

NO SAFEWORD SERIES - BOOK 2



Claiming Hannah

CLAIRE
THOMPSON

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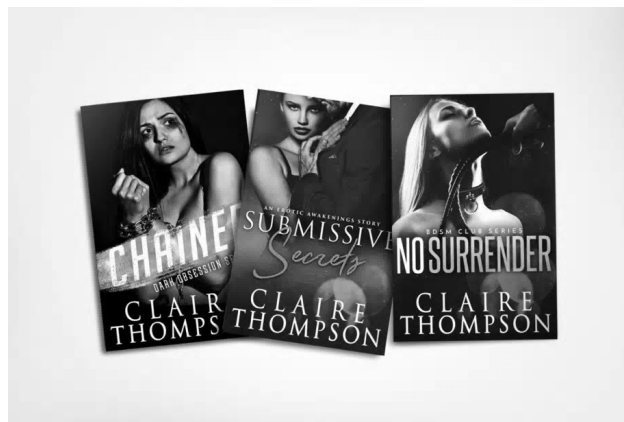
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Part One

Chapter 1

Hannah Davies stared at her laptop screen, fingers poised on the keys. She'd sat down with such determination earlier that morning, ready to at least try to write again after the long hiatus. She stared at the screen for a long while, willing herself to create something, damn it.

But she got distracted by two shimmering hummingbirds flitting around the bird feeder that hung from a tree just outside her window. And by her own wandering thoughts, though she couldn't for the life of her remember where they'd wandered.

She snorted as she reread what she'd written so far: *Chapter One*.

Finally, with a heavy sigh, she pushed back from the desk. "Give it up, Davies. Not happening today."

It wasn't as if she *had* to write another novel in her bestselling Angelique Rose BDSM series. The royalties kept coming in, and Andy's life insurance payout had been enough to live on for the rest of her life. But she'd been so hopeful that morning, eager to get the creative juices flowing once more.

Her ringing cell phone startled her.

Glad for the reprieve, Hannah jumped to her feet and followed the sound to the kitchen. She found the phone half hidden beneath a dish towel. As she grabbed it, *Charlotte Rivers* flashed across the screen.

"Hey there, Charlotte. What's up?"

"I miss you, that's what's up."

"I miss you, too," Hannah replied sincerely. "I know I've been kind of a recluse lately," she added.

Charlotte snorted. "Kind of? Understatement of the year. I thought you said last time we talked that things were better. That you were ready to get back into the swing of things."

“Yeah. Yeah, I did say that. I know I’ve been a lousy friend these past months. I’m sorry.”

“No apologies necessary. Here’s your chance to make it up to me. I’ve got some news I want to share, and I want to do it in person. How about I swing by with some pastries? You make the coffee. Deal?”

“What news?” Hannah demanded. “Good news, I hope?”

“Excellent news,” Charlotte replied.

“Did Jim—” Hannah began excitedly.

“No fishing,” Charlotte chuckled, cutting her off. “I’ll tell you when I see you. I can be there in about forty-five minutes, if that works for you.”

Hannah glanced around her kitchen. The sink was full of unwashed dishes. The non-perishable groceries still sat on the counter from yesterday’s shopping run. The floor was gritty with crumbs. When had she become such a slob?

“Uh, the place is kind of a mess,” she hedged as she walked into the living room. It wasn’t much better. A half-bottle of wine and the glass were still on the coffee table, alongside the remains of the huge bowl of popcorn she’d had for dinner. She’d been binge-watching the first several seasons of *Downton Abbey*, her go-to show when she wanted to forget everything.

“I haven’t had breakfast yet. Would you rather meet at Tupelo Honey’s over on College Street?” Charlotte persisted. “That would work, too.”

“Yeah, that would be better,” Hannah agreed. She hadn’t had breakfast either, unless you counted three cups of coffee. And it would be good to see Charlotte in person. Of all her friends, Charlotte had been there for her during the really hard times when Andy had first been diagnosed, and at the end.

Not that she blamed the others. Most of them had been the wives of Andy’s friends, and their relationship was more as couples than as close girlfriends. Hannah had been the one who failed to return calls or reply to well-intentioned

condolence emails. Nor had she exactly been much fun to be around this past year.

The only time she perked up was when one or both of the kids made time in their busy lives to come home for a visit. They'd come often during the first six months after the funeral, incredibly supportive, as she'd tried to be for them.

Charlotte's call was well-timed, as Hannah had made a conscious decision to get back into writing and, by extension, living again. Before she faced the world, however, she definitely needed to shower and wash her hair.

"It's"—she glanced down at her watch—"eight forty. How about we meet at ten? Does that work?"

"Like a charm."

In the bathroom, Hannah shucked off Andy's old *Luella's BBQ* T-shirt she'd lived in the past two days and shimmied out of her baggy shorts. As she waited for the shower water to heat, she regarded herself in the mirror, something she usually avoided.

Her hair was no longer any discernible style, and looked shaggy and overgrown. She'd been too busy and distracted when Andy was sick to even think about making an appointment. Afterward, she hadn't much seen the point. It was easier just to pull it back in a ponytail and forget about it.

She leaned closer to the mirror. There was a worry line between her brows that hadn't been there before Andy's diagnosis and her lips were drawn down at the corners in a perpetual frown. She forced herself to smile brightly for the mirror as she took a step back to examine her naked body.

Her breasts weren't as perky as they'd once been, but at least they were still full and round. She'd never managed to lose (or rather, to keep off) those ten extra pounds she'd been carrying since having kids, all of it settling in her too-soft belly and hips. But all in all, she didn't look too bad for a forty-four-year-old.

Mindful of the time, she stepped into the shower. As she washed and conditioned her hair and soaped her body, she

thought about her friend. While Charlotte didn't practice the all-out erotic submission and total power exchange Hannah wrote about in her novels, she was immersed in and completely at ease with the BDSM lifestyle.

Not for the first time, Hannah mused on how different her own life would have been if she'd had a better understanding of her sexual orientation when she and Andy had first met. Even before she'd met her future spouse, she'd had a secret fascination with BDSM. But she'd never found the nerve or opportunity to act upon it.

They'd married insanely young, she a nineteen-year-old virgin, he only a year older, both still in college. At the time, she hadn't had either the vocabulary or the courage to admit her erotic fantasies of being spanked, tied down and sexually controlled by a stern, exacting Master.

She'd—wrongly—assumed her secret fascination with BDSM was just a passing phase, something she would get over as she sexually matured. Zoë was born when Hannah was barely twenty-one, Ben following two years later. With two babies and Andy barely out of law school and working impossible hours, for a number of years sex was something they grabbed when they could. Usually both of them, worn out at the end of the day, preferred sleep.

When the kids were finally in school, Hannah, always a fan of romance novels, decided to take her own stab at writing. She met with some success and slowly built up a fan base over time, self-publishing a series of sweet, sexy romances with formulaic happily-ever-afters.

It wasn't until her early thirties that Hannah found the courage and sexual maturity to delve more deeply into her own erotic fantasies. She inhaled what BDSM erotica there was out there, which fueled her fantasies and reawakened her sluggish libido. At first, she hid what she was reading from Andy, assuming he'd be scandalized if he found out.

Eventually, she screwed up her courage to confide some of her milder BDSM sexual fantasies with her husband. To her pleased surprise, Andy had enthusiastically agreed to give it a

try. He'd even gone out and bought fleece-lined wrists cuffs and a small flogger from the local sex shop.

Disaster had ensued.

While Andy was willing to try a little slap and tickle, he couldn't hide his confusion and even horror when she pressed for more. He couldn't understand why she wanted him to *hurt* her, the concept of erotic pain utterly foreign to him. When she attempted some sexy role play to heat things up, suggesting he be the intruder who breaks in, ties her down and has his way with her, he explained he could never do that—he respected her too much.

Embarrassed and frustrated, Hannah had eventually thrown away the toys—painful reminders of what was not to be. Andy, clearly relieved to return to vanilla sex, never said another word about it.

But the Pandora's Box of her longing had been opened, and she couldn't quite manage to get the lid back down. She became quietly obsessed with erotic fantasies of being claimed by a powerful Dom who wouldn't have to be cajoled in BDSM play, but would *demand* it.

While she had zero interest in betraying Andy with any kind of affair, in person or online, she did join several online BDSM groups where she could talk with experienced players, and not be judged for her desires.

It was then she made the career shift from vanilla romance to BDSM romance and pure erotica. She gave free rein to her darkest impulses, creating dark, sensual worlds filled with erotic slaves, controlling Masters and plenty of whips and chains.

It wasn't until Ben left for college that, with Andy's knowledge and blessing, she'd started attending some local BDSM events to learn firsthand what she'd so far only gleaned from internet research. It was at one of these events that Hannah had met Charlotte. Their rapport had been instant. At the end of the event, they'd shared contact information and met soon after for coffee.

As their friendship deepened, Hannah had lived vicariously through Charlotte's much more exciting life. She'd delighted in Charlotte's detailed descriptions of scenes she'd enjoyed at her favorite BDSM club—The Garden. That was where Charlotte had met Jim, and their connection had been instant and intense.

Charlotte had become friendly with the owner of The Garden, Anthony Gerace. Between careers, Charlotte had taken a part time job there manning the door. When Anthony's manager had abruptly quit due to family matters, he'd offered Charlotte the position and she'd accepted on the spot.

She was the one who had suggested Hannah go to the club to witness genuine BDSM scenes in progress. With Andy's blessing, Hannah had accepted Charlotte's invitation. She had gaped in jealous awe as she watched submissives flogged, whipped and sexually teased. Her skin had tingled with longing as she watched a Shibari Master wrap a woman from head to toe in confining rope and then suspend her by her long hair from the ceiling. She couldn't help but imagine herself bound to that St. Andrew's cross, or chained to the whipping post while a gorgeous Dom dressed in black leather had his way with her.

By the time she left the place, her panties had been literally soaked, her nipples throbbing so painfully she'd had to squeeze them as she drove herself home. She'd jumped Andy's bones that first night, practically raping him in her lust. He hadn't seemed to mind. After that, he'd been happy for her to hang out there, delighted to reap the benefits of her frustrated libido.

“Oh, I miss you, baby,” she whispered, tears filling her eyes.

No.

She was not going there. Not now.

Climbing out of the shower, she dried off and went into her closet. She rummaged through her clothing rack, eventually selecting a pretty floral sundress that still had its tags. She'd

bought it just days before Andy's diagnosis of terminal pancreatic cancer had upended their world.

She slipped the dress over her head and returned to the bathroom. As she blew her hair dry she made a mental note to make a hair appointment for later in the week. Glancing at the small travel clock that still sat on Andy's side of the counter, she quickly applied moisturizer and makeup.

"You'll do," she said to her reflection.

When Hannah arrived at the café, Charlotte was already seated at a table for two near the door. Two years younger than Hannah, Charlotte was a slender woman with short, dark hair that framed a fox-shaped face with a pointed chin. She had large, dark eyes and a ready smile.

"Hey, there," Charlotte called, getting to her feet as Hannah approached. "It's so good to see you again." They embraced and took their seats. Two large menus and two glasses of ice water were already on the table.

A young waiter appeared almost immediately with the restaurant's free signature buttermilk biscuits, along with butter and a pot of honey. "Can I get y'all coffee? Juice? You know what you want to order yet?"

Charlotte ordered coffee, Hannah some orange juice.

"I don't get why they do this," Charlotte said as she cut into one of the biscuits and slathered it with butter and honey. "Give us breakfast before we order breakfast."

"I know, right?" Hannah agreed, preparing her own biscuit. "I guess it works as a business model, though. People still order an obscene amount of food here." She glanced around at nearby tables, where other patrons were tucking into huge platters of eggs, sausage, grits, waffles and pancakes. Hannah took a bite of the hot buttermilk biscuit. It was good, but not as good as her own.

Andy had loved her biscuits.

Stop it.

When the waiter returned with their coffee and juice, Charlotte ordered a side of grits while Hannah chose the fried green tomatoes.

“Okay,” Hannah said, once he’d gone. “The suspense is killing me. I can’t wait another second. What’s your big news?”

Charlotte’s face suffused with pleasure. “Jim and I are getting married.” She held out her hand, displaying a stunning emerald-cut diamond on her left ring finger.

“Oh, Charlotte,” Hannah cried, thrilled for her friend. “That’s such great news. Congratulations. When’s the wedding?”

“We don’t have an exact date yet, but probably sometime next spring. He’s never been married before, so he wants the whole shebang—big church wedding, me in a white wedding gown, a three-tiered cake, and his little nephew as ring bearer.”

She snorted. “I’d just as soon elope and save the money to build a first-rate dungeon in our basement. But I don’t want to deprive Jim of his big day,” she added with a grin.

She leaned forward, lowering her voice conspiratorially as she added, “The ceremony *I’m* looking forward to will involve collars and chains and very little clothing. We’re going to formalize our BDSM relationship of Master and slave. It’s happening this Friday night. Master Jim is going to pierce my nipples as part of the ceremony.”

Hannah sucked in a breath of shocked excitement. She briefly tried to visualize herself in such a scenario—and failed. “That’s so brave of you, Charlotte. And so exciting.”

While Hannah couldn’t imagine allowing someone to poke a needle through her nipple, or any other of her body parts, she did love the look of body jewelry and appreciated its D/s significance. Many of her characters underwent piercings as symbols of ownership or as part of intense erotic play. That was one of the cool things about her characters—they did everything she’d never had the opportunity or the nerve to try.

“Where are you having the ceremony?”

Charlotte's smile lit her entire face. "That's the best part. Anthony has offered to let us do it at The Enclave."

Anthony was one of the founders of The Enclave, a group of BDSM enthusiasts dedicated to the art and passion of BDSM as a 24/7 lifestyle. Hannah had met him on several occasions during her visits to the club. He had exuded dominant charm, embodying her concept of a true Master.

Ever since Charlotte had first told her about The Enclave, Hannah had been dying to see the place. It was like something out of her own novels, with the huge added attraction that it was actually *real*. Charlotte and Jim had been invited to a few Enclave dungeon parties since she'd signed on as his club manager. Each time Charlotte had returned, she'd shared some of the details of the intense BDSM training and erotic play she'd both witnessed and participated in while there.

"You must be thrilled, Charlotte. I'm so excited for you."

"I am. I haven't been able to think about anything else since he made the offer. Master Brandon and Mistress Marjorie are going to participate in the ceremony with us—kind of like the groomsman and bridesmaid, but way more fun."

"Remind me who they are again?" Hannah interjected.

"Brandon and Marjorie are two of the founding members of The Enclave. They're both dominant, but Marjorie is submissive to Brandon. They own a sweet little slave girl named Katie."

Hannah bit back a sigh. What she wouldn't give to be granted admission to that BDSM Shangri La. What an incredible opportunity to observe a genuine BDSM community firsthand. What she learned would surely enable her to add more authenticity to her Angelique Rose novels.

But her longing was about far more than an opportunity to take field notes. She couldn't help but fantasize about being a part of it all. Imagine finding the courage to submit so completely to another? Just the thought sent shivery chills of both terror and desire down her spine.

Charlotte's laugh pulled Hannah from her reverie. "What?" she said, looking up.

"Your face," Charlotte replied, still chuckling. "Is that the light, or are you actually green with envy?"

"Huh? No," Hannah protested, not wanting to tarnish Charlotte's news because of her own unrequited longing.

"Don't lie, girlfriend," Charlotte retorted. "You've been dying to go there since I first told you about it." She leaned forward, her expression animated. "Here's the good news. We're allowed to bring a guest. Master Jim is fine with me inviting you."

"Me?" Hannah squeaked, both shocked and delighted. "Seriously? That would be awesome. Beyond awesome." She frowned as a new thought occurred to her. "Anthony's okay with you bringing someone who isn't actually part of the scene?"

"He was delighted when I suggested it."

Hannah was confused. "Huh? Does he even know who I am?"

"Sure he does. He remembers you from the club, but more than that, his slave girl, Lucia, is a *huge* Angelique Rose fan."

With a startled laugh, Hannah cried, "No way. Why would she want to read about what she gets to live in real life?"

"Are you kidding? I've read your stuff and it's hotter than a properly spanked behind. Clearly, Lucia thinks so too. So you've got an invitation, *if* you want to attend, that is."

"Oh, hell yeah," Hannah exclaimed a little too loudly, as two white-haired ladies sitting nearby glared at her.

"Great. Then it's settled. You're coming as our guest. I'm warning you in advance not to freak out by anything you might see there. The Garden is pretty tame compared to The Enclave. It's a private residence and, unlike the club, anything goes. And I mean *anything*."

As Hannah's creative mind instantly clicked into overdrive, Charlotte continued, "The slaves there are kept

naked, save for their slave collars, and are constantly marked. Canings, extreme bondage, real punishments involving cages and humiliation, blood play, complete sexual servitude—you name it, it happens at The Enclave. Obviously, everything that occurs there is fully consensual and all the Doms there are highly skilled. But I don't want you to think it's just a private version of The Garden. This place is the real thing."

"Okay, got it," Hannah said with a decisive nod, reining in the squealy girl dancing a jig in her head. "I promise not to freak out."

"There's going to be a dungeon party after the ceremony," Charlotte continued. "No pressure, but if you do decide to scene, The Enclave is definitely where you want to be. Every Dom in that place is top-notch."

"Gosh, I don't know," Hannah blurted, the thought of actually participating in a scene rather than merely observing was more than a little alarming. And thrilling. And crazy. She laughed nervously. "I'm not sure The Enclave is the place to make my debut. What if I make a total fool of myself? I mean, let's face it. I have zero actual experience. Why in the world would any of them want to scene with a total newbie like me?"

"Hey," Charlotte said kindly. "Everyone was a newbie at one time. And they're not like that there. Anthony is very supportive and encouraging of submissives, especially those just starting out. He'll look out for you, don't worry."

Was Hannah a submissive? Or just a sexual masochist? She honestly had no idea. Still, it was some comfort to know she wouldn't be judged, or not too harshly, for her virgin status. If only she had more than two days to get herself properly psyched up. Not to mention, lose those pesky ten pounds. At the same time, she was so excited at the prospect of not only attending the ceremony at The Enclave, but of finally daring to experience what she'd fantasized about for so long. No way was she going to blow this by being a chicken.

"Okay, then," she said with more confidence than she felt. "I'm in. All the way."

“That’s the spirit,” Charlotte enthused. “Come with me after breakfast. I’m picking up my ceremony outfit from that terrific BDSM boutique that recently opened downtown. I’ll help you pick out something sexy to wear for the event. Even if you’re not an experienced player, you might as well look the part, right?”

Chapter 2

Friday night arrived in the blink of an eye. Hannah sat on her porch swing in the deepening twilight, as anxious and excited as a teenager waiting for her prom date to show.

She'd had fun at the BDSM boutique. Charlotte had looked stunning in the wine-red bustier and matching red leather miniskirt she'd modeled for Hannah, along with four-inch fuck-me heels.

Inspired, Hannah had tried on various waist cinchers, corsets, revealing dresses and tight skirts. She basically hadn't shopped for much clothing of any sort, fetish or otherwise, during this past year of hibernating grief. It felt good to be back out in the world, doing something purely for herself.

She'd especially loved the way a particular corset had hugged her curves, slimming them while accentuating her breasts. The only problem was that she could barely breathe in the contraption, and the stays were already poking into her flesh within the few minutes she modeled it for Charlotte. Forget about sitting down. Deciding she was too old to be that uncomfortable in the name of fashion, she'd reluctantly put it aside.

With Charlotte's encouragement, she finally settled on an elegant black leather skirt that came to her knee. It had sexy slits on either side, revealing plenty of thigh when she walked. Feeling daring, she'd opted for a pretty pink push-up bra that allowed her breasts to defy gravity, or at least create that illusion. Over that she'd chosen a low-cut pearly pink silk sleeveless top, so sheer the lacy bra was visible beneath. Though the stiletto heels Charlotte had recommended to complete the outfit were flattering, Hannah knew herself too well to risk them. She opted instead for some kitten heels.

Though it was a pleasant September evening in Asheville, it could get quite chilly up in the mountains at night this time of year. Hannah was actually glad of this, as it gave her an excuse to wear a light coat over her ensemble for the evening.

While she looked good, she was definitely out of her sartorial comfort zone.

She glanced down at her hands as she waited for her friends, her thumb moving over her ring finger, now conspicuously bare. She'd struggled with herself as she'd dressed for the evening, trying to decide whether to remove her wedding and engagement rings for the event. Her own mother still wore her wedding ring though her father had passed away over six years ago now. But her mother also didn't attend BDSM events where she might want to scene with some sexy Dom.

Finally, Hannah had removed her rings, setting them carefully into a ring box and placing the box beside the one that held her late husband's ring. The symbolic significance wasn't lost on her. She was making a conscious decision to return to the world, single for the first time in twenty-five years.

Headlights beamed in the driveway, pulling Hannah from her bittersweet reverie. Jumping to her feet, she walked toward the vehicle. As she approached, Jim hopped out of the driver's seat of his Chevy pickup truck. He opened the back door for her, gentleman that he was.

"Evening, Hannah," he said, smiling. Jim was a good-looking guy in his late forties. He had a mop of blond curly hair, light blue eyes, a full beard and a ruddy complexion. Hannah had met him a number of times, both at The Garden and at various BDSM events. Tonight he wore a black leather jacket over black leather pants, shiny black cowboy boots on his feet.

"Hi, Jim," she replied, accepting his offered hand as he helped her up into the truck. "Thanks for coming to get me."

"My pleasure."

Hannah slid into the spacious back seat. Jim shut her door and climbed into the cab. As he put the truck in reverse, Charlotte twisted around from the front seat. Long red earrings dangled from her lobes, sparkling against her shiny black bob.

Her dramatic eye makeup gave her an exotic look, and her lips were painted the same shiny red as her outfit.

“You look fantastic,” Hannah said. “That cat eyeliner is super sexy.”

Charlotte tossed her hair and did a dramatic lip pout. “It’s my Amy Winehouse look.” She tilted her head to regard Hannah appraisingly. “You look amazing too. Love the hair and makeup.”

“Thanks. I finally went to the hair stylist yesterday. I got a mani-pedi too.” Hannah held out a hand to show off her pink lacquered fingernails.

“Nice. So, how you feeling?” Charlotte asked. “Ready for adventure?”

Hannah let out a shaky laugh. “As ready as I’m gonna be.”

“You’ll be fine, hon. You’ll see,” Charlotte said.

Eager to change the focus from herself, Hannah asked, “How about you? Are you excited about the ceremony?”

Charlotte bit her lower lip. “I am a little nervous,” she admitted. “I mean, I totally want to do it. But getting my nipples pierced with everyone watching...”

“You’ll do just fine, darlin’,” Jim said, placing a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder. “I promise.”

“Thank you, Sir. I know you’re right.” She gazed at Jim with undisguised adoration.

“And you will, too,” she added, turning back to Hannah. “Tonight’s the night. I can feel it, Hannah. You’re going to move from voyeur to participant, and it’s going to be awesome.”

Hannah blew out a breath, hoping her friend was right. Though the brief experiments at home with Andy hadn’t panned out, they’d been enough to let Hannah know without a doubt that she craved erotic pain. She could still recall, a decade later, how she’d shivered with dark pleasure as the leather stroked her flesh while her hands were bound to the headboard. The one spanking Andy had given her had been

heaven on earth, even if he did keep ruining it by asking if he was hurting her.

She was determined not to chicken out tonight, assuming the opportunity presented itself. While excited, she was also anxious. What if she wasn't able to get out of her own head enough to take that first step? What if she made a total fool of herself?

Chill, she reminded herself as they began their ascent into the Blue Ridge Mountains. *Just take things as they come.*

Jim had the windows cracked and fresh, pine-scented mountain air filled the truck's cabin. They wound their way around a narrow dirt road and finally emerged at a large plateau. The road there was wider and paved, and a large structure was visible in the near distance.

"We're here," Charlotte squealed excitedly, though Hannah couldn't yet see much by the truck's headlights. They stopped at a set of tall gates set into high concrete walls that surrounded the place. Jim pulled to a stop beside an intercom and pressed a few buttons.

Someone spoke through the intercom, though Hannah couldn't make out the words. Jim responded, "Hi, it's Jim Spencer and his two sub girls." He winked at Hannah in the mirror.

The gates opened slowly inward and they drove through. Hannah drew in her breath at the sight of the multi-storied mansion. Built of stone with wood accents, it was lit by recessed lights, the effect warm and welcoming.

A man with white-blond hair stood at attention by the curving drive that fronted the building. Despite the chill in the air, the man was shirtless. As they got closer, Hannah saw he wore a thick, black leather collar around his neck. His broad chest was smooth, save for small gold barbells through his pierced nipples.

As Jim pulled the truck to a stop, the man jumped forward to open first Charlotte's door and then Hannah's.

“Welcome to The Enclave,” he said in accented English. “My name is Hans.” He pronounced it *Hahns*.

Hannah admired the young man’s pierced nipples and slave collar. She made the mistake of looking down, her mouth actually falling open as she unavoidably focused on the sizable bulge in the guy’s black leather pants. Recovering herself, she looked instead into his face. He was quite good looking, with high cheekbones and bright blue eyes.

“Nice to meet you, Hans,” she said, pleased her voice didn’t betray her nerves. “I’m Hannah.”

Jim appeared from the other side of the truck, which was still running. He had a small gear bag slung over one shoulder.

Hans turned to him with a deferential smile and a slight bow. “Welcome, Master Jim. With your permission, Sir, I will park your vehicle. You are free to enter with your slaves. Master Anthony is expecting you.”

“Thanks, Hans,” Jim said.

Hannah nearly opened her mouth to correct the man as to her status, but Charlotte caught her eye and gave a minute shake of her head.

“*Go with it,*” she mouthed.

Hannah grinned. Charlotte was right. She arrived with them, so the assumption was reasonable. It was exciting to be thought of as someone’s slave. While she didn’t see herself as slave material in real life, it was a very compelling fantasy.

As they walked down a stone walkway that led to the entrance, one of the double doors opened inward. A pretty young woman gestured for them to enter. The redhead was stark naked save for a gorgeous emerald-green slave collar made of what looked like the softest leather. Her hair fell in soft ringlets to her shoulders, framing a round face with lovely green eyes and a rosebud mouth.

“Welcome, Master Jim,” she said without a trace of self-consciousness. “We’re honored that you’ve chosen our home for your collaring ceremony. Welcome, Charlotte,” she added, “It’s wonderful to see you both again.”

Hannah caught her breath as she noticed a crisscross of pink welts on the girl's full, heavy breasts, as if she'd been recently whipped. Small gold hoops hung from her gumdrop pink nipples. Her mons was shaven smooth.

Jim shrugged out of his leather jacket. Underneath, he wore only a black leather vest, open to reveal his curling blond chest hair and six-pack abs. "Good to see *you* again, Katie," he replied as he handed her the jacket. "*All* of you," he added with a wolfish grin, his gaze flickering over her bare body.

If his words or behavior irritated Charlotte, you'd never know it. She, too, was all smiles.

"Thank you, Sir," Katie replied softly, a slight flush moving over her rounded cheeks. She flashed a shy smile at Hannah.

"This is my good friend, Hannah," Charlotte said. "Hannah, meet slave Katie, Marjorie and Brandon's girl."

"Hi, Katie." Hannah pulled her own coat closer around herself as if that would somehow offer Katie some coverage. She was just so...naked.

Katie's eyes widened, another flush pinkening her cheeks. "My apologies. Please, let me take your coat."

Reluctantly, Hannah allowed the girl to take it from her. "Thank you."

As Katie scurried away with the wraps, Hannah turned to take in her surroundings. "Whoa," she breathed, awestruck. The walls of the large front hallway were decorated with all sorts of medieval-looking torture devices, including iron manacles, curved, long-handled knives, whips and floggers of every size. An antique chair was set against one wall, its seat, arms and back covered in pointy, metal spikes. There were other strange-looking torture devices she had no name for. Everything looked completely authentic and, within the context of BDSM play, diabolically sexy.

"Impressive, ain't it?" Jim drawled. "Anthony's pretty proud of his collection. It's mainly for show, but I'm sure someone would be glad to give you a hands-on demonstration.

You might enjoy the Judas Cradle there.” He pointed to a pyramid-shaped wooden device affixed atop a wooden tripod. There were a series of ropes and pulleys suspended above it. Hannah didn’t even want to imagine what it was used for.

“Only if you go first,” Hannah quipped. While she’d never want to actually be impaled on such a terrifying device, the whole concept of erotic torture had made her hot and bothered. She crossed her arms over her chest to hide her rising nipples.

“There they are,” a masculine voice boomed. “Our guests of honor. It’s so good to see you both.”

Hannah turned to see an attractive couple in their fifties. The man had auburn hair and deep-set blue eyes, his features rugged. He was dressed in caramel-colored leather pants and a white cashmere sweater, his feet in fancy Italian loafers.

The woman was tall and willowy, with honey-blond hair swept back in a twist, her eyes a clear green. She wore a red floor-length satin gown and a silver slave collar with a heart-shaped padlock at its center. They wore matching gold wedding rings.

“It’s great to see you, too,” Jim said, shaking the man’s hand and then embracing the woman. He turned to Hannah. “Hannah, meet Brandon and Marjorie.”

“Very nice to meet you,” Hannah said, forcing herself to drop her arms to her sides.

As Brandon openly appraised her, she could almost feel the heat of his gaze. Damn it if she wasn’t blushing like a schoolgirl.

“We’re delighted to have you in our home,” Marjorie said with a gracious smile. “I’ve heard so much about you from Charlotte.” She put her arm around Charlotte, who leaned into her, nearly purring with pleasure as the older woman stroked her hair. “And we love your work.”

“Yes,” Master Brandon agreed. “We’ve been looking forward to meeting Angelique Rose in the flesh.”

“Oh, gosh,” Hannah blurted, taken by surprise. “Thank you.”

The idea of all these serious, knowledgeable lifestylers reading her novels was humbling indeed and also mildly panic-inducing. Internet research and voyeurism only went so far. There had to be any number of inaccuracies in the work, and they probably noticed every single one.

Brandon came closer, his deep-set eyes boring into hers with almost hypnotic power. “Marjorie likes to read passages aloud to me to give me ideas.” He winked at his wife. “Your writing is very descriptive and catches much of the nuance and power of D/s.”

Face hot with embarrassed pleasure, Hannah grinned stupidly at the compliment. “You’re very kind.”

Katie returned to the foyer and dropped into a graceful kneeling position beside Brandon. “We look forward to bringing some of your creative scenarios to life at the dungeon party later tonight,” Brandon added. He placed his hand lightly on Katie’s head, his lips lifting into a cruel smile. “Don’t we, slave?”

“Yes, Sir,” the naked girl replied a little breathlessly.

Hannah swallowed hard as several dark, erotic possibilities flitted through her mind. Was it hot in there, or was it just her?

Chapter 3

They moved from the foyer into a living room so large it contained two fireplaces. A huge picture window dominated the back wall, revealing the dark night sky beyond. There were several seating areas set around the space in conversational groupings. The furniture looked elegant but comfortable, beautifully upholstered in rich leather and brocade. Intricately patterned Persian rugs covered most of the hardwood floor.

The space was at once grand and intimate. Hannah caught her breath not only at the obvious opulence, but at the warm, welcoming vibe. The foyer, with its medieval torture devices, coupled with Charlotte's vivid descriptions of the dungeon, had given Hannah the erroneous impression that the entire place was like The Garden, just on a much grander scale.

Still, this wasn't just any living room, and this wasn't just any group of friends gathering for a party. There were easily a dozen or more people, some seated, some standing in small groups. Naked or nearly naked subs knelt here and there on floor cushions near their Masters and Mistresses.

A small wedding arch had been set up in front of the larger of the fireplaces. Black and red silk roses had been artfully woven through the latticework. In front of the arch stood a small padded bondage table draped with black satin.

A naked man with close-cropped blond hair knelt on a cushion on one side of the hearth. A naked woman with light brown hair hanging in a shiny curtain down her slender back knelt on a cushion across the hearth from him. They both appeared to be in their early to mid-twenties. They each wore slim black slave collars around their necks with steel O-rings dangling at the front and back. Their hands were crossed behind their backs, their heads bowed.

"Jim and Charlotte," Brandon said, "Let's head over to the hearth there so we can go over a few details before the ceremony." He turned to Hannah. "If you'll excuse us, Marjorie will take you around to meet our Enclave family."

“Of course,” Hannah said.

As the others moved away, she asked Marjorie, “Are those two young people kneeling at the hearth slave trainees? Charlotte told me The Enclave has a training facility.”

Marjorie glanced toward them with a nod. “That’s right. We presently have three slaves we are training. Those two are Michael and Ellen.”

Hannah looked again at the pair. How, she wondered, did one get recruited into the training program? Were they already “owned” by someone? Had they left their jobs to be here? She had so many questions, but now obviously wasn’t the time to ask them.

Instead, she asked, “Where is the third slave?”

“Lia is presently being punished. She’s down in her room in the slave quarters, chained to her bed.”

“Oh,” Hannah breathed, intrigued by this information, delivered so casually. “What did she, uh, do?”

“Sorry to say, I’m vague on the particulars. Lawrence, our primary disciplinarian, could give you more details if you’re interested. I’ll introduce you to him and you can ask him directly.”

Marjorie took Hannah around the room, making introductions. They stopped first at the sofa where Hans knelt on a floor cushion between two men.

The first man had chiseled features, a square jaw and wavy light brown hair. Christ, the guy was drool-worthy. The second guy had his own appeal, if you liked the burly shaved head heavily tattooed type, which Hannah did not. No, she’d much rather focus her attention on Mr. Gorgeous. Or should that be Master Gorgeous?

“Gentlemen,” Marjorie said as they stopped in front of the trio. “I’d like you to meet Charlotte’s guest, Hannah. Hannah writes under the pen name Angelique Rose, one of my favorite BDSM romance authors.”

“How delightful,” Master Gorgeous said in a to-die-for British accent. The big guy grunted noncommittally. The odds were good neither had any idea who Angelique Rose was. Not that Hannah was especially surprised, as her readership was primarily female.

Marjorie turned to Hannah. “I believe you’ve already met Hans?”

“Yes,” Hannah, smiling at the kneeling man. “Hi, again.”

He nodded in silent greeting.

Marjorie gestured toward the Brit. “This is Julian, one of the founders of our community.”

Even his name was sexy. What would it be like to scene with this beautiful man? Would she find out tonight? Just the thought left her weak in the knees.

“A pleasure to meet you, Hannah,” he said graciously. He brought her hand to his lips. Heat rose in Hannah’s face and between her legs as he lingered over her hand, his lips soft against her skin.

Letting her go, he leaned over and kissed the top of Hans’ head. “I trust my darling slave boy treated you well when you arrived?”

Damn. Why were the gorgeous ones always gay?

Hoping no one had noticed her visceral reaction to Julian’s touch, Hannah managed a smile. “He was perfect.”

“And this is Mason,” Marjorie continued, turning her attention to the other man. “He’s not only The Enclave’s chef, but a master chef of considerable renown.”

That got Hannah’s attention. She looked at the burly guy with more interest, curious where he’d worked and where he’d trained. Obviously, now wasn’t the time for that particular conversation, but she made a mental note in case the opportunity arose.

“Nice to meet you,” she said, again extending her hand.

Mason took her hand in his. His grip was firm, his skin rough. She felt the thick calluses on his fingers as they shook—chef’s hands.

He had clear gray-green eyes beneath thick, straight brows. His nose was prominent and slightly crooked, as if it had been broken at some point. His lower lip was full, almost pouty. In contrast, the upper was asymmetrical, one corner curving slightly upward. His neck was that of a linebacker’s above square shoulders, his tattooed arms corded with muscle.

Dressed in a black T-shirt, faded jeans and heavy black boots, he came across more like a biker dude than some hotshot chef. With the shaved head and tattoos, he looked downright dangerous. If she’d met this guy in a dark alley, she would have run screaming in the other direction.

Still holding her hand in his much bigger one, he let his eyes travel insolently over her, as if his gaze alone could strip her bare. When their eyes met again, heat splashed over Hannah’s cheeks and throat. Flustered, she took a step back, pulling her hand from his.

He let her go but continued to regard her with a knowing look. In spite of herself, Hannah was involuntarily drawn into his dominant orbit.

“There’s Lawrence over there,” Marjorie said, thankfully breaking the spell. “I’ll introduce you to him next.”

Hannah could almost feel Mason’s gaze following her as they walked away. It took an act of will not to look back to check.

Thrusting him from her mind, Hannah followed Marjorie toward a nondescript guy in his late thirties or early forties. He had a slender build, thinning sandy-blond hair and narrow shoulders. This unprepossessing guy was The Enclave’s disciplinarian?

Head down, he sat in a large wingback chair, his legs resting on something, or was it someone?

As they got closer, Hannah saw it was indeed *someone*. A naked young woman with long, pin-straight shiny blond hair

was on all fours, apparently serving as his footrest.

The Dom was on his cell phone, thumbs flying. He didn't look up as they approached. "Lawrence," Marjorie said. "I want to introduce Charlotte's guest for tonight's festivities. This is Hannah."

Finally, the man looked up from his phone, fixing Hannah with pale blue eyes. "Nice to meet you," he said, his voice warmer than she'd expected.

"You, as well," she managed, unable to stop staring at the crouching woman at his feet.

Following her gaze, Lawrence lifted his legs from his human ottoman and leaned over the naked girl. He wrapped his hand in her hair, using it to pull her head up.

The girl, probably mid-twenties, was absolutely gorgeous, with high cheekbones, dark blue eyes, a small, upturned nose and full lips. Hannah's immediate thought was what the hell was she doing with *this* guy?

"This is slave Danielle, my proudest possession." As he said the words, his face was transformed with happiness, his eyes lighting up as a tender smile lifted his lips.

Danielle also smiled, fixing her gaze on Lawrence with such open adoration it took Hannah's breath away. Silently, she chided herself for judging a book by its cover. Love could find its way into the most unlikely places, and flourish there.

"Danielle," Marjorie said, smiling down at the girl. "You might be interested to know Hannah writes under the pen name Angelique Rose." To Hannah, she added, "Danielle's read all your books."

The girl's eyes widened, her mouth falling open as she stared up at Hannah. She looked back to Lawrence. "Permission to speak, Sir?"

"Of course, darling," he replied, stroking her cheek.

Still holding her position on hands and knees, she gushed, "I *love* your work, Ms. Rose. I'd heard you were local. I've always wanted to meet you."

Her face now warm with both embarrassment and pleasure, Hannah replied, “Thank you. That means a lot to me.” Had everyone at The Enclave read her books? The thought was both thrilling and unnerving. She had always just assumed her primary fanbase consisted of people like her— intrigued by BDSM, but with limited or no actual personal experience.

She remembered Marjorie’s remark about the slave girl, Lia, chained to her bed. While she was burning with curiosity, she couldn’t quite find the nerve to ask Lawrence what the girl’s transgression had been.

As they continued to make the rounds, Hannah had to make a conscious effort to keep from gawking, open-mouthed, at everything and everyone she saw. The scent of lust and power permeated the air. So much smooth, bare flesh, some of it freshly marked from recent whippings, accentuated by collars, cuffs and chains. Dominants in repose, a casual hand on the back of a kneeling slave’s neck or loosely holding the leash attached to the kneeling sub’s collar, was a constant reminder that she wasn’t in Kansas anymore.

Unfortunately, Hannah was so visually distracted and just plain thrilled to be there that most of the rest of the names went in one ear and right out the other.

Once they’d completed the circuit of the room, Marjorie brought Hannah to the sofa nearest the large fireplace, where she saw Anthony. As they approached, he rose to his feet, his face warm with welcome.

“I’ll leave you here,” Marjorie said, giving Hannah’s hand a friendly squeeze. “The ceremony is about to start.”

Anthony looked dashing as ever, dressed that evening in a charcoal-gray cashmere sweater over black leather pants. In his sixties, he was still quite handsome, with a full head of silver hair, dark eyes and an athletic build. He exuded a natural dominance that was extremely sexy.

“Hannah,” he said, taking both her hands in his. “It’s a pleasure to see you again after so long.” Still holding her hands, he examined her face as if he could see past it into her

soul. "I know it's been tough this past year," he said gently. "I'm glad you came out tonight."

"Thank you," Hannah said, blinking back sudden, unwelcome tears. "I'm very honored to be here. Truly."

Letting her go, Anthony turned to a woman beside him. "This is Lucia, my slave girl and my true love."

Lucia was a petite woman with an olive complexion, dark eyes and thick, straight black hair. With the grace of a ballet dancer, she rose from her cushion. She was naked and shaved smooth, as all the female submissives at The Enclave seemed to be. Around her neck was a beautiful slave collar made from strips of artfully woven burgundy leather, a gold O-ring at its center.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, Hannah," the woman said with the hint of a Spanish accent that was pleasing to the ear. "I'm sorry for your loss." She glanced at Anthony and back to Hannah. "As two people who were also widowed, please know it is possible to find love again, even if you don't think so now." She slipped her small hand into Anthony's much larger one.

Hannah was at first taken aback. So self-absorbed in her own grief this past year, she had almost forgotten others had experienced the same loss, or worse. "Thank you," she said sincerely, both humbled and encouraged by Lucia's kind words.

"My slave has been looking forward to meeting you," Anthony said, smiling. "She's a big fan."

Hannah smiled warmly at Lucia. "I'm so glad you enjoy my stories. It means a lot to me."

To her surprise, Lucia placed her hands on her hips and fixed Hannah with a surprisingly stern gaze. The effect was mildly comical, given her nudity. "You left us with a cliffhanger last year, Ms. Rose. Tell me you're almost done with the next installment."

Hannah shook her head ruefully. "I wish I could say yes. I've been suffering from writer's block. Too stuck in my own

head, I guess.”

“No worries,” Anthony interjected. “We know just the thing to remove writer’s block, or any kind of block, don’t we, Lucia?”

“Yes, Master Anthony,” she replied with an angelic smile. Anthony’s smile, on the other hand, looked decidedly devilish.

“All joking aside,” he said. “I hope you will join Lucia and me for a scene in the dungeon after the ceremony.”

“Oh, I, um...” Hannah sputtered stupidly, dumbfounded and thrilled in equal measure. While she’d hoped someone would toss her a bone, she hadn’t dreamed it would be Anthony Gerace himself.

“Please,” Lucia added earnestly. “We would be honored.”

“I’d love to,” she blurted, trying to ignore the panicky feeling rising in her gut. No way was she going to throw away the most amazing opportunity of her life. But in the interest of full disclosure, she felt compelled to add, “I should tell you, I’ve never actually participated in a scene before. I mean, I’ve observed plenty, and my late husband and I dabbled a bit. But I have no real experience to speak of.”

“Master Anthony is excellent with newbies, Hannah,” Lucia assured her. “You couldn’t ask for a better introduction.”

“You’ll be fine,” Anthony added. “I’ll see to it.”

“If I may have your attention,” Brandon said in a loud voice. “We’re ready to begin.”

Lucia sank at once to her cushion while Anthony took a seat on the sofa. Hannah turned to sit beside him, but he stopped her with a shake of his head.

“No, Hannah,” he said, capturing her again in his powerful gaze. “Tonight you will kneel beside Lucia.” It wasn’t a question but rather a declaration.

She glanced at Lucia, who knelt with her back straight, her hands loosely clasped, her expression calm and serene. Feeling as if she were entering one of her own novels, Hannah lowered herself to the free cushion beside Lucia. Her knees creaked

and her skirt hampered her movement a little, but she managed to assume the position without toppling over.

Someone dimmed the lights in the room, leaving only a spotlight on the hearth. Jim and Brandon stood on one side of the bondage table, Charlotte and Marjorie on the other. The silent, naked slaves remained in position, hands clasped behind their backs, heads bowed.

Once the room was silent, Brandon said, “We are here tonight to celebrate the formal collaring of slave Charlotte by Master Jim. Before the actual collaring, as a demonstration of her devotion, Charlotte has chosen to be pierced by her Master.”

At a nod from Jim, Marjorie moved behind Charlotte and unhooked her bustier. As it fell away, she handed the garment to one of the kneeling slaves.

Charlotte, now bare-chested, her miniskirt riding low on her hips, allowed Marjorie to help her onto the table. Charlotte lifted her arms over her head, crossing them at the wrist. Standing at the head of the table, Marjorie placed both her hands around Charlotte’s wrists to hold her in place.

Charlotte had pretty breasts, small and round, the nipples prominent. Brandon matter-of-factly swabbed her nipples with alcohol while Jim opened a small kit and removed the hollow piercing needle.

While Hannah had never had the chance to attend a piercing demo, she’d done plenty of research on the topic, and had written many scenes involving needle play. She was in awe of Charlotte for having the courage, despite her admitted nerves, to undergo a public piercing as a way to show her love and submission for her man.

Hannah’s own nipples tingled in sympathy and anticipation as Brandon gripped one of Charlotte’s nipples, pulling it taut. His expression calm and assured, Jim bent over and placed the tip of the sharp needle on the side of Charlotte’s nipple.

Hannah held her breath, her heart beating high in her throat as Jim pushed the needle through flesh. She forced herself not to look away as he slowly threaded the jewelry through the hollow piercing needle. Suddenly dizzy, she closed her eyes as she swayed slightly on her knees.

A small hand closed over hers, giving it a gentle squeeze. Opening her eyes, she glanced toward Lucia.

“You okay?” Lucia whispered.

Hannah drew in a breath and let it out, her dizziness falling away. “Yes,” she whispered back. “Thanks.”

When she looked back at the stage, it appeared Jim had completed piercing the second nipple. As he helped Charlotte to a sitting position, Hannah saw the tiny diamonds glinting on either side of each nipple.

Charlotte stared down, pure delight lighting her face. Looking up at Jim, she cried, “I love them! Thank you so much, Master Jim.”

While the room erupted with cheers and applause, Jim helped Charlotte from the table, proud as a peacock. As he pulled Charlotte into a careful embrace, he dipped his head to whisper something in her ear. In response, she stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the mouth, eliciting another round of applause.

The two slave trainees rose to their feet and moved to the satin-covered bondage table. Hannah couldn't help but notice that not only the young woman, but also the man was shorn of his pubic hair. The head of his rather large cock was pierced with a captive bead ring.

The pair carried the bondage table to the side of the hearth and then resumed their positions on their cushions. Meanwhile, Marjorie produced a small bottle of water, which she handed to Charlotte. She drank its entire contents in one long gulp and handed it back.

“Well done, both of you,” Brandon said. “Now for the formal collaring.”

Charlotte radiated a quiet joy. Jim gazed at her with such naked love it took Hannah's breath away.

The room quieted again as Brandon took an oblong box from the small table beside him, opened the lid and held it out for Jim. Jim removed a burgundy-red leather collar with a heart-shaped silver padlock clasp, much like the one on Marjorie's collar.

As Charlotte sank gracefully to her knees, he said, "Charlotte, by accepting this collar, do you agree to be my slave, my property, my most cherished possession to use and adore as it pleases me?"

She looked up at him with shining eyes. "Yes, Master Jim. I do."

Hands clasped behind her back, Charlotte bowed her head as he slipped the collar around her throat. He clicked the padlock closed, locking the collar in place. Meanwhile, Marjorie quietly turned and took something from the second slave kneeling behind her.

Moving close to Charlotte, Marjorie bent down and dropped whatever it was into Charlotte's open hand. Charlotte lifted her hand, palm open, to her Master. Hannah was close enough to see it was a silver key on a chain.

"Master Jim, will you accept the key, not only to my collar, but also to my heart?"

Jim's eyes glistened with tears as he accepted the chain and slipped it over his head. "Yes, my darling slave girl. I will."

"By the power vested in me," Brandon boomed, grinning broadly, "I now pronounce you Master and slave. Master Jim, you may kiss the slave or spank her or whip her—your choice."

"How about all of the above?" Jim replied amidst the laughter and cries of congratulations.

"Excellent idea," Brandon agreed. "Let's all celebrate, Enclave style. The dungeon awaits."

As people rose to their feet and filed out of the room, Hannah felt Anthony's hand on her shoulder. "It's time you were properly introduced to erotic pain. Will you join us, Hannah?"

His deep, sonorous voice, his piercing gaze and his words were like fingers slipping into her panties. Ignoring the birds flapping their frenzied wings in her chest, she lifted her gaze to his.

"Yes, Sir," she said, feeling like a heroine in her own novel. "I would be honored."

Chapter 4

When Hannah had visited The Garden for her research, she'd always felt like a kid with her nose pressed to the glass of a candy store. Now she was standing inside the equivalent of Willy Wonka's chocolate factory, a golden ticket clutched in her hand.

Not quite as large as The Garden, The Enclave's main dungeon was laid out in similar design. There were spanking benches, whipping posts, St. Andrew's crosses, bondage chairs, a pillory, a suspension swing, a cock and ball torture device and various restraint racks. There were several cages along the back wall, some vertical, some horizontal. Portable racks of impact toys including floggers, whips, riding crops, canes and paddles were set strategically about the large space.

Charlotte appeared beside Hannah, glowing with happiness. She had remained bare-breasted, the diamonds glittering at her nipples. "Mistress Marjorie and Master Brandon want to scene with us. Will you be okay?"

"Sure," Hannah squeaked, her voice pushed an octave higher from nerves.

"She'll be fine. Lucia and I will take good care of her." Anthony placed a hand lightly on the back of Hannah's neck and gave it a gentle squeeze. His touch centered her, and she was able to breathe again.

"Thank you, Anthony," Charlotte said, taking his hand. "Both for letting us share our joy here at The Enclave, and for taking care of my dear friend, Hannah."

"Go have fun," Anthony said. "Just be careful with those piercings."

"Will do."

As Charlotte hurried away, Hannah noticed people were gathering at various scene stations, readying for play. She saw the Mistress in a clingy black dress whose name she had

immediately forgotten upon introduction. The woman's collared sub boy was a tall, nice-looking man with short dark hair. Dressed in only black Spandex gym shorts, he led the two naked trainees by leashes attached to their collars.

An attractive couple Hannah was pretty sure were called Mark and Jenna, or maybe it was Janey, were already at one of the padded spanking benches. The lovely girl was draped over the bench, her Dom securing her with wide leather straps. Hannah vaguely recalled Charlotte telling her that Mark, once in a successful band, was now a solo musician who performed locally.

Anthony interrupted Hannah's people-watching by saying, "Let's go over to that bondage rack. It should accommodate the two of you nicely."

Hannah's stomach swooped with nervous anticipation. As they made their way to the scene station, a little voice in her head chanted, "*Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god. This is really happening. This is really happening.*"

Made of black metal, the bondage rack looked like a small swing-set frame. But instead of swings, several chains hung from the top bar, large O-rings attached on their ends. A thick yoga mat had been placed on the floor beneath the rack.

There was a rolling metal cabinet nearby, several items arrayed neatly on top of it, including various cuffs, blindfolds and gags. A whip rack stood beside it filled with all kinds of impact toys.

"Kneel and present," Anthony said to Lucia.

Lucia immediately sank to the mat. She spread her knees wide, fully revealing her denuded sex. Back straight, she placed her hands palms up on her thighs.

To Hannah, Anthony said, "We use basic slave positions here at The Enclave. The *present* position allows the slave to demonstrate her grace, respect and patience. Lucia will remain in that position until I release her."

Hannah glanced at Lucia, so calm in repose, a secret smile on her face, her dark eyes sparkling.

“As for you, Hannah,” Anthony continued, “please remove your shoes, top and skirt. You will fold them neatly and set them to the side. Then you will kneel in *present* mode beside Lucia while we discuss the parameters of your virgin scene.”

Hannah hesitated as she tried to muster the courage to take off her things. *You’ve come this far. Don’t blow it by wimping out.* At least he hadn’t ordered her to get naked.

She toed off her shoes. Reaching back, she unzipped the tight leather skirt and let it slide down her legs. Taking a fortifying breath, she reached for the hem of her top and lifted it over her head.

Ignoring her burning cheeks and trembling hands, she folded her things as directed and set them on the edge of the mat. Finally, she lowered herself to her knees beside Lucia. At least it was easier without the confining skirt.

Copying Lucia, she straightened her back and placed her hands on her thighs, palms up. Squaring her shoulders, she sucked in her gut, self-conscious about her soft, rounded belly, such a contrast to Lucia’s firm, toned body.

She spread her knees as best she could, her hip flexors protesting in the process. Lucia made it all look so easy, but it most definitely was not.

Finally, she glanced up at Anthony, who was regarding her with a small, amused smile. “Very good, Hannah,” he said. “You have natural grace. With a little practice, you’ll be perfect.”

“I feel like a big cow next to Lucia,” she blurted before she could censor herself. Unable to stuff the words back into her mouth, she followed them hastily with, “But thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“The proper response is *Thank you, Master Anthony,*” he said sternly, but his eyes danced with mirth.

“Thank you, Master Anthony,” she repeated, flames licking her cheeks.

He nodded, as regal as a king. “Before we go any further, let us be clear regarding the parameters of this scene. My

intention is to secure your wrists with cuffs and chain to the top bar of the bondage rack, and then introduce you to impact play. I believe a simple flogging will be your best introduction to erotic pain. Before we get started, you are free to ask questions. Once the scene begins in earnest, that is, once you are bound and in position, you will simply submit. Is this clear?"

Hannah swallowed hard, her breath catching in her throat. She glanced around the dungeon, where several intense scenes were already under way. What had made her think she could handle this?

"What is it?" Anthony asked, regarding her. "Speak freely."

Hannah cleared her throat as she tried to compose herself. She didn't have to be Hannah just then. She could be Jess, the protagonist in one of her novels. Jess was confident, self-assured and determined to persevere, even when tested by the most sadistic of her club's members.

"I'm just a little nervous is all," she managed, pleased that her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

Anthony nodded. "That's perfectly understandable." He fixed her with that intense mesmerizing gaze. "But you want it, too. Don't you, sub girl?"

"Oh," she whispered without having meant to speak. His words were like a flame igniting inside her. "Yes," she managed to croak. Clearing her throat, she reiterated, "Yes, please, Sir."

"Good girl. Now. Stand up and take off your panties and bra."

Hannah's hand involuntarily fluttered to her mouth, her gut clenching. She'd known on some level this was coming, but now that it was here...

Anthony regarded her calmly. "I understand this might be difficult for you, Hannah. Some women, even genuinely submissive women, are shy about removing all their clothing, especially at first. I'd like you to consider the symbolism

involved in disrobing at the request or command of a Master. It is an act of submission in and of itself. Do you have the courage to reveal yourself in this basic way?"

Did she?

After all, what he was saying made perfect sense. Stripping for this man, for this Master, wasn't a sexual act, at least not overtly. It was an act of submission. Her first true act of submission. And what was the big deal, really? Heck, half the people in this room were stark naked and nobody batted an eyelash.

True, she wasn't at her most physically fit, but she'd seen plenty of subs at the club and the BDSM events she'd attended with less-than-perfect bodies, and it hadn't mattered to anyone there. Indeed, it was one of the things she loved about people in the scene—they seemed far less judgmental than vanilla folks.

She stole a sidelong glance at Lucia, who gave a minute nod of encouragement. She tried to speak, cleared her throat and tried again. "Yes, Sir," she said, her voice breathless in spite of her resolve.

Anthony's smile was warm. "Good girl. Now, do as you're told."

Unlike Lucia, who had made standing from a kneeling position look easy, Hannah rose awkwardly, nearly toppling over in the process. When she reached behind herself to unhook the bra, her hands were trembling so much she couldn't manage to release the hooks.

"Damn it," she muttered under her breath, embarrassed by her fumbling. She tried to breathe, to separate her nervous feelings from her excited ones, and to lock the nervous ones away where they could no longer annoy her.

Anthony placed a hand on her shoulder. "Calm down, Hannah. You're among friends here. If this is more than you can handle, there's no shame in admitting that. We can end the scene now. It's really okay."

“No,” Hannah blurted, tears of frustration springing to her eyes, which she rapidly blinked away. “I do want to scene with you. More than anything. Please.”

Channel Jess, she reminded herself. When Jess had to face the audition tribunal to join the invitation-only BDSM club, she’d girded her courage and took whatever they threw at her. If Jess, who was a product of Hannah’s imagination, could do it then, damn it, so could she.

Feeling somewhat calmer, she managed to unhook the bra. Heart pounding, she let it fall from her shoulders. Finally, her body coursing with so much adrenaline she felt translucent, she stepped out of her panties.

Heat fanned her face and prickled in her armpits as she forced herself to stand tall and proud. She was keenly aware of her pubic hair, clearly an anomaly at The Enclave. As Anthony moved his gaze slowly and appraisingly over her body, she half expected him to remark on her ungroomed state.

Instead, a ghost of a smile hovered on his lips. “That wasn’t so hard, was it, sub girl?”

Yes, it absolutely fucking was, her non-submissive side wanted to retort. But, continuing to channel Jess, she replied, “No, Sir.”

Turning his gaze to Lucia, he commanded, “Stand up beside Hannah.”

Lucia rose with the grace of a dancer.

“Both of you hold out your arms in front of you, wrists crossed.”

Lucia immediately obeyed and Hannah copied her movements. Now that she’d actually managed to get naked without bursting into flame or melting into a puddle on the floor, she felt considerably calmer.

Anthony moved to the rolling cabinet and selected two pairs of nylon cross handcuffs, the kind that looped over both wrists. He slipped them into place first on Lucia and then on Hannah, adjusting the fit with Velcro closures.

She stared down at her cuffed wrists, her entire body thrumming with delight. It not only looked incredibly sexy, it just felt so...right.

Anthony removed a small one-step stool from the cabinet and set it down between the two women. At a nod from her Master, Lucia raised her bound wrists high over her head. Stepping onto the stool, he clipped the D-ring at the top of her cuffs to the chain. Then he adjusted the chain until her arms were fully extended overhead. Lucia breathed deeply, her chest rising and falling, a look of utter calm and contentment on her face.

“Your turn,” he said to Hannah. “Stand with feet flat, slightly apart and raise your wrists high.”

Her heart thumping like a dryer with shoes in it, Hannah obeyed. As he pulled her arms taut and clipped her cuffs into place, she again experienced a powerful feeling of rightness, even necessity. She felt incredibly sexy and daring in this vulnerable position. She was dizzy with nervous excitement and anticipation.

Setting the stool aside, Anthony moved toward the nearby whip rack. He selected a gorgeous long-handled flogger with dozens of thick tresses. “This is an exploratory session to see how much you can tolerate. I’ll start slowly and build up. Feel free to tell me if it’s too much, or not enough. I would caution you not to be too quick to label what you’re experiencing as pain, and therefore bad. Think of it more as sensation. Let it build and resonate inside you.”

Anthony paused for a moment. “Hmm.” He looked around. “I had planned to alternate Lucia’s whipping with your flogging. But now I’m thinking you might find the experience more rewarding if I can get another Dom to help us out.”

Before Hannah could react to this, Anthony called out, “Hey there, Mason. Are you available for a quick scene? I’ve got my hands full with these two.”

The big tattooed man appeared in front of them. She hadn’t realized how tall he was—easily six foot four. He swept his gaze over her with that same slow, insolent sweep as when

they'd been introduced. Only now, naked as she was, his gaze felt like a laser beam scalding her skin. Heat rushed over and through her, from the soles of her feet to the top of her head.

"I think I could manage that," he said, his eyes still on her.

"Excellent," Anthony replied. "Though Hannah is familiar with BDSM from an academic standpoint, this is her first actual, hands-on scene. As such, we don't want to overwhelm her. We'll stick to basic impact play."

"Got it. We've got ourselves a virgin." Mason smirked at Hannah. "Don't worry, darling. I'll be gentle."

Hannah would have laughed if this was dialogue on a page. In real life, however, she was way too nervous to find him funny.

The two men turned toward the toy rack. They both had deep voices, and Hannah heard their quiet rumble as they conferred, heads close. Seizing her chance, she whispered urgently to Lucia, "I'm not sure how I feel about this. I didn't agree to another Dom."

"You agreed to submit to Master Anthony for the duration of the scene. That's all you need to focus on," Lucia murmured. She smiled encouragingly. "Relax. Master Mason is a wonderful scene partner. You have absolutely nothing to worry about. Just let go. That's the first step to true submission."

Easy for you to say, Hannah wanted to retort, but she held her tongue. Who was she to say what was or wasn't easy for Lucia? Maybe when Lucia had first started her own submissive adventure, she'd been as frightened as Hannah. And Lucia was right. She didn't need to control everything all the time. It would be good—cathartic even—to just let go. If she could figure out how.

The two men returned to them. She was relieved to see that Anthony still held the large, multi-tressed flogger, while Mason had a single tail whip in his large hand. Hopefully that meant Anthony would handle her scene while Mason took care of Lucia.

Anthony placed a comforting hand on her shoulder. “I want you to remember to breathe throughout this exercise, Hannah. This will help you to remain calm and focused. Don’t allow yourself to be distracted by whatever is happening around you. I expect you to remain in position, feet flat, eyes straight ahead. Understood?”

“Yes, Master Anthony,” she replied. It was good advice. She would just ignore whatever was going on around her. She was determined to get through this with as much courage and grace as her fictitious heroines, especially with the other Dom present.

She dared a quick glance at Lucia. As if feeling her gaze, Lucia turned her head ever so slightly in Hannah’s direction. “You got this,” she mouthed.

Lord, Hannah hoped so.

Chapter 5

So, this was the novelist whose books had made the rounds among the women at The Enclave. Mason didn't read much fiction, preferring cookbooks when he read anything at all. Even if he had had time for novels, some treacly, happily-ever-after girly romance would *not* be his genre of choice.

He'd been surprised when Anthony informed him of Hannah's virgin BDSM status. Given her career choice and her presence at The Enclave, he'd naturally assumed she had experience. Normally, he preferred his sub girls to be well-trained. But in her case, he was willing to make an exception.

Something had definitely sparked between them during their brief introduction. He'd enjoyed making her blush as he'd undressed her with his eyes. Her wide-eyed expression of both fear and desire had stoked the sensual sadist in him.

While looks weren't especially important to Mason, he couldn't deny that Hannah was very easy on the eyes. She had thick dark brown hair, large silvery-blue eyes and a lush mouth. He'd always liked that contrast of dark hair and light eyes. Her figure was voluptuous, with full breasts and wide hips—a woman's body rather than a girl's. He liked a woman with a little meat on her bones.

Ashley had definitely been the exception. Not only had she been far too young for him, but she was as petite as Lucia, with small breasts and no hips to speak of. But holy moly, was that girl a firecracker. She'd kept up with him every step of the way. In the year and change she'd worked in his kitchen and slept in his bed, she'd never once balked, no matter how intense the edge play.

Though she'd been gone for several months now, the thought of her still made his heart twist. It was his own damn fault. He'd been foolish enough to think there was something more between them than there had been. He'd confused her devotion and submission with love.

Annoyed with himself, Mason dismissed his self-indulgent wallowing. He returned his attention to the lovely woman standing naked and bound before him. As before, she blushed as he let his gaze wander lazily over her body. A neat, dark triangle of pubic hair covered her mons like a fig leaf.

Though he probably wouldn't admit it if pressed, his being near the scene station Anthony had chosen was not happenstance. If Anthony hadn't invited him to join the scene, he would have stayed anyway to watch. He was curious to see how their guest would handle herself under pressure.

He glanced at his watch to assess how much time he had. Mark had asked him if he'd join him and Jaime, his partner, for a scene later in the evening. Mark had come a long way since joining The Enclave the year before. He'd been something of an emotional wreck when he'd first arrived, still licking his wounds from the death of his rock band partner and the demise of the group.

To his credit, he'd thrown himself into the program, and his training as a Master had gone well. When Jaime had shown up a few months later, Mark had fallen fast and hard, though it had taken him a while to admit it.

Mason glanced over at the pair, who were still engaged in a scene at one of the spanking benches. From the look of things, he figured he had some time before they wanted him to join in. And, given Hannah's lack of experience, he assumed her first scene would be brief, the need for aftercare minimal.

While Mason would have preferred to be the one to give Hannah her virgin flogging, he made no protest when Anthony said he would assume that role. If things were going well, he might hand off the flogger to Mason.

Not that it was any hardship to scene with Lucia. Barely five feet and probably ninety pounds at best, Lucia was one of the strongest, bravest submissives Mason had ever met. She was also one of the only people he'd had in his kitchens who wasn't cowed by him as chef. Though always courteous and respectful, Lucia could definitely hold her own.

The men took their places behind the bound women. Gripping a handful of Lucia's silky hair, Mason yanked her head back and leaned over to murmur, "Are you ready to suffer for me, girl?"

"Yes, *please*, Sir," she replied softly.

Letting her go, he took a step back, readying his whipping arm. As he let the lash snap against her flesh with a satisfying crack, he stole a glance at the BDSM virgin. She startled at the crack of his whip, gasping as if she were the one on the receiving end. Her hands clenched into fists above her wrist cuffs. Mason wished he could see her face.

Aware he was neglecting his charge, he returned his focus to Lucia. He snapped the whip several times over her ass and thighs, leaving dark red lines on her coppery skin. Lucia's head fell back, her face a study in masochistic bliss.

When next Mason stole a glance at the pair beside him, he noted with approval that Hannah's ample bottom was reddening nicely. She seemed to be handling the flogging well as the leather rained over her flesh. Unlike silent, stoic Lucia, Hannah was panting, the sound decidedly sexual to Mason's ears. His cock stiffened at both the sight and sound. He had never favored gags for precisely that reason—he liked to hear them scream...

Suddenly eager for a turn, Mason caught Anthony's eye. He lifted his brows in question as he gestured with his chin toward Hannah.

Anthony agreed with a nod, and they exchanged impact toys as they shifted positions. Mason took his place behind Hannah, his cock stiffening with anticipation as he pulled back his arm.

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Hannah had the strangest sensation of both standing there, feeling the slap of the flogger against her skin, and of hovering just above, watching the action. She was beyond proud of herself. Here she was, naked, bound and submitting to an

actual flogging at the hands of an accomplished Dom. Not only was she enduring it, she was loving it.

She adored the thuddy sting of the flogger, just as she'd known she would. As Anthony slowly ratcheted the intensity level, the leather began to sting more. She tried to keep her feet flat and not twist away from the leather.

It's a good pain, she reminded herself. It was the erotic pain she'd always craved. Her entire being thrummed with lust, intertwined with a dark, delicious erotic helplessness. The intensity of her experience was heightened by her nudity and bondage.

After a moment, she realized the flogging had stopped. Was it over already? She certainly hoped not. She was just getting into her groove.

There was some movement behind her and she very nearly twisted back to see. But, mindful of Anthony's admonition not to turn her head, she remained dutifully in position.

The flogging resumed suddenly, with far more intensity than before. Unable to stop herself, she yelped as the stinging tips of the flogger snapped against the backs of her thighs. Before she could catch her breath, the flogger crashed against her ass, the force of the blow causing her to take an involuntary step forward. She would have stumbled but for the cuffs holding her in place. Sweat broke out on her upper lip and beneath her arms. She couldn't quite manage to fill her lungs.

As if sensing her distress, Anthony suddenly eased the intensity. He brushed her skin with the leather in long, sweeping strokes until her panic ebbed away. Relieved, Hannah inhaled deeply and released her breath in a long sigh. She settled into herself as he slowly but surely increased the intensity once more.

The leather continued its stinging dance over her flesh, but it was easier to take now. No, that wasn't exactly right. It was somehow more *necessary* now. She wasn't just enduring the lash or even enjoying it precisely. She *needed* it.

A dark pleasure sluiced through her as the flogger moved from her thighs to shoulder and back again. The heat on her skin penetrated through to her blood and her bones. She felt energized and determined. The sting was still there but it was now encased in velvet and satin, its touch both thrilling and soothing.

Hannah moaned without meaning to. Her nipples tingled and her clit throbbed. “More,” she heard herself beg. A gush of moisture had dampened her inner thighs. Her cunt pulsed with the need to be filled. Her skin was on fire from shoulder to thigh.

He obliged, flogging her with a steady, slapping motion that sent her into a kind of trance. At the same time, she felt wildly alive.

“Oh, god,” she cried, confused by the clashing sensations building inside her.

Suddenly, strong arms wrapped around her, pulling her back against a hard body. Before she quite realized what was happening, Master Anthony cupped her cunt, his fingers finding the hard nubbin of her clit.

Hannah’s brain stuttered, shock and guilt colliding head-on with wild, careening lust. She opened her mouth to explain, to protest. Instead, a groan was dragged from deep in her throat, guttural and raw. She forgot who she was, where she was or why she was there.

The pads of his fingers were sandpaper-rough against her sex as he held her in place against him. Every nerve in her body narrowed to his touch. She could feel his erection, hard against her back. Her ass stung from the flogging, the erotic pain only adding to her pleasure.

As he slid a finger into her sopping heat, her body shook with lust and need. Her heart leapt and tumbled in her chest as she panted, unable to fill her lungs. She was going to catch fire.

Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop...

“Oh,” she cried as a powerful orgasm crested and crashed through her, catching her off guard. The pleasure was blinding, made all the sweeter by the lingering sting from the lash.

Still his hand moved over and inside her, pulling a second and then a third climax from her body. When he finally let her go, she sagged against her cuffs. Her head felt heavy, and she let it loll forward as she drifted in a post-orgasmic daze...

Slowly, the world clicked back on. Hannah could still feel his hard body just behind her, though his hands had fallen away. As Hannah came back to herself, the shock of what had just happened—what she’d allowed to happen—slammed into her.

How did she feel about a man who was not Andy touching her so intimately? How did Lucia feel about her Master making another woman come right next to her?

Hannah dared a glance in Lucia’s direction. Anthony had released her wrists from their confines and was cradling her gently in his arms.

Hannah froze in confused consternation.

If Anthony was with Lucia, then who...?

“What the hell,” she gasped, twisting in her shackles as she tried to turn around.

“I was just going to ask you that,” Mason rumbled from behind her, a chuckle in his voice. “Don’t you know sub girls ask for permission before coming?”

Chapter 6

“What do you think?” Mason asked Anthony as he freed Hannah from the cuffs and brought her arms down to her sides. “Should we punish the newbie for coming without permission?”

He was going for casually breezy and was reasonably sure he’d pulled it off. He’d learned long ago while being berated and belittled by irate chefs during his early days in the kitchen how to hide his emotions. Never let them see you sweat—that was his motto.

But inside he felt anything but casual. He’d lost his cool, even if no one else knew it. He’d only meant to tease her a moment in order to add a dash more spice to such a tame scene. But her trembling, breathy reaction to his touch had shot directly to his cock, stiffening it to steel. When she’d come like that, with such passion and raw abandon, he’d felt powerful and in control.

Now Hannah pulled away from him, wrapping her arms protectively around herself. She was flushed, her hair tousled, her eyes bright.

“That’s not fair,” she cried, looking from Mason to Anthony. “I didn’t know...he wasn’t supposed to...I’ve never...” She trailed off, looking so genuinely perplexed and anxious that he almost felt sorry for her.

“He’s teasing,” Anthony said reassuringly, giving Mason a mildly disapproving glance. “There will be no punishment, don’t worry. If anything, Mason is the one in need of correction, as he went beyond the agreed parameters of the scene. But in fairness to him, here at The Enclave we Doms are rather spoiled. We’re not used to limiting ourselves.”

Anthony cocked an amused brow at Hannah. “Hopefully you didn’t suffer too much of a hardship, hmm?” His tone was playful, though Mason could hear the underlying concern in his voice. Remorse rushed through him. He’d overstepped and

he knew it. Hannah wasn't one of their trainees. He'd violated the parameters of the scene. He'd let his little head think for his big one, something that hadn't happened in a very long while.

He was about to open his mouth to apologize, but he forgot what he was going to say as he took in Hannah in all her blushing glory. There was a wild, sexy look in those silvery-blue eyes. And her nipples, he noted with approval, were fully erect. As plump and perfect as gumdrops, they were a dusky rose color. He wondered if her labia were a similarly pleasing pink. Unable to resist, he lifted his fingers to his nose to breathe in her intoxicating scent.

“Oh, I, yes, I mean no...” Hannah stammered helplessly.

Was this girl for real? Mason had only scened with seasoned submissives for so long that he barely remembered what it was like to scene with such a novice. Would she be up for a second scene—just the two of them?

“Hey, hope I'm not interrupting?”

They all turned to the sound of Mark's voice. He stood at the edge of the scene station, his eyes flicking appreciatively over Hannah's naked body. If Mason had owned her, he would have insisted she stand tall, arms at her side, or perhaps with her hands laced behind her neck. A slave was for admiring, after all.

He shook the absurd thought away. Hannah was no slave girl. Not by a long shot. To get anywhere near Enclave standards, she'd need at least a month of intensive training...

Okay, enough. He needed to get out of there before he said or did something stupid. Mark's appearance had not only reminded him of his earlier promise, but offered the perfect getaway.

“Oh, hey, Mark. Sorry. I didn't mean to keep you waiting.” Mason turned to Anthony and said apologetically, “I promised Mark to help out with a blood play scene with Jaime and Ellen. You got this under control?”

“Not a problem,” Anthony replied.

Mason cleared his throat as he turned back to Hannah. Hoping his erection was no longer obvious, he shoved his hands into his pants pockets and said with a grin, “You did pretty good, for a newbie. See you around.”

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See you around?

Seriously?

While she’d been in the throes of one of the most intense encounters of her life, he’d obviously been underwhelmed by the experience. With barely a wham-bam-thank-you-ma’am, he’d walked off without a backward glance. It was as if he flogged naked, bound women and then gave them mind-blowing orgasms every day of the week.

Duh.

That was probably exactly what he did.

Anthony placed a light hand on Hannah’s arm, his expression serious. “I apologize if Mason overstepped. Just so you know, I was watching, and if you’d exhibited even the slightest sign of distress, I would have intervened.”

Oh, great. So it wasn’t enough that she’d come like a crazy woman, but she’d had an audience as well. She looked away, absolutely refusing to allow herself to blush again.

In a gentle voice, Anthony continued, “I have to say, I’m impressed, Hannah. You comported yourself very well in a difficult situation. I’m a rather good judge of submissive character. I believe you have excellent potential if you choose to pursue a D/s connection.”

“Oh,” Hannah replied, pleased in spite of herself and the confusing situation. “Thank you. It was pretty wild. I wasn’t really expecting what happened.”

Talk about understatement. In spite of her shock at what Mason had done, the flogging had exceeded her wildest dreams. And his fingers...what the hell had he done to her? She’d never experienced anything like it. Her body still thrummed pleasantly with post-orgasmic satisfaction.

And she had done it! She had finally graduated from a kid with her face pressed to the window of the BDSM scene. She was a player now, a genuine participant. While the jury was out on her submissive nature or lack thereof, she was definitely an erotic masochist. She was born for this, and she wanted more.

Anthony moved behind her and ran a light finger over her back. “No marks to speak of. Just some redness that should resolve itself within the hour.” The skin on her back and ass felt tender but otherwise fine. “I don’t think you need much in the way of physical aftercare,” he continued, “but I’m sure you could use some downtime to process what you’ve experienced. After I see to Lucia, she’ll take you to the meditation room.”

Meditation room. Hannah instantly visualized people sitting in lotus positions on flat cushions, incense burning around them. Hopefully there were chairs and sofas there, as she’d had enough of kneeling on the ground, thank you.

Opening the cabinet door, Anthony removed a folded robe and held it out. “Would you like to put this on?” He flashed a smile. “Though, if you’d rather stay naked, that’s perfectly fine as well.”

Hannah practically grabbed the robe from his hands. “Thanks. This is perfect.” She wrapped the thick, knee-length silk robe around herself and pulled the sash tight at her waist.

Lucia had remained still and silent since the scene had ended. She stood beneath the bondage rack, her arms loosely at her sides. From the cracking, whistling sound of the lash, Lucia had taken quite a whipping, yet she appeared as calm and serene as ever.

Anthony bent down to a small cooler near the cabinet. Opening the lid, he took out two bottles of chilled water and handed one to Hannah before moving to Lucia. As he handed her a bottle, he gently stroked a tendril of hair behind her ear.

Hannah could almost see the love like an aura shimmering between them. For a moment, she missed Andy with such intensity that she nearly cried out. Fortunately, it quickly passed, leaving behind only wistful melancholy.

While Hannah sipped the chilled water, Anthony removed a tube of ointment from the cabinet and gestured for Lucia to turn. As she pivoted, Hannah drew in her breath.

Lucia's tan skin was crisscrossed with dark red welts that had to hurt like hell. Hannah shuddered in sympathy, though she was aware her sympathy was perhaps misplaced. Lucia was there because she wanted to be. She was clearly deeply masochistic and thrived under her Master's harsh lash.

Would Hannah ever have the nerve to receive an actual whipping or caning?

Lucia sighed softly as Anthony smoothed the ointment over her skin. When he was done, he said, "You two go relax. I need to have a quick word with Lawrence, and then I'll be along shortly with a snack."

"Yes, Sir," Lucia said softly. "Thank you, Sir."

"Yes, thank you," Hannah echoed.

The scene had taken more out of her than she'd realized and relaxing sounded like a wonderful idea. Dinner, which she'd been too nervous to do much more than peck at, had been hours ago, and a snack would be most appreciated. Hopefully something sweet and full of carbs.

As Anthony left them, Lucia bent and retrieved Hannah's small pile of clothing and her shoes. "Come," she said, smiling.

Chapter 7

Hannah followed Lucia through the dungeon. As they wove their way between scenes in full swing all around them, she scanned the room for Charlotte and Jim, but didn't see them. She decided not to worry about it. She would just go with the flow.

Leaving the dungeon, Lucia led Hannah down a hallway. She stopped at an ajar door and gestured for Hannah to enter. As they stepped inside, Lucia flicked on the lights. They were muted and recessed, casting a warm, peaceful glow about the small room. Three of the walls were painted a soft pale blue. The fourth wall appeared to be made of dark slate with copper inlays.

“Have a seat.” Lucia gestured toward an overstuffed sofa strewn with pillows. There was a small coffee table in front of it and pocket chairs on either side.

Hannah sank gratefully into the yielding cushions. As she did so, Lucia flipped another switch and a rippling sheet of water cascaded down the slate and copper wall.

“Wow,” Hannah exclaimed, delighted. “That’s so beautiful.”

Lucia settled onto the sofa beside her, snuggling into a corner. “Isn’t it great? I love this room. It’s the perfect place to just get away from everything. I spent a lot of time here when I first came to The Enclave to live.”

Hannah shifted so she could see both the lovely wall fountain and Lucia. She wanted to get Lucia’s take on the scene, but wasn’t quite ready to go there yet. Instead, she asked, “So, can you tell me more about how the training program works here? Charlotte once mentioned that you don’t allow the slave trainees to use a safeword. Doesn’t that go against the whole *safe, sane, consensual* mantra?”

“No, not really,” Lucia replied. “Not when you understand how it works. Precisely because we work intensively with our

trainees, they have no need of an arbitrary word that stops everything in its tracks. Before, after and sometimes during a particular training scenario, the trainee will have the opportunity to express themselves when it is appropriate.”

“That makes sense,” Hannah said.

Lucia nodded. “Submissives who sign slave training contracts with us aren’t engaging in scenes with built-in exit doors. When undergoing the sort of intense training we offer, having no safeword can be quite freeing. There is no decision to make, no guard to keep in place.”

Hannah wasn’t entirely sure how she felt about that. The Garden BDSM club used the universal safeword *red* for all its patrons, which made sense, like a red stop sign. Everything she’d gleaned from the internet and her limited experience in the BDSM scene told her a safeword was essential, no matter how well you knew and trusted your Dom.

She’d even picked out her own safeword, if and when she ever had the opportunity to be in a position to need one. She’d chosen a variation of red for herself—*rose*—which was also a silent nod to her pen name, Angelique Rose.

Not wanting to question the wisdom of her hosts, however, she didn’t bring up her concerns. Instead, she asked, “How long has this place been around?”

“Let’s see.” Lucia looked up at the ceiling as she pondered. “It’s been five years now. At first, it was just Anthony and Brandon with a concept. They both have pretty deep pockets. They spent the first year or so getting the place fitted out to accommodate a dungeon and slave quarters, along with suites on the second floor for permanent residents and occasional guests. Then they set about finding like-minded people who wanted to join them.”

“You mentioned earlier you and Anthony had both been widowed? If it’s not too personal, how long have the two of you been together, and how did you meet?”

Lucia smiled, though her eyes were suddenly sad. “I lost my husband a little over four years ago now. It was sudden—a

heart attack. Miguel owned a construction company and he'd actually done quite a bit of work for Anthony when they were remodeling this place. They were already friends because both were very active in the Asheville BDSM community."

Lucia shifted on the sofa, taking one of the pillows and hugging it to her chest. "We came as a couple to The Enclave for some of the training programs they ran during their first year. That's when I first met Master Anthony. When Miguel suddenly passed away, Master Anthony was a huge help to me in handling the estate. He also let me come to stay at The Enclave while I got myself sorted."

She shook her head, smiling. "I basically never left. I help Master Mason in the kitchen at mealtimes, and I also assist in training and grooming the slaves who come through the program. It wasn't until last year that Master Anthony and I finally admitted what everyone else around here apparently already knew." She gave a small laugh. "We were in love."

"Gosh, that's so romantic," Hannah said, wondering if she herself would ever fall in love again. She was about to ask more about The Enclave when Anthony appeared at the door. He carried a tray with two mugs and a plate of some kind of pastry.

"Peppermint tea and blueberry scones for my girls," he said, setting down the tray on the coffee table.

Hannah leaned forward, checking out the treats. "Those look yummy." Though scones were not Hannah's first choice for carb binging—usually too dry for her taste—these looked especially good.

"Mason is almost as good a baker as he is a chef, which is saying a lot," Anthony said with a smile. "These are Lucia's favorite." Leaning over, he gave Lucia a quick kiss and then looked at Hannah. "Charlotte and Jim are still playing in the dungeon. You'll be okay here for a while?"

"Sure, thanks," Hannah said, perfectly content to stay put.

After he'd gone, both women took a mug of steaming tea and a scone. Hannah bit into hers. Her eyes fluttered closed

with pleasure as the moist, lemony cake and fresh blueberries filled her mouth.

“Whoa,” she enthused between bites. “I’m not much of a scone person, but this is the best scone I’ve ever had in my life.”

“Right?” Lucia agreed. “I could live on these.”

They ate and sipped their tea in companionable silence. Then Lucia said, “Enough about The Enclave. Tell me about your experience tonight, Hannah. I got kind of, uh, distracted during the session so I wasn’t paying a whole lot of attention to your scene. Though,” she added with a smile and a lift of her brows, “I did notice you were having a pretty intense time there at the end.”

“Uh, yeah, you could say that,” Hannah said dryly, though she, too, was smiling.

“Was the flogging what you’d expected?”

“The flogging was great,” Hannah said, her skin tingling at the memory. “I absolutely loved that part. There was a while there where it was almost too much, and then it just...wasn’t anymore. It’s hard to explain.”

“No explanation necessary,” Lucia assured her. “We speak the same erotic language. From what I’ve learned from my own experience and in working with the submissives here, we don’t experience erotic pain the same way vanilla folks do. It hurts, sure. But it’s a welcome pain—a necessary pain. I think of it as a completion of a circuit. It’s a craving that’s sometimes indistinguishable from necessity.”

“Oh, I like that,” Hannah enthused, her writer’s brain engaged by Lucia’s evocative description. “Can I quote you on that?”

Lucia laughed, flushing ever so slightly. “Sure. You can put me in one of your books. I would love that. I’ve always thought The Enclave would make a great setting for an Angelique Rose novel. Of course, you’d have to change the location and the names of the characters. We value our privacy.”

“That would be amazing,” Hannah replied, instantly excited by the idea. In order to give it justice, she’d need to understand the ins and outs of the whole setup. She’d need to spend a significant amount of time there, observing, taking notes...participating?

While she did not see herself applying for a position as a slave in training, would they allow her to participate in a less intense fashion? Would she find the courage to experiment with more intensive forms of impact play?

Okay. Enough cart before the horse. She needed to stay where her feet were.

Lucia brought her back to the moment. “I didn’t know the guys were going to switch out. Were you okay with that? Were you okay with Master Mason giving you that orgasm?”

“I think so,” Hannah replied, still not entirely sure. “I definitely wasn’t expecting it. But maybe that was a good thing. I was just in the moment, you know? That flogger, the wrist cuffs, his hand between my legs.” Her entire body tingled at the memory. “That’s all there was. No past, no future. Just that moment in time.”

“You were in the zone,” Lucia said with a smile. “If it’s not too personal a question, was this your first time with another man since your husband passed away?”

Hannah chuckled as she glanced at the naked woman beside her. “I think we’ve moved way past ‘too personal.’ And yes, it was. You’re probably going to think I’m some kind of nun or freak or something, but Andy was the first, last and only guy I’ve ever been with.”

Lucia smiled. “Not at all. Miguel was my first and only until we became Master and slave. Once we got heavily into the lifestyle, Miguel sometimes gave me away to other Doms. It was scary at first, but I trusted Miguel and so I went along.”

“Really?” Hannah squeaked, shocked in spite of herself. “I can’t even imagine.”

Lucia shrugged. “You’d be amazed what you’re willing to do for your Master, when you’ve truly given yourself to him.

Once I got over the shyness and shock of being with another Dom, I was able to revel in the absolute *submission* of the situation. Master Miguel enjoyed sharing me with his like-minded friends from time to time. His wish was not only my command, but my deepest pleasure.”

“He wasn’t jealous?” Hannah asked, trying to imagine such a situation in her own marriage.

Lucia shook her head. “He had no reason to be, because he knew I belonged solely to him—my heart, body and soul were his to command. If he gave me away for an hour or a day, it was because it pleased him to do so and that, by extension, pleased me. I knew he would always keep me safe. I literally trusted him with my life.” She leaned toward Hannah with a conspiratorial smile. “But it was about more than just submission. It was also sexy, daring and thrilling in its own right. It was fun.”

Lucia’s expression was playful, even a touch sly. This was a strong woman, Hannah realized. Submission did not equal weakness—not by a long shot.

“Please excuse me for going on about myself for so long. Let’s talk more about your first scene here at The Enclave. Master Mason did step over the line, but was it okay for you? I don’t mean the physical pleasure—clearly that was good.” She flashed a grin. “But the whole idea of another man doing that—someone other than your husband, and in such a public venue.”

Hannah took another sip of tea as she gathered her thoughts. “I still haven’t entirely figured that part out yet,” she admitted. “It really caught me by surprise. I just assumed it was still Anthony behind me, which was weird in its own right. But then I wasn’t thinking about who was touching me. It was just so mind-blowingly intense, when coupled with the erotic pain of the flogging. I mean, I feel disloyal admitting this, much less saying it out loud, but I never had such a powerful orgasm with Andy.”

“I get it,” Lucia said, her eyes kind. “And you shouldn’t be hard on yourself because of that. You loved your husband—

it's clear on your face and in your eyes when you talk about him. The fact that you had a chance tonight to connect with that part of you that is hardwired for BDSM doesn't diminish the love the two of you shared. Nor should you let that love, or, more accurately, any guilty feelings you may have as a result, diminish the power of what happened tonight."

Hannah snorted. "Powerful for me, maybe. For Mason it was just another quicky scene he did as a favor to Anthony. He couldn't get out of there fast enough."

"I can see why you might feel that way. But if you knew Master Mason like I do, you'd be nothing short of amazed at what happened during that scene. It was a small miracle, in my opinion."

Hannah wrinkled her nose in confusion. "Huh? How so?"

"Well, to understand, you need to know a little of Mason's backstory. There was a girl here—a staff slave—named Ashley. She's a chef in her own right, and also a very hardcore masochist. Mason actually recruited her for a position at The Enclave. She'd been a sous chef in one of his restaurants and they were both active in the scene, and she was looking for a change."

Unable to resist, Hannah reached for another scene. "Go on," she encouraged, intrigued.

"So, she's a lot younger than Master Mason—she's probably twenty-six now, to his forty-five. Which isn't at all a big deal, especially not in the scene. Master Anthony is nineteen years older than I am. But anyway, Master Mason and Ashley got kind of involved. He never officially collared her, but they scened very intensively together, and he brought her up from the slave quarters to stay in his suite upstairs. So, that lasted for about a year. Then, about five months ago Ashley took a job outside of The Enclave compound. The irony is that Master Mason supported her branching out professionally. He even helped her find this position as a head chef at a new restaurant in Asheville. But I think he thought she would remain at The Enclave as his informal slave girl, and continue to live with us."

“And I’m guessing that wasn’t the case?” Hannah asked, eager to know more.

Lucia shook her head. “She still lived here for about a month after she took the new job, but she was working crazy hours. It can be a real slog up the mountain, especially at three in the morning. She came back less and less. Eventually she left for good. We’re still in touch, she and I. She’s living with a guy now who’s also into the scene—a guy her own age. When Master Mason found out, he pretended like it was no skin off his back. He just grumbled about the loss of his sous chef, though he’s made no effort yet to recruit someone new. But it was obvious to anyone who knows him well that he was pretty broken up about her leaving and hooking up with another guy.”

“That must have been hard for him,” Hannah said, suddenly feeling sorry for Mason, in spite of everything. “So,” she asked, curious about Lucia’s earlier words, “what was the miracle tonight? That he agreed to scene with such a total newbie?”

Lucia shook her head. “No. While it’s true he prefers to scene with very hardcore, trained masochists, I don’t think he minded stepping in. But it was the sex part, Hannah. When he made you come at the end like that. That was the miracle.”

Hannah blushed yet again—she’d blushed more in one night than in her entire life, or so it seemed. “I’m not sure what you mean?”

“The closest I’ve seen him involved in any sexual way with a sub since Ashley left is when he works with a slave on their cock worshiping skills. His touching you like that—not only touching you but bringing you to orgasm—that was a real surprise.”

“Hmm,” Hannah said, mulling over Lucia’s startling words. So, he wasn’t just doing his thing? There might have been something more personal in it? He’d sure seemed eager to get away the second it was over. “I don’t know what to think,” she admitted.

Lucia shrugged. “I don’t really know what to think, either, to tell you the truth. Master Mason is a fairly self-possessed guy. It’s hard to know what *he’s* really thinking or feeling sometimes. And I know him better than most since we work together.”

“There you are.” They looked toward the doorway. Charlotte stood there, dressed again, Jim looming behind her. “Anthony said we’d find you back here. Are you ready to go soon, Hannah? Jim and I are thinking of heading back down to Asheville.”

Hannah found she didn’t want to leave. Not yet. She was enjoying talking with Lucia, and still had a ton of questions about The Enclave. But obviously, they were her ride, and she didn’t want to be rude. Just as she was about to thank Lucia and get to her feet, Lucia spoke.

“What if you stayed the night, Hannah? We’re used to having overnight guests from time to time. The Enclave is somewhat off the beaten path and our dungeon parties can go quite late. There’s a guest room up on the second floor, or you could stay down in the slave quarters.”

“Stay the night?” Hannah echoed, glancing from Lucia to Charlotte.

“You do look awfully comfy in that robe, missy,” Charlotte said, flashing a grin. “We’re fine with that, aren’t we, Jim?”

“Of course,” he agreed.

“How would I get home?” Hannah asked, trying to keep the squealy girl excitement out of her voice.

“Mistress Aubrey and Gene could drop you off on their way to work in the morning. They keep Saturday morning hours at their clinic,” Lucia said. “If they can’t do it, I’m sure Hans could drive you down.”

“Sounds like a great idea,” Charlotte said. She winked at Hannah, adding, “Of course, I’ll expect a full report.”

Chapter 8

“So, where would you rather sleep tonight? The slave quarters or upstairs?”

Hannah instantly visualized monkish cells with straw pallets, chains and manacles dangling from stone walls. While she didn't especially want to sleep in such accommodations, she was wildly curious to see them.

“I'd love a tour, if that's possible. Then I'll decide?”

“Sure,” Lucia agreed. “Let's go find Master Anthony first.” She gave a sheepish smile. “I should have checked with him before extending the invitation. But he won't mind.”

They found Anthony in the living room. He was seated on a sofa beside Lawrence. At first, Hannah thought they were alone but as she entered the room just behind Lucia. But as they drew closer, she saw two naked women kneeling on the ground. One had her head in Anthony's crotch, the other in Lawrence's. The girls' heads were bobbing in such a way it was clear what they were doing.

In spite of the fact that Hannah had written similar scenes in her novels, Hannah was shocked at the scene. While she understood intellectually that this sort of thing must happen all the time at The Enclave, she wondered how Lucia felt about this.

It had to be weird to watch your partner being pleased by another woman, even if it was part of their training. But, true to form, Lucia didn't seem the least bit perturbed. She appeared perfectly calm, even content as she came into the room.

Hannah followed, trying to get her face under control. As they got closer, she recognized the naked woman between Anthony's legs. It was Danielle, Lawrence's slave girl.

The other girl was also naked. She had short spiky hair the color of cotton candy. A tattoo of a dove was inked on her

upper back, an olive branch in its mouth. A leash hung down her back, attached to the black slave collar around her neck. Hannah hadn't met this girl during her rounds with Marjorie—she would have remembered. Was this the third trainee, Lia?

Unlike Danielle, whose hands were free and at present appeared to be involved in her frenzied activity between Anthony's legs, the other girl's wrists were bound behind her back with black leather cuffs that had been clipped together. Her hands, Hannah observed, were clenched into fists.

Anthony had his head back, his eyes closed in apparent bliss. Lawrence was watching the girl between his knees, his gaze hard. He had his hand on the back of her head. As Lucia and Hannah came closer, Hannah could hear gagging sounds from the girl as he held her in place.

Lucia placed her hand lightly on Hannah's arm. She touched her lips with her index finger to indicate they should be quiet. With her chin, she gestured toward some nearby floor cushions. Her face calm and serene, Lucia lowered herself effortlessly to one of the cushions.

This kneeling shit needed to stop. Either that or she needed to sign up for a yoga class, pronto. Still, when in Rome... Lifting the hem of the robe so she wouldn't get caught in it, Hannah got down on her knees.

In that instant, Anthony's lips parted as a shudder moved through his body. A moment later, he patted the top of Danielle's head. The girl leaned back on her haunches, her back straight.

Anthony opened his eyes, his gaze fixing on Lucia and Hannah as he tucked himself back into his pants. Without the slightest hint of self-consciousness or guilt, he smiled.

Lawrence, meanwhile, had pushed the girl in front of him from his crotch. Fisting his erect, spit-shiny cock, he aimed it at the poor girl's face. With a strangled cry, he ejaculated over her face and breasts.

Then he leaned back against the couch cushions, cock still in his hand, a smug, satisfied look on his face. "Lick Lia

clean,” he ordered Danielle, confirming Hannah’s guess as to the identity of the girl.

It was like a porn movie happening in real life. Lia shifted on her knees to face Danielle. Hannah could see the ejaculate dripping on her cheeks and small breasts. Danielle appeared perfectly comfortable dipping her head to lick her Master’s spunk from the other girl’s skin. Lia, however, looked positively mutinous.

Hannah was startled by the girl’s expression, which struck her as anything but submissive. Was that why she’d been punished earlier? What was this girl’s story? She would love to find out.

Anthony got to his feet and ambled over to Lucia and Hannah. “Hello, girls. Did you enjoy your snack?” He lightly tapped Lucia’s shoulder.

This was apparently a cue for Lucia to stand. “Yes, Sir,” she said, rising gracefully to her feet. “Thank you, Sir.”

Hannah followed suit, glad to get off her knees. She pulled her robe tighter as she glanced toward the couch where Lawrence and the two slave girls had remained. Danielle was now in his lap, Lia being used as his footrest.

“I invited Hannah to stay the night,” Lucia said. “I know I should have checked with you first, Sir. Please excuse me.”

“No problem,” Anthony replied easily. He smiled at Hannah. “You’re welcome to stay the night, or as long as you like. We’re delighted to have you.”

“Thank you,” Hannah replied gratefully, glad Lucia wasn’t in any kind of trouble.

“I’m going to give Hannah a tour of the slave quarters. If she’s comfortable, she’ll stay in one of the spare rooms tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Anthony agreed. To Hannah, he said, “If you decide to stay for more than a night, we can discuss what your role here might be.”

“My role?” she blurted, immediately alarmed and intrigued in equal measure.

“Guest, slave trainee, visiting author doing research, all of the above?” he said with an arched brow.

“Oh, um,” she hedged, not quite sure how to respond.

Anthony chuckled. “You don’t need to decide now. As I say, we can discuss all that tomorrow. No pressure. Just know you’re welcome.”

“Thank you, Anthony,” Hannah said, stunned and delighted to be granted *carte blanche* to this secluded BDSM haven.

As Lucia led her from the room, she pondered Anthony’s startling offer. Of course, she immediately dismissed the idea of signing up as a slave trainee. Even if she’d had a desire to submit to that degree, no way in hell would she be willing to parade around naked all day and night, forced to kneel constantly and suck random men’s cocks. Not to mention serving as furniture and being chained to her bed when she misbehaved.

Not happening.

End of discussion.

But she was already sold on the idea of staying at The Enclave for a few days or maybe longer. What an amazing opportunity to learn firsthand how such a community actually worked, not just in her imagination, but in real life.

Plus, she really liked Lucia and Anthony. They’d accepted her on her terms without making her feel like the wide-eyed wannabe she was. The couple was also a welcome reminder that there was the possibility of finding love again someday. While she wasn’t ready to leap into any kind of serious relationship, the possibility of happiness existed.

The real question was to what extent she wanted to become involved in the BDSM aspects of the community. After a lifetime of longing, was she ready to dive in headfirst? Or would she be better suited to baby steps? What was

Anthony offering exactly? She would need to take him up on that promised discussion.

Then there was Mason. Not that she necessarily wanted to scene with him again. But she was curious about what made a guy like that tick. She could volunteer to help out in the kitchen to conduct her sleuthing mission. After all, she had some culinary training.

It was all too much to think about. A good night's sleep was what she needed to clear her muddled head.

Lucia led her to a door near the kitchen that opened to a set of stairs. They walked down the narrow concrete steps in single file. Hannah was pleasantly surprised when they got to the bottom. The comfortable space was set up like a cozy living room, with thick carpeting on the floor and groupings of chairs and sofas.

“Wow, this is really nice,” Hannah said.

“It’s a good place to just hang out and chat during down time in a Dom-free environment,” Lucia said with a grin. “We even have our own little kitchen down here if you want a snack or a cup of tea.” She waved toward a stainless steel cabinet with a built-in sink and a small microwave, a mini fridge and shelves beneath it. “Come this way and I’ll show you the bedrooms.”

Hannah followed Lucia down a hallway. She gestured to the left and right as they moved past doorless rooms, none of them presently occupied. “We’ve got space for eight slaves down here. We’ve never had more than four at any one time. But I do know Master Anthony and Master Brandon have been talking about offering some new programs that would utilize the space more. Meanwhile, right now it’s just Michael, Ellen and Lia.”

“What’s the story with Lia?” she couldn’t resist asking.

Lucia sighed. “She’s our newest charge. And our most difficult one. I personally believe there’s a sub hiding behind her tough-girl bravado. Hopefully she can get with the program before they throw her out.”

“You can get thrown out?” Hannah asked, startled.

“Sure. Slave training here is serious business. Most applicants are very sincere in their desire to become the best erotic slave they can be. Even so, they sometimes enter the program with unrealistic expectations about what it’s going to be like. It’s hard work, even if you’re hardwired to submit. The training process can be very intense. Hopefully, she’ll find her groove.”

Hannah wanted to ask more, but decided not to press. Lucia probably had better things to do than answer her thousands of questions. She’d been incredibly patient and kind as it was.

Lucia stopped at one of the rooms and gestured for Hannah to enter. “This is where you’ll sleep tonight, if you decide to stay down here. We’ve got extra toiletries in the bathroom you can use.” She grinned, adding, “We don’t have spare clothing, since we slaves don’t generally wear much.” She glanced down at her own naked body to make her point.

“I’m not sure I’d have the nerve to walk around naked all the time,” Hannah observed. In fact, she *was* sure—sure that she had neither the nerve nor the inclination.

Lucia shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. Especially if you’ve been involved in BDSM for a long time, as I have. Even if you’re not used to it at first, you adapt pretty quickly because it’s how we do things here. Slaves are to be fully accessible to all Doms who live here, as well as to their guests. Clothing can get in the way of that.” She flashed a grin. “That said, we do wear things like aprons in the kitchen, and whatever sexy outfits it might please our Masters for us to wear during scenes. But in general, slaves at The Enclave remain naked as a symbol of our subservience to our Masters.” Her hand went to her slave collar. “Except for these, of course.”

Hannah touched her own throat, wondering what it would be like to always wear a leather reminder of ownership around her neck. Not that she planned to find out, but it did look rather sexy.

She took stock of the small bedroom. Most of the space was taken up by a double bed set in a wooden frame. It was made up with white sheets and a peach-colored down quilt, along with several plump pillows. A small bureau sat nearby. There was no window, but the room was softly lit with indirect lighting similar to that in the meditation room. Definitely no monk's pallet here.

It was then she noticed the long chain hanging from an eyebolt embedded in the wall above the bed. A pair of wrist cuffs were attached at the end of the chain. And at the bottom of the bed she noticed a metal bar with ankle cuffs.

"Whoa," she said, taking a step back. "What're those for?" Realizing it was a dumb question, she amended, "I mean, I'm not expected to sleep in chains down here, am I?"

The idea was both alarming and wildly sexy. Imagine, chained to your bed, helpless and at the mercy of the masterful, sexy Dom who came to claim you...

"No, no," Lucia said quickly. "The chains are only for slaves during the initial stages of their training. It helps get them more quickly into a submissive mindset."

Hannah's more practical nature took over. "Isn't that potentially dangerous? I mean, what if there's a fire or something and they're chained to their beds?"

"They can get out of the cuffs themselves," Lucia replied. "The chains are more symbolic than actually confining. Though they better not try it without a very good reason," she added with a grin. She pointed upward toward a small camera mounted in a corner, its red light blinking. "Because someone might be watching."

Hannah frowned. "So, someone might be watching me tonight?" She wasn't sure she liked that idea.

Lucia shook her head. "Don't worry. The only time the slaves are watched is if they're being punished or controlled in some way that requires supervision. Safety is really the main concern."

That made sense to Hannah, and she nodded, relieved no one would be checking in on her. “Okay,” she agreed, suddenly overcome with exhaustion. “I’m fine staying down here for the night. That bed is calling my name.”

“Great. Let me just show you the bathroom and get you situated.”

The end of the hallway opened up into a large dormitory-type bathroom. There were four sinks set up along one wall and a large bathtub in one corner of the room. Like the bedrooms, the shower stalls were doorless, as were the toilet stalls. Hannah wasn’t crazy about that particular setup, but understood the approach as in keeping with the “fully accessible” philosophy of slave training.

Lucia moved toward the sinks and opened a drawer. She took out a toothbrush still in its packaging, along with a small tube of toothpaste and some face wash. Neatly folded towels of various sizes were stacked beside each sink. “There’s shampoo and conditioner in each shower stall, and blow-dryers and all kinds of makeup and hair products in the cabinets. I’ll have one of the trainees bring down your clothing and your purse. In the morning, we can figure out what’s what.”

She gave Hannah a sudden, impulsive hug. “I’m glad you’re here, Hannah.”

“Me, too,” Hannah replied, hugging her back.

Chapter 9

Mason sat at the small wooden table in the kitchen. He was on his third mug of coffee as he thumbed through his binder of recipes. Jaime, Mark's slave girl, worked in The Enclave main office, where she handled the household accounts and financial arrangements for various Enclave events and programs. She suggested that she could type up his recipes for him so he could easily access them via an iPad.

Obviously, he'd dismissed the idea out of hand. Each of his recipes was handwritten, with notes, variations and observations in the margins. These were time-tested recipes, some based on ones he'd learned over the years from other chefs, others his own original creations. Many of the pages were stained with grease splotches, dried bits of food and even the occasional smear of dried blood from the slip of a paring knife. The sheets had character and charm, all of which would be lost if consigned to the digital pages of a tablet.

He flipped through the binder, pondering what he should make for tonight's dinner and what he would need to get from the butcher and farmers' markets later that afternoon. He also needed to stop by one of his restaurants down in Asheville to see how things were going with the new chef he'd hired the month before.

But his mind kept drifting, snagging on the woman Lucia had informed him earlier this morning had stayed the night down in the slave quarters.

He hadn't seen her again over the course of the evening. Not that he'd sought her out. What would have been the point? Still, he'd been unable to put her completely out of his mind.

He glanced at the large wall clock above the double ovens. It was already after nine. Everyone who had wanted breakfast had already come and gone. Maybe Hannah wasn't a breakfast person. Or maybe she was sleeping in.

What was his problem? What did he care if she was a breakfast person or a late sleeper? She was just an overnight guest, a tag-along with Anthony's club manager, Charlotte. She wasn't even into the lifestyle, not in any serious way. She'd probably just been slumming—gathering material for her novels.

And if he'd learned one thing in his life, it was not to get involved with a BDSM wannabe, however sincere they might be in their curiosity. He was way too old for that shit. If and when he took another slave girl, she would be fully trained, deeply masochistic and one-hundred-percent submissive.

Not that he was interested in getting involved with anyone. He was still licking his wounds from Ashley's defection. It was his own damn fault. He'd been the one to encourage her to spread her culinary wings. He couldn't really blame her for leaving him behind. She had her whole life ahead of her. He'd been the idiot—falling for a girl nearly half his age.

He looked up as Lucia pushed through the swinging doors, Hannah just behind her. "...already left for work, but Hans can take you down after you get a bite to eat," Lucia was saying.

As the two women came into the kitchen, Lucia said, "Excuse me, Sir. I hope we're not disturbing you."

"No, no. You're fine."

He looked past Lucia to Hannah. She was in the same outfit she'd worn the night before and he liked the way it hugged her curves. Her dark hair was pulled back with some kind of barrette, no discernible makeup on her pretty face.

"Morning," he said.

A faint wash of pink bloomed on her cheeks. "Morning," she replied.

What was that blush about? Was she recalling that she'd been bare-ass naked, his fingers buried in her cunt only twelve hours ago? Maybe she remembered how she'd come so hard that she'd nearly passed out. He rubbed the fingers of his right hand together as he recalled the silky, wet slick of her cunt beneath them.

The memory was making his dick hard. He looked down at his binder as he got himself back under control. Without looking up, he said, “There’s still a little of the casserole from this morning, plus the usual fruit, yogurt, etcetera. I just made another pot of coffee.”

“Please excuse me, Master Mason,” Lucia said with her usual deferential sweetness. “I have positions training duty and I’m already a little late. Hans will be running Hannah back down to Asheville but he’s not heading out for another twenty minutes or so. If you could...?”

“You’re clearly busy,” Hannah interjected. “I’ll just grab a mug of coffee and sit on the veranda until Hans is ready.”

Mason jerked up his head, startled to realize he did not want her to leave. Not yet. “It’s fine,” he interrupted, getting to his feet. “You can go on, Lucia. I’ve got it under control.”

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Hannah experienced kitchen envy as she took in the top-of-the-line stainless steel appliances, granite-topped counters and copper pots and pans, everything gleaming and in its place.

As Lucia vanished through the swinging doors, Hannah faced Mason, trying not to feel self-conscious in her tight-fitting silk and leather. Hey, at least she wasn’t naked.

“Look, it’s really fine,” she reiterated, not sure she was ready to be alone with Mason anyway. She’d had some very intense dreams about him the night before, and had woken up with her hand between her legs, her clit throbbing. She’d been unable to get back to sleep until she’d finished what had been started in her sex-drenched dreams. The resulting orgasm had been highly unsatisfactory, especially when compared to what he’d done so effortlessly only hours before.

The memory sent another jolt of desire to her sex. Refusing to allow herself to blush, she said, “Seriously, I don’t want to interrupt whatever you’re doing there. I’ll just get a cup of coffee and get out of your hair.”

Mason brought his hand to his shaved head and laughed. “Too late. Now sit down and be quiet, girl. You’re not interrupting anything.”

“Yes, *Sir*,” she retorted with an answering grin, feeling a little more at ease.

“That’s better,” he said, lumbering toward the industrial size coffeemaker. “How do you take your coffee?”

“A spoonful of sugar, thanks.”

As Mason handed her the mug, his calloused fingers brushed hers. Her breath caught in her throat at his touch, her skin tingling as if electricity had passed between them. She glanced up at him. Had he felt it too?

A slow, knowing smile moved over his rugged face. He stared down at her, those clear gray-green eyes capturing hers. “Hungry?”

Hungry for more of what I gave you last night?

Her brain stuttered over the unspoken question, heat rushing into her face as her treacherous nipples sprang to attention.

“Huh?” she asked stupidly.

Furrowing his brows, he gave her a quizzical look. “Food. Breakfast.”

“Oh,” she blurted, silently cursing herself as she struggled to shift gears. “I don’t want to put you to any trouble.”

“It’s no trouble.” Turning from her, he went to the ovens and opened the top one. Without using mitts, he pulled out a casserole dish. A delicious aroma of caramelized sugar, butter and banana wafted through the room.

“What *is* that?” Hannah’s mouth watered, her stomach rumbling.

“It’s a crème brûlée banana French toast casserole.” He tilted it slightly so she could see what remained of the contents. “Want some?”

“God yes,” she enthused. Then, aware she must sound like a greedy piglet, she amended, “Just a small piece.”

As he prepared her a plate, she took a sip of the coffee. It was hot and strong, just like she liked it. She took several more fortifying gulps, the caffeine clearing her mind.

Whatever had happened last night had obviously impacted her far more than it had him. Which made perfect sense. He lived this intensive BDSM lifestyle, 24/7. He had slave girls all around him, constantly at his beck and call. What had felt so momentous to her had probably barely registered with him.

She glanced at the binder he’d left on the table, glad for the distraction. It contained recipes, the pages as annotated and stained as her own binder at home. She resisted the urge to pull it toward her, aware a chef might not appreciate someone nosing in his proprietary recipes.

He came to the table with a tray that contained silverware, a cloth napkin and an absurdly huge portion of the French toast on a plate, along with a small bowl of fresh raspberries and a little jug of maple syrup.

As he set the food in front of her, Hannah exclaimed, “Oh, that’s way too much. I’ll never be able to eat all of that.”

Mason shrugged. “Just eat what you want.”

After placing her napkin in her lap, she ate a few of the raspberries, which were perfectly sweet and ripe. Saliva pooling in her mouth, Hannah cut a forkful of the banana French toast and brought it to her lips. She couldn’t quite stifle her moan of pleasure.

“Oh, my god,” she breathed once she’d swallowed. “This is absolutely heavenly.” She took another bite, closing her eyes as she parsed the flavors. “Is that a hint of nutmeg I taste?”

Mason lifted his eyebrows. “It is. You’ve got a keen palate.”

Should she tell him about her culinary career, as brief as it was, or the many awards she’d garnered over the years in local bakeoff competitions? No, it might sound like she was bragging or, worse, trying to put herself on a par with him.

Instead, she offered, “I love to cook. I especially enjoy baking.”

He gave a brief nod, clearly unimpressed. Slightly chagrined, she focused on her meal. She hadn’t been kidding. This decadent dish really was spectacular. She couldn’t stop eating it. She made something similar, but it was denser and less nuanced. She would love to get her hands on the recipe but didn’t have the nerve to ask.

She glanced up at Mason as she reached for her coffee. His hands wrapped around his mug, he was watching her with an amused expression. “You going to lick the plate clean?”

Abashed, Hannah realized she’d just inhaled every single bit of the huge portion. She laughed self-consciously. “What can I say? It was that good.”

As he continued to regard her, his eyelids hooded, his mouth quirking into a sexy half smile. “I might actually enjoy that,” he said in a slow, teasing voice. “Watching you lick the plate clean. Of course, you’d need to be on your knees, hands behind your back.”

Heat rushed again into Hannah’s face, her hand fluttering to her mouth. Was he flirting with her? Or was he challenging her? Was she up to that challenge?

“Oh, um...” she stammered, the details of last night’s scene once more front and center in her mind’s eye, which only made her blush more. She reached for her mug to hide her face. Her hand, she was alarmed to observe, was trembling.

For crying out loud. What was her problem? She was acting like a teenager. Did she actually have a *crush* on this entitled, tattooed chef? Maybe this whole Enclave idea was more than she was ready to handle at this point. She’d been a recluse for the better part of a year. Talk about going from zero to a hundred.

“Relax,” he said, grinning. “I know you were just along for the ride last night.” He cocked a brow. “That said, your performance was quite impressive, even if you did fail to ask

for permission.” He brought his fingers to his nose and made a show of inhaling with exaggerated pleasure, a smirk on his face.

Hannah pushed back abruptly from the table. The bastard was making fun of her. She was nothing more than a joke to him. She blinked back hot tears of embarrassment, drawing on her fury instead.

“I’m glad I was such a source of amusement for you,” she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Getting to her feet, she dropped her napkin on her embarrassingly clean plate. He started to speak, but she cut him off.

“Thanks for the breakfast. See you around.”

Chapter 10

Hannah blew a tendril of hair out of her eyes, her arms up to the elbows in sudsy water. She was still ruminating on the events of the night before and that morning as she washed dishes. She'd arrived home feeling edgy, excited, irritated, angry, confused and aroused in equal measure.

In a word, she was a mess.

Unfortunately, no housekeeping fairies had arrived during her overnight absence, so she decided to put her angst to work on some serious deep cleaning. Two hours later, the bathrooms were scrubbed and sparkling, the sheets changed, the rugs vacuumed, the furniture dusted, the floors mopped. She'd saved the dishes for last, after which she planned to treat herself to her favorite comfort food—a grilled cheese sandwich on sourdough accompanied by a cup of her homemade tomato soup.

She recognized with the passage of a little time that she'd probably overreacted to Mason's glib remarks. At least her timing had been good when she'd made her dramatic exit from his kitchen. Just as she'd pushed her way through the swinging doors, Hans had appeared, her coat in his hands, politely asking if she was ready to depart. Other than a bit of polite small talk, the young man had been mostly silent on the drive down, which had suited her at the time, as she was still riled up by what had occurred.

Calmer now, she tried to put things into perspective—to see them from Mason's point of view. He'd been invited to participate in what was surely to his mind an extremely tame scene with a woman he regarded as something of an interloper. He'd made that much clear.

“You were just along for the ride.”

No doubt, he was so used to the highly trained slave girls at The Enclave that he'd thought nothing of flogging her to a frenzy and then making her come, just because he could.

When it was done, so was he—on to the next scene, the *real* scene he'd been waiting for. She was the one who had made too much of it all, reliving the events in exhaustive detail as she lay in the unfamiliar bed the night before, that camera in the corner blinking at her.

Now, as she set the dishes in the rack to dry, she fervently wished she'd handled things differently this morning in his kitchen. When Mason had quipped about putting her on her knees to lick the plate clean, she should have come up with a clever, sassy retort, instead of blushing beet red and stammering like an idiot. If only real life was like writing, and you could highlight and delete the sections that just didn't work.

Her phone dinged on the counter. Reaching for the dish towel, she dried her hands and grabbed it. It was a text from Charlotte.

Hey! Where's my full report? Are you home or still up at The Enclave?

Hannah experienced a pang of guilt. Caught up in her own drama, she'd completely forgotten to text Charlotte.

I'm home. Sorry I didn't text sooner. I was seized with the urge to do some deep cleaning. That only happens once every decade or so, so I went with it. Where are you? How are your piercings?

Piercings are good! I'm over at The Garden with Anthony. We're expecting a delivery of some new equipment for the club. While he's down here, he would like to talk to you about whatever y'all discussed last night. Can you come over to the club?

A shiver of excitement fizzed through Hannah. Anthony must have been serious when he'd said there might be a role for her at The Enclave. Did she even want to go back there after flouncing out of Mason's kitchen?

Who was she kidding? Wild horses wouldn't keep her away, Mason or no. She thumbed back:

Sure, yes! I can be there in a half hour or so. Does that work?

Perfect. See you then. ☺

Heart racing with excitement, Hannah hurried into her now sparkling bathroom for a quick shower. She dressed in a black knit top over blue jeans, applied a bit of makeup and fooled with her hair for a few minutes. The shirt was lower cut than she usually wore, and with the new push-up bra beneath it, she was revealing quite a bit more cleavage than she was used to. She stood in front of her full-length mirror for a while, trying to decide if her outfit was too sexy for the middle of the day.

“Maybe to go grocery shopping,” she said aloud. “But for a meeting with a Master at a BDSM club, I’d say it’s about right.” She squinted at her image. “But it needs...something.” All at once, she knew exactly what was missing.

She rummaged in her jewelry drawer and finally found the old leather choker necklace Andy had given her back in their college days. It was a simple string of leather with a pearl knotted at the center. While it wasn’t a collar, it gave the suggestion of one.

Satisfied with her appearance, she hurried to the kitchen, grabbed her keys from the hook by the door that led into the garage and climbed into her trusty old Subaru.

The Garden was located in downtown Asheville near the cross streets of Patton Avenue and Grove Street. Unlike the more flamboyant gay bars surrounding it, The Garden was housed in a nondescript brick building, the unmarked entrance accessible through the alley in the back. It was a word-of-mouth place, but word had definitely gotten out, as it was always packed whenever Hannah had been there.

When she tried the handle of the door, she found it locked. She rang the buzzer beside it and took a step back as she waited. A moment later, she heard the sound of a deadbolt turning. The door opened and Charlotte stood there. She wore black leggings and a tight-fitting red T-shirt that had the word *property* stamped on it. If you looked carefully, you could just

see the outline of her nipple jewelry. The red slave collar with the heart-shaped silver padlock was around her neck.

“There you are,” Charlotte said, opening her arms. Hannah stepped into them and they embraced briefly. As they parted, Charlotte added, “Your timing is perfect. The delivery guy just left.” Taking a step back, she regarded Hannah with a raised brow. “I’m liking this new look. It’s downright sexy. And what is this?” She touched the leather and pearl choker at Hannah’s neck. “Is that a collar I see?”

Mildly embarrassed but also pleased, Hannah admitted, “Not really. It’s just an old choker Andy gave me a hundred years ago.”

“Well, it suits you,” Charlotte said, her own hand going to the genuine slave collar around her neck. “Maybe one day you’ll wear something as lovely as this, gifted to you by your true Master.” She held up a hand to forestall Hannah’s inevitable protest. “I know you don’t think you’re slave material, but never say never, Hannah. Because you just never know.”

Only the day before, Hannah would have dismissed Charlotte’s words out of hand. But this morning, she felt differently. While she sincerely doubted she would ever embrace D/s as a 24/7 lifestyle, last night had opened her eyes, at least, to the possibilities.

As Charlotte ushered Hannah inside the club, she said, “You must have made quite an impression last night, girlfriend. Anthony told me of his invitation to you to spend a little time up at The Enclave. You totally *have* to do it. You know that, right?”

“Um,” Hannah hedged. “I should probably wait and see what the terms are?”

Charlotte chuckled. “Okay, okay. For me, it would be a no-brainer. I keep forgetting how new you are to all this.” She placed a light hand on Hannah’s shoulder. “Listen, I have to handle some club business on my laptop, but it shouldn’t take too long. After you talk to Anthony, let’s grab a quick bite? I

want to know every detail about what happened last night and whatever y'all talk about this morning. Deal?"

"Deal," Hannah replied with a grin.

"Come on back. I'll let Anthony know you're here."

Hannah had never been in the club except at night when it was dimly lit and filled with people. The place looked and felt different in the daylight. Windows that were covered with black blinds at night were now open. There was none of the edgy, breathy excitement, no sounds of whips snapping and subs moaning, no crush of people clad in leather and chains, gear bags slung over their shoulders, craving adventure. Even so, just being in the presence of all the sexy bondage, torture and restraint devices caused her panties to moisten, her nipples to stiffen.

As she followed Charlotte toward the back of the dungeon, she noticed a bondage rack identical to the one at The Enclave where she'd experienced her virgin BDSM scene. Her imagination immediately placed her under the rack, arms raised, wrists cuffed, Mason standing behind her. The memory awakened a number of conflicting feelings, none of which she had time to ponder just then.

Charlotte lifted the red satin drape that hung over the pocket door that led to Anthony's office. She tapped lightly on the door. "Hannah's here, if you're ready for her."

A moment later, Anthony emerged from his office. He looked elegant, as always, today dressed in dark gray slacks and a white linen shirt.

"So nice to see you again," he said, taking both Hannah's hands in his as he had done the night before. "Please come into my office. We have much to discuss."

Hannah glanced back at Charlotte, who gave her a thumbs up. Stomach fluttering with nerves, she followed Anthony across the threshold. The space was set up more like a sitting room than an office, with comfortable-looking caramel-colored leather chairs and a matching sofa dominating the

space. There was a small desk with a marble top in the corner, atop which sat an open laptop.

“Please, have a seat,” Anthony said. “We have soft drinks, water and white wine.” He waved toward a small refrigerator with a glass front. “Would you like something?”

“Water would be good,” Hannah replied, her mouth suddenly dry.

She perched on one of the chairs, as nervous as if she were at a job interview. Anthony handed her a bottle of water and sat in the chair catty-corner from hers.

They exchanged a bit of small talk, during which Hannah relaxed somewhat. She set the bottle of water on the small table beside her chair and sank back into its comfortable cushions.

“So,” he said, leaning back and crossing his legs. “Now that you’ve had a little time to process your feelings, are you still interested in returning to The Enclave?”

Hannah instantly thought about the way she’d flounced out of Mason’s kitchen. It would be embarrassing to see him again. On the other hand, no way was she going to blow an amazing opportunity because she’d overreacted to the cocky chef’s teasing.

“Yes,” she said to Anthony, putting Mason firmly out of her mind. “I’m very interested. I would like to learn more about how the slave training program operates. And I’m very curious about the day-to-day dynamics of a 24/7 BDSM community. With your permission, I’d love to write an Angelique Rose series about The Enclave—of course changing the names and location to protect your privacy.”

“I’m sure Lucia and the other girls would love that,” Anthony said. “And, yes, as long as I am afforded the right to review your manuscript to assure there’s nothing there that might compromise our privacy, I am amenable to your presence as a writer-in-residence.”

Writer-in-residence. That had a very nice ring to it, and Hannah smiled. “That would be wonderful. I think I’m finally

ready to get back to work. I haven't been able to write a word since..." She hesitated, but then remembered Anthony had lost his wife as well. "Since my husband passed away."

Anthony nodded soberly. "I understand. Grieving can feel so large that it crowds out everything else. Loss can feel so all-consuming that you doubt you'll ever recover."

His sad tone and the flash of pain that momentarily lit his features made it clear to Hannah he was talking about himself.

He blinked suddenly, the pain replaced by a sympathetic smile. "I'm glad you're finding yourself able to return to the business of living. And I'm glad you found the courage to scene with us, Hannah. That was an act of bravery. Don't think I'm not aware of that."

Hannah smiled, both pleased by his praise and a little embarrassed. "I guess it was pretty obvious, huh? I might as well have been wearing a sign on my back: clueless newbie."

"Not at all," Anthony said, smiling back. "Lack of experience is not the same as cluelessness. You handled yourself exceptionally well, especially when things took an unexpected turn."

Hannah barked a nervous laugh. "Unexpected is one way to describe it." Heat rushed into her cheeks as she recalled Mason's large hand between her legs, his erection hard against her back as he brought her to the most powerful orgasm of her life.

Anthony frowned. "Mason was out of line last night. I spoke to him just before I came down the mountain. He hadn't realized quite how inexperienced you were."

Oh, great. Mason got yelled at because of her. No doubt it further confirmed his belief she was an imposter wannabe, hanging on the edges of the scene like some kind of groupie. She didn't know how to respond directly to what Anthony had just said, so she sidestepped it.

"So, what would it entail, exactly? Me coming to The Enclave as a writer-in-residence?" She definitely liked the sound of that.

“Well, to tell you the truth, Hannah,” Anthony said, leaning forward in his chair so their knees were almost touching, “I have something more in mind.”

“More?”

“Yes. Last night confirmed what I’ve suspected since I first met you. You’re a natural submissive who hasn’t yet had the chance to explore her true nature. We’re uniquely positioned at The Enclave to help bring that potential to life. A Master is more than just a dominant scene partner. He is also a teacher. I believe you demonstrated last night that you are quite teachable.”

Anthony placed a hand lightly on her thigh. His touch sent a small electric jolt through her. His natural dominance spoke to something deep inside of her.

“You handled what could have been a potentially difficult scene for you with considerable submissive grace. You were able to transcend your fear, which allowed you to enter what I call submissive headspace. You took quite a flogging for your first time. And, correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe the erotic pain dramatically heightened the impact of the sexual interaction.”

Hannah absolutely *refused* to blush again. While she was embarrassed to be reminded of the orgasm Mason had effortlessly pulled from her, she was also thrilled that Anthony saw such potential in her. And, as a wordsmith, she couldn’t help but be charmed by his flowery language.

“You’re not wrong,” she admitted. “I know it was a very tame scene by Enclave standards, but it was pretty intense for me.”

Anthony nodded. “That’s why I think you might want to consider widening the parameters of your stay with us. You would be an excellent candidate for slave training.”

“What?” Hannah exclaimed, caught completely off guard. She shook her head, her arms reflexively crossing over her chest. “No. No, no, no. I am definitely *not* slave material. I can tell you that right now. Not happening. No way.”

She hadn't meant to be quite so emphatic, but he'd really thrown her for a loop. Aware she might have sounded rude, she added, "I mean, I really appreciate the vote of confidence, but 24/7 slave training is just not in the cards for me."

Anthony didn't reply right away. Instead, he looked her slowly up and down, as if peeling away not only her clothing, but her resistance.

Finally, he met her gaze, his lips lifting into a wry smile. "You're certainly adamant for someone who doesn't really know what it is she is refusing. I'm not suggesting the total immersion 24/7 program that we typically offer trainees. I was thinking you might benefit more from a modified program. Something developed specifically for you. You're a natural, Hannah. BDSM is in your DNA. You're hardwired for erotic suffering and submission. You've just never had the opportunity to complete the circuit."

Hannah couldn't deny this, and didn't try to. Now that she was over the initial shock of his offer, she was becoming increasingly intrigued. "So," she said slowly, trying to gather her thoughts. "What would that entail exactly? I mean, if I agreed to some kind of modified program?"

"I'd show you a copy of our standard slave contract. We would figure out together which parts of it would be appropriate for you. I think ten days should be sufficient to give you a thorough introduction to our training methods. At the end of that time, we can reassess and decide where to go from there."

"Go from there?" Hannah echoed, not certain what he meant.

"You might decide this whole D/s business is not for you, despite your initial experience. Or you might decide you'd like to enter the full-fledged training program—the one with no safewords and no hard limits."

Hannah refrained from blurting out her first thought: *No way in hell would I agree to that kind of training. I'd probably die of a heart attack the first day.* Instead, she said, "Okay. That makes sense."

Anthony nodded. “Off the top of my head, I’m thinking you would benefit from basic slave positions training to start, as well as the opportunity to experience various types of bondage, discipline and impact play. It would be a chance for you to figure out what works for you—what resonates with you—and what doesn’t. Basically, I’m offering you a controlled setting that allows you to fully explore your submissive and masochistic leanings while working under the tutelage of trained, committed Doms. It’s not something I offer lightly, Hannah.”

Hannah had completely forgotten to breathe while Anthony was outlining his astounding proposal. She was both terrified and wildly intrigued at the thought of undergoing the kind of slave training that occurred at The Enclave, modified or not. She was also very curious why this man, who barely knew her, would extend such a generous offer.

Wait. Maybe it wasn’t free. Those slaves probably had to pay a hefty fee for that kind of training, not to mention room and board at that gorgeous compound. How much would she be willing to pay for such a program?

“What would it cost?” she blurted, because it was easier than addressing the rest of what he’d said.

Anthony furrowed his brows. “Cost?” He shook his head. “No cost. You would be our guest, Hannah.”

“Oh, um. Thanks.” Damn it. She was blushing again, this time with pure chagrin. Pushing past her gaff, she asked the next most obvious question. “It sounds like an incredible offer. The thing is, I’m not some young submissive being groomed to serve a Master or hoping to become an Enclave staff slave. At the risk of looking a gift horse in the mouth, I have to ask. Why would you even bother with me?”

Anthony smiled. “It’s simple really. First, because I see potential in you, and I enjoy exploring a true submissive’s potential. My second reason is more purely personal.” He smiled, his features softening. “Lucia wants you there. And while I may be the Master of her body and soul, she is definitely the Mistress of my heart.”

Tears filled Hannah's eyes—not of sadness, but because she was moved by his sweet, disarming declaration of love for Lucia. It was that as much as anything that made her say, “Then, yes. Yes, please. I accept your offer.”

Chapter 11

Hannah opened her eyes Sunday morning to sunlight streaming through her bedroom window. The first thing she was aware of was intense excitement—the kind she had felt as a child when her parents took the family to Disney World for an entire week.

Throwing back the covers, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. A glance at the clock told her it was later than she'd thought. She needed to get moving. Hans would be there soon to drive her up to The Enclave.

“Oh, he doesn't need to do that,” she had protested when Anthony had told her Hans would pick her up. “I can drive my own car.”

“You could,” Anthony had agreed. “But in order to enjoy a more authentic experience, I recommend you allow Hans to retrieve you. Though it's only symbolic, since of course you may leave The Enclave at any time, not having your own vehicle at your disposal is a first step in giving up control. You are, quite literally, putting yourself completely in our hands.”

“I guess that makes a certain kind of sense,” Hannah replied. Not to mention, she hated driving narrow, winding mountain roads.

“On the drive,” Anthony had continued, “Hans may ask you to do things that are out of your comfort zone. I hope you will find the courage to obey. It's an excellent way to help you ease into a submissive mindset.”

That had sounded both ominous and thrilling to Hannah. In the end, she'd agreed to all his stipulations. If she was going to do this thing, she'd do it all the way.

She was glad to be going the very next day, as it wouldn't give her a chance to back out. She went online to hold her mail for her anticipated ten-day absence, paid any upcoming bills and tossed the few perishables in her fridge that wouldn't last while she was gone.

Thank goodness she'd had Charlotte to keep her from bouncing off the walls with nerves, and to reassure her she was doing the right thing. She was grateful for her friend's steadfast support and encouragement.

Just as she was climbing out of the shower, her cell phone dinged. Wrapping the towel around her body, she reached for the phone. It was a text message from Charlotte.

Good morning! Just checking in. You all packed and ready?

As ready as I'll ever be!

You'll be awesome! Keep me posted on how it's going, okay? That is, if you have use of your cell phone.

That got Hannah's attention.

What do you mean? Isn't there reception up there?

I know the slave trainees don't have access to their phones during training. Did you and Anthony discuss that?

No. Not yet. We're going to hash out the details of my training when I get there.

Got it. Let me know either way, k? I plan to live vicariously through you!

Hannah had to smile at that. Talk about a turnabout. After a decade of unrequited longing for an authentic BDSM experience, now *she* was the one with this amazing opportunity. And it was in no small part thanks to her dear friend. She thumbed back:

Hopefully I won't make a total fool of myself! Either way, I want to thank you from the bottom of my heart for everything you've done to help me get to this point. I love you, girlfriend.

I love you too! Now, quit texting and get yourself ready. You don't want to be late for your slave girl debut. ☺

Charlotte was right. Hans would be by to collect her in less than an hour and she hadn't packed yet. Not that there was that much to pack. Just enough clothing for the stay, her toiletries and her laptop.

She made herself a quick cup of coffee and brought it with her back to the bathroom. She sipped it while she blow dried her hair and put on some makeup. If nothing else, this whole Enclave thing had finally jogged her out of her lethargy.

She packed several outfits in a large duffel bag, including some casual dresses, a skirt and blouse, a couple of pairs of pants and knit tops, some sandals and a pair of sneakers. She tossed in underwear and a couple of bras, including the sexy push-up bra with the pink lace.

The day was warm. For the drive up, she selected a pretty pink summer dress made of a soft, stretchy fabric that hugged her breasts, the flowing skirt stopping just above her knees. A pair of matching flats completed the outfit. As she regarded herself in her full-length mirror, she asked aloud, “Are you sure you know what you’re doing, Hannah Davies?”

“No,” she replied to herself. “But when has that ever stopped me?”

She made her bed and washed out her coffee cup. She considered eating something, but she was way too nervous for food. Instead, she stepped out into the beautiful day to refill her hummingbird feeders. Returning to the house one last time, she grabbed her purse, duffel bag and laptop case and headed out the door.

She was just settling on the porch swing when a dark blue Audi sedan turned into her driveway. She jumped up, feeling like a little kid on her first day of sleep-away camp.

The car pulled to a stop. The trunk popped open and Hans exited the driver’s seat. He was dressed in all black, a pleasing contrast to his blue eyes and white-blond hair. “Good morning, Hannah,” he said in his slightly accented English as he walked toward her.

“Hey there, Hans. Good to see you again.” Hannah hoisted her bags over her shoulder and walked down the porch steps.

“Give me your things. I will put them in the trunk. You will please sit in the back seat for the drive.”

Okay, that was a little weird. It wasn't like he was an Uber driver—they knew each other. But then Anthony's words returned to her. The drive was her first step to "giving up control." She would just go with it and stop second-guessing everything.

Hans was quiet as they drove out of Hannah's neighborhood and through downtown Asheville. She was too nervous to make small talk and so contented herself with looking out the window as they headed toward the mountain road.

But once they had begun the ascent, Hans said in a conversational tone, "For the duration of the drive, you will address me as Sir and do as I say. Is this understood?"

Hannah felt hot and cold all at once. It was happening. Her training was starting already!

"Yes, Sir," she replied, her voice breathless even to her own ears. She tried to take a calming breath but only managed a hiccup.

"You will please remove your panties and hand them to me."

"Excuse me?" she blurted, though she'd heard him perfectly well.

"You will please remove your panties and hand them to me," he repeated. "Is there a problem?"

Uh, yeah.

Anthony had warned her she would be asked to do things outside of her comfort zone. This definitely fit the bill.

"No, Sir," she replied, surprised how easily the honorific tripped off her tongue. Feeling like a character in one of her own novels, Hannah lifted her hips, reached beneath her dress and pulled down her panties. Face hot, she handed them over the seat into Hans' open hand.

Meeting her eyes in the rearview mirror, he said, "Please spread your legs and pleasure yourself. You will tell me when you are about to come."

Hannah was struck dumb for several long seconds. Was he serious?

Again, he said, “Is there a problem, Hannah? I was told you had been advised to obey me as you would any Master. This is a very simple directive. I will be forced to report your disobedience when we arrive back at The Enclave.”

Okay, don't blow this before you've even started, Hannah cautioned herself. The thought of his tattling on her was as much of an incentive as her desire to participate fully in the process. She didn't want to arrive with a black mark already on her report card.

“No,” she said hurriedly. “You don't need to report me. I-I'm doing as you ask.”

Closing her eyes so she wouldn't see his in the mirror, she licked her fingers and slipped her hand under her dress. She was startled to discover she was already sopping wet. In spite of her nerves, this whole thing was turning her on. Here she was in the back seat of a sedan, her driver coolly directing her to masturbate for him as he drove.

She imagined herself draped over a spanking bench, wrists and ankles locked into place, ass bare. A hard hand smacked her bottom over and over until she was whimpering in protest. When her bottom was on fire, her heart pounding, fists clenched and toes curled, he cupped her burning ass cheeks and then slipped a hard finger into her wetness.

She moaned in her fantasy and then realized a split second later that she'd actually moaned aloud. Her eyes flew open and met Hans' in the mirror. He arched a brow.

“Are you close?”

“Yes, Sir,” she breathed, too aroused now to be embarrassed of what she was doing. “Very close.”

“You will stop at once,” he barked. “Place your hands on top of your head and hold that position until I say otherwise.”

Her fingers had continued of their own accord while he spoke. As his words penetrated the fog of her lust, she managed a shaky laugh. “Seriously?”

To her surprise, Hans pulled over sharply onto the shoulder of the narrow road. He put the car in park and turned back to her, his expression grave. Alarmed and embarrassed, Hannah pulled her hand from between her legs and sat up straighter, again forcing herself to meet his eye.

“I was told you were joining us for ten days of modified slave training that would begin when you entered the car,” Hans said, his voice stern. “I was told you understood you were to obey me as an extension of our Masters for the duration of this drive. Yet, you seem to have trouble with the most basic commands.”

“Gosh, I, uh... I’m sorry,” Hannah managed, suddenly feeling like she was four years old. “This is, um, strange for me.”

His expression softened. “Listen, Hannah. This isn’t a game we are playing. It is a lifestyle we embrace and cherish. Master Anthony has made the decision to give you a glimpse into our private world. If these very simple tasks I am giving you are cause for distress, *vielleicht nimmst du dir zu viel vor?* In English I think the expression is that you have perhaps bitten off more than you can chew? There is no shame in that. I will drive you back to your home and let Master Anthony—”

“No,” Hannah exclaimed, alarmed. “I’m sorry, uh, Sir. I didn’t mean to mess up like this right off the bat. I just wasn’t expecting...I don’t really know what I was expecting, to tell you the truth. Can we...can we just start over? I’ll do better. I promise.”

“We can. But I’ll still have to report this, Hannah.”

Hannah bit back her desire to whine and wheedle her way out of the situation. He was right—this wasn’t a game. Her nearly desperate need to climax had evaporated. “Yes, Sir,” she said in a small voice.

“Good girl. Now,” he said, a cruel smile lifting his red lips, “you will start over. I’m going to watch this time. Bring yourself to the edge of orgasm. Tell me when you’re about to come.”

Oh god. This was much worse than doing it while he was distracted with driving. Could she really deal with having a beautiful gay man at least fifteen years her junior stare at her while she frigged herself in his back seat? She would die of embarrassment.

She guessed that was the point. Hadn't she written similar scenarios in her novels? Modesty had no place in a slave's repertoire—she understood that. While she herself was no slave, she had agreed to try this experiment. The members of The Enclave were graciously doing this for *her*, not the other way around.

Determined this time to obey to the letter, she let her eyes close and concentrated on her pleasure. Again, the mystery Dom in her mind stood behind her, alternating a blistering spanking with delicious cunt teasing until she was about to explode.

“Please, Sir,” she gasped, forcing her hand to still so she didn't lose it. “I'm about to come.”

Please let me, please let me, please let me...

“Stop at once,” Hans ordered, as she'd known he would.

Determined to be a good girl, she obeyed, biting back her sigh.

“Because you disobeyed the first time, you will now lift your dress so your bottom is on the leather. Bunch your dress at your waist and spread your legs wide. Then you will place your hands on your head. You will remain in that position until we arrive at the compound.”

Seriously?

She bit down hard on her lower lip to keep herself quiet. This was far more embarrassing than jerking herself off in the back seat of a car. The fact that he was gay didn't make it any better. In some ways it made it worse. There was no voyeuristic thrill in it for him. It was all about the humiliation.

If you can't do this, you might as well accept his offer to take you home. You know good and well this is a piece of cake compared to what's in store for you, however modified the

training might be. Stop being a wuss. Channel your own submissive heroines. Be brave and determined. You can do anything you set your mind to.

Thus fortified by her internal pep talk, Hannah drew in a deep breath and let it out. Her gaze sliding away from his, she lifted her hips again and pulled her dress up so her bare bottom rested on the soft leather upholstery. Face so hot she was actually sweating, she bunched her dress as directed, leaned back in the seat and spread her legs.

“Better,” Hans said, flashing a perfect smile. “That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

Uh. Yes. It absolutely was.

“No, Sir,” she said aloud, determined to see this through.

With a grunt, Hans turned forward and eased the car back onto the road. They were both silent for the rest of the drive.

Chapter 12

Hans pulled the sedan to a stop in front of the imposing building that housed The Enclave. While Hannah climbed out of her seat, Hans popped the trunk and hoisted her bags onto one shoulder. She smoothed down her dress, keenly aware of her lack of panties beneath.

As Hans came around the car, she saw he had something in his hands.

“This is your slave collar.” He held up a thin black collar with O-rings, identical to the collars the slave trainees had worn at the party. “You will wear it for the duration of your stay here, except when given permission to remove it. Please lean your head forward and lift your hair so I may buckle it in place.”

Both thrilled and a little unnerved, Hannah did as she was told. A shiver of excitement shuddered through her as he buckled the collar around her neck. As she lifted her head, she saw he also held what looked like a dog’s leash. Her heart thumped as he clipped the leash to her collar and gave it a small tug.

“When we get to the front door,” Hans informed her, “you will kneel and wait for someone to retrieve you.” She allowed herself to be led up the stone walkway, which was flanked by a beautifully maintained, lush lawn.

At the large double doors of the entrance, Hans stopped and tugged downward on the leash. “Kneel on the mat,” he ordered. As Hannah lowered herself somewhat awkwardly to the large welcome mat, he instructed, “Please place your hands behind your head, fingers laced together. You will wait here in that position while I go get the Masters.”

“I have to stay out here alone?” she asked, her voice squeaky with nerves.

Hans quirked a brow. “If you find this simple command difficult, be glad you are not a true slave in training, Hannah.

In that case you would be naked, back arched, knees spread wide, while you waited.”

Hannah’s mouth actually fell open. She was indeed grateful that hadn’t been required, as she almost certainly would have lost her nerve. As it was, she felt incredibly vulnerable kneeling like this with her hands behind her head outside someone’s front door. Thank goodness there were no neighbors around.

Hans squatted so they were eye-to-eye. “You will be fine, Hannah,” he said, his tone kind. “You are here because you choose to be. Don’t forget that. Master Anthony would not have extended his generous offer if he hadn’t seen something of value in you. Stay focused on why you came here and what you hope to achieve.”

Hannah nodded. “Yes. Thank you, Hans. I mean, Sir,” she added with a nervous laugh.

“Hans is fine now that we are home,” he said. Her bags still on his shoulder, he rose to his feet. Opening one of the massive doors, he stepped inside. The door shut behind him with a soft click.

Alone, Hannah considered dropping her arms, which were already getting tired. But she reminded herself of her promise to fully embrace whatever was in store for her. Not to mention, she wouldn’t put it past these people to have some kind of camera trained on her at that very moment.

As she waited, she closed her eyes and breathed in the fresh mountain air. She very much liked the feel of the collar around her neck. She wanted to touch it but forced herself to stay in position.

A minute ticked by, and then another. Her knees were getting sore.

“Come *on*,” she muttered, jittery with nerves.

Finally, the door opened again. This time, Anthony stood there, along with the man she recognized as Lawrence. Anthony wore a cashmere sweater over dark slacks, his feet in

leather loafers. Lawrence was dressed in a black button-down shirt over black leather pants and heavy boots.

Anthony smiled down at her. “Welcome to The Enclave, Hannah. You may stand.”

He held out a hand, helping her to her feet. “After Master Lawrence addresses the issue of your misbehavior during the drive up, we will formalize the terms of your slave contract.”

“Misbehavior?” Again the damn squeak in her voice.

Unlike gracious Anthony, Lawrence had a hard look in his eyes. He pursed his lips and then said, “Hans informed us of your constant questioning of his directives and failure to immediately obey. Before you sit down with Master Anthony, I will give you a quick lesson that this kind of behavior is not acceptable at The Enclave, however temporary your stay here.”

“Oh,” Hannah breathed with dismay, her voice barely a whisper.

She was starting to think Hans had been right. Maybe she had bitten off more than she could chew.

It was one thing to write these kinds of scenarios. She’d done the research and read literally hundreds of testimonials and blogs written by both Doms and subs, many of whom lived a Master/slave lifestyle. But as she stared up at these two men, she realized just how vast the chasm between fantasy and reality actually was.

The Enclave disciplinarian, a guy she’d barely met and hadn’t much cared for, was waiting to give her a “quick lesson,” before she’d even hashed out the terms of her stay. What if she refused outright? Explained that, while this was all very exciting and daring, it was moving just a tad, or no, let’s be honest, way the fuck too fast for her to cope with? Would they cut her some slack? Or would they have Hans take her right back home?

Come on, a voice in her head protested. *Do not blow this right out of the gate, Hannah.*

A “quick lesson” couldn’t be all that terrible. And anyway, Anthony wouldn’t let anything truly bad happen to her.

When Lawrence reached for the leash that dangled from her collar, Hannah followed obediently. She saw no one as they passed through the foyer and the living room. She was glad, as she felt ridiculous being pulled along on a leash behind the two men.

“Bring her to the veranda when you’re done,” Anthony said to Lawrence as he turned to leave them.

“Will do.”

Lawrence brought Hannah to a small, windowless room just off the living room. There was a St. Andrew’s cross set against the back wall, as well as a metal kennel cage with a padlock on its door. A freestanding rack of impact toys had been placed near the cross. The only other piece of furniture in the room was a folding chair.

“This is the punishment room,” Lawrence said, leading her inside. “If you had signed up for our actual training program, I’d cuff you to that cross and give you a proper caning. The welts would serve as an excellent reminder of what happens when you willfully disobey.” He lifted his chin, looking down his narrow nose at her. “But since you’re just a little pet project of Master Anthony’s, I’ve been advised to go easy on you.”

Thank goodness for that small mercy. Didn’t this arrogant man realize she was doing the best she could? She didn’t appreciate the snark in his tone or his condescending remarks. She had to press her lips firmly together to keep from wisecracking something along the lines of ‘if only your dick was as big as your ego or worked half as well as your mouth maybe you wouldn’t have to resort to insults to get your point across.’

Lawrence unclipped the leash from her collar and hung it on a hook near the door. Then he sat down on the single chair. “A good, hard spanking will help put you in a more submissive mindset.”

Hannah had adored the few erotic spankings Andy had given her, and her perverse pussy instantly contracted with lust, her ass tingling with anticipation. But Lawrence was the last guy she would have chosen for her first real spanking at the hands of a Master. He'd made it quite clear this was to be a punishment, not an erotic experience. She got the strong feeling he didn't even *like* her, or at the very least resented her as an interloper.

Lawrence spread his legs and patted his left knee. "Let's go. Bend over my thigh."

She moved closer, doing a kind of awkward shuffle as she attempted to position herself. As she crouched self-consciously over his thigh, Lawrence immediately placed his other leg over the backs of her knees, trapping her in a firm grip.

"Hands behind your back, wrists touching," he barked.

As she obeyed, he wrapped a firm hand around both her wrists. He lifted her arms slightly, which had the effect of forcing her head down nearly to the ground. The net result was that Hannah couldn't have wriggled free, even if she'd tried.

A spurt of adrenaline born of genuine fear shot through her. Yet at the same time, she was thrilled to be held down in this way, completely at this man's mercy.

Then he flipped up the back of her dress, fully exposing her bare ass. She had never felt so vulnerable in her life. At least he couldn't see her face, which was hot with embarrassment.

"Ten strokes," Lawrence informed her from above. "During the spanking, I will make a series of statements that you will repeat and hopefully internalize. Understood?"

"Yes," she managed breathlessly. This was really happening.

His grip tightened on her wrists. "That's yes, *Sir*."

"Yes, Sir," she managed, her heart booming in her ears.

“That’s better.” He loosened his vise-like grip on her wrists but didn’t release them.

“Make sure to address me as Sir or Master Lawrence when you repeat these directives.”

Without giving her a chance to respond, he swung his arm, his hand crashing down with such force against her ass that she grunted involuntarily. Holy fuck! That hurt like hell. She had to struggle to hear his voice over her pounding heart.

“Repeat after me. I will always address Dominants as either Master or Mistress, Sir or Ma’am,” he intoned.

Breathlessly, Hannah repeated the phrase.

He smacked her on the same spot as before, bringing tears to her eyes. “I will obey every Master and Mistress here without hesitation or question.”

Again, Hannah dutifully parroted the words, remembering to add the honorific.

He struck her again, this time four very hard swats in a row, two on her ass, two on her thighs, all of them setting her skin aflame.

“Ouch!” she yelped involuntarily. She tried to twist away from the blows, to no avail. Held as she was, her legs trapped between his, her wrists in his firm grip, she literally couldn’t move an inch.

“I understand my Masters punish me to teach me,” Lawrence said above her, his tone calm and measured.

Hannah repeated the words, her breath a ragged pant.

His hand crashed down again on hot, tender flesh.

“I am grateful to be punished, as it teaches me obedience and submission,” Lawrence intoned.

As Hannah repeated the words, it startled her to realize that, yes, despite everything, she *was* grateful—if not exactly for the punishment itself, at least for this chance to explore her true nature, at last.

Lawrence's hand caught her just where her thighs met her ass, delivering three blistering strokes that made the tears already gathered in her eyes spill over.

"I am a dirty little cunt who deserves whatever I get," he said above her.

A spurt of ice shot through her blood while a flame of lust roared to life deep in her belly. A dark, hot shame that felt very much like pleasure beat deep inside her like a drum.

"I am a dirty little...cunt," she managed, stumbling over the words even as they thrilled her. "...who deserves whatever I get, Sir."

He chuckled and gave her a small push, rolling her from his lap. She fell in a kind of awkward, slow-motion crouch to the floor, both face and ass burning.

Lawrence got to his feet. "You handled that well, Hannah," he said, no trace of snark left in his tone. To her surprise, he actually smiled. "Consider that your 'do-over.' Your slate is now clean. Hopefully you'll do better going forward."

He held out his hand, which she accepted, allowing him to pull her upright.

She was confused by a rush of elation that nearly lifted her off her feet. It was more than just the endorphins released as a result of being held down over his knee and experiencing the erotic pain. She'd had her first punishment, and she hadn't freaked out. She was awesome! And Lawrence was awesome, too, for guiding her through it.

Without pausing to think it through, she grabbed him, catching him in a bear hug as she buried her face against his neck. He stood stiffly at first, but after a moment, his arms came around her.

He patted her back for a few moments before gently disengaging from her. She half expected him to rebuke her, but, to her surprise, he was smiling—a genuine smile that included his eyes.

After a moment, he cleared his throat, as if recalling himself. "Let's go. Master Anthony is waiting."

Hannah rubbed her stinging bottom through the fabric of her dress as they passed back through the living room. Lawrence stopped at a set of French doors near the kitchen that led outside to the back of the house.

As they stepped outside, she gasped with awe at the beautiful setting. To her right was a neatly tended vegetable and herb garden. The large stone veranda was surrounded by bright flower beds. Rolling lawns sloped down toward a lake nestled between large old maple and oak trees. The place was truly idyllic.

Anthony sat in profile to them at one of several tables. He held a mug of something in his hand. There was an open laptop on the table. As they approached, Hannah caught her breath again. On the other side of the veranda stood a trellis made of sturdy wooden beams. Chains hung at intervals from the beams. A large wooden sawhorse sat beneath it. An outdoor dungeon!

Anthony turned as they approached. “Did our new charge learn her first lesson?”

“I believe she did,” Lawrence replied, gifting Hannah with another genuine smile. He glanced at his watch. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a training session in a few.”

As Lawrence took his leave, Anthony said, “Please, have a seat.” He waved toward the chair beside him as Lawrence marched back toward the house, his boots clicking on the stone.

Hannah sat gingerly on the cushioned chair, her bottom still smarting from the spanking. Setting down his mug, Anthony turned back to the table. Pulling the laptop closer, he angled it so they could both view the screen.

“What we have here is our basic, boilerplate slave contract. It’s safe to say this goes beyond the scope of the experience I think you’re looking for. For example, our slave trainees are expected to be naked at all times. You will, of course, have that option, but it won’t be a requirement.”

“Phew,” she muttered. The thought of parading around naked with all those perfect-bodied slaves made her break out in a cold sweat.

He regarded her with a faintly amused expression. Returning his attention to his laptop, he said, “That said, we will require some modification in your daily attire. Specifically, you may not wear pants, underwear or bras at any time while you reside here at The Enclave. During sessions and scenes in which you are actively participating, you will be required to strip completely. It’s not only a sign of your total submission, it’s necessary for impact play and other types of training. Is that going to be a problem, Hannah?”

Hannah bit her lower lip as she struggled with the question. She’d managed to strip for her virgin scene Friday night and she hadn’t died in the process. Nevertheless, the thought of baring her less-than-perfect body again was still mildly terrifying.

But what did she really have to be afraid of? Nudity was common practice at The Enclave, and absolutely not a big deal. It was a sign of submission, and one she needed to learn to embrace.

“No, Sir,” she replied, striving for a resolute tone but not sure she’d succeeded.

Anthony smiled. “Good girl. Remove your bra and hand it to me.”

Heat immediately rushed into Hannah’s face, belying her resolve of a moment before. Getting to her feet, she reached behind herself, trying to get at her bra from the neck of the dress. It wasn’t happening. Not knowing what else to do, she reached under the hem of her dress, twisting away from Anthony as she did so.

Somehow she managed to get the damn thing off without contorting too much, though she was pretty sure she’d flashed her butt at him in the process. Finally, turning back to face him, she placed her bra on the tabletop and sank back down into the chair.

He cocked a brow. “I didn’t say put it on the table,” he said in a mild but firm voice. “I said hand it to me.”

Embarrassed, she grabbed the bra and held it out to him. He took it without comment and draped it casually over the back of his chair. Then he pointed to the computer screen.

“This part here is standard slave contract language that gives you an idea of what training typically includes.”

Hannah crossed her arms over her chest to hide her nipples, which were poking insistently against the thin fabric of her sundress. Wishing she had her reading glasses, she leaned forward, squinting, and read:

I promise complete obedience to the Dominants at The Enclave, and/or to whomsoever they deem appropriate. This includes, but is not limited to, allowing myself to be whipped, chained, suspended, caned, cropped, paddled, spanked, gagged, clamped and plugged. I further agree to submit to various types of edge play, including needle and knife play.

As property of The Enclave, I agree to submit sexually in whatever way pleases my owners. This includes oral, vaginal and anal sex of every variety.

Every Dominant at The Enclave is my Master or Mistress for the duration of my stay. They are free to use, train and punish me as they see fit, with the clear understanding that they will always keep me safe from harm.

Hannah’s eyes widened as she read, her breath catching in her throat. Plugged? As in anal plug? No, thank you. Oral, vaginal and anal sex of every variety? Not even if gorgeous Master Julian were straight. Needle and knife play? No way.

Had she made a huge mistake in signing on for this?

“I can see from your expression this is a bit overwhelming for you,” Anthony said, placing a hand lightly on her arm. “I show you this not to frighten you, but to give you a glimpse into what our actual slave trainees sign up for.”

“Okay,” she said, relieved but still uncertain.

“I’ve taken the liberty of modifying the contract to accommodate a more limited scope. You let me know if anything here is objectionable to you. But I would caution you—don’t balk just because something is new or scary. This experience by its nature will be new, and yes, sometimes it will be scary. But I believe, if you can trust in both us and in yourself, it will be worthwhile.”

“Okay,” she repeated, feeling more confident now. These guys were pros. And she wanted this—she’d practically begged for the chance. “Thank you,” she added, touching the collar around her neck.

“My pleasure,” Anthony replied with a smile. “Now, as to the terms. First, some basic protocol. You will always address the Dominants here as Master or Mistress, Sir or Ma’am.”

I already learned that lesson, Hannah thought with chagrin, her bottom still stinging from Lawrence’s hard palm.

“During your one-on-one training sessions, you will only speak when spoken to, or if you first ask for permission to speak and it is granted. You will sleep in the slave quarters along with the other trainees, but you will not be chained to the bed, unless of course you wish to be. You will be permitted use of your electronics, but only during your free time down in the quarters.”

Hannah nodded her agreement.

“You will work with various Dominants to get exposure to different styles and training techniques. You will learn to handle all sorts of impact play but, because this is a modified program, you may choose from our various options, rather than being expected to submit to any and all of them.”

“Okay,” Hannah agreed. “That sounds good.”

Anthony frowned. “I suggest you begin *now* with proper protocol.”

“I’m sorry?” Hannah said, not understanding.

“When you speak to a Master or Mistress here at The Enclave, you will reply respectfully, as befits a submissive.”

“Ah,” Hannah replied, flashing a nervous grin. “Okay. Yes, Sir.”

Anthony smiled back. “That’s better. Now, regarding sexual contact, our slaves and slave trainees are expected to service the Dominants in every sexual way requested of them. Because you are not specially training to become a full-on erotic slave, I believe in your case some modification is necessary.”

“Absolutely,” Hannah blurted, perhaps more emphatically than she’d intended. What had already happened with Mason that first night was about the limit of what she could handle. “Sir,” she added belatedly.

“The thing is,” Anthony continued, “BDSM training, even if modified, is sexual by definition. It’s the nature of the beast, if you will. But for you, for now, I think it would be wise to exclude oral, anal and vaginal penetration, at least during this trial training period.”

“Agreed, Sir,” Hannah said, relief coursing through her.

“That said, there *will* be sexual contact, Hannah, and you need to be prepared for that. Orgasm training is a basic component of our program—learning to come on command and learning *not* to come until given permission. Furthermore, sexual stimulation is used during impact training as well, helping the sub learn to associate pleasure and pain on a visceral level. I believe, based on your behavior and experience this past Friday with Master Mason, that you can handle this degree of intensity.”

Hannah flushed at this remark, vividly recalling Mason’s hand buried between her legs after the intense flogging, and the powerful orgasm that had followed.

Anthony offered a knowing smile. “Would you agree, Hannah?”

Hannah swallowed, her heart racing with both excitement and, if she were completely honest, anticipation. She’d felt more alive over the past two days than she could remember,

and it was in no small part because of what had happened during her virgin scene.

“Yes, Sir,” she admitted.

“Good. In addition to your one-on-one training, you will be permitted to shadow our slave trainees when appropriate. This will give you an opportunity to witness more intense forms of training without actually having to participate. Though, again, you will have that option if you so choose.”

Hannah hugged herself. “It’s all so exciting,” she said. “I just hope I’m up to the challenge.”

Anthony nodded soberly. “It *will* be a challenge, Hannah, make no mistake. Though your program is modified, you will still be expected to obey, without hesitation, whatever is asked of you. As you’ve already discovered, failure to do so, even in this modified setting, will result in punishment. Are we clear on that?”

Hannah drew in a sharp breath, his words both thrilling and terrifying her. The thought of being punished again, especially if Lawrence was to be her disciplinarian, was motivation enough to obey everything required of her. And how hard could it be? Look how well she’d handled her virgin scene in the dungeon. She was a natural. Anthony had said so.

Lifting her chin, she replied resolutely, “Yes, Sir. Crystal clear.”

“Excellent.” Anthony closed the laptop and turned to face her. “Lucia will be your mentor during this process. She will see to it that you get where you need to be, when you need to be there. You can go to her with any and all questions and concerns.”

“That’s great,” Hannah said, eager to reconnect with her new friend. “Thank you, Sir.”

“She will also assist you with proper daily grooming,” he added.

“Grooming?” Hannah echoed, dismayed. “You mean shaving? Am I expected to shave my, um, private parts?”

“Your cunt,” Anthony said calmly without a trace of discomfiture. “No euphemisms necessary here. The short answer is no. As a temporary slave in a unique situation, you will not be *required* to shave.”

As Hannah blew a mental sigh of relief, he continued, “I would, however, strongly recommend it, as it is yet another way to ease yourself fully into the submissive mindset. From a purely practical standpoint, erotic torture and pleasure play are easier without pubic hair getting in the way. From a submissive point of view, it’s a symbolic offering—a statement that you are making yourself fully accessible to your Master, nothing hidden or held back.”

“Okay,” Hannah said noncommittally. She would talk it over with Lucia, but she was pretty darn sure the answer would still be no.

“Then there is the matter of a physical and blood work. Normally, Mistress Aubrey would conduct your physical as a prerequisite to joining the training program. Because of the limited nature of your contract, however, her particular, uh, ministrations”—he lifted his brows, his lips curving in a half smile, giving Hannah the idea Mistress Aubrey’s physical would have a lot in common with the medical porn fantasies she’d seen online—“won’t be necessary. However, since you may be involved in exchanges of bodily fluid, including possibly blood, we need to make sure you have a clean bill of health.”

Hannah tucked away the alarming remarks regarding the possible exchange of bodily fluids including blood away for later examination. “I actually just had my annual physical and blood work a few weeks ago,” she volunteered. “I can access it via a patient portal. I have no problem forwarding the results, if that works.”

“That works just fine,” Anthony agreed.

“Finally,” he continued, “all our slaves do basic household chores on a daily basis. Charlotte mentioned to me that you enjoy cooking and baking. I know Mason could use some help in the kitchen since he lost his sous chef. When you are not in

training, you will serve as Mason's assistant in whatever capacity suits him. Does that work for you?"

For the hundredth time since it happened, Hannah flashed back to her regrettable kitchen exit scene. Mason probably thought she was an idiot. "Is he, uh, okay with that?" she asked.

"Absolutely," Anthony said. "He's the one who suggested it."

Chapter 13

Mason glanced out of the kitchen window that gave him a view of the veranda out back. Hannah was seated with Anthony at one of the tables. Her back was to him. Her dark, lustrous hair shone in the late morning sun.

If he hadn't had the opportunity to scene with her on Friday night, he would have resisted the idea of bringing a wannabe onboard for training, modified or otherwise. To Mason's way of thinking, only serious lifestylers prepared to submit fully to all aspects of The Enclave training program should be granted admittance.

But he couldn't get that scene from Friday night out of his head. As tame as it had been, she'd gotten under his skin. It would actually be good to have her around so he could get over whatever it was he was feeling. It was no doubt a very temporary infatuation, one easily dispelled by proximity.

He'd been amused when she'd flounced out of his kitchen the day before. He sensed a strong will beneath her blushing indignation. Maybe he'd take her for a session or two and find out what she was really made of.

He glanced at his watch. Everything was ready for lunch, which would be served in a little over an hour. He had cleared his schedule for an introductory edge play session with their newest trainee, Lia.

Mason's personal jury was still out on Lia's potential as a slave. She'd been in some kind of trouble pretty much from the moment she'd arrived. Consensus was that she was a hardcore masochist but sadly lacking in the submissive traits necessary to become a full-fledged BDSM slave.

Just as he pushed through the kitchen doors to head up to his suite, Anthony came in from the veranda, Hannah just behind him. "Hey there, Mason. You remember Hannah."

Mason grinned at what he assumed was a rhetorical question. He'd flogged and frigged the girl only two nights

ago. "Sure," he said affably, smiling at her. "Welcome back."

"Thanks," she said, her smile a little tenuous.

"Hannah has just agreed to the terms of a modified slave contract," Anthony said. "I've created a trainee profile for her on the website so we're all on the same page with her training. Hannah has also been advised she'll be working with you as a part of her household duties. Did you want to show her around the kitchen before I fetch Lucia to get her situated?"

Mason shook his head. "Sorry, can't right now. I'm just going up to prepare for an edge play training session with Lia before lunch." He looked at Hannah, letting his gaze move slowly over her body. His cock nudged with approval at the sight of her full, round breasts, clearly unfettered beneath the thin fabric of her dress. He flashed back to Friday night, her arms bound overhead, her lovely ass reddened by the flogger, the wet slickness of her cunt cupped in his hand...

"Why don't you come on up with me?" he suggested. "Maybe you'll learn something."

Anthony turned to Hannah with a questioning look. "What do you say? You might as well dive right in. Mason is our edge play expert. You'd certainly be in good hands."

"Oh, gosh," she stammered, hugging herself. "I'm not sure..."

Mason shrugged, pretending an indifference he didn't feel. "No pressure. I totally get it if it's just too much for you, newbie."

As he'd hoped, she took the bait. Drawing herself upright, she said, "I *would* like to attend the session. Just to observe," she added hastily.

"We can play that by ear," Mason replied with a smirk. He looked at Anthony. "Shall I take it from here?"

Anthony gave Hannah a pat on the shoulder. "She's all yours."

Mason led Hannah to the second floor, his mind buzzing with possibilities for the upcoming session. He was looking

forward to putting Lia through her paces. The newbie's presence would add a nice bit of spice to the mix.

"My suite's down at the end," he said, leading her along the hallway.

As they stepped into the space, he watched Hannah take it in. The room was L-shaped, his king-size bed and a bureau along the shorter wall, his play area/dungeon occupying the rest of the space.

"Oh," she breathed, turning in a slow circle as she took it all in. His private dungeon contained a St. Andrew's cross, a portable bondage rack and a bondage table, as well as a freestanding wardrobe and a large worktable set against the back wall. "This is really something."

Mason nodded. "I like to do my edge play up here because there are no distractions. Plus, I've got all the necessary gear and supplies and the bathroom nearby for easy cleanup." He nodded toward his en suite bathroom, which also contained a sunken tub large enough to easily accommodate two. How would Miss Newbie handle water play? Not that he planned to find out.

"I need to get set up for Lia's session," he said, moving toward the wardrobe. "I'll check your profile in a sec. Meanwhile, why don't you tell me about the terms in your own words? What's different from our usual slave training contract?"

"Oh. Um. I get to keep my clothes on," Hannah said in a rush.

He turned to look at her, openly eyeing her erect nipples, which tented the thin fabric of her dress in an alluring way. "But no underthings, I'm guessing?"

"Uh, yes." She wrapped her arms around her torso, a flush rising on her cheeks.

"Arms at your sides," he snapped automatically.

After a brief hesitation, she obeyed.

Turning from her, he opened the wardrobe and removed his wooden knife box and his needle kit and placed them on the worktable. “Go on.”

“I don’t have to, uh, sexually service anyone.” Her blush deepened. “And I don’t have to be chained to my bed.”

Mason snorted. “Enough with what you *don’t* have to do.” He pulled his cell phone from his pocket and opened The Enclave website. Finding Hannah’s new profile, he clicked on it and scanned the contents.

“Obey without hesitation,” he read aloud. “Standard slave protocol including proper titles, permission to use the furniture... Positions training... Exposure to different styles and training techniques... A variety of impact play... Nudity when appropriate during training sessions... Shadow actual slave trainees... Punishment for disobedience...”

He slipped the phone back into his pocket. “So, BDSM training lite. I guess I can work with that.” He flashed her a grin. “Your contract says proper protocol. You might as well get used to addressing the Dominants here appropriately if you’re really going to do this thing. You may call me Master Mason or Sir—your choice.”

“Oh. Um. Yes, Master Mason.” Her tongue appeared for a moment on her full lower lip. She had a very sensual mouth, he couldn’t help but notice. What would it be like to kiss those lips...

God. It was tempting to just grab this newbie and throw her down, caveman style. It irritated him that her bullshit BDSM-lite contract precluded his using her body as he wished. It was yet another reminder that she wasn’t a serious slave trainee.

It reminded him of that old commercial about the dude saying he wasn’t really a doctor—he just played one on TV. Hannah wasn’t really a sub—she just wrote about it in her romance novels.

Pushing down his irritation, he said, “Here’s what’s going to happen during this session. I will assess how Lia handles

needle and knife play. She's a tough cookie, heavy on the masochism, light on submission, so I'll keep the focus on her obedience. You will watch and learn."

Returning to the wardrobe, he took out the sharps container, the first-aid kit and a roll of disposable exam table paper. He covered the bondage table with a long sheet of the paper and then turned to regard Hannah. "How do you feel about needles and knives? Are you the type who passes out at the sight of blood?"

Hannah drew in a breath. "Only my own," she said with a nervous laugh.

Mason nodded. "Duly noted. I'll be sure to use a blindfold for your session."

"For *my* session?" Hannah replied, her voice squeaky with alarm.

Mason chuckled. "Relax. I doubt you'll progress to that point—not with all the loopholes and caveats in your contract."

Hannah scowled, a look that would have been grounds enough for a punishment, if she were actually in training. Why was he letting her get under his skin? He should just accept her on her terms and keep his expectations low.

Maybe he'd work with her on her submissive skills, or rather her lack thereof, or maybe he wouldn't. But he'd be damned if he'd waste his time cajoling her into something she wasn't up for. Just now he had an *actual* trainee to work with.

He glanced at his watch. "Lia should be here in a minute. Normally, I'd have you kneel on a floor cushion to observe a scene, but because I plan to put Lia on the table, you wouldn't be able to see much from that vantage point. I can't have you distracting me during edge play, so I'm going to cuff you to the bondage rack. You can observe from there."

He waited a beat to see if she'd protest. She only stared at him, her silvery-blue eyes wide.

He cocked a brow. "Question is—do we keep your dress on or take it off?"

Chapter 14

Hannah stared up at Mason, who was regarding her with a shit-eating grin. She wanted to wipe that damn smirk off his face. She wanted to snap at him to quit calling her *newbie*. But, then again, she was a newbie. A newbie who was probably in over her head, modified contract or not.

Still, he didn't have to be such an asshole about it. She could tell he was just waiting for her to refuse to remove her dress. He clearly assumed she didn't have the courage.

She wouldn't give the bastard the satisfaction of watching her stammer and blush. "I'm fine with taking my dress off," she said. Damn it. Was that a quaver in her voice? Hopefully, he hadn't noticed. She kept her head up, her gaze on his rugged face as she tried to calm her beating heart.

He gave a startled laugh. "There's hope for you yet, newbie. Get that thing off and stand under the rack, arms out in front of you, wrists touching."

Absolutely determined not to blush again, Hannah reached for the hem of her sundress and pulled the garment over her head. She dropped it on the edge of the mat beneath the bondage rack and took her place there, wrists held out in front of her as directed.

Mason barely glanced at her as he reached up and removed the pair of leather cuffs that hung from a chain over her head. As he cuffed and clipped her wrists together, she admired his muscular forearms, and the tattoos inked on his skin.

There was the requisite chef's knife on his right arm, outlined in scrolly design work. Hannah knew from her brief stint in culinary school that chefs often got tattoos not only as symbols of pride in their work, but also to hide the myriad burns and scars that came with the territory.

Mason's left arm was inked with what on first glance appeared to be abstract designs. But on closer inspection, Hannah saw they were actually intertwined chains and rope.

While Hannah had never been a fan of tattoo art, she had to admit that the work was incredibly detailed and artfully done.

Her attention was diverted as he lifted her cuffed arms over her head. When he reached up to attach the cuffs to the chain, he stood so close to her that his massive chest brushed against her bare breasts. He smelled good, like fresh bread and woodsmoke.

He stepped back and this time looked her over, his eyes hooding in a way that made her heart rate quicken. “Comfy?”

Oddly, she was. It felt good, somehow *right*, to have her arms once again extended overhead. Her captive position freed her from having to concentrate on standing still or worrying about her posture. The position gave her the added bonus of lifting her breasts, momentarily defying the gravity of forty-four years and two babies.

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, feeling empowered despite her bound position, or maybe because of it.

Mason looked up at the light tap on his doorframe. The girl with the pink spiky hair stood there. Hannah guessed her to be around five foot one, tops. She was slender but still curvaceous. Her breasts were firm and round. The nipples were pencil-eraser perfect and, surprisingly, given all her other piercings, appeared to be intact. She had a BDSM triskelion tattooed in black ink on her smooth mons and a multicolored snake curving around one hip.

The punk hair, tattoos and multiple piercings—an eyebrow hoop, a diamond nose stud and a constellation of tiny gold hoops rimming the perimeter of each ear—gave her a tough-girl look.

“Come in, Lia,” Mason said. As the girl stepped into the room, he gestured toward Hannah. “Don’t know if you’ve met Hannah or not. She’s here as an observer.” He flashed a smirk in Hannah’s direction. “At least for now.”

Lia’s gaze flickered toward Hannah and then away again. There was something stiff in her bearing, almost sullen. She refocused on Mason.

“*Wait up* position,” he said brusquely.

Lia at once straightened her back and stood with her legs slightly apart, her wrists crossed above her head. She stared directly at Mason, something defiant in her gaze. He must have noticed it too, because he barked, “Eyes straight ahead, slave.”

Lia shifted her gaze so that it landed on Hannah. Hannah stared back, fascinated by this young woman, who didn’t seem the least bit nervous about what surely awaited her. Her eyes were an unusual shade of brown—a kind of amber copper blend, and her mouth was a perfect cupid’s bow.

Mason went over to the worktable and returned to Lia holding a box filled with single-use hypodermic needles capped with pale green plastic hubs.

“How’re you with needles?” Mason asked the girl.

She eyed the box impassively. “Bring ’em on.” She had a low, slightly raspy voice, incongruous with her waif-like form.

All at once, Mason slapped the girl across the face, making Hannah gasp in shock. “Address me properly or this stops right now and you spend the rest of the day in a cage.” He didn’t sound angry, but his tone was firm.

Lia’s cheek was red from his slap, but she didn’t appear the least bit cowed. Her nipples had stiffened and engorged to dark red cherries. “Yes, Master Mason, Sir,” she said without inflection.

Turning away from her, Mason went back to the worktable. He picked up one of the needles and tore off its plastic wrapping. He returned to Lia and gripped one of her nipples, pulling it taut. “Bring ’em on, eh? So you’re cool with me sticking this needle right through your pretty little nipple?”

Hannah was close enough to see Lia’s pupils dilate. There was a hungry look in her eyes. Lia wanted to feel the sharp prick of that needle.

“Yes, please, Master Mason, Sir,” the girl said, her tone now eager.

He took a step back and pointed to his black boots. “Get on your knees and lick my boots like you mean it.”

Lia’s eyes flashed. She didn’t move. Hannah held her breath, tensing in her bonds. *Come on*, she urged silently. *Don’t get yourself punished again.*

With obvious reluctance, the girl lowered herself to her knees in front of Mason. Hannah watched with fascination as the girl’s pink tongue brushed against the scuffed leather toes of Mason’s boots. After what seemed like a full minute, but was probably less than half that, Mason gripped a handful of the girl’s pink hair and jerked her upright.

“Lie on the bondage table faceup so I can strap you down,” he commanded.

Lia hopped up onto the table and lay flat against the paper. Mason reached for wide leather straps attached to the bondage table. He drew them across Lia’s torso and thighs, immobilizing her.

He busied himself for a moment at the worktable, first pulling on a pair of surgical gloves, and then unwrapping a number of the needles. He placed them neatly on a small tray. Returning to Lia, he swabbed her nipples and areolas with antiseptic wipes.

He glanced at Hannah. “You good over there?”

“Yes, Sir,” Hannah replied, unable to drag her gaze from all those sharp needles.

“You’re lucky, Lia,” Mason said, turning his attention back to the girl. “I wasn’t especially impressed with your rather pathetic show of submission just now. But I’m going to go ahead with the needle play for our newbie’s edification.”

He turned back to Hannah. “Your job is to watch and learn. Don’t look away. Don’t close your eyes. Got it?”

Hannah swallowed hard, not sure she was up to this after all. “Yes, Sir,” she croaked, her mouth suddenly dry.

She watched in horrified fascination as he slipped the tip of a needle into the delicate areola around Lia’s left nipple. Lia

wincing, but then sighed, the sound sexual to Hannah's ears. When the needle was about halfway in, he slid a second needle into the flesh just beside the first. He worked quickly and methodically until there was a ring of green plastic hubs around the poor girl's nipple.

Hannah's own nipples throbbed in sympathy. Her knees felt a little wobbly, and she was glad of the cuffs holding her upright. He made quick work of the second nipple, ringing it like the first.

There was no trace of pain or distress on Lia's face, only bliss. Her eyes were closed, her lips softly parted.

"What do you think, newbie?" he asked, smirking at Hannah as she stared, wide-eyed at the needles circling Lia's engorged nipples. "You want to try it next?"

Hannah swallowed, her nipples tingling almost painfully at the thought of his sliding needle after needle into her tender flesh. "No, thank you, Master Mason," she managed.

He chuckled. "We'll have to work on that."

No, we won't, Hannah thought but did not say.

He turned his attention back to Lia. Placing a hand on her cheek, he said, "You handled the needles well, as I suspected you would."

Lia's eyes opened, a saucy smile lifting her lips. "Please, Sir. May I have some more?"

Mason grinned. "You want me to cut you now. Don't you, pain slut?"

"Fuck, yeah," she blurted. Then, flushing, she backpedaled, "I mean, yes, Sir. Yes, please, Sir."

Mason didn't look impressed. "You'll have to earn it."

Mason withdrew the needles one by one, wiping Lia's areolas periodically with antiseptic wipes. As he worked, he said, "I'm curious, Lia. Would you consider yourself submissive?"

After a brief hesitation, the girl replied, "Yes, Sir."

He continued to remove the needles. As he worked several droplets of blood beaded at the tiny wounds. Lia didn't appear in the least bit perturbed. Hannah, on the other hand, in spite of her previous assurance that only the sight of her own blood was an issue, felt a little queasy at the sight of that impossibly red blood against Lia's pale skin. She looked away, trying to catch her breath.

“Are you willing to prove it?”

“I'm sorry, Sir?” the girl asked.

“I know you want to be cut. I know you're a pain slut who gets off on erotic suffering. But to be a fully realized BDSM slave, submission is essential.” He released the straps that held Lia down.

Taking a step back, he pointed at the ground. “Get back down here on your knees.”

Lia sat up slowly, a play of emotions moving over her face that Hannah couldn't quite interpret. Trepidation? Defiance? Fear? Longing? All of the above?

The girl swung her legs over the side of the table and hopped nimbly down. She lowered herself easily to her knees in front of Mason. They were both in profile to Hannah, affording her a good view of both of their faces.

Mason picked up one of the knives from the worktable. Its long blade looked as sharp as a scalpel. Hannah held her breath, suddenly keenly aware of her own vulnerable state, bound and helpless.

The knife balanced lightly in his hand, Mason stared down at the kneeling girl. “Define erotic submission for me, Lia.”

She looked up at him. “It is the exchange of power, Sir. The sub gives the Dom power over her body and he, in turn, meets her needs.”

Mason shrugged. “That's one definition, I suppose. But here at The Enclave, we take things further. Your *needs* are not our concern. Submission isn't about you getting off on blood play or wearing sexy outfits at clubs or choking on your boyfriend's dick while his friends watch.”

Lia flushed as he spoke, making Hannah wonder if Mason knew this stuff about her or was just throwing out generalizations.

He continued, “You are here to serve at the pleasure of your Masters. Submission is about surrendering yourself, both physically and emotionally. It’s about service, obedience, grace, endurance, selflessness, courage and passion. A fully realized erotic slave derives her emotional and sexual satisfaction from pleasing and obeying her Masters. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Sir,” Lia replied, but her voice lacked conviction.

“Okay,” Mason continued. “Let’s give it a try. Spread your knees wide. Offer your cunt to me.”

Again that slight hesitation, but then Lia spread her knees, arching her back to further expose her delicate pink labia.

Hannah held her breath as Mason crouched down in front of the young woman. He touched the tip of the knife to the soft spot at the apex of Lia’s collarbones. “You’re going to play with yourself now for my amusement. Stay as still and quiet as you can so I don’t accidentally cut you. Be sure to ask for permission before you come.”

Her copper-colored eyes locked on his, Lia spit on her fingers and put her hand between her legs. Her pretty nipples were fully distended, the pinpricks left by the needles still visible on her areolas. As she rubbed herself, Mason kept that damn knife at the girl’s throat though, Hannah was relieved to note, the tip of the blade was no longer actually touching her skin.

It was thrilling to watch, but when Hannah tried to visualize herself in Lia’s place, masturbating for Mason while he held a knife to her throat, her brain rebelled. She would, quite simply, die of terror, embarrassment or some combination of the two.

But Lia had no such qualms. She was going at it fast and furious, her face twisting in concentration as she played with

herself. It wasn't long before she was panting, her fingers a flurry between her legs.

"Please, can I come?" Lia begged breathlessly.

"No," Mason said.

Lia didn't seem to hear him, her fingers still flying over her sex.

Mason set down the knife, his face darkening. He slapped Lia's hand away and then gripped a handful of her pink hair, jerking her head back. "I said *no*," he repeated in a hard voice.

Getting to his feet, he pulled her upright by the hair. When he spoke again, he didn't sound angry, only measured and firm. "You just failed submission 101. Obey your Master without hesitation or question. Clearly, you've got a lot to learn if you want to make it through this program."

Lia's face was red with some combination of indignation, shame and fury. Letting her go, Mason took a step back and shrugged. "Frankly, I'm not sure you're worth the bother. Go on. You're dismissed. After lunch, Lawrence will see to your punishment—again."

The poor girl fled from the room.

Mason turned to Hannah, his eyes flickering over her bare body. She'd almost forgotten she was naked, so caught up in the drama unfolding before her. Now her bound arms twitched with the need to cover herself.

"Sorry about that," Mason said with a rueful smile. "Though I guess it was a lesson of sorts—a lesson on how *not* to behave." Mason shook his head. "Anthony must have seen *something* in the girl to grant her admittance, though I've no idea what."

Hannah wasn't sure if she was supposed to reply or not. To be on the safe side, she held her tongue as she waited for him to let her down.

Instead of moving to release her, however, Mason busied himself cleaning the play area and putting away his gear. He

bunched the paper covering the bondage table into a ball and tossed it into the trashcan beneath the worktable.

Finally, he came over to Hannah. As before, he stood very close to her as he reached for her cuffs. Closing her eyes, she again inhaled his comforting scent. He leaned closer, his chest brushing her bare nipples, sending a shiver of desire through her.

He released the cuffs and brought her now tingling arms down to her sides. He didn't step away, as she'd expected. Instead, without letting go of her wrists, he dipped his head so she could feel his warm breath on her cheek.

Hannah froze, her heart fluttering wildly in her chest. What should she do? Was he going to kiss her? Should she shove him back before it was too late? Or should she just let it happen...

All at once, Mason took a step back. He gave a quick shake of his head, as if he were engaged in a silent conversation with himself, just as she was. Turning abruptly away from her, he bent down and plucked her sundress from the floor.

He tossed it to her with a grin. "Come on, newbie. Let's go down and serve lunch."

Chapter 15

It was late Tuesday afternoon when Mason took off his apron and hung it on its hook. Everything was prepped for dinner, the kitchen tidy, the dining room table already set. Hannah was off doing positions training or some other BDSM-lite bullshit activity.

Despite what he still considered her wannabe status as a trainee, she was turning out to be of far greater help than he'd anticipated. She had surprisingly good knife and prep skills and clearly knew her way around a kitchen. That morning, he'd given her the task of making biscuits to go with the morning's breakfast, along with his recipe.

To his surprise, she'd asked if he wouldn't mind if she used her own recipe. He'd been mildly affronted at her audacity. If she'd been his actual sous chef, he would have put her promptly in her place. Curiosity won out over professional umbrage, and he'd let her go ahead, though his expectations had been low.

She'd produced a product as good, if not better, than his own, with a perfect golden-brown crust, the insides fluffy and flaky. When he'd complimented her on them, she'd smiled shyly, her cheeks dimpling prettily. He'd liked that smile and had found himself smiling back.

It still irritated him that Anthony was allowing Hannah to wear clothing when not in a training session. He found her clothing distracting. All Enclave subs were generally kept naked or nearly so, particularly the trainees. He was so used to this state of affairs that he barely registered their nudity in a day-to-day setting. But Hannah's clingy dresses, the fabric hugging her ample ass and draping over her lush breasts, were like a taunt.

If she'd been any other Enclave trainee, he would have come up behind her as she worked. He would have flipped up that dress and pressed his hard erection against her bare ass. "Don't stop what you're doing," he would have murmured in

her ear. Then he would have gripped her by the hips, pulling her against him as he slid his hard cock into her wet cunt.

Idly massaging his cock through his jeans, he glanced out the kitchen window at the outdoor dungeon. Brandon and Marjorie were conducting a training session with Michael and Ellen. The two slaves straddled the punishment horse, facing one another. Their arms were bound and suspended from the overhead trellis beam. They were both on their toes, their genitals almost but not quite touching the hard-edged wood between their legs.

To give them even more of a challenge, clover clamps were attached to their nipples—one chain tethering Michael's left nipple to Ellen's right, the other Michael's right to Ellen's left. Each time one of them flinched or jerked, they both paid the price.

The punishment horse was aptly named. The basic wood sawhorse had been modified so the thin edge of the main plank faced upward, perfect for fitting snugly between labia or pressing painfully into testicles. The plank could be adjusted to accommodate the height of those who straddled it. To make up for the height difference, for this session it had been angled so both trainees faced the same trial. Even so, Michael had the advantage of muscle over Ellen, whose slender legs were already trembling with the effort of holding her cunt above the sharp-edged sawhorse.

To add fire to the slow smolder of their predicament bondage, Brandon stood behind Ellen, Marjorie behind Michael, each wielding a single tail whip. From his vantage point at the window, Mason could see Ellen's face twist into a grimace of pain each time the lash snapped against her back.

Aroused, he went out back to watch the scene unfold. To his delighted surprise, Hannah was kneeling on the tatami mat nearby, her arms bound behind her with Shibari rope. Her nipples were also caught in a pair of clover clamps, the chain swaying between her breasts. Her knees were spread wide, no trace of clothing on her curvaceous body.

Moving quietly so as not to disturb the scene in progress, Mason crouched beside Hannah. She turned her head, her eyes widening, her mouth falling open in surprise. Mason let the hint of a smile ghost his lips as he looked her over.

She'd apparently succumbed to Lucia's gentle persuasion to shave her pubic mound. Her plump, pretty labia were tantalizingly exposed by her position. He wondered what she would taste like.

Brandon acknowledged Mason with a lift of his chin and then returned his concentration to his task. Both trainees were sweating, their backs crisscrossed with thin red welts, their legs shaking.

"Shibari rope suits you," Mason whispered into Hannah's ear. His cock was stiff beneath his jeans, his balls tight. She gave no indication that she'd heard him, save for the flush of color moving over her chest and throat. Her nipples had to be numb by now. He tugged lightly at the chain between her breasts, making her wince.

All at once, Ellen cried out, her feet slamming to the ground, wedging the sharp-edged plank between her labia. "Oh, oh, it hurts! It hurts!" she cried out, tears flowing down her cheeks. She tried to lift again to her toes but her aching legs refused to support her.

"You win," Brandon said to Marjorie with a grin. Neither of them appeared particularly concerned at Ellen's predicament. "Or rather," he added with a chuckle, "Michael wins."

They both set down their whips. Working quickly, they released the trainees from their bonds and helped each off the horse. "Stand next to me and get your reward, boy," Brandon directed.

Still breathing hard, his body covered in a sheen of sweat, Michael took his place beside Brandon. He had a broad grin on his face. Marjorie, meanwhile, directed Ellen to kneel in front of the male sub.

She then knelt beside the girl, effortlessly switching from Domme to sub as her husband/Master opened the fly of his pants and pulled out his sizable erection. Mason glanced at Hannah, who watched the scene with rapt attention.

“It’s good timing that you came along when you did,” Brandon said, smiling at Mason. “Can you see to Hannah while we finish this session?”

“Sure,” Mason said, getting to his feet.

“Don’t come till I tell you to,” Brandon said to Michael. “You do and you’ll be right back up on the horse.”

“Yes, Sir,” Michael replied a little breathlessly.

To the women, Brandon said, “Hands behind your backs. Make us come with only your mouths.”

Marjorie at once knelt up, taking her Master’s cock into her mouth. After a moment’s hesitation, Ellen followed suit with her fellow trainee. Both men sighed audibly. Mason’s cock ached. Damn it. Hannah should be kneeling up as well, mouth open, eager to receive him. A drop of pre-come wet his underwear at the thought. His balls ached.

Nearly shaking with sexual frustration, Mason hauled Hannah to her feet perhaps a little more roughly than he’d intended. She gave a small cry, nearly losing her balance with her arms still bound behind her back.

Wrestling himself back under control, he placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her. “Let’s get those clamps off you. You know it’s going to hurt, right?”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, her voice a little unsteady. She bit her lower lip, clearly afraid.

Mason’s favorite time to remove clamps was when his slave was on the brink of orgasm. The combination of pleasure and pain made the experience even more intense. All too aware that wasn’t an option in this case, he again commanded himself to get a grip. He was the Dom here, the caretaker. He needed to sublimate his lust and focus on the sub’s needs.

“Breathe,” he said, stroking her soft cheek with his thumb. “Close your eyes and take a deep, calming breath. I’ll release both clamps at once. Keep breathing the whole time.”

He waited until he was satisfied she was breathing deeply enough. Then he gripped the sides of both clamps and said quietly, “On the count of three. One, two...three.”

Hannah yelped as the blood rushed back into her compressed nipples. Her thick, dark lashes were spiky with tears. Without stopping to think what he was doing, Mason cupped her luscious breasts, dipped his head and sucked one swollen bud into his mouth.

“Oooh,” she breathed, the word infused with both lust and surprise. After a moment, however, she took an abrupt step back, pulling her plump nipple from his lips.

“Stand still, girl,” he growled. “The session isn’t over. Consider this aftercare.”

Holding her shoulders again to keep her still, he closed his lips over the other nipple, flicking it with his tongue, pleased as it stiffened in his mouth. He nudged it with his teeth, lightly biting and then suckling her until she sighed softly, the sound like fingers tickling along his shaft.

Forcing himself to stop before he lost the last vestige of control, he pulled away. Stepping behind her, he undid the bondage knots and unwound the rope from her arms. Though she hadn’t been bound especially tight, her skin was cold to the touch from lack of circulation. Remaining behind her, he brought her arms gently to her sides and ran his hands up and down the smooth flesh as the blood flow returned.

“Now,” Brandon cried, drawing Mason’s attention back to the scene before them.

On cue, the younger man grunted and shuddered, his fingers twisting in Ellen’s shiny hair as she made small gagging sounds. Brandon had his hand proprietarily on Marjorie’s head. His eyes were closed, his mouth slack with pleasure. Practiced cocksucker that she was, Marjorie kept his

shaft deep in her throat until she'd milked every drop of his seed.

Unable to help himself, Mason wrapped his arms around Hannah from behind, rubbing his throbbing erection against her as he dipped his head to bite her neck. She moaned. Spurred on by her reaction, he slipped his hand between her legs, thrilled at the wet heat he found there.

With a small cry, she pulled abruptly from his embrace and whirled away from him. Before he could react, she grabbed her stupid dress and slipped it over her head.

God damn it to fucking hell. What was he even doing? How had he let this woman get so thoroughly under his skin?

Mason turned away with a growl and strode rapidly back to the house. Grabbing the keys to his car, he loped to the garage, suddenly desperate to leave the compound for a while. He would stop by the farmers' markets and the butcher. He would check in with the chefs at both his restaurants. He would stay away until he could stop behaving like a teenaged boy with a perennial boner.

As he drove, he cursed himself soundly. He'd crossed a boundary with Hannah yet again. Every time he got near her during a scene or session, he lost control. That had never happened to him before, even when he was a new Dom. All these restrictions Anthony had imposed regarding Hannah were driving him to distraction. If only he had carte blanche. He would take her properly in hand. He would show her what it really was to submit, instead of all this namby-pamby bullshit.

Thank god she was leaving in a few days, because he really couldn't take much more of this.

Chapter 16

Late Thursday afternoon during the trainees' free time before dinner prep, Hannah made her way down to the slave quarters to text Charlotte. She'd kept her friend apprised of her adventures over the past four days, enjoying Charlotte's avid interest in even the smallest detail of her experience.

It was hard to believe that she'd already been at The Enclave for four days. It felt as if she'd only just arrived. Each day leaped by, packed with training sessions, observations sessions, working with Mason in the kitchen to prepare and clean up after three full meals a day for eighteen people. After dinner was the best time to corner various Doms and subs, engaging them in conversation about their BDSM lifestyle and choices. She tried to be careful not to overstep, aware she was there as their guest, not an investigative journalist.

Still, the idea of a series based on The Enclave was exciting. She already had a working title—*The Compound*—and lots of ideas for the first novel. Every night before bed, she opened her laptop to write down her impressions and feelings about what she'd experienced that day, along with ideas for characters and storylines based on her conversations.

One of the things that had really struck Hannah about The Enclave was how close-knit this group of people was. While D/s protocol was always observed and the roles clearly delineated, it was obvious the Doms and subs who lived together in this rambling home genuinely liked and respected each other. This was especially clear during lunch and dinner, when everyone sat together around the huge dining room table.

The subs all filed in first, waiting respectfully behind their chairs until the Doms entered the room. Both she and Lucia were excused from this ritual, since they were busy in the kitchen helping Mason prepare and plate the food. But once everyone sat down, the conversations were easy and relaxed, the subs chiming in as freely as their Masters.

Hannah was surprised at how quickly she'd adapted to being naked during her sessions, probably because it was so taken for granted by everyone around her. She'd learned The Enclave's ten basic slave positions, more or less, though she had nowhere near the fluid grace of the other subs. She'd adored the bondage sessions, a deep calm settling over her as the ropes and leather swaddled her tight. She had experienced an actual caning, though not hard enough to leave any welts. Still, it had stung plenty. She'd been proud of herself for getting through it without freaking out.

Each day had presented challenges, some of which she surmounted, some of which she shied away from. While she'd sometimes been offered the opportunity to participate directly in the various intensive training sessions she had been permitted to observe, no one had pressured her to do so. Nor had she been pushed too far in her one-on-one sessions with the various Enclave Doms.

As Hannah navigated her way through her daily training adventures, Lucia had been a godsend. She was always there for Hannah when she felt overwhelmed or confused, offering gentle encouragement and advice. To her own surprise, Hannah had allowed Lucia to talk her into grooming. Because of Lucia's easy, matter-of-fact manner, she hadn't even felt embarrassed when Lucia snipped away her pubic curls and then carefully, expertly shaved her smooth.

While she worked, Lucia had teased, "I don't mean to brag, but I've been known as something of a matchmaker over the years, and I'm rarely wrong. There's a spark between you and Master Mason. Just a little fanning and it's going to burst into flame."

Hannah had scoffed. While she couldn't deny her growing attraction to the man, he was *so* not permanent partner material. Not that she was even looking.

One thing she hadn't shared with Lucia or Charlotte was her increasingly confused feelings about Mason, who was taking up entirely too much space in her head. She needed time to figure things out on her own before offering them up for dissection by well-meaning girlfriends.

Though neither Mason nor she had addressed it directly, she'd felt the chemistry buzzing between them like a livewire from the moment she'd entered his kitchen. Every gesture, every word, seemed infused with hidden meaning and subtle, sexy innuendo. Though she hadn't really expected it to go anywhere, and wasn't sure she'd wanted it to, she felt like a teenager with a huge crush, giddy with excitement and anticipation.

She'd been quietly disappointed that he'd yet to volunteer for a one-on-one training session with her, though she'd intellectually recognized it was probably not a wise idea. The sexual attraction she had *thought* had been developing between them would have made things...complicated.

But then had come that session outside with the trainees Tuesday afternoon. The way Mason had appeared out of the blue and taken charge of her had been both terrifying and sexy as hell. The pain when he'd released the clamps had caused actual stars to dance before her eyes, though it had soon been replaced by the euphoria of released endorphins.

The deliciously terrifying part had come when he'd closed his mouth over her nipples, first one and then the other, licking and suckling her in a way that made her weak in the knees. The attraction she'd tried to tamp down since he'd made her come that first night in the dungeon had burst into flame.

Then he'd pressed himself against her from behind, his cock hard as a bar of steel at her back as he'd bitten her neck. It had all been too much to handle. It was the shock of her own fierce desire, more than what he'd done, that had made her pull abruptly away.

He, too, had seemed to come suddenly to his senses. She had seen the way his face had closed down as he'd turned away from her. She'd very nearly begged him to stay—to give her another chance. But pride, common sense and lingering confusion had kept her silent.

Since that afternoon, everything had changed between them. She still didn't know what to do about it or how to feel about it. When they worked together in the kitchen now, he

was all business, directing her to chop, peel, scrub, clean, plate and, occasionally, handle a side dish on her own. Conversation, when it happened at all, had become neutral, not a hint of the playful innuendo she'd enjoyed during those first few days.

Whatever had been smoldering between them had apparently been snuffed out, at least as far as Mason was concerned. She told herself this was for the best. It was too soon, and she was way too far out of her league. She would be nuts to get involved with a man who had made it clear he was looking for a 24/7 slave girl, if he was even looking at all. It would be a recipe for disaster for both of them.

She tried instead to focus on getting the most out of her remaining few days at The Enclave. If nothing else, the experience had definitely reawakened her creative mind. Dozens of possible plot scenarios were now swirling through her brain, which she typed into her laptop each night before curling up in her single bed in the slave quarters. Now that she was experiencing firsthand some of the things she'd spent the last decade writing and dreaming about, she was excited to return to her work, sure she could create something more authentic than she had previously.

Now, as she got to the bottom of the slave quarter stairs, she saw Lia curled up on one of the chairs in the communal area, her face in her hands. The girl was frequently in trouble and spent much of her time in the punishment cage or put on display in the living room after dinner, forced to hold some difficult position while everyone around her ignored her.

Hannah had tried once or twice to engage the girl during free time, both concerned for her and also very curious why she was making things so difficult for herself by constantly disobeying the Doms. Lia had been monosyllabic to the point of sullenness. Hannah would have been insulted by her rude behavior, had the girl not reminded her of her own daughter during a particularly heinous period of her teenage years.

Zoë had been a delightful child, open, sunny and easygoing. She'd been an excellent student and a good big sister to her younger brother. Then she'd turned fifteen and

morphed almost overnight into a sullen, moody, disrespectful and rebellious girl.

Zoë had, without permission, dyed her hair a harsh black with a purplish sheen. She'd started wearing raccoon-like eye makeup and black lipstick and wore clompy Doc Marten boots and a perennial sneer. Worse, she'd snuck out several times at night, not coming home until well after her eleven p.m. curfew, reeking of weed and discontent.

Thankfully, the phase had been short-lived. Zoë had eventually confided she'd been trying to impress a Goth boy at school with whom she'd thought she was madly in love. That, plus raging teenage hormones had caused her, to use her words, to go temporarily insane.

"You guys were so good about giving me 'my space,'" Zoë had told her later. "I was actually kind of waiting for you to tell me to knock it off so I could stop pretending to be something I wasn't."

Thinking of Zoë, Hannah stopped now beside the young woman. Lia was no teenager, nor was she Hannah's daughter, but she looked and behaved like someone who was calling for help, at least on some level.

"You okay?" Hannah asked softly.

Lia didn't respond, save for a quiet, snuffling sound. Was the poor girl crying? Unable to help herself, Hannah shifted immediately into mother mode. Crouching beside Lia, she placed her hand lightly on the young woman's narrow back, which was marked with a crisscross of new and fading welts from her various sessions with the hardcore Doms.

Lia didn't move, but neither did she pull away.

Gently, Hannah patted her back, just letting Lia know someone was there. After a while, Hannah offered quietly, "This whole power exchange thing is way harder than it looks. I have no idea how you and the other trainees can be so brave. I can't even imagine the courage it must take to undergo the type of full-on, intensive training y'all have signed up for."

Finally, Lia lifted her head. Her eyes were red. She sniffed noisily and wiped her nose with the back of her hand. Then she barked a short, harsh laugh followed by a snort of disgust. “Look at me, bawling like a baby. My parents would be appalled.” Her voice rose into a singsong falsetto, the accent pure antebellum southern gentility. “Magnolia Rose Duvall, where *are* your manners, young lady? Quit that disgusting display this second.” Lia’s voice deepened to a baritone, her face twisting into a comically censorious expression. “You’re a disgrace to the family name. You’ll do as you’re told. I don’t want to hear another word about it. Now, where’s my whiskey and soda, damn it? Loretta, fire that new maid.”

In spite of herself, Hannah laughed. “You’re quite a good mimic, Lia.” At Lia’s rueful grin, she added gently, “Seriously, though. It’s clear you’re hurting right now. Do you want to talk about it?”

Lia ran her hand over her face and up through her spiky hair. “I thought this place would at least be a good timeout, maybe even somewhere to hide away for good. And don’t get me wrong—the intense impact and edge play are fucking awesome. But it’s this submission crap that I can’t get my head around. If I wanted to be told what to do and how to feel every second of the day, I could have stayed in my old life, with all its rules, expectations and mind-numbing conformity.” She sighed. “I should have known better than to think I could make it work.”

“You’ve been here what, nearly two weeks, right?”

Lia nodded glumly. “Two weeks of constantly fucking up.”

“So, maybe...” Hannah hesitated, aware her unsolicited advice might not be welcome, but deciding to risk it. “It’s just a thought, but if it’s not working for you here—if it doesn’t feel right—then maybe it’s not. Even as young as you are, you’re what—twenty-one, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-four,” Lia said. “And not getting any younger,” she added in the drawling falsetto apparently reserved for her mother.

Hannah chuckled. “So even at the ripe old age of twenty-four, you’re old enough to know your own mind, and do what’s right for *you*. Quiet all that other noise in your head, if you can. Forget other peoples’ expectations. Follow your heart.”

Lia tilted her head, as if she was thinking this over. “Follow my heart, huh? I guess first I have to figure out what the hell my heart actually wants.”

Mason, tall, imposing, gruff, arrogant, condescending, sexy as hell, pushed his way yet again into Hannah’s mind.

You and me both, sister, she thought.

Chapter 17

It was late Thursday evening when Mason found Anthony sitting alone in a quiet corner of the living room. He had his head down, apparently reading an actual paperback novel.

“I need to talk to you about Hannah,” Mason said, lowering himself into a nearby chair.

Anthony looked up from his book with concern. “Is there a problem? Is she not working out in the kitchen?”

“She’s working out fine in the kitchen,” Mason said. The lemon pound cake with the peaches and cream she made for that evening’s dessert was worthy of any dessert chef.

“So...?” Anthony asked, giving Mason his full attention. “Tell me what’s going on.”

“She’s distracting,” Mason said bluntly.

That was putting it mildly. Ever since he’d nearly lost it during that Tuesday session at the outside dungeon, he’d managed to keep a tight rein on his desire or longing or lust, or whatever the hell it was he felt when he got too close to Hannah. For the past two days he’d just barely managed to keep their relationship professional. He’d forced himself to ignore the curve of her ass under her damn sundress, or the way her nipples tented the fabric of her clingy top. But it was driving him up the fucking wall. It was making him, as Lucia had sweetly chided recently, grumpy. Something had to give.

“Distracting how exactly?” Anthony asked mildly.

Mason hit his knee with his fist. “Either she’s here for slave training or she isn’t. Either she is a sub, or she’s not. This whole modified training thing. The idea she’s doing this to add so-called authenticity to her sappy romance novels. No offense, but it’s bullshit.”

Anthony regarded him with a cocked brow. “You’ve gotten spoiled, living here. We all have, I suppose. When we point to the ground and order a slave to kneel up, open her mouth and

demonstrate her deep throating skills, we expect her not only to jump to obey, but to do it eagerly and with skill. If we want to bind her in Shibari rope, suspend her from the ceiling and take turns whipping and teasing her until she is reduced to nothing but pure, raw sexual need and submission, she only thanks us, both before and after, for using her as she needs.”

“Exactly,” Mason agreed emphatically, his cock hardening at the thought of using Hannah in those ways. “And from what I’ve seen, she’s got potential, far more than she’s demonstrated. She just needs someone to take her in hand.”

“Someone like you?” Anthony suggested, a hint of a smile lifting his lips.

The question gave Mason pause.

Was that what he was saying? Was *he* willing to take Hannah on as a personal project? Did he even want to?

He did routinely participate in The Enclave slave training program, but only minimally, offering introductions to edge play with an emphasis on knife and needle safety. He was of more use as a Dom trainer. He enjoyed sharing his skills with both Enclave Doms and the Doms who signed up for various programs occasionally offered to the Asheville BDSM community.

Ashley had been the exception and look where that had gotten him. Did he really want another woman in his life, even if it was just for a few weeks?

Whoa. Who said anything about a woman in his *life*? Since when couldn’t he train someone without getting emotionally involved? He had always excelled at keeping his distance—to a fault.

Anyway, this wasn’t about him. This was about her. The Dom in him could clearly sense the sub in her. Anthony and Brandon had established The Enclave with the idea of helping submissives reach their full potential. Weren’t they doing Hannah a disservice by letting her skate along without correction or consequence? Didn’t she deserve better?

That was it. His motives were entirely altruistic.

Okay—maybe not entirely.

So he was attracted to her. That didn't mean he planned to collar her, for crying out loud. He just wanted to give her a more authentic training experience.

If nothing else, it would get her out of his system.

“Yes,” he asserted. “Someone like me.”

He waited for the amused chuckle, the knowing look, the gentle ribbing. Instead, Anthony regarded him quietly for a moment. Then he nodded. “Okay. I actually think it's a good idea, if you're willing to take her on.”

A jolt of excitement shot through Mason's nervous system. For the first time in a long time, he was ready, even eager, to train someone so new to the scene. He'd have to modify his usual methods, since he couldn't hold her to the exacting standards required of Enclave slave trainees. But he would take charge, make no mistake. It was what she needed, even if she didn't know it yet.

“Let's discuss it with her,” Anthony continued. “Because I agree with you—she could definitely handle more than she's signed up for. Your timing is good, actually. I've been talking with some of the others who have participated in her training, as limited as it has been, and we've all come to the same conclusion that Hannah could handle more than what we're giving her. Indeed, that she would benefit from a more intensive program.”

“Agreed,” Mason said, pleased Anthony was of a similar mind.

“I negotiated that contract with her because of her unique situation—just coming out of mourning, and feeling her way in her fledgling submissive journey,” Anthony continued. “I suggested what I thought she could safely handle without her freaking out in the process. If you think you're up to the task of taking her on, one-on-one, I'm all for it. Assuming she's willing, obviously.”

Mason got to his feet, energized and ready to act. He glanced at his watch as he bounced excitedly on the balls of

his feet. “It’s not even that late. She’s probably still awake. Even if she isn’t, I can—”

“Whoa. Hold on,” Anthony interrupted with a chuckle. “Let’s take a step back. She probably *is* asleep. And even if she isn’t, I’m willing to bet she’ll be more receptive if we approach her calmly in the morning.”

Impatient to get the ball rolling, Mason opened his mouth to protest. Then he closed it, forcing himself to take a mental step back. He wasn’t some teenager just looking to get his rocks off. Responsible Doms practiced patience. Anthony was right. Hannah would probably be more receptive if she wasn’t blindsided.

Anthony got to his feet and held out the paperback he’d been reading. “Meanwhile, I suggest you take a look at this. It’s one of those Angelique Rose novels you were disparaging earlier. Give it a skim and see what you think. You might just change your mind.”

“I doubt it,” Mason said with a grin. But he took the book.

Friday morning Mason was up by six, as always, in order to get the breakfast service prepared for those Enclave members who were heading out to work and for the trainees, who always got an early start. He’d stayed up easily an hour later than he’d intended, which was the fault of Angelique Rose. But, even sleep deprived, he’d awoken raring to go.

Mason had taken the paperback to bed with him with the intent of giving it a quick skim, just to say that he had. He’d opened the novel to a random page, his mouth already twisted into a preemptive sneer.

But then he’d started reading.

And hadn’t been able to stop.

Having never read a romance in his life, he’d expected something along the lines of the bodice rippers his mother used to keep in a stack on her nightstand. They’d sported shiny covers embossed with a muscle-bound dude with long hair blowing holding a half-fainting busty wench who stared up at him with a mixture of alarm and pouty-lipped adoration.

The Angelique Rose novel, by contrast, had a photograph of a young woman dressed in a waist cinching crimson corset on the cover, the image set against a stark black background. She was on her knees, her head bowed, her face obscured by long, flowing hair.

The prose was immediately engaging—no gushing, swooning heroines in sight. As he'd read, he'd tried to get his head around the fact that Miss Newbie Wannabe had actually written a story so compelling, so authentic, that he couldn't put it down.

Sleeping on the idea of training Hannah hadn't changed his mind. If anything, he was more resolute this morning than he'd been the night before. It was her writing, as much as anything, that had solidified his resolve. Despite her lack of personal experience, she brought passion and a surprisingly nuanced understanding of D/s to her work. That wasn't something you could fake. She was a natural, even if she didn't know it yet.

He was at the table, his mug of coffee and the book in hand when Hannah entered the kitchen, dressed in one of those stupid dresses, her voluptuous body taunting him as usual with its unavailability.

“Good morning, Sir.” Hannah made her way to the coffee urn and poured herself a mug. As she was helping herself to a blueberry muffin, Mason opened the novel to an earmarked page and read aloud.

He snapped the lash sharply across the top of her left breast, leaving a line of fire in its wake.

She gasped as pain and pleasure crackled and popped along her nerve endings like fire in a grate. Again and again, he flicked the whip against her tender flesh, each stroke taking her deeper into subspace until she was trembling from head to toe, the word, “More” balanced on her tongue.

“You need this,” he murmured, running his fingers lightly over the welts that crisscrossed her breasts. He drew a sensual circle around one distended nipple, pulling another

moan of raw lust from her lips before she could clamp them shut.

His laugh was low and sexy, his eyes sparkling with lust. “And still you want more, don’t you? You want me to whip your cunt.”

Mason glanced at Hannah as he read, curious to see her reaction. At first, she barely seemed to be paying attention as she walked toward the table, mug and muffin in hand. Then, pausing in her tracks, she tilted her head, a quizzical expression moving over her face.

He continued to read.

“Yes,” she breathed, caught in the thrall of his power, too far gone in the moment to resist this charismatic man in any way.

He gave the wheel another slow spin, causing her to rotate once more from an upright position. The Master crouched low beside her so their faces were level. Gently, he cupped her cheek. Looking into her eyes, he commanded, “Beg me. Beg me for what you need.”

“Please, Sir,” she begged, unable to help herself. “Whip my cunt, Sir. *Please.*”

“As you wish,” he said, another cruel, sexy smile curving his lips. Rising to his feet, he positioned himself in front of her. But instead of the wicked bite of the whip, he moved his fingers over her spread sex. She was so aroused by the man and the circumstance that she nearly came on the spot.

Mason glanced again at Hannah, amused at her expression. Her mouth had fallen open and a rosy flush stained her throat and cheeks. “Oh, my god,” she said, laughing. “It took me a minute. You’re reading from one of my books. Have you ever considered narrating audiobooks? That gravelly deep voice will have the ladies swooning.”

“Quiet, wench,” Mason scolded, though he was grinning. “I’m not done yet. Sit down and eat your muffin.”

He waited until Hannah had taken a seat before continuing.

His fingers danced over her swollen, slick flesh. Effortlessly, he brought her quickly to the edge of a climax. She was filled with a yearning, slippery ache. Blood pounded in her ears. Her skin burned. Every fiber of her being was focused on those perfect fingers teasing her spread cunt.

Sadist that he was, he left her teetering on the brink. His hand fell away. A moment later, the whip whistled in the air. It snapped against her sex in a blinding flash of pain that instantly transmuted into dark desire. Then the fingers were back, easing away the sting with a perfect, sensual touch. She was pure sensation now, pure animal lust, grunting and begging, barely aware of what she was doing or saying.

Mason snapped the paperback closed and set it on the table between them. Hannah was staring at him, her face still flushed, her pupils dilated. She wasn't laughing anymore. Her nipples, he was both amused and pleased to note, were fully erect, beckoning to him from beneath the clingy fabric of her dress. As he met her gaze, she lifted her mug quickly to her face, turning away slightly as she sipped.

"I thought I'd check out what all the hoopla was about this Angelique Rose author all our sub girls are always in such a twitter about."

He placed his hand on the book, caressing its cover as he hooded his eyes, letting his gaze burn into hers. "I'm especially curious, Hannah, how much of your own desires and longings are written into these pages? Do you squirm when you're typing the incendiary words into your laptop? Do your panties get wet? Do you forget how to breathe along with your protagonist?"

"I...uh...I..." she stammered, looking adorably confused and embarrassed.

He let his hand slide from the book to her arm. Running a finger along her smooth, bare flesh, he murmured, "Does your skin burn, your heart race, your cunt spasm like the women in your novels? Do you wish you were one of them, a naked

slave girl kept in chains, used for her Master's pleasure and soundly punished when you disobey?"

Hannah pulled her arm away, her face now red as a beet. She rose from her chair, her lips pressed together, tears suddenly filming her silver-blue eyes as she crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know what you're doing right now, Mason. You've basically ignored me for the past few days, making it clear you're not interested in anything but having an extra pair of hands in the kitchen. That's fine. I may not entirely like it, but I get it. But now, suddenly, you're reading from my novel and asking those personal questions."

She blinked away the tears, her face taking on a look of angry resolve. Shit. He'd visualized the scene in his mind as something fun and sexy—something to let her know he was interested, and to gauge her reaction in turn. But, as usual, he'd handled things poorly, missing her cues and fucking things up.

"Look," she said, her voice trembling. "I know you think I'm just some BDSM-curious wannabe. You've certainly made that clear enough. But when you start making fun of my work, of my vocation and my life's passion, you can just go and..." She trailed off but then the determined expression returned. "You can just go and f—"

Without planning it, Mason jumped up from the table and pulled Hannah into his arms, cutting off her words by placing his mouth over hers. He kissed her hard on the lips, which she at first kept pressed into a hard line. But as he took her face in his hands, her lips finally parted, just a little.

Seizing his advantage, he slipped his tongue past her lips. He breathed in the clean lemony scent of her shampoo as he explored her soft, sweet mouth with his tongue.

All at once, she was kissing him back, her hand coming up to cup the back of his neck. That tacit permission unleashed something inside him. He growled against her mouth, biting her lower lip as he pulled her close. He loved the feel of her soft breasts pressed against his chest. His hands slid of their own accord down her back. He gripped her ass through the

sheer fabric of her dress, his palms itching to smack the rounded globes.

Her entire body trembled as he moved his hands down the backs of her thighs and then slid them up beneath her dress to cup the bare globes. It would be so easy to just lift her up, deposit her on the counter facing him and ease his throbbing cock into the wetness he was sure he would find between her legs.

“Ahem,” someone said from behind them.

Go away! Mason wanted to shout. Damn it. Talk about bad timing. Maybe if he ignored whoever it was, they would take the hint and disappear.

But the moment was lost, the spell broken as Hannah pulled away and wriggled from Mason’s arms, her face blazing.

“If this is a bad time,” Anthony said with a chuckle, “I can always come back later.”

Chapter 18

Hannah tugged at the hem of her dress as she struggled to catch her breath. What had just happened? How had she let it happen?

That was no ordinary kiss. It wasn't soft or searching. It had been a claiming, wild and unchecked, and it had unleashed something inside her, something she wasn't yet ready to face.

She glanced at Mason, who was tugging at his own shirt, though it did little to hide the bulging erection in his jeans. Her inner thighs were wet with her own juices, her nipples aching. What would have happened if they hadn't been interrupted?

Cheeks flaming, she turned toward Anthony, wondering how much he'd seen. Belatedly, she processed his words. "*If this is a bad time...*" Bad time for what?

Before she could ask, Mason replied gruffly, "No, it's fine." Clearing his throat, he added, "You want coffee before we get started? There's grilled ham, blueberry muffins, and fresh sliced fruit."

"I'll have some fruit," Anthony said, moving toward the counter to help himself. Hannah now noticed he had his laptop under one arm. He set it down as he filled a bowl with fresh peaches, blueberries and watermelon. "Let's go out to the veranda so we aren't interrupted by breakfast stragglers."

"Sounds like a plan," Mason agreed.

Anthony turned to Hannah, who was still trying to get her bearings. "Shall we?"

Finally finding her tongue, Hannah blurted, "Shall we what? I'm not following."

Anthony looked at Mason. "You haven't talked to her yet?" He lifted a brow, his mouth quirking upward. Hannah could almost hear the words he was telegraphing toward them. *You were too busy making out like teenagers?*

“Not yet,” Mason said, flashing a grin. He, unlike Hannah, appeared to be fully back in control.

“But you still feel as you did last night?” Anthony said, addressing Mason. “Now that you’ve had a chance to sleep on it?”

Sleep on *what*? What was going on?

“I’m more convinced than ever,” Mason affirmed.

“I’m sorry,” Hannah said, trying to keep the frustration out of her tone. “I have no idea what you guys are talking about.”

“If you do take her on,” Anthony said, ignoring Hannah as he spoke to Mason, “the first thing you’ll need to do is teach her proper manners.” Turning back to Hannah, he said, “You seem to have completely forgotten trainee protocol this morning. When in this house, all subs, even temporary ones, are expected to address their Doms with the proper respect.”

Oh, shit. Would an apology be enough, or were they going to call in Lawrence to punish her again? It was Mason’s fault. He’d thrown her completely off-balance with that kiss.

“My apologies, Master Anthony,” she said quickly. She turned to Mason, who still had that shit-eating grin on his face, and forced herself to add, “Please excuse me, Master Mason, Sir.”

“We’ll see,” he said, his eyes dancing.

Wildly curious what this was all about, Hannah followed the men outside. As Mason slid into a chair at one of the round tables, Anthony, the consummate gentleman, pulled out a chair for Hannah. She sank into it, not sure whether whatever was coming was a good thing or a bad one. Anthony sat on her other side.

Anthony speared a square of watermelon with his fork and popped it into his mouth. Finally, he turned to Hannah. “Mason has come to me with an interesting proposal. We haven’t hashed out the details yet. We wanted to get your input first. This is about your trainee contract,” he added, as if in afterthought. “You’ve done well with the modified impact play

and positions training, and you comport yourself well as an observer during more intensive scenes.”

Hannah smiled, pleased by the praise, though still uncertain what was being asked of her, if anything.

“But that only goes so far,” Anthony continued, selecting a slice of ripe peach. “The contract you and I first negotiated basically gives you an out any time you feel uncomfortable. But, after observing you, talking it over with Lucia and discussing it with those Doms you’ve trained with, I’ve come to the conclusion that you aren’t being challenged in the way necessary to really tap into your masochistic and submissive core.”

Hannah wasn’t sure what to say to this. She sure as hell had felt plenty challenged over the past week, thank you. At the same time, she couldn’t deny that there was some truth in what he was saying. She did get to pick and choose which sessions she participated in, and to what degree. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing. After all, she wasn’t interested in a 24/7 Master/slave lifestyle, even if she did find it absolutely fascinating to observe.

“Master Mason came to me last night with an interesting proposal that we both believe would offer you a more rewarding, if challenging, experience.” He nodded toward Mason. “You want to take it from here?”

Mason cleared his throat. “Okay. First, I want to address the elephant in the room, as it were. That kiss. I didn’t plan it, and I apologize if I overstepped.”

Hannah felt herself blushing yet again as she glanced from Mason to Anthony. Anthony smiled faintly but said nothing. She looked back at Mason. “Oh, um. That’s okay,” she said, her fingers floating up to touch her lips before she could stop them.

“Okay. Good. I bring up the kiss because I want you to understand this proposal isn’t some kind of back door for me to take advantage of you, sexually speaking.”

The devil on Hannah's shoulder whispered, "*Oh, come on. Take advantage.*" She gave it a mental flick and the imagined demon vanished.

"That said," Mason continued, "Both Master Anthony and I agree that you would benefit from a more direct training approach. I have volunteered to take on that task. I'm willing to work with you one-on-one during the remainder of your stay."

He placed his hand on her arm, his touch sending a shiver down her spine as he locked his gaze on hers. "But only on the condition that we dispense with the BDSM-lite bullshit. If I take you on, you won't get to pick and choose what you want to do, when you want to do it, or how far you want to take it." He moved his hand up her arm and over her shoulder, brushing his fingers along her throat. His touch left a trail of heat in its wake.

Mason opened his hand so his thumb and forefinger spanned her jaw. As he gently pressed into the yielding flesh just below her jawline, Hannah forgot how to breathe. Something dark and hot deep in her belly flickered to life at his primal touch. Her heart fluttered like a trapped butterfly as they stared at one another.

Once again, Anthony cleared his throat with that polite, "Ahem."

Mason's hand fell away, and Hannah managed at last to fill her burning lungs.

"So, to summarize," Anthony said, "if you agree, Master Mason will become your full-time trainer for the duration of your stay. He will conduct all your sessions, and administer any punishment deemed necessary. You will not have the option of refusing him, but by the same token, he will respect your limits."

"My limits," Hannah echoed faintly. What were her limits? She couldn't think clearly. Was this really happening? Did she want it to? Or was it time to end this adventure and run back to the safety of the familiar?

Don't let fear hold you back from your dreams, a voice whispered in her soul. This was an amazing chance, if she had the courage to seize it. But it was also terrifying.

"You will not have the option of refusing him."

She understood now on a visceral level what Lucia had meant that first night they'd met. Having no safeword, no back door, would be so freeing. There would be no decisions to make, no internal justifications necessary. She wouldn't have to constantly question her own motivations and desires. She could just...submit.

"Yes," Anthony replied. "Your limits, which we can discuss and agree upon now. Our slave trainees are not afforded this option, nor do they want it. But, at least for now, since you are not seeking erotic enslavement, but only a deeper exploration of your submissive and masochistic potential, you will be permitted to set hard limits. Limits that Master Mason will not violate, not without first getting your consent and approval."

Hard limits. Yes. Hannah knew all about those from her research. But what the hell were hers? She could barely think straight. What if she forgot something crucial? Wait. Was she actually considering this? And with Mason, of all people? Was she out of her mind?

"Hey," Mason said, his voice uncharacteristically gentle. "You look like a deer caught in the headlights. Relax. You're among friends here." He placed his hand lightly over hers. "I take my job as a responsible Dom and trainer very seriously. This isn't some roundabout way to get into your pants, or to force you into something you don't want to do. I hope you'll give it a chance—give me a chance—to help you uncover the true submissive I believe is still furred inside you."

Oh, shit. Now he was being poetic on top of melting her with his kiss and igniting her with that hand on her throat, not to mention that powerful orgasm he'd wrested from her before they'd even been properly introduced...

A part of her—the reckless part—was more than ready to say yes to the dress, and everything that went with it, limits be

damned. Another part—the sane part—was still demanding to know if she'd lost her marbles.

She'd dipped her toe in the BDSM water these first few days at The Enclave. She'd had fun splashing around in the shallow waters. But was she ready to dive headlong into the deep end? As astonishing as it might be, these two guys, these two trained Dominants, seemed to think so.

Follow your heart.

Did her counsel to Lia extend to herself? Did she have the courage to follow her heart, wherever it might take her? Did she trust Mason enough to take the leap with him?

“Yes,” she whispered, unable to look away from Mason's powerful gaze. “I agree. I accept.”

“Excellent,” Anthony said, breaking the spell. “Now there is the matter of your hard limits.”

The laptop sat between them. Opening the lid, Anthony tapped a few keys. “Slave Jaime, our resident computer expert, has created this handy form for when we have training seminars with visitors from the BDSM community.”

He turned the laptop so the screen faced her. “As you go down the list, click once on the space bar to place an H in the box, indicating this is a hard limit. If you click twice, it will place a T there, indicating it's a negative trigger. Just use the down arrow to skip the boxes that aren't hard limits. If you click something by mistake, or just change your mind, click on the box again and it will remove the H or T. Take your time as you go down the list. Be honest with yourself. Don't automatically click on something because it looks scary or taboo. Everything on this list is safe, if challenging. Master Mason will press your boundaries—that's a given. But he will never put you in harm's way.”

Hannah glanced at Mason, who nodded gravely. Her gut swooping with a combination of nerves and excitement, she focused on the screen. The alphabetical list was comprehensive, running the gamut from anal sex to whipping.

“I understand the concept of triggers,” she said as she did the initial scan. “But I don’t really know what my triggers are, if any. The sum total of my actual hands-on BDSM experience has been here at The Enclave.”

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that right now,” Mason said. “I’ll be paying close attention, and we’ll be communicating every step of the way. If something doesn’t feel right, we’ll both know it.”

Hannah nodded, satisfied with this response. Returning her focus to the list, she immediately checked the box next to *anal sex*, and scrolled down to click *vaginal intercourse* and *oral sex* while she was at it. A kiss was one thing, but no way was she ready for more.

She added *asphyxiation, blood play, knife play, branding, electric play, face slapping, fisting, golden showers, mummification, needle play, scat* and *spitting* to her hard limit list.

She was deciding what else to add to the list when Mason spoke. “Try to keep an open mind as you go down that list,” he said. “Like Master Anthony counseled, don’t be too quick to eliminate something just because it might look scary. It takes courage to submit, Hannah. I believe you possess that courage.”

Hannah reviewed her choices as she pondered Mason’s words. The thought of knife play, while scary, was also thrilling. It tapped directly into one of her more powerful masturbatory fantasies of the dark, sexy stranger coming into her bedroom late at night, awakening her with the tip of his knife at her throat. “*Don’t move. You belong to me now...*”

Heart beating with excitement, Hannah removed the H from the *knife play* option. She returned the laptop to Anthony.

Biting back a nervous giggle, she asked, “What happens now?”

Part Two

Chapter 19

They only had about an hour before they'd need to do lunch prep. Mason brought Hannah inside, eager not to waste a moment. "Master Anthony will upload your hard limit list to your profile," he said as they climbed the stairs to the second floor.

The site had been another of slave Jaime's excellent ideas. The trainers used it to review and tailor individual slave contracts as needed, track progress and note concerns. Every slave, including resident submissives and those in training, had their own profile. It was a great way for the various trainers to share ideas and suggestions without having to physically get together for the exchanges—a nearly impossible task with their varied schedules.

"I'll have a look, and then we'll discuss some basic ground rules."

He led her down the hall to his suite and pushed open the door, gesturing her inside. "Go kneel on a yoga mat in the play area while I review your hard limits."

Hannah obediently moved toward a mat and lowered herself to the ground. So far, so good.

Mason pulled his phone from his pocket and opened the link to a private website. He clicked to Hannah's page, pleased to see Anthony had already uploaded her hard limits list. He scowled when he saw she had precluded all penetrative sex from the get-go. Yet, even in his frustration, he recognized it was probably for the best. He wasn't looking to have a relationship with this woman, after all. He just wanted to help her realize her submissive potential.

Keep telling yourself that.

He ignored the irritating internal voice.

He scowled when he saw she'd ruled out needle and blood play. But she hadn't checked off the box for knife play, he was

pleased to see. He could already envision several diabolical scenarios that would press her submissive envelope to its very edges.

Slipping his phone back into his pocket, he came over to Hannah. “I’ve reviewed your limits and will abide by them, for now.” As her eyes widened, he added, “Meaning we can always revisit them as you progress in your training.”

She looked so nervous kneeling there, her lower lip caught in her teeth, her eyes wide and frightened. Was she already regretting what she’d signed up for?

Though he didn’t want to, Mason forced himself to take a mental step back. While he very much wanted to train Hannah for reasons he hadn’t entirely admitted to himself, he did *not* want to lead her kicking and screaming into anything.

Moving to her, he crouched in front of her and stroked a strand of her hair behind her ear. “Hannah,” he said gently. “It’s not too late to change your mind about this. While I believe you have real potential as a slave girl, training only works if you’re one hundred percent on board. If you’re having second thoughts, there’s no shame in that. And no recriminations. You can go back to your BDSM-lite contract, and we can forget about this whole idea.”

He forced his expression to remain neutral and calm as he waited for her response. He could barely admit to himself just how much he wanted to train this woman. And not just because she had potential. He wanted to be the one to bring out that potential. He wanted to claim Hannah, even if only for a few days.

“No,” she finally said, her voice husky. “I’m not backing out. I want to give this a try. I’ve waited my whole life to experience this. I’m not going to blow it now.”

Mason couldn’t stop the wide grin that split his face. “Good girl. That’s the spirit.” Getting to his feet, he rubbed his hands together. “Let’s go over a few ground rules. Number one—slave girls, even those in training—especially those in training, are to be naked at all times. Take off that silly dress and then kneel up in *present* position.”

Hannah's mouth fell open. For a second, he thought she was actually going to protest. Where was that resolve she'd displayed only a moment before? But then she closed her mouth and reached for the hem of her dress. Lifting up slightly on her haunches, she pulled the dress over her head and tossed it aside. Swallowing visibly, she spread her knees a couple of inches apart and placed her hands on her thighs, palms up.

Crouching in front of her, he said, "Spread your knees wider like a proper Enclave slave and straighten your posture. Go on. Don't make me ask twice."

Looking away, she did as she was told. He tilted his head, letting his eyes move slowly over her body, lingering at her smooth cunt. Color was seeping over her chest and throat and splashing onto her cheeks. She really needed to get over her ridiculous shyness at being naked. He would be sure to work on that with her.

No penetrative sex didn't mean he couldn't touch her body as he wished, and even bring her to orgasm if it pleased him to do so. He considered cupping her cunt, feeling its heat, slipping a finger inside her wetness. But she looked so fucking nervous that he decided to cut her a break—for the moment.

"Better," he said, getting back to his feet. "Rule two—for your remaining days at The Enclave, you will sleep up here with me. You can bring up your things after lunch."

"What?" Hannah blurted. "You want me to sleep *here*? With *you*?"

Ignoring her disrespectful tone, not to mention his irritation that she seemed so freaked out at the prospect, Mason waited a beat for Hannah to at least add the honorific. But she just kept staring at him, mouth hanging open.

Leaning down, he grabbed her by the arm and hauled her upright. Wheeling her toward the back wall, he placed a hand on the back of her neck and frogmarched her toward the corner, ignoring her spluttering cries.

His hand still on her neck, he held her in place, her face pressed into the corner. "This is the timeout corner for naughty

submissives. Not the most auspicious start to your one-on-one training, but that's on you. Let that be the last time you fail to treat me, or any Dom here, with the proper respect. You will address me as Master Mason or Sir, and not only during an active session, but 24/7. Got that?"

"Yes, Sir," she muttered, her face still pressed against the wall.

"Furthermore," Mason continued, "from this moment forward, you will not speak unless spoken to, or without first asking for, and receiving, permission to speak. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir," she repeated, her voice barely a whisper.

"Speak up. I can't hear you."

"Yes, Sir," she repeated, louder this time.

"Better," Mason said.

He didn't want to be too hard on her right out of the gate. By the same token, she needed to understand that he meant business. If she couldn't handle such basic protocol, they might as well pack it in now.

Letting go of her, he took a step back, admiring the view. She had a gorgeous ass, full and round, perfect for spanking. Both his palm and his cock tingled at the thought of pulling her over his knee. Resisting the impulse, he instead addressed her question about sleeping arrangements.

"Here's the thing, Hannah. The way things stand now, we only have five days left to work together. I plan to make the most of it. To answer your earlier question, having you traipse up and down from the basement to the second floor is a waste of time. Since I'm your sole trainer now, it makes sense for you to stay here with me when you aren't otherwise occupied. And don't worry, this isn't some kind of convoluted way for me to get you into my bed. That's a privilege you have to earn."

He paused for a beat, letting that sink in. "For now, you'll be sleeping on a special mattress on the floor. It comes with built-in restraints so you won't be tempted to wander around at night without permission."

Though her face remained to the wall, he could see the tension in her hunched shoulders and clenched fists. He was about to tell her she could turn around but had a better idea.

“We have some time before lunch prep. We’re going to do a quick exercise in obedience and self-control. Be forewarned, I’m going to touch your body as it pleases me. Your job is to follow my orders, remain in position, stay quiet and keep your face to the wall.”

A diabolical idea entered his head. At first he dismissed it as too challenging. But then he reconsidered. After all, he only had five days to whip her into a proper slave girl, pun intended.

Reaching into his pants pocket, he fished out a coin left over from a recent visit to the farmer’s market. Moving to stand beside her, he held up the quarter. Her face was slightly angled toward him, allowing her to see what he held.

“You’re going to hold this quarter against the wall with your nose. Don’t let it fall, no matter what I might be doing to you. Do you understand?”

She stared at the quarter, again swallowing visibly. But, after a beat, she replied softly, “Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl.”

He placed the coin against the wall just beside her, level with her shoulder. “Move over a little so you can get your nose on the coin. I’ll hold on to it until you’re in place. As you can see, you’ll need to bend over in order to get into the right position. I want you with your ass out, legs spread wide.”

He waited as she got into position. “Spread your legs wider,” he said, toeing the inside of her ankle with his boot. “Better. Now, place your hands on either side of your head, palms flat against the wall.”

She looked so fucking hot, ass sticking out, her hot little cunt peeking between her legs, her round breasts gently swaying, the nipples fairly begging for weighted clamps.

Forcing himself to rein in his erotic fantasies, he only said, “Good. I’m going to let go of the quarter now, so make sure

you've got it with your nose. Don't let it fall, Hannah. Not until I give you permission. No matter what I do to you, or how I touch you, you will remain in position, nose on the coin, hands pressed flat against the wall. Are we clear?"

"Permission to speak, Sir?"

Mason considered denying her permission, but he didn't want to push her too far, too fast. "What is it?"

"I don't think I can hold this quarter against the wall like this for very long, Sir. It's an awkward position."

"Do the best you can." He tapped on his watch and opened the timer app. "I'll time you. If you can hold the coin in place for three minutes, you will be rewarded. If you drop it, you will be punished."

He half expected her to let the coin drop immediately—to whirl around and tell him this was all a mistake. Instead, she replied, "Yes, Sir."

Maybe she was slave material after all. Time would tell.

"I'm going to touch your body now, Hannah. Remember, don't move out of position, and don't drop the coin."

He started slowly, running his hand over her back and shoulders, letting her get used to his touch. She flinched at first, but then seemed to relax as he stroked her soft, smooth skin and lightly kneaded her shoulders. Stepping back a little, he let his hands roam lower. When he cupped her ample bottom with both hands, she flinched.

He waited, expecting the coin to tumble to the floor. But, to her credit, Hannah managed to hold her position. "I'm going to touch you more intimately now, Hannah. Have any of your trainers so far worked with you on orgasm control?"

"No, Sir," she replied a little breathlessly.

The memory of last Friday night—had it really only been a week ago?—when he'd made her come so easily, already primed from the flogging, leaped into his mind's eye. She had so much potential. If only they had more time.

"No time like the present," he said, chuckling.

Again, he half expected her to balk, but she remained silent.

Encouraged, he stroked and kneaded her ass. Unable to resist, he cupped his palm and gave her a sharp, stinging swat. Predictably, she yelped. Yet, she didn't move out of position or drop the coin.

Now for the real test.

Ignoring his raging erection, he cupped her cunt from behind. She gasped audibly, but the quarter remained in place. Slowly, gently, he rubbed her labia, using his middle finger to find the little button of her clit. She was wet, her clit hard, which pleased him.

Leaning over her back, he murmured in her ear, "You're a perfect little slut. Aren't you, Hannah? Beneath the blushing and the modesty is a dirty girl just waiting to come out."

When she didn't reply, he pulled his hand from between her legs and gave her another sharp smack, this one hard enough to leave a partial handprint on her creamy skin.

As she yelped again, he said calmly, "I asked you a direct question, slave girl. I'll ask again. You're a perfect little slut. Aren't you, Hannah?"

"I-I don't know, Sir," she said breathlessly. Still the coin remained pressed against the wall.

"Is that right?" he said, chuckling. "Then we'll just have to find out together, won't we?"

"Yes, Sir."

Again cupping her lovely cunt, he stroked and teased her, enjoying the small moaning sounds she made. It wasn't long before she was trembling, her breath increasing to a pant. She was so responsive, and so wet. He wanted to yank down his pants and sink his cock into that slick, tight heat.

"You're doing well," he said, his voice hoarse with barely controlled lust. Damn her hard limits.

Still rubbing her slippery cunt, he glanced at his watch. There were only thirty seconds to go. If she made it, he would

reward her with an orgasm. “Don’t come without permission,” he warned, pushing a finger inside her.

“Ooooh,” she cried, her vaginal muscles clamping down on his finger as a shudder moved through her body.

The coin clattered to the floor.

Mason abruptly withdrew his hand. “Oops. What a shame.” He glanced again at his watch. “You only had twelve seconds to go. Oh, well. Looks like someone’s earned another punishment.”

Chapter 20

Hannah whirled around, her arms automatically coming up to cover her breasts. She gaped at Mason, a dozen protests forming on her lips. She had meant it when she'd reaffirmed her intention to submit to intensive one-on-one training with Mason. And she'd been wildly proud of herself—stripping for him without freaking, holding that stupid quarter against the wall with her nose, managing to maintain that embarrassing, exposed position while he played with her.

She hadn't even dropped the damn coin when he'd smacked her, and that second smack had really hurt. And now he wanted to punish her? "Not fair," she wanted to whine. But he was watching her with that annoying, smug expression, silently daring her to protest.

She clamped her mouth shut. No way would she give him the satisfaction.

No matter how embarrassing or how difficult this intensive training turned out to be, she was determined to give it her very best shot. She just needed to approach this whole thing with the proper attitude. Closing her eyes, she channeled Lucia, the quintessential slave girl. If Mason said she'd earned a punishment, then by golly, she'd just have to endure it.

Resigned to her fate, she focused on her sexual frustration. Talk about climax-interruptus. She'd been right on the edge of an orgasm, despite her uncomfortable, embarrassing position.

What *was* it about Mason? He wasn't her type—not in the least—yet when he touched her, something ignited deep inside her, drawing her toward him like a moth to a flame.

And everyone knew what happened to those poor moths...

Okay. Enough. This wasn't about Mason and Hannah.

He was *Master* Mason training the sub girl Hannah.

She, Hannah Davies, who'd spent her life on the outside looking in, was now a bona fide sub girl! She couldn't wait to

text Charlotte and tell her about every amazing second since she'd woken up that morning, starting with that kiss...

"Arms at your sides," Mason said sternly. "You know better than to cover yourself in front of your Master."

She did know better, in theory. If only she was twenty pounds lighter and, what the hell, as long as she was at it, twenty years younger. However, not wishing to compound whatever punishment awaited her, she forced herself to drop her arms.

Would he spank her as Lawrence had done on her first day of training? In spite of her trepidation, she couldn't help visualizing herself draped over Mason's muscular thighs. He would sit on his bed and pat the mattress, a sexy smile curving his mouth, his eyes glittering with lust...

Would he hold her down with his legs as Lawrence had done, her wrists caught in his large hand as he reddened her bottom? Would she feel the swell of his erection, hardening beneath her as she squirmed against him? The spanking would hurt—that was a given. But just the thought of his big, strong hands on her made her already swollen clit throb.

"Get down on the floor," he ordered instead, his tone and his words like a pin popping the balloon of her fantasy. "I want you on your hands and knees, ass up."

When she didn't immediately flop to the ground, he took a step toward her, his brow furrowing. "Do as you're told. Now."

Not wanting to compound her infractions, Hannah hastily dropped to her hands and knees, glad for the cover of her hair as it hung down over her face. A firm hand pressed against her back between her shoulder blades.

"Forehead touching the floor," Master Mason directed, forcibly guiding her down. "And spread those knees wide. I want to see your cunt."

Her entire body flushed with embarrassment as she forced herself to assume the position. Not only her sex, but her asshole was now on full display. She had always been very shy

about exposing that particular orifice. She nearly whimpered aloud with humiliation, even while her rational mind assured her this was nothing Master Mason hadn't seen many times before.

She could hear him moving behind her. Then he said, "You've earned the paddle. Ten strokes." He crouched beside her, showing her a large oval paddle made of wood, with a long handle covered in black leather.

Ice trickled down Hannah's spine, her gut swooping unpleasantly as she stared at the terrifying implement. What had she signed up for? Should she have taken the out when he'd given her the chance? Was it too late to back out now?

Mason got to his feet, stepping out of her line of sight. "Don't move out of position," he said, now behind her. "Though I don't mind if you scream."

Hannah hiccupped with fear.

A calm, quiet voice spoke inside of her—it was the voice of Angelique, her alter ego. *Be brave, Hannah. After all these years of living vicariously through the lives of the submissive heroines you've created, you have a chance to experience what you've only dreamed about.*

Hannah managed to take a deep, cleansing breath. She let it out slowly as she willed herself to calm down. Yes. She would be brave and strong. She would get through this and make Master Mason proud.

The first blow came without further warning, smashing hard against both cheeks. The pain was all-encompassing, pushing all coherent thought from her mind. The second hit her right cheek, the third her left. She howled in pain, abandoning any thought of submissive bravery. It hurt. Fuck, fuck, fuck, it hurt!

Again and again the paddle struck. She grunted, yelped and tensed for each stinging blow. Sweat prickled in her armpits and hairline as tears flooded her eyes. She lost count. Gritting her teeth, she focused only on holding her position as the stinging oval crashed against her.

A particularly savage blow took her breath away. Before she realized what was happening, she had collapsed on the floor. She curled into a ball, the pain overwhelming her.

Strong arms lifted her with apparent effortlessness. Mason cradled her against his massive chest as he walked across the room. He deposited her on his bed, laying her gently on her stomach as she continued to whimper.

“You’re okay,” he said in his deep rumbly voice. “Just lie there and rest. You took a good paddling, all ten strokes before you fell out of position. I’m impressed.”

In spite of her tears, in spite of her pain, pride bloomed like a flower unfurling inside her. Mason was impressed with her. She was impressed with herself. She’d handled a full-on, blistering paddling, staying in that embarrassing position right until the very end. If someone had told her only a week ago that she could endure such pain, erotic or otherwise, she would have told them they were nuts.

She felt the give of the mattress as Mason got to his feet. She kept her head buried against the quilt, letting the tears flow, though her mouth had curved into a small, satisfied smile. A moment later, he was back, his weight making her roll a little toward him as he once again sat on the bed.

She sucked in a breath when his hands moved over her flaming bottom. He rubbed a cool and creamy ointment into her skin. There must have been something magic in the soothing balm, because, while her ass still felt tender, the worst of the stinging pain had simply vanished.

“Whoa,” she breathed. Then, quickly recalling herself, she added, “Permission to speak, Sir?”

He continued to stroke her ass, more of the soothing ointment on his hands. “Granted.”

“What is that stuff you’re using?” It had a lovely fragrance, too—eucalyptus, clove and something else—sage? “It’s amazing.”

“Mistress Aubrey, our resident doctor, developed this salve for impact play aftercare,” Mason said, still stroking her. She

liked the feel of his hands moving over her skin. “There’s a compounding pharmacy in town that makes up large batches for our private use. I don’t know what all’s in it exactly, but I do know that medical-grade CBD oil is one of the key ingredients. Our slaves swear by it. As you might imagine, given our lifestyle and our training program, we order it by the case.”

Finally, he gave her bottom a perfunctory pat and got to his feet. Wiping his hands on a cloth, he said, “Punishment over. Slate wiped clean. There’ll probably be some bruising, but that’s to be expected.”

Bruising! Hannah wasn’t sure if she was horrified or thrilled. Maybe a little of both.

He held out his hand. “We need to head down to get lunch ready for the hordes. Up you go.”

Feeling suddenly nearly overcome with fatigue, Hannah would have much rather stayed right where she was on the comfortable bed, her ass now tingling pleasantly. She very nearly begged him to come back—to stay beside her and keep doing what he was doing. His touch had felt so good. She’d been bereft of touch—of intimacy—for too long.

What if, instead of her trainer, Mason was her lover? Would he lie down beside her and pull her gently into his arms? Would she rest her head on his chest as he stroked her hair and murmured sweet things in her ear?

Whoa. Come back to planet Earth. Mason is not your lover. He’s not even your type. Not with all those tattoos and that shaved head, not to mention his gruff manner and swaggering arrogance.

Hannah accepted his offered hand and let him pull her upright. She swayed, suddenly dizzy.

“Take it easy,” Mason said, placing a steadying hand on her shoulder.

Hannah’s head cleared. “Thank you, Sir,” she said, glad Mason couldn’t read all the tumultuous thoughts tumbling

through her brain. “I’m fine now. I just need to use the bathroom real quick.”

“Not a problem.”

Mason’s bathroom was large and well appointed, with two sinks set into marble countertops and a huge Jacuzzi -type bathtub. There was a toilet and a bidet, both of them ultra-modern. She realized as she looked around that Mason had followed her into the bathroom.

“Uh, I’m good, thanks,” she said, hoping he’d take the hint and give her some privacy.

He didn’t, instead moving to one of the sinks. Turning on the water, he grabbed the bar of soap and washed his hands. As he reached for the hand towel, he gave her a quizzical look. “Why are you just standing there?”

Duh. Did she really have to spell it out?

Apparently she did. “I need to pee, Sir,” she said, trying to keep the impatience out of her voice.

Mason raised a brow, a sardonic smile on his face. “Permission is granted, if that’s what you’re waiting for.” He gestured with his chin toward the toilet. “Go on. Get a move on. We have work to do.”

A test. That’s what this was. Hannah bit back a sigh as she sat on the toilet. Thank goodness she only needed to pee. She stole a glance at Mason.

Hands on his hips, he was staring directly at her, one brow lifted, a smirk on his face.

Looking away again, Hannah finally managed to pee. Finishing as quickly as she could, she flushed the toilet and jumped up to wash her hands, all the while avoiding eye contact.

Then she hurried out of the bathroom, making a beeline for her dress, which she’d left in a heap in the play area.

As she bent to retrieve it, Mason appeared suddenly beside her. He placed a firm hand on her shoulder. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Getting my dress, Sir,” she said, stating what should have been obvious. “So we can get down to the kitchen and get lunch served.”

But before she could slip the dress over her head, Mason plucked it from her fingers. “Have you already forgotten? Slave girls don’t cover themselves. The only thing I want to see you wearing right now is this.” He hooked a finger into the O-ring at the center of her collar.

“Your body belongs to me now, at least for the next few days,” he said, using the O-ring to pull her closer. “While I will respect your hard limits”—he made a face as he said those words, as if he smelled something rotten—“I’ll use and display your body as it pleases me.” He let go of the collar and took a step back. “You said it in one of your own novels, *Angelique*,” he added with a grin. “There is no place for modesty in a slave’s repertoire.”

She couldn’t deny she’d written those words. But that was *fiction*.

Even so, she recognized that for purposes of this immersive experiment she didn’t get to pick and choose what suited her. In spite of her shyness about her less-than-perfect body, she would obey Master Mason’s directive. If nothing else, it would help her fit in more with the other Enclave submissives.

Freshly resolved, Hannah stood tall, though that still left her nearly a foot shorter than the tall man staring her down.

“Please excuse me, Sir,” she said, not quite sure if she was channeling one of her heroines or just being herself. “It won’t happen again.”

A smile ghosted his lips. “No,” he agreed, propelling her out of the suite. “It won’t.”

Chapter 21

After lunch, Mason pulled around to the front door of the house, letting the car idle while he waited for Hannah. Since he now had full control of her schedule, he figured taking her with him for his usual provisions run would give him more of a chance to talk to her one-on-one, without interruption.

Since they would be going into town and she would accompany him into the shops, he had told her she could put on her civvies, including underclothing. While slaves went naked on The Enclave property, none of the Doms, Mason included, would ever put them in a potentially compromising position when in public.

Mason allowed the subs in his kitchen to speak freely, and Lucia had been bubbling over with eager questions and barely contained excitement as she helped plate and carry out the lunch. Hannah was smiling too—revealing those deep dimples in both cheeks that Mason found adorable.

Now Hannah appeared at the front door and walked quickly down the path toward the driveway. She wore a pale pink, short-sleeved knit top over a floral-patterned skirt that fell to mid-calf, flats on her feet. Her thick, dark hair was pulled back in some kind of twist at the nape of her neck, probably courtesy of Lucia. The only nod to her slave status was the training collar. With its O-rings, it might raise a few brows in town, but only from those in the know.

She climbed into the passenger seat, her eyes bright with expectation, nervous energy radiating from her like an aura. “Permission to speak, Sir?” she asked.

Mason smiled. “Yes. While we are running errands you have carte blanche, no need to ask, and no need for protocol.”

“Oh, good,” Hannah said, perhaps a touch too eagerly. As he drove down the long driveway toward the exit gates, she added, “I used to love going to the butcher and the various

farmers' markets and specialty shops. It's been a long time since I've had anyone to cook for."

It occurred to Mason he knew next to nothing about Hannah outside of The Enclave, except that she was an author and a widow. "Lucia mentioned you'd lost your husband last year to cancer. I'm sorry for your loss. That's gotta be really rough, losing your partner so young."

He glanced at her as he made his way carefully along the dirt road that wound down the mountain. She was blinking rapidly, her eyes bright with sudden tears. Shit. Why had he brought that up?

"Yes," she said quietly. "It was rough. We'd been together our entire adult lives—just shy of twenty-four years. I was only nineteen when we married..." She trailed off, then gave an abrupt, embarrassed laugh. "Are you sure you want to hear this?"

"I really do," he asserted, surprising himself. Normally, he took little to no interest in the private lives of the slave trainees that came and went at The Enclave. He enjoyed training and playing with them, as far as it went. Then they left, and that was that.

But Hannah was different. For one thing, she was an excellent dessert chef. He hadn't really given her a chance with much more than prep work for the main courses, but perhaps he would remedy that. For another, she was sexy as hell. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so attracted to a woman. And the more he got to know her, the more attracted he became.

He glanced at her again as he drove. She was staring out her window, her arms wrapped around her torso. Hoping to distract her from sad thoughts, and also because he was interested, Mason said, "Tell me about your culinary background. You clearly know your way around the kitchen. You're a top-notch baker. And your prep skills tell me you've had at least some formal training. Am I right?"

"Oh, well," she replied with a flustered laugh. "Actually, you're looking at a culinary school dropout. I lasted all of four

months.”

Mason chuckled. “Why’d you drop out? Wait. Let me guess. Was it the insanely expensive tuition, the cutthroat competition, the ridiculous hours or the abusive chefs that got to you?”

Hannah laughed. “Those were definitely factors. Then there was the fact of two little kids at home and a husband gunning for partner in his law firm, working sixty-plus hours per week. Not to mention a revolving door of nannies who looked good on paper but could never live up to my expectations. Which isn’t to say I’m sorry I tried it. While I learned a lot, the key thing I figured out was that I don’t have the drive it takes to make it in that kind of environment. Turns out, I’d much rather be at home playing with the kids or sitting with my laptop, tapping out stories, though it would be years before I actually made any money at it.”

She groaned, theatrically slapping her forehead. “Oh, god. Listen to me. Blathering on about stuff I’m sure you have zero interest in.”

Mason chuckled. “Hey, I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t interested.” He snorted, adding, “Blathering? Is that even a word?”

“Of course it’s a word,” she said, sounding for all the world like his fifth grade teacher. “It means to go on and on about something or, as my meemaw used to say, ‘holding forth.’”

“Your *meemaw*?” Mason repeated incredulously, still laughing. “Seriously?”

“What?” she demanded, affronted but grinning. “Meemaw and Papaw. Perfectly respectable Southern grandparent names. Where are you from, anyway?”

“Upstate New York,” Mason replied.

“Ah, that explains it. A Yankee,” Hannah said.

“Guilty as charged,” Mason agreed. “Though I’ve been down here since graduating culinary school.” They were

entering the city of Asheville now, and he eased into the traffic that was getting worse every year.

“Were you ever married?” Hannah asked, adding quickly, “I mean, if that’s not too personal a question.”

“Nah. Turnabout is fair play, after all.” Mason shrugged. “The short answer is no. I guess I never found the right woman. Or the time. Forget sixty-hour work weeks. I was clocking up to ninety hours in some of the kitchens I worked in. People hooked up all the time, sure. But no one really had time for a relationship. We would all be so hopped up and overtired by the time the workday ended, often not until two or three in the morning. For a while, the only way I could unwind was with drugs and alcohol. That worked until it didn’t.”

Suddenly aware how much he was sharing, or oversharing, he glanced at Hannah. Based on the somewhat sheltered suburban life she’d described for herself, would she judge him regarding his casual references to hooking up, drinking and drugging?

But all he saw was interest in her expression. She was watching him intently, as if hanging on his every word. While he appreciated her listening so raptly, it also made him uneasy. Especially since he’d just opened that can of worms about his past self-destructive behavior.

Eager to head off any probing questions in that regard, he rushed on, “I eventually saved up enough to open my own restaurant, and then I was even busier. Forget a relationship, I barely had time to breathe. I was burning out by forty. BDSM was my only real release valve. It was my salvation, really. Then I met Anthony and Brandon, and the timing was perfect. They needed a live-in chef. I needed a major change. Win-win all around.”

He pulled into the small parking lot of his favorite local butcher shop and cut the engine. Hannah accompanied him inside.

He asked for her input as he selected various cuts of beef and pork. He was impressed when she made the same

selections he would have. Ditto at the fish store and his favorite farmer's market.

When the car was loaded with provisions, Mason drove to a secluded spot on the edge of town behind a boarded-up warehouse. He left the engine idling as he turned to Hannah. "As of now, we resume your training, sub girl. You will abide by the earlier rules of only speaking when asked a direct question, or first requesting and receiving permission. You will do exactly as I say during the drive. Understood?"

Hannah's eyes had widened as he spoke. "Yes, Sir."

"Unbuckle your seatbelt, remove your panties and hand them to me."

She glanced quickly out the windows, looking adorably nervous. Then she did as he said, lifting her hips and sliding a pair of silky pink panties down her legs. Her cheeks flushed, she handed him the panties.

He tossed them in the back seat and directed, "Now the bra." He watched with impressed amusement as she executed that most feminine of tricks of getting her bra off without removing her top. The knit fabric hugged her full breasts and her nipples, he was pleased to note, were fully erect.

He tossed the bra in the back seat as well, and then reached back to retrieve the small gear bag he'd packed for the trip. As he unzipped it, he directed, "Put your seatbelt back on."

While she complied, he pulled out a pair of Velcro wrist cuffs, each with an extra nylon strap with a Velcro strip sewn into it. "Hold out your wrists," he directed.

"Are you sure this is..." she began nervously, her head swiveling around the empty lot.

"What do you think you're doing?" Mason interrupted, his tone firm. "Did you ask permission to speak? Did I grant it?"

She swallowed, more color splashing onto her cheeks. "No, Sir," she said faintly.

"Speak up, slave. I can't hear you."

"No, Sir," she said, her voice louder.

“That’s correct. This time, I’ll let you skate with a warning. Next time, you’ll be soundly punished.”

As he slipped the cuffs around her wrists, he added, “Here’s what’s going to happen now. You’re going to reach back behind your seat so I can Velcro your wrists together. In the event of an emergency, you can pull them free just by yanking on the straps. Otherwise, you will remain cuffed. While I’m driving us back to the compound, I may choose to touch you. Whatever I ask of you, you will immediately obey. Whatever I do to you, you will accept it with the grace befitting a sub girl. Got that?”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied, looking so nervous he almost took pity on her.

He climbed out of the car and walked around to the other side. Opening the back door, he leaned into the car and clipped her cuffs together. Next, he opened the passenger door. Reaching for the seat controls, he adjusted Hannah’s seat so she was leaning back in a reclining position with plenty of legroom. She looked incredibly hot. Having her wrists cuffed in this way forced her to arch her back a little, causing her luscious breasts to jut forward.

Returning to the driver’s seat, Mason eased out of the parking lot and back into the traffic, heading for the mountain road. Though he hadn’t even touched her yet, he could feel Hannah’s tension in the rigidity with which she held herself. Her eyes kept darting around, as if the people in the passing cars were all staring at her. In fact, his car windows were tinted as dark as was legally permitted. You’d have to stand directly by the car, your face nearly touching the glass, to see in. He didn’t tell her that. The sadist in him enjoyed watching her squirm.

Once they began their ascent, he reached over and casually flipped up her skirt, exposing her thighs and smooth sex. “Spread your legs wider, slut,” he commanded. “And keep them spread, no matter what I do to you.”

She bit her lip as she glanced quickly at him and then away again. After hesitating for several seconds, she finally let her

thighs part. Once he had her properly trained, there would be no hesitation whatsoever, no matter what he asked of her.

Keeping his eyes on the road and one hand on the wheel, he reached over and rested his hand lightly on her thigh. She jumped like a skittish cat at his touch.

“Shh,” he soothed. “Relax, Hannah. Remember, this body belongs to me now.”

He stroked her soft skin for a minute or so until he felt her relax. Eventually, he moved his hand to cup her mons. She drew in a sharp breath and slammed her thighs together.

After glancing in the rearview mirror to make sure no one was coming, Mason veered sharply to the narrow shoulder of the road and put the car in park. Turning to face Hannah, he demanded, “What do you think you’re doing? You know better than that. A slave *never* closes her legs to her Master.”

Her brows furrowed, her mouth working as if she was about to speak. Wisely, she appeared to think better of it. After another moment’s hesitation, she let her thighs fall open, though she wouldn’t meet his eye.

As Mason pulled back onto the road, he tried to remember when he’d worked with such a modest trainee. The typical Enclave trainee was already deeply involved in the BDSM lifestyle and came to The Enclave to improve and deepen their skills. Hannah was definitely the exception. But, with a little time and patience, he was sure he could bring out her inner submissive, and mold her into the slave girl she secretly longed to be.

As he drove, he cupped her mons again. This time, she managed to keep her legs spread, though her tension was palpable. After a moment, he moved his fingers lightly over her labia. She shivered at his touch, her face averted from his. He stroked her a while, teasing in a circle around, but not touching, her clit. Eventually, he slipped a finger inside her. She was sopping wet and invitingly tight.

Using her juices as lubricant, he rubbed her cunt, lightly grazing her hardening clit with his fingertips. She sighed

softly, her eyes fluttering closed. He pressed a finger again inside her and added a second. She groaned, a shudder moving through her body. Keeping his fingers inside her, he ground his palm against her spread sex.

She moaned, the throaty sound further stiffening his cock. He wanted to make her come. He would make her come. But not yet. She had to earn it.

Without warning, he pulled his hand away and then smacked her cunt with a hard palm.

Hannah yelped, her thighs slamming together.

“Open those legs,” Mason barked. “How dare you close your legs to me?”

Her breath tremulous, Hannah cast him a beseeching look.

“Do as you’re told,” he warned her in a low growl. “Don’t compound the punishment you’ve earned by disobeying again.”

Tears filled her eyes, which she rapidly blinked away. She was breathing fast, her chest rising and falling. Was she trembling?

Mason placed a hand gently on her thigh, reminding himself she wasn’t yet a trained Enclave slave, ready and eager to suffer and to serve. She was still at the beginning of her submissive journey. She just needed someone, someone like him, to guide her.

“Slow your breathing, Hannah,” he urged gently. “I’m not giving you more than you can handle. Trust yourself. Open yourself to me. You know you need this. You know you long for it.”

With a tremulous sigh, she let her legs fall apart. The spicy-sweet scent of her arousal filled the car. He breathed it in, his mouth watering at the thought of tasting her.

“Here’s what’s going to happen for the rest of the drive. I’m going to bring you close to the edge of a climax. Only to the edge, mind you. To keep you from toppling over, I will smack your sweet little cunt with my open palm. No matter

what I'm doing to you, you will *not* close your legs. Your job is to suffer for me, Hannah. To accept the pleasure I give you and embrace the pain that is the price of that pleasure. Do you understand?"

"I'm afraid, Sir," she cried. "I want to obey, but it hurts. It really hurts when you smack me like that."

"Of course it does," he agreed with a chuckle. "You're a sexual masochist, sub girl. For you, there is no distinction between pleasure and pain—not when it pleases your Master to use you in this way. You were born for this. I see it in your eyes, Hannah. I hear it in your sigh."

He waited a beat, in case he was pushing the newbie too far, too fast. To his delight and relief, she didn't offer any more protests. Encouraged, he reached again between her legs. He rubbed and teased her until she was panting, her clit hard as a marble beneath his fingers, which were slick with her juices.

When he gauged she was again about to climax, he pulled back his hand and smacked her wet, swollen cunt once more.

She cried out but, this time, managed to keep her legs spread. "Good girl," he encouraged. "You please me."

For the rest of the drive, he toyed with her, bringing her to the edge of orgasm, then slapping her reddened cunt with a resounding smack. Her whimpering cries only spurred him on.

His erection throbbed, his balls tight with lust by the time they reached the gates. As he guided the car to the house, he flipped down Hannah's skirt and yanked her cuffs free of one another.

"No orgasm for you, slave girl," he said, his eyes once more on the road. "You still haven't earned it."

She huffed a breath, and he half expected her to protest. But she remained silent. Good girl. He'd shape her into a proper slave girl yet.

Pulling to a stop in the circular drive in front of the house, he twisted in his seat, reaching for her discarded bra and panties. Turning back, he tossed them onto Hannah's lap.

Several tendrils had escaped her twist and hung prettily around her face. Her color was high, her eyes bright.

Glancing at his watch, he said, “You have an hour’s free time before dinner prep. I’ll expect you in the kitchen at six sharp. Meanwhile, you’re going to climb out here while I pull the car around back and bring in the provisions. Be sure to take off the rest of your clothing and present at the front door like a proper Enclave slave, naked and on your knees, until someone comes to let you in.”

A play of emotions moved over Hannah’s face—part fear, part desire, part pure mutiny.

You can do it, he telegraphed silently, holding her gaze with his.

As if she received the message, she lifted her chin, a look of resolve coming into those silvery-blue eyes. Her panties and bra clutched in one hand, she released her seatbelt, opened her door and stepped out of the car.

As Mason drove away, he watched her in the rearview mirror and smiled.

Chapter 22

Heart hammering, Hannah knelt in front of the doors, her clothing in a small bundle beside her. Though the property was private, she couldn't stop glancing around continually, anxious that someone might see her.

Her inner thighs were damp with her own juices, her clit still throbbing. Her bottom still felt tender from the paddling. She was careful as she adjusted herself on her haunches.

After an hour had passed—or maybe it was more like five minutes—one of the doors finally opened and Mark's partner, Jaime, appeared. While they had exchanged a few words in passing, Hannah hadn't yet had a chance to properly get to know Jaime.

She was a very pretty girl with beautiful eyes and long, flowing dark hair. She was naked, too, save her elegant slave collar, nothing like the strip of black leather Hannah wore. Jaime's collar was made of soft leather dyed a deep blue gray with what looked like a genuine diamond where an O-ring might have been.

Hannah's eye was drawn to the small silver hearts studded with yet more diamonds that framed Jaime's cherry-red nipples. The hearts were held in place by thin rods that pierced each nipple, tiny balls on either end. Hannah's own nipples tingled in sympathy. That had to have hurt. But she couldn't deny that the result was quite striking.

"Hey, there," Jaime said, smiling down at Hannah, who felt more than a little ridiculous kneeling on the welcome mat as if she were a package that had just been delivered. "Master Mason sent me to fetch you."

"Finally," Hannah breathed, scrabbling to her feet. Grabbing her clothing bundle, she rushed into the front hall.

"Your first time naked outside?" Jaime asked with a grin as she closed the door.

“Yeah,” Hannah agreed, hugging her clothing to her chest.

“Boy, I remember my first time,” Jaime said with a rueful grin. “Master Julian and Master Mark took several of us trainees out on a hike. We were only allowed boots, backpacks and hats. I was constantly looking around, certain some random hikers were going to appear on the path and call the cops or something.”

“Did they? Appear, I mean?” Hannah asked, wondering how she would react in that situation.

“Nah,” Jaime said. “Which was a good thing, since Master Julian strung me up between two trees and used a violet wand on me. Talk about an electrifying experience,” she added with a laugh.

“Wow,” Hannah breathed, both shocked and thrilled at this information. It brought home yet again how easy she had it in comparison to the actual trainees. Or at least how easy she’d *had* it, until she’d agreed to this new contract. “I can’t even imagine.”

Jaime grinned. “Sure you can. You’re Angelique Rose, after all. You have an awesome imagination. I’ve read all your books.”

“You’re too kind,” Hannah replied, embarrassed but pleased.

“You know your next novel has to be about The Enclave, right?” Jaime continued. “Of course, you’ll have to change the names to protect the guilty,” she added with a laugh.

“The thought has occurred to me,” Hannah replied, her fingers suddenly longing for a keyboard. “Anthony has already endorsed the idea, as long as I show him the manuscript before publishing.”

“Makes sense,” Jaime agreed “While this place isn’t exactly a secret, we do value our privacy.” She touched Hannah’s arm. “We better get moving. Master Mason says you’re to collect the rest of your things and bring them up to his suite. You do realize we will require full details on how the heck you managed that,” she added with a laugh.

“I’m not even sure I know,” Hannah admitted. *Or exactly how I feel about it.*

Jaime gestured for Hannah to precede her. As Hannah stepped past her, Jaime exclaimed, “Someone got lucky. Or was that punishment?”

“Huh?” Hannah asked, turning back toward Jaime, confused.

“Your butt,” Jaime said, grinning. “You’ve got a couple of nice bruises there.”

“I do?” Hannah reached back with her free hand to touch her bare bottom. She was part thrilled, part horrified. “It was a punishment,” she admitted, feeling sheepish. “Though he set me up,” she added indignantly.

“Don’t they always?” Jaime replied with a laugh.

As they made their way down the stairs leading to the slave quarters, Jaime said, “The change in your training contract has lit The Enclave grapevine on fire, I’ll have you know. Everybody’s buzzing about it.”

“They are?” Hannah said, mildly alarmed by this information. No way could she live full-time in a place like this, where everyone knew your business before you did. “Is that a good or a bad thing?”

“That’s what we’re dying to find out, girlfriend.”

When they reached the bottom of the stairs, Hannah saw Lucia curled into one of the chairs. She held her phone in her hands, thumbs flying. As they approached, she looked up and smiled. “There she is. Our newest slave trainee.”

Hannah dropped her clothing on the loveseat and sat down. Jaime flopped down beside her. Hannah picked up one of the throw pillows between them and hugged it to her chest.

Lucia’s phone dinged with the sound of an incoming text. As she glanced down at her phone, Jaime asked, “Who’re you texting, Lucia? Is everything all right with your daughter?”

Lucia smiled. “Everything’s great with her. That’s not who I’m texting with. It’s Lia.”

“Lia,” Hannah exclaimed, remembering the poor girl’s tears of the day before. “Is she okay? Where is she?”

Come to think of it, she hadn’t seen Lia since their talk. She hadn’t been at lunch, now that Hannah thought about it. She had been so distracted and self-conscious by all the attention she’d received that she hadn’t thought to question Lia’s absence.

“She left The Enclave very early this morning,” Lucia said. “Hans drove her back down to Asheville. This is the first chance I’ve had to connect with her. She’s feeling very conflicted at the moment. She has a lot of external pressures we didn’t know about when she entered the program. She has stuff she needs to work out, so this decision was probably for the best.”

“Poor Lia,” Hannah said, recalling the girl’s sobs the evening before. “I know she was having a hard time.”

“It was a struggle for her from the beginning,” Lucia agreed. “She was pretty much in non-stop trouble since she arrived at The Enclave.”

“Yeah,” Jaime agreed, shaking her head. “She’s such a tough little cookie. I sometimes wondered if she wasn’t more Domme than sub. She’s definitely a hardcore masochist. She could take anything the Masters dished out, and only ask for more. Even if she had been allowed a safeword, that girl would never have used it. I was in awe, to tell you the truth.”

“Which is all well and good,” Lucia said. “But masochism is only part of the equation for an Enclave slave. True submission from the heart is an essential. And while I believe Lia has the potential to embrace submission, she resisted it at every turn. It’s why she was constantly being punished—she was holding back that part of herself.”

“Maybe she’s just not cut out for the whole slave thing,” Hannah suggested, thinking at the moment more of herself than Lia.

“Maybe,” Lucia said. Then she sighed. “I hate to see anyone quit before the miracle, but for her this was probably

the right decision, at least for now. Lia says she took your advice, Hannah.”

“My advice?” Hannah asked, alarmed. Was she to blame for Lia’s “quitting before the miracle?”

“Yes,” Lucia said, smiling again. “You told her to follow her heart. Apparently her heart told her to leave.”

“Yikes,” Hannah said, clutching the pillow to her chest. She’d had no idea she’d had such an impact on the girl. “Maybe I should have kept my big mouth shut. I mean, what do I know?”

“No,” Lucia said decisively. “You did her a service. Not everyone is the right fit for what we offer. Sometimes potential trainees sign up for the wrong reasons or have unrealistic expectations. Lia had been white-knuckling her way through the program since day one.” She shrugged philosophically. “And who knows? Maybe one day she’ll be back.”

“Meanwhile, *you’re* still here, Hannah,” Jaime chimed in. “And inquiring minds want to know—how in the world did you manage to talk Master Grump, I mean Master Mason, into personally taking over your training?”

Hannah laughed in spite of herself. “It’s the other way around, actually. And it’s the question I keep asking myself. How did I let him and Master Anthony talk me into this? While I do want a more authentic experience, I’m wondering if maybe I should have stayed with BDSM lite, as Mason calls it. I’m afraid I might be in over my head.”

Lucia pursed her lips thoughtfully. “I disagree, Hannah. Master Anthony and I talked over the idea after Master Mason approached him last night. We both see something in you—something more than just a writer wanting to lend authenticity to her stories. You may not yet be ready for full 24/7 immersion training, but that’s why you were permitted those hard limits. None of us have hard limits, do we Jaime?”

As Jaime shook her head, Lucia added, “That doesn’t mean our Masters exploit what might be triggers for us. They’re very careful to keep us safe in that regard. But the key

to take away from that is that *they* are the ones who keep us safe—who decide what we can and can't handle. It takes time and a building of trust to get to that point. Since you're only here for such a short time, those limits are a good framework for Master Mason to operate within. And hopefully, it frees you up to give yourself more fully to the experience."

"And not just that," Jaime interjected. "You're the first woman to catch Master Mason's attention since Ashley left us last year. I know he comes across super gruff and unapproachable, but, as cornbally as it sounds, there's a tender heart beneath all that. Finding a guy was probably not your prime motivation for coming here, but hey"—she shrugged, smiling—"you could definitely do worse."

"No," Hannah quickly retorted, willing away the blush that tried to rush into her face. "I'm definitely *not* here to find a guy. And if I was, he would not be that guy."

Why had she just said that? Was it even true? Was she just protecting herself from any future pain?

"He's a good man," Lucia said gently. "And I stand by my claim that you two would be good together." Before Hannah could protest, she continued, "I understand your hesitation. Master Mason is a hardcore Dom who specializes in edge play, and you've only just begun your submissive exploration. But Jaime is right. Not only are you the first woman he's noticed in quite some time, but this is the first time since he's been with us that he ever signed up for something like this. Clearly he sees something in you—something worth exploring."

"You should know, too," Jaime said, "that we're all rooting for you, Hannah. Anything we can do—anything you want to run by us, any way we can help you, you just say the word. But first"—she leaned expectantly toward Hannah—"we still have half an hour. So, out with it. Tell us everything, from the beginning."

"Absolutely," Lucia agreed with a chuckle. "We're all ears."

Hannah laughed, both charmed and embarrassed by their interest. She'd allowed herself to become so isolated since

Andy's death. It felt at once strange and wonderful to have these women, these potential genuine friends, take such an interest in her. They had only known her a few days but had welcomed her with open arms. That felt good.

Thank goodness for Charlotte, who'd finally dragged her out of her hermit's cave. She made a mental note to text her as soon as she had the chance.

"Okay," she said almost giddily, feeling for all the world like she was back in her college dorm, whispering excitedly with her girlfriends about her latest crush. "First, you need to know about the kiss..."

Chapter 23

That evening as dinner was ending Mason tapped his glass with his fork to get everyone's attention. When the chatter around the table had ceased and all eyes were on him, he said, "As some of you may know"—he cut himself off to chuckle. "What am I saying? As all of you know, our guest trainee has entered into a new contract. This arrangement more closely resembles our typical trainee contract, albeit with some caveats. I have taken full charge of our newbie, who will be staying in my suite for the duration so I can maximize her training."

He glanced at Hannah, who sat on the other side of the table, sandwiched between Lucia and Jaime. She managed a nervous smile.

He smiled back as he continued, "Because of the very short length of her tenure here, Hannah will be subjected to an intensive regime. One area in which Hannah needs improvement is comfort with her own nudity. Additionally, she's basically untried when it comes to allowing others to touch and use her as it pleases them. Tonight, that's going to change. I would like to invite any of you who are interested to join me in the main dungeon during the evening's play. My slave trainee will be available for your amusement. All I ask is that you review her hard limits beforehand."

As several of the Doms remarked that they were looking forward to it, Mason checked out Hannah's reaction. She had, predictably, turned bright crimson. She was staring down at her lap, her lovely breasts rising and falling as if she were struggling to catch her breath. He'd never worked with such a blushing flower before. If she was going to make a proper slave, she really did need to get over that.

Once the meal had ended, he left the girls to do the after-dinner cleanup. As the others were filing out of the dining room, he caught up with Ellen.

Hannah hadn't been the only one left sexually frustrated after their car ride. If he was going to make it through the dungeon session without developing a serious case of blue balls, he would need some release, pronto.

He placed his hand on Ellen's shoulder. Her ass showed evidence of a recent whipping. The fading welts made his dick harden. "Are you scheduled for any training at the moment, Ellen?"

She immediately stopped walking and turned toward him, eyes deferentially downcast. "No, Sir. Not until later this evening, Sir."

"Good. Come with me."

He led her to the meditation room for a little privacy. Without preamble, he unzipped his fly and pushed his jeans and underwear down his thighs. "Get on your knees and make me come, slave."

The young woman at once dropped to the ground and knelt up prettily, her lips already parting. She was nearly done with her tenure at The Enclave, and was going to be put up for auction, at her request.

The whole auction thing was still in its initial stages. From what Mason had gleaned from conversations with Lawrence, who was spearheading the initiative, it was a kind of dating service for Doms and subs heavily into the scene. Trained subs who were looking for long-term partners would participate in a once-monthly auction to be held at The Enclave. Vetted Dominants from the community would be given the opportunity to scene with the various subs before the auction began. The Doms would then bid on the available subs, who would agree beforehand to abide by the results of the bidding.

Mason wished Ellen the best, but at the moment his main concern was taking the edge off so he would be able to focus during Hannah's session. "You may use your hands and mouth," he said, placing his hands on his hips.

The girl cradled his balls in one small hand, the other curling around the base of his cock. Staring up at him with big

brown eyes, she closed her lips over his shaft and took him into her mouth. Mason sighed with pleasure. Even so, as eager and as skilled as the girl at his feet was, he couldn't deny it—he'd rather it had been Hannah.

Mason was waiting near one of the spanking benches. He'd changed into leathers for the session, black leather pants and a vest, forgoing a shirt. He wore his usual black boots.

He'd made sure to grab one of the portable, wheeled cabinets that was filled with all sorts of sexy toys and restraint gear. He'd also made sure the station's impact toy rack was fully stocked. This was going to be fun.

Brandon was already engaged in a scene with his slave boy and the trainee, Michael, at a nearby whipping post when Hannah entered the space. "Over here, slave girl," Mason called, eager to get started.

As she approached, he asked, "How are you? Ready for some intense, hands-on play?" *He* certainly was, but he'd decided he would direct during this session, rather than participate. That could come later, up in his suite.

She was staring at his chest, no doubt admiring the various tattoos. Amused, he put a finger under her chin, directing her gaze to his face. She swallowed visibly. "I-I think so, Sir," she managed.

"Good girl," he encouraged. "Here's what's going to happen over the next hour. I will strap you down on the bench and allow whoever wanders in to play with you in whatever way amuses them. This might involve sex toys, impact toys, or whatever they come up with." Taking in Hannah's somewhat terrified expression, he added, "Don't worry. Your hard limits will be respected."

She looked slightly mollified by this reminder, but she was still strung tight as a bow.

"I recognize I'm kind of throwing you in the deep end here. Don't worry about being perfect. Just do your best, Hannah. I have faith in you, or I wouldn't have stepped up to be your personal trainer."

“Thank you, Sir,” she said in a soft, tremulous voice.

He tucked an errant tendril of her hair behind her ear and gave her an encouraging smile. He placed both hands on her shoulders and looked down into her eyes. “It’s all good, Hannah. This is what you want. It’s what you need.”

He could feel the tension in her body and see it in her face. She was still skittish as a colt. A part of his mind whispered that he ought to slow down. Maybe she wasn’t ready for this yet, despite the fact she had agreed to full-immersion training. But they only had a few days, damn it. She’d really given him no option.

He wanted to take her face in his hands and kiss those sensual, full lips. Would she kiss him back? Or push him away? Was she ready for a new relationship, or still in mourning for her late husband?

Relationship?

What the fuck? Who the hell is talking about a relationship?

Dismissing his crazy thoughts, he focused on his charge, who was in need of some pre-session care. “Close your eyes, Hannah. Focus on relaxing your body and opening your mind. I want you to breathe in through your nose and then let it out through your mouth. Slow, deep breaths.”

As her eyes closed, he noticed how her long, thick eyelashes touched her cheeks. There were faint smile lines at the corners of her eyes. Mason had a sudden desire to see that full-on dimpled smile again.

“Breathe,” he reminded her. “That’s it. Let all the tension flow out with your breath.” He kept his hands on her shoulders, hoping his touch helped to steady her. “I know this is challenging for you, Hannah. But you’re brave and strong. You can do this.”

He smiled. “It might not always seem like it during this kind of intensive training, but you’re among friends here. We all want you to succeed.” He stroked her cheek. “If you can,

focus on the pleasure of submission and the satisfaction of your masochistic cravings, rather than your fear.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said, his words appearing to calm her.

Moving his hands from her shoulders, he cupped her lovely breasts, gently pressing them together.

“Do well during this session and you will be rewarded.” Before he could control his impulse, Mason lowered his head and sucked one perfect nipple into his mouth.

Hannah’s soft moan brought him back to his senses. Dropping his hands, he took a step back. “Climb up on the bench and straddle it, facedown, ass up,” he said briskly. “I’m going to strap you down.”

As she tentatively approached the bench, he nodded.

“That’s it. Up you go.”

Chapter 24

Only the week before, Hannah had watched with longing as Mark had secured Jaime to this very spanking bench. Now she was the one draped over it, her shins and forearms flat against the padded side rests.

Earlier, while Lucia and she were clearing away the things, loading the dishwasher and tidying the kitchen, Lucia had given Hannah a steady dose of much needed encouragement and support. She'd also gently reminded Hannah that she had entered into the new contract willingly and that, while she might be scared, on some level she had to want what was happening.

"I *do* want it," Hannah had agreed. "I've dreamed about something like this my entire adult life. Now, I've finally got the chance to live out my fantasies. It's just... It's turning out to be harder than I anticipated."

"Hard isn't necessarily bad," Lucia had reminded her. "Even so, you still have a choice. You always have the option, just as Lia did, of leaving The Enclave. D/s only works with full consent. Submission by its nature is something you give willingly and with all your heart. So, if this doesn't feel right, there's no shame in that, Hannah. No one would judge you."

"So, those are my choices?" Hannah had asked, aware she sounded petulant. "Play ball or go home?"

Lucia had laughed. "Basically, yes. While you're here at The Enclave, you need to play by our rules. The fact Master Anthony and Master Mason allowed you hard limits is already something of a concession. Take comfort in that, and trust that Master Mason will keep you safe."

Lucia was right. Hannah was there by choice. And Mason believed in her. He thought she was strong and brave. He saw something in her worth nurturing, and that was thrilling in and of itself. While this particular scenario involving multiple Doms didn't mesh precisely with her vision of a more intimate

sort of D/s, she wanted to remain open to the experience. Mason's advice made sense. She would focus on the thrill of submission and the erotic pleasures surely in store for her. She would flow with it, and see where it took her.

She sighed with pleasure as he brought wide bands of leather over her lower back, wrists and calves, binding her securely in place. The bench was nicely padded. There was even a headrest like the kind on fancy massage tables, which had the added benefit of allowing her to hide her face.

"Comfortable?" Mason asked, his hand coming to rest on her upper back.

"Yes, Sir," she replied, lifting her head. As comfortable as she could be with her ass and cunt on full display.

Mason appeared beside her and crouched so they were at eye level. "You're gonna do just fine tonight, Hannah." This close, she couldn't help but notice how charmingly his eyes crinkled at the corners. There was genuine warmth there, and kindness. "You're ready for this, or I wouldn't have brought you here," he added. "This is your chance to show me—and more importantly, to show yourself—that you have what it takes to be a slave girl."

He lifted his hand to stroke her cheek with his scarred, calloused fingers.

"Make me proud." Then he leaned in and kissed her on the cheek. It was just a brief brush of his lips, but her skin tingled at his touch.

"Yes, Sir," she breathed. "I will."

He rose and stepped away, his manner suddenly nonsense. "Good girl. Let's get this party started."

People were entering the dungeon. When she saw Brandon making a beeline toward them, Hannah quickly dropped her head back into the cradle. She felt like a little girl who believed if she hid her face, no one else could see her.

"Hey there," Mason said. "Where's your better two-thirds?"

It took Hannah a moment to parse that sentence before she understood.

“Marjorie was in the mood for a full body massage,” Brandon replied. “Katie is tending to her up in our suite. So your invitation was perfect timing. I’m looking forward to playing with your girl toy.”

Girl toy?

Hannah couldn’t quite decide if she liked the playful term or not.

“Great ass,” Brandon added, giving Hannah’s bottom a playful swat. “I like a woman with a little meat on her bones.”

She didn’t get a chance to feel insulted, immediately distracted by the touch of a finger running lightly along the crack between her ass cheeks. She would have slammed her legs closed if she’d been able. As it was, she could only twitch.

When Brandon rimmed her asshole with his finger, Hannah tensed at the invasive touch. If she hadn’t been strapped in place, she might not have been able to resist the urge to jump down from the bench and flee.

“You had a chance to fuck this sweet ass yet?”

“You need to review her hard limits, Brandon,” Mason said, to Hannah’s vast relief. “No anal sex.”

“Right, right,” Brandon said, chuckling. Something in his tone made it clear he’d known that all along. He was messing with her on purpose, the sadist.

“What about toys? Anything specifically precluding dildos and plugs on that little cheat sheet of hers?”

“Why, no, now that you mention it,” Mason said. Hannah could hear the smile in his voice, the bastard. “Nary a word.”

Hannah lifted her head abruptly, her lips parting in protest. Then she paused and lowered her head back into the cradle. She’d known going in that Mason was going to press her submissive boundaries tonight. Submission by its nature was a

kind of surrender. To truly submit, she needed to let go and accept what her Master chose for her.

And, as nervous as she was, she couldn't deny the dark excitement heating her blood. She was definitely no longer on the outside, looking in. Stark naked and bound to a spanking bench, she was the focus of not one, but two confident, sexy Doms. Who knew what wonderful, terrible things they were going to do to her?

Despite her resolve, she gave a small cry when something cold and gooey was smeared between her cheeks. Then someone's finger circled and then pressed into her asshole.

"Nice and tight," Brandon said, moving his finger inside her. "You sure we can't fuck this little slut? It's not like she could do anything about it."

It occurred to her that, though she had hard limits, she, like the other subs at The Enclave, had no safeword. He was right—bound as she was, she would be powerless to resist them. All at once, the air whooshed out of Hannah's lungs. Her heart boomed, her hands clenching into fists.

Mason stroked the back of her neck with his large, comforting hand. "Calm down, Hannah. He's just messing with you. No one is going to violate your hard limits. Remember, I've got you." His touch and his gravelly voice pulled her back from the brink. She managed to draw a tremulous breath. As he continued to gently massage her neck, her panic ebbed away.

"Better. Lift your head and look at me," he said, his voice gentle.

Hannah obeyed, meeting his eyes. There was an intensity in his gaze that was at once compelling and also a little scary. In it, she saw determination, power and total control. He was pure Dom, and the submissive in her responded with an unvoiced, dreamy sigh.

"We *are* going to play with your ass," he said, his tone now firm. "You have absolutely no say in the matter. But you do have a choice in how you handle it. You can either white-

knuckle your way through it, or you can embrace the experience. It's up to you."

"Yes, Sir," she whispered.

He moved once more out of her line of sight. She dropped her head back into the cradle, determined to be brave, no matter what they did to her. Though she was nervous, she was also incredibly turned on.

"What's your pleasure tonight, Brandon?" Mason asked from behind her.

"I'm thinking a butt plug. She's so tight. You really should begin anal training right away. For now, I think a small anal plug will loosen her up nicely."

Hannah instantly forgot her resolve to be brave as a shot of adrenaline squirted through her system. Shit. She'd been so focused on the big-ticket items on the hard limits list that she'd somehow missed checking off the box for anal plugs. Was it too late to add that in?

"Slave Hannah," Mason commanded from behind her, "Ask Master Brandon politely if he'll please insert a butt plug up your ass."

Oh god. Seriously?

He's testing you. They're only words. You can totally do this.

Taking a deep breath, Hannah lifted her head.

"Please, Master Brandon," she managed, barely able to hear her own voice over the blood roaring in her ears. "Please..." She blew out a breath, trying to get herself to say the words. In a rush, she finished, "Please, Sir. Please insert a butt plug up my ass."

"It will be my pleasure, slave Hannah," Brandon replied, chuckling.

She bit back a groan, once more hiding her face in the cradle.

There was the crinkling sound of a wrapper being torn away. Then something hard nudged at her sphincter. Her spread legs prevented her from tensing, which was probably a good thing. She gasped as the tip slipped inside.

To her relief, it was almost immediately withdrawn. The relief was short-lived, however, as he again pressed the tip of the plug between her ass cheeks, going slightly deeper this time.

“Good girl,” Brandon encouraged. “Stay relaxed. You’re doing fine.” He placed a hand on her lower back. Slowly, carefully, he repeated the process, each time going deeper. It didn’t hurt, not exactly.

“Breathe,” Mason reminded her.

She managed to relax a little. She could do this. She was doing it. Then, all at once, a flash of pain sliced through her anus like a knife.

“Ouch,” she cried, her anal muscles trying to expel the foreign object. “That hurt!”

To her chagrin, both men chuckled. “You’ve done it, sub girl,” Mason said. “You took it all the way. You should be proud.”

Hannah grinned in spite of herself. She *was* proud. And it had stopped hurting. The sense of fullness wasn’t horrible. In fact, it felt kind of good.

Suddenly, the plug whirred to life inside of her. Hannah gave an involuntary yelp at the unexpected sensation. Once she adjusted to it, the steady vibration filled her with a sweet, shivery pleasure. Her clit hardened, throbbing in time to the pulsating rhythm of the anal plug.

“Very nice. May I have a turn?” Hannah recognized Mistress Aubrey’s voice. Was her slave boy, Gene, there too?

“By all means,” Mason said. “What’s your pleasure?”

“The anal plug looks so pretty,” she replied. “How about we add a nice fat vibrator into her tight little cunt?”

“Absolutely,” Mason agreed.

It was strange in the extreme to be talked about and handled as if she were a doll or a toy. In a way, it was wildly freeing not to be the one in charge. She had no decisions to make. All she needed to do was submit. That added layer of surrender made her sexual excitement all the more powerful. There was no denying how incredibly turned on she was. The vibrations inside her anus were spiraling through her entire groin. Her sex felt swollen, and her clit throbbed almost painfully.

Unlike the plug, the vibrator slipped in easily. In spite of herself, Hannah moaned with pleasure as the toy filled her. A deep shudder moved through her body.

Since Andy's passing, she had masturbated now and again, using a similar vibrator on herself. But that had just been scratching an itch, the satisfaction limited to a brief, spasming pleasure. This promised to be something altogether more powerful.

"So responsive," Aubrey purred. Then the phallus, too, clicked on, sending more pulsating waves of pure pleasure through Hannah's core.

Oh, it felt so good. So, so good. She'd never experienced anything like it—both orifices filled at once, each pulsating against the other through the thin membranes that separated them. Her awareness that others were watching her—focused solely on her as she squirmed in her bonds—somehow made her pleasure even keener. While it was utterly foreign to be the center of this sort of attention, it was also wildly exciting. And the fact that Mason was the one orchestrating this whole thing—allowing the others to use her for *his* pleasure, satisfied something deep in her soul.

She heard a moaning sound and realized it was her own voice.

"You're not going to let that worthless slave come without earning it, are you?"

It took Hannah a moment to place the reedy voice: Lawrence.

“I’m not sure I could stop her,” Mason replied with a chuckle.

“I’ll stop her.” Lawrence said. Hannah heard the unmistakable whoosh of a cane being whipped through the air. “With your permission, of course.”

“By all means,” Mason said. “Just be careful not to break the skin.”

“Understood.”

Before Hannah could open her mouth to protest, the cane flicked against her ass, leaving a trail of fire in its wake. It hurt, make no mistake. But the thrumming pleasure radiating from the dual phalluses offset the pain.

Almost.

The next flick was a little harder, yanking a gasp from Hannah’s lips. Yet another line of fire seared over both cheeks. In spite of the pain, in spite of being bound and exposed for all to see, Hannah was more aroused than she’d ever been in her life. Her clit was going to explode. Her entire body trembled on the edge of a climax.

Just as she was about to topple over, the cane whipped against her flesh, landing in such a way it caught her spread pussy in its path. Blinding pain short-circuited her brain and she howled.

“Take it,” Lawrence snarled. The cane landed again in a flurry of sharp, flicking strokes over her bottom. The vibration inside her cunt increased, accompanied by the steady pulse of the vibrating plug.

Hannah broke out in a cold sweat as the brutal cane snapped relentlessly against her ass and thighs. Mercifully, it didn’t catch her exposed pussy again. Even so, she writhed in her bonds. Her body was bathed in sweat, her breath rasping, heart smashing, cunt pulsing.

Oh god, oh god, oh god. It hurt. Fuck, it hurt so much. *It hurt so good.* The pleasure was unbearable, the pain intolerable. Then fingers—rough, calloused chef’s fingers, were suddenly on her vulva, which was slick with her juices.

At his touch, everything else fell away, and Hannah came.
And came... And came...

Chapter 25

Mason sent the others away while he saw to Hannah's aftercare. He was impressed with how well she'd handled what had to have been quite a difficult scene for her. It was one reason he'd chosen that particular spanking bench—to allow her the refuge of hiding her face when she needed to. She wasn't quite ready to look her task Masters in the eye and accept their bidding with head held high. That would come in time.

Apart from being a sexy and, in his estimation, very successful scene, Hannah's response further solidified what had been growing in his mind the more they spent time together. There was definitely a slave lurking beneath that innocent exterior. When she could get out of her own way, Hannah demonstrated real potential as a full-on submissive.

After removing the toys and treating the welts inflicted by Lawrence's cane, Mason released the leather straps that held Hannah down. She swayed a little as he helped her from the bench to the ground. Her hair was tousled, her eyes fever-bright, her color still high.

He placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her. Again, he had that absurd desire to kiss her. It was his own damn fault. He never should have given in to his teenage impulse in the kitchen. That kiss had cracked a door he'd thought was locked. And damn it all, he only wanted to open it wider...

He dismissed the thought with a slight shake of his head. At least for the time being, now that he'd signed up as her trainer, he would need to remain on a professional footing. It was essential he keep his emotions under control and his dick in his pants. While it irritated the crap out of him that Anthony had allowed her hard limits, that didn't relieve him of the responsibility of observing and respecting those limits.

Now he smiled down at his charge. "You did well, Hannah, except for one thing. You failed to ask permission when you came."

“I couldn’t help—” she began.

He cut her off with a sharp shake of the head. “A slave girl doesn’t offer excuses. She acknowledges her mistake and accepts whatever her Master deems is the appropriate response.”

A play of emotions moved over Hannah’s pretty face—part indignation, part fear, part contrition. To her credit, however, she pressed her lips together and gave a quick nod.

“I’m not going to punish you,” he added, amused at the nearly comical look of relief that flashed over her features. “You’ll be feeling those welts Lawrence gave you for a little while longer. That should be enough of a reminder.”

Letting go of her shoulders, he took a step back. “I think you’ve had enough communal play for tonight. Let’s go upstairs.”

He led her out of the dungeon and up to his suite. Once inside the room, he shut the door. Hannah appeared to be pretty wiped out. After the intensity of the session, she was probably experiencing some degree of sub drop. A little TLC was in order.

Mason retrieved two bottles of chilled water from the small refrigerator he kept in the play area. He handed Hannah one and took the other for himself. As she sipped hers, he suggested, “How about a nice hot bath?”

“That would be wonderful, Sir,” Hannah agreed.

In the bathroom, he said, “You may use the toilet if you wish while I get the water going.”

Unlike earlier that day, this time she readily sat on the toilet. Mason smiled to himself, thinking how quickly she was learning. Maybe five days would be enough, after all. If nothing else, it would be a very good beginning. He could refine her skills and obedience over time...

While she peed, he turned on the tap to fill the tub. As an afterthought, he grabbed a bottle of bath oil and poured some into the water. Deciding he might as well seize the moment, Mason picked up his toothbrush.

When Hannah emerged from the toilet, he said through a mouthful of toothpaste, “Might as well do your teeth too since we’re in for the night.”

With a nod, she approached the sinks. When she was done with her ablutions, Hannah performed that most sub-like of gestures. Facing the full-length mirror on the back of the linen closet door, she turned around and twisted back to see her ass.

“Holy fuck,” she breathed softly to herself.

“You look like a bona fide slave girl with those welts and bruises,” Mason said, grinning. “You should be proud of yourself.”

When she turned back to him, her face was a study in contrasts, part delighted, part horrified. “I am proud,” she declared, lifting her chin. “But I’m also kind of freaked out. I mean, the welts look so...so brutal.”

He noted the omission of Master or Sir, but let it pass. She’d had a very long day, all things considered. They could focus more on protocol training going forward. Instead, he said, “That word—brutal. It evokes something very negative in my mind—something harsh and cruel. Does it *feel* brutal to you, Hannah? Does it feel wrong, like something done to you against your will, without your consent, without your desire?”

She was quiet a long moment, her expression thoughtful. Finally, she said, “No. If I’m totally honest, it feels kind of... amazing. *I* feel kind of amazing. Empowered.” She flashed one of those dimpled smiles.

Mason smiled back, delighted with her. “Spoken like a true sub girl. Just think of those marks as badges of submissive courage. And enjoy them while they last,” he added with a chuckle. “With Aubrey’s magic salve, you’ll barely notice them by tomorrow.”

“Well, that’s a good thing,” she replied, twisting back once again to peer at herself.

“Not to worry,” Mason quipped. “I’ll be adding new ones—you can count on it.”

He returned to the tub, which was nearly full. “Climb in,” he said, turning off the tap. “The water’s fine.”

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Hannah eased herself carefully into the steaming water, her bottom still quite tender from the caning. The water surrounded her as she settled back against the curved contours of the tub. With a satisfied sigh, she rested her head against the built-in headrest and closed her eyes.

The endorphin-based high from the powerful orgasm coupled with the caning had started to ebb, leaving behind a bone-deep but not unpleasant exhaustion. The soothing scent of lavender mingled with the steam rising above the tub. If she wasn’t careful, she’d fall asleep right there in the water...

“You look so comfortable,” Mason said in that deep rumble of his that was definitely growing on her. “I think I’ll join you.”

Hannah’s eyes flew open, her lethargy falling away. She watched, wide-eyed as he casually removed his sexy leather vest. He had a big barrel chest covered in dark curly chest hair. She noticed that the top of his left pec was inked with a detailed tattoo composed of shapes and symbols that radiated from the center outward in a circular pattern.

As he toed off his boots and reached for his leather pants, Hannah forgot all about the tattoo. She forgot how to breathe. His eyes fixed on hers, he unzipped the pants and pulled them down his legs, along with his underwear.

Heat she couldn’t blame on the bath suffused Hannah’s face as she took in the man’s naked form. Her nipples stiffened beneath the water, her cunt tightening. Holy hell, he was built.

Mason was a big man, but there wasn’t an ounce of fat on him. It was muscle—solid muscle. His semi-erect cock was in proportion with the rest of him—long and thick. She tried not to gawk—and failed.

“Like what you see?” he said with a chuckle.

Hannah at once averted her gaze, wishing she could disappear.

Mason settled into the tub opposite her without a trace of self-consciousness as she struggled to regain some semblance of composure. His long, muscular legs stretched out on either side of hers. His sexy arms rippled with muscle as he relaxed them along the sides of the tub.

“Tell me about that tattoo,” Hannah blurted to keep from focusing on his gorgeous naked body. “It looks like some kind of mandala wheel.”

Mason’s hand came up briefly to touch the tattoo. “That’s exactly what it is. Are you familiar with the concept of entering the mandala?”

“Vaguely,” Hannah replied, glad she’d managed to distract them both. “What does it mean, exactly?”

“Mandala is the Sanskrit word for circle. It symbolizes balance, eternity and perfection. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there’s a belief that by entering the mandala and proceeding toward its center, you’re guided through a cosmic process of transforming the universe from one of suffering into one of joy and happiness.”

“Huh,” Hannah mused thoughtfully. “Kind of like BDSM.”

Mason gifted her with a broad smile. “Exactly,” he replied enthusiastically. “That’s what attracted me to the whole mandala concept. BDSM is its own kind of mandala, on a much smaller scale, of course. For a submissive, you move through erotic suffering not only for the masochistic pleasure it affords you, but to experience the transformative process of total surrender to your Master. For a true sub, that brings a joy of its own kind.”

He looked so happy as he spoke, his tone boyishly earnest. Though she wasn’t entirely sure she shared the sentiment, she found herself smiling back at him. “That’s very poetic,” she offered.

He nodded. “And this mandala isn’t just any mandala. Did you notice what’s at its center?”

She leaned forward to get a better look. “Oh, wow,” she said, taking in the triple spiral that made up the hub of the tattoo. “That’s a BDSM triskelion, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” he beamed. “Cool, right?”

“Very cool,” she agreed. His tattoos were actually growing on her. They suited him, somehow. And, if she were completely honest, they were hot—a physical manifestation of his sexy bad boy persona. She was just going to ask about some of his other tattoos, but he spoke first.

“Turn around,” he said, his eyes hooding.

“I’m sorry?” she replied, not understanding.

He drew his legs up to give her more room. “I want you to turn your body so your back is facing me.” The earnest, eager boy of a moment before was gone, the stern Master returned.

“Why—” she began, but he immediately cut her off.

“No *why*, Hannah,” he said sternly. “You do not question your Master. You do as you’re told.”

You’re not my Master. I don’t have a Master.

The mutinous words very nearly leaped out of her mouth.

Hold on. He is your Master right now. All you have to do is obey.

“Yes, Sir,” she said aloud.

Scooting forward, she managed to twist herself around until she had her back to Mason. She heard him moving behind her in the water and then his strong arms were around her, pulling her toward him.

Startled, she stiffened, not sure what was happening.

“Relax,” he rumbled, his mouth close to her ear. He brought his arms around her waist as he settled her against him. “This pleases me, and therefore should please you, slave girl.”

It did feel awfully nice to be held in the arms of a big, strong, sexy man. Quieting the nervous girl fluttering in her

head, she gave in to his comforting embrace. She sighed with pleasure as the deliciously hot water penetrated her muscles and soothed her aching body.

When he cupped her breasts, she drew in a sharp involuntary breath, but she didn't pull away. She stared down at Mason's large, capable hands, tan against her paler skin. Could he feel the pounding of her heart?

His hands shifted, his fingers finding her nipples. Grasping each between thumb and forefinger, he rolled them until she moaned. There seemed to be a direct conduit between her nipples and her clit. It felt almost as if he was stroking her there.

Then his fingers tightened on her nipples, compressing them until the pleasure turned to pain. Or no, the pleasure was still there, but the added layer of erotic pain increased the intensity of the experience tenfold.

She sucked in a sharp breath, her hands finding and gripping his hard thighs beneath the water. "It hurts," she gasped between gritted teeth. But she made no effort to pull away.

"Good," he rumbled, his mouth close to her ear. "Suffer for me, slave. Suffer for your Master."

His words were sexy, in a fantasy kind of way. But was it a fantasy for him? Or did he really believe she wanted to become a slave? *Did* she want that? Could she ever achieve the level of training necessary? Was it even something you could train for? Or did you have to be born that way, and training only brought your natural inclinations to the fore?

He gave each nipple a sharp twist, and all thoughts tumbled from Hannah's brain as she winced in pain.

"I can't," she whimpered, trying to squirm away from him. He easily held her in place with his thighs, however, and his grip remained tight on her tortured nipples.

"Of course you can," he growled. "You just need to let go. To surrender control to me. Once I feel that surrender, I will let you go."

A protest rose instantly in Hannah's throat, but when she opened her mouth, it died away. She could get away from him if she really wanted to. But it would ruin everything and disappoint him. And it would be quitting.

"Once I feel that surrender, I will let you go."

She relaxed against his hard body as best as she could, though her jaw was clenched tight with tension. After a moment, mercifully, he released his pinching grip as promised.

"That's better," he crooned into her ear. "You please me."

He circled her nipples with his fingers, slowly widening the circles until he cupped her breasts in his large hands. After a while, one hand traveled past the slope of her breast to her stomach as his teeth scraped lightly against her neck in a lazy caress.

"What is it you want, Hannah?" he murmured. He nipped at her earlobe as his hand traveled lower, and lower still. "Hmm? Do you want this?" He cupped her sex, his fingers dancing over her swollen labia with the proprietary touch of someone who understood his own power.

Unable to help herself, Hannah leaned back into his hard, warm body as he slid a finger inside her, sending a spasm of pleasure through her core. "Oh, god," she groaned. "Yes, Sir. Yes, please." She held on to the "s" as he ground his palm against her clit while his fingers moved inside of her. His cock was hard as a rod of steel against her lower back.

All at once, his hand fell away. Before Hannah could offer even a whimper of protest, he rose to his feet in the tub, pulling her upright along with him. "Bath time's over," he said gruffly.

Lifting her as easily as if she were a child, he set her on the thick bath rug beside the tub. A moment later, he, too, climbed out. He stood before her like a god, water streaming down his big, strong body, his cock like a divining rod pointing directly at her.

"Dry me off, slave," he commanded. "There are towels there in the linen closet." He pointed an imperious finger.

Hannah's brain skittered and careened inside her head like a pinball as it tried to process her intense physical arousal, her abject terror at what this man with his huge erection expected from her and her confusion at his abrupt change in demeanor from sexy Dom to bossy Master.

Pushing her tumultuous thoughts aside, Hannah scurried to the closet and pulled out two thick, white towels. Setting one on the counter, she shook out the other and started to wrap it around her body.

“What do you think you're doing, slave?” Mason barked. “You dry your Master before yourself. Drop that towel at once.”

Hannah almost pointed out the stupidity of this, since she'd do a better job if she wasn't dripping and chilled. It was like when you were on an airplane during an emergency—you put your mask on first before helping others.

But one look at Mason's expression made her drop the towel as ordered. Fresh towel in hand, she moved toward him. Closing her eyes a moment, she channeled one of her romance novel heroines. She existed in that moment to serve her Master in whatever manner pleased him. What better way to show her submission than to put his comfort before her own? And, come on—it was no hardship to dry this man's hard, strong body.

Kneeling in front of Mason, she ran the towel over his long, muscular legs. When she got to his groin, she couldn't stop the flush of heat that washed over her face and chest. His cock was thick and hard, the balls heavy beneath it. He smelled good, too, and she had a sudden, nearly irresistible compulsion to bury her nose in that tender spot between his groin and inner thigh.

Blushing furiously, she ran the towel over his genitals, daring to glance up at him as she did so. Mason stood with his hands on his hips, his eyes burning holes in her.

Averting her gaze, she got to her feet. She dried his massive chest and then moved behind him to dry his muscular back and gorgeous ass. Some people looked better in clothes,

others naked. Mason definitely fell into the second category. He was a fucking Adonis.

“Good enough,” he announced abruptly. He turned to face her. “Remember that going forward. Slaves always serve their Masters before themselves.”

“Yes, Sir,” she said dutifully.

“Now, it’s your turn.” Mason grabbed the towel from the floor. “Stand with legs shoulder-width apart, hands on your head.”

Hannah assumed the position. She closed her eyes as he moved around her, toweling her dry with surprising gentleness. He took his time between her legs. Her apparently insatiable clit immediately perked up, greedy for the attention. When he was done, he ran his hands along her sides.

It tickled, and Hannah twisted away, giggling involuntarily.

“Stand still and stay in position,” Mason snapped.

Hannah pressed her lips together to keep the retort that wanted to escape from doing so. She would have liked to lower her arms. She was suddenly exhausted from the very long day.

But then he started touching her again. He stroked her breasts and let his hands trail down her abdomen. Instead of cupping her cunt, as she’d hoped he would, he again stroked her sides. It still tickled, but this time she managed to stay still and quiet.

“Good girl,” he murmured.

He continued to run his hands lazily over her body, leaving trails of electricity and desire sparking along her skin. As he touched her, he dipped his head and again sucked her nipples into his mouth, one at a time. Hannah moaned softly, claspng her fingers together on her head to keep from reaching for him.

When he finally released her, her legs were trembling, her heart beating high in her throat, her cunt throbbing. He took a

step back and looked her up and down, his tongue appearing on his lower lip. His cock still bobbed between them.

“You’re beautiful,” he said, his eyelids hooding.

A flush of pleasure and confusion heated Hannah’s entire body. With all those gorgeous, twentysomething naked slave girls running around The Enclave, how astounding that he found *her* beautiful as well. At the same time, a part of her instantly wanted to point out the soft pouch of her post-baby tummy, and the pale silver stretch marks that still remained just above her mons, not to mention the cellulite on her butt.

She looked away from his sweeping gaze. He gripped her chin lightly, forcing her face back to his.

“I want you, Hannah,” he said in a low, sexy voice. “I respect your hard limits, and I won’t violate them. But will you lie down with me? I want to hold you in my arms.”

“Yes,” she heard herself whisper before she could stop herself. “Yes, Sir.”

Chapter 26

Mason put his arm around Hannah's waist as he walked her into the bedroom. His rational mind advised him that what he was doing wasn't the best idea. But the rest of him told his rational mind to shut the fuck up. He wanted what he wanted, damn it. And she did too. He saw it in her eyes; he felt it in her tremble.

When they got to the bed, he threw back the covers and lay down, drawing her down beside him. The air in the room was cooler than the steamy bathroom, and Hannah shivered as he pulled her closer against his body.

Wrapping his arms around her, he lightly kissed the top of her head. She snuggled into him, hiding her face in his chest. It felt good to hold her. His arms had been empty for too long. He rocked her gently in his embrace, sensing how much she, too, needed the physical touch of another.

It would be so easy to take her lovely face in his hands and claim her mouth with his. He wanted to do more than just kiss her. He imagined rolling her onto her back, spreading her legs and plunging inside her wet, tight heat. Or taking her from behind, easing into her tight virgin ass while teasing her sopping cunt with his fingers until she screamed with pleasure...

His cock throbbed. How tempting to grab a handful of her thick, soft hair, using it to guide her head down over his shaft. He wouldn't let her up until she'd milked every last drop and then licked his balls clean.

As if privy to his fantasies, Hannah lifted her head, meeting his gaze with a tentative smile. He could feel the rapid patter of her heart against his side. She looked so sweetly nervous, and yet her lips had parted, as if for a kiss, or a cock...

She wanted it. She wanted him.

And he wanted her, in the worst way.

With a growl, he rose on his elbow and pushed her easily onto her back. She gasped, her eyes widening with fear that only made his cock get harder. Hard limits be damned. He wanted what he wanted, damn it.

Fisting his cock, he lifted himself over her.

“Mason,” Hannah cried, twisting out from beneath him. “What’re you doing?”

Her words were like a sucker punch to the gut.

What the hell *was* he doing?

Hannah wasn’t his lover. She was a trainee. And he’d promised her very clearly only moments before that all he wanted to do was to hold her.

“I’m sorry,” he rasped, his voice hoarse with barely suppressed lust. He rolled away from her and swung his legs over the side of the bed. Getting to his feet, he wrestled himself firmly back under control.

He glanced at his watch, ignoring his damned erection, which had yet to flag. Crouching down, he reached under the bed. As he pulled out the sleep mat, he silently cursed himself for his loss of control. The look on her face when he’d risen above her—it had been pure fear. If any desire had lingered beneath that fear, he’d seen no evidence of it.

No way was he going to force himself on someone. If and when he claimed Hannah, she’d be the one to beg him for it.

Getting back to his feet, he held out a hand to his trainee, who was regarding him with a quizzical, confused look.

“Come on,” he said, pointing to her mattress. “It’s time for bed.”

Hannah sat up slowly, frowning. “What just happened, Mason?”

He blew out a breath. “I nearly lost control, is what. Won’t happen again.”

She seemed about to speak, but after a moment, she only nodded.

He held out his hand to her. “As we discussed, you’ll be sleeping on this mattress for the duration of your training.” He managed a smile. “It’s better like this. I’m not sure I can trust myself with you in my arms.”

She took his hand, allowing him to pull her upright.

Custom made, the sleep mat was a modified mattress with canvas straps sewn onto the sides at strategic intervals, fleeced-lined cuffs attached for wrists and ankles. He’d covered the mattress with a fresh fitted sheet earlier that afternoon, along with a duvet folded neatly across the bottom and a plump pillow at the top.

After a brief hesitation, Hannah lowered herself onto the mattress.

Back under control, he crouched beside her. “I’m going to cuff you to the bed. There’s plenty of give in these straps so you should be comfortable enough. The idea is to remind you, even in sleep, that you are owned. You won’t be able to get up without my permission.”

Again, Hannah nodded.

When he had her properly cuffed, he drew the duvet up around her shoulders. “There we go.” He patted her on the head. “You good?”

She stared at him for a long moment. If she gave the slightest hint or said anything to indicate she’d rather be up in the bed with him, he would uncuff her in an instant and take her into his arms.

But when she finally spoke, all she said was, “Yes, Sir. I’m fine.”

≈

What had just happened?

One moment she was in Mason’s arms, ready for his kiss. The next he was looming over her, cock in hand, a dangerous look in his eyes. Her fear had been real, but it wasn’t primarily directed at Mason. It was the thought of having sex—intercourse—with another man that had so alarmed her. Yet,

she couldn't deny how much she'd wanted him in the moment, in spite of her trepidation.

Why hadn't she just told him the truth?

Mason was right, of course. Hard limits were supposed to be sacrosanct in a D/s power exchange, and he'd definitely overstepped his, or rather her, boundaries. But he hadn't done it in a vacuum. She'd been right there with him.

She'd known beforehand that climbing into bed with him wasn't the smartest thing she'd ever done. She'd felt at once nervous and recklessly bold when she'd pressed her body against his. She reveled in his masculine scent and hard body, even as her heart had boomed in her chest. When she'd lifted her face for a kiss, her entire body had tingled with expectation, with longing, with lust...

He had responded to her desire, rising over her like a god, his huge cock in his hand, his eyes hooded with lust and power. It was only then that fear had ripped through her like a jagged jolt of lightning.

As attracted as she was to Mason—and she could no longer deny that attraction—that didn't mean she was ready to take that next step. She'd always believed Andy would be her one and only. Though he'd been gone over a year now, she still couldn't imagine going to bed with another man.

The light flicked out, plunging the room into sudden darkness. She heard Mason fall back heavily onto his bed.

Hannah tugged gently at her restraints. As promised, there was plenty of give, but it still felt strange in the extreme to be cuffed to a mattress on the floor like some kind of...slave. It was sexy as a fantasy, but in real life, she'd rather be in a bed, thank you. And able to get up to pee without having to involve another person.

She bit back a sigh, reminding herself this whole Enclave training thing was a grand experiment, and one she'd eagerly signed on for. Yes, some of the reality of genuine submission was a lot harder than it had seemed as pure fantasy, but that

wasn't necessarily a bad thing. The only way to truly know her own mind and heart was to experience it firsthand.

Bringing her cuffed wrists together, Hannah folded her hands beneath her cheek. The mattress was surprisingly comfortable, the duvet cover extremely soft. It was better she was down there. Lying beside the naked, powerful man all night, she wouldn't have gotten a wink of sleep.

Despite her inner turmoil, sleep held out its arms to her. Exhausted, she crawled into them and closed her eyes.

Chapter 27

In the morning, they washed up side-by-side at the dual sinks like an old married couple. Mason didn't say a word about what had happened—or almost happened—the night before, so neither did Hannah.

She watched with interest as he shaved his head along with his whiskers. It felt strange when Mason dressed in his usual black T-shirt and jeans while she remained naked. Though she wasn't as painfully aware of her nudity as she had been at first, she had yet to find the easy, confident grace of The Enclave slave girls.

Down in the kitchen, they slipped into the routine they'd established since her arrival, cracking eggs, making batter for the muffins, grinding coffee beans, setting out the fresh fruit and juices, frying bacon. They discussed the lunch and dinner menus. As chef, Mason naturally had the final word, but Hannah appreciated the way he asked for her input and really seemed to listen.

After the morning kitchen duties were dispensed with, Mason came up behind Hannah as she was giving the counters a wipe down. Before she realized what he was doing, he had clipped a leash to the O-ring on the back of her collar.

Giving it a light tug, he said, "It's time to ramp things up, slave girl. This morning I'm going to introduce you to some serious edge play. Let's go."

Hannah's pulse instantly flipped into overdrive at his words. She followed nervously as he led her like an animal through the empty living room and up the stairs to his suite. Once inside, he brought her to the dungeon area and unclipped the leash.

"I should tell you, I was impressed and pleased that you didn't rule out knife play on your hard limits list. Based on your progress so far, I think you're ready to experience my blades firsthand."

Hannah's mouth went suddenly dry, a spurt of adrenaline chilling her blood. She wrapped her arms protectively around her torso. Had she been a total idiot to uncheck that box?

As if sensing her trepidation, Mason cupped her cheek, his smile gentle. "Do you trust me, Hannah?" he asked in a low, sexy growl.

Did she?

So far, he hadn't taken her anywhere she didn't ultimately want to go, however difficult it had been sometimes. He knew so much more about all of this than she did. So, yes. She trusted him.

"Yes, Sir," she replied, pleased her voice sounded reasonably steady. "But I'm scared," she added in a whisper.

"A little fear can be a good thing for a submissive. It adds a powerful dimension as you work past the fear to embrace the experience. I have faith in you, Hannah. You can do this." His lips quirked in a smile. "And this particular scene might be the first one where you're actually *submitting*, versus simply living out some of your erotic fantasies."

Hannah instantly bristled at that remark. At the same time, she couldn't deny the truth of it. She was surprised Mason had intuited it, though she probably shouldn't have been. He was a highly trained Dom, after all.

Mason smiled a knowing smile. "That's what I thought," he said, as if he'd been listening in on her thoughts. He clapped his big hands together. "Now, up you go." He pointed to the bondage table. "Lie down on your back so I can strap you in place."

Praying she wasn't making a huge mistake, Hannah hoisted herself onto the padded table. She lay back, heart hammering despite her resolve.

Mason stretched her arms overhead and strapped her wrists into cuffs at the top corners of the table. He did likewise with her ankles. Finally, he brought a wide leather strap across her abdomen.

She felt deliciously vulnerable and sexy, bound and spread-eagled, awaiting the erotic torture her Master had in store for her. Her nipples stiffened, her sex pulsing gently between her legs.

Turning from her, Mason went to the wardrobe. When he came back to her, he held a wooden box. Angling it so she could see the contents, he opened the box. Six very sharp knives were nestled in velvet grooves.

Hannah's breath caught in her throat as she ogled the blades. Ice trickled down her spine. If she hadn't been lying down, she might have passed out on the spot. "No. No, I'm sorry, Sir," she blurted before she could stop herself. "I can't do this."

"Of course you can. All you have to do is let go." His expression gentled. "I have faith in you, Hannah. Have faith in yourself."

A small voice in her head was getting louder, warning her this was a mistake. But as she stared into those deep gray-green eyes, Hannah felt the Dom's power settle like a net over her. He wanted this for her. He knew what he was doing. She needed to trust him.

"Yes, Sir," she said. "I'll try."

"That's my girl," Mason enthused. Closing the lid of the box, he set it at the end of the bondage table just below her feet. He went to the wardrobe again and this time returned with a hank of thin rope.

He smiled down at her, his eyes glinting with power. "You have such lovely breasts. I'm going to bind them so they make a nice offering for my blades."

Hannah's stomach swooped unpleasantly at his words. *No blood play*, she reminded herself. *He won't cut you.*

At least not on purpose.

Fuck. *Not helpful, Hannah.*

He worked quickly, expertly twisting the rope in a crisscross pattern over and around her breasts. When he was

done, they were bunched together, her nipples poking up like cherries on top of snowballs. It wasn't painful, just very, very snug.

Mason took a step back, his eyes sweeping over her body as his tongue moved sensually over his upper lip. "You look so beautiful bound like that." He reached toward the box he'd left at her feet. She watched with wide eyes as he removed a knife and stepped closer so she could see the blade. Its sharp edge glittered in the light. Leaning over her, he touched the flat of the blade to her cheek. She squeaked involuntarily, her eyes squeezing shut.

"Open your eyes," Mason commanded.

Hannah obeyed as she tried to catch her breath.

His voice deepened as he stared into her eyes. "You are completely at my mercy now, Hannah. You do understand that I'm going to do just exactly what I want to you. You no longer have the slightest say in the matter."

Hannah understood intellectually that he was employing classic Dom mind-fuckery. She'd done it herself, many times, in her novels. It had seemed super sexy as a fantasy. But in reality? It was downright terrifying.

She was frozen in place, unable even to draw a breath. At the same time, her body tightened with arousal. Lucia's words came back to her: "*Don't quit before the miracle.*"

Assuming she didn't die of fright first.

Mercifully, he removed the knife, placing it back into its box. Leaning over her once more, he stroked her cheek. "Relax, slave. It's all good. You please me."

His touch calmed her and his words warmed her. While she remained afraid, she was determined to get through this, not just for him but for herself.

Mason again went to the wardrobe, this time returning with a black satin sleep mask.

"Fear and anticipation heighten the sensation of pain. Use the breathing techniques you've learned to slow your pulse and

calm yourself.”

He waited a few moments while she managed a deep, if rather tremulous breath, and let it out slowly.

“Better,” he said. “You’ve already demonstrated you can handle significant erotic pain. When you stop anticipating and just accept, it will go much better for you, I promise. This blindfold should help you with that.”

As her world was plunged into darkness, he added, “As long as you stay very, very still, you’ll be just fine.”

≈

Mason opened the knife box. Instead of the razor-sharp blade he’d shown to Hannah, he selected the one that had been purposely dulled with steel wool so it wouldn’t cut the skin, even if you tried.

He set the flat of the blade carefully on Hannah’s midriff. Predictably, she startled at its chill and drew in a sharp breath. She was trembling slightly, but otherwise remained still.

Returning his focus to the box, he picked up the packet of expired credit cards and withdrew one. The edge of a hard plastic card can feel quite sharp when dragged along the skin and leave a pretty mark to boot.

While he wouldn’t have hesitated to use real knives with a properly trained slave, Hannah was too new and too nervous for that. If and when he claimed her properly, she would not only permit him to engage in needle and blood play, she would come to crave it.

For now he would content himself with the mind fuck. He’d primed her to expect the blade, and that’s what her brain would believe was being employed. It would be a true test for Hannah—a test both of her submission and of her ability to handle erotic stress without freaking out.

He wanted her to succeed more than he was quite willing to admit. How had he become so invested, so quickly, in this woman? She was no longer just some trainee he was playing with for his amusement. He had a stake in her success. He was, at least temporarily, her only Master.

Closing the knife box, he shoved the card into his back pocket. Then he took the dead knife from where it balanced below her bound breasts.

Bending over her, he placed one hand over her heart as he touched the tip of the knife to the soft flesh just beneath her jaw. Hannah squeaked like a little mouse, her heart racing beneath his fingers.

“Shh,” he murmured, his mouth close to her ear, the point of the knife still at her throat. “You’ll fare much better, slave, if you surrender to me. All that tension you’re holding in your body right now will only accentuate the pain.”

“Mason,” she said in a trembling voice. “I’m scared.”

He pulled the knife away, though he kept his other hand on her heart. “Remember, a little fear is a good thing. It helps you focus. I’m going to push your submissive boundaries this morning, but remember, I’ve always got you. If you fall, I’ll be there to catch you.”

He was pleased when she seemed to calm. He stroked her cheek, again reminding her to breathe. When her breathing had slowed from a pant to something closer to normal, he took a step back. Replacing the dead knife in its slot, he pulled the credit card from his pocket.

Her breasts had darkened from the constricted blood flow. He slipped a finger beneath the rope to make sure it wasn’t too tight. Her engorged nipples were fairly begging for a pair of clamps. In time, once he’d acclimated her properly to knife play, he would add clover clamps to both her nipples and her labia to heighten her experience.

The breast bondage, aside from being beautiful and sexy, had the added benefit of sensitizing the nerve endings in the breasts. Holding the card so one of its sharp corners touched her skin, he dragged it in a light circle around her right nipple.

Hannah, expecting the knife’s blade, cried out in alarm. Mason ran his finger around the faint pink circle he’d left on her skin.

“Good girl,” he praised. Without giving her a chance to regroup, he ran the card’s edge around her left nipple.

Again, she cried out. Taking pity on her, as well as satisfying his own lust, Mason leaned over his bound slave girl and sucked one perfect, hard nipple into his mouth. He flicked it with his tongue. Her moan as he gently bit the tender bud made his balls tighten with need. He took the second nipple between his teeth, biting until she again cried out.

“Try to slow your breathing, if you can.” He stroked her soft cheek as he waited for her to calm herself. “That’s better. You’re doing very well, my brave girl,” he encouraged. “We will continue.”

As he drew the edge of the card down her abdomen, it left a pretty red line on her fair skin. Hannah jerked hard in her restraints as he did this, her hands clenching into fists.

Mason tapped her fists. “Relax your hands, Hannah, and stay still. You wouldn’t want me to accidentally cut you, would you?”

“No, Sir,” she cried breathlessly, though he’d meant the question to be rhetorical. “Please, this is scaring me. My breasts hurt. I think I need a timeout.”

He placed his hands over her breasts, which were hard to the touch, their color darkening from crimson to purple. While it wouldn’t cause any actual damage after so short a time, he cut her some slack.

“All right,” he agreed, unwinding the rope. “Consider this your timeout.”

As her breasts resumed their normal color, he thought how pretty they would look with stripes from a single tail. Perhaps he’d finish the session with that, if they got that far.

A small voice in his head warned him he might be moving too far, too fast with Hannah, still a relative newbie. But she was so fucking sexy, bound and at his mercy, trembling with that delicious combination of erotic fear and lust that made his blood run hot with desire.

Moving down to the end of the table, he scraped the hard plastic edge against the tender skin of her inner thighs. Her spread cunt was swollen and glistening. She could cry out all she liked—she was turned on by what was happening, as she should be.

“You need this, Hannah,” he murmured, his voice throaty with his own pent-up lust. “Let’s forget all those silly hard limits. I’m going to take you where you long to go—where pleasure and pain have no meaning as separate sensations.”

He ran his fingers lightly over her labia, pleased when she shuddered at his touch. “Did you know that labia bleed when they’re nicked?”

Her gasp was audible.

Smiling, he slipped a finger into her tight, wet cunt and moved it in a sensual circle. He had her right where he wanted her, the mind fuck a complete success. Unable to resist, he added, “You just need to stay very, very still, my darling. I don’t want to accidentally cut you.”

“Mason, I think I need to stop,” she said in a rush. Her hands were fisted again above the cuffs.

He rubbed the heel of his palm against her vulva as he continued to move his finger in a slow circle inside her. “Shh,” he soothed. “You’re doing so well, my brave girl. Remember, I promised to keep you safe, and I will.”

Though she was trembling, Hannah’s clit was hard as a marble, despite her protestations. He focused on her cunt until she moaned softly, some of the tension easing from her.

Leaning his head close to her ear, he murmured, “Surrender to your true nature, Hannah. Surrender to *me*.”

She was still trembling, but she offered no further verbal resistance. Good girl.

Spreading her labia with one hand, he pressed the corner of the credit card into her hard little clit.

“Rose, rose, rose!” Hannah screamed, startling Mason.

Rose?

It took him a second to understand, as it had been so long since he'd scened with anyone outside of The Enclave. She was using a safeword.

Before he could properly address the situation, a gush of warm liquid ran over his fingers. For a split second, he thought it was blood. Then he realized it was urine. The mind fuck had been a little *too* effective. How the fuck had he missed her cues? He'd been so wrapped up in what he *thought* was happening, he forgot to pay attention to what was *actually* happening. And, as a result, the poor girl had peed herself in her terror.

Asshole, that same niggling voice cried, a shout in his head. *I told you it was too much, too fast.*

Dropping the card, he wiped his hand on the back of his jeans and reached for her ankle cuffs. "It's okay, everything's okay, Hannah," he assured her. She wasn't the first person to lose control of their bladder during an especially intense scene. "Scene's over. We'll get you cleaned up. It's no big deal."

Moving quickly, he removed the strap from her torso and then pulled the cuffs at her wrists free.

He lifted the mask from her face and smiled down at her reassuringly. Tears streaked her cheeks, and she was breathing hard.

"It's okay, sweetheart," he soothed. "You're okay. Everything's fine. This happens sometimes. It's no big deal."

Before he could help her down, she rolled to the floor, stumbling in her apparent haste to get off the table.

"Whoa, steady there," he said, reaching for her.

But instead of melting gratefully against him, she shoved him in the chest with both hands, pushing him away. With what sounded like a sob, she raced past him.

Alarmed, Mason started after her.

"Hannah, wait!" But before he could reach her, she was out the door, slamming it closed behind her.

Chapter 28

Hannah raced down the stairs, gasping and crying. Her thighs were damp from her own pee. She probably would have died of embarrassment if she weren't too busy freaking out. She needed to get down to the slave quarters to shower. She needed to get the hell out of this place. What had possibly made her think she could do this?

At the bottom of the stairs, she smacked headlong into someone, the force of the blow knocking her back on her ass. Hiding her face in her hands, she sobbed.

“Whoa, what’s this? Hannah, what’s wrong?”

Even in the midst of her tears, she recognized Anthony’s calm, deep voice. He sat beside her on the stair, placing his arm gently around her shoulders. “Are you hurt? What’s going on? Where’s Master Mason?”

As if Anthony’s voice had summoned him, she heard Mason at the top of the stairs. “Hannah, come back up here right now.”

“I can’t,” Hannah managed between sobs. “I don’t want to see him right now.”

“Mason,” Anthony said. “Give us a moment, please.”

Hannah sniffed and wiped at her eyes with the back of her hand as she struggled to regain control. “I’m sorry,” she managed, unable to meet his gaze. “He... I just need... I want... I...” A strangled sob swallowed her words.

“May I, Master Anthony?”

It was Lucia’s soft, sweet voice.

“Of course. I’ll go talk with Master Mason.” As Anthony rose to his feet, he placed his hand briefly on the back of Hannah’s head, gently stroking her hair. Then he turned and headed resolutely up the stairs.

Lucia held out her hand, her face a mask of concern. “Let’s go down to the quarters where we’ll have some privacy. Then you can tell me what happened.”

Hannah allowed Lucia to lead her to the basement stairs. Even in the midst of tears she couldn’t seem to get under control, a rising sense of humiliation was taking over. She was making a scene, something she never did. If the ground had opened at that moment, she would have gratefully allowed it to swallow her whole.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs, Lucia said, “Let’s sit down and sort this out.”

“I need a shower first,” Hannah said. Heat rushed into her face as she forced herself to admit, “I peed myself.”

Lucia’s smile was kind. “You wouldn’t be the first trainee to do that. There’s no shame in it.”

As they walked together toward the communal bathroom, Lucia asked, “But why did you run away from Master Mason? He would have helped you through this. That’s part of his job as your trainer.”

“I just wanted to get away from him,” Hannah said with more vehemence than she’d intended.

At Lucia’s startled expression, Hannah forced herself to modulate her tone. “Things between Mason and me are getting too...complicated.”

Not wishing to dwell on that aspect of the whole confusing situation, she focused instead on what had just occurred. “I *knew* I shouldn’t have gone through with it,” she said angrily. “I never should have unchecked that box, damn it.”

At Lucia’s confused expression, she elaborated. “Knife play. I put it as a hard limit at first. Then, like a dope, I unchecked it.” She wiped at her eyes. “Damn it. I thought I could do this whole submission thing. But that session really freaked me out. I’m so confused right now.” She sniffed loudly, more tears rolling down her cheeks.

“It’s okay, *querida*,” Lucia said soothingly as she placed her hand lightly on Hannah’s shoulder. “And you’re right—a

nice hot shower will help. Master Anthony will talk to Master Mason, and then we can get this all figured out.”

“Maybe,” Hannah said doubtfully.

In the bathroom, she unbuckled the slave collar and set it on the counter as the water heated. She looked at herself in the mirror. Her eyes were puffy, her nose red, but at least she’d stopped crying.

The shower did feel good. After she’d soaped and rinsed herself, she stood under the hot spray for several minutes. The aborted scene kept replaying in her mind in a horrible, humiliating loop. She just wasn’t cut out for this slave business, no matter how willingly she’d agreed to the revised terms.

Lucia was waiting when she stepped out of the stall, a large, fluffy towel in her hands. When Hannah had dried herself and brushed her damp hair back, Lucia held out her slave collar. “Don’t forget this.”

Hannah shook her head. “I don’t want it.”

Lucia frowned but didn’t challenge Hannah. “Okay. Let’s go sit down. I made you some hot tea with lemon and honey.”

Hannah kept her towel around herself as she curled up on one side of the loveseat. Lucia set the collar down beside her without a word. Turning toward the microwave, she removed a steaming mug and handed it to Hannah.

“Thanks,” Hannah said gratefully. The tea was hot and sweet, and just what she needed.

Lucia sat beside her, angling herself so she faced Hannah. “So, tell me. What happened?”

Hannah briefly described the scene, getting upset again as she exclaimed, “I really thought he was cutting me. I understand now that he was employing that head game thing that Doms do, and which I’ve even written about. But in the heat of the moment, I was totally freaking and he didn’t seem to get it. He just kept telling me to be brave and some shit, and I finally had to use my safeword.” She snorted. “Not that I even *have* a safeword here.”

“Oh, Hannah,” Lucia cried, looking genuinely distressed. “I’m so sorry that happened. I can’t understand how Master Mason could have misread your cues so completely. I guess, in his defense, he’s used to working with subs who are more heavily into a complete power exchange. And maybe,” she added, smiling a little, “he’s so head over heels for you that he wasn’t thinking straight.”

“What?” Hannah exclaimed, shaking her head. “No. He’s not. If there was something brewing between us, and I’m not denying there was a certain, um, attraction, that’s history now.” She closed her eyes, humiliation again washing over her. “I peed on the guy, for chrissakes.” She barked an angry laugh.

“Hannah, no. Don’t focus on that. It’s not important. You were scared. It was a fight-or-flight reaction. It’s absolutely nothing to be ashamed of, I promise you.”

“Maybe,” Hannah said, not convinced. Letting her embarrassment go for a moment, she said, “Bottom line—this is a community of Masters and slaves. I knew going in that’s not me.” She gave a small, bitter laugh. “I guess I thought I could fake it till I made it, as they say. I got so caught up in the excitement of being a part of The Enclave that I tried to convince myself I could handle this. But what happened just now really crystalized for me that I’ve just been playing a part. Trying to fit a square peg into a round hole.”

“It sounds to me like there has been a breakdown in communication between you two,” Lucia offered. “And that’s on Master Mason. As your Dom, it’s his job to make sure those channels remain open. I’m sure he’s beating himself up right now, Hannah. We forget sometimes that Doms are only human. They screw up, just like we do. Setbacks happen all the time in a training situation. Master Mason can be a bit heavy-handed, but he really is a good guy. I know he’s probably feeling pretty terrible right now. Once you’ve both calmed down a little and had a chance to sort things out, I’m sure you guys can work through this.”

Hannah shook her head, clarity finally burning through her distress and confusion. “No, Lucia,” she said gently. “I really

appreciate everything you've done for me. Truly, I do. And the experience has been amazing"—she snorted—"for the most part, that is. But this is about more than just a breakdown in communication. While I'll always be grateful for the opportunity to experience a 24/7 BDSM experience, I need to stop pretending this is a lifestyle I could embrace."

At Lucia's stricken expression, she added, "It's not that I've fallen out of love with BDSM. Not at all. And I remain in awe of what you guys have here at The Enclave. You've all been incredibly kind and generous to open your home to me, and to give me this amazing chance to explore my masochistic and submissive inner self."

She managed a smile. "I've learned that I am a genuine sub with definite masochistic leanings—not just someone who writes about it. And who knows"—she shrugged, blinking away unwelcome tears— "maybe someday I'll find a Dom that fits my groove. But I'm not 24/7 slave material." She snorted. "I think we can all agree on that."

"Oh, Hannah," Lucia breathed, tears coming into her eyes as well. "Don't quit before the miracle."

Hannah wiped away the tear that slid down her cheek. "Maybe that's the problem. Since I lost Andy, I no longer believe in miracles."

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Mason paced his room like a caged lion as he tried to explain what had just happened. "She was doing so well. Then she starts shouting, 'Rose, rose!' Before I could figure out she was using a safeword, everything blew up. She tore out of here like she was on fire."

"So, are you saying it was the sub's fault?" Anthony asked in that maddeningly gentle way he had.

Mason sighed. "No. To be honest, there was a part of me that was aware I might be moving too fast with her. But I wanted it so much, I didn't pay attention. I fucked up. I should have picked up on her cues before it got to this point."

He ran his hands over his scalp as the events of the last few moments replayed in his mind. What a dick he'd been. Talk about amateur hour. There was no excuse for it. Damn it. *This* was why he kept his emotions out of the equation when training. He'd become so invested in her success, he'd failed to understand what was really happening.

"She was in distress, and I just passed it off as good, healthy sub fear—something she would get past and grow from. I let her down."

"You will explain that to her," Anthony said, as if it were an obvious and simple solution. "Lucia is talking to her now. I'm sure, once she's had a chance to calm down, she'll come to you. How you handle that will be very important, Mason. I recommend you don't punish her for running away. She's probably feeling as terrible as you are. But this can be a teaching moment. For both of you."

Mason wasn't in the mood to focus on teachable moments. "It's not like I didn't know better. I saw from the outset that she was just a wannabe, but I convinced myself otherwise. I tried to convince her in the process."

Damn it. *This* was why he avoided getting emotionally entangled with the subs he played with. First Ashley, now Hannah. He was too old for this shit. He should have followed his initial gut instinct and steered clear of the newbie from the get-go.

He sighed heavily and sank down on the bed opposite Anthony, who had taken a seat in the desk chair. "I never should have suggested we ramp up her training. I never should have volunteered to be her trainer. What the hell was I even thinking?"

"Let's give her a little time," Anthony suggested, no doubt assuming Mason was just venting. "Once you've both had a chance to calm down, I'm sure things will look brighter."

"I'm not," Mason muttered under his breath.

But Anthony was right about one thing. No matter his personal tribulations, he had to prepare and serve lunch, with

or without his MIA slave girl.

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Hannah looked down at the slave collar she'd discarded and sighed. The fantasy was over. The thought of seeing Mason again, of being forced to relive her humiliation, made her cringe. Maybe eventually, when she'd calmed down, things would look different. But right now all she wanted to do was get the hell out of Dodge.

Setting down her mug, she squared her shoulders. "It's time for me to leave The Enclave. Really, it's for the best."

For a moment, Lucia looked as if she was going to protest. But then she just nodded, though her eyes remained sad. "Okay. You have to do what's right for you." She glanced at the wall clock. "Master Anthony has to go down into town after lunch. He can give you a ride."

Hannah had completely lost track of time. Was she expected for lunch prep after what had happened?

As if reading her thoughts, Lucia added, "I'll handle prep with Master Mason. You can collect your things from his suite. If you don't feel like joining us for lunch, there are snacks and fresh fruit in the fridge." She gestured toward the kitchenette.

"Thanks," Hannah said sincerely, relieved she wouldn't have to face Mason. "I really appreciate that."

She reached for Lucia's hand, taking it between both of hers. "Thank you, Lucia. For everything. You've been amazing. I hope we remain friends."

Lucia smiled, placing her free hand on top of Hannah's. "Of course we will. I'm sure of it."

Once she was alone, Hannah leaned back against the couch with a deep sigh. Thank goodness for Lucia. No way did Hannah want to face anyone right then. News of her meltdown had probably already filtered through The Enclave grapevine.

For a while she just sat there, letting her mind drift. Despite the rather ignominious end to her grand experiment, if

nothing else, she had several pages of plot ideas jotted down in her laptop. Maybe she could finally get back to writing.

After a while, she got up and returned to the bathroom. She blew her hair dry and applied some of the readily available makeup to her face in an effort to cover the evidence of her crying jag.

She waited until she was sure everyone was seated for lunch before leaving the slave quarters. Happily, the stairs to the second floor weren't visible from the dining room, and Hannah was able to ascend without being observed. Once in Mason's room, she grabbed her duffel, which she'd brought up only the day before.

Unzipping the bag, she pulled out some clothing. As she pulled on her panties and put on her bra, she kept glancing toward the door, as if she was doing something illicit. She opted for a blouse and jeans, marveling at how strange it felt to wear clothing after over a week of being kept naked. If nothing else, this time at The Enclave had certainly desensitized her to her own nudity.

Retrieving her laptop case and purse, she slung the duffel over her shoulder and hurried back downstairs. Leaving her things beside the front door, she returned to the slave quarters to wait.

Her romance with The Enclave was over.

It was time to go home.

Part Three

Chapter 29

“How many times do I have to say it? I’m fine. Just fine,” Mason snapped. Mark’s third-degree interrogation about how he was *really* doing was getting old. Why couldn’t everyone just leave him the fuck alone?

It was the first week in October. Hannah had been gone for two weeks, not that Mason was counting. Mark and he were sitting on the veranda that morning after breakfast, despite the chill in the air. Mark had been noodling on his guitar, as usual. Mason was ostensibly working up his shopping list for later that afternoon, though all he’d written so far was *fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck*.

Mark snorted. “You’re such a lying sack of shit.”

Mason bristled, affronted. “What the fuck do you know about it?”

Mark shook his head. “What I know is that you’ve been a total asshole since Hannah left. Even worse than when Ashley moved out.”

Mason chuckled bitterly. “This is the real me, bro. I’m basically an asshole. Ask anyone I used to work with in the food industry.”

Mark ignored this. “You want to talk about it? About what happened with Hannah?”

“Not especially,” Mason said irritably. “There’s nothing to talk about. Hannah was never right for The Enclave. She’s not slave material. I knew that going in. I don’t know what the fuck I was thinking, wasting my time with her. End of discussion.”

“I’m not talking about that,” Mark countered. “I’m not talking about Hannah’s potential fit as an Enclave slave. I’m talking about you. The two of you. I’ve heard it second-, third- and fourth-hand, but I want to hear it from you. What exactly

went down? And more importantly, what do you plan to do about it?”

“What went down? You really want to know?”

“Uh, yeah. That’s why I asked.”

“Fine. I’ll tell you what ‘went down.’ I let my dick do my thinking for me. I got excited by the idea of taking a newbie and molding her into my ideal slave girl. I thought all she needed was the right man—the right Dom—to help her discover her true potential.”

He snorted derisively, the derision directed at himself. “Talk about arrogance. She’s not some eager twentysomething who doesn’t yet know her own mind. She told me in a dozen different ways that she wasn’t comfortable with some of what was happening. I was convinced I knew better. I let her down. I let us both down. Especially that last day...”

He trailed off, shaking his head. He’d relived that botched scene a hundred times over, cursing himself every time. It was still painful to think about, much less talk about.

“Forget it,” he said, pushing back his chair and rising from the table. “There’s no point in rehashing this. I fucked up. End of story.”

“No,” Mark said, placing a surprisingly firm hand on Mason’s arm, effectively pushing him back onto his chair. “Say what you were going to say. Tell me about that last day. Tell me what happened, and why you think it went wrong.”

“Why I *think* it went wrong? Are you suggesting there’s room for interpretation here? A sub under my care used her safeword, something that hasn’t happened to me in at least a decade. Then she peed herself with terror and ran screaming from the room. There’s no *think* about it. It went horribly, terribly wrong. And it’s one hundred percent my fault.”

Mark looked unimpressed. “Okay, so you fucked up. Welcome to the human race.” A thoughtful look moved over his face. “You know, back when I was in the band and we were on top of the world, I became a total asshole myself. All the attention, the money, the free drugs and the girls throwing

themselves at us after every show. I treated those girls like toys to be used and tossed aside. I let the fame go to my head. I thought I was entitled to whatever the fuck I wanted, whenever the fuck I wanted it.” He sighed, his expression clouding. “I’m not proud of my behavior back then. We were all in over our heads. Poor Bobby paid the highest price, but it could have easily been me.”

Though Mason didn’t listen to pop music, preferring jazz, he was, of course, aware of Mark’s band, Planck Time. Mark had been the lead singer in the very successful group, which had famously imploded when the bass player had OD’d on heroin while onstage.

“It wasn’t until just this past year, with Jaime’s support and encouragement,” Mark continued, “that I went back and made amends to some of the people I fucked over during that time. I hope it made some of them feel better, but it wasn’t just about them. It was about me, and how I felt about myself. What I’m trying to say is, it’s not so much the fuckup. It’s what you do about it. You know how important communication is in a D/s relationship, even if it’s just a trainer/trainee scenario. That’s when amends are made—when lines of communication are reopened. Have you talked to her? Have you apologized? Have you discussed how things could work better going forward?”

“I never got the chance,” Mason retorted. “She wants nothing to do with me and I can’t really blame her. She grabbed her shit and bailed before I could say a thing.”

Mark raised his brows, a perplexed expression on his face. “You mean she just vanished?”

Mason frowned. “Yeah, basically. She hid out in the slave quarters until Anthony took her back into town. You know that.”

“Ah,” Mark said, leaning back with a self-satisfied smile. “So, she didn’t actually *vanish*. She just went back down to town, where you go at least three times a week, am I right?”

“Well, yeah, but—”

“No buts about it. Have you asked Anthony for her contact information?”

“Well, no, but—”

“So you *could* communicate with her. You could go see her. If you had the balls.”

“What’s the point?” Mason snapped, refusing to react to Mark’s taunt, which was so obviously designed to goad him into action. “It’s over and done with.”

“If that’s true, Mason,” Mark replied, his tone gentling, “then why are you still so completely and utterly obsessed with her?”

Mason opened his mouth to deny it.

Mark was watching him with an *I dare you to deny it* expression.

Mason closed his mouth and looked away.

Mark was right. Try as he might, Mason couldn’t get Hannah out of his mind. Though she’d only spent an hour in his bed, it now felt empty without her in it. Though he was aware she was all wrong for him—he required a 24/7 slave girl to be fulfilled—his first thought on waking was of Hannah.

Not just what he could have done differently in terms of her training. But on that one, stolen kiss. On the way she’d fit so snugly against him, as if their bodies were made from two parts of a whole. Of how much he had enjoyed having her in the kitchen. She was lively and intelligent, not to mention a damn good cook in her own right. He missed her dimpled smiles and her sweet innocence when it came to the scene. She was like a rare flower that, instead of handling with care, he’d crushed in his big, brutish paw.

To his astonishment, tears suddenly filled his eyes. Startled, he wiped them away. This time when he got to his feet, Mark didn’t try to stop him.

“Look,” Mason said, almost managing a smile. “I know you mean well. Anthony means well. Lucia means well. Everyone means well.”

He sighed. “It doesn’t matter how many times I go over what happened. Bottom line—Hannah’s gone. I had thought there was something that went beyond trainer and trainee starting to happen between us. But maybe that was wrong, too. When things went haywire, she didn’t try to speak to me, not then and not since. I fucked up. She hit the road. End of story.”

“So maybe it’s time to write a new one,” Mark replied.

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It had been two weeks since Hannah’s melodramatic departure from The Enclave. Anthony had been more than kind on the drive home. To her relief, he hadn’t lectured her about running away or encouraged her to stay and give it another try. He had simply apologized on Mason’s behalf and hoped she wouldn’t let that one experience stop her in her personal submissive journey.

“When you’re ready,” he’d said gently, “you might want to reach out to Mason, if only to give yourself some kind of closure. Meanwhile, please know that you’ll always be welcome at The Enclave, Hannah. That writer-in-residence position is still open,” he’d added with a smile.

When she’d arrived back at her silent, empty house, she’d made a batch of double chocolate brownies. Taking the entire pan with her, along with a chilled bottle of white wine, she’d plopped down on the sofa to watch old movies on TMC. Wiping away the tears that kept slipping down her cheeks, she’d worked her way steadily through the brownies and the wine until she’d fallen into a drunken sugar coma.

When she came to at about three in the morning, she took two aspirins and drank two large glasses of water. Wide awake, she’d thrown out what was left of the brownies, put the empty wine bottle in the recycle bin and taken a long, hot shower.

“That’s it, Hannah,” she’d said to her image in the bathroom mirror as she dried her hair. “You had your night of indulgent self-pity. Now it’s time to get to work.”

Writing had always been the one thing in which Hannah could totally lose herself. Despite her less than auspicious exit from The Enclave, her experiences and observations had given her fodder for at least a three-novel series. After a year's hiatus, she was finally ready to get back into the groove. Armed with a steaming mug of strong coffee she'd sat down at her laptop.

For the first time in over a year, her mind and her fingers were in sync, and by eleven that morning, she'd written the full outline of her next Angelique Rose novel, along with the first two chapters. The novel would be about a BDSM romance writer who finagles her way into a special compound where Masters and their slave girls live a BDSM lifestyle 24/7. The heroine goes through various trials and tribulations as she explores her own submissive tendencies and desires.

Instead of crashing and burning, her fictitious heroine bravely works through her fears. At the end of her training, the gorgeous, unattainable Dom who had guided her through the process confesses he has fallen madly in love with her. In a beautiful collaring ceremony at the end of the novel, he claims her for his own.

There was a certain ironic satisfaction in rewriting the ending of her own failed experiment, giving her readers and herself the HEA that was unfortunately all too elusive in real life.

Lucia had been checking in to make sure Hannah was all right and encouraging her to return to The Enclave. While Hannah appreciated her new friend's genuine concern, she had explained she still needed some time and space to work through this on her own.

She had confided in Charlotte, who had immediately dropped everything to come over and commiserate.

"Did I ever tell you about the time I punched Master Jim in the face?" Charlotte said over their second glass of wine.

"No," Hannah exclaimed, the revelation pulling her momentarily out of her own head. "What happened?"

“It was fairly early in our relationship. He had me tied down spread eagle on the bed, a gag in my mouth, a blindfold over my eyes. He’d been doing lots of sexy, wonderful things to me involving a single tail whip, his fingers and tongue, and my favorite vibrator.”

“Sounds pretty good to me,” Hannah had said.

“Yeah. It was awesome. But then he started tickling me. Now, I absolutely hate tickling more than anything in the world. Probably because my older brothers used to hold me down and tickle me until I peed my pants when I was little. Master Jim didn’t know about this trigger. I had a safeword, of course, but we hadn’t yet worked out any kind of safe signal at that point. He told me after that he thought I was having a grand old time. Tied down and gagged as I was, I couldn’t do a thing but lie there and take it. I was so furious by the time he untied me that I just hauled back and socked him.”

“Oh, wow,” Hannah said, laughing in spite of herself. “Talk about a buzz kill.”

“Right?” Charlotte had replied, laughing too.

“So, what did he do? Did he get mad?”

“Only at himself. He was mortified that I’d been so upset, and he hadn’t realized it. We talked it through to figure out what we could have done to avoid that situation, and how we could do better going forward. I guess my point is, D/s is a journey and a learning curve for both Dom and sub. Mistakes happen. People sometimes get punched,” she added with a laugh. Sobering, she’d said gently, “Maybe give him another chance, Hannah?”

Hannah had shaken her head. “It’s not the same as what you and Jim have, Charlotte. Mason and I aren’t in a relationship—not even close. I’ve been thinking a lot about what happened and how it could have gone differently. It wasn’t just Mason’s fault. Though it’s been mostly academic to this point, I’m well aware how important communication is in a D/s scenario. I kept my mouth shut because I wanted to live up to what everyone seemed to expect of me. The crux of

the problem wasn't his ignoring my cues. It was me trying to be something I wasn't."

When Charlotte had attempted to protest, Hannah had cut her off as gently as she could. "I'm not saying I'm not into BDSM. I'm saying I'm not in the same league as you all. The Enclave is a community of people who embrace the lifestyle 24/7. That's not me, even if I was pretending it might be for a few weeks there. Even if I'd stayed and Mason and I had worked things out in the short run, there's always going to be that basic disconnect."

Mason had *not* texted since she'd left The Enclave two weeks ago, not that she could really blame him. She'd been the one to cut and run, never properly explaining herself, or giving him the same opportunity. While she was sorry in retrospect for how she'd scampered, as the days passed and one week became two, she told herself it was for the best.

The attraction she'd felt for him had just been a byproduct of her overall excitement at being a part of a BDSM community, however briefly. Mason and she were so clearly wrong for each other. While she wished things had ended differently, the net result was always going to be the same.

Still, in spite of her resolve to move forward, leaving The Enclave as she had left her without a sense of closure. Maybe someday she'd get up the nerve to accept Anthony's kind, open invitation to return.

Meanwhile, she refused to allow herself to fall back into the morass of depression that had immobilized her for so many months after losing Andy. Instead, she threw herself into her work, happy to finally be creating once more.

That particular morning found her once more in her creative happy place. Her fingers were flying, the characters in her novel now directing her instead of the other way around, which meant she was definitely on the right track.

She vaguely registered the sound of the doorbell, which momentarily broke her concentration. It must be the printer ink she'd ordered online, which was due to arrive that day. They could just leave it on the porch.

But as she was returning her attention to the laptop screen, her cell dinged several times in succession. Glancing down, she saw the series of texts from Charlotte.

Cancel any plans. I won two free passes for the full treatment at that new spa that opened on Central Ave! I have to use it or lose it this morning, and you're coming with me!

Open up!

I know you're in there.

Hannah closed her laptop with a chuckle, aware she was no match for the force of nature that was Charlotte.

Charlotte did most of the talking as they drove to the spa, eager to share some salacious gossip about two coworkers at the clothing store where she worked part time who were caught having sex in one of the changing rooms.

When she asked Hannah how she was doing, Hannah told Charlotte about her new novel, glad for a chance to keep the topic off her love life, or lack thereof.

The spa was fancy, and they were given thick terry cloth robes to change into before being ushered into a private room. Soft music comprised primarily of panpipes played from hidden speakers and the scent of lavender oil permeated the air. Once they were prone on side-by-side padded massage tables, naked under soft sheets, two young women dressed all in white appeared. As strong, oiled hands skillfully pummeled and kneaded Hannah's muscles, her mind drifted, as usual, back to The Enclave.

Despite the way it had ended, there were lots of silver linings from the experience. It had helped her to understand her own mind and heart. After a lifetime of longing and yearning, she now knew for sure that she was indeed a submissive masochist. She craved erotic pain and loved the edgy thrill of being taken firmly in hand by a strong Dom.

But she'd also learned that her desire to submit didn't extend past the bedroom or the dungeon. If and when she was ready for a new partner, she hoped she'd find someone who shared her sensibilities—someone who could accept that,

while she adored the intensity of erotic submission, it wasn't something she could, or even wanted, to sustain 24/7.

After the massage, Charlotte and Hannah took quick showers and then, back in their comfy robes, they were treated to hot, spiced tea and cinnamon cookies. Once dressed, they were offered complimentary makeovers. Afterward, Charlotte bought several hundred dollars-worth of makeup and creams.

"Wow," Hannah said as they walked together into the brisk sunshine. "That was amazing. I feel like a new woman. How can I repay you?"

"Easy," Charlotte said with a grin, touching her slave collar. "It's Master Jim's birthday on Sunday. He loves anything chocolate. Oh, and he loves custard, too."

"How about chocolate éclairs with custard filling?" Hannah suggested.

"Perfect," Charlotte enthused. "You're the best."

When Hannah returned home, she no longer felt like writing. Having learned from years of wrestling with her creative process, she knew it would be useless to return to the laptop until she was ready.

Instead, she opted to do a practice run with the éclairs. It had been years since she'd made them, and the choux pastry that formed the shell of the dessert could be a challenge.

She pulled out her dessert binder, which was filled with recipes she'd collected over the years, some cut from newspapers, some downloaded from the internet, some handed down from her mother and grandmother, some she'd created herself after lots of trial and error.

The éclair recipe had come from her brief tenure in culinary school. The page was stained with a circle of ancient butter grease and a few daubs of chocolate, par for the course of a dessert chef, she thought with a smile. She had everything she needed except the milk and heavy cream.

After a quick run to the store for those ingredients, she changed into her sweats and an old T-shirt and got to work. Several hours later she had the filled pastries cooling in the

refrigerator. After heating heavy cream in a saucepan, she poured it over the semi-sweet chocolate chips for her chocolate ganache glaze. As the chocolate melted into the hot cream, she whisked it until a smooth sauce had formed. Pulling out the plate from the fridge, she sat down at the table to dip the custard-filled éclairs into the ganache, licking her fingers as she worked.

She had just finished glazing the éclairs and had put on the kettle for tea when the doorbell rang for the second time that day. Wiping her hands on her apron, she headed to the front door. Pulling it open, she expected to find the package on the porch, the delivery guy already driving away.

Instead, a tall, imposing man with a shaved head and a nervous smile stood there. He wore a black leather jacket, his hands shoved in the pockets of his jeans.

“Hey there,” Mason said.

Chapter 30

Hannah stared up at him, her mouth falling open. She looked way better than a woman had a right to, her hair glossy, her unusual silvery-blue eyes bright in her pretty face. There was a dab of flour on her chin, her chef's apron dotted with what looked like chocolate.

After several long seconds, Mason ventured, "Uh... Can I come in?"

Still she hesitated, as if pondering whether to slam the door in his face. During those few seconds, Mason fought an internal battle, at once chiding himself for coming in the first place—he should have texted or emailed or even called to test the waters—and holding back his nearly uncontrollable desire to pull her into his arms and kiss her.

But then she took a step back, gesturing him inside.

Before she could change her mind, he stepped across the threshold. The scent of melted chocolate and caramelized sugar filled the air.

"Something smells really good," he said, his carefully planned speech of apology gone completely out of his head.

"What're you doing here?" she blurted. Then color washed over her face. He'd almost forgotten how easily she blushed. "That came out wrong," she quickly added.

"No," Mason said. "It's a reasonable question. The short answer is I wanted to see you." The longer answer was far more complicated, so he left it at that, for now. "But you look like you were in the middle of something. If it's not a good time..."

"No. It's okay," she said. "I've been baking." She glanced down at herself, giving a nervous little laugh. "Obviously."

Unable to resist, he reached out and wiped at her floury chin with two fingers. She took a step back, her hand flying to her chin as if he'd burned her.

“Sorry,” he said quickly. “You had flour on your chin.”

Fuck. What had made him think he could show up out of the blue after the way things had ended? She clearly didn’t want him there. He should just go.

“Look, I—” The unmistakable sound of a tea kettle’s whistle interrupted his words.

“Oh,” Hannah exclaimed. “My kettle. I should get that.”

When she made no move to do so, Mason said, “Hannah? You okay?”

“I’m sorry. I... Yes. Yes. I should definitely get that.” She turned and walked abruptly away.

Bemused, Mason followed her through a comfortable living room. The space was furnished with plump sofas and deep wing-backed reading chairs, woven throw rugs set here and there on the hardwood floor.

They entered a large, old-fashioned kitchen with brightly painted yellow walls, hanging pots and pans and a fifties-style white Formica table with red chairs. A blue enameled KitchenAid mixer stood on the countertop in pride of place amidst a barrage of mixing bowls and measuring cups. Flour seemed to dust everything in the place.

Hannah moved quickly to the gas range and turned off the burner beneath the now urgently whistling tea kettle.

Mason’s eye was drawn to a tray of beautiful éclairs that sat on the table beside a large metal bowl with melted chocolate dripping down the sides. “Those look amazing,” he said sincerely.

She turned from the stove with one of those dimpled smiles that nearly took his breath away.

“They came out pretty good,” she acknowledged, no longer quite as flustered as she’d been. “Though I haven’t tried one yet. You’re just in time to test the final product. But be gentle, chef—I haven’t made these in years.”

Mason smiled back, relieved to have something other than his trepidation and uncertainty to focus on. “No worries. I left

my chef's hat in my kitchen. Promise.”

“I'll hold you to that.” She gestured toward the table. “Have a seat. I'll just make the tea and join you. Irish breakfast okay?”

“Sure,” Mason agreed, though he wouldn't have minded a couple of fingers of whiskey right about then to fortify his nerves. He wasn't used to apologizing.

He watched as she poured the hot water into a white china teapot. Even baggy sweats and the apron couldn't hide her voluptuous figure. He imagined coming up behind her and pulling her back against him as he lightly bit her neck. He remembered her shocked reaction when he'd touched her chin and remained firmly in his seat.

She came to the table carrying a tray on which she'd placed the teapot and two mugs, along with two plates and a small stack of napkins.

“Here, let me,” Mason said, getting to his feet as she set the tray on the table. He poured the steaming tea into the mugs as she returned to the counter and came back with some sliced lemon and a small jar of honey.

As Hannah added lemon and honey to her tea, he asked, “What's the occasion? Or do you typically bake complicated French pastry on a Friday afternoon just for something to do?”

“My friend, Charlotte, oh, wait, you know her.” A small laugh, another flush. “I mean, obviously you know her. She's the one who first brought me to The Enclave. Anyway, it's Jim's birthday on Sunday, and I volunteered to bake. I haven't made eclairs in forever so this is my practice run. They came out pretty, which is a good thing. But the real proof is in the pudding, or rather, the custard.”

Mason lifted an éclair from the plate and took a large bite. The pastry was light and airy, the custard rich and creamy, the semi-sweet ganache the perfect complement. “Wow,” he enthused. “This is fucking awesome, Hannah. I could totally serve these in my restaurant. Do you need a job?”

She laughed, clearly pleased. “I’m glad you approve.” She lifted an éclair and took a bite, her eyes fluttering shut with sensual pleasure. “Oh, yeah,” she breathed. “They are pretty awesome, if I say so myself.” She licked a bit of chocolate off her full lower lip. Mason bit back a groan of pure lust.

Focus, he silently ordered himself. *You have a job to do.*

He took a second, fortifying bite of the confection, wiped his mouth with his napkin and plunged in. “I owe you an apology, Hannah. I let you down. What happened was one hundred percent my fault. There’s no cleaning it up, but I want you to know I’m really sorry. Sorry I didn’t pay enough attention to your cues, sorry I pushed you too far, sorry I let you go without insisting we talk things through.”

Hannah dropped her gaze, suddenly going very still.

Mason held his breath. He wanted to say more. He wanted to explain himself, excuse himself, demand that she say something—anything—to let him know where he stood. But he held himself in check, waiting.

Finally, she looked up, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “I’m sorry, too. I’ve given it a lot of thought these past couple of weeks. I was complicit in what happened. I was trying to be something I’m not. I understand that now.”

The fault line that had cracked along his heart when she’d bolted from his room widened at the sad finality of her words. But his stubborn mind refused to accept what she said.

“You’re a courageous, sexy submissive, Hannah. One botched scene doesn’t negate that. You have real potential as an erotic slave. We just need—”

“No, Mason,” she interrupted, her tone quiet but firm. “It’s not a matter of tweaking my training or whatever. The experience was amazing, and I’m grateful for all of it. Even my fuckup at the end,” she added with a rueful smile. “It really clarified some things for me. After a lifetime of subjugating my true sexual nature, I got so caught up in the romance and fantasy of it all that I forgot to listen to my gut.”

She placed a light hand on his arm. He resisted the urge to pull it to his lips.

“I’m not slave material, Mason. I don’t want a Master.” She managed a small laugh. “I’m way too bossy to be a 24/7 sub.”

Mason chuckled in spite of himself. “Actually, most subs are bossy. It makes their genuine submission all the sweeter.”

Instead of replying, she lifted her mug and sipped her tea.

Mason finished the éclair and reached for another. Then he pulled his hand back. “Sorry. Is it okay to take a second?”

“Sure. You know they’re best the day of, and I can’t possibly eat all of these myself.” She smiled again, this time with the dimples. “Though I was prepared to give it a try.”

Mason smiled back reflexively, but his mind was in turmoil. He wanted to tell her she was totally wrong about not being so-called slave material. He’d been so used to working with the eager trainees who were desperate to please and to submit. He’d approached things all wrong with Hannah. He’d moved too fast. He needed another chance. But he sensed she wasn’t yet ready to hear all this. And he didn’t want to risk upsetting her to the point that she asked him to leave.

“Here’s the thing,” he ventured. “I didn’t just come here to apologize. I came because I can’t get you out of my head. I’m in the kitchen and I turn around to ask you to taste the mustard glaze for the pork tenderloin so you can tell me what’s missing, but you’re not there. I pass by the dungeon and see a trainee bound to the spanking bench and remember how sexy and perfect you were during that session. I lie down in my bed at night, recalling that brief but wonderful moment when you curled up against me and I held you close.”

He was probably saying too much, but he kept going. “I remember that very first night, when you flew from that flogging. I knew right then that there was something special about you.” His cock stiffened at the memory.

“Every moment we spent together is right there when I close my eyes,” he continued, unable to stop now that he’d

started. “Something was happening between us, Hannah. You can deny it all you like, but in your heart you know it’s true. Just think about that kiss. That one stolen kiss in the kitchen.” He brought his fingers to his lips, which still burned with the memory. “I will never forget that kiss.”

If this were a movie or one of her romance novels, Hannah would get to her feet now, her eyes shining, and fall into his arms. He would rise, carrying her effortlessly to the bedroom, where they would make passionate love for hours. Afterward, she would admit she was madly in love with him and longed to be his forever slave girl. It was only fear that had held her back, not desire.

But life rarely imitated art, at least in his experience, and this time was no exception. Hannah didn’t leap up and throw her arms around him. She didn’t drop to her knees and beg to serve her Master. But neither did she laugh in his face or tell him to take a hike.

Instead, she said in a low voice he had to strain to hear, “I haven’t forgotten that kiss either, Mason. I don’t think I’ll ever forget it.” She sighed. “I’ve missed you like crazy, if you want to know the truth.”

Mason’s heart leapt at her words. Hope swelled inside him like a helium balloon. Maybe he hadn’t ruined everything.

“I’ve talked it over endlessly with Charlotte, with Lucia, with myself,” she continued. “It’s not just that I can’t do the whole Master/slave thing.” She blew out a breath, as if girding herself for what she had to say next. “My late husband is the only man I’ve ever been with. I know that sounds impossible in this day and age, but it’s true. We got together when I was only nineteen. I don’t know if I even know how to be with another man.”

Mason had lost count of how many women he’d been with, even disregarding the one-night stands fueled by drugs and alcohol. And yet, in some ways, the two of them weren’t all that different.

“I’ve only ever been in love once before, too,” he offered. As he admitted those words, his pulse quickened, his mouth

suddenly dry. He wasn't one to put his feelings out there—the real ones, the ones that hurt. He hadn't talked about Carla to anyone, ever. He still blamed himself. If only he'd been a better Dom—a more courageous one, she might have stayed.

“Lucia mentioned Ashley,” Hannah began.

“No, not Ashley,” he said with a wry smile. “I lusted after Ashley,” he admitted. “No question about that. She was deeply masochistic and delightfully submissive. But her leaving was a blow to my ego, not my heart.” He shook his head. “That relationship had a limited shelf life from the beginning. It wasn't just that she's nearly twenty years my junior. She was always going to leave, sooner or later, and I knew that. I think I only let myself get as involved as I did *because* I knew that.”

Hannah tilted her head with a curious smile. “So, then who?”

Mason hesitated. Did he really want to talk about this? Would it make Hannah think less of him? He demanded complete honesty and full disclosure from his subs. Wasn't it time he gave it in return?

Taking a breath, he blurted, “Her name was Carla.”

“Carla,” Hannah repeated.

“Yeah.” To his surprise, it no longer hurt to say her name aloud. “We met in culinary school. She's the one who introduced me to BDSM. I'd always been hardwired as a Dom and a sensual sadist, but I had yet to experience anything firsthand at that point. She was a total masochist—nothing was too much for her, and it thrilled me. She was eager to bring all my darkest, deepest fantasies to life. I fell for her hook, line and sinker.”

He smiled as he recalled, “Both of us nearly got thrown out of the program because we kept forgetting to show up for class, too involved in some lengthy scene to keep track of time. I wanted to collar her. Shit, I wanted to marry her.”

“So, what happened?” Hannah asked. She had been listening to him with her full attention, her eyes fixed on his face, her expression rapt. She always did that, he realized now.

She listened with her whole self. It was just another thing he loved about her.

He shrugged. “Immaturity. Bad timing. Those were definitely factors. But the real problem was that she wanted me to do stuff that even I wasn’t comfortable with, especially back then before I had any real training.”

“Like what?” Hannah breathed, eyes wide.

“Choking her out, burning her with cigarettes. Body suspension.”

Hannah squinted in apparent confusion. “Like hanging by your wrists?”

“No. Like hanging from skin hooks.”

“Skin hooks,” Hannah exclaimed, a horrified expression on her pretty face.

“Yep. You lift the person off the ground using sterile hooks inserted into the skin and attached to ropes or cords that are in turn connected to a frame or pulley setup.”

“Jesus,” Hannah breathed. “Who would want to do that?”

Mason shrugged. “There’s a whole fetish community into it. It’s safe enough, if you know what you’re doing. But I wasn’t comfortable with it, especially not back then. Long story short, she found someone who was. It really knocked me for a loop. I was devastated as only a twenty-year-old with a broken heart can be. It took me a long time to get back into the scene, much less get involved with another woman.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mason. That sounds rough,” Hannah touched his arm briefly, her fingertips leaving a trail of heat on his skin.

He snorted. “Yeah. But it probably saved my culinary career. So, there’s that.”

“Silver lining,” Hannah replied, smiling. “I like to think of those, too. Keeps me going.”

He smiled back, marveling not only at her cuteness, but at how much it charmed him. His well-deserved reputation as an

old curmudgeon was going to tarnish at this rate. He might even have to cast it aside after all these years.

“I guess my point in telling you about Carla is that I get it. BDSM is a continuum, and we’re all at different places along that continuum. Maybe you’re right, and you’re not ‘slave material’ as you say. Or maybe we were approaching it all wrong.”

“All wrong?”

“From a trainer/trainee standpoint instead of...” He hesitated, not quite believing he was about to say this, and then deciding, fuck it. Nothing ventured, nothing gained. “...of lovers.” As her eyes again widened, he plunged on, “I heard what you said, and I get it. I do. This is new for both of us. But there was something there, Hannah. I know you felt it too. You ran away before we could explore what that might be. Please, Hannah. Just give me—give *us* a chance. That’s all I’m asking.”

Hannah was quiet for a long time. Too long. Mason bit his lip to keep from demanding an answer—the right answer. He gripped his mug so he wouldn’t reach for her.

Finally, she spoke, her gaze fixed on a spot on the table in front of her. “I’ve spent the past two weeks trying to put you out of my mind. Now, suddenly you’re here, bigger than life, saying all the things I thought I was longing to hear. I believe you mean what you say, but I’m afraid if we start this again, we’re going to run into the same brick walls.”

When he started to protest, she met his gaze and held up a hand, silencing him.

“No, hear me out. You’re a hardcore Dom who wants a 24/7 slave girl. As sexy as it sounds as a fantasy, and as much as I wanted to try it, it’s just not who I am. I can’t be the woman you want me to be.” Again, she dropped her gaze, bowing her head as if in defeat.

Mason forced his fingers to uncurl their death grip on the mug before he shattered it. His knee-jerk impulse was to tell her to trust him—that he knew what she needed better than she

did. But that was the old Mason—the pre-Hannah Mason. The one who wore his dominance like armor.

She wasn't asking him to *fix* things, to make them right by sheer force of will. She was expressing her heart. Maybe it was time he found the courage to express his.

Why was it so damned hard? Somehow, this newbie, this innocent, had laid him bare. He'd never felt so vulnerable in his life. Was this what love was?

He reached for her, placing a finger beneath her chin to raise her face to his. Her eyes were bright with unshed tears and his heart twisted with tenderness and longing.

"I hate to see you sad," he said gently. "I hate to think I'm the one who did that to you."

A single tear rolled down her cheek. He swiped it gently with his thumb. "This is new for me, Hannah. I'm not used to expressing my feelings. Shit, I'm not used to acknowledging that I even have any."

She managed a smile at that. He smiled back, determined now to express the words in his heart. "You know, before I met you I would have agreed with you about what I needed to be fulfilled. I really believed a 24/7 Master/slave relationship was what I required. But your leaving the way you did—it threw me for a loop. It forced me to take a step back and examine what it was I *actually* want at this point in my life."

He took a breath, determined to get past his ingrained habit of saying the bare minimum when it came to his feelings. This mattered too much. Hannah mattered too much.

"Here's what I figured out, and what I need to tell you. What you do with it will be up to you. But I owe it to you—to myself—to be completely honest, no matter the outcome."

His heart was now pounding so hard he thought it might thump right out of his chest. "I don't want a 24/7 slave girl. I want *you*. I want you in my life. I'll do whatever it takes to make that happen." He swallowed hard and plunged on, "I'm falling in love with you, Hannah. Not some idealized version of you as a perfect slave girl. You—just as you are."

There. He'd done it. He'd laid his soul out there for her. He had nothing left to offer.

"Oh, Mason," Hannah breathed, her hands fluttering to her chest. "I don't know what to say. This is all so new for me, too. But I think..." she trailed off.

Mason forced himself to be still, when all he wanted to do was rush to her and take her in his arms. Instead, he prompted softly, "You think...?"

"I think I might be falling in love, too. With you," she whispered.

Now he did rise, moving around the table to her. He held out his hand and she took it, allowing him to pull her upright. Heart singing, he pulled her close, gathering her tightly against his chest.

She melted against him with a sigh. If he could just stand there forever with her enfolded in his arms, it would be enough.

Then she lifted her face, eyes closing as her lips parted in a clear invitation for a kiss.

Maybe life did imitate art sometimes, after all.

Chapter 31

They kissed for a long time, just standing there in her kitchen, arms wrapped around each other. When they finally pulled apart, Hannah was breathless. A kind of startled joy bubbled through her like fizzy water.

At the same time, her mind was reeling with the implications of what they'd just admitted to one another—to themselves. Was she ready to love again? Did he really mean what he said? Could she ever be enough for him? Was he right for her? Could they still explore their D/s relationship without running into the same brick walls they had before? Were they moving too fast, too soon?

It was all too much to think about.

“Let me put away the éclairs,” she said, reaching for something concrete to do while she gathered her thoughts. However confused she might be, the sexual electricity still crackling in the air from that amazing kiss had left her both aroused and as nervous as a teenager on her first date. “Unless you want another one?”

“No, thanks,” he said, patting his gut. His usual grumpy expression—what she thought of as his chef face—was nowhere in evidence. He was smiling broadly, grinning ear to ear. “Two’s my limit. Especially if we want to grab a bite later. I was thinking I could take you over to Uptown Café for a meal.”

Mason owned Uptown Café and, until he’d retired to The Enclave two years before, he’d also been the head chef. The place was super trendy and wildly popular, reservations required weeks in advance.

“Oh,” Hannah exclaimed. “I’ve never been.” She grinned. “Think we can get a reservation? I hear it’s basically impossible.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mason deadpanned. “I know a guy.” He glanced at his watch. “It’s five thirty. How about we

make it for eight? We should have digested those éclairs by then.”

“Sounds good,” Hannah agreed, excited to try the food at Uptown Café, and also glad they had a concrete plan that precluded falling into bed together, something she was most definitely *not* yet ready to do. “I’ve got a nice Sauvignon Blanc chilling in the fridge. Care for a predinner glass?”

“Sure,” Mason agreed with a smile. The palpable tension that had pulled him as taut as a rubber band since he’d arrived on her doorstep had vanished, making her realize he’d been as nervous as she had, maybe even more so.

They sat side-by-side on the sofa. Mason poured the wine and handed her a glass. “To new adventures,” he said, clinking her glass with his. She curled into a corner of the sofa and turned to face him. How strange it felt to have another man in her home, a man who had just professed his love for her.

“Tell me about your childhood,” she said, feeling the need to lower the erotic temperature in the room, which had soared during that kiss. “How many siblings? Did you always know you wanted to be a chef? Are your parents still alive? Does your family know about your BDSM lifestyle?”

Mason held up a hand, laughing. “Whoa. I can only keep one question in my head at a time. I’m not really used to talking about myself.”

“Now’s as good a time to start as any,” Hannah retorted with a grin, feeling more relaxed now that she was on safer ground. “I want to know everything about you.”

He told her about his life in the lower Hudson Valley and about his two older brothers, both of whom had gone into the family construction business. He talked of his parents, who were still alive and well. He lit up when he talked about second grade, where a cooking class was offered four times a year. He’d loved every session more than the last. He’d even asked Santa for an Easy Bake Oven.

“Me too,” Hannah exclaimed, laughing with delight. “I loved making tiny brownies and cookies in that thing. And

making my family eat them.”

Mason asked her questions in turn about her early life, her children, her writing career, her exposure to BDSM prior to coming to The Enclave. They shared funny stories about their awkward teenage years and serious recollections about difficult times in their lives.

Their talk was easy and animated, and Hannah couldn't remember the last time she'd felt so relaxed and happy. As clichéd as it sounded, it was as if they'd always known each other.

The room had darkened as they'd talked, the sun setting without their noticing. The wine bottle was empty, Hannah pleasantly buzzed. “What time is it?” she asked.

Mason looked at his watch. “Oh, shit. It's already eight fifteen. Still want to go to Uptown Café? I'd just as soon order pizza so we can keep talking.”

“I like that idea,” Hannah agreed, not wanting to break whatever lovely spell had wrapped itself around them, capturing them in its warm, lifegiving glow.

Mason pulled out his phone. He typed something quickly, thumbs flying, and then looked up at her. “Mellow Mushroom?”

“The best in Asheville,” she replied with a laugh. “The Holy Shiitake Pie?” It was her favorite pizza at Mellow Mushroom, with an olive oil and garlic base, covered in fresh shiitake and portobello mushrooms, along with caramelized onions, mozzarella and white cheddar cheese, finished with fresh chives and shaved Parmesan.

“You have to ask?” he quipped.

They continued to talk until the delivery guy arrived at the door forty minutes later. They returned to the kitchen and proceeded to inhale the pizza, liberally sprinkled with red pepper flakes and washed down with fresh lemonade.

It was after eleven when they finally pushed back from the table.

“Gosh,” Hannah exclaimed. On the one hand, she didn’t want him to leave. On the other, she was relieved that the decision would be made for her. “I guess you need to head back. You have to be up in seven hours to get breakfast going.”

“Actually, I don’t,” Mason replied. “I texted Anthony before I ordered the pizza. Told him they’d need to fend for themselves for one more day.”

“Oh,” Hannah said, feeling suddenly hot and cold all at once. Her body thrilled at the implications of his words, but her mind was suddenly on high alert. What was he expecting now?

“I’m so glad you came to see me,” she ventured. “I’m happy and relieved we were able to talk things through. This has been a wonderful night. But I’m not sure...”

“Hey, it’s cool,” he said, placing his huge hand on her arm. “Zero pressure, Hannah. I can sleep on the couch, even get a motel room, whatever. I just didn’t want to have the obligation of meal prep hanging over my head in the morning.” He grinned, adding, “The chef needs a day off now and then. And there’s this amazing new breakfast place I wanted to take you to in the morning. They make these blueberry blintzes that are out of this world.”

His easy manner set her at ease. He wasn’t expecting her to fall into bed with him. He didn’t plan to retake control as a Dom. Because, even while the idea was deliciously thrilling in the abstract, she just wasn’t ready.

“Okay,” she agreed. “I have a guest bedroom. I might even have a spare toothbrush.”

“No need,” Mason said, getting to his feet. “I brought an overnight bag.” At her raised brow, he added with a grin, “What can I say? I was a Boy Scout.”

A half hour later Hannah was in her big bed, alone, her door closed. She’d wrestled with herself over whether or not to ask Mason to join her. It had felt odd, even wrong somehow, to invite him into the bed that she’d shared with Andy for so

long. Yet, she wanted to lie with Mason, to snuggle against him as he wrapped his strong arms around her.

Their mutual declaration about falling in love made her want to squeal with excitement, but also with terror. Had they really said those words aloud? Was she ready to commit to another man? Would she ever be?

“Okay, back it up, Hannah,” she muttered to herself. No one was talking about a full-blown relationship at this point. They were still feeling each other out. One thing she knew for sure now—she didn’t just lust after Mason the sexy Dom. She really, really liked Mason the man. And she wanted to know him better.

The evening had flown by, their talk as easy as if they’d known each other for years. It was both startling and gratifying to learn just how much they had in common, and how similarly they viewed the world. He’d been so unapproachable at The Enclave, even during intense training sessions, or maybe especially then.

Everything felt different now. It had been touching to watch his obvious internal struggle when they’d sat at the table, each baring their hearts to one another. By allowing her to see his vulnerability, he’d only made himself stronger in her eyes. He wasn’t just some uber-Dom determined to claim her as a conquest. He was a real flesh-and-blood man, someone she could trust.

Someone she could love.

There was still that dominant, masculine vibe, make no mistake. And the sub in her responded eagerly to that dominance. Beneath their easy, friendly banter there remained a steady buzz of sexual attraction, like an electric current arcing between them.

She glanced reflexively at Andy’s side of the bed, empty for so long now. Despite all the time that had passed, a pang of guilt snapped like a rubber band against her heart. She’d always believed he would be her one and only. Would he have wanted this for her?

I want you to be happy. I'll always be in your heart. But it's time to live again.

Hannah gasped and sat bolt upright in the bed, her hands flying to her mouth. That had been Andy's voice, as clear as day.

"Andy?" she whispered, heart hammering.

He didn't reply.

She remained still, listening hard. But there was only the chirping sound of the crickets playing their music outside her window. As her heart slowed to something approaching normal, she lay back down. She didn't believe in ghosts. She must have imagined his speaking aloud, when surely it had only been in her head. But Andy's words, even if they were pulled from her own psyche, comforted her.

"Thank you," she said softly to the universe.

Turning on her side, she closed her eyes again, waiting for sleep to beckon. But she was once again wide awake. She tried counting backward from one hundred. She tried controlling her breathing. She tried visualizing each part of her body slowly relaxing...

Her mind refused to shut down. Her eyelids flew open like cheap vinyl roller shades. There was no way she was going to be able to sleep with Mason in her house, right down the hall.

She flashed back to his hard, naked body that day in his bathroom. The way his strong legs had gripped her on either side in the tub as he'd cupped her breasts and rolled her nipples... How he'd stood there like a god as she'd dried his body, tall, massive, powerful and so quintessentially masculine. Her clit throbbed at the memories, her nipples aching for his touch.

Was he naked under the sheets? Was his huge cock fisted in his hand? Was he thinking of her as he stroked himself? Was she insane to be hiding out in her bedroom, instead of lying in his arms?

The digital clock by the bed informed her it was nearly one a.m. She turned over again, plumping her pillows, adjusting

the sheets, closing her eyes...

What would happen if she crept down the hall...

No. It was better she stayed where she was, sleepless or not. It was safer. Mason was a man, with a man's appetites. And while it was thrilling in the abstract, the thought of actually making love with another man was more than a little terrifying. And anyway, she wasn't on birth control anymore. And then there was the issue of his cock. It was way too big for her to accommodate, she was sure of it.

More tossing and turning ensued. More counting, more breathing, more flipping her pillow to the cool side.

"Okay, this is stupid," Hannah finally announced to the empty room.

Sitting up, she threw off the covers and swung her legs over the side of the bed. Padding to her bathroom, she peed, washed her hands and face and drank a dixie cup of water. Back in the bedroom, she went to her bureau and pulled out a satin nighty. She slipped it over her head and, before she could talk herself out of it, she walked to her door, opened it and stepped into the hallway.

Heart pounding, she made her way to the guest bedroom. Placing her hand on the knob, she turned it slowly, listening all the while for any sound within. Hearing nothing, she pushed open the door on silent hinges.

She stopped just inside the door. The moon was high in the sky, casting the room in a silvery glow. Mason lay on his back, the sheets covering only his lower half, his broad chest bare.

"Are you asleep?" she whispered.

He turned his head toward her and held out his arms.

She came closer, heart beating high in her throat.

"I was hoping you would come," he murmured.

"I couldn't sleep," she said.

"Come lie with me. I'll rock you to sleep."

Before she could overthink it, Hannah reached for the hem of her nightgown, drew it over her head and tossed it aside. Cautiously, she lay down beside him.

He reached for her, pulling her gently into his arms.

“Hannah,” he breathed, his voice hushed and intimate, as if she were something sacred.

For the first time in a very long time, she relaxed fully, letting him enfold her in his strong, safe embrace. With a contented sigh, she rested her cheek against his chest and closed her eyes.

She fell instantly asleep, not moving until the sun rose.

Chapter 32

Mason opened his eyes, something pulling him from a very hot, sexy dream. The sky outside was splashed with pale gold and pink. For a moment he had no idea where he was, or who was in bed with him.

As his brain clicked on, he glanced down at the lovely woman beside him. She was covering his chest in tiny kisses, her hand stroking his abdomen in widening circles toward his groin. Her body was warm against his, her bare breasts brushing his skin as she moved.

When her hand wrapped around his rock-hard morning erection, he couldn't quite stifle a groan. His natural impulse was to guide her head down and command her to take him deep into her throat. He held himself firmly in check.

She was no longer his to command and train. The rules were different now. Or rather, they hadn't yet been rewritten between them. While he was certain Hannah was indeed a submissive with a deep masochistic streak, he didn't want to risk ruining the moment by going all Dom on her. So he remained quiet and still—as still as he could with those perfect fingers stroking his cock and balls.

But when her mouth closed over his shaft, he couldn't contain the moan that was pulled from deep inside him. He buried his fingers in her thick, soft hair as his breath quickened. He tightened his grip in her hair as pleasure threatened to engulf him.

All at once, she pulled away from him and lifted her head. Her eyes were bright, her lips wet and shiny. None of the hesitation or timidity he'd seen before remained in her expression. A small, knowing smile ghosted her lips. She had him completely in her thrall and she knew it.

“I want you, Sir,” she said in a sexy, throaty voice. Her use of the honorific thrilled the Dom in him.

“I want you, too, Hannah. Very, very much.”

Then a little worry line appeared between her brows. “But I’m scared,” she whispered, suddenly looking so vulnerable and sweet it was all he could do not to scoop her into his arms, his raging erection notwithstanding.

“What are you scared of, Hannah?” he asked gently.

“This,” she said, curling her fingers once more around his throbbing shaft. “It’s so big. And anyway, I’m not on birth control, so...”

To his dismay, she let go of his cock and flopped down next to him in the bed. He kept his disappointment to himself, aware she was like a wild animal just then, one who might flee if he made any sudden moves.

Keeping his voice light and soothing, Mason offered, “We can take it very slowly. I won’t hurt you. I promise.” He gestured with his chin toward the night table where he’d placed several condoms the night before, just in case. “And I have a lubricated condom.” Not that she’d need additional lubrication if he had anything to do with it.

Hannah barked a nervous laugh. “Boy Scout is right.”

He smiled, stroking her soft cheek until she calmed. Lifting himself on an elbow, he leaned over her and gently sucked one of her nipples into his mouth. Encouraged by her soft, sexy sigh, he flicked the nubbin with his tongue and then lightly bit down. Her gasp was like fingers on his cock. He did the same to her other nipple, licking, sucking and nudging with his teeth until she moaned.

Mason released her breasts and trailed his tongue down her abdomen. When he reached the soft mound of her mons, he half expected her to slam her thighs together. To his delight, she let them fall open. The spicy-sweet scent of her arousal drove him nearly wild. Shifting quickly before she could change her mind, he slid down between her legs. Gripping each thigh, he held her open as he licked and kissed the soft, delicate folds of her sex.

“Ooooooh,” she breathed, holding the word for several seconds as a deep shudder moved through her.

He flicked at her clit, hard as a pearl, until she was trembling, her breath a pant. Releasing one thigh, he slipped two fingers inside her hot, slick tunnel. His cock throbbed. How he longed to rear up and plunge himself inside that tight, hot sheath, without regard for her comfort or fears.

Instead, he pulled his fingers from her slickness and lifted his head. “Do you want to come, Hannah?”

“Yes,” she said throatily. Then, to his surprised delight, she added, “but not like this, Sir. I want to feel you inside me.” Then, in a smaller voice, “But I’m still scared.”

Tenderness, not a feeling he was used to, nearly overwhelmed him. “Don’t be scared, sweetheart,” he soothed. “It’ll be fine. Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to put on the condom and then you’re going to climb on top of me. You’ll control the pace and the penetration. Take as long as you need while your body adjusts to me. If it doesn’t feel right or even if you just change your mind, that’s okay, too. We’re not in a hurry. We have all the time in the world.”

He held his breath, waiting for her decree. No matter what she said, he would accept it without pressuring her. As much as he longed to throw her down, caveman style, and plunge into her, he held himself firmly in check. If and when she came to him, it had to be freely, without coercion.

“Yes,” she finally said, so softly he almost couldn’t hear her.

“Yes, what, Hannah? Tell me what you want.”

“I want that. I want you. I want to feel you inside me, Sir. Please.”

He couldn’t stop the grin that spread across his face as he reached for the condom. Tearing it open, he rolled it onto his cock, his body fairly vibrating with pent-up lust.

Swallowing visibly, Hannah lifted herself over him, her luscious breasts swaying, the erect nipples still shiny from his kisses. Her eyes fixed on his, she slowly, carefully, eased herself over the head of his shaft.

Then she winced, pulling up slightly but not completely disengaging. He was used to women needing time to adjust to his girth. He only smiled and reached for her hips. He gripped them with a light touch just to anchor her—to let her know she was safe.

Slowly, slowly, she lowered herself onto him again, her hair falling like a curtain over her face. Every inch into the tight, blazing wetness of her was both paradise and torment. He was desperate for more. He needed to go deeper, to the very core of her. He longed to claim her with every part of himself.

Finally, finally, he was fully seated inside her, her delicate inner muscles clenched tight around him. He groaned as she moved on top of him. Her hips swiveled in a sensual rhythm that drove him wild. Impaled on his cock, she reached back to cup his balls. Desire roared through him. He forgot all his promises to be gentle. With a growl, he rolled her over onto the bed, spreading her beneath him.

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Hannah gasped with surprise to find herself suddenly underneath Mason. He was still buried deep inside her, his perfect cock sending spirals of fierce pleasure eddying through her. The initial pain of penetration when she'd first straddled him had quickly subsided into buttery, hot desire the likes of which she'd never experienced before. She'd been the one in control—the one on top, both literally and figuratively.

But he'd flipped the tables as easily as he'd flipped her body. This sudden change—him on top of her, big, strong and once more in complete control, sent tremors of dark, delicious helplessness through her being. She no longer wanted to dominate. She longed to submit. To be claimed by this man.

But Mason, his eyes locked on hers, held himself still inside her. Trembling beneath him, quivering with lust, she cried, "Please, Sir. I want it. Fuck me."

A cruel smile curved his lips. Still not moving his hard, perfect body, he reached for her arms. He pulled them over her head and pressed them down against the mattress, pinning her

in place. Power emanated from him like a forcefield, drawing her inexorably into its orbit.

“Beg me,” he commanded, his hands gripping her wrists.

A frisson of genuine fear iced up her spine while the rest of her melted into a pool of molten lust and desire. She adored being pinned down in this way, helpless and breathless beneath this big, strong man.

“Please,” she gasped, arching her hips up to meet him, desperate to feel his cock moving inside her. “I beg you, Sir. Please fuck me. Please, oh, please.”

Fire in his eyes, Mason dipped his head, sucking her nipple into his mouth until she moaned. Heat bloomed over her skin, as if she were on fire from within. She was pinned beneath his weight, unable to move, trembling with desire. Finally, releasing her breast, he began to move again inside her.

With a feral cry, she lifted her hips, meeting his strokes, thrust for thrust. As he pummeled her, Mason dipped his head to hers. He parted her lips with his. When his tongue entered her mouth, she kissed him back with a passion she couldn't contain. When he finally broke the kiss, she threw back her head, baring her throat for him.

With a growl, he bit the side of her neck as he drove his cock deeper into her. She was being split in two, and the pleasure of that pain nearly overwhelmed her.

The sweet ache of him inside her sent shuddering waves over her skin. As she arched up into his touch, he murmured into the hollow of her throat, saying her name over and over, like a prayer. The rough longing in his voice set her afire.

Her entire world constricted to the cock deep inside her, and to the touch of his hands and his lips on her skin. When he cried out against her neck, the desperate, utterly male sound was her undoing. Wave after wave of climax sent her spiraling up and up until she finally fell back against the bed, pulsing with pleasure.

She clung to him, helpless and limp, stroking his head as their breathing slowed. As he slowly collapsed against her, she

reveled in the solid weight of him atop her, her own body blissfully boneless.

Her heart twisted with a confusing onslaught of emotions she couldn't quite untangle. Unbidden tears sprang to her eyes. They trickled from the corners of her eyes into her hair as her breath caught in her throat.

Mason lifted his head, his face creasing with concern. "Hannah?" he asked, brushing a knuckle over her wet cheek. "Are you crying?"

She tried to smile, but the tenderness in his tone undid her. "I don't know. I might be," she managed, her voice cracking on the last word.

He rolled quickly from her, expertly removing the condom in the process and setting it aside. "Are you hurt? Is everything okay?"

"No, no. I'm fine," she assured him, barely able to speak over the lump of hot tears that had risen in her throat. "I have no idea why I'm crying. I'm really happy," she insisted, while choking on a sob. She turned away from him, hiding her face in her hands as her shoulders shook with the effort of holding back the floodgates of her tears.

Strong arms came around her from behind as Mason pulled her close against his chest. "It's okay, baby. You're okay. I've got you."

The floodgates broke. Loud, ugly sobs filled with loss, pain and raw emotion racked her frame. Andy was gone. He would never see his grandchildren. He would not grow old beside her. He was no longer her one and only.

At the same time, she cried with happiness, wonder and a new, burgeoning joy as fragile and determined as a new sapling. She was ready to live again, fully and with all her heart. As snot and tears poured down her face, Mason held her close all the while, rocking her gently in his arms.

Finally, completely spent, Hannah stilled, no more tears left. Mason pulled gently away from her and reached for the box of tissues on the night table. He plucked several and

turned to her. His smile was tender, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he handed them to her.

She managed a wan smile in return and then noisily blew her nose.

He took the wet wad of tissues from her and handed her a fresh tissue. His expression was a mix of curiosity and concern. She tensed, not yet ready to explain why she'd cried. She had no real answer, at least not with words that would make sense.

But instead of peppering her with questions, Mason only said, "Feeling better?"

Hannah sat up, pushing her hair away from her face as she turned to him.

"Yeah," she replied, smiling. "Much better."

The wonder of the last twelve hours washed over and through her. A curious lightness suffused her body and heart, as if a weight she'd been carrying for too long had suddenly lifted. A laugh bubbled through her, and she gave it voice.

Impulsively, she reached for Mason. Catching his face in her hands, she showered him with tiny kisses on his mouth, his cheeks rough with stubble, his nose and his eyelids, laughing all the while. He began to laugh too, until they were both roaring with mirth.

Finally, pleasantly exhausted and still smiling, Hannah collapsed beside Mason. He pulled her toward him, tucking her against his body, her head resting against his shoulder.

Her empty stomach chose that moment to rumble loudly.

"Blintzes, anyone?" Mason chuckled.

Chapter 33

Hannah closed her eyes, her face suffusing with pleasure as she ate her first bite of the blintz topped with blueberry compote and a dollop of sour cream.

“Good, huh?”

“Oh my god, Mason. Better than good.”

The small restaurant was crowded, a line of people waiting patiently outside. When they’d arrived at the place, Mason had gone directly to the back of the building. Predictably, one of the kitchen staff was leaning against the wall smoking a cigarette. Mason had asked if Bella, the chef, was in. She had worked briefly in one of Mason’s restaurants before spreading her wings to open her own place.

They were ushered into the kitchen where Mason introduced Bella and Hannah. Though they’d made incredible love that morning, Mason still wasn’t entirely sure what to call his relationship with Hannah yet—if he could even use that word. So he’d introduced her only as his friend. Bella had found a seat for them at a tiny table for two in the back of the restaurant. The table was so small that their knees were touching beneath it, which suited Mason just fine.

Now their waitress, Becky, reappeared, a carafe of the café’s excellent coffee in hand. “Can I get you anything else?” she asked as she topped their mugs.

Mason glanced at the chalkboard of handwritten specials. “Yeah, actually. Bring us one of those Charleston chicken biscuits to share. Oh, and a side of the country ham.”

“Where are we going to put that?” Hannah asked as the waitress left to fill the order. “I’m not sure I can even finish this.”

“I just want you to try it. The bacon gravy is topnotch, and Bella’s biscuits are almost as good as yours.”

Hannah beamed, her adorable dimples melting his heart. “When you put it that way,” she replied.

The biscuits arrived in short order. They continued to eat and drink until both pushed their plates away. Mason glanced around for the waitress, suddenly eager to leave.

They’d taken a long, sexy shower together after their lovemaking. To his surprise, Hannah had dropped to her knees of her own accord, towel in hand, to dry Mason’s body before her own.

He had been startled by the gesture, given how she’d balked during her brief slave training. Though he’d never precisely thought of it this way before, being a Master was sometimes a lonely business. You were always in control, calling all the shots, managing both your slave’s reactions and your own.

A fledgling thought, almost heretical in nature, had entered Mason’s head as the lovely woman knelt at his feet. Maybe this new dynamic that Hannah and he were just beginning to explore might be even better than a pure Master/slave connection. Maybe the difference was precisely that he hadn’t commanded her to submit. She’d instead offered her submission freely. It was oddly exciting in a way that was new to him. It felt less like a Master/slave situation and more like a...relationship.

He looked now across the small table that separated them. Hannah was licking a bit of blueberry compote from her lip in a way he found extremely sensual. She met his gaze with just the hint of a smile, as if she knew precisely her effect on him.

The waitress chose that moment to reappear, and Mason, his wallet already on the table, asked for the check.

“Chef says no charge,” she said with a smile.

Mason reached into his wallet and pulled out two twenties. “Please thank her for me,” he said, handing her the bills. “And thank you, Becky, for the excellent service.”

Becky smiled broadly as she slipped the money into her apron. “Thanks. Y’all come back soon.”

“That was nice of Bella,” Hannah said as they got to their feet. “And nice of you to tip the waitress so well.”

Mason shrugged. “I used to wait tables while I was in school. It’s a tough gig.”

They stepped outside into the sunshine. “Want to walk a little?” Hannah suggested. “It’s such a nice day.”

“Sure.”

Hannah reached for Mason’s hand as they walked down the sidewalk toward a small nearby park. He gripped it gently, his heart again flooding with that tenderness that was so new, and so sweet.

As they made a slow loop around the park, Mason pondered how to approach what he wanted to say. He wanted to express his feelings—his real feelings—without freaking Hannah out with too much, too soon.

Fuck that, a voice inside him said. Just speak your heart.

“I love whatever it is that’s happening between us, Hannah,” he said.

Hannah gave his hand a squeeze. “Me, too.”

“I meant what I said earlier,” he added. “I’m really excited about exploring our D/s connection, on *our* terms—yours and mine. Not as Master and slave. Not even necessarily as Dom and sub. But as partners creating something that works for both of us.”

“I want that, too,” Hannah said. “We’re still so new and feeling our way. But I’m ready now. Truly ready for this next adventure with you, wherever it takes us.”

Mason smiled, happiness suffusing every pore of his being. But he wasn't done with what he wanted to say. What he needed to say.

“I've always told myself I needed a Master/slave relationship to be fulfilled. I understand now that I was clinging to that construct partially as a way to keep myself at an emotional distance from any potential partner. Unlike Anthony and Mark and the other Doms at The Enclave, I never allowed *love* to enter the equation—until now.”

He stopped walking and turned to her, taking both her hands in his. “I know we don't have a crystal ball. But I promise you this: going forward I will never take your submission for granted again. I will cherish it as the gift it is, not something I demand.”

In answer, Hannah reached up and pulled him down for a long, lingering kiss. Just as they were pulling apart, two teenagers walked by, one of them calling out, “Get a room.”

To Mason's delight, Hannah laughed. “Not a bad idea.”

During the ten-minute ride home, Mason slid his hand under Hannah's skirt to stroke her bare leg. He let his fingers trail down her inner thigh.

A sexy shudder moved through her at his touch, her legs falling open in invitation.

As they turned into her driveway, he asked, “Have you ever had a bare-assed spanking over the knees of a naked man who plans to turn your bottom cherry-red?”

“Oh,” Hannah exclaimed, her eyes going wide as she turned to him. “Gosh.”

He slipped a finger under the silky crotch of her panties. She was soaking wet.

“Answer the question, sub girl.”

“No. No, Sir.”

Excellent.

He was learning that her use of the word *Sir* was a way to indicate she was in a submissive state of mind.

Turning off the engine, he jumped from the car and moved quickly to the passenger side. He pulled open the door for her and held out a hand. “As soon as we’re in the house, you will go directly to the guest bedroom and strip naked. You will then kneel on the carpet, arms extended along the floor in front of you, ass high in the air. I’ll join you shortly. Understood?”

“Yes, Sir,” she replied in that throaty voice that made his dick hard.

Her hand was trembling slightly as she put the key in the lock, but she managed to get the door open. Once inside, she disappeared down the hall that led to the bedrooms. He, meanwhile, went into the kitchen. There, he filled a small mixing bowl with ice.

When he entered the bedroom, she was kneeling as directed, her luscious ass on display. He was pleased that she didn’t move as he entered the room. Some of the training at The Enclave had apparently stuck.

He set the ice on the nightstand and shucked his clothing quickly, eager to get this party started. Crouching beside her, he placed his hand on her upper back. He’d given the idea of a safeword some thought. While there was no such thing for slave trainees at The Enclave, things were different now. They were a new couple—if he even dared use that word—still figuring things out between them.

He was not going to make the same mistake he had then, assuming he knew what was best for her without taking the time to really understand her mindset. “I don’t think you’ll need it, but I want you to use your safeword if you need to.

And you can always just tell me if things are getting too intense.”

She lifted her head, meeting his gaze. “Thank you, Sir,” she said quietly, and he understood she was thanking him not only for the permission, but for showing her that he understood the new dynamic between them.

Mason sat on the bed and patted his thighs. “Come lie over my lap, facedown.”

When Hannah rose from the floor, her beautiful eyes were bright, her lovely nipples fully erect. As she lowered herself over his lap, he adjusted her body until he was satisfied with her position. Her head rested comfortably on the bed, her legs extended on the mattress, though he could feel the tension in her muscles.

He started gently, lightly stroking and tapping her bottom until she relaxed against him. Cupping his palm slightly, he slapped her flesh with a satisfying smack, enjoying the jiggle. She gave a small, sexy yelp but didn’t try to squirm away.

Little by little, he increased the intensity of his swats until her bottom was pleasantly pink and warm to the touch. “You ready for more?” he asked, his cock hard beneath her thigh.

“Yes, please, Sir,” she replied, to his delight.

He varied his strikes from soft to hard, keeping her on edge, not knowing what to expect next. At first, she flinched in anticipation of each swat. But after a while, she relaxed into the experience. He slipped his hand between her legs to cup her hot cunt. She was sopping wet, her inner thighs damp. The musky sweetness of her scent made his mouth water and his cock throb.

He covered every inch of her ample bottom, including the crease where ass meets thigh. Her yelping cries eventually subsided into moans as her bottom turned a beautiful shade of red, radiating heat beneath his touch. There was something intensely satisfying about seeing the imprint of his hand on her soft, glowing flesh.

He felt the precise moment when she slipped into that delicious, rarefied zone some called flying. Her entire body relaxed, every muscle loosening as a deep sigh escaped her lips. It was the same place he'd taken her that very first night, before he had any real idea who she was.

“Yes,” he urged softly. “Just like that, Hannah. Perfect.”

This time when he put some power behind the strike, she didn't move a muscle or make a sound, save for another soft sigh. He struck her hard several more times and still she didn't move. Her eyes were closed, a smile lifting the edges of her lips. She was in that zone where she no longer had the ability or physical awareness to use her safeword or otherwise stop him. It was up to him to keep her from harm.

He gradually eased the intensity of his strokes until he was lightly patting her heated flesh. Still, she didn't move. He leaned over, gently tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Hey, you,” he said softly. “You alive?”

“Mhmmmm,” she breathed. Her eyes slowly opened, her lips curving into a smile. “I'm better than alive. I'm in heaven, floating in the clouds.” Then a small pucker appeared between her brows, her eyes focusing on his face. “But, man, my poor ass is on fire.”

Grinning, Mason reached for the bowl of ice. He plucked a cube and ran it lightly over her hot flesh. She sucked in a breath at the sudden cold.

“Oh, that feels *good*,” she said, giving a deeply southern inflection to the word.

He continued to rub the ice over her flesh. Once her skin had cooled, he dropped the melting ice back into the bowl.

“I didn't think to pack Aubrey's miracle balm. We should take a ride up to The Enclave later. If you want to, that is,” he added hurriedly, not wanting to pressure her in any way.

She lifted her head, twisting back to meet his gaze. “I would like that,” she said with a smile. Then, to his pleased

surprise, she rolled from his lap to kneel on the floor between his legs.

Gently cupping his balls with one hand, she lowered her mouth over his rock-hard shaft. Mason groaned as she expertly milked his cock. As a powerful climax rose inside him, he reached for her head, intent on holding her in place while he loosed his seed down her throat.

But, to his surprise, Hannah twisted adroitly away, his cock falling from her lips. “I want you to beg for it,” she said, eyes sparkling, a grin on her face.

“You’re barking up the wrong tree,” he replied with a laugh. Before she could respond or get away, he reached for her, lifting her into his arms. Half rising from the bed, he threw her down on the mattress and straddled her hips. Pinning her arms easily over her head, he added, “I just gave you a spanking, but clearly you need another. Maybe next time with the paddle.”

A look of genuine fear flashed in her eyes, releasing the sadist in him.

“Yes,” he breathed, pushing her thighs apart with one knee. “I’ll paddle that poor bottom until you’re the one begging. That will remind you who’s in charge here, little girl.”

“Yes, Sir,” she breathed. Then, with a saucy smile, she purred, “How can I make it up to you, Sir?”

Releasing his grip on her wrists, Mason grabbed one of the condoms from the nightstand and tore it open.

“I’ll think of a way,” he said with an answering grin.

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Hannah smiled to herself as she dressed, enjoying the twin sensations of a well-spanked bottom and a well-fucked cunt. She now understood that whole concept of being so happy you were walking on air. She floated in a bubble of pure bliss, her feet barely touching the ground.

Her impromptu sass about making him beg had been a test, she realized in retrospect. She was daring Mason to assert

his dominance and, to her delight, he'd more than risen to the occasion. She loved this new, playful side of the man. It didn't make him less of a Dom in her eyes. On the contrary, it just made him sexier.

They drove up the mountain in companionable silence, glancing now and again at one another and smiling. She was glad to be returning to The Enclave. She'd felt bad about the way she bolted, never properly thanking everyone for accepting her so graciously into their community. Mason was just taking her back for a visit that day, but eventually she might return for a longer stay, assuming that writer-in-residence position was still on offer.

When they arrived and entered the house, Lucia threw her arms around Hannah, pulling her close.

"I'm so glad you're back, Hannah," she said when she finally let her go. "We've missed you so much these past two weeks."

"I missed you all, too, Lucia," Hannah replied sincerely. "But I'm not actually back. That is, I'm just here for a visit. I'm done with training."

"Oh, I know, *querida*," Lucia said with a glance at Mason and Anthony, who were speaking quietly nearby. "Master Mason texted Master Mark, who told Jaime, who told me..."

Hannah mock groaned. "Why am I not surprised?"

Lucia smiled and shrugged. "Please know we're just glad to have you here. And glad you brought Master Mason home, too. I'm tired of defrosting casseroles," she added with a laugh. Leaning closer, she whispered, "I told you, right? The two of you were meant for each other. Good that you finally listened."

Hannah laughed. While she couldn't know just exactly what the future held, she felt hopeful and eager for whatever

came next. She glanced toward the men.

Mason, perhaps feeling her gaze, looked over at her and smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way she loved.

“I have to admit,” Hannah said, smiling back. “I feel like I’ve fallen into one of my romance novels.”

Lucia clapped her hands. “And don’t those always promise a happily-ever-after?”

Mason approached them, his smoldering gaze still fixed on Hannah. She stared back, falling once more under his dominant spell. When he was very close, so close he could kiss her if he just dipped his head, he murmured softly, “I love you, Hannah.”

Hannah’s heart twisted with happiness. “I love you, too,” she murmured back.

Turning to Lucia, who stood beaming beside them, she replied, “Yes. That they do.”

If you enjoyed this novel, please take a moment to leave a review! Indie authors like me really appreciate it!

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BTTYWCGY>

Ready for more of Claire Thompson’s sizzling BDSM Romance?

Check out her Erotic Awakening Box Set! Here’s an excerpt from Book 1

Accidental Submission

Sold for revenge... Bought by accident... He wants her too much to let her go...

What readers are saying—“A villain that gives new meaning to the words slimy and nefarious... a great read!” “An alpha male with a tender side and a woman with strength who chooses to submit to him...” “Will leave you melting in your chair...”

Elizabeth earned her new high-powered position through years of hard work, but a coworker’s revenge plot could bring her world crashing down around her.

Cole quickly realizes the slave girl he bought at auction has no clue about and even less interest in dominance and submission... or so she says. But when he introduces Elizabeth to the dark, delicious possibilities of BDSM, she’s a little frightened... and a lot intrigued. Too bad the coworker’s dangerous games are only just beginning...

Chapter 1

The girl screamed around her gag. As he snapped the whip, power surged through Gary Dobbins like a drug. He had bound her to a whipping post in the small, dark BDSM club that catered to the heavy scene players.

“Take it, Elizabeth,” he demanded, letting the leather fly. “I’m going to whip you to shreds and there’s not a damn thing you can do about it.”

The girl opened her eyes wide and gurgled something behind the pretty red ball gag he’d wedged securely between her teeth. She opened and closed both fists several times.

He ignored her.

It should have been mine. He struck her again, putting his weight behind the blow. *That’s my corner office.* The leather slapped at her flesh, each stroke punctuated by his thoughts.

Fucking bitch stole my job.

Bastards betrayed me.

Should have been mine.

Six months ago his promotion had been in the bag. How had that cunt won out over him? So, she had the degrees and the industry awards. Apparently eight years of selfless dedication and loyalty meant shit. To add insult to injury, he had to report to the phony bitch and pretend to like it.

The pain, the humiliation, the sheer unfairness of it ate away at him like a corrosive acid that spread through every aspect of his life.

He ended the scene when his arm got tired. The girl’s back and ass were crisscrossed with sexy red welts. As he unbuckled her gag, he wished he could make her suck him off, but the stupid club rules wouldn’t allow it. When he released the girl from the post, she slumped to the ground. He waited

for her to whine about his ignoring her distress signals, but all she said was, “Who the fuck is Elizabeth?”

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“Evening, Ms. Martin.”

Elizabeth looked up, startled by the sound of the janitor’s voice. “I didn’t realize it was so late. How are you tonight, Mr. Jackson?”

“Can’t complain,” he replied. Stopping in front of her desk, he shook his head. “I hope you don’t mind my saying so, but you sure do keep long hours. Young woman like you—don’t you have someplace better to be?”

Elizabeth looked into the older man’s kind face as she pondered the question. *Not really...* She flashed him a smile. “I was just leaving, actually. I’ll be out your way in a few minutes.”

“Don’t worry on my account,” he said. “Take all the time you need. I’ll come back in a bit.”

“Thanks. Have a good evening, Mr. Jackson.”

“You, too.”

As Elizabeth watched him walk away, she sighed. She had promised herself tonight she would get out before the cleaning crew came, but here she was, still working on the stupid budget for the upcoming year. Budgets were so tedious—it was all guesswork and pipedreams anyway. She much preferred the excitement of a new advertising campaign—the positive energy when her team’s creative juices were flowing, the anticipation as they closed in on a deal.

At thirty, she was the youngest executive vice-president in the short but illustrious history of Wallace & Pratt, one of the hottest up-and-coming advertising agencies in Manhattan. She’d worked hard as hell to get here, basically putting her social life in the deep freeze, spending every moment working toward her goal.

Her job was terrific, no question about it. The money was great, the work challenging and the atmosphere at the agency

one that lent itself to creativity. She had a good team. Even Gary, despite his whining and not very well hidden resentment, was smart as a whip. She had worked with guys like him before—good-looking and smart, used to getting his way with his charm and good old boy connections. It was his problem if he had an issue reporting to a woman. She would just make sure his problem didn't become hers.

With a sigh, she shut down her computer and swept some papers and files into her briefcase, shutting it with a click. Tomorrow was another day. She would go home, take a hot shower, open a new bottle of wine and microwave something. Then in the morning, she'd get up and do it all again.

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Gary glanced toward his closed office door and pulled the invitation from his briefcase.

House of Usher

Monthly Slave Auction

He was familiar with the process for entering a slave girl into the auction, though if he owned a girl, he would never share. You had to prepare a portfolio, or *dossier*, as they grandly called it at the club, so the bidders would have some idea in advance on what they were getting. It was to include a description of the slave's likes, dislikes and limits, plus the usual assortment of photos showing the slave in various submissive positions, naked, bound and exposed for the potential Master.

Gary's cock stiffened as he thought about the last auction he'd attended. How he'd like to put Elizabeth up for auction. He would sell her into sexual slavery—now *there* was a novel way to get rid of the competition.

He closed his eyes, imagining her on the auction block, dressed in a dark red satin corset, the waist cinched so tight she could barely breathe, six-inch heels on her feet. He'd make her wear garters and stockings, her pussy bald and exposed for the onlookers. She would be blindfolded, arms bound securely behind her, turning slowly for the bidders.

The intercom buzzed, jerking him from the fantasy. He jabbed at the button. “Yeah?”

“It’s three o’clock,” his secretary announced, as if that should mean something.

“Yeah, so?”

“Conference call in Elizabeth’s office with Jackson & Associates. Did you forget?”

“Shit,” he swore beneath his breath. “Okay, thanks,” he said aloud. Slipping the auction invitation back into his briefcase, he grabbed the files he needed and headed down the hall.

He couldn’t quite bring himself to knock on the open door of what should have been his office. Elizabeth didn’t bother to look up as she tapped her keyboard with polished pink nails. “One sec. Need to finish this thought.” Finally she deigned to grace him with her attention, offering one of her false smiles. “I think the pitch went well this morning, don’t you? We had them eating out of our hands by the end.”

Gary waited for her to thank him for his hard work on the project. He waited in vain. Elizabeth glanced at her watch and then at the phone. “They’re late. Just as well.” She held a piece of paper toward him. “Check this out.”

Gary took the folded page and began to read. It was a brochure from the Autism Outreach Foundation that touted a silent auction of goods and services to raise money for research. It was a black-tie affair hosted by the foundation.

“It’s a service auction for charity,” Elizabeth announced unnecessarily as he scanned the information. “You know how Art’s big on this type of thing. I’m a pretty good cook, or I used to be, back in the day when I had time to cook more than a packaged meal in a microwave. I could offer to cook a meal for four, something like that. It would be fun.”

Naturally the boss had invited Elizabeth. He’d been hitting on her since day one. If he hadn’t porked her yet, it wasn’t from lack of trying.

As Gary examined the invitation, he thought about the slave auction, which was, coincidentally, on the same night as this one, four weeks away. Wouldn't it be great if he could somehow trick Elizabeth into attending that one instead of this one...oh, what a delicious, diabolical situation that would be.

His mouth went suddenly dry and his heart began palpitating in a way that was almost painful. A brilliant plan leaped, fully formed, into his mind. It was ridiculous, risky, insane.

But it just might work.

“So what do you think? It looks like a worthy cause. Good exposure for Wallace & Pratt.”

Smoothing his face into a pleasantly neutral expression, Gary smiled. “I think that’s a terrific idea, Elizabeth. Is Art taking you to the dinner?” It would be tricky to maneuver around Wallace, but Gary was confident he’d find a way.

“Sorry, I didn’t make myself clear. Art gave me the tickets. Evidently he bought them last year and was planning to go, but now he can’t make it. I thought you could go with me.”

Fate was clearly handing him this gift. Gary arched an eyebrow, trying to suppress the surge of excited glee. He wasn’t foolish enough to think the Ice Goddess was hitting on him—though he was regarded as the best-looking guy in the office, with his boyish, blond good looks and his impeccable style. Nevertheless, the chance of a lifetime had just dropped into his lap.

Keeping his nervous excitement tightly under control, he spoke with an offhand air. “I’d love to go. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“You bet. I hear you’re a decent golfer. Maybe you could offer a lesson or something.”

The intercom buzzed and Elizabeth’s secretary’s voice came over the speaker. “They’re on line three.”

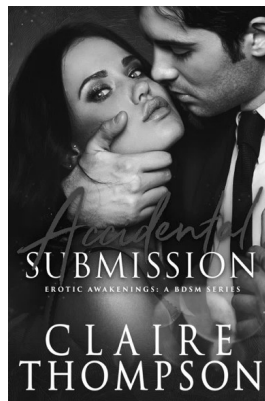
“Thanks, Angela.” She looked up at Gary. “Did you bring the analysis portfolio?”

“Got it right here.” He waved a gray folder toward her. She reached for it as he slid it across the desk, annoyed anew that he was sitting on the wrong side, though he kept his face impassive.

Elizabeth opened the folder and scanned it. “Good.” She flashed him a brilliant smile, her right cheek dimpling as she batted those impossibly blue eyes. She probably wore tinted contacts. “Thanks, Gary. What would I do without you?”

Let's find out, shall we?

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