

RAISSA DONOVAN & ADDISON WOLF



SAVAGE

A DARK BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

BILLIONAIRES OF NEW BRISTOL

I thought my life had hit rock bottom when I was forced to work at a strip club with a very lax "no touching" policy. Nothing could possibly be worse.

It turns out I was wrong. Getting sold to Dr. Hunter Savage, a control freak with a heart as cold as ice, has sent me down another layer of hell. He demands absolute obedience, and uses me any way he pleases. I hate every order, every touch, every kiss.

Most of all, I hate how my body reacts to him. I hate how I crave the small cracks in his armor, the hint of a smile.

I hate how I start to crave him.

And I hate that I might actually find some measure of happiness with a man who wants to shape me into his perfect woman.

Savage is a standalone, dark billionaire romance that contains dark and potentially triggering content, including: noncon & dubious consent; sex work/sex trafficking; drug abuse; self-harm and a suicide attempt on page; and more content notes available in the Authors' Notes.

SAVAGE

A DARK BILLIONAIRE ROMANCE

BILLIONAIRES OF
NEW BRISTOL #1

RAISSA DONOVAN
ADDISON WOLF

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Authors' Notes

Hello, and thank you so much for picking up **Savage**!

Before we get into all the content notes, we'd like to give a special shoutout to all our subscribers on our website, wolfandphoenix.com, and on [Ream](#). You're making it possible for us to keep creating in this niche and writing what we most love.

This is a completely standalone novel, although it's set in the same universe as our Lucia and Vanessa books. If you're familiar with our works, you know how dark our writing can get.

Savage isn't as dark as [Breaking Lucia](#) or [Claiming Vanessa](#), but it does deal with some dark and heavy themes. If you have no triggers and just want to jump in, please skip ahead to chapter 1!

Content Notes

Non-consent / dubious consent: There is no way around it. The relationship between Hunter and Stef begins with zero consent. Stef does not want to be with him, and he forces himself on her. While their relationship does develop, this is not a healthy relationship and should not be seen as an endorsement of any of what Hunter does to Stef. It's a fantasy, but not a realistic one.

Drug abuse: Stef is a drug addict. We've done research, but we are not experts on the subject. **Savage's** opinions on drug addiction do not reflect our own. Please do not take anything in this book as a 100% accurate representation of drug addiction, or an endorsement of any specific way to deal with drug addiction.

Self-harm/attempted suicide: Stef's struggles will take her to a very dark place. Once again, we have attempted to do the subject justice, but no experiences are identical.

Those are the main things we want to highlight. Other things you can expect:

- Sex trafficking/sex work
- Total Power Exchange relationship
- Anal sex
- Medical kink scene
- Semi-public sex
- Sex toys
- Bondage
- Somnophilia
- Total sensory deprivation
- Spanking
- Sexual punishments
- Watersports/omorashi
- ... and potentially more

If all of those things sound okay to you, please enjoy the book! If not, no hard feelings. We know that not all books are for everyone.

Love and other indoor (or outdoor) sports,
Raissa & Addison

Contents

1. [Stef](#)
2. [Stef](#)
3. [Hunter](#)
4. [Stef](#)
5. [Hunter](#)
6. [Stef](#)
7. [Hunter](#)
8. [Stef](#)
9. [Stef](#)
10. [Hunter](#)
11. [Stef](#)
12. [Hunter](#)
13. [Stef](#)
14. [Hunter](#)
15. [Stef](#)
16. [Stef](#)
17. [Stef](#)
18. [Hunter](#)
19. [Stef](#)
20. [Stef](#)
21. [Stef](#)
22. [Hunter](#)
23. [Stef](#)
24. [Stef](#)
25. [Hunter](#)
26. [Stef](#)
27. [Hunter](#)
28. [Stef](#)
29. [Stef](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Joint Works by Addison & Raissa](#)

[About Addison Wolf](#)

[Also by Addison Wolf \(as Adara Wolf\)](#)

[About Raissa Donovan](#)

[Also by Raissa Donovan \(as R. Phoenix\)](#)

CHAPTER 1

Stef

MY HAND SHAKES as I apply the makeup. It shouldn't. There's nothing unusual about tonight. I'm not going to be pulled aside for a private session. I'm not good enough for any of the fancy clients, and there's no reason for the boss to ask for me. I'm fine.

I haven't even cried at all this week, which is... well, it's something.

"Here," Elena says, handing me a deep red lipstick. "It'll go well with that eye shadow."

I take the lipstick and smile gratefully at her, my eyes sliding over the scarred side of her face. It's still hard not to stare, to wonder just how she got the burn marks, especially on nights when her hair doesn't fall in exactly the right spot to hide them. "Thanks."

Elena has been here a lot longer than I have. Rumor has it, she used to be married to the boss's father, until he got bored of her. It's amazing that she's as... kind as she is, considering everything she's gone through.

She's truly seen the worst of the worst this strip club has to offer.

Strip club.

I wish it was just a strip club instead of the nearest thing to hell I've ever experienced.

I wonder what Dylan's doing right now.

I wonder if my ex-boyfriend is enjoying his life—enjoying his next high—with someone new by his side.

I wonder what he'll do to her when his debts get too high again and he has the perfect scapegoat to pin it all on.

Again.

"Stef?"

I startle, looking at Elena as she speaks. She nods to the tube of lipstick

I'm still holding. Just like she's taught me to do a hundred times, I carefully paint my lips. I watch myself in the mirror, ensuring I don't go beyond the lipliner I've used. I don't want to have to do this all over again.

Some giggling at the other vanity catches my attention, and I turn to see Cat and Traci leaning in close to each other. Even being in the same room as them makes me anxious sometimes, but they're ignoring me right now, focusing on each other instead of tormenting me.

It must be nice to actually have a friend in this dump. There's Vanessa, the boss's... girlfriend, I think? But she's confined to her room for now because she tried to run away.

I don't think about it often, just what kind of girlfriend she has to be for the boss to share her with his friends and keep her locked up in a strip club that might as well be a brothel.

I'm just glad I'm not in her position. Having the freedom to roam Ntimacy is better than being locked away.

"Here, we'll clip back your hair a bit, give you that alluring look," Elena says, grabbing a hair clip from the vanity. "The men love it when you play with your hair seductively."

"I guess," I say, turning to face her. "But I'm okay with them not liking how I look."

Elena gives me one of her half-smiles. "I know. But that's not going to get you in Giulio's good graces, and—"

The door to the dressing room suddenly slams open, and the boss, Giulio Pavone, strolls in.

"Hello, ladies!" Giulio greets us. He's a handsome man, with a friendly smile and casual air to him. He has frosted tips in his dark hair and is wearing jeans and a t-shirt with sandals on his feet even though it's already October.

"Speak of the devil." Elena sets the hair clips down and goes over to him, leaning in for a brief kiss on the cheek. "I thought you were busy today?"

Giulio nods. "So did I, but I rearranged my schedule for this. I need one lovely lady to help me wine and dine—well, seduce—a friend of mine. For some reason, he doesn't want me to do it." He goes past Elena and starts looking around the room.

I shrink back, not wanting him to notice me. I'm not the right person for the task anyway. I don't know how to *seduce* people. Even with Elena's lessons, I still feel awkward and ridiculous every time I try to make a move.

"I could do it, Giulio," Traci says, getting up from the vanity. "I'm

always happy to help you out.”

I try not to audibly breathe out a sigh of relief. Good. Traci can do it. Giulio likes Traci; she always does well. If she’s a little bit of a bitch, well... She’s been at Ntimacy for longer than I have, and that would turn anyone a little callous and cruel.

I wonder when it’ll happen to me.

Giulio shakes his head. “Nah, my buddy doesn’t like the bitchy girls. Hell, he doesn’t even like the good girls. What my buddy wants...” He starts moving around the room, inspecting the other girls who are getting ready for opening hours. He dismisses all of them with a brief comment, like “too big,” or “too healthy.”

Then he stops in front of me, and his grin widens. “Hi, Stef. Have you cried this week?”

I shake my head wordlessly. I have the feeling I’m about to, though. I don’t want a reward for not crying. I don’t want a punishment for crying now. I just want to be left alone and invisible, not to be one of the chosen few. Maybe it’ll take me longer to work through Dylan’s debt this way, but I don’t want to become one of the popular girls.

“Good job,” Giulio says, reaching out to pat me on the head. I tremble, wanting to pull away but not daring. “Turns out, my buddy *really* likes girls who cry. He pretends he doesn’t, but I’ve got his number.” He starts laughing. “Okay, realistically, I would have picked you even if you weren’t a crybaby, but it’s definitely a bonus. So come on, let’s go show Dr. Savage a good time.”

I don’t know why a doctor would like women who cry, but it doesn’t surprise me anymore. I used to believe people went into vocations like that to help people, just like police officers and the clergy, but I’ve seen enough of their type over the past few months to know just how delusional and naive I’d been.

Private visits are even worse than being on the floor, but it’s not like I can say no. I get up and cast one last helpless look at Elena, who only smiles encouragingly at me, before my shoulders droop and I walk toward Giulio.

I don’t know what he sees when he looks at me. There’s nothing really appealing about my too-thin body, my sallow skin, or my thin, too-dry blonde hair. But if the guy likes tears, pleasing him shouldn’t really be a problem.

I want to laugh, even though it’s not actually funny at all.

Giulio puts an arm around my shoulders and plays with the strap of my

top. “Hmm... well, I guess the outfit doesn’t matter. I’d put you in a sexy nurse costume, but he’d probably walk out the moment he saw you.” He guides me out the door and toward one of the private rooms.

He stops to knock only briefly, then pushes the door open.

“Hey, Dr. Savage! Nice to see you. I brought you the girl I told you about.” Giulio says. His tone is cheerful, but his grip on my shoulder is strong, as if warning me not to try anything.

Like he really needs to warn me.

The man already sitting inside is even better looking than Giulio, with dark hair and piercing eyes, and he’s wearing a well-tailored suit that’s completely at odds with most of the customers of this place.

He’s also scowling.

“Giulio,” Dr. Savage says. “Is this a joke? She looks like you picked her up out of the gutter.”

I want to be offended, but he’s not too far from the truth. Dylan and I hadn’t been far from the gutters by the time he’d handed me over to Giulio Pavone.

“No, no. You want a *project*. I know you. If I give you one of the other girls, you’ll just get bored. Also, you definitely don’t want one of the ones who talks back.” Giulio nudges me toward the sofa where Savage is sitting. “Go on, Stef. Show him what you can do.”

What I can do? I give him a desperate look, because we both know I have no idea what to do. Traci or Cat would already be on his lap, probably, giving him a flawless lap dance, but I’m not either of them. I’m not particularly graceful.

Giulio shoos me forward anyway, with that too-pleased look on his face that lets me know this is going exactly like he wants it to.

That doesn’t make me feel any better.

I approach the doctor, shivering and wishing I had more on than a skimpy top and a tiny skirt over an even tinier pair of sheer panties. Some of the girls would try to talk to him, but my mouth is dry, and I have nothing to say.

There are no rules in Ntimacy about keeping hands off the girls, but this man doesn’t strike me as the type to blindly grope a random woman. Maybe. Maybe I’m thinking too much of him. Maybe I’m mistaking his boredom and annoyance for something else entirely.

“Would you like a lap dance?” I whisper, the words almost lost in the room.

“What else would I want?” he says sharply.

Giulio comes over and sits down on the same couch, with a decent amount of space between him and Savage. “You could ask her to get on her knees and open her mouth,” he suggests.

Savage glares at him. “I’m not getting my cock out in front of you.”

“Fine, fine. One of these days I’ll convince you to be more adventurous. For now... Stef, just give him a nice lap dance. Let’s get our overworked doctor to relax a bit.” Giulio makes an impatient gesture with his hands.

I can’t deny that this is awkward... and I don’t like it. I don’t like that Giulio is insisting on being right here, next to us, where he has his eyes on me the entire time. If he wasn’t in here, maybe I could do a little better, but as it is, I struggle to get into position to begin one of the erotic dance routines Traci had impatiently shown me once then given up on me over.

Just a dance. I can do this. I’ve done so many of them in these past months that it should be nothing... but it doesn’t feel like nothing.

I place my arms on his shoulders and give him a crooked smile. “You can sit on your hands if that helps you not to touch—”

“Eh, it’s okay if you touch,” Giulio interrupts. “You can get your fingers all over her if that’s your fancy.”

Savage grits his teeth in clear annoyance. “Are you going to talk the entire time?”

“What, you want me to be *quiet*?” Giulio laughs. “Better stick something in my mouth... eh, nah. Sorry, don’t really want to suck your dick.” He pulls out his phone and taps on it, and a few seconds later, the music in the room starts up. “Now I’ll be quiet. Just start dancing, Stef.”

That’s a clear order—and not one I can ignore. I paste a smile onto my too-red lips and focus on the dance. It shouldn’t be difficult, not really, but it requires more agility than I have. I’m getting better, but I still end up needing to touch his shoulders and arms more than I should.

I don’t dare look into his eyes to see what he thinks of that.

While I’m awkwardly grinding his thighs, my chest forward so he gets a good look at my breasts, he suddenly grabs my wrist. I startle and try to pull away, but his grip is tight.

Savage taps the inside of my elbow, where all the bruising and pin marks are. “Are you *high* right now?”

I let out a nervous giggle, unsure of how to respond. My eyes go to Giulio as I wordlessly plead with him to intervene.

Giulio shrugs. “Dunno. Maybe? Donny and Paul dole out the drugs at their discretion. But I guess if she weren’t high, she’d be shaking and sweating.”

Shame surges through me, and I wish I wasn’t too weak to avoid those offerings. Even when Paul offers — when he expects us to *earn* it — I can’t say no. It’s easier when Donny doles it out because he isn’t too bad.

He at least remembers that the cost of the drug already comes out of our meager pay.

Savage makes a disgusted noise. “No wonder she’s like this. I think I’m done here.”

“Nah,” Giulio says, and even though he’s smiling, something about his expression is scaring me. “Stef, take it all off. Give Savage a good look at you.”

I don’t think twice, even though tears prick at the corners of my eyes. The fabric that masquerades as clothing is meant to be easily pulled off, and I make a quick show of removing it all.

Savage’s face remains stern. I want to shrink away from him, but I don’t think Giulio would be happy with me if I did.

I’ve seen what happens if Giulio is pissed off.

I stand straight and try to keep my trembling to a minimum.

I don’t know why this still affects me. I’ve been here for a few months already, and I’ve had worse done to me. Nudity shouldn’t still be making me flush with shame.

Savage stands up, towering a head over me, and places a single finger under my chin to force me to look up.

“Open your mouth,” he orders.

I don’t dare hesitate. I part my lips, opening my mouth a little for him. With a second thought, I open it a little more, my heart thundering in my chest.

Savage inserts a finger into my mouth and pushes down on my jaw, forcing my mouth even wider. He spends some time peering inside, running that single finger over my tongue and my gums and my palate. My skin crawls at the dispassionate touch, and more tears start to collect in my eyes.

“When’s the last time she’s even seen a dentist?” Savage mutters.

“Dunno,” Giulio answers. “She’d been using for years, living on the streets, before she ended up with us. Unless her dealer also doubled as a dentist...” There’s a small pause as he laughs. “There’s an idea. Maybe I

should set that up. Get them hooked on the stuff, but at least their teeth will be clean before they start falling out.”

Sometimes, I really, really hate Giulio.

He’s terrifying, and he’s so dismissive of everything—including people—and it’s that last bit of a lack of regard for humanity that makes the tears start to spill down my cheeks at long last.

I don’t try to close my mouth to answer. There’s no point, because I can’t remember the last time I’d been to a dentist. The closest I’ve even gotten to a doctor was the dismissive gynecologist who’d done a precursory examination when I’d gotten to Ntimacy, and all she’d done was make sure I wasn’t *diseased*.

She’d put it like that, too.

Savage finally releases my mouth, but his touches don’t stop. He examines my hair and my eyes—that means I get a very close look at *his* bright blue ones—before lifting my arm to look at the track marks once more.

He pushes down on one of the bruises, and I flinch at the slight pain.

Pain is another thing I thought I’d be used to by now.

“She looks like she’d break from a single blow,” Savage says dispassionately.

I shudder. Is that what he wants to do? I’m sure it is, knowing the men who frequent this place. Why not beat someone when they’re already down?

Giulio huffs in amusement. “Probably. You’ll have to fatten her up. But it also means you won’t have to expend too much energy spanking or whipping her.”

The way they’re talking about me... I don’t bother to wipe away the tears. Why should I? They like seeing them. If they didn’t want me to cry, they wouldn’t discuss me so coldly, like I’m some sort of animal instead of a person.

I’ve been at Ntimacy long enough to have heard rumors that people who piss Giulio off disappear, and I’ve tried very, very hard not to think about where they might have gone.

Savage moves on to my breasts, squeezing each of them like he’s conducting a breast cancer screening. That thought almost makes me laugh. Here I am, debased and dehumanized, but maybe I’ll find out about some life-altering medical condition.

“At least she’s not flat-chested,” Savage says, and for some reason that has Giulio making a disgruntled noise.

“Nothing wrong with the flat chicks! Especially if they’re kind of lean all over, and there’s a slight boyish quality to their frames but they’re still pretty and feminine... And maybe you get to see them swell up with pregnancy, if they aren’t being fucking traitorous—” Giulio breaks off with a laugh. Is he talking about Vanessa? I can’t follow his line of thought, but it doesn’t matter anyway, because Savage is still fondling my breasts in that oh-so-professional way that’s meant to make me think he’s not enjoying it.

“Anyway. Nice tits, Stef,” Giulio says.

“Thanks,” I mumble, even though it doesn’t feel very complimentary at all.

Savage ignores Giulio too, letting go of my breasts to run his hands over the bumps of my ribcage. He doesn’t comment about that, but I notice his scowl deepen. He covers my bare pussy with that large hand and runs his thumb over the skin.

“I don’t know why you keep them like this,” Savage says. “They look like children.”

My cheeks flush at that. I like the feeling of being bare. I don’t like the waxing kits we have to use to stay that way, but it feels better. Tidier.

“If you can figure out a way to keep all the pubic hairs inside the teeny tiny thongs, please, enlighten me,” Giulio answers.

I shift uncomfortably, not liking the way the conversation is going between the two of them. It’s clear Savage is displeased with pretty much everything about me, and Giulio is just... being Giulio.

I do notice Savage rolling his eyes, right before he grabs my hips and forces me to turn around. I let out a startled sob and tense up. Seconds later, Savage squeezes my ass cheeks.

“How am I supposed to spank an ass this bony?” Savage complains.

I can’t see Giulio, but I can imagine his amused smile. “With a paddle?”

I shudder. I’ve been paddled before, and I couldn’t sit properly for a few days after.

None of the other patrons have done anything even remotely close to this. I usually do a lap dance, strip down... and occasionally do more, depending on who it is and what they want. I can always tell who the boss’s friends are based on how they treat me, and I shudder all over again to think about some of the men I’ve had to service.

I feel Savage’s hand pushing at the small of my back, and his foot taps the inside of my calf. “Bend over,” he orders.

Something about the way he handles me makes it more... dehumanizing somehow, than if he was simply telling me what to do. I bend over, trembling as I try to wipe away my tears. They just keep coming, though.

Savage wastes no time in reaching between my legs to spread my folds. He gets a single long finger inside me and starts moving it like he's searching for something. I'm dry, and the whole experience is unpleasant, and the shame is making my tears fall even harder.

I'm caught off guard by another one of his fingers seeking out my clit and rubbing it roughly. I bite my lip, not sure what he's hoping to accomplish. It's not like any of the men I've been with here have shown any regard for my pleasure, and even my boyfriend before this didn't much care as long as he had lube—or spit—at the ready to make it possible for him to force his cock inside of me.

I start to squirm as he keeps going, though, as his fingers slide to the side of my clit instead of touching it dead-on. My eyes widen a little as I start to feel a strange pleasure building up inside of me, and the finger he has inside of me moves a little more easily.

I bite my lip to keep from whimpering. My legs tremble in an effort to keep me upright.

Please, no. I don't want this to feel good. I don't want to get off on this humiliation and degradation.

I'm openly sobbing, the tears falling unbidden, as Savage continues to finger me. I can feel my pleasure growing, and I realize with panic that I'm dangerously close to orgasm. I clench, trying to keep his finger from moving, hoping I don't end up succumbing to this.

When Savage withdraws his fingers, I'm both relieved and disappointed. Pleasure held at bay—but it's the first pleasure I've had in months.

Savage wipes his fingers on my ass and steps away from me. "Maybe," he says darkly. "I have to consider things. If you have any other girls, who aren't as emaciated—"

Consider things? Consider what things? Isn't this just supposed to be a lap dance?

"I'll take a look at our back stock," Giulio answers. "Maybe there's another girl still locked up back there, just waiting for you."

Back stock.

Stock.

His words make me shudder, and I stare down at the floor as I fail to keep

another sob from escaping me. Does he have other women locked up here?

What does he do with them?

What's he going to do with me?

I stay in this position until Savage has left the room with barely a goodbye. Only once he's gone do I allow myself to fall to my knees on the floor.

Giulio walks over to me and looks down, shaking his head. "Stef, we talked about the crying. Touching happens sometimes."

"You told me he likes the crying," I whisper, not looking up at him. I feel like a broken marionette, its strings cut. It doesn't matter, though, because I'd have cried anyway, and we both know it. But I'd thought I had some sort of strange permission to cry for his friend.

"Oh, he does." Giulio crouches down in front of me and reaches out to wipe away some of my tears. His smile terrifies me. "I bet he's gonna call back before the evening is over. Or maybe you'll be lucky, and he'll wait for a better-looking model to come in, and I'll just have to find some other way to torment you."

I flinch, but I know better than to pull away. "What... I... I thought this was..." I stumble over my words, unable to figure out how to properly *spea*k. "Why are you selling me? I'm... I'm trying, Giulio, I promise."

"I know you are. But Dr. Savage is a dear friend, and I bet he hasn't gotten his dick wet in years now. You heard him, he's like fucking Goldilocks. I couldn't let his prick shrivel up and die on my watch." Giulio claps me on the shoulder. "Now get up and get dressed. You still have work for tonight. Some sad fuckers out there want your half-assed lap dances."

The worst part about all of this is... I'm relieved to be doing lap dances instead of being sold to a man who treats me like I'm cattle.

CHAPTER 2

Stef

IT'S the middle of the day, and I'm in my room—or my cell, depending on how you look at it—trying to get a nap in before I have to prepare for the evening. I've been having a hard time sleeping ever since that meeting with Savage days ago, especially coupled with Giulio's threatening words. I'm considering begging Donny for more drugs when my door bursts open.

I startle and sit up, clutching my thin blanket to myself. Ben, one of the strip club's bodyguards, walks through the door.

Donny, the manager, is standing on the other side, phone in hand. "Hey, Stef." He looks apologetic. "Sorry about this. Boss's orders and all."

"Sorry... Sorry about what?" I ask. It's not like I expect privacy, and I don't even care about my partial nudity anymore, but the fact that they're intruding during the middle of the day doesn't bode well at all.

Ben comes up to me, holding up a pair of leather manacles. "I'd ask you to come quietly, but..." He looks over at Donny.

My heart is already racing, but it feels like it's going to pound right out of my chest. "Wait. I will. I'm not going to fight you. What's going on?"

"Giulio was really clear. Chain her so we can transport her." Donny, who usually looks relaxed and maybe even kind sometimes, looks grim. He holds up his phone, and I hear the sound of the camera going off.

Ben bends down to snap the manacles around my wrists and ankles. I consider kicking him, but I already know there's no point. I'm not stronger than him. I'm not even stronger than Donny, who's about half his size.

"Why?" I ask, trying not to cry. "I've been doing better lately."

Donny grimaces, like he actually feels sorry for me. "I don't think it's anything you did or didn't do. Just one of Giulio's whims. You know how he is."

Unfortunately, I do, but that doesn't mean I understand this. I shiver, wishing I was wearing more than a thin nightgown. "It's... It's that doctor, isn't it?" I whisper, bile threatening to rise up from my stomach.

"Yeah." Donny gets closer with his phone. "Sling her over your shoulders and push her nightie up so I can get a good photo."

Ben sighs. "She's skinny, but she's not *that* light. Giulio should try lifting her himself."

"You gonna tell him that?" Donny counters.

Of course he isn't. Ben reaches out to pick me up and lift me over his shoulder like I'm a sack of potatoes. Donny helps push my nightgown aside so that my ass is entirely exposed.

I let out a squeak, my cheeks flushing red, and I wish I could pull it down again. I know better, though. They're being gentle, almost nice, but that would change in an instant if I tried to fight them at all.

Another click from his phone—another picture—and I lose it. The tears start to flow as Ben carries me toward the door. Donny follows us down the stairs and toward the back exit. I catch Traci and Cat staring, and...

Elena stands by the exit, wearing a veil to cover her scarred face.

"Elena," I say through my sobs. "Please. I don't want to... Can you tell Giulio..."

She comes closer to me, and Ben stops for her.

"Stef," Elena says gently, petting my hair. "It's inevitable. Just try to figure out what he wants and give it to him. You'll be fine."

"Why is it inevitable?" I ask, leaning into her touch, trying to take some small comfort from the only mother figure I've had in ages. "I want..." I almost say, *I want to stay here*, but do I really? I'm getting numb to everything, but that doesn't mean I'm happy here.

But if I go to the doctor, that's it. There's no one who cares if I stay safe, if I live or die.

I've never claimed to be smart, but I'm not stupid, either.

Giulio just sold me, and there's not a damn thing I can do about it.

"It was inevitable the moment you ended up in this world," Elena answers. "Your only hope is to become somebody they want. Remember, bending is better than breaking."

Are those words supposed to be encouraging? I don't want to change for somebody else. I just want to be me, and safe, and all sorts of things I haven't had since I was a teenager.

Donny makes a disgruntled noise. “Yeah, thanks, Elena. We need to get moving. Her buyer is waiting.” Then he turns to look over his shoulder. “And the rest of you, stop staring and go back to cleaning or whatever you were doing.”

I try to breathe, try not to throw up all over Ben’s back, but it’s a near thing. I wish I could say I’m a strong person, someone who can survive this without breaking, but... I’ve never been strong. If I was, I wouldn’t be here now.

I catch a glimpse of Traci’s smirk as we pass, and I squeeze my eyes closed so I don’t have to see anyone else’s reactions.

Ben carries me toward a black sedan parked out back. “Was that dramatic enough?” he asks Donny.

Donny scrolls his phone and shakes his head. “Apparently not. Dump her in the trunk. I’ll take a few more photos.” He pops the trunk of the car and lifts it up.

I squeak, and I clutch at Ben’s shirt. I shake my head furiously. “No. No, please, not the trunk.” My voice is high with panic, and I fight not to completely lose control. “I’m being good. I’m behaving. Please, please, don’t do this. Just... just take pictures and...” I’m crying so hard I’ve started hiccupping, and I can barely even understand my own words. “And let me sit in the back. Please.”

Ben grimaces and lowers me into the trunk. “We could, right? Giulio wouldn’t have to know...”

Donny rolls his eyes and points toward the building. “The cameras are right there. And I’m sure Giulio’s gonna chat with the buyer later, who might notice if she wasn’t in the trunk.” He turns to me. “It won’t be too long, Stef. Maybe half an hour—”

Ben snorts. “Sure. Half an hour, if it was 2 a.m. and zero traffic.”

They’re trying to be nice—as nice as they can possibly be, given the situation—but that doesn’t help at all. I don’t understand why Giulio’s being so cruel about this. He knows I’ll behave, knows that everything will go the way he wants because it always does. “Please,” I whisper. “We could... could drive somewhere... and I could get out?”

I know it won’t work. Someone would notice a girl getting out of a trunk in her nightclothes no matter where we stopped, especially in the middle of the day.

“Sorry,” Donny repeats. That doesn’t change anything. They close the lid

of the trunk on me, leaving me in total darkness.

I try to go for the latch I know has to be there, only to discover that it's been tampered with and won't move.

They've used this car for these purposes before.

Am I going to run out of air? It's cool outside today, thankfully, so it isn't boiling hot in the trunk, but... I feel like I'm suffocating already. I just wish I knew what I'd done to deserve this sort of treatment. I'm never going to get the answer to that question, though. Even if I could ask, Giulio would only smirk at me and keep his reasons to himself.

I cry myself into an uneasy sleep, which passes some of the time, but I jolt awake when the car comes to a final stop and someone comes to unlatch the trunk.

It's the doctor. He sneers at me when he sees me, and I cringe. If he doesn't like me, why did he buy me?

"Remove the ankle chains. I'm not going to carry her," Savage orders.

Ben enters my line of sight and shrugs. "Sure. Stef, you'll behave for him, right?" He's already reaching into the trunk to unlock the manacles around my ankles.

I could run now. I don't know where we are, but there are probably cameras—there's no place in New Bristol that is safe from cameras. If somebody notices, maybe they'll call the cops... I nearly laugh at myself because I know what the cops are like here. Even if they did show up, they'd probably go away after a bribe.

After a *taste*.

"I'll behave," I whisper. I wish I'd thought to beg Donny for a hit before we'd left, to make all of this easier to handle. I remember the way Savage had looked at my arms, though, and I know it's too late to ask for any sort of fix.

Dread starts to rise up within me. What if he doesn't intend on giving me anything at all? What if he's going to just make me stop, and cold turkey at that? I can't bring myself to look at any of them, even as Ben leans down to unfasten the ankle cuffs.

Ben lifts me out and sets me on cold concrete. We're in a parking lot, and the lack of heating is already getting to me. I shiver and pull my arms closer to myself.

Savage makes a noise and holds up a large coat. "Stand still." He wraps it around my shoulders and fastens it in the front, so my arms are now trapped against my chest—but I'm warmer, and I'm no longer as exposed.

He wraps one arm around my shoulders. "Walk calmly and quietly," he hisses at me, "or I'll tell Giulio I don't have need for you after all."

As little as I want this, I want to experience Giulio's wrath even less. I nod to him, blinking back tears all over again. "Yes, sir," I mumble.

Nobody says anything else. I hear the car doors slam shut, and it drives off while Savage leads me toward an elevator. Savage doesn't speak at all while the elevator takes us up, and up, and even higher up.

Finally, at floor 45, the doors open up into a hallway. I follow Savage out and wait as he unlocks one of the two doors on this floor. Once the door is open, Savage pushes me inside.

My eyes widen as I try to take it all in. The expensive furniture. The lamps that look like they're made of crystal. The white sofa that has to be leather. A dining table big enough for twelve people.

Savage keeps moving though, not allowing me to get a good look at any one thing. He pushes me through another door, one with a heavy keypad on the front.

My breath hitches, and I stare at it. The fear that's been at bay for so long threatens to overwhelm me, and I whimper. Locked rooms are never a good thing, especially when I've just been... purchased. Is he going to just dump me in here and leave me alone? Why would he buy me if that was the case, though?

Savage takes the coat off of me and tosses it back out into the hall. Without saying anything, he lifts my wrists to remove the cuffs. They've left a faint imprint, even though I didn't struggle.

"Strip," he orders. "You're filthy."

My cheeks heat up. I'm not wearing much, but the nightgown shields me from some of his critical stare. I still remember the way he'd first looked at me, all arrogant and derisive like I was something under his shoe, and it doesn't look like that has changed a bit. I pull off the nightgown, shivering as I stand there before his gaze, and I look down at the floor.

Savage pushes another door open, revealing a bathroom. It's gleaming white, with no decor at all. There's nothing extraneous inside, only soap, towels, and a toothbrush and toothpaste. Savage takes my wrist and pulls me inside.

The lights are harsh and make me appear even bonier in the mirror. I startle a little when I see myself, though. Ntimacy had mirrors, but none this clean, and usually I only looked at myself long enough to apply makeup.

Without the clothes or the makeup, my face is gaunt, my eyes sunken. I look like I haven't slept in weeks. The bruising on my arm contrasts starkly with my pale skin. My shoulder-length blond hair is limp and disheveled.

No wonder Savage judged me so harshly. It doesn't explain why he decided to *buy* me, though. I wouldn't want to own someone who looks like I do.

Savage goes over to the shower and turns on the water. "Get in there. There's soap and shampoo. I assume you know how to use those?"

My pride has already suffered several massive blows over the past few months—the past few years, really—but this seems like an especially heavy hit. "Yes," I say quietly. I shower thoroughly every day at least once, but the toiletries at Ntimacy aren't fancy. I don't try to explain or make excuses. Instead, I go to the shower and climb in, shivering as cold water hits my skin. It warms quickly, though, which is something I'm not quite used to, and I make a soft sound of surprise. It feels so good.

"Wash all over," Savage orders, watching me through the glass shower doors. "Especially your cunt. I saw how it looked the other day."

It would be easier if his gaze was hungry, if he was interested. But his dismissal of me, the way he treats me like I'm nothing... It's difficult not to cry all over again.

Crybaby Stef, I can practically hear Traci's voice in my mind.

But Giulio did say Savage likes tears. Maybe if I cried, he'd be a little nicer to me.

I don't, though—not yet, at least. Instead, I allow myself to enjoy the hot water as I shower, making sure to scrub myself thoroughly. I take my time with the shampoo and conditioner, too, and marvel at how it makes my hair feel after.

I had these luxuries once.

If only I'd known just how lucky I was...

"Enough," Savage says, opening the shower door and abruptly turning off the water. "Get out. I don't have all day."

"You don't have to be mean about it," I blurt out, cringing as I realize what I just said. It shouldn't surprise me when people are cruel to me, not anymore, but after today... I just don't know how much more I can stand. I get out of the shower, shivering on the mat.

Savage stares at me, and then, in clipped tones, says, "I can be however I want. But now is a good time to go over the rules." He grabs the towel from

the towel rack but doesn't hand it to me. "You will address me as *Master*. You will not talk back; you will not argue. I expect complete obedience."

I look longingly at the towel as the cool air starts to overtake the lingering warmth from the shower on my skin. "Yes... Yes, Master," I say awkwardly. I don't usually talk back or argue anyway, and obedience... That's been pounded into me these past few months.

Savage keeps looking at me, and I have no clue what he wants anymore. My nipples are turning hard from the cold, and I shiver. I don't dare try to cover myself though.

Finally, he says, "Good," and hands me the towel.

I take it quickly from him, half-expecting him to rip it back from my grasp and start to dry off. It's a fluffy towel, so unlike the harsh fabric of the towels at Ntimacy, and I realize just how low my standards have fallen.

Then again, I'd never been rich, and this was all beyond my means anyway.

When I'm done, I hold up the towel awkwardly.

Savage sighs and points at a basket in the corner. I hurriedly throw the towel in there.

I'm still naked. I wonder when I can expect the usual demands on my body, and if he'll be as harsh or clinical when fucking me as he is with everything else.

"Follow me," Savage says, walking out the bathroom without another glance at me.

My fists clench at his tone. I don't know why this feels so much worse than the lewd comments I used to receive. But I quickly follow, remembering his insistence on obedience.

He leads me further into the room, which has a large bed against the center of the wall. The curtains on the large windows are drawn, revealing the large open skies. This high up, there's no way anyone can see me walking naked past the window.

I'm more concerned about the bed, anyway. It has a very heavy frame, with metal bars on the headboard.

And chains, already dangling from said headboard.

I take a step back, not liking what I'm seeing at all. It's not like I can go anywhere, and if he tells me to get on the bed, I will... but I don't want to. I don't like the way it looks at all, and I don't even understand why someone would need to chain me up. Did Giulio tell him I'm disobedient? That he has

to treat me so callously because I don't listen?

Savage closes the distance between us, and it takes everything in my power not to flinch away from him. He ignores my trembling and tilts my chin up, gazing into my eyes.

"When's the last time you saw a doctor?" he asks. "A real one."

I swallow hard, wishing I could look away, but I'm caught in his steely blue eyes. "I... I don't know." The only doctor I'd seen had been the one at Ntimacy who'd checked us for *diseases*.

Not for us, of course, but so we couldn't accidentally pass things on to the clients.

"Well, I won't tolerate you harming your body—*my property*—from now on." Savage grips my shoulders and squeezes harshly. "Let's see what needs to be fixed."

I flinch.

Fixed.

I want to protest and say that I'm healthy, but I know better. I'm not. I'm a total mess, and even if I hadn't known that before, he's made it perfectly clear since the moment he first laid eyes on me.

He lets go of me and turns to a nearby dresser, which has a duffel bag on top. I watch warily as he withdraws a stethoscope from it.

And a speculum.

I shudder at the sight of it, already recoiling at the thought of him placing the cold metal device inside of me so he can stretch me wide.

I know better than to argue, though, so I bite my lip hard instead of speaking.

"Are you on birth control?" Savage asks in such a mild tone I could almost confuse him for a real doctor.

I guess he *is* a real doctor. But he's also the man who bought me.

"Yes," I say in a small voice. "I... It's an IUD. I got it like... three years ago, maybe?"

I'd had to go to one of the free clinics when I'd realized Dylan was getting sloppy and forgetful with the condoms, and I had no plans of getting pregnant. I'm glad for it now, though I have a moment of panic when I realize he could very well take it out.

What if he wants to get me pregnant? They'd been doing that to Giulio's girlfriend at Ntimacy, using her over and over as they tried to get her pregnant. I shudder at the thought. I don't want to be a mother, least of all to

this man's children.

Savage grunts, which doesn't tell me if he's pleased by this or not. He takes the stethoscope to my chest and places his hand on my back. "Breathe deeply."

I obey, drawing in a deep breath—once, twice, then again as he moves the cold metal from one place to the next.

Finally he stops, and he doesn't say anything at all as he puts the stethoscope away. He touches my jaw and pushes against my lymph nodes, checks my breasts, and does all the usual things I expect from a general physical without saying a single word the entire time.

Because I'm not a real patient. I'm his property, and I don't need to know what he's doing with me.

I'm shivering and holding back sobs by the time he says, "Lie down on the bed, on your back. Spread your legs."

I move to the bed and gingerly lie down, trying not to look at the chains or think about what they mean. As long as I behave, he won't bind me... I hope.

Savage picks up the speculum. I clench, remembering how unpleasant it was the first time I had one of those inside me. I'm almost shocked when I see him cover the tips with lube.

He looks at me, and a frown crosses his features. "Spread *wider*."

I whimper, and the tears that have been threatening to fall start to leak from my eyes. I spread my legs as wide as they can go, staring up at the ceiling so I don't have to look at his blank or annoyed faces.

He gets into position between my legs, and without any warning at all, thrusts the speculum inside me. I gasp at the cold of the lube and the discomfort of something so hard and unforgiving going in.

It gets worse when he opens the speculum and stretches my hole wider around it.

I try not to squirm, but I can't help it. He slaps the inside of my thigh, and I go still—or try to. It only hurts more when I move anyway, but the impersonal touch makes me feel so small.

He puts on a pair of latex gloves, my cunt throbbing from the speculum while he takes his time. Then he reaches inside me, pushing against all my inner walls like he's trying to find something.

The touch is clinical, and humiliation threatens to overwhelm me. I'm not a real person to him. I'm just this toy for him to inspect.

Will he get rid of me if I don't pass muster?

"Well, at least you weren't lying about the IUD," he remarks. He doesn't stop massaging though, and I squeak when he pushes down somewhere that feels far too good.

"I wouldn't lie to you," I manage to get out, trying to ignore the strange, unwelcome pleasure.

He snorts in disbelief. "I doubt that." His fingers keep moving, but his eyes are on my face now. I bite my lip to try to prevent myself from making any sounds, for all that it's a futile effort. I gasp and tremble, the pleasure he's forcing on me almost more unwelcome than the speculum.

Almost.

"What—" I start to ask, trying to figure out what he's doing.

My g-spot, I realize. Dylan had never found it, and it had seemed to be a myth instead of something real.

Now, though...

"P-please," I whimper, and I'm not sure if I'm begging him to stop... or to keep going.

But that's ridiculous. I don't want to feel good. I don't want any of this.

I don't understand how he's making me feel like this when I want nothing to do with him.

Savage keeps *looking* at me. I have no idea what he wants, but that intense gaze is almost too much to bear. I cover my eyes with my arm just to avoid it.

"Arms at your sides," he orders immediately, all while his fingers continue to force pleasure onto me.

I whimper, hating that he's making me feel these things, hating that he's got me feeling things I haven't felt since... since Dylan and I had started to date, when he'd still bothered to pretend he cared about me.

He still hadn't made me feel this good, though.

I drop my arms back to my sides, forcing them to stay there with a great deal of effort. I close my eyes instead, even though I have a feeling he's going to force me to leave those open, too.

Why is he humiliating me like this?

I can't even tell if Savage is enjoying this. He isn't making any sounds. The only thing I can hear are my own stuttering breaths and aborted moans.

"Open your eyes," he tells me, but I still can't read him.

I don't know if he's feeling anything at all, even as he works my body

like an instrument, coaxing me closer and closer to orgasm when I haven't felt one in years.

That's the worst realization to come to as it creeps up on me, and I come knowing that he's breaking a dry spell in a way I never wanted. No one at Ntimacy wanted to get me off, Dylan didn't care, and I wasn't interested in masturbating.

I cry out as I come, and I stare into his eyes for a moment as I shudder and shake from the force of my climax. I can't keep my eyes open any longer, though; they flutter closed as I try to ride it out.

It's only then that I realize the speculum is still inside of me, warm now from my body heat, with the stretch more appealing than disconcerting until the realization that I'd come from this hits me.

I whimper when he takes the speculum out then sets it aside, and I sag back onto the bed as I try to recover from the overwhelming pleasure and humiliation I'd just felt.

But Savage barely gives me any time to recover.

Giving me a dispassionate look, he says, "Lean back and close the cuffs around your wrists."

I blink at him a few times, the words taking a moment to register in my brain.

Don't talk back, he'd said, and even though I want to protest, I duck my head and obey. I can't help but feel utterly betrayed, and I don't even know why. It's not as though I thought he cared, but I haven't done anything to show him I'm going to disobey.

The only mercy is that the cuffs are padded, even comfortable, around my wrists as I fasten them, and there's enough slack to where I can move around a little.

Savage approaches and checks the cuffs, then adds small locks to both of them. They're staying in place.

I can't get out of bed anymore, no matter how hard I try.

My body starts to tremble, and I'm afraid I'm going to throw up.

"I took time out of my busy day to pick you up today," Savage says, like it's my fault, like I'm such a terrible inconvenience when he's the one who *bought* another person. He takes a blanket from a nearby chair and drapes it over me in a gesture that could've been affectionate if it wasn't for the whole situation. "But I don't have time to babysit you. I'll be back in the evening to feed you."

The idea of being left alone in this bed, chained like one of Giulio's new girls all over again, is almost more than I can stand. I sit up, tugging against the bonds, and my eyes are wet as I plead, "You don't need to lock me up like this. I... Please. I haven't fought, I haven't tried to run, I haven't tried to do anything. Where..." I nearly choke on the half-sob, half-laugh. "Where would I even go?"

"I don't trust you not to do something stupid. You're a drug addict."

Like I really need the reminder.

Savage goes to the nearby dresser and opens up a drawer. I watch with dread as he pulls out a ball gag.

"I won't do anything stupid," I say, tears rolling down my cheeks. "What if I have to pee? I... You already have me locked in this room, and I'll be quiet. I'll be good. I'll be so good for you. Just please don't... Don't leave me like this."

"I've seen the lengths addicts go to for their fixes." Savage walks back to my side and brings the gag up to my mouth. I press my lips together to prevent the gag from going in, but Savage pushes his thumb and forefinger into either side of my cheeks so hard that I'm forced to open up. I whimper as he shoves the ball gag inside and secures it behind my face.

I start sobbing even harder.

Savage checks that everything is secure before backing away again. He points at a bookshelf against the far wall, and for the first time, I notice the camera sitting there.

"I'm monitoring the room. I don't know when you last got high, but that's over now."

My heart drops into my stomach. The last time? How am I supposed to survive this, survive *him* while I'm sober? The only thing that made Ntimacy bearable was the easy supply of drugs. Maybe it added to my debt and kept me there longer, but it had been worth it.

"The chains are for your own protection, so you don't harm yourself during the detox." After a second he inclines his head. "As for the bathroom issue... I'll be checking in again in a few hours. Hold it until then. Or I can set you up with a catheter."

I shake my head furiously at that. I'd rather piss myself than have him catheterize me. But more than that, I'm worried about how he's handling this because it seems like he's expecting me to stop the drugs *cold turkey*. If I'd known this morning would be the last time...

I'd have just overdosed and been done with it.

Savage looks at his wristwatch. "And now I really need to get back to work."

He walks toward the door, and I make a distressed sound.

Don't leave me here.

He stops at the door, glances over his shoulder at me for just a second, then leaves. The door shuts behind him, and I hear the beep of the electronic lock.

Then I'm all alone in what's going to be my own personal hell.

CHAPTER 3

Hunter

IT'S a good thing tele-health is all the rage these days. I can consult with several patients over the computer, all while keeping an eye on my new acquisition.

At first, she simply cries, and I feel the familiar stirring in my cock just at the sight of her tears. Giulio had said she cried a lot, but I hadn't really believed him. The types of women who end up in his clubs are jaded and numb, not like... this.

Although I can't say that "Stef" is an outlier in his clubs. They're all addicted to one drug or another, and she has all the classic signs of a long-time addict.

Purchasing her was a mistake. I shouldn't have let Giulio convince me.

I end a call with a patient and stare at the screen that shows Stef shifting around, testing the bondage. There's enough leeway so that she can get comfortable, but not so much that she'd be able to harm herself.

I zoom in on her face. Her lips look good stretched wide around the gag, and I can already imagine what they'd look like around my cock. Maybe once her skin is less sallow, when she doesn't have the bags under her eyes...

She was probably beautiful, once. I can help her be beautiful again. She just needs a strong hand to guide her, to keep her from doing something stupid like shoot herself up with a drug that will eventually kill her.

And this is why Giulio was able to goad me into this purchase. As annoying as he can be, he is deceptively good at reading people. He'd figured out exactly what I wanted.

I force myself to look away from Stef and get ready for the next patient. They always thank me for doing the most basic task of reading my notes before I talk to them. Of course I prepare in advance. It'd be unprofessional,

and borderline incompetent, to show up unprepared.

But two patient calls later, I'm back to staring at Stef. She's shivering a little, and I wonder if the blanket I'd placed over her wasn't heavy enough. I'd made sure the condo's temperature was warm enough to be comfortable with minimum clothing. Of course, she could be shivering for other reasons. It would be a little fast for withdrawal symptoms to be kicking in, though.

I check my schedule just to be sure, but I have a break built in now. I lock the computer and head to the kitchen, where I warm up the leftovers my housekeeper had set aside for me. Once I've got everything cut up into bite-sized morsels, I place the plates on a tray and head back to Stef's room.

She makes a sound as soon as I enter, which I ignore. I set the tray down on the bedside table and pull the armchair closer.

"I'm going to remove the gag so I can feed you. Are you going to cooperate?" I ask.

She nods fervently. Her cheeks are flushed, and her hands are trembling, but she doesn't seem to be going through withdrawal just yet.

I unfasten the gag, wipe it down with a tissue, and set it aside. Stef sucks in a sharp breath. I wait for her breathing to steady before I pick up a small morsel from the plate—with my fingers, because I'd neglected to bring a fork.

If I were less self-aware, I would say it was an oversight. I could always go get a fork, after all.

But I just want to see her take food from my hands.

I hold up the piece of chicken to her lips and wait.

"I can feed myself," Stef says, her cheeks flushing. She lifts her hands. "I even have enough give in the chains. You don't have to feed me."

"Eat," I say, pushing it against her mouth.

She pulls away from me and shakes her head, her lips pressing tight together. She stares at me, meeting my eyes as she refuses the food.

Her refusal is putting a damper on things, but I should have expected this. She doesn't comprehend yet that I'm doing all this for her own good.

"Do you remember the rules?" I ask her, unable to keep the annoyance from my voice.

She flinches away from me, but the glare doesn't fade. "I don't want you to feed me. I'm not an invalid."

"I can also mash it all up and set up a feeding tube," I threaten. "If you don't want to eat real food. It's not my preferred method but if that's the best

way to get food inside you...”

“I’m not even hungry!” Stef says, her voice going a little high. “I just ate this morning. I’m... I’m fine. I just want to be unlocked. I need...” She shudders, looking around the room. “I need to pee.”

I put the food aside, clean my hands with some disinfectant and tissues, and nod. “Very well. I’ll unchain you and escort you to the bathroom.” I unhook the chains from the ankle cuffs, but I leave the ones on her wrists in place, simply running my thumb over the skin just underneath the cuffs.

“You don’t need to escort me. I don’t know what you think I’m going to do,” she protests. “I couldn’t even get out of this room if I wanted to.” For all her talk earlier about how she’d listen and obey, she’s certainly not doing either right now.

I unhook one wrist from the chain, then guide it over to her other wrist so I can hook the two together before finally releasing her from the bed entirely. She now has her legs free, but her wrists are bound together in front of her. If she’s very flexible, she might still be able to get out of that, but I’m not going to give her that opportunity.

I grip her shoulder to help her sit up. “Come on, then. Since you need to urinate.”

She squirms, trying to pull out of my grasp, but I’m not letting her go. She finally sits up, and I guide her out of the bed so she doesn’t trip or fall. “Why are you being like this?”

“I told you. I can’t trust you. I’ve seen what drug addicts do to themselves.” My mouth curls into a sneer. My rotation at in-patient hospital care cured me of any notion that people could take care of themselves. You could give them all the tools in the world, and they would still choose self-destruction over salvation.

Maybe I ended up as an obstetrician because *those* patients are almost always happy to take care of themselves, for the sake of their unborn children.

Stef stares at me, shuddering and trying to pull back, but I only tighten my grasp. I can feel her bones grinding together beneath my fingers, and she winces. For a moment, we just watch each other, and she seems to be fumbling for something to say.

Nothing comes of it, though. Instead, she starts walking in the direction of the bathroom with halting steps.

I push the door open and follow her inside, gently pushing her toward the

toilet seat. I glance at the bathroom mirror and wonder if I should have removed it, so there's no risk of her shattering it and using the shards to hurt herself.

But she's so frail, and I'm going to keep her chained up. I'd already removed all medications and razors that used to be stored here.

She stands in front of the toilet seat, looking at me again. "Can you at least... turn away for a minute? I'm not going to hurt myself that fast."

I steadily meet her gaze. "No. You need to get used to me being here, overseeing everything. I'm going to be controlling every single one of your actions from now on. Now sit and do your business."

My cock thrums with arousal, although I make sure not to react. I'm not a teenager who can't control himself anymore. I know that patience can bring the best rewards.

A shudder runs through her, and her expression is a little conflicted as she looks at me. But her voice is a soft whine as she complains, "That's going to take too much time. You have a lot to do as... as a doctor and all. You don't have time to control everything." Or so she hopes, apparently.

I grip her shoulders and push her down onto the seat. "I have time for this." I wait, but as expected, nothing happens.

"I can't while you're right here," she says. "I need... I need a little bit of privacy. Master," she adds, though there's no sincerity to the word or in her tone at all—unsurprisingly, too.

I reach down to her belly and push down over her bladder. Stef gasps and squirms, and her skin takes on a flushed hue that looks surprisingly good on her. It hints at what she could look like when she's healthy. "If this doesn't help," I say, "I can always get the catheter."

Stef cringes, shaking her head. "No. I just... I need a minute. Please." Now *that* sounds sincere.

"Then I can wait," I answer, stroking her belly and insistently pushing down on her bladder to help things along. I hate how many of her ribs I can see, and how her breasts seem to be almost deflated. I'll need to start getting a lot more nutrients into her.

She probably needs a good exercise regimen too, but that can wait until after the detox and after she's put on another ten to twenty pounds. She probably doesn't weigh even a hundred pounds at this point, which is not a weight I would recommend for any healthy adult.

It takes a little longer—and a little more pushing—but finally, her cheeks

flush and the thin dribble of urine sounds from inside the toilet. “Okay,” she says, trying to pull back. “I’m... I’m done.” She glares at me, for all that it lacks real heat. “Are you going to insist on wiping me, too?”

I’m surprised at the intense thrum of arousal I get from even the mere suggestion.

“Yes. You can hardly wipe yourself with your hands bound,” I answer steadily as I rip off some toilet paper. “Stand up, spread your legs a little.”

She stares at me in disbelief. “You’re serious,” she says slowly. She swallows hard but slowly stands, trembling as she parts her legs for me.

I do a quick wipe, resisting the urge to tease her clit, and throw the used toilet paper into the toilet before flushing it all.

“Good,” I say, and I’m rewarded by Stef’s face lighting up in crimson. Her skin is so pale that the blushes show beautifully.

She looks down, staring at her feet instead of looking at me, and closes her legs quickly.

I wash my hands quickly, then grab her arm to pull her closer. “I’ll wash your hands, too.”

Stef stumbles a little. “My hands aren’t dirty,” she protests, but she doesn’t stop me from pulling her hands under the stream of water.

I make sure to get the soap all over and carefully wash between her fingers. It’s a bit difficult since the cuffs are keeping her hands close together, but that’s why I’m here to help her. When I’m convinced that her hands are clean, I turn off the water and stand behind her, looking at both of us in the mirror. I run my fingers through her limp hair and sigh. “You’ll look so much better once the drugs aren’t ravaging your systems.”

She doesn’t look up at the mirror. “Why did you... buy me?” she asks, her voice choked. “Just to torture me? I was fine at Ntimacy.”

“Were you fine?” I ask coldly, and she starts to squirm. “You’re emaciated, drugged up to the gills, crying, and you barely made any money from what Giulio said...” I shake my head. “You’re better off with me.”

“Giulio said you like crying,” Stef says after a moment, finally daring to meet my eyes in the mirror.

I inhale sharply. Giulio and his big mouth. “Whether I enjoy tears or not doesn’t matter.” I stroke her bony shoulders and down her arms. “Maybe I should be asking whether you enjoy dancing for all those men, day in and day out. Presumably you fuck them, too. Is that better than here, where I’ll take care of you and make sure you get healthy?”

“You’ll want the same thing from me, eventually,” Stef says, her eyes finding the countertop again. “Dances, sex... I can’t say no to you any more than I could say no to them, and at least there I had... stuff to help me get through the day. All I have here is my own thoughts.”

I don’t bother disagreeing with her. Eventually, yes, I’ll want to fuck her. But I know that when I finally do, she’ll be begging for me.

“Let’s get you back into bed,” I say. “And you need to eat, if the last time you had food was in the morning.”

“I’m nauseated,” she says, which probably isn’t far from the truth. “I don’t think I can keep anything down, and I don’t... I don’t want to throw up all over myself.”

“You need to eat anyway. We’ll do small bites, but you need energy to get through all this.” I grip her shoulders and guide her back to the bed.

She trembles and shakes her head, making a few cursory attempts to avoid getting chained up again, but she really doesn’t have any muscles on her body. She doesn’t have a chance against me.

I finish chaining her ankles and hands to the bed again. On a whim, I wrap my hand around her delicate wrist, and a small thrill goes through me when I manage to encircle it entirely. With a bit of pressure, I could easily break her. Her bones might as well be as brittle as a bird’s.

Stef whimpers and tugs at her hand. “Please. I just want to...”

I let go of her and reach for the tray of food again, picking up another small slice of chicken. “Eat,” I order. “You need the calories. It’ll help with your recovery.”

She pulls away from me, but this time when my eyes narrow in warning, she slowly opens her mouth.

“Good,” I tell her, picking up a piece of carrot next.

She lets me feed that to her as well, though she balks when I try to get her to take a third bite. “I really don’t feel good,” she says, staring down at the bed sheets instead of looking up at me.

I consider carefully how much I can trust her. If her stomach is truly upset, it would be unwise to feed her more just so she’ll vomit it up later, especially when she can’t reach the toilet on her own. But addicts are prone to lying.

“If you’re truly nauseated, I can hook you up to an IV drip,” I say. “Then you’ll get the nutrients delivered straight to you. I would probably need to tighten your bondage though, so you don’t rip the IV out.”

Stef looks up at me, like she's trying to figure out whether I'm being serious or not. I am, and she clearly sees it in my expression, though it only makes her look like she's even more at a loss. "I *am* nauseated, but I don't want an IV. I'm... I don't need to eat. I ate this morning."

I scowl at her. "You're an adult woman. You need more calories than that. If you don't want the IV, you'll eat now. I will not tolerate lack of care about your health."

"I don't have to be healthy for you to fuck me," she says, nibbling on her bottom lip before looking up at me through long lashes. "And I could suck your cock instead. Wouldn't that be better than feeding me anyway?"

"No," I answer flatly. "You can't manipulate me, Stef. But fine, it sounds like you do want the IV. Or potentially a feeding tube." I pick up the tray and get up. "I'll be back with all those supplies in a bit."

"No!" she says quickly. "I'll eat. I'm sorry. I'll... I'll eat. Please. No IV, no feeding tube. I'll eat." She looks utterly miserable, but she'll look more miserable than that if she doesn't get proper nutrition to help her get through the next few days.

I sit down again and pick up another small morsel. Without another word, I hold it up to her mouth and wait as she tentatively eats from my hand.

My cock stirs again, but I ignore it and focus on feeding her instead. Her little tongue darts out a few times, lapping against my fingers. I don't think she's doing it on purpose, and that only makes it all the more beguiling.

Halfway through the meal, Stef turns her head aside. "Please. I really can't anymore."

Considering how little she's been eating, she's probably gotten used to a calorie deficiency. I nod and set the tray aside, then reach out to rub my thumb across her bottom lip. "Good girl. Was that so hard?" I ask gently.

"Yes," she whispers. "My stomach... It's uncomfortable. I need... I need you to unchain me in case I get sick."

The transparent attempt at manipulation doesn't amuse me, but I set my hand on her belly and begin rubbing. Her skin pebbles up underneath my touch, and her nipples harden. "If you make a mess, I'll clean you up," I tell her.

Stef is already pale, but she goes a shade paler. She squirms as I touch her, looking up at me with a bleak look, like she's not sure whether she should beg me to stop or go along with this.

I want to explore her body and learn every blemish, every flaw. I want to

measure her, feel the bones, and know that I'm the one who's making her better. I'm going to cure her, and she'll worship me for it.

But not yet.

I let go and stand up. "I'll bring a bottle of water," I say, taking the tray of leftovers. "Try to get some rest, though. It's going to be a rough few days."

"You don't... You don't really expect me to stop cold turkey, do you?" she asks, though she already looks resigned. She knows the answer to that question.

"I'm not going to let you poison yourself any further," I answer. "And this is the fastest way to get through it."

I could wean her off the drugs, slowly reducing her dosages, but that would take weeks or months and has no guarantee that she'll truly come off it.

Going cold turkey is harder, but she doesn't need to worry about backsliding.

I'll be keeping her on track the entire time.

CHAPTER 4

Stef

IT's the nausea that wakes me.

In my dream, I'm on a boat, and it's rocking so hard in either direction that I can't even stand up. I sit down, flailing for something to hold onto, but there's nothing to grasp except soft cloth.

A bed.

I'm not on a boat. I'm not seasick.

I know what this is, what it means, and it has tears blurring my vision because I've been through this before when I pissed Giulio off too much.

I need another hit, just a quick fix to keep all of this at bay, but the doctor is more determined to make me miserable than anything else. Making me go cold turkey is just cruel, but then, what else should I expect from him?

He hasn't been that bad, a small part of me tries to argue. Just... invasive, and condescending, and dickish.

Just like every other man I've been around in the past few years. It's nothing new. They're all assholes, and they all think they know everything. This one's no exception.

Except... this one *owns* me, and there's nothing I can do to change that because he has me locked up in a bedroom in his private, expensive home.

I slowly try to sit up, wanting to see if it'll clear my head, but it makes everything worse. I gag, trying to keep down the little bit of food and water I'd managed to take in the night before, and it's all I can do not to vomit all over the bedspread. I shouldn't have agreed to eat. At least if he'd forced the IV, it wouldn't have been something sitting heavily in my stomach like the chicken and vegetables he'd made me eat.

I close my eyes, trying to will the room to stop spinning, but it's like I really am on a boat, or some kind of amusement park ride. I retch again,

trying to hold it all back, but all I can manage to do is aim for the floor instead of the bed beside me as every last bite of the previous evening's meal comes back up.

Tears spill down my cheeks because I know he's going to be angry. He's going to think I did this on purpose, that I'm not really sick—that I'm just some stupid, lying addict who's made herself throw up.

The door opens with only a soft sound, and I look up blearily. Savage walks in with a bucket in hand, already wearing rubber gloves.

That was fast. I'm too tired to check, but the speed with which he got here probably means he's actively monitoring the cameras in the room.

I squeeze my eyes shut and roll away from him, wishing I had more than a simple blanket to cover me. I want to hide away forever; I want to disappear into the floor and never come back up again.

My eyes land on the closed curtains on the opposite wall. Forty-five floors up. How long would it take for my heart to give out on the way down?

My teeth chatter as I shiver. Behind me, I can hear Savage mopping up my mess without a word.

When he's done, he simply leaves again, not even saying a single word to me.

It's worse than if he'd railed at me or gotten angry at me, and I'm torn between despair and anger and utter misery because I'm so fucking alone and so miserable to boot. The room won't stop its inevitable spin, and my head feels like something's pounding on it from the inside. I'm freezing, but there's only the one blanket, and it's not nearly enough to chase away the cold. I need to use the bathroom—though I don't even know how I'd make it there even if I wasn't manacled and shackled to the bed.

In time, I manage to doze, falling in and out of an uneasy sleep as consciousness releases me then claims me again. Each time I wake, I have to turn to the side of the bed as I retch. Nothing comes out the next three times, but on the fourth, it's like everything that's been waiting to come up just... splashes out onto the floor.

It's disgusting, and it smells horrible, and I start to cry even as my body shakes from fear and exhaustion and the fucking cold. Why does he have it so cold in this room?

The door opens again, letting light in from the hallway. Savage enters again with his cleaning supplies, and this time his nose wrinkles when he approaches me.

He still cleans everything up wordlessly.

He's going to leave me alone again.

"P-please," I whimper as he finishes with the mess on the floor. "Please don't... Don't go. I don't—" A hiccuping sob interrupts my words, something I wasn't even expecting, but I can't seem to make the cries stop once they start. I don't want him. He can't possibly offer any comfort to me. Yet I'm so desperate not to be alone that I'll take anything I can get.

Savage looks at me, his eyes as cold as the room, but he nods.

"You need a shower," he says. He strips his rubber gloves off—the way a doctor does, never touching anything directly—and sets them aside with the cleaning supplies. Then he begins to undo the manacles. His hand is so hot against my freezing skin, and it feels like he's tapping small needles over every spot he touches.

It's still better than being left alone.

After my limbs are free, I try to get up, but my body is so weak that I collapse immediately.

It's only been a few hours since my last hit, right?

A full day, maybe? But I can't remember the last time I'd gone a full day without even a small dose. Paul and Donny would always dutifully help us shoot up so we'd be steady enough to dance.

Savage places his hand over my forehead and scowls. "You're burning up."

"I feel... I'm so cold," I whimper, managing to look up at him even though everything's swaying in front of me. I stop trying to sit up, curling back up in the blankets again even though I'm free of the bonds.

"Shower," Savage says, tugging on my shoulder.

I shake my head, not even wanting to think about how much it'll hurt to walk.

He sighs and gets one arm underneath my knees, the other around my back. "Hold on to me," he orders, and lifts me straight up.

I gasp sharply and curl into his chest. He's so warm, basically a furnace in comparison to the rest of the room. I cling to his soft t-shirt and try not to puke as he carries me toward the bathroom.

He fumbles to turn on the light. As soon as it's on, I whimper and shake my head.

"Too bright," I say, but he ignores me and takes me to the shower. He steps inside with me still in his arms, sets me down, and closes the shower

door behind us.

I shiver more violently as my ass hits the cold tile floor, and I try to get back up. I end up grabbing at his sweatpants, but I can't move.

"It's so cold." I try to blink my tears away, but I can't make them stop.

Savage takes the showerhead off the handle and turns the water on. He holds it up to his own hand first, and when he seems happy with it, he crouches down and turns the water on me.

I yelp, but it's not cold like I was instinctively expecting—like it always was at Ntimacy. It's warm, bordering on too hot, but I lean into it as my teeth continue to chatter. The tile is still so cold beneath my ass, and I manage to get up to my knees.

Savage pans the showerhead over my body, using his other hand to direct me as he pleases. He has me tilt my head back so he can get my scalp wet too, and I sob at how good the warm spray feels.

The water is soaking through Savage's clothes, but he doesn't seem to care about that. I notice he isn't wearing shoes or socks, and I wonder if he was barefoot the entire time or if he took them off while still carrying me.

He doesn't seem like the type to go barefoot, even in his own home.

Once I'm not shivering as hard, Savage sets the showerhead back onto its hook and lowers everything down, angling it so I'm still underneath the spray. He stands up and reaches for the shower gel and loofah in the wall nook.

I grope for the side of the shower, trying to get up, but I can't move. I retch again, but this time, nothing comes up, and I end up sobbing as I sag down against the hard tile beneath my knees. I sit down, not bothering to try anymore, and lean my head against the shower wall as I try to peer at Savage through the stream of water.

He squats down next to me again, and without saying anything, begins to run the lathered-up loofah over my body. The shower spray is hitting him more than me now, soaking his shirt and messing up his hair.

There's a slight curl to his hair now that it's wet. And even in this dim light, I can see how clear his blue eyes are. Like he's staring straight into my soul. I sob again, because why the fuck am I noticing something his appearance at a time like this?

I shudder, trying to shrink back, but he grabs me by the hair and pulls me close again, forcing me nearer to him. All I can think about is how I'm going to drown here in his eyes—or I'm going to throw up all over him, and I don't

know what he'll do to me if I do. I gag, trying to suppress the urge, and I close my eyes.

The water is finally starting to warm me up enough to where I'm not shivering nonstop, but I still feel like I should be because of the way he's looking at me.

He takes hold of my arm and lifts it up to run the loofah over it. He makes sure to wash my armpits, even, and I note a little hysterically that it's been a few days since I shaved. Why did he buy me? What could he possibly want from me?

Savage lets my arm drop again and moves to wash my chest, lingering just long enough over my nipples that I wonder if it's on purpose. He gets a little closer to run the loofah down my other side...

And now I can see, in stark clarity, the outline of his erection through his soaked pajama pants.

I swallow hard, trying not to shrink back again. I don't want that harsh grasp on my hair again; it reminds me too much of patrons at Ntimacy who get impatient with me for not being fast enough or skilled enough. Is he going to make me get him off?

Maybe it would be better if I just took the initiative.

My head is spinning, and my nausea is damn near overwhelming, but I reach up with a shaking hand to run my fingers along the outlines of his soaked cock.

"Hands to yourself," he says harshly. "I'm not done washing you."

The words shock me, and I stare up at him for a moment. I snatch my hand back, feeling a little wounded somehow even though I can't understand why.

Savage shakes his head and moves to crouch between my legs, pushing my thighs apart. My lip wiggles as he begins washing the insides of my thighs, borderline caressing the skin and making me want to shift uncomfortably.

He ignores my discomfort and keeps washing until the only place left is my cunt.

I squirm, not wanting to be touched there. It's ridiculous; I'm hardly a virgin, and this is far from the first time someone has touched me without my consent. But he's so clinical about this that it makes me feel like I disgust him somehow.

Savage sets the loofah aside, but he grabs a washcloth hanging on a small

hook and pours soap on it. I gasp when he spreads my pussy and begins rubbing the cloth between my folds, giving me a thorough, impersonal cleaning. Even though I can see his erection—even though his thumb lingers on my clit and massages small circles around it—I still wonder if he’s actually aroused at all.

I feel too ill to be, yet I can’t help but shift beneath his touch, restless and wanting more even as I want to tell him to *stop*. I know better, though, and I don’t want to make this worse on myself. I bite my lip against another wave of nausea, wishing he’d just let me give him a hand job and be done with it.

I let out a whine when he lets go and stands up. He unhooks the shower head once more to rinse me over again, then turns the water off.

“Can you stand?” Savage asks, still glaring at me.

I don’t understand how he can be so cold with me and still take care of me like this, but I don’t like it. I feel like a burden, and I hate that I feel *guilty* about it. He bought me. He refused to give me even a single dose of anything to keep the withdrawal at bay. I shouldn’t care about whether he has to clean up my vomit and my body.

“I don’t know,” I admit, my voice a low rasp. I try to get up, only to fail when the wave of dizziness brings me back down, hard, onto my knees. I wince, but my knees are used to worse than smooth tile.

Savage takes my arm and helps me up, although my knees are still so weak that I end up leaning against him for stability. Shit. He’s still warm, even in his wet clothes. The t-shirt conforms to his abs, highlighting just how muscular he is underneath.

He really could snap me in half if he wanted to.

Savage pushes the shower door open and slowly guides me to stand on the bathmat. I wobble but manage to stay upright, even though the room is swaying. He grabs a towel from the nearby rack and drapes it over my shoulders. I stare at it, wondering if I can drum up the strength to dry myself, when I realize he’s stripping off his shirt.

There’s a hint of hair on his chest, thicker around his belly and where it leads down. I wonder if he’s one of the guys who likes to have his chest-hair played with, or if he’d yell at me for daring to accidentally hurt him.

He strips the pajama pants off too, but he’s wearing boxer briefs underneath them. His cock is desperate to escape its confines, but somehow, he keeps ignoring it. After he’s tossed his wet clothes into the hamper, he grabs a robe, puts it on, then turns back to me.

I should be surprised when he begins toweling me dry. Is his touch gentle? It's hard to tell. The friction is too much for me to handle, but I'm trapped here, swaying as he runs the towel all over my body.

Finally he deems me dry enough.

"Back to bed," he says. "I'll change your sheets in the morning."

I nod, leaning hard against him as I close my eyes. I'm just glad I didn't throw up all over myself and the sheets. "Can I... Can I have another blanket?" I mumble. "It's... It's so cold in there."

Savage's arm wraps around my back, drawing me closer. "Yes. I'll set out a bucket next to the bed too."

I let out another sob and try to stop the tears from falling. It's just a blanket. It's a bucket for *vomit*.

It still feels like the nicest thing anyone's done for me in months.

In years.

I bury my face against him, unable to help it, and I feel his body tense as I do. I don't care. As long as he doesn't pull away, it's fine. I feel so dizzy and sick, though, and I want to get back to bed. "Please," I croak, tears in my eyes.

Savage lifts me up again and carries me back to the bed.

I don't try to protest the chains this time.

CHAPTER 5

Hunter

I CHECK the camera feed again, and just like last time, Stef is still there, moaning and writhing through the throes of her detox. It's unprofessional for me to be so distracted from my work, but I'd known from the start that I wouldn't be able to concentrate while I was nursing her back to health.

I force myself to read another article in the medical journal. A doctor is only as good as his current knowledge. Even if it isn't my own field, it's good to read up on new discoveries in case there's some overlap.

After another ten minutes, I realize I've absorbed nothing about the study. I sigh and minimize the tab, going back to the one showing Stef's camera feed.

She's finally fallen asleep, although from the way she occasionally jerks, I doubt her dreams are peaceful. It's better than when she'd been crying out every few hours, convinced there was something in the room trying to dig underneath her skin.

My hand drops down to my fly, and I palm my cock through my slacks. The way she'd sat there while I washed her, the way she'd trembled and leaned against me...

Fuck. I hate how easily Giulio had read me, but I can't deny that caring for Stef is doing a lot of things for me.

There's no reason to keep denying myself. Stef is mine to do with as I please, and she'd been willing, even. It had taken all of my self-control not to shove my cock in her mouth or cunt.

I lock my laptop and head into Stef's room. I leave the lights off, navigating by the bit of sunlight peeking through the edges of the curtains.

Stef moans and shakes her head, but her eyes are still closed, and she makes no indication of having woken. She hasn't seemed to be a light

sleeper, although I don't care if I do wake her up.

Still, I want time to study her without her moving around and protesting, even if the tears are welcome to see.

I carefully draw the blankets back, revealing her body. She shifts a little, but she still doesn't wake. I run a hand down her bony chest, my fingers ghosting over her nipples, and they pebble under my touch. A soft murmur escapes her, but she must be sleeping deeply—dreaming deeply, maybe, and I can't help but wonder what about.

She's still too pale, but she isn't sweating as much as she had the first night, and her body isn't wracked with chills. I dip my fingers into the divot of her pelvis bone, and I wonder how she'll look when she isn't so emaciated.

After I've made her beautiful again.

I gently move her legs apart and crouch down to get a closer look at her. I've seen so many vulvas at this point in my life that they don't particularly affect me anymore. They're simply part of human anatomy.

Still, staring at her, I can feel my cock stir again. It isn't because she's a naked woman. It's because she's *mine*, chained to my bed, wholly dependent on me, waiting for my touch and guidance.

I slowly push a finger inside her, rubbing gently, coaxing her to wetness over several long moments. Stef makes a small sound, but she doesn't wake. Her body isn't quick to respond, and I wonder if that will change as time goes on.

I wonder, too, how much I can do before she does more than stir a little. Could I push inside of her mouth, her cunt? Would she react if I did? How would she respond if she woke with me inside of her? So many questions. So many what-ifs.

It thrills me in some strange way, knowing I'll get to explore all of those things with her and there's nothing she can do to stop me.

Maybe she'll even enjoy it.

I'll make her enjoy it.

For now, I withdraw my finger, which is already a little wet, and head over to the drawer with all the supplies. I pull out the lube and choose a small, curved dildo. Larger than my finger, but nowhere near as large as my cock. I coat the toy in lube and take it back over to her.

I push it in slowly, watching her reactions as the toy makes its way inside. Once the larger head is in, it settles in her cunt. She groans softly, and her chest takes on a slightly red hue, but she remains still.

My cock hardens in my slacks. I debate my next step, gently tapping on the dildo. Finally I undo my fly and give myself a long, slow stroke.

I won't take her yet. But I want to see her pure reactions, when her mind isn't getting in the way of her pleasure. After a few more strokes to my cock, I carefully sit down on the bed and begin manipulating the toy again.

Stef shudders and attempts to close her legs, but I block the movement with my other hand. I half expect her to wake, but she's either an extraordinarily heavy sleeper or the past few days have had their toll on her.

It pleases me, to have her body completely open to me, an instrument of my will, and I go back to touching my cock. One stroke, another; the only thing that would feel better would be her hand or her body.

One of my hands keeps the toy moving slowly inside of her, while the other pleases myself. It's tempting to shift, to lie down so I can take her clit into my mouth, and I reluctantly pull my hand away from my cock so I can touch it instead.

Her reaction is beautiful. Her mouth parts and she moans, her eyelids flutter, but she stays asleep, the pleasure washing over her. Has anyone touched her properly? Has anybody taken care of her? From the state of her, I can almost imagine that I'm the first to truly see her. She isn't pure—there's no way she could be, having been working at Ntimacy—but I doubt anybody there did more than pump and dump into her.

I keep playing with her, watching the way her breath hitches and how her skin deepens in color. The sweat building on her skin gives her an almost healthy sheen.

I let go of the toy and go back to stroking myself one-handed. Her cunt clenches as I continue to massage her clit. The small hairs on her pussy are starting to grow back, a fact I'm very pleased about.

Nobody else gets to dictate how she looks.

She's completely mine in every way.

I stroke myself faster, harder.

She sobs softly, her mouth opens into a wide O, and her back arches as she orgasms.

That image alone, knowing that I'd done this, that I'd made her come and her body obeyed me, sends me over the edge too. I shoot over her stomach, and I stare at it, feeling primally pleased with myself.

I reach out to rub the cum into her skin. I want her to wake up and see it, feel it.

But it's too soon. She's not ready for that.

I wait a few moments to collect myself, then head to the bathroom to clean up. I get a washcloth, run it under warm water, and return to her, gently wiping the cum off of her and sliding the dildo out. I go on to wipe the rest of her body down.

I'm wiping sweat off her forehead when her eyes blink open.

Stef shifts awkwardly, pressing her legs together, and she croaks out, "What...?" She seems confused, which is understandable. It takes her a moment to focus her eyes on me. "Did I... Did I get sick again?"

I push the hair on her forehead aside, petting gently. "You were sweaty. I should probably change the sheets, too, but I didn't want to disturb you when you'd finally fallen asleep."

Her brows crease. "You didn't," she says. "I was just..." She shudders. "I was dreaming."

"Dreaming?" I ask, truly curious about what her mind conjured up. I put the washcloth aside and pull the blankets back over her.

She bites her bottom lip, closing her eyes for a moment. "It's nothing," she says, shaking her head. "Just stupid dreams."

Now I definitely want to know. I can't stand the thought of her keeping something from me. "Tell me," I demand, sitting down at the edge of the bed again.

Stef opens her eyes, blinking at me. They're slightly glazed over—with tears, maybe—and she shakes her head. "It... Just... Intimacy," she mumbles.

"Of what you had to do there?" I ask. I debate for a moment, then position myself on the bed next to her, resting against the headboard. She tenses a little, but she doesn't fight me when I have her lay her head on my thigh. I gently stroke her hair and note with satisfaction that it's not quite as limp as when I first met her. A few days have made a remarkable difference.

She glances at me, her eyes a little troubled. I can see it's bothering her, which is interesting considering she'd felt only pleasure moments ago. Dreams are strange things, and they can associate events that don't make sense with each other.

"Yes," she says quietly. "Bad things. But in my dream..." Tears well up in her eyes. "In my dream, I... I..."

"In your dream?" I press, lightly running my nails over her scalp. As I expected, she shivers at the touch. "Tell me everything."

"I don't want to talk about it," she says, giving a shake of her head.

“Please... Don’t make me talk about it.”

“*Tell me,*” I order, annoyed that she’s denying me this. “You said you’d be obedient, Stef.”

Stef nibbles on her lip again, not looking at me. “I just... In my dream, I enjoyed it,” she whispers, her voice ragged.

I swallow a breath. If I hadn’t just come already, my cock would be stirring at her confession. “Is that a bad thing?” I continue to stroke her scalp, watching how her breath hitches. She closes her eyes and leans into my touch—whether on purpose or unconsciously, I don’t care.

She’s already learning to crave me.

“Yes,” she confesses over a half-sob. “It was... It was horrible. There were so many of them, and they kept using me, and I... I ended up passing out, I remember that, but right before I passed out, I came, and they laughed, and—” She starts crying, her tears wetting the cloth of my pants.

I scowl. That is not where I expected the dream to have gone, but I remind myself of the state I found her in. “Did that actually happen? Were you made to service many men at once?”

Stef whimpers, then nods. “Only... Only once. But it was...” She shudders hard, her entire body shaking. “I didn’t come,” she says, her voice going a little high. “When it really happened. I’m not... I’m not like that.”

“Not like what?” I demand, even though I’m secretly thrilled that I was right about good experiences having been few for her.

“Not...” She shivers and buries her face against my thigh—so close to my cock, though I don’t think she realizes that. “Not the type of person who comes from... that. I know... I know some of the girls there do. I don’t know if it makes it easier for them, or harder, or not... But *I* don’t.”

I tilt her head so she’s forced to look at me. “You aren’t there anymore. You’re here, with me. Nobody else will touch you. And if I want you to come, you’ll come.”

Her eyes slowly open, still wet with her tears—tears that are only for *me* now—and she stares at me for a moment before speaking. “I don’t think I can. I always stay so... so dry. It just hurts.”

I inhale sharply. She doesn’t know how wet she’d been for me. She doesn’t know what her body is like when it’s *me* touching her.

“You’ll get wet for me,” I promise. “Your body belongs to me now. Everything I want, you’ll do.”

She closes her eyes again, as though in denial. “Will you... make me do

that?” she asks, her voice wobbling. “Service... service lots of men until I pass out?”

The very thought of it sends rage coursing through me. I grip her chin harshly. “No. I don’t share.” I remember how Giulio had watched me with Stef, and even that had been almost too much to bear.

She takes in a deep, shuddering breath, lifting her head as she stares at me with more intensity. “Are you sure? You... Do you promise?”

“I have no interest in other men,” I snarl. “Why would I want to participate in an orgy? When I’m with a woman, I want her focused solely on me.”

Stef’s features convey her hesitation, her... *disbelief*, and I don’t like it. “What if you want to... punish me?”

“Are you going to give me a reason to punish you?” I ask. “But even if you do, punishments will be appropriate to the infraction.”

She quickly shakes her head. “No! But I... I...” She looks back down, her eyes on my soft cock for a moment before she looks away again. “I didn’t do anything wrong either,” she whispers.

That gives me pause. I know Giulio isn’t quite as friendly as he appears, but he never struck me as the type to abuse the girls in his clubs. From what my older brother told me, the Pavone clubs actually improved significantly after Giulio took over.

“What happened?” I need to know everything about Stef if I want to improve her to my liking.

She shakes her head again. “I don’t... I don’t want to talk about it.”

“What did I just say about obedience?” I glower at her. “Do I need to find a punishment for you already?”

“N-no!” Stef says quickly. “I just...” She squeezes her eyes closed. “There was a... meeting. And Giulio got mad because his...” She hesitates for a moment, as though deliberating over what to say next, and it takes all the patience I have not to urge her on. “His girlfriend snuck in. And he took...” Her voice shakes. “He took it out on me. I know that’s what he was doing.”

This is the first time I’ve heard of Giulio having a girlfriend. “His girlfriend? And he keeps her at Ntimacy?” I try to imagine the kind of woman Giulio would “date,” and my mind comes up blank. He’d gone off on that strange tangent when I’d brought up flat-chested girls, but I’d chalked it up to Giulio being himself. Now I wonder if he was describing a specific

person.

“I... Yes. I guess?” She swallows hard. “I don’t know what she is to him, exactly.” I can tell she’s avoiding telling me something she knows, though, and I don’t like it. “But it wasn’t... It was just Giulio being Giulio.”

“Why was she there? Giulio shared her out, then punished you when he changed his mind?” I’m tempted to call Giulio and tell him exactly what I think about his methods, but I know it’s a moot point. I also don’t want to piss Giulio off. I might not like him, but he has a certain amount of power and violent vindictiveness I don’t want to cross.

“No...” Stef trails off again. I don’t think she expected this line of questioning, but I want to know all of the answers. “She... She was trying to help. She thought if she came in as one of the girls, there’d be less pressure on the rest of us.” Her shoulders slump. “She was wrong.”

Whoever this woman is, I hate her already. “She’s stupid. What did she think would happen?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “She just... It doesn’t make any sense. Giulio’s never cared when other people fuck her. Damien and Slayer both do, and she’s had clients outside of the club. I guess he just saves her for...” Stef winces. “Special occasions?” The words sound almost apologetic, somehow, but I don’t think she has anything to sound that way over. “But Vanessa is the only person who was really nice to me,” Stef adds quickly. “Even nicer than Elena. Elena acts nice but she’d never try to help.”

I scoff at that. “She was so nice that you ended up getting passed around and used. You don’t need that kind of help.”

“It’s not... She didn’t mean it that way,” she protests. “She felt really bad.”

“She sounds like a naive idiot.” I shake my head and hold up my hand to stop her from responding. “It doesn’t matter. You never have to see her ever again. You’re here, with me.”

Stef seems about to argue again, but she looks at my raised hand with wariness. “Am I... going to be allowed to have friends? Because she’s my friend.”

“No,” I say flatly. “You don’t need other people. Especially not right now, when you’re a complete mess.”

At least this time, she looks resigned rather than like she wants to argue with me. I doubt Giulio encouraged the girls to be friends with one another; competition would be far better for his business than them getting along

amicably. “Okay,” she whispers.

I continue petting her, but there’s nothing else to say. She stays with her head against my thigh until she drifts off to sleep again.

I won’t let anyone touch her again. I won’t let anyone get close to her again.

All she should be worrying about is pleasing me.

CHAPTER 6

Stef

I STARE at the sliver of light coming through the curtains, and for the first time in... days, maybe even a week, it doesn't give me a blinding headache.

I have no idea how long I've been chained to this bed. Savage shows up to feed me and wash me, and sometimes he just holds me through the chills.

I'm not shivering now, though. The blanket might even be a bit too warm.

Does that mean I'm cured now? Once you go cold turkey, you're completely free of the addiction, and your body is back to normal?

That doesn't sound right. If it's so easy, people wouldn't relapse all the time. *I* wouldn't have relapsed, that time I tried to quit a few years ago. But Dylan was with me then, and he'd shared his party favors, and the shakes had been bad enough that I couldn't see a good reason to keep trying when everything was easier while I was high.

We're so high up. If I open that curtain, all I'll see is wide open sky. Maybe we're high enough for clouds to form here, or for birds to fly past.

I'm still contemplating that sliver of light when the door opens again. I turn toward Savage and watch as he walks in with a tray of food.

He sets it down wordlessly on the side table, then sits on the edge of the bed. Our eyes meet, and I wonder once more just what is going on inside his head. He's so... cold. Distant.

But he doesn't want to share me.

He's taking care of me.

"You appear to be feeling better," Savage says as he picks up an apple slice from the plate. "Good."

I obediently open my mouth, already knowing what to expect from this. Refusing doesn't get me anywhere, and there's no sense in even trying. The apple is crunchy and sweet, just a little bit tart, and I feel like I can really

enjoy food for the first time in days. I sit up a little more, watching him.

“You never told me your name,” I say, feeling like the words are coming from nowhere but wanting to know anyway.

Savage takes another apple slice, and this time he dips it in peanut butter. “You know my name. Savage. But you will call me *Master* or *Sir*.”

“Your given name. The one your family calls you,” I say, again opening my mouth for him.

He feeds me the apple and rubs my lower lip once I’ve swallowed. “It’s Hunter. You may only use it if calling me *Master* would put you or me in harm’s way.”

“You’d have to let me out of this room for that to happen,” I say, pulling back a little. “Are you going to let me out now that I’m better?” I don’t really dare hope that he will. I know better. Men like him... He’s not going to let me roam around.

Savage—no, *Hunter*—lowers his hands and looks at me with a strange expression. “It would be inconvenient if I had to come here every time I wanted you. You’ll be allowed to stay at my side while I’m at home, and if you’re good, you’ll be allowed to sleep in my bed. I will not tolerate disobedience or general unruliness.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, much preferring that to *Master*. I have no real desire to fight him, though, and I’d rather be on his good side.

Hunter nods in approval and gets more food. “When you’re done eating, I’ll give you the tour.”

That sounds... almost promising. I eat from his fingers, my tongue accidentally licking his skin a few times, until I feel full from the fruit. Hunter brushes my hair aside and stares down at me again.

“Are we... going to do the tour? Sir?” I ask hopefully.

“Don’t rush me.” Hunter’s hand travels from my head down to my jaw, my neck, my shoulders. He gently caresses the skin on my chest, barely even touching my nipples. His fingers tap along my ribs, then go down to my cunt.

I squirm beneath his touch, not knowing if it would count as disobedience to pull away from him. I’m not in the mood to be touched; for all that I feel better, I just don’t like being the sole subject of someone’s attention in a sexual way.

“Spread your legs,” Hunter orders, one finger resting against my clit.

I don’t want to, but I slowly obey, spreading my legs just a little to give him access to my cunt. I nibble on my bottom lip, trying not to protest as he

massages my clit.

Unfortunately, he seems to know what he's doing, and my cunt starts to get wet. I whimper and look away from him, trying to will the pleasure away.

Except when he removes his hand, I let out a gasp, and I don't think it's in relief.

"If I give you pleasure, you will take pleasure," Hunter says sternly. "Don't fight me."

"Yes, sir," I whisper. I squirm, starting to press my legs together until he fixes me with another of those looks. I spread my legs a little more this time, giving him more than enough access even as tears leak from my eyes as confusion races through me.

Hunter strokes the inside of my thigh and gently pats my folds, but he doesn't go back to my clit. He penetrates me with his finger, only lightly thrusting, before pulling out again. He wipes his finger on my stomach then sits up.

I stare at him in confusion as he unsnaps the cuffs from around my wrists and ankles. Once those are gone, he rubs my skin, as if to soothe the chafed portions.

"Get up," Hunter says, standing. "Take the tray and follow me."

I blink, and it takes my mind a moment to catch up with what he's saying. I nod, though, and carefully get out of bed. I feel surprisingly steady, and it's nice not to have to cling to him to stay upright. Still, I take my time as I grab the tray, just in case I have any nasty surprises when I try to walk.

I hesitate at the doorway, though. "Can I... Is there something I can wear?" I ask cautiously.

He looks over his shoulder at me, makes a disappointed noise, then heads through the door.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, I consider for only a few more seconds before cautiously following him.

My first thought is that it's so *bright*. My little cell had been illuminated only by those few slivers of sunlight and a small table lamp. It's almost too much for me, and I blink quickly to try to adjust my eyesight as I shift the tray higher to try to cover my breasts.

Hunter either doesn't notice or doesn't care about my discomfort, and he keeps walking. I quickly follow, not wanting to be sent back into the room for daring to "disobey" by being a bit slow.

He brings me to the kitchen, which is sparkling clean, with white marble

countertops and gleaming white cabinets. The floor is tiled white, too. The only things not in white are the appliances, which are brushed silver.

“The dishwasher is there,” Hunter says, pointing.

“Am I going to be your maid?” I ask, immediately feeling stupid for the question. Of course I’m going to be his maid. It doesn’t seem like he needs one, though. Everything is so neat—sterile, even.

Hunter gives me a look. “I pay for a cleaner. She comes once a week. You’re going to clean up after yourself and keep things tidy if you notice something out of place. I don’t tolerate messes.”

Is there anything he *does* tolerate?

“Yes, sir,” I say. I’m not used to having things to have out of place, honestly. Most of what I wore at Ntimacy was basic, and anything more elaborate was from the dressing room everyone took a turn at using. I didn’t have anything to call my own, so of course the room I’d stayed in was spotless.

“Do you know how to cook?” Hunter asks, his eyes still boring into me.

It’s strange though. Despite my nudity, he really is just looking at my face. It’s different from how the men at Ntimacy treated me.

“Not really,” I say. It’s been a long time since I’ve even tried. When I was home... But if I think about that, I’ll cry. “I can follow a recipe.” I fidget with the tray, looking down at it instead of meeting those intense blue eyes.

Hunter makes a sound, and I can’t tell if that’s disapproval. I tense anyway, waiting for him to chastise me.

“What are you waiting for?” he finally asks.

I look up at him again, puzzled. “What?”

Hunter rolls his eyes and motions to the dishwasher. “The dishes?”

I’m still not following, and it’s only when he makes another impatient gesture at me that I realize I’m still holding the tray. I blush, going over to it to stack the dishes inside. There aren’t many, and it’s not long before I’m stuck with nothing to distract myself with. I cross my arms against my chest now that I’m not holding the tray, trying to hide as much of myself as I can from view.

“I won’t remind you to do simple things every time. If you neglect something, I’ll find an appropriate punishment.”

Then he walks on, snapping his fingers as if to signal for me to follow, like I’m a dog.

“Why can’t you remind me?” I ask, frowning, and it takes me a moment

to reluctantly follow after him. “People forget things. Why wouldn’t you just... mention it, instead of skipping to a punishment?”

Hunter leads me to the living room with its white leather couch and white rug and white coffee table and white everything. I feel like I’m going to stain it just by setting foot into the area.

“Because I am not your mother,” Hunter says curtly. “And because lack of care for one’s environment shows lack of care for oneself. You belong to me now, and you will follow my rules.”

I want to say something clever, but all I have in me is, “Yes, sir.” The agreement isn’t sincere, though. I don’t want to just mindlessly do what he orders me to do. I can clean up after myself, but I don’t like the idea of being punished if I do something like... leave a cup out on the counter.

“How would you punish me?” I ask, fidgeting with my hands. I rub the inside of my elbow, and I think of how much easier this would be if I had just a small hit. Something to numb the growing fear and despair inside me.

His eyes catch my movements, and I quickly force my hands down.

“Spankings are traditional. I have other implements. But depending on the infraction, I might find other ways.” He goes to sit in the large white armchair and points to the floor in front of him. “Sit.”

I shiver. I’ve been spanked before by men at Ntimacy, but they’d always been excited about it, never this cold and distant. I have a feeling he’d be like this the whole time he was doing it, too, not even showing a shred of desire.

I don’t know why that bothers me as much as it does.

Instead of responding, I go to the floor in front of the chair and sit down, feeling awkward. I stare down at the clean floor beneath me, and I’m thankful for his cleanliness all of a sudden. This would’ve been disgusting at the club.

He stares down at me long enough that I grow even more uncomfortable. I end up crossing my arms over myself, and that gets me a furrow of his brow in response.

Great. He’ll disapprove of me even when I’m not doing anything at all.

“Kiss my feet,” Hunter says, “and thank me for taking you in.”

I stare up at him, taken aback by the demand. I don’t want to kiss his feet. I don’t want to kiss anyone’s feet. I don’t want him to think I’m worshiping him like he’s some sort of deity—which is clearly what he wants.

“What happens if I don’t?” I whisper.

Hunter sighs and makes a hand motion. “Stand up.”

“N-no,” I say quickly. “I mean. I’ll do it.”

“Stand up,” Hunter repeats, much harsher this time. “And bend over my lap.”

I swallow hard, slowly getting to my feet, and I wish I’d just done what he’d asked—told—me to do. I give him a beseeching look, but he ignores it, looking pointedly at me, then his lap. My shoulders slump, and I slowly bend down over his lap. “I’m sorry,” I say. “I just...”

Hunter places one hand on my back to keep me in place. It feels oddly warm in comparison to his cold attitude. He places his other hand on my ass.

“Still bony,” he says with disapproval. “Regardless. The punishment is for not obeying me, and to show you that there are indeed consequences. I will be lenient this one time. Don’t test me again.”

I shudder, and I find that his disappointment somehow hurts. I don’t know why. I don’t understand it. It’s not like I want to kiss his feet, or thank him for taking me in, but I don’t want *this* either.

“Ten blows,” Hunter says. “Count them and thank me for them. If you forget, it won’t count for the total.”

Tears spring to my eyes, but I nod. “Y-yes, sir,” I whisper. I brace myself, not knowing how much pressure he’s going to put behind his blows.

Hunter squeezes my ass once, then raises his arm up. I tense up, and the first blow lands hard on my ass. I gasp at the pain, the way it spreads across the area.

That wasn’t a warmup blow at all.

I don’t know if I can stand ten of these. Either way, I say, “One. Sir. Thank you.” My vision is blurred from the tears that I’m barely holding back.

He huffs quietly, then brings his hand down again on the opposite ass cheek.

“Two. Thank... thank you,” I say. How am I going to handle eight more of these? My ass is already burning, and I’m dreading the feeling of his hand coming down on me again and again. It’s not the worst pain I’ve ever felt—or so I have to remind myself—but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to handle either.

The next two are the same, landing on unblemished parts of me. I thank him for them and sniffle to hold the tears back.

The fifth blow lands right on top of the first. I startle, because the pain of it is even worse, and tears start to flow. I still thank him, even though I can barely get the words out. By the seventh, I’m having a hard time keeping track of the blows, and I don’t even think it’s because of the pain. It doesn’t

even hurt that much.

It's just something about him spanking me in general, not giving me the chance to even hesitate for a moment. I can't be eager for everything he wants all the time, always ready for something that sounds disgusting and horrible to me. Can I?

I brace myself for the next blow, expecting it to be harder or faster.

Instead it's a much lighter tap. It still stings as it lands against my tender ass, but I'm so surprised by the change that I almost forget to count it.

"Eight. Thank you?" I say, confused.

The ninth is similarly light, on the opposite ass cheek. I thank him and relax a little.

The tenth lands right in the center, catching both sides at once, but like the preceding ones it's not nearly as hard of a blow.

It's a relief, and it almost makes me feel like he's a little less mad at me. Like maybe I've done a better job, somehow. I promise myself I won't hesitate again, but... I know that isn't exactly true. I can't stop myself from hesitating from things that sound so unappealing.

"Good," Hunter says, guiding me upright. I feel wobbly on my legs, but it doesn't matter because he pushes on my shoulders to let me know he wants me on the floor.

I kneel in front of him, my ass burning in pain, and stare up at him with my tear-stained eyes.

"Let's try again. Kiss my feet, and thank me for taking you in."

I swallow hard, but nod. His feet are probably clean, even though they're bare. I look down at one of his feet, then the other, before slowly leaning down to kiss the top of the left one. "Thank you for taking me in," I say before kissing the right one as well.

"Thank you for taking me in, *Master*," Hunter corrects. "Do it again."

I hate calling him *master*. It seems so ridiculous, and *sir* is so much easier. But I nod, not wanting another spanking from him. I kiss the tops of his feet then say quietly, "Thanks for taking me in, Master."

"Good girl," Hunter says, and for the first time I notice some hint of positive emotion in his voice.

He *is* getting off on all of this.

I straighten my back again to look at him. I can see the bulge in his slacks. It's a bit of a wonder that he's been hard and somehow resisted fucking me immediately. The men at Ntimacy never bothered with a long

game.

Then again, they were paying by the hour. Hunter has all the rest of my life to toy with me.

“Rest your head here,” Hunter says, patting his thigh.

I don’t hesitate this time. I shift so I can more comfortably kneel before him, so I can lean my head against his thigh. I look up at him, uncertain of what he expects me to do. His cock is so close—his *half-hard* cock, which is clearly outlined through his pants—and I have a feeling I know what’s coming.

But instead of having me take him out of his slacks and begin sucking, he starts gently stroking my hair. I tense up, wondering exactly what he’s trying to do.

“Relax,” Hunter says, still petting me and sending small shivers across my scalp. “You’re still resisting.”

I want to protest that I’m not resisting, that I’m willing to do everything he tells me, but that would be arguing. He’d see that as a sign of disobedience, and my ass burns enough as it is. I don’t want another punishment.

Instead, I close my eyes and simply rest my head there, trying to just enjoy the feeling of him stroking my hair. I’ve always loved that sensation, for all that it had been a long time since someone had done it to me.

“Good.” Hunter runs a finger across my closed eyes and wipes at the remnants of tears, then trails down to my mouth. “Keep your eyes closed. Open your mouth and hold it open.”

Of course it couldn’t have been this easy. Of course there has to be something else. I almost sob again, but I catch myself. Maybe he’s just testing my ability to obey. Maybe he’ll keep touching my hair, being gentle with me, and treating me like I’m something more than trash.

I obey, opening my mouth for him. I hear the clink of his belt buckle and the zipper of his slacks, and I can smell it when he frees his erection, that natural—and thankfully, not unpleasant—odor. I’ve definitely smelled men who weren’t this fastidious about cleanliness.

“Don’t do anything but hold your mouth open,” Hunter orders as he guides my head toward his cock.

I’d expected something like this, so it’s no real surprise. I wait as he pushes into my mouth, his semi still filling it but not nudging at my throat like a full erection might. I’m tense, though, just waiting for the order to start

licking and sucking.

“Hold,” he says, stroking my scalp with one hand. “This is all you need to think about right now. You managed to be a good girl. I’m going to make you so beautiful, so *perfect*.”

I don’t know what to make of this. I squirm a little then try to go still, because I can tell that’s what he wants from me. I don’t understand why, but this is easier than giving him a blowjob even though the words are harder to deal with than any blowjob. I don’t know that I like being called a good girl. I don’t think I like being told he’s going to make me beautiful and perfect, either, because I don’t know what that means to him.

I don’t think I’m going to like it, and I stay tense while I try to think about what his expectations might be. Will he want a doll, someone to just fuck? What would make me flawless in his critical eyes?

The moments tick by, and his cock somehow stays only partially hard on my tongue at first. It’s uncomfortable, stretching my jaw this way, and when I try to swallow to keep the drool from sliding out of my mouth, he gives a slight tug on my hair. Message received: I’m not allowed to do that.

I peer up at him as best as I can to get a sense for his mood, and I’m shocked when I see that he retrieved his phone and is now reading something, all while his other hand continued to pet me. He’s half-ignoring me now.

I squeeze my eyes shut again and wish that didn’t bother me. Maybe I should be grateful he isn’t shoving his cock down my throat and face-fucking me.

As awful as the situation is, I get used to it after a while. I grow a little tired, even, and my eyes slide shut a bit more naturally. My jaw remains slack, drool drips down my chin, and all the aches become just simple background sensations. The bruising from the spanking, the ache in my knees and jaw—all of it fades away and is superseded by the pleasant little jolts I get when his fingers rub my scalp. I’m not even craving the usual high.

I sigh and sink a little deeper, the tension evaporating.

There’s nothing I can do.

I just need to accept this.

I’m not sure how much time passes before Hunter slowly slides his cock out of my mouth. I make a small sound, surprised and unsure.

“Shh. Well done,” Hunter says, taking my arms and urging me to stand.

I feel almost more unsteady than after the spanking. I blink stupidly at him and watch as he wipes his cock down and zips up again. He gets up,

pulling me closer.

Pulling me into an embrace.

“Good job. See, that wasn’t so hard. Being good is easy.” He strokes my hair and back while I rest against his warm chest.

Being good is easy.

Right now, while I’m sleepy and blissfully close to someone who’s just holding me, it really, really is.

I wish he would kiss me.

Would that be so much to ask? Probably, and I don’t want to ruin this moment. Instead, I close my eyes and stay there, pressed against his chest, not wanting to move.

“All right. Come on. You did such a good job, you can sleep in my room.” Hunter doesn’t let go of me as he leads us to his bedroom.

It’s dark, but even if it were light, I don’t think I’d be in a state to take anything in. I just follow him, and I lay down across the foot of the bed as directed.

“Stay,” he says when he lets go of me. I whimper, suddenly cold. I don’t want to be alone.

I hear him rummage for something, and when he returns, he has a thick leather collar in his hand.

“Let’s get this on you, then you can sleep,” he says.

I blink drowsily at him, and I have a feeling I should be protesting. But I just feel so sleepy, so relaxed, that it doesn’t seem to matter. I struggle to sit up, finally managing to rest up on my elbow, and look at him as he moves in closer.

He’s gentle as he secures the collar around my throat, and I swallow hard, feeling how tight it is. It doesn’t inhibit my breathing, but the sensation is new.

Not exactly welcome, either.

Hunter finishes by attaching a chain to the d-ring on the collar. I follow the chain blankly, noting where it attaches to the post at the foot of the bed. I have maybe two feet of slack. Enough for me to roll around, but not enough that I could sleep the right way around.

“There you go. Good girl.” Hunter ruffles my hair. “If you can be good, I’ll let you sleep here regularly. But if I can’t trust you, I’ll need to constrict you more.”

Good girl.

Again, the words strike me, but I'm just too tired to really pay much attention to them. "Thank you... Master," I say, the words slurring a little. "I'll be good."

He covers my naked body with a soft blanket, and for a split second I think I see a hint of a smile. But when I look again, he's as stern as ever.

Wishful thinking.

I drift off, wondering what it would take to actually get him to smile.

CHAPTER 7

Hunter

I LOCK the door to Stef's room, ignoring her pleas. She's crying about being a good girl, and she doesn't deserve it, but I can't trust her alone in my condo just yet.

I check the camera feed from my phone as I ride down the elevator, watching her sob to herself.

The tears look amazing on her.

It had been so hard not to simply fuck her mouth yesterday. She'd been open and pliant and so malleable, but I'm biding my time until she's truly ready for me.

I have the concierge hail a cab for me, and even though I should be using the time to read the news or a journal article, all I do is keep watching that camera feed. The usual interminable 30-minute drive is over faster than expected.

As I ride up to my practice's floor, I realize I don't actually want to work.

It's the strangest sensation. I don't think I've ever dreaded work, not in the ten years since I've been doing this job. I've never had anything else I'd rather be doing, though.

The elevator dings open, and I head to my practice, stopping short when I see a man hanging around out front.

I scowl when I see him. It isn't unusual for men to visit my practice, although they're normally accompanying a wife or a girlfriend. The few times we've had lone men, they were stalkers trying to gain access to their pregnant ex.

Judging from this man's demeanor, he likely fits that category.

"Can I help you?" I ask him coldly.

When he looks up at me, he looks older than what I originally would've

pegged him as. His face is haggard and worn, and he has a twitch that won't seem to go away. He flashes me a big smile, though, and says, "Just trying to figure out where the gastroenterologist is. The building is a little confusing."

Somehow, I have a hard time believing that's why he's here. The twitch could be nerve damage, but his clothes look like he's been living on the streets for weeks.

"Dr. Lamard is Suite 512, one floor up," I say curtly. "If you're looking for the social services office, it's on the second floor."

He blinks at me, then scowls, his eyes darkening. "Hey, fuck you, man. I don't need the social services office, Dr...?"

"In which case, be on your way so you don't scare the patients." I glare at him pointedly and motion toward the elevator. I really can't have him loitering around here and disturbing the women coming to see me.

"Yeah, whatever," he says, starting to head to the elevator. He stabs at the button to call the elevator, then pauses, turning back to look at me. "See you later, doc."

Hopefully not. I make sure he gets on the elevator before I head into the office. My office manager, Clara, is already there, preparing for the day.

"Clara, contact security and inform them about the man who was lurking outside just now. Have them pull up their security footage to see what he looks like."

Clara stands up straighter and nods. "Yes, sir. Oh, and Dr. Paladar is going to be a bit later today. She got held up by... something."

Of course she did. She's late more often than not, but it's helpful to have her on staff since some of the patients prefer a female doctor. The nurses I employ are all women, too, for that same reason.

The only other man in the office is one of the receptionists. At least I don't need to deal with the constant backstabbing and competition I would have in a larger setting. My years during rotation at the hospital cured me of any idea I could be friends with fellow doctors.

I head to my office to check my schedule for the day. I have about fifteen minutes to prepare for the first client, so of course that is when my mother calls.

The temptation to ignore her is strong, but she is fully aware of my work hours, and ignoring her now would invite her to harass me in the evening.

"Yes?" I answer, not bothering to hide my annoyance.

"Is that any way to greet your mother?" she says. I can hear the bustle of

her office in the background, the regular chatter of her congressional staffers as well as the TV set to a news station.

Senator Constance Savage is a very busy woman, so perhaps I should feel honored that she bothered to call me at all.

“Very well, Mother. To what do I owe the pleasure of your call?” I set the call to speaker and begin browsing my emails. There are a few patients who have questions, and...

Hmm. One from Damien Rossi, Giulio’s right-hand man.

I open that one, surprised that he’d be willing to send an email. It’s obfuscated, of course, the sender listed as a random set of letters and numbers, but the subject line makes it clear who it’s from.

Dr. Savage,

I’m writing to request your services for G’s girlfriend...

“Are you listening at all?” my mother suddenly says, louder than before.

I roll my eyes. “No, Mother. You’ll have to repeat that.”

Giulio’s girlfriend... would be that Vanessa woman Stef mentioned. I feel an irrational anger thinking about her already. It’s her fault Stef was whored out to twenty different men at once.

“One of these days, I’m going to quiz you, and cut off your trust fund unless you manage to get all the answers right.”

“I haven’t touched my trust fund since grad school,” I counter. “I bought the condo with my own investments.”

“I still think you could have found a house. That’s a better investment than a condo.” Her voice goes distant, and I can hear her shouting at one of her staffers to stop fucking up.

This is why I don’t pay attention to her calls. She’s not paying attention to them either.

“Anyway, as I was saying. The hospital fundraiser is coming up soon. I had my assistant forward you the details and calendar invite, and she says she hasn’t received the read receipt yet. Your brother and sister will be there too, but obviously you’re the important one this time.”

“Your donors will not care that you showed up to a hospital fundraiser with your doctor son,” I point out, not mentioning that technically she’s supposed to be fundraising for the hospital, not herself.

We both know she’s only going to the event as a PR opportunity.

“I’m having Jared draft a speech for you. It’s a very impassioned plea to please think of the children and whatever else it is hospitals do. Oh, and bring a girlfriend. Wife would be better, but obviously you can’t arrange it that fast. I don’t want these rumors about you to keep spreading.”

“There are no rumors about me,” I answer flatly. I know, because I check news about my mother regularly, and nobody really cares about her children. The only rumor that exists is within the family, started by my brother when we were both in college and he wanted to date my then girlfriend.

“Regardless, you’re almost forty, and it looks bad for me if you aren’t partnered off. Although, maybe we can get you onto one of those *most eligible bachelors* lists...”

That sounds even worse than the other option. I click open the invite for the fundraiser, click *accept* to add it to my calendar, and make another annoyed sound. “Fine. I’ll bring somebody.”

“My assistant included a list of choices in her email. Senator Barbos’s daughter is also a doctor; she’s my top pick for you. But I’ve been talking to Marilyn’s agent—you know, the model?—and bringing a celebrity would do wonders for our optics.”

“*Your* optics. I don’t want to date a model.” I delete the email with the suggested women, then glance at the clock. “And now I have to go, because I have a patient to attend to, and I can’t make people wait around just to make it clear how much more important I am than them.”

“You could do that,” my mother argues. “But I have a Senate hearing soon. Dan, did you prepare the summary? What’s this hearing about?”

She hangs up on me without even saying goodbye, but I’m used to that. I pull up my patient’s chart and head to the exam room. My patient is sitting on the exam table, much more visibly pregnant than the last time I’d seen her.

“Hi, Jan,” I greet her, forcing myself to smile a little. “How are you this morning?”

I would love to simply do the exam as quickly as possible, no words at all. But if I make the patients uncomfortable, they find alternative care or leave nasty reviews, and it’s much easier to get them to tell me the truth if they think I’m a warm, friendly person.

I’m as fake as my mother is, I suppose.

I get through the exam as quickly as possible, and when I’m alone in my office again, I let out a small sigh.

Five minutes of rest, then on to the next patient.

Five minutes is enough to check the camera feed. I click on the app on my phone and feel something settle inside me as I watch Stef sleep. Obviously she can't stay there forever, but more rest is probably good for her right now. She's destroyed her body; it's time for it to finally heal.

I zoom in on her face, and even in the somewhat grainy feed, I can see the way her lips are slightly parted. It reminds me of how she'd looked yesterday, waiting for my cock, and I can feel a slight twitch in my pants.

I'm not so unprofessional as to pursue this line of thought, though, and I don't have the time for it anyway. I reluctantly close the app and prepare for the next patient.

The day goes by, much slower than usual, until finally my work hours are done. Of course the last patient had run longer than expected, thanks to her husband who'd kept interrupting and asking stupid questions.

It puts me in a foul mood, and the series of cancellations and last-minute appointments scheduled for tomorrow doesn't help. I'm going to be taking work home after all, and part of me wants to just yell at everybody involved to just do as I say.

I can't do that without destroying my professional reputation, but I do have somebody at home who obeys.

I have somebody at home who won't talk back at me, won't question me, and won't waste my time.

I don't need to pretend to be warm and friendly for Stef.

Knowing that she's there calms me a little and makes the ride home during rush hour less tortuous.

I spend the ride thinking how best to make use of her tonight.

CHAPTER 8

Stef

FOR ALL THAT I don't miss being at Ntimacy, I can't help but wish I was there instead. I didn't have friends at Ntimacy, and I doubt anyone misses me, but at least having people to talk to made time pass by faster. Even having chores to do helped with the boredom, tedious as it had been.

I've spent the whole day alternating between sleeping and pacing, grateful that Hunter didn't bind me to the bed but at the same time wishing he'd agreed to let me roam the condo instead of being stuck in here. A few times, I've even checked the bedroom door, as though somehow it will have magically unlocked.

I find myself looking forward to him coming home, which is strange. I don't want to be around him, but at the same time, I don't like this solitude either. Then there's the memory of the way he'd gently stroked my hair and allowed me to relax, to drift against him. Even though I'd had his cock in my mouth, I'd still enjoyed it because it was strangely soothing.

I've thought of nothing but him all day.

I've dreamed of nothing but him, too.

When the door finally does click open and Hunter enters, my mouth goes dry. He's freshly showered, wearing a t-shirt and sweatpants that cling to his body. He's barefoot again, which still strikes me as so at odds with what little I know about Hunter Savage.

I get out of bed, not sure what to do with myself, and bow my head. "Hi... Master," I mumble awkwardly.

"Hello." Hunter sighs a little, and I don't know what to make of that. Then he points at his feet. "Kiss my feet, and thank me for taking you in."

I blink at him, and it takes me a moment to comprehend the words. He wants me to do that again? I just did it yesterday. But the way he's looking at

me, so expectant, so unyielding, tells me he's not going to wait long before moving into punishment mode.

I slowly get down to my knees in front of him, leaning down and pressing a kiss to the top of each foot before I murmur, "Thank you for taking me in, M-master."

"Good girl." He reaches down to pat my hair. "You'll be doing that every day from now on."

I stare down at his feet, trying to pretend it doesn't feel so good to be petted, to be praised. "Yes, sir... Master," I amend before he has to correct me.

My stomach makes a loud growling noise, and I blush, but it's not my fault he only left me water and a few small snacks to get me through the day. At least he hadn't chained me to the bed this time, and I'd been able to go to the bathroom when I'd needed to. It's one more freedom, and the sign of more to come, right?

"I brought food. You may get up and follow me." Hunter doesn't wait for me to actually obey the order. He just turns around and leaves.

I get up quickly and head out of the room before I can be locked inside again, following him into the kitchen. The smell of food makes my stomach grumble again, and I touch it, willing it into silence. It's strange having an appetite again. At Ntimacy, I almost never got hungry, but now that Hunter has forced me off of the drugs, I'm hungry all the time.

I feel a pang of need, one I've had to push away several times during the course of the day. He's not going to give me anything, especially now that he's brutally pushed me through withdrawal hell. But I want it. I'd rather have drugs over food, even though I keep my mouth shut about it.

Hunter sits down at the head of the table and motions next to his chair. "Sit here."

"Where?" I ask, balking a little. "On the floor?"

"Yes, on the floor, Stef." He makes one of his disappointed noises, which are starting to get too familiar. "Never mind."

"Wait," I start to say, but he gives me a look and I immediately shrink back. I should've just gotten on the fucking floor.

Hunter gets up, says, "Stay," then goes to his bedroom. When he returns, he has cuffs and a collar in hand.

It's not the same collar as yesterday, when he'd let me sleep on the bed with him. This collar looks a lot scarier, far wider and thicker. I instinctively

shake my head when I see it, even though I know the last thing I need to be doing is refusing him again.

“Sit on this chair,” Hunter says, pointing to the one adjacent to where he’d been.

At least it’s a chair and not the floor. Maybe he’s just giving me a second chance to obey. I sit down, still conscious of my nudity and wondering if it might’ve been better to kneel on the floor than sit bare-assed on the chair.

Without saying a word, Hunter takes one of my arms and lays it on the armrest—then cuffs my hand to it. I pull instinctively, but I only have an inch or two of leeway. There’s no way I can use this hand to eat.

Hunter picks up my second hand.

“Wait—” I start to say.

“Quiet,” Hunter orders, cutting me off. “You didn’t want to sit on the floor.” He cuffs that hand to the chair, too, and now I have no way of picking up a fork at all, or even getting out of the chair.

“No, it’s fine, I’ll sit on the floor—” This time, I cut myself off, because it’s not going to make a difference and I know it. I slump a little, watching him warily as he approaches with that thick collar.

Hunter places it around my neck, forcing me to look up and stare forward, and buckles it securely. I swallow hard as I realize the size of the collar means I can barely move my neck at all anymore.

He steps back and observes me for a second, then takes the chair and angles it so it’s facing his.

“Ah,” he says. “One more thing.” He goes back to his bedroom, and I tremble with dread. What’s he going to come up with next?

When he returns, my eyes widen. He’s holding a dildo, and the end of it has a suction cup. He taps the inside of my ankle with his bare foot and says, “Spread and lift up.”

“What...” I look up at him pleadingly, but I can’t shake my head and I don’t dare verbally refuse. Not again. I whimper. “I’m not sure if I can sit up that much,” I tell him honestly, even though I try to lift my hips.

“You can.” Hunter leans in and, without waiting for me to get ready, begins pushing the dildo in. It slides in easily enough, and I realize he must have lubed it before bringing it out.

I pant heavily and try to relax enough for the dildo to slide in all the way. When Hunter is satisfied, he pushes down on my thighs and angles me so the dildo’s base lands—and sticks—on the chair. I let out a soft whimper, but all

my squirming does is make the dildo work its way deeper inside of me. “Master...” I start to protest, but I can see now that it’s only going to make things worse for me to try to argue.

Hunter takes a step back to observe me, then nods in satisfaction. “You look good like that.”

I don’t feel like I look good. I’m uncomfortable and miserable, and again I’ve gotten myself punished for simply hesitating to obey him.

He grabs one of the brown bags with the food in it. There’s another oddity: he doesn’t strike me as somebody to eat straight out of takeout containers, but here he is, popping the lid off the plastic container and spearing a piece of chicken. He brings the fork close to my mouth and rubs the saucy chicken over my lips. “Open.”

I don’t want to see what else he has planned for me if I don’t obey him fast enough again, so I open my mouth. The chicken is sweet and sour, a flavor bomb I don’t remember having in... a long time.

Before Ntimacy.

They didn’t bother to feed us anything that was beyond palatable. This is an entirely different thing, and despite the absurdity of my situation—the dildo I’m impaled on, my nudity, my self-consciousness—it’s the taste of the food that makes tears come to my eyes.

I blink quickly to drive the tears away, but Hunter notices. He sets the fork down and brushes a thumb along the corner of my eye.

“Crying? I haven’t even done anything,” he says softly, but something about the way he’s staring at me makes it clear he’s turned on.

I don’t know what to make of it. I don’t know what part of my reaction is turning him on. My helplessness? The toy? The tears?

All of it, probably.

“I’m sorry,” I say, wishing I could duck my head but finding the collar gets in the way of that, too.

Hunter eats some of the food himself, watching me the entire time. When he’s done chewing, he gets more for me, and I squirm in humiliation. I try to remind myself about the good things. I’m eating delicious food. I’m not being shared.

But I’m strapped naked to the chair, the dildo rubbing along my inner walls, with Hunter’s eyes roving all over me. I don’t think I’ve ever felt so exposed in my life, not even when I was dancing for the men at Ntimacy.

Once I’ve taken the food off the fork, Hunter scoots his chair a little

closer and reaches out to cup my breast. “What size were you before the malnutrition?” he asks, running his thumb over my nipple in slow circles.

It’s distracting, and it takes a moment for the words to sink in because I’m having to bite my lip against the unwanted pleasure. “What size what?” I ask, confused. “Bra, or clothes, or...”

“Bra, but clothes too. You probably need to gain at least twenty pounds, if not more.” His hand travels down to my ribcage, and he taps on one of the ridges. “There’s no point in buying real clothes for you when they won’t fit you soon, anyway.”

I shake my head. It’s been so long that I don’t even really remember. “A C cup,” I say. “And...” I close my eyes. “I don’t know. I don’t remember.” I’d always been skinny, but I have a feeling he’s not going to accept that.

“We’ll get you to the right size,” Hunter says. After a few more lingering touches, he pulls away and gets more food. “Do you know why I bought you?”

“Because I cry a lot?” I ask, feeling a little bitter because it’s probably the truth. “I don’t mean to be a crybaby. Giulio always says...” I trail off. I don’t want to think about Giulio Pavone. I don’t want to think about Ntimacy.

“Because I needed somebody who wouldn’t fight me,” Hunter answers. “I deal with enough of that everywhere else in my life. When I get home, I just want things to be... easy. Neat. Orderly. Controlled.”

To my utter shock, Hunter’s lips twitch into something that almost resembles a smile.

“I think that’s the clichéd psychoanalysis they always give about people like me.” Hunter lifts more food to my mouth, and I automatically eat it. That hint of a smile drops away. “So after a day of dealing with patients, dealing with their entitled partners, answering unnecessary phone calls, and analyzing worrying ultrasounds, I just wanted to enjoy a nice evening with you against my thigh.”

I blink at him. That hadn’t been what I was expecting at all, but I guess it makes sense. “I’m sorry,” I say, though I’m not quite sure why I’m apologizing. For not immediately getting on the floor? For not leaning against his thigh? That was a little ridiculous.

“Now I have to think about what we’ll do instead.” Hunter eats for a few moments, and I watch him warily. We’re already doing something else.

If I could, I’d be looking down to hide my face from him. I’m sure my body is completely flushed red. The dildo isn’t helping on that front. I

squirm, and of course that just sends another tingle of pleasure through me.

The strange feeding continues, until Hunter is satisfied that we've both eaten enough. I don't tell him that I'm far too full, actually. I haven't eaten this much in months. Years, probably. But Hunter places his hand on me and rubs my bloated belly gently. "Good," he murmurs. "Maybe I can forgive your little... rebellion."

I don't want to say that it wasn't a rebellion, that it was just my uncertainty, because he might see that as talking back. It's already exhausting, trying to figure out what he's going to see as rebellion, but I have to figure this out.

One man. I just have to please one man. That's it.

That makes this situation worlds better than Ntimacy, even if I'm uncomfortably turned on and in a strange sort of headspace that I don't recognize. "Please, Master," I say. "I'm sorry for... for..." For what? "For disobeying you."

He removes his hand from my belly to stroke my scalp instead. "I'm not sure I believe your sincerity. But good that you're trying. I'll reward you for that."

I'm not sure I like the idea of a reward from him. Men like him think their cocks are a reward.

Hunter reaches into the pocket of his slacks—and yes, he's definitely hard—and pulls something out. It's a little remote of some sort, and I have no idea what that's for.

Until he clicks it, and the dildo I've been sitting on suddenly begins to buzz.

I let out a little gasp, and I can't help but shift slightly, trying to lessen the way it presses in all the right places. I'm not used to getting turned on by *anything* anymore; I keep lube on hand so men at Ntimacy don't complain about my dry pussy. But right now?

I'm not dry at all.

I mewl when he reaches out to play with my nipples again, my eyes widening in surprise. This isn't what it's like.

It hasn't been this way since Dylan.

No, even then, it hadn't felt this good.

"Wait," I plead, trying to lift my hips off the chair. But there's nowhere to go, not with my hands cuffed to the arms of the chair, and I sink back down again. The motion just makes the vibrations seem even stronger inside me.

“I liked that,” Hunter says. “Do it again. Fuck yourself on the dildo.” He presses a button on the remote again, and the intensity of the buzzing increases.

I can’t help but moan, and I try to duck my head again. The collar still stops me, though, so I close my eyes for a moment. I don’t want to disobey—again—so I gingerly rise up a few inches and lower myself again. It feels surprisingly good.

“Keep going.” Hunter rubs his thumb along my bottom lip. “Open your mouth. Keep it open while you fuck yourself. I want to hear all your sounds.”

I swallow hard, and I tentatively lick his thumb. I don’t know if it’s the right thing to do or not, but he keeps going. I let out a soft moan as I raise my hips a little higher and settle back down, the dildo touching all the right places. “Do you…” I hesitate. “Can I suck you? While I…” I shiver. “While I do this?”

Hunter watches me so intensely that I regret even asking. I blink to stave off tears.

I don’t know why I thought he would want me to.

Then he asks, “Do you want it? Do you want your master’s cock?”

No.

Yes.

I don’t know.

I’m so mixed up inside that I don’t know what I want anymore. But I nod as much as I can around the collar. “I want to thank you for everything you’ve done for me, Master.” I pause in fucking myself on the dildo, looking at him with a slight wince as it drives all the way inside of me again. The vibrations are making it hard to focus, and I let out another soft noise.

Hunter lets out a soft noise. “Not quite. But I’ll allow it.” He sets the vibrator remote on the table and, surprisingly, unbuckles the collar around my neck.

I take in a deep breath. I hadn’t realized just how restricted my breathing had been until now.

Hunter rubs my throat a few times before getting up and positioning himself in front of me. I have to crane my neck to look up at him, and I realize now why he removed the collar.

His erection is straining in his slacks, and I still don’t understand how he can be so calm while he’s so hard. I’ve never met a man who didn’t make his erection his first priority.

“Do you want to come?” he asks me as he strokes my hair.

“I...” To my own surprise, I realize I do. I already feel good with the vibrator buzzing away inside of me, but I want to feel even better. I want to actually come for the first time in as long as I can remember—because I definitely never came at Ntimacy. I pretended, sure, but that had been about it. “I’m not sure I can,” I admit. Maybe my body is incapable of it now.

“You can,” Hunter says with a strange confidence. He doesn’t know my body, though. He’s groped me and fondled me, but he doesn’t know how little sex has appealed to me in the past few months.

I guess even with Dylan, I did it more out of a sense of obligation than actual desire. That’s why it feels so weird to be wet and squirming on the dildo now.

Hunter reaches for the remote and taps another button. The vibrations are no longer a steady rhythm. They randomly slow, then increase again, and I gasp as the unpredictability of the stimulation sends more pleasure coursing through me.

“You’ll come before I do,” Hunter says as he unbuckles his belt.

I doubt that’s possible, but I have to try. I don’t want to make him upset with me again. I want... I want him to be pleased with me. It’s a strange desire, but one I can’t ignore. “Yes, Master,” I whisper, but I don’t really believe it’s going to happen.

He pulls out his erection. I’ve seen so many cocks at this point, it shouldn’t be anything special.

But somehow, despite knowing him for almost two weeks now, this is the first time I’ve gotten a good look at it. Even when he’d had me holding his cock, he’d told me to close my eyes before it went into my mouth.

It’s... long. Not the thickest or largest I’ve ever seen, but my mouth waters strangely.

Last time, he hadn’t let me suck him properly. This time, though, he slowly presses it against my lips, and I lap at it with my tongue. He’s clean, a bit salty, a bit unfamiliar still—but still so much better than many of the cocks I’ve sucked. I don’t know how he’s going to be now that he wants me to suck him off—now that I’ve offered—but I’m oddly interested in seeing how he’s going to treat me.

Hunter crowds me, dragging his cock along my lips. “All right. Show me how much you want to... thank me.”

I look up at him, licking him again before taking him into my mouth. I

suck slowly, mesmerized by the feeling of it even as the vibrator keeps going in that uneven series of short and long bursts. I wish I could reach down and touch my clit, and the thought is so foreign to me that I miss a beat on trying to take him deeper into my mouth.

“Keep fucking yourself,” Hunter orders, tugging lightly on my hair. He also messes with the remote again to change the rhythm of the vibrations.

This time, it’s a steady pulse, which makes it hard to ignore. I lift my body up then lower it again and again, trying to somehow coordinate my body’s movements with my mouth on his cock.

It’s impossible to concentrate on everything at once—or at all—so I get sloppy. Drool slides out of the corner of my mouth as I try to get him off, and my own rhythm is unsteady from how turned on I am.

How am I this aroused? Why does it feel like I’m close to orgasm? That can’t be true. I haven’t come from anything but my own fingers in years.

Hunter traces my lips stretched around his cock. I realize now he hasn’t moved at all—I’m doing all the work, and that sends another strange feeling coursing through me.

I should be resentful. But he’s letting me control this, at least.

Or he’s getting off on making me labor for him.

It doesn’t matter. The vibrations ratchet up again, and I cry out, his cock muffling my sound.

I feel his cock twitch.

How much control is it taking him not to thrust deeper into my mouth? How does he have so much control?

He’s letting me do this, and I don’t understand how or why. Doesn’t he want to *own* me? Why is he—

My orgasm hits me without warning, and I gasp around his cock as my body trembles and arches with the force of it. It’s more of a surprise than anything else, and I suck more of him into my mouth, desperately taking every little bit I can.

Hunter’s hand tightens in my hair, and I brace myself, expecting him to speed up, to thrust into my mouth and choke me as he comes.

But he pulls out instead. I stare blearily, opening my mouth wider and trying to chase after him, but his grip on my hair is absolute. The vibrator is still going inside me, drawing out my pleasure even as I begin to feel overstimulated.

Hunter starts stroking himself with his other hand, and a few seconds

later, he pulls back and comes all over my face.

I sputter a little, not having expected that. I thought he'd want me to drink it down. It's humiliating, the same way it always is, and it's at odds with what I think about him. He feels so classy, and having his cum dripping down my cheeks and into my mouth feels... trashy.

Hunter lets go of me, and I can hear his breathing, louder than the buzzing of the vibrator. He looks down at me, no hint of approval or satisfaction on his face. I'd just seen him come. He can't be disappointed with me, right? I tense up, trying to figure out where I'd gone wrong.

He reaches down to rub my cum-stained cheeks. "It looks good on you," he says, before turning away and grabbing a napkin from the takeout bag. I watch dumbly as he cleans himself up and tucks his cock away.

"I'll give you a choice," he says in an even tone. "You can go back to your room. Or you can stay out here with me, but you'll keep a toy inside you."

I desperately do not want to go back into that room, all alone—but I don't want to keep a toy inside of me either. As it is, the one buzzing away inside of me has me feeling like I'm going to come all over again, and I don't know what to make of that. I feel overly sensitive, ready for it to come out.

I bite my lip, tasting him on my tongue. It feels like I'm being set up somehow, like he's giving me a chance to mess up.

"I want to be out here with you," I say after a moment.

Hunter nods, and I have no way of knowing if that was the answer he wanted. He unbuckles my wrists, though, and helps me off the chair—and off of that dildo. It vibrates for a few seconds longer, unconstrained by me, before Hunter turns it off.

My legs are weak, and I cling to him just to stay upright. Hunter takes another tissue and wipes my face with it. It's a surprisingly gentle gesture after everything he's put me through.

"Crawl to the sofa," he orders. "Wait there while I get something suitable."

I nod, but I don't immediately release him. He's warm and strangely comforting, and it's with reluctance that I pull away before he sees my desire for comfort as an act of rebellion. I get down on the floor, lowering my head as I crawl to the sofa.

I close my eyes and wait.

CHAPTER 9

Stef

HUNTER ISN'T GONE LONG.

I look up when he returns, holding two items in his hands. One, I recognize—it's a dildo, not too big, but not exactly small, either—but the other one confuses me until he gets closer. I'm not ignorant of most sex devices, and I realize it's some kind of leather harness. Its purpose takes me a moment longer to figure out.

He sets the harness down on the couch next to me and shows me the lubed-up flesh-colored dildo. I eye it, wondering if it's another vibrator, but I shift when he tells me to so he can get it inside. I squirm, the lube and the last traces of my climax making it easy for him to slide it in, and he grabs the harness. He uses the wide base of the dildo to secure it into the leather harness, securing it around my pussy, then my waist to hold it up.

It feels awkward and a little uncomfortable, and I glance up at him, not sure what to make of it.

After wiping his hands with a tissue, he sits down on the couch and pats his lap. "Get up here and lie down with your head on my lap."

I obey again, even though the dildo inside of me rubs against my inner walls and makes me keenly aware of my recent climax. I rest my head in his lap, trying to figure out if I should reach for his cock again to warm it. I decide not to, remembering how he'd told me to keep my hands to myself, and try to relax there.

Hunter picks up a tablet from the side table, and after tapping around on it a bit, he settles in with the tablet in one hand and the other on my head. I swallow hard, tense for a moment, but all he does is stroke my hair gently.

I jolt at first, expecting him to grab and pull or do something remotely demanding, but he doesn't. He just... touches me, and it's somehow more

intimate than the dildo inside of me. I glance up at him, but he's ignoring me as he focuses his attention on the tablet.

I wonder what he's reading. It's hard to see with the tablet in the way, but he moves it enough sometimes that I catch a glimpse of his expression. His brow is furrowed in consternation, and it doesn't seem like he enjoys whatever he's reading.

Part of me wants to ask questions. But he'd been so upset at my slight hesitation, and he said he wanted *total obedience* when he was at home.

That doesn't stop my own mind from wandering... and getting bored. I don't hate his petting, but once I've grown used to the dildo inside me—just don't squirm too much—I wonder if maybe I shouldn't have chosen to go back to my room after all.

I feel strangely ignored.

To keep myself occupied, and from doing something stupid like complaining, I look around the living room. The couch we're on has a firm seat and immaculate white suede cushions. The coffee table is similarly white. The walls are, of course, white. Even the carpet under the coffee table is white. There's a textured pattern, but it's white all the same.

I bet the only reason the TV hanging on the wall isn't white is because they don't sell them in different colors.

It's such a big TV, I wonder why we aren't watching anything right now. What a waste of the curved screen. It must be a 4K TV, and I'd guess it's at least 70 inches. I check the console underneath the TV for a Blu-ray player or movies or...

My eyes widen. There are no movie cases, but there *is* something better.

"Do you play?" I ask, surprised.

Hunter's hand on my head stills. "Play? Play what?"

I point toward the gaming system sitting behind the glass doors. "Video games. That's a current gen system. I'd been saving up for one, but..." I cut myself off. Dylan had pointed out we needed the money for drugs, and I'd agreed with him.

"No," Hunter answers. "I don't play. My nephew set it up, but I've never used it."

"Oh," I say, more than a little disappointed. It could've been something we could talk about. "If you ever decide you want to," I go on, my voice tentative, "I can recommend some games."

Hunter sets his tablet aside and looks down at me. "Aren't these things

for children?”

“No!” I turn a little so I can meet his eyes more easily, squirming when that makes the dildo inside me rub against my walls. “They make so many different games these days. Like... um, what kind of movies do you like? Or books? They have fantasy games, and sci-fi games, and, oh! I played a doctor game once.” I can’t stop myself from giggling a little. “I don’t think it was very realistic. I had to use a laser to burn out virus polyps. And a few bandaids fixed up all the mistakes I made.”

“A... laser?” Hunter looks at me in confusion. “And I don’t consume fiction.”

“Not even a little?” I ask. “Come on, you have to have read the ‘classics,’ at the very least.” I make little quotes with my fingers on the word *classics* because I was never really very impressed by them.

Hunter huffs. “Yes, I read the classics. And I suppose I’ve read the occasional noir novel.”

“Perfect!” I sit up—and stop, halfway up, realizing that I’ve disobeyed him. “Um. That is... If you want. I know a few noir games.”

He glances at his tablet, then back to me. I’m ready to lie back down and beg for forgiveness, but he makes a *go on* gesture with his hand. “Fine. But I don’t have any games.”

I hesitate, not sure if I should talk about spending his money. He obviously has a lot of it, if the condo is any indication, but he could be frugal.

Then again, I doubt especially frugal people buy sex slaves.

My thoughts threaten to darken, but I shake it off. “If you don’t want to commit to buying specific games, they have subscription services that let you play a lot of them.”

“I can afford a few games,” Hunter says again. “Just get on with it.”

That sounds like an order, and I’m not going to question this strange generosity. I crawl over to the game system, not wanting to push my luck too far. The movement does mean the dildo shifts inside me, and maybe that’s why he was willing to indulge me in this.

I find the TV remote, turn the TV on, then check to make sure the gaming system is indeed hooked up. Miraculously, even the controller is charged. I crawl back to the couch and kneel down next to him while the system boots up.

“You can buy the games digitally,” I tell him as I navigate to the game store. I use the d-pad to search for the noir game I was thinking of, and

thankfully it's available. You never know with the older games. "You might need to add your... Oh, your credit card is already stored here."

"My nephew must have done all of that," Hunter says. "I remember him begging for my card while he was here."

Out of curiosity, I navigate to the menu to show me the purchased games. My eyes widen when I see five different racing games. "Your nephew really likes cars?"

"Yes. I already know what my brother will get him as soon as he turns sixteen." Hunter gently scratches the back of my head.

I know rich people are different from the rest of the world, but I can't imagine receiving a car for a birthday. My parents hadn't been poor, but they never would've been able to afford even a used car for me. We'd had one vehicle to share, which meant I'd relied on public transportation—something I doubt Hunter Savage has ever done.

"Are you playing a racing game?"

"No, I'm not that into those... If it's okay, I'll get a detective game for you?" I navigate back to the store.

"Get whatever you want." Hunter pauses, then tugs on my shoulders. "Sit next to me."

The order surprises me, and I glance up at him. It's strange to think about sitting next to him, especially when I still feel self-conscious around him. I get up and sit next to him, squirming as the dildo shifts inside of me, then select the noir detective game I'd been thinking of and purchase it. With his wi-fi, it downloads quickly, and I'm soon loading into it.

"Here you go," I say, holding out the controller to him.

Hunter shakes his head. "You play. I'll watch." Then he drops his arm around my shoulder and pulls me closer to him.

I don't know what to make of this behavior. He has me naked with a dildo strapped inside of me, yet he's got his arm around me like we're companions—or lovers, though I quickly disabuse myself of that notion.

I know what I am to him.

I start a new game and watch as the opening movie loads up.

"Are you playing already?" Hunter asks, glancing down at my hands.

"Um, no. This is a cutscene... it's not a playable part. This is the story portion." I squirm a little, unnerved by his sudden intensity. But maybe it's a good thing?

We see a person getting stabbed by a mysterious figure in black, and soon

the game lets me walk around as the hard-boiled detective. “Now I’m playing,” I tell Hunter. “We go around and collect evidence, question suspects, and try to figure out who did it.”

“Couldn’t you just read a book?” Hunter pulls me a little closer and cups my breast. He pinches my nipple, but not particularly hard. More like he’s trying to... distract me?

“I could, but a book would just tell me the path. In the game, I have to try to figure it out myself,” I tell him. “Think of it like a puzzle, or a mental exercise.”

“Hmm.” Hunter rearranges my legs so one of them is over his thigh, forcing me to spread wide. He tugs on the belt a little and shifts the dildo inside me. I do my best to sit still while I direct the detective to talk to different characters, biting my lip to stifle my moans.

“Who do you think did it?” I ask a little breathlessly. It’s been a while since I played the game, so I don’t actually remember, and it’s hard to concentrate while he’s playing with my body like I’m just a doll for him to manipulate.

“The wife,” Hunter answers. “It’s a noir story. It’s always the wife or the lover.”

“We haven’t talked to them yet,” I point out, trying to focus on the game even though it’s increasingly difficult. I’m going slower, and I’m paying less attention to the dialogue. I don’t really know what the witnesses have said, which is going to make the gameplay more difficult later. But when he shifts to tweak one of my nipples again, I let out a quiet whimper.

“Keep playing,” Hunter orders while massaging my breast. “Actually, come sit on my lap, first.”

It takes me a second to parse his order. I’m already half on his lap, but I nod and scoot fully onto his lap. He has my legs spread over his thighs, and he wraps his arms around me. Now he can touch me all over... and he puts that access to good use.

“I... I can’t play like this,” I complain when he tugs on the belt again, causing the dildo to wiggle.

I can’t believe I’m getting turned on again. I’d just come. I haven’t been this wet in months—probably in years.

Hunter sucks on the nape of my neck. “Keep playing. I want to see if I’m right about the wife.”

My laugh turns into a moan when he nips the skin. “It’s going to take

more than an hour or two to solve the case. Especially..." I don't want to point out how distracted I am, because I don't want him to stop.

I don't know what to make of that thought.

He cups both of my breasts with his hands and taps softly on my nipples. "You're not going to get anywhere making the detective walk into a wall." Then he licks the shell of my ear, like that's going to make it easier for me to concentrate.

"Oh," I say, feeling a little stupid as I realize I have, in fact, been trying to make the detective walk straight through the wall. I force myself to try to focus on the game, but even as the dialogue starts, I can't concentrate on it. It's a good thing this is just the tutorial and not something that requires much attention.

Somehow, I make it through more of the game, even though I keep walking the wrong way and selecting the wrong items. I feel Hunter huff softly against my neck, in a way that seems amused.

That's good, right? He's having fun? Even if it's at my expense.

"You need to present the bloody boots," Hunter points out when I get stuck on an interrogation. I have no idea what he's talking about, because he's slipped two fingers under the harness and is massaging my clit.

"B-boots?" My grip on the controller loosens, and I groan as the pleasure builds inside me.

I whine when he pulls his fingers away and taps on the controller enough to have the cursor move down to the right evidence.

"There." Hunter snorts and nips at my shoulder. "I thought you said you knew how to play."

I let out another quiet sound, nearly dropping the controller. "I've never... played like this before." Even Dylan had been too interested in the games—before we'd sold our console—to pay more attention to me than the screen.

"Clearly my way is..." Hunter suddenly trails off, and his grip on my waist tightens. "Wait. That's wrong."

I make a confused sound. "What's wrong?"

"They're arresting the wrong person," Hunter says. "It's definitely the wife. Why are they arresting the neighbor? Those boots weren't the neighbor's."

It takes me a second to realize what he's talking about. "Oh. This is the first case. It's supposed to go wrong. You get the right person later."

Hunter wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me closer. “How long does that take?”

“Uh...” I try to remember how the game went. “Maybe the third or fourth case? That’s hours away.”

He grumbles and pinches my nipple. “Then we’ll play again tomorrow and make them do it right,” he says definitively.

I don’t know why, but his indignation over the case makes me laugh. He’s actually human and not just a weird, emotionless robot.

“What’s so funny?” he asks me.

“I thought you didn’t like fiction,” I find myself teasing him.

Hunter doesn’t say anything for long enough that I worry I’ve insulted him, until he suddenly pushes me onto the couch. I squeak and drop the controller to the floor. Hunter boxes me in, staring down at me with those blue, blue eyes of his.

“Maybe this wasn’t so bad,” Hunter answers, right before he kisses me.

No, I think, this isn’t so bad at all.

I can feel his erection through his pants, but he doesn’t move to take the dildo out of me. He even stops groping me, instead focused solely on kissing me until I’m breathless. I don’t know what to make of it, but after only a few minutes, I stop caring.

It just feels good.

I keep expecting him to go back to touching my nipples, to caressing my breasts, but he just continues to kiss me. I don’t remember the last time I just made out with someone. None of the customers at Ntimacy wanted to kiss, and I wouldn’t have wanted to kiss them either. And with Dylan... Well, he’d just wanted to fuck and get it over with, whether I was ready for it or not.

Right now, I’m more than ready for it. I’m even eager for him to unhook the harness and pull the dildo out so he can take me properly, and I arch my hips in supplication.

He doesn’t do that, though, and I can’t figure out why.

I try to make myself as loose and open for him as possible, and I groan into his kisses. When I attempt to wrap my arms around his shoulders, he takes my wrists and places them flat on the couch again.

“Shh,” he says, nibbling at my lower lip. “Just relax.”

I am relaxed, surprisingly so, but I find that I want the intimacy of it all.

In a way, it feels like a rejection that he doesn’t want me to do anything more than lie here and kiss him, but I don’t let that show. Instead, I give him

what he seems to want, even though I'm not sure I'm doing the right thing.

I can feel his erection against my thigh, but he doesn't grind against me. When I lift my thigh just a little to stimulate it, he raises his pelvis away and pushes my thigh back down.

He really wants to simply kiss me.

My mind is whirring in confusion as I give into it, forgetting about attempting to please him. Maybe I can pretend that he actually likes me, and he enjoys spending time with me.

When was the last time any man actually liked *me* though?

I bury that thought before I start tearing up again. I want to just drift away on these dreamy, soft sensations.

When Hunter pulls back, I whimper in disappointment. My lips feel swollen from all the kissing, and I'm throbbing with need.

"I think it's time for bed," Hunter says, getting off the couch. He turns the system and the TV off, then looks down at me. "You can sleep at the foot of my bed, or you can sleep alone. But you won't see me in the morning if you sleep alone."

I realize I don't like the idea of sleeping alone and waking alone, and I quickly say, "I'll sleep at the foot of the bed." It's strange, the idea that I'm some pampered pet. I don't really want to sleep like a dog, but it's better than the alternative.

Hunter nods in what I think is approval. "Then come along. Let's get you chained up for the night."

He heads off toward his bedroom, not even waiting for me to obey—because he simply expects that obedience.

He's going to get it, too, because as uncomfortable as I am with the dildo inside of me—as much as I hate this arrangement—I'd rather have his praise than his displeasure. I follow him into the room, taking cautious steps that make the dildo shift inside of me and bring unwelcome pleasure. I wait for him to motion to the foot of the bed before climbing up onto it, offering out my wrist for him to chain.

Hunter doesn't smile, but he says, "good girl," and I inhale at the sudden warmth I feel in my chest.

I'm not actually his pet, I remind myself. I'm not supposed to care what he thinks of me.

But maybe it wouldn't be bad if he liked me, just a little.

CHAPTER 10

Hunter

MY PHONE DINGS with a new email when I'm on the elevator. It's to my work address, and since it's after hours I should just ignore it, but sometimes I can answer a patient email in five minutes.

I don't recognize the sender, though, and the subject is simply "Question about procedure."

It's probably spam, but I open it anyway.

*Dear Dr Savage
I heard u like skinny girls
who cry a lot
and suck dick like they were paid to do it
and can't ever leave*

Underneath that message is a photo of me entering Ntimacy via the back entrance.

I force myself to keep breathing evenly. This is a toothless threat. The sender doesn't even specify something they want.

But somehow, they know about Stef and Ntimacy.

I screenshot the message, then delete it. I know I should probably see if any of my tech-minded friends can trace it, but then I would need to acknowledge that I'd bought Stef.

I know two people who wouldn't care either way, but the humiliation of asking for help over something so minor has me balking at the idea.

If I ignore it, whoever it is will get bored.

The elevator finally arrives at my floor, and I put my phone away. It's

time to enjoy a nice, quiet evening with Stef. Maybe we'll finish her game, too. There are only two cases left. She's adorable with how into the game she gets.

She's extra adorable when she's flushed red with arousal while trying to direct her detective in the right direction.

Maybe tonight I'll have her wear the nipple clamps while we game, and I'll chain them to her wrists so every time she moves her hands, she'll tug on her nipples. That sounds like a plan.

I change out of my work clothes, then head into her room.

"Stef," I say by way of greeting, and I stop short. She's already sitting up, eyeing me desperately.

"M-master," she says, and she hesitates only briefly before getting out of the bed. She crawls over to me, kissing my feet. "Thank you for... Um..." She blinks, and she looks up at me like she can't remember the rest of a very simple set of words.

"For taking you in," I prompt, biting back the annoyance.

"Right," she says, nodding slightly. She stares back down at my feet. "Thank you for taking me in. I..." She hesitates, then hedges, "I've... I've been good, right?"

I narrow my eyes at her but nod curtly. "Yes."

"Do you think I could... maybe..." She doesn't look up at me as she asks all in a rush, "have just one little teeny tiny hit just once?"

It takes a second for the question to register, but once it does, the rage overwhelms me. She's asking for drugs? After I'd gone through so much trouble to get her clean?

I sneer at her, and she flinches. "Why would I let you poison yourself again? No. There are no opioids in my condo anyway, so it's no use asking."

"But you could get them," Stef presses, looking at me with tear-filled eyes. "Please, Master, just once. Just once, that's all I'm asking. It's been..." She fights back a sob. "Just please."

All my plans for a nice, quiet evening together are out of the question now. I grab her arm and force her to stand. She sobs and averts her gaze.

"I was going to let you play more of your game tonight," I tell her coldly, "but you've ruined it. Come on."

I pull on her arm and she stumbles, but I don't care.

How dare she? How dare she try to undo all my hard work, try to harm herself again.

I don't even understand it. She'd done so well the night before. What had happened during the day to make her go from bright-eyed and anticipating her game to this mess of a creature who wants nothing more than to get high again?

I drag her into my bedroom and toss her onto the floor.

Stef yelps, trembling as she curls up into a ball. "I'm sorry," she chokes out. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean... I'm sorry!"

"You are *never* going to get high ever again," I tell her, fighting to keep control of myself. "Now get on the bed, on your back, and grab your ankles. Spread wide."

She looks up at me with wide, terrified eyes, struggling to get up to her feet. She manages it after a moment, but it feels like she's taking forever just to spite me. She stumbles toward the bed, still sobbing, and gets on it.

For a moment, though, she just lies there, curling up again instead of grabbing her ankles like I'd ordered her to do.

"Did you not hear me?" I ask in a curt tone. "Have you gone deaf as well as stupid?"

"I'm not... I can't..." Her words are barely audible over her sobbing, and she buries her face in her hands. "Please don't hurt me."

"What did I tell you about my expectations?" I turn to my dresser and open the drawer with the sex toys. I find the nipple clamps I'd meant to use today and a set of manacles.

"I don't... I don't..." She's wheezing, and she presses her hands against her eyes, shaking her head. "Please, I'm sorry."

"Sorry? You already know how I feel about drugs. You're provoking me on purpose." I walk back to the bed and glares at her. "Last chance. Grab your ankles and spread your legs, before I do it for you."

"I'm not!" Stef says, looking up at me with tears streaming down her cheeks. "I'm not, I promise, I just, I don't—" She starts to spread her legs, then seems to remember to grab her ankles, and she ends up looking confused for a moment as she tries to process everything at once.

I cuff her wrists to her ankles, all while she cries. The tears look good on her, but I'm too annoyed over the entire situation to truly appreciate them.

I want her to be crying because of what I've done, not because she's going through some psychosomatic withdrawal.

She tries to tug at her wrists, but she can't move now. "Please don't do this to me," she whimpers. "I've been so good. I've been good. I just asked..."

I just asked a question.” She hiccups.

“You *were* good,” I growl, “until you let your addiction supersede your common sense.” I massage one of her nipples until it perks up, then snap the clamp on it. Stef gasps and whimpers.

I repeat this with her other nipple, then tug on the two long chains, watching her nipples extend a little before I loosen my hold on the chains again.

It takes her a moment to figure out what I’m doing, and when she does, her watery eyes go a little wide. “Please, Master, I—” She squirms, and it tugs at her nipples. She lets out a strangled, startled sound.

Part of me relaxes when I hear her noises. This is what I wanted from her. I tug once more on the chains, drinking in her whimpers, before I attach each end of the chain to the wrist manacles.

The chains are long, but there’s not a lot of slack. When I push on her thighs, it causes the chains to pull on her nipples again.

Stef cries out again, and it goes straight to my groin. “Master...” She tries to curl in on herself, but she realizes soon enough that no matter how she moves, it’s going to put pressure on her pert nipples.

“I’m going to spank your pussy,” I tell her steadily. “You will apologize after every one and thank me for it. How many do you deserve, for insulting all the hard work I’ve done on you?”

“I... But...” She looks up at me, so much pleading in her eyes, and there’s also genuine confusion.

“Because that’s what you did, with your asinine question,” I tell her. “I’ve been working hard to get you healthy and clean, but you decided that was worth nothing. So tell me, how many times do you deserve to be spanked for this insult?”

“I didn’t do it on purpose!” she pleads. “I don’t... I...” She slumps down a little, as though finally understanding that her actions have consequences. “I don’t know.”

I’m a little disappointed she didn’t give me a number, but it’s not going to stop me from carrying out the punishment. “Ten, then.”

The first slap is light, but she jolts anyway, her wrists pulling at her nipples and eliciting another few mewls from her in pain and protest. Her face is messy from tears and mucus, and she should look entirely unappealing... but this is exactly what I want her to look like.

I just want the cause to be something different than her stupidly asking

for more of the poison that got her into this situation to begin with.

“Do you remember what I told you to do?” I ask her, lightly stroking the folds of her pussy. It’s warm to my touch, and I can already imagine how heated it’ll be after another few slaps.

“Y-yes,” she whimpers. “You want me to... to... I’m sorry for insulting you, and, um... Thank you for... for correcting me?”

“Good girl,” I say, pleased that she was able to remember that much. I bring my hand down again, harder than last time.

She jerks and makes another few distressed sounds, and this time... This time, her sobs are all for me. I can enjoy them now, especially as she says, “I’m sorry for being ungrateful. I... Thank you for... for disciplining me.”

I nod in approval and brush my knuckles over her cunt before lifting my hand and spanking her once more. I watch how her body jerks, and the clamps pull at her nipples. The skin around them is deepening in color, bruising from the abuse.

She squirms and writhes, but it does her no good. She only makes it worse for herself, even as she babbles her apology and subsequent thanks for the slap.

I do the next two in quick succession, barely giving her time to apologize and thank me between them. Her pussy is hotter now, and I can feel it throb under my touch.

Her tears flow freely, too, and she sobs with every word.

I increase my force for the next several blows, and she cries out desperately after each one.

“S-sorry,” she slurs, “and... thank you...”

Not as coherent as before, but it’s fine. I brush the back of my hand over her tear-stained cheeks and smile.

“One more,” I tell her, “and then I’ve forgiven you. Do you want that?”

It seems to take a moment for the words to sink in, then Stef nods. “Y-yes. Yes, p-please forgive me.”

I raise my arm. Stef tenses and sobs, squeezing her eyes shut.

I bring my hand down on her pussy in a light slap.

She lets out a startled little sound, not as intense as the others, and looks up at me as she chants her apology and thanks. She sounds out of it, and her entire body is trembling as she takes the blow and tries not to twitch too much from it.

“Good girl,” I say. “You’re done.” I move to unbuckle her wrists and

ankles from each other, and I have to stop her from moving her hands too much and putting tension on the nipple clamps. I unhook the chains, then cup her breasts. “Now, sit up and give your master a hug.”

Shuddering, Stef obeys, though her motions are sluggish. She reaches out to hug me and ends up clinging to me. I let her, even wrapping an arm around her in turn for a moment before I pull back.

She whimpers, but I ignore her as I unfasten the nipple clamps. She lets out pained sounds, for all that she tries to bite them back, as blood rushes back into her nipples.

I pull her into my lap, and only once she’s straddling me do I realize that I’m hard. I ignore my cock and stroke her hair while she sobs into my shoulder.

“There you go,” I murmur. “You know I only want what’s best for you.”

She doesn’t respond to that for a moment, simply crying against me. Finally, she whispers, “I know. Thank you for... for teaching me a lesson, Master. Please, I...” She shivers and looks up at me with her red, red eyes from so many tears cried. “Can I thank you properly?”

I incline my head at her. “How would you do that?”

“I can...” She swallows hard, nuzzling into my shoulder again and kissing me through my shirt. “I can suck you or... Or I can ride you? I can make you feel really... really good.”

I suppress a small groan. I don’t think she truly wants me, not yet, but I should reward her for this. I should let her associate my cock with comfort, so she’ll come to crave me.

“You may ride me,” I tell her with a small nod. I reach down and slide my fingers between her folds, and I’m surprised to find it slick. I thought she would need lube or warm-up, first.

“Th-thank you,” she says, and she sounds a little surprised. She squirms on my lap, then shifts so she can get to my pants.

Her slim hand on my cock sends a thrum of arousal through me. I move so it’s easier for her to line up, and she casts me another odd look before getting into position.

I stroke her back as she lowers herself onto my cock. I let out a soft groan at the slick warmth, and she gives an answering whimper as she bears down on me. She rests her hands on my shoulders, and as she stabilizes herself, I reach out to tweak her nipples. She gasps, writhing atop me.

“Shh,” I say soothingly. “Enjoy yourself. You’re good now.” I lean down

to lick one of her pert, abused little nipples, and I feel her shudder around me. Her fingers tighten around my shoulders, and she tilts her head back.

“I will be,” she whimpers. “I’m sorry I... I’m sorry I disappointed you.”

“You’re forgiven,” I say before taking one of her nipples into my mouth. She cries out and her cunt tightens. I put one hand on her ass and guide her to ride me properly.

She doesn’t need much guidance. Though she’s still a little slow and languid from the aftermath of the spanking, she knows what she’s doing.

I want to draw this out, but I know I won’t last. I’ve been waiting to sink into her since the first day I’ve had her. But I can’t stand the idea of her not enjoying it just as much as I am, so I reach between her legs again and place my fingers on her clit.

“Keep going,” I say, before moving to tease her other sensitive nipple.

Stef bites her bottom lip but nods, lifting herself and settling down, over and over again. She leans back a little to give me proper access to her clit, and gradually, her noises get louder and louder.

When she convulses around me, sharing her climax with me, I groan and suck harder on her nipple. The poor nub is swollen and elongated in my mouth, and I nibble on it even as she cries out in pleasure.

The ripples of her cunt pulsing draw my own orgasm out of me, and I hold her tight while I release into her. Stef gasps and digs her fingers into my shoulders.

“Good... good girl,” I murmur, not letting her get off my lap, even after my orgasm subsides. “Good girls get rewards.”

She buries her face against my neck, nuzzling me with desperation. “I’ll be good,” she promises. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t good earlier.”

I stroke her back and let her take comfort from me, nodding in approval. “Just keep that in mind. Now. Would you like to play your game some more?”

“I...” She looks up at me, searching my expression. “Yes. Please. If that’s... if that’s all right, Master.”

“I wouldn’t have suggested it if it wasn’t.” I kiss the side of her mouth gently. “I’m only doing all of this to help you, Stef. Everything I do is for your own good.”

She lets out a shuddering breath, nodding to me. “I... I know.” She sounds uncertain, but she’ll realize it soon enough. It’s better for her this way, even if the lessons are sometimes painful.

CHAPTER 11

Stef

FOR ALL THAT Hunter tells me he's doing this for my own good, I don't really believe him. How can I, when he leaves me miserable and alone for days on end?

I've been trying—really, really trying—to be perky and adoring and blindly obedient, but my thoughts won't leave me alone. I miss Dylan. I miss my parents. I even miss Ntimacy, where I'd had company throughout the day. Maybe it hadn't been good company for the most part, but... I'd had a friend there. I'd had Vanessa, who'd been going through her own private hell.

She hadn't understood, I knew that much. But she'd tried to be a friend anyway.

Now? Now, I'm just trapped in this room all the time, only let out like a dog to please her master in the evenings and sleep at the foot of his bed at night.

It's hard not to resent him.

It's hard not to want to escape all of this by any means necessary.

It's not that I make the decision to disobey. It's not a conscious thought. But when he comes home, when I hear him moving around, I just... can't bring myself to care. I don't want to get punished, but if he's so determined to leave me alone, he can just do that.

Even though I hear him moving around in the other room, I just curl up more tightly in bed, burying my face in the pillow. It's not a lie to say I don't feel good, even if most of the pain is mental and emotional, rather than physical.

Hunter opens the door, letting in light from the hallway. I debate going over to him and doing the usual song and dance, but what's the point? I don't look up at him, curling up more tightly into the covers. Maybe he'll think I'm

sleeping and leave me alone. Maybe we won't have to have yet another exhausting exchange.

I doubt it.

"Stef," he hisses sharply. "Get up."

I whimper, unsurprised by the harshness of his voice and the immediacy of the order, and for a moment, I'm tempted to get up and play pretend. But I'm so damn *tired*, and my limbs ache, and really...

I just don't want to.

"I don't feel good," I mumble into the pillow. He never seems to mind leaving me alone during the day. Why is the evening any different? What's he going to do, close the door and leave me alone all over again?

"You'd feel better if you'd actually eaten," Hunter says harshly. "Now get up and do what's expected of you."

I think about the snacks he'd left on the bedside table, but they don't appeal to me. Finger foods, things that can sit out all day without causing problems—peanut butter crackers, fruit, and whatever else he'd left today. Maybe if he left out something appealing... But no. I wouldn't have eaten even a candy bar the way I'm feeling today.

The sense of wrongness goes down to my core, and I just want to disappear. "I can't," I whisper. "Please, I'm sorry, but I *can't*. I don't... I don't feel good." I know repeating the words isn't going to help, but I don't know what else to say.

"You know how I feel about disobedience," Hunter snaps. He stalks over to my side, each footstep thumping hard against the wooden floors. I tense up, but that doesn't stop him from grabbing the covers and pulling them off me. "Have I been too lenient? Did you think I was *gentle*? Is that why you're rebelling now?"

I let out a whimper, still trying to curl into the fetal position to protect myself as much as I can—which isn't much. I'm naked and alone except for this madman who thinks he's trying to save me from myself... yet doesn't care about me at all.

"I just... Please... Master..." I choke on the words, and for the first time, I do feel a shred of a desire to disobey. No, he hasn't been lenient, gentle, or kind. But maybe it's better I see him for what he really is.

A monster.

"This is your last chance to do as you're told," Hunter says. "Otherwise the punishment will be even more severe."

I sniffle. Everything comes with a punishment. Even if I obey now, he's still going to punish me. There's nothing I can do now, no matter how despondent and miserable I am, to fix this.

Is it even worth obeying now?

Shaking, I slowly get out of the bed, stumbling over to him and kneeling in front of him. I know the words, but I don't want to say them. I don't want to thank him for taking me in. I don't want to be here. I can hardly believe it, but I'd rather be back at Ntimacy.

There must be something wrong with me. At least I'm not fucking three different guys a night here! At least I sometimes get to play video games and relax.

But my skin crawls when I think about how Hunter is trying to make me depend on him, how he's trying to take away all my choices. Even at Ntimacy I was allowed to choose what I wanted to wear for a dance routine. I got to choose my makeup. I got to choose not to be fucking perky and happy all the time.

I got to choose to be high and to escape my thoughts and to not think about the pit I've fallen into.

I glance up at Hunter, and all I see are those ice-cold eyes and that expression that judges me for all of my failures.

"Thank you for taking me in, Master," I chant, my voice dull and disinterested in the words even as I utter them. He wants obedience, and this is the best I can give him while I'm drowning in depression.

It won't be enough for him.

It never fucking is.

Hunter makes a disappointed sound, and I hate how I instinctively tense up.

"I was going to do a medical exam on you today," he says. "And if I was pleased with your progress, I would have allowed you to choose a movie. But I see that's not in the cards tonight." He shakes his head. "Get up. I'm going to get your vitals anyway, and we'll see what you deserve after that."

There's a part of me that wants to get snarky with him, that wants to tell him that choosing a movie isn't the reward he seems to think it is. But what's the point? He's already angry at me, and nothing I do is going to make this better.

Maybe I could get on my knees, beg for his cock, beg for forgiveness... but I just don't have the energy to do it. After all I've done for so long here, I

just *can't*.

It takes me a moment to muster up the energy to pull myself to my feet. Everything feels heavy, sluggish, and it's like my body isn't receiving the messages my brain is sending to it.

Then he hisses sharply. "What did you do to your arm?"

My arm?

I blink at him, not even sure what he's talking about until I follow his gaze down to my arm. Huh. I don't know when I started scratching at my arm, let alone when I brought blood to the surface in a few places, but I apparently had. I put my hand self-consciously over the spot, not wanting him to see it and judge me even more.

"Why did you do that? I trust you enough not to chain up your arms." Hunter's voice is brittle with anger.

I take a step back, wanting so badly to escape his judgment, even though I know there's nowhere to go. "I don't... I don't remember doing it," I whisper, tears starting to roll down my cheeks. "I'm sorry. I'm... I'm..."

"Don't remember doing it? You aren't a child. You have more control over your body than that. And you choose to scratch yourself up like some sort of animal. Do you even want to get better?" Hunter reaches out for me, and I instinctively take a step back.

I know it's a mistake, but my head is beginning to fuzz up.

Do you even want to get better?

I feel like I'm back home again, facing my parents as they berate me for the choices I've made.

"No," I say, then I burst into tears.

Getting better hurts too much.

"So you simply enjoy being a waste of space and a drain on society's resources. Ruining your body and mind for a pointless, temporary high that fixes nothing," Hunter answers sharply.

I hunch my shoulders, hugging my arms against my chest. I don't know what to say to that. Yes, I want to get high; no, I don't want to be a burden.

I hadn't been a burden at Ntimacy, had I? I'd earned money for Giulio... when I hadn't been chasing off clients because of my tears and misery.

I really am just a fucking waste of space.

Hunter sighs and puts his hands on my shoulders. "This is why you need me to take care of you. You aren't willing to do it yourself. Starving yourself, harming yourself, chasing after drugs..."

I flinch, though whether it's from the touch or the words, I don't even know. I don't know what to say, what to do. He's just going to hurt me, to punish me, and I can't stop it. I'm just a *thing* to him, some pet project, and I'm never going to be what he wants.

It's just going to be one day of isolation followed by another, with the only highlights in my day being a chance to play a video game here and there.

"You keep telling yourself that," I mumble, unable to keep the bitter words from escaping my lips. It's the first spark of life I've felt all day, even though I know snarking at him isn't going to make any of this better. He'll just see it as more disobedience and pile more and more punishments onto me because no matter what I do...

It's never enough.

Not for him, not for anyone.

"Excuse me?" Hunter squeezes my shoulders threateningly. "Do you want to repeat that?"

I don't look up at him.

"You're trying to make yourself out to be a martyr," I say, suddenly exhausted and finding it impossible to care about what I'm saying. "But you love that I can't take care of myself." I can't help but laugh, for all that there's no humor in the sound. "That's why you wanted *me*. Giulio knew it, too. You wanted someone helpless, someone who wouldn't fight back. Someone who would just obey and cry because I don't know *how* to fight back."

But I guess I'm fighting back now, aren't I?

For a split second, Hunter loses his icy cool and glares at me with unabashed anger. I don't know why that feels like a victory. I've actually broken through his barrier and made *him* feel something, for a change.

"I see." He grabs my wrist and starts pulling me out of the room without any preamble. "I suppose this is your attempt to manipulate me, then. What kind of punishment do you want? More spanking? Should I bind you so you can only just barely touch the floor? Or perhaps you're hoping that I'll stuff your pussy and get you to the edge of orgasm."

I stumble along behind him, and honestly, I don't know how he can possibly be so delusional. "I don't want to be punished, and I don't want you to touch me. I just want you to leave me alone."

"I can absolutely do that." He brings me to his bedroom and pushes me

toward the bed. “Lie down. Hands behind your back, legs together.”

And he just fucking walks to his drawer of toys, as if sure that I’m going to obey him.

I stay where I am. He’s going to punish me whether I cooperate or not. Why should I make this any easier for him?

There’s a part of me that wants to bow my head and meekly follow, but it’s not strong enough. I’m just desperate and exhausted and miserable, and I don’t know why I should listen. It’s not going to make this any easier. He isn’t going to change his mind.

Hunter turns around again, his torture tools in hand, and purses his lips when he sees me. “You really want this punishment,” he says with a sneer.

“It doesn’t matter what I want. You’re going to do what you want anyway,” I tell him, but my voice is trembling now. Maybe I am making this worse on myself. Maybe he is just getting more ideas about how to hurt me. Maybe...

I don’t fucking know what to do.

He grabs my wrist again, and I try to struggle against him. I don’t know why. Even when I was in full health, thirty pounds heavier and rested properly, I wouldn’t have been able to fight him off. Now I don’t have a chance.

Hunter snaps a manacle around my wrist and twists my arm behind me. I cry out in pain, and he takes that opportunity to grab my other wrist and slap the other cuff on it. In just a few seconds, he’s bound my hands.

“Stop!” I say, my voice shrill. “I’ll listen!” I should’ve listened from the start. Why had I been so stupid?

He ignores me and scoops me up to drop me on the bed. I remember how he’d bound my wrists to my ankles, how exposed I’d felt with my cunt out like that.

“Please,” I beg, trying to crawl away from him. The best I manage is a pathetic wriggle, and it takes him even less effort to cuff my ankles together.

“You wanted to be alone? I can give you alone,” Hunter says. The menacing tone makes my heart pound faster.

“I—” No, this isn’t what I meant. I just wanted to sleep. I just wanted... I didn’t want what he’s going to do to me now. I know that much. But now that my panic has overwhelmed that depressive haze, I’m all too aware that he can do any and everything he wants to me.

I struggle, but there’s nothing I can do to stop him from placing the

blindfold around my eyes. Once he's stolen my vision, he tilts my head and stuffs something into my ear. He's going to deafen me too.

"No!" I beg. "Please, I'm sorry, I didn't mean it!"

"Yes, you did. And since you've been angling for a punishment all evening, I'll give it to you. I'll show you just what consequences your actions have." Hunter tilts my head the other way, and I have no way to evade the second earplug.

Now I'm blind and deaf. The world is nothing but quiet darkness around me.

I flail, for all that it doesn't do a damn thing.

Something pushes at my lips, and I go still and open up, expecting his cock. Maybe I can please him, and he'll change his mind.

But it's a smooth plastic ball, protruding into my mouth just enough to force my jaw wider. He fastens it around my head, and now I can't even beg.

He's taken everything away from me.

My freedom, my relief in drugs, my sight, my hearing, my ability to speak, my pride, my—

There's nothing left, and if I'd thought I was depressed earlier, it's nothing compared to this utter despondency that races through me.

I let out a muffled cry when I feel him lift me up. His chest is warm in comparison to the coldness of being alone, but I hate not being able to see or even hear where we're going. He can't take me far, though, right?

Unless he plans to return me to Ntimacy like this, blind and bound and silent, to tell Giulio that I couldn't even satisfy someone who likes tears.

For all that I'd wished it earlier, I don't want it anymore.

I can't tell where he sets me down, other than it's on a rug. In the living room, maybe? The dining room? Maybe he took me out of and back into the bedroom. I have no idea.

What I do know is that he lets me go, and steps away, and then I'm truly, completely, utterly alone.

TIME PASSES in a strange blur as I cry, as I feel drool sliding down my chin and onto the carpet beneath me. I must drift to sleep, but I wake up as a foot presses against my side. I jolt awake, opening my eyes, but there's nothing to see but the cloth of the blindfold.

I lean hopefully into that touch... but it's gone again just as quickly. I sob

and curl into myself as much as I can.

IT KEEPS HAPPENING. I feel his hand, his foot, or maybe just a brush of fucking air, and my hopes soar, thinking he's going to release me... only to plummet back down once the touch withdraws.

IT'S TORTURE.

By the seventh or eighth time it happens—I've lost track—I realize he's just doing it to keep me from falling asleep and using that to relieve some of this horrible punishment. I want to ignore it when I feel those footsteps next to me, when that brush of hand or foot wakes me, but I can't. I whimper and whine around the gag, but it's all I can do.

I MOAN at the next touch, a warm hand on my shoulder that forces me onto my back. My arms hurt from the added pressure, but it's more stimulation than I've had in a while.

I barely dare hope... until I feel the fingers against my ear, pulling one of the plugs out.

I shudder as feeling starts to surge back into my limbs.

"Have you learned your lesson?" Hunter asks softly. He doesn't sound mad anymore... but I fully believe he'll leave me like this if he doesn't like my answer.

I nod desperately, trying to say *yes* around the gag, but it only comes out as a garbled noise.

He rubs my lips briefly before unfastening the gag. I take in a shuddering breath and desperately swallow, trying to get some moisture back in.

"Shh. Here," Hunter says, guiding me into a sitting position. His body is so warm, and his arm so steady around me, that I can feel the tears forming underneath the blindfold as relief floods me. Then I feel something against my lips.

It's a straw. I suck eagerly, and cool water flows in. I drink until he takes it away, and while I want more...

I really have learned my lesson this time.

“Thank you, Master,” I whisper hoarsely.

He strokes my hair gently, like he actually cares about me. I swallow another sob.

“I want what’s best for you,” he says, and I think I feel his lips brush against my head. “I want you to be healthy. I want to be able to trust you.”

I don’t believe him, not when he’s willing to do something like this to me, but I’m not going to say that out loud. I’m not going to get snarky. I’m not going to let despair override my common sense. I’m not...

“Thank you, Master,” I repeat, this time a little uncertainly because I don’t know what he expects me to say to that.

“I’m going to release you now. We’ll have a late meal together—you really need to eat—and after that...” He trails a finger down my cheek. “I’ll allow you to sleep in the bed with me.”

“Please, Master,” I say, tears continuing to soak into the blindfold. “Thank you. I’ll be good. I promise.”

“That’s all I want from you.” He removes the blindfold.

I blink and try to orient myself. We’re in the living room, and I’m next to the coffee table. The only light is the small table lamp next to the couch. His tablet is on the side table, but so is one of the controllers for the system.

I’m pretty sure I’d put that away properly the last time we played, but that’s only a fleeting thought.

All I care about is that he’s supporting me, practically holding me, and if I wasn’t bound, I’d be clinging to him. As it is, I bury my tear-stained face against his shoulder the best I can. “Thank you, Master,” I whimper.

He kisses the top of my head before finally unhooking my wrists and ankles from each other. I can’t stop myself from wrapping my arms around him and sobbing softly into his shoulder.

Don’t be grateful, I try to remind myself. It’s his fault I was in that position in the first place.

But the relief I feel to finally be free again, and to have his affection and forgiveness, is almost overwhelming.

“Good girl,” Hunter whispers to me, and I shiver in response.

Those words shouldn’t have such a big impact on me, but they do. I swallow hard, and I hesitate for only a moment before I climb into his lap. I should probably get his permission first, but I kiss his throat frantically in apology. “Please, I need... I need you,” I say, trying to replace the horrible feelings of loneliness with something, anything.

He rubs my back soothingly. "I've got you." He starts to stand, and I whimper at the idea of being separated from him. Thankfully he keeps his hold on me and slowly guides me back to the bedroom. He has me get onto the bed next to him, and I keep my arms around him.

There's a tray of snacks already on the bedside table, and even though I don't want to eat, I let Hunter feed me until I'm full, despite the awkward position.

"Please don't..." I start to say once we're done eating.

"Please don't what?" Hunter asks, and his voice is gentle enough that I risk it.

"Please don't make me sleep away from you." I can feel my eyes start to tear up again.

He kisses my forehead and nods. "All right. You can sleep in my arms."

I shiver, feeling weak with relief. He's not angry with me. He's not refusing me. He's letting me have something new, something so personal, and I... "Thank you, Master," I say fervently, peppering kisses along his cheek and throat. "I won't disappoint you again. Thank you."

"You will," Hunter says, stroking my hair, and I start to tense up because I don't want him to punish me before I've even made another mistake. "But I'll correct you. I'll help you be good."

I nod, closing my eyes, and I let myself relax into his arms as he coaxes me into lying down beside him. "I'll do my best," I promise, but I know I have to do better than that. I have to succeed, because otherwise...

I can't handle another punishment like tonight.

CHAPTER 12

Hunter

STEF'S REBELLION the other night—and the subsequent correction—seem to have stabilized her mood somewhat. She's been eating well, and she's been more enthusiastically obedient. We finished her detective game and are working on some other game now.

It's in the middle of one of these gaming sessions, with Stef sitting with her back against my feet, that my phone buzzes. I pick it up to check the caller out of habit, and huff through my nose when I see the caller ID.

"Stay quiet," I order Stef before I answer the call.

"Hunter! Do you need my stylist to pick out your suit?" my mother asks without preamble.

I swallow my instinctive irritation. "Why would I need that? I have plenty of suits. *Good* suits. I'm not Jacob."

"Well, I've already had a new suit sent to him. I simply meant, if you're going to go with Marilyn—the model, remember?—you should have something to match her dress." My mother shouts something to somebody, which lets me know she's still at her office despite the late hour. Since it's unlikely Congress is going to be in session at nine in the evening, she's either having secret meetings or avoiding my father.

"I told you, I'm not going to go with her. I'll go to the event, but I don't need to make nice with a vapid model just so you can show me off to your friends." It's a lost cause, I know. I rub the bridge of my brow, hoping to stave off the inevitable headache.

I realize then that the TV screen is darkened, and the center displays the word *paused*. When I glance down, I see Stef fully tensed up, although I can't make out her expression from here.

I reach down and stroke her scalp gently. She lets out a soft breath and

leans into the touch, turning to kiss my palm before resting against my hand again.

“And I told you, it looks better if you’re at least courting marriage.” My mother huffs loudly. “I have a flight tomorrow morning. You can meet me for breakfast—no, I already have a breakfast meeting. And I’m seeing Congressman Prentiss for lunch. Can you believe the nerve of that man? Did you see what he said?”

I have not, in fact, been paying much attention to everything all the politicians are saying, but I hmm noncommittally and wait for my mother to finish her tirade.

“I’ll meet you at the venue,” I say when she pauses. “There is no need to introduce me to any women. Focus on finding a husband for Bethany.”

That gets the desired annoyed reaction from my mother. “Why did I send her to that expensive university if she didn’t come back with a husband? But at least your sister is dating. When was the last time you... oh, never mind. I got the email I was waiting for. Don’t be late!”

She hangs up on me, which at least saves me the trouble of figuring out how to end the call. I set my phone aside and sigh once more.

Stef tilts her head to look up to me, resting her head against my knee. “Is... everything all right?” she asks gingerly, looking at me with a guarded expression on her still too-thin face.

“Yes. Just my mother.” I stroke her hair and let the movement calm me down a little. “I’ll be going to an event tomorrow evening, but hopefully I can leave after an hour.”

She nods, and she hesitates before asking softly, “Are you going to bring someone with you?”

I can’t read her tone or her expression, and I pause, sliding my hand down to cup her cheek.

“My mother would love that,” I say with a dark chuckle. “Presumably, despite my objections, she will introduce me to one or three ladies she thinks are of good breeding and would make suitable wives for me. My brother went along with that, and I’ve seen how miserable he and his wife are.”

Stef pauses again, then she says, “I... I could go with you.”

My hand stills, and I look down to meet her eyes. “What? Why would you come with me?”

She shifts uncomfortably. “If your mother thinks you’re... with someone, wouldn’t she leave you alone a little? I mean, she’d disapprove of me,

obviously, but I could play pretend for an hour or so.”

I consider her proposition. I should say no. She’s right that my mother wouldn’t approve. I also have that strange email to consider, the one threatening... something. There hasn’t been a follow up email, so I’ve mostly put it out of my mind, but it feels like taking her out of the condo would be a bit risky.

On the other hand... I could dress Stef up. She’d probably need to use a lot of make-up, because despite her improved health, she still has a slightly wan complexion, but she’s doing better than before.

It could be a test run.

“You expect me to trust you?” I ask, keeping my voice as toneless as I can. “I have no guarantee you won’t cause trouble once we’re outside.”

Stef lets out a humorless laugh. “Vanessa tried to escape, you know. Ran straight to the police. Know what happened?” She meets my eyes. “They brought her back. She... I...” She takes a deep breath. “There’s nothing else for me. What am I going to do? Tell everyone you bought me? They’d think it was a bad joke anyway.”

“You’d be laughed out of the building,” I agree with her. “I have powerful friends. Lawyers, judges, politicians, law enforcement, and of course Giulio.”

She shudders, nodding.

Do I trust her not to create a scene? If she goes to the police, there’s no problem at all. If she starts screaming bloody murder in the middle of a fundraising event with hundreds of people with cell phones, not to mention the gathered press, though...

But she’s a drug addict. Her arms still have track marks on them. And I’m a doctor—I could easily discredit her.

“You obey me while we’re there,” I say, realizing that I’ve already made up my mind. “You do not speak to anyone without asking me first.”

Stef swallows hard. “What if... What if they ask me a question?”

I frown at her. “You answer it as simply as you can. Beyond that, you remain at my side. You will not drink alcoholic beverages. You will not say anything that could embarrass me in a personal or professional capacity. Understood?”

Stef looks a little pale. “I... Maybe it’s not such a good idea. I don’t want to f—” She catches herself. “I don’t want to mess up,” she amends.

It’s a test, now. I’ll dress her up and make her look respectable. It’ll be

proof of how good my training is, and I'll enjoy seeing her straining for my approval.

I check my schedule on my phone and note with satisfaction that I only have one appointment I can't reschedule. "We'll go shopping tomorrow," I say. "And go to a salon, to get you cleaned up. Maybe a professional make-up artist too. My mother would notice a half-assed job."

I can tell she's already regretting speaking up, but she nods anyway. "Yes, Master," she says softly. "What do you want me to call you when we're there?"

Master, I want to say, but that definitely wouldn't fly. "You may call me 'Hunter' if we're in the presence of others. 'Sir' if we're alone."

"Yes, Master," she says. She buries her face against my thigh.

I find the website for my regular salon and skip the scheduler to email my usual stylist. She'll get me in for tomorrow regardless of whether there are current openings or not. I ask her for recommendations for a make-up artist as well, and then check which clothing stores are in the vicinity. Normally I would order online, but there isn't time for that.

Stef is tense against me, and I notice her staring at the television. She doesn't start her game again, though, instead waiting for me.

I gently stroke her head again, then stand. I hit the remote for the TV to turn it off.

"Heel," I tell her, heading toward my bedroom.

She follows just behind me, crawling on the carpet, hesitating a few steps behind me. "Where would you like me to go?" she asks demurely, eyeing the foot of the bed but not moving toward it yet.

Much better than she'd been a few days ago. "Over the ottoman, ass as high as you can go," I tell her, and move for my drawer of toys.

I'm in the mood to stuff her entirely full tonight, I think.

Toying with her drives the less pleasant thoughts from my mind for the night.



STEF CLINGS to my arm as we walk down the streets of New Bristol. She's wearing a simple pair of jeans and a sweater, neither of which is particularly flattering on her, but I haven't bought a new wardrobe for her yet. The

sweater is big on her, too, since she hasn't put on enough weight yet.

We have about an hour and a half before the salon appointment, which should be enough time to pick out several dresses for her.

She's a little wide eyed as she looks around, and I doubt she's seen this sort of display of wealth before. I nudge her slightly. She can't gape at all the other guests at the fundraiser, after all.

She startles but looks up at me and bites her lip. "Sorry, Master," she murmurs softly. "It's just that I've never been near so much fancy stuff in my life. I bet even the underwear costs more than I earned in a month at Ntimacy."

"That's very likely," I answer. I don't know how the finances at Ntimacy work, but I can't imagine those girls were paid well—especially not one like Stef.

I bring us to a luxury fashion store that my sister frequents and step inside. Unlike outside, the store itself is quiet, with only faint background music. There are very few other shoppers—just two women whispering to each other by the handbags.

I place a hand on the small of Stef's back just as one of the store clerks approaches us.

"Hello, sir, ma'am," the woman says politely, eyeing Stef askance. "Can I help you find anything today?"

"Yes," I say briskly. "I need cocktail dresses for my companion."

The woman's expression lights up, and I'm sure she's thinking of the commission she'll be earning. "Of course. Right this way."

She leads us toward a smaller section with a small couch and several dresses on racks. She pulls a curtain across the entrance, giving us privacy.

"Do you see anything you like?" she asks me. She barely even looks at Stef. She must be used to people coming in to buy clothes for their partners.

I glance at the dresses on the rack and shake my head before sitting down on the couch. Stef tries to follow me, but I hold my hand up to stop her.

"What would you recommend? I need something that highlights her features properly."

The clerk comes back to us, and she gives Stef a more thorough once over. Stef squirms under the scrutiny, looking to me for direction. I find that I like it, but I gesture for her to stay where she is.

"It's hard to tell with the sweater what size she is, but you probably want something tight. I have a lovely red sleeveless..."

Stef winces, tugging self-consciously on the sweater's sleeves.

"No," I interrupt sharply. "She needs long sleeves. But I agree that a tight dress would look good."

The woman nods, unperturbed by my interruption. "Tight, long sleeves, and short. I have several that would fit." She goes over to one of the racks and pulls a black dress out, holding it up to Stef's body. "The back is open on this one. I'm not sure black is the best color for her though, considering how pale she is. And..." She purses her lips. "It might be helpful if she removed her sweater, just so I know what size I'm looking for."

Panic flashes across Stef's expression, and she starts to shake her head before catching herself. She looks to me again, her eyes pleading with me, but it's clear she'll do anything I tell her—and it's a feeling that goes straight to my cock.

No matter how uncomfortable she is, or self-conscious, she'll do anything to please me.

"That sounds like a good idea," I say, my eyes on Stef. "Take the sweater off. And the jeans, too. You'll have to try the dresses on anyway."

Tears spring to her eyes, but Stef nods to me, obeying wordlessly. She takes the jeans off first, stalling as she folds them carefully and sets them down nearby me. It's like she thinks I'll change my mind if she takes long enough, but I only fix her with a stern look. She wilts visibly, her hands shaking as she pulls the sweater off and folds it next to the jeans. When she's down to her bra and underwear, she looks at me with desperate eyes.

I give her a small nod of approval. She swallows hard, ducking her head and staring down at the floor. She holds herself awkwardly, and I can see she's trying to keep the track marks from easy view.

The clerk circles around Stef, reaching out but never touching her. "Ah, good. I was afraid she was hiding unflattering lines underneath the clothes. But I think she's only a size two. A bit more breast than I expected, but I have dresses that will still be flattering on her."

Stef's cheeks flush in embarrassment, and she fidgets, one of her hands going to touch the marks on the inside of her arms before she catches herself.

Sharp anger hits me when I hear the woman's words. "You will refrain from commenting on my companion's weight."

The woman pauses before nodding. "Of course. My apologies." She holds up the black dress, then shakes her head. "Definitely the wrong color." She puts the dress back and takes two more off the rack, one in red and the other

in purple.

The red one has a slight shimmering sheen to it, and when she holds it up to Stef, I see the wrap design that tightens on one side. It's also short enough that it barely reaches midway down Stef's thigh. After confirming that I've seen the dress, she holds up the purple one. It's a very dark color, with a glittering sequin design going up one side of the dress. The neckline isn't as deep as the red one's, but I can already imagine Stef in both of them.

"Try them on," I order. "And while she's getting dressed, go find matching shoes and purses."

The clerk sets the two dresses on the small table. "Of course, sir. I'll be right back." She goes past the curtain, leaving me and Stef alone.

Stef lets out a slow, shaky breath, sagging in relief. She goes to the table and selects the purple one, unzipping it and pulling it on before coming to me to help her zip it back up. Her expression is uncertain, but she looks considerably more comfortable now that her arms are hidden again.

I trail my hand along her spine before directing her to turn around again. "It looks good on you," I say, admiring the way the fabric clings to her. I sit down again and run my hand up her thigh, and she pauses in the slow spin so I can touch her. "I like how easily I can access you, too."

"I'm glad you like it," she says demurely, though she doesn't give her own opinion of it.

That pleases me, because I don't particularly care whether she likes it. She's learning that she, and her body, are here to satisfy me.

I let go of her and sit back once more. "The next one."

Stef glances in the direction the saleswoman had gone in before turning so I can unzip the dress for her. The red one is next, and while it's not as flattering, she still looks pretty in it—if entirely too thin. My lips purse, and I start thinking of ways to return curves to her body once it's healthier. A wrap dress like this definitely deserves more to fill it.

I cup her breast and squeeze lightly. "I can't wait to see you fully healthy," I tell her, thumbing her nipple through the fabric. The bra is thin enough that I can still see the way it pebbles underneath the dress. "We'll go on a real shopping spree then."

"You don't have to—" she begins, but she catches herself. "Thank you..." Another glance in the direction the woman had disappeared in. "Sir," she finally settles on. I find that I don't like it as much as "master," but she's right in that the circumstances necessitate it.

Then again, I doubt the saleswoman is unfamiliar with women calling their sugar daddies Master.

I let go of her breast and play with the hem of the skirt. This one might be shorter than the purple dress, and I push it up another inch on her thighs. If she bends over, she'll flash everybody.

"Turn around and bend over," I order softly, giving her ass a squeeze.

She obeys with only a beat of hesitation, giving me a display of her underwear. It's tempting to tell her to remove them, but I am aware that we're in a public store.

I run my finger between her folds, and even through the thin panties I can feel how hot she is.

I also hear the clerk's high heels clacking on the marble floor. Reluctantly I guide Stef into standing upright again, then sit down just as the clerk pushes inside.

"I brought a selection," the clerk says, either oblivious to what we were doing or discreetly ignoring it. "Oh, the red looks good on her. In terms of shoes..."

We have Stef try on the various different styles, then the clerk suggests more dresses. All in all, I buy five sets.

Stef looks overwhelmed by the time we're done, and she's hunched over in her oversized sweater to try to hide the thin lines of her body. Her eyes go wide when she sees the total on the payment screen, and I place my hand on her back again as I tap my black card against it.

With our new purchases in hand, I lead us to the salon. The man at the front desk recognizes me.

"Dr. Savage! Penny is just finishing up with her client. Just five minutes," he says, smiling apologetically. He glances over at Stef. "Ooh, and you're the one he booked the last-minute appointment for? I can see why. But don't worry, we'll get your hair in perfect condition."

Stef's cheeks flush red, and she ducks her head. At this rate, I don't know how she's going to function at the gala itself.

She'll figure it out, though. She doesn't have a choice.

"Thank you," she murmurs awkwardly.

Penny pops out then, not even five minutes later, and smiles warmly. "Hi, Dr. Savage." She turns to Stef and gives her an assessing look. "She's the one you mentioned? Hmm. We definitely need to trim the ends. I'll dye it a slightly darker tone, to give her hair just a tad more depth. And we can do

layers to make the hair look a bit fuller...”

We follow Penny into the salon, and Penny even grabs a stool so I can sit next to Stef while she works.

Stef keeps looking to me for direction, but she relaxes slowly when Penny washes her hair and chats with me. It seems to make her more at ease not to be grilled or addressed, and her deference continues to please me. At this rate, she’ll earn a proper reward—a new game, perhaps, and more time to play it.

My phone buzzes, and I pull it out of my pocket, expecting to find a text from my mother. It’s a new email notification, though, and the sender has me frowning.

I shouldn’t, but I click on it.

*hhhhey i went to ur office today but u werent there
i just wanted to talk about S
and her tight cunt
and how much u’ll pay me not to tell anyone about her*

There’s no indication of who he is or how much he even wants. I scowl at the message and close my email. I don’t have time to deal with that now. I really thought the last email had been... an outlier. A prank.

Can I still risk taking Stef to the fundraiser?

I look at Stef, whose hair is starting to take shape properly. The dye was still blonde, but there’s a subtle red hint to it now to make it look bolder. She’s going to look amazing when we’re done here.

I want to show her off. I want everybody to see how much better she’s doing.

She glances at me again and again, until Penny finally chides her and she stays still. She takes subtle clues well, which is something that pleases me. It’s enough to improve my mood, even though that email sits uncomfortably in the back of my mind.

By the time Penny is finished, Stef looks like an entirely different person.

It would be hard to recognize her as the undernourished waif I picked up a few weeks ago.

“I like it,” I tell Penny. “You did good work.”

But I knew she would. That’s why I come here, after all. Penny handles male and female cuts with an equally deft hand, and she has a good eye for what cuts would flatter a person.

I don't ask what Stef thinks of her new haircut. After I pay, leaving Penny a sizable tip, I take us home again. Stef doesn't say anything during the cab ride, but she does keep reaching up to touch her hair.

"Don't ruin the style," I say. "And stop fidgeting."

Stef's shoulders slump, and she nods. She's still for a few minutes, but by the time we're near the condo, she's squirming again.

"If you don't stop squirming, I'll give you a reason to squirm," I warn her, and the idea of it makes me want it. As much as I want her to behave, I want to punish her, too.

Again, she goes still, but she can't maintain it for long.

"Enough," I bark. The cab driver startles, but he knows better than to interfere. "You're not convincing me I can take you anywhere."

"I'm sorry," Stef says, looking contrite. "I'll stay still. I promise."

I somehow doubt that. I mull over what ways I can correct her, and I have a plan by the time we get back to the condo. She doesn't even manage to stay still during the elevator ride up, which is enough to convince me that she needs a lesson.

"Strip," I say as soon as we're through the door. "And crawl to my bedroom." I take the shopping bags with me and walk to the room at full stride, not bothering to wait for her. I know she can't keep up when she's on all fours, but she'll follow.

I set out the dress I want her to wear on the bed, find a matching pair of panties, then go through the drawer of sex toys until I find what I'm looking for.

She doesn't take long to strip down. She keeps her head bowed when she approaches me, staring down at the floor. "I'm sorry, Master," she says. I can hear her swallow hard, then she adds, "It's just so hard to stay still. I'm..." She cuts herself off, likely figuring out that I don't care what her reason is.

"Ass up," I say curtly, "And spread your cunt."

Stef is finally still when she situates herself, leaning down on the floor and propping herself up so she can raise her ass in the air while still being able to spread her labia for me to see.

Her pubic hair is growing back, and maybe I should have gotten her a full-body wax, too, but I wasn't lying to Giulio when I said I didn't like the fully shaved look. I snap on a pair of latex gloves and squat down behind her, pushing against her hole but not going in all the way. She trembles and whimpers softly.

“Obviously I don’t want to mess up your hair right now,” I say while I play with her hole. “But it seems you aren’t capable of paying attention to what matters. So I’m going to give you a reminder of who’s in charge here.”

“I-I know who’s in charge.” Stef whimpers. I can tell she’s trying to stay still, but just like before, it’s too little, too late.

I push my finger inside and rub against her g-spot. Her cunt begins to get wet in response, facilitating my finger sliding even deeper into her. “You will be the very model of composure tonight,” I tell her. “I don’t want to see you fidget, or squirm, or give any indication that you are in any way uncomfortable. Do you understand?”

“I understand,” she whispers, for all that she tightens around my finger as she tries to remain still. “Master.”

The word gives me a small thrill, and it’s a shame I actually don’t want to ruin all of Penny’s hard work. I withdraw my finger, satisfied that she’s wet enough now, and push a small, oval toy inside that makes her gasp and clench. It has a single loop at the bottom for ease of retrieval.

And, more importantly, it’s remote controlled via a phone app.

I stand up, toss my gloves, and pull out my phone to tap open the app. I watch in fascination as her thighs twitch. She lets out a high-pitched sound.

“No moving,” I order. “No matter what happens, you will appear calm and composed. Now get up and get dressed.”

I don’t soften the vibrations.

“I... Master, I...” She whimpers. “I can’t. I can’t stay calm with this inside of me,” she stammers.

“You’re going to have to learn,” I say sternly. “Now, are you getting dressed, or do you intend to go to the fundraiser nude?”

“I’m getting dressed!” she says, getting quickly to her feet. She has to touch the bed to stabilize herself, and her cheeks are already flushed from the sensations. It’s nice to see some color in them.

She pulls on the panties first, biting her lip as she struggles not to react to the vibrator inside of her. The dress is next, and she meekly comes to me to zip it up in the back. I help her with it and smooth the fabric over her shoulders. I’m pleased to note that the vibrator is as quiet as advertised. I can’t hear it even while standing directly behind her.

Stef looks pleadingly at me. “I don’t think I can do this, Master. I... Can I stay here?” she asks, tears welling up in the corners of her eyes.

I place my hand on her hip, steadying her. “You can do this. And it’ll be a

lot more convenient for me if I have a partner. You were the one who suggested this, anyway.”

“I know. I just didn’t...” She bites her bottom lip, and I find myself wanting to take it between my teeth instead. She steels herself, nodding and straightening. She’s trembling, but it could be attributed to anxiety. “Okay. I’ll... I’ll manage.”

“Remember. Calm and composed,” I repeat. I wait another second, before tapping the app on my phone and turning the vibrations off. “Now sit on that stool, hands on your knees, legs apart, while I get ready myself.”

She blanches, but she slowly does as I tell her—about as much disobedience as I’ll accept with her delay. She sits down on the stool and puts her hands on her knees, spreading her legs and giving me another pleading look.

I ignore her while I get changed for the event. I head to the bathroom to wash my face, shave, style my hair, and apply cologne. If I showed up in any state but absolutely impeccable, I’d never hear the end of it.

I don’t particularly care about my mother’s opinion of me, but I don’t want to listen to her lectures. Besides, I wouldn’t want to appear in public in a disheveled state either.

When I return, I check Stef’s posture. “You’re slumping,” I say sharply. “Back straight, chin up.”

She immediately does as she’s told, sitting up straighter and averting her eyes. She doesn’t even try to speak, which pleases me. No backtalk, no excuses—simply obedience.

“Good. Now, let’s get your make-up done, and we’ll head straight to the fundraiser after that.” I extend a hand to her, and she takes it immediately. When she’s standing in front of me, I say, “If I see you squirming or fidgeting, I will turn the vibrator on. Understood?”

Relief floods her expression, and Stef nods quickly. “Yes, Master. Thank you, Master.”

“Good girl,” I say, and I kiss her forehead as a reward.

She blinks, looking startled as she looks up at me, but she offers a shy, seemingly sincere-looking smile.

This evening might not be as tedious as I feared.

CHAPTER 13

Stef

I'VE NEVER BEEN ANYWHERE as fancy as this before, and I can't help but gape, awestruck. Someone like me couldn't even pay to *work* there, let alone accompany a prominent doctor with a sadistic streak to a fundraising event.

But here I am.

I clutch Hunter's arm when he slides it into mine, chanting *don't squirm, don't squirm* over and over in my mind as I try to keep my posture as perfect as I can. I feel like I need to do the thing they do in old-fashioned movies and practice walking with a book on my head to get used to this.

Maybe it's something I'll try, if he ever decides to let me out again.

I glance at him, anxious for some sign that I'm doing at least a satisfactory job of holding it together.

Hunter doesn't even look at me as he leads me through the crowds. It looks like we're heading toward the open bar until somebody says, "Hunter! Finally!"

Hunter stops and turns towards the voice. "Bethany. Hello."

The woman who greeted him is beautiful, with long, dark hair styled into waves. She has very familiar icy blue eyes. Her outfit is gorgeous too, although not anywhere near as tight as mine.

She must be Hunter's sister.

"Mother isn't here yet," Bethany says. "But Jacob and Holly are. Do *not* mention the summer house, by the way. Holly is on a rampage, and she is very certain Grandmother is slighting them on purpose by not having died yet."

I swallow hard, stunned by her words. Do people actually talk like this in the real world? I glance again at Hunter—who ignores me again—and concentrate on staying still even though I'm constantly aware of the toy

inside of me.

“Even if Grandmother died, she wouldn’t leave the house to Jacob,” Hunter says. “And what does Holly need it for? Don’t her parents have that lake house in Maine?”

Bethany laughs a little cruelly. “Yes, but apparently Holly’s sister has been crashing there, on account of that whole alcoholic bender she’s been on, and... see, you miss all the gossip when you skip the family events. Speaking of.” Bethany’s gaze suddenly lands squarely on me. “Who is this?”

I don’t like the attention on me. This petty, arrogant woman belongs to another world, and in that world, people like me are servants—or less. I happen to be much, much less, but I’m not going to say as much.

Still, I don’t introduce myself, instead looking to Hunter. I have a feeling he’ll like the deference, and it suits us both for me to please him.

“This is Stefanie,” Hunter says. “My date for the evening.”

Bethany gives him a knowing smirk. “Yeah? How much did you pay for the evening?”

I blink at her, stunned that she’d make that sort of statement in public.

Hunter lets out a small snort. “Nothing. Don’t confuse me with Jacob. It’s more of a surprise he’s here with Holly at all.”

The words make me go a little wide-eyed. How can people talk so casually about people purchasing the services of other people and... well... I can’t help but think no one here would think anything of my plight even if I tried to tell them.

“Mother invited both of them, that’s why.” Bethany looks at something past my shoulders and waves. “There she is.” She pulls out her phone to look at the time. “Wow, only twenty minutes late.”

Hunter’s brows crease. “Is her speech early? Or...”

For some reason, Bethany starts giggling. “No, I see now why she was on time-ish. Hi, Mother. Lovely to see you.”

Hunter’s mother approaches us, but she isn’t alone. There’s a man with her, much too young to be Hunter’s father, as well as a gorgeous woman around my age. There’s something familiar about the woman, but I can’t really place it.

“Hunter, Bethany!” Their mother opens her arms for an embrace, although they barely touch each other. The air kisses are a good six inches apart. When the greetings are done, she steps back and motions to the woman. “Hunter, I told you about Marilyn? She is just as passionate about

healthcare for children with terminal diseases. And..."

Finally, she seems to notice me. I try to step away from Hunter, but he keeps a firm grip on my arm.

"You didn't say you were bringing somebody," Hunter's mother says in a brittle tone.

Hunter snorts. "In fact, I did. Mother, this is Stefanie. Stefanie, this is my mother, Senator Constance Savage."

I don't know if I'm supposed to speak, but I do know I'm not going to do any of those pointless air kisses. I don't belong to the class of people who do them, and I don't want to get close to them. "Hello, Senator," I say politely, making sure I stand up straight. My voice trembles a little, but I try to hold it together—and the nerves have nothing to do with the toy inside of me and every bit to do with the intimidating woman in front of me. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

The look she gives me implies that I might as well be gum stuck to the bottom of her shoe.

"Yes, charmed. Anyway, Hunter. Marilyn was telling me about the charity drives she does on her social media, the mypages or whatever—"

"It's on Instagram," Marilyn interrupts. "I've just always thought, since I have such a huge following, it's my duty to use that for good. And I know what it's like to be a sick child—"

Suddenly, it clicks where I know her from. She's a model, one I've seen in makeup ads. My friends and I used to browse websites looking for makeup tips and new looks to try out, and she'd been the spokesperson for one of the brands.

"Oh, it's cute that you do that," Bethany says after Marilyn has finished explaining her whole charity drive. "Everybody needs a hobby. Stefanie, what line of work are *you* in?"

My thoughts flee from my head, and I find myself going completely blank. We didn't discuss this. I don't have a job. I don't have interests I've been able to pursue except for gaming, and I doubt they'd be impressed by me sharing a hobby instead of some line of work. Then again, I bet Bethany is a trust fund baby who's barely worked a day in her life.

Or maybe I'm being unfair.

I look at Hunter, trying not to let the panic show on my features as I work through my thoughts.

"Stefanie is auditioning for plays at the moment," Hunter says smoothly.

“Bethany, weren’t you friends with one of the directors of...”

“So she’s a waitress,” Senator Savage interrupts. “I suppose that would be the only place you’d meet people. In that case, Stefanie, do be a dear and get all of us a glass of wine. I’m sure you have a lot of practice balancing drinks on a tray.”

I hate this woman, and I’ve only just met her. Condescending *bitch*, I can’t help but think, but I try to keep my expression as open and pleasant as I can even though I want to tell her to get her own fucking drink.

“I...” I glance at Hunter again, feeling so helpless because we didn’t go over any of this. He’d told me not to leave his side, but I guess I’d been so stupid to think I could accompany him anywhere. I feel even smaller by the second.

“Here, I’ll go with you,” Marilyn says. “You’ll need more hands anyway. White wine for everybody?”

“That would be lovely, yes,” Bethany says. “It’ll give me time to chat with my brother and mother in private, anyway. And... Oh, I forgot you were there too, Ethan.”

The man, whom I’d almost forgotten about, sighs. “I’m just here to keep Senator Savage on track. You have about fifteen minutes before the speeches. Doctor Savage, did you get the one we sent you?”

Marilyn takes my hand and starts dragging me towards the bar. I expect Hunter to stop me, but he doesn’t do anything. I can’t help but feel betrayed. It’s like he’s thrown me—a tiny fish—into a shark tank, and he expects me to somehow survive. I’m uncultured, below middle class, and I have no place here.

I want to burst into tears, but I somehow keep control. I stay quiet, though, as Marilyn leads me toward the bar.

Once we’re well clear of the Savages, Marilyn sighs loudly. “Christ, what a bitch. Sorry they all treated you like that.”

I look at her, surprised, but I can’t be sure it’s not a trap. I don’t know what to say, so I shrug. My shoulders have slumped a little, but when I realize it, I stand straighter again. I’m already a mess. If Hunter turns the vibrator on, I don’t know what I’ll do.

“It was fine,” I demur.

“It’s not. She looks down on me, too. The only reason she even wanted to invite me is because she hopes I’ll tell my online audience to vote for her.” Marilyn shakes her head in disgust. “Did you hear how she talked about this

event? Like fundraising for child healthcare doesn't matter."

I still can't tell if she's faking it, and I don't think I'm going to be able to. I bite my lip, trying to think for a moment as we make our way through the crowd toward the bar. "It probably doesn't matter to her," I say quietly, but that's the most negative thing I intend to say about any of the Savages.

We get to the bar, and Marilyn places the order for six glasses of wine.

"Wait," I say quickly. "Just five. I only want water." Hunter was perfectly clear on me not drinking.

Marilyn gives me a look. "You want the wine, trust me. There is no way to put up with this crowd otherwise."

I shake my head, trying to figure out how to word this without looking like a total idiot. There's no real way to do it, though, and I sigh. "Hunter wouldn't like it if I drank. He's... um..."

Marilyn's perfectly plucked eyebrows go up. "He's a controlling dickbag? You *definitely* want the wine, then." She picks up one of the wine glasses and forces me to take it, then clinks her glass against it. "Cheers. Let's get through this and help redirect all these people's funds to a better cause."

I find that I like her a little—or at least, I like the persona she's pulling off. If she's being genuine, I could've been friends with her in a better life. I bite my lip then down the wine, setting the empty glass down on the bar. "Water, please," I tell the bartender. Hunter doesn't need to know.

"Perfect!" Marilyn smiles at me and picks up the wine for the others. "I'll mingle a bit once we deliver these, but..." She looks around, then leans in closer to whisper against my ear, "If you need something a bit stronger, try the bathroom on the second-floor hallway."

My heart hammers in my chest at the thought. Something stronger. I could go for something stronger, but I don't have any money. I'm not going to tell this pretty model that, though. Despite how nice she's being to me, she probably looks down on me, too.

Honestly, she has every reason to.

"Thanks," I say, and I genuinely mean it. Hunter would kill me if he knew how badly I was yearning for the release. Or rather... He'd torture me over it, and I think in some ways, that could be a lot worse.

"No prob." Marilyn smiles ruefully. "And don't worry about the actress thing. It takes a while to get a foot in the door, but I bet your boyfriend can open some doors for you. Money really does make the world go 'round." She

starts heading back to the Savage family, expecting, like Hunter does, for me to simply follow.

I can't stop thinking about what she said, though. The bathroom on the second floor. It would be easy to find. I could be gone and back before Hunter even realizes anything's wrong. I should really ask for permission to use the bathroom, though—which is a thought that strikes me as insanely *off*. I shouldn't need to ask someone for something that basic.

But I do.

I bow my head and carefully take a tray, relying on the grace I'd learned at Ntimacy to help me carry the tray through the crowd. Unlike the cheap beer at the club, though, this wine is probably over a hundred dollars per bottle—maybe more.

I return to Hunter's side, presenting the tray to him. "The water is mine," I murmur.

"Good," he says, taking a glass of wine. Senator Savage and Bethany already have theirs, which means the remaining glass of wine is for the Senator's assistant. He takes it and offers me a small smile before turning his attention back to his boss.

I breathe a sigh of relief. Hunter didn't smell the wine on my breath, but then, I hadn't had much of it. Not nearly enough, at any rate.

"Ma'am, the speeches are about to start," he says. "Doctor Savage, you're up right after the hospital director."

Hunter lets out a small huff, but he doesn't say anything. He finishes his glass of wine and nods. "Fine. I see Doctor Ghislain. I'll go greet her."

I look pleadingly at Hunter, but he doesn't motion for me to join him. He simply sets the wine glass back on my tray.

He's probably embarrassed by my presence by now.

"You're reading the speech we sent you, right?" Senator Savage says as Hunter starts to leave. "Because... Oh, look, I see Turner over there. I need to discuss the next fundraiser with him." She walks off, her assistant following behind her in a harried manner.

That leaves me with Marilyn and Bethany. I hold my breath without even meaning to, not wanting to embarrass myself in front of these two. Marilyn seems nice enough, but Bethany? She's not someone I want to be around.

"I should make the rounds, too," Marilyn says. She sets her empty glass on a nearby table. "It turns out, people want to see my face before they donate to sick children. See you around, Stefanie, Bethany."

I want to protest, but my words get stuck in my throat. My face isn't the one they want to see, which means I'm stuck here with Hunter's sister. I wait for her to make her excuses as well as I clutch the stem of my water-filled wine glass, but she doesn't move away.

Fuck.

She sips on her drink and eyes me for a while. I don't trust the strange smirk on her lips, and I try to think of a reason why I should leave. Maybe I need to offer moral support for Hunter, or I want some appetizers, or...

"So how did you and Hunter meet?" Bethany asks, still smirking. "I only ask because despite what Mother said, I don't think Hunter *would* go to a restaurant. Definitely not the kind of restaurant that employs aspiring actresses."

My cheeks flush, and I wonder what she would think if she knew her beloved—well, as beloved as anyone can be in a family full of backstabbers and snakes—brother had met me in a low-class strip club.

If she knew he'd *bought* me.

She'd probably just question his taste level and nothing more.

I hate these people.

I almost miss Ntimacy.

"I... Ah... You see, I..." I stumble over my words, taking a sip of water to give myself a precious few seconds to think. If I humiliate Hunter, he'll turn on the toy inside of me. "I was just lucky, that's all."

Bethany snorts. "Lucky. Sure. I can't think of the last woman who thought she was *lucky* to meet my brother. But I guess his riches are worth putting up with him. Take my advice—let him buy you a few diamonds and some clothes, then get out of there."

I wish I could say I was surprised at the way she throws her brother under the bus, but I'm not. "Why do you say that?" I ask cautiously.

"You don't know yet?" Bethany laughs. "Have fun finding out, then. I think I see my other brother. I'll go rescue him from his wife." She places her empty wine glass on my tray and leaves me, just in time for a high-pitched sound to come through from the audio system.

I want to ask her what she means, but I doubt she'll clarify even if I try to get her to. Besides, I'm grateful to be alone—until I realize I *am* alone in a crowd of people, and I have no idea where to go or what to do.

Except the second-floor bathroom.

My arm itches.

I linger there, awkwardly sipping on my water after ditching the tray on a table, and look up at the podium.

An older woman with blonde hair smiles at the crowd. “Wow, there are a lot of you! I’m glad to see so many other passionate people here tonight. I hope you’ve all been enjoying the bar—not so much that you can’t sign your name on a check, of course.”

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, but the crowd laughs at her joke.

I feel terribly lonely in this crowd of horrible people who only decide to help people when it’s fashionable or when they can show it off to an audience.

At least the people at Ntimacy didn’t pretend to be anything other than what they were, but the more I’m around this supposed high echelon of society, the more I realize the two-sidedness might even be worse.

The woman talks only for a few minutes before she introduces “the esteemed Doctor Hunter Savage.”

He gets up on stage, and to my shock, he’s smiling. It’s not one of those small, private smiles he occasionally bestows upon me, though I wouldn’t call it genuine, either.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen,” Hunter says in a much warmer tone than I’m used to. “It is nice to see you all gathered here today, despite the traffic.”

More chuckles from the crowd.

“Now, it won’t come as a shock to anyone that a doctor cares just a little about healthcare. I’m an obstetrician, and I specialize in difficult pregnancies. So I can tell you that I’ve seen quite a few cases that were all but hopeless—or appeared so.

“We’re all aware that our country is currently suffering under a healthcare crisis. It hits our youngest patients especially hard. Nobody should be suffering from a terminal illness, let alone anyone too young to have lived.”

He almost sounds like he really does care, and I’m not sure if it’s real or if he’s just pretending. Is there a part of him that does want to help people?

I can’t help but doubt it.

He continues talking, mentioning anecdotes of babies and mothers he’s saved, and a case where he didn’t. Is any of it true? Does he actually have this warm, caring side to him, and it’s just *me* he treats with contempt?

Because they’re innocents, and I’ve made my choices, I guess. I know he doesn’t think drug addicts are even real people deserving of empathy. But

children... It's not hard to think about children being worth saving.

I wish someone had saved me instead of letting me tumble into this life headfirst.

I listen to him, intent upon his words, like memorizing this fake speech will somehow lend me a little insight into the mysterious Doctor Savage. I know it won't, but there's a part of me that does want to get to know him.

Hunter's eyes meet mine, and I shiver, clutching my arms around myself. There's a slight furrow to his brow, but he keeps talking, moving on to look at some other spot in the room.

But I notice when his hands move to the podium to shift something—his notes, I assume at first.

Until the thing inside me starts vibrating.

I let out a startled little sound before I can help myself, and one of the men nearby gives me an odd look until I gather myself.

I fight not to hug my arms against my chest, keeping my posture straight—in vain, because the vibrations don't cease. They don't intensify, either, but it's still enough to make it difficult not to squirm.

He continues to speak like he isn't torturing me like this, and it's all I can do to stand there and bear it.

Then I wonder why I'm bothering. The wine wasn't enough, and Marilyn had said there was someone with "*something stronger*" upstairs. I want it. I want it badly. I don't have money for it, but I'll figure something out. With any luck, the person dealing will be a rich fuck who likes sharing.

The way tonight has been going, though, I don't think I'm going to get that lucky.

I slip through the crowd, biting my bottom lip to keep from making more noises. By the time I get to the stairs, I'm sweating a little. I cast a look back at the podium, where Hunter is still giving his speech, then hurry up the stairs to the second floor.

It doesn't take me long to find the bathrooms there.

I wonder if Marilyn meant the men's or women's bathroom, but I know the answer when a woman leaves the men's, giggling to herself.

"Heey," she says, biting her lip at me. She's younger than I am, and I wonder who dragged her to this event. "You get tired of this stuffy event too?"

"Yeah," I say, envying her for already being so fucked up. I tell myself to be patient; it's only a matter of minutes until I can find some sort of relief.

It's all I can think about, the thought of it pounding in my head and even making it possible to ignore the vibrations inside of me. All I care about is one thing, and that one thing is within reach.

Hopefully.

"Through there?" I ask, pointing to the men's bathroom door.

She nods and licks her lips. "Yeah. Mike is really generous." Then she adjusts her short dress, takes a stumbling step in her high heels, and giggles. "Shit. I should... I gotta get back to..." She laughs and keeps walking back toward the main hall. After a few stumbles, she does manage to right herself, and if I hadn't just seen her, I'd never have known that she was high.

She's had a lot of practice with this.

Like I have.

I push open the door of the bathroom, blinking in the bright lights, and I see two men in their early thirties standing there. They're laughing about something—probably the girl who just left, just like they'll probably laugh at me after I've left.

Not that I care as long as I get what I came here for.

Their gazes instantly snap to me, and one of them gives a foxlike grin. "Hey, pretty girl. What's your name?"

It's like the vibrator doesn't even exist anymore. It's just a vague annoyance that buzzes away somewhere far away.

"Stef," I tell him. "Is one of you Mike?"

I need one of them to be Mike.

I'd only thought I'd wanted the stronger stuff when I'd headed upstairs, but now? Now, I *need* it.

The two look at each other and laugh again. I don't care. The guy with the darker hair nods. "Yep. I'm Mike. What can I do for you, girl?"

The sink counter next to him has a very telling line of white dust on it.

I look longingly at it, not even trying to hide my growing desperation. "I hear you might be up to sharing something," I hedge, my cheeks flushing brightly as the vibrator continues to hum away inside of me.

The second guy rubs his nose, and he must have already had some. "Sure. We could share. It's fifty bucks for one bump."

Of course I couldn't get lucky and find someone who just likes being around other people who are high to party with. My luck ran out years ago.

"For just one?" I ask. Granted, it's been months since I've made my own deals for drugs, but that sounds terribly high. "I'm sure we can do better..." I

offer him my best sultry smile.

Mike bursts out laughing, nudging his companion. “What’d I tell you, Parker? You thought this gala would be a bust.”

“Dude, it’s like... sick and dying children? I thought everybody here would be uptight and serious!” Parker leers at me though. “You think your cunt is worth fifty bucks, girl?”

My cunt. Of course. “My cunt is worth more than fifty,” I inform him as haughtily as I can manage, trying to hide the fact that I’m just... desperate. “I’ll blow both of you. And swallow.” Mostly because I don’t want to get the dress dirty.

The two start laughing again, and I flush with humiliation, but it doesn’t matter. Release will be here soon. Once the first bump is in my system, I won’t even care.

“Sounds good. I’ll let Mike go first, since he’s the supplier.” Parker dunks his pinky into the line of powder and takes it up to his nose, snorting it expertly. He only wrinkles his nose a little when he’s done, then he smiles widely. “Fuck, that’s good stuff.”

The vibrations inside me suddenly get stronger. “Let me have some first,” I say as confidently as I can.

Mike and Parker exchange another look, but Mike shrugs. “Sure. But I get to fuck your throat hard, then.”

Relief floods me. I can do this.

But the increased vibrations are driving me crazy, and I can’t help but squirm.

Parker laughs. “Looks like she’s getting all hot and bothered at the thought, man. Maybe we really should fuck her and just give her a little more.”

“No!” I say quickly. “I don’t have that much time.” Hunter is going to realize I’m gone very soon; if the vibration is any indication, he already has. “Let’s just make this quick. Drugs first, then I’ll let you fuck my throat as hard as you want.”

Mike points toward the small amount of powder still on the bathroom counter. I’m sure he has more, cleaner stuff somewhere, but I don’t care. I dip my finger into it and scoop up as much as I can, bringing it up to my nose and inhaling sharply.

It burns going in. This was never my drug of choice, but that doesn’t matter.

Relief and pleasure race through my body almost immediately, and I let out a soft, keening sound. I hadn't forgotten what a high felt like, of course, but it still feels like I'm new to this. I want more, though. I deserve more if I'm going to blow both of them and try to figure out how to get downstairs before Hunter finds me.

"I get more," I insist, wiping my nose. "If I'm blowing both of you..."

"Give us a taste, first," Mike says, going for his belt buckle. "Open wide, honey, so we can be sure you're worth all this blow."

I try to glare at him, but I can't really bring myself to do it. Between the drugs and the vibrator buzzing away inside of me, I'm quickly suffused with so much pleasure that it's hard to be unpleasant. "How do I know you won't go back on your word?" I ask, trying to sound a lot bolder than I feel. "C'mon. Just a little more, then I'll suck you off. I'm good at it. I've had lots of practice."

Dylan had made sure I'd had plenty of practice begging for cock, too, and even before Ntimacy, I'd been good at it.

But Mike shakes his head. "No way. Open up. If I like your mouth, I'll let you snort some off my finger while you're blowing me."

Good enough.

"Yeah, okay," I say, and I drop to my knees in front of him, heedless of the cold tile of the bathroom floor on my bare knees. It's at least clean, a testament to the luxurious environment, but I can't say I'd have hesitated even if it hadn't been. I help him with his zipper with deft fingers, then take all of him down on one go with minimal hesitation. I feel like I could do even better than this right now, for all that I'm not sure teeth wouldn't be involved if I got too distracted.

It's all so familiar. The hard tile underneath my knees, the scent of cock, the taste of it—and that lovely buzz filling my veins. The vibrator is new, but who the fuck cares anymore?

Just as long as I can get rid of all these awful fucking thoughts.

CHAPTER 14

Hunter

“HAVE YOU SEEN STEFANIE?” I ask Bethany while my mother drones on about the importance of fundraising and reforming the healthcare system or whatever.

Bethany raises her eyebrows at me. “Yeah, earlier. If you mean recently, then no. I don’t keep track of your sex toys.”

I glare at her, but Bethany isn’t intimidated. “She was around here. Text me if you see her.”

Bethany rolls her eyes at me, and it’s clear she’s going to be of no help. I check my phone again, not sure what I’m expecting to find. Stef doesn’t have a phone on her, and I don’t have a tracker in her.

I need to change that. I have to know where she is at all times.

Fuck. I shouldn’t have trusted her. If I have to call in help to track her down, I’ll never hear the end of it.

The other possibility... I check the threatening email I received, but nothing about it suggests the blackmailer wants to take Stef away from me.

I grind my teeth and take a breath, trying to remain calm. She can’t have gone far. She has the vibrator inside her... unless she removed it.

That’s probably the first thing she would have done if she was trying to escape. I ignore the people trying to talk to me and stalk toward the restrooms. I peer inside the women’s room, but it’s empty.

Just in case, I check the men’s room too, but it’s just as empty.

Shit, shit, shit. I try to calm myself down, but it’s getting harder to see through the haze of anger. I need to maintain control. I can’t lose it, not here.

When I head back to the main hall, I have a small modicum of composure. I scan the room, but Stef’s purple dress is nowhere to be seen.

I do notice a different woman who looks out of place, though, with a

slight wobble to her gait. And when she turns around, I can see the red tint to her eyes, and how she keeps sniffing and moving her nose. She's hanging off the arm of one of the donors, a big man with graying hair and a thick beard.

I approach them, pasting a smile on my face. "Mr. Benetton! Good evening. How good of you to come today."

"Doctor Savage, nice to see you. Lovely speech you gave earlier." Benetton extends his hand to me, and I shake it. The woman at his side doesn't even pretend to care about me.

"I didn't realize you'd brought your daughter," I say, knowing full well she's anything but that.

Benetton chuckles awkwardly. "No, this is my date. Janine, meet Doctor Savage."

She waves at me, her eyes not tracking properly. How long ago did she use?

"Hello, Janine. I'm sorry to bother you both about this, but I seem to have lost a friend somewhere in the crowd. Have you seen a young, blonde woman in a purple dress?"

Benetton shakes his head, but Janine nods.

"Yeah. She was upstairs, using the bathroom. Guess it was too crowded down here." Janine rubs at her nose. "Hey, sweetie, I'm gonna grab a drink. You want anything?"

"Sure. A red wine, please." We both watch Janine leave, and I itch to disappear too. Benetton coughs though. "Savage, good that you're here. I was wondering, could you talk to your mother about..."

I listen as politely as I can, but as soon as there's an opening, I interject, "Yes, I'll let her know. I'm sure she'll be interested."

I leave, half-rushing toward the stairs. I don't even remember what Benetton wanted anymore. My mind is stuck on the image of Stef, hiding away somewhere. Hiding from me.

Doing something *stupid*.

I check the women's bathroom first, but of course it's empty. I do hear a loud moan coming through the walls, though.

My vision is getting hazy with anger. I can't stop myself from slamming the men's door open.

"Jesus fuck!" somebody shouts.

There are two men up against the far wall, both with their cocks out. Their noses are as red as Janine's was.

Sitting on her knees in front of them is Stef.

Stef turns to look at the door with unfocused eyes—and I see that she, too, has a reddened nose.

I can't even hold the rage back anymore.

I go over to her and grab her arm, pulling her away sharply, and she lets out a quiet cry of protest. Her lips are swollen, and there are white smears on her cheeks.

Her makeup and hair are, of course, ruined. All that hard work, down the drain.

“What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?” I growl at her.

To my utter shock, Stef *laughs*. “What does it look like, Doctor?” She squirms against me, trying to pull her arm back. “Let go. You're hurting me.”

I only pull on her tighter. One of the shitstains with his cock out stands up straighter and tugs on my arm.

“Buddy, leave her alone. We're all just having a good time. It's none of your business.”

I let go of Stef, though I don't want to, and slam my fist into the guy. He yells as his head knocks against the wall.

Stef screams, her hand covering her mouth.

“What the fuck?” the other guy shouts. He's zipping up his pants and trying to run, but I knee him in the gut before he can go farther.

“Do not fucking touch my property,” I growl at them. “And if you don't want me telling everybody downstairs about your little side hobbies, you will get the fuck out of here. Got it?”

The man I punched wheezes and eyes Stef, but he wisely decides he's not getting involved in this. He gets up and scrambles to the door. “Just leave me the fuck alone,” he says as he stumbles out the door.

The other guy whimpers, still clutching his stomach. “Jesus, sorry, sorry. Didn't know she had a guy. She's the one who offered her mouth, man.”

Anger overwhelms me all over again, and I land another kick to his side. He cries out and curls up on himself, sobbing desperately.

Then I turn to Stef.

She still has her hand pressed against her mouth, and it seems that her fear has overwhelmed whatever high she'd been experiencing.

She's not laughing now, I note with vicious satisfaction.

Instead, she cowers, staying on her knees and bowing her head in front of me. “I'm sorry, Master,” she says, but I couldn't possibly care less about her

fake apology.

“Get up,” I snarl at her. “We’re leaving. And you’d better manage to fucking walk straight.”

It takes her a long moment for her to pull herself to her feet, and she has to brace herself against the wall. “I can’t,” she whimpers. “Not with the... the thing... I can’t walk straight with it like that.”

“Then maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to disobey me,” I say. I have the overwhelming urge to expose her ass and belt her, but I know I can’t do that here.

I have to stay in control.

I can’t show myself like this in public.

“Will you follow, or do I need to leash you to ensure you won’t wander off to fuck the next cock you see?” I ask coldly.

Her cheeks are already flushed, but they seem to go a shade darker. “Will you turn that thing off so I can walk, or do I need to tell everyone what being your property means?”

The backtalk enrages me even more. I reach out and grip her throat, squeezing just enough to be a threat. “Do you want to repeat that?”

Stef gives a quick shake of her head, but I still have to wonder just how much of that fucking drug she’d just taken. She’s never that bold, never that sassy. She absolutely fucking knows better.

But here we are anyway.

“Then let’s go. Head up, back straight, and no fucking fidgeting.” I cast one more glance at the asshole on the floor, but he’s got his eyes squeezed shut like he’s pretending not to be there. Good.

She stumbles more than once on her way to the door, but she keeps her head bowed and her eyes averted. By the time we get to the hallway, she’s walking upright with just enough of a tilt to her steps to where others might just think she’d had a little bit too much to drink.

I know better, though, and it makes the rage inside of me threaten to spill over with each movement she makes.

I get her out to the street, giving a few terse excuses to the people who try to talk to me. The car I’d requested is already waiting, thankfully, and the driver only says a cursory greeting before he’s driving us back to my condo.

I keep an arm around Stef’s shoulders the entire time. She’s completely tense, and I see her thigh jittering. I could turn off the vibrator, but she deserves to suffer after what she did.

She deserves to suffer a lot more than this.

We're the only ones getting onto the elevator at the condo building. Its mirrored walls show off Stef's mussed state. Her mascara has smeared and the lipstick on her trembling lips has faded, no doubt left behind on those other men's' cocks.

I tighten my grip on her shoulders.

She lets out a quiet, surprised sound, and unsurprisingly, she's already crying as she tries in vain to pull away from me. Any high she'd gotten appears to have faded, and while nothing she could do can please me at the moment, I enjoy the fact that she didn't get to enjoy it at all while she was ruining the body that belongs to *me*.

When we finally arrive, I shove her through the door to my condo and lock it behind me.

"Strip," I order harshly.

Stef doesn't look up at me, only trying to obey. She fumbles with the zipper at the top of the dress for a moment then finally whimpers, "I can't... get it unzipped, Master. I'm sorry. I... I'm so sorry about everything, I really, really am..."

"You're only sorry I caught you," I growl, going to unzip the dress. It takes every last bit of self-control not to simply rip the whole thing off her. I should burn the thing anyway. It's probably covered in those other men's filth. "I trusted you. You swore you would behave."

From the way she flinches at those words, it's like I just hit her—and that only makes me angrier, because I'm not saying anything she didn't already know.

"I didn't mean to—" she begins before cutting herself off, daring to look up at me for only a split second.

"Didn't *mean* to?" I stare at her incredulously. "You *accidentally* stumbled into the men's bathroom, onto your knees, and opened your mouth for those men? You *accidentally* inhaled drugs?"

She sobs, burying her face in her hands as she hunches in on herself. "It just hurt. Everything hurt. I needed... I needed something to make it stop hurting. I'm sorry," she repeats.

It's the same excuses the addicts always give. They never bother to think about anything more than that momentary high, chasing something that won't even last for more than half an hour.

My fingers itch to break something.

“I fucking told you to strip,” I say. “And then we’re washing you. You’re disgusting. Filthy.”

Again, she flinches as though the words are somehow physically hurting her. She takes the dress the rest of the way off, folds it over the nearby chair, then works on the bra and panties. When she’s standing there only in her heels, she dares to give me another pleading look.

I go over to her and grip the back of her neck. “Shower. Now.”

I don’t take her to my bedroom. I take her to the shower in the guest room, where she’d been confined to at the start.

Where I should’ve kept her confined instead of letting her humiliate me.

Stef stumbles along, either blinded by her tears or simply having trouble keeping up with my brisk pace.

I was too lenient. I let myself get lulled into complacency by her pretty words. Of course she isn’t truly mine yet. She was only pretending.

I’m going to fix that, though.

She quickly kicks the heels off when we pause. She tries to duck her head, but I dig my fingers more insistently into the nape of her neck to keep her upright. “Please,” she whispers, tears rolling down her cheeks. “I’ll make it up to you.”

“You can’t *make it up to me* when you’ve purposefully sullied yourself,” I say, shoving her into the shower stall. I turn the water on, and I don’t care that it’s still freezing cold when it hits her.

She yelps, letting out another loud sob as she tries to shy away from the stream of water.

Where else did they touch? Just her mouth? Did she let them fuck her cunt, her ass?

“On your knees, ass up,” I order harshly.

She scrambles to obey, her knees thudding when they hit the bottom of the shower. She’s shivering violently, her head bowed as she tried to keep her face out of the stream of water.

I step away from the shower to grab latex gloves from the cabinet. My eyes catch on something else in there too, and I pull it out and set it on the shelf near the shower.

If she’d seen it, I’m sure she’d be panicking even more.

I take my shoes off and bend down behind her. Water splashes against my pants, but I don’t care.

“I’ve been too nice to you,” I say, gripping her ass. “The food, the

dresses, the *video games*. You forgot why you're here." I push my finger into her cunt, finding the hook of the still-vibrating toy and pulling it out roughly.

Stef lets out a muffled cry, her body bucking as I do. I'm sure it's long since stopped being pleasurable, but any relief she feels is going to be short-lived. "No, please, I haven't. Master, please, I'll do better. I'll do better!"

"I've heard that before. But you chose to embarrass yourself—embarrass *me*—at a public venue. You're like a fucking child, unable to control herself." I grab the second shower head off its hook and turn it on, then direct the cold blast directly at her cunt. "Did they fuck you? Would you have spread your legs for every single donor just for your stupid, momentary high?"

She cries out again, shaking her head furiously. "No! I didn't let them fuck me. I wouldn't... I wouldn't have let them."

I don't believe her.

I think she'd have been willing to fuck anybody and everybody just to get a few minutes of that high, and it infuriates me even more.

When I'm satisfied that her cunt is clean, I turn off the second spray and reach for the kit I'd set on the shelf.

An enema kit. I'm going to clean her inside and out.

"Do you know what this is?" I ask her as I start filling the bag with ice cold water.

Her frightened, red-rimmed eyes go up to mine, and they widen as she sees what I'm holding.

I don't like that she knows what it is, or that she's frightened of it, because I wanted to be the first one to torment her like this. It just reminds me that she's a whore from Ntimacy, someone I purchased despite all of her flaws.

Because of her flaws, a voice inside nags me, but I ignore it.

Once the bag is full, I hook it to the shower rod and briskly work to secure the tubing in place. The whole time, she's shaking her head, and she blabbers on some apology or another that I tune out because it isn't enough. Nothing's going to be enough.

Not until I hear her scream.

I slap her ass, the sharp reminder that it's supposed to be up in the air seemingly enough to make the sobbing whore remember she's meant to have it up. She holds that position, for all that her trembling is growing more intense as the cold water continues to sluice over her body.

When I place the nozzle against her hole, Stef sobs again, begging, “Please! Please don’t, Master. Please, I didn’t let anyone in... inside of me.” She hiccups, swaying as she tries to keep herself upright. “I wouldn’t have. I wouldn’t have let anyone fuck me but you.”

“You were covered in their semen,” I growl. “You had your mouth on their cocks. I’m supposed to believe that you have *standards*?”

She nearly chokes on another forceful sob, her shoulders shaking violently—and I haven’t even begun to punish her yet. My cock is painfully hard in my trousers, and after I clean her out, I have every intention of taking advantage of that.

I unclip the tubing, and cold water starts to rush inside of Stef’s ass.

I can both see and hear it as the first cramp hits her. She yowls in pain, but it only makes me angrier. She deserves this, and I’m not going to feel bad for her.

I squeeze the bag of water, forcing more liquid into her that much faster, and I’m gratified by her panting, by her strangled cries that come over and over again. She has to be miserable, yet it still doesn’t feel like it’s enough.

Yet.

Once the first bag is empty, she looks at me with those wide, desperate eyes. I smile at her, but it’s without humor. Grimly, I begin to fill the bag again. Her horrified eyes get wider still, and she shakes her head furiously.

“Yes,” I tell her. “This is your punishment for being unclean.”

When I’ve finished filling the bag a second time, I’m even more brutal with forcing the water inside of her. I squeeze and squeeze, and she seizes up and whimpers and cries out until she’s finally screaming.

I don’t know if it’s enough. She’s sobbing and whimpering, her body is wracked with convulsions and shivers, but I still see her with her reddened nose and blown pupils, servicing those other men.

How dare she do this to me.

“Don’t you fucking dare spill any of it,” I tell her, pulling the nozzle out. “You’ll hold it all for ten minutes.”

“Ten—” she croaks, but she stops speaking when she sees the look in my eyes.

I must look crazed, deranged, but that’s what she’s reduced me to—and I will fucking punish her for pushing me to act this low.

“Now get onto your back,” I say.

Stef obeys, if clumsily, and I regard her. I finally turn off the shower,

which feels like more of a reprieve than she deserves, but I want to touch her without getting soaked in turn.

Her belly's swollen and distended, and for the first time, I think I understand some men's kink for pregnant women. Not that I want her to get pregnant—especially when she's stupid enough to taint her body like this, again and again—but it's enough to make me think I should do this to her again.

I reach down, massaging her stomach with my gloved hand, and her eyes widen. She wordlessly shakes her head, trembling violently already.

“If you didn't want to be punished, you shouldn't have provoked me,” I say, pushing just enough to make her whimper again. “Was that your way of trying to get my attention? You couldn't handle being alone for twenty fucking minutes?”

“No! It wasn't. I just... Your family... Everyone... I felt...” She babbles on nonsensically, and I have no idea what she's trying to say.

Granted, my family could probably drive anyone to drink, but they hadn't been *that* bad. She'd been so good to choose water instead of wine, and I'd thought that might be a mild improvement, a sign of change that she greatly needed.

I'd been wrong.

At least she's stopped trying to speak, only answering my prods to her stomach with high-pitched cries of misery. She stares at me, and the pleading in her tear-filled eyes just has me getting harder and harder. If I lacked any more self-control, I'd be opening my pants and stroking myself, and...

Why the hell not?

I stop touching her and reach down to unfasten my fly, letting my cock free of the confines of my clothing. I let out a deep breath of relief, staring down at her. I could just stroke myself to completion over her, but it feels like a waste after cleaning out her ass.

Then again, she's still unclean. No amount of water can wash away her betrayal; no measure of tears can make me easily forgive her for it.

I get up without a word, going back to the cabinet and finding the pack of condoms from there. It's not the same as taking her bare, but I can't stand the thought of getting her filth on me.

The enema should make her clean, but the filth goes beyond body-level, straight into her mind and soul.

Unsurprisingly, she's still crying when I get back, lying on her back and

clutching her swollen stomach. She looks up at me, her lips forming the word “please” before she sees the condom in my hand.

“Get up,” I say. “You may empty yourself in the toilet now. Do *not* make a mess.”

She’s shaking as she forces herself into a seated position, her cheeks flushed and her breath coming in short gasps. She swallows hard and looks at me, then the toilet, then back. After a brief pause, she starts to get up, and water trickles down the inside of her leg. She sobs, and I can see her squeeze more tightly as she gets out of the shower stall and stumbles to the toilet.

Despite the way her cheeks flush even more, Stef lets go, the unpleasant sounds filling the room. I’ve seen worse, heard worse, and I watch her impassively.

Her misery keeps my cock hard.

“Get back into the shower and clean yourself properly,” I order her when she’s finished.

She looks wrung out and miserable, incessant tears falling and falling, and I wish I could lick them away. If she hadn’t fucked up so badly, I might’ve kissed them away, made her feel a bit better.

But no. She’d brought this upon herself.

She’s flushed red despite how her teeth chatter, and she sobs as she walks back to the shower. Her hand lingers on the tap before she turns the water back on—and I note with a little satisfaction that she doesn’t attempt to turn the water warm.

It takes her a few tries to pump soap out onto the loofah and wash herself. I watch dispassionately as she scrubs her cunt and hole.

She’s still not clean.

No amount of water and soap can make her clean.

I clench my fists, breathing through the anger. “Enough,” I tell her. “Hands against the wall, legs wide.”

Stef bows her head and obeys, trembling and barely able to keep herself up as she leans against the wall with her legs spread wide. I turn off the shower spray. She says nothing, pressing her forehead against the cold shower tile and waiting helplessly while I spread her ass cheeks.

I roughly shove a finger into her ass, and she cries out again. Sobs wrack her body while I thrust in and out, getting as deep as I can before I pull my finger out again.

The gloves come out clean.

It doesn't feel like they should. She's still stained, still tainted.

"I'm going to fuck you," I tell her. "With a condom, because you don't fucking deserve to have me bare. And when I'm done, you're going to thank me for not throwing you out into the trash. Do you understand?"

Stef nods quickly, leaning hard against the wall as she trembles. "Please," she whispers. "Please f-fuck me. Thank you for... for not..." She dissolves into tears again.

I roll the condom onto my cock, then grab her by the nape of her neck with one hand while grabbing for the bottle of lube I keep in the shower with the other.

I slather my condom-covered cock with a thin layer of lube.

That's the only mercy I plan on giving her.

I shove into her without any sort of preparation, and again, she screams; again, my cock throbs with desire at the sound of it, at the feeling of her clamping around me so snugly. I thrust into her with abandon, over and over again, while she whimpers and whines and cries out.

"I wanted you to be perfect," I growl at her as my pleasure builds. "You promised you'd behave. I've been so *nice* to you."

"I'm sorry!" she cries out, but it seems that's all she can say, and it's not enough. It's never going to be enough. Words are only words, and no matter how many times she utters them, it's not going to erase the taint of what she's done. "Master, please!"

She tightens up around me, and another few thrusts have me coming hard... into the condom, with no chance of leaving anything behind in her.

It's just as well. She doesn't deserve anything from me.

The endorphins from the orgasm are enough to dampen my anger a little. I loosen my grip on her and slowly pull out. Stef sobs silently against the wall.

I take the condom off, holding it so that nothing spills. "Clean me up," I order. "With your mouth."

Stef bites her bottom lip but slowly turns, getting to her knees in front of me and taking my cock into her mouth. Her tongue laps at me like a kitten's at first, and I growl. She takes the hint and licks more fervently, taking me deep into her mouth as she licks every trace of cum from my cock. It has to taste like the condom and lube, but I don't give a damn.

When my cock is as clean as it'll get from her mouth, I shove her head away. "Enough. Now, did you already forget what I told you?"

“N-no. I didn’t. Thank you, Master, for not throwing me... into the... into the trash.” She nearly chokes on another sob.

I stare at her, at her tear-stained face, the way her wet hair clings to her skin.

And it’s still not enough.

I empty the condom out onto her head.

She sobs harder, bowing her head. Most of the cum lingers in her hair, but some of it drips down onto her face. She doesn’t try to push it away, too hysterical to think about it—or maybe understanding that she’s on a razor’s edge.

“Come. I’m locking you up for the night, since I can’t trust you on your own.”

Stef whimpers but nods, and she starts to crawl toward the bedroom. The crawling should soothe some part of the animalistic rage racing through me, but it just makes me more disgusted.

I thought she’d be the right one.

But maybe I *should* just throw her away.

I don’t say anything else as I cuff her to the bed and leave her there.

CHAPTER 15

Stef

I CRY FOR A LONG TIME—LONG after my sobs turn into hiccups and I feel like I can't cry anymore. But I can. There are always, always more tears, no matter how much I try to avoid crying.

Giulio had hated that. The men at the club had hated that.

It had been a lie that Hunter had liked it, or he might've taken pity on me.

The thought is almost enough to make me laugh—not with humor, of course, but with something far more bitter. I fucked up, and I fucked up bad, but all I can think about is how fucking *good* it felt to be high for even a few minutes before Hunter had gone and ruined it for me.

I should be angry too. I have every right to be. I'd earned those drugs.

But all I feel is hollow.

Time passes, and I drowse, waking and falling back asleep out of misery and boredom. He leaves me alone, and I'm not sure if it's been minutes or hours. Not even a day, probably, though I'm thirsty.

Thirsty, and I really, really have to pee.

I try to call out to Hunter. "Master? Master, I need to... to use the bathroom. Master?"

No response comes, and I'm not surprised, but it does make me feel more desperately alone. I have time to think about how much I screwed up, how much I took a good thing and threw it away just like he might throw me away after this.

But his family had been so horrible, and he'd done nothing to protect me from them. He'd thrown me into the lion's den, and I might as well have been covered in blood with how quickly they'd descended upon me.

I should be used to people looking down on me.

It still hurts.

I call out again after another few minutes; again, there's nothing.

I whimper, squirming on the bed. I have to hold it. If I wet the bed like a child, he'll probably make me sit in it. Maybe he intends to just leave me here forever, letting me slowly waste away in this bed where I'm alone with my thoughts.

They're horrible thoughts.

I keep thinking about Dylan, about the club, about how many mistakes I'd made to get to this point, and I can't escape them. When I do manage to think about something else, it's only about the urgent press of my bladder, the way I feel as though I can't hold it much longer.

I yell for Hunter again, thrashing in my bonds.

He's either aware and ignoring me, or he has just relegated me to being less than nothing. Dread keeps pooling in my stomach, rising as the need to piss gets even greater.

Until finally, I start to sob again as a pool of warmth settles around me from where I can't hold it back any longer.

Cum in my hair, piss in the bed beneath me, the ache of the need to get more drugs, to lose myself... I close my eyes and cry all over again.

The piss has cooled by the time the door finally opens.

Hunter enters, his nose wrinkling in disgust. "Filthy all over," he says as he comes to stand next to the bed.

I flinch away from him as best I can, closing my eyes and trying desperately *not to cry*. I manage, for once, for even just a moment. "I'm sorry, Master," I croak out. "I know I'm... I'm..." I dissolve into tears. "Please don't throw me away. Please. I'm sorry. I'll do anything to make it up to you, I'll do anything anyway because you own me, I promise."

"People always say things when they're desperate." Hunter lifts his hand up, and I realize he's holding a phone.

Fear races through me. I don't know what he's planning, who he's planning to call, but it's not good. What if he wants to sell me? What if things get even worse than this?

"Please don't," I whisper. "Please don't get rid of me. Master, please, I'm so sorry. I'm desperate and afraid but I want... I want to stay with you. I want to learn to be better for you."

"Or I can simply call Giulio and get a different girl," Hunter says flatly. "I should have insisted he show me another girl that first day, anyway."

I whimper. "Master, please. Please don't. Please. I... I..." I don't know

what to say to convince him. I have no idea how to appeal to him. “He’s probably busy. Or asleep. We don’t need to bother him. Let me show you how good I can be tonight.”

Hunter lets out a soft snort. “Doubtful.”

Another strangled sound emerges from my throat, something pitiful and desperate, and I can’t even describe it. All I know is that I’m afraid, desperately afraid, that he’s going to send me back to Giulio.

Though there’s a tiny sliver of a part of me that might not mind it.

At least there are drugs there.

At least there’s oblivion.

But there are no quiet nights with a gentle hand stroking my hair, no video games.

No smiles.

“Please,” I beg. “Master, please.”

What do I even say? How can I convince him not to do this?

Hunter taps on his phone, and a few seconds later, I hear the familiar, terrible voice of Giulio Pavone.

My heart drops into my stomach.

“Yo, Doctor Savage! What’s up?” he asks.

Hunter levels his stare at me. “See, I knew you’d be awake. I was told you wouldn’t want to hear from me at this late hour.”

“You know me. I’m a night owl. But how can I help?” Giulio’s voice sounds like he’s on speaker, too—but from what I remember, Giulio almost always sets his calls to speaker, regardless of how private they should have been.

“I’ve been having problems with my recent acquisition,” Hunter says flatly. “First the detox—I had to tie her down for it—and then getting her to even eat right.”

I whimper again, and I close my eyes tight because I can’t stand to look Hunter in the face right now. I can’t stand to watch him as he so dispassionately discusses all the things that are wrong with me.

“Damn, that sucks. There’s no refunds though, you know,” Giulio says. “Unless you want to trade her in for a different model.”

I shake my head helplessly, still squeezing my eyes tight. No. No, I don’t want this. I don’t want to go back to Ntimacy. I don’t want to be traded in for *a different model*. I had started to be... not happy, exactly, but it’s better being here than with Giulio.

There could always be someone worse, too.

Like Slayer, Giulio's friend who liked to make me cry and bleed. Like any of the other men Giulio consorts with.

"I might," Hunter answers. He gives me the same bored look as when we'd met.

I start to sob again, shaking my head desperately. I don't know what to say. I don't know what to do. I can't help but babble as I finally look up at him with pleading eyes. "No! Please, please don't! I'm sorry, I didn't mean it!"

"Hey, Stef!" Giulio says loudly. "You enjoying yourself with Doctor Savage?"

"Yes," I whimper, looking imploringly at Hunter. There's so much I want to say that it's dizzying, and I don't even know where to begin or where I could stop, and all I can think to do is beg him more. "Don't send me back, please, Master."

Giulio bursts out laughing.

"Then next time, don't make me regret my purchase," Hunter says. "My patience is running thin."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," I babble, wishing I could hide my face, wishing I wasn't lying in a large wet spot on the bed of my own making, wishing everything was different and that I hadn't fucked up so badly.

"Should I be asking for a video call?" Giulio asks with an amused chuckle. "I'm always up for more porn. Hey, speaking of, do you want to see the pics of—"

Hunter cuts the call and stares at me. "That was your only warning. If you ever embarrass me like that again, I will personally deliver you back to Giulio, and I will tell him the only thing you're good for is the gutter, to be used up like the filth you're trying so desperately to be."

I can *feel* the color drain from my face, and I hiccup as I try not to visualize what that might consist of. No. No, I'm not even going to think about that. I'm going to do better. I'm going to be better.

"I won't, Master," I say fervently. "I won't. I promise. I'll be good. I'll be so good for you." I will never, ever offer to go anywhere with him again, though I have a feeling it doesn't matter. I opened that door, and now he's got his foot firmly in it with his expectations of what I can and can't do.

It's so much. It's too much to stand, but I have to be strong.

I just wish I thought there was any strength left in me.

Hunter stares at me for a long time, and I'm worried he's going to change his mind and send me to Giulio anyway.

I swallow hard, squirming under his scrutiny.

But he steps closer and undoes the cuff around my wrist, then pulls my arm up to inspect it. "You bruised yourself struggling."

I bow my head, looking away from him. "I'm sorry," I whisper for what seems to be the hundredth time today. "I..." What does he want to hear? "I didn't mean to... to bruise your property. I just... had to..." Well. I don't need to finish that sentence. I'm sure he knows what I mean, and he probably knows when I got that desperate, too.

He undoes the rest of my chains, then snaps his fingers and points to the floor next to him. I hurry to get off the bed—away from the wet spot—and kneel there.

My entire body is shaking, and my limbs are sore from having been in one position for so long, but I can't risk disappointing him even more.

"We're going to have a stricter regimen," Hunter says. "I thought you were smart enough not to squander your luxuries, but I was clearly mistaken. You will have to *earn* them from now on."

My eyes threaten to tear up all over again. I have no idea how he's going to be even stricter with me. He's already so controlling, and he expects so much of me. I'm going to have to be flawless now, and I don't even know that I'm capable of that. "Yes, Master," I whisper hoarsely. "Anything you want. Anything."

"Then go get cleaned up. You're disgusting." Hunter motions toward the bathroom.

I scramble to do what he's told, but I don't dare stand up. I crawl to the bathroom, expecting him to follow... but he doesn't.

Misery threatens to overwhelm me. How much solitude is he going to punish me with?

Maybe I do deserve it.

I can't get resentful; I can't get upset.

I have to obey.

I don't stand up until I reach the shower, and my knees are aching from the time spent on the hard tile floor. I fumble with the temperature, and while I'm tempted to make the water warm, I think that maybe he'll consider it at least a small act of penance if I take a cold shower.

I leave the temperature near freezing, shuddering beneath the water, and I

take a quick but thorough shower. He doesn't come in, doesn't check on me, and I don't know if I'll even find him in the room when I return.

When I've cleaned off the piss and cum, I stumble out of the shower, my teeth chattering.

I remember how he'd toweled me off on the first day, and how I'd thought he'd been kind, or gentle.

I squeeze my eyes shut to ward off even more tears. How can I still have tears left in me, after all the crying I've done?

I towel off, put the used towel into the laundry basket, then crawl back out. Hunter is still standing there, phone in hand.

I can't help but be relieved, even though it's short-lived.

"Strip the sheets," he orders, not even looking at me.

I obey, shivering violently, pulling the sheets off the bed and grimacing. At the very least, it hasn't soaked beneath the mattress cover, but that's only a small mercy. "Where do you want me to put them, Master?" I ask meekly.

"In the laundry basket," Hunter answers with open annoyance.

I shrink back. "Yes, Master," I whisper. "I didn't know if..." It doesn't matter. He doesn't care if I wanted to put them right into the washer. I just have to listen to him, but he wants me to somehow guess what he wants—only to punish me with annoyance and impatience when I can't.

This is going to be miserable, but going back to Ntimacy isn't even an option anymore. Giulio would only sell me to someone who would take everything they could out of my body until there was nothing left—then I really would be just another piece of trash on the street for them to discard.

I add the dirty sheets to the laundry basket and crawl back to Hunter, looking up at him. I don't dare hope that he'll be appeased, but maybe he'll tire of being mad at me soon.

He finally looks away from his phone to glare down at me.

I hunch my shoulders, trying to make as small of a target of myself as possible, and stare at the floor. I can still practically feel the heat of his gaze on me.

"I suppose you're hungry," Hunter says, and even that feels like an accusation.

I swallow hard. "I..." I have to watch every word I say, but at the same time, I can't think for too long or he'll get upset. "I don't want to... um..." Fuck. I don't want him to think I'm saying I don't want to *eat*. "I don't want to starve your... your property, Master," I say in a rush. "But I don't know if

I've earned food."

"Ah, so you do know that you need to eat." The accusation makes me flinch. Fine, I hadn't wanted to eat when he'd first bought me. But it's different now.

I wouldn't need to eat as much if I were still high.

"Stay," Hunter says, and heads out the bedroom door.

I stay.

I let out a deep, shaky breath, still feeling the cold in the marrow of my bones. I should've just taken a warm shower. He probably hadn't even noticed that I'd taken a cold one for him.

He's only gone a few minutes, and when he returns, I look up at him—and freeze, because he's carrying a dog bowl. I don't have to be told that this is for me, and humiliation makes my cheeks burn.

Hunter sets the bowl down in front of me. "Eat. And try not to make a mess."

I stare at the contents in the bowl. It's a sloppy mess, and it takes me a moment to realize it's oatmeal. I glance up at him, unsure of how I'm supposed to keep from making a mess. I know better than to ask for a spoon; if he wanted me to have one, he'd have given it to me.

I also know better than to refuse.

I bow my head, and I lean down, trying to take a bite. All that happens is that plain, tasteless oatmeal ends up going up my nose. It's impossible to eat, and the harder I try, the more of a mess I make of my just-cleaned face.

"Are you even trying?" Hunter asks.

I wish he'd sound angry, at least. But it's this cold, dispassionate voice, and I have no idea what he's actually thinking.

I didn't realize how much I'd gotten used to having him *care* in his own way.

I want to protest that I am trying, and that I'm trying hard, but all I end up doing is sputtering and feeling like I'm going to suffocate on the food. It's a double-edged sword. I can't eat without making a mess, but I can't refuse to eat, either.

It's miserable, and I hate it, and I'd give anything to just eat from his hand again.

I end up licking awkwardly at the oatmeal, slobbering all over but somehow getting the bowl empty. I can't say that it tasted good, or that I'm even full now, but my stomach isn't threatening to cramp up in hunger.

Hunter picks up the food bowl and shakes his head. “Messy.” He starts to go toward the door, though, and I panic.

“M-Master?” I ask, my voice high.

Hunter stops and looks over his shoulder at me. “What?”

“U-um. The... bed... the sheets...” I look at the bare mattress and the dangling cuffs.

Hunter huffs loudly. “You’re sleeping on the floor. The bed is a privilege. Now shut up. I’m going to bed. I do have work in the morning.”

I flinch at his words. “Can I... Can I rinse off my... my face so I don’t get... get anything on the floor?” I whisper.

But he ignores me, and heads out. He locks the door behind him.

I bite my bottom lip, unsure of what to do. I finally decide that he’d get angrier at me for not being clean, and I crawl back to the bathroom. I scrub my face until there’s nothing left on it, then crawl back to the bed. I look longingly at it. I have no blankets, and I doubt he’d allow me to use one of the pillows.

So I go to the side of the bed and lie down on the floor, staring up at the ceiling and wondering what the fuck I’d done with my life to deserve this.

CHAPTER 16

Stef

I DON'T KNOW how many days I've been relegated to the floor, forced into solitude while Hunter comes in only long enough to feed me and make sure I have water—like I really am nothing more than a pet—before leaving again.

Even though I try to earn his attention each time—crawling toward him and bowing my head—he ignores me completely. Sometimes he even nudges me aside with his foot to keep me from trying to perform the ritual I'd desperately wanted to avoid.

Today when he enters the room, I jolt upright like usual. I can't help the bitter gratitude I feel just from seeing him. I can't fuck up. I don't want him to leave again after another silent non-interaction.

Without hesitating, I crawl to him before he can get more than a few steps into the room, then bow my head until it's almost against the floor. Anything I have to do to keep him from deserting me again is better than the alternative, and for maybe the first time, the required greeting is genuine as he finally allows me the time to utter it.

“Thank you for... for taking me in, Master, and for not...” My voice catches, but I force myself to continue, “For not throwing me away like...” The words hurt. The words hurt so much. “Like the trash that I am.” I know my voice is barely audible, but I can't bring myself to speak them any louder.

I kiss his feet, bracing myself from some terrible fear he might decide to kick me while I'm down.

Hunter doesn't, thankfully, instead saying curtly, “We're doing something different today.” He sets a bag on the floor. “There's an outfit in there. Get dressed.”

I bite my bottom lip, but I peer into the bag and pull the... outfit out.

It reminds me of something I might've worn at Ntimacy, but nothing

there would've been nearly this elaborate—or expensive. The... *thing* is some kind of bondage gear, complete with straps and mesh and buckles, that looks vaguely like it might pass for a dress.

God, is he going to make me wear this in public?

I can't keep the edge of panic from my voice when I tell him, "I don't... I don't know how to put this on."

He lets out an impatient huff, like it's somehow my fault that I've never put anything like this on before. "Get up."

I scramble to my feet, and he holds out a hand for the outfit. I hold it up, fumbling with the straps as I try to figure it out like the puzzle it is.

He scowls at me. "It isn't that difficult," he snaps before snatching the dress back from me. "Do you need me to dress you, too?"

I bite back a whimper, hating that I feel so fucking helpless, but this is just out of my depth. I shake my head, but he ignores me, starting to pull the straps loose with a deft hand. All I can do is stand there, shivering, as he dresses me as dispassionately as if I were a doll.

I can see more easily now that the "fabric" the dress contains is sheer gauze that covers only small triangles over my nipples and my cunt. The rest of it is comprised of leather straps, which he tightens until my breasts are painfully constricted.

He loosely connects straps around the bottom of the outfit, turning it into a semblance of a skirt.

Despite all of the leather, I'm still pretty much naked, and I'm dreading finding out what he intends to do with me in this outfit.

He's too deliberate, too calculating, to simply have me wear this for his pleasure.

I hope I'm wrong.

I don't think I am.

He fastens the final strap around my throat, and it constricts me like the collar he made me wear before. His hand lingers there, stroking the leather, and I fight to keep from trembling too severely. My own fingers itch to touch the leather, to try to pry the thing off of me, but I keep my hands at my sides.

"Go brush your hair and clean up your face," Hunter orders. "Then come to the kitchen."

I nod quickly, scurrying off with my shoulders hunched. I scrub my face clean as quickly as I can, then brush my hair. I can't help but marvel at how soft it feels, how full, since coming here. I want to attribute it to the fancy

shampoo he bought for me, but I know it's equally because I'm no longer on the drugs, which means I'm able to eat more regularly.

I hover in the doorway, touching the frame and waiting for another order.

"There are trays of food in the fridge," he says without looking at me. "Wait here. When I ring this bell," he lifts a small bell and rings it, "you will bring the trays. There will be no delays. Got it?"

My heart sinks. He's not taking me anywhere, but this can only mean he's going to have people over. With me dressed like this... It doesn't bode well for me.

I nod quickly. "Yes, Master," I say, my voice hitching a little. "I... If you're having... company..." I nearly choke on the word, then force myself to swallow hard to try to clear my throat, "What should I call you?"

"Call me *Master*."

So these are people who know. Dread settles into my bones, and my lip wibbles. What kind of people will they be? Horrible, probably, like he often is when he's angry at me. Maybe that's why he's having them over, as yet another punishment for me.

I don't know how much more I can take.

I've apologized, I've begged, I've been as obedient as I can, I've done *everything* he's told me to do as quickly as possible.

It's still not enough.

I look at him, trying to find some sign in his expression that I'm doing this right, that I'm doing *anything* right, but his face is stoic.

He leaves the kitchen without another word, and silence descends over the condo.

For a moment, I force myself to simply breathe, trying to fill my lungs with the air my body keeps denying me as waves of panic run through me. But when the doorbell rings the first time, it's like a cold vise has gripped my throat, and I feel like I'm going to pass out.

I hear Hunter greet someone at the door, then a low whistle comes from the room. "Wow, have you redecorated?" an unfamiliar voice asks in an accent I vaguely place as British. I'm a little puzzled because there's nothing that looks new or personal in the condo. "I think there's a slight hint of color in the place."

Color? Where? I certainly don't remember any color.

A second voice chimes in, as cool as the first voice was almost... friendly, and devoid of any identifying accent. "Got an interest in video

games now? Nice to see you have hobbies, though... I think your other hobby sounds far, far more entertaining.”

I don't have to be told to know he means me, and my trembling gets worse.

“I'll show you my new hobby in a bit,” Hunter says, and I hate that they're calling me a hobby. I'm a person. “First, take a look at this,” he continues.

There's silence for a moment, and I wish I could see what they were doing. All I can do is stand there, though, uncomfortable in the tight dress-like thing.

The man with the British accent speaks. “This is way too specific to be just a prank.”

What is he talking about?

I frown, and if I dared, I'd get closer to the living room to try to figure out what they're talking about.

I don't dare, of course.

“Yeah,” Hunter says. “I don't know who it could be, though. I don't know how this person expects me to pay, either, with how vague they are.”

Pay? Pay what?

I only get more puzzled the more they speak so cryptically, like they're talking in code, but it's clear to everyone but me.

“The demand will come,” the second man says. “They're just trying to get you worked up first so they can scare you into compliance.” He snorts. “Well. They think that's what will happen, anyway.”

“I'm not paying them anything,” Hunter growls, his voice so different than it usually is.

No, that's not true. He sounded like that when he was full of rage at me.

“But I don't want to wait around for their next move,” Hunter continues before I can get too lost in my thoughts... in my memories of my personal hell.

“I know a good private investigator,” the probably-British guy says. “I can have them look into things.”

“And I can ask my IT guy to trace the email,” the other man adds. “He's very discreet.” A pause, then he continues, “He's got a few interests he doesn't want me to tell anyone about himself, and he knows how to stay quiet.”

I shudder, only able to imagine what kind of *interests* the IT guy has. It's

probably something like these men have, something that can only be classified as perverse and wrong.

“Thank you,” Hunter says, and while there’s reluctance in his voice, there’s gratitude, too. To hear him sound so expressive continues to be strange to me, and I wish I could see his face. But then he goes on, and my blood freezes in my veins. “Let’s have some snacks now.”

That’s my cue.

I go to the fridge, and I open it when the bell rings. I can’t hear what they’re saying anymore, but I’m sure it’s nothing nice.

The charcuterie tray is filled with meat, cheese, crackers, and some grapes that try to escape the confines of the platter. I balance it with all the skill I learned when serving men who tried to grope me and throw me off at every turn.

It’s only that experience that keeps me from dropping it when I see the other two men in the living room—one lean East Asian man, and a broad-shouldered and imposing Caucasian man. I think I can guess whose voice belongs to who.

I bow my head before Hunter chides me for staring, setting the tray down on the coffee table without a word.

I don’t know why I expected to be dismissed. That obviously doesn’t happen.

“Turn around for Chase and Drake,” Hunter orders me. “Let them see all of you.”

My cheeks heat up when I straighten, turning so both men can see all of me. I tilt my head up just a little so they can see the way the straps form a collar around my throat, the way it hugs me too tightly to be comfortable. I don’t dare look at them any longer, though, instead training my gaze against the plain white walls as I dimly wonder in the back of my mind where they’d gotten *color* from in this room.

“Delicious. You do like the waifish types, don’t you?” I don’t have to look at the men to know it’s the broad-shouldered one, the one whose voice is cold and cruel yet somehow filled with delight at my predicament.

Hunter doesn’t respond.

The other man’s gaze settles on me, and I squirm. “Love the outfit. Did they charge you by the amount of fabric it doesn’t use?”

Hunter huffs, and I can’t tell if he’s annoyed or amused. “I paid premium for the leather.”

I swallow hard. I imagine he did, though I don't know *why*. Just to amuse his friends? To titillate them? To tempt them? I don't know what he has planned, and that scares me more than anything.

I don't want to be the main event at another gangbang.

"Uh huh," the bigger man drawls. "Hey, girl. Enjoying serving this asshole right here?"

I blink, startled into staring at him. I glance at Hunter, not sure if he'll want me to speak at all, even if it is to lie and say I am.

Hunter gives him an annoyed glare. "Keep that up, and I'm kicking you out."

The Asian man laughs. "Better behave, Drake! Hunter tolerates no disobedience."

Drake. I commit the name to memory, for all that I never, ever intend to use it. That means the man with the accent has to be Chase.

"Can't blame a man for being curious," Drake says with a smirk. "Anyway, it's cute to see how she looks to you to see what to say."

"At least she's learned a little bit," Hunter says mildly. "She was certainly trying to prove how disobedient she could be a few days ago."

I flinch, quickly looking down at the floor. I want to tell him I'm sorry again, to get down on my knees and beg for his forgiveness, but this isn't the time or place for that. Instead, I stand there so they can keep looking at me.

"Did you train her to do anything else? Or just to stand there?" Chase says. "If I had one of my own, I'd probably do regular floggings. Just so she'd know where she stood with me."

I shudder at that, hunching my shoulders and hugging my arms against my chest.

"Let me guess," Drake says mockingly. He leans forward and grabs a few things from the tray, putting the meat and cheese onto a cracker. "He's trained her to do anything he says, but to just stand there when he isn't using her. If you wanted a sex doll, you could've gotten one for much cheaper, you know." He bites down, the sound obnoxiously loud in the otherwise quiet room.

"A sex doll can't obey orders," Hunter counters. "For example—bend over the ottoman and spread your legs wide, Stef."

I'm trembling, and tears are already pricking at the corners of my eyes, but I obey. It means I can't help but look at Drake where he's sprawled out across the couch, and I'm all too aware of just how open and vulnerable it

makes me to everyone in the room.

Hunter makes a sound that gives away nothing. “There’s a container next to the couch. Pick something from it and we’ll use it on her.”

Drake gets up, wiping the crumbs from his mouth. “You wanna decide, Chase?” He starts to dig through the container, whistling. “Nice selection here, but I’d go bigger, or more interesting. Like the ones with the knots or the ribbed sections. Gotta make sure she feels it, Hunter!”

“Jesus, Hunter, this flogger is practically vanilla,” Chase says.

I can’t see what he’s doing, but I know how any flogger can be *vanilla*. My shoulders tense and I bury my head as much as I can into the ottoman.

“I do want her to still be usable in the morning,” Hunter responds drily. “Are you going to pick something or not?”

I flinch. *Usable*. It’s not the kindest word, but then again, what about Hunter lately has really been kind?

Drake pulls out a dildo from the box, but I can’t get a good look at it. “So plain,” he says with a sigh. “I need to get you some better toys. Me and Chase will buy you some early Christmas presents to use on your pretty little living sex doll here.”

Living sex doll.

God, I hate this man.

“Here. This is the best one you have.” He tosses the dildo over to Hunter, and my eyes widen when I see just how large the toy is. And despite what Drake had said, the dildo isn’t *plain*. It has several large indentations, making it look like several increasingly large bulbs stacked on top of each other.

Hunter comes closer to me and taps the dildo against my ass.

My hands tremble, and it takes extreme effort not to let go of myself and close my legs.

“Her cunt will look good stretched out around this,” Hunter says, sliding the dildo between my ass cheeks. “Chase, did you want to add anything?”

“Hmm. One sec.” Chase gets up and leaves, which confuses me. We can all hear him opening the fridge and one of its drawers.

“We are not doing anything that will get my furniture dirty,” Hunter says loud enough for Chase to hear.

I whimper, and Drake smirks at me. I avert my eyes, not wanting to see the cruelty in his expression.

I hear another drawer open, and a few sounds I don’t recognize. I hold my breath. With my luck, it’s a cucumber or something equally horrible.

“Don’t worry! This isn’t messy!” Chase returns, but I still can’t see him or what he’s holding.

Drake and Hunter both make approving sounds, though.

“That’s acceptable.” Hunter squeezes my ass cheek. “Which one first?”

I look up over my shoulder at Hunter, pleading with him not to do whatever he’s about to do to me. I know it’s not going to make any difference though. He’s going to do it anyway, making sure to humiliate me in front of his friends, making me service these men... then he’s probably going to throw me away again until he’s ready to hurt me some more.

I can’t help the sob that escapes me.

“Haven’t even done anything and she’s already crying?” Drake asks, chuckling.

“Yes. She cries a lot,” Hunter says, and there’s a hint of something in his voice that I can’t parse. He’s probably just aroused.

Or maybe it’s starting to piss him off. I don’t know.

“What do you think?” Drake muses. “Dildo first? Or do you want to see her crying when you shove that cock inside her pretty little pussy?”

“Definitely the dildo first,” Chase says. “I have to finish shaping this, anyway.”

Hunter huffs softly. “If it gets lost, I have the tools to retrieve it.”

Retrieve it? Retrieve what?

No. No, no, no. I don’t want this. I don’t want any of this.

But I’m not going to say that aloud. I wouldn’t dare, not to Hunter when he’s alone after all that’s happened, and definitely not in front of his friends.

Hunter pushes the dildo against my cunt, and I whine. I’m not wet at all, and I’m so tense, but of course that doesn’t stop Hunter. He spreads my cunt wider and begins forcing the dildo into me.

The strange bulbous depressions mean that I have a small moment of relief that it’s “in,” only Hunter keeps pushing, and my cunt gets stretched wider again. The rigid silicone rubs against my insides in such a way that my body does start to lubricate itself, and I hate it.

My body isn’t meant to betray me like this.

It never has before. Not with Dylan, not with any of the men at Ntimacy.

What is it about Hunter and his careless control of me that gets my body responding this way? It isn’t right. It isn’t fair. I should never be reacting this way to his use of me.

But here I am reacting all the same, and soft whimpering sounds spill past

my lips as the discomfort slowly begins to turn into pleasure. I squirm, grasping the sides of the ottoman as I brace myself, and I close my eyes so I don't have to see Drake's cruel amusement or try to figure out what Chase is doing.

Finally the dildo stops, and I have to assume it's all the way inside me. It feels so big—bigger than any other dildo I've had in me. My cunt is stretched wide enough that I can feel a slight burn, and I try to control my breathing so I'm not sobbing.

"Okay, all done," Chase says, and he gets closer to me.

My eyes widen in panic. I don't want him touching me.

"Just hand it over," Hunter says, stopping Chase short.

I don't know if I want to know what *it* is, but I'm grateful Hunter isn't letting Chase touch me. I was afraid, so very fucking afraid, that all three of them were going to fuck me, and...

I remember all too well the times I'd been fucked by more than one man in rapid succession—at Ntimacy, and before.

I remember the time I'd been gang raped into unconsciousness at the club.

I remember...

My breathing becomes more ragged despite my attempts to retain control.

Hunter's hand slides up and exposes my asshole. Something wet and slimy pushes up against it.

I don't get more warning than that before he shoves it in.

It's surprisingly small, and I am thankful for small mercies, until I feel the first tingles, and itching, and *burning*.

At first, it's not too bad, but as the seconds tick by, it gets more and more intense. I gasp, and I squeeze my eyes closed, and I bite back a desperate plea.

It'll only make him angrier, crueler, and if I do anything wrong in front of his friends... I don't even want to imagine what the consequences might be.

But as the sensation grows more and more intense, I can't help it. "Please!" I beg. "Please, Master, it—" I bite my tongue, trying to stop myself from begging, and tears roll down my cheeks.

It's only a matter of time until he fucks me, until they all fuck me.

Then there's not going to be anything left of me.

I can't do this.

I don't have a choice.

Hunter ignores me and grabs the dildo again, pulling it out and thrusting it back into me.

Chase laughs and walks around to my front. “Fuck, she’s all red and crying. That’s hot.”

Drake groans, and I don’t want to see what he’s doing. I don’t want to know. I don’t want to see them getting ready to fuck me, to line up and take me one after another until I don’t know what’s up and down, until I pass out because they don’t let me breathe—

My breath starts coming in hiccuping sobs, and I bury my face in the ottoman as my body shakes from the force of my crying.

“Do you think you can get her to come?” Chase asks with vicious glee. “I always love that, when they’re suffering and in pain but clearly loving it too.”

“Yes,” Hunter answers, and I feel his fingers slide between my folds and tap against my clit. “Spread wider, girl.”

Girl.

I don’t even get a *good* girl. Just... girl. He might as well be crushing my heart.

I cry out, nearly choking on air as I spread my legs as much as I can. It feels good, impossibly so, but I can’t let myself fall into the pleasure.

I shake my head, but I don’t voice my protests, my complaints.

“I need to get one of those,” Drake says, sighing. He gets up, and I can sense him walking around me. He stands behind me, beside Hunter and crouches down.

I’m lost in a haze. Every thrust of the dildo jostles whatever the fuck they put into my ass, making more burning pain flare up alongside the pleasure. Hunter massages my clit at the same time, and there’s nothing I can do as my cunt clenches around the dildo, driving me closer and closer to orgasm.

“Please,” I beg, tears flowing freely down my cheeks. “Please, I... I...”

I don’t want this.

But I don’t dare say that.

They’re talking, but I have no idea what they’re saying anymore. I just feel it as my orgasm climbs, the sensations pushing me toward the edge—then over it. I cry out hoarsely, my entire body spasming, but I don’t collapse in relief onto the ottoman.

They’re not going to leave me alone. They’re all going to touch me until I can’t breathe. They’re going to hurt me over and over again and steal pleasure from me so they can amuse themselves with my misery.

I cry harder as my climax starts to fade, aware of nothing but the dildo in my cunt and that terribly painful thing in my ass.

“Did she come?” somebody asks.

“Maybe? Man, it’s so hard to tell with women.”

“Only if you aren’t attentive.”

It doesn’t matter which of them said what. They’re all terrible. I sob when somebody tugs on me and forces me to sit up.

Hunter. Hunter is pulling me into his arms, stroking my back, but the dildo and slimy thing are still inside me, and he makes me straddle his lap and rest against him.

“Shh,” Hunter says, stroking my hair. “Take a breath. We aren’t done showing you off yet.”

He sounds more pleased with me than he has in days.

I just want to disappear.

CHAPTER 17

Stef

I STARE up at the ceiling without blinking until my eyes burn and I'm forced to close them again—but I open them immediately, because I keep seeing Hunter and those men.

The thoughts transform into that terrible night at Ntimacy, when the men had fucked me over and over until I'd fallen unconscious. I haven't stopped having nightmares about it. I don't think I ever will.

The evening had passed in a blur over my climax, and...

I keep remembering my own desperation, my terrible sobs and growing anxiety and—

And the fact that Hunter Savage just didn't fucking care as he broke me down again and again and again.

I don't know how it's worse this time.

He didn't let the other two touch me, even though they certainly wanted to. He kept me all to myself, like the toy I am, and he'd been *pleased* as I'd dissolved into tears and panic.

Nothing else I do pleases him, not for long, and he's always quick to remind me of that fact.

He only wants my misery.

I hate it.

I hate him.

I'd thought he was starting to like me. The video games, the small smiles, the way he even fed me from his own hand in a way that had stopped feeling condescending and had started to be comforting... He'd been kind to me, if kinky, but I could handle a little kink.

What I can't handle is this incessant, never-ending erosion of my self-worth.

I already know it isn't much.

Dylan had drilled that into me when he'd told me to just suck a little cock or put out a little for our next hits. It was just my body; it didn't matter. It was worth it.

It had even *felt* worth it.

But this? This is different. This is far more intense, holds far more gravity, because Hunter has gotten into my *mind*.

I close my eyes again, and I see the start of the evening play out in my mind's eye. I'm not even sure what really happened past the first orgasm. My body feels like it's been touched all over, even though I don't think Hunter let either of them touch me—like a boy who doesn't want to share his toy with his friends, only proudly show it off.

I feel disgusting, and miserable, and I don't know what to fucking do with myself.

If I'm not thinking about Hunter, I'm thinking about Ntimacy; if I'm not thinking about either of them, I'm thinking about Dylan. I'm thinking about Alicia, the friend I'd lost, because with her, I might not have ended up on this path to begin with.

I've never let myself mourn her before, but I mourn her now.

I mourn everything.

I stagger up to my feet, ignoring the tray of food Hunter must've left before going to work this morning. I don't think I could eat if I tried, and it's all I can do not to just throw it against the wall.

He'd make me clean it up, probably with my tongue, because he doesn't abide disobedience or acts of rebellion. He doesn't allow for hesitation, for moments of uncertainty, for anything other than perfection.

I have never, ever been perfect, and the more I try to be, the harder it gets.

Tears blind me as I stumble to the bathroom, and I don't bother wiping them away. Even as I stare at the mirror in front of me, seeing tousled hair and bloodshot, dead eyes, there doesn't seem to be any point in trying to clear my vision.

It'll only show me what I already know in increasingly vivid detail.

I turn on the shower, putting the temperature as high as it'll go. I don't feel it when I step under the stream, even though it doesn't take long for my skin to turn red. I soap up the loofah and start scrubbing at my skin, trying to rid myself of the fingerprints I can't see but somehow still know exist. It doesn't help. I can still feel the touches, still feel the hot gaze of those eyes

upon me as they lusted so cruelly after me.

My throat tightens, and I can practically feel the night at Ntimacy where I got fucked into unconsciousness, too, when a man had kept his cock down my throat until I'd passed out. I don't know how many more men had used me after that, but that... That's somehow mild.

I didn't panic then.

I'd cried, but I hadn't felt this dead inside.

I can't get clean, but I leave the water running as I step out of the shower. I slip and fall, hard, onto my ass, and I wish I'd just hit my head and ended all of this. It would've been so much easier.

It would all be so much easier if I just... wasn't here anymore.

It's not like anyone would miss me.

It's not like anyone would even notice I'm gone at all.

I open my eyes, staring up at the mirror, and some whisper at the back of my mind reminds me that everything here is high quality. This is no cheap mirror. This is pure glass, and while it might not easily shatter... It will break under the right pressure.

I get up, decision made.

I don't think I'm strong enough to punch it, so I start searching the bathroom.

It's strange, how the more I look for something to break the mirror with, the calmer I get. It's like something inside has settled now that I've made the decision to escape all of this, and it lends me a sense of clarity that I don't remember feeling for a long, long time.

I take a deep breath, and I cross back into the bedroom as I think about the tray—the fancy thing Hunter uses to bring my meals in with, because he couldn't be bothered with something simple and flimsy.

No. It's strong, and it's stable, and I have no doubts that it'll do exactly what I need it to.

I dump the food onto the sheetless bed, and even as I survey the mess, I realize I don't care about it. He won't be able to punish me for it anymore.

I'll be the last person to punish myself.

I cross carefully back into the bathroom, my steps light on the tile. This time, I don't want to slip and fall. A concussion would give me a break, but it's not the sort of break I want.

It's not permanent enough.

The strange calm that has suffused me doesn't falter as I swing the tray

forward and slam it into the glass with a strength I didn't even know I had.

It cracks and shatters, several large shards landing on the bathroom counter.

Huh.

I guess desperation really does have a way of lending you the very thing you need in the moment.

This... This is what I need more than anything.

I don't need his fake fucking smiles, or the feigned interest he shows in my video games, or the way he only wants me for my body—and only as long as I'm *perfect*, because he can't have anything less from me.

I stare at the broken glass, reaching out to the sink to grab a sliver of it. It's unsurprisingly sharp, and it slices into my fingers and palm. Droplets of red start to plop down onto the flawless white sink, and I marvel for a moment at just how much of a mess he's going to have to clean up.

I doubt he can get his housekeeper to clean *this* up.

Maybe if I felt something, I'd have been amused that he'd have to cover this up somehow.

What a fucking inconvenience it'll be for him.

My hand already feels as numb as my thoughts, the pain somewhere distant, and I'm grateful for that. I clutch my prize—the sharp, sharp piece of glass that'll be the end of me—and head for the shower.

The water is still hot, and I sit down beneath it. I can't even feel it scalding me any longer. I can only feel the glass in my hand as I watch the droplets of red swirl down the drain, and I sigh. It's going to be over soon. So very, very fucking soon. All I have to do...

The blinding pain is unexpected amidst the numbness that's settled over me, but it doesn't last long before it turns into relief. If it hurts that much, it has to be deep enough. Red flows smoothly from my arm, and I stare at it in wonder.

It was surprisingly easy.

The other wrist isn't as easy to slash, though, because it's my non-dominant hand and I've already started to lose feeling in my fingers. But I can't risk doing this half-assed, because if he was angry at me before...

How angry will he be at my corpse?

Laughter threatens to bubble up within me, and I rest my head against the back of the shower. I keep the glass in my hand, just in case, but the blood doesn't stop flowing.

I close my eyes and smile as it all fades away.

CHAPTER 18

Hunter

THE FIRST THING I notice when I open the door to Stef's room is the mess on the bed. I huff in annoyance, but she isn't anywhere to be seen.

The shower is running though, so she must be there. I open that door, and...

The mirror is shattered.

"This petty rebellion won't get you anything," I say out loud, although my voice catches in my throat.

It's just a rebellion. A cry for attention.

I go to the shower. The shower door is ajar, and water has escaped, creating a large puddle around it. There's a red tint to the mess.

"Stef, get out," I order roughly, pulling the door open.

She doesn't answer.

She doesn't answer, because she's passed out against the corner of the shower stall.

Her skin is pale, almost as white as the tile.

The only color is the watered-down red flowing from her wrists.

I stare, and my breath hitches, and for one long second, I can't see or hear anything.

Then I come to my senses, and I lurch forward. I turn off the water and hold my hand in front of her mouth, press my fingers to her throat. It's hard to tell, but she's still breathing. She still has a pulse, even if it's faint.

Fuck.

Fuck!

I pull my phone out of my pocket, and I'm amazed that my hands are steady as I dial 911. As soon as I'm connected, I calmly say, "Hello, my name is Dr. Hunter Savage. My girlfriend attempted suicide. She's lost a lot

of blood, so I'm going to need..." I give the operator more emotionless, clinical detail, then my address. They try to keep me on the line, but I have other things to do. I hang up on the operator, then go for the first aid kit I have stashed under the sink.

I bandage her wrists and hands up, and once I'm sure the wounds are as sealed as I can get them, I pick her up and carry her out to the living room.

She needs a blanket. Her body is cold and clammy.

I set her down on the couch and go to the linen closet, pulling out three blankets. I get them around her, gratified when I notice her lips trembling.

Shivers are good. Shivers mean she's still alive.

I should... I need to...

No, I can't panic. Panicking won't keep her alive. I've done what I can so far.

She'll need clothes though. I go back to my bedroom and begin packing a bag with things we'll need in the hospital. I pack clothes for myself, too, because I'm not going to leave her side.

My intercom rings, and I let the EMTs in.

"Sir, what happened?" one of them asks as they place Stef onto the stretcher.

I stare for a second. "I don't... know? I went to work. I got back and found her in the shower. Her wrists were..."

That satisfies the EMTs, because it's such a standard answer. Nobody knows why suicidal people commit suicide. It's always a shock, unexpected.

I've always hated those cases during my residency, having to do my damndest to save the people who didn't even want to live. Why waste resources on that trash, when there are others who do want to survive?

But Stef isn't trash. Maybe they weren't trash either, not to the people who cared for them. Maybe...

No matter how I feel, I can't let Stef die.

I ride with the ambulance to the closest hospital. It's the one I direct my patients to when it's time to deliver their babies. The EMTs rush her into urgent care, and I try to follow, but one of the nurses stops me.

I vaguely recognize her, but I have to glance at her name tag to remember who she is.

"Dr. Savage, hi," Miriam says, tablet in hand. "Can you fill out the paperwork for your friend?"

I look at the tablet, and I frown at it. "I want to be there. I can—"

“This isn’t your area of expertise,” she chastises gently. “You’ll help out more by doing all this.”

One of the boxes at the top is *Family Name*.

I realize I don’t actually know her last name.

I take the tablet and go to sit down in the waiting area. I fill out as much as I can. No insurance information, address—my own. Next of kin—me.

Last Name.

Finally I add “Smith,” because it’s as good a name as any.

I go to hand the tablet back. “Whatever it costs, I’ll pay it,” I say to the receptionist. He nods and gives me a sympathetic look.

Then the only thing left for me to do is wait.

How do people do this? How do people sit here, waiting, and waiting, not knowing what’s going to happen?

My phone buzzes a few times, but I ignore it. Several people stare at me, and I wonder why until I realize that I’m still wearing my suit, and it hasn’t dried yet from when I’d stepped under the shower.

Why hadn’t I changed first? Normally I change before I go to see Stef. I hadn’t even taken my shoes off.

Was there something different today? I’d heard the shower, or there was a smell... But that’s ridiculous. There was no smell, not with the water pelting down on her and washing the blood away.

Those thoughts are still circling in my mind when a doctor approaches me. “Dr. Savage?”

I glance up at the man. I think I’ve seen him around, but we aren’t in the same department.

...Of course we aren’t. This is emergency services. We aren’t here to deliver any babies.

“Yes?” I say after too long of a pause.

“I’m Dr. Henrikson. We’ve stabilized her for now. Please, come this way so we can discuss things.”

I follow Henrikson to the ‘bad news’ room, as we called it during my residency, where the doctors tell the patients’ loved ones all the terrible things that have happened.

No, it’s also the room where they tell them good things. Fuck. I need to snap out of this daze.

“Okay, so, first of all, good job on bandaging her up. You probably helped save her life,” Henrikson says.

“Yes,” I answer. I look at the couch in the corner of the room, but I don’t want to sit down. I just want to go to Stef’s room.

“I just wanted to ask a few follow-up questions. She’s your girlfriend, you said?” Henrikson asks. “Do you have any idea what might have caused this?”

“I have no idea.” My voice is steady, numb.

Of course I fucking know why she did it. Because she’s an addict, she doesn’t value her life, she thinks she can waste her body and her mind and...

...and because of how I’ve been treating her these past several days.

Because of everything since the party.

It’s my fault.

I clench my fists. “I want to see her.”

“She’s not awake yet. We want to keep her for observation.” Henrikson eyes me strangely. “A lot of the nurses here will be disappointed to find out you have a girlfriend, you know.”

“I don’t care what they fucking think,” I snap back at him. “Ask your questions, then let me see her.”

He bristles a little, but he must be used to this kind of reaction, too, because he manages to remain pleasant as he goes through his list of questions. I barely remember my answers. Whatever I say must satisfy him, at least.

“She’s in room 208,” Henrikson says at the end of it. “But don’t expect much.”

I don’t expect anything at all. As long as I can see her.

I don’t quite run, but I’m definitely rushing as I make my way through the hospital to Stef’s room. It’s small but private, and I’m grateful for that.

There’s a nurse checking Stef’s vitals, and she glances at me when I enter. “Doctor... Savage, right?”

“Yes,” I answer. Everybody seems to know me around here, even though I don’t know any of them. “I was told I could see her now.”

“Well, Ms. Smith isn’t in critical condition anymore, but she’ll be under observation for a while.” There’s a somewhat suspicious look in her eye. “Do you know why she was naked when it happened?”

I stare at her and shake my head. “She didn’t want to get her clothes wet?”

Or because she had no clothes at all, and was sleeping on the floor, and I was treating her like a dog.

The nurse sighs. “Yeah. A lot of patients do the strangest thing, like they don’t want to inconvenience anybody so they choose to... anyway.” Her expression softens. “I’m sorry that this happened, and it’s good you found her when you did. You’ll have to support her through the next few days. Months. Depression can be a lifelong thing.”

I don’t know what she expects from me. I don’t answer, and after a while, she coughs awkwardly and heads to the door. “You know the drill. Ring that buzzer if you need a nurse.”

Once she’s gone and the door is shut, I pull one of the chairs closer and sit down at Stef’s side.

Her hair is matted, her skin is still pale, the hospital gown looks terrible on her... but she’s alive and breathing. That really is all that matters.

I reach out to touch her jaw, and I’m gratified by the warmth I feel.

I’m sorry, I think.

I rub my eyes against the impending headache. Fuck.

What do I do now?

I get no answers, and my phone buzzes again. I fumble to check the messages just to have something to do. I need to cancel my patients for tomorrow anyway.

There’s a new anonymous email.

Did u know there’s a mole on the inside of Stef’s thighs, right next to her cunt?

I do know that. But how the fuck does this person know?

No, that’s a dumb question. There have been many, many men who have seen Stef in various states of undress. Hundreds of clients who have passed through Ntimacy, watching Stef awkwardly dance, watching her *cry*.

Anger clutches my chest, and I welcome it. Anger is better than that feeling of helplessness that’s overwhelmed me these past few hours.

I dial Giulio’s number, and I’m not surprised when he responds with that distinct quality of being on speaker.

“What’s up, doc? Good of you to call, I actually wanted to schedule an appointment anyway, so—”

“What’s Stef’s last name?” I ask, interrupting whatever inanity he was about to spew.

Giulio pauses. “Her... last name? Does it matter?”

No, except it suddenly feels like the most important thing in the world. I know nothing about Stef. I don't know her last name, I don't know where she's from, I don't even know if Stef is her real name.

"Just tell me," I bark out.

"Uh... Damien, do you know?" Giulio calls out. Damien Rossi is his consigliere, the one who does a lot of the day-to-day management for Giulio.

"No. We probably have her old wallet somewhere, but I don't remember. Her family were nobodies though." Damien's voice gets closer. "Dr. Savage, we need to make an appointment for Vanessa. She's pregnant—"

"*Probably* pregnant, judging by how she puked up her fancy dinner and made two lines appear on a stick."

"I don't fucking care," I snap at them. "Call my office and make an appointment during normal business hours. And find me her information."

Shit. I need to calm down. I need to stay in control.

Giulio's voice is a lot less amused when he answers. "Careful, buddy. I like you, and I treat my friends right. But being friends, that's a mutual arrangement. And if you don't want to offer me respect, well... Stef's information isn't the only thing I've got on you."

It's hard to remember sometimes that Giulio Pavone isn't just the jester he pretends to be. He has no qualms about selling women, or drugs, or any other manner of illegal goods. The Pavones have been friends with my family for decades—and that friendship included their support in the Savage dynasty's political ambitions.

Sometimes that support meant doing the dirty work that couldn't be done openly.

I take a breath, and say, a lot more steadily, "Apologies. I'm currently under a lot of stress. I would... appreciate it... if you could find that information. And of course I'll see Vanessa. I'll tell the office staff to rearrange my calendar to fit you in."

"That's better. I'll have somebody track down that wallet for you."

"Thank you," I say through gritted teeth.

Giulio ends the call, and I'm left with the quiet of the hospital room, just Stef's labored breathing filling the silence.

For the first time in my life, I don't know what to do.

I can't lose her though.

I *won't* lose her.

CHAPTER 19

Stef

I WAKE UP.

That in and of itself is an unpleasant surprise, and even in my half-conscious state, I know I shouldn't have. I know I was desperate to stay asleep forever.

As I struggle to open my eyes, I see the reason why.

Dr. Hunter Savage.

My master.

My owner.

I have to blink a few times, because even though I see him, I don't quite recognize him. I've never seen Hunter disheveled like this, looking badly like he needs a shower and a shave—and in a t-shirt and sweatpants?

I have to still be unconscious.

But why would I dream about him?

The steady sound of beeping finally infiltrates my awareness, and I realize that I'm in a hospital room. A glance down at my arm shows an IV in my vein—and not the kind I want to have in me. Everything is a little fuzzy, and while I know there should be pain, I can't feel it.

I squeeze my eyes closed, not wanting to have to talk to him. With any luck, he won't realize I've woken up at all.

But luck has never been on my side.

"Stef," he whispers, reaching out for my hand. He strokes it surprisingly gently, and I open my eyes to look warily up at him. I try to shy away, but my entire body feels floaty and distant, and besides, wouldn't he just get angrier at me for disobeying him like that?

I brace myself for his accusations. Trash, filth, idiot... whatever words he can find to remind me that I'm the lowest of the low.

For a long moment, all he does is stare at me.

Then, to my shock, he says, "I'm sorry."

I blink at him.

I can't have heard him correctly. There's no possible universe in which he'd apologize to me. "No one's watching," I mumble, despite knowing I'm only going to sink myself deeper. I'm not even trying to be bold or defiant, though; I'm just that fucking despondent. "You don't have to... to pretend."

"I'm sorry," Hunter repeats, and he squeezes his eyes closed for a second. When he opens them, I realize they have a red hint to them.

He can't possibly have been crying, but it's hardly like he'd have done drugs, so I don't know how to explain it.

"I..." Hunter takes a breath. "I shouldn't have... demeaned you. I don't want to lose you. I don't want you to die."

I try to stare at him, but I can't focus. It's hard to think, harder still to try to reconcile his words with what I know of him.

With the things he's said to me.

With the things he's *done* to me.

I close my eyes again, taking in my own deep, shuddering breath. I am bone weary, ready to just collapse into unconsciousness again, but sleep evades me. "Why?" I whisper, not even really understanding what I'm asking. Why did he hurt me, why did he degrade me, why did he treat me so poorly, why did he expect so much of me...

Why is he pretending to care?

"At the fundraiser," Hunter starts. He lets go of my hand and balls his hands up into fists. "When I saw you high again. When I saw you on your knees for those other men. I was so angry that you were... hurting yourself. But it felt like you were trying to hurt me. I thought you were doing better. Eating again. Being healthier. And I'd... trusted you." He takes a deep breath and unclenches his hands. "But I reacted badly."

I can't help but laugh, an ugly sound that I don't even recognize as my own. "You reacted... badly," I repeat, but I can't even be angry at him. Tears start to roll down my cheeks as I think about that night. He'd reacted terribly, yes, but... I'd deserved it, in a way. I'd broken what little trust he'd started to have in me. It doesn't mean what he did was right—it isn't—but I can't even hate him for hating me.

How could I, when I hate myself more than he ever could?

"I went too far," Hunter says in a strained voice. "I focused on my own

pain and ignored yours.” He chuckles darkly. “While I was sitting here, I realized... I don’t even really know your name. I know nothing about you. Only that you enjoy video games.”

“And that I’m trash,” I mumble, though there’s no venom or bitterness in my voice. I’m just... tired. “I bet you think people who do... what I tried to do”—failed to do—“are even worse than drug addicts.”

Hunter lowers his head before answering, “Yes. I did think that. I used to see it a lot during my residency. I wondered... Why bother helping them, if they don’t want to be helped? That’s why I went into obstetrics. Everybody wants life there.”

I can’t help but think that’s not entirely true. I know people who don’t really want babies, who are forced to have them anyway. He believes what he wants, though, and he always will. There’s no point in trying to tell him differently, even if he seems more open to conversation than he ever has been.

He shakes his head. “But... I didn’t know any of their circumstances. I know yours, and... and I know your choices didn’t happen in a... vacuum. I...” He curses and bites his lip. “I’m sorry.”

“Isabela,” I say abruptly, not wanting to talk about those *choices* that weren’t choices at all. “Isabela Diaz. I... I was raised in the west side of New Bristol. I...” My throat feels like it’s closing around the words. “I’m a drug addict. I’m weak, pathetic trash. That’s... That’s all you need to know about me.”

“Isabela.” Hunter takes my hand again and squeezes gently. “I want to help you get strong.”

It feels wrong to hear my name. It hasn’t been my name in months, not since I got kicked out by my parents and only had Dylan to turn to.

“I’m not Isabela anymore,” I say quietly. I’m not that same girl, and I never will be. “Just... call me Stef. All right?”

Hunter nods. “Of course, Stef.” Then he gives me a strange smile. “I want to offer you whatever you want, but I don’t want to let you leave me either. I... if I let you out of my sight, would I ever see you again? Would you be safe?”

I stare at him for a long, long moment—long enough to where I start to feel uncomfortable in the silence, but he doesn’t pressure me. He doesn’t force me to answer, and it’s strange. Slowly, I shake my head. “No,” I say quietly, swallowing around the lump in my throat. “I don’t... I don’t like who

I was when I... when I made my own decisions.” I manage a brittle smile. “I was starting to like you, you know.”

He looks startled. “You... were? Nobody likes me, Stef. I’m an asshole.”

I snort, the sound surprising even me. “You are,” I agree. “But you’re also an asshole who wants to find out if the wife did it.” I let out a slow breath. “I don’t always like the way you’ve done things with me, but I... I’ve felt better than I did in a long time. I felt healthy. I don’t look like a skeleton. My tears don’t bother you. I don’t like having to make decisions.” I realize I’m babbling, and I stare down at the IV in my vein. “But I want to feel like a person,” I whisper.

“I’m sorry,” Hunter repeats. “And... I like making decisions. If...” He sighs and runs his hand through his hair. “We could... work on rules. Set... limits. Or a... safe word.”

My lips twitch into a small smile, just for a moment before I rest my head back against the pillow. I feel utterly drained, and I probably shouldn’t be making decisions right now. But I need the reassurance. “I don’t want you to throw me away,” I say, wiping at my tears in frustration.

“I won’t. I wasn’t going to.” Hunter leans forward and clasps his hands. “I don’t think I would have gotten so angry if I didn’t want to keep you. If I wasn’t already invested. And now... I really don’t want to lose you, Stef.”

I bite my bottom lip. I want to believe him. I really, truly do. “Is that how you’re always going to act when you get angry at me?” I ask in a tiny voice.

“No.” Hunter shakes his head. “That’s one of the rules or limits we can discuss.” He chuckles briefly. “I went to Giulio because I didn’t want a relationship with rules or limits. But now... I’d rather have that than not have you at all.”

I believe him. I don’t know why, but I do. “You know I don’t have a choice,” I say, still staring at the IV. “Without you, I’d be stuck somewhere worse than even Ntimacy. I’d be dead within a year, if even that.”

That’s not the reason I want to stay with him, but I don’t know how to say that.

Hunter purses his lips. “Do you want me to help you get back to your family? Is that better than staying with me?”

The thought of trying to go back to my family is worse than staying with him. Not worse than being forced somewhere worse than Ntimacy, but... I don’t want to go back to them.

“Even if they accepted me back,” and they wouldn’t, “I’d lose myself

again.” I squeeze my eyes shut, wiping again in a futile effort to get rid of my tears. “I like a lot of what you do to me. I don’t know why. I shouldn’t. But I’m also...” I look at him. “I’m also *bored* and *lonely* and it makes me want to do awful things because I feel like I’m just a toy you put on the shelf when you’re done with me.”

“Because that’s what you were,” Hunter says. “And I didn’t trust you not to... not to run. Not to do something that would ruin things.” He straightens his shoulders. “But that’s one thing we can change. I won’t lock you up. You can have free rein of the condo. Did you have other hobbies? I have another spare room we could convert for you.”

It sounds impossible, and amazing, and like something far more than what I’m worth—and that drops my mood again. “I don’t deserve all of that,” I say, choking back a sob. “God, I don’t... I don’t. I’m just a fuckup, Mas—” I realize where I am, and amend, “Hunter.”

Hunter scoots his chair closer and strokes my face, making me go still. “I’ll help you. You’ll grow strong with me. You’ll... you’ll get healthy, and we’ll work on things until you won’t feel the need to... make these choices.”

“And what if I fuck up again?” I whisper, because I need to hear it again. I need him to tell me that he won’t shatter me again. “What will you do to me?”

“I can’t promise I won’t get angry. But I’ll... I’ll control myself. We can talk about what you want from me when we’re home.” He presses his forehead against mine. “I just want you to be safe and healthy, Stef.”

Home.

It’s such a foreign word to me that I don’t know how to react to it. “Are you going to punish me for making a mess of the... the bed and... and the mirror?”

He stares at me, then laughs. It’s not a cruel laugh though, but actually joyful, and it makes me smile despite myself. “I forgot about that. No, I’ll tell the housekeeper to deal with it.”

I feel bad for the housekeeper, whoever they are, but I’m mostly relieved I don’t have to do it.

There’s so much I want to talk about, so much I want to discuss, but... in the end, if I’m going to make this leap, I realize I have to trust him to take care of me. “Okay, I whisper, touching his cheek with my bandaged hand.

I don’t tell him that I really don’t feel like I have a choice. He seems so hopeful, and it’s strange, and I don’t want to ruin this moment.

There will be plenty of time to do that later on, I'm sure, because despite his words... He wants perfection, and I'm not perfect.
But that's a problem for another day.

CHAPTER 20

Stef

I BREATHE a sigh of relief when Hunter unlocks the door to the condo a few days later, beyond ready to be out of the hospital and back *home*.

It feels like home now, too, even though the stark white of the place is a little less than welcoming. Maybe I can talk him into adding a few throw pillows and a blanket for the couch that have some sort of color... But I'm getting ahead of myself, and really, I don't know anything about decorating.

Maybe it's dumb to want to leave some sort of a mark here, but I kind of want to see if Hunter is in earnest about making this my home too.

I still don't know what strings he pulled to keep me from being sent to some sort of institution after... *after*, but I'm grateful for it. The last thing I need is to constantly be on high alert that I might say something about Ntimacy, or Giulio, or that I didn't get to Hunter's by choice.

No one would understand my decision to stay, too. At the very least, Hunter would seem like an abusive boyfriend, and any mental health professional I saw would think I needed to leave.

Maybe they'd be right.

Maybe they'd set me on a path where I could take care of myself, where I wouldn't end up with someone like Dylan, where I wouldn't end up in a place like Ntimacy because of drug debts.

The thought makes my heart squeeze painfully, because in the end, I'd be alone all over again. I'd only end up someone else's prey—someone who doesn't even pretend to care.

I look up at Hunter, fidgeting as he closes the door behind us. I don't know what to say now. It feels like a new beginning, yet it's also a continuation.

At least I'm wearing clothes this time.

“Do you need to rest?” Hunter asks. “Your bedroom is clean now, but the couch and my bed are available too.”

I shake my head, even though the offer of his bed is more than I’d expected. “I got enough rest at the hospital,” I say with a weak smile.

If I hadn’t cut up my hands so badly when I’d grabbed the glass from the mirror, I’d probably press my luck and try to talk him into letting me play more of the video game, but...

I pause for a moment, then I blurt out, “I still want you to be my master.”

Hunter looks at me in stunned silence. “What?”

I slowly get to my knees in front of him, pressing my face against his leg. “I...” I swallow hard. “I don’t trust myself,” I whisper. “You were... You were right not to trust me.”

“Stef...” Hunter’s breath hitches. “You were right not to trust me, too.”

Maybe. But I can tell he enjoys me like this. I kiss his bare foot, grateful that he’d removed his shoes and socks as soon as we’d stepped inside, and say, “Thank you for taking me in, Master. Thank you for saving me.”

I won’t say the other part. But this much feels right.

Hunter inhales sharply, and answers, “I promise to take care of you, Stef. I promise to make you strong.”

Even if it kills me, I can’t help but think. Because his methods damn near did that.

“I just...” I bury my face against his leg. “I don’t have anyone but you. I had... I had someone, but he sold me to Ntimacy when the drugs got too expensive.”

Hunter strokes my scalp gently. “I won’t sell you. I just... I can see that you’re a beautiful person, Stef. And I want you to shine.” He scoffs at himself. “I know my actions and words don’t reflect that.”

I close my eyes, simply enjoying the feel of his fingers running along my head. “I...” My voice wobbles, but I manage—somehow—to find the courage to say, “I just want... three things. Everything else is up to you. Everything. Can I ask for them?”

Three sounds like a lot when I’m putting it that way, and I cringe. He has no reason to give me anything, to accommodate me at all. But I bite my tongue instead of taking the words back. This might be the only time I’ll ever have the courage to ask.

“Tell me,” he says with enough sternness to sound like an order. His hand remains gentle on my head though, reminding me of the days we’d spent with

me against his thigh, simply relaxing.

I take a moment to breathe, clutching at the fabric of his pants. “Please don’t sell me, or threaten to sell me,” I begin, almost choking on the words because it seems like a huge thing to ask. “If you want me to leave... I’ll go.” I don’t know what I’d do, or *where* I’d go, but I’d disappear from his life. “I’ll never tell anyone about this, or anything. I promise. That’s... that’s the most important one.”

I finally risk a glance up at him.

“All right,” Hunter says. “I promise not to sell you, or even threaten to sell you.”

I feel like I can breathe again. “I don’t... Please don’t let other people... use me.” That seems big, too, like something that’s impossible for him to agree to.

“I wouldn’t,” he answers sharply, making me flinch. “I don’t share. I...” Hunter sighs. “Chase and Drake wanted to see you, but I would never have let them touch you.”

Tears well up in my eyes. “I was so scared you would,” I say before burying my face against his leg again. “I don’t... I don’t ever want to be... I don’t want to be a whore again. I know it’s a lot to ask, but...” But it’s not like he needs the money, or the drugs. Unless he wants to pass me around to his friends, he doesn’t have to. “You will never touch another man again,” Hunter says vehemently. “I don’t share, and I’m jealous, and possessive. As you’ve already experienced.”

I nod. I know blowing those men in the bathroom had been my choice the last time—sort of—but I don’t want a repeat of that. Even for drugs. Even for anything.

“I know you’ll... need to punish me sometimes,” I go on quietly, meekly, “but I don’t think I can handle the... the solitude thing again. Where I couldn’t hear or see or anything. Your other punishments make me cry, but that’s okay because you like my tears... Right?” I look beseechingly up at him.

“I love your tears.” Hunter brushes his thumb underneath my eye.

I lean into the touch, wanting it, wanting more of it—needing more of it.

“But I can work with that.” He looks a little unsure before he continues, “I want to mold you into your best self. And that will be hard. You’ll have to trust me. But if there’s... if real issues crop up again, tell me and I’ll consider them. I can’t handle seeing you like that again.”

I don't know that I can *trust* him, not really, but I don't know if I could truly trust anyone at this point. Everyone I've trusted has left me, and that realization makes it all seem more solid, somehow. I can't blame Alicia for the car accident, but I can't deny that her death led to so many worse things.

"I was just so desperate," I say, swallowing hard as the memories crash into me all over again. "Everything... Everything hurt, and I just wanted it to stop."

Hunter squats down and carefully takes my hands into his, then guides me to stand. Once upright, he pulls me into an embrace and kisses the top of my head. "I'm sorry," he repeats for what must be the hundredth time in the past few days.

I don't know what to think of his apologies. They sound sincere, but I also don't know how long this sort of contrite behavior is going to last.

"Let's go sit down on the couch. We can watch TV, or I can play one of your games."

That startles a laugh out of me. "You think you can?" I ask, tentatively teasing him.

Hunter scoffs. "It can't be that hard."

We wander over to the couch and arrange ourselves with my head on his lap while he powers up the system with the controller. He manages to start up the game, but the problems start almost immediately when he twirls the camera around instead of moving the character.

"It's the other joystick," I point out.

It takes Hunter a few tries to figure it out, and with more of my guidance, he does manage to direct the main character to talk to other figures. During the scripted scenes, he strokes my hair.

It's nice and dreamy. This is the Hunter I like.

I wish it could always be this way, but I'm not confident that it will be.

Dylan was nice sometimes, too, in the beginning.

When he turns off the console, I look up at him, but he's not in a hurry to move—and neither am I. "What do you think?" I tentatively ask. "Going to be a gamer?"

"I prefer watching," Hunter says, placing the blue controller on the stark white coffee table. "But I'll play until you're healed."

I can't help but smile at that, and I hesitate before turning my head a little in his lap to gaze up at him. My mouth is right by his cock, and I'm so tempted to ask if I can... What? Get a reward for not dying?

Thank him for doing something that's just for me?

"Can I..."

He gazes down at me, and I still can't read those icy blue eyes of his. "Can you what?"

A shiver runs through me, and it's all I can do to keep meeting his eyes. "Master," I say softly. "May I please... suck your cock?"

Hunter inhales sharply, and I tense, afraid that I made him mad again. But he strokes my head gently, and he says, "You may. Get on your knees on the floor, and keep your hands at your sides. I don't want to see them moving. If you move your hands or strain them in any way, I'll be forced to end things."

A touch of warmth blossoms in me at the words. He's worried about me doing further damage to my hands, even to the point where he'd stop letting me pleasure him if I do.

Would that be a punishment? I don't know, not really. I want this, though, so I have to say *yes*, it would be.

But it's a punishment I'd be able to take without wanting to die.

I sit up and slide to my knees on the floor in front of him, nuzzling his cock through his pants. I don't think I can release him from their confines without the use of my hands, and I peer anxiously up at him in a silent plea for help.

He nods at me and undoes his belt and fly, pulling his cock out. He isn't hard at all yet, which is so different from usual, but I find it oddly comforting, too. He wasn't getting off on having my head in his lap. He was being nice for no other reason than to be nice.

I don't quite know what to make of that, but I like it.

I rub my cheek against his cock at first, just enjoying the feel of the velvety softness against my skin. I could've lost all of this. I could've lost *everything*.

At the same time, though—and I'd never say this aloud—maybe things never would've changed, never would've gotten *better*, if I hadn't done something drastic.

That hadn't been why I'd done it, but it seems almost like a blessing in disguise.

He starts to play with my hair while I luxuriate in the feeling of his cock next to me, starting to harden but still so undemanding. I'm getting to set the pace, which is beyond bizarre, but I'm grateful for it.

I realize I don't actually know how he likes to touch his cock. He usually

sets the pace, and sometimes he'd give orders to suck harder or to lick, but I don't know if he has any particularly sensitive spots, or if he prefers one type of pressure over another.

I can't believe I *want* to know—because I genuinely want to, not because I *need* to for my own well-being.

“How would you like me to do this, Master?” I ask quietly after several moments, after I feel him respond to my little teases and licks and brief touches to my mouth.

“Go slowly,” Hunter says, still playing with my hair. “The only thing I want to see is your hands staying right there at your sides.”

It makes me feel surprisingly warm inside to know he cares so much—or maybe he doesn't really care, but it's an exercise in obedience. It's an exercise I'm grateful for, though, because I don't need to do more damage to my hands.

I nod, continuing to tease and lick and briefly take the tip of him into my mouth. Slowly at first, then with a bit more fervor, I start to suck on the head of his cock.

I can't say I ever liked sucking cock. I usually only sucked Dylan's because he whined and whined that it was a basic right and all girlfriends did this. The men that I'd serviced beyond him, well, they hadn't necessarily been clean or pleasant.

It's different this time. Hunter smells good, and I genuinely do want to see him lose himself to pleasure. Maybe I shouldn't. Maybe I'm being an idiot, but today has been so warm and almost magical that I want to do this for him. I keep sucking and licking, testing out his different reactions.

Hunter doesn't make a lot of noise, but I notice the hitch in his breathing and how his hand on my hair tightens and loosens in turn. When I look up, his face is redder than before, and his eyes have softened.

I want to see him have more of a reaction, to lose himself to my touch and know that it's simply because of my skill. I've never been particularly flattered by a man losing control on my behalf, but with Hunter, it's entirely different.

I take more of his cock into my mouth, sucking it down until it breaches my throat. I swallow hard around it, coaxing it in deeper, and I have to fight to keep my hands at my sides instead of reaching up to rest my hands on his thighs.

Knowing it's an order makes it easier. He wants my hands at my sides, so

I should leave them there. I don't need to worry about what to do with them. I don't have to overthink things or try to do any more than simply this.

Hunter thrusts forward, but he pulls back almost immediately—like he'd done it by accident. I loosen my jaw and glance up at him again.

“Carry on,” Hunter says softly, his face flushed.

I like that he might've lost control, even a little, that his body might be reacting without his mind's explicit permission, and I smile as I take him back into my mouth. My chin is slick with precum and saliva at this point, but I can't bring myself to care.

Or maybe I'm proud of that, of being messy and bringing him pleasure and having the evidence of it on my face. It doesn't feel humiliating like it usually would. It just feels... good.

I take him deep again, then ease up, teasing him and sucking in earnest.

It doesn't take much longer before I feel his hands tightening in my hair and his thighs trembling next to me. I consider pulling back, but I can't exactly finish him off with my hand.

I suck harder. Hunter groans and arches his head back as he releases into my mouth. I swallow it all as fast as I can, although some cum dribbles onto my chin. I don't care. It's proof that I've done a good job, and I gently suckle him as he stays there for a moment until it gets too much for him to bear.

Only then do I pull back, feeling good about this—about myself—as I look up at him and lick the cum from my bottom lip.

My heart flutters when I see the dazed smile on his face.

A split second later, the expression is gone. Hunter reaches down to wipe at my jaw. “Good girl,” he says. “You managed to keep your hands still, too.”

I nuzzle against his hand, taking in his praise with a desperate need for more. But there's so much warmth, so much that's good about it, that I can only smile at him. “Thank you, Master,” I manage breathlessly after a moment, wanting to say *something*, even if it's not that much. I rest my head against his inner thigh, my eyes fluttering closed.

Hunter keeps stroking my head, and I'm happy to simply doze against his thigh, until he says, “Get up here.” He pats the couch next to him. “Hands loose at your sides.”

I blink up at him, not sure why he's having me sit next to him again, but I obey. It's easier to obey now, and I can't even place why. It should be more difficult. I should resent him—hate him, even—but instead, I find myself wanting him more. It makes no sense, but there it is.

I sit down, forcing my hands to stay loose at my sides with my palms up, and I glance at him through half-closed lashes.

To my utter shock, he gets off the couch and gets on the floor in front of me.

“What?” I ask, tensing up. It looks wrong to have him kneeling.

Hunter pulls on the waistband of my sweats and pulls it down. Confused, I lift my ass so he can get both my pants and panties off. He sets them aside and kisses the inside of one knee, then he pushes my thighs apart. “Just stay still. No moving. Especially not your hands.”

I still don’t understand, not until his face is directly against my cunt and he’s licking between my folds.

I gasp, more out of surprise than anything else at first, but it isn’t long before I’m moaning and gasping for another reason entirely. To my surprise, he actually seems to know what he’s doing. There’s something oddly clinical about the way he focuses solely on my clit, keeping my folds spread so he can reach it without making a mess, but I can’t say I care because of how good it feels.

For some reason, I didn’t think he’d do something like this. Dylan definitely didn’t. The one time I’d gotten him to go down on me, he’d complained and whined about the taste and the position and the way it had hurt his neck, and I never felt like bringing it up again.

I force myself to focus on the present, on how Hunter’s tongue and fingers are doing their best to drive me to pleasure. It’s surprisingly hard to keep my hands still, and I automatically clench one of them. Pain blossoms through me, but I ignore it.

Hunter pulls away. “Hands loose, Stef. Palms down. Don’t move them.”

I shudder at the order but nod quickly, swallowing hard as I try to relax my hands again. My wrists are starting to ache; the pain medication has long since begun to wear off. But I can’t bring myself to care, not when I feel so good.

“Yes, Master,” I whisper.

He looks at my hands, nods in approval, and goes back to licking and sucking at my clit. He gets two fingers inside me too, rubbing insistently against my inner walls. My pleasure builds and builds.

I almost move my hands again, but I remember his order. I have to keep them loose. I can’t do anything but accept this pleasure.

I tilt my head back, trying not to squeeze my hands tight. At least I have

my palms down, and it's easier not to curl my fingers up that way as I keep them flat. I moan, my eyes flickering closed as I let myself *feel*.

I can't believe sex can feel this good, and the pleasure keeps getting more intense. My orgasm races through me, shoving me over the edge with an intensity I'm not sure I've ever felt before.

If I have, I certainly don't remember it.

Hunter looks away with a satisfied expression. "Good girl." The words make my cheeks flush, and I can't help but offer him a shy smile. He gets up and tousles my hair. "I think it's time for a nap."

I nod in agreement. It takes me a moment to get onto my feet, my legs wobbly, and my smile falters a little. "Where... would you like me to sleep?"

"In my bed so I can keep an eye on you," Hunter says. "When you wake up, I'll take a look at your wrists, and it might be time for another round of medication."

I nod, and for once... I'm happier to curl up with Hunter than I am to get the pain meds.

Huh.

I won't even mind waking up this time, either.

CHAPTER 21

Stef

“I HAVE TO GO,” Hunter says, stroking my hair.

My heart plummets into the pit of my stomach. I knew this was coming. He’d told me the night before that he’d have to return to work, but... I hadn’t really thought it would happen. Or maybe I’d just wanted to pretend otherwise.

The idea of being alone all day with just my thoughts terrifies me, and it seems all the more real because it’s going to happen *now*.

“Are you going to lock me in... in my room?” My voice is pathetically small, but I can’t muster up a brave face for him.

“No.” Hunter cups my cheek and tilts my head up. “I won’t lock you in your room anymore—as long as I can trust you to behave.”

I swallow hard. He hasn’t replaced the mirror, and I know there’s nothing in the bathroom or the bedroom that I could easily use to hurt myself. But the rest of the house...

I look down at my still-bandaged wrists, then back up at him. Right now, I can promise not to do anything because he’s right here, and I’m full from the breakfast he hand-fed me. I’m comfortable and safe and even content.

But once he’s gone? I don’t know what’ll happen.

I don’t know where my thoughts will go.

“I’m scared,” I admit, my voice trembling. “I don’t... I don’t know what to do all day without you.”

Hunter gives me a small smile. “You aren’t without me. You’re doing everything *for* me.” He strokes my head again, then gently pulls away from me to stand. “I’ve made a list of things for you to do today. They aren’t *chores*. They’re for your own good.”

A list. It’s a dizzying relief, and I don’t even know why. I guess I’ve

gotten used to people telling me what to do when, and the idea of having a schedule for the day is more comforting than off-putting.

He motions for me to stand, and I reluctantly get to my feet. I'm naked, but I don't mind. It means I can please Hunter whenever he needs it.

It should worry me that that's on my mind, but I shove the thought down.

Hunter walks over to the blinding white kitchen island and pulls a sheet of paper out from the drawer. It's, shockingly, pink, a strange splash of color in this otherwise sterile room.

"Here," Hunter says, placing it down on the counter. "Read it. Let me know if you have any questions."

I nod, running my finger along the paper as I read over the tasks. It's in his handwriting, but he must have gone through extra effort to make sure it was legible.

1. *Walk—do not run—on the treadmill for 30 minutes*
2. *Take a bath or a shower. Do not get your wrists wet.*
3. *Have lunch—the meal is in the fridge, just needs to be reheated.*
4. *After lunch, take medication. Pills have been portioned and placed in container inside kitchen cabinet.*
5. *Take a 40 minute nap.*
6. *Tidy up the condo. Do not do any heavy lifting or scrubbing.*
7. *Find something you want to learn, and think about what you need for that goal. Ex: Art, coding, cooking, photography*
8. *Watch TV or listen to music if you're done with everything.*
9. *Have snacks if you're hungry.*
10. *Call me if you need to hear my voice.*

TEN TASKS. Just ten, but they're so carefully thought out that it makes a lump form in my throat. That... and he's trusting me to be alone, to do what he tells me and nothing more. I wish I had video game time in that list, but I know he doesn't want to stress my hand or my wrists until they're more healed.

The last one is what really shocks me, though. It's the most unexpected

thing on the entire list.

I look up at him in surprise. “I can call you?” I ask in a small voice. “Just to hear your voice if I need it? But won’t you be too busy for... for me?”

“If I’m with a patient, you can leave a message and I’ll get back to you as soon as I’m free,” Hunter says. He opens the kitchen drawer again and pulls an old-school flip phone out, placing it on the counter. “My number is programmed in.” He pauses and levels a stare at me. “I’m trusting you.”

It makes my heart ache. I haven’t done anything to deserve that trust, but he’s giving it to me anyway. “I won’t break your trust,” I whisper, staring down at the device. “I promise, Master.” I close the small distance between us and rest my head against his arm, wishing I could just cuddle with him all day.

I don’t want to be alone, even though the list is a vast relief from all of the scenarios I’d gone over in my head the night before when he’d informed me he was going back to work.

Hunter kisses the top of my head. “All right. I need to go, or I’ll be late for work.”

Maybe it’s my imagination, but he sounds reluctant to leave, too.

I follow him to the front door and watch as he slips his shoes and socks on. He bundles up for the cooler weather, and... that’s it. There’s no more reason for him to linger.

Hunter places his hands on my shoulders and meets my eyes. “You can do this,” he says with more confidence than I feel. “Remember that I’m with you. I want you to succeed and thrive.”

I look up at him, trying not to show just how desperate I am not to be alone. I know he can see it, though. “Okay,” I whisper anyway, my voice wobbling. “Thank you, Master. May I have a kiss?”

Hunter nods and leans down to press his lips against mine. It isn’t a deep kiss, but my heart flutters and I warm anyway.

“I’ll see you tonight,” Hunter says when he pulls away.

I want to stop him somehow, but he has other people depending on him. Instead, I watch as he leaves and closes the door behind him.

I watch the door for a long moment after he departs, as though he’s going to change his mind and return.

He doesn’t, not for the five whole minutes I stand there staring at it.

I brush my hair out of my face and turn around, going back to the kitchen to stare at the pretty pink paper with my to-do list for the day. It won’t take

me long, maybe half the day, but I don't mind. The afternoon programming on my favorite cooking network has the best shows after around two. I can get everything else done, and that'll be my reward for behaving.

For being *good* for Hunter.

I decide to start in the order of the list, going to the room with exercise equipment. I'd wondered how he stayed in such good shape before, especially because he doesn't seem like the type to enjoy going to a public gym. Now I can see why. There's a treadmill, and there are some weights, and other things I don't quite recognize. I'll have to get him to show me how to use some of it when I heal.

My wrists throb at the thought of healing, and I'm not sure if it's real or if it's just a phantom effect that comes from thinking about them. Part of me wants to rip the bandages off, to stare at the deep wounds I'd left behind... to reopen them so Hunter has to come back and save me again.

I shudder.

No. I can't think like that. I have to think more positively. It's up to me and my pathetic willpower to keep going without thoughts like this.

But it's so fucking hard, especially when I'm lonely and miserable and—

I shut my thoughts down hard, going to the treadmill. I gingerly stop onto it, and with his note still emblazoned into my mind, I set the speed and the timer. For half an hour, I walk, focusing on my steps instead of all the ways this could go wrong today.

All the ways I could fuck up and disappoint Hunter.

But I'm not thinking about that. I'm thinking about walking and staying at a pace Hunter would be satisfied with.

When the timer chirps at me and the treadmill comes to a stop, it startles me. I'd gotten so caught up in the movements of my feet that I'd forgotten to think for a whole half hour. Now that I'm done, the morbid thoughts threaten to return.

God, I need to stop fucking thinking.

The second item on the list makes me a little queasy. Ever since I tried to slit my wrists, showers make me nervous. A bath is better, I think, but I don't want to bathe in "my" room.

Instead, I go to Hunter's, feeling a little bit like an intruder as I creep into the bathroom and start to run the tap. Clumsily, I wrap my hands and wrists with the waterproof film he'd shown me how to put on, but I wish he was there to re-wrap them for me and make sure everything stays sterile.

I stay in the bath until the water gets cold, then I bathe with his soap. It makes me feel a little better, like he's there with me, but I realize in dismay that I got the bandages wet despite my attempts not to. It threatens to destroy my improved mood because I just know he'll be disappointed in me.

He'll change again. He'll go back to being that terrible, cold person who acts like he hates me unless I'm perfect. He'll...

I tamp down those thoughts as firmly as I can.

God, I need... something.

Even though I'm not supposed to watch TV or listen to music until I'm finished with my list of chores, I gingerly flip the TV to a music station so I can have something in the background to keep my thoughts occupied. I'll confess it first thing, as soon as I talk to him, and...

I go to the phone, wanting to admit to my infractions, and I call the number he'd programmed into the archaic piece of technology. It rings a few times, and my breath hitches. What if he doesn't answer? What if I have to live with this terrible guilt? I pace as I wait, glancing at the TV. I should turn the music off, but my thoughts are driving me crazy.

"Stef?" Hunter says as soon as he answers. "Is everything all right?"

"I..." I have to swallow hard to keep from crying. "I messed up. I'm sorry, Master."

"What happened?" he asks, his voice stern. "Are you hurt?"

"N-no," I say quickly. "No. I didn't hurt myself. I just... I took a bath, and I got my bandages wet even though I tried not to, and I even wrapped them with the... the stuff you showed me how to use. And..." I don't have to admit to the music. But the guilt is gnawing at me, and I continue in a burst, "And I put on music because I can't stop thinking."

Hunter doesn't say anything for a few seconds, and I brace myself for his rebuke.

I startle when he lets out a soft chuckle. "Thank you for telling me, Stef. Those are fine. Try to dry the bandages, but I'm going to change them tonight anyway. And the list was only in a loose order. You may listen to music while doing other things."

I let out a breath, relief racing through me. "Th-thank you, Master. I'm sorry. I just... It was... I used your bathroom, too, and your soap. I... I miss you," I admit in a whisper.

"Good girl," Hunter says. "You're allowed those things. I'm glad I bring you comfort."

“You do,” I reply quietly. “I... I won’t keep you. I know you’re working. I just didn’t want to disappoint you, and I thought you should know I’d... deviated from the list and messed up a little.”

“You’re doing well. I do need to work, but I know this is hard for you. We’re going to work to make you strong, Stef.”

I want that. I want to be strong for him. I don’t want to disappoint him, I don’t want to fuck up, and I just... I want someone to be proud of me. “Thank you,” I whisper. “Okay. Bye, Master.” I don’t want to let him off the phone, but I know I need to.

“Take care, Stef,” Hunter says.

The call ends, and I’m left with silence.

Or, not silence. The music is still going. The music that Hunter said I’m allowed to have, even though I hadn’t asked first.

I flip the phone closed, then look down at the list. I’m not hungry yet, but I *am* tired, so I crawl into his bed. After setting the alarm for exactly forty minutes, I curl up under the blankets and breathe in his scent, focusing on the music and imagining him stroking my hair until I fall asleep.

THE REST of the afternoon is almost painless. I eat, take the medication he’s doled out for me, and settle in to work on the biggest task he’d left me. I don’t know what goals to set for myself. Everything seems impossibly hard, though I’m intrigued by the options he left me. I’m not good enough with computers to really consider coding, though photography... I’d love to take pictures of Hunter.

It still doesn’t appeal to me as much as cooking does, though, for all that I doubt he’s going to let me near the sharp knives any time soon. As it is, they’re neatly tucked away in a thick metal box with a combination lock that I couldn’t get into even if I tried. His forethought brings mixed feelings in me, but then, I haven’t really earned his trust yet.

And there’s a part of me that’s a little too fascinated with the idea of taking a blade to my skin again...

I shudder and close my eyes, leaning back on the couch.

It doesn’t take long for the obvious to strike me. I never fucking finished high school. How would I even take classes on anything without a diploma or

even a GED? It seems necessary all of a sudden, but like an insurmountable task. I'm not stupid, but I'm not brilliant either. I don't know if I could pass that test.

Hunter's right.

Drugs *are* poison, and they've seeped into my brain and left me even more stupid than before.

I can't help it. I call Hunter again, waiting anxiously for him to answer the phone.

He picks up after the third ring. "Hi, Stef. I have about five minutes before my next patient."

Five minutes. Five whole minutes.

"Hi, Master," I reply awkwardly. I realize I don't know what to say to him now that he's on the phone. I'm quiet for a moment, long enough for the silence to drag on. "I'm sorry to keep calling. I'm just... I'm lonely."

"I understand," Hunter answers. I can't tell if he's annoyed or not. "It's your first day on your own since... well. It's something to work up to."

I nod even though he can't see me. "I've done everything on the list. I'm... going to sit down and watch TV for a little bit until you get home." I wish I could use some of the knowledge I'm gaining from the cooking shows and fix a meal for him, but everything would require the knives I'm not allowed to even look at, let alone touch. "Are you having a good day?" I ask feebly.

"Better, knowing that you're trying so hard."

I wish I could see him. He's usually not very expressive, but sometimes I can see small hints of smiles, and they reassure me so much. All I have now is his usual flat tone of voice, no matter that the words themselves are gentle.

"I'm glad." I'm quiet again. "I guess I'll... let you go. I just wanted to check in."

I just wanted to hear your voice.

God, what is fucking wrong with me?

We end the call, and I struggle to put the phone down and get on with my day.

I need to figure out what I want to learn. I need to be able to tell him what I need so I can learn and improve myself and stop being such a fucking failure and—

I sob and sink to the floor, wrapping my arms around myself. I stay that for a long time, wallowing in my self-pity.

Fuck, I'm pathetic.

After what seems like an eternity, I slowly get up, going to the couch and sagging down onto it. My hand is throbbing, so I can't write down my list. I end up thinking it through in my head instead.

Cooking is out because of the knives, but I've always loved the smell of fresh bread. Maybe I could bake, as long as I'm careful with the oven. Hunter would need to buy me a cookbook, but he wants me interested in more things.

Maybe I can try photography, but I wouldn't want him to buy me an expensive camera until I figured out if it was my thing or not.

I turn the channel on the TV to a cooking competition show, and soon I'm engrossed in watching people who don't know how to cook learning how to do it on national—global—television while their mentors both cheer them on and get exasperated with their progress. I'm in the middle of the finale when I hear the door unlock, and I abandon the TV to race to the foyer and drop down to my knees hard enough to make me wince.

Hunter smiles when he sees me, and I sigh in relief. He isn't mad that I called him.

"Hello, Stef." He pats the top of my head before taking his coat and shoes off.

"Hello, Master," I answer. Once he's barefoot, I crawl closer and bend down to kiss the tops of his feet. "Thank you for keeping me, Master. Thank you for taking care of me, Master."

"Good girl," Hunter says. He scratches my scalp again. "You are a welcome sight to come home to."

I smile up at him, sitting up to rest my head against his leg. "I'm so glad you're home," I tell him.

He offers his hand to help me up, and I wrap my arms around him, breathing in his scent.

Everything will be all right now. I don't have to think. I don't have to worry.

All I have to do is please him.

CHAPTER 22

Hunter

I MASSAGE lotion onto Stef's wrists, careful with the still healing wound. "They're healing well," I tell her. I wipe my hands and wrap the bandages around the cuts once more. "You'll get the stitches out soon. We'll keep the skin moisturized to reduce the scarring."

She nods to me, leaning in to nuzzle my arm in a quiet display of affection. She's been doing more of that lately, and I enjoy the way she looks to me for strength and comfort.

Stef has also been on her best behavior. On days when I have to go to the clinic, she follows all the instructions I leave behind, which mostly include eating, resting, and keeping herself clean and healthy. Sometimes I come home to her napping on the couch, or watching TV, and the sight of her settles something in my stomach.

She's developed quite the addiction to cooking shows. I've come to recognize the voice of the celebrity host counting down the clock to frazzled chefs who've had to make meals from mystery baskets, as it always seems to be playing when I get home.

She often earnestly tells me about different things she's learned that day. Her enthusiasm warms me, and it's nice to see that she's developing more interests. Maybe when her hands heal more, she can test out some of her new knowledge in the kitchen—though the idea of her exposed to heat and knives without me there makes me a little wary.

Stef had suggested baking, and I bought her several cookbooks, as well as a heavy-duty stand mixer that will let her mix ingredients or knead bread without straining her wrists.

"Thank you," Stef says once I've finished bandaging her.

I pat her on the head and get up. "I have clothes for you." I go to the

closet and pull out the outfit I'd had delivered a few days ago. It's a simple combination of jeans and a turtleneck sweater that complements her eyes. I want her to wear sexier things, but I also don't want her wounds to be on display for everybody.

Stef looks at me in surprise. "Clothes? Are people visiting?"

"Lift your arms." I help her put on a bra, an undershirt, and the sweater. "And no. We're going out."

Her breath catches, and she visibly pales. "What? Why?" She tries to rise off the bed, but I gently push her back down.

"You need a change of scenery." I squat down in front of her to help get the panties and socks on her. "And I saw an ad for something I think you would enjoy."

She exhales slowly, looking relieved. "Thank you," she says. "But you don't have to take me anywhere. I like making you happy here... where I don't mess up as much."

"You won't mess up," I say firmly. I get the jeans on her even though she briefly has to stand so I can pull them up the rest of the way. "Sit down on the ottoman. I'll be right back." I don't have to glance at her to make sure she obeys. I know she will.

I go to the bathroom to grab the remainder of the supplies. As expected, she's sitting exactly where I told her to, her hands nice and limp on her lap. I set the moisturizer down next to her and walk around behind her so I can brush her hair.

"If things get hard, you can come to me." I go slowly, gently detangling the small knots that formed overnight. "And we'll take breaks when you get tired."

The look she casts me is one of utter adoration and relief, and it goes straight to my cock. This is what I wanted—to have someone who's willing to put their own needs and desires aside and come to me for guidance, and she's turning out to be perfect now that she's stopped fighting me.

Fighting herself.

I braid her hair and tie it off, after which I begin applying the facial moisturizer to her. She sighs in contentment as I do that, closing her eyes so I can safely rub the cream in under her eyes.

"Thank you," she murmurs, though I'm not entirely sure what she's thanking me for.

"One more thing," I say gently. I reach into my pocket and pull out a

short necklace with a small gemstone amulet. I put it on her and tuck the necklace underneath the fabric of the sweater. “So you won’t forget who you belong to if we get separated.”

Stef shivers a little at that, reaching up to touch the necklace through the cloth. “I don’t think I’ll ever forget who I belong to,” she says softly, and she looks up to meet my eyes. She touches my cheek, tilting her head up like she wants a kiss but is waiting for permission.

I oblige her with a quick press of my lips against hers. She sighs happily, and I’m again hit by the wave of desire that comes from knowing she’s finally truly given herself to me. I alone dictate everything about her life.

I pull away and pat the top of her head. “All right. Let’s go so we can make the most of this day.”

She nods, getting up, and for a moment, she presses her body against mine. “Thank you,” she murmurs, resting her head against my shoulder before stepping back. “I like the clothing, Master. Thank you for getting them for me.”

I smile approvingly at her. We get our shoes and jackets, and I hail a cab to take us to the Van Geersdorf Gallery.

“Have you ever been to an art gallery?” I ask her as I buy our tickets.

She shakes her head. “I don’t know much about art,” she admits, ducking her head. “I’m not... I’m not really like... cultured, or anything.”

“Neither is anyone in my family. They only pretend to be.”

Stef looks curiously at me, but she doesn’t ask any questions.

I grab the brochure for the special exhibit. “But it doesn’t matter. I came here for a specific exhibit.” I lead us to the back of the first floor, where a wall is decorated with giant pixel artwork. I think it’s meant to be a specific character, although I don’t know enough about video games to be sure.

Stef recognizes it though. “Wait. What is this?”

I point to the nearby sign. “It’s an exhibit on video games. The description said something about emerging artforms and ludonarrative something or other.”

Her smile lights up her face. “You brought me to a video game exhibit?” she says, as though to make sure she heard me correctly. “Even though you’re going to be bored out of your mind?”

“I won’t be bored,” I assure her. Even if I don’t care about video games, I can observe Stef’s excitement and derive enjoyment from that alone.

We head inside, and Stef pauses in front of a screen playing a game from

the early 80s, just two sticks bouncing a rectangle back and forth between them.

“It’s so cool how far the tech has come,” Stef says. “Although if this is what I’d started with, I probably wouldn’t have kept wanting to play.”

“What was your first game?” I ask curiously. “Not anything this old.”

“No. I started on a third gen console. My dad had bought one for himself, and my parents didn’t want to upgrade to a more modern one. But it was still fun even without the most modern graphics. I spent hours trying to find every secret in some of the games.” Stef smiles sadly. “I saved up my allowance to buy a new console when I was a teenager, but traded it later for...” The small smile drops, and she focuses her gaze on the floor instead of looking at me.

“For drugs,” I finish for her. I hate the thought of Stef giving away something that gave her joy in favor of something that destroyed her body. I want to tell her that was a stupid decision, that she should have valued herself more, but she doesn’t need to hear that right now.

She nods, biting her bottom lip. She gives me a wary glance, as though expecting a critical response from me, but I stay quiet and walk on to another screen. This one has a keyboard and mouse underneath it, inviting us to play.

The WASD keys are highlighted and have arrows stuck on them. I use those to move the character around, but I don’t really understand what I’m doing. “Nothing’s happening,” I say after some scenery has changed on the screen.

“I think this is one of those experimental indie games,” Stef says. “The point is the experience. You just walk around and take in the sights and the sounds.”

“Ah. So, it’s pointless like all the indie movies are.”

She gives me an exasperated look, but there’s a smile on her lips. “It’s for enjoyment, sir,” she says after casting a glance around the mostly empty room. “It’s just... there. Like people listening to classical music. Is there really a point to any of it?”

“Classical music is the only decent form of music,” I inform her. She bites her lip like she wants to argue with me. After a few seconds, I smile at her. “But I do enjoy the occasional rock album.”

Stef laughs, shaking her head. “Classic rock, or do you listen to anything contemporary?”

I walk toward the next display, which includes a controller not dissimilar to the one we’ve been using at home. “I don’t listen to that much music. It’s

mostly a distraction. But I don't dislike hearing it." I pick up the controller and read the explanation next to the display. "It says this is a... rhythm game? What's that?"

She smiles at me. "It's a music-based game. They play the music, and you hit the buttons in time with it. There are versions like... dancing games where you actually use your feet and dance in time with the music. I loved those," she says wistfully.

I make a mental note of that. Maybe I can find a version of those games for her to play at home, although it'll have to wait until she's more healed. I don't want her doing anything too rigorous and opening up her stitches.

I try the game and fail miserably. We wander over to the next few displays, and I don't think I'm learning anything about video games, but Stef is clearly amused at how terribly I'm failing at all of them.

Normally I'd be irritated to have somebody derive amusement from my failures, but I enjoy her relaxed attitude, and I don't actually care about video games. The point is simply to do something together.

When we reach the end of the exhibit, Stef looks at me and sighs wistfully. "So many memories," she murmurs, and she leans against me. I wrap my arms around her, and she says, "Thank you for bringing me here. I really enjoyed this." She offers a small, almost mischievous smile at me. "I'd say I'm sorry for laughing at you, but I'm really not. You need more practice."

"I'm only playing until you're healed," I inform her. "Then you can take charge of the controller." I check my phone and note the time. "It's about 1:15. Let's go grab lunch. The gallery has a nice café on the other side of the sculpture garden."

She nods to me. "That sounds wonderful. Thank you."

I don't know if I've ever seen her this relaxed before, but I like being the reason she's happy.

Drake and Chase would howl with laughter at me for being so indulgent with her, but there's something about having complete control over a submissive woman that simply appeals to me.

I lead her through the garden, and she takes her time marveling at the beauty of it all. I don't entirely see the appeal of it, but she does seem to take pleasure from simple things. I file that away as well. Stef walks alongside me, still glowing with contentment after the museum visit and the stroll through the garden.

It's a weekday in late fall, so the cafe isn't too busy. There are no tourists or school groups, just some local office workers who have popped over for a quick lunch. Stef is quiet at my side, seeming content to let me lead her along to a table by the window.

I order for both of us, and Stef doesn't seem surprised or offended like other women might've been.

"The portions might be a bit large," I say. "Eat as much as you can, and I'll have the rest."

I look out the window too, wondering what the point of that strange jumble of metal just outside is supposed to be. I'm sure the title of the piece will be *Industrial Revolution* or *The State of Man* or some other pretentious nonsense. My sister would give me a whole monologue about the meaning of art and how deep it is, while my mother would simply look at the artist's name and decide whether that meant it was a good piece or not.

"It looks like a collapsed house," Stef says after a while. "Like somebody pulled out a load-bearing beam and everything crumbled. Everything looks fine, then you just remove one piece and suddenly it's a huge mess."

I wonder if she's hinting at something. "Or it's simply a collection of beams the artist threw together because they had leftover scraps from another project."

"It could be both, I guess," she replies, tilting her head as she regards it. "I—" She cuts herself off as a group of four men enters the room, talking and laughing to themselves, and the color drains from her face. She hurries to duck her head, staring down at the table.

I glance at the men, trying to figure out what spooked her. They look completely ordinary in suits and ties that could almost pass for high quality. The tailoring is off for most of them, which tells me they buy the suits off the rack.

Stef squirms, taking a deep breath, and she offers a forced smile as the waiter returns with our food. Her breathing has quickened, though, and I can see the way her hands tremble. She spears a piece of salmon from her salad, but she doesn't eat it.

One of the men breaks off from the group, grinning at me as he approaches.

Stef slumps more in her chair, hunching back like she's trying to make herself appear invisible.

"Hey, Stef!" he greets her as cheerfully as if they were old friends.

He tries to touch her arm, but I grab his wrist before he can.

“Excuse me,” I say coldly. “You’re interrupting my lunch.”

He pulls his wrist back, looking surprised. “Hey, sorry, man. No offense meant. I was just saying hello. Never would’ve expected Ntimacy to let her out and about. How much did it cost for a day with her?”

My vision flares red at the edges. I have to remind myself that we’re out in public, and making a scene here would likely get us banned.

“It’s out of your price range,” I say. “Now go away.”

Stef is so low in her chair that I’d chastise her for her posture if it wasn’t for the situation.

“I doubt that.” He sneers at her. “She’s the cheapest whore they have.” He’s at least keeping his voice down, but that doesn’t help keep my temper in check. “That’s fine. I’ll just call and ask for her myself.”

I eye him critically. “Really? I highly doubt anyone there even knows your name. Your wallet looks decidedly... middle class.”

He stiffens, his own stance turning into something defensive and angry. “They’ll still take my money.” He casts another glance over Stef, who’s got her head bowed as she stares at her uneaten salad. “Bet she’s cried all day.” He chuckles darkly. “But fine. Enjoy your... lunch.”

I wait until he leaves, then move to sit next to her on her side of the table. She’s trapped between me and the window now, but she shifts quickly to press up against my side.

“I told you, I won’t be sharing you,” I say quietly. “Giulio wouldn’t ever give him the time of day, either.”

Stef swallows hard, looking up at me with tears shining in her eyes. “I... I know,” she says, and she sounds like she’s trying to believe those words. “But I’m an embarrassment to you. People from before... If your family knew...”

“My mother’s entire career is based off of lying to ninety-nine percent of the American population. My brother regularly cheats on his wife, who I presume is having an affair herself. My father hasn’t found a single good idea he hasn’t ground to dust, and the only reason he’s ‘successful’ is because he manages to jump sinking ships before anyone notices the leaks.” I shake my head. “So you can just keep that in mind if they say anything. I know I do.”

“What about your sister?” she asks, sniffing a little. “I... She wasn’t very nice.” She hesitates, then says quietly, “She basically told me to take your money and run.”

A flash of annoyance hits me. “Bethany can mind her own fucking business. And she’s not doing anything with her life right now except for living off of our parents’ money and pretending she’s looking for an appropriate husband.”

“Aren’t they going to want you to find an... an appropriate wife?” Stef asks. There’s a flash of panic in her expression as she whispers, “Will you get rid of—” She blinks, looking up and seeming to remember that we’re in public. She tries to pull herself together, but I can see she’s on the verge of breaking down.

I put my arm around her shoulders and pull her even closer to me. “No. I have no interest in anybody my mother would approve of.”

The few times I’d dated for her benefit, the women ended up breaking up with me anyway, to my relief. I don’t want to spend my limited free time catering to anyone else’s whims. The sex had been mediocre at best, too. Definitely not worth the effort.

Stef, on the other hand...

I pick up Stef’s fork and spear some of the salmon, holding it up to her lips. “Here. Eat, and don’t waste your time worrying about something silly.”

She nods and opens her mouth. Her quick obedience and trust in me go right to my cock, in a way no other woman has ever managed to do. No, I would never want to replace her with one of my mother’s pre-approved supermodels or senators’ daughters.

We finish our lunch like this, with me feeding Stef, and I don’t even care that we got several strange looks from people. What I do with Stef is none of their business.

By the time I’m done feeding her, Stef has stopped trembling. People around us have gone back to their own meals, and no one else bothers us.

She even smiles, if a bit tentatively, when we get up to leave. “May I have a kiss, sir?” she whispers to me.

I nod approvingly and cup her cheek gently before bringing our lips together. It’s chaste, and I’ve never been much for kissing...

But something warms in my chest, especially when I pull back and see the slight blush on her cheeks.

I don’t care what anyone else thinks.

Stef is mine, and I’m going to keep her forever.

CHAPTER 23

Stef

I'M STILL SHAKEN from the encounter at the museum cafe. The man's awful words keep ringing in my head, no matter how much Hunter tried to comfort me afterward.

How long will I even get to keep Hunter?

For all that he said he's not going to get rid of me, I can't shake the feeling that he won't have a choice. His mother is formidable, and if she pushes him to get a proper wife... What will happen to me? The most I can ask for is to be the pampered mistress on the side, the person who gives him everything he wants—only to be left alone when he returns to the woman in his marriage bed.

I look at Hunter for a moment, my eyes brimming with tears, but I know that if I question what he said earlier, he'll get upset with me. His word is final, and he'd sounded so certain. It's just my own paranoia.

Isn't it?

I wait until he's taken his shoes and socks off, then I get on my knees and kiss the tops of his feet. "Thank you, Master," I whisper, "For..." I know what I'm supposed to say, but it doesn't feel right. "Thank you for defending me today."

When I look up, Hunter has his usual impenetrable expression on his face. "You're mine," he says.

Is that an answer? An explanation? Either way, though, I feel just the smallest bit better.

"I don't..." I trail off, not sure how to put my thoughts into words. "I don't know what that means yet, Master." I rest my cheek against his leg, and the feeling of his fingers smoothing through my hair brings me a moment of bliss I don't understand.

I know who he is—what he is—but it’s hard to remember that right now.

“It means that you’re mine,” Hunter repeats, like it’s an actual answer. He keeps petting me, and the tingles in my scalp are stronger than the dull pain in my wrists.

I close my eyes and sigh. I could stay like this forever.

Except that the silence starts whispering to me, little words reminding me that this isn’t going to last, that I’m just a whore, that he’ll get bored of me and throw me away and...

The tears at the corners of my eyes threaten to fall, and I repeat to myself that I shouldn’t cry. He’s reassuring me, over and over, and it feels like I’d be slapping him in the face if I refused to accept his reassurance.

But I’m Stef the crybaby, and I can’t just accept what he’s saying.

“I need... I need...”

Proof.

But I don’t know how to say that.

“I need you,” I finally whisper.

His hand on my head stills, and I tense, afraid I’ve fucked up yet again. I look up fearfully, but he isn’t scowling.

“Get up,” he orders, and I immediately obey. “Go to the bedroom. Undress, and kneel in front of the bed.”

I hiccup as I try to hold back the sobs, but I hurry to go to the bedroom. I have to fumble a little to get the clothes off, but in the end, I fold them carefully and set them at the foot of the bed before kneeling down and bowing my head.

I don’t want to ruin what was a good day by being punished, but I need *something*.

“Did you enjoy yourself today?” Hunter asks as he returns. He’s holding a bag of some sort, large enough that I’m worried about what it could contain.

I force myself to focus on his question. “I did. Thank you for taking me to the museum, Master.”

It was a nice outing. It was nicer than anything I’d ever done with Dylan, and Dylan and I had been together for years. I tug at the edges of my bandages, wondering what it would take to get my nails through the fabric and—

“Stop fidgeting,” Hunter says sternly. “You were so good today. But you’ve forgotten that you’re meant to only think about me, and not anyone

else.”

My chest squeezes tight, and I shake my head. “No, Master. I haven’t. Please—”

He approaches me and makes that hand gesture he always does when he wants me to be quiet. I quickly press my lips together.

Hunter squats down in front of me and cards his fingers through my hair again. I sigh, some of the tension easing away again.

Why can’t I just forget about the rest of the world? It really would be easier if I could simply focus on Hunter all the time.

“Open your mouth, and keep it open,” Hunter orders.

I obey, although my heart pounds in anticipation. I watch as he pulls something out of the bag, a strange device that I can’t figure out at first glance.

I accidentally lean back when he raises it up to my mouth.

Hunter frowns at me. “Stef.”

“Sorry, Master,” I whisper, straightening my back and opening my mouth wider.

It’s a gag, only instead of a ball or penis, it has a big ring that forces my mouth to stay open. I shudder as he fastens it around my head and make an embarrassing noise. I’m suddenly self-conscious of my tongue and how it’s just... there, and my face heats in embarrassment.

Hunter sits back and nods in approval, but he reaches into the bag again. This time he pulls a flat disc of some sort out, and I have to sit still as he attaches it to the gag. It ends up pushing my tongue down, preventing me from moving it at all.

I guess I don’t have to worry about what to do with my tongue anymore, but it doesn’t stop the shame spreading throughout my body or the drool that has begun to collect at the corners of my mouth.

“Not bad,” Hunter murmurs, petting me with both hands. I lean into that touch and make yet another sound that I can’t swallow down.

It’s silly. I’m completely naked, and he’s seen every part of me already. I don’t know why having my mouth forced open like this suddenly has me ashamed in a way I haven’t been before.

Ashamed, and needing him to touch me.

I need his approval more than I’ve ever needed anything in my life, to know that he’s satisfied with me and won’t just throw me away. As long as I do things like this—as long as I’m *good*—he has every reason to keep me

around.

Right?

“Follow me,” he says, and I get up so I can do just that. He leads me into the kitchen, where again, a dildo has been suctioned to the seat of a chair.

I whimper, looking at him as I begin to panic. Am I in trouble again? For thinking of somebody else?

Hunter seems to notice my panic, because he gives me the smallest of smiles. “You want to please me, don’t you?”

I nod quickly, trying to take comfort in that smile. It’s such a small thing, but it means so much to me.

He approaches me and takes two more straps out of the bag. I watch, confused, as he fastens one around each of my thighs, as high up as they can go. They’re tight enough that they probably won’t fall off soon.

I notice the little hooks on them too, and I imagine him strapping my legs together.

Hunter motions toward the dildo, which I notice is already gleaming with lube. “Sit.”

I don’t hesitate, even though my heart flutters and nerves threaten to overwhelm me. I go to the dildo and position myself over it. My eyes meet his, and slowly, so slowly, I lower myself down with soft whimpers and whines escaping my lips. All the while, I can feel drool continuing to trickle down my face, gathering on my chin before dripping down onto my breast.

I shudder when I’m fully seated, my eyes slowly closing.

“Remember, no slouching,” Hunter says, guiding my back straighter. The touch sends tingles up my spine, gentle and almost ticklish.

This isn’t so bad, I think as I settle in. It’s uncomfortable, and humiliating, and the dildo is a bit large, but I can handle this.

Maybe I should have known better. Maybe I jinxed it by even thinking it.

“The last part,” Hunter says, and this time he pulls two thin chains out of the bag. I stare at them—and the clamps at the ends.

My head grows a little fuzzy, because I know exactly where those kinds of clamps are meant to go. My body trembles as Hunter fastens the hooks to the straps on my thighs, then lifts the chains and clamps them to my nipples.

I can’t help but gasp as the sensation shoots through me. The clamps aren’t even too tight. It’s uncomfortable, but this... This is nothing.

The real torture is going to be when he finally takes them off.

“Back straight, Stef,” Hunter admonishes, and I realize I’ve slumped

forward to relieve the pressure on my nipples.

I sit up again and wince at the tug.

“Now, I want you to sit very still. Back needs to be straight, hands on your thighs. Head up—you’ll make a mess of yourself otherwise.” Hunter touches me as he speaks, positioning me exactly how he wants me. Legs slightly apart, my hands loose on my thighs, my back straight and my eyes staring directly ahead.

Each touch makes me shiver and clench around the dildo, and I feel myself growing hotter still. I feel like a doll, like a *toy*.

But I notice the eagerness in his eyes, and the slight bulge in his pants.

He’s enjoying himself, too, and that makes it easier to relax into this position.

This isn’t a punishment.

“Good,” Hunter says, petting me. “Let’s see how long you can last.”

He leans against the dining room table and reaches into his pocket. I can’t see what it is, but I feel it just a second later.

The dildo begins vibrating.

For a moment, sheer panic threatens to overwhelm me as I remember the last time he put a vibrator inside of me. But one look at his face and the hunger there—one hard yank of those clamps that makes me mewl in pleasure and discomfort alike as I flinch—makes me settle just a little.

I can’t relax too much; he wants my back straight even though it puts pressure on the thin chains leading from my nipples to my thighs. But I can breathe, at least, even if I’m all too aware of the *thing* in my mouth.

The vibrations go through me, and it’s a struggle not to squirm or slump down. More drool slips down my chin.

It takes all of my concentration, to the point where thinking about anything *else* gets harder too. Stay straight. Legs apart. Chin up. Don’t slump

I make an embarrassing sound when Hunter reaches out to adjust my posture. I had slumped down, trying to relieve the pressure on my nipples. His touch is warm and grounding, reminding me of where I am.

“Loosen your hands,” Hunter murmurs. “Don’t fight it.”

I slowly relax my hands, forcing myself to spread my fingers instead of balling them up. It’s so fucking hard not to fight it, though, when I’m torn between pleasure and building discomfort.

All the while, saliva continues to drip from my mouth onto my skin, and

the buzzing of the vibrator gets stronger, making me whine and fight not to squirm.

I can only think of this, of him, and everything else has long since been pushed to the side. I don't care about that man, or about Dylan, or about anyone else. My attention is fully focused on Hunter and only Hunter... and what he's doing to me.

Slowly, I give into the posture. My chest aches and my pussy keeps clenching, and all of this is fine. I think if not for the gag, I might even smile a little.

I lose track of time like this, letting my mind drift into this peaceful pleasure-pain.

"Good," Hunter says softly, rubbing his hand over the bottom of my chin. "Just like that."

I let out a soft hum, but my eyes have fluttered closed. It's a pity; I'd like to see his face. But I'm just too caught up in bliss edged with slight discomfort to open them again. The most I can do is tilt my head into his touch, reminding myself to sit up straight despite the ache in my nipples.

Hunter places two fingers on my tongue, pressing down on the thing in my mouth. "I'm going to fuck your mouth now. Your only job is to keep breathing and holding still."

If my mouth hadn't already been watering, it would be now. I try to nod, but it feels like too much effort. Instead, I hold my pose and keep breathing as steadily as I can, feeling for all the world that I could drift off right here and now in my happy little bubble.

Hunter steps away only long enough to push his cock past the ring in my mouth. I didn't even notice him unzipping. With the ring-gag in the way, I can't suck or lick. I don't have to try to perform and make it the best blowjob ever.

I just have to be.

I sigh happily as he thrusts in and out of my mouth at a slow, languid pace. His hands on my head remain gentle. I don't feel like I'm being face-fucked; I don't feel like I'm being *used*.

It's a strange feeling, and everything else fades into the background: the low buzzing of the vibrator, the clamps, the way I have to sit up perfectly straight... It's just *there*, and all I have to do is be open and receptive to it all.

I whine when he pulls out, but I don't chase after his cock. I'm supposed to stay just like this.

I hear him grunt and feel the hot splash of his cum all over my chest. I sigh and clench around the vibrator, trying to get it even deeper into me.

“Beautiful,” Hunter says, his voice ragged. “Do you want to come, Stef?”

I don’t even know. I feel so good that it feels like one more sensation might ruin the moment. I just want his hands on me. I want him to hold me.

In a lot of ways, I feel like I’ve already come.

But I nod to him despite my dazed state, because if I feel this good now, I can only imagine what an actual orgasm would feel like.

Hunter reaches down and massages my breast, making the clamps pull. I gasp at the sudden new sensation.

Then he removes the clamp from that breast.

For a moment, there’s nothing, then blood rushes back to my nipple. I let out a garbled cry, some of the floaty feeling dissipating as reality comes crashing back into me along with the pain. Tears fill my eyes, but I blink them away as I anticipate the next one being removed.

“Shh,” Hunter says, kissing my forehead. “You’re doing good.”

That’s my only warning before he removes the second clamp. I scream, and part of me wishes I could swallow it down—but my mouth is forced open, so there really is nothing I can do but to show Hunter all of my natural reactions.

Exactly what he wants.

Hunter kisses the top of my head again, petting me, and I lean into his touch. I shudder when his other hand goes down between my legs.

He finds my clit easily and uses two fingers to massage it with purpose. I tremble, but I don’t squirm. Squirming feels like it would be too much work, and he’s doing such a good job with it that I just don’t feel like it.

The pleasure simmers near my awareness as I slowly return to that floaty place where everything is bliss and soft around the edges. The dildo inside of me, the feeling of his fingers... It’s all so good.

So, so good that only a few moments pass before the pressure is building at the base of my spine. I shudder, wanting more, *needing* more, and he gives it to me. One moment, I’m lost in the depths of this strange pleasure, and the next...

The next, it’s so intense that it’s almost painful.

I cry out and jerk, grateful for the fact that the nipple clamps are off. I can’t help but writhe and try to push my cunt harder against his fingers as the sensations send me over the edge.

My vision is fuzzy and my ears ring. All I know is that I'm leaning against Hunter, his presence strong and warm at my side. The vibrations slow to a stop, and I whine as Hunter undoes the gag.

I didn't even realize how much my jaw was aching. Hunter rubs my chin and jaw, helping to massage the muscles until I close my mouth.

"There you go," Hunter says breathily. "I'm going to pick you up now."

I nod and try to lift my arms up so I can help him, but my limbs are too heavy to move. All I can do is sit there as he picks me up, cradling me in his arms. I rest my head against his shoulder, already half-asleep from the intense sensations that have been my entire universe for... minutes? Hours? I don't even know, and I don't care, either.

Hunter carries me to his bed and sets me down gently. I whine when he moves away, but he comes back with a damp cloth and wipes my chin, chest, and cunt clean. I think I feel the bed dip, but I drift off, my mind blessedly silent.

CHAPTER 24

Stef

“BUT WHAT’S the point if you keep dying in the game?” Hunter asks with a huff against my ear.

I giggle and lean further into his embrace. I like it when we game like this, with me on his lap and his arms around me. I’m not sure how comfortable it is for him, but he doesn’t complain.

“The point is that I’m having fun and learning how to play it better,” I say, directing my character to enter the dungeon again. “And... maybe it’s okay to fail sometimes.”

I glance down at my wrists. They’re no longer bandaged, and I can see the scars that formed despite Hunter’s careful treatment. He still rubs the lotion on them every day. I could probably do it myself, but I like that he does it for me.

Hunter doesn’t respond to my statement. Maybe it’s boring him to watch my character attempt to get through all the monsters only to be felled again and again, but I’m finding something cathartic about it. Get up, try again.

No giving up. It’s okay to just keep trying.

“The roast smells good,” Hunter says after my third attempt at the level. “I’m looking forward to when it’s done.”

I smile at him, feeling a little shy. It’s one of my first attempts at really cooking, though he’d helped me chop onions before he’d left, and he’d gotten me these little red potatoes and tiny carrots so I didn’t have to cut those up. I’d seasoned it myself, though, for all that I’d painstakingly followed a recipe.

Maybe it’s dumb to be so proud, but it’s one of the few things I’ve actually accomplished.

“I’m looking forward to the bread,” I admit, my stomach growling at the

scent of fresh bread. I glance in the direction of the kitchen when the oven beeps to let me know it has one minute left, and I pause the game.

I put the controller down, waiting until Hunter has let go of me to walk over to the kitchen. I'm naked, but I grab the apron lying on the counter so I don't accidentally burn myself somewhere inconvenient. The bright red stand mixer stands out among the blinding white kitchen, and I hope Hunter will let me leave it sitting out on the counter instead of packing it away every time. Maybe if I bake every day...

Then the doorbell rings.

I freeze halfway to the oven and give Hunter a panicked look. "Did you... invite somebody? Sir?"

Hunter shakes his head, frowning. "No. Go to the bedroom and wait." He gets up and heads for the door. I don't need another order; I don't want to see anyone else.

I don't need anyone else except Hunter.

There's only one problem: I hear the oven timer go off once I'm in the bedroom. I also hear Hunter talking to somebody, and it doesn't sound like he's going to get the bread out of the oven.

I fidget with the strings of the apron, biting my bottom lip. I don't want to upset him, but I don't want to burn the food, either. I take a deep breath and quickly shimmy into my jeans and sweater before heading out into the living room. "Sorry," I say, anxiously glancing at Hunter before darting into the kitchen. "Bread. I'll be two seconds."

I pull the bread out of the oven, sighing in relief when it looks like it's supposed to. The crust formed nice and evenly, and it has a wonderful golden hue. I set the bread onto the wire rack for cooling, itching to cut into it even though I know it needs to cool for at least ten minutes.

"Oh my god," a woman says, far too close.

I jump, turning quickly to face her, and I can *feel* my cheeks paling as I recognize Hunter's sister Bethany standing right there. I stare at her for several seconds before looking to Hunter in a panic.

He looks so annoyed that I almost shrink back, but with how often he's been drilling into my head to *stand straight*, I manage to keep myself standing tall.

Bethany is less dressed up today than the last time I'd seen her, but I don't have to know who she is to realize she's rich. The luxury brand handbag hanging on her arm is probably there less as a functional item and

more to let everybody know that she's worth a lot. The shoes—and she didn't take them off when she stepped inside—probably cost more than I'd have made in a year at a regular job, let alone Ntimacy.

“I should have taken that bet,” Bethany says, giving me a sharkish smile. “Jacob thought she'd be gone by the end of the week.”

“I don't need a new woman every week like him,” Hunter snaps at her. “Now get out. I was enjoying a quiet evening.”

Bethany ignores him and circles around the kitchen counter to stare at the bread. “Oh, I bet.” She takes a deep breath. “Smells good. Did you keep her because she's domesticated?”

Keep her. Domesticated.

Does this whole family think of people as possessions?

I stay quiet, swallowing hard and trying not to look at Hunter's irritated expression. I don't know whether he's pissed off that his sister showed up unannounced or that I appeared without permission—probably both—and I don't want to make things worse.

“Stef is staying here because I want her to.” Hunter motions toward the door. “Now, go before I tell Mother—”

“Oh, that's why I'm here,” Bethany interrupts. She reaches into her handbag and pulls out a small envelope. “Your invitation. Delivered by hand, so you can't pretend it got lost in the mail.”

Hunter takes the envelope from her, scowling the entire time. As he reads, his brows furrow even deeper. “Is this a joke?”

“Nope. And, I quote Mother, this is a mandatory family event. Apparently, it's just *sad* that our family has grown so far apart.” Bethany meets my eyes. “I'm not sure plus ones are included, though.”

The slow cooker timer beeps, announcing that the roast has been going for six hours.

Hunter ignores it and tosses the invite back at Bethany, but she doesn't even attempt to catch it. “I'm too busy. I'm not flying to Hawaii just on her whims.”

Hawaii. On a whim.

I could never have even dreamed of such a thing.

But I don't want to go anyway. Even if I did want to spend time with Hunter's family—and I absolutely do not—a trip to the beach would necessitate a swimsuit... which would mean my wrists would be exposed.

“You have four months to prepare. Rearrange your schedule, because she

won't take no for an answer." Bethany glances at the slow cooker. "Let's have dinner, shall we?"

She strides over to the dining room table, which has already been set for two people, and takes the seat that would have been mine. After setting her handbag down, she pours herself a glass of wine.

I look helplessly in Hunter's direction. I don't know if I should get an extra plate or if he's going to order her to leave again, but for fuck's sake, I can't serve homemade *pot roast* to his sister. I don't even know if it's going to taste good, or if it'll be tender, or if it's just too low brow for someone who probably eats foie gras and truffles every night.

Hunter's hands are balled up into fists. He glares at Bethany, but she meets his gaze head-on.

"I'm starving," Bethany says with a pointed smile. "And you know I can get so hangry. I might make phone calls somebody might regret. Not me, I wouldn't regret them. But you might."

"Fine," Hunter growls. He goes over to the drawers to get another set of cutlery. "I really don't need my own sister blackmailing me too."

Too?

My brows furrow in confusion for a moment, but I catch myself and force my expression into something more neutral. I get an extra plate and bring it to the table, getting a large spoon. If it's been done properly, the roast should break apart easily. If not, I'm going to be even more embarrassed than I already am.

I return to fuss with the bread, freezing when I realize the serrated knife I need is in the locked box on the counter with the rest of the sharp objects in the house.

Hunter seems to notice, because he says, "I'll do the bread. You serve the roast."

I swallow hard, not looking at the box, as if not looking at it will mean she doesn't notice. "Yes, M-... S-" I stumble over the list of titles, instead settling on a more vague, "All right."

Bethany lets out a sarcastic laugh. "Oh, you know how to help out, Hunter? That's a change."

"Did you get your university degree in bitchiness?" Hunter shoots back. "By the way, how's your love life coming along? Mother says your cunt is probably growing dry by now."

I stare at him, aghast, with the lid of the slow cooker in one hand and the

spoon in the other while I try not to drop either one.

But Bethany laughs. “I would love to hear her actually say that. And anyway, big brother, shouldn’t you be well aware that those are just harmful stereotypes about women without any medical basis?”

I busy myself with the roast, scooping off the fat cap from the top of the picanha before starting to portion it out. To my utter relief, it comes apart easily enough to where trying to keep it together is more of a problem than anything. “Carrots? Potatoes?” I ask Bethany in a tiny voice.

“So she does speak.” Bethany’s attention focuses on me now, and I wish I hadn’t said anything at all. “Speaking of cunts, that must be one magical one if you’re still here. Either that or desperate.”

I blanch, and I can’t help but stare at her for a moment before looking to Hunter for guidance. My hands are trembling, and all I want to do is flee. But there’s a part of me that knows it would make her feel victorious, like she’d won something, and... I don’t want that.

I still don’t say anything else.

Hunter takes one of the full plates and sets it down in front of Bethany, glaring at her the entire time. “If you can’t shut your fucking trap, I am going to physically kick you out,” Hunter growls. “And I won’t give a fuck what you tell anyone, either.”

Bethany’s eyes widen, and for a moment she looks terrified.

For all that Hunter can be scary, it’s strange to see the look on his sister’s face. I look helplessly between them, wishing I could cut some of the tension with a clever remark, but that’s never been my strength.

I wordlessly dish out another plate for Hunter, barely putting any food on my own as I sit in the chair across from Bethany. I don’t know why I’m so upset that she’s taken “my” spot because I’m still next to Hunter, but I’ve grown to like the routine we have.

Bethany looks away from Hunter and takes a sip from her wine glass. “Fine, I’ll play nice.” She meets my eyes, and in a much more pleasant tone asks, “How are the auditions going?”

Auditions?

For a moment, my mind blanks out, and I have no idea what she’s talking about—then I remember that Hunter had said I was an aspiring actress. Fuck. “Oh, you know,” I say vaguely, taking a long sip of my water. “It’s not an easy industry to break into. But I’m staying optimistic.”

“I’m sure.” Bethany takes a bite of her food, and I can’t tell at all what

she thinks of the taste. “Well, I have a few friends in the industry. I could pass along your information if you want.”

I freeze. I don’t have any contact information. I can’t use the emergency phone for anything but emergencies—and for calling Hunter—and it’s not like I have access to email or anything else.

And even if I did, I don’t want to stand on a stage and perform, waiting for people to judge me.

“That won’t be necessary,” Hunter says curtly. “By the way, Bethany, have you been to the Van Geersdorf gallery recently? We went the other day.”

“Oh, did you see the industrialist sculpture exhibit?” Bethany starts talking about art, completely distracted from the topic of... well, me.

It’s a relief, and I nibble on my food. I can’t get much down, even though the roast is surprisingly good. A little lacking on salt, maybe, but I’m not really a food aficionado to be judging it too harshly.

The bread, on the other hand, is perfect, and I eat more of that than the rest of the food on my plate.

I zone out of the conversation, thinking about what I can try next time. If I can regain Hunter’s trust—if I can regain my own faith in myself—maybe I can use knives and cook something more interesting than a pot roast.

“How much you want to bet that Jacob is going to sneak one of his mistresses to Hawaii with us?” Bethany asks, and I realize the topic of conversation has drifted.

Hunter snorts and shakes his head. “Of course he is. The question is, will Holly bring somebody too?”

I listen to their conversation, finding that Bethany can be interesting when she isn’t trying to get a rise out of Hunter. Is that sibling rivalry, maybe? Or something more? I can’t tell. “Would they really bring other people with them?” I find myself asking.

Bethany starts laughing. “Yes. Jacob’s done it before. It’s hilarious watching him try to hide it, when everybody knows what he’s doing.”

“No, Father sometimes doesn’t realize,” Hunter counters. “But only because Father somehow actually believed that—I forgot her name already—was Holly’s personal yoga trainer. Simply there to help with the yoga. Who brings a yoga trainer to Tuscany?”

My mouth goes dry. “He paid for her to go to Italy with you all? Wouldn’t it have been easier to find a local strip club...” I stop, my face

going hot when both of them stare at me. My hands clench under the table, and I'm worried I've pissed Hunter off again.

He shakes his head, though. "I've told him that. I even found a local place for him."

Bethany rolls her eyes. "I think half of the thrill for Jacob is getting away with it under everybody's noses, except we all know! I have no clue who he thinks he's fooling."

A little emboldened by their response, I say, "Himself?"

Bethany covers her mouth and lets out a laugh. "Yes! Exactly." She gives me a smile. "If you do come to Hawaii with us, you'll have to pay attention to Holly and Jacob. Their drama is usually worth the family trip alone. And! I once caught their individual side-fucks making out with each other, too."

It's the nicest she's been to me, and I offer a tentative smile. Now that I'm getting to see a little more of her, I can see she's the type who likes a captive audience. All I really have to do is give the appropriate minimal reply and she'll chatter about gossip and the family without coming after me.

Hopefully.

I give her the appropriate scandalized expression. "Did they find out about that?"

"That would require them to pay attention to anything but themselves," Bethany answers, but she leans in closer to launch into some other family gossip. It's easy to listen to her when she's animated like this, and I briefly wonder what tales she has about Hunter.

Hunter squeezes my thigh underneath the table, and I meet his eyes briefly. He gives me the smallest smile.

I return it, grateful that he seems to approve of how I'm handling his sister.

She stays for a little while longer, and despite the amusing stories, I'm beyond ready for her to leave by the time she stands up to excuse herself.

"Don't tell Mother you're not coming," Bethany says. "If you really don't want to go to Hawaii, just be late for the flight or something. But I think you should come." Her eyes glance over to me. "Especially if Stef is miraculously still with you by then."

"She will be," Hunter answers curtly, crowding Bethany toward the door. "And I'll think about Hawaii."

"I'm sure." She looks past Hunter and waves to me. "Dinner was good, Stef. Take my card, in case you want to call me." She ignores Hunter's

crowding and pulls a business card out of her purse, reaching past him to hand it to me.

I take it, even though I have a feeling he'll throw it away. It isn't as though I'd ever call her, though, so I don't think I care. "Thank you." There's really nothing else to say, and I smile tentatively at her as she takes Hunter's more than unsubtle hint and leaves.

Once the door is firmly closed—and locked—behind her, I look at Hunter. My entire body is tense again as I wait for a reprimand for having disobeyed him.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, messing up the careful styling. "This is why I can't ever let her into my condo. She takes forever to fucking leave."

I tentatively press myself against him, wrapping my arms around him and resting my head against his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Master," I say in a small voice. "I just... The bread..."

"The bread? It was good." Hunter puts his arms around me and pulls me closer to me. "Let's go clean up." He starts leading us toward the dining room. "I really was hoping to just relax tonight, but of course Bethany had to ruin things. At least there was nothing for her to complain about in terms of the food."

I follow him. "But... Did *you* enjoy it?" I ask, biting my bottom lip. In the end, I don't give a fuck whether Bethany liked the food. I just care if Hunter liked more than just the bread, even though it was a simple peasant meal for people who can't afford to spend a few hundred dollars on a single meal.

"Yes, it was good. Let me know what ingredients or tools you need for other dishes and I'll have them delivered." He lets go of me to pick up the dishes and take them to the kitchen.

I follow, starting to tidy up. I already washed out the bowl for the stand mixer and wiped it down, and there's not much else to clean up after we put the leftovers in the fridge and clean out the slow cooker. The plates are easy enough to put in the dishwasher.

As we work, I say, "Thank you. I... really like the stand mixer. Do you think we could maybe leave it out?" I pause, then attempt a joke, not sure if he'll like it or scowl at me. "I know it's a splash of color, but you're the one who bought it in red instead of industrial white or silver or something."

Hunter looks at the stand mixer, his brow furrowing in confusion. "What?"

I just bought the first one listed. And my place isn't completely white. I don't know why people keep saying that."

I quirk a brow. "The only thing that's not white in the living room is the blue controller for the gaming system. What else has color besides your clothes?" Shit. I shouldn't mention clothes. He'll realize I'm wearing them, but... Surely he has to realize it was better than me prancing out in just an apron and nothing else.

"The fridge and ovens are silver," Hunter says, like that's a victory. "Anyway, I simply enjoy the look of a clean space."

I can't help the small snort. "Maybe you can get a throw pillow in black. Or a gray blanket for the couch," I tease him. "A purple candle. It's a slippery slope, though. Next thing you know, you'll have a pink live-laugh-love sign on the wall."

Hunter shudders. "Those are an abomination. Holly put them all over Jacob's house." He stops to look at the living room, then shakes his head. "Let's finish up here so we can shower and turn in for the night."

I nod, helping him straighten up the dining room in companionable silence. It feels... good, and tiny butterflies rise in my stomach as I think about bathing with him and cuddling close in bed.

Things are looking up.

CHAPTER 25

Hunter

THERE'S A DISTINCTLY different vibe between a strip club like Ntimacy and one like Club Ruby's. At Ntimacy, I always watch where I step, and it almost always feels like my shoes are sticking to the floor. The women there are sadder, more desperate, and always look emaciated or drugged up. The alcohol they serve might as well be piss, and even the music they dance to feels lower class.

Club Ruby's caters to a wealthier crowd, with cocktails and fine wine, special effects on the stage, and dancers who glow under the attention.

I used to enjoy watching the performances, but I'm bored enough that I'm just browsing my phone, now.

Chase and Drake are watching the stage with rapt attention, though, each of them ready to toss the women a few hundred dollars. It's not until the dancer on stage finishes and there's a lull between performances that Chase elbows me.

"Seriously? What's so interesting on your phone?" Chase asks. "Got pics of your girl?"

I do have the video feed, which I check occasionally to see what Stef is up to. She's being a good girl and following my orders, and watching her usually settles some of the annoyance and anger in me.

It won't help today. "The blackmailer got in touch again," I say, not bothering to lower my voice. Nobody else is going to be able to hear us with the music going.

Drake grimaces. "Well, we figured he would. Has the fucker gotten to the point yet, or is he still sending you that cryptic bullshit?"

I pass my phone to Drake. He reads the message I have open, and his eyebrows rise.

Transfer \$50k in bitcoin to this wallet. if u don't, the whole world will know what kind of fun u get up to and what kind of girl Stef is.

“This guy’s an idiot,” Drake says.

Chase leans closer and laughs. “Bitcoin? Seriously? The funds are going to be worth less by the time the transfer even goes through.” He opens his briefcase and pulls his tablet out. “That’ll help us get closer to the identity though. Bitcoin has basically no privacy. Your techies can track it, right, Drake?”

Drake nods without hesitation. “Yeah. It’s a fucking security nightmare. I’ll get this info to the tech guys; I’d say we’ll know who’s behind these emails in a few days.”

I didn’t realize I was stressed about the emails, but my muscles loosen, and I feel like I can breathe again. “Thanks. Can I email back and tell whoever it is to fuck off?”

“Probably not recommended, but... you’re going to do it anyway, aren’t you?” Chase asks. He taps on his tablet and opens up a text file. “By the way, I did the digging you asked on Stef. She didn’t lie about her name. Isabela Diaz, age 23. Her parents are immigrants, but she was born here. Never left the state, grew up in New Bristol. It looks like she never finished high school though. She dropped out in her final year, and we weren’t able to figure out why she left home.”

I almost snap at Chase, until I realize that I did ask him to find out more about Stef right after her suicide attempt. I didn’t want any other surprises about her.

“Thanks.” I have to grit out the words. “You don’t need to investigate her further.”

She’s mine. Nobody else needs to know this much about her.

Chase seems to realize my change in mood. He closes the file and smirks at me. “What? Is there something Drake and I should know about your girl?”

“Hunter’s in loooooove,” Drake says like we’re teenagers all over again. “And this time, he can’t scare the girl away by being a fucking controlling asshole.”

“I can’t scare her away because I own her,” I hiss at them. “She’s not leaving.”

“I don’t think you have a legally binding contract,” Chase points out, full of amusement. “Last I checked, owning a human is against the law.” His eyes

turn darker. “Fucking shame though. When I think about what I’d do to... well, never mind.”

Drake nods in agreement. “I’ve actually started thinking about what I’d do to someone who couldn’t say no.” He laughs. “You’re a bad influence, Hunter.”

There’s a reason the three of us are friends. I know for a fact that the two of them have kinks that are as unethical as my own.

“I can introduce you to Pavone,” I say. “He’ll welcome the new business.”

“Nah. I don’t have time right now.” Chase shuts off his tablet and puts it away. “Now, are we going to get lap dances, or...”

The only one I want a lap dance from isn’t here, though. “You go ahead. I’m going home. I already paid enough; I don’t need to waste more money here.”

Drake smirks at me. “Yeah, you’ve already paid enough to get easy pussy at home. You don’t need to be teased to the point of blue balls when you have the girl at home.”

I scoff. “If you pay enough, I’m sure some of the girls here will follow you out of the club.”

“Yeah, but I don’t know where these girls have been,” Drake retorts with a grimace. “It’s great to have them rubbing all over me, but I’m not sure even a condom would be enough to convince me they’re safe to fuck, and I don’t want to wait for fucking blood test results. Hard pass.”

I almost go into a lecture about STIs and the efficacy of condoms, but I’m sure Drake doesn’t care. I get up and toss a few bills onto the table. “Fine. Have fun on your own. I’m going home.”

“Yep. Give your girl a good spanking from me,” Chase says, waving. His eyes are already on the stage again, where another performance has started up.

“Have fun,” Drake echoes, following Chase’s gaze. “Don’t be too gentle on her. She might start to actually think you care.”

I resist the immature urge to flip them off and hail a cab to get home. On the way, I type out my response to the blackmailer.

No.

And if you ever contact me again, I will track you down and leave your face so misshapen that even your own mother wouldn’t

recognize you.

It's mild, as far as threats go, but there's not much that sounds particularly threatening when written down anyway. He doesn't need to know how close I am to finding him right now.

I'm sure once I do find him, Drake would be more than happy to help me teach him a lesson.

I'm surprised when I get a response only a few minutes later.

Last warning.

Money in my wallet, or u'll regret it.

I sneer at the phone, but we've arrived at my condo building. I pay the driver and seethe the entire way up to my condo, imagining beating whoever it is into a bloody pulp.

The anger surges inside me, making my vision haze around the edges. I want to hurt someone. I want to destroy something.

When I open the door, Stef is kneeling in the foyer, naked.

"Welcome home, Master," she says, and some of my anger deflates. She seems to notice my mood, though, and after kissing the tops of my feet, she rests her cheek against my thigh. "Is there anything you'd like me to do for you?"

Hurt her, part of me thinks. Show her she isn't special.

But I imagine losing control again and discovering her bleeding out in the shower once more—only this time, I'll be too late to save her.

I take a deep breath. "Go prepare snacks for us. We'll relax in the living room."

She gives me a searching look but nods, getting to her feet. She briefly presses her body against mine and kisses me shyly before scurrying off to the kitchen.

I sit down on the couch and force myself to breathe and relax my hands. I need to stay calm. I need to stay in control.

After a few minutes, she returns with some snacks—crackers and cheese and meats, vegetables with ranch dressing—and sets them down on the coffee table before kneeling next to it.

"Good girl," I say, mostly out of habit.

But she *is* good. She's sweet and obedient and has learned not to question me. When she looks at me with adoration in her deep brown eyes, I might as well be the center of her world.

I eat a few crackers before taking a cherry tomato and dunking it in dressing. I hold it out to her lips. "Eat."

Stef's lips wrap gently around my fingers, and she takes the tomato delicately from them. She eats it before returning to resting her head against me, and despite my mood, her reliance on me to comfort her, to make her feel better, starts to soothe me.

She doesn't chatter at me; she doesn't make demands. I continue to feed her in silence, and finally, slowly, the urge for violence slips away.

I stroke her hair gently, and she sighs, resting her head against my thigh.

"Do you want to keep playing your game?" I ask. I have no idea if she's anywhere close to finishing it—there seems to be no point except to keep doing the same things over and over—but I enjoy watching her reactions while she plays.

She pauses, and I can see the indecision in her face as she sorts through what she wants to do and what she thinks I want her to do. She finally says, "I would like that, but I'd also like to pleasure you. I want to help you relax."

The Stef I'd brought into my home two months ago would never have offered something like that—at least, not without desperation and bleakness in her gaze instead of this calm desire to please me. I smile at her. "You can definitely do that." I take a moment to consider the possibilities, but I don't feel like doing anything elaborate. "Take my cock out and get me hard."

Stef nods, nimbly unfastening my pants and pulling them down a little so she can get to my boxer briefs. She nuzzles against my soft cock through them for a moment, mouthing at it, then slowly coaxes it free of my underwear. Her mouth finds my exposed cock in seconds, and she sucks me into her mouth in one quick, practiced motion.

I lean back and groan, letting myself enjoy the sensations of her warm mouth. She's learned what I like and uses her tongue to massage the underside of my cock. I could easily come from this alone. I'm tempted to, even.

When I'm fully hard, I put my hand on her head and push her back. "Enough."

She startles but pulls back, looking up at me. She bites her bottom lip anxiously, then rests her hands on my thighs as she awaits further orders.

“Come here. Face the TV and sit on my lap. With my cock in you, of course.” I don’t particularly try to sound reassuring, but her expression eases all the same.

She gets up, and after giving me another quick, hesitant peck on the lips, she turns away from me and gets into my lap. She slowly guides me to her hole, and I’m both surprised and pleased to find that she’s already wet as she eases down onto me. Her breath catches in a soft moan, and she arches her back.

I wrap my arms around her and kiss the back of her neck, taking a moment to breathe in her scent. She uses my soaps and shampoos, but somehow there’s still something unique about how she smells.

Although I don’t deny that I enjoy knowing she smells of *me*, too.

“Grab the controller and start playing,” I say to her.

The blue controller, sitting on the side table, is apparently the only “splash of color” in this room. I still don’t see what’s wrong with the rest of the decor or why everybody keeps bringing this up.

Startling, Stef turns her head to look at me, and her cheeks are flushed. She reaches over to get the controller, squirming on my cock as she turns the TV and the console on. “I’m at the *hard* part,” she says, and though there’s a hint of a pout to her voice, I can tell she’s trying to tease me.

“I’m sure you can manage,” I say, keeping my hold on her loose. Her cunt is warm around me, and I resist the urge to thrust into her. “If you fail, you do it again.”

Stef huffs, but she starts directing her character to fight the monsters. It’s a far cry from the detective game we’d played earlier, and a lot less engaging for me.

It does mean I don’t have any issue giving my attention to something else. When Stef goes against the first of the larger monsters—which she’d called the *area boss*—I reach up and pinch her nipples.

She lets out a quiet yelp, squirming on my cock, and she moans as she tries to settle again. The red bar at the top of the screen gets smaller. “You’re very distracting,” she grumbles.

“You need to learn to multitask,” I joke—and I can’t remember the last time I joked around with somebody. I massage her breasts, and her cunt tightens in turn.

A quiet gasp accompanies her giggle, and once again, she doesn’t get out of the way of the effect on the ground in time to avoid taking damage. “Damn

it,” she says, but she laughs again. “This is harder than I thought I would be.”

I suck on her collar while playing with her tits, and I enjoy the way she squirms for me. I notice that her character has died and been sent back to the starting area, but is now standing completely still.

“Keep playing,” I order. “We’re relaxing for the evening.”

Stef gives a soft laugh, a breathless sound, and I find that I like it—and I like the way she clenches around me again as she squirms on top of me. “This... I guess I’m lucky this isn’t one of those games where if you game over, you lose progress.”

She directs her character to move again, and I keep my touches gentle until she gets into a groove again.

But when she’s got the boss at half health, I start tickling her sides.

She squirms and wiggles, clenching and unclenching around my cock and getting me to thrust unbidden.

“Nooo,” she whines, laughing as she directs the character right into the path of the giant axe right as it comes down. A few seconds, and she’s back at the starting area again.

“Keep going,” I say, biting down on her neck. I direct her to lift and lower her hips just enough to tease myself.

I wonder how long I can hold out—but I’m already so hard, and my balls are growing tight with the need to come.

“I give, I give!” Stef says, tossing the controller onto the couch beside us and turning. She starts to lean in for a kiss, then she hesitates. “I’m sorry, Master. I’ll keep playing.”

Despite the honorific, she’d forgotten who I am to her, for even just a moment.

I growl and lift her up to spread her out on the couch. Stef squeaks, peering up at me with wide eyes, but I get my cock into her once more, leaning down to catch her lips in a brutal kiss.

Somehow, it feels like she’s smiling, and she wraps her arms around my shoulders.

I nip at her lips, kissing and marking every part of her I can reach while brutally fucking her.

I realize my own lips are curved up into a smile as well.

I don’t think I’ve ever had *fun* with sex.

She’s the most passionate she’s ever been, throwing her head back when my lips and teeth find her shoulder again. I’ve never heard her moan this

loudly, and she's never been this wet before. She clings to me in a death grip, like something might change if she relaxes her grip for even a second.

I've been teasing her—and myself—for so long that I'm already close. I speed up, thrusting even harder into her. With one hand, I fumble for her clit, rubbing insistently.

“Come,” I order.

Stef squeezes her eyes closed, and it doesn't take her long to begin trembling. Her orgasm stays at bay for only a few seconds, then I can see it as it overtakes her—and I can feel it, too, as her cunt tightens impossibly around my cock.

I give in to the sensations and come directly into her, luxuriating in the feeling of her milking my cock dry.

When I come down from the orgasm, I stare down at Stef. She's panting hard, her face red and a thin sheen of sweat covering her forehead. Her eyes look dazed, and her mouth is slightly agape.

I bend down to kiss her, more gently this time.

It doesn't mean anything.

I'm not *in love*.

But I won't let anything jeopardize this, whatever it is. Not my family, not my friends, and certainly not some weaselly little fuck who thinks he can blackmail me.

CHAPTER 26

Stef

I HUM to myself as I clean up the dishes from breakfast, eschewing putting them in the dishwasher in favor of washing them by hand to give myself something to do for a few minutes. I've already gone through most of the discussions on the recipes in the cookbooks Hunter gave me. While I'm allowed to game and watch TV during the day after I exercise, I'm starting to get restless and bored.

Still, I can't deny my good mood as I head to the living room to find something to entertain myself with.

I go to the bookshelf, and I smile a little to see so many of Hunter's textbooks and manuals lined up neatly on a few of the shelves. It sends a strange sense of wistfulness through me, though.

What would've happened if I had graduated high school and gone to college?

If I'd really wanted to become an actress, and Hunter was willing to allow me to try to make it a viable career? I don't want to, but the option of doing something with my life is an alluring one.

It makes my smile drop, though, because I *haven't* had the education or "the inclination to make something of myself," as my parents had put it. The only things I know how to do involve drugs and sex... and being Hunter's personal sex slave.

Not that it feels that way anymore, especially after the past few days. Hunter might not come home in a good mood, but it no longer feels difficult to change that. Seeing him smile is the highlight of my day, and while I'm always afraid he's going to tell me I've gone too far, it's worth it to see him... happy.

Because I think he is happy.

I pull one of the textbooks off the bookshelf and take it to the couch, curling up in a corner of it and flipping the cover open. I lack the foundation to really understand it, and it makes me wish all over again that I could somehow learn the rest of the basics high school would've afforded me.

I decide then and there that I'm going to ask Hunter for a chance to get my GED. Even if I can't do anything with it, I would still be proud to say that I have it despite everything that's happened. I don't know if he'll be happy with me being more educated, or if he likes that I'm so ignorant, but it's worth a try.

I skim through a few pages, grimacing when it just gets more difficult to understand. I should've grabbed one of the introductory books. I hop off the couch to put this one away and grab another, but halfway to the shelf, somebody knocks on the door.

I freeze.

It's not Hunter. It can't be Hunter. He wouldn't knock on his own door.

If he was expecting one of his friends to come over, he would've warned me, wouldn't he? He'd told me he wasn't going to share me.

Maybe it's Bethany again.

If it wasn't for the tide of loneliness that washed over me then, the way I was feeling down on myself, I probably would've ignored it outright.

I want to call Hunter and ask what I should do, but chances are, it's just a marketer or the building manager or something.

Does this building even have managers?

While I hesitate, trying to decide whether to open it, somebody knocks again and again, more insistently. I head for the kitchen to grab the phone, but to my shock, I hear something break, then the door opens.

Fuck.

My heart races—then sinks when I see that the phone isn't on the kitchen island where it normally is. Of course it's not there. I had to move it to the bedroom to charge it the previous night.

I instantly grab the apron to cover myself up as much as possible. Maybe someone is here to rob Hunter, knowing he's wealthy and successful and thinking no one would be here.

My heart nearly seizes when I see who saunters in the front door, though, and terror grips me.

Dylan.

He looks the same as I remember, with his disheveled brown hair and

wearing jeans with far too many holes. He's got the same scruffy beard.

He's wearing the same dumb baseball cap too, which he always wears in order to conceal his face from cameras.

I try to duck behind the kitchen counter, but it's too late. He's already spotted me.

"Hey, Bela!" Dylan shouts, walking over to me. "Nice fancy digs you've got here. You really moved up in the world."

Fuck. Fuck!

I try to edge around the room, skirting the island and trying to keep it between us. "You need to get out," I say, trying for firm, but god, I'm shaking so bad my teeth damn near chatter. "Hunter has cameras everywhere. He'll see that you're here and call the police."

"Pff, sure. Not before I trash the place though." Dylan starts opening kitchen cabinets, and I notice that he's wearing gloves. "Where does that rich prick keep the knives?"

Like I'd really tell him that.

As soon as he's fully turned away from me, I dart for the large doorway leading to the living room. I just need to get into the bedroom. That's all. I can lock myself in there and call Hunter.

And the police. But mostly, I need to hear Hunter's voice right now.

I get halfway to the bedroom before Dylan slams into me, hard. I cry out and stumble to the floor, Dylan on top of me. He straddles my body and wraps a hand around my neck.

"Are you thinking of doing something stupid, Bela? I don't recommend it."

"N-no," I wheeze. "Please, Dylan, you need to leave. Seriously. He'll... He'll really fuck you up for messing with his stuff."

"I'm not afraid of some sissy rich boy." Dylan sneers at me, gripping my throat more tightly. "And what's with your attitude? You should be *thanking* me. You're living in the lap of luxury now."

"Why would I thank you, Dylan?" I ask, going still. "You sold me to Giulio Pavone! He whored me out to anyone who would pay a few dollars. At least here..."

At least here, Hunter cares about me.

Doesn't he?

Dylan uses his other hand to slide down to my breast, and I wince as he tweaks my nipple.

“Yeah. I heard you got sold—and at quite a markup.” Dylan keeps groping me, his hand going underneath the apron.

My lip wibbles as I try to stave off tears.

“Why the fuck shouldn’t I get a piece of that pie, huh? You were mine first.” Dylan growls and suddenly squeezes my breast, hard enough that it’ll probably bruise.

I let out a quiet yelp, but I don’t dare try to pull away.

I don’t doubt that he’d choke me and leave me here if I fight.

“He won’t... He won’t pay anything for me,” I say, and the tears start to fall as I wonder if that’s the truth. After the last few days—after everything—would he?

“Maybe.” Dylan’s expression turns nastier. “But before he makes a choice, I figure I should let him know the consequences.” He lets go of my breast and reaches into his coat pocket. I don’t know what I expected, but it certainly wasn’t a gun.

The sight of it makes the tears fall faster, and I think of my blood splattered across Hunter’s perfect white kitchen. It would be the only color besides the fucking red, red stand mixer.

“Please don’t kill me,” I whisper. “I’ll... I’ll go with you. I’ll earn for you. I got really good, Dylan, I promise. I can make you money.”

Dylan snorts in disbelief. “I heard you were a total crybaby, which didn’t surprise me. Fuck, you cried for *ages* when Alicia died. Only thing that got you to stop moping were the drugs.”

I swallow hard, the pain of the loss almost more than I can stand. It makes my veins itch, the need to fill them with something to erase the misery becoming something immediate. “Please,” I try again. “Dylan, I’ll behave. He won’t care if I leave.”

I hope I’m wrong, but I just have no idea.

“You can start by showing me where the valuables are.” Dylan lets go of my throat, but he doesn’t move off me. “If you try *anything* funny, you’re dead. Got it?”

“Yes,” I say, nodding quickly. “But I don’t know where the valuables are.” Tears continue to stream down my face, but I don’t wipe them away. “He doesn’t keep them out anywhere that I’ve seen. They’re probably in a private safe in... in the bedroom.”

Which is where the phone is.

But trying to call him would be doing something *funny*, as Dylan put it.

“There’s got to be something valuable around here. His fucking golf clubs! His laptop! His...” Dylan looks toward the living room and starts smiling. “His video game systems.”

It’s like a stab to the gut.

I swallow hard, nodding. “Y-yeah. His tablet is there. The laptop is in his office. And...” Why does the idea of him selling yet another gaming system out from under my nose hurt so much?

Dylan slowly gets off me and jerks the gun. “Get up. Find a bag, pack everything up for me.”

I don’t want to do this. So badly, I don’t want to do this.

“And get some fucking clothes on,” he adds.

I stand up, not bothering to try to dodge him when he grabs my arm.

“Not that you’ll need them for long.” Dylan leers at me. “Now go on. Get the shit together.”

I nod, swallowing hard as I wipe at the tears on my face. I don’t even know what to think. Is Hunter watching this on the video feed right now? Is he with a patient? Is he on his way home?

I don’t hear the phone in the bedroom ringing, though, which means... either he doesn’t know, or he doesn’t care.

Dylan follows me to the bedroom, staying on my ass the entire time. I glance helplessly in the direction of the side table, where the phone is charging, and he follows my gaze. His expression gets uglier. “I thought I told you not to try anything.”

“I’m not!” I protest quickly. “I was... I was just...”

He grabs the phone, examining it. He lets out a nasty laugh. “Wow. He really doesn’t trust you at all, and you’re defending him?”

“It’s just a phone,” I mumble. It didn’t mean anything. It was just a security measure to Hunter... Right?

I hurry into the closet, finding one of Hunter’s suitcases and dragging it out.

I find Dylan crouching down in front of the safe in the side table. “You know the combo?” he asks me, then he snorts. “Yeah, right. Who would trust their fucktoy with that?”

My cheeks flush red, but he’s not wrong. Hunter has no reason to trust me with anything. Not a smartphone, not the combination to his safe, not anything. I watch Dylan for a moment, hoping that cops will magically burst through the door because Hunter has seen what’s happened and called for

help...

But nothing happens.

Dylan presses the buttons on the safe's keypad, but it doesn't react. He grimaces. "Tch. If I had more time..." He gets up and eyes me. "Well? Didn't I say to get fucking dressed? Jesus, did you get stupider after you left me?"

His words make me flinch. I feel like I have. I feel like I'm just a sex toy, especially right now with Dylan's voice ringing in my ears. I go to the dresser and find my underwear along with a pair of jeans and a sweater. I start to get dressed, stalling.

Suddenly I hear a strange sound behind me, and a *smell* wafts to my nose. I turn around and gape when I see Dylan pissing on the bed.

"What are you doing?" I ask in dismay, fumbling with the sweater before pulling it over my head.

"What does it look like I'm doing? Fucking rich asshole." Dylan shakes his cock around to get as much of the bed as he can, until the stream runs dry. He catches my eye and smirks at me. "You're salivating already? Don't worry, I'll give it to you later."

I flinch, brushing again at the tears that never seem to stop.

Except they had stopped, for a little while—when I'd been with Hunter, when he'd smiled at me, when he'd touched me gently. I'm not delusional enough to think he loves me, or that I love him, but... We had fun, didn't we?

I finish getting dressed and find my shoes. "I'll go pack up the stuff from the living room," I mumble.

Maybe I can run before he figures out I've gone anywhere. Even if I just go downstairs, if I tell the concierge somebody is vandalizing Hunter's home...

I hear the click of the gun safety.

"Don't fucking move, Bela," Dylan says. "Open up the drawers here. There's got to be something worth taking along."

My breaths come faster, harder, as I struggle not to hyperventilate. I don't look at the gun. I don't dare. "Okay," I whisper, going to the bedside drawer. I blush as I see the drawer full of sex toys, of dildos and gags and even the collar and leash Hunter has been saving for another day. "This isn't worth anything," I say, even though I have no idea how much these have cost.

Dylan gets closer and peers inside. "Jesus fuck, he's one kinky fucker." He picks up the collar with his free hand, holding it up to my neck. "Put it

on.”

I nearly choke on a sob, but I obey, taking the collar and putting it around my neck. I secure it in place, staring down at the floor. I flinch when Dylan hooks the leash onto it.

“Nice. Guess he does at least know how to treat his bitches.” Dylan tugs hard enough to make me stumble. “Okay, pile some of it into the bag. We’ll grab the electronics and get out of here.” He laughs. “Just like old times, right, Bela?”

I want to collapse onto the floor and refuse to move, but I’m keenly aware of the gun in his hand. So instead of curling up in a ball on the floor, I go through the drawers in the bedroom looking for anything of value, slowly putting things into Hunter’s small suitcase.

When we return to the living room and it’s time to get the gaming console from the TV stand, my tears start up anew.

Yeah. Just like old times.

“I think that’s... that’s everything,” I say around hiccupping sobs.

“Fucking Christ, are you crying?” Dylan groans. “I’m *saving* you here. From some rich asshole who bought you, and won’t even fucking share the wealth.”

He isn’t saving me at all, and we both know it. I duck my head, zipping up the bag instead of responding aloud.

“Speaking of.” Dylan goes up to the TV and pulls on it.

I watch dumbly as the TV topples over onto the floor with a loud cracking sound.

Dylan looks around, then tugs on my leash to take me to the kitchen. He opens the fridge and pulls out the bottle of ketchup.

“Here,” he says, handing it to me. “Go spray it all over his fucking white living room.”

I stare at him for a moment, uncomprehending, and he waves the gun at me until I take the bottle from him into my trembling fingers.

Hunter is going to think I’m doing this because I want to. He’s going to look at the video feed and think I’m gleefully stealing from him and defiling his home. He’s going to be so pissed off that it’s never going to occur to him that I might not have wanted to do any of this.

I go into the living room and half-heartedly squirt the ketchup onto the couch, wincing as it gets onto the nice fabric. It doesn’t take long to empty the bottle onto the white furniture, then I turn to look back at Dylan.

He rolls his eyes at me. “Seriously? What happened to *fuck the rich*? Alicia would be so ashamed of you. You know she’d be right here with me, fucking this prick’s shit up.”

She would be disappointed in me for protecting my captor, someone who has had no qualms about using me. I don’t know if she’d approve of vandalizing his home, but then, it’s been so long since I’ve talked about her—let alone *to her*—that I don’t know anymore.

I toss the bottle onto the couch. “We’ve done enough,” I mumble. “Let’s just go before he gets back.” My breath hitches, and I have to fight not to throw up because of all of the nerves and misery.

“Man. I wanted to do worse. But yeah, let’s get the fuck out of here.” Dylan motions toward the suitcase. “You carry that. We’re gonna go on a lovely car ride.” He raises the gun at me, as if I’ve forgotten what the stakes are.

I glance back one more time at the bedroom.

The phone still isn’t ringing.

My shoulders slump as I get the suitcase and follow Dylan out of what could’ve been my home.

THE HOUSE he takes me to is a dump, but that isn’t a surprise. Dylan’s never been able to keep any place clean.

I don’t think he actually lives here, though. It’s more likely that he found an empty place and started squatting. I get bad vibes from it, and the deteriorated walls and flooring tell me it might have sat empty for a while.

He catches my look and grins. “Pretty sweet, right? Apparently there was a grisly murder here some years back, and they’ve never managed to sell it.”

I shudder, trying not to look around to see what my—temporary—new home is. Dylan will find somewhere else before long, and it’s not like I’m going to get attached to here, not knowing that what’s going to happen here is potentially going to be worse than Ntimacy.

“How did you even find me?” I mumble, hugging my arms against my chest.

Dylan ties the end of the leash around a beam in the center of the room. “I went to Ntimacy to check up on you, and somebody there was nice and told

me where you'd ended up." He goes to flop onto the shabby couch. "I couldn't believe it. Do you know how fucking much the guy paid for you? Like, Jesus fuck, I could buy myself a nice luxury car with that kind of money. And the dude dropped it on a used-up cunt like yours."

I don't know how much Hunter paid for me, and I find that I don't really want to know. But the fact that he could buy a nice car with it... I can't help but laugh, for all that it's a bitter sound. "Yeah, I know I'm not worth even a quarter of that."

I wonder if Hunter knows yet.

Why do I miss him?

The laughter turns into sobs, and I sink down onto the dirty floor to hide my face in my hands.

Dylan ignores me for a while, for which I'm glad. I don't know what he wants to do with me, but I doubt it was actually to free me. I wipe at my tears and glance in his direction.

He's fumbling with his phone, typing something with fast movements of his fingers. He's never been the type to spend hours on his phone... but it's been a while since I last saw him.

Or maybe it hasn't been that long at all. Only a few months. Half a year?

"What are you going to do with me?" I ask quietly.

Dylan looks up from his phone at me. "Guess that depends on whether Dr. Fuckface is willing to pay for you. If not... eh, I'm sure I can find somebody to take you off my hands in another state. Benton City's got a bunch of strip clubs too, I hear."

I try to swallow around my tears, but it's all I can do to remember to breathe. I'd told him I'd go with him and behave, that I'd suck and fuck whoever he wanted, but the idea of being sold to another strip club like Ntimacy makes me despair even more this time. I hadn't known how horrible it would be then, but now? Now, I know just how bad it can be.

"Just leave him alone," I whisper. "He won't pay for me."

"Probably not. You know how those rich fuckers are. They hoard all the wealth for themselves." Dylan shakes his head, and I see some of the passion I remember from our early days together. "I looked into him. Doctor Perfect, sterling reputation, but he's a fucking hypocrite, isn't he? I mean, you and me, we did shit because we were desperate. That fucking prick does stuff because he thinks the world owes him." He stands up, putting his phone in his back pocket, and walks over to me. The smile is familiar, and it would

almost be possible to forget exactly what he's doing...

Except he's still holding the gun.

Except I'm still leashed.

"What the fuck makes him better than me, anyway?" Dylan growls, grabbing my hair. "The world bends for him because he was born rich, but the rest of us, we gotta claw our way up and still nothing ever goes our way."

He's not wrong, and I can't even say I disagree. Dr. Hunter Savage had an incredible advantage by being born into that family, but... I remember the way he talks to, and about, his family. Maybe there's a price for being born into that life.

God, Alicia would laugh at me if she heard me defending anyone like that. She hadn't been as passionate as Dylan was, but she'd still had very strong opinions on capitalism and supposedly high-ranking members of society.

I think she'd have regretted introducing me to Dylan in time, though, especially because of the drugs. That part, she never would've been okay with.

And god, I want those drugs right now. I want to fall into oblivion, to escape deep inside of myself where nothing hurts, where I don't have to think about the fact that the phone never rang, that Hunter won't pay a ransom for me, that I'm just utterly useless now as anything but a fucked-out whore.

I squeak when Dylan pulls my head toward his crotch.

"I promised you something earlier, didn't I?" Dylan says.

I shake my head. "Please, no. I don't want to, Dylan."

He laughs and tugs my hair harder. "What, you get used to his billion-dollar cock? You don't want to live like the plebs anymore?"

I'd told him I'd behave, but at the same time... What's really at stake anymore? I'd only said those things to get him out of Hunter's home, and now...

Now, I really don't fucking care if he shoots me or not. Maybe death really would be better than living like this.

My wrists itch, and I have to fight not to claw at the healing scars hidden beneath my sweatshirt.

"I can't," I whisper, and fuck, am I ever going to stop crying? How is it even possible for one person to cry this much?

Dylan makes an annoyed sound and rolls his eyes, but he shoves me away from him. "Fuck, I forgot how boring you are when you're sober." He strides

over to a cabinet on the far wall and opens one of the drawers.

I already know what's coming, but that doesn't stop my whimper when Dylan turns around with a syringe in hand.

"Come on, Bela, let's have some real fun."

At least if I have to live like this, I don't have to go through it with the clear mind I've developed over the past few months. But I've worked so hard to get to this point, and I don't want to lose all that progress now.

I fucking care for the first time in my life, and while I'd gladly take death in this moment, I don't want to lose myself to drugs again. I don't want to become that person again, that hollow-eyed waif who'd do anything for another high. I want to be the girl who longs to get an education, to understand graduate-level science, who loves to bake fresh bread.

I can't believe I thought I could really be those things.

I can't believe I'm giving in to Dylan so easily.

"No," I say, shaking my head as I reach up to untie the leash. "No. I came with you. I said I'd fuck and suck who you want me to, but I don't want the drugs."

I do. I fucking do. I want them so bad it aches.

And why not? Hunter doesn't fucking care.

But I care, and that kills me.

And maybe Hunter does care, and maybe he will come, and what would he think if he knew how easily I'd given in to addiction when he'd worked so hard to get me through that hell?

"Bela, babe," Dylan says, squatting down next to me and gripping my wrist tight enough to hurt.

I want to tell him to stop calling me *Bela*. I'm not that person anymore. I don't want to be that person.

"Sex is always better when you're high," Dylan tells me.

I'd have agreed with him once, but I think about the other night when Hunter and I had laughed our way through sex and pleasure, rolling into bed together like we were lovers instead of master and slave.

Dylan sets the gun down so he can get the syringe up against my arm.

This is my chance, I realize.

I'm terrified, but I yank my hand out of his grasp and sit back to kick him. Dylan gasps, and the syringe clatters onto the floor.

"You fucking bitch!" Dylan shouts.

"Leave me alone!" I yell, scrambling away from him—but the leash is

still tied around the post. I tug, and by some stroke of luck, it comes free.

Dylan never learned to tie proper knots. I laugh desperately, but I don't have time to dawdle. I start running, down the hallway and toward the front door. I hear Dylan catching up to me, but I reach the door.

It doesn't open—because of the dead bolt. Fuck. I turn it as fast as I can, and I pull the door open to get a taste of fresh air.

Before I can take a single step outside, Dylan manages to grab the end of the leash and tug on it so hard that I choke and fall backward.

“Ungrateful cunt!” Dylan shouts as he slams the door shut. “You think you're better than me now? Is that it?” He wrestles me onto the ground, and I kick and scream, but he's bigger and heavier than me.

I cry out when he punches me in the head so hard that I see stars.

My body goes limp as I try to catch my breath.

I can't do anything to stop Dylan from jabbing the syringe into my elbow and pushing down on it.

“Stop fucking pretending you aren't the same gutter trash as me,” Dylan snarls.

I try to say something in response, but the words die in my throat as the drug—as the *poison*—pumps into my veins.

The woman I hoped I could become is gone just like that, a single instant eradicating all of the progress I've made and tearing away any future I could've had with Hunter.

He'd never want me back now.

But it doesn't matter, because he doesn't want me anyway.

No one does except Dylan, and when he forces my mouth open so he can shove his cock inside, I part my lips and cry even as the euphoria of the high threatens to overtake me.

CHAPTER 27

Hunter

I DON'T LIKE my current patient.

She's a tall woman, with long brown hair, brown eyes, and a flat chest. There's nothing about her that stands out in particular, other than the fact that she's accompanied by Damien Rossi, Giulio Pavone's consigliere.

This is Vanessa Pavone, Giulio's... wife? Girlfriend? The mother of his future child, in any case.

More importantly, she's the one Stef seemed to like.

"The heartbeat is strong, just like I told you two weeks ago," I say with impatience. "If there hasn't been any trauma, there's no reason to think otherwise. I don't need to see her for another month."

Damien either doesn't notice or doesn't care about my irritation, because he gets closer and places his hand on Vanessa's belly. She flinches and squeezes her eyes shut. "We appreciate your care with her. Giulio wants to be sure nothing will go wrong."

But the way Damien looks at Vanessa, I suspect it isn't *Giulio* who's so concerned.

I have no interest in detangling whatever is going on there, though. I turn the screen toward Damien so he can see the ultrasound images.

Damien huffs and says, "It's more than a tadpole, now."

Vanessa starts to speak, then looks at me with a wary expression. She shakes her head, but she ends up not saying anything at all.

Good.

For all that Stef seemed to like her, it seemed that Vanessa was the reason she got punished, too, and that's unacceptable.

"Is that all?" I ask abruptly. I haven't heard from Stef in at least a few hours, and that's grating on my nerves. Usually, she calls often, just to hear

my voice, and I like that she's so dependent on me for her happiness. Not today, though, and it has me remembering the sight of her in the bathroom, surrounded by blood...

Damien stares at me, like he's trying to assess something. I meet his gaze, unflinching, and after a few seconds Damien says, "That's all, thank you. We'll be back soon."

"In a month," I reiterate, but I know he'll be back sooner—for the ultrasound images, if nothing else.

When they're finally gone, I head back to my office and pull up the condo's camera feed. I check the living room first, but she isn't there. I tab over to the kitchen, the bedroom, even the spare bedroom, and... nothing.

I go back to the living room, wondering if I'd missed seeing her, and now that I'm paying more attention, I realize something is wrong. There's a large red stain on the couch. The camera angle means it's in the corner of the frame, which is why I missed it the first time.

My throat closes up, and I stare at that stain. The splatter doesn't look like blood... right?

I rewind the feed, and I sigh in relief when I see Stef standing, *alive*, and squirting ketchup over the couch.

I don't know how to describe the intense emotion that washes over me next when I realize she's wearing a collar, and there's a man holding the leash.

Who the fuck is he? What the fuck is he doing in my condo, what is he doing with Stef?

I watch as the two of them walk away, carrying one of my suitcases.

Fuck.

I close the video feed and call Chase.

"I have a problem," I say as soon as he picks up. "Call Drake and tell him to meet me at my condo immediately."

"Uh, I'm in a meeting—"

"I don't fucking care," I growl, ending the call. I grab my wallet and coat, and I stand up just as the nurse comes in to tell me the next patient is ready. "Reschedule her," I say. "I have a... family emergency."

Fuck. I rush outside and hail a cab, snapping at the cab driver to hurry the fuck up. My mind is in disarray during the entire commute. I stop in front of the condo door and see that the lock has essentially been destroyed.

I'm going to sue the building for this shoddy quality. I'm going to destroy

everybody who even allowed this to happen.

I go inside, but I don't know what I expect to see. The ketchup on my couch—not blood, thankfully not fucking blood—the destroyed TV, the missing electronics. There's a distinct stench of human urine in my bedroom, and the drawers have all been pulled open.

And of course, Stef is nowhere to be seen.

Chase and Drake show up ten minutes later, when I'm back in the living room, staring at the couch once more.

“When I said you needed more color in here, this isn't what I meant,” Drake says, but there's no humor in his voice. “Jesus. What the fuck happened here, Hunter?”

“Somebody broke in,” I snap at him. “And he took Stef.”

Chase looks around the room. “And stole a bunch of shit, it looks like. You have any security in here?”

“Yes.” I pull up the video feed and hand my phone to them.

Chase grimaces. “Fuck. Is he holding a gun?” He scrolls through the feed, his expression getting more worried. “You might need to call the cops, Hunter.”

“And tell them what? My sex slave got kidnapped?” I half-shout.

Fuck. Fuck, I need to calm down, but I keep replaying Stef's despairing look as she walks toward the front door.

“No, you dick, you tell them that your *girlfriend* got kidnapped. This has got to be the blackmailer, right?” Chase suddenly frowns. “Wait. Here. He looks up for a second, and... I recognize him.”

Drake glances down at the still frame. “Yep, that's the idiot who tried to blackmail you. My IT guy sent me pictures a few hours ago. His name's, um...” He gets his phone out, tapping on the screen. “Sorry, man. I was in a meeting when I got this, and I hadn't had time to look at it too closely. Okay. He says his name is Dylan Castor. He's a real piece of shit. He's been arrested on suspicion of several crimes, but he keeps weaseling out of the charges. No evidence, etc.”

Chase laughs. “Fuck, really? Because I got another report from the PI this morning. This is Stef's ex-boyfriend. She was living with him for a while. I was going to forward that info to you tonight.”

Stef's ex.

“I'm going to kill him,” I say flatly. “When I find him, there isn't going to be a single bone in his body that's still where it should be.”

Drake gives me a long, measuring look. “Is she worth going to jail over?” he asks carefully, though there’s so much in that question that I want to punch *him* for its implications. “She’s more than just your property?” It sounds like a question, but I can tell he sees the truth.

“Nobody’s going to jail,” Chase says. He hands my phone back to me. “I know several extremely good criminal defense attorneys.”

Right as I take the phone, it buzzes with a new message. I stare at the notification in disbelief.

It’s from the blackmailer—from *Dylan*.

*I got ur girl
She tastes so good
Shoulda paid me the first time
U want her back, i want double now.*

Drake whistles. “He’s got some balls, I’ll give him that.” He flashes me a dark grin. “Too bad I bet my guy is better than him. Forward that to him.” He gives me his IT contact’s email then makes a quick call, barking out the order to trace it *now* before hanging up. When he’s done, he looks at me. “You sure she didn’t want to go with him?”

“She was on a fucking leash, and he’s pointing a gun at her,” I bark at him. “Do you honestly fucking think she’d want to go with that little pissant, to live in fucking misery, when she has me?”

Drake and Chase exchange a look, and Drake says carefully, “She’s a drug addict and a whore, man. She—”

Whatever he sees in my eyes has him stopping, lifting his hands palms out in surrender.

“All right. I was just—”

Chase elbows him, hard, and Drake stops talking altogether.

“Right, we’ll find her,” Chase says. He pulls his own phone out and scrolls through something. “The report said that Dylan was squatting in an abandoned house on the other side of the city. Do you want to start there, or wait for Drake’s contact?”

The thought of sitting around and doing nothing is unbearable. I’m already on the verge of destroying a wall or Drake’s face.

“Fine. One second.” I go back to the bedroom, ignoring the mess, and open the safe. There isn’t much inside—my passport, some cash, a few

important documents...

...And my handgun.

I load it and head back to the living room.

Chase's eyes widen when he sees the gun. "Please tell me it's not registered to you. Do not murder somebody with a gun registered under your name."

"We might need a gun if that shithead tries to pull his on us," Drake points out. "But yeah, this is a fucking stupid idea, Hunter."

The only stupid idea was not keeping Stef locked up and safe. If she'd still been in her bedroom, behind lock and key, Dylan wouldn't have been able to reach her. She wouldn't have been out here, vulnerable, easily stolen from me.

"I don't fucking care. You can stay here if you want, but I'm going to destroy that shithead." I stalk toward the front door, not caring if they follow.

"Fuck. I don't want to perjure myself," Chase mutters. "But okay, I'll come along to help. *Don't* start by shooting, okay? We can't spin it as self-defense if you shoot first."

Drake snorts. "Yeah, and it's our word against his—assuming he's even alive to try to say otherwise. I don't want to be an accessory to fucking murder, though. Is she really worth all this? You could always buy a new one."

I whirl around and grab Drake by the throat, squeezing before he has a chance to react.

"If you fucking suggest something like that ever again..." I growl, all the rage flaring up inside me.

Drake looks too stunned to do anything, but he grabs my wrist, trying to slam his fist on my arm to get loose of my grasp. He's bigger than I am, and usually he'd be stronger, but my anger is fueling my own strength.

Chase grabs my shoulder. "Hunter, chill. Drake isn't the enemy. We'll find Stef. She's going to be fine, and we can, at the very least, beat up Dylan so badly he won't be able to stand in front of court for a few years."

Drake manages to free himself from my grasp, and he takes a step back. "Sorry, man," he says, but I ignore the repentant look on his face. "I didn't realize..." He rubs his temples. "We're wasting time. I—" His phone dings, and he pulls it back out of his pocket. His expression turns triumphant, a dark smile on his lips as he says, "Got an address. Chase, is this the one your guy found?"

Chase nods. “Yep. I’d say we’re good to go. We can discuss our approach on the way.” He looks around the condo. “And we should document the damage—”

“No. Stef is more important.” I don’t bother to listen to their prattle anymore.

I’m going to find Stef, and I’m going to rescue her.

Nobody else gets to make her cry.

“OKAY, I know we aren’t here to hunt for properties, but I think this could make a sweet real estate investment,” Chase says, staring at the abandoned house. “You could easily buy up the neighboring houses too, bulldoze the neighborhood and turn it into nice housing. I bet most of the people here would be glad for the paycheck. We’d be doing the city a favor, too, cleaning up this place.”

I clench my fists and resist the urge to punch him. “I don’t fucking care.”

“Time and place, Chase. Time and place,” Drake says, getting out of the car. “Let’s go before Hunter has an aneurysm.”

Chase stops once he’s out of the car. “Is this a good time to mention I’ll just keep watch? I don’t really want to witness... whatever is going to happen there.”

“Are you squeamish?” Drake asks incredulously. “You’re the one with the hardcore floggers and whips and torture implements.”

“I’m not squeamish,” Chase snaps. “I’m practical. And I know I’m not going to be of any use, and it’s better if I’m here to intercept any cops that get called if you start shooting willy nilly.”

Drake gives an exaggerated sigh. “You’re fucking squeamish. Just—”

I ignore them, walking with quick strides toward the entrance of the house. My hand is tight on my gun, and it’s all I can do to avoid trying to kick the door in. I know it’s not as easy in real life as it is in the movies, but I wish I could make that sort of... memorable appearance.

Dylan had managed it despite the supposed security of my building.

Drake curses but follows behind me.

Of course, there’s no need to kick the door in if it’s just unlocked. Drake and I both share a look as the door easily opens. I quietly step inside, even

though all I want to do is rush inside to find Stef.

I'm not going to help her by getting shot before I can do anything, though.

I peer into all the rooms as we walk through the hall, but they're all empty. Once we get closer to the back of the house, though, I hear voices.

"I don't think he cares about you," a man says. "I sent the email like a fucking hour ago!"

"I told you he wouldn't pay anything for me," a woman's voice replies—Stef's voice, sounding slurred and despondent in a way I haven't heard in a long time.

"See? Rich fucks never want to share the wealth. Hoard it all for themselves, the rich getting richer, while us little people have to scrape to get by. I've worked hard too, Bela! Why shouldn't I—"

My next step is on a creaky floorboard, and the sound is loud enough to interrupt Dylan's ranting.

"Fuck. Who's there?" Dylan shouts.

Stealth isn't an option anymore. I stride closer and say, "If you want any of my *wealth*, you'll lower your gun. I can't pay you if I'm dead."

I enter the living room and freeze when I see Stef lying across the hardwood floor, completely naked, leashed to a pole in the center. Her body is streaked with dirt and cum, and her eyes are too dilated to focus.

I glance at her arm almost out of reflex, and I can see a bloody spot on the inside of her elbow.

Shoot him, my mind shouts.

He's standing too close to Stef though. If I miss, if something ricochets, if Dylan uses his own gun...

Fuck.

Dylan gapes at me. "What the fuck? How did you find me?"

Stef has lifted her head, and I can tell she's trying to look at me. Tears are leaking out of her eyes, though, and she can't hold her head up for long.

"You're pretty fucking sloppy," Drake says. "Now, unless you want to end up with your brains splattered all the way across the floor, get down on your goddamn knees and put your hands on the back of your head. Just pretend I'm a cop. You've been frisked by plenty of those, right?"

Dylan clearly doesn't like being outnumbered. His fear is palpable, but he stands taller despite his trembling limbs and aims his own gun at Stef. "Yeah, well. You pay me or she dies. How's that for a threat?"

“You won’t get paid anything if she’s dead,” Drake says, his voice colder than I think I’ve ever heard it. “Drop the fucking gun, dickhead.”

“Mas-Master?” Stef manages to get out, her voice wobbling. “What are you...” Her voice is so thick and sluggish that I know without a shadow of a doubt that she’s on something.

“What did you feed her?” I ask, my vision hazy around the edges. “If she overdoses because of you—”

“I fed her my cock,” Dylan answers bluntly. “You’re welcome, by the way. For warming her up for you. You should be thanking me that you got to fuck her at all, actually. Without me, she’d probably just have killed herself after her friend died. Stef’s always been a weak-willed bitch.”

Stef whimpers, scratching at the scars on her wrists.

I hand my gun to Drake. “Hold this,” I say, barely conscious of what I’m doing. I walk closer to Dylan, who jerks back.

He isn’t holding his gun like he intends to shoot. His finger is nowhere near the trigger.

“You should have quit while you were ahead,” I say with more calm than I feel.

Dylan doesn’t seem to comprehend what’s about to happen. “Hey, back off, buddy. The only way you’re getting out of this is by handing over—”

He jerks the gun in my direction, and I lunge forward. Dylan yelps, but it’s trivial to pry the gun from his hand.

Drake’s right there to grab it from me, probably afraid I’m going to just shoot Dylan—but that’s too kind. He deserves to be pummeled into unconsciousness, only to wake up and have to face the pain of his injuries day after day.

“Mas— Hunter,” Stef whimpers, nearly choking on the words with her sobs. “You came...” I want to go to her, to wipe away her tears, but I’m too fucking focused on Dylan.

“Take care of her,” I order Drake. “I’ll handle this asswipe.”

“Sure you don’t want me to just take out the trash?” Drake asks.

Dylan tries to throw me off him, but I punch him in the face. And then I punch him again, satisfied by the *crunch* of his nose, and the blood that starts gushing out.

“Fuck! Stop, stop!” Dylan begs, but did he stop when Stef was crying? Did he stop when she was begging?

I squeeze his throat and continue to pummel him, until his face is a mess

of black and blue and red, and the only noises he makes are incoherent moans. He'll have a concussion, and the associated aftereffects. Memory loss, muscle issues, migraines—

Or I can keep going, until he can't breathe at all anymore.

I should have brought a scalpel.

"Hunter. Hunter!" Drake says urgently.

I blink, my hand still around Dylan's neck as I glance over at where Drake is crouched by Stef.

I sit back, and I realize my arms are shaking. That'll be the adrenaline.

I glance down at Dylan. I can't tell if he's breathing or not, but I don't care.

Slowly, I go over to Stef's side, and kneel down next to her. "Stef," I whisper, my voice sounding unsure.

Stef is shaking, and Drake is holding her to him in a way that makes my primal instincts scream and demand blood all over again. "She's not doing so hot," Drake says, though, and that has me grabbing for her instead of punching him in the face.

I force my emotions down so I can assess Stef's situation properly. There are no open wounds, and I don't see any bruising except for in the inside of her elbow. Her throat is a bit red—from the collar—but nothing that would cause her situation.

No, the only thing that's wrong with her is the toxin in her bloodstream.

"Do you know what he gave you?" I ask Stef.

She blinks at me a few times. "I..." She clutches weakly at me. "I didn't want to," she says with a sob. "I tried... I tried to fight him. I'm so... I'm so sorry, Mas... Master."

"I know," I say, kissing the top of her head. "I know, Stef, it's not your fault."

It isn't her fault. She's been trying so hard, she's been so good lately, and this fucker tried to destroy all of her progress.

It makes me want to go back and beat him even more.

"Please don't... don't hate me—" Stef starts to say, but she gags, turning her head. She weakly tries to pull away from me as she retches.

Drake shoves something in my face, and it takes me a second to realize it's the first aid kit I keep in my car.

I fumble it open and find the syringe I'd added after I found Stef high at the charity event. I swab her elbow clean, then inject the drug into her. It'll

counteract some of the drugs, and I hope that's enough for now.

I should take her to the hospital. I need to make sure she gets the proper care.

But she isn't going to get better care there than with me. I'll call a colleague if I need another opinion, but I know she needs to ride out the drugs, again.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there," I whisper to her, pulling her into my arms.

She's sobbing harder now, mumbling an apology over and over again. I'm not sure she even hears me over the sound of her own hysterical voice.

Stef clings to me, weeping. "I didn't want it. I didn't want to leave," she whimpers. "I didn't want to do any of that. I didn't..."

"I know," I say, at a loss on how to comfort her.

I don't comfort people. I tell them what's wrong with them, and I help them heal, but nobody would ever claim I had good bedside manner. That's what my nurses are for, but I don't have a nurse here to help Stef. It's just... me.

I start to stand, and Stef clings to me even harder. Her entire body trembles, from her sobbing and the drugs coursing through her system.

"I'll carry you to the car," I say—then I realize she's naked, and I don't want her going outside like this, for everybody to see. I glance over at Drake, who is, smartly, keeping his eyes to the floor. "Drake, give me your coat."

Drake doesn't hesitate. He shrugs off his coat and hands it over to me, and I wrap it around Stef. Despite the weight she's put on in the past few months, she's still small and light, and it's not hard to pick her up.

She instantly presses her face against my shoulder, and even though her lips are probably still wet with vomit, I don't push her away.

I cast one last look at Dylan's beaten face. I should deal with him—but Stef is more important.

Besides, he doesn't look like he's capable of causing any more trouble.

I carry her out, trying to shield Stef from the cold as best I can. Drake follows at my heels, and I have no idea what he's done with the guns—and I don't particularly care, either. He could've gone back in and shot Dylan, and I wouldn't have been sorry in the slightest.

Chase sees us and immediately opens the back door of the car for us. It's awkward to maneuver us both inside, especially with Stef clinging to me as she is, but I refuse to let go of her.

Once we're both inside and the door closed, I sigh in relief.

Stef burrows against me like she's afraid that if she lets go for even a second, I'll disappear. She's still mumbling apologies that sound drunken, and she feels even more fragile than she had when I'd first... acquired her.

Chase gets into the driver's seat, Drake into the passenger seat. They're both silent as Chase starts the car and begins driving us out of the neighborhood.

"We probably should've just finished him off—" Drake begins.

"Shut up," Chase interrupts. "I don't want to know anything about it. We were helping Hunter find his wayward girlfriend. Whatever happened was self-defense. If you think you need a lawyer, I'll put you in touch with one."

Maybe once I've ensured that Stef is safe and healthy, I'll call somebody. Not a lawyer, though. No, I doubt Dylan is stupid enough to try to report me. I'm Senator Savage's son, and no cop would dare touch me anyway.

But part of me isn't satisfied. Dylan needs to suffer more.

I'll call Giulio Pavone instead and let him deal with it.

Stef whimpers in my arms, and I press another kiss to her head. "Shh. I've got you," I whisper.

She blinks her eyes open, looking at me. Her eyes are still glazed, out of focus, but her fingers curl around my shirt. "You came," she whispers back, her voice trembling.

"Of course I came," I answer. "You're mine, aren't you? I'm not sharing you with anyone, let alone some filthy, disgusting piece of trash like him."

She shudders. "I'm..." She swallows thickly. "I'm trash too."

My breath hitches. I'd called her that, hadn't I. I'd told her she was trash, worthless, a drain on society.

"No," I say quickly, pressing more kisses to her head. "You aren't. I wouldn't want you if you were."

I want to say more, but I'm very conscious of Drake and Chase sitting in the front of the car, both being extremely quiet. Anything I want to say should be said in private, without them listening in.

Stef sighs, finally seeming to calm. She's still trembling, but she isn't babbling any longer. It doesn't take long for me to realize she's fallen asleep, safe in my arms.

I close my eyes. I almost lost her.

I can't lose her.

I refuse to lose her.

CHAPTER 28

Stef

I DON'T WANT to wake up.

I don't want to open my eyes.

I don't want to move at all, not when Hunter's arms are wrapped around me. I know I need to, but I feel safe in his arms—safe, though at the same time, I'm worried that when I fully come to my senses, he'll have come to his and he won't want me anymore.

But I have to face reality, so I slowly open my eyes and look at him, terror seizing me and making it impossible to speak.

Hunter is asleep.

I didn't expect that, and some of my tension deflates as I stare at his sleeping expression. He looks so... kind.

I know he isn't kind. I know he's cold and cruel, but when I look at his handsome face, right now all I can think about is how he came for me. He saved me from Dylan.

I glance down at my wrists.

He saved me from myself, too.

More than once, even if his intention wasn't to save me the first time. If I'd stayed at Ntimacy, though, I'd be nothing more than a fucked-out whore. Giulio probably would've gotten rid of me, and I—

Hunter sighs and pulls me closer, his lips brushing against my forehead. "Stef."

Trembling, I cling to him. "Master," I whisper. "You saved me. Again."

His eyes flutter open. Those impossibly blue eyes gaze directly into mine, and it feels like he can see right through me.

Maybe he can.

"Of course I saved you," Hunter says slowly. "You're mine. Nobody else

gets to have you, or hurt you, or—” He stops and turns away from me. “Fuck. When I saw what he’d done to you. I really wanted to kill him.”

I bite my bottom lip, unsure of what to say to that. When did he start seeing me as more than just a disposable slave? He’d been so willing to return me to Giulio at first, but somewhere along the way...

He must’ve started to care.

“It’s probably a good thing you didn’t,” I reply. I want to cuddle close to him again, but I’m afraid I’m going to crowd him.

“It shouldn’t have come to this.” Hunter covers his eyes with his arm. “I should have dealt with him faster. And don’t worry, I’ve already talked with the building’s security because it’s unacceptable that somebody like him managed to get inside the building at all.”

“How did he get in?” I ask, tentatively reaching out to touch his arm. “I mean...” I shudder, thinking about how easy it had seemed to be for Dylan to break inside.

“He pretended to have a delivery—and the porter on duty was apparently an idiot who just let him through.” Hunter sits up, and the sheet falls down to his waist, revealing his bare chest. “They’re changing the locks on the condo too. And... fuck, I need to get a new couch. And a new mattress.”

I wince. “He got through the lock so fast,” I whisper. “And I... I’m sorry about the c-couch.” I can’t help but stammer, looking at him pleadingly, hoping he won’t blame me for the damage. “He had a gun. And I didn’t—”

“I’m glad it was ketchup and not your blood,” Hunter interrupts. “I didn’t... I can’t ever see your blood like that again, Stef.” He pulls me into his lap and kisses the top of my head. “Furniture can be replaced. You can’t.”

I don’t know what to say to that, so I kiss him—slow and deep, steadily turning more urgent as his hand slides to the back of my head and he pulls me closer.

“Thank you,” I whisper. “I don’t... Not many people have really cared what happens to me before.” I bite my bottom lip. Alicia had. Alicia had cared more than my own parents did.

I don’t think about them often. It still hurts, knowing how easily they gave up on me.

I don’t think about Alicia often, either, but that’s for different reasons entirely. I don’t know where I would’ve ended up if she’d survived that car accident, but it probably wouldn’t have been here. I’d have finished high school, gone to college, and found some job that I probably would’ve hated.

Is this really so much worse?

“Other people are idiots,” Hunter says with his usual sternness. It makes me smile to hear him turn that voice on other people.

We sit quietly for a moment, our arms wrapped around each other. I can’t believe how much comfort his steady warmth is giving me, when just a few months ago I hated him.

A few months ago, I’d hated myself, too, hadn’t I.

“I was an idiot,” I say softly. Hunter doesn’t respond, and I don’t know if I should laugh that he isn’t immediately disagreeing with me. I’m glad he isn’t interrupting, at least. “Before... everything. Going out with Dylan was a mistake. Taking the drugs was a mistake. Dropping out of high school was a mistake.” I bury my head in his shoulder. “I didn’t even realize how far back my mistakes went. But today, when he had that gun aimed at me... I don’t want to die with my life having been nothing but a mistake.”

“You aren’t a mistake,” Hunter says, his voice pained. “If this is because of what I said—”

I shake my head quickly. “No,” I say, realizing that’s the truth as I say the word. “Master...” I sigh, blinking back the inevitable tide of tears. “My parents were disappointed in me, too. They’re the ones who threw me out. They didn’t try to make things better. They gave up on me almost immediately.”

His arms around me tighten. “You’re never seeing them again. Ever.”

I swallow thickly. “I don’t want to see them. They probably think I’m dead anyway. After... After Alicia died...” I hesitate, but the tears start to come anyway. “She was my best friend, had been for a long time. She introduced me to Dylan before she knew he was a... druggie. Before I became one.”

I’m so thankful that Hunter stays quiet, only gently stroking my back to give me comfort. I don’t know what I would do if he gave me false platitudes, the way everybody else had back then.

“Alicia and Dylan used to get along,” I say with a broken laugh. “Then she got into a bad car accident. From one day to the next, she was gone. And I didn’t know how to deal with those feelings. Dylan offered me some of his stash, and for a few blissful hours, I wasn’t sad.” I bite my bottom lip. “But it always came back. The pain, the grief, the knowledge that I’d never talk to her again.”

I nearly choke on a sob.

“My parents just kept telling me that these things happened, that I needed to get up and go to school and prepare for the real world,” I manage to get out. “Then they found the drugs, and suddenly... I wasn’t their daughter anymore.”

Hunter presses a soft kiss against my shoulder. “I’m sorry.”

I wonder if he’s sorry about my parents, or about his own attitude toward me when he’d caught me taking drugs.

It doesn’t matter. He’s comforting me now; he cares about me now.

“Dylan was the only one who didn’t judge me. He liked me when I was happy. When I was high.” I laugh bitterly. “I wasn’t really happy. But I could pretend to be, when all the bad feelings were numbed away by the drugs. The fake euphoria that lasted less and less as the months went on. But going without wasn’t an option anymore.”

“Addiction is... difficult,” Hunter says. “I’ve been doing more reading. And I know the physical effects of withdrawal... well, we’ve seen them.”

I pull back, surprised, to look at him. I almost want to make a snarky comment about how he was so sure that going cold turkey was the best way to handle the *poison* I’d been injecting into my veins, but now isn’t the time—even if I do feel defensive because of the conversation. “Yeah,” I say softly. “It’s hard.”

That’s putting it lightly.

“I’m sorry,” Hunter says again. “That you went through that. That I couldn’t protect you. That I—”

I place a finger to his lips to stop him from continuing, even though his words warm me from the inside. “Please, I need to finish. I can’t... I don’t want to talk about all this again.” I take a deep breath, steeling myself for the hardest part of this conversation. “I realized that the past few years of my life really have been... nothing. But I don’t want to be *nothing*. I want to be... better. I want to matter, just a little. So, Master, may I... may I please get my GED? And maybe take some online classes?”

I look anxiously at him, afraid he’s going to deny me—and maybe I’m a little afraid that he’s going to agree, too, because then what? Once I get a GED, there are so many things I could do... but I don’t want to do them. I want to be here with him, home for him when he wants me and needs me.

Hunter meets my eyes, and I can’t tell what he’s thinking. He isn’t smiling, but he isn’t scowling either.

After a few seconds, he nods. “Yes. I’ll buy prep books for you. And a

laptop so you can sign up for online study classes.”

I bite my bottom lip, hesitating. “I still... I still want to be yours,” I whisper. “I’m not going to try to... to run away or anything...”

He tilts my chin up and brushes his lips against mine. “I know. You *are* mine. And I want you to be perfect. Being educated isn’t wrong.”

I relax a little against him. It feels like a weight has been lifted from my shoulders now that something I’ve been thinking about so long is within reach. “I want you to be proud of me,” I say. “I want to be something more than just a useless drugged-out whore for you.”

“You already are,” Hunter says, and my heart melts. His hand is surprisingly gentle on me. I’m so used to him being demanding, and I’m so relieved that he isn’t punishing me for this.

He brings one hand up to my breast and plays with the nipple while he brings his mouth to mine for a sweet kiss.

A shudder runs through me, and I arch my back, running my hand down his bare back to keep him close to me.

I never want to let him go.

I tentatively graze my nails along his back, and he lets out a little growl that goes straight to my pussy. He pushes me down onto the bed, and I moan as I move my hands. He grabs my wrists with one hand and pins them over my head.

“Keep them there,” Hunter says as he kisses my neck. “Don’t move your wrists at all.”

A shuddering breath runs through me, and I quickly nod. “Yes, Master.”

He starts kissing his way down my body, stopping to bite, suck, and lick my nipples. I gasp at the pain of the bite, then moan when he soothes the pain with gentle licks. He blows across the wet, swollen nub and has me groaning. I want to wrap my arms around him, but I remember the order.

It’s easier this way. I don’t have to figure out what he wants me to do. I don’t have to psychically know what will turn him on, what he finds sexy. He tells me, and all I need to do is follow orders. I don’t know why that thought has my cunt throbbing even harder.

“Good,” Hunter murmurs, turning his attention to the other nipple. “I love how you obey.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying not to squirm. I want him to be proud of me, to be pleased with me, and the knowledge that he likes something about me—*loves* something about me—sends a wave of warmth through me.

I'm doing something right.

I'm not being a disappointment, or a failure, or anything else.

Hunter gently bites my breast, making me gasp—and whine in disappointment when he moves away to kiss my navel.

“Remember. Don't move those hands,” Hunter murmurs.

I nod, clenching my hands. I can do this for him. It's easy enough—or so I think, until Hunter begins tickling my side.

I let out a startled giggle, and I start to move my hands until I remember that I'm supposed to be holding them still. I clench them into fists and force them to stay above my head, but I can't stop my body from squirming.

“No! Please, Master, I can't—” I say between giggles. I glance at him, and shock stills my laughter for a second.

He's smiling. Properly smiling.

I stare at him in awe, struck by how damn gorgeous he is when he smiles. I want to tell him that he should smile more often, but that would probably wipe it right off his face.

Instead, I just luxuriate in the knowledge that I *can* make him smile, that I *can* please him.

His hands still, and he kisses my stomach again. “Good girl.” His kisses travel lower, and he pushes my thighs up to kiss them, too. He starts sucking on the inside of my thigh, right where it meets my cunt.

A gasp escapes me, and I have to clench and unclench my hands to keep myself from moving them. God, I just want to bury my fingers in his hair—not even to urge him closer, but just to feel that connection.

Then again, it's hardly like we lack a connection right now, especially when he leans in to flick his tongue across my clit. I moan, my hips lifting just a little as I squirm.

“Be still,” Hunter says. “I'm trying to enjoy myself.” He doesn't sound mad though, and it's hard to consider his words a rebuke when they're followed by his tongue pressing harder against my clit.

I swallow hard, trying not to move, but it's so difficult. It just feels so good, and I can't figure out what to do with so much intimate pleasure. We've fucked, sure, but this goes beyond that.

Hunter slides a single finger inside me and starts massaging my inner wall, all while he continues to lick and suck my clit. I tremble and do my best not to move, but even keeping my hands in place starts to get difficult.

I won't fail though. I'm bound just as much now as if he'd used rope. I'm

going to show Hunter that he was right to save me, that he's right to *keep* me.

I grasp at the sheets, trying to use them to keep me focused on this moment, on doing what I'm supposed to do instead of all the ways I could fail. I don't want to fail. I want him to be proud of me, to care for me, and I want to hear him call me *good girl*.

But it's so difficult because it feels so fucking amazing.

The more he laves his tongue over my clit, the more he coaxes his finger inside of me, the more pleasure that builds up inside of me. I don't think I've ever approached orgasm this quickly, and I mewl in desperate pleasure.

He continues insistently, and I clench and unclench my fingers in time with my body doing the same. I would never have guessed that he could bring so much pleasure to someone, and I wonder how many women he's done this with.

I can't help but be jealous of them.

But that feeling swept away almost immediately because my body starts to tremble as pleasure builds and builds. I let out a series of pathetic moans that steadily increase in volume and intensity, until I can't hold it back any longer. I wail, my fingers clawing helplessly at the sheets, as I fight not to grab his hair.

"Master!" I cry out as the orgasm crashes over me like some great wave, and I'm swept under the tide to the point where I don't even notice at first that he's moving. It isn't until his cock is pushing inside of me that I realize he's gotten atop me, and it gets even more difficult to keep my hands to myself.

I'm obedient, though, and he likes that I'm obedient—so I don't move my hands even though I'm quivering all over.

"Beautiful," Hunter says as he thrusts into me. His movements are quick, erratic, a far cry from how controlled he usually is. There's a desperation there that's unfamiliar—but also *known*, because I feel it too. His hands grip my thighs tight enough that I'll probably have bruises tomorrow, but those will just be another sign of how much he desires me.

I clench my cunt for him as best I can, despite how wrung out I am. I want to give him as much pleasure as he's given me. I want to show him how much I...

My breath stutters as I realize where that thought was going.

Hunter's hips slam against me, and he drives even deeper inside. I cry out, my back arching, but I keep my hands exactly where they're supposed to

be.

Hunter lets out a guttural sound. “Mine,” he growls, pounding faster, harder, so much that my body slides up the bed a few inches.

“Yes,” I cry out, shuddering as my back arches and more pleasure fills me to the brim. If he keeps going like this, I’m going to come again—again and again, until there’s nothing left of me.

He keeps going, his fingers digging into my skin, his body pressed against mine as sweat starts to trickle down his face.

“Master!” I cry out again as the second orgasm threatens to overtake me. “Master, please!”

Hunter leans down, his thrusts getting a little shallower, and kisses me savagely. He moans against my lips, and his movements falter.

I mentally urge him to keep going. I’m on the precipice, and if he stops, I don’t know if I can finish—and it would be terrible, because I’m so fucking close, and the pleasure that’s sweeping over me is so intense that I don’t want to let it go yet.

With a groan, though, he gives a few more stuttering thrusts before I feel his warmth flood me.

“Good girl,” he pants out against my lips.

That’s enough to send me over the edge, and my climax makes my entire body shake as my cunt clamps down around his cock to hold him inside, to pull him deeper. I’m dizzy with relief, the sheer force of the orgasm rendering me breathless.

I can’t keep my hands above my head anymore, though. I have to touch him. I wrap my arms around him, whimpering.

Hunter grabs one of my wrists, and I expect a rebuke—but all he does is kiss it, right over the scars. He watches me with lidded eyes, and I automatically clench around him again.

When he releases my hand, he bends down to kiss me again. It’s surprisingly gentle in comparison to his ferocity from earlier.

We keep kissing, even as his cock slowly, disappointingly, slips out of me. At one point our lips are barely touching, and all we’re doing is breathing against each other, and still Hunter doesn’t pull away from me.

I kiss him again, feeling like my veins are on fire.

I want to say the words, but I’m scared to—especially now, after this. But it’s true, and I want him to know I don’t want to leave him, that I love the fact that he owns me.

I hesitate for only a moment before saying quietly, almost too quietly to hear, “I love you, Master. I know I’m only your slave, and that’s okay, but... I care so much about you. I trust you. I love you more than I’ve ever loved anyone.”

Not that that’s saying much; I’ve only ever loved Dylan, and I’m realizing that was only a surface-level *affection*. Not love.

Never love.

Hunter tenses, and I panic that I’ve ruined everything by saying those stupid words.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out. “Never mind. Please ignore me. I—”

Hunter tilts my head up and kisses me again. I gasp, shocked at how demanding the kiss is when it was so gentle just a few moments ago, but it’s easy to give over to it—to give over to *him*.

“Mine,” Hunter growls. “Forever. Do you understand, Stef? I’m never letting you go.”

I shiver, those words going right to my heart, to my core.

In a way, they’re better than an *I love you, too*.

Love is temporary.

Ownership is forever.

CHAPTER 29

Stef

THE COMPUTER SCREEN'S cursor blinks at me, waiting for me to type in my response. It's a longform essay question, the ones I hate the most because I barely know how to *say* the things I'm thinking, let alone write them down.

But it's important to try. Trying and failing is okay; giving up is not.

Tell us about a difficult moment in your life and how you overcame it.

I take a deep breath and start typing my response.

I smile to myself. I don't think I'll talk about everything I've gone through with Hunter. Even if this is just a practice paper, I doubt a college admissions team wants to read the X-rated version of that.

I'm probably getting ahead of myself, but I've already finished the GED practice for the day, and Hunter's instructions said to look into what I need to do for college applications after that.

I don't think he meant for me to actually write an essay, but I won't need to show him.

...I might want to show him, though. He's been really good about helping me improve my work. I didn't expect him to be such a patient teacher, and from what I've heard from Bethany and Chase and Drake, he isn't patient with anyone but me.

It warms my heart to know that I'm special.

After Alicia's death, I didn't think it was possible to be happy again.

Even if I had stolen moments of bliss with the drugs Dylan was quick to provide, it wasn't anything close to true joy. When Dylan had sold me to Giulio Pavone, to Ntimacy, I'd been certain I'd die without ever offering a true smile again.

Writing the essay takes me almost an hour of typing and erasing. I end up explaining everything about Alicia, and my drug addiction, and how I got a

wake-up call.

They definitely don't want to read this. I'm not going to send it, but it feels good to get it all out.

I leave the document open but unsaved, unsure of what to do with it now.

My thoughts scatter when I hear the front door open. I glance at the laptop's clock, surprised at exactly how late it's gotten.

I close the lid and run toward the entryway. I'm too late to be on my knees for Hunter when he opens the door, and I cringe a little internally at myself for having fallen down on that job.

"Welcome home, Master," I say, kneeling for him anyway. I feel my cunt throb, the way it usually does these days when I'm on my knees in front of him.

He finishes taking off his shoes and gives me a small smile. "Hello, Stef." He strokes my hair lightly. "How was your day?"

I rest my head against his thigh, enjoying his warmth and presence. "I got a lot done," I say, feeling a little bashful now about writing that essay. I don't know what he'll think of it, especially since my writing skills aren't the best. Spellcheck takes care of a lot of it, but Hunter says my grammar needs a little bit of work.

That's all right.

Like he always says, the only failure is not trying at all.

"That's good. You can show me in a bit." Hunter pats my head one last time and starts heading toward the bedroom. I get up to follow him, so I can help him change out of his work clothes.

I know that should be another one of the many humiliations he piles on me—helping him dress and undress—but there's something so intimate about it. It makes me feel trusted.

He stands still while I undo his tie and unbutton his shirt, murmuring, "good girl" as I get his clothes off him. When I'm on my knees to undo his belt buckle, I consider leaning in to tease him, but I know he would tell me if he wanted that.

It's nice, not having to wonder what he wants.

Once he's in his t-shirt and sweats, he goes to sit at the foot of the bed. It's strange to see the bright blue sheets instead of white ones, but the change is a welcome one. After how Dylan had ruined it...

Hunter pats his thigh. "Rest your head here, Stef."

This is probably one of my favorite positions, and it's one I go to

instinctively now. I don't even like sitting on the furniture—unless I'm in his lap—because of how safe it makes me feel.

I obey without question, closing my eyes and inhaling the scent of him. Soon, I'll ask him how his day went and tell him how mine went, but this time is for us to simply be together.

Hunter strokes my head gently, his fingers sending shivers down my spine. I love how well he knows my body, and how he can make me feel pleasure with just these simple touches.

His hand stills on the back of my neck. “I have a present for you. Two presents, really. One I hope you'll love, and one I know you'll hate—but it will be good for you. Which would you like first?”

I focus on the fact that he's going to give me something I love, not something that I'll hate. Besides, if it's a present, how much can I really dislike it? Everything he gives me makes sense sooner or later, and I would never reject anything.

“The one I won't love as much,” I say after a pause.

Hunter reaches for his phone and taps on it for a few seconds before holding it out for me to see.

I read the screen, uncomprehending at first.

YOUR FLIGHT to Honolulu has been booked. Please see ticket details below.

HONOLULU.

Hawaii.

Fuck.

Okay, maybe he was right that I would hate it because this is absolutely *not* a present. This is going to be torture. “How long will you be gone?” I ask, knowing perfectly well that he means I'm going too.

He must see through my attempts to delay, but he ignores them. “We'll be there for a week. You'll need new clothes, of course. We'll go shopping soon. And I doubt Mother has anything planned outside of staying at a hotel and sitting around a pool, so we can research day trips for us to do while we're there. A week is hardly enough time, but I don't think any of us can afford to take more time off work.”

“Your family hates me,” I say mournfully.

Well, Bethany likes me more now, but his mother absolutely loathes me. I haven’t seen her since the event—the one I desperately do not want to think about, especially now—and I have no desire to see her again.

Then there’s the fact that bathing suits will put my wrists on display, and I’ll have to face inevitable questions or stares.

“Mother hates you,” Hunter corrects. “But I don’t care what she thinks, and neither should you. I’m more worried that Jacob will like you a little too much. We’ll have to make sure he brings his mistress *du jour* on the trip.”

I wrap my arms around his leg, burying my face against his leg. My voice is muffled as I respond, “I hope he doesn’t notice me. I don’t want anyone paying attention to me but you.”

“If anyone makes you uncomfortable, just tell me,” Hunter says. He massages the nape of my neck. “It’s still two months away. We can invite Bethany over sometime, or Jacob and his family. My nephew was very impressed that I’ve played a video game by now.”

I draw back a little, unable to hide my smile. “You’re even getting better,” I tease him. He doesn’t make his character fall off of cliffs as much, and he doesn’t fail at making jumps like he used to.

“Yes, yes.” He tweaks my nose affectionately, and I beam up at him.

I don’t think Hunter even knew how to joke around before me. I feel like I’ve given *him* something too, even if I won’t ever tell him that.

“Now, do you want the other gift?” Hunter reaches for his briefcase and opens it, angled in such a way that I can’t see what’s inside.

“Yes,” I say quickly, straightening. “Please, Master.”

I try to be patient, but I can’t help but fidget.

Hunter pulls a black, rectangular box out of the briefcase and sets it on his lap. He sets a stern gaze on me. “This gift... once you accept, you can’t ever refuse it. I need you to understand that.” He shakes his head. “But if you refuse, that might be the end, too.”

“The end... The end of what?” I ask, alarmed by his tone.

He lifts the lid and angles the box towards me.

Stretched out lengthwise is a beautiful necklace. It isn’t delicate—the chain looks sturdier than most, in fact, but the links are in an intricate design, and they’re polished to a shine. The center holds a large circular O-ring with a gemstone dangling in the middle.

It’s beautiful.

And I know it's not just a necklace.

"Why would I ever refuse it?" I ask in a hoarse whisper. "Why would I ever refuse *you*?"

Hunter gives me an amused look. "Many, many people have refused me, Stef. I'm the kind of man women warn each other about. I know, because at least one of my exes did exactly that." He removes the collar from the box and holds it up to my neck. "This is permanent, Stef. You will *never* be allowed to leave me once I've placed this on you."

I blink at him, alarm rising within me at the thought that I might leave at all—that he might *let* me when I thought this was forever. "I don't understand, Master," I tell him, swallowing hard as I fight back tears. "I told you I'd stay forever. You told me you'd never let me go. Don't you want me anymore?"

Hunter laughs. "Stef. I want you so much. If it were up to me, I'd lock you up in that room and make sure the only person you ever interacted with was me. I am... trying... to do what's right for you. I don't... I don't want to be the reason you decide not to try anymore."

I clutch his leg, burying my face against his cock through his sweatpants. "I like the way you are," I admit in a muffled voice. "I know it's..." I frown a little. I don't actually know what it is. A bit extreme, maybe? "I don't know why anyone would refuse you. I really, really don't. You're the best thing that ever happened to me."

He pets me for a moment before guiding me to look at him. I try to blink away the tears—but I know it doesn't matter if he sees them, because he loves my tears.

"My beautiful Stef," Hunter says, and he clasps the collar around my neck. "You're mine. Forever."

I take in in a slow, shaky breath, relief filling me as much as the air in my lungs. "I thought for a minute you didn't want me anymore. I don't care about other women think about you, or about us."

There's a part of me that wonders what might've happened if I'd refused his collar. Would he have kicked me out? Left me to the streets again?

I can't survive on my own.

"Then it definitely doesn't matter what my family thinks of you," Hunter says, the barest hint of a smile twitching at the corner of his lips.

My cheeks flush. All right, maybe I care what they think, just a little.

But in the end, it doesn't matter.

I have Hunter, and Hunter has me.
That's enough.

We hope you've enjoyed reading Savage! We'd be absolutely delighted if you'd drop us a review at Amazon, Goodreads, Bookbub... wherever you like to leave them is fine with us!

Want to read about Stef and Hunter's visit to Hawaii? Sign up for [Wolf and Phoenix](#) or [Ream](#) today at the Bonus or Ultimate tier for extras and more! (We also plan to write an extra about just what happened to Dylan, so stay tuned! :-D)

Curious about Chase Vicious and Drake Brutal? Their stories are coming soon.

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You can get one chapter of our current WIP a week plus other extras as

we get them out there. You can also get early access to our Smashwords exclusives, along with epub copies of those works, and signed paperbacks! We both have things we'd love to share, so we're excited to welcome you to the [Wolf and Phoenix](#)! If you'd prefer a more Patreon-like format, we also have a page on [Ream](#)! We hope you'll join us.

*Joint Works by Addison &
Raissa*

M/F AS ADDISON WOLF AND RAISSA DONOVAN

Spoils of Victory Trilogy (RH/MMMF w/MM)

[Breaking Lucia \(#1\)](#)

[Taming Lucia \(#2\)](#)

[Loving Lucia \(#3\)](#)

[Playing With Lucia \[Extra\]](#)

Breeding Contempt Trilogy (RH/MMMF w/MM)

[Claiming Vanessa \(#1\)](#)

[Ruining Vanessa \(#2\)](#)

[Keeping Vanessa \(#3\)](#)

Billionaires of New Bristol (MF Standalones)

[Savage](#)

[Vicious](#)

M/M AS ADARA WOLF AND R. PHOENIX

The Monster's Pet Series

Can be read as standalones but are best enjoyed in order

[The Dragon and His Prince \(#1\)](#)

[The Dragon and His Prince's Wedding \[Extra\]](#)

[The Phoenix and His Prince \(#2\)](#)

[The Shade and His Thief \(#3\)](#)

[The Dragon and His Knight \[Standalone\]](#)

The Mages of Corentin Universe

[Mind Controlling the Haughty Mage](#)

[Mind Controlling the Brute](#)

[Mind Controlling the Twins](#)

Other Standalones

[Surrender \(Ruthless Daddies Standalone\)](#)

[Submit \(Mafia Doms #1\)](#)

[Forcibly Fucked by His Vampire Twin](#)

About Addison Wolf

Addison Wolf is the pen name of Adara Wolf, for writing dark (MM)M/f romances. Under either name, she enjoys writing dark situations and characters finding themselves in very dubiously consensual situations. Please [check her website](#) for a full list of works and detailed content notes for them.

You can also receive a free short story by [signing up to Adara's mailing list](#).

Other stalking links: <http://adarawolf.com> || [Facebook](#) || [Twitter](#)



Also by Addison Wolf (as Adara Wolf)

Other Works by Addison Wolf, under the name Adara Wolf, her m/m pen name.

Under His Heel series

Sci-fi D/s romance featuring humiliation, bondage, and many, many more kinks.

- [Under His Heel](#)
- [Under His Heel: A Kidnapping](#)
- [Under His Control](#)
- [Under His Skin](#)
- [Under His... Shorts](#) (short story collection set in the Under His Heel universe)

Leashing His Heart

Spin-off featuring Tracht's nephew Johan and the bondservant forced on him. Petplay, praise kink, dubcon, some unhealthy relationships. Coming in 2022!

Standalones

- [Flesh & Blood](#) (Monster-on-a-leash, enemies-to-lovers, extreme gore/violence)
 - [Bruising Love](#) (yakuza, extreme masochism, promiscuity)
 - [False Feathers \(Dark fairy tale, humiliation, bondage\)](#)
 - [Blue Storm](#) (M/M/m, fantasy, slavery)
 - [Binding Breath](#) (Historical, urban fantasy, mafia, mind control)
- [Hunger and Other Tales of Erotic Horror](#) (anthology of erotic short stories)

Saga of the City by the Flowers

A Mesoamerican-inspired fantasy series, following different men who are trying survive in a world that seems to have it out for them. The gods tend to meddle in the affairs of mortals, and that's not always good for the humans...

- [In Life, In Death](#)
- [A Coward, A Warrior](#)
- [In Pain, In Pleasure](#)

About Raissa Donovan

Raissa Donovan is the pen name for M/M writer R. Phoenix. Raissa has recently ventured into writing dark (MM+)M/f romances.

As R. Phoenix, she writes anything from pretty pink fluff to dark noncon twincest. She prefers to write dark — the darker, the better — but sometimes her muse takes her to some pretty strange places. Her books are primarily available on [Amazon](#), but the especially taboo works are only at [Smashwords](#).

[Website](#) | [Facebook Page](#) | [Facebook Profile](#) | [Facebook Group](#) | [Newsletter](#)



*Also by Raissa Donovan (as R.
Phoenix)*

For a complete, up to date list of books by R. Phoenix (including related kinks, taboo content, and warnings), check out her website!

Cages Duo

Gilded Cages: age play, ABDL, puppy play, Stockholm Syndrome, kidnapping, enemas, humiliation, dubcon, noncon, and more.

Tarnished Cages: *Daddy, Cammy, and Zay's journey concludes.*

The Beauty and the Beast Duo

The Beast's Beauty: Stockholm Syndrome, puppy play, kidnapping, humiliation, enemas, scarred MC. Psychological thriller.

The Beauty's Beast: Stockholm Syndrome, kitty play, humiliation, etc. Dark romance.

Contemporary Romance

Almost Strangers [w/MA Innes]: Incest, puppy play. Only available on Smashwords due to taboo content (incest).

It's Just Us [w/Chris McHart]: ([also available in German](#) and [available in audio](#)) & its sequel **It's Still Just Us [w/Chris McHart]:** ([also available in German.](#))

It's Just You [w/Chris McHart]: Panties and lingerie. Hot tattooed muscled demisexual dude. Sweet as sugar.

Too Close: Domestic Violence, puns, age difference. ([also available in Italian](#) and [available in audio](#))

Don't Let Go (Broken Boys #1) [w/T.N. Nova]: Angst, rock star, graphic designer, mental illness, BDSM & its sequel **Trust Me (Broken Boys #1.5) [w/T.N. Nova]:** BDSM, mental illness, Halloween, angst.

Urban Fantasy

Undone [w/Morgan Noel]: Dark UF. Fae, incubus, nephilim, emotional abuse and manipulation, corrupt cop, dinosaur donut ([also available in audio](#)) & its prequel **Come [w/Morgan Noel]:** *Even though this is the prequel to Undone, it's best enjoyed after reading Undone. Leandro and Kolt first*

meet.

Of All the Odds: Dark UF. Fae, Master/slave dynamics, consensual BDSM, D/s, toys, breath play, asphyxiation, Grimm fairy tale style, non-traditional love story.

Shards of Ice: an M/M retelling of The Snow Queen fairy tale. Friends to lovers, abuse, urban fantasy, blood play, knife play.

The Fate of the Fallen World (19 Books)

The Fate of the Fallen Series (7 Books)

Bought (#1): Dark erotica. Witch, Werewolf, dubcon, blackmail, puppy play, slavery, psychological manipulation

Ravel (#2): Dark romance. Werewolf, billionaire, thief, entitled male, reality check.

Recoil (#3): Dark erotic romance. Vampire, rebellion, enemies to lovers, first time, slave

Owned (#4): Dark. Sexual violence, dubcon/blackmail, sire/childe relationship. The characters from Bought, Ravel, and Recoil start to come together.

Temper (#5): Dark. Non-graphic gang rape, noncon. The characters from Bought, Ravel, and Recoil continue to come together.

Refraction (#6): Dark. Culmination of books 1-5.

Sanguine (#7): Dark. Series finale.

*Get the series discounted with the [Fate of the Fallen Omnibus \(#1-4\)](#) and the [Fate of the Fallen Omnibus \(#5-7\)](#). **They are also available in audio, including in box set editions!***

The Need Trilogy (A Fate of the Fallen Trilogy)

Want (#1): Twincest, dubcon/noncon, drugging, age play, ABDL, humiliation, kinky, taboo

Take (#2): Twincest, dubcon, age play, ABDL, spanking, dildo pony

Have (#3): Twincest, age play, ABDL

Need (Short Story Collection): short stories about Rex and Tavi

*Because of the taboo content (incest), the ebooks of this series are only available on Smashwords. You can also get the series discounted with the [Need Trilogy Box Set \(#1-3\)](#). **The first three books in the series are also available in audio.***

The Tamed & Trained Trilogy (A Fate of the Fallen Trilogy)

Puppy (#1) Playful dark erotica, puppy play, dubcon, vampire, body modification, kinky

Alpha (#2) [w/M.A. Innes]: MMM, menage, puppy play, body modification, vampire, werewolf

Master (#3) [w/M.A. Innes]: MMM, puppy play, vampire, werewolf

This trilogy is also [available in audio](#).

Standalone & Other Fate of the Fallen Books

Prequel: Day Zero (*Werewolf Kevin only wants to protect his little brother. Set the day of the Takeover. Incest*)

Prequel: Daddy (*Vampire Darius wants witch Rowan to submit to him in exchange for protection for his family. Set shortly after the Takeover. Daddy kink with no age play, spanking & discipline,.*)

Asymmetry: Fluffy, cute, sweet, vampire and witch meeting and getting along despite the odds. ([available in audio](#) and [also available in German](#))

Spoiled [w/Morgan Noel] & its sequel **Anticipation** [w/Morgan Noel]: BDSM (heavy BDSM and MMM in *Anticipation*), betrayal, hot sex (The duo is available [as a box set](#) at a discount. *Spoiled* is [also available in Italian](#))

Gifts (Status Quo #1) [MF/MMF; as Raissa Donovan]

Other Books

Henry the HuCow Trilogy

Henry the HuCow: A Gay Lactation Fantasy: Milking, body modifications, piercings, tattoos, a touch of humiliation and plenty of mooos. @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)

Henry the HuCow 2: Milking, body modifications, piercing, double penetration. @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)

Henry the HuCow 3: Milking/lactation, sounding, breeding kink (no mpreg), eating healthy, med kink, mild watersports @ [Amazon](#) & [Smashwords](#)