The money I just paid you in rent. I'm going to need back.”

“If you think you’re going to mooch off me—”

“Newsflash, I’m moving out.” She gestured to the bags. “I won’t live here anymore. I don’t care how cheap the room is. I don’t want to be anywhere near you or our parents.”

“Where are you going to go?” Lisa’s expression was as controlled as ever.

Lexi snorted and hefted the bags onto her shoulders. “Like you give a shit. As far as I’m concerned, we’re done. I don’t want to see you or hear from you ever again.”

“Don’t be like that. This will all blow over, and you’ll find a new guy. You’ll—”

Lexi lost her shit over her sister’s belief she somehow helped her. And she snapped. “You don’t even get how badly you fucking betrayed me. Out of what? A hurt ego because Josh didn’t give you the time of day and wanted me instead. And you know, I don’t care what you think of me or my choices. At the end of the day, you are exactly what Mom and Dad made you, a self-absorbed, egotistical bitch who can’t see past her nose. You and Mom and Dad have done everything in your power to push me out of this family because I don’t fit into your perfect little boxes. Well, y’all got your wish because I’m out. So you no longer have to worry, because I certainly won’t be worrying about you guys. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m leaving. And I won’t ever be back.”

“Lexi, it doesn’t have to be like this.”

“Yes, it does. I’m done having the three of you treat me like I’m this stupid little girl who doesn’t know her own mind

and can't do anything right. But guess what? I'm smarter than you. My PSAT, SAT, and ACT scores were all higher than yours. My GPAs have always been higher than yours. I worked toward a career I didn't want in the hope that one day, one of you assholes would actually love me. But you guys don't even love yourselves. You love being pompous, self-inflated, egotistical assholes who look down their noses at everyone else."

"Lexi—"

"No. You don't get to play this off like you're so much better. What you did was wrong. You don't even realize how fucking toxic you are. And you know what, keep the goddamn rent. I will figure it the fuck out on my own, just like I have everything else."

She shoved past her sister. At the honk from the driveway, she murmured a prayer in thanks and headed for the front door.

"Lexi. Come on. Don't be like this."

With the doorknob in hand, she glanced at her sister. She wouldn't come back here. Ever. As much as it pained her, she never wanted to see Lisa or her parents again. They would never accept her. Even if she went on to medical school, they would always find fault with her.

And the moment she walked out the door, she no longer had a family. But she would make one of her own, like with Cliff, Nate, and Robbie. Those were the people who cared about her.

“Goodbye, Lisa. Have a nice life.” She walked out the door, needing to get as far away from Denver as she possibly could.

Because there was nothing for her here now.

A full week went by without her. And then another before he finally extracted his head from his ass.

It had been the longest two weeks of his life. He'd texted her about the stuff she left behind. He knew she didn't have much. And he'd been a total horse's arse.

Josh was fecking miserable. More than he had been at the end of his marriage. Because he had been wrong. So what if she had student loans? Plenty of people did in this day and age, and he was proud of her for leaving the lane her parents wanted her in and striking out by herself.

That took guts. And yeah, she'd hurt him by removing her collar. But she'd only done it because he'd walked in guns blazing. All because he'd been terrified he'd been played again.

Because his bloody ex really had done a number on him. Except by holding onto his past and using what his ex-wife did as a shield, he was depriving himself of happiness.

In all his days, he would never forget the look on her face when she stormed out. They needed to talk. He never should

have accused her without speaking to her about what Lisa told him. And if she would just give him a chance to explain, they could fix this.

Bloody hell, he missed her.

But she wasn't responding to his text messages.

Josh wanted her back. They belonged together. Because he realized something far too late.

He loved her. Deeply. She was it for him.

It was up to him to apologize and beg her to come back. But she wasn't answering his calls. His stubborn sub forced him to find another route.

And he knew what he could do to lure her back in.

He contacted his friend, Gage Walker, and called in a favor. He was a club member and had his own security company. Josh paid him a large sum of money to find out where her loan was being held.

As a peace offering, he'd pay the loan off for Lexi. In so doing, it would hopefully prove it wasn't a big deal and would be part of his apology for hurting. Gage told him he was crazy. And he was, but only because he loved her so fucking much he ached with it.

And he realized the depths of his feelings about an hour after she stormed out of his place. He thought he had known love before her advent into his life. But even his feelings for his ex-wife paled in comparison.

And it's why he sat at his desk with the information Gage procured and called the loan company. He would pay it off and beg her to come back.

After telling his secretary he would be on a call for a bit, he dialed them up and was on hold for a bit before an agent came on the line.

“Yes, Sir, how can I help you today?”

“I have a loan that I would like to pay the balance on. It's a rather hefty amount, too, so I'll need to know the best method for transferring the funds.”

“Oh, certainly. I would be happy to help you out. What is the account number or social on the account?”

Josh rattled off the account number.

“Okay, give me just a moment while I pull up the account information.”

Josh tapped his pen against the desk while he waited.

“Um, I'm sorry, sir, but that account balance is zero. There's nothing to be paid off.”

“It's paid for? In full?” Shock riddled him. But Lisa told him there had been over two hundred grand. How was it paid for?

“Yep. We received the final payment last week.”

“Oh. Okay, thanks.” Josh hung up the phone and leaned back in his seat. She paid it off. It was the only explanation.

Bloody fucking hell, he was an eejit.

He'd lost the best thing that had ever happened to him over a lie. He didn't understand why Lisa would lie about it. Unless she hadn't known. But why would she try to sabotage his relationship with her sister? Josh didn't get it.

He wanted to speak to Lisa, but her secretary indicated she was on a conference call. While he waited for her to be done with the call, he went through the stack of mail on his desk. And he reached a tan envelope addressed from a Williams.

Could it be?

He ripped open the envelope, yanking out what was inside.

It was a billing statement for Lexi's student loan, with a copy of the final payment attached. And on the bottom of the bill, inscribed in her handwriting, she wrote:

Fuck You!

In big, bold red letters.

That does it. He shot up out of his seat with the bill in hand. There was something fishy going on. And it was time he confronted her on this and found out where Lexi was holed up. He marched out of his office and headed to Lisa's on the other side of the building.

"Is she available?" He jerked his chin toward her door.

"Ah, yes, I'll let her know you want to speak with her," she said, reaching for the phone.

"No need." He strode past her. Knocked briefly and then pushed his way inside.

Lisa sat behind her desk, a cup of coffee at her elbow. And a file in front of her on the desk. At his entrance, her head shot up, and a slow smile appeared.

“Josh. To what do I owe the visit?”

“I’d like to know why the fuck you told me about your sister’s loan? What was the purpose of telling me?”

Lisa’s eyes widened for a moment, but then she shrugged. “I thought you should know what you’re getting yourself into. I’m sorry, but my sister has always been difficult. She didn’t like our parents’ rules. And she has always thumbed her nose at convention.”

Meaning she wouldn’t live the way they wanted her to. He should have seen this coming. The way Lisa acted all high and mighty when she talked about her sister. “You should be ashamed of yourself for trying to stir up trouble between us. And I was the fool who bloody fell for it. Lexi paid off that two hundred grand in loans all by herself. See for yourself.” He tossed the bill down on her desk.

“Wait, she paid it off?” Lisa lifted the bill up and paled.

“Yep. And what I want to know is why? Why the fuck did you stir up trouble between us? Because for the life of me, I cannot think of an explanation.”

She winced and lowered the bill onto the desk. The bright red letters blared boldly. But then, that was Lexi.

Lisa sighed and replied, “I was jealous. I kind of have a crush on you. And when I saw the two of you—”

Her admission, the truth of it, hit him hard. He put his hands on his hips and glared at her. “Lisa, don’t take this the wrong way, but are you fecking kidding me? One, I would never date a coworker. Two, I have never considered you in that light. Nor have I ever indicated any interest. And three, you hurt your sister and me because you felt slighted.” Livid did not even begin to describe his fury. This petty woman had caused a world of hurt for him and the woman he loved. “Where is she? She’s not answering my texts.”

“I don’t know.” Lisa appeared contrite.

“What do you mean you don’t know?” How the fuck did she not know where her sister was?

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her arms defensively. “She called me a few names and moved out.”

“They were well warranted, I’m sure. You and your parents don’t even realize what a gem Lexi is, and you don’t deserve her. You’re her fucking family, and you’ve treated her like dirt. But don’t worry, I will make it up to her, not for your sake, but for hers, because she deserves better. And I will ensure she never doubts herself or has anyone make her feel like dirt ever again.”

Lisa’s eyes widened. “You sound like you love her.”

“That’s because I do. And I will be her family from here on out. And Lisa, I think it’s best if you request a transfer to another department.”

“But I’ve worked hard to get here.” She argued, her face pinched in a scowl.

Josh nodded in acknowledgment. “You have. But the thing is, I refuse to have someone on my team I cannot trust. Nor will I allow any spiteful, vindictive backstabbing like I just witnessed with your sister. Either you request a transfer, or I will go to Jase. One way or the other, your time on my team is at an end.”

“You’re serious,” she said, stunned.

“Aye, I am. I want your transfer papers on my desk by the end of the week.” He headed toward the door.

“What are you going to do?”

“Me? I’m going to go find the love of my life and apologize for ever listening to your toxic nonsense.” And then he would move heaven and earth to make her his for all time.

Josh headed to her friend's place. He'd called the Java Hut to find out when she was working again. And they told him she quit and no longer worked there.

He headed to the warehouse where her band practiced, but he couldn't get in the building because he forgot what the access code was and couldn't find it in any of his text messages with Lexi. He stood outside like an idiot, hoping he would be able to get inside if someone came. But after an hour, he figured he had crept out the neighborhood enough by standing there.

And he even headed to the bar where the Celestials played. They weren't on tonight, but he noticed on the schedule they were slated to play Friday night.

Gotcha!

He left and headed home. He didn't want to wait until Friday night, but he had no other options. Not even Gabe would know, so there was no point in contacting his cousin.

But when he arrived home, he didn't sit and mope with a beer. Instead, he sat with a beer and made a list of all the

things he needed to do to make this place ready for Lexi to live here full time. And everything he needed to do to get ready to woo her back into his life and bed permanently.



Lexi sat on her friend Jan's couch for the third day in a row. Her former roommate was beyond excited she was back. They'd been roommates their freshman year and had been friends ever since.

Jan was in class, leaving Lexi alone with her thoughts. And that wasn't a good place to be right now. Her brain was a jumbled mess.

While her heart ached. She'd ventured into the depths of despair deeper than she had ever thought possible. She thought the heartbreak her family put her through had been the most awful thing that had ever happened to her. She'd been wrong. So damn wrong.

Because she hadn't understood just how much a heart could break.

She'd lost everything she cared about. And now here she was, trying to get herself excited about going back to school when all she really wanted was to curl into a ball and weep.

But returning to school was simply a means to an end.

When she contacted her parents and told them she was going back to finish up her final year of school, they'd been overjoyed. She simply asked for access to her trust once she got her degree.

They had joyfully agreed, going on about how she'd make a wonderful doctor. And of course, once she graduated in the fall, it would be hers.

And she warned them that she had an attorney review the will and trust. And if they tried to pull an underhanded tactic when she got her bachelor's degree, she would see them in court. They thought she was being overly dramatic again, but agreed it would be hers. So here she was, miserable and alone in the last place she wanted to be. Because that money equaled her freedom from those people.

She didn't really want to be here. She missed her guitar. She missed her band. But mostly, she missed Josh.

And she'd been delaying registering for summer classes. She wasn't sure why. She hated the thought of going into more debt just to do something she didn't want to do. Her mom had even offered to pay for it.

But their money came with strings attached. And they were strings she wanted nothing to do with.

So she spent the first week back in Chicago sulking on Jan's couch. She loved hanging out with her friend. If only it didn't feel as if her heart had withered and died.

On Saturday night, she and Jan sat on her couch, chowing on some pizza, when there was a knock at the door. Her on-campus apartment was a six hundred square foot one bedroom. It might be small, but she had spruced it up with touches of color everywhere.

“I wonder who that could be. You weren’t expecting anyone, were you?” Jan asked, her curly red hair bundled into a topknot. She rose and headed to the door.

“No. No one knows I’m here.” It’s not like she had told anyone where she was going except her bandmates.

Jan opened the door. And there was a direct line of sight from the couch to the front door. And she almost fell out of her seat as recognition settled over her—Josh.

He was here.



The week that followed his interaction with Lisa was the longest fucking week in the world. Friday night couldn’t arrive fast enough. When the night arrived, he headed to the Jukebox. If he had to corner her after their band played, he would. If he had to get down on his knees and beg her, he would. Josh would do whatever it took to get his Lexi back.

The club was the same rundown place. He didn’t spy her ex, Travis. He was in an enough of a mood that he’d likely get into a fight with him. But he sat at the bar expectantly, waiting for Lexi to take the stage. Only when the Celestials arrived on stage, some dude was standing there, singing and playing guitar.

Where was Lexi? Why wasn’t she here?

Deep in his gut, he knew something was wrong. This wasn’t right. Was she sick? Had she gotten hurt? What the feck happened to his Lexi?

Josh waited while the band played through their set. And they weren't the same without Lexi. She had this energy and presence on stage, an intangible quality that made the difference between the musical legends and local bands.

Lexi had it.

At the end of the show, he approached Cliff while they were packing up their instruments.

"Hey, Cliff. Great show."

"Oh hey, man. Didn't expect to see you here." Cliff looked at him with a slight frown. But there was an edge to it, which meant he knew about their breakup.

"Yeah, I'm looking for Lexi. We had a horrible fight because I'm an idiot. And I need to apologize."

"She's not here, dude." Cliff shrugged with a *Duh. Look around, dude*, look.

"I gathered as much when I didn't see her on stage with you guys. Could you tell me where she's at? I really need to talk to her. Any help you could give me would be appreciated."

"I wish I could, man, but she left Denver."

"What do you mean she left Denver?" His panic increased. She wasn't in Denver? Where the hell had she gone? "Where the bloody hell did she go?"

"Uh, Chicago. She's, um, going back to school or something. Says she'll be back in December. That's why we

got Phillip to fill in for her until she's back. Although she might not come back. She pawned her guitar."

"She did what?" Oh, he was the dumbest fecker who ever lived. She'd gotten rid of her guitar. And it was because of him.

He swore then and there that if she forgave him, he would spend the rest of his days making it up to her. If that meant he had to follow her around the country while she toured with her band, so be it. His life was with her.

"I don't know what to tell you. She was really hurt by the fight you guys had. Wouldn't talk about it much."

"I'm an idiot. And I need to tell her that and beg her to come back. But I can't do that if I can't get in touch with her. Do you have any idea where she is and how I could get in touch with her?"

"I know she's crashing with a friend while she's there."

"Do you have the address?" *Please let him have the address.*

"Nah, dude. Sorry."

"Look, I know you don't know me well. But could you text her and get the address for me? Just don't tell her it's for me. Tell her you have a package to ship her way and need an address."

"Yeah, I could do that. You're not going to hurt her or nothing?" Cliff asked skeptically, assessing Josh like he might be a serial killer or intend to harm her.

He decided honesty was the best policy to get his assistance. “I’m going to marry her, if she’ll have me.”

“Nice, dude. All right, I’ll help you out.” Cliff whipped out his phone and texted Lexi.

The gods must have been smiling down on him. Because Cliff got a text back in under a minute.

“Got it. What’s your number? I’ll screenshot it and text you.”

Josh relayed his number. “Thank you. And please don’t say anything to her until I’ve had a chance to talk to her.”

“My lips are sealed. Good luck. You’re going to need it.” Cliff shook his head. And his expression said it all. That it would take a miracle to get her to forgive him.

Josh raced home and called his cousin. He picked up on the first ring. “Is there a reason you’re calling me this late? Is everything all right?”

“Jase, I need to borrow one of the planes.”

“Are you telling me you got me out of bed with my wife because you need to borrow a plane?” Jase growled.

“It’s because I need to fly to Chicago tomorrow so I can tell Lexi I love her and ask her to marry me,” he explained, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“Lexi? As in Lexi Williams from the Eros Pit? That’s who you felt the Ryan click with?” Jase asked with a laugh.

“Bloody hell, yes. Will you help me out? I buggered it all up and need to go apologize and win her back. I’ve got a

bloody ring. Dammit, man.” He wanted to strangle his cousin. But his mum would be put out with him if he did that.

“Fine. I’ll contact my pilots and have them set up a flight plan. I’ll text you your flight time.”

“Appreciate it.” He finally felt like his life was moving in the right direction toward Lexi. And he’d do whatever it took to make her his forever.

“Oh, and Josh? Congratulations.”

“I haven’t even proposed yet. She could say no.”

“I know. But the thing is, when a Ryan feels the click, even when we mess up, we’re meant to be with them. And we tend to win whenever we set our mind to something.”

He was right. And he was the best at arguing his case. Now he had to argue the most important one of his life. “Thanks, Jase.”

“Aren’t you going to tell me not to tell the others?”

“Nope. Because Lexi’s mine.”

Jase hung up, laughing his ass off. But he didn’t care. They could make fun of him all they wanted, but he wouldn’t bite. Because by this time tomorrow night, Lexi would be his fiancé.

Jase texted him within the hour with his flight time. It was just enough time in the morning for him to run two errands. He had to go pick up something his woman was surely missing.



Lexi bolted up from her seat. Josh paid no heed to Jan, who was rather shell-shocked when he waltzed right past her and came and stood in front of her.

“What are you doing here?” her eyes drank him in.

He looked disheveled. Josh was always a neat freak, every hair in place. But he hadn’t shaved in days. He was in jeans and a tee and looked as if he hadn’t slept in weeks. She knew the feeling.

“I came for you, Lexi. I’m so sorry, lass. I was a total ass. It’s my past that made me jump to conclusions. You see, my ex-wife used me to get through law school. We met our first year of law school and fell for each other. We got married before the end of that year. But being newlyweds in law school, we didn’t have a lot of money. So, we made a deal where I would support her while she was in school and would work my job at the local grocery until she graduated. And then we would switch. Once she got a job as a lawyer, she would support me. Instead she cheated with a partner at the firm she was interning at, and once she graduated, she asked me for a divorce. She used me to get through school before she went and latched on to the next poor schmuck. She used me for my money. And hearing about the loan just made me think I had been duped again. Only this time it hurt even worse, because I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

During his speech, tears welled in her eyes and slowly slid down her cheeks. Because she saw his pain. And she understood. Even though he had been cruel, he’d been hurt as badly as she had and acted out of fear. And as much as she

wanted to make him pay for it, he'd flown all this way. How could she not forgive him?

"You love me?" she asked, searching his face for the answer, and what she found made her heart tremble. Could it be? He loved her.

"Yeah, I do. And I brought you something." He held it up.

And for the first time since he entered Jan's apartment, she looked at what he was carrying and did a double take. "My guitar."

He set the case down beside her and cupped her face. "Lass, you should never give up your music. It's what you're meant to do. I'm so sorry if I made you think otherwise. Please forgive me. I was hurt and scared and acted out. And know that I will support you in whatever manner you need me to. Just come home with me. This isn't you. Going back to school like this."

"No. I need to get access to my trust. I don't want anyone thinking they need to support me," she said through tears.

"It's already done." He pulled up his phone. "On the way to the airport, I spoke with your parents. I told them you had retained my services. And unless they wanted to be sued, to release the trust and grant you immediate access. They transferred the funds into an escrow account. All I need to know is where you want the funds transferred, and it's yours."

He'd gotten her guitar back and ensured she didn't have to jump through her parents' hoops to get her money. She

couldn't stop the waterworks if she tried. "I can't believe you would do this."

"Lass, there's nothing I wouldn't do for you. I love you. I want you by my side. I want you to come home and live with me." It was all there in his eyes. Everything he felt for her.

"And wear your collar again?" she asked, breathless because in her wildest dreams, she never imagined he would love her.

"No. I don't want to just collar you, lass." He went to one knee and withdrew a ring from his pocket. "I want to marry you. I don't ever want to be apart from you again."

"But my music, what happens if the band gets big? What if?"

"Lass, don't you get it yet. I'd follow you to the ends of the earth, woman. If your band becomes a household name and you need to tour, I'll go with you."

"But your job?"

"Screw my fecking job. All I need is you. Everything else is just window dressing. You're my home. And as long as we're together, it doesn't matter where we are. Marry me, Lexi. Give me the chance to love you every day."

And he was her everything. She blubbered through tears, "Yes."

A smile brighter than the sun appeared while he slipped the ring on her finger and rose, pulling her into his arms.

“And is there anything else you’d like to tell me?” he asked with a dark brow quirked and more love in his gaze than she ever thought possible.

God, this man. He’d upended her world in the best of ways. And she found she couldn’t deny him. “I love you, Josh. I’ve been miserable without you.”

“Let’s never do this again. I’ve got a pilot standing by to take us home. Ready?”

Home. He was her home. With him by her side, she felt like she could do anything. And the weight that had been holding her down lifted.

“I was born ready. I just need to grab my things.”

“There’s a good lass.” He leaned in and murmured, “And if you’re real good, we can finally join the mile-high club.”

“Well, then, what are we waiting for?”

And Josh kissed her, showering her with more love than she had ever known. Things wouldn’t always be perfect. They would fight. Their personalities were too strong not to go a few rounds. Yet she knew their life would be grand. Not because of money or their individual interests, but because of the love they shared.

And for Lexi, she had finally found the Dom of her dreams. The only Dom worth kneeling for.

THANK YOU!

Thank you so much for reading Midnight Dissonance! I hope you loved reading Josh and Lexi's love story as much as I enjoyed writing them. If you did, please consider leaving a review!

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I didn't expect to see her again. Nor was I prepared for the desperate desire she'd ignite in me. I crave her. Want her. Need her.

I can't stay away from her this time. Not when her touch mends all my broken pieces.

She doesn't trust me to stick around but I'll do whatever it takes to prove my devotion. After all, I thrive on adversity. And I'll draw on every ounce of strength I possess to win her heart because now I'm convinced:

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ABOUT ANYA

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Anya grew up listening to Cardinals baseball and reading anything she could get her hands on. She remembers her mother saying if only she would read the right type of books instead of binging her way through the romance aisles at the bookstore, she'd have been a doctor. While Anya never did get that doctorate, she graduated cum laude from the University of Missouri-St. Louis with an M.A. in History.

Anya is a bestselling and award-winning author published in multiple fiction genres. She also writes urban fantasy, paranormal romance, and contemporary romance under the name Maggie Mae Gallagher. A total geek at her core, when she is not writing, she adores attending the latest comic con or spending time with her family. She currently lives in the Midwest with her two furry felines.

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