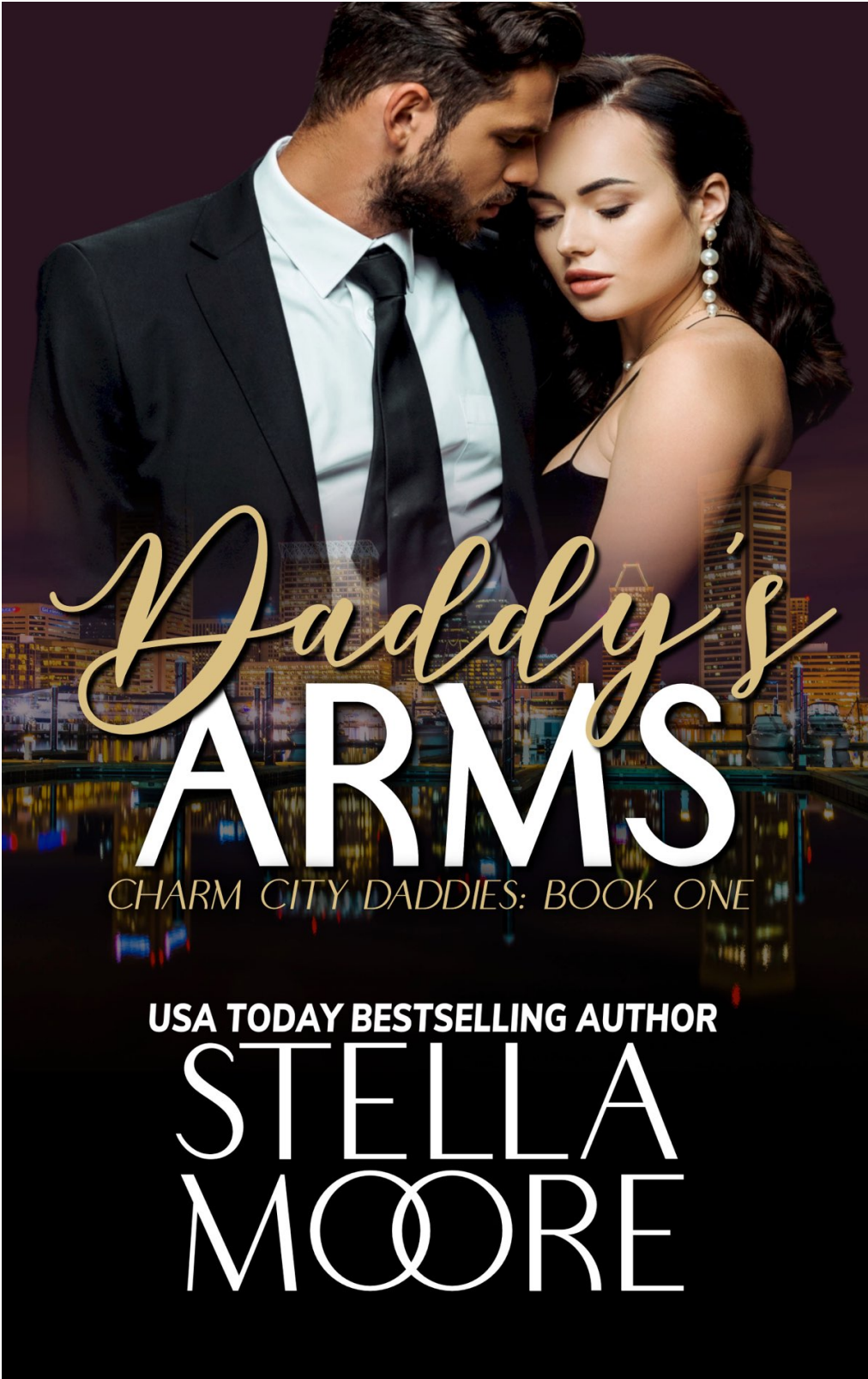


Daddy's
ARMS

CHARM CITY DADDIES: BOOK ONE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**STELLA
MOORE**



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BOOK ONE



STELLA MOORE

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Dedication:

For all the people back home who believed in me, and my mother who gave me my love of reading. Even though she would have been horrified by every single word of this book.

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Daddy's Laws Preview - Chapter 1

About the Author

By Stella Moore

Also By Stella Moore

CHAPTER 1



Exhausted and wanting nothing more than to go home and curl up on her couch with a glass of red wine the size of her head, Olivia Monroe pushed through the front doors of her agency's office, nearly smacking the man currently exiting right in the face with the pane of glass.

Mustering her waning energy, she gave him her best happy realtor smile. "Whoops, sorry about that! I hope I didn't hit you."

"Just missed me." With a reassuring smile of his own, he stepped to the side and held open the inner door for her to walk through. "Have a good day, Olivia."

Pausing just inside the lobby, she watched him leave, her mind working to place if she'd seen him before.

Still racking her brain, she glanced over at the small, mousy woman seated at the front desk. "Who was that?"

The other woman's eyes went wide behind her slightly-too-large-to-be-trendy frames, and her voice shook slightly as she answered the question. "Oh, um, he had an interview. For the open realtor position?"

MaryAnn Foster had been their receptionist for just over a year, and Olivia still wasn't sure exactly how she'd gotten the

job. She always looked like she was terrified of every single person who walked through the door, even the ones she'd known from the start.

“Right, right.” Olivia vaguely remembered James mentioning an interview that afternoon. With that mystery solved, she headed for the short hallway that led to the various realtors' offices. “I'll be in my office if anybody needs me.”

“Um, Mrs. Monroe?”

There was an undercurrent of fear in MaryAnn's voice that had the hairs on the back of Olivia's neck standing up. “Yes?”

“You know those papers you asked me to send over for the D'Angelos?” Eyes darting around the lobby, MaryAnn licked her lips nervously. “I, um, sort of forgot.”

Too stunned for a moment to even speak, Olivia stared at the tearful woman behind the desk. “The deadline on that was yesterday, MaryAnn. Tell me you're joking.”

“I wish I was, Mrs. Monroe.” MaryAnn's already too-quiet voice had dropped to a nearly impossible to hear whisper.

Pinching the bridge of her nose, Olivia closed her eyes and prayed for patience. The D'Angelo deal was worth nearly eighty grand for the agency, and she was personally looking to take home half of that. And while the loss of her commission would be hard to swallow, the blow to her reputation worried her just as much, if not more. Which meant the patience she was praying for was in dangerously short supply as she opened her eyes and pinned her receptionist with an icy look. “Tell me how this happened. Tell me, in detail, how you could be so fucking stupid.”

MaryAnn opened and closed her mouth several times, reminding Olivia of one of the goldfish she'd won at a county

fair as a child. “I—I don’t know. I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry.” A hollow feeling grew in her gut as Olivia barked out a laugh that lacked any humor whatsoever. “Well, then. You can call my clients and tell them you’re *sorry* their paperwork wasn’t submitted to their lender on time. And while you’re at it, you can tell them how sorry you are they won’t be getting their dream house after all.”

“Is there a problem here?”

There had been a time, not so long ago, when that voice would have made her knees tremble. When she would have dreaded turning around, dreaded facing his disappointment and anger.

But these days, the anger and disappointment seemed to be all hers. Plastering a smile on her face, Olivia turned to face the broker who ran the agency she’d poured her heart and soul into. Her boss, who also happened to be her husband.

And, up until recently, her Daddy.

“No problem at all,” she said, letting an insincere sweetness infuse her tone. “Unless you consider being surrounded by complete morons to be a problem.”

The corners of his lips turned down, just slightly, in a look she knew all too well. Her heart rate kicked up, and her palms dampened with sweat. Had she pushed him too far? Memories of past punishments, of painful discipline at the hands of the man who ruled both their workplace and their home flickered through her mind. Hope and fear warred together in her stomach, doing far more damage than silly butterflies ever could.

But his eyes shifted from her to the front desk, and disappointment filled her once more.

“What’s going on here, MaryAnn?” There was no doubting the authority in his tone, but she doubted it had the same effect on their timid little receptionist.

Still, sympathy stirred in Olivia’s heart, and she stepped between them, forcing his attention back to her. “It’s really nothing, James. Nothing MaryAnn and I can’t work out between us. Isn’t that right, MaryAnn?”

From behind her, MaryAnn’s voice was surprisingly firm, given the circumstances. “Absolutely, Mrs. Monroe. I’ll take care of it right away.”

“Thank you.” Olivia gave her husband a small nod before turning on her heel and marching down the hallway to her office. With the door safely shut behind her, she leaned back against the wood, giving herself some time to tame her out-of-control emotions.

“Get a grip, Monroe,” she muttered. “It’s better this way.”

The logical, rational part of her agreed, cheering loudly at her resolve. But the little girl inside of her, the part of herself she’d fought for months now to ignore, wanted to weep at the unfairness of it all.

Annoyed with herself, she pushed away from the door and placed her bags on the desk. There was no use in sitting around feeling sorry for herself. She and James had worked too hard to build their business over the past few years for her to throw it all away just because her marriage had hit a rough patch. Dropping into her chair, she stared at the blank monitors on her desk and willed her system to settle.

A familiar, firm knock rapped on the door before it swung open without waiting for her to acknowledge him. She tensed,

bracing for a fight when James stepped inside and shut the door behind him again with an audible, ominous *click*.

He stood just in front of it, his arms crossed over his chest, his gaze steady and unwavering. The seconds ticked by with the two of them locked in a silent battle of wills before he finally spoke.

“What was that all about, Olivia Jane?”

Her full name. Oh, god. Despite the hurt and anger, heat flooded her pussy, soaking through the sensible underwear beneath her practical business skirt. Outwardly, she gave him only a slight tilt of the head and a confused expression, determined not to let him see how he affected her. “What exactly are you asking about, James?”

When his eyes narrowed, she had to force herself to keep her head lifted. Years of training, coupled with her naturally submissive nature, urged her to lower her gaze to the desk. But she kept her head high, refusing to give him even the slightest bit of acquiescence.

“You were reading MaryAnn the riot act when I walked in, and as soon as I asked about it, everything was fine. What aren’t you telling me?”

Oh, how she wanted to confide in him. To simply lay all of her cares and worries at his feet, the way she once had. But that wasn’t the relationship they had anymore, it seemed. “It’s being handled.”

Frustration radiated from him as he took a step forward, and then another, until he was directly in front of her desk. Eyes locked on hers, he uncrossed his arms and lowered his hands, pressing his palms against the smooth solid wood.

“You and I are going to talk. Tonight.” With that pronouncement, he stood and straightened the flawlessly cut jacket of his suit. “You will be home no later than six-thirty. I will take care of dinner.” His eyes met hers once more, and the resolve in them would have brought her to her knees if she hadn’t already been sitting. “I suggest you take some time over the next few hours to think about what you want. From our business, as well as our marriage. I’ll see you at home.”

Without another word, he turned and left her office. The sound of the door clicking shut behind him might as well have been a gunshot. Olivia jumped at the noise, nearly knocking over the half empty can of soda sitting next to her docking station.

Tears burned behind her eyes, blurring her vision as she tried to focus. How the hell was she supposed to get any work done after a bomb like that? Months had passed with little more than a disapproving look here and there, and all of a sudden, he wanted to talk?

Fighting back her growing panic, she grabbed her purse and laptop bag. There was no way she would be getting any work done now. Walking out with her head down to avoid talking to or alarming anyone, she pulled her phone from her purse and sent out an SOS message to her closest friend.

Need coffee. James is being super weird.

Halfway to her car, her phone vibrated with an incoming message. Some of the panic ebbed when she read the response.

Be there in ten.

Without her usual care, she tossed the laptop bag in the backseat and slid behind the wheel of her SUV. She only just

remembered to buckle her seatbelt before peeling out of the parking lot.

There wasn't, thankfully, much time to think on the short drive to the coffee house she and Shannon had adopted at the start of their friendship. Olivia didn't even like coffee; she only went to humor Shannon, though the shop did have the best hot chocolate in Baltimore—possibly all of Central Maryland.

She snagged herself a cup of said hot chocolate with extra whipped cream, and debated briefly over the extra calories in the huge chocolate chip cookies beneath the glass before ordering one of those as well. Thankfully, the shop was relatively empty at three in the afternoon, and she was able to find a pair of chairs away from the other patrons.

Shannon walked in just as Olivia was settling into one of the oversized armchairs. Tall, blonde, and thin as a rail, Shannon Wright always looked as though she'd just walked off the cover of one of those fashion magazines MaryAnn was always sighing over. Stopping just inside the shop, she paused, and Olivia wondered if she even knew she was striking a pose.

When her gaze landed on Olivia, she sent her a saucy wink and a wave, then strolled up to the counter and placed her order. Large medium roast, with just a splash of cream. Olivia didn't even need to hear her placing it to know what she was ordering, since it hadn't changed in all the years they'd known each other.

Coffee in hand, Shannon glided across the shop and plunked her skinny ass down into the chair beside Olivia. "So, what's going on with you and Mr. Sexy?"

Sipping her hot chocolate, Olivia debated on how much to share. She and James had met Shannon at a play party not long

after they'd married. And despite Shannon opting to work for one of James's biggest competitors, she was still Olivia's best friend in the whole world. So there wasn't much about her personal life Olivia hadn't shared with the bombshell blonde across from her. But for some reason, telling her best friend that she was worried her marriage was ending had seemed too big, too scary to share. "Things are... weird lately. With me and James."

"Mr. Sexy getting handsy at work?" Shannon asked with a suggestive eyebrow wiggle.

With a roll of her eyes, Olivia snorted. "No." She broke off a piece of her cookie and shoved it in her mouth, as much to give her a moment to gather the courage to say the words out loud as a desire to enjoy the yummy treat. "Just the opposite, actually. It's like we can't switch that work mode off when we get home anymore." Another bite of cookie to delay the inevitable just a few more seconds. "He says we need to talk tonight."

Shannon's eyes widened, a mix of sympathy and surprise shimmering in the bright blue. "Just talk or *talk*?"

"I don't know. We haven't *talked* in months."

"What? Why?"

Unable to meet her friend's earnest gaze, Olivia studied her cup as she swirled the hot chocolate around. "I don't know, really. We've just been drifting apart, and I don't know how to fix it."

There was a long, heavy silence before Shannon spoke again. "I'll tell you what you're going to do."

Intrigued by the resolve in Shannon's voice, Olivia looked up. "Okay?"

“You’re going to go home, put on your best ‘Fuck me, Daddy’ outfit, and make that man talk to you. Talk and *talk*, if that’s what you need. Then, you’re going to seduce him and fuck like bunnies until you can’t see straight.”

“I wish it was that simple,” Olivia grumbled.

“Why isn’t it?”

“It just isn’t. He’s barely touched me in months.” And she had no idea why. Which was the crux of the problem. He’d pulled away, practically overnight, and she had no clue what she’d done to earn the cold distance he’d put between them.

“Babe, all couples go through dry patches. Just talk to the man, or I swear I’ll spank you myself.”

“Shay!” Olivia glanced around to see if anyone had heard Shannon’s threat. But all the other patrons were glued to their phones and tablets. Settling back in her chair, Olivia shot her friend a glare. “You’re horrible, you know that?”

Shannon shrugged, obviously unbothered by Olivia’s ire. “I love you. And I’m not about to sit back and let my favorite couple implode because you’re both too stubborn to talk it out.”

Blowing out a breath, Olivia closed her eyes and let her head fall back against the chair. “Fine. I’ll talk to him. But I’m crashing at your place if this all blows up in my face.”

“I’d say I’ll leave the light on for ya, but I doubt you’ll need it.”

She wished she had half the confidence Shannon did in her marriage. But she at least had to try, so as she finished sipping her hot chocolate, she mentally made plans to seduce her husband. And she prayed it wouldn’t be the end of everything.

CHAPTER 2



Inside the house she'd shared with James for the last six years, Olivia stared at the closed door in front of her. There'd been a time when she'd spent some time in this room nearly every day. Whether it was waiting on her Daddy to come punish her or just taking some time to decompress, this had been her safe place for nearly half their marriage. Now, she only stepped inside when the room was scheduled for a good dusting, and even that she didn't do nearly as often as she should.

For the first time in weeks, she reached for the knob and turned. The door swung open, and her eyes filled at the sight of the familiar room. At her request, the walls had been painted a lovely pale green—her favorite color. The antique four-poster bed she'd picked out herself still stood against the middle of the far wall, with one lonely stuffed hippo sitting between the fluffy peach-colored pillows.

If anyone had poked their head into the room over the years, they would have seen a somewhat fussy, feminine spare room, but little more. She hadn't wanted a nursery, or really even a playroom. What she'd wanted—and been given—was simply a space to unwind and be herself when life started to weigh too heavily on her.

Shaking off the memories, she crossed the room to the dark dresser and opened the top drawer. Simple cotton panties filled the space, in all the colors of the rainbow, and some with various cartoonish designs decorating the fabric. She chose a pair in pale lavender, because purple was Daddy's favorite.

"Not that he'll notice," she mumbled to herself, shutting the drawer with a snap before opening the one below it.

Closing her eyes, she fought back tears as a wave of misery washed over her. This whole thing was pointless. James hadn't shown any interest in being her Daddy for months. She was going to look like the worst kind of fool, throwing herself at him this way.

But the image of him, his eyes flashing with anger and resolve, was burned into her brain. That afternoon, she'd caught a glimpse of the man she'd married. The one who could turn her knees to water and her mind to mush with just a look.

She wanted that man back. And if she had to humiliate herself to get him, then that was exactly what she'd do.

Filled with a renewed resolve, she opened her eyes and plucked a pair of pajamas from the drawer. She carried the clothes through a door just to the right of her bed, to the adjoining guest bathroom where she quickly stripped and hopped in the shower. James would be home soon and she wanted to be ready for him.

Once she'd scrubbed off her makeup and run a razor over her legs, she stepped out of the shower and grabbed one of the large, fluffy towels she always kept on hand, since it was a guest bathroom after all, not that they entertained much these days. She quickly finger-combed her curls before pulling the long chestnut locks into a ponytail high on her head. No

pigtails for her. She'd tried them a couple of times, but never could get used to the way they looked. And Daddy was fond of the single ponytail. Heat crept up her neck, into her cheeks when she thought of all the times he'd wrapped her ponytail around his hand before forcing his cock between her lips.

She pressed her thighs together against the ache her memories inspired. Though she and James still slept together regularly, it wasn't the same. She longed to be forced to her knees, or onto her back, her body open and ready for his pleasure. And hers, if he allowed it, though she couldn't deny the thrill it gave her when he denied her, when he used her body with little or no regard for her wants or needs.

She decided against even a hint of makeup, valiantly trying to ignore the wrinkles and dark circles under her eyes. James preferred her without makeup at home, and tonight was about pleasing her Daddy, so maybe, just maybe, he would remember how much he loved playing his part.

The slamming of the front door made her jump. With a muttered curse, she dropped the towel and hurried into her panties and pajamas. Taking one last look at herself in the mirror, she took a deep, steadying breath and opened the door to the hall.

James was already at the top of the stairs, and he stopped mid-stride to stare at her. His gorgeous blue eyes went wide, raking down her body and back up again. When their eyes met, she saw the hunger and the need swirling in his for just a moment before they went flat again.

Her heart trembled, on the verge of shattering. If he rejected her tonight, how could she face him again?

The simple answer was, she couldn't. She knew that in her bones. If he rejected her, if he turned his back on what she—

they—so desperately needed, their marriage was over.

Please, please don't let it be over.

“Hi,” she said, deliberately keeping her voice soft and submissive. The word *Daddy* stuck in her throat, but she hoped it was implied clearly enough.

“What is this, Olivia?”

There was no softness in his voice, and she winced at the cold, hard tone. “I—I just... you said we needed to talk. I’m ready to talk.” It was pretty lame, as far as explanations went, but she couldn’t seem to conjure up anything better.

Hope shimmered at the curiosity coming to life in his eyes. “Why the outfit?”

Olivia caught her bottom lip with her top teeth, a nervous habit she knew drove him wild in all the best ways. Lowering her head, she looked up at him through her lashes. “Can we talk in my room?”

It took longer than she would have liked for him to answer, but she made herself wait patiently, and she was rewarded with a short, brisk nod. “Go wait for me on your bed. I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

The careful hope she’d carried with her all afternoon was now a living thing inside of her. Olivia took off down the hall, slowing abruptly at her husband’s sharp admonishment. “No running!” But even his scolding couldn’t drown the happiness bubbling in her chest. If anything, it fed the renewed light inside of her, gave her something to cling to as she waited for him to come to her.

In her room, she hopped onto the bed, drumming her feet against the side while she waited. And waited. And waited.

When the waiting became too much, she jumped down and began pacing back and forth in front of her bed.

“Olivia Jane.”

The sound of his voice froze her in place. It wasn't fear, exactly, that sent the butterflies dancing in her stomach. It was some strange mix of anxiety, anticipation, and excitement. She turned around, and her breath caught in her throat at the sight of her Daddy filling the doorway.

In the nearly twelve years they'd been married, she'd never quite gotten over how handsome he really was. Age had only refined his features, chiseling down the jawline now enhanced by a neatly trimmed beard. Not a single gray hair was to be found in the sweep of brown atop his head.

And those eyes. Those pale, ocean blue eyes that seemed to see right through her to the darkest depths of her soul. She'd fallen in love with those eyes the moment she'd looked up from where she'd dropped her armful of books in the quad to find him watching her. With just the hint of a smile, he'd helped her to her feet and offered to walk her to her next class. From that very first meeting, she'd known, somehow, that he was someone she would be safe with. Loved, even, if she let herself be loved.

It was shocking, how things could be so heartbreakingly different and yet still the same.

The sleeves of his dress shirt were rolled to his elbows, perfectly showcasing his lean, taut forearms. And threaded through the loops of the old, faded jeans he'd changed into was the thick leather belt her bottom was well acquainted with. Was she drooling? She lifted a hand to her mouth just to be sure, relieved to find her chin dry as she remembered with a jolt that he'd spoken to her.

“Yes?” The word was barely a whisper.

He lifted an eyebrow, a gesture that never failed to have her tummy doing somersaults. “Are you doing what you were told?”

She was so distracted by him, by the longing in her heart, it took her a moment to remember what he’d told her to do. When she did, she rushed to her bed and hopped up on the mattress again, her hands folded in her lap.

With a hum of approval, he retrieved the straight-backed chair from her little desk along the far wall of the room and carried it over to the bed. Placing it directly in her line of sight, he dropped onto the hard wooden seat.

“You want to go first, little one?”

The endearment emboldened her, and Olivia nodded. Her fingers twisted against each other in her lap, and the nervousness she’d held at bay all afternoon flooded her system. “I...” She swallowed, her throat suddenly too dry to speak. “I just, I know things have been weird and I...” Forcing herself to look up, she met his gaze, his eyes filled with emotions she hadn’t seen in so long she’d forgotten what they looked like. “I want my Daddy back!” The words burst out of her, accompanied by a rush of hot tears streaming down her cheeks.

Seconds ticked by with the silence growing heavy and strained between them before he finally spoke, his words cold and solemn. “Do you?”

“Huh?” Sniffling, she swiped at her eyes and stared at him. What was he asking?

“Do you really want your Daddy back? Or is that just what you think I want?”

She blinked, momentarily at a loss for words. “What kind of question is that? I wouldn’t have said it if I didn’t want it!”

Sighing deeply, he scrubbed a hand over his face, and she was struck by the thought that he looked so much older than his years. “I want to believe you, Olivia. God, I want to, so badly. But I need to know you mean it.”

Stunned by his response, she gestured helplessly at her pajamas. “What do you think this is all about? You think I just put on my little girl PJs and had you come in here, to my space, for the hell of it?” Though she hadn’t been given permission, she slid from the bed and knelt in front of him. “Why don’t you believe me?”

“It’s a lot of little things. At first I thought you were just pushing the boundaries, testing me. But then the last few times I punished you, you seemed to resent it. Not immediately, but you were... distant, for a day or so after.”

Had she done that? Sitting back on her heels, she ran the past few months over in her mind. There had been a period of time, she was forced to admit, where having him issuing orders left and right had grated on her nerves. She hadn’t realized it had affected him so much, though.

“You’re right. I was struggling with submitting to you, especially at work. But,” she broke off and shook her head, still not quite ready to bare her soul to the man who’d already broken her heart a dozen times over.

“No. None of that, Olivia. Finish your thought.”

Chewing on her lip, she gathered her courage and after several long moments finally lifted her head to look up at him again. “Can I be completely honest?”

The corners of his lips turned up, but the smile didn't quite reach his eyes. "Always."

"I did pull away. And there were days when submitting to you was harder than it's ever been, and I probably pushed you away. I own that, and I know that's on me, even though that's not what I ever meant to do. But you *let* me push you away. You never talked to me about it or asked me why. You just let me go, and it broke my heart."

Silence filled the room, and she swore she could feel the physical weight of it. Did he feel it too? Did it sit on his chest, making each breath a chore like it did for her?

"You're right," he said after what felt like a lifetime of waiting, his voice filled with grief.

Shock had her mouth falling open. "What?"

"You're right. I thought you wanted me to back off, and instead of sitting down and talking it out, maybe renegotiating our dynamic, I pulled away from you. I'm sorry, Livvy. I let you down, both as your husband and your Daddy."

The knots in her stomach began to loosen, and for the first time in months, she honestly felt like they might make it through this rough patch. "We're both to blame. I wasn't honest with you about how I was feeling, and I should have talked to you instead of being a brat."

"Well, let's not get carried away." Now the smile did reach his eyes, lighting up the pale blue. "You know I love it when you're a little bratty."

"I do."

Cupping her face with one hand, he ran the pad of his thumb over her cheekbone and she sighed at the simple, sweet

touch. “How about we give ourselves a fresh start? Wipe the slate clean and hit the reset button tonight.”

She smiled, love for him filling all the empty places she hadn't realized were there. “Okay, Daddy.”

CHAPTER 3



The vise around James's heart loosened at his wife's simple response. *Okay, Daddy.* When was the last time he'd heard those words from her lips? When was the last time she'd called him Daddy at all?

He'd thought she was over being his little girl. And though it had broken his heart, every day, he'd kept his mouth shut. All he'd ever wanted was for her to be happy, and he'd thought she was satisfied being nothing more than his wife and business partner.

But that afternoon, he'd gotten a glimpse beneath the tough exterior. When he'd walked in her office, she hadn't been quick enough to hide the glimmer of tears in her eyes. So, he'd pushed his luck. And when he'd leaned over her desk to lay down the law, it hadn't just been tears shimmering in her eyes.

There had been pure, raw need. A kind he hadn't seen in her or felt in himself for months.

And when she'd walked out of her bathroom, her hair in the high ponytail he adored, wearing nothing but a plain pink tank top and pair of pajama bottoms with tiny hippos frolicking on a field of blue? His heart had stopped.

But he'd needed more. Needed to hear it from her lips before he felt like he could let his guard down. The relief he'd felt when she'd finally blurted out that she wanted her Daddy back had nearly made him weep with joy.

And now, with her kneeling at his feet, watching him expectantly, he had some decisions to make. They needed a fresh start, and if he knew his girl, there was only one way to go about it.

“Stand up, Olivia.”

Her eyes went wide, and there was just a little flicker of fear in the brown depths. But she pushed to her feet and stood in front of him, her fingers picking at the fabric of her pajama bottoms.

“I'm going to ask you a question, and I want an honest answer. Okay?”

The corners of her mouth turned down in a small frown, and she hesitated for several seconds, but eventually he got a nod out of her.

“Have you been acting out at work to see if Daddy would punish you?”

Another hesitation followed by a much smaller, slower nod.

He'd wondered. Months ago, when the distance between them had begun to grow, her behavior at work and at home had changed. More and more he'd overheard her swearing in the office or being rude to MaryAnn. He'd thought it was simply her exercising her newfound independence. Hindsight being 20/20, he could now see the behavior for what it was: a cry for help.

Well, his little girl was about to get all the help she needed.

Hardening his heart against the urge to simply pull her onto his lap and cuddle her out of her, he put all the ‘Daddy’ he could muster into his words as he laid out his plans for the evening. “I thought that might be the case. So, here’s what is going to happen. You’re going to go over my knee for a long, hard spanking on your bare bottom. Then you’re going to sit at your desk and write lines while I go make us some dinner. After we eat, we’re going to have another discussion. How the rest of the night goes depends on our talk.”

“What kind of ‘talk’?” she asked, suspicion coloring her tone. Not that he could blame her, since his actions over the past few months hadn’t exactly been predictable.

“Just a talk, little one. We’re going to discuss where we went wrong and how we can make sure things don’t go so far off the rails going forward.”

“Oh. Okay.”

She still sounded unsure, and the nerves she must have been feeling were written all over her face. Normally, he would enjoy the anticipation, making her wait and squirm before he finally delivered her punishment. But he was more than ready to get this over with so they could get that clean slate he’d promised, for both of them. Taking her hand in his, he guided her over his lap, grateful when she didn’t fight him or even utter a word of protest.

When she was securely in position, he rubbed his hand over her pajama-covered bottom, giving them both a moment to readjust to the familiar position. “All right, little one. Daddy’s going to make sure you’re a good girl from now on.”

The small whimper that escaped from her lips had him hardening uncomfortably. Ignoring his own discomfort, he

raised his hand and brought it down on her bottom with a smack that echoed in the small room.

He gave himself a moment to enjoy the feel of her bottom giving way under his hand. To appreciate her little gasp of surprise, and the sting in his own palm before he focused on giving his little girl the spanking she needed. He spanked fast and hard, not giving her time to recover from one swat before he laid down the next. Olivia wiggled over his knee, her bottom jiggling with each swat.

“Ow! Daddy, stop!”

Her feet drummed against the floor as she struggled, and damned if it wasn't the cutest thing he'd ever seen. God, he'd missed the sight of her over his knee.

As cute as he might have thought it was, she didn't need fun and playful, she needed stern and strict. So that was what he gave her. “Daddy will stop when you've learned your lesson, little girl.”

“I—ow!—I have! Please, Daddy!”

It really was adorable how she thought they were done when he hadn't even pulled her pajama bottoms down. James paused long enough to do exactly that, chuckling at the pale purple cotton against her olive skin. “Were you hoping wearing my favorite color would earn you some leniency, Livvy?”

“Maybe,” she admitted, twisting her torso around to grin up at him.

“Cheeky brat.” Because he knew she'd be disappointed if her ploy worked, he put a little extra force behind the next flurry of swats.

Howling, Olivia kicked her feet up to cover her bottom and he paused the spanking to frown at the disobedient form draped over his knee. Had it been so long since he'd punished her that she'd forgotten the rules?

“Olivia Jane. Put your feet on the floor right this minute.”

“But Daddy, it hurts!”

He steeled himself against the long, plaintive wail. “At the risk of sounding cliché, it's supposed to hurt, little girl. Feet down or we finish with my belt.”

The threat was enough to have her dropping her feet to the floor immediately. He picked up where he left off, and the room filled with the sounds of his hand connecting with her bottom and her pitiful cries.

By the time he paused again, she was panting and whimpering over his knee, and he could see the bright pink of her bottom peeking out from beneath her panties. But they weren't finished. She wasn't anywhere close to where she needed to be, and he'd promised her a bare bottom spanking. If he didn't deliver on his promise, she wouldn't trust him to keep his word on anything else they'd discussed.

Blocking out her whimpers of distress, he slipped her panties down to her knees. And when his hand connected with her bare bottom, her whimpers turned to shrieks.

Now he took his time, letting each swat sink in before layering the next on top of it. It took less than a dozen for her to throw her arm back in a desperate attempt to stop the punishment. But he easily captured her hand in his before laying six extra-hard swats down on the tops of her thighs. “Naughty Livvy. You know better than to put your hand back, little girl.”

“Ow, ow, ow, I’m sorry! Daddy! Please!”

James tightened his grip on her hand, firmly pinning her in place while he seared her bottom with more firm, well-placed swats. When he heard her breath begin to hitch, he moved lower, focusing his attention on the sensitive curve of her lower bottom. He wanted to be sure she felt his love for her when she sat down to write her lines.

Another dozen to her sit-spots brought on the tears. His little girl went limp over his knee, sobbing as though her heart was breaking. And because his own was breaking right along with her, he pulled her up onto his lap and wrapped his arms around her.

“Shhh, little one. There’s my good girl. I’m so proud of how you took your spanking.”

“Hurts,” she said, her voice little more than a whimper. Sniffling pitifully, she pressed her face into his neck.

“I know. But don’t you feel so much better now?”

“No. My bottom hurts.”

Chuckling at her petulant protests, he pressed a kiss to the top of her hair. “Well, how does your heart feel?”

She sighed and snuggled in closer. James closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of having his little girl in his arms again.

“It’s better,” she eventually admitted. “I’m sorry I was so bad.”

“You weren’t bad. Sit up, little one.”

She obeyed, wincing when her tender bottom pressed against the stiff denim of his jeans. Cupping her cheek with one hand, his eyes locked with hers. “I love you. And I’m sorry I didn’t see how badly you needed me. From now on, I’ll

try to pay better attention. But I need something from you, too.”

“What, Daddy?”

“I need you to come to me and be honest with me if I’m not being the Daddy you need. You’re not to act out at work to try and get my attention. And to make sure you remember that, you’re going to write ‘I will be honest with Daddy’ and ‘I will not act like a brat at work’ fifty times each.”

At the mention of writing lines, her lower lip pushed out, and he couldn’t resist leaning in and capturing her mouth with his own. The taste of her was better than the sweetest wine and he groaned, deepening the kiss as she opened for him. Everything in him yearned to lay her down on the floor and worship her from head to toe before fucking her senseless.

But his little girl still had some lessons to learn. And since this whole fiasco was partly his fault, it only seemed fair for him to suffer right along with her. Reluctantly, his entire being screaming in protest, he pulled away and broke the kiss.

“Let’s get those lines started and Daddy will go make dinner.”

Looking slightly dazed, she stood and shuffled over to her desk. He followed behind, carrying the chair back to its rightful place. Olivia wrinkled her nose before looking longingly at the pillows on the bed and then back at him, her question clear in her eyes.

“No, Livvy. I want you to feel how much your bottom hurts and think about that while you’re writing your lines.”

“Yes, Daddy,” she conceded with a sigh before lowering herself into the chair. She winced when her bottom pressed

into the unforgiving wood, and he gave her a minute to squirm before he placed the paper and pencil in front of her.

“Fifty of each, Livvy. What happens if you don’t finish before I come back upstairs?”

It took longer than he normally would have allowed for her to answer, but he was willing to give her a little leeway, all things considered. “I get another spanking.”

“With?” he prompted gently.

“Your belt,” she whispered, her wary gaze landing on the thick leather encircling his waist.

“That’s right. One for each line you don’t finish. You better get started, little one.”

She sighed but picked up her pencil without argument and started writing. Leaning down, he pressed another kiss to her hair and left to go make dinner for his favorite girl.

CHAPTER 4



When the door shut behind him, Olivia let out another, much louder sigh, and shifted in her chair, trying her best to take some of the pressure off her burning bottom.

As much as it hurt, she couldn't really complain. She'd wanted her Daddy back, and that was exactly what she'd gotten. It still sucked that she had to write stupid lines, though. She hated lines, something her Daddy was well aware of.

I will be honest with Daddy. Her tummy clenched as she wrote the words for a fifth time. Each line was like a knife in the heart, because she *hadn't* been honest with him, and now she knew it had hurt him as much as it hurt her.

"Stupid," she muttered under her breath as a single tear slipped down her nose and plopped on the paper.

"Goddammit." Annoyed with herself, she glared at the wet spot. Daddy expected her paper to be neat and presentable and now she'd have to start all over again, which meant she wouldn't finish and she'd get a whipping with Daddy's belt. All because she was a big crybaby.

Resentment started to build, crowding out the happy, contented feeling she'd had after her spanking. It wasn't her fault, completely, that things had gone so sideways between

her and James. So why was she the only one being punished? It wasn't fair.

The resentment grew to outright anger and she slammed the pencil down on the desk. Jumping up from her chair, she yanked her panties and pajama pants over her bottom, wincing a bit when the cotton brushed against her raw skin. The flash of pain made her pause. If she didn't finish her lines because she messed up and had to start over, there was always the chance James would show her some mercy. But if she didn't finish because she was being deliberately defiant, even the smallest chance at leniency would evaporate. Sitting comfortably would be a distant memory if he kept his promise of one stroke for every line she didn't finish.

But it still wasn't fair. Her bottom was burned from the spanking she'd already gotten, and sitting on the chair was pure hell. It simply wasn't right for him to keep punishing her like this.

Her mind made up, she stormed out of her pretty little bedroom down the hall to their master suite. Here, James's influence was more noticeable, though her taste still reigned supreme, much like the rest of their house. Ignoring the guilt gnawing at her tummy, she grabbed her Kindle and stretched out on top of the cream-colored duvet. She opened the book she'd been trying to read all week, about a daring female spy and the hard-nosed man she'd been paired with who didn't take lightly to her putting herself in danger. It didn't take long for her to lose herself in the story, and she was deep in a world of intrigue and danger when the Kindle suddenly disappeared from her hands.

Blinking in surprise, she lifted her head to meet James's furious gaze. With more calm than she felt, she smiled up at

him. “Oh. Hey. Is dinner ready?”

The widening of his eyes was actually rather comical, but she wisely smothered the laugh bubbling in her chest. There was bratty and defiant, and then there was just fucking stupid. Laughing at him when he was clearly furious with her definitely fell under the latter.

“You have five seconds to explain why I shouldn’t take my belt off right now and give you every one of the ninety-five licks you have coming, young lady.”

The resentment that had caused her to disobey in the first place rose to the surface and she pushed herself to her knees so they were eye to eye. “Because it’s not fair! I shouldn’t have to get punished over and over when you fucked up, too!”

A muscle in his jaw ticked, a sure sign his temper was brewing. “Your dinner won’t taste nearly as good after I wash your mouth out. That’s the only warning you get, Olivia Jane.”

She knew firsthand he wasn’t bluffing. Soap, hot sauce, vinegar. He’d employed each and every trick in the book to break her swearing habit years ago. Even as mad as she was, she knew when she was pushing too hard against that particular boundary, so she swallowed the profanity-laced retort burning on her tongue.

But that didn’t mean she was ready to completely back down, either. Crossing her arms over her chest, she glared at him. “I’m not writing lines.”

They stayed there, eye to eye, for several long moments before he spoke again. “Go to your room.”

Her heart thumped hard against her chest at the prospect of another punishment so soon. “I don’t wanna.”

“Now, Olivia Jane Monroe.”

“Fine.” Tears of frustration and humiliation burning against her eyes, she climbed off the bed and stomped down the hall to her room. James was right behind her, and the second she stepped through her door, he grabbed her arm and marched her to the desk.

With her arm still locked in his vice-like grip, he used his free hand to jab a finger at the five lines she’d written. “What does this say?”

“Why?”

Several hard swats had her dancing in place as he renewed the fire in her bottom. “Read it, Olivia.”

“Fine!” she snapped, trying to jerk her arm away but his hold on her only tightened. “It says ‘I will be honest with Daddy.’ Happy?”

“And are you being completely honest with me about why you didn’t write your lines?”

The guilt she’d been trying to ignore clawed at her tummy. “I don’t know,” she mumbled.

“Then let’s try again.” His voice gentled, but the grip on her arm didn’t ease. “Why didn’t you finish your lines?”

The wet spot on the paper had dried, leaving behind smudged ink and a slightly wrinkled spot on the paper. It mocked her, telling her she wasn’t brave enough or smart enough to tell the truth.

“I was sad,” she said, not lifting her eyes from the mocking little spot.

“Why were you sad, little one? Because I spanked you and made you write lines?”

“No.”

“Then tell me why you were sad.”

“Because I wasn’t honest. I lied a lot and I ruined everything.”

“Oh, Livvy.”

“I’m sorry.” The sob burst out of her and a split second later she was in his arms, weeping into his chest. “I’m sorry I’m so bad and I ruined everything and I didn’t write my lines and—and—and—”

“Shhh. Little one, you’re not bad. And you didn’t ruin everything. We just hit a little bump in the road is all. And now we have a fresh start.”

“But I ruined that too!”

“You did not.” The simple phrase rang with authority. “You’re going to sit back down and write your lines like a good girl, and I’ll be back up when dinner is ready.”

Sniffing back another wave of tears, she looked up at him. “Are you gonna spank me again?”

His lips lifted in a sad smile, giving her his answer before he even spoke. “What do you think, little one?”

Sighing heavily, she snuggled back into his chest. “I think you love me and I learned my lesson, so no more spankings are needed.”

His chest vibrated with laughter. “Nice try. You’re getting another spanking before bed, with Daddy’s belt. How many strokes is up to you.”

“Even if I finish all my lines?” she asked, even though she knew the answer.

“Even if you somehow finish all one hundred lines in the next twenty minutes, you’re still getting another spanking. Do you know why?”

Ugh, she hated having to answer that question. “Because I was naughty and I didn’t listen the first time?”

“That’s right. I can’t have my little girl thinking I don’t love her enough to punish her when she’s naughty, especially right now.” Stepping back, he turned her to face the desk. “Pull your PJs and your panties down again and sit your bare bottom in that chair. If you move again before I come back upstairs, we’ll add a round with the hairbrush before dinner. Understood?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Do I need to warm your bottom up again, or are you going to be a good girl?”

She rushed to bare her bottom and sit down, gasping when her still stinging skin connected with the wood. “I’ll be good, Daddy.”

“Thank you, baby. I’ll be back in a little bit.”

She’d picked up her pencil again and was halfway through rewriting her first line when he called her name. Twisting in her chair, she turned to face him.

“I love you, Livvy. I hope you know how much I love you.”

There was no place for sadness or resentment or any other yucky feelings with the love blooming inside of her. “I know. I love you too, Daddy.”

He grinned and blew her a kiss before disappearing down the hall. Olivia set to work on writing her lines again, this time

with a smile on her face



BY THE TIME DADDY CAME BACK UPSTAIRS, HER HAND HAD started to cramp up, but she hadn't gotten up from her spot on the chair. When a large, familiar shadow fell across the desk, her tummy dropped. She was nowhere near done with all her lines.

“Let me see your lines, Livvy.”

“But I'm not done, Daddy.”

“I know. But you had plenty of time to finish before you decided to be naughty, didn't you? Now, let me see.”

Pouting, she handed him the papers and kicked lightly at the desk while he inspected her work.

“You did a lot more than I thought you would be able to. I'm proud of you, Livvy.”

Despite the happy feelings his praise inspired, she shrugged. “I'm still gettin' a whippin'.”

“Yes, you are, because you disobeyed Daddy. Do you know how many licks you're getting?”

She shrugged again. “A thousand?”

His loud laughter teased a reluctant smile out of her. “Not hardly, little one. Twenty-two licks with the belt before bed. And if you're a very good girl the rest of the night, we won't have to add any more. Ready for dinner?”

Her tummy answered with a loud growl before she had a chance to say anything. Daddy laughed again and she grinned

up at him. It hadn't really occurred to her until just then how empty their house had sounded. There hadn't been nearly enough joking and laughter during their 'rough patch'.

"I'll take that as a yes. Go wash your hands and meet me downstairs."

She popped out of the chair and tripped over her PJs before she remembered to pull them up. When she did, she was a little disappointed her panties didn't bother her bottom anymore. It had been ages since she'd felt that lingering soreness after a thorough punishment, and she'd missed it almost as much as the spankings themselves.

Hands thoroughly washed, she raced down the stairs to the kitchen. They had a dining room, but mostly they used it for fancy grownup parties. She loved her parties, but her favorite place to eat was at the little nook in the corner of the kitchen by the big bay window.

The scent of garlic and tomato sauce hit her as soon as she ran through the kitchen entryway. "Spaghetti? We're having spaghetti?"

"Spaghetti and meatballs. From scratch, just like Nonna taught me," James said with a wink.

Olivia was hopeless in the kitchen, a fact that had devastated her Nonna until James had come along, eager to learn. Falling easily into their routine, Olivia grabbed a set of plates and silverware and set the table. She was reaching for a bottle of wine when she remembered they were back to normal, which meant she needed to ask.

"Can we have wine with dinner, Daddy?"

"Sure. But just a small glass each."

She wanted to pout, but all that would get her was a lecture, possibly even a time out, and no wine. So she picked out a bottle of red and poured them each a glass. James brought over a bowl of spaghetti and a bowl with the meatballs swimming in sauce and set them on the table. At his nod, she scooped up a small serving of spaghetti for herself and two meatballs.

“So.” His tone was deceptively casual as he served himself, and it had the hairs on the back of her neck standing up. “Do you want to tell me what was really going on with you and MaryAnn this afternoon?”

Frowning at the unpleasant memory, she cut into her meatball. “We handled it. I don’t want to get her in trouble.”

“I appreciate that. But I need to know if there’s a problem.”

It went against her nature to rat out a friend, and despite her behavior that afternoon she did consider MaryAnn a friend. A friendly acquaintance at the very least. But at the end of the day, he wasn’t just her husband and Daddy, he was also her boss. And as her boss, he had a right to know when there was a potential issue with a sale. “We missed the deadline for the D’Angeloses’ lender.”

“That’s a problem, Olivia.”

“I’m aware, James,” she snapped, infusing his name with more sarcasm than was probably wise given the current situation.

“Careful with the attitude. I just meant it’s a problem, and I need to be aware of these things, not that I think you can’t handle it on your own. Do I need to speak with MaryAnn tomorrow?”

Olivia shook her head. “No. It was partly my fault. I dropped the paperwork off with her and didn’t follow up.”

“All right. I trust you two to get it fixed. What’s your pipeline looking like these days? Anything you need help with?”

With that crisis handled, she relaxed into the easy and familiar conversation. Sipping her wine, she mentally flipped through her files. “Actually, there is this one client. They’re being difficult about the price. Comps in the area are going for about five to five-sixty, but theirs is in need of some serious upgrades. I’m trying to talk them into coming down about thirty thousand, but they won’t listen to me. And they’re being stubborn about doing basic shi—stuff to make the house presentable.”

Shaking his head, James gave a derisive snort. “Well, if they’re not listening to you, they’re morons. You’re my top agent, and one of the best in the state.”

She grinned at his praise. “I am pretty good at my job. Which makes it even more frustrating that they don’t seem to trust me.”

“Want me to talk to them?”

Twirling pasta onto her fork, she considered the offer. It grated to feel like she had to come crawling to Daddy to fix her problems for her, but at the same time, maybe they would listen to him. Even in an industry as female-dominated as real estate, some clients still responded better to a man. She wasn’t quite ready to admit defeat, but she was pretty damn close. “Maybe. I have a meeting with them this week. If I can’t get through to them, I’ll bring in the big guns.”

“Just let me know if you need me. Anything else?”

“Nothing off the top of my head. Oh! How did the interview go?” She’d completely forgotten about the man whose face she’d nearly smashed in with their front door.

James gave a very uncharacteristic eye roll. “I wouldn’t trust him to sell doghouses on the side of the road. Talks like he knows everything about real estate, but you can tell the majority of his knowledge has come from binge-watching HGTV. You know the type.”

Giggling, she lifted her wineglass to her lips. “I’m well acquainted with the species.”

“I did have a promising interview with another agent earlier this morning. And I have a few more interviews tomorrow as well. We should be able to make an offer by the end of next week. Do you want more spaghetti?” he asked, nodding to her empty plate.

“Nope. Full as a tick.”

They cleared the table together, with James boxing up the leftovers while Olivia loaded the dishwasher and washed the wine glasses. She was wiping down the counter when he slipped his arms around her waist, the hard outline of his cock pressing into her bottom.

“Daddy. You’re not supposed to have pointy things in your pockets. Someone could get hurt.”

His laugh rumbled in his chest and she grinned when he pressed his lips to the side of her neck. “Brat,” he growled.

Giggling, she tilted her head to give him better access. “What are you going to do about it, old man?”

Before she’d even finished her taunt, he’d wrapped her ponytail around one hand and yanked, pulling her head back.

She gasped at the unexpected movement, and had to grip the counter to steady herself.

“I’m going to fuck you. Do you know why?”

“Why?” she asked, breathless.

“Because I can. Because every inch of your body belongs to your Daddy and I can do whatever I want with it. Isn’t that right, little one?”

The groan escaped her lips before she could stop it. “Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s my good girl. On your knees.”

The second he released her ponytail, she stepped away from the counter and lowered herself into position in front of him.

“Eyes on me, little one.”

She lifted her gaze to his, her pussy throbbing in anticipation when he reached for the buckle on his belt.

“Open your mouth for me. Hands on your knees.”

Heart racing, she parted her lips, her eyes never leaving his face. And just as she’d known he would, he wrapped her ponytail around his hand again and guided his cock between her waiting lips.

His moan of satisfaction was the sweetest sound she’d ever heard.

“Fuck, you feel good on Daddy’s cock. Relax your throat, baby.”

Even after all these years, she still felt that initial rush of panic when he gripped her hair more tightly and pushed his cock deeper into her mouth. But years of training and a desire

to please overrode her instinct to pull away or to fight against the intrusion.

And even still, her throat contracted around his cock, making her gag slightly. Another man might have pulled away then, given her a chance to recover. But her Daddy knew she could take more, and so he pushed her limits, thrusting against the back of her throat. Her eyes filled with tears and she struggled to breathe through her nose while he fucked her mouth, but she kept her hands on her knees and her eyes on his face.

When she was tiptoeing up to her breaking point, he finally released her. She gasped, greedily dragging in air once he'd slipped from her mouth.

“You look beautiful like this. With tears on your cheeks and your face flushed so prettily.” A gentle tug on her hair signaled her to rise to her feet.

“Take your clothes off for Daddy.”

She grabbed the hem of her tank top and yanked it over her head. Rough, familiar fingers caressed her naked breasts, rolling and pinching her nipples until her head fell back on a moan, the rest of her clothing forgotten under the onslaught of pleasure.

“Bottoms too, little one.”

When she was standing naked before him, he hooked his hands under her arms and lifted her up onto the smooth granite.

The move surprised a squeal out of her. “James! I just washed the counters!”

He responded by shoving her legs apart and delivering a sharp slap to the tender skin of each inner thigh.

“Who’s in charge here, Olivia Jane?”

“You are,” she replied, pouting. Her thighs stung, but she knew better than to rub at the punished skin.

Two more stinging slaps had her crying out and gripping the edge of the counter. “Who is?”

“You are, Daddy!” she cried, tears stinging her eyes courtesy of the punishment he’d delivered to her sensitive skin.

“And that means Daddy can fuck his little girl whenever, wherever, and however he wants. Isn’t that right?”

“Yes, but—ow! Stop!” she whined when he delivered a third pair of swats to her thighs.

“No. There is no arguing or bargaining. Put your arms behind your back.”

Reluctantly obedient, she moved her arms into position, cupping each elbow in the opposite hand. James reached up and tweaked her left nipple, hard enough to make her cry out at the stab of pain. The right nipple received the same rough treatment. Tears filled her eyes and slipped down her cheeks, as much from humiliation as the pain of the actual punishment.

“Are you going to be a good girl?” he asked softly, releasing her tormented nipple.

“Yes, Daddy.” She whimpered at the sting he’d left behind in her thighs and breasts. “I’m sorry.”

“I know, little one.” Dipping his head, he ran his tongue over her nipple, turning her whimpers to moans of pleasure. The tortured peak still throbbed, but the pain only increased the pleasure he lavished on her with his skilled tongue.

When both nipples had been attended to, he pulled her to the edge of the countertop. His hands gripping her hips, he pushed his cock deep into her dripping pussy. He showed her no mercy as he drove into her, branding her with each forceful thrust.

“Daddy. Please.”

“Please what, little one?”

“I want to come. Please.”

Begging had become second nature to her over the years. In the early days, it had humiliated her, but she'd long since shed her pride over it. It pleased her Daddy to hear her beg, and so she begged.

“Since you asked so nicely.” He moved a hand to her mound, pressing against her clit. For several long moments he teased the aching little bud, driving her closer and closer to the edge until her begging had become wild and frantic before finally granting her release. “Come for Daddy, Livvy. Come for me.”

The simple command was her undoing. Her core clenched, then released painfully, sending liquid fire coursing through her veins. The orgasm was like him—fierce and demanding, owning every last inch of her until she trembled.

“Again, Livvy.”

She whimpered at the gruff demand. “Can't.”

The rough pad of his thumb pressed harder against her clit, making her cry out. It was pleasure so intense it bordered on pain and she caught herself just before she reached for his hand to push him away.

With a knowing smirk, he rubbed circles around the sensitive nub. “You can. Just one more, little one.”

He coaxed her over the edge of reason once more, until she shuddered and sobbed with that odd mixture of pleasure and pain he was so skilled at giving her. It wasn't long before he followed her over, filling her with one final thrust and emptying himself into her.

Spent, emotionally and physically, she dropped her head to his shoulder. James wrapped his arms around her, cocooning her with the kind of peace and strength she'd so desperately missed over the last few months. It was several long minutes before their breathing slowed enough for her to speak.

“Daddy?”

“Yes?”

“Your turn to clean the counter.”

There was a brief pause before his loud, booming laugh filled the kitchen. “That seems fair.”

CHAPTER 5



Stretched out on the couch, her head in James's lap, his fingers running through her hair, Olivia was in heaven. Her body felt loose from the two earth-shattering orgasms, and her heart was light as a feather.

"What's on your mind, little one?"

"Mmm." Stretching like a cat waking from a nap, she rolled onto her back and grinned up at him. "Just thinking how amazing I feel right now. You?"

"Pretty much the same." He ran a finger down her cheek. "I'm sorry it took me so long to realize you needed me."

Love filled her at the simple apology. It took a strong man to admit when he'd screwed up. The fact that he could only increase the respect she had for him. "And I'm sorry I wasn't honest with you about it."

"It's all forgiven, little one. But I do need to ask you something."

Nerves twisted her tummy into knots at the serious tone. "Okay?"

He continued to stroke her cheek. "Does it bother you when I correct you at work? For, say, your language or something of that nature."

Frowning, she considered the question. “Sometimes. But I think that’s my own pride more than anything. It would bother me if you really came down on me in front of the others, but you’ve never really done that. Why do you ask?”

“Just making sure we’re both on the same page, moving forward.”

“As long as we keep it private, I don’t mind if you need to be my Daddy sometimes at the office.” Embarrassment heated her cheeks as she thought of how she’d behaved that afternoon. “I know sometimes I’m not the easiest person to work with.”

“Speaking of, I think you owe MaryAnn an apology tomorrow for how you spoke to her today.”

Olivia wrinkled her nose at the suggestion. Apologizing for being a bitch was hard enough, but doing so because her Daddy had told her to added an extra layer of humiliation. “I thought you might say that.”

“Do you disagree?”

Sighing, she shook her head. If anything, she was getting off light with just an apology. If he was going to start Daddying her all the time again, she may very well find herself wearing a plug around the office if she couldn’t keep a civil tongue in her head. “No, Daddy.”

“Good girl.” He tapped her nose. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten about your bedtime spanking.”

“You could, you know. Forget,” she said, giving him her best cheeky smile. “I won’t hold it against you.”

“Nice try, Livvy. I think we both know you’d secretly resent it if I let you off the hook. Isn’t that so, little one?”

I will be honest with Daddy. The words she'd written over and over echoed in her mind. "On the advice of my counsel, I invoke my Fifth Amendment right against self-incrimination and respectfully decline to answer your question."

"You're not allowed to talk to Bryant anymore," he grumbled. "Well, if you're not in the mood to talk, then you can march your pretty little bottom upstairs and finish your lines before bed."

"But I already did them!"

"And you have twenty-two lines left. Go on."

Even though she knew the answer, she felt compelled to ask. "If I finish them, does that mean I don't get another spanking?"

"Sorry, little one. You're getting the twenty-two licks either way, because you didn't listen to your Daddy the first time. Go on, before I decide to double it."

Eyes wide, she shook her head. "That's okay, Daddy. I'll go do my lines."

The corner of his lip tilted up in a satisfied smirk. "That's what I thought. I'll be up in half an hour. You have plenty of time to finish."

Olivia rolled off the couch with a heavy sigh and trudged up the stairs. But as much as she hated writing lines, and as much as she'd argued, knowing her Daddy cared enough to punish her again filled her with warmth. God, she'd missed this.

Back in her room, she sat at the slightly oversized desk and picked up where she'd left off. *I will not act like a brat at work.* Olivia nibbled her bottom lip while she wrote. She worried that these lines contradicted the first set. Was it really

being honest if she promised not to be a brat at work? She couldn't seem to help herself, especially when things got a little crazy and she started to feel neglected.

Despite her reservations, she finished the lines well before her half hour was up. It took all of thirty seconds for her to get bored with just sitting in the chair at her desk. Daddy hadn't told her she couldn't leave her room if she finished early, but she had a feeling he wouldn't be happy if she wasn't here when he came upstairs.

She settled for wandering the room, studying all the pretty little trinkets she'd picked up over the years. Her taste trended toward more of a modern farmhouse style in the rest of the house, with several distressed pieces scattered throughout. But she'd had a different vision for this room. Here, she'd gone for the more classical pieces. White porcelain figurines were lined up on a shelf of smooth mahogany. She loved the contrast of the dark, rich wood against the pastel walls.

As she admired her favorite pieces, some deep, primal instinct welled up in her, and she turned to face the bedroom door. James was leaning against the frame, his arms crossed over his chest, a small smile on his face.

“Hi, Daddy.”

“Did you finish your lines, little one?”

“Uh huh.”

He crossed the room to the desk and picked up her paper. “Good job. Thank you for finishing.” After he'd examined her work, he dropped the paper back onto the desk and looked over at her. “How do you feel about what you wrote?”

It was on the tip of her tongue to just say everything was fine. But that would fly in the face of her first set of lines.

“Honestly?”

He tapped the papers, mirroring her own thoughts with his actions. “Of course.”

“Then, honestly, I don’t think I can do both. Saying I won’t be a brat feels like a lie.”

The knots in her stomach loosened when he laughed. “I don’t expect you to be perfect, Livvy. But I do expect you to try harder not to use our workplace to get my attention and to come to me sooner when you feel neglected. Fair enough?”

“I think I can do that.”

“That’s my girl. Come on, let’s get your spanking over with so we can get to bed.”

She opened her mouth to protest, then clamped her lips together. It wouldn’t get her anywhere with him. And if she was being truthful, she craved the feel of his leather on her bare bottom. Craved the release a long, hard whipping would bring.

Resigned to her fate, she walked to the bed and stood on her tiptoes to bend over the side. At five-eight, she wasn’t ‘little’ by any physical definition. But James had set the bed up in such a way that she had to hop up to climb in. She loved the thrill of feeling so small and helpless when she bent over the side to accept a punishment.

James stepped up behind her, interrupting her wayward thoughts, and tugged her PJs and panties to her knees. “Feet on the floor and hands in front of you, or the stroke doesn’t count.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He stepped away, and the clinking of his belt buckle sent her heart racing. All these years together and the sound still made her tremble.

The first stroke caught her by surprise, as it always did. Olivia squealed at the deep burn, but before she could voice her discomfort, the second fell.

She grabbed at the duvet, clutching it in her hands to keep herself in place. He was going for the fast, hard whipping tonight. The kind that layered pain over pain until all she knew was agony.

It was somewhere around the twelfth stroke when she found her voice. “Daddy! It hurts!”

“It’s supposed to hurt.” The belt connected twice more, her cries melding with the crack of the leather. “This is what happens to little girls who disobey their daddies.”

“I’m sorry!” It was more plea than apology, a long, drawn-out wail begging for mercy.

“Are you going to listen to Daddy?”

“Yes! Promise!” She pressed her toes into the carpet, keeping her feet in place by sheer force of will. The instinct to kick up and cover her bottom was strong, but her bottom ached and burned and she just wanted it over so her Daddy would hold her.

“Last five, little one. Stay in place.”

She was staying in place! Why did he need to remind her to do something she was already doing?

Her answer was delivered in a line of fire across the tops of her thighs. Goddammit, she hated that spot! She buried her

face in the duvet, and every ounce of energy she possessed was channeled into staying still.

The next four were delivered with measured precision across her thighs. By the time the final stroke fell, she was exhausted from the effort it had taken to stay in place. A rough hand stroked her bottom and she whimpered at even that soft contact.

“Poor baby. Daddy’s so proud of you. You didn’t even move once.”

Now that the whipping was over, she had nothing to focus on but the pain in her bottom. Her breath hitched, a sob catching in her throat as the agony overwhelmed her.

James stretched out on her bed and held his arms open to her. Accepting the invitation, she scrambled up and curled into him. The moment his arms closed around her, the dam broke, and she cried against his chest, months and months of silent worry and fear finally being purged from her system.

“That’s my good girl,” he crooned, stroking a hand over her hair as she wept. “I love you, Livvy. So much.”

“I l-love you t-too. I’m s-sorry I didn’t l-listen.”

“I know. It’s all behind us now. Clean slate.”

There was nothing left to say that they hadn’t already said. Letting his comfort surround her, she pressed her face into his chest and wept until she had no tears left inside of her.

When it was over, she felt hollowed out, but in a good way. Like all of the bad feelings had been scooped out of her and thrown away.

“Feel better, little one?” he asked when she snuggled closer with a quiet whimper.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Let’s get to bed, then.”

Sitting up, she winced at the flash of pain when her wetted bottom pressed into the mattress. She’d definitely be careful to follow Daddy’s instructions.

At least for a little while.

CHAPTER 6



Standing in front of the mirror in their bathroom, Olivia craned her neck to see if there were any marks left from the night before. She pressed her fingers against a slightly discolored spot, savoring the flash of pain. Other than that one little spot, the welts and redness were gone, with only a slight lingering ache to remind her of the multiple punishments she'd endured.

As strange as it may have seemed to anyone else, she was disappointed by the lack of marks and discomfort. She couldn't remember the last time she'd had a punishment or even a play session that had stayed with her the next day. Resigned to a day of sitting comfortably, she walked into the bedroom to get ready for work.

James was already dressed, looking perfect as always in his dress slacks and shirt. He frowned when he saw her, most likely due to her still being naked when she had about five minutes left to get ready if she wanted to leave on time. "Livvy, you need to get moving. You're going to be late."

With a roll of her eyes, she turned toward her closet. "I'm getting dressed. Geez."

"Excuse me? Try that again, young lady."

Ugh. As much as she'd missed him, missed this, it was hard not to resent the scolding tone when she was already feeling sulky. "I'm getting dressed, *Daddy*. Happy?"

She'd turned away, so she couldn't see his expression, but he didn't answer. Didn't so much as growl in response to her sass.

Great. They were back where they'd been before their supposed slate-cleaning the night before. So much for a fresh start. Fighting back tears, she stomped into her closet and jerked a blouse off a hanger. She was reaching for a skirt when strong fingers closed around her upper arm.

Taking a seat on the long bench in the middle of her closet, James yanked her down over his lap. The first crack of her hairbrush across her naked backside had her crying out.

"James! Stop!"

He didn't stop, didn't even acknowledge her demand. The brush continued to fall, lighting her bottom on fire until she couldn't take another burning swat.

"I'm sorry! Daddy, I'm sorry! Please!"

"What are you sorry for, young lady?" The fall of the brush didn't so much as falter when he spoke.

"Ow ow ow! I'm sorry I was rude!"

The spanking slowed, and he capped the impromptu punishment with six solid swats to her sit spots, making her howl with each one.

When it was over, he helped her sit up, cradling her in his arms. Sniffing and whimpering, Olivia wrapped her arms around his neck and held on tight.

"Feel better, little one?" he asked once she'd quieted.

“Uh huh.”

“Want to tell me what happened?”

She shrugged, then yelped when he squeezed her tender bottom.

“Daddy asked you a question, Olivia Jane. Is that how you answer me?”

“No, Daddy.”

“Good girl. Now tell me what got into my sweet little girl this morning.”

Pouting, she dropped her head to his shoulder. “I just felt a little sad.”

“Why did you feel sad, baby?”

She picked up his tie and ran it through her fingers. “You’ll think I’m silly.”

“If it made you sad I would never think it’s silly.”

It was a struggle to trust him, but she knew she had to if they were going to rebuild what they’d come so close to losing. “I sort of missed my welts from last night.”

He chuckled and Olivia sat up straight to glare at him. “You said you wouldn’t laugh!”

“No, little one, I said I wouldn’t think it was silly. And it’s not silly. I was laughing because you’re so cute. Do you still miss your welts?”

Since her bottom was still throbbing from the paddling he’d just given her, she shook her head vehemently. “No. I’m good.”

“Good girl. Now hurry up and get dressed. I’ll see you at the office.”

She hopped off his lap and James stood to gather her into his arms. When he bent his head and captured her lips in a long, lingering kiss, everything inside of her went gooey.

“Be good,” he murmured and dropped a kiss on her nose.

“I will. I love you.”

“I love you too, Livvy.”



JAMES WAS ALL BUT WHISTLING WHEN HE WALKED INTO THE office. Everything was back to normal between him and his little girl. The business was booming, which it had been for a while, but success was sweeter when he wasn't feeling so out of sorts at home.

Unlocking the door to the darkened building, he let himself in. The lights automatically brightened when he walked through the door and down the hall to his office.

He loved this time of day. Those few precious minutes of quiet before the office became a bustling hive of activity. Before the phones rang, before there were people knocking on his door demanding answers. It still baffled him some days that there was anybody to come knocking. Employees who looked to him for help and guidance, who relied on him to keep things running as smoothly as possible. He had built his brokerage from the ground up, with Olivia by his side, and he never took that success for granted.

At the mere thought of her, an image of Olivia popped into his mind, naked and draped across his lap with her bottom turning pink from the firm application of her hairbrush that

morning, and he couldn't help but grin. His little one would be testing him over the next few days, if not weeks. It wasn't unusual when he tightened the reins for one reason or another. And if he was being honest, he was rather looking forward to what she might be getting up to.

"All right, enough daydreaming," he lectured himself, pulling his laptop from his bag and placing it on the desk. "You've got a business to run."

"Sir?"

He considered it a testament to his strength that he didn't jump at the unexpected voice. Turning around, he found MaryAnn standing in the doorway to his office watching him with those wide, perpetually terrified eyes of hers.

"Good morning, MaryAnn. I'm afraid you caught me giving myself a bit of a lecture. You're early."

Her eyes went even wider and she immediately looked at the floor. "I had some things to take care of, so I figured I'd get an early start. I hope that's okay."

"Of course. I appreciate your dedication to the firm."

She nodded without looking up and turned on her heel to flee. James didn't even bother to sigh. After a year with her at the front desk, the prospect of her gaining any confidence seemed increasingly less likely. Of course, if Olivia had been giving her a hard time on a regular basis, that might explain some of MaryAnn's continued timidity.

Making a mental note to keep a closer eye on his wife for a bit where MaryAnn was concerned, he docked his laptop and powered everything on. Jesus, how did he have so many emails since yesterday? Didn't people ever turn their computers off these days? Settling in, he began working his

way through them, deleting trash and spam and flagging the ones he would need to address sooner rather than later.

He was nearly finished cleaning up his inbox when the scent of coffee pulled him from his work like a siren's song. He looked over and found MaryAnn again standing in the doorway, this time holding a mug and a brown box.

“If that coffee is for me, you're getting a raise.”

Pink immediately stained her cheeks as she nodded. “This package also came for you just now.” She set both the coffee and the box on the desk and took a step back. James picked up the package and grinned at the return address.

“I was hoping these would get here this morning. Liv is going to freak.” Setting the box back on the desk, he grabbed a letter opener to slice through the tape. When he opened the flaps, his wife's face stared at him from the glossy cover of *Maryland Homes Today*. He couldn't help but grin as he picked up one of the magazines and studied the picture. The photographer had managed to capture not just her natural beauty, but the confidence and trustworthiness that made her such a fantastic realtor. The magazine was running a piece on local women in real estate, and Olivia had been beyond ecstatic when they'd asked not just to include her in the piece, but to put her on the cover, so he was glad to see they'd done her justice.

The sound of heels clicking down the hall alerted him to the possibility of her presence and he quickly moved the box to the floor, hiding the magazine he held behind his back.

“Morning! Did you—oh.” Olivia stopped in the doorway of his office when she spotted MaryAnn, her cheeks turning an adorable shade of pink as she glanced over at him. He simply

raised an eyebrow in response, secretly adoring the resignation on her face.

“MaryAnn.” She smiled politely at the now visibly panicking receptionist. “I just wanted to apologize for my behavior yesterday. I was rude and I never should have raised my voice or used the language I did. Forgive me?”

MaryAnn looked over at James, and he nearly burst out laughing at the confused look she sent him. “It’s not a trick, MaryAnn.” The Daddy in him wanted to elaborate, but as they’d discussed the night before, he would never humiliate her that way at work.

“Oh.” Still visibly nervous, MaryAnn looked back at Olivia. “Um. Thank you. I know it was my fault for missing the deadline and everything so it’s not a big deal.”

Olivia shook her head and his heart swelled with pride. “No. Regardless of what happened, my behavior was completely unprofessional and uncalled for. Nobody ever deserves to be berated like that at work, and I’m truly sorry.”

“It’s okay. Really. I, um, have to get back to work.” MaryAnn darted out of the office before Olivia could say anything else.

Cheeks still slightly flushed with embarrassment, Olivia turned to him. “Was that okay?”

“Yes. Thank you, Liv.” He dropped his voice so only she could hear him. “Daddy’s very proud of you.”

The pink on her cheeks darkened, but he had a feeling it wasn’t embarrassment turning her olive skin that beautiful dusky rose. His hunch was proven right when she responded with a soft, “Thank you, Daddy.”

“I have a surprise for you.”

Her eyes went wide and the color on her cheeks deepened further. “Surprise?”

“Not that kind of surprise, my love.” But her response had the wheels turning in his mind. Pushing thoughts of her bent over his desk with a plug in her bottom from his mind, he pulled the magazine from behind his back and held it out to her.

Shock and delight filled her eyes seconds before she let out a high-pitched squeal. “It’s here! That’s me! Give it!” She dove across the desk and snatched the magazine from his hands. Under normal circumstances, he would have scolded her for being rude, but he couldn’t bring himself to ruin her excitement.

“Oh, look at it! I look good. I was worried my ass looked fat in that skirt but I look good.”

“Your ass never looks fat. And you don’t just look good, you look sexy and confident.”

Her grin was just as sexy and confident in person as it was on the cover of the magazine. “I do, don’t I? I wonder what the article says.” She flipped through the glossy pages until she found what she was searching for. “Here we go! Blah blah blah, in business with her husband, yadda yadda, oh!” Tears clouded her eyes and she gave a delicate little sniff. “How lovely.”

“What does it say?”

“Olivia Monroe isn’t just your typical cheerful, happy-to-help realtor, though she is all of those things. There is a sincerity that shines through in her conversations with her clients, and an honesty that’s refreshing to see in this business. It’s clear her goal is to find the best home for her client, not

just the best commission for herself. She is a breath of fresh air in a cutthroat business.”

James walked around the desk and pulled her close. “It’s the truth. I know I don’t tell you this often, but you really are excellent at your job. Even the most difficult clients end up raving about you at the end of the day. I am so proud of you, Liv, every day for the woman you’ve become.”

As her Daddy, he often told her he was proud of her. But he rarely used those words at work, and judging by the gratitude shining in her eyes, it meant the world to her to hear them. He’d have to remember to tell her more often.

“I’ve been at work ten minutes and this has already been the best day ever. I swear nothing could ruin this day.”

“It’s definitely one for the books.”

Her lips curved up in a slow, sexy smile. “We should celebrate tonight.”

Despite the door to his office being wide open, he couldn’t help himself. Tightening his arms around her, he bent his head to hers, taking her lips in a quick, brutal kiss. He’d only meant for it to last a second, enough for her to know how that smile affected him. But then she whimpered, and her mouth opened, inviting him in. Need overrode any sense of propriety. With a hand fisted in her perfectly curled hair, he held her in place as he swept in, conquering her mouth. She melted into him, and his need for her was so great he might have taken her right there on the floor of his office if the sound of someone clearing their throat hadn’t brought them crashing back to reality.

Slowly lifting his head, he looked over at Patty O’Halloran, the first realtor he’d hired after Olivia. Patty’s

clear blue eyes twinkled and her lips were turned up in a knowing, mischievous smile. Olivia pushed at his chest, but James didn't release her. "Good morning, Patty."

"Good morning, yourself. Good to see you kids have worked things out." Patty winked and walked away, her loud laugh echoing down the hall.

"Oh, my god." Groaning, Olivia pressed her face against his chest. "I can't believe that just happened. I'm just going to hide here the rest of the day."

"Sorry, little one. You have work to do."

Tilting her head back, she glared up at him. "You're a—"

James lifted a finger to her lips. "Careful, my darling little girl." Leaning forward, he whispered in her ear, "Little girls who call their daddies naughty names go to bed with no dessert and sore, red bottoms."

He was close enough to hear her breath turn ragged. "Sorry, Daddy," she whispered in return.

"That's my girl." He pressed another kiss to her lips, a promise of things to come later that night. "Go get settled in and let me know if you need me for anything today. Anything, Livvy. I mean it."

The gleam in her eyes told him she understood the true meaning behind his words. "Yes, Sir."

Concentrating on work was going to be hard as hell with the images dancing in his mind of the things his Livvy might need during the day. Doing his best to ignore them, at least for now, he settled back at his desk and opened the next email in his box.

CHAPTER 7



As her laptop powered down, Olivia leaned back in her chair, stretching her arms up over her head. What a crazy freaking day. Her email and phone had positively blown up, thanks to the magazine article. Picking her copy up off her desk again, she grinned at the photo of herself, beaming off the cover of the state's most popular real estate publication.

James was right. The cover oozed confidence and sex appeal. But it was the article inside that made her practically giddy. It was wonderful, beyond words, to be recognized for her hard work and her dedication to her clients.

She flipped the magazine open to her section and reread, savoring every word. When she'd finished, she flipped the page and giggled at the picture of Shannon smirking out from the pages. Now there was a woman who exuded sex and confidence with every breath. Olivia had wondered why they didn't choose Shannon for the cover, but Shannon had just rolled her eyes when she brought it up.

"It's hilarious how blind you are to your own beauty," Shannon had said. "I'm not at all shocked they chose you."

Unable to contain her excitement for a moment longer, Olivia grabbed her phone and hit the call button.

"Hey, rock star!"

Olivia laughed at the exuberant greeting. “Hey, yourself. Is it weird that I can’t stop staring at myself?”

“Hell, no! I’ve been checking out your beautiful brown eyes all day.”

“You don’t look so bad, yourself, you know.”

“I look fucking hot. But I’m not the cover model. Dinner tonight to celebrate?”

“Can’t. James is taking me out. How about tomorrow?”

“It’s a date! See you then, babe!”

After she ended the call, Olivia packed up her computer and the paperwork she wanted to work on later that night. She slung the laptop bag and purse over her shoulder and headed for the door. James was just shutting down his computer when she paused in the doorway of his office.

God, he was gorgeous. He wasn’t super buff like the men on the covers of the romance novels Patty was always reading. But he was tall and lean, with wiry muscles that belied the strength rippling underneath his smooth business attire.

And when he looked up at her, those crystal blue eyes stole her breath.

“Hey,” she said, suddenly feeling a shyness she hadn’t felt since the early days of their marriage.

“All done for the day, little one?”

Oh, how she loved that nickname. Everything inside of her went soft and warm whenever he used it. “Yes, Sir.”

The blue of his eyes heated. “Where would you like to go to dinner?”

They had a dozen options, just within a mile radius of the office. But there was only one place she wanted to be in that instant. “Home.”

His eyes locked on her, James rose from his seat and slipped his laptop bag over his shoulder. “You’re sure?”

Need rose up in her, so strong it nearly brought her to her knees. Heart thundering with each step he took, she watched in helpless fascination as he approached her. Stalked her. A sleek, regal jungle cat on the prowl, and her the helpless little bunny caught in his crosshairs.

Stopping just in front of her, he lifted a hand to her cheek. “We could go anywhere you want. This is your celebration.”

“I know. I want to go home. I want...” The words stuck in her throat.

“Tell me, little one.”

She swallowed. This had never come easy for her, articulating her wants, her needs, her desires. “I want you to use me.”

The smile that curved his lips was slow and wicked. He moved his hand to her neck, his strong fingers encircling her throat. Her pulse beat a steady, if far too fast, rhythm against the palm of his hand.

“Is that what you want? To be Daddy’s little plaything for the night?”

Swallowing hard against the sudden lump in her throat, she managed to force out a response. “Yes.”

“Ask me nicely.”

The heat that flooded her cheeks was a heady combination of embarrassment and desire. “Will you please take me home

and fuck me hard, Daddy?”

Stroking the skin of her throat with his thumb, he nodded. “Since you asked so sweetly, little one, I would be happy to. You go on home. Take a shower and be waiting for me in our bedroom.”

“You’re not coming with me?”

“I’m going to stop at the store. I plan on working up an appetite tonight.”

Holy shit, it was a wonder she didn’t spontaneously combust right there in the middle of their office. “Okay.”

His hand tightened around her throat, and fear twined with desire in a delicious cocktail she knew oh so well. “Try again, little one. What do you say when Daddy gives you an order?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“That’s my good girl. Go on. I’ll meet you at home.”

He bent and feathered a kiss over her lips before releasing her. Flying high on that mixture of anticipation and need, she walked down the hall and out the front door. Across the parking lot to her big black SUV where she climbed inside and drove home as fast as she dared. She wanted to just ignore the speed limits and race home, but Daddy would whip her ass if she got a ticket and a punishment that severe would put a damper on the whole night.

So, she pushed it as fast as she dared, beyond relieved when she finally pulled into her driveway. The car was barely in park before she killed the engine and practically leapt out. Heart pounding, she raced inside and up the stairs to the master suite. On any other night, she would have carefully stripped, depositing clothes into the laundry basket or hanging up items that could be worn again. But tonight she simply let

each item fall to the floor on her way to the bathroom. Daddy might spank her for it, but that spanking wouldn't ruin anything. That kind of 'punishment' would only enhance the desire already pumping through her veins.

In the bathroom, she bundled her hair on top of her head and switched the shower on. After waiting for what seemed like an eternity for the water to heat up, she stepped inside and lifted her face to the spray. Since Daddy was taking a detour, she took a little extra time to rub her sugar scrub over every inch of her body, ensuring her skin would be fresh and smooth and a little extra sensitive for whatever he had planned. Goose pimples rippled over her skin when she stepped back into the cool air of the bathroom.

She hadn't had a night like this in so long. A night where she could completely surrender herself to the man who ruled her heart and her body.

He wouldn't be fair. He wouldn't be just or gentle. He would demand more of her than she knew how to give. He would punish even the slightest disobedience or defiance. He would give her pain, just as he gave her pleasure, but she knew she had nothing to fear.

Because he was her Daddy, and she trusted him with her very being.

When she finished with her usual after shower ritual, she hung her towel up on its hook and returned to the bedroom. For a moment, she debated if she should dress. Her Daddy appreciated the lacy, silken underthings tucked away in her drawers. But she didn't want anything between them when he came home.

As if thinking about him and all the wicked things he had planned conjured him, the front door slammed. Driven by the

desire to be ready and waiting when he walked in the door, she scrambled up onto their bed and stretched out, her heartbeat counting down the seconds until he appeared.

By the time he opened the door and stopped, his gaze roaming her naked body with hungry appreciation, she felt like she might burst with anticipation.

“Look at my pretty little girl, all laid out for her Daddy. Did you take a shower like I told you to?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl. Roll over on your tummy.”

She rolled as instructed, pillowing her head on her arms as he stepped up to the bed and ran a hand down her back, a gentle caress that left her shivering. It was the calm before the storm, and she trembled thinking of the brutal tempest about to come.

That same hand that had been so gentle moments before cracked across her bottom twice in a row. Once for each quivering cheek.

“You know, little one, looking at this bottom, you’d never guess that you were punished last night and again this morning. There isn’t a mark on you. Let’s see what we can do about that.”

No response was required, so she kept her mouth clamped shut and closed her eyes. She could hear him moving about the room, the opening and closing of their toy chest. Every second that passed ratcheted her anticipation up another notch.

“Lift your head and open your mouth.”

Opening her eyes, she found him standing by the bed once more, this time holding a steel ring with two strips of leather

attached. Knowing what was expected of her, she obediently raised her head and opened her mouth so he could fit the ring between her teeth and fasten the leather strips at the back of her head.

“What’s your safeword with the gag in, little one?”

She lifted her hand and snapped her fingers twice.

“Good girl. I’m not going to tie you up unless you give me a reason to. Are you going to be a good girl for Daddy?”

With the gag forcing her mouth open, she couldn’t form any coherent words, so she nodded her agreement.

“I hope so. Arms out in front of you, feet on the mattress. Daddy’s going to plug your bottom before we get started.”

She whimpered in response but did as instructed. It wasn’t that she minded being plugged. On the contrary, she loved being filled in every possible way by him. It was just that the wait was killing her, and she wanted him to get to the good parts already.

But her Daddy knew her, and he knew how impatient she could be. He’d taken it upon himself from the word go to teach her patience. She was reminded of that fact when he lazily ran his hand from her ankle to her bottom and delivered two more solid smacks.

“You’re so beautiful. My little Livvy. You’re going to look even more beautiful with this plug in your red, striped bottom while I fuck you.”

She jerked when the cold liquid squirted between her cheeks, but she quickly settled. Fighting just made it worse and delayed their pleasure. A single finger pressed against her bottom hole, and she had to remind herself to relax. Olivia squealed when he pushed in right past the initial resistance

without giving her time to adjust, but she didn't move away from the intrusion.

Slowly, deliberately, he fucked her bottom with his finger, coating her with the lubricant, before pushing a second finger inside. She squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden, sharp pain, but it quickly faded into a mild discomfort. Skilled, sure fingers worked her bottom hole, stretching her and loosening her up. When he pulled his fingers from her bottom, she had a brief moment to miss the feeling of being so full, but only a moment before the cool metal of the plug pressed against her hole.

“Breathe out, Livvy.”

She took a deep breath in and let it out slowly, relaxing as much as she could while he worked the plug into her bottom. It burned and stretched, and already she could feel tears stinging her eyes.

“Hnnh!” She tried to protest, but the steel ring prevented her from speaking.

“Almost there, little one.” He pushed the plug in a little further and she shuddered when the fullest part of it pushed past that tight ring of muscle. But then it was in, fully seated, and she sighed with relief. Getting the thing in was always worse than just having it in, and tonight was no different. The sharp pain was gone, and she was left with little more than the strange, full feeling that always came with being plugged. Moments later she heard the water running in the bathroom, and then he was beside her again.

“Daddy is so proud of you for taking your plug like a good girl. But it seems a certain naughty girl left her clothes all over the floor. Are we supposed to make messes with our clothes, little one?”

The question sent her already pounding heart into overdrive. She hesitated only a moment before shaking her head.

“Clothes go in the laundry when you take them off, Olivia Jane. You know better. I think a dozen with the strap should be a good reminder for my naughty girl.”

She braced for the blow, and still it took her breath away. When the first burning stroke fell, she instinctively squeezed her bottom cheeks together, a move she immediately regretted when she was reminded of the large item lodged firmly inside her ass.

He delivered each of the twelve with slow, measured precision. By the time he finished, she was a shaking, whimpering mess, and her bottom burned like he'd lit a fire across her skin.

And her pussy, soaked with her own juices, throbbed with every beat of her heart.

“Are you going to be a good girl and put your clothes where they belong?”

A silent nod replaced her usual “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl. Present your bottom for me, Livvy. I want to put some lines on it.”

Lines meant the cane. She had such a complicated relationship with the cane. While she loved the lingering marks it inevitably left behind, the process was agony and it never failed to reduce her to tears within a few short strokes.

Trembling, she tucked her knees up under her, so her bottom was lifted high, the skin stretched taut across her waiting cheeks. The cool, slender implement tapped against her bottom twice, and she allowed herself one soft whimper.

The room was silent, so quiet she clearly heard the soft *swoosh* of the cane before it connected with her exposed flesh. It took a heartbeat for the pain to sink in, and when it did, she screamed at the sensation, a thousand needles stinging her skin in a thin line where the cane had landed. A second and a third stroke fell in quick succession, and it took everything she had in her to stay in place.

His hand returned, gentle fingers running lightly over the welts. And then he squeezed each cheek in turn, pulling another scream from her with each flash of pain. Olivia let out a strangled sob, tears already streaming down her cheeks. His hand disappeared, and there was another soft *swoosh*, another line of hellfire.

The caning continued without hesitation until twelve perfect lines had been laid across her ass. She could barely catch her breath through the waves of agony, but still her body was aching, demanding his touch and the pleasure only he could give her.

“On your back.”

A minute. I just need a minute. The plea echoed in her mind, urging her to snap her fingers, just once, just enough to let him know she needed a moment to breathe before he pushed her past what she could bear. But more than mercy, she needed this, needed him to push her as close to the edge as he could without actually breaking her. And because she trusted him to do exactly that, she rolled onto her back without taking the time her mind insisted she needed.

“Spread your legs. As wide as you can. Hands above your head.”

She positioned herself as requested, her pussy gushing at the sheer lust in his gaze. Daddy stepped away from the bed

and returned a moment later with a familiar implement in his hand. The flogger wasn't large, and the falls were thin and light. This particular flogger had one purpose in their household, and the knowledge of that purpose had her trembling again when he stepped back to the side of the bed.

“Do not move, even an inch. Or I'll take the plug out and fuck your ass until you're begging me for mercy. Understood?”

Braced for the first, painful stroke, she nodded. Apparently satisfied with her silent acknowledgment, he flicked the flogger in circles, making a figure eight in the air. Once he had his rhythm, he lowered his arm so the ends of the falls licked her inner thighs. Olivia whimpered, willing her muscles to stay locked in position as he continued up and down her thighs, leaving little kisses of pain along her tender skin. When she'd been thoroughly welted, he changed direction slightly, and the flogger lashed her exposed pussy.

She wanted to arch her back against the pain. Slam her thighs shut to stop the assault in its tracks. Roll off the bed and lock herself in the bathroom until the pain ebbed enough for her to continue.

But the only thing that would gain her even an ounce of mercy at this point was a snap of her fingers. And as much as it burned, as much as her mind screamed at her to make it stop, she was nowhere near her breaking point. She could take more. She knew it, and what was more, her Daddy knew it.

He continued lashing her exposed lips, each burning stroke making her throb in response. And when she was standing there at the edge, her toes up against the line she couldn't cross without breaking, he stopped. Her body shuddered with relief, but she soon realized it was short-lived. Daddy dropped the

flogger and stepped away from the bed just long enough to shed his clothes. And then he was on top of her, straddling her chest so she couldn't move.

His intent registered a split second before he fisted a hand in her hair and lifted her head from the pillow. Seconds later, his rock-hard cock pushed through the steel ring into her mouth. Panic immediately set in and she jerked her head back, but he held fast. She gagged, her throat closing around his cock, but he didn't so much as pause his assault of her mouth.

When he pulled out again, she dragged in a greedy breath, saliva pooling around the gag and dripping down her chin. She lifted her eyes to his, and realized with a flash of tantalizing horror he wasn't finished. As soon as the realization hit, his grip on her hair tightened and he pushed into her open mouth once more. She was better prepared this time, and she remembered to breathe through her nose as he fucked her throat.

By the time he was finished, her throat was raw and her jaw ached from the abuse her mouth had just taken. She whimpered around the gag, pleading with her eyes for mercy. But she'd known going into this that he wouldn't be merciful. Hell, she'd begged for exactly this.

Abandoning his place on her chest, he knelt between her spread thighs. With a single thrust he pierced her to her core and her insides went molten, the orgasm rushing through her, taking them both by surprise.

“Oh, my disobedient little girl. Are you allowed to come without Daddy's permission?”

Whimpering and whining, she shook her head. It was a long-standing rule, one she rarely broke, for she knew retribution would be swift and fierce.

“Again. Apparently, you need a reminder of who’s in charge, here.”

Buried to the hilt inside of her, he brought his hand to her clit, his rough touch sending her flying a second time before she fully recovered from the first. He began to move inside of her, his cock stroking her overly sensitized nerves and his clever fingers still furiously working her toward another release. Pleasure mixed with pain as he pushed her to the edge of sanity a third time.

“Again, little one.”

She shook her head, earning her a growl in response. “Come, Olivia. Now!”

The sharp command sent her over again, waves of pleasure so acute they were actually painful crashing over her. Instinct overrode training, and she reached for him, wrapping her fingers around his wrist and tugging.

“Naughty little girl. On your knees.”

Pulling out of her, he gripped her and helped flip her over. She didn’t even have time to get into position before he lifted her hips and drove into her again. He fucked her, his hips slamming into her welted bottom, reigniting the pain from the thorough strapping and caning. Full. Between the plug and his cock, she was so full, a feeling she normally relished. But the forced orgasms had every nerve on fire when he drove into her. He moved a hand to her bottom and squeezed the tender flesh, pulling a long scream from her already raw throat.

The hand on her ass moved to her hair, gripping tight and yanking her head back. “Daddy says when and if you come. And you never,” he gave her hair a short, sharp yank that sent pain shooting through her scalp, “*ever* try to push Daddy

away. You are mine and I will do whatever I want with you. Isn't that right, little one?"

She nodded as well as she could with his hand still gripping her hair. "Good girl. Are you ready for Daddy's cum?"

Another strained nod. He held on, slamming into her sore, aching pussy until he exploded within her. Completely against her will, her inner walls spasmed around him, wave after wave of painful pleasure flooding her as she milked his cock for every last drop. When he was done, he collapsed on the bed beside her, their breathing heavy and erratic.

"Come here, little one."

She gratefully crawled into his embrace, snuggling against him while their hearts pounded so loudly she could hear each beat and their breathing slowed to normal.

"Such a good girl," he crooned when they finally settled. "Would you like the gag off now?"

She nodded and bent her head so he could access the buckle at the back. He released the restraint and gently pulled the steel from her mouth. Every inch of her ached, from her jaw to her pussy to her well-punished bottom.

But she felt the satisfaction of being well used and loved in every cell of her being. Eyes growing heavy, she snuggled into his chest. "Thank you, Daddy. I loved my celebration."

His chest rumbled with laughter beneath her cheek. "I'm glad, little one. Sleep now. I love you."

"Love you too." As soon as the words left her mouth, she fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER 8



She woke the next morning positively ravenous. Other than James waking her briefly to remove her plug, she'd slept straight through the night, completely wrung out from their celebration session. Sitting up in bed, she took stock of the twinges and aches making themselves known in her body. Her arms were a little sore from holding various positions for so long without moving. And her ass still burned, inside and out. Remembering the caning from the night before, she jumped out of bed and ran for the bathroom. She twisted her body to see her bottom in the mirror and grinned at the lines she could still see across her cheeks.

Humming happily to herself, she washed her face and threw on one of James's old T-shirts and a pair of yoga pants. When she reached the bottom of the stairs, the scent of bacon frying made her mouth water. She all but skipped to the kitchen, where James stood before the stove, clad in a pair of faded blue jeans and an old Notre Dame sweatshirt. Olivia walked up behind him and slipped her arms around his waist, her face pressed against his strong back. "Hi, Daddy."

"Good morning, sleepyhead."

"I didn't even check my phone. What time is it?"

"Almost ten." The amusement was clear in his voice.

“Holy crap, really?” She pulled her arms from around his waist to plant her fists on her hips. “You shouldn’t have let me sleep so late!”

“You’ve earned the right to sleep in on a Saturday.”

“But you didn’t sleep in,” she pointed out sulkily.

“Olivia Jane, are you arguing with me about letting you get a few extra hours of sleep that you obviously needed?”

She grinned at the exasperation in his tone. “Maybe a little.”

“Well, maybe I should warm your bottom up a little. How about that?”

“Nah, I’m good.” Laughing, she darted away when he lunged for her. She snagged a piece of bacon from a plate on the counter and ran to the living room, well out of reach of Daddy and his wooden spoons. As usual, James had the news on so he could listen as he cooked. Yuck. She wanted to watch something fun. But before she could grab the remote, the image on the screen had her rooted to the spot.

“The body of Angela Winters was discovered this morning by the owners of a house she was contracted to sell. Cause of death has yet to be determined, but the police are actively pursuing all leads. We will have more details for you as soon as they become available.”

Fear slithered up her spine at the somber, monotone explanation. Feeling as though she was watching someone else in her body, she made her way back to the kitchen. “Do you have a copy of the magazine?”

Looking up from the stove, James frowned at her. “In my laptop bag, in my office. Why?”

“I just need it.” With a sudden urgency, a need to *know* for sure what her gut was already telling her, she ran down the short hall to his office and grabbed his bag. She pulled the magazine free and frantically flipped through the pages until she found what she was looking for.

Two pages past her own story was Angela Winters, staring at her from the glossy pages of the magazine.

“Olivia? What’s wrong?”

“I met her.” Her hands shook so hard when she held the magazine up for him to view, she nearly ripped it in half. “I met her when we all got together for our photo shoots. And now she’s dead. I think—I think someone killed her, James.”

“Oh, Livvy. Come here.”

A sob bubbled up in her throat, bursting out of her when his arms locked around her, cradling her to his chest. “Who would do something like this?”

“I don’t know, baby. I’m so sorry.”

Held tight against him, she grieved for a woman she’d barely known, for the family that would never be whole again. “I don’t understand,” she said with a soft sigh when the tears faded, leaving behind a hollow ache in her gut.

“I’m not sure this is the kind of thing that can be understood, baby.” James pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “Come back to the kitchen with me, I’ll finish making you some breakfast.”

“Not hungry.”

Pulling away, he gently tilted her face up. There was no anger or condemnation in his expression, only concern, but there was no doubting the authority in his voice when he

spoke. “You didn’t eat any dinner last night, little one. You need to put something in your tummy. At least a couple bites of breakfast, and then you can go lie down for a bit, if you want.”

It was so easy and simple to slide into her role. For now, she could just be his little girl, before she had to deal with so many grownup emotions. “I want ice cream.”

Despite his obvious amusement with her request, her Daddy shook his head. “You can’t have ice cream for breakfast, Livvy. But if you’re a good girl, you can have some ice cream after dinner.”

“Kay,” she conceded with only a small pout. Ice cream was ice cream, even if she had to wait a few hours to get it.

“That’s my good girl. Come with Daddy.”

Slipping her hand in his, she let him lead her from the office back down the hall to the kitchen where he guided her to the little breakfast nook she loved so much. After he ducked back into the living room to turn the tv off, it didn’t take long for him to finish cooking, and he returned to the table with two plates, each holding a huge waffle and a pile of bacon.

“Waffles!” Wiggling her butt on the bench, she grinned up at him. “We haven’t had waffles in ages!”

“I figured our celebration could carry over to this morning, and I know they’re your favorite.”

Grief and guilt gripped her, twisting her heart and stomach inside out. While they’d been enjoying each other’s bodies and celebrating her accomplishments, someone had been murdering Angela. Did she even have a chance to celebrate? Have a drink with a friend or kiss someone she loved?

Tears blurring her vision once again, Olivia poked at her waffle with her fork. “Thanks.”

“Livvy, I know you’re sad, but you need to eat something.”

With a small sigh, she soaked the waffle in syrup, just the way she liked it, and cut off a small bite. Though she barely tasted it when she chewed, she mustered up a smile for him. “It’s good, Daddy.”

“I’m glad you like it, baby.”

They ate in silence for a while, neither of them apparently willing to engage in their usual breakfast chatter. After half a waffle and a couple bites of bacon, she pushed her plate away.

“Is that all you want, Livvy?”

“Uh huh.”

Concern filled her husband’s eyes as he studied her, but he eventually nodded. “Okay. Why don’t you go up to your room and lie down for a bit. I’ll be up to check on you later.”

Grateful for his understanding, she slid off the bench and headed up the stairs to her pretty room with the green walls. But she couldn’t settle when she got there. Trying to take her Daddy’s advice, she stretched out on the bed for a few minutes, but her mind just continued to race with unanswered questions. It didn’t take long for her to grow frustrated enough to roll off the bed in search of something to purge the grief still gnawing at her gut.

Hidden away in the drawers of her desk was a stash of paper and various drawing utensils. Pulling out some paper and colored pencils, she settled in at the desk and got to work.

Art had always been a passion of hers, and she funneled everything she was feeling into her drawing. Little by little,

she could feel the weight of her emotions lifting from her shoulders as she worked. She was so focused, she didn't notice Daddy's presence in her room until he dropped a hand on her shoulder.

“What are you drawing, little one?”

“Just a picture,” she replied softly, her attention still zeroed in on her drawing.

“May I see?”

Shaking her head, she covered the paper with her hands to hide it from his gaze. “No.”

“Well, if you want to show me later, I'd really like to see it.” He ran a soothing hand over her hair. “How are you feeling?”

Still not looking up at him, she shrugged and kicked her feet against the legs of the chair.

“Baby.” Daddy crouched by her chair and reached up to turn her face toward him. “I know you're upset. It's okay to be sad or angry.”

“I kind of feel both,” she admitted, her voice barely a whisper.

Stroking her cheek, he offered her a sad smile. “Yeah. Me too.”

“You don't think I'm silly for being so upset when I barely knew her?”

“Never.” Conviction rang clear in his voice. “Your ability to feel so much is part of what I love about you.”

“Yeah?”

“Absolutely.” Leaning in, he brushed a soft kiss over her lips. “Do you want to keep drawing or do you want to come watch a movie with me?”

The drawing was pulling at her, begging her to finish, a feeling she hadn’t had in ages. “Can I finish it and then come downstairs?”

“Sure thing. I’m going to go get some work done, but you just come find me when you’re ready.”

“Thanks.”

When he was gone, Olivia lifted her hands from the picture and studied it.

There was one emotion she hadn’t told her Daddy about. And that emotion, more than any others, influenced her current artwork.

Guilt.



JAMES GLANCED BACK AT THE DOORWAY TO HIS OFFICE BEFORE he opened his computer. He’d hoped Livvy would follow him downstairs, despite her desire to finish whatever it was she was drawing up there. If she didn’t come down in an hour, he promised himself, he’d check on her.

Five minutes before his self-imposed deadline, she walked in. She barely made a sound, but he knew the instant she entered the room, like an animal sensing its mate. When he looked up from his computer, she was standing in the doorway, holding a piece of paper.

His poor baby girl. She looked so lost and sad, exactly like a little girl trying to process emotions too big for her to really understand. Not that he blamed her—he couldn't seem to wrap his mind around what had happened, either. Was anyone ever big enough to really understand such a tragedy?

“All done?” he asked gently.

She nodded, but didn't move from her spot by the door. Without bothering to finish his email, James closed the lid of his laptop. His little girl needed him. Everything else could wait.

Watching her carefully, he considered his options. Should he push her to show him the drawing? She hadn't offered, and pushing her too hard could make her shut down. It had happened before. But if he didn't ask, she might think he didn't care about it anymore, and he wasn't sure he could ever undo that level of damage. He had to at least offer, but he wouldn't push the issue if she balked.

“Can I see your drawing now?”

It was always fascinating to watch her expressions. Outside of business dealings, she wore her heart on her face. If he paid attention, her big brown eyes would tell him everything he needed to know.

Right now, she was uncertain and troubled. It reminded him of how she looked when she wanted to confess something naughty. It took several long seconds, but she eventually nodded and walked over to the desk.

“You promise you won't be mad?” she whispered.

Whatever was on that paper, he was certain the last thing he would feel was anger. At least not toward her. “Cross my heart, little one.”

She hesitated a moment longer, then finally handed him the paper.

His stomach dropped as he took in the drawing. Livvy had always had talent in spades, though she hated the idea of making a living off her art. It was too stressful, she said, so she kept it for herself and their home. Several of her paintings lined the walls in various rooms of their house.

But this was different. She'd gone for colored pencils, her favored medium when she was feeling particularly 'Little.' That alone gave the drawing a younger, more innocent feeling. The art itself wasn't as sophisticated as her usual work, either. The innocent, childlike nature of the drawing made the subject matter all the more jarring and heartbreaking.

To the right, a man and a woman embraced. They were faceless figures, really more of an impression of people than actual depictions. On the left-hand side of the paper, she'd drawn a lone woman, with big sad eyes and tears streaming down her face. Those features, by contrast, were defined enough that he could tell the woman was Angela Winters. The word 'help' was scattered across the left of the page, but a giant black line down the middle of the paper stopped the words from reaching the couple on the right.

Placing the picture on his desk, he turned his chair so he was fully facing her and pulled her between his thighs. Mind racing, he searched for the words to ease her pain. Ease her obvious guilt over something she never could have prevented.

But she spoke before he had a chance to organize his thoughts. "Are you mad?"

That, at least, was a simple answer. Settling his hands on her hips, he lifted his face so she could see the truth of it in his eyes. "No. Not even a little tiny bit, Livvy. You're allowed to

feel whatever it is you feel. I will never be mad at you for having feelings.”

“I know. I just—it’s stupid for me to feel like this.”

“Not at all. I’d honestly be surprised if you didn’t feel a little guilty. I think that’s a normal reaction, especially when something like this happens to someone we know.”

“Maybe.” The frustration in her expression echoed in her tone.

“Would I lie to you, little one?”

She smiled, just a slight lift at the corners of her lips, but it was enough to ease the churning in his gut. “No, Daddy.”

“Then if I wouldn’t lie, I must be telling the truth about this, right?”

“I guess.”

It was as good of an answer as he could expect, given the circumstances. “Do you want to talk some more or are you ready to go watch a movie?”

“I think I’m okay for now.”

“Movie it is, then. I think I saw that new scary movie you wanted to watch was available to rent.”

Pure delight lit her eyes, momentarily banishing the demons haunting her. “Really? But you hate those movies.”

“Then you better go set it up before I change my mind.”

Her laugh eased the last bits of anxiety clinging to him. No doubt she would have some bad moments over this in the future, but at least for now, things were okay.

Deciding the half-finished emails in his box could wait, he headed straight for the kitchen and popped a bag of popcorn.

He dumped half of it into a bowl for them to share. If he brought the whole bag, she'd eat it without even thinking about it and then she'd be sick half the night.

Just as he was walking into the living room, her phone buzzed. She winced at the readout and answered with obvious reluctance.

“Hey, girl.”

Shannon, most likely. James set the popcorn on the coffee table and joined her on the couch. Glancing over at him, she sent him a small, forced smile.

“Yeah, I heard. Uh huh. No, I totally agree. Rain check. Monday night? Hang on.”

She moved the phone and covered the mic with her hand. “I was supposed to have dinner with Shannon tonight. I forgot to ask, with... everything. Can I go out Monday?”

“I don't see why not. But you have a three-drink limit.”

“Three? Really, James?”

“Yes, really.”

When her face fell into a familiar pout, he raised an eyebrow, sending what he hoped was a clear message. Since she sighed and didn't argue further, he assumed the message was received.

Uncovering the mic, she put the phone back up to her ear. “Hey. What? No, I'm not in trouble.” Her cheeks turned bright pink at whatever Shannon was teasing her about. “Just making sure we didn't have plans. I can do Monday. Want to meet me at the office and we can share a ride? Okay. See you then.”

When she'd ended the call, James tugged on her arm, pulling her over to him. “Come here, Olivia Jane.”

She visibly winced at the use of her full name but obeyed and straddled his lap. Cupping her bottom cheeks, he squeezed, pleased when she yelped. Her marks from the night before must have still been tender.

“Do good girls argue with their daddies about rules?”

Her cheeks, which hadn't yet lost their color, darkened further. “No, Daddy. But three drinks isn't a lot!”

“I know. And if I were going with you, it would be different. Three drinks is enough to have fun but still be aware of your surroundings.”

“But Shannon is going to have way more than three,” she whined.

Shannon. He really liked Shannon, but she had a habit of getting his girl in trouble. One of the worst punishments she'd gotten in the last couple of years had been thanks to a shopping spree inspired by Shannon and a few too many drinks.

“Even more reason for you to keep your wits about you,” he said firmly. “Three drinks is plenty, little one.”

“Okay...” She dragged the word out, making it clear she was agreeing to his terms under duress.

Perhaps he could make it a little less onerous for her. “Good girl. Turn around, but keep your position.”

Despite her obvious confusion, she shifted so she was still straddling his lap, but with her back to him.

“Lean back,” he said, pleased when she again followed his instructions without question.

When she was situated just how he wanted her, he cupped her breast with his left hand and ran his right down her torso to

the band of her yoga pants.

He toyed with her quickly hardening nipple, drinking in her gasps and whimpers as he plucked and tortured the sensitive peak. His right hand dipped under the waistband of her pants, where he found her wet and ready.

“Good little girls,” he whispered, sliding his fingers through her slick folds, “who listen to their daddies,” he drew out her honey and pressed against her clit, eliciting a long moan from her, “get rewarded. You want your reward, little one?”

“Yes, Daddy.” The words were nearly lost on a gasp. She rocked her hips against his hand, her bottom rubbing against his cock with every movement until he was rock hard beneath her. As uncomfortable as he was, this moment was about her. He wanted her safe, which meant she needed to follow the rules he set in place.

Punishments weren't the only way to encourage little girls to obey their daddies.

“That's my girl. Come whenever you're ready, Livvy.”

Murmuring praise and encouragement in her ear, he continued to tweak and tease her nipple while he stroked her clit. In no time at all, she shuddered, her body bucking against his hand as she rode out her orgasm. He knew her body as well as his own, and he used that knowledge to pull every ounce of pleasure from her until she lay limp in his arms, her chest rising and falling with deep, ragged breaths.

“My good girl.”

Head rolling to the side, she grinned up at him. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“My pleasure, little one. Ready for your movie?”

“Mmhm.”

Chuckling, James reached for the remote. For his own comfort as much as hers, he left her where she was, snuggled on his lap while they watched her movie.

CHAPTER 9



*S*ervices will be held Wednesday afternoon...

By the time she'd reread the same sentence for about the twentieth time in a row, the words had begun to jumble on the page.

Services. What an oddly simplistic word for a time filled with such grief.

Should she go? It seemed like the right thing to do, but just the thought of stepping foot inside that funeral home sat like a rock in her gut. She hadn't really even known Angela all that well, since they'd only met the one time.

"Why the frown, little one?"

At the sound of her Daddy's voice, she looked up and found him hovering over her, concern etched into his features. She handed him the tablet without saying anything, relieved when his expression shifted from concern to sympathetic understanding.

"I know this is hard for you, but I'm sure it would mean a lot to her family if we went."

"I thought you might say that," she mumbled.

Before he could press the issue, a melodic tinkling echoed through the house. With an irritated glance toward the

entryway, James handed her the tablet again. “I’ll be right back and we can talk about the service.”

Figuring it was simply a delivery of some kind, she went back to scrolling through her social media. It wasn’t until she heard her husband’s hushed, angry tones that she sat up, straining to hear the conversation.

Who the hell was at their door, and why did James sound so pissed?

She got her answer when James returned a few minutes later, a man and a woman she’d never seen before trailing behind him. The man, only slightly taller than the woman with a rounded stomach on an otherwise muscular build, wore sympathy like a mask. At least, that was how it seemed to her, something fake he put on for the occasion. The woman’s face, by contrast, was completely flat, devoid of any kind of emotion.

But it was her husband’s expression that sent the chill racing up her spine. It was a kind of cold fury she’d never seen in him—and something she hoped to never see again.

“Liv, Detectives Michaelson and Rogers are here to ask you some questions.” That muscle in his jaw, the one that always let her know when he was trying to control his temper, jumped. “It’s about Angela.”

She instinctively reached for him, for his comfort, as her stomach tied itself into nervous knots. Taking her hand, he joined her on the couch and her gaze darted frantically between him and the detectives. “Angela? What about Angela?”

“We’re sorry to interrupt your Sunday, ma’am.” The male detective—Michaelson, according to the badge he’d flashed in

her direction—spoke with the same fake sympathy in his voice he wore on his face. “May we sit?”

She looked to James for direction, only to find he was already gesturing to the loveseat, albeit with rather thinly veiled hostility. The pair sat, their rigid postures making them look even more out of place in her warm, comfortable living room than they had when they’d been hovering over her.

Michaelson spoke first, and she fleetingly wondered if they were going to pull some good cop/bad cop deal on her. “How well did you know Ms. Winters?”

“Not well. What’s this about?”

“Breathe, Livvy.” Despite his obvious anger at the situation, James’s voice was soft and soothing, the way it always was when she was on the verge of panicking. “Just answer their questions, baby.”

Tightening her grip on his hand, she inhaled deeply and tried to draw strength from his touch. Just answer their questions. She could do that. “I only met her once, when we were doing a photo shoot for a magazine article.”

“This photo shoot?” Rogers, the female detective, pulled a plastic bag out of the portfolio she held and handed it over.

Olivia’s stomach lurched at the image. It was Angela’s picture from the article, with ***BITCH*** scrawled across her face in bold red letters.

“What is this?” Olivia whispered, unable to tear her eyes away from the horrifying image.

“Is this a picture from the article you mentioned?” Detective Rogers pressed.

“Yes. What’s going on? Who...” Olivia’s breath caught in her throat, and for a moment she teetered on the edge of the breakdown she was fighting so hard to avoid. But then James squeezed her hand, pulling her away from the cliff’s edge. Feeling steadier, she met Detective Rogers’s gaze head on. “Who would do this to her? Is it because of the article?”

“We can’t say.” Rogers held her hand out and Olivia passed the bag back to her. “Right now it’s just one small piece of the puzzle.”

“When you were at the photo shoot, how did she seem? Happy? Anxious?” Michaelson spoke again, drawing her attention away from his cold partner.

“Excited. We were all so excited and a little nervous, I guess. But I mean, that’s normal, right?” She looked to James, who nodded and squeezed her hand again. “It’s normal to be excited and nervous. She didn’t seem scared, or worried someone might kill her over her face in a fucking magazine.”

The initial shock at being questioned by the police was wearing off. Anger, hot and righteous filled the void left behind. Without speaking, James squeezed her hand again, letting her know he was still there, still supporting her. Swallowing her anger and grief, she focused on the detectives again. “Anything else I can answer for you?”

Michaelson stood and shook his head. “Not at this time. Thank you.”

Rogers joined him, and James brushed a kiss across Olivia’s temple before he rose and ushered them out. It took longer than it should have for him to return, and the anger she’d just barely held back during the interrogation began to boil over.

“So,” she snapped when James returned to the living room. “What did they say? Should I be on house arrest until they catch this asshole?”

To her surprise, he grinned. “You know me well, don’t you? No, they don’t think there’s any threat to you or the others in the article. Like they said, it’s just a piece of the puzzle.”

“The puzzle.” She all but spat the words at him. “She’s not a puzzle, James. She was a person. And someone killed her. Because she was good at her job? Maybe a little too cutthroat for some neutered jackass in a suit? Fuck that.”

“We don’t know why, yet. We might never know. And it pisses me off, too.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. It pisses me off.” Some of that cold fury from before etched itself into his features, turned the brilliant blue of his eyes to ice. “And it scares the shit out of me, because there’s a small piece of it that touches you. I could kill this sonofabitch for even that small piece of horror touching our lives.”

What did it say about her that his anger soothed her own? Rising from the couch, she wrapped her arms around his waist, her head tilted back. “I love you.”

His arms came around her, safe and comforting. “I love you too. But you’re not going to like what I have to say next.”

Alarm bells rang in the back of her mind. “Uh oh. Why?”

“Your plans for tomorrow, with Shannon.” Lifting a hand, he tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear. “Instead of going out, have her come over for dinner.”

“What?” She tried to pull away, but his arms tightened around her, holding her in place. “No.”

“Excuse me?”

Despite the icy warning in his tone, she shook her head. “I’m not changing my plans.”

“You will if I say so, little girl.”

She opened her mouth to argue, to tell him to go to hell and that he couldn’t control her. But a small, quiet voice reminded her that this was what she’d asked for. She’d wanted her Daddy back, and this was what daddies did. They protected their little girls. With that in mind, she took a deep, steadying breath. “Yes, if you tell me to change my plans, and that’s your final decision, I’ll accept it. But can we talk about it? Please, Daddy?”

It had been the right tack to take. She saw it in the way his mouth lost its tightness, the way his eyes softened. “Okay. We can talk about it.”

“I love that you want to protect me. But you can’t lock me away like a princess in a tower. I have a life and a job.”

With a defeated sigh, he dropped his forehead to hers. “I know. But I won’t risk you, either. Compromise?”

“Compromise.”

“One drink. Home by ten.”

It was excessive. But if it helped ease his anxiety over the whole situation, she could humor him. “Deal.”

“I mean it, Liv. If you break either of those rules, I’ll blister your ass with your hairbrush until you can’t sit for a week. I’m not playing with this.”

“I get it. I don’t like it, but I get it.”

“You don’t have to like it. You just have to obey.”

These were the times when submission was the hardest. When she honestly felt he wasn’t being reasonable or fair, but she had to swallow her pride and do as she was told.

“Okay, Daddy.”

The tension gripping him eased a bit. “Thank you, little one.”

His arms tightened around her, and she snuggled into his embrace. If this was what it took to give her Daddy some peace of mind, then she would try her best to be a good girl.

For him.

CHAPTER 10



“*M*aybe you should take the day off.”

Lifting her gaze to the bathroom mirror, Olivia forced a smile, hoping it would ease the worry she could see in her husband’s expression. “I’d rather stay busy, keep my mind off things.”

The struggle between understanding husband and protective Daddy was written all over his face. “Then we’ll both work from home, keep each other company.”

“James.” Turning away from the vanity, she looped her arms around his neck. “The one thing that will help me the most right now, is for everything to stay as normal as possible. And in this case, that means both of us going to work as if nothing has happened. Please?”

It felt like an eternity before he finally gave in with a sigh. “All right. But if you need some time, you’ll take it. Understood?”

“Yes, Daddy.” Pushing up to her toes, she pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “But if we’re going for normal, you need to get out of here. Whatever will you do if you’re not at the office thirty minutes before everyone else?”

A wicked gleam flashed in his eyes. “I could think of plenty to do with that extra thirty minutes.”

“Then we’d *both* be late, and you’d just use it as an excuse to spank me. Now go, so I can finish getting ready.”

“Fine. But you’re mine when you get home tonight, little girl.”

Butterflies danced in her tummy at the growled promise. “Yes, Daddy.”

Despite her own insistence on keeping things normal, she was nearly half an hour later than usual walking in the door. Her mind was busy conjuring up all the delicious ways her Daddy might ‘punish’ her for being late right up until she pushed through the front doors of the office.

Patty and Ryan, the two realtors who had been with them the longest, were crowded around MaryAnn’s desk. Which wasn’t in and of itself unusual, except for the eerie silence that fell over them the moment Olivia stepped into the lobby, and the pity in their eyes when all three of them turned to look at her in unison.

Maybe she should have just stayed home after all.

Determined to continue as she’d meant to go on, she forced a smile and put as much cheerfulness as she could muster into her greeting. “Good morning!”

“Good morning, Mrs. Monroe. Is there anything I can get for you?”

For once, MaryAnn didn’t sound absolutely terrified of speaking. If anything, her tone was strong but soothing, as if she were finally in her element. It caught Olivia so off guard, it took her a moment to respond. “Oh, um. I’m fine, thank you. I’ll just...be in my office.”

Without giving any of them a chance to grill her or issue any kind of platitudes, she hurried down the hall. She was just turning the knob on her office door when she heard her name.

It was MaryAnn again, this time looking a bit more like her usual uncertain self. “Mrs. Monroe, I just wanted to say, um, I know we aren’t really friends but if you ever need someone to talk to, well, I’m...around.”

“I appreciate that, MaryAnn, but I’m fine. Really. Nothing to talk about.”

Olivia reached for the door again, biting back a groan when MaryAnn kept going. “It’s just, things like this have a tendency to sneak up on us. Violent death takes a toll on the people left behind, even if you didn’t know the person all that well.”

The earnestness in her tone had Olivia dropping her hand and turning to study the other woman more closely. Sincerity shone in her eyes, but there was something else there, too. An understanding, the kind born from a shared experience.

Who had she lost, to put that look in her eyes?

When Olivia smiled this time, it was distinctly less forced. “Thanks. I promise to come find you if I need to talk. Deal?”

“Okay. Um, well, you know where to find me.” With a nervous laugh, she turned to hurry back to the front desk.

Going with what she and Shannon often referred to as their ‘girl gut’, Olivia called out for her. “Hey, MaryAnn?”

Eyes wide, the other woman spun back around. “Yes, Mrs. Monroe?”

“First of all, we’ve worked together for over a year now. You can call me Olivia. Or Liv.”

The smile that lit MaryAnn's face sent a pang of guilt straight to Olivia's heart. She should have extended that particular olive branch long ago. "Okay...Olivia."

"Second of all...I'm having dinner with Shannon tonight, kind of a delayed celebration for the magazine deal. Would you like to join us?"

"Really? You want me to hang out with you? Outside of work?" An awed sort of shock filled her eyes and voice.

Now Olivia *really* felt like an ass for how she'd treated her. "Yes. Shannon is planning to meet me here around six so we can share a ride to the restaurant. We'd love to have you."

"Okay! I'd like that. Thanks, um, Olivia."

Her mood bolstered by the fence-mending, Olivia finally opened the door to her office and stepped inside.

But it only took a few minutes, and a few dozen emails for her happy mood to evaporate. She'd assumed her coworkers knew about her connection to Angela because James had told them, and that was still entirely possible, but apparently the media had gotten wind of it as well. Her inbox was flooded with requests for comments, as well as messages from old and new clients ranging from genuine concern to obvious attempts at information gathering. A quick check of her phone showed the same tidal wave of notifications that had come in during her drive to work.

It was going to be a long fucking day.



"GOD DAMMIT!"

Pausing a few steps past Olivia's office, James backed up until he was standing in the open door. "Problem, Livvy?"

From her seat at her desk, she shot him a glare that would have sent a lesser man running for the hills. "I am trying to work, but I can't wade through all of the bullshit in my inbox to get to the emails I actually need to answer. And I had to turn off both of my phones because they wouldn't stop ringing, so now I have about two dozen voicemails to listen to on top of it, and I just—arrgh!"

At her short, frustrated scream, he closed the door behind him and rounded the desk to crouch down beside her. Grabbing a hold of her chair, he turned her to face him. "Breathe, little one."

"I don't have *time* to breathe, James, didn't you hear a fucking word I just said?"

He'd been her Daddy long enough to recognize when a meltdown was on the horizon. Because she was obviously teetering on the edge of what promised to be an epic one, he ignored the f-bomb she'd just dropped but infused his voice with enough steel to get her attention. "I heard every word, little girl, which is why I am telling you to take a deep breath. Now."

Still glaring daggers at him, she dragged in an exaggeratedly deep breath. Fighting back a smile at her bratty ways, he nodded. "Good girl. Hold. One...two...three...good girl. Slow exhale."

By the time they'd repeated the process an additional five times, some of the tension had left her shoulders and she no longer looked like she wanted to stab him. Her final exhale came out as more of a sigh. "Sorry I was a bi—not very nice person."

“It’s okay, little one. You’re having a hard day.” Reaching up to tuck a stray bit of hair behind her ear, he smiled, letting her know he wasn’t mad. “My offer still stands to let you go home if you need to.”

“I can’t. I’m swamped and my work isn’t going to magically get done if I go home and hide under the covers for the rest of the day.”

The Daddy in him wanted her to do exactly that. But she was right, and forcing her to take the day off would only end up stressing her out more. “Then I guess Daddy will just have to help you relax.”

“You could take me to lunch and buy me a bottle of wine,” she suggested with a wide grin.

Pushing to his feet, he crossed the small office space and flicked the lock on her door before moving to the window and pulling the blinds shut. He’d had the office designed with their clients’ privacy in mind, but it would have been a lie to say he hadn’t dreamed of doing exactly this on more than one occasion.

“James? What are you doing?”

“I told you.” Returning to his previous spot in front of her chair, he knelt and pushed the chair back against the side of her desk before running his hands up her thighs. Her eyes widened with understanding when he reached under her skirt and hooked his fingers in the waistband of her panties. “Lift up for me, baby.”

“We can’t do this here!” she protested in a low, harsh whisper even as she raised her ass up from the chair so he could slide the red satin down her legs.

“Sure, we can. You just have to be extremely quiet.”

Hooking his arms under her knees, he pulled her forward with a quick, sharp jerk so her bottom was balanced precariously on the edge of the seat. Olivia squeaked in surprise and slapped a hand over her mouth when she realized how loud the sound was in the nearly silent office.

“Good girl. Since we need to be quick and quiet, you don’t have to ask to come.” With that, he nudged her legs further apart and lowered his mouth to her exposed pussy. Her lips were already gleaming with her arousal, and he indulged himself with one long, slow lick, dragging his tongue from the bottom of her pussy up to her sweet little clit just starting to poke out from under its hood.

She whimpered softly, and he couldn’t help but grin at how desperate she sounded. Forgoing his usual teasing, he swirled his tongue around the increasingly swollen little nub at the top of her pussy, using every trick he knew to drive her wild.

And then her hands were in his hair and she was bucking against his mouth, her chair squeaking loudly with each movement.

Ah, well. It wasn’t like his employees didn’t know they were married. If they wanted to *assume* anything about those squeaks, they were welcome to. He didn’t have to actually confirm anything.

Luckily, it wasn’t long before she arched up and then collapsed into the chair, her ragged breathing filling the office along with the musky scent of her arousal. Easing off her clit, he lapped at her pussy, cleaning up the juices threatening to drip onto the seat beneath her.

“Good girl,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to the sensitive skin of each inner thigh. “Feel better, baby?”

“Uh huh.” A wide, satisfied smile stretched across her face. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“Anytime, little one.” He helped her back into her panties before standing and pulling her up into a long, hard hug. “I love you, Livvy. Everything is going to be fine, I promise.”

“Mmmm. I hope so.”

“It will.” Though whether he was trying to convince her or himself, he wasn’t entirely sure. “If you get too swamped, let MaryAnn help you. I’ll approve any overtime she needs to get things done until it calms down a bit around here.”

“Ah, actually.” Olivia pulled away, her smile now strained at the edges. “MaryAnn can’t work tonight. She’s going out to dinner with me and Shannon. I hope that’s all right.”

That was a surprise, albeit not an unpleasant one. “Of course it is, little one. As long as you follow the rules I gave you.”

“I will. Promise.”

“Then as far as I’m concerned it’s absolutely no problem at all.” A quick glance at his watch confirmed he needed to get back to his own office. “I’ve got a few meetings this afternoon, but I should be done before you leave for dinner.”

“Kay, Daddy. Um, thanks for...you know. I do feel much more relaxed now.”

“Good.” With a final quick kiss, he made his way down to his office, satisfied he’d done his part to boost company morale for the day.

CHAPTER 11



Standing in front of the office bathroom mirror, Olivia craned her neck to see how fat her ass looked in the jeans she'd just changed into. "Definitely starting that diet tomorrow," she muttered to herself.

Resigned to looking like a cow next to her svelte bestie and itty bitty MaryAnn, she packed up her work clothes and left the bathroom to make her way down the hall to James's office.

He looked up from his computer when she walked in, and her heart fluttered at the predatory grin that spread across his handsome face. "There's my sexy girl. Come here."

With a teasing smile of her own, she rounded the desk and planted a chaste kiss on his cheek, then danced away when he reached for her. "None of that, Mr. Monroe. This is my place of business."

"That didn't stop us this afternoon."

The reminder of him practically devouring her pussy and making her come so hard she'd seen stars had embarrassed heat rushing to her face. "That was a one-time thing."

"All right." His exaggerated sigh made her giggle. "But I make no promises when you get home."

“I’ll hold you to that. You sure you don’t mind taking my bags and stuff home?”

“Of course not. You go enjoy yourself, baby. Just don’t forget what we talked about.”

Right. The one drink limit and ten o’clock curfew. The arguments burned on her tongue, but she swallowed them like the bitter pills they were. They’d discussed and she’d agreed to the rules. There was nothing left for her to argue. “I remember.”

He studied her, his head tilted ever so slightly, and she knew he saw through her. He always could. And so, when he held a hand out to her, she knew it wasn’t simply for another kiss goodbye. Reluctantly, she took the offered hand and let him pull her to his side.

“I know you think I’m being a hard ass. But I love you too much to let anything happen to you. Are you going to be a good girl tonight?”

Thank god most of the staff had left and MaryAnn was finishing things up at her desk. Even though they were alone, her cheeks burned at his question. “I’ll try.”

Raising one eyebrow in a look that had butterflies dancing in her tummy, he tapped the top drawer of his desk. “Maybe you’ll try extra hard with a plug in your bottom all night.”

Since when did he keep plugs at the office? Probably since she’d told him she didn’t mind being punished there, which she was already starting to regret. “No, Daddy. I’ll follow the rules. But I still don’t like it,” she added under her breath.

“I know.” Rising to his feet, he pulled her in for a long, simmering kiss. “Thank you for obeying anyway.”

“Yeah. Okay.”

“Liv! You ready? Where the—well, hey there, Mr. Sexy.” Shannon stopped in the doorway of James’s office, all sex and confidence in her skinny jeans and tummy-baring top.

“Hi, Shannon. How are you?”

Olivia wondered if he caught the flash of grief on Shannon’s face before she winked and tossed her long blonde curls over her shoulder. “Hot, successful, and brilliant. How about you?”

“Same.”

It was a game they played nearly every time they saw each other, but it never failed to make Shannon laugh. “Yeah, you are. I’m here to steal your wife for the night. Ready to paint the town red, Liv?”

“Yeah.” James squeezed her hand and she had to fight not to roll her eyes as she added, “I have a client meeting in the morning though, so I need to be home early.”

“Lame. But, same,” Shannon added with another tinkling laugh.

“You girls have fun. Livvy, I’ll see you at home.”

Olivia lifted her face for another smoldering kiss before Shannon grabbed her hand and dragged her away.

“Don’t worry, Daddy, I won’t let anything happen to your girl,” Shannon called behind them as she tugged Olivia out of the office. “See ya!”

James’s laughter followed them down the hall, but Olivia was certain her cheeks could light the way for Santa’s sleigh. “We’re at work, Shay! And MaryAnn doesn’t know.”

“Oh, right.” The smile that never seemed to leave Shannon’s face turned mischievous. “A newbie to corrupt. I

can't wait.”

“We are not corrupting my receptionist.”

“What? Why else would you invite her out with us, if not to introduce her to our wicked ways?”

The heat in Olivia's cheeks grew hotter. “Because I've been kind of a bitch to her in the past. This was my way of making it up to her.”

“You're so cute. I love you.” Pulling Olivia closer, Shannon let her head fall to the side, resting against Olivia's.

“I love you too. Brat. Now, behave.”

Shannon didn't have time to do more than snort out a giggle before they stepped into the lobby, where MaryAnn was waiting patiently in her conservative black skirt and stiff white blouse. Olivia felt a stab of guilt that she hadn't suggested she run home and change first, but she also wasn't entirely sure MaryAnn's wardrobe consisted of anything more exciting.

Ugh, even in my head I'm a bitch. Be nice, Liv.

“Ready?” Olivia asked, giving MaryAnn her best ‘excited realtor’ smile.

With a distinctly more nervous smile of her own, MaryAnn nodded, her gaze darting between Olivia and Shannon. “Yes, I think so.”

“Perfect! The car's waiting outside. I found this adorable little Mexican restaurant the other night,” Shannon said as they headed out. “Mondays are jumbo margaritas for two dollars. Sound good?”

“That sounds amazing.” Climbing into the middle row of the sleek black SUV that was waiting for them, Olivia let out a

quiet moan. “James hates Mexican food so we hardly get to eat it.”

One hand pressed to her heart, Shannon’s expression shifted into one of mock horror. “What kind of monster hates Mexican food?”

“Hey, he may be a monster but he’s my monster.”

A soft gasp met Olivia’s response and she winced. Hopefully MaryAnn understood she was joking, and that what was said during a Girls’ Night was sacred and stayed between them.

Before she could turn around to the back where MaryAnn had claimed a seat, Shannon changed the subject. “I still can’t believe this whole thing with Angela. Did the cops come talk to you?”

“Yeah. It was weird.” Wiggling her shoulders, Olivia tried to shake off the unsettled feeling that came with the memory of two homicide detectives sitting in her living room.

“Way weird. You going to the funeral and stuff on Wednesday?”

“I don’t know. James thinks we should.”

“Which means you’ll go. What?” Shannon asked when Olivia frowned at her. “Where goes James so goes your kingdom or whatever.”

“It’s not like that.” It was, of course, exactly like that. And Shannon understood, or at least she had once upon a time, so Olivia knew it shouldn’t bother her so much to be reminded that at the end of the day, her husband’s word was law.

And yet, in moments like this, it did, for reasons that still escaped her.

“What’s not like what?”

At the question from the backseat, Shannon shot Olivia an apologetic look before her expression shifted to more of a smirk and she twisted to talk to MaryAnn. “Just teasing Liv here about how bossy her sexy husband can be.”

“Tell me about it.” Another surprised gasp, as if she couldn’t quite believe she’d said such a thing out loud. “I’m so sorry, Mrs. Monroe. I didn’t mean anything by it.”

Mirroring Shannon’s stance, Olivia shot the other woman a wide grin. “Don’t apologize. If anybody knows how bossy James is, it’s me. I’ve lived with him for way longer than the rest of you. And I swear I’m going to make you take a shot of tequila for every time you call me ‘Mrs. Monroe’ tonight.”

“Oh, I don’t usually do shots.” A shy smile, as if she was getting away with something particularly naughty, curved MaryAnn’s lips. “But you’re the boss, Olivia.”

“That’s better.”

“So, um, this might be really out of line but is Mr. Monroe that, you know, ‘bossy’ at home, too?”

The sound Shannon made was something between a cough and hyena’s laugh, which had Olivia shooting her a glare as her brain scrambled for an answer. “He can be,” she finally managed, wishing a hole would appear and swallow her so she could avoid this conversation altogether.

“That’s...kind of sexy.” Red crept up MaryAnn’s neck and she slapped a hand over her mouth, her eyes dancing with mischief.

“It is. It’s really sexy, actually.” Even if it sometimes embarrassed her, there was no denying the effect her husband’s bossy ways had on her body.

Desperate to change the subject, Olivia looked out the window, trying to gauge their surroundings. “Where is this place, anyway? I’m starving.”

“Right here, Miss Impatient.” Rolling her eyes, Shannon pushed open the door of the SUV and climbed out. The restaurant was packed with people, and the music blaring out of the speakers was no match for the roar of conversation.

“Why are there so many people on a Monday?” Olivia asked, her stomach already protesting at the thought of having to wait for a table.

“I told you.” Hooking an arm with Olivia and MaryAnn, Shannon escorted them up the stairs. “Jumbo margaritas! But we have a reservation.”

“Wright, party of three.” At the hostess station, Shannon raised her voice to be heard over the din. “I called this afternoon.”

With a bright if somewhat harried-looking smile, the hostess grabbed their menus and gestured for them to follow her. “Perfect timing! Your table just opened up. Come with me.”

They followed her through the crowded restaurant to a small booth tucked in a corner. Olivia slid onto the bench, grateful to be somewhat insulated from all the noise. Judging by the slightly stunned look on MaryAnn’s face, she was in the same boat.

The second the hostess left, a waiter appeared with a basket of chips and salsa. “Can I get you ladies something to drink?”

From across the table, Shannon winked before giving him their order. “Three jumbo margaritas.”

James hadn't said how big her 'one drink' could be, but she still felt a twinge of guilt. She should have run the whole jumbo margarita thing past him before she'd left. But he'd said one drink, and she was planning to just have the one.

That small voice, the one that urged her to be a good girl and listen to Daddy, whispered that he wasn't going to be amused by her reasoning. But the waiter had already disappeared, and it would be beyond mortifying to call him back and change her order. Especially with an already too-curious MaryAnn seated beside her.

"How's work going? Sell anything good lately?" Dipping a chip in the salsa, Shannon popped it in her mouth, munching happily. The woman ate like a linebacker, but still somehow managed to stay rail thin. If Olivia didn't love her so much, she might have hated her for it.

Scooping up her own share of salsa, Olivia shrugged. "Not since the last time we talked. But I've got this pain in the ass couple. Won't agree to lowering the price, won't do anything to improve the property. Fuck, I can't even get them to do the dishes when we have someone coming for a walkthrough."

"Ugh." Shannon wrinkled her nose in obvious disdain. "Those are the worst. Have you told James?"

"Yeah. He offered to help but I hate having to drag him into things like this. Makes me feel like a failure."

A small huff preceded MaryAnn's annoyed protest. "Well, that's stupid."

Mouth open in surprise, Olivia turned to stare at her. "What?"

"She's right," Shannon said with a shrug of her shoulders. "He's your broker. It's his job to make sure you have what you

need to move houses. If you need him to kick some ass, then that's what he's there for."

It was a fair point. If he hadn't been her husband, she probably would have asked him to step in already. Pride was keeping her from letting him do his job, and as MaryAnn had said, that was just stupid. "Well, when you put it that way, I guess I can't argue."

Their margaritas arrived, and Olivia's stomach dropped to her knees. She had never seen margaritas in a bucket. At least it looked like a bucket, akin to what a child might use to build sandcastles at the beach.

"Ho-ly shit," she whispered. "It's huge!"

"That's what she said," Shannon said, laughing hysterically at her juvenile joke.

Olivia forced a laugh. This wasn't one drink, no matter how she tried to slice it. It was enough to knock out a baby elephant.

James was going to kill her.

CHAPTER 12



The sound of a car in the driveway pulled James from the quarterly reports he'd been working on all evening. What time was it? Rubbing the exhaustion from his eyes, he squinted at the clock on his computer screen. Ten after ten. Cutting it close, just barely sliding in under the fifteen-minute grace window she had.

It didn't mean he couldn't have some fun, though. Putting on his best 'Daddy face,' he went to go wait for her in the entryway, his arms crossed for added effect.

The sound of maniacal giggling met his ears before they even made it through the front door. He was reaching for the knob when the door swung open and two very drunk women stumbled inside, tripping over each other and landing at his feet.

"Daddy!" Olivia's brown eyes lit up when she looked up at him. "I'm home."

"I see that," he managed through clenched teeth. "Hello, Shannon."

"Hey, Mr. Sexy. I'm gonna go now." The beautiful blonde pushed up and immediately lost her balance again. She collapsed against Olivia, sending the pair into a renewed fit of giggles.

James sighed. He was pissed that Olivia had so blatantly defied him, but it was pointless to even attempt a lecture at this point. “Stay here. Both of you.”

“Mmm, I love a man who takes charge.” Tilting her head back, Shannon grinned up at him. “Will you be my Daddy, too?”

“No!” Voice full of outrage, Olivia shoved at Shannon’s shoulder. “He’s my Daddy!”

Stepping around the pile of naughty little girls at his feet, James glanced outside, relieved to see their driver backing out of the driveway. Since Olivia had left her car at the office, he’d assumed Shannon was driving, but at least they’d had the sense to use a rideshare.

By the time he turned back around, Shannon had managed to struggle to her feet, and was attempting to pull Olivia up with her. He rushed forward when they wobbled, just catching Olivia before she hit the floor. Unfortunately, he didn’t have enough arms to catch Shannon as well, and she stumbled backward into the entryway table, sending one of Olivia’s favorite vases tumbling to the floor.

The shattering of glass seemed to sober the pair right up. “Oh, no! Our honeymoon vase!” Olivia wailed.

“Oh, shit!” The horror in Shannon’s eyes would have been comical if he hadn’t been so annoyed with the pair of them. “I’m sorry, Liv! I’ll clean it up.”

Visions of his wife’s best friend slicing her hands to ribbons in his front hall filled his head. “Stop!”

The snapped order stopped her before she’d had a chance to move an inch. James said a silent prayer of thanks that she

still had some sense about her. “Just stay there before you cut yourself.”

Olivia’s elbow connected with his gut. Luckily for her, she was too drunk to put much effort into the swing. “James! You can’t yell at my friends!”

“I can when they bring my wife home three sheets to the wind and bust up my house. Sit.” He’d managed to get her to the stairs and he plopped her on the bottom step. “If you move a muscle I’ll bend you over and whip your bottom right here in front of your friend.”

Even as annoyed as he was, her pout was adorable. “You’re a mean Daddy.”

“You haven’t even seen mean yet, little one. Mean is what happens tomorrow when you get home from work.”

“But I only had one drink, Daddy, I swear,” she whined.

The flash of temper burst out of him as a growl. “You really want to lie to me? I’m this close to putting you over my knee right now, young lady.”

“I’m not lying! Shannon will tell you!”

“What?” Shannon’s slurred voice asked from behind them.

James closed his eyes. “Nothing, Shannon.” Opening his eyes again, he jabbed a finger at his wife. “Stay.”

The little brat had the nerve to lift her hands like a puppy and pant. His palm positively itched to connect with her bottom. “You’re going to pay for that,” he promised her. “Tomorrow.”

He turned away to deal with his other problem for the night. Shannon was still leaning against the table, teetering ever so slightly. With a sigh, he walked over and grabbed her

arm, holding her tightly as he helped her pick her way around the glass to where Olivia was still obediently perched on the steps. Between the three of them, they stumbled their way up the stairs, stopping at the guest room to deposit Shannon into bed. She fell face down and was snoring before he and Olivia made it back to the doorway.

Too exhausted to deal with helping an unconscious woman into a pair of pajamas, James ushered his wife to their bedroom.

“Daddy, I’m sleepy,” she whined, leaning into him.

“I know, little one.” Despite his anger at her obvious disobedience, her pitiful tone tugged at his heart. “Let’s get you into bed.”

Sitting on the bed, he pulled her to stand between his knees. It took some time, but he managed to get her jeans over her hips and down her legs. She bent to finish pulling them off her feet, and her bottom presented such a perfect target he couldn’t help but plant a firm smack on the round globes.

“Ow!” She shot up and rubbed at the handprint he’d left behind, her glazed eyes full of indignation. “What was that for?”

“Because I’m the Daddy and I can.” With a shake of his head, he helped her pull her shirt off. “You are in so much trouble, Olivia Jane. That little love pat is just the beginning.”

“But Daddy, I really did just have one drink.”

It was unlike her to lie to his face, which just made the whole situation that much more infuriating. Swallowing his anger, he gently turned her toward their bathroom. “We can talk about it tomorrow. Go use the bathroom and then get your butt into bed.”

When she stumbled to the bathroom and back out again a few minutes later, James helped her into bed and tucked the covers around her.

“I’m really not lying, Daddy.” Her voice was soft and sleepy. “It was just one drink.”

“Tomorrow, little one. Get some sleep and we’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Kay. Love you, Daddy.”

“I love you too, Livvy. Goodnight.” Leaving her safe and sound in their bed, James made his way down the stairs to clean up the shards of glass and to plan his naughty little girl’s very big punishment.



“RISE AND SHINE, LITTLE ONE.”

Olivia groaned and yanked the covers over her pounding head. A second later, they were pulled from her body, leaving her exposed to the blinding light.

Squinting against the glare, she groped for the blanket to hide under again. “Leave me alone.”

“Not a chance. You have a busy day. Time to get up.” James issued the order with a singsong quality that made her want to punch him.

Since hitting him wasn’t a risk her butt was willing to take, she settled for burrowing her head into her pillow. “I’m sick. I’ll reschedule my showings.”

“Like hell you will.” All traces of playfulness had left his voice. “Up. Now, Olivia Jane.”

She switched tactics and rolled over to give him her prettiest, most pitiful pout. “But Daddy, I don’t feel good. My tummy is sick.”

Strong hands wrapped around her upper arms, pulling her up to a sitting position on the bed. “And why is your tummy sick?”

Admitting she’d had way too much to drink was out of the question, so she just shrugged. “Dunno. Food poisoning?”

“Try again.”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel good.” She put as much ‘Little’ into her voice as she could, hoping to gain some sympathy.

But judging by the set of her husband’s jaw, her plan failed spectacularly. “Your tummy hurts because you disobeyed your Daddy last night and you drank too much alcohol. Now, unless you want to start *and* end your day over my knee, I suggest you get your butt in the shower in the next thirty seconds.”

Most of the night was something of a blur, but there was one thing she knew for certain. One shred of hope she could cling to, that night, possibly save her from the punishment he seemed certain she’d earned. “It really was just one drink.”

The blue of his eyes darkened with anger. “I’m not in the mood for your games, Olivia Jane. Get in the shower. Now.”

Hurt mingled with the throbbing in her head and the churning of her stomach until she felt tears burning in her throat. “Fine. Don’t listen to me.” She stalked to the bathroom and slammed the door behind her, a move her head immediately regretted.

“Asshole,” she muttered, flipping the shower on. “It was one drink.” But the words sounded hollow, even to her. She’d known when they’d put the concoction in front of her that it wasn’t really ‘just one drink’. Hell, she hadn’t even meant to finish the whole thing. *Had* she drunk the whole thing? She couldn’t remember. However much she’d had, it was clearly too much. Feeling sorry for herself, she climbed into the shower and lifted her face to the warm spray.

By the time she stepped back out, she was feeling marginally better. At least, her head wasn’t throbbing quite so much. Her stomach was still coated with sickness and her heart hurt with the weight of the guilt she was carrying.

The guilt wasn’t assuaged by the bottle of water and the two painkillers sitting on the counter. Even when he was pissed, her Daddy took care of her.

Maybe he’d spank her before work if she asked nicely enough. She couldn’t go the whole day feeling like this. Somewhat bolstered by the thought, she shrugged into her robe and headed for the stairs.

She’d just reached the bottom step when a familiar female voice reached her.

“Please don’t be mad at Liv. I ordered us the drinks. I didn’t realize they’d be so big.”

Olivia crept closer to the kitchen, curious to see where this conversation would go without her.

Her husband’s voice was a low rumble she had to strain to hear properly. “I appreciate that, Shannon. But this is between me and Olivia.”

“I just hate seeing you guys fight. You’re so perfect for each other.”

Deciding she'd eavesdropped long enough, Olivia stepped into the kitchen. As soon as she did, James's head snapped up, his eyes locking on hers. "Yes. We are."

Turning away from the island, Shannon grinned. "Guess we got a little carried away last night, huh, Liv?"

Without taking her eyes off her husband, Olivia shrugged. "I guess so."

Shannon cleared her throat and crept toward the entryway of the kitchen. "I'm going to run up and grab a shower while I wait on my ride. Thanks again for letting me crash here."

She hurried away, leaving Olivia alone with her obviously still very pissed off husband. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, baby. How do you feel?"

Tears filled her eyes at the simple question. "Not so good."

"Hmm. I bet. Come here."

When he opened his arms she ran to him, throwing herself into the comfort he offered. "Are you super mad?" she asked, the question muffled against his shirt.

"I am definitely mad. But we can talk about it tonight."

"Oh." Nerves danced in her tummy. "Um, I was kind of hoping maybe we could talk about it before work."

"No. We don't have time to properly handle this before I have to leave."

"Fine." Even more hurt and angry than she'd been before her shower, she yanked herself from his grasp and turned to walk away. "Guess I'm not as important as work."

The sharp volley of swats caught her by surprise, making her squeal and dance away from his hand. "James! We have

company!”

“Yes, we do. Which is the only reason you’re not bent over this island getting your bottom warmed up good and proper.” With one hand wrapped around her arm to hold her in place, James used his other hand to grip her chin and forced her to look up at him. Fire flashed in his eyes. “You are the most important thing in my life. But I won’t have you trying to guilt me into dealing with this before I’m ready. I am still far too angry with you to punish you for last night just yet. I’ll see you in the office, and for your sake you had better show up with a better attitude, little girl.”

He kissed her, hard and quick, then dumped the remainder of his coffee in the sink before stalking out of the kitchen. The guilt she’d been trying to assuage dug its claws in deeper, tearing her to shreds from the inside.

Resigned to feeling like crap the rest of the day, she stomped toward the stairs. She stopped short at the sight of Shannon standing on the bottom step, her eyes wide in her unmade face.

“Everything okay?” Shannon asked, her tone cautious, as though she was worried it might stir the hornets’ nest.

“No.” Tears she’d been desperately trying to keep at bay filled Olivia’s eyes. “James is really pissed.”

“About last night?”

“Yeah. He asked me to not drink a lot because he’s freaking out about Angela’s murder.”

Shannon winced and sent her a sympathetic look. “I wish you’d said something. We could’ve just had wine or at least gotten the regular margaritas or something.”

Olivia jerked a shoulder. “It’s embarrassing.”

“I’m not going to judge you because your husband loves you enough to worry. And frankly, I thought we were better friends than that.”

The hurt in her friend’s eyes just gave the guilt she was already feeling a firmer grip on her insides. “Than what?”

“You think you can’t tell me Daddy told you not to drink? Like I’m going to judge you for it?”

“I...well, I honestly don’t know anymore.”

Shannon’s lips turned down at the edges. “Why not? Liv, you can tell me anything.”

“I guess. It’s just, I’m supposed to be this big bad real estate agent. Sometimes it’s humiliating to talk about having rules and crap like that. And you haven’t had a Daddy in ages, so I figured you just like, grew out of it.”

Something flashed in Shannon’s eyes but it was gone too quickly for Olivia to pin it down. “That’s not why I haven’t had a Daddy. It’s...more complicated than that. But even if that *was* the reason, it doesn’t mean I would judge you for still having one.”

Groaning, Olivia sat on a step and dropped her head into her hands. “I fucked up, Shannon. Really bad. I haven’t seen him this mad in ages.”

“You guys will work it out. James loves you so much it almost makes me sick.”

“We’ll work it out with his belt across my ass,” Olivia mumbled.

“Probably.” Sounding far too chipper for Olivia’s taste, Shannon joined her on the step and draped an arm around her

shoulder. “And you’ll feel a hell of a lot better once it’s said and done.”

The honking of a car horn cut Olivia off before she could respond. With another quick sideways hug, Shannon popped up off the stairs. “That’s my ride. Call me later, let me know how it went.”

Olivia watched her friend waltz through the front door. As much as she hated to admit it, Shannon was right. She’d feel better once she’d been punished and forgiven. Somehow, she just had to get through the rest of the day without having a complete meltdown so they could finally clear the air.

Dragging in a deep breath, she tried to calm her racing heart. When she finally felt a bit steadier, she made her way upstairs to get ready for work.

CHAPTER 13



An hour later, Olivia walked into the office with her headache down from torturous to merely nagging. She still hadn't been able to eat anything, between the hangover and the guilt. Hopefully after she talked to James again, she'd be able to hold down some breakfast.

"Morning, MaryAnn."

MaryAnn looked up from her computer, and for once she didn't look like a deer caught in the headlights. And unlike Olivia and Shannon, she didn't look the least bit hungover. If anything, she was more alert and bright-eyed than Olivia had ever seen her. "Morning, Olivia! Last night was so much fun. Thank you again for inviting me."

"It was my pleasure." At least, she assumed it was. From what she could remember, they'd had fun, and MaryAnn had turned out to be far more interesting outside of the office than Olivia had expected. "We'll have to do it again sometime soon."

Excitement lit MaryAnn's eyes. "Really? That would be amazing. And don't worry." The other woman's voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. "Your secret is safe with me."

Alarm bells rang in the back of Olivia's mind. "Ah, I think I may have had just a little bit too much to drink. What secret

is that?”

“You know.” When Olivia shook her head, MaryAnn glanced from side to side and leaned forward, her voice lowering even further. “About Mr. Monroe being your... Daddy.”

Just when she thought this day couldn't possibly get any worse. “I told you that?”

“Yes. You really don't remember?”

“Obviously not,” Olivia snapped, inwardly sighing when MaryAnn's eyes widened and the excitement disappeared as though someone had flipped a switch. That someone, Olivia supposed, was her.

Great. Now she'd pissed off her husband and hurt her new friend's feelings. What else could she manage to fuck up today? Feeling like the world's biggest asshole, Olivia forced an apologetic smile. “Sorry, I'm still feeling a little off this morning. I appreciate you keeping that information just between us.”

“Of course.”

The stiffness in MaryAnn's voice told Olivia she hadn't been forgiven, but she did her best to act as though everything was fine. “Thanks. Is James available? I was hoping to see him before I had to head out for the day.”

“He's on a conference call at the moment. Would you like me to tag him when he's done?”

“No, that's okay. I'll catch up with him later.”

Bummed she'd have to wait even longer to make amends, Olivia made her way to her office, closing the door behind her

in the hopes for some much needed solitude. Obviously, she was not suitable for human interaction this morning.

God, her head ached. As much as she hated coffee, it might be her only hope of getting the hangover to ease up a bit. In the meantime, she grabbed another bottle of water from the mini fridge in her office and chugged while her computer started up.

Her emails, thankfully, were light. But one from James caught her attention immediately.

LIV,

Let's schedule a sit down with the Jacksons so we can figure out a game plan. I'm available this afternoon.

James

SHE SCROLLED DOWN, AND HER BLOOD BEGAN TO BOIL AS SHE scanned the email he'd forwarded to her. How *dare* they go around her and directly to James! And implying *she* was the problem? Fingers trembling, she hit reply.

JAMES,

These are the assholes I was telling you about who won't listen to a word I say. You're welcome to them.

Olivia

IT WAS PETTY, BUT SHE FELT A SMUG SENSE OF SATISFACTION at signing her full name. He'd get the message she wasn't just pissed at the client. He could have come to her instead of just taking the reins and pandering to their whining. Just because he was put out with her didn't give him the right to be a dick to her professionally.

Seconds later, a chat window appeared on her screen, and it was only her sense of righteous indignation that kept her from crawling under the desk at the command.

MY OFFICE. NOW.

HEAD HIGH, SHE SHOVED BACK FROM THE DESK AND WALKED down the short hall to his office. Swinging open the door, she stopped short at the furious expression on his face. Apparently, she was in trouble, again.

Great.

"I know you're upset," she began, closing the door behind her.

"Upset? I'm not upset. I'm fucking livid. How could you be so stupid?"

The words stopped her cold. He'd never, in all their years together, called her stupid. It was so completely out of character, she wasn't entirely sure she'd heard him right. "What?"

"The email you just sent me. Do you not understand the difference between 'reply' and 'reply all,' Olivia?"

The room spun around her, making her stomach roll. Gripping the desk for support, she repeated the same question. “What?”

James turned his laptop so she could see the screen. Right there, in black and white, was the email she’d sent him.

With the client clearly listed on the line below her husband’s name.

Fuck.

“Oh, God. I didn’t mean to copy them. I swear, James, it was a mistake.”

“That doesn’t mean a whole hell of a lot right now. Do you know how much damage control I’m going to have to do? I don’t even know if I can fix this. If you were anyone else, I’d be tempted to fire you on the spot.”

“I-I’m sorry.” She couldn’t stop the tears from welling up and slipping down her cheeks. “I don’t know how this happened.”

His laugh was cold and humorless. “Let’s see. It could have something to do with you coming into work with a hangover and a pissy attitude.”

“I didn’t! I mean, my head hurts some but I don’t have an attitude!”

“Really?” Disbelief turned his voice to ice. “This email suggests otherwise.”

“Okay, so I was pissed they went to you and pissed that you seemed to be taking their side. But it’s not like I did this on purpose!”

“Trust me, if I doubted that at all, you’d be bent over my desk getting your ass whipped until you couldn’t sit for a

week, and I wouldn't give two goddamns who saw. Do you have any showings today?"

The sudden change of topic made her head spin. "Yes. Why?"

"Call me when you're done. You're dismissed."

"James, can't we talk about this?"

"Not right now, Olivia."

She dropped her voice, terrified of being heard despite the closed door, but desperate to reach him. "Daddy. Please."

When he closed his eyes, her heart broke at the misery on his face. "I can't deal with you right now, Olivia. I'm too angry, and I've already said things I shouldn't have. Go."

She opened her mouth to argue, then snapped it shut again. He wasn't ready to listen. Just like he hadn't been willing to talk to her about last night. With a jerky nod, she crossed the room and yanked open his office door.

Back at her desk, she sat and studied her computer screen through a sheen of tears. How had she managed to so thoroughly fuck everything up in such a short span of time?

It wasn't long before she realized she wasn't going to get any work done. At least not in the office, with James so close. She undocked the laptop and shoved it in her bag. Without a word to anyone, she snuck past the front desk like a naughty teenager and out the front door.

Luckily, finding Wi-Fi in a city this size wasn't hard. She ended up nestled into an oversized armchair at Edgar Allan Joe a couple of hours later, nursing some chocolate coffee concoction the barista had suggested. It wasn't as good as her

plain hot chocolate, but it wasn't horrible like the coffee her Daddy liked.

"Focus, Liv," she muttered to herself. Thinking of James just made her want to cry all over again.

Her phone chose that moment to ring, and his handsome face popped up on her display. She could ignore it, pretend she was in a showing. But he'd figure it out eventually, and then she'd be in even more trouble.

Bracing herself, she answered the call. "Hi."

"Liv? Where are you?"

Well, she was back to being Liv so maybe he didn't completely hate her. "I'm... out. Working."

There was a long, strained pause. "Livvy, I'm sorry I blew up at you. I shouldn't have yelled at you and I sure as hell shouldn't have called you stupid. I'm so sorry, baby. Forgive me?"

The apology went a long way toward soothing the ache in her chest. "Of course, I do. I'm sorry I screwed up so big. Reset?"

Back in college, she'd had a tendency to let the slightest hiccup completely derail her. When James had come along, he'd taught her to do what he called a 'reset.' It was as simple as taking five to ten minutes to just sit still and do something to clear her mind and settle her nerves. The process never failed to soothe her and help her restart her day with a better attitude.

"I think we could both use a reset. But don't think you're off the hook tonight. These people have been a pain in my ass all morning."

Her bottom clenched at the growl in his words. “I really am sorry. For everything. This whole day has been a shit show.”

“Language, little one,” he scolded gently. There was just enough playfulness in the words to give her hope she hadn’t ruined everything after all. “Take a few minutes for yourself, hit the reset button, and call me when you’re done for the day. I love you.”

“Love you, too. And I will.”

When the line went quiet, she assumed he’d hung up and nearly did the same before he spoke again. “Liv.”

“Yes?”

“You know I’d rather cut off my own arm than ever truly hurt you, right?”

She smiled, the first genuine smile of her day. “I do.”

“Okay.” His voice sounded strained, and she wondered if he was feeling as awful about how this morning had gone down as she was. “Be good, Livvy.”

“Yes, Sir.”

It wasn’t nearly enough to completely erase the guilt eating at her, but it helped. Enough that she was able to get back to work, and actually be productive.

But even so, her mind raced with thoughts of what her punishment might entail once she got home. If James had ever been this angry with her, she couldn’t remember when.

Regardless of the details, one thing was certain. Tonight, she was going to be a very sore, very sorry little girl.

CHAPTER 14



Putting on her best realtor smile, Olivia joined her clients in the kitchen of the charming townhome they'd been touring for the past half hour. "So, what do you think?"

"We love it. These floors are stunning, and the natural light just gives it such an open feeling," Maria Alvarez gushed, her gaze traveling the open space as she spoke.

Robert, her husband, frowned slightly. Olivia imagined he thought he had a great poker face, but there was no mistaking the excitement in his eyes. "It's a great house. But I'm not sure about the price."

Olivia fought hard not to roll her eyes. The home was well within their budget, and reasonably priced for the area. Especially considering the recent upgrades, such as the gorgeous hardwood floors his wife was head over heels for.

"Well, we can make a lower offer, but keep in mind if we go too low, someone may swoop in and snatch it from under our noses. Especially in this market," she explained, not surprised in the least when Robert's face fell.

"What would you suggest?" he asked.

“All things considered, I wouldn’t go more than five under the asking price. Even that is pushing it, if I’m being honest.”

“Oh, Bobby.” Maria rolled her eyes and swatted her husband on the arm. “Stop being such a tightwad. It’s perfectly move-in ready, right down to the color of the paint on the walls. And well within our budget as it is.”

‘Bobby’ had the grace to look sheepish. “That’s true.” Looking over at Maria, who nodded her head excitedly, he blew out a nervous breath. “Okay. Let’s do it. Let’s put an offer in.”

“Excellent!” Resisting the urge to do a victory dance, Olivia held out a hand to shake on the deal. “I’ll draw up the paperwork and have it sent to Allison this evening. I should have an answer for you by morning at the latest.”

With her excited clients on their way, she locked up and headed to her car. Since it was her last showing of the day, she hit the button to dial her husband’s number, her heart racing with a familiar combination of fear and anticipation.

“All done for the day?”

His voice was lower than usual, and the tone sent a thrill down her spine. She’d been on edge, ready to hear that voice all day, and she slipped effortlessly into her role as his naughty little girl. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl. You are to go straight home and change into your pajamas. When I get home, I expect to find you in the corner, with your bottom bare, holding your hairbrush.”

A whimper escaped before she could stop it. “Anything else?”

“You might want to use your time in the corner to think about the consequences of disobeying your Daddy, and how

differently this day could have gone if you'd followed the rules I gave you last night."

Tears blurred her vision as the guilt that had been sitting like a rock in her stomach all day grew even heavier. "Yes, Daddy," she whispered.

"That's my good girl. I'll see you in a bit."

He ended the call, and she took a couple of deep breaths to try to tame her wild emotions. She couldn't remember the last time she'd fucked up this bad. It was going to be a long night.

The drive home was mostly a blur. All too soon, she found herself in their driveway. Bracing herself for what was to come, she parked the car, gathered her bags, and headed inside. Tears stung her eyes at the empty space where her beautiful honeymoon vase had been, and she had to force herself to drop her bags off in her office so she could begin her trek up the stairs.

Her first step was the master suite, where she grabbed her brush from the counter in their bathroom before she headed to her room. After a quick change into a fresh pair of pajamas, she used the brush to pull her hair up into the high ponytail her Daddy favored.

Now she was ready for the corner. Well, she was dressed for the corner. She was never really *ready* to just stand there for what felt like hours with her bare bottom on display, waiting to have said bare bottom spanked and paddled until she was certain she'd never ever sit comfortably again.

But she was in far too much trouble to even consider disobeying a direct order, so she walked to the corner where she pulled her pants and panties to her knees. And she stood there, nose to the wall, waiting for Daddy to come punish her.

Sometimes, she couldn't focus while she waited. Her mind would bounce from their grocery list to work to movies she wanted to see, anything but the reason she was about to get her bottom roasted once again.

This time was different. What she could remember of the night before played over and over in her mind, starting from the moment Shannon had ordered the stupid drinks that had started it all. Between her own fuzzy memory and what Shannon and MaryAnn had filled in for her, it was easy to see she'd made a huge mess of things.

And that wasn't even counting this morning. Not only had she been a whiny brat from the time she'd opened her eyes, she'd risked the business they'd worked so hard to build by letting her emotions get in the way of her sense. How could he ever forgive her?

The wood of the brush grew heavier with each passing minute. She imagined it was the weight of her husband's disappointment, the weight of every mistake she'd made over the past twenty-four hours. Her arm began to ache well before the sound of the front door slamming shut reached her ears.

But the second it did, every nerve she possessed was at attention, waiting for the inevitable moment when her Daddy would enter the room and take her over his knee. She heard his footsteps on the wooden planks in the hall, closer and closer until they stopped. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end, and she knew without turning around that he was watching her. She wanted to run to him, to fall at his feet and beg forgiveness, but she knew it wouldn't be welcome. Not until he called for her.

His footsteps started again, this time away from the doorway and down the hall. And a few minutes later, back

toward her room. She grew restless while she listened to him moving around the room behind her. Why wouldn't he just call for her already?

“Stop fidgeting, Olivia.”

She nearly lifted her foot to stomp it, but managed to curb the urge before she dug her grave any deeper. If the waiting was part of her punishment, she would do her best to accept it with grace. Still, her impatience grew and grew until he finally called her name.

Time to face the music.

“Come here, Olivia.”

As slowly as she dared, Olivia turned and shuffled across the room to stand in front of him. James sat in the straight-backed chair from her desk, his back tall and stiff, tapping his fingers on one knee. Serious eyes watched her progress across the room, until she was standing in front of him, clutching her hairbrush, her heart pounding at the thought of the punishment to come.

“Tell me about last night.”

Finally. “We went to this Mexican restaurant and we each had a margarita with dinner and then we came home. That's the truth, I swear.”

“One margarita?”

Her head bobbed up and down so fast she nearly gave herself whiplash. “Uh huh.”

Eyes narrowing dangerously, he studied her, and she hoped he could see the truth of her words in her face. “What kind of margarita?”

“Sir?”

“What kind of margarita, exactly, gets two women so wasted they can barely stand up straight? Was it a special kind of tequila? Or,” he leaned forward, sending her pulse racing even faster, “is my little girl leaving out some key details about this margarita?”

Shit. If he hadn't asked, she might have been able to dance around it. But she wasn't about to tell an outright lie. She didn't make a habit of lying anyway, and she wasn't stupid enough to start when she was already in so much trouble. “Well. Um. It was a jumbo margarita.”

“Define ‘jumbo’ for me, Olivia.”

Shrugging, she nervously began tapping the brush against her leg. “I dunno.”

“Olivia Jane Monroe, unless you want me to blister your bottom with that brush every day for the next week, you'd better start talking.”

“It was big, okay?” she blurted out, tears again filling her eyes. “It was at least three, maybe four normal margaritas, just in one gigantic container.”

“So, when you received said margarita, did you honestly believe you were obeying my rule to only have one drink?”

“No, Daddy,” she whispered.

“But you drank it anyway, even though you knew it was naughty and disobedient.” The disappointment in his voice nearly brought her to her knees.

“Yes, Daddy.”

“And this morning, when you kept insisting you only had one drink, you knew that wasn't exactly the truth.”

The knot in her tummy tightened with every word. “I guess.”

“So you lied to your Daddy.”

Too miserable to speak, she nodded.

“Are disobedience and lying allowed in this house, Olivia Jane?”

“N-no, Daddy.”

“No. And because it is not allowed, you are going over my knee for a very long, very hard spanking with your brush on your bare bottom. I plan on making sitting comfortably a far distant memory for you by the time I am done. This is not a lesson I ever want to repeat again, little girl. Am I understood?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Good.” Leaning back in the chair, he crossed his arms over his chest, his expression somehow turning even more stern and serious than before. “Now, let’s talk about this morning.”

God, she just wanted this part over with so she could get her ass blistered. She craved the safe, loved feeling she knew would come when he finally took her in his arms and forgave her. “Do we have to? I screwed up. We fought. End of story.”

“Hardly. I spent an hour on the phone with Mr. Jackson this morning, unruffling his feathers. Do you have any idea how much I wanted to reach through the phone and strangle that pompous ass?”

Her mouth fell open, and she knew her eyes were wide as saucers. “You did?”

“Yes. I’m not unsympathetic to what you’ve gone through. But, Olivia, we can’t risk this kind of reputation. You’ve built an entire career around being a kind, thoughtful, caring agent. You nearly unraveled years of hard work with one careless email. Not to mention the possible damage to the firm when he tells all his friends what happened.”

“I know, I’m sorry. But it was an honest mistake!”

James raised an eyebrow, and she knew her argument was going to get her nowhere. “And would you have made that mistake if you hadn’t been sick and miserable this morning?”

Dropping her gaze to the floor, she shrugged. “I might have. I don’t know.”

“You might have. But you’ve never so much as dropped a ‘damn’ into an email at work. The entire email, and your carelessness, were all very unlike you. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I guess,” she mumbled, unsure of why she was being so stubborn about this particular point. For some reason, it made her feel even more like a naughty little brat to admit she’d been in a shitty mood because she’d disobeyed her Daddy.

“Well, I know it was very unlike you, and we’ve already discussed why you were in such a foul mood this morning. Since I’ll be taking over the Jackson account—commission free, mind you—and they’ve already proven to be such a pain in my ass, I think it’s only fair for me to be a pain in yours.”

Something in his voice had her antennae quivering. “Another spanking?”

“Oh, no, little one. After I’ve turned your bottom nice and red, I’m going to fuck your tight little asshole, and I’m going to give you something to think about the next time you’re

tempted to be anything less than an absolute professional at work.”

CHAPTER 15



Olivia's stomach dropped and she stared at her husband. Her Daddy, who'd just told her he was going to punish her bottom inside and out. They'd discussed him fucking her bottom as punishment plenty of times, but this was the first time he'd actually played that particular card.

"But—you can't!" The words burst out of her before she could stop them.

"Excuse me?"

A shiver ran down her spine at the icy tone of his voice. "I—I just mean, I don't want you to. Please, Daddy, anything but that."

"I'm sure you don't want me to. But you don't have a say in the matter."

She blinked rapidly against a fresh wave of tears. "Will it hurt?"

"Yes. A lot." His expression softened, just a fraction. "But you know I'd never harm you, right?"

Swallowing hard, she nodded.

"No, Olivia. Answer me. Do you understand that I will never cause you permanent harm, as much as your punishment is going to hurt?"

Her throat was so tight, it took everything she had to force out the words. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good. Over my knee, little one. Time for the first part of your punishment.”

Almost in a trance, she stepped forward and placed herself over his left knee, the brush still clutched in her hands. She couldn’t seem to take her eyes off it as he positioned her for her spanking.

James’s heavy hand rested on her bare bottom. “Let’s get this bottom nice and warm, so it can take a proper paddling.”

Olivia squeezed her eyes shut, then popped them back open with a squeal when his hand connected with her bottom. Her Daddy wasn’t holding back—he spanked hard and fast, covering every square inch of her bottom with stinging swats.

Almost immediately, she began to fight against his hold. “Ow! Daddy, it hurts!”

“Good. Maybe you’ll remember this the next time you want to ignore my rules.”

“I didn’t! Ow, Daddy, please!”

She was too relieved when the spanking stopped to consider how much trouble she’d just landed herself in.

“Excuse me, little girl?” Ice coated his tone, and her stomach. “You didn’t ignore Daddy’s rule about only having one drink when you got completely wasted last night?”

Oh, shit. Mind racing, she tried to backpedal. “I just meant I didn’t *intentionally* ignore your rules!”

James shifted her forward over his knee, and she barely had time to find her balance before he attacked the tops of her thighs with rapid, burning spansks.

“Daddy! Stop, stop, stop! Ow!”

“It does not matter if you set out to break the rules. You could have ordered a different drink, or you could have drunk less of the one you ordered.” Somehow the swats managed to come even harder, faster, as unforgiving as the displeasure in his voice. “But you thought you found a loophole and you exploited it, even though you knew better.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry!” The words spilled out of her in a rush of air, followed by a high-pitched wail.

But the relentless assault on her poor bottom and thighs didn’t even slow. James continued to spank, up and down, side to side, until her entire bottom and her thighs throbbed.

When he stopped again, she sagged over his leg, relieved for the break and the chance to catch her breath.

But the relief was short-lived.

“Hand me your hairbrush.”

“Daddy, please, I learned my lesson! I won’t ever do it again!”

The hand that had so thoroughly punished her rested heavily on her heated skin. “What won’t you do again?”

“Drink! I’ll never drink again!”

She felt his sigh as much as heard it, and she could picture him shaking his head without even looking at him. “You think that’s what this is about?”

“Yes,” she said with a sniffle. “No. I don’t know.”

“Why are you getting a spanking, Olivia?”

Whimpering, she reached back to rub her bottom, but her hand was quickly caught in his and pinned to her lower back.

“Because I didn’t listen.”

“So, this doesn’t really have anything to do with drinking, does it?”

“N-no, Daddy.”

“Then what lesson are you supposed to be learning?”

“Listen to Daddy and follow your rules.”

“There’s my good girl. Now, give me your hairbrush so I can make sure the lesson sinks in good and proper.”

“It has, I swear!”

“Last chance, Olivia. Brush.”

She wanted to argue, or to wiggle off his lap and flee to the safety of her bathroom. But that would only delay the inevitable and make it worse in the end. So, she lifted the brush and offered it to her Daddy.

“Thank you. I know it’s hard to be obedient when it means getting your bottom paddled. I appreciate you being my good girl.”

“I don’t feel like a good girl,” she whispered.

“Oh, baby. You are my good girl. You were very naughty, and Daddy is going to make sure you know better next time. But you’re always my good girl.”

The guilt that had dug its talons in so deep that morning finally began to lessen its grip. Nodding her understanding, she relaxed over his knee, signaling that she was ready to accept the rest of her punishment. James tightened his grip on her hand and moved his right leg over hers. Testing his hold, she wiggled a bit, but she was well and truly stuck. She wasn’t

going anywhere until her Daddy had made sure she was very, very sorry.

The first crack of the brush against her bare skin made her yelp, and despite being pinned down, she still jerked like a fish on a line. A second blow fell on the opposite cheek, leaving twin squares of pain emblazoned across her bottom.

Steady and predictable, the brush connected with her bottom over and over. Under different circumstances she might have enjoyed the dependable rise and fall of his chosen implement. She would have relaxed under the soothing cadence, even though her bottom burned with each stroke.

Her current situation didn't allow for such enjoyment. The wood of the brush was cruel and unyielding, and each stroke felt like it was flaying her alive.

It wasn't long before the pain was more than she could bear. "Daddy, please! I'm sorry!"

Without so much as pausing in his assault on her poor bottom, her Daddy answered her in low, comforting tones. "I know you are, little one."

With his leg over hers, she couldn't kick her feet, so she settled for drumming her toes on the floor. She managed to twist her torso away from him, but he barely missed a beat when he released her hand and wrapped his arm around her waist.

The spanking stopped again, and Olivia lay over her Daddy's knee, gasping for breath. Was he finished? A strange mixture of relief and disappointment swamped her. It didn't feel like he was finished, so why was he stopping?

His cool hand rubbed her bottom and she sighed under his soothing touch. "Why did I give you such a strict drink

restriction last night, little one?”

“Um.” She struggled to think straight through the fog of pain and the distracting pleasure of his hand rubbing her bottom. “You were worried.”

“Why was I worried?”

The guilt dug in deep again. “Because Angela got hurt.”

“That’s right. So, I wanted you to be alert and aware of your surroundings in case someone tried to hurt you too.”

“I know.”

“Then why didn’t you listen?”

“I was embarrassed.” The confession passed her lips in a whisper, but the truth of it echoed in her soul like the roar of a wounded lion.

“Embarrassed? Because you have a Daddy who loves you and wants to keep you safe?”

A single tear slipped down her nose and plopped onto the carpet. “Sort of.”

Daddy squeezed her aching bottom, making her hiss at the flash of pain. “We discussed this, Olivia. You said you wanted your Daddy back.” The hurt and confusion in his voice gave the guilt inside of her an even firmer hold.

“I do, I promise, it’s just...sometimes I still get embarrassed.”

“By my rules?”

“No. Yes, sort of, but that’s not all of it.” God, why was it still so hard, after so long, to say it out loud? “It’s embarrassing how much I like this. How much I love being your little girl.”

“My sweet Livvy. You have nothing to be embarrassed about.”

“I know.” Sighing, she pressed her cheek to his leg. “I’m sorry I was naughty, Daddy.”

“Well, while we finish up your paddling, you can think about how much it hurts our relationship and your bottom when you let your pride get in the way of your submission.”

The brush slammed into her bottom again, and her world narrowed once more to the burning ache in her ass. The little break they’d taken had only served to make her bottom nice and tender when he started up again.

She swore up and down she would be a good girl forever and ever. No matter how silly she felt, she’d always listen to her Daddy and she’d never, ever give him a reason to spank her so hard ever again.

And when he focused on that sensitive curve where her bottom met her thighs, she felt the building pressure in her chest begin to crack. It hurt, God, it hurt so bad.

“Daddy! No!” she screeched when he landed several swats in the same spot. But her pleas went unanswered, and he repeated the process on the opposite cheek, and then back again a little lower, over and over again while she screamed and bucked and fought to free herself from the painful chastisement.

It wasn’t until the spanking slowed, giving her time to absorb each blistering swat, that she began to crumble. The breakdown started with a hitch in her breath, with tears burning in her throat and begging for release. After a set of particularly hard swats, she finally broke on a long, keening

wail and collapsed over his knee, weeping out her pain and guilt.

“That’s my good girl. Let it out, little one.”

She jerked when his hand came to rest on her bottom again. Even that gentle touch burned, and she just knew she’d never sit comfortably for the rest of her life.

“H-hurts.”

“I know it does.” He talked her through her sobbing, and she focused on his low, soothing voice until her sobs quieted to sniffles and whimpers.

“Ready to get up?” he asked softly once she’d settled.

“Uh huh.”

He helped her stand, gathering her in his arms with her bottom hanging off the side of his lap. As much as her ass was killing her, the ache in her gut and her chest had disappeared. She’d accepted her punishment, and now the slate was clean.

Except it wasn’t.

“Oh, no.” Moaning, she pressed her face into her Daddy’s neck, the tears she’d just managed to get under control streaming down her face again.

“What is it, little one?” Worry filled his voice as James ran his hands down her body, like he was checking for broken bones or something. “Are you okay?”

“No! You’re still gonna... you know.” It was a struggle to get the words out, and when she finally did, they were a barely audible whisper. “Punish my bottom hole.”

The big jerk had the nerve to chuckle. “Yes, I am. But I’ll let you decide if you’d rather get it done now, or wait until

after dinner.”

“Oh.” Her entire bottom felt like one giant bruise. Could she really take more punishment? On the other hand, could she stand waiting, knowing what was still coming? As much as it was going to hurt, there was no way she could go the rest of the evening with more punishment hanging over her head. “I don’t want to wait.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Please, Daddy? I hate waiting.”

“All right, baby. Stand up.”

Trembling slightly, she stood and faced him. James reached into his jeans pocket and pulled out a small bottle of lubricant. She watched, equal parts fascinated, aroused, and terrified as he unzipped his pants and released his cock. A small whimper escaped her throat when he covered the shaft with a small squirt of the lubricant.

“Turn around and bend over with your hands at your ankles.”

Her face heated with shame, and she wouldn’t have been surprised to find the blush covered her entire body. Especially since the heat seemed to radiate straight to her core. Even in the middle of what might be the worst punishment of her life, her body craved his touch.

Silently, she turned and bent at the waist, wrapping her fingers around her ankles. In this position, she was fully exposed to him, unable to hide any of the most secret parts of herself. Or that she was dripping with need.

A fact which her Daddy pointed out with a quiet chuckle as soon as she was in place. “Is my naughty little girl enjoying her punishment?”

“No!”

Her denial was answered with two stinging spanks, one for each still burning ass cheek. “I think you’re telling fibs, little one. There’s nothing to be embarrassed by, Livvy.”

She couldn’t bring herself to give him more than a whimper in response. But judging by his answering growl, he didn’t mind. He’d told her more than once he loved the little sounds his punishments drew from her.

When he pressed a slick finger against her bottom hole, her whimpers grew louder. She loved the feel of him invading her this way, but it had always been for play and pleasure before. Not knowing how far he might push her, how close he might take her to that breaking point terrified and thrilled her at the same time.

He was gentle, at least at first as he worked one finger and then two inside of her, murmuring words of encouragement. The familiar burn and stretch of his fingers preparing her for him eventually relaxed her.

And then he withdrew, instructing her to stand, and her body was on alert again. “Back up and straddle my lap. You’re going to ride Daddy’s cock.”

Stepping back, she placed one foot on either side of the chair. He gripped her hips to position her over his cock, and she slowly lowered herself until she felt the tip pushing against her bottom hole.

Panic clawed at her throat. “I can’t. Daddy, I can’t do it!”

“You will, little one. You’re going to take Daddy’s cock all the way inside your tight little bottom, just like you have before.”

As far as pep talks went, it wasn't super encouraging, but it gave her the courage to obey his silent command when he pushed on her hips. His cock stretched her, burning as it pushed past the tight outer ring. Though he didn't simply thrust into her, he definitely didn't give her as much time to adjust as he normally would.

And now she knew why it was a punishment. It was always uncomfortable, but now it *hurt*. Her bottom still throbbed from the thorough spanking he'd just delivered, and now she felt like she was being split in half by his cock. Had he gotten bigger, somehow? It certainly seemed that way when he pulled her further down on his shaft.

"Daddy," she whined, "it hurts!"

"Does it? Does it hurt as much as sacrificing your career, our livelihoods, because you came to work with an attitude?"

A sob bubbled up in her chest. "N-no, Daddy."

"Then you're getting off easy, aren't you, little one?"

She didn't want to answer that, so she stayed silent and focused on pleasing him. He still wasn't completely inside her, and she must have pushed his patience to its breaking point, because he gripped her hips and pulled her down the rest of the way. Every inch of her bottom, inside and out, burned and throbbed with his displeasure.

And she still wasn't done.

"Ride, little one."

With tears slipping down her cheeks, she balanced her hands on his legs and lifted her hips. The brief moment of relief she felt when his cock slipped from her bottom was overshadowed by the realization she had to repeat the process all over again.

And even though it hurt, so fucking bad, she did it. She lifted and lowered her bottom, riding her Daddy's cock with as much enthusiasm as she could muster.

"Harder, little one."

Oh, God, no. "I c-can't."

"Harder, or we'll have to repeat this lesson."

"But I'm sorry! I'm so sorry! Please!" Any sense of pride or dignity had fled, reducing her to a begging, whimpering mess.

"I won't tell you again, Olivia Jane."

Sobbing, she did as she was told and slammed her bottom down on his cock. Hard hands gripped her hips, guiding her movements, applying pressure when she began to falter.

Behind her, James groaned. "Fuck. Faster, Livvy."

With a whimper she pushed herself to move faster, even though the friction inside her bottom was becoming unbearable. Just when she felt she couldn't go another second, his fingers dug into her skin, holding her in place while his cock swelled and emptied into her. The feeling of his seed, hot and sticky, filling her most secret place had heat rising to her cheeks.

"That's my good girl." His arms came around her, and Olivia melted into him. For a long while, his ragged breathing and her soft whimpers were the only sound in the room.

"You took your punishment so well, little one," he said once he'd managed to catch his breath. "Daddy's so proud of you."

"Am I your good girl again?"

The same hand that had punished her and held her in place while she took his cock in her bottom lifted to her chin. With a gentleness that seemed counterintuitive to the pain he'd just inflicted, he turned her head so she was forced to meet his serious gaze.

“As I said. You are always, *always* my good girl. Even when you're naughty, you are still my good girl.”

His words soothed the last of the ache in her soul. “Thank you, Daddy.”

“How are you feeling?”

“My bottom hurts. A whole lot. But I feel good. Thank you for loving me enough to punish me.”

“Always.”

She let her head fall back to rest on his shoulder. “I'm starving.”

“Mmm.” He nipped at her shoulder. “Me too.”

“Not like that,” she said, laughing. “Tummy hungry, Daddy.”

“Me too. Pizza sound good?”

“Yes! And ice cream?” she asked hopefully.

“Hmm. Only good girls get ice cream.”

Letting her bottom lip push out into a pout, she looked up at him through her lashes. “But you said I was a good girl.”

His smile warmed her in places she hadn't realized were still cold. “Exactly.”

CHAPTER 16



The tentative knock on his office door announced MaryAnn's presence. "Mr. Monroe? Mr. Jackson is here to see you."

James glanced at the clock on his computer and frowned. "Did we have an appointment?"

As predictable as the sunrise, his question had poor MaryAnn's cheeks flushing bright red. "N-no, sir. But he said you told him to come by whenever."

He hadn't said anything of the sort, but from the few interactions he'd had with the man, he wouldn't take no for an answer. Especially from a receptionist, who he probably saw as lower than the dirt on the bottom of his shoe. "I have a few spare minutes. Bring him back."

MaryAnn's head bobbed in acknowledgment before she disappeared down the hall. She returned a few moments later, with their problem child in tow.

"Thank you, MaryAnn. Mr. Jackson." James held out a hand and barely resisted the urge to sneer at the man's clammy, limp handshake. "Have a seat. What can I do for you this afternoon?"

“Well, I just assumed you’d want to meet in person to discuss our strategy going forward. What did you do about our previous agent?” The weasel across from him smirked, and it was almost worth the blow to their reputation to wipe it off his face. With his fist. “I trust that situation’s been handled?”

An image of Olivia, whimpering and whining while she took his cock in her gorgeous, well-paddled ass flashed in James’s mind. But he’d be damned if he gave Jackson the satisfaction of implying she’d been so much as reprimanded, so he kept his expression bland. “What can I do for you, Mr. Jackson?”

“For starters, you can assure me she no longer works here. She didn’t seem all that interested in selling our house in the first place, and that email was just the icing on the cake.”

He swallowed the irritation, bitter as it was. The urge to defend his wife was strong, but he wasn’t about to get into a pissing contest with the little weasel. “I’ve spoken to Olivia at length about your situation. She had some very good suggestions. Did you implement any of her ideas?”

The weasel snorted. “Like leaving a couple dirty dishes in the sink really hurt anything. Please tell me you have some better ideas than that vapid bitch.”

“Excuse me?”

The ice in James’s tone apparently didn’t affect weasels. The man leaned in like he was sharing a juicy secret, his greasy smirk somehow managing to get even slimier. “Look, props to you for scoring such a nice piece of ass. And I’m sure those big doe eyes and bangin’ body probably sell houses but come on. We both know there’s not much going on upstairs.”

James's fingers curled into a fist on top of his desk. "Mr. Jackson, I'm afraid this isn't going to work out."

"What isn't?"

"Listing your home with us. You'll need to find another agency."

The look of shock on the little weasel's face was worth every single penny it might cost him in lost business. "What kind of games are you playing, Monroe?"

"No games. While Olivia's response to your email was unprofessional and unacceptable, your behavior in this short meeting has shown me she probably put up with far more from you than she should have. I will not entertain clients who treat my agents poorly. And I most certainly will not do business with anyone who sees my wife as nothing more than a, how did you put it? Oh, yes." He smiled, savoring the way the man's eyes widened with fear. "A nice piece of ass. Good day, Mr. Jackson."

The color drained from the weasel's face, and then returned with such a vengeance James worried for a moment he might have a stroke. Jackson popped out of the chair like a, well, weasel. "You'll be hearing from our lawyer, and you'll be closing your doors within a month, I promise you that."

"I doubt it, but I look forward to explaining your sexist attitude to your legal counsel. Have a good afternoon, Mr. Jackson."

The man stormed out, and James sat staring at the picture of Olivia on his desk, waiting for the fury churning in his gut to abate. When it had calmed somewhat, he stood and strode down the hall to her office. She was on the phone when he

opened the door, so he quietly shut it again behind him and waited for her to finish.

Glancing over, she gave him a sassy wink. “That’s great news! Once I get the paperwork, I’ll call my clients. They’re going to be thrilled at the offer. Thanks, Jenny. Uh-huh. Bye!”

When she hung up the phone, she did what he always thought of as her ‘money dance’, jumping out of the chair and wiggling her hips while pumping her fists in the air. “I just got an offer for ten thousand over listing for that house on Maple.”

“Because you’re brilliant. Good job, Livvy.”

“Thanks. Did you need me?”

“Yes.” As much as he hated to ruin her good mood, he wasn’t about to let this slide. “We need to talk.”

Her face fell into an adorable pout. If they’d been home, he would have put her on her knees with a playful lecture about how good girls used their mouths. Goddamn office protocol.

“What did I do?” she asked, her voice bordering on a whine.

“Mr. Jackson was just here.”

The pout disappeared, replaced by a combination of embarrassment and icy disdain. “And?”

“He had some very... unkind things to say about you.”

Olivia rolled her eyes, but for once he didn’t correct her. If anyone had earned the right to roll their eyes at a client, it was her. “Not surprised. Did you assure him I’d been properly reprimanded?”

“I told him I’d spoken with you. A few minutes before I kicked him out of my office and told him we would no longer

be doing business together.”

Her mouth fell open. “You—you did what?”

“I won’t have clients who insult and berate my agents. Especially my wife. Why didn’t you come to me, Olivia? I would have taken care of it if you’d told me how abusive his behavior was.” It was the one thing he couldn’t find an explanation for, other than she hadn’t trusted him to take care of her. And he couldn’t deny that thought about fucking killed him.

“I don’t need you to fight my battles.”

After checking to make sure nobody was passing by, he rounded her desk and reached down to give her ass a long, hard squeeze. She yelped, and a shimmer of tears covered her beautiful brown eyes. He had no doubt she was still sore from last night, and short of breaking every rule they had by bending her over and paddling her in the middle of the office, this quick reminder would have to do.

“Listen to me very carefully, Olivia Jane Monroe. I respect your desire to handle difficult clients on your own. But I will not have my agents berated, belittled, or abused for the sake of a commission. The next time I find out you’ve been ‘handling’ a client like him without telling me the full story, you’ll spend a full day holding a plug inside a very sore bottom. Do you understand me, young lady?”

“But I can—”

He cut off her protests with another hard squeeze. “I know you *can*. I’m saying there’s no need for you to. Have I made myself clear?”

“But—”

“Olivia.” He put as much warning as he could into her name. “Keep arguing with me and I’ll go fetch the plug I have in my desk drawer. Have I made myself perfectly clear, little girl?”

Color darkened her cheeks, and her voice was a tremulous whisper when she spoke. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl.” Releasing his hold on her, he gave her bottom a gentle pat and brushed a quick kiss across her cheek. The reminder on his phone dinged and he sighed, hating that he had to ruin her day even more. “We have to leave soon.”

The grief in her eyes shattered him. He’d give every last cent they had to never see her in such pain again. “I know.”

“We don’t have to stay. We can stop in, give our condolences to her family, and leave. It’s up to you, little one.”

“Maybe.”

He kissed her again, but this time he lingered, offering comfort and solace the only way he knew how. When they broke apart again, her eyes were slightly glazed, and he couldn’t help but grin. She was so adorable when she was all flushed with pleasure.

“Meet me in my office in half an hour. We’ll leave your car here tonight and drive home together.”

“Kay.”

Leaving her to finish her deal, he returned to his office to get some work done. But the reports he’d been working on earlier seemed like a jumble.

“Fucking weasel,” he grumbled. Realizing he wouldn’t be productive until he eased his own mind, he grabbed the phone

on his desk and dialed the number of the only person he knew who could help.

“Law Offices of Keppel, Monroe, and Abrams,” an overly cheerful voice answered.

“Hello, Judy. It’s James Monroe. Is my brother around?”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Monroe. He’s in. Let me just see if he’s available for you.”

James stared at the chair where the weasel had been sitting, tapping his fingers on the desk while he waited for his brother to answer the phone.

“What do you want?”

The gruff annoyance in Bryant’s voice had a grin stretching across James’s face. “That’s a fine howdy-do for your big brother.”

“Ten minutes. You have ten minutes on me, asshole. What do you want?”

“Can’t a guy just call his brother and chat?”

“Not at one-thirty on a Wednesday. Shouldn’t you be out, dominating the real estate world?”

“That’s actually why I’m calling. I have a possible situation.” He gave Bryant a quick rundown of what had transpired with the Jacksons. “Think he could cause us any trouble?”

“Nah. He’ll make a fuss, maybe call you out on social media. But legally, he doesn’t have a case. And any good lawyer will tell him that.” There was a short, heavy silence. “Did he really say that about Liv?”

“Yeah.” Just the memory of it had him baring his teeth, wishing he could take a chunk out of the little weasel.

“Want me to go kick his ass for you?”

“As much joy as that image brings me, I don’t want to make this any messier than it already is. Thanks, though. You should come over for dinner sometime soon.”

“Sure. Haven’t seen the little brat in a while. Give her a hug from me.”

“Will do.”

Feeling centered again, he hung up the phone and refocused on his reports. He’d just wrapped up one of the financials that had been giving him a headache when Olivia knocked on his door frame. “Ready?”

“Let me shut down.” While the computer powered down, he stood and motioned for her to come closer. “Come here.”

She stepped around the desk, a mischievous smile on her lips. “Yes, Sir?”

James wrapped his arms around her, making her laugh with an overly enthusiastic bear hug. “That’s from Bryant. This,” he lowered his lips to hers for a deep kiss, “is from me.”

“Mmmm. Thanks, for both. Everything okay?”

“Of course. Why do you ask?”

“If you’re giving me a hug from Bryant, you spoke to him recently. And if you called him in the middle of the day at work, something is wrong. What’s up?”

Grinning at her observations, he grabbed his laptop and stuffed it in his briefcase. “You’re a little too observant for your own good, sometimes.” He linked his fingers with hers

and they walked out together. “Just making sure Jackson can’t give us any legal trouble.”

“Can he? The little asshole will, if he can.”

“According to Bryant, no. We’ll keep an eye on social media, since that’s where he’s most likely to make some noise. But I don’t think we have to worry about anything from a legal standpoint.”

“Good.” They stopped by the passenger door to his SUV and she turned to him. Her eyes, which never could hide anything from him, were filled with apology. “I’m really sorry I caused so much trouble.”

“Livvy. It’s done. No more apologizing, little one. Understood?”

“I know, it’s just—I’m sorry.”

“And you took your punishment and you’ve been forgiven. So now you can forgive yourself. In you go.” Opening the door, he nudged her inside. He put both of their bags in the backseat, and walked around to the driver side door. When he climbed in, she was staring out the side window, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. “Do you need another spanking?”

Her head whipped around, her eyes wide with shock. “What? No! Why?”

“If you’re having trouble letting it go, maybe you need another spanking to help you forgive yourself.”

“No. No, I’m good, Daddy.”

“That’s my girl. I’m not sure your bottom could handle another punishment so soon.”

Wrinkling her nose, she shook her head at the suggestion. “No spankings. Well. Maybe a little fun spanking when we get

home? Just a little one, though.”

God, was it any wonder he adored her? Looking over, he sent her a wink that had her blushing prettily. “I think we can make that happen.”

CHAPTER 17



Their good moods had evaporated by the time they parked behind the funeral home.

“Ready?” Reaching across the console, James gave his wife’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Olivia blew out a breath before offering a small, forced smile. “Yeah. Guess we should go in.”

The smell of lilies hit him full force the second they walked through the door. God, he hated that smell, the scent of death and grief. Setting aside his own discomfort, he slipped an arm around Olivia’s waist and followed the sign in the foyer to a large, open room. The casket was placed at the front, past rows and rows of folding chairs.

Beside him, he heard Olivia’s breath hitch. Focusing on her, he pulled her closer and pressed a kiss to her hair. “You can do this, little one. Daddy’s right here.”

She nodded, her eyes never leaving the large wooden box at the end of the aisle. As one, they walked past the rows of chairs to the casket. They stopped in front of the open coffin, where the body of a woman he’d never met rested.

“I’m so sorry,” Olivia murmured. “You didn’t deserve this. I’m so sorry.”

For the hundredth time, it crossed his mind how easily it might have been her. How often did she go to a showing alone? If Angela had been targeted because of that article, it could have just as easily been his little Livvy.

Breathing through the fear and panic, he fought the urge to usher her outside and into the car. He wanted nothing more than to take her home and keep her there, where she would be safe forever. But they had lives to live, and he couldn't keep her locked away, as much as he wanted to.

Olivia shifted, shaking him out of his fog, and he turned with her to where the family stood. The woman beside the box was almost an eerily similar copy of the woman in the casket. The same eyes, only more lined with age. The same sweep of dark hair, with a few glimmers of silver sprinkled through. Her mother, he had to assume. Swallowing an unexpected lump in his throat, James held out a hand to her. "I'm so sorry for your loss."

She nodded absently, but her shattered eyes gained some clarity when she focused on Olivia. "I know you."

Stepping forward, Olivia clasped the other woman's hands in her own, and her voice was tinged with grief when she spoke. "I met Angela during the magazine shoot. She was a lovely woman. I'm so very sorry for your loss."

"She admired you."

"What?"

Olivia's voice pitched higher, confusion and panic clear in her voice. James squeezed her shoulder, reminding her he was right next to her.

Angela's mother continued, oblivious to Olivia's distress. "She called me that night, talking about this other woman

she'd met and how you were so successful but still so kind. It was so nice for her, she said, to meet someone who hadn't let the business harden them or make them mean. She called me the day the magazine came out and told me the girl on the cover was the woman she'd met at the shoot, and weren't you just so beautiful?"

"I—" Olivia drew in a shaky breath. "Thank you. I remember her being very sweet to me that day. I'm glad she thought the same of me."

"She was sweet. I worried about her, all the time, whenever she said she was meeting someone at a house." Without warning, the woman surged forward, her eyes suddenly too bright, a little too wild in her pale face. "You be careful. Please be careful." She looked up at James, and the desperation on her face nearly broke him. "You keep her safe."

"I will, ma'am," he managed past the fear clawing at his throat.

"Good." And just like that, any trace of emotion disappeared from her face, leaving her an empty shell once more. "That's good. Thank you for coming."

With a hand firmly at the small of her back, James guided Olivia away and out a side door. When she began to tremble, he led her to a couch away from the rest of the mourners. She dropped down, as if her legs simply couldn't hold her a second longer and looked up at him, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"I didn't know. I should have gotten her number, or kept in touch somehow. Maybe this wouldn't have happened—"

"No." The word lashed out of him like a whip, and she visibly cringed. Silently cursing himself, he knelt in front of her, taking her hands in his own. "No, baby. You couldn't have

stopped this. It's a tragedy, and there wasn't anything you could have done to stop it. Okay?"

She closed her eyes, tears slipping down her cheeks. "I guess. I just don't understand."

He opened his mouth to tell her he didn't understand either when a shadow fell over them. Irritated by the intrusion, he looked up to find Detective Michaelson standing over them.

Fuck.

"I'm sorry to bother you." Michaelson's voice dripped with the same fake sympathy tainting his smile. "But we need to talk. The director is letting us use his office."

"Can't this wait?" James snapped.

"No, I'm afraid it can't, Mr. Monroe. There's been another murder."

CHAPTER 18



Detective Michaelson's words had Olivia jerking her head up to stare at him. "What? When? Who? Oh, god." Tears burned in her eyes and clogged her throat. "Shannon? Is Shannon safe? I haven't talked to her today. James, what if—"

"Ms. Wright is waiting for us," the detective interrupted. "If you'll just come with me, please."

Relief knocked the air from her lungs. "Oh, thank god."

Pushing to his feet, James held a hand out to her. "Come on, baby. I'm right here with you."

Daddy's here. She heard the words as clearly as if he'd said them. Leaning on that bit of strength, she slipped her hand into his and let him pull her to her feet. Together, they followed Michaelson down the hall to the office. The other detective was there, along with Shannon and a woman Olivia vaguely remembered from the shoot. Shannon looked up when they entered, and her red-rimmed eyes went wide with shock.

"Liv!" Rushing over, Shannon threw her arms around Olivia's neck. "They said there'd been another murder and they wouldn't tell me who and I hadn't seen you." Voice cracking, her arms tightened around Olivia almost to the point of pain.

“I’m here.” Olivia rubbed her back, doing her best to soothe her friend. “I’m right here. I’m fine.”

“I know, I just—I need a minute. God, Liv, I was so fucking scared it was you.”

“It’s not me. I’m right here, Shay.”

“Okay.” Shannon pulled away and wiped at her eyes before slipping an arm around Olivia’s waist. “Okay,” she repeated softly.

James moved to her other side, lending her some more of his strength. God knew she needed it. Even flanked by her husband and her closest friend, she was terrified of the news to come.

Michaelson closed the door and walked to stand by his partner, the pair of them eyeing the small group before Rogers spoke. “This afternoon, we received a call alerting us that Nancy Black had been found dead.”

“This is fucking ridiculous.” The brunette in the corner, the one Olivia only somewhat remembered meeting, glared at the detectives. “Why haven’t you caught this asshole yet?”

“We’re pursuing all viable leads,” Detective Rogers replied.

The brunette sneered. “By locking us all in a room to tell us someone else has been killed? What the fuck good is that doing?”

“We wanted to alert you all before you heard from the media. And we’d like to urge the three of you,” Michaelson looked around the room, locking eyes with each of the three women, “to be extra vigilant.”

“Great. Some fucking psychopath is out to get us and that’s the best you can do? Be vigilant? I’m out of here.” The brunette—Tracy, Olivia thought her name was—grabbed her purse and strode across the room to the door.

Olivia jumped when it slammed shut behind her. The detectives shared a look before refocusing on the trio still in the room with them. Rogers spoke first. “Have any of you noticed anything strange since the photo shoot?”

“Like what?” Shannon was finally sounding more like her usual, confident self.

“Anything at all,” Michaelson said. “Anyone paying too much attention to you during a showing or being a little too friendly?”

Olivia looked over at Shannon. Seeing her own answer reflected in her friend’s eyes, she turned back to the detectives and shook her head. “No. Nothing comes to mind.”

“You’re sure?” Rogers pressed. “Nothing at all? Nobody getting a little handsy or wanting to know too much about you?”

“We already said no,” Shannon snapped.

“Is that all?” The steel in James’s voice was unmistakable. Olivia looked up at him, not in the least surprised to see a muscle twitching in his jaw.

“For now.” Rogers jerked her head toward the office door. “We’ll be in touch. If you think of anything out of the ordinary, anything at all, let us know immediately.”

“We will.” With that, James ushered them out and down the hall, through the front door of the funeral home.

“I can’t believe this.” Standing in the middle of the crowded parking lot, Shannon fumbled in her purse for the gum she’d taken to chewing to kick her cigarette habit. Her hands trembled as she popped a piece free from the wrapping. “What the fuck is going on?”

“I don’t know.” Leaning into her husband, Olivia pressed her face against his chest. “Why would someone be targeting us?”

“Jealousy?” Shannon jerked a shoulder. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“I tend to agree.” Tucking the phone he’d just been texting on back into his pocket, James ran a soothing hand down Olivia’s back. But despite the gentleness of his touch, she could feel the violence in him, simmering just beneath the surface. “Maybe someone who has a problem with successful women.”

The laugh Shannon barked out lacked any humor. “So, half the men in this fucking city? Goddammit, if I get murdered and prove my mom right, I am going to be so pissed.”

Fear wrapped its cold fingers around Olivia’s throat. “Don’t say that. Nothing is going to happen to you.”

“Trust me, I’m not keen on anything happening to me.” But there was a tremor in her voice when she spoke again. “I feel like an idiot asking this, but I-I really don’t want to be alone tonight.”

“You can stay with us.” Stepping forward, Olivia wrapped her arms around Shannon’s neck. “Tonight, tomorrow, as long as you need to feel safe.”

“Thanks.” Shannon’s voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper. “But shouldn’t you ask Mr. Sexy first?”

Shit. Shannon had a point. Releasing her, Olivia stepped back and turned to James, who was watching her with a mildly amused expression. “It’s all right, isn’t it, James? Shannon lives alone and we don’t even know what happened to Nancy.”

“Of course, she can stay with us tonight.” He shifted his attention to Shannon. “As long as you need, actually.”

Swamped with relief, Olivia threw her arms around his neck. “Thank you, Daddy,” she whispered.

“Of course, little one.” With a brief kiss for Olivia, he turned to Shannon. “Why don’t you go home and grab whatever you need and meet us at our place? Do you have to go back to work?”

Shannon shook her head. “No, and I don’t have any showings or anything scheduled. I’ll meet you guys there in about an hour. And thanks. I know it’s a huge inconvenience.”

“It’s not,” James said firmly. “We’ll see you there.”

After a quick hug for each of them, she took off for her car. James slipped an arm around Olivia’s waist and led her to the passenger door of his SUV and helped her in.

“I’m sorry. I should have asked first,” Olivia said the second he climbed inside and shut the driver’s side door behind him.

“It’s all right, little one. You were upset and worried. I’m not mad.” He started the car and backed out of the parking space. “But I am going to put a plug in your bottom for the rest of the night.”

“What? Why?”

Reaching over, he squeezed her hand. “You have a tendency to forget yourself, and our rules, when Shannon is

around.”

It certainly wasn't the worst punishment. And the way he phrased things, it wasn't really a punishment at all, so she ignored the instinct to argue. “Yes, Daddy.”

“Good girl. When we get home, I want you to go upstairs and wait in your corner.”

Now it definitely felt like a punishment. Pouting, she pulled her hand from his and crossed her arms over her chest. “I thought you weren't mad.”

“I'm not mad. But I want you to take a few minutes and settle, and think about how much I love you, and remember that I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

Silence filled the vehicle. Her Daddy was waiting for her to answer him, but the words wouldn't come. On the one hand was resentment. She was a grown woman; she didn't need a hunk of plastic or metal in her ass to remind her of the danger currently surrounding them.

On the other hand was gratitude. She had a man who loved her, who wanted nothing more than to make sure she was safe and well-loved.

In the end, gratitude and obedience won out. “Okay, Daddy.”

When he looked over, the smile on his face was worth every moment of embarrassment and discomfort that came with wearing a plug. “Good girl.”



AS SILLY AS IT WAS TO BE EMBARRASSED, SHE DIDN'T WANT TO be in her little girl PJs when Shannon came over, so she changed into a pair of soft leggings and an old sweatshirt from college. Standing in the corner of her sweet little bedroom, she pushed the leggings to her knees, along with her panties.

James didn't keep her waiting long. If she had to guess, she'd only been in the corner about five minutes when he joined her in the bedroom and called for her. Turning away from the wall, she found him sitting in the straight-backed chair from her desk. On the floor, to his right, sat a box and a bottle of lubricant. When she didn't immediately move from her corner, Daddy lifted a hand and crooked a finger at her. Olivia shuffled to his side, and at his silent command, lowered herself face down over his lap.

He shifted under her, and moments later came the cool spurt of liquid between her cheeks. It never failed to make her jump in surprise, despite knowing it was coming. But Daddy held her easily in place and pushed a finger into her bottom, coating her inner walls with the slick liquid.

“Why are you wearing a plug tonight, little one?” he asked, his tone conversational, like he was asking about the weather and not why he had his finger shoved in her bottom.

“To remind me to behave while Shannon is here.”

When he pushed a second finger inside of her, stretching her, her voice rose to a whine.

“I'll be good, Daddy, promise!”

“I'm sure you will, little one. But you'll be extra good with this little reminder in your bottom, won't you?”

It was pointless to argue, since they both knew the truth. “Yes, Daddy,” she answered with a sigh.

“Good girl. Bear down for me.”

She braced her core, and sure enough, warm rubber replaced his fingers. The plug stretched her, not to the point of pain, but definitely enough so she'd feel it with every movement during the evening.

The fullest part of the plug pushed past her entrance and Olivia winced. “Daddy! Ow!”

“Almost there.” Seconds later, the plug slid home, no longer painful, just mildly uncomfortable. “Such a good girl for Daddy. I think we have time for a quick spanking before anyone gets here.”

“No, we don't!”

But his hand connected with her bottom despite her pleading. After the third swat, it had become obvious this spanking had nothing to do with punishment. The spansks stung—a lot—but nowhere near what he'd be giving her if she was in trouble.

By the time he finished, Olivia had practically melted over his lap, the stress of the past few days having slipped from her body as the warmth in her bottom had grown.

Stroking her heated skin, James asked, “How was that, little one?”

“Mmm. Really nice, Daddy. Do we have time for more?”

The answer to her question came in the form of the front door slamming, and a familiar voice calling their names. “Oh! Let me up, let me up!” Wiggling from his grasp, Olivia slid off his lap and yanked her leggings into place. She ran from the room and down the stairs, where a tall, handsome man stood, waiting to catch her.

“Bryant!” Squealing with delight, she launched herself at him. Despite being twins, Bryant was a couple of inches taller than James, and a bit broader in the shoulders and he easily caught her. “What are you doing here? Did you bring me a present?”

“Presents are for special occasions, brat.” With a loud smacking a kiss to her lips, he set her down in front of him.

“Aw.” Playing up her disappointment at being denied a gift, she pushed her bottom lip out in a pout she knew he couldn’t ignore. “But I haven’t seen you in forever!”

Bryant mock glared at her, then at the stairs behind her. “I thought you’d tamed this little brat?”

“I try.” Amusement was laced through James’s exasperated tone. “What did she do?”

“Acting like I live on another planet and only come around on holidays.”

“You do only come around on holidays!” Olivia protested, crossing her arms and sticking her tongue out at him.

James chuckled. “She has a point, little brother.”

“I’m about to make a point on her bottom. Here.” Picking up a paper bag she hadn’t even noticed sitting on the floor, Bryant held it out to her. “Have your present, brat.”

Olivia grabbed the gift from his hands and pulled out a bottle of peppermint schnapps—her favorite. “Yummy! I’m going to make a drink. Anyone else?” Without waiting for an answer, she headed for the dining room where they kept a fully stocked liquor cabinet.

“Olivia Jane.”

Her full name, delivered in her Daddy's no-nonsense tone, stopped her in her tracks. Turning back around, she gave him her best sheepish smile. "Yes, Daddy?"

"Do I need to go get a larger plug to help you remember the rules?"

Embarrassment heated her cheeks, and she shook her head. "No, Daddy, I'll remember. May I please fix myself a drink?"

"Wait until Shannon gets here and see if she wants a drink. One, Olivia Jane. And not a 'jumbo' one, either."

Jesus, if her cheeks got any hotter, she'd be able to bake cookies on them. "Okay. I'll just go put this with the other stuff."

"Good girl."

CHAPTER 19



James watched his wife hurry through the entryway to the dining area where they kept the liquor cabinet. When she'd disappeared from sight, he grinned and shook his head.

"Jumbo drinks?" Bryant cocked an eyebrow at him, obviously waiting for the rest of the story.

"Yeah. She went out with Shannon the other night and 'technically' only had one drink like she'd been told. But considering she herself confessed that 'one drink' was really the equivalent of several margaritas, she earned every bit of the paddling she got the next day."

"Poor little brat."

James narrowed his eyes at his brother. "Don't let her hear you say that."

"Why not? All the easier to convince her to run away with me," Bryant shot back with an easy grin.

"Asshole."

"Jerk."

Pulling his brother in for a quick, hard hug, James let the short embrace settle him, giving him back some of the strength he'd lost over the past few days. "God, I've missed you."

“I know. I don’t come around enough.”

The pair separated and James punched his twin in his rock-hard shoulder. “You don’t. But Olivia and I haven’t invited you in a while, either. She misses you, too.”

“I know, I know. Jeez, just lay the guilt on me, Mom.” Bryant rubbed at the back of his neck, a habit James recognized since he’d caught himself doing so on more than one occasion when the matriarch of the Monroe family had given him a piece of her mind.

“Doesn’t matter. You’re here now. Thanks for coming so quickly. We need someone who can cut through the legal bullshit without emotions clouding everything.”

With a derisive snort, Bryant shook his head. “I’ll do my best, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t feeling some pretty strong fucking emotions about the whole thing. I love her too, you know.”

Olivia waltzed back into the foyer with a distinctly mischievous smile on her face. When she tilted her face up for a kiss, he tasted peppermint on her lips. Well, that explained the smile. His little brat was looking for a spanking. “Olivia Jane Monroe. Did you have a drink after I told you not to?”

Her gaze slid to Bryant and back to him. As much as she tried to look contrite, there was no mistaking the excitement in her eyes. His little girl had a bit of an exhibitionist streak, at least with people she knew and trusted. It was something he didn’t often indulge her in, as he generally preferred to keep her to himself. But if it took her mind off of the horror surrounding them, even for five minutes, he was willing to play along.

“It was just a little sip, Daddy.”

Keeping his gaze stern, he caught her chin in his hand and forced her to meet his eyes. “But you still disobeyed me, didn’t you, young lady?”

“Um. I guess.”

Releasing his hold on her chin, he wrapped an arm around her waist, forcing her to bend over. With one arm still holding her in place, he tugged her leggings down enough to bare her still pink bottom. The plug he’d chosen was topped with a bright pink jewel that winked at them from between her bottom cheeks.

“What a cute little plug you have in, Livvy,” Bryant said with a deep chuckle. “Too bad it didn’t do its job, huh?”

“Oh, hush, you!”

James landed several hard swats to her bare bottom that sent her feet dancing. “Watch your tone, young lady, or I’ll let Bryant have a turn when I’m done.”

His declaration earned him a grin from his brother. It wouldn’t be the first time he’d gotten to warm Livvy’s bottom, and James knew he wouldn’t turn down a chance to do so again.

“Actually,” James lifted his hand and swatted her bottom a few more times, loving the way she squealed and wiggled with each swat, “I think we need a new rule. If you get punished in front of Bryant, he gets to spank you, too.”

“What? Ouch! That’s not fair!”

After another dozen spanks, James let her up. He cupped her face in his hands and rubbed his thumbs along her heated cheeks. “If you really don’t want Bryant to spank you, just say the word, little one.”

But it wasn't fear or refusal in her eyes. Oh, no, his little girl was enjoying every second of this. "It's okay, Daddy. I was really naughty."

God, he loved her. "Yes, you were." Looking over at Bryant, he grinned and nudged Olivia in his direction. "She's all yours, bro."

Bryant propped a foot on the bottom stair and easily hauled Olivia up over his knee. Even without Olivia's sharp cries, it was obvious Bryant was spanking a good bit harder than James had. James found himself torn between being fucking turned on as hell, and wanting to protect his little girl from his brother's hard hand.

"You don't get to disobey your Daddy just because I'm here, young lady." Bryant's hand never faltered, even as he lectured. "Do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir!" Olivia wailed, her legs kicking helplessly. "I'm sorry! I'll be good!"

Bryant finished off with a half-dozen well-placed swats to the sensitive under curve of Olivia's bottom. Though she shrieked with each one, James could see the evidence of her desire pooling between her thighs.

She slid off Bryant's knee when he released her, and Bryant wrapped her up in his signature bear hug. "You going to be a good girl the rest of the night?"

"Yes, sir," Olivia said with a soft snuffle.

It was the snuffle and the sweet, submissive tone that finally pushed him to his breaking point. "Bryant, would you excuse us for a few? If Shannon shows up—distract her."

Olivia had just pulled her leggings back up over her bottom when James grabbed her hand and pulled her up the

stairs behind him. She stumbled to keep up, but he couldn't slow down. If he didn't get his cock inside his wife in the next minute, he might spontaneously combust.

Pulling her into her room, he slammed the door shut behind them. As soon as it closed, he pressed her up against it, crushing her lips against his. She opened for him immediately, and he swooped in, his tongue tingling with the mixture of peppermint and Olivia.

Shoving his hand down the front of her leggings, he thrust his fingers into her, inwardly crowing at the slick arousal coating his fingers. She came like a firecracker, and he swallowed her scream as she went wild under his hand.

He pulled away enough to yank the leggings down, then repeated the action with the gym shorts he'd donned when they'd gotten home. Without giving her time to adjust or catch her breath, he wrapped his arms around her thick thighs and lifted her. Wild with needing her, he drove into her waiting heat, and she clung to him, her whimpers and gasps fueling him as he fucked her. Her pussy contracted around his cock when she came again, her scream muffled by the shoulder she'd buried her face in. An almost embarrassingly short time after, he followed her over the edge, emptying himself inside of her.

"Such a good girl," he murmured, pressing his lips to her neck.

"God, I needed that." Lifting her head from his shoulder, she gave him a wobbly, satisfied smile. "Thank you, Daddy."

When she said Daddy like that, not in her 'Little' voice, but in her husky, grown up, well-fucked voice, he was nearly ready to take her again. "You're welcome, little one. But let's keep the bratting to a minimum when Shannon gets here."

Cheeks pink from the gentle reprimand, she nodded. “Sorry. It’s been so long since you spanked me in front of someone, I just couldn’t resist.”

James released her legs so she could stand. “I understand. But I do expect you to try and behave while our guests are here, little one.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

His heart constricted in his chest and he brushed her hair from her face. “I love you, so fucking much. I’m going to keep you safe, Livvy. I swear it.”

“I know. And I’ll do my part. Whatever you want me to do, I’ll do it.”

Stroking his thumb across her cheek, he gave her a wry smile. “I’m going to remind you of that when you’re whining about all my rules.”

“What’s the fun if I don’t whine about them?” she answered with a giggle.

“Brat,” he growled, reaching down to squeeze her bottom.

“You wouldn’t have me any other way.”

Because it was true, he bent his head and captured her lips in a long, slow kiss. She sighed when he broke away, her eyes were slightly glazed. “We, ah, should probably go downstairs and make sure Shannon hasn’t eaten your brother alive.”

Chuckling, James stepped away and pulled his pants back up. “Pretty sure that would be the other way around. Even though he swears Shannon isn’t his type.”

“Really?” Olivia quirked an eyebrow at him in obvious amusement as she dressed. “A tall, hot blonde with a smart mouth and a secret Little side isn’t your brother’s type?”

“I know. I’m pretty sure she’s his soulmate, and they’re both just too stubborn to realize it.”

With a loud, happy laugh, Olivia threaded her fingers through his and they made their way downstairs. The sound of arguing reached them when they were halfway down, and Olivia smirked up at him.

“Look, buddy. Even if I needed a keeper, I sure as shit wouldn’t pick some Neanderthal like you.”

“Oh, this is going to be good,” Olivia muttered just before they turned the corner into the living room.

Sure enough, his brother and Shannon were toe to toe in the middle of the room, wearing almost identical glares of frustration. James cleared his throat and two heads whipped around to stare at him. If looks could kill, he’d have been mortally wounded right then. But while his brother’s stare stayed stony, Shannon’s immediately cleared and shifted to the sex-kitten smile he knew so well.

“Hey there, Mr. Sexy. Liv.” Shannon raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to the side. “You look thoroughly well-fucked, darling. Good for you.”

“Do you always have to be so damn rude?” Bryant demanded, turning his glare back to Shannon.

“Rude?” Baring her teeth, Shannon jabbed a finger into his chest. “Rude is trying to lay down the law with a woman who has no interest in having said law laid down for her. You’re not my Daddy.”

“It’s a damn good thing, too. You’d never sit comfortably again.”

“Well then I suppose it’s lucky for me I’m not in the market for a Daddy.” But the flush in Shannon’s cheeks let

everyone in the room know she wasn't being a hundred percent truthful.

Taking pity on her, James stepped forward. "All right, back to your corners, fighters. We need to figure out dinner, before we do anything else."

"Pizza?" Olivia asked, and he couldn't help but smile at the hope in her eyes.

"I think that's an excellent plan." He looked over at Bryant and Shannon, who each shrugged. "And while we're waiting for the pizza, we can discuss how we're going to keep you girls safe until this son of a bitch is behind bars."

CHAPTER 20



Olivia toyed with her pizza, picking at the pepperoni and sausage. The ‘debate’ on how to keep her and Shannon safe had carried into dinner, and call her crazy, but she was finding it difficult to eat while discussing her impending murder. Judging by the scowl on her friend’s face, Shannon wasn’t a fan of the current conversation, either.

“Not hungry?”

Bryant had leaned over; love and concern clear in eyes that matched James’s so closely it was sometimes a little unnerving. Unable to hold his gaze, she looked back down at her plate and shrugged. “Guess not.”

“You should eat something, sweetheart,” he pressed quietly.

“I’m not hungry!”

She hadn’t meant to snap at him, but she was already so on edge, and being nagged about eating wasn’t helping.

“Olivia.” Across the table, James was frowning at her.

“It’s fine.” Draping an arm around her shoulder, Bryant gave her a comforting squeeze. “I think we’re all a little tense.”

“I’m sorry, I just can’t eat when we’re talking about all this.” Olivia wrapped her arms around her middle. “It makes my tummy hurt.”

“You and me both.” Shannon lifted her glass of wine as if toasting and downed the rest of the contents in a single swallow.

James’s expression softened. “I’m sorry it upsets you two. But we do need to come up with a game plan. A buddy system, or something of the sort.”

“A buddy system?” Amusement and sarcasm dripped from Shannon’s words. “Have you forgotten I work for your competitor, Mr. Monroe?”

Raising an eyebrow in a way that made Olivia’s bottom clench, James focused on Shannon. “I haven’t forgotten. What exactly is your agency doing to make sure you stay safe?”

Shannon jerked a shoulder. “I haven’t talked to them since before we got the news.”

“Of course, you haven’t,” Bryant grumbled. “That would have been the smart thing to do.”

“Excuse me? Are you implying I’m stupid?”

The ice in Shannon’s voice could have frozen the Atlantic, but Bryant just matched her glare for glare. “You’ve never impressed me with your reasoning skills”

“I’m not here to impress you, asshole.” She pushed away from the table. “I need a fucking drink.”

“I don’t think so.”

Ignoring Bryant’s admonition, Shannon moved to the island and poured herself another glass of wine. “You can keep your opinions on my drinking to yourself, other Mr. Monroe.”

“Enough.” The whip-crack of James’s voice silenced the argument. “Getting into a pissing match isn’t helping anyone. Shannon, I think you need to speak with your agency first thing in the morning. See if you can’t set up a buddy system with someone at work. Olivia, from now on you will call me before and after any showings. You will let me know if you are late arriving and if you are going to be longer than a half an hour. If I don’t hear from you within the specified time frame, I will call you, and God help you if you don’t answer. And you do not, under any circumstances, go into a house with anyone alone. If you have a showing scheduled with an individual, let me know and I will accompany you.”

“That sounds like a solid plan.” Shannon lifted her glass. “Cheers to a long, healthy life for our Olivia.”

Grabbing the glass she’d barely touched, Olivia crossed to the island and deliberately clinked her glass against Shannon’s. “For both of us. If you get yourself killed, I’m going to be pissed, you hear me? You figure out a way to stay safe or I’ll get Bryant to tag along on all of your showings.”

“Me? What did I do to deserve that?” Bryant’s baffled question had both girls bursting into giggles.

Leaning into her closest friend, Olivia sent Bryant a smug smile. “You’re going to go around being all bossy, I’m going to make you put your money where your mouth is. Can we stop arguing now?”

Shannon rested her cheek against Olivia’s head. “I’m all argued out. Truce, Lawyer Boy?”

“Truce.” But the storm in Bryant’s eyes told Olivia he wasn’t done with the beautiful blonde. Not by a long shot.



“YOUR BROTHER-IN-LAW’S A PIECE OF WORK.”

From her spot on the bed in ‘her’ room, Olivia grinned and waggled her eyebrows. “You like him.”

Shannon stopped in the middle of pulling her pajama bottoms up to glare at her. “Shut up. I do not.”

“You do. He likes you, too. He wouldn’t be such an asshole all the time if he didn’t.”

“Aren’t I just the world’s luckiest woman,” Shannon replied dryly, jerking the pants up over her slim hips. “I’m practically swooning.”

“It’s not so bad, you know.” Despite the heat rising in her cheeks, Olivia pushed forward. “Having a Daddy who cares for you.”

There was a flash of something in Shannon’s eyes. If Olivia hadn’t known any better, she would have called it grief. “Not everyone is meant to have what you have, Liv. Besides, I enjoy all my bad habits far too much to let someone take them away.”

“Suit yourself.” But Olivia tucked the conversation in the back of her mind to examine once all this nonsense had been worked out.

Shannon joined her in the bed, stretching out so they were facing each other. “Are you going to follow James’s rules?”

“Yeah. And you’ll get a buddy at work?”

“I’ll try. If not, I’ll figure something out.”

“If your agency won’t help, tell us. I meant what I said. I’ll be pissed if you get yourself killed. I love your stubborn ass.”

“Ditto.” Shannon jerked her head toward the bedroom door. “Speaking of asses, you should get to bed before James comes in and whoops both of ours.”

“He wouldn’t do that.” Not without their consent, at least. Although Olivia couldn’t help but think it might be exactly what they both needed. “Night, Shannon.”

“Night, Liv.”

When she walked into the master suite, James was already in bed, dressed in nothing but a pair of loose-fitting gym shorts, propped up with his laptop on his lap.

“Work?” she asked, climbing into bed and snuggling into his side.

“After a fashion. How do you feel about a house in Ocean City?”

“Really? I would love that!” Peeking at the listing he had pulled up, she frowned. “Can we afford this one? It’s expensive.”

“It would be tight, for a bit. But we could rent it out when we’re not there and more than cover the mortgage.”

“Hmmm. It’s cute.” Shifting so she could see the screen more fully, she watched as he scrolled through the listings. “We should take a weekend trip soon and check out some of the ones we like best. Oh, I love this one!”

“Me too, if we can talk them down on the price a bit. It’s a little more than I was wanting to spend.”

“Hmm.” In full business mode, she considered their options. “What if Bryant went in with us? He’s always taking

trips to the beach. I'm sure he'd love to have his own place."

James closed the lid on the laptop and set it aside. "That might work." Chuckling, he leaned over to switch off the bedside lamp. "Except we'd never be able to rent it since he'd always be there."

"True, but it wouldn't be as tight for us if we went in together on it."

"I'll talk to him about it." In the dark, he turned to her and gathered her into his arms. "How are you feeling, little one?"

"Tired. I hate this feeling of not knowing what's going to happen next."

"I know. I wish I could protect you from all of this."

Love welled up in her and she lifted her head to press a kiss to his chin. "I know you do."

"You'll stick to the plan?"

"Yes, Daddy. I'll stick to the plan. I'm not going to be stupid."

"Stupid, no. Impulsive and reckless? Maybe."

Despite the light, amused tone, she heard the worry underneath. "I'll follow the rules. I promise."

"Good girl. Get some sleep, little one. You've had a long day."

Snuggled into his arms, she drifted off within minutes.



TWO DOWN, THREE TO GO.

The police hadn't been expecting another murder so soon. Nobody had. And oh, what a delicious thrill that was, surprising the police and everyone else. It shouldn't have been so easy, but for a department the size of the Baltimore PD, their resources were stretched thin. Committing murder in the most dangerous city in America certainly had its benefits.

The pictures on the wall offered comfort. And direction. They were arranged in an X formation, with the picture of the final target in the middle. Her round face, with those devious brown eyes and that cunning smile.

Nobody else seemed to see it. The article in the magazine had been glowing, fawning even. They didn't know, they never bothered to look beneath the fake, shiny exterior to the lying, cheating whore beneath.

But when it was all done, they'd see. And the work was almost complete. After the next two whores were taken out, it would be time for the grand finale. The literal cover girl for ambitious cunts everywhere.

“X marks the spot, bitch.”

CHAPTER 21



Friday was a bitch. The police still had no leads, as far as any of them could tell. Shannon's agency had pretty much told her she was overreacting and hadn't offered her any help, even after a heated phone call from James. And every single client Olivia talked to wanted to discuss her impending murder more than their housing options.

By five, the headache pulling at the base of her skull had threatened to become overwhelming. Equal parts relieved that the day was over, and irritated by how much she hadn't gotten done, she shoved her laptop in her bag and jerked the strap over her shoulder. James had left early, so at least she didn't have to worry about snapping at him on her way out the door and earning herself another trip over his knee.

"Stupid asshole murderer. Ruining everything for everybody."

"What was that?"

Olivia jumped at MaryAnn's voice and slapped a hand over her pounding heart. "Jesus Christ, you scared the shit out of me! I thought you'd left already."

Poor MaryAnn's eyes went wide, and Olivia felt like the worst kind of heel. "S-sorry. I'm leaving soon. I thought you'd

have left with Mr. Monroe.”

“It’s fine.” Pinching the bridge of her nose, Olivia blew out a breath. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have snapped at you.”

For a moment, the two women simply stared at each other. MaryAnn opened her mouth, then closed it again, like she was trying to get the courage to say something. “It’s all right,” she said at length.

“No, it’s not. I’m jumpy and on edge, but that’s no reason to take it out on the people around me.” Dragging in a deep breath, Olivia offered up an apologetic smile. “Any plans for the weekend?”

To Olivia’s surprise, MaryAnn grinned. Not just the polite, timid smile Olivia was used to, but a full-on grin that lit up her entire face. “I have a date tomorrow night.”

“Oh! How lovely.” Genuinely excited for her, Olivia leaned against the front desk. “First date?”

“Third, actually.”

“Third, huh?” Looking around to be sure they were alone, Olivia dropped her voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Well, let me know if you need me to cover for you with James on Monday.”

“Why would I need you to cover for me?”

Olivia stared at her, certain she was being played. But MaryAnn’s expression was open and honest, without a hint of guile. “Um. No reason, I guess. Enjoy your date and I’ll see you on Monday.”

“Thanks!”

Shaking her head, Olivia pushed through the front doors. And got her second shock of the evening when she stepped

outside and found James waiting for her. Holding a giant bouquet of flowers, leaning against the hood of a sleek, sexy convertible.

“Run away with me, Olivia,” he called, flinging his arms wide like the lead in some cheesy romantic comedy.

“What is all this?” she asked as she slowly descended the stairs in front of their office.

His smile flashed, quick and boyish, an easiness she hadn’t seen in far too long on his face. “I thought we could get away for the weekend. We’ve had a rough week.”

Stopping in front of him, she tilted her face up for a kiss. Her heart sighed when he obliged, laying his lips on hers in a kiss so gentle and sweet it reminded her of when they’d first started dating.

“How about it, beautiful?” he asked when he lifted his head. “Run away with me for a couple of days?”

“I don’t know.” Pretending to think about it, she tapped a finger on her chin. “My boss is kind of a tyrant and I have tons of work to do.”

“I think I can smooth things over with the tyrant. Here.”

He handed her the flowers and she buried her face in the colorful bouquet. “They’re gorgeous. You know you didn’t have to do this.”

“I know, baby. I wanted to.” Another quick kiss, followed by a playful swat to her ass. “Now, get in the car, brat.”

With a squeal of delight, she ran around the side of the car and tossed her bag in the backseat before climbing inside.

“Where are we going, Daddy?”

“It’s a surprise. Here.” Leaning over her, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out a pair of sunglasses.

“Oh, my God. Oh, my God.” She stroked the rose gold frames with reverence. “The Tom Fords I’ve been drooling over. Oh, my God. But you said they were too expensive.”

“I said you couldn’t *buy* them. I never said you couldn’t *have* them.”

“That’s a distinction without a difference,” she said, slipping them on and immediately flipping the visor down to admire her reflection. In the waning sunlight, they were even more gorgeous than they had been in the store.

“Maybe. Do you like them?”

“I love them.” Even through her excitement, she couldn’t help but feel there was something she was missing. “James, what’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“Everything is fine.” Taking her hand in his, he lifted his fingers to his lips. “Can’t a Daddy spoil his little girl every now and again?”

“Spoiling me is letting me have ice cream for dinner. This is... extravagant.”

“Livvy, just relax. I thought we could use a quick vacation and I wanted to buy you something pretty. End of story.”

“Okay.” It most definitely was *not* the end of the story. But she also knew that tone of voice; her Daddy was done talking about it and if she kept pressing, she’d just end up getting in trouble. Not wanting to ruin their weekend before it even started, she let it go.

And since he was so intent on spoiling her, she took the liberty of hooking her phone up to the car’s audio so she could

blare her 'Road Trip' playlist. James shook his head, but she caught him singing along with nearly every song.

They passed their usual exit and she turned to him, raising her voice to be heard over the music and the wind. "Aren't we going home?"

"Nope. Already packed your bags."

"But what if you forgot something?"

"I didn't. Just relax and enjoy the drive, Livvy."

Oh, well. If he had forgotten something, it would just give her an excuse to go shopping once they got where they were going. Determined to enjoy the trip, she settled back against the soft-as-butter leather seats and sang along with the playlist at the top of her lungs while they drove.

Their destination became clear about twenty minutes into the drive, and Olivia bounced excitedly in her seat. "The beach? Are we going to the beach?"

James glanced over and winked. "I thought we could check out some of the houses I've been looking at."

"We haven't been to the beach in forever!"

"I know. I'm sorry."

It wasn't the words so much as the tone that had her looking over. "I didn't mean it like that, Daddy. We've just been busy."

"I should never be too busy to take my little one to her favorite place."

"Well, we're going now, so that's all that matters. Ohh, can we go to that little seafood place we like tonight?"

"Whatever you want, Livvy."

Satisfied with his answer, she settled in again. The drive only took a couple of hours, and he seemed happy to let her control the radio, which hardly ever happened, so she took advantage and played all of her favorite songs.

Dusk was setting in, turning the sky brilliant shades of red and purple by the time they pulled into the driveway of a stunning house right on the water. “Isn’t this one of the ones you showed me the other night?”

“Yup. The owners are still renting it out while they’re trying to sell, and they happened to have an opening this weekend. I thought it would give us a chance to see if we really liked it.”

“I love it! Let’s make an offer.”

Laughing at her exuberance, James shut off the car engine and winked. “Let’s take a look around before we make any decisions, Livvy.”

“Do you have the key? Can I go inside?”

“There’s a code in the glove compartment. Go ahead, I’ll grab the bags.”

She popped open the compartment and grabbed the paper. The code was only four digits, something she wasn’t keen on. If they bought the property, she’d see if they could change it to something longer, or if she’d need to get the locks changed out. If they needed new locks, that was several hundred dollars they’d need to consider when negotiating the price. But if it meant getting her hands on a house that looked like this, she might be willing to eat the cost.

The squeal she let out when the door opened wasn’t in the least bit dignified, but she didn’t care. Tile floors and a soaring ceiling met her the moment she stepped inside, and she could

already see herself dazzling their friends with dinner parties. Maybe even a play party or two, if she could talk James into it.

Then again, as much as she loved that initial ‘wow’ factor, the high ceilings meant equally high energy bills. Something to consider, but god, did she love the view.

Olivia wandered from room to room, noting where updates were needed and cooing over amenities she liked. The Jacuzzi in the master bath was a particular favorite. Maybe she could talk her Daddy into a sexy bath later.

The man in question was dropping their bags on the floor of the master bedroom when she walked back out of the bathroom. When he opened his arms, she ran to him, nearly knocking him over when she threw her arms around his neck. “It’s amazing! There are a few upgrades I’d like to make if we bought it, but nothing we couldn’t hold off on if we needed to. Did you see this view?”

Grabbing his hand, she dragged him to the French doors she’d left standing open. The deck looked out over the ocean, with nothing but pale sand between them and the crashing waves. “It’s perfect,” she said with a sigh.

“I’m glad you like it. We can put an offer in tonight, if you want.”

“What?” She nearly elbowed him in the face when she spun to face him. “We can what?”

Grinning, he pulled her into his arms. “I’ve been thinking about this for a couple of months, and this place in particular has been calling our names. I wanted to be sure we could make it happen before I got your hopes up. I talked to Bryant, and he loves the idea of getting a place together. He said he trusted me, and I happen to know the woman listing the house, so I

told her we were interested. She has the paperwork ready to go as soon as you say go.”

If his arms hadn't been around her, she very well might have toppled over the railing of the deck. “Are you serious? But we haven't applied for financing or, or, or any of the million other things we have to do. And this is the first house we've looked at.”

“Between us and Bryant, we'd be paying cash. He's putting up about seventy percent of it, so he'll make the most off the rentals. But at least this way we wouldn't have a second mortgage to worry about. And if you want, Melanie is more than willing to show us a few other listings we've discussed tomorrow.”

“I think we should at least look at our options. We're talking about a huge investment.” But in her heart of hearts, she knew this was the one. “Where the hell would Bryant even get that kind of cash?”

“You know how he is. He lives well below his means. And he's had a few lucrative cases lately.”

“But still.” Running the numbers through her head, she nibbled at her lower lip. “I saw how much they were asking for, James. Are you sure he can afford it?”

“We'll lowball it. They're asking too much, and the house has been on the market for almost a year. Between that and the fact that we're paying cash, I think we can cut the price down significantly.”

She let the worry over the finances and the dozens of other details recede to the back of her mind and smiled up at him. “Have I told you lately you're a genius?”

“You haven't.”

Looking around, she took a step backward. There were houses on either side of them, but the deck was fairly secluded. And there was nobody on the beach. With a grin, she sank to her knees and reached for his belt.

“Someone’s feeling naughty.”

“I just want to show my Daddy how much I appreciate him.”

“Well, I’m certainly not going to stop you.”

Laughing, she pulled the belt free and unsnapped his khakis. By the time she pulled his cock from his pants, he was rock hard. Lowering her head, she sucked just the tip between her parted lips. When he groaned in appreciation, she opened her mouth and took him in as deep as he would go.

“Fuck. That feels amazing, baby. Don’t stop.”

She had no intention of stopping until he was completely drained. He’d taught her how to please him early on, and she used that knowledge to her advantage. Running her tongue along the sensitive underside of his cock, she looked up and met his hungry gaze. With her eyes locked on his, she opened her mouth and took all of him inside of her mouth. She focused on relaxing and breathing through her nose even as her throat spasmed around his cock. His hand gripped her hair when she held him there for a count of one, two, three.

“Goddamn, Livvy.”

There was nothing more powerful in her world than the knowledge that she could bring him such pleasure. Just her. There was nobody else, and there would never be anybody else, who would give him this. She savored that feeling as she sucked and licked him almost to completion.

“Close your eyes.”

The gruff order was immediately followed by his hand tightening in her hair, and his cock sliding free from her mouth. Even knowing what was coming, she obeyed. Moments later, her cheeks were splattered with a hot, sticky liquid.

“You look so pretty with Daddy’s cum all over your face, little one. Open your eyes.”

She looked up at him, and his grin was worth every bit of stickiness coating her face. “I really like this house, Daddy.”

He laughed and helped her to her feet. “Me too, little one. Let’s get you cleaned up and we can go to dinner.”



AN HOUR LATER, SHE WAS CLEAN AND FRESH AGAIN, AND dressed for dinner. James had packed one of his favorite dresses, a short, hot pink number that left little to the imagination. Studying herself in the mirror, Olivia tugged on the hem of the dress, turning side to side and frowning at the swell of her tummy under the fabric.

“I can’t wear this. I’ve gained like fifty pounds since I bought it.”

“You have not.” His image, as handsome as the day they met, joined hers in the reflection. “You look incredible.”

“I look like a whale.”

As soon as the words left her lips, she knew she was going to regret them. In the mirror, she watched his eyes harden, and that telltale muscle tic in his jaw.

“Olivia Jane Monroe. What did you just say?”

Shit. “I’m sorry, Daddy, I didn’t mean it.”

“Bend over. You know the rule.”

“But Daddy, I said I was sorry!”

“Am I the person you’re supposed to be apologizing to? Bend over.”

Pouting, she bent at the waist and placed her hands on her knees. She lifted her eyes to meet her own gaze in the mirror, then looked up to where he was standing behind her. A soft whimper escaped as he slowly removed the thick leather encircling his waist. “Do I have to do this?” she whined. “It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly. You know I don’t allow anyone to talk about my wife that way, including, and *especially*, my wife.”

She watched, helpless, as he lifted his folded belt and snapped it against her bottom three times in quick succession.

“Apologize.”

Resigned to her fate, she shifted her attention back to her own reflection. “I’m sorry I called you a whale.” Mirror Olivia winced when the belt cracked against her bottom another three times. “I’m sorry I called you a whale.” The final three had tears stinging her eyes. “I’m sorry I called you a whale,” she whispered.

“Good girl. Come here.”

When she straightened, James wrapped his arms around her, rocking her slightly side to side. “I haven’t had to do that in a long time. Is everything okay?”

“Yeah.” With a soft sigh, she snuggled into his embrace. “It’s just with everything with us the past few months, and

now with this murderer, I haven't been watching my diet and I've gained some weight. I don't like the way my clothes fit."

"Then, when we get home, we can start making some healthier changes to our diet. But this weekend is for us, and the next time I hear something negative from you, you'll be making your apologies with a mouth full of soap. Understood?"

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good girl. Ready for dinner?"

"I guess."

Cupping her cheek with his hand, he tilted her face up so she was forced to look at him. "You look beautiful, little one. I promise. Would Daddy lie to you?"

She smiled. "No, but you might be a tiny bit biased."

"Biased? Because I'm married to the most beautiful girl in the whole wide world?"

Her insides went to complete mush at the ridiculous compliment, but she rolled her eyes for form. "Haha. I'm ready to go if you're done sweet-talking me, old man."

"Oh, you're going to pay for that, you little brat."

His fingers drilled into her sides, making her squeal with laughter. "Daddy, stop! I take it back, you're not old!"

"That's more like it. Let's go."

They left the top down on the way to the restaurant, and it was so stunningly perfect Olivia didn't even mind the wind tugging at her carefully styled hair.

"We should get one of these," she said when they parked.

"A convertible?" James snorted. "Absolutely not."

“But we need one! How can we have a beach house without a convertible?”

“Livvy, we already have two cars. We don’t need a third.”

Changing her approach, she shifted in her seat to face him and ran a hand up his thigh. “James. I really love this car. Have I ever mentioned how much sports cars turn me on?”

“Nice try, little girl. We’re not buying a car right now.”

With a defeated sigh, she pulled away. “Can’t blame a girl for trying.”

“I suppose I can’t. Unless a certain little girl is going to pout about being told no.”

“I might.”

“Well, little girls who pout don’t get dessert.”

“Pout? Who’s pouting? I’m not pouting.”

With a loud, happy laugh, James leaned over for a hard, quick kiss. “God, I love you.”

CHAPTER 22



James watched, growing more uncomfortable by the second as his gorgeous wife enjoyed her dessert. Seemingly oblivious the effect she was having on him, she gave the hot-fudge-coated spoon a long, slow lick, and he was reminded of their little episode on the back deck earlier. It was taking every bit of self-control he had to not drag her out of the restaurant and back to the house.

But he had plans for his girl. It had been too long since he'd really spoiled her, and with all the madness surrounding them, he wanted her to have some time to enjoy herself.

"This is incredible. I always forget how much I love this place." Her eyes opened, mischief twinkling in the brown, letting him know she wasn't completely clueless as to his current predicament like he'd believed. "We should pick up some chocolate sauce on our way back to the house."

If his pants got any tighter, he was going to be in serious trouble. "We can do that. But we're not heading back yet. How about a walk on the boardwalk?"

Excitement lit up her face like the Fourth of July. "Really? All the way to the end?"

The end of the boardwalk housed a small carnival of sorts, a spot he knew she loved. "Absolutely."

“Oh.” Her face fell into a pout and once again he was reminded of the way her lips had looked wrapped around his cock. Lifting one of her long, shapely legs, she examined the skinny heels he’d packed for her. “I can’t walk that far in these.”

As much as he loved the way her legs looked in the heels, she was right. But a good Daddy always came prepared. “Lucky for you, I tossed a pair of sandals in the backseat while you were getting dressed.”

“Then why are we still sitting here? Let’s go, old man!”

Since he’d already paid the bill, James stood and held out a hand for her. Walking out of the restaurant, he put his head down so only she could hear. “Call me old man again, and I’ll be turning that pretty little bottom red when we get back to the house.”

The playful expression on her face was worth the rock-hard erection pressing painfully against the zipper of his jeans. “Promises, promises, old man.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.” A quick glance around confirmed they were mostly alone, so he reached down and swatted her once, hard enough to make her squeal.

“James!” Her voice dropped to a hiss. “You can’t do that here!”

“It’s Daddy to you, little girl. And I can do whatever I want. Isn’t that right?”

Though her cheeks went pink with embarrassment, her eyes blazed with need. “Yes, Daddy.”

God, it was tempting to ditch their plans and spend the entire weekend in bed. Instead, he winked and linked his fingers with hers. At the car, she changed into her sandals, and

they walked the short distance to the wooden boardwalk. The soft breeze coming off the ocean lifted her carefully curled hair, sending it dancing to a tune he couldn't hear. Unable to stop himself even if he wanted to, he pulled her into him and lowered his lips to hers.

“I love kissing you, little one,” he said when he reluctantly broke the kiss a few moments later.

“Yeah?” She grinned up at him, and he'd have been lying if he said he didn't enjoy the way her eyes had gone just a little unfocused and glassy with his kiss.

“Yes. I don't get to kiss you nearly as often as I'd like.”

“Then shut up and kiss me again, old man.”

He growled softly, and the kiss he laid on her this time wasn't slow and gentle. It was filled with dark promises of retribution. “Keep pushing your luck, little one,” he murmured against her lips. “The ride home Sunday may not be as much fun as the ride here.”

“Whatever you say, Daddy.”

“That's more like it.” James took her hand again, swinging it lightly as they strolled the boardwalk.

“Oh!” They'd only passed a few shops when Olivia rushed over to a window display, pulling him along behind her. “Isn't it gorgeous?”

The sculpture was stunning. Made of what he assumed was marble, a mermaid rose from a crashing wave made of glass, her head tossed back as some imaginary wind lifted her hair. The mermaid's face was somehow hopeful and sad at the same time, and it tugged at something in his soul.

But not nearly as much as the wistful look on his wife's face. "Do you like it?"

"I love it. It would look beautiful in the new house. It's probably a small fortune, though."

"Let's go take a look."

"Oh, no, we don't have to. I just thought it was pretty. Really, James, you've spoiled me enough this weekend."

"Nonsense. There's no such thing when it comes to my girl. Come on." Ignoring her protests, he pulled her into the shop.

The sculpture wasn't as expensive as he'd imagined, though it was more than he'd normally spend on such a piece. But he couldn't put a price tag on Olivia's happiness, and it was obvious she wanted the sculpture. After paying for it, he made arrangements to have it delivered to the new house after the papers were signed.

"You really didn't have to buy it, James."

"I know. But you wanted it, and I wanted to make you happy."

Without warning, she stopped in the middle of the boardwalk, looking up at him with her 'I have something big to tell you' look. "James, I don't need things to make me happy. This whole weekend, the house, none of it matters to me. I mean, I love it, please don't get me wrong. But what makes me happy is having you by my side. I don't need you to spoil me."

He considered brushing her off, but the earnest look in her eyes told him he needed to come clean. "I need it."

"What?"

Rubbing the back of his neck, he blew out a breath. “I need to spoil you. The past few months without my little girl were hell, and we were finally getting back on track when this asshole decided to start killing people. I love you, and I need to spoil you a little so you never forget how much I love you. Losing you...” He had to stop and drag in a breath to counteract the shakiness in his voice. “Losing you would fucking kill me, Livvy. I just need you to know you’re my whole world.”

“Oh, Daddy.” She threw her arms around his neck and squeezed. “I know. I always know. But if you need to spoil me, I won’t say another word about it.” Pulling away from him, she mimed zipping her lips and throwing away the key.

Her silliness helped to ease some of the tension gripping him. Leaning down, he brushed a kiss over her lips. “That’s my girl.”



SUNDAY MORNING, HE WOKE TO THE SOUND OF CRASHING waves. Sitting up in bed, he squinted at the sunlight pouring into the room through the open door.

Why the hell was the door open? He looked to his left, his stomach lurching violently at the empty space beside him.

“Liv? Olivia!”

He’d just yanked on his shorts when she came jogging up the stairs. “You’re awake!” she called cheerfully as she stepped through into the room.

Without giving her a chance to explain where she'd been, James sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her across his lap. The damp spot on the back of her shorts gave him a pretty good idea where she'd disappeared to, which just cemented his decision. Tugging the shorts to her knees, he slammed his hand into her wet, bathing suit covered bottom.

"Ow! Daddy, stop!" Kicking and squealing for all she was worth, Olivia struggled to avoid his hand, but he was well practiced in giving his little girl the spanking she needed, no matter how hard she fought.

"You do not disappear without telling Daddy where you're going!" He continued to pepper her bottom with hard, well-placed swats while he lectured. "I had no idea where you were. You scared the shit out of me, Olivia Jane!"

She froze over his lap. "Oh. Ouch! I'm sorry, Daddy."

It was the real contrition in her voice that convinced him she'd had enough. After a few more heavy spanks, he stopped and rubbed her bottom. "Why are you sorry, little one?"

"I didn't think about your feelings. I'm sorry, please don't be mad anymore."

"Oh, Livvy." With a sigh, James helped her to sit up on his lap. "I'm not mad. I was scared. You should have left me a note or woken me up or something. Not to mention the whole issue with going into the ocean by yourself, young lady."

"I'm not a baby, I know how to swim."

"I know you're not a baby. But even the strongest swimmers have accidents in the ocean. No more going in without me, okay?"

"But Daddy—"

“Olivia.”

She pouted, her full bottom lip sticking out so far he could've landed a 747 on it. “Fine, I won't have any fun without you.”

Raising an eyebrow, he gave her ass a hard squeeze. “Someone seems keen to ride home on a very sore bottom this afternoon.”

“No, Daddy.” Resting her head on his shoulder, she sighed. “I'm sorry I scared you and I won't go in the ocean alone again.”

“Much better. Now, how about some waffles?”

CHAPTER 23



Olivia was fighting sleep by the time they turned into their neighborhood. Despite sleeping like a rock the night before, she'd worn herself out with swimming and other activities with her Daddy.

But when she spotted Bryant's car in their driveway and the figure sitting on their front steps, every trace of sleepiness fled.

"Something's wrong. James, did he call you? What's going on?"

"I don't know—Olivia!"

Before he'd even put the car in park, she was unbuckled and out of the door, racing for the front steps, her heart threatening to beat out of her chest. "Bryant! What's wrong?"

Pushing to his feet, Bryant reached for her, and the sadness in his eyes knocked the air from her lungs before he even spoke a word. "Livvy, sweetheart. It's Shannon. She's in the hospital."

The world spun violently and she stopped at the bottom of the steps, clutching at the porch railing. "You're lying."

"No, sweetheart, I'm not. I saw it on the news this morning, and I made some calls. She was attacked last night."

“Daddy?” Tears blurred her vision as she turned, seeking comfort, but even James’s strong, familiar arms weren’t enough to hold back the sobs.

“I know, baby. Let’s get you inside so you can lie down.”

“No!” Jerking out of his embrace, she glared up at him. “I need to see her.”

“Livvy—” As if catching himself, he broke off and sighed. “I’m sorry. Of course, you do, baby. We can go see her right now.”

“I’ll drive,” Bryant said, pulling her close to press a kiss to her forehead.

Unable to speak, she jerked her head up and down, grateful to have them to lean on as James bundled her into the back of Bryant’s car. Her mind was racing in a million different directions, but whenever she tried to focus on a particular thought, it seemed to skirt out of reach. Almost as though her brain was trying to protect her from the enormity of what was happening.

“What happened?” she managed to ask halfway there.

“I don’t know, exactly. The hospital couldn’t tell me anything, since I’m not family. The detectives were a little more forthcoming, but not much.”

“Is she going to be okay?”

“I—” He audibly swallowed. “I don’t know, sweetheart.”

“What the hell *do* you know, Bryant?” she snapped, ignoring James’s attempts to calm her.

“I know she was found this morning in a house she’s listing. And she’s pretty beat up.” When he met her gaze in the rearview mirror, her stomach twisted at the grief in his eyes.

“Livvy... she might not make it, sweetheart. You need to be prepared for that possibility.”

“No. You don’t know her like I do. She can’t—she won’t.” Squeezing her eyes shut, she focused on her breathing. But she couldn’t seem to draw in enough air through the vise of fear gripping her lungs. “She’s strong,” she whispered.

“Livvy.” James’s gentle voice prodded her to open her eyes and turn to him. She saw her own fear mirrored in the crystal blue, but underneath she saw the strength she so often relied on him for. “Just breathe, little one. You need to breathe, and calm down so you can be strong for Shannon. Can you do that for me?”

“Yes.” She gripped his hand, centering herself with his touch. “I’m calm. I’m calm.”

“Good girl.”

While he’d been coaching her through her mini panic attack, Bryant had found a parking space. The three of them climbed out of the car and James’s hand on hers was the only thing that kept her from running through the white, sterile halls in search of her best friend.

Bryant had worked some kind of magic with his police contacts and gotten them cleared through. The uniformed officer standing guard outside her room made it clear which one she was in. Gesturing for them to stay put, Bryant stepped forward and spoke to the officer in hushed, secretive tones before waving her and James on.

But now that she was here, she couldn’t move. Fear, the deep, primal kind that came from the possibility of losing someone you love kept her rooted to the spot.

“Livvy?”

At the sound of her name, she looked up at James. Her Daddy. The vise around her chest loosened and she was able to breathe again. "I can't," she whispered, shame heating her cheeks and bringing tears to her eyes.

James lifted a hand to her cheek. Part of her expected to see disappointment in his face, but she was met only with compassion. "Yes, you can, little one." He dropped his voice so only she could hear. "Daddy's right here. We'll go together."

"Okay." Focusing on him, she matched her breaths to his as he took one deliberately deep breath, and then another. "Okay."

Hand in hand, they walked the few short steps to the doorway. The sympathy on the officer's face was genuine, nothing like what she was used to seeing from Detective Michaelson.

She couldn't decide if that was better or worse.

A squeeze from her Daddy's hand propelled her forward and together they stepped inside.

Nothing, she realized, could have prepared her for the sight of her best friend in a hospital bed, pale and lifeless with dozens of wires and tubes connected to her. Shannon, who had always seemed larger than life, looked like a tiny, frail little girl in the large bed. Her right eye was black and blue, a stark contrast to the white of the bandages around her neck.

"Oh, Shay." Olivia rushed forward, picking up her friend's limp hand. There was so much she wanted to say, but the words all seemed to get stuck in her throat.

Bryant and James flanked her, quiet sentries guarding their princess. As grateful as she was for their silent strength, she

desperately wished she could will some of it into the lifeless form in the hospital bed.

They'd only been in the room a few minutes when the sound of a throat clearing had them all turning to face the door. Detective Rogers stood just inside the room, her face a stony mask. "I'm sorry to intrude, but I need a few moments with Mrs. Monroe."

"Can't this wait?" Bryant snapped.

Forcing a smile, Olivia squeezed his hand. "It's fine. Will you stay with her while I go talk to the detective?"

The muscles working in his throat told her he wanted to argue, but he eventually nodded. "Whatever you need, sweetheart."

James once again took her hand, and they followed Rogers down the hall to a small, empty waiting room.

"I know this is difficult for you, but I just have a couple of questions. Would you like to sit?"

"I'm not sure how much help I'll be," Olivia said as James guided her to a chair. "We've been out of town since Friday and we just got home."

Rogers jotted something down in the small notebook she'd pulled from her jacket pocket. "That's helpful. Anything you can give us might help us piece things together. You and Ms. Wright are friends, correct?"

"Yes." Swallowing hard, Olivia blinked against the tears burning in her eyes. "She's my best friend."

"Do you know if she'd been taking any precautions since the first murder?"

Murder. Olivia couldn't quite stop the soft whimper from escaping, prompting James to drape an arm around her shoulders and squeeze. "Um. She stayed with us for a couple nights. Her agency didn't seem too concerned, but I do know she was able to get some of her coworkers to go to a few showings with her."

"That's very helpful, Mrs. Monroe. Did you speak to her at all this weekend? Did she mention anything about who she might have been meeting last night?"

"No. I didn't call her Friday to let her know I was leaving town. She'd decided to go back to her place, so I didn't even think to call her." Each breath required her to focus. "I didn't think of her at all this weekend."

Beside her, James shook his head. "Livvy, baby, we didn't know."

"We didn't know because we didn't call her. I was so wrapped up in the house and the surprise vacation, I never thought to check in. I should have." Hysteria bubbled up inside of her and no amount of breathing techniques could keep it at bay. "If I'd called last night, I would have known something was wrong and we could have helped her."

"Look at me."

The snapped order from Detective Rogers shocked her into obedience. "This was not your fault. This happened because some asshole has it in their head that they have the right to come after you and your friends. Everything that has happened, every second of pain and misery you all have experienced is his fault. Not yours. Understand?"

"Yes, ma'am." The lecture and instinctive response helped to push the panic back, at least enough so she didn't feel so

wildly out of control. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Or anybody else for that matter. Not a goddamn bit of this is your fault, so don’t you dare apologize.” The detective rose and tugged forcefully at her shirt sleeves, as if the fabric had somehow offended her. “If you think of anything else, you know how to contact me.”

“I like her,” James said when the door shut behind her.

Olivia stared at him for a moment before snorting out a disbelieving laugh. “She’s a real peach.”

“Well, she could certainly work on her customer service skills, but she wasn’t wrong. And you don’t look like you’re about to go into a full-blown meltdown anymore.”

“No, I’m better.” She was surprised to realize she meant it. Though she was still sad, and scared, she no longer felt like she was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. “We should go back to Shannon’s room.”

“You sure? You can have a few more minutes if you need it.”

“I love that you want to protect me, but I’m good. Pinkie promise, Daddy.”

Hooking his pinkie with hers, he leaned down to press a kiss to her lips. “All right. Let’s go.”

They returned to the hospital room where Bryant had been joined by a stunning older version of Shannon. “Mary.” Taking the last few steps at a run, Olivia threw her arms around the older woman’s neck. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“She’ll be fine.” Mary Wright’s voice held the strength Olivia couldn’t seem to find in herself. “My baby is strong. She’s a fighter.”

“I know.” Olivia stepped back, allowing James to move in for a hug. Bryant hung back, slowly moving toward the door.

But Olivia wasn't about to let him get away that easily. Linking arms with him, she anchored him in place. “Mary, have you met my brother-in-law, Bryant? He and Shannon are... friends.”

Mary's eyebrow quirked up, and despite the circumstances, her green eyes danced with mischief. “We've been introduced, but I was under the impression he was here with you.”

“Don't let him fool you. He's been working up the nerve to ask Shannon on a date since he laid eyes on her.”

The look Bryant sent her told her she'd regret that bold statement eventually. But she was enjoying herself too much to stop, and her teasing had chased some of the pain from his eyes.

Worth it.

“So, Bryant. Now that I know you have designs on my Shannon, might I ask what you do for a living?”

The look Bryant sent James was clearly a silent plea for help but James simply shrugged, amusement dancing in his eyes. Apparently realizing he was on his own, Bryant forced a smile in Mary's direction. “I'm a lawyer, ma'am.”

“What kind of law?”

“Criminal, but nothing as glamorous as you might see on television.”

“Ah. I got my start in criminal law, but Shannon's father convinced me to move to real estate law after she was born.”

Olivia hadn't known Bryant's face could turn that particular shade of red, and she had to swallow a giggle when

he stammered out a reply. "I'm sorry, ma'am. I, ah, didn't mean to imply anything."

"Of course not, dear. Do you own your own home? I happen to know a lovely agent."

"No, ma'am. I rent an apartment downtown."

"He is about to co-own a property with Olivia and me in Ocean City," James finally spoke up. "We'll be using it as our own personal beach getaway as well as a rental property."

"Figures."

The low, croaky commentary had all of them whipping around to where Shannon was glaring at them from her bed.

"Shannon!" Olivia rushed to her side, and if it hadn't been for all the wires and tubes she would have climbed right into bed with her. As it was, she made do with clutching her hand and running a hand over her matted hair. "You scared the shit out of us, Shay."

"Sorry. Hurts." Pain etched into every line of her face, she turned her head. "Mama."

Mary pressed her daughter's hand to her cheek. "I'm right here, baby. I'm right here."

"What..." Shannon swallowed, and the simple action had tears slipping from the corners of her eyes. "What happened?"

"You don't remember?" Bryant asked, frowning from his position at the foot of the bed.

Olivia glared at him. "Unhelpful, Bryant." Softening her expression, she turned back to Shannon. "You just rest and get better and then we can talk."

“Can’t remember.” Panic filled Shannon’s pale eyes.
“Why? Liv? Mama?”

Before Olivia could reassure her friend everything would be fine, she and the men were ushered out of the room by a handful of nurses. With nothing to do but wait, they returned to the room Detective Rogers had interviewed her in.

“What’s taking so long?” Wringing her hands, Olivia paced the small room for what felt like the hundredth time.

“They have to be thorough, Livvy. Maybe we should go home and check on her in the morning,” James suggested softly.

“No!”

Her outburst earned her identical raised eyebrows. “Do you really want to push your luck with both of us, young lady?” Bryant growled.

Ignoring the warning in his voice, she crossed her arms. “I’m not leaving her. And that’s final.”

With a warning look for his brother, James pulled her close, running his hands up and down her back. “Livvy, baby, they won’t let us stay all night. I’m going to see if we can say goodnight to her, but then I’m taking you home. I’ll be back in a few minutes. Try not to kill each other while I’m gone.”

He left after dropping a kiss on her head and Olivia glared at his retreating back, stomping her foot when the door shut behind him.

“Come here, Olivia.”

“Ugh.” Making sure her eye roll was obvious enough for him to see, she turned to Bryant. “What?”

“Oh, little girl. You are so lucky we’re in a public place. Come. Here.”

Bryant had never punished her without James’s explicit permission, but that didn’t mean he wouldn’t. But she was too annoyed with the pair of them to give in that easily. “Why?”

“Because we both need it.”

The truth of it caught her off guard. Letting her arms drop, she crossed the room and crawled into his lap. Holding her tightly, he rocked from side to side and eventually the tension in her body eased little by little.

“I’m scared, Bryant,” she admitted in a whisper.

“I know, sweetheart. Me too.”

She couldn’t resist needling him. “Because you like her,” she said in a singsong voice.

“Because I love you.”

“Bryant, this isn’t about me.”

“Don’t be stupid, Olivia.”

Twisting out of his arms, she jumped to her feet and glared at him. “I’m not stupid.”

“You are if you don’t see this is about you. If you haven’t figured it out yet you’re the grand fucking prize.” Fury unlike anything she’d seen in him before blazed in his eyes.

“You think I haven’t figured that out?” She didn’t care that she was shouting. “I’m not a fucking moron! You think I don’t know, for whatever reason, I’m the end game? That I’m the reason my best friend is lying in a hospital bed after someone tried to kill her? You really think I don’t know that, you arrogant asshole?”

“Shit.” All of the fight left him and he scrubbed a hand over his face. “Sweetheart, that’s not what I meant. This isn’t your fault.”

“I want to believe that. Detective Rogers told me it wasn’t. But it’s hard. And I’m so scared.”

Bryant easily plucked her off her feet and cradled her on his lap again. “Your Daddy and I would never let anything happen to you. Understand me? We’re going to keep you safe. I swear it.”

“What if you can’t?”

It was, selfishly, her greatest fear. One she hadn’t even voiced to James.

“We will. You just have to be an obedient little girl, and I swear we won’t let anything happen to you.”

A shadow fell over them and she looked up to see James standing next to them. “Bryant is right, baby. We would never let anyone hurt you.”

Though she still wasn’t convinced, she nodded. “Okay. Can we go see Shannon now?”

“Yes, baby. But then we are going home and you’re going to take a nice hot bath and go to bed. Got it?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

He held out a hand, and she accepted his help back to her feet. Flanked once again by the two men she loved most in the world, she summoned every ounce of her strength and walked back down the hall.

CHAPTER 24



*A*fter news about the attack on Shannon spread, everyone at Olivia's agency suddenly became her personal bodyguards. She no longer went to any showings alone, regardless of who the client was. And now, more than ever, all of her clients seemed more interested in the murders than buying houses.

Then there was James. The man hardly let her out of his sight if he could help it. More often than not, he was the one who accompanied her to her showings. He insisted on driving her to and from work, and if he couldn't go with her to meet a client, he made her ride along with whoever was shadowing her. She hadn't driven her own car in nearly a week.

And every evening after work, they met Bryant at the hospital so she could sit with Shannon for a few hours before going home. After five days confined to a bed, Shannon wasn't in a particularly chipper mood.

"I feel fine. I don't know why they won't let me go home."

"They said you could probably be released tomorrow." Nudging the tray of untouched food closer to her friend, Olivia tried to keep her voice bright and cheerful. "The guest room is all ready for you."

“Seriously, Liv. You guys have already done too much.” Shannon pushed the tray away again. “Mama said I can come stay with her for a little while.”

“You’ll be safer at their house,” Bryant insisted from across the room. “And it’s easier for the cops to keep an eye on the two of you if you’re together.” Olivia glared at him, but he just shrugged. “You know I’m right.”

“You don’t have to be such a jerk about it, Bryant.” Olivia’s voice was sharper than she’d intended, but the reminder of the constant police presence just cranked up her nerves, which were already in overdrive.

“Livvy.” James ran a hand over her hair, a gesture that normally soothed her, but at that moment just felt patronizing.

Shrugging off his touch, she focused on Shannon. “If you make us a list, we can stop at the store tomorrow and get you whatever you need. I know you like those weird smoothie things.”

Shannon rolled her eyes. The puffiness around her right eye had gone down considerably, but the discoloration lingered more than Olivia cared for. “I make my own breakfast smoothies, but I can live without those for a few days. Whatever you normally have at the house is fine.”

Frowning, Olivia nudged the tray of food back toward Shannon. “Don’t be silly. We want you to be comfortable.”

“Really, Liv. It’s just for a day or two, so I’ll be fine.”

Bryant snorted disbelievingly from the corner he’d planted himself in. “The only way it’s going to be a day or two is if you have some superhuman healing powers you’ve neglected to clue us in on, *and* the cops somehow manage to catch this

guy in the next forty-eight hours. You're with them until he's caught and you're back to one hundred percent."

The corner of Shannon's lip curled up in an impressive snarl. "You are not the boss of me, Bryant Monroe."

"Maybe not, but you're still going to listen to me. I'm trying to keep you alive, goddammit."

"You think I want to die?" Shannon's voice, still rough from having their would-be murderer's hands wrapped around her throat, rose sharply.

"I think you don't seem too interested in helping us keep you alive," Bryant shot back.

Before anyone could get another word in, Shannon snagged the cup of pudding from her dinner tray and hurled it at him. Unfortunately, her aim was horrible and the pudding hit the wall behind him, exploding in a shower of chocolate.

A nurse came rushing in moments later. "What is going on in here?" She looked over at Bryant, then at the chocolate dripping down the wall behind him. With a resigned sigh, she shook her head. "All right. That's enough excitement for one night. You all need to go home now."

"But—" Olivia's protests were cut off by James squeezing the back of her neck. As much as she wanted to argue, she knew that signal well enough and she had no desire to earn a spanking on top of all the other bullshit they were dealing with.

"Go on, Liv. I'm tired anyway." Shannon offered a forced smile. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"We'll be here." Giving her friend's hand one last squeeze, she forced a smile of her own. "I promise not to bring Bryant."

Closing her eyes, Shannon lay back against the pillows and laughed. “Good luck with that.”

After James and Bryant each said their goodbyes, the trio was ushered out of the room by Shannon’s harried nurse. They walked to the parking deck in silence, each lost in their own thoughts and worries.

“Bryant,” James began when they reached Bryant’s car. “Would you like to come over for a bit?”

The casual tone was almost too casual, and Olivia narrowed her eyes at him. What were they up to?

The slight curve of Bryant’s lip just confirmed her suspicions that they were planning something behind her back. “Yeah. I’ll meet you there.”

“What’s going on?” she asked, looking from one brother to the other.

Bryant’s only answer was to lean down and brush his lips across her cheek. “See you in a bit, brat.”

Slipping an arm around her waist, James guided her to his SUV. Unsatisfied with Bryant’s non-answer, she looked up at her husband. “James, what are you up to?”

“You’ll see.” Opening the passenger side door, he nudged her inside.

“That’s not an answer, James!” Anger began to override her curiosity. “Tell me what’s going on, right now.”

“No.” The refusal was delivered in a perfectly calm, even voice, but she heard the authority ringing in that single syllable. “You do not make the demands, little girl. I do. You’ve just earned yourself a loss of speaking privileges until we get home.”

“That’s not fair!”

“And that’s three. Want to try for more?” He cocked an eyebrow, practically daring her to speak again.

It had been so long since he’d used this particular punishment, she’d nearly forgotten how it worked. But it came rushing back to her then. One swat with the paddle for every word she spoke while under restriction. And she would have to take each stroke in perfect silence, or it didn’t count. Unwilling to risk adding to her punishment, she silently shook her head.

“Good girl. I think you’ll enjoy what Daddy has in mind when we get home.” With a wink, he shut the car door. Biting back the dozens of questions dancing in her mind, she folded her hands in her lap and faced forward.

They rode the first five minutes to the house in complete silence before he spoke. “You’re being such a good girl, Livvy. Would you like to know what Daddy and Bryant are planning tonight? Nod if you do.”

Nodding, she shifted to face him.

“You’re so stressed, little one.” Glancing over at her, he lifted a hand to stroke her cheek. “And it’s been a while since we all played together. I thought you could use a night of distraction. Sound good so far?”

Squeezing her thighs together in an attempt to relieve the sudden ache between them, she nodded again.

“That’s my good girl.” James grinned and gave her hair a playful little tug. “When we get home, I want you to go upstairs and wait for us in your room. I want you on your knees in the corner, naked.”

Her lower lip pushed out into a pout, but he just laughed. “You can pout all you want, little one. It will just give Bryant a reason to spank you, and you know how much he enjoys turning your bottom red.”

Because it was true, and Bryant spanked a hell of a lot harder than her Daddy even when he was playing, she immediately stopped pouting.

Bryant’s car was already in the driveway when they turned in. Putting their car in park, James leaned over to release her seatbelt. “You can speak again, little one. But you still have those three coming for so blatantly ignoring me earlier.”

“Yes, Sir. I’m sorry.”

“I know you are, little one. Go on, we’ll give you a few minutes to get settled before we join you.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Such a good girl,” he murmured, stroking her cheek again. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” The passenger door opened, revealing a grinning Bryant.

“Ready for some fun, Livvy baby?”

Sticking her tongue out at him, she hopped out of the car. “Only if you’re nice.”

“Please.” Bryant fisted a hand in her hair, yanking her head back as he pulled her into him. “You love it when I’m mean.”

“Do not.”

“Keep lying to me, sweetheart. It’ll just give me a reason to be even meaner.”

Releasing his grip on her hair, he turned her toward the house and sent her off with a stinging smack to her bottom. Turning back, she gave him one last poke of her tongue before walking to the house. Even though she was dying to see what they had planned for her, she forced herself to walk and not run. No sense in giving them an even more inflated ego over the way they affected her.

She took her time getting ready. Stripping naked, putting her hair up, all the little things she needed to do to prepare for them. With no stalling tactics left, she sighed and knelt in the corner, her back straight and her hands laced behind her head the way she knew they would be expecting.

“What a beautiful sight.” Bryant spoke first when the door opened behind her, his voice husky with desire.

“Isn’t she?” James’s voice was a low purr. “You want to warm her up for me? She has three with the paddle coming before we can play.”

“It would be my pleasure. Come here, brat.”

Taking a deep breath, she pushed to her feet and turned. Experience had taught her never to cover herself around either of them, so she kept her hands by her side as she walked over to the chair where Bryant was seated.

“I heard you disobeyed your Daddy, naughty girl. Care to explain yourself?”

She glanced over at James, who was laying different implements and toys out on the bed, including the large wooden paddle she’d be facing once Bryant was finished with her. “Not really, sir.”

“It wasn’t a request, young lady. Explain.”

Giving in to the annoyance welling up inside of her, she stomped her foot and crossed her arms. “I was just upset about being left out of the plans, okay?”

“Does this really seem like a good time to be getting an attitude with me?”

The steel in his voice sent a shiver down her spine and she immediately dropped her arms. “No, sir.”

“You’re lucky I don’t have your Daddy double that count with the paddle. Get over my lap before I change my mind.”

Knowing it wasn’t out of the realm of possibility, she hurriedly draped herself over his knees. A large hand, larger and rougher than her Daddy’s, rubbed her bottom.

“You know, if you had just listened to your Daddy, you could be getting a fun spanking right now. But you decided to be naughty instead.” Cupping each cheek individually, he squeezed hard enough to make her wince. “So now I get to warm you up for your Daddy’s paddle before we can have any fun.”

That large hand slammed into her bottom, setting her skin on fire with one swat. “Ow! Bryant, stop, that’s too hard!”

“Excuse me, young lady?” A second swat landed on the opposite cheek. “Who decides how hard naughty little girls get spanked?”

She howled when a third and fourth spank quickly followed. “You do, sir! I’m sorry!”

“Better.” With that, he focused on setting her ass on fire. God, she’d forgotten how hard he could spank when he wanted to teach her a lesson. And no amount of squirming and fighting allowed her to escape even a single punishing swat.

“Are you going to be a good little girl the rest of the night?” His assault on her bottom didn’t even slow as he lectured.

“Yes, sir! I promise, I promise!”

“Let’s make sure, shall we?” The final lightning round was applied to her sit spots, drawing a long screech from her.

By the time he finished, she was limp over his knee, whining and whimpering at the burning in her bottom. A burning that was matched only by the heat between her thighs. She couldn’t stop herself from pressing her hips into Bryant’s muscular leg, seeking some kind of release.

“Naughty girl,” Bryant said with a chuckle, giving her two more slaps to her bottom that just made her grind harder against his leg. “Up you go, so your Daddy can paddle you.”

Groaning, she stood and allowed him to lead her to the bed, where James was standing with the dreaded paddle in hand. “Daddy, Bryant spanked me really hard! You don’t have to paddle me; I swear I learned my lesson.”

“Nice try, little one. One more argument from you and I’ll start adding strokes. Get in position.”

With a heavy sigh of defeat, she rose on her tiptoes and bent over the side of the bed with her bottom high, waiting for the first blow.

“Why are you getting a paddling, little one?” James tapped the cool wood against her burning backside.

“Because I was naughty and I argued with you after you put me on restriction, Daddy.”

“Three swats, no noise whatsoever or it doesn’t count. Ready?”

“Yes, Daddy.”

The first blow took her breath away, and it took every ounce of willpower she had not to gasp or shriek at the thousands of little needles burning into her skin.

“That’s one. You did good, little one. Two more.”

The second swat was lower, but it covered enough of the same real estate that the burn brought tears to her eyes. Burying her face in her arms, she let out a slow, shuddering breath.

“Brave little girl.” Bryant’s murmur of approval was accompanied by his hand running over her aching bottom. “Almost done, and then we can have some fun, okay?”

Nodding, she braced herself for the final blow. This one caught her sit spots and the tops of her thighs, and she just barely stopped the scream burning in her chest. She did stomp her foot, but Daddy had never said she had to keep her feet on the floor, so she hoped he wouldn’t hold it against her.

“That’s our good girl. Come here.” James pulled her up and into his arms and she finally let out a whimper.

“Hurts, Daddy.”

“I know, little one.” Pulling away, he smiled down at her. “Are you going to be a good girl the rest of the night?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good girl. You can start by bending back over the bed so Bryant can plug your pretty little bottom.”

Turning away from her Daddy, she saw Bryant holding up one of her larger plugs. It was on the tip of her tongue to argue, but the paddling was fresh enough in her mind to

remind her to behave. So she silently returned to the bed and draped herself over the edge once more.

“Maybe you need to paddle her more often, James.” Bryant’s voice was low and husky with need and amusement. “She’s so sweet and obedient afterwards. Hold her open for me.”

Warm hands, her Daddy’s hands, gripped her sore cheeks and separated them, baring her most intimate place to their view. Instinctively, she clenched, trying vainly to hide those secret parts.

“Relax, Livvy,” Bryant scolded gently. “You know it’s just going to hurt more if you fight us.”

“Why do you have to plug me? I don’t like it,” she whined, well aware she was lying through her teeth.

A sharp spank landed on her exposed bottom hole, making her shriek in response. “That’s the last lie I’ll allow tonight, young lady.” Bryant swatted her again and tears filled her eyes at the sharp pain. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir,” she whispered, turning her cheek to rest it against the cool comforter. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right, sweetheart. Hopefully having this plug in your sore little hole will remind you to be good the rest of the night.”

Cool liquid landed on her exposed hole and she jumped at the sensation, but quickly settled when she felt the tip of the plug pressing against her entrance. It was small enough for her to take without much preparation, which Bryant obviously knew. He pushed the plug past her initial resistance, chuckling at her whine of protest. Her bottom burned as he stretched her, but her pussy throbbed in response to the pain.

She loved her husband, and if he never let Bryant play with them again, they would continue to have a spectacular sex life. But she'd have been lying again if she said she didn't occasionally enjoy Bryant's harsher, stricter ways. Her entire ass was on fire, inside and out, and they'd barely gotten started with her.

By the time the plug was fully seated, she was full and aching, both in her bottom and between her thighs. A fact Bryant fully exploited by running his hand down her burning cheeks to the place where she desperately wanted them to touch her.

"Just as I thought," he said with another low chuckle. "She's soaking wet."

"Of course she is." James released his grip on her bottom, allowing her cheeks to close around the plug. "My little girl loves being punished. Don't you, Livvy?"

"Yes, Daddy." Moaning, she lifted her hips and opened her legs, inviting them to touch her.

Knowing, sure hands moved over her body, bringing every inch of her alive with need. She'd lost track of who was touching her where at this point. All she knew was that someone was stroking her aching clit, just light enough to drive her out of her mind with pleasure.

"What do you say, James? Let her have a little fun before she takes my cock down her throat?"

Say yes, say yes, say yes.

"Hmm. I don't know. Do you think our naughty girl deserves a reward so soon?"

"Daddy, please!" The plea was clear in her voice, but she felt no shame in begging when she was this desperate.

“All right, baby. Go ahead and come all over Bryant’s hand like the dirty little girl you are.”

With his permission, Bryant’s touch became rougher, almost painful. But to her body, it was all pleasure, and it took almost no time at all to have her bucking and writhing and screaming out her release as it exploded inside of her.

The bed dipped beside her head and she opened dazed eyes to see a very naked Bryant stretched out on her pretty duvet. “I’ve missed your mouth on my cock, sweetheart. Come here.”

It was all the invitation she needed. Hopping up onto the bed, she crawled between his splayed legs and ran her tongue over the tip of his cock.

“On your knees, little one,” James ordered from his spot beside the bed. “Daddy wants to spank you some more while you suck Bryant off.”

Shifting so her bottom was lifted high, the already burning skin stretched taut, she returned her attention to Bryant. With a low, guttural groan, he ran a hand over her hair when she took him more fully in her mouth. “Good girl. Just like that.”

Something heavy, yet flexible, connected with her bottom and she moaned around Bryant’s cock. If she had to guess, Daddy had chosen one of the small leather paddles. Her favorites. The sting was accompanied by a deep thud she felt all the way to her core. And thanks to the mind-blowing orgasm Bryant had just given her, every nerve in her body was overly sensitive, amplifying both pain and pleasure as he paddled her.

The hand stroking her hair pushed against the back of her head. Taking her cue, she loosened her jaw and took him in as far as she could before pulling away again. Slowly, she rode

him with her mouth while her Daddy kept up a steady rhythm with the paddle, spreading a lovely burn all over her bottom and the tops of her thighs.

“God, that feels amazing.” Hands fisting in her hair, Bryant guided her, forcing her to increase her speed. Shifting slightly, she cupped his balls with her hand and he let out a string of swear words she knew good and well he’d never let her or his own little girl get away with saying.

The paddle fell two more times, harder than any of the previous swats and she groaned at the sting but didn’t falter in her movements on Bryant’s cock. Seconds later, the bed dipped again, and she felt James between her thighs. With a single, quick thrust, he filled her.

Full. Every single part of her that could be filled was full and stretched to capacity. It was nearly enough to have her coming again on the spot, but she held off. Just because her Daddy had let her come once didn’t mean she had carte blanche, and she didn’t want any more punishments tonight. Desperate to please, she focused on Bryant’s cock while her Daddy fucked her hard and fast.

“My good girl,” James crooned, releasing his hold on one of her hips to reach around and pinch her clit. “Should we let her come again, Bryant?”

“Not yet.” Bryant’s voice was deep and harsh, and the hand in her hair tightened. “She hasn’t earned another one yet.”

His words drew a groan from her and when James rolled her aching clit between his fingers it took all of her control not to give into the pleasure he was teasing her with. Even having just come, she was already desperate for more. Because she knew them, she knew the fastest way to earn her orgasm was

to please Bryant. With that goal in mind, she increased her speed, her head bobbing up and down as she squeezed the heavy sack in her hands.

“Fuck!” The shaft in her mouth swelled and tightened, moments before hot liquid filled her mouth. She swallowed immediately, just like her Daddy had always insisted, and she continued sucking until Bryant finally relaxed under her.

“Now she can come,” Bryant said, stroking her hair. “Look at me, sweetheart. I want to watch your face as you come all over your Daddy’s cock.”

Lifting her head, she met his gaze just as James pushed her over the edge. Her core tightened, and everything inside of her shattered, sending waves of pleasure washing over her. James followed her over, slamming his hips against her aching bottom as he filled her.

“Come here, Livvy.” Scooting down the bed, Bryant pulled her into his arms and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “You were such a good girl.”

“Thank you, sir.” Snuggling into him, she yawned, and James wrapped his arms around her from behind, pressing a kiss to her shoulder.

“Sleep, little one. You earned it.”

Grinning at her Daddy’s praise, she fell asleep cradled between them.

CHAPTER 25



Once Olivia's soft snores reached them, the brothers carefully untangled themselves from her and slipped out of bed, dressing as quietly as they could before tiptoeing out of the room. James paused in the doorway, looking back at his wife, sprawled out on her bed, worn out from their play. His heart did a slow roll in his chest at the sight.

"You okay?" Bryant whispered from the hall.

"Yeah." Leaving the door halfway open, he turned and headed for the stairs. "She's out like a light."

"We wore her out." With a grin and a wink, Bryant headed for the liquor cabinet and poured them each a finger of scotch. "Thanks for inviting me over."

"She needed it." Because it was Bryant, the confession came easily. "She needed harsh, and I don't know if I would have had it in me to give it to her without you there."

"Sure you would." Bryant sipped his scotch, studying his brother over the rim of the glass. "But I was happy to help. Think she'll sleep the rest of the night?"

"I hope so. She hasn't slept well since Shannon was attacked."

It was interesting to watch the emotions play out across his brother's face. Olivia was right; there was something there between him and the pretty blonde.

"I hate sitting here, waiting for the cops to find this guy. I wish there was something we could do." Frowning as if surprised to find his glass suddenly empty, Bryant went to pour himself another.

"Me too. But anything we might try would put one or both of them in danger." Swirling the amber liquid, James studied his brother. "Maybe Tracy had the right idea, getting out of town."

"None of us can afford to just disappear. And when would we come back? We have to accept that the cops may not catch him, and then what?" Scowling, Bryant sipped his drink. "We all move away, start over? Let him chase us out of town? Fuck that."

"Point taken. I just want them safe, Bry."

Bryant's expression softened with understanding. "Me too. So, we keep them safe. You enforce the rules with Livvy and, well, I guess we hope she can talk Shannon into following along."

Laughing, James shook his head. "Good luck with that. The best we can hope for is that her brush with death has scared her into being more careful. And her firm, for that matter, since they seemed to think it was no big deal."

"Fuckers." Bryant's grip on the tumbler tightened. If it hadn't been solid crystal, James might have worried it would shatter. "They deserve to be in that hospital bed, not her."

"No argument from me." It still grated that he hadn't been able to make them see how important it was to protect her

from the start. Maybe if he'd pushed a little harder, Shannon wouldn't be lying in a hospital bed with a black eye and fingerprints on her neck.

“Hey. Cut it out.”

Looking over, he found Bryant glaring at him. “What?”

“I can see you blaming yourself. Stop.”

He didn't even bother to ask how Bryant could 'see' something like that. Despite being fraternal and not identical twins, they still had a connection even he couldn't explain. “It's hard not to feel like there isn't more I could have done for her.”

“Well, like the cops told Livvy, this is all on the asshole who attacked her. Nobody else.” Pausing, Bryant shrugged and smiled what James always thought of as his ‘Lawyer Shark’ smile. “Well, maybe the assholes at her firm, too. But not you. Got it?”

The lecture helped to settle his nerves as much as the scotch had. “Got it. You staying the night?”

“You need me to?”

It was tempting, but in the end they needed as much normalcy as possible. “Nah. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Sure thing. I'll meet you at the hospital to help move Shannon in, and hopefully get them to agree to some ground rules.”

After he'd left, James spent some time washing out the glasses they'd used and tidying up before returning to Olivia's bedroom. She was still stretched out on her bed, snoring quietly.

Their bed was more comfortable, but he risked waking her if he tried to move her. And she really did need the sleep. Stripping off his clothes once more, he stretched out beside her and pulled her into his arms. She whimpered softly, and her forehead crinkled like it did when she was worried, but she quickly settled down again.

The love he felt for her was enough to bring any man to his knees. Brushing the hair from her face, he drank in her features, memorizing them as he'd done hundreds of times before. "I'll keep you safe, little one. No matter what."



HE AND OLIVIA BOTH CLEARED THEIR SCHEDULES THE NEXT afternoon so they could take Shannon home with them. She'd called that morning to let them know she was definitely being released, but nobody could seem to tell her an exact time. James met Olivia and Randall, one of their newest realtors, at the house they'd just finished showing.

"Hey, boss!" Randall greeted him cheerfully when he got out to open Olivia's door for her. "Headed to the hospital?"

"Yes. Thank you for tagging along with Olivia today. I had a meeting I couldn't get out of."

Randall waved a hand in the air. "It was my pleasure. I think this one's in the bag. Liv's really great at this, you know that? I may tag along some more, see if I can't pick up some tips," he added with a wink.

Olivia rolled her eyes, but her cheeks had turned pink with pleasure. "You're good at this, too, Randall. You just need to

be more confident. And find ways to turn potential negatives into positives, like we talked about with the yard on this one.”

“Right, smaller yard, less grass to mow, but still enough space for entertainment. Got it. See you guys at the office!” With a final wave, Randall turned and headed for his car.

“Do you think this one’s in the bag, little one?”

Grinning, Olivia climbed into his SUV. “Absolutely. They loved it. I think we’re going to lowball it though; it’s priced a little high for the neighborhood, despite the gorgeous bathroom reno they just did. It definitely bumped up the value, but not quite as much as they were hoping.”

“Excellent news.” Leaning in, he brushed a kiss across her lips. “Ready to go get Shannon?”

“I’m ready.” Her grin turned a little wicked, and he felt a frisson of fear down his spine. “But are you?”

“Of course,” he replied with a confidence he didn’t remotely feel. Keeping tabs on Olivia was one thing. As her Daddy, he wielded a certain amount of power. Shannon, however, was the wild card in this situation.

After closing Olivia’s door, he walked around to the driver’s side and climbed in. Perhaps he should have a conversation with his Livvy before they got to the hospital. “I think we need to go over our rules, little one.”

The professional realtor disappeared when she scrunched her face up exactly like a little girl being told she couldn’t have something she wanted. “Why? I know the rules.”

“Yes, but you tend to be a little...loose with them when Shannon is around. Which is bad enough when you’re just out for the night, but since she’ll be staying with us for a few days at the bare minimum, a reminder can’t hurt.”

Reaching over, she linked her fingers with his as he drove. Her voice was soft and kind when she spoke. “Daddy, I’m not going to do anything stupid. I promise.”

“Promise me you won’t let Shannon talk you into ignoring the rules.”

“To be fair, I don’t always tell Shannon about a rule before I let her talk me into breaking it.”

“Then I’ll make sure Shannon is aware of the rules, so maybe she’ll be able to keep you in line.”

“Daddy!” Groaning, Olivia leaned back against the car seat. “You can’t do that!”

James gave her hand a little squeeze of warning. “I can, and I will, Olivia. Whatever it takes to make sure you’re both safe.”

“But it’s embarrassing.”

“You’ll survive.” Lifting their joined hands, he pressed a kiss to her knuckles. Better embarrassed than dead, as far as he was concerned. But he didn’t want to say that and risk upsetting her, so he left it at that.

The silence between them lingered all the way to the hospital. He could feel her tense as they pulled into the parking garage, and he gave her hand another squeeze.

They were still halfway down the hall to Shannon’s room when they heard her. “I don’t need you telling me what to do, Bryant Monroe!”

Beside him, Olivia groaned. “What is Bryant doing here? Shouldn’t he be at work?”

“Did you really think he was going to pass on this?” Chuckling at her exasperated sigh, he swung her hand up and

back in hopes of helping her calm down. “It’s all right, Livvy.”

“She’s supposed to stay calm. He doesn’t keep her calm, he stresses her out.”

It was a good point. “I’ll talk to him.”

They’d reached Shannon’s room by then, and Olivia dropped his hand to rush to the bed. “Ready to get out of here, lazy bones?”

Shannon, who looked a million times better now that she’d had a chance to shower and dress, rolled her eyes. “I’ve been ready, but these people won’t let me leave!” Her voice rose to a shout by the end.

Bryant crossed his arms and James just managed to hold back a sigh. It was going to be a long few days. Before Bryant could lecture, or whatever else he had in mind, James clapped him on the shoulder and pushed him toward the door. “Let’s get some air.”

“I don’t need air,” Bryant grumbled, but he followed along all the same.

“Me neither. But the girls need some space.” James waited until they’d reached the end of the hall to speak again. “I told Livvy I’d talk to you. About Shannon.”

“What about her?”

“You’re stressing her out. And since she’s already stressed, she doesn’t need you adding to it. So just, maybe dial back the Daddy-mode a bit, okay?”

Bryant’s eyes narrowed. “I am not in ‘Daddy-mode.’”

“Bullshit. I’ve never seen you be this protective of anyone, not even Liv, and you know it.”

“Fuck.” Scrubbing a hand over his face, Bryant turned and paced away, then back. “She gets under my skin, man. And I’m worried about both of them.”

“You think I’m not?”

“No. I know you are. And I don’t want to say it’s easier for you. But at least you can just paddle Liv’s ass if she breaks the rules.”

Since his brother’s thoughts mirrored his own from earlier, James grinned and threw an arm around Bryant’s shoulder. “That does give me an advantage. But Shannon is smart, and I think this whole business scared the shit out of her. Hopefully enough for her to follow the rules without either of us threatening to whip her ass.”

“I hope you’re right.”

“Look, why don’t you go on ahead of us to the house and make sure everything is set up. We’ll call when we’re leaving here.”

It was clear he didn’t want to go, but he eventually caved with a short, sharp nod. Rolling his eyes at his brother’s retreating back, James took a moment to consider his strategy before rejoining the girls in Shannon’s room.

Relieved to find Shannon’s scowl had been replaced by a bright, if somewhat tired smile, James approached the bed. “How are you feeling, Shannon?”

“Tired of being in bed.” Though her eyes had lost some of their sparkle, a familiar mischief filled them when she tilted her head to study him. “Come to lay down the law, Mr. Sexy?”

Beside her, Olivia’s eyes widened, but she didn’t protest. After sending his girl a reassuring wink, he turned back to Shannon. “As a matter of fact, that’s exactly why I’m here. I

am more than happy to have you stay with us as you recover, but while you're there, you will do as you're told."

The mischief in her eyes faded and she wrinkled her nose in a way that reminded him of Olivia when he'd given her a rule that wasn't to her liking. "Like what?"

"Mostly following the doctor's orders. And I don't want either of you leaving the house alone, even if it's just for a walk around the block."

"But we have cops watching us constantly!" Shannon protested, her voice rising to a whine he hadn't heard from her in years. Not since she'd suddenly stopped attending play parties.

"And there's no need to make their jobs any harder than they already are." Seeing the struggle on her face, he softened. "I'm not trying to be an asshole, Shannon. I just want you both to be safe. You mean a lot to me and to Liv."

Olivia slipped her hand into Shannon's. "Please, Shay. He wouldn't be doing this if it wasn't important."

"I know." With a long, heavy sigh, Shannon nodded. "All right. I'll be a good girl."

"Do I have your consent to enforce the rules we just discussed?"

Another exaggeratedly put upon sigh. "Yeah, I guess."

"Shannon..."

"Okay, fine. Yes, you have my consent to enforce your over the top rules. Happy?"

"Very. Now, let me go see if I can find someone to cut you loose."

CHAPTER 26



*I*t was nearly five by the time the hospital released Shannon to go home. She'd fallen asleep waiting, which worried Olivia more than the bruises still covering her face and neck. Shannon never napped, and she routinely thrived on less sleep than any other human Olivia knew.

And now she was curled up on the bed in Olivia's pretty little guest room. Seeing her friend resting on the same bed where she'd been so thoroughly used and pleased the night before brought a rush of heat to her cheeks. Thank God she'd changed the sheets.

"Liv? Why are you blushing like a tomato?"

"No reason." Clearing her throat, Olivia busied herself with putting away the clothes Shannon's mom had packed for her.

"Liar." Shannon yawned and shifted positions, wincing a bit. "Come on, tell me. I need a distraction."

"All right. Since you insist."

Abandoning her chore for the moment, she climbed onto the bed and sat cross-legged beside Shannon. "Okay, I'm going to tell you but you have to promise me two things."

Eyes bright with curiosity, Shannon shifted to rest on her elbows. “What things?”

“One, you won’t judge me. And two, you won’t let it change how you feel about Bryant.”

“Bryant?” Shannon frowned. “What does he have to do with anything? And I don’t feel anything other than annoyance for him, so I don’t see why you care if that changes.”

“Liar. You like him. And he likes you.” When Shannon just rolled her eyes, Olivia sighed and shook her head. “Fine. But just promise me, would you?”

“Okay, okay, I promise.”

Blowing out a breath, Olivia gathered her courage. “So, you know how James is my Daddy?”

“Old news, babe.”

“Right. Well, sometimes he likes to share.” At Shannon’s blank look, she felt her cheeks grow even hotter. “Me, Shay. He likes to share me. With other doms.”

“What?” Pushing up into a sitting position, Shannon stared at her, mouth open. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope.”

“Wow. And you’re okay with that?”

“Okay with multiple orgasms and being so thoroughly used my bones feel like rubber?” Grinning, she gave Shannon’s arm a little shove. “I’ve learned to live with it.”

“Holy crap. Wait.” Shannon’s eyes narrowed. “What does Bryant have to do with this?”

“Oh. Ah... he’s the person we normally share with.”

“So you get to have not just one, but both sexy Monroe brothers in your bed?” The corner of Shannon’s mouth lifted into a smirk. “Lucky bitch.”

“You don’t think I’m like, slutty or anything?”

“Please.” With a snort, Shannon laid down again, stretching out carefully on her back. “You’re so far from slutty. And even if you were, who cares? You do you, boo.”

“And you promise not to hold it against Bryant?”

Closing her eyes, Shannon sighed. “Look, Liv. I know you think there’s something there between me and Bryant, but there isn’t. He’s a Daddy and I’m not looking for a Daddy.”

“But you want one.”

Shannon’s eyes flew open again, then narrowed into slits. “What makes you say that?”

Olivia shrugged. “You hide it better than I do, but I’ve seen the way you look at him. You like it when he’s bossy, and part of you wants to let him be the boss of you. You may have buried her deep beneath those layers of polish and sophistication, but your Little is still there and she needs a Daddy.”

“She’s buried deep for a reason, Liv. To be honest, I’m not sure I was ever a real Little anyway. The only thing I’m sure of is that I have zero interest in finding a Daddy again.”

“Why don’t you think you’re really a Little?”

“Just drop it, Liv.”

Olivia opened her mouth to argue, then snapped it shut again. “All right. But as soon as you’re feeling better, we’re talking about this.”

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

As much as she wanted to push, she’d promised to keep Shannon calm and as stress free as possible. “All right. You up for coming downstairs?”

“I think I’m just going to rest for a bit.”

Leaving was somehow harder than it had been in the hospital, but Olivia nodded and stood to go. She’d made it to the doorway when Shannon called her name.

Stopping, she turned, her heart breaking at the uncharacteristic vulnerability on her bestie’s face. “Yes?”

“Thank you. For everything. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I love you.”

“I know. But thanks anyway.”

Pulling the door shut behind her, Olivia closed her eyes and blew out a long, shaky breath. Once she felt a little steadier, she headed downstairs to where her husband was fixing dinner while Bryant sipped a glass of scotch and watched his brother cook.

“I need to come over more often. I miss home-cooked meals.”

“I see how it is.” Olivia sniffed dramatically, drawing the attention of the two men her way. “You just miss my Nonna’s Chicken Alfredo, not me.”

“Of course I miss you, silly girl. But your Daddy’s cooking is a definite bonus.”

“Eh, he does okay.” Giggling, she darted behind Bryant when James turned away from the stove wielding a wooden

spoon. “Kidding, Daddy!”

“Hmm.” Tapping the spoon against his open palm, James sent her a wicked grin. “You can’t hide behind Bryant forever, little one. Did you get Shannon settled?”

“Yeah. I asked if she wanted to come down for dinner but she said she wanted to rest.”

“She needs to eat so her body has the energy to heal.” Bryant’s voice was gruff, but tinged with worry. “I can carry her down if she’s that worn out.”

Stifling a giggle at the mental image of Bryant trying to carry Shannon down the stairs against her will, Olivia patted his shoulder. “I’ll take a plate up to her when she’s ready. I think this was all just a lot for her today. Emotionally as well as physically.”

Bryant turned and studied her through narrowed eyes. “What did she say while you were up there?”

“Nothing, really,” Olivia lied, ignoring the slight pang of guilt. “But I know her. She’s not used to needing anyone.”

“Well, she needs to stop being so damn stubborn and let you help her.”

“I don’t disagree.” With a shrug, Olivia moved to the wine fridge. “Daddy, may I have a glass of wine with dinner, please?”

“Yes,” James answered, lifting a spoon to his lips to taste the sauce. “Go ahead and open a bottle. Dinner should be ready in about ten minutes.”

When she carried the bottle to the table, Bryant gave her an indulgent smile. Whiskey always put him in an affectionate mood. “I need a well-mannered little girl like our Livvy.”

Olivia glanced over at James, and they both burst into laughter. “Sure you do.” Letting him see her exaggerated eye roll, she placed the bottle of wine on the table.

“What’s that mean?”

“It means,” she replied teasingly, “sometimes what we think we want isn’t what we need.”

She’d expected the slightly-more-than-playful swat he landed on her ass, but the shock of pain made her yelp all the same. “Ow! What was that for?”

“Being cryptic. What are you trying to say, little girl?”

With another eye roll, she pulled the corkscrew from the drawer and went to work opening the wine. “Look, I love you. And you enjoy playing with me. But I’d bore you to tears inside a week.”

“You would not.”

“Yes, I would. Wouldn’t I, James?”

From across the kitchen, James chuckled. “I’m afraid so, little brother.”

“You like brats,” Olivia continued, pulling wine glasses from the cabinet. “And I enjoy being a brat for you, when you’re here. But someone like me isn’t going to give you what you’re looking for on a regular basis.”

Bryant scowled into his empty whiskey glass. “Maybe I’m ready to settle down with someone I can just enjoy instead of someone I have to tame.”

Olivia let the subject drop with a noncommittal hum and focused on setting the table. Bryant, seemingly content to let it go for now, addressed the elephant in the room as they sat

down to eat. “So, how do we make sure this doesn’t happen to Liv?”

She felt herself pale, but James reached over and squeezed her hand, lending her some of his strength. “I already have a shadow at every showing. I don’t drive myself anywhere, and I have cops watching me almost constantly. What more can we possibly do?”

Tapping his fingers on the tabletop, Bryant considered her. “Maybe you could do some more office work and less in person. Take some of the administrative stuff off of James’s plate, let him do the showings.”

“Absolutely not.”

James ran a hand over her hair, resting his hand at the nape of her neck. “Livvy, we’re just discussing options.”

Crossing her arms, she leaned back in her chair, glaring at Bryant. “Well, it’s not an option. You’re asking me to give up my career!”

“Stop being melodramatic, Liv,” Bryant scolded. “Nobody wants you to give up anything.”

“Fuck you, Bryant.”

She’d always heard the phrase ‘the silence was deafening’ but she’d never realized how true the saying was until that moment. Neither of the men at the table with her spoke a word, but their disapproval practically roared in her ears.

The apology couldn’t leave her mouth fast enough. “I’m sorry, Bryant. I didn’t mean it.”

“Apology accepted,” he said, but she could still see the muscles in his jaw working as he reined in his temper.

Tears burned behind her eyelids but she managed to blink them back. “I really am sorry.”

His expression softened. “I forgive you, sweetheart. I think all of our emotions are running high.”

Grateful for his understanding, she sent him a watery smile before tucking into her pasta. The men continued to discuss ‘options’ for keeping her safe, but she mostly tuned them out.

“James, why don’t you take Liv up to bed. I’ll clean up.” Without waiting for an answer, Bryant stood and began gathering dishes from the table.

“I can do that,” Olivia protested, hopping up to help him.

But as soon as she was on her feet, her Daddy took her hand and pulled her toward the stairs. “Thanks, Bry,” he called behind him as he guided her up the steps.

“James, that was rude! Bryant is a guest.”

Letting out an uncharacteristic snort, James shook his head. “Bryant is family. And you and I need to talk.”

Her stomach dropped at the word ‘talk’. “What kind of talk?”

“Just a talk, little one.”

When they came to the guest bedroom, she slowed, but the silent tug on her hand propelled her forward.

“I should check on Shannon,” she protested, glancing over her shoulder at the door.

“Livvy, she’s fine.” Opening the door to their bedroom, he ushered her inside. “Change into your PJs and brush your teeth.”

“James, I have things to do.”

She started to turn back to the door, but his hands came to rest on her shoulders, gently forcing her to face him.

“The only thing you have to do right now is listen to your Daddy. Understood?”

The tone was gentle, but firm. It was one she knew well, and the little girl inside of her responded to it instantly. “Kay.”

“Good girl.” After pressing a kiss to her forehead, he gave her a gentle push toward the bed. “PJs, teeth, bed.”

Pouting just a little, she gathered the pajamas he’d laid out for her and went to do as she was told. Once she’d completed her tasks, she returned to the bedroom. Her Daddy was stretched out on top of their duvet, holding her e-reader and her favorite stuffie—Walter, a black and white kitten he’d gotten for her when they’d first started experimenting with their roles.

“Daddy? What are you doing?”

“Picking a book to read to my little girl.”

Pleasure, innocent and pure, bloomed inside of her. “Really?” With an excited squeal, she raced to the bed and clambered up beside him. “You haven’t read to me in *forever*.”

“I know. I thought you could use some Little time tonight. I know it’s hard being such a big girl all the time.”

Snuggling into his side, she hummed her agreement as she studied the device in his hand. “Oh! What about this one, with the witch? I’ve been wanting to see the movie, but I wanted to read the book first.”

“So you can complain about all the things they changed?” he asked with a chuckle.

“Duh. That’s half the fun. Please, Daddy?”

“Of course, little one.”

While he downloaded the book, she burrowed under the covers. With her head resting on his chest, she could feel the words rumble in his chest as he spoke them. Clutching Walter in her arms, she closed her eyes and listened to her Daddy’s low, soothing voice as he read.

She was out before chapter two, and she dreamt of magic lands where she was a beautiful witch so powerful, no mere mortal would dare try to harm her or the people she loved.

CHAPTER 27



Shannon was in the kitchen when Olivia wandered down the stairs the next morning. “Should you be up? I would have brought you something,” Olivia scolded with a wide yawn.

Rolling her eyes, Shannon limped to the fridge. “I’m not an invalid, Liv.”

“I know that, but you’re supposed to be taking it easy. Want me to make you a smoothie?”

“I can do it.”

“Shay. I know you can do it. I’m asking you to let me, so I don’t have to worry about you falling and breaking your neck on top of worrying about some maniac trying to murder us.”

“Low blow,” Shannon muttered, but she settled onto a stool at the island and gestured towards the bag of frozen fruit and the yogurt she’d already laid out. “If it makes you feel better, mother hen, go for it.”

“Thanks.” Measuring out the ingredients, Olivia studied her sulking friend. “James and I have an open house this afternoon, so you’ll be on your own for a bit.”

“I could come, help set things up.”

It was on the tip of her tongue to refuse, but the hope in her friend's eyes had her forcing a smile. "If James is okay with it, I'd love to have you."

Another eye roll from the beautiful blonde sitting across from her. "James isn't my Daddy."

"No, but you agreed to follow my rules." Drenched with sweat, James crossed the kitchen to grab a bottle of water from the fridge. He chugged half of it before joining the girls at the island and pinning Shannon with a look Olivia knew all too well. "Just because you're injured, doesn't mean you're free from the consequences of your actions, Shannon. I can be very creative when it comes to punishing naughty little girls. Isn't that right, Livvy?"

Oh, God. Wishing the floor would just open up and swallow her whole, Olivia nodded.

"But James—"

"But nothing, Shannon. You agreed to follow my rules, and what's more, you consented to me enforcing said rules. So unless you'd like to sit at the kitchen table writing lines the rest of the morning, you'll stop arguing with me."

Shannon opened her mouth, then snapped it shut again, glaring at James, who simply smiled and took another pull from his bottle of water before speaking again. "Good choice. Now, if you'd like to ask me about whatever it was you and Liv were talking about before I came in, I'd be happy to discuss it with you."

"She wants to go to the open house and help us set up," Olivia offered, just barely resisting the urge to roll her eyes when James gave her ponytail a warning tug. "What? It's what she was going to ask!"

“And she’s capable of speaking for herself, little one.”

“It’s fine.” Shannon, on the other hand, didn’t bother to stop her eye roll when James pinned her with a disapproving look. “Well, it is. I *was* going to ask about going to the open house.”

“I’m about to put you both in the corner and make you stay there until we leave.”

Grinning, Shannon bounced on her stool. “So, I can go?”

“Yes. If you promise to take it easy and rest when you start to feel tired.”

“Cross my heart!” Shannon swiped a finger in an ‘X’ shape across her chest.

“I’m serious, Shannon. If I see you overdoing it, you’ll be writing lines until your hand falls off. Understood?”

Lifting her hand to her forehead, Shannon gave him a snappy salute. “Sir, yes, sir!”

“Brat,” James mumbled, but he was laughing when he left the kitchen.



“OLIVIA, WE’RE GOING TO BE LATE AND YOU’RE NOT EVEN dressed yet.”

“I know. I’m sorry.” Flashing her husband an apologetic smile, Olivia rubbed the towel over her skin. “I just need twenty minutes.”

“We don’t have twenty minutes, Olivia. Not if we’re going to get everything set up in time.”

“Then why don’t you take Shannon and I’ll be right behind you?” Ignoring the glare he shot her in the mirror, she slathered moisturizer over her skin. “Seriously, twenty minutes. That’s all I need.”

“Twenty minutes. And that’s twenty with the brush when we get home, little girl. Another two for every minute over that. Understood?”

Swallowing hard against the knot in her chest, Olivia nodded. “Yes, sir. I’m sorry.”

“I’ll see you at the house.” James yanked her in for a quick, scorching kiss. “I love you.”

“Love you, too.” As soon as he left, she focused on getting her makeup done as quickly as possible without looking like a clown. It took her nearly all of the twenty minutes she’d allotted herself, thanks to whatever law of the universe stated only one eye could have perfect eyeliner at any given moment.

She was slipping into her heels at the twenty-five-minute mark when her phone rang. “Olivia Monroe,” she answered, praying she didn’t sound as breathless as she felt.

“Olivia? It’s MaryAnn.”

“Uh, hi, MaryAnn. What’s up?” Shoes on, she raced for the kitchen, then swore under her breath when she didn’t see her purse on the island where she *knew* she’d left it the night before. Which, if she had, her Daddy had probably put it in the coat closet where he was always telling her it belonged. Letting out a silent scream of frustration, she headed for the front hall.

“I just had a couple call about the Petersons’ house. They’re really interested in taking a look.”

Reaching for her purse, which was indeed in the coat closet, Olivia froze. “The Petersons? Seriously?” It was one of her most expensive properties and she’d been trying to move it for two months. “Wait.” Pulling the phone away from her ear, she frowned at the number on the screen. “Are you at the office?”

“Um, yes. I...came in to catch up on some paperwork.”

“Why are you calling me on your cell?”

“I have them on the office line. They’re sitting in the driveway, waiting on someone.”

“Fuck! Seriously? I have an open house; I can’t meet them now.” Who the hell called on a Sunday, anyway?

“I’m sorry, but they said it has to be today,” MaryAnn squeaked out.

“Okay. Okay.” Closing her eyes, Olivia focused on the problem at hand. “It’s definitely a couple? Did you speak to the wife?”

“Um, yes?”

“Good. Let them know I’m ten minutes away. Then, call James and let him know where I’m headed and see if he can’t find someone to meet me there.” James was going to have her ass, but this was too good of an opportunity to pass up.

“O-okay.”

“Thanks, MaryAnn. I appreciate all the hard work you do for us.”

She ended the call, cutting off MaryAnn’s stuttering and grabbed her purse. The Petersons’ place was just a few neighborhoods over, so she was there under the ten-minute

mark. A somewhat battered SUV was parked in the driveway, and a tall man climbed out when she pulled up beside it.

Unease pooled in her belly, but she chided herself for passing judgment based on the fact that they drove an older car. *Lots of people keep the same car for years, Liv. Don't be a snob.*

Putting on her best realtor smile, she hopped out of her car. “Good afternoon! I’m Olivia Monroe.”

The man smiled, and while it was perfectly charming with no hint of malice, she couldn’t seem to shake that uneasy feeling as he shook her hand. There was something familiar about him, but she couldn’t put her finger on it. “Nathaniel Cooke. Everyone calls me Nate.”

“Well, Nate, it’s nice to meet you.” Leaning around him, she searched the interior of the car. “Is your wife with you?”

“Oh, no, it’s just me.” Again with the perfect, charming smile that made Olivia’s stomach turn.

“I see. Will she be joining us?”

“No, she’s out of town on business. I’m actually leaving in an hour to meet her, which is why I wanted to go ahead and see the house. I really think it’s perfect for us.”

What the hell, MaryAnn? “Well, it might be better to wait until your wife can tour the house as well, don’t you think?”

The charming smile cranked up a notch, but Olivia couldn’t help but think it made him look a little crazy. “My wife trusts my opinion, Mrs. Monroe. I would like to see the house now.”

Taking a step backward, Olivia froze when he shifted and the sunlight bounced off the barrel of the gun he’d stashed

beneath his long coat. Ice skittered up her spine. The smile he wore now had lost all of its fake charm, revealing the deranged killer underneath.

“We should go inside, Olivia. People will start to talk if we linger.”

Her mind raced as she searched for some way to get out of this mess she'd landed herself in. She could scream, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't just shoot her and leave. She could fight, but he had a good foot in height and at least fifty pounds on her.

Which really only left her with one option. Giving him a curt nod, she turned and walked up the driveway, praying he had enough sense to wait until they were inside to kill her. If she could stall long enough, someone would show up. Probably James himself, once MaryAnn told him she'd gone to the house alone.

At the front door, she gathered her courage and turned to face him. “Why are you doing this?” Even if he killed her today, she at least wanted to know that much first.

“We can talk about it inside. Open the door.”

Rapidly running out of options, she punched in the code for the front door. It swung open, and Olivia nearly fell to her knees. The last shred of hope she'd clung to slipped through her fingers.

There in the entryway, looking even more nervous than usual, stood MaryAnn.



“OLIVIA JANE, I SWEAR TO GOD IF YOU DON’T ANSWER YOUR phone or text me back in the next five minutes, sitting comfortably will be a fond memory. Call me. *Now.*”

Doing his best to ignore the dread forming in the pit of his stomach, James hit the button to end the call. It was the fifth time he’d called her in the last twenty minutes, and the third voicemail he’d left.

“I’m sure she’s fine, James. Probably just had a wardrobe emergency or something.” From her seat at the kitchen table, Shannon sent him what was probably meant to be a reassuring smile, but she didn’t quite succeed in hiding the worry in her eyes.

“She would have called me. At the very least to let me know she was running late.”

Frowning, she tapped a finger on the table. “Don’t you have like a ‘Find my phone’ thing? I thought she downloaded an app or something because she was always losing it for a while.”

“I thought that app just made the phone ring.”

Shannon shook her head. “Most of them give you a location. Worth a shot, right?”

Since it was at least worth trying, he opened the app on his phone and tapped the icon for Olivia’s device. The spinning circle in the middle of his screen seemed to taunt him as he waited. And waited. And waited, until it finally pinpointed his wayward wife’s location.

“That’s odd. It says she’s stopped somewhere. I know that address,” he mumbled, moving to the laptop he’d set up on the counter.

The small ball of fear in his stomach became a boulder when the address popped up as one of their available listings. “Fuck! Shannon, call Bryant and give him this address.” He thrust the laptop at her before heading toward the front door.

“Wait! I’m coming with you!”

“No!” He felt like an asshole when she visibly flinched, but he didn’t have time to play nice. “I need you to cancel the open house and let Bryant know what’s going on. I can’t handle that and help Liv.”

“You think he has her.”

“Yeah. I think he has her.”

Shannon’s eyes seemed huge in her suddenly pale face. “Okay. I’ll take care of this. Go save her.”

Running out the door, he pulled up a contact he’d hoped he’d never have to use and hit the button to call.

“Detective Rogers.”

“This is James Monroe. Olivia is in danger.”

“Where is she?” The detective’s voice was instantly alert.

“Why the hell don’t you know? Aren’t you supposed to be watching her?”

“Yes, and I promise you whoever dropped the ball will be handing me theirs on a silver platter.” Her tone even more so than her words held a dark promise. “After we make sure your wife is safe.”

Yanking open the door of his SUV, James gave her the address. “I’m on my way there now.”

“No! Mr. Monroe, I need you to stay where you are.”

“Fuck that. This is my wife, Detective. I’ll see you there.” Without giving her a chance to argue further, he hit the button to end the call and started the car. When the Bluetooth connected, he called Bryant.

“He has Olivia.”

“I know. I’m still fifteen minutes away.”

“Fuck. I’m almost twenty out. I’ll kill him, Bry. If he so much as lays a finger on her, I’ll fucking kill him.”

“Not if I get there first.”

The twenty minutes felt like hours, but he finally arrived at the house. Olivia’s SUV was parked in the driveway alongside a similar, but much more worn-looking vehicle. James drove past the house and parked his car by the curb behind Bryant’s sensible sedan.

As soon as James was parked, Bryant jumped out of his car and made his way toward the house carrying a crowbar. James opened the door of his vehicle and nodded at the weapon. “Good idea. Got a spare?”

“I don’t just keep weapons lying around, James. I’m a lawyer, not a fucking Green Beret.”

The enormity of the situation hit James in the gut and he had to lean back against the car to steady himself. “How the hell do we get her out, Bry? We’re not trained for this.”

Before Bryant could answer, another car turned onto the street and whipped in behind James’s SUV. Relief washed over him when the detectives clambered out of the car and strode toward them.

“Mr. Monroe, I told you to stay put,” Rogers said, her usually flat eyes lit with an uncharacteristic fury.

“And I told you I wasn’t just leaving my wife in some maniac’s hands. I’m going in.”

“I’m afraid we can’t allow that, Mr. Monroe.” Michaelson’s sympathy rang as false as ever and James bared his teeth at the detective.

“You’re going to have to shoot me to stop me, Detective.”

As if on cue, a sound like a car backfiring pulled their attention to the house. James felt his head spin a moment before he took off running for the front door. Bryant dove for him, but James had always been faster, and he easily evaded his brother’s grasp.

“Fuck! Get him, Michaelson! I’m going in!”

Something heavy slammed into his side and he hit the ground, the air leaving his lungs in a painful *whoosh*. “Olivia,” he croaked out, struggling beneath the weight of his attacker.

“We’ll help her. I need you to calm down, or I’m going to have to cuff you.”

The sound that escaped him wasn’t entirely human. Above him, Detective Michaelson sighed, and a moment later came the telltale *snick* of cuffs opening before the cold metal clamped down around his wrist. Both arms were jerked behind his back and the cuffs were secured around his other wrist. He was dimly aware of Bryant shouting at the detective, threatening him with all manner of lawsuits, but his focus was on the opening Detective Rogers had just disappeared into.

“Liv,” he whispered, his heart threatening to shatter in his chest.

Please, God, let her be alive.

CHAPTER 28



Sitting on a hard dining room chair with her hands bound behind the wooden slats, Olivia studied her captors. MaryAnn, with her sweet, innocent-looking face, which had gone completely white after her friend had tied Olivia to the chair.

Then there was the man. The more she looked at him, the more she was convinced she knew him. He seemed familiar somehow, but she couldn't for the life of her figure out where she'd seen him before.

And she may never get a chance to figure it out, if he kept waving that damn gun around. The idiot was going to kill her before he got a chance to kill her.

"Nate, I don't know about this. You said you just wanted to talk to her." Eyeing Olivia with growing uncertainty, MaryAnn twisted her fingers together in front of her.

'Nate' smiled, but there was no warmth in it. "I do want to talk to her, baby." Moving behind MaryAnn, he slid an arm around her waist, all while keeping his eyes locked on Olivia. "I want to talk to her about the way she's treated you. Swearing at you, berating you for the tiniest little mistakes. Remember that, MaryAnn? Remember how she talked down

to you, made you feel like nothing? And then she pretended to be your friend, only to do it all over again?”

Fuck. Olivia felt her chances of survival slipping away when MaryAnn frowned and nodded.

“She did do all of that. But I don’t want to kill her.”

“But don’t you?” Releasing his hold on MaryAnn, Nate sauntered over and raised his gun high, a deranged smile stretched across his face.

The back of his hand connected with Olivia’s cheek, hard enough to snap her head back and have her tasting blood. From across the room, MaryAnn whimpered but didn’t move to intervene.

“Women like her, whores who spread their legs to get ahead, they think they’re better than everyone else.” Using the tip of the pistol, Nate lifted Olivia’s chin up so she was forced to look at him. “You really think you’d be top bitch if you weren’t sucking your broker’s cock on a regular basis, Olivia?”

A laugh, bitter and slightly hysterical, escaped before she could stop it. “That’s what this is about? You’re pissed I’m better at my job than you are?” It hit her, then, where she knew him from. “Wait. You’re that guy James interviewed. The one he said he wouldn’t hire to sell doghouses on the side of the road.”

Sneering, Nate ground the gun into Olivia’s chin, and she swore her life flashed in front of her eyes. “He didn’t hire me because he can’t shove his cock between my legs whenever he wants!”

“If that’s what you have to tell yourself.” Feigning a calm she didn’t remotely feel, Olivia shrugged. “But I’m sure our

other agents would be rather surprised to learn of their new job duties. Especially Randall.”

“Shut up!” Even though she saw the next blow coming, she was helpless to stop it. Pain radiated through her skull and her vision darkened at the edges when the butt of the gun connected again with her cheek.

MaryAnn’s shocked gasp distracted Nate and he crossed the room to her, taking her in his arms. “I’m sorry, baby, I didn’t mean to upset you. But she had that coming. You heard the way she talked to me.”

“MaryAnn. Please.” Half blinded by the pain, Olivia fought to focus on the figures across the room. “Let me go. I swear I won’t tell anyone you were involved.”

“I’ve heard enough of your lies. Hold this.” Nate thrust the gun into MaryAnn’s hand and pulled a length of rope from his jacket pocket. He stalked over to the chair Olivia was bound to and dropped the rope around her neck.

The rough, prickly cable pressing into her skin reignited the fight in her. Ignoring the pain in her cheek and the burn of the rope digging into her wrists, she jerked against her bonds.

“Fight me all you want, bitch. I won.” His voice dropped to a hoarse whisper, tinged with madness. “I beat you.”

He pulled tighter, completely cutting off her air. The world began to darken and her lungs felt like they were going to burst. This was it. She was going to die here. She’d never see James again, never feel his lips on hers. She was never going to see Bryant and Shannon get married.

Something exploded in the room, and the pressure around her neck disappeared. Warm, wet stickiness splattered her

cheek. Gasping for air, Olivia whipped her head around, looking for her rescuer.

She found only MaryAnn, still standing in the same spot, the gun pointed just over Olivia's head.

“Wha—” Olivia swallowed against the burning in her throat. “What did you do?”

From behind her came a low, pained groan and she twisted around to find Nate rolling on the floor, clutching his bleeding shoulder.

Before she could begin to process what had happened, the front door burst open. “Police! Drop the weapon, now!”

MaryAnn complied immediately, crouching to place the gun on the floor before thrusting her trembling hands into the air. As soon as the weapon was down, Detective Rogers moved in, nudging it away with her foot. “Face down, hands on your head!”

“It wasn't her!” Olivia tried to yell, but it came out as more of a croak.

Detective Rogers flicked a glance toward her. “Are you all right, Mrs. Monroe?”

“Yes, I'm fine. She saved me.” Jerking her head to the side, Olivia gestured toward the man still moaning in pain behind her. “He's the one you want, he tried to kill me.”

“Okay. What's her name?”

“MaryAnn. MaryAnn Foster. She's our receptionist. Please don't hurt her.”

“Your receptionist?” Out of the entire bizarre scenario, that detail seemed to shock the hardened detective the most.

“Jesus. All right, MaryAnn. I want you to stay right there, with your hands on your head. Got it?”

“Y-yes, Officer.”

“Detective.” With one hand still holding her gun trained on MaryAnn, Rogers reached for her phone and dialed. “Yeah, I got them. We have backup yet? Send ‘em in.”

Moments later, the house filled with cops in tactical gear shouting orders. MaryAnn was handcuffed despite Olivia’s shouted protests. Rogers gently removed the ropes from Olivia’s wrists, but kept her pinned to the chair when she started to rise.

“EMTs are on their way to check you out. You’ve got a nasty bruise there, Mrs. Monroe.”

At the reminder, her cheek began to throb. “It hurts like a mother. Goddamn asshole.”

“Probably a good thing we’ve got your husband in cuffs,” Rogers said with a chuckle. “I’m not sure we’d be able to keep him from killing the bastard otherwise.”

“You arrested James? Why?”

“He’s not under arrest. We had to cuff him to keep him from getting himself killed. When that gun went off, he made a run for it. For you.”

A pair of paramedics joined the officers in the house. A tall brunette with pink streaks in her hair offered an overly enthusiastic smile. “Hey, there. Olivia, right?”

“Yes. I think I need to go to the hospital.”

“You sure do. Can you look straight ahead for me? I hate to do it, but I gotta shine this light in your eyes real quick, okay?”

“Okay.”

Staring ahead as she'd been told, Olivia tried not to flinch when the light flashed into her eyes.

“Pupils are equal and reactive. Let's get you up on this stretcher and into the ambulance.”

“I can walk, really,” Olivia insisted, pushing up from the chair.

But pink hair wrapped a surprisingly strong hand around her arm. “Sorry, ma'am. Protocol, ya know? Up you go!”

Rolling her eyes would be torture, so she settled for pouting as they helped her up onto the stretcher. Her stomach rolled at the waves of pain, so she closed her eyes and focused on not puking on anyone.

“Livvy! What the hell happened to her?”

Opening her eyes again, she squinted up at James and Bryant. Her husband's face was even whiter than MaryAnn's had been, and her heart lurched at the worry in his expression. “I'm okay. Just a bruise.”

“You're covered in blood, Livvy. Where are you hurt?” Lifting his head, he bared his teeth at Detective Rogers as she came jogging up. “What the fuck did he do to my wife?”

“The blood isn't hers, Mr. Monroe. Just a little splatter from where your receptionist shot her boyfriend.”

“What?” Voice rising with obvious anger, James leveled a furious glare at the small crowd surrounding them. “What the fuck happened in there?”

“He hit me,” Olivia offered, swallowing hard. “Hurts.”

Fury took a backseat to concern, though she could still see it burning in his eyes. “I know, baby. I’ll be right behind you.” He started to lift his arm, but the movement was cut short. Growling, he glared at Detective Michaelson. “Do you mind?”

Olivia couldn’t help it. The sight of her Daddy in handcuffs sent her over the edge and she began laughing hysterically.

“What’s wrong with her?” Bryant demanded.

“I-I’m supposed to be the one in handcuffs!” she managed between breathless fits of giggles.

There was a moment of dead silence before Bryant let out a howl of laughter. James’s mouth fell open, his face turning a shade of red she’d never seen before.

“Let’s get you in the rig, sweetheart,” pink hair cooed. “Before you give your man there a heart attack.”

“He’ll be fine.” Waving a hand dismissively, Olivia grinned at her Daddy.

The EMTs lifted the stretcher into the ambulance, and as soon as the handcuffs were off, James tried to climb in behind her.

“Sir, you need to ride up front.” With a smile that bordered on manic, pink hair popped up and pulled the doors shut on James’s shocked face.

“I think I’m a little in love with you,” Olivia said, her head rolling to the side as whatever drugs they’d pumped into the IV started to kick in.

“Back atcha, cutie. Now you just sit tight and let us take care of you.”

“Yes, ma’am.”



SHE WOKE ALONE IN HER OWN BED THE NEXT MORNING. FOR just a moment, everything seemed normal. Until she stretched and smiled, and the blinding pain in her cheek brought the memories rushing back. Whimpering, she stumbled to the bathroom to inspect the damage.

“Motherfucker.” The whole right side of her face was various shades of black and blue. According to the doctors, it wasn’t broken, but they could’ve fooled her. She poked at the bruise, hissing when searing pain shot through her skull.

“That looks painful, little one.”

“It is.” Lifting her gaze, she met his eyes in the reflection and sent him a smug smile. “But you should see the other guy.”

“According to the detectives, he’ll live. Unfortunately.”

“MaryAnn is either a crap shot, or an excellent one.” Worrying her bottom lip with her teeth, she turned to slip her arms around his waist. “Daddy?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you gonna fire MaryAnn?”

The muscles in his back tensed. “I assumed that was a given. She helped a killer abduct you, Olivia.”

“I know, but I don’t think she really knew what was going on.”

“How could she not know? We had no less than five meetings about how a deranged killer was after you.”

“Yes, but, how was she supposed to know he was the killer? And it wasn’t like he said ‘Hey let’s get your boss here so I can strangle her to death’. She thought we were just going to talk.”

“Be that as it may, she will most likely spend some time in prison. Even if I was inclined to keep her on, we can’t hold her position open for an indefinite amount of time, Livvy.”

Pulling away, she frowned up at him. “She doesn’t belong in prison, James.”

“That may not be up to us.”

“But it’s not fair. She saved my life!”

“I know.” When he sighed, she knew she was winning the battle. “I’ll have Bryant find us a lawyer for her. He’s bound to know someone who can help.”

“Thank you, Daddy!”

“I’m not promising anything, little one. Just that we’ll do what we can to help her.”

“That’s enough.” Her tummy chose that moment to loudly protest the lack of food it had received in the last twenty-four hours. “What’s for breakfast?”

“Waffles.” Slipping an arm around her waist, he led her from the room.

“Waffles! And ice cream?”

“Absolutely.”

“Wait, really?”

“If anyone deserves ice cream for breakfast today, it’s you.”

The excitement she felt over the ice cream quickly gave way to guilt. Tears filled her eyes and she shook her head. “I don’t deserve ice cream.”

Stopping at the top of the stairs, he turned to her. “Why not?”

“I broke the rules. And I got hurt and you got arrested and MaryAnn shot someone!”

“That’s all true.” Lifting a hand, he feathered his fingers over her cheek. “But this seems like punishment enough.”

“Oh.”

“You seem disappointed, little one.”

As always, she struggled with how much to tell him and exactly how to say it. “I guess I am. I broke your rules, even though I knew better. When MaryAnn called, I knew you were going to spank me but I did it anyway because I wanted to.”

“Well, I think it’s safe to say I won’t be spanking you for anything until your cheek is healed.”

“But Daddy, I can’t wait that long,” she whined.

“Then I’ll have to think of something else.” He nudged her forward and they started down the stairs again. “Since you broke the rule because of a phone call, I think a week without phone privileges sounds about right.”

“A week? I can’t go a week without my phone! What about work?”

“You’re taking at least that long off to heal. Patty is covering for you in the meantime.”

“You can’t really expect me to give up my phone for an entire week, James.”

They'd reached the bottom of the stairs, and he once again stopped to face her. Only now, disapproval was etched into every line of his handsome face. "I do expect it. Do you know why, little one?"

Her heart nearly beat out of her chest at the serious, stern tone. "Because you're my Daddy?"

"Exactly right. And as your Daddy, I can and do expect you to follow my rules. And I expect you to accept whatever punishment I decide on when you break those rules."

"But a week is a really long time!"

"It's nothing compared to the eternity I spent waiting for you to come out of that house. I expected you to leave in a body bag."

Guilt twisted her stomach into knots. "I'm sorry," she whispered.

"I know, little one. And while this is going to be a long week for you, I would never let your career suffer. I'll have your phone with me at all times in case something urgent comes up. But there's no social media, no texting, no internet for a week. Understood?"

With a heavy sigh, she nodded. "Yes, Daddy."

"That's my good girl. Now, let's get you some ice cream."

EPILOGUE



*O*ne Month Later

“HOW WAS YOUR FIRST WEEK BACK AT WORK?”

Stretched out on the couch in Olivia’s living room, Shannon rolled her eyes. “Boring. All of a sudden, they’re worried about my health and well-being, so I’m supposed to be ‘taking it easy’. Which basically means sitting back and letting everyone else snag all the good properties.”

Olivia secretly thought it was a good idea for her to ease back into things, but Shannon would probably flay her alive if she said it out loud. “Sorry, hon. That’s rough.”

“It is. But not much I can really do about it.” She sighed heavily, then flashed a smile that was a little too bright to not be forced. “On to happier things. When do y’all close on the house?”

“Next week.” At the mention of the beach house, Olivia’s mood instantly lifted. “They have some rentals scheduled through the end of the year we’ve agreed to honor, but the first chance we get we’re taking a week to ourselves. James will

probably still have to work, but I plan on being a complete beach bum.”

“That sounds awesome. Put me down for a few days, would ya? I’ll pay the going rate.”

“You absolutely will not. I’ll take a look at the calendar and see when I can squeeze you in. But between the existing renters and Bryant, I may only be able to get you a couple days.” Olivia waggled her eyebrows suggestively. “Unless you’d like to bunk with Bryant.”

“Absolutely not.” Scowling, Shannon gave a vigorous shake of her head. “I’d rather get a room at one of those cheap hotels all the college kids crowd into than stay with him.”

“Suit yourself.” But now that she’d said it out loud, the idea was lodged into Olivia’s brain. Maybe a little...nudge was exactly what those two needed.

“Thanks, babe. I could use a vacation, even if it’s just for a night or two.” Glancing at her phone, Shannon grimaced and pushed to her feet. “I need to get going if I’m going to make my therapy appointment. Of course, if you wanted to hang out, I could totally reschedule.”

“If you put it off one more time I swear I’m going to get James to paddle your ass.”

The man in question chose that moment to walk into the room, a single eyebrow raised. “Why am I paddling Shannon’s ass?”

“Because she keeps moving her therapy appointment.”

A dark cloud passed over his face. “You still haven’t gone to your first appointment?”

“Tattletale,” Shannon whispered loudly, sticking her tongue out at Olivia. “It’s not my fault, stuff just keeps coming up and I have to reschedule.”

“You know.” His tone almost too casual, James took a step in her direction, and Shannon’s eyes went wide with surprise. “Technically speaking, you never revoked consent for me to punish you. And I would say this falls under the category of ‘following doctors orders’, wouldn’t you?”

With her bottom lip pushed out into a pout, Shannon’s expression turned sulky. “I mean, if you want to be technical about it.”

“I absolutely want to be technical about it. Go to your appointment, Shannon. And if you miss another one, we will definitely be having a discussion about it. Understood?”

“All right, all right, I’m going!” Grabbing her purse from the couch, she paused just long enough to press a noisy kiss to James’s cheek. “Thanks for caring. I’ll see you guys later!”

“That girl needs a Daddy,” James muttered, shaking his head after the front door slammed shut behind her.

“And your brother needs a brat to tame. They’re a match made in heaven.”

“You’re not wrong.” Bending down, James gripped the back of the couch, effectively caging her in with his arms. “But you are not going to go around playing matchmaker, Olivia Jane. They’ll find each other when they’re ready.”

“I wasn’t going to do anything!”

“Mmhmm. I see that look in your eye, little girl. So, let me be very clear about this. If I catch you meddling, it will be *your* ass feeling the sting of my paddle. Am I understood?”

Arms crossed, she pouted up at him. “Yes, Daddy.” But as far as she was concerned, it would be worth a few swats if it meant two of her favorite people got their happily ever after.

“Good girl. Now, wipe that pout off your face. I have a surprise for you.”

And just like that, all thoughts of playing matchmaker disappeared and she bounced excitedly on the couch. “Oh! What kind of surprise?”

“If I told you, it wouldn’t be a surprise, now would it? Go get in the car and we’ll go for a ride.”

Driven by the wild curiosity fluttering in her chest, she raced outside and clambered into the car. “Where are we going, Daddy?” she asked when James climbed into the driver’s seat.

“It’s still a surprise, Livvy.”

“Can I have a hint?”

“It’s something you’ll enjoy.”

Flopping back against her seat with a huff, she crossed her arms again. “I figured that much out already.”

“Keep up the attitude and the surprise is going to be you getting your naughty bottom spanked on the side of the road. Is that what you want?”

Immediately uncrossing her arms, she sat up straight and shook her head. “No, Daddy. Sorry.”

“Good girl.” A smile curved his lips as he tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. “Tell you what. If you can guess what it is, I’ll tell you, but I’m not giving you any more hints.”

“Deal! Ummm, is it ice cream?”

His laughter filled the car. “No, baby, it’s not ice cream this time.”

“Rats. Another trip to the beach?”

“Nope.”

“Is it a trip somewhere else?”

“Nope.”

“Dinner at a fancy restaurant?”

“First of all, neither of us are dressed for something like that. So, no. Second of all, you must be hungry because that’s your second guess already that involved food.”

“I’m starving,” she admitted dramatically, pressing the back of her hand to her forehead. “I might waste away if you don’t feed me soon.”

“Surprise first, then dinner.”

“Okay, but I really wish—oh my god.” Their destination became clear as he turned into a large parking lot crowded with sparkling, brand new vehicles. “Are you getting me a new car?”

“You’ll see. Stay put, I’ll be right back.” Parking in front of the main entrance, he climbed down and headed into the dealership. She watched, bouncing in her seat as he shook hands with a man who looked like he’d be just as at home on a football field as he was selling cars.

The salesman disappeared and James walked back to their car, an uncharacteristically wide grin stretched across his face.

“Cover your eyes, little one,” he instructed when he opened the door and helped her down.

Hands over her eyes, heart beating wildly, she bounced some more as she waited for her surprise. It only took a few moments for the roar of an engine to reach her ears, then the murmur of two men talking and the jangle of keys. The suspense was killing her by the time James leaned down and whispered in her ear. “Surprise, baby.”

She was pretty sure her heart stopped the moment she opened her eyes. “Oh my god. Oh my *god!* James!”

Spinning around, she threw her arms around his neck and squeezed before turning back to run her hands over the shiny red metal, awe filling her. The sleek convertible in front of her wasn’t quite the same model as the one they’d rented for their impromptu beach vacation, but it was close enough as far as she was concerned. She could already see herself flying down the highway, the wind whipping her hair around her face, Shannon in the passenger seat finally looking as carefree and happy as she had before...before.

Forcing the dark thoughts away, she turned her gaze to her husband. “This is really for me?”

“It’s all yours, baby.”

“But...why?” It wasn’t her birthday, or their anniversary, or any other special date she could put her finger on.

“Because I love you, and I want you to have the things that make you happy.”

“Oh, James.” Looping her arms around his neck again, she brushed a kiss across his lips. “I have all of that, right here. You’re all I need.”

A teasing smile curled the corners of his mouth upward. “Ah, well, I suppose it’s not too late to tell them we changed our minds.”

“Don’t you dare!”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, little one.” Even with the smile playing at his lips, his expression was all Daddy. “There are some rules, though.”

“There’s always rules with you,” she grumbled, though she’d known it was coming.

“Only three. One, you obey the traffic laws. The first time you get a ticket for any kind of moving violation, you’ll be handing over the keys for a week.”

Well, she had a feeling she was going to be losing her keys fairly regularly. Who could drive a car like that without speeding? It was impossible. “What’s rule number two?”

“You always wear your seatbelt. I know you do anyway and it goes without saying,” he said, cutting off her protests, “but I’m letting you know right now that if I catch you so much as backing out of our driveway without your seatbelt on I will make sitting in that driver seat extremely uncomfortable for you. Understood?”

“Yes, Daddy.” That one was easy enough, since she’d had that rule forever anyway. “And the third?”

Now his smile spread, and the stern expression left his eyes. “Have fun. I want you to enjoy every second you spend behind the wheel of that car. And that’s an order, little girl.”

Grinning, her heart full, she pushed up to her tiptoes and pressed a noisy kiss to his lips. “Now that rule, I’m happy to follow.” While he was distracted by her kiss, she snatched the keys from his hand. “Last one home is a rotten egg!”

She made it there in record time, a fact which did not go unnoticed by her Daddy. Since she’d managed to avoid getting a ticket, he compromised by putting her over his knee for a

spanking that left her bottom burning and her pussy dripping with need.

Then she spent the rest of the evening showing him how much she appreciated her new car, before finally drifting off to sleep, snuggled in the safety of her Daddy's arms.

The End

DADDY'S LAWS PREVIEW - CHAPTER 1



With the fading summer sun warming her skin and the wind teasing her hair, Shannon Wright pushed the little convertible to its limits with a whoop of pure joy. She fucking loved summer. And her best friend, Olivia Monroe, had lent her the use of her beach house and the car she insisted went with it, for five glorious days. The convertible had been a surprise gift from Liv's deliciously sexy husband, James. According to him it was a "just because" surprise, but Shannon had her suspicions it was more of an "I love you and I'm glad you're not dead" present.

Considering all Shannon had gotten for her own brush with death was a pile of hospital bills and weekly therapy appointments, she didn't feel the least bit guilty about borrowing the car or the house for a few days.

Shaking off the gloom threatening to ruin her weekend, she cranked the music up another few notches and pressed the accelerator to the floor. So far, traffic was surprisingly light for a holiday weekend and according to her traffic app, she should have smooth sailing all the way to the beach. Then again, that had been half an hour ago, and traffic on the Chesapeake Bay Bridge was unpredictable, at best. It couldn't hurt to double check, so she grabbed her phone from her purse and unlocked the screen.

A second later, the wail of a siren pierced the air.

Glancing in her rear view mirror, she rolled her eyes at the red and blue lights behind her. “Fucking hell.”

She slowed and eased the car to the shoulder. Silently fuming, she sat with her hands at ten and two until the trooper approached her door.

“Do you know why I pulled you over, ma’am?”

Plastering on her most apologetic smile, she looked up. “I’m not sure, officer.”

“Well for starters, I clocked you doing eighty in a fifty-five. And then there’s the little issue of using your phone while you’re driving.”

“Oh.” She gave a breathless, “silly me” laugh, which was difficult when her stomach was in knots. With Maryland’s strict laws against handheld devices, there was no way she was going to tell him she was checking her traffic app. “My friend called and I picked it up without thinking.” When the officer’s stony expression didn’t change, she put a little more apology in her voice. “But I should have pulled over. I’m sorry, officer, I won’t let it happen again.”

“And the speeding?”

She tried for sheepish and prayed she could pull it off. “I guess I got carried away.”

The officer snorted and shook his head. “Unfortunately, ma’am, none of those are legitimate reasons for breaking the law. License and registration, please.”

Since arguing or throwing a fit would most likely just make things worse, she reached into the glove compartment and retrieved the documents he’d requested.

It seemed like hours before the officer returned with the ticket for her to sign. By some small miracle, he'd fudged her speed a bit and hadn't dinged her for reckless endangerment. She scribbled off her signature and handed the ticket back to him without another word.

"You have a good day, ma'am. And slow down out there."

"Yes, sir. Thank you." Blowing out a shaky breath, she stuffed the slip of paper into her purse before pulling back onto the highway.

An old, familiar ache spread through her chest as she slipped back into traffic. She knew better than to use her phone while driving, even for a second. Especially at the speed the highway demanded. If it had been Liv driving, it was doubtful she'd sit comfortably the rest of her vacation.

But for Shannon, even if James somehow found out about her ticket, the worst she might receive was a stern glare and a long lecture. When she'd stayed with them after being released from the hospital, James had certainly laid down the law. And while he hadn't hesitated to put her in timeout, or have her write lines until she felt like her hand was going to fall off, he hadn't physically punished her.

Bryant, James's equally sexy twin brother, was another story. He'd made it clear he would be all too happy to spank her until she was red and sore and sobbing out her apologies. And she would have been lying if she'd said she hadn't used that particular fantasy as late night fodder when she'd been alone in bed with only her vibrator for company.

But a man like Bryant wouldn't be happy with just smacking her ass a few times and calling it a night. No, he'd want the whole package, her full submission, and she'd made herself a promise years ago to never go down that road again.

So there would be no Daddy waiting for her at the beach house to redden her bottom and then hold her and comfort her when her punishment was over. Nobody to ease the guilt churning in her stomach. The ache in her chest spread, and she hated herself for wanting the one thing she couldn't have.

“Get a grip, Shay,” she lectured herself as she turned the volume back up to just shy of ear-splitting. “Forget about the ticket and drive like a normal person.”

Driving like a normal person turned out to be easier than she'd expected since traffic had slowed to a crawl by the time she reached the bridge. Refusing to let the cluster of cars ruin her mood any further, she flipped through her road trip playlist until she found the perfect song and sang along at the top of her lungs.

Two hours later, exhausted and sore from being stuck in the car, she parked in the driveway of her friend's gorgeous house. There was a reason Liv's face had been plastered on the front of *Maryland Homes Today* - she knew real estate better than anybody in the business. And she'd known the big blue house, with its beach access and irresistible curb appeal was going to make them money hand over fist as a rental property.

Of course, that same business savvy had made her the target of a madman, and nearly cost both Shannon and Liv their lives. But she wasn't going to think about that. Not this week. Forcing all thoughts of psycho killers out of her mind, she grabbed her bags from the tiny trunk and headed into the house.

Since she'd be alone, the master suite was all hers. Dropping her bags on the bed, she wandered the huge, airy room, taking in all of the homey little details Liv had added. The painting of the Boardwalk over the bed, the oil diffuser in

a gorgeous cerulean blue that added hints of soothing lavender to the air.

Stepping up to the French doors, she opened them and walked out onto the back deck. The stairs led directly down to the sand and it was a few short feet from there to the water.

She should unpack. She needed to run to the store and pick up supplies so she wasn't forced to live off takeout all week.

But the ocean beckoned. The siren's song of waves crashing against the sand called to her, begged her to come and play.

And why shouldn't she? This week was about indulging herself without the weight and worries of the real world. Why shouldn't she be a little irresponsible? With that thought in mind, she hurried back into the bedroom to strip and change into her favorite green bikini. Towel in hand, she all but ran down the steps to the beach.

Even though the sun was setting behind the house, it was still warm enough for a quick dip in the Atlantic. Leaving her towel and phone on the sand, she raced for the water.

When she was waist-deep, she took a deep breath and dove straight into a wave. The cool water hitting her face was a shock, but she quickly adjusted, cutting through the clear blue water like a mermaid.

It wasn't long before her lungs began to burn, urgently reminding her of their need for oxygen. A memory tried to push to the forefront of her consciousness: hands around her throat, cutting off her air, that same burning in her chest as darkness crept along the edges of her vision. She deliberately willed the memory away, refusing to give in to the panic slithering up her spine.

He wasn't allowed here. He wasn't allowed to taint this perfect place or her perfect vacation.

What happened to me does not define me. The mantra her therapist had taught her played through her mind, chasing away some of the panic.

Sheer stubbornness kept her under longer than was wise, long enough for her lungs to turn to fire and her head to ache. When she broke the surface again, gasping for air, the world around her spun a little. With another deep breath, she dove back into the waves, staying under until her lungs felt like they would burst.

Just when she was about to surface again, she was lifted from the water. For a moment, the panic almost consumed her, but the arms cradling her were too thick, the chest she was pressed against too broad to be *him*.

Forcefully blowing the stale air from her lungs so she could pull in fresh oxygen, she swiped at the hair clinging to her face and looked up at her captor. Shock rolled through her as she found herself face to face with the last person she'd expected to see.

“What the fuck are you doing here?”

Those piercing blue eyes she'd been trying so hard not to think about during the drive to the beach hardened at her question. “Saving you from killing yourself, as far as I can tell.”

“I wasn't drowning, you neanderthal. Put me down!”

He didn't put her down. He didn't so much as pause in his trek across the sand. “You meant to stay under the water for almost two minutes?”

Shit. Had she really been under that long? No wonder she'd felt like she was going to pass out. Not that she had any intention of letting him know how close she'd come. Tilting her chin up, she gave him her best defiant glare. "Yes. I knew exactly what I was doing."

A muscle in his jaw jumped and her heart responded in kind. "Well. That makes my choice an easy one."

"You mean the choice to put me down? Yeah, it's pretty easy."

The man had the nerve to smirk at her. "I wouldn't be so eager for that to happen, if I were you."

"Why not?"

"Because as soon as I put you down, you're going right over my knee so I can paddle some sense into that damn thick skull of yours."

Thank god she was already drenched from her dip in the ocean. Otherwise, she was certain he'd feel her arousal soaking through her bathing suit bottoms.

She was so distracted by her body's response to his words, it took her brain a moment to catch up. When it did, she went rigid in his arms. "You can't spank me, Bryant Monroe!"

"Watch me." Without missing a beat, he stalked up the stairs of the beach house to the room she'd claimed as her own less than thirty minutes earlier. In a move she might have appreciated under different circumstances, he sat on the edge of her bed and flipped her facedown over his lap in one sweeping move.

BRYANT FINALLY HAS HIS GORGEOUS, SASSY LITTLE BRAT all to himself for an entire week. Now, he just has to convince her to let her guard down enough to let him be the Daddy she's always needed...

Read their full story here! **Daddy's Laws**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stella is a USA Today Bestselling author of romance featuring irresistibly sassy heroines and the strict, dominant men who try to tame them. Her favorite place to write is on her deck, with a glass of wine, enjoying her fabulous view of the countryside. Aside from reading and writing, Stella's favorite hobby is shopping. She is a fierce advocate for teaching women to love themselves, both in her writing and in the real world!

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