



Darn Near
THE PERFECT
Man

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF KEPT
CAROLYN
FAULKNER

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Darn Near the Perfect Man

Carolyn Faulkner

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DARN NEAR THE PERFECT
MAN



CAROLYN FAULKNER



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CHAPTER 1



“YOU. ARE. DRUNK,” I declared as neutrally as I could manage.

His somewhat bleary blue eyes rested on me like the caress they always seemed to be as he drawled slowly and deliberately, “Possibly.”

That was likely the closest thing to agreement I was going to be able to get out of him. Collin Somerset was no fan of appearing weak, even to me, his oldest friend.

“Well, the party’s over. I’d really like to get you into bed before I leave,” I said, rising in hopes that he would follow my lead but knowing better than to expect him to comply that easily.

No, instead, he chose to give me a lopsided smile, lowering his lids to half-mast and not appearing anywhere near as drunk as he had five seconds before. “Promises, promises,” he drawled teasingly.

I put my hands on my hips and gave him my best glare. “You know what I meant.”

He sighed somewhat dejectedly. “Yes, I do, and although I’m fine, I suppose you’re right.” Collin stood, slowly unfolding all six-foot-five of himself and doing so with more grace than I could have mustered even if I were completely sober, which I was not—nor have I ever had a graceful bone in my body.

Still, once he had risen to his true height—seeing that he was barefoot—he began to wobble and weave a little.

Slipping his arm around my shoulders, keeping a hold on his wrist as I did so for leverage, I let him lean on me as much as I thought he could. Thankfully, he didn't have a huge need for me and was aware enough that he managed not to give me too much of his weight, or we both would have ended up in a heap on the floor.

If he was truly too drunk to walk, then he was better off stretching out on the couch for the night, since there was absolutely no way I could carry the man or even come anywhere near doing so.

Luckily, his bedroom wasn't too far away, and I got us both there without killing either of us, which I counted as a win. If he landed on me, even at my not particularly small size, I'd be a goner.

I hadn't foreseen the way he very nearly took me down with him when he fell onto the bed, though. I ducked out from under his arm at just the right time, and he landed there by himself, looking up at me as if he were both bemused and disappointed to find that he'd arrived there alone.

"Scootch up to the pillows," I ordered, patting his legs, frankly amazed when he obeyed me. Not that he noticed, thankfully. He was too busy furrowing his forehead and applying all of his attention to the task at hand—trying to get his big fingers to work the buttons of his dress shirt—and I was too busy trying not to laugh at him as he did it.

It was strange to see him struggling at something so easy. He always projected an air of being in charge, of being strong, able to tackle anything. Somehow, I found the sight more than a bit unsettling, for reasons I wasn't interested in examining any further.

Instead, I whirled around, facing away from him, pretending to look for something—anything—so as not to betray how uneasy I was just being in his room with him like this, especially with him in the process of undressing.

"Silly?" I heard him ask from behind me. "I can't seem to get the buttons to cooperate, and I don't want to sleep in my dress shirt."

He knew how much I hated that nickname—from the moment he'd bestowed it on me when we'd met decades ago, in grade school, even then deliberately spelling it the wrong way—which, of course, was the only reason why he continued to call me that, as well as “Prissy,” on occasion. That was the one that inevitably earned him a smack, not that he ever really noticed it, and it certainly didn't function as any kind of deterrent, either, unfortunately.

“Priscilla,” I corrected automatically, turning around to come to the head of the bed, where I sat down gingerly, brushing his big—usually quite adept—hands away and unbuttoning them myself as quickly and efficiently as possible.

He wore a mischievous grin as he asked, while searching my eyes, obviously hoping mine would meet his at some point, “I've always wondered what it would be like for you to undress me, but you've never been willing to take me up on my offers to be your sugar daddy.”

That was probably one of the most dangerous things he'd ever said to me. Hoping to prevent him from musing any further along those lines, I stood immediately at that, turning my back to him again. “And I never will take you up on that offer.” I looked at his shirt. “They're mostly done. If you have to, take it off over your head.”

I could hear him doing just that, then there was more commotion behind me and I knew he was undressing himself. The man slept in the nude—I had discovered that fact myself, unexpectedly, years ago. And I had no interest that I was willing to come to grips with at this moment, to myself or him, Heaven forbid, in reconfirming that fact, so I vacated the room and went into the kitchen.

Moments later, I returned with a large glass of water, peeping through the crack in the door to make certain that he wasn't just lying there nude. I wouldn't have put that past him in the least. Not because he wanted to make any kind of statement towards me or even make me in the slightest uncomfortable—which was something I had managed not to

let on to him, I hoped—but only because he, unlike myself, was entirely comfortable with his body.

Who wouldn't be, with a physique like that?

But he was under the covers, up to his waist, anyway, so I presented him with the glass. “Drink all of this.”

“Ah, bless you,” he sighed. “You take such good care of me, Sill.”

I couldn't help but smile to myself at the compliment. “We have taken care of each other almost all of our lives.”

“Yes, but all I've done was intimidate a few assholes for you. You've, actually, physically taken care of me on more than one occasion.”

“That's what friends do. They take care of each other.”

He finished the water and handed the glass back to me, which I put on the coaster on his nightstand. Then I bent down to try to adjust his pillows, which were askew behind him.

Collin's arms came up and around me as he carefully twisted himself, and before I knew it, I was lying next to him, on my back, as he leaned over me, those muscled arms still lying loosely around me.

Breathless merely at being in what was still a pretty staid position with him, I said, “Collin, let me up.”

His words were dark and soft. “I would never hold you against your will, Priscilla.” My brows rose at his use of my full name. “But I have to admit that I have wondered why you've never seen fit to proposition me.”

What I considered to be the absolute absurdity of that question made me guffaw loudly in his face, which caused it not to shutter itself as I expected and he would be well within his rights to do, but rather to look openly surprised.

“I had no idea that you found me so unattractive,” he said casually, his eyes on me.

Dear God, I had no idea how to extricate myself from this situation without either causing him more offense—which was

very likely how this was going to go, regardless of any verbal maneuvering I might attempt to spare his feelings—or revealing myself to him in a way that I had literally spent my life preventing, as it would very likely be akin to Armageddon to our relationship, and thus to me.

The bald truth was that I found him so attractive that he was the first thing I thought of in the morning and the last at night. I had rejected every man who approached me but one, whom I now, much less than fondly, referred to, not by his name, but as “The Mistake”. I had married him in a fit of depression about the fact that Collin was becoming very serious about a woman I detested. I ended up in a years-long, extremely unhappy marriage, and he ended up living with that awful woman but never actually marrying her.

I know what and who I am, good and bad, and none of those things would qualify me to be loved by him in any capacity other than in the one in which I already, mostly happily, exist—the friend zone, where I have carefully ensconced myself for all of these years. I have outlasted all of his women—the short and long-lived ones—by being his friend and never even coming slightly close to positing the idea that we could be anything more than that.

Because the reality of the situation is that I am Medusa to his Apollo. He is what every woman in her right mind wants—tall, broad, deep voiced, soft spoken, slow to anger, quick to smile man who graduated with a 4.0 grade point average and double majors in business and classics, a staunch feminist with old world manners who wasn’t afraid to display his love of women, animals, or kids. And it didn’t help that even though we were both in the middle of our fifth decade on the planet, he still looked like an incredibly potent combination of Jason Momoa, Chris Evans, and a young Paul Newman.

In short, he was darned near the perfect man. Every woman I saw parading through the very bedroom—the very bed—in which I found myself at that moment was a solid ten, some of them were darned close to elevens.

Oh, he certainly had his faults, and I knew them all—he hated to be awakened suddenly, could be a bit too fond of

drinking, especially around his friends, and he was stubborn. Collin could also be demanding and intimidating if he had a mind to, which, luckily, was rare. He couldn't seem to bend his standards when it came to a life partner enough to actually choose one to stick to. He wasn't a Lothario, exactly, but I had long since given up hope that he'd fall in love, get married and make a gaggle of gorgeous babies with whomever it was he chose.

But since that had never come to pass, and as much as I tried to want that for him—because I knew it was what he wanted—I couldn't help but feel a modicum of relief about it, too—for which, of course, I felt eternally guilty. I had never, and would never, do anything to disrupt his path to love, and I would have been truly happy for him to have found the right woman with whom he could settle down.

Unfortunately, I am more than flawed enough that I have thanked whatever God came to mind at the time for that large favor every single night as I crawled into my lonely bed.

No, I could never be what he needed, and I had spent the past years dedicatedly trying to convince myself that being his friend was more than enough for me, and sometimes I even actually believed my own propaganda.

The biggest—and hardest—part of that was learning how to keep my mouth shut about whom he was dating. Sometimes, especially on the rare occasions when he asked my opinion about his latest love interest, I had to bite my tongue until it was damned near bloody, but I knew that it was the right thing to do. Nothing good could come from me criticizing the woman he was sleeping with.

There I was, though, lying in his arms, on his bed, with him looking at me with a bemused expression. Somehow, it looked to me as if his eyes weren't quite as out of focus as they had been, although I continued to attribute his unusual actions to him having drunk too much. No other explanation was viable as far as I was concerned.

Instead of answering his question—which I would never be drunk enough to do—I resorted to our usual teasing. “I had

no idea that your ego was that fragile. Do you require that your best friend drool all over you, too, along with the rest of the female inhabitants of the planet?”

I knew from the set expression on his face that I wasn't going to be able to change the subject that easily. And damn him, he still managed to blush when I said things like that, even after all these years.

One of Collin's most endearing qualities was his unfailing and sincere modesty. Unlike the majority of good looking men, he'd never seen himself as nor acted as if he were endlessly desirable.

The hand that had been at my waist rose to make me look at him. Again, I noted that those stunning blue eyes appeared to be clearer than they had been mere moments ago, but I dismissed it again instead of realizing that that was a warning sign I needed to heed.

Still, his gaze was as hypnotic as it had always been, especially close up, and I found it impossible to pry myself away—probably just as impossible as it would be for me to get away from him if he decided he wanted to keep me there, despite what he'd said.

Just the brief thought that he might act in any way dominant towards me while I was in that position, was more than enough to make me want to arch myself against him. It was a testament to just how well I'd trained myself not to respond to him in that way that I didn't. But, Christ, my hips were poised to do that, and my entire body ached at the effort to hold myself still!

The big hand that had held my chin released it in favor of cupping my cheek as his expression changed to something I'd never seen from him before, just as he brought his mouth to mine.

Mayday! Mayday! Mayday! Klaxons and air raid sirens were going off in my head, and I could feel myself stiffen. My own hand came up to clamp onto his wrist—although it made absolutely no attempt to dislodge his hold on me—and it was too late to do that, anyway.

His lips were carefully pressed to mine, at first—tentatively, almost. I couldn't help but gasp at the idea that this was happening after I had spent so long doing exactly what I'd just maligned the rest of the women on the planet for doing—lusting after him, however secretively.

When my mouth opened beneath his, he took complete advantage, holding me still with incredible gentleness that was just the right amount of firm at the same time. Every bit of me wanted to melt into the kiss, to return it with all of the built up frustration and fervor of having to suppress my desires after all of these years, but, as usual, I hesitated.

I'd always said that he was almost preternaturally able to sense how I was feeling, and he pulled away, although not far. We were still intimately face to face, his hand still cupping my cheek, the other at the top of my head, slowly caressing my hair.

“Am I barking up the wrong flagpole?” he asked, and I had to smile at the mixed metaphor. “Your pupils are dilated, and your breathing is irregular, but I can tell by the way you're holding yourself that you're feeling wary.” His voice became even softer. “Talk to me, honey. Tell me what you're thinking and feeling.”

In my head, my mind said what I knew I should say to him. “I just don't want to screw up what we have.” In my fantasy, that would result in him letting me up, me tucking him in and heading home to my lonely house.

That was the way things should have happened—the way they had happened between us for forever.

But instead, I heard my lady parts say for me—out loud—to him, “It's just... new, and you know how I hate things that are new.”

He smiled, and any residual brain cells I owned departed while waving a white flag. “It is, and it isn't. I mean, we already love each other. We've each seen the other at our best and our worst. There's very little I don't already know about you, and vice versa.” He grinned and did a reasonable Captain Kirk imitation. “This is the final frontier.”

“If you start quoting Star Trek at me now...” I warned with a slight growl, and Collin chuckled and opened his mouth again, but I pre-empted him. “Star Wars would be even worse.”

He gave me a sci-fi nerd’s best glare. “Them’s fightin’ words.” Then he lowered his mouth to mine once again, whispering just before he covered them, “And fighting with you could not be further from my mind at this moment.”

Full, sensual lips slanted across mine, and this time my mouth fell open naturally. I couldn’t imagine denying him access for one second longer. Our tongues met and caressed each other as he deepened the kiss, wrapping his arms around me and holding me to him, shoulder to knees.

When Collin lifted his head, I felt compelled to ask, even as I knew I might not want to know the answer, “Are you sure you want to do this?”

He stopped in the act of sweeping his hands down over my tummy, towards the hem of my shirt, and said in a tone of voice that made it sound like the most profound vow, “Absolutely. You?”

Without hesitating so much as a nanosecond, I answered, “Yes, please.”

With that, I casually threw away all of that time spent denying myself the chance to be with him, even if it was just this once and he was too drunk to really remember it—or worse—he remembered it and regretted it, which would gut me entirely.

Still, some parts of me had apparently decided that I could happily live off this experience for the rest of my life. If it meant at some point in the future, it caused us to no longer be friends, I would be devastated. But to know this man—once—as completely as I had always fantasized about? It would be worth it.

I hoped.

No, I knew it would be. To hell with my father—who was a wonderful man but to whom I wasn’t particularly close,

unlike Collin. I had spent my life comparing all men to him, and they had—invariably, every last one of them, most especially the one I ended up marrying—fallen very short of the lofty expectations he created in me.

I just hoped that I hadn't built things up too much in my mind. By now, even he might not meet the high mark I had set for the others in my life.

But I already loved him as much more than a friend, so he was starting from well ahead of anyone else I had ever met.

CHAPTER 2



IT WAS the sense of relief that I felt flow through his entire body as it relaxed against me that surprised me the most at that moment, as if he had been holding himself stiffly in preparation for me to turn him down.

Unlike most men, who, in my experience, tended to concentrate entirely too much on the end game, their own satisfaction, to the exclusion of their partner's, and who likely would have immediately relieved me of my top, Collin, instead, leaned down and kissed me again. This time, it was much more tender, almost shyly exploring my mouth, not demanding but coaxing, and all of those things combined within me to make it one of the sexiest kisses I'd ever experienced, despite how tame it was. So much so that when he moved a little away from me, I just lay there, eyes closed, still trying to come to grips with everything he had just made me feel.

“Okay?” he asked, and I opened my eyes.

“Yes. That's just...” I cleared my throat, in the grips of a sudden kind of nervousness that I hadn't felt before with him. Reeling myself in, lest I say more than I should to him, I instead said something that made me sound like a seventh grader, “That was a nice kiss.”

He smiled at me then, his hands still playing around the hem of my shirt. “Priscilla?”

“Yes?”

“I, uh, know that you like dominant men, and in case you didn’t know, that’s pretty much how I am in bed.” My cheeks reddened. I remembered that I had told him once what I preferred, which was one of the reasons I didn’t get drunk around him anymore—my lips loosened considerably when I was soused. And he had given me more than enough hints throughout our friendship that I was pretty sure that he preferred to be very much in control in the bedroom. It was one of the many reasons he’d starred in all of my masturbatory fantasies. “And we know each other pretty damned well, so I’m going to assume I’m doing what you want me to do, unless you tell me otherwise.”

“I’m okay with that,” I agreed, nodding.

Then he gave me one of those looks from under his drawn brows, the kind that I kept snapshots of in my head to replay for my own enjoyment. But this was by far the most potent one I’d ever been on the receiving end of.

“And you are especially to tell me if I’m doing anything that hurts you—physically or otherwise.” He lowered his voice to a husky growl. “Understood?”

I might consider myself a submissive, and Lord knew I fantasized about it incessantly, but I’ve never actually been one—in fact, quite the opposite. But since this was Collin—whom I envisioned as my ultimate Dom—I allowed myself to answer him softly in a manner that I found came surprisingly naturally to me.

“Yes, Collin.”

He didn’t miss my tone, as I knew he wouldn’t, smiling down at me encouragingly. Even just as his friend, he paid very close attention to me, more so than anyone else in my life ever had. I come from a larger family and got a bit lost in the shuffle. I was hardly neglected, but I was neither the golden child oldest, nor the entertaining baby of the family.

But Collin had always seen me for who I was—who I really was—and liked me anyway.

“I know this is new between us and that will make you a little tense, but try to relax, honey. It’s just me, and you know that I only ever want what’s best for you, right?”

“Right.” ‘Just him’ really didn’t work for me at all. He was much too important to me to ever be ‘just him’.

His hands brought my shirt up and over my head, mussing my hair and forcing me to futz with it so that it didn’t look like a rat’s nest atop my head. The natural curls tended to have a mind of their own and were always wanting to tangle.

But he caught my hand and brought it back down, saying, “Your hair looks fine, baby, and I intend that it’ll be all mussed up by the time I’m done with you, and you’ll look just as gorgeous to me then as you do now. As you always do,” he added.

Collin waited until I opened my mouth to say something that he knew would be self-denigrating to put his finger over my lips. “Don’t say it.”

I shut my mouth.

He gave me a lopsided grin. “Smart girl. I know you would have said something negative about yourself, and that would have earned you your first spanking from me.”

I pursed my lips in displeasure, but he was grinning at me like an idiot.

“I think I’m going to like this new phase of our relationship. I’ve always wanted to break you of that habit.”

He was speaking as if this was going to be more than a one night stand, but I knew better. Men like him didn’t have ongoing sexual relationships with women who looked like me. It would upset the natural order of things in the universe for the two of us to become involved like that.

I managed not to dive under the bedclothes when he relieved me of my top, but it was close. My arms did a terrible job of covering the ample parts of me that I really didn’t want him to see, and splaying my hands over my fat really just emphasized it as it bulged through my fingers anyway.

“Hands at your sides.” It was no less effective, no less dominant, for the quiet way he said it. Collin’s expression was loving and gentle but resolutely expectant, too. I knew he wasn’t going to magically decide to back down in the next few seconds and let me continue to try to hide myself from him and fail miserably at doing so.

I also knew that he was only going to be patient with me for so long as I finally began to move my hands away just about as slowly as I could manage.

In the meantime, he reached down and put his hand between my legs. I was still fully covered there, but I might as well have been utterly naked, considering the bolt of pure, powerful desire that just the idea of him touching me there caused in me, much less him actually cupping me.

Of course, my hands immediately glommed onto him, and no sooner had they done that than he asked in the same tone of voice as before, “Where should your hands be, honey?”

Try as I might, and I did desperately want to obey him, I could not convince my hands to let go of him.

“Do you need help doing as you were told?”

There wasn’t the slightest hint of anger or impatience in his question, and—lulled into a false sense of security because of it—I nodded, figuring that he would move them for me.

But I was wrong—very wrong.

Instead, I felt myself being flipped—more easily than I would ever have guessed that any man could do to me—onto my stomach, and before I knew what was happening, his hand began to descend on my backside with a stunning, quiet vengeance.

Why, oh, why couldn’t I have worn my new pair of stiff, unyielding jeans tonight? Why had I chosen a lightweight cotton pair of capris that afforded me absolutely no protection whatsoever?

If this was what it was like to be spanked by him over my clothes, I knew immediately that I never wanted to give him cause to spank my bare bottom. And I also knew, at the same

time, that it was unlikely I'd be able to behave myself well enough. even just tonight. to avoid that exact fate for very long.

It wasn't a flurry of swats; it was an unrelenting cadence of them, each a crisp, individual punishment unto itself. Because it was him, if he had seen fit to stop at just one, I would have been just as chastised as I was at the twentieth. They were all horrendous, and I immediately regretted that I hadn't obeyed him in the first place.

Surprisingly, I didn't cry—although, regardless of how much of a dichotomy it was, I am not a fan of any kind of pain and have threatened, in jest, of course, to go to the ER for a hangnail or a paper cut. I think it was because it was so unexpected and such a novel experience for me. I was too busy thinking about it to feel it as much as he might have intended me to.

Just as efficiently and completely without warning as I had gotten there in the first place, I found myself again on my back. But this time, my hands remained at my sides, where they'd landed.

“If you still need help,” he commented casually, “I have ties in the nightstand.”

“No, thank you,” I said primly, as if he offered me a cup of tea rather than a method of binding my hands that might help me avoid another spanking.

He caught that, too, teasing with a grin, “You're welcome, Ms. Madison,” as he unhooked my bra and threw it over his shoulder, moving his hands to the waistband of my pants while he looked into my eyes, as if to gage how I felt about him doing that.

Despite how I had been inspired so recently to want to behave, the muscles in my arms nonetheless jerked with the effort not to try to stop him.

As if he had noticed that, too, although I doubted it, he whispered, “You are as safe with me as you want to be, Priscilla.”

My eyes widened at his choice of words. It wasn't quite like the warm, loving things he usually said to me. But then he took my pants and panties down and let them fall to the floor, and I was too busy trying not to get myself into trouble again to worry about it any further. My hands gathered the comforter beneath me into a death grip, since they couldn't do what they wanted to, but that wasn't enough. Finally, I tucked them beneath my butt, which really wasn't comfortable, either, but it was better than getting spanked again—this time on the bare.

I heard him chuckle softly when I did that. "Perhaps I should bind your hands," he mused. "But, no. As long as you obey me, I'll allow you to retain the use of them."

He really didn't need to touch me at this point. The things he was doing to me and saying to me—his tone as well as his words—combined to very nearly get me there without him ever having to touch me in a particularly intimate manner. If he kept talking like that, it was going to be all over for me.

Suddenly, instead of touching me in a way I knew was going to either kill me, give me a heart attack, or make me come harder than I ever had before, Collin stood and began shucking quickly out of the remainder of his own clothes—his dress pants, briefs, and socks.

As much as I wanted to be circumspect, although I'm not sure why I still had that impulse since we were going to have sex, I couldn't keep my eyes away from him. Previously, when I'd seen him in a bathing suit or bare chested in the summer, in just a pair of shorts, I had only ever stolen glances at him. I didn't want to make him feel uncomfortable—as he would have to me if he'd stared at me blatantly—but I also didn't want to inadvertently reveal my desire for him. That was my overarching concern.

This time, I drank in the sight of him as if I was seeing him for the first time, and he was still the epitome of gorgeous to me. He didn't disappoint, either, although I did keep myself from staring at him *there*, as much as I really wanted to. I didn't have a lot of experience with men, but I still realized that he was much more generously endowed than any of my previous lovers.

When he rejoined me on the bed, he lay on his back and pulled me to him. I tucked my head onto his shoulder, hand landing naturally on his chest. We remained that way until he encouraged huskily, “Touch me, honey.”

“Really?”

“Yes. You know how tactile I am. I’ve always wanted more of your touch than I thought you were comfortable giving me.”

He was right—I’m not very touchy-feely, especially not compared to him. He was the kind of guy who hugged his friends, even if he’d seen them just yesterday. He hugged me all the time, too, held my hand, and sometimes touched the small of my back when we were walking somewhere. It took him a while to get to the point that he’d do that, but I’d told him once that I liked it when he did all of those things, and they instantly became much more frequently bestowed by him.

“Sorry.”

Collin shook his head slowly. “No need for sorries. I love you—and all your neuroses, too—just like you love me and all of mine.” Mine far outweighed his in number and severity, but I wisely kept my mouth shut about that. “We’ve long since accepted each other’s shortcomings, and we’re still very close.”

I nodded. He was right. He knew more about me than anyone on the planet, and yet here he was. I didn’t think I’d ever get over that fact, so much so that I really couldn’t let myself think about it at the moment. I’d persevere over that later, when I was by myself.

For now, for once, I indulged myself. My hand drifted over his shoulders and down his arm, noting the pronounced curve of his bicep and tracing what I could clearly feel were the bulging veins I found there, following them down his forearm to the back of his hand. I massaged each finger individually, as well as using my thumb on the palm, and was rewarded with a groan.

Then I dragged just the very tips of my fingers up the insides of his arm to his shoulder again, following the line of him to his neck and up to his scalp. His hair was longer than I usually liked on a guy, but on him, it worked. Bald would have worked, too, though, because he was Collin. I massaged his scalp a bit, before bringing my fingers down over his face, brushing them gently over his eyelids, over those high cheekbones of his, memorizing the sharp angle of his nose to the divot beneath, then over his lips and following the strong line of his jaw to the sensitive, tanned skin of his neck.

He actually shuddered as I found his chest again, brushing lightly over it to find and flick his nipples before discovering his taut stomach. Collin was a runner who did weight training and yoga. He was muscley, but not overly so, although he was more than in shape enough to have a very distinct Adonis Belt and a six pack that I couldn't resist running my hand over.

“Will you turn over onto your stomach?” I'd barely gotten the request past my lips and he did it. His backside was almost more beautiful than the front. Somehow, his shoulders looked broader from that angle. I touched every inch of his back, then surprised him by scratching him there, too.

“Oh, my God, bless you!” he sighed, sounding as if he was already ecstatic.

“Do I know what you like, or do I know what you like?” It was one of the few physical things I would let myself do for him that I knew he always enjoyed.

“You absolutely know what I like,” he agreed dreamily.

When I was done, his perfectly rounded butt taunted me silently, as if it knew that I was hesitant to touch him there. But I forced myself to seize the moment—if not him—using the last sweeping stroke of my nails to drag them down one cheek, then up the other.

I noticed that my nails barely dented his flesh. Damn, that thing was as rock hard as I'd always imagined it would be! But Collin hissed in his breath as I did it, and I felt as if I was queen of the world.

When I'd explored the rest of him, I asked him to flip back over, exposing the very last part of him I had yet to explore, which was already standing at attention. I reached out to take him in hand, but he deflected me away, and my disappointed, "Aw!" was quite audible.

He laughed softly. "You can play with it later, I promise," Collin said, as if it was a toy we would share, and, again, I found myself flat on my back.

But this time, when his hand found its way between my legs, I had no protection from it whatsoever, and I was the one gasping. My hands weren't beneath me any longer, so I had to slap them down onto the bed in order to keep them from getting me into trouble again. That, of course, made him smile.

"Open your legs for me, honey."

I did, but only slightly.

"I am not going to play that kind of game with you, Priscilla."

Damn. I was not very easily intimidated—especially not by him. At least, I thought I wasn't, but he was proving me very wrong on both counts with that tone of voice.

"But I did open them," I defended myself while, at the same time, moving my legs farther apart.

"As I said, baby, I don't play that kind of game. Responding to an order I've given you half-heartedly or with half-measures is just disobedience of a different kind."

Dear God, it sounded as if it would be a good thing that this was just a one-off, or I could see that I would constantly be in trouble with this man, just due to my naturally contrary nature. I had no doubt at all that if he were my Dom, I would chafe against any and all rules he gave me, even though I knew, intellectually, that they would all be for my own good.

His fingers found me—every bit of me, from stem to stern. It was the stern that had me immediately arching my hips off the bed, making him grin. "Off limits for the time being?"

I nodded. "Off limits."

Nothing more was said about that, for which I was very grateful. That was a conversation I had never fancied myself having with him, and I was certainly not eager to have in real life.

“You’re wonderfully wet,” he complimented.

I wasn’t at all sure what I should say to that—no one else had ever commented on it in such a positive manner, that I could remember. And I wouldn’t have, because it was something about myself that I’d always found embarrassing.

“Thank you?” I responded tentatively.

He laughed at that, hanging his head down over my chest, planting tiny kisses all over my breast, then taking a swollen nipple in his mouth. “I did mean it as praise.”

“Thank you. That’s not how everyone has intended that comment.”

His head jerked up, leaving my nipple to cool in the air. “Someone said something derogatory about you being wet?”

“Yeah. I think ‘too wet’ is usually what’s said.”

“More than one man has said that?” Collin sighed, as if despairing of the behavior of his own sex, which was something on which we often agreed. “Oh, honey, those men are fools.” His hand came up to caress my cheek. “It’s a marvelous thing, and I take it as an incredible compliment to myself that you are.” As he returned to reclaim that peaked bud, I saw that leonine head shake and heard him murmur against me, “Idiots.”

Knowing, adept, yet infinitely sensitive fingers claimed the other bud, expertly strumming it. He seemed to know me so well—knew what I liked, how I craved to be touched—it was as if we had been making love all our lives. Or perhaps it was just how sensitive I was to everything he did. But it didn’t take me long before I was nearly there, too.

I wasn’t sure how that worked with a Dom, though. I didn’t know if I should try to back myself off or ask permission or what. “Collin?”

“Yes, hon?” he asked without missing a chance to flick the tip of his tongue over the tip of my nipple.

“I-I’m really close.”

He lifted his head and caught my eye. “Wow, already? You’re very responsive!”

“Is that good or bad?”

“It’s very good. Do you think you can come?”

I played that question over in my head, knowing that the bald truth was that I could have come from across the room—without him every having touched me—if he had but spoken to me as he had been since we got into bed together this evening. But I wasn’t about to say that to him.

Instead, I said in a manner that would leave him no doubt whatsoever as to my honesty, “Oh, hell yes.”

He grinned like a kid who’s been told he can have anything he wants from the candy store. “That’s great!” he said.

“It’s okay?”

Without missing a beat, he answered, “Absolutely. Especially since this is our first experience together, you can come any time you feel like it. I’ve always wanted to see you in the throes of ecstasy, frankly. It’s hard to imagine—you’re usually so reserved, physically.”

My cheeks flushed at that, even though I highly doubted that he had ever spent any time at all thinking about how I looked when I came. And, of course, it had the opposite effect than he intended—making me paranoid about how I was going to look to him when I came.

“Is there anything I can do to make it better for you?” he asked in all sincerity.

I just shook my head. He was unbelievable, especially compared to the majority of the men I’d been with—he was so concerned with my pleasure, as opposed to his own!

“You’re sure?”

“Yes.”

His fingers went back to their delightful work, lips suckling avidly at my nipple. I was probably closer than I let on, and interruptions didn't usually bother me, but—try as I might, and I did, because it meant so much to me—I couldn't seem to get back into the groove. I was so close but couldn't seem to nudge myself over the edge. I knew he'd say that was what he was there for, but what was going on in my head definitely influenced the rest of me, and I couldn't convince myself to relax enough to just let go and let it happen.

Against my better instincts—because I so loved looking at him—I closed my eyes, hoping that might help, but it didn't.

Collin was incredibly patient, but I didn't want to have him keep trying if I wasn't going to get anywhere, so after a relatively short amount of time, I simply rolled towards him and hugged him. His arms immediately wrapped tightly around me.

CHAPTER 3



“DID I DO SOMETHING WRONG?”

“No. It’s just me. I-I’m, I just can’t, at the moment, apparently.”

He looked genuinely disappointed. “We haven’t given it very long,” he suggested, although I felt it had been too long, myself. “Is there anything I could do differently? Want me to go down on you?” Collin was practically halfway between my legs before I answered.

“No. I’m fine. Don’t worry about it.”

But I knew that no matter what I said, he was going to worry about it. That was just the kind of unselfish, generous man he was. So, instead of letting either of us wallow in it, I put a hand on either cheek and kissed him, letting all of those pent up desires have free reign—at least in that—as I pressed myself against him, reaching down at the same time to caress his cock with a barely there touch that had him pumping into my hand, seeking firmer contact.

Before I knew it, he was above me, poised between my legs. I could look down and see—well, most of him, although my tummy blocked some of him. I could feel him notched against my opening and closed my eyes.

As he sank into me, I heard him growl, “Jesus, Priscilla, I’ve wanted to do this so badly for so long!”

His confession stunned me, at first, but then I brushed it off as something he would say in the heat of passion.

I was no virgin, but when he sank every inch of himself into me, some inches more than others, made my breath catch in the back of my throat. Not only was he long, but he was thick, too, and it was a bit of a challenge.

He was still taking most of his weight on his hands and knees as he looked down at me. “You okay?”

I nodded. I was fine, but it had been a while since I had been stretched like that. It hadn’t really ever been my thing, but I had to admit that it made me feel instantly submissive to lie beneath him, literally filled to overflowing and pinned by him like a butterfly, having to concentrate on being able to accept him fully into my body.

My mind wanted to wander into “big, fat butterfly” territory, but I refused to allow it. I knew I was fat, he knew I was fat, I should long since have considered that it was a non-issue, but that is not how my mind works, especially not in regards to Collin.

Then he began to withdraw, dragging himself slowly out against my slick inner walls—all the way out—before pressing himself into me again, not quite as carefully as he had before. As he established a rhythm, he became more and more involved with his own journey, which was fine with me.

I was all for that, not really liking a lot of attention to be concentrated on me, and for almost the first time since we’d ended up in bed together, I was actually able to relax. I let my hands settle on his back, touching him lightly just below his shoulders, then letting them drift down, applying a bit of nail the closer I got to his butt and hearing his breath catch as I finally let them grip those taut cheeks tightly, digging into that rock hard flesh as they did so.

That seemed to spur him on, and it wasn’t more than three or four strokes more before he was literally slamming into me, and on the fifth, he arched his hips to the point that I could feel him nudge up against my cervix. It wasn’t the most pleasant thing, but I just gripped his butt that much harder and he did that stutter step plunging that signaled a man’s release, until he let his arms go and all of his weight landed on top of me.

That was one of the best parts of whole experience, and he moved away much too quickly, as far as I was concerned, to lie next to me, on his back, panting as if he'd run a marathon. When I would have moved away from him, an arm reached out and hauled me up against his side.

“Where do you think you're going, young lady?” he asked, not bothering to open his eyes.

My clit, which had been missing in action for a while, began to throb. No one had called me that since I was six or so—certainly never in that way—and I had no idea that it had such a power over me. My entire body clenched, hard.

“Home?”

“No. Not until I've tried again to get you off.”

Shouldn't he be rolling over and falling asleep? I would have been just as happy if he'd done that, frankly—maybe happier.

“There's no need for you to do that—”

He jackknifed up suddenly, arranging me on my back, then taking his place stretched out beside me. “There's every need for me to do that,” he frowned. “I want to bring you off. I can't take the risk of not satisfying you. You'll never want to do this again if I let you go home unfulfilled.”

“Collin—” I began, but one look in his eyes told me to shut my mouth. And for once in my life, I did the intelligent thing, rather than what I wanted to do.

“Smart girl,” he complimented when I did so. “Should I use a vibrator? What can I do to make it better for you?”

Sighing, and calling myself all sorts of a hypocrite, I mentally chastised him for being the kind of man he'd already proven he was—loving and caring towards his partner and not just out to get his rocks off. Why couldn't he be a selfish fuck like most of the rest of the male population? It would make this so much easier on me!

I shook my head. “You didn't do anything wrong. It's me. I'm too tense.”

“I noticed you were holding yourself that way the whole time.”

“Well, there’s tense, and then there’s tense.”

“Say what?” he asked.

I sighed, and he took my hand in his while he focused all of his attention on me. It was such a romantic gesture that I very nearly teared up. But that would never do.

“Well, I don’t know how it works for any other woman, but I keep myself pretty tense down there when I’m trying to come. The problem is that I-I’m not really relaxed with you.”

He snorted, then realized that I wasn’t kidding when I didn’t find it amusing. “How could you not be? How long have we known each other?”

“Very long, but not in this capacity.”

“So?”

I closed my eyes. “Well, you know I’m tense in new situations.”

“Yes, but it’s still just me.”

Nodding in agreement, I said, “Exactly. It’s you. There’s no exception for you in that capacity. As a matter of fact, I’m more tense because it’s you.”

Collin frowned. “Really? Why would that be? Shouldn’t you be more comfortable with me?”

My eyebrow went up as I stared into his eyes. “Have you met me?”

He grinned. “Yeah. I should have known better than to think that about you, huh?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you... do you want to bring yourself off?” he asked, big hand landing on my belly, where I wished it hadn’t. Now every time I moved, my fat was going to jiggle beneath it.

“Yes, if I can go home and do it in my own bed, alone.”

“Priscilla.” Patient, but nonetheless firm. “Is there really nothing you can think of that I could do to help get you there while I’m here?”

I squirmed a bit, because there were a couple of things we could try, but I didn’t want to be a bother. I’d be willing to bet that he’d never had this kind of problem with any of his model-gorgeous girlfriends.

“Tell me.”

“I can’t.”

Again, I found myself on my tummy, his hand now covering cheeks that sure as shit stung as if they were still red—or at least pink.

“I suggest you reconsider that position right quick, baby girl.”

The words fell out of my mouth in ridiculous haste as I abandoned my principles entirely and spilled my guts to him. “Talk to me while you’re touching me. And close your eyes.”

He turned me over gently, and we went back to our original positions. “Well, honey, I’d be very glad to do the first, and I’m glad you like it when I talk to you while we’re making love. I think you’re the first woman to say that to me, and I like it when you talk to me, too. I think a lot of women think I’m too wordy in bed.”

“Really? You have a voice for phone sex. It’s deep and expressive and you’re really well spoken—the only thing better would be if you had a British accent. If you ever needed to change professions, you could make a lot of money doing that, and I would be your best customer.”

Collin chuckled. “I’ll keep that in mind, but I think I’ll stick to businessman, for the moment.” Then he took my hand again. “But, as much as I want to make you happy, and I hope you know that I really do, I’m not going to be able to close my eyes, honey. As I mentioned before, I want to see you when you come. I want to see the expressions on your face—I want to watch you as it happens to you. I want to know everything I can about what it’s like for you.”

I wanted him to close his eyes more than I wanted him to talk to me—not that I wouldn't love it—but I wasn't surprised to hear him say that.

“I want to try again.” He vaulted gracefully up from the bed, disappeared for a moment with the water glass I'd brought to him earlier, and returned with it half full of what I suspected was whiskey—this was Tennessee, after all—along with a smaller water glass that he put on the coaster.

Sitting up, I asked, “Are you trying to kill me?”

He looked offended. “Of course not. I just thought it might help you be less tense.”

“But I have to drive home when we're done here, Collin!”

Without spilling a drop, he lay back down next to me and handed me the glass, saying, “I want you to take a couple gulps—and I do mean gulps—of that.” As I did as he requested—ordered—he calmly and implacably said, “And if you think I'm going to let you out of my bed tonight, then you are sorely mistaken. And if you're not now, then I sincerely promise you that you soon will be if you try to get up and go home before I'm done with you.”

Smooth as glass, he took the whiskey away and handed me the water, which I definitely needed at that point, although he didn't let me drink as much of it as I wanted to. “You can't water down the whiskey too much if you want it to accomplish what I want it to accomplish.”

I could feel the alcohol spreading its artificial warmth down my throat and into my belly. I was very susceptible to alcohol—and pot—and I knew it wouldn't be long before it had the desired effect of relaxing me, whether or not I wanted to be relaxed, which I found weirdly arousing.

He put the glasses on the nightstand, then turned back to me. “I think you were very kind not to mention it, but I think that I'm at fault, too, for not taking nearly enough time with you.”

I clamped my hand over my mouth.

“What?” Before I could even so much as shake my head at him, he added, “And don’t even think about not telling me, Priscilla. You know how much I hated that habit before, when we hadn’t gone to bed and you weren’t submissive to me. I think you have more than an adequate enough imagination to suss out how I’m going to handle that this evening.”

“But you know how hard it is for me to talk to you about some things,” I whined.

“Not tonight, Priscilla. I just plain won’t have it.”

I sighed, wanting to wait him out, but knowing that he would be as good as his word. So, while looking down at my hands as my fingers fidgeted nervously, I said in an uncharacteristically quiet voice, “You’re wrong. It’s not you at all. It’s me.”

“You don’t know that.”

My eyebrows rose in surprise. “Are you trying to tell me that I don’t know my own body, Mr. Somerset?”

“No, but—”

“Good, because that would be a criminally bad case of mansplaining right there. The truth is that it’s my own nervousness around you that did it—my own insecurities about being in this particular situation with you—that played with my head. It’s not something you’re responsible for at all.”

“My apologies,” he said sincerely.

“The truth was,” I sighed, then plowed ahead with it, “that I was practically there from the moment you put me on the bed with you.” Since well before that, but I wasn’t going to admit that to him. “But you know how my mind works against me sometimes.”

He nodded but kept quiet, letting me speak and appearing to be quite eager to hear what I had to say.

“And it worked against me then. I start thinking, and it all goes to hell.”

The whiskey appeared before me again. I took a healthy swallow of it, and it was rotated out for the water, then they

both disappeared again.

“Well, I’m hoping that I can keep that overactive little mind of yours occupied enough to get you there,” he pronounced, tucking himself against my side and brushing the hair away from my face before he kissed me with great tenderness. “But it can’t hurt to take things a bit more slowly, either. I barely touched you before I reached for your crotch. I’m usually not into the caveman approach.”

“I’d sooner that than have you spend any amount of time looking at me, you know.”

He brushed the side of his index finger over my cheek, then hugged me tightly. “I know. I wish I could help you realize that I love all of you.”

I continued to look down. “How could I possibly expect you to do something that I can’t do for myself?”

“Baby girl,” he sighed. “So, if I do what you did for me—touch me all over like that, which was fabulous—it’s just going to make you feel that much more uncomfortable and tense, isn’t it?”

I leaned a little away from him and said sarcastically, “So you *have* met me!”

My broad grin inspired a dour look of his own. “Well, that’s something for us to work on. But for the moment, I’ll play to my own—and your strengths.” Collin rested his elbow on the mattress and his head on his hand. “I know I should have asked you this before, but have you been spanked by anyone else?” he asked, casually reaching out to tweak each of my nipples.

It was very hard to think when he did that, which was the entire point of the exercise. “I, uh, oh, uh, no.” Then I thought better of it. “Well, sort of.”

He smiled. “Which is it, my dear?”

I could hear how he was tempering his voice, making it dark and rich with dominant tones around the edges, as if to make me think I’d be in trouble if I didn’t answer him straight this time.

“Well, as much as I hate to bring him into this conversation —”

“Don’t then,” he said flatly. Collin had always hated John —my ex—although he did his level best not to criticize him while we were together. But once we broke up, all bets were off.

“You asked,” I answered innocently.

“Oh, all right, if you must.”

“He was good in bed—if a bit boring—and he did try to give me what I wanted. It wasn’t his fault that it wasn’t what I was into.”

I could tell he was having a hard time keeping his mouth shut.

“But that was an entirely different experience from how you spanked me.”

“I’m glad, because I thoroughly enjoyed doing that, even if it was just a baby spanking, really.”

My frown was fierce. “A baby spanking? Hell no!”

He nodded sagely. “And with your pants and panties on, too. Not even a real spanking, technically.”

“Bullshit.”

Collin laughed. “I am going to have so much fun taming you.”

That idea didn’t bear thinking about. No, I determinedly clung to the belief that this was just an anomaly—a tear in the fabric of the space/time continuum that would be fixed by the morning, never to be repeated.

A hand drifted slowly down between my legs, finding them closed again. He leaned down to whisper, “Where should your legs be, baby?” sweet as honey but with an unmistakable thread of steel—and its accompanying promise of retribution—running through it.

I whimpered—something I rarely did—but complied, and that hand claimed all of me again.

“Still beautifully slick, I’m glad to see.” He dropped baby kisses all over my face as he continued, “I’ll bet it helped you when I fucked you, didn’t it? Did you know that I watched every second of it when I took you, when I first entered you? Seeing you like that, hearing the sounds you made—very submissive sounds, by the way—feeling you stretch around me. Your mind might fight against it, Priscilla, but your body recognizes its master. Damn, woman, I could come again right now, just thinking about it.”

Middle and ring fingers found their way inside me, pumping insistently, while his broad thumb danced with surprising delicacy over my clit, teasing and enticing me, increasing the pressure on that delicate bud every once in a while, driving me crazier and crazier as I did forget to worry about what I looked like and surrendered myself to him and the ecstasy he was bringing me to.

“I can’t wait to put you over my lap, or bend you over the end of the bed. I’m going to punish and then take you and make you come in every room in this house, then I’m going to start all over again.” It was a threat, it was a promise, it was a vow, and he effortlessly made it sound like all three powerful things rolled into one.

I lost any shred of what remained of my composure when he used his free hand to pull my wrists over my head. I think the way I moaned and mewled loudly let him know that his instincts were perfect and he had done the very best thing.

Seconds later, when I could feel my body gathering in that familiar way, all my muscles tensing, the pleasure coiled within me at his behest seconds from exploding, he leaned down to whisper into my ear, “You had better come for me, baby girl, or I will strap your behind until you won’t want to sit—”

That was it. That was all I needed.

“Collin! Oh. God. Please!”

I had never screamed so loudly while orgasming, and he didn’t stop stroking me during it, either. As a result, all that white hot, impossible to handle, acute ecstasy rolled into

another and another and another, gathering steam and accumulating sensations until I begged him—on yet another scream—to please stop!

When he did, he didn't just leave me alone, either. He gathered me to him, holding me tightly, not letting me escape even when I tried to fight him to get away.

“No, honey. Stay here with me,” he said quietly, giving me no choice but to do as he said. “You're safe.”

To me, it wasn't a matter of being safe. I had absolutely no doubts that I was safe with him. It was a matter of being stripped down to my innermost self, the one I'd never even shown to him, and left utterly bare and raw.

I covered my face with my hands, knowing I was being terribly selfish. He'd said he could come again, and I could feel his hardness pressing against my leg. But I honestly couldn't do a thing about it at the moment—not one damned thing. I was barely human, the words that were usually part of the armor I'd worn since I could remember ripped away from me. And I was incredibly embarrassed to be that way in front of him.

Not that he paid the slightest attention to what he had to know was my acute discomfort. Collin just continued to hold and rock me. I wasn't crying, but I might as well have been. I certainly wanted to, although probably not for the reason he might expect. He held me that way until I had calmed down, and then some, as if he were loath to let me go.

When he finally relinquished his hold on me, I just lay there, where he'd left me, head still buried in my hands, trying to get hold of myself. When I'd fantasized about what might happen between us, I'd never expected this—this feeling of total exposure, and I wasn't at all sure what to do about it.

But he seemed to know. He only left me long enough to turn out the light, then reclaimed his position, bringing the covers up over us and me back into his arms.

I had to admit that did feel pretty damned fantastic—hands down, better than I'd ever imagined.

“Are you all right?” he whispered against my temple. “You don’t have to say anything elaborate. Just nod your head.”

It was a good thing he wasn’t expecting erudite conversation. I was barely managing to hold myself together and not sob my heart out all over him. What I did do was press myself even farther into his arms while nodding my head.

His hand cupped the back of my head, holding my cheek to his chest. “Good. There’s nothing you need to do. Just let me hold you. Fall asleep if you can, although I can’t promise that I’m not going to wake you in a couple of hours, because I intend to indulge myself with you tonight. I want you, and no matter how many times I have you tonight, it will barely take the edge off for me.”

My mind rebelled against what he was saying, how he was assuming we would continue being intimate like this when that was patently ridiculous.

But I was too tired—too utterly and completely sated—to argue with him about it, and I was asleep almost as soon as he finished speaking.

CHAPTER 4



THE REVERSE HAPPENED the next morning, when I was able to stealthily leave without waking Collin up, which was some kind of incredible miracle, considering that I am not the most graceful of people. It was much more likely that I would loudly break something, catch my toe on a piece of furniture and awaken him to the sounds of me using my extensive vocabulary of blue language, or me just flat out falling on my face for no particular reason on the way out of the bedroom. Luckily, none of that happened.

As I drove home in the cool, early morning light of Knoxville, the guilt set in, as I'd known it was going to. I did my best to fight it off, but there was no way it wasn't going to take hold within me. As relaxed as he had managed to get me last night, had little effect on how tense I was getting the farther I was from him and his damnably magic voice, and fingers, and mouth, and cock...

To my great surprise—I made it all the way back to my place before my mental self-flagellation was interrupted by his text tone—which was the sound of money from the beginning of the Pink Floyd song because he was a businessman, and I found both the song and the sound to be apropos.

My hands never left the steering wheel. I had no intention whatsoever of dealing with him this morning. I needed some time to think. And rake myself over some hot coals, metaphorically, anyway. To make my stomach twist in aguish at what we'd done—what I'd done—while torturing myself

and making myself feel even more guilty by replaying a highlight reel in my head on repeat, especially since it made me hot again.

Coins clanging together and old cash register sounds assaulted my ears again. And again. And again. Yup. He was pissed.

Then my phone began ringing, and I knew it was him because his ringtone is the chorus of the song *I'll Be There for You*, from the show *Friends*.

I blithely ignored all of it, at my own peril, I sensed, but again, ignored.

Needing something to distract me from my own more unsettling than usual thoughts, once I was home, I dove into my Saturday routine, which was everything I hated to do when I wasn't working, the reason I did them first thing in the morning. That gave me the rest of the weekend, free and clear, to do as I pleased, at least until Sunday night, when I would always have to sit down and correct papers.

I cleaned the house, starting with the back bedroom, which was really more storage than anything else, although there was a bed in there, so it really just needed to be vacuumed and dusted.

Then I made my way through the rest of my small condo until I landed in the kitchen, which, because I like to cook, was always a mess. I did all of this with my cat winding his way between my legs at every possible opportunity, or walking annoyingly slowly in front of me until I actually said to him, "You do realize that if I trip over you and die because you're being an asshole, you're going to end up in the pound?"

Teddy continued to look remarkably unconcerned at that threat, even though it was less a threat and more of a promise.

Collin had said that he'd love to take Teddy—my butt ugly, brachycephalic, shedding his long hair everywhere—cat, but he was gone too often for work, and he was a needy little fellow who had bonded very tightly with me and would hate being alone with just a cat-sitter coming in for a little while

each day. Although I had secured his promise to find him a good home if anything ever happened to me.

I was in a pair of clingy leggings because I'd accidentally ordered them and found that they were infinitely comfortable, but I wouldn't be caught dead in them anywhere but the safety of my home. It was topped by a disreputable t-shirt—over no bra whatsoever—that should have been looser on me than it was and was more hole than shirt. Half of the Patriots logo was peeled off, which was no loss to me since I hated football. It was the only thing of his that I stole from my ex when I left, mostly because I knew it was his favorite shirt. It didn't come anywhere near to making up for how shabbily he'd treated me, but nonetheless, I loved my revenge shirt, and I pictured my distraught former husband when he realized it was missing every time I put it on, and that always brought a smile to my face.

I was just about to put the mop to the kitchen floor when I heard someone pounding on my door. That was strange. The UPS guy just knocked politely and left whatever package I'd decided to support poor Jeff Bezos by buying. Normally, none of my friends would have cause to beat up my door, but then, this was not normal times.

Then it happened again, louder and more angrily, since I hadn't opened the door. "Priscilla!"

I already knew I was wrong about none of my friends needing to do that, and I wasn't happy about the way he was acting. It was a side of him I'd never seen before, and I didn't like it.

As soon as I did, he bulled his way past me and into my living room then turned to me—bulging arms crossed over his equally impressive chest—and asked, "You don't answer your texts or phone calls?"

I shrugged. "Isn't that one of the advantages to cell phones—not having to do that until or unless you want to?"

That flippant remark was not at all how I should have handled him, but I hadn't yet recognized that fact. I should have paid more attention to his tone.

Collin sighed audibly, closed his eyes and hung his head for a moment, as if he were struggling for patience, then those piercing blue eyes found mine. His question seemed a bit calmer and was very much quieter, but had no less of an angry edge. “Why did you leave this morning without waking me up?”

I automatically countered with a defensive, “Why would I wake you up? We were up all night. I wanted to let you sleep.” I also wanted to avoid talking to him, but that remained unsaid. I had no doubt he knew that was the reason much more so than my concern for his sleep deficit.

His expression did the one thing I really didn’t want it to do—growing infinitely darker and harder—but I only just realized that in that moment. He was rarely angry at me—or I at him—because neither of us played games or were fans of drama, and overall, we were both pretty easy to get along with, he more so than I, of course.

Still, that look on his face made me take a step away from him without thinking, and his hand shot out to capture my forearm, more than big enough to wrap all the way around it when he did. He used his hold to pull me closer to him, and for one of the few times in my life, I didn’t want to be closer to him. He looked more annoyed at me than I think I’d ever seen him, and that was never going to be a good thing for me, especially since I’d submitted myself to him last night.

I hadn’t expressed it at the time—which I realized was my own fault—but I honestly hadn’t considered that I needed to say to him that I realized that what happened between us was going to be a one-time thing. I’m extremely skilled at ignoring what I don’t want to deal with, so I was easily able to do that, regardless of the fact that he kept saying things that let me know he wanted our relationship to continue along all of the new lines we had spent hours exploring together in the dark of night.

The arm that was holding my wrist deftly twisted it behind me and held it there, while the other wrapped around my waist, forcing me even more tightly against him before it came up to cup my cheek, not allowing me to look away from him.

“Priscilla, I realize that you’re—you struggle with feelings of inadequacy, especially as they pertain to me.” He drew in a deep breath, eyes searching my face. “But did last night not mean anything at all to you?”

Tears filled my eyes at that, and I could feel my chin start to tremble, but I blinked them back and forced my body to stop betraying me to him, although it wasn’t easy. I wondered what the best way to answer his question was, because I could tell he was angry and hurting—and that was the last thing I would ever do to him intentionally—and he deserved an honest answer from me.

Of course, my mind was working overtime, trying to suggest what I should say to him, how I should spin it to try to conceal my feelings for him from him. But, for once, I shut off that cacophony of fear and insecurity and downright terror at the thought of losing what little I had had of him until last night and answered from my heart.

“Of course, it did, Collin. It was—” I bent my head for a second, then looked back up at him, whispering with an undeniable reverence, “It was everything and more than I could ever dream of.”

That seemed to relax him a little, and I felt his body unwind a bit, although he still held me tightly, as if he thought I was going to flee. He swallowed hard and said, “I know you’ll discount this immediately, but I felt the same way. I *feel* the same way. That’s why I was so hurt to see that I was alone in my big bed when I woke up. I wanted us to have the weekend together, to spend learning about this new aspect of us—and beyond—and instead of being able to tuck you beneath me and slide into you, as I woke up very much wanting to do, I instead had to send you several texts, as well as call you, both of which you ignored.”

Collin continued to speak as he took my hand and brought me over to my big recliner, where he sat down. “That meant that I couldn’t spend a lazy day in bed with you, as I’d wanted to do, and I mistakenly—apparently—thought that you would want to do, too. Instead, I had to get up, shower, get dressed

and make my way over here to show you just how unhappy I was that you disappeared on me like that.”

I was so engrossed in what he'd been saying that I really wasn't paying attention to how he was physically maneuvering me until he stood me in front of him, pushed my pants and panties down and gave me no choice but to lie over his lap when he gave my wrist a firm tug.

“What are you doing? This is not right!” I whined, although I knew the battle had already been lost.

“On the contrary. It's very right for you to be punished for leaving without saying so much as one word to me this morning. It made me feel used, like I was some one night stand, some guy you found on Tinder whom you'd never met before and never intended to see again.”

Well, I thought to myself, that's pretty much how I had coached myself to think about it. His comparison was annoyingly apt, even though he knew that I don't use Tinder. But I was more than smart enough to keep that to myself.

“I thought I was someone you loved as a friend for a very long time, with whom you had found a wonderful new aspect of your relationship that would benefit both of us, one that would most likely deepen and enhance how well we know each other, increase how much we love each other, and would fulfill each of us in a way neither of us has seemed to be able to find from anyone else over the years.”

I wanted to open my mouth and defend myself, but considering my seriously compromised position, I knew that it would greatly benefit me to remain quiet and was actually able to do so.

Yay me!

Sort of.

“So. You're going to get a spanking for leaving like that this morning. It was highly disrespectful. Even if you still don't consider me to be your Dom, it was a very impolite thing to do. When we're done, you're going to sit on my lap and we're going to talk this out.”

He didn't give me any time to consider what he'd said. When he stopped speaking, the spanking began, and within less than ten very hard swats, I was already thoroughly regretting what I'd done, even though, at that point, anyway, I'd still likely do it again. It didn't take long past that—an embarrassingly short time, frankly—before I was more than willing to reverse my way of thinking if it would just get him to stop spanking me.

The first time he'd punished me, I was even more surprised to find myself in that position, and thus, I didn't have much of an ability to curb my responses and I wailed and moaned throughout.

This time, I tried to remain quiet, but to my horror, I found I literally couldn't! He was too damned good at this, which—despite the interest I'd had since I could remember in him doing exactly this—was yet another reason why I should not knuckle under and let him be my Dom on an ongoing basis.

Damn, that man's hand was easily as hard as his head was!

I'm not an agile person, but I was literally dancing on his lap, kicking my legs up in a way that the Rockettes would have been proud of, twisting and leaning and trying to squirm off his lap.

Unfortunately, he was much stronger than I was, and always would be. If I went on a diet and got skinny, it would be even worse. My size—at this moment—was my best advantage, although even that was woefully inadequate and not at all up to the task. Still, it was really the only defense I had against him, and I tried to make the best of it.

The arm he looped around my waist to hold me in place, though, was like a metal band—immovable and unbreakable, no matter what I did or how desperately I threw myself into doing it.

Long before the spanking ended, my lips became unsealed, and I had not the slightest qualm about begging and pleading for him to stop, groaning, yelping, and squealing every time his palm made contact with my butt, still residually sore from

last night's discipline, which only added exponentially to my misery.

When he stopped, I tried to scramble off him immediately, but he wouldn't let me go. His arm was still around my waist, holding my arm in place against me.

“Not so fast,” he chided. “You will apologize to me.”

While the area between my legs clenched at his words and tone, the rest of my body automatically stiffened in protest, and the sarcastically questioning, “Apologize?” was out of my mouth before I could stop it.

Yes, I am an idiot.

Round two commenced immediately and was infinitely worse than the previous. It was at least as long and hard, only it was applied to a backside that had already been thoroughly ravaged.

Abandoning all hope of retaining any sense of dignity and completely forgetting to worry about the other houses around me, I bellowed my unhappiness from beginning to end, dissolving into tears long before he stopped. Not even an immediate apology—if one delivered under sincere duress—softened his resolve towards me.

The second time his hand finally stopped smacking me, I apologized yet again, as sincerely as I could through tears and hiccupped sobs. I didn't even try to get off his lap that time. I just lay there, draped over his legs, pathetically weeping, not even worrying or caring about how I looked. I was just very glad that it was over, I thought, rejecting the idea that perhaps it was just a break in the action.

After a few long moments being held in place—which were extremely humbling, to say the least—he rearranged me on his lap so that he could hold me. Big arms wrapped around me and held me to him as I continued to sob pitifully while he soothed me with gentle caresses and kisses, as well as his deep, dark voice.

“If I didn't love you, I couldn't discipline you, Priscilla. And I hope you know—I think you do—that I do love you.”

He rocked us in the chair, and I let myself be held for longer than I think I'd ever let him hold me—when my parents died. Sometimes, my fierce desire for independence worked against me, but for once, this time, I wouldn't—couldn't—let it.

“I think we need to establish a safe word for you, honey,” he said, when I'd calmed down almost completely. “We'll talk about it more later, but I think it should be your choice, since you're the one who needs to be able to remember it.”

I didn't protest that that wasn't necessary—why get myself into even more trouble? That possibility didn't even bear thinking of at the moment.

Then he leaned forward and stood, carrying me into my own bedroom without the slightest effort—he emitted no groans and didn't seem to have any problem lifting me off his lap whatsoever—and laying me gently down on the bed, where he removed the rest of my clothing, as well as his own. Naked, he scrunched himself down towards the end of the bed and gently grasped an ankle, parting my legs rather than asking me to do so for him this time, and taking his place between them.

My butt hurt just lying there, and it hurt even more when I—idiotically—made as if to move away from him. “You can't do that. I've been cleaning. I'm all sweaty and disgusting.”

In answer, he reached up and used his hands hooked over my thighs to pull me back down to him, leaned forward and buried his head between my legs. “I like your smell—your natural smell. You smell like a woman—like my woman.”

My hand was over my face. “Dear God, I am so mortified,” I whispered, more to myself than him.

“Why? If I wanted you to shower, I would have brought you to the bathroom. We could have showered together. Why would you be mortified when I'm not—” he interrupted himself and continued, “strike that. Don't answer it. I know why.”

“Because I'm me,” I answered. “And I'm not your woman, Denise Willoby is, at the moment.”

He frowned. “I’m seeing Denise, yes, but we’re not exclusive, or I wouldn’t have done with you what I did with you last night. I don’t cheat.”

“I didn’t mean to imply that you did.”

“So, what other arguments do you have against us becoming a couple?”

“A couple? I’m still working on you Domming me last night and us having sex.” It was the absolute truth.

One finger began to casually stroke my folds. I could feel his warm, coffee-scented breath on my sensitive parts. “Well, start working on the idea that it’s going to be more than that—hopefully a lot more.”

I didn’t say anything to that because I couldn’t. I was too busy trying to blink back tears.

Of course, he noticed them immediately, even though I was trying to hide the signs, and reached up to brush them from my cheeks. “What is it, honey? What are you all wrapped around the axle about?”

“I-I don’t want to do anything different from what we’ve always done, because I don’t want to take the chance of losing you in my life,” I whispered, not looking at him, but not really wanting to stare down at myself, either. There was really no good place for my eyes to land at the moment, so I stared up at the ceiling, noting that it wanted painting.

He didn’t hesitate even for the slightest second, but moved up to hold me tightly in his arms. We were both lying on our sides, my head on his chest. One hand rested on my waist—and I resisted the urge to try to shrug it off, knowing he was touching my fat—and the other was stroking my hair and rubbing my back.

“Priscilla, we’ve known each other longer than most people will ever be married in their lives. We’ve shared secrets, we’ve seen each other at our very best and our very worst, we’ve laughed and cried and, Lord knows, we’ve talked. I think the two of us are just about the wordiest people I’ve ever known. That’s probably one of the hazards of loving

an English teacher.” He grinned. “I don’t think there has ever been an instance—at least from my perspective—where I’ve been angry at you for more than a few minutes. And we still love—and like—each other very much. I miss you horribly when I’m traveling and I can’t see you as often as I’d like. Thank God for Facetime. I can’t remember a time when you weren’t the first person I think of in the morning, and the last person I think about before I fall asleep.”

That was eerily close to something I’d thought to myself recently.

“I don’t think we’ve ever had a fight—certainly nothing knockdown, drag-out like lots of folks. Neither one of us likes—or Heaven forbid, wallows in, as some people do—that kind of thing. I think we are already scarily compatible, and that moving into a romantic relationship with you is the next natural step.”

“I don’t know,” I breathed. “Doesn’t that just beg the question ‘why didn’t we do this a long time ago?’”

“Well, we were both building our own lives. We’ve definitely gotten closer since you divorced The Mistake.”

“And you’re not concerned that we could ruin what we have for the possibility of a romantic relationship that might not work out?”

He tipped my chin up, finding my eyes. “I think that if we were going to fall out, it would have happened a long time ago. And I also happen to think that we would work out really well as a couple. But if we didn’t, I’d bet we’d be able to become friends again.”

It would be a tremendous gamble. It would be taking the chance of losing something that was very precious to me, that had been a part of my life for almost as long as I had been alive, and that was a very frightening thing for me to contemplate.

And I said all of that, aloud, to him, knowing that he would both hear and understand me.

“You’re not wrong. I absolutely understand and, to some extent, share your apprehension.” His fingers caressed my cheek. “But I haven’t found anyone else who makes me as happy as you do, and that makes me willing to take that chance, because I want more from you.”

I didn’t say anything, but he must’ve sensed how uncomfortable I was feeling, because he hugged me. “I know this is something that’s very hard for you to talk about.” Then he chuckled. “It’s kinda unusual, but I’m the more emotionally open of the two of us. Usually, that’s the woman in any given relationship.”

I pursed my lips. “That’s not how I was raised.”

“I know, baby. Thank you for being so forthcoming with me about how you’re feeling. Relationships—the good kinds, anyway—require lots of communication, but especially D/s relationships, because of the nature of the fact that I’m going to bring you pain sometimes.” He smiled. “I just thought of the fact that you’re a masochist who doesn’t like pain and a submissive who isn’t very submissive.”

“Yeah, I’m complicated like that.”

“You just need someone you trust to take care of you in those very special ways, so that you don’t feel as if you always have to protect yourself from them.”

I nodded. “I’ve always been wary of people, but John made it worse.”

Collin growled in the back of his throat at the mention of his name. “I much prefer it when you call him what he was—a mistake. A big mistake. I still wish you’d let me go after him on your behalf, just once. I wouldn’t beat the daylights out of him, although I would want to. I just want to lay the bastard out, just once, for how much he hurt you.” He sounded quite fierce, as if he would very much relish doing that.

When it came down to it, I would have loved to have seen that—as a fly on the wall—too. John was small but scrappy, although he’d be no match for Collin’s size and power.

“No, it’s not your fight, and it wouldn’t be right.”

He gently used the hand that was in my hair to bring my eyes to his. “Of course, it’s my fight—you’re mine, and you have been for a long time, regardless of whether or not you were willing to admit it.”

That skirted very close—terrifyingly close—to the truth of how I had lived my life all these years, loving him to the marrow of every bone in my body but never even so much as hinting at that truth.

“Well, he’s no longer in my life. He can’t hurt me anymore, so there’s no need for you to get your revenge.”

“Yeah, but it would still feel damned good,” he admitted, voice low and more vengeful than I’ve ever heard him be. He kissed me then, and it was so blatantly possessive and rawly sexual that when he moved his lips away from mine, I was panting. With his forehead pressed to mine, he said, “So, I want you to think about it for a couple of days—us becoming a couple. I have a business trip next week, and we’ll reconvene Friday night and pick up where we leave off this weekend.”

“This weekend?” I parroted back at him.

“Yes. I claim this weekend with you, as I was going to do if you had stayed put where you should have been instead of sneaking off in the dead of night without my permission.” His hands glided down my back to grab my butt cheeks, and I yelped when he did. The sting had just begun to calm down a little, and he was reigniting it. I had a feeling he knew that, too, the bastard. “When I’ve made you scream your lungs out—in a few minutes—and I do so myself a bit later, I’m kidnapping you back to my place.”

He was between my legs again, lips poised barely an inch from my center.

Suppressing the urge to wiggle away from him, I asked, “Why your place?”

“Bigger house, bigger bed, bigger bathroom, bigger shower stall—”

“I get it. It’s bigger.”

Collin raised a foot and waggled it at me. “Three fourths of me is hanging off this bed.”

I immediately tried to move myself around so that he'd have more room, but he held me still. It was an interesting experience for me. I'd never been held down like that by anyone before, and it added a lot more fuel to my fire that he could do that so effortlessly. Testing that theory, I made a more concerted effort to get away from him—it was very important to me that he be comfortable. But I couldn't move a muscle, and I could feel my desires ratcheting up several notches because of it.

“My word, your honey is practically pouring out of you!” he marveled openly. Collin looked up at me with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Gives an entirely different interpretation to when I call you ‘honey’, doesn't it?”

“Stop that!” I frowned. “Don't you want to move—”

He interrupted me again. “No, and if I did, I would already have asked you to do so. That's not something you need to worry about. Trust that I will never hesitate to ask you for what I want, even though—fair warning—sometimes, it might not be what you want at all.”

That sounded ominous, and I supposed I should be worried about it, too, but truthfully, I found the idea of submitting myself to his will to be oddly titillating. Not that I thought it was going to be easy for me to do, and that, too, was more enticing than off-putting, surprisingly.

Two fingers, then quickly three, found their way inside me as he bent his head to surround my clit with those warm, soft lips of his, while his tongue began to lick over me, slowly and deliberately.

I released my breath on a long, obscene groan as I couldn't help but arch my hips, in an offering that he accepted as his due. Working in tandem with his occasionally wandering free hand, which reached up to pluck at my nipples, I reached down—not to try to dislodge him, Heaven forbid, but rather to run my fingers through his hair. I didn't try to control his

movements at all. I just wanted to feel yet another connection with him.

Soon, though, I had to withdraw them, for fear that I would grasp his hair too tightly without meaning to. “Collin, please!” I pleaded.

“Mm.” His mouth vibrated against me. “I like the sounds of you begging me—either for your pleasure, or against my continuing to spank you.”

“No!” I wasn’t really sure what it was that I was supposed to be protesting, but the word came out of me with no effort whatsoever.

It made him chuckle softly. “Contrary to the very end, baby. I can’t wait for you to come in my mouth,” he moaned against me.

He got his wish seconds later. I could feel his eyes on me even though I’d closed mine as my own moans had become nearly constant, rising in pitch until I was carried over the peak.

“Collin, oh my god, Collin!” I screamed, wildly buffeted by the tempest within me. He clung to me like a rodeo rider clings to a bucking bronco, never letting up, never giving me a second’s respite, forcing me to careen violently from one tremendous height to another, barely able to finish one climax before I had started on the next.

When he finally moved up to take me once again, he kissed me, and I could taste myself on his lips—his whole face was perfumed by my scent, like some terribly intimate kind of cologne. His cock seemed even bigger to me this time—which was strange—and I very nearly came the first time he stretched me open, it felt so unbelievably, undeniably good.

I had never been able to climax during intercourse—until him. This time, he ‘rode me hard and put me away wet’, and I used the very last of my strength to clutch at him as the only solid thing in my world.

We recovered together, slowly, him lying panting atop me, my breath bellowing up at him, and him making absolutely no

move to get off. I felt lightheaded—probably the closest I'd ever come to fainting during sex—and concentrated on getting my breathing under control, while he did the same.

When he did move, it was just barely to one side of me, his hands and arms still on me, as if he couldn't bear to break contact with me completely. I was just as bad, as my hands sought him like a sunflower turns to the sun. Not touching him was practically painful—a fate not worth considering.

It took us a while to actually get there, but we did end up back at his place, with a highly disgruntled Teddy in tow. He was right that that was where we belonged. There was nothing wrong with my condo at all, but his was a big, single family home, set well back on a two acre lot. He couldn't see the street from his place, and no one from the street could see the house. As if he'd planned this and known I would be loud in bed, he was already in negotiations to buy the lots around him, too, as a kind of buffer from the rest of the world.

I cooked and he didn't, so we brought provisions—as well as a few things we stopped to get at Kroger to tide us over—from my place. I could be somewhat scatterbrained about some things, but I could also be ridiculously organized about others, and I had lots of meals that I had cooked and frozen, so we each picked our favorites.

We spent what came to be known to us as the Lost Weekend in bed... and the shower... and in the pool—the first time he'd managed to convince me to skinny-dip with him—and even once, and only once, if the grass stains on my butt and knees had anything to say about it, the back lawn. We ate what we wanted, drank what we wanted, shared a joint together, and had—hands down—some of the best sex I have ever had in my life. Screaming, crying, panting, groaning sex that never once allowed me the interest in or the ability to worry about what I looked like while I was begging him either to make me come, or stop making me come, or stop spanking me.

And if there was anything that happened that weekend that he could consider to be a compliment to himself—and there were really too many contenders to name—that was hands

down the most impressive. He had accomplished a feat that no other man I'd been with had been able to do—he'd gotten me to stop being so self-conscious about my body around him.

Even when I was married, I let it be known that I preferred to make love with the lights off, under the covers, and my then-husband had never said a word. No one had ever really challenged me about that. Now I was with a man who wouldn't let me settle for limiting myself—or him—in that way. He was unfailingly loving and encouraging and complimentary, which had a contrary effect sometimes, but he was also firm and unyielding in a way that was very good for me, even if I couldn't necessarily see it at that exact moment.

Collin kept me so constantly sexually charged, so sensitive, so ready for him and anything he might suggest the entire weekend that I never once worried about what I looked like.



HIS TEXT CHIMED. He was very good—now and always—about staying in contact with me, even when he was traveling. In a lot of ways, he already treated me as his girlfriend. “I’m getting on the plane, Silly. Behave while I’m not there to keep you in line.”

“Let me introduce you to an expression: while the cat’s away...” I texted back.

“...the mice will be earning punishments,” he finished for me.

“Yeah, no. What you don’t know won’t hurt me.”

He sent me a laughing emoji. “Don’t you count on it, baby girl.”

“I’ll take my chances,” I replied, knowing I was pushing my luck.

“Grr. TTYL.” The last thing he sent was a pair of lips, and I responded in kind.

He was headed across the country—to L.A.—and a few hours later, while I was slaving away at my desk, I got another buzz.

“Landed. I am now technically deaf from screaming children—and adults—on the plane. The children I can forgive. The adults, not so much.”

“Poor baby.”

“Meetings until tonight, then dinner with a potentially very big client, then back to my lonely hotel room. Might not be able to chat much until late, and you’ll be in bed asleep by then, especially with the time difference.”

“No problem. I’ll text when I can.”

“Me, too. Miss you already.”

“Miss you, too.”

“I can’t wait to get home and have you...” There was a cat and a chair emojis finishing that sentence.

“You want me to put Teddy on a chair?” I asked, confused. “The alternative is even worse. You want me to put a chair on Teddy?”

“LOLOLOLOLOL! No. Cat = pussy, chair = sit. Translation = sit on my face.”

I sent him a frowning emoji. “That is disturbing.”

“Sorry. There’s no specific emoji for that, so I had to improvise.”

“As well there shouldn’t be. Shudder.”

“Still, the sentiment remains true: I can’t wait to get home and have you sit on my face.”

“Collin!”

“Gotta go, hon. TTYL. Love you.”

“TTYL. Love you, too.”

Despite the fact that he’d warned me that he might not be able to maintain as much contact with me as he usually did, he did pretty well. I heard from him several times each day, some,

I could respond to, others, I couldn't because I was teaching a class, and it was the same with mine to him. Some, he could respond to, and some, he couldn't because he was in a meeting. I tried not to bother him during business hours much, because I knew that landing this client was very important to him.

He tried to make sure that he said good night to me before I went to bed, and I tried to make sure that there was a "Good morning!" text waiting for him when he got up. It was hit or miss, but that was okay.

That Friday morning, the day he was returning, which was an in-service day that I didn't have to attend, thankfully, I got a text from him saying not to meet him at the airport, but rather at his place and to dress comfortably.

I did as he asked, waiting in his driveway for him to pull in. When he did, he got out of the car and came over to open my door and help me out. "You could have gone inside the house, you know. You have a key."

"I know, and I've been watering—and carefully not breathing on, so they're all still alive and not shriveled, black husks—your plants all week. But... I don't know. I'm just not comfortable being there without you."

"That's cute. Come with me. I want to get there early so we can get good seats."

He had yet to tell me to where he was kidnapping me, but I knew as soon as we turned into the parking lot.

It was because of something I'd mentioned to him a month or so ago about one of the old, restored theatres in town. Movies weren't shown there—at least, nothing resembling new ones, anyway—anymore. Sometimes they'd do a marathon of older movies—*Agatha Christie*, the *Godfather Trilogy*, the old *Planet of the Apes* movies, etcetera. I'd noticed that they were doing a sing-a-long double feature of old musicals, and tonight, they were presenting the original *Music Man* and *The Sound of Music*.

It was very like him to surprise me like this—having paid attention to what had been an offhand remark about something I’d like to do or have—and I was positively gushing all over him as he escorted me into the theatre. We got exactly the seats we wanted—near the front, in the middle, the sweet spot—and he went to get us snacks, coming back just as the curtain went up. I was glad we’d gotten there early, as the place had really filled up while he was gone. No wonder it had taken him so long to procure the requisite drinks, popcorn, and Milk Duds.

It was one of the best nights of my life—mainly, because I was with him—but also because we both knew all of the songs, and it was a wonderful experience to be surrounded by people who also knew all of the songs and loved the movies at least as much as we did.

When we got back to the car, having sung our hearts out, he turned to me and laid his arm across the top of my seat, leaning forward to kiss me, then pulling slowly back to look deeply into my eyes and say, “I love you, Priscilla.”

That was hardly the first time he’d said that to me, though, so I didn’t attribute any more meaning to it than I usually did. Ridiculously oblivious me didn’t stop to consider that his tone was different this time—much more serious than ever before and perhaps he meant something more than he did usually when he said that, that he was trying to convey an even deeper feeling for me.

Instead, I blithely said, “I love you, too, Collin. Thank you for a wonderful evening!”

Of course, I didn’t notice until he kind of looked like he wanted to correct me, or say something more, but instead he started the car, grabbed my hand, and kissed the back of it.

Sometimes, I have to be hit over the head with things, because I rarely look for deeper meanings. On the other hand, Collin was always aware of that kind of thing. It was yet another way that we were different from stereotypical males and females.

But I knew I had just blown an opportunity with him—an important opportunity—and I knew I needed to make it right, to acknowledge how his feelings for me had changed and sooner, rather than later.

CHAPTER 5



THE WEEKEND PASSED in the most pleasant way possible—in a haze of nearly constant sexual fulfillment. We never left his place, and as soon as we got home from the musical interlude—having, of course, completely forgotten that I wanted to talk to him about something important—he narrated me opening Teddy’s carrier by saying, in a decent imitation of that wrestling announcer guy, “Release the Kraken!”

The cat immediately scampered away in an offended huff, of course.

And then my dearest, oldest friend—and yet to be formally acknowledged boyfriend and Dom—instituted a rule for me that I was not happy with, and I let him know that I wasn’t happy about it.

He literally waltzed me into his house, humming, *I Could Have Danced All Night* under his breath the whole time. It wasn’t a song from either of the musicals we saw, I pointed out to him on a chuckle. Nonetheless, I felt as if I were floating on air, until he said very casually as he went through his mail, “Honey, I want you to go into the bedroom and take off all your clothes, and then come back to me. I want to be able to take you any time the whim strikes me, and I don’t want to have to deal with your clothes before I do so.”

I stood there for a moment, fervently wishing that I hadn’t heard what he said, leaning slightly forward as if I was trying to walk but not managing to actually do it. My mind seized on the first logical reason I could come up with for why I shouldn’t be required to do this, but then I saw him pull out his

phone and use an app to raise the temperature of the entire house. As I was the one who always ran cold, he certainly wasn't doing that for his own benefit.

Damn him for knowing me so friggin' well!

My mind—already frazzled at the thought of being naked all weekend—couldn't come up with another even slightly valid reason why I couldn't do that.

“Silly?” he asked. “Are you okay?”

I gave him a patently false smile as I nodded and forced myself to head for the bedroom, although I wasn't at all sure what I was going to do once I got there. I wanted to submit to him. It was a need I'd had for a very long time, and I was extremely happy—not to mention, surprised—to actually have the chance to do it somewhere other than in the farthest reaches of my mind.

So the first thing I did was take off all of my clothes and fold them neatly—which was definitely a sign that I was stalling. But once I did, I just stood there, in the bedroom, unable to convince myself to go back out to him as I knew he wanted me to do.

“Baby?” I could hear him calling me as he walked down the hall towards his room, and I turned away from him just as he came into the room. His voice was warm and soft, as it usually was with me, when he asked, “Priscilla, are you okay?”

I nodded again, and it had been a lie both times, but more so this one. My eyes were filled with tears that I was having no success at all blinking back.

“I'm glad to see that you did as I asked,” he complimented.

I nodded again, wrapping my arms around myself, not because I was cold, but because I felt uncomfortably exposed.

“I know you don't wear a robe at home,” he began. I don't wear one at home because my pajamas are sweats and a t-shirt, and if I need something warmer than that, I add a sweatshirt. “But if you're cold, you can borrow one of mine until the heat kicks in.”

“No, thank you,” I said, and it came out just the way I least wanted it to—soft and broken and pathetic sounding.

Collin didn't waste any time in coming to stand in front of me, reaching out to bring my eyes to his. “What is it, honey? Are you not feeling well? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head, blinked, and tears ran down my face. He instantly pulled me into his arms. I stood stiffly within them, causing him to look down at me with a quizzical expression.

“Talk to me, baby girl.” It was quietly said, but I knew he expected me to answer him in short order. “What about being nude around me this weekend bothers you to the point that you're in tears about it, hmmm? I know we're pretty new in that area, but I thought you were getting used to me seeing you without your clothes on. Am I wrong about that?”

“No,” I whispered.

A big hand laid itself over my backside. “I'd like to think that I'm a fairly patient man, love, but I want you to answer my question sometime before we both have to go to work Monday morning.”

I got the hint, as well as the implied threat. “It's... it's the exposure. I'm just not comfortable walking around naked all the time.”

His arms tightened around me. “I think I already knew that about you. You are modest to the point that I'm surprised you take your clothes off to shower.”

That stung a little, although I knew he only meant to tease me. “Well, can you blame me?” I asked, gesturing vaguely towards my misshapen body.

I found myself staring up at him again, seconds later. “Yes, I can. I love you—not just parts of you, although there are some parts of which I am more fond. I've said before, I love all of you, and I find the thought of having you naked and available to me to be incredibly arousing.” Then, as if he'd thought of something, he stripped off himself, until he was standing in front of me in all of his glory.

I couldn't help it—my gaze swept over him like a starving man eyes a buffet. “While I appreciate the effort on your part, your nakedness is hardly comparable to mine.”

He laughed, then asked, “Why not?”

“Don't be disingenuous, Collin. You're fucking gorgeous.”

“You really think so?” he asked, and I sensed he was being genuine, although I didn't know how that was possible.

“Of course! You're what every woman would ever want in a man, physically.”

He looked a little uncomfortable just before he asked, “A woman say, like you?”

It wasn't like him to fish for compliments on any level. “Of course!”

He frowned a little. “Well, I didn't assume that. You've never said anything about how I look, except the occasional compliment when I'm in a tux or a new suit or something. Believe me, I've paid close attention to that kind of thing over the years. I've always thought you didn't find me particularly attractive.”

I'd never thought of it that way before. “I assumed you had women falling all over themselves—and you—to tell you things like that.”

“Yes, but that doesn't—they don't mean anything to me. They're just trying to get into my pants.”

“My point exactly.”

“No, it's not real. It's not from someone whose opinion of me matters to me, someone I love, like you.”

Stunned, didn't even begin to cover how I felt hearing that from him. And it reminded me what I had intended to do as soon as we got home if he hadn't broadsided me out of nowhere with the whole “let's get naked for the weekend” thing.

“Son of a bitch.”

“What?” He frowned.

My sigh was long and loud, but I was no longer tearing up. I stood in front of him and said, “Look, you know how stupid I am sometimes about social cues, and I wanted to remember to tell you I know that, in the car, when you told me you loved me, you were trying to say it in a way that I would recognize as being more than how we usually used to say it to each other.”

A small smile appeared on his face.

“You were telling me that you love me—as a girlfriend, as a woman, as much more than a friend, right?” I ventured.

He took me back into his arms and hugged me hard. “Yes, exactly. I do. You don’t have to say it back to me—I don’t expect you to. I said it in a way I’ve wanted to say it to you for a very long time, but I never thought we’d become intimate like we have, and if you’ll forgive me for doubting you, I frankly didn’t think that you’d notice the difference in my ‘I love yous’.”

He’d wanted to say that to me for a very long time? Was I hearing things? Had he really just said that? The very idea made me feel a little lightheaded.

It was too much for me to think about at the moment, especially when he said it to me again. “I love you, Priscilla. In pretty much every possible way a man can love a woman. I just want to get that out there, so you know. And like I said, don’t feel pressured to say it back to me, please. I’d rather wait and hear you say it to me when you really mean it than have you just say it back to me because you feel obligated to.”

Marvelous. So now, even if I felt the impulse to tell him the same thing, he wouldn’t really believe me. Still, it took a lot of the pressure off me that he went first, although I couldn’t believe it from him, either, at first.

Then he hugged me and kissed the breath out of me, before heading to the door of the bedroom, then turning back and holding his hand out to me. “Come.”

It wasn’t really a help that he was naked, too, and I didn’t really want to. But I figured this was one of those moments he

had talked about when he would ask me to do something that I might not want to do, but he would still expect me to do it.

I took several tentative steps towards him and put my hand in his, making him smile. “Good girl.” We walked down the hallway. “Are you hungry?”

“Are you going to cook naked?” I asked.

“Why not?”

“It seems designed to end up getting burned in very uncomfortable places, and it also seems somewhat unhygienic, too.”

He stopped and backed me up against the wall, not too far from where he had a rogues’ gallery of family pictures displayed. Unfortunately, he was an only child of older parents, and none of them were still around. “You didn’t answer my question,” he tsked, but he was nibbling at my neck, his cock poking insistently against my tummy, and I couldn’t think straight.

“Huh, wha?”

His grin was entirely too self-satisfied at having managed to render me largely non-verbal. “Are you hungry?”

“For food?”

That got a loud growl from his throat and his stomach at the same time, and we both laughed.

“I am. First, lunch was a long time ago, and popcorn and candy will only carry a person so far.”

He captured my hand and held it while we made our way towards the kitchen. “That’s right, I forgot that they have you on that horrible early lunch schedule.”

“Eleven o’clock. It’s just awful. By the time I get home at three, I’m ready to chase Teddy around with a knife and fork.”

“Speaking of the devil, where’d he get off to?” He looked around. “He’s not usually more than three feet from you at any given time.”

“Yeah, well, you know how much he just loves being shoved into his cat carrier and dumped out in a strange house. He’s probably hiding under a bed somewhere.”

“Well, then, it had been my intention that we would eat what remains of our bounty from the all-important Lost Weekend, but I’m all for making an exception to that rule, when warranted.” He grabbed his phone. “Pizza or Chinese food, or something else entirely?”

“Chinese food—better leftovers for breakfast.”

He gave me a big frown and opened his mouth to say something to me, but the restaurant picked up at that point, so he couldn’t.

Unfortunately, as much as I liked him paying attention to me when we were just friends, he was even more likely now to tell me what he wanted me to do, and now I couldn’t just blow him off anymore when he said something I didn’t like.

Of course, he knew exactly what I wanted him to order, too, when even my previous husband couldn’t have done that if his life had depended on it. He even remembered the extra duck sauce and to swap out the boneless ribs for the chicken fingers that usually came with the meal.

But when he was done ordering the food for delivery, he found me standing in the living room. “You can sit down on the furniture, you know.” I gave him a dubious look. “Is it your intention to stand all weekend?”

“No...”

Collin disappeared and returned with several large bath towels, which he put on the couch and chairs. “Better?” he asked, motioning for me to come sit with him.

“Yes, thank you.”

As soon as I snuggled against him, and he rested his head on the top of my head, he said, “Oh, by the way, no more Chinese food for breakfast.”

“But—” I was all ready to argue with him that millions of people ate rice for breakfast, but I had no doubt that he would

counter with the idea that they likely had it with steamed fish or vegetables, not swimming in sweet General Tso's sauce.

An index finger across my lips silenced me, but I still found myself over his lap.

“Hey, this isn't right! I didn't argue.”

He chuckled. “Well, that's not quite right. I stopped you from arguing with me, and I would suggest that you might want to consider not doing that immediately after I give you a rule, because at some point, I'm not going to help you avoid a punishment like I did. I'm just going to correct you like this.”

It wasn't his hand that cracked loudly—agonizingly—across my cheeks, though. It was something much worse. I suspected that it was my hairbrush, which I had bought from a spanking company who made them, and who'd burned my name into the back of it very nicely. It was a token of what I wanted, what I fantasized incessantly about, that I actually liked to use for its original purpose.

He'd seen it before, of course, but had never said anything to me about it, although now I realized that he must've known exactly what it was for.

If his hand was bad, then this was next generation horrid. From the very first swat with that horrible thing, I wasn't sure how much of it I could take, but I knew very quickly that it wasn't much.

It surprised me, then—since he'd not done it before—when he stopped and began to rub my bottom after only giving me ten or so smacks, which were more than awful enough. I'd never bought into the idea I'd read about frequently in spanking fiction that the pain could be “rubbed away”. To me, it sounded like it would just make things worse to be deliberately touched on the area that had been so recently spanked. But I was wrong.

It helped a lot. He was quite good at it, too, and before he raised the hairbrush again, Collin had pretty much gotten me back to how I'd felt before he laid into me with it the first time.

But that didn't mean that once it was applied again, it wouldn't hurt even worse, because it did. It was the same ten God awfully hard to bear smacks. I'd wondered what the sound of that thing hitting my flesh would be like—I'd even tried to spank myself with it and had tested it against my own palm, too.

None of it prepared me for that loud splat, or how there was just the slightest delay before the pain—especially of it being brought down on a spot that had already been smacked—rudely announced itself to me.

I was screeching by the time he stopped to rub again, panting as if he was bringing me off instead of punishing me.

“Is this because I almost argued with you?” I asked, needing to know so that I did my best never to argue with him again, as if that vow wasn't going to last more than an hour if I was very lucky.

“No. I just want to spank you,” he answered calmly, brushing his hand over my sensitized flesh while I jerked and arched at the very idea of being touched.

It felt swollen to me, not that I knew what a swollen butt felt like, and I knew it had to be a bright, angry red.

Still, he was both persistent and patient, and eventually, he was massaging me again the way he had before, and beyond. I really didn't want it to, but this spanking—this very specific way of conducting one—was getting me very hot, and I could feel the copious juices from my genitals dripping down beneath me, onto what had to be his.

As if he'd heard me think that, the hand that was soothing me slipped down between my cheeks. I reared up, surprised, but stayed put.

“Spread your legs for me, Priscilla.”

Again, my first impulse was to argue with him, and my second impulse was to clamp my legs shut. But instead, I did as he told me and spread them as best I could.

“Are you comfortable this way? Is this position hurting you in any way?”

“No,” I answered truthfully, wondering whether or not I should.

“Good.”

And there I lay, for quite some time, even more exposed than I felt when I was standing, getting my butt blistered for no good reason other than to amuse him, and—at very nearly the same time, being quite expertly fingered by him between rounds with the hairbrush.

He never deviated from ten smacks at a time, but then, he really didn't have to, because despite my size, that covered more than all of my rear end. And even with all of the soothing he was doing—of various types—I quickly got to the point where, even after he'd rubbed it, my butt never returned to a state of not feeling hot and sore, as if I'd gotten a sunburn.

Is there such a thing as “hairbrush burn”? If so, I had it.

But Collin kept me, quite expertly, right on the edge of but carefully never pushing me over feeling like the spanking was too much. He varied their administration a bit, sometimes giving me all ten in fast succession—which I found very hard to tolerate, but the reward was him giving me a thorough finger fucking, then reaching down to caress my clit until he could sense that I was getting close.

Sometimes he drew out the painful part by landing ten very hard swats, but taking time between each of them to rub my butt, or tickle my clit until I was lewdly arching against his fingers without thinking about it in the least. Nowhere in my mind, was I in the least worried about how I looked while I was doing so, either.

I was amazed at how effective it all was at distracting me from the real pain I was in, but it did. He hadn't been kidding when he said that I was a masochist who didn't like pain, and if he had described this scene to me prior to doing it, I probably would have thought I'd hate it.

But the two things—my clit and the spanking—fed off each other, one either tempering or enhancing the other, until it got to the point that he was bringing the hard, wooden head of

that hairbrush down on me nearly constantly, while the fingers of his other hand expertly kept me just short of orgasming, as if that was something he did to me regularly.

“All right, baby, I think it’s about time I let you—” he began, only to be interrupted by the doorbell. Our food had arrived.

I couldn’t help it. I did something that was very unlike me, yelling loudly and not caring whether or not the driver heard me, “Nooo!”

I think Collin was trying not to giggle at my anguish, but he wasn’t doing a very good job of it as he slipped out from under me. He took a few steps towards the door, then turned back to where I was now lying on my tummy on the couch, practically humping the couch cushion. “I would hope that this would go without saying, but I’m going to say it anyway. You are to stay right where I’ve put you, and do not touch yourself while I’m gone.”

My growl of frustration was almost as loud as my scream had been.

“In fact, where are your hands at this moment, Priscilla?” he asked. “Put them above your head and don’t move them.”

Damn him!

I’d already maneuvered them beneath myself and was slowly moving them closer to the very area he didn’t want them to be in.

When I didn’t move my hands, he asked in a stern tone, “Do you really think that I won’t come back there and use the hairbrush on you again—without any kind of pleasant consolation I’ve been doing for you at the same time? I don’t care in the slightest if the delivery guy has to wait while I discipline you.”

Gulp.

There wasn’t the slightest doubt in my mind that he would do exactly as he said, so my hands were immediately moved above my head.

He moved a bit, as if to head to the door again, then paused, warning, “I suggest you stop trying to push the envelope with me like that, or when you least expect it, you’ll find yourself on the receiving end of a spanking the likes of which you’ve never experienced before.”

Double gulp.

CHAPTER 6



COLLIN WENT to get our dinner, which he put on the counter before returning to me.

I had spent those few minutes aching fiercely while contemplating what he'd said and realizing that—if this relationship continued—I was really going to be expected to change my behavior. That was not going to be easy for me. And Collin couldn't be expected to make it easy for me, either—quite the opposite, in fact.

He lifted me off the couch and sat down, then laid me down over his lap again, putting the hairbrush atop my butt—even just that hurt my thoroughly tenderized skin. Then he arranged my legs the way he wanted them to be, taking up the hairbrush in his right hand again and unerringly finding my clit with the fingers of his left hand.

“Now. Where were we?”

“You were saying that you thought it was about time you let me...” I hesitated saying the word, which was new for me. I was a grown woman, I'd had plenty of lovers. Then why was I all of a sudden so frequently blushy about sexual matters with Collin, of all people?

The answer to that question was, of course, the fact that our relationship had never been this intimate before, and—more so than any other man I'd ever had sex with—I was concerned about his opinion of me. Plus, our relationship had the added elements of dominance and submission, which was still very new to me and rendered me somewhat less confident

than I used to be. Not to mention the fact that embarrassment was definitely one of my biggest kinks, and it was at the forefront of all of what we were exploring together.

“Come, yes.”

It was as if there hadn't been an interruption at all. He went right back to snapping that thing down on my poor rear, while frigging me furiously. All of those incredibly powerful feelings, which had tamped down some during his absence, flooded right back into me, and I was almost immediately back at the edge of orgasming.

Then he stopped moving his fingers and landed five extremely hard swats that left me breathless and unable to cope with the amount of pain he had inflicted on me.

In the aftermath, while I was in acute misery and unable to think about anything other than how badly my flesh was throbbing, those fingertips surrounded my clit again, brushing over it. He afforded me no more respite than the hairbrush had my bottom, until I was again at the rim of that blissful abyss, staring over the edge but kept from going over it by another set of five horrendous cracks.

I was sobbing hard before he finished, until those fingers attacked me again, and this time, I fell in—and, unlike any other orgasm I'd had previously—that was what it felt like. My body was completely overwhelmed and I was enveloped in a pleasure that was at least as excruciating as the unbearable discomfort I'd been feeling seconds ago. His hand began to rub—not gently—over my backside, and the sensations he was causing within me immediately threw me into another round of peaks that made me feel utterly out of control. It was as if I had totally ceded myself to him, putting myself totally into his very strong, capable hands.

Collin kept me there, in that perpetually ecstatic state, until my body couldn't produce another orgasm for him if my life had depended on it. At that point, he brought me into his arms and held me tightly, which was something I very much needed at that moment.

There were no more tears, no begging, no moaning, and surprisingly, no words, either, at all. I just lay there in his arms like a rag doll, letting him comfort me. He brought the afghan down from the back of the couch, wrapped me up in it, and just held me.

“Okay?” he asked, and I nodded. “Good. You don’t have to say or do anything, baby. Just be.” Collin lay back on the couch, keeping me against him but letting us both stretch out comfortably. He used the remote to turn on the fireplace, and we lay there for a long time, not saying anything, and not needing to, either. I had no concept of how long, because I wasn’t really thinking at that point. But I knew it was more than just a few minutes.

Eventually, I looked up at him as if there was something important that I wanted to say to him, but my mind was still largely empty.

He threaded his fingers through my hair. “Still okay?” he asked.

Nodding was really all I could do at the time.

“Good.” He held me quietly, making no demands on me whatsoever for another long while, then kissed the top of my head and said, “Are you hungry, love? How about I go get us some dinner now?” Before he left me, he made sure that everything I might need was within my reach—the blanket still wrapped around me, the remotes for the fireplace and the TV. “You stay still. I’ll be right back.”

When he returned, it was with a big tray of food. We always combined our meals when we had Chinese when we realized that we always ended up eating off each other’s plates, anyway. He usually got cashew chicken and pan fried dumplings. We both had egg rolls, and I had the General Tso’s and boneless ribs. He’d arranged all of it on the tray—everything around a big mountain of pork fried rice—bringing all of the other accoutrements with him, including big glasses of spring water for the both of us.

I moved—hissing and gasping when my butt came in contact with anything, which was tricky not to do on the couch

—so that he could sit on the corner seat. He drew me back against him. I ended up kind of reclining next to him, which reminded me of how the ancient Romans ate if BBC historical dramas could be relied upon to be right about that kind of thing. He handed me a plate he'd made up for me, turned the TV on, and brought up the next episode of *Severance*, which we were both addicted to.

Still, even as he was eating, he kept a watchful eye on me, noting when I stopped eating and taking my plate from me. He made as if to get up, but I clung to him, and he sank back down to hold me.

Eventually, though, he had to get up and take care of the leftovers. Acting in a way that was particularly contrary to my usual demeanor, I felt the need to follow him like a little lost soul. Teddy came out of his hidey hole and did the same thing to me, mewling plaintively at me while Collin boxed everything up, put it in the fridge, and made sure that the food and water station that lived at his house specifically for when Teddy visited were filled.

Then he put an arm around my waist and brought me back to the couch. We assumed our previous positions, with me lying at his side but almost on top of him, as if to prevent him from leaving without me, somehow—not that he would.

When he reached for the remote to skip the credits of one episode and the theme song of the next, I leaned in and asked quietly, “But what about you?”

He instantly paused the show. “What do you mean ‘what about me’, honey?”

I could feel that he was still rock hard—he had been the entire time. “Don’t you want to... come?” I forced myself to say the word but couldn’t keep from coloring when I did it.

Collin chuckled softly, rubbing my back soothingly. “Absolutely. But that’s not something you need to worry about, baby. You’re mine, and I’ll take you whenever I want to. I know that you came really hard, and I can tell you’re still kind of processing what happened. And, truth be told, I kind of

like waiting a bit. I like being hard around you and not feeling like I need to hide it from you anymore.”

I was agog. I had no idea that he had been doing that at all. Apparently, I’d been so wrapped up in trying to hide my own reactions to him—which was very like me—that I had missed his to me completely.

“But, like I said, that’s not something for you to concern yourself with. You’re my submissive. All you have to worry about is submitting to me. I won’t hesitate to let you know what I want from you, whenever I want it.”

I nodded.

Collin played with a strand of my hair. “You’re very quiet, and that’s perfectly fine. I don’t want you to feel that there’s any pressure for you to talk to me if you don’t want to. But in case you hadn’t noticed, I like to check in, especially in the early days, to make sure that you’re still okay.”

“I am.” I took him at his word and didn’t say anything else, because I still couldn’t verbalize what I was feeling.

“Still want to be my submissive—for the weekend?” he added, although he sounded reluctant to do so.

“Yes.”

“Good. I know how tense you are, overall. in life, and I’ve always wanted to help you with that. I really hope that submitting to me will relieve you of some of the things that make you feel you have to be tense all the time. It’s my responsibility to take care of you, to make your life easier in a lot of ways, but harder in others, perhaps.”

“What’s my responsibility to you, though?”

“Just what I said. Submit—nothing more, nothing less.”

It sounded too easy, which made me wary, because things like that are often a trap. But I knew that it wasn’t always going to be what it was like; that it wouldn’t all be Chinese food and orgasms.

Since I got up very early in the morning to be at school at seven-fifteen, I was yawning by about nine-thirty.

“Someone’s tired.”

As much as I was trying to make myself aware that I didn’t have to be contrarian about everything—and that, indeed, it might make my life very much easier if I weren’t—my protest was long since ingrained in me. “No, I’m not.”

Collin laughed. “You are such a five year old.”

“Am not!” I responded in my best spoiled brat tone. It was the most normal-for-me thing I’d said since he’d brought me off.

Still, the TV was turned off, as was the fireplace, and he stood, helping me up and bringing me into the bathroom that adjoined his room, where we showered together for the first time.

At first, I wondered just how much showering we were really going to accomplish, since he immediately backed me up against the glass wall of the enclosure and began to kiss me ravenously. I didn’t think I’d ever grow tired of kissing him like that. It felt infinitely sexy yet infinitely romantic at the same time.

Then I found myself having switched places with him, so that his back was against the wall and his hand was gently exerting pressure on the top of my head.

As soon as I understood what he wanted from me, I knelt before him, which felt surprisingly right to do. I had no problems giving blow jobs—and I liked to think I was reasonably good at it, especially once I learned what a man liked in particular. As a rule, I had rarely ever gotten on my knees before any man. It had felt degrading the few times I had tried it, and that was definitely down to the men who were asking for me to do that purely to satisfy their egos.

I’d never gotten that—or, indeed, any other kind of creepy vibe—from Collin, or we wouldn’t have been friends for as long as we have. When he looked down at me, I saw a potent mixture of love and passion and strength, and it actually made me feel better about myself, not worse.

“Can I ask you a question?”

“Always. You never need to hesitate about that.”

“I-I, uh, like to touch you.”

He smiled. “I’m glad. I like to touch you, too.”

“Yeah, but... do you prefer, when I’m doing this or something like it, that I just kind of get down to it, or do you like to be touched elsewhere first? My instinct is the latter, but I’ve known some men who found it to be annoying, like I was trying to stall or something.”

“Honey, I want you to take my hand and hold it, and hug me, put your hand on my leg while I’m driving, kiss me deeply or give me a peck on the cheek, or touch me in any way you want, any time you want. Unless you take my nuts in a vice grip, there’s really no bad way for you to touch me, and if I could, like Teddy, I’d be in constant physical contact with you.”

I was both smiling and blushing furiously at that declaration. “Good, because I love the feel of you beneath my hand. You’re very strong and hard, but your skin is soft, and I find that contrast strangely soothing and arousing at the same time.” He moaned a bit at that, eyes drifting closed, head back, and then I reached up and tweaked his nipples, making it deepen into a groan.

Mindful of not wanting him—or me—to get cold, I didn’t do as thorough a job as I might have liked to, but I also really hated the idea of just glomming onto a man’s cock without touching him elsewhere, first, too. So I let my hands glide over him—aided by the water that was cascading over us from many different angles—rediscovering his flat stomach and prominent thigh muscles. I tickled the back of his knees and glided my hands up the backs of his legs from his ankles while his cock bobbed in front of my face.

And then I leaned forward and took him into my mouth, all the way down to where my nose was pressed into his lower stomach. I didn’t know whether he shaved or got waxed down there, but he didn’t have much hair, and frankly, I always found that a blessing. Pubic hair—and chest hair, for that matter—always tickled my nose and interrupted things for me.

He was a veiny but smooth column of rock hard flesh, and he felt good in my mouth. I made sure to stroke the underside of him with my tongue as he glided in and out, using it again to curl around the head as I held him with one hand and used the other to cup and gently roll his balls.

“Fuck me,” he sighed, leaning back into the corner of the shower for support. I took that as a compliment. There were recessed railings at intervals around the shower, and he was gripping the ones on either side of him for dear life, making his chest and arm muscles bulge enticingly.

For several long moments, I continued to take him—slowly and completely—into my mouth, twisting my hand and my tongue with each stroke. Then, when I could hear his breathing becoming even more ragged, I let go of his balls and where I had been using my hand as an extension of my mouth on his shaft and reached around behind him to grab his butt cheeks and squeeze.

He went up on his tiptoes at that, and I took that as a good sign as I continued to suck and lick and roll my tongue eagerly over him, pursing my lips particularly tightly over the head and almost popping him out of my mouth each time, sometimes not going much further than that, trying to make my lips as tight as I could and using as much suction as I could to keep the head in my mouth each time.

“Son of a bitch, woman!” he groaned.

Then, when I knew he was very close to coming, I let my finger move to a place I thought he might enjoy, and—neither hearing or seeing any protests from him—my reward for being that bold was his complete and utter loss of control. There was no other way to put it than that he reached down, held my cheeks in his hands and fucked my face.

And I relaxed and let him. That had never really been my thing, after too many overeager, aggressive, and selfish men doing that to me and making it a thoroughly unpleasant experience. But he was perfect, and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing him so totally unwound.

I swallowed every drop as he leaned back into the corner, as if he didn't think his legs would hold him. They were shaking, I had to admit with no small amount of pride. But then again, if he collapsed on the floor, we were screwed because there was no way I could pick him up like he did me.

Collin only took a minute or so to himself to recover before he helped me up, and we both got washed and were standing under the heat lamps very soon afterwards.

He had washed me quite efficiently, and now he dried me that way, too, before seeing to himself, knowing that I would easily become cold. "Brush your teeth quickly and go get under the covers. I'll be right there when I have enough strength to crawl to you."

I waggled my eyebrows at him in the mirror. "Hmmm. That would be something I'd pay to see."

He reached out and patted my bottom, drawing an annoyed yelp from me at how much even that gentle touch hurt, as he dried himself, chuckling softly. "Don't hold your breath, baby. That's not how this thing works between us."

I got under the covers, still pleasantly warm from the lamps and whatever it was that he'd raised the temperature of the house to, and he joined me there momentarily, drawing me into his arms. "I had no idea that you had Domme tendencies."

My snort must've given him a clue as to what my response to that supposition was going to be. "Not on your old lady's corset cover, buddy. You don't know me at all if you don't already know that I'm much too lazy to be a Domme, and I certainly don't want to be in charge of someone else—I can barely manage to be in charge of myself!"

"That's what I'm for," he informed me smugly.

"Yeah, well, I would be no one's idea of a good Domme."

"Good, because I would be no one's idea of a good sub."

A few moments later, I asked, "Did you like what I did at the end there? To your end?"

"You couldn't tell?"

“Well, I should have asked you beforehand, but I took a chance.”

“You were all sorts of right.”

“Can I get that in writing?”

“No.”

I yawned again.

“Sleep.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Now that’s what I like to hear.”

“Don’t get used to it, Bub.” Jesus, would I never learn to keep my mouth shut?

He sat up. “Excuse me?”

I put my hands up. “Sorry, sorry, sorry. You know I have a smart mouth. I’m sorry.”

When we’d settled back down, he said, “I hope you know that I don’t want to change your personality. As your Dom, I just want a little less disrespectful sass that openly challenges my authority.”

Nodding my head, I said, “I understand.”

“I love you, Priscilla.”

“I love you, too, Collin.”

“Sleep well,” we said to each other at the same time.

“You owe me a beer,” I said, rolling over within his arms.

“You don’t drink beer.”

“Okay then, you owe me a tequila.”

“Done.”

CHAPTER 7



IT WAS APRIL VACATION, and I was meeting him at his house, as usual. Unlike previously, I was actually in the house, waiting for him. It had taken him a little fancy talking, but he finally got me to wait for him in the house, rather than in my car in the driveway.

We never did have the talk that he'd said we'd have after I'd considered continuing our relationship on a deeper level, and that was very unlike him. Collin liked to talk about things—to talk them out—and this was a pretty big thing between us. I had pretty much come to the conclusion that it was a big enough thing that he was worried he might not like my answer. Although, if he really thought about it, he would have realized what that answer was, since we were still sleeping together and he was still disciplining me—both on the regular.

The painful regular, I thought to myself as I shifted positions on the couch. There really wasn't a comfortable position—sometimes for several days—after he spanked me, though, especially once he'd introduced me to his own collection of implements, which was something I could have lived without.

They were in what he called his “toy box”, which was a very innocuous looking chest that was tucked away in the back of the closet in his spare room, where I had slept many a night, mere feet from it, but never snooped. Just like I didn't want him snooping in my house, so I had never snooped in his—not once. Not that there was anything there that I didn't want him to see, necessarily. He might have stumbled on to my own

collection of toys, but I wouldn't have cared about that in the least. It was more the principle of the thing, the expectation of respect for someone's private property.

Some of the things in there were just plain no-gos for me. I had no interest in enormous paddles, or single tail whips, or canes—the “big guns”, he called them, which was more than enough of a turn off in and of itself to convince me that I wanted nothing to do with them.

“I kind of had a feeling you wouldn't be interested in those,” he'd said, not trying to change my mind about wanting to use them in the least. As a matter of fact, he'd praised me for telling him that I wasn't into them.

But there were some straps and belts and paddles that I didn't say no to, like the idiot I am, and now, while I was waiting for him, I was having to shift my position every five seconds. I should have just stretched out on my stomach, but that might have resulted in me falling asleep.

I glanced at my phone, because I never trusted that I hadn't missed a notification of a text or call or Facebook message from him. Three-forty-five. I knew his plane had landed, and he'd texted me that he was on his way “home to me”—which warmed my heart—but that was over an hour ago, and it didn't take anywhere near that long to get to his house from the airport.

I supposed he could have been picking up dinner for us, or stopping to buy me flowers or some other small surprise, which was something that he did pretty regularly, but I kind of doubted it.

Lord knows, I am a confirmed, dedicated worry wart, which was something Collin had alternately teased me about and worried about himself, on my behalf. Now, he was on a crusade to try to eliminate my need to perseverate about a lot of different things that I really didn't need to worry about as best he could. He was doing a pretty good job of it, I had to admit, and he was accomplishing it pretty subtly, without stepping on my independence, which couldn't have been easy for him to do.

He'd begun encouraging me to stay at his place a lot, which meant that I was about a half hour closer to school than I was when I stayed at my own house. This gave me about an hour more of time to use every day. He never formally instituted one, but he knew I sometimes suffered from insomnia, so he did his best to try to get me to bed at roughly the same time every day, too, feeling that a routine at night—at least during the week—was what I was lacking.

I was sleeping better. I hated it when he was right.

Unfortunately, and entirely due to my own fault, he'd also discovered that spanking me before we went to bed gave me an excellent night's sleep. A nightly spanking before bedtime was something he'd threatened but hadn't yet implemented, thankfully.

He made my lunches for me every day, much more nutritionally balanced ones than I made for myself, and memorized the lunch calendar so he knew what days I'd want to eat there, instead. Unlike most school cafeterias, the food was pretty good at mine, and their lasagna, in particular, was excellent.

Overall, he really tried to make my life easier, and I did my best to do the same for him by taking over the cooking. I offered to do the cleaning, too, but he had someone come in. Because we were damned close to living together, he bumped her from once a month to once a week, and I insisted on paying for half of the cost of having her come in, but he flatly refused, despite the fact that I was the reason he was having to spend more to keep the house clean.

The problem was that he made so much more money than I did, and he could easily have afforded to have her clean daily. On a school teacher's salary, I certainly couldn't afford to do that. I couldn't really afford to do what I'd offered to do, either, but I liked to pay my own way.

The phone interrupted my musings, and I was sure it was him, but I didn't recognize the number—even though it was local—so I didn't answer it.

A few minutes later, I heard the voicemail chime, and I brought up the translation.

“This call is for Ms. Priscilla Madison. You are listed as the primary contact for Mr. Collin Somerset.” I stood as I read further, my heart already pounding painfully in my chest. “Mr. Somerset has been in a serious traffic accident and has been brought to UT Medical Center’s Emergency Room—”

I grabbed my keys and my purse and ran out to my car.

It was close enough to rush hour that it took me much longer than I wanted to get there. I went through the metal detector at the first set of doors, and then a security guard at the second set asked my reason for being there.

“I got a phone call about my friend being in a car accident—Collin Somerset.”

He escorted me through the lobby, past the waiting room and through more double doors to the nurse’s station. “This is Priscilla Madison. She’s here for Collin Somerset.”

As the guard left, the nurse came around to me from behind the desk. “The doctor needs to speak with you, Mrs. Somerset.”

“Oh, I’m not his wife,” I corrected.

The nurse stopped in her tracks. “You’re not?”

“No. Where’s Collin?” I asked, worried that I wasn’t sure whether I really wanted to know the answer.

She was walking while she was talking to me. “He’s been brought up to ICU. His doctor’s name is Whalen. Take this elevator up to the fourth floor, and make a right out of it. Then you can either follow the blue line on the floor or read the signs for the ICU. After the right, it’s your first left, then your first right. That’s the ICU waiting room. Use the red phone to call back to the ICU nurses station to let them know you’re there. Someone will likely come and bring you right back.”

I was trying to remember her instructions, but my brain was utterly unable to absorb them, so I ended up repeating

them to myself while I was—thankfully alone—in the elevator.

“Right out of the elevator, first left, first right. Right out of the elevator, first left, first right.”

By some miracle, I actually got there on the first try, crossing immediately to the table where the red phone was sitting. There was no dial on it, and I didn't know at the time, but there was no face on it because when you picked it up, it rang only in the ICU nurses' station.

“Yes?”

“This is Priscilla Madison. I'm here for Collin—”

“Somerset. Do you see the hallway at the top right of the room, by the restrooms?”

“Yes.”

“Take it down the catwalk to a set of double doors that say, ‘Authorized Personnel Only’. Someone will come get you so you can talk to the doctor.”

My mind still utterly blank but for the instructions I had been given, I planted myself in front of the big, wooden double doors, which took entirely too long to open. When they finally did, there was a small, older woman standing there. “I'm the ICU charge nurse. Follow me, please.”

I was taken to a small conference room. Before she left, I said, “I'd really like to see m-my friend, please?”

“He's being prepped for surgery. You'll have to talk to the doctor first, and you might not be able to see him until he gets out. It'll be up to the doctor. He'll be right in.”

“Right in” to me meant within five minutes at the most, but it apparently meant something else in medical settings, because it was twenty minutes before I met the doctor.

“You're Ms. Madison?”

“Yes.”

“I'm Dr. Whalen. How are you related to Mr. Somerset?”

“I’m not, but I’ve been best friends with him since we were in grade school.”

“You’re listed as his next of kin.”

“Because he has no living close family members left. I think he has some cousins in Oregon somewhere, but I don’t think he’s been in contact with them since I’ve known him, and I wouldn’t even be able to tell you their names.”

That didn’t seem to sit well with him, but it was the truth. “Okay.” He sighed heavily. “Mr. Somerset was involved in a very serious, head-on collision with a large pickup truck, and he needs immediate surgery to relieve the pressure on his brain. He also, likely, needs a hip replacement, as his femur was—” The man stopped, as if he’d managed not to say something he didn’t think I needed to hear, for which I was very grateful. “The accident did a lot of damage to his hip on one side and his leg on the other, in addition to the head injury. I need the permission of his next of kin to operate.”

“Well, since he doesn’t have one, I guess that’s me.”

“We would really prefer someone who is actually related to him. ‘Best friend’ isn’t really a legally recognized relationship.”

Although I understood from where he was coming, that didn’t change the reality of the fact that Collin didn’t have someone like that, which was essentially what I said to him. “If time is of the essence, and you need a signature from someone who loves him, then I’m it,” I stated flatly.

“Yes, you’re right.” He didn’t seem happy about it, but I didn’t really care. I would guess that he flunked bedside manner in medical school, frankly.

I swallowed hard and forced myself to ask the hardest question of all. “Is he... is he going to be all right?”

“We hope so, ma’am. We hope so.”

I’m sure there were more questions I should have been asking about his treatment, but I was at a loss, medically, so I just signed all the papers they put in front of me.

Before he left, I asked, “How long will all of those operations take?”

“Well, we’ll address the head injury first and see how he responds to that. Then we’ll worry about the other injuries.”

“When can I see him?”

Dr. Whalen looked pensive, then said, “Does the sight of blood or medical things in general tend to bother you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Okay. Well, he’s got a lot of tubes and wires and bandages and machines around him, and he’s in a medically-induced coma and won’t be able to talk to you—”

“I don’t care. Please let me see him. I promise you I won’t freak out on you.”

He nodded. “All right, but it won’t be for long. I want to get him into surgery as quickly as I can.”

As brave as I had sounded to the doctor, nothing could have prepared me to see him looking as sick and broken as he was. My Collin was as strong as an ox. But all of those white bandages around his head and other parts of his body—through which I could see bright red blood in some places—the monitors beeping away, and the IVs were terrifying. I had thought that I was scared before, but that was nothing compared to how I felt when I saw him like that.

I forced myself to walk up to his bedside and put my hand on one of the few areas that wasn’t covered in bandages or hooked up to some kind of apparatus or under a blanket—his upper arm. It had been a long time since I’d been at the bedside of a seriously ill person—since my mom had died of a long, drawn out illness, and I’d spent the last month or so of her life sitting in an uncomfortable hospital chair twenty-four-seven, holding her hand and talking to her. She’d been able to hear me, at first, and respond a little, but that didn’t last very long. But I continued to talk to her anyway.

Old habits die hard, and I immediately began to speak to him. “It’s me, Collin. Silly.” It was stupid to call myself that, especially since he knew I didn’t like it, but it was his

nickname for me, and that was what was important. “I’m right here with you, and I won’t ever be anywhere else. The doctors are going to take great care of you. You’re going to have an operation soon, but I know you’ll pull through with flying colors. You’re much too stubborn to...” I superstitiously refused to say the word, especially not to him. “And when you’re back in your room, I’ll be right here, waiting for you. I love you, Collin.”

I pretty much just kept saying variations of those words on a loop, until the nurse came and told me that I had to leave. I stood, saying, “I love you, Collin.” My lower lip began to tremble, and my throat hurt with unshed tears as I said in a whisper, which was all the volume I could manage, “I love you in the same way you love me.”

As I left him there, walking backwards out of the room so I could see him for as long as I possibly could, tears poured down my cheeks. I’d never wished for anything more than I wished that I had said exactly that to him when I had the opportunity.

“Will you keep me informed of what’s going on with him, please?” I asked the nurse.

“Of course. Do we have your phone number?”

“Yes. At least, someone at the hospital does. I got a call from you guys to come here.”

“Well, stop at the nurses’ station and give them your info, just to be sure.”

I did that, and the woman I spoke to was very nice. Even though I had no intention of leaving, I gave her every single contact number I could think of and tried to give her my email information but she said they would never use that.

“I’ll be in the ICU waiting room. I’d like to see him as soon as possible after the operation, please.”

She nodded, and I walked slowly away to begin my vigil, carefully choosing a seat right next to the phone.

At least I had some things to do to keep me occupied for a little while. I called Joey, Collin’s right hand man at work, to

let him know what had happened, along with his friends. He was like me, though. He knew a lot of people because of his business, but he didn't consider very many of them to be his friends.

I also told my own friends and my boss. He might not have been my husband or even my fiancé, but everyone who knew me knew that he was the most important person in my life, and I was not going to be at work for some time. Frankly, I told Ellen—my department head at school—that if she needed to, she could fire me.

She scoffed at that idea and said they'd just get a sub. She asked me to sketch out—if I had the time—where I was in my plans and what I was working on. She and I had been working together for some time, and she even let me suggest the sub I wanted.

“Have her call me, and I'll give her what I have once I go home again, although I don't know when that will be.”

“We'll muddle through; don't worry. I hope he's well soon. I know how close you two are.”

“Thank you, Ellen.”

My friends—all three of the ones I was closest to—volunteered to come sit with me, of course, but frankly, I was feeling even less social than usual, and since I was likely going to be crying more often than not, I'd rather be by myself if I was doing that. And I had some things that would keep me busy for a while.

The problem came when four hours stretched into six, and then eight, and finally ten hours and forty-five minutes. I'd long since exhausted all of the things I'd needed to do, and I was damned sick of playing games on my phone by then. I couldn't concentrate enough to read, unfortunately, and even though I knew that I would hear the phone, I couldn't bring myself to use my ear buds to listen to a podcast. I knew I really wouldn't be listening to it anyway, so I ended up just kind of sitting there, worrying and torturing myself, thinking about all the bad things that might happen.

Was it a good thing or a bad thing that I hadn't heard anything in so long?

The red phone had rung for others, earlier. In the middle of the night, when I was alone and unable to sleep, it finally rang again. I jumped up and grabbed the receiver.

"Yes?"

"I'm looking for Priscilla Madison."

"This is she."

"I just wanted to let you know that Mr. Somerset is out of surgery and in stable condition. It'll be another hour or so before he's back in his room."

"Would you call me when I can come see him?"

"It is past visiting hours, ma'am."

"I know, and I won't stay long, but I'd like to see him again, just so he knows someone is there for him."

"He won't be conscious."

"I don't care."

"Just a second, let me check with the charge nurse." She put me on hold, and it was torture waiting to find out if I could see him again or not. "All right. But you can only stay with him for ten minutes or so. We'll call back when you can come down."

"Thank you. No problem. I'm thankful for any time at all I can have with him."

And wasn't that the absolute plain and unvarnished truth.

He looked worse—if that was possible—the next time I saw him, paler and more sickly than before, but then, he'd just had brain surgery. "How did the operation go?" I asked the nurse who was adjusting the IV drips.

"As well as can be expected," she said, which was annoyingly non-committal and did nothing to ease my concerns. I didn't know if she wasn't being more forthcoming because that was how ICU nurses were, or if they were

waiting for the doctor to tell me the worst of it, or if they were still reluctant to talk to someone who really had no “legally recognized” connection to him.

I waited until she left and went to stand next to him. The next thing I knew, a chair appeared, so I could sit, which I did. But I kept my hand on him the entire time, continuing to talk to him even though that might make them think I was a bit crazy—not that I gave a flying fuck. Besides, I’m sure they heard people doing that all the time.

“Well, you and your hard head pulled through the operation. It took a lot longer than I thought it would. A lot of the rocks up there must’ve shifted,” I teased, but I wasn’t smiling when I did it, and neither was my voice. “I called everyone for both of us. Rafe and Kathy and Artie and Jack and Davis all send along their wishes for a speedy recovery, and so does Ellen, who was very sweet and understanding about me being out for who knows how long. I told her she could fire me, but I don’t think she will. Maybe you’ll end up being my sugar daddy after all,” I mentioned, because he’d teased me about that occasionally. But not since we’d started having sex, which was something interesting I hadn’t thought about. Not that I was ever going to let him do that, anyway, regardless.

“Ryker and Eileen and Belle and Kim all offered to come sit with me, and that was very nice of them, but they have their own lives, and I’m almost always better off alone. I worked on my phone, writing up instructions for the sub—whom I got to choose—and emailing them to Ellen.”

I was running out of steam. My voice was weak but okay, but I couldn’t think of things I wanted to say, and that wasn’t a good thing. Soon, my voice wasn’t okay, because my throat was clogged with tears, and I hung my head and bawled for the longest time.

“Ma’am? Ma’am, are you okay?”

I lifted my head and nodded. “Oh dear, I got his IV wet. I’m sorry. Will it be okay? Will it get infected?”

“No, dear. It’ll be fine. I need to get to him to get his vitals, though, and you really should go home. Is there no one else here with you?”

“No. Just me.”

“Oh, honey. Go home.”

I shook my head. “No, but I’ll go to the waiting room and get out of your way. I don’t want to be a bother to you guys. Thank you for taking care of him so well.”

“You’re welcome.” I took a couple steps towards the waiting room, and she said, “Hey, wait.”

I turned back.

“Are you really going to sleep in the waiting room?”

I nodded.

“Stay right there for a sec.”

She left, returning with a couple of blankets that had been in a warmer and a pillow. “The couches out there aren’t really good for sleeping, but hopefully these will make you a little more comfortable.”

“Thank you very much.”

The nurse was very right about the couches. They were not built for comfort. I probably got two hours of sleep, max, but that was okay. I could sleep later, once I knew he was going to be all right.

CHAPTER 8



THE PHONE NEXT TO ME, ringing, was what awakened me.

“Miss Madison?”

“Yes?”

“The doctor would like to see you if you’ll come to the door.”

This time, it was a bedside consultation, even though the person in the bed didn’t know what was happening.

“I am cautiously optimistic about the success of the operation. I didn’t want to talk to you last night until I had more to tell you, but the pressure on his brain has eased. It might take him a few days to make his way back to us, and his overall recovery is not going to be an overnight thing. He’s going to need at least one more operation and PT for his other injuries. He’ll need to be evaluated to see if there are any lasting effects from the brain injury. It’s not going to be an easy road back, but he’s a very fit, healthy man, and I believe he will make a full recovery.”

One of the hardest things I’ve ever done in my life was to not fall into a heap at that doctor’s feet. Tears flooded my eyes and overflowed down my cheeks. I did grab his hand and pump it up and down entirely too many times. “Thank you so much, Doctor. Thank you.”

They let me spend a few minutes with him, then ushered me out so they could do their morning routine and take him for tests.

I made it back to the waiting room and saw that our friends had gathered there. I cried all over them, too, while giving them the good news.

Ryker, who was a mother hen, hugged me hard, then said, “I’m not going to tell you not to be here every hour of every day, because I know I’d be wasting my breath. But we’re all here now—he’s not alone. Take a deep breath.” He looked at me expectantly while I stared back at him. “I meant it, take a deep breath.”

I knew he wasn’t going to leave me alone until I did, so I complied.

“Good. Let go of some of that stress. Now. Go home and cry in a long, hot shower.”

How did he know?

“Have something to eat—something nutritionally good and not something that just tastes good—and pat Teddy for a moment. That’ll help lower your blood pressure. Then grab what you want to have here that you won’t care if it gets stolen, because even in ICU waiting rooms, some people are assholes. Then come back here and sit by his side, like we all know you intend to do, but you’ll be a bit refreshed.”

I hugged him again.

Ryker spoke a mile a minute, and since I wasn’t around him very often, I really had to listen closely to catch what he was saying. It was like trying to listen to someone who had a particularly intricate accent. “Until he comes out of it, and beyond, if you want us to, of course, we’ll set up a rotating schedule of someone always being here—for you in the mornings or evenings. Even half dead, he’s got the whole ICU dancing attendance on him, especially the ladies and the gay guys, unless I miss my guess. That’ll give you some time away, but you’ll know that he’s not alone, and you can go home once a day to take care of the cat and decompress for a bit before you come back.” He grabbed my hands and swung them back and forth with his. “He’s going to get better, but you need to be taken care of, too.”

“You are too good to me.”

“Wait’ll you get my bill.” Ryker was a counselor, and I wouldn’t put it past the pain in the ass to send me a bill, just as a joke.

“Worth every penny I intend to pay,” I threw over my shoulder on the way out.

And, boy, was he right about the restorative power of a simple shower and change of scenery. I was very grateful for hospitals and the people who worked in them, but they were so sterile—out of necessity, of course. And they smelled funny, and they were always too hot, for some reason I’d never been able to figure out.

But as much as I agreed with and wanted to follow his advice and did most of what he asked, I couldn’t just lounge around at home for any length of time. I showered—while crying copiously—brushed my teeth, changed my clothes, fed, watered, cleaned the litter box of a cat who was Velcroed to my side, gathered what I wanted to bring back to the hospital in my big old L.L. Bean canvas bag that would likely outlive me, and booked it back to the hospital.

When I arrived, our friends were still there.

“Who had that she’d be back in ten minutes in the pool?” Eileen asked.

“I’ve been gone for longer than ten minutes,” I informed her.

“Not much more.”

“We’ve all been rotated in to see him—in pairs, and only for five minutes each. He looks sick but still hot,” Davis pronounced.

Kathy hugged me. “Don’t listen to him. The nurse said he’s doing better, and they expect him to wake up any time. We’re all going to depart, but we’re just a text away.” She had been a teacher, too, and she waggled her finger at me and gave me her best “teacher” look when she said, “And you are not to hesitate to call, or we will definitely rat you out to the man in the hospital johnny, when he wakes up.”

They all nodded their heads, had a group hug, and then they were gone.

I called back to the desk and asked if I could come see him, and they said yes, that the door was open, but to always call back in case they were doing something to him or he was out for a test or something.

I perched myself on the chair that was still there, only moved to the other side, away from the things they had to adjust the most often, so that I could stay longer. And I did. They often forgot all about me, because except when I was talking to him—which I did while consciously trying to be quiet, which did not come naturally to me, I didn't make any other demands of them. I left when they told me to and came back when they said I could. I was not there to get in the way of the important work they were doing of taking care of Collin. As a result, nearly a week later, I was with him when he woke up.

It wasn't long after they'd done their morning stuff and I'd come back in. I always started first thing by telling him about all of the get well wishes I received daily from everyone and was moving on to complain about how I'd found out how badly my students were behaving for the substitute, bless her heart, when I heard a soft, somewhat mumbled, "Stop talking, for once, Silly, and kiss me."

I stood up so fast that I flipped the chair over behind myself, and everyone came running, catching me in the act of kissing him.

When I finally stepped back, I quipped, "'Bout time you woke up!"

"Well, it looks like he's feeling better," Veronique said. I did my best to learn his nurses' names. I'd learned that from back when my mom and I had been visiting my dad in the hospital at the end.

"Secretaries and nurses—always learn their names and always be nice to them. Secretaries can make or break you at almost any job because they have the boss' ear, and nurses are the ones taking care of your loved ones in a way that you can

never hope to do.” She adjusted her advice a few steps later. “Scratch that. Just be nice to everyone, from the janitor and the guy who pumps your gas, to your bosses and CEOs, and everyone in between. You never know who might end up helping you along the way, or whom you can help on their way.”

I didn’t always follow that advice, I was ashamed to admit, but especially in this instance, I knew she was right and it wasn’t really very hard to do. I thought everyone was doing an excellent job of taking care of Collin, but I would not have hesitated to pitch a fit if I hadn’t felt that way.

“Priscilla, would you mind stepping out?”

“I want her to stay!” Collin protested, however weakly.

“It’s okay,” I said, patting his arm. “Let them do their thing. I’ll be in the waiting room. The couch I sit on there has my name stenciled on it now. They’ll let me know when I can come back, and I’ll be right in.” I turned, then turned back and gave him a stern look that wasn’t far off the ones he gave me. “You behave for them now. They’ve taken good care of the both of us. Don’t piss them off now.”

Leaving him was very hard to do, and my legs trembled practically to the point that I couldn’t walk until I could sit down in the waiting room and group text everyone that he was awake.

They were all ecstatic and wanted to know when they could talk to him. I said I had no idea, but he was still in ICU, so he didn’t have a phone and I had his cell.

Once I’d done that, I leaned forward, buried my face in my hands and just cried from pure, unadulterated relief.

When the red phone rang, I was nowhere near it, so someone else got it. “Is there a Priscilla here?”

Within a few minutes, I was back sitting next to him, holding his hand, which he squeezed frequently, looking down at me as if he was amazed to see me there.

“Thank you for being here, my love,” he said, voice a bit hoarse from disuse.

I rested my forehead on his forearm and said, my own voice fading into reediness because of the tears that were closing off my throat, “I wouldn’t be anywhere else, Collin. I couldn’t be.”

When I raised my head, he could see that I was crying. He made as if to hug me, but he was still attached to a myriad of things, so he really couldn’t.

“Stop, stop, before you pull something vital out of somewhere that I don’t want to see.”

He grinned unrepentantly at that but sat back.

The doctor appeared at that moment, wearing a smile instead of a very dour expression for the first time since I’d met him. “Well, Mr. Somerset, it seems that you’ve recovered from your operation.”

I leaned over and whispered to him, “Translation, I was right all this time. You have a fucking hard head.”

He tried to give me a dirty look, then gasped and raised his hand to his head. “Ow! Don’t make me glare at you—it hurts.”

“Oh yeah. Like that’s going to happen,” I teased, unable to stop myself from planting a gentle kiss on his cheek.

The doctor talked to us for a bit longer, letting us know what we could expect for the remaining time that he was in the hospital, as well as beyond, to a certain extent. The first thing that was going to happen—after they did some tests—was that he was going to be moved out of ICU, likely into the orthopedics floor, which was the next medical situation that needed addressing.

When he left, it was just us. I sank back down into the chair, still clutching his hand for dear life.

“You look tired, baby,” he said.

“You silver-tongued devil, you,” I teased.

Then Collin frowned. “What day is it?”

“Wednesday.”

“But I flew home on Friday, right?”

“Yes.”

He looked astonished. “So I’ve been unconscious for six days?”

“Yes.”

“That’s just bizarre. I feel like it should be that Friday night, or at the latest, Saturday morning.”

I showed him the date on Google Calendar, and he shook his head.

“And I’ll bet you’ve been with me this entire time, haven’t you?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged. “Where else would I be?”

“No wonder you look exhausted.”

“Wow, you really know how to turn a girl’s head there, Casanova.”

He tried to give me a stern look, but that hurt him, too.

For some reason, I couldn’t stop smiling at that. “I think I’m going to like you not being able to glare at me for a while.”

“Don’t you think you’re going to get off easy because I’m injured, young lady. I’m sure you’ve been doing plenty of things that want correction while no one has been watching over you.”

I snorted. “It’s hard to get into trouble in an ICU waiting room.”

“Ah, baby girl,” he whispered, then squeezed my hand again. “I’m sorry you had to do that, but thank you for being with me. I’ll never be able to say that often enough for what you’ve done for me.”

Praise like that made me uncomfortable in the extreme, and he knew it. “It’s no less than what you would do for me.”

“You should go home, honey, and get some rest. I’ll be fine.”

Of everything he'd said since he woke up, that was the thing that set me off. I dissolved into tears. "No, please, let me stay with you. I'm fine. I want to stay! Please don't make me go home!"

I was literally choking with sobs, and he ignored all the things that were pulling on him to hug me properly.

"But the IVs!" I protested.

"They can drill for more later. Right now, I need to hug my woman." He did, indeed, hug me tightly, rubbing my back and trying to soothe me as best he could.

But even with both of our determination, it was very hard to work around his hip and his other leg, on top of the other things, so although I would have happily crawled into bed with him, we really couldn't even hug very long without all sorts of alarms going off.

"Okay, you two, that's enough canoodling," Nancy joked. She came in and reset all of the alarms.

"I'm trying to get her to go home and get some rest, but she's being stubborn."

I had no problems at all glaring at him. "I've been here for a week while you were unconscious. Now that you're awake, I'm even less likely to want to go home."

He couldn't even lower his head, like he normally did, and look out at me from under his drawn brows. But—even weak—his voice was still potent. "Priscilla."

Nancy turned to look back at him from where she was resetting the IVs' alarm. "Ooh. That's some deep voice you have there. Makes me want to do as you say, too."

"Unfortunately, someone else isn't anywhere near as susceptible as she should be."

I knew he was only half-teasing.

When she was gone, the waterworks turned themselves on. "Please don't make me go home."

Collin sighed. “What time is it?” The clock was behind him.

“Eleven-forty-five.”

“How about if you stay till three, and then go home for the night?”

“How about six o’clock?” I wheedled.

I knew that if he hadn’t been feeling bad, I wouldn’t have won that argument.

“All right, baby. You have me wrapped around your little finger.” He leaned his head back onto the pillow and promptly fell asleep, which was probably the best thing for him.



I SPENT the rest of the week in the hospital with him, preparing to go back to school the next Monday, although I really hated to do it. He was growing steadily better, and I’d already planned to take more time off when he needed the operation on his hip, so I figured it was better to go back than to stay out all that time.

The doctors seemed constantly amazed at his capacity to heal. Even before the operation on his hip, he was asking what exercises he could do in preparation, and then he actually did them. He was antsy about being in the hospital, but for the first few days—until not long before his hip surgery—I wouldn’t let Joey talk to him. I wanted him to concentrate on getting better, not worry about what was going on with his business, and at first, he was okay with that. But the healthier he got, the less cooperative he became with my attempts at making him take it easy and not try to recover immediately from what had been a serious car accident.

Once he was well enough to have the hip surgery, which was done in the same hospital, he was moved to a physical rehab place because his other leg was still in its cast, where they would help get him back to fighting-fit.

And that was where it all went to hell. I could see—and so could the physical therapists who were helping him recover—that he was pushing himself too hard, and I pointed that out to him in a way that he found a bit too sharp for his tastes.

“Priscilla.” He came just about as close as he’d ever come to actually yelling at me. “I will thank you not to talk about something that regards my recovery from the surgery that you really know nothing about.”

As usual, I was sitting in a chair, next to his bed.

My usual routine had changed a bit, because instead of getting up, going to school, then going back home, I always went to see him before I came home. Sometimes I stayed and we had an inedible meal together—the place was excellent as far as helping people come back from hip or knee replacements, but culinarily, it left a lot to be desired. But that depended on how he was feeling and how much homework I had. Exams—as well as the end of the quarter—both rolled around while he was in recovery, and I had to get those papers graded and the grades into the school’s software by a certain day.

I’d managed to do that, but it meant that I hadn’t been able to spend as much time with him as I liked to. And they wiped me out more than usual this time, too.

So when he said that, tears filled my eyes, and I stood, grabbed my purse, and left, at as close to a run as I could manage.

I could hear him bellowing after me, and my phone began to blow up almost immediately, making me seriously regret having given it back to him. At first, I just sat in my car and cried, but then I kicked myself in the butt. I didn’t have to just sit there and cry.

It was only about four o’clock, but I was hungry, and at the risk of being considered a senior citizen out to take advantage of the early bird specials, I stopped at one of my favorite restaurants and treated myself to a nice dinner, including one drink. It was already hard enough to drive through tears—I didn’t need to add being drunk to it. I could have called

someone to come eat with me, but I would have just cried all over them, so I didn't, and I had no qualms about eating alone.

My phone buzzed away next to my plate while I was waiting for the food to come, so I put it into my purse, but I could still hear, and feel, it.

Then I went home—to my home—corrected some papers, wrote some lesson plans, recorded some grades in blissful silence, having left my purse at the door.

When I was done—and more tired than I should have been—I gave up and got my phone. There were seventeen messages from him, and at least two or three from most of the folks in our groups of friends. Some of them had even left messages, all of them seeming to have gotten a panicked phone call from Collin, asking them to call me to ask me to call him—although they let me know that he hadn't put it quite so politely.

I texted everyone that I was fine and sorry that Collin had brought them into something that was between the two of us.

Everybody was very supportive, especially the women.

I went to bed earlier than I usually do, but I knew I would never be able to get to sleep without knowing that he was okay. But I also wasn't willing to call him, so I called the nurses' station instead. They all knew me.

“Priscilla, hi! This is Peggy. Do you want me to transfer you to Collin's room? Do you have the direct number?”

“Hi, Peggy. No, I don't and, yes, I do. He and I are, well, let's just say that I'm not very happy with him at the moment, and I don't want to talk to him, but I do want to make sure that he's all right.”

“He is, but—”

My heart nearly stopped. “But what?”

“Well, when you left, he was beside himself—screaming and yelling for you to come back. He tried to follow you—to get out of bed on his own and walk out of the building. He fell, of course, but I've never seen anyone so desperate to get to

another person. When Cindy found him, he hadn't stopped trying to get to you and was using his arms to try to Army crawl to you—and he was doing it! He was at the door to his room, for crying out loud! And he was not happy when the orderlies picked him up and put him back in bed. We had to threaten him with restraints before he'd agree to stay in bed.”

My head was in my hand by this point, and I was crying yet again. “Yeah, he can be a bit stubborn.”

“Takes one to know one, huh?”

I frowned. “Hey! Whose side are you on? He got all huffy with me about me telling him that he was trying to do too much—which is something that I've heard the PT guys say to him. I was just repeating it to him, because I agree with them. And he was, like, telling me that I shouldn't have an opinion about his medical stuff, because I'm not in medicine.”

“Uh oh. Well, he's probably hurting and frustrated. You know how men are. He didn't mean it, I'm sure.”

“I don't know. I'm sorry to take up so much of your time. You must have stuff to do.”

“Well, he's fine. He's not happy, but he's fine.”

“Thanks!” I paused. “Peggy? Don't tell him that I called.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome. Are you going to be in tomorrow morning?”

Tomorrow was Saturday.

“I honestly don't know.”

“Well, keep in mind that you nearly lost him, and none of us knows when our number is up. Just something to think about.”

“Thanks, Peggy. Have a good night.”

“You, too, Priscilla.”

Peggy was right, too. I remembered back to when I would have given anything to be able to tell him that he wasn't the only one in this relationship whose love had matured beyond just friendship.

And I still had yet to tell him that, for no good reason that I could think of. It should have been one of the first things I said to him, but I was too relieved, and then neither hospitals nor physical rehabilitation centers were conducive to romance.

Still, I should do that sooner, rather than later, I knew.

CHAPTER 9



I TOOK my time going to visit him the next day, which was quite the opposite of my usual behavior. My phone had been by my side all night—charging—but there hadn't been so much as a peep out of him—or anyone, for that matter.

Instead, I did my usual Saturday chores. That bespoke an awful lot about how hurt and angry I was, that I would do something I absolutely hated—cleaning—instead of going to be with him. As I cleaned, I argued with myself—and him—in my head.

I knew that I was just being stubborn and childish and I should have learned my lesson from his accident about time with our loved ones being extremely precious and all of that crap, but I, apparently, was a horrible person who couldn't get past her anger enough to go visit her annoying, bastard boyfriend while he was in what was, essentially, a hospital.

Except that I had been doing exactly that for the past six weeks. I don't think I let even one day go by without seeing him, even if it was just for a quick second on my way home to work and slave my fingers to the bone. I was the one who signed the papers that let them operate on him. I was the person who rearranged her entire life while he was recovering so that I could maximize my time with him as much as possible.

And that was the thanks I got? Well, that wasn't quite right. He was very thankful, and he told me that often, but still. That was a pretty shitty thing to say to me, and I was not happy. I did not regret walking out of his hospital room in the

least. He should have known better than to try to get out of bed and follow me—he'd just had surgery, for fuck's sake.

But Peggy's description of what he was like when I left, how hard he tried to get to me and how successful he'd been just by crawling on his belly and using his arms...

I was scrubbing the kitchen sink with my tears as much as the water I was using when, suddenly, the doorbell rang. My first thought was that it was him, of course, but that was a ridiculous thought.

Wasn't it?

It turned out that I was just as surprised by who was standing there—a florist with an enormous bouquet of apricot roses, which he knew were my favorite.

I brought them into the kitchen and took the card from its envelope.

“Please forgive me. I didn't mean what I said. I had a head injury, which I intend to plead from now on when I do something stupid, like this. Please come back to me, my love. My arms ache for want of you. Collin.”

Of course, my heart melted completely upon reading that.

Hating to leave things half done, though, I finished cleaning the kitchen, then showered, put on a nice dress, for a change, and headed out to see him.

The nurses all greeted me when I walked in the door, and they complimented me on how nice I looked. “He'd better treat you right, looking like that!”

His room was at the end of one of the long corridors, and it was private, because his insurance was much better than mine. If what had happened to him had happened to me, I'd be in a ward with eleven other people, or a pup tent on the lawn, or whatever was the cheapest possible solution. They'd hand me a sewing kit to stitch myself up after surgery and provide me with flour, water, and newspapers to make a cast for my broken bones.

The door was closed. I knocked, because he could have been in there with a doctor, and at that moment, I still didn't feel sure whether or not he wanted me to be included in his medical decisions.

“Come.”

I opened the door and stood near it.

“Priscilla,” he breathed, eyes glued to me.

“Thank you for the flowers,” I said, feeling surprisingly shy and remaining by the door. “They're very beautiful.”

“You're welcome, but they're nowhere near as beautiful as you are, I'm sure.”

That made me blush, of course.

He put his hand out. “What are you doing all the way over there? Come here, please.”

I walked over to the side of his bed and he held both arms out to me. “Can I have a hug, please?”

How could I possibly deny him that?

As I wrapped my arms around him, he twisted slightly, and I had no choice but to lie across him. But I immediately pulled away from him, trying to get up. “Isn't this hurting you? I must be too heavy for you!”

“Don't you dare try to get up,” he said, voice soft but firm. “And no, if it hurt me, I wouldn't do it, I promise.”

It felt incredibly good to be in his arms again. This was the first time he'd really been able to do this because of his injuries.

He nuzzled my nose with his. “So am I forgiven?”

“Yes.”

“I am sorry, honey. I know how much you've done for me over the past months, and I should never have called into question your right to have a say in my recovery—in everything about me. And you were right, too, that I am pushing myself more than I should, but I just want to get back

to our life—our damned close to perfect life, as far as I’m concerned—as soon as possible, not to mention my work.”

“It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not, but thank you for forgiving me.”

“Well, you’re right about me not really having a right to say anything about you medically. They weren’t happy that there wasn’t a blood relative around to sign the paperwork for you to have brain surgery. Everyone kept assuming that I was your wife.”

“Well, that can be easily remedied. We could fly to Vegas and get married. Hell, we could fly anywhere you’d like and get married.”

“Stop, Collin.” That kind of talk made me uncomfortable, too—as most things did.

He pressed his lips to my neck, making me giggle because of how ticklish I am. “Why? I would marry you in a heartbeat.”

I stiffened in his arms, and when I spoke, my tone was deliberately serious for one of the few times in my life. “Really, Collin, stop with that.”

“All right, honey. Don’t get your knickers in a twist. We just got them untwisted.”

I laid my head down on his chest, thoroughly enjoying just being in his arms.

Then I sat up a little. “But there is something that I want to say to you that’s kind of along those lines.”

“Oh?” He seemed surprised, and I guess I should have expected that.

“Yes. Before the accident, we talked about how the meanings behind you saying ‘I love you’ had changed for you, become deeper? Had more meaning than just loving me as a friend?”

“I remember that, and I remember telling you not to worry about it if you didn’t feel exactly the same as I did.” He gave

me a considering look. “Are you worrying about that?”

I could feel myself flush, and there weren't butterflies in my stomach; they felt more like bats... or pterodactyl.

“No, I'm not, because while I was sitting at your bedside, when you first came in, I realized that I do feel the same way you do—my love for you has changed—gotten a lot larger and deeper.” I sighed. “I know I'm bungling this badly, regardless of how verbal I usually am.”

“No, you're not, baby. I know what you mean, and it's okay if you can't quite say it the way you want to. I understand the feelings behind it.”

I lifted my eyes to his. “You were unconscious when I realized it, and I was horrified by the fact that I hadn't told you sooner, that I might miss the chance to tell you at all.”

Collin hugged me against him. “Well, you didn't. I'm right here, and I can't tell you how wonderful it is to hear you say that you feel the same way about me.” He pressed his lips to the top of my head. “And I didn't mean to push you about marriage, but that kind of comes under the heading of ‘don't waste time if you don't have to, because you don't know how much of it you have’, too.”

“I know. I just can't contemplate that at the moment. Maybe when you're more healed and back home with me.”

“Of course, honey. All I ever want is for you to be happy.”

“I feel the same way about you, too.”



ALTHOUGH HE DID scale back his efforts, to make them much less superhuman, he remained ahead of the curve as to how quickly he was recovering. And because of that, he came home quicker than they thought he would. He was still sore, but he was one of those people—unlike me—who really didn't pay a lot of attention to pain.

He was still using crutches when he got home, but the physical therapist he'd hired to live in and get him back to where he'd been before the accident said that he could probably convert to a walker anytime.

Collin had me practically living with him, too, even though he wasn't allowed to have sex for four to six weeks. I was terrified to be in bed with him, not wanting to roll over onto him—even though I'd never done that before—or hit him or something while I was sleeping.

But he was adamant. From the first night he was home, he wanted me by his side, and when we were in bed, with me curled up against his non-surgical side, he couldn't seem to keep his hands off me.

“Collin, you can't! This isn't leading anywhere!” I protested, trying to push his hands away.

“I'm sorry, did you just move my hand away from your breast?”

Shit. “Yes, but why would you want to start that when you know you can't finish it?” I asked, knowing I was right.

His eyebrow rose, and that was never a good sign, so I put his hand back on my breast. It didn't seem to help. “Are you allowed to move my hand away from you in any instance, whether I'm just caressing your cheek or spanking your bottom?”

“No...” I answered reluctantly.

He moved himself—awkwardly—so that he was lying on his side, with a couple pillows between his legs, sore hip up.

“Lie on your stomach, please.”

I knew where this was going to lead, and I didn't like it at all. “Collin! You can't possibly want to spank me when there's someone else in the house!” I hissed at him through my teeth.

Not a word came out of his mouth. He just looked at me, and I rolled onto my stomach.

“I knew you were getting too big for your britches while I was out of commission. You need someone to be accountable

to, or you'll run amuck and forget who you are." He was accenting almost every word with a loud, hard slap.

I buried my face in my pillow, trying to muffle my moans and yelps, with limited success, and he didn't seem to care if the whole world heard us! He just kept swatting away at my bottom!

"Whose are you, Priscilla?"

"Yours!" I practically yelled, then hid my face in the pillow. My butt hadn't been this sore in weeks, but he was well on his way to making sure that I wouldn't be sitting comfortably for quite some time—kind of like him.

"And who are you, to me?"

I wasn't really sure what he wanted to hear. "Uh, girlfriend?"

He smiled, but it didn't stop him from continuing to blister my ass. "Yes, and I'm glad to hear you say that. More than that, though."

"Submissive," I whispered.

"I didn't hear you," he said, cocking his head towards me.

"Submissive," I repeated, not much louder.

That changed immediately when he asked, "Do I need to have you get my belt?"

"*Submissive!*" I yelled immediately.

He chuckled at that. "Well, that'll give Daniel an earful if he heard it. I gave him a room on the other side of the house for a reason, honey. There's no way he can hear us way over there."

"Uh huh." My words dripped with doubt.

He caught my chin in his hand as he continued to spank me without missing a beat. "There are times when I will embarrass you for my own—and your—amusement, but making my physical therapist feel uncomfortable in my home while he's helping me get better is not one of them. If I

thought he could hear us, I wouldn't be spanking you. I'd just be noting that you needed one when I was recovered."

"Oh."

It was a bad enough spanking, for what it was, but I think he was hurting, so he stopped sooner than he might have.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" I asked as he groaned while he lay back on his stomach.

"Oh, yes, I definitely have something in mind for you to do."

I don't think I could really convey to him how much I wanted to do absolutely anything to help him. In the hospital and rehab, he'd had nurses and therapists taking care of him, and I was merely an addendum—the entertainment committee. Now that he was home, I was very eager and earnest to do whatever I could to help his pain or make things easier for him to do, which, frankly, was the very opposite of what he wanted.

But still, that was my instinct, and it wasn't easily subverted.

So when he said that he had something planned that I could do for him, I sat up eagerly in bed. "What? What can I do?"

Collin grinned up at me. "You are just the sweetest thing, aren't you?"

I frowned. "You know better than that."

"Yes, but you're very anxious to help."

"Of course, I am! I want you to feel better. I'll do anything to help, Collin."

He smiled up at me innocently. "I'm so glad you feel that way, baby girl."

"So, what can I do?" I asked again, watching him roll towards me and onto his side again, even though I could hear that it hurt him.

“In the nightstand on your side of the bed, there’s a little present for you.”

I opened the drawer and pulled out a box that was about ten inches long and wrapped. “What is this for? It’s not my birthday or Valentine’s Day or Christmas.”

“Well, it’s a gift for the both of us, especially now, when I’m incapacitated.”

“Oh? Can I open it?”

“You sure can.”

How I didn’t realize what it was until I saw the box, I will never know. But soon enough, I discovered what it was that I was holding—a big, pink vibrator.

“Why did you get me a vibrator?” I actually asked him that question, as he was lying there, looking all eager at me. I really am that stupid.

Collin chuckled. “Because I want you to use it. There’s lube in the drawer, too.”

“What, now?”

“Now.” The way he said it was patient, but it also let me know that it would not go well for me if I argued with him.

So I didn’t.

Why masturbating in front of him made me blush, I will never know, but it did.

“There are already batteries in it.”

“Uh huh. How do I turn it on?”

I handed it to him, and he turned it on and cycled it through about a hundred and twelve possible vibration patters, none of which were what I wanted. “You know me. I just want it to do what it’s supposed to—vibrate. I don’t need it to do the Macarena on my clit, for fuck’s sake. I just want it to plain old buzz.”

He finally found the “plain old buzz” setting and handed it back.

I was already lying on my back, with my legs spread under the covers.

“Pull the covers back.”

It probably wasn't the smartest thing to do, but I did give him a bit of a look before I pushed the sheet and blanket back. Then I was about to press the thing to my clit when he said, “Wait a sec!”

And before I knew it, he had leaned over to put his hand between my legs, dipping a finger between my lips. “Oh, yes. You're wet. I knew a spanking would get you that way.”

“I'm like that all the time around you; you didn't have to spank me to get me wet, you know.”

“Yes, but it's fun, and it both teaches you a lesson and arouses you. Win-win.”

“Well, it isn't fun when I'm lying here on a sore butt.”

“Then be better behaved and you won't get spanked,” he replied, as if it was the answer to everything.

And I hated that it kind of was fun, although I'd never be perfectly behaved. Not in this lifetime, anyway. And that didn't address the fact that he could—and did—punish me at will, whether or not I'd done anything wrong, either. Although I never got the chance to bring that up.

“Let's see how that thing works for you.”

I applied a little lube to myself, then brought the smooth, bulbous head of the vibrator to my clit. It was damned powerful, and I knew that it wasn't going to give me a choice about coming. It was going to happen—multiple times—and it was just a matter of when. It didn't help that he was staring at me the entire time, either.

“I do love seeing you like this. It's different from bringing you off myself.”

“It's even more embarrassing.”

“More?”

“Yeah. When you’re eating me, you’re concentrated on a very specific part—parts—of me. Now, you’re watching all of me, and it’s embarrassing.”

“I wonder if you’ll ever not be embarrassed.”

I shrugged. “You’re the only man I’ve ever been embarrassed with.”

He looked surprised. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Why do you think that is?”

I drew an increasingly ragged breath. “I think it’s because I don’t care what very many people on the planet think of me. If I did, I’d be skinnier. But you are one of those few people whose opinion of me is important to me.”

“Aw, that’s lovely. Thank you.”

“Welcome.”

We were both silent for several long moments, me with my eyes closed. “Are you usually this quiet when you bring yourself off?” he asked. “I ask because you’re usually not quiet in bed with me.”

“Yeah, but that’s a helluva lot more exciting than being in bed with myself.”

“Aw, you’re just full of compliments tonight, aren’t you?”

“Not intentionally,” I admitted, and he snorted.

Another silence, and then he whispered, “Would you like me to touch you? Would that help, or would it interfere with whatever fantasy you’re spinning in your head?”

“Well, no, it wouldn’t help, but I’m not fantasizing.”

He sounded startled. “You’re not?”

I smiled, eyes still closed. “No.” I opened my mouth to say something more, then closed it again.

“Tell me what you were going to say, honey.”

Right on cue.

Sighing, I said, “Well, at the risk of complimenting you again, you’re here, so I don’t have to fantasize about you. And you’re making me do this, so I don’t have to fantasize about you doing that. And I can hear you breathing, and smell your scent—you, not your cologne—and this is your house, and I’m in your bed—it’s all really more than I need. I’m really just trying to concentrate on coming. It’s harder for me to do when I’m this much of the center of attention, frankly.”

“You are my center of attention, Priscilla. I’m afraid you’re going to have to get used to it.” He used it—that tone, the one that made me pant, and that was exactly what I started to do. Of course, he noticed it. “You respond well to my voice, don’t you?”

It was harder to catch my breath and talk to him, but I answered, “It depends on the tone you’re using, but, yes.”

“And the tones you like are...”

I really didn’t want to answer him. “What do you think they are?”

“No, I want to hear it from you.”

“But I don’t want to tell you,” I said, getting a little more lube and applying it directly to the head of the vibrator and then to my clit.

He moved a little closer to me and whispered, “I don’t recall asking you,” again, using that particular tone.

I couldn’t help it; I whimpered.

“Well, I’ll have to remember that one.” Then it became even deeper and more stern. “Answer me, Priscilla.”

Another, longer mewl. “I like a lot of your tones. You have a very expressive voice, and it’s very deep, which is infinitely sexy. I...” I sighed. I didn’t want to give away all of my secrets. He was dangerous enough as it was, simply going on his instincts about me alone! He didn’t need any help! “You have a voice that is both very loving and very dominant that you use sometimes. I like that combination a lot, because it brings emotion into something that is usually just sexual. And I love it when you lecture me while you’re spanking me,

because you know just what words to use to get to me on both levels—sexual and emotional—and your tone is always perfect, too. And, having told you all this, I have a sneaking suspicion that you are never going to be able to fit your head through a door again.”

He chuckled, and it was more of a rumble in his chest.

“That’s fucking sexy, too.”

“Are you getting close?”

“Y-yes, very.”

“Good.” Somehow, he lowered his tone even more. “One of the biggest reasons that I want to get well so quickly is because I can’t wait until the time when I can bind your wrists together and hook them above your head on that wall over there.” He pointed to the one opposite the bed, where I had never noticed that there was a hook that had been placed at what would be just about the right height for my wrists, I realized. “Then I’m going to use a spreader bar to force you to keep your legs open, and I’m going to hold that vibrator, the one you’re using now—”

That was all I needed. Hell, that was more than I needed!

My body had been wound just about as tightly as it could get, my clit throbbing beneath the incessant buzz of the vibrator, until it was given absolutely no choice but to give in to the pleasure that was being forced on it, and I exploded.

“Collin!”

My head was whipping back and forth, moaning, hips arching up rhythmically, which moved the vibrator on my clit and sent me to yet another peak where I screamed his name uncontrollably.

I lifted that evil thing off my clit, turned it off, and handed it back to him.

“That’s it?”

“Yes. I don’t usually orgasm as much with myself as I do with someone else.”

“Especially me?” he asked, teasing.

I glared at him. “Yes.”

“Why are you giving me this back? It’s yours.”

“I thought I wasn’t allowed to pleasure myself?”

“You can when I tell you to. Keep it in your nightstand, please.”

“Okay.” I tucked it away, then lay there on my back for a few moments, recovering.

“You are amazing, you know.”

I gave him a look. “Now that kind of thing I don’t like you saying.”

“I know, but you’ll just have to lump it, because I like complimenting you.”

“I know,” I grumbled.

He chuckled, then opened his arms to me. “Come over here, so I can hold you properly.”

In that instance, I was only too happy to do as I was told.

“Oh my God, I have missed this,” he groaned as he clutched me to his chest, squeezing me tightly and rubbing my back.

Collin was quiet for a moment, and so was I. But it didn’t take him very long to realize why I hadn’t said anything, probably because I was soaking his chest with my tears.

To his credit, he recognized immediately what was going on with me. I had been holding myself too tightly throughout this entire incident that, since he was actually, finally home with me, where he belonged, I finally felt that I could let my emotions go—it just happened to be all over him, but then, who would be better for me to cry my heart out on?

I don’t think I’d ever heard his voice softer or more tender than when he spoke to me then. “Oh, baby, I’m so sorry,” he crooned, and that just made it worse. I keened and sobbed and wept and cried, dragging big, loud lungfuls of air into myself,

then moaning and sobbing some more. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. You must’ve been so scared. I’m so sorry, honey.”

He put his chin on my head and just held me while I dissolved into an inconsolable puddle in his arms.

“But I’m here. I’m safe. I’m on the mend, and we’re here together. I’ll never be able to thank you enough for being so brave and spending so much time with me. It must’ve just been horribly hard—I know how I’d feel if I were the one wondering whether you were going to make it through the night, and I can’t imagine how scared you were, but we made it through. We did. We made it through together.”

It took a while for his words to get through to me, but he didn’t rush me. He just continued to talk to me, and try to soothe me with his voice and his hands.

I fell asleep in his arms, and it was the best night’s sleep I’d had in a long time.



IT WAS the last day of school for the year. It couldn’t have come quickly enough for me. I usually liked almost all of my classes. I’d wanted to be a teacher since I was in grade school myself, and I loved teaching.

But the rest of the crap around the teaching was getting out of hand, and it was making the whole process a lot less enjoyable than it used to be. This was the first year when, on my last day, I wondered whether I would be back the next fall—not because of the kids. The majority of them were great. But their parents, and the administration, and all of the ridiculous make-work junk I had to do that had absolutely nothing to do with imparting knowledge to students was an incredibly annoying and frustrating waste of my time.

It just wasn’t fun anymore, but I hadn’t said anything to anyone about how I was feeling—well, I’d said a little to Collin, because he was home more than he ever had been, and

he saw first-hand how much work I did that didn't pertain to lesson plans or classroom work.

Besides, if I wasn't teaching, then what would I do?

It didn't really bear thinking of, anyway, because I certainly couldn't afford to retire this young, so it was a moot point.

I boxed up my stuff, turned in my books, said goodbye to all my friends—the other teachers in my department, the guidance staff, the secretaries, the librarian, who was one of my best friends, and headed home.

Daniel, the physical therapist, had been let go, and Collin had just started to go back to work, but he was only doing half days at the moment, so he might well be home when I got there, and I certainly hoped he would be. I'd been terribly spoiled by having him home so much, but I didn't doubt that, since he was doing so well recovering, that he'd soon be back to flying around the world in search of the next big client to woo.

His car was there when I got home, and when I opened the door, it was to streamers and party horns. "Last day of school! Yay!" he yelled, popping a champagne cork.

It was a tradition that he did for me every year, since very early on in my teaching career, when summer vacation didn't mean that I had two and a half months off to do as I pleased. It meant two weeks off if I was lucky, then I worked a part time job to make ends meet until a week before school started again in the fall.

"Congratulations on making it through another year, baby girl. They're lucky to have you."

There was even cake and ice cream—yellow cake with vanilla ice cream. "The only vanilla things about you," he teased.

"Where would you like to go out to dinner to celebrate?" Collin asked, as he had me sit down on his lap—which I still did very gingerly—and fed me a spoonful of both of those sweet delights.

“I hadn’t thought about it. There’s been so much going on that I forgot about this.”

He kissed my cheek. “Well, there’s no pressure. We can do it anytime.” His hands ran through my hair as he looked up at me.

I don’t know why, but I was feeling incredibly exhausted, and I hadn’t done anything today. It was a half day, and I had gotten everything I needed to get done for the end of the year done days ago. Still, I felt as if I’d run a marathon in Hell.

Collin reached for an envelope and handed it to me.

“What’s this?”

“I think you’ll have to open it to find out. I started to think about the trip we usually take at the beginning of the summer,” he said, referring to what had started out as a day trip to the coast, because that was all either of us could afford at that point. “And I thought we might do something different this year. Something maybe a little more elaborate.”

Inside the envelope, were two tickets to Bermuda.

“Collin, I can’t afford this!”

“You don’t have to afford it, because I can afford it.”

Of course, I opened my mouth to protest, but the look in his eye had me closing it again, quickly.

He grinned. “You are trainable, after all! Good girl!”

“Thanks, I think.”

“Well, between one thing and another, it’s been a bitch of a year for the both of us, and I thought we deserved a getaway. One of my clients owns a beautiful resort down there, and we would be staying there all-inclusive, free of charge, in one of the deluxe huts they have that are literally in the water and that also have their own private pools. We can hang out on the beach and have sex and read and have sex and eat and have sex...”

“I’m sensing a theme here.”

He gave me the cheesiest of grins. “Absolutely. That’s all the physical exertion we will do for three long weeks.”

“Three weeks? Wow! That’s a long vacation.”

“Yes, but it’s no more than you deserve.” He looked into my eyes. “Let me take you away for a while, honey, where all you have to do is rest and recharge.”

Like everything new and different, my first impulse was to say no. But I was consciously trying not to be like that anymore, so instead, I put my arms around him and said, “Yes.”

It was extremely telling when he really didn’t believe I’d agreed at first, without him having to cajole and wheedle me into it. “Really? Just like that?”

“Yeah. I’m turning over a new leaf, and I’m going to try to say ‘yes’ to more things.”

“Well, that sounds like a wonderful bit of personal growth.”

“Or my boyfriend, whom I love very much, almost suddenly died, and I want to wallow in him before we’re too old to wallow anymore.”

Collin reached up and dipped me down so that my hair touched the floor. “Oh, honey, I will lust after you even when I’m three days dead,” he said, lifting me back up again.

I frowned. “I know you meant that to be romantic, but I’ll have you know that necrophilia is not one of my kinks, just for the record.”



IT WAS in the eighties and sunny the day we landed. Collin had promised that the last mundane chore I’d have to do was pack, and he was right. I didn’t have to lift a finger. If there was something physical to do, he did it. The rest of the time, I had a glass of champagne in my hand, or, once we landed and got

to the resort, I was handed a lovely blue tropical drink, whose origins I didn't question. I just drank it.

“You really are turning over a new leaf, aren't you?” He'd noticed that I hadn't even asked what I was consuming, which was very unlike me.

He'd insisted on buying me a few new things for our trip, all of them light and cotton and comfortable. Our bungalow over the water was gorgeous, and I just couldn't get over the color of the sea against the sand. I could see right to the bottom from our deck!

“What would you like to do first, my lady?” he asked, twirling me around our enormous bedroom that had yet another deck off it, which was where the private pool was. “Shall we skinny dip?”

“You know what I would like to do? I want to go lie on the beach.”

“Then lying on the beach it is.”

We each brought an iPad, so we could read, and left our phones in the room. “If the business burns down,” he announced expansively as he stepped out of the bathroom in just his swimming trunks, “I don't wanna know. I'll deal with it when we get back—if we ever go back.”

He carried the tote with all of our supplies, and we set up in side by side lounge chairs. There was a convenient umbrella over them and an even more convenient table between us.

A gentleman arrived and asked us what we would like to eat and or drink, and we gave him our orders.

Once he returned with another blue drink for me and a scotch for Collin, my sweet man raised his glass to me. “Here's to you making it through yet another year without strangling a kid, a parent, an administrator, or a school board member with your bare hands. I can only say that I greatly admire your—and every teacher's—fortitude in not doing so.”

“I'll drink to that,” I said, taking a rather large, fortifying gulp of the drink for what I was going to say in return. I held

my glass up to him. “I’d like to propose a toast—and something else, too.”

“Oh?” he asked, raising his glass again.

“To you, Collin. Thank God for your hard head. I don’t know what I would have done if you’d died on me.” Then I leaned forward and looked into his eyes. “Marry me.”

It was rare for me to be able to really surprise him, but with that, I managed to accomplish it. I wished I’d had a camera available. The look on his face was absolutely priceless.

He put his drink down and looked at me again. “Really?”

I nodded. “Yeah, really, if you’ll have me. I want to be your wife. I don’t want to have to worry that they won’t do as I ask because I’m nothing ‘official’ to you. I want to wake up next to you and go to bed with a sore rear end, but with my whole lower body throbbing because you’ve made me come forty-seven times.”

“Holy fuck, yes!” he agreed, leaning over to kiss me and bring me onto his lap.

“You always have such a way with words, dear,” I teased. “There’s something else I want to talk to you about.”

“What’s that?” His face went slack. “You’re pregnant?”

“No, I’m not. I was thinking... that I had such a bad year this time that it might have been my last year teaching.”

“You want to retire?”

“I do. I won’t have as much to live on as I would if I paid in for another ten years, but by then, I will have killed all of the people you listed, or myself. I think I’m done.”

“You do realize that you will have more than enough to live on.”

“I know,” I whispered, “but I don’t want you to think that I’m marrying you for your money.”

He snorted. “I’ve been trying to get you to do that for years—or, at the very least, let me be your sugar daddy.” Collin

picked up his drink again and raised it to me. “To the future Mrs. Somerset.”

I raised my own to him. “To the current Mr. Somerset—the perfect man for me.”

CAROLYN FAULKNER

The words “spanking” and “discipline” have always sent a shiver up Carolyn Faulkner’s spine. She knows she’s not alone. Writing started as a way to explore her feelings. Soon short stories flowed from her pen featuring reluctant heroes taking the leading lady in hand, but always for her own good.

Today Carolyn is the author of dozens of books. She writes from her home in Maine, where she lives with her husband and leading man.

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